



Forever and a Duke (The Bridewell Sisters #1)

Author: *Christy Carlyle*

Category: Historical

Description: A roguish duke seeks to escape the demons of his past via a marriage of convenience with his friend's bluestocking sister and gets far more than he bargained for.

Miss Lily Bridewell—stubborn, intelligent, and fiercely protective of those she loves—is determined to keep the misfortunes that have befallen her family from affecting her sisters' futures. When the heir to their father's title and estate ousts them from their family home, Lilys desperation drives her into the arms of the one man she fears she cannot trust—especially with her heart.

Griffin Knightley, Duke of Edgerton, vowed to mend his rakehell ways when he inherited a dukedom. But he falls back into old habits one fateful night that leads to tragedy—the death of his best friend. Guilt haunts him even as he tries to become a respectable nobleman, and when his late friend's sisters lose their home, he sees it as his duty to assist them. A marriage of convenience with the eldest would solve two dilemmas—his need for a duchess and the Bridewell sisters' need for a home.

A simple agreement. A practical transaction. But attraction to his strong-willed bluestocking bride makes it impossible for Griffin to be the cool, levelheaded duke he's determined to be, and Lily wont settle for anything less than his heart.

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PROLOGUE

October 1890

Griffin Kingsley, the recently minted Duke of Edgerton, was cold, exhausted, and very probably going to die. Given how recklessly he'd lived the last few years of his life, it was a mystery to all good society how he'd made it to six and twenty unscathed.

His devil-may-care nature might be forgivable if his foolishness didn't touch anyone else. But tonight, his impetuous choices affected more than only him. In a burst of clarity, he realized they always had. Every mistake that had led him to this misty and damnably cold Hampstead field in the dead of night had brought his best friend too.

"We need to end this. Now." Something was wrong. He felt it in his gut—a gnawing certainty that everything about this moment would have irreparable consequences. "We need to call off."

Leo Bridewell, loyal to a fault and far too willing to follow Griffin's lead, spluttered in protest. "You want to beg off? What about a Kingsley never backs down?"

"A fool's philosophy. A wise man knows to choose his battles. And, besides, you're not a Kingsley."

"An honorary Kingsley." He tipped a crooked smile. Their friendship had been so long and steadfast, they referred to each other as brothers. "You won two duels last year."

“They weren’t truly duels and there was no winning. I punched Rockford in the nose, and he threatened to shoot me before passing out from too much gin. Wilcox and I met in the dead of night, but he collapsed from fright, and his second was too sensible to pick up the pistol in his stead.”

“You never told me any of that.”

“Why embarrass either of them with details? Rockford drinks too much, and Wilcox’s bark is far greater than his bite.” Griffin leaned in, clutching his friend’s sleeve. “But Basil Pomeroy is a madman. He won’t back down, and you won’t survive this.”

“I’m a good shot.”

“To hell with precision. It’s cold and dark, and we need to call off. Leo, this is a bloody mistake.”

Griffin knew about mistakes. He’d made more in his life than he could possibly list—he’d overspent, he hadn’t studied as he should have, he hadn’t spent time with his mother before he lost her, and he’d bedded widows when he was too drunk to even remember their names afterwards.

The Kingsleys were a family of mistake makers. It was almost a family curse—and sometimes with deadly consequences.

His uncle had made the mistake of riding a barely tamed horse across a sodden field in a lightning storm. His father had made the mistake of never speaking to a physician about the sharp pains in his side until it was too late. And his brother had been fool enough to take a drunken midnight dip in the ducal estate’s pond. The absinthe he’d guzzled caused him to forget he had no earthly notion how to swim.

Perhaps the curse continued down to new generations because Kingsleys were too bloody bullheaded to learn from their predecessors. Because here he was. Drunk. Cold. Regretting everything that would come next.

If Leo died tonight, it wouldn't simply be a mistake. It would be a tragedy.

"Don't do this, Bridewell." He gripped his best friend's arm harder to emphasize his seriousness. "Please."

Seriousness was a rarity between them. They loved nothing as much as being jolly. Laughter and gaiety were the hallmarks of their nearly two-decade friendship. And tonight, being as Leo rarely took Griffin seriously, especially when they were both full of whiskey, he feared his words would have little effect.

Leo shot him a squint-eyed look in the moonlight. "You don't think I can best him?"

"This isn't about besting him. A wise man would walk away. He'll hate that most of all." Griffin glanced over his shoulder at the man pacing in the long shadows across the field. "Pomeroy is here to draw blood."

"As am I," Leo said, chuckling darkly. "Teach him to insult Miss Fairchild."

"Eliza Fairchild is not your betrothed! She's not even a woman you're seriously pursuing. She's sure as hell not worth losing your life."

"It's the prinsh..." Leo cleared his throat, though they both knew well enough that it wouldn't clear the drunken haze. "The principle," he said more clearly. "Pomeroy is a brute."

At the sound of footsteps thudding across the grass, Griffin spun, then stepped forward to shield Leo.

“It’s Halford,” Leo said.

Griffin strode forward to meet Pomeroy’s second. He didn’t know Lord Halford well, but he suspected the man was no keener to cart off a dead friend than he was.

“I’m doing my utmost to convince Bridewell to call off,” he told his fellow second.

In the moonlight, the lean nobleman arched both dark brows in surprise. “Is he willing? Because I doubt Pomeroy would be. He sent me over to insist we delay no further.”

Griffin swallowed hard. Bile pushed back, rising in his throat. A glint of metal caught his eye. Pomeroy stood with his pistol clutched in his hand.

“You tell him the Duke of Edgerton has called off. Take him home.” He’d possessed his late brother’s title for less than a year, and this was the first time he’d tried wielding it to force matters to his liking, as his father had been so skilled at doing.

“No!” Leo shouted. “Take your places, gentleman. There will be no calling off.”

Somehow, Griffin’s words had carried on the breeze and Leo heard him. Bloody rotting hell.

Griffin swung back and began rushing toward Leo. Fear froze his heart in his chest when Leo bellowed across the field, waving the pistol in his hand.

“Stop!” The shout burst from Griffin as Leo raised the pistol.

He lurched toward his friend, determined to knock the weapon from his grip.

Then the night exploded with a vicious crack. Before Griffin could reach him, Leo

jerked back. Time slowed. Griffin held his breath as Leo toppled to the ground.

Shouts rang out behind him. Griffin rushed to his friend. He rolled Leo onto his back and only began to breathe again when Leo looked back at him.

“Should have listened?—”

“Someone get a bloody doctor!” As he screamed, he shrugged off his coat and laid it over Leo. Then he removed his neckcloth, pressing it to the spot where the bullet had struck him in the chest. “Hold that tight.”

“Pomeroy’s bolted. Took my damned carriage,” Halford called breathlessly, his voice pitched high.

“Take mine and fetch a doctor,” Griffin told him.

“Would it not be quicker to take Bridewell to one?”

After a moment’s hesitation, weighing the fear of whatever pain they’d cause Leo, Griffin agreed.

“Help me lift him.”

Halford took Leo’s legs. Griffin lifted him under his shoulders.

Leo hissed in pain as they made their way to Griffin’s carriage, and somehow even that reaction reassured Griffin that Leo would get through this. His friend was strong and almost as bullheaded as the Kingsleys.

Halford shouted up the name and direction of a physician. Griffin offered the nobleman a nod of thanks.

They laid Leo on one bench and Griffin sat opposite him, leaning forward. He kept one hand on the cloth covering Leo's wound and the other wrapped around his friend's hand, squeezing tight to remind Leo he was not alone.

"We'll get you stitched up," he vowed.

Leo's eyes fluttered closed.

"How much farther?" Griffin barked at Halford.

"Left up the lane and we'll be there."

"Leo, only a few moments longer."

His friend's eyes opened again, wide now. His skin had gone terrifyingly pale.

"I'm here," Griffin assured him. "And we'll soon get you put to rights."

Leo tipped his head to look at Griffin. "Take care of my sisters."

"You'll bloody well take care of those hoydens yourself." He attempted the words as he usually would, with a teasing lilt, but his throat burned. His voice emerged as a rusty rasp.

"Promise," Leo urged, trying to lift his head, the muscles in his neck straining.

"You have my promise, damnit."

Leo's body seemed to melt against the cushioned bench, then his eyes drifted closed once more. His fingers slackened in Griffin's grip. A breath shuddered from his lips, and then—nothing.

Griffin knew in that instant, his best friend was gone.

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CHAPTER 1

April 1891

“Can you hear anything?” Daphne’s whisper came first. Light and sweet, as if she wasn’t certain she should dare interrupt.

“Let me have a try,” Ivy put in vehemently. She’d just turned seventeen, read Mary Wollstonecraft and detective novels, and said almost everything vehemently.

“Both of you must be quiet if this is to work.” To emphasize her words, Lily Bridewell lifted a finger to her lips, then steadied her breath, trying to shut out all other sounds.

Listening intently, she held her stethoscope against the damask-papered wall. In the room on the other side, she heard movement but no words.

Metal clattered as if their cousin and his associate were going through the silverware drawers. Then came the scrape of porcelain on porcelain.

Lily closed her eyes and sent up a quick prayer that they wouldn’t chip Mama’s favorite china set. It was painted with pink roses and the prettiest purple violets and had only come out for the most special occasions.

“What can you hear?” Ivy demanded as she huddled behind Daphne at Lily’s side.

“Shh, they’re beginning to talk,” Lily told her in a whisper.

She couldn't bear to report the bit about them manhandling the dinnerware.

One voice was quite recognizably her cousin Edwin, though she could not make out what he was saying. The other man's tone was deeper and seemed little more than a sound of assent.

"Well?" Ivy shout-whispered, her face scrunched in worry.

"They're going through the items in the sideboard, I think."

"That makes sense," Daphne put in quietly and with her usual equanimity.

When Lily and Ivy swung their gazes her way, her blue eyes widened.

"What?" she said in a defensive tone. "He's inherited the house and all that's in it. He's curious."

Lily pulled her stethoscope from the wall and let out a heavy sigh. Of course, Daphne was right. Knowing Edwin as they did, none of them should have been surprised he'd show up and tally the worth of everything. He'd brought a solicitor with him, for goodness sakes.

"But they're our belongings." Ivy slumped down onto a chair and crossed her arms.

"Not anymore." Daphne's soft interjection was tinged with so much sadness that Lily swallowed against a lump in her throat.

The truth of her sister's words settled over the room like a gloom-filled cloud.

It had been six months since their brother's death. They were just out of their months of mourning black, according to the dictates of polite society. Yet their cousin's

arrival and what it portended about their futures dredged up all the pain of losing Leo, making the grief feel suddenly fresh and raw.

She reached out to wrap an arm around Daphne's slim shoulders and Ivy rose from her chair to pull both of them into an embrace. They'd done the same many times in the past handful of months, requiring no words, just closeness.

Their younger twin sisters had been hugged and comforted aplenty too. Hyacinth and Marigold had come late in their parent's marriage and were only on the cusp of turning ten. Daphne and Ivy were but two years apart in age, and Lily had been an only child for four years until Daphne came along.

Lily felt she could speak to her two eldest sisters openly about the loss of their brother and the possibility of losing their family home as a result. But they'd all agreed that the twins should be sheltered from such hard truths as long as possible.

And there'd been many hard truths to accept in the past six months.

Lily learned that the course of one's life could change in the blink of an eye and by circumstances beyond one's control. No amount of tears or prayers or willpower could alter what had befallen their family.

But she'd also learned that life went on, even if your heart did not feel ready for it. Even if memories clung to you, pulling you back into happier times. Even if you cursed today for not being what once had been.

They'd struggled most in the winter. Leo's birthday came and went, and they all agreed that they'd half-expected him to burst through the door, bringing his usual charm and joviality with him. Then their first holiday season without him passed, cold and somber. But the first hint of spring had brought gentle rains and cool breezes. Even now, the trees outside the music room window danced and swayed in

the wind. Below them, snowdrops and crocuses shot up through the grass in bursts of white and purple.

So much beauty on a day she and her sisters had been dreading for months.

When Leo had lost his life at the hands of London ruffians and their cousin had inherited the only home she and her sisters had ever known, they'd understood that he would eventually take possession. In a letter of condolence, he'd said he was willing to wait. Lily thought that meant affording them a full year of mourning. Apparently, she'd ascribed more patience to her cousin than the man possessed.

"What do you think he's going to do?" Daphne asked in her usual soft tone.

She twisted the two ribbons hanging from the front of her gown into a tight knot and cast worried glances at the wall to their left. Their cousin's arrival had worn away at her natural serenity.

"He's going to make a full assessment, I expect." Inspection was probably a more accurate word. Their cousin, Edwin Bridewell, now bearing their father's—and oh so briefly their brother's—title of Lord Dashford, hadn't given them much notice. A letter had arrived from Edwin but a day before he had, informing Lily of his plan to visit. He'd arrived quite early in the morning. Eager, it seemed, to inspect the modest country home that would now be his.

From the dining room, even without a stethoscope against the wall, they heard the squeak of hinges and crack of wood on wood as drawers and cabinets were opened and closed.

The wait for their cousin to finish sifting their valuables was maddening, and Lily loathed inaction. Daphne had inherited most of their father's patience. That virtue had somehow skipped Ivy entirely and Lily's portion wore thin at moments like these.

“Perhaps I should go and speak to him.” As the eldest, Lily felt responsible for her four younger sisters. When she spoke to Edwin, it would be on behalf of all of them. Fate had put their futures in his hands, though her stomach twisted at the prospect of appealing to her cousin’s sense of compassion.

Mostly because she wasn’t certain he possessed any.

Four years older, he’d always been one to lord his seniority over her since they were children. Even in his youth, he’d taken great pleasure in teasing that one day he would be lord of Briarfield. Back then, Lily had never worried. Papa had been healthy and full of life. And Leo seemed to emerge from every reckless endeavor unscathed.

But then Papa had fallen ill, and Leo had tempted fate one too many times.

“We might as well let him finish,” Ivy said with her usual practicality. “I suspect he won’t stop until every single valuable has been tallied.”

“Then I’ll speak to him as soon as he’s finished.” Lily put a bit of their late mother’s determination into her tone. “But do not fear. We have options.”

“You mean when he casts us from our home without a farthing?” Ivy was nearly as cynical as she was bold.

“We don’t know that he will,” Daphne admonished gently. “We don’t truly know his plans.”

“But we do know his nature.” Ivy laid her book aside and strode toward the wall that separated the music and dining rooms. She laid her ear against the wallpaper.

Lily cleared her throat.

“Actually, I’ve been wanting to speak to both of you about that.” Lily sat in one of the room’s overstuffed chairs and loosened her hold on the letter she’d pulled from her skirt pocket. “I didn’t know if we should wait until the twins come down.”

“If it’s bad news, we should spare them,” Ivy put in decidedly.

She was as sure of her opinion as anyone Lily had ever known, but Ivy hadn’t yet wept for the loss of their brother. That worried her. Not because she didn’t think Ivy felt the loss, but because she knew that, despite her sister’s passionate nature, she tended to keep her deepest feelings bottled up.

Lily smoothed out the letter on her lap. “I’ve had a reply from Aunt Margaret.”

Both girls focused on her intently.

Lily bit her lip. What their aunt offered probably seemed generous, but it would overthrow both of her sister’s aspirations for their futures. Not to mention Lily’s own.

“She says that she knows of two families in need of governesses,” Lily began, “and is willing to put myself and Daphne forward as candidates.”

“No,” Ivy strode to the center of the room, her hands planted on her hips.

“Let me finish,” Lily said, though her own throat burned at what came next. “She would like to train you, Ivy, to be her companion. She says she is busy with many charitable endeavors?—“

“This is madness,” Ivy cut in. “You can’t be seriously considering such a fate. And what of the twins?”

Their elderly aunt thought the twins would be too much for her to manage, but she

suggested Edwin could take them in after he married, which he seemed quite determined to do soon.

Lily's stomach roiled at the prospect of telling her sisters that the man currently rifling through their silverware had been suggested as Hyacinth and Marigold's guardian.

"So there will be no coming out," Daphne said on a shuddery exhale.

"I'm sorry." Lily's heart ached with a sharp pain she knew would only deepen as the life they'd known came apart at the seams. Especially if they were all forced to go their separate ways.

"We should run away," Ivy said matter-of-factly, as if it was at all a reasonable option. "We could go to France."

"There are no more options in France than here," Lily told her, trying for logic, which Ivy did possess a great deal of, despite her passionate nature.

"And we know no one," Daphne put in. "At least here, there are some who might take pity on us."

"Then we should we begin a list." Ivy strode to the chair she'd abandoned and scooped up the notebook and pen she always kept nearby.

"The Kingsleys," Daphne offered immediately.

Lily bit her tongue. The Kingsleys were the highest-ranked family of their acquaintance, with the grandest properties and royal blood in their veins, and the man who'd just inherited all of it—and become Duke of Edgerton—had been a friend of their brother's. His best friend. Indeed, they'd been together that fateful night in

London.

He'd never spoken to her of the details, but he'd watched her intently at the funeral. His gaze had seemed to follow her every movement. Which was terribly strange, since Griffin Kingsley had rarely noticed her much prior to that day.

The mortifying part was that she'd spent years wishing he would notice her. Strikingly handsome with dark gold hair and stormy blue eyes, Lily found it impossible to ignore the man whenever he was in her vicinity. But her interest had never been reciprocated. He'd only ever addressed her with simple amiability, as he had her sisters, when visiting Leo at home.

"I'm almost done," Ivy proclaimed as she scribbled furiously, apparently assembling a list far beyond Daphne's suggestion.

In her own mind, Lily could think of very few friends, family members, or acquaintances who'd be willing to house five Bridewell sisters.

A rap on the music door stilled them all.

Lily cast her gaze at Daphne and Ivy, though she knew it was her task to face the man on the other side of the polished oak panel.

Before she could offer any reply, Edwin swung the door open.

"May I speak to you, Cousin?" He stared straight at Lily, leaving no doubt which cousin he meant. And he hadn't entered the room, indicating that she should join him in the hall.

"Of course," Lily replied and then rose from her chair.

Edwin offered one sweeping gaze and a nod of his head to Daphne and Ivy before lifting an arm, urging Lily to join him.

When she did, he closed the music room door and started off down the hall without a word. Apparently, Lily was expected to follow. His brusque manner grated at her frayed nerves.

He stopped in front their father's study. For a brief time, Leo's study, though even he had continued to refer to it as Papa's. Lily used it now as her space for managing the household.

For a moment, she wondered if Edwin might ask her permission to enter.

"I'd prefer we had this conversation privately, if that suits you," he said with a brief glance back at her.

"I..." Lily swallowed hard. How could she refuse him when the house was his by the laws of England?

He took her single syllable as agreement and opened the door.

Inside, Edwin stopped immediately and looked around as if confused. His gaze swept over the vase of flowers on the desk, the pastel pillows in the window seat, and a small pile of books Lily had left on the settee.

"You've been using this room?" There was more shock than accusation in his tone.

"Yes, it seemed practical. All of the accounting ledgers are in here, and the books—" Lily stopped herself from saying more. Edwin did not need to know that she had claimed her father's medical books as her own and had been studying them for years.

“This house and its contents mean a great deal to you.”

“Of course they do.”

He crossed his arms and wandered the room. Clearly, this was one space he had yet to subject to a thorough inspection. Then he pivoted suddenly, and all his focus fell on Lily.

She endured it, trying to muster a smile.

“I must return to London for a matter in the Lords, so I shall not waste your time or mine.” He lifted his hand and waved it in an arc to encompass the study and the pile of ledgers. “You’ve taken on a great deal since your brother’s death.”

Lily flinched, and his gaze softened a bit.

“Forgive me for speaking so plainly, but I don’t believe in prevarication.”

“I prefer plain-speaking, Cousin.”

His mouth tightened then, and Lily wasn’t sure why. She hadn’t seen the man in years. Indeed, the last time she had seen him, he’d been a cruel teenager with a particular loathing for Leo. At the time, she’d thought it must be jealousy, since Leo was handsome and convivial and everything Edwin was not.

“I need to marry.” He flicked his gaze to her mouth, then down as if taking in her gown. Or worse, inspecting her figure.

Lily swallowed so hard her throat ached, and a chill raced down her back, for she suspected what might come next.

“You have no wish to leave your home. If you did, you could have married years ago.”

“I...” Lily started to explain that marriage had not been an option when she’d been left as the sole caretaker of her family —first after Mama’s death, then Papa’s, then Leo’s. But the way Edwin gaped at her unsettled her so much that she couldn’t find the words.

“If we marry, you can become mistress of Briarfield for the rest of your life. Provide me with an heir, and you may teach our child to value it too.”

A chill that had raced down her back a moment before now settled in her bones. Lily shivered as if a winter wind had blasted through the room. Yet her face felt hot, flushed. Panic twisted her belly into knots.

Edwin’s brow pleated in a frown. “Are you unwell?”

“I fear I am. Would you excuse me a moment?”

He approached then, far too close, and she barely resisted the urge to hold out her arm to keep him at bay. Instead, she forced herself to keep still.

“Do consider my offer,” he said firmly. “I will require an answer within the hour. It is only fair that you and your sisters know your fate before I return to London.”

Lily nodded and turned to depart, but he grasped her upper arm, holding her in place. He tugged her closer as the strangest grin caused his upper lip to curl.

“We would rub on well together, you and I.” His gaze locked on her mouth once more.

Lily arched away from him. “I am unwell, Cousin. Perhaps I’ve fallen ill, and you wouldn’t wish to catch it.”

He jerked back as if he feared she’d give him the plague.

“I must lie down.”

When he nodded curtly, Lily spun and dashed from the room. She pulled the door closed behind her, wishing she’d never been fool enough to join him in the study alone.

But how could she know he’d make such an outrageous offer? It made her skin crawl and her stomach riot. She hadn’t entirely fibbed when she’d said she was unwell.

Clutching her stomach, she rushed into the music room. She slammed the door shut, pressing her back to it as she faced her sisters.

Daphne shot up from the settee.

“What’s the matter?” she rushed over, then lifted a hand to Lily’s cheek. “You’re holding your breath. Let it out. Breathe.”

Lily dragged in long gasping breaths. She pressed her palm to her chest, willing her heartbeat to slow.

“You’re flushed and look angry. Did he toss us out?” Ivy demanded, fists planted on her hips. “The rotter.”

“He did not toss us out,” Lily finally managed. “He offered a...solution.” She swung her gaze from Daphne’s sweet blue eyes, filled with worry, to Ivy’s moss-green gaze that was full of thunder. After a gulp, she confessed the offer that made her want to

cast up her accounts. “If I marry him, we can all stay.”

“No,” Daphne whispered, a hand against her throat.

“No!” Ivy said more loudly and emphatically. “You cannot marry him.”

Her own heart echoed the same sentiment. No, she could never, ever imagine being Edwin’s wife. He was her cousin, for heaven’s sake. One who’d bullied her throughout childhood. Everything in Lily revolted at the prospect, but then she looked at her sisters. Guilt welled up to push away the revulsion. She considered the stability it would offer them. That’s what they all wanted most—to remain in their beloved home.

As Lily’s mind spun, Ivy tapped her lower lip and paced the floral rug their mother had adored so much.

After a few moments, Ivy stopped and turned to both of them. “This calls for desperate measures.”

CHAPTER 2

Griffin's eyes slid open on a shout. He realized it had come from his own throat.

He'd jolted awake from the same dream he'd had since the night Leo died. Breathing deep, he waited for his heart to settle into a regular patter and then let out a groan.

His back ached as if he'd slept on solid marble, and his knees popped angrily when he tried to stretch out his legs. The antique settee in his father's study—now his study—never seemed a comfortable resting place, but he'd been so bleary-eyed the night before while trying to make sense of the bloody estate ledgers that he'd slumped down onto the sapphire-blue monstrosity anyway.

Anything was better than the ducal suite.

He could not bear to be in that room for long without thinking of Alexander. His brother had only been duke for three years, and yet he'd redecorated many aspects of the edifice their family had lived in for generations. He'd started with the ducal suite, determined to put his stamp on it. Now, every aspect of the room—from the dark maroon wallpaper, to the bucolic landscape paintings his brother favored, to the enormous mahogany four-poster bed with the family crest emblazoned at the top of each post—reminded Griffin of his brother.

The man had dubious taste in decor, but he'd been passionate about every choice he made. Alexander never doubted himself or his own taste. Like most Kingsleys, he had never been wracked with anxiety over how a choice might reverberate into the future.

Griffin had never worried about the future much either. Not until he'd done nothing to stop his best friend from tossing his bloody life away on a misty field.

He surged to his feet as memories flooded back, so sharp he could smell gun powder. His body refused to suffer in stillness. A ball of electricity invaded his belly, and he itched to get out of his own skin.

In his reckless youth, he'd have sought escape—in women, in drink, in gambling, and every reckless endeavor he could find. But then Alexander had died. And then Leo.

Griffin never wanted to be a duke. He'd never been trained and mentored for the role the way his brother had been, but he knew a duke was expected to refrain from drinking himself into stupor. He knew that damned much.

So now he sought relief in the mundanity of a ramble across Edgerton land or a hard ride on Apollo. The enormous bay horse was the only thing he'd inherited from his brother that he didn't regret acquiring.

The skies looked as if a spring rainstorm was coming, but he told himself he could manage a quick ride before the worst of it bucketed down.

Heading out of the study, he pressed a hand to his back where muscles still screamed their hatred of that damned settee. But he didn't get more than a few steps before his grandmother called to him from the drawing room across the hall.

"Griffin, darling, won't you come and greet Lady Harrington?"

He drew in a long breath. The ride on Apollo would have to wait. "Of course, Grandmama."

He could not regret asking her to come and stay with him at Rosemere, the ducal

estate. In the last year, he'd lost his brother and best friend. His parents had passed years before. The last few months had been the loneliest of his life, and he'd welcomed his grandmother's company and advice. As dowager duchess, she knew what was expected of him, and she was determined to help him take on the role in a manner that would make his father proud.

"Welcome, Lady Harrington." He nodded at the older woman, who was one of his grandmother's closest confidantes. The two were forever visiting each other, gossiping about the goings-on in the county, and competing against each other at chess.

"Your Grace." She offered a warm smile. Almost too warm.

He'd learned from his grandmother that Lady Harrington had an unwed granddaughter she was keen for him to meet. Griffin did not share that eagerness.

All the duties of the dukedom were still a tangle, and he woke each day feeling the weight of all of it. Though he had every intention of marrying—it was one of those duties that had fallen to him—he had no time for matchmaking at the moment.

"We were just remarking on the Godfreys' new addition. An enormous conservatory," his grandmother said as if it was the most fascinating tidbit of news she'd heard in months.

"Positively soaring ceilings," Lady Harrington enthused. "Just imagine it, Georgina. They say it will be the equivalent of two stories high."

"Not as much square footage as we have in Rosemere's conservatory, I'd wager."

Griffin pressed his lips together to keep from smiling.

To his grandmother, everything was a competition, and she was determined that the Kingsleys be the best in every category.

Lady Harrington lifted her teacup and observed her friend. “But do you still use the space, Georgina?”

Oh, she had his grandmother there. Though he knew she’d once fancied herself quite the gardener, she claimed the conservatory was too much fuss to maintain nowadays.

To deflect, his grandmother waved him farther into the room.

“Come and sit, won’t you? We were just musing on how fine a country house party would be.”

Griffin didn’t want to sit. Indeed, anxious energy still had him tapping his foot, rapping his fingers against the arm of his coat while he stood at the drawing room threshold.

“I was just heading out for a ride. Perhaps later?”

She made a little noise. One he’d become quite familiar with in the past months. A harrumph of unmistakable disappointment.

Griffin gritted his teeth and proceeded into the drawing room. “Very well,” he said to appease her.

After settling into one of the elegant armchairs, he gestured in a rolling motion toward his grandmother. “Go on. Tell me about this house party. Who’s invited us?”

She smiled at him. “You misunderstand, my dear. We were discussing how grand it would be if you hosted a house party here at Rosemere.”

Griffin shook his head before his mouth had a chance to form words. “I don’t think...”

Her silver brows both winged up. He could feel Lady Harrington staring expectantly too.

“A house party? At Rosemere?” Griffin understood precisely what she expected of him, but he still wanted to retreat from the notion.

He hadn’t yet made sense of the bloody ledgers, and now she wanted to bring a dozen visitors to Derbyshire? For weeks?

“It would be an excellent way to set the tone for the dukedom and allow a few of the finest families to see what a gracious host you are.”

Was he? He’d lived in a London townhouse for years and rarely entertained except for a paramour now and then. He was a chronic soiree attendee and very rarely sought the role of host.

But he knew why he should be one now, even if none of it sounded appealing.

Duty.

Of course, his grandmother was right. His father had been a leader in the Lords and a popular member of the community around the local village. Alexander had been on his way to following in those footsteps.

“Let’s begin the discussion at dinner, Grandmama.” He cast his gaze at her friend. “Will you join us this evening, Lady Harrington?”

She blinked as if surprised by the question and then offered a warm smile. “Thank

you, Your Grace, for the kind invitation, but I cannot tonight.”

“Soon then?”

“Perhaps I could bring Alina when I return.” Her eyes had taken on a strategic sort of gleam that made Griffin’s skin itch.

He’d seen that look before among marriage-minded mamas at society balls during the Season.

What the hell could he say to that?

“Of course, she’s welcome too.” One glance at his grandmother told him that he’d pleased her, and that was satisfying enough to put any worries about Lady Harrington’s matchmaking urges aside. “Now, ladies, please forgive me, but I have an appointment with Apollo.”

“Have a care when you ride that beast,” his grandmother said warmly.

He stood and then bent to brush a kiss against her cheek on his way out of the room. Rain clouds were darkening the sky, but they were still off in the west, and he’d choose a short route for his ride. He strode into the hall, preparing to turn past the staircase to head out to the stables.

“It’s a terrible shame about the Bridewells.” Lady Harrington’s voice carried from the drawing room.

Griffin stopped short as if he’d struck a wall. He stilled, listening for his grandmother’s response.

“No one expected the cousin to come so soon,” she finally said. “Are you quite

certain?”

“Their housemaid and ours are cousins, and the information passed to my lady’s maid.”

“Dreadful.”

Griffin’s gut clenched. Leo’s words rang in his head. Take care of my sisters. Among all the other responsibilities he’d taken on, he’d failed in fulfilling that one. The last time he’d seen them had been at Leo’s funeral, the pain he’d seen on the sisters’ faces haunted him.

A protective urge welled up. Nothing dreadful would befall the sisters if he could help it. Turning back, he stepped into the drawing room once more.

“What’s happened to the Bridewells?”

His grandmother’s eyes widened. “We thought you were off flying across the countryside.”

“I was just on my way and heard you mention the Bridewells.” He glanced between the two women. “You sounded concerned for them.”

“The loss of their brother was such a tragedy,” Lady Harrington said before taking another sip of tea.

Griffin clenched his jaw, tightening his fist around the riding gloves he held. “Indeed.”

Out of the corner of his eye, his grandmother give the tiniest shake of her head at her friend. She alone knew the darkness that had all but swallowed him after Leo’s death.

“But why are you discussing them?”

Lady Harrington started to speak and then cast a glance at his grandmother questioningly.

“Their cousin has arrived, apparently,” Grandmama said softly. “He’s inherited the title and their home.”

“He could cast them out if he wishes to,” Lady Harrington rushed to add.

“No one will cast them out,” Griffin insisted. Over his dead bloody body would anyone harm the Bridewell sisters. “Excuse me.”

He didn’t wait for the niceties of leave-taking this time, marching out of the room and straight out the front door, which pointed him in the direction of the Bridewell home. It was a short walk.

He’d been a preoccupied fool.

Leo’s wishes should have been a priority long before now, but Griffin would rectify that. The Bridewell sisters needed to know he would assist them in whatever manner he could.

Lily swiped a dangling hair out of her face and bent to scoop up another shovelful of dirt. Sweat trickled down her neck and the muscles in her arms and back burned.

She only hoped she’d picked an appropriate spot to dig. The location, out of view of the house, lay hidden behind a little grove of beech trees. Burying the trove of their most prized personal possessions had been Ivy’s idea, and it had taken a great deal of persuading for Lily to agree. But each of them had only chosen items that were well and truly theirs—items that should rightfully never belong to Edwin.

Ivy chose books on detection and a set of tools she claimed would allow her to pick locks. Lily prayed she'd never practiced on any lock beyond those in the Bridewell home. Daphne chose a few botanical books and a sewing machine Leo had purchased for her last birthday—the largest and heaviest item. But who could deny Daphne anything? Marigold selected her old sketchbooks and watercolor paints and brushes. Hyacinth insisted on a book about paleontology and the box of shells and rocks she'd collected on a family holiday to Margate.

And Lily, of course, had added her father's medical books. If she had her choice, she would follow in his footsteps and study medicine formally, but there was certainly no money for that now. She couldn't even say for certain where she and her sisters would be living in the coming months.

At the sound of footsteps, she glanced over her shoulder. Through a light layer of fog, Ivy approached in a determined stride, arms swinging at her sides, brow furrowed.

“Go back to the house, Ivy.”

“I want to help,” she said in an uncharacteristically pleading tone. “You needn't do it all yourself. Why are you so stubborn?”

Lily chuckled and arched a brow at her sister. “Are you truly asking me about my stubbornness?”

Ivy was almost wholly composed of tenacity and persistence.

She rolled her eyes and cocked a hip, pressing a hand to her waist. “Fair point. But this will go much more quickly if you allow me to help.”

“You already helped me transfer the trove out here.” Lily blew at the tenacious wisp of hair that had somehow found its way into her face again. “And I'm not playing the

martyr. I want you and Daphne and the twins to remain inside so as not to raise Edwin's suspicions. I asked you to watch him. Distract him if necessary."

Ivy left out a huff of frustration. "I suppose you're right."

"Should we add that one?" Lily pointed to the book clutched in her sister's left hand.

"No!" Ivy lifted the book and tucked it close to her chest, wrapping both arms around the cloth-bound volume to hold it safe. "I'm reading this one. I'll hide it under my damned skirts when he throws us out if I need to."

"Language."

Ivy growled but turned around, stalking back toward the house. "I shall go and watch over Edwin."

"Thank you," Lily called to her retreating form.

They'd collected everything into a trunk that had once held some of their father's old suits, wrapped the trunk in oilskin to keep the rain from soaking through, and then used a wheelbarrow to transfer it to the spot beyond the grove. Lily looked at the trunk and then back at the dimensions of the hole she'd dug. It didn't have to be deep. Just shallow enough to cover the case with a bit of dirt. She carved away a bit more at the sides, tossing the soil out of the hole. Then she climbed out of the depression.

The distant rumble of thunder drew her gaze up. Storm clouds had gathered overhead, and she'd been so occupied, she'd hardly notice how the sky had dimmed and the fog had thickened across the field. She had to finish before the rain came or before Edwin noted her absence.

At that thought, she heard footsteps approaching and instinctively moved back,

ducking behind the trunk of a beech tree.

Would he search the grounds for her? And how did he ever get past Ivy? Her sister would sooner tackle the man bodily than let him discover their plan.

“Are you hiding from me, Miss Bridewell?” The low, masculine voice wasn’t anything like Edwin’s reedy tones. And it was one she recognized all too well.

A man she would rather not face with dirt on her hands and disheveled hair.

Lily lifted a hand to tuck a few stray hairs into pins, then she stepped out to face him. “Your Grace, I am not hiding. I’m here. As you see.”

“Glad to know you’re not eager to avoid me.” The lightness in his tone made her mouth dry, and then her cheeks heated.

Good grief, the man was irritatingly provoking, but she didn’t have time to be affected by him.

Griffin Kingsley, now the Duke of Edgerton, had always been the handsomest man she’d ever known. Even when he was younger, she’d thought her brother’s closest friend was far too attractive. Distractingly so. Maddeningly so.

His presence made her breathless, and she loathed that her body betrayed her whenever he was near.

Now, he strode toward her with purpose, and she got caught up in staring. He did too, surprisingly. Their gazes seemed to lock, neither of them willing to look away.

“Wait!” The word burst from her.

But a moment too late.

Edgerton's boot slid at the edge of the hole and he pitched forward with a shocked yelp, throwing his hands out to brace his fall. The thud as his tall, muscular body hitting the ground made her wince.

Lily rushed to him. "I should have warned you. Good heavens, are you injured?"

"Did you set a trap for me?" Edgerton glowered up at her.

"Of course not. You must stop assuming you inspire all my actions." Lily held a hand out to help him up.

She guessed he might refuse her assistance. He was a duke now and oozed a disconcerting masculinity. But apparently he was also practical, for he immediately grasped her hand in his.

Lily bit back a gasp. He wasn't wearing gloves. Neither was she. His much larger hand enveloped hers, his skin tantalizingly hot against her own.

Lily got so distracted thinking about how it felt to touch him that she forgot her purpose in reaching for him until he planted his free hand on the ground and pushed himself up.

Lily finally tugged, nearly pulling him off balance. He stumbled toward her. She reached out to brace him against another fall. But he only listed toward her, his breath whispering along her cheek as he steadied himself.

"Damn," he grumbled.

"What is it?" Lily looked up into his blue-gray eyes and swallowed hard.

He winced as if in pain. “I’ve twisted something.” Easing away from her, he lifted his hands as if he feared giving offense. “Forgive me for lunging at you?—”

Lily ignored him and kept one hand on his upper arm, the other pressed to his waistcoat. “Can you put weight on it?”

He tried, but it clearly caused him pain.

“I’d like to get a look at your foot and ankle.”

“No.” Eyes wide, he shook his head. “Not necessary.”

“Please don’t be stubborn.” She closed her eyes a moment, willing him to be cooperative. But with her eyes closed, she noticed the scent of his shaving soap, felt the comforting warmth of his body as he stood close enough that his boots brushed the hem of her day dress.

A rumble of thunder rolled again, closer now, and she opened her eyes to see lightning stretch across the sky.

Lily glanced back at the trunk. “Hurry. Lean against this tree,” she told the duke. “I need to finish this.”

To her shock and relief, he obeyed, reaching an arm above her head to place a hand against the trunk of the tree at her back. It brought him closer to her, but he’d turned his gaze toward her father’s case too as he examined the hole she’d dug.

“What exactly did I fall into?” He looked down at her. “Miss Bridewell,” his voice had gone low and teasing, “are you digging a grave?”

“Don’t be silly.” Lily ducked under his raised arm and approached the trunk. Pushing

it seemed more logical than pulling, so she positioned herself behind it. “But I do need to bury this quickly.”

Lily bent, gripped the trunk’s top edge and pushed. It moved but a few inches.

“Let me help you.” Griffin limped closer, nudging her arm with his. “Please, allow me.”

With a little huff of frustration, Lily let him take her place, and he heaved the trunk to the edge of the hole she’d dug. It gave way under his strength as if it weighed nothing at all.

“Oh, wait, I should...” Lily scrambled down into the freshly dug earth and clasped the leather straps on the edge of the trunk. “Now push.”

“Watch yourself.” He checked to make sure she was well back, then he pushed while Lily pulled to keep the trunk from toppling on its edge as it settled into the ground.

He reached out a hand. Lily took it and then climbed out again.

“Now that I’ve helped,” he said, limping a step closer, “you have to tell me who we just buried.”

Lily huffed out a gasp. “Are you accusing me of murder, Your Grace?” She pushed at him playfully as she’d done when they were younger, but there was nothing childish about the broad, muscled chest that felt hard and warm beneath her palm.

She snatched her hand back, then found she couldn’t meet his gaze. Yet he focused on her intently.

“I never mentioned murder, Miss Bridewell,” he said, his mischievous and quiet, as if

they were sharing a secret. “It might have been an accident.”

Lily wasn't in the mood for playfulness and rolled her eyes. “Stop teasing me and help me cover this, will you?”

When she went for the shovel, he beat her to it, snatching it up and scooping huge heaps of heavy earth easily before depositing it on the trunk. It took him only moments to have much of what she'd taken an hour to excavate filled around the edges of the hole. He favored his good leg while he worked, and Lily still wanted to get a look at the injured one. She suspected it was nothing more than an sprain, but some ice or a poultice would ease the pain.

After dropping clumps of earth on the trunk, he smoothed it with the shovel until it was completely covered.

Then his eyes narrowed as he stuck the shovel's tip into the ground and leaned his elbow on the handle. Pointing to the disturbed patch of earth, he mused, “Perhaps it's that cousin who's causing you so much trouble.”

CHAPTER 3

G riffin hadn't truly meant to accuse her of murder, and yet her eyes widened as if he had.

He'd known Lily well over a decade and there was no woman less likely to do murder in all of England. She had the same healing instinct as her father. As a child, she was ever rescuing animals or plants or any living, injured thing that came across her path.

"Forgive me for jesting." He pointed at the buried suitcase once more. "Will you not tell me what this is all about?"

She swallowed. Hard. He watched the muscles of her throat work, saw the doubt and fear in her gaze.

Then he spotted a tear. One single dash of wetness against the smooth pink of her cheek, and he cursed himself for being every kind of arse. He'd avoided her for months and then bumbled over here without an invitation and teased her.

He damn well deserved the sprained ankle and all the pain ricocheting up to his hip every time he moved.

"I'm sorry, Lily." Digging into his pocket, he pulled out a handkerchief and then inelegantly made his way toward her. "I'd never wish to make you cry."

Though he knew he already had. No doubt months of tears because of his idiocy on

that field in Hampstead.

She frowned, and then another tear joined the first. One hit him too, and he realized they weren't tears. They were raindrops. When he gazed skyward, they came at him like a volley of wet arrows.

"We need to go inside," she told him.

Then she did the most extraordinary thing. She tucked herself against his side. Suddenly, all her warm, floral-scented curves seamed against his body, and rogue urges welled up. He'd never been this close to his best friend's eldest sister, though he'd secretly imagined it. Then she slid an arm around his waist underneath his overcoat and the rightness of her nearness made his pulse tick faster.

"Wrap your arm around me," she instructed. And he did. A little too eagerly.

She urged him forward, and they moved as quickly as he could manage toward the rear terrace of Briarfield. Halfway there, his boot hit a rock hidden in the grass, and pain shot through his leg. He bit back a curse.

"If you let me look at that, I'll tell you what we buried." She grinned at him impishly. The wind had caused her cheeks to redden. Her lips too. God, he'd been too long without the sight of her. She'd always been pretty, but today—mud-streaked and rain-dappled—she took his breath away. Of course, he'd noticed her—that honey-blond hair, vibrant blue eyes, those dimples when she truly let go and smiled. Yes, he'd forced himself not to act on those feelings.

As his best friend's sibling, she wasn't a girl he could ever consider for anything but friendship.

Though she certainly wasn't the gangly girl she'd once been anymore. His own body

registered the lushness of her curves against him, and he willed himself not to pull her closer as he longed to.

After they'd crossed the terrace, she turned and pressed both hands to his chest. He lifted his overcoat to keep the rain from her as much as he could.

"Wait. Let me make sure we're safe to go inside." She swung away, cupping her hands over the glass of the French doors and peering inside.

He hadn't a deuced clue why entering her own home would pose any danger. Except for the bloody cousin. Was the man already being a tyrant to them?

"It's clear." She reached out her hand, and he took it. The moment he did, a strangely comforting warmth shot straight to his chest.

Inside, she led him across the hall to a small sitting room and shut the door. He noted that she'd thrown the lock.

"Sit on the settee and remove your boot." She released his hand as she directed him, and he was ridiculously bereft the moment she let go.

"You really want to do this here? Now?"

"Of course. You're injured. Let me help you."

Griffin hid a smile when he bent to remove his boot. He'd heard those words from her before. When she'd found an injured bunny in the field near his family's estate, she'd whispered those words to it. Another time, he'd heard her murmur them to a wounded bird she'd brought inside to feed by hand.

Apparently, he was now one of her wounded creatures to rescue. Rather than fight it,

he decided to succumb and began removing his boot. It proved hard-going as his ankle screamed its opposition.

“Here, let me.” Lily knelt next to him, and though her movements were gentler and more patient than his own, she had the boot off a few moments later.

“It’s swollen,” she murmured as if speaking to herself more than him. Then she stood and went to the room’s bell pull. “I’ll have Cook fetch some ice and a bit of salve for a poultice to help with the pain and swelling.”

“That seems a great deal of trouble to put you to for?—”

Before Griffin could finish his thought, someone banged loudly and repeatedly at the sitting room door.

“Open this door at once. What is the meaning of this?” A man’s high-pitched voice rang through the panel. Then he began rapping again, drumming a fist against the door as a petulant child might do.

Lily closed her eyes a moment, drew in a deep breath, and then unlocked the door.

“What in God’s name are you—” The man—the cousin, Griffin presumed—burst into the room, his face reddened with outrage, his hair mussed, and his mouth twisted in a scowl.

“You cavort with a man under my very nose in a locked room? This is scandal.” The cousin’s voice had gone quiet, though still seemingly laced with rage.

“This is Griffin Kingsley, the Duke of Edgerton,” Lily said with a measure of patience Griffin couldn’t manage to summon. “Our neighbor and a dear and longtime friend of this family.”

The fact that she called him a dear friend did something odd to him. Until that moment, he'd never wanted to be more than just a friend to her. Now, suddenly, he found that he did.

But it was the revelation that he was a duke that altered Lord Dashford's entire expression—from frowning outrage to shock and then an undeniable flash of respect.

This, Griffin had to acknowledge, was one of the undeniable advantages of inheriting his father's title.

“Your Grace,” Dashford finally managed. “I’m most keen to protect Miss Bridewell’s reputation, as you can certainly appreciate.” He glanced down at Griffin’s bootless foot as if it was proof of a scandal.

“Miss Bridewell is the most respectable lady I know.” Griffin stood, forcing his weight onto his good foot, and was morbidly pleased at Dashford’s flinch when he towered over him. “A rock foiled my pleasant midday walk, and Miss Bridewell was kind enough to offer me aid.”

“I was not aware Miss Bridewell had taken herself out into the rain.” Dashford appraised her sodden dress. “Indeed, I was under the impression she had taken ill and was resting upstairs.”

Without even a hint of bending to his attempt to corner her, Lily offered him an angelic smile. “I felt the need for a bit of a fresh air, Cousin, as I had so much to contemplate.”

There was an emphasis added to her words Griffin didn’t quite understand, but Dashford seemed to. A bit of scarlet rushed into the man’s already flushed features.

“Of course.” Dashford seemed almost contrite. Then he looked at Griffin as

remembering he was in the room. “Will you dine with us, Edgerton?”

“Oh, I don’t think—” Lily started.

“I don’t wish—” Griffin began.

They spoke at almost the same moment. Griffin glanced at her questioningly, and she gave him a tight little shake of her head. Though he had been on the cusp of declining the invitation, he was curious about the sudden awkwardness between Lily and her cousin. If the man was treating the sisters poorly, Griffin intended to put an end to it. He’d use every ounce of his ducal power if necessary.

“I accept the invitation. It’s been too long since I’ve dined with the Bridewell sisters.” He looked to Lily to see how much he’d displeased her, and she looked well and truly vexed.

“Very well. I...” Dashford stared down at Griffin’s injured foot again.

“I’ll see to His Grace and then speak to Cook to let her know there will be one more at table this evening,” she told her cousin.

Dashford nodded. “Don’t be long, Miss Bridewell. I shall be in the study. Come and find me when you’re finished with...this.” He gestured at Griffin’s discarded boot.

“Of course, Cousin.”

Dashford lingered a few more awkward moments and then departed, holding Lily’s gaze until she cast her eyes down to the carpet as if out of demureness. Griffin suspected it was to avoid the man’s gaping.

She shut the door lightly after he departed.

“You shouldn’t have accepted his invitation,” she whispered.

“What’s going on, Lily?”

She pressed her lips together. Whatever it was, she didn’t wish to tell him, but he needed to know. He yearned to help them. He’d vowed that he would.

“You may trust me with whatever you divulge,” he assured her. “Is your cousin treating you and your sisters with the respect you deserve?”

Lily scoffed and then covered her mouth as if she’d just blurted the most shocking of expletives. After a deep breath, she opened her mouth as if to confess all, but a knock drew her attention to the door.

She opened it and spoke briefly to the maid who stood at the threshold. The young woman had delivered a laden tray, and Lily set it on a low table near the settee.

“Sit down, and I’ll bind your ankle.”

When he hesitated, she pointed at the spot he’d occupied a moment ago on the settee.

Griffin took the indicated spot and let her get to work.

“Since I’m yielding to this,” he said softly, “tell me what was in that trunk.”

With gentlest care, she worked his stocking off and then applied a chilled cloth to his ankle. The cold soothed the sharpness of the pain quickly.

As she knelt before him applying light pressure to the cloth, she finally looked up and met his gaze.

“Our belongings,” she said softly. “Only those that are truly ours. We’re not stealing from Edwin.” Her eyes blazed with intensity and the gloss of unshed tears. “We each chose a few items that matter to us most, fearing he might claim them if we didn’t.”

Griffin swallowed hard and a surge of anger made him want to find Dashford and throttle the man. Yet he longed to soothe Lily more.

“Have I shocked you?” She’d taken his silence as disapproval.

“No, of course not. If I feel shock, it’s only for how wretchedly you’re being treated. This is your home. He is your closest male relative. How dare he not make provision—and generous provision at that—for all of you?”

She licked her lips but wouldn’t meet his gaze.

“What has he done?” A sick, twisting dread roiled in his gut when her skin paled at his question.

“He...” She closed her eyes a moment and then looked up at him. “He has made provision. We may all stay at Briarfield if I consent to marry him.”

Griffin felt his jaw slacken, then his hands balled into fists. “He’s your cousin,” he whispered.

“Yes, but such things are not unheard of.”

“Perhaps they bloody well should be!”

“Ssh. I don’t want him coming back before I’m finished with your foot.” She reached up and placed a hand on his chest, then quickly removed it.

“You can’t marry him, Lily.” The notion was so vile Griffin struggled to get the words out. “I won’t allow it.”

“Won’t allow it?” Her tone was suddenly sharp, irritated. “I have few options, and your meddling is not necessary. The last thing I need is to anger Dashford.”

Griffin planned to do more than anger Dashford. He meant to bend the boulder to his will. He’d offer a sum Dashford could not decline. Or he’d use his power among other nobles to ruin him. Even as such thoughts rolled through his mind, they disgusted him. It was the way his father had wielded his power—controlling others, ruining men who failed to heed him. He’d never wanted to be that sort of duke, but he knew of no greater cause than protecting Leo’s sisters.

Lily bent to her task again, carefully applying a thin layer of a pungent concoction, then wrapping his ankle expertly in cool, clean cotton bandaging. While she worked, she caught the edge of her lower lip between her teeth and a sort of serene contentedness softened her features.

He’d missed being in her company. Missed her smile and her kindness and the way she cared so deeply about helping others. He felt lighter, more like himself again, after only half an hour of being near her. Something about her always put others at ease, just as she did with the menagerie she took in to nurse back to health.

She’d make an extraordinary duchess. The thought came unbidden, the rightness of it striking him like a thunderbolt. He felt a bit dizzy. A little breathless.

“What if you had another option?” he asked slowly, the thoughts still solidifying in his mind.

“We do have a few,” she told him as she used scissors to snip the edge of the cotton cloth. “My aunt has suggested that I become a governess, and she’s willing to take

Ivy on as her companion.”

He almost chuckled at the notion of Ivy Bridewell as a lady’s companion. The girl was so fearsome, she’d once made his cousins run from a room crying because she’d recounted some ghastly story she’d read in The Police Gazette .

No, he’d offer something better than these bright, brilliant sisters going into service.

“I have an alternative suggestion.”

“Oh, yes? What’s that?” Lily had turned away from him as she put all her mending materials back on the tray, seemingly only faintly interested in whatever his answer might be.

Griffin needed her to hear him, to know he was utterly sincere.

He reached for her, stroking the backs of his fingers against her cheek.

She turned, eyes wide, but didn’t pull away from his touch.

“Why not marry me instead?”

A frown pinched her brow, and she pushed his hand away. “This is not the time for jesting, Griffin.”

“I’m serious. Look at me, Lily.”

She did, though she’d crossed her arms over her chest.

“It’s a logical solution.” Yes, that was the path to take. She liked logic. Always had.

“I need a wife. You need to ensure your sisters’ futures.” And he needed to do

something to fulfill his vow—his debt—to his best friend.

Something shifted between them. She blinked and then seemed to study him anew. When she pressed her lips together, he wasn't certain if she was overcome with anger and trying not to lash out or?—

She laughed. The sound bubbled up and then burst from her lips. She laughed so hard, tears sprang to her eyes. As she swiped them away, her laughter petered out into a chuckle.

“Well, that's not quite the reaction I was expecting upon proposing to a lady.”

“I'm sorry, but it's ludicrous.” She gathered her tray and got to her feet. “I'm a spinster,” she told him succinctly. “And you're...” Balancing the tray with one hand, she swept the other toward him. “You.”

“Am I a worse prospect than marrying that fop of a cousin?”

Lily tipped her head as if confused by the question. “You are serious.”

Griffin huffed out a sigh and pressed off the arm of the settee to get to his feet, noting that his injured foot felt much better after her ministrations.

“I did just say as much not a moment ago.” No, irritation would not win her. He needed patience. He needed to appeal to her reasonable nature. “You said yourself that we are friends, and I?—”

He caught himself on the cusp of admitting that he'd vowed to Leo that he would protect her and her sisters. But reminding her of that loss was something he wished to avoid.

“You what?” she prompted.

“I want to help your family however I am able.”

“Marriage is a great deal to offer to be helpful. And marriage must be more than merely friendship,” she told him softly. “You’ll need heirs.”

“Yes, I will.” Griffin didn’t miss the way her cheeks grew pink, but she held his gaze. She was lovely, and he’d found her so for years, even if he’d convinced himself to ignore it. Bedding her would certainly be no hardship. “We needn’t rush that part.”

He stepped closer and heard her sharp little inhale when he smiled at her. Then he took her hand in his and drew her an inch closer.

Suddenly, he ached to kiss her. She was close enough. He could bend his head and take those pink lips, prove to her how good it could be between them. But he did not want to shock or offend her. She needed to know how he would champion her wishes in all things.

And he had no intention of letting passion overtake him, not with her. He no longer wished to be the impulsive version of himself he’d grown to hate in the last six months. He’d been selfish, foolish, rash, and it had led to tragedy.

He wanted to be a better man now. Logical. Responsible. Honorable.

This was a perfectly logical solution. He’d never longed for a love match and hadn’t been looking forward to marriage much at all. But he knew Lily well, trusted her, and believed in her ability to be an admirable duchess.

For now, she and her sisters needed what he could offer—the legal protection of his name, his title, and the benefit of his connections to secure the sort of futures they all

deserved.

“We can worry about heirs later,” he vowed to her. “And when it happens, it will be because you’re ready. We shall consult each other in all matters, and I vow to make you happy in every way that I am able.”

The more he thought of the future they could make together, the more right it felt to offer for her. Indeed, they’d do this quickly. He’d seek a special license. The sooner he could make her his bride, the better.

“How does that sound, Lily?”

CHAPTER 4

Lily had always been the one with answers. When her little sisters needed her, when she found a wounded creature, when her brother—who'd been just two years older—came to her for advice about some scrape he'd gotten into. Logic rarely failed her, and she'd trained herself long ago to remain calm when others panicked.

But now her own emotions were rioting, her heartbeat thundered in her ears, and she had no answer to give the confounding man in front of her.

How does that sound, Lily?

It sounded like madness.

What on earth was happening? Spinsters of four and twenty did not receive two marriage proposals in one day. And a penniless spinster with four sisters to manage did not dare to dream a man like Griffin Kingsley would offer to make her his duchess.

Yet she'd had years of childish teasing from him and her brother, and she could see in those stormy blue eyes of his that he was utterly and madly in earnest.

In fact, the longer she hesitated to give him an answer, the more distressed he appeared.

“Lily? You've gone white as chalk.”

He drew closer, but she lifted a hand to keep him back. If he touched her again, it would be harder to regain any sort of equilibrium.

But he mistook her gesture and folded his own large, warm hand around hers, holding it gently, as if he wished for nothing more than to give her comfort.

“I’m not going to faint,” she insisted as much to herself as to him.

He smiled that breathtaking smile of his that had always put a little flutter in her belly. “You’re the least likely to swoon of any lady I’ve ever met.”

“If you’re offering this...union between us in order to be heroic, you needn’t.”

A frown pulled his bronze brows together. “I’m no hero and never will be. It’s a practical solution for both of us.”

Lily knew Griffin too well to not suspect his need for heroism wasn’t woven into this wild offer. She’d watched him struggle to outdo his older brother and win his father’s approval for so many years, and she knew it had sometimes caused him to doubt his own worth.

“This is for life, Griffin, not something to offer lightly.”

“Do you not believe I am sincere?” His brows arched up in question. “How can I convince you?” He drew a little closer, and she couldn’t help but breathe in his scent of coffee and juniper and rain-damp linen. “I know you deserve a proper courtship?—”

“No! I’m not asking for that. I’m not asking for anything.” She slipped her hand from his. “This makes no sense.” Lifting a hand to her head, she rubbed at her temple as if she could summon logic and cool reason that way.

“It’s the most sensible decision I’ve made in years. Perhaps in my whole life.” He stood patiently. And his very sincerity worked on her, the appeal of it—of him—outweighing all the warring feelings surging through her.

She had secretly yearned for him for so long. But then she’d cured herself of it, reasoning that to hold onto such childish wistfulness was silly. Pointless. Especially after he’d inherited his father’s title.

Yet now, here he stood, his dark blond hair wild and curled from the rain, his clothes rumpled, and his cuffs muddy from the dirt he’d helped deposit on the buried trunk. She found herself caught up in studying his mouth, the breadth of his chest, the width of his muscular shoulders.

Heavens, she wanted to agree to this rash scheme. This marriage to the man she’d dreamed of far too often. And not just for practical reasons, though those were myriad. As the sisters of a duke, Daphne, Ivy, Marigold, and Hyacinth would have a world of options she could never give them in any other way.

A knock at the sitting room door nearly made her jump out of her boots. How long had she stood staring at him like a ninny?

A moment later, Daphne slipped into the room.

“Goodness.” Her soft voice belied the shock in her gaze. “You two look as if you’ve been dragged along the creek bed.”

“We were caught out in the rain,” Griffin told her breezily.

But Daphne was no fool and focused in on the mud on Lily’s hem and Griffin’s shirtsleeves. Then her gaze flashed up to Lily’s.

“He helped you bury it,” she said in an amused tone. “I suppose thanks are in order, Your Grace.”

He offered a silly, dramatic bow. “’Tis always my pleasure to assist the Bridewell sisters.”

Daphne giggled. He had that effect on all of them.

Then she immediately quieted, her expression pinched and serious. “I’ve come because I heard Edwin ask Ivy to fetch you to him in the study. I caught her in the hall and assured her I would do the task.”

She flicked a look at Griffin and then Lily. “I suspect he wants his answer. And there’s more.”

“What more?” Griffin asked her.

“The vicar arrived not ten minutes ago. He can’t expect you to marry him today, this minute, can he?”

Lily’s heart thudded against her ribcage as if trying to escape. She felt trapped, desperate. And then she glanced over at Griffin. There wasn’t a hint of worry in his gray-blue eyes, not a single indication that he doubted or regretted what he’d offered her. In fact, what she saw when she looked into his eyes was concern for her and what seemed like a plea.

“I doubt he’s obtained a special license, but regardless, I won’t let him force you to do anything,” he told her softly. “Whatever your answer to me, you will always have my aid and support, but?—”

“I know.” Protecting all of her sisters would be so much easier if she were a duchess.

She pressed her lips together, closed her eyes a moment, and sent up a little prayer that she was choosing rightly, that her parents would have approved, that Leo would have given his blessing.

A wash of calm rushed through her once she'd decided, though as soon as she looked at Griffin, that flutter in her middle started up again.

And he knew. Somehow, he sensed that she had made her choice.

He smiled with such relief that it made a sweet warmth bloom in her chest. She still couldn't make sense of any this, but it seemed he truly wanted her as his duchess, so she grinned too.

"What's happening?" Daphne whispered.

"Griffin has asked me to marry him."

Daphne gasped, clapped her hand over her mouth, and bounced in place as if she could not contain her excitement. Of course, she knew how heartsore Lily had sometimes been over her feelings for him. She was the only one Lily had confided in.

"And you've said yes?" Daphne asked, smiling and all but vibrating with glee.

Lily fixed her gaze on Griffin. "Yes." Then she turned to her sister. "Do you approve?"

In answer, Daphne flew across the room and pulled Lily into a joyful embrace. "I'm so happy for you," she whispered. Then more loudly, "Of course, I approve."

Lily held onto Daphne's hand. "I want to tell Ivy and the girls before I say anything to Edwin."

A knock sounded at the sitting room door that Daphne had pulled closed behind her.

Her blue eyes bloomed bigger. “I’m not sure he’ll wait that long.”

“Then we’ll do it together,” Griffin told Lily.

He’d drawn closer. Then he offered her his hand, and she savored the feel of his skin against hers when she took it.

“Ready?” he asked her.

“You’re going to tell him in only one boot?” Daphne seemed to be the only one to notice that he stood with one foot bare.

“If need be.” Griffin chuckled. “But give me a moment, and I shall remedy that.”

He bent to slide his boot back on.

“Careful,” Lily reminded him.

“It feels a great deal better. You have the healing touch, Miss Bridewell.” He winked at her.

Winked. Griffin Kingsley, who’d never once asked her to dance at any ball they’d both attended, was winking at her as if it was the most natural thing in the world.

As soon as he straightened, he reached for her hand once again. This time tucking it over his arm.

“Let’s go give your cousin the news.”

“And then Ivy and Mari and Cinthy.”

Daphne nodded, strode across the room, and then pulled the door open.

Lily was not at all surprised to see her cousin on the threshold, looking even more cross than he had earlier.

“Is there some reason why I continually find you all conspiring together in this room?”

Griffin’s instinct was to charge straight into announcing their betrothal to Lily’s cousin, but he sensed from her fretful expression that a lighter tread was called for.

For better or worse, this man was her closest relation, and he suspected she wanted to remain on good terms with him to whatever extent she could.

So Griffin waited, forcing himself to be patient.

Lily stepped forward after a moment’s hesitation, forcing Griffin to release her. “Cousin, I know you’re awaiting an answer from me. I do have one for you, but it’s not the one you’re expecting. Indeed, it wasn’t the answer I was expecting to give.”

She turned to glance at Griffin, and he infused a smile with as much reassurance as he could.

“What’s the meaning of all this?” Dashford grumbled.

Lily drew in a breath. “I regret whatever disappointment this might cause you, Cousin. Would you like us to tell you here, or shall we do it in the study?”

Dashford looked at all of them as if dumbfounded. His jaw moved, but no words

emerged. Then he waved a hand as if commanding them. “Get on with it. Do it here.”

“Very well,” Lily said quietly.

“Just so you know,” he ground out, “the vicar is in my study, waiting for us to join him, but I suspect whatever you have to say may change the course of our conversation with him.”

Griffin stepped forward and reached for her hand again. When she slipped her palm against his, he couldn’t keep from smiling.

Dashford noticed and glowered at both of them.

Griffin gave Lily’s hand a gentle squeeze, a signal to her that he was willing to do the deed. She glanced over and gave him a little nod.

“Dashford, I’ve asked Miss Bridewell to be my wife, and she has consented.”

The man stared, mouth agape, at Lily, then Griffin, confusion writ large on his pasty features.

“I confess I do not understand,” he stated loudly.

Griffin frowned. He hadn’t expected the man’s intellect to fail him. He’d anticipated anger, perhaps even rage. It was all simple enough.

Dashford stepped closer. “You never told me that you had any other suitors,” he growled, his glare on Lily. “You might have mentioned that when I put my question to you.”

She looked down at the carpet.

Griffin had had enough. “Miss Bridewell did not expect my proposal, but she’s accepted it. That is the end of it, Dashford.” He suffused every ounce of ducal arrogance into his tone.

The man had every right to be disappointed, but Lily had done nothing wrong.

“Betrothals are brokered every day in the ton,” Daphne offered in her soft, low-pitched voice. “Sometimes it takes years of scheming, moving people into place like chess pieces. Sometimes it’s but a few dances on the marriage mart during the Season. And sometimes, two people simply decide one day and know it is the right course.”

Lily squeezed Griffin’s hand as she looked at her younger sister with a kind of gentle awe.

Even Dashford seemed softened by Daphne’s earnest attempt at tempering the moment’s high emotions. The man seemed to transform, standing a bit straighter and tugging at his lapels before notching up his chin and locking gazes with Griffin.

“It seems congratulations are in order, Edgerton.” He turned to Lily, and Griffin thought his expression might be genuine regret. “And to you, Cousin.”

He swung back to Griffin. “I have had occasion to meet your grandmother. I wonder what she will say to this precipitous proposal.”

Griffin sensed Lily and Daphne turning their attention his way. But he would not offer Dashford any reaction to his baiting question. He stared at the man and thought of the sort of duchess Lily would be.

He had no doubts. If this resentful man thought he could provoke some, he was gravely mistaken.

“She will be thrilled, I assure you.”

Dashford quirked one thin dark brow. “Then it shall be blessings all around.” He sniffed. “Perhaps you’d like to speak to the vicar, Edgerton. Arrange for the banns and whatnot.”

“No need,” Griffin told him with a grin. “A special license will be in my hands directly.”

A moment of shock played across Dashford’s features. Then the congenial mask he’d tried donning slipped away. “I see,” he managed through clenched teeth. Then he turned and bolted from the room.

“Heavens,” Daphne murmured. “I thought he’d take it with more grace.”

“I didn’t,” Lily said matter-of-factly. “And I don’t think we can reside at Briarfield much longer with him so displeased.”

“You can begin moving into Rosemere immediately, as far as I’m concerned.”

“We couldn’t. Not before we’re married.” Lily released his hand and shook her head, worrying her lower lip between her teeth.

“My grandmother and the entire staff will be there to chaperone you if that’s your concern.”

“It just seems improper,” Daphne agreed.

Griffin didn’t want to start their life together with worry weighing down Lily and her sisters. “I’ll go and speak to Dashford. Make it clear that whatever disappointment he feels should not affect your ability to remain here until we’re wed.”

“I hope he’s amenable,” Lily said.

Daphne looked doubtful. “I understand you’re to join us at table this evening. Perhaps we should dine with him alone this evening. Not rub all of this in his face,” she said quietly.

“Very well. I’ll make my excuses to him when I secure his agreement for you to remain at Briarfield for now.” Griffin looked at each sister before offering Lily a smile. “He will be amenable.” Griffin would offer the man money, if necessary. Or access. Or some privilege he did not now possess. “And you may all pack your belongings at your leisure. No more hiding treasures away for fear he’ll take them.”

Lily stared at him a moment and then nodded, seemingly with the same sense of resolve he felt deep in his bones. This was right. He knew it. All would be well.

“Daphne,” Lily called, though her gaze was still fixed on his. “Will you gather Ivy and the twins and assemble in my bedchamber? I want to tell them where we’ll have privacy.”

“Of course.” Daphne shot Griffin a warm smile before she departed.

When she’d gone, Lily drew closer. “Do you think the dowager will disapprove as Edwin implied?”

“No.” Griffin knew his grandmother. Dashford did not.

Whatever reservations she might initially express—if only because she’d had no part in choosing his bride—would be overcome.

Leo had endeared himself to Griffin’s grandmother long ago, and she’d found all the sisters she had met to be charming too. Yes, charming was the word she used.

How could she be surprised he would be taken by Lily? Even if it hadn't happened exactly that way. Even if he wanted to help the sisters of a man he had led to his demise.

Grandmama would come to see Lily the way Griffin did.

"She will offer us her felicitations, and all will be well. I'm sure of it," he assured her.

Now he just had to convince his grandmother. Show her how certain he was of this decision.

She would be pleased. Wouldn't she?

CHAPTER 5

“Tell me again,” Ivy insisted as she paced the rug in Lily’s bedchamber, where all of them had gathered to hear the news of her betrothal. “How exactly did this come about?”

“I’m sure it came about in the usual way,” Daphne told her with uncharacteristic pertness. “Griffin got down on one knee and asked.” She shot a beaming smile at Lily.

Lily didn’t want to dash Daphne’s fairy tale notions, but she needed them to understand. “Actually, there was no getting down on any knees. He...simply asked me.”

Ivy gave her an arch look, as if she’d just revealed some very informative clue regarding whatever mystery she was attempting to solve.

“So,” Ivy said thoughtfully, “did you have any notion that he felt this way about you?”

Daphne, who could never hide her emotions, immediately snapped her gaze to Lily’s. A bit of the enthusiasm had ebbed from her expression—the realization that this engagement was not about romance.

“No, I did not, Ivy, and I don’t know that this marriage will be about feelings.”

Marigold and Hyacinth exchanged a quizzical frown.

“What does that mean?” Hyacinth asked.

“She means he swooped in because of Edwin, I suspect,” Ivy surmised from the spot near the fireplace where she’d stopped to plant her hands on her hips. “It’s not a coincidence.”

“No,” Lily allowed, “it was not a coincidence.” She turned to her youngest sisters. “And what it means is that Griffin and I are marrying for very good, practical reasons. It suits us both.”

“Practical,” Marigold repeated, as if trying to make sense of the word.

“I thought it was one of those perfect moments when exactly what you need comes precisely when you need it.” Hyacinth frowned and then cast her gaze around at the rest of them. “Like in a storybook.”

“That sounds like coincidence,” Marigold whispered to her twin.

“More like serendipity,” Daphne put in.

“In life,” Ivy started in her oft-used tutorial tone, “much as in the investigation of criminal matters, coincidences are rare. Indeed, they are often a sign that something is wrong.”

“I don’t think that’s true,” Daphne rebutted softly.

“You’ll understand one day,” Ivy told her.

“Don’t speak to me as if I’m a child,” Daphne bit back.

All of them turned their attention to Daphne. It took a great deal to raise her ire, but

Ivy seemed to do so with ease these days.

“Ivy,” Lily cut in, “will you please sit down?”

Ivy gave a little sniff and settled herself on a straight-back chair near Lily’s *escritoire*. At least it used to be her writing desk before it had been inherited by Edwin.

“I’m sorry I was not able to tell all of you before Griffin and I?—”

“You’re calling him Griffin again, just like you used to,” Mari said with a little grin.

Hyacinth nodded. “Rather than Duke of Edgerton , like you called him at the—” Her eyes grew wide, and she swallowed nervously.

The last time Lily had addressed Griffin at all had been at Leo’s funeral. She’d felt it necessary to be formal and call him by his new title.

“Yes, it seems right to call him Griffin now.” Lily reached out and gave Hyacinth’s hand a squeeze to let her know she’d done nothing wrong.

Though all of them struggled to speak of Leo, and none of them wanted to recall that rainy day when he’d been lowered into the churchyard cemetery, it was no mistake to acknowledge it.

“Soon, she’ll call him husband.” Daphne lit up with happiness again. Her passionate heart would insist on seeing this marriage as a romantic one, even if Lily knew differently.

Husband.

Looking into Daphne’s clear blue eyes, Lily suddenly felt a bit queasy. Since

accepting Griffin and speaking to Edwin, a bit of the relief of what she'd agreed to had ebbed. Doubt had begun a slow creep into her mind.

Had she made the right decision? Could she endure a cool, logical marriage to a man she'd had improper dreams about for years?

"I'm so happy for you," Marigold said, matching Daphne for earnestness.

"Thank you, Mari. I'm excited for all of us because soon we'll be moving to Rosemere." Lily infused excitement into her tone, ignoring her own misgivings. Change was hard, and they'd already endured an enormous one when they'd lost Leo.

"We can come and visit Briarfield, can't we?" Hyacinth couldn't disguise her worry. Of the five of them, she seemed to carry the weight of the world on her narrow shoulders at times.

"I suspect we can," Ivy opined, "but Edwin will be here. It's his house now."

When Hyacinth's lower lip began to tremble, Daphne reached out to wrap her in an embrace.

"You will grow to see Rosemere as your home, and it's not far from Briarfield at all." Lily didn't know why she was mentioning distance. No matter how close it might be, they could never call it their home again.

"We'll visit," Ivy insisted. "We'll have Mrs. Spears tell us when he's not at home."

Lily bit her tongue because a row with Ivy wasn't what any of them needed, but they would not be sneaking into Briarfield if she had anything to say about it.

Marigold straightened from where she'd been curled up on the chaise. "Isn't Mrs.

Spears coming with us?”

This was a topic she'd not yet discussed with any of the staff, or Edwin or Griffin, for that matter. She doubted Griffin would wish to take on their existing staff, except perhaps Nell Green, who served as a makeshift ladies maid when needed but had most often served as a housemaid. They'd never been terribly formal with their staff, but she knew Rosemere would run quite differently.

“That's not yet been decided,” Lily told them honestly.

She planned to ask Edwin if he wished to maintain their staff, and she hoped he would agree, since she knew their man of all work, Mr. Jones, who'd served their family longest, was particularly worried about losing his post.

Lily could feel the energy of the room shift. Not even Daphne's joy about the engagement could forestall the worry the twins clearly felt about their futures.

“I'm certain we can find a room at Rosemere that you'll love and can make your own.”

“Will we truly be able to make it our own?” Ivy asked sharply. “It's a ducal estate and there will be rules.” For a moment, her moss-green eyes softened. “No one will face more rules than you.”

Lily nodded as if the prospect didn't terrify her a little. She had to be strong for all of them, as she'd always been. “I have a great deal to learn, and Griffin will be there to help us all.”

“And the gorgon dowager too,” Ivy mumbled.

“Ivy!” Daphne chastised, her soft voice only rising slightly.

“I didn’t make it up. I heard Lady Westmoreland say it more than once.”

The baroness was acerbic at the best of times, and she had no love for the Dowager Duchess of Edgerton. The dowager was bold with her opinions. In truth, she was known to be quite a force to be reckoned with. But, as far as Lily knew, she could not turn men to stone with a single glance.

“So,” Hyacinth said hesitantly, “he did not confess his love for you? Isn’t that how it is supposed to be?”

Hyacinth, an avid reader like all of them, always preferred stories with happy endings.

“He cares for me a great deal.” Lily didn’t believe any man would make the offer he had if he did not care. “But it is also a logical solution. He needs a duchess. And I need?—”

“A place to live,” Ivy put in.

“Someone who cares,” Hyacinth said almost at the same time.

Lily reached out and cupped her little sister’s cheek. “Yes, Cinthy. We’ve been friends most of our lives.”

“So you’re marrying your friend?” Mari tipped her head to the side.

“Yes, I am.”

“I like that,” Mari said approvingly.

Ivy scoffed from her spot near the writing desk. Lily drew in a sharp breath and

prayed she would not argue further. Ivy knew, of course, that Griffin and Leo had teased Lily when they were all younger.

By some miracle, Ivy held her tongue.

Lily met the gazes of each of her sisters. They understood, even if Ivy had misgivings.

“So we should begin packing. Griffin says we need have no fear about taking what’s ours.”

“All my books?” Hyacinth asked.

“All of them,” Lily assured.

“We should start now,” Hyacinth told her twin.

Mari nodded, and they both rushed to Lily, giving her a tight hug before heading off to their room.

Ivy stood too. “I take it there will be a special license, and we’ll be removing to Rosemere soon.”

“That is the plan.” Lily wanted a hug from Ivy too, but she rarely demanded one. Ivy was much like a cat. She gave affection when it suited her.

“Very well. I’ll start packing too.” Ivy gave Lily a nod, but her brow remained pinched with worry. Then she departed for her own room.

Daphne remained seated on a wingback by the fire. She stared at the flames, and Lily wondered what was going through her mind.

After several moments, she turned back to Lily.

“Will it be enough for you? Being married to a friend when you love him so desperately?”

Lily didn’t rush to answer. She couldn’t. A lump of uncertainty caught in her throat.

It was a question she’d asked herself when Griffin proposed. But the real question, of course, was whether he could ever love her in the same way. She told herself she should not expect it.

“It will have to be enough.”

But she didn’t know if she could stop herself from hoping.

His grandmother reached out a bejeweled hand and laid her palm against his forehead.

“What are you doing?” Griffin looked up at her from where she’d insisted he take a damask-covered seat in her chambers and explain himself .

“Trying to determine whether you have a fever. Whenever your father had a fever, he did things that were reckless and irrevocable.”

“I’m not feverish, Grandmama. I made this decision with my full faculties. And it’s the right decision.”

She waved that same bejeweled hand, her diamond bracelet glinting in the light.

“Tosh, my boy. It is impetuous. It is foolish. It is thoughtless.”

Griffin shook his head. “I disagree. It is potentially the most thoughtful choice I’ve

ever made.”

For once, he hadn’t considered only of himself—seeking his own pleasure, his own satisfaction. He wasn’t yearning for approval or trying to best someone else, as Kingsleys were always supposed to do.

Grandmama groused as she took to her favorite chair and settled the skirt of her beaded silk day dress around her. She fussed with her bracelets, then lifted a hand to run her fingers across the pearls at her throat.

Griffin’s middle tightened a bit out of long habit. When his grandmother grew quiet and fussed with her fripperies, it meant a lecture was brewing in her clever, fearsome mind.

Finally, she lifted her cool green gaze to him. “This,” she declared in her haughtiest tone, “is a typical Kingsley mistake.”

“It is not. I’ve considered this?—”

“For how long? All of half an hour?”

Griffin bit back a reply and took a breath. He wasn’t going to be an impulsive fool anymore. “She will make a wonderful duchess.”

Another wave of her hand, this time with her embroidered kerchief clutched in her fingers.

Griffin swallowed hard. If he caused his grandmother to cry...

“You have no notion of whether or not she will be a wonderful duchess.” She dotted the kerchief against her upper lip and scowled at the blazing fire in the grate. “She

has not been trained for it.”

“Nor was I trained to be duke.”

She narrowed her eyes at him. “You cannot catch me out in this, Griffin.” Though she paused and picked at the lace edge of her kerchief thoughtfully.

He prayed she’d relent because she was a key part of making Lily’s transition into her new role a success.

“All those girls are unapologetic bluestockings. Their parents encouraged it!”

“Marigold and Hyacinth are not yet ten.”

“Bluestockings in training then.” She huffed, tapping her finger against the arm of her chair.

Griffin was heartened. A huff usually indicated she was beginning to relent. Or scheme.

“Has she ever planned a soiree? Has she ever even made a guest list? Heaven forbid she be left to organize a house party.”

Griffin edged forward on the dainty little stuffed chair. “No, I doubt she’s done the latter, but neither have I. And you would be perfectly willing to teach me.”

“I wasn’t going to leave you to plan alone, that is certain.”

“I wasn’t prepared for this role, but I intend to do it well.” He took a breath when she didn’t argue with him. “Lily is intelligent. She is kind, gracious, well-mannered...” He arched a brow. “Shall I continue? I could sing her praises all day.”

His grandmother snapped her gaze to his at that. “Have you formed some sort of attachment to her? Has something happened?”

“Yes, a great deal happened. I went to visit the Bridewells and realized that Lily would make a perfect duchess. It struck me as unalterably right.”

She tsked at him. “I meant something scandalous, my boy.”

Griffin barked out a laugh. “No, Grandmama. Lily would never do anything scandalous.”

She actually gave a concurring nod to that declaration. “The Bridewells are largely well liked and have the goodwill of everyone in the county, especially after their brother—” Her eyes ballooned. “Ah, I see.”

Griffin’s whole body tensed. “What do you see?”

“You heard Lady Harrington and I talking and realized they were facing dire circumstances if their cousin chose to toss them from the family home. So you decided to rush in like a chivalrous knight of old.”

Griffin chuckled and barely resisted rolling his eyes. “I’ve never thought of myself as a knight.”

His grandmother gave him a narrow-eyed look. “Griffin Arthur Kingsley, I may be of an age, but my memory is sharp as a blade. You adored stories of King Arthur and were mad for the notion of becoming a knight yourself.”

“I was a child, for heaven’s sake. I outgrew those notions.”

She tapped her chin with one bejeweled finger. “The stories and the fantasy, yes, but

perhaps the impulse remained.”

“Nonsense.” Griffin wouldn’t be cornered by her memories of what a fanciful child he’d been. Marrying Lily wasn’t about being a knight. He was anything but. An honorable man wouldn’t have been a drunken fool and lost his best friend.

But he did need his grandmother’s help.

“You’re a wonderful strategist,” he told her, hoping to gain her as an ally in this endeavor and, in the future, for Lily and her sisters. She could guide those young women in ways he couldn’t. “You’re my most valuable advisor. I know that my next step is to obtain a special license, which I’ll do posthaste. Then I’ll speak to the staff about preparing rooms for the Bridewell sisters.”

She closed her eyes and drew in a long, shaky breath. “I feel a megrim on the horizon.”

His grandma was as hardy as she was sharp-minded.

“Grandmama,” he said softly. “I have no wish to make you unwell, and I do understand this decision may seem impulsive or hasty.”

“Thoroughbreds at the Epsom Derby are plodding by comparison.”

Griffin leaned forward, his hands clasped before him. “I know you may have some reservations, but I also know you wish for me to be happy.” He leaned a bit farther forward. “Look into my eyes.”

She did, but with one silver brow arched dubiously.

“I feel different after making this decision. More like the man I wish to be than I ever

have.”

“Are you in love with her?”

Griffin swallowed hard and turned his gaze toward the fireplace. He couldn’t meet his grandmother’s eyes because the truth was he did feel something more than simple esteem for Lily. Her beauty was entirely provoking and undeniable, but he admired her spirit too. Her intelligence. And, yes, damn it, he was bloody eager for the first time he could kiss her and make her his own.

But what could he admit to his grandmother? If she knew the thoughts in his head, she’d call him besotted and claim his bride would be a distraction. The truth was he did not know precisely what he felt or how their relationship would grow.

“I love her as someone who I have been close to my whole life, and as the sister of my best friend. I admire her. Perhaps it’s not a love match in most people’s estimation, but we trust and know one another.”

“A man can lose his head for a lady, forgoing his duties, forgetting his responsibilities. A duke cannot indulge in such a way, and I hope that won’t be the case here.” His grandmother scrutinized him as if trying to read his thoughts. “I remember a time when you used to tease that girl madly, but you and Leo were terrible in that regard. You said she was too studious.”

“It’s ironic because I admire her cleverness now. She’ll adore Rosemere’s library.”

“We’re all fond of the library.”

“But the Bridewells are voracious. They’ll read every book.”

“The bluestocking brigade,” she said archly.

“I would like you to meet her as soon as can be arranged.”

“I have met her, my boy.”

“That was years ago.” Griffin shot her a look. “I mean now that she’s my betrothed.”

His grandmother inhaled and let out an enormous sigh. “Very well, I’ll invite Miss Bridewell and her sisters to a luncheon so that we may become reacquainted.”

“Excellent.” A weight of worry lifted in Griffin’s chest.

“We should still go forward with preparations for the house party. It will give us a chance to introduce her as your duchess. I will help with the planning.”

Griffin smiled. “Thank you, Grandmama. I knew you would.”

She reached up and tugged at her ear, a worried frown pulling her brows together.

“Never forget, my boy, that you’re choosing a young women with no preparation for what lies ahead. That choice will have consequences. Some of which you may not like.”

“Sounds like a challenge, and Kingsleys are always up for a challenge, are they not?”

She nodded thoughtfully. “We do relish challenges, but we also make mistakes.”

“Marrying Lily is not a mistake. I’ve made my share of those already. There won’t be anymore.”

“You’re so hopeful of a sudden and I cannot be displeased with that turn.” She reached out and cupped his cheek as she used to do when he was young. “We shall

see what the future holds, dear boy.”

Griffin knew it held promise now. So much more than when he’d woken this morning from another nightmare.

Whatever challenges came, he and Lily would face them together.

CHAPTER 6

Two days later

“It goes without saying, but best behavior while we’re there,” Lily told her sisters as the family carriage—now Edwin’s carriage that he’d been gracious enough to let them borrow—rumbled toward Rosemere.

Ivy rolled her eyes.

Daphne nodded earnestly.

The twins exchanged a look of mock horror and giggled.

“I understand she’s very fierce,” Marigold said with an undeniable air of admiration for the dowager she’d only heard rumors of.

“She is...formidable.”

The twins had not yet met the Dowager Duchess of Edgerton. Ivy and Daphne had, but it had been years ago. That was the last time Lily had met her too.

It was more than a little disconcerting to realize the fearsome woman would soon be her grandmother-in-law. She wasn’t known for her warmth, though she was benefactress to every charitable endeavor in the village. Indeed, she led the way in almost all social goings-on throughout the county. Other noblewomen looked to her as their guide. But she was also known to set high expectations for those within her

sphere.

Would she be content with Griffin marrying a spinster who was a mere viscount's daughter?

"Mama would be so proud of you." Daphne nudged Lily's elbow as if to remind her she was not alone in this.

Ivy made a scoffing sound. "Women should not be considered accomplished because of who they marry, but because of their own merits." She gestured toward Lily. "You know more about medicine than Dr. Crawford. You taught each of us to read. Then you taught us all French and Latin too. And you sew stitches better than Crawford and nursed us all whenever we were sick."

"And now she'll be a duchess, and she'll accomplish a great deal because of it," Daphne was quick to add.

Lily actually tended to agree with Ivy. Women should not be praised merely for the man's name or title they acquired. But she also understood what this union would mean for her sisters.

"You'll have a Season now, Daphne. All of you will have one. And don't roll your eyes, Ivy. You'll have the opportunity to study as you wish to. Perhaps become a journalist, if that's still your goal."

"I might become a detective instead."

Marigold and Hyacinth let out little synchronized gasps.

"Very well." Lily would not be daunted by her most challenging sister today.

“A detective. A writer of mystery novels. A journalist,” Ivy listed off. “I have many options that I'm considering. And none of them are reliant on a man.”

Lily didn't contradict her, but she knew that wasn't entirely true. Because of her marriage to Griffin, Ivy would have time to consider her options, rather than following after Aunt Margaret as her lady's companion or a passel of children as a governess.

“What does a duchess do?” Hyacinth asked quietly.

Lily swallowed hard, unsure she knew all the duties that would soon be hers. Though she knew a few. “I'll manage the household, much as I did at Briarfield. Organize events. Most likely engage in more charitable endeavors.” And produce Griffin's heir.

That thought kept her awake at night, and not in a fearful way. She felt only anticipation. Now, with her sisters looking at her quizzically, she willed her cheeks not to flush.

“You do many of those things now,” Marigold said thoughtfully.

“But now she doesn't have a husband to deal with day in and day out,” Ivy said as if it was the most challenging burden Lily would face.

How could she explain to her sisters that spending each day, and each night, with Griffin Kingsley was the part she was looking forward to most?

“Promise me, Robards.” Griffin watched out the window as he spoke to his butler, who hovered behind him. “You'll keep her distracted for...” He consulted his pocket watch. “A good ten minutes.”

“It will be done, Your Grace.”

“Don’t fail me.” Griffin turned back to find the elderly man who’d served the dukedom longer than Griffin had been alive staring at him solemnly.

“You have my vow, Your Grace.”

“And no telling her what this is about. The dowager needn’t know about this.” It wasn’t a great secret he was keeping from his grandmother. Just a moment of distraction to take care of something she need not have knowledge of, or cast judgement on.

“Understood.”

Flicking back his gaze to the window, Griffin’s heart jolted in his chest. “Now,” he told the butler. “Go now.”

As soon Robards made his way out the door, Griffin raced down the stairs, ignoring the gasps of a couple of housemaids.

He tried to walk at a more sedate pace but broke into a sprint when he reached the conservatory. Bursting through the door that led to a stone terrace, he spotted the Bridewells’ carriage on the lane that curved around Rosemere before approaching the gravel drive.

When their carriage rounded that curve, he strode out until he was in view of the driver and waved a hand in the air. The man snapped his notice Griffin’s way, and Griffin directed him to pull in alongside the manor house rather than into the carriage circle out front.

Patience was needed as the carriage moved sedately toward the drive, but he found he

was quite short on it today. His grandmother had urged him to remain occupied during the luncheon so that she'd have a chance to get to know "those Bridewell girls" on her own.

He wasn't having any of it. Griffin knew precisely how forbidding his grandmother could seem to those who didn't know her well. Besides, he wanted to speak to Lily and her sisters before the luncheon began and had sent around a note asking them to arrive early.

The truth was Lily had been on his mind from the moment he'd asked her to marry him. Little flashes of that day in the rain came to him at the oddest moments—the flash of her sea-blue eyes, how ridiculously good it felt to have her pressed against him, her smile, her gentle touch, her maddeningly enticing scent.

He should have kissed her—that thought played through his mind too. And then he'd tell himself that he had a lifetime ahead to kiss her. Assuming she'd want him to outside of the whole "producing heirs" matter that had almost put her off the whole notion of marrying him.

The sound of carriage wheels on gravel pulled his thoughts to the present, and the Bridewell carriage rolled up just where he'd directed.

Lily sat near the leftmost window, and the sight of her made his chest constrict almost painfully. Why on earth was he acting like a bloody smitten fool?

"We're not entering through the front door?" Ivy called out once he'd opened the carriage door.

The driver came down from his seat, but Griffin did the honors of handing each young down from the vehicle. When they stood surrounding him, he smiled first at Lily.

“You look lovely.” And she did. They’d all turned themselves out in frills and bonnets and delicate lace gloves for this luncheon.

She blinked, her eyes widening a bit. “Thank you, Your Gr?—”

“Griffin,” he insisted, then cast his gaze at each of them. “You must all call me Griffin.”

Daphne beamed at him, and Hyacinth mouthed his name under her breath as if testing whether it sounded right. Only Ivy narrowed her eyes as if he’d just done something extremely suspicious.

Perhaps he had. “I have a surprise for all of you, so you’ll enter through the rear of the house today,” he explained.

“A good surprise or an awful surprise?” Marigold asked with all the hesitation of a child who was once told she was going to take a teaspoon of treacle and found it was some foul medicine.

“A good one, I hope.” He lifted his elbow, offering Lily his arm, and felt immeasurably more at ease once she took it. Then he led them around the way he’d come and ushered them into the conservatory.

Both Lily and Daphne seemed awestruck by the size of the space.

Noting their interest, Griffin grinned. “This is to be your home and your conservatory. You may do with this space as you see fit,” he told Lily. “It’s been a bit abandoned in recent years, but I recall how you love growing things and thought you might want to revive it.”

“I do,” she said with enthusiasm, gripping his arm a bit tighter.

Unbidden, a thought came of their not too far away wedding, and he prayed she'd have as much anticipation in her eyes that day.

"Now for the surprise," he announced when they they'd stepped a few feet into the conservatory.

Robards had helped him with this bit too, erecting a makeshift curtain to hide a dozen items in the corner.

He released Lily's arm and strode over.

"On the day I asked your sister to marry me, I helped her with a rather curious undertaking."

Lily ducked her head and wore a mischievous grin when she lifted it again.

"We buried a trunk, and when she told me what was inside, I knew I wished to start your time here at Rosemere by bringing a few of your belongings over."

He pulled back the curtain to reveal all the items his staff had found in the trunk after retrieving it from the field. Though he couldn't be entirely certain which items belonged to which sister, he knew they were all precious in their eyes.

"I've added a few books, since your family appreciates them so much. A book on paleontology as one of you seems quite keen."

"Me," Hyacinth said shyly.

"And a medical tome my London bookseller insists is quite new for Lily."

"Thank you," she mouthed quietly.

“And perhaps this one will please you, Ivy.” The black volume with gold embossing was a memoir by some Frenchman called Vidoq, and his bookseller assured him a young lady interested in crime detection would value it.

“Once you’ve chosen your rooms, we’ll help you get all of this upstairs to begin making your chamber your own.”

Lily gave him an achingly sweet smile. “Thank you. This is perfect.”

Ivy approached the table, running her fingers over the book he’d purchased for her. “This was genuinely thoughtful,” she said matter-of-factly. “I hope your motives are sincere,” she added a bit more acerbically.

Lily closed her eyes a moment and sighed.

Griffin chuckled. He hadn’t spent a great deal of time with Ivy, but he knew that, like Lily, she was fiercely protective of her sisters. “I suppose we’ll need to get to know one another a bit before you can fully weigh the sincerity of my soul.”

Ivy nodded as if satisfied with his reply.

“Now”—he cast a glance at his pocket watch—“I think we have enough time to give you all a quick tour of the upstairs bedchambers. You needn’t decide immediately, but perhaps after luncheon, Mrs. Seaton can help you choose yours, and we’ll begin preparing it for you.”

The twins seemed most excited by this news, clasping their hands together and all but bouncing on their toes.

As he led the little troupe upstairs, he offered Lily his arm once more. She hesitated but a moment before wrapping hers around his. The odd twinge in his chest came

again and felt suspiciously like relief.

“Do you have any advice to offer?” she whispered as they climbed the house’s main stairwell. “Before the luncheon commences.”

“You need only be yourself.”

She rolled her eyes at that, and it reminded him of how she’d responded when he and Leo would tease her.

He laid a hand over hers where she held his arm. “You’ve nothing to prove, but she does tend to make everyone feel as if they do. Give as good as you get. She admires that. But know that you’re capable of any challenge she tosses your way.”

“How do you know that?”

“I’ve known you a long time, Lily Bridewell.”

“I didn’t realize you were watching,” she quipped, almost under her breath.

“More than you know.” He couldn’t look at her as he said it and didn’t know why he’d made the partial confession.

“This one,” Daphne said as she stood near one of the bedchambers. It was papered in a pale-yellow silk and contained lovely mahogany furnishings and Griffin could understand why she’d chosen it.

“The one at the end of the hall has two beds,” he told Lily. “I thought the twins might like it if they prefer to share a room.”

“And these?” She pointed to two doors along the left side of the hall that were closed.

All the others were open as he'd asked the staff to air the second-floor bedchambers.

"The ducal suites," Griffin told her, gesturing toward the first door. "Yours and mine is farther down."

Lily swept her gaze toward his as if surprised and then nodded. "Of course."

"Would you like to see? You can change anything about it that doesn't suit you." For some reason, it mattered to Griffin a great deal that she approved of the room. For the first time since inheriting, he'd begun sleeping in the ducal suite because he anticipated being close to her once they'd all moved to Rosemere.

"I could take a peek."

He led her to the door he hadn't opened in years, though the staff were instructed to maintain the room regardless of whether a new duchess was in residence or not.

She reached for the latch first and pushed the door open.

The staff had heeded his instructions to air every room, and the windows were open to let in the light spring breeze. Sunlight dappled over the rose-hued wallpaper and lit up the gilded edges of the French-style decor.

"It's very grand," she said quietly. "And what are the doors on either side?"

"One leads to your sitting room and the other to my bedchamber."

"Oh." A sweep of pink rushed over her cheeks.

Griffin felt an answering heat ripple through him, and if her sisters hadn't been wandering the hall behind them...

“What is the meaning of this?” his grandmother demanded in her sternest tone.

All the Bridewell sisters’ excited chattered dimmed to silence.

“I was showing them the rooms that will soon be theirs,” Griffin told her in a pleasant tone, offering a warm smile that he hoped would quell her ire.

“I did not know they’d arrived.”

“I asked them to come early.” He gestured at the guest bedrooms that would soon become family rooms. “For precisely this purpose.”

“You need only have told me,” she said with a sniff.

“Forgive me.” Griffin pressed one hand to his heart. “I promise to escort them downstairs soon and in time for an introduction before the luncheon commences.”

Her gaze swept across all the sisters, lingering with what Griffin spotted as a flicker of warmth when she took in the twins. Both of them stared at her as if awestruck.

“Very well. Do not tarry. Our guests will be arriving soon.” With that, she pivoted, the voluminous beaded skirt of her Worth gown swishing as she began to stride away.

Griffin followed after her. “Guests, Grandmama? Our guests are here.”

She swung back to him, one silver brow winged high. “Oh, I thought it appropriate to invite a few of the ladies that Miss Bridewell will soon become acquainted with as she carries out her duties.”

Griffin narrowed his eyes at her. “You promised this would be an intimate affair, Grandmama, for you to get to know Lily and her sisters,” he said quietly.

“And I shall.” She reached up and patted him on the cheek. “Fret not, my boy. If she’s all you say she is, why fear?”

Griffin tried to press down the irritation rising inside him. His grandmother had a habit of maneuvering matters to her liking, much as his father had, and expecting everyone to dance to whatever tune she set. And he hated that Lily had been spoken of as if she was not present. But bickering in front of the sisters was not the welcome to Rosemere that they deserved.

He straightened and tugged at his cuffs. “Have the staff add a place setting.”

His grandmother’s brow that had sailed high on her forehead a moment before slashed downward now.

“It seems I’ll be joining this luncheon after all.” Griffin held her gaze. If she balked, he would insist.

But instead, she nodded. “Then I shall see you downstairs.”

CHAPTER 7

If the dowager duchess's intention was to make Lily doubt whether she would do well in the role of Duchess of Edgerton, she'd succeeded.

But only momentarily.

The lavishness of the luncheon service could overwhelm anyone who wasn't used to such formality. At Briarfield, her parents had rarely been formal at table. Family meals were a place of discussion and laughter. No one cared if they had matching plates or their silverware was in the proper arrangement.

Somehow, Griffin sensed her feelings as he sat beside her. Under the table, he offered his hand palm up.

His grandmother watched her closely, and Lily suspected she'd note the exchange.

Perhaps the test was to show that she could handle any challenge on her own. The dowager clearly hadn't expected Griffin to join the luncheon. Yet that wasn't the Bridewell way either. Leaning on each other was as much a part of their family's traditions as lively dinners.

So Lily laid her palm against his below the edge of the table, where only her sisters sitting nearest might notice. He gave her hand a squeeze, all the while answering a question that Lady Harrington had asked him.

Lily relished the warmth of his touch and the reassurance he offered. Then she lifted

her hand to take a sip from her teacup. Throughout the hour they'd been at table, she continually kept watch that her sisters were at ease. Daphne seemed to be soaking it all in eagerly, the twins had apparently been stunned by the pomp of it all into near-perfect etiquette, and Ivy observed everything and everyone warily.

The announcement of their engagement had come before a single bite of food was served, and the ladies the dowager invited had all expressed their well wishes, even if a few couldn't quite hide their surprise. Over the next hour, they volunteered Lily for half a dozen charitable events and invited her to as many soirees.

Lily nodded politely and smiled, certain she'd forget half of what she'd committed herself to by the end of the day. Whenever she felt thoroughly at sea, she peeked at Griffin.

Beside her, he spoke to Lady Mortimer about how long he and Lily had known each other with such warmth in his voice that Lily wondered if he had noticed her in ways she'd never realized. Had she somehow misread him and his feelings towards her over the years?

Only when the noblewoman mentioned his friendship with Leo did Lily sense his discomfort. His replies became more curt, his posture stiff. It was clear that loss still haunted him as it did Lily and all her sisters.

As the final course was swept away and dessert served, Lily offered her own hand to him, palm up, matching what he'd done for her earlier.

He laid his atop hers for only a moment before raising it above the table edge to reach for his dessert spoon, but the firm set of his shoulders had eased.

As soon as dessert was cleared, Lily breathed a sigh of relief. Her sisters had behaved with almost flawless manners. No food had been spilled. No inappropriate comments

had been blurted by Ivy. The twins had even managed to keep from bursting into a fit of giggles as they were wont to do.

She expected the visiting and discussion might continue into a drawing room, as would have been the custom at the Bridewell home. But after they'd departed the Rosemere dining room, each noblewoman bid their adieus, most promising Lily that she would soon receive the invitations they'd mentioned.

Once everyone had departed, the dowager turned to Lily. "Well done, Miss Bridewell."

"Thank you, Your Grace."

After only a moment of allowing Lily to bask in her praise, the dowager swung her attention to Griffin. "I suppose the next event shall be the wedding. Have you set a date?"

Griffin slipped a hand inside his suit coat and lifted out a folded document. "I have secured the special license. Shall we say in two days?"

Daphne gasped.

Hyacinth gulped.

Lily's belly dropped to her toes. "Two days?"

"May we have a moment, Grandmama?" Though he stood next to her, Griffin's voice sounded somehow distant.

"Come, young ladies," the dowager called, clapping her hands, "let us give these two a very little bit of privacy." She arched a brow at Griffin. "But only a few moments,

my boy. You're not married to her yet."

He gave his grandmother a long-suffering smile and immediately guided Lily to a nook in Rosemere's grand entry hall so they might have something like seclusion from passing staff.

"It's so soon," Lily whispered with a glance toward where the dowager duchess had led her sisters through to what appeared to be a grand drawing room.

"But I thought you'd want haste," Griffin whispered. "Dashford seemed quite determined?—"

"No, yes, of course you're right." The prospect of more days at Briarfield as Edwin stalked the rooms and inventoried the family's belongings wasn't what any of them wanted. It kept them all in a state of nervous anxiety.

"Would a few more days put your mind at ease?" He drew close, and somehow his nearness, which usually made her a flushed, nervous ninny, soothed her today.

One look into his gray-blue eyes and suddenly waiting seemed nonsensical. He was offering them all a home—and an opulent one at that—and safety from the uncertainty of Edwin's whims.

"We'll do it at the chapel," he told her. "With just my grandmother and Lady Harrington as witnesses. And of course your sisters." Bending, he leaned in a bit closer. "Invite Dashford only if you feel you must."

Lily chuckled.

"Best to get it done immediately," he said softly, then arched a brow as if waiting for her agreement. "That way Dashford can exert no more pressure and all of you can

begin getting used to your new home.”

The reasons were practical. Logical. Nothing to do with his eagerness to be with her, she noted. No keenness to share his life, his thoughts, and his bed. Based on what she’d seen upstairs, she wondered if they’d ever sleep in the same room at all.

But of course, that wasn’t why they were marrying. She reminded herself it was not a love match. It was sensible, and she’d insisted to Daphne that such a marriage would be enough for her.

So why did her foolish heart insist on wishing it was more?

Lily nodded her assent. “Two days it is.”

Two Days Later

Griffin paced the carpet in his study and eyed the drinks cart, though he knew imbibing moments before he exchanged vows was a dreadful idea.

Lily had arrived with her sisters in tow an hour ago, but, of course, his grandmother insisted on the nonsense of him waiting until the ceremony to see her. He’d attempted to leverage his power as head of the dukedom to bypass the tradition, but his grandmother had fixed him with one of those steely looks that made lesser men shudder. Then she’d asked the one question it felt as if she’d been sharpening like a barb for that precise moment.

“Are you having doubts, my boy?”

His hackles had risen to the bait, and he’d been on the verge of biting back when her manner softened.

“There is still time if you do. The last thing you’ll want is regrets. Either yours or hers.”

She’d strode forward and lifted a hand to cup his cheek as she’d done since he was a boy. Then she’d left him alone with this thoughts.

It was the hers that caused all the relief and rightness he’d felt the last few days to ebb. Not dissipate entirely, just reduce a bit, providing room for doubt to slip in.

For his own part, he remained certain of the choice he’d made, the bride he’d chosen, the feeling that he had done right by his departed friend. He was gaining a beautiful, clever wife.

But what of Lily? Had she hoped for a love match?

He could not deny that she deserved one. Indeed, Griffin could never understand why she hadn’t been overflowing with suitors during her first Season out. He’d attended a ball she’d gone to that year and had watched her partnered for nearly every dance. Even then, he’d wondered how Leo would react if he danced with his eldest sister. But he hadn’t asked.

When Leo told him Lily was preparing for her second Season, he’d scoffed. Were the gentlemen blind? Never in his life had he met a woman more worthy of being the Season’s diamond.

But then her second Season had been cut short when she returned to Briarfield to care for her mother, who’d fallen ill. Had she missed out on a gentleman who would have courted her as she deserved?

Now the lady would be his duchess. Every time he thought of it, his chest swelled with pride and a potent flare of possessiveness.

Yet he was going to meet her in his family's chilly and rarely used chapel and have the quickest, most bare-bones ceremony he could arrange on short notice.

Bloody fool. He ran a hand through his hair.

He should have planned something more lavish. She deserved that.

"Your Grace?" His valet, Keswick, had slipped into his bedchamber. "The ceremony is imminent."

Griffin drew in a deep breath. Then he made his way down the stairs, out the front door, and strode across the dew-damp grass toward the family chapel.

Organ music drifted toward him, and the reality of what he was on the cusp of settled over him.

He picked up his pace, eager to see Lily. Desperate to see if he could detect any doubt in her eyes.

His grandmother stood in the arched doorway of the chapel. "Never leave your bride waiting," she told him in an amused tone. "I suppose I should have given that advice before now."

"Am I late?"

"Almost." She wrapped her arm around his to lead him inside. "I detect only eagerness in your face, my boy."

"I do not doubt my choice, Grandmama."

"Good. You have that ring?"

He patted his waistcoat pocket. “Yes.”

With that, he escorted her into the chapel and found that it had been brought to life with flowers and candles, though it was early in the day. And, of course, the youngest Bridewell sisters stood near the front.

His grandmother stopped at a pew where Lady Harrington sat, and he waited until she'd taken a seat. Then he strode to the head of the chapel, where the vicar greeted him.

Only a moment later, the organist played with greater fervor, and Lily appeared in the doorway he'd just entered.

She looked like something out of a dream. Her blonde hair had been swept up in an elaborate arrangement with tiny white flowers and bejeweled combs. Her veil sparkled in the light spilling in from behind her. Though they stood some distance apart, he saw eagerness in her gaze, and it buoyed him.

It was a moment before he noticed that Dashford stood beside her. Though it made sense that her nearest male relation would give her away, the man's presence rankled.

Griffin focused only on Lily.

He'd never felt so lucky in his life as he did when she strode toward him to promise she'd be his for the rest of their days. Though he'd vowed this was not a love match, something in his chest bloomed with warmth. It felt as if some knot inside him was slowly unfurling.

The vicar recited the exhortation and then put the questions to each of them.

“Wilt thou have this woman to thy wedded wife...?”

Griffin said, “I will,” almost before the vicar had asked if he’d keep only unto her as long as they both lived.

Lily smiled, and after the vicar had put the same question to her, she immediately replied, “I will.”

Then came the question of who gave Lily to be married to him.

Dashford seemed surprisingly even-tempered as he acknowledged his duty.

Finally, Griffin could reach for her. He held out his hand, just as he’d done days ago. The mere privilege of knowing she’d respond when he reached for her felt like a victory over all the moments in his life when he’d failed.

Today, as she slipped her hand in his, a frisson jolted up his arm. As if she was the spark that would bring light into his life and sweep away all the darkness of the last six months.

The vicar then led both of them in the repeating of their vows.

As Griffin spoke the words “my wedded wife, to have and to hold” his voice dropped lower. He went on repeating the vows even as his heart began a racing tattoo in his chest. This was the most important moment of his life. And barring that one cold night in October, the most consequential.

She repeated her vows without reservation. “I, Lily Augusta Bridewell, take thee...”

Griffin studied each lovely feature of her face as she spoke—her gorgeous blue eyes, the sprinkle of tawny freckles along her nose, and the curve of her cheeks. Those full, pink lips he’d kiss beginning today and, he hoped, every day after.

Her eyes studied his features too, flicking down more than once to his lips.

She seemed to want that first kiss as much as he did.

As she said the word “obey,” there was a decided scoff from Ivy, but Lily didn’t take notice. “...and thereto I plight thee my troth,” she finished, her hand warm and steady in his.

He didn’t let her go as he dug for the ring with his free hand. The glittering diamond and sapphire-studded band had been in the Kingsley family for generations, and yet it looked absolutely right on Lily’s finger.

The vicar continued with the pronouncement that they were now man and wife and afterwards offered a final prayer and blessing. Then the small gathering rose as one and cheered and clapped and shouted their well wishes.

Amidst the sounds of felicity, Griffin only cared about the little intake of breath as he bent to take Lily’s lips in a kiss. He’d intended it to be chaste, proper, and yet she responded eagerly, and so he wrapped an arm around her waist and drew her closer.

Her lips were far sweeter, far softer than any of his fantasies.

By the time he lifted his head, she was as breathless as he was.

They turned to face those they’d forgotten about for a moment.

A moment that promised a passion he’d only imagined and secretly hoped for between them. Still, he told himself to proceed slowly. She wasn’t a lady he could tup and discard. She was his bride, a partner for all the coming days of his life.

Uncertainty tried to steal its way into his mind. Did he truly deserve Leo’s most

beautiful sister after leading the man down a fatal path? Could he be worthy of her, or would he fall into his usual foolish choices?

No , some deep part of him responded fiercely, and he inadvertently squeezed her hand too tight.

She just smiled and gave him an answering squeeze.

You're a lucky bastard . Halford had said those words to him a day after he'd lost Leo and narrowly avoided Pomeroy's bullet himself. He'd punched the man for his comment. Then again until he found some modicum of control.

He hadn't felt lucky. In that moment and for months afterwards, he'd been so lost in grief, he'd wanted nothing so much as to have traded his life for his friend's.

Now, for the first time in half a year, he felt fortunate.

Lily Kingsley was now his to care for, as he'd just vowed, and he would not let his weaknesses, his impulsive nature, his urges and impulses, ever prevent him from giving her all that she deserved.

Duty mattered most to Griffin now, to those who relied on him in the dukedom, to his family that had just grown by four sisters, and to his wife, who understood duty as well as he did. Probably better.

“Well, Georgina,” Lady Harrington whispered to his grandmother more loudly than she likely imagined, “after that kiss, I do hope Rosemere's staff will be serving cool drinks at the reception.”

CHAPTER 8

Lily sat in the ornate bedchamber designed for a duchess and struggled to accept that it was now her own. Every night for the foreseeable future, she'd lay her head down on the plump pillows under the pale pink counterpane.

And the man she'd been in love with since she was a girl of sixteen was but a room away. She stared at the door connecting their suites. Could he have simply gotten under the covers and gone to sleep?

She couldn't imagine how he was able to rest when her own nerves were jangling.

All through the reception, he'd stayed close to her, often reaching out to touch her arm or hold her hand. Once, he'd even bent to kiss her cheek. He'd been kind, solicitous, bringing her drinks and refreshments. Being as attentive as she could have wished.

And yet when the guests departed and her sisters went upstairs to their new chambers, he'd pulled her aside and told her he wished to cause her no distress. He reiterated what he'd said the day he proposed—she understood without further explanation. There was to be no rush in regard to the physical part of their marriage.

When she was ready, he said, she need only come to him. And she'd known in that moment that he meant at some point in the future. Whether it be days or weeks, or even months. He seemed content to wait on her to make this decision.

Yet as she perched on the edge of her opulent bed, wearing a thin, silky night

dress—a revealing confection that her mother had at some point placed in her trousseau—she wondered how much she would shock her new husband if she were to knock on the door that connected their chambers tonight.

Perhaps waiting was the proper thing to do. Perhaps it was what he expected of her. But that kiss as they'd stood on the altar, after uttering such earnest vows to each other, had unlocked something in her. Or perhaps revived it.

All the yearning she'd felt for him for so long. All the desire she'd thought she'd extinguished and swept away like ashes in a fireplace grate. Well, it hadn't burned out at all. It had always been there, if only as an ember, waiting to flame back to life.

Before she could talk herself out of it. Lily stood and faced that pretty filigreed connecting door. Fear, hesitation, and good sense all rushed in to stop her.

What about propriety?

But another part of her fought the fear. What impropriety could there be to keep a freshly wed wife from her husband on their wedding night?

She knew the mechanics of coitus from the textbooks she'd read. Male anatomy. Female anatomy. Reproduction. Her father hadn't sheltered her from studying biological functions.

Though she realized that when emotions and the heart were engaged, it stopped being a matter of simple biology.

And there had never been a man she'd wanted to give herself to except Griffin Kingsley.

He'd be pleased that she was about to knock on this door, wouldn't he?

Even if he didn't feel for her as she did for him, she'd sensed desire in the kiss they shared. She hadn't imagined it. Or had she? If nothing else, she needed to determine whether she had. Whether attraction, at the very least, was something shared between them.

So she raised her hand to knock. And then hesitated.

What if she seemed too brazen? That wasn't the way for a duchess to behave. His grandmother would no doubt offer that admonishment.

No, she was being a fool. The man had just vowed to be hers. He would not mind that she knocked upon his bedchamber door.

She rapped softly. If he didn't respond, she'd assume he was asleep. And she would go to bed and force herself to do the same.

This wasn't the only night. There were many nights ahead of them. She needn't make so much of the fact that it was their one and only wedding night.

Then the door opened. And he stood before her, wearing only trousers and a half-buttoned shirt—and a frown.

At that frown, her belly dipped a bit. Perhaps this had been a terrible mistake.

Though she couldn't seem to drag her gaze from the hard planes of his bare chest. Indeed, she fought the urge to unbutton the remaining buttons of his shirt and push it from his shoulders.

“Are you all right, Lily?”

When she stood mutely, dumbstruck at the sight of him half dressed, he reached for

her. "Come in, please. Tell me what's troubling you."

He led her toward the fire, and she realized how bare she was. The sleeveless filmy slip of a nightgown hid nothing.

When she looked up at him, she caught him drinking her in, his gaze on her breasts, then sliding lower.

She thought she felt a tremble where his hand still rested on her upper arm.

"Will you tell me what's troubling you?" he asked and his voice emerged deep and husky, a bit breathless.

"I wanted to see you."

His mouth began to tip up in a smile. "Did you?"

"Yes. It's our wedding night," she added as if he might have forgotten.

"It is."

"And I know you said we needn't rush. I understand that bit. I don't want to rush either." And yet she was doing just that as her words tumbled out quickly. "But I was wondering if you would..." The rest stalled somewhere in throat.

He immediately sought to soothe her, running his hand down her arm until he clasped her hand. Then he lifted it to place a kiss on her palm.

"Anything," he whispered against her skin. "Ask me and it's yours."

"I don't think I can sleep...until you kiss me goodnight." Lily's body tensed as she

waited for him to respond.

He said nothing, and he'd stilled too. But his eyes had altered, from stormy blue to a vivid cobalt. Perhaps it was a trick of the firelight, but Lily saw desire in the depths of his eyes. Strong. Vibrant. As fierce as her own.

She dared to lay her palm against the bare skin of his chest. Yes, his heartbeat thrashed like hers. It emboldened her, and she slid her hand lower, tracing over the rigid muscles of his chest. Without any sense of shame, she explored freely, running her fingers up to stroke the hollow at the base of his throat. She barely resisted the urge to rise onto her toes and press a kiss there.

After she'd explored, he stroked his fingertips along her cheek, then dipped to hook a finger under her chin. Nudging her up as he bent down, he studied her lips as if deciding how best to devour them.

Lily let out a little moan. She hadn't meant to. Didn't even know where it had come from. But she knew what caused it. Longing. Such intense, deep longing for this man.

He took her mouth. This wasn't a gentle brush as their kiss in the church had begun. Tonight, he claimed her as his, then pulled back to nip at her lower lip. Lily gasped, and he took it as the invitation it was. His tongue stroked inside to taste her, and her knees nearly buckled.

But then his arm came around to pull her into the shelter of his body. As he kissed her and stroked her with his tongue, she nearly forgot to breathe. Then he pulled back long enough to skim his lips along her neck.

Lily arched back, reaching up to grasp his shoulders, one hand sliding to his nape to brace herself. She clutched at him as if afraid she might slip away, and he was the anchor that would keep her steady. He took his time exploring her skin, licking,

nipping with his teeth, tasing with his tongue.

“You’re delicious,” her murmured near her ear. “And so damn beautiful.”

At that, Lily couldn’t resist any longer. She reached for those still unfastened buttons on his shirt and undid every one of them. He understood and straightened, allowing her to push the fabric from his shoulders. Allowing her to run her fingers across the skin of his chest, the bulge of his muscled shoulders, the sprinkling of hair that ran into his waistline.

Though when she reached that spot, he hissed as if she’d burned him.

“Did I do something wrong?” she asked him quietly.

“You couldn’t.” He cupped her cheek. “But if you keep touching me…”

“Do you want me to stop?”

He laughed that warm, melting laugh of his, and Lily covered his hand with her own. She clasped it, nudging it down from her cheek, inviting him to touch her where she’d touched him.

Griffin swallowed hard and allowed her to lead him. When she drew his fingertips over her breast, across her nipple that was hard and aching for him, he groaned.

Then wrapped an arm around her again and bent to kiss her aching bud. He laved it through the silk, tugging her into his mouth and then suckling gently.

When she reached out to stroke a hand through his hair, he rewarded her by treating her other nipple to the same sweet torture.

“Please” she keened, and then she couldn’t stop a chuckle that bubbled up.

He straightened, wrapping both arms around her. “Something amusing, my duchess?”

“I don’t even know what I’m begging for.”

He stroked her cheek again, held her gaze as he drew his fingers through her unbound hair. “I do,” he finally whispered before he kissed her again.

These kisses were languid, tender, and he moaned when she flicked her tongue out to taste him as he had taught her. He slipped his hand down to caress her breast, then lower across her belly, where he began to tug up her night rail, bunching the fabric above his wrist.

Cool air on every inch of her body that was not pressed against him was a shocking contrast to his heat.

Then his fingers found the spot where she was warm and wet and aching for him. He never stopped kissing her as he dipped his fingers through her curls, stroking her folds, and finding that one point where all her need seemed to center.

He stroked her mouth with his tongue in much the same rhythm that he stroked her body with his fingers. And Lily was lost to anything but those two points of pleasure—his mouth on hers, his fingers dipping and circling—until her body felt as if she was climbing, yearning for some great height. She knew the physical mechanism—why it happened, how it happened. But this was beyond any medical text. It was so intense it pulled her under. She let out a cry as it overflowed inside her, through her, until she was shuddering in his arms.

“That was...extraordinary,” she managed when she could once again form words.

“ You are extraordinary.” His lips hovered near her temple and he murmured, “I adore your passion.”

“I feel as if my very bones have melted.”

He chuckled and kissed her forehead. “Then let me make sure you get to bed safely.”

Without a moment’s hesitation, he swept her into his arms.

Lily cast a glance at his mammoth four-poster bed longingly, eager to sink into it and wrap him in her arms. But he didn’t head that way. He carried her through the connecting door that still stood ajar and placed her gently on the duchess’s bed. He pulled back the coverlet, and Lily slid underneath.

After tucking the blanket around her, he pressed his hands on either side of her and leaned over to kiss her once more. Just a gentle, soft peck.

“See you in the morning, lovely wife.”

“Do we have something special planned?” Lily’s voice still sounded odd to her own ears, dreamy and deeper than it should be.

He frowned. “I’m afraid the land agent is coming to meet with me tomorrow, but I will find you as soon as we’re finished.” He bent once more and kissed her nose. “Don’t let Grandmama keep you trapped planning the house party.”

Swirling thoughts spun in her head. “House party?” Were they to travel somewhere together? Hadn’t there been some mention of a house party at the luncheon?

“Yes, she’s already sent out invitations. Guests arrive on Friday.”

When he'd gone, and the damnable connecting door had closed behind him, Lily felt the sting of tears welling in her eyes.

She hadn't truly expected a post-wedding journey, yet her silly heart had hoped for perhaps a day trip. Just the two of them and time to get to know one another more deeply. Now it seemed that in but a few days, she would be embarking on her duchess duties and sharing her husband with a house full of guests.

The next morning, Griffin could think of nothing but Lily.

As Masters, his land agent, went over facts and figures about the state of the ducal holdings, Griffin's body missed the tantalizing feel of having her in his arms. That she'd trusted him with her passion and need had affected him deeply.

He licked his lips and could swear he still felt the lush heat of her mouth on his. And how she kissed him, how she touched him—good Lord, it was if she'd been waiting all her life to have him.

Taking her back to her bedroom had tested all his self-control. But it was necessary. He'd known from the start that they should not share a bed. It would make her miserable and lead to questions he did not want to answer.

"Is that satisfactory to you, Your Grace?" The man's voice finally broke through his musings.

"Pardon? Repeat that, will you, Masters?"

The bespectacled man smiled. "Perhaps such a long meeting but a day after your wedding ceremony was not ideal."

Of course the man was absolutely correct, but this meeting had been on his calendar

for months, and the wedding been so much more important that he'd forgotten to cancel Masters' visit.

"Why don't I leave these documents with you? I've made notes of everything we discussed, and I can return in a week to finalize anything that requires my attention."

"Excellent." Griffin collected the pile of documents without much enthusiasm. He still had the damned estate ledgers to review, and all he wanted to do was spend time with Lily.

"Once again, I offer my congratulations upon your nuptials, Your Grace."

"Thank you, Masters." Griffin stood and then waited impatiently for the man to gather his things and head toward the door.

"Good day to you, Masters," he said as the man bowed to take his leave.

Then he immediately headed out into the hall to find Lily.

"Is Masters leaving so soon?" his grandmother called when he was halfway up the stairs.

She emerged from the drawing room as if she'd been waiting to catch him the moment he stepped out of his study.

"We've finished early," he told her, "but he'll be back next week. Now, if you'll excuse me, Grandmama."

"I do hope you're not going to seek out the duchess and distract her. I suspect she's making good progress on the house party planning. In fact, I was going to invite her to take her lunch with me and answer any questions she might have."

Griffin clenched his teeth and then turned, descending the stairs until he and his grandmother stood face to face. “I’m going to speak with my wife. You may call it distraction if you please. And I am claiming her for lunch as well.” He kissed her cheek before she could offer up any argument.

As he climbed the stairs again, he considered for the first time since her arrival whether he should ask his grandmother to return to the dower house. He adored her and believed she meant well, but Lily was now his priority. His grandmother needed to understand that.

He expected to find his wife in the sitting room next to her bedchamber. It featured floor-to-ceiling windows that looked out onto the field that faced toward Briarfield, and he suspected that would please her.

But she wasn’t there.

As a housemaid passed, he asked if she’d seen the duchess.

“She’s in the library, Your Grace,” the girl told him.

Ah, of course. How could he not realize she’d be drawn to that book-lined room?

He headed to the library with long strides, eagerness building inside him. At the threshold, he stopped, the air seizing up in his chest.

She sat at one of the map tables with papers strewn around her. Sunlight shone through the stained-glass windows, lighting her skin in a kaleidoscope of colors. His wife was a breath-stealing beauty, and he’d been a fool not to fully appreciate that fact years ago.

He knocked softly at the oak door. “May I interrupt?”

“Yes, please do.” Her smile at seeing him made him smile too.

She stood as he approached, pressing her hands to her lower back and arching as if she’d been sitting too long.

“Here. Let me.” Pointing to the table, he told her, “Place your hands there.”

Lily did as he directed, leaning down to place her hands on the tabletop.

Griffin stood behind her and swept his hands across her lower back, kneading with light pressure and then a bit harder. When she moaned, his body responded as it had last night. He was hard and aching to finish what they’d started. He reminded himself to have patience, restraint.

After he’d worked the knots in her back a bit more, he took her waist in his hands and forced himself to push away the image of taking her bent over the table or?—

“You’re very good at that,” she said softly, gazing at him over her shoulder.

“I have many talents, wife.” With a hand on his chest, he feigned offense. “That you would assume I don’t wounds me deeply.”

She straightened and chuckled. “This is all a bit daunting,” she admitted, gesturing at the papers scattered across the table.

In the pile, Griffin identified a schema of Rosemere’s dining table and a sketch of the order in which Rosemere’s guest rooms were laid out, plus a menu written in a neat hand that he assumed must be Lily’s.

“Let me take you away from all this for a bit.”

With one last glance at the table, she nibbled her lower lip, seemingly oblivious to how it made him want to tip her back onto the table and kiss her senseless.

“Your grandmother insisted?—”

Griffin hovered a finger near her lips. “She may seem as if she is the arbiter of all decisions at Rosemere, but she’s not.” He lowered his hand and offered it to her, palm up. “Come walk with me. It’s a beautiful day. We’ll have the staff prepare us a picnic basket.”

She took his hand, and it felt like a key slipping seamlessly into some locked part of himself. Each time they held hands—a simple act that had never affected him with any woman before—it gave him an extraordinary sense of comfort and ease.

“I’m a bit worried about the twins.” The frown she wore disturbed him.

“Are they all right?”

“Frankly, they’re a bit nervous. The dowager duchess informed them that they’ll be getting a governess soon.”

“Do you not wish them to have a governess?” It sounded reasonable to Griffin, given their ages, but he would defer to Lily’s wishes in regard to her sisters.

After a moment’s hesitation, she finally said, “If I am able to choose the governess, I think it makes a great deal of sense. But I’ve always tutored them, you see. Or Daphne or Ivy. They’re imaging the worst sort of tyrant, I fear.” She laughed lightly, but he could still sense her unease.

“No one will be hired without your approval. I promise you that.”

She eyed him dubiously, but then nodded as if she would trust in his promise.

“I told you when I proposed to you that we would consult each in all matters, and I meant it.”

“But what will your grandmother say?”

He stopped as they headed out into the hall and stroked his fingers along her cheek. No longer able to resist tasting her again, he bent to kiss her. She responded eagerly, laying a hand on his chest and gripping the edge of his lapel to pull him closer.

When they were both breathless, he pulled back but had to kiss the tip of her nose before finally letting her go.

“I don’t want you to worry,” he told her softly, “so please leave Grandmama to me.”

CHAPTER 9

Lily had always known that Rosemere's grounds were extensive, but she'd never truly understood how vast they were until she joined Griffin on a ramble toward a folly near a little gathering of trees and a small pond. It was as if they'd stumbled into some other land with the little Greek-inspired temple and the untamed overgrowth of flowers, vines, and shrubs.

The spot was so far away from the house that servants had driven a pony cart out ahead to prepare a picnic spread for them. They were driving back just as Griffin and Lily approached, and she gave a wave of thanks to them.

Griffin tipped a look her way.

"I can't help it," she confessed. "It's what we've always done."

"What's that?" he asked with a frown.

"Thanking the staff. Your grandmother gave me a bit of a talking to for thanking the footman every time he refills my cup or glass at luncheon."

"Ah." A smile teased at his lips—lips Lily could not look at without wanting to kiss him.

"I'll do my best to learn."

"No." He stopped and turned to face her, effectively stopping her too. "You must do

what feels right to you. How can gratitude and graciousness ever be wrong?" He drew in a breath and glanced back toward Rosemere. "Grandmama was raised a certain way, trained in her duties by a Dowager Duchess of Edgerton who was, by all accounts, a bit of a harridan."

"I see."

He took her upper arm into his hand lightly, stroking his thumb back and forth against her sleeve, sending delicious curls of sensation all the way to her belly.

"Don't stop thanking anyone you think deserving of your gratitude. Don't stop chatting amiably with Rosemere's staff if you feel the desire to. And don't stop loving books and spending time growing medicinal herbs and taking in wounded beasts. I knew all those things were important to you, Lily. I can hardly ask you to become someone you're not."

When he'd finished, he was breathing quickly and his brow had furrowed. "I don't want you to be unhappy here."

"I'm not." Lily took a step closer and laid a hand on his chest to reassure him. "But thank you for your blessing if I thank the footmen." She grinned, and a bit of the tension in him seemed to ease.

Fitting in at Rosemere mattered to her a great deal. She wasn't someone who did things in half-measures, and she was determined to be a success as Duchess of Edgerton. But she also wanted to be true to herself, and yet she was logical enough to know those two desires might be in opposition.

Griffin's encouragement meant the world to her because he seemed to understand her need to cling to her own interests. He was the same with her sisters, seemingly determined that Hyacinth should not snuff out her curiosity about paleontology. He

even encouraged Ivy's fascination with criminal detection. Though both topics would be deemed unladylike by most of good society.

"Shall we?" he finally said, gesturing to the wide blanket the staff had set out for them.

Once they were seated, Lily poured tea from a bottle wrapped in linens to keep it warm.

As Griffin took his cup, he watched her, almost warily, from over the rim.

"What is it?" she asked after taking her first sip.

"I do understand you've taken on a lot, and I know it can feel overwhelming. It does to me, and I was born into this family."

"But you never expected to be duke."

"Never wanted to be either." He softened that firm pronouncement with the slightest of grins. "But I know my duty and will do it." That last part was added stiffly, as if he must say it. As if it was a proclamation he'd been forced to repeat over and over.

Lily wondered if he'd heard his father or brother say those words.

She lifted a plate filled with scrumptious-looking confections, offering him first choice. He chose a macaron and popped the whole thing into his mouth.

Once he'd washed it down with a drink of tea, she eyed him and noticed a bit of that tension that sometimes rose up in him seemed to have returned.

"What would you do instead?" she blurted before she could think it better of it.

He blinked and tipped his head.

“Instead of being Duke of Edgerton?” she clarified, realizing immediately how ridiculous it sounded. It wasn’t simply a piece of clothing one could remove—the title came with power and responsibilities that couldn’t be ignored.

He looked so uncomfortable with the question that she dearly wished she could take it back.

“I’m sorry. That was a nonsensical inquiry.” She cringed. “Ivy would be so disappointed.”

He barked out a laugh. “Ivy? Why?”

“Oh, she prides herself on her well-crafted questioning skills.”

“Ah,” he said. “But I don’t think it’s a nonsensical question at all. I just...feel like a fool when I consider my answer.”

“Why?”

He swallowed hard. “I never really thought of what I would do. My father was forever trying to force me onto some path—the military, the church, even law. Good God, can you imagine me as a barrister?” He shook his head. “None of that suited me, and I knew the only thing I wanted to do was impossible. At least for a Kingsley spare.”

Lily held her breath, guessing what it would be because of how closely she’d observed him over the years. Always with a little sketch pad in his pocket that he’d pull out when he thought others wouldn’t care or notice.

When he said nothing, she whispered, “Do you mean art?”

He whipped his head up and stared at her. “Did Leo tell you?”

“No, but I noticed you drawing on occasion.” Because I could rarely take my eyes off of you.

For a moment, he stilled, looking a bit like an animal snared in a trap. “He and I spoke of it often. My grand plan to go to France and Italy to study and learn.” A wry look came over him and then a soft smile. “In truth, he mostly teased me about Parisian women.”

Lily’s brows shot up, and he immediately reached for her hand.

“I never went to France. There were no Parisian women.”

There were other women, she knew. He’d been as notorious as her brother in that regard.

“I should like to paint you,” he murmured. “I’ve drawn you many times.”

“You drew me?” Lily’s breath caught and she nearly dropped her teacup.

“Don’t look so entirely shocked.” He steadied the cup in her hand and laughed.

“But you never even noticed me.” The words burst out of her, louder and laced with more hurt than she’d ever intended to reveal to him.

Griffin immediately turned toward her, shock clear in his wide eyes. “Is that what you thought?”

“You didn’t give me a reason to think otherwise.” Lily tried to temper her tone. He was her husband now. What was the point of revisiting girlish sadness?

He surprised her by getting to his feet. For a moment, she wondered if she’d angered him.

Then he offered her his hand. “Come with me.”

There was something in his gaze that made her comply. She took his hand, and he helped her to her feet. Then he led her up the few steps into the folly itself. Toward the back stone wall, she noticed a seam, an indent where Griffin tucked his fingers and pulled open a hidden door.

Still holding her hand, he immediately stepped inside a circular room that was shockingly bright. Stained glass windows at the rear of the structure glowed with the light of the mid-afternoon sun. It was one of the coziest little hideaways she’d ever seen, with a sofa, stuffed chairs, a desk, an easel, a small bookcase filled with books, and art—on canvases and simple sketches on small pieces of paper—decorating nearly every inch of the walls.

“It’s really only habitable during the temperate months, but my mother originally had it outfitted as a place where she could come and paint. She’d let me join her,” he said almost reverently. “It’s where she taught me to appreciate the old masters and learn line and shading and color.”

“I love it,” Lily said and meant it.

He gave her a beaming smile and then crooked a finger, urging her over to a bureau with many narrow drawers. Sliding one out, he extracted a couple of sheaves of paper and a sketchbook.

“Have a look.” He offered her the pages and the book.

Lily gasped when she examined the sheafs. One was a quick, rough sketch of her walking in the garden at Briarfield. With the strokes of his pencil, he’d been able to capture movement and the joy she felt whenever she worked in her family’s garden.

The next made her heartbeat ratchet up until she felt it pounding in her ears.

These lines were softer, the shading more detailed. He’d captured every aspect of her face—the little beauty mark above her upper lip, the way her eyebrows dipped down too abruptly, the freckles forever dotted across her nose and cheeks. Even a few stray curling wisps of hair at her temple.

“I noticed you.” He spoke in a voice that heated her blood. “How could I miss that my best friend’s sister was a stunning beauty?”

“I’m not,” she instantly rebutted, her voice soft and breathy. She’d never thought of herself that way, but oh, how she wanted it to be true that he did.

“Achingly lovely,” he continued as he watched her study his drawings. “I’d watch you at dances and hate every man who got to dance with you.”

Lily scoffed, even as her heartbeat rioted. “I never had a full dance card.”

Had he truly noticed her? All the years of watching him and she’d somehow missed that he’d been studying her too. Perhaps because every time he did look her way, she averted her eyes, afraid he’d catch her observing him.

“Maybe it’s because the gentlemen heard me growling every time anyone dared to ask.”

She couldn't help but laugh. "One might argue that the kindest thing to do would have been to help me fill my dance card by asking me yourself," she teased.

"I wanted to." He reached for her, sliding a hand around her waist and urging her closer. "God, how I wanted to. But Leo..."

"H-he wouldn't have liked it?" Lily murmured. With all the heat of him pressed against her, her mind turned to mush.

"He was protective."

Lily knew the truth of Griffin's words. Leo had never considered any man good enough for any of his sisters, though Daphne, in particular, had her share of admirers. Leo had proclaimed that it was his responsibility to watch over all of them. Which is why his jaunts to London, when he invariably got into all sorts of mischief, had rankled Lily so much.

A thought struck her, and she raised her gaze to Griffin's. "Do you think he'd give his blessing to us now?"

Bleak, stark grief swept his features of all the warmth of a moment before.

Lily felt the tautness in his body. Noted the hard set of his jaw.

"Yes," he said with the same firmness with which he'd spoken of duty. "Because I'm not the man I was before. He'd know I've changed. And he'd understand that I married you to protect you."

A lump formed in Lily's throat, and her chest felt suddenly hollow, empty except for a deep ache. She was smart, not some foolish girl. She understood why he'd proposed. For practical reasons. They'd both agreed on that score.

But then he'd kissed her and been kind and caring, even loving. Yet it wasn't love. There was a powerful attraction between them, for certain. He'd drawn pictures of her. He'd noticed her when she'd thought she was invisible to a man as handsome and appealing as Griffin Kingsley.

"I've said something amiss." The furrow had returned to his brow.

Lily gently eased herself from his hold and strode toward one of the long windows at the rear of the folly. She looked out through the etched glass and hugged herself around the middle, willing herself not to cry.

"What would you do?" he asked as he strode toward her.

If he touched her, she didn't know if she could hold back the tears.

Thankfully, he didn't. He seemed to understand how fragile the moment was.

"What do you mean?" she asked him, her eyes still trained on the colorful cuts of stained glass.

"If you hadn't taken on the duty of being my duchess." His voice had lowered to a near-whisper. "What did your heart truly want?"

You. She couldn't say it. Not in this moment. That raw truth felt far more vulnerable than admitting to any girlish disappointment that he'd never partnered her for a dance.

She swiped at a single hot tear that escaped. "I wanted to be a doctor, like my father."

"Of course." He was close enough for her to feel his breath against her nape. "That makes perfect sense. Did you want to go to medical school?"

“Yes.” It had seemed a far-off wish but possible at one point in her life. There had been ladies in Scotland who’d graduated from medical school. And then a ladies’ medical college opened in London. One day, she’d thought. She’d even saved money for the endeavor. And then Mama had died. Then, soon after, Papa. Then Leo.

“But I was the only one they had left.” As the eldest, caring for her younger sisters had always been a part of her life, but it never felt more crucial than after they’d endured grief after grief together.

“You have always taken care of others.” He took a step forward. “From wounded birds to your sisters, and now instead of mending people as you yearned to, you’re tasked with this bloody house party.”

“I don’t regret my choice.” Waking up and knowing she could see him, touch him, kiss him brought her a happiness she wasn’t certain she’d feel again after losing so much.

Her sisters were settling in and soon they’d begin to feel at home too.

“And I could never regret mine,” he whispered.

Lily could feel the warmth of his body at her back. Sense that potent energy about him that had always pulled her in.

Goodness, she didn’t want to disappoint him. Just as she’d never wanted to disappoint her parents, her sisters, any of them.

“I hope the house party is a success.”

Griffin couldn’t take away her worries, nor diminish the duties that came with being a duchess, but he wished he could. The bond between them felt as if it grew stronger

every day, and yet he fought a nagging fear that he'd lose her. His dreams, so often full of memories of losing Leo, had become dreams of Lily turning to him at the altar with hurt and horror in her gaze and then bolting from the church.

He told himself it was foolish. Nonsensical. Nothing more than nightmares, but the anxiety sat in his chest, refusing to go away.

"I trust it will be a success," he told her and meant every word. Between Lily's efforts and his grandmother's, it would be a triumph.

She turned to face him, arms wrapped around her middle, still looking fretful. "I have a dozen lists, and yet I feel as if I've forgotten something."

"We'll sort it out." Griffin couldn't resist reaching for her, stroking her arm, attempting to reassure her. "I've only attended a few house parties, and however well planned they are, the guests were the unpredictable variable."

"I'm acquainted with very few people on the guest list."

"You'll come to know them."

Her frown began to ease, but she still arched one tawny brow at him. "Don't you want everything to be perfect?"

"I want you to take some enjoyment in the next few days." He stepped closer and she unclasped her arms, laying a hand on his chest.

How could a simple touch be so soothing?

"Will you review the schedule of events and make sure they're all to your liking?" she asked him.

“Of course. Anything you wish of me, you need only ask.”

She snapped her gaze to his at that and looked as if she wished to say something but resisted. The pointed look in her eyes eased into something softer.

“Thank you.” She stroked her hand up to his shoulder.

Griffin took what felt like an invitation to slip his arm around her and embrace her fully. He dipped his head and whispered, “I’m your husband, remember? You needn’t thank me.”

“It’s my nature to thank people, remember?” she teased.

“Mmm. It’s why you’ll be a spectacular duchess.”

She laughed, and it was delicious to feel it reverberate against his own chest. “You and your grandmother have quite opposing views regarding the qualities required to make one a spectacular duchess.”

“I don’t remember him well, but my grandfather wasn’t a particularly kind man. No doubt he had expectations she felt she must conform to.”

“And what of your expectations?”

Griffin hardly wanted to admit that he’d given very little time to thinking about what he expected of a wife. In truth, he’d mostly considered how he might put marriage off a bit longer.

But that was before he’d made the best choice of his life.

“What if we carve our own path?”

She studied the shape his shoulder with her fingers and then trailed her fingertips down his arm. “Become a new sort of Duke and Duchess of Edgerton?” she said thoughtfully.

“Precisely.” That prospect made him more eager to take on the role than he’d ever felt. Lily would have ideas, and he had a few too. Charitable endeavors, of course, but she and her sisters so loved books. He wondered if they could not spearhead some enterprise to share books with those who needed them.

“We may cause a stir.”

“Good.” Griffin slid a hand up her back, gripped her waist in his other. “Let’s surprise them all.”

He dipped his head, and she arched up to meet him. Their kiss began softly and grew in heat, in urgency.

His grandmother had warned him about losing his head over his wife, but Lily would make him a better man. A better duke. He knew it.

CHAPTER 10

Three days later

Lily breathed a sigh of relief as she stepped into her bedchamber after dinner.

The guests would begin descending on Rosemere tomorrow, and she'd done all she could to prepare events, meals, and activities befitting a visit to a ducal estate.

She was tired to the bone, but also deeply grateful to Rosemere's staff. They had pulled together beautifully to help her. Some of the arrangements had already been underway before the wedding because the dowager and Griffin had previously agreed upon the house party. In the end, Lily was grateful for that early planning and for the dowager's knowledge and assistance.

The lady felt a bit like an adversary at times, and yet this afternoon she'd praised Lily for what she'd been able to accomplish in the last few days.

Griffin had been wonderful too. He possessed no arrogance about his title or position and had dug in to help, particularly with the conservatory. Lily was eager to revive it before the party, and he'd helped arrange freshly purchased potted plants from a local nursery. Ivy, Daphne, and the twins all pitched in by planting flowers in the raised beds too.

But for two nights in a row she'd dropped into bed so exhausted that she hadn't ventured through the connecting door again. Part of her wanted Griffin to be the one to knock from his side the next time.

After those moments together in the folly, when he'd showed her the drawings he'd made of her, she thought he might. But he hadn't. Though he had once told her that he would wait until she was ready.

This evening, she decided she wouldn't wait any longer.

She wanted to be with him in every way. As busy as she'd been, there hadn't been an hour that she hadn't thought of Griffin. And each day, he'd sought her out throughout the day, sneaking kisses when no one else was about. Or he'd simply spend time at her side, helping or chatting with her about how her sisters were settling in or the upcoming house party. With his time, attention, and bone-melting kisses, he'd showed her that she meant a great deal to him, that this practical marriage could be one of mutual regard too.

Tonight, however, Lily wanted to fully give herself to him.

She strode into her dressing room, where she'd filled the enormous claw-footed tub with warm water. The modern plumbing at Rosemere was a wonder. The twins were fascinated by the magic of turning on a tap and having hot water. Even Ivy was agog.

As Lily slipped off her robe, she picked one of the scented soaps set out for her use. The lilac one was her favorite, and she fetched it before stepping into the tub.

The moment she sunk into the deliciously soothing heat of the bath, she heard footsteps in her bedchamber and guessed it was her maid, Nell, who'd come with them from Briarfield. She usually set out her night rail and offered to comb Lily's hair before bed.

"That looks quite good," a low masculine voice opined.

Lily's eyes flew open and she turned to find Griffin watching her from the threshold,

one broad shoulder propped against the doorframe.

“It’s warm and lovely,” she readily admitted.

She raised her arms to cover herself, though she was mostly covered by soapy water. Then she lowered her arms and sat up a bit straighter. There was something terribly tantalizing about shedding her shyness and being bold when they were alone together.

“You should join me, Your Grace.”

“Temptress.” He laughed in a low, sensual rumble—so deep she felt it in her own belly.

Then he strode over and settled on the wooden frame that enclosed the porcelain bath. “I think…” he said, taking up a small clean cloth folded neatly at the tub’s edge, “that I’d rather help.”

Lily licked her lips and watched as he dipped the cloth into the soapy, floral-scented water, then used it to stroke along her shoulders. Down her arms. Across her breasts, causing her nipples to peak almost painfully. Then he slowed his movements as he dipped the cloth down her stomach.

He’d been looking attentively at her body as he washed her, but now he locked his gaze on hers, released the cloth, and stroked his fingers along her thighs.

“I was going to—” she started just as he ducked his head toward hers to kiss her.

“Going to what?” he asked, his lips but a few inches from hers, his fingers still whispering over her upper thighs.

“Come to you through the connecting door tonight,” she rasped as she arched her

hips, eager to feel his fingers where she wanted them most.

“Were you indeed?” He tipped his head questioningly. “Is it all right that I strode through this time?”

“Of course. I’ve been waiting for you to. Griffin, I don’t want to wait anymore.” She leaned forward. “Must we wait?”

“Absolutely not.” He shook his head and a slow smile lit his handsome face.

Lily raised the cloth and set it aside, then she reached for his shoulders, bracing herself as she stood.

Griffin swallowed hard and looked awestruck. “My Aphrodite.”

Lily laughed, then ran her damp fingers through the thick, dark gold locks of his hair. “Your Aphrodite needs that towel over there.”

He got to his feet, retrieved it, and then came back, holding the large swath of fabric up for her to step into. Lily dried herself as he watched hungrily. She found she loved having him watch her that way, as if he found her beautiful, desirable, as if he was entranced with her. It was a heady feeling.

As soon as she’d finished, she hesitated a moment and then set the towel aside. She felt her cheeks begin to flame, but she’d decided on boldness tonight.

“Lily,” he breathed and stepped closer. “You steal my breath.”

“Will you take me to bed with you tonight?” She reached up and unfastened the first button of his shirt. “I don’t want to be apart from you.”

Uncertainty crept into her tone and her heart. She knew he desired her, felt it in each glance, each touch, each dizzying kiss, but this was also so new. As familiar as his presence was to her, the intimacy they'd begun to share was different. In all the best ways.

More , her heart seemed to say.

He cupped her cheek, sweeping his thumb along the edge of her mouth. "I think of you constantly, of the next time I get to touch you, hold you. Do not ever doubt that I want you."

Lily wrapped her arms around his neck, let him take her weight. He thrilled her by bending to take her lips in a searing kiss, then lifting her into his arms.

"If that wasn't clear enough," he told her with a devilish grin, "the answer is yes."

Griffin carried her with a look she'd never seen on his face—something between triumph and tension.

When they reached his grand four-poster bed, he lowered her gently, as if she was precious. But the way he looked at her was full of hunger. He licked his lips as he stood next to the bed, sweeping his hooded gaze over her bare skin and unbuttoning his shirt.

She watched as the fabric parted, revealing more and more of his muscled chest and the dusting of dark blonde hair. Her mouth watered when he worked the fly of his trousers loose, toed off his boots, and then pushed the fabric off until every inch of him was revealed to her.

Lily's breath escaped in quick, hot gusts as she took him in. He might be the artist, but she wished to etch this memory on her mind.

Goodness, he was gorgeous from head to toe.

“I want to touch you,” she said, her voice sounding different to her own ears. Low and husky. Wanton.

She stretched out a hand to run her fingers over the cut of muscle at his hip, then down to shape the hard, thick length of him with her hand.

He closed his eyes. Bit his lip. And then, as she continued to explore the tip of his hard silken shaft, he moaned.

“Lily—”

“I love the feel of you,” she murmured. “I’m always aching to touch you, to feel your hands on me.”

At that, he climbed onto the bed, arching over her, his hands braced at her sides to support his weight. Then, with maddening slowness, he settled himself between her thighs. “I’m yours to touch,” he said on a low rasp. “Just as you’re mine.”

A tremor jolted through Griffin as he reached down to stroke his fingers through Lily’s damp curls.

The same desire he felt burned in her eyes, a bright blue spark of need and heat. But there was more. No one had ever looked at him with such trust, and it rattled through him, shaking parts of him loose.

This moment mattered because she mattered, and he wanted to make it good for her. He took her lips, and she immediately dragged a hand through his hair, making a delicious shiver chase down his spine.

Lifting his head as he stroked his hand up the length of her body, he took his time, lazily tracing a circle around one nipple as he bent to suckle the other. She bucked against him and slid a hand down his back.

“We can take this slow.” He murmured the words against her belly as he kissed and licked her warm skin.

“No.”

Griffin stilled and looked up at her. She tugged at his shoulder, and he arched above her again, their lips inches apart. “What is it?”

“I don’t want to go slow.” She lifted her hips toward him, even as she said the words, and his cock slid against her. She gasped and arched to repeat the stroke again. “I feel as if I’ll go mad if I can’t have you.”

“You have me, sweetheart.” He lifted his hips and rocked against her again, slipping toward that connection with her that every part of him ached for.

“You know what I mean.” She bit her lip, even lowered her gaze a moment before looking at him boldly. “All of you.”

“Tell me.” He’d promised himself he’d take this slow and make this perfect for her. But her boldness fired his blood. “How do you want me, Lily?”

“Inside me,” she whispered. “Please.”

It was the please that did it, smashing through all the restraint he’d intended, all the perfection he’d wanted to give to her. In that moment, it was just him, an imperfect man with his heart in his throat as he thrust inside the woman who was precious to him.

He hesitated when she gasped as he filled her.

But then she reached a hand down to grip his hip, as if to urge him on.

“Please—”

“I don’t want to hurt you.”

She shook her head, scattering golden strands of damp hair across the pillow. “You won’t. It’s simple physics.”

Griffin chuckled at that and dipped his head, kissing her neck as he filled her to the hilt.

He relished her moan as he began to move, then the sweet breathy gasp each time he thrust into her again. She lifted her head to take his lips, and she kissed him as if she could not get enough of the taste of him.

The scrape of her nails as she gripped his back urged him into a fiercer rhythm. When she bent her knees, planting her feet on either side of his thighs, he angled his hips to stroke deeper, to drive into her faster.

Lily’s body tensed against his as she arched back and stared up at him wild-eyed.

“Oh, Griffin.” She watched him as she began shudder, then her lashes fluttered and her breath caught in her throat as he felt the pulse of her release. It was the single most beautiful thing he’d ever seen as Lily found her pleasure. The way she threw her head back, her bee-stung lips parted, her eyes glittering when she opened them again—bright with a contented glow.

Lily gripped his neck and kissed him, stroking her tongue against his as his own

release rushed through him, more powerful than any he'd ever known, pulling him under.

When he could think again and somehow move, though he felt boneless, he settled next to her. She immediately turned and tucked herself against him. As extraordinary as making love to her had been, holding her after those moments was something else entirely.

Contentment settled over him, and nothing else seemed to matter as much as keeping her next to him.

He told himself he should take her back to her bedchamber. With his dreams and restlessness throughout the night, he'd keep her from restful slumber. His nightmares would remind her that he'd been there that night with Leo.

But she settled one slim leg over his, wrapped her arm around his chest, and tucked her head against his shoulder. Soon, her breathing settled into a slow, comforting rhythm.

She was lilac-scented heaven in his arms, so he told himself he could doze for a few minutes. Half an hour at most. Then he'd carry her back to her own bed.

Griffin closed his eyes as he stroked his fingers through the satiny waves of Lily's hair. He breathed differently, drawing air in more deeply, as if some weight had been lifted from his chest.

When he felt sleep threatening, he forced his eyes open. But Lily was snuggled against him, sleeping peacefully. He could not bring himself to wake her.

If his usual night terrors took hold, then he'd take her to her chamber.

CHAPTER 11

Griffin opened his eyes, stunned to find Lily's back to his as he held her against him.

She rested peacefully, her hair tickling his cheek, her long legs tangled in his.

For the first time in six months, he'd slept through the night without waking, without night terrors of a past loss he could not change or a future loss he feared.

When he stroked his fingers through her hair, Lily let out a contented sigh and stretched.

"I could get used to this," she said, her voice a sultry, sleep-tinged rasp.

Griffin was already aching for her again and murmured his agreement.

She arched back against his hard length, and he reached up to fill his hand with the lush swell of her breast. Just as he bent to kiss the tantalizing nape of her neck, a knock sounded at his bedchamber door.

The hazy peach light of dawn peeking through the curtains told him it was early, and he lifted up to squint at the clock on the mantel to confirm it.

Lily tensed beside him. "Something must be wrong."

He kissed her bare shoulder. "I'll see to it."

The act of getting out of bed and leaving her frustrated him almost as much as the incessant knocking. Quickly, he retrieved his robe and donned it, then opened the door a crack.

“Forgive me, Your Grace,” one of the footmen, Thomas, said nervously. “The dowager duchess bids you?—”

“Oh, do step aside, young man,” his grandmother said from behind the lanky servant. “I shall see to this. Go down and assist with the crisis.”

The footman retreated, and his grandmother surged forward, all but pushing into the room.

“I must speak to you, Griffin. Urgently.”

“What’s happened?” Lily said from behind him. She’d gotten out of bed and wrapped herself a coverlet.

“May I come in and speak to both of you? This concerns Lily as well.”

Griffin tipped a look back at Lily, and she immediately nodded her assent.

He opened the door wider, and his grandmother stormed into the room.

A frantic sort of energy seemed to animate her as she stood before them twisting one of her kerchiefs in her hands.

“We have a problem,” she said, unmistakable vexation in her tone. “A kitten problem.” At those words, she fixed her gaze on Lily.

“A what?” Griffin wasn’t certain he’d heard her properly.

“Oh my,” Lily said softly.

“ And a rabid hedgehog problem, which has frightened Sally and Anna nearly to death.”

“She’s not at all rabid.” Lily stepped forward to face his grandmother. “Give me a moment to dress, and I’ll be down to fix this.”

“By fix, I presume you mean removing those creatures from Rosemere for good.”

Lily looked back at him, and he recognized the worried frown pinching her brows together. It was the expression she wore when she’d found some wounded, needy thing and knew it required mending.

Understanding began to dawn on him. “Give us both a few moments, and we’ll come down.”

“This is not acceptable at Rosemere. For heaven’s sake, we have a dozen guests arriving in hours,” his grandmother offered in her most imperious tone, giving no indication she planned to depart and allow them to dress. “Your sisters explained that this was quite common in the past,” she said, her gaze fixed on Lily, “but you left that unruly life behind when you took on the role of Duchess of Edgerton.”

“Unruly?” Lily straightened and lifted her chin. “Briarfield was not an unruly household, Your Grace. But it was one where compassion was our pole star. And it always guided us well.”

“Guided you to anarchy, you mean? To a household full of sickly wild creatures and daughters almost as wild?”

“Enough,” Griffin said in a low but firm tone.

Behind him, Lily bristled. Griffin even heard a little huff of outrage emerge, and though he trusted his wife to hold her own in the face of his grandmother's ire, he stepped between them.

"Grandmama, as I said, we will be down directly. You must allow us to dress."

She eyed them both, her lips seamed into a tight line and then offered the slightest dip of her head before striding out of his bedchamber.

"I'm sorry," Lily said when he turned, but then her eyes flashed. "You did tell us we could bring anything that belonged to us when moved to Rosemere."

Griffin reached for her arms, stroking her bare skin. "And I take it kittens and a hedgehog were among those precious belongings?"

"Actually, it was one cat in a delicate condition, a hedgehog, and two mice." She cast a fretful look toward the bedchamber door. "It sounds as if none of them have found the mice yet, but I suspect the staff will see them as vermin and?—"

Her voice broke, and Griffin swallowed hard. "Then we must dress quickly and go down to make sure no harm comes to them."

Eyes wide, she looked shocked. "You're not upset?"

Griffin cradled her cheek against his palm. "How could I be upset that you have a heart to help the wounded? That you recognize the value of a life and help any ailing creature, whether it be a clumsy duke with a twisted ankle or a mouse."

"In fairness, you weren't clumsy," she said with a flicker of a smile. "I'd dug a deceptively large hole."

“And despite my sore ankle, I quite like remembering that day.”

“Do you?”

“Oh yes.” He bent until his forehead rested against hers. “I made the best decision of my life that day.”

Lily tipped his chin up and kissed him softly. “I think I did too.”

“You think?” he teased, wrapping an arm around her and pulling her closer.

“I’m reserving judgement until I determine whether I make a debacle of this house party,” she said, her eyes full of warmth. “I want to know I can pull off being a duchess.”

“You already do every day. It’s you I chose, you I want, not just to fill a role.”

She lowered her gaze, then met his again. “I know.”

“Now,” he told her, then kissed the tip of her nose, “let’s go save those mice. Do they have names?”

“Of course.” Lily laughed softly. “Elinor and Edward.”

“Of course.” Griffin shook his head. “I’m sure they’re a charming pair. Dress as quick as you can.”

Lily went downstairs side by side with Griffin, and as they proceeded through the hall together, she observed the chaos unfolding.

One housemaid stood crying near the threshold of the conservatory, while another

comforted her.

Two footman bickered inside the conservatory, and Ivy remonstrated in the most strident tones with the Dowager Duchess of Edgerton.

Lily rushed forward to intervene at the same moment Hyacinth and Marigold dashed from the opposite direction. Each of them clutched one of Griffin's hands.

"We need him," Mari told her earnestly. "Just for a few moments."

Griffin nodded when Lily looked back at him. "I'll come into the conservatory straightaway."

Lily lifted the edge of her skirt and nearly ran to head off an all-out battle between Ivy and the dowager.

"She wants to put the kittens in the barn," Ivy told Lily as soon as she spotted her. "They won't be safe there."

"They're destined to be barn cats. It's where they should be." The dowager duchess spoke the words as if she were repeating them and had grown tired of the recitation.

Lily stepped forward, a hand on Ivy's arm. "My sister is correct, Your Grace. This young, they won't be safe in the barn. It's too easy for predators to get to them." Lily glanced at the footmen arguing over how to catch a hedgehog and wondered where Henrietta had gotten to. "For now, we must keep them inside," she said as she turned to face the dowager.

"That won't do." The dowager drew in a sharp breath.

A skirmish with her grandmother-in-law a few hours before a houseful of guests

arrived was nothing Lily wanted, and yet she knew that Rosemere was certainly large enough to house a mother cat, a few kittens, a hedgehog, and two mice.

“We’ll find a place for them,” Lily insisted.

The dowager duchess shook her head before Lily could even finish speaking.

“That is not the way things work at Rosemere.”

“We can adjust,” Griffin said as he strode into the conservatory and shot Lily a meaningful look.

A scream echoed off the high glass ceiling of the conservatory and they all turned to see a maid, who’d hopped up into one of the raised beds as Henrietta trundled along the white-and-black diamond pattern of the conservatory’s floor tiles.

“Get her, will you?” Lily asked Ivy, who, blessedly, merely nodded and headed off, scooping the hedgehog up a moment later.

“I’ll secure her,” Ivy said before hurrying out of the conservatory.

The dowager’s expression turned harried. “Where on earth is she going with that beast?”

“She’ll make sure Hettie?—”

“You give these sickly creatures names? They are not pets,” the dowager all but spat.

Griffin stepped forward until his shirt sleeve brushed her arm. “They are in Lily’s care, and as such, we shall find a proper place for them at Rosemere.”

His grandmother's eyes took on a fierce resolve. "May I speak to you alone , Griffin?"

As he stood beside her, Lily felt the tension fill his frame. She glanced up to see a muscle jumping at the edge of his cheek as if he was clenching his teeth. The urge to touch him nearly overwhelmed him, and she leaned a bit closer.

He glanced down at her, then faced his grandmother again. "I need to speak to my wife. If you go to my study, I'll join you there momentarily."

Lily watched emotions flit over the dowager's face—irritation, confusion, and then finally acceptance.

"Very well," she said with a nod.

When she'd gone, Griffin drew Lily over to the edge of the conservatory behind a stand of newly planted palms.

"What did the twins want with you?" she asked him.

He grinned and the tension in his shoulders seemed to ebb. Bending his head, he whispered, "We've secured Elinor and Edward. The groundskeeper provided the twins with a cage for them and one of the housemaids is sending up food."

"Thank you." Lily arched up to kiss Griffin's cheek. "They were emaciated when we found them. We think they were poisoned as rodents often are. I think they're siblings since they don't seem to have mated, so I don't think we need worry about a bunch of mice pups."

"Duly noted." At that Griffin's eyes positively twinkled.

Lily's cheeks warmed. Without saying a word, she knew they were both thinking of last night. Just as she knew that if his grandmother had not interrupted them, they would have made love again. Might be doing so at this very moment.

Anticipation for the next time almost made her breathless.

"Will you forgive me?" he asked, stroking the backs of his fingers along her cheek.

"Forgive you for what?"

"It may seem that I've capitulated to my grandmother by agreeing to speak to her alone, but I assure you I will not waver." He cast a glance over his shoulder as if to make sure no one could see them, then he bent his head and took her mouth. Without hesitation, Lily opened to him, stroking her tongue against his.

By the time he lifted his head, her knees felt as if they were made of custard. He rested his forehead against hers a moment as if to steady himself.

"She cannot wedge us apart," he vowed with as much earnestness as he had on the altar.

"I trust you," Lily whispered, then lifted onto her toes to kiss him again.

Griffin stiffened, then turned his body to shelter her when they heard footsteps on the conservatory tiles.

"All's well," Ivy told them, her voice echoing up to the glass ceiling. Then she stepped closer and whispered, "All patients have been secured, and Anna and Sally have even stopped being screaming like ninnies at Henrietta."

Griffin frowned down at Lily.

“The hedgehog,” she whispered. “Thank you, Ivy. I’ll be out in a moment.”

After a moment, Ivy’s footsteps retreated but then slowed to a stop. “You know, you might as well finish kissing or whatever you’re doing because it will be much harder once the house is full of guests.”

“Thank you for the encouragement, Ivy,” Griffin called to her.

“It wasn’t encouragement. Just practical.”

Practical . That’s what they said this marriage would be, and yet it had become so much more so quickly. Lily’s heart felt as full as it ever had, and she could feel Griffin’s affection for her in turn. He hadn’t said the three words she longed to hear, and she’d struggled to hold them back last night as they’d made love and been closer than they’d ever been.

But she felt desired. Cared for. Cherished. And, for now, that was enough.

Lily looked up at the man who held her in his arms and looked at her as if he wanted to push her against the conservatory wall and take her again.

“You should go and speak to the dowager,” she told him, even as she ached to unfasten the buttons of his shirt and waistcoat, shed her dress, and feel his bare skin against hers.

He drew in a long breath and groaned. “You’re right. I must go. I’ll find you again before the guests arrive.”

“You’d better,” Lily told him. “I don’t want to greet all these strangers on my own.”

He kissed her on the forehead and then strode away.

Griffin strode into his study and found his grandmother sitting like a queen upon her throne in one of the wingbacks in front of the fireplace.

She exhibited perfect posture, her chin was lifted in the most regal way, and her bejeweled hands rested on the arms of the chair.

“How did she manage to delay you?” she asked without turning his way. “I imagine it didn’t take much as you seem quite besotted, my boy.”

The my boy had never grated before. It had seemed an endearment, a shared reminder of how much time they’d spent together when he was a boy, since his father had little interest in spending time with his spare heir. And the besotted he was expecting. He couldn’t hide how he felt Lily and didn’t want to.

“She’s my wife, and, yes, my feelings for her grow stronger each day. I won’t apologize for that.”

She finally turned her incisive gaze his way. “So it is a love match after all?”

Griffin swallowed hard. Something in him held back from admitting that much, from allowing himself to go that far, to feel that deeply. He was holding a part of himself back, but it also felt as if he was protecting Lily. Or so he told himself.

His grandmother nodded as if he had replied. “So perhaps it’s just possessiveness.”

Griffin gritted his teeth. “Why did you ask to speak to me alone?”

His grandmother rose from her chair and took up a spot in front of him, holding his gaze in that steely manner of hers. “What is it that you expect from your duchess?”

Griffin scoffed and closed his eyes a moment, trying not to chuckle.

“Is that question somehow amusing?”

“Only because Lily asked me much the same recently.”

His grandmother blinked and a tight smile curved her lips. “I’m honestly pleased to hear that. She is, at times, a most sensible young woman. At other times, she confounds me. But I’d still like to know your answer.”

Lily was the only answer that came to Griffin’s mind. She was what he expected of a duchess. Kind, warm, gracious, intelligent. A woman with a heart for others and an ability to rise to challenges that came her way.

“Let me put my query another way,” his grandmother said, bristling when he gave her no answer. “What are Lily’s responsibilities?”

“I do not like being asked questions that both of us know the answer to. What is your point, Grandmama?”

“My point, dear boy, is that taking in sickly vermin cannot be on the list. She is not an expert in animal husbandry. Nor is she a physician of any sort. She simply cannot be if she is to be Duchess of Edgerton.” Her voice had risen as she spoke, as had the color in her cheeks. “One would hope she understood the honor of becoming your duchess, and that she might forfeit her...hobbies as a result.”

Griffin’s hands clenched into fists. The tension in his body felt as if it would snap him in two.

Hobby had been the word spat by his father more times than he could recall. It was how he referred to Griffin’s mother’s talent for art. That she’d taken it beyond the simple banality of ladylike watercolors to paint portraits with passion and bold strokes of oil had enraged him for reasons Griffin could never comprehend.

Then, of course, when he'd discovered one of Griffin's sketchbooks, he'd spat the word again, but he'd added more. Disappointment. Disgrace. Wastrel.

"Such trifling suits you, I suppose" were words that had somehow stuck in Griffin's mind.

Griffin pulled his shoulders back, let his fists unfurl, and looked his grandmother in the eyes.

"Lily is allowed to be more than a prescribed list of attributes. She's a flesh and blood woman with aptitudes and interests." He realized he was barking as his father used to and softened his tone, desperate for his grandmother to understand. "She was raised by a doctor and has the heart of a healer. That's the person I knew she was when I chose her. Why would I wish her to be something else?"

His grandmother worked her jaw, dropped her gaze to the dark floral rug, and then looked up at him.

"The duties of a dukedom are all-encompassing. I thought you understood that, or would grow to. She needs to understand that too. There's very little room for whimsy. There's no place for fanciful hobbies."

Griffin let out a sigh, and the weight that lifted whenever he was with Lily seemed to settle on his chest again. "I love you, Grandmama, and you've been an extraordinary help and ally to me. And all agree that you are a formidable Duchess of Edgerton." He stepped forward and placed a hand gently on her shoulder. "But in this matter, you and I will simply have to disagree."

He bent and kissed her cheek. Then he straightened. "I need to go to Lily and help greet our guests."

She offered no reply and made no move to stop him as he headed toward the study door.

But just as he reached the threshold, she said quietly, “You will see. In time, you will see.”

Griffin kept walking. He heard his grandmother’s warning tone, but it could not blot the happiness he’d found in the last few days. It could not stem the hope he had for the future.

He and Lily had agreed to blaze their own path, and they would.

CHAPTER 12

“Don’t forget to breathe,” Ivy instructed as she and Daphne sat sipping tea and watching over Lily in Rosemere’s front sitting room.

“I am breathing.” Lily had to be breathing because she could feel her heart beating much too fast in her chest.

“You’re not breathing easily. You hold your breath when you’re nervous.” Daphne scrutinized her with the same look their father used when assessing his patients—eyes slightly narrowed and keenly observant.

“Try a deep breath. Like this.” Ivy set her teacup aside and stood to demonstrate, drawing a lungful of air in and then exhaling while bracing a hand against her middle.

“I do remember how to breathe.”

“Try it. Please,” Daphne urged.

Lily did as instructed and, shockingly, it did feel a bit like the fluttering race of her heartbeat had eased. “Very well. It helps.”

Ivy beamed one of her rare but blindingly pretty smiles. For all her fierceness, she was as thrilled when she could help someone else as the rest of Bridewells. They’d all been taught the value of it from both their parents.

Daphne nodded sagely. “There you go. It will be alright.”

Lily strode over to the long window with a view of the carriage circle. A polished black carriage came into view, though it was still far off on the lane approaching Rosemere. “Oh good heavens, it’s begun.”

“Right on time.” Immediately following Ivy’s pronouncement, the long clocks in various rooms chimed the three o’clock hour.

“It’s only a single carriage so far,” Lily murmured as she watched the elegant vehicle’s approach through the lace curtains. “But there will be half a dozen more.”

Familiar footsteps sounded on the marble floor of the foyer, and Lily exhaled a slow breath. Greeting a throng of nobles sounded daunting, but she wouldn’t have to face it alone.

“You’ve prepared everything wonderfully,” Griffin told her from the threshold.

She turned and the sight of him consumed all her attention for a moment, as it always did. They exchanged a smile that eased a bit of the tightness in her chest.

He strode toward her and brushed a kiss against her cheek, and the warmth of his lips made her whole body quiver. If her sisters weren’t in the room, if there weren’t guests descending on their carriage drive, she would have begged him to touch her and kiss her until she felt that melting, boundless pleasure he’d brought her to over and over last night.

“I fear I’ll forget people’s names,” she whispered.

“Then I’ll remind you.”

“What if it rains and we have to cancel all the yard games we’ve planned?”

“Then we play parlor games instead.”

Before she could offer up more worries, the butler was admitting the first guests.

Griffin wrapped her arm around his and they strode out to greet them. “Lord and Lady Turnbull. Friends of my father’s,” he whispered out of the side of his mouth as they approached the elderly couple.

After their coats and hats were collected and staff scurried to secure their traveling trunk, the two nobles chatted with Griffin and Lily with warmth and deference. Then, though Lily hadn’t noticed her approach, the dowager appeared to add her own greetings. She seemed particularly friendly with Lady Turnbull and led her to Rosemere’s grandest drawing room, where staff had prepared refreshments.

“See,” Griffin said as he stroked his fingers against her cheek, “that wasn’t so bad, was it?”

It took forty minutes for all of the guests to arrive, spend time chatting with Griffin and Lily, and then be ushered into the drawing room to greet the others.

At one point, when the previous guests had entered the drawing room and the next carriage had yet to arrive, Griffin pulled Lily into a nook in the entryway behind the staircase and kissed her until a pulsing ache built at the apex of her thighs.

After the next guests arrived, a Lady Dalrymple and her niece, Miss Hunter, who looked at Griffin as if he were a Greek god come to life, had been greeted and escorted by the dowager to the drawing room, the butler informed them the last set of guests were not expected until the next day. Lord Middleton, his daughter, and her fiancé had been delayed by a broken carriage wheel. They’d sent a missive via messenger explaining their delay and vowing that they still planned to attend.

“I suppose we should go to the drawing room then,” Lily said when the butler departed.

Griffin looked at her and squared his shoulders. “I suppose we must, though it’s not my preference.”

Lily quirked a brow at him. “Oh? What’s your preference, Your Grace?” she asked teasingly. Though even as she said it, her gaze dropped to his mouth, and her mind spun with memories of all the wickedly wonderful things he’d done with it last night.

His eyes followed her gaze, and he shot her a deliciously seductive smile. “You know very well, Duchess.” His voice emerged rough and low.

“Tell me,” Lily whispered, repeating the words he’d spoken to her last evening.

“I want to take you upstairs and put my mouth exactly where you want it.”

Lily bit her lip. She’d never been so frustrated and so eager for nightfall to come. “We have dinner and then dancing to get through before we can retire for the evening.”

“Save me a dance?”

Lily laughed. “You’ll finally ask me?”

“Of course I will,” he told her in low, tender tone. “I pray it will make up for all those times I wanted to and didn’t.”

Then he kissed her. It was too quick but delicious all the same, and it bolstered her for the hours ahead.

Together, arm in arm, they strode into the dining room to mingle with their guests.

A satisfied smile lifted Lily's lips after the guests all returned to their rooms to change for the first formal dinner of the house party. So far, everything had gone exceedingly well. The assembled nobles partook of refreshments and made conversation for hours after their arrival, giving staff time to settle their belongings into their rooms.

In the late afternoon, Lily led them on a tour of Rosemere's outdoor gardens as the sun had been out for hours and the air was warm and sweet with the scent of spring flowers. Then she showed them the recently revived conservatory—thankfully, with no sign of kittens or a hedgehog, though the dowager seemed to fix her gaze on every corner, as if expecting one of them to dart from the shadows.

Now that everyone had gone up to dress for dinner, she was eager to find Griffin, who'd taken some of the gentlemen off to show them the billiards room.

She also wanted to check on her sisters, especially the twins, who were quite disappointed that they couldn't join the rest of the guests at table this evening. They were simply too young to partake of what would be a very long service with ten courses planned. Lily had insisted on allowing Daphne and Ivy to join the dinner, to the surprising agreement of the dowager.

But as she climbed the stairs, scanning the hall for any sign of Griffin, the Kingsley butler, Robards approached, a worried frown pinching his usually unruffled brow.

Her stomach tightened. "Is something amiss, Robards?"

"Your Grace, I'm afraid one of our guests has fallen ill."

"Oh, no. Who is it?"

“Lord Turnbull, I’m afraid. Lady Turnbull thinks it might be something he ate.” Robards looked about as if ensuring no one might overhear. “She says his stomach often ails him.”

“I see.” Lily felt awful that one of the guests was suffering. No one wanted to fall ill on holiday. “So I take it he won’t be joining us for dinner. What can we do for him?”

“No, Your Grace, he won’t. Lady Turnbull wished for me to give you her regrets that he won’t be able to attend. She says he has a tonic for such occasions and will rest for the evening.”

“He’s in his room now?”

“Yes, Your Grace. Shall I send for Dr. Crawford?”

Lily hesitated. The village doctor was well-known and well-respected by many, but she knew him to be a man of archaic medical notions. Bleeding patients was still his preferred method of addressing most ailments.

“Allow me to discuss the matter with His Grace. I shall send for you if that’s the case. Thank you, Robards.”

The butler’s expression had smoothed into his usual stoic one and he nodded, offered her a bow, and made his way back downstairs.

Lily considered the menu of everything offered to guests during their time in the drawing room, hoping it was nothing they’d served. If it was, they’d have more guests feeling unwell.

The mention of a stomach tonic made her curious. Often, they were less than helpful concoctions that contained liquor or laudanum to numb the discomfort rather than

ease the digestive process itself.

Lily changed course and strode toward the staircase that led up one level to the corridor of guest rooms. She remembered where each guest had been placed. And though she'd worried about failing to remember each visitor's name, after speaking to them in the drawing room, she found it no difficulty at all.

As she approached the bedroom given to Lord and Lady Turnbull, a young woman emerged. Lily knew they'd brought their own lady's maid, as a few other guests had brought their own staff along.

When the young woman spotted Lily, she immediately bobbed a curtsy. "Your Grace."

"I've been informed that his lordship is unwell. Is he up to speaking with me?"

The girl's expression turned fretful. "He's sitting up by the fire, Your Grace. Should I ask him?"

"Would you?"

"Yes, Your Grace." The girl ducked back in the room and emerged a moment later. "He asked me to admit you."

Lily stepped inside the room and was pleased to see that the gentleman didn't look as poorly as she feared. He stood near the fire.

"Please do sit, Lord Turnbull. I only wished to see how you're feeling." Lily took a seat at one of the two chairs arranged near the fireplace so that he wouldn't feel the need to stand.

He settled heavily into his chair. “It’s fatiguing more than anything.”

Indeed the nobleman looked drowsy. For several moments, they simply sat in amiable silence.

“Your stomach ails you, I understand.” Lily leaned forward a bit to examine his eyes and the color of his skin. His cheeks were a bit ruddy, and his pupils were constricted, but the firelight was casting a bright glow, and the curtains had been pulled wide to let in the last bits of daylight in.

She saw no outward signs of serious illness.

“I must admit that it does.” His speech was the slightest bit slurred.

Lily’s suspicions grew.

A wry grin drew up the edges of his mouth. “A man does not wish to be felled by something so mundane.”

“I trust you won’t be felled for long.” Lily looked around and spied a slim bottle with a cork stopper on the table by the bed. “You have a tonic for it, I see.”

“Ah yes. You’ve a sharp eye, Your Grace. I do indeed. Bateman’s Drops were recommended by my physician back in Dorset.”

Lily clenched her jaw, but she knew she must tread lightly. Gentlemen did not like their trusted medical men to be gainsaid by a lady, even if she was a duchess. However, Lily knew that Bateman’s Drops contained both opium and alcohol, neither of which did anything to actually soothe the stomach. They’d only numb any discomfort and perhaps slow the digestive system itself. And opium was highly addictive.

After making a few minutes of small talk about the events of the house party so far, she leaned forward again.

“May I let you in on a little secret that has aided me in such matters and might be of interest, Lord Turnbull?” Lily lowered her voice to a conspiratorial level but kept her tone light.

“Please do, Your Grace.”

“I also have a special tonic that I use in such circumstances, and it does wonders. I also ask my maid to bring up peppermint tea, which is quite soothing.” Lily paused, hoping he’d agree to try her remedy, which was a tincture comprised of stomach-soothing herbs, such as chamomile, slippery elm, fennel seed, and a bit of ginger root.

Since she’d sometimes given it to her sisters, so she made it with vinegar rather than alcohol.

The nobleman’s silver brows knitted as he tilted his head. “I would welcome your tonic, Your Grace. If it is efficacious, I would consider it a godsend. In truth, mine merely makes me quite dozy.”

“Excellent.” Lily smiled and stood.

When Lord Turnbull tried to rise too, she lifted a hand to stop him. “Please don’t trouble yourself, my lord. I’ll ask a staff member to bring up mint tea and some bone broth. And I’ll check on you later, if I may.”

“Of course, Your Grace.” He looked up at her with undisguised appreciation. “With such a full house of guests, it is very kind for you to trouble yourself on my behalf.”

“It is no trouble at all, Lord Turnbull.” The thought that her tonic might actually give

him ease brought her a soul-deep satisfaction. “And if you don’t mind me advising you so, I’d suggest holding off on more Bateman’s Drops until you see if the tonic I send up is helpful.”

He nodded and seemed to take no offense. “Thank you again. Edgerton has found himself a gem and a most gracious duchess, if I may say so.”

“Thank you, Lord—” Lily started.

The opening of the bedroom door stopped her, and they both turned to see Lady Turnbull enter the room. Her Ladyship’s brow lowered, and then her eyes widened. She offered Lily a nod.

“Your Grace, I am surprised to find you here,” she said hesitantly. “Royston, did you call for Her Grace?”

“He didn’t,” Lily put in. “I am afraid I pushed in and insisted on seeing his lordship. When I was informed that he’d fallen ill, I worried and wanted to make sure we’d done all we could.”

Lady Turnbull laid a hand against the tucked waist of her elegant gown. “Well, that is quite kind, Your Grace, but unnecessary. Lord Turnbull has these spells and then he takes his medicine and feels much better. I’m sorry if you worried needlessly.”

Lily side-eyed that little bottle of Bateman’s and kept silent when all she truly wanted was to list the dangers of consuming the insidious stuff.

“Not at all, Lady Turnbull.” Lily cast a look back at the lady’s husband. “I’m going to ask my staff to bring up some items that might be soothing to his lordship.”

Lady Turnbull bristled. “As I’ve said, Your Grace, he has medicine.”

“A bit of tea and broth never hurt anyone,” Lily said with a smile. “Now, if you’ll excuse me.”

The noblewoman offered a nod of deference as Lily took her leave.

As she stepped into the hallway, Anna, one of Rosemere’s maids approached looking harried and winded. “Your Grace,” she said, “thank goodness I’ve found you. His Grace was worried and had us all searching for you.”

Lily smiled and patted the girl’s arm. “As my sisters would say to me, slow down and breathe. Thank you for finding me, Anna. I was merely visiting Lord Turnbull, who’s taken ill.”

“I’ve heard as much, Your Grace.”

“Would you prepare a tray for him? I’ve some mint tea and tincture that I will give to you to prepare and send up with bone broth.”

The girl curtsied. “Yes, Your Grace.”

“Thank you, Anna.”

Griffin climbed the stairs and entered the ducal suite after having searched the library and the conservatory for Lily. He’d rushed upstairs half an hour ago, eager to have a bit of time alone before they had to go down again for dinner.

He’d planned to send his valet and her lady’s maid away and take her to bed, but instead he’d found her lady’s maid agitated because Lily had not returned to her suite as expected. Indeed, the staff could not locate her in any of the downstairs rooms or among the family rooms.

“Griffin?”

He spun at the sound of her voice and approached in two long strides. After reaching up to close the door behind her, he stepped her back against the panel, tipped her head, and took her mouth in a kiss that was rougher than he intended.

“Thank God, you’re all right,” he whispered against her lips and then kissed her more gently.

“Goodness, I couldn’t have been gone more than twenty minutes.”

“But you were gone.” Griffin straightened and ran a hand through his hair. “All sorts of things happen at house parties.”

She reached up and pulled him down for another kiss. This one was slow, soothing, and when he pulled back, he could breathe again.

“I’m sorry I caused such worry,” she said earnestly. “I was merely visiting Lord Turnbull in his room.”

“Turnbull?” Griffin finally began to put the pieces together. “Robards told me he’d fall ill.”

“It’s dyspepsia, but when Robards told me he was taking a tonic for it, I had discovered what it was.”

Griffin shook his head, already confused. “Why did you need to determine what medicine he used?”

“Because it’s not medicine in many cases,” Lily told him in an impassioned tone. “In this case, the drops he takes contain opium.”

“For his stomach?” Griffin had once visited an opium den during a night of carousing with a group of other young noblemen. All of them had quickly realized they were out of their depth. The drug seemed to make its devotees senseless, and he’d heard whispers that once one consumed it, the desire for it only grew.

“Doctors, especially if they’ve always done things a certain way, continue that way. Crawford prefers bleeding as a first phase of treatment for nearly any ailment.”

Griffin shivered, remembering the time his brother fell ill and the beloved village doctor bled him. He’d been young, not more than the twins’ age, and he’d vowed then and there to never fall ill so as to avoid the leeches.

“Perhaps we should send for a doctor from London. Do you recommend anyone?” Griffin asked. “Via train, it won’t take him long to reach us, and he can convince Trumbull to try something other than an opium tonic.”

“Actually—”

Whatever his wife meant to say, her words were cut short by a series of sharp, quick knocks against the paneled door at her back.

Lily stepped away and cast him a worried frown. “I hope his lordship hasn’t taken a turn.”

Griffin opened the door and his grandmother pushed past him to enter his bedchamber.

He stifled a groan because there was fire in her gaze again, and it felt like they right back at how their day had begun.

“What in God’s name is this?” she asked, then thrust an object at his chest.

Griffin reached for the dark brown stoppered bottle. “I have no idea.” For a moment, he thought it might be opium-laced tonic Lily had spoken of, but then she stepped forward and laid her hand over the bottle, slipping it from his fingers.

“It’s mine,” she told him, her voice laced with a bit of steel as she turned to face his grandmother. “Why do you have it?”

“How dare you?” his grandmother snapped.

Griffin stepped between them as he had that morning in almost the exact same spot. “Someone tell me what’s going on. Now, please.”

Lily lifted the little bottle in her hands. “This is a tincture that I’ve been making for years. It’s an herbal concoction to treat dyspepsia that I’ve given to my sisters. It contains no laudanum or opium.” As she spoke the last word, she shot him a pointed look.

“You are no doctor,” his grandmother pronounced each word emphatically. “How dare you think to meddle in the health of a respected nobleman?”

“Because his own doctor prescribed drops that may cause him harm,” Lily told her, crossing her arms. Griffin noted that the gentle curve of her cheeks had hardened as she clenched her jaw.

He wanted this constant bickering to stop and reached a conciliatory hand out to his grandmother. She waved him off.

“You cannot know that,” she barked at Lily.

Lily sidestepped past him to face his grandmother. “Of course I can. Medical knowledge is not God-gifted to men in some burst of instant understanding. It’s

studied, practiced, and available to anyone willing to devote themselves to both.”

His grandmother’s mouth gaped.

Griffin smiled. Though he had no wish to ever provoke his wife, Lily was quite magnificent when she was fierce and righteously incensed.

“You had no...right to...interfere.” His grandmother’s voice emerged quiet, hesitant, as if all the furious wind had seeped from her sails.

Griffin took a step closer to her. “Grandmama, Lily had every right to see to Lord Turnbull. Indeed, as a guest in our home who is unwell, he is our responsibility.” He shot a gaze at his caring, brilliant wife. “We were just discussing whether to call in a London doctor, though Lily’s herbal remedy is so safe, she’s given it to her own sisters.”

“This is not how a duchess conducts herself.” His grandmother stretched up, straightening her spine, regaining a bit of her certainty.

Lily lifted her shoulders too. “It is how this duchess conducts herself. And I hope you might accept that one day.”

Something shimmered in his grandmother’s eyes.

Griffin’s breath caught in his throat, and hope made his heart pound hard in chest.

But rather than offer an apology or even a word of acknowledgement, his grandmother simply dipped her head and then took her leave.

CHAPTER 13

The next day, the good weather held and the house party guests spent much of the day outdoors participating in the games Lily and the staff had planned for them.

A game of croquet was set up on the front lawn, and archery targets were arranged on the far back lawn. The ladies flocked to the archery area, and Lily was glad she'd arranged for additional bows, arrows, and quivers.

"I told you," Ivy said triumphantly as Lily walked with her and Daphne back toward the archery setup.

"You were right," Lily agreed. "I acknowledge it."

"Ladies are so often trussed up and confined within all the little rules of etiquette and the ridiculously limited hobbies that are considered ladylike ." She all but spat the final word. "Ladies are as keen to be active and engage in sporting activities as gentlemen do."

"Some ladies," Daphne put in. "Just as some men prefer quieter pursuits. It's alright if ladies do too. We should respect each person's individual passions."

Ivy rolled her eyes, and Lily was grateful she walked between her sisters so that Daphne missed it.

"More ladies than you might imagine would like to know how to defend themselves," Ivy insisted. She gestured ahead toward the archery range. "I suspect if you set up a

boxing ring and said it was for ladies only, they'd flock to that too."

Daphne choked out a shocked laughter. "Can you imagine Lady Dalrymple in a boxing ring?"

"I can imagine her niece in one," Ivy said. "That girl seems rather fierce."

Lily had only noted how often the young lady looked at her husband as if he was some eligible bachelor on the marriage mart. Which, of course, he had been but a few weeks ago.

"I can imagine the dowager in the ring," Lily murmured before she could take it back.

Daphne looked at her wide-eyed, and Ivy shot her a knowing look.

"But only if you were her opponent, eh?" Ivy said teasingly.

"I do not know how to earn her approval and still be who I am," Lily admitted. "I will never be the sort of duchess she is. And Griffin seems to accept as much, so why can't she?"

"Perhaps she was forced to give up parts of herself to become the duchess she is," Daphne said thoughtfully. "Maybe it's the only way she knows."

Lily felt the rightness of Daphne's suggestion. Griffin had said that his grandfather was a hard man. For a moment, she imagined what she might have done if Griffin refused to support her the way he did. What if she'd married a man who demanded she bend to his narrow prescription of what a duchess should be?

The thought brought a sharp, hollow pain in her chest. She'd want to please and be the best duchess she could be. She would likely try to conform, to stifle her own

passions.

Perhaps the dowager's sharp edges made sense if that's what she'd endured.

Lily wrapped her arm around Daphne's, and her sister offered her a sweet smile. Then she reached out and looped her arm with Ivy's too.

"What is it?" Daphne asked.

"I'm very lucky to have such clever sisters."

Ivy's lips curved into a knowing smile. "If anyone can get through to the dowager, it's you."

Lily scoffed. "Do you truly think so?"

"Of course. You're patient, usually, and you're kind. You have a way of making people feel better."

It was high praise indeed coming from Ivy, and as they drew to a stop near the archery range, Lily leaned in and pecked a quick kiss on her sister's cheek.

Ivy chuckled rather than flinching away, and Lily considered that a victory.

"You're lucky in your choice of husband too, I think," Daphne said as she cast a gaze over to where Griffin was attempting to help kit Lady Dalrymple out with a quiver and bracer. It was clear the elderly noble lady didn't consider herself a toxophilite, though her niece, Miss Hunter, looked quite comfortable with a bow in her hands.

Ivy was quite good with a bow too. Leo had taught her archery. And she took up a spot on the shooting line.

Daphne initially said she'd merely observe, but Lily urged her to at least see if she liked the sport.

So once Lily stepped up, Daphne took the place next to her, bow at the ready.

Griffin strode over. "Seeing you all armed is quite impressive."

Ivy cast him an impish look. "Do you not wish to join us? Or are you afraid we'll all best you?"

Griffin narrowed his eyes and strode over to take up a bow, quiver, and bracer.

"Kingsleys always rise to a challenge," he told her once he'd taken up the spot on the line next to her.

Once all of them were set and had nocked their bows, the line let fly one by one, starting from the far end, each taking their turn.

After Griffin's arrow thwacked into the bale of hay with the target strapped to it, he bit out a groan of frustration. His arrow had gone wide. Ivy's had landed almost dead center.

Lily looked down the line and saw that none had done as well as Ivy. Only Miss Hunter came closest.

The two young ladies, Ivy and Miss Hunter, locked gazes, and both nodded at each other as if acknowledging a worthy opponent.

"Your shot was better than mine," Griffin called to Lily past Ivy.

"I can teach you a few pointers if you like," Lily told him saucily.

He immediately stepped back from the line and approached. Lily stepped back too, laying her bow aside on one of the racks the staff had set out.

“Only if they’re private lessons,” he whispered when he’d walked with her far enough back that others couldn’t hear their exchange.

“I wish we could start now.”

Griffin wrapped an arm around her, seemingly unconcerned that others might see. “It’s maddening to spend all day socializing when all I want is to spend time with you.”

“You know I feel the same.”

His gaze was heated, and Lily bit her lip to keep from arching up to kiss him in front of their guests.

Then he lifted his head and looked past her, his brow lowering into a frown.

Lily turned back to see Robards approaching. “Is it Lord Turnbull?”

“No, Your Grace. His lordship asked me to inform you that he’s feeling much better.” The elderly butler lifted his eyes to Griffin. “I merely came to inform you that, as expected, Viscount Trenthorpe and his party have arrived. We have all the guests settled into their rooms now.”

“Excellent,” Griffin told him.

“They say they will join the party following dinner as they took early supper at a coaching inn while awaiting the repairs to their vehicle.”

“Thank you, Robards,” Lily added.

The butler departed, and they turned back to observe the archers.

Griffin still pressed a hand to her lower back and began tracing circles higher, where no one could see.

“I noticed the event schedule allows for two hours to dress for dinner,” he said quietly.

“Yes, I thought a bit of rest time might be apropos after the lawn games.”

He bent his head and whispered, “It might be a perfect time for meeting one’s husband in the folly.”

A delicious shiver rippled through Lily’s body.

Several hours later, as the sun began to sink in the sky, Lily made her way to the folly.

Over the course of the day, she and Griffin had been forced apart, as he was drawn into a lively discussion regarding matters in the House of Lords with the gentlemen, and the ladies took tea in the conservatory.

She wasn’t certain he’d had time to break away, but she hoped he had and was already in the folly. Even a few hours separation caused her to miss him.

As she pulled the door open, she found the folly empty, but someone had been inside.

There were lanterns set around the interior, pillows strewn on the settee, a tray with fresh strawberries and lemons tarts, and wonderfully fragrant bouquets of lilacs in

vases dotted around the space. Oddest of all, the medical book Griffin had gifted her sat on a table near the settee.

She picked it up and opened to the table of contents. She hadn't had a single moment free to read or do much of anything that wasn't related to the house party. As she began reading, she settled against the pillows and soon got lost the way she did when she read her father's medical tomes.

"I thought that might please you," Griffin said quietly from the folly's threshold awhile later.

Lily smiled up at him. "This was very thoughtful. Thank you."

He stepped inside and closed the folly's door behind him. Then he pointed to the easel where a fresh canvas sat. "If you like, you can continue reading, and I'll sketch out an idea that's been on my mind the last few days." A wistful look came into his eyes. "I haven't painted in almost a year."

Lily was torn. Part of her did want to take this quiet moment and use it get lost in a book, and she wanted Griffin to have time to take up painting again too.

But he stood before her looking mouth-wateringly appealing in nothing more than shirtsleeves and trousers that hugged his muscular thighs. He wore no neckcloth, and his shirt was unbuttoned at the throat.

"I want to read, and I want you. It's a conundrum."

He laughed and the low, delicious rumble echoed in the small domed room.

Lily laid her book aside. It would still be there for her when the house guests left, but her husband was here now, and she couldn't resist him.

She stood and approached. Griffin closed the distance and wrapped his arms around her waist.

“You don’t mind if we set aside reading and painting for a bit?” she asked.

He shook his head slowly. “I want you. Always. But I arranged this for you. To give you a respite from all you’ve done of late. Taking care of the guests, your sisters, every little detail.”

“Oh, Griffin.” Lily turned in his arms to take in all the details. To truly savor how much effort he’d put in to making sure she felt thought of.

“Oh my goodness,” she said and he loosened his hold so she could approach the stained-glass window where he’d set up a small table with embroidery thread and an embroidery project she’d forgotten she’d stuffed into the trunk they’d buried. It was to be a family tree, and she realized with a smile that she could add Griffin to it now.

“Who takes care of you, Lily?” He came up behind her and laid a hand at her waist. Then he was against her. A wall of heat and strength that she let herself lean into. “I want to be the one who does,” he said against the skin of her nape before placing a kiss there.

Every part of her body yearned to melt into him, to trust him to catch her, to trust him with her heart. But some part of her insisted on more.

“I want more than to be taken care of.” She was almost surprised to hear the words emerge. They’d been a thought and then they were on her tongue and then she’d whispered them aloud.

He touched his lips to her neck again, breathed against her skin. “Tell me what you want, and it’s yours.”

Lily edged away from him enough to turn and face him. “I want to be loved.” She was breathing hard, and her heart thrashed in her chest.

His gaze widened, then he nodded. “You deserve to be loved.” His hand came up and he cupped her cheek, tipped her head, and bent to take her lips.

Lily couldn’t resist the enticement of that kiss, and she twined her arms around his neck, stroking her fingers into his hair.

He plundered her mouth, stroking her with his tongue, tasting her as if was starving for her, as if it had been days rather than hours they’d been apart. She felt a tremor ripple through his body, and she snuggled closer, wanting to give him whatever he needed. Wanting to give him all of her.

Then he pulled back, leaving them both panting.

His storm blue eyes blazed with a new intensity. An almost desperate need.

He opened his mouth to speak, but no words emerged. Then he dipped his head a moment before facing her.

“Let me love you,” he said, and then he kissed her again. As he did, he gently backed her against the long window. Then he began gathering her skirts. Even as he kissed her, he pulled higher and higher, until the fabric bunched at her waist.

When she stood with her drawers bared, he lowered himself in front of her, getting onto his knees. If they weren’t already wed, she would have imagined he was on the verge of proposing for how adoringly he looked up at her.

Then with her skirts gathered in one hand, he tugged at the pink ribbon of her drawers.

Lily gasped, realizing what he intended. And mercy, how she wanted it. She helped hold up her skirt, freeing his hands. He smiled and stroked his fingers along the backs of her thighs, then tugged the delicate cotton garment down until the fabric pooled at her ankles.

He urged her to lift her feet to free herself of the bundle of cotton altogether.

Then she stood before him, exposed and vulnerable and aching, and he licked his lips before looking up at her.

“Every inch of you is beautiful,” he murmured. “How did I get so lucky?”

Lily bucked her hips unbidden, her body eager for his touch.

“My eager duchess.” There was no chastisement in his words. Indeed, as he spoke, he ran his hands up her thighs, then slid his fingers through her curls. Without another word, he dipped his head and kissed her. Tasted her. Explored her with his tongue just as he did when he kissed her.

Her body began to quiver when he murmured against her core. “So wet, my duchess. So sweet.”

The words emerged as heated wisps of breath against her body, stoking the need in her until she reached out for him, gripping his shoulder, sinking her fingers into his thick golden hair.

She closed her eyes, bit her lip, and felt her body tipping toward that blissful peak he’d brought her to before. He seemed to sense her body’s every response when they made love, and now he continued his wicked, wonderful magic with this tongue. Then he slid a finger inside her, and she almost buckled at the knees.

Griffin's arm went around her, a hand at her hip to steady her, as a sweet, syrupy warmth rushed through her veins and her body shuddered against him. "I have you," he whispered. "I won't let you fall, Lily."

But she already had fallen—so very deeply in love with him.

As he stood, he kept hold of her, kissed her temple, tenderly stroked her back. As her heartbeat began to steady, she almost said the words. They were there on the tip of her tongue. The urge to confess nearly overwhelmed her.

Let me love you , he'd said. And he'd meant lovemaking, and, heavens, how she'd adore every single moment of it. But he had never yet said I love you .

She felt loved as he held her, when he touched her, when he lost himself inside her, and every time their eyes met across a room and they smiled like besotted fools at each other.

But if he felt it as deeply as she did, why could he not bring himself to say the words?

CHAPTER 14

The guests had taken so keenly to dancing an hour or so after dinner was served that they'd hired the musicians to come back nightly. Even if some guest chose to sit in the drawing room, or some of the gentlemen withdrew to the billiards room, a few were always eager for a turn in Rosemere's lavish ballroom.

Tonight, Griffin was eager to dance with Lily.

He'd failed to for so many years. He had a great deal of making up to do.

And after today in the folly, there'd been an inexplicable tension between them. Lily hadn't said as much. In fact, she'd kissed and touched and smiled at him as she always did. But he knew that something wasn't right inside himself.

He adored his wife and yet he could not tell her the words she deserved to hear. He could not even allow himself to fully feel the love he wished to give her. Something held him back. Like a dam had been built inside him, and he couldn't seem to break through.

As he'd hoped, she entered the ballroom with her sisters.

The music had already begun and a few couples had taken to the dance floor. If tonight followed the same pattern as the previous one, guests would filter in and out as they pleased.

Lily looked strikingly beautiful in one of her new ball gowns. The sapphire blue

fabric hugged her curves, and the low neckline made his mouth water.

He approached, and she smiled warmly. “Would you join me for a dance, Duchess?”

“Yes,” she said breathily.

He led her out and soon after the musicians struck up a waltz. Griffin savored the opportunity to hold her close, to breathe in her floral perfume, to get lost in how good it felt to have her in his arms.

As they stepped back and turned, Lily licked her lips, and there was a heat in her gaze that shot a maddening warmth through his belly, and lower.

Would he ever not have the urge to carry her up to their bedroom and make love to her?

As he led her into another turn, a figure appeared in his periphery. A gentleman, who he assumed must be Viscount Trenthorpe. Griffin knew he was a friend of his grandmother’s, and if he’d met the man, he couldn’t recall the occasion.

Lily turned to follow his gaze. “Our guests who arrived late,” she confirmed. “But where’s the daughter and her betrothed?”

As the tall, grey-haired viscount strode into the room, a couple followed behind him. A dark-haired, prim-looking young lady and a tall, lean young man.

Griffin stumbled the next step of the waltz. Then he stopped altogether.

“Griffin?” Lily’s soft voice came as if from far away. “What’s wrong?”

The young man locked eyes with Griffin and he seemed to be stuck in place too.

Griffin saw the young man swallow hard, then he whispered something to the young lady on his arm.

Griffin was aware of Lily clasping his arm and striding with her off the dance floor. At the edge of the room, she pressed a gloved hand to his cheek.

“Please talk to me,” she urged. “What’s happened? Are you unwell?”

Griffin looked at her, and every part of him wanted to take her hand and walk out of the ballroom. He wanted to take her to into a room, lock the door, and keep all the rest of the world out.

Then the worst happened. The young man, Lord Halford, who he’d last seen on the night he most wanted to forget strode forward.

“Edgerton—”

“No.” Griffin felt the sound tear from his chest as much as heard it reverberating in the high-ceilinged room. “Not here.”

The music stopped. The dancing stalled. The small group of guests had all turned their attention toward whatever was unfolding on the edge of the room.

“Leave the ballroom. Have a staff member take you to my study. I’ll meet you there.” Griffin wasn’t certain how he got all the words out. His lungs felt empty. His chest felt hollow.

Lily still stood before him. He could feel the tension in her body, see the fear in her eyes.

And yet he couldn’t let her in. He couldn’t share the ugliness of that night with her.

He'd wanted to protect all of them from it. Protect Leo's reputation too.

Griffin lifted a shaking hand to her shoulder. "Forgive me, but I must speak with him."

Then he stepped past her, walking woodenly toward his study.

In that moment, it felt right to stride away from her. She was all that was good and bright. Her love—and he could feel how much she loved him every single day—had even chased away the nightmares.

But he could feel all of that darkness closing in again now. Halford was the harbinger. The reckoning that he'd always sensed was coming, no matter how he tried to shut it out. Fend it off. Even after he'd married the most beautiful, wonderful woman he'd ever known and made her his own.

Halford was at the drinks cart, his hand hovering over a bottle when Griffin entered the quiet, dimly lit room.

"Have one," he told him. "God knows I need one."

Halford poured himself two fingers of whiskey, then lifted the decanter and crooked a brow at Griffin.

He nodded and the man poured the same again for him, then handed Griffin a glass before taking up his own.

While Griffin was savoring the burn of the liquor, Halford drew in a deep breath.

"I apologize, Edgerton. I knew it was a mistake to come."

“Then why did you?”

“Eliza wanted to come with her uncle. He’s like a father to her.”

“Your betrothed?”

Halford nodded. “It’s that Eliza,” he added quietly.

“What Eliza?” Griffin’s head ached. His heart ached. He couldn’t make sense of anything.

“Eliza Fairchild.”

The name was there somewhere in Griffin’s memory, and then he heard it spoken in Leo’s voice.

Teach him to insult Miss Fairchild.

“Good God, were you already involved with her that night?”

“No!” Halford ducked his head. “Forgive me for shouting. But no. I went to her in the aftermath. I knew she was why Bridewell had challenged Pomeroy.”

Griffin pressed the heel of his hand to his forehead. Just hearing the name of the man who’d taken Leo’s life shot a searing pain through his skull.

“He’s dead, you know.”

Griffin snapped his head up. “Pomeroy?”

“Yes. He exiled himself to Italy and apparently caught a fever there only a few weeks

ago. Never recovered.”

“Not much of a bloody loss.” Griffin winced as soon as the words were out. Lily would be horrified to hear him say such a thing. Her heart always yearned to help those who were ill and injured.

“Agreed,” Halford said succinctly, then swigged back a bit of the whiskey in his glass.

“How could you have befriended such a brute?” Griffin couldn’t stop himself.

“We weren’t friends. We were acquaintances at best, and I didn’t truly know what he was until that night.” Halford swallowed down the rest of his whiskey. “I was a fool. I’m sorry, Edgerton. I’d go back and do everything differently if I could.”

The utter sincerity in the man’s voice struck Griffin hard. His sentiments too. He would give anything to go back to that night and change it. Though it was more than just that night. He’d go back and be a different man, a better man, who never would have inspired his friend to stride out onto that field in the first place.

“We can’t change the past,” Griffin said the words that his grandmother had repeated to him so often in those weeks after Leo’s death.

“No. That’s the damnable truth of it.” Halford sighed heavily. “I’ll make my excuses and depart tonight, Edgerton. I thought...” He paused, twisted the cut crystal glass in his hand. “I thought you’d seen my name on the guest list and no longer felt enmity toward me.”

Griffin looked at the young man. “I don’t.” It was the truth. Halford had done his best to help that night. But he was with Griffin the moment he’d lost his best friend. He was the most tangible reminder of that pain—that hollow gaping ache that had

opened up inside him that night and had still not fully healed.

“You should stay,” Griffin said. He didn’t want the gossip, the questions, and most of all, he didn’t want to cause Lily any distress. “Forgive me for...” Griffin gestured in the direction of the ballroom. “Causing a scene.”

“You were shocked. I could see it on your face.” Halford pressed his lips together. “I’m sorry to have caused that.”

Griffin could only incline his head in agreement. The shock still held him in its grip, forcing him to feel all the pain, all the regret, all the agony of that night all once again. Flashes of Leo filled his mind.

“You’ll say nothing.” He heard the hardness of his father’s voice in his tone.

“Of course not. I never would, and I never have. Not even to Eliza.”

“You should go back to her. I’m sure she’s worried,” Griffin told him.

Halford bent his head in leave-taking.

Griffin knew Lily was worried too, but he couldn’t go to her like this. His hands still shook. His mind was churning with memories of her brother’s death.

Instead, he went to the drinks cart and poured an unseemly amount of whiskey into his glass. He tipped it back and quaffed it deeply. The burn was intense, but even that didn’t blot out the ugliness of his thoughts. Didn’t stop the thundering ache in his head.

He’d sleep on the bloody miserable settee in his study tonight. He couldn’t subject Lily to his nightmares, and they would come back tonight. He knew it.

Taking another long drink, he thought of how it would hurt her. He hated the thought of it.

Yet, in that moment, as much as he wanted her, wanted to please her, he didn't feel as if he deserved her sweetness, her attention, her love.

For the first time in a long while, his thoughts had turned black, and he wasn't certain how to make his way back to her.

"May I have a word with you, Lily?"

Lily stopped short and gritted her teeth. She didn't have time for a confrontation with the dowager right now, but she turned on her heel and pasted on a friendly smile.

"What is it?"

"May I have a word with you privately?"

"May we speak later? I'm on my way to find Griffin. Lord Halford returned to the ballroom, but Griffin didn't. I think he's still in his study."

The dowager nodded tightly. "Yes, I'm certain that he is, and I'm just as certain that is very much purposeful."

Lily exhaled a huff of frustration. "What do you mean?"

"I mean that he likely wants or needs time alone."

Lily's hackles rose at that. "He won't want time alone from me. I can help him."

The dowager dipped her head in acknowledgement. "You have helped him a great

deal. I acknowledge that. I have seen it.” She locked her gaze with Lily meaningfully. “But it might be best to allow him some time.”

The dowager took a few steps toward her. “Please,” she said more softly than she’d ever spoken to Lily. “Please, may we talk privately? If you want to go to him afterwards, I won’t stop you.”

Lily bristled. The dowager couldn’t stop her now. She was the Duchess of Edgerton, and she wanted to see her husband.

But there was something in the dowager’s eyes that she hadn’t seen before. A softness. No, it wasn’t softness. It was tenderness. Lily didn’t think it was toward her. She suspected it was about Griffin.

She knew his grandmother loved him very much and that the feeling was mutual. Whatever her own feelings about the dowager, she knew that the two of them shared a strong bond.

“All right,” Lily relented. “We can speak for a few minutes, but then I am going in to check on him.”

“I understand.” The dowager led her into the library. A guest stood perusing a book, but with a single look from the dowager, the young nobleman scurried from the room.

The dowager closed the door behind him and slipped the lock.

“Shall we have a seat before the fire?”

Lily agreed. Shivers had been racking her body since Griffin left the ballroom.

Worry, fear, uncertainty had gripped her. In that moment on the edge of the dance

floor, their connection seemed to be nothing to him. He'd shuttered himself, then walked away so easily.

She couldn't reach him, and that terrified her.

They arranged their chairs by the fire so that they sat facing each other. Then they sat silently for a moment. Lily could see that the dowager was struggling. It was something she'd never seen before. The older woman stared into the firelight, her brow pinched.

"There are things you should know," the dowager began. "Perhaps I should have told you before as I knew that he would not."

"What things?" Lily's throat felt scratchy and raw. Anxiousness made her tap her foot against the carpet.

"First, let me say that I am terribly sorry for the loss of your brother. I understand it was a great loss to you. To all of your sisters. And it was a great loss to Griffin too."

Lily swallowed back the tears stinging the corners of her eyes. She gripped the arms of the chair, willing herself to remain steady. To hold back her grief.

"In those months after the loss of his dearest friend, my grandson went to a very dark place." The dowager swallowed, laid a hand against the choker at her throat. "There were moments when I feared I might lose him. I was as terrified as I've ever been. And I don't terrify easily."

"No, I can tell that you don't. Are you saying that?—?"

"Yes. I feared the very worst." She pressed a hand to mouth and then continued. "There were moments when his life did not seem to matter to him. He drank quite

heavily. He may do so again tonight.” When she looked up at Lily, the dowager’s eyes glistened with tears. “It’s the young man who arrived with Trenthorpe, I think.”

“Lord Halford?”

“Yes. He seemed to spark some memory in Griffin. Perhaps he was present that awful night.”

Lily knew that Leo and Griffin had caroused with a changing group of young noblemen. She'd never heard Halford's name before, but that didn't mean anything.

“So that could be why Griffin reacted the way he did. Perhaps he hadn't seen him since that night.”

“I suspect as much.” The dowager nodded. “That look on Griffin’s face. I hadn’t seen it in months. That dreadful haunted look.”

“Like after Leo...”

“Yes. I had to ask the staff to watch over him, just so I could sleep. When he was in his cups, he would sometimes go down to the pond. Or ride Apollo.”

Lily hated thinking of Griffin being so reckless.

“His uncle died after a horseback ride, and his brother died in that pond.”

Lily flinched. “Oh my goodness, I had no idea. I knew Alexander had passed too young but...”

They’d never spoken of his brother, just as they’d never spoken of hers.

“You’ve both had too many losses in your young lives. You and Griffin. The loss of so many who should still be here.”

Lily tensed as the grief of Leo came back like a sharp bladed thing.

“But for some reason, the loss of your brother nearly destroyed him. That loss made him wish to destroy himself.”

The tears did come then, slipping down Lily's face. She couldn't stop them. The thought of losing Griffin brought a tightness in her chest that made it hard to draw breath.

In those early months of her grief, there were times when she'd resented Griffin because he had been with Leo in those last moments. She knew that he was close to Leo, that they were as close as brothers, and if he could have stopped what happened, he would have.

Now, hearing what his grandmother conveyed about his pain at that loss, it was further confirmation.

“He hadn't told me any of this,” Lily admitted.

“I didn't think he would. He got better after a while, but it took many, many months. And even then, he still wasn't quite himself.” His grandmother paused until Lily met her gaze. “Until he came to me and told me he wished to marry you.”

Lily swiped at her tears.

“He wishes to be a good duke, you see, but Griffin is tender-hearted,” the dowager explained. “That always made me fear for him. Because the tender hearted can be so easily broken.”

“He's not broken,” Lily told her fiercely. “He is a good duke. He's a good man.”

“I certainly believe so, but it heartens me greatly to hear you say it. You love him, don't you?”

“Yes, and I have for a very long time.”

His grandmother's brows lifted. “I see.”

“I was completely taken with him, but he didn't know. And he didn't see me the same way.”

The dowager eyed her a long moment. “I wouldn't be so certain that he didn't see you the same way. He mentioned you many times. Never mentioned any other Bridewell sister. Only you.”

Lily swiped at her tears. “He sketched me when I didn't realize. So perhaps he did notice me. He's very talented.”

His grandmother dipped her head. “Yes, I've seen some of his sketches.”

“You should see more of them. You should encourage that in him.”

The dowager emitted a heavy sigh. “Lily, as many duties as will fall on your shoulders, there are many more upon his.”

“I understand, but art is important to him. Just as it was to his mother.”

“He has no time for such endeavors anymore.”

“Well, then I'll make sure he takes the time, because life has to be more than just

duty.”

At that, all the dowager’s tenderness seemed fade, and she straightened her shoulders, squared her gaze.

Lily wouldn’t relent on this point. “I say that as someone who was willing to give all of myself to duty.” Her voice broke. Tears streamed down her face. No matter how often she swiped, they kept coming. “My mother died. Then Father. And then Leo. I told myself I could live for others, that I wanted nothing for myself.”

She sucked in a deep shuddery breath. “But all of us who have duties and responsibilities to others must acknowledge our own hearts too. Our passions and desires.” A smile touched her lips. “Griffin has talent and skill, and it brings him joy, I suspect. When I see a thing in need of mending, to do so gives me a satisfaction I can’t fully explain. Even cats and hedgehogs.”

The dowager groaned. “Must we return to this topic?”

“I’m going to keep taking in animals that need my help,” Lily told her, infusing her tone with the same thread of steel she’d learned from the dowager. “It’s not a topic that’s up for debate. The kittens and hedgehog are still here,” she confessed.

“Yes, I know.”

Lily gasped. “You do?”

“The staff at Rosemere are very loyal to the Kingsleys. Now that includes you and all your sisters, and apparently any ailing creature you are caring for. Robards himself insisted that he would safeguard Henrietta despite my protestations.”

Lily seamed her lips together but couldn’t hold back a grin.

“Just tell me,” the dowager said in a long-suffering tone, “will all the kittens become pets?”

“Some of them might. We will have pets at Rosemere beyond thoroughbreds in the stables. I can promise you that.”

“Wonderful,” the dowager said with what Lily thought might be a hint of amusement.

“We have a houseful of guests.” The dowager gestured and her diamond bracelet sparked. “Can you not give some of them away?”

Lily pursed her lips and considered it. “Maybe. Some vetting would be required. I'm not giving a kitten away to just anyone.”

The dowager's chest heaved, and Lily realized it was a little ripple of laughter. “Goodness. What a young woman you are.”

“Thank you.” Lily almost held her breath, afraid to settle into what was, finally, seemed a genuine hint of approval.

“Will you always regret not becoming a doctor?”

“No.” Lily had no regrets. “It was a dream once, but now I want this life. A life with Griffin and my family.”

The dowager tipped her head. “I didn't know if you'd be up to all of this.”

“Yes. I wasn't prepared?—”

“But you've impressed me. You've surprised me. Not only have you been able to handle all the duties of hosting an enormous house party, but you find time for

everything else too.” The dowager smiled, and it felt genuine and unfettered. “You're confident in who you are. I wasn't when I first married, so I admire that in you. Most of all, I'm very grateful for how Griffin has come alive since you've come into his life.”

“Oh.” Lily's tears, which had dried, began again.

“I have never seen him so happy. Never. In all of his seven and twenty years, and I know that is, in large part, down to you.”

“Do you truly think I should leave him alone tonight?”

“No. Part of me wants you spare you from the anger that sometimes bursts out of him when he's lost in his pain, but I've seen you two together. If anyone can help him through this, you can. Not only because Leo was your brother. Because of the connection you and Griffin share.”

The dowager leaned forward and placed a hand on Lily's wrist. “I've also learned you're stubborn and wouldn't listen to me even if I told you to.”

“Yes, probably true.”

“It is true. Now go to him.”

When Lily shifted to rise from her chair, the dowager held her fast.

“Thank you for loving my grandson,” she said quietly, her voice thick with emotion.

“Thank you for seeing that I do.” Lily laid her free hand atop the dowager's. “And thank you for accepting me as I am.”

After they'd both stood, the dowager turned to her once more. "You're not any kind of duchess I've ever known before, but I see the promise in that now."

Lily hesitated and then wrapped her arms around her grandmother-in-law. At first, Griffin's grandmother stiffened, but then she held Lily lightly too.

Then Lily strode from the room to find Griffin. But he wasn't in the study. Robards informed her that he'd gone to his bedchamber.

When she found him, he was passed out in bed, an empty whiskey decanter beside him.

Lily decided that all of her hosting duties could wait. The guests could make their way to their bedchambers, and the staff was capable enough to deal with any minor detail that might arise.

She undressed down to her chemise, tugged off Griffin's boots, and then climbed into bed beside him.

CHAPTER 15

The morning after Halford's arrival, Griffin woke early with a smashing headache.

Lily's warm, lush body lay curled against him, and the sight of her made his gut clench. He was only thankful he'd had so much to drink that he'd been asleep when she came to bed. He couldn't bear it if he'd said something irrevocable, or done something awful, that she'd never forgive him for.

But as much as he wanted to savor her warmth, pull her closer, and never let go, another part of him yearned for escape. Perhaps it was cowardice, but he couldn't bear to wake her, or face her.

So he'd risen from bed, his heart aching as he left her.

Then he'd washed and dressed and gone to the stables in the cold light of morning, saddled Apollo, and ridden hard across the dew-damp fields until the fear gripping him eased enough to allow him to breathe.

Lily was ever in his thoughts. She was the best part of his life. The only truly right thing he'd ever done was marry her. And the bond they'd formed, the way they were together, their insatiable hunger for each other, was more than he'd ever hoped for.

Yet what kept ringing in his head were her words spoken that day in the folly.

I want to be loved.

He hated himself for how much those words had terrified him.

It wasn't the prospect of loving her. Loving Lily was easy, and she'd had his heart, if he was honest with himself, for years.

When he'd bedded other women in the past, it had been only about the act itself. Nothing was ever promised. Nothing more than pleasure and passion were ever expected from his past lovers.

And even in those years, his thoughts had turned to Lily. Each time he saw her on visits to Briarfield or when she came into town with Leo, he'd recognized how special she was. And he'd felt more yearning for her than he had for any other lady in his life.

Now she was his. His duchess. His partner. His lover.

Each time he kissed her, touched her, brought her pleasure, it felt consequential. A deepening of their connection. A moment that solidified their bond.

Though every time he thought of truly letting her in, of confessing all he'd felt for her for years, fear held him back. Fear that he'd disappoint her. That he'd fail in some spectacular way as he had in the past and it would crush her. Fear that he'd acknowledge how much he loved her, needed her, and would then lose her somehow.

In the folly the other day, he'd come so close to telling her how he felt. Showing her the drawings the first time they'd gone there had been a confession of sorts.

Yet he knew she yearned to hear the words, and she damned well deserved them every single day.

But if she knew the truth of how he'd been in the past—not his reputation but a true accounting of all the foolish, thoughtless, reckless things he'd done—would she still

want his love? If she realized how his own misguided actions had inspired Leo to stride out onto that bloody Hampstead field, would she ever forgive him?

Loving Lily was the easiest thing he could imagine. Losing her was unthinkable.

The hell of it was that he knew she would not abandon their marriage or her duties as duchess. She was a woman who'd lived her life bound by and committed to her duty to others.

She would stay, but there would be an unbridgeable gulf between them.

Something in him had come alive in these days with her—when she eagerly returned his kisses, when she smiled so brightly every time he stepped into a room.

Imagining a cold, formal marriage like his parents had—one of civility and obligation and nothing more—felt like a slow death. And he couldn't bear that with Lily.

He yanked Apollo to a stop at the crest of a hill, his breath coming fast, though whether from the hard ride or the thoughts tormenting him, he couldn't say. The early morning mist curled around the fields below, softening the edges of the world as if offering him a moment of peace.

But there would be no peace until he resolved this.

He had to tell her. He had to trust her.

The problem was, he didn't know how.

Griffin ran a hand through his hair, staring out at the vast fields of Rosemere, the estate he was bound to, just as he was now bound to Lily. After his parent's example, he'd never expected to fall in love with the woman he married. And he'd certainly never expected this all-consuming need he felt to be close to his bride, to make her

his partner in every way.

But if he wanted to be worthy of Lily, if he wanted the warmth and joy she brought into his life to last, he'd have to tell her the truth. Surely, what he wanted with her was worth the risk.

Turning Apollo back toward the house, Griffin rode with new purpose. He could not change what he had done, but perhaps, just perhaps, he could be the man Lily deserved.

Lily woke alone in the enormous ducal bed and stared up at the canopy for a long while.

She'd hoped to wake to find Griffin beside her. There was a great deal she needed to say. Questions she wanted to ask.

But if he'd felt bad enough to drink himself into a stupor, she understood that talking wasn't likely what he wanted. She suspected he'd gone for a ride.

Though she was torn between giving him the time he needed and the yearning to be with him, she decided she had to try to bridge the gulf that had somehow grown between them last evening.

Somehow, though Leo had meant so much to both of them, they'd avoid any mention of him. That told her that his grief was as sharp as her own. But if their closeness meant anything, she hoped it had built a trust that would allow them to broach such painful topics together.

So she went to her room, washed and dressed, and made her way out the stables. She confirmed with the stable master that Griffin had taken Apollo for a ride. However, the horse was back now, getting a wipe down from one of the stable boys.

Griffin, however, was nowhere to be found.

“He walked that way, Your Grace,” the stable boy called to her.

“That way?” Lily confirmed.

The boy nodded.

“Thank you.” The boy had pointed in the direction of Briarfield, and Lily started off in that direction.

Then she saw him in the distance. He walked slowly, head dipped as if in contemplation.

Lily hesitated a moment. Then she broke into a run.

He must have heard her because he turned back. Lily stopped.

“Do you mind if we talk a bit?” she called to him.

“Talk?” he said as he approached in long, ground-eating strides.

Lily noticed the shadows under his eyes. The seriousness in his expression.

“Yes, let’s talk,” he said finally.

Lily swallowed against a sudden lump in her throat. Now that he was in front of her, all she wanted was to touch him. “Will you kiss me first?”

A spark flickered in his eyes. “You’re certain you want me to?”

“Absolutely certain.” She didn’t wait and reached for him, sliding her hands up his

chest, pressing her body into his.

He looked at her a long moment, licked his lips, and then cupped the back of her head and took her mouth in a hot, hungry kiss that stole her breath. He lifted her in his arms until she was on her toes, gripping her hip to pull her against his hardness. Even through their clothes, she could feel his heat, his need for her.

“God, I missed you,” he murmured against her lips.

“I didn’t go anywhere,” she told him, cupping his stubbled cheek. “You did.”

“I’m sorry, love.”

Lily stiffened at his use of the word she so longed to hear from him, and he released his hold on her.

“I know I owe you an explanation.” His gaze was stark as he ran a hand through his hair.

There was a pleading quality to the look in his eyes, and she began to feel the first hints of fear. Something had happened, or was about to, and from the look on his face, he dreaded all of it.

“Tell me what’s troubling you,” she said quietly and offered him her hand.

He worked his jaw as he stared at her. It was the first time since the day he proposed to her that he had not taken her hand eagerly when she offered it.

But Lily wouldn’t give up so easily. She kept her hand extended, waiting.

With a hard swallow, he took her hand and stunned her by getting onto one knee. He kissed her hand almost reverently, then he sat on the ground.

Lily lowered herself and sat next to him. She stroked her fingers along his sharp jaw, surprised to find it hard and tensed. "Please tell me. Let me help you if I can."

He laughed at that, a low, rueful rumble. "You've always wanted to help others, whether they deserve it or not."

Lily frowned. "Why don't you deserve my help?"

"Because, my darling, I've been an arse. Rather spectacularly so."

"Have you?" Lily shook her head. "You've been wonderful to me, you've?—"

"No, not in the way I should be."

"I don't understand." A terrifying thought popped into her head and her heart ached in her chest. "Are you having regrets?"

"God, no! Not even for a second." He turned and cupped her cheek, dipped his head, and kissed her far too briefly. "You are a gift I feel I do not deserve."

Griffin raked a hand through his hair once more. It was now a tangled, appealing mass of twisted waves.

"I should have said this sooner," he began, his voice rough. "I should have told you everything before we ever married, before I ever touched you. But I was a coward. Not because I didn't love you, but because I did. I do . More than I ever thought possible."

Lily's breath hitched, but she waited, afraid to interrupt.

"You said you wanted to be loved." His voice cracked slightly, and he shook his head. "I have loved you for so damned long, but I've been too much of a fool to tell

you. And not because I didn't want to, not even because of Leo. I feared you would turn away if you knew the truth."

"What truth?" she whispered.

He swallowed hard and forced himself to continue.

"You know of my reputation. My past is full of reckless, selfishness actions I wish I could take back. I—" He hesitated, then seemed to force himself to continue. "Leo wasn't attacked by ruffians. He wanted to face off with a man who'd insulted a lady. He wanted a bloody duel, but he wouldn't have been on that field that day if it weren't for me. My arrogance, my thoughtlessness, my damn pride—I led him into it, and I blame myself for it. If I had been the man I should have been, none of it would have happened."

He exhaled, his shoulders rising and falling. "I wake at night and fear that will be my legacy—failing the people I care for most. And you, Lily, are the most precious person in my life. The idea of failing you, of not being the man you deserve, terrifies me."

He looked at her, his shoulders hunched, then cast his eyes down as if expecting her wrath or rejection. "I held back because I was afraid that if you knew the truth, you'd realize I'm not worthy of you."

He'd said so much, her mind spun. Her heart was lodged somewhere in her throat, and she was struggling not to cry.

"Griffin..." she whispered, her voice thick as she tried to make sense of all he'd said.

He let out a slow breath. "I don't want to be my father. I don't want a cold, distant marriage. I want you. Your smiles, your laughter, your endless kindness and fire. I want to love you exactly as you deserve. And I swear to you, I will spend every day

proving that to you, if you'll let me."

He squeezed her hand that he still held and bent to kiss it.

"I love you, Lily. And I will never hold back again."

"I..." Her insides felt tangled—half joy at his confession of loving her, half confusion at learning that her brother's death wasn't what she'd been told by the doctor who attended him that last night.

"I love you, Griffin. I have for longer than you know."

His expression lifted in a beaming smile.

"But," she rushed to add, "I wish someone had told me the truth about Leo. I wish you had told me the truth."

His smile faded to a grave look. A haunted look. "You deserved that. I had some foolish notion of protecting him."

Lily understood that part, or she'd surmised it. Duels were outlawed, and it seemed Leo had sought to be a part of one willingly. As a man attacked by an unknown assailants, he was an innocent victim. But she'd often wondered if there was more to it.

"You were there that night?"

"I was." He closed his eyes as if recalling the moment. "He asked me to be his second. I tried to talk him out of it." A shiver seemed to chase over him. "I'm not trying to absolve myself. We'd both had too much to drink, and I was a reckless fool to let it go that far."

“Leo wouldn’t listen to you?”

He shook his head. “He believed he could win, I think.”

Lily jerked back. “Does anyone win a duel?”

“No, of course not. I regret every moment of that night, Lily. The guilt eats at me.”

Some part of her wanted to be angry with him, to have someone besides her brother to blame. But a greater part of her knew precisely how wildly stubborn Leo could be, especially when he was in his cups.

“You have every right to rage at me,” he told her in a resolved tone. “I deserve it and more.”

She shook her head. “I don’t want to rage at you.” Tears threatened. The pain of knowing Leo had willfully put his life in danger when all their futures were at stake made her feel raw and grief-stricken all over again.

“What do you want?” he asked softly. “Tell me and I’ll do it. If you want me to give you time on your own...”

“No.” Lily swiped at a tear. “I don’t want to be apart from you. Will you just hold me?”

His eyes flared in surprise. Then he pulled her into his arms.

Lily settled onto this lap, rested her head against his shoulder, and let the tears she’d been stemming come. She couldn’t cry delicately. The grief was too raw. The momentary break in the growing bond between her and Griffin was too recent.

Long, gasping sobs racked her frame, and Griffin held her, stroking her hair, her

back.

“I’ve got you, love,” he whispered. “It’s all right.”

Then she felt a tremor rush through him and he exhaled a shuddering breath. He cried too. Not as long, not with the same heaving keens that had rattled out of her, but when her tears began to slow, she looked up to see the sheen on his cheeks.

“I love you,” she told him, feeling such relief at being able to say the words, at the knowledge that he returned her feelings in every way.

“I love you so much, Lily Kingsley. Even those words don’t feel like enough.” He kissed her tear-streaked cheek. “I adore you.” He pressed a kiss to her temple. “I admire you.” He hooked a finger under her chin. “I need you, and I should have told you as much before now.”

“I need you too. This closeness. This trust. Please know you can talk to me about anything.” Lily laid a hand on his chest. Both of their hearts were beating too fast, and she felt another tear streak down her face.

“I do. I will.” He bent and kissed her, gently at first, but then their hunger stoked it into a fiery plunder.

Lily shifted to straddle him. Griffin gripped her hips and trailed kisses down her neck.

They’d fallen so easily into being partners and lovers. The first days of their marriage had felt perfect, but she didn’t want perfect. Both of them knew too well that life was full of unexpected turns. Tragedy when one least expected it.

“Whatever comes, we’ll face it together,” she told him, reaching down to capture his gaze.

“We will. I promise. I’m sorry I closed you out last night. I won’t anymore.” He lifted her hand and pressed it against his chest. “You have my heart. You always will.”

She kissed him, leaning into him, her hand still captured between them.

Griffin slipped his hands under her dress, stroked them up her thighs, then gripped her hips to rock her body against his.

“We can’t make love in this field,” she whispered against his lips.

“Why not?” he asked as he dipped his head and nipped at her neck. “It’s our field.”

Lily laughed and scrambled off of his lap, then she laid down, stretching out in the field grass. “At least come down here where no one will see.”

He immediately positioned his body over hers, bracing himself above her, settling between her thighs. His body warmed her, and his eyes held such love that it made her dizzy. She closed her eyes, relishing his nearness. Feeling safe. Feeling loved.

“What are you thinking, my Aphrodite?”

“I’ve decided,” she said as she began to unfasten the buttons of his shirt.

“Oh yes?”

“Marrying you was the best decision I’ve ever made.”

He blinked, his eyes glistening. “I will make sure you never have reason to think differently.”

Lily wrapped an arm around his shoulders, lifted up, and kissed him with all the love in her heart.