



Healing the Duke's Scarred Heart (Love and Secrets of the Ton)

Author: *Daphne Pierce*

Category: Historical

Description: Jacqueline Winterbournes world is turned upside down when a hidden family secret forces her into the home of a duke who once humiliated her. Bound by duty to protect her family, she must confront a man she has every reason to fear. Can she survive his coldness and trust him with her heart?

After a life-altering accident, Philip Churchill became a reclusive duke, hiding behind a mask and retreating from society. When the woman he loved abandoned him, he lost all purpose in life until he offered a lady an impossible deal that could transform their lives forever.

With only three months to change their fates, can Jacqueline and Philip defy their darkest fears and build a future together, or will their pasts—and enemies—destroy everything theyve come to love?

Healing the Dukes Scarred Heart is a historical romance novel of approximately 60,000 words. No cheating, no cliffhangers, and a guaranteed happily ever after.

Tropes: Beauty and the Beast, Reclusive Hero, Marriage of Convenience

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Prologue

If Philip was determined not to become a recluse, a masked ball was precisely what he needed.

It was a blessing and a curse that his hair was the way that it was; a deep auburn, shoulder length, rendering him unmistakably the Duke of Creighton. One look from any member of the ton and it would be evident who he was, and once upon a time he might have enjoyed it. But that time had been and gone, and he wanted more than anything to be unremarkable.

As he fixed his mask in his carriage, his fingertips traced the leathery skin of his cheek. It would have been preferable to him to wear a mask permanently, but his hair aided him in that respect on other occasions.

He shook himself gently, reminding himself that he was the same gentleman that had attended such parties before, and there was no need to be fearful for any reason. He was well-liked, and had been missed a great deal during his absence in society, or so he had been told.

“I would recognize that hair anywhere!” A bright voice came as he approached the front door.

He could not see terribly well in the dark, but there was no mistaking her voice.

“Lady Smythe,” Philip smiled, bowing to his hostess. “How have you been?”

“I ought to ask you that very same question,” she replied gently. “You poor thing, you must have been through such a terrible ordeal.”

“I am perfectly well,” he promised. “And it is my sincere hope that the accident will not be the talk of the ball. All discussions should pertain to you, the lady that has thrown this spectacular event.”

“It is nothing, only a little something to celebrate the beginning of this year’s season. There are many young ladies in attendance tonight. Perhaps it might do you well to speak with a few?”

“I am sworn off ladies,” Philip laughed emptily. “I believe you know why.”

“I do,” Lady Smythe sighed. “Though, if you were to ask my opinion, I would tell you never allow that girl to make you see yourself differently. You are a good man, Your Grace.”

“I try to be,” he nodded. “In any case, it is not a priority of mine for the moment. I only hope to finish recovering, before I reenter society completely.”

“Certainly. Now, I ought to greet my other guests, even if I would love to spend the evening talking to you, and you alone. Enjoy your evening.”

“I aim to,” he smiled.

At least he had an ally there. As he entered the ballroom, the light became brighter, and he was met with one of the most beautiful ballrooms that he had ever seen. Paintings adorned the walls, there were flowers on every pillar, and everything was in some shade of gold or other. It was opulent, perfect, and Philip felt as though he did not quite belong anymore. A scarred gentleman did not fit amid such beauty.

As if on cue, that was when he saw her; the beauty that he could no longer claim.

Ophelia Sutton had not been his choice of a wife. He did not know her at all, but his father was a good friend of her father, and so a deal was made the week she was born. Philip had not minded this; it was not unheard of, after all, though he had wished that he had been told about the matter years ago, rather than it being a brief mention in his father's will.

Even so, there were worse ladies to be tied together to in marriage, and as much as he did not wish to admit it, he had truly fallen for her during their time together. She was a young lady of many talents, and she was known for her beauty. Her hair was deep brown, and her eyes were the color of brandy. What more could a gentleman want than to look into his wife's eyes and see his favorite drink?

A wife that wouldn't leave after he was in a horrific accident, one might suppose. In sickness and in health was how a marriage was supposed to be, and Philip was at least grateful to discover that she had no such intentions before the wedding.

That did not, however, make it any easier to see her fluttering around other gentlemen, batting her eyelashes demurely at them while sweeping her fan across her bosom. She was free to find any man she pleased, and it was evident that that was what she was going to do, whether he was there to see it or not.

Philip wasn't quick to feel anger, or jealousy, and certainly not hatred, but in that moment, it was all he could feel. Ophelia had a right to flirt with whom she chose, now that they were no longer betrothed, but it did not make it any less painful.

It was supposed to be his reintroduction to society, but Philip no longer wished to be there at all. He could not endure watching the lady he once loved, all season, getting everything that she wanted. Not after destroying him the way she had. There would be no proving himself to be above it all, because he was not. He was hurt, and he

wanted to leave.

The cold night air felt good against his skin, but it did not aid in calming his breathing. His clothing felt tight, even though it fit him perfectly, and he felt as though he might collapse at any moment. It did not help that he was once more in darkness, and so he was stumbling away from the household in a vain attempt to locate his carriage. He gave in, making his way back and leaning against a wall, looking at the stars.

“Beautiful, aren’t they?”

Philip shirked from the voice, even though it had been a calm one. He turned to where it had come from, only to see a small figure in pale blue, her skin even paler. She turned to him just as he jolted, and quickly took his hands in hers, quietening him.

“It’s all right,” she said gently. “Follow me.”

And perhaps it was, because as he was utterly disoriented, he did so. Soon enough, she had guided him to a bench a short way from the rest of the party, and the two were sitting together, one of his hands not leaving one of hers.

She slid her other hand around his back in circles, gently rubbing it. It was soothing him a lot, as was her voice.

“It was quite hectic today,” she smirked. “My sister is to debut in the next two years, early for a young lady, and so she has been quite adamant that she needs to accompany me to events. I would personally love that, but our father refuses. He says that she must wait her turn.”

She giggled as she said it, clearly holding a lot of affection for her sister.

“And it is strange,” she continued. “Because I would have thought that our father might have been honest about the matter; we do not have the money for it, but he protected her feelings. I suppose I am grateful for that. I am also grateful for our beloved Winston, our dog, for he adores Elizabeth and is the entire reason she is happy to stay home.”

“Stay home,” he echoed. “That is perhaps what I should have done.”

“Oh? Why is that?”

“It is simply that I... well, this used to be the sort of thing that I excelled at, and now I would much rather be home. I never would have thought that I would be like this.”

“People change as they grow,” she replied matter-of-factly. “I, for one, see no harm in preferring to be at home, especially if one has a particularly lovely one.”

“I do, indeed, but it is also the privacy that I long for.”

He wanted to silence himself, but speaking with her was so easy that he could not make himself stop.

“And you are well within your rights to want that. I do not know if you have been told that before.”

“I have not. There is, instead, the expectation for me to perform for the masses, which I used to be good at it, but I cannot bring myself to do it any longer.”

“Then you need not do so. You cannot be forced to do anything, not unless you consent to it, and then that is hardly forced, is it?”

Philip noticed that whatever she had done had worked well; he was far calmer now.

As he turned to thank her, he at last took note of what she looked like thanks to a lantern she had brought.

She had lowered her mask to place her hand on his back, revealing blue-black hair that had seemingly been forced into place, striking pale blue eyes, fair skin with many beauty spots on her face and reddish-pink bow-shaped lips. She looked almost doll-like, and with her lips parted and her eyes searching she only emphasized that.

She had perhaps the kindest eyes that he had ever seen, and remarkably she looked exactly like the sort of lady he might have danced with to the waltz that he could hear, had their circumstances been different.

He froze. He could hear the musicians, meaning that they were suspiciously close to the ballroom, and therefore the other guests in attendance. Now, when he looked at the young lady, he could not stand her; he knew what she had been trying to do. Everyone knew who he was, with or without the mask, and whether she had helped him or not she must have known what she was doing.

He was angry with her, angry with all women, for how they treated him as if he were his title and nothing more, tempting scandal if it meant the chance of being a duchess. It was too much to bear.

“How dare you?” he thundered. “Is it in your plans to accost a man in a fragile state?”

“What?” The young lady asked, mouth open. “Sir, I can assure you that I would never—”

“I do not care to hear it. All you young ladies are the same. I hope that whatever man you set your cap to next sees your intentions as I have.”

He did not give her a chance to respond, instead snatching the lantern she was using

and stumbling away. He wanted to look menacing, or at least strong, and he hoped that he had achieved that evening through his struggle. He marched to his carriage, boarded it, and immediately set for home, swearing off women entirely, more so than he thought he had.

Even so, he couldn't help but think of her. She was almost like a sparrow, and she certainly did not appear deceitful. Then again, he had been fooled by a lady's looks before, and he refused to fall for it again. He would not forget her face for a long time, he knew that much, and he was grateful for that in some respects.

At least he would not fall for any other lady trying the same thing any time soon, and he had that mysterious young lady to thank for that. He also should have thanked her for helping him, he quickly realized, but perhaps if she did not have such questionable motives he might have done so.

He was confused that night, but in spite of it all one thing remained perfectly clear. He would not be seen in society for a very, very long time indeed. It was for the best after all; he did not want to hear the whispers, and he knew that eventually it would all die down. Soon enough, Lady Ophelia would marry another poor soul, and he could declare that he had no intentions to marry and would be left well alone.

Sighing, he slammed a bottle of brandy on his desk. He knew it would never happen; such things never did in London.

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Chapter 1

“You will be cordial with the Duke of Creighton, and that is final.”

Lady Jacqueline Winterbourne, daughter of Lord Pemberton, had not told her father about her conversation with the duke all those years prior, but somehow, he seemed to know that she had no interest at all in the man.

Regardless, it did not matter that she was hesitant. What mattered was that she oversaw the packing for the trip; her father would not do it himself, and even if he did it would not be of any use to them.

Besides, Jackie reasoned, it would aid her in her future running of a household, should she ever marry.

“You seem concerned,” Elizabeth smiled kindly. “Might I be of any assistance?”

“If you could find a way for the two of us to escape this visit, that would be wonderful.”

“Sadly, even I could not persuade Father to do that. This could mean big things for his standing, should he be in with a duke. There shall be no changing his mind on the matter, whether you want to avoid the duke or not.”

“He said the duke has invited us all personally,” she sighed, not truly responding to her sister. “Why on Earth would he do that? He was so brutish when he and I met, and if you ask me, I do not think a man of his standing would ever be forced to

change his ways.”

“Perhaps you caught him at a bad time?”

“Be that as it may, I do not wish to know him.”

“It is a shame, because with how popular you were when you were out, it would have been quite easy to snare him as a husband.”

Jackie gave her a pointed look.

“Should I ever marry a man like that, you must send for a doctor immediately.”

“You shall never marry at all if you do not reenter society.”

“Liz, I cannot. You know that. For a start, I am much too old. When was the last time you saw a hopeful unmarried woman of four-and-twenty?”

“You would be fine, I assure you. Why, Lady Blackburne was two-and-thirty when she married an earl. There have been stranger things to happen, I assure you.”

“I do not wish to be seen as strange any more than I already am. You know, if you put half as much effort into your own season, you might find some success yourself.”

“Perhaps,” Elizabeth considered. “Though with Father being the way he is, I highly doubt that there would be a gentleman that would not be frightened off.”

Jackie sighed. Her sister had been every bit as beautiful as the ton had viewed herself, yet for some reason Elizabeth had struggled to enter a single courtship. That was what Elizabeth told her, at least, but she had never been one to lie.

The young ladies were not fools, of course; their father had changed immensely since the death of his wife, and now among his gambling debts and brandy bottles it was difficult to see why any self-respecting man would want to enter into such a family.

“Why did you help the duke in the first place?” Elizabeth asked suddenly. “You must have known it was dangerous to be alone in the dark with a man.”

“I did not, in truth, think of that. I simply saw a person with the same problem that Mother used to have, and I knew how to help her, so I wanted to try helping this other person. The fact that he was a duke meant very little to me.”

“I do not suppose that he ever saw it that way, of course.”

“No, he likely saw me as some silly girl trying to trap him, and a part of me does not blame him for that, but even so I cannot see past the way he spoke to me. Accusatorily, as if I had not just helped him.”

“You make an excellent point. Regardless, we could spend the entirety of the visit avoiding him, if you wish. I have little interest in speaking with him.”

“Whyever not? You could have him for yourself if you wish.”

Elizabeth blushed gently.

“No, thank you,” she chuckled. “He is no more the type of man for me than he is for you. I will say, though, that it was wonderful of him to have invited Lord Greene too. Now that is a man of fine standing. Did you know, he is set to inherit his father’s title? He shall be a marquess from then on.”

“Yes, so it is even stranger that the duke has invited our father of all people. Why do you suppose he has done that?”

Again, Elizabeth's face flushed, this time even more than it had before. Jackie eyed her carefully. It had been more and more common for her sister to avoid her gaze, and she did not know what to do about it. There were only so many times that she could ask about it before she had to leave the matter be. She had enough to do each and every day without trying to decipher something about her sister, who usually shared everything with her.

"Father told me the two of them are friends," Elizabeth explained. "They frequent the same gentlemen's club."

"If that is the case, why is this the first time that we are hearing of it? I cannot help but feel as though there is more to it than a simple friendship."

"Well, you have always had a tendency to look too deeply into things. I would not pay too much mind to it. It is a visit and nothing more, and who knows? Perhaps you and the duke might find some common ground."

"Could you take these to my father's study?" Jackie said quickly to a servant, handing her some papers. "My sincerest apologies, Sister, what did you say?"

"I do not find you amusing."

"A pity, for I certainly do."

"Jackie, you have to try and see things differently. I do not believe that the duke even remembers what happened between the two of you. Dukes meet a lot of people, after all, and if he had remembered it and continued to blame you, why would he have invited you in the first place?"

"Because he is a friend of Father's."

“You are being deliberately obtuse, aren’t you?”

“Perhaps,” Jackie smirked, taking some gowns from a maid. “Now, are you going to be in my ear all day or are you going to prepare for our trip?”

“If you allowed me to lift a finger here, I might be able to help you rather than follow you around.”

“There is not a single chance that I will be doing that. I am the lady of the household, and it is my responsibility to ensure everything runs smoothly. It is your job to learn how to paint and sew and sing.”

The two girls laughed brightly, Elizabeth taking some gowns from her sister with a grin.

“I cannot stand sewing,” she said firmly. “I—”

“Prick your fingers too much?” Jackie suggested, to which she nodded. “That is all the more reason to practice. We could find you a good husband, you know.”

“I am far happier with you,” Elizabeth promised. “Besides, if you are happy with this life, then perhaps I could be the same?”

Jackie eyed her sister carefully. There was a sadness in the way that she said it, but Jackie was quite sure of why that was. Elizabeth had always talked about her life as a wife and mother, until recently, but Jackie had not paid that part any mind. After all, several years could not be erased from memory after a mere few weeks.

“You would be miserable. You have always longed to find a husband, and you know it.”

“As did you, once upon a time,” Elizabeth pointed out. “What changed?”

“Mother died,” Jackie replied bluntly. “You had another two years before your debut, and so I had to spend that time preparing you for it, rather than swanning off with the first gentleman to express an interest in me. I had no time for the London Season, and in truth I did not miss it too terribly.”

“Yes, you did.”

Jackie gave her sister a smile.

“Not as badly as you might think. I enjoy running the household, and seeing how well you have bloomed in the last five years I cannot truly have any regrets. How could you expect me to?”

“You’ll miss so much, though. Do you not wish to marry at all?”

“Of course I do, but it is not something that I can do as yet. For a start, I must see to it that you are a wife, and then should I find a gentleman willing to marry an old maid I shall accept my fate.”

“You are hardly an old maid. I am twenty, myself, and you would never call me that.”

“Not with that spirit of yours, no. I don’t know, Liz, it is simply not how I see myself.”

“But if the opportunity were to present itself—”

“Do you know something that I do not?”

Elizabeth stiffened. Jackie never snapped at her sister in such a manner, so it was no

surprise to her that she seemed so uncomfortable.

“My apologies, Elizabeth,” she sighed, then allowing herself to smirk. “Should I magically be in a position where you are married and the gentleman of my dreams appears, then I suppose that I would not be opposed to it.”

“That is all I ask,” Elizabeth replied excitedly. “But now that you have said that, you simply must keep to it.”

With that, she raced off. Jackie watched her go, envying her only slightly. It would have been easier if their mother were still alive, and they had been able to debut and spend their London Seasons together, but she would never have taken her small sacrifice back, not for anything in the world.

Even so, she had to admit that she missed her life as a young lady out in society. She had only been out for a year before her mother was too unwell for Jackie to see any use in playing a part in it all. Things were needed at home, and she was no use to anyone if all that she did was simper in some gown and tell gentlemen how wonderful she thought them to be.

With the exception of the Duke of Creighton, that was. She shook the thought from her mind. She harbored no ill will toward the man, she never did toward another person, as it was not her nature. Besides, she reminded herself, he had seemingly been through quite enough without receiving any hatred from her.

She was aware that the duke had a scarred face; it was all anyone could talk about the year she debuted, but it had never made her see him any differently other than it made her pity him. It must have been difficult, she reasoned, to have been through whatever it was that caused the disfigurement and still attend events as though nothing were amiss. It was no surprise, then, that he had snapped at her so unkindly.

Which was precisely why she was so wary about meeting him once again. She had not been in society since, and so had heard no more about him. There was no way for her to know whether or not he had changed at all, and had regretted his actions, or if he held steadfast in his beliefs that Jackie had been a problem and was therefore not someone he wished to associate with, or even show any kindness to.

Regardless of whether or not he had changed for the better, however, Jackie had no choice but to continue preparing for their visit. He was, after all, a friend of her father's. She scoffed at the thought, certain that if he kept company with her father then he could not be of the highest caliber of gentleman.

But it did not matter what she thought, nor what she was frightened of being faced with upon her arrival. She was to see the duke, and spend time with him as any good guest would, and the thought of it made her almost miserable. It was not the norm for a lady to be so upset by the thought of spending time with an unmarried duke, but then it had never been a priority of hers.

"This is to be a wonderful time," her father said coldly as the three of them boarded their carriage. "You shall be good to the duke if you know what is good for you. Am I quite clear, girls?"

"Yes, Father," Elizabeth replied, far more enthusiastically than she tended to.

Jackie saw her father eyeing her carefully, a tightening in her throat knowing that she would have to lie to him.

"Yes, Father," she replied quietly.

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Chapter 2

Philip had many regrets about his life, but not noticing the fire sooner was not at the top of the list.

In truth, his biggest regret for years had been the way that he had spoken to a young lady at a ball. He could hardly believe it himself, as it was not unheard of for men, especially those of his standing, to assume the worst in a girl and speak to them accordingly, but it was the case. He had been unkind to her at best, and once he had returned home, he realized just what he had done.

She had been trying to help him, he was sure of it. He had never seen her since that night, meaning it was impossible to help the situation beyond making a few inquiries about a young lady with wild black hair and kind eyes. It was no surprise to him that there were, in actuality, many young ladies in London with those two features, not that they would have been anything like her.

“You are pacing, Creighton,” Lucien Landerfield, the Viscount Montague, said in a low voice as Philip caught himself and came to a stop.

“It would appear so, yes.”

“Surely you are not still concerned about this?”

“Which part of this should I not be concerned about? Lady Jacqueline and her family are to arrive quite soon, and I have no idea where to start.”

“One typically starts with preparations, and yourself and your mother had that matter handled days ago. Now comes the easier part.”

“There is nothing at all in this that is easy.”

“Of course there is. You are a duke. Charm them.”

Philip could not be as certain as his friend was, no matter how hard he tried. Lucien had always been the same; confident and bright and daring, and Philip wondered at times if he would ever be able to catch up with him once again.

“I certainly caught Lord Pemberton at the worst time,” he replied instead.

“Or the best, if I may. After all, it has benefitted him greatly that you were there. You need not pity him.”

It was true, in part. Philip had been at White’s one evening, only to be faced with a miserable older gentleman who was almost in tears. It was a sorry sight to see, and Philip had not seen a man in such a state ever since he had looked at his scars for the second time.

The first time, strangely, had not been too terrible. He had thought it temporary, and the marks at least matched the physical pain he was in, but the second time? The pain was gone, yet he was still disfigured. It made no sense, and it was most unfair as far as he was concerned.

Regardless, in a moment of weakness he saw himself in the gentleman and dared to ask him about his condition. He was masked, and had his hair not labeled him as the Duke of Creighton, he might have appeared to be a threat, but the gentleman seemed at ease around him.

His name was Lord Pemberton, and he was in financial straits. He had lost his wife a few years prior, and was at an utter loss in her absence. Incapable of handling matters himself, it had all been left to his eldest to handle, and his youngest daughter had been unable to marry the gentleman she loved more than anything in the world.

One daughter could not marry for he could not afford the dowry, and the other could not because she had the world on her shoulders, even if she was a good woman and would have made the perfect wife otherwise. Philip thought back to when he was set to be a good husband only to be prevented through no fault of his own. He saw one similarity too many between himself and the two young ladies, and it had been his downfall.

“That is what happens when one enters a gambling hall, I suppose,” he mumbled to himself.

“What was that?” Lucien asked.

“Well, only bad things can come from gambling. It is why I never do it myself. I mean, look what happened the one time I did enter one.”

“Yes, you finally found a way to make things right to that girl you were awful to all those years ago.”

Philip glared at him. It was fitting that Lord Pemberton’s eldest daughter just so happened to be the young lady he had been cruel to, and convenient in a way, because he had never been able to find her himself, even knowing her name from giving acquaintances a description of her. It was as though she had vanished from society altogether. He could not, in good faith, seek out her father for fear that a marriage would be arranged before he could finish a sentence.

He chuckled. Such a fate had befallen him regardless.

“Come now, Philip,” Lucien sighed. “You must admit that you have been fortunate here. You have been thinking about marriage for a long time, even after everything that happened with Lady Ophelia. You are a man who needs love at heart, and this is precisely what you needed. A man so desperate to find a match for his daughter that he will not ask questions. An easy affair.”

“I would hardly call it easy,” Philip argued. “After all, I might have been thinking about the prospect of marriage, but I cannot in good faith marry someone who cannot stand the sight of me. Not only that, but I cannot bear the thought of having a wife with whom I have nothing in common.”

“You could well have an heir in common with her soon enough.”

“That is not enough for a good marriage, and you know it. It is a convenient marriage in that I require an heir, to be sure, but I nevertheless want a good relationship with my wife.”

“And she is a good woman, so I am sure you will find a way to make that happen. She certainly made an impression on you all that time ago, and based on what her father has said of her she is a lot like you. It would appear that the two of you shall be a good match.”

“In any case,” Philip said quickly. “I am not going to discuss marrying the poor girl. When I wrote to Lord Pemberton, I requested to court her. Nothing more.”

“Courting her with the intention to marry her,” Lucien corrected. “And any young lady that hears those words knows the meaning behind them. She is more than likely excited by the prospect. From the daughter of a poor and miserable gambling earl to a duchess. Why, she is likely dragging her family here as we speak!”

“I doubt that she is dragging her family here to stay for a few months with the

prospect of marrying a man that was unkind to her in their one interaction.”

“My God, Philip, can you see things for how they are for a moment rather than how you believe them to be? You are a duke, she is from a family in need of money. It is convenient for both of you, so act like it is.”

“If it is any use to you,” Philip’s mother said suddenly, entering the room. “I made a few inquiries of my own, and I can indeed confirm that Lady Jacqueline is wonderful. Not much is known about her, given that she became something of a recluse after the death of her mother.

What is known is that she gave up her place in society so that her younger sister can continue her role in society. It is an honorable thing to do, especially given the success she was having during her time out.”

“See?” Lucien said pointedly. “She is lovely. All will be well, and I will be here with you throughout this to ensure that all goes according to plan.”

“The plan being that I marry her?”

“Precisely!”

Philip sighed. There was no escaping Lucien’s confidence at times, especially when he was in tandem with his mother. They seemed to make a most formidable team when necessary, and Philip had to admit that if there were ever a time where they had to pounce on him to make him do what was needed, this was it. He was unsure of how to be around the young lady, even though he knew exactly how he would act.

He knew what would happen, too. It would be the same as it always was; he would wear a mask around her, she would find him mysterious and interesting and assure him time and again that he could take the mask off around her, only for her to shriek

and then abandon him when he finally did so.

He had been there before, and in spite of the good he had heard about her there was no doubt in his mind that she would not be too different from the other girls of London Society.

“Will you be all right entertaining them at first?” He asked his mother, who nodded gently.

“Of course, but you know that you must show yourself eventually.”

“I plan to, do not worry about that, but I first want to ensure that they are comfortable here. There is no need to alarm them as they settle in.”

“You know, Son, it is not as bad as you believe it to be.”

“You have to say that. You are my mother.”

“I do not say it out of obligation,” she promised. “But if it will make you happier to avoid the festivities for a while, then I shall allow you to do so.”

“I do not know if it will make me happier, necessarily, but it is what I must do. I will keep an eye on the young lady and see her countenance for myself, and then when—if—I am ready, I shall come and join you all.

“Very well,” his mother nodded. “If that is what you want. I will not, however, have Lucien masquerade as you in order to find out more about her. There shall be no schemes.”

Philip could not help but laugh, as the thought had crossed his mind once or twice, though he never considered taking it any further. After all, she had seen him before,

masked or not, and she was undoubtedly expecting a man that hid himself thanks to his scars. It was no secret in the ton, and that came with good and bad things for him.

“What if she hates me, Mother?” He asked when Lucien had left the room.

“She will not. One cannot hate a good man like yourself. It is not something that happens.”

“Lady Ophelia certainly does.”

“I do not think that she hates you. I simply think that she... well, she has always had a dream to fulfill, and when you no longer fit into that you had to go. I shall never forgive her for what she did, but you cannot deny that it is a good thing that that it happened when it did, rather than years into your marriage.”

Philip agreed with her, but it did not make him feel any more confident about meeting Lady Jacqueline. What if history repeated itself, after all?

“If Lady Jacqueline hated you,” his mother continued. “She would not be coming here to enter into a courtship with you, would she? We ladies may be told to follow our father’s instruction, but if we are pushed to do something we truly do not wish to do, then we have ways of escaping.”

Philip sighed, seating himself on a sofa. There had to be some truth in his mother’s words, and so he tried to believe in them.

After all, Lady Jacqueline knew precisely why she was coming.

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Chapter 3

Jackie had never lived in a large manor house, not even when they were wealthy.

Her family's estate was sizable, certainly, and the gardens were vast, but it all seemed miniscule in comparison to that of the duke. She had always loved ivy, and the way it scrawled across the walls and nestled into its cracks caught her attention in an instant.

Not only that, but everything was pristine, straight out of a fairytale book. It was vast, almost intimidating, and Jackie could see that her father was equally as affected by it as she was, perhaps even more.

"It is magnificent," Elizabeth breathed. "Oh, Jackie, could you imagine living in such a place?"

"We are going to be doing so for a while," Jackie reminded her. "So I do hope that you become accustomed to it soon."

"Believe me, I shall find a way to."

Before they could say another word, an older lady stepped outside. She was small and thin, but she appeared to be deceptively young. Had it not been for the way she ambled over, Jackie could have been quite easily fooled.

"Welcome, all of you," she greeted warmly. "I am Lady Anne Churchill, the Dowager Duchess of Creighton. It is so lovely to meet you at last."

“The pleasure is ours,” Jackie’s father replied. “My daughters have spoken of nothing but this trip for weeks now. Frankly, I am pleased to have at last brought them here so that they might find another topic of conversation.”

The dowager duchess laughed brightly, and Jackie and Elizabeth followed suit, but Jackie couldn’t help but feel confusion. After all, she had been told with a mere day’s notice, not weeks like her father had said.

She looked over at Elizabeth, who did not seem to have caught onto it. Regardless, it was not the moment to ask about it and so she continued to smile and nod and agree to the tour of the household that Lady Creighton had offered.

The opportunity to ask her father what he had meant would require an even longer wait, for he was whisked away by the butler to see his room, leaving Jackie and Elizabeth with the duke’s mother, who was only too pleased to show the girls to their bedchambers.

They were separate, on opposite ends of the hallway. Elizabeth was shown hers first, and Jackie felt strange walking so far from her; they were never too far from one another unless Elizabeth was attending a ball.

“I hope it is to your liking,” the dowager duchess said gently, opening her door. “It has been decorated quite recently. My son said it was his favorite, and so I thought it best that you are the first lady to stay in it.”

“That is most thoughtful of you,” Jackie replied, marveling at the pale blue walls and light green curtains. “Though there is no need to favor myself over my sister. I assure you, I do not require such a thing.”

“Oh, no, it is not that we thought you required it,” she laughed. “No, I simply—well, I never truly thought that my son would marry, not after what happened to him. I am

so grateful to you for agreeing to the match, and you have it on my honor that if you only give him some time, then you will see that he truly is a good man.”

Jackie blinked, alarmed but still aware that it was not the time nor place to disagree with the lady; she seemed so hopeful that it would have been unfair to dash said hopes. Instead, she waited until the dowager duchess left her to her own devices, at which point she sat on her bed and looked at the painting on the wall, thinking.

This was the same duke that had been unkind to her all those years before, and now he apparently was hoping to marry her? In the years since their altercation, they had not spoken, not even seen one another. Quite simply, it did not make any sense, but the one thing Jackie continued to think about was how her father had known, for weeks as far as she could tell, and he had not said a word about it.

“Oh, wow!” Elizabeth gasped, entering Jackie’s room. “This room is far larger than mine, no wonder it is so far away! Fear not, Sister, for I do not mind at all. It certainly makes a change from our rooms at home, at least, because your room there is so small and—”

“I am to marry the duke.”

Suddenly, everything made sense. Elizabeth’s face changed in the exact same way that it had done every time that Jackie had asked her if she was hiding something from her. She turned scarlet, and Jackie knew at once what had happened.

“What do you know about this?” She demanded.

“Nothing!”

“Do not lie to me, Elizabeth. You have never been one to do that, and I refuse to have you start doing it now. Tell me everything, whether you think I wish to hear about it

or not.”

“Well,” she grimaced. “Letters were exchanged between the duke and our father. Father told me that they have come to a deal of sorts. We are here to visit, and should you be compatible with the duke, and it is a good match, then the duke will pay all of our debts, and give me a dowry so that I can marry—”

Again, she froze.

“Marriage?” Jackie echoed. “You are not even in a courtship.”

“Erm, well, that is another thing... I have been in a courtship with Lord Greene for a while now.”

Suddenly, Jackie’s own match meant very little to her.

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Because it was never going to go any further,” she sighed. “I knew that I had no dowry, and it was simply a matter of time until he found out himself and refused to marry me anyway. I was simply enjoying it while it lasted, but now... I have a real chance at happiness.”

“And so you lied to me in order to secure it?”

“It has been destroying me since the moment I learned of it. I cannot apologize enough for what I have done, but you have to understand. I wanted to save our family from ruin, and when I found out that I could also marry the man that I love... I had a moment of weakness and Father knew it. He told me that, if I told you, then you would run away, and I would never see you again and it would all fall through anyway. I did not know what else to do.”

“What you should have done was talk to me,” Jackie argued.

“I couldn’t. The longer I kept quiet the harder it was to tell you until I could no longer say anything at all. Truly, I wanted to tell you, but I was afraid.”

By that point, the younger sister was in tears and the older sister was trying with all her might to maintain her composure. She had never been one to make outrageous displays, but at that moment she was unsure of how long she would be able to keep control.

“I wish to be alone,” she said coldly.

“Sister, I—”

“I need to be alone for a while,” she repeated.

Elizabeth seemed to understand at last, and left without another word. Jackie left the room herself after a moment, knowing that she needed some time alone in the gardens before she could face the others for dinner.

“Excuse me,” she asked a servant in the hallway. “I am sorry for bothering you, but might you be able to point me in the direction of the garden?”

“Of course, my lady. The stairs are just there, and then from there the quickest route is on your left, down that hallway, and through the fourth door.”

Jackie nodded quickly and thanked the servant before going on her way. She couldn’t help but feel watched, but she scolded herself for being superstitious and told herself that it was simply because of what she had discovered.

The gardens were magnificent, perfectly cared for. It was the best place for a walk so

that she could think about what had happened. Deep into the garden came a dense thicket to navigate, and Jackie welcomed it as it gave her some privacy.

It was dark from all of the shade cause by the tall trees and long branches, but soon enough she spotted a clearing and headed toward it. The sun on her face, warming her skin, she at last allowed herself to think things through.

She did not know whether or not she could forgive Elizabeth. After everything she had done for her younger sister, it was a betrayal greater than she could ever have foreseen, and yet she pitied the poor girl greatly. After all, she understood her predicament. Whether she would have done the same thing or not, she didn't know. Especially given the threat their father had given them that Jackie would run away if she came to learn the truth.

Jackie did not know what she would have done, nor did she know what she would do now. She was angry with her sister, and downright furious with her father, but she did not hate them. They had been granted the opportunity to protect their family, and though they had not taken the best route, Jackie could not deny that it was something to heavily consider. After all, they had to be a good match first, did they not? If the duke did not like her, then it would all fall through regardless.

And she was positive that the duke did not like her at all, whether he had invited them there or not. He likely did not remember her at all, and if he did then he could not have known her name. He would see her, remember who she was, and call it all off, she was certain of it, and then they could all return home and she could forgive Elizabeth simply because it was impossible for her to stay angry with her sister.

A twig snapped.

Her line of thought broken, Jackie turned to the source of the sound, only to see a figure retreating away. She recognized the figure in the darkness of the woods, as if

she had seen it before.

“Stop,” she called out. “Please do not run away.”

Against all odds, the figure did come to a stop.

“Have you been following me?” She asked, knowing it to have been the case.
“Why?”

The figure continued into the darkness a little more before turning around. She could not see his face, but there was that unmistakable shoulder-length copper hair.

“Greetings, Lady Jacqueline,” he said gently. “I did not mean to startle you. I only wanted to see you for a while before we met in person. That was not my best idea, I cannot lie. Perhaps I should have done something else, or maybe I simply should have watched my step a little more carefully.”

He chuckled, but Jackie did not find him amusing. She knew who he was in an instant, and it did not ease her concerns about how she would be seen during her stay there. The man before her was none other than the man that could eventually be her future husband.

It was none other than the duke.

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Chapter 4

It was likely not the best first impression that Philip could have given, but at least it was over and done with.

She stared at him for a moment, and he wondered if she could see him. The thought of it paralyzed him, for if there was one thing worse than being followed by someone you did not know, it was most certainly being followed by a stranger as hideous as he thought she'd see him as.

“Is there any particular reason why you are following me?” She asked after a while. “I thought you were otherwise occupied today.”

“I am—I should have been, I mean.”

“I see...”

Philip did not know what to say; he knew it had not been right to follow her around without her knowledge, but he had to know whether or not she was all that her father had claimed her to be. To her credit, she truly was; she was respectful to his servants, as well as his mother.

She carried herself with a certain grace, which was strange at first because what Philip had noticed, after he allowed himself to look at her face for a little longer than he should have, he noticed how ill-fitting her gown was.

It was not a polite thing to say about a lady, but it was true. It was as though it was

not made for her, which was quite absurd given her status, but then he remembered that her family's finances were not as they should have been, and it became a lot clearer to him what was truly happening.

Lady Elizabeth's gown fit her much more nicely, and Philip could only think that it meant all funds for gowns went to her instead. He admired that about Lady Jacqueline, for it was uncommon for a lady to be content without beautiful dresses to attract a husband.

Even so, he had been so sure that she would have been given something special to wear when meeting the man who could possibly become her husband.

"Your Grace?"

"Yes?"

"I asked you why you were following me."

"Yes—my apologies. You see, I was only out walking myself, and then when I heard someone nearby, I felt the need to see who it was. As it turns out, it was the very same young lady I had invited to stay with me for a while, and so I..."

"Felt compelled to watch me for a while?"

"Would it be awful if that were the case?"

"It would certainly be quite bizarre, yes, but I cannot say I'd loathe it too terribly."

She was somehow prettier than she had been when they first met, more mature, and he liked that a great deal. She was also smiling at him, a surprise given the circumstances, and she curtsied politely, which he requited with a bow.

“It is rather unexpected circumstances,” she said gently. “But it is a pleasure to meet you all the same.”

“The pleasure is all mine,” he replied, maintaining the distance between them. “I thank you for accepting the invitation.”

“I thank you for extending it. We typically do not receive such things.”

“That astounds me, truly. Two beautiful young ladies and yet the gentlemen do not quarrel over who can court the pair of you. It hardly makes any sense at all.”

“You and I both know the reason for it, I believe, Your Grace.”

So she was aware of her father’s finances, at least.

“Regardless,” he said quickly. “It is my hope that the two of us can come to know each other well, and enjoy one another’s company.”

She seemed startled by that, and he wasn’t sure precisely why that was. It was possible that she was flustered by his words, but it was not as though he had said something completely out of order, only that he hoped they would come to like one another.

Perhaps, he considered, that was why she seemed uncomfortable. It would have been no surprise to him that her father was forcing her hand, and if that were the case then the arrangement would be thrown out in an instant. He could not do something like that to her, he would not do it.

Then again, given that he had kept his distance from her, it was not as though he could clearly see her face. That had been the point, after all; he could not let her get too close to him for fear of her seeing him. Given that he could not use her expression

as a guide, he simply had to accept that something felt wrong, and he didn't like it. He had wanted her to enjoy her time there, and yet...

"Is the room to your liking?" He asked.

"It certainly is," she nodded. "Your mother told me that you chose it especially for me."

"I did. We are in the midst of changing a few things, and so we decided to split the three finished rooms between the three of you. I could not resist, however, giving you my personal favorite."

"That is most kind of you. There is no need to do so much for me, though, I assure you."

"Whyever not? You are my guest, after all, and so I ought to show you a certain level of hospitality. You know, this is my first time hosting anyone in quite some time."

"Well, you are doing it well, I promise. I am settling well, and your home is beautiful."

Silence settled over them, and still she did not seem to be in any more comfort. It was as though it was his presence that was unsettling her, and he recoiled at the thought. He did not want her to dislike being around him, whether they married or not.

Did she remember how he had spoken to her? It was entirely possible, and it made him feel awful that she had memories of it after so much time had passed. He wanted to do something to fix it, but with no way of knowing whether or not that was the problem, he was at a loss.

"Well," she said suddenly. "This has been a most pleasant introduction, but I really

ought to return to my room to dress for dinner. Thank you, again, for your hospitality.”

Before he could stop her, she ran away from him. She, at least, did not run past him, and therefore did not come close enough to see him well, but that did not dull the ache in his chest.

After all, it did not even have to be the way he had spoken to her all that time ago that had disgusted her. She must have known that he was scarred from society gossip in London, and hiding away in the shadows only led to the rumors being confirmed in her mind. In essence, she had been shipped away to his household to marry him because her father needed money.

Perhaps that was why she had agreed to it. She loved her sister, that much was clear to him, and so she was sacrificing herself to give her the chance at real love. That was the last thing that he wanted, however, and even though she had not said so in so many words, he knew that it would be the case.

Nobody could love a man like him, he knew that well enough.

“She is wonderful, is she not?” His mother asked brightly, having been waiting in his study for him.

“Mother!” He gasped. “What are you doing in here?”

“Well, I saw the two of you going in the same direction into the woods, and so I assumed the two of you might meet sooner than you were expecting. Am I right in said assumptions?”

“You are, but that does not mean that we had any sort of lengthy discussions.”

“You do not need one. It certainly did not take me long to see that the two of you will make a good match. She will be good for you, I think.”

“And I think she is horrified by me, exactly as I feared, and will run the second she is given the chance to.”

“Nonsense,” she sighed, placing a hand gently on his shoulder. “You need to stop seeing yourself as inherently unlovable. I shall not stand for it.”

“But you did not see how she was looking at me.”

“She does not know you, Dearest. Why, when I met your father, I was a young lady barely out of leading strings, and I was feeling everything that Lady Jacqueline must be feeling right now.”

“Yes, but Father was an attractive man that you could eventually fall for, and his dukedom was merely an added strength. Mine, however, is all that I have.”

“That is not fair to you. Philip. You are an intelligent man, you are passionate and kind whether you see that or not, and any lady would be fortunate to be your wife, I assure you.”

“Ah yes, such wonderful fortunes as a hideous husband that cannot even leave his own home. What self-respecting lady could say no?”

“Philip, I am not going to do this with you, and I am not going to tell the poor girl that you are some sort of monster when you are not. If you cannot bring yourself to see things a little more optimistically, and you lose this girl, then you shall only have yourself to blame. Am I clear?”

Philip sighed. He knew that his mother was right, and he had to find a way to get to

know Lady Jacqueline better, as she would be staying with him for a good amount of time whether they married or not, but something told him that there was more to the predicament than his appearance. She did not seem to want anything to do with him at all, and he had to know just what that was.

“You are most clear, indeed,” he nodded. “I ought to prepare for dinner, as Lady Jacqueline is. I shall see you later.”

“Philip—”

“I know. I shall think on what you have said, and I shall do my best to speak with Lady Jacqueline at dinner.”

He had not intended to attend the first dinner, or if he did attend then he planned to seat himself at the opposite end of a long table so that he could not be looked at too closely, but his mother was correct.

He had to at least make an effort and try to speak with Lady Jacqueline. He liked her well enough, that was not in question, and if she did not tell him directly that she felt the opposite then he had to believe she felt the same way.

He left his mother in the study and dressed for dinner, fixing a black mask onto his face to match his shirt. The shirt had been his favorite since the accident; long sleeves, high collar, and made of thick material that could not be seen through even if wet. It was a shirt he could not picture himself replacing, even though it had begun to thin from how often he wore it.

He made his way to dinner, his heart pounding in his chest. There would be a space beside her to sit in, and he had to sit in it whether he liked it or not, and talk to her. He did not know what he would be speaking with her about, of course, but with any luck the words would come to him with ease, just as they used to.

As he peered into the room, however, he realized that his evening would be far easier, but it was devastating all the same.

Lady Jacqueline was not there, even though her father and sister were. There were two empty seats instead of one, and he therefore had no real requirement to enter the room at all. There was no young lady there to impress, and so as far as he was concerned, he did not need to be present at all.

And so he walked away.

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Chapter 5

“Do you have any idea what missing the first dinner signifies, young lady?”

Jackie’s father, it appeared, did not want her to miss it. That much was certain.

“It is certainly not the sort of thing a young lady wishing to marry a duke would do,” she snapped back, to which her father seemed surprised.

“Has the thought of marriage crossed your mind?”

“It has now that I know the truth.”

Her father gave Elizabeth a foul look, but Jackie stepped in front of her.

“It has nothing to do with her. It was the dowager duchess that told me. I do not know why you thought you could keep this hidden from me, but it has not worked as you can see.”

“And look at how you are behaving now that you know! Could you blame me for wanting to keep it from you?”

“I should have known so that I could prepare.”

“So that you could run away, you mean,” he scoffed. “I have given you a wonderful opportunity here. You are to become a duchess, and you cannot even thank me for it. All that you do is act spitefully toward me as if I have committed some act of evil

against you.”

“Marrying me off to a man that I do not know and forcing my hand so that Elizabeth can marry is evil. How could you do this to me?”

“I thought you would do anything for your sister. You make a great show of running the household for her, at least. This is to be the last thing you ever have to do for her, so now is not the time to be selfish.”

Selfish. That was how her father saw her not wanting to marry a man she did not know outside of an unpleasant encounter. There was no reasoning with him, but it did not make following his orders any easier.

“Now,” he continued. “Act like the lady you were raised to be and come to dinner. Suffer through it, if you must, but you shall not tarnish the family name with disrespect.”

“I have a headache,” she protested. “I would be no fun there even if I did come down. Not to mention how disrespectful it would be for me not to eat a dinner prepared by their cook while sitting right there.”

“Are you truly unwell, Sister?” Elizabeth asked. “You seemed quite fine before.”

Jackie was becoming quite irritated with how her sister had changed since hearing of the plan, but she could not stay angry with her for long and so she did not bother being angry.

“Yes, I was,” she sighed. “But I believe all of the traveling has caught up to me. I think it would be best for me to rest a while, and rejoin the festivities in the morning.”

“That is anything but what is best,” her father thundered. “Now do not be so

ridiculous. You know why we are here now, and so there is no need for you to pretend not to be involved. You are to woo this duke.”

“Perhaps if I had known that was my aim, I might have been more prepared to do so.”

“I could not risk such a thing, and you know that. Now, if you are refusing to be a good house guest, then your sister and I shall do our part as well as yours. You will not pull this stunt a second time, is that clear?”

“Of course,” she replied, simply content for that to be the end of it.

They left, and she threw herself onto her bed.

She knew that she was being incredibly rude, and a terrible guest, but she could not imagine facing everyone in attendance after what she learned. She was not a fool; she knew something was odd about coming to the duke’s estate even if he was a friend of her father.

She simply never imagined her father had arranged a courtship with the intention to marry her off. She certainly had not expected him to do it without saying a word to her. It was more his style to announce it to all he knew, and toy with her until the last possible moment.

His motives were simple, there was no denying that, and in some way, she understood them completely. That did not make it any better that he had kept it from her deliberately, and now was berating her for not being happy about it.

Time passed, the hum of the dinner beneath her only serving to make her feel far worse, and eventually it was dark out. She heard a knock at her door and closed her eyes, feigning sleep.

“Jackie?” Elizabeth whispered. “Are you awake?”

Jackie remained silent, refusing to give any indication that she was. Regardless, her sister entered.

“I know you likely hate me right now,” she continued. “And you have every right to, but I will make it up to you. Even if it takes me the rest of my life, I will do something to fix this. I love you.”

She left again, and Jackie felt tears form in her eyes. It was the first time that they had ever truly argued, and she hated it, but she could not forgive it. She understood that Elizabeth had only done it because she had deemed it a necessary evil, but that did not make it hurt any less.

She tried to sleep, but it wouldn’t come. Nothing made it any easier to fall asleep, and even when she did, she was awake again within minutes. Eventually, she gave in and noticed that the sky was lightening once more, and temptation took over her completely.

As a girl, she would watch the sunrise with her mother, and the two of them would talk about anything and everything that came to mind. Jackie still did it, from time to time, and it was the right morning for it. Tiptoeing through the halls, she found the door leading outside and seated herself, watching the sky turn red, then orange.

“This is quite awful, Mama,” she said gently. “I don’t suppose that you ever saw me in a situation such as this, did you? I know I certainly did not. It is strange, because a part of me knows that I would have done it willingly had I known.”

She almost waited for a response, though she knew that none would come.

“The house is lovely, is it not?” She continued. “It is larger than anything I could

have dreamed of, and Elizabeth certainly seems enamored with it. And the gardens are wonderful. I do so love flowers, as you know, and these have been tended to beautifully. It makes me think about being courted, and how I might have received flowers of my own.”

She was to be courted, of course, but not in the way she had once thought.

“I wonder, Mama, if you were here, things would have been different? Of course it would have, for Father never would have started to—never mind. What I mean to say is that I would have married another gentleman, surely? Would he have been a duke, do you think? Likely not, even if I was liked during my season. An earl would have been perfectly fine, though. I was never one for riches, which is just as well given what happened when you... when you left us.”

Had her mother been there, Jackie was quite sure that she would have smiled, rubbed her arm affectionately, and told her to be brave and do what she thought was right. It was a scary situation to be in, that much was clear, but the only way out was through, and so she had to act accordingly. After all, how bad could life as a duchess be?

As if on cue, the duke appeared. He was not near her, but close enough that she knew it was him. She wondered if it was mere coincidence, or if she was being followed again, but he appeared not to have noticed her. If anything, he was walking in the opposite direction, and she should have been pleased about that, but she was not.

She was resigned to her fate. If it helped her family, then she would marry the duke and do what was necessary to make her life good. However, marrying him meant that she would need to be accustomed to him sooner or later, and she thought it best that they knew one another well before too much time passed. He had been pleasant enough, after all, and seemed to be quite different from the man she had met once before.

“Your Grace?” She called, and he froze, turning to her. “Good morning.”

He remained still for a moment, and only partially turned. His hair hid his face, but she saw some scarring on his hands and arms even with the distance between them.

It was old scarring, a shade lighter than his complexion, slightly raised and taut in some areas. She had never seen such a thing on a person before, but from what she had been told he was supposed to be a hideously disfigured man. This, however, was nothing like the red and raw state she had been expecting to see.

“Good morning, Lady Jacqueline,” he replied at last. “I hope that you slept well.”

“Well, if we are to begin this honestly, you might as well know that I did not. I have certainly found it easier to sleep, at least.”

He paused for a moment, and she wondered what was going through his head. She had been disrespectful, even if she had good intentions, and it was not too dissimilar to the situation they were in years ago, when he was most unkind to her. She waited for the harsh words, but they did not come.

“You should know that I won’t force you into a courtship, not if you are not comfortable with me.”

It did not make any sense at first. After all, he had done everything in his power to make her feel welcome, and since her arrival he had been nothing but cordial. There was no real reason for her to feel uncomfortable around him, as far as she was concerned.

Then she saw how the sunlight reflected on his hands, the scars shining. All at once, she realized what he meant. He expected her to be horrified by him, as if he were some beast rather than a man.

She did not know, of course, the extent of his burn scars elsewhere, and should he have felt uncomfortable letting people see them, then she would not have been surprised. But they were to marry—if all went well—and she could not spend her life being suspicious of his looks. Whether she liked it or not, they would have to handle the matter before they could go any further.

“We ought to be more at ease with each other, I believe,” she said gently. “If we are to make this work, then we will both have to give a little, if that is all right with you.”

“Oh... of course,” he replied, still facing mostly away from her.

“Very well. Might you turn and look at me, so that we can speak face to face?”

She saw his eyes widen.

“Lady Jacqueline, as much as I would love to do that, as I know it would help you know me better, I—”

“We cannot very well have a wedding ceremony with you standing several feet away from me,” she joked gently, trying to lighten things. “I assure you that I will not see you any differently. If anything, it will make me trust you a good deal more, because I will have seen you properly.”

He kept his distance, not moving at all, as if thinking about the best course of action.

“Please, Your Grace?”

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Chapter 6

Philip was well aware that, eventually, Lady Jacqueline would ask to see his face.

He had not once, however, expected it to be so soon. It had not even been an entire day since her arrival, and already she had requested it. It had not been particularly demanding, but that did not matter. What mattered was that she had asked, and even though he wanted her to see him with time, he was not ready.

“N-no,” he stammered, taking yet another step away from her. “I cannot let you, not just yet.”

He wondered if any facade she was holding might slip, and she would turn into some demanding and petulant child, but of course it did not. Even from his distance, he could see that her features remained soft. Any worry that she saw him as some creature left him for the moment, something that rarely happened around others.

“Very well,” she replied gently. “I shall not press the matter further. Instead, I shall ask you how you came to be near me a second time.”

Somehow, that questioning was even worse.

“I have been thinking about your behavior,” he explained. “Not that it has been anything untoward, of course, but it was a surprise to me. You see, we had been led to believe that you were aware of the plans, and that you were happy with them. I had no idea that the truth was kept from you.”

“I cannot say that I am surprised by that,” she smirked. “It is quite like my father to do something like this, though I never thought that he would go to such extremes.”

He raised an eyebrow at her, not that she could see it, but she seemed to know he did not fully believe regardless.

“Well,” she laughed sadly. “It is not as though I am surprised, as he had been acting quite bizarrely of late, as well as my sister. I am yet to forgive her for her part in it.”

“Her part?”

“She knew. For the first time in our lives, she has kept something from me, and all because she fancies herself in love— love I tell you.”

“Yes, with Lord Greene. She was quite enraptured by him last night.”

“I shall have to meet him myself at some point, seeing as I was not at dinner last night. Surely, I cannot be blamed for holding this all against this gentleman, at least a little?”

“Would you rather honesty or support?”

“Honesty. Always.”

“I believe this poor gentleman is none the wiser about all of this, and so it is unfair to place any blame upon his shoulders.”

She seemed to think for a moment.

“I suppose so,” she sighed. “It is only that, well, I knew that my sister would fall in love eventually. She is a lovely lady, and a pretty one too, and so it is no surprise that

she has made a match, but I feel so betrayed. I should have had a part in it all, surely? Instead, she has fallen in love to the extent that she has been willing to marry me off to a stranger and I have been none the wiser.”

“You did say that she had been acting strangely.”

“I thought she might have been tempting scandal, not all of this!”

“Ah. In any case, you are here now, and under no obligation to even like me if you do not wish.”

“Yes, which makes this even more difficult,” she confessed.

“Should it not make it easier?”

“No. If I had no choice, then I could call it a noble sacrifice that had been out of my hands. Being given the choice, however, means that I must still do the right thing and still have to shoulder the responsibility for it.”

“I had not thought of it in that way. In that sense, I suppose that I haven't truly given you a choice at all. It is either your family, or your freedom, and I can tell already which you would choose.”

“Every single time, without hesitation,” she affirmed.

“Which is admirable, though I must admit that I pity you. You did not deserve any of this.”

“On the contrary, I have needed exactly this. It will enable my family to return to prosperity, and my sister can marry the man she loves. I have dreamed of being able to help them, and now I can. I can only thank you for it.”

She truly was good . He had not expected someone like her to come into his life, and yet now that she was here, he did not want her to leave. In another sense, a larger one at that, he simply wanted her to be happy, and it was impossible for her to feel that way as his wife. He could not do that to her.

“What if there was another way?” He asked suddenly.

“There is not, Your Grace.”

Philip turned away completely, in thought.

“But there is,” he continued. “What if I were to put an end to the arrangement, but I will still help your father pay his debts and give your sister a dowry. I do not know the figure your father had in mind, as we are yet to discuss the finer details, but I am sure I can afford such a measure even without the wife to balance that.”

“That is too much to ask, Your Grace.”

“You are not asking, I am giving it to you. Consider it an apology for...”

They had not yet discussed their very first meeting. He did not know how to talk to her about it, for he was ashamed of it and did not know how to tell her that without seeming pathetic.

“For inviting you here without telling you personally what it was for,” he finished. “It would be no small feat, if it is what you want.”

He felt her brush his arm, and he jolted, taking several steps back.

Having had his back toward her, speaking, he had not sensed her approaching him until she was touching the scars on his arm. He had not been touched for a very long

time, not even by his mother, as he had made a point of telling people not to do so. It no longer hurt to touch his scars, but he hated the reminder that they were there.

“My apologies, Your Grace,” she explained quickly. “I tend to find it easier to talk to people when I am closer to them. I understand that you do not wish to remove your mask, and I shall not look too closely at you, but I cannot spend my life several feet from you.”

“Well, I shall admit that I am quite embarrassed to have jumped at a touch, but it is not out of anything other than surprise. I assure you, you have done nothing wrong.”

“Good, because, well... I do not want to put an end to this arrangement as yet.”

Her words did not seem to settle in his mind. He had thought that she would take the easy out that he was offering and run out of there faster than any carriage could take her, yet here she was offering to stay.

“Are you quite sure?”

“Certainly. I do not deal in charity. Whether I knew it or not, I have given my word to try and see this through, and so that is what I intend to do. I want to at least enter into a courtship, and come to know you more, and if we then decide that it is not right, then we can discuss other options. For now, however, I am happy to spend some time with you.”

She was incredibly sweet. He knew the truth; that she was only saying it for her family’s sake, as it would be far harder for him to refuse if they were married. but she seemed so sincere that he wished it was not so. For a fleeting moment, he thought of how it would feel to have a lady truly feel like that for him, like he was worth knowing, but he soon came to his senses.

He was reminded, as he often was, of the night she helped him. He never really thanked her for it, instead accusing her of being untoward, yet all that time ago she had shown him genuine kindness without asking for anything in return. For days after that night, he had expected to hear word that she had accused him of being inappropriate so he would be forced into marriage, claiming the title of duchess, but that never happened.

She helped him—not wanting anything in return, and he was rude to her. She likely had not even known who he was, even if he was so well-known and recognizable.

“I ought to apologize to you,” he said at last, and when he dared to look her in the eyes, he saw that she looked quite inquisitive.

“You have done nothing wrong, Your Grace.”

“Yes, I have. I have been acting in a most peculiar fashion, and I assure you that it will not be forever. I simply have not been a sociable character for a good while now, and I do not know what it is to be around strangers.”

“Then it is just as well that we are no longer strangers. We are acquaintances, which is another thing entirely.”

“Acquaintances,” he echoed. “I must admit, that is quite pleasing to the ear.”

“And then friends,” she continued. “And then, should it go any further, we shall find the name for it.”

It was precisely what he needed to hear, and he wanted to believe Lady Jacqueline when she said it. There was, of course, the risk of being a fool all over again, but it was a risk that he was willing to take.

“I must go,” he said suddenly, taking his leave. “Please come to dinner tonight, at least?”

“Of course, Your Grace. For now, however, I simply must retire to my bedchambers and rest. I have yet to do so.”

Philip left her there, going immediately to his valet. If he was to court Lady Jacqueline, then he would be doing it correctly. He could not do it in any other way, for it was not proper.

“I require a favor,” he said firmly.

“Certainly, Your Grace, anything.”

“I shall need flowers to be arranged. I want a different arrangement given to Lady Jacqueline each day for the duration of her stay.”

“Of course. She is quite lovely, is she not?”

“Most certainly, and I am pleased that others are seeing that. It makes me feel less foolish for trying.”

“You should never feel foolish,” the valet nodded. “She is a good lady. Believe me, I know how people are. I have quite the knack for it.”

“In which case, what do you think of her father?”

At this, the valet seemed a little more apprehensive.

“Sadly, Your Grace, I do not think it wise to speak ill of the father of the lady you are courting, and so I shall hold my tongue.”

The two gentlemen laughed, but Philip made a note of it in his mind. He was not the only one not to trust the coward of a father that Lady Jacqueline had been stuck with.

He would have to keep an eye on that.

Chapter 7

When Jackie had accepted the duke's request to join him for dinner, she had not once considered the fact that breakfast was a mere three hours later.

She had planned to eat, and then retire to her room and rest for a while longer, having put a lot of her hurt and confusion to bed. However, when she entered the room, she noticed the duke's absence. It was, at least, an opportunity to meet her sister's betrothed, as he had also been invited, even if she had not been planning on that for a while.

"Good morning, Lady Jacqueline," the dowager duchess said warmly. "Are you feeling better?"

"Yes, quite, Your Grace. Thank you for asking. I apologize for my absence. I do not mean to show myself in a disrespectful light."

"It is no trouble at all. Why, my son had a similar ailment himself and had to excuse himself. It is understandable, so you mustn't think I am upset with you."

Jackie dared to flash her father a victorious smile. She was liked there, whether he had been expecting it or not, and their family seemed to be full of love and forgiveness, just as her own had been when her mother was around.

"And where might the duke be now?" she asked. "Is he unwell now, too?"

She played the role of concerned betrothed well. She knew perfectly well that he had

not been suffering from an ailment of any kind, and was the picture of health when she had seen him that morning, meaning that he had another reason entirely for his absence, but there was no need to pry.

“I believe he is recovered,” the dowager duchess explained. “I believe it was simply the nerves of the day. No, he is fine, but he is absent this morning because he does not tend to dine with me. Instead, he prefers to break his fast in his study, quite a while before I do.”

That explained, at least, why he had been awake at such an early hour.

“And he shall be quite busy today, he so often is,” she continued. “So please do not see it as a personal slight if you do not see much of him.”

It should have been a comfort to hear that he would not be too present, given the circumstances, but Jackie could not help but feel quite disappointed. After how gentle he had been with her that morning, showing her such kindness as offering to forget all about the arrangement, she had warmed to him a good deal. He was not the frightening man she had expected, that much was clear.

“That is a shame,” she replied gently. “I had been hoping for some time to speak with him.”

“Fear not,” her father said helpfully. “You shall have a few months here to speak with him. Surely that is sufficient time?”

Jackie tried not to glare at him. She was yet to tell him her thoughts on what he had done, and she did not appreciate his jovial tone as if he had not signed her life away.

Instead of saying anything more, she seated herself beside her sister and began to eat. She noticed Lord Greene, seated at the far end of the table, and took the opportunity

to study him carefully.

He was a tall gentleman, with brown eyes like a stag, and blond hair, and it appeared, a quiet man. She could see why Elizabeth had fallen for him, but she was yet to talk to him and see if he truly was such a charmer that her own sister would be willing to betray her.

“I was wondering,” the dowager duchess said after a while. “If the two of you young ladies might wish to take a small trip with me this morning? There is a market nearby, and I was hoping that you would join me.”

“Certainly, Your Grace,” Elizabeth replied immediately. “That is so gracious of you.”

“I would also enjoy the trip very much,” Jackie nodded, though she had to admit she would greatly miss the rest that she had planned.

It would also mean that she would have to wait before trying to speak with her father with a clearer mind. Yet even though she wanted to speak to him about it all, it was a comfort knowing she would not have to do it as yet.

It was a frightening prospect; her father was a frightening man when necessary, and at times when it was not necessary. In any case, it would be a pleasant morning at the market, and Jackie excused herself to dress for the trip.

Her gown did not fit correctly, having been one of her mother’s old ones that she had found in the attic. All of their money for gowns had been given to Elizabeth, and even then, it had not been enough for what Jackie would have wanted for her.

Fortunately, Elizabeth fit Jackie’s older gowns well enough that she had enough to get by, and Jackie did not leave the house enough to warrant anything more than what she had. It was simply another thing that Jackie had sacrificed for her sister, not that it

had made a difference.

As she opened her door, she was taken aback in an instant. She had never received flowers, even when gentlemen had wanted to court her, yet there in front of her was the grandest bouquet that she had ever seen. They were lilies, one of her favorites, white and perfect, untouched. They took her breath away, and as she regained her composure, she saw that there was a card attached.

“Lady Jacqueline,

I apologize for my absence this morning. I should have told you that I am otherwise occupied, and would therefore be in my study instead.

I am aware that my mother is to take you and your sister out today. I wish you luck, for she can be quite determined when she sets her mind to something. Should you want my advice, it would be not to try and tell her no. She means well, I assure you, and will only want to show you kindness. Allow her to, if it does not offend you too terribly.

With that being said, I hope that you and your sister have a good day. I would so like to hear about it upon your return. I would also like to take the opportunity to thank you. I wanted to before, but I could not make the words come. I am so grateful to you for what you did for me all those years ago. I shall never forgive myself for how I treated you in return, and now I hope to fix it. We can discuss it more later, if you wish.

For now, however, you are to enjoy yourself. I shall see you later.

Yours,

Philip Churchill, Duke of Creighton”

It was endlessly sweet of him to have gone so out of his way to arrange such a thing while she was downstairs, and it touched her greatly.

It seemed to be the sort of man that the duke was when he was not startled. Upon becoming comfortable with her that morning, he had been more than willing to forget it all, and he had thanked her for her aid even though it had been so many years before. He remembered things well, and she appreciated that.

One thing was for certain, he was not the man she thought he was. She had only just referred to him as her acquaintance, but already she was beginning to see him as a friend. It was strange to think that she might have a friend, as other than her sister and their staff at home she had not had any since she stopped attending events.

Another possible friend, it appeared, would be the duke's mother, for she was determined to give Jackie what felt like most of the items for sale at the market.

"I cannot allow you to wear gowns like this," she said briskly, waving a hand to make a seamstress take her measurements. "You would look lovely in anything, Dear, but there is no harm in giving you something to truly feel beautiful in."

"It is quite all right," she tried to explain. "This gown was my mother's. It makes me feel more connected to her. It is a choice, I assure you."

"It is not," Elizabeth said.

"Elizabeth!" Jackie hissed.

"They are all aware of our situation, Sister," Elizabeth pointed out. "There is no harm in honesty."

Jackie scowled at her; her younger sister was not one to talk about honesty at that

moment.

“There is no reason to feel any shame,” the dowager duchess smiled. “Consider it a gift. It would be my pleasure. After all, I bought your sister that perfume.”

It was true; Elizabeth had found a perfume scented with roses and marveled at it and then the dowager duchess had purchased it without second thought. A gown, however, was far more expensive.

“Your Grace, it is too much—”

“Anne,” she corrected her. “Please, I cannot have my daughter-in-law call me by such formalities forever, and so we might as well put an end to it now.”

The words rang in her ears. Daughter-in-law. Was the woman thinking too far ahead, or was she partaking in heavily wishful thinking? Either way, Jackie did not like it too much, in fact feeling quite threatened by it. She did not like the suggestion that she would be marrying the duke as yet, but she knew that the lady was harmless.

And so Anne it would be.

Jackie nodded, at last allowing the seamstress to take her measurements and write them down.

“Do you enjoy writing, Lady Jacqueline?” Anne asked. “I could purchase a quill for you, if you wish.”

“In truth, I have never been much good at it. I smear the ink all over the paper, and it is practically illegible at the end of it.”

“Then what do you enjoy?”

“I like painting well enough, as well as playing the pianoforte.”

“Then wait right here, and finish with this lovely lady. I shall be right back!”

“Anne, wait—”

But the older lady was surprisingly nimble for her age, and had disappeared before Jackie could stop her. Elizabeth, meanwhile, giggled away at her.

“I must say, it has been most enjoyable watching you receive the goodness for a change. You deserve this, Sister.”

“Be that as it may, this is too much too soon. I am not engaged to her son, even if that is her wish, and it concerns me how set she is on it.”

“But you are going to be his fiancée, are you not?”

Suddenly, Jackie could see fear in her sister’s eyes, and for the first time in her life she was not made miserable by it. For one short moment, she felt almost a sense of vindication, as that was precisely how her sister had made her feel of late.

“Who is to say?” She replied, neglecting to mention the duke’s offer. “After all, he might not fall for me and cancel it all. You know his terms; if he chooses to marry me, then we shall marry. If he does not, then we will be back where we started. There shall be no harm done though.”

There would of course, to Elizabeth, but under the circumstances her younger sister was not about to say as much. Jackie felt awful toying with her in such a way, but she knew that she would tell her the truth eventually. It was not revenge, exactly. It was more a matter of telling her sister the reality of the situation.

After all, it was not a given that she would allow the duke to help her regardless of whether or not they married. Elizabeth couldn't know of the offer either, for she would be too set on Jackie leaving the duke behind and she was not ready to do that.

And the realization of that made her quite concerned, indeed.

Chapter 8

“How is your bride?”

“She is not my bride, Lucien,” Philip sighed.

His friend was a lot more optimistic than he had been, to his credit. However, he was too overzealous for his own good at times, and that did not stop with Lady Jacqueline.

“She seemed quite disappointed about your absence at breakfast, your mother says,” Lucien continued. “She did not speak at all, instead eating and then leaving with her sister and your mother.”

“Yes, my mother mentioned that. A market.”

“Is she ready to do battle?”

“Who? My mother?”

“Lady Jacqueline,” he chuckled. “The first time I visited you after the accident, your mother bought me a new dining table simply because I mentioned that I was looking into acquiring one. She is quite eager.”

“She certainly is, but I have warned Lady Jacqueline about that in a note.”

“A note? Are you yet to speak to her?”

“Of course not. Why, I spoke to her this morning before breakfast. I sent her a note because that is what one does when sending flowers.”

“Oh God, like mother like son.”

“It is not a gift, it is a gesture.”

“Certainly.”

“It is! I am well aware that I am not the sort of gentleman to have a lady like her, but we have found a mutual understanding, and we are going to see what happens.”

“Ah, so it is going well thus far.”

“Yes, in spite of her father’s best efforts. Can you believe that he did not say a word of the arrangement to his daughter? How can one do that and expect her not to take it badly?”

“I suppose he did it so that she could not rebel until she was already here. Arranged marriages can have that outcome.”

“In any case, it certainly did not help matters. Could you imagine if she thought I was in on his plan? She would have hated me.”

“She did not hate you when you accused her of trying to entrap you in marriage, so I doubt she would have taken it that far.”

“I do not find you entertaining.”

“That is quite the shame, for I certainly do.”

“In any case,” Philip said with a sigh, “we have discussed it, and have agreed to become friends and then see if that becomes a real courtship, just as I had planned to begin with.”

Lucien nodded, then suddenly looked at him with a puzzled expression.

“Hang on a moment, when did these conversations take place? You were both absent at dinner last night, and you were absent at breakfast. When did you find time for a conversation?”

“Two conversations,” Philip corrected him. “We have had two thus far, and it has been while we were both outside on walks. She seems quite at ease with me, believe it or not, and I certainly had not seen that coming.”

“But has she seen you yet?”

Philip was sure that his friend meant well, but it did not make him feel good to hear such words.

“You say that as though you expect Jackie to go running once she sees my face.”

“Of course not.”

“Why not? You know perfectly well that it is a possibility.”

“Possible yes, likely no.”

“But why did you say it like that?”

“Like what?”

“As if you expect her to run a mile upon bearing witness to me. I would have thought that you would be more supportive.”

“My apologies. Of course I do not mean it like that. I do not wish to discourage you, and I never have. This will be good for you, as your mother and I have told you time and again. I am not concerned that this girl will not like you, I am simply concerned because this sort of behavior is unlike you. Nothing more.”

It was true. Philip had changed since Lady Ophelia had shunned him, and he had thought for the longest time that he would not find happiness a second time, and now that Lady Jacqueline had arrived it gave him hope that he could trust that happiness again.

Regardless of how much he wanted to, however, he had to admit that Lucien was right; his sudden change in behavior was strange, and he had to remember not to throw himself in too far, lest it not end well once more.

“Was this a mistake?” Philip asked.

“No, no of course it wasn’t,” Lucien replied, though he did not sound certain. “I only want what is best for you, and you to only act when you are sure it is right to, as you do with everything else.”

Philip nodded, understanding his position completely, when there was a knock at the door.

“Excuse me, Your Grace,” the butler said quietly. “Lord Pemberton wishes to speak with you.”

Philip groaned. He did not wish to speak to Lady Jacqueline’s father for the moment, frustrated with him after what he had done. He did not want to discuss any particular

matter with him until he had calmed down about it, and he did not know when that would be.

Even so, he had to be a good host, and that included speaking to his guests whether he was pleased with their actions or not.

“We can continue this conversation later,” he said to Lucien, who simply nodded and left the room, and Lord Pemberton entered soon after.

“Before you say a word,” Philip said firmly. “I want to make it clear to you that I am unimpressed by what you have done.”

“What might that be, Your Grace? I do believe I have acted as any good guest should during my stay here.”

“It is the reason for your visit here that has left me unimpressed.”

“What do you mean, Your Grace? Is my daughter not pleasing to you?”

“She most certainly is, but the fact that you have brought her here without telling her the true purpose of the visit has left me anything but pleased.”

“Ah, you have come to learn that.”

“You know perfectly well that I would have eventually. What sort of marriage, if that was truly your goal, would be made up of two people that do not discuss things with one another?”

“My marriage worked perfectly well that way. We found it more amicable.”

“Well, thank God that such a fate will not befall me. It does not matter what excuse

you give, it was completely wrong of you to deceive your daughter in such a manner. I did not agree to this arrangement thinking that I was fooling a sweet lady. It astounds me that not only did you choose to do such a thing, but that you are so evidently proud of it.”

Suddenly, he saw the earl falter.

“I am not proud,” he mumbled. “I may act as though I have no regrets, but that is precisely as it appears to be, an act.”

Philip tried not to roll his eyes at the man.

“You see,” he continued. “I am every bit the coward that you think I am, but I only needed more time.”

“You had enough time to tell her.”

“I did, but I did not know how to broach the subject. I thought, I hoped, that if we gave it enough time for the two of you to get along before I revealed the truth to her, she might have been more willing to listen. I was only wanting to soften the truth, not to trick my own daughter.”

Philip did not believe the excuse, but he pitied the man a great deal.

“Then why did you not warn me of that fact? Your scheme was ruined instantly by my mother, for she had no way of knowing not to say a word. Even if I wanted to go along with your plan, I could not have when you did not tell me that there was one to begin with.”

“I am embarrassed enough, Your Grace,” Lord Pemberton snapped. “Is that what you want me to say? I am embarrassed that I have been reduced to putting my daughter in

this position. I never once thought that I would have to do this to her, and now here I am. Forgive me for not being man enough to tell her when it was convenient.”

His explanation was precisely why Philip pitied him. As the father, the head of the household, he was supposed to shoulder such responsibilities as having the difficult conversations and making the difficult choices, and yet he was unable to. It was difficult to see how he managed to find a wife to begin with, but then he had no way of knowing how affluent Lord Pemberton had been before gambling it all away.

It was entirely possible that his wife’s death had destroyed him, though his revelation that the two of them never shared things with each other caused that idea to be questioned greatly.

“Does she hate me?” Lord Pemberton asked, defeated.

“I cannot answer for her,” Philip sighed. “But your plan is not ruined as yet. She and I discussed it this morning, and she is willing to go ahead with the courtship. Should it go well, then the marriage will happen, and it will be as though you never betrayed her. But should we change our minds, you are never to blame her for it. You only have yourself to find fault with for lying to her. Do I make myself clear?”

“Yes, Your Grace. I ought to speak to her myself about it, so that I might explain it all.”

“She will be having an enjoyable time right now. You will not ruin that when she returns. If she wishes to talk to you about it, then she will do so in her own time. For now, I want her to enjoy her time here and to be in the best spirits possible so that the two of us might find a connection. Do you understand?”

Lord Pemberton nodded, apologizing once more before leaving the study. With a groan, Philip rested his head on the desk. In spite of what men in gentlemen’s clubs

said, he had to admit that ladies had always been easier to be around.

He was not a lady's man, nothing of the sort, but they were far easier to talk to, and to understand. He found himself missing Lady Jacqueline, as he had enjoyed their conversation that morning, and he wanted to continue it.

Then he thought of how she was eager to see his face, and he was less inclined to see her so quickly. He did not know how to handle that situation, as he could not hide himself forever. The last time a lady had seen the extent of his injuries, it had been Lady Ophelia, and when she did see them, she immediately called off their engagement.

It had destroyed him, and he had never fully recovered from it. The first lady to see them, however, had led to an even worse experience. It had been his mother, and he hated that she had never looked at him in the same way since.

It was not with disgust, but with fear. Ever since that day, she had cared for him as though he were a child of eight, not a man of eight-and-twenty. She had been so careful with him ever since, and he had hated it. That was why he was so frightened of showing Lady Jacqueline the extent of his injuries.

He had only ever seen two responses—to run away or to act as though he needed protecting. He could not decide which of the two was worse.

Chapter 9

Jackie wondered how much a lady could carry before her arms fell off, but only for a moment.

Being in the residence of a duke, it was no surprise to her that the staff were only too happy to take her parcels from her and carry them away for her, leaving her alone in the hallway with her sister.

“That was quite an adventure,” Elizabeth smiled. “I haven’t received so many gifts in my life.”

“I feel terrible about it. That must have cost an awful lot. Do you suppose we could find a way to return them?”

“Certainly not! It would offend the dowager duchess. You might end up the wife of her son, and so it would not be right for you to refuse gifts from her.”

“Liz, for the last time—”

“I know, you are making no promises, and it might not work at all, but I am choosing to believe that all will be well. So that I can be happy until otherwise proven. I would rather that than be miserable at the possibility of something happening.”

Jackie rolled her eyes, but she had to admit that there was some truth to her sister’s words, and she almost admired her for it. She had always been an optimist, Jackie making sure of it, and at last it was proving to have been a good thing.

“I know it is easy for me to say that,” Elizabeth continued. “And I know that you are yet to forgive me. Perhaps you never will, but I want you to see the good in this too. At worst, I do not get to marry yet, and we can return home with our gifts knowing that we did all we could, especially you.”

“That is not true, you would loathe me entirely for it.”

“I could never. If it does not work, then it does not work. I am content knowing that you have sacrificed so much for me, whether it leads to anything more or not.”

“Lady Elizabeth?”

Both ladies looked toward the end of the hallway to see Lord Greene. Elizabeth flashed Jackie a quick smile before running down to him. He kissed her hand gently, greeting her kindly, before walking back to Jackie with her.

“Lady Jacqueline,” he greeted, with a bow. “It is nice to finally speak with you.”

“The pleasure is all mine,” she replied, forcing a smile. “It is good to properly meet the gentleman that has swept my sister off her feet.”

“And it is good to meet the sister that I must impress. That is what I have been told, at least.”

“Actually,” Elizabeth giggled. “I said her opinion means a great deal to me. I would, of course, rather that she held you in high regard.”

“Then I will do all that I can to ensure it.”

He was, indeed, a charmer.

“Might we go for a walk about the grounds?” Elizabeth asked. “I was hoping to go for one last night, but we had no chaperone.”

Jackie felt heat rising in her cheeks; she had been alone with the duke not once but twice, and she could not in good faith tell her sister to do the same.

“If you wish,” she replied. “I shall be nearby.”

As they walked, Jackie truly saw how happy her sister was. In spite of the fact that Lord Greene had seemingly been wanting to speak to her, she spent the entirety of the walk listening to the animated chatter of two people in love. Upon hearing that Elizabeth was in love, she had almost wondered if it was one-sided, and Elizabeth only fancied herself in love. But as she listened to them, she knew that such an assumption couldn’t have been any more wrong.

They loved each other, as much as two people that were not married could, but more than that they clearly liked each other. They laughed together, playfully argued with one another, and kept a minimal distance at all times. It was no surprise that they required a chaperone.

And Jackie could not help but wish that she had what they had.

It was no concern of hers that she was sacrificing her future for her sister, as she would have done it no matter the circumstances, but even so she couldn’t help but wonder what she could have had if everything had been different.

She shook the thought from her head. It was not conducive to her happiness, which she was determined to hold onto if it killed her.

Suddenly, Lord Greene turned to Jackie, and she froze.

“He wishes to speak with you,” Elizabeth explained, and Lord Greene fell back and began to speak.

“I want you to know that my family are not pleased with the match,” he said before anything else. “I know it is not the best first topic of discussion, but I must tell you as much now.”

“That is perfectly fine. I can tell you myself that I was not completely happy about it when I first heard of it.”

“Lady Elizabeth has told me about that. She seemed to regret what happened a lot, and it appears that she still does.”

“I believe so.”

“I, on the other hand, am here against the wishes of my parents, so I suppose I am not too different from her.”

“Against their wishes? You are a grown man. Why can you not do as you please?”

“I am aware that I have more privileges than a lady, to be sure, but family responsibilities weigh heavily on every son set to inherit their father's title and wealth, and I am no exception to such a rule.”

“You and I have such responsibilities in common, that much is sure.”

“The issue is that my parents don't want me to marry a penniless woman whose father is a chronic gambler,” he said quickly before closing his mouth, eyes wide. “My apologies, I did not know how else to say it.”

“That is quite all right, I can imagine that I would have been the same if it were your

family in such a predicament.”

“My parents came to hear about his bad habits, and now even though they like Elizabeth a good deal, they cannot see past your father. I need you to keep that to yourself, however. I do not want to tell Elizabeth, even though we tell each other everything, because it will only make her worry.”

“You like my sister a lot, don’t you?”

“I do, regardless of what my family thinks, and I shall find a way to marry her no matter what, but I do not think it is right to force you into an unwanted marriage just to get what I want. I suppose, in that case, I should say that I would almost do anything to marry her, rather than such brutish exclamations as no matter what.”

“I appreciate that. I assume that my sister told you all about my upcoming nuptials?”

“Yes, beyond my one secret we do not keep anything from one another. Not only that, but it has been tormenting her for some time now.”

“I know, which is why I am becoming more and more tempted to forgive her.”

“I shall not tell you what to do, but I will tell you that this has been torturing her, and she truly is incredibly sorry.”

Jackie nodded at him, pleased that her sister had at least found a good man that was reasonable, and kind to ladies beyond those he was courting; such men were few and far between.

“Should it come to it,” he continued, “I have been thinking about eloping. With each day that passes I am more and more tempted to simply escape to Gretna Green, but I do not know if your father would allow it.”

“That thought has crossed my mind, but you are right. Elizabeth is not yet one-and-twenty, and so it would not be something he would approve of, especially if he can rid himself of me if he does another thing.”

“I am at a loss,” he sighed. “I love your sister, truly I do, but I do not want you to think that you have no other option.”

“Then you need only give me time,” she nodded. “You need not turn to eloping just yet. I wish to see if myself and the duke are a good match.”

“I am please about that at least. Might you know when you shall have an answer?”

Jackie had not thought of that. It was easy enough to say that she would try, but far more difficult to give herself a deadline. After all, how could one know whether or not they could grow to love someone?

“I shall give you an answer by the end of our stay,” she promised. “In the meantime, I hope that you and my sister shall treat this as a holiday together. It is a beautiful place, after all.”

“It certainly is. I am eternally grateful to you for doing this, Lady Jacqueline, whether anything comes of it or not. Your sister is too. Please do not doubt that.”

Jackie did not doubt it, and it made it all the more difficult to be angry about it all. The two of them were clearly in love, and such sweetness made it impossible for Jackie to hold her grudge anymore. If she had she felt the same way for someone, there was no telling what she would have done to protect it.

“You and I must talk,” she said to Elizabeth as they returned to the house.

“Oh? What did Lord Greene say to you?”

“Not here,” she whispered, pulling her sister toward her bedchambers.

“What is it?” Elizabeth asked, exasperated. “If you are going to berate me again, at least do it now so that I can go and fawn over my gifts sooner to cheer myself up once more.”

“You do understand why I have been so angry with you, don’t you?”

“Yes, of course I do, Sister. Not telling you has been my biggest regret, especially now that I know that Lord Greene would not have left me behind even if you did refuse.”

“That certainly is admirable of him. I had not thought him to be the sort of gentleman to marry a girl without requiring a dowry... when I imagined him.”

“He is perfect, is he not? I have never met a kinder man, and it feels as though he and I have always known one another even though it has been mere months. I wish I had told you about him sooner.”

“As do I. It would have saved the both of us a lot of heartache.”

“I know. It was foolish of me at best, and if you never forgive me then I shall understand completely.”

“Well, you need not feel that way,” Jackie smiled. “I have spent a lot of time thinking over the past day, and I want you to know that, even though I am still confused and unsure of what to do, I have come to understand why you did what you did. I saw the two of you today, and I’ve realized something very important. I love you, Sister, and no matter how much you vex me, I cannot stay angry with you. I am not capable.”

Elizabeth’s eyes sparkled.

“You- you mean to say that you are no longer angry?”

“With you, yes. I only want the best for you, as I always have, and one look at this man and I can tell that he is what is best for you. I am more than happy to do my duty as your sister and do everything in my power to make sure you can be together.”

“Even at the expense of your own happiness?”

“Who is to say that I will not be happy?” she asked, smiling. “The duke is a good man from what I can tell. Who knows? Perhaps I might fall for him as you did for Lord Greene.”

Elizabeth pulled her into a tight embrace, and Jackie reciprocated. At last, all of the tension between them had dissolved, and they could enjoy their trip.

“Jacqueline,” their father said suddenly, appearing in the door. “Might I have a word?”

Chapter 10

Jackie did not wish to speak to her father.

She knew that she would, eventually, need to, but that did not signify. Her father was a villain for what he had done, plain and simple, and there was nothing that he could say that would help matters. She hated him, and did not want to see him, even if she had no choice but to.

She gestured to Elizabeth, who left without another word. Her father entered, pale and clearly unsure of what to say.

“You need not speak,” Jackie sighed. “We do not need to have the same conversation over and over about our situation. What’s done is done, and I am happy to give it a try.”

But as she was talking, she saw that her father seemed close to tears, and she came to a stop. Her father never cried, never showed any emotion besides anger and contempt. She had thought that he saw himself as a strong man for that, but now that he was standing before her, she did not know what to think at all.

“I wanted to apologize,” he said shakily, for the first time that Jackie had ever heard.

“Father, you did what you thought was best for us—”

“No, not for that. That was a necessary evil, a way out for us after everything that I have done.”

“I understand, truly I do, but could there not have been any other way? We could have handled matters ourselves, found the root cause of the issue and gone from there.”

Jackie knew the cause of their misfortunes, of course, and that was none other than her own father, but it was nothing that could not be fixed.

“I thought I could find a way,” he confessed. “I thought that if I simply had one good bet, one good move on my part, I could save us. I never did, and so it became worse and worse until—”

His throat was so tight that he was choking on air. Jackie knew that the right thing to do was comfort him, but she did not know how. This was a problem of his own doing, and nobody else’s, yet when she looked at him, all she could see was a boy that had been caught doing something that he should not have been.

Reluctantly, she did what she had always done when it had been her mother. She placed a hand on his back, rubbing gentle circles, until he composed himself.

“It is bad, Jacqueline,” he said gravely. “I promise you that I never would have done this to you if I did not need to, but it is past the point of no return. If this does not work, we shall be on the streets before the year is out.”

Jackie took a step back. She knew that the situation was bad, having been the one handling the day-to-day spending, but she had no idea of how terrible his debts had become.

“I tried to hide it from you,” he continued. “I tried to shield both of you from it all, believing that eventually I could save us, but I have to know when to give in, and it is now. If your courtship does not work, then we shall be destitute.”

Jackie made the decision not to tell her father what the duke had promised her, not because she had a burning desire for their courtship to continue but because she did not know how her father would react to it. Would he force her to keep up appearances and marry him regardless, worried that he would never find a dowry for her, or would he call it all off and take the money and leave?

More startlingly, she asked herself, which outcome would she dislike more?

“How could you?” She whispered. “How could you do this to us? You must have known after a certain point that there would be no coming back from what you were doing, and yet you continued.”

“I have been trying to control myself!”

“You knew that we had to do this weeks in advance, given that you had arranged all of this with the duke. So, if you knew how dire it all was, why were you gambling until the night before we arrived?”

“Because I thought that I could fix it. Do you honestly think that I would marry you off to that beastly man if I did not have to?”

She flinched at the suggestion that the duke was a beast.

“Yes, I do, because you always had a choice. You could have chosen not to be so reckless when Mother died. You could have chosen to stop before it went too far. You chose this, whether you want to believe that or not, and that truth does not cease to exist simply because you want to feel better about yourself.”

“I know that, and now I am trying to fix it in whatever way I can. I am doing the best that I can, you cannot ask more than that of me.”

“I can, and I should have. I should have asked for more when this all started, asked that you not keep secrets from me while also relying on me for the household to function. I should have asked for so much more, because then perhaps I would not have received so little.”

“What else could I have done? You might have lost your mother, but I lost my wife. She was the love of my life, Jacqueline. I had to lean on those vices to stay alive for the two of you, or else I never would have used them.”

“You did not need them,” she snapped before taking a breath. “You did not. You could have come to us. I know that you saw us as young girls, and that you still do, but we were your girls. We should have struggled together, not apart. Did you know that I told Elizabeth, a year after Mother died, that I felt that I lost both parents that day?”

At last, her father broke. Her words had been harsh, and she had not thought herself to be capable of such cruelty, but she could no longer allow herself to tell her father that their situation was nobody’s fault when all along it had been his.

“I do not wish to talk about this anymore,” she said gently. “What’s done is done, and now we must press on. I cannot say that I forgive you for what you did, but perhaps one day I might understand.”

“For your sake, as well as that of anyone you love, I hope that you never do.”

Jackie thought about his words as they left the room, going their separate ways. She wondered just how tormented her father had been all that time, and why he felt the need to carry such a burden instead of talking to his daughters about it. Suddenly, however, her thoughts were broken by the sound of pianoforte.

She thought Elizabeth had been asked to play, but only for a moment, for whoever

was playing sounded nothing like her sister. Elizabeth had always played well, but daintily, as if afraid of damaging the keys. This was something else entirely, haunting almost, as if they were taking out their sadness through music, and Jackie felt a connection to that.

Following the sound, she arrived in a music room to see the duke himself at the pianoforte, his back to her. There was no sheet music as far as she could tell, proving that he was not simply mimicking a work by a composer. It was his own piece that he had written, and Jackie could not help but be enthralled.

She knew that it was not proper of her to approach him, as they could not be alone together but also because he seemed to be in want of privacy, but she could not think properly. All that she could do was listen, and feel. She sat in a chair nearby, watching him play for a moment and studying him.

He was sitting upright, just as a professional would, his fingers moving deftly across the keys. She closed her eyes, feeling as though watching him made it too intrusive, as it was bad enough that she was there to begin with.

The piece was beautiful, but also filled with sorrow. Was this how the duke truly felt? Anguish, sadness, longing? He was in pain, she knew that, but she had never questioned how he felt beyond that. Was he angry about what had happened to him? Did he have regrets about what had led him to whatever had happened? Surely, he missed the life he had led before, but did he blame himself for his condition and therefore believe he deserved it?

Above all else, however, the only thing that came to mind was simply how sorry she felt for him. She had faced difficulties of her own, and the biggest had only just hit her, but at least she had always felt like herself. She wondered how it would feel to look in a mirror and not recognize the person before her, but she could not imagine herself any other way than how she was. Did the duke remember how he once

looked?

Without warning, she felt tears stream down her cheeks. She wanted to pretend it was due to her argument with her father, but she could not lie, even to herself. She was crying out of sadness and pity for a gentleman that could have been so much more than a reclusive duke hidden away for fear that he would be hated.

The music ended, and she opened her eyes. She did not know how much time had passed, but she did know that her eyelashes were wet and there were spots of tears on her new gown. It had been a beautiful song, and she would have asked him to play it again under any other circumstance.

She heard his stool creak, and as she looked up, she realized that he had turned around and was looking at her. She expected him to tell her to leave, or quickly put his mask on, but he did neither. He continued to watch her, his own eyes damp and his cheeks shining from tears of his own. She met his gaze, and even though she did not know anything further, she could not help but feel as though she understood him.

He had, indeed, not quickly placed a mask over his face, and so for the first time she saw him clearly. Leathery skin, just like his arms, and different mottled shades of brown and white and red. She had expected to feel some sort of disgust at his disfigurement, but it never came. Instead, she felt an immense feeling of anguish in his place for how much pain he had to be in, not to mention how horrible the physical pain must have been when it happened.

Studying him further, she realized that she could not feel disgust, simply because in spite of the scarring he was indeed still a very handsome man. There was a kindness to him that not even a terrible accident could take away, and even after everything that he had been through he had not allowed himself to become bitter, and that was all she needed to know when deciding the contents of his character.

She wanted to make him feel better, to take his pain away so that he would not be hurt anymore, and the thought of it made her freeze. She had never felt that way before for anyone, and she knew exactly why that was. The duke was a handsome man, a kind man; the sort of man that she could find herself attracted to.

Which was certainly something that she had not expected to discover.

Chapter 11

Sometimes, Philip felt as though his only outlet was music. It communicated his heart and thoughts far better than his words ever could, even back when he was good at socializing. While playing, he could forget his position in life and every bad thing that had ever happened to him, and do something he truly was good at.

He hadn't expected an audience when he turned around.

Typically, no one was permitted into the music room when he was there. There was a sort of judgment to it that he could not stand, even if it were his own mother. He had been biding his time before showing Lady Jacqueline his face, but his efforts had been in vain, because there she was behind him, staring at him.

He should have been appalled, and he knew that, but then he saw the tears in her eyes. He hadn't been ready, but he had to admit that he could never have prepared her for what he looked like. Even so, when he looked into her eyes, he did not find disgust or pity in them. Even his mother had pitied him too much for too long.

It was a refreshing change, as though she understood him. He laughed at himself, for it was a strange and impossible thing to think, but it was his thought all the same.

"My apologies," she said at last, wiping her tears away. "It was terribly rude for me to intrude on you, but I... you play beautifully."

"Do you think so?"

“Most definitely. I have never known a man to be so skilled, nor so genuine, with a pianoforte or otherwise.”

He quickly wiped his face. There were many ways that he had been described throughout his life, but that had never been one of them.

As he finished drying his face, he considered turning his back to her once more. She had seen him, and that had to be enough to satiate any curiosities she had had, yet he still could not see any sort of aversion in her eyes. For the first time since the accident, he dared to maintain their eye contact, and she did not shrink away from it.

“You have nothing to apologize for,” he replied. “I must admit, however, that I am not used to having an audience when I play.”

“That is a terrible shame.”

“Do you... like music?”

He was waiting to see some sort of disgust in her face, and it made it so difficult to continue being so open with her, even if he truly wanted to try his best to be.

“I adore it,” she sighed. “Though I have never been much good at it, nothing like you at least.”

“Surely you can play. Aren’t all young ladies taught?”

“Believe me, efforts were made by my mother, but having an adoration for music does not translate to having any real aptitude for it. I can play, but no better than most of the young ladies of the Ton . You, on the other hand, are very talented indeed.”

“I could show you a few things, if you like.”

He had said it quickly—too quickly, and he did not know why he had done so. Teaching her would mean her coming even closer to him, and surely she would not wish to do that? It was a foolish thing to suggest, but he had felt a strange rush of good emotion when she spoke so kindly to him. The words had fallen from his lips before he could compose himself.

“I would like that very much,” she replied, and he bristled.

She seated herself beside him, looking at him with a smile on her face as if he was not horrifically disfigured. He almost felt like his old self again, which had not happened in a long time. She looked up at him expectantly, her lips parted slightly, awaiting his instruction.

“For a start,” he began, clearing his throat. “I shall assume that you learned your scales.”

“Was I taught scales? Yes. Was I ever any good at them? No, no I was not.”

Philip chuckled, placing his hands on the keys at the beginning of a scale. She studied his hands for a moment, and he wondered if she was looking at his scars, but she soon placed her own hands on the keys, copying his stance.

“Like this?” She asked.

Philip nodded, scolding himself for doubting her even though she had given him no reason to do so.

“Now, you do this.”

Philip did a run of scales, slowly so that she would see what he was doing. She then copied him clumsily, hitting the wrong note on more than one occasion, which made

her smile a little wider. She had always appeared so careful and gentle, and yet when she tried to play an instrument known for emitting gentle sounds when played correctly, she was clunky, loud, and giggly. It was another side of her completely, and he enjoyed it.

He played it again, and she watched him with a furrowed brow and determination sparkling in her eyes. She copied him once more, doing better the second time but still not perfect. She sighed, tilting her chin up to the ceiling.

“I am not made for this,” she smiled. “But I must say, listening is just as entertaining. More so, in fact, because then I have no fear of doing things wrong. I am good at listening, you know.”

“I have noticed, yes,” he nodded with a smile. “Now, one more time.”

He wondered if she would groan at him and try a third time with a sulk, but of course she did not. She watched him one final time, and then she attempted once more. At last, she did it without making a mistake, and when she succeeded at last, she looked at him with her mouth open, practically shaking with pride for herself. He could not help but feel the same way.

He also could not help but feel dazzled by her. She was beautiful, especially when she was curious and determined, and he realized that his heart was pounding in his chest. He wiped his hands on his sleeves, noticing how they had been sweating while she was beside him.

He knew what his feelings were all too well, and they were most dangerous. He had admired her, to be sure, but he had not been attracted to her. That was a crucial part in his offer to let her go if she wished; he did not love her, or have any such feelings at all, and so what was the harm?

If he did fall for her, however, she would have so much power over him—power that Lady Ophelia had used against him until he had become the shell of a man he was now.

He shook his head, the thoughts of Lady Ophelia falling away as he did so. This was not her, this was Lady Jacqueline, and she was nothing like the lady that had broken his heart. She was worthy of his trust, and he knew that he had to give her that, even if it terrified him completely.

“I have never done that before,” she breathed. “I know it seems quite far-fetched, but believe me it was the last thing I expected to succeed in.”

“Well, now you can say that you have succeeded in it,” he smiled, proud of her even if he had not known that she had struggled with it. “Though I must ask about your sister. Did she ever learn?”

“Somehow, yes. She received lessons while my mother was alive, of course, and perhaps it was those lessons that got her far enough, but after Mother’s passing, Elizabeth’s schooling fell to me. I could tutor her in most things, but when it came to music... let us just say it was a struggle.”

The two of them laughed, and Lady Jacqueline gently stroked a key with a finger.

“Did you have a music teacher?” She asked.

“Many, yes, which is perhaps why I am any good at it. I had tutors for everything, and as a child I never had a moment to myself. I learned history, geography, and mathematics. Reading and writing were a given, and then there were special lessons about my family’s history, as well as the area I would be in charge of. It was a lot, but I always tried to be grateful for it. I never once wanted to seem unhappy about my life, given how fortunate I had been.”

“Fortune is an odd thing, isn’t it? I always considered myself to be more fortunate than Elizabeth, because I was able to enter society when we had money, and debut while we still had access to such luxuries as tutors. Then, one day, she told me that she had always seen it as the opposite, and that she had had far more luck in that her tutor was her closest friend.”

“Even so, it would have been wrong for me to dislike how many opportunities I had been given.”

“At the expense of being a boy,” she pointed out. “You can be grateful while still wishing you had lived a normal life. I am grateful to my father, against all odds, because I know that he has done his best for my sister and I, but that does not mean I have to feel only good things for him. I am angry with him, unbelievably so, and it is entirely possible for me to feel those two ways.”

Philip considered her words carefully. She was entirely correct; he had spent his entire life trying to be perfect—the perfect gentleman, the perfect son, the perfect duke, and after his accident he had seen it as all having been in vain. The truth, however, was that he was a person with bad experiences as well as good, and he could not be too unkind to himself because of that.

“I do not know how you do it,” he sighed.

“How I do what, Your Grace?”

“Remain so good. You are kind and wise and intelligent, where most people would have been furious and given back every unkind thing that had happened to them twice as hard as they had ever received it.”

“Well, I suppose that it simply would not help anyone to do so. I could be angry. I could be positively furious, but what good would it do? Perhaps I would momentarily

feel better, but what then? It would only cause hurt to others, and that is simply not the person I am.”

“And that is remarkable.”

“Were you...” she said gingerly. “Were you ever angry, Your Grace?”

He had not expected that.

“I... yes, for the longest time I was, and I did not know how to contain all of that anger. When I was recovering, I could hardly do anything at all. After spending my entire life constantly learning or doing things, I had to lay there and do nothing, and it infuriated me. All that fury, of course, had nowhere to go, as I could barely even speak at first, never mind raise my voice. It was all locked within.”

“That must have been horrible,” she said gently. “But the relief you must have felt when you played the pianoforte again for the first time must have felt magical.”

“It did, but I cried the first few times.”

He bit his tongue. Lady Jacqueline seemed to naturally pull secrets out of him, and he did not want to fight it.

“I mean,” he continued, “it was this great release of months of anger and hurt. It was tremendous, but I could not look at the pianoforte for a while after. I had missed it so much, but I couldn’t bear the sight of it.”

“Then you have come a long way, much further than anyone would ever know from looking at you.”

A comfortable silence settled between them, but not for long before Lady Jacqueline

gasped, rushing to her feet with a smirk.

“In spite of our situation,” she blurted out with a giggle. “I believe it is improper for the two of us to be here alone together.”

“Oh! Yes, I suppose that it is.”

He could see the blush creeping across her cheeks, and he dared to believe that it was because she was near him, even if he knew it was impossible. She took her leave, and he watched her go, hoping it would not be too long before she stumbled her way back to him again.

Chapter 12

It was not like Jackie to think about an encounter the following day, yet that was precisely what she was doing.

Had she not been thinking about the gentleman that she was in a courtship with, she would have scolded herself. But that was not her situation; the duke was courting her, and so she had every right to think about him, did she not?

“Jackie?” Elizabeth interrupted her thoughts. “You have hardly touched your tea. Is everything alright?”

Jackie blinked, and became aware of where she was and what she was supposed to be doing. She was in the parlor with her sister and the Dowager Duchess, and she was sure that she had been lost in thought for so long that her tea would be cold, and the bread of her sandwiches would be going stale. The dowager reached for her teacup, offering to get her another, but Jackie pulled it back quickly.

“Do not trouble yourself,” she assured her. “I prefer my tea on the cooler side anyway.”

She did not, of course, but she did not wish to be a burden, and besides that she could not stand wasting good food and drink.

“If you are sure, Dear,” the dowager replied, somewhat in disbelief. “Now, as you were saying, Elizabeth?”

“Yes, Lord Greene. Oh, isn’t he wonderful? Why, at dinner last night he was telling me all about his mother’s ring. It is an heirloom, he says, and has been in his family for five generations. Can you believe it?”

“We have a similar ring, though it has not been passed down for as long as yours. Perhaps if my son came down to dinner, he could have such conversations himself.”

“Will he be joining us soon?” Jackie asked absent-mindedly. “It is strange not having the head of the household present.”

“That depends entirely on His Grace,” the dowager sighed. “And it is a shame, for he makes excellent company.”

“He certainly does.”

Jackie knew what she had said the moment she said it.

“I did not know that you had been spending time with the duke,” Elizabeth said, an eyebrow raised.

Fortunately, at that moment, the butler entered with a lady that Jackie did not recognize. It was strange to see an unexpected visitor, but it meant that Elizabeth had something to think about other than where her older sister had been.

She might not have recognized the young lady, but the dowager duchess certainly did, even if her face registered a good deal of shock, followed by happiness, followed by outright confusion.

“Lady Ophelia,” she said in an odd tone. “What a... surprise.”

“Your Grace,” she beamed, curtsying deeply. “It is a pleasure to see you again. I

know it is improper of me to arrive unannounced, but I simply had to come and see you while I was in town! I have missed you greatly.”

She was extremely beautiful, Jackie noted, and slowly she began to piece everything together. She had heard whispers of a Lady Ophelia, who had left the duke that she was engaged to after she deemed him unworthy. It was a great source of gossip during her first season, some chastising her for being so set on good looks, others agreeing that the most beautiful girl in London should marry only the most handsome man, nothing less.

It was no secret that, even when she did not know either party, she was angry on behalf of the duke. Elizabeth had agreed with her, though to a lesser extent. Now that she was standing before her, though, Jackie could hardly contain her annoyance; to throw someone aside after knowing them for so long because of something out of their control was inexcusable, as far as she was concerned.

“Oh! Where are my manners?” The dowager duchess said quickly. “Lady Ophelia, may I introduce you to Lady Jacqueline and Lady Elizabeth?”

The two sisters curtsied in turn, neither speaking to Lady Ophelia.

“Lady Jacqueline is to marry my son,” she continued excitedly, and Jackie did not feel that it was the right time to correct her wording.

She knew that she had made the right decision when she saw Lady Ophelia’s face, one of shock, though she quickly composed herself.

“He is a wonderful man,” Lady Ophelia nodded. “You are quite fortunate to have him.”

“I am, indeed,” Jackie smiled, reveling in the young lady’s apparent discomfort.

“You know, he always was very adoring,” Lady Ophelia continued with a smirk. “Why, when we were courting, he sent me flowers every day, always accompanied by a love letter. We would promenade together, and he would practically follow me around like he was my puppy.”

Jackie thought about the flowers she had been receiving every day since her arrival. It was a normal thing to receive during a courtship, but knowing that he had done it all before did take some of the shine away from it she had to admit.

What was worse, however, was the way she spoke of the duke as if he were no more than a dog—her dog. He was a person, and more to the point, if she thought he was so utterly wonderful, why did she reject him? Her mind began to race in a way that it never had before, wondering if this was her coming back for him, to apologize and take him back all over again.

“Is he here?” Lady Ophelia continued.

“He is not,” the dowager duchess replied. “I am afraid that the duke has some rather pressing matters to attend to today, and is unavailable, but I shall tell him you came by.”

“I would have preferred to speak with him myself. That is an awful shame.”

“Indeed, but we sometimes cannot control what happens around us, can we?” The dowager duchess asked.

Jackie looked between the two ladies, quite certain that Lady Ophelia needed to have taken something from those words.

“Very well,” she sighed. “Although I would so love to walk in the gardens again. They were always magnificent. Lady Jacqueline, would you be so kind as to

accompany me?"

Jackie looked to the dowager duchess, who did not seem to object to it, and it would have been impolite to say no, and so she gave a quick nod, and the two ladies left for the gardens.

"Oh, have you ever seen anything so beautiful in all your life?" Lady Ophelia sighed as they entered the garden. "I am quite adept in the language of flowers, and I can tell you exactly what the gardener wanted to say with his work."

"Oh? And what might that have been?"

"You do not honestly want to hear about that," Lady Ophelia laughed. "Come now, Lady Jacqueline, I am sure that you wish to know all about my time with the duke. I would not blame you for it, given that the two of you are to be married."

Jackie wanted to tell Lady Ophelia that she did not wish to hear about the two of them, but she knew that that would only make her sound jealous. Was it better to allow her to talk? Jackie could not possibly know for sure, and so she thought it best to listen and not allow herself to be upset by anything she heard. Besides that, she was curious.

"If that is what you would rather discuss," Jackie shrugged. "Though a talent such as knowing the language of flowers makes you far more interesting than being someone that was courted by a duke."

"Engaged," she corrected. "Why, the duke and I have known each other for years now. Our fathers were good friends, and the late duke was all too happy to arrange a marriage between us. I was everything that a good duchess should be, he told me, and that I was the perfect match for his son."

“He must have been a good man.”

“The very best. I suppose you never had the chance to meet him, given that your family does not run in the same circles as mine. That is quite the shame. They’re a lovely family, though, are they not? I always considered this place my second home. The duke himself told me that it might as well be.”

“They are certainly welcoming, yes, especially his mother. She has already asked me to call her by her first name.”

“I would not feel too special about that, she does the same thing with everyone.”

Jackie wondered why she was trying to compete with a young lady that she had never met, that had long been removed from the duke’s life. Even if she had not been, it was not as though she had any say on who the duke did or did not speak to.

“I must admit,” Lady Ophelia continued, “coming back here has only further proven to me that letting him go all that time ago was the biggest mistake of my life. This is my home, my family.”

Jackie blinked. Was she trying to tell her that she had come to take him back? Was this her warning, her challenge, not to go near him?

“Yes, it is certainly a shame for you that you rejected him like that,” she replied, perhaps a little too curtly. “But then, I suppose we all do things we later regret, only to realize that it is too late to change how things are. I suppose I should be grateful to you, though, for he truly is such a kind man.”

“He is, the kindest that I have ever met in my entire life, so I am most fortunate to have known him all of this time.”

“Do the two of you still talk?”

Lady Ophelia faltered.

“No, not as often as I would prefer, but that will soon change, I hope. He always was my best friend, and I his. I would give anything for that to be the case once more.”

Jackie so desperately wanted the conversation to turn to something else— anything else, because she could feel herself growing more annoyed with every mention of Lady Ophelia’s past with the duke. She felt the jealousy rise within her, wishing that she could have been the one to know him all that time ago, and it made her unsteady on her feet.

She was not supposed to care for the duke that much, not yet at least. They had only just met—she hardly knew him at all. Yet she couldn’t bear the thought of another lady coming into the picture, least of all one that had hurt him.

She tried to tell herself that she disliked Lady Ophelia simply because of what she had done to the duke, and not because of any rivalry that she felt between them. She was an unkind girl, and that was what annoyed Jackie so greatly.

That was what she told herself, at least.

“Yes, well,” Jackie said carefully. “I suppose that is what happens when we act in a way in which we regret, but there is no coming back from that. What’s done is more often than not done.”

Suddenly, Lady Ophelia turned to her, eyes mischievous.

“Not when it comes to me, Lady Jacqueline. I always was one to get exactly what I wanted, and this will be no exception to that rule.”

Chapter 13

With each passing day, Philip tried to will himself into joining the festivities.

They ate without him, at his request, and he kept himself so busy that he had the excuse not to join them at other times of day. He did not wish to be too close to them, lest they see, and more importantly judge, his appearance. Fortunately, the one person that he truly did wish to spend time with kept stumbling into his way, and he had been grateful for the distractions.

Lady Jacqueline was beautiful, kind, and exactly the sort of lady he had dreamed of marrying, the sort of lady he had once thought that he would marry before she left him. At least, he considered, that meant that she was not the person he had thought her to be, and so there had been no harm truly done to him.

Lady Ophelia had not crossed his mind too often, especially since Lady Jacqueline had arrived. He had enjoyed thinking about his guest far too much for any other lady to enter his mind. He thought about this as he looked out of his window, wondering if that counted as him thinking about Lady Ophelia, when all of a sudden, he saw something and immediately wished he had not.

He was fond of Lady Jacqueline's blue-black hair and the way it fell like ink around her, and so it was the first thing he tended to look at when he saw her. This time, however, she was accompanied by a lady with deep brown hair, and he knew exactly who she was.

Ophelia.

He did not know why they were together, or why Lady Ophelia was there in the first place, but he did know that whatever the reason, it could only mean trouble. He had to stop it before it went too far, and he hoped that he was not too late for that.

He ran out into the hallway, realizing that he had left his mask in his study, but he did not go back for it. Lady Jacqueline had already seen him for who he was, so there was no point in hiding himself now, and as for Lady Ophelia... He had already given enough weight to her opinion of him in the past.

“Philip?” Lucien asked as he reached the door. “What are you doing?”

“I have to go.”

“What about our horse ride?” he asked. “You told me you wished to discuss something with me.”

He had, of course. He wanted to tell Lucien about his sudden attraction to Lady Jacqueline, but that would have to wait.

“I cannot. Perhaps tomorrow?”

“Philip, you are completely flustered. What has gotten into you?”

“Ophelia,” he replied bluntly. “She is in the garden, right now, with Lady Jacqueline.”

“What? But that is not possible.”

“It quite clearly is, else I would not have seen her with my own eyes.”

“I wouldn’t think much of it. Who knows why she is here?”

“That is precisely why I must think on it. She is with the lady I am courting right now. Why has she suddenly come back like this? Why is she walking and talking with Lady Jacqueline, someone she doesn’t even know?”

“It is possible that they know each other. They are of the same age, after all.”

“No, to my recollection Lady Ophelia only ever spoke to people of her social standing or higher. She made a point of it.”

“A rather nasty girl. Remind me why you were in love with her, again?”

“I do not need that right now.”

“No, no of course not.”

“I remember it all, you know, even to this day. I remember the hurt and anger of her betrayal, and seeing just how spiteful she had been all along. After everything that she did to me, I fear she might be talking Lady Jacqueline out of giving me a chance too, just to be cruel.”

“I doubt that she would go so far out of her way just to do that,” Lucien said gently. “But I do think it would be better for you to see that for yourself, because otherwise you might drive yourself entirely mad. We can forget the horses for today. Come, I will accompany you on a promenade with them.”

Philip nodded, grateful to his friend, and the two of them left for the garden. They found the ladies quickly, as they had not gone too far, and Philip tried to listen in on their conversation as much as he could, but it was no use. They were too far away, and seemingly whispering.

“Good day, ladies!” Lucien said brightly, and Ophelia instantly seemed to light up.

Lady Jacqueline, on the other hand, seemed quite relieved more than anything.

“Your Grace!” Lady Ophelia greeted, ignoring Lucien entirely. “How wonderful to see you. It has been so long since you and I have seen each other, yet it feels like only yesterday that you and I walked these gardens together, just the two of us.”

“The two of us and your maid, yes,” Philip nodded, noticing that same flicker of disgust in her eyes, even if she was doing a better job at hiding it than before.

It was a look that he did not see in Lady Jacqueline’s face, though she did seem quite uncomfortable.

“Would you like to join us?” Lady Ophelia asked.

“Yes, you are more than welcome,” Lady Jacqueline agreed. “I assure you, you are not intruding at all.”

It was strange; this was not the lady that he had spent time with at the pianoforte, the lady that he truly did think he might have a future with. He wondered if it had something to do with Lady Ophelia’s presence, and if it were the case then he could hardly blame her for that. They had been in love, once upon a time, or at least he had thought himself to be in love with her. It couldn’t have been easy for her to see Lady Ophelia again, especially if (and he truly hoped it to be the case) she harbored some kind of feelings toward him in return.

“I simply must speak with you, Your Grace,” Lady Ophelia said suddenly. “Your mother told me you were busy today, but now that I have you, I have to talk to you about why I am here.”

“That sounds perfect,” Lucien replied for him. “This way, I can acquaint myself with our guest.”

Philip was stunned at how quickly Lucien had left him with Lady Ophelia, but Lady Jacqueline did not seem to mind, being led away by Lucien quite quickly.

“So?” Lady Ophelia asked, beginning to walk and waiting for him to follow, which he reluctantly did. “Wonderful. So, I have had a long time to think, and I had to see you so that I could tell you how I have been feeling.”

It had always been about how she was feeling, he thought, but he was too kind to say it aloud. Besides, he was far too busy watching Lucien and Lady Jacqueline. In spite of his usual lack of jealousy, he couldn’t help but think they looked good together.

At last, Lady Jacqueline was smiling again and talking away. He was listening to her rather than Lady Ophelia, even if her words were not meant for him, because quite frankly he would rather hear Lady Jacqueline talk about her sister than Lady Ophelia talk about herself.

“As for how I am feeling,” she continued, “I have been quite miserable of late.”

“Yes, quite,” Philip responded absent-mindedly.

“Yes, and my poor mother has been trying with all of her might to find the cause of such an ailment. It has been taking up the majority of her time, and so at last I have had to tell her the truth. It was a difficult confession, I must admit, but now that I have told her, I feel ready to tell you.”

“Yes,” he nodded, his focus entirely on Lady Jacqueline’s hair as it bounced when she walked.

“You see, I truly do regret how we left things. You might think me heartless, but I assure you that it is not the case. In fact, I have thought of you each and every day since, and I would do anything at all to make things right. I was hoping that you

might feel the same way, and that we could become friends once more. I truly have missed you, after all. You and I have known one another for so long that I do not know any other way to be.”

“To be sure.”

Lady Jacqueline was now telling Lucien about her passion for music, and so now there would be no way of preventing Philip from listening in. She had not been feigning interest just for him; she truly was passionate, and her face lit up when she discussed it. She truly was a beautiful lady, and he couldn’t imagine someone like her with him at all.

Suddenly, she fell.

Fortunately for her, there was a gentleman beside her that caught her perfectly, putting her back on her feet with ease. Unfortunately, that gentleman had not been Philip, but his good friend instead.

“Oh!” she gasped. “Thank you, my lord. I should have been watching my step.”

“There is no need to thank me, nor to excuse anything. I like that you are passionate about the things that bring you joy. We are similar, in that sense.”

There was that jealousy again, and Philip hated it. He was not a jealous man, not even when he had heard word that Lady Ophelia was once again being courted by another man, but in that moment, it was all that he could feel besides uncertainty.

He had only just come to realize how attracted to her that he was, and suddenly his friend had stepped in and now...

He shrugged it off. He knew that Lady Jacqueline liked him, and she knew that they

had a deal. If she wanted to, she could have left and yet she hadn't. She must have liked him too, even simply as a companion. He had to trust her.

"We ought to see if she is alright," he said quickly, hoping he had not interrupted Lady Ophelia but not giving too much thought to it.

He strode forwards to the two of them, Jacqueline laughing as he approached.

"Lady Jacqueline, are you alright—"

He felt a hand on his arm, firm and tense. He turned to look at Lady Ophelia, who was clinging to him in a strangely possessive way, looking up at him with wide eyes.

He ignored her, turning back to Lady Jacqueline, but she was no longer laughing. She was hardly even smiling. Philip froze. Did she not like the sight of Lady Ophelia on his arm? If that were the case, he could not have her thinking that anything untoward would happen.

"Lady Jacqueline, I—"

"I ought to leave," she said, a pained smile on her face. "I have left my sister with the dowager duchess, which was terribly rude of me, and I have been away far longer than expected. Thank you for accompanying me."

It pained Philip that she directed the last part to Lucien and not to him. She left, Lucien on her heels, and asking her if she was feeling unwell.

"Goodness, some ladies can be so dramatic," Ophelia sighed, her hand still on his arm. "Was I ever like that?"

He did not dignify her with a response. He wanted her gone, back wherever she had

come from, and quickly.

“Regardless,” she continued, louder this time. “I am so glad that you return my wishes, and that we can be companions once more.”

Lady Jacqueline turned to face him at this, and he could not at all read her expression before she turned back and walked away.

Philip sighed, concerned that whatever they had shared would be over before it could even properly begin. What he certainly did not like, however, was the sickeningly sweet smile on Lady Ophelia’s face.

Chapter 14

Jackie wondered just how impolite it would be to have a guest removed from a house that was not hers.

Lady Ophelia was strange. She had been the one to abandon the duke, and yet any fool could see that during her visit she was trying to make the duke go back to her. Why, she wondered, if she had already left him once before?

She certainly did not approve of the way Lady Ophelia clung to the duke, pointedly saying that they were friends once more. Jackie was not stupid; she knew exactly what the other young lady was trying to do, and no matter how much she tried to ignore it she had to admit that it had worked.

“Are you well, Sister?” Elizabeth asked at dinner.

“Yes, quite,” she replied. “I had a fall this afternoon, that is all. I suppose it has made me become rather out of sorts.”

“And it has nothing to do with our guest this afternoon?” She whispered.

“No, of course not,” Jackie hissed. “Besides, she left a few hours ago now. She has had no effect on me whatsoever.”

But she had. Lady Ophelia’s arrival could have meant a number of things for the duke, but the fact that he did not immediately send her away made her feel quite uneasy indeed.

“My apologies,” the duke said suddenly, entering the dining room.

All eyes fell on him. It had been the first time that he had joined them all at a meal, and he had come without his mask. He seemed ill at ease, sitting down beside her in an instant and beginning to eat. She noticed Elizabeth staring at him and nudged her in the side.

Fortunately, her sister knew exactly what this meant and complied.

“It—it is nice to see you, Your Grace,” Elizabeth began dutifully.

“Likewise,” he replied.

“Yes, I was beginning to think that you would not show your face at all,” her father said brightly before realizing just what he had said. “That is to say that I am pleased you can join us this evening.”

“It was time for it,” the duke nodded, and then silence fell.

Jackie was proud of the duke, unbelievably so, for making such a large step, but even so there were still uncertainties about their courtship in her mind. She knew it was only a matter of time before her heart became involved, even if she had been trying to keep her feelings separate, and with what she had seen that day she knew it was a risk. The duke had adored Lady Ophelia from what she had heard, and now that she was back and clearly willing to have him again, the duke could take that offer and disappear.

Was it worth it?

She thought about his kindness, the way he made her feel at the pianoforte, the fact that he sent her flowers every single day of her visit, and that he was now sitting with

her family, his scars laid bare, trying to make an effort with them. He was doing everything right, and she appreciated it greatly.

Then again, as far as Lady Ophelia had been concerned, this was nothing compared to what he had done for her.

Jackie took a breath. She was far too late if she had been wanting to save herself from heartache; she had already become emotionally invested in the courtship. Whether she had planned to or not, and admittedly she had not, she really did like the duke.

“So, Elizabeth,” the duke tried again. “Your sister was telling me that you play the pianoforte.”

“Yes, though I cannot say I have ever been exceptional. I suppose she told you that part, too?”

“I said no such thing,” Jackie laughed before turning to Lord Greene. “She plays well, for what it is worth.”

“I would love to hear it, sometime,” he smiled back.

“Jackie!” Elizabeth exclaimed under her breath. “I shall only cause myself a great deal of embarrassment now.”

“No more than I cause myself each and every time I play.”

Elizabeth seemed to understand her sister’s words all too well.

“Well,” the dowager beamed. “Whether the two of you ladies are aficionados or you sound like two mangled cats, I have thoroughly enjoyed your presence thus far. I was never much good with music, not like my son, and so it is not as though I can hold

the two of you to such a standard. What matters to me, and this is for you Lady Jacqueline, of course, is how well you treat my son.”

There were murmured laughs around the table, the duke shrinking into himself, and Jackie did not understand why he had done so.

But then he smiled at her, and she had to admit that it flustered her a little.

Dinner came to end, and as they retired to the drawing room the duke pulled her to one side.

“Might I have a word?”

“Of course, Your Grace,” she replied, and he led her to some seats on the other end of the room.

“I wanted to explain my behavior,” he began. “Especially at dinner. I saw your face when my mother made that comment. It had nothing to do with you at all, but simply that I was embarrassed to hear my mother speak of me like that. She means well, and is a most loving mother, but then and there I felt like a schoolboy.”

Jackie giggled at him.

“I suppose I can understand that. My father hardly knows enough about me to put me on such a pedestal, so I suppose I only see it as a good thing to receive.”

“Not after twenty years of it,” he laughed. “How are you feeling after today?”

Jacki almost wished that he had not asked.

“It was certainly an experience,” she sighed. “I hardly know Lady Ophelia at all,

given that I only ever had one season out, but she was definitely a character.”

“Well, regardless of how she made you feel, I want you to know that I am serious about you and me. I want to give this courtship some real effort.”

“As do I,” she nodded.

“And I have been thinking about how compatible you and I are. I wish to know more about you, be it from promenading together, just you and I next time, or having tea together, or even more music lessons. I want to know you properly, because thus far I truly have liked what I have seen.”

It was exactly what Jackie wanted to hear, but even so there was a lingering doubt that Lady Ophelia could have him back if she wanted.

“As for our guest?” she asked. “I know that the two of you have history, even if I do not know the details of it. I do not want to step on anyone’s toes, so to speak.”

“There shall be no toes to step on,” he assured her. “I am pleased that you and I can discuss this now, because you must know that there will never be anything between myself and Lady Ophelia again. The past is the past, and with all that happened I can honestly say that I do not intend to revisit it.”

Jackie wanted to believe him, and so she did not question his words. She breathed a sigh of relief, her shoulders relaxing as she released all of the tension she had been feeling.

“That makes me feel a lot more at ease,” she explained. “Because I too would like to pursue this courtship. You and I seem to have more in common than we might have thought at first, and I do not want that to end over a lady that has come back for you.”

“And it will not,” he promised.

“Very well. Now, shall we suggest a game of cards?”

“I haven’t played in a while...”

“Well, if you wish to be more at ease with my family, there is no time like the present!”

He sighed, but he was smiling as he did so. He rose to his feet before helping her up too, and then they walked to the others.

“Is anyone interested in a game of whist, perchance?” He asked, to which everyone nodded, and they headed to a table.

“I shall go with the duke,” Jackie explained. “And then Elizabeth, you can go with Lord Greene.”

“Lucien,” the duke continued. “You can go with my mother.”

“I shall join them,” her father said. “So that the four of you can make your own game.”

Jackie gave her father a quick nod of gratitude, and the two groups split off.

“Oh,” Elizabeth said uncertainly, biting her lip. “I’m afraid that I do not know this game at all.”

“You shall be a quick study, I am sure,” the duke smiled. “First of all, you must take a card from this pack. We all will.”

They each took a card, and Elizabeth squealed.

“I have the king!” She exclaimed. “That is a good thing, is it not? Do I win?”

“You are the dealer,” Jackie laughed. “And the person with the second highest will be your partner.”

“That will be me, I suppose,” Lord Greene grinned. “For I have a queen.”

And so, the game began. Jackie had to admit that she also did not know how to play whist very well, but she covered that fact well. In fact, when in a team with the duke, she seemed to play better than she ever had before.

“My, Lady Jacqueline,” the duke smirked. “You are very good at this. It is no wonder you wanted to play cards.”

“Father and I used to play together,” she admitted. “I spent many nights in the drawing room with him, though we never played whist unless Mother was willing to join.”

“And I am most grateful for that,” Lord Greene laughed. “Because I would quite like to win a hand at some point.”

The four of them laughed, and Jackie noticed that Elizabeth was watching them.

“The two of you work well together,” Elizabeth said at last. “It is lovely to see, I have to say.”

Jackie couldn't help but wonder if she meant this, or was trying to push them together for her own sake. Then she realized that they had won the third hand, and therefore the game, and knew that it had to be the former option.

“Brilliant,” the duke whispered.

“Again,” Elizabeth commanded. “And this time, the two of you are forbidden from working together!”

The four of them laughed before dealing once more, and this time as they went to choose their cards, Jackie’s hand brushed the duke’s. He did not flinch at her touch, nor did she, but she couldn’t help but wonder if he felt the same rush that she had done.

She also hoped that nobody else could see the effect that it had had on her. She was not ashamed, far from it, but not much time had passed at all, and she wanted to be sure before she said anything to anyone, especially her sister.

She could not allow Elizabeth to get her hopes up if it would all be for nothing in the end.

“It isn’t fair,” Elizabeth muttered as they retired to their bedchambers. “Could you not have allowed me to win even one game?”

“Certainly not. It would take away from your victory if I simply gave it to you. Think of how happy you shall be if one day you do win, knowing it was all your own doing?”

“If?” She echoed, laughing, and the two ladies continued on their way until they reached Elizabeth’s room.

Suddenly, Elizabeth grabbed Jackie’s sleeve and pulled her back.

“I wanted to thank you,” Elizabeth continued. “For trying. I know that this is not what you wanted, but you are trying to see it through regardless and I truly am grateful for

that.”

“Of course,” Jackie nodded, pulling her sister into an embrace. “I would do anything to take care of you.”

Especially, she thought, when it benefited her so well too.

Chapter 15

Relief.

That was all that Philip could feel as he closed his eyes that night; relief that Lady Jacqueline had given him another opportunity, that Lady Ophelia's sudden appearance had only brought them closer, and that Lady Jacqueline had not run off with Lucien.

With every moment he spent with her, Philip could feel himself being drawn more and more to her. He had found himself wanting nothing more than to simply be around her that evening, which was what had possessed him to go to dinner.

It had been a frightening prospect, and he did not know what to expect when it came to her family, but he was grateful to see that they accepted him, even if they needed a moment to adjust. Only her father had seen him before, when planning the courtship, and even then he was wearing his mask.

And then they touched during the game. It was only their hands lightly brushing, not enough to make even the most stalwart matrons blush, but even so he had felt the strangest thing wash over him. Fortunately, one look at Lady Jacqueline proved that she had felt it too, and he was pleased to know that he was not the only one affected.

Then came a sense of unease as he lay in his bed. How could he prove to her how serious he felt about their courtship?

He had gone to dinner, and it had taken a lot of courage and made him feel quite

uncomfortable, but he was pleased to have done so by the end of the evening. Then again, it did not mean that he was ready to go out into the world and bare his scars for all to see. It was easier to hide in the shadows than step into the sun, and he preferred it that way.

It was strange for him to have even shown his face to Lady Ophelia, who had seen it before, but he had not cared about what she thought. His only intentions were to prevent her from saying something unkind to Lady Jacqueline.

He had been thinking a lot about his behavior around Lady Jacqueline of late, and he wondered if it was truly nothing more than mere gratitude for what she had done for him, or if it was something more.

He shook the thoughts from his head. She had only been there for a few days. Was that truly enough time to like someone so much that he could feel jealousy at the sight of her with another man?

He wanted to do something for her.

“And where are we going?” She asked the next morning, laughing as she followed him out into the gardens, a maid in tow to act as chaperone.

“Is it not evident from the basket?” He asked, lifting it up pointedly.

“It could be a few things. Perhaps you have simply brought a lot of candles to light and put out, and that is our activity for the day.”

“Would you be entertained by that?”

“I do not believe so, no.”

“Ah, that is a shame indeed, for that is precisely what I had in mind for the two of us.”

He kept up the act until they had reached their destination, and he then placed the basket on the ground and allowed her to open it. She gasped at the picnic that he had prepared; little sandwiches, biscuits, cakes, and drinks.

“I must thank your cook when I see her,” she said wistfully.

“You can thank me whenever you please.”

“What?”

“I could not sleep last night,” he explained. “It had been rather eventful, and I needed something to do with my hands this morning. Granted, I did not bake the bread, but other than that this was all made by myself.”

“But these—these are my favorites!” She said in surprise as she searched the contents. “How did you know?”

“Your sister knows everything about you,” he smirked. “And she was more than happy to tell me what you would like to eat.”

“You truly have thought of everything, haven’t you?”

“I hope so, yes. I have been wanting to do something for you, and this is what I settled on.”

“You have done exactly the right thing,” she smiled, serving him some of the food he had prepared. “Did you include any of your own favorites?”

He had not been expecting that question.

“No,” he replied. “I was only thinking of yours, though I must say I do enjoy them a lot.”

“Oh, in that case, what are your favorites?”

He certainly had not expected that question. Nobody had ever cared to ask about his preferences other than his own parents, even when he was out in society, whole , as he so often put it. It had never been about what others could do for him, only what he could do for them, and he hadn't minded that too much. When a man was in a position such as his, it was only fair that he gave back, after all. But then, as he watched his friends disappear when he needed them, he realized that he truly did need people to care about him.

And now here she was.

“I suppose I am partial to cucumber,” he said quietly.

“Cucumber?” She echoed. “Do you not like anything a little more adventurous?”

“I enjoy jam.”

“Which kind is your favorite?”

“Strawberry.”

“Ah, mine is blackberry. You knew that, of course.”

“Yes, and your sister explained that you do not like too much of it. A thin layer, so that the bread has a flavor but nothing more.”

“Precisely! If there is too much then it is too sweet. I cannot stand it.”

“Then I swear never to forget that,” he promised. “What else might you enjoy, picnic food aside?”

“Well, music, as you know, though I do also truly enjoy literature. I did not think to bring the book I am reading right now, but thus far I have been far too busy to read it. I can look forward to seeing it again upon my return, though!”

“Which book is it?”

“It is Waverley by Sir Walter Scott. I am thoroughly enjoying it, though I am barely even a quarter of the way through it.”

“I have read that before! It was the first thing that I read after the accident. It is truly an incredible story, you will love it.”

“Do you like to read?”

“I am a reclusive man that scarcely ever leaves his household. Other than playing the pianoforte and handling my county, what else is there for me to do?”

She laughed, and then sipped her lemonade.

“If I ask you something,” she said carefully. “Do you promise not to mock me?”

“I shall do my utmost not to, but it is entirely dependent on your question.”

“As a duke, are you taught different languages?”

“I certainly was, yes.”

“But is that because you are a duke, or because your parents ensured that you had many tutors?”

“It is vital that dukes speak many languages. We never know who we might have to meet, as the King and Queen know people in various countries, and so we must be able to communicate with them.”

“I never truly had a need to learn them, but I adore French and Latin.”

“I am fluent in both. I also enjoy Spanish, though I cannot claim to be perfect at it.”

“What are your favorite words?”

“I wish you would stop making me wonder about these things.”

“You need not answer,” she smirked.

“Oh, no, I certainly will,” he replied, thinking for a moment. “For French, I would say it is *escorce* . It means the bark of a tree. As for Latin, I would say *prodigiosus* , meaning something unnatural and wonderful. And for Spanish, it is *azacán* .”

“What does that mean?”

“It is a word for someone who is particularly anxious about their responsibilities or business.”

She seemed to like that one the most.

“I may never meet the King and Queen’s prestigious guests from foreign lands,” she said with a gentle laugh. “But I do think it would be helpful to speak a second language with someone, so that we could use it around others, so that they would not

know what we were discussing.”

“Then we can make your French even better and do that,” he suggested, to which she nodded.

“These are truly delicious,” she sighed, biting into a cream cake. “If you ever decide that a dukedom is not for you, you would make an excellent baker.”

“If only I had such a choice.”

“Yes, of course. My apologies, I do not mean to remind you of your role.”

“You need not apologize. I am incredibly fortunate for my place in society, and I would not trade it for anything.”

He wanted to take her seriously, but he saw the cream on the corner of her lips, and it distracted him entirely. He gestured to the corner of his own mouth, and she tried to wipe it away, but she missed it. He chuckled, doing it a second time, but this time—when she did not get it—he gave in and leaned forward, placing his hand gently on her face to wipe it away himself.

He froze.

“I do apologize,” he said quickly. “I should not be taking liberties with you like that.”

But she was giggling, a blush creeping across her cheeks, and he had to admit, if only to himself, that he was not sorry in the slightest.

“It is fine,” she assured him. “You did not do anything that I did not want you to do.”

“Is that to say that you deliberately did not clean it away yourself?”

“It is to say that a lady of my age is typically able to remove cream from her lips.”

His heart thudded, the heat of her skin still lingering on his fingers. She was far more intelligent than any lady he had ever met, a quick wit, just as his mother was, and he loved it about her. He had never wanted a wife that would simper and fan herself demurely, and she was proof of this. If anything, he wanted to be kept on his toes—he had to be.

The sun was high when they left for the picnic, but it was beginning to dip beneath the trees, the sky turning red. He saw Lady Jacqueline looking at the sky, sighing.

“I ought to return to the house,” she said begrudgingly. “It will be dinner soon, and I do not wish to be late.”

“No, of course not,” he replied, hating the fact that time passed.

“Will you be joining us again tonight?”

“I believe so, though I shall have a few things to take care of before I make my appearance, namely returning this basket.”

“I can help you, if you wish.”

“Do not worry, I can do it. You go and prepare for dinner, and I shall see you later.”

He hated that he had not accepted her request, but he refused to have her help him when she was his guest, or even the lady he was courting. It simply would not do.

She left with her maid, and he watched her go before lying back in the grass and closing his eyes. It had been a wonderful afternoon, and once more he had found himself alone after spending time with Lady Jacqueline, and missing her greatly. He

could not wait to see her again, hence he would go to dinner, but he also knew that he would be quite occupied in the coming days, and he was already suffering over the matter.

He would, however, find time for her. He promised himself that he would, because she had been gone a few mere moments, maid in tow, and already he longed to see her again.

And he still could not believe that he felt that way.

Chapter 16

Words did not come easily, but Jackie found herself longing to hear them.

The duke was very busy for the following few days, even though he made a point of at least speaking to her each day. She snatched the moments when she could, and enjoyed each moment, but she found herself sitting in the drawing room and waiting for him to pass, only to be disappointed for the better part of her day.

Fortunately, she had a lot to think about. She had thoroughly enjoyed their picnic, and she could not stop thinking about how much effort he had made to make it perfect for her. Every action he took was the right one since they met the second time around, and she had to admit that she truly had become very much attracted to him.

It was something that, in any other circumstance, she would have told Elizabeth, but there was too much pressure to do so in that moment. Too much positivity would only lead her sister to think that the matter was settled, and she would marry the duke, but she could not say that as yet; he was yet to tell her with words that he really liked her.

It was a foolish thing to wait for with all of the effort that he had been making, but she had to hear it from him before she could do anything further.

Elizabeth, meanwhile, seemed rather withdrawn that morning.

“Is something wrong?” Jackie asked, and instantly she wore a smile.

“No, nothing at all, Sister,” she replied. “Have you seen the duke today?”

“Not as yet, no. I do hope that he finishes his work soon, though.”

“You truly have taken a liking to him, haven’t you?”

“Something of the sort, yes, though I cannot be too sure of it for now.”

“I can,” she smirked. “The two of you already look to be the very picture of affection, whether the two of you can see it or not.”

“Be that as it may,” Jackie laughed, rolling her eyes. “It is still early days. It could be a while before we know for sure.”

At that, Elizabeth’s smile faltered.

“Elizabeth,” Jackie sighed. “We can play this game of yours where you clearly have something troubling you and I pretend not to notice, or you can be honest with me now. What has happened?”

Wordlessly, Elizabeth handed her a letter addressed to Lord Greene. Jackie gave her a look, but Elizabeth motioned to it.

“It is open.”

Jackie read the letter tentatively, feeling as though she was greatly invading Lord Greene’s privacy, and she quickly had to fold it away again, understanding it completely.

His parents had written to him, giving him an ultimatum; either he returned home that day, or they would have no choice but to take further action.

“Where did you find this?” Jackie asked.

“I did not take it from his room, if that is what you are suggesting,” Elizabeth sighed.

“He is not the organized sort, and he left it in the hallway by the door, no doubt having read it as soon as he received it.”

“But it is private.”

“It pertains to me, and so I am allowed to see it.”

“Elizabeth—”

“Can you please give me support instead of telling me that I have done something wrong? You can call it whatever you like, but it is cruel. I do not deserve to be spoken about like this.”

“Admittedly, I did not read that far.”

“A wanton, they called me,” she explained, close to tears. “A no-good girl that is two steps away from the streets, desperate to cling to his wealth. They have forbidden the match, and if he does not do as they say then they will come here and drag him away. No doubt they will threaten to strip him of his position as heir, too.”

“They cannot,” Jackie said gently. “Whether they like it or not, he is their eldest child, only son if I remember correctly, and therefore they need him.”

“But they are angry. People are capable of frightening things when they are angry. I am frightened that they will burn everything to the ground if it means they do not have their family name tarnished by me. Maybe they are right, and he should find a lady that is more respectable.”

Suddenly, none of the secrets mattered at all and Jackie wanted to make Elizabeth feel more secure, even if it would have been easier to agree and leave with her.

“Elizabeth, what they have said about you has nothing to do with you and everything to do with them. If a duke’s mother can take no issue with us, something with far more to lose than a mere earl, then we clearly are not the issue.”

“That does not signify. The only important thing is that they hate me, and I need them to like me, and it will never happen.”

“You do not need their approval. Lord Greene is a man, and he can do as he pleases, and I have seen the two of you together. You are clearly in love, and he would do anything for you. Do try not to be so burdened by this.”

Elizabeth took a deep breath, nodding sadly.

“I will do all that I can, but this is frightening, Jackie. I do not want to lose him, especially after what it has led to with you. I cannot have your sacrifice be in vain.”

Jackie thought about that as she headed to the library that afternoon, hoping to forget her troubles for a while with a book. Knowing that the duke enjoyed reading made her quite confident that she would find something enjoyable, which was precisely what she needed; a distraction from the fact that she was under more pressure than ever to marry the duke.

She liked him, she truly did, but she had to look out for herself, and something in her told her that she could not do anything until she knew for sure that Lady Ophelia would no longer be an issue.

After searching for a moment, she settled on a book that she had never heard of before and began to read it. It was written well, but it took her a while to understand

what was happening, and just as she began to lose herself in the story, she heard footsteps approaching. She had nestled in a corner and kept to herself, and that was a luxury when she saw who had arrived.

It was the duke, and he was looking around as if searching for something or someone, and she wondered if he had come looking for her. She could have called out to him, and she thought that perhaps she should have, but she was far too busy watching him.

He was a powerful man, tall and broad, but he moved with an uncommon grace in comparison with other men. Not only that, but he was incredibly handsome. He had his scars, but she no longer even noticed them when she looked at him. She was far too busy looking at the rest of him to see them. He also had beautiful eyes, and she was hoping that he would turn to look at her so that she could see them, but he did not.

It was only when she saw him about to leave the room that she realized she had missed his presence, and wanted to speak to him whether she had been what he was looking for or not.

“Your Grace?” She called out, and he snapped to attention in an instant, his face lighting up.

She felt quite strange inside when he did that, and she knew that she was flustered by his presence.

“There you are!” He said brightly. “I have returned from my work, and I wanted to see you. I was hoping that you would be here. I have a trunk with me, and it is filled with books that I was wondering if you might wish to look at?”

“That sounds wonderful.”

“Then we shall go right this instant. It is in the parlor room—would you like some tea, perhaps? It won’t be as extravagant as the picnic, but I’m sure Cook can put something simple together for us while we look.”

He was practically trying to make a start for the door the moment she rose to her feet, and she was enamored by how excited he was to show her the books. Chuckling gently, she followed him to the parlor to see Elizabeth and the Dowager Duchess sitting there, though they were not interested in the trunk. Elizabeth seemed to be in better spirits, at least, and was chattering away to the Dowager.

“Now,” the duke explained as he knelt in front of the trunk. “These are some of my personal favorites. I had them placed in storage after what happened to me, and since then I could not bear to look at them, but now... It feels like the right time.”

He opened the trunk and immediately Jackie wished to reach out and take one. They were beautiful, each one in pristine condition, and it was the only reason why she could hold back; she did not wish to damage them.

“They seem quite entertained,” Elizabeth said in the background. “They truly are so similar, are they not?”

“Yes, quite,” the Dowager Duchess replied. “It is lovely to see, even if you and I might not understand it.”

Jackie was going to respond, but then she saw it. The very same book that she had left behind. Without thinking, she reached out to it, just as the duke did the very same thing, and her ungloved hand touched his once again. It was more intense to feel his skin against hers, and her entire body came alight. She looked to him to apologize, but he was already looking at her.

“You are so beautiful,” he whispered.

She had no control over the shade of red her cheeks turned.

“Might we take a walk?” he suggested. “Until the tea arrives, of course.”

She nodded, and the two of them left the household.

“The book is yours,” he began gently. “For as long as you are here, and even longer if you wish.”

“I have my own at home,” she reminded him. “Although I thank you for it. How did you know it was there?”

“It is as I told you, it is one of my favorites.”

“But it was the first one that you read again. How did it end up with the others?”

“I... For a long time after the accident, I was afraid that it would happen a second time. I had all of the things I care most about hidden away so that no harm would come to them. Thankfully, nothing more ever did come to pass, but still I could not stand to look at them.”

“Well, now you can,” she smiled. “That is an incredible step, Your Grace.”

“Is it in your nature to be this supportive?”

“I like to think so. I want to be something good to people.”

“You most certainly are. I enjoy the time I spend with you, but more than that I find myself liking the person that I am when I am around you. Lady Jacqueline, I truly do really like you.”

He seemed nervous to have said it, but Jackie adored it. It had been precisely the confirmation that she had needed.

“You should know that I feel exactly the same about you,” she said gently, watching the smile crawl across his face. “You should also know something else.”

“And what might that be?”

“I do not want you to call me Lady Jacqueline anymore. I would prefer Jackie, just as my sister calls me. I have always preferred it.”

“I can do that,” he grinned. “So long as you call me Philip in return.”

“I most certainly can,” she breathed.

She never would have expected their courtship to go so far on its own, but she could not stop smiling, knowing that she would not have changed a thing about it.

Chapter 17

“You do not typically visit me this often,” Philip said, an eyebrow raised.

It was true; Lucien was his closest friend, but that did not mean that they saw each other more than once a week. It was especially difficult to see one another when taking into account that Philip refused to leave the house.

“I am aware that you have guests, and that this might be a more difficult time for you, and so I wanted to make sure you were coping with it all.”

“I suppose you are right, although I have to say this is all going far better than I had expected.”

“I told you there would be nothing to worry about, did I not?”

“Yes, as did my mother, and I owe you both an apology for not listening to you sooner.”

It was true; now that his moment of jealousy toward his friend had dissipated, he had been able to see things a little more clearly, and he realized that he truly was happy for the first time in years. His budding relationship with Lady Jacqueline— Jackie, as she had requested, was truly beginning to blossom and he could not believe his good fortunes.

“In other news,” Philip continued, “how is the town?”

“The usual scandals. Lady Fitzharding, for example, is rumored to be with child though she is not promised to any gentlemen. The Warburtons shall be hosting a ball next month, it appears, for they were seen in the florist requesting dozens of bouquets, and Lady Ophelia—”

Philip winced.

“I would rather you knew than did not,” Lucien explained. “She has been asking after you a lot. I saw her this morning, and she asked me how you are. She feels genuine remorse for what she did, I believe.”

“That is none of my concern. She can feel as much remorse as she pleases, but I feel no burning desire to accept any of it.”

“None at all?”

“Why should I? I would much sooner leave it all where it belongs, in the past and forgotten about. I have much greater things to look forward to.”

“My, it certainly is good to see you so optimistic about things.”

“What can I say? Jackie has changed me.”

“Jackie?”

“Lady Jacqueline,” he explained. “We have agreed to call each other by our first names now.”

“Ah, that is a large step to take. Are the two of you prepared for that?”

“It feels like the right time. She is already a good friend to me, and she feels the same

way about me, and so why shouldn't we do what we feel is good for us both?"

Lucien did not seem convinced, but when it came to Jackie, Philip did not care too much as to what high society deemed acceptable. After all, who was there to witness any improprieties?

"She is a very interesting lady, is she not?" Lucien continued. "She told me that she was burdened with the upbringing of her sister when their mother died, and my heart broke for her. It is such a shame that she was never able to fully debut for longer than a year, because I am of the opinion that she could have had her pick of the gentlemen."

"Certainly, though it seems to have worked in my favor that she did not. She also seems very content in her choice. She told me that she does not regret a thing."

"She truly is selfless. That must be where her beauty comes from. I have always said that a lady's beauty comes from the amount of kindness she shows to others."

Philip did not like how complementary Lucien was about Jackie, but he had to admit that he agreed with every word and so he paid it no mind. He tried not to, at least.

"Where is she, on that note?" Lucien asked, and again that cloud of doubt came to Philip. "I was hoping to greet her while I was here."

"I do not know. She and I tend to do as we please until we find one another. That is, of course, I have planned something for the two of us. In fact, I was going to do so tomorrow, a walk around the property."

"I certainly enjoyed my walk with her," he smirked. "And it is a shame that you do not know of her whereabouts. I would have known her exact location at all times if I were you."

“Well, unlike you, I prefer to give a lady her freedom, and if she comes to me then it is all the better as it is proof that she truly wishes to be around me.”

“Yes, dukes tend to have that luxury,” he joked.

“I hope I am not intruding, Your Grace,” Jackie’s voice came as she entered.

“Not at all!” He smiled, noticing that she was carrying a tray of biscuits with her.

In truth, he had been hoping that she would not come to see him until Lucien had left, but he did not mind too much. After all, it was an excuse to see her, and he would take as many of those as were offered to him.

“Oh!” She gasped. “My apologies, Philip. I did not know that you had company.”

“Lady Jacqueline,” Lucien greeted her with a smile. “We were only just discussing your whereabouts. What have you been doing today?”

“I was in the gardens with Elizabeth,” she explained, eyeing the biscuits she had brought. “Would you like one, too?”

Lucien grinned in a way that Philip had not seen before, and then he pulled out a chair for Jackie.

“Sit with us,” he offered. “We are not discussing anything of any real importance. Nothing that cannot be for your ears, at least!”

“I always have wondered what you men discuss when us ladies are not around,” she laughed as she sat down, Lucien pushing the chair back in for her.

“And you must go on wondering,” he replied.

“Truly, that is such a shame.”

“What were you doing in the gardens?”

“Well, my sister and I used to love walking together. Before we debuted, we would circle our grounds for hours, talking about everything and nothing all at the same time. It has been one of my favorite memories for a long time now.”

“Then it is no wonder that you walked with me so easily,” he smiled. “It is second nature for you.”

“Until my stumble, that was. Thankfully, I did not fall completely.”

Philip felt rather bitter that he had not been the one to catch her, nor the one to suggest that she sat with them, nor the one that pushed her chair in. Lucien had done all of those things for him, and he could not help but resent him for that, even if he did not blame him. He was only being polite, was he not? Even so, he did not like the way he had become invisible from the moment Jackie had appeared.

He also did not like the way he had brought her into their conversation so quickly.

“We should promenade again,” Lucien suggested.

“That would be lovely! I could bring my sister along, as well as Lord Greene. You shall join us too, of course, Philip.”

Was he already an afterthought?

“I need not come with you if you do not wish,” he replied quietly, and she looked back at him with a most puzzled expression.

“I did not say you last as if I had not thought to invite you,” she smiled. “It is simply that your presence is a given in my mind. I cannot imagine doing anything social without you there.”

“Even a ball?” Lucien suggested. “Because you shall be fighting a losing battle if you wish to attend one with him. He cannot stand them.”

“Well, perhaps it is time that I try and enjoy them again,” Philip argued. “I enjoyed them once before. Who is to say that I cannot learn to like them again?”

Jackie’s eyes sparkled.

“I would so love to attend one with you! I do not wish to push you, however. We can do things as and when you are ready for them.”

Philip could not help but smile; if Lucien was trying to test Jackie’s affections, it certainly was not going to work. She was talking as though she saw a future with him, and he could not believe his luck.

“Oh! I must go,” she said suddenly. “I have left Elizabeth in the parlor, and I promised her that I would return immediately.”

“Give her my regards,” Philip smiled, and she nodded politely before rushing away once more.

“Truly, she is a gift,” Lucien commented after she left.

“Why did you do that?”

“Do what?”

“Talk to her so much. I barely got a word in.”

“We were having a conversation, Philip. You were more than welcome to participate.”

“Except that when I did, you made cutting comments. What was that all about?”

“It was in jest. Besides, the young lady clearly saw no harm in it. She said she wishes to attend a ball with you, for a start. You need not be so sensitive at all times. It would be far better for your health.”

“Lucien, if there is something I need to know, you must tell me.”

“There is nothing at all that I must tell you. You have found yourself a good lady, and you should feel as lucky as you are. There is nothing more to it. She is a friendly young lady, and I enjoy making conversation with her, and there should be no reason for you to feel threatened by that.”

“I do not feel threatened,” he lied. “But after what happened with Lady Ophelia, I have to admit that I am rather on edge about falling in love again.”

“Then perhaps it is not the right time for you to do so.”

“No, it most certainly is. In case you are yet to notice, I truly do like Lady Jacqueline, and I am inclined to believe that she feels the same way for me.”

“Then there is no need for you to act like this,” Lucien pointed out. “You have every reason to be completely content with what you have, and if you mean what you say and you truly wish to leave Lady Ophelia in the past, then you must do so.”

Philip knew that his friend was right. He was being possessive, and he had no reason

to be; Jackie was nothing like Lady Ophelia, and he had to trust that, if they were ever going to have something between them.

Not only that, but Lucien was his friend, his only friend for some time. He had been nothing but a good and loyal person to him since they had met, and had stood by him through everything that had happened. He had no right, nor any reason, to accuse him of anything.

Besides, Lucien was an intelligent man of decent rank, and he was objectively very handsome. He could have his pick of any lady, and the only reason that he had not already chosen one was because he had been waiting for the perfect one to come along. He had his choice, so why would he choose to pursue someone that Philip was already courting? It simply did not make any sense to do so, and he had Lucien's word, and so he would have to believe it.

He would also have to find a way to ask Jackie to accompany him on a walk without making it seem as though Lucien had been a factor in it.

Chapter 18

Jackie thought that Philip's friend was a nice man, but she did not take much notice of him.

In truth, she was nice to him because she hoped to make a good showing of herself around people the duke respected, but outside of that she could not say that she was all too fond of him. He was far more direct than she was used to, as if he were a gentleman interrogating her at a ball, and she did not enjoy it too much, but she knew there was no harm in him and so she chose to ignore it.

After all, he certainly seemed to care about her thoughts a good deal, as any good friend would, and if she were to marry the duke then it was only right that she acquaint herself with his inner circle, even if that inner circle consisted of one friend and his mother.

"I enjoy the changing of the leaves," the duke noted as they walked the grounds.

"As do I," she replied. "Elizabeth has always hated it. She says it is as though we are watching the death of summer, but I do not see it that way. Perhaps it is because I enjoy the harvest in autumn too much."

"The harvest?"

"Yes, I have been running a small farm on our grounds for a few years, to help with saving some money here and there, and the autumnal produce has always been my favorite."

“I cannot believe that you have never told me that.”

“It is quite shameful,” she confessed. “I know that you are aware of my family’s situation, but it still does not make it any easier to talk about things. Even I forget just how dire things became.”

“I do not find it shameful. I find it admirable that you were able to do all of these things by yourself.”

“Well, you would be the first to see it that way.”

“And I am more than happy to be if it means that you do not see yourself as a commoner without class forever.”

Jackie appreciated his kindness, but she did not know how to handle the attention that he was giving her about her life back home. She forgot, at times, just how bizarre it truly was.

“Are you not joining the hunt?” she asked. “The nobility is supposed to.”

“I never have,” he explained. “I have never had a desire to kill for sport. The very idea seems cruel to me, especially when there are so many other ways to spend my time.”

It was then that Jackie realized how the duke treated others in general. Lady Ophelia had appeared out of nowhere, and he could have sent her away in an instant, but he had not shamed her. He was good to animals that could not help themselves. He was a good man, and it was a shame that nobody was able to see it given that he did not leave his estate.

His scars affected him greatly, she knew that—or rather, the way others perceive

them did, and she felt almost guilty about it. She knew that he deserved far better than to be hidden away. Scars did not fade entirely, and so this would be his life for as long as he allowed it to be.

And she would possibly be his wife.

Could she make peace with that? Could she be happy to have a husband that avoided the outside world while she wanted to see as much of it as possible? To her surprise, she decided she could. Philip was a good man, whom she liked a lot, and against all odds she was attracted to him. It was more than she could have hoped for upon her arrival.

“What did you expect you would be doing right now?” She asked, albeit clumsily.

“In what sense?”

“In the sense that... well, when I was a girl, and my mother was still alive, I dreamed of marrying and adventuring, just like in my books. We were never the most affluent family, but I sometimes wonder if I could still have had the means to if she had not passed, or if my father had not squandered it all.”

“That is a dream that you can still achieve one day.”

Jackie smiled, but she knew it would not be the case if they married. She could not very well travel alone, and it was clear that he would not accompany her.

“I suppose,” he continued, “I always wanted to be more like my father.”

“Lady Ophelia told me that it is a shame that I shall never meet him, and that he was wonderful.”

“He certainly was. He had this charisma that worked on everyone, no matter who they were. My mother told me once that the Queen herself called him a charmer—the Queen! I thought that I could do the same, threading that needle that he did so deftly, so that I was not known as a rake.”

“You were certainly never seen as that.”

“No, only ever as a recluse.”

She looked at him, his face fallen, and placed a hand on his sleeve.

“You need not ever tell me what happened to you,” she said gently. “I can see in your eyes just how much you lost without needing words to understand.”

“Do you truly not know?”

Jackie shook her head. There had been gossip about him, of course, but it had never been anything about how it had happened, only the aftermath. It was true, they referred to him as a scarred recluse that refused to see anyone, but there was never anything further beyond speculation.

“My apologies. I truly thought everyone was aware of it.”

“Others may be, but I never asked. It did not matter to me, for I tend not to meddle in the affairs of others.”

“Then I shall rectify that for you. It is not something that I am ashamed of. You see, years ago now, my father and I were reading in his study late at night. My mother came in, asking the two of us to go to bed, but we knew better than she did.”

He laughed sadly at that.

“It was something my father and I joked about. We never meant it, for my mother is highly intelligent, but we would tell her that we had ‘dukely matters of the utmost importance’ to tend to, even if it was a paper that had nothing to do with our dukedom, which it more often than not was.

We read by candlelight, and that night when my mother came in, we did our little routine and then I left a few minutes later. I was tired, in truth, and my mother often did come in at the right time.”

“Mothers always seem to know, don’t they?”

“More than we give credit for,” he sighed. “I fell asleep, but after what seemed like not much time at all, I awoke once more. My walls were peeling, and there was this strange smell... burning...”

Suddenly, it all began to make sense.

“My father had continued reading that night, until his body gave in, and he fell asleep at his desk. He knocked the candle onto the floor. He couldn’t have known that it would brush against the curtain, setting it alight. He couldn’t have known about anything that would transpire.”

Jackie had a hand to her mouth, imagining it all clearly.

“Did he...?”

“No, thankfully. I found my mother, and she had already escorted the staff out and exited into the gardens, but my father had not been so fortunate. He was still in the study when I got out, and the only thing in my mind was that I was not ready to lose him yet. I ran back inside.”

“That must have been so painful. You were so brave to do that.”

“We both sustained burns, but admittedly my condition was worse. Somehow, even though the fire had started in the study, it did not touch his desk for a good while, and so the only real trouble came when we tried to leave. He was a shorter man in his later years, and so I was able to cover his body with my own. He had some marks across his back, but nothing that he couldn’t recover from.”

“He must have been so grateful to you.”

“He was, until the day he died. Other people were sympathetic at first, but soon enough they gave up on me. I cannot say that I blame them. After all, no one would choose to be around such a gloomy person. The only exception was Lucien. He was the only one to truly care enough to stay with me.”

“And now I am here.”

“And now you are here, even though I am a shell of the man I once was and cannot give you what you deserve.”

“I like to think that I deserve happiness, and you have thus far given me that.”

“But I wish to give you more. I want to travel with you, so that you can do everything that you wish to.”

“Well, you can do that. You simply have to find the courage to do so. I believe we both do.”

“You make everything sound so simple.”

“Because I like to think that things are. If you want something, you have to do what is

necessary for it. There is no questioning that.”

“Do you ever regret it?” he asked. “Giving up your life to take over your household?”

“No more than you regret saving your father,” she explained. “It was never a question for me; they needed me, and so I was there and did what was necessary. That is what happened for you, is it not?”

“It was precisely that.”

“And so there are no regrets,” she smiled. “Things are the way that they are, and clinging to something we once wanted is not going to change that. I might never see the Americas, but I know that I have enough in my life without all of that. Besides, what if I did go, and I discovered that I loathed it entirely? It would have been a waste. I suppose, in that sense, I truly do not care that I might never have that dream.”

“All the same, perhaps we can start again? We can make new dreams and chase them, no matter what happens.”

Jackie liked the sound of that. She hadn’t truly believed she could attain any dreams since losing her mother, but the duke seemed so sure of himself that she could not help but believe in it.

She held out a hand as though they were making some sort of business transaction, and he laughed and shook it. She looked into his eyes, and couldn’t help but notice that there was something more there. There was attraction, of course, but something even more than that. She could feel how much he had meant his words. It was a pact, but more than that it was a promise, and she intended to keep it.

“I am going to find my happiness,” she said firmly. “I am capable of doing so, and nobody can stop me. That is my new dream.”

“And I am going to be the man I was before, except perhaps a little wiser. I will not attempt to become my father, but be my own man. I will be and do everything that I have ever wanted.”

They both nodded, and there was that strange feeling that the duke had been stirring within her for a while now. She wished that she could put a name to it, but she could not. All that she knew was that she liked him a great deal, and something within her was telling her that it was, in truth, more than that.

And she wanted to believe in that, too.

Chapter 19

“The two of you seem quite content,” Philip’s mother noted at breakfast.

Philip was simply grateful that they were the only two in the room, for he was quite sure that she would have said it no matter who was in attendance.

“There is contentment on my part, to be sure,” he nodded.

“And hers. The two of you have been getting along beautifully of late, and there is no denying that there is something growing between you.”

“In which case I shall not deny it,” he smirked. “She is a good lady, Mother, and I’m starting to believe that she and I...”

He did not know how to say it in a way that would not have her setting a wedding date.

“You are falling for her, Dearest, aren’t you?”

“Hopelessly,” he sighed. “I cannot help myself. She is kind, and understanding, and never once has she shirked or shunned me for what I look like. Did you know that she did not know what happened to me at all? She never participated in the gossip surrounding it.

“You certainly seem to have stumbled upon a gem. You mustn’t let her slip away.”

He wanted to tell her that he would not, and that it was the last thing that he wanted to do, but at that moment Jackie and Elizabeth entered with their father, and nothing further was said.

That afternoon, he found Jackie painting outside. She was good, far better than she had suggested she was, and he couldn't help but admire her work. He wondered if she had always spoken down on herself while making her sister seem to be the better sibling, and he knew there had to be some truth to it.

It had been two months since her family's arrival, and it had quickly become a new normal for them. They were a part of the household, even her father, which he had not expected at all. Her family also seemed to be better with one another, and with one month to go Philip felt quite uncertain.

Not about Jackie, of course. There was another month before any final decisions had to be made, but he knew what he wanted. Nothing had ever been clearer to him; he wanted to marry her. Frankly, he was quite aware that he was in the midst of falling in love with her, and he couldn't bear the thought of letting her slip away.

"I can sense you there," she said suddenly, and he snapped to attention.

She had not turned away from her painting, but he could hear in her voice that she was smiling.

"I do apologize. I did not mean to intrude, but this is clearly a talent of yours."

"Thank you, Your Grace," she replied, turning around at last.

The sunlight reflected in her dark curls perfectly, and he had to force himself not to reach out and run his fingers through them.

“Do you always make yourself sound mediocre with things?” He asked. “Because you so often speak of yourself as though you are no good at most things, when here you are, making a beautiful landscape.”

“I prefer to let my actions speak for themselves. Besides, if I told you I was a brilliant painter, you would have all sorts of expectations.”

“And you would meet them, I assure you.”

She laughed gently at him.

“You know,” she said tentatively. “I have been told that there is to be a ball in October. An autumn masquerade ball, to be specific. I haven’t been to one since my first season. It feels like a lifetime ago.”

“I have been to a few. It was the only event that my mother could insist on my attendance at, as nobody would see me. It sort of ruined my argument when she said that.”

“Do you not miss such events?”

“I have come to see them as things that I attended, but not necessarily enjoyed. There is no harm in it, they are simply not for me.”

He noticed that she looked quite defeated at that, and panic rose in him.

“However,” he continued quickly. “That isn’t to say that I will never attend another. In fact, it would be quite an honor if you would join me there.”

“The honor would be mine,” she replied, her smile firmly back in place. “But only if you are certain. I do not want you to be uncomfortable.”

“Where is the harm in trying? I wish to make you happy, Jackie, and if simply attending a ball will do that for you, then I cannot refuse.”

He loved it when she smiled at him, and he wanted to make sure that was all she would ever do when in his presence.

“Your Grace,” his butler said, appearing behind them. “Lord Montague is here to see you.”

Philip almost groaned at the intrusion. He felt like a terrible friend after everything Lucien had done for him, but frankly he did not want to see him. His behavior had been strange of late, and he did not know what to do about it beyond ignoring it entirely, and so he hoped that he would be able to.

“Lady Jacqueline!” He greeted, merely giving Philip a nod. “My word, is that artwork yours?”

“It is nothing, My Lord,” she replied. “Just something I have been working on this afternoon while the duke tended to other matters.”

“How can there be matters to tend to other than yourself?”

There it was again, the strange insistence on speaking to her as if he was the one courting her.

“The duke and I,” Jackie continued, seemingly ignoring his comment, “were discussing the ball that you were telling me about. He will be accompanying me, if you can believe it.”

“Philip?” he said in surprise. “I have to admit, I hardly can. I attend several events each month, however, and so I will be more than happy to reacquaint the two of you

with it all.”

Philip noted that Lucien had been the one to tell Jackie about the ball, and he wondered why his friend had not discussed it with him himself, but he simply decided that Lucien had asked him to go to many events over the years, and he had refused each time. It was no surprise that he had given in.

Even so, he had to admit that Lucien was right; he did attend a lot of events, and Philip had missed out on a lot of life since the fire. He was not the socialite that Jackie would need in a reintroduction to society, and if he was put against Lucien on that front, he simply would not stand a chance. Regardless, the matter was settled and the three of them would be attending, because Philip could not give in that easily.

“Your Grace,” Lord Greene, asked him in the hallway that evening. “Might I have a word?”

Lord Greene had not had a real conversation with Philip since his arrival, and he had not minded that at all. His invitation had been extended more on Lady Elizabeth’s part than anything, so that she would have someone to entertain her beyond her sister but also so that he could be certain that their plan was not all for nothing. They truly were, however, quite in love with one another and so Philip was more than happy for him to stay.

They entered the study and Philip looked at him expectantly.

“I am aware that you know of the courtship between myself and Lady Elizabeth,” he began. “But I require someone to confide in that is not the lady herself. I cannot burden her with this.”

“Then I am all ears,” he nodded.

“It is my family. They have been threatening to cut me off if I dare stay with her, stripping me of my rights as heir, and I know that they are serious about it. I have been thinking about it, and I do not truly care what they do to me, but I... I want to give her a good life, and I cannot do so if I am left destitute.”

“I understand your predicament. It is incredible that you like her so much that you are even considering it.”

“I love her, Your Grace,” he sighed. “I cannot see myself ever marrying another, no matter what they say. I hate that I cannot fix it, given that my money is tied to my family, and so... so I cannot help her family in any real way that matters. I am at a loss.”

“Did you want me to handle matters?”

“No, I could not ask that of you. I am aware of the plan that you have with Lord Pemberton, and that is more than anyone could ever ask of you. I only wished to talk to someone about it, because this has been eating at me for too long now. I will find a way through this, I am sure.”

“You are not alone in this,” he promised. “If there is anything that I can do, you need only ask, and it will be done. I will do everything in my power to help the two of you, I assure you.”

Lord Greene seemed to like this, and believed Philip’s words. He nodded before thanking him and leaving, and Philip thought about the matter.

He already knew what he had to do, and it was the very same thing he had suggested to Jackie all that time before. He would pay off her father’s debt, thus restoring Elizabeth’s dowry, and then make it known in society that he held her family in the highest of regards. They would, at last, have the respect they deserved, and Lord

Greene's family could not then continue to refuse her for any real reason, and would have to concede.

That was what he hoped, at least.

"I have a plan," he explained to Jackie's father that night, when the two gentlemen were alone.

He was all ears, and when Philip explained it, he was quite sure that the man was close to tears. He could see nothing but gratitude in his face, and Philip realized that he did not hate him nearly as much as he had expected to. He was not a villain, only a man that had made too many mistakes. He could help them, and he was determined to.

"You are the best thing that ever could have happened for my daughter," he told Philip. "Rest assured that you have my blessing for marriage, even if that is not needed as yet."

"I appreciate it greatly," Philip replied. "I must say, I will not rush your daughter, but I do see a future with her. However, there is something that I must ask of you."

"Certainly, Your Grace. Anything."

"You cannot tell her, nor can you tell Lady Elizabeth, as she would be too quick to tell her sister about all of it. I cannot have that happen as yet. I do not want her to feel pressured into marrying me out of gratitude."

He knew that he and Jackie had already discussed it, but he also knew that Jackie thought duty to be one of the most important things for her to uphold. He could not have her feel as though her hand was being forced, not when he felt so close to falling for her completely.

Her father nodded, his smile still on his face.

“You have my word. I shall keep this between the two of us, and when you believe the time is right, remember that you need not ask me a second time if you can take my daughter as your wife. There is nobody in this world more deserving of her than yourself.”

With that, Philip was left alone once more to contemplate all that had happened, not least of all that, when all was said and done, he would be out in society again sooner than he had thought.

Chapter 20

It was only a ball, yet it would be one of the most important nights of Jackie's life.

She was sure of it as she wandered from shop to shop with Elizabeth and the Dowager Duchess. It had been at the latter's insistence, of course, but this time Jackie did not feel as much guilt as she had done the first time.

"Now, girls," the Dowager explained, "if it were up to me, the two of you would have chosen the designs for the gowns yourselves, but given how preoccupied the two of you have been, I thought it might be best if I handled the matter myself."

"That was most thoughtful of you," Jackie smiled. "And my sister and I shall adore whatever it is that you have chosen for us."

"Here is hoping!"

As they entered the shop, the seamstress was nowhere to be seen, but they could hear a rather sharp tone coming from nearby, one that Jackie had come to recognize all too well. They approached the voices, and even though Jackie did not want to listen in, she could not help herself.

"You cannot expect me to pay that much!" Ophelia thundered. "If you believe your work to be of that quality, then you are quite mistaken. Why, I have half a mind to tell my father of this behavior."

"You are the only customer of mine that takes issue with the price," she replied

gently. “Perhaps, if I am more than what you can afford, you might wish to try Madame Dupont.”

“I cannot use her! Her fashions are more akin to what my grandmother might have worn.”

As she said this, she turned to Jackie, looking her in the eye before flushing scarlet.

“Never mind,” she said quietly. “The price is not in question. Do what you must with the gown, for I simply must be perfect.”

“If that is what you want.” The seamstress nodded, turning her back and walking away.

Ophelia then strode over with a bright smile, as if they had not heard the commotion that she had caused.

“Good afternoon, how are you all?”

“We are well,” Elizabeth said shortly. “We are here for a fitting for our gowns, and yourself?”

Jackie nudged her sharply.

“Well,” Ophelia said slowly, as if trying to think of what to say. “I had the perfect gown for the ball, but it is from a few years ago now, and so I thought it best to bring it here to be fixed.”

“Why not purchase another gown?” The Dowager Duchess asked, and Jackie wondered if she had not heard the exchange between Ophelia and the seamstress.

“I did not wish to have too many gowns. It is far better to appreciate something you already have than to go chasing after something new, I believe.”

Jackie tried not to scoff—could Lady Ophelia hear the words as she spoke?

The three ladies seemed to simply blink at her, as if lost for words, before Elizabeth cleared her throat.

“I shall go first,” she said brightly. “Might you come and give me your opinion, Your Grace?”

The Dowager Duchess nodded, and the two scurried away. Jackie watched them leave, wondering just what had transpired between the two of them while she had been with the duke.

“Your sister is sweet,” Ophelia said gently. “I remember when I was her age, or at least when I had a spirit such as her own. I was so happy, about to marry my one love. Sometimes I wonder what might have been if we were not torn apart by such vicious circumstances.”

“And what might those circumstances have been?”

Jackie was no fool. She knew why Lady Ophelia had rejected the duke, but she wanted to know just how far her delusions led her. Surely, she did not think that what she had done was out of her hands, her control?

“We all make our mistakes, and we all have lapses in judgment. What hurts most is that the duke and I are soulmates, and we were pulled away from one another once before, and now here is someone else making some vain attempt to stand in our way.”

“Yes, vanity truly is a terrible thing. It is such a shame that it can break such a great

love so easily.”

“I disagree. I believe that nothing can come between a gentleman and his first love, no matter what happens. After all, a gentleman never forgets her.”

With a wry smile, Lady Ophelia left. Jackie stood there, watching her leave and feeling a burning in her throat. Whether she liked it or not, Ophelia was right. A man could never forget the first woman he fell in love with, so what would that make her?

She was not Ophelia, the daughter of wealthy nobility and a lady of renowned beauty, not anymore. She did not have the years of history with him, Ophelia did. Would she spend the rest of her life comparing herself to her?

Would the duke?

“Jacqueline,” the Dowager Duchess said gently, approaching her. “You must come and see your sister’s gown. It is exquisite! Then we can try yours too, yes?”

Jackie nodded and followed, but she no longer wished to be there. In truth, she did not know where she wished to be. Her sister was content with the duke’s mother, and the duke would be more than welcomed by another young lady. They were all living somewhere that she no longer felt like she belonged in, and there was only one thing to do about it.

She tried her own gown on, and she adored it. It was everything that she had ever wanted in a gown, and she couldn’t have been more grateful to the dowager for purchasing it.

She found the duke the moment they arrived home.

“Ah, Jackie!” he greeted. “I was going to come searching for you. I was hoping we

might have some tea, so that you could tell me about your afternoon.”

She nodded, and he led her away. She hated that she felt so insecure, because she had fallen for the duke, and she knew there was no escaping that. She wished that they had not seen Ophelia that day, even if she had enjoyed witnessing her flustered for that brief moment.

“Something is troubling you,” the duke said as they sat down. “And if it was my mother, you must accept my apologies. She is excited to have ladies around her again, that is all.”

“Your mother is wonderful,” she assured him. “And this afternoon was perfect. We adore our gowns, and I must thank you again for being so willing to attend a ball with me. I know that it is not something you typically would do.”

“Then what is on your mind? If the afternoon was lovely, and my mother was not wholly overbearing, and you are excited for the ball, why do you look so downtrodden?”

“We have already discussed the matter. Should I mention it again you will only be upset that I am still thinking about it.”

“Jackie, if something is causing you pain, I want you to tell me, even if it is the hundredth time. Please. I can assure you that I will not be upset.”

“Well... we saw Lady Ophelia today at the modiste. She and I were left alone, and she had some choice words for me.”

“And you paid heed to them? Jackie, she is—”

“You promised to listen to me.”

“Yes, yes of course. My apologies.”

“She first inferred that one shouldn’t replace something they cherished with something new, and then she told me outright that the two of you are still in love, torn apart by circumstances out of your control, and that I am in the way of your happiness.”

She could not believe what she was saying. From what she knew, it was not for a lady to be so forthcoming with a man, even one that could eventually become her husband. Not only that, but she was engaging in gossip about a lady he was in love with once. She looked at the duke, unsure of what he would say, and when she did so she saw that he was smirking.

“What is it?” She asked.

“I am not finding your trouble humorous,” he explained quickly. “And I understand your pain, truly I do, but did she truly say all of that without laughing?”

“She did, yes.”

“She is as skilled a liar as I thought. Jackie, it does not matter what she says to you. It is not the truth. I never loved her. I thought myself in love, long ago, but that simply was not the case. I was making the best out of an arrangement, and she was pretty enough, and so I let myself believe that I already loved her.”

“As opposed to this arrangement?” She asked, but she too was smiling.

“This is different. This was something that I arranged from the start. It was my idea and my choice, and what a good idea and choice it was. You had every right to turn me away. Ophelia did so after knowing me for years, and so nobody would have blamed you if you had done so after a mere few days.”

“I never would have done that.”

“I know, and that is why I—”

He stopped talking. Jackie looked at him, silently pleading with him to continue. She was unsure of what exactly she wished to hear, but she knew she wanted him to say something.

“I do not know if this is something I should say to you as yet. I have been trying for so long not to tell you, not wanting to pressure you into doing anything you do not wish to do.”

“There is no pressure,” she assured him. “Tell me what you wish to. No judgment will come from me, as I like to think it never has.”

“It never has.” He smiled at her. “Jackie, I have fallen for you. I want to say that I tried not to, because I wanted us to move as you wished, and I wanted to keep my feelings separate, but I could not. You are everything that I could ever want in a wife, in a friend. I have been sitting with all of these feelings, and I have not known what to do with them. I haven’t wanted to scare you away, but every time I have seen you, I have been on the very edge of confessing everything, and now...”

And now?

Jackie could hardly believe what she was hearing. She had thought that she was falling for him without reciprocation, yet here he was having felt the same. It was everything she wanted him to say, yet it was almost overwhelming. She looked at him eagerly, willing him to continue. She thought he might propose, and in spite of what she had first expected, she realized that was precisely what she wanted.

“And now I have to laugh at myself for how I treated you all those years ago.

Scolding myself as I do, of course, but if only I had known then that the time we'd spend together would be the happiest I would ever be."

It was not a proposal.

She was quite disappointed, but she could not complain. He had fallen for her, and thought of her as a wife, his wife. There was nothing to be upset by, all things considered, yet when she looked at him, he almost looked fearful of what he could do to her.

"Philip, I—"

"Your Grace," the butler said quickly rushing into the room. "I apologize sincerely for the intrusion, but your presence is required. Some farmers are at your door, some sort of dispute between the two of them."

Philip looked at her incredulously, and the two shared a small laugh before he had to leave.

They truly could not have a moment alone together, but it did not make her feel any negative way about it. How could she, after all? He had confessed the truth to her, and now she had to find a way to do the same.

Chapter 21

He had done it.

Philip had not expected to tell Jackie anything until the very last moment, not wishing to make her feel guilty into reciprocating, but he had to prove to her that he was serious. He could not bear how sad she looked when talk turned to Ophelia. He wished he had never met Ophelia to begin with if it meant Jackie would feel better.

Every word that he had said was the truth. He did adore her wholly, and when the visit was over, he would tell her that he truly did wish to marry her, if she would have him, of course. She was perfect, everything a wife and duchess should be, and the thought of having her around forever made him feel nothing short of ecstasy.

The fear of rejection, however, paralyzed him.

Fortunately, he did not have time to dwell on such terrible thoughts, for he had a dispute to settle. He had never had to do so before, and part of him wondered if that was the role of a duke, but nevertheless they had come to him, and so he thought it best to listen to them, at least.

“Good afternoon, gentlemen,” he greeted. “How can I be of assistance to the both of you?”

“Your Grace,” one began. “My family has been using our land for generations, and now this man has come to me stating that part of the property is his.”

“Because it is,” the other interrupted. “As there was an agreement between our great-grandfathers that the land could be borrowed, and it was never returned.”

“Purchased. He purchased it. It is therefore mine.”

Philip was unsure of precisely what to do, but he knew that his afternoon would be quite long indeed.

Eventually, after a long discussion that Philip did not wish to be a part of, the two gentlemen came to the agreement that no change needed to be made at all, for it would be mutually beneficial if the owner of the land received crops from the other. He wondered if he had been required for such a conclusion to be reached, but he was pleased that there had been one, nonetheless.

It was simply a shame that it had to interrupt his time with Jackie. He had to speak to his mother, and he found her sitting in a drawing room.

“Mother,” he said suddenly, appearing in the doorway. “Might we have a word?”

He needed to tell someone about what had happened between himself and Jackie, and he could not bring himself to speak to Lucien about it. His behavior has been strange, and he did not know how to feel about that. His mother, however, was all too happy to hear it all.

“You seem rather tired, Dearest,” she said gently, and he chuckled.

“It has been a long few hours with those two farmers.”

“At least it is settled now, and you did a wonderful job doing so.”

“I am certainly not used to handling such matters.”

“You will be in time. Now, what did you wish to talk about?”

“It is Lady Jacqueline. You must promise not to take it too far, but I have fallen for her, and I have told her as such.”

He should have made her promise first. Immediately, she began to cry, the smile on her face a mile wide.

“Oh, Philip, this is wonderful! I knew it was only a matter of time before the two of you confessed your feelings to one another.”

“She has not reciprocated.”

“What do you mean?” She asked, brow furrowed.

“She did not have time to,” he explained. “We were interrupted by those farmers, and so I had to leave.”

“Well, she shall tell you in time. I am sure of it, for I have seen how she looks at you. We all have; the two of you have not been as discreet as you might have thought.”

Philip wanted to believe that his mother was right, and that Jackie truly did feel the same as he did, but until she said it herself, he could not trust it too much.

“I hope that you are right, Mother. I truly did not expect to feel this way, not this quickly at least, but now I cannot believe that it has taken me so long to say something.”

“Then we must celebrate! I shall arrange everything, and make it a most grand affair. My son is in love!”

“No!” he gasped. “No, not as yet. We must wait until she has told me herself that she feels the same way. I shall not make you wait forever.”

In spite of his promise, she seemed quite disappointed.

“I am so happy for you, Dear,” she smiled. “But you have to trust it. I cannot be excited enough for the two of us.”

“Are you certain of that? You seem to be close enough to it.”

She laughed gently, placing a hand gently on his shoulder.

“I suppose you are right. Very well, we shall wait a little while longer, but you cannot blame me if I am so ecstatic that I give it away too soon!”

“We have a deal,” he promised, before the two of them left for dinner.

Lucien was already seated there.

“Oh!” Philip’s mother gasped. “Good evening. My son did not inform me of your attendance this evening.”

“If I were aware of it, I might have.”

“My apologies,” Lucien smiled. “It slipped my mind to tell you. I suppose I am here so often that I was confused with another time.”

“You certainly are here a lot,” Philip nodded.

“Not to worry,” his mother smiled, taking her seat. “Cook will be able to prepare something for you. It is as you say, you are here so often that she likely plans for your

arrival in advance.”

Lucien was smirking at him. Philip did not understand what he was doing at all. He was not there for him, that much was clear when Jackie entered, and he changed his seat to the one beside her. Fortunately, Philip’s seat was at the head of the table, and Jackie had chosen a seat beside him, so Lucien could not block him out completely.

Not that easily, at least, but he had other ways.

“My, Lady Jacqueline,” Lucien said kindly to her. “You look wonderful this evening.”

“Thank you, My Lord,” she replied. “I must admit, I was unsure of the new gowns at first, but they have made me far happier. It’s strange, for it is only a dress, but it makes me happy.”

“You certainly seem happy this evening. Would it happen to have anything to do with anyone here?”

She flashed Philip a smile, and it was precisely what he needed.

“There might be a correlation,” she replied. “Though I must say, being here has made me quite content all around.”

“As you deserve to be. I would hate for a lady such as yourself to be unhappy.”

Philip blinked. Once again, his friend had come to visit and only taken any notice of Jackie. It did not make any sense to him; Lucien was supposed to be his friend, not Jackie’s. She did not seem to notice what Lucien was doing, and Philip wondered if that was simply because there was nothing to notice at all.

“Then it is a good thing that I have been very well kept here.”

“And it is my hope that you will find a gentleman to make that continue.”

Philip shot him a look. For all intents and purposes, as far as Lucien was concerned, Jackie had found a gentleman. The purpose of her visit to begin with was to meet Philip and marry him, even if that was not what had happened on her part. They were courting, and Lucien knew that, yet here he was acting as though she was not already spoken for.

Dinner continued with Lucien focusing all of his attention on Jackie, and by the time it ended Philip had reached his limit.

“Might you join me in the study for a brandy?” He asked Lucien, as everyone else left for the drawing room.

“Might it be best for us to join your guests?”

“We can do so afterward. I require a word.”

Lucien sighed and followed him, and when they reached the study Philip poured two glasses of brandy before sighing himself.

He did not want to have a conversation of this nature with a friend.

“I would prefer not to speak around this issue,” he began. “So I shall ask you outright. What is the purpose of you coming here to only speak to Lady Jacqueline?”

“That is not the purpose of my visits. I would have thought that my friend of many years would think better of me.”

“I want to, but it is difficult to do so when I cease to exist the moment you see her. You come here and speak with her more than is normal for an unmarried gentleman to a lady who is spoken for.”

“You can see it that way if you wish, but I am simply trying to learn more about the girl that you are showing an interest in. She and I ought to have a friendship of some kind if the two of you are going to continue your courtship, should we not?

“Not at the expense of ours, no.”

“Philip, the only thing coming between us right now is your jealousy. There is no need for you to be so insecure that you accuse me of acting unbecoming with a lady.”

“I am not accusing you of anything. I am simply asking you why you feel the need to act this way when she is around, because you have never done that before. You were not this interested in knowing Lady Ophelia, for example, and we were engaged.”

“That is because I did not like her, but I had to bite my tongue around her because you were so smitten.”

Philip was unsure of what to say to that. In the aftermath of all that had happened, he did notice that Lady Ophelia was not the kind lady that he had thought her to be, and so it was no surprise to him that others saw through her act.

“All I am asking,” he sighed. “Is that you do not forget that other people exist when you are around her.”

“I do not forget, and it is not my fault if she is the most interesting one in the room. You should be pleased that I am making such an effort to get to know her, not making me feel as though I am doing something that I am not. It is not fair, especially after everything that I have done for you.”

“Very well, I understand,” Philip conceded. “If your intentions are pure, then all I can say is that I am grateful for your efforts. Now, shall we join the others?”

“I shall have to decline the offer. I do not wish to say or do the wrong thing again, and have you be angry with me when I am only trying to be polite. I shall see you sometime soon.”

“Lucien, I apologize if you have taken offense—”

“If? You bring me here and accuse me of trying to steal a lady away from you, and you are unsure as to whether or not you have offended me? I do not have time for this, Philip. I will come and see you again when you have a better head on your shoulders.”

He left without another word, and Philip finished his glass before joining the others in the drawing room.

“Hello again,” Jackie smiled when he arrived. “Where has your friend gone?”

“He had to leave,” Philip explained, trying not to lie to her outright.

“Oh, I see. That is a shame; he is a good friend to you.”

Philip winced, knowing it was true.

Chapter 22

Jackie had thought the men's argument to be quite strange, but then she had hardly ever been around gentlemen. It was not as though she had a good grasp on their behavior.

Even if she had wanted to think on it, it was not as though she had the time. There were preparations to make, pressing matters to tend to, and in spite of her pessimism around the matter of the duke that she once had, she was enjoying playing the part of duchess-in-training.

"It is remarkable how far the two of you have come," the dowager smiled as Jackie poured tea. "I, of course, knew that it would happen, but it is nice to see it all the same."

"I never would have seen it coming," she confessed. "But I am glad that you were able to see something that I could not."

"And I am glad that my sister shall marry before me," Elizabeth chimed in, her smile wide. "As I would have felt terrible being the youngest and the first married. I believe it is more prudent that we take turns."

"The duke has not proposed as yet," Jackie reminded her. "So there is no way of knowing who shall marry first."

"He will do so eventually, though. I am certain of it."

“So, should the duke propose, would you be happy for the two of us to enjoy a very long engagement? Would three years be enough? Five?”

She giggled at how the color drained from her sister’s face.

“Well, a few months would be enough, do you not think?”

“I do not know. It has been such a quick few months, and I would appreciate taking some time before becoming a duchess.”

“In that case,” the dowager joined in, a glint in her eye. “Why not have both weddings at once? That way, you can both be married at the same time, or we could officiate Jackie’s first so that you are in order.”

Elizabeth seemed to hate that idea even more.

“Certainly not,” she huffed, her cheeks turning pink, “I have not waited all this time- I mean, my sister has not waited all this time to marry only to have to share her wedding!”

“I am not opposed to it,” Jackie teased.

“Well, I am.”

Fortunately, Elizabeth seemed to realize that it was all in jest, and she smiled at the two of them.

“As for this ball,” she continued, “will it be the last one we attend?”

“Perhaps, though when you have married Lord Greene I do not see why you cannot host a ball of your own.”

“That will take some time. I must wait for him to receive his title, first. Not that I am wishing any morbidity on his father, even after his attitude toward us.

“I have a feeling that such attitudes shall change soon enough,” the dowager smiled.

Jackie hoped that it would be the case. She was no longer considering marrying the duke simply to please her sister, but she had to admit that it was important, nevertheless. Everything that she had ever done was for Elizabeth, and she hoped and prayed that at last, when it was all over with, Lord Greene’s parents would accept her.

“The sister of a duchess,” Elizabeth sighed gently. “I cannot believe it!”

The ladies then received a visitor, the butler allowing her to enter with an almost apologetic look on his face. It was, of course, none other than Lady Ophelia, basket in tow, smiling as if she had been invited to begin with.

“Do excuse my intrusion,” she greeted. “I have been in want of female companionship of late. Being an only child has always been rather lonely, and now that I am aware of other young ladies in my vicinity, well, it would be a shame not to take advantage of it!”

Jackie looked to Elizabeth, who seemed to simply shrug and look to the Dowager Duchess for a response. Jackie wondered if she wanted to say no, but was being a good hostess, or perhaps she pitied the girl. It was quite evident that her family was facing some struggle or other, and even though Jackie could not stand her, she had to admit that she felt for her. After all, she knew what it was like to be in such a position.

Perhaps that was why she allowed herself to be led out into the garden.

It was a warm day, and Jackie blamed that for the strange feeling inside of her. Then

again, she had always loved the warmer days where she could sit in the sun and forget all of life's trials and tribulations. She was not a fool; she knew that it was Lady Ophelia's presence that was causing her troubles, but she did not know what else to do but play the part of the welcoming hostess.

She shook herself briefly. It was not her house, not yet at least.

They all sat on a blanket that the Dowager Duchess had told a maid to fetch, and Ophelia began serving them all, though Jackie picked gingerly at hers. There was an unease within her that made the thought of eating all too unpleasant.

Her sister, however, finished everything in minutes and accepted more with a smile. In truth, it did look good; jams, confectionery, breads and cheeses all arranged neatly, but that only made Jackie feel worse. Ophelia was good at such womanly duties, better than Jackie, and that was a simple fact.

"I used to love making picnics for the duke," she sighed. "Even as children, we had them often. As a girl, I always looked up to him and wanted to please him, and this was the best way that I knew how."

Jackie thought back to the picnic that the duke had prepared for her all that time ago and felt a chill. Had he simply been trying to recreate what he once had?

"You certainly have a talent for it," the dowager smiled. "As does my son, who prepared a wonderful one for himself and Lady Jacqueline from what I have heard."

"Truly, it was marvelous," Jackie nodded, grateful for the change in focus. "He always knows exactly how to give me those little surprises."

"He knows a lot," Ophelia quipped, a smirk on her face. "He knows me better than anyone else in the world, and thanks to our fathers we shall always be tied to one

another in a way. I, for one, am glad that of all men to be linked to for the rest of my life, it is one that is so wonderfully dedicated to those he cares about.”

“And he most certainly cares about my sister,” Elizabeth snapped. “I find that they complement each other very well.”

The dowager nodded in agreement, and Jackie could see the look of displeasure on Ophelia’s face, but she paid it no mind. She knew what her point was; that she was not going anywhere and would not be so easy to be rid of, but the duke had promised her that Ophelia was in the past. She had to trust him, and he had made it quite easy for her to do so.

“Oh!” Ophelia gasped suddenly. “There he is now!”

The ladies turned to see the duke and Lord Montague approaching them. Jackie had wondered why Lord Montague had been there so often of late, but she hadn’t thought much of it. After all, he was Philip’s friend and therefore had as much right to be there as she did. Before they could come too close, Ophelia was putting a plate of food together.

“I know precisely how he likes it, too,” she grinned, laying pieces of cheese, cold meat, and preserves together.

Jackie tried to ignore the sinking feeling in her chest. Whether she liked it or not, Ophelia was right. They had spent their lives together, knowing each other on a deeper level than Jackie ever could. It was no use trying to compete.

Then again, Philip had told her that there was nothing to worry about. She repeated his words over and over in her mind, hoping that it would ease her frustrations.

“I can take it to him,” Jackie offered. “As it would be good for you to sit a while. You

have done more than enough for us.”

“Nonsense! I am nothing if not a good hostess, and it is important for me to use such skills, as my future shall require it.”

“Will you be fixing a plate for Lord Montague too, in that case?”

“Of course not! If you wish to help, perhaps you could do so yourself?”

Jackie shared a look with Elizabeth, and Ophelia jumped up with the plate and went running off.

“Does she truly think that the duke will take her back?” Elizabeth asked.

“I do not know,” Jackie sighed. “But I have the most terrible fear that it will work.”

“Nonsense. We have all seen how the duke looks at you. There is no comparison. If I were you, I would pay her no mind at all.”

“Then why do you?”

“Because I find her delusions most entertaining. Beyond that, I also get to eat cheese, and you and I both know how much I love cheese.”

“An excellent point,” Jackie laughed. “I suppose you are right. There is nothing for me to worry about.”

Just as she said that, however, there was a scream and the clattering of the plate. They turned to look at what had caused such a commotion only to see Ophelia fall into his arms.

“What terrible luck,” Elizabeth smirked, nudging Jackie. “Truly, such unfortunate circumstances that would lead to her falling perfectly into the duke’s arms like that.”

“Do you suppose that it was deliberate?” Jackie whispered.

“Does the sky tend to be cloudier in October than in June?” Elizabeth replied, rolling her eyes. “Of course it was.”

Suddenly, Jackie hushed her. They were close enough to them that they could hear their conversation and Jackie wished to know what was being said.

“What happened?” Philip asked.

“I was overly excited I suppose,” Ophelia replied gently. “You see, I prepared a picnic for us all, and you know how much I used to enjoy the ones we shared.”

“Ah, I see. Did you bring this for myself, or for Lord Montague?”

“For you,” she blushed. “I would have made one for Lord Montague too, but Lady Jacqueline said she would prepare one for him herself.”

She was a liar, and in that moment, Jackie decided that she couldn’t stand her.

“Very well,” Philip nodded, placing her down. “Now let’s get you back to—”

There was a scream—a wail even—as he set her onto her feet. Philip seemed to instinctively pick her up once more.

“I… I cannot walk,” she stammered. “I must have hurt my ankle when I fell.”

“I can help you over there.”

“Perhaps,” Lord Montague suggested. “It would be better if you take her inside and send for the physician?”

Jackie waited for Philip to hand Ophelia off to his friend while he sent for the physician. He remained still for a moment, and she wished that she knew what he was thinking. Surely, he remembered his promise to her? He had to remember that Ophelia was his past, and Jackie was his future. She waited for him to hand her over, and waited.

But he did not.

Instead, he turned toward the house, and carried her inside. She was in his arms as if she were his bride, and she watched as Ophelia buried her face in his chest, thanking him for what he had done.

Jackie felt her heart shatter.

It was the gentlemanly thing to do, she told herself, but there had been two gentlemen present. There were options besides him taking her away and making it so they would be alone together. She hated it, all of it.

“Are you all right?” Lord Montague asked. “You seem unwell.”

But she didn’t listen to him. That last thing that she wanted was to hear empty kindness from the man who had suggested that Philip take Ophelia away in the first place. She remained unmoved, focused only on the duke.

If only, she thought, The duke could have returned the favor.

Chapter 23

Philip was not a fool, or at least that he hoped that he was not.

It was evident to him that Ophelia had pulled her little stunt deliberately, and he was sure that everyone else in attendance realized the same thing, but he knew what the gentlemanly thing to do was. It did not matter that she was Ophelia, it mattered that she was an injured lady. He simply hoped that Jackie saw it that way.

Carrying her through to the drawing room, he thought about how this would be the last time that he would ever see her. He was to spend the rest of his life with another lady, and he couldn't have been happier about that. He wanted to drop her onto the floor, but instead he pretended that she was Jackie, and it made everything much easier.

"Thank you," she whispered as he laid her on a settee. "For what you have done for me. Not just this, but everything."

"You need not thank me. I was simply doing my duty."

"But I must show my gratitude," she protested. "Because of how things had ended between the two of us. I had never wanted it to be that way."

"Nor did I, but now the two of us are all the better for it. Now, if you'll excuse me—"

"Don't go!" She begged.

Once upon a time, the pleading in her voice would have destroyed him, but this time he could not even force himself to feel anything for her.

“I am in so much pain,” she whimpered. “I do not wish to be alone. I do not—I do not wish to be without you.”

“Johnson?” He called, and a servant came in soon after.

“Yes, Your Grace?”

“Lady Ophelia has been injured, and I must send for the physician. Would you mind keeping an eye on her? She says she is in too much pain to be left alone.”

“But I want you!” she pouted. “It is not only my ankle that is hurt, but my neck too. Come and look a little closer at it, I think it might be bruised.”

Again, Philip thanked himself for not being that big of a fool.

“Johnson shall keep an eye on you,” He replied coldly before walking away.

He would have sent for the physician had he considered her to be in any real pain, but he knew the truth. She had thrown herself at him in some bizarre bid to have his attention, and then when they were alone together, she had encouraged untoward behavior. However, the motives for such actions would have to go unknown, as he only had one interest in that moment and that was speaking to Jackie.

He hoped that she had not taken what had happened badly, for it was exactly that behavior that he had assured her would not happen. He was supposed to be proving to her that she was the only lady he wanted, which was the truth, yet he had shown the opposite to be the case.

Philip was also annoyed with Lucien, who had insisted on accompanying him during his work that day, only to have seen the ladies outside and insisted that they join them. Now, once again, Lucien had stayed with Jackie instead of helping his friend handle another matter. It was becoming more than he could take, but it was not the time to pull Lucien aside. He had to see—

There was mayhem when he returned outside.

His mother and Lady Elizabeth were seated beside Lucien and Jackie, watching on in shock. Philip ran toward them before seeing Lucien rubbing her back gently and whispering in her ear, his face concerned. Jackie's was pink, and her eyes were red and damp from tears. The sight of her turned his stomach, but what made it even worse was the way Lucien was doting on her.

“A drink will help,” he suggested sweetly, pouring her a lemonade. “And you mustn't drink it quickly. Sip it.”

She smiled and thanked him, drinking it bit by bit. Whatever had happened, Philip had arrived far too late to do anything meaningful to help, and why was that? Because he had been with Ophelia, at Lucien's suggestion of all things.

He was furious, but mostly with himself for agreeing to it. He hadn't cared about Ophelia's antics, knowing it was more than likely simply her trying to have the last laugh, but now that it had affected Jackie it changed everything.

“Jackie,” he said gently. “Are you alright?”

“I am perfectly fine,” she replied bitingly.

“She choked,” Elizabeth explained. “I cannot be so sure how, but that is what happened.”

“I said I’m fine,” Jackie snapped, rising to her feet and starting to leave.

“Lady Jacqueline,” Lucien said, following after her. “Please, stay with us for a while so that we can—”

“I need a moment, Lord Montague.”

“Jackie, I—”

“Is it painful for you to listen to me? I am perfectly fine, and I do not wish to be followed, so accept my words and leave me be.”

Philip had not even thought her capable of anger.

He turned to Lucien to ask to speak to him, only to see his friend watching after her with a look of adoration on his face. Philip did not wish to believe it, hoping that it was simply admiration for her speaking her mind, but he knew better than that.

“You and I need to speak,” he said to Lucien, leading him back to his study.

“Very well, but perhaps you might first wish to return Lady Ophelia’s basket to her?”

“I shall do it,” Lady Elizabeth replied helpfully, jumping to her feet and nodding to Philip.

Lucien did not argue with her, though he seemed displeased by it.

“Now,” he began when they arrived. “Would you be so kind as to tell me what all that was?”

“I do not know what you are referring to.”

“Do not play coy with me, Lucien. Do you think I haven’t been aware of what you have been doing of late? How you continually come here only to spend all of your time with the lady that I am courting?”

“It is as I told you, Philip, we are friends, and I am hardly coming any more often than usual. Besides, after what happened last time do you not think it is best that I ensure this lady is a good one?”

“I will not have any unkind assumptions made about her, am I clear?”

“Perfectly so, and I shall never do it again. Will that be all?”

“Lucien, what is it? Do not evade my questions and simply answer me. I know what I saw just now, and I expect better of you than lies. You have been behaving in an inappropriate manner with Lady Jacqueline and I must know why.”

“Well, it is as you say,” Lucien sighed. “You know what you saw.”

“And what is that supposed to mean?”

Philip was hoping that there was a perfectly reasonable explanation as to why he had been acting so strangely, that it had all been innocent, but with what Lucien had said he knew that it could not be the case.

“I love her.”

He certainly had not expected that.

“You do not know her,” Philip laughed, exasperated.

“I know her a darn sight better than you. Tell me, what is her favorite color?”

Philip opened his mouth only to close it again.

“It is green,” Lucien scoffed. “And her favorite season is spring. She says it is a time for new life to be born.”

“What does that have to do with anything?”

“It shows that you do not know her! You think you are in love with her because she is kind to you, and if that is all that it takes for you then you might as well accept Ophelia’s advances. We all know that you have made little effort to turn her away.”

“You say that as though I had a choice to begin with.”

“You did. It is your household, is it not? You could have sent her away the moment she came, but you did not. What is it, Philip? Are you keeping her around for when Jackie refuses your hand? You have been parading Ophelia around as if it doesn’t destroy the young lady you are courting. That is hardly fair on either girl.”

“I have done everything in my power to avoid Ophelia. She is a friend of my mother’s. What do you want me to do?”

“What I want,” Lucien smirked. “Is for you to accept the truth. You loved Lady Ophelia for years, and you spent every day pining after her. Now she is here, wanting you once more, and you expect me to believe that you no longer want her? I know you better than that. Why don’t you step aside, let me have Jackie, take Ophelia for yourself once more?”

“Stop calling her Jackie! You do not know her well enough to call her that, and you do not have her permission. Only I do.”

“How would you know? You have spent so much time with your first love that you

have no way of truly knowing what discussions we have had. Do you think I wanted to fall for her? I tried not to, but I cannot help how I feel.”

“You will.”

“Or what? Philip, you and I both know that, if push came to shove, she would choose me over you. You have the title, yes, but can you tell me one single other thing that a lady in her position would want that you can offer her?”

“Get out.”

He had said it quietly, frighteningly so. He was trembling, not with anger but with restraint, and he took a step away from Lucien.

“Philip, you are being ridiculous. We can talk about this, just as you wanted.”

“I do not wish to talk to you. I do not wish to see you. I will only ask you one more time. Leave.”

“Jealousy has made you ugly,” Lucien snarled. “You cannot accept that I would make a better match for her than you, can you?”

“Why, because you know she likes green and spring?”

“Because what the ton likes to see is a beautiful couple with their beautiful children, and that is something that you could never be a part of no matter how much money you have.”

Philip punched him.

He was not a violent man, and he never had been, but he had tried everything in his

power to control himself and Lucien had continued to push. He did not know where all of the hatred was coming from, but in that moment it did not matter. Lucien was the last person that he wanted to see again.

He did not need to tell him to leave a third time. Lucien scurried off down the hall, and Philip tried to regain his composure. After everything that he had been through, Lucien had stayed by his side only to leave him when the opportunity to steal a lady from him came. Such years of friendship did not matter to Lucien when he made advancements on Jackie, and so those same years of friendship could no longer matter to Philip either.

It was the end of it.

Philip went to the window to see if Jackie had returned, only to see his mother and Lady Elizabeth sitting in the sun without her. He wondered where she had gone, and whether or not she would want him to find her, but he had to take her at her word.

She wanted to be alone, no matter how much he wanted the opposite.

Chapter 24

The servants said the duke and his best friend had argued.

Unfortunately, Jackie sighed, nobody else knew anything further. All that she knew was that Lord Montague was no longer coming to see them, and that the household had not been quite the same since the picnic.

“It’s strange, is it not?” Elizabeth asked, as Jackie tried to listen. “Tense, even. I am not saying that I wish it were not just the two of us in here, but it certainly is different to how it was before.”

“Yes, even the dowager duchess has been spending less time with us.”

“Perhaps she feels disloyal to her son. After all, she may like us a good deal, but she is the duke’s mother in the end, and if she had to pick sides...”

“Oh, I certainly do not blame her, I only miss how it was.”

She missed the duke. She scolded herself for doing so, because there was no need to; he was in the same household, and if she truly wanted to speak to him that much she could do so easily. However, knowing that she could do something and finding the courage to do so were two very different things.

Philip had been the best company that she had ever had, with the exception of Elizabeth of course, and that was what she missed, but each time she tried to think back to those moments in order to push herself to talk to him, she remembered him

carrying Ophelia away.

He was protective, instinctive when it came to her in a way that he had never shown Jackie. She wanted to understand it, to put it all down to the fact they shared history, but if anything that only made it worse.

Ophelia would always have known him for longer than Jackie would.

“I need to not be in this household right now,” she said suddenly, and Elizabeth looked at her with a furrowed brow.

“Do you mean you wish to leave? That seems rather extreme for what I would call a misunderstanding.”

“Not permanently. I do not think so, at least. No, I wish to spend some time in the village.”

Fortunately, Elizabeth did not resist any further, and the two of them left for town under the guise of making a few purchases for the ball. It was an easy lie to tell, but Jackie had Elizabeth tell it so as not to alert any suspicions.

“Why do you suppose the duke and Lord Montague argued?” Elizabeth asked as they made their way there.

“I couldn’t say. They seemed like such good friends, and I have never heard of either of them taking issue with the other in all the time that we have stayed with them.”

“Perhaps it was something to do with Ophelia?”

“In what sense?”

“I do not know, but it is strange how they argued after what she did.”

“Who knows? Maybe the duke harbors feelings for Ophelia still, and Lord Montague had the nerve to ask him what he was doing.”

“I would not have thought so. Jackie, I know what I see when the duke looks at you. He adores you. Then again, I would be remiss if I did not admit to seeing that very same look from the viscount.”

“Lizzie, I do not have the patience for that sort of thing.”

“Very well, we shall focus on our trip instead.”

For once, her sister had listened to her without arguing, and Jackie was most grateful for it. She was not an idiot, and she knew that the viscount had been acting in quite an inappropriate manner, but she had put it all down to him being the duke’s friend and wanting to know more about her.

It had also occurred to her that it could have been a test to see if she truly did have feelings for Philip, and she hoped more than anything that it had not been the case, for she did not want her emotions called into question.

As if she had summoned him herself, Lord Montague was in the first shop that they entered. Elizabeth did not see him, instead going straight to the shopkeeper to ask about shoes, but Jackie saw him. Lord Montague also saw her, and looked away quickly.

Unfortunately, Jackie wanted answers, and upon seeing the bruising on his cheek she found that she had even more questions than she thought.

“What happened to you, My Lord?”

“I have received stranger greetings than that, I suppose.”

“Do forgive me. Good day, My Lord.”

“I said it in jest, Lady Jacqueline,” he smiled, tracing his bruise with his fingertips. “If you must know, this is the aftermath of what happens when you tell a man the truth.”

“The truth? My Lord, did the duke do this to you?”

“I should not say this to you. The two of you are courting, and it is not for me to tell you the pitfalls of him.”

“If I am to marry him then I must know what sort of man he is. It is imperative, even.”

“Very well,” he sighed. “The duke has been acting strangely ever since a certain arrival. You know who I am referring to, because I am quite sure that you have been thinking the very same thing.”

“Yes, but that is not of your concern.”

“When I am watching a good lady’s affections being taken for granted, it most certainly is. I could not sit by and watch it happen anymore. I could not tolerate it, and what he did with Lady Ophelia that day was the final straw.”

“So you do not consider him a friend because of his feelings for her?”

“I do not consider him a friend because he refuses to see things clearly. He is in love with her, Lady Jacqueline, and because he would let her do as she pleases with him. He is doing everything in his power to keep you around, and is only dragging you

along with him in the event that she abandons him.”

Jackie did not know how the viscount could be so sure of it, but then she had also seen the same signs and she did not even know the duke as well as Lord Montague did. He had to be right about it.

“And so, after what she did at the picnic,” Lord Montague continued. “And you felt you had to leave, I told the duke that we needed to talk. I told him that I could no longer stand by and watch as he destroyed your affections because of his own apparent affections for another. He told me I was wrong, I told him that I was anything but, and then he punched me. As hard as he could.”

“Because of your accusation?”

“Because I dared to question him, to not agree. He might show himself to be the perfect man, Lady Jacqueline, but he is anything but. He is cruel when he deems you deserving of his cruelty, and it is quite apparent to me that one need not do too much to warrant it in his eyes.”

Jackie said nothing for a moment, thinking back to her very first encounter with the duke. He had thought that she was being improper, and it had led to him berating her and storming away. She couldn’t help but wonder if the viscount was right.

Not only that, but there was a pain in her chest, and she knew precisely why that was. She had been telling herself over and over that she was simply seeing things, that of course the duke only harbored any affections for her and her alone, and that Ophelia no longer had any impact on him, but the truth was right in front of her in the form of a nasty purple bruise.

Clearly, Philip’s heart was spoken for, and it had been since before she had arrived.

“I do not know what to say,” she replied at last. “Except that I am sorry. I am also grateful to you for defending my name, My Lord. I apologize that it ended the way that it did.”

“You have nothing to apologize for. You cannot help a man’s outburst.”

She wished that she could have. They said their goodbyes and she found Elizabeth immediately.

“We must go,” she explained quickly.

“But we have only just arrived. What is it?”

“I shall tell you on the way home.”

“Very well, but can I purchase these shoes first?”

Jackie sighed, nodding.

“This ought to be important,” Elizabeth huffed on their way home. “For you know how much I have been enjoying the shops here.”

“He is still in love with her.”

She fell silent in an instant.

“The viscount was there, a nasty purple mark on his cheek from the duke. They had a confrontation, Elizabeth, over the fact that he is still in love with Ophelia. How could I have been so blind?”

“If that is true,” Elizabeth said after a moment. “Then it is not due to any blindness on

your part. I do not believe it, myself. I cannot believe it. I know how the duke feels about you, and I know that it is reciprocated. Something is not right about this, do not worry.”

But Jackie had no choice but to worry. The aching, burning feeling in her chest had not gone away, and it had appeared at the thought of the duke loving another. It only spelled danger, as far as she was concerned, because she knew precisely why she felt the way that she did.

She was falling in love with him, while he was falling in love with someone else.

Jackie had never been one to stand in anyone’s way, and as they returned home, she thought about returning to her home, back in Somerset. That way, the duke could be with the lady he truly did love, Lady Ophelia could be saved from her family’s clear financial situation, and she could...

Serve as a disappointment to her own family. It was not even certain as to whether or not her marriage to the duke would have secured Elizabeth’s own match, but it was their only chance at it. It was also the only way of saving themselves from their own financial ruin, and she was willing to walk away from it all because the duke did not love her, something she had expected to be the case in the first place.

He was not supposed to fall for her, just as she was not supposed to fall for him, so why was she hurt so much?

Either way, she sighed, she could not do it. She couldn’t live a lie, no matter how much she wanted to, and she could not force a man to marry her if he truly wanted her to be someone else.

It was then that she remembered their deal. If she did not want the marriage, he would still pay off her family’s debts, and restore Elizabeth’s dowry. He had given her his

word, and she wondered if that would still stand if she left for home. If anything, he would have preferred that, would he not?

That way, at least he could say he did the decent thing as a gentleman and be free to marry whomever he chose, and once again there was a sharp pain in Jackie's chest at the realization that that person was not her.

More than anything, however, she wished to keep her distance from the duke after what he had done to the viscount. It was a horrible mark, and she had not seen one like that—not since she had to help Elizabeth tend to their father after a particularly awful bet that he could then not pay off. If he was truly capable of such anger after being told that he could not do something, then perhaps he was not the man for her at all.

Which, given that she was not the lady for him, was perhaps for the best.

Chapter 25

Word travels fast, and even without people seeing his scars Philip was becoming known as a beast once more.

It was cruel, people said, that he would attack a friend in such a manner. Especially a friend as good as Lucien, who had been by his side through the worst time of his life. Philip agreed, and he had wished that it hadn't come to that, but he had been left with no choice. Lucien was not the friend that he had made all those years ago, and he wanted the one lady that had truly been good to him, and he could not see past that.

He also could not bring himself to speak to Jackie. He had wanted to ever since the day of the picnic, but he had not been able to. That same night, she had asked to be left alone, and he had obliged, but after that he did not know whether or not her opinion had changed. Therefore, aside from murmured greetings, he thought it best to wait until she came to him.

And those days were torture.

Eventually, he decided that he had to speak to her no matter how closed off she seemed. It was partly his own fault for not proposing when he confessed to her, and he would rectify that.

He had known her for two months, and saw her every day and got to know her more and more, always liking what he found out. It was not yet the end of their deal, and she did not yet have to make her wishes known to him, but he had to ask her. He had to make his own intentions plain to her.

Except that she was not home. She was out with her sister, and he was unsure of where exactly and therefore not sure if searching for her would have any good outcomes. Instead, he waited in his study for her to return.

“Philip!” Ophelia said brightly, stepping into his study unannounced.

She was the last person that he wished to see.

“Why are you here?” he snapped. “I have not been inviting you, and I am quite sure that my mother has not either.”

“Is it not obvious, Your Grace?” She asked, smiling through the tears that were suddenly forming. “Why do you think I have been here so often, so determined to be close to you? I am in love with you, Philip.”

His head began spinning. This was the very same lady that had shown him nothing but cruelty for years, and now here she was telling him all this?

“Leave.”

“Philip, please. You must listen to me. It was a mistake. What I did to you all those years ago was wrong of me. I was barely out of leading strings, not nearly mature enough to know that what I did was wrong, but now that we have grown up, I can see it. I never should have done that to you, and I shall regret it for the rest of my life.”

“That is none of my concern.”

“But you loved me,” she whispered, stepping closer to him and reaching out. “And I have every reason to believe that you still do, else you would have had me sent away when I came here. I mean, it was always the plan for the both of us to fall in love- why else do you suppose that the two of us remain unmarried after so many other

proposals?”

“Those proposals are exclusively ones that you have received. I have never turned someone else away in favor of you, and I would like to make that very clear to you.”

“And I would like to make it clear,” she replied taking his hand only for him to snatch it away again. “That you and I have something special. We always have. We should be together, just as we always wanted to be. I want you to know that I no longer care about your scars, and as that was the only thing standing in our way, why not call it all over and done with? We would both be far happier for it.”

“You are too close, Ophelia. This is highly inappropriate.”

“There is nothing more appropriate than you and me, Your Grace.”

Philip had a sudden sinking feeling. Ophelia had never been so brazen, having received a highly conservative upbringing, and so for her to have appeared so suddenly, so determined to take him back, there had to be another motive.

Then, he heard footsteps approaching the study.

This was the worst possible thing that could happen. If they were caught alone together, Ophelia would be compromised, and he would have to do the gentlemanly thing and-

And that was what he feared she wanted.

Fortunately, the steps continued past the door, clearly one of his staff going about his duties. He saw Ophelia’s smile fade for a moment, turning into a scowl before she quickly hid it once more.

“You know, Your Grace,” she sighed. “They are saying some terrible things about you. Not to worry, though, if ever it all becomes too much, you know where to find me. I will be there for you, I promise.”

“And what is being said about me?”

“You will likely find out soon enough. I cannot be the one to tell you, it would hurt me far too much. Think about what I have said, and when you see sense, I shall be waiting for you.”

Philip wondered if she was telling the truth. She left his study with a weak smile, disappearing from view. She had clearly been hoping that she would be discovered alone with him, but even though that had not happened she had given him enough cause for doubt. She had been kinder to him than she ever had been, and the foolish younger part of him wondered if that was because she was being honest about her feelings.

Regardless, it did not matter. Philip had fallen for Jackie weeks before, and since then Ophelia had not caused any positive feeling in him at all. She was gone, as far as he was concerned, even if he was curious as to what was being said of him.

“The young ladies have returned,” the butler said a while later.

“How did they seem?”

“The youngest seemed as always, and the oldest seemed... perturbed?”

Perhaps she had heard exactly what was being said of him? He knew that he had been given the blame for Lucien's bruise, which he took full responsibility for, but as to why he had supposedly given him it, he was not sure.

“She has asked to speak with you,” the butler continued. “Only, she wishes to do so in the music room, not in here.”

Philip was grateful for that. He had seen enough of his study over the last few days, and was eager to see somewhere else. Beyond that, he adored the music room, and he knew that Jackie was aware of that.

“Good afternoon, Lady Jacqueline,” he greeted. “How was your outing?”

“Are we to use formalities again?” She sighed.

“No! No, it was only because of... well, I did not wish to assume that you still wished to use our other names.”

“I have not told you as much, so one might assume that it would stay the same unless it was what you wanted.”

“Well, I do not, so all is quite well.”

“Philip, are you sure that you do not harbor any affections for Lady Ophelia?”

“Must we discuss this a third time?” he huffed, raking a hand through his hair. “No. I have told you this. She broke my heart years ago, and now that you are here, I am grateful to her for it. I have been meaning to discuss that matter with you. Jackie—”

“That is not what the viscount said.”

“Lucien?”

She nodded, keeping a distance from him.

“He was in the shoe shop this morning when we visited. He told me that he has been telling you for a long time to stop playing with my affections, as you are so clearly still in love with Ophelia. He said that you became so enraged at him telling you to leave me be that you attacked him.”

“That is the opposite of what happened.”

“So you did not attack him?”

“I punched him. Once.”

“That is hardly making you seem any better.”

“Jackie, that is not what was said. Do you wish to know the truth? Lucien was more than willing to cast me in a bad light because he has fallen for you. He wants to cause trouble between the two of us so that he can have you for himself.”

“That cannot be right. He was your friend.”

“Yes. He was. Now he is not. Any man that tries to force my hand when it comes to matters of my heart will not remain a friend of mine.”

“Force your hand?”

“He told me that I should accept Ophelia’s advances, even if they have caused me great discomfort, because he is the better match for you. He is not ugly and scarred like I am, and therefore there should be no competition.”

“There is no competition,” she laughed incredulously. “I would never see the viscount in such a way. I cannot believe that you would think that of me.”

“You were angry with me, and for good reason. I shouldn’t have played into it. I should have ignored Ophelia from the second she began doing all of these things, but I did not. I thought that you might have changed your mind about me, about us.”

“Do you still believe that?”

“You came here believing that I attacked a friend for no apparent reason.”

She was quiet for a moment. He willed her to say something, anything, but she did not.

“Jackie, I want this to work. I have felt this way for a long time, and I know you have too, and there is no reason why it should not. All we would need to do is ignore the two people trying to make it difficult and instead focus on all of the people that want it to be easy, the two of us included.”

“You sound so resolved on the matter.”

“Because I am.”

Unfortunately, it was quite possibly the worst moment for a proposal, and he did not want to pull it out of nowhere when he could wait until a better time. Instead, she would have to trust his feelings that he had shown her, and it would have to be enough for her to believe him.

“So you promise me that your fight had nothing to do with you still wanting to marry Lady Ophelia? You promise me that you are not going to abandon me for her if and when she confesses to you?”

He already had, of course, but it was not the time to tell her that he had only just been alone with her in his study for an extended amount of time. Not when he was

attempting to ease her concerns, that is.

“I promise you,” he assured her. “And the next time she tries to enter this household, she shall be sent away in an instant. I should have known not to let her in in the first place, but my mother liked her once upon a time.”

“And how does she feel about her now?”

“I do not know, and quite frankly I do not care. What I do know is that she adores you, and she has from the moment you arrived, and she has had every reason to. What is important is that Ophelia will no longer be a concern of ours. Do you believe me when I say that?”

Jackie looked up at him, her eyes searching his, and he willed her to answer.

Chapter 26

Jackie wondered if the duke was lying to her for a few mere seconds.

Then the truth of the matter settled in. He had never lied to her before, even when it had been in his best interests to do so. Not only that, but she knew him, and she knew him well. He had always acted with kindness, even toward those undeserving of it. If he had snapped, it was not through any fault of his own, and she was certain of that.

She also did not know the viscount at all. He had been a charmer toward her, saying and doing all of the right things, but it had not shown any of his character except for the fact that he was a charmer. If anything, it only proved that he was trying to woo her so that she did not fall for the duke, exactly as Philip had said.

Her heart believed the duke, and every word that he said, but then her self-preservation told her otherwise. If she allowed herself to love him, only for Ophelia to come running to him and take him away from her, it would destroy her. She couldn't allow herself to put herself in harm's way, could she?

"I believe you," she whispered.

This was not a monster. This was a man that she had fallen for, the only one that she had ever done so for.

"Oh, Jackie, that is—"

"But," she interrupted. "I cannot handle these entanglements anymore. I hate them."

“What do you mean?”

“It is rather obvious, would you not say? From the start, there was the issue of me being brought here under false pretenses by my father. I know that that was not your fault, nor was it mine, but it hardly helped us. Now we have two people determined to come between us, that you have spent a long time liking. It is a lot to undertake, and it is exhausting.”

“Is my appearance also a problem?”

Jackie froze. Was he truly asking her that after everything they had been through? She had promised him that she did not care, and unlike his explanations for Ophelia only to allow her continued presence there, her actions had backed up her words.

“How could you even ask me that?” she asked. “Is it not the one thing that I have proven time and time again that I do not care about?”

“I know, but others have held it against me.”

“Are you saying that I am like them? I thought you would have seen me in a better way than that.”

“I do!”

“Then why did you feel the need to ask? Is it because you are still thinking about Ophelia?”

“Of course not. I only ask because these scars have caused me so much pain.”

“They would not have, this time. This time, you only have yourself to blame for any pain you might feel, because they have never made a difference to me.”

She did not give him time to answer, turning on her heel and walking away.

It was almost unbelievable. Jackie wondered what the duke truly thought of her, if even after all the time they spent with one another, he could not see that his scars did not matter to her.

She no longer had an appetite. Dinner came and went, and she did not leave her room, instead staring at her ceiling and thinking about how she felt on her first night there after discovering the true purpose of her visit.

It was difficult knowing that she had not had a say in most of the events that had transpired during her time there, but even worse knowing that that had been her own fault. She could have taken the offer the duke gave and left, or thrown her family to the wolves the way they had done to her, but instead she sat meekly and did what was expected of her.

But she could change that, she considered. She could change her future no matter what had happened in her past, and return to Somerset and remember everything as a bad dream.

Ophelia would no doubt stop the duke from aiding Jackie's family financially, but Elizabeth would come to understand eventually, knowing that Jackie could not live a lie, and forgive her after enough time had passed. It was possible, and with the sick ache in Jackie's stomach she wondered whether she felt unwell because she knew it was the right thing to do. Because, deep down, she knew that it was not what she wanted, or because she hadn't eaten.

There was a knock at the door. She called for them to enter.

"I know you wished to be left alone," he father said sheepishly, entering. "But I have been keeping something from you for a while now and I think it is best that you

know.”

Jackie braced herself for whatever revelation he was going to drop on her, as she knew it couldn't be anything good.

“The duke,” he continued, “has paid our debts.”

“Excuse me?”

“In full. He did it days ago. He also has sent a letter to Lord Greene's family, urging them to reconsider their decision and to allow your sister to marry him. I do not know if it will work, per se , but it is the best he can do without the two of you being married.”

“Why was I not consulted on the matter?”

“He did not want to make you feel as though you had to do anything in return, namely marry him. He refused to force your hand, and I agreed at the time, but I cannot lie to you a second time. A third, if you count my lies about our financial situation.”

Jackie supposed that she should have been surprised by the duke's actions, but she was not. After all, he had already promised her that he would do so, only he had done it before they decided whether or not they would marry. Perhaps he loved her as much as she did him, meaning she had been presented with the final proof that she needed that he was the man for her, and she had to tell him that.

After she had spoken to someone important, of course.

Philip knew he had done the wrong thing in asking Jackie whether or not his appearance bothered her. He knew that she did not care and never had, caring only that it had hurt him. She was not Ophelia, and he scolded himself for thinking otherwise. It was simply an insecurity that had gotten the better of him, and he hoped that he could reconcile with Jackie before it was too late.

He braved dinner, knowing perfectly well that word had spread of his argument with Lucien and likely aware that he was now known as some aggressor, but nobody treated him any differently. Even Elizabeth, who was known to protect her sister, seemed to know better than to have taken Lucien at his word, even if she had heard about it.

Even so, the room felt empty without Jackie there. He missed her and was desperate to see her, to talk to her, but he did not know what he would say even if he did. There were only so many times that he could call himself a fool before she would agree, and thus want nothing more to do with him, and he could not hear her say those words to him. It would have destroyed him, and he could not take such a risk. He did not dare.

After spending a night sleeping for perhaps ten minutes at a time before waking up once more, he gave in and left for the garden. It was dawn, the sun just barely coming up into the sky, but even in the half-light he knew that he was not alone outside, and he knew exactly who it was.

She was speaking, and he did not wish to listen in, but he could not help himself. She was talking to her mother, about everything that had happened, and how she no longer knew what to do. His heart ached, knowing that he loved her so and he had caused her pain. It was the one thing that he swore to himself that he would never do.

He couldn't stand staring at her, and not doing anything, any longer. He had to do the right thing and tell her exactly how he felt, no more waiting for the perfect moment that was not coming.

“Jackie,” he said gently, stepping out after her. “I wanted to tell you—I wanted to apologize for what I said. It was wrong of me, and I never should have suggested such a horrible thing of you.”

“It is all right, Your Grace.”

“No, it is not. Jackie, I... I love you, and I have done so for some time. I haven’t told you before because I haven’t wanted you to feel pressured into marrying me. I wanted you to decide for yourself, and now I have ruined everything, and I do not know what to do about it besides telling you everything.

We agreed on three months, and in a few weeks those three months will be up, and you shall have to make a decision. I was hoping that you would allow me those few weeks to make things right again, and not leave before then, even though you should know that I wouldn’t blame you if you did. It is as they all say, I am a monster.”

There was silence.

He wanted her to speak, but at the same time he did not. If she did not speak, it meant that she hadn’t refused him, and he wanted that to continue for as long as he could. He could not bear the thought of her leaving, not after everything that had happened between them.

“I do not need any more time,” she said suddenly. “For I have already made my decision. I should have made it long ago.”

“And that is?”

“That of course I wish to marry you,” she whispered into the darkness. “Do you truly think that you have been falling in love alone?”

He could have run away to the church with her then and there.

“Jackie, are you sure? After what happened?”

“I should have listened to you, too,” she confessed. “Rather than to people I do not know. You are the one I trust, and the one I love. That is all that matters now.”

He took her hands in his, so elated that he was about to kiss her, when he froze. She was perfectly happy with his looks, he believed that, but such physical intimacy was another matter entirely, not to mention inappropriate until they were married.

But then he felt her hand on his cheek, her lips placed softly on them in a way that made him almost fall to his knees. It was the side of his face that had suffered the most burns, the side that he could scarcely look at himself, yet here she was kissing it gently as if she treasured it, as if she treasured him. Tears fell down his cheek, and at last he pulled her close, her head against his chest so closely he swore she could hear his heartbeat.

“We shall move at your pace,” she promised. “But I love you, and I want everything to be all right again no matter the cost.”

There was no doubt about it, not that he thought any different. This was love, and this was the woman for him, and she wished to be his wife. It was the most surreal yet perfect moment in his life, and he almost thought he would awaken from a dream, but the sun continued to rise, and he did not wake up.

She was perfect, and she was his.

Chapter 27

Philip loved being in love.

He thought himself foolish for it, but then he quickly decided that if being in love made him a fool, then so be it. He had not needed to propose, as one day she came to breakfast wearing his mother's ring, which he later discovered his mother had given her, and he hadn't been able to stop looking at her finger since.

He loved Jackie, and now that they had said as much to one another and were to be married there would be nothing in their way. Not even a ball, which would be that evening.

He had almost forgotten about it with everything that had happened, but now that it was approaching, he had to admit that he was quite concerned. He was not one for parties, and he did not wish to disappoint Jackie, who was readying herself with Elizabeth.

However, he aided himself by remembering that she would soon be arriving in a gown with her hair done perfectly and looking her best, which he considered his reward for attending.

And what a reward it was. Her hair was not tamed into submission, which pleased him greatly as he preferred its natural glory, and her gown fit her perfectly, a far cry from the ones she wore upon her arrival. She was almost unrecognizable from the woman he met, yet she was exactly the same lady that he had fallen for.

“My girls,” her father sighed when they appeared. “You are both so beautiful. You shall have the most wonderful evening.”

“We shall indeed,” Jackie smiled. “Should we ever arrive, that is!”

They all bundled into carriages and left for the ball, Philip fixing his mask for the first time in a long time. It almost felt foreign to him, and he was unsure of what to think about that. It had been the one thing he wore at all times until Jackie came, and it was familiar to him until then.

“Will you be speaking with Ophelia?” Elizabeth asked Jackie in the carriage. “After all, nobody would blame you if you wished to show your little victory in front of her.”

“It is not my style, Sister, and you know that. Besides, I believe that the duke and I arriving together and dancing only with each other is all the proof that she would need to say that she lost.”

“Ah! So there is that spirit in you. Tell her, Your Grace, that it would be the perfect vengeance.”

“It certainly would,” he considered. “And I think it would be best for us to announce our engagement to all those in attendance, so that it is on our terms.”

“Well, when you put it like that,” Jackie nodded. “I suppose it would be the right thing to do.”

Philip would enjoy it, he knew that much.

He knew that he would enjoy it all the more when they arrived to see Ophelia and Lucien in the corner, sipping their drinks with faces like thunder. They had no way of

knowing that he and Jackie were engaged, as they had kept it secret, but he had not gone back to Ophelia as she had hoped, and she was no doubt furious about that. Perhaps that was why they were together?

Upon their entry, the two of them stormed over, Lucien almost purple in the face.

“Do not make any further trouble for the two of us,” Philip commanded. “For one, it will not work, and for another it is not wise to anger a duke.”

“But Philip,” Ophelia began. “You must know that—what is that?”

She was looking directly at Jackie’s left hand, to which Jackie turned her hand carefully so that the ring sparkled in the light.

“Please tell me that is not your mother’s ring. It was meant for me.”

“It was, and then you handed it back to me if I recall correctly, saying that you couldn’t marry a man as terrifying and deformed as I am.”

“I have already told you why that was, and how sorry I am. Philip, please tell me that it is not too late for me.”

“It was too late for you the moment you rejected him,” Jackie pointed out. “You made your choice, and now you must live with those consequences. I shall no longer fall victim to your schemes, Ophelia. He does not love you, and he has not for a long time now. It is time to leave him be.”

“But I need him!” she wailed. “It is all well and good you saying he doesn’t love me, but I love him, more than you ever could, and more to the point my family needs it.”

Philip gave Jackie a look, which she reciprocated, though she seemed a little more

knowing than he was.

“Why might you need it ?” Philip asked. “Not that I know what it is.”

“Money!” She exploded. “My family is in financial straits, and for years I have suffered the blame for it because we did not marry. I was supposed to come back and win you again, but she kept getting in the way.”

“She has done nothing to you,” Philip sighed. “She made me feel like a person rather than a dog, something you never did, even before the fire. Marry another one of your suitors.”

“They do not want me. The only man to ever have taken me seriously was you.”

“That is untrue,” Elizabeth said brightly from nearby. “You received four proposals this year, and you turned each one down.”

“Because they could not help me. The duke can.”

“The duke could have,” Philip reminded her. “Had you not thrown me to one side. What’s done is done, Ophelia. It is time for you to move on as I have done, and find another poor soul’s life to ruin as you did mine. I will say, though, that it is good to know that you never loved me —only the things I could have provided for you. Especially as those things never changed.”

Lucien laughed, and it was exactly what Philip needed.

“As for you,” he continued. “I would love to know what persuaded you to tell such dreadful lies about me. I know that you have some feelings toward Jackie, but that does not give you any right to slander my name and reputation, especially when such attempts are made to her.”

“Do you truly wish to know why?” Lucien sneered. “I cannot believe you did not work it out for yourself. Quite simply, you are not good enough for her, and you never will be.”

“I am more than capable of deciding what is right for me,” Jackie protested, but Lucien laughed at her.

“Then tell me what is so appealing about a man who cannot even show his face in public? Lady Jacqueline, you are a beautiful lady, intelligent and kind. You deserve so much more than this. You deserve a whole man, one that will love you utterly and completely.”

“A man like you, you mean?” she asked. “Is that what you are referring to?”

“Who else could I possibly mean? I have truly fallen for you, and because of who you are, rather than the fact that you tolerate my presence. If he knew what was best for you, he would have given you to me willingly instead of forcing my hand.”

“Even if you were right, I am not simply something to give away and accept. That, My Lord, is why I could never love you, or anything even remotely resembling it. If you want what is best for me, then you need to accept that I love Philip, exactly the way he is, and I have no intentions of changing him.”

“More to the point,” Philip said suddenly. “What do you mean by ‘forced your hand’?” What exactly were you forced to do?”

Lucien and Ophelia looked at one another for a moment, both in surprise and a small amount of fear. Philip wondered who would break first, though he had a feeling he knew which it would be.

“It was his idea,” Ophelia replied, confirming his suspicions. “He knew of my

problems and told me that if I could seduce you, and he could steal Lady Jacqueline away, then we could both have what we wanted.”

“And you wanted to marry me, did you not?”

“It is as you said, I wanted your money. In all honesty, now that I can tell you my true feelings, I can admit that it pained me every time I had to look at you. It is a shame, because you were so handsome once before.”

A few years ago, those words would have devastated Philip, but they no longer held any meaning. She was a pitiful girl and nothing more—desperate to claw back what she had lost, but Philip could not bring himself to pity her.

“You,” Lucien said, pointing at Jackie. “are a fool. You could have had me as your husband, a man of wealth and intelligence that is not afraid to hide in the shadows, and instead you chose him. You will regret that in time.”

“I shall do no such thing,” Jackie argued. “For it is precisely as I said. I love the duke the way he is, and I would not change him for anything, no matter how much you wish I would. I certainly would not change him for some dreadful and bitter man who cannot fend for himself, that is for certain.”

Philip did not think it was possible for her to be so scathing, but he had to admit that he was pleased to see it. Lucien had earned a few biting remarks from her, and biting they clearly were as Lucien had nothing to say in response.

“Enjoy your life in the shadows,” Ophelia snarled.

“That will not be necessary,” Philip said suddenly, surprising even Jackie.

She had not known what he had planned to do, because he had not planned to do

anything of the sort, but it was time. He had a lady that he loved more than anything, and if nothing else then he would at least have that.

He took her hand, leading her to the middle of the ballroom.

“Philip, it isn’t time for the dances yet!”

“I am not going to dance as yet,” he smirked. “It is time for our announcement, I believe.”

Her eyes sparkled when she smiled at him. The mere word that an announcement was to be made caused those in attendance to look directly at him, which he had not considered when the idea came to him.

“You all know me,” he began, “as a recluse, an elusive duke that lurks in shadows and refuses to see anyone about anything. That was true for far too long, and it is time for it to come to an end. I came to know Lady Jacqueline three months ago, when I had never felt worse, and she taught me what it meant to be truly happy, and truly in love. She and I are to be married, and the date cannot come soon enough.”

There was applause from the guests, and Philip hoped that the hosts would not be angry with him for distracting them from their night. It had not been his intention, he simply adored his fiancée so much that he wanted everyone to know about it.

“How foolish of me!” he exclaimed dramatically. “It is a masquerade ball, and thus you do not even know who I am. Well, how about I bring my life in the shadows to a close, and reveal myself to you once and for all?”

Jackie’s eyes widened, but he gave her no time to protest before raising a hand to his mask and taking it off.

There were varied responses from the crowd, some applauding, some taking a step backwards, but he did not see any of them. All that he could see was Jackie, smiling brightly at him.

And that was the only thing he cared to see at all.

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 11:20 am

As a few months passed, Philip realized something very important, which was that the ton never forgets.

He thought that he would be affected far more by the people that were appalled by his appearance, that felt as though he should have remained hidden away, but as time went on, he never once felt that way. Quite simply, their opinion did not matter to him, though he was grateful for those that congratulated him for his efforts and considered him brave.

He wanted to say that he was not brave, that anyone else would have done the same thing, but he also wished to revel a little. After all, it had taken him long enough to get that far.

They had not heard from Ophelia since the ball, which he could only consider a blessing. In fact, hardly anybody could say anything about her at all, which was strange given the way she seemed to exist as the center of attention. Again, however, he had bigger things to concern himself with.

Lucien also stayed away since that night, and seemed bitter on the odd occasion that they did cross paths. Philip was sad that their friendship ended so terribly, given their history, but he knew that he could not compromise his happiness for his friend's selfishness. He also never apologized, which Philip had to admit that he might even have accepted had he done so, because they truly had been such good friends.

Fortunately, Jackie did not blame herself for that for too long. Philip worried that she would consider herself responsible for all that had transpired, when in fact she had dealt with it all perfectly. He couldn't have asked for more from her.

Philip also realized, while Jackie was at her family's home settling matters before the wedding, that he had made a fatal error.

He had not proposed.

He hadn't thought of it for a long time, but then he remembered that she simply began wearing the ring one morning and nobody questioned it. She had never mentioned it to him, but he knew it was the right thing to do, given that she would only be married once, and so it was only fair that she received at least one proposal. It was easy enough to find a musician to accompany him to Somerset as a surprise, and the following day they arrived.

"Oh!" she gasped upon seeing him. "Philip, I wasn't expecting you!"

"Might you find some time away from your usual duties to accompany me to a hall?"

"Well, I have settled all of our financial matters, but I do still have my sister's engagement to help with."

It had taken some time, but at last Lord Greene's parents had relented and allowed him to marry Elizabeth. Philip wondered if they had finally decided that they wanted an heir for their son, so they had no choice but to give in. Regardless, they were at last able to marry, and he couldn't have been happier for the two of them.

"My engagement is going perfectly well," Elizabeth called from nearby. "So do not let that stop you!"

"Thank you, Elizabeth!" Philip called back. "Come along. You will love it, I assure you."

There was a dinner arranged, and in the corner of the room stood a pianoforte, the

musician already sitting at it and playing. He watched as Jackie tried to decipher which piece it was, though he knew she couldn't.

“Is this one of the musician's pieces?” she asked. “It is beautiful, and so happy too. I always like when music communicates emotions other than sadness, especially the pianoforte.”

“This piece is about a man that realizes he is in love, and doesn't know how to say it with words. It was written for his fiancée, though she was not his fiancée at the time.”

He watched her as she thought, and then suddenly...

“Did you write this? About me?”

“Indeed I did,” he confessed. “When I first realized that I had feelings for you, I began composing a piece. I was useless with my words, and so I used music instead. I wanted it to say everything that I couldn't.”

“You certainly achieved that, though I must say that you have no issues telling me how you feel now.”

“You made it easier. Speaking of which, it is about time that I do something that I should have done months ago. Could I see my mother's ring for a moment?”

“What's the matter? Are you going to take it back?” She teased.

“For a moment, yes, but you shall have it right back.”

She handed him the ring, and he placed it into a ring box under the table before leaving his seat and getting down on one knee beside her.

“Oh, Philip,” she sighed, laughing gently. “I had forgotten that we didn’t do this!”

“We have certainly been unconventional,” he agreed. “But it is time to rectify that. And so, Lady Jacqueline Winterbourne, will you do me the honor of becoming my wife?”

“Nothing in the world would make me happier!”

Nothing has really changed, Philip thought, and yet everything has.

“Diamonds or pearls?” Elizabeth asked, holding two necklaces against Jackie’s neck.

She thought that every aspect of her wedding had been planned, even arranging it for months away, in April, so that the Dowager Duchess could have the spring flowers that she wanted. However, the finer details were continuing to appear, even on the morning of the wedding itself.

“Diamonds,” the Dowager replied for her. “Poor Jackie has been waiting for long enough, she deserves an extra special gift.”

“Truly, I have not minded the wait. It gave me more time with my family before becoming a wife—which I am of course excited to become!”

“It is not as though you will be vanishing,” Elizabeth joked. “You can see us whenever you choose, or invite us to see you. Besides, Rupert and I shall be married soon enough regardless.”

“I know. Do you suppose that Father will be lonely?”

“He will have more than enough to do. Ever since his debts were cleared, he has made some good friends.”

“And I hope that it stays that way.”

“Either way, it is as I said. He can visit. Now, we shall have to make our way to the church soon. Are you ready?”

“I couldn’t be more prepared if I tried! As we said, it has been a long engagement, and I cannot wait for it to be over so that I can return home with my husband.”

It was still a strange word to say, even though she had told herself the same word over and over hoping that she would adapt.

As she walked down the aisle alongside her father, Philip looking at her as though she was the most beautiful woman in the world, she wanted everything to freeze. She wanted to feel that way for the rest of her life, but she also wanted to reach the part where they were married and so she had to continue.

At last, the time for vows came.

“Philip Churchill, Duke of Creighton” the vicar began. “Wilt thou have this Woman to thy wedded Wife, to live together after God’s ordinance in the holy estate of Matrimony? Wilt thou love her, comfort her, honor her, and keep her in sickness and in health; and, forsaking all other, keep thee only unto her, so long as ye both shall live?”

“I will,” Philip replied, his gaze not leaving hers.

“And Lady Jacqueline Winterbourne, wilt thou have this Man to thy wedded Husband, to live together after God’s ordinance in the holy estate of Matrimony? Wilt

thou obey him, and serve him, love, honor, and keep him in sickness and in health; and, forsaking all other, keep thee only unto him, so long as ye both shall live?"

"I will," she nodded affirmatively, meaning every word.

Philip took her right hand, and took his turn to say his vows. He was terrified of saying it incorrectly, he had already confided in her as much, but she knew that he would do it perfectly.

"I, Philip Churchill, take thee Jacqueline Winterbourne to be my wedded wife, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death us do part, according to God's holy ordinance; and thereto I plight thee my troth."

It was a vow that they both knew that they could keep, given that they had already been for richer and for poorer on her part, and in sickness and in health on his. There was no question about them being able to keep to it.

"I, Jacqueline Winterbourne," she said proudly, taking her turn, "take thee Philip Churchill to be my wedded husband, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love, cherish, and to obey, till death us do part, according to God's holy ordinance; and thereto I plight thee my troth."

Neither one of them stumbled over their vows, and she could see Philip become visibly relaxed at the realization that that part was over with. They were married, and at last the festivities could begin. Just as soon as the register was signed, of course, but such a thing did not involve speaking before a church filled with people.

Lord Greene hosted the wedding breakfast, as he had become a good friend to both of them. He had made an incredible effort, and already the guests were discussing what

a beautiful ceremony it was, and how meticulously planned everything else had been. Jackie smiled, sitting down to eat.

After a while, however, she felt a hand graze her arm. It was Philip, and he was looking at her with a mischievous glint in his eye.

“You know, Your Grace,” he mumbled. “We are yet to share something very important.”

“Oh? And what might that be, Your Grace?”

“You shall have to come with me if you wish to know.”

It was not customary to leave one’s own wedding, but then they had never been too strict with societal expectations, and so she followed him into Lord Greene’s house and they hid away in his library.

“Now you can tell me, surely?” She asked, and he pulled her into his arms.

“I can indeed. Jackie. We are yet to share our first kiss.”

She giggled, and he placed a gentle kiss on her lips, her first of many, she hoped.

“I will love you,” he promised her, “through every trial and tribulation that could possibly be thrown at us, and I shall do so with a smile on my face.”

“And I shall do the very same. You have my word.”

“And I shall also love you,” he continued, “through every triumph. No matter where we are in the world, it shall be a steadfast constant. This is my promise to you as your husband.”

“And my promise to you as your wife is that you shall never face anything alone again. I will be by your side always, which is exactly where I shall always want to be.”

“Then we are both going to be very happy people,” he smirked.

“Very happy indeed. Now, shall we return to our guests before they believe something untoward has happened?”

“There is no longer any such thing as untoward for us,” he grinned. “For we are married, and only the Lord himself shall dictate the manner in which I treat my duchess.”

“Your duchess,” she breathed. “I can hardly believe it!”

“Well, you shall have the rest of our lives to come to terms with that.”

And with one final kiss, they agreed to return.

THE END

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 11:20 am

Jackie was under the impression that a lot could change in a few short months, but she had no way of knowing just how much could change in seven years.

For a start, it brought along four little miracles in the form of her two sets of twins. Identical, two boys and then two girls a mere two years later. She had started to wonder if the number two had any significant meaning to her.

“Philip,” she said to one of them one afternoon. “Please tell me that you tidied away that toy.”

“I am William, Mama,” the boy said with a grin. “Philip is in the garden.”

“Well, so long as he stays away from the pond. Philip is a terrible swimmer.”

“I shall make sure to tell him what you said!” The little boy laughed before leaving the room, adjusting his clothing, and returning inside. “I am Philip now, and will be sure to do as you said.”

Jackie couldn’t help but laugh at him. She knew which brother he was, because William had never been the sort to play tricks. If she had to guess, she would say that William was in the library with the duke, reading, which was precisely where she needed them to be.

“Come now, Philip,” she smiled. “It is Papa’s birthday, and you remember our little secret, don’t you? We wouldn’t want it to be spoiled, would we?”

“No, Mama. When will they be arriving?”

“Within the hour, I believe, and so I shall need you to find someone to dress you for this evening. I shall locate your brother myself when he is not with your father.”

“Shall I find someone for Elizabeth and Edith?”

“If you happen upon someone, though I suspect they are already being tended to.”

He was a very talkative boy for his age, and well-spoken too. It made sense that he was the one that used his voice, while his brother sat quietly reading.

Her guess had been correct, and within the hour Elizabeth and Rupert arrived with their own child, a daughter they had named Jacqueline Anne Greene, which had made Jackie tear up at the time. She was still very small, but she clung tightly to Jackie’s hair whenever she held her, which her own children had never done.

“She has your curls,” Elizabeth lamented as she handed the baby over. “Truly, they are impossible to tame.”

“Then let us hope that she never tries, for it is a frustrating and fruitless process.”

“Speaking of fruitless,” Elizabeth smirked. “Shall I wait for the duke to arrive, or would you like to hear some ton gossip beforehand?”

“Beforehand would be best. Philip does not engage with that sort of thing.”

“Ophelia has married at last!”

“After all this time? I would have thought that she would have chosen someone as quickly as she could.”

“Had she been able to find someone, perhaps she might have, but after the way she

behaved all those years ago nobody wanted her anymore.”

“In which case, I dread to think of the sort of man that married her.”

“A merchant,” Elizabeth explained. “He has no title, but he is fabulously wealthy. It was enough to settle her family’s debts, and that was enough to make her parents send her away to him.”

“I pity her.”

“I do not. There is a reason why you are a duchess, and she is a merchant’s wife, in spite of the fact that you both were in the same circumstances.”

“I suppose that is true. Have you heard anything from Lord Montague?”

“No, nobody has. It is as though you married the duke, and he disappeared completely, never to be seen again.”

“I always thought that he might marry Ophelia.”

“Knowing how she behaved when she didn’t get her own way? It could never have happened.”

“So he chose to vanish instead?”

“Yes, and it is for the best, if you ask me.”

“It is a shame, though.”

“Does the duke ever talk about him?”

“From time to time. I know that he misses his friend, and that after so long he is prepared to at least try to forget about everything, but it is hard to do when he cannot be tracked down.”

“Then here is hoping that you find him one day.”

Their conversation was punctuated by the arrival of their father, accompanied by his new wife Margaret. She was a gentry woman, and they liked her a good deal because she never expected them to call her their mother, or even their stepmother. She was simply Margaret, and they appreciated her a great deal. She certainly made their father happy, too.

Then came the arrival of Philip’s mother, who had brought along some of their friends from their town. They were trying to keep quiet, but they were hushing each other so loudly and then giggling with one another that they may as well have been talking all at once.

The dowager had never remarried, saying that she had already had a great love and did not feel any need to replicate it, and instead filled her days planning activities with other widows. She was a good planner, and it brought her happiness to help others.

“I hear voices,” Philip said brightly as he entered the room, William under his arm giggling. “My goodness, would you look at this, William? All of these people have come to see you!”

All of the guests gave the little boy some attention, and then gave the duke his turn. Once that was over, the party truly could begin.

“This is the best birthday present,” he whispered in Jackie’s ear as they danced. “I cannot thank you enough for it.”

“I am so happy that you are enjoying yourself,” she smiled. “And that everyone could come.”

Suddenly, the door opened, and everyone fell silent, turning to look at who had entered. Jackie blinked, wondering if she was imagining things, but she was not. There, stood before her, was Lucien himself. He seemed a lot older, withdrawn, but just as confident in his walk as he had always been.

“Lucien?” Philip gasped, turning back to Jackie for a moment.

She nodded to him, and he let her go and walked to Lucien, who did not seem to have any one emotion on his face. There was uncertainty there, but also hope, and slight hint of fear.

“Where have you been?”

“I have been away in my own space, thinking.”

“For seven years?”

“I had a lot to think about. Philip, when I said and did all of those things, I was angry. I was downright furious that you could have anything that you wanted, and I could not. I saw it as fitting revenge if I took the one thing you truly wanted from you, and it was wrong of me.”

“It was, but it did not mean that you had to hide away for so long.”

“I chose to. I needed some time to learn who I was outside of a duke’s friend, or a duke’s enemy.”

“And what else did you do during that time, besides think?”

“I found a wife, if you can believe it, and we are to have a child soon. Our wedding was last year, and it was then that I realized that I never even loved Lady Jacqueline. The way I feel for my wife, that is truly love, meaning I threw all our years together away for mere infatuation. I am so sorry, Philip, and I understand if you never forgive me. I simply wanted to come here and tell you myself just how apologetic I am for what I did to you.”

“Where do you live now?”

“In the South. I traveled for three days to be here, but that is what was needed. My wife has accompanied me, and we are staying at an inn, but she hasn’t come tonight in case things took a bad turn.”

“Go back to her,” Philip replied. “And tell her that there shall be no bad turns, and that the two of you are to come here together. There is no need for an inn, so long as you do not mind the house full of children.”

Lucien smiled at Philip, shaking his hand tightly, and Jackie looked on with hope. She knew that her husband was a forgiving man, and this was no exception. At last, they could begin to repair their friendship after so many years. Lucien left to get his wife, and the party continued, Elizabeth taking Jackie to one side almost immediately.

“Now that was a true surprise! Did you invite him?”

“I would have, had I known where to find him. He came of his own accord, it appears, and I am pleased that he did. It feels as though we can finally leave everything that happened in the past now, and look forward to everything else.”

“And there is so much to look forward to! I was thinking of planning a party for the dowager duchess, as it is her birthday in a month’s time. What do you think?”

“I think that we will be planning parties for the rest of our lives,” Jackie giggled. “And I will be honored to do so.”

“Good evening, Ladies,” Philip said, joining them. “My apologies, Elizabeth, but I require a moment with my wife.”

“Of course!” Elizabeth grinned. “I shall take my turn with the boys.”

“You know,” Jackie remarked as they headed to the balcony, “it is customary for the children to be kept with a nanny during events like this.”

“And did you know that they are wanted there more than you and I?” he joked. “They are incredibly well behaved when necessary.”

“Yes, which you wouldn’t think when looking at Philip.”

“One of our children had to cause mischief somewhere! It just so happens that he is the one with my name, and he clearly stole all of my mischief from me.”

“You say that as though you haven’t snuck away from your own party with me.”

“I cannot help myself. If I go too long away from you, I get these horrible tremors, and I become clammy. It really is an unfortunate sight, and so it is better if I simply do not leave your side at all.”

“Oh, certainly. We wouldn’t want you to become unwell.”

“Then you must stay by my side.”

“I believe I agreed to that around seven years ago, now.”

“And you are pleased to have done so?”

“It was the best decision that I have ever made, along with our decision to have our little ones. Truly, I believe that I might be the most blessed lady in the world.”

“And I the most blessed man. To celebrate a birthday surrounded by family and friends, no longer hiding away, and adored by my wife and children. What more could a man want?”

“I would say that you could wish for sons that were not born together at exactly the same time.”

“Ah, yes. That might be a difficult conversation in a few years. At least the girls will be able to have their seasons together without any fierce battles.”

The boys had not been born at exactly the same time, of course. William was first, followed by Philip ten minutes later, but those ten minutes meant everything when selecting an heir. It was for that reason that they had never disclosed the order, which had seemingly worked well given that William was perfectly happy not having such responsibilities.

“I believe the boys will come to a decision themselves,” Jackie laughed. “Though if you believe the girls entering society will be painless, I have some terrible news about how ladies act.”

“But they will likely be perfectly fine, will they not?”

“Likely, yes. And if not, then we shall have to keep to our vows and overcome it all together.”

“And that,” Philip smiled, kissing her gently, “is the greatest gift of all.”

THE END

Chapter 1

“Evelyn! Oh, Evelyn, wake up!”

Octavia’s voice travelled through the hallways, and Evelyn awoke with a start. The soft morning light filtered through the lace curtains of her bedchamber, casting delicate patterns across her sleeping form. She stretched before slowly sitting up straight, the last threads of her dream fading away in the morning light.

"Another day of wedding preparations," she murmured to herself, the exhaustion dissipating to make room for something akin to excitement – of course, the excitement, however, was not without a smidge of ... well, something else.

Though she was genuinely happy for her sister Octavia’s impending nuptials to the esteemed Nathaniel Hartley, Evelyn couldn’t help feeling a twinge of envy. At nineteen, she was still considered rather young for serious courtship, while her beautiful older sister had captured the heart of one of the most eligible bachelors in the county. Evelyn sighed softly to herself as she thought of her sister’s betrothed.

Evelyn’s gaze drifted to the window, where the first light of dawn was painting the sky in soft hues of pink and gold.

The manor’s gardens stretched out before her, shrouded in the early morning mist, and she could just make out the vague silhouettes of the rose bushes her mother tended. She closed her eyes with a serene smile appearing around her lips.

She couldn’t help thinking about the countless mornings she had spent in this very

spot, dreaming of her own future. Of grand balls where she would dance the night away, of tender declarations of love from a handsome suitor ... and, of course, eventually, of a wedding day filled with joy and promise.

It was not as though she were jealous of Octavia ... but it was difficult to understand how her sister could seem so unaffected by her own wedding. With a rueful smile, Evelyn turned back to her dressing table, her fingers absently tracing the embroidery of the nightgown Octavia had gifted her what felt like a lifetime ago.

Thoughts of Octavia naturally led to thoughts of her betrothed, and a deep blush coloured Evelyn's cheeks.

Nathaniel Hartley was everything a young lady could wish for in a husband—he was handsome, wealthy, and kind. She could still vividly remember the first time she had seen him—at a garden party the previous summer.

He had stood out among the other gentlemen—his tall frame and broad shoulders had cut an impressive figure in his impeccably tailored coat.

But it was his smile that had truly captured her attention. When he laughed at something Octavia had said, his entire face had lit up—crinkling at the corners of his eyes in a way that made Evelyn's heart flutter.

She had watched him with a strange feeling she'd never experienced before blooming in her chest as he offered Octavia his arm for a turn about the garden.

With a shake of her head, Evelyn attempted to rid herself of these thoughts. She was happy for her sister—of course she was. She could only hope that she would find a husband as worthy as Nathaniel—and as kind and handsome. She was certain he would fit in perfectly with their family.

In truth, she quite liked him a lot. She could still recall the first time he had truly seen her—seen her in a way that her family had not.

“Why, look at you, young lady Evelyn,” he had said, his tone gentle. It was shortly after his courtship with Octavia had come to fruition. “Soon, you will have many a man of the court vying for your attention,” he had continued.

She had blushed then—as she did now—overwhelmed by the attention of the broad-shouldered man.

She shook her head quickly and rose to her feet, looking through the dresses. She finally chose a simple muslin gown in a becoming shade of green—the colour she had worn when Nathaniel had told her that she was pretty.

Though she knew he was betrothed to her sister and that he looked at her as little more than a nuisance, she had a strong feminine urge to have him find her pretty.

She found it quite surprising that Octavia had seemingly decided a call to wake her was enough—she half-expected her sister to barge into the chamber and see that she had risen.

A frown adorned her forehead as she thought of the chaos that awaited her downstairs. Octavia had insisted on hosting the wedding at Windermere Manor, a decision that had thrown the entire household into a frenzy of preparation.

“Miss Evelyn?” A gentle knock accompanied the voice of Sarah, her lady’s maid. “Your mother requests your presence in the drawing room to discuss flower arrangements for the ceremony.”

Evelyn sighed, tying off her simple braid. “Thank you, Sarah. I shall be down shortly.”

As she made her way downstairs, the buzz of activity was impossible to ignore. Servants scurried about, arms laden with linens and decorations.

The delicious aroma of baked goods wafted from the kitchen, where Mrs Baker, their cook, was undoubtedly testing recipes for the wedding breakfast.

In the drawing room, Evelyn found her mother, the Viscountess of Thynn, Lady Eleanor Windermere, surrounded by an array of flower samples. The older woman's brow was furrowed in concentration as she compared various blooms.

"Ah, Evelyn, there you are," her mother said, looking up with a smile. "Come, dear. What do you think of these roses for the centrepieces?"

Evelyn dutifully examined the flowers and nodded. "They are beautiful, Mother," she said quietly –all the while knowing that her opinion did not truly hold much sway. "Roses are quite traditional and symbolic of love," her mother muttered. "But lilies hold an innocence ... a pure beauty ..."

Evelyn looked around curiously, suddenly noticing a rather important absence. In the midst of discussions about flowers, the bride-to-be, whose voice had awoken her, was nowhere to be seen.

"Where is Octavia this morning?" Evelyn enquired, trying to keep the disapproval from her voice. "Surely she would want to have a say in these decisions."

Eleanor's smile faltered slightly. "Your sister is ... indisposed this morning. She asked that we make the selections on her behalf."

Evelyn bit back a retort, knowing it would do no good to voice her frustrations. It seemed that Octavia had been 'indisposed' more often than not lately, leaving the bulk of the wedding preparations to fall to their mother and the household staff.

“Perhaps I could take some samples up to her room later,” Evelyn suggested, not wanting to let the matter drop entirely. “She might feel more inclined to participate if she did not have to leave her chambers.”

“That’s very thoughtful of you, dear,” Eleanor replied, though her tone suggested she doubted the efficacy of such an attempt.

As they continued their floral deliberations, Evelyn’s thoughts drifted to Nathaniel Hartley once more. She had always admired him, finding his quiet strength and kind demeanour a refreshing change from some of the more boisterous young men of their acquaintance.

The thought of him binding himself to someone who seemed so disinterested in their union made her heart ache for him. He was one of the few young men who truly spoke to her like she was more than a child.

Evelyn’s thoughts disappeared when the doors swung open to reveal their father, Theodore Windermere. His usually jovial face was creased with concern as he addressed his wife, hardly taking notice of his youngest daughter.

“Eleanor, my dear,” he said, his voice low, “I have just received word that Captain Felix Carrington will be joining us for dinner this evening. Octavia has ... requested his company.”

Evelyn’s ears perked up at this news. She had heard whispers of this Captain Carrington, an officer Octavia had met during her recent trip to London. Though she was young—and possibly a bit naive—she had noticed how her sister’s eyes sparkled when she spoke of this young captain.

“But Father,” Evelyn protested, unable to contain herself, “surely it is inappropriate to entertain another gentleman so close to the wedding? What would Nathaniel

think?”

Theodore’s expression softened as he looked at his youngest. “Now, now, Evelyn. Captain Carrington is merely passing through on his way to his new posting. It would be ungracious of us not to extend our hospitality.”

Evelyn nodded, chastened but unconvinced. She couldn’t shake the feeling that there was more to this visit than simple hospitality.

Still, she knew full well that her father would not share his concerns with her if he had any—and as such, she excused herself, leaving him in the company of only her mother.

It was at least an hour before her mother called her once more, and as the day grew on and she kept herself preoccupied with mundane wedding tasks, she couldn’t entirely rid herself of the growing unease in the back of her mind.

“Mother,” she requested softly as they finished reviewing place settings for the wedding breakfast, “might I be excused, please? I promised Lily and Jane that I would meet them by the stream this afternoon.”

A flicker of concern crossed Eleanor’s features, though she nodded after a long silence. “I suppose so, dear,” she said at last. “But please do not stay out too late. And do be careful. Remember, we must all be presentable for dinner ... with the captain.”

Grateful for the escape, Evelyn hurried to her bedchamber to change into a simpler dress—one more suitable for an afternoon outdoors. As she made her way across the grounds towards the babbling stream that marked the edge of their property, she felt the tension begin to leave her shoulders.

The sight of her two dearest friends, Lily Miller and Jane Blackwood, brought a

genuine smile to Evelyn's face.

The three young women had been inseparable since childhood, sharing secrets, dreams, and the occasional mischievous adventure. Only they knew about the secret dreams she harboured in her chest—though there was one that even they were unaware of.

“Evelyn!” Lily called out, waving enthusiastically as she approached. “We were beginning to think you were no longer coming.”

“And miss the chance to escape all this wedding madness? Never,” Evelyn replied with a laugh, settling down on the grassy bank beside her friends. She shifted her dress up slightly to reveal her legs, basking them in the sun and throwing her head back to breathe in the air, so free of constraints.

“So, Evelyn,” Jane began, a mischievous glint in her eye, “how does it feel to know you will soon have the dashing Nathaniel Hartley as a brother-in-law? I daresay half the young ladies in the county are green with envy.”

Evelyn's smile faltered slightly, and her heart skipped a beat. “He is a fine man,” she agreed, choosing her words carefully. “I only hope he and Octavia will be happy together.”

Lily, ever the perceptive friend, caught the note of hesitation in her friend's voice. “Is something the matter, Evelyn? You don't seem as excited about the wedding as one might expect.”

Evelyn sighed and plucked absently at a blade of grass. “It is just ... Octavia seems so disinterested in all the preparations,” she admitted, lowering her voice to a mere whisper. “And now this Captain Carrington is coming to dinner ...”

Her friends exchanged curious glances. “Captain Carrington?” Jane repeated. “Who is he?”

“An officer Octavia met in London,” Evelyn explained, the words tumbling out in a rush. “She has been talking about him incessantly since she returned, and now she’s insisted on inviting him to dine with us mere weeks before her wedding!”

Lily reached out, giving Evelyn’s hand a comforting squeeze. “Oh, dearest Evelyn,” she said gently. “Perhaps it is nothing to worry about. I am certain that Octavia is simply trying to maintain her connection to society before settling into married life. Surely, your parents would not allow anything improper!”

Evelyn nodded, though her smile lacked conviction. Though her friend’s words made sense, she just could not quite bring herself to believe it. The three girls lapsed into a contemplative silence, broken only by the gentle gurgling of the stream and the occasional chirp of a nearby bird.

As the afternoon light faded, Evelyn was the first to rise—pulling her dress down to cover her ankles once more. “I suppose I need to return home and prepare for dinner with the captain.”

She grimaced as she said this, and her friends flashed her sympathetic grins. The walk back to the manor seemed far too short, and the second she found herself inside the manor, she was once more dragged into the flurry of activity that preceded any formal dinner.

It was nearly time for the captain to arrive when she finally reached her bedchamber, Sarah in tow. Evelyn remained quiet as Sarah helped her dress in a pale blue gown, one more suitable for the evening.

Though she was quiet, her mind was racing. She did not understand why Octavia

insisted on inviting another man to dinner. Surely, she tried convincing herself, Octavia would not jeopardize her engagement to Nathaniel? Evelyn was certain that the captain could not be as handsome, gentle, or kind as she knew Nathaniel to be.

She turned around quickly when she heard the sound of carriage wheels on gravel and rushed to the window. In the fading light, she could make out the figure of a man alighting from the vehicle. Even from a distance, she could see that Captain Felix Carrington cut a dashing figure in his red coat, his posture straight and proud.

A movement in the corner of her eye caught Evelyn's attention. She glanced to the side, suppressing a gasp, when she saw Octavia standing at her own window, a strange expression on her face as she watched the captain's arrival.

It was a look Evelyn had never seen before—perhaps it was excitement or anxiety ... though there was something else she could not quite name.

The dinner that followed was, to Evelyn's eyes, an excruciating affair. Captain Carrington proved to be charming and witty, regaling the family with tales of his adventures in London and his military exploits. Yet Evelyn couldn't shake the feeling that something was amiss.

She watched, her food largely untouched, as Octavia laughed at the captain's jokes, her eyes sparkling in a way she had never seen before. Even her parents seemed rather charmed by their guest. Their parents seemed oblivious to the undercurrent of tension as they laughed at his jokes.

"Please ... excuse me," Evelyn mumbled as dinner drew to a close and the family made their way to the parlour. "I just ... need some fresh air," she explained at her father's curious look before rising.

With a shake of her head, she went up to her bedchamber to grab a shawl before

rushing outside. The cool air was truly a welcome relief after the stifling atmosphere of the dining room, and she pressed a hand on her heart, willing her breath to come more easily.

Though she could not quite lay her finger upon it, something was bothering her.

She wandered aimlessly among the flowerbeds, her mind whirling with conflicting thoughts and emotions. So lost was she in her ruminations that she almost missed the sound of hushed voices from a nearby alcove.

Curiosity overcoming her sense of propriety, Evelyn crept closer, her heart pounding in her chest. As she peered around a conveniently placed topiary, her eyes widened.

There, half-hidden in the shadows stood Octavia and Captain Carrington. They stood far closer than propriety allowed, their heads bent together in intimate conversation. As Evelyn watched, frozen in horror, the captain reached out, brushing a stray lock of hair from Octavia's cheek.

"Octavia!" Evelyn cried out, unable to contain herself any longer. "What on earth do you think you are doing?"

The pair sprang apart, guilt written clearly across their faces. Octavia's expression quickly morphed from surprise to anger as she looked at her younger sister, her cheeks reddening.

"Evelyn," she hissed, her voice low. "How dare you spy on me? This is none of your concern!"

"None of my concern?" Evelyn repeated, her voice fraught with indignation. "You are engaged to be married, Octavia! To Nath ... Lord Crestmoor."

Captain Carrington had begun to look decidedly uncomfortable, and he edged away from the quarrelling sisters. "Perhaps I should take my leave," he murmured—though both women ignored him.

"You are a child, Evelyn," Octavia snapped, her eyes flashing dangerously. "You are a mere child, playing at being grown up. You know nothing of adult matters, so you ought to keep your nose out of my business!"

Evelyn recoiled as though she had been slapped. Tears pricked the corners of her eyes. "I may be younger than you, Octavia," she retorted hotly, "but I know right from wrong, and what you are doing ... it is shameful. How could you betray someone like this? Someone like Lord Crestmoor!"

For a moment, something like guilt flickered across Octavia's face. But it was gone in an instant, replaced by a cold mask of indifference. "Go to bed, Evelyn," she said, her voice icy. "And if you breathe a word of this to anyone, I will make you regret it."

Hurt and anger warred within Evelyn's chest as she stared at her sister. This was not the Octavia she knew and loved. This was a stranger, cold and cruel.

Without another word, Evelyn turned on her heel and fled back to the house. She ran blindly, tears blurring her vision, until she reached the sanctuary of her bedchamber. Collapsing onto her bed, she finally allowed the sobs to overtake her.

As she lay there, her mind raced with the implications of what she had witnessed. How could Octavia do this to Nathaniel? To their family? If this were to become known, the scandal would be devastating.

Yet even as these thoughts swirled through her mind, Evelyn knew she could never betray her sister's confidence. For all Octavia's faults, for all the hurt and anger Evelyn felt at this moment, she was still her sister.

As the tears gradually subsided, Evelyn found herself facing a harsh reality. The carefree days of her youth were coming to an end. The world seemed to be a far more complicated place than she had ever imagined.

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“You look like a man besotted, Nathaniel,” came the amused voice of Lord Marcus Dashwood, the Baron of Stone, from the opposite seat of the carriage as they left the bustling streets of London. Nathaniel Hartley leaned back against the plush seat, and his contented grin widened. “I don’t believe I’ve ever seen you quite so ... joyful,” Marcus continued.

Nathaniel chuckled as he faced his longtime friend. “Can you blame me, Marcus? In just a few days, I shall be married to the most beautiful woman in all of England.”

Marcus raised an eyebrow, a teasing glint in his eye. “My, my.” He let out with a laugh. “You truly are far gone, are you not? The most beautiful woman in all of England, you say?”

Despite his friend’s teasing, Nathaniel was unperturbed, and he merely let out a laugh. “You will understand when you meet her,” he ascertained. “Lady Octavia is ... well, she is unlike anyone I have ever known.”

Marcus laughed softly. “Is it like the great love of Paris and Helen that we read about?” he teased, and Nathaniel shook his head with a laugh.

“This is real life, my friend,” he insisted. “And I do believe that while there will not be songs written about us ... I could not dream of a better love.”

The carriage jostled as it hit a rut in the road, momentarily jolting Nathaniel from his reverie. He glanced out the window at the passing countryside, and a smile appeared on his face. Every bump, every mile brought him closer to his bride-to-be. Soon, he’d be a married man.

“You know,” Marcus spoke suddenly, interrupting his thoughts, “I can hardly believe you will be married soon.”

“Nor can I,” Nathaniel admitted with a grin. “But here we are.”

Marcus laughed softly. “I can vividly remember the night you met. The Carmichaels’ ball, was it not?”

Nathaniel nodded in agreement. “Indeed. And the moment I saw her, I knew she was something quite special.”

Marcus flashed him a teasing grin. “I could tell.” He laughed. “You were barely able to string two words together when you asked her to dance.”

Nathaniel chuckled at this, and his cheeks grew hot at once. “Well, of course,” he retorted. “She is breathtaking. You cannot possibly blame me. And now ... now we are about to embark on the greatest adventure of all: a life together. One that is ... fulfilling for us both.”

Though he spoke rather confidently, it was evident that Marcus had noticed the second of hesitation in his voice.

“Nathaniel,” he spoke now, his voice uncharacteristically serious. “Forgive me if I seem ... less than supportive, but I must ask. What exactly do you have in common?”

Nathaniel shifted uncomfortably at this. “Well, we both ... enjoy ... social gatherings. And she does have quite the keen eye for fashion and decor, which will be invaluable to managing Leyton Place, and ...” he trailed off suddenly, struck by how utterly shallow it all sounded. “We are still getting to know each other,” he explained quickly. “There is plenty of time for shared interests to develop.”

Marcus merely lifted a brow, and Nathaniel felt a desperate need to fill the silence.

“It is a good match, Marcus,” he insisted. “Octavia comes from a respectable family, and she is beautiful and charming ... everything a man could want in a wife. And I am fond of her; truly, I am. The rest ... will come with time. I am certain of it.”

Despite the certainty of his words, a thin frown settled between Nathaniel’s brows as they continued the journey. He tried with all his might to imagine being married to Octavia; he had to admit that he could not quite imagine her in any domestic capacity.

Still—they were to be married soon. He had little doubt that it could get better than this.

Marcus merely nodded and glanced out the window. As the carriage rolled towards Hampshire, Nathaniel found his mind drifting back to that fateful night in London over a year ago.

He could still picture Octavia with perfect clarity – her golden hair gleaming in the candlelight, her blue eyes sparkling with wit and charm as she laughed at some clever remark.

“I do wish Grandmother and Daisy could have made the journey,” Nathaniel mused, a slight frown creasing his brow. “It hardly seems right, getting married without them there.”

Marcus reached out, patting his friend’s knee sympathetically. “I know, old chap. But your grandmother’s health must come first. And Daisy couldn’t very well leave her alone, could she?”

Nathaniel nodded in agreement. Of course, Marcus was right. His grandmother’s recent bout of illness had been a source of great concern for the family. Though she had insisted she was well enough to travel, Nathaniel had put his foot down. The journey from Derbyshire to Hampshire was simply too taxing for a woman of her advanced years.

“At least they will be there to welcome us home,” Nathaniel said, brightening at the thought. “I cannot wait to show Octavia Leyton Place. I think she will love it as much as I do.”

“I hope she will,” Marcus agreed. “We have had some good times there.”

Nathaniel nodded with a laugh. “We have indeed,” he agreed. “And I do hope there will be many children to carry on our mischief ... sons and daughters!”

Marcus merely laughed as Nathaniel delved even deeper into a song and dance about what he expected of married life.

The carriage pulled up to Windermere Manor just as the sun was beginning to set. As Nathaniel alighted, smoothing down his travel-worn coat, he was greeted by the warm smiles of the Windermere family – all save one notable absence.

“Nathaniel, my dear boy!” Lord Theodore boomed, clasping him in a hearty embrace. “Welcome, welcome! We are so pleased you have arrived safely.”

“Thank you, sir,” Nathaniel replied, returning the older man’s embrace with genuine affection. Over the past year, he had come to regard the Windermeres as a second family. “I cannot express how grateful I am for your hospitality in hosting the wedding.”

Lady Eleanor stepped forward, her kind eyes crinkling at the corners as she smiled. “Nonsense, dear. We wouldn’t have it any other way. Now, come inside. You must be exhausted from your journey.”

“Please, do meet my good friend, Lord Stone,” Nathaniel said as they entered, taking note of the flurry of activity around them. “And I do hope we have not caused too much trouble with all these preparations,” he continued, a note of concern evident in his voice.

“Not at all!” Eleanor assured him. “We are delighted to have something to celebrate. It has brought such life to the house.”

Before Nathaniel could think to respond, a blur of movement caught his eye. Suddenly, a whirlwind of green muslin and chestnut curls was before him, eyes bright with excitement.

“Nathaniel!” Evelyn cried, appearing as though she was barely restraining herself from throwing her arms around him in a most unladylike fashion. “Oh, I am so glad you are here! How was your journey? Is your grandmother feeling any better? And Daisy – does she send her love?”

Nathaniel couldn’t help smiling at the youngest Windermere’s enthusiasm. Evelyn was growing up—and he loathed to think that soon her excitement and vigour for life would leave her, and she would become one of the proper ladies of the ton. He took his time now to study the girl who would be his sister-in-law.

She had grown even more beautiful than the last time he had seen her, but he suppressed the thought quickly. Meditating on another woman’s beauty was improper—especially one related to his betrothed.

“She is quite a beauty,” he heard Marcus whisper, and a strange, unpleasant feeling that he could not quite place coursed through him at this comment. He shot Marcus a dissatisfied look before turning his attention to Evelyn.

“One question at a time, Evie,” he teased, reaching out to give her hand an affectionate squeeze. “The journey was pleasant, despite the length thereof—thanks in no small part to my dear friend, Marcus.”

He gestured to Marcus, who bowed politely. Evelyn, however, kept her gaze on him—her eyes wide and eagerly awaiting more news.

“Grandmother is on the mend, though still not quite up to such a long journey, hence her missing the wedding. And yes, Daisy sends her love—she is quite looking forward to meeting all of you when we return to Derbyshire.”

Evelyn’s eyes lit up at this. “Oh, I would love that,” she exclaimed. “I must admit, I quite feel like we already know each other from all you have told me.”

Nathaniel flashed her a gentle smile. “I am sure the two of you will be great friends,” he assured her, his eyes flitting around as they made their way to the drawing room.

“I hope Octavia is well,” he said, turning his head from one to the other in the room. Though he tried to keep the note of disappointment from his voice, he couldn’t quite do that.

Evelyn looked down in an attempt to avoid his eyes, and a frown settled between Nathaniel’s brows.

“Oh, Octavia ... she had some errands to attend to in the village,” Eleanor explained with a carefully neutral tone. “But of course, she will be back for dinner—and I am certain she will be thrilled to see you.”

He could not do anything but nod, though Nathaniel could not deny that he had to force aside a small tendril of unease. Of course, he silently reasoned with himself, Octavia would have obligations to see to, with the wedding so near. It was unreasonable to expect her to sit idly waiting for his arrival.

Rather than focus on his dissatisfaction with his bride’s absence, Nathaniel turned his attention to his future sister-in-law, who was looking at him with wide-eyed wonder.

“Are you looking forward to being married?” Evelyn asked unblushingly, and Nathaniel nodded, though he did feel his own cheeks grow hot at the question.

“I believe I am, yes,” he muttered, and she sighed deeply.

“And are you certain Daisy will not mind sharing you? I would hate to think of her feeling left out once Octavia comes to live with you.”

Nathaniel’s expression softened at her concern, and he looked at her with a bit more attention, noticing for the first time the extraordinary hazel colour of her eyes.

“Daisy is overjoyed at the prospect of having sisters,” he assured her, and Evelyn’s brow furrowed in confusion.

“Sisters?”

“Of course,” Nathaniel insisted with a soft laugh. “After all, you will be her sister too—and she is quite determined that you should come to visit as soon as possible. According to her, it is high time someone stood with her against my insufferable brotherly teasing.”

A surge of affection coursed through him when Evelyn’s face lit up at this. “Oh, that’ll be lovely,” she exclaimed, leaning forward. A lock of hair fell across her cheek, and sweet lavender rose from her.

Just then, the grandfather clock in the hall chimed six, and the opening of the front door caught everyone’s attention. A moment later, Octavia swept into the room, a vision in pale blue silk.

“Nathaniel!” she exclaimed, her eyes widening in apparent surprise. “I had no idea you’d arrived already.”

Nathaniel rose to his feet, and he flashed her a smile. She was beautiful indeed, he told himself. He was lucky to have a bride like her ... and if she did not look overwhelmingly happy to see him, well, that was to be expected. It was a

marriage—not a fairy tale. “My dear,” he murmured, taking her hand and gently kissing her knuckles. “You look radiant as ever.”

A becoming blush coloured Octavia’s cheeks at his words. “You flatter me, sir,” she replied, though her pleased smile belied her modest words. “I trust your journey was pleasant?”

“It was,” Nathaniel nodded with a smile. “Though it was made all the sweeter by knowing I would see you at its end.”

Nathaniel thought he saw Evelyn shift uncomfortably from the corner of his eye, but his attention was quickly drawn back to Octavia as she started speaking quickly.

“I do hope you will forgive the state of chaos you’ve found us in,” she said sweetly, gesturing vaguely at the flower-strewn surfaces around them. “There seems to be an endless list of details to attend to.”

“Not at all,” Nathaniel assured her. “I am only sorry I could not be here sooner to assist with the preparations. You must be exhausted from all the planning.”

Something flickered in Octavia’s eyes—a feeling he could not quite place—but it was gone before Nathaniel could be certain it had been there. “Oh, it has been no trouble at all,” she said lightly. “Mother and Evelyn have been absolute treasures, taking care of most of the arrangements.”

At this, Nathaniel glanced at Evelyn once more. She carefully avoided his eyes still, and a frown settled between his brows. How was it that she had spent more time preparing for the wedding than the bride-to-be? And this by Octavia’s own admission?

Still, despite his reluctant concern, Nathaniel found himself constantly drawn to Octavia, marvelling at her beauty and charm. As they moved to the dinner table,

however, he couldn't shake the feeling that something was ... off. She seemed distracted, her smiles not quite reaching her eyes as they usually did.

As the meal drew to a close, Octavia rose from her seat. "If you will all excuse me," she said, keeping her voice light, "I have a bit of a headache coming on. I think I shall retire early this evening."

Nathaniel stood as well, concern etching his features. "Is there anything I can do?"

Octavia shook her head, offering him a small smile. "No, no, I'm sure it's nothing a good night's rest won't cure. Please, don't let me spoil your evening."

Before Nathaniel could protest further, Octavia had swept from the room, leaving a palpable tension in her wake. He sank back into his chair, a frown creasing his brow as he stared at the door through which she had disappeared.

"I ... I am sure it is the stress of the wedding preparations," Eleanor said quickly, though her voice sounded almost strangled. She reached out to pat Nathaniel's hand comfortingly. "Octavia can be quite ... delicate," she explained further.

Nathaniel merely nodded and forced a smile. "Of course," he agreed, though the knot of unease in his stomach refused to dissipate. "These things can be quite ... overwhelming."

Still, even as he left for his hired house, Nathaniel could not shake the feeling that something was wrong. He was certain that something was troubling Octavia—though every time he had raised this concern with the family, they were quick to dismiss it.

"Is it just me, or does Octavia not seem like a happy, blushing bride?" He turned his queries to his friend, who sat easily on a chaise in the parlour. A sliver of doubt crept into his mind, and he tried to shove it down.

Still, the doubt would not let up. He couldn't help feeling as though this was not what he truly believed love was meant to be. Still, he told himself, it was what it was—and as far as love went, he was rather lucky to have someone like Octavia, wasn't he?

Unaware of his tumultuous thoughts, Marcus merely shook his head with a laugh. "You are imagining things, old chap," he insisted. "Pre-wedding nerves, nothing more. I am certain by tomorrow, your dear Octavia will be her charming self."

"I hope you are right," he murmured in response, though he was speaking more to himself than his companion. Perhaps, he thought as he withdrew to his bedchamber, Octavia was overwhelmed by the magnitude of the changes ahead.

After all, she would be leaving behind everything she knew to start a new life with him in Derbyshire. It was only natural for her to feel some trepidation.

He would speak to her privately the next day, he decided firmly. He would reassure her of his love, his commitment to her happiness. Whatever doubts or fears she might be harbouring, they would face them together.