



# Duke of Lust (Sinful Dukes #3)

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**Category:** Historical

**Description:** "I will never touch you, love. But if you want me to cease my ways, your nights shall belong to me..."

Duke Frederick may be an insatiable rake but he never goes back on his word. So when his friend's younger sister is left in his care, he vows to protect her. Only, the sweet minx stirs a dark obsession within him...

Nothing must stop Annabelle from finding a match this Season. Not her shy, wallflower nature. And especially not her dangerous protector. Until she steps into his bedroom...and sees something she never should have.

So, Frederick makes her an offer she cannot resist: he shall help her find a husband and she agrees to give him her nights...Yet he must never touch an innocent like Annabelle. No matter how much he yearns to corrupt her.

\*If you like a realistic yet steamy depiction of the Regency and Victorian era, then Duke of Lust is the novel for you.

**Total Pages (Source):** 30

## CHAPTER 1

“ Good morning, Witmore,” said Lady Annabelle Elkins cheerfully, with a slight skip in her step as she walked from her coach towards the entrance of Heartwick Hall in the May sunshine, her maid at her side. “How lovely the house looks at this time of year! I’m so glad to be here again.”

Short and curvaceous with lively blue eyes and a mass of strawberry blonde curls pinned earlier that morning but now escaping from beneath her bonnet, Lady Annabelle looked to be exactly what she was - a good-tempered young woman of appealing aspect but slightly younger in personality than years.

The usually staid butler looked bewildered and not particularly happy as he came down the steps to meet the two women but nodded at Annabelle’s remark and gestured two footmen towards the coach to bring in the baggage. Annabelle had caught him exchanging some tense words with other servants but had not been able to make out what was said. Regardless, the atmosphere was uncomfortable.

Still, Heartwick Hall did indeed look very beautiful today with clematis and wisteria both coming into bloom around the front door, and some of the potted plants that Duchess Sarah tended so carefully with her own hand also beginning to unfurl. There was no need for Annabelle to concern herself with what was likely only a squabble among the domestic staff. But where was the dowager duchess?

“Is Duchess Sarah indisposed?” Annabelle wondered aloud, looking around the front of the house with a frown. “I hope she does not have that awful cough that is going around the ton. My mother was quite ill for two full weeks and we feared what could

happen if the contagion were to pass to Father.”

There had always been someone to meet her here on previous visits. Before marriage to the Duke of Walden, it would have been her friend Penelope, of course, but Duchess Sarah was usually there too, smiling gently in the background, wearing the muted clothing of an extended widowhood. Penelope was mistress of her own home now at Walden Towers and about to embark on the great adventure of motherhood.

Witmore shook his head gravely, still appearing rather displeased. It made Annabelle feel like a child again, a naughty child who had trespassed in a forbidden orchard or shed, perhaps.

“The dowager duchess is visiting the Duke and Duchess of Walden.”

“Oh!” Annabelle said incredulously, halting on the steps. “But Duke Frederick and my brother arranged for me to stay here while my family is away. I believed Duchess Sarah was expecting me today. I do not understand...”

Beyond not understanding, Annabelle did not at all know what to do in the absence of either host or hostess. Should she even go inside? Should she return home, more than an hour’s ride away? That was likely not even an option. Aside from a skeleton staff, the servants would be gone, either accompanying her family or taking their own holidays.

“Your arrival is certainly expected but not for at least another week, Your Ladyship,” Witmore said shortly, and then caught the eye of a junior footman. “We shall make all necessary rearrangements with your rooms. Gordons! Go and inform Mrs. Kimble of Lady Annabelle’s early arrival.”

The youth swiftly hurried away to carry these tidings to Mrs. Kimble, the Heartwick Hall housekeeper.

“But Frederick must be home,” Annabelle commented, continuing to look around and noting another small carriage, tucked around the side of the house rather than in the carriage-house, as though for a quick getaway. “I see he has a visitor.”

“The duke has many acquaintances,” Witmore responded cryptically, leading the two women into the house. “I could not say who is presently calling. Do make yourself comfortable in the drawing room, Your Ladyship. If your maid goes to Mrs. Kimble in the meantime, she will advise on your rooms.”

Now Annabelle was entirely thrown. More than ever, she felt like an unwelcome trespasser, and an unwise one too. Duchess Sarah was absent and Duke Frederick had an unknown caller about whom Witmore was either unable or unwilling to comment. Stephen would never knowingly have sent her here under such circumstances. This was not the usual warm welcome guests received at Heartwick Hall. What on earth had gone wrong?

“There was definitely a letter sent ahead last Tuesday, confirming that I would be arriving today,” she told the butler, in case he was thinking that she had deliberately –and rudely – arrived without notice. “If that wasn’t convenient, Duchess Sarah or Duke Frederick would have written back. It must have been lost. How vexing! Stephen will be most displeased with the messenger when I tell him.”

At these words, Myrtle, Annabelle’s elderly but much loved maid gave a nervous cough and grasped her young mistress’ arm, bringing them to a standstill in the hallway.

“Oh, My Lady, this is all my fault,” the poor woman said with some distress, holding out a slightly creased letter with unsteady fingers. “I was meant to give this to the messenger last week, wasn’t I? But here it is still in my pocket. Mr. Witmore, I must apologize to you, and to the duke and dowager duchess. What a foolish old woman I am to cause such problems!”

Annabelle patted the maid's hand sympathetically. Myrtle was becoming increasingly forgetful in her old age but she had served the Elkins family faithfully for more than forty years and Annabelle could not be truly angry with her. Nor did Witmore choose to take issue with the innocent error, to Annabelle's relief.

Our staff are perfectly capable of accommodating Her Ladyship and yourself today," he said to the distressed maid. "The duke and dowager duchess will not be inconvenienced."

"Indeed, it is as Witmore says," Annabelle agreed. "Duke Frederick won't give a fig if I'm here today, tomorrow or next week, will he? He has his own life. As for Duchess Sarah, if we write and tell her of the mix-up, perhaps she will come home straight away. Yes, it can all be ironed out and we won't even need to tell Stephen..."

"You are both kind to an old woman," sighed Myrtle, "but I am shamed to cause such breach in etiquette in the home of a duke, no less. I could never have led a young lady into such a tangle twenty years ago."

"Really Myrtle, Frederick might be a duke but he's still just...Frederick," Annabelle continued to reassure her as they entered the drawing room, despite feeling increasing qualms herself. "From everything I hear around the ton, he's the last man in the world to value propriety for its own sake. Some people even call him..."

Biting her tongue as she remembered injunctions from both her mother and Stephen about avoiding indiscretion and showing good manners, Annabelle stopped before she could actually call her friend's older brother a rake in front of his own staff.

Thankfully, Witmore had not entered the room with them and was standing in the doorway looking as though he had overheard nothing of her words to Myrtle.

"Let me escort you to Mrs. Kimble, Mrs. Muggins," said the butler smoothly. "Tea

and cake will be brought presently, Your Ladyship.”

“Will Duke Frederick and his other guest be joining me?” Annabelle queried as Myrtle now followed the black-suited manservant out of the room.

Witmore’s face was inscrutable as he turned back to answer.

“Duke Frederick is not to be disturbed this morning, Your Ladyship. If Duchess Sarah were here she might suggest a walk in the gardens after you have rested, or perhaps you might like to make use of the library or the music room.”

“Thank you, Witmore,” Annabelle replied, feeling more lost and unsure than ever as the door closed behind the two servants before she sat down to await her solitary morning refreshments.

When it arrived, the tea and cakes were as fresh and tasty as they always were at Heartwick Hall, although Annabelle found she did not enjoy them as much without the company of Penelope and Duchess Sarah. Even the Duke of Heartwick loitering about the room with his mercilessly teasing remarks would have been better than the silence and ticking of the clock.

Some in society might call him a rake but that was never the face that Frederick showed directly to Penelope or Annabelle.

“Is Duke Frederick still with his other guest?” Annabelle asked the young maid who eventually came in to take away the tea tray an hour later.

“I wouldn’t know, Your Ladyship,” said the mousy girl quietly without raising her eyes. “Can I get you anything else?”

“You surely must have some idea,” pressed Annabelle but the young woman shook

her head.

“Mr. Witmore and Mrs. Kimble say I must keep to the main rooms downstairs when the duke has personal guests and not ask any questions. I do as I’m told, Your Ladyship.”

“You don’t even know who he is? The other guest, I mean.”

The young girl again shook her head without raising her gaze and Annabelle gave up. Like Witmore today, the little maid’s attitude was decidedly odd and put Annabelle further on edge.

“Never mind. You may take the tray back to the kitchen.”

As the girl scuttled away, Annabelle felt a further lurch of uncertainty in her gut. She now strongly wished that her brother had not sent her here at all.

Without Duchess Sarah in residence, he never would have done so. Frederick might be a family friend but he was also a notorious rake and there was no way that a man as proud of his family’s reputation as Stephen would want his sister to remain alone under the Duke of Heartwick’s roof for a single night.

If Stephen found out about the mix-up, he might rush all the way back from Norfolk. He might even fire poor Myrtle for her part in the confusion. Hopefully Frederick would see that it was imperative that Duchess Sarah return immediately and send an express message.

It was unfortunate too that so many other close friends and family were out of town, ill or expecting babies. Of the wider options, Stephen had already dismissed the possibility of Annabelle staying in a hotel, even with Myrtle. It would have been fun to visit Victoria Crawford, the very modern and educated younger sister of the Duke

of Walden, who was presently residing with her cousins in London.

Despite their contrasting personalities, Annabelle and Victoria had become good friends since Duke Maxwell married Penelope. Stephen, however, was only slightly less dubious about the propriety of Annabelle staying with another young woman in London than the hotel idea. Her brother could be such a stick-in-the-mud about his principles sometimes, like a man twice his age.

Stephen had settled on Annabelle staying at Heartwick Hall, even obeying Frederick and following his guidance throughout the season in Stephen's stead. She had wondered if Frederick would be as strict as her brother or more permissive, given his own habits? She had hoped for the latter.

Well, whatever attitude the Duke of Heartwick took, and however the present mix-up with Duchess Sarah was resolved, this year Annabelle had her own goal and no one was going to stop her achieving it.

"Not even you, Duke Frederick!" she stated aloud and then jumped slightly as the clock struck twelve.

Noon and there was still no sign of Frederick. He must know of Annabelle's presence by now, mustn't he? It was actually quite rude not to even acknowledge her arrival. She thought again of the small carriage around the side of the house. Had Frederick actually been drinking with a friend until late last night and was still sleeping it off?

Briefly, Annabelle hoped that Frederick and his unknown friend suffered the terrible headaches and stomach aches they doubtless deserved. But she was a kind-hearted person who could not seriously wish anyone ill. Also, what if Frederick had actually fallen and hit his head?

She well-remembered the appalling events at Huntingdon Manor last year, a story



only gradually revealed after the wicked Lord Silverbrook had fallen drunkenly on the stairs while attempting to assault Penelope. The Duke of Walden had luckily witnessed the scene and managed its consequences.

Frederick had probably not fallen down the stairs, or the staff would have found him. Still, he could have stumbled inside his room and hit his head on the solid oak furniture. He might be bleeding, unconscious or too weak to call for help... The possibility of Frederick genuinely being injured plagued her.

Eventually, Annabelle went into the hall and ran upstairs. She remembered how she and Penelope had taunted the teenaged Frederick by knocking on his door and running away early in the mornings when they were little girls. At thirteen he had shouted and chased them down the corridor.

Would Frederick be equally cross today if Annabelle woke him? She wouldn't run away now, of course. Anyway, if he were angry, so what? That would mean that he wasn't sick or injured. Then it would serve him right to be disturbed. It was far too late to be laying in bed and she needed him to send an urgent message to Duchess Sarah.

Feeling bold and justified, she marched up to the next floor and turned onto the corridor where she remembered that Frederick's bedroom lay.

Standing outside the door she raised her hand to knock but then froze as a strange and rather animal sound issued from inside the room. The moan was almost pained but with some peculiar quality that Annabelle could not name, and the voice did not sound like Frederick's. But who else could it be in his bedroom? Perhaps he really was injured and unable to speak properly!

"Frederick!" Annabelle called out in a panic, grasping the door handle and pushing it open before she even knew what she was doing. "Are you hurt? Frederick?!"

If her limbs had frozen a few moments earlier, now her very blood seemed to have turned to ice at the sight that met her eyes.

Frederick was here. Frederick was well. Frederick was also half-naked, kneeling on the floor between the thighs of an equally disheveled woman, spreadeagled on the bed with her hands tangled in his blond hair.

Good God, what was this?! Shocked to the core, she could only stand there wide-eyed and open-mouthed as the woman retreated swiftly under the bedclothes and Frederick stood and turned to face Annabelle.

Bare-chested and barefoot, he wore only his under-breeches and she felt her face flame as hot as a bonfire at the sight of his bare limbs, never mind the attitude in which she had just found him. At such close quarters and in such a state of undress there was no disputing that Penelope's elder brother was a handsome, well-built man.

Frederick had the long clean limbs of an athlete, likely thanks to his love of riding and other sports which balanced out his drinking and carousing. The golden hair of his head also glinted on his strong forearms and chest, running all the way down to his navel. He looked something like a young Greek god from her old story books, perhaps Apollo.

The expression on his face made Annabelle swallow. Flushed and slightly wild beneath the tousled hair, his blue eyes were surprised but oddly fierce as though he had been interrupted in the middle of a fight rather than... whatever this was.

His gaze locking on hers sent a strange fire running through Annabelle's veins now as well as ice, and jolted a good dose of both indignance and bemusement in her stomach for good measure.

What on earth had Frederick been doing to that woman and why had she allowed it?

What she had witnessed did not fit into Annabelle's limited understanding of the sexual act. The one thing she was sure of was that it was all highly improper.

Finally regaining control of her legs, Annabelle turned and physically ran from the room.

"Annabelle?!" Frederick called behind her, his voice sounding rougher than usual although not with anger. "Annabelle!"

"There you are, My Lady!" exclaimed Myrtle as Annabelle almost collided with her on one of the landings leading back towards the main staircase. "I went to the drawing room to tell you that your room is ready but you were gone. We thought you must be taking a turn in the garden."

"I must go to my room, Myrtle," Annabelle said, slightly breathless after her flight from Frederick's bedroom.

"Of course. You'll be wanting to change out of your travel dress before luncheon, won't you?"

"Yes. That's it. I must change," gabbled Annabelle. "I must be decently dressed for luncheon mustn't I?"

"I'll lay out the sprigged muslin, shall I? Or the blue poplin?"

"You have done enough, Myrtle. Go and take some rest. I shall change my own dress."

"Are you sure, My Lady?" said the maid a little doubtfully, although Annabelle knew that any rest would be appreciated.

“Please, Myrtle. I am quite sure. I know how hard travel is on your rheumatism.”

As the old woman agreed and set off back downstairs, Annabelle went to the room she always occupied on her visits to Heartwick Hall and closed the door before leaning back against it and dropping her head into her hands.

Why had she had to witness such a scene? And what had she even witnessed? Again Annabelle’s mind replayed that strange sound and then the sight of Frederick’s semi-naked body rising up from the ground, his face flushed and eyes so intent. Strangely, she could barely remember the other woman, only her nakedness and posture. It was the memory of Frederick speaking her own name that made her tremble.

A few minutes later, the sound of carriage wheels made Annabelle fly to the window, half-wondering if this was Duchess Sarah’s return. No, that was a ridiculous idea. Frederick had certainly sent no message, whatever else he had been doing since Annabelle’s arrival. Nor could she have covered the distance from Walden Towers so quickly. It was at least a two hour journey.

The small open carriage outside was departing Heartwick Hall, not arriving, carrying only a single passenger, whose face was well hidden under hat and veil, although Annabelle could just about make out her blonde hair underneath.

The clock on the mantelpiece read thirty minutes after noon. In half an hour, Annabelle must presumably face Frederick over the luncheon table, regardless of the scene in his bedroom earlier. She must pretend she had seen nothing and talk of relatives, parties and mutual friends as though everything was perfectly normal. It would be awful and it was all Frederick’s fault.

Frederick Hayward, Duke of Heartwick might have the face – and body – of an angel but he was certainly not one of their number. Annabelle had finally seen him today as other women presumably saw him: a highly desirable but dissolute man.

Angrily, she paced the room, unable to push the unwanted sounds and images from her head. No wonder Witmore and Mrs. Kimble wouldn't let the young maids venture far when the duke had company. Did Duchess Sarah have any idea what he had been doing this morning?

At this moment, the unlocked door opened and Frederick himself stepped inside and closed it behind him.

"I did not invite you in!" Annabelle squeaked, noticing that while he had thrown on trousers and a shirt, he had not yet fastened the latter garment, her gaze inexorably drawn once again to his torso.

"That cuts both ways, Lady Annabelle, does it not?" he replied pointedly, sparking a self-conscious blush as she recalled her own intrusion. "I think we must both dispense with such niceties today. We have to talk and it is best to do so privately, under the circumstances."

"How dare you carry on like this! Especially when you have a guest. My brother would be utterly scandalized if he knew what was going on in this house," she berated him, remaining by the window and as far away from him as possible. "Does Duchess Sarah know of your flagrant cavorting in broad daylight?"

"I'm sorry you had to see that, Annabelle," he said as he fastened his shirt and tucked it in. "But do not exaggerate matters. My friend has gone. You will not meet her again. There is no need to upset either of our families."

"If you were capable of being sorry you would not do such things in the first place. You are shameless, and indecent, and, and..."

Annabelle paused, searching for words and conscious that Frederick was regarding her with folded arms and an amused smile.

“You speak of things you don’t yet understand, little Annabelle,” he said, as though she were still a girl rather than a young woman of age.

“And you need to brush your hair!” she threw back at him, matching words with actions as she caught up a brush from the nearby dressing table and hurled it at him. “You utter rake! I can’t believe Stephen has left me here with you.”

Lightning fast Frederick’s arm reached out and caught the brush before it could strike him, the expression on his face becoming more serious.

Her own anger caught Annabelle off-guard. She had a right to be upset, of course, and to pass judgement on such flagrant misbehavior, but throwing things was crossing a line. Maybe she was too angry for her own good but the revelation of Frederick’s other face had been in some way overwhelming.

Where was the teasing, irreverent but light-hearted Frederick she was used to? He was not in the room with her now.

Walking across to the dressing table, the Duke of Heartwick placed the brush pointedly back beside the other tools of the toilette .

“I cannot apologize for what I am, Annabelle,” he said. “I am only sorry that you had to see what you saw. You have always been Penelope’s friend and you are always welcome at Heartwick Hall, but you know that I am not Penelope, nor am I one of your other women friends. I am a man and you must remember that. My bedroom is out of bounds.”

Frederick was standing so close now that she could smell the faint scent of his skin, some combination of fading cologne and fresh sweat. He had evidently not taken the trouble to bathe yet after whatever exertions he had indulged in earlier.

Annabelle might have run past him and out of the room if it had not been for the suspicion that he would actually seize hold of her and make her listen to him. She swallowed hard and then found her voice.

“I understand perfectly. A respectable lady should never be friends with a rake. We need never speak of this morning, or your so-called friend, again, Your Grace. If I encounter other ‘friends’ I shall look the other way.”

Already rather steely, Frederick’s blue eyes hardened further at these declarations.

“I have promised your family that I will keep you safe at Heartwick Hall and I shall do so, Annabelle. I will bring no other women onto the estate while you are here. You were not expected until next week. That was why I was taking my opportunities now. Do you understand?”

While the sternness of his voice and gaze slightly unnerved her, Frederick’s actual words touched Annabelle in some strange way. So, he would never have deliberately brought another woman into the house while Annabelle was here. Did that mean he respected her? Liked her? He was very clear that he intended to look after her regardless.

Part of her wanted to smile at him now, to see his face melt into its usual lighthearted if somewhat provoking expression. Perhaps they could even laugh at this episode together? Then Annabelle remembered again, with shivers passing through her limbs, exactly what she had seen in his bedroom. No, she could not laugh at that with Frederick. It was all wrong.

“I understand, Your Grace,” she said rather pertly, again deliberately not using his first name although she had always done so since childhood. “You will do your duty and I will keep my mouth shut about your liaisons. Your private life is none of my business.”

“Annabelle,” Frederick said crossly, looking directly into her eyes with a expression that evoked some new kind of danger. “Are you actually trying to provoke me this morning?”

“I...”

She stopped, feeling herself on increasingly uncertain ground. Provoke him? What did Frederick even mean by that question.

“If you are, don’t,” he continued before she could think of anything witty or cutting to say in response. “For your own good as well as mine. We will talk further at luncheon. There are actually bigger problems in this house than your naivety.”

With these words, the Duke of Heartwick turned on his heel and left the room. As the door closed behind him, Annabelle realized that her whole body was trembling.



### CHAPTER 2

“ You must write immediately to Duchess Sarah and tell her that I have arrived earlier than you anticipated,” Annabelle said as soon as Frederick entered the dining room for luncheon, now restored to entirely respectable dress and appearance.

She had decided it was best all round to make no further reference to what she had seen upstairs, and certainly not to how it had made her feel. She needed to focus instead on the visit ahead of her.

Frederick gave an irritated snort at her words as he sat down at the head of the table and pushed a letter towards her across the white linen cloth.

“It is not that simple,” he said. “Read it.”

Confused but curious, Annabelle took up the letter and opened it as the maids served their ham and vegetables and then retired from the room. It was a recent letter from Duchess Sarah to her stepson, dated only two days earlier.

After the usual greetings and wishes for good health, the dowager duchess dived straight into family news.

“...Penelope seems well and unworried, not wanting any fuss or disruption to her days. However, Dr. Murchison remains concerned at how large the child might be and warned that it could arrive in the coming month. He wishes her to slow down. The midwife Maxwell has employed believes that it may even be twins...”

“Twins!” exclaimed Annabelle excitedly, but Frederick only raised an eyebrow.

“Continue reading,” he ordered. “That is not the immediate issue.”

“Maxwell has therefore asked me to stay here for a further week to keep Penelope company and encourage her to rest in preparation for the birth. I plan to return to Heartwick Hall on the day of Annabelle’s arrival and have written to Mrs. Kimble to ensure correct arrangements are made.”

“Duchess Sarah isn’t coming back for another week? But I am already here!” said Annabelle, dropping the letter onto the table, her eyes wide.

“So you are,” commented Frederick drily. “What is to be done about that? I could pack you off to Norfolk, I suppose.”

“But I would miss the season!” Annabelle wailed. “That is the whole reason they didn’t take me with them. Don’t send me away.”

“Could you return to Colborne House?” he mused. “I know your brother had exhausted all other homes for you to stay in.”

“Colborne House is all closed up and most of the staff sent away.”

“Damn,” he swore. “What am I supposed to do with you?”

It was a rhetorical question, asked to himself rather than put to Annabelle. Frederick clearly didn’t want her here at Heartwick Hall and she didn’t want to be here either. Tears began to well in her eyes.

“Stephen will sack Myrtle over this, I’m sure. He is going to be so angry at her, and at me, whatever I do. I cannot stay here without a chaperone but I have nowhere to

go.”

After some moments’ consideration, Frederick put down his cutlery and looked at her pointedly.

“Does Stephen have to know?” he said, a thought that had not occurred to Annabelle. “Only my family and you know that the Duchess of Heartwick is remaining at Walden Towers. My stepmother has no social engagements this week and there is no reason for your brother to hear that she was absent at the start of your visit.”

“I would have to lie to him?” Annabelle thought aloud. “And to Duchess Sarah?”

“An omission rather than a lie,” Frederick shrugged. “Do you have a better alternative? Or are you personally frightened of my company?”

A day earlier, Annabelle could have laughed and scoffed at this question from her friend’s older brother. Now, she had seen something of his naked body as well as his other shadowy life. Perhaps she was a little afraid.

“I don’t have any better ideas,” she admitted quietly.

“Well then, let us make the best of things,” Frederick pronounced, putting the letter back into his pocket. “There is nothing more to be said on the subject.”

“There, as pretty as a picture and ready to start the day,” Myrtle declared proudly, as she tied the pale green sash on Annabelle’s white muslin dress the following morning.

Annabelle smiled at the elderly maid in the mirror. Myrtle had indeed done a good job in arranging her simple dress and pinning up her mass of unruly curls. The old woman doubtless believed in her own words, having known and cared for her young

mistress in one way or another since babyhood.

“Thank you, Myrtle. My hair is always just right when you dress it. I can’t trust anyone else’s hand, not even myself.”

“You have such beautiful hair, My Lady,” said Myrtle with satisfaction as she began to put away the brushes, combs and other accoutrements of the morning hour. “I have never seen curls as long and thick as yours.”

“They’re a little too much,” sighed Annabelle, turning away from the mirror.

Everything about her own appearance seemed a little too much to her. Her height was too short to be taken seriously as an adult woman; her figure too plump to be elegant in the fashionable Grecian styles; her breasts too full to hide completely without a wrap; and her hair too heavy to stay put in any style without heavy-duty pinning.

Annabelle had always longed to be more like her friend Penelope, who might also be diminutive in stature but had the slender limbs and pixie-like features to match, never mind the same perfect golden hair and blue eyes of her brother Frederick.

Frederick, oh, damn Frederick! Why must he keep appearing in her mind? Yesterday’s luncheon and dinner had both been hard work for Annabelle, especially knowing that she was entering into a domestic arrangement that would enrage her older brother. Nor could she shake off an uncomfortable awareness of Frederick’s presence and all that had passed between them since her arrival.

Would this feeling last throughout her entire visit? She sincerely hoped not. It would ruin her visit to Heartwick Hall and might even detract from her determination to achieve one important goal this season. That must not be permitted.

“Are you going down to breakfast now, My Lady? The hour is a little early.”

Annabelle glanced at the clock which showed its hands a little after seven. It was far too soon in the day for a layabout like Duke Frederick, hence her early rising.

“I am hungry this morning. I shall see you after breakfast, Myrtle,” Annabelle said and made for the door.

“Good morning, Lady Annabelle,” said Frederick, folding and setting down his newspaper as she entered the breakfast room unawares.

“Oh!” Annabelle said, caught by surprise. “You are awake early today.”

“I often am nowadays,” Frederick shrugged. “When Penelope married and moved away, I promised I would try to keep my stepmother company. So, I do normally keep her regular breakfast hours. I do not remember you as an early riser either.”

“No,” Annabelle admitted with a slight blush, feeling herself caught out in her attempt to avoid him. “But I was hungry.”

She glanced surreptitiously at Frederick across the table as she took her coffee and a warm bread roll from the tray, not wanting him to notice her studying him.

This morning he looked exactly like his usual self, dressed impeccably in a summer suit with carefully combed hair and an almost boyishly handsome and seemingly carefree face. Yet this was the same man she had disturbed yesterday in clandestine activity of some kind with a woman Annabelle supposed to be only one of many such playmates.

The image of his half-naked body seemed burned into her imagination. Something she could not unsee or forget, no matter how hard she tried. Tense and awkward with the effort of controlling her memories, Annabelle quickly ate her first roll and poured a second coffee. Frederick sat in a seemingly contemplative silence which only

further unnerved her. This was ridiculous.

“Have you had any new word from Penelope and Maxwell themselves? My last letter was four days ago,” she said conversationally. “Penelope did promise to keep me informed, but it sounds like they are too busy to write to anyone but family.”

Frederick smiled his familiar brilliant smile.

“No, I have no more recent letter than the one I showed you from Duchess Sarah. But I do believe you’re more excited about this baby than the actual parents, Annabelle. Are you hoping to be godmother?”

She shook her head but could not help blushing pinkly once again. This was something she had hoped for, given that Penelope was her oldest and best friend.

“That will be a decision for the Duke and Duchess of Walden,” she said primly, and then expanded her words instinctively. “I’m only looking forward to meeting the baby. I’m sure it will be the dearest little thing.”

“I shall write and tell them that you must be fairy godmother,” Frederick teased. “You are, after all, the only person small and sweet enough for such a role.”

It really felt for a moment as though yesterday had vanished for Frederick, the slate wiped clean. If she allowed herself to rise to his gentle baiting, Annabelle suspected she could easily forget his other face, and slide back into their old relationship. Unfortunately, Annabelle was a fundamentally honest person and could not permit herself to forget either his impropriety or the way it had disturbed her.

It was sad to admit, but Frederick’s good-natured and innocent approach this morning now felt like some kind of a lie. Annabelle had seen his other face and could not unsee it. It unsettled her further to realize that in a strange way, she did not even want

to unsee it. Frederick had been undeniably pleasing to look upon in his half-stripped animal passion.

Oh, how she missed Penelope at this moment! Always wiser in human nature than Annabelle, and now an experienced married woman, her friend might have been able to help her understand her own feelings if not explain or excuse Frederick's behavior.

No, Annabelle would not react to Frederick's teasing but would instead focus on her goal for the season. If she achieved that then none of this would matter soon enough.

"I plan to attend the opera with Victoria Crawford this evening," Annabelle announced, keeping her dignity as she deliberately changed the subject. "She and her cousins have Maxwell's box for the season and I have never seen Don Giovanni . Before that, I shall spend today on watercolor painting. Duchess Sarah said she would help me with my technique while I am here."

Frederick raised an eyebrow at this news.

"The opera will not be possible tonight, unfortunately," he said, to Annabelle's irritation.

"While Stephen does not approve of Victoria's household, he has no objection to my keeping company with her," she protested. "Victoria Crawford is sister to the Duke of Walden and perfectly respectable."

Frederick held up his hands against her flurry of words.

"I make no accusations against Victoria Crawford. In fact, I personally like and respect her a great deal. Nor has your brother left any instructions that would impede your friendship. It is simply that I am otherwise engaged this evening. Without a suitable chaperone, I cannot let you visit the opera house, especially not for Don

Giovanni .”

“But I must see Victoria,” Annabelle said with dismay. “I have to go. She is engaged for the rest of the week.”

In Penelope and Madeline’s absence, Victoria Crawford was the next best female counsel Annabelle had. While still unmarried, Victoria’s extensive education, wide travel with her older brother and broad acquaintance among the intellectual elite gave her a worldliness and good judgement that Annabelle knew she herself sometimes lacked. She would need all the help she could get in achieving her ambitions.

“I am sorry, Annabelle,” Frederick answered. “I have business in London tonight.”

“Business?” she repeated, unable to keep the mocking tone out of her voice. “Is that what you call it?”

“Yes, I do,” Frederick snapped crossly now, clearly smarting at her jibe. “My sister will soon give birth to a child who will be not only Maxwell’s heir but mine, in the absence of any family of my own. There are legal and logistical arrangements to be finalized and my timing is uncertain. I do not know even know if I will return here tonight.”

“I would be perfectly safe with Victoria,” Annabelle tried to insist one more time. “You do not need to escort me.”

“Yes, I do,” he answered tersely. “Especially because you don’t even understand why it’s necessary. If you had told me of your plans sooner, we might have accommodated them but you cannot expect me to rearrange everything on so little notice. Or do you think the world revolves around you, Annabelle?”

Now it was Annabelle’s turn to smart under whip-like words. She did not believe at



all that the world revolved around her but the accusation still stung. The look in Frederick's eyes told her that there was no way he would change his mind.

"I see," she said, draining her second coffee and rising from the table. "I shall be preparing my equipment in the parlor near the conservatory."

There was no point in further argument. Firstly, because Annabelle could see that Frederick would not change his mind and was likely telling the truth about his commitments in London that day.

Secondly, because she had no intention of letting Frederick ruin her plans. Annabelle saw no reason why she should not join Victoria and her cousins at the theatre without Frederick. He was simply being as pernickety as Stephen often was, perhaps even at Stephen's instruction.

Neither of them could be allowed to get in her way.

"The emerald earrings, please, Myrtle," Annabelle instructed. "The ones my grandmother left to me. They will look well with my blue silk."

"Is this wise, My Lady?" said Myrtle doubtfully, while opening the jewelry box as she was bidden.

"Everyone dresses up at the opera," Annabelle said, dismissing any concern with a smile. "There will be ladies with far finer jewels than mine on display tonight. Anyway, I shall either be in the coach with you or inside the opera house with Victoria Crawford. I don't expect to meet any footpads or jewel thieves in the Duke of Walden's box at the Lyceum."

"I did not mean that, My Lady. Is it really wise for you to go to London tonight without any proper escort? I know Lord Emberly would not like it at all."

“Stephen need not know anything about it, any more than he needs to know about your forgetting to send that letter,” Annabelle said pointedly. “Anyway, I am doing nothing improper. I shall be with you or Victoria for the entire night.”

“His Grace, the Duke of Heartwick will not be happy either,” Myrtle added anxiously. “He did not give his permission, did he? What will happen if he comes back to Heartwick Hall before you and finds you absent?”

“I am one-and-twenty now, Myrtle, and Frederick is Penelope’s brother, not mine. I do not need his permission for an entirely respectable evening at the opera. I even told Stephen last week that I planned to attend this performance and he raised no objections, although he doesn’t like the story himself.”

“That is because Lord Emberly assumed you would be properly accompanied in London, Lady Annabelle. It is not a respectable opera,” continued the maid, in a final attempt at dissuasion. “I have heard that it’s all about a man who has his way with many women and then is taken by the devil for his sins. You don’t want to see that, do you?”

“All the ladies of the ton seem to have seen Don Giovanni, Myrtle, except me, and it has caused no scandal. It can’t be that bad. Anyway, as I speak no Italian, I shall simply enjoy the music and the acting. Pass me my cloak. The carriage is already outside waiting for us.”

With some reluctance, Myrtle handed over the silvery-grey velvet cloak to Annabelle and fastened her own black woolen coat and hat, shaking her head sorrowfully all the while.

Darkly, Annabelle reflected that what she had witnessed in Frederick’s bedroom yesterday had been infinitely more indecent than anything she was likely to see on the stage tonight.

“You came,” said Victoria Crawford with a grin, bending to embrace Annabelle with her usual enthusiasm as the latter entered the opera house. “I hoped you would.”

“Despite the reservations of my maid who believes Don Giovanni to be the devil’s work, yes, here I am,” Annabelle laughed. “I offered Myrtle a seat in the stalls but she prefers to wait for me in the carriage.”

“Dear old Myrtle,” Victoria commented merrily. “I’m sure she has your best interests at heart, but she must be past eighty. The world has moved on.”

Tall and physically assured with golden-brown hair and steady blue eyes Victoria had a striking self-assurance despite being the same age as Annabelle.

“Exactly,” Annabelle agreed as the two women proceeded arm in arm towards the box. “The world moves on and we must move with it. I cannot sit still and let life pass me by, or I will end up an old maid.”

“Being a spinster is not so very bad, as long as you have money,” Victoria pointed out, having always rejected the idea of marriage for herself. “No man to tell you what to do and how to do it. Freedom, independence and none of the mess and danger of childbirth.”

“It is well for you perhaps,” sighed Annabelle. “You are set to be rich whether you marry or not. I would end up the kind of spinster who must live with her family forever. Stephen is likely too particular to ever marry, and if he did, his wife would probably be awful. Either way, I would be a burden and we would all drive one another mad.”

“That does sound exhausting,” Victoria commented, without further judgement.

“Yes, it does. I know that I’m already a burden to my family in some ways and it will

only get worse. So, you see, I have one goal for this season and I am determined to achieve it. This year I will find a husband.”

“Oh my!” laughed Victoria. “You sound as though you’re going to war and launching a military campaign.”

“I suppose I am,” Annabelle reflected. “But does it sound silly? I know I’m not the catch of the ton, but my family and dowry must count for something.”

“My dear Annabelle,” said her friend, stopping for a moment with an amused but concerned expression. “It does not sound silly at all. Young women have so few options and I know how lucky I am. A deliberate campaign to find a good husband might be the only sensible way to go about marriage. Love is certainly too unreliable.”

“That is how I feel too,” Annabelle sighed. “When I was younger, I had dreams of falling in love of course, as all girls do...except you, Victoria. I wished so hard that I would grow up to be beautiful, like Penelope, so that my dream man would love me back. Now, I want only to find a man who is kind, good and meets Stephen’s exacting social standards.”

Victoria nodded thoughtfully and put an arm around her friend’s shoulder.

“You don’t have to be polite, Victoria,” said Annabelle with a sad smile. “I would appreciate your help though. I know some call me a gossip because I know everyone in the ton by reputation but I don’t really know them as people, especially men. You actually have friends who are men. How can I meet men who might consider me as a wife?”

“Let me give that some thought,” said Victoria, with a glint in her eye as she accepted the challenge. “Come, let us take our seats before the curtain rises.”

Annabelle could almost see the cogs of Victoria Crawford's active mind working throughout the performance, her opera glasses in frequent use although rarely trained on the stage itself.

"Let me introduce you to some new acquaintances," Victoria whispered as the curtain fell after the last act. "I have already spotted some prospective husbands for you here tonight and we might be able to catch one or two in the lounge before they leave the theatre."

"Really?" asked Annabelle, excited and also slightly daunted by this news as she followed Victoria towards the theatre's refreshment area. "Who?"

Most women in the room behind the bar were there with men aside from a party of serious-looking elderly ladies with orchestral manuscripts and pince-nez. Victoria, however, was not at all intimidated by entering this male-dominated environment.

There followed a bewildering and frustrating series of introductions to men who seemed too old, too young, too distant, too familiar and all far more interested in either Victoria's work or Annabelle's family than in Annabelle herself.

Annabelle yawned as they walked away. She doubted that a single one of her new acquaintances would remember her in the morning and could not say that she regretted that fact, although it did make her feel like a hopeless failure.

"I'm sorry, Victoria. I don't seem to be very good at this, do I?"

"Tonight is just a first practice," Victoria assured her. "Do not worry. Oh, but there's Alexander Marston and his sister Julia. Do excuse me and wait here for one moment while I check the date of their next scientific salon. It can be of no interest to you. I shall be right back."

As Victoria's dynamic figure dashed away in pursuit of an elegant middle-aged couple in black proceeding away from the bar, Annabelle found herself alone in the still crowded bar room and feeling very self-conscious. Looking around for Victoria's cousins or any familiar lady she might easily approach, she gave a gasp as she recognized one particular blond-haired, blue-eyed face regarding her steadily across the room.

What was Frederick doing here?!

Annabelle felt a surge of guilt about her deceit but also a sense of injustice at apparently being followed. As she had told Myrtle, she was one-and-twenty and deemed legally fit to make her own way in the world, if men like Stephen and Frederick would only stop obstructing her.

To make matters worse, Frederick had not even come forward to meet her, but only watched her from the bar like a teacher in a schoolroom or a prison warden with a captive.

Annabelle also saw that women around him were already casting appreciative glances in his direction, and one or two even trying to catch his eye with welcoming smiles. That sight infuriated her and raised her suspicions. Was it worse if he weren't here on Annabelle's account at all?

"Well, you're a pretty little girl to be here all by yourself, aren't you?" said an unfamiliar man with a mustache and a strong smell of whiskey, approaching from her left and breaking in on her vexed thoughts.

The man was around forty and his clothing and voice implied that he was someone of rank and means, to whom good manners might normally be owed. However, his drunken and over-interested expression made Annabelle distinctly uncomfortable and she shrank instinctively from his approach. Lord Silverbrook had been a man of rank

and means too, and look at what a blackguard he had turned out to be.

“I am here with friends,” Annabelle said shortly, hoping that this would deter him from seeking further acquaintance. “They will return presently.”

“You’ve lost your friends? Well then, I shall be your new friend. As Don Giovanni showed us, young women should not be left unprotected in this wicked world.”

The man’s smile was almost a leer as he placed a hand on Annabelle’s gloved arm. She jerked away in alarm and revulsion, smelling the drink on the man’s breath even more strongly now as he loomed over her.

“Keep your distance, sir!” she ordered him as sternly as she could while keeping her voice down and attempting to step out of his reach.

The last thing Annabelle wanted was a scene in the opera house that would draw public attention and likely draw Stephen’s wrath too when he heard about it. The best thing might be to simply run away now and seek the safety of her carriage with the Heartwick Hall coachman and Myrtle. With dismay, however, she realized that the mustachioed man was standing between her and the nearest doors.

A woman as tall and athletic as Victoria Crawford or Duchess Madeline might physically push this rude, intrusive man aside but Annabelle knew that she was far too small for this. Feeling panicked and helpless, she feared that she was going to have to scream in order to save herself from being publicly manhandled by this stranger.

“Go away!” she hissed, realizing from his amused expression that her anger was only entertaining the stranger.

“I want to be friends,” he said. “You look like a friendly girl to me.”

As he reached out a hand towards her this time, another hand intervened, grasping the mustachioed man's hand firmly by the wrist and twisting it with a force that made him cry out in alarm.

"Be careful, the floor is a little unsteady there," said Frederick's voice rather menacingly, although anyone further away than Annabelle might only think he was warning the man of a genuine hazard. "You would not want to fall and injure yourself."

"I am sorry. I thought the young lady was here alone," the man tried desperately to excuse himself as Frederick continued to twist his wrist. "I meant no harm."

"Then go," the handsome young duke ordered him. "Get out of my sight and never let me find you pressing unwanted attention on a woman again."

His wrist now released, the man stumbled away and through the doors towards the exit, his face contorted with confusion and fear.

"My word! What was that about?" exclaimed Victoria, now rejoining them, her amazed eyes following the mustachioed man through the doors and then returning to Frederick.

Annabelle blushed miserably, feeling that the incident and rows that were bound to follow were all her fault. She waited for Frederick to upbraid her but it didn't happen.

"A man with too great an appetite for alcohol and too little regard for vulnerable young ladies," he said, the cold anger that had made his face so hard a few moments earlier fading into solicitous concern. "I hope he did not frighten you too much, Annabelle."

"There are too many such men in London," Victoria tutted. "I'm sorry I left you



alone, Annabelle. It was remiss of me.”

“I am perfectly well,” Annabelle said, her voice unconvincing even to her as she struggled to hold back the tears forming in her eyes. “He did give me something of a shock but Frederick dealt with him.”

“He certainly did,” Victoria said with a nod. “I saw that much. Maxwell always said there was steel under your silk, Frederick. Now I know what he meant.”

Annabelle choked back a small sob, disoriented and overwhelmed by everything that had happened in so short a space of time. There was indeed some iron-strong substance beneath Frederick’s disarming silky charm and she felt she was seeing a third face to him in little over a day.

“It is time for us to return to Heartwick Hall,” he announced decidedly, observing Annabelle’s struggles for composure. “Should we escort you home on the way, Victoria?”

“No, my cousins will be waiting for me in our carriage by now.”

After quick farewells, Annabelle walked outside to the carriage on Frederick’s arm, glad for the solidity of his form beside her but anticipating the admonitions she knew must follow eventually.

### CHAPTER 3

“I shall take Lady Annabelle straight up to bed,” Myrtle clucked as they walked into the hallway at Heartwick Hall. “I told her it was a most upsetting subject for an opera but she would not listen. Now look at the poor child. Thank God you visited the opera house and brought her home, Your Grace.”

“I must speak to Annabelle first,” Frederick said in a voice that brooked no dissent. “In the drawing room, please.”

Annabelle’s heart fell and she looked down miserably at the floor. She could see the scarcely restrained exasperation and ill-temper on his face as well as hearing them in his tone.

In the carriage, Frederick had been curt and quiet but solicitous, explaining Annabelle’s emotional state to Myrtle as upset from the performance and leaving the old woman to fuss over her like a mother hen, settling her with cloaks and cushions like an invalid or child. Despite the silence, Annabelle had known that there would be consequences for her actions that evening. Now it was time to face them.

“Would it not be better to speak in the morning, Your Grace?” pleaded Myrtle. “My Lady is so very tired.”

“All is well, Myrtle,” Annabelle assured her quietly, going to the drawing room door. “I will speak to Duke Frederick now. Please wait for me upstairs.”

Once the door had closed and Myrtle’s footsteps died away, Frederick turned to

Annabelle.

“Take a seat,” he told her and paced over to the window, gathering his thoughts as an unhappy Annabelle waited to hear them.

“I did not know you were so untrustworthy,” Frederick said finally, the bald accusation and icy tone coming as a shock to her.

“Untrustworthy?” she said blankly, shaking her head.

“You deceived me. I expect you deceived Victoria Crawford and her cousins too. What else would you call your behavior tonight if not untrustworthy?”

Annabelle stood up and faced him across the room.

“How dare stand there and lecture me about deception the very day after bringing that woman into the house and then encouraging me to deceive my brother and Duchess Sarah about the circumstances in which I find myself at Heartwick Hall?”

“You do not understand what you’re talking about,” Frederick shot back. “It is entirely different. Neither myself nor anyone else has been placed in jeopardy through my actions. As for my stepmother or Stephen, you may tell them what you like if you are willing to cause them unnecessary distress and handle the fallout. Tonight, in contrast, you placed yourself in very real danger.”

“You’re twisting everything!” Annabelle shouted at him, confused and angry.

“Do you not see how helpless you were tonight, Annabelle? What would have happened if I hadn’t sent a messenger to check whether your family’s coach was at the opera house? What would have happened if I had not been there to intervene?”

She shook her head stubbornly, unwilling to admit Frederick was making a good point until he conceded his own faults.

“You had me followed? I can’t believe you did that, Frederick. Am I to be followed about the entire time I stay at Heartwick Hall?”

“Yes, damn it all, if you prove yourself so untrustworthy. If I have to follow you all over London to keep my promise to your brother, I will.”

“I’m not a child who needs a nursemaid!” Annabelle shouted at him furiously. “I’m one-and-twenty!”

“When you behave like a sensible adult woman, I shall treat you like one!” he shouted back. “You’re just a damned, helpless...innocent!”

“And you Frederick Hayward are nothing but a...a...a...”

“Enough!” Frederick blazed, holding up a hand to silence her before she could think of an insult. “You are under my roof, Annabelle. Until Stephen returns, you must listen to my guidance, act as I tell you to act and follow my command.”

Annabelle began to cry with both rage and frustration now. She knew she was helpless and she hated it but there seemed nothing to be done. She was hardly going to grow any bigger now, and developing a more forceful personality seemed almost equally unlikely. Everyone seemed to see her as a child.

“I’m just a burden, aren’t I?” she sobbed. “To my family and to you. I have to find a husband this season, Frederick. I have to if I don’t want to be a burden forever. Can you even begin to understand? That’s why I must go out and about and meet people, like tonight, and try... I don’t know how to do it, but I must marry...”

“Marry?!” he repeated with what sounded like complete consternation.

“I know I’m not wise in such matters. I thought Victoria might advise me since she knows so many men, but it turns out they may not be the right sort of men to marry.”

“You never thought to ask me about this?” Frederick asked, to Annabelle’s surprise.

“Well, no,” she admitted, staring at him with consternation even greater than his own.

The fact was that such an idea would never have occurred to her, even if yesterday’s unfortunate bedroom incident had never happened. Frederick was a man, and Frederick was a rake. On both counts, he was not the first person she would have thought to consult on her own marital ambitions.

Still, for some reason, her definite answer seemed to irk Frederick.

“So, rather than consulting someone who has your best interests at heart and would have ensured your personal safety, you chose to deceive everyone and venture out to try your fortune with insufficient protection.”

“I was with Victoria!” she pointed out.

“Until you weren’t! Do you have any idea what that man could have done to you, Annabelle, if I hadn’t been there to stop him?”

The feeling on Frederick’s handsome face appeared to be genuine as he spoke and Annabelle felt a flash of insight and then a pang of compassion.

“Is this about me, or Penelope, Frederick?” she said quietly now. “Penelope is well. Maxwell saved her from Lord Silverbrook, didn’t he?”

“Yes, and I am grateful to him. I always will be. But she never asked me for help...”

His voice trailed off as he frowned and wrestled with some internal puzzle. Evidently, regardless of the happy ending to the matter, Frederick had not forgiven himself for ever allowing Lord Silverbrook to get so close to Penelope.

“I shall help you to find a husband, Annabelle,” he stated unexpectedly, his blue eyes focusing again and looking straight into hers with great determination.

The fierceness and flush of his face recalled again the sight of him yesterday, half-naked and rising from the floor to meet Penelope’s gaze. Her stomach flipped and clenched as the image passed in front of her mind’s eye, her heart beating faster and heat rising in her face.

Involuntarily, she looked away from Frederick’s handsome face and cast down her eyes, afraid of the powerful stream of sensations he was inadvertently provoking. Annabelle almost wished she could faint at will, as some young ladies claimed to be able to do, in order to escape this experience.

She gasped aloud as Frederick reached out a hand and gently tilted up her chin to meet his gaze again. Her face was burning. At her yelp, he drew back his arm immediately as though he had not realized what he was doing.

“You seem to doubt me,” he said, evidently misunderstanding her reaction to his offer. “I can help you and I will.”

“How could a man like you help me marry? You are a rake!” Annabelle blurted, wondering what kind of game he was playing.

His expression hardened again at these words. Was he actually speaking in earnest?

“In which case, you must concede that I’m in a better position than Victoria Crawford to advise you on what men find desirable in a woman. With my guidance, you could have every eligible man of the ton eating from your palm.”

“What do you mean?” Annabelle breathed, now unable to break her eyes from his.

“To begin with, from now on, you must spend your nights with me...”

### CHAPTER 4

Annabelle's gave a yelp of horrified surprise, jumping back from him as though he had transformed into some terrible beast.

"Despite your innocence, your imagination is perhaps more sordid than mine has ever been, Lady Annabel," he teased her. "I meant only that you will be attending an array of evening entertainments at my side, in order to broaden your male acquaintance. One way or another, I shall find you a suitable husband before the season is out. Are we agreed?"

"Well...yes... thank you, but why must you always tease me?" Annabelle said crossly, ever more stirred up and confused about how to act in Frederick's presence.

She did not know whether she more wanted to stick out her tongue at him, slap him or hug him out of gratitude. Maybe all of them.

"Because you make it so easy," Frederick said thoughtfully, considering her question seriously. "I suppose I also...like teasing you."

That fierce interest glinted once more in Frederick's blue eyes as he contemplated both Annabelle and his answer to her question. She continued to blush deeply. There was something like a powerful hunger in his gaze and at that moment she sensed she was in danger of becoming its object, just as that other woman had been yesterday in his bedroom.

"I must sleep now," she said with a squeak in her voice and was relieved that



Frederick did not attempt to halt her flight from the room.

Frederick was already in the breakfast room again the next morning when Annabelle came downstairs, folding his newspaper and giving her his full attention and a brilliant, if somewhat forced, smile as soon as she entered the room.

“Have there been any letters this morning?” Annabelle asked politely after exchanging the usual morning greetings and taking her seat with a carefully controlled dignity that belied the tumult of her emotions.

Their exchange in the drawing room the previous evening echoed in her head even more loudly in Frederick’s presence than it had done upstairs as she dressed with Myrtle. His offer had been a peculiar one and she still did not know exactly how to take it, or how to interpret the words – and touches – they had exchanged.

“Not this morning,” Frederick answered her question, shaking his head.

“Oh,” Annabelle said, slightly surprised. “I thought I saw a messenger leaving from the window of my room while I was dressing.”

Frederick shook his head again and grinned.

“There have been no messages received today at Heartwick Hall. I do admit, however, that I did dispatch a message to London first thing this morning. If you are to find a husband this season, you must be suitably educated and attired. We should have a visitor this afternoon who can help with this.”

“A visitor?” Annabelle asked with a smile, unable to hide her automatic excitement, even though she knew Frederick was likely to be teasing her a little with his deliberately intriguing turn of phrase. “Who is coming to call? Is it anyone I know?”

“Perhaps you might... Do you know Madame Deveaux?”

“The modiste ? Of course. I mean, I know of her. She is the finest dressmaker in London. Stephen and Mother say she is too French and I have never had a dress from her, but her gowns are quite wonderful on other ladies. But why is she coming here?”

Frederick laughed at this question.

“Why, she’s coming to dress you, of course, Annabelle. I am not in the market for new French gowns myself, and nor is Duchess Sarah.”

“Me?” Annabelle questioned, both shocked and pleased. “But Stephen...”

“Stephen isn’t here,” Frederick interrupted her. “I am, and I know Madame Deveaux well. She will make you gowns that are as modest and becoming as you wish. If you are to set out on a quest for a husband, I believe you will be best equipped to do so with a new wardrobe.”

For a few moments, it felt as though the sun shone in Annabelle’s heart and she even clapped her hands like a child at the thought of such fun. A new gown from Madame Deveaux! A whole new wardrobe from Madame Deveaux! Frederick was smiling with her, seeming equally happy at the prospect. Then Annabelle remembered herself. She was not a child, after all.

“But it’s too much, Frederick,” she said with a sigh. “Far too much.”

“No, it isn’t,” he stated firmly. “I have more money than I need and I like making you presents just as much as I like teasing you, Annabelle. If you let me do the first, perhaps I will learn to restrain myself from the second.”

Despite her best efforts, she could not help returning the smile that accompanied

these humorous words. They made her feel warm inside and slightly achy, as though she actually wanted him to make her gifts and tease her but could not ask.

“I have also given Myrtle the day off and she has already departed to visit her niece,” Annabelle pointed out. “Surely I would need a lady’s maid to help me if I am ordering new clothes. I am not very good at describing fit and fabric and so on, Frederick. I might get everything wrong without Myrtle.”

“You have me,” he said. “However my experience has been acquired, I promise that you will find me a more than competent in all necessary respects. No woman has ever complained about a dress I have had made for her.”

“Oh,” Annabelle responded, these reassurances provoking both further warmth in her belly and dismay at the thought that Frederick had likely commissioned Madame Deveaux to make dresses for many of his paramours.

“So, you see, there are no real objections to be made,” said her breakfast companion finally. “It is all settled.”

“Then, I can only thank you,” she said haltingly at last. “I did not expect anything like this when you said you would help me.”

Frederick grinned at her, and pushed a plate of fresh lemon cake across the table towards her.

“Do not overthink matters,” he said. “Just enjoy.”

Was that his personal motto in life, Annabelle wondered?

“This must be the young lady you mentioned, Your Grace?” said the Frenchwoman, looking Annabelle up and down critically as though she was a prize heifer at the fair,

both with the lorgnettes that hung from her neck and without.

At first, Annabelle felt very English, clumsy and frumpily dressed under the eye of this elegant continental lady of around fifty years, whose figure would have been the envy of any women twenty years her junior. Then, she realized that the modiste's expression was one of interest and satisfaction, not negative judgement of any sort, and she relaxed a little.

"Yes, this is Lady Annabelle Elkins, a good family friend who is staying with us for some time," Frederick introduced her. "Annabelle's brother is Lord Emberly and her father is the Duke of Colborne."

"A good family," nodded Madame Deveau, with a knowing smile. "But very conservative, non ? I see that much even in the lines of your dress, Lady Annabelle."

"I suppose they are," Annabelle admitted with a sigh. "My brother is generous with my clothing allowance but I have only ever had dresses from my mother's dressmaker, Mrs. Fenchurch."

"A very good dressmaker, at least for the older lady," said Madame Deveau understandingly. "Your present dress is of excellent quality. Mrs. Fenchurch uses only the best fabrics and her workers are all highly skilled, but none of them have ever been to Paris."

Frederick's mouth quirked in a little smile.

"I think that that is exactly what Annabelle needs, clothes that look like they could have come from Paris. Am I right, Annabelle?"

Annabelle imagined herself walking along the Mall in an elegant Parisian walking dress and jacket of the latest cut. In her fantasy, other young ladies looked at her

enviously and young men asked their sisters who she was... It felt like an impossible daydream but Madame Deveau was here in front of her now with bags full of plates, samples and color swatches.

“Yes, I would like that,” she said very quietly, making Frederick laugh again and turn his teasing blue eyes to her in fun.

“I assure you, Madame Deveau, Lady Annabelle is far more enthusiastic about this venture than she might seem at the present moment.”

“I know she is, Your Grace,” said the modiste, somewhat reprovingly. “I can see it in her eyes.”

She smiled kindly at the younger woman and picked up her bags. Madame Deveau seemed to somehow instinctively understand people and treat them as equals without seeming to violate the code of respect for rank. Annabelle decided that she liked her, whatever her past connections with Frederick may have been.

“Come, let us go to your dressing room and begin our work,” said the dressmaker.

At these words, Annabelle halted and looked uncertainly between Frederick and the Frenchwoman.

“Madame Deveau can hardly measure you up and drape you in samples in the drawing room, can she?” snorted Frederick at Annabelle’s hesitation and then chuckled. “Witmore might come in.”

“I will follow you, Lady Annabelle,” Madame Deveau said, ignoring Frederick’s jibes. “We will do your fittings however you wish.”

Annabelle nodded and walked upstairs at the Frenchwoman’s side, Frederick a little

behind them and humming a tune to himself lightly under his breath.

To Annabelle's consternation, he followed them into her bedroom and through to the dressing room door. Now she did feel some panic about what she was getting herself into.

Was Frederick actually expecting to stay in the room with her while she undressed? He was an utter rake after all, but she had no reasons to think he really had designs on her, his sister's best friend whom he had known since childhood.

Luckily, Madame Deveaux soon took control of the situation.

"Now, Your Grace, you will stay here in the bedroom and look through my bag of plates and samples to make some first suggestions for your young friend. We can trust your eye, I know. Meanwhile, I shall go with Lady Annabelle into the dressing room and take the necessary measurements."

To Annabelle's relief, Frederick nodded as though this was what he had been expecting all along. Presumably it was. It was only her own naivety that had suggested anything else.

"I was thinking soft colors, like springtime," he said, opening the bag. "Bluebell and hyacinth, like Annabelle's eyes, and light greens and yellows. Simple clean lines too, and not too much heavy fabric. People must see Annabelle's body as well as her gowns. Presently, she sometimes looks a prisoner inside them."

"I agree," the modiste nodded with amusement, even as Annabelle made a sound of indignation at this characterization of her present mode of dress.

Ushering Annabelle in front of her, Madame Deveaux closed the dressing room door behind them and took out her measuring tapes and notebook while Annabelle stripped

down to her petticoats.

“Take off all but your stockings and stays and put this on,” the older woman instructed.

She handed Annabelle a pale dressing gown of the finest oyster-colored silk while she herself had donned an apron with many pockets.

“Mrs. Fenchurch always measures over my petticoats,” noted Annabelle uncertainly.

“Mrs. Fenchurch is likely under instruction from your mother not to make your gowns too form-fitting or to draw too much attention to your body’s curves,” the Frenchwoman smiled. “But if you are hunting for a husband, I think your dress requirements are a little different this season, non ?”

“Frederick told you that?” said Annabelle with self-conscious dismay but the Frenchwoman demurred.

“No, but the duke did tell me that you wished to make a strong statement this season. There is usually only one reason why a young lady should have such a wish and I have been around long enough to know it, Lady Annabelle. Your friend did not betray your confidence.”

“Oh. I must sound very foolish to you, wanting to dress up like an elegant Parisian lady and find a husband when I am really only short and chubby and English.”

Madame Deveaux tutted and frowned at this assertion, her back turned slightly to allow Annabelle the chance to undress further with some modesty.

“Nonsense. In well-fitting clothes, any woman can be elegant and many can be beautiful. You, for example, I believe could be very lovely. Your skin is perfect and

your face is appealing. As for your figure, your bosom would be the envy of half of London, if they only saw more of it. Your future husband will be a very lucky man.”

Although she did not believe them, the compliments sounded sincere and made Annabelle blush with pleasure. No one had ever complemented her breasts before and she had certainly never considered anyone else envying them. In fact, she spent half of her life trying to hide them entirely or at least cover them and hold them immobile.

Once she was in the thin dressing gown, Madame Deveau set to work taking speedy and efficient measurements and scribbling notes deftly as she moved up, down and around Annabelle’s body.

“May I see your stays?” she asked Annabelle, putting her pencil back into an apron pocket and gesturing towards the opening of the dressing gown.

Annabelle unfastened the dressing gown and showed the robust garment underneath to the modiste .

“As I thought,” the woman murmured. “Are all your stays in this style?”

Again Annabelle nodded. She had worn the same style of underwear ever since her body had first developed and no one had ever suggested she should do otherwise.

“Then, we shall have some new ones made. Your present stays are those of a young girl, constructed to hide and minimize what cannot and should not be hidden in an adult woman. You shall have more appropriate undergarments that lift and support your bosom comfortably.”

She scribbled another note on her pad as Annabelle tied up the robe again, her eyes bright with wonder. She had never had a proper conversation about underwear before. Her breasts had always seemed so large that Annabelle had assumed she was doomed



to wear the plain and matronly stays provided by her mother for ever.

“Now, let us begin to look at some ideas for dresses,” said the dressmaker brightly, stepping to the door and walking back through to the bedroom, evidently expecting Annabelle to simply follow.

Annabelle, however, hung back nervously in the dressing room. She had assumed that she would dress fully again before they rejoined Frederick but apparently she had been naive once more.

Both Frederick and Madame Deveaux seemed to expect her to walk around in only her stays, stockings and the thin shimmer of a cover from the silk robe, bound only with a loose belt. Annabelle was not sure that she dared.

### CHAPTER 5

“ Annabelle?” Frederick called after a minute had passed. “Do you need some assistance?”

“No!” she called back swiftly, tying the robe even more tightly in case he came in. “It is only that...”

She paused and swallowed, unable to find the words to express her reticence, her fears and also her longing to be braver. Annabelle wished that she was more worldly and knew better how to deal with such situations but at the moment it felt beyond her.

Then, she heard Madame Deveaux instruct Frederick in quick terse French to stay in the bedroom. A moment later, the modiste returned to Annabelle .

“You are shy, are you not?” she said from the doorway, addressing Annabelle without any annoyance or judgement. “It is well for young women to be a little shy but there is no need today. Do you think you can trust me?”

Annabelle nodded, but then her eyes met those of Frederick who had appeared behind Madame Deveaux’s shoulder. The sun was shining in through the window and catching his hair, giving his handsome face something like a golden aura.

She thought again of his resemblance to a young Greek god and shivered at being caught in his sights like this, even half-skulking behind a rail in the dressing room. She knew well from secretive reading of the ancient myths that gods could be very dangerous to mortal maidens.

“Can you trust Duke Frederick?” the modiste asked, again without pressure. “You have known him for a long time, I believe, although I understand that this situation is unusual for you.”

Could Annabelle trust him? With women in general, of course not. He was a rake. But he was also Frederick, Penelope’s brother, and he was the same Duke of Heartwick who had so forcefully extricated her from the grasp of that awful man last night - showing a nature of steel under silk, as Victoria had said.

It really was as though Frederick were three men at once. Still, none of the three had ever done her any harm and all of them seemed well-intentioned towards her.

“Yes, I do trust Frederick, I think,” she said quietly, hoping that her trust was not misplaced. “It is only as you say, Madame Deveaux, that I am shy. I have never even been to the dressmaker without my mother before, which is ridiculous for a grown woman.”

“I will be with you all the time,” said the older woman. “You will not be compromised by this appointment today, I promise.”

“I would never do anything to hurt you, Annabelle,” Frederick added. “You know that.”

In that moment, she felt that she did. Very slowly, Annabelle emerged from the dressing room and smiled uncertainly at her companions. While she feared that the bright rays of sunlight might make the thin silk robe translucent, neither of her companions showed any awareness of such a development and Annabelle pushed it from her mind.

“Where do we begin?” she said.

“Annabelle liked this light green silk,” Frederick said, holding up a long swathe of fabric. “I think it’s better for the evening dress rather than the ballgown.”

He cast it casually over Annabelle’s shoulder as he spoke, the fabric cascading down, front and back.

“It drapes elegantly over her curves, don’t you think, Madame Deveaux? The color brings out the fire in her hair too.”

Annabelle held her breath as his fingers brushed aside a stray ringlet that had fallen away from its pins.

“Yes,” said Madame Deveaux thoughtfully, scribbling notes as she spoke. “I would recommend a thicker silk for the ballgown, at least for the bodice. But the evening dress will be less structured, more flowing. Empire line, I think, but perhaps clasped at the shoulders for a Grecian note.”

In line with the dressmaker’s words, Frederick arranged the fabric around Annabelle’s neckline, his fingers barely touching her but still far too intimate for comfort. Annabelle could feel herself tensing and reacting to every slight contact in a way that made her feel she was undergoing some strange but disturbingly pleasurable physical trial.

“Stand a little straighter, Annabelle,” he instructed her. “We must see how the fabric falls. No, shoulders back too. You’re all hunched over. Straighten up here, and here.”

In illustration, Frederick’s hand glanced over her shoulder blades and then ran lightly up her spine from waist to nape, the unexpected contact making Annabelle catch her breath. Did he think she was a doll or a dressmaker’s dummy? Or did he know the effect such touches would have?

“That’s it, just right,” Frederick murmured, a hand lightly on each shoulder as he stood behind her now, and his breath feeling like it was caressing her neck when he then leaned forward to rearrange the fabric to his satisfaction over her bust.

Annabelle could not help the sigh that resulted from these touches. Where had that come from? Perhaps this dressmaking adventure had not been such a good idea after all. Stephen would certainly have deemed it improper, regardless of Frederick’s intentions and the presence of Madame Deveaux, but it was too late to back out now.

“No, I think we should keep the neckline simpler,” stated Frederick after further consideration. “Look how this color compliments Annabel’s skin and hair. It’s like limpid seawater against pearl and sunrise. Why ruin such a perfect contrast by adding clasps?”

“He is right,” laughed the Frenchwoman, making a further note on her pad. “This silk could have been made for you, Lady Annabelle.”

“So, we will cut in a low sweep, here and here, with only a slight draping to the fabric over the bosom,” noted the modiste, touching Annabelle’s side-body to indicate her intentions.

Frederick nodded, the fixing of his gaze on her breasts beneath the dressing gown making her pulse race.

“Or even lower,” he suggested, causing her heart to flip as he actually touched the silken gown at the side of her breast, so lightly that it was barely a touch at all. “Here perhaps? For a Parisian-style evening gown. Annabelle could carry that off.”

“Ah, but you must take account of new stays,” advised Madame Deveaux. “I should have mentioned that Lady Annabelle will require new underwear too. Better constructed stays make the bust higher and fuller.”

“Of course,” he agreed, as though they were merely discussing the weather rather than the intimate dimensions of her body. “Then here, a little higher, as you originally said.”

Annabelle bit her lip as he touched the same spot of silken fabric again, with barely detectable pressure on the flesh beneath. She was trying so hard not to react but with this focus on her breasts, even hidden under the robe, her body was aching and throbbing in a way she had never experienced.

“Stand back, please, Your Grace,” said the dressmaker, her tone clear but polite. “I must see more closely for myself.”

Frederick halted for a moment and then nodded, stepping away to let Madame Deveaux and her tape measure take his place before Annabelle. His face was averted and although Annabelle could not tell what he was thinking, she noted his closed eyes, the heightened color of his skin and set of his jaw.

“I want this to be one of the dresses of the season, Madame,” Frederick continued after a few moments, his expression deadly serious as he opened his eyes. “Do not skimp on the best materials and workers. The cost is immaterial to me. Lady Annabelle must catch the eye of every bachelor in London.”

Annabelle herself was both touched and disturbed by this declaration. It again made her feel something like prize animal being groomed, decorated and fêted by an expert salesman .

“I understand,” agreed the Frenchwoman. “It shall be as you say. With Lady Annabelle’s figure, it will not be so very hard to achieve.”

Following two evening gowns, they planned the ballgown, a day dress and walking suit and even a night-gown of the same silk as the semi-diaphanous robe. Madame

Deveaux advocated the purchase of such attire for her anticipated wedding night, supported by Frederick who seemed to think nothing of a woman wearing only such a scanty wisp of fabric.

Annabelle's cheeks had been flaming since the moment she stepped out of the dressing room. Now she no longer dared to even glance in the looking-glass for fear of seeing the full-body blush and tousled hair that she knew must be visible to all.

"But what would my husband say when he saw me in such a garment!" she exclaimed of the nightgown, much to Frederick's amusement.

"He would say only that you are very beautiful," Madame Deveaux asserted confidently but Frederick shook his head.

"I am sure that he would say nothing at all," he told Annabelle with an amused but knowing expression. "Men are simple creatures and easily overwhelmed by such a sight as you see in that plate."

"Overwhelmed?" queried Annabelle, slightly alarmed, handing the sketch back swiftly to the modiste .

"In a good way," Madame Deveaux assured her. "Your friend the Duke of Heartwick teases you, non?"

"He always does," Annabelle acknowledged, feeling a little overwhelmed herself at this point. "He always has, for as long as I've known him."

"Are you telling me to stop?" Frederick asked, raising his eyebrow and reminding Annabelle of his admission that he actually enjoyed teasing her. "I would if you really wanted me to."

Despite her involuntary responses to his light contacts with her barely dressed body, and her confusion over the rushing and throbbing his proximity seemed to arouse, she had enjoyed their time together, especially having Frederick's full attention. She could not claim otherwise.

"No, I only wish I was older and sharper and knew how to answer you better," Annabelle answered truthfully.

"I should have no sport at all if you were all worldly and sophisticated, would I?" the Duke of Heartwick said with a smile that made her shiver.

"Remember, these new dresses are only to display your natural form at its best, not to change you, Lady Annabelle," Madame Deveaux added. "Now, I shall put away all the samples and then we will return to the dressing room so I can make some final measurements for undergarments to suit your gown choices."

"You are marvel, Madame," said Frederick with a bow to the dressmaker, as he headed for the bedroom door, his part in the visit now played. "Don't forget that all bills must come to me. We can't have Lord Emberly spoiling all the fun before it even starts, can we?"

"What kind of man do you seek for a husband, Lady Annabelle?" Madame Deveaux asked conversationally, finishing the repacking of her bags as Annabelle dressed herself. "A rich man? A handsome man? A man of great rank?"

"A good man," Annabelle said, with a little smile to herself. "My ambitions are not so great as many young ladies of the ton. He must have a certain degree of fortune and rank if my brother is to approve a match, but for myself, I think I long most for kindness."

"That is a true virtue," the older woman agreed, "and a wise choice for a young



woman to make, even if it can be equally hard to find as more worldly qualities. You do not speak of l'amour , of love. Is that not also a consideration?"

"It has always felt like too much to ask," Annabelle admitted. "I do not think that I am the kind of woman that men love. As Frederick said, I am not worldly or sophisticated. I do not know at all how to flirt. If he had not offered to help me, I would not know how to begin seeking a husband."

Something in this explanation amused the modiste.

" Duke Frederick has been a good friend to you, non? Has he never spoken to you of love? Perhaps he might help you to find it somewhere. "

"Love? Frederick?" Annabelle laughed aloud at this idea. "I do not believe he knows the first thing about love or seeks it for himself. I have no reason to believe he could help anyone else to find it."

"Men are not such simple creatures as Duke Frederick claims, Lady Annabelle," the French woman advised her, stepping in to help with buttons and tapes. "Men too may feel unworthy of love. They may seek love without knowing that is what they chase. Some seek it again and again with woman after woman but it is never there until someone convinces them they are worth loving."

"So, you're saying that...rakes only want to be loved?" asked Annabelle with a confused frown at this peculiar idea.

Madame Deveaux laughed gently and shook her head.

"No, no, Lady Annabelle. Be very wary of such men for your own safety. I say only that some men who appear to be rakes, as you say it, are not really so. Well, you are young. Such things will become clear to you in time."

The fitting was over and Madame Deveaux took up her bags, leaving Annabelle to turn over this strange final conversation in her head.

Thanking the modiste for her services and consideration, Annabelle led her back downstairs and out to her carriage. As already arranged with Frederick, who was apparently a valued customer of long-standing, the new clothes would be ready for the first fitting within days. Madame Deveaux looked forward to seeing Annabelle again in London soon.

“Good evening, Frederick. Is there any news from Walden Towers yet?”

Frederick’s eyes were on Annabelle as she entered the dining room and took her seat at his right hand, near the head of the long table. She wore a slightly fussy yellow muslin with embroidered flowers, looking a little like a child in her mother’s dress.

“No, there have been no letters today. I do not really expect anything unless there is news of the baby, or the day before Duchess Sarah’s return,” Frederick informed his guest. “I would, of course, inform you of any such news.”

This was the first time he had spoken to Annabelle since their session with the modiste earlier although he had watched her from a window walking in the gardens after luncheon, then swinging from Penelope’s old swing, and finally being chased by a bee...

Recalling that last scene made him smile again, having chuckled to himself at the time. He would have gone outside to aid her if she had been stung, of course, or at risk from any genuinely dangerous creature. With a mere bee, her frantic alarm was only funny, and somewhat sweet.

“Oh, of course. Thank you,” Annabelle replied politely and Frederick felt slightly disappointed that she did not look directly at him or smile as she spoke but rather

shyly and down at the table setting.

She made one or two further impersonal remarks about the weather and the gardens while the chicken soup was being served and then fell into self-conscious silence as she began to eat. Her body language was more tense and cautious than usual and Frederick began to suspect he was responsible.

“You have been busy this afternoon, Annabelle,” he remarked lightly. “I have not seen you since luncheon.”

“I was outside for most of the day. I needed fresh air and did not wish to keep you from your usual business.”

Again, her words were clipped and anodyne, inviting no further engagement. This was not the Annabelle Frederick knew who could chatter and gossip amusingly for hours if encouraged.

Had she deliberately avoided him since the modiste’s call? He was sure that Annabelle had enjoyed planning her clothes with him and Madame Deveaux, just as he had wished. Still, he could not deny that it had been a risqué experience for such an innocent young woman. He would be sorry if she regretted it.

“I hope you enjoyed meeting Madame Deveaux today and that your new wardrobe will please you,” Frederick said and saw Annabelle immediately color, reinforcing his suspicion that this was part of what was on her mind.

“I did, very much,” she answered, glancing up at him shyly, and then back to her soup. “Stephen would certainly not approve, but it is the most generous present I have ever been given.”

“Then we must find you a match before Stephen ever has the chance to find out that

his sister is now one of London's most fashionably dressed young ladies.”

At last, he did receive a smile, if a tentative one. Still, it raised his spirits and gave him hope that any error on his part had been minor and open to correction.

“You have bought dresses from Madame Deveaux before, I think,” Annabelle said carefully and Frederick's heart sank again as he nodded confirmation to this obvious truth.

“Yes, but that was different,” he told her. “It need not concern you in any way. Let us only look forward to your new dresses.”

When he had commissioned Madame Deveaux to measure and fit dresses for any of his lovers, it had always been entirely different. A series of enthusiastic widows, freethinkers and women from the artistic classes had been all too keen to tease him with casually undressed bodies and talk of scanty underwear and easily unfastened bodices.

Commissioning a wardrobe for Annabelle, however, had been intended as a blameless gift and useful toolbox in her hunt for a husband rather than an erotic interlude. Regardless, Frederick recognized that the familiar frisson of male-female attraction had been in the room with them today, despite Annabelle's innocence and Frederick's best efforts to control his instincts.

Focusing on fabrics, fits and illustrations, he had hoped that Annabelle would not notice the atmosphere, but she had certainly perceived something even if she had not understood it, blushing and breathing harder every time he came near. She had shown herself physically responsive to the lightest of touches and inflamed an imagination Frederick was still wrestling to keep under lock and key tonight.

Half the world thought him a rake and Frederick now wondered if it were true. He'd

always denied this label before, seeing himself only as a man who physically enjoyed women and was fortunately well-blessed with the means to attract and satisfy them. His lovers were experienced, willing and at least equal in age. He had seduced or abused no one and took care not to get women with child.

Yet now, it seemed that Frederick had in some way inadvertently begun to seduce Annabelle, of all people, rousing feelings that evidently disturbed her and maybe even marred her trust in him. All because of their silly argument yesterday and his impulsive and reckless gift to her today.

Now he must somehow restore the balance between them and wipe away the nervousness holding back Annabelle's usually sweet smiles. Then, he must do as he had promised and find her a husband, removing her from his own dangerous influence forever.

"Speaking of dresses, did your present gown come from your mother's wardrobe?"

"Frederick!" Annabelle scolded him, jolted out of her pensiveness just as he had intended. "That's not a very nice thing to say!"

"But I think the Duchess of Colborne a very well-dressed woman," he protested. "You deliberately misconstrue my compliment, Lady Annabelle."

Now, she finally laughed and Frederick joined in.

"You are teasing me again, Frederick. You see, I am learning to recognize it."

"You will doubtless look better in the green silk evening gown we chose today," he added. "You are not a middle-aged matron, after all."

That made her blush again, but more in her usual manner.

“It will make a lovely dress,” she sighed. “I can’t wait to wear it. You must tell me honestly how it looks first though, Frederick. I would not want to make a fool of myself if I look ridiculous.”

“Save the night-gown for your husband, but the other dresses I insist I must see before any other man,” he declared. “If I get tired of looking at them before you leave Heartwick Hall, I might even have to buy you more.”

“Oh, that really would be too much!” Annabelle burst out with such dismayed delight that Frederick was tempted to sweep her up and waltz her about the dining room.

Or did he wish to sweep her up and do something else entirely with that softly rounded little form of hers? Swiftly, Frederick struck down this dangerous thought and returned to safer ground, telling Annabelle tales, some of them true, about what women were presently wearing in Paris, Rome and Vienna.

By the end of the meal Annabelle was laughing and pink-faced from Frederick’s teasing and ridiculous tall stories. Enjoying himself almost as much as he had in planning her new wardrobe, he wished they could continue for another hour.

“Shall we take coffee in the drawing room?” he suggested.

“I fear I will fall asleep on those comfortable sofas if we go into the drawing room. I must say goodnight,” Annabelle said with a yawn.

From nowhere an unbidden image entered Frederick’s head of Annabelle falling asleep in the drawing room in that frumpy yellow dress and having to be carried up to bed in his arms.

That thought was merely amusing but then his imagination rolled off along a parallel track, proceeding to show him carrying her towards his own bedroom. In this altered

fantasy, Annabelle wore a revealing evening gown of green silk and her face was not at all sleepy. Instead, her expression could only be described as wanton, filled with longing for his embrace, wherever that led.

When his dream version of Annabelle whispered his name and told him that she wanted him, Frederick stopped himself sternly.

“No,” he said aloud, causing Annabelle to look curiously at him.

Indecent fantasies were dangerous but there was nothing wrong in simply enjoying her company, was there?

“Stay with me a little longer,” he added impulsively and Annabelle stopped rising from her chair and then sat down again, her face full of questions. “I mean, you must tell me more about the type of husband you seek. Then, I can think and plan our course strategically.”

“Oh, I see,” she acknowledged with a little shrug. “As I told Madame Deveau this afternoon, my stipulations are few. In the end, he must really only be kind and socially acceptable to my brother.”

“You give me very little to go on, Annabelle,” Frederick laughed at her simple desires. “Dark or fair? Young or older? A dandy or an intellectual?”

“I can’t suppose I will care about any of those things as long as he is a good man,” she answered, looking bamboozled by his questions.

“But what is a good man?” Frederick pressed, partly seeking her answer but partly only wanting to keep her there with him for a little longer.

“A man who is not vicious, I suppose. Someone who does not drink too much, or beat

his wife, or treat his servants badly. Someone with a good reputation. Not a rake, I suppose...”

The words were spoken unthinkingly in Annabelle’s normal disingenuous manner but she stopped dead at this point with a mortified expression and bit her lip. Her body language was so natural and without artifice that her thoughts were very easy for Frederick to read.

“Not a man like me, you mean,” he suggested, causing her face to fall in a mass of chagrin and discomfort.

Yes, that must be what she meant but could not say, and for some reason this cut him to the quick. And yet, Frederick had seen how she had trembled and softened at his touch that afternoon, despite her high principles.

He got up himself now to leave the room and paused beside Annabelle’s chair, caught by a waft of the light floral perfume from her hair that felt so familiar and appealing as he breathed it in. Ah, to bury his face among those red-gold curls and then to bring them down over her shoulders and bosom as she spoke his name...

“Frederick,” Annabelle began, startling him from his reverie.

If he had truly been a rake, he could have dismissed the modiste this afternoon , carried the confused and excited young woman to his bed and possessed her body thoroughly for his own delectation. Annabelle would have enjoyed it at the time – he would have made sure of that – although he suspected she would have hated him later, just as he would have hated himself.

Now her expression was growing anxious as Frederick stood silently over her. Her mouth was slightly open as she looked up at him, her pink rosebud lips tempting his kiss.



“You don’t know what you want, Annabelle,” he snapped at her, frustrated by his own longings.

“What do you mean?” she responded with incomprehension in her widening eyes.

It took a sterling effort not to reach out and brush those stray curls from Annabelle’s face, or touch his finger to that moist lip she was biting. After their experience during the dress fitting this afternoon, he knew how she would shiver and gasp if he did touch her.

“I mean exactly what I say. You don’t know what you want. You certainly don’t know what I want.”

“Frederick,” Annabelle said in a voice that was almost a whisper. “I want...”

This was too much. Frederick turned and marched out of the room before he could do anything they might both come to regret.

### CHAPTER 6

“ I ’m sorry that I was short with you after dinner last night, Annabelle,” said Frederick abruptly as soon as she entered the breakfast room. “This is not a normal situation for either of us. I believe life will be easier at Heartwick House if we both remember our manners.”

“I am sorry if I said anything to offend you,” Annabelle felt obliged to answer, having been unsure what kind of reception she would receive that morning, or even whether she ought to come to breakfast at all.

Generally, she still felt herself mystified by the currents underlying both his behavior and his unprovoked outburst last night. Still, she was a guest in this house and Duke Frederick was its master. She could be polite even if it was hard to meet his eyes.

Annabelle had not meant to be either rude or ungrateful in the face of Frederick’s kindness and generosity, but feared that she might have been. She had certainly not intended to call him a rake to his face, and he had looked genuinely hurt by the idea. Somehow they had both misunderstood one another and Annabelle had no idea how to put this right.

But Frederick was a rake wasn’t he? If he didn’t like being one, he could always stop couldn’t he? Madame Deveaux’s odd words on men came back to Annabelle again but she did not understand those either.

“You do have letters this morning,” she observed, turning away from her own puzzlement towards more concrete matters as she observed two letters at Frederick’s

right hand, one already clearly opened and read.

“One is for you,” Frederick stated, pushing the unopened letter across to her.

Recognizing the writing, Annabelle broke the seal and read the note eagerly, although all too conscious of Frederick’s gaze from the other side of the table. She could not claim that he was staring at her. It was only that she seemed to have become more conscious of his attention, and more affected by it, in recent days.

“Victoria Crawford would like to meet in London on Friday afternoon,” she said cautiously, remembering how poorly her opera plans had been received earlier in the week. “I would like to see her if it doesn’t clash with anything else.”

“Perfect,” Frederick announced, offering her his own letter, on notepaper marked with the crest of an elaborate ‘D’ and an address in one of London’s fashionable shopping district. “We will already be in London on Friday to call at Madame Deveaux’s atelier. She says here that your wardrobe is ready for fitting. I will escort you.”

Annabelle gave a delighted sound that made Frederick smile.

“It suits you very well,” said Victoria Crawford approvingly, “although I am no authority on fashion. I like the simplicity of that outfit, and something in the colors is so perfectly matched to you.”

Annabelle laughed happily, extending her arm and swishing her skirt again to examine anew all the features of her new summer walking suit as she strolled in the park with Victoria.

“It was perfectly matched to Annabelle,” Frederick commented laconically, the look in his eyes making the blood rise in Annabelle’s cheeks as she recalled their shared

encounter with the modiste at Heartwick Hall. "In every way."

A delicate blue-grey tinged with faint violet, the suit's fabric was on a spectrum with the color of Annabelle's eyes. Lining and piping of pale green silk were the only ornaments beyond the mother-of-pearl buttons. The character of the garment lay in cut rather than embellishment, and, of course, in the way it conformed so perfectly to Annabelle's figure.

The suit had been close to completion that morning when she had visited Madame Deveaux's atelier with Frederick and she understood that he had paid the seamstresses extra money to work through their luncheon hour so that Annabelle might wear the new outfit to promenade in Hyde Park that afternoon.

"Madame Deveaux is a marvel," Annabelle said quickly to cover her blushes. "I have never had such a dress."

She did not know what else to say and there was a strange small pause before Frederick spoke again.

"Well, then, ladies. I am sure you have much to discuss. I shall leave you to talk, unless you need anything."

As both women shook their heads, the Duke of Heartwick gave a polite nod of farewell and paused on the path to let them walk ahead, before following behind at a discreet distance.

"I wasn't sure about the neckline at first. It seemed so low for a day-dress, especially with these new stays," Annabelle confided to Victoria once they were alone. "But Madame Deveaux said that most women wear much lower cuts. It is only that my bust is large and I am so self-conscious of it. With the jacket, I rather like this look."

“The English can be so prudish about breasts,” said Victoria with an indifferent shrug. “As though they were something to be ashamed of rather than a normal part of the female body. I’ve seen dresses on the Continent so low and stays so insecure that sometimes nipples pop out while ladies are walking around.”

“Really?!” gasped Annabelle. “How shocking!”

“I prefer to be warm and comfortable myself, but see no reason to judge other women for displaying their bodies if they wish. There should be more freedom in dress, in my view.”

Annabelle did not know whether to agree or not, rather horrified at the thought of dresses and stays that routinely exposed their wearers. Despite making her feel as though her breasts had been lifted and put on public display, her own new stays were of secure and comfortable construction.

“That man was looking at you,” Victoria leaned over now and whispered with a grin. “The tall young man with auburn hair, over there. Your new dress is working already.”

“Really?” Annabelle queried. “Are you sure he wasn’t looking at you?”

“More fool him if he was,” Victoria guffawed. “No, he’s definitely looking at you again now, as is his companion with the green waistcoat. So is the man coming up on our right, although he’s married so no use to you.”

“Oh, Lord Haughton,” said Annabelle, hiding her pleasure at attracting even useless attention. “He looks at everyone like that. I think he is short-sighted.”

Victoria laughed and twirled her hat on her wrist, uncaring as ever how this might make her appear to the other denizens of the ton out and about in the May sunshine.

Annabelle herself turned and looked happily back towards Frederick, still walking about twenty yards behind them, instinctively wanting to share her small moment of victory with him.

His eyes were on them and his face was already crinkled in a smile. Annabelle saw him raise his hat politely to two ladies who attempted to detain him, but then move on without pausing. Meanwhile, other women seemed to be eyeing him hungrily from all directions.

“They’re all after him, aren’t they?” Victoria whispered conspiratorially as she followed Annabelle’s gaze and waved merrily to their escort.

“Women do like Frederick,” Annabelle replied a little ruefully, “and Frederick likes women.”

In fact, Frederick must be the most handsome man she knew, she sighed to herself. He could not help attracting attention from the opposite sex wherever he went. Likely, he could not even understand how much it meant to her to be able to do the same on a more limited scale. She must thank him for this later.

“Does that bother you?” Victoria asked, turning back to the road ahead and taking Annabelle’s arm.

“Bother me?” asked Annabelle, startled. “Why should it bother me?”

“Oh, I don’t know. The two of you seemed a little odd around one another just now. I wondered if you’d had an argument, or if living at Heartwick Hall was proving difficult.”

“We did have an argument,” Annabelle admitted, feeling guilty and self-conscious. “Or at least I think it was an argument.”

“You ought to know whether or not you’ve had an argument,” laughed Victoria.  
“What was it all about?”

About? Annabelle wondered how she could even begin to explain the events of the past few days. Victoria was not even aware that she was living alone at Heartwick Hall with Frederick. While Victoria herself was unlikely to care about the niceties of such an arrangement, she might let slip such a fact to someone who did care. Or worse, someone who knew Stephen.

“Frederick said he would help me find a husband,” she admitted, feeling that this much was enough to explain her over-sensitivity but not enough to be controversial.  
“I told him everything I told you.”

“Well, that’s good, isn’t it?” said Victoria, looking pleased and still a little bemused.  
“He knows many eligible young men around the ton, far more than me. How did you manage to argue over that?”

“Oh, I called him a rake,” Annabelle said, wincing. “Right to his face.”

Again, Victoria only laughed. She had not been in the room with them at Heartwick Hall and could not appreciate the reality of that confrontation or how it had felt to Annabelle at the moment when Frederick had drawn so close to her.

You don’t know what you want. You don’t know what I want.

“How did he take that? With his reputation, Duke Frederick could hardly argue with you. Or did he try?”

“I don’t know really,” Annabelle dissimulated. “But he didn’t seem happy.”

She glanced back again towards Frederick and saw that he had stopped on the path to

speak to another man, someone tall, dark and rather striking in aspect, even at this distance. This man wore a gold-worked waistcoat and carried a polished golden-topped cane, his outfit almost like a stage-costume if it had not also been so well-cut and clearly expensive.

“Who is that?” murmured Victoria. “I don’t believe I know him, although he’s definitely looking this way. Your new dress has made yet another conquest, I think, Annabelle.”

“It’s the Duke of Blackwell, Edwin Murden,” said Annabelle, intrigued and intimidated, even at this distance. “I’ve never spoken to him but he’s notorious. He gives legendary dinner parties although I’m not sure any respectable lady attends them, at least, no unmarried and respectable lady.”

“Yes, I think I’ve read of him. Should we go over? Duke Edwin is smiling at us, but Frederick doesn’t look too pleased, does he? I suppose he knows that Stephen wouldn’t want you to strike up an acquaintance with someone like that.”

“No, Stephen disapproves of the Duke of Blackwell thoroughly,” Annabelle agreed with a sigh. “Although he does disapprove of so many people that I would never meet anyone if I stuck strictly to his preferences.”

“Come on then. Let’s take the opportunity to broaden your horizons while we can,” said Victoria, linking Annabelle’s arm again and walking them both back on the path towards the two men.

Annabelle’s eyes were on Frederick as they approached and she could see the truth of Victoria’s observation from the narrowing of his blue eyes and straightness of his lips. For whatever reason, he had not wanted to introduce them to Duke Edwin but now he had little choice.



After the required round of formal introductions, curtsies and bows, the Duke of Blackwell's twinkling dark eyes settled on Annabelle.

"I was just inviting Duke Frederick a little evening event I am hosting next week and he was prevaricating over his answer. He cannot have any more pressing engagements since what could be finer than my hospitality? He has been an appreciative addition to my parties before. Nor do I believe he has any domestic responsibilities that could keep him at home. What do you think, Lady Annabelle?"

The handsome man's question terrified Annabelle on some level and she found herself tongue-tied for a few moments. Could he know that she was living alone with Frederick at Heartwick Hall? Perhaps that was why Frederick had been minded to decline the invitation.

She looked to Frederick for some steer but received no inkling from his expression as to how she was supposed to answer. Victoria was regarding their new acquaintance with slightly disdainful amusement, perhaps having dismissed the Duke of Blackwell as a frivolous pleasure-seeker.

"I couldn't say, Your Grace," she replied at last. "But Duke Frederick is always very much in demand around the ton."

"In demand," repeated Duke Edwin with a rather roguish laugh. "Yes, my good friend Frederick is certainly always very much in demand, isn't he? Only last week, Lady Dempster was asking me whether..."

"Very well, Edwin, I shall attend your next gathering," Frederick interrupted him before he could complete his sentence.

"Will you be accompanied? Maybe by one of these lovely young ladies?"

Victoria's eyebrows now rose almost to her hairline and Annabelle felt herself shrinking back from this strange man, not enjoying his interest in her and wishing heartily for a higher neckline to her walking outfit.

"No, neither Lady Annabelle nor Miss Crawford will accompany me. Aside from anything else, their older brothers would never agree to it." Frederick said pointedly, stepping in front of the two women.

There was something like a warning in his stance which Duke Edwin seemed to take in good part. Annabelle was glad to be able to hide behind Frederick, feeling protected from this strange man's gaze by the Duke of Heartwick's broad shoulders.

"A pity," the Duke of Blackwell commented with a final smiling glance to Annabelle over Frederick's shoulder. "I welcome ornament and intelligence in my home. When I can find both, I count myself doubly blessed. Another time, perhaps. I shall see you next week, Frederick."

Espying another acquaintance across the park, Duke Edwin took his leave with a smile and departed with a wave of his gold-topped cane. Frederick watched him go with still-narrowed eyes, while Victoria Crawford shook her head with a huff of disbelief. Annabelle exhaled with relief.

"Not my ideal dinner companion, Duke Frederick, but I dare say he improves on better acquaintance," commented Victoria.

"Shall we go to the bandstand and have some lemonade?" Frederick suggested rather forcefully instead of picking up Victoria's remark. "There is an outdoor concert today and I can hear music beginning."

"Yes, if Annabelle wishes," Victoria agreed.

Annabelle nodded her assent in turn, registering that Frederick did not wish to discuss the Duke of Blackwell, or at least not with her. Were the two men friends or not? It had been hard to tell.

It was after six o'clock when they returned to Heartwick Hall, the coach loaded with boxes containing the first half of Annabelle's new wardrobe. Frederick had inspected all of the finished garments at Madame Deveaux's establishment, satisfied both with his purchases and their effect on both the physique and mood of their new owner.

The green silk evening gown would not be finished until the following week but a second evening dress of bluebell silk with a faint embroidery of rose-gold thread had Annabelle in raptures.

"It is the most beautiful thing I have ever seen!" she had exclaimed as she emerged from the changing room with Madame Deveaux to spin before the mirrors where Frederick stood.

"The shade is a perfect match for your eyes," said the dressmaker with a smile. "Do you approve, Your Grace?"

"Entirely," said Frederick with a husky catch in his voice, forgetting for a moment that it was Annabelle, his sister's friend, standing before him, and simply enjoying the display of female beauty as a man.

Without jewelry or other ornament, the off-the-shoulder gown displayed the rounded sweep of Annabelle's half-bared bosom to perfection, her loose curls enhancing rather than detracting from the overall impression.

If a striking widow or artist's model had appeared before him in such a guise on one of his evening's jaunts around London, Frederick would have lost no time in seeking her further acquaintance and exploring her openness to other forms of

companionship.

Today, however, he was not in a bar, theatre or studio after hours. He was in a respectable atelier with a young lady of good family entrusted to his care. That young woman was now regarding him with wary eyes, not fully understanding his deep interest or his silence, although a faint pink blush was already visible both on her cheeks and the upper slopes of her breasts.

“Exquisitely constructed, Madame,” Frederick said more formally. “I know that you can always be relied upon to deliver the finest gowns in London.”

“Trop gentil, ” murmured the modiste, although clearly pleased with both the duke’s compliments and Annabelle’s delight. “You are too kind.”

With other finished garments packaged up, Annabelle had worn the new walking suit to meet Victoria Crawford. Although neither as striking nor as revealing as the evening gown, Frederick had undeniably enjoyed the sight of Annabelle in the well-fitting garments, as had other men in the park. This wider appreciation had not escaped his notice and had even pleased him, indicating his own triumph.

That was until that infernal Duke Edwin had appeared, of course, feasting on Annabelle with his hungry eyes in a way Frederick understood only too well. The Duke of Blackwell possessed a hunger that mirrored Frederick’s own and he would rather not have introduced them at all.

Now, back at Heartwick Hall, as the boxes were taken inside by the servants, Annabelle turned to him. He had feigned sleeping in the coach, not in the mood to talk any more.

“Do you like the Duke of Blackwell, Frederick?” she asked guilelessly, although seeming to have read his mind in some way. “I thought you were friends because he

invited you to dinner but you didn't seem to want to go."

"Duke Edwin's parties are unique and entertaining," Frederick answered cryptically as they entered the house, a response that did not satisfy her.

"But does that mean you like him or not? I should like to know what to think of him."

"Sometimes I like him and sometimes I like his parties, but that does not mean I always wish to attend them. In the same way, I do not wish to eat Christmas pudding every day or wear my silver-buckled shoes, or go to church more than I have to."

"Frederick!" Annabelle reproved him, likely a regular churchgoer at Stephen's side in the Duke of Colborne's pew of their parish church. "That's an irreverent thing to say."

"I'm an irreverent man, Annabelle. I leave the observance of proper behavior to friends like your brother Stephen. Had you not noticed?"

She giggled at this comment and Frederick reflected that the idea of taking Annabelle to one of Edwin's infamous dinners was truly beyond impossible. A woman as innocent as this would have to be guarded at every instant in such an environment, neither knowing the social rules of such gatherings nor how to politely deflect unwanted attentions.

"You might be irreverent," Annabelle said, again seeming to follow his thoughts with preternatural ease. "But you did not think it proper for me or Victoria to attend Duke Edwin's dinner, did you?"

"Enough of Duke Edwin!" Frederick groaned. "As for what is proper for you, how could I expose you to a man as... worldly as that when you do not even know how to flirt?"

“I do know how to flirt,” Annabelle protested. “Penelope and I used to practice with our fans in front of the mirror.”

Frederick held back the dismissive laughter that had been his first reaction and beckoned her into the drawing room, closing the door behind them. His statement about flirting had been only a throwaway comment, intended to distract her from the subject of the Duke of Blackwell but now that he thought about it, and noted the time before dinner, this conversation held distinct possibilities.

“That is mere child’s play, Annabelle,” he said baldly. “If you are going to catch a husband, you must first learn how to lure men in and keep them close.”

“Close?” she echoed uncertainly, stopping where she was standing in the middle of the room.

“Close,” he repeated, beckoning her to him and enjoying the beautiful blush that bloomed so easily on her face with his teasing. “How else will an eligible man make a proposal of marriage to you? Shouting it across a crowded ballroom or chattering dinner table? Hardly the stuff of romance.”

“I suppose not,” she admitted and came to stand a few steps from Frederick.

“Now, look at me, but only for a moment, and only from the side. Then look away, and smile slightly to yourself.”

Annabelle obeyed his instructions to the letter, flashing her bluebell eyes shyly at him and then turning to the window with a slight upturn of her mouth.

“Like that?” Annabelle asked. “Or was that too quick?”

Turning her eyes back to him, that beautiful countenance looked deeply into his for a

few seconds. The sparks of her first attempt blazed into a small fire in his gut. Taking a deep breath, Frederick dampened the flames and returned to the lesson.

“Yes, just like that,” he answered, keeping his voice even and teacherly. “Now, do it again, but this time bite your lip slightly before you smile, as though you feel you shouldn’t be smiling.”

Annabelle thought about this and then nodded before she swept him once more with those winsome blue eyes and looked away. As she bit her lip, he observed a brief flash of her pink tongue and felt the fire flare up inside him again before her hint of a smile blew the blaze to a disturbing level. This game had gone far enough.

“Damn it all,” he said in frustration, not having expected his own reactions to be quite this strong.

“I did exactly what you said,” Annabelle reacted, disconcerted by this seemingly discouraging response, and approaching him with an appeal in her voice. “Tell me what to do next.”

“You’re not ready for this,” Frederick began to say but Annabelle broke in.

“I can do it!” she insisted and then, standing on her toes, she unexpectedly pressed her lips against his for the briefest instant, but still long enough for the fire to overcome all Frederick’s boundaries.

Frederick looked utterly stunned. For a moment, Annabelle felt pleased with herself. He had claimed she couldn’t flirt when she could and now she had shown him! His lips had been so soft and warm too. Had she really just touched her own against them?!

Yes, she had...The understanding that she had indeed just kissed the Duke of

Heartwick stunned Annabelle in turn. She had certainly been vexed but how had she ever dared to do such a thing?!

As her courage dissolved, Frederick recovered himself, the astonishment in his eyes replaced by something else entirely that only made her quail further. She knew he was bound to be angry with her now and she would have backed away if his arm had not passed firmly about her waist.

“That is not how a kiss is given, Annabelle,” he said, his voice deeper and rougher than it had been earlier in their conversation. “This is a kiss.”

Now Frederick’s mouth descended very deliberately onto hers and she found herself bent back and swooning in his strong arms as those soft, warm lips explored hers at length, his tongue delicately but insistently seeking and finding entrance before dancing with her own. Annabelle felt utterly but pleurably lost in his embrace, overcome by his touch, his scent and the very heat of his skin.

By the time Frederick righted her on her feet and released her from his grasp, she was panting as though she had run a race, her hand seeking the steadiness of a sofa in order remain standing.

“Never, ever, do that to me again,” Frederick warned thickly, shaking his head as he went to the door.



### CHAPTER 7

“ I have a headache,” Annabelle called out in response to the soft rapping on her bedroom door.

It was locked but she had still jumped at the sound of knocking, having informed Myrtle that she would not be going down to dinner that night but would go to bed early to nurse her headache. There was no way she could face Frederick after what had passed between them that evening.

Would it be possible to keep to her room until Duchess Sarah returned? How many days might that be now?

She had kissed Frederick, if barely. Without a doubt, he had kissed Annabelle. It had been the most amazing experience of her young life and Frederick’s enthusiasm seemed obvious at the time. But then, he had spoken so tersely to her and left as though he was unhappy. Annabelle could understand none of it.

“It is Myrtle, My Lady,” said the old woman’s voice outside the door. “I’ve brought you some bread and warm milk. Do try to eat a little, for your health.”

With a sigh, Annabelle rose and went to the door to admit her maid.

“London is a bad place for young ladies,” Myrtle tutted as she came inside and laid out the plate and mug on the table. “It always seems to upset you so, but I suppose you young ladies must all go there to find husbands.”

“That’s the whole idea of the season,” Annabelle agreed, sitting down and taking a sip of the drink to reassure the white-haired attendant. “Do not be concerned, Myrtle. Everyone has headaches from time to time. I actually had a very nice time in London today, picking up all my new clothes and seeing Victoria Crawford. I am likely overtired.”

“The duke asked me to bring you this. I promised not to forget this letter. He said you would want to know, but if your head hurts, maybe you shouldn’t read it until tomorrow.”

“No, I can read,” Annabelle said, nervously accepting the letter that her maid now offered with her wrinkled hands. “My head is not so bad as that.”

She calmed herself on seeing that the writing on the front was not Frederick’s and when she unfolded the pages she found a short note from Duchess Sarah to her stepson, sent yesterday from Walden Towers and received at Heartwick Hall while they were in London.

One section jumped out at her immediately as she spotted her own name:

“...with the likely size of the baby, Penelope’s headaches and dizziness are some concern to the physician and midwife. Maxwell and I have persuaded her to take the advice of bedrest. I have decided to remain here until after the birth, which could equally be next week or not for more than a month. You will have to advise Lord Emberly to make other arrangements for Lady Annabelle...”

Annabelle took a deep breath, not wanting to give away too much of her reaction in front of Myrtle.

“Not bad news I hope? His Grace looked very grave when he gave it to me.”

“Duchess Penelope is approaching birth and has been unwell,” Annabelle summarized briefly. “Duchess Sarah has decided to stay at Walden Towers until the baby arrives.”

“Dear me! The poor woman. Well, that’s best, isn’t it?” Myrtle chattered. “Most women want their mother, at least for the first baby. I was surprised at Duchess Penelope making do with a midwife. Oh, if Duchess Sarah won’t be at Heartwick Hall, I suppose you cannot stay here. Will you join your family in Norfolk? It will be a shame to miss your parties and balls.”

“My family sent me to Heartwick Hall and I must stay until Stephen instructs me otherwise,” said Annabelle, conscious that she must also soon write to Stephen, without mentioning some of the crucial particulars of her stay at Heartwick Hall. “I must write to them tomorrow, and to Walden Towers too.”

An absence of letters from her would tell her brother that something was wrong. Was omission as bad as outright lying? She hoped it was not because she could see no other alternative. She could not find a husband in Norfolk and her plan for this year would be ruined.

The only real way out of her various predicaments was to find a husband and a new life before Stephen could come back and find out the truth.

Promising Myrtle that she would finish the bread and milk, she dismissed her maid and spent the following hours wondering how she could get through the weeks ahead with Frederick. At least the season would be getting into its swing and they would be out frequently with others.

As she slid into sleep, Annabelle’s imagination drifted back to the drawing room as her self-control loosed its usual bonds. She did not hear her own cries or remember her dreams of Frederick repeating his kiss.

“I hope Penelope fares better soon. I shall write today,” Annabelle said politely, her words well-rehearsed as she returned Duchess Sarah’s letter to Frederick the following morning at breakfast.

As long as she didn’t look directly at his face, she found she could speak calmly and sensibly. But could she keep it up for an entire meal?

“This development does present certain problems,” Frederick observed, Annabelle’s stolen glance at him revealing that he too was choosing to look out of a window. “It will require discretion with our friends and acquaintances, even those you trust.”

“I know, Frederick. I’m not a complete fool,” Annabelle flared up slightly but then stilled herself. “It seems to me that this only makes it all the more important that I find a husband this season. Once I am married, neither Stephen nor anyone else can kick up a fuss.”

“That seems a sensible way of looking at things,” he said without expanding, now seemingly concentrating on very symmetrically buttering a piece of bread.

“Are you still going to help me?” Annabelle added, finding herself as annoyed by his non-responsiveness this morning as she had been agitated by his burst of unexpected passion yesterday evening. “To find a husband, I mean.”

Frederick took a long breath and nodded, before taking a bite of his bread and chewing it slowly.

“Yes,” he said after a minute’s thought. “The Duke and Duchess of Yardley have their summer ball on Saturday and you will wear your new ballgown. We will focus on preparing for that and practice striking up conversation. The gown itself will make a strong first impression the first time anyone sees it.”

“Will it?” Annabelle mused, still unsure of herself but recalling the undeniable attention her new walking outfit had drawn in the park. “Are you sure?”

“Of course I’m damned sure. I’ve seen you in it, haven’t I? I ought to know,” said Frederick crossly, his eyes finally settling on hers. “I chose it to create allure and it succeeds admirably.”

“Very well, what kind of conversation should we practice?” asked Annabelle, trying both to avoid his gaze and to shift tracks a little from whatever was stirring his temper again.

Until this week, she had thought she knew Frederick Hayward inside out but now his behavior seemed impossible to predict. Would he rage at her? Tease her? Or kiss her...?

“For God’s sake, Annabelle,” Frederick muttered, pushing his plate away and standing up. “Meet me on the top lawn at ten o’clock.”

“Not the drawing room?” she queried, reflecting that the upper garden would not be very private, visible as it was from every room on that side of the house and crossed regularly by gardeners, grooms and other servants.

“I don’t think that’s a very good idea, do you?” Frederick remarked and left the room without finishing his breakfast. “I’ll see you at ten.”

Annabelle swallowed as she watched him go, her pulse rising with his words. She suspected that he wanted them to be in sight of the house and its staff so that she wouldn’t be foolish enough to kiss him again. Was he still angry about that? But the kiss he had given her in return had been far longer, deeper and more improper. She could not understand.

Maybe she could not hope to understand and trying would only prove a confusion and distraction to her plan to find a husband. Annabelle decided that whatever else was happening, she must focus on that. It was her only way out.

“A perfect entrance,” said Frederick in a low but approving voice as they took their place in the receiving line at Yardley House in Mayfair. “Now, keep that smile on your face while we wait, not too much and not too little.”

Annabelle smiled and nodded. She had heard the admiring comments of other ladies as she removed her cloak and revealed Madame Deveau’s creation in the hallway, a marvel of golden silk and subtle blue silk paneling and fastenings. She had also seen the admiring eyes of several gentlemen ranging across her face and figure.

Frederick too was already getting his fair share of attention from ladies, as usual. As she saw the gaze of a man a few yards away resting lasciviously on her half-uncovered breasts, she hoped that Frederick would not abandon her for one of his paramours. A striking black-haired woman nearby was definitely trying to catch his eye although Frederick himself seemed unaware of this.

“After the Duke and Duchess of Yardley receive us, we will go straight into the ballroom and I will seek out some eligible men to make introductions. Are you ready for those conversations? Do you remember everything we have discussed?”

“Listening more than speaking, more questions than answers, more eyes than words,” repeated Annabelle, summarizing his lessons of the last few days at Heartwick Hall. “I remember.”

“Exactly. The important thing is to intrigue these men and leave them wanting more. Don’t let yourself get carried away. Make them want to know you. Make them seek you out.”

Annabelle nodded again, more nervously now as they reached the head of the line and were announced to the Duke and Duchess of Yardley. She performed her curtsy with more ease and elegance than she usually felt, attributing this to her gown and Frederick at her side.

“Duke Frederick, Lady Annabelle, thank you for gracing us with your presence tonight. I understand that Lord Emberly is indisposed?” said the Duke of Yardley, an acquaintance of their family but not a close friend.

“My family thanks you for your kind invitation tonight. My brother has had to accompany my father to Norfolk for his health,” Annabelle clarified, using the exact formula of words she had agreed with Frederick for such inquiries. “Stephen has asked Duke Frederick to escort me here tonight and I am grateful for his friendship to my family.”

“Do give the Duke and Duchess of Colborne our best wishes, Lady Annabelle. I hope the Norfolk air will prove invigorating for Duke Magnus,” the Duchess of Yardley said, smiling kindly. “Duke Frederick, I hope you enjoy the evening.”

Introductions over and done with, they moved into the ballroom, where Frederick was instantly intercepted by the dark-haired woman who had been making eyes at him in the receiving line a few minutes earlier.

“How wonderful to find you here tonight, Duke Frederick. I was afraid that I would be bored,” she said with a playful smile and flirtatious eyes that Annabelle felt put all her own attempts to shame.

“None of us need be bored tonight, Lady Coltenay,” said Frederick with a small bow and pleasant expression. “I believe there is a wide field of ladies and gentlemen of all ages and interests. The Duke and Duchess of Yardley’s events have wide appeal.”

“The wider field does not interest me,” Lady Coltenay answered. “As you might remember, I am a decisive woman who knows what she is looking for.”

Annabelle felt Frederick stiffen beside her and wondered if she was about to lose him to his woman who communicated her interest so easily with her eyes, her body and her words.

“I have responsibilities tonight, Lady Coltenay,” Frederick said lightly. “I am not here purely for my own entertainment.”

“That is a pity,” said the woman, looking at Annabelle now with hard, curious eyes. “Are you not going to introduce me to your young friend in the most beautiful gown I have seen yet tonight?”

Even with the strength of Frederick’s arm beneath her gloved hand, Annabelle felt shy and exposed in this elegant outfit, as if it wasn’t really hers. To compound matters, Frederick wasn’t really hers either. He was neither her brother nor her cousin, and certainly not her lover.

“Lady Annabelle, this is the Dowager Viscountess of Coltenay. Lady Coltenay, this is Lady Annabelle Elkins, a family friend I am escorting here tonight at her brother’s request. Now, you must excuse us, there are some introductions I must make.”

Frederick’s words were brief, pointed and polite but disinterested. Annabelle moved with him as soon as he began to walk away from the sultry Lady Coltenay without even a backward glance. While relieved, she still felt uncertain. Surely, he would rather be with this woman than helping Annabelle with her plan. She could not hope to have him at her side for the entire night, could she?

“If you want to go to Lady Coltenay, you can. I don’t mind,” Annabelle said tentatively, even though she did mind.



Shad no idea where she would even start to meet men tonight without Frederick. Likely she would end up hiding in the retiring rooms. But she did not want to be a burden to him either.

“I have no intention of leaving you alone here,” Frederick answered firmly, dismissing the suggestion out of hand. “I made you a promise to help you, didn’t I? I also promised your brother you would be safe in my care. I intend to honor both promises.”

Annabelle nodded, her heartbeat quickening as his eyes fixed hers briefly but her nervousness also calming with the reassurance of his words. Frederick would not abandon her for Lady Coltenay, or anyone else.

“Well, let’s make a start before any other distractions appear,” he added decisively, nodding towards a young man with auburn hair who appeared to be attending the ball with his mother and two sisters, all with the same dark-red hair. “Lord Easterly will make a good first conquest. This should be easy even for a beginner.”

“Frederick! Too fast...” Annabelle gasped as the Duke of Heartwick whirled her around through the measures of a lively country dance. “I swear I shall fall over.”

“No, you won’t,” he declared, laughing and strengthening his grip at her waist and arm as they spun before releasing her to dance up the line and back with the other ladies.

In some ways, this was just like balls in previous seasons when Frederick had only been her friend’s older brother. They were dancing together, Frederick was teasing her and Annabelle was rising to the provocation. However, in other ways it was a radically different experience.

“I won’t let you fall,” Frederick said in a whisper as she returned to him “Have I

ever?”

Reuniting in the dance, his touch sent waves of pleasure through her entire body. Annabelle shook her head and swallowed the faint involuntary sound that had risen unbidden in her throat. Dancing with Frederick might be enjoyable but it was also unbearable when it had this strange physical effect on her. She almost wished to dance with someone else to release her from these intense and unfamiliar sensations.

Despite her success in meeting and conversing with a number of men at Frederick's instigation, she had so far been unable to accept any other dance engagements. Sometimes this was due to Frederick's own interruption or ending of a conversation, ostensibly to pique the interest of the men concerned.

“I think Lord Easterly might ask me to dance,” she commented to Frederick in the last bars of the dance, glancing at the red-haired young man who had danced this measure, and previous dances, with one or another of his sisters.

He had certainly been throwing occasional interested glances towards Annabelle between the dances, although each time, his mother appeared to pair him with another sister.

“One or the other of you would certainly fall over,” Frederick commented with a grin as the younger man almost tripped over his own feet as he bowed to his partner. “That would make a most entertaining spectacle. How about the waltz? I might pay to see it.”

At first cross, Annabelle frowned and opened her mouth to retort before realizing that Frederick was only teasing as usual. A moment later, the red-haired man trod on his sister's skirt and tore it, much to her loud chagrin.

“Oh dear,” Annabelle murmured in sympathy for the young woman while Frederick

only continued to look amused.

“No, we’re not going to waste your time on young Lord Easterly,” he said, offering his arm and guiding her away from the dance floor. “There’s a much better prospect for you over there, near the conservatory door: Oswald Quince, the Earl of Darrington. Everyone likes him at the club. He’s not much of a drinker but always up for fun and games.”

Annabelle followed Frederick’s eyes to the slim man with light brown hair and lively hazel eyes. He was standing with a woman of similar aspect and another man in military uniform.

“That’s Oswald’s sister, Lady Meredith Quince, and their friend Captain Jacob Rawlings,” Frederick informed her as they approached the group.

A few moments later with his usual easy manner, Frederick had eased them into the trio’s conversation and introduced Annabelle to Oswald. He himself occupied Lady Meredith and Captain Rawlings in order to give her a chance to make an impression and she set to work again.

As she had done with other men earlier in the evening, Annabelle tried to follow Frederick’s instructions in her exchanges with Oswald, casting her eyes at him in shy flirtation and asking him simple questions about himself. Unlike with Lord Easterly and others, however, this appeared to have no effect whatsoever. While good-humored, he appeared otherwise occupied and not open to the distraction she was trying to offer.

“Do you see that man skulking in the conservatory?” Oswald said to Annabelle after politely glossing over her question about his plans for the season, his eyes dancing with glee. “The tubby middle-aged man with spectacles?”

“Why, yes, it’s Lord Copperley, isn’t it?” Annabelle replied. “My mother knows his sister. I thought he’d gone to Bath to take the waters.”

“That’s what Lady Copperley thinks too,” confided Oswald rather conspiratorially. “That’s why she has gone to visit an old schoolfriend in his absence. But he is actually here in London, at Yardley House.”

“But why?” Annabelle asked immediately, unable to resist gossip. “And why is he hiding in the conservatory?”

“ Cherchez la femme , in both cases,” Oswald explained. “The lady he came here hoping to meet tonight is the recently widowed Dowager Countess of Neston, a former flame of his from before his marriage. The lady he is hiding from is Lady Ruthingham, his wife’s sister, whom he was not expecting to be at the Yardley ball.”

“Oh my!” exclaimed Annabelle, despite herself. “How thrilling. He is going to get into trouble, isn’t he? But who will find him first?”

“You love gossip too, don’t you Lady Annabelle? I can always tell just by looking at someone. I knew I was right about you.”

“Yes,” she laughed in agreement, feeling very easy in this man’s company despite their new acquaintance. “I’ve always enjoyed watching the ton from a distance. I’ve been a bit of a wallflower, I’m afraid, at least when compared with my best friend, Penelope. She’s married now and I’m even more by myself.”

“Not a wallflower, an observer of human nature,” Oswald objected with a smile. “Watchers often see and understand so much more than participants.”

“That’s a kind way of looking at things. Penelope always says there’s nothing wrong with watching and being quiet but everyone else seems to disapprove. Oh, I’m talking

too much. I did promise Frederick that I wouldn't."

"Well, I don't disapprove in the slightest, either of watching or talking. But how about a dance? That should be fun too and I expect they're going to do a reel next."

"Why, yes," Annabelle answered delightedly, amazed at how easily this was happening. "I would love to dance."

"Come on then," he grinned and offered his arm. "Let's dance and gossip to our hearts' content."

### CHAPTER 8

“I think we can count tonight a success,” Frederick said much later that night, as the coach set off on its return to Heartwick Hall. “At least four of the men you met tonight have made further inquiries about you with me or another friend. I observed several of them watching you throughout the ball.”

Despite this assertion of their success, Frederick found that he did not feel the unalloyed triumph it should surely merit. Something was gnawing at him.

“That’s good,” Annabelle yawned. “Isn’t it?”

“You’ve made only the first step,” he cautioned. “Now we must plan the next steps. What did you think of them all?”

“They seemed nice,” she answered rather dutifully. “Especially Lord Easterly.”

“Nice,” Frederick said the word with a laugh that came out almost scornful despite his intention to be only civil and neutral. “Yes, I suppose he is. Lord Easterly is said by all the mamas to be a very nice young man. But forget him. Easterly was only your practice target. What about Oswald Quince? He’s a man of more substance and seemed to take to you. You did well to keep his attention for so long.”

He looked keenly at Annabelle’s face for some reaction. She had indeed managed several long conversations with Lord Darrington and danced with him twice. If there had been any man who mattered tonight, it had been Quince.

While Frederick had disrupted other men's attempts to partner Annabelle on the dance floor in order to raise their interest for future events, Darrington had given him no chance. Annabelle had returned to Frederick's side laughing and jolly after each dance. Yes, there was promise in that connection.

Now, as she sought to answer his question, Annabelle looked proud at the compliment Frederick had just given her, if unsure of her reply.

"It was not so hard to keep Lord Darrington's attention as I thought it might be. He actually seemed... interested in me. I don't know how I did it but he seemed to like me as a person and to want to talk to me."

Despite an initial sense of physical and mental weariness as they had entered the carriage after the ball, Frederick could not now help smiling back at Annabelle. She was so pleased with herself for making this new acquaintance and putting her new skills into action.

"Yes, no one could doubt his interest in you. But what did you really think of him, as a man?" he followed up.

"He is one of the most amiable men I've met," Annabelle said artlessly. "Lord Darrington likes gossip, watching the people of the ton and dancing, just like me. His friend Captain Rawlings teases him about his gossiping, just as you tease me."

Frederick laughed aloud and shook his head at such childish trivia. Truly Annabelle was not a woman of the world.

"Everyone knows that Oswald Quince is a most amiable man, Annabelle. I was asking for your view of him as a potential match. Could you see him as your husband? He has a large fortune, good family and excellent manners. Stephen could not object to such a prospect."

These words were unexpectedly difficult to speak. Frederick liked Oswald Quince personally and felt sure that he would treat any wife kindly and fairly, as he treated all his friends and deserving acquaintances. Still, the idea of him marrying Annabelle did not seem to Frederick the glowing prospect he had expected it to be. He supposed he must just be tired.

“As a match...” Annabelle said slowly, thinking and frowning before shrugging her shoulders, her unfastened cloak falling back onto the seat behind her. “I don’t really know how a good match should feel. I liked him but when we danced, I didn’t feel like...”

She stopped here and shook her head, some of her long red-gold ringlets fallen now from their loosened pins and trailing over the pale expanse of her quite magnificent décolletage . While the light from the carriage lamps was dim, Frederick could tell from her body language and long familiarity that Annabelle was blushing at her own thoughts.

Dancing with Oswald Quince didn’t feel like what? Like dancing with Frederick..? Annabelle rarely danced with anyone else either tonight or in previous seasons. She could only be thinking of him and Frederick felt a deep involuntary response to this idea. It was something he knew he should not and could not act on. He must distract himself.

Knocking on the roof of the carriage, he stuck his head out of the window.

“Take the longer route back,” he ordered the coachman. "We wish to look at the moon.”

It was indeed a beautiful night with a high waxing crescent moon and galaxies of visible stars clustered about the deep blue sky. Yes, they would take the long route home and look at the night sky together. That was both pleasant and safe, was it not?



He rolled down the glass of the window, letting the June breeze into the coach.

“Isn’t it late for a drive?” Annabelle asked Frederick doubtfully as he settled back into the seat. “It’s well after midnight.”

“Well, I did promise that we’d be spending our nights together, didn’t I?” he reminded her with a grin that made her smile bashfully once again.

“When you do find a suitor,” continued Frederick, “whether Oswald Quince or another man, you may well go out driving with him in the evening. Let us practice that.”

“Stephen always makes me take Myrtle in my carriage unless I am with another lady,” Annabelle observed. “He says that appearances are as important as realities.”

“Luckily for you, Stephen is not here and I shall not require you to take Myrtle out driving on any romantic trysts,” Frederick laughed. “You want to keep your suitor and bring him to a proposal, not frighten him away.”

“I suppose so,” agreed Annabelle, returning his smile. “Myrtle can be rather disapproving, although not quite so much as Stephen.”

“Forget them both for now,” he told her decidedly. “Look at that moon instead.”

“It is so very bright tonight, isn’t it?” Annabelle remarked, leaning closer to the window, with apparently no consciousness of how her breasts moved with her in that revealing gold and blue gown.

Frederick shifted his eyes very deliberately to the night sky and away from the contours of Annabelle’s figure opposite him in the coach.

“Soft, pale and glowing,” he murmured to himself as he regarded the luminous crescent hanging above them. “I have rarely seen anything so lovely.”

“It feels like you could almost reach out and touch it, doesn’t it?” said Annabelle wonderingly, reaching her hand out of the carriage in a mirror image of her words.

“It does,” Frederick agreed, his eyes drawn inexorably back to his present companion, following the arc of the crescent moon down her small graceful hands and back along the pale inviting curve of her arm.

Even more of her hair had descended now, giving Annabelle a distinctly tousled look. The bosom on which it rested, rising and falling lightly with her breath, looked as though it was mere inches from escaping Madame Deveaux’s carefully constructed bodice. With his experienced eyes, Frederick knew how little effort it would take to free those tempting globes from their silken prison and caress them in his hands.

“Why are you looking at me like that?” Annabelle asked him, breaking in on his unintended erotic reverie.

Frederick started at this blunt but innocent question and covered himself quickly.

“Why not? Surely any suitor is bound to look upon a beautiful woman in so fine a dress. If you intend to encourage Oswald, or some other man, ask a different kind of question. Ask whether they find you pleasing, for example, or what is in their thoughts.”

“Is that not too forward?” she queried uncertainly.

“Not if you wish to encourage him,” Frederick assured her. “Then you should be a little forward. How else will an honorable man know that his attentions are welcomed? He might interpret too much modesty as disinterest.”

“Oh, I had not thought of that,” she remarked, before glancing once more at the moon as though gathering her thoughts, and then back at Frederick.

“What were you thinking of when you looked at me, Frederick?” Annabelle said very softly. “Is there something in the moon that made you think of me?”

“Yes,” he breathed, the words rising of their own accord from the depths of his mind. “Your skin is as luminous as moonlight.”

His hand had taken one of hers, seemingly of its own volition and Frederick became conscious of how close their heads now were at the carriage window. A night-time drive had never really been a safe distraction and part of him had wanted it anyway, thirsting to reach this moment.

Wide and wondering, Annabelle’s blue eyes fixed on Frederick. If he leaned forward a little and captured her lips with his own, he knew her eyes would close and she would make the same little sounds of startled pleasure as when he had kissed her that night in the drawing room.

Frederick’s self-control was ebbing, sapped by the moonlight and Annabelle’s inner radiance. Stephen, Myrtle and the mores of the ton all seemed to him as distant as the stars. There was only Annabelle and his hunger to embrace her again, to cover her with kisses and fill his eyes and hands with the magnificence of her physical form.

Yielding to instinct, Frederick inclined his head but before their lips could touch, the carriage jolted slightly and came to a halt. Perceiving that they were actually now outside Heartwick Hall, they both swiftly drew back from one another, Annabelle busying herself in putting on her cloak and Frederick in fastening his coat.

By the time the coachman opened the door, they both appeared entirely calm and composed. Annabelle’s face under the hood of her cloak was inscrutable and still,

making him wonder if she even realized how close she had just come to semi-ravishment at his hands.

Then after he had jumped down and offered his arm to descend, Annabelle hesitated and looked at him with wary eye before she lightly laid her hand on his forearm.

She evidently knew that something had just passed between them, even if she could not say what. Frederick himself knew that he would have to tread even more carefully from now on. They were on very, very thin ice and if it broke there was no hope of rescue.

### CHAPTER 9

“ Y ou do look well, Annabelle,” said Duchess Sarah, kissing the younger woman’s cheek and holding her back critically. “I heard you were quite the belle of the ball at Yardley House and I can quite believe it.”

“Thank you,” Annabelle answered with a blush. “I did enjoy the Duke and Duchess of Yardley’s ball this year. I feared I would not without Penelope but all was well.”

They sat down together at the table of the café in Hyde Park, among the other denizens of the ton taking refreshment during their summer morning walks among the greenery.

Annabelle had been happy, if surprised, to receive Duchess Sarah’s note inviting her to meet, London being a convenient middle point for both Heartwick Hall and Walden Towers. Frederick had been less enthusiastic but good manners and family responsibility dictated that he must cooperate in escorting Annabelle to meet his stepmother. Presently, he had gone to order lemonade, there being no sign of the waiters.

“How does Penelope fare?” Annabelle asked and Duchess Sarah smiled, even if a little concern lingered around her eyes.

“She is well, but must rest now until the birth. I do suspect it will be twins. They do run on both sides of the family. It does at least explain how the pregnancy has advanced so fast and become so large. Twins might be easier than one very large baby, at least.”

“Penelope wrote to me that her midwife was a very good woman and highly respected by other ladies in the county,” Annabelle said with over-confidence. “I am sure all will be well.”

She spoke to soothe her own concerns as well as those of Penelope’s mother. The dowager duchess nodded.

“Yes, I am sure too. Now, I did not invite you here to talk of Penelope today, although she is naturally much in both of our thoughts. We will have good news to share soon enough. I think you know why I wanted to see you.”

Did Annabelle detect a gentle reproof in these words and the gentle blue eyes under the faded gold and silver hair? She flushed a little guiltily and swallowed, thinking of the letter that Duchess Sarah had recently sent to Frederick regarding her changed plans, including the specific comments proposing rearrangement of Annabelle’s stay.

“It was too late when we saw your letter,” Annabelle said and then the full explanation came tumbling out under Duchess Sarah’s expectant gaze. “I was already at Heartwick Hall. There was a mix-up by my maid, you see, and I arrived a week early. Then we thought that you would be back soon and there was no need to trouble everyone. Then it was all too late.”

“Stephen doesn’t know that you are at Heartwick Hall alone with Frederick, I take it?” the older woman asked and Annabelle shook her head.

“I have not mentioned it in my letters,” she mumbled, and then raised her eyes. “You won’t tell him, will you?”

Duchess Sarah sighed and Annabelle quaked a little inside. If the dowager duchess did tell and Stephen interrogated Annabelle she knew it would all come out. Not only had she been living alone with Frederick, but she had allowed him liberties with her

body while choosing clothes and succumbed to his passionate embrace at least once. Worst of all, she regretted none of it.

More than wishing to keep her improper behavior from Stephen and avoid his anger, she wished to keep these undeniably indecent but wonderful secrets close to herself. They seemed to belong to her and to Frederick but no one else. She would not even reveal them to whichever man she should finally marry if her plans for the season worked out.

“If Stephen asks me, I must tell him, Annabelle,” the older woman warned. “If he does not ask, then I am presently entirely occupied with the imminent birth of my first grandchild and had not intended to write to him. You must hope that he does not inquire, and that no servants’ gossip reaches his ears. I counsel you to remove yourself from Heartwick Hall while you can...”

“But I have a plan, Duchess Sarah,” Annabelle interrupted. “If it all works out then no one will need to be upset at anything. I intend to find a husband this season and Frederick is helping me. By the time Stephen comes back, I hope to be betrothed to someone. Then it won’t matter even if it does come out.”

“You aim to marry and Frederic is helping you? Frederick?!” asked the older woman, astonished.

At this moment, the man himself reappeared bearing three glasses of lemonade and took his own seat at the table.

“Did I hear my name?” he asked mildly, although with a determined set to his features.

“You did,” Duchess Sarah confirmed, her usually placid face puzzled and not entirely happy. “I have been hearing about Annabelle’s present stay at Heartwick Hall and her

plans for the season. While her ambition is a normal one for a young lady, I cannot deny having some concerns about how the two of you are proceeding.”

Frederick gave a long drawn-out sigh as he arranged the glasses.

“There is nothing to be concerned about, Stepmother. Annabelle is perfectly safe where she is and I am helping her to navigate the season to her best advantage.”

“And if it becomes known that she is living at Heartwick Hall alone with you?” Duchess Sarah pressed quietly, with a surreptitious glance around them in case of listeners. “What then, Frederick?”

“There is no need for it to become known,” he answered somewhat irritably. “In fact, I believed that was the principal reason you wished to see us both in person today. It was not really to see me, or even Annabel. You intended to show the ton the three of us together, to reduce the chance of questions being asked.”

“For both of your sakes, yes. That is precisely why I asked you here,” Duchess Sarah admitted freely. “I am glad that so many have seen us here this morning. It gives a veneer of normality to the situation and the only protection I can offer. You may be the Duke of Heartwick and the head of this family, Frederick, but you must have more care for Annabelle’s reputation.”

“Of course I care for Annabelle’s reputation,” he snapped at his stepmother. “Do not deliberately misconstrue my motives or actions, Duchess. It is unworthy of you.”

“Oh, Frederick,” the older woman sighed, her eyes now seeming very tired. “I only want the best for you, both of you. You as well as Annabelle.”

The friction between them was distressing Annabelle and she turned her eyes pleadingly to Frederick, silently begging him to be kinder to Duchess Sarah. She did



not know whether her plea registered but he sighed and smiled.

“Then tell me of Penelope and Maxwell, Stepmother. I would like to hear of my sister and you would like to talk of her, I have no doubt. That is a subject upon which we can all agree.”

To Annabelle’s relief, the rest of their conversation was taken up entirely with news from Walden Towers and the plans and events that would hopefully follow a healthy birth.

As the clocks struck noon, Duchess Sarah rose, and Frederick with her, Annabelle jumping up a few seconds later as she realized that the visit was over. They walked the dowager duchess back to her waiting carriage and then watched it drive away from the park.

“Did you have to be so terse with Duchess Sarah? She really was very worried,” Annabelle said once they were alone again. “Ladies of her age do so often worry about these things more than the young, especially mothers.”

“Duchess Sarah is my stepmother, not my mother, remember,” Frederick said shortly, closing Annabelle down and making her doubt herself for a few moments.

Then Annabelle recovered herself. What Frederick said was true, but Duchess Sarah did care about him and had come here today out of concern for both of them.

“That doesn’t matter, Frederick. She only wanted to help you, and me. Even if she’s wrong, Duchess Sarah was well intended. You could have been kinder.”

“Is that so? I’ll tell you what, Annabelle, you can lecture me about how I should behave with my family, and I shall lecture you about how you should behave with yours. Shall we start with not believing everything Stephen tells you as though you

were still five years old?”

“You are the one who sounds like a five-year-old,” Annabelle retorted. “Not me. Why are you making a simple observation from me into a personal criticism of you rather than reflecting on it calmly? Can you really not hear yourself today?”

Frederick glared at her but then straightened his face and folded his arms.

“Very well, Annabelle. If you are so grown-up and worldly now, you shall accompany me to Lord Blackwell’s dinner this evening. I was going to leave you at Heartwick Hall but as I promised to spend my nights with you, perhaps it is right to have you on my arm.”

Annabelle regarded him crossly with hands on her hips, not knowing how to react to his words or the news that she was now to be a guest of the notoriously louche Edwin Murden. The idea both intrigued and repelled her, rather like the man himself.

“I am sure you know best,” she said, for want of anything wittier or more original. “But returning to the subject of Duchess Sarah...”

“None of that matters right now,” Frederick said, cutting her off again. “We must go home and get ready. There is a particular mode of dress and behavior for Edwin’s parties and you must be suitably attired and prepared.”

Arriving back at Heartwick Hall, they found that a box had arrived that morning from Madame Deveaux, containing the green silk evening dress and matching shoes.

“Perfect timing,” commented Frederick, as Penelope peeked into the box and then lifted its lid with a delighted exclamation on discovering its contents. “You shall wear it tonight. Am I forgiven now that you have this reminder of my better qualities as well as my worse?”

Annabelle nodded and then shook her head, laughing as she did both.

“I cannot follow what you are thinking sometimes, Frederick.”

“Thank God for that,” he said in a cheerful voice but with a half-smile that made Annabelle pause as she closed the dress box, recalling the moment in the carriage after the Yardley House ball when she had asked him whether the moon made him think of her. “Now, go upstairs and try it on. There are some accessories you will need too. I shall bring them to you later.”

Before Annabelle could ask any further questions, Frederick walked away with a thoughtful expression on his face.

At six o’clock, Annabelle sat at her dressing table, freshly bathed and dressed in her new green silk which Myrtle had complimented even while expressing doubts about its neckline and the striking effect of the new French stays.

Once her mass of red-gold ringlets had been bound up with copper-colored pins, she had dismissed her maid for the night, not wanting the old woman to be witness to whatever transpired with Frederick when he brought whatever further item of dress or ornament he believed she would need this evening. Nor did she wish to face Myrtle’s disapproval if they returned home at an unduly late hour.

Annabelle knew that she should not really be receiving Frederick in her bedroom alone, but it all seemed far too late to worry about that now. It was such a small thing compared to everything else. When he knocked and entered a few minutes later, she only smiled at him, turning in her seat before the looking glass.

“You look beautiful, Annabelle,” he said directly as he approached her and laid down several boxes on the dressing table. “Then, how could it be otherwise?”

His handsome eyes scanned her body from top to toe approvingly, lingering on her face and bosom.

“Thank you,” she responded, always inclined to disbelieve compliments on her appearance but unable to argue with the apparent sincerity in Frederick’s rather hungry blue eyes.

“Turn back to the looking glass,” he instructed as he opened the first box and took out a necklace of blue sapphires set in delicate silver.

She shivered as his warm hands touched her throat and shoulders in fastening the necklace.

“Keep still or I fear I shall drop it down the front of your dress,” he warned, making her eyes open very wide.

In the looking glass she met Frederick’s eyes again and saw that he was teasing her but also, somehow, serious at the same time. Once the clasp was fastened, he did not step back but remained there, very close to her back, apparently admiring the reflection of either Annabelle or the necklace. Maybe both.

“That necklace belonged to my mother,” he mentioned lightly. “Duchess Sarah chose never to wear my mother’s jewelry. It has all been waiting a long time to be worn once more.”

“Then it is surely of too great a value for me to wear tonight,” Annabelle objected, thinking also that it was likely too striking and expensive for an unmarried young woman, especially in combination with her simple but exquisitely cut dress.

A simple pendant or cross would be more usual for an upper-class maiden of good reputation, or perhaps a string of pearls. People who saw her tonight might think she

was a fast and immodest young woman, a thought that appalled and appealed in equal measure.

“I insist that you not only wear it, but keep it. Can you think of a woman and a dress that this necklace would better suit?” Frederick said, reaching around to caress the stones but also flickering over Annabelle’s skin in the process. “I cannot.”

“Frederick,” Annabelle spoke his name aloud, unsure whether she intended to object further or to thank him for his consideration and unreasonable generosity.

In the event, she did neither, caught up in his gaze in the mirror and the sensation of his warm hands now resting on her bare shoulders as he regarded her in the glass. It was not the monetary value of this latest gift that disturbed her but its intimacy that also made it impossible to refuse.

“One more thing,” he said at last, removing his hands and opening the box to reveal a second item, a black silk half-face mask, sewn with dark blue and green sequins. “We will be masked tonight.”

Again, she could not hold her body’s automatic quiver as Frederick placed the mask to her face and tied it carefully behind her head, knotting the silken bow firmly.

“Masked...” she whispered to herself in the looking glass. “But why?”

Frederick gave her no answer to this question, instead producing his own mask, matching hers but cut to more masculine proportions and without the sparkling decoration.

As she watched him don his mask, it was odd to reflect how handsome he was both before and after the fabric was placed. Despite hiding so much of his well-proportioned face, the mask acted only as an enhancement, not a concealment. This

outfit would do nothing to deter women from throwing themselves at him as usual, Annabel suspected.

Then, Frederick smiled at her in the glass, in a manner she could only describe as rakish, but which made her heart race nonetheless. He handed her the cloak that Myrtle had left on the bed earlier.

“Time to put this on and face the big, bad world, Annabelle.”

### CHAPTER 10

“Where are the coaches going? Oh, I see,” Annabelle commented, peering out of the carriage window. “Look at that too, that one has covered up its crest. I wonder who it is?”

Instead of pulling up outside the Duke of Blackwell’s London house, vehicles were directed along a passage at the side of the house and into a massive coachhouse where guests could disembark with comfort and discretion before proceeding into the house through a shielding avenue of trees.

Frederick only smiled indulgently at Annabelle’s curious chatter, letting her form her own first impressions of the place and people. At his direction, their cloaks were left behind them in the carriage.

“How strange it all is!” Annabelle mused as they walked together through the avenue of spruces, the air around them stirred by only a mild June breeze and the needles of the trees glinting with the last sunlight of the day.

“You’ve seen nothing yet, Annabelle,” Frederick reminded her with a hint of a smile. “Remember what I said in the coach earlier: observe but don’t react, even if you see things that might be considered scandalous in another place and company. I will be near you and no harm will come to you here but this is also no place for the prudery your brother has fed you.”

Annabelle nodded, doubting whether she would be scandalized or not. Could anything again ever shock her as much as catching Frederick with that woman on the

first day of her visit to Heartwick Hall? He evidently still thought her only one step up from a schoolgirl, when she was actually one-and-twenty.

They entered the house through the open French windows of a large reception room bordering the gardens. The room already blazed with candles even though the sun was at least an hour from setting. Around the room were dotted other couples, groups and some single men and women, all elegantly dressed and masked as Frederick and Annabelle.

“Everyone is so...good-looking,” Annabelle observed to Frederick in a whisper. “I have never seen so many handsome men and women in one place.”

It was true. Everyone she could see, whether younger or older, men or women, was of pleasing aspect, well-dressed and radiating a deep physical confidence.

“Why do you think I brought you?” he whispered back. “You fit in perfectly.”

Annabelle did not know whether it was a compliment or not. She did not feel as though she fitted in and was reserving judgement on whether she wanted to, after Frederick’s warnings. He, however, did fit in here. It as though she were seeing Frederick back among his native people when she had only previously met him in foreign lands, among other tribes.

While the Duke of Heartwick in a mask seemed barely disguised at all to Annabelle, she still could not make out the identities of any other guests. Even the servants were masked as well as uniformed. Perhaps it was all part of the evening’s games, like at a more normal masquerade. The atmosphere had a dreamlike quality.

“I assume we are not to be presented to Lord Blackwell?” Annabelle queried as Frederick guided her out into the hallway and continued their tour, following the sound of music.



He shook his head with a sound of amusement.

“Certainly not. Names and titles are only exchanged discreetly here if they are not already known. But Edwin will find us eventually and you will have your chance to speak with him. He is a decent enough man by his own moral codes, if not those of society at large. Do not fear him but have no care for your usual guest etiquette either.”

They now walked into a small ballroom from where the music Annabelle had heard earlier was emanating. Despite the relatively early hour, several couples were already moving to the strains of the masked orchestra, some dancing indecently close to one another, or even embracing deliberately as they whirled together.

Although Annabelle felt her eyes widen, she remembered Frederick’s earlier words and said nothing aloud, even when faced with a couple where the woman had buried her face in her partner’s neck and his hand on her back was far too low for public decency.

“Are they married?” she couldn’t help whispering to Frederick as they continued their walk away from the couples and across the ballroom.

“Yes,” he answered, his eyes alive with laughter. “But not to each other.”

Annabelle drew a sharp breath and held more tightly to Frederick’s arm. Disapproval was not a strong enough word for what Stephen would make of this gathering.

Frederick led her now through several connected dining rooms where a massive spread of food and drink was laid out on various serving tables. She saw whole roast boar with apples in their mouths, multiple dishes of salmon and piles of roe, an entire table of roasted chickens and other birds with different stuffings. Was that actually a peacock in the centre?! The colored feathers surrounding its dish certainly implied as

much.

“Are you hungry yet?” Frederick asked and Annabel shook her head, very definitely, partly in sympathy for the peacock.

Laughing guests were already eating and drinking in several of the rooms. In one chamber a man appeared to be consuming a slice of cake as large as his own head while his friends cheered him on. In another room, a full-bodied woman in a violet evening dress and matching gloves was lying back on a table as a man carefully poured champagne directly into her mouth.

Since she had declined to eat yet, Frederick took them back through the ballroom again and this time into the conservatory. It led to an orangery and then other glasshouses full of exotic plants, the air of each one hotter than the one before.

Behind some of the bushes and shrubs, Annabelle thought she detected movement, but it was only when she heard the sound of a woman’s cry that it occurred to her what might be happening under cover of the potted undergrowth. Now she was truly shocked and froze in her tracks, clinging to Frederick

“Ah, I assumed it might be too early for such festivities out here but evidently not,” Frederick commented urbanely, although he rapidly steered them back to the ballroom once more and picked up two glasses of champagne on the way. “Here, drink this.”

Annabelle did as she was told and sipped the effervescent liquid as her heart raced. The sound she had just heard had been very similar to the cry she recalled coming from Frederick’s bedroom that day. At the time she had mistaken it for pain, but believed she knew better now even if she did not entirely understand the nature of such noises.

“I know your eyes, sir. I feel sure we have met before,” said a woman with ash-blond hair, a dress cut even lower than Annabelle’s, and an owl mask.

Approaching them boldly, she reached out to take Frederick’s other arm in a gesture of familiarity that matched her words.

“Maybe,” he acknowledged with a polite smile. “But I am already engaged tonight, as you see.”

“Ah, but you have two arms, and I do not mind sharing you,” purred the woman, pressing into Frederick, and smiling mischievously at Annabelle.

“There will be no sharing tonight,” he said firmly but pleasantly as he disentangled himself. “I am sure you will have no problem finding an alternative companion who pleases you equally.”

“Oh, very well,” sighed the woman, pretending to be piqued. “But next time, you are mine and I shall not be gainsaid. Don’t forget.”

“You’re a one-woman man tonight, are you, Heartwick?” interrupted another voice behind them, this time deep and male. “That’s a rare event.”

As Annabelle jumped, Frederick laid his hand over hers on his arm in a gesture of reassurance that soothed her as well as sending disturbing surges of sensation into her belly.

“Blackwell,” Frederick smiled in greeting, identifying his host in the black-clad man who had surprised Annabelle. “I see your party is already in full swing. I thought we might even be too early.”

Annabelle automatically dropped a small curtsy as the Duke of Blackwell’s dark

eyes took in her form. When she raised her gaze to his, his expression was amused but appreciative.

“It is early in the season,” shrugged Duke Edwin. “No one is weary yet and most are eager to socialize so games are progressing a little faster than usual. Speaking of which, Lady Gordney is here and asked after you, Frederick.”

“Did she, indeed?” Frederick said rather thoughtfully to himself and Annabelle felt a vague disquiet.

She remembered Lady Gordney all too well as one of Frederick’s women friends last year. A widow of independent means, the Dowager Marchioness of Gordney needed only observe the forms of social convention to remain respectable and the relationship had been an open secret. Mutual friends had deliberately invited them both to the same parties or ordered a single carriage after a ball, assuming they would leave together.

If Delia, Lady Gordney was here tonight then Annabelle knew that there was some level on which she could not compete for Frederick’s interest. Annabelle would feel as she had with the sultry Lady Coltenay at the Yardley ball but even more strongly given Frederick’s connection with Lady Gordney, and more distinctly in this more sensual environment where partners might well do more than merely dance together.

Frederick might still feel bound to look after Annabelle in this strange environment, given his promises to both her and her brother. However, he would not really want to be at her side and they would both feel that disappointment.

“Apparently Lady Gordney has missed you greatly this winter,” the Duke of Blackwell continued. “I told her you would be here alone but now see that she may be disappointed by the failure in my intelligence. Shall I let her down for you? I would be only too happy to comfort her.”

“I will let her down myself,” Frederick replied, his expression hard for Annabelle to read. “If she wishes to seek comfort, I’m sure she will find a suitable arm to lean on. Do you know where she is?”

“Over there, near the conservatory,” Duke Edwin directed with a nod of his head. “I suspect she was hoping you would want to view the orchids with her.”

Frederick laughed and released Annabelle’s arm, an alarming development that only made her want to cling on to him. It was rather like suddenly finding herself in open water rather than on the deck of a ship. What if the water was too rough to swim?

“Look after Lady Annabelle for me please, Edwin. This is her first visit to your house, remember. I would like her to look forward to a second.”

“Ah yes, I remember that you have a brother who might not approve of your presence here tonight, Lady Annabelle,” said the Duke of Blackwell, offering her his arm in lieu of Frederick’s. “You might find we are not so dreadful as he believes.”

Always well-mannered, Annabelle took Duke Edwin’s arm but cast her eyes at Frederick in alarm which only seemed to amuse him again. He bent his head and whispered in her ear before he moved off.

“Tonight is your best chance to practice everything I have taught you. Don’t waste it.”

She nodded acquiescence since there was nothing else she could do and turned to her host with another polite smile.

“I noticed that even your orchestra and servants are masked tonight,” she observed, in what she hoped was a neutral and inoffensive comment. “I confess I have never seen a party quite like this before.”

“Yes, I find people behave so differently and interestingly when they find themselves anonymous, and among others equally anonymous – or at least imagining themselves so. I do like to see how their behavior diverges when they feel safe from the mores and judgements of the ton.”

“Are they really so very different when everyone is masked?” Annabelle asked curiously and her host nodded.

“Yes, in the main. It is a great relief to some and a great opportunity to others. You, however, my dear, masked or unmasked, appear to be very much the same young woman I encountered in Hyde Park with the Duke of Heartwick.”

“I don’t know how to be any different,” said Annabelle, feeling as though she had to give some excuse or explanation.

“You are perfectly natural and charming, my dear,” Duke Edwin told her with a smile. “With or without the mask. They are qualities that few possess in such abundance and I am sure your escort tonight appreciates them both equally.”

Annabelle nodded her thanks at what she assumed was a compliment and then found her eyes straying to the doorway by the conservatory where blond-haired Frederick appeared to be rapt, in deep conversation with a very attractive auburn-headed woman in a puce dress, her décolletage and hair ornamented with strings of fine pearls.

Well, from the attentiveness of his gaze and animation of his words, Frederick certainly appreciated Lady Gordney. Annabelle felt her stomach drop as she watched them. Had she really ever imagined that she would hold Frederick’s full attention tonight in this place, in the presence of such sophisticated and experienced women?

“Lady Gordney is very beautiful,” she commented to their host, who laughed again,

and nodded in agreement.

“Every man here would concur and most are only too ready to partner the dowager marchioness on the dance floor, or for a walk among the orchids, should Duke Frederick not wish to press his advantage.”

Either he did not appreciate the sadness his words brought her, or he did not believe in sheltering her from it. He was also clearly among the men who would gladly step into Frederick’s place beside Lady Gordney, should he choose to vacate it.

Annabelle knew she could not hope to understand someone like the Duke of Blackwell if she could not even understand Frederick. As she was about to change the subject and ask about the poor peacock served up in the buffet room, she heard her name.

“Lady Annabelle? Is that really you? Yes, it is. Now my night is complete and the clock has not even struck nine. Blackwell, you do attract the most extraordinary selection of people to your parties. I congratulate you on the variety of your acquaintance!”

Disoriented, Annabelle turned, amazed and a little alarmed to be recognized at this gathering despite her mask. She instantly and instinctively relaxed when she saw the slim man with light-brown hair above a harlequin mask, his hazel eyes sparkling through it.

“Lord Darrington!” she exclaimed with delight and then noticed the other familiar man at his side.

While out of military dress tonight and wearing a finely tailored blue wool suit with a harlequin mask that exactly matched his friend’s, Annabelle was sure she recognized him from the Duke and Duchess of Yardley’s ball too.

“Captain Rawlings?” Annabelle added more hesitantly, in case she was wrong, or he perhaps did not wish to be identified.

Both men, however, appeared delighted to have found her and that she both recognized and remembered them.

“Now we have the ideal dance partner, Jacob,” Oswald Quince remarked. “Didn’t I tell you that the right woman always appears at Edwin’s gatherings?”

“You gentlemen know Lady Annabelle from the wider world, I gather,” said Duke Edwin. “Duke Frederick has left her with me as a jewel of precious worth, to be guarded from marauding blackguards, among whom neither of you are numbered, I know.”

The three men shared a smile as though at some running joke that Annabelle was not party to. She hoped that she had not done anything to make herself appear foolish or silly.

“Lady Annabelle is indeed a kindred spirit,” Oswald Quince declared. “You may leave her safely with me, Edwin. She will only be in danger of too much dancing. You will give me the first dance, won’t you, Lady Annabelle? Jacob is a fine dancer but does not have my conversation.”

Annabelle found herself now at ease and laughing, despite her strange surroundings and whatever might be happening in that corner between Frederick and Lady Gordney. How wonderful it was to find Lord Darrington here.

“Remember, I will be ready to offer respite from Oswald when his stream of gossiping becomes too much,” jested Captain Rawlings with a bow to Annabelle. “In the meantime, I will go and greet a fellow officer I believe I have spotted.”



“Major Owens?” suggested the Duke of Blackwell. “Yes, he is here tonight. I shall accompany you.”

Evidently judging Oswald Quince a suitable substitute guardian for Annabelle’s comfort and virtue, their host departed with Captain Rawlings, leaving Annabelle and Oswald to watch the dance.

“Frederick told me that those two are both married to other people,” Annabelle confided to Oswald as the too-closely entwined pair waltzed by them. “I’m not sure whether I was shocked, or only shocked that no one else was shocked because I am so used to it.”

Lord Darrington nodded, grinning. He did not think her a foolish child.

“Better than that fact, or worse, depending on whose judgement you take, her husband and his wife are also here tonight and they are all good friends,” he told her, causing Annabelle to giggle and clap a hand to her mouth to muffle the sound.

“I could never have imagined such a thing,” she admitted.

“Do you judge them?” he asked her curiously and she shook her head after a moment’s thought.

“No. It does not seem to me that anyone is being hurt or dishonored, if all concerned are content with the situation. I do not understand, and cannot imagine that I would be so understanding, but I cannot judge others.”

He smiled at this, seeming pleased with her answer.

“What about you?” Annabelle probed. “What attitude do you take?”

“I take the attitude that life is hard enough, especially for those who do not, or cannot, live entirely by society’s rules. I will not judge other adults who behave honestly and fairly and hope they will extend the same understanding to me.”

“You put that so well, Lord Darrington,” she commented, struck by his compassion and clarity of thought. “I agree with you entirely.”

“See? Didn’t I say we were kindred spirits? Now, if the next dance is something merry, we shall have it, shan’t we?”

Annabelle nodded without hesitation. It was so very easy to be with Oswald Quince and she thought again of Frederick’s questions in the coach after the Yardley House ball. Could she see this man as a potential husband?

He would be a bright, amiable and kind companion, she had no doubt. But was there something missing? She had a sense that there might be. As her reluctant eye again fell on Frederick and Lady Gordney, she recalled once more how different it felt to dance with Frederick, compared to Oswald Quince.

No one and nothing felt quite like dancing with Frederick and never had. Annabelle sighed at this fact and tried to put it from her mind. What did it mean anyway? It was only dancing.

“Come on,” Oswald said, taking her hand. “Listen. I think it’s actually going to be a quadrille next. We must take our places.”

“Marvelous!” Annabelle agreed and followed him onto the dance floor.

### CHAPTER 11

“How evasive you are tonight, Duke Frederick,” remarked Lady Gordney with a skillful flickering of her fan and raising of one eyebrow above her vivid green eyes. “You positively refuse to be pinned down one way or another. Have you belatedly rediscovered your Sunday school morals?”

Frederick laughed heartily at this jokingly delivered suggestion. He had intended only a brief renewal of acquaintance with his former paramour tonight, wanting them to remain on good terms more than to pick up the loose threads of their passionate liaison of last summer. It seemed, however, that picking up the threads was exactly what the flame-haired and sharp-minded beauty in front of him had set her mind upon.

“I have no objection to pinning down in principle, in either direction, my dear Delia,” he countered. “But it is vital that everyone concerned freely accepts the time and place of the pinning, is it not? If I am presently otherwise engaged, you must excuse me.”

“Naturally, your full and earnest cooperation is vital,” Lady Gordney sighed. “If only you would give me the chance to excite it, and perhaps even arouse your... fuller enthusiasm.”

“I have responsibilities this summer, family responsibilities. My energies and interest are engaged elsewhere for the time being.”

“Ah, of course. Your sister’s child must be due any day – your heir as well as the

Duke of Walden's. You are fond of Duchess Penelope, I recall. She will be glad of your support, I am sure. But family responsibilities should not deprive you entirely of your own pleasures, surely."

Frederick did not comment. It was not quite the responsibility he had meant but he would allow Delia to believe it, if she wished. The thought of discussing Annabelle with Lady Gordney was distasteful to him.

"You deserve a man who can give you undivided attention this season and can take your pick among many," he offered without receiving any enthusiastic response.

"Sadly, the many do not interest me, Frederick, only the select few. I am a woman of taste. It seems that you are to abandon me to solitude."

While her words were light, her disappointment did appear genuine. Still, so was his determination to guard and steer Annabelle to matrimony this season. He would not be able to do that effectively if distracted by the manifold charms of his former lover.

He remembered with distinct regret how his absorption in Delia's body and her breathtaking bedroom skills had distracted him from noticing the threat that Lord Silverbrook posed to Penelope last year. He would not make such an error again when a young woman was relying on his protection.

"Duke Edwin has intimated that he would not allow you to pine," Frederick informed his former lover with a suggestive smile. "Now there is a challenge beyond the ordinary for a woman of discernment and experience. Is that not a fruit you have imagined tasting?"

"You have discussed this with our host already? How indecent," Lady Gordney commented, although she did not appear displeased by the idea.

The Duke of Blackwell was a handsome, well-travelled and well-read man as well as a bon viveur. Frederick had never heard any complaints from Duke Edwin's bedroom companions, some of whom were acquaintances of many years. He assumed the man was likely to be a skilled lover and would probably suit Delia well in that regard.

"Perhaps I shall tell him of your unconscionable behavior, Duke Frederick, and see what he suggests by way of remedy," Lady Gordney suggested now, with a serious tone but laughing eyes.

"Do," Frederick urged her. "Curse me together and enjoy it. I would like to see you both happy."

Both of their eyes now scanned the growing crowd, seeking the black-clad figure of Edwin Murden and finding that he was no longer in the ballroom.

"He's gone, damn it," muttered Frederick, assuming that their host had swept away Annabelle at his side and having wanted to keep her at least within sight tonight. "I must find him."

Before he could rush off, Delia took his arm and pointed to the dance floor.

"She is over there, Frederick, if you're looking for that sweet little creature you came in with tonight."

Indeed Annabelle was there, on the dance floor and dancing a lively jig with Oswald Quince, their faces both suffused with carefree laughter and happy exertion.

Had they been dancing together the entire time that he had been caught up in conversation with Delia? The thought irked Frederick for some reason, as though they were at a regular dance, Annabelle were a minor and Lord Darrington should have asked for Frederick's permission.

“If I may say, Frederick, she does not seem to be missing your company right now. In contrast, I miss it greatly. Must you really rush away so soon? We both know that there are certain regards in which such a proper young lady cannot provide you with the satisfaction of more worldly women.”

As she spoke, Lady Gordney’s hand snaked up his arm and rested over his heart in an intimate gesture that immediately recalled other times and other embraces between them. Frederick brushed it away and stepped back, not wanting her to touch him at all.

“I wish you well, Delia,” he said shortly, his eyes still on Annabelle and Oswald Quince as the current dance came to an end. “I...What the hell does she think she’s doing?”

As he watched, the pair on the dance floor seemed to be sharing some joke, Annabelle touching Lord Darrington’s arm and he patting her shoulder as they laughed together. Something in that simple and companionable gesture infuriated Frederick and he strode away from Lady Gordney now without hearing anything else she might have said.

Marching onto the dance floor, Frederick went straight to Annabelle’s side and placed himself between her and Lord Darrington.

“It’s Oswald Quince, Frederick,” said Annabelle quite innocently. “I did not imagine we would see him here. Did you?”

Frederick acknowledged the other man with a short bow but no further address and saw the confusion his coldness sparked on Annabelle’s face.

“We’re leaving, Annabelle,” he stated baldly. “Now.”

“But we’ve been here barely an hour,” she protested, astonished. “Why must we leave?”

“I was a fool to ever bring you here,” Frederick replied through gritted teeth. “What was I thinking?”

“It is probably best that you leave,” remarked Lord Darrington to Annabelle, calmly and without rancor, before shifting his eyes to Frederick. “Lady Annabelle was safe with me, Duke Frederick but I agree with you that she perhaps does not belong in this environment. I hope to see you both again soon in more salubrious circumstances.”

Darrington smiled an encouraging smile at Annabelle as Frederick led her away. The Duke of Heartwick half wanted to punch the man’s good-humored face and half to apologize to him for what he knew deep down to be unreasonable rudeness. Frederick could not justify his behavior but nor could he stay there and watch a moment more of the scene he had just witnessed.

While Annabelle left the Duke of Blackwell’s house without objection, her meekness vanished as soon as they entered the coach.

“Why did you do that, Frederick? You humiliated me in front of Oswald Quince. Everything was going so well.”

Annabelle’s words conveyed all of the disappointment, consternation and hurt that she felt, but some internal wound of Frederick’s own would not allow him to be mollified so easily yet.

“So well?” he repeated angrily, his mind’s eye still full of the images of Annabelle and Oswald Quince, dancing, laughing and conversing together so intimately. “What did you think you were playing at in there with him?”

“Him? Oswald Quince, you mean? You know what I’m doing. I’m trying to find a husband. Wasn’t I going about it exactly as you instructed?”

“You were meant to flirt with potential suitors, not let them manhandle you in public.”

“What are you talking about, Frederick? There was no manhandling of any kind from Lord Darrington. If you were watching me, you must have seen that.”

“I saw you touch Darrington’s arm. I saw him touch your shoulder.”

“That’s ridiculous, Frederick. Men and women touch more than that in even the most formal dance. Anyway, that’s how Oswald is with everyone when he talks, men as well as women. Have you not noticed?”

“Oswald already, is he?” Frederick threw back at her, the early use of Lord Darrington’s first name not escaping his notice.

“Why should you even care?” demanded Annabelle, her face flushing crossly. “I thought you were meant to be helping me.”

They argued this way all the way back to Heartwick Hall until Frederick was in half a mind to open the carriage door and jump out. Whatever he said, he could not win because he knew deep down that he had been wrong in some way. He also knew that he’d had no choice in his actions. Some deeper instinct would not let him act otherwise.

Even after the coach arrived at Heartwick Hall, their rowing continued. Annabelle even refused his arm to help her down from the coach, stumbling on the dark step of the coach in her new high-heeled evening shoes as she attempted to jump down by herself.



“Are you trying to do yourself an injury just to spite me?” Frederick demanded, catching her in his arms and righting her on her feet, much to her fury. “Damn it all, Annabelle!”

The sensation of her warm and rounded breasts pressing against him for a moment drove him mad, as though she had done it on purpose to goad his desire.

“Why should you care if I fall?” Annabelle flared again, breaking away from him. “That would stop me going out anywhere wouldn’t it? Would that suit you better?”

“Drive on round to the carriage house,” Frederick ordered the coachman tersely, not wanting any further witness to this undignified exchange that showed no sign of abating. “Of course it wouldn’t suit me, Annabelle. What a damned stupid thing to say.”

“Well, dragging me away from Oswald Quince on no grounds whatsoever and then making such ridiculous accusations was a damned stupid thing to do.”

Frederick did not think he had ever head Annabelle use a profanity before and it surprised him. In any other moment, he might have laughed at the incongruity of it but now it only nettled him.

As she retorted, Annabelle was trying to hurry ahead up the stone steps of the house but with her shoes and shorter legs, she could not manage to distance him. Frederick had caught up with her by the time she reached the front door. He crossly waved away the footman who had held it open for them, telling him that all the staff could now go to bed.

“I made a mistake, Annabelle,” Frederick told her as they walked through the hall, trying and likely failing to keep his voice down now that they were indoors. “I never should have taken you to the Duke of Blackwell’s gathering. You’re too innocent and

it was all wrong.”

At the bottom of the stairs now, she stopped running away and regarded him with blazing eyes. Something in this remark was incendiary to her.

“Do you think I want to be innocent, Frederick? Do you think I’ve ever had the chance to be anything else? Maybe I wanted to experience something more tonight, even if it was only vicariously, by watching others. I thought you wanted that for me too.”

Along with her words, Frederick was struck by the full force of Annabelle’s bluebell eyes, her disordered hair, her flushed cheeks and the angry beauty her features composed as a whole, never mind the splendid breasts rising and falling in their green silk wrapping beneath.

Lacking suitable words to convey the feelings she had stirred up inside him this evening, Frederick did not want for actions. Before he knew it, Annabelle was in his arms in the muted candlelight and his lips had claimed hers once more. The sound from her throat was not one of protest and her hand tangled almost immediately in his hair.

Frederick kissed her again and again, reveling in her warm response and wanting never to stop. Had they only argued in lieu of kissing? If so, where would this end? Her curious but tentative lips and tongue were firing his desire far more strongly than the knowing kisses of any more experienced woman and her bosom moulded heavy and warm into his hand as he caressed its curve for the first time.

“We should go upstairs to your room,” he said at last, panting as he managed to draw back his face from Annabelle’s for a moment.

Annabelle seemed to be nodding, although fear and desire vied for supremacy on her

face.

“I would never hurt you. I promise,” Frederick said. “But I think we both need more and I cannot show you all that I should here.”

Now Annabelle inclined her head more clearly and let him take her arm as they began to climb the stairs to an uncertain destination.

The entire night had been a bewildering whirlwind of emotions and sensations for Annabelle. First had come the shocking and fascinating scenes at the Duke of Blackwell’s house, then the scenes of unadulterated fun and friendly chatter with Oswald Quince, followed quickly her thunderous row with Frederick, likely the worst they had ever had.

Now, somehow, she was leaning on Frederick’s arm as they proceeded together towards her bedroom, her entire body aching for more of the kisses and gentle but downright improper handling she had received from him in the hallway.

“What are we doing?” she whispered both to Frederick and to herself as they crossed the landing.

“Whatever you wish,” he answered, lifting her hand to his mouth and kissing first her fingers and then her palm, his blue eyes seeking hers while his head was bent. “Up to a certain point. You may stop me at any time, Annabelle.”

In reality, she could not imagine that her own longing would allow her to stop Frederick doing anything. It felt too strong and too unfamiliar to rein in. Annabelle wanted things she could neither visualize nor describe. She knew only that the man beside her could provide them.

“Frederick,” Annabelle said, feeling as though she was tasting his name while she

gazed on his handsome face.

As soon as she spoke his name, he kissed her again, pinning her passionately against one of the walls between two paintings and eliciting small sounds that she did not at first recognize as coming from her own throat.

“What if the servants see us?” she gasped breathlessly as he stepped back once more and drew her with him up the last short flight of stairs.

Frederick might have dismissed the staff for the night some minutes before he had kissed her but Annabelle knew that maids and footmen could easily be lurking quietly on unseen final tasks.

“In your bedroom, no one will see us,” he told her, sliding an arm about her waist as they finally reached the corridor leading to her room, Frederick carrying a small candelabra he had lifted from one of the small tables on the landing.

Inside the bedroom, Frederick locked the door and put down the candelabra on the nightstand before reaching out to caress Annabelle’s face as she stood tremulously before him. What would happen now? She felt she could scarcely breathe for the anticipation.

“Don’t be afraid,” he said once again and kissed her mouth softly “All you have to do tonight is enjoy me. I will do you no injury.”

While Annabelle did not fully understand the words, she did understand the sensations that thrilled through her as Frederick pulled her body against his and parted her lips with his tongue. In the candlelight, his hair had a golden halo and she thought again of him as a Greek god, this time visiting a mortal maiden for salacious purposes.

Slowly but efficiently, his hands stroked her bare shoulders, unfastened her hair and explored the lines of her body through its silken sheath. Meanwhile, his kisses held her rapt in his arms, falling first on her mouth, and then her throat before moving to the pale hills of her bosom, swelling above the neckline of her dress.

“Do you know how beautiful you are, Annabelle?” Frederick murmured, caressing the long, heavy sweep of curls now falling freely about her shoulders.

She shook her head in disbelief and turned away shyly but he only tipped up her chin and kissed her again until she was giddy and clinging to him.

“That is how beautiful you are,” Frederick said with a fiercer heat. “Believe in it. Your face is beautiful, your body is so very, very beautiful, Annabelle...”

Now his fingers were again stroking her shoulders, busying themselves at with buttons at her back, sliding about her waist and then coming up again to fully cup her breasts through the silk dress. Annabelle felt her nipples hardening against his palms and moaned aloud. She did so more loudly a moment later when Frederick eased down her loosened bodice and stays to take the pale, full globes into his hands.

When he covered her bared breasts with kisses, she could only whimper and pull him closer with her hands once again buried in his golden hair. That gesture seemed to incite him to further kisses, eventually returning to her mouth. One of Frederick’s hands came again to her back, now unfastening enough buttons that the entire sweep of her green silk gown fell to the floor at her feet.

At that moment, Annabelle found herself standing before Frederick in only a disarrayed petticoat, stays and stockings, breathing hard and making no effort whatsoever to discourage the hand laying claim to her breasts or the mouth drawing kiss after kiss from her own lips.

Daringly, Annabelle began to push Frederick's jacket from his shoulders, and then, with his cooperation to unfasten his waistcoat.

"I want to see your body too," she panted and he swiftly heeded her words, dropping his upper garments to the floor and lifting the linen shirt away over his head.

"Only this far," he said, taking her hands away from the waistband of his trousers, his voice having now become something like a growl. "I must keep control of myself, Annabelle, for your sake."

Trembling, Annabelle placed her hands on the bare golden-haired expanse of his chest and ran them across his shoulders, arms and stomach. How was it possible for a man to be this perfectly made? She pressed her own few impulsive kisses onto his torso, her head not even reaching his chin.

"God! You have no idea what you do to me," Frederick groaned and then tumbled Annabelle onto her bed.

Her heart raced as she felt his weight on her body, their hands entwined and her mouth claimed once more by his. Was she to be deflowered tonight? She knew the basic facts about the sexual act but could not in any way relate them to the sensually overwhelming experience they were presently engaged in.

Something hard and eager at Frederick's groin nudged and pressed at her thigh and hip through his trousers as they embraced but he held himself back to some extent and stopped Annabelle's hands from wandering below his waist.

He did not, however, apply the same constraint to his exploration of Annabelle's body. Frederick's hands found the curve of her hip and the full length of her legs as they kissed, stroking her flesh through the fine fabric of her petticoats and stockings.

“...such gorgeous breasts...must kiss your belly...your thighs are so soft and warm...”

All the time, she could hear him murmuring his sensual appreciation of her body and its apparent beauty. The erotic litany drove her wild and even though she knew the moral transgression of Frederick’s hands sliding under her petticoats and raising them, there was no question at all of asking him to stop.

Even when he kissed his way down to her navel and raised the fine silk underskirt to her waist, she could only moan and gasp for more. Frederick even parted her thighs with his sure hands and gazed on her most intimate flesh with fierce eagerness.

“Annabelle, Annabelle, Annabelle...” he whispered, stroking the bare skin of her thighs where pale pink garters marked the end of her stockings. “So very beautiful...”

He stroked the red-gold hair on her mount of Venus and then pressed a first kiss to that throbbing mound. As with his first kisses to her mouth, Frederick’s lips began with a soft warm pressure that made Annabelle press herself to him for more. Only then did his tongue begin to flicker and make itself known to her sensitive folds.

As Frederick settled himself between Annabelle’s thighs and began to stroke, lap and stimulate her womanhood in earnest, she finally understood exactly what she had witnessed on that first day at Heartwick Hall. His knowing tonguing of the firm little bud at the top of her slit banished the question of why any woman would have allowed him to handle her in such a way.

Then even these thoughts were banished, lost to the sweeping waves of sensation that Frederick was deliberately provoking and building. A finger had intruded itself into her body, and then another, their pressure providing a counterpoint to the movements of his tongue. Eventually, overcome with need, uncertainty and impossible pleasure, Annabelle heard herself wail his name as she dissolved on a pinnacle of sensual

experience.

“Frederick, oh Frederick,” she sobbed again as the waves continued, although fading now in intensity.

As they faded into a general warm glow, she felt his fingers withdrawn and his body rising to lay beside her. When Frederick kissed her again, she tasted the tang of her own salt on his lips.

“You’re even more beautiful when you’re in ecstasy, Annabelle,” he growled and she realized that while her own tension was now released, Frederick’s body still felt tightly wound and full of potential energy.

“What did you do to me, Frederick?” she asked with wonder. “I never imagined I could feel something like that.”

“You are still a maiden but I have taught you something of the nature of bedroom games,” he said gruffly, taking another rather hungry kiss from her lips and covering one of her breasts again with his hand.

“I know why all those other women chase you,” she sighed, closing her eyes and enjoying the warmth of his palm over her sensitive nipple.

“Don’t talk of them,” Frederick said, shaking his head sharply as if to banish presently unwanted memories. “Don’t talk of anything. Just kiss me.”

Annabelle obeyed, caressing his face as she pressed her lips to his and let their tongues dance delicately together. Still, he was holding his lower body slightly away from her and her stomach contracted at the thought of what could happen if he did not.



Part of her wanted to touch him there and uncover the organ he was hiding, even if that led to the loss of her maidenhead and her potential ruin.

“What happens now?” she asked timidly and Frederick inhaled and exhaled deeply, his face flushed and absorbed.

“We do that again, and then I let you sleep,” he stated, setting out a clear path for both of them.

“So, you don’t intend to...”

“No, Annabelle,” Frederick said firmly, cutting her off. “Do not go there. You are safe as long as you let me keep you so. Now, let us get rid of these.”

Kissing, stroking and squeezing, he stripped away the disordered petticoats and stays from Annabelle’s body and gazed on her nakedness with full and frank lust that made her tremble, especially when he spread her thighs again and applied his mouth a second time.

This time, when it was over, Frederick rose from the bed while Annabelle was still crying out with the last stabs of agonized pleasure deep inside her belly. She gazed on him in breathless silence as he dressed himself, his own breath audibly ragged.

After a few long breaths with his back turned to her, he returned to the bed and pulled back the covers before tucking her inside. Annabelle did not resist, feeling warm, cared for and utterly overwhelmed.

She thought he was going to give her a final kiss but he only looked at her with an expression of intense longing that managed to spark her own desire all over again. How many times was it possible to feel this in such quick succession?

“Annabelle.”

That was the only word of goodnight he uttered. After briefly caressing her face and running his thumb across her lips, Frederick unlocked the door and left.

### CHAPTER 12

Frederick awoke with the sunrise, having neglected to draw the curtains in his bedroom last night and surprised for a moment by this unusual failure. Then, with a jolt, the reasons for his distraction last night came back to him, reinforced by the faint scent of a woman's arousal on the hand beside his head.

Throwing himself out of bed, he washed his hands and face at the wash stand. Last night he had publicly rowed with Annabelle. Then he had kissed her, stripped her naked and reveled in the pleasure of her innocent excitement.

What did you do to me, Frederick?

The memory of the wonder in her bluebell eyes as she spoke those words pierced his conscience to the quick, even while the mental image of those full, rosy-tipped breasts gave him an unwanted surge of renewed lust.

"Christ, what have I done?!" he asked his own reflection in the looking glass of the stand. "What kind of man am I?"

Lady Annabelle Elkins was no seasoned woman of the world, no widow, courtesan or lady adventurer. She was a virgin, a marriageable young lady of good family and the younger sister of a family friend. He might even have felt compelled to call out any other man who had taken half of the liberties Frederick himself had enjoyed.

At least he had exercised some self-control last night and had not claimed her maidenhead. Annabelle was at no risk of getting with child and no one else needed to

know what had passed between them.

With a pang of remorse, Frederick thought of his stepmother's well-intended but dismissed admonitions. She had been right to be concerned. An innocent like Annabelle should never have ended up in the clutches of a man with his reputation. She trusted him completely and he did not deserve such confidence.

At the same time, Frederick had always despised self-pity and the paralysis of useless introspection. To think clearly, he was a man who needed action. There was no question of staying in his bedroom and castigating himself for half the morning. Pulling his riding clothes from the wardrobe, Frederick dressed carelessly and took himself straight out to the stables.

"Annabelle," Frederick blurted as he entered the breakfast room and found her already sitting there at the table, a piece of fruitcake just about to enter that pink little rosebud mouth of hers. "I did not realize you had risen so early."

He covered his surprise and excitement at seeing her with politeness and a small bow, conscious too of the footman who had just brought in another jug of steaming coffee.

"I thought you had gone out," Annabelle said quietly, putting the cake back down on her plate and blushing bright red.

"I only took a ride around the estate. It helps me to clear my head in the mornings," he said and sat down. "Are you well, Annabelle?"

Shyly, she flicked up her eyes to his face and then looked away again. The action was just as he had taught her but right now seemed an entirely natural response. Of course she was shy after what they had done last night. Any inexperienced young woman would be. She could have no idea what he intended.

Then she smiled at him and it was like the sun coming out.

“Yes, I am very well,” Annabelle said and the radiance of her skin and eyes reinforced her words.

There had been a moment during his ride the morning when it seemed that clouds were gathering thickly and the day ahead might be gray and miserable. But then, as Frederick emerged from woodland, the sun had re-appeared, clouds drifting away on the summer breeze, and leaving the land bathed in golden warmth and Frederick’s heart lifted and hopeful again.

Annabelle’s smile now was like that striking re-appearance of the sun, reassuring him that all was well and as it should be. He had not hurt her or damaged her reputation and her feelings towards him were only positive.

“I am glad to hear that,” he commented, returning her smile and letting his eyes feast for a moment on her loosely bound curls, luminous complexion and fair bosom rising and falling above her pale blue muslin summer dress. “I worried that you might be... indisposed after yesterday.”

She shook her head, her eyes still bright and happy.

“I am not at all indisposed. I feel wonderful today,” she admitted, still a little shyly but with perceptible warmth. “Thank you.”

Those last two words surprised him. Had he expected her to rail at him? To resent the advantage he had taken of her innocence? To castigate herself for some imagined moral failing in indulging the pleasures of the flesh?

Annabelle was not going to do any of these things it seemed. Last night she had wanted him. She had told him that she sought experience and she had been an active

participant in achieving and enjoying it. He had not besmirched Annabelle at all. He had only treated her as she wished to be treated – as an attractive adult woman with normal, healthy desires.

Relieved and encouraged by this realization, Frederick laughed a little, and glanced quickly around the room to make sure no servants were present.

“I wonder what you are thanking me for,” he said in a low voice. “I seem to remember enjoying yesterday quite as much as you.”

“Not quite as much, I think,” Annabelle said, her expression delightfully coy. “I believe you were generous.”

Her physical presence and the sound of her voice were both now sending erotic chills through him and Frederick could not deny his pure physical desire for this young woman.

“My enjoyment was different to yours, yes,” he conceded. “Still, it was very real, believe me. I only wish I could...”

He broke off as the door to the breakfast room opened and pulled back the hand that had been about to reach across the table and cover Annabelle’s.

“A letter for you, Your Grace,” said Witmore, presenting the folded note on a silver tray and then withdrawing.

“It’s from Stephen,” Annabelle said with slight apprehension as he opened and unfolded the notepaper. “I recognize the seal and the writing. It is not bad news from Norfolk, I hope?”

Frederick read quickly and then put the letter on the table and slid it over to

Annabelle.

“Your father and the rest of your family are well,” he told her immediately, to put her mind at rest, but let her read the rest of the letter herself.

“Stephen is returning to London in two days and will collect me from here. Father is well enough that he can be left with only Mother and the physician. I can see out the rest of the season at home as long as nothing changes.”

“Well, that is good news, isn't it?” said Frederick with a heartiness he did not feel. “About your father, I mean. Norfolk has evidently been a boost to his constitution.”

“Yes, of course,” Annabelle agreed with a conviction just as unconvincing as Frederick's.

Their eyes rose and locked at the same moment.

“Do you think Stephen knows anything?” she asked him worriedly.

Frederick reflected and then shook his head, not having to ask what Annabelle meant.

“If he did, he would be here to take you away by lunchtime, not in two days time. He would probably have threatened to horsewhip me too, of course.”

Annabelle laughed at this although her hand also flew up to her mouth in horror at Frederick's jesting words. They were not too far from the truth.

“Why is this wrong, Frederick?” she asked guilelessly. “Why must something that feels so right make Stephen and the rest of the world so angry?”

“Because it can lead to other things, I suppose,” he answered with a long sigh.

“Things you have not experienced and should not, for your own good. We must be very careful, Annabelle.”

“I don’t want to go home with Stephen,” she said then, an alarming statement that unsettled Frederick even while the slight pout of her perfect lips aroused him. “I want to stay with you.”

He did not want any kind of row with Lord Emberly and his family any more than he wanted to harm or dishonor Annabelle. For both of their sakes, such sentiments must be quashed.

“Sometimes, we cannot have what we want,” he said levelly. “We must make do with what we have.”

Annabelle looked sad but nodded her understanding of this.

“I must leave with Stephen now, and I must still find a husband this season too. You will still help me with that, won’t you?”

“Absolutely,” Frederick answered with a definitive nod.

With a husband at her side, Annabelle would hopefully be safe from him and his kind forever. This short time at Heartwick Hall was all he could ever have of her.

“Betsy is a reliable mount,” Frederick said, patting the flank of the old gray mare. “Duchess Sarah rides her sometimes.”

“She’s still very big,” Annabelle noted nervously, not being a confident rider.

“No, you’re just rather small,” Frederick teased her. “Now, I shall give you a leg up. One, two, three...”



Without any time to protest, Annabelle found herself boosted up into the side-saddle by Frederick's strong arms, first only his hands at her feet, but then his arms around her waist and pressing her thigh and hip as he settled her safely.

"Oh," she gasped, both in reaction to the physical contact and the rush of excitement it prompted in her veins, as much as finding herself now on horseback.

Frederick had dismissed the grooms once they had saddled the two horses and made it clear that he himself would provide the only assistance to Annabelle. He stood presently in his shirt sleeves, having tossed his jacket aside onto a fence. Glancing towards the stables, Annabelle observed the movement of the men and boys going about their work and wondered what they might think.

Well, she was leaving the day after tomorrow and there was no point in worrying about that. She was determined only to enjoy Frederick's company while she could and had been pleasantly surprised at how easy it had been to persuade him after breakfast that they should spend the day outdoors together on the Heartwick Estate.

"Sit up a little straighter and hold the reins a little tighter. Let Betsy know you're in charge," Frederick instructed. "Show me a walk and then a trot around this paddock. If you can do that, I'll take you out to the woodland paths."

Annabelle swallowed, still nervous, but not wanting to ruin their little expedition with her childish fears. Betsy whinnied softly and began to walk as Annabelle relayed the appropriate instruction with the reins and the heels of her boots. The unworried sound from the horse was soothing and soon Annabelle began to relax.

"Very good, now trot," Frederick called to her and Annabelle nudged Betsy again with her heels.

The amenable mare moved to a trotting movement without any fuss. Annabelle

laughed joyously as she realized that, perhaps for the first time, she was enjoying herself on horseback. Betsy was indeed a reliable animal, and the bouncing movement of the trot was actually rather pleasant.

“You have progressed!” commented Frederick with a grin. “I’ll never believe you again when you say you’re not a rider.”

“I always wanted to ride but I was too afraid when I was younger. Now, I don’t think I’m scared any more,” she said, more to herself than to the handsome young man watching her intently from the centre of the paddock.

Frederick’s interested gaze made Annabelle smile. The day was sunny, the breeze was warm and she knew that her riding habit became her. It was not a new garment but today was the first time she had worn it with the French stays.

Her own reflection in the looking glass had fascinated her after Myrtle had fastened the habit and stepped back with a rather doubtful expression on her own wrinkled visage.

“Maybe that habit needs some adjustment, My Lady. You don’t ride often and might have grown since it was made.”

Annabelle barely heard the elderly woman’s words. She was back again in this room by candlelight with Frederick last night, his voice rough and his handsome face suffused with desire.

...your body is so very, very beautiful, Annabelle...

Frederick had caressed, fondled and kissed her breasts with a passion that leant truth to his words. Perhaps they weren’t too big after all.

“I think this habit is just right,” Annabelle had declared, as Myrtle shook her head with some chagrin.

Now, bouncing rhythmically on the trotting horse in the paddock, the looks she kept catching from Frederick’s eyes only reaffirmed Annabelle’s confidence in her body.

She was beginning to feel rather warm and strange, almost lightheaded but more in her belly and between her thighs. It was a similar feeling to the one when Frederick was first kissing and touching her last night. Blushing, she wondered if she was going to find her private places all soft and slippery again, just as they had been after Frederick’s attentions.

Pulling his jacket back on, Frederick vaulted into the saddle of his own horse and grinned her, preparing to lead them off towards the woodland paths.

“You’re ready,” he declared, his words making her swallow with longing.

When she married, would her husband make her feel like this too? Annabelle ached to be touched again. She was certainly ready, but ready for what?

After Myrtle had put away her clothes and departed that night, Annabelle let herself cry into her pillow. She did not really even know what she was weeping for.

Was it because she was leaving Heartwick Hall? Because Frederick was not there beside her? Or because she was so increasingly confused about what she should seek and expect from a husband?

Despite other calls on his time, Frederick had spent the whole day with Annabelle at Heartwick Hall. As well as a long ride and picnic in the woodlands, they had played on Penelope’s old swing and walked in the orchards.

Several times when they seemed to be alone out on the estate, Frederick had pulled Annabelle into his arms and kissed her, although all too briefly for her frustrated yearning. She longed for him to tumble her to the ground, disorder her clothes and cover her in indecent kisses all over again.

Yet each time Frederick embraced her he pulled back, as though he was fighting some internal battle, unable to entirely resist his own physical urges but nor to indulge them.

The riding habit itself also acted as some restraint and shield to modesty, too tight and complicated to unfasten for Frederick to easily loose her breasts. Annabelle whimpered with frustration as he kissed the upper curve of her breasts, only able to cup them in his hands through the fabric after he had lifted her down from her horse in the middle of the woodland and embraced her.

“I want you, Frederick,” Annabelle told him. “I want you so much.”

“We cannot,” he sighed, pulling back once more, with one more stroke of her hair. “We must not, but you are so very lovely.”

Lying alone in the dark of her bedroom, Annabelle whimpered again as she let her own hands cover her breasts and imagined them as Frederick’s. Moving lower, she stroked her belly and thighs and then the softly furred slit between them, finding that it was just as swollen and slippery through thinking of him as when he had touched her.

“Oh Frederick,” she sighed, letting herself believe that her finger was his tongue and seeking again the pleasure and release he had given her.

As she peaked, Annabelle also felt a moment of clarity in her thoughts. This was what she should be seeking from a husband. She needed a man who would make her

feel the same pleasure and longing that Frederick aroused.

For some reason, this thought made her cry again and she wept herself to sleep.

### CHAPTER 13

“ You mentioned that Duchess Sarah is visiting Penelope and Maxwell today,” Stephen began with a mildly curious air as a maid served braised duck and new potatoes at the table. “Can I ask...?”

Having been dreading such a turn in the conversation ever since Stephen’s coach first drew up to the front door of Heartwick Hall, Annabelle now held her breath with trepidation. She could not entirely set aside Frederick’s previous casual comments about her brother horsewhipping him for their illicit, if incomplete, liaison.

Lord Emberly had arrived an hour earlier and agreed that he and Annabelle should stay for luncheon before they returned to Colborne House. This final meal of her visit was both a joy and a torture to her, glad to be Frederick’s presence for a little longer but acutely conscious of how much must be hidden from Stephen.

“Yes. My stepmother will be sorry not to have seen you, Stephen,” Frederick thankfully cut in before the question itself could be fully worded. “Walden Towers is no great distance away but her occupation with my sister is such that I am confident that she will not be back before you leave.”

“Then it is fortunate that I have arrived to collect Annabelle. If Duchess Sarah needs to remain at Walden Towers now then...”

“This duck is very well cooked,” Annabelle spoke up, now taking her own turn to cut her brother off before he could say anything that might require her to lie or tell a disruptive truth. “Don’t you think so, Stephen?”

She and Frederick had agreed at breakfast that they must be highly circumspect in Stephen's presence, heading off such inflammatory topics and avoiding too much direct conversation or eye contact with one another. While neither of them considered that they had done anything so very wicked, Stephen was unlikely to be of the same opinion.

Lord Emberly paused and nodded absently in agreement with Annabelle's compliments on the food. Then, however, his eyes returned to Frederick as though he might pick up his unwanted line of inquiry about the dowager duchess yet again.

"You and your mother must be so relieved that your father's condition is now stable, Stephen," Frederick put in, smoothly and politely changing the subject. "Your letter was a great surprise to Annabelle, as it was to me, but the news it contained was obviously welcome."

Dry and serious in manner today, Stephen had already told them at length about the air and weather in Norfolk and the opinions of several physicians on the best course for the Duke of Colborne. Their father's health seemed to be the one topic guaranteed to engage his attention.

Annabelle flashed Frederick a smile of appreciation for his clever deflection before remembering that she was not supposed to smile at him at all today and looking down at the table with a self-conscious expression that made Stephen glance at her with puzzlement.

"Naturally, my father's present respite is more than we could have hoped for a month ago," he said. "Physicians are reluctant to speak of improvement or any likely extension of life, but he is certainly more comfortable and that is a great deal to be thankful for. I do hope Annabelle has not worried too much while she was away from us. She seems so pensive today."

This comment made Annabelle blush guiltily. While she loved her father dearly, he had been ill for so long that her concern for him was a constant background companion she had learned to live with rather than a daily worry at the front of her mind. Stephen might take such an attitude for callousness.

“I was very grateful to hear that Father is so improved,” she said dutifully. “I only hope it will continue as long as possible.”

“Yes, there have been other respites and false hopes, haven’t there?” Stephen sighed. “You are right to be so cautious, Annabelle. I will do the same.”

“Will he remain in Norfolk for the whole summer?” Frederick asked.

“Perhaps even until the end of the year. We will join them there after the season.”

With a pang of irritation, Annabelle noted that her brother had not even considered the faintest possibility that she might meet a suitable marital prospect during the season.

“But what if I were to find a husband this season?” she asked impulsively.

“A husband?!” Stephen exclaimed, starting in astonishment. “What can you possibly mean, Annabelle? I know of no suitors for your hand.”

Frederick’s face was full of warning as he looked at Annabelle across the table, slightly shaking his head, but all rather too late.

“Have you met a man of interest?” Stephen pursued her, “You wrote to me of no one, Annabelle.”

“It was only a theoretical question,” Annabelle muttered but her brother was now



staring at her rather hard and she did not know what he was seeing.

“Doesn’t Annabelle’s outfit become her?” Frederick suggested with somewhat forced jollity, attempting to change the subject again.

She was, in fact, wearing Madame Deveaux’s neatly cut walking dress in violet-tinged gray and she knew that it did become her. She also knew that Frederick’s appreciation of the dress’s low neckline and easy fastenings was genuine.

Yesterday, his fingers had successfully loosened its bodice while they walked in the woodland near the lake and his mouth had covered Annabelle’s breasts with kisses for a glorious five minutes before he stopped himself.

Last night, Frederick had even come to her bedroom very late, declining to undress or allow himself to be pulled onto the mattress, but instead kneeling beside the bed and almost wordlessly arranging Annabelle before him. Legs parted and nightgown raised to her throat, she had panted, moaned and buried her louder cries in a pillow as he gave his mouth free rein.

Such memories heated Annabelle’s face and sent echoes of pleasure and longing through her body. Recalling them under Stephen’s gaze made her squirm uncomfortably as though he might read her mind and know that she had wished for Frederick to undress and claim her fully rather than kiss her a silent and frustrating goodnight and leave again.

“I’m not sure whether that outfit becomes her,” Stephen commented sternly, only making Annabelle feel worse. “It seems far too modern and fast for my tastes and likely for Mother’s too, especially for an unmarried woman of one-and-twenty. She may want to speak to Mrs. Fenchurch. Did you actually ask her to cut your clothes like that, Annabelle?”

Annabelle remained silent, half embarrassed and half indignant at Stephen treating her like an errant schoolgirl in front of Frederick. Frederick himself looked none too pleased either.

“It’s a high-quality gown made in the Parisian style, by a respectable but French society dressmaker,” the Duke of Heartwick said with a touch of impatience. “There is nothing wrong with Annabelle wishing to look like a woman rather than a little girl.”

“So, I am to expect a second round of dressmaker’s bills in addition to those from Mrs. Fenchurch for this seasons’s clothes? I begrudge you nothing, Annabelle, but you should really have discussed this with me. I might otherwise have returned these bills in error when they arrived.”

“I bought it, Stephen. There will be no inconvenience to your family at all,” Frederick responded, seeming defensive of Annabelle now in a manner that both heartened and alarmed her.

“Frederick,” she said quickly, shaking her head at him in the knowledge that his news was only likely to inflame her brother further. “There is a jacket that goes with this dress, Stephen. It looks quite different when they are worn together.”

Stephen, however, was paying no attention to Annabelle’s assurances on the additional modesty provided by the jacket. As she had feared, the idea of Frederick buying her clothes was at least as offensive to her older brother as the garments themselves.

“Oh? I see. Then you must let me repay you, Frederick,” he said with icy politeness, laying down his knife and fork. “I cannot let my sister be a burden on your purse when you have been kind enough to host her here for my family’s convenience.”

“There is no need. It was a gift I was glad to give. When Penelope was here, I bought her dresses each season.”

“Yes, but Penelope is your sister and Annabelle is not,” Stephen objected. “I cannot let another man, a single man in your position especially, buy Annabelle’s clothing. It is most irregular.”

“It was only a gift, Stephen,” insisted Frederick, refusing to back down. “I will not hear any talk of repayment.”

For a few tense moments the two men regarded one another across the table with narrowed eyes.

“Please don’t let us all argue so on my last day here,” said Annabelle, fearing a full blown argument was about to erupt. “With Father and Penelope and...everything else, we all have so much on our minds at the moment. Stephen, Frederick, please.”

Reluctantly at first, Stephen nodded.

“We are all evidently overwrought,” he agreed. “It has been a trying time. Duke Frederick and I can discuss this matter another time, Annabelle. Let us finish our meal and be on our way.”

“I have no wish to argue,” Frederick returned. “Apologies if I have neglected my duties as host today and let my tongue run away with me. As you say, Stephen, we are all overwrought.”

For a brief second, his blue eyes caught Annabelle’s. Her instant physical response to Frederick’s gaze made her draw in a sharp breath which she had to stifle and mask with a cough in case Stephen noticed its oddity. No other man had ever had such an effect on her. She suspected that no man ever could.

Looking firmly away and fixing her attention on her plate, Annabelle made herself focus on the duck and vegetables until the meal was done.

“The coaches are prepared, Your Grace,” announced Witmore after entering the dining room where Frederick, Stephen and Annabelle were still sitting, largely in silence, over cups of post-luncheon tea. “Mrs. Muggins advises that all Lady Annabelle’s effects have been loaded.”

“Very good, Witmore,” Frederick responded with a nod to the butler, rising from the head of the table and tossing aside his napkin.

At last this awful meal was done. He did not know how much longer he could have tolerated making polite, stilted conversation, tormenting himself with stolen glances at Annabelle’s subdued beauty, and generally pretending to be the same kind of creature as Stephen Elkins. Frederick knew he was not.

It had also been distinctly disagreeable to see Annabelle so pensive and quiet, a world away from the charmingly ingenuous and excitable young woman he had wandered and dallied with around the Heartwick estate so carefully in their last few days together here. He loved seeing her happy. Even more than that, he loved making her cry out in erotic pleasure.

Sending Annabelle away now with her stern and proper brother seemed fundamentally wrong, but Frederick had no right to keep her here, even less to arouse and caress her as he had done, or to physically possess her completely as he longed to do. Still, what right did Stephen have to treat her like a child rather than a grown woman?

“Well then, we should take our leave,” said Lord Emberly, his face grave although the rest of the luncheon conversation had remained civil if sparse.

“Annabelle, you can go out to the carriage and make yourself comfortable. I shall follow presently.”

“I’ll wait for you,” she said to her brother, flashing her bluebell eyes briefly at Frederick, with a sigh she couldn’t quite stifle.

“I wish to speak to Duke Frederick alone for a few moments,” her brother stated stiffly when he saw that she intended to linger. “Please leave us.”

Seeing the renewed agitation on Annabelle’s face, Frederick made himself smile reassuringly even though he shared her reservations. Whatever Stephen had to say to him, he knew it wouldn’t be good.

“Farewell, then, Lady Annabelle. Your company has been appreciated and I trust we will meet again at Lord and Lady Orville’s ball.”

“Yes, of course. I hope Stephen and I will attend. You have been most kind and generous during my stay, Duke Frederick. I shall miss Heartwick Hall very much.”

Her lower lip trembled as she spoke these final words and the urge to kiss it was strong, making it hard for Frederick to tear his eyes from her face. Thankfully she turned and left the room, breaking their gaze.

Stephen watched his sister go with an uneasy expression and then turned to Frederick once the door to the dining room had closed again, studying him intently.

“I trusted you, Frederick,” said Lord Emberly pointedly. “I trusted you with my younger sister’s well-being, reputation and virtue. You gave me to understand that you were a trustworthy man despite your private unsavory pastimes.”

By now, Frederick was in no mood to tolerate this kind of attack, especially from a

man too proud and hidebound by tradition to know how much of life he was missing. Still, he tried to rein in his temper for Annabelle's sake. She was the one who must cope with the aftermath of Stephen's mood and its consequences.

"There is nothing unsavory in appreciating women or enjoying physical pleasure and I am not willing to justify my private life to you or any other man, Stephen," Frederick stated clearly. "For the record, whatever you are implying, Annabelle is leaving my house with her virtue intact. I am not a danger to her."

"You swear that?" responded Stephen suspiciously. "I'm not blind and the way you look at one another is distinctly upsetting, not to mention the highly inappropriate manner of your buying her indecent clothing. Even if you have committed no physical trespass, Annabelle seems half in love with you and I can't believe you haven't encouraged it."

"I'd swear it on the Bible if you required that. Annabelle is unharmed from her stay here. She leaves Heartwick Hall in as much a maiden state as when she entered it. Anyway, the dresses are perfectly decent, Stephen. Can't you see she's a woman, not a child, damn it!"

"Dresses, plural?" registered Lord Emberly with renewed disapproval. "Have you lost your senses entirely since we last met? I will take your word that Annabelle has not been physically dishonored at your hands but don't you see how this all looks to the outside world?"

"The outside world can go hang," Frederick commented with irritation. "I see no vice in making a present that brings a young woman so much natural enjoyment without causing her harm. Why should Annabelle be deprived of harmless pleasures for the sake of stupid society rules?"

"Are we still talking about the dresses?" returned Stephen coolly. "You may laugh at

me for being old-fashioned but I think you a dreamer for imagining yourself so modern that the established rules don't apply to you. Well, they do. A man making extravagant and intimate presents to a young and unrelated woman invites scandal and you risk putting Annabel at the center of it."

"Annabel is innocent and there is no scandal," insisted Frederick, recalling her in her green silk and mask for Lord Blackwell's party. "She is someone who could walk safely through a den of libertinage and remain untouched and unchanged by anything she encountered. I wish you could see things only as they are, Stephen, and not through the distorting magnifying glass of social convention."

"Does Duchess Sarah see things your way, Frederick? I find that hard to believe."

There was nothing Frederick could say to this remark, not trusting himself to speak at all on the subject of his stepmother's views, lest this lead to other more awkward questions around her presence or absence. He folded his arms and regarded Stephen in silence as the latter looked back at him thoughtfully.

"It sounds very much as though you're saying you don't trust me, Lord Emberly."

"I trust your word, Duke Frederick, but I don't believe I can trust your judgement which seems so very questionable in my eyes. While I hope we can preserve the long friendship between our families, Annabelle will certainly not be staying under your roof again. I leave it to you to explain this to Duchess Sarah in your own words."

"I see," Frederick answered shortly, biting back the tempting retort that Annabelle would always be welcome at Heartwick Hall should she choose to visit, regardless of Stephen's edict. "If that is all you have to say, let me see you to your carriage, Lord Emberly."

### CHAPTER 14

“A nnabelle!” said Stephen with surprise and disapproval as she handed him her wrap on entering the grand ballroom at Lord and Lady Orville’s palatial London home. “Good Lord, you are almost bare!”

“I am perfectly well-covered and the weather is too warm for a wrap,” Annabelle retorted rebelliously, having carefully and deliberately kept her Madame Deveau ballgown hidden from her brother’s eyes until they were safely arrived and surrounded by others. “Anyway, look at some of the other ladies here. Their gowns are far more daring, but less elegant.”

Just as at the Yardley ball, the gold silk with its subtle blue underskirts and fastenings drew instant attention from ladies and gentlemen around them. Annabelle understood well enough now that the appreciation of the men was far more for her generous breasts than the gown that partly covered them. She hoped that some of them would ask her to dance and Stephen would allow it.

“But none of those ladies are my sister and the daughter of the Duke of Colborne,” Stephen pointed out unhappily. “Anyway, they are likely all married ladies and you know that makes a difference. Well, there’s nothing to be done now, but we really must make an appointment with Mrs. Fenchurch or some other good English dressmaker.”

“There is no need, Stephen,” Annabelle sighed. “I have enough clothes for this season.”



“You clearly do not like the clothes Mother chose or you would not have allowed the Duke of Heartwick to make you such inappropriate gifts. Every gown I see you in shocks me more than the last. I would rather see you wearing something that both pleases you and respects propriety.”

“Look, there’s Victoria Crawford with her cousins,” Annabelle pointed out across the ballroom by way of distraction, smiling brightly to her friend and hoping they could soon speak to her. “I wonder who else will be here?”

Annabelle had shut down several conversations with Stephen over her new wardrobe from Madame Deveaux in the days since she returned from Heartwick Hall. The memories of Frederick’s hands trailing swathes of silk over her half-dressed body were too risqué and too intimate to risk their exposure.

“Come, let us make a tour of the room and greet our friends and acquaintances, Annabelle,” Stephen declared. “Then we shall dance together.”

“Of course,” she replied flatly.

Dancing with her brother was more a chore than a pleasure for Annabelle, although he knew the steps well enough and was by no means clumsy. It was only that Stephen always seemed so concerned about doing everything properly, even when they were meant to be having fun.

It was not like dancing with Frederick, nor with Oswald Quince, both of whom took great pleasure in music and movement, although in different ways. On the dance floor she would have swapped Stephen for either of them in a heartbeat.

“Good evening, Lord Easterly,” sounded Stephen’s voice as they stopped by a small party composed of the the red-haired young man and a gaggle of his sisters. “Lady Sarah, Lady Susan, Lady Sylvia. You know my sister, Lady Annabelle?”

“Yes, we met at Lord and Lady Yardley’s ball,” said Annabelle with a smile, offering her greeting to each of the family in turn. “How lovely to see you all here again.”

In attempting to bow, young Lord Easterly accidentally butted one of his sisters and disarranged her hair, causing all of his siblings to tut at him politely.

“Dear me...Erm. Lady Annabelle, I wonder if you might like to...”

“You will be fully occupied in dancing with your sisters tonight,” Annabelle broke in quickly. “I could not deprive them of your company. Perhaps we will all see each other at supper. Do excuse us.”

Exerting pressure on Stephen’s arm, she drew him onward, taking a moment to perceive the surprise on his face.

“Lord Easterly dances very ill and I have seen him tread upon and ruin his sister’s dress before now,” Annabelle explained. “Your disapproval and a large tear together might prove too much for this gown.”

To her surprise, Stephen actually smiled.

“That was nicely done, Annabelle. You spoke sensibly and politely. It is also quite proper, as you say, that Lord Easterly should devote himself to his sisters if his mother is not present to do so. I naturally intend to do the same.”

She nodded politely, although less than happy with the thought that Stephen intended to remain at her side. Annabelle also realized that she had surprised her brother in taking the initiative and exerting her own will, having normally followed his lead at social events.

Had Frederick been right that sometimes she was treated as a child because she acted

like one? Well, no more, she thought to herself with new confidence. She was a woman.

“Do you know that man in black over there, smiling at us?” Stephen asked her, and she almost laughed to see who it as.

“I know that Lord Blackwell is a friend of Frederick’s,” Annabelle said, daring a slight smile and nod towards the man who raised his glass of champagne to them but thankfully made no move to approach.

“Blackwell?! I do not wish you to know that man,” remarked her brother tersely, changing their direction to put him both out of their path and line of sight. “You wanted to greet Miss Crawford and her cousins, did you not? They are over there.”

Annabelle guessed that Stephen might throw a fit if he knew that his younger sister had actually attended one of Lord Blackwell’s parties, witnessed scenes of huge social transgression and conversed with the man in person. If Stephen knew what Frederick had done with her after the party, he would struggle to decide which of the two men he wished to horsewhip first.

Thinking of Frederick, would he be there tonight or not? Annabelle had spent all day imagining dancing with him again, knowing that every touch in the dance now seemed linked to every kiss or caress he had ever bestowed, clothed or unclothed. Unhappily, she realized that she might have become one of the many women who threw themselves at Frederick in public. One of many.

“Victoria! I’m so glad you’re here,” said Annabelle, embracing her friend. “I know you don’t come out to many balls so I did not expect you.”

“My cousins wished to attend and I do love to dance. Lord Emberly, how good to see you too. I was glad to hear from Annabelle of your father’s improvement. It must be a

comfort to your whole family.”

As Victoria spoke, and then introduced her two cousins, she extended an arm and shook the hand of the astounded Stephen as though she were a man herself, greeting a fellow club member. Her dress was a simple Grecian-style white muslin, designed for ease of movement more than decoration, Annabelle suspected. Her golden-brown hair was piled carelessly on her head as though done in haste in the carriage en route .

“How kind, Miss Crawford. Yes, we are much relieved,” Stephen said, still non-plussed by Victoria’s manner but unfailingly polite and proper. “I trust that you and your cousins fare well?”

“Very well, although we are sadly lacking any gentlemen in our party tonight. I hope we might prevail upon you when the dancing begins, Lord Emberly, if Annabelle will permit it?”

Stephen’s amazement at Victoria’s direct style made Annabelle laugh to herself. It must be hard to be her brother, always so proud and proper.

“Of course you must dance with Victoria and her cousins as well as me, Stephen,” Annabelle said with her new self-assurance. “My brother dances very well, I assured you all. You need have no care for your skirts or your toes.”

“Naturally, Miss Crawford. I am at your service, ladies,” Lord Emberly said with a small bow, unable to do anything else although Annabelle could tell that something bothered him.

Promising to return when the music began, Annabelle drew Stephen away again.

“I should speak to Duke Maxwell,” Stephen worried aloud. “Victoria Crawford is a fine young woman but she does put herself at risk, being so forward and going about

without any gentleman as escort. Those cousins are barely older than she is. I must keep an eye on their party tonight. It would be remiss to do otherwise.”

Despite her own belief in Victoria’s capability, Annabelle nodded with satisfaction, seeing her own opportunities for freedom opening up. She might even manage to dance with some other men, ideally including Frederick...

But Frederick might not even attend tonight, after all. With Annabelle gone from under his roof, he was free to indulge himself at home as he wished. He might even now be at Heartwick Hall, closeted in his bedroom with some willing beauty, or more than one – experienced and sophisticated women he could enjoy without restraint.

Images of Lady Gordney, Lady Coltenay and the unnamed blonde women loomed before her, all smiling at her patronizingly with knowing eyes as they gave Frederick all that Annabelle could not. Or rather, that Frederick refused to take from her. She knew well enough now that she would refuse him nothing if he had sought it. The thought of other women providing him with physical satisfaction was painful.

“...brought up without a mother, Miss Crawford likely does not fully understand the social conventions...” droned Stephen but Annabelle was no longer giving him her full attention.

A golden-haired man in a dark blue suit had entered the ballroom and Annabelle suspected she would have known it was Frederick merely from the expressions on the faces of other ladies as they regarded him. His expression was focused, as though searching for someone, and he did not stop to talk as he made his way through the gathering crowd. Her heart began to beat faster.

“...dressed as though she’d just risen from bed...” continued Stephen’s commentary on Victoria Crawford. “Did you notice that she had no gloves?”

“The music is beginning, Stephen. Why don’t you go and ask Victoria to dance now and get it over with, if the thought is so awful?”

“Yes, you are right. I should warn her of her behavior too. Don’t go far until I return. Good Lord, what if Miss Crawford were to greet the Duke of Blackford as she greeted me, shaking his hand with bare fingers and inviting him to dance? There is no telling how that kind of man might interpret such an approach from a young woman.”

“Go,” Annabelle instructed him, her eyes still fixed on Frederick and a slight smile on her lips as their eyes met and he began to make directly for her. “Or someone else might take the first dance.”

Again, she almost felt sorry for Stephen and the burden of all his worldly cares. From her own short acquaintance with the Duke of Blackford, she already felt sure that he would likely do nothing with Victoria Crawford any more than with Annabelle herself. Edwin Murden would rather seek out a woman of his own kind and nature, like Lady Gordney.

Annabelle’s heart was pounding as Stephen walked away and Frederick approached, the smile on his face seemingly only for her although she knew at heart that half the women in the ballroom would likely feel it too.

“Lady Annabelle,” the Duke of Heartwick said very properly, taking her gloved hand and bowing over it with perfect propriety. “Your gown becomes you as well as the first time you wore it. It makes me think of moonlight.”

“You also look well, Duke Frederick,” Annabelle said with equal propriety although her mouth felt clumsy as she spoke and she feared what could accidentally emerge.

“I see your brother is already dancing. Lord Emberly is rarely the first on the dance floor.”

“He wishes to warn Miss Crawford about her forward behavior,” she said with a smile and Frederick laughed.

“There are not many young ladies who would take kindly to that,” he noted and then took two glasses of champagne from a passing tray for them. “We should dance too, as we always do, should we not?”

Annabelle’s heart was still beating madly but Frederick’s bonhomie puzzled her a little. He seemed more like Penelope’s older brother again now and not the passionate man who had awakened her physical desires and shown her something of the adult world. Was Frederick going to pretend that their interlude at Heartwick Hall had never happened?

“I wasn’t sure whether you would be here, Frederick,” she said. “I thought that you might have other priorities now that I’m not living at Heartwick Hall.”

“I promised to help you find a husband, didn’t I?” he answered. “If you still want my help.”

“I always want...your help,” Annabelle stumbled over her response, falling into her old blushes as she slightly misspoke and then raising her eyes to find Frederick appraising her with frank male desire.

“Good,” he said shortly, veiling his expression again and offering his arm. “Look, Stephen and Victoria are going to dance the quadrille together too, although they don’t seem very happy about it.”

“Oh dear,” Annabelle commented, following his gaze towards the other couple who had surprisingly remained on the dance floor but were now glaring at one another. “You were right that she has not taken kindly to whatever Stephen said, but then, why are they going to dance again?”

“Each of them still has something to say and is determined that the other must hear it,” Frederick suggested with a grin. “We are all the captives of our partners once the dance begins.”

Annabelle had to control her breathing that threatened to become ragged with the pounding of her heart. The feeling of Frederick’s arm beneath her fingers reminded her of the play of other muscles under her hand. His chest, his shoulders and his belly, stroked either through his shirt or skin on skin, her fingers trailing through faint golden hair as his mouth took kiss after kiss from her own...

Here and now, there could be no such games, nor even open reference to them. She felt simultaneously closer to Frederick than ever and yet an uncrossable chasm lay between them, its edges guarded by Stephen, Duchess Sarah and all the other good upstanding citizens of the ton. She only wished she knew how to cross the divide.

“What are you thinking?” Fredrick broke in on her thoughts and she realized that he had been gazing at her face rather than at Stephen and Victoria for the last few moments.

His question was somehow knowing, tender and curious all at once. In response, she could only shake her head shyly and fruitlessly to hold back the flush of her cheeks.

“God, you’re so beautiful when you blush,” Frederick declared under his breath, his tone abruptly as intimate as when he was in her bedroom and she was virtually naked and helpless in his arms.

“Duke Frederick, Lady Annabelle,” interrupted a cheerful voice from behind them, startling them both. “Now that we’re back in Lady Annabelle’s more usual environment, I believe I am owed a dance.”

“Ah, Lord Darrington,” said Frederick with a quick bow. “Yes, I must apologize for



my impetuosity at our last meeting.”

“No, no. It was all right and proper of you but I would have liked to have finished the dance. May I?”

Oswald Quince offered his arm to Annabelle while looking inquiringly at Frederick. With a sigh of sad, resigned amusement, the latter nodded.

“Lord Emberly would thoroughly approve,” he said inscrutably.

While he was not going to object, she could not tell whether Frederick was actually happy for her to dance with Oswald now or not. Still, he had not yet invited her to dance himself and they could surely not simply stand there together all night.

Tense with the unspoken emotions of the preceding minutes, Annabelle regarded the calm and jolly Lord Darrington with relief although part of her wished to remain at Frederick’s side. She finally took Oswald Quince’s arm with a smile.

“Your brother is here? I would like to speak to Lord Emberly when he is not engaged, Lady Annabelle. Perhaps you would be good enough to present me after our dance.”

“Certainly,” Annabelle replied, nodding a farewell to Frederick and suddenly noticing that, for the first time in their acquaintance, he actually looked rather tired. “Although I must warn you that Stephen does not care much for gossip or any kind of fun.”

“It takes all sorts to make a world,” Lord Darrington shrugged. “Aha, a reel – my favorite! Come on!”

Caught up in his easy merriment, Annabelle let herself be swept onto the dance floor.

Stephen evidently did indeed approve. Briefed by Frederick during the first reel, and

likely having checked Oswald Quince's credentials with other guests, or knowing something of him already, her brother only nodded and smiled at her when she accepted a second dance with Lord Darrington.

At Lord Emberly's side, Frederick looked less content but Annabelle was relieved to find that he and her brother were still at least on speaking terms.

"Duke Frederick looks a little down in the mouth tonight, doesn't he?" Oswald remarked as he swirled her around in the waltz. "I dare say he is missing your company at Heartwick Hall now that Lord Emberly is back. Anyone would."

"You are a blatant flatterer!" Annabelle laughed, enjoying their spinning.

"Not at all. Your dress is divine, you have taught me at least three new pieces of very naughty gossip about fellow guests before the clock has even struck ten, never mind your wonderful dancing. You are an excellent companion for any social venture, in my opinion, Lady Annabelle. That is not flattery, it is truth."

"Then I thank you for your good opinion, Oswald," she returned, happy to be so genuinely and straightforwardly appreciated. "I'm afraid this dress is part of the problem with Frederick though. He won't let Stephen pay for it because I was staying at Heartwick Hall when it was made, but Stephen is very proper and does not like other men buying me clothes."

"Dear me," said Oswald sympathetically. "That does rather leave you stuck in the middle, doesn't it? At least they both have better manners than to argue in public."

"Exactly," Annabelle sighed. "I knew you would understand, Oswald. You're not all complicated and mixed-up, like Frederick and Stephen."

"I have to be simple," said her companion with a smile, "because the world around

me is so complicated and I must fit in with it where I can, or at least appear to. One day, I must even marry to fit in, I dare say.”

“Yes, so must I,” she noted. “It is the done thing, isn't it? And, as a young woman reliant on my family, I shall have no freedom until I do.”

“Is that you most want from a marriage, Lady Annabelle, freedom? Not love?”

Annabelle shrugged and then shook her head.

“There must be trust and respect between a husband and wife, mustn't there? I suppose love might come in its own time but it's all too hard to understand.”

Oswald Quince smiled and spun Annabelle again in the dance, seeming very satisfied with something she had just said.

“Freedom, trust and respect. What a sensible young lady you are, Lady Annabelle. That is what we should all aspire to in marriage, I believe. I shall make it my own motto too.”

They danced on happily, enjoying one another's company and unaware of any audience.

### CHAPTER 15

A third dance?! Frederick sighed and folded his arms crossly as he watched Oswald Quince leading Annabelle into some jolly country dance with the clear approval of Lord Emberly.

“They’ve danced together several times before while Annabelle was staying with you, you said?” queried Stephen.

“Several times, yes,” Frederick said shortly, neglecting to go into any further detail on times and places. “Lord Darrington does love to dance.”

“He certainly does,” agreed another man in a military uniform, stepping forward to join them. “I do believe that Oswald would dance his way through every day and night if society allowed for it.”

“Lord Emberly, can I present Captain Jacob Rawlings?” Frederick made the necessary introduction, and saw Stephen’s attention quickly decrease as he took in Rawlings’ rank and credentials. “Captain Rawlings is the youngest son of the Earl of Dulford and a good friend of Lord Darrington.”

A younger son was no prospect for Annabelle and Stephen had no interest in military matters himself, preferring the political or economic worlds of male activity.

“Very pleased to meet you,” remarked the officer with a bow to Stephen.

“Captain Rawlings, Stephen, Lord Emberly, is Lady Annabelle’s brother and an old

family friend of mine,” Frederick completed the introduction.

“Your sister is a wonderful dancer too,” Captain Rawlings remarked, his eyes drawn back to the couple on the dance floor. “She has so much natural grace, rather like Oswald.”

“Thank you,” Stephen said, accepting this compliment with satisfaction, natural grace being a very acceptable female attribute in his eyes, and far superior to glamour, sophistication or opulence of dress.

Stephen did not, however, catch the glimpse of raw longing in Jacob Rawlings’ eyes as he looked towards Annabelle and Oswald. It was a glance that took Frederick rather by surprise although he recognized it instantly, both from his own passionate nature, and his feelings about its presumed target. Annabelle was especially lovely tonight. How could any sane man not look upon her and experience desire?

A moment later, the look was gone, and Rawlings had turned to Stephen with some sensible question about the Colborne estate that held no interest for Frederick. He supposed it might be that Oswald Quince and his friend Rawling both saw Annabelle as a prospective, but it was Quince who would inevitably win her in that case.

Evidently, Rawlings knew that he had no chance and was putting a brave face on the matter, Frederick mused. He even felt a pang of compassion for the man.

“With your permission, Lord Emberly, might I ask your sister to dance?” Frederick heard the officer ask as the country dance began to wind down.

He guessed that Rawlings simply did not want to watch his friend dance yet another dance with Lady Annabelle. Frederick too felt that he had stomached about as much as he could stand of that for some reason. Even if Quince was a good marital prospect, they did not need to spend the whole evening together at this stage, surely.

“The next dance is mine, Captain Rawlings,” he asserted. “After that, you must consult Lord Emberly and Lady Annabelle.”

Without waiting for a reaction or objection from either of his companions, Frederick discarded his empty glass on a tray and approached Annabelle as the final bars of the dance played out.

“My turn,” he said to her and then cleared his throat after hearing his voice come out almost as a growl.

Oswald Quince smiled blithely and glanced back at Captain Rawlings and Stephen before bowing to Annabelle.

“Of course, Duke Frederick. As the lady wishes. Jacob can introduce me to your brother, Lady Annabelle. Thank you for your dances.”

“Don’t you think that was a little rude?” Annabelle said as the orchestra struck up for another waltz, this time in a slightly faster measure than the first.

“No,” Frederick said gruffly, taking her hand and waist, ready for the dance to begin. “Lord Darrington has had three dances one after the other and I thought it quite enough. People will begin to talk.”

Did she react like that to Quince too, he wondered for the first time, sensing the pleasurable shiver that passed through her body at his touch? The very thought infuriated him.

“Dancing with you feels so different to dancing with anyone else,” Annabelle remarked with artless sensuality as their eyes met, instantly quenching his anger as though she had read his mind. “I do not understand why.”

“Annabelle,” he spoke her name as the waltz began, unable to easily address such a question in any way in so public an environment.

If he could, Frederick would have told her that it felt different because he had already kissed, stroked and tasted her entire body. Dancing was like an echo of bedroom games with one always referencing and recalling the other.

“It has always felt different with you, Frederick” Annabelle added wonderingly, her voice catching in her throat as he dipped her slightly in their twirl.

Always? Yes, it had always been different to dance with Annabelle. When she first came out, Frederick had not seen her as he saw other women. She was more a little pet to tease than a young beauty to flirt with or a mature and independent woman to bed. But now she had grown up into something else and dancing with her was still a very, very different experience.

Frederick pressed the dip of her waist, longing to hold and caress the pale breasts emerging so temptingly from the neckline of her dress, or the curving haunches that led down to rounded thighs and the softly furred gold-red triangle of her womanhood. He knew how to make the folds within tingle, soften and throb at his touch.

“I suppose I am different, aren’t I?” he reflected. “From the other men you might dance with. I’m like Duke Edwin, not Stephen and the respectable young men of the ton. You shouldn’t really dance with me at all if you intend to live in their world forever. Your brother does not approve of my personal life.”

God, what he would not give to take Annabelle out into the garden under the moonlight tonight and hide together in some folly or copse of trees. He would kiss and caress her slowly and gently at first until she was ready for more and then, finally, ease himself into her tight heat and claim her fully. But Stephen would never allow them to walk alone together, certainly not now.

“You’re not like anyone, Frederick. You’re just yourself,” Annabelle said with a frown. “I like dancing with you. I like doing all manner of things with you that I’ve never imagined doing with anyone else.”

“Oh Annabelle,” he said, unable to hold back either his smile or the surge of lust engendered by her words. “You don’t know all the things I wish to do with you.”

Did she know, for example, that he fantasized of actually deflowering her outside under the moonlight? Of ravishing her again in the coach as they raced away to Heartwick Hall afterwards? Of somehow hiding her there until dawn in order to have his way with her in more ways than she could yet imagine?

These kinds of fantasies had haunted his dreams and heated his blood with even greater intensity since the day Annabelle left Heartwick Hall. He had, in fact, barely slept for several days, almost feverish with desire and yet repelled by the thought of seeking out any other woman to satisfy him.

“I would like to know,” Annabelle responded breathlessly. “I would like you to show me.”

“Hush, Annabelle, we cannot,” said Frederick quickly, wary of beginning a game that could not end well for either of them. “For your sake more than mine, we must keep some distance.”

It felt ironic to say these words even as he held her physically close and turned in time with her to the waltz’s strains. He saw Annabelle smile slightly, as if considering the same irony.

“You look tired, Frederick. You actually have dark circles under your eyes. Have you not been sleeping?”



God, no, he had not. He had been lying awake or tossing and turning in his bed, unable to get away from his driving physical need for this very woman. How could someone so soft, sweet and inexperienced cause such a conflagration of desire? Before this summer he would not have thought it possible.

“Everyone has warned me for years that my lifestyle would catch up with me eventually,” he jested lightly, discouraging any deeper inquiry. “The day has finally come, perhaps. Penelope will be delighted and think it serves me right, won’t she?”

Still, Annabelle seemed undeterred either by his argument for distance or his attempt at deflection. The waltz was ending and Frederick danced her back to the edge of the dance floor near where Stephen, Oswald Quince and Captain Rawlings were standing.

“I believe you need rest and recreation, Frederick,” she said decidedly as they bowed to one another. “In fact, I have an excellent idea. Let’s all have a picnic on Saturday afternoon.”

This suggestion was made just as they were rejoining the other three men.

“You would come to a picnic, wouldn’t you Oswald, I mean, Lord Darrington?” she asked, glancing briefly to her brother whom she knew would not like her taking liberties with mens’ first names on so short an acquaintance. “And you, Captain Rawlings?”

“We love picnics!” Oswald Quince replied with a grin, slapping his friend on the back. “Don’t we? I shall bring my sister Meredith too. We need to make the most of Jacob’s leave before he must rejoin his regiment.”

“There, we have three guests already, Stephen, if you agree to a picnic,” enthused Annabelle. “Frederick must come too. He is looking rather under the weather and the

fresh air will be good for him.”

Frederick knew that he should really refuse but still found himself nodding, carried along by the smiles and goodwill of the others around him as well as the undeniable physical draw of Annabelle’s charms. He supposed he could always arrange or pretend a conflicting engagement later.

“I do agree,” Stephen responded with a smile, evidently still keen on promoting his sister’s connection with Lord Darrington. “We can picnic in the gardens at Colborne House. With Father’s illness, we have given no hospitality there for years but a picnic while he’s away would not be disrespectful or disruptive. Have you thought on other guests?”

“Oh, we shall stay a small group, I think, but let’s invite Victoria Crawford too,” suggested Annabelle.

“Really?” asked Stephen with a pained expression. “I am not sure that Miss Crawford cares for my company.”

“Well, isn’t it better that she should spend a day with us rather than running around London on her own?” Annabelle argued, wondering exactly what had passed between her brother and her friend.

“I believe so, but I cannot say that Miss Crawford agrees with my viewpoint on that matter and made her opinion very clear to me during our dances.”

“I shall speak to her,” Annabelle said decidedly, unwilling to let this small hiccup ruin her plans. “All will be well.”

Faced with the thought of spending an afternoon close to Annabelle but surrounded by her over-protective brother and two likely admirers, Frederick did not share her

confidence.

“Do excuse me,” he said to the others, turning towards the rear corridor door, as though he had to pay a call of nature in one of the hallway closets with chamber pots set aside there for gentlemen for this purpose.

The Duke of Blackwell caught up with him there, yawning but likely more in boredom than in physical weariness.

“I’m going on to Madame Serena’s salon in Chelsea shortly. A wonderful Italian contralto will be singing, and Madame Serena is a good friend of mine, as you know. If you didn’t look so damned tired, I’d invite you to join me, Frederick.”

“So everyone keeps telling me tonight. I must be getting old, Edwin. Is this how you know when youth is over? When women start commenting on the tiredness of your eyes rather than their particular shade of blue?”

The Duke of Blackwell laughed.

“I diagnose you with gloom and ill-temper, not age, my young friend. I saw you watching Oswald Quince on the dance-floor with rather green eyes earlier this evening, didn’t I? Perhaps even a hint of it for Jacob too?”

“I don’t know what you mean,” Frederick said with some irritation, not willing to discuss Annabelle or his own feelings with Duke Edwin.

“You’re a man of the world, Frederick, or so I have always thought you. You can’t possibly be jealous of lovely Oswald and Jacob dancing with your little darling can you? Has she really dazzled you quite so much that you cannot see what is in front of your face?”

“Jealous? Pah!” Frederick said dismissively and walked away, assuming that Duke Edwin was teasing him for his lack of sang froid and choosing not to rise to it.

The Duke of Blackwell’s hearty peal of laughter rang out behind him, prompting Frederick to think that the man had intended something more by his comment and Frederick had missed it.

### CHAPTER 16

“ O n your mark, get set, go!” called out Lady Meredith Quince, Frederick’s pocket watch in her hand to time the three men racing in their shirt sleeves to the bottom of the middle field in the garden of Colborne House.

Annabelle and Victoria stood watching and calling out encouragement equally to all three runners, while Lord Emberly stations himself a little to one side, in good temper but not quite joining in with the merriment.

The ladies called out more loudly on the return leg, especially Victoria.

“Come on then, stir yourselves!” she yelled in fun. “No lemonade for the last man in!”

The vigor of her voice and words made Annabelle giggle, as did the shocked expression on Stephen’s face.

Frederick and Jacob Rawlings came in neck and neck over the pathway marking the race’s endpoint, with Oswald a few steps behind.

“I hope Miss Crawford didn’t mean what she said about the lemonade,” he laughed breathlessly. “I always let Jacob win these things, because otherwise he gets upset. I would have run harder if I’d known the stakes were so high at the start.”

“I was only teasing, Lord Darrington,” Victoria assured him, going over to the laden picnic table and pouring glasses of cold lemonade from a bottle in a covered ice

bucket.

“Anyway, at least you ran,” Annabelle added, handing out three glasses to the panting men. “That alone earns you lemonade.”

“Do you not like sport at all, Lord Emberly?” asked Victoria, looking over to Annabelle’s brother with a raised eyebrow. “I suppose it is insufficiently serious to engage you, although it was viewed as an essential element of education and good health for the ancient greeks.”

For a moment, Stephen was silent, surprised to be directly challenged on his unwillingness to join in the race with the other men. He and Victoria had not seemed entirely comfortable with one another that afternoon although both had been civil enough. Their mild clash at the ball had cast a longer shadow than Annabelle had expected.

“I suppose that in my father’s absence, I feel that I am acting in his stead in hosting you all here,” Stephen said slowly after gathering his thoughts. “I cannot therefore do anything that would not befit his dignity. I do like some sports very much. Mountaineering and climbing, for example, although family circumstances have precluded that in recent years. I swim in the lake every morning I am here.”

The rest of the party was quiet for a moment, all slightly abashed at this reminder that Colborne House was more normally host to physicians and nurses than picnickers and merry-makers. Annabelle felt sorry for her brother, sensing again that he was in some ways as much a prisoner of conventions as she was, or even perhaps more.

Unsure what to say, she went over and patted his arm, hoping that someone else would step in and change the subject. Despite his pride and stiffness, Stephen had always been good to her and Annabelle loved him dearly.

“Tell us more about the ancient greeks, Victoria,” Frederick spoke up with a grin, not failing Annabelle’s hopes. “Didn’t their young women take part in sports and racing too?”

“Among the Spartans, certainly,” Victoria replied. “Their young women ran, rode, threw javelins and even wrestled. They had their own competitions and some even competed with the young men.”

“That does not sound altogether safe or sensible to me,” commented Stephen. “I would certainly not like to think of Annabelle exerting herself in that way. She might be badly hurt. Surely women are better suited to gentler exercises, like walking and dancing.”

“I do like to ride nowadays,” Annabelle pointed out to her brother. “Frederick took me out with him at Heartwick Hall and sometimes we even galloped.”

She paused when she perceived the slight frown forming on Stephen’s face at this mention of her time with Frederick. It was as well not to aggravate him or to plant any further questions in his mind.

“Although do I concede I am too small for any other athletic event, even only with other women,” she added.

“Never mind. If there are any further races, I shall run on your behalf, Annabelle,” Frederick joked, without knowing how his words made her heart flutter. “If you need a champion, I will wear your colors.”

Oswald Quince, meanwhile, laughed and clapped his hands.

“That sounds like a capital idea to me, Miss Crawford. You should race with our two real athletes here while I drink lemonade with Lord Emberly and Lady Annabelle.”

“I am in more than half in mind to do just that,” declared Victoria, returning from the picnic table and gazing down the garden. “I am close to the gentlemen in height and I do keep myself physically fit. In fact, yes, I shall run, if any of you gentlemen would be willing to race again.”

Kicking off her shoes with a determined expression on her face and a challenge in her eyes, Victoria glanced briefly to Stephen as though daring him to make any further remark. Then, she sat down on the ground with her back to the group and peeled off her stockings, tossing them after her shoes, to Annabelle’s mingled shock and admiration.

Annabelle heard her brother inhale sharply as Victoria strode to the starting line barefoot and then looked over to Frederick and Jacob Rawlings with a raised chin, summoning them to the second race.

“Surely not,” Stephen said, something like genuine concern in his voice. “This does not seem quite right to me, Miss Crawford.”

“True, these two are tired from their first race while I am fresh. However, I am also a woman rather than a man, so I shall assume that their immediate handicap merely levels the playing field. Are you ready with that watch again, Lady Meredith?”

“I am, Miss Crawford,” said the other woman, her lively hazel ideas dancing as merrily as her brother’s.

“What would your brother say, Miss Crawford?” Stephen put to her, his expression still incredulous and somewhat flustered.

““Run faster, Victoria! That’s what your legs are for!”, I expect. That’s the kind of thing he used to say when I was running about with other children at home,” Victoria answered with a laugh, much to Stephen’s consternation.



“On your mark, get set, go!” shouted Lady Meredith again and the three figures set off across the lawn, Victoria’s white skirts flying at the back while she caught them in one hand at the front.

This time Jacob Rawlings tripped as he turned on his heel for the return lap and then rolled on the floor laughing at his own misfortune. Frederick and Victoria, however were running abreast of one another, legs racing and arms pumping.

Annabelle could see that Stephen’s eyes were fixed in dismay on the indecent exposure of Victoria Crawford’s shapely and powerful legs. Her own eyes, however, were all for Frederick, the sight of his exertion and physical capability warming and accelerating the blood in her veins as much as his.

Once again the result was a draw, with both Frederick and Victoria collapsing happily onto the grass at the path boundary.

“You may take that one, Victoria. I was running for Annabelle after all, so she is the one to share your victory,” Frederick pronounced, panting heavily. “What do you think of that Stephen? Victory to the ladies!”

“Are you quite well, Miss Crawford?” said Stephen anxiously, coming to Victoria’s side and extending an arm to help her up from the grass. “I cannot believe that was healthy for you...”

At these words, Victoria sprang crossly to her feet without any assistance.

“Of course I am well,” she said tersely. “I am no more out of breath than Frederick. We were simply having fun, Lord Emberly. I exert myself more than that on a gentle stroll through the woods at Walden Towers. In fact, I feel rather in need of such a stroll now. Do excuse me.”

Without even pausing to collect her shoes and socks, Victoria stomped away down the garden, leaving Stephen standing there and looking after her with bafflement.

“Did I speak out of turn, Annabelle?” he asked her and she could only shrug.

“You might have complimented Victoria’s running,” she suggested. “That might have been better received.”

“Complimented her running?” he repeated, even more confused at the idea of complimenting a woman on such a strange thing. “But why? And now Miss Crawford has gone off without her shoes and stockings and will take a chill and sicken. I must go after her. Do excuse me.”

Picking up Victoria’s discarded items of clothing, Stephen hurried away in the direction she had taken. Meanwhile, Jacob Rawlings had returned to the group, still laughing.

“Just as well that I did not offer to be your champion, is it not, Lady Meredith?” the soldier said. “You would have lost miserably.”

“You and Oswald are always my champions, dear Jacob,” smiled Oswald’s sister, holding out her hands to both her brother and his friend. “Now, while that little drama with the shoes is playing out, why don’t the three of us take a walk around that maze, if Lady Annabelle is agreeable. Jacob returns to his regiment soon and there are things we wanted to talk about before then.”

“Of course, do go,” Annabelle encouraged them. “It is not a very big maze and I doubt you can get very lost. If you’re not back by the time we start eating, I’ll send Stephen to find you.”

As the other three guests walked away into the hedges, Frederick rolled across to

where Annabelle was now sitting on the grass and looked up at her with a smile on his presently pink and always handsome face. For the first time that afternoon, they were alone.

“I should thank you for my victory, I suppose,” she said softly, responding automatically to his smile with one of her own.

“A kiss is the traditional means of reward in such circumstances,” he told her with mock seriousness and then sat up to swiftly to steal a kiss from her startled lips.

Annabelle made a sound of flustered pleasure, eager for Frederick’s touch but terrified of discovery in this environment.

“Stephen could reappear at any minute,” she reminded them both. “Imagine what he would say if he saw that.”

“But it was such a small, quick kiss, wasn't it?” Frederick teased her. “I could easily claim I was only helping wipe a piece of dust from your eye or chasing away an insect.”

“As if Stephen would believe that! He now thinks you are a true libertine, Frederick.”

“And yet still he has gone chasing a barefoot Victoria Crawford across Colborne House gardens and left me here alone to have my wicked way with you.”

“It does not seem so very wicked to me,” Annabelle said. “Whatever Stephen might think, or anyone else.”

“No,” Frederick agreed, touching her hand but pulling back quickly. “I am determined not to be wicked at all with you, Annabelle. It is only that you are so very kissable that it’s hard to deny myself at least that much. Speaking of kisses, have you

kissed Oswald Quince yet?”

“No!” said Annabelle, the question feeling unnatural and disturbing as well as unexpected. “I have not. There has never been any question of it. I don’t want to think about that at all, Frederick. It is too strange.”

“Don’t you think you should kiss him if you intend to marry him?” Frederick suggested. “Imagine being married to a man you never wanted to kiss.”

“Don’t,” Annabelle murmured, tears coming into her eyes from nowhere. “I’ve already said I don’t want to think about it.”

“But Lord Darrington has shown great interest in you, hasn’t he? You danced together three times at the Orville ball and seemed very happy in his company. He will want to kiss you eventually, you know.”

“Maybe he dances with me only for fun, or out of politeness because he knows that I am shy. We both like to gossip, I suppose, and there is that too. Oswald is a kind man, but I have no reason to think he wants to kiss me.”

“You’re beautiful, Annabelle, but how easily you seem to forget it. You should have more confidence in your effect on men. Just look at what you do to me. How could Oswald Quince not want to kiss you? Or Jacob Rawlings, come to that.”

Annabelle blushed and met Frederick’s eyes seeing only sincerity and desire in their gaze. It was not an expression she had ever seen in Lord Darrington’s eyes, or those of Captain Rawlings, and she genuinely did not think that she wanted to.

“Oswald shows no sign of wishing to kiss me, but we did talk about marriage,” she conceded.

“Oh,” Frederick said lightly, turning onto his back with an arm behind his head and looking up to the sky rather than at Annabelle, as though he were thinking deeply. “Marriage before kissing. How very proper. Stephen would be delighted with such a brother-in-law, I think.”

“It was not even that kind of conversation, Frederick. There is no need to say anything to Stephen at all. Oswald only asked me what I thought about marriage, and what was important to me in a husband. It does not mean that he is thinking of actually marrying me. I dare say that men ask women these questions all the time.”

“They do not,” Frederick said crisply, his eyes still fixed on the few clouds floating across the perfect blue of the summer sky. “I have never asked a woman what she sought in a husband, Annabelle, because I have never sought to become a husband. If Lord Darrington has asked you such a question, then marriage is certainly on his mind.”

This thought sent Annabelle into a flurry of panic even though she liked Oswald Quince very much and had indeed embarked on a plan to find a husband this season.

“Then what should I do, Frederick?” she asked. “Are you certain in your interpretation of Oswald’s behavior?”

The golden-haired man on the grass only took a deep breath and continued to stare up at the sky.

“They’re all good signs,” he said vaguely.

Annabelle wished she could throw herself down on the grass beside Frederick, close her own eyes and rest her head on his chest. From their illicit embraces at Heartwick Hall, she knew how powerfully and comfortingly his heart beat and how the scent of his skin both soothed and excited her.

In Frederick's arms, society and all its conventions paled into insignificance, leaving only heat, pleasure and longing. Here and now, however, such wishes were pointless.

"Annabelle! Can you please tell your brother to let me be?" rang out Victoria Crawford's exasperated voice as the woman herself returned to view from beyond the hedges near the fountains. "I cannot seem to convince Lord Emberly that it is perfectly healthy and normal to walk barefoot outdoors on a summer's day? He is still pursuing me now."

"Keep running, Victoria! That's my advice," Frederick laughed, sitting up and grinning with his usual easy charm. "He'll never catch you, if you don't want him to."

"Why must he underestimate women so much?" Victoria fumed, coming to sit down on the grass beside Annabelle and Frederick without noticing Annabelle's short, sad sigh and fleeting glance at the Duke of Heartwick. "It is infuriating!"

"Beyond Annabelle and the Duchess of Colborne, his mother, I do not believe that Stephen has great experience of the society of women," Frederick observed, his expression teasing. "Perhaps more of your company is what he needs to set him right, Victoria. Or other more patient women, if you can make the necessary introductions?"

"It is possible for a man to have too much experience of women's society," Victoria responded tartly to Frederick's suggestion.

"Touché !" he laughed, unoffended. "Although I do not feel it has done me any harm."

"I'm sure that the society of the right women is good for men," Annabelle said, seeking a happy medium between her friends. "But I will speak to Stephen. I'm sure

he means well but he does interfere so sometimes.”

As they spoke, Lord Emberly himself reappeared on one path while the Quince siblings and Captain Rawlings popped up again on another, smiling and talking happily together.

“Miss Crawford! There you are,” Stephen called out. “I feared you might have taken the wrong path and become lost on our neighbor’s land.”

“God save me!” Victoria muttered. “How do you stand it, Annabelle?”

Annabelle scrambled to her feet and extracted her friend’s shoes and stockings from her brother’s hands.

“I’m very hungry, Stephen. Aren’t you?” she asked.

“How did you find the maze?” Frederick added, directing a question to Oswald Quince and his companions while deftly heading off Stephen’s move towards Victoria by putting an arm around his friend’s shoulder and steering him to the picnic table.

Frederick always seemed to know what to do in any social situation, Annabelle sighed to herself, glad that he was there today for that reason as well as her own pleasure in his company.

“We enjoyed the maze very much,” Lord Darrington confirmed. “As you said, the puzzle to be solved turned out to be not so large at all.”

The three of them shared knowing glances with one another and smiled as though they had been sharing some private joke out there. Perhaps they had. The trio seemed very close and Annabelle thought for a moment that it would be a shame for any of

them to marry and ruin their natural symmetry.

“Indeed? Which puzzle was that?” Frederick asked Oswald Quince frankly but with a slight edge to his voice that surprised Annabelle.

The latter only shook his head and laughed.

“Oh, never mind puzzles today. We have sunshine, plentiful food and good company. Tomorrow we may have none of these.”

“Hear, hear,” said Stephen. “Let us be thankful for our health, prosperity and happiness while we can.”

Taking up glasses of lemonade, they all raised a toast in the sunlight. Despite the gloriousness of the June day, the fun of their earlier games, and the smile on Frederick’s lips, Annabelle could see nothing of real joy in his eyes.



### CHAPTER 17

“Lord Darrington,” announced Simons, the Duke of Colborne’s elderly butler, in his rasping but still dignified voice as he held open the door.

Oswald Quince walked past the butler and into the drawing room at Colborne House where Lord Emberly and Annabelle awaited his arrival. His hazel eyes were as jolly and dancing as ever and the smart white carnation in his buttonhole perfectly complemented the gray of his suit.

“How kind of you to call, Lord Darrington,” said Stephen, coming forward to shake the other man’s hand, and gesture him towards the sofa where Annabelle was already seated. “We were glad to receive your note. Annabelle was to take tea with a neighbor this morning but the lady has caught a chill, likely from insufficient care in the open air, just as I warned Miss Crawford about.”

Annabelle and Oswald shared a glance of common amusement at this assertion, both remembering the clash of personalities between Stephen and Victoria Crawford only too well.

“You are only too kind to receive me, Lord Emberly,” Oswald Quince answered with a nod and a smile, sitting down beside Annabelle. “I am glad to provide Lady Annabelle with some diversion as well as extending my acquaintance with you and your wonderful home.”

Stephen looked pleased at this compliment to Colborne House, while Annabelle was pleased that Lord Darrington seemed to know how to best handle her brother.

“Colborne House is a striking building,” Stephen commented. “I have always preferred it to our country estate, which is rather an unfortunate agglomeration of buildings from different eras and styles.”

“Yes, it is a perfect example of restrained neoclassical architecture,” agreed Oswald. “The grandeur of the house is all the more striking given the structure’s simplicity of form.”

“Exactly,” returned Stephen with delight. “If you are interested in architecture, I must lend you a book about Colborne House which includes extensive original sketches from the architect who worked for my great-grandfather, the Fifth Duke of Colborne.”

“I should like that very much. I also wonder if I might prevail upon your goodwill to have a few minutes of private conversation with Lady Annabelle? If she wishes it, of course.”

The request took Stephen by surprise, just as it took Annabelle, but it did not appear unwelcome to him. Her brother seemed to feel no instinctive need to protect her from Lord Darrington as he did from certain other men, including Frederick. He only looked thoughtful as he considered the request.

Annabelle swallowed, feeling a welling of fear in her stomach – fear of the unknown rather than fear of Oswald. When their visitor looked at her and smiled, she realized that her heart was hammering as hard as when Frederick first kissed her, but without any of the pleasure of that encounter.

“Am I to understand that you intend to make my sister an offer of marriage?” Stephen asked calmly after he had thought for a few moments. “That is the only honorable reason I can understand for your wanting to be alone with a young woman.”

“Yes,” Lord Quince answered equally easily. “If Lady Annabelle will do me the honor of listening to my suit, that is exactly what I intend.”

So, Frederick had been right after all. Annabelle’s fear rose even as she nodded her consent to both men for the fateful conversation to take place. This had been what she wanted and planned for, hadn’t it?

“Very well, I shall leave you to talk. Tea will be brought in fifteen minutes and I will return then, unless Annabelle summons me before.”

“Please don’t look so frightened, Annabelle,” Oswald said, as soon as Stephen had closed the door. “It makes me feel like an awful blackguard. It’s only that after we talked at the Orville ball, and I’d consulted my sister and Jacob, this seemed like a good idea for all of us.”

His smile was too good-natured and unthreatening for Annabelle to sustain her pitch of suspense and she relaxed at little at these words, although still not comfortable.

“Your suit is only unexpected. We have only recently met and become friends after all. While I admit that I hoped to find a husband this season, with all the qualities we discussed at the Orville ball, I had no idea of receiving a proposal so soon. No one has ever proposed to me before, Oswald, and I don’t know how to react.”

“We are friends, aren’t we?” Lord Darrington agreed. “That is why I supposed you and I might be able to make a marriage work well. It would give us both freedom and protection of a kind and we could have such fun together, all four of us.”

Now Annabelle was even more confused.

“All four of us?” she reiterated. “You mean that Jacob and Lady Meredith are getting married too?”

At this idea, Oswald threw back his head and laughed.

“No, no. They have never imagined such a thing, although now you have suggested it, I must tell them. It will give them such laughter too. I mean only that the four of us will be fine companions for one another around the ton. Two pairs are often easier for others to fit into their planning than a threesome, I find.”

“I suppose so,” Annabelle commented, still puzzled.

She was growing sure only of one fact: Oswald Quince did not want to kiss her, whatever Frederick might believe.

“Oh dear, I have made this all rather a muddle, haven’t I? I suppose I was just so keen to get everything tied up before Jacob returns to his regiment. He must be my best man, of course. Let me start again at the beginning.”

“Please do,” Annabelle encouraged him.

“I’m in love with someone else, Annabelle. Someone I can never marry and someone for whom society would cast me out if they knew of my love.”

“Not your sister?!” Annabelle gasped in horror, but received only another yelp of laughter in response.

“No, no, no! I am not Lord Byron. Now I have been too melodramatic and must begin again. Let me try a third time to explain so that you might understand.”

“Some men prefer the society of other men, Annabelle. In all ways.”

“Yes,” acknowledged Annabelle slowly, thinking dimly of some such men.

“I am such a man, and there is someone I have loved for a long time. Marriage for me would be a protection and a shield from small-minded prejudice. I would want a wife only for friendship and to divert the eyes of the world from my love.”

“Ah, now I see. You are looking for a marriage of convenience,” Annabelle realized aloud, relief sounding in her voice even as it coursed through her body.

“Yes, that is it exactly. In return for her presence, I would give my wife all that I could: liberty, a title, full access to my fortune. I cannot give her love, but would not object if she too sought it elsewhere, and with discretion.”

Annabelle sat nodding and taking these words in, an uncertain smile growing on her face.

“You’re not going to kiss me, are you?” she checked and Oswald burst out laughing yet again.

“Certainly not, or only on the cheek, as I might my own sister. We would have no need of heirs as long as Meredith marries and has children. Although if you ever did want a child with...someone else, I would understand and accept them as my own.”

“Someone else...”

Annabelle’s eyes grew very round at this idea.

“If you wished it. You are a young woman and it is natural to desire a handsome man who is obviously so very charmed by you, if shy of marriage. In time, bearing a child might become...inevitable.”

This notion was shocking in some ways but also made perfect sense. It was also hard to know whether Lord Darrington was speaking theoretically or had someone in

mind, although her own conscience would not allow her to imagine the name or face of an illicit father for her child in such circumstances.

She supposed that all those in the Duke of Blackwell's sophisticated circle must have such modern and unconventional ideas of love, marriage and getting children. While strange to her, it was not automatically any worse than the idea of bearing children to a man through more traditional means.

"May I have time to think this over, Oswald? I cannot imagine a proposal that would suit me better, or a man with whom I might live more easily, but this has still come out of the blue."

"Of course, my dear Annabelle. You must take all the time you need to make a decision about the rest of your life, and mine. If you wished, we might also have a long betrothal so that you could get to know me, and Jacob and Meredith better. You truly are a jewel among women and would be worth any man's waiting."

After sharing a further smile of understanding with her unexpected suitor, Annabelle rang the bell to summon tea and bring Stephen back to the room.

"Well, then, have you made up your mind?" Stephen asked Annabelle over dinner that evening. "It has been more than eight hours since Lord Darrington called."

She shook her head with some annoyance. While Annabelle had obviously had to tell Stephen something of Oswald's proposal, the crucial issues were deeply private and her brother could not understand her wish for time to consider her answer.

"No. Oswald has told me that he does not expect a quick answer, Stephen. I do not want to rush into a marriage, even with someone I believe to be a good man."

"You will not find better, in my opinion," Lord Emberly declared. "Lord Darrington

has fortune, title and good reputation, despite his very broad circle of friends. I have asked around the ton and he is not a man to play fast and loose with the hearts or reputations of young ladies.”

At this unknowing comment from her brother, Annabelle could not help emitting a giggle. At his own admission, Oswald Quince was certainly not a man to break any young ladies’ heart, or threaten her virtue.

“He is a serious man and you must treat his proposal with the weight it deserves,” Stephen upbraided her, misunderstanding her laughter.

“Yes, he is,” Annabelle agreed. “Oswald is a kind man and a humorous man too. He likes to laugh, just as I do. We might even have a long betrothal if I prefer so that I can get to know him that way. Then I might break it off if it seems we cannot get along.”

“Those sound like rather modern and dangerous ideas to me, Annabelle,” Stephen warned. “Did they come from Frederick? I’ve told you that while he is not a bad person, his influence may be injurious to you...”

“No!” Annabelle interrupted crossly. “These ideas came from Oswald. He knew that his proposal was sudden and wished to give me time to consider it freely. If only you could do the same!”

She pushed away her plate like a petulant child, half in a mind to storm away upstairs to her rooms. Why had Stephen had to raise Frederick right now? She had been trying hard not to think about him ever since Lord Darrington’s call.

“I am sorry, Annabelle,” Stephen said unexpectedly. “I must aggravate you greatly, I am afraid. I am a fit companion more for ailing old men than spirited young women, it seems.”

This unusual apology took Annabelle aback. Was something playing on her brother's mind? Likely the temporary respite from her father's sickbed had given him time to think about things.

"You are a good brother, Stephen," Annabelle assured him. "I know that you want what is best for me. But I am one-and-twenty now and must be trusted to make that decision for myself."

Stephen sighed.

"You still seem so young to me, Annabelle. It seems only yesterday that you and Penelope were in short skirts and playing with your dolls. Sometimes you are still so impetuous too. It would be remiss of me not to offer you my guidance even though you are no longer a child."

Annabelle pulled back her plate and took up her knife and fork. There was no point in trying to speak to Stephen. He came from a world she had outgrown and did not wish to live in. She knew that now. She might not be one of the sophisticated inhabitants of the Duke of Blackwell's milieu but her human understanding and interests had surpassed her brother's.

The only person she really wished to speak to was Frederick. He might better understand Annabelle's confusion and the aching in her heart even though she had been offered the very prize she had set out to win. Perhaps he could even explain it to her. Or at least kiss her until the confusion itself no longer mattered...

"I am tired," Annabelle announced, as soon as the meal was done. "I shall go to bed early tonight, Stephen. I suggest you do the same. It has been a long day."

Frederick sat morosely at his small campfire on the edge of the woodland of the Heartwick Estate.



“Are you tired, Thunder? We both should be, but I’m not.”

Thunder, his gray stallion, neighed softly and then went back to the nosebag of oats that his master had provided. Restless after dinner, Frederick had saddled the animal himself and ridden hard in a circuit around the nearest three villages before returning to Heartwick itself and sending the staff to their beds.

Even after that he had not wanted to retire. Instead, he had groomed and watered the horse himself before bringing Thunder to this spot and building a fire as though he were a schoolboy again, camping outside as an adventure in the holidays.

“Do I plan to stay out here all night? God only knows. Why am I even asking questions of a horse?”

This time Thunder did not even neigh at the sound of Frederick’s voice. The fire was warm, the mossy ground was soft and the horse was company enough, if he did remain outdoors. There had been another letter from Walden Towers for him that day, not with any real news, but enough implied judgement from his stepmother to make him feel worse than he had already.

...Penelope is faring better with rest, her headaches are less frequent and the physician is content with her health. I trust that my next letter will be the one bearing the best of news for all of us...

Duchess Sarah also wrote that she had been glad to hear of the improvement in the Duke of Colborne’s health and to know that Annabelle had returned to her brother’s care. It was her next lines, presumably commenting on this, that Frederick brooded on.

...I hope that in the long run, you will come to understand that this return to normality was for the best, dear Stepson. The world can be very hard on those who

challenge its order and decline to accept their assigned place and role. I should hate to see any young people I care for suffer such a fate. Please do not pursue Annabelle's company beyond Stephen's bounds...

Would he ever come to understand and accept the world the way it was? He doubted it. That damned picnic at Colborne House certainly hadn't helped him to understand anything.

Except perhaps Annabelle's beauty in a dress of palest green muslin, originally a girlish cut but now made more womanly by new underwear that raised her curves into prominence. There had been little chance for more than subtle glances, given the eagle-eyed presence of Lord Emberly, the Quince party's aggravating interest in Annabelle, and Victoria Crawford's inability to get along with Stephen.

He had been able to feel Annabelle's attraction to him as almost a tangible object as they sat together on the grass. It was something warm and sweet, alive and fascinating to him, like Annabelle herself. When they were so close, Frederick wanted always to hold her, kiss her, tease her, bring her to fulfillment as he knew how...

Stephen might have been right in his accusation that his sister was half in love with Frederick, and that he had encouraged it. So what? He desired what Annabelle could not honorably give him, but he had no intention of taking it. No, instead of taking, he had given. One day she might even thank him for what he had shown her this summer.

"Do you hear that, Thunder?" Frederick asked, sitting up straighter and looking out towards the main drive.

The horse's ears had indeed pricked up at the same sound that Frederick had heard. There was someone approaching in the distance on the road to Heartwick Hall. He

could detect the sound of at least two horses, he thought.

For a minute or two, Frederick's blood ran painfully hot and then cold with the idea that it could be an express messenger from Walden Towers. He swallowed hard as he thought of his younger sister in labor with twins. Penelope was strong and brave but childbirth was dangerous enough with one child. Duchess Sarah would never have stayed so long if she had not feared for her daughter.

Thinking rationally, however, express messengers normally rode singly and on horseback for speed. Whatever was approaching on the road sounded more like a small vehicle. If it was an unlikely express messenger, Frederick would give no tip for speed and efficiency of delivery tonight.

Could it be a drunken neighbor riding home from the Cross Keys Inn? Sir Harry Bowers, for example, did sometimes stay out late drinking with locals, and would be driven home by one of his footmen. But the most direct route to Sir Harry's home at Starley House did not pass by Heartwick Hall.

Frederick frowned and dismissed this option too before jumping to his feet and removing Thunder's nosebag.

"Sorry, old chap. This bears some investigation, I fear," he said.

Pulling himself back into the saddle, the Duke of Heartwick eased into a gentle trot back towards the main drive.

Who the hell could be out there at this time of night?

### CHAPTER 18

“ T en shillings, did you say?” Annabelle asked the hired cab driver as she took out her purse and counted the money carefully in the darkness. “There. You must check it too. The moon is behind a cloud and I cannot see the coins properly in this light.”

“There’s only nine shillings there, Madam,” the driver said quickly, whether he had counted them or not.

“Oh, dear. Let me find another.”

Scrabbling again in her purse for the right coins, she did not hear anyone approaching until a man’s voice suddenly sounded right beside the coach, authoritative and somewhat displeased.

“Here’s your money, Sir, and another few coins for your trouble. Travel quickly back to London tonight. I shall see the lady safe now.”

“Why, thank you, Sir. Very kind of you, I must say. Much appreciated indeed.”

While the cab driver was obsequious over Frederick, Annabelle had not particularly liked the man, having sensed from the moment she got into his vehicle that he intended to cheat her, and that there was likely nothing she could do about it.

Any cabman must guess that a young lady wrapped up in a black cloak, sneaking about the streets on the outskirts of London at night must have something to hide.

The door of the carriage clicked open and Frederick was there beside it, holding out his arm expectantly. While his features in the darkness looked more forbidding than friendly, Annabelle was only relieved to see him. While determined to sneak out and visit Heartwick Hall, she had been terrified at every moment of her night's adventure since she tiptoed past Stephen's bedroom door. Now, however, she was safe.

"Come," he said and helped her down, making a quiet but definite shushing noise when she attempted to speak. "Later."

It was not until the hired coach had rattled away back down the drive that Frederick spun Annabelle around and took hold of her by the shoulders.

"Annabelle, what on earth are you playing at? Does Stephen know where you are? What are you doing here?"

"I had to see you Frederick," she told him. "There was no one else I could talk to, and certainly no one who can understand. I just had to come here."

"Oh Annabelle," he sighed, the moon now reappearing and casting his handsome features in silvery light that exposed the concern and of his expression. "It is extremely dangerous for you to go out alone at night like this. Anything could have happened to you. That cab driver swindling you was the best of the possible option."

"Stephen thinks I'm asleep in bed, Frederick, and no one else knows I'm here."

"Except that cab driver. Does he know your name? Did he pick you up at Colborne House? What if he seeks to blackmail you?"

"No, he knows nothing, except that I wished to come here. I sneaked out and walked along the road towards the city. That took me an hour, and the cab another hour, I think."

“How are we going to get you back and what if...”

“Oh, will you please stop asking me questions, Frederick,” Annabelle burst out now, her heart overfull and her nerves strained. “Can’t you just...”

Lost for words but not actions, Annabelle stood on her toes and pressed her lips to Frederick’s mouth. It shut him up like magic, the hands that had been crossly laid on her shoulders sliding down her back and pulling her in closer so that he could return the kiss more fully.

“One more question,” he said breathlessly, after some moments had passed, caressing her cheek between his kisses. “Are you alright, Annabelle? You must tell me what is going on.”

“Later. Now, I just need you to kiss me, Frederick,” Annabelle pleaded and pressed herself into him as he complied.

Back in Frederick’s embrace under the stars at Heartwick Hall, Annabelle could feel the weight of the world falling away and its influence quickly being replaced by the rushing of blood in her veins and pulsing of desire in all her most sensitive places.

“We can’t stay here on the driveway, and you can’t come inside,” Frederick observed the next time he raised his head.

The sound of a horse nickering caught Annabelle’s attention and she turned slightly in Frederick’s arms to see Thunder standing there beside the drive, fully saddled.

“You were out riding at this time of night?” she asked with astonishment.

“It’s no stranger than you riding about the country in hired cabs, is it?” he returned with a smile. “Now, let us move. I know where to take you, but you must get up on

Thunder.”

Annabelle gave a squeak of fright at this suggestion but Frederick ignored it and she found herself lifted onto the horse’s saddle by his strong arms, too nervous to resist.

“That’s it, you’ll need to ride astride,” he laughed, arranging her legs and taking the opportunity to stroke her skin through the silk of her stockings.

“You’ll be leading Thunder, won’t you?” Annabelle quavered, scared of being up at such a height on a powerful horse despite her new confidence on smaller, less spirited animals.

“I’ll do better than that,” Frederick said and vaulted up behind Annabelle taking up the reins and urging her forward in the saddle to settle her body between his thighs. “Thunder is strong enough to carry both of us.”

At Frederick’s signal, Thunder walked off the drive and away toward the woodland and Annabel sank back thankfully into the security of Frederick’s body.

“You excite me so much, Annabelle,” Frederick murmured to her in acknowledgment of the bulge of his stiff organ at her back, a fact that could not be hidden or denied. “Sometimes I cannot control my response to you.”

His lips were right beside her ear as he spoke these words and he finished them with a kiss to her neck. Annabelle felt no fear or trepidation now, only longing, her desire spiked further by her indecent posture on the horse, legs spread wide and skirts halfway up her legs, one of Frederick’s hands reaching down briefly to caress her thigh as he spoke.

“I like to feel your excitement,” she breathed in reply, speaking only the truth. “I like the way your body feels, the way you smell, the way you kiss me.”

When she turned her head to look at Frederick, he captured her mouth again with his and then gently bit her lower lip for a moment before releasing her.

“Annabelle, you are so tempting that I simply want to eat you.”

Given what she already knew he could accomplish with that knowing and sensitive mouth, Annabelle shivered with pleasure and lust at his words, hoping that they signaled his intention to do exactly that.

A few minutes later they arrived at the edge of the woods and what appeared to be a small fire smoldering beside some items of human and horse equipment, including a nosebag, a bottle of something and a bag which was presumably Frederick's. His cloak was there too, lying on a large log.

Lifting Annabelle down and kissing her again as he did so, Frederick paused only to stoked up the fire and then spread his cloak on the ground. Thunder had instantly lost interest in the humans once they were off his back and walked away to graze on the half spilled nosebag.

With his next kiss, Frederick drew Annabelle down onto the ground with him and did not stop until she was beginning to whimper with need. His building of her desire seemed as deliberate as his actions in stoking the campfire. Surely he would not stop at kisses tonight – she could not bear it if he did.

“Do you have any idea of what I dream of doing with you in moonlight, Annabelle?” Frederick asked her, showing no signs yet of stopping anything.

His hands had already unfastened her cloak and were working at the fastenings of her neckline.

“This?” she suggested with a moan as he dropped kisses on the upper slopes of her



breasts.

“More than that,” he breathed, kissing lower as his hands began to push down the loosened fabric of her dress. “Far, far more. I dream of thrusting myself deep inside your body and enjoying the embrace of your tight little slit that gets so slippery for me. I dream of how your hidden lips will caress my manhood softly and wetly just as the lips of your mouth caress my tongue in our kisses...”

“Oh Frederick,” Annabelle whimpered, impossibly aroused by these erotic taunts and the images they conjured up alongside the feelings his hands and lips were provoking. Her own hands had untucked his shirt and found the hot, lightly furred skin of his torso beneath, the drum of his heartbeat setting a compelling rhythm for her senses.

“I dream of kissing and suckling your breasts even while I am filling your womb with my seed,” he declared roughly, baring her breasts entirely in the moonlight and then covering them with his hands. “All that should be your future husband’s, I dream of claiming for my own.”

Again, Annabelle could only utter his name and press into his touch, knowing that if he did exactly as he said, she could offer no resistance at all. She wanted him so badly now that all consequences seemed to belong in another less concrete world.

This one was the real world, the world where Frederick was kissing and fondling the pale globes of her bosom, sending surges of delight through her belly to spark between her thighs. No theoretical husband could make her feel these sensations, Annabelle felt sure. It seemed to her that they could only flow from Frederick’s touch.

“But I cannot do these things to you, because you are Annabelle, and I will not hurt you,” Frederick continued now, with something like a groan. “Still there are other pleasures, are there not?”

Finally, a hand that had been caressing her gartered thigh a moment earlier, moved slowly upward and tangled playfully in the curls at her Mount of Venus.

Annabelle gave an involuntary jerk at this contact, making Frederick smile despite the roughening of his own breathing and voice.

“You want me to touch you there, Annabelle?”

“Yes, oh God, yes...” she moaned before her mouth was covered again by his and the sounds she made in response to his gentle fingering swallowed by his kisses.

He relented from his sweet torment this time only to kiss his way down her body, tasting the tips of her breasts and her navel with his tongue on the way.

Annabelle was entirely lost by the time his mouth found her salty folds and the swollen bud of pleasure within. It took very little time before she gasped and cried out as wave after wave of pleasure flowed through her, radiating out from deep inside her body.

Frederick remained kneeling between her thighs, gazing with utter lust and fascination at her excited body while the firelight danced on them both.

“Please let me look at you a little longer,” he said hoarsely as she tried to sit up. “I may never see you like this again, Annabelle.”

She nodded slightly, propping herself up only slightly on her elbows and exquisitely conscious of the breeze over her naked breasts and the indecency of exposing her lower body to Frederick at such close quarters, with her skirts upped around her waist.

At last, he leaned forward and kissed her again with a sigh.

“I wish I could do that for you, Frederick. I wish I could give you something of the same pleasure that you give me. You look almost in pain.”

“I will not take you,” he said fiercely. “Not like this, in a way that could cause us both such shame and disgrace. It would turn something natural into the obscenity that the rest of the world would heap upon all sensual experience.”

“Is there really no other way?” Annabelle asked innocently, knowing only the most simple facts of human reproduction and able to deduce more only from her experiences with Frederick. “Can I not touch you with my hands and my mouth as you touch me?”

“I cannot ask you to do that,” Frederick said immediately but could hide the flush of excitement that her proposal caused him to feel.

“Why not?” she pressed, reaching out and laying a hand over his swollen groin before he could stop her. “Is it not possible? Is there something I do not understand about a man’s body? Would you not enjoy it if I touched you? Or can that cause a woman to get with child too?”

For once, it was Frederick who seemed lost for words.

“I cannot ask you,” he repeated, shaking his head as though groping for some other answer he had forgotten.

“You have not asked me,” Annabelle said, kneeling up and kissing Frederick, her hand now feeling the full shape of his shaft through the fabric of his trousers. “I have asked you because I want to touch you.”

“You’re not like any other woman I’ve ever met, Annabelle,” he marveled and then kissed her passionately.

“Does that feel good?” she asked, squeezing his groin cautiously, and then did it again as he nodded.

With uncertain fingers, Annabelle directed her attention to the waistband of Frederick’s trousers, fumbling a little more than Frederick did with her clothing but finally loosening his garments enough to reach inside and feel the smooth, eager heat of his organ with her bare hand.

“Oh,” she gasped, blushing a little at the thought of what she was now holding, even as the throbbing of its length called forth pulsing from between her own thighs. “It is even larger than I imagined, Frederick.”

“You do not have to do this,” he reminded her through gritted teeth even while the look of growing ecstasy on his features steeled her determination.

“I like how it feels,” Annabelle assured him, pushing the fabric of trousers and undershorts away now entirely and bringing his manhood into her view for the first time.

Annabelle had never seen an adult man fully naked, and certainly not one in a state of arousal. The sight of Frederick’s physical excitement aroused her curiosity in tandem with her desire, each of them spurring her on.

She explored his shaft with both hands, discovering and uncovering the swollen head at its tip and the mysterious hair-covered balls that lay at the base. Instinctively, she handled them more lightly, drawing encouraging groans of appreciation from Frederick.

When Annabelle lowered her head and kissed his shaft, he gave a deeper groan, one of his hands tangling in her disordered hair, although whether to stop her or guide her, she did not know. Uncertainly, Annabelle ran her tongue along the impressive

organ and when Frederick seemed to surge towards her, she opened her mouth and drew the head of his manhood inside, suckling on it lightly.

The hand that was not in her hair, now reached down and found one of her naked breasts, this instinctive caress seeming to signal that whatever she was doing was right. For some minutes, she continued to experiment with drawing Frederick into her mouth and working out how her lips and tongue could stroke him and what reaction she was drawing.

Frederick's breath was audibly growing more ragged with her ministrations and his hand tightening in her hair.

At last, he pulled away from her abruptly.

"No more," he panted. "I do not want you to continue like that. Not this time. Not until you understand what will happen."

"But I want to give that pleasure to you," Annabelle protested, gazing longingly at his manhood. "Let me, please."

"I have another idea," Frederick said abruptly, with a glint in his eye and then pushed Annabelle onto her back and parted her legs.

Although she cooperated, her mind was thrown into a tumult. Was he going to deflower her after all? Had she pushed him too far? Resigned to it, and even desiring it now, Annabelle moaned involuntarily when she felt his shaft rubbing against her wet folds.

She whimpered slightly as Frederick's weight pressed against her, equally stirred at the thought of his size and the thrills of pleasure that passed through her when the head of his organ repeatedly touched the sensitive bud within her womanhood.

Still, he made no move to enter her and Annabelle vaguely wondered if something was wrong, or there was something she was meant to do first. Frederick's face however, told her that everything was right, filled as it was with semi-restrained lust and enjoyment.

"So beautifully wet, Annabelle," he whispered to her. "Now close your thighs tightly so that I am caught between them. Oh, yes, like that. There. Yes..."

Frederick began to move slowly and rhythmically, rubbing his shaft against Annabelle's slippery folds and warm rounded thighs with deeply voiced sounds of enjoyment. She could feel herself growing ever softer and wetter with the strange new stimulation, her own little cries accompanying his until he stiffened and held her very closely.

Annabelle felt his manhood throbbing forcefully in a final paroxysm that made her smile in triumph even though it was his and not hers.

With a final sigh, Frederick released her and rolled to one side, Annabelle now perceiving a new wetness on her thighs and mount as his movement left her bared once more to the elements.

Even after his climax, Frederick's eyes glinted with lust as they kissed her lips and roamed over her body and Annabelle gloried in it, looking down at herself too to see what it was he saw and desired.

In the firelight, she looked curiously at the pearls of milky liquid now streaking her golden-red pubic fur and dampening the skin of her thighs. As her fingers reached down to touch it, Frederick's own reached out to join them.

"It is my seed," he explained, "drawn safely from me outside your body. I did not want to take you by surprise by spurting that into your mouth without warning and I

was too excited to explain anything.”

“But you liked what I did?” Annabelle checked. “It seemed that you did.”

“Liked it? Annabelle, you are extraordinary. Let me show you how it felt.”

His fingers again took up their stations in her folds and completed the second circuit of excitement that had paused for Annabelle with his own conclusion.

They lay in the darkness together for a long time as the fire burned down to embers again, in a a salty, sticky disarray of kisses, erotic remarks and laughter. It was only when a pale gray band on the horizon presaged the fading of the stars that the atmosphere grew more serious, as though they knew that reality would return with the sun.

“So, are you going to tell me what brought you here, Annabelle?” Frederick asked her as they began to adjust their clothing.

Her heart dropped as she remembered something that she had put entirely from her mind since she arrived at Heartwick Hall.

“Oswald Quince asked me to marry him yesterday,” she said.

“And did you accept?”

“I told him that I must think about it. Lord Darrington wants a civilized arrangement, Frederick, not a love match. He has promised me freedom, respect and companionship as well as title and fortune. I wanted to talk to you before I made any decision, Frederick. There is no one else I can ask about something like this.”

“Lady Darrington,” Frederick said to himself with a smile that was not really a smile

and a joking tone that was not funny.

“Don’t tease me, Frederick,” Annabelle pleaded. “I couldn’t bear it, not after the way we touched one another, and not about this. I am so very confused and I really need your advice.”

Frederick took a long, deep breath before he turned to her.

“We are too entangled right now, you and I, aren’t we? We must make ourselves think about this rationally, aside from what we have just experienced.”

“Must we?” Annabelle questioned, somehow disappointed by this logical approach.

“It seems so. Now, you have been aiming to marry in order to be free and independent of your brother. For whatever reason, Oswald Quince is offering you what you seek with no strings attached, not even seeking what a man would normally require from a wife. If you believe in his sincerity, then the bargain he is offering is a good one.”

“Is it?” asked Annabelle uncertainly, realizing that she had not really wanted this to be true.

“It seems unlikely that there are many men who would offer so much entirely on your terms. The only sensible reason to turn him down would be if you did not trust him and expected him to break his end of the bargain. Is that the case?”

“Well no. It seems he is a good man and I expect he would keep his word.”

“That is also my impression. Money and personal liberty you can pin down to some extent in the marriage contract, in any case. Respect, companionship and lack of romantic expectation can’t be legalized in the same way, unfortunately. Does he want



an heir?"

"Oswald would be happy enough for the estate to pass to his sister's children in due course," Annabelle informed him shortly. "It seems that is the fashion now."

She ignored Frederick's frown at this remark and turned away to restore her bodice to modesty.

"He may change his mind on that after you are married," Frederick warned her.

"He will not," returned Annabelle with certainty, unwilling to share Oswald's confidences on the nature of his own love, not even with Frederick.

"Well then," said Frederick, getting to his feet and sounding rather tired. "It seems that on balance, you must marry the man. It makes perfect sense when we look at the facts in an orderly way."

"I'm not sure I want to look at them in an orderly way," Annabelle said crossly.

She felt a growing ache in her heart and increasing anger at Frederick although she could not entirely justify it. She had asked him for advice and he was giving it to her plainly. It would be unfair to rail at him for that, and yet it did anger her.

When Frederick tried to take her back into his arms, she pushed him away.

"I can't," she said.

"Very well," he accepted with another long and tired sigh. "Now, I must see you safely home before Stephen rises from his bed and raises hell."

The creaking of a garden gate attracted the attention of Lord Emberly as he got up to

use the chamber pot. He had followed Annabelle's example and gone to bed straight after dinner, with the result that he had awoken at dawn.

The hour was still very early, too early even for gardeners, surely. With a frown, he pulled back a corner of the curtain and looked outside into the garden just in time to see a small figure in a black cloak disappearing into the kitchen garden, the hood pulled up too far to see the face or hair.

A maid on a morning errand? Or a maid out on secret assignments and up to no good? He made a mental note to speak to the housekeeper and mention the early wanderer. It would be up to her to discipline the culprit if there were no innocent explanation.

Deciding that he would return to bed and read for an hour, Stephen selected a volume of Spinoza from his bedroom bookshelf, always finding calm and comfort in the philosopher's thinking on ethics and morality.

Before he had crossed the room back to his bed, his sensitive ears detected the muffled sound of footsteps on a nearby staircase. What on earth was going on this morning, that so many people should be up and about? If there were some significant problem, Stephen expected that he should be told of it.

Opening his bedroom door he was just in time to see a small figure in a black cloak crossing the end of the corridor and moving towards the bedrooms on the opposite side of house. The hood was now down and a mass of red-gold curls tumbled in disarray down the young woman's back.

Annabelle?! Where had she been at this hour of the morning? What could this peculiar behavior mean?

Struck dumb with surprise and concern, Stephen closed his bedroom door again as

quietly as he could and sat down on his bed to think.

### CHAPTER 19

“Y ou must know why I am here, Duke Frederick,” Stephen said stiffly and without preamble as Frederick joined him in the drawing room at Heartwick Hall.

Having spent the night first riding, then ravishing Annabelle as far as his honor allowed before traveling as secretly as possible back and forth to London to return her, Frederick had barely slept.

The last thing he had wanted this morning was a guest, and the last guest he wanted to see was Lord Emberly. However, by turning up on his doorstep unannounced, the man had left him little choice.

Annabelle’s older brother had been pacing by the mantelpiece when Frederick entered the room, and still stood beside it now, unhappy and unsettled. Oddly, that was rather how Frederick felt too, although for very different reasons.

“Please do sit, Stephen,” he opened as pleasantly as he could, as if he had not heard Lord Emberly’ challenging first words. “Shall I ring for refreshments?”

“There is no need, in reference to either of those suggestions. Do not play games with me, Frederick. I’ve come here for the truth and I intend to have it.”

Frederick stifled a yawn, not wishing to insult or antagonize the other man unduly.

“Stephen, I am very tired. Far too tired to follow whatever you might be implying, in fact. I can better answer your questions if you put them to me directly.”

“Very well, if that is how you intend to play it,” Lord Emberly replied. “What exactly is between you and my sister Annabelle?”

His tone was quietly furious and his eyes like gimlets as he posed this question. While it was common enough to see Stephen irritated or disapproving, the open expression of anger was more unusual. Did Stephen think that the Duke of Heartwick would quail under aggressive questioning? Perhaps a lesser man might have done but Frederick, despite his charm and sociability, was not a lesser man.

“Again?” the Duke of Heartwick returned calmly. “You ask me this again? I thought we had already discussed the matter, established that your sister’s virtue was intact, and you had decreed that Annabelle should no longer visit Heartwick Hall. Was that not your recollection?”

“You have not answered my question,” Lord Emberly shot back. “I believe you are being deliberately evasive.”

Yes, Frederick was, and he knew it. He didn’t have the right words to describe what was between him and Annabelle now. He only knew that it was delightful, compulsive and forbidden by the world, even though it brought them both so much natural joy. And pain...

He closed his eyes briefly, remembering the hurt that had lanced through him when Annabelle confessed that Lord Darrington had made her an offer and she was considering it. The fact that Oswald Quince professed to want only a marriage of convenience had not dulled the pain. Unlike Annabelle, Frederick could not believe in such an intention for a moment.

“Well? After the long years of friendship between our families, the least you owe me is an answer, damn it, Frederick!” Lord Emberly’s voice rose now, likely considering Frederick’s silence as deliberate insolence rather than consideration.

Frederick looked his friend straight in the eyes.

“Have you considered that I am being respectful?” he said.

“Respectful?” Lord Emberly scoffed.

“Yes, respectful of Annabelle. I cannot stop you from treating her like a foolish child but I am not going to collaborate in it either. I shall not talk about her with you further. She is an adult woman and it’s time you accepted that.”

This approach threw Lord Emberly off-track. Likely he had expected denials, lies, explanations and even wanted apologies, but he was unprepared for Frederick to refuse to discuss Annabelle at all – and for a respectable if unconventional reason.

It occurred to Frederick to wonder exactly how much Stephen might actually know. Something had certainly sent him rushing over to Heartwick Hall only shortly after the breakfast hour, but was it merely a suspicion?

“If you have real concerns about Annabelle, then the first person you should talk to is Annabelle,” he suggested reasonably.

“Annabelle is still in bed. If I didn’t know that she had been out somewhere at dawn, I might even think she was ill. I want to know where she was this morning, damn it all!”

“Stephen, this is ridiculous. Won’t Annabelle be a married woman soon enough? Are you going to let her grow up then?”

Frederick quickly realized that he had gone too far in his efforts to reason with his friend and made an error in mentioning Annabelle’s prospective engagement. Lord Emberly, however, did not miss the slip and seized on it instantly.

“So you know of Lord Darrington’s proposal? Annabelle told you presumably, at some point in the last twenty-four hours. Did she write you a note or did you see her in person?”

“I have advised her to accept him,” Frederick stated flatly, without addressing the issue of when or where.

“What?! You what?”

He at least had the satisfaction of throwing Lord Emberly for a second time, even though reminding himself of his own advice made him feel slightly ill.

“Are you perhaps only jealous that she sought my advice instead of yours, Lord Emberly?” Frederick asked, losing some of his goodwill in the waves of his own tightly bound and unexpressed distress.

“I gave Annabelle the same advice,” Stephen snapped. “Why she should want yours is beyond me, Frederick, but at least we are of one mind on this. It still doesn’t tell me, however, where she was this morning.”

“I cannot help you with that,” the Duke of Heartwick said staunchly.

“Well, I will not have this match with Darrington ruined by your meddling and bad influence. Do you understand?”

Frederick exhaled loudly, his patience fraying badly. While Lord Emberly might not know it, this conversation about Annabelle’s future was as painful to Frederick as it clearly was to him. Presently, he wished it only to end, and then decided to end it.

“Stephen, listen to me. Annabelle is about to marry another man and I am wishing them every happiness. I have no intention of ruining anything or anyone. Why does

that not satisfy you?”

It was a rhetorical question really, posed by Frederick to himself more than to Stephen. Leaving his guest to show himself out, he stormed away to his suite upstairs.

Why did it not satisfy him? Why could he not be truly happy for Annabelle? Why did everything have to be so hard?

“Annabelle, I insist that we must talk...” said Lord Emberly tersely as he tried to simultaneously hand his outdoor clothing to a maid and

His younger sister, however, seemed barely to hear him. Annabelle seemed to be moving in a dream today, her face strange and disconnected in some way that prevented his displeasure or concerns from reaching her at all. At the same time, she also seemed more mature now, rendering his agitation faintly ridiculous merely by shrugging them off.

“There you are, Stephen. I’ve been looking for you all morning. Lord Darrington will be coming to Colborne House to call on us at three o’clock this afternoon. If you weren’t back by luncheon, I was going to send word to cancel his call.”

“Of course he must come. We have plenty of time now for luncheon, don’t we? Lord Darrington must be impatient for your answer, Annabelle. I hope you have given it the attention it deserves and are ready to answer respectfully.”

Annabelle smiled faintly and shook her head slightly, again giving him the sense of a greater and more adult assurance than he had seen in her before.

“I have summoned Oswald in order to formally accept his offer, Stephen –not the other way around. I wanted you there in order that the arrangements may be made as soon as is feasible. I know the marriage contract is not always a simple affair, but as I



am my father's only daughter and Oswald has few demands, I hope it will be straightforward."

Frederick's infuriating lecturing about Annabelle being a woman rather than a child came back to Stephen again as she spoke. This certainly seemed to be a sensible adult decision, and a cause for celebration in the Elkins' family. Together with her manner, it made it impossible for him to speak to her as sternly as he had planned in the coach on the way back from Heartwick Hall.

He had been so sure when he set off in his coach before breakfast that Annabelle had somewhere and somehow been with Frederick, but her announcement now shook this belief even more than Frederick's apparent equanimity in the face of her potential marriage. Had he only made a show of himself on a fool's errand?

Most likely Annabelle had taken a walk alone in the Colborne Hose gardens at dawn in order to think over Lord Darrington's proposal and come to the right decision. It was Stephen who had been impulsive and rash, not Annabelle...

"My dear sister, may I be the first to congratulate you?" he offered, kissing her cheek by way of unspoken apology. "I know Mother and Father will both be delighted when I write to them, although I should warn you that I think it unlikely they will be able to attend a wedding this summer."

"Thank you. I would not expect anything very big in the way of a wedding celebration anyway, Stephen. It would not seem right with Father so ill. Oswald and I would go to Norfolk to visit them instead, as soon as we are married, if he agrees to that, and I'm sure he will."

Stephen nodded, pleased at Annabelle's consideration and understanding. He knew that many young women would expect a day of pomp and circumstance with the bride at its centre, or would at least be disappointed if family circumstances rendered

such an event impossible. Annabelle, however, had no selfish or unreasonable expectations.

In fact, she and Lord Darrington both appeared intent on entering married life with minimal drama, fuss and disruption all round. That was something admirable...wasn't it?

"I'll wait for you in the dining room for luncheon, Stephen if you want to freshen up. Did you go out anywhere important?"

"Not really," Stephen answered a little cagily, hoping that he would not have to admit his embarrassing call on Frederick.

There was no need to worry, however. Annabelle accepted him at his word and drifted serenely away toward the dining room without further questions.

Stephen frowned slightly as he watched her go. He only wished he understood what was going on inside his sister's head.

"Well if that is all acceptable to you, Lord Darrington, then I'm sure we can have the marriage contract finalized within a fortnight. I must say, it is a little unusual for a husband to settle so much authority and fortune on his wife, especially a woman as young as Annabelle."

Lord Emberly sat back in his chair in the Colborne House drawing room, away from the small table where a handful of family papers lay, setting out the terms of Annabelle's dowry and other related legal issues for Oswald Quince.

"Oh, it is not only acceptable. It is vital in my opinion, Lord Emberly," laughed Oswald Quince kindly, seeming to understand, as Annabelle did, that her brother's question sprang from concern for her rather than lack of respect. "What is marriage if

not a partnership? It would be a terrible thing to marry a woman of poor judgement. I am choosing someone I can trust.”

“A partnership...I suppose so,” said Stephen thoughtfully. “Yes, it is, isn’t it? As well as being a merger of the interests of two families. I’ve never really thought about marriage like that. How interesting.”

Annabelle and Oswald looked at one another briefly with laughter in their eyes. Stephen was so very serious about everything, and seemingly so determined to protect every woman he knew that there was no opportunity for simple conversation. No wonder he himself had never come anywhere near marriage, despite his title, fortune and good looks hidden behind an old-fashioned manner.

“A small wedding as soon as the marriage contract is ready would suit me well,” Lord Darrington continued. “As I’ve told Annabelle, my best friend must join his regiment again soon and I would very much like Jacob to be my best man and part of the day.”

“A fine idea,” Stephen remarked. “Good friends are important in a man’s life, even when he marries.”

“I’m glad you agree,” said Oswald and then turned to the young woman with red-gold curls sitting rather silently, although not unhappily, on the sofa beside him.

“But Annabelle, are you absolutely sure that this is what you want? I can certainly tap up a friendly bishop and get a license for us to marry as soon as the ink is dry on the contract. However, we could equally wait until Jacob’s next leave, even if that isn’t for six months or a year. Don’t let my immediate convenience pressure your overall decision.”

“It is what I want, Oswald. If we are of the same mind and expectations, what

difference will it make to start married life now or next year? I am also mindful of my father's illness. Presently, the situation is calm and likely to remain so for some months but if there is another crisis, then Stephen will be called away and matters will be harder to arrange."

"Well, it seems to me that a quick wedding suits both families, in that case," Stephen said. "Your pragmatism is most commendable Annabelle, and yours, Lord Darrington. There is none of this mad rushing about and undignified emotionalism that seem to be part of so many modern matches."

"I believe we will be content together, Annabelle and I," stated Oswald Quince, standing now and taking up the papers that Stephen had provided to pass on to the family lawyers for the wedding contract. "There is enough drama in life without our adding to it."

"Life is hard and complicated enough," Annabelle put in, nodding. "Why make it harder?"

She and Oswald smiled at one another again, sharing some inklings of the sad secrets that she knew Stephen couldn't guess. Then, she remained in the drawing room and watched the street from the window while her brother showed her intended husband out of the house.

Stephen's face was very occupied when he returned to the room.

"It seems we can leave most of the marriage contract to the lawyers, and the wedding license to Lord Darrington, but our family must still stir ourselves with our social obligations. I will write to our parents now and then there must be a notice in The Times, and you and I must call on the vicar if you're really set on the local church."

Annabelle nodded. An hour in the local church followed by a small wedding

breakfast at Colborne House was more than enough to solemnize and celebrate the kind of civilized arrangement she and Oswald had planned. Anything more than that might feel like an elaborate hoax they were playing on family and friends.

“We will also host a garden party, to formally share the news with relatives and friends. As the wedding itself is to be small, it will give those not invited the chance to congratulate you in person. It would be nothing too ostentatious, of course. With your assistance, I am sure we can manage that it here at Colborne House.”

“Do we really have to?” Annabelle questioned, wincing at the idea of having to face a hundred smiling faces, intrusive questions and well-intentioned pieces of advice on marriage.

“Yes, I believe we do,” stated her brother, firmly but in good humor. “There are also some older ladies, Great Aunt Margery for example, whom you must call on personally. Come Annabelle, you are normally the one who wishes for a larger social calendar and I am the one reining you in. I cannot believe that our positions have been so suddenly and inexplicably reversed.”

“It is only that I do not wish to spend a whole afternoon talking about the wedding and Oswald with all those people.”

“What a strange young woman you are, Annabelle! I thought that talk of weddings and husbands was the favorite topic of the ton’s young ladies.”

“I suggest you do not repeat that remark to Victoria Crawford,” Annabelle commented smartly and saw him swallow, but then she gave a long sigh and made herself smile and nod to her brother.

This was, after all, the very last time Stephen would have any input at all to her social life. She would soon be free, although the prospect did not seem as sweet now as it

had once done.

“Never mind, I will do whatever you think best, Stephen. Tell Mother that my own letter will follow yours.”

### CHAPTER 20

“It seems a lifetime since we last saw one another, Baroness,” Frederick said with a smile, bowing over the hand of the trim blonde Spanish widow of an Austrian nobleman. “I’m calling to ask if I might tempt you to join me for a night at the opera this week.”

The woman raised handsome grey eyes to his, displaying curiosity rather than displeasure at his sudden appearance at her house this morning. Camila Cristina, Baroness von Fürstenberg, had been Frederick’s favored companion for the opera and theatre since she arrived in London two years ago, having equal enthusiasm for musical performance as the private physical engagements that generally completed their nights together.

“I don’t know, Duke Frederick,” she said, letting him hold her elegant bejeweled hand for a moment longer. “I may be busy this week. I have kept very busy since the morning I was summarily shooed out of Heartwick Hall in order to protect a young English lady’s modesty. I had hoped our games were merely interrupted rather than ended but the lack of word from you told another story.”

Frederick looked down and then met her gaze again with genuine regret. He had not intended any slight to this woman and only now realized how badly he must have behaved in her eyes. It was callous not to have at least have sent a note or called on her here in town before now.

“I will understand if you choose to amuse yourself elsewhere, Camila. I can only offer my apologies for not offering you any fuller account or compensation for that

embarrassment at the time. As explanation rather than an excuse, I have been rather distracted lately.”

“Distracted by your innocent young English lady?” Camila suggested with amusement. “Oh, I can see how that would keep a man busy, although it does not seem your usual style. I heard that you even took her, or some very similar girl, to one of Lord Blackwell’s parties. Have your tastes really shifted as far as the seduction of virgins, Frederick? I thought you more sophisticated than that.”

Frederick flinched involuntarily, not liking to hear Annabelle associated with Lord Blackwell’s circle, even if it seemed the baroness did not know her identity. Still less did he like the implication that he had seduced her, although he supposed he had, in everything but the final and most important physical detail.

Or had Annabelle seduced him? When he recalled their night at the small campfire in Heartwick Hall’s grounds it sometimes seemed that strange idea might be partly true. Frederick had never intended to do half of what he had done with Annabelle but he could not say no to her.

“It does not matter really what distracted me, does it?” he offered with a shrug. “My actions towards you have been remiss regardless. What I would really like to know is whether there is any way I can make up my misbehavior in your eyes.”

The baroness looked Frederick’s handsome form up and down with interested eyes and glanced at the generous bouquet of yellow roses he had brought, her expression thoughtful. She rang the bell to summon refreshments.

“I don’t know quite what to say yet, Duke Frederick. Still, as I find myself at a loose end this morning, let us sit down and talk for a while...”

“Do you remember the night we saw *The Magic Flute*?” asked Camila with a warm



smile. "It was a summer evening, but English summer and the rain seemed it would never end that month."

They had quickly fallen back into easy conversation in their old manner, beginning with London's present offer of theatricals and musical events and then reminiscing over those past.

"Yes, I remember," laughed Frederick leaning back on the sofa where he was now sitting beside his sometime-lover and feeling a little more welcome than when he first arrived. "You told me that if the rain didn't stop that night, you would return to your family in Spain, war or no war."

"And you promised to distract me from the rain long enough to change my mind," she reminisced. "You were good to your word that night, Duke Frederick. You changed my mind about both English rain and English men. I never now feel one without thinking about the appealing qualities of the other."

"The whole ton ought to thank me for your continued presence then," he grinned. "You've been quite a social star ever since. I heard the sought-after Earl of Graffing was particularly seeking your favor this season."

Camila pulled a slight face and shook her head..

"Ah, Graffing is a good man, and a more than acceptable dancer, but he is too serious. He might frequent the opera and the ballroom with me this season after two years in mourning for his dead wife but he has young children for whom he needs a new mother. That is hardly my style. I prefer my old friends who understand me. Friends like you, Frederick."

"Does someone's style never change?" he found himself asking, realizing that he was interested in her insights given her ten year seniority in age.

“Yes, people do change sometimes,” Camila said with a sigh. “That is well and good if it comes naturally. But if it is forced on them by the world, or a loved one, it is no true change, but a prison of the soul.”

She lightly laid a hand on Frederick’s thigh and looked him in the eye.

“Have you changed, Frederick? Is that what you’re trying to tell me? Or did you come here hoping that I would tell you that you are still the same man?”

“I don’t know,” he admitted, letting her hand lay there on his upper leg and sensing the warmth of her fingers through the fabric of his trousers.

“You don’t know? You have never been a man who does not know who he is or what he wants. I find it hard to believe.”

With the second question Camila’s other hand caressed his jaw experimentally.

“I can’t think,” Frederick told her. “I don’t really want to think any more, only to feel. I want to wash the world away in sensuality and be myself once more.”

What he said was true. The memory of Annabelle at the campfire had consumed him night and day this week, making it impossible to enjoy eating, sleeping or normal social activities. Frederick felt almost possessed by the lust that had animated him, the ecstasy he had experienced and the pain that had come after. They ran through his head in a continuous and unstoppable cycle.

Part of him knew he had really come here today looking for an exorcism at the hands of a beautiful, knowing woman. Yet another part of him did not want to admit this, insisting that his dalliance with Annabelle was merely that – no more to either of them in the grand scheme of their lives than a dance, a play or a shared meal.

“And do you think that will work?” Camila put to him, her face so close now that he could feel her breath on his cheek and smell her gardenia perfume.

Frederick looked at her silently for a long moment, undeniably affected by her touch and proximity, his manhood already twitching eagerly, but also stilled by some more powerful sensation even than that. He had the strong sense that he was in the wrong place at the wrong time.

“No, I don’t think it will work,” he said and closed his eyes, frowning. “God, I’m so sorry, Camila.”

“Don’t be,” she said quite crisply, withdrawing her hands and taking up her teacup instead. “Delia had already told me that you were quite different and I see that now for myself.”

“What do you mean? What did Lady Gordney say?” Frederick asked in bewilderment with the unexpected news that two of his lovers had been discussing him in such terms.

“I mean that the old Frederick would have locked the door and had me on my back on this sofa within five minutes of entering the room. Delia only said something along the same lines about your latest meeting with her. Your attention is somewhere else, Frederick. Neither of us would hold that against you, but do not insult us by denying it.”

Stunned and confused, Frederick rose and gave a polite bow.

“I can only thank you for your honesty and patience with me, Camila. I will not waste any more of your time.”

“Frederick,” she called out, jumping up after him and catching his arm before he

reached the drawing room door.

“Be kind to yourself, Frederick,” she said unexpectedly. “Change can be a painful and difficult thing, chosen or not.”

He did not entirely understand what she meant but thanked her again and left.

Heartwick Hall seemed dull and quiet when he returned from his failed liaison, absent of life and interest. Absent of Annabelle...

With few words, Witmore took Frederick’s hat and coat and directed him to the silver tray of post on the hallway sideboard.

“Thank you. I shall be taking luncheon here after all, Witmore,” Frederick told the butler. “Do tell the kitchen I am not very hungry. Soup and bread will suffice today.”

There were only two items in today’s mail, one a letter in his stepmother’s hand which he broke open and read immediately in the hallway only for the news that nothing had changed at Walden Towers.

The second item Frederick picked up and carried with him through to his study. It was an invitation card to a garden party the following week – a garden party at Colborne House to celebrate the engagement of Lady Annabelle Elkins to Oswald Quince, the Earl of Darrington.

With a pang, he recognized that the card was written in Annabelle’s own hand and traced her writing of his name with a finger. Why did this hurt so much? He sighed heavily and reflected that he should not really attend. Seeing Annabelle on Lord Darrington’s arm would be hard to endure and any signs of affection between them impossible, even if they came only from Quince’s side.

Annabelle might be naive enough to believe that her future husband sought marriage in name only, but Frederick could not imagine any red-blooded man not wishing to claim Annabelle for his own on their wedding night.

He should let her go now and content himself with his memory of Annabelle by the campfire, even if it had somehow ruined him for the company of other women. No one else's skin gleamed such irresistible invitation in the moonlight, no one else's breasts were of such perfectly heavy weight in his hands, and no one else made such sounds of eager surprise at his touch.

Sitting down at his desk, Frederick dropped his head into his hands and closed his eyes, an act which only intensified the images rather than banishing them. Still, he remained in that posture until the gong sounded for luncheon.

### CHAPTER 21

“Y es, Stephen, before you ask I have greeted all three of our aged aunts and great aunts, including the two I have already called on personally with my news. I have also spoken with Lady Burroughs, Mother’s old schoolfriend and found her a seat in the far gazebo with Lord and Lady Trent. There is no need to follow me about and check on these things.”

Annabelle spoke with a light laugh in her voice rather than any irritation today but Stephen still looked puzzled by her words. Was she insufficiently convincing at playing the happy bride-to-be at this garden party? She was trying as hard as she could but could feel her mask slipping, especially with Stephen’s frequent interference.

“I would expect no less from my sister who will soon be Lady Darrington,” Lord Emberly said after a short pause, choosing his words carefully. “I suppose I am not yet used to seeing you as a hostess in your own right rather than my little sister. I must accustom myself to that. Where is Lord Darrington, incidentally? It is important that you are seen together.”

“He is just looking for his friend, Captain Rawlings, who was due to arrive a little while ago. I shall make sure to take him to meet Lady Burroughs so that she might write her own impressions to Mother. Is there anything else, Stephen?”

“Well, as you know, I shall be giving a short speech at three o’clock and I would like to pass my remarks by Lord Darrington before...”

“Annabelle,” called out Victoria nearby, giving her opportunity to turn from her brother before he could get any deeper into the detail of what was only a collection of the usual well-intended remarks that someone might give at an engagement party. “I think Oswald is looking for you. He has found his friend. They’re over by the large fountain.”

“Oh, are they? I will go straight away. Do excuse me, Stephen. Why don’t you consult Victoria on your speech? She is quite accustomed to public speaking herself, if more in scientific gatherings than social ones.”

Stephen looked confounded by this suggestion, although he could hardly object to Annabelle going to find her fiancé given his own observation that they ought to be seen together. Turning slightly pink and coughing as he tried to cover his discomfiture, he turned to Victoria with a polite bow, which Victoria used as cover to wink at Annabelle.

With a grateful smile in return, Annabelle hastened towards the fountain in the western part of the upper gardens. Victoria had offered to distract Stephen whenever he became overbearing and Annabelle was glad to have agreed to this tactic. Whether Oswald had really wanted to see her or not was immaterial.

She found the two men there, standing together on the far side of the tinkling fountain with its carved dolphins and water nymphs of both sexes. Oswald’s hand lay beside Jacob’s on the rim of the fountain’s basin, touching as much as they dared in company but their faces both contented in their simple companionship.

Annabelle stopped for a moment and smiled to see the pair looking so happy on this supposedly joyous summer day. It seemed a shame to intrude on their privacy, especially knowing of their relationship and the fact that Jacob must soon leave town. Then Oswald spotted her and grinned, waving in welcome and beckoning her over.

“Annabelle, come and join us,” Captain Rawlings echoed, looking equally pleased at her appearance rather than disappointed. “I was about to throw a coin in the fountain and make a wish.”

“I don’t think it’s that kind of fountain,” she told him with a smile as she joined them beside it. “Or at least none of the wishes I made as a child came true. All I ever got was a lecture from Stephen on wasting money that could be better put into the poor box at church.”

“Oh dear,” laughed Oswald. “He’s not going to spring out and give us the same lecture, is he? That really would take the fun out of things.”

“No, my friend Victoria Crawford is kindly handling him this afternoon. She is a scientist and a rather vocal advocate for women’s rights. Poor Stephen never knows what to make of her. I must, however, give her some gift for her trouble later as I know he vexes her just as much as me.”

“Three cheers for Victoria Crawford,” remarked Jacob Rawlings, selecting three silver sixpences from among the loose change in the pocket of his uniform jacket. “Now, I have one for each of us. Are you both ready?”

Oswald and Annabelle each took their coin and smiled at one another.

“Altogether, after three. One, two, three...”

The three silver sixpences rose into the air and fell into the water with faint splashes.

“I wished that Uncle Murgatroyd would not buy me another of those ugly vases as a wedding present,” Oswald claimed. “I made the mistake of being too polite about the one he bought for my twenty-first birthday and now I have a whole collection of the infernal things. What did you both wish for?”



“Liar!” laughed Captain Rawlings. “I don’t believe that is what you wished for at all, and if you did, it was a waste of a good wish. I wished that the time might pass quickly until I am next home on leave and back at Darrington Hall.”

Oswald Quince smiled at the man he loved.

“I am a liar, you’re right. I wished that all three of us standing here might be happy, come what may. How about you Annabelle?”

“Oh, I wished that we might not be unhappy,” she admitted shyly.

“What a poor ambition!” said Oswald with sympathy. “You are too young yet to give up all hope of happiness, Annabelle.”

“We will teach her how to be happy, won’t we, Oswald?”

“Indeed. I won’t rest until you’re as happy as we are,” Lord Darrington declared. “It can be done, Annabelle, even in the most trying of circumstances.”

Annabelle let both men put an arm about her shoulders, touched and comforted by their kindness.

“You’re right. I don’t think I do know how to be happy yet, but I should like to learn.”

“That’s the right attitude. Now, let’s go back to the party and find someone you really want to talk to. That’s a good start in learning to be happy. So, not your aged relatives, or your mother’s school friend, or your brother, or that very dull and worthy bishop. Someone else.”

“Your handsome blond friend, for example,” Jacob suggested, coming to her other

side as Oswald took Annabelle's arm. "I've seen you look very happy when dancing with him."

"Ah, Duke Frederick," said Oswald with a glance to Jacob over Annabelle's head, too high and fast for her to catch his expression. "Yes, he is a good friend, but do not get Annabelle's hopes up, Jacob. He may not attend."

Annabelle said nothing, thinking only that Frederick had not even replied to the invitation. Stephen had barely remarked on the fact, likely only having invited him out of respect for the friendship of their families.

"With Duchess Sarah away, I daresay he has no one to mind his social calendar properly. He is not the kind of man who understands propriety."

Annabelle had ignored this statement from her brother at the time, just as she ignored Jacob's teasing remark now. She did not expect to see Frederick this afternoon, or perhaps ever again except in the background at family events. They would likely never even dance together again.

"May not attend, my foot!" murmured Captain Rawlings as they re-entered the main gardens where the party was taking place. "Oh, I don't think attention is an issue for Duke Frederick, do you?"

"Be good, Jacob," Oswald remonstrated but with his ever-present laughter. "Too much attention can be as bad as too little, you know."

It took Annabelle several moments to catch up with what her two companions had already noticed and were remarking upon. The Duke of Heartwick had already arrived. From their vantage point at the western end of the top lawn, they could see that he was already very much the center of attention for several ladies, with others watching him and whispering behind fans to one another.

Annabelle took a long, slow breath to compose herself. Why did he have to look so very handsome in the sunlight? He really did almost glow, and she was not the only woman there who could see it. She did not feel jealous, only rather defeated, and then panicked when his eyes settled on her and he set himself on the path they were about to take.

“Annabelle, Oswald, I have not yet offered you my congratulations as a couple. I do wish you every happiness,” he declared with apparently effortless charm, his smile warming Annabelle as much as the sun although she was determined not to react.

Why did this approach infuriate her so much? Was it because their intimacy had felt so great beside that small campfire, at least until she told him of Oswald’s offer, and now they had none? Was it because she wanted him to be left in the same ferment of confusion and desire as her, rather than calm and collected as ever?

As though she were looking down from somewhere a great distance away, Annabelle fixed her smile on her face and watched Oswald accept Frederick’s congratulations, shaking him by the hand and assuring him that he would always be welcome at Darrington Hall after their marriage.

Frederick conversed easily with Oswald for a few moments more as Annabelle and Jacob looked on. Then she could bear it no more.

“Do excuse us, but I have promised to introduce Oswald to an old friend of my mother’s. Enjoy yourself, Frederick.”

“I shall go and escort your sister, Oswald,” Captain Rawlings announced. “Lady Meredith has arrived and is over there. We shall see you later.”

Their group split up and Annabelle and Oswald did their duty with the rather deaf but also garrulous Lady Burroughs. After making their escape from that formidable lady,

Annabelle let out a long sigh.

“Would it be very bad if I sneaked off for a few minutes alone, Oswald? I feel like my head will explode with all these people. It is far more than I wanted for an engagement party but Stephen was so determined to do things properly.”

“I shall cover for you, Annabelle,” Oswald agreed with compassion in his merry eyes. “Go and hide at the bottom of the garden or wherever you normally go. Come back when you’re ready. I shall tell Lord Emberly that you are in the retiring room, the refreshment tent or still speaking to Lady Burroughs, depending on which direction he is facing at the time.”

“Will you be well, though? All these people want to talk to you too. Perhaps Lady Meredith and Captain Rawlings can help fend them off if I’m not there.”

“It doesn’t bother me as much as you, dear girl,” he shrugged. “Anyway, I doubt anyone wants to talk to me quite as much they want to talk to your friend the Duke of Heartwick, at least the ladies.”

“Indeed,” said Annabelle acidly, not trusting herself to say anything more. “Anyway, I’ll try not to be too long. I just need a little peace.”

Oswald patted her on the back and with a slightly guilty glance at the busy party up and down the garden, Annabelle slipped through a small gap in the hedge and took a rougher path down to the old pond, one of the places where she and Penelope used to play.

They would pretend that the pond was a lake or sea and their dolls in old boxes were boating or crossing the ocean to strange lands. A gardener had set out some sections of tree stumps as tables and chairs for tea parties with milk and water. A weatherworn canvas hammock had been strung between two trees nearby, sometimes occupied by

one or another of their annoying older brothers.

As she drew closer to this calm and familiar spot, Annabelle smiled at these childish recollections from a simpler time. Yes, this was the perfect place to be alone for a few minutes and gather her thoughts.

Then she stopped dead in her approach, seeing the hammock swinging slightly, a man's leg over one side with a foot on the floor, rocking himself lightly. The leg, the golden hair on a head presently turned away from her, and the man himself were all too familiar to her.

"You! What are you doing here, Frederick?" she almost wailed, her heart simultaneously leaping in pleasure and sinking in dismay at his sudden appearance.

The rocking stopped and Frederick sat up, swinging both legs over the side of the hammock and looking at her.

"What am I doing at the old pond or what am I doing at the garden party?" he asked, his face looking both tired and confused, not at all as nonchalant and assured as he had seemed a short while earlier among the other guests.

"Either! Both! Oh, Frederick, why did you have to be here? How can I get on with my life when you're always there. Always in front of my eyes, in my head, in my dreams?"

So vexed was she at Frederick and at herself for being so upset that she stamped her foot.

Now he stood and folded his arms defensively.

"How can you get on with your life? You seem to be making a good job of that, I

must say. My life, however, has been turned upside down by you Annabelle. I was perfectly content until you barged your way into Heartwick Hall at the start of the season. Now, I cannot have you and everything seems empty, meaningless, pointless. Why did you do this to me?"

"What are you talking about, Frederick?" she threw back him with distress equal to his own, her voice then dropping to a whisper. "You could have had me any time you wanted. You know you could."

"Not the way I want you, Annabelle. I want you completely, honorably, without reservation. It's all impossible, isn't it? God, I'm such a coward, as well as a damned rake!"

"Frederick, stop!" Annabelle insisted, marching up to him now, hating to hear him berating himself even though she herself would have done it. "Don't do this. I won't hear such things. You're a good man and the only man I have ever...desired, but you are different, I know. Just let me remember how wonderful it felt to be with you, even for a short time this summer."

"That sounds like goodbye to me," Frederick said sadly and tentatively reached down to stroke Annabelle's cheek.

She leaned into his touch with a gasping sigh and then held him close once more as his lips took hers in a prolonged kiss that was sweet and sorrowful in its intensity. When it was over her eyes were filled with tears.

"Annabelle," Frederick breathed her name as he raised his head and dropped one final kiss into her thick pile of red-gold curls. "I have never met a woman like you and I doubt I ever will again."

Turning, he walked away, back towards the house and out of her life. Annabelle

watched him go with desolate eyes.

“Goodbye, Lady Burroughs. Yes, we will see you at the church for the wedding on the 20<sup>th</sup> of this month. AT THE CHURCH, yes. For the WEDDING.”

Stephen spoke with measured patience and loud emphasis on the important words as he put Lady Burroughs into her carriage. The ear trumpet she carried in her bag was little use when she never used it, Annabelle reflected, standing back and waving politely. Her own patience with the final slow-to-depart guests was long spent.

“Well, as that was the last guest, we shall go now too,” Oswald announced, Captain Rawlings and Lady Meredith flanking him. “You must both be very tired. Thank you again for holding our engagement party here, Lord Emberly. You and Annabelle were the perfect host and hostess today. I look forward to returning your hospitality at Darrington Hall in the near future.”

“It did go well, didn’t it?” Stephen observed, pleased with this compliment. “I’ll admit I’m a little out of practice as a host, given my father’s ill-health, but I did my best and it seems to have been enough. Even Miss Crawford seemed in unusually good humor with me today.”

“You were both wonderful,” Lady Meredith concurred with her brother, Jacob nodding agreement beside her, before helping her into Lord Darrington’s carriage.

“I shall call to take Annabelle for a walk at your mutual convenience,” Oswald Quince added before joining his companions in the carriage.

His quick smile to Annabelle told her that this was a lifeline, extended for her escape whenever Stephen’s company became too much before the wedding. She returned his smile as well as she could although the heaviness of her heart seemed to deaden even pretended happiness now.

Annabelle hoped it was true that Oswald and Jacob could teach her how to be happy because right now it felt that she could never feel joy again. Wearily, she followed Stephen back into the house and took a seat in the drawing room, wondering whether seven o' clock was too early to take to her bed without exciting his alarm and sparking calls for the physician.

Having taken up station at the mantelpiece, Stephen regarded her with a frown for some moments, something evidently playing on his mind. Annabelle played with one of the curls framing her face and kept her expression blank. Whatever tiresome thought might be now in his head, she hoped he would come out with it quickly and leave her alone with her own thoughts for the rest of the evening.

"Where did you go before my speech?" Stephen suddenly asked her and Annabelle froze, not having anticipated this line of questioning and knowing where it could easily lead.

"Your speech? I'm sorry I delayed you Stephen, I lost track of time. Still, I don't think anyone minded waiting another ten minutes. The party was a great success, as you said yourself."

"That isn't the point, Annabelle. You vanished completely. Where were you? Oswald seemed to think you were in the retiring rooms but no one else had seen you go there. Myrtle was sent to search for you without any result. Nor were you in the refreshment tent or with Lady Burroughs as he helpfully suggested."

"I see," Annabelle said, finding herself backed up against a metaphorical wall.

Oswald had likely done his best but her brother was like a bloodhound once he had the scent of any impropriety.

"Frederick was nowhere to be found either," Stephen added with surprising calm.



“Am I to conclude that the two of you were together, alone, secluded somewhere in the grounds of Colborne House? Was that why you lost track of time?”

Annabelle said nothing. Her final kiss with Frederick was something precious and belonged to her alone. No, she would not haul it out for her prim and proper brother’s humiliating inspection. She stood up and looked back at him now with silent but defiant expression.

“I don’t know what’s been going on with you and Frederick, Annabelle,” Stephen continued, shaking his head. “You both seem determined to hold your tongues on the matter, for better or worse, and I am afraid to guess at the truth. I do know that it has to end, however. You’re getting married ”

“Do you think I don’t know that?” she burst out angrily. “Stop asking me questions about things that are none of your business, Stephen. My only duty in this family is to marry well and get out of it. I’m doing that duty, so leave me be!”

“Annabelle!” he said her name with dismay and concern. “I only have your best interests at heart.”

“That’s what you always say. You probably even believe it, but you have no idea what my best interests are, Stephen. You don’t even know me. You’ve never even tried to know who I am. At least Frederick pays me that much respect.”

Fearing that she had said too much, Annabelle marched from the room, her brother calling after her.

### CHAPTER 22

“ I said I am not to be disturbed,” Frederick thundered as the knocking at the library door sounded a third time.

This time it was lighter as though Witmore was thinking better of his persistence. Or as though it was now a lighter hand applying itself to the heavy oak of the door.

“Frederick? This is your stepmother,” sounded the familiar voice of the Dowager Duchess of Heartwick. "You must let me in. We are all worried about you.”

So, Duchess Sarah had returned. Frederick should have known this would happen eventually. He should have made the effort to write briefly to Walden Towers in response to recent letters from her or his brother-in-law. He could even have pretended an minor illness or business crisis to discourage calls. Then he could have avoided this intrusion.

He remembered groggily that he had ordered his staff to send an appropriate congratulation and gift to the Duke and Duchess of Walden once the news of the twins’ birth arrived by express from Walden Towers. He was not far enough gone to neglect that much. What day had that been? Frederick could no longer remember. He was even less sure of what day it might be now.

Penelope and her children – including a son who was Frederick’s heir – were safe and well. His relief for that had been genuine. He simply could not bring himself to care about the wider chatter of visits, names, Christenings and family resemblance now occupying all his relatives. All letters concerning such inanities had been cast aside,

largely unread beyond an initial scan.

“Let me in, Frederick. Please. I only want to see you are well.”

Well? No, he wasn't well, God damn it all. In fact, he doubted he would ever be well again. It was, however, something impossible to explain, either to respectable members of his family and acquaintance, or to his loucher friends and lovers from Lord Blackwell's circle.

“Penelope has told me to remain here until I have seen you and am satisfied that you are safe and well, Frederick,” Duchess Sarah insisted. “Her midwife and physician have both emphasized the importance of new mothers avoiding unnecessary worry.”

This was pure and obvious emotional blackmail now, but still powerful enough that he could not ignore it, caring deeply as he did for Penelope.

The Duke of Heartwick swore and rose to his feet, slightly stumbling and knocking over first the almost empty bottle of claret by his seat and then the still half-full glass on the table. He muttered further oaths as he crunched over the mess of wine and broken glass to the door.

As soon as he turned the key, his stepmother rushed into the room, followed by Witmore and two manservants. Were they worried he might have gone mad and needed restraint? Or had they expected to have to carry him to bed in his cups like an elderly and habitual soak?

“I am as you see me, Stepmother,” Frederick managed to say as she took in the mess of the room where he had been secluding himself, even sleeping in one of the large chairs by the fireplace.

Aside from the broken wine glass and bottle rolling in a puddle of claret, trays of

half-eaten meals and discarded items of clothing lay scattered about the place, while correspondence was cast across a desk, some fallen to the floor and in danger from the encroaching wine.

“Witmore, have the staff clean this up and tell Duke Frederick’s valet to run a bath and lay out fresh clothing,” Duchess Sarah instructed as she retrieved the letters from the floor and placed them back on the desk, noting her own handwriting as she did so. “We will take a light meal in the dining room as soon as the Duke is ready.”

Frederick laughed incredulously as he listened to her trying to put things to rights. Did she really think she could come back here and mother him out of his present mood?

“You’re not my mother!” he exclaimed as the two footmen set to work in cleaning up the room, knowing even as he spoke that he sounded like a drunk and petulant youth.

“I’m the closest thing you have and I consider you my son. I always have, Frederick,” said Duchess Sarah quietly. “I have been worried sick by not hearing from you. Even Maxwell was concerned that something might have happened.”

“I sent a present, didn’t I? Witmore?” Frederick pointed out, looking to the rather solemn-looking butler for confirmation.

“You did, Your Grace. Two silver infant drinking cups, to be engraved with names after the Christening.”

“Very well chosen, Witmore.”

The butler inclined his head in acknowledgement but said nothing in response to Duke Frederick’s praise, more conscious than his master of the view that Duchess Sarah was likely to take of Frederick’s delegation of so personal a task.

“If you had brought them personally, or even written a note with them, Penelope’s mind would have been at rest,” his stepmother remarked. “As it was, your sister has convinced herself that your continued silence means that you are in the greatest peril of some sort. Is she right?”

“Do we have to have this conversation in front of the.. the.. schtuff?” Frederick began and then stopped upon hearing the humiliating stumbling and slurring in his words.

“The Heartwick Hall staff have been worried too, Frederick. It’s a little late to be concerned about what they might see or hear, isn’t it? Let us all help you. Please. For Penelope’s sake, if not mine or your own.”

Duchess Sarah gestured around the room, her voice deeply concerned rather than angry, which somehow only made matters worse. For perhaps the first time in his life, Frederick began to feel truly ashamed of himself. He had messed everything up for everyone, hadn’t he?

“Why can’t I be allowed to forget everything?” he muttered to himself. “Why?”

Sitting back down heavily, Frederick closed his eyes and wished the world away. It seemed that every time he began to be able to forget, the world threw some awful reminder back in his face.

Several days ago, for example, an unexpected box had arrived from Madame Deveaux and upon opening it, Frederick had found the shimmer of silken fabric that formed Annabelle’s bridal nightgown, together with a message congratulating her on her marriage. Evidently, the dressmaker was unaware that Annabelle was no longer residing at Heartwick Hall.

Consumed by conflicting desires both to bury his face in the fabric and rip it apart, he had instead had the box taken upstairs and placed far away from him in the now

empty bedroom where Annabelle had stayed. He had not even been back upstairs since then, fearing what he might do to the garment.

“Witmore, fetch some strong coffee and biscuits while that bath is being drawn.”

When Frederick opened his eyes again a few minutes later, there was only him and his stepmother in the room, the servants on their errands.

“What has happened to you, Frederick?” Duchess Sarah asked him gently, now that they were alone. “Can you tell me?”

“I just want it to be over,” he said and saw her visibly blanche with alarm.

“Oh, not my life, Stepmother,” Frederick clarified speedily, lest she send for a physician, a priest or both, equally unwanted. “Just everything else. It’s the waiting that’s so hard. Knowing what is coming and not being able to stop it. What’s the date?”

“It’s the morning of the nineteenth of July, Frederick,” the dowager duchess answered with a troubled expression. “How long have you been in this state? Three days? Four? Longer? Witmore was reluctant to say so I am only guessing from what I have seen.”

“The nineteenth,” he mused, the rest of his stepmother’s questions falling away unanswered. “Then it is nearly over. Nearly over...”

“What is nearly over?” Duchess Sarah inquired and then sighed. “No, I don’t need to ask that, do I? I shan’t feign ignorance. You are speaking of Annabelle’s wedding I believe.”

Annabelle’s wedding. The words hit him like a blow and he felt his face crumple

before he could control it.

“Duke Frederick’s bath will be ready in five minutes,” Witmore relayed as he returned with a steaming pot of coffee, a plate of biscuits and several maids and footmen ready to set about the library and restore it to order.

Duchess Sarah took the tray.

“Very good, thank you Witmore. Give us five minutes alone before you start the cleaning.”

She closed the door behind the household staff and went back to Frederick’s side, laying a hand on his shoulder. It was a cautious gesture, likely not knowing how it would be received, but he found it oddly comforting to know that at least one person cared that he was in pain.

“Does Annabelle know how you feel, Frederick?” his stepmother asked mildly, stepping back to pour out the coffee and place a cup in Frederick’s unsteady hands.

“She must do. How could she not?” he blurted out, the images of all their embraces, ecstasies and whispered erotic endearments rushing through his mind. “How could she not know?”

“But have you ever told her?”

“Told her? I have surely shown her in everything that I have done, everything that we have done together...”

At this, his stepmother held up her hand.

“There are some things it is best that I do not know, Frederick, for everyone’s sake.”

“Why does everyone assume that I am a heartless rake and have besmirched or hurt Annabelle?” Frederick demanded angrily. “I would never do that, not to any innocent or unwilling woman, and certainly not the woman I...love.”

The last word was spoken in a horrified whisper. He had never said it aloud before, and never knowingly even to himself. Still, he had known it was true for some time now, at least since that night by the campfire. Annabelle was the woman he loved. The only woman he could ever love – and she was to marry another man tomorrow.

The sadness on his stepmother’s face under its faded gold and silver hair told him that she was thinking along the same lines. Annabelle would become the Countess of Darrington tomorrow and lost to Frederick forever.

“You never told Annabelle that much, did you?” she suggested. “She certainly does not know that you love her. If she did, I wager that she would not be marrying Oswald Quince.”

“You speak very confidently,” Frederick reacted with a humorless laugh.

“I am not as blind as you seem determined to be, Frederick. Did you really never notice Annabelle’s affection for you? She has been devoted to you ever since she was a little girl.”

“You’re talking only of a childish infatuation,” he dismissed this idea easily, tempting though it was. “Annabelle is an adult woman now and knows her own mind. Given how protective Stephen can be, I was likely the only young man she knew as a girl. Now she sees that there are other choices and she is free to make them.”

“Annabelle loves you,” stated Duchess Sarah as slowly and clearly as though trying to explain something to a confused small child rather than a drink-addled man. “That has been obvious to me for years. I have never encouraged her affections, given her



naivety and your... lifestyle. Still, that young woman would have followed you to the ends of the earth if you asked her.”

Every word was now a dagger, especially as the coffee began to restore some order to Frederick’s befuddled senses. What was the point of saying these things to him now? It had always been impossible and it was now also far too late.

“Annabelle shines like the moon in the sky,” he said with a sigh of thwarted longing. “She is sweeter and more wholesome than any fruit, and more natural and desirable than any woman I’ve ever met.”

“And yet you have never told her these things,” remarked his stepmother with sorrowful wonder.

“A man like me, a woman like Annabelle – how could that ever end well?” he asked, choking on his own bitter laughter. “As I said, I won’t hurt Annabelle. It surely would hurt her to hear me declare my love now. I must let her move on with her own life.”

“Is that what love is to you, Frederick? Only pain? Oh, my dear boy. That is not how it should be at all.”

“It is not what I want, it is who I am. I hurt everyone I love, don’t I? You and Penelope most of all. You never deserved the way I behaved after Father died. Neither of you did. God, what is wrong with me?”

Duchess Sarah pulled up another chair beside Frederick’s now and took one of his hands between hers.

“We have spoken of this time before, Frederick, but you must not have believed what I said. You were a hurt and grieving child after your father died. I held nothing you said then against you, ever. You are my son. Even when you went your own way,

when you chose to live partly beyond society's limits, you have always been my beloved son and Penelope's beloved brother."

Frederick squeezed his stepmother's hand between his own but shook his head.

"I don't understand how Annabelle could love me as you say," he admitted. "Do you know, I gave Annabelle my mother's sapphire necklace and told her to keep it? Still, I could not speak what I felt, even to myself. I have made myself into a man not fitted for love."

"You have not," Duchess Sarah contradicted him firmly. "I cannot claim to understand the circles you move in, the lifestyle you lead, but I believe none of it can be entirely wicked if it includes a man like you, Frederick. There is no evil in you. Annabelle's love alone is proof of that."

Still he shook his head in disbelief and his stepmother suddenly laughed in unexpected joy.

"How could she love me?" he questioned, addressing himself and the universe as much as his stepmother.

"Oh, Frederick, how you do remind me of your father at this moment!"

Frederick saw tears in her eyes as she made this remark, but happiness too, rousing his curiosity as well as his sympathy.

"I can see from his old portraits that we are alike," he commented.

"It is not just your face, Frederick, although Philip, your father, was just as handsome as you. All the ladies ran after him, you know, just as they run after you."

Frederick did not know what to make of this slightly embarrassing revelation so merely listened.

“Of course, your father’s attention was elsewhere. He had been very much in love with your mother and when she died, he was distraught. His principle concern was for you, not chasing women.”

“I never even asked how you met Father,” he remarked.

“You were there when we met,” she said with a smile, “although likely too young to remember. We were both flying kites out on Hampstead Heath, your father with you and me with my nieces, Kitty and Isabelle. The wind was strong and our kite was so big that it nearly pulled me off my feet. Your father ran after us and rescued both me and the kite.”

Duchess Sarah smiled warmly at this reminiscence, clearly a very happy day for her although she was correct that Frederick did not remember it at all.

“After that, Philip called at my family’s house to ask after my health and present me with a smaller kite. I thought he was only being kind, even when he invited me out to fly the kite with you both next time I was out with my nieces. Then, he bought a little boat for the pond in Hyde Park and gifted me that.”

“When did you realize it was more than kindness?” Frederick asked.

He was sorry now that he had been too young to remember any of the courtship he must have witnessed directly. Before Penelope’s birth when he was six, Frederick remembered little of his early life at all, not even the face of his natural mother.

“Your father’s interest had to be pointed out to me by my mother, who was more astounded than I was. At eight-and-twenty, I was considered to be on the shelf in

those days and likely to be no more use to my family than as a kindly aunt to my sisters' children. The idea that the handsome Duke of Heartwick might seek my hand was incredible.”

Duchess Sarah shook her head and smiled again as she looked back across the years.

“I was considered very plain beside my sisters, who were both very glamorous and accomplished ladies. They played many instruments, took a great interest in fashion and could paint and draw better than any other lady in society. They married young and very well. Meanwhile, I was a homebody, happiest in the garden or greenhouses with my plants, or playing games with my nieces.”

“I don’t remember you being plain,” Frederick thought aloud. “I only remember you being calm and happy, and that my father was calm and happy when he was with you.”

“Yes, we were very happy together, and yes, our marriage was a tranquil one. His first marriage to your mother was more dramatic, I think, with her family originally opposing the match due to some family feud or other. Then, she died so young and so suddenly. Poor Philip was done with drama by the time we met.”

Frederick listened with interest, never having spoken very much to his stepmother about his father before, at his own wish rather than hers.

“It’s good to speak like this and we should do it more. Still, I don’t understand what it was that reminded me of my father a few moments ago.”

“Ah, yes, I must be rambling. Forgive me, Frederick. I’ve rarely had the opportunity to speak to you about your father and I am carried away. Well, when he finally declared his love and made me an offer, I was too astonished to speak. He took this as rejection and I had to stop him leaving instantly. It was what he said next that

reminded me of you.”

“What was that?”

“When I explained that I never thought that a man like him would consider someone like me, he was amazed. Then, he told me that he did not believe he was a man any woman could love again, given the marks that grief had left. That handsome man, with his title, his fortune and a personality that would have won friends without the rest, considered himself to be unlovable.”

“Ah,” Frederick said and dropped his eyes back to his now empty coffee cup. “He and I both saw the hidden places inside ourselves where others cannot look. His was filled with grief and mine with dissolution.”

“Your father was lovable and so are you, Frederick. It is not too late.”

“You think I should jump up in the church and disrupt the wedding, do you?” he asked with a raised eyebrow, not serious about this idea and doubting that Duchess Sarah could ever encourage such an outrageous action. “You think Stephen would just let me carry Annabelle off from the altar?”

“Of course not. But, if Annabelle marries a man she does not love, all while loving you, will she be happy, do you think? Speak to her before the wedding. Please.”

Frederick gave a long sigh, the thought of Annabelle’s potential unhappiness enough to jog him from his own inward spiraling.

“All I had to do was get through one more day and then this would all have been academic. Now you want me to jump through another hoop before I give up, don’t you?”

“You deserve happiness and love, Frederick, both you and Annabelle. It is up to you whether you seek it or give up. Now, I will not keep you from your bath. I will be waiting in the dining room when you are ready to eat.”

Steadier on his feet with the coffee now in his blood, Frederick stood up and left the library, passing the servants in the hall without a word as he went upstairs.

Duchess Sarah had always been a little sentimental in her kindness but at least one thing she said rang true. It was important that he see Annabelle one more time and ascertain for himself if what his stepmother said was true. Did she really love him as he loved her? Would she really be unhappy if she married Oswald Quince?

If she did not love him then he would let her walk up that aisle without raising a finger. But if she did...what then?

### CHAPTER 23

“Please, Stephen. I ask only a few minutes, in your presence. There is nothing improper in my request.”

Frederick stood at the top of the steps to Colborne House where he had been met by Lord Emberly himself, evidently not wanting to even let the Duke of Heartwick inside the house this evening.

“Nothing improper? Frederick, you must be mad if you think it is proper for a single man of your character to turn up on my doorstep tonight and beg an audience with my sister who is to be married in the morning to Lord Darrington.”

Frederick fought down the urge to attempt barging past Stephen and into the house, calling aloud for Annabelle. Lord Emberly would doubtless have the footmen remove him unceremoniously from the property. No, Annabelle would not thank him for that scene, and it would be the cause of a serious rift that others in the family would rightly blame him for.

“I only want to know that Annabelle will be happy,” he pleaded again. “If I am assured of that, I will leave immediately. You have my word.”

“It is not your business whether Annabelle is happy or not, Frederick,” Stephen told him sternly but not without a touch of baffled compassion in his eyes.

Lord Emberly might believe that Frederick’s presence there was inappropriate and undesirable but he did not believe him to be vicious or otherwise ill-intended.

“Then let me tell her that herself, Stephen,” Frederick suggested. “Let Annabelle send me away herself.”

“Frederick, go home. Annabelle is tired and overwrought and I will not have her disturbed with your ramblings. Frankly, you look ill, or like you haven’t slept for a week. I will excuse your behavior on those grounds. If you really wish to judge Annabelle’s happiness then I suggest you come to the church tomorrow with our other family and friends and attend the wedding.”

“You leave me no choice, do you?” responded Frederick and backed away, descending the steps and pausing at the bottom to look up hopefully at the lighted windows of Colborne House.

There was, however, no sign of a young woman with red-gold curls and a rosebud mouth visible at any of them and nothing he could do to get to her.

“Will you at least tell Annabelle I called here tonight?” Frederick asked, although he already knew the answer. “Please? Let her know that I wanted to see her.”

“I will not, Frederick,” Stephen answered, standing firm. “Now, go home.”

“Here, let me do that,” said Duchess Sarah, picking up the budding white rose that Frederick had been fumbling with for his buttonhole, and fitting it neatly to his jacket. “You look very tired, Frederick.”

“I am,” he conceded, knowing that he could not hide his sleeplessness or emotional turmoil even though he had not told his stepmother of his fruitless visit to Colborne House last night. “Shall we go?”

His stepmother glanced at the clock which showed it was very early to be leaving for the wedding yet, but decided not to comment, just as she had not commented on the



sound of horse and carriage leaving Heartwick Hall and then returning yesterday evening.

“Yes, I am ready,” she answered and took his arm.

“Are you sure you want to do this?” Oswald asked Annabelle kindly as they stood together outside the church doors. “If you don’t, jump back into your carriage and Stephen can take you home. I’ll go inside and make the perfect scene of a heartbroken lover, jilted at the altar. That should prevent any questions being asked about my unmarried state for at least another five years.”

Despite her low mood and nervousness, Annabelle could not help laughing at this proposition, drawing a puzzled glance from Stephen who was being conveniently detained in the street below by Captain Rawlings and Lady Meredith.

“Oh dear, what a thought! Poor Stephen. I can’t think how he would take that,” she chuckled. “He is already at sixes and sevens over my insistence on seeing you this morning. Breaking with traditions does not come easily to my brother and he had never heard of a bride and groom meeting directly before the wedding before.”

“Oh fiddlesticks! Let Stephen worry about himself for once,” Oswald tutted, patting her gloved hand. “You must think of yourself today, Annabelle. For example, your outfit is quite lovely. I hope you are pleased with it.”

“Yes, very much. It does suit me, doesn’t it? At least Stephen’s consternation over our meeting distracted him from focusing on my attire and I’ve had my way entirely with my dress today.”

For her wedding, Annabelle had chosen a cream silk suit from Madame Deveau. Initially opposed to this idea, Stephen had softened after viewing plate sketches showing only the dress worn with its relatively modest matching jacket.

He had not seen the daring but elegant fit of the dress worn alone, its neckline cut to show off the wearer's décolletage to maximum advantage, along with any jewels she might wear. In her hair, a few cream and yellow blush roses completed the simple grace of her toilette .

“You look astonishingly beautiful, Annabelle. In fact, I insist that we have your portrait taken in that very dress for posterity. I even know exactly where it should hang in the gallery at Darrington Hall. Those sapphires are perfection too. Are they a family heirloom?”

At this enthusiastic remark, Annabelle turned bright red, her fingers moving to her throat and protectively touching the silver-set sapphires hanging there. She remembered Myrtle's strong disapproval that morning when she had insisted on wearing this necklace to her wedding. Annabelle had brooked no argument, feeling the need for some small piece of Frederick near her.

“They were...a present from someone,” she said, and swallowed. “If Stephen had noticed the necklace, he would likely not have allowed me to wear it.”

“Then I shall not say a thing more to draw attention to your necklace until after the ceremony when your jewels are no longer any of your brother's concern. At Darrington Hall, you may wear whatever you wish.”

Oswald's words were discreet but it came to Annabelle then that he likely knew exactly who had given her the necklace, and maybe even how she felt about the giver. Despite his open nature and good humor, Lord Darrington was a worldly man and it was probably naive for her to have assumed her feelings for Frederick were entirely a secret to him.

“You've been so understanding and so good to me, Oswald,” Annabelle marveled, with tears in her eyes. “For no reason at all too. Thank you. I was so nervous last

night and that's why I had to see you, but now I know that whatever happens, I have a true friend."

"Yes, I will always be your friend," Lord Darrington assured her staunchly, passing her his handkerchief to wipe her eyes. "Even if you do choose to leave me at the altar in there..."

Again, Annabelle could not help giggling through her tears as he invoked this ridiculous scenario a second time. Glancing down into the road, she saw suspicion as well as bafflement on Stephen's face now.

"I can't imagine what is going on in his head," she said. "I suppose you and your party had best go inside now. We'll wait five minutes and then follow. That's the tradition, of course. The bride must be slightly late."

"God forbid we break tradition," Oswald remarked with merry irony, his hazel eyes dancing as he beckoned now to his sister and Jacob Rawlings. "What would the world come to?"

Annabelle stood to one side with Stephen as the three others entered the church ahead of them, her brother checking his watch, likely to time their entrance more precisely. Satisfied with whatever the device told him, Lord Emberly turned to his sister.

"What was all that about?" he inquired. "I was almost minded to refuse when you demanded to meet Lord Darrington here early. It seemed so very odd and unconventional, although not as bad as the Duke of Heartington turning up at Colborne Hall last night, wanting an interview with you..."

"Frederick was at Colborne House last night?" Annabelle gasped, seizing her brother's arm, his question rendered irrelevant. "Why didn't you tell me?"

“I thought you had enough concerns with the wedding. Duke Frederick is far too unconventional and free in his thinking. It is best that you put him from your mind now that you are to be Lady Darrington. God forbid that any scandal should attach itself to you after your marriage, any more than before.”

“You thought I had enough concerns?!” she berated him, even striking him on the arm with her cream and yellow bouquet, causing a flurry of petals to the ground. “They are my concerns, not yours! I realize now that my main objection to you is not that you don’t treat me like a human being, but that you don’t act like a human being yourself!”

“Control yourself, please, Annabelle!” Stephen tried to persuade her, trying to evade the wildly waving bouquet with only mixed success. “There are people in the street.”

“I don’t care!” she retorted but took two deep breaths and looked down at the now-uneven bouquet in her hand. “I don’t care about what those people think, or what you think of me.”

Horried by her outburst but also highly conscious of time and social expectations, Stephen looked again at his watch and then cautiously approached Annabelle and her floral weapon.

“Another minute and then we should go in. I did not mean to hurt or upset you in anything I have done, Annabelle. Quite the contrary. Please believe that.”

Annabelle did believe him but that made matters worse rather than better. Frederick had tried to come to her last night, but to what purpose? She would never know now. Maybe he would not even be at the wedding after Stephen sent him away. What if he thought it had been done on her instruction?

There were too many questions and not enough time to even count them, never mind

come to a view on there likely answers.

“It doesn’t matter, Stephen,” Annabelle said at last with weary determination and took his arm once more. “None of it matters any more. I’m about to get married.”

Frederick sat skulking behind a pillar at the back of the church, having escorted his stepmother to the front and seated her beside an older lady with an ear trumpet on the side for the bride’s family and friends. Duchess Sarah had not argued when he explained that he could not bear to have Annabelle see him and feared he could not control his face in front of others present.

Part of him had hoped that Annabelle would arrive early, against all tradition, and he might have some last chance to speak with her in the vestry or another quiet corner. A larger part of him knew this was entirely unrealistic and hopeless. Really he only wanted to hide here in the dark, better to cope with the ordeal ahead.

Tense, he shifted sharply in his seat when the church doors opened, but it was only Oswald Quince, his sister and his best man. They made their way to the front of the church, all smiles and greetings to those they passed in the pews. At least someone was going to enjoy the day, Frederick thought grimly.

Shortly after that, he began to catch faint snatches of voices through the wooden doors, likely not audible to those further inside the church and closer to the organ which was playing a quiet hymn. The voices were immediately recognizable to him as belonging to Annabelle and Stephen

Why didn’t you tell me..?

Frederick swallowed with pain at the distress in her voice even sounding so faintly. It seemed he had chosen the worst place to sit after all, at least for now.

...my concerns, not yours... you don't act like a human being...

His heart beat faster in sympathy with her agitation.

I don't care!

The pitch of her emotion was becoming too much for him. Frederick was almost on his feet, not knowing what he could possibly do in this situation, only that he wished to defend Annabelle with his whole heart from whatever was assailing her, whether Stephen or her own unhappiness.

It was, however, too late for that too. Within seconds, the heavy doors swung open again and Annabelle entered the church on her brother's arm to a sigh of approbation and murmurs of general approval from around the congregation gathered there.

Everyone could see how very beautiful Annabelle was today, and how well chosen her outfit was to match her figure and coloring. Only Frederick, however, still behind his pillar, seemed to perceive the utter desolation on her lovely face and the way her bluebell eyes were anxiously scanning the pews ahead of her, as if looking desperately for something, or someone.

Maybe he saw only what he wanted to see? This doubt vanished almost as soon as it rose upon noticing the blue sapphire necklace at her throat – his mother's sapphires, which he had gifted to Annabelle with so little ceremony, but so very much unspoken meaning. She knew, surely... Annabelle must know that he loved her?

"Annabelle," he called out fiercely, striding into the aisle behind the pair now halfway to the altar. "Annabelle!"

"Frederick?" she responded instantly, looking around wildly and then turning to face him despite Stephen hissing something at her. "Frederick!"

The organ fell silent and the occupants of the pews began to whisper and murmur with mingled disapproval and salacious glee, all eyes now trained on the Duke of Heartwick and his every word likely to be relayed across the ton and maybe across England by sunset.

Despite the attention, the joy on Annabelle's face as she met his eyes meant that no one else's opinions or actions mattered. He would speak as he pleased, to her alone.

"I can't let you do this, Annabelle. I can't let you marry someone else without telling you that I love you. I didn't want to tell you here, now, like this, and I never wanted to hurt you, but I never knew how to begin."

"Oh, Frederick," Annabelle said with shining eyes, tears falling onto her cheeks but apparently tears of happiness.

She began to walk towards him and when Stephen reached out a restraining arm, she struck him in the chest with her bouquet in irritation and then stuffed the unwanted flowers into Stephen's hands before continuing on her way.

Lord Emberly stood unmoving in a little puddle of fallen petals, his face a picture of utter bemusement and dismay. A young woman nearby laughed and Frederick heard her inquire to a friend whether this scene meant that Lord Emberly would be the next to the altar.

From the present altar, Lord Darrington gazed at Frederick with amused and appreciative eyes, his mouth curved in a baffling smile. It was not at all the expression Frederick would have expected to see on the face of a man whose bride has just been publicly importuned by another lover. Beside Oswald Quince, Captain Rawlings' seemed to share the same strange joke as his friend.

There was no time to figure out what this jest might be because Annabelle was in

front of him now, and her hands were somehow in his.

“You fool, Frederick Hayward,” she murmured. “Don’t you know that I have always loved you? Yet you wait until here, today, to speak to me. You utter fool!”

To scandalized gasps from the crowd, his petite beloved stood up on her toes and kissed him rather chastely on the lips, as she had once kissed him in the drawing room at Heartwick Hall when he was pretending to both of them that he was teaching her to flirt.

With the further gasps and guffaws at the drama unfolding, Stephen’s face darkened and Frederick saw him begin to make a move down the aisle. Ready for a confrontation, he also thankfully saw Duchess Sarah step out from a pew and intercept Lord Emberly before he could get any closer, whispering something earnest to him while grasping his arm.

With the aisle clear, Frederick and Annabelle now had a clear view of Oswald Quince and Jacob Rawlings at the altar, both now openly grinning.

“How can he so easily let you go?” Frederick marveled under his voice, fighting down a strange urge to smile back at the two men as though they were all co-conspirators of some sort.

Annabelle again stood on her toes, but this time it was only to whisper something quietly in Frederick’s ear, shaking the foundations of his understanding but also making the world fall further into its proper place.

“I have been blind,” he acknowledged – as blind as any callow and unpracticed youth in love, despite his extensive experience of bedroom matters.

It was obvious once Annabelle confirmed it that something deeper lay between Lord



Darrington and Captain Rawlings. It had been signified not only by the matched masks they wore at Lord Blackwell's party, or Lord Blackwell's later amusement at Frederick's unnecessary jealousy, but also by the constant companionship of the two men and the way they looked at one another before the altar with affection and common understanding.

Now enlightened and relieved, Frederick did return Lord Darrington's smile. With his eyes, Oswald directed Frederick's gaze to Stephen being temporarily held in conversation with the Dowager Duchess of Heartwick and then mouthed one word to the errant lovers.

"Run!"

With a smothered laugh of both excitement and anxiety, Annabelle took Frederick's arm and flashed her eyes up to his with urgency and mischief.

"Oswald is right, Frederick. We really can't stay here now, can we?"

In full agreement, Frederick laughed too before they turned together and raced out of the church.

### CHAPTER 24

“Geraldson! Ready the horses. We must move quickly,” Frederick shouted out as the doors swung shut behind them.

“Your Grace?” said the brown-haired young coachman from Heartwick Hall, looking up in bewilderment with a pipe in his mouth as Frederick and Annabelle came rushing down the church steps toward the row of parked vehicles outside.

“You read and write, don’t you, Geraldson?” the duke added, baffling Annabelle now as much as the servant.

“Yes, Your Grace. I completed the local school in Heartwick before I joined the estate.”

“Good man.”

Annabelle felt as though she was in a dream or daytime fantasy, running away with Frederick. Running away with Frederick?! Was that really what was happening? When he swung her bodily down the last few steps for speed, taking her breath away, she knew that this time it was no dream. Frederick was here and he loved her, as she loved him.

While no one else showed any sign of yet emerging from the church, the various carriage drivers were looking at one another speculatively and exchanging uneasy words at the peculiar appearance and behavior of the Duke of Heartwick and the young woman many of them recognized as the supposed bride for today’s

ceremony.

“To my agents, Carter & Lombard, just off Piccadilly,” Frederick instructed loudly, helping Annabelle into the small open-topped carriage that had brought him and Duchess Sarah to the church and getting in after her.

Recovering his wits but keeping his pipe in his mouth, Geraldson had already checked the horses and jumped back into the driver’s seat. At a nod from Frederick, he set off down the street with the horses at a brisk trot.

“Everyone will know where we are going,” pointed out Annabelle as they pulled away. “Stephen will certainly follow us to your agent. I don’t know how long Duchess Sarah will manage to keep him in the church.”

“We won’t be there more than five minutes,” Frederick assured her. “Only long enough to sign affidavits that we are free to marry. Geraldson here is the one who will be waiting around longer to take Mr. Carter or Mr. Lombard to call on the Bishop of London. This young man is going to be the one to collect the marriage license.”

“A marriage license?” the young man repeated, turning his head briefly and speaking with an incredulity that might have been impudent if the circumstances had not been so bizarre that all three of them were only inches from hysterical laughter. “For you, Your Grace?”

“Yes, for me and Lady Annabelle,” Frederick confirmed. “My agents are going to need a sworn statement that we are each free to marry. However, we are likely to be pursued to Carter & Lombard. I am therefore relying on you Geraldson, to be my proxy today and help my agents to carry out my instructions urgently. Duchess Sarah must take a hired cab.”

The young man grinned at the unfolding of this plan but kept his eyes on the road, his expression indicating that this morning was turning out to be better sport than he ever could have planned.

“A marriage license?” Annabelle laughed more freely now that the church had receded into the distance. “Haven’t you forgotten something, Frederick? Something involving me?”

She unfastened her jacket and shrugged it off, delighting in the breeze running over her almost bare shoulders and bosom.

“Not single detail, no,” he said and smiled, also relaxing a little more as his eyes roamed in wonder and pleasure over every visible aspect of her face and body. “That is not really an appropriate morning dress, Annabelle, but it damned well should be. Look how those people are staring at us!”

Indeed, pedestrians and working men at carts and roadsides were gaping and some even pointing at the Duke of Heartwick’s carriage, easily identifiable by the crest on its side.

“Well, if one is going run away from one’s wedding, one might as well do it as scandalously as possible,” Annabelle returned, reveling in her freedom and the promise of love renewed as well as Frederick’s appreciation of her physical form. “I must insist however, that you have forgotten something. You have never actually asked me to marry you.”

For moment, he looked amazed and then surprisingly doubtful and even slightly abashed. Finally, he simply leaned in and kissed her so passionately that Annabelle feared they might end up causing some serious public disorder.

“That was me asking you to marry me and never leave me,” Frederick said at last, as

they finally drew apart panting. “My heart would break if you did not say yes.”

While his handsome golden face was as charming and good-humored as ever, Annabelle perceived the vulnerability beneath his surface. Despite all that had happened between them over recent months and now in the church, Frederick was somehow not yet fully assured of her love.

Madame Deveaux’s words came back to Annabelle then:

...Men too may feel unworthy of love. They may seek love without knowing that is what they chase. Some seek it again and again with woman after woman but it is never there until someone convinces them they are worth loving...

It was obvious to Annabelle now that the dressmaker had been speaking of Frederick, hinting at what was clear to a woman of her age and experience but that neither of the young people had yet been able to acknowledge.

“I was always going to say yes, Frederick,” she told him. “When we are married, I hope to demonstrate that convincingly enough that you will never doubt my love.”

“My Annabelle,” he breathed, again embracing her more closely than the denizens of London might expect or approve in an open carriage at this time of day. “Thank God, you are here with me.”

As they approached Covent Garden, Frederick opened his jacket, took out a wad of banknotes and peeled off several which he then leaned forward and pressed into the top pocket of the coachman.

“That should cover the marriage license fee and any meals and other expenses you incur today, Geraldson. My agents should be able to change the smaller note to coin for you. Mr. Carter and Mr. Lombard will do the talking if you can do the driving and

keep things moving. There will be a further reward for speed and efficiency in returning to Heartwick Hall with the necessary document.”

“I shall make every effort, Your Grace,” Geraldson promised. “And I shall tell everyone but your agents and the bishop that I don’t know where you’ve gone.”

“Oh, send them to the Pulteney Hotel or to Dover or to Gretna Green as you please!” Frederick agreed and Annabelle could not help a dismayed smile at the thought of Stephen’s face on hearing of any of these possibilities.

“As you say,” nodded the coachman happily, increasingly amused by proceedings and evidently on the side of the young couple rather than any potential pursuers.

“Now, my agents obviously have my personal information but in case you must confirm it for the bishop too, my full legal name is on my card,” Frederick added and put the said item in the man’s pocket too, along with a larger folded piece of card. “Lady Annabelle’s is on this wedding invitation.”

At the incongruity of this form of identification, Frederick spluttered with laughter and Annabelle giggled too, even Geraldson joining in as he pulled up in a yard and leapt down to open the carriage door for them.

In less than fifteen minutes, Frederick and Annabelle were in an unmarked black cab racing back through the streets of London, having signed the necessary affidavits, given an urgent if laconic set of instructions to the agents and left Geraldson there on site, with the Heartwick Hall carriage, to draw the sting of any pursuers and later deliver the precious marriage license into Frederick’s hands.

“Now what do we do?” Annabelle asked Frederick. “Hide out in the woods at Heartwick Hall until we can marry?”

“We’ll barricade ourselves in the house,” Frederick declared, at least partly seriously. “I’ll have the gates closed so that no carriages can pass, and set footmen to guard the doors. I’ll also send word to the rectory straight away. For the right donation, Reverend Lewis will find a spot in his schedule to marry us quickly once we have the license. I won’t let anyone stop us, Annabelle.”

She nodded thoughtfully and nestled back into his arms on the seat, reassured by his determination. Breathing in the mingled scent of Frederick’s clean skin and woody cologne, Annabelle enjoyed the entire shape and feel of his body as he swept kisses across her hair and then her mouth, lightly but surely, as though savoring her.

Her skin felt very soft and sensitive, receptive to every small touch from her lover’s hands and lips. As the misery of recent weeks and the turbulence of their sudden dash from the church faded further, desire was rising in its wake. Frederick’s golden-haired face was so handsome it made her ache and his tender smile melted all reservations.

While not yet urgent, Annabelle sensed that her physical longing for Frederick was more powerful now, like a rising tide that would become impossible to hold back once it reached a certain point. The idea of Stephen, Duchess Sarah or anyone else coming between them felt like the worst evil and could not be endured.

“There is another way we can ensure this wedding happens on our terms, Frederick,” Annabelle said intently, looking up at him as he stroked her lips with his fingers and murmured something about rosebuds. “Another way that we can guarantee no one will try to stop or delay us.”

Frederick took a long breath and held Annabelle very closely, the tension in his body tangible to her, along with his quickening heartbeat. He knew exactly what she meant and he instinctively wanted it just as much as she did.

“That is a dangerous game, my love. Are you not afraid?” he asked, his voice already roughening at the very thought of claiming Annabelle fully at last. “If I take you now, and we make no secret of it in order to force our family’s compliance, there is no going back. Even after our marriage, there may be talk of what we did.”

“I am afraid, but I know you will keep me safe,” she told him, both shivering and then putting her arms around his neck as he pulled her onto his lap. “As for talk, we have already created the scandal of the season this morning.”

This was true and neither of them could deny it. Frederick drew deep breaths as he thought Annabelle’s words over, trailing kisses down her throat and across the upper slopes of her breasts.

“I will always keep you safe, Annabelle,” he vowed. “You shall soon be the Duchess of Heartwick, my wife and the mother of my children. But I shall not begin our married life by taking you carelessly in the back of a hired cab on the road from London while you tremble with fear of discovery more than pleasure.”

Frederick’s last sentence was spoken with both a smile and a look of searing lust, one of his hands now stroking Annabelle’s silk-covered leg beneath her skirt.

“Then where and how would you like to take me?” Annabelle breathed, her eyes locking onto his and her voice catching in her throat as his fingers stroked the bare skin of her thigh above her garter.

“In the proper place – the bed of the Dukes of Heartwick, naked and aroused and eager for me,” he answered in a low throaty voice.

“Then please, Frederick, take me back to Heartwick Hall right now and make me yours forever.”



“Yes,” he growled and expressed any further nuance to his wishes through the touch of his lips and tongue and the ranging of his hands over Annabelle’s body.

### CHAPTER 25

“ Witmore! Send immediately to bring Reverend Lewis here. I must arrange a wedding as soon as the license is in my hands...”

“Your Grace?”

“...Use the hired carriage outside – I don’t want that driver seen on the London road before sundown and he has been paid accordingly. Let Geraldson return, but keep the gates closed and set footmen to guard against intruders.”

“Your Grace?!”

“...In the meantime, we are not to be disturbed, by anyone.”

“Why, yes...yes, Your Grace, but...yes, Your Grace,” stuttered the usually imperturbable butler in response to this volley of commands barked by Frederick while marching up the steps and into Heartwick Hall with Annabelle at his side in her slightly disordered wedding outfit, skin flushed and gold-red curls now tumbling about her shoulders after their embraces on the road.

This was certainly not a scene that Heartwick Hall’s staff had anticipated when the morose young duke and his stepmother had left for London that morning to attend a small society wedding.

“Do you understand?” Frederick added crisply, jogging Witmore from a temporary inertia just inside the front door.

The butler had paused only through confusion rather than disobedience, his steady mind struggling to make sense of what was happening. The Duke of Heartwick's face and tone were firm, however, and not to be questioned today. Witmore and other staff quickly jumped to obey their orders and Frederick paid them no further attention, his focus returning entirely to Annabelle once the necessary wheels were set in motion.

"Come, my love," he said and led her towards the staircase. "It is our time now."

Annabelle held tightly to Frederick's arm as they ascended the stairs. Her cheeks were burning and she did not let herself look at any of the servants she knew must be watching them walk so brazenly towards the duke's suite. Despite her own desire and determination, she quavered a little inside at the thought of what they were about to do.

It might have been her supposed wedding day, but Annabelle had not woken up expecting that she would actually be deflowered today. Married to Oswald, she had, in fact, imagined that she might even remain a virgin forever, despite the fact he had made it clear that he would not object to her taking lovers.

Now, however, with Frederick beside her, his arm possessively about her waist and his breathing already audible to her, events were set on an entirely different course.

At the corridor leading to his suite, Frederick swept Annabelle up into his arms and kissed her long and lovingly as she squeaked with anticipation.

"My Annabelle," he marveled again, as though he still could not believe she was there with him, carrying her into his bedroom and kicking the door closed. "Always my Annabelle."

Setting her down, the duke locked his bedroom door and tossed his jacket aside while meeting her eye, his fingers already unfastening his waistcoat.

Annabelle reflected briefly that she loved gazing on Frederick particularly in this mood, fired up and full of distinctly male energy, the sensual spark in his gaze setting her ablaze in turn. Still, today would be different to the previous times she had observed him in this state. Today she would finally see the natural conclusion of their mutual attraction.

“Frederick,” Annabelle said a little unsteadily and held out her hands to him.

Understanding her need for closeness, Frederick came to her and held her against his torso, hands stroking her hair and her back under the silk dress, although also investigating its buttons and tapes as he did so. Annabelle put her hands on his chest beneath the hanging waistcoat and felt his heat and pulse through his shirt before she pulled it out from his waistband, seeking the bare skin beneath.

“Today we shall both be naked,” he whispered into her ear, “except for your stockings and the flowers in your hair. That is how I wish to take you.”

“Yes,” she said breathlessly and followed his lead in kicking off her shoes.

Frederick’s shirt and waistcoat soon followed his jacket and he lost no time in lowering Annabelle’s wedding dress to her waist, breathing hard at the sight and then the sensation of her breasts once more in his hands. Annabelle heard her own moaning as he fondled those pale globes, saying ‘yes’ again and again with the rhythmic, throbbing sensations he was arousing in her.

She ran her own fingers over his shoulders, his arms and his chest, fascinated and aroused by the muscles, the faint golden hairs and the hungry but purposeful way he touched her.

“This is our altar,” Frederick said with a distracted smile, gesturing to the bed, and these kisses are our vows.”

He kissed her again as he unfastened the rest of her dress and pushed it to the floor, Annabelle shrugging off her own underskirts to join it.

“Yes, yes, and yes,” she told him and reached for his waistband, her still inexperienced fingers welcoming his assistance a few moments later.

At last, they finally stood naked before one another and Annabelle’s mouth ran dry at the sight. Frederick was as cleanly sculpted as a classical statue, although the substantial shaft now rearing from golden hair between his thighs marked him distinctly as a real human man rather than a neutered museum piece.

Just as wondrous to her as the vision of Frederick’s body was his gaze on her own form with a matching intensity of fascination. At this moment, she finally and truthfully felt beautiful. If a man this handsome and desirable believed it so, how could Annabelle disagree?

Her womanhood throbbed fitfully as Frederick picked her up again in his strong arms and carried her over to the bed, pulling the covers down and laying her on the sheets.

“It may hurt a little the first time,” he warned Annabelle between kisses as he joined her. “But I will try to give you enough pleasure that I hope you will soon forget any temporary discomfort.”

“I know you will,” Annabelle gasped, her body already tingling and longing for more as his hands slowly stroked every limb and curve. “Oh God, Frederick. I want you, I want you...”

“Such beautiful breasts,” he said hoarsely as he suckled and squeezed them, Annabelle arching to his touch and finding he had already placed himself between her thighs.

Frederick stroked Annabelle's legs wider apart as she writhed and moaned helplessly, but it was his lips, not his male organ that caressed the soft skin of her inner thighs a moment later.

"First this," he murmured, his hands holding her silk-stockinged thighs in position as he pressed a kiss into the soft, wet red-gold fur of her womanhood.

Then Frederick's tongue occupied itself in a non-verbal dance of teasing and slow-building stimulation that had Annabelle screaming his name by its ecstatic conclusion, her entire lower body seeming to contract rhythmically at her peak.

She tasted her own salt on his tongue as he came back up to kiss her, his manhood probing her wet slit at the same time and making her gasp wildly.

"Kiss me," Frederick urged, lodging the head of his shaft within her, and Annabelle obeyed, kissing him desperately in response to this new and strange sensation.

He proceeded slowly, considerate of her tightness and inexperience despite the animal lust she could see and hear upon him. Still, his organ was large and Annabelle's body untried in sexual congress. At the halfway point, she gasped and bit her lip as something gave and then Frederick was sliding all the way inside her, finally filling her to the hilt.

"My love," he groaned, swirling his hips as he held himself deep in her slit. "My Annabelle."

She clung to Frederick with little whimpering moans as she grew accustomed to his penetration. Meanwhile, he continued the barely-moving rocking motion he had begun and captured her mouth for his kisses in between her gasps.

Very gradually the thrusts of his shaft became longer and deeper, stimulating and

exciting Annabelle just as much as the rhythmic pressure of his body rubbing at her Mount of Venus. She had no coherent words left and could only kiss Frederick and squeeze the hands entwined with her own in order to encourage him to continue, feeling that if he stopped she might die or go mad.

Fortunately, Frederick seemed to have full understanding of Annabelle's needs as well as his own. It was only when her sounds grew frenzied and more helpless again, and her body clasped him with involuntary strength, that he finally let go and thrust into her without restraint. Dizzily, from her second peak of pleasure, Annabelle felt the throbbing of his shaft merging with that of her own intimate places.

"Now you are mine," Frederick breathed, raising his head after some minutes had passed, his body still a pleasant weight on hers and his organ still within her although not as hard as it had been. "Your children will be mine. No one can gainsay us after this."

"My husband," Annabelle responded, caressing his face with a smile of pure happiness as Frederick nodded.

From being the saddest day of her life, Annabelle now marked this as the happiest. Frederick took her twice more in the next hour, slow and careful but thorough in his attentions, making her cry out repeatedly with pleasure despite the initial sting of her induction to full womanhood.

"I should dress," Frederick said regretfully at last as they lay entwined, his eyes glancing at the clock on a shelf nearby. "If Reverend Lewis should arrive, I must be ready to receive him. You may stay here and rest if you wish, my Annabelle. We have worked you very hard this afternoon."

She shook her head and sat up alongside him.

“We face the world together now,” she said with a certainty she also felt in her heart.

Even so, when Annabelle stood, the unfamiliar wetness of her thighs made her look around and survey the mess of the sheets with dismay. The evidence of their congress was unmistakable in the copious deposits of seed streaked slightly with the blood of her maidenhead. The flowers from her hair now lay scattered across the pillows, tumbled but fragrant

Every servant who did not already know that the Duke of Heartwick had taken Lady Annabelle Elkins to his bed certainly would as soon as these sheets reached the laundry.

“Do not worry about that,” Frederick assured her, his arms warm and strong about her body again. “Everything is as it should be. We should not need such evidence as our bed but it only strengthens our hand.”

With a deep breath, Annabelle nodded and they both began to dress. While putting on the same clothes they had arrived in, she now felt as though they had become slightly different people inside them. Without needing to be asked, Frederick helped to refasten her dress, and she managed to close the waistband of his trousers without assistance, making him smile and kiss her tenderly.

Hand in hand, they descended the stairs to find Witmore pacing the hallway with agitation.

“What is it, Witmore?” Frederick asked directly. “What has happened?”

“I am sorry, Your Grace. Her Grace brought him in. I could not prevent it.”

Annabelle and Frederick shared a wary glance but then nodded with shared determination.



“Is Lord Emberly in the drawing room, Witmore?” she asked with a calm that surprised herself.

“Yes, Your Ladyship. With Her Grace, Duchess Sarah.”

### EPILOGUE

Stephen jumped to his feet as soon as they entered the room. Annabelle only had a fraction of a second to perceive that he had been sitting with his head in his hands, Duchess Sarah at his shoulder talking to him earnestly. She even felt a twinge of sympathy for her older brother although it was expunged almost as soon as he opened his mouth.

“Annabelle! Dear God, what on earth came over you this morning? I do not know how we will explain all this. You must come home with me at once.”

“Stephen,” said Duchess Sarah softly but in warning, shaking her head sadly in the vain hope of warding off an outburst she had presumably already warned against.

“I am not coming back to Colborne House. I am staying here, Stephen,” Annabelle stated calmly. “There is no need for your worry. I am quite safe here with Frederick.”

“But Annabelle, you were to marry Lord Darrington and now the word is all over the ton that you have left him at the altar and run away with the Duke of Heartwick. It is a true scandal. What am I to write to Mother and Father?”

“You must write to them as you think best,” Annabelle sighed. “Everything you say is true enough, although I do not think Lord Darrington will hold my actions against me. Frederick and I will be married directly. You may tell our parents that if you wish, or I shall write myself.”

“Annabelle, please listen to me. You do not know what a man like Duke Frederick

can be. You do not understand how easily he could dishonor you and cast you aside. If necessary, I shall go to the courts and..."

Stephen tried to cross the room as he pleaded with her but Frederick blocked his way, scowling.

"A man like me, Stephen? Are you implying that I intend to dishonor Annabelle? As far as I am concerned, your sister is already my wife, and the marriage ceremony will only make that official."

"Good Lord! How dare you? You seem to think you are God himself, Frederick," Stephen retorted, confronting the Duke of Heartwick in turn. "Listen to yourself. If Annabelle remains here, everyone will assume the worst. Half of them already do after your display at the church this afternoon."

"Annabelle will remain here with me," Frederick said implacably. "You cannot take her from me against her will."

"How can you even be sure he intends to marry you?" Stephen now threw desperately at Annabelle. "A rake might only toy with women as long as they hold his attention. You have no idea how close you are to ruin!"

Frederick's face grew thunderous at this remark, his fists clenching at his sides. Annabelle understood with alarm how deeply each of these men felt their own peculiar sense of honor.

"Do you impugn my word, Lord Emberly?" the Duke of Heartwick snapped. "If so, I must demand that..."

"Stephen, Frederick," Duchess Sarah interrupted before the situation could escalate, casting admonishing glances at both men as she came to stand in the middle of the

room between them. “Both of you, please sit down.”

They obeyed reluctantly, Annabelle remaining at Frederick’s side and putting a reassuring hand on his shoulder. She was not going anywhere, whatever Stephen or Duchess Sarah might have to say next.

“Frederick loves Annabelle and intends to make her his wife as soon as possible,” the older woman stated, looking from one man to the other, daring either to deny her assertions. “Stephen also has very natural concerns over his family’s honor which Frederick would be wise to address rather than starting an unnecessary fight.”

“Yes,” Frederick answered first, placing his hand over Annabelle’s on his shoulder. “I do love Annabelle and we shall be married as soon as it can be arranged. I have already applied for the license.”

Stephen however, could not speak so temperately yet.

“I believe that Frederick deliberately misled us at his agents’ offices in London, in order that he might bring Annabelle here under false pretenses. Without Duchess Sarah’s insight, I might easily now be on the road to Dover or humiliating myself at the Pulteney Hotel due to your man’s misdirection.”

“Stephen!” Duchess Sarah said again, more sharply this time but Stephen could not restrain himself and rose once more to his feet.

“I respect your view, Duchess Sarah, but I cannot possibly stay silent while a known rake is conspiring against my sister’s innocence, even if he is your stepson. What kind of man would that make me?”

“There is no conspiracy,” Annabelle spoke up then, realizing that she was the only one who might end this fruitless clash. “I told Frederick to bring me here, Stephen,

exactly because I did not wish to return to Colborne House with you. He did so because he loves me. Frederick has only ever done what I wanted him to do. I shall be his wife in law too soon enough.”

“What you wanted him to do?” Stephen questioned in bewilderment and outrage. “Good God, Annabelle! What are you saying?!”

“I am saying that Frederick is my husband in all but the final formality and I shall not be leaving Heartwick Hall.”

“Frederick!” Annabelle heard Duchess Sarah say with deep concern somewhere in the background. “This is truly reckless. How could you?”

“Be still, Stepmother,” Frederick answered firmly. “All is in hand if you would but trust us.”

Annabelle’s attention, however, was more focused on the fall of Stephen’s face as he took in the ramifications of what she had said to him, and all that she had implied. Would this finally make him understand that she was not coming back? It was a harsh message but a necessary one.

It was then that the sound of a carriage on the path drew the attention of everyone in the room. Frederick leapt up and pulled aside a lace curtain.

“Geraldson!” he exclaimed, smiling at Annabelle. “With two guests.”

“Father Gerard Mallford, and Mr. Robert Goodinson, parish clerk for Heartwick and Cleriford,” Geraldson introduced the two gentlemen to the room at Duke Frederick’s request. “I’ll let the gentlemen themselves explain why they are here.”

The two ladies sat together on the sofa. Duchess Sarah had patted Annabelle’s hand

although the older woman's face remained strained, clearly shaken by how far Annabelle and Frederick had been prepared to go against society's rules. At the mantelpiece, Stephen paced ceaselessly, his orderly mind at its limit with the surprises of the day.

The minister stepped forward first, giving a small bow to the room and then subtly scrutinizing its occupants as he rose again.

"Gerard Mallford, assistant and friend to John Randolph, Bishop of London," said the urbane and rotund cleric with a bow. "While all requirements for a marriage license were met, and your man Geraldson here was most persistent in tracking down Bishop Randolph in his bath..."

Here, Geraldson coughed and busied himself with his pipe while Stephen looked freshly scandalized and Frederick smothered a grin.

"...I have been sent personally to investigate the circumstances of this proposed marriage before I hand over the license, given that the lady named is already the subject of another marriage license, with the wedding supposed to take place in London this very day. Bigamy, as you know, is a serious offense under English law."

"No marriage took place this morning," Annabelle stated immediately. "Everyone here can attest that fact."

"You are Lady Annabelle Elkins?" asked Gerard Mallford with interest.

"I am," Annabelle confirmed, "and I did not marry this morning."

"Soon to be Duchess of Heartwick," Frederick added. "The ceremony did not take place this morning."

The cleric looked expectantly at the others in the room and Duchess Sarah nodded agreement with her stepson.

“No marriage took place this morning,” confirmed Stephen gloomily. “I am Lord Emberly, son of the Duke and Duchess of Colborne, and I can confirm that my sister here is... still a spinster.”

“I also understand that both parties are of age?” continued Father Mallford, checking off the formalities.

“Only just,” said Stephen grudgingly and then sighed, perhaps beginning to accept that he must make the best of the situation. “Yes, Annabelle is one-and-twenty and supposedly of sound mind, although we have not yet even had the chance to discuss a wedding contract...”

“You can have whatever contract you and Annabelle can agree on, Stephen,” Frederick broke in. “I will sign whatever my wife wishes, but the wedding itself shall not be delayed.”

“Duke Frederick is thirty years,” confirmed Duchess Sarah, interrupting in her turn before Stephen and Frederick could wrangle, “and of sound mind, if impetuous spirit.”

“Very well,” said Mallford, now producing a sheet of paper from his satchel and holding it out to Frederick. “In that case, here is your license to marry in your local parish as soon as can be arranged.”

“Excellent!” Duke Frederick responded, taking the paper and then shaking the cleric’s hand warmly “Do pass my thanks to Bishop Randolph. You must stay to dinner now that you are here. In fact, why don’t you stay and attend our wedding? It will be a small affair after all the chaos we have wrought today, no doubt, but...”

The second man now coughed, shaking his head and stopping this congratulatory conversation.

“Matters are not so simple, Your Grace, begging your pardon. I’m Mr. Robert Goodinson, parish clerk for Heartwick and Cleriford. Mr. Geraldson thought I should come here. Reverend Lewis was unfortunately called away yesterday to attend his aged mother in Scotland. We do not expect him back for at least a month, perhaps two months. I don’t yet know whether we will have any cover until he returns.”

“A month or two?” said Annabelle with dismay. “We cannot wait so long, can we?”

She looked at Frederick with genuine alarm, having no idea how likely it was that she might be child after their union today or how long it would take for this to become obvious to the world. Across the sofa, Duchess Sarah took her hand and squeezed it silently.

“Well, what about Lady Annabelle’s parish?” asked Gerard Mallford reasonably, without any apparent judgement on the case. “They could marry there easily enough, could they not, Lord Emberly?”

“Yes, I suppose I could speak to our rector,” said Stephen in rather a jaundiced tone. “Although after today’s fiasco, I have no idea what view he might take of our family and its matrimonial intentions.”

The Bishop of London’s assistant swallowed a sigh, and then smiled, sharing a curious look of confidence with Geraldson over by the door.

“Well, as I am here, and satisfied as to the bona fides of both parties, I see no reason why I should not conduct the marriage ceremony in Reverend Lewis’s absence, as long as Robert Goodinson here can make the necessary records in the parish register. Would that be convenient for you, Mr. Goodinson?”



“Certainly, Father Mallford. With Reverend Lewis’s departure, all other use of the church has been cancelled.”

“Today?” Frederick asked both men hopefully, coming over to the sofa and extending a hand to draw Annabelle up beside him.

“Well, as your man Geraldson insisted that I should bring vestments and anything else required for a wedding ceremony, just in case, I could certainly do that,” confirmed the cleric. “Otherwise, I have the feeling that Duke Frederick will be riding off to obtain a special license from the Archbishop of Canterbury, whom I can already tell you now is in Bath for his health.”

“Well then,” Frederick laughed joyously. “Ladies and gentlemen, may I invite you to our wedding at Heartwick and Cleriford parish church, as soon as Father Mallford is suitable prepared? It will be followed by a celebratory meal here at Heartwick Manor, including a table for our staff.”

“Good God!” Stephen exclaimed, dazed by the too rapid progression of events over the last ten minutes. “Now there is another wedding?!”

Duchess Sarah stood and kissed Annabelle on both cheeks.

“Thank God,” she said sincerely, speaking quietly into Annabelle’s ear. “I have been out of my mind with worry for you both since the first day I learned you were here alone with Frederick. You have sailed close to the wind but come safely into harbor at last.”

As the party moved to the hallway to don coats and hats, the sound of footsteps sounded on the gravel outside. Frederick broke from briefing poor bewildered Witmore on organizing an impromptu wedding celebration that evening to look at Annabelle in puzzlement.

“Is anyone home? Or is Heartwick Hall entirely fortified against foreign invaders?” called out Oswald Quince’s voice on the other side of the front door. “We’ve left our carriage at the front gate and walked all the way up the drive. We come in peace, even though Captain Rawlings is a soldier and Lady Meredith can be very vicious with a pall-mall mallet!”

At a nod from Frederick, Witmore opened the door and let Lord Darrington, his sister and Captain Rawlings into the hallway.

“Oh good, no one has a black eye,” Oswald remarked, looking around the assembly in the hallway and then grinning at Annabelle. “Is all well with you, my non-wife?”

Annabelle leaned into Frederick’s arms and smiled back, noticing Father Mallford’s twinkling eyes on all of them. He did not seem in the least bit surprised or put out to find her jilted fiancé turning up so merrily at the front door and she decided that she liked him.

“Very well. We’re actually about to get married, Oswald. Would you like to come to my wedding?”

“We love a good wedding,” he responded enthusiastically, linking arms with Lady Meredith and Captain Rawlings. “Don’t we?”

Dearly beloved, we are gathered here together, in the sight of God, to join this man and this woman in holy matrimony...

Annabelle and Frederick smiled lovingly at one another as the service began in the small parish church of the Heartwick estate.

Aside from the bride and groom, and the stand-in minister, there were only a handful of ill-assorted guests in the pews. Duchess Sarah, Robert Goodinson and Geraldson

the coachman sat on Frederick's side of the church while Lord Darrington, Lady Meredith and Captain Rawlings kept Stephen company on the bride's side.

Therefore if any can show just cause, why they may not lawfully be joined together, let him now speak, or else hereafter forever hold his peace...

In the pause that followed there was only the sound of shifting weight on old oak pews, rustling clothing and the faint rushing of a breeze on the windows.

Neither the wedding attendees nor even the minister's words were at the front of Annabelle's mind at this moment, however. She was lost in the blue of Frederick's eyes, the gold of his hair and the memory of the pleasurable weight of his naked body on hers in his bedroom, gazes locked and instincts seemingly synchronized. How many hours would it be before they were alone again?

At the altar a few moments later, Father Mallford, coughed politely and Annabelle realized that they had been gazing so intently into one another's eyes that one or another of them had forgotten to respond to him.

Frederick murmured a quiet apology and the minister repeated himself.

"Wilt thou, Frederick Lancaster Clemence Hayward, Duke of Heartwick, have this woman to thy wedded wife, to live together after God's ordinance in the holy estate of matrimony? Wilt thou love her, comfort her, honor and keep her in sickness and in health, and, forsaking all other, keep thee only unto her, so long as you both shall live?"

"I will," Frederick confirmed very certainly at the second time of asking.

"Wilt thou, Annabelle Eleanor Elkins have this man..."

Annabelle was nodding before the question had even concluded, wanting Frederick to know that she had no hesitation at all in accepting him, loving him and wanting him.

Unlike the more formal event earlier that morning, the ceremony proceeded as normal without interruption. Still, Annabelle felt as though she were hearing every word for the first time now that they were directed at her, and at Frederick.

“With this Ring I thee wed,” Frederick vowed to her, “with my body I thee worship, and with all my worldly goods I thee endow: In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.”

As he spoke these words, her new husband slid a ring onto her finger, a silver band set with sapphire, matching the necklace she already wore. Now Annabelle knew what Frederick had raced into the study for at the last moment before they left the house, his mother’s remaining jewels evidently being kept in the large safe there.

“Forasmuch as Frederick and Annabelle have consented together in holy wedlock, and have witnessed the same before God and this company, and thereto have given and pledged their troth either to other, and have declared the same by giving and receiving of a ring, and by joining of hands; I pronounce that they be man and wife together, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.”

At the altar, Frederick embraced Annabelle wholeheartedly if briefly, with both passion and tenderness, before they followed the minister and parish clerk into a small room to sign the register, with Duchess Sarah and Lord Emberly as witnesses.

When they emerged from the church doors, Annabelle and Frederick were surprised to be met with a flurry of rice and rose petals from Oswald, Jacob and Meredith in the porch.

“Where did you manage to get those?” Annabelle laughed as she brushed the small

decorations from her face. “Or do you always carry them, just in case of a surprise wedding?”

“Meredith had the presence of mind to acquire them from various elderly ladies after this morning’s aborted ceremony,” Oswald confided. “She told them she would be attending another wedding soon and they would be put to good use.”

“How prescient of you,” Frederick commented to Oswald’s sister.

“Not really,” she responded with amusement. “You see, Jacob and I had just decided that we should marry, and obviously we don’t want to go to any great fuss, in the circumstances.”

After a moment’s surprise, Annabelle and Frederick both laughed and offered their congratulations, understanding that this was just a marriage of convenience of another kind.

“It seemed the best way round to do things, in the end,” Oswald whispered to Annabelle as he embraced her in congratulation. “They will make a home at Darrington Hall and we three shall be together always. I’m happy things have worked out for you with Duke Frederick in the end.”

“I’m very happy for you too,” Annabelle said honestly. “Let us always be friends, Oswald.”

This news seemed to neatly tie up the past and leave the road to the future clear, with the present only there to be enjoyed. Only Stephen’s solemn face was at odds with the note of harmony and joy on which the day was ending.

“I hope you will understand one day,” Annabelle said to her brother gently, laying a hand on his arm while Frederick waited to hand her into their carriage. “I hope you

will love someone as I love Frederick and see that I really could not have done anything else.”

Stephen frowned and held back whatever it was that he automatically wanted to say in response. He might be proud and wedded to convention but he was not cruel or unkind and he knew that he must accept events, regardless of his own discomfort.

“I hope you and Duke Frederick will be happy together,” he said sincerely. “The Duchy of Colborne’s lawyers will be in touch about the marriage contract, although the situation is peculiar. For your own sake, Annabelle, do take it seriously. It protects you if you are widowed, and the rights of your future children if you should predecease...”

“Later, Stephen,” Annabelle said and kissed him on the cheek. “I promise I will take it all very seriously on a day which is not my wedding day.”

Entering their open-top coach, the Duke and Duchess of Heartwick relaxed together on the rear seat in the last sunlight of the warm July day and let Geraldson drive them back towards their home.

The End?

*Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 9:59 am*

Eight Years Later

“Elias, I said no!” shouted Annabelle from the shore of the small lake where the family had been picnicking on a hot August afternoon in the Lake District.

### CHAPTER 1

The Duke of Westall, Stephen Wilkins, stood in the entrance of the Rosenberg estate and watched the servants milling around him in a panic with a cold eye. One was hanging his coat, another offering him brandy, a third dashing back and forth between the rooms as though trying to find something useful to do and a fourth trying to ask him a fifth time about the nature of his visit.

One might have thought that the devil himself had come to call.

It was not far from the truth.

“Your Grace, can I offer you refreshment?” asked a young valet, eyes wide in alarm. “Is there anything that I can bring you after your journey?”

“No,” he said crisply, used to command and used to the sight of unease or even fear in the eyes of other men. “Send word to the family that I have arrived as we have agreed. The rest of you may leave, I have no need of you.”

They glanced among themselves, clearly trying to communicate their concern. A Duke of Westall had never in the history of the two houses set foot on the Rosenberg estate without bringing war in his hand and death at his heels. The bad blood between the families went back centuries, and even now they could not meet without attempting violence upon each other.

Stephen had no qualms about violence himself. When he had been in university, still a young strapping boy, not yet weighed down with the pressure of taking on the



mantle of the Dukedom, he had been known to his friends as Mars, the god of war.

Too big, too fierce and too quick to fight.

He had always had too much inside him, too much rage and darkness. It had not gotten better as he had grown. It had grown with him like his shadow.

But then his younger brother, dearly loved and impulsive Herbert with youth and the certainty of immortality in his veins, had fought the cursed heir of the Rosenberg estate, Dudley Barnes, and both had been badly wounded.

He cared nothing at all about the young Lord Dudley, but seeing Herbert in a sick bed had brought to him how the feud would be if it were allowed to continue, the death and grief and horror that would be dragged in its wake.

For the sake of his brother and for the red eyes and pale faces of his sisters he would not allow that to happen. Which was why he was here, growing mightily impatient with the flutterings of the servants around him.

He was about to break with good manners and walk past them to find his own way when the butler rushed towards them, face flushed in embarrassment and irritation.

“Your Grace,” he said, waving the others off quickly. “I apologize for the delay; there was a little confusion about the time you were expected. Please, let me lead you to the family.”

Confusion, hm? Stephen would have wagered that the confusion was engineered by the family themselves, never willing to waste an opportunity to cause embarrassment to him or his. But he nodded curtly and let the man lead him back towards the drawing room at the front of the house. It was a strange place for a man to do business, but Albert Barnes, Duke of Rosenberg, was a strange man.

He was shown into a grand drawing room, distinctive with green chairs and a white plush carpet. He made a bow to the room, noting that his Grace was seated in a broad chair with a great spreading back and carved wooden arms next to his son, in a smaller chair, and that four ladies were seated on two settees a little way off.

It was said that no member of the Wilkins family had ever entered the Rosenberg estate in the long centuries the two families had been feuding. Stephen certainly would never have set foot here had he not been driven by necessity.

The ladies he barely knew, having seen them only in the distance at events, but he burned at the sight of the Duke of Rosenberg and his son.

God forgive me , he thought. For making a pact with the devil himself, but there is nothing else to be done.

“Westall,” Albert said, waving off the servant with one hand. “I believe you know my son.”

Stephen nodded at Dudley Barnes, his heart thudding in his ears. A rush like a fever of rage swept through him. His heart still ached with rage and fear that he might have lost his brother the way that Albert had taken his father all those years ago.

He could not imagine hating anyone as much as these two men. “We have met,” he said instead, his voice cool and level.

The old man did not offer a seat and Stephen did not take one, too certain that if he were to sit he would no longer be able to conceal his anger. Instead Albert took a pinch of snuff from a small box on the table next to his chair and passed the box on to Dudley.

The younger man followed suit, but Stephen noticed how he moved carefully and

smiled to himself in dark furious delight. Herbert had done that. Herbert, his wonderful fool of a brother.

“You had matters you wanted to discuss,” Albert said, gesturing as though Stephen were a serf that he could command.

“Indeed, as did you, Rosenberg,” Stephen said. “The matter of the wedding.”

“Ah, yes. The wedding. The dowry shall be three thousand pounds,” Albert said, his eyes sharp and piercing. “There is no need for a long engagement. I’m sure you will agree that our families can only benefit from being brought together as quickly as possible.”

Stephen snapped his head to stare at Albert sharply, then at the ladies and back to Albert. It was an insultingly low amount, one that a duke’s family would barely offer a mere gentleman, let alone a duke. “There is no need for a dowry,” he said coldly.

“A dowry is traditional,” Albert said, his own cheeks flushing slightly insulted in turn. “To give none would be insulting to our daughter.”

“There is no need for insult. She will be well cared for with the wealth I have.” Stephen knew that Albert envied the Westall estate and the riches that exceeded his own and felt a little cold pleasure at the way that the old man tried and failed to hide his bitter anger over the reminder.

“So it shall be,” Albert said, a rictus of a smile on his face. “We are agreed.”

“And once the wedding is had, there will be peace between us.” This was the true prize after all; this was what Stephen was here for with his pride kept carefully at bay. They would put an end to the fighting and the killing and those of his who came in the future would not need to look over their shoulders in fear of a Barnes blade.

“You will leave mine be, I shall yours.” Albert looked across at his son, whose face was contorted in a most unbecoming scowl. “That is agreed.”

“Very well. Who is the lady?”

A smile crossed the old man’s face, twisted and mocking. “Come forwards, Elizabeth, my dear daughter.”

Stephen looked over at the ladies. He recognized the Duchess easily, and two of the younger ladies looked familiar from events he had attended amongst his duties. The woman who stood and approached her father was not one he could recall having seen before.

She was short, that was the first thing he noticed. Small enough that he was sure she would not come to his shoulder if they stood side by side. The second thing he noticed was the proud tilt of her chin as she met his gaze. And the third, the third thing that he noticed was her clothing.

While the other two young ladies wore chemises of fine cloth cunningly embroidered, this one was dressed so simply that he would never have guessed her to be a member of the family if he had been asked. Her hair was fair, a warm golden color completely different from the rest of her family and her eyes were not the watery icy blue of her father but a warm brown.

She held his gaze steadily, a challenge in her eyes. He was the first to look away, glancing to her father.

“I had thought, Rosenburg, that you had two daughters. How is it that your bounty has been increased now to three?”

“My dear Elizabeth was a gift from her dead mother,” Albert said, that same twisted

smile still playing on his lips. “While she is certainly my daughter, she is not a daughter of my wife and so she is not out in society.”

The younger two Barnes daughters lifted their fans to cover what Stephen suspected were cruel smirks and the Duchess looked across at her husband, her cold beautiful face unsmiling and set.

He was being given a bastard.

It took a moment for the insult of it to sink in, to really settle in Stephen’s mind. He was asking for a family connection and instead this was what he was being offered, this insult was all he was worth. His lips thinned. “What of the lady’s sisters?”

Albert barely glanced back at his two legitimate daughters, smiling even wider. “They are spoken for, Westall.”

They were not. Stephen would never have come to the Rosenberg estate had he thought there was no Barnes daughter he could tie his fortunes to. He knew that the elder was promised to the Duke of Seymour but there were two of them.

Albert met his gaze. He could see the old man knew that he knew he was being insulted, that he was just waiting for Stephen to call the whole charade off, insult the young lady to her face and cast her aside as a marriage prospect. It was the best they could possibly expect from him, it was all he could be expected to do.

But Stephen was not a common man. He was a man with a driving purpose. Both families wanted the feud to end, Albert just as much as himself. While he was not willing to concede peace without trying for one last win over Stephen’s family by offering a bastard child, he still didn’t want his only son and heir murdered in the bloody battle between the families.

No. Stephen would not allow Albert Barnes to win. He would have Elizabeth Barnes for his wife. He would end the enmity no matter the cost.

“Leave us,” Stephen said coldly. “Clear the room so I may propose to the young lady.”

The titters and murmurs from the younger ladies stopped dead. Dudley stilled, even Albert froze in a moment of unguarded shock as they all looked at Stephen and then at Elizabeth Barnes and back again.

Stephen almost smiled. Choke on that, you devils.

It took a minute or two for the rest of the family to leave them. It was clear that none of them were eager to give in to his demand, but he was in the right of it and it was how things were done. So, slowly and reluctantly, they left and it was him and the young woman alone.

She had still to say anything.

“Won’t you sit down,” Stephen said, his tone flat and cold. Whoever and whatever she was to this family, she was to be his wife. But she was also the daughter of the man who had made it his business to try to erase the Wilkins family name from the history books.

Elizabeth kept looking at him, her eyes warm and brown and her face set so still that he wondered if she knew how to smile. “I shall not,” she said firmly in a voice as clear as a bell. “I will meet my fate head on, on my feet.”

Stephen almost fell back a whole step in surprise at her boldness. Did she not understand the importance of what they were doing? It felt as though he could not escape the piercing intensity of her gaze and it made him feel frustrated, ill at ease in

his own skin. “Very well. What is it that you think of this union, Lady Elizabeth?”

“Would my thoughts have merit to a duke, Your Grace?” she asked, her hands folded so demurely at her front that one could almost imagine that she was not speaking knives. “I am but a woman, after all.”

“I have never held a woman’s thoughts at a lower merit than a man’s,” Stephen said firmly. “My sisters have my ear as much as my brother and their words have as much worth to me. I would know your mind on this matter as you are just as much involved as I.”

“Just as much? Am I not more?” she asked, tilting her head to one side curiously. “After all, shall I not be leaving my family home and all those I love to go to yours?”

Stephen frowned at her words. The sharpness of her wit was something he might have enjoyed at another time, in another place. If she were not a Barnes, he might even have been enticed by her. But here in the drawing room of this accursed family all he felt was vexation. One simple answer was all that he wanted. “And you will be given wealth and a home of your own in return,” he said. “You will be a duchess. Many would say you are the winner here.”

“Is there a winner here?”

It was so strikingly close to his own thoughts that Stephen was begrudgingly impressed. She was such a small, drab thing and yet her words were so fast, her wit so quick to match his own that he had to admire her for it, for all that she was driving him mad.

“Is there a loser?”

“I don’t know, Your Grace,” Lady Elizabeth said, smiling at him. It was the faintest

raising of the corners of her lips. It was as much of a lie as anything her father had ever said. “Do you think of me as a prize?”

He almost snorted and had to cough to cover it. “Lady Elizabeth,” he said finally. “I will not insult you by using the usual forms of a proposal and pretending that this is not something you expected or that you are unaware of my merits as a prospect. We are sensible people. I am asking for your hand in marriage, you know how much rides on this arrangement. What do you say to the matter?”

He did not go to one knee or protest romantic love. He felt that she would scorn him behind those sharp, fierce eyes. He felt that it would be something she would detest and moreover he would never get down on a knee before a Barnes. She thought for a moment, and then laughed—a hard noise so loud and sudden that it shocked him. When she spoke, her voice was cold and mocking.

“You speak as though I have a choice in the matter, Your Grace , and yet we both know that my father and you have already decided it all for me. At least do me the respect of not pretending otherwise.”

Stephen felt himself flush in anger, the sharpness of her words inflaming him almost as much as the fire in her eyes. He took a great step towards her, pleased as she backed up, retreated from him.

Yet she never looked away, her chin tilted back defiantly as he walked slowly towards her, backing her up until she was trapped against a wall, his arms caging her on either side.

“Have a care, Elizabeth,” he said lowly, leaning in so that his breath was hot in her ear. “You should not try to provoke my anger.”

“Or what,” Elizabeth said, her eyes blazing. “What shall you do, Your Grace?”



He caught her chin, bringing their gazes together like lightning striking. “You will not like the consequences if you do,” he said.

He could smell her scent, something light and barely perfumed and he could feel the heat of her, like a fluttering bird. He looked down on her cheeks and could see a flush spreading up from her neck, down past her fichu.

How far might it go down her body?

The thought caught him, pinned him, made his heart beat fast in his chest. What she was doing to him made him more aware of himself than he had ever been in his life, more overwhelmed, more—out of control. He could touch her cheek and feel her skin beneath his fingers, he could...

Stephen stepped back abruptly and bowed, composing himself. “I will see you at the wedding, Madam.”

He turned on his heel and stormed from the room. He was not going to lose himself to her. She was a means to an end and that was all. That was all she would ever be.

### CHAPTER 2

“Will there be sweetmeats?”

“There will be cakes and sweets aplenty, Annie, now do get down from there and help me with this,” Mrs. Adams said, her kind face contorted with the effort of not laughing. “It is our Miss Elizabeth’s wedding day, after all. We must be getting on!”

“Will all the ladies be dressed in lace and frills?” Annie said, grinning and spinning on one foot. She was stood on the chair at Elizabeth’s dresser and was trying her hardest to make a fichu look like a bridal veil. “And will there be enough flowers that I could have some?”

“Now, none of that,” Mrs. Adams said, looking over at Sally with a raised eyebrow that said she thought her older daughter might have been filling her youngest’s head with fancies. “Any flowers will belong to Lady Elizabeth and she’ll get to say what happens to them.”

“I would be glad to send you some, Annie,” Elizabeth said. “But I do not think I shall have the time.” In secret she rather suspected that she did not in fact get to say what happened to anything, but it would do no good to spoil the girl’s fun by saying so.

Sally smiled at her mother and ducked around Elizabeth to pull her little sister down and take the gloves and fichu off her so they could continue putting the finishing touches on the packing.

Their laughter was so familiar to Elizabeth that it was like a hug, and that made her

feel all the more like there was a knife going into her stomach with every second that she got closer to leaving forever.

Annie had been so little not so long ago, just a tiny little slip of a girl and here she was already shot up to Elizabeth's height, a strapping girl of three and ten. She had her own duties for the family, she was almost a young woman now.

What else might Elizabeth miss of her life now she was going away?

She was standing in the center of all the bustle and chaos staring out the window but she was caught in the middle of thoughts of the only family she really cared about and how she couldn't take them with her or even come visit them, not properly.

She was to become a duchess, after all. Duchesses didn't go calling on housekeepers and their children.

"My lady," Sally called, her bright cheerful face blazing with a smile. "Come on now, let me help do you up. We're almost ready."

The dress felt foreign to her. It was a dark green, and she knew just enough to know that there was a message in that somewhere, something a little cruel, a little grim. Just like most things that her family did.

But even so, it was so much finer than anything she had ever worn that the fabric felt dangerous to touch too much with her hands. She was standing as still as she could manage, her arms held awkwardly at her side so she would not mess up the embroidery somehow and she almost had to laugh at how silly she must look.

All the many little buttons down the back of the dress still had to be done up and she was already so aware of every inch of herself that she dreaded that last little bit of suffocation like it might wring the breath from her lungs.

How could she do this? She had never gone out in society one day in her life, how could she now go from her only home and be enough for a duke to marry? Could she really make it that far or would he look at her in the church and turn his head away like everyone had thought he would that day in the drawing room?

Elizabeth swallowed, her face heating at the reminder.

Why had he looked at her like that? He was so much taller than she had expected, so broad and so striking. He looked as though he was on fire inside, like everything he touched must catch on fire too.

Maybe that was why she felt so hot under her skin when he was close to her, leaning over her—

“All right, Miss,” Mrs. Adams took one of her hands and squeezed it, her smile large and warm just like everything else about her. “It’s perfectly normal for a lady to be nervous on her wedding day. Don’t you worry, you’re only going to better and bigger things.”

“That’s right,” Sally said stoutly. “I’ve heard that the Duke of Westall has twice the money at least that His Grace does. I bet that sticks in his throat and chokes him when he’s trying to sleep!”

Elizabeth bit back a laugh as Mrs. Adams rounded on her daughter, shock on her face. “Sally Adams, you bite your tongue and pray that the good lord didn’t hear you talking so about your betters!”

“I don’t know about my betters,” Sally muttered, almost too low to be heard. “Money doesn’t make a gentleman, you always say.”

“And a fast tongue doesn’t make a well behaved miss, neither,” Mrs. Adams said,

wagging her finger comically enough that Elizabeth gave in to a giggle.

“Now, Mother Adams,” Elizabeth said, touching Sally on the arm fondly. “Let’s not quarrel today. I want you all to be glad with me.”

“Of course, my lady,” Mrs. Adams said, her face softening. “Girls, now work quickly, I want to see my lady in her finest at last.”

Elizabeth let them finish with her gown, and smiled a little at her friend as Sally went to get her headdress and Mrs. Adams fussed and worried over her hair.

They were so excited for her. They were so sure that this would be the best thing that could have happened for her. They wanted her to have her freedom at last.

“Oh Miss Elizabeth,” Mrs. Adams breathed.

Elizabeth looked at her dearest friend’s mother, the woman who had held her at night when she was a little girl crying about how lonely and cold and dark her rooms were, the woman who had listened to her thoughts and worries, had watched her grow. The only family she had really ever had.

Sally handed her the beautiful silk gloves that felt like a second skin and then led her over to the mirror so that she could look at herself.

The green of the dress was just like his eyes, she thought. It was such a sudden thought that her knees felt weak beneath her. His eyes and how they had bored into her as she stood before him, just an object for him and her father to bicker over—why had they affected her so?

She was pale, the darkness of the gown making her more so and making her eyes look huge in her face. Sally and Annie and Mrs. Adams were clapping their hands

and saying how beautiful she was and how happy she would be but all Elizabeth could see in the mirror was a caged bird going to a new cage.

The footman had her bags and was loading them into the carriage and Sally was going to follow after with her own cases, of course. Elizabeth wished desperately they could come to the ceremony and stand with her, but of course that would look strange at a duke's wedding, wouldn't it?

No one would be happy if she admitted that she saw the housekeeper and her daughters as more her own than her flesh and blood.

"I'll think of you every day," Annie whispered fiercely, grabbing her hands and pressing them tight. "And I'll pray every night for you, Lady Elizabeth, I promise I will."

"I'll miss you, Annie," Elizabeth said softly, ruffling the girl's hair. "Be careful."

Mrs. Adams was next, clasping her into an embrace that felt like home and everything that she would be leaving behind and Elizabeth ached to cry and cling and beg her to come too.

"I wish you all the best, my dear," she said very softly in Elizabeth's ear. "Be well and be happy, Lady Elizabeth. Have everything that you ever deserved."

The Duchess of course had not come to see Elizabeth getting ready and neither had Lottie or Rose. They were her half-sisters, she was marrying the Duke of Westall to save them from having to do it and they couldn't even bother to come and wish her well before the ceremony.

But this was enough, Elizabeth felt, closing her eyes tight so that she wouldn't have to let the tears fall. This was what a mother's blessing was meant to feel like. This

was all that she really wanted. She squeezed Mrs. Adams back and whispered, “Thank you ,” hoping that it said everything that she meant in her heart.

“I really cannot thank you enough, sister,” Dudley said, his long legs crossed as the carriage carried them towards the church. “Your generosity and self-sacrifice will not be quickly forgotten by the family, I assure you.”

Lottie made a loud sniggering noise and Elizabeth wondered if she thought the Duke of Seymour would approve of his wife making such a vulgar sound.

“Is the Duke of Westall really wicked, Dudley?” Rose asked. She was the youngest, and she should perhaps have been the sweetest. Elizabeth could still remember when she was a little baby, all rosy cheeks and those wide eyes of innocence.

Their gazes met across the carriage. There was no innocence in Rose anymore. There was nothing in this whole family but malice and misery.

“I couldn’t possibly scare my sweet sisters so terribly,” Dudley said. “Exposing your delicate ears to the tales of his villainy? And so close to our sweet Elizabeth’s marriage to the devil? Oh! It would be too cruel for words!”

“You can’t simply tease us and leave us wondering,” Lottie said, her fan dropping to her lap and her eyes sparkling with merriment. “I’m sure that Elizabeth will appreciate any truth about her intended in the spirit in which it’s meant, won’t you Lizzie?”

Elizabeth looked at her steadily, but said nothing. It was always best for her to say nothing when they were like this. They circled her sometimes, like hungry beasts tracking their prey. They surrounded her and if she was still and quiet and gave no sign of the blood they were drawing they got bored and went away.

“You are quite right of course, Lottie,” Dudley said, slapping his thigh. “I had not thought about how it might be useful for Elizabeth to know what she must be careful of with her new husband.”

Of course sometimes they were just encouraged to try harder.

Dudley leaned forwards, his face twisted into a mimicry of concern. “Now, Elizabeth. I have met your intended several times, and quite a few of those times were with a sword in my hand. The first thing you should know about Westall is that the man has a temper that would put the devil himself to shame. One time I was trying to retreat from the field after winning the first blood, and he was so enraged that he came at me with his bare blade and tried his best to cut me open with it.”

Lottie and Rose gasped, their hands going to cover their mouths and Elizabeth raised both her eyebrows. It would be rude to roll her eyes at him. She would not do so, no matter how much she wanted to.

“It was only the involvement of our seconds that saved my life, that day,” Dudley said. “He is a fiend when things go against him, but he is even worse when they go for him. One time when he had disarmed me and all should have been ended, he came forwards and ground the heel of his boot into my hand.” He turned his left hand, showing the faint scars across its back. “He said ‘that will teach you to try to best me, you young cur, you’ll think of this next time you raise a sword against me’.”

“The scoundrel!” Lottie said, heat in her voice.

“How can it be borne?” Rose said. “You must have gone back to teach him a lesson, brother darling, you must!”

“Of course I tried,” Dudley said, attempting an expression of modesty which fit very poorly on his face. “But the man is such a slippery fellow. One cannot fight him fair



and to his face and one cannot trust him to leave be once the fight is done. He is all temper and cunning, like a howling dog.”

Rose wrapped her arms around Elizabeth’s shoulders. “Oh, we are so fortunate to have a sister who will save us all from him!”

“Aren’t we?” Dudley said, meeting Elizabeth’s gaze and smiling.

Was it possible that even this man could be worse than her own family? Elizabeth wondered.

But then he had warned her not to provoke him.

And he was so tall. So strong.

“Of course his sisters are no better,” Lottie said sharply. “That older one with all of those strange ideas, she’s loud and coarse. If I ever find myself in company with her I quickly make my excuses, it’s just impossible to have a normal conversation with her.”

“And the younger, she’s not even out yet,” Rose said. “And she’s eight and ten! It’s all because the older one just won’t abide a man, but I can’t imagine that the younger is much better. I’ve heard she’s touched in the head.”

“That or she has some sort of disease,” Lottie said. “That would explain why she’s so old and hasn’t any suitors.”

“Of course it might just be because she is rather plain.” Rose giggled, her smile broad and her cheeks dimpled.

“The brother is awful too,” Lottie said. “Going after Dudley the way he did, he must

be quite mad! He very nearly killed him!”

“I wouldn’t say nearly,” Dudley demurred. “He was lucky, that’s all. I was feeling quite ill on the day.”

His sisters petted him and Elizabeth swallowed, her stomach churning as they drew ever closer to the church. This was what her life was going to be, was it? An angry violent man and a family who hated hers and wanted them dead?

She could certainly tell that the Duke was dangerous when she first met him; it was in the controlled liquid way he moved, the broadness of his shoulders and the quick way his gaze assessed everything around him. It was frightening but it also made a part of her thrill a little, like liquid excitement in her veins. She had never felt it before.

The carriage drew up and rumbled to a stop and there was a flurry of activity as the Duke came over to help his little girls down and fuss over them. There was so much of a fuss, so much going on that Elizabeth didn’t notice until too late that she was on her own with Dudley.

She was never alone with Dudley.

She never dared.

He caught her wrist before she could move to get down from the coach, ignoring the need for a hand to dismount in her rush to depart. “Now, sister. Stay a moment, there’s just one more thing I want to say to you.”

“I cannot tarry,” Elizabeth said, swallowing as she heard how pale and faint her voice was in her own ears. “I must get to the church.”

He leaned close, his voice lowering, a smile on his face as their father came over to

help her down. “It’s just this, dearest. If your husband should happen to be an Othello, or perhaps a Herakles and tear you limb from limb I want you to remember and be glad in the fact that we, your family, will be happy to avenge you.”

His teeth were bared, barely even a smile, and she felt cold all over, numb and trembling as her father handed her down from the carriage and towards the church.

*Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 9:59 am*

“.. a nd charge you both, as ye will answer at the dreadful day of judgment...” the curate intoned, his tiny round body quivering with excitement as he read from the Book of Common Prayer. “...if either of you know any impediment why ye may not be lawfully joined...”

Elizabeth tried as hard as she could to listen to each word. She could feel the beat of her pulse hammering under the delicate skin of her neck, the heat of the gazes of her family burning into her back.

Perhaps in another life she would have been able to stand here with Mrs. Adams at her side giving her away and Sally and Annie in the little chapel, smiles splitting their faces. Instead, the Duchess and Duke of Rosenberg were there, stiff and still as they listened to the ceremony, each step burned into her mind from the single lesson she had been given.

It had clearly burned her father’s wife to be in the same room as her for even that long but they wouldn’t want their precious reputation to be sullied by rumors of a ruined wedding day, and if there was one thing the Duchess cared about more fiercely than anything else it was the safety of her children from more Wilkins blades.

“Wilt thou have this woman,” the chaplain said, turning to the Duke of Westall. He was standing next to her, his tall frame dwarfing hers. She could almost feel the heat from his body and her own skin felt flushed.

She couldn’t think .

“...so long as ye both shall live?”

The Duke didn't look at her, his eyes on the Chaplain, his face serious. "I will."

The Chaplain then turned his attention to Elizabeth and she felt her flush grow hotter as she tried desperately to concentrate. The mixture of fear and anxiety and awareness of him whirling in her mind. Any mistake would be picked apart for months, any slip...

He had finished speaking, Elizabeth realized and said, "I will," as carefully as she could, hoping she had not taken too long.

"Who giveth this woman to be married to this man?" the chaplain asked, looking in broad satisfaction towards the others in the chapel.

There was no pause, though Elizabeth had almost expected there to be one. No one pointed out that she didn't belong to them or with them so they couldn't give her away. Her father didn't turn up his nose or scowl. He stepped forwards instead and said 'I do' as though it was something he was pleased about.

That remained with Elizabeth as the ceremony continued. He looked pleased with her for once, and yet he was marrying her to his biggest enemy.

The Minister was reaching for her hand now, giving it to the Duke, putting her hand into his large, scarred one. "Plight your troth, my dear," he said encouragingly to Elizabeth as though maybe he knew how anxious she was.

She swallowed and had to read the words, but that didn't seem to cause a stir. She said she would take him as her husband as though she had a choice in the matter, that she would hold to him in sickness and in health, that she gave him her troth before God and this holy man who had kind eyes in his tiny old face.

The Duke let go of her hand and Elizabeth glanced cautiously up at him, and wondered if he had imagined this day, who he had imagined at the altar with him. His

expression was still serious as he received the ring from the Minister and placed it on her fourth finger.

“With this ring I thee wed,” the Duke said in a low, thrumming voice. “And with my body I thee worship.”

They said more, but Elizabeth couldn’t hear any of the words. Her part was done. She was married. And she was filled with the thoughts of this tall strong man worshiping her with his body.

“Oh Selina, do pass me some more chocolate!”

“I shall not until you’ve had more buns to fortify yourself with, my dear, you shall not subsist entirely on chocolate.”

“It’s a special day,” Diana, the younger of her two new sisters-in-law, formed a mock pout as she appealed to the elder. Clearly practiced as she was at puppy dog eyes, there was still none of the spoiled pettishness that underlay everything Elizabeth’s own sisters did. “It is indeed, but that is no excuse to sup your breakfast only,” Selina said, moving to pile buns onto her younger sister’s plate. “I shall bring you another cup to drink but only when you have finished something more substantial.”

Elizabeth envied them their free laughter and jostling. She could barely bring herself to move, she was sat so close to the Duke—her husband— that moving made her all the more aware of his presence. Her plate had on it a few pieces of fruit and a little bit of cake and of that she had not eaten any.

The wedding ceremony had been bad enough but the madness of the breakfast was quickly making her feel suffocated, hemmed on one side by Dudley and on the other by the new man she belonged to, the man who would decide her whole existence soon.

They were ensconced in a long room in the Westall Estate, the table laden with everything one could hope for at a breakfast and lined with enough chairs for both families and the friends that the Duke of Westall had invited. It was a vast place, sprawling out over beautiful grounds.

It was overwhelming, the luxuriousness of it all. It was too much. She wanted her room and Sally. She wanted to get away from all the people watching everything that she was doing.

Would this breakfast ever end?

She glanced over at the Duke, or Stephen as she supposed she had the right to call him. He was still very severe, the lines of his face like they were cut from stone. There was no gaiety or joy in that face, though it was handsome. His lips were set into a firm line, his eyes focused on a conversation that his brother was having with her father.

What would he look like if he smiled, she wondered.

“May I have your attention,” he said in a low commanding voice that she thought for a moment was directed at her. Then she realized he was standing, glass in hand and addressing the room. “I ask you all, ladies and gentlemen, to raise your glasses with me to my new bride. I am sure you will agree that her loveliness is only surpassed by how ardently one must feel that I am a lucky man to have secured her affections. To my wife, Elizabeth, the Duchess of Westall.”

She stared up at him, eyes round. The words were so kind, so sweet and unexpected, and yet as he finished his speech he turned his gaze on her and it was cold as ice. There was no affection there for her, nothing kind.

All this time she had been sitting here feeling drawn to him, aware to her very bones of how well he looked and he saw her as nothing but a tool to bring two warring

families together as one. She was his enemy and she could see as plainly as day that she was not welcome here in his home.

There was a murmur of appreciation from the gathering, who raised their glasses in response and sipped the light, fragrant champagne.

Elizabeth barely touched hers. The anxiety in her chest was in her throat now, threatening to choke her. It only got worse as Dudley finished a long draught of his drink and leant over towards her seat.

“What a lucky girl you are, dear sister, to have found a man who values you so highly.”

“Indeed,” she said softly, her eyes on her plate.

“I wonder how high that value really is,” he said softly, his lips red from berries and his smile wide with cruelty. “I wonder how high anyone here would value you if they knew more of your true background.”

This did not seem safe to reply to, so she did not.

“Have you ever seen a finer spread? Have you ever seen such a fine group of people gathered together? I simply cannot imagine how you will manage in this world, sister dearest. You are such a poor, clumsy thing. You are sure to embarrass yourself and the Westall name before long.” He put a hand on her arm, his grip tight and painful even as his voice was dripping with fake kindness. “I am only speaking for your own good, sister. You will have to learn very fast to know your place, after all.”

“Her place is at my side,” said a deep calm voice, and Elizabeth glanced up to see Stephen take Dudley’s hand and remove it firmly from her arm. “I am sure my wife, the Duchess, is aware of how much good you mean her, Lord Dudley. It’s hardly the right conversation for a wedding.”



There was a moment where the tension between them was a frisson of hate, Dudley's face pale with two spots of flush high on his cheeks in fury at being given so stern a warning.

Elizabeth almost smiled. She had never been defended before, never had a name or title of her own to defend herself with. It made a little of the fear and anxiety filling her ebb away.

"Of course, one simply can't interrupt a wedding," Dudley said sweetly, staring at Stephen. "I have to congratulate you on your felicity. It's very appealing. Perhaps I should be looking for my own wife. You could introduce me to your sisters. The young one looks particularly delectable."

It felt as though thunder had entered the room with them. Stephen leaned forwards, his voice never raising, his tone never sharpening, and said simply, "I shall not and you will never speak of them again." However, the expression on his face and the taught lines of his body made Elizabeth shiver.

He was a man who meant what he said. He was a man created for danger.

"How dare you—" Dudley started up a little from his seat, grasping the opportunity immediately to cause trouble as he adored to do, but their father was there and putting a hand on his shoulder.

"I am sure whatever this is can be explained as wedding day spirits, is that not so, Westall? My son?"

There was a moment when Elizabeth thought Dudley might do it anyway, a moment when she was sure there would be no bringing this back from the edge.

But then he nodded slowly and sank back into his chair.

It was the first time in her life she had ever seen Dudley not get his way. A small flame that felt like joy lit in her heart and she turned to Stephen, ready to thank him.

He was glaring at her, stormy eyes full of anger. It was as though he felt she was to blame, like he was angry at her, and Elizabeth shrank back a little, turned back to her plate and swallowed her thanks.

After only a little more time, the Rosenberg party decided it was time to leave and with them went the rest of the guests, laughing and complimenting the couple and wishing them the best as though Elizabeth had not sat as still as a mouse for the entire affair.

Once the farewells had been said, Stephen stood again from his seat and glanced at his own family with a small nod. Both young ladies rose and exited the room, soon followed by their brother who seemed a little more reluctant to go.

For the first time since the proposal, they were alone. Elizabeth felt her heart begin to pound once more and she stood too, hating to be so much at a disadvantage to him.

Why was he so tall? So frustratingly handsome? Why couldn't he have been at least a little ugly so she could look at his face and not feel heat in her veins at the same time?

"Wife," Stephen said seriously, turning to her, his hands clasped behind his back. "I am aware it has been a trying day, but I ask you to remember your position as the new Duchess of Westall. You are no longer the kind of person that Lord Dudley may speak to the way that he was doing."

Was he scolding her? Elizabeth felt a little of her anxiety fade and be replaced with anger. "I am distressed that family matters should have so upset you, Your Grace," she said with slow deliberation. "Perhaps you could educate me on how you would like me to respond in future since you are the expert on all matters."

“You would do well to listen to such instruction,” he said, the muscles in his jaw bunching a little as though he were grinding his teeth. “You are clearly ill-prepared to take on the part of being Duchess and you have a lot to learn. It is not my fault that this is true and I shall not apologize for pointing it out.”

“And I shall not apologize for pointing out that you are speaking like a pontificating old school master trying to teach a class of children,” Elizabeth snapped back. “I shall treat my brother as I decide to treat my brother, it is not for you to tell me the way I should act.”

“It is my business if you act in a manner which undermines the respect our family is due!”

“Oh please, Your Grace, do tell me.” She knew that she was speaking too much, saying too much, but his words hurt and she could not help but battle back. She would never again be part of a world where all she could do was suffer in silence. “Exactly what respect is that?”

“The respect that you are failing to show me, as your husband and as the Duke of this estate.”

“I am a quick study, Your Grace, I learn from experience. I shall show you the same respect I receive from you and no more.”

Stephen made an explosive gesture with one of his hands. “Why must everything be a battle with you, woman!”

“I cannot be blamed for waging war on a battleground that has been picked for me,” Elizabeth retorted. “Perhaps you should reconsider your approach, my husband.”

“Perhaps,” he said, stepping closer to her in a long stride, his height looming over her. He leaned down and caught her chin in his scarred fingers, his touch warm even

as his eyes were burning with anger and heat. “Perhaps I should introduce you to this new approach when I come to your chambers tonight, my wife.”

Elizabeth swallowed hard, her words evaporating in her mouth as he leaned close, his face near to hers, their eyes locked on each other's. It seemed her body was intensely aware of his, of the mere inches between them. It felt as though she might break apart with how he made her feel, it felt as though she might die if he were to ever know about it. It was like being pinned by a hunter, waiting for him to strike.

“Until then,” he said softly, let her go and walked from the room, leaving her weak, her chest heaving and her face aflame. What had happened? What was that ? What was she going to do?