



Her Charming Duke (Regency Roses #3)

Author: *Hanna Hamilton*

Category: Historical

Description: Ill teach you how to charm, but you must promise to leave me alone

When Lady Judith is threatened with an unsavory match, she is determined to marry within a month. Even if that means she needs the help of the most arrogant yet charming duke...

Duke Aaron has just returned to England, only to find himself responsible for his best friend's spirited younger sister. He always knew she was gonna cause him trouble

As their lessons progress, Aaron discovers that Lady Judith doesn't need help winning someone's heart—least of all, his own. But with the month slipping away, he realizes he is about to lose her forever

*If you like a realistic yet charming depiction of the Regency and Victorian era, then *Her Charming Duke* is the novel for you.

Total Pages (Source): 38

CHAPTER 1

“ You must be so glad that soon you can wear something other than black and lavender,” Rosy Lymington, the Duchess of Cambridge, said as she and Judith walked back toward the sprawling house.

Judith tugged on the sleeve of her lavender-colored gown and sighed deeply. “I suppose I am,” she said with a shrug. “But the truth is, a part of me feels strange because the dark colors have been like a cloak for me, a shield. When I go outside, people see I am in mourning and leave me in peace. I do not get invited to balls and functions, and nobody bothers to tell me that I must marry because I am on the shelf.”

“You are not on the shelf,” Rosy stated sharply.

Judith shook her head. “I am four and twenty, Rosy. Do not forget that I am older than you. I am unmarried. We must face reality—I am on the shelf. A spinster. An old, old maid.”

Rosy gave her a playful pat on the arm. “Stop it. You make yourself sound as if you were a grandmother.”

Judith sighed and took her friend’s arm. “You must admit, it is not easy to defy Society’s demands and expectations. You must feel it. You have been married for almost three years, and you haven’t a child yet.”

Rosy cringed. “It is true, but it is by choice. And...” She bit her lip and looked at Judith. “You not being married is somewhat by choice. You could have been married

by now, but you chose not to. I thought it was so brave and inspiring at the time. Do you not think so anymore? Do you regret it?"

Judith pondered this for a moment. It was true. She had been all but betrothed three years ago to a gentleman from Scotland. She'd spent a lot of time with him, and everyone had expected them to be married—as had she. However, she'd had a change of heart when those around her, particularly Rosy, Joanna, and to a lesser degree their elder sister Sally, had chosen husbands they loved and embraced lives that made them truly happy.

She'd decided to end her courtship then, seeking instead true love—alas, love had eluded her up until now. She hadn't been bothered by it at first, as she'd been willing to wait. However, now that she had reached an age that made the prospects of marriage improbably small, she wondered sometimes if it had been better to marry when she could have.

Alas, it was too late now, and there was no point in pondering these issues. She wasn't married and perhaps would never be.

"It cannot be helped now," she said as they approached the house. "I did what I did. I am sad that love has not found me, but I must live my life as best I can. Father never pressured me. Besides, it has been so long since I have been to a ball, I do not think I'd remember how to dance or charm anyone."

She meant it in jest, but there was a kernel of truth to it. The longer she'd been without a courtship, the harder she'd found it to be charming or even graceful. Once upon a time, she'd been among the most refined ladies in high society, but now she often felt out of place. Her mind was occupied with other things—things that seemed more important than etiquette and accomplishments.

Since her father's death, she'd had to care for her younger brother, who'd been

distraught by their father's passing. She'd been a companion to Matilda, who had spiraled into deep melancholy with the sudden loss of her husband. And she'd had to assist Oliver as he found his way into a role he'd never wanted.

Balls and the opera had been the furthest things from her mind—and in a way, she hoped they would remain this way, as she had no desire to re-join Society.

“Rosy, I have half a mind to ask you to take me with you when you go visit Sally in Portugal next,” she said.

Rosy's older sister spent most of the year with her husband, Leonard Harding, the Duke of Chester, and children on the Continent to tend to her Leonard's vineyards.

“You ought to! We are going in the spring,” Rosy offered enthusiastically.

But their conversation was interrupted when a window flew open on the upper floor and her brother's face appeared.

“Judy! Come to my study,” he shouted and disappeared again.

Judith groaned and shook her head. “I suppose I have been summoned. I beg your pardon, Rosy,” she said, but her friend waved a hand.

“Do not fret, I understand. Your brother ought to be grateful he has you to help him with the estate and everything.” Rosy lowered her voice a little. “How is he doing, by the way? I know you said he never had an interest in the estate.”

“He didn't, and he doesn't. He does what must be done but leaves most things up to the steward. It is a good thing the estate was in good condition, thanks to my father. Oliver needs to do nothing but show his face at the House of Lords when necessary. Everything else runs almost by itself,” Judith drawled, but then, the window opened

again.

“Judith!” her brother barked, louder this time.

“Yes, I am coming,” she bellowed back and rolled her eyes. “I must go. Tell Joanna I will see her for tea tomorrow.”

She hugged her dear friend, and then they parted ways. As soon as Rosy’s carriage disappeared around the corner, she made her way back into the house.

It was winter now, and the great manor always seemed cold, no matter how many fires were lit. She pulled her shawl tighter around herself and climbed up the steps to what had once been her father’s study.

“Oliver?” she called as she entered.

Her brother looked up from his desk, his eyes bleary, a glass of whiskey on the desk beside him. She glanced at the clock. It was two in the afternoon. She didn’t think her brother ought to be drinking so early, but he wasn’t the type who’d take advice from anyone, least of all his younger sister.

Judith closed the door behind her and looked at Oliver, who was now standing up, straightening his waistcoat. She noticed the dark circles under his eyes and the strain in his expression.

“Judith, good. I thought you were going to chat the entire day away with your friend. You’re quite popular, I see. With the young ladies, that is,” he said.

Judith tilted her head to the side. What was that supposed to mean?

“I have my friends, as you do yours,” she replied.

Indeed, Oliver spent more time at Brooks with his friends than at Parliament.

He looked at her, his eyes narrowed. Then, he scratched his stubble and indicated the seat in front of him while dropping into his own.

“Sit, Judith,” he ordered and then placed a foot up on the desk.

She inhaled sharply. Her father would have been livid at this display.

“Oliver, what is it?” she asked, walking toward the desk before taking a seat.

He took a deep breath. “Judith, we need to talk about your future.”

“My future?” Judith raised an eyebrow, sensing where this conversation was headed.

“Yes, your future,” Oliver repeated, avoiding her gaze. “You’re four and twenty now. In Society’s eyes, you are considered an old maid.”

Judith folded her arms. She knew they’d have to talk about this at some point, but she didn’t appreciate his bluntness. “And?”

“And you need to find a husband,” he stated candidly.

Judith’s eyes narrowed. “We are still in our mourning period, Oliver,” she reminded him, but he waved a hand.

“Yes, yes. Only another three weeks. Who is counting, anyhow? Besides, Father would rather you find a husband than observe this custom, I am sure.”

“Are you? And how would you know what Father wanted? You’ve hardly been here to know what he liked to eat for breakfast,” she fired back.

Her brother flinched and looked at his fingers before raising his head again. “Judith, we need not argue. I acknowledge that Father and I did not see eye to eye on... much. But this, I am sure of. It was in his will. He left me a letter, as you know,” he said.

He opened a drawer to his right and withdrew a folded letter that bore their father’s handwriting.

Judith sat upright. Her father had left a letter for each of his children, as well as Matilda, with personal words of encouragement and hopes for their future. He had always been a pragmatic man, and while his sudden death had not been foreseen by anyone, it hadn’t surprised her that he had created such documents. She’d wondered what he might have written to Oliver. And now she knew.

To say that this was a surprise was an understatement.

“He wanted me to help you find a husband and be settled, and we will see that this is done. His letter asked me to start the search the moment the mourning period was over so as not to waste time. However, I am afraid I cannot tend to this matter myself,” he continued and leaned back, removing his foot from the desk.

“And why, pray, is that?”

The idea that she was to be thrown into courting so soon after the mourning period was over was bad enough, but now her brother was shirking his responsibilities?

Oliver sighed and rubbed his temples. “I must leave for a business trip. I leave tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow? A business trip?” Judith scoffed. “You mean you want to avoid your responsibilities again.”

“That’s not true!” Oliver protested, a bit more forcefully than he intended. He softened his tone. “I have obligations that cannot wait, Judith. While our estate is run perfectly, my own business needs attention. I must travel to the Continent. I’ve already postponed the trip several times.”

“So, am I to be working with a matchmaker, then? Is that it? Since you cannot tend to the matter yourself? You’re abandoning me to some gabster who likes to pretend they are Cupid?” she asked bitterly, for this was often how ‘old maids’ found partners. Some lady of high society who had no pastimes of her own would make it her business to find matches for the hard-to-marry.

This was getting worse and worse by the minute.

“There will be no matchmaker involved. And I am not abandoning you. My very good friend has just arrived back in England from Italy, and he has agreed to help you find a match in my stead. He will approve any gentleman you might meet and ensure everything is done properly until I return.”

Judith’s eyes widened. She had an idea who that person might be but hoped she was wrong. “Your best friend?”

“Yes, you know him. Aaron Fitzwilliam. The Duke of Nottingham,” Oliver said. “I tasked him with helping you find a husband. You’ll attend balls and other events together, and he will make an introduction when he deems it right. And he’ll teach you some tricks that might help you.”

Judith’s blood seemed to roar in her veins. “Tricks? What, as if I am a dog? You cannot be serious, Oliver. Besides, the Duke of Nottingham is the last person I need help from. He’s a rake, a charmer, and the most arrogant man I’ve ever met.”

Oliver chuckled. “He’s not that bad, Judith. He’s a good man, and he’ll take care of

you while I'm away. You don't need to be afraid."

"I am not afraid. I simply do not like him."

She recalled her childhood days. Aaron had pulled her hair and teased her mercilessly when they were children, and then, once they were older, he'd always treated her more like a pesky fly than a young woman. He'd vexed and irritated her at every turn—and she'd always had the feeling that he liked doing so.

"He's not the type of person I want to look after me. And if your goal is to find me a husband, he is the last person who ought to be in charge of that. His reputation..."

"His reputation as well as mine are entirely undeserved. You know how the ton is. Whoever goes against convention has all manner of rumors attached to their name. You should know this better than most, given what your friends have gone through," he argued as Judith shrugged.

It was true. Her friends, the Blackmore sisters, had been written and talked about a lot—and at one point so had she—but she had experienced Aaron's behavior herself, seen the way he acted. Therefore, she was almost sure that his reputation was indeed rightly earned.

"Aaron will help you while I am away—he will look after you like a sister," her brother told her.

Suddenly, a knock sounded at the door.

"Come," Oliver called, and the door opened just as Judith leaned back and closed her eyes.

What a disaster this was. So much had happened these past few months. Her father

had died, her brother returned, and now, suddenly, she was to be thrown back into the marriage mart, something she'd considered behind her. How could things possibly get any worse?

"Well, well, if it isn't the Marquess of Worcester himself," a voice drawled as the door opened.

Judith turned just as a figure entered the room. She blinked as he came into view, her lips parting. Before her stood a man more handsome than any she had ever seen.

Tall and muscular, he stood a half head taller than Oliver, who'd rushed to his side. His dark blue eyes flashed as he looked at Judith over Oliver's shoulder, and his luscious lips curled into a smile. A strand of black hair had fallen over his face and drew her attention to his sharp cheekbones.

This man was utterly charming, there was no denying it.

But who was it? Surely this wasn't ... Or could it be?

As if to answer her question, Oliver turned to her.

"Aaron, there you are. Perfect timing as always," he said and stepped aside. "You remember my sister, of course?"

"How could I forget," the man murmured, and his voice sent a warm tingle through her entire body. It was smooth and soothing, like a cup of hot milk with honey on a cold winter morning. "Lady Judith," he said with a smile while she stared at him, unsure of what to say. "What a lovely young woman you have grown into."

It was him. The Duke of Nottingham. The man who was to be in charge. Had he always been so handsome? Or had she simply forgotten?

“I thank you,” Judith replied in a whisper, for now that she stood before him, it became painfully clear to her that her life had just become a whole lot more complicated than she’d ever imagined possible.

CHAPTER 2

The young woman stared at him as though he had flown into the room on some sort of magic carpet. She blinked her green eyes at him and looked him up and down while he thought of what he was supposed to say now.

The truth was, seeing Lady Judith before him had taken him by surprise. He hadn't expected to see her the moment he stepped into Oliver's study. In fact, he had been entirely unprepared. Not that he was going to show that.

He had known, of course, that he was going to see Lady Judith today. He was, after all, supposed to look after her—whatever that was supposed to mean—on behalf of his friend. The details of the arrangement were not yet clear. Oliver had simply told him he needed his help to ensure his sister was looked after during his absence—and had help finding a husband.

Aaron was to learn the details of this arrangement this afternoon. He hadn't been certain what he was to expect, but now that he saw her, he realized Lady Judith looked nothing like he had imagined. He had not seen her in a number of years, not since her mother's funeral some six or eight years ago.

The years had blurred before him, and he wasn't quite sure how long it had been, but he remembered her being a lanky, somewhat awkward girl, not yet old enough to have her coming out ball, but too old to require constant attention.

The last time he had seen her before that had been when she was a mere child. Judith had always been what Oliver considered a precocious child, someone who had an

opinion about everything and was not shy about expressing it. The truth was, Aaron had found her thoroughly vexing, and his friend's request to look after her and help her find a husband while he tended to his business did not exactly fill him with any joy.

Aaron had no sisters of his own, and being tasked with tending to Oliver's sister was not how he had imagined his return to England would commence. Oliver was his best friend, and Aaron hadn't been able to say no. The poor lad had just lost his father, after all, without having a chance to reconcile their differences. Aaron wasn't going to make his situation worse by refusing.

Still, now that he saw Judith before him, he realized that the task ahead might be a little different than he had anticipated. How did one find a husband for a young lady one did not know well?

Indeed, when Oliver had told him that his sister was still unwed at the age of four and twenty, Aaron had imagined her to be rather unattractive. Perhaps with buck teeth, crossed eyes, and pigeon-toes. He was sure there had to be a reason why a lady of her standing, the daughter of a marquess, hadn't married yet. However, now that he saw her before him, he realized that his assumptions had been entirely wrong.

For Lady Judith was a beauty. Her hair, the color of wheat in the sunshine, was pinned at the back of her head with sparkling gemstones, and her eyes, almond-shaped and bright green, sparkled as she looked at him. Her lips, plump and pink, were pressed together, but he could imagine that she had a beautiful smile. Her nose and chin completed her heart-shaped face.

She was stunning. That was nothing to say of her elegant, graceful figure.

Why was she not married?

“Your Grace,” she greeted, bobbing a half-hearted curtsy before rising and looking at him again. “It has been some time.”

Her voice was melodic but had an edge to it. She was clearly not pleased to see him. Indeed, the way she looked at him through narrowed eyes, highlighted by her knitted eyebrows, made it clear that she did not want to be in his presence.

So, Oliver had already told her about his proposition. Good. At least he did not have to.

Still...

“It has,” he replied. “But I understand your brother has already told you that we will be seeing a lot more of one another.”

“Yes, indeed. Not that I was consulted,” she said in a surly tone that made his shoulders tense up.

It must be her salty personality that has kept her from finding a husband yet.

He sighed and looked at his friend. Why had he ever agreed to any of this?

A knock interrupted his thoughts, and the butler, whom he recognized from past visits, entered. “Excuse me, My Lord, but the solicitor is here with the documents.”

Oliver sighed but nodded. He placed one hand on Aaron’s shoulder. “I will return as soon as I can.” Then, he slipped out of the room, leaving him alone with his sister, who now blinked at him with a mix of curiosity and judgment.

“Well, it seems we will be spending rather a bit of time together these next few months.”

Her eyebrows rose as he said this, and she crossed her arms.

“I will have you know, Your Grace, that I am more than capable of looking after myself. I am not a child who needs a governess,” she declared, and he had to suppress a chuckle because she reminded him of the forward child she had been.

“Then it is a good thing I am not a governess.”

“It sounds as though you are, given how my brother described the reason for your visit. That or a matchmaker. Pray, will you be staying here? For I am almost certain our old governess’ quarters are empty—a little dusty perhaps, but suitable,” she drawled.

She was feisty, and he could see now why she did not yet have a husband.

“Lady Judith, I do appreciate your kind offer. However, I shall decline. We will meet in a more organized manner that does not require my staying here. However, if I dare say so, if you wish to successfully leap off the shelf you have been placed upon, then controlling your tongue might be a first step,” he advised as he crossed his arms.

Her eyes went wide, and her chest rose as she inhaled sharply. “I did not ask for your advice,” she hissed.

He shrugged. “But you shall receive it anyhow because your brother has tasked me with helping you find a husband and keeping you safe during this endeavor. And I am true to my word—that I can assure you of.”

She pursed her lips and looked toward the empty seat her brother had vacated earlier. “Have you nothing better to do than to tend to a grown woman who has no need for you?”

The venom directed at Aaron was both surprising and worrying. He hadn't wanted to help her, to begin with, but he had agreed out of duty to his friend. Yet, her behavior was rather vexing.

"I will have you know that I have many more enjoyable things to do than spend time with an uncouth young woman without manners," he fired back.

"I beg your pardon? I am by no means uncouth. I only object to being treated as though I were a mere child, rather than a woman of four and twenty. I can make my own decisions, and I do not need help from anyone."

"Oliver believes you do," he pointed out, and she sneered.

"Oliver has hardly been here to know what anyone in this family might need."

She was exasperating, that much was obvious. However, he could see that these next few weeks might be a challenge—and while she was rather irritating right now, Aaron wasn't the sort to shy away from a challenge. Indeed, as he watched her, he realized that it was quite understandable she'd be upset.

For one, she was of an age where she was considered an old maid—a circumstance that had to be mortifying for any young lady. And for another, she had to worry about her status, so perhaps her defiance was not born out of rudeness but out of mortification and fear.

Determined to break through to her, he lowered his voice and used the sort of tone he usually used when he wished to charm a young lady.

"Lady Judith, I believe we have misunderstood one another. I do not want to upset you. I am merely here to help you and Oliver. That is all. It is my duty to ensure you can court and be introduced to eligible bachelors while your brother is away with a

sense of security. Security I will provide. You can rest assured, there is nothing to worry about at all,” he said and smiled.

Alas, his assurance had not had the desired effect.

She threw her head back and glared at him. “Your Grace, you might be used to charming ladies whenever you wish, but this theater will not work on me. I will speak to my brother, for I do not need nor wish someone to provide me with security or a match. I am quite independent, even if my brother refuses to see it. Excuse me,” she huffed and marched past him before he could so much as gather his wits about him.

The door creaked open and slammed shut behind her while he was left standing there, blinking in confusion.

She was a spitfire, there were no other words for it. And at that moment, Aaron realized that the task before him would be much more difficult than he ever could have imagined.

“I am not so certain about this, Oliver,” Aaron said later, after his friend had rejoined him. “Your sister stormed out in rather a huff. She doesn’t seem to want my company while you’re away.”

Oliver waved a hand, dismissing his concern. “Ah, she is a little theatrical. She always has been, you know this. She will learn to appreciate your help. Besides, she has no choice.”

Aaron took a deep breath, taking in the notes of cedar in the air from the fireplace.

“Exactly what is it that you wish for me to do? You said I am to look after her but that she also needs help finding a husband? I am unsure what role I am to play.”

Oliver smirked. “Yes, when I asked you to look after her and keep an eye on things, that is what I meant. She will need to attend balls and dinners and all manner of things to find a husband. I cannot accompany her, but I want you to. Along with a proper chaperone, of course. You know everyone in town, Aaron. Introduce her to your friends.”

Aaron shrugged. That he could do. While he enjoyed traveling the world with Oliver, he spent more time at home than his friend did because his own father had passed some years ago, thus leaving him with the burden of managing the duchy. He still made sure to spend much of his time away from rainy England—preferring Italy, Spain, and France—when the war allowed.

There was indeed nothing better than to frolic in the waves under the Italian sunshine, and spending evenings with lovely ladies while sipping fine wine and eating delicacies. He knew in England, his tendency to enjoy life was frowned upon, and he’d earned a reputation as a rake, but his life had made him happy—so far.

Besides, Aaron hardly considered himself deserving of being called a rake. Yes, he liked to keep the company of ladies, but he wasn’t the sort to abuse his position or wilfully ruin anyone. Indeed, he made it a point not to spend private time alone with young ladies whose reputations might suffer because of it.

No, all the ladies he was with over the years were willing and capable of looking after themselves. However, he’d never felt the urge to clarify this to the English high society. In fact, he liked having such a bad reputation because it achieved two things: A certain popularity among the young nobles who wished to live as he and Oliver did but wouldn’t dare, and a distinct lack of attention from aristocratic families looking for husbands for their daughters.

No gentleman would want to marry his daughter off to a man with so adventurous a lifestyle as him—and it suited him just fine, for he was not in any hurry to find a

wife. Indeed, he enjoyed his bachelor life so much that he was considering making it permanent.

“I can introduce her, certainly. But pray, what exactly is it that you want? For her to have a husband ready for you to approve of when you return?”

“Indeed,” Oliver confirmed. “My father has been far too lenient with Judith. He should have forced her to marry when she was betrothed, but he gave in to her foolish desire to marry for love because her friends, those Blackmore sisters, did. And see where it left her. An old maid.”

“I would not call her an old maid,” Aaron countered, uncomfortable with that description, for it felt unkind and needlessly rude. Besides, Lady Judith hadn’t struck him as what he considered an old maid. He always pictured timid, homely women when he heard that term, and she was none of these things. “She struck me as rather opinionated and independent.”

Oliver let out a belly laugh. “She fancies herself both these things, but she is neither. She has not courted anyone in years, and I doubt she knows how to charm a man. You will need to teach her. I already told her you’d teach her skills.”

At this, Aaron’s mouth dropped open. “Teach her?”

“How to charm a man. I know you are not easily charmed, but you know what we like. Help her be graceful, help her make conversation that will draw a gentleman in. Help her find herself a husband, for if she doesn’t find one by the time I return, I shall have to make a match for her.”

“You do not think that is a little too far?” Aaron demanded at once.

He was not one to favor arranged marriages, having almost been forced into one

himself. Years ago, his father had attempted to force a match between him and a young lady, Lady Amelia Cornell. Amelia had been perfect for him, according to the matchmaker. Alas, he'd never warmed up to her—and if she was honest, neither had she.

He shuddered as he thought back to the brief courtship and its long, drawn-out, ugly end. No, arranged courtships were a recipe for disaster. Surely, Oliver had to know this. However, he seemed determined.

“On the contrary. Arranged marriages are good for some people—like my sister, who isn't able to find a husband. Now, I can count on you, yes? You will do all you can to help her?”

Aaron gulped but nodded. He didn't want to be Lady Judith's guardian, but he also didn't feel right about leaving her to her own devices. The idea of his best friend forcing his sister to marry a man of his choosing didn't sit well with him.

No, he'd do what he could to help the young woman. If she was as capable and confident as she'd presented herself, it ought not be a problem. He'd introduce her to a few eligible bachelors, she'd lose her heart to one of them, and he could wash his hands of the entire situation without upsetting his friend.

It wasn't how he wanted to spend his days, but he had no option. He'd do what had been asked of him and hope it would go seamlessly, for the last thing he needed was to get stuck with Lady Judith for longer than necessary.

CHAPTER 3

J udith sat at the table and stabbed her fork into the carrot before her. It pierced the buttery vegetable with ease, and the sound of her fork hitting the porcelain filled the silence.

“Judith?” Matilda prompted. “Is something the matter? You seem a little perturbed.”

Perturbed. Judith snickered at the word, for it was nowhere near a powerful enough word to explain just how she felt.

“I am vexed,” she said, looking up from her plate.

“Because your brother left again?” Matilda asked.

It was clear from her tone that she did not like Oliver’s departure any more than Judith did, though perhaps for other reasons.

“Indeed. He should not be traveling now—we are in our mourning period. He should be here, with the family, and take an interest in the estate and its needs. But that is not why I am upset,” Judith said and turned to Matilda.

She wanted to tell her stepmother everything that truly bothered her. Everything from the way her brother had distanced himself from the family for years only to now swoop in, thinking he could change everything, including the way he’d commanded her to find a husband.

She wanted to tell her how humiliated she'd felt when her brother, whom she hardly knew, had told her that his friend, whom she knew no better but disliked greatly, was to help her find a husband. To teach her 'tricks,' to ensnare a man. Furthermore, she wanted to tell her stepmother about the argument that had broken out between her and Oliver after Aaron had left. An argument during which she'd made her position clear: She did not want to be forced to court anyone, least of all under the supervision of Aaron Fitzwilliam.

Alas, she knew she could tell Matilda none of these things. They weren't friends. Nor were they really mother and daughter. Theirs was an odd relationship. While she liked her well enough and things had been amicable while her father was alive, she wasn't quite sure where she stood with Matilda now.

Matilda had moved into the dower house some weeks ago but still dined with the family daily, and it was clear she was not going anywhere—at least until she remarried, as was the custom. In any case, the melancholy that had set in with her husband's death continued to plague her, and burdening her with more troubles would not be fair or right.

Thus, Judith shook her head.

"It is nothing. I am simply unhappy that he has left as he did. That is all."

Matilda placed a hand on her arm. "I understand. But do not fret too much, dear. He will find his way. As will you."

Judith sighed and gave a nod before returning to her meal. She wished she had her mother with her still, she'd understand. She'd speak to Oliver and explain how foolish his plan was. No, she would not even have to. If her mother hadn't died, her father probably would not have died either because... because... Well, because everything would have been different.

She didn't know how likely these were foolish thoughts, but she could not help herself. These past few days, all she could do was think how things could have been different, how she longed for things to be different. And yet there was not a thing she could do, for she was powerless. She was literally at the mercy of her brother and his changeable temperament. And at that, of his irritating and handsome friend.

Judith sat on the edge of a wooden bench in Hyde Park, the sun casting dappled patterns through the canopy of trees above. Beside her, Rosy pulled her scarf closer around her, her eyes wide with incredulity.

"I can't believe it, Judith. Your brother has left before the mourning period is over, and now the Duke of Nottingham is to help you find a match and serve as your guardian while Oliver is away?" Rosy exclaimed, her voice reflecting the apprehension Judith felt. "It is ridiculous."

Judith nodded, her expression one of resigned acceptance. "Yes, that's exactly what happened. Oliver has always been so restless. I suppose I shouldn't be surprised, but it's still... unbelievable. And to imply I do not know how to find a husband on my own, it is insulting. I know everyone thinks I am on the shelf, but for my own brother to say it..."

"And the Duke of Nottingham of all people. You know I do not like idle gossip, but I know he has a dreadful reputation for debauchery." Rosy wetted her lips. "I will not speak badly of someone simply because he enjoys the company of the ladies. George did as well before we met, but the Duke of Nottingham is a known gambler, and he drinks like a fish and..."

"I know, I know it all," Judith muttered, although she felt worse now that she'd heard her friend repeat the stories she'd read in the scandal sheets.

She shook her head, remembering their childhood days when Aaron had been

insufferably arrogant.

“I heard he’s the biggest charmer in the realm,” she said. “And he tried to charm me. He tried to make it sound as if all was well and we’d have a grand time—right after admitting he did not want to be around me any more than I wanted to be around him.”

“And what did you do in the end?” Rosy asked breathlessly.

“I left him to stand where he was and stormed away. I spoke to Oliver, but it was of no use. Can you believe he wants to teach me tricks? To learn to charm a man as if I am utterly useless?”

Judith knew she sounded indignant, but the truth was that she’d worried about her ability to find a husband on her own after her brother had so severely hurt her confidence. Could it be that she had indeed lost her charm? She’d been out of practice even before her father passed away, and now she’d missed out on most of the Season, and all that lay ahead of her were the masquerade balls of winter and?—

No. I must not let these men confuse me. I do know how to charm a gentleman—I simply want to make sure I charm the right one.

Judith’s lips pressed into a thin line, her irritation evident. “Who does he think he is? It’s outrageous that he’s been given any power over my life. I can manage quite well on my own, thank you very much.”

Rosy patted her friend’s hand, her expression sympathetic. “You must try to endure the next two months until Oliver returns. Then we can talk some sense into him. I’ll ask George to speak for you—I will do it gladly. He doesn’t stand for such foolishness.”

Judith was about to thank her friend when, from the corner of her eye, she spotted

Aaron coming their way.

“Faith, no. There he is,” she groaned and slid down so she was partially hidden beside Rosy, who craned her neck to see what she was looking at.

“Oh, he is handsome,” Rosy noted quietly.

Judith swiftly swatted her arm. “Do not make it worse,” she huffed.

She watched from behind Rosy, trying to remain inconspicuous as Aaron conversed with a few other gentlemen nearby. His laughter rang out, drawing glances from passersby, who seemed equally charmed by his presence.

Judith’s heart sank. It was exactly as she had feared. Aaron Fitzwilliam was the center of attention, as always, and loved every moment.

Rosy turned to her, noticing her discomfort. “Judith, perhaps we should leave. We can blend into the crowd.”

Judith was about to agree when she saw Aaron turn his attention toward them. Her heart skipped a beat as he gracefully excused himself from the conversation and headed their way.

“There’s no avoiding it now,” she muttered under her breath.

“The Duchess of Cambridge, if I am not mistaken,” he said and bowed.

“Have we met?” Rosy asked.

To her horror, Judith saw her friend’s cheeks redden slightly. A married woman! This man managed to charm a married woman who was moon-eyed over her husband just

by showing up! It was truly beyond infuriating.

“Duke, it’s always a pleasure. How are you this fine afternoon?”

“Very well, thank you,” he replied, his eyes flicking to Judith, who did her best to appear composed. “I’ve come in search of your friend here, the fine Lady Judith. Lady Judith, I went to your home earlier, hoping we might meet to discuss the next steps now that Oliver has gone. Your stepmother informed me that you were here in the park.”

Curse Matilda.

Judith forced a smile, her irritation bubbling just beneath the surface. “Your Grace, it seems you are always well-informed.”

Aaron’s eyes twinkled with amusement. “I do my best to stay informed, Lady Judith. It’s in both our interests. Now, I do not want to disturb your afternoon, but I thought perhaps I might introduce you to my friend.”

His friend? Judith felt her entire body grow cold. Why would she agree to be introduced to one of Aaron’s friends at a park without a warning? She was dressed for a cozy afternoon with her friend, not for a promenade and certainly not for meetings with gentlemen. Did this fool not know that one needed time to prepare for such things? One could not simply be introduced to gentlemen at a moment’s notice.

“I do not think now is the best time,” she said, but to her horror, Aaron waved a hand and then offered her his arm.

“Nonsense. No time like the present, eh wot? Imagine, if you like him and he likes you, this can all be behind us. Wouldn’t that be wonderful?”

Judith looked at Rosy, whose cheeks had returned to their usual hue. Her friend shrugged, and Judith closed her eyes for a moment. Perhaps this was best. If his friend was in the least bit tolerable, maybe she could strike up a conversation, perhaps go to a ball with him—if this was to come to pass, she could pass the time until her brother came back, and she would make him see how ludicrous all of this was.

“Very well, I shall go with you. But let me assure you, I am not in any need of a matchmaker. I am quite capable of managing my own affairs.”

Aaron’s expression softened slightly. “I have no doubt about your capabilities, Lady Judith. But it is your brother’s wish, and I intend to respect it.”

“Very well,” Judith replied. “Rosy, I will meet you and Joanna for tea over by the oak tree in a little while.”

She squeezed her friend’s hand, and Rosy departed. Then she took Aaron’s proffered arm, and together they walked along the wide, sandy path toward where two of his friends were standing next to a statue. She felt her palms grow clammy beneath her gloves and felt heat rising to her cheeks.

This was not ideal by any means, and she wanted nothing more than to run in the other direction, but she was trapped. The closer they came to whoever it was Aaron wanted to introduce her to, the more nervous she became. This wasn’t right. This wasn’t what she wanted.

“Your Grace...” she started, but he interrupted her with a smile.

“I know this is not what you wanted,” he acknowledged. “But I think it is for the best. It is difficult to find a match at any age, particularly at yours. Not that you are old,” he added quickly, but the damage was done. Already nervous, Judith felt her confidence sinking even lower. “You see, Oliver thought that I should select the right

sort of gentleman for you from among our peers, but I think it would be better for you to make your own choice. Do you not think so?"

"I did not choose right now," she fired back.

It was painfully obvious that all he wanted was to match her up with the first lord he knew so he could wash his hands of her.

"Well, no. But how can you choose if you do not meet anyone? And my friend is a lovely fellow, you'll see. Be yourself, and you will see you'll have yourself a decent gentleman to court in no time at all. And you and I need not bother one another much anymore."

"I do not see how I am bothering you," she huffed. "Seeing how I did not choose any of this. Now, may I at least know the name of the man you intend to introduce me to?"

"Naturally. There's someone I think you'll find particularly agreeable. Henry Wachsman, the Earl of Guernsey. He's just over there, in the velvet top hat with the red stripe."

Judith looked at the Earl, who grinned at her in a way that made her feel all the more self-conscious. What did this man know about her? Had he been told that she was an old maid desperate for a husband?

Her stomach churned, and she thought she might be sick. Judith was about to ask her companion to stop, but she saw the smirk on the Duke's face and realized he was enjoying this, even though he'd assured her he had better ways to pass his time.

No, he enjoyed this torture, didn't he?

Well, she'd not give him the satisfaction of seeing her falter. He wanted to introduce her to someone to comply with Oliver's silly request? Very well, let him. She'd charm his friend and put an end to this stupidity once and for all.

CHAPTER 4

Aaron walked beside Judith as they headed toward his friends. He hadn't told either of his friends why he wanted to introduce her, only mentioning she was a lovely young lady. He didn't want to cloud their perception of her by telling them he'd been tasked to find her a husband.

Indeed, Aaron had decided the best thing he could do for Lady Judith was to let her make her own choice. All he would do was to facilitate meetings. She seemed self-assured enough. In fact, she was so confident that he thought her a little haughty. But he'd let her do things on her own terms and hope for the best.

He knew he should be more committed to the project, but the truth was, if Oliver had told him how vexing Judith still was, he might have made an excuse to get out of it. In fact, it occurred to him now that Oliver had been purposely obtuse when it came to what exactly Aaron's role would be—until he'd already arrived at the manor and Judith had been told.

Oliver could be a scoundrel, but Aaron loved his friend too much to stay mad at him for too long.

Still, the truth was, the more time he spent around Judith, the more daunting his task became. She clearly did not want his company any more than he wanted hers, nor did she think she needed his help. On his way here, he'd considered telling her the truth, that it was either this or her brother would marry her off to a man without consulting her. But she'd been so combative, he couldn't deny that he enjoyed her present discomfort a little bit.

Was that unkind? Perhaps, but she had spent much of their childhood doing all she could to annoy and trouble him.

Did she remember that? He certainly did. One time, she'd placed a frog into his shoe, causing him to squeal in front of her parents and their polite company. Another time, she'd salted his shaved ice during dinner.

Aaron smiled as he thought back to those days, but his thoughts were interrupted when they reached Henry and their mutual friend, Sir Marius.

"Sir Marius, Lord Guernsey, allow me to introduce you to Lady Judith Birks," Aaron said, his tone warm.

Henry turned, a friendly smile spreading across his face. "Lady Judith, it's a pleasure to meet you."

Judith managed a stiff smile. "Lord Guerdsney, the pleasure is mine."

"Guernsey," Henry whispered, and her eyes widened a fraction.

He chuckled. "It is a most awkward name, Lady Judith, do not worry," he said kindly as her cheeks grew red.

Aaron had stopped himself from grinning because all of Lady Judith's bravado had suddenly evaporated.

Not so cocky now, eh wot?

"Lady Judith has just rejoined Society after a period of mourning," he explained, hoping to set expectations.

While he enjoyed seeing her taken down a peg, he didn't want to totally ruin her confidence.

Henry nodded understandingly. "Of course. Lady Judith, I can't imagine how difficult it must have been for you. Please, do accept my condolences."

Judith shifted, her eyes darting from one to the other. "Yes, it has been. But it seems time goes on, and so must we, yes?"

Henry nodded. "Indeed, it does. If there's anything I can do to make your return to Society easier, please don't hesitate to ask."

Judith bit her lip, clearly nervous. "Well, thank you, Lord Guernsey. That's very kind of you."

There was an awkward silence.

Aaron could see that Judith was struggling. In fact, she was struggling more than he'd expected. Somehow, he'd assumed once she was past the initial awkwardness, she'd rise to the occasion and charm Henry into next Wednesday. Alas, the opposite was true. She appeared to be shrinking into herself.

"Lady Judith is among Society's most accomplished young ladies," he boasted, not certain if there was any truth to this.

"Is that so? Pray, what are your favorite activities?" Henry asked eagerly, his eyes resting on her.

Judith looked at Aaron, her eyes wide with panic. "Um, well, I enjoy reading, mostly. And, uh, embroidery. I... embroider. On... materials."

What in the world was she doing? Hadn't she assured him she knew how to find herself a husband? Perhaps Oliver had been right and she needed more help than Aaron had first imagined.

He decided to change the subject.

"Henry, have you heard about the new exhibition at the Royal Academy?"

Henry's eyes lit up. "I have! Lady Judith, do you enjoy art?"

Judith's eyes darted to Aaron, then back to Henry. "I... I do, yes."

Aaron stared at her, willing her to say something more than just yes. But she stood like a statue, not even blinking.

He stepped in, trying to salvage the situation. "Lady Judith, Henry has a great appreciation for art. Which piece is your favorite?"

"I like... I..."

He saw a sweat pearl on her forehead and felt guilty now for doing this to her. Clearly throwing her feet first into the water had been a dreadful mistake.

"Perhaps a piece by Vermeer? I recall you..." Aaron started, but to his surprise, she turned and walked away quickly, leaving him and Henry standing there.

Henry looked at him, his brow furrowed. "Did I say something wrong?"

Aaron sighed. "No, Henry, it's not you. I should have prepared her better. I didn't know she'd be so..." He waved a hand. "Excuse me."

Quickly, Aaron sprinted after Judith's retreating figure, feeling a pang of guilt. He had hoped this introduction would go smoothly, but it seemed he had miscalculated her readiness for such an encounter. Not only had she made a cake of herself, but she'd also made him look like a fool for introducing her.

Then again, there was something rather amusing about the way she'd just turned and run away like a petulant child. He remembered her doing this when they were younger. Whenever she found herself confronted with a situation she could not control, she'd bolt.

As he followed her, the awkwardness of the situation was replaced by memories from their shared childhood, and by the time he caught up with her, he couldn't help but see the little girl she'd once been. Especially as the pose she stood in—leaning against a tree with her arms and legs crossed and her bottom lip pushed out—conjured up many images from the past. She truly hadn't changed much at all.

"Judith," he said gently, approaching her, though he suppressed a smile. "I must beg your pardon. I did not mean to put you on the spot."

Judith looked at him, her eyes glistening with an unexpected defiance. "Oh, did you not? For it seemed as though you all but dragged me into this meeting."

And there she was, the petulant, hard-headed girl he'd always known. His sympathy evaporated rapidly.

"You told me you were ready to meet gentlemen," he fired back. "Although to me, it looked as though you'd never spoken to a man in all your life."

"On the contrary, I have mingled with London's finest nobles. I have conversed with Italian counts, and... and... I was simply not prepared to be pushed into a courtship just like this. I am very sorry my brother imposed this on you, but I assure you, I do

not need you. I am perfectly capable of?—”

“Finding a husband on your own? By butchering a gentleman’s name, stammering and praising your skillful embroidery of ‘materials’?”

He chuckled now because her pride seemed to have gotten the best of her, rather than a bout of despair he feared he’d brought on.

“You were presenting me to him as though I were a prized mare at the market,” she hissed. “Without letting me so much as collect myself. I dare say, if you wished to have a career in matchmaking, I’d urge you to reconsider, for you are terrible at it.”

“A governess, a matchmaker—have you any other suggestions for possible careers for me, Lady Judith?” he asked with a smirk.

She looked at him for a moment, her lips pressed together, and then a small smile appeared on her lips.

“Lady Patroness at Almack’s perhaps, since you pride yourself on your connections.”

At this, a genuine laugh escaped him. She had a true sense of humor, this young lady. Still, he needed to address the matter at hand.

“I shall consider your suggestion. Now, I can see you are witty and strong-willed, but I must say, if what I saw back there was any indication, you are not as skilled at making civil whiskers as you might have thought. Regardless of whether I was a little hasty in my quest to introduce you or not.”

“Your Grace is awful for speaking to a lady in such a manner.” She puckered her lips in an adorable yet petulant manner.

Aaron's expression softened. "I didn't mean to offend you. I only want to help. I know you want to find a husband."

Judith crossed her arms, her stance defiant. "I appreciate your concern, but I don't need your help."

He took a step closer, his tone more serious. "I beg to differ. Your brother will take matters into his own hands when he returns. Would it not be preferable if I helped you learn how to be charming and find a husband, so you can succeed before he returns? For, I dare say, Oliver is a great many things, but a matchmaker is not one of them. You'd have to agree to follow my orders on the matter, of course."

The idea of her brother making a match for her seemed to sufficiently disturb her, for her eyes went wide and her nostrils flared.

"You want me to follow your orders?" she asked, skeptical. "That seems rather demanding, Your Grace."

"I shall not demand that you do anything you do not wish to do, but I know a great many people, and I can make introductions. And I am rather well known for my charms, and you could benefit from that."

He knew he sounded high in the instep, but the fact of the matter was that he was right. He had a reputation for being charming—and for being hard to charm himself. It would do her good to pay attention.

She pursed her lips, considering his point. "Very well. But know this—I'm agreeing to this only because it serves my purpose, not because I particularly enjoy your company."

Aaron grinned. "Finally, something we can agree upon. Now, do you have a voucher

for Almack's?"

She rolled her eyes. "Of course, I do."

"Good, as do I. In fact, one of my aunts is a Lady Patroness," he revealed and grinned at her. "So, I propose that the two of us go to Almack's tomorrow. I will ensure every gentleman will want to dance with you. We will fill up your dance card. I guarantee, your feet will hurt by the end of the night."

She sighed, more resigned than anything else. "I suppose we could do that. But I ought to warn you, I have not danced in a very long time," she said with a small shrug.

"Well then, I suppose the first dance shall have to go to me, won't it? I assure you, my toes are made of steel, so you can step on them as many times as you need," he assured her, suddenly determined to make her feel more comfortable, so the entire evening did not end in disaster.

The last thing he needed was for her to run out of Almack's as she had just done.

She flashed him a small smile, but something about her gave him pause. She'd spoken with her shoulders pulled back and her head held high, but there was something different about her. She appeared defeated, though she did her best not to show it. Alas, it was written in her eyes and the corners of her lips, which were downturned.

A part of him felt badly for the position she was in. Sometimes, in his desire to be rid of this responsibility, he forgot that in the end, she was just a young woman who'd lost her father and whose brother had given her over to the care of someone who might as well have been a stranger.

She might grate on his nerves and fight him at every turn, but there was something about her that touched him, for he'd seen that beyond her independence, there was a vulnerable young woman. And that tenderness and uncertainty made him want to protect her—a feeling he'd never expected until this very moment.

CHAPTER 5

Aaron looked after her as she rejoined her friend, feeling entirely less certain of his role in her life. He'd been tasked with a job he hadn't wanted, found Judith rather irritating when they met again, but now found himself at a crossroads.

He'd taken quite a lot of joy out of teasing and exposing her a little, but her reaction had shaken him. Had he taken things too far? Their banter and her biting replies to his challenges had given him the impression she was rather a fiery, steely young woman, but there was a vulnerability there he hadn't expected. Perhaps he'd have to approach their time together with a little less bravado and a little more empathy.

He sighed, for this was proving far more challenging than he'd anticipated. Curse Oliver and his tasks. His friend should have warned him about how difficult this would be.

"Aaron?" Henry called behind him and caught up to him a moment later. "Pray, did I say something wrong?"

Aaron shook his head. "No, not at all. It is just that I overestimated her..." He waved a hand. "I should not have introduced you to her in this manner, or her to you. She was ill-prepared."

"I'll say. I do not think I've had such a peculiar introduction in a long time," Henry admitted, before he laughed. "Why did you want me to meet her?"

Aaron shrugged. "A friend of mine asked me to help her find a husband. She has not

courted in a while, and I thought... I thought this would be a simple task. I ought to have told you ahead of time.”

Henry shrugged in return. “It would not have made a difference. Pray, how old is she? She seems a little old not to be married.”

Aaron frowned. Judith had made a bit of a cake out of herself, but this judgment was harsh and hardly deserved.

“She is... unique. She knows what she wants, and she is rather independent.”

Henry chuckled. “She seemed rather bird-brained to me. Pray, who is this friend who has asked you to help her find a husband? Ah, wait. Judith Birks? Is her brother Oliver Birks, the new Marquess of Worcester? It all makes sense now. Lady Judith has a bit of a reputation for being picky.”

Aaron perked up at this and drew his eyebrows together. A chill whipped through the air, and he pulled his shoulders back. “Does she now?”

He’d heard that she was on the shelf from Oliver and that she wasn’t terribly interested in making a match, but now he was told she had a reputation for being picky? There was little worse than a lady with a poor reputation. For a man, even when one could be considered a rake, a reputation always added to the mystery and allure. For a woman, it made it almost impossible to find a husband.

“Indeed. She had a good match and was to be married but then ended it. Nobody has wanted to court her since, and she has not seemed terribly interested either. Pray, do you really think you can find her a husband?” Henry let out a snort as if this was the funniest thing he’d ever heard.

“I think I can, and I shall,” Aaron declared. “I think you have forgotten who I am.

The Duke of Nottingham does not give in or give up, and he always gets what he wants.”

He realized that speaking about himself in the third person sounded arrogant, but he knew that with people like Henry, one had to display confidence.

“I do not envy you one bit,” Henry said. “Indeed, I think I will have to place a wager on the matter.”

Aaron narrowed his eyes, suddenly irritated by his friend. “Do not say such things, it is improper and unkind.”

“Improper and unkind?” Henry parroted. “Are you not the one who will place a wager on anything at a moment’s notice? Why not this? Or do you not have any confidence in yourself at all?”

Aaron pressed his lips together “I can find her a husband. I know I can. But I do not think it right to be a fool about it and place wagers. This is her life we are talking about.”

Why am I suddenly protective of her? It makes no sense...

“Come now, Aaron, do not play coy,” Henry scoffed just as Sir Marius joined them.

“What is this I hear about a wager?”

Henry turned to him with a bright grin. “I told Aaron here that I’d place a wager against his ability to find a husband for Lady Judith, but he seems ill-inclined. You see, she is the one. The picky one. Lord Worcester’s daughter.”

“Ah, I see,” Marius replied, as though he knew exactly what Henry was talking about.

“A wager? I am for it,” he agreed at once. “I bet you ten Guineas that you won’t be able to find a man to take her off your hands by the time her brother returns.”

Henry nodded. “As do I.”

“You are both horrid,” Aaron huffed and crossed his arms, his eyes following the young woman as she continued on her way. She and her friend were now walking along the Serpentine, arm in arm.

“You only say that because you know you cannot win,” Marius jested. “For I dare say, while she is beautiful, she seems entirely ungraceful and incapable of having a meaningful conversation.”

“I agree,” Henry said. “Finding her a husband will be near impossible. Had I known she was so ill-spoken and slow, I’d have not agreed to let you introduce me to her.”

What had he been thinking, introducing Henry to Judith? Had his friend always been such a horrible man? Or was this just the way young men acted? Had he simply never noticed before? It was so odd that people would act in such ways. Aaron had never judged a woman for her appearance or her mannerisms—unless she was outright rude to him, which of course was the case with Judith. Still, she didn’t deserve such judgment.

Still, she had displayed a shocking lack of class and charm when speaking to his friends. He wasn’t sure what had happened exactly, other than the sudden introduction, but he could not help but worry that perhaps she was simply incapable of being charming. Not every beautiful woman had the skills needed to catch a good match.

No, he had to stop thinking like this. Judith might have all the grace of a milk maiden, but she had something most other unfortunate ladies did not. She had him. And if

there was one thing Aaron knew, it was how to charm someone.

He'd find her a husband—and before Oliver returned.

With his nostrils flared, he looked at Henry and Marius. "I guarantee you that by the time Oliver returns in two months, she will not only be involved in a courtship but she will also be betrothed."

His friends broke into whoops and hollers before shaking his hand, accepting his wager.

As he shook their hands, Aaron could not deny feeling a sense of foreboding and unease in his stomach. But it was too late now. He was committed, one way or the other.

"It was a disaster. I do not know how else I can say it," Judith moaned later that day as she, Joanna, and Rosy sat in the drawing room, cups of tea growing cold in front of them. "The moment he introduced me to his friend, my entire mind went blank. I did not know what to say. I could not speak properly. I do not know what came over me. I am not such a bumbling fool."

Joanna chewed on her bottom lip and leaned back. "Well, I think it is no wonder that you reacted as you did. Your brother has made you sound as though you do not know how to speak to a gentleman, and this Duke of Nottingham has not helped matters by teasing you and implying that you need his help. If people keep telling you that you lack skill, you will start believing it. But you know it isn't true."

"Yes, Judith, you know it isn't true. You were always one of the most graceful ladies in the ton. Gentlemen always wanted to dance with you and be in your company," Rosy added.

Judith let out a puff of air. “That might have been the case in the past, but I am older now. Everybody who hears that immediately thinks there is something wrong with me. Why else would I be unwed? They think something is wrong with me, and the way I conducted myself yesterday will only give more credence to this.”

She closed her eyes, and the sound of the wind whipping around the house drifted to her ears. It mingled with the crackling from the fireplace. Usually, winter was one of her favorite times of the year. She loved how the leaves changed color and then fell in big piles, which she would sometimes joyously kick with her feet into the air to watch them dance around as they fell back down to the ground.

She loved bundling up on the lounge with hot chocolate and freshly baked pastries while reading a good book. Some nights, she liked to play the pianoforte until her fingers grew stiff. When her father was alive, he used to sit beside her and enjoy the music. She hadn’t played yet this year. In fact, her fingers felt so stiff that she wasn’t sure if she would be capable of producing any sort of pretty sound.

Hang that Aaron Fitzwilliam and his haughty nature. Joanna was right.

“He had made me so uncomfortable. He had me thinking that I truly did not know how to entice a gentleman into desiring my company. I know I am an exceptional conversationalist. How dare this man instill doubt in me?”

Judith’s friends exchanged glances before focusing on her again.

Joanna asked, “What are you going to do?”

“I agreed to go to the Wednesday night ball at Almack’s tomorrow with His Grace. He’s accompanying me along with one of the maids. He said he would introduce me to gentlemen he knows and ensure my dance card is full. He asked for the first dance, however,” Judith replied.

Rosy raised her eyebrows. “The first dance? Why in the world would he ask for that?”

Judith shifted in her seat a little sheepishly. “I might have implied that I have not danced in a while. I know it is not something one is likely to forget, but in the moment, when we were speaking to one another, I felt so very low. I felt like such a failure. I worried I might not be able to dance properly and humiliate myself. So, he offered to dance with me first.” She paused then and slid forward on her seat. “Rosy, Joanna, I will tell you something I have not told anybody else.”

Her friends both leaned forward and waited with anticipation.

Judith took a deep breath and then shared with her dearest friends what had been on her mind these last few hours since returning from the park.

“When my father was alive, I was not highly concerned about what would happen to me if I did not find a husband. Of course, I wanted to. I still do, but I had resigned myself to being alone if I could not find love. I knew my father would look after me. He would have allowed me to live here, with him and Matilda and John when he’s home from Eton. They would not have forced me into any sort of marriage. But with Oliver, it is different. His Grace implied that he will marry me off to a man I do not want if I don’t find a husband by the time he returns.”

“What?” Rosy exclaimed. “An arranged marriage? That is dreadful. Are you sure he meant it?”

“Rosy is right. What if the Duke only said that to make you agree to his plan?” Joanna added.

Judith shook her head. “He did not seem to want to tell me, and the truth is, I suspected it for some time. Oliver isn’t like my father was. He’s... I don’t know what

it is, but he isn't so concerned about my happiness—he never has been. I do not doubt it is true.” She pressed her lips together for a second. “The Duke indicated that it would be better for me to let him introduce gentlemen to me that I might like. And I feel he might be right. I think, otherwise, Oliver might choose someone for me who is far more dreadful.”

“Do you truly believe that your brother might force you into a marriage you do not want?” Rosy asked, her tone betraying her feelings. “That is unconscionable.”

“But not unheard of,” Joanna pointed out. “You know that is how many couples meet. Our parents might not have, but your in-laws and mine both found one another in this way. And both were miserable.”

“Joanna!” Rosy hissed, but Judith raised her hand.

“It is all right. I am glad Joanna is as blunt as she is because she is right. Arranged marriages often spell nothing but misery. I want to choose a husband of my own, and I most certainly do not want to rely on my brother to pick one for me. He doesn't even know me. He has been away for so long... But can I trust Aaron? He tormented me when I was a child.”

“Did not you torment him also?” Joanna asked. “I remember your father telling mine that you were a little wild as a child.”

Judith tilted her head to the side. She did not recall acting in an unkind way toward Aaron Fitzwilliam, but the truth was, she had been a child, and memories of that time were not exactly clear.

“It doesn't matter,” she replied in the end. “I do not think that I can trust either of them with my interests. But what am I to do?”

“It is simple,” Joanna said. She crossed her legs at the ankles as she leaned forward. “Let him teach you whatever it is he thinks he can teach you. Let him introduce you to gentlemen. But be sure you do not allow yourself to be pushed into anything. If he thinks he knows eligible gentlemen who are looking to be married and who might be suitable for you, let him. You have two months. That is an eternity before your brother returns. And if you have not found a husband by the time he does return, we will tell our husbands to sit down with your brother and talk sense into him. All will be well.”

Judith smiled at Joanna, genuinely grateful that the two of them had managed to revive a friendship that had been forged back when they were in finishing school.

Thanks to her foolishness, Judith had managed to ruin her friendship with not just Joanna but with Rosy and their older sister, Sally, some years ago. But since then, they had mended things, and she had never been more grateful for their friendship.

The click-clack of boots on the marble floor drew their attention, and then Matilda entered.

“Your Graces,” she greeted with a smile upon spotting Rosy and Joanna, curtsying before the younger women who outranked her. “I thought I heard voices here. Are your fine husbands with you?”

“No, My Lady, they are not. Although we were just here talking to Judith about finding her a husband,” Joanna said.

Judith shook her head. She did not want her stepmother to know what they had been talking about because she had a habit of inserting herself into things that did not concern her. Alas, it was too late. Her stepmother took Joanna’s comment as an invitation to join them and sat in the armchair by the door.

“Oh, I wish you would find a husband, Judith. Your father hoped for it also, but he used to tell me not to press the matter, that you’d know when the time was right.”

Judith blinked, wondering why—if this was the case—her father had written to Oliver, asking him to find her a husband as soon as possible.

“Well, time might be of the essan?—”

“Essential, that is true. Timing is essential,” Judith interjected, cutting Rosy off.

She didn’t want Matilda to know the truth. There was no reason for her to know what Oliver had planned. In fact, she preferred that Matilda did not know anything about her personal affairs. She liked her stepmother, but they weren’t friends, and she wasn’t a mother figure to her. More like an aunt, a distant one. The sort who’d come to live in one’s house after losing her husband.

Was that unkind? No, Judith didn’t think so. It was life, that was all.

“If you ever want me to help you find a matchmaker, you let me know,” Matilda offered, a smile gracing her lips.

She’d switched from wearing all black to navy now, and Judith knew that it would be some time before her stepmother wore anything with color, for her mourning was deep.

“Is that how you met the late Lord Worcester?” Rosy asked.

“No, not at all,” Matilda answered, and Judith wished Rosy had not encouraged her to stay longer. “I met him at Almack’s, in fact. I met my first husband through a matchmaker, but it was not meant to last, as he decided he’d rather keep company with another lady.” She sighed and shook her head. “But that is another tale. You see,

I never thought I would marry again after all of that, but there I was, aged four-and-thirty, at Almack's, when I saw your father. And he saw me."

The smile on her lips made Judith forget that she'd been vexed just a second prior. Her father hardly ever spoke about Matilda when he first met her because Judith had struggled with his romantic life, but now she appreciated hearing about this. It was almost as if he was back among them, if only fleetingly.

"Was it love at first sight?" Rosy asked.

Matilda's cheeks colored. "I think so. It was for me, anyhow. We danced the quadrille together and then talked for an hour, and then danced the Boulanger. It was magical. I never thought I would experience anything like it in all my life," she sighed, and her eyes filled with fresh tears.

Judith swiftly withdrew her handkerchief and handed it to her stepmother, the rush of happiness replaced by sadness for their mutual loss.

"Thank you dear," Matilda croaked as she dabbed at her eyes. "I did not mean to dampen the mood."

"No, not at all," Joanna reassured her. "I adore hearing stories such as this one. It shows how important it is to marry for love." She looked at Judith. "True love is worth waiting for."

"Indeed, it is," Matilda agreed. "But I do encourage searching for it as well, rather than waiting for it to find you."

She glanced at Judith, who looked away, uncertain what her stepmother was implying, if anything. Surely Matilda did not mean to imply Judith hadn't been looking for love. Or was she?

Judith had never considered that her stepmother held any opinion over her unwed status. She sank lower into her seat, her mind suddenly swirling with thoughts of just what Society thought of her. Both her stepmother's and Oliver's words echoed in her mind, filling her with doubt, but it was Aaron's voice that rang loudest with his promise to help her.

Would he? Could he? And more importantly, did she really want him to?

CHAPTER 6

Judith sat in her chamber, sipping her tea and gazing out the window as the setting sun painted the sky in hues of orange and pink. The gentle breeze rustled the curtains, and she found solace in the tranquil scene outside. As she lost herself in the mesmerizing dance of the leaves, a soft knock on the door drew her attention.

“Come in,” she called out, setting down her teacup.

Marianne, her loyal maid, entered the room with a concerned look on her face. “My Lady, there is a caller,” she announced, her voice filled with uncertainty.

“A caller?” Judith furrowed her brow, puzzled by the unexpected visit. “At this late hour? Who could it be?”

Marianne shrugged. “I’m not sure, My Lady. The butler sent me to tell you. Shall I have them sent away?”

Judith shook her head, her curiosity piqued. “No, no, Marianne. I shall see who it is. Are they downstairs?”

“Yes, My Lady, in the parlor,” Marianne replied before departing.

Judith cast one last glance out the window, the fading light casting a warm glow on her features.

As she descended the stairs, her curiosity about the unexpected caller grew. The clock

in the hallway chimed softly, indicating that it was just after six o'clock, a rather unusual time for a social call. Her mind raced with questions as she made her way down to the parlor.

As she approached, she heard her stepmother's unmistakable voice. Peering around the corner, she spotted her stepmother conversing with a gentleman, though she could only see the back of his head, as he was facing away from her.

"And what about you? Are you involved in a courtship?" Matilda asked.

Judith's eyes went wide. She could not make out the guest's response but saw his head move back and forth. Something about him was oddly familiar, though she could not place him.

"Ah, well then, I am glad you are here to see my stepdaughter. Judith is highly accomplished, I assure you. She plays the pianoforte, and she is well-read. Any gentleman should be glad to have met her," Matilda said.

While Judith appreciated her stepmother's praise, she didn't like that it was addressed to a stranger.

"She is a wonderful dancer also, and a skilled conversationalist."

Judith's cheeks flushed with embarrassment as she listened, feeling exposed and vulnerable in the presence of the unknown guest.

She had to put a stop to this. She wasn't a cow at the market who had to be made to sound attractive. Whoever this man was, he would not wish to speak to her anymore after her stepmother all but foisted her on him.

Swiftly, she burst into the parlor, ready to stop her stepmother, when she stopped in

her tracks. The stranger sitting in the armchair was no stranger at all.

It was the Duke of Nottingham. And he wore his telltale smirk.

Her heart sank like a stone as she absorbed the implications of their conversation.

“Your Grace,” she greeted, recovering the air of poise she’d carried earlier.

“Lady Judith,” he replied and rose with a smile on his face.

He wore a deep burgundy waistcoat that complemented his skin tone perfectly and made his reddish lips look redder still.

“I was just telling His Grace what a wonderful dancer you are,” Matilda piped up with a beaming smile. “He is unattached,” she added with a wink, and Judith wished the ground would open up and swallow her that very second.

“Lady Worcester, it is not right to say such things in front of a guest. He may be mortified by such a declaration,” Judith interjected, her tone firm but not unkind.

Matilda’s expression faltered, and she appeared remorseful at her misstep as she addressed Aaron.

“I beg your pardon, I meant no offense.”

“There is no need, Lady Worcester,” he assured her quickly, then turned his attention to Judith. “Please, Lady Judith, your stepmother spoke of you only with the highest regard. There is no need for concern, and I do not mind having my status advertised,” he added, his voice warm and understanding.

“Right, well, I should leave the two of you be. Judith, I will leave for the dower house

for the night. Call on me if you need,” Matilda said and then made her way out of the parlor.

Judith never called on her stepmother and generally spent the evenings alone in the grand house, though she did not recall her stepmother offering before.

Shaking off the abasing experience, Judith took a moment to compose herself before turning her attention to the Duke, her curiosity unabated.

“Well, now that we are alone, may I ask what brings you to our home at this hour, Your Grace?” she inquired, her demeanor composed but with a tinge of unease lurking beneath the surface. “I was not expecting you.”

“I was not expecting to be here either, but as I thought about what occurred today, I came to the conclusion that it would behoove us to have an honest conversation before the ball tomorrow. Would you care to take the air with me?”

She hesitated, dreading what he had come to say, but realized she had no choice. She was mixed up in this arrangement with him now, and the sooner she got this out of the way, the faster she could get back to her book.

“Of course,” she replied and motioned behind him, where the door led out to the garden.

She noticed that his greatcoat was resting on the back of the chair, which was unusual, for normally it would have been handed to the butler. However, he slung it on now but then eyed her with a raised eyebrow.

“Should you not get your coat? It is rather cold.”

“I am quite all right,” she said, not wanting to bother with fetching her coat and

bonnet. She did not intend for this conversation to last very long.

Alas, the second she stepped outside, she regretted it because the cold air nipped her cheeks, and she shivered. Determined not to show her discomfort and prove him right once more, she gestured toward the lake at the end of the gravel path before they set into motion.

“I beg your pardon for my stepmother. She should not have interviewed you the way she did,” she started, feeling it was only polite to do so.

He offered her his arm, and she took it without thinking. It felt odd to walk arm in arm with a gentleman again, for it had been years, and somewhere inside her, a little voice whispered just how much she’d missed this.

“You need not apologize on her behalf. I was not bothered by her questions. Lady Worcester only means well. She wants the best for those in her life, which is an admirable quality.”

His words came out smooth and full of genuine admiration, which gave her pause, as she’d been unaware there was any connection between Matilda and this young man.

“You know my stepmother?”

He shrugged, and the wind blew strands of hair into his face, which he swiftly tucked behind his ear. From this angle, she saw how sharp his features were and how angular his face was. He was a handsome man, she couldn’t deny that. No wonder he was so popular among the ladies.

She pushed that thought aside, annoyed for allowing herself to think of him in such a way at all.

“I know her younger brother, the Earl of Marble—or rather I knew him. He has passed away, as you know.”

Judith wanted to nod in agreement, but then she realized that she hadn’t known this at all!

The truth was, she didn’t know a whole lot about her stepmother. Matilda’s appearance in the former Marquess’s life had been rather sudden, but she’d found her place in the family quickly and seamlessly. And because she’d made her father so very happy, Judith had never bothered to try to question her presence. Though neither had she tried to find out much about her life.

Getting to know Matilda hadn’t been something Judith ever considered, for by the time she appeared, Judith had been involved in a serious courtship, one she’d assumed would lead to marriage.

When she’d ended that arrangement, Judith had planned for another gentleman to come into her life and whisk her away. There wasn’t a need to get to know Matilda, as she’d figured they’d hardly see one another...

Little had she known she’d remain in her father’s home for three years, living with her stepmother.

“I did not know,” she admitted. “When did he pass?”

The Duke eyed her curiously, as if her lack of knowledge truly took him by surprise.

“Five years ago. He drowned when the ship he was on sank in the English Channel. You really did not know?”

“No. I suppose Matilda and I lead very different lives and didn’t really speak to one

another about her past.” Judith left out the fact that she’d never bothered to ask.

“It would benefit you to get to know her better, especially if you intend to stay in one another’s lives. She is a kind soul, from all I know of her. Her brother was only three years my senior, thus we knew one another well at Eton and after. He always spoke very highly of his sister. She has a true, gentle and kind heart, and on the few occasions I met her prior to this, she had always impressed me with her gentle nature. Although I doubt she remembers meeting me—it was many years ago.”

“She never mentioned it,” Judith replied.

“In any case, let me say that your stepmother would not harm a fly. She was just curious, as any good mother would be when a gentleman caller presents himself without prior notice.”

“She is not my mother,” Judith said, her voice sharper than intended.

“I know. That is not what I meant. I only meant it is natural for her to want the best for you. Thus, you need not apologize for her actions. She had a tragic life. Her first husband had a reputation, and she seeks to protect those around her.”

“That I do know. He was a drunkard who dallied with his servants,” Judith scoffed.

“Indeed. From what I know, your stepmother was very unhappy in the marriage, and I will say that his death must’ve come as a relief to her. I admire that she was able to embrace marriage and life in general once more. Of course, one must do that after tragedy. There is no other way.”

She looked up at him, wondering what sort of tragedy had befallen him to make such a statement. Or was it just a platitude?

“Which...” He looked at her, slowing his pace a little. “... brings me to what I wanted to talk to you about.”

Here it was. The reason for his visit. Judith braced herself.

“I think that it cannot be denied that you struggled somewhat this afternoon.”

Instantly, anger ignited within Judith, and she spun around. “Well, I cannot very well be blamed for that, seeing how you threw me to the wolves without any kind of preparation.”

He looked sufficiently humbled by this, which tempered her rage somewhat.

“It is true. I should not have been so forward. However, you presented yourself to me as somebody entirely independent and capable of finding a husband on her own. So how was I supposed to know that it would be such a disaster?”

She took a deep breath and was about to launch into a fierce defense of herself when he raised both hands.

“Be that as it may, you struggled. And I cannot help but wonder, is it to do with your father’s death? Do you hesitate to truly embrace courtship and the marriage mart, as Society likes to call it? Or is there another reason?”

Was he truly trying to understand her? Where had the compassion come from?

“I do not know what you mean. Surely it is understandable that I would not be courting and looking for a husband while in my mourning period. Indeed, it is quite early to be doing so now. We are barely out of?”

“I understand, but we are at a time where it is acceptable for you to court again, yet I

cannot help but wonder what about before your father's death? It seems to me that you have not been in a courtship in more than three years. I cannot help but wonder how the failure of your last courtship impacted you, and your father's death only compounded that? Are you perhaps hesitant about... living your life to the fullest?"

Judith spun around so quickly that the gravel crunched beneath her feet and glared at him. "What would you know of my life? I will have you know that I have purposely not courted because I was waiting for the right person."

His blue eyes narrowed, and he tilted his head slightly to the side. The sky was a brilliant crimson with hints of purple as the sun set behind him, casting an otherworldly glow on him. He was so handsome, it was almost painful to look upon him.

Judith squeezed her eyes shut, chiding herself for having such thoughts again, and when she opened them, she redirected her focus on the oak tree just to his right rather than directly at his face.

"How will you find the right person if you do not court? Again, I wonder, why have you not tried more? Why have you not gone to the theater and everything else? It seems almost as if you have used your failed courtship and your desire for love as an excuse to not embrace life."

How dare he judge her in such a manner?

"Embrace life? It is easy for you to talk about embracing life when you are a gentleman who can do whatever he wants. You can saunter off and board a ship to go anywhere in the world, as my brother did. You can charm as many ladies as you like, both here and abroad, and the worst you will get is the label of a rake, which does not hinder or harm your progress in society. I am a woman. My actions reflect on me more severely than yours."

She watched his lips press together as he took her in, and then he tilted his head slightly. “That might be true, and I am not saying that society doesn’t stifle a lady, but there are things you can do. You can still dance. You can still live. I could have operated within these confines, but it seems that you have chosen to build a small world of your own away from society, living in the hope that somehow a gentleman will find you here in your home locked away rather than like in that new fairytale everyone is talking about. The one about the young lady who ate a poisoned apple and then slept.”

“I think you are mixing up your fairytales. Snow White ate the poisoned apple, Sleeping Beauty slept for one-hundred years.” She smiled.

“That might be right, but here we have it. A perfect example of what you ought not to do. You should refrain from correcting people you meet at a ball,” he remarked, shaking his head slightly.

Judith couldn’t help but snort. “But if someone is wrong, why should I not correct them?”

The Duke leaned in and said firmly, “You can, when you know them better, but no gentleman will want to be corrected by a woman he just met.”

Feeling a wave of irritation, Judith sighed and wondered if Rosy and Joanna had to watch what they said around their husbands. She doubted it.

“A gentleman should not mind being challenged. Or do you? Do you mind being challenged?”

The Duke let out a hearty laugh, which once again made her bristle. “What I do or do not like in a lady does not matter.”

Judith arched an eyebrow. “Then why won’t you answer? Is it because it would contradict your own advice, Your Grace?”

After a moment, he conceded. “I like a lady who can stand up for herself and challenge me, but I am not the one you need to charm.”

The garden was bathed in the soft, golden hues of the setting sun, casting a warm glow over the neatly trimmed hedges and blooming flowers. The air was filled with the fragrance of roses, and a gentle breeze rustled the leaves, creating a serene and picturesque scene.

Aaron and Judith stood near a marble bench, the tension between them palpable.

“Your Grace, I really don’t think I can do this,” Judith declared, her voice wavering slightly. “Sometimes the gentlemen only want to talk about hunting and fishing. How can I pretend to be interested in things I know nothing about?”

Aaron pursed his lips and examined her from head to toe, as if he were reconsidering his promise to her brother. Indeed, he appeared rather vexed.

“First, I think you ought to call me Aaron when we are alone—we might as well drop the formalities. For another, I will need you to gather your wits about you. You cannot give up now. Or are you not as independent and strong as you had me believe?”

This jolted her backward. How dare he imply she was weak?

“I am strong and independent, Your Gr—Aaron.”

“Well, good. Then you will do as I say and not sabotage our plans. Now, you need to follow my instructions, Judith. Smile, act politely, and show interest in whatever they

are talking about. It's important to appear humble and engaged. People already think you're picky."

"But eye contact feels too intimate," Judith protested, her voice barely above a whisper. "I don't like looking people I don't know in the eyes."

Aaron took a step closer, his expression serious. "Judith, eye contact is important. It shows confidence and interest. We need to practice."

Judith felt mortification rising within her. "I'd rather not," she murmured, her cheeks burning with embarrassment.

Aaron's expression softened even further as he reached out and gently touched her chin. She shuddered under his touch, but not in a bad way. Instead, she felt a sudden warmth spread through her. Her heart raced as he lifted her chin, his fingers light but firm.

"Look at me, Judith," he said softly.

She hesitated for a moment, then met his gaze. As their eyes locked, the world around her seemed to blur and fade away. Aaron's eyes were deep and compelling, holding hers with a magnetic intensity she couldn't resist. It was as if he was seeing right into her soul. The initial discomfort she felt melted into an unexpected warmth that flooded her chest, spreading like wildfire.

Her breath caught, and she felt a curious mix of vulnerability and connection. The blue depths of his eyes were not just looking at her but drawing her in, pulling her into an unspoken promise of understanding and intimacy.

Her pulse quickened, and she realized that this eye contact, once daunting, now felt like an open door to a deeper, unexpected closeness with him.

“Aaron,” she whispered, her voice trembling slightly. “I do not...”

He smiled, a slow, confident smile that made her heart flutter faster. “It’s not so bad, is it?” he asked softly.

Judith shook her head slightly, still captivated by his gaze. “No, it’s not bad at all.”

Aaron lightly brushed his thumb against her chin before he dropped his hand. “Remember this, Judith. Look the other person in the eyes and do not look away first. Let them be the ones. Do not stare either, you do not want to look as though you are bird-brained.”

She nodded, unable to tear her gaze away from his. “Right. I shall not look bird-brained,” she repeated, a little perplexed. “I promise.”

As the sun dipped below the horizon, casting the garden into a soft twilight, Judith realized that something had changed between them. At that intimate moment, she had discovered a new strength within herself, a strength she hadn’t known existed. And as she looked into Aaron’s eyes, she knew that she could face whatever challenges lay ahead with confidence and grace.

CHAPTER 7

The following evening, Aaron entered the hall, his eyes scanning the room. He hadn't been in Almack's since he returned from Italy a couple of weeks ago, and before that, it had been at least a year. Oddly enough, nothing seemed to have changed. Gentlemen mingled, many standing in small groups as they chatted, while women chuckled behind feathered fans, wearing their best dresses, and an orchestra played.

He spotted a footman carrying a platter of what had to be Almack's infamous, horrible, dried cake into the banquet room, a place he would surely avoid.

"Aaron!" a voice called, and he turned to see his friend Marius walking toward him, followed by Henry.

Usually, he enjoyed seeing his friends at events like this. They would sit together, drink, place wagers, and make merry, but since their meeting in the park, he felt differently.

"Well, well," Henry drawled. "Is she here? Or has she decided to stay at home and deal you a humiliating defeat before you could even start your quest?"

"She will be here," Aaron stated, though he had yet to spot Judith.

They had agreed that she would come with her maid and she would meet him inside before the minuet—the first dance. His hope was that he could ease her into dancing in the hope she'd be a good partner to others, rather than a stiff broom.

The orchestra was playing already, but the master of ceremonies had not yet called for the first dance. Therefore, she wasn't late.

But what would he do if she didn't show up? After their conversation, he knew she understood what was at stake—nothing short of her happiness. But she seemed so uncomfortable during their exercise yesterday, when he had made her look into his eyes to practice eye contact.

He wasn't quite sure why that had occurred to him. He never really thought about such things. Flirting came naturally to him, as it did to most of the ladies he knew. He never had to teach anyone.

Still, after their afternoon in the park, he had not been able to stop thinking about Judith and how uncomfortable she had been. He had looked at his task as an irritating one, only taken on out of duty to his friend, but now that he took it on, he had to do his best for her. And thus far, he hadn't.

Judith was right, her behavior had likely been due to him pushing her and making her feel insecure. And yet he couldn't deny that when he had stood with her outside in the garden and looked into her eyes, he had felt something.

"Aaron?" Marius prompted.

Aaron looked up. "Yes?"

"I asked what your plan is. The way I see it, you have a challenge ahead of you. The young lady does not seem as though she can manage on her own."

"Do not speak about her like that. I guarantee you that she will do just fine," Aaron added with confidence, although he didn't really feel it.

“You must hope she does, otherwise you’ll lose your bet,” Marius warned.

“Does she know you placed a wager on her—” Henry started but then snapped his lips shut as something, or rather someone, caught his eye.

Aaron frowned, turning around to see what the Earl was looking at when?—

“A wager? You placed a wager on me?” Judith snapped, and he inhaled sharply, catching a whiff of assorted sweet perfumes.

“Judith...”

“Indeed,” she replied, her lips twitching with displeasure.

“You look lovely.”

And she did. Clad in a mauve-colored gown that was cinched underneath her bust, she was a vision. The dress flattered her curvaceous figure, her hair pinned up with a silver band running through it.

He noted she had minimal makeup, her eyelids a hint of color reflecting the hue of her dress and her lips a pinkish red. She was a vision, there was no denying it. However, the fire in her eyes did not add to her allure.

“He is in trouble,” Henry intoned and winked at her. “I do wish you the best of luck. Not too much,” he said, then walked away.

Marius joined him, leaving Judith alone with Aaron. Her maid, Marianne, stood a few steps behind her, awkwardly staring at the ground.

“Did you place a wager on whether you could find me a husband?” Judith asked.

Aaron wanted to deny it, but that would've been a lie. "I did not mean to."

"So, you accidentally placed a wager on me and my marital prospects?"

Why must she challenge me at every turn?

"Well, if it makes any difference, I wagered that I can find you a husband and that you will be betrothed before your brother returns. So that should give you confidence in... my confidence."

He rubbed his temple. What was wrong with him? Confidence in his confidence? What did that even mean? Sometimes being around her seemed to jumble up his brain.

"I should've known," she hissed. "Everything is a game to you. Everything. Well, I will tell you, this is my life, not some frivolous sport that you can place wagers on." She paused. "How much did you wager?"

He gulped, surprised by the sudden change in her demeanor. "I..."

"Well? I should know how much my happiness is worth," she pressed sharply.

Unable to come up with a smart response, he told her the truth, and she nodded.

"Not too shabby. Well, I shall forgive you, but only if you give me half."

This totally shocked him, and he staggered backward two steps. "Half?"

"You are lucky. I'm not demanding all, since it depends on me whether you win or lose a tidy sum."

“What would you do with it?” he asked, although he should be happy that demanding half of his wager was all she was asking for. She could’ve just turned around and gone home instead.

“I will do as I please. Perhaps I will buy a new gown. I will take my friends to Brighton for a weekend. I hear the boiler room is marvelous. Didn’t you tell me yesterday that I should live my life?”

“Touché, Lady Judith, touché. Very well. I agree. Half shall be yours.”

She glanced at his friends, and he realized that it must’ve been a blow to her confidence to find out that other gentlemen had wagered against her. He was about to comfort her when she looked at him with a shrug.

“Very well. We will have to show your friends, won’t we? It looks like the master of ceremonies is about to announce the minuet,” she said, pointing at the man who was walking toward the middle of the dance floor with his ceremonial staff.

Aaron offered her his arm. “Shall we, then?”

“We shall.”

“And after that, we will see about filling up your dance card.”

As the music started, Aaron led Judith to the dance floor, the familiar strains of the minuet filling the room. He felt an unexpected thrill at having her in his arms. They began the dance, moving gracefully in time with the music.

He reminded himself that he wasn’t supposed to enjoy her company—this was strictly an arrangement, after all. This he inhaled deeply and brought her attention back to the matter at hand.

“So, do you see anyone you’d like to add to your dance card?” he asked.

She raised an eyebrow. “Are we playing a game now?”

“Why not? We may as well make it entertaining, and we have to choose some gentlemen somehow.”

She glanced around the room. “How about that gentleman over there, dancing near the window?”

Aaron followed her gaze and saw Lord Pembroke, a tall man with a reputation for his charm and wit. Ladies often spoke of his good looks.

He felt a pang of envy, though wasn’t sure why.

“I know him,” Aaron said, trying to keep his tone light. “Lord Pembroke. We went to Eton together.”

“It seems all of England went to Eton,” Judith quipped, and he let out a chuckle.

“It does, doesn’t it? Anyhow, he’s quite popular among the ladies.”

“Is he now?” Judith teased. “Well, perhaps you could make an introduction?”

“Of course,” Aaron replied, though the idea did not please him.

Lord Pembroke, or Chucky as they used to call him, was a bit of a dandy. The type of man who’d soak his pantaloons overnight to make them extra tight. A peacock. Did she find that sort of man attractive? Was she genuinely interested or just playing the game?

“May I ask, why Lord Pembroke?” he asked, trying to sound casual.

Judith laughed softly. “I just thought he looked like someone who might make interesting conversation. Why, is there something the matter with him?”

“Of course not,” Aaron said quickly, but the truth was he felt a twinge of something he couldn’t quite fathom. “I just want to make sure you’re making a wise choice.”

“Oh, Aaron,” she teased, her eyes sparkling with amusement, “did you not tell me I am to fill my dance card?”

“I did.”

“Every dance, you told me,” she added.

“That I said as well, and I meant it.”

“Well then, I shall have to select more than just Lord Pembroke, do you not think?”

She smiled and looked around the room, and nodded at another man. Aaron made a note of who he was, and then the two continued both their dance and their selection process. It was almost entertaining, making such a game of it. Almost. For somehow, in the pit of his stomach, Aaron felt unease growing with each gentleman she selected.

Why did it bother him that she was doing exactly what he’d asked of her? Was it because... No, certainly not.

He wasn’t charmed by her. He couldn’t be. He, Aaron Fitzwilliam, charmed others. He was not charmed by them.

Except at this very moment, he could not deny that the way she looked around the room, a small half-smile on her lips and her eyes sparkling with newfound mischief, was... decidedly charming.

CHAPTER 8

After the dance had come to an end, Aaron offered her his arm, which she took at once. Together, they made their way off the dance floor and toward one of the tables. Judith noted chatter and stares being thrown in their direction and wondered what people were thinking of them.

Did they think they were here together? As in together as a pair? If so, this whole exercise might be for naught because nobody would be interested in her if they thought she was already attached to someone.

Aaron turned around and motioned for Marianne to join them for propriety's sake. As if he had read Judith's thoughts, he narrowed his eyes.

"Where is your dance card?" he asked, and she retrieved it from her reticule. The granite pencil dangled from it. "Very well. Lord Pembroke, you said?"

Judith nodded and looked at the tall, ginger-haired gentleman who had just stepped off the dance floor. Truly, she had no idea who he was and had simply picked him because Aaron had demanded that she choose somebody. He hadn't appeared particularly pleased with her choice, and she wondered if this was because Lord Pembroke was perhaps undesirable or if there was some other reason.

Of course, she couldn't think of another reason.

"Aaron," she said, then quickly corrected herself. "Your Grace." She had to remember to call him by his title when they were out together. "Are you quite sure

that Lord Pembroke is suitable?”

He paused and wetted his lips, leaving a shimmer that drew the eye. His lips were plump, and if she hadn't known him to be such a terrible rake, she might have wondered what it would be like...

Do not make a cake of yourself, Judith. Do not do it.

“Lord Pembroke is a perfectly suitable gentleman. Do not worry. Now come and let me introduce you.”

Judith nodded at Marianne to remain at the table and then followed Aaron across the dance floor. Multiple gentlemen and even more ladies greeted him with bright smiles, and she was reminded once again just how popular he was in these parts.

He had achieved something quite remarkable—the perfect balance of being in England and in town often enough to ensure that everybody knew him, and being away long enough to remain an enigma, which made him interesting to everyone who met him.

She couldn't fault them for it. She also found that the people who were the most interesting were those who traveled the most. She always loved hearing tales of foreign lands. Sally and her husband would often tell wondrous stories of their life in Spain and Portugal, as they kept homes in both countries. And Rosy, her dear friend Rosy, had traveled all around the world, it seemed. She'd spent her honeymoon in India and had written the most exciting letters from there, and just recently, she and her husband had gone on a Grand Tour of Europe, not that the war was over.

Judith was ripped from her thoughts as they reached Lord Pembroke and Aaron introduced her.

“Your Grace,” Lord Pembroke greeted, though he didn’t take his eyes off her. “Good to see you. I didn’t know you’d returned.”

“Just about a week ago or so,” Aaron replied.

“Ah, well, good to have you. And who have you brought with you?” Lord Pembroke looked at her with a wide smile.

Aaron chewed on his bottom lip, and she wondered why that might be. Was he nervous that she would make a cake of herself and embarrass him somehow in front of this gentleman? She couldn’t blame him, she’d done it before after all.

“Lord Pembroke, may I present Lady Judith? Judith, this is Lord Pembroke,” Aaron said and motioned to her.

She curtsied the way she’d practiced and ensured to keep eye contact with Lord Pembroke.

“Lady Judith,” Lord Pembroke said, bowing slightly, his ginger hair catching the candlelight.

His smile was warm and immediately put her at ease, yet she couldn’t help but feel nervous, remembering the disastrous introduction to Aaron’s friends at the park. She took a deep breath, recalling Joanna and Rosy’s words of encouragement.

“Lord Pembroke,” Judith returned. “It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

“The pleasure is mine, Lady Judith,” Lord Pembroke replied.

Determined to make a good impression, she smiled brightly and focused on being charming. She noticed the grand surroundings of Almack’s—the glittering

chandeliers casting a warm glow over the elegantly dressed guests, and the soft murmur of conversation mixed with the strains of music from the orchestra.

“Are you enjoying the evening thus far?” she asked, without taking her eyes off him.

She remembered Aaron’s lessons and was determined to show him that she could be graceful and charming. Just because she hadn’t been on the marriage mart in some while, or rather interested in it, didn’t mean she’d lost all of her skills.

Lord Pembroke nodded. “Indeed, I do. Almack’s might not be known for its food, but I enjoy the music. Do you like music?” he asked.

She took a deep breath, relieved that this was the topic he’d chosen. Of all the things gentlemen liked to talk about, music was the one topic she felt confident discussing.

“I do. And I adore The Creation by Haydn,” she replied, nodding to the orchestra that was currently playing the piece.

Lord Pembroke’s eyes lit up with genuine interest. “Indeed, Lady Judith? You have excellent taste. My favorite is Beethoven’s Symphony No. 2 .”

A man who knows about music! What good fortune!

“Both pieces are masterpieces of our time,” she declared with enthusiasm.

Aaron looked at her, his lips parted in surprise, clearly taken aback by her poise and charm.

“I agree. Well, Your Grace, I must thank you for introducing me to this charming young lady. It is rare that one meets another with a genuine interest in music, beyond playing it to claim as an accomplishment,” Lord Pembroke said.

“Thank you, Lord Pembroke.” Judith beamed, feeling a surge of confidence. “I find that music has a way of speaking to the soul, don’t you agree?”

“Absolutely,” Lord Pembroke replied, his gaze appreciative. “It is the language of the heart. Pray, may I have the honor of dancing with you this evening?”

“Of course,” she said and handed him her dance card and pencil.

“Your Grace, may I borrow your back?” he asked.

Aaron, after a brief hesitation, turned his back to him.

Lord Pembroke took her dance card and wrote down his name for the quadrille, using Aaron’s back as a table—which made her grin, as this time, it was Aaron who was uncomfortable.

“I look forward to our dance, Lady Judith.”

“As do I, Lord Pembroke,” she replied with a genuine smile as she took her dance card back.

As they moved on, Aaron glanced at her, a mix of admiration and surprise in his eyes.

“You were wonderful, Judith. I must admit, I didn’t expect that.”

Judith laughed softly, feeling a sense of triumph. “Thank you, Aaron. I suppose I just needed the right motivation. We might win our wager yet, do you not think?”

“I think we ought not to bet all our money on the first horse,” he cautioned quickly.

She raised her eyebrows, bemused. “Do you mean that Lord Pembroke is a horse?”

They looked at one another and then burst out laughing, which eased what had remained of the tension between them.

“Let us not jest too loudly, lest I ruin my chance of dancing with him,” she said.

Aaron grew serious at once. “Of course. Shall we press on? That dance card is still very empty, and we need to find you someone to dance the Boulanger with.”

They walked around the opulent ballroom, the scent of beeswax and perfume drifting in the air, and Judith couldn’t help but feel a newfound confidence as the evening progressed. Aaron introduced her to a number of gentlemen, some of whom she already knew, and she found that this time, conversation did flow easier.

If it was because she simply had found her rhythm again, or because she wanted to show Aaron’s high-in-the-instep friends that she could find herself a husband if she wanted to, she didn’t know. But whatever it was, she felt invigorated. Once her dance card was nearly full, they came to a stop near an alcove.

Aaron turned to her with a warm smile. “You were truly impressive tonight, Judith. Especially when you spoke with Lord Pembroke. I had no idea you knew so much about music.”

She hesitated, unsure if he was teasing her or genuinely impressed. “Do you mean that?”

“Absolutely,” he replied, his tone sincere. “Your knowledge and passion for music were evident. Not that you weren’t equally impressive when talking about other matters. You have a keen knowledge of current affairs.”

Judith felt a blush creep up her cheeks. She didn’t want to admit it, but she’d gone through four different newspapers that morning to familiarize herself with what was

going on in the world, so she might be able to impress.

“Well, thank you. I do my best to be informed,” she said, not meeting his eyes so he would not see the lie in hers. “But I must admit, I am glad when music is the subject, for I do love music. As a child, I hated the pianoforte, but now it’s almost a refuge for me. I find great joy in playing.”

It occurred to her that she hadn’t played in a while, and she resolved to sit down at the instrument this very evening to play.

Aaron nodded, his eyes softening. “I understand completely. I cannot extract a single tune from any instrument, unfortunately, but I love listening to music and singing. One of my favorite things to do when I travel is to attend musical concertos.”

“Really?” Judith’s eyes widened with interest. She loved it when people told her about their journeys, even though it made her envious. “That sounds wonderful. What have you seen?”

“I once saw a performance of Rossini’s opera *Il Barbiere di Siviglia* in Italy. It was magical,” Aaron said, his eyes lighting up with the memory. “Afterwards, I walked back to the inn and passed the Spanish steps. It was so warm and lovely, I found myself humming the melodies all night.”

She wondered if he had been alone when he hummed those melodies, or if he had the company of a woman, but she knew she could not dare to ask such things. Besides, she ought not to care. They weren’t courting, after all.

“Italy sounds enchanting. Tell me more about your travels. What else have you seen? Tell me about Italy.”

Aaron chuckled and looked across at the dance floor. On the edge, couples already

lined up in anticipation of the next dance. “You will miss the next dance.”

“It is the English Country Dance, which I am supposed to dance with Lord Wortham Stowe, but he is over yonder, asleep.” Judith nodded her head toward the chair the young man in question reclined on, his mouth open.

They weren’t near enough for her to be certain, but she was sure he was snoring.

“Very well then, I suppose we can use this time for a story. Italy is indeed enchanting. The art, the architecture, the food... Oh, the food! I’ve had the most exquisite pasta, fresh and bursting with flavor. And the gelato, Lady Judith, it’s like tasting a piece of heaven.”

Judith laughed softly, imagining the vibrant streets of Italy filled with the aroma of delicious food. Her mouth watered as she thought of it, and she placed a hand on her stomach, wishing she had something to eat before leaving Worcester House.

“It sounds divine. I would love to visit one day. Indeed, my mouth is watering right now.”

“You must visit,” Aaron said, his gaze lingering on her face. “There’s a certain romance in the air there, something that inspires and captivates.”

She felt a flutter in her chest at his words, the atmosphere between them charged with a subtle tension. “I can see how it would be inspiring. Have you been anywhere else that captivated you like Italy?”

“France has its own charm, especially Paris. The city is alive with art and music. I attended a concert at the Opéra Garnier once. The grandeur of the place is breathtaking.”

Judith sighed dreamily. She imagined herself walking along the narrow avenues of Paris, flowers blooming and the thrilling sensation of love in the air.

“I have read so much about these places in books but never seen any of them.”

“Have you not traveled at all, then?” he asked, though he sounded more surprised than judgmental.

“To Scotland,” she revealed.

“Ah, one of my favorite places in the realm. I love the Highlands. It is so quiet there, one can be alone with one’s thoughts and not see a soul—aside from the occasional goat.”

She giggled, imagining him in the Highlands, sitting on a blanket with nothing but a herd of goats walking by.

“I have been to the Highlands,” she said, happy she could finally share a tale of her own. “On my first visit, I was accompanied by my mother, my father, and Oliver—this was before my youngest brother was born,” she continued, her eyes sparkling with mirth. “We stayed in a quaint, little village, surrounded by rolling hills and picturesque lochs. One morning, we decided to go for a hike to see a famous waterfall.”

Aaron listened intently, his curiosity piqued.

“Now, my mother had always insisted on proper attire, even for hiking.” Judith smiled as she remembered her mother and her desire to always have her family look her best. She hadn’t been a superficial woman, just someone always prepared for every eventuality. “So there I was, in a ridiculous ensemble of sturdy boots, a long skirt, and a bonnet that kept flopping into my eyes. We hadn’t been hiking for more

than an hour when we encountered a herd of sheep.”

Aaron chuckled, imagining the scene. “I can sense a turn in the story,” he jested.

“These weren’t just any sheep,” Judith said, grinning. “They were the most stubborn, determined sheep you’ve ever seen. They stood right in the middle of our path, and no amount of coaxing would make them move. My father tried shooing them away, my mother waved her bonnet in the air, but they just stared at us as if we were the most amusing spectacle they had ever seen.”

She paused, laughing at the memory. “Finally, in a fit of frustration, my brother decided to chase them. He ran at them, yelling and flailing his arms. The sheep, naturally, were unimpressed. They scattered a bit, but then regrouped and began following him!”

Aaron burst into laughter. “They followed him?”

“Yes!” Judith exclaimed, giggling. “He ran up the hill, thinking he had won, only to look back and see the entire herd trotting after him. He panicked and started running faster, which only made them more determined to keep up. By the time he reached the top of the hill, he was out of breath, and the sheep were calmly grazing again, as if nothing had happened.”

Aaron wiped a tear of laughter from his eye. “That’s hilarious. Oliver never told me this story.”

“And he will deny it if you tell him you know about it,” she snorted.

Aaron shook his head, still chuckling. “I can imagine,” he said, his eyes sparkling as he looked at her in such a way that her face grew hot at once.

Why was his mere look making her feel so flushed? She had to stop allowing herself to spend so much time with him. She wasn't here for a conversation with him—she was here to save herself from an unfortunate marriage arranged by her hapless brother...

And yet the last ten minutes had been the most enjoyable she'd had since her father's death. That in itself, she knew, was a bad sign, for she ought not to be having a grand time with the man assigned as her guardian. Still, at this moment, she wished for nothing more than the ability to keep talking to him, to hear his stories... to be near him.

And judging by the way he smiled at her, she wondered if perhaps, just perhaps, he felt the same.

CHAPTER 9

“Excuse me, I believe this is my dance,” Lord Pembroke declared suddenly.

Aaron felt a rush of irritation, for he hadn't even been aware the man had made his way over to them, so engrossed had he been in their chat. He looked at the man, wanting to admonish him for interrupting their conversation, but then he realized that this was exactly why they were there. For her to dance, not to stand in the corner, relaying travel stories.

“Of course,” he said and stepped back.

“Lord Pembroke, a pleasure to see you again.” Judith smiled broadly at the young man, who offered her his hand.

Aaron's eyes followed her arm as it moved toward Lord Pembroke, who took it. As he placed a small kiss on the back of her hand, Aaron noted her moving slightly, as though she was uncomfortable with this. Something they would have to address later.

“Your Grace,” she said with a small nod, before Lord Pembroke walked her to the dance floor, where dancers were now lining up for the quadrille.

Aaron watched them, his bottom lip trembling. He had so enjoyed his conversation with her that he hadn't realized how quickly the country dance had come and gone. Nor had he anticipated how much he would dislike the feeling of her dancing with another man. Yet, there she was, about to dance with Lord Pembroke.

What if the two of them truly liked one another? What if, by some strange twist of fate, she would indeed find herself in a courtship with the very first man Aaron had introduced her to? Well, the first man at this ball, for the first one had been Henry—but that would've been a disaster all around.

“Aaron,” a voice called suddenly.

Aaron felt a chill run down his spine. Indeed, it felt as though his entire skeleton had turned into ice with the snap of a finger. He turned to look at the source of that voice, sucking in a lungful of air as if he were about to dive into the deepest ocean.

“Amelia,” he uttered, once the all too familiar face appeared before him.

“No, I am now Lady Lundgren,” she replied coldly, her green eyes flashing with an anger he had long forgotten.

Lady Lundgren, of course. She had gotten married. When? Six months ago? A year? He couldn't quite remember. Oliver had shared with him the news that his former fiancée had found a husband, but Aaron hadn't paid much attention then, nor had he been terribly concerned about finding out more.

Why had she approached him? She had made it clear the last time they spoke that she never wanted to see him again. Knowing her, she likely had come to gloat and flaunt her newfound happiness and wealth in front of him, for the one thing he did remember was that her new husband was richer than him, despite being a marquess, not a duke.

“Lady Lundgren,” he corrected. “I am surprised to see you here. I thought that you no longer attended balls and such now that...”

“Now that I have finally been removed from the marriage mart?” she supplied in a

tone as cold as the icy shivers that still ran through him.

“Indeed. I was always under the impression that young ladies only came out in order to set their cap at somebody. But I must have been wrong.”

“You were wrong about a great many things, Your Grace,” she said with a smile, though it didn’t escape his attention that she’d switched to using his title rather than his first name, which she’d used to get his attention. Like an opening salvo in a war, rather.

He felt a pearl of sweat bead on his brow, which was peculiar because it wasn’t particularly warm. True, the ballroom was teeming with people. Candles were burning, but it was January, and outside, it was frigid cold. Still, here he was, sweating as if it were a sunny day in August.

He remembered the last time he had met Amelia. The day he had told her that he did not wish to marry her. They had been courting for several months, and in fact, wedding preparations had been in progress.

Aaron had known he didn’t want to marry her from the first meeting, but it hadn’t been his choice but his father’s. The late Duke had been of the opinion that Aaron was old enough to wed. Only two-and-twenty at the time, he hadn’t agreed in the least. He’d wanted to explore the world and find his place in it before marrying, but the late Duke had been insistent. His mother, herself chained to her husband by way of an arranged marriage, had been more sympathetic, but she’d already been ill then and hadn’t had much strength to fight a battle not her own.

Thus, he’d been forced to meet Amelia. He had been so averse to the thought of marrying her that he’d fantasized about escaping. He and Oliver had made plans to vanish to India or Australia. How odd that he felt more comfortable with the idea of escaping to a place where prisoners were routinely sent rather than getting married.

Looking at Amelia now, he understood his younger self's decision. True, she was beautiful, there was no denying that. She had porcelain skin, the complexion any young lady of the ton desired. Her green sparkling eyes and blonde hair made her a highly desirable beauty. And she came from one of the country's wealthiest families.

If he had been a man who cared about his social standing, he might have been pleased with the match. But he wasn't a man who cared about his standing. He wasn't a man who cared about Society. He was a man who cared about his freedom and the right to make his own decisions.

"You cannot even pay attention to me for five minutes," she sneered, her voice like a serrated knife through his flesh.

"I apologize. I was thinking about the last time we spoke."

She curled her upper lip. "Yes, I think about that often myself. An unfortunate day. But I wanted you to know that I am content now. Happy, even. Charles—that is, Lord Lundgren—has a large estate in Devon. We have horses—Arabians. He has a vacation home in Bath and another outside Glasgow."

"I am happy for you," Aaron said.

And in a strange way, he was, because these were all things she had always wanted. Now she had them. After all, he wasn't a monster. When he had ended things, he had seen how humiliated she was. Not because she had been so in love with him and had her heart broken, but because the title of Duchess had escaped her. Plus, having a broken engagement undoubtedly made it harder for her to find a match.

Whatever her reasons, she had been upset, and he wasn't the kind of man who enjoyed seeing a woman in anguish.

“He is a marquess?” he asked politely.

Her eyes flashed with irritation. Clearly, she’d assumed he’d kept tabs on her.

“The fifth Marquess of Lundgren,” she enunciated stiffly. “And I hear you are still not married.”

“No, and I do not think I will ever be. You see, if I learned one thing from our courtship, it is that I wouldn’t make a good husband for anybody.”

She snickered. “I agree with you. A first,” she said, her tone dripping with sarcasm.

Aaron’s strong dislike for her resurfaced. He recalled how unpleasant he had found her when they were courting.

“There’s a first for everything,” he replied tersely.

“I heard your father passed away. I was sorry to hear it, as he seemed a decent man,” she said, offering her condolences with a thin veneer of sincerity.

“Both my parents have passed,” he pointed out, though of course she had to know this. Anytime a duke or duchess passed, the scandal sheets wrote about it in detail.

“Ah, a shame,” she said, though she clearly didn’t mean it.

He wanted to excuse himself from this conversation but didn’t know how. It would be impolite to walk away, and thus far she hadn’t given him a chance to end the discussion elegantly. So instead, he changed the subject.

“What brings you to London?” he asked.

“My brother is in need of a wife, and I have come to town to help him find one,” she replied, nodding her head in the direction of a lanky, tall man who was talking to a woman.

Aaron vaguely remembered him as Amelia’s younger brother. The last time he had seen him, he was perhaps fifteen, but now he looked like a grown man. Time had indeed flown.

“I was always fond of your brother,” Aaron said sincerely.

She looked at him with a hint of bitterness. “At least you were fond of one person in the family.”

He opened his mouth, wanting to protest, but then realized he could not. Fortunately, she hadn’t expected a reply, as she pressed on.

“You did not tell me why you are here,” she reminded him, turning the conversation back to him. “Did your aunt press you to attend? I recall she is one of the Lady Patronesses.”

“No, although I am doing a favor to someone. I’m helping my friend’s sister find a husband,” he explained.

“Is that the lady I saw you talking to?” she asked.

Aaron felt uncomfortable that she had watched them. He felt oddly protective of the quiet moment he had shared with Judith yet saw no point in denying it, and thus he replied with a nod.

“I’m glad to hear you aren’t courting her, because that is what it looked like. I wouldn’t like to see another lady mistreated,” Amelia said.

Now Aaron lost his cool. “Amelia, please let us not pretend that I mistreated you. I think I did you a kindness, actually. I would have been an awful husband. And let us not forget you didn’t want to marry me any more than I wanted to marry you. We were forced into it by our parents.”

She drew her shoulders back and puffed out her chest. “That’s not entirely true. I would have honored the arrangement, as expected.”

“But you never loved me,” Aaron argued sharply. “You were more concerned with the title and the prestige.”

“And you were more concerned with your freedom,” she shot back, her eyes flashing with anger. “You never gave us a chance.”

“Perhaps,” Aaron conceded. “But it wouldn’t have worked, Amelia. We were never meant for each other. You never cared about the things I liked, and I could not have cared less about many of the things you did,” he accused, his voice rising with anger. “It is better for both of us that we never married.”

“That’s easy for you to say,” Amelia retorted bitterly. “You’re a duke. Do you have any idea what you’ve done to me?” she asked, lowering her voice to a harsh whisper.

Aaron looked around nervously, checking if anyone could overhear their heated conversation.

“What are you talking about?” he asked, his voice strained.

“You have no idea,” she said, her voice trembling with barely contained fury. “I’m married to a man thirty years older than me. Thirty years, Aaron. He’s rich, yes, but all he has are Waterloo teeth and hardly a hair on his head. He reeks of whiskey and sweat and tastes of tobacco. He pines for his first wife, and her portraits are

everywhere in each of his homes. His adult children hate me. They make my life a living hell every single day.”

Aaron’s eyes widened in shock. “Amelia, I?—”

“Do you know what it’s like to live like that?” she continued, her voice rising. “I’m lucky if I can even have a child of my own—though the thought alone makes me sick. I wake up each day hoping my husband will die so I can be free, but I’m stuck. Trapped in this life because of you !”

“Amelia, please,” Aaron said, his voice dropping to a whisper as he glanced around again, afraid of drawing attention.

“And you,” she spat, “you stand there with your freedom, your life of ease, congratulating me on my ‘comfort.’ Congratulations, Aaron. Congratulations on your good fortune and your freedom. But remember this every day—I am in a prison of your making.”

Aaron felt a cold sweat break out on his forehead. “I never meant for this to happen,” he said.

In the back of his head, he knew this wasn’t his fault, although of course, if he hadn’t become betrothed to her, maybe she’d have had another option?

“Meaning doesn’t change the outcome,” she hissed. “While you roam free, I am tied to a man I despise, in a life I loathe.”

“Amelia, I’m so?—”

“Save your apologies,” she cut him off, her eyes flashing with anger. “They mean nothing to me. Enjoy your life, Your Grace.”

She turned on her heel and walked away, but then stopped and turned back.

“I do hope for the sake of the young woman that you meant what you said, and you are merely interested in her for your friend’s sake, because as you said, you’d make a poor husband for anyone. I, for one, rue the day I met you.”

Then, she walked away, leaving Aaron standing there, utterly shaken. He stood motionless, the weight of her words crashing over him, the distant strains of the music now a haunting reminder of the lives they could have had but never did.

CHAPTER 10

Judith floated across the dance floor with Lord Pembroke, the strains of the orchestra's music filling the grand ballroom. The chandeliers above cast a soft glow over the elegantly dressed couples twirling around them. She found herself enjoying the conversation about music, Lord Pembroke proving to be both charming and knowledgeable.

From the corner of her eye, she spotted Aaron conversing with a beautiful woman. Her curiosity was piqued, and she couldn't help but steal glances in their direction.

Lord Pembroke noticed her distraction and raised an eyebrow as he followed her gaze, only to let out a surprised 'Huh.'

"I hadn't thought I'd see those two talking to one another again," he remarked.

Judith returned her attention to him. "What do you mean?" she asked, trying to keep her tone casual.

"How well do you know the Duke?" Lord Pembroke inquired, leading her into a graceful spin.

Judith hesitated, considering her answer. "He is my brother's best friend, but I do not know him well at all. He is only doing my brother a favor by looking out for me while Oliver is away."

"Ah, I see," Lord Pembroke said, nodding in understanding. "The woman he's talking

to is Lady Amelia Cornell—Lady Lundgren now. She and His Grace were once betrothed.”

Judith’s eyes widened in shock. “Betrothed?” she echoed, unable to mask her surprise.

Lord Pembroke nodded solemnly. “Yes, it was quite the scandal when the engagement was broken off.”

Judith’s mind raced as she processed this revelation. Aaron and Lady Lundgren were engaged? She glanced back at them, their intense expressions and body language hinting at a complicated history. She felt a pang of curiosity and something else she couldn’t quite name—something unsettling.

The dance continued, but Judith’s thoughts were far from the music and the elegant steps. The revelation about Aaron and Lady Lundgren’s past lingered in her mind, casting a shadow over the pleasant evening.

“I did not know he was once engaged,” Judith murmured, her voice tinged with surprise.

“It was years ago,” Lord Pembroke explained. “From what I heard, it all ended terribly, and Lady Lundgren was left to marry someone far older than her. I suppose one could have expected it, seeing how his reputation is not exactly stellar.” He nodded his head toward a young man dancing nearby. “That is Lady Lundgren’s brother.”

Judith glanced over, recognizing the tall, lanky man from earlier. Her mind raced as she continued to dance with Lord Pembroke, her movements now more mechanical than graceful.

Aaron was engaged, and he'd ruined the lady he was meant to wed, leaving her to make a bad match. Yet, he was supposed to help Judith make a good one. Was Oliver aware of all of this?

The revelation echoed in Judith's mind, and she found it hard to focus on anything else.

Her dance partner continued to engage her in civil whisks, but she forgot his questions as well as her answers almost the moment the exchange was completed, her thoughts consumed by this new piece of Aaron's history.

How could she not have known about something so significant?

She was shocked that Aaron, someone she had begun to see in a different light, could have been so callous as to put a woman in such a position. Yet, as her mind spun, she couldn't help but wonder if there was more to the story.

Was she grasping at straws? Perhaps. But the Aaron she had come to know seemed complex, capable of both charm and aloofness.

Judith knew of Aaron's reputation as a rake, but she had started to see beyond that superficial image. He'd been so charming during their dance, and then when he'd told her stories of his travels, she'd felt almost at ease with him. Had she been foolish to allow herself to be drawn in?

He was known for being the man who could get any lady he wanted, after all.

As the dance continued, Judith's eyes occasionally darted to Aaron and Lady Lundgren, their intense conversation still ongoing. Her curiosity mingled with an inexplicable sense of unease, and she realized how little she truly knew about Aaron's past and the complexities that shaped him.

The dance came to an end, and Lord Pembroke offered his arm to Judith, escorting her back to the edge of the ballroom.

“Well, you are an angel indeed when you dance,” he praised and winked at her.

“You are too kind. I stepped on your foot at least once,” she said, and he let out a chuckle.

“And yet I would be remiss if I did not ask if you would do me the honor of dancing with me again next Wednesday. I assume you will be here?” he asked with a warm smile.

“I would be delighted,” Judith replied, smiling back.

“Very good, I look forward to it. Perhaps we could even dance twice?” he suggested and then shook his head as she searched for an appropriate answer.

Two dances indicated serious interest... Was she ready for that?

“I did not mean to be forward, but a man must ask, lest he loses out. I see your dance card is quite full tonight.”

He winked at her and then departed, leaving her to make her way toward Aaron, though she felt a strange sensation in her stomach.

The revelation about his past engagement weighed heavily on her mind. She had seen a different side of him recently, but now she was unsure what to think. She spotted Lady Lundgren speaking with her brother, their animated conversation contrasting sharply with the tension she felt.

Aaron approached her, his expression softening as he drew nearer. “Judith, how did it

go?” he asked, his tone light.

“Lord Pembroke is lovely,” she replied, her voice slightly distant. “He asked to dance with me again next week.”

“That’s wonderful,” Aaron said, though his tone and expression contrasted with his words.

Silence fell between them, the unspoken tension thickening the air. They looked at one another, and Judith’s thoughts raced. She wanted to ask about Lady Lundgren but couldn’t bring herself to voice the question.

Instead, she forced a smile and said, “I’m quite hungry now. I think I’ll have a piece of cake.”

Aaron’s teasing grin appeared. “The cake and lemonade here are dreadful, you know.”

She laughed lightly, though it felt hollow. “I’m so famished, I don’t care.”

“Let me go with you,” he offered, stepping closer.

Judith shook her head quickly. “No, thank you. I need a moment alone.”

Aaron’s expression turned into one of confusion, his brow furrowing slightly. “Are you sure?”

“Yes, absolutely,” she replied, trying to keep her tone light. “I’ll be back shortly.”

As she walked away, she could feel his puzzled gaze on her back. Her mind was a whirl of conflicting emotions, and she needed a moment to gather her thoughts.

The lively atmosphere of the ballroom seemed distant, the laughter and music muted as she approached the refreshments table. She took a deep breath, trying to steady herself, but the unease in her stomach remained.

The banquet room was a quieter, more subdued space compared to the bustling ballroom. The soft clinking of glasses and the low murmur of conversations provided a stark contrast to the lively music and laughter outside. The room was adorned with rich, dark wood paneling and velvet drapes, creating an intimate atmosphere. A large table laden with various pastries, cakes, and lemonade stood in the center.

Judith sat at a small table in the corner, staring absentmindedly at a slice of cake on her plate. Her mind was a whirlwind of confusion and unease. The revelation about Aaron's past engagement had unsettled her more than she cared to admit. As she tried to make sense of her thoughts, a young man entered the room.

It was the one Lord Pembroke had pointed out as Lady Lundgren's brother. He was tall and lanky, with a serious expression.

Approaching her, he bowed politely. "Lady Judith?" he inquired.

Judith looked up, surprised. "Yes, I am Lady Judith," she confirmed, her curiosity piqued. "May I ask how you know who I am?"

"I saw you speaking with Aaron Fitzwilliam, the Duke of Nottingham," he admitted, his tone polite but firm.

Judith grew uncomfortable, her grip tightening on her fan. "And you are?"

"Thomas Cornell," he introduced himself with a slight bow. "Lady Lundgren is my sister."

Judith felt a knot form in her stomach. “I see,” she muttered, trying to maintain her composure.

She began to fan herself, the motion more an attempt to gather her thoughts than to cool herself.

Thomas seemed to sense her discomfort. “Please, Lady Judith, I mean you no harm,” he said softly. “I am simply concerned. Do you truly know the Duke of Nottingham?”

Judith’s evasiveness became more pronounced. “He is a friend of my brother’s,” she replied, her eyes darting around the room.

Just then, someone else entered, momentarily breaking the tension.

Thomas took a step closer, lowering his voice. “I understand, but I urge you to be cautious. He is not the man he appears to be.”

Judith’s heart raced, the mix of curiosity and dread making her pulse quicken. “Why do you say that?” she asked, trying to keep her voice steady.

Thomas looked around the room, then back at her. “Would you step outside with me? I can explain more, but not here.”

Judith hesitated, glancing at her maid, who had just walked into the room and was waiting nearby. “My maid would have to come with us,” she said, her voice firm.

“Of course,” Thomas agreed immediately. “I understand completely.”

Judith stood up, signaling to Marianne.

They made their way through the banquet room, the heavy air of murmured

conversations following them as they stepped into the garden. The cool night air was a welcome relief, the quiet of the garden a stark contrast to the overwhelming atmosphere inside.

The moon cast a pale light over the manicured hedges and blooming flowers, creating an almost surreal atmosphere. Judith walked alongside Thomas, feeling both curious and apprehensive. She took a deep breath, trying to steady her nerves as he prepared to speak. Marianne followed closely behind, her presence a small comfort.

“Lady Judith,” Thomas began, his voice low and urgent. “I need you to understand that Aaron is not a good man. He has caused my sister immeasurable heartache. She is trapped in a horrible marriage because of him. He ruined her.”

Judith felt a chill run down her spine. “Why are you telling me this?” she asked, her voice trembling slightly. “Why do you feel the need to warn me about Aaron?”

Thomas sighed, his frustration evident. “Because I don’t want to see another woman suffer the way my sister has. Aaron is a rake of the worst order. He hides many secrets, and you won’t be safe with him.”

Judith felt a surge of defiance mixed with doubt. “With all due respect, Lord Thomas, I don’t know you at all. My brother trusts Aaron. I appreciate your concern, but I will follow my brother’s lead.”

They had made a turn about the small garden and had arrived near the door again, and she had hoped they would part ways and she would return inside. She had been foolish to come out here in the first place. Of course, there were a few others wandering through the garden, but still.

Alas, Thomas’s face turned red with anger. “You are foolish,” he snapped. “I’m trying to warn you, and you choose to side with Aaron? You are making a grave

mistake.”

“I’m not choosing Aaron,” Judith said firmly, trying to keep her voice steady. “I’m simply not going to let a stranger tell me what to do.”

Thomas’s expression darkened, his eyes flashing with rage. “Aaron ruined my sister’s life forever. If you are going to side with a man like that, then perhaps you deserve to have your life ruined too.”

Judith felt a surge of fear as his tone grew menacing. She glanced at Marianne, who looked equally alarmed. They had known one another for so long that they did not need to exchange words for the maid to understand what had to be done.

Marianne rushed back into the ballroom. As she left, Thomas grabbed Judith’s arm, pulling her closer.

“Let go of me!” she cried, struggling against his grip.

“Don’t be a fool,” Thomas hissed, his face inches from hers. “You need to understand?—”

But before he could finish, he pulled her forward, clearly trying to make it look like they were in a compromising position for anyone watching from the ballroom windows. Judith’s heart pounded in her chest as she realized the gravity of the situation. If they were seen like this, she would be ruined.

“Stop it!” she shouted, pushing against him with all her strength. “Let me go!”

Thomas’s grip tightened, and he leaned in to kiss her, but she turned her head away, her terror mounting. Just then, the door to the garden flew open, and heavy footsteps rushed toward them.

A fist flew through the air, connecting with Thomas's jaw with a sickening thud. He staggered back, releasing Judith, who stumbled away from him. She spun around, her breath coming in ragged gasps, and saw Aaron standing there, his eyes blazing with fury.

"Are you all right?" Aaron asked, his gaze never leaving Thomas.

Judith nodded, tears welling up in her eyes. "Yes, I think so."

Aaron stepped forward, his body tense and ready for a fight. "If you ever come near her again, I will make sure you regret it, Cornell," he growled.

Thomas glared at him, clutching his jaw. "You have no idea what you've done," he spat, his voice filled with venom. "You'll pay for this, Aaron."

"Get out of here," Aaron said coldly. "Before I make you."

Thomas hesitated, then turned and stalked away, his posture rigid with anger and humiliation.

Judith watched him go, her legs trembling with the fear coursing through her.

Aaron turned to her, his expression softening. "Judith," he said gently, "I'm so sorry you had to go through that."

Judith shook her head, trying to steady her breathing. "Thank you, Aaron. I don't know what would have happened if you hadn't come."

Aaron took a step closer, his concern evident. "Are you sure you're all right?"

"I'm fine," she replied, though her voice wavered. "Just... shaken."

Aaron nodded, his eyes full of empathy. “Let’s get you back inside. We’ll find a quiet place where you can sit and catch your breath.”

Judith nodded, leaning on his arm for support as they made their way back into the ballroom. Her mind was still reeling from the encounter, and she couldn’t shake the feeling that the evening had changed everything.

CHAPTER 11

Inside, the noise and warmth of the ballroom enveloped them again, but the comfort it once offered now felt suffocating to Judith. She turned to Aaron, her expression resolute.

“Aaron, I wish to leave,” she said, her voice steady but tinged with desperation.

The incident had shaken her to the core, but not just that—she now doubted her judgment. She should not have gone outside with a man she had just met. Why had her curiosity about Aaron’s connection to Lady Lundgren been so strong that it had pushed aside all common sense?

Aaron looked at her, concern etched on his features. “But, Judith, you still have other dances promised. Are you sure? Leaving now might cause more rumors, and the people you agreed to dance with will think you are flighty.”

Judith shook her head. Her frustration only grew because the reason she was in this situation was because of him. He should understand how she felt.

“I don’t care about the other dances. After what happened... that man tried to ruin me in front of the entire ton. And why?”

Aaron gulped, hesitating.

Judith’s eyes bored into him, demanding the truth. “It’s because of you—we both know it.”

Aaron sighed deeply, his shoulders slumping. “Yes, Judith. It’s true. That man, Thomas Cornell... his sister is Lady Lundgren.”

Judith scoffed. “The woman you were betrothed to. I am aware. He told me.”

Aaron nodded, a shadow crossing his face. “You do? Pray, what did he say?”

Judith chewed on her bottom lip, her mind racing.

But before she could respond, the door opened, and Thomas appeared again, glaring at them. Tension filled the air, and Aaron’s hands balled into fists again as he took a step in front of her, shielding her from view.

Judith’s face grew hot, and she looked around to see a great number of people looking their way. Or was that her imagination? She couldn’t be certain.

Nobody had actually seen what transpired outside, she’d made sure of that when they entered. Nonetheless, one could never be too careful.

To her relief, Lady Lundgren appeared beside her brother. They whispered urgently to each other before disappearing back into the crowd. Judith saw Aaron exhale, the tension in his body visibly easing, as did her own.

“I should explain,” he said curtly as he took her hand.

But the sudden connection—one she had never felt before—sent tingles up her arm. It occurred to her that she’d never held anyone’s hand before. Even when she was engaged, she and her ex-fiancé had been cordial at best. She’d walk with her hand on his arm, but they never held hands, not in any intimate fashion. That was reserved for after marriage, he’d told her.

“Judith?” Aaron prompted, startled by her reaction, and quickly let go.

“Yes, yes, let us go,” she said hastily.

Judith followed him through the crowded ballroom, feeling the weight of the evening’s events pressing down on her. They found a quiet alcove near a large, ornate window, the sounds of the party muffled by heavy drapes. She realized it was the same alcove where they’d exchanged travel stories just a little while ago. But oh, how different it felt to be standing there now.

Aaron turned to her, his expression earnest. “I’m so sorry, Judith,” he began. “Years ago, Lady Amelia—Lady Lundgren and I were engaged. It went badly, and this is the first time I’ve seen her since. She resents me to this day, and it seems her brother—whom I cared for in the past—has inherited that from her.”

Judith looked down, feeling the sting of embarrassment and uncertainty.

“What happened? How did you come to be outside with him?” Aaron asked gently. “I saw you leave and followed just in case, but I am quite confused as to what happened exactly.”

Judith hesitated. She didn’t want to reveal how quickly she had followed Thomas outside and listened to his stories.

“We spoke in the banquet room,” she said slowly. “He asked me to step outside with him for some fresh air. I agreed. Then he told me he wanted to warn me about you. When I wasn’t interested, he said something about me deserving what happened to his sister and tried to ruin me by kissing me. Marianne rushed inside to seek help.”

Aaron’s face darkened with fury. He huffed and puffed, his anger palpable. “Yes, I saw her just as I came out. Pray, what did he say to you?” he asked through gritted

teeth.

“He said you were a terrible man and that I shouldn’t associate with you,” Judith replied, her voice shaking slightly. “He pretended to care about me, but when I would not do as he said, he tried to kiss me.”

Aaron clenched his fists, his rage barely contained. “I can’t believe he would do such a thing,” he bit out.

“What did you do to Lady Lundgren that made her hate you so much?” Judith asked, regretting her choice of words the moment they’d come out of her mouth. “I mean... What... It is unusual for a woman to...”

Aaron raised a hand to indicate that he understood. “I did do something to her, though I thought it was all behind me now. It seems it is not. But do not fret, I will not let it affect you in any way, that I promise.”

He sighed deeply, his shoulders slumping. “I agreed to an arranged marriage with her even though I didn’t love her,” he admitted. “I should not have agreed to the arrangement in the first place. When I realized I couldn’t marry her, I ended it. She felt humiliated and betrayed, and I can’t blame her for that. Although I will say that she did not love me either. She certainly loved the...” He waved a hand as if he had second thoughts about saying what was on his mind.

Judith wanted to know what he’d wished to say but didn’t press him.

She looked at him, seeing the pain in his eyes. “But that doesn’t justify what her brother did,” she stated firmly.

Aaron nodded, his anger giving way to a deep sadness. “I know,” he said softly. “Oliver told me she got married, but it seems the marriage is not a happy one. She

says my breaking our engagement left her with little options. I... I do feel bad. I never wanted to hurt anyone. I just wanted to be free to make my own choices.”

Judith saw in his eyes that he meant it, and it struck her that he was far more empathic than she’d assumed. She considered his reputation as a rake. She’d assumed the end of his engagement had something to do with his love for debauchery, but it seemed this wasn’t the case.

She narrowed her eyes. Something about Lady Lundgren’s story did not make sense. Even with a broken engagement, she would have been able to secure a good match. She was beautiful, and while a broken engagement could reflect badly, one could still succeed. Judith could have done so herself if she’d wished, but she’d chosen to wait.

There had been offers— good offers—but she’d turned them down in favor of love... with her father’s support. So why had Lady Lundgren ended up in a bad marriage?

And Aaron? What were his options? Should he have gone through with the wedding, even though he didn’t want it, just because he made a promise?

This gave Judith pause. She had always longed for freedom and the ability to make her own choices. How could she blame Aaron for wanting the same? Still, the thought of Lady Lundgren’s misery and her brother’s anger troubled her deeply.

“Why did Lady Lundgren find herself in an unfortunate position?” she asked.

Aaron shrugged. “Amelia always dreamed of being a duchess. Many young women do. There are not many dukes in Britain, as you know. I suspect another could not be found and she had to settle with someone else. But it couldn’t be helped. We would have been unhappy and utterly bored, as we had nothing in common.”

He paused and observed her closely. “That’s one of the reasons I wanted to help you,

Judith. I don't want you to end up in a terrible marriage like my parents did."

Judith's curiosity got the better of her. "Were your parents very unhappy?" she asked.

Aaron nodded, his expression grim. "Not because they hated each other. They were cordial enough. Alas, they had a boring marriage. They had nothing in common and led separate lives under one roof. They were strangers sharing a house, not partners sharing a life. It was suffocating for them, and it would have been suffocating for Amelia and me."

Judith looked at him, her mind filled with questions. "Isn't that what most marriages end up being? Routine?"

At least she had always thought so. Even the best love matches ended up this way, didn't they?

Aaron shook his head. "It shouldn't be. A marriage should be a partnership, about sharing lives, dreams, and goals. My parents' marriage was a cage for both. That's why I chose not to get married. I'd rather embrace life for what it is than be trapped in a marriage of convenience or convention."

Judith dropped her shoulders. Somewhere in the back of her mind, she had entertained a fleeting thought—a fantasy, really. But no! She stopped herself.

It doesn't matter what he wants. It matters what I want, and we are here to make sure I do not end up the miserable one.

She pulled her shoulders back, determination setting in. "Very well. I do thank you for telling me."

From within, the sounds of the cotillion rose, and she gasped.

“I am to dance this dance!”

“Well, you better find your partner,” he urged with a smile. “I take it you’ve changed your mind about staying?”

Startled, she paused and then recalled she’d demanded to leave. “I suppose I have. You’ve made me understand how important all of this is. I will continue the night as planned.”

Aaron nodded. “Good. Do not let a man like Thomas Cornell stop you. And do not fret, he will not go near you again. I am here, and I will protect you as you do what needs to be done for you to find happiness. Don’t settle for less than you deserve.”

Judith looked at him, her heart full of gratitude. “Thank you, Aaron.”

With that, she rushed out to meet her dance partner, who had already been on the lookout. They stepped onto the dance floor, and Judith did her very best to be charming and personable, but as the night wore on, she found herself scrutinizing each man more closely, considering not just their titles and fortunes but their personalities and interests.

Some were charming, others less so, but none sparked the connection she now realized she craved. Yet, she was determined not to give up. Aaron’s story—and that of Lady Lundgren—had made her understand how important it was to make the right decision not just for now, but for her future.

When the night came to an end and her feet ached from dancing, she and Aaron parted ways, each heading to their respective carriages with a promise to meet one another again in two days, so he could help her practice polite conversation during a dinner setting—something else she’d not done in a long while.

It had been a long night, but Judith had to admit that despite her inner turmoil, being out and about with Aaron had been a change of pace—and one she could get used to. At least for the time being.

CHAPTER 12

As she approached Worcester House, Judith noticed that the light was on at the dower house. She alighted from the carriage and headed that way. She hadn't visited the dower house in some while, not since she'd helped her stepmother move into it weeks ago, but tonight she could not stop herself from walking the few paces to the small structure and knocking on the door.

She'd expected the butler or a maid to answer, but to her surprise, it was Matilda herself who answered, looking surprised but pleased to see her. Her auburn hair was down, cascading over her shoulders, as she had clearly settled in for the night.

Judith was struck by how young and pretty her stepmother looked in this relaxed state. It occurred to her just how remarkable it was that Matilda, at such a young age, had already endured the loss of two husbands. A tragedy, really at any age, but Matilda was not yet forty. In addition, she never had a child of her own, and at this stage, she never might.

"Judith, my dear!" Matilda exclaimed, stepping aside to let her in. "What a surprise! Come in, come in."

"I beg your pardon. I did not keep you from anything, did I? I saw the light was on."

"No, not at all. I often do not sleep until the early morning hours. I just got up to make a cup of tea. Would you like one? I've made it myself, so I cannot speak for the quality. I do not like to keep the staff up in case I need something, so I dismissed them hours ago," Matilda said.

Judith blinked, she hadn't been aware her stepmother was so self-sufficient. Somehow, she'd always looked at her as someone who needed servants for everything.

She entered the cozy sitting room, where the fire crackled warmly in the hearth. As Judith sat, her stepmother poked the fire, adding another log—another activity she'd never seen her undertake.

“How are you, dear? And how was the ball?” Matilda asked, her eyes filled with genuine concern.

Judith spotted a steaming cup on one of the small tables and a book. Was this how her stepmother spent her nights? Reading by the fire? It was peaceful and quiet, and yet the silence in the house invoked loneliness.

Judith took a moment to collect her thoughts. “It was nice,” she replied, her voice soft. “I danced a lot.”

Matilda smiled warmly. “I'm glad to hear that. You deserve some enjoyment. I remember those nights at Almack's. My feet would hurt so much that I needed to soak them the next day.”

The evening had stirred something within Judith—emotions and reflections on her own desires for freedom and choice. Hearing about Lady Lundgren's arranged marriage and Aaron's longing for freedom had made her think of her stepmother.

“I... I'm not sure why I'm here,” Judith admitted. “But somehow, I felt like I should come.”

Matilda's smile softened at her words. “I'm always here for you, Judith. You know that. Did something happen at the ball?”

Judith nodded, taking a deep breath. “The ball was nice, but there was an incident with a gentleman who tried to ruin me.”

Instantly, Matilda’s expression turned furious. She stood up, her posture rigid with anger. “Who was it?” she demanded. “I will have a word with him.”

Judith felt a surge of warmth at Matilda’s protective reaction. She had never thought of her as a replacement for her mother, but it was clear from her fierce reaction that Matilda saw herself as just that. Judith’s heart filled with warmth for the woman, though at the same time a fierce longing for her mother.

“Please, do not worry yourself. Aaron—the Duke handled it. But in any case, it was a man named Thomas Cornell,” she said quietly. “He tried to warn me about Aaron. You see, his sister and Aaron were once engaged, and he took the end of the engagement rather hard. I told him that I was following my brother’s lead. He was rather upset when he understood I had no intention of listening to him, and thus he tried to ruin me.”

Matilda’s eyes blazed with fury. “How dare he! I will not let this go unaddressed. What would cause such venom from a young man? It is unconscionable.”

“He was upset with His Grace, and I suppose his anger drove him to seek revenge on me... But I... I’d rather not talk about it anymore. It is behind me.” Judith wetted her lips, her thoughts swirling around the events of the evening when she raised her head and faced Matilda. “May I ask you something you might find too personal?”

Matilda’s curiosity was piqued. “Of course, my dear. We are family, you can ask me anything. What is it?” She sat down again, her anger dissipated now that Judith had changed the topic.

Judith hesitated, then asked, “Can you tell me about your first marriage?”

Matilda's eyebrows shot up, taken aback, but she settled back into her seat. "Of course. What has brought this on?"

Judith took a deep breath. It was time to tell her stepmother what she had learned. Indeed, she would have been wise to open up to her long ago.

"Oliver wants me to get married, and that's why Aaron—the Duke of Nottingham—has been helping me to make that happen. Oliver tasked him with this before he left because he is eager to see me wed. He told me that my father wrote him a letter in which he conveyed that if he were to die, he'd want Oliver to find me a husband as soon as possible, should I remain unwed. He left us all letters, as you know."

Matilda's eyes softened, and her features contorted as the grief she'd suppressed resurfaced. "Judith, you must know this—your father was very worried about your unwed status. He would have protected you always, even if you'd chosen to remain unmarried, but deep down he wished you'd marry someone. Someone you love."

"That's what I want too," Judith confessed, her voice catching. "But it hasn't happened yet, and I know now that Oliver will force me. He said that's what Father wrote in his letter."

Matilda shook her head, her auburn hair catching the light from the fireplace. "Oh, Oliver... No. That's not what your father wanted, Judith. I know what he wrote in the letter—he showed it to me. I also saw the letter he wrote to you and John. Oliver has misinterpreted the letter's intention. Your father wanted him to reassure you and help you find a husband, but not by force."

Judith felt a surge of relief. She'd been so worried that her father thought her a failure that it had weighed on her heavily. "I thought he was disappointed in me."

“Never. Judith, your father was proud of you. He wanted nothing but happiness for all three of you. He did not believe in arranged marriages after the unfortunate events with your friend, Joanna,” Matilda said, referencing the brief, unfortunate period when the late Marquess had been so desperate that he’d almost agreed to an arrangement with the much, much younger Joanna Blackmore—now the Duchess of Wells. “I hope you did not go around these last few days thinking anything else.”

Judith pressed her lips together, not wanting to look her in the eyes because that was exactly what she’d worried about. Not that she felt bad for doubting her father’s intentions. He’d been a kind, loving man—of course, he would not have wanted to force her into an arranged marriage.

“It may not have been what he wanted, but that’s how Oliver took it, and now I’m stuck. I’ve even been considering a gentleman just to appease him. I met Lord Pembroke tonight, someone I thought was charming, and I’m considering courting him, though it’s not what I want.”

Matilda’s expression grew thoughtful. “I’m familiar with Lord Pembroke. He is nice enough to talk to, but he has a roving eye. Be cautious with him.”

Judith felt a knot of frustration tightening in her chest. Of course, there was something the matter with the man. Although the odd thing was that her thoughts instantly drifted to Aaron. Hadn’t he said Lord Pembroke was a good choice? Did he know about this roving eye? Or had he not been around Lord Pembroke long enough or often enough to notice this?

“Thank you for telling me, but, Matilda, what if I can’t find anyone? What if I’m forced into a marriage I don’t want?”

Matilda reached out, taking Judith’s hands in her own. “If that happens, I will speak to Oliver myself and make sure he does not force you into marriage. And if he

persists, you can move out and stay with me here at the dower house.”

Judith chuckled softly, the tension easing slightly. “That’s not a very far escape. I can see the dower house from my chamber.”

Matilda smiled, her eyes twinkling. “That makes it more convenient. But on a serious note, by law, the dower house is mine, and your father provided for me handsomely by way of jointure. As you know, jointure is a financial arrangement made for a widow, ensuring she is well looked after. I have enough to support us both. You will be looked after one way or the other.”

Judith felt a wave of relief wash over her. “Thank you, Matilda. I needed to hear that. Although I do hope I won’t have to make use of your kindness.”

She knew she was truly blessed by the women in her life. Her stepmother’s kind offer followed on the heels of Joanna and Rosy’s offer to have their husbands speak to Oliver on her behalf. She had people on her side, that she knew. And yet it wasn’t over. Not by far.

Matilda squeezed her hands reassuringly. “You are not alone, Judith. Your father wanted you to find happiness, not to be forced into something that doesn’t bring you joy. You see, you asked about my first marriage. I was forced into it. I was miserable. Every. Single. Day. It is not the Christian thing to say, but it was a relief when he departed this world so young. It allowed me to breathe.”

Judith looked at her with curiosity, for such talk was rare among their peers.

“Your father knew this, and combined with his own experience with the Duchess of Wells, he became determined not to make you do anything against your will. A marriage based on love is the only kind that can truly endure, I am certain of it. Though I did not get the chance to truly test this, as my poor Marcus...” Matilda’s

voice broke, and she looked away to compose herself. “Anyhow, those are my thoughts on the matter.”

Judith sat there for a little while, taking in her stepmother’s words, when she thought back to Aaron’s assessment of marriages earlier at the ball.

“Matilda,” she began hesitantly. “Do you think marriages, even happy ones, become boring after a while? That is what Aaron told me.”

Matilda’s eyes sparkled with amusement. “Oh, His Grace has never been in love, that is quite clear. No, dear, marriage can be many things, and boring doesn’t have to be one of them. It depends on the people involved. If there’s genuine affection and shared interests, it can be quite the adventure. I wonder what made him say this?”

Judith pondered this, her thoughts drifting back to Aaron and the conversation they had earlier. “Aaron said that his parents had a boring marriage. He is quite adamant about not getting married. It is why he ended his engagement to Lady Lundgren, among other things.”

Matilda nodded slowly. “I see. It makes sense. Seeing a loveless marriage can leave a lasting impression. But it doesn’t mean he won’t change his mind if he finds the right person. I did not want to get married again until I met your father, and the same goes for you. You might be averse to marriage unless you find love, but when you find it, you will see marriage can be a true blessing. You see it in your friends, the Blackmore sisters.”

Judith felt a flutter in her chest, quickly quashed by a surge of practicality. “I just want to make the right choice, not only to please Oliver but for my own happiness.”

Matilda smiled warmly. “And you will, Judith. Trust your heart and don’t rush into anything. Your father wanted you to be happy, and I believe you will find your way.”

Judith felt comforted by Matilda's words. With her stepmother's support, she felt she could face the challenges ahead. The evening had brought unexpected revelations, but also a renewed sense of purpose. She wasn't alone in this journey, and that made all the difference.

CHAPTER 13

The early morning mist hung low over the fields as Aaron rode through the countryside, the rhythmic pounding of his horse's hooves on the dirt path providing a steady backdrop to his turbulent thoughts. The sky was a pale gray, hinting at the sun that would soon rise, but the chill in the air matched the unease in his heart.

He hadn't slept much, the events of the previous night replaying in his mind like a relentless specter. Seeing Amelia again had been a shock, and hearing about her misery had unsettled him deeply. He had left her years ago, believing it was the right decision for them both. But now, doubt gnawed at him.

Had he made a colossal mistake? Would it have been better to marry her and avoid the pain and suffering she seemed to be enduring? He would have lost his freedom, and surely he'd have been unhappy, but maybe he could have found a way? He could have traveled as he did now, leaving Amelia behind to live a life of her own choosing but with the comfort of his title...

His horse, sensing his agitation, snorted and flicked its ears back, but Aaron barely noticed. His mind was consumed with questions and regrets. Amelia's bitter words echoed in his ears, mingling with the memory of her brother's angry accusations.

He couldn't shake the image of Thomas Cornell's furious face, nor the terror in Judith's eyes when he had found her in the garden. Had he really made Amelia so unhappy that her brother was so blinded by rage that he'd tried to take it out on an innocent bystander like Judith? To do what? Get back at Aaron?

The countryside around him blurred as he pushed his horse harder, as if he could outrun his guilt.

As he rode past the edge of the estate, he spotted a familiar figure in the distance. It was Mr. Barrett, the steward who had known Aaron since he was a boy. The older man was inspecting the fields, his keen eyes missing nothing. Aaron slowed his horse and directed it toward the steward.

“Morning, Mr. Barrett,” Aaron called as he approached. “What brings you out here so early?”

“Good morning, Your Grace,” Mr. Barrett replied, tipping his hat. “We’ve had some sightings of boars nearby, and I wanted to make sure the kale crop is safe,” he replied, before tilting his head to the side. “You’re out early.”

Aaron dismounted, feeling the need to stretch his legs and talk to someone who might offer some clarity. Mr. Barrett had been loyal and almost fatherly to him his entire life—and he’d been around during the aftermath of his broken engagement.

“Couldn’t sleep,” Aaron admitted. “Too much on my mind.”

Barrett nodded in understanding. “I heard about the incident last night. Are you alright, Your Grace?”

Aaron sighed, looking out over the mist-covered fields. “Physically, yes. But I had a rather unfortunate run-in with Lady Lundgren last night, and it has brought up some memories I’d rather forget again.”

The steward studied him for a moment before speaking. “It’s been a long time since that business with Lady Lundgren. It must have been quite a shock.”

“It was,” Aaron agreed. He hesitated, then asked, “Mr. Barrett, do you think I made a mistake with Amelia? Should I have married her, despite everything?”

Mr. Barrett was silent for a moment, considering his words. “Your Grace, you’ve always been a man who values freedom and honesty. You knew you didn’t love her, and you couldn’t bring yourself to live a lie. I told your father it was a mistake to make the arrangement, to begin with.”

Aaron nodded, for it was true. Mr. Barrett had been on his side from the start. He’d even smoothed the waters after the engagement ended.

“I know, but she is unhappy in her marriage and blames me for ruining her future.”

The steward waved his hand. “She might be unhappy now, but who is to say she would have been happier living here? You knew you could never love her and that it wouldn’t be right. You did what you felt needed doing. That takes courage. Marrying Lady Lundgren would have made you both miserable.”

“But look at her now,” Aaron said, frustration seeping into his voice. “She’s in a terrible marriage, and her brother despises me for it. He tried to hurt Lord Worcester’s sister only because she is connected to me.”

Mr. Barrett knew all about the arrangement with Oliver, something he seemed

“Amelia’s situation is unfortunate, but you cannot take all the blame for it,” he said firmly. “Her family pushed for the match just as much as yours did. And as for her brother, he’s acting out of anger and protectiveness. It’s understandable, but it doesn’t mean you were wrong.”

Aaron looked down, his brow furrowed. “I just can’t shake the feeling that I’ve caused so much harm. Judith was nearly scandalized last night because of my past.”

Mr. Barrett laid a reassuring hand on his shoulder. “Your Grace, life is full of difficult choices. We can’t always foresee the consequences of our actions. What’s important is that you acted with integrity. You refused to trap yourself in a loveless marriage. You must leave the past behind and focus on the present.”

Aaron nodded slowly, feeling a small measure of relief from the steward’s words. “Thank you, Mr. Barrett. I needed to hear that.”

“Anytime, Your Grace,” Mr. Barrett said with a warm smile.

As they parted, Aaron felt a renewed sense of determination. He couldn’t change the past, but he could ensure Judith’s future was secure. She would not be tied to a man who was like him, unwilling to be wed. Or a man like Amelia’s husband, too old to make a good husband.

No, he’d help her as he’d promised, and he would eye the prospective suitors with more scrutiny. At Almack’s, he’d let her choose any gentleman she fancied, and for that one evening, it had all been well and good. He’d wanted to teach her self-confidence, after all. Now that she had it, at least in some measure, he would set his eye on a truly worthy match for her. And perhaps, in doing so, he could find some peace for himself.

Aaron rode back to the house with renewed determination. The cool morning air whipped at his face as he urged his horse faster, feeling a sense of urgency he hadn’t felt in years. He would not allow Judith to suffer the same fate as Amelia. He had to prevent her from settling for a poor match from the very beginning.

Once back at the estate, he handed off his horse to a stable hand and strode purposefully into the house. The click-clack of his boots echoed in the grand hallway as he made his way to his chambers to change. The conversation with Mr. Barrett had strengthened his resolve, and he felt a clarity that had been absent since seeing

Amelia again.

As he walked down the hall, his eyes landed on a painting of his parents. They stood side by side in front of a blue wall, their expressions solemn and distant. Just as they had been in life. Aaron paused, studying their faces. His father's stern countenance and his mother's resigned gaze reminded him of the loveless marriage they had endured. A marriage of convenience and social expectation, devoid of true companionship or joy.

Had they ever been happy in one another's company? He thought back to the many birthdays and Christmases as well as Easter celebrations held at this estate, and he knew the answer. They'd found happiness in his presence, in the company of their family and friends, but not each other. He sighed deeply, feeling the weight of their unhappiness.

His parents' painting loomed behind him, a reminder of the consequences of poor choices and societal pressures. He was determined to break that cycle.

Reaching his chambers, Aaron quickly changed into fresh clothes, his movements brisk and efficient. He had a mission now, a purpose that transcended his past regrets. Judith's future depended on him, and he would not fail her. As he thought of her, his heart fluttered at the memory of their conversation. She'd been so alive, so cheerful—he'd loved to see it. And he'd enjoyed talking to her. She was a lovely person with a fiery personality. And her beauty transcended that of even Amelia. A shame that they were so...

He shook his head. No, no. He could not think of her as anything other than his friend's sister, a young woman in need.

As he descended the grand staircase, the household staff went about their morning routines. He nodded to them, his expression set and serious. He needed to speak with

Judith and plan their next steps. He also had to speak to her regarding her plans for Lord Pembroke. He wasn't entirely sure if he was the right match for her.

Truly, he hadn't thought too much of it when he'd picked him. He was a solid enough gentleman with a good estate and income—although he did like the company of young ladies. In that, he wasn't so wonderful a match. He might stop that habit if he had someone to focus his affections on, but it could not be guaranteed. Perhaps they ought to keep looking. No point in...

"Betting on the first horse," Aaron muttered to himself, remembering their conversation. He chuckled, drawing the eye of a passing footman.

"Your Grace?" the man asked.

"Nothing, just a humorous thought that came to me," Aaron said and pressed on.

Witty. That was the other quality he liked in Judith. She was witty. He sucked in a lungful of air as he went on. She deserved happiness. And he'd do all he could to make sure she found it.

CHAPTER 14

Judith and Rosy strolled through the garden, the sun filtering through the leaves and casting dappled shadows on the path. It was cold but not unpleasantly so. The chilly wind lent a spring to Judith's step as she had been recounting the events of the previous evening at Almack's, her feelings swinging between frustration and lingering shock.

"... and then he tried to kiss me, right there in the garden," she finished, her cheeks flushing at the memory. "I thought I was going to be ruined. His Grace rushed out at the last moment and planted a facer on him, sending him into the dirt. Otherwise..."

Rosy's eyes widened in shock. "Good heavens, Judith! How terrible! What a despicable man. And to think, all because of the Duke's past with his sister."

Judith sighed, shaking her head. "I know. It's all so tangled. But, Rosy, what if I end up like Lady Lundgren? Forced into a marriage I don't want, all because of societal expectations? Matilda said she'd shelter me if I needed to escape, and she'd talk to Oliver because she feels he misunderstood my father's letter, but you know my brother—he is stubborn as a mule."

"I know it. But perhaps you will meet someone in these next few weeks who will suit you. I am in two minds about the Duke, but at least he saved you, though one could argue it was all his fault."

Judith exhaled sharply. "I know it. It has bothered me for some while. I cannot believe I didn't know his history. Did you?"

Rosy nodded thoughtfully. “I did hear whispers about the Duke being engaged once. It was a long time ago, and it ended badly. But Lady Lundgren is married to a marquess now. Not the worst outcome.”

Judith frowned. “It doesn’t matter what happened to Lady Lundgren anymore. I’m more concerned about myself and my future. I must do all I can to prevent it from happening to me. I must find someone I like. Someone who is...”

Her thoughts drifted to Aaron and his smile as he spoke of Italy, but she shrugged it off, not wanting to allow herself such thoughts. However, as so often, Rosy had picked up on her thoughts.

“Perhaps you should ask the Duke of Nottingham to pose as your suitor in front of Oliver, to give you more time. It worked for me and Joanna?” Rosy suggested, a playful glint in her eyes. “He’s quite the dashing figure, isn’t he?”

“Aaron would never do such a thing. He adores my brother,” Judith argued.

Her friend’s eyebrows rose. “Aaron?”

Judith felt a blush creep up her neck. “He wants me to call him Aaron,” she explained, trying to sound nonchalant.

Rosy smirked. “Oh, does he now? That’s rather intimate, don’t you think? Perhaps he’d be inclined to do more than pretend.”

Judith’s blush deepened. “It’s just a name, Rosy.”

“Just a name,” Rosy echoed, a teasing note in her voice. “Come now, Judith. You’ve spent quite a bit of time with him at the ball. Anything else to share?”

Judith felt a knot form in her stomach. She wanted to tell Rosy how she felt when she looked into Aaron's eyes, how strangely hot and flustered she had become when they danced. But it seemed too silly, too impractical. Aaron had broken off a betrothal to remain free and unwed. Thinking of him in any romantic manner was foolish, she reminded herself.

"It's nothing like that," Judith said, brushing off Rosy's teasing. "He's helping me because of Oliver. That's all. He's made it clear he doesn't want to be tied down."

Rosy's smile softened. "Still, it must be nice to have someone like him looking out for you. Even if he is a bit of a rake and almost had you ruined by extension."

Judith sighed. "Yes, but I have to focus on myself, Rosy. Aaron is helping me, and I need to listen to his advice to find a husband before Oliver returns. I want to avoid a confrontation with my brother, Matilda, and everyone else who wants to see me settled."

Rosy nodded, her expression turning serious. "I understand, Judith. It's important to take control of your own fate. But don't forget to look after your heart as well. Sometimes, the right person is the one you least expect."

Judith forced a smile. "I appreciate the sentiment, Rosy, but I can't afford to think like that."

They continued walking, the garden's vibrant colors and fragrant blooms providing a calming backdrop. Judith couldn't help but feel a pang of doubt, though. What if Rosy was right? What if her heart knew something her mind refused to acknowledge?

But there was no time for such thoughts. She had a mission—find a suitable husband and avoid being forced into a marriage she didn't want. She had to trust Aaron's guidance and focus on the goal at hand. There was no room for foolish romantic

fantasies.

Judith's fingers glided over the keys of the pianoforte, filling the music room with a delicate, mournful melody. The room, bathed in the soft afternoon light, seemed to resonate with memories. The last time she played here, her father was still alive, and the house was filled with a sense of wholeness she desperately missed. She closed her eyes and let herself slip into the past, imagining the scene as it once was.

Her father sat in his favorite armchair, listening intently, a soft smile playing on his lips. Beside him, Matilda, with her warm auburn hair and gentle demeanor, looked at Judith with encouragement. Her brother John, only ten years old, fidgeted in his seat, trying to sit still but utterly captivated by the music. Even Oliver, who was usually so stern and reserved, seemed touched by the melody, his eyes betraying a rare moment of affection for his sister's talent.

As Judith continued to play, she felt the comforting presence of her mother behind her, looking over her shoulder. It was as if her mother's spirit had returned to the room, drawn by the music and the significance of the day.

Today would have been her mother's birthday, and the weight of that realization pressed heavily on Judith's heart. A single tear rolled down her cheek, and she let it fall, unashamed. The music seemed to take on a life of its own, expressing all the sorrow, longing, and love that words could not convey.

Lost in her reverie, Judith did not hear the soft footsteps approaching. It wasn't until the music faltered and she opened her eyes that she saw Aaron standing in the doorway. His presence was unexpected, and for a moment, Judith felt as if her private sanctuary had been invaded. But then she saw the concern in his eyes, and something in her softened.

Aaron stepped into the room, his expression one of sympathy and respect. He did not

speak immediately, giving her the space to gather herself. She wiped the tear from her cheek, feeling a bit self-conscious but also grateful for his silent understanding.

“You play beautifully,” Aaron said finally. “I didn’t mean to intrude.”

Judith shook her head, managing a small smile. “It’s all right. I was just... thinking of my family.”

She felt an unfamiliar vulnerability wash over her as she sat in front of him. His presence, usually steady and composed, now seemed to invite a deeper level of intimacy.

She found herself telling him, almost in a whisper, “It’s my mother’s birthday today.”

Aaron took a sharp breath. “That is right. Oliver told me her birthday would fall during the period he was away. I beg your pardon for not realizing it was today.”

Judith closed the lid of the pianoforte and stood up. “It is quite alright, I did not expect you to know. The truth is, the more time passes, the more likely it is to be forgotten. That is in part why I played her favorite tune. I’d forgotten.”

Indeed, she had gotten up that morning, dressed, ate her breakfast, and met with Rosy as if nothing at all had happened. It wasn’t until Matilda had called on her and asked if she’d like to come to the cemetery with her that she remembered. For it to have been her stepmother, the woman who had taken her mother’s place, who remembered instead of her had been jarring.

Still, she’d gone to the cemetery with Matilda, and they’d laid flowers there and read prayers from a prayerbook Matilda had brought with her, and they’d spent some time there until the cold got too much for them. Then, with Matilda back at the dower house, Judith had found herself drawn to the music room, hoping that playing the

pianoforte would help alleviate the guilt she felt.

“She passed away three and a half years ago. My father followed her only a week later. Their death dates are so close that it feels like they planned it that way.”

“I forgot both my parents’ birthdays last year,” Aaron admitted quietly, drawing her from her thoughts. “I felt dreadful. I was away with Oliver, and we were taking a tour of the Swiss Alps. Their birthdays were only a week apart, and I... they slipped my mind.”

She nodded and shared her experience that day, which seemed to ease his lingering guilt as well. Then, a silence fell between them until he cleared his throat.

“Judith, is this a bad time for me to call on you?”

Judith shook her head. “No, it’s all right. Actually, would you come for a walk with me? I want to place some flowers. I went to the cemetery with Matilda, but there is another place I’d like to visit.”

“Of course,” Aaron replied without hesitation.

Judith fetched her redingote and bonnet, and they set off together.

“Where are we going?” he asked, turning up the collar of his greatcoat.

“There is an elm tree that overlooks the water,” she said softly. “It is special to me.”

Aaron nodded. “Would you tell me about the elm tree?”

Judith had hoped he would ask. She had to admit that walking and talking to him eased the burden of the day somewhat.

“It’s a tree my parents planted when they got married,” Judith explained as they walked. “I like to sit there and think of them. In the past, Oliver and I would place flowers there when he was home at this time of year. He wasn’t home last year, so I did it alone. And I’m alone again this year.”

Aaron’s steps slowed, and he turned to face her. “You’re not alone, Judith. I’m here with you.”

His words, simple and heartfelt, wrapped around her like a comforting embrace. She knew he meant what he said as a friend and nothing more, but still, she drew more comfort from his presence than she’d ever thought possible.

They continued their walk in companionable silence, for which she was grateful. She wanted him with her, but at the same time, her thoughts were heavy that day. The path led them to the elm tree that stood tall and proud, its branches swaying gently in the breeze. The tree overlooked a serene stretch of water, its surface shimmering under the afternoon sun.

“This tree has always been a symbol of their love,” Judith murmured. “It’s where I feel closest to them.”

“I can see why. It’s a beautiful spot, Judith.”

Judith looked at him, her eyes searching his face. “Thank you for being here. It is nice not to be alone. Would you sit with me a bit?”

“Of course,” he said and sat beside her at the base of the tree as they looked out over the water.

She glanced at him, imagining how her parents had sat here together when they were young. Memories of her childhood surfaced, and she allowed herself to ponder them

for a little while when a thought occurred to her and she turned to Aaron.

“I wish Oliver were here,” she said, her voice trembling slightly.

“I am certain he’d like to be here too,” he replied quickly.

“I don’t know.” She shook her head, and the wind blew a strand of her hair into her face. “He is always so distant and cold. Even on the days he did come here with me after she died. It was almost as if it was a burden.”

Aaron shook his head gently. “Oliver isn’t cold, Judith. He’s just... different. He’s always struggled with the responsibilities that come with being a marquess, especially since your father was so well-liked and admired. He feels he can’t measure up. I suspect that wanting to get you married off is something he sees as a way to prove himself.”

Judith sighed, wishing she knew her brother the way Aaron did, because Aaron’s tone was so filled with conviction—his words brooked no argument.

“Matilda told me this isn’t what our father wanted. She said he wanted Oliver to reassure me, to help me find a husband, but not by force.”

Aaron nodded thoughtfully. “Oliver wants the best for you, Judith. Although you are right, he might be interpreting things in his own way. He has a habit of doing that.”

“Aaron,” she said, turning in her spot so she was facing him. “Why is Oliver so... so... You say he isn’t cold, but different. I do not understand why. Father has loved him, and our mother as well.”

Aaron wetted his lips before replying, choosing his words with great care. “Oliver feels he’s been a disappointment to your father. Not because of anything your father

said or did, but it is something he has in his own head. He doesn't think he'll ever live up to the standard your father had set, so he decided at a young age not to even try. In some ways, it was easier for me because my father—while rich and respected for his title—was never well-liked. People feared him, and that is how he liked it.”

Judith listened carefully. She didn't know much about the late Duke of Nottingham. He had visited on occasion when they were children, but she had no clear memories of him.

“You think Oliver struggles because our father was popular?” she asked, not quite understanding what he meant.

“Indeed, that is exactly what I mean. It is so much harder following in the footsteps of a beloved man than in those of a hated one. I knew that no matter what, people would like me better than my father. But Oliver? No matter what he does, it will be hard to measure up to your father, not just in the eyes of the tenants, but yours, John's and Matilda's. He feels he is fighting a losing battle,” Aaron explained, and suddenly, Judith began to see her brother in a different light.

“Still, while I can see that is hard, forcing me to marry isn't going to make me think of him in a higher manner,” she pointed out.

Aaron nodded. “We still have a few weeks before he returns. Who knows what will happen? If you meet the right man, all this debating and fretting will be for nothing.”

Judith appreciated his reassuring words but still felt uncertain about the future.

“Perhaps,” she murmured.

Aaron smiled gently. “Now that we have talked about the things we cannot do anything about, shall we discuss the things we can do something about? Such as

introducing you to more gentlemen?”

“Of course,” she said, relieved not to have to talk about Oliver anymore.

“Would you like to go promenading on Saturday at Green Park?”

Judith brightened at the suggestion. “I would like that very much.”

“Good. Then we can also talk about my reasons for being here,” Aaron continued. “I wanted to talk to you about our next lesson.”

Judith raised an eyebrow in surprise. “I didn’t think I needed more lessons. The evening at Almack’s was a big success, despite our troubles.”

Aaron chuckled. “It was, but I noticed something. When I went to hold your hand, even for just a split second, you jerked back.”

Judith’s cheeks flushed with embarrassment. The truth was, she had pulled away because of the strange, conflicting feelings she had for him, but she didn’t want to admit that.

“I—well, yes,” she stammered.

“And I also noticed,” Aaron continued, “when you walk with a gentleman, you always put a great distance between you, walking as far away as possible.”

Judith nodded, feeling even more mortified. “It’s true. I don’t like accidentally touching a man’s hip with my own.”

Aaron smiled, his eyes twinkling with amusement. “That’s very proper of you, but gentlemen like it. It’s enticing and a little forbidden, but it must be done just right.

Also, one must walk close enough to give a taste of what might be in the future.”

Judith’s face turned a bright red, deeply embarrassed by what he was saying. “Aaron, I?—”

He held up a hand to stop her. “This is part of catching a husband, Judith, and I can show you if you’ll let me.”

The idea of being closer to Aaron was enticing but also terrifying. She looked at him, her heart pounding in her chest. Still, she found herself nodding. “I’ll try.”

“Alright, Judith,” Aaron began, his tone light but serious. “Let’s start with the basics. When you offer your hand, you need to do it gracefully and with a touch of elegance.”

Judith nodded, her fingers trembling slightly. “Alright, but I’ve never really done this before.”

Aaron smiled reassuringly. “That’s why we’re practicing. Now, extend your hand to me as if you are meeting me at a ball.”

Judith took a deep breath and slowly extended her hand, trying to appear confident. Aaron took her hand gently, his touch sending a shiver down her spine. “Relax, Judith. You’re doing fine.”

She tried to relax, but the sensation of Aaron holding her hand was both exhilarating and unnerving. She couldn’t help but notice how warm his hand felt, how secure. She was so nervous that she’d do something wrong and act like a fuzzer and he’d think she didn’t know how to hold a man’s hand. She didn’t really need this lesson, she knew how to hold a man’s hand. The reason she kept jerking away was him... But she couldn’t tell him that. This time, she forced herself to pretend he was someone

else, anyone else, and held on to his hand as she would at a ball.

“Perfect. Now, let’s move on to the next part. When a gentleman takes your hand, he should lift it slightly and kiss it just above the knuckles. Like this.”

He lifted her hand, his movements slow and deliberate, giving her time to anticipate what was coming. Judith’s breath hitched as his lips brushed against her hand, and she averted her eyes, unable to look at him as she knew she should. Still, the kiss sent a surge of unfamiliar feelings through her. Naturally, she knew how a gentleman kissed a lady’s hand.

“I have had my hand kissed before,” she protested.

“I know, but you just looked away when I did it. You should look at the person doing it. I raised my eyes to yours, but you looked away.”

Of course, I looked away! I might have fainted otherwise! Why is he making me feel like this?

Judith nodded, unable to find her voice for a moment. “Yes, I did.”

Aaron smiled, a twinkle of amusement in his eyes. “Let’s try again. This time, relax a little bit more. You’re holding your breath. And keep your eyes on me.”

Judith let out a nervous laugh. “I am not holding my breath!”

“You are,” Aaron teased. “Come on, Judith, breathe in and out.”

She took a deep breath, feeling the tension in her shoulders ease just a bit. “Alright, here we go.”

Judith extended her hand again, this time with more confidence. Aaron took it, and the now-familiar warmth spread through her. As he kissed her hand again, she felt a strange flurry of emotions—the awkwardness of having her hand kissed by a man she was beginning to like more than she should, the thrill of the intimacy, and an undeniable enjoyment.

“Much better,” Aaron noted, still holding her hand. “You’re a quick learner.”

Judith smiled, a blush creeping up her cheeks. “It’s not as difficult as I thought.”

“See? I told you,” Aaron replied, his tone gentle. “Now, there’s one more thing. When you’re walking with a gentleman, you should allow a bit of contact, just enough to hint at what might be in the future. It’s all about the promise, the anticipation.”

Judith raised an eyebrow, her curiosity piqued. “The anticipation?”

Aaron nodded. “Yes. Like this.” He positioned himself beside her, close enough that their hips almost touched. “When you walk, let your hips sway naturally. It’s not about pressing against him, just a gentle brush.”

Judith felt her cheeks heat up again. “Aaron, this is...”

“I know it sounds a bit scandalous,” Aaron said with a chuckle, “but trust me, it’s all part of the dance. Here, walk with me.”

He took her hand again, and they began to walk back to Worcester House. This time, he walked much closer to her, which caused her entire body to grow stiff and awkward, but as they continued, her confidence grew. She felt the subtle, almost imperceptible brush of their hips and found herself enjoying the closeness.

“There you go,” Aaron said softly. “You’re getting it.”

Judith looked up at him, her eyes meeting his. “This is... so peculiar. Lord Peterborough never walked this close to me when we were courting.”

She hadn’t thought of her ex-fiancé in so long that it felt strange comparing him to Aaron.

Aaron’s smile was warm and genuine. “I’m glad you get to experience how it should be. Remember, it’s all about making a connection, showing a bit of interest without being too forward.”

Judith nodded, feeling a new sense of confidence. “Thank you, Aaron. This has been... enlightening.”

Aaron squeezed her hand gently. “Anytime, Judith. And remember, I’m here to help you.”

As they continued to walk, Judith felt a sense of contentment she hadn’t expected. The awkwardness had melted away, replaced by growing ease and contentment in Aaron’s company. Of course, as they walked, she had to remind herself that it wasn’t Aaron she was doing this for. And yet he was the only one whose opinion she cared about, the only one she wanted to charm—but it was futile.

She had to remember that he didn’t want a wife—not her, not Lady Lundgren, not anyone. He wanted his freedom, and there was nothing she could do to change that fact.

CHAPTER 15

As Aaron rode back to his estate, a smile played on his lips. The afternoon with Judith had been unexpectedly delightful. She was witty, entertaining, and thoughtful, a far cry from the persnickety, little girl he remembered from their childhood. He couldn't help but replay their interactions in his mind, the way she had laughed, the spark of resolve in her eyes, and the brief moments of vulnerability she had allowed him to see.

That she'd brought him to so intimate a place, a spot that meant so much to her had touched him more than he'd expected. What did this mean? Did she trust him? Or did she perhaps see something in him he hadn't anticipated?

No, do not be a fool, Aaron.

Still, he was already looking forward to their next encounter, the promenade they had planned. The thought of spending more time with her filled him with an unexpected anticipation. But as the realization settled in, he paused, a sense of caution creeping into his thoughts.

He was not the one looking to court her; he was supposed to help her find someone else to court. His feelings were irrelevant, and he needed to keep them in check.

Still, hadn't his wish to remain unattached been born out of the fear of leading a boring life if he married? With Judith, there was never a dull moment. Sometimes, she was dramatic. Other times, she was hilarious. And other times she was contemplative—but never boring.

Chiding himself for allowing these intrusive thoughts to get the better of him, Aaron tried to refocus. He reminded himself of his role and the importance of helping her secure a good match. His own desires and inclinations were secondary to the task at hand.

With a determined sigh, he nudged his horse into a faster trot, eager to shake off lingering thoughts of her.

As he approached his estate, the sight of a carriage waiting outside the front entrance drew him out of his reverie. His brow furrowed in curiosity and concern.

Visitors were unusual. He was popular, but he hadn't made it a habit of inviting people to his sanctuary. His steward handled most estate-related callers, and his friends knew to arrange meetings elsewhere. The only one who came to visit him unannounced was Oliver. No... indeed that was not true. There was one other. But surely it could not be?

Could it?

He dismounted swiftly, handed the reins to a waiting stable boy, and approached the carriage. The door of the carriage opened, and to his surprise, a familiar figure stepped out.

"Graham?" he called.

Indeed, the person standing there was none other than his friend Graham Baxter, the Earl of Leeds. Aside from Oliver, Graham was his dearest friend, but much like Oliver and Aaron, Graham often traveled, although in his case, it was related to business, not pleasure. They hadn't seen one another since a chance encounter in Spain six months ago, thus seeing Graham now was exhilarating.

He was a striking figure with sandy hair, a broad grin, and a mischievous twinkle in his blue eyes. His presence was always lively and filled with good-natured teasing. Whenever the two of them were together, merriment followed. And if Oliver joined them, the delight was tripled.

Although Graham and Oliver were not as close as Aaron was to either of them, they would enjoy each other's company if Aaron brought them together.

Still, there was a difference in the sort of joy he found with each of his friends. Oliver was as boisterous as Aaron, and they enjoyed drinking, dancing, and visiting taverns together. Graham, on the other hand, enjoyed fine music as much as Aaron did, and they'd visit the opera together. It had been Graham who accompanied him to the opera he'd told Judith about. They attended the theater together or dined in new establishments.

"Aaron," Graham complained playfully, "I thought you'd left me to rot out here."

Aaron rushed to his friend. "Graham! What are you doing here?" he asked, extending his hand in greeting.

Graham shook his hand, his expression one of amusement and mock indignation. "Can't a man visit his old friend without raising suspicion?"

"Of course," Aaron replied, smiling. "Come inside."

As they walked toward the house, Graham couldn't resist teasing him. "You smell like a bouquet, my friend. Have you been keeping company with ladies? Is that why I was left out here to grow roots?"

Aaron felt his face heat up. Judith's perfume must have rubbed off on him during their lesson. He dismissed it quickly, saying, "Just a woman I'm spending time with

now and then.”

Graham laughed, clapping him on the back. “Some men never change.”

Aaron smiled, but inside, he felt bad for having dismissed Judith as ‘just a woman.’ She was more than that in many ways. And yet he hadn’t wanted Graham to know this. Why? He was entering a slippery territory, and he knew it.

As they walked inside, Aaron’s expression turned from amused to serious. “So, when did you arrive in town? I had no idea you were coming.”

Graham handed his greatcoat to the butler, mirroring Aaron’s action. His demeanor grew serious as he responded. “I just got back yesterday. I almost did not make it back from India. I got on the last boat before monsoon season makes travel almost impossible, but it was time. I needed to come home.” He side-eyed Aaron and smiled. “There’s something I’ve been meaning to tell you.”

Aaron raised an eyebrow, intrigued. “Oh?”

“I purchased a house in Mayfair,” Graham announced with a hint of pride. “I decided it was time to have a proper residence here.”

Aaron’s confusion was evident. “You bought a house in town? When did this happen?”

Graham hailed from England’s northern region of Northumberland, and whenever he came to London, he’d stay with Aaron, since Aaron’s estate was close to town. He’d never expressed a need to own a home of his own, as he hadn’t had much interest in taking up his parliamentary duties. If he had to be there for votes and Aaron was out of town, he’d still stay at Aaron’s home—in fact, Graham had a chamber all to himself, always ready for his occupancy.

Graham chuckled. “It was my mother and sister’s doing. They viewed the house with the steward, bought it, and even furnished it. I had barely any say in the matter. Of course, I told them what I wanted before I left for India. But I must admit, I was a little weary, but they did an excellent job. You must come and see it as soon as possible. It’s lovely.”

“Where is it located?” Aaron asked, still processing the news. “Is it near Brooks?”

“I am afraid not,” Graham replied.

“Crockford’s? I do hope it is within walking distance of my favorite coffee house,” Aaron said. But again, Graham shook his head. “Ah, I have it. It is near Tatterall’s. I know how much you love the horse races.”

Graham shook his head, smiling. “I do enjoy the horse races, but no, not at all. It’s in Berkley Square, close to the parks, a private school, and other family-friendly places. It’s a quiet area, perfect for a more settled lifestyle.”

Aaron nodded, realization dawning on him. “That sounds... different from what I expected from you.”

Graham shrugged, his smile widening. “Well, life takes unexpected turns, doesn’t it? And it’s not like I’m abandoning all fun and entertainment. It’s just... time for some changes.”

They moved into the drawing room, where the fire crackled warmly, casting a cozy glow. Aaron offered Graham a seat, and they settled in comfortably.

“So, what prompted this sudden desire for a family-friendly residence?” Aaron asked, genuinely curious.

Graham leaned back, his expression thoughtful. “I suppose I’ve been thinking a lot about the future. My mother and sister have been hinting—rather strongly—that it’s time I consider settling down. And honestly, after years of gallivanting around, the idea doesn’t seem so terrible anymore.”

Aaron nodded, understanding the sentiment. “It’s a significant step. But it sounds like you’re ready for it.”

Graham smiled, a touch of nostalgia in his eyes. “I am. And having a proper home in Mayfair is the first step. Now, I just need to find someone to share it with. Aaron, I confess, I do wish to be wed. I wish to be a father. I see the other gentlemen with their wives and daughters, and I long for the same. On the boat, I became quite friendly with a Scottish laird and his family, and seeing them...” His eyes sparkled. “It is what I want.” He paused, then leveled Aaron with a look. “What about you?”

“Me?” Aaron asked, feigning ignorance.

Graham grinned and wagged an index finger in his direction. “Do not play me for a fool. I know there is a lady. My nose told me as much. Pray, is it serious?”

The question about Judith’s presence in his life bothered Aaron because he had no answer that satisfied him, let alone his good friend. Thus, he did what he did best—deflect.

“I do not know what you mean.”

“Marriage, Aaron,” Graham said with a roll of the eyes. “Are you betrothed? Have you found a lady to settle down with and carry on the family name?”

Aaron’s thoughts drifted to Judith, her image vivid in his mind. But he quickly suppressed the impulse to reveal his feelings. Instead, he offered a smile, masking his

inner turmoil.

“No, Graham,” he replied, his tone neutral. “Marriage isn’t for me. I find it rather... dull, to be honest. I don’t wish to sacrifice my vibrant lifestyle for a union akin to what my parents had.”

Graham’s brow furrowed slightly, a flicker of sympathy in his gaze. “Ah, I see you are still ensnared in the grasp of your old convictions. You have not met the right lady to pry you out of them yet. Aaron, my dear friend, you haven’t experienced the right kind of courtship. A loving partner can bring immeasurable joy and companionship. It’s a bond that enriches life in ways one cannot imagine.”

“You sound as though you have experienced it,” Aaron quipped, but the regretful look on his friend’s face told him that it had been the wrong thing to say.

“I have not, and I regret that I have not looked sooner, but seeing my friends aboard the ship with one another made me understand that it is time. The devotion and love I saw struck something inside me. I want to have a wife—I want to be a husband. You’d find great joy in it also, I am sure of it.”

Aaron listened to Graham’s earnest words, his heart heavy with conflicting feelings. While he admired his friend’s sentiment, he couldn’t help but feel the weight of his own dilemma.

“Graham,” he began, a hint of uncertainty in his voice. “If marriage is what you desire, I’m certain the perfect woman is out there for you.”

“I very much hope so. Someone sophisticated, with a love for music, and, above all, kind and loving.”

Aaron forced his lips to remain shut, but he wanted to groan.

Graham's eyes brightened, hope evident in his expression. "Do you know someone who fits that description, Aaron? If so, I would be most grateful for an introduction."

Aaron's throat tightened as he fought the urge to say Judith's name. Graham would be perfect for her, and she for him. But the thought of losing her, even to a man as worthy as Graham, was a prospect he couldn't bear to contemplate.

"I'll keep my eyes open, Graham," Aaron replied, his words carefully chosen. "I'm sure the right person is out there for you."

As he bid his friend farewell and stepped out onto the bustling streets of Mayfair, his thoughts were consumed by Judith. He knew he wasn't ready to let go of her, even if it meant denying Graham a chance at happiness. And her a chance of defying her brother.

But no. He would introduce them in time. He would. It was the right thing. But for the time being, he had to... He had to keep Judith's existence and the role he played in her life from Graham.

Deep within, Aaron grappled with the conflicting desires of his heart, torn between his loyalty to his friend and the longing for his own happiness. The truth was a burden he wasn't prepared to bear yet.

CHAPTER 16

The following weekend, Judith found herself at Green Park with Matilda, who had kindly offered to chaperone her, since Marianne was ill. The late February air was crisp, carrying the scent of freshly turned earth and the faint promise of spring. The park was dotted with clusters of people enjoying the sunshine, despite the occasional gusts of wind that tugged at bonnets and cloaks.

Judith felt a flutter of nerves at the prospect of seeing Aaron again. She knew she should not be excited about seeing him—she should concern herself with finding a husband, yet it could not be helped. Every time she thought back to their interactions, she wished for more of the same.

These are dangerous thoughts. I must focus on the task at hand. Aaron is not available. He's not interested. I must remember this.

Her mind racing with the events of the past week, she made herself think of Almack's instead and the gentlemen she'd danced with. Unpleasant images of her interaction with Thomas Cornell resurfaced, but she pushed them aside. Instead, she tried her best to recall the gentlemen she'd danced and conversed with, trying to decipher if any of them made her heart skip a beat. Alas, none did. Not even Lord Pembroke, who'd been so charming but whose reputation she now worried about.

"Dear, your bonnet will fall off at any moment." Matilda's voice interrupted her thoughts.

She had been so preoccupied with everything that she hardly noticed her bonnet had

gone askew until Matilda's gentle hands set it right.

"Faith, I didn't realize," Judith muttered.

Matilda smiled. "There you go," she said, smoothing Judith's hair back into place. "You are a little pale. Some color would do you good. Here."

She pinched Judith's cheeks lightly, bringing a touch of color to them.

"Matilda!" Judith exclaimed, half-mortified, half-amused.

Matilda laughed, her eyes crinkling at the corners. "There, much better. You look radiant, dear."

Judith couldn't help but smile back, a wave of affection washing over her. This little gesture, one she'd seen mothers make at balls and in parks to make their daughters look more appealing, somehow touched something within her. The feeling wasn't one of daughterly affection, but it came close.

These past few days, she'd spent more time with Matilda, either going for walks, dining together in Worcester House, or sitting together while reading. It had been comforting not to be alone in the house anymore. Still, this new closeness was something they had to navigate.

"Why did you come with me today?" she asked, her voice softer.

"Does it bother you? Would you rather have me send another maid?" Matilda asked, the smile on her face faltering.

Judith quickly shook her head. "No, no, that's not what I meant. I meant... why do you care so much? Why did you offer to speak to Oliver? Why did you offer to take

me in if I wanted to run away?”

Matilda paused, her gaze softening as she looked at her. “Because, Judith, I hoped that you, John, and to some extent Oliver, would want me in your lives. I know I’m not your mother, and I’m not trying to replace her, but I’d like to be here for you in whatever way you need.”

Judith felt a lump form in her throat, touched by Matilda’s words. She had never fully appreciated Matilda’s efforts until now. Impulsively, she stepped forward and hugged her, a gesture that drew a few surprised glances from passersby. Public displays of affection were rare, but Judith didn’t care.

“I do want you in our lives, I really do. I know I never took my time to get to know you when Father was alive, and I should have, but now... I... I am grateful, Matilda.”

Matilda beamed, her eyes sparkling with emotion. “Thank you, Judith,” she whispered.

Judith pulled back, her eyes misty. “Thank you, Matilda. I’m glad you’re here.”

They stood there for a moment, a silent understanding passing between them. Then, just as Judith was about to speak again, she spotted a familiar figure approaching through the park’s winding paths.

“Oh,” she muttered as she spotted Aaron looking dashing as always in his tailored coat and top hat.

He moved with a purposeful stride, and her heart rate quickened at the sight of him.

“Look who’s coming,” Matilda said, her tone light and teasing.

Judith straightened, smoothing her skirts and trying to quell the butterflies fluttering in her stomach. “Yes, it’s Aaron—I mean, His Grace. I should use his title in public,” she explained, hoping her voice didn’t betray her nerves.

“And handsome as always,” Matilda added with a wink.

Aaron reached them with a warm smile. “Good morning, Lady Judith, Lady Worcester.”

“Good morning, Your Grace,” Matilda replied with a courteous nod. “It’s a lovely day for a walk, isn’t it?”

“Indeed it is,” Aaron agreed, his eyes flicking to Judith. “Lady Judith, are you ready for our promenade?”

Judith nodded, feeling a surge of excitement mingled with nervousness. “Yes, I am.”

“Good, well. I have no intention of crowding you, so if you do not mind, I will sit over yonder. It is cold, but the sun is lovely. Just do not walk beyond that bend there, so I can see you and fulfill my duties,” Matilda said and winked, before setting off for the indicated spot.

Judith glanced at her stepmother, who gave her an encouraging smile. She felt a swell of gratitude and newfound confidence. She wasn’t alone—she had Matilda, Rosy, and Joanna. And perhaps, despite the uncertainties ahead, that was enough.

The air was crisp, and the wind occasionally gusted, sending leaves rustling across the pathways and lifting strands of Judith’s hair from her face. She walked closely beside Aaron, their hips brushing now and then, making her acutely aware of his presence.

Was this proximity for show, or did it mean something more? She forced the thought away. Of course, it was on purpose. They'd practised walking like this. Although, wasn't she meant to walk with other gentlemen in such proximity?

Aaron broke the silence before she could pursue the thought further.

"You and Lady Worcester seem to be getting along well. I hadn't expected to see her today, let alone having such an intimate conversation with you."

Judith nodded, a soft smile playing on her lips. "Marianne was ill, and Matilda offered to come. We have been getting along very well of late. I've spoken to her more and more lately, thanks to you."

Aaron's eyebrows rose in genuine curiosity. "Thanks to me? How so?"

Judith glanced at him. "You told me about Matilda's past. It made me want to get to know her better. In a way, her story isn't so different from mine. She was forced into a marriage she didn't want but then found love, if briefly. I hope to avoid being pushed into a marriage I don't want and find love on my terms, as she did. Matilda taught me that even having love briefly is worth it, so I will do my best to find someone I can love and marry in the short time I have before Oliver returns. In any case, I will fight for love. I am certain the perfect man for me is out there."

"And pray, who might that be? I realize that we have not spoken of what you really want in a gentleman. We have just focused on who is available that might not offend you too much," he said, his voice thick with something she could not place.

She thought about this before replying. "Someone who cares about others, who is honorable and righteous. Someone who likes music and is entertaining to talk to. Someone who has an interest in things beyond Society," she replied, realizing she was describing him.

She looked up at him, wanting to make sure he wasn't unsettled by this, and saw that he'd paled. Mortified, she stopped.

"Are you unwell? Did something I said upset you?"

He shook his head, dismissing her worry with a wave of his hand. "No, I'm fine. Indeed, I must confess, I did not hear much of what you said. I'm afraid I cannot focus—I slept poorly."

Judith was at once relieved that he hadn't heard her accurate description of him as her ideal man and disappointed, which was of course silly. Even if he had heard her, the description could be applied to many gentlemen, surely.

"Would you like to sit down for a while?" she asked, concerned.

Aaron smiled but shook his head again. "No, we have a task to do."

She nodded her head, but she did not feel like being charming. She was stuck in her own head, which swirled with questions she could not answer and feelings she didn't understand. But they were here for a reason, he was right.

As they passed a group of gentlemen, Aaron leaned in slightly and whispered, "Smile."

Judith forced a smile, but it felt unnatural, almost as if she were baring her teeth.

Aaron chuckled softly. "Judith, you look like a tiger at the Royal Menagerie. Do you mean to scare them off?"

"Of course not," she replied, but he stopped again.

“Smile. Look at me and smile. I did not think we’d have to practice this,” he said, but his eyes twinkled with amusement, which inspired her to flash him her widest smile.

“There we are, that is much better. You look like...” He blinked, and it was clear he was at a loss for words.

“Please do not say a horse,” she said quickly, eager to ease the tension.

This time, he chuckled. “I would never. I was going to say you look... lovely.”

They stood across from one another, neither able to speak. Her lips parted, and her heart thundered so rapidly that she felt it in her throat. Alas, he suddenly stepped back.

“So, smile like that, and you will surely be approached. Now, it will do you no good to be seen walking with me all afternoon, as people will think we are together. I suggest that you wander down to the water and feed the geese,” he suggested, nodding toward the water.

“Geese? I did not bring food,” she protested, for she hadn’t planned on walking anywhere alone.

Judith looked at Matilda. Should she call her over? For, of course, he was quite right. If they continued to walk together, everyone would think they were courting, and it would defeat the purpose.

Why hadn’t she thought of this? Why hadn’t Oliver? Indeed, this exercise was futile for?—

“Judith?” Aaron said, handing her a small sack. “I brought some. Here. Take it and go down to the geese and feed them. Look at ease and smile serenely.”

She raised her eyebrows. “Who will approach me if they think we are together?”

“I will take care of that. I know a lot of the gentlemen here. I will mingle and make it clear we are not together, and, in a few minutes, I am sure word will spread and you will be approached. Now, go.”

Judith inhaled the cool air and did as she’d been told. Of course, Aaron had thought of everything. He was always prepared. How silly of her. As she went, she could not help but feel a sadness settle in her bones. She wanted more time alone with him—a thought she couldn’t share with him.

At the water’s edge, she withdrew the small sack of feed and tossed breadcrumbs to the geese and ducks that gathered eagerly at her feet. The serene sounds of the park and the gentle ripples of the water provided a peaceful backdrop, but her mind was elsewhere.

She glanced over her shoulder, her gaze drawn to Aaron, who was surrounded by a group of four gentlemen. He was engaging them in conversation, likely trying to encourage them to approach her. She sighed, feeling a pang of sadness. He was doing his duty, fulfilling his promise to help her find a suitable match. But in doing so, he was distancing himself from her.

She turned back to the animals, her heart heavy. The ducks quacked, and the geese honked, seemingly oblivious to her inner turmoil. Just then, a voice interrupted her thoughts.

“May I borrow some of your feed?”

Judith looked up, startled. Standing beside her was a tall, dark-haired man with bright blue eyes and a charming smile. He was impeccably dressed, his demeanor confident yet warm. She glanced back at Aaron, who was still engrossed in conversation with

his friends, then returned her gaze to the newcomer.

“Of course,” she replied, offering him some breadcrumbs.

“Thank you,” he said, taking the feed from her. “I’m Graham Baxter, the Earl of Leeds.”

Judith’s eyebrows rose in surprise. She had heard of Graham Baxter, the heir to one of the wealthiest earldoms in the realm.

He’d been out of the country for some while, but she remembered that years ago, back when she was still a fixture on the marriage mart, he’d been well sought after—though unwilling to commit.

“A pleasure to meet you,” she offered with a smile. “I am Judith?—”

She got no further, for behind her, a bone-chilling shout rent the air. She spun around, and she saw with fright that Matilda was sprinting toward her, one hand on her hat and the other swinging at her side, as though she were running for sport.

Something had happened, something dreadful, Judith knew it in her heart, and as she staggered toward her stepmother, leaving the young man behind, she could not help but feel dread sink its cold claws into her.

CHAPTER 17

“Not at all, I am her guardian until her brother returns—that is our only connection,” Aaron explained to the group of gentlemen who had gathered around him.

It was crucial to make it clear that he and Judith shared no romantic attachment whatsoever. Any hint of such a connection would be detrimental to her chances of finding a suitable match.

Fortunately, he knew most of the people who had congregated at Green Park that morning, and word would soon spread.

“Indeed, if you would like me to make an introduction...” he added, but just then, a fast-moving figure caught his attention, and he saw Lady Worchester rushing past him.

“Judith, Judith!” she called, waving her fan.

Aaron’s head whipped around just in time to see Judith dropping the satchel of bird food he had given her and running toward her stepmother.

He noted with surprise that she had been talking to a gentleman, and he squinted to see who it was, but the sun glared down, making it difficult to discern the figure. However, the man looked familiar...

Was it... No, it couldn’t be. The man turned away then and walked in the opposite direction, disappearing into the crowd. Aaron dismissed the thought, his attention instead taken up by the increasingly hysterical Lady Worchester.

“Excuse me,” he said, leaving his friends behind and joining stepmother and daughter. “What’s happened?” he asked, his concerned eyes darting from Lady Worcester to Judith and back again.

Instinctively, he placed a hand on Judith’s back, hoping the gesture might soothe her.

“A messenger has come. Your brother had an accident at Eton.”

“An accident?” Judith repeated, all color draining from her face.

Aaron felt her stagger and pressed his hand more firmly against her back to support her.

“Is he badly hurt?”

“Apparently, he fell during a riding lesson and broke his leg. There are scraps and scratches. He is in a lot of pain,” Lady Worcester explained, her words tumbling out one over the other.

“We must go to him!” Judith exclaimed, her voice a mix of determination and anxiety.

“That is what I said as well. The letter said not to worry, that they only meant to inform us, but I cannot bear the thought of the dear boy alone at Eton, in pain, without anyone from his family there to comfort him. Indeed, I would prefer that he came home until he is recovered,” Lady Worcester said.

“I would like that too,” Judith agreed. “We must collect him.”

Aaron had been watching the two of them quietly until now, but he knew he had to speak up.

“I am uncertain that you will be able to accomplish this. Lady Worcester, you are not his mother, and you, Lady Judith, are merely his sister. It is Oliver who is his guardian. If the school thinks that he should stay, it may be difficult to bring him home.”

“This is ludicrous,” Judith snapped, clenching her hands into fists. “We are his family. We should be able to take him out of school if we wish.”

Aaron felt uncomfortable being confronted with the harsh realities of their patriarchal society, but the fact was that the man of the house, be it the father or the brother, was the one who had legal custody over the child. Unless...

“It is true. I am in full agreement with you. But I am familiar with Eton’s headmaster. He is... shall we say, of the old sort. He will stick by the rules, which state only Oliver can remove the child or his appointed stand-in. I would like to accompany you to Eton if you will let me.”

Lady Worcester nodded at once. “Of course. Do you believe you being familiar with him will help?”

Judith looked at him expectantly, and Aaron took a deep breath, bracing himself.

“I must return to my manor and retrieve the necessary papers,” he said, earning curious glances from the two women.

“Papers?” Lady Worcester echoed, her eyebrows raised.

Judith tilted her head to the side. “What do you mean?”

He cleared his throat to explain. “Oliver left a letter that gives me control over his affairs, signed by a barrister.”

Lady Worcester gasped sharply, and Judith's eyes went wide.

"You are in charge of the estate? Officially?" Judith gasped. "You are not just doing him a favor by looking out for me?"

"You are guardian over John, then. And... everything else," Lady Worcester said, though she sounded more surprised than upset. Judith, on the other hand, wasn't pleased.

Aaron hadn't wanted to tell them that he had any authority over them at all. But Oliver was nothing if not careful. He might have been free-spirited, but he knew that responsibility rested on his shoulders. Should anything happen to him, his sister, brother, and stepmother would be in legal limbo. Thus, he had ensured that—should something happen to him on the road or during his trip—someone was in charge until the situation could be rectified.

And that someone was Aaron.

He hadn't wanted to tell Judith because he did not like how it would skew their relationship. He didn't want to be seen as having power over her in any way, but the situation was urgent.

"It means nothing. Not for either of you, only that I can protect you legally if I have to. However, it is different for John. It means that I have the authority to remove him from school," he explained, looking earnestly at Judith.

"Well, I suppose it is as Oliver planned," Lady Worcester said.

Judith nodded, although he caught a flash of displeasure in her eyes.

"We will go home," Lady Worcester continued. "We will ready our carriage and

depart promptly once you join us. Then we will travel to Eton together, retrieve John, and bring him home.”

She sounded very much like the boy’s mother rather than his stepmother.

“Thank you,” Judith murmured quietly.

The three parted ways, each with a sense of urgency and purpose. Aaron watched as Judith and her stepmother rushed to their carriage. His mind raced with the urgency of their situation, and a part of him longed to be beside Judith, offering comfort. But just as he was about to turn away, he heard a familiar voice calling to him.

“Aaron!”

It was Graham.

Aaron’s heart sank as he realized it was indeed Graham he had seen with Judith earlier. How had they met? Why was Graham talking to her? Jealousy gripped him, which he knew to be entirely irrational.

Graham approached, his expression bright. “Aaron, there you are!” he said, clapping him on the shoulder. “Do you know the young lady I was just talking to? Judith something?”

Aaron hesitated, his mind racing. “I... I’m not sure who you were talking to.”

Graham’s face fell. “Really? You were standing so close by that I thought you must have seen us. We were feeding geese and ducks over yonder.”

“I was chatting with some of my friends,” Aaron said. “I thought I saw you walking in the other direction earlier, but I did not see you chatting with anyone.”

“After she was called away, I had half a mind to leave, but then I remembered seeing you and thought you might have seen us talking over there.” Graham nodded his chin toward the lake. “I didn’t catch her full name before she rushed away with another woman. I’d hoped to find out who she is and perhaps ask her to go to the opera with me.”

Aaron shrugged, trying to appear indifferent. “I beg your pardon, I don’t know.”

Graham sighed. “That’s a shame. She seemed quite charming. A diamond of the first water, indeed.”

Aaron’s insides twisted with guilt and a touch of something else he didn’t want to name. He should tell Graham that it was Judith he’d spoken to, and that Judith was in need of a decent match—but he didn’t. He didn’t want to introduce Graham to Judith. He knew in his heart why, but admitting it was another matter entirely.

“So, Aaron,” Graham continued, seemingly dismissing the topic, “I’m going to a private ball at the Lord Chancellor’s house next week. Lots of influential people will be there. Are you going?”

Aaron’s vexation deepened. He had planned to take Judith to that ball, knowing it would be a perfect opportunity for her to meet eligible gentlemen. Yet, the thought of her there with Graham gnawed at him. He’d have to introduce them whether he wanted to or not. Graham would recognize Judith, and he’d know that Aaron had been keeping their connection from him.

What was he doing? With every passing second, he was digging a deeper hole for himself...

“I have other plans,” he said curtly.

“Ah, that’s too bad,” Graham replied, looking a bit disappointed. “Well, we should have dinner together soon.”

“Of course,” Aaron agreed, though his mind was already elsewhere. “But I must be off now. Urgent matters to attend to.”

Graham nodded. “I understand. Let’s catch up soon.”

As Aaron hurried away, he couldn’t shake the feeling of doom building within him. The crisp February wind bit at his face, and the barren branches of the trees swayed ominously overhead. The park, usually a place of tranquillity, felt oppressive. He strode quickly, his thoughts in turmoil.

Why had it bothered him so much to see Graham with Judith? Why had he felt a pang of something akin to jealousy? He knew he couldn’t let himself get attached, couldn’t let his feelings cloud his judgment. He was supposed to be helping her find a match, not hoping she wouldn’t.

Aaron quickened his pace, the gravel crunching under his boots. He had to focus on the task at hand—retrieving John from Eton. But even as he tried to concentrate on the immediate problem, his thoughts kept drifting back to Judith, to the way her eyes had widened with worry, to the feel of her hand in his.

He reached his carriage and climbed in, signaling to the driver to go. As the carriage rumbled away, he looked out the window, the bleak winter landscape mirroring his mood.

The feeling of dread clung to him, a shadow that refused to be cast aside. He knew he had to keep his distance, but the more time he spent with Judith, the harder that seemed to become.

CHAPTER 18

“Well,” the elderly headmaster said with a shrug, “you can certainly see John. He is doing just fine. He fell during a riding lesson and broke his leg, but our physician has tended to it. There’s no reason to be alarmed, Lady Worcester.”

Judith looked at her stepmother, who glared at the man. “You mean to tell us we cannot take him home with us?” she asked. “We are only his sister and stepmother. Only Oliver, as the head of the household, has the right to remove John from the premises?”

“I am grateful that you are willing to let me see my stepson,” Matilda interjected, her tone sharp. “But we will be taking him home. An injured child should be with his family.”

“I’m afraid it will not be possible,” the headmaster replied. “Lord Worcester has not given instructions to allow you to do so, and since you are not his legal guardians, I cannot permit it.”

“This is ridiculous!” Judith exclaimed. “Are you saying that because we are women, we have no rights?”

She’d known this might happen. Aaron had warned them of this exact situation, but she hadn’t wanted to believe it. She’d assured herself that as John’s sister and closest living relative, she’d be allowed to take him home whenever she wanted. Alas, Aaron had been right.

The headmaster, an older man with white hair and a gray beard, shifted uncomfortably. "I do not sit in Parliament, nor do I make the laws. If you wish to see this changed, perhaps you should speak to Lord Worcester about it."

Joanna glanced at Matilda, who looked furious.

"If you will excuse me, I have other matters to tend to," the headmaster said, rising and motioning toward the door. "I will have somebody escort you to the infirmary."

"This is an outrage!" Matilda declared once they were outside. "How can they act as though we have no rights?"

"Because we do not," Judith replied bitterly. "Women do not have rights in our society. I never thought about it before because Father was always there to protect us. But now that he is gone and Oliver is not with us, I see just how helpless we are."

"It has been an outrage for quite some time that we do not have equal rights," Matilda continued angrily. "We should be able to own property, not just through our husbands or brothers. Can you imagine if your father had not taken care of me by way of jointure? I would have to find some family member willing to take me in."

Judith listened, a horrible realization dawning on her. She would be entirely dependent if Matilda decided to kick her out. Yes, she could live with Matilda, but what if they had a falling out?

"It's unconscionable," Matilda went on, "that I should find myself in this position. And why? Because I do not have a husband."

"All this time, I worried about nothing but love," Judith said softly. "Marrying, because it was my heart's desire. But now I see reality. Without a husband and without Father, I would be lost."

“What’s the matter?” Aaron asked, approaching them.

“The headmaster won’t allow us to take John, just as you said,” Matilda huffed. “I thought surely my standing as Lady Worcester would allow me to take him home, but you were right.”

Judith looked up at Aaron. On the journey to Eaton, they had planned to remove John on their own, hoping their titles held sway, but it seemed not.

“It’s awful that this has happened,” he said, “but I promise you, I will have John with us shortly. I promise.”

Judith knew he would keep his word, but it didn’t ease her dread. She now understood her position in society and the need to prioritize practical considerations over dreams of love.

The carriage rocked gently back and forth, the rhythmic motion almost soothing as it carried them back home.

Judith watched Matilda sleep, her head resting against the window, her face peaceful despite the recent events. John lay stretched out across the seat, his leg elevated and wrapped in a splint made from wood and sturdy leather, secured with cloth bandages to keep the bones in place. His leg was carefully padded to prevent further injury during the journey.

Judith sat beside Aaron, who was engrossed in a book. She couldn’t help but smile as she glanced at him. He had been wonderful throughout this ordeal. It had been made quite clear that without him, they would not have been able to take John home. He had stepped in, presenting himself as the family’s guardian.

How odd it was to think of him as such. Oliver had told her that Aaron was to be her

guardian, but she had considered this more an arbitrary title given by her brother. Knowing that Aaron actually was in charge of the family felt a little strange. A mix of gratitude and unease settled in her chest.

Aaron looked up from his book, a small smile on his lips. “I thought you were asleep.”

Judith shook her head. “I can’t. I’m too riled up.”

She glanced at John, her worry for him gnawing at her. His face was pale, and he stirred restlessly in his sleep. The sight of his broken leg, even though it was set properly, filled her with concern and helplessness.

Judith smiled softly at Aaron. “Thank you for your help. Truly.”

“I’d help you anytime,” he replied earnestly.

Judith’s smile faded slightly as she looked down at her hands. “I just wish we didn’t need your help. It seems so unfair.”

Aaron frowned, leaning closer. “What do you mean?”

She sighed, glancing out the window at the passing scenery. “This ordeal has only impressed upon me how diminished a woman’s role is in our world. We have no legal standing, no real power. I’ll never own anything, have anything that is truly mine, or make my own legal decisions.”

Aaron shook his head. “That’s not entirely true. There are ways for women to own property. For instance?—”

Judith dismissed his words with a wave of her hand. “No, Aaron. I have to make a

choice, a good one. I'm beginning to think that maybe my quest to wait for love was silly. I should have focused on finding someone decent who'd protect me and look out for me. I might be able to be friendly with such a man—maybe even love him."

Aaron's brow furrowed. "You regret your decision to wait for love? I know that you had decided to secure a match that might turn into love at least, but now..."

"Now I will consider anyone who is decent. I will not ask anyone to intercede on my behalf anymore either—not you, not Matilda. I must find someone, and I know I will if I lower my expectations."

She gulped and looked past him, but then she felt a pang of sadness as she nodded.

"I see, if that is what you want," he said.

"That's not what I want. I want time to find someone I care about and who cares about me, but seeing how I had to rely on you to get my brother from school because I had no standing... it made me realize that I can't leave my fate up to a notion such as love. I need to find a decent man. Maybe Lord Pembroke is that man."

"No, I think not," Aaron blurted out, his voice sharper than he intended. "He isn't. Pembroke has a roving eye, and while he's a decent enough fellow, I wouldn't want you married to him."

"Did you not reassure me he is a good man?" she asked, surprised.

She wasn't even certain Lord Pembroke was the right man, but if he was decent and kind to her, she might be able to look past his roving eye, if he had one.

"He isn't right for you," Aaron insisted sharply.

Judith raised an eyebrow, teasing. “So, I take it you gave me false information then when I first asked you about him?”

He remained serious, his expression unwavering. “No, Judith. I’m looking out for you. I’ll help you find a good man, someone who will truly care for you and protect you.”

Judith looked into his eyes. There was an intensity there that made her heart race. Why couldn’t he be that man? Why did he have to insist that marriage was dull? If only he could see that the two of them might have something special.

They had so much in common. They loved the idea of traveling, they adored music... Alas, she pushed the feeling aside.

“Thank you, Aaron. I appreciate that.”

“Of course,” he said. “However, I want you to be happy. Do not settle too easily. We still have some weeks ahead of us before Oliver returns.”

The carriage continued its journey, the weight of their conversation lingering in the air.

Judith stared out the window, lost in her thoughts. The road ahead was uncertain, but she knew she had to be practical and make the best decision for her future, even if it meant letting go of her dreams of finding true love.

Aaron ground his teeth as he looked at Judith. The encounter at Eton had been unpleasant, to say the least. The old headmaster had refused to release John until Aaron had produced Oliver’s letter making him John’s guardian. He hated that it had come to this. A stepmother and sister ought to have the right to remove their child or brother from school, but no. He, an unrelated man, had more power. No wonder

Judith was now hesitating regarding her options in life.

He wished he could protect her, be that person for her if society wouldn't let her be in charge of her own affairs. A pang of realization struck him—could he be that person? He couldn't deny it, being there for her in her time of need had felt good. Spending time with her felt good. He wanted to be with her, be near her. He craved her company, and he was jealous—there was no denying that.

Could he possibly be moon-eyed over her? Could he envision a future with her?

He gulped, opening his mouth to voice the possibilities, but then she sighed.

“One must always strive for happiness,” she said softly. “But if that can't be accomplished, then looking for someone decent is best. I must take matters into my own hands. Otherwise, I might end up like some unfortunate ladies who are on the shelf, eternally reliant on their brothers—or worse, make bad matches.”

Aaron closed his mouth, understanding the weight of her words. He knew she meant Lady Lundgren. He understood then that he wasn't a good match for her.

He had made Amelia unhappy because he couldn't get past his selfish desire for freedom and adventure. How could he be sure he'd not do the same to Judith? And what if he confessed his feelings for her only to find their marriage dull within a few months? He'd rush away into the world, abandoning her, wouldn't he? That was the person he was, after all. Amelia had made that clear.

He took a deep breath, realizing that he must do the right thing by Judith. He turned to her, trying to hide his inner conflict.

“Judith,” he began. “There is someone I'd like to introduce you to. Someone good and decent, a lover of music. Someone, I think, you could at least be contented with if

not more.”

Judith looked up at him, surprise flickering in her eyes. “Oh?”

“Yes,” he said, forcing a smile. “He’s a kind man, respectable, and I believe he would appreciate you for who you are.”

Judith nodded slowly, a hint of uncertainty in her expression. “Who is he?”

“He is a good friend of mine,” Aaron replied. “He’s a gentleman I’ve known for some time. He only recently returned to town and has expressed a desire to wed.”

He hated how perfect he was making Graham sound to her.

“He wishes to be married?” she asked, her eyes wide, though there was some subtle sadness in them as well that he could not quite understand.

“Very much so, yes. He bought a house recently, large enough for a family.”

At this, she paused. “He did not have a home before?”

“Of course, he did,” he said quickly. “He is a gentleman—an earl. I mean he bought a home in town.”

She bobbed her head up and down, taking this in.

“An earl? Pray, what is his name?” she asked.

Aaron hesitated. If he told her his friend’s name, he’d have to introduce them—there would be no going back. Should he tell her that he saw them together in the park? No, she could never know that he’d hesitated to make the introduction, and Graham could

never know that Aaron had known Judith was Judith Birks all along.

Aaron would look petty and untrustworthy, and he didn't want to lose the high opinion his friend had of him—nor did he want to lose Judith's trust. The mere thought tugged at his heart.

"Graham Baxter," he revealed, letting the name tumble out rapidly before he could change his mind. "The Earl of Leeds."

"Oh!" Judith exclaimed. "I met him at the park just before I got the news that John broke his leg. He was very charming."

"Indeed, he is."

"And handsome," she added.

The word was like a dagger to his chest. She thought Graham handsome... Well, he was. Even Aaron knew this, but still, it bothered him that Judith thought so.

This is ridiculous. I am supposed to be helping her secure a match, not acting like a fool...

"Well, I am told he is. In any case, he is a good man, you will like him," he assured her.

"I already do," she replied and leaned back in her seat.

Aaron's stomach churned, and his heart clenched. He wanted to take it back, tell her that he'd made a mistake, but he couldn't.

"Well, very good then. Perhaps we will win that wager of ours sooner rather than

later,” he said, forcing himself to sound cheerful.

She studied his face, her brow furrowing slightly. “Perhaps we shall. In any case, thank you, Aaron. I appreciate you looking out for me.”

Aaron nodded, trying to ignore the ache in his chest. “Of course, Judith. I want what’s best for you.”

As the carriage continued to rock gently back and forth, Aaron couldn’t shake the feeling of doom building within him. He had done the right thing, hadn’t he? He had to protect her, even if it meant sacrificing his own desires.

But as he looked at Judith, he couldn’t help but wonder if he was making the biggest mistake of his life.

CHAPTER 19

Judith sat in the drawing room, her fingers idly tracing patterns on the embroidered cushion beside her. The room was bathed in the soft afternoon light, the golden rays filtering through the lace curtains, creating a warm and inviting atmosphere.

Across from her, John was sprawled on a chaise longue, his broken leg elevated and encased in a cast. Despite his injury, his spirits were high as he concentrated on a sketch, something their father had taught him to love.

Matilda sat nearby, her knitting needles clicking rhythmically as she worked on a new scarf. She looked up occasionally, smiling at the serene domestic scene.

“Judith, look at this,” John called, holding up his drawing.

It was a depiction of their family estate, the lines precise and the details carefully rendered. It was rather impressive for a boy of only ten years. One day, Judith thought, he might be an artist or a painter.

She smiled, wondering what Oliver might say to that. Did he envy their younger brother because he’d be free to pursue a life of his own choosing while Oliver was stuck being a marquess? Not that being a marquess was a bad thing, but Oliver didn’t have a choice...

Or would John one day become a marquess as well, if Oliver chose not to have a child?

Judith had been so preoccupied with the task her older brother had given her that she had no idea what his plans were. Would he marry? Surely he'd have to. But what if he was like Aaron, determined to remain unwed? It wasn't fair that men had the choice and would not be judged as harshly as women. There had never been a case of a gentleman being considered 'on the shelf' or 'an old fellow' like women were.

"What do you think?" John demanded, drawing her from her thoughts.

"That's wonderful, John," Judith praised, moving closer to get a better look. "You're getting so good at this. Father would be proud."

John beamed, his eyes sparkling with pride. "Do you think I can add more trees here?" he asked, pointing to a blank spot on the paper.

Absolutely, Judith encouraged. "It would make the scene look even more lively.

Matilda glanced up from her knitting. "You've inherited your father's talent, John. It's lovely to see you so engaged with it."

John grinned, his attention already back on his drawing. "I can't wait to show it to Oliver when he's back."

Judith and Matilda exchanged a gentle, knowing smile. It was moments like these that made their current worries seem distant.

"Matilda," John said, breaking the brief silence, "can we have pudding cake tonight? I know I'm supposed to eat fruit, but I think it's time to celebrate my getting better."

Matilda chuckled softly. "I suppose we can make an exception. You've been very brave through all this, after all."

“Yes, you’ve been very brave, John,” Judith agreed. “What flavor would you like? Chocolate or lemon?”

“Chocolate, please!” John replied enthusiastically. “With lots of cream on top.”

“Chocolate it is, then,” Matilda confirmed, setting her knitting aside for a moment. “I’ll make sure the cook prepares it just the way you like it.”

John’s face lit up with excitement. “Thank you, Matilda! You’re the best.”

Matilda reached over to ruffle his hair affectionately. “Anything for you, dear. You’ve been so patient with that leg of yours.”

Judith watched the exchange, feeling a deep sense of contentment. Despite the challenges they faced, these simple, everyday moments were a reminder of the love and support that bound their family together. She looked at Matilda, grateful for her steady presence and nurturing spirit.

“I’m glad you’re here with us, Matilda,” she said softly. “You’ve made such a difference.”

Matilda’s eyes softened, and she reached out to squeeze Judith’s hand. “I’m glad to be here too, Judith. We’re a family, and we take care of each other.”

As they settled back into their activities, the room was filled with a peaceful, comforting silence.

Judith glanced at John, whose head was bent over his drawing once more, and felt a surge of hope. No matter what challenges lay ahead, they would face them together, as a family. At least she had that.

Judith sat down at her writing desk, the delicate quill poised above a fresh sheet of paper. She'd decided to write to Rosy.

Her friend had left a few days ago and was most certainly still on the ship, but given the slow postage, she didn't want to dally. Besides, she had much to report to her friend.

She dipped her quill in the inkpot and then began to write, her thoughts flowing onto the paper.

Dearest Rosy,

I hope this letter finds you well and in good spirits. It feels like ages since you left, though it has only been a week. I miss your company terribly and long for the day we are reunited.

There has been quite a commotion here. Poor John had an accident while at Eton and broke his leg. It was such a frightful ordeal, but he is home now and being the brave boy he has always been. His leg was set, and he has taken to drawing to pass the time. It reminds me so much of Father, and it warms my heart to see him so engaged.

The headmaster at Eton was dreadfully uncooperative when Matilda and I arrived to take John home. We were practically dismissed because of our gender, which was infuriating. Thankfully, Aaron came to our aid and presented a letter from Oliver that granted him guardianship over John. Without Aaron, we might have left empty-handed.

This whole incident has left me contemplating my future more seriously. I have decided that I must consider marriage even if it is not for love. Aaron has promised to introduce me to a gentleman he believes will be a good match. It seems so unfair, but I have come to accept that this is the reality we live in.

She paused, looking over what she'd written thus far. She'd given a full report of the past events, but there was something she wanted to say and did not know if she ought to. A secret she'd kept to herself. If Rosy were with her now, she might not divulge it either, but her friend would be on the Continent by the time this letter reached her, so it seemed oddly safer... She wouldn't have to look in her eyes, see her judgment or her worry...

I paused just now, wondering if I should share what is truly on my mind. Rosy, I think I love Aaron. It feels strange to write it down, but there it is. I cannot deny these feelings any longer. I daydream about him constantly and eagerly look forward to seeing him. He has a way of making even the most mundane moments feel special.

Just yesterday, he made me laugh so hard. We were in the garden, and he was trying to teach John how to draw a caricature of Matilda. He drew her with such exaggerated features—enormous knitting needles and an impossibly large bonnet—that even Matilda couldn't help but giggle. It was such a light-hearted moment in the midst of all our worries.

Despite these feelings, I don't believe Aaron is interested in me. Sometimes, though, I catch a look in his eyes or a softness in his tone that makes me wonder. It's maddening, this uncertainty.

I don't know what the future holds, but I am trying to stay hopeful. Please write back soon and tell me all about your adventures. I miss you dearly and treasure our friendship more than words can express.

With all my love,

Judith.

Judith sprinkled sand onto the ink, allowing it to soak the excess, then poured the

sand into the waste basket beside her before folding the letter carefully, sealing it with a drop of wax. She gazed at the envelope, her heart heavy yet hopeful.

Writing to Rosy had brought her some comfort, and she hoped her friend's response would provide even more comfort. Perhaps by the time Rosy's reply came, she'd already know the gentleman Aaron had in mind for her better. She'd met him at the park, of course, but beyond his name, she did not know anything about him.

Would he be able to dislodge thoughts of Aaron from her mind? She had to hope so. Otherwise, she might find herself engaged in the worst kind of courtship—one where she was with one man while her heart longed for another.

And that, she knew would not do at all.

Aaron stood in front of his mirror while his valet, Banks, adjusted the lapels of his finely tailored evening coat.

"It is early to go out, Your Grace," Banks noted.

"Indeed, it is. But I have a stop to make before heading to the Lord Chancellor's ball," Aaron replied. "Would you get my platinum cufflinks?"

The valet hurried away to retrieve them while Aaron examined himself in the mirror. The deep midnight blue fabric contrasted sharply with the pristine white of his cravat, which he meticulously tied into a perfect knot. His waistcoat, a shade of silver-grey, shimmered subtly in the candlelight.

"Here we are," Banks said and straightened his cuffs, adorning them with understated yet elegant cufflinks.

"Thank you, you may go," Aaron instructed.

The valet slipped out of the room, allowing him to continue taking inventory of himself. His dark trousers and polished black shoes completed the ensemble, making him every inch the picture of a refined gentleman ready for a ball.

Despite his polished exterior, Aaron's mind was racing. Tonight was the night he would introduce Judith to Graham.

It was the right thing to do. Graham was a good man, suitable, and undoubtedly perfect for her. Yet, the thought gnawed at Aaron. He sighed deeply, his shoulders slumping momentarily under the weight of his conflicting emotions.

It was too early to leave for Judith's home, Banks had been quite right. Needing a distraction, Aaron's gaze fell on a small box half-hidden under his bed. He reached down and pulled it out, a rueful smile touching his lips. It was his little memory box, filled with keepsakes from his youthful adventures.

He chuckled softly, recalling the competition he and Oliver had during their travels—a harmless game of collecting mementos from their romantic encounters. They'd decided to see who could woo more ladies and come up with a plan to track their conquests, by way of keepsakes from the ladies they met.

Opening the box, he sifted through the contents—hairpins, rings, patchboxes, and handkerchiefs. Each item told a story, a witness to his carefree days.

He started counting but stopped abruptly, a flush of embarrassment creeping up his neck. He knew none of these women were harmed or ruined by their time together; they had all been willing participants in the fleeting romances. Yet, an uncharacteristic sense of shame washed over him.

What would Judith think if she knew about this box? The thought lingered. He imagined her laughing, perhaps even teasing him. She wasn't prudish like Amelia had

been. Still, the idea of her knowing this part of his past unsettled him. If they were to be married, would she still look at him the same way?

“If we were to be married?” he muttered, snapping the box shut. “What is wrong with me?”

The notion was absurd. He shook his head, trying to rid himself of these foolish thoughts. He stood up, straightened his coat one last time, and left his room with determined strides.

Tonight, he would practice dancing with Judith one last time before taking her to the ball. She didn’t really need another lesson—she was perfectly refined as she was. But he’d been unable to fight the desire to be alone with her one more time. After tonight, he knew, there was a good chance she’d no longer need his assistance. He would introduce her to Graham, and he would do everything in his power to make sure they were a perfect match.

No more nonsense, he told himself firmly as he made his way to Worcester House. He had a duty to fulfill, and he would not let his foolish desires stand in the way.

CHAPTER 20

J udith stood before the mirror in her bedchamber, admiring her reflection as Matilda made the final adjustments to her gown.

Her dress was exquisite, a delicate shade of lavender that complemented her fair complexion. It featured a high waistline, cinched just below the bust with a satin ribbon, and flowed gracefully to the floor in soft, billowing folds of silk. The bodice was adorned with intricate lace and tiny seed pearls, adding an air of elegance and refinement. Short, puffed sleeves left her shoulders bare, and a modest décolletage completed the ensemble, striking the perfect balance between sophistication and allure.

Being invited to the Lord Chancellor's home was a great honor, and she knew she had to look her best. Well, that and of course the fact that Aaron intended to introduce her to someone very promising, indeed.

She sighed, watching her chest rise and fall in the mirror as thoughts of Aaron snuck up on her. She shook her head, chasing them away as Matilda stepped in front of her, helping her with her hair.

Without Marianne, who was still bedridden, Matilda had stepped in, proving surprisingly adept at the task. She gathered Judith's curls into a loose chignon, securing it with delicate hairpins that sparkled faintly in the candlelight. A few tendrils were left to frame Judith's face, softening her features and adding a touch of romance to her look.

“You seem nervous, dear. The Lord Chancellor is a grand man, to be sure, but he is mild-mannered, you need not worry. Or is there another reason you are fidgeting?” Matilda asked with a twinkle in her eyes, as if she already knew.

“Aaron is going to introduce me to a gentleman tonight. The one I spoke to at the park, the day we learned about John’s injury,” Judith confided.

Matilda paused, her hands stilling in Judith’s hair. “Oh, I see,” she said, sounding surprised. “Is that what you want, dear?”

Judith nodded resolutely. “It is. I appreciate everyone wanting to help me, but I know I must find a husband now. This gentleman was kind, and he is Aaron’s friend.”

Matilda resumed her task, her expression thoughtful. “I see. Well, if that is what you want, I will not stand in your way, of course. But I noticed the way you and His Grace look at each other. I had an inkling that perhaps there is something between you two. Am I wrong?”

Judith felt her heart clench. She knew Matilda had seen the truth, even if she couldn’t admit it aloud.

“No, there isn’t,” she replied, though the words sounded hollow. “He is helping me, that is all.”

Matilda met her eyes in the mirror, her gaze gentle but probing. “Be careful when making choices, Judith. You need to look out for your heart as well as your future.”

Judith nodded, though she wasn’t sure how much she could control her heart anymore.

Just then, a footman appeared at the door, announcing Aaron’s arrival.

“He’s here,” Judith said and took a deep breath.

Matilda gave her shoulder a reassuring squeeze. “Remember what I said.”

Judith stood up, smoothing down the fabric of her gown. “I will. But I know what I want. Thank you, Matilda.”

She had come to admire her stepmother these last few weeks, but she could not let her influence her now.

She made her way out of her room, her heart pounding with a mix of excitement and trepidation. Tonight could change everything, and she had to be ready for whatever came next.

Judith descended the stairs with an ethereal grace, her gown flowing around her like a cloud. Aaron felt his heart thud painfully in his chest as she approached. Her beauty was almost otherworldly, and he couldn’t take his eyes off her.

Lady Worcester, following close behind, glanced at him and remarked with a light smile, “You’re quite early, Your Grace.”

Aaron cleared his throat, tearing his gaze away from Judith. “I wanted to go over the evening with Judith before we departed. And I thought we might practice a few dances.”

Matilda chuckled softly. “Practice? I thought you had taught her all there is to know about dancing. And she wasn’t all that bad, to begin with.”

“I was rusty, Matilda,” Judith interjected quickly.

Aaron nodded. “Indeed, but she is much better now. However, it is an important ball

we are going to, so one can never be too careful.”

“Ah, I see,” Matilda relented and then departed, but not before giving Judith a knowing look.

What was going on here? Aaron wondered what the two of them had been talking about before his arrival but then dismissed the thought. Whatever it was, they had to focus on what was important right now.

“I thought we could go to the ballroom and practice there,” he said and offered Judith his arm, which she took.

They made their way to the ballroom, which stood empty and silent. As they walked, he felt her hip bumping into his every now and again—a technique he’d thought her, although one she was to use with other gentlemen, not him.

“Well, what would you like us to practice?” she asked, looking up at him expectantly.

The polished floor gleamed under the soft glow of the chandeliers. Aaron turned to Judith, his expression serious.

“We should practice a couple of dances the Lord Chancellor is particularly fond of, but which are not often played.”

Judith raised an eyebrow. “What sort of dances?”

Aaron hesitated for a moment. “One of them is the waltz.”

Judith’s eyes widened. “The waltz? That’s not a socially acceptable dance. Even Lord Byron was scandalized by it.”

Aaron smiled. "It's becoming quite popular now. And I know the Lord Chancellor likes to dance it, and if he does, so will everyone else. Now, do you know the steps?"

Judith shook her head. "I don't."

He stepped forward, his gaze never leaving hers. He had always adored the waltz, as it allowed one to be close to one's partner, although he had to admit, he suddenly wasn't too sure if showing her was such a good idea. He was trying to stay away from her, after all. But he could not let her embarrass herself, especially if someone at the ball asked her to dance this dance.

"I'll show you. Don't worry."

Judith glanced around the empty ballroom. "But we have no music."

Aaron's smile widened. "We do."

He began to hum a soft, lilting melody, moving his feet in time with the tune. She watched, fascinated, as he demonstrated the steps, his movements fluid and confident. Music had always come easily to him, and he could remember melodies with ease.

"One, two, three. One, two, three," he said and went back to humming.

Their eyes met, and Aaron felt a spark of something indescribable.

"Now you try," he said softly.

Judith hesitated, then placed her hand in his. They began to dance, Aaron humming the melody as they moved together. She picked up the tune and started to hum along, her voice blending with his. Likewise, she mastered the steps with ease, stepping on his feet only once. He counted out the steps for them, guiding her with a gentle touch.

As they danced, he felt the warmth of her body close to his, their gazes locked. The room seemed to fade away, leaving just the two of them in a world of their own. They moved in perfect harmony, each step bringing them closer together.

Aaron's heart raced as he looked into Judith's eyes. He felt an overwhelming urge to protect her, to be the person she could rely on. But more than that, he realized, he wanted to be with her. The thought of her being with someone else, even someone as good and decent as Graham, filled him with a sense of dread.

The mere idea of Graham holding her like this filled him with rage, which was, of course, irrational...

"This dance is quite something," Judith said, her eyes shining, though he noted tension in her jaw.

She seemed to be struggling with her thoughts, just as he was. He wanted to tell her how he felt, to confess everything, but the words were stuck in his throat. Instead, he held her a little closer, letting the dance speak for him.

As the final notes of their hummed melody faded away, they came to a stop, standing across from one another in a manner that was a little bit too close to be proper.

The moment stretched out, filled with unspoken words and emotions. Aaron opened his mouth to say something, anything, but Judith spoke first.

"Thank you," she murmured then took a half step back.

Aaron reluctantly let go of her hand, feeling the sudden loss of her warmth. He cleared his throat and forced a smile. "My pleasure. You're quite ready for the ball now."

In truth, he wanted nothing more than to continue dancing with her, to keep her close. But he saw the way she stepped back, putting a respectful distance between them.

She nodded, a faint blush on her cheeks. “I think I am.”

She pursed her lips and looked around the empty ballroom while sweat beaded on his brow, not from strain but from nervousness.

“We should get to the carriage,” he said, but she shook her head.

“It is still early. I thought perhaps you might tell me about your friend?”

Graham .

Aaron wanted to groan but, of course, she was right.

“Why don’t I tell you about him as we walk to the carriage? We can ask the driver to drive through the park, it will be pleasant.”

“Very well,” she agreed and took his arm again as they walked out of the ballroom. “So, what is he like?”

Aaron hesitated for a split second. A part of him, the selfish part, wanted to paint Graham in an unflattering light. To be sure, he knew many unpleasant stories about him—they’d known one another for a long time, after all—but he couldn’t do it. Graham didn’t deserve it, and neither did she.

Aaron took a deep breath and spoke honestly. “Graham is a good man. He’s kind, intelligent, and quite accomplished. He has a love for music, much like you do, and a sense of humor that makes him pleasant to be around.”

Judith smiled softly, seeming reassured by his words. “He sounds lovely.”

Aaron nodded, though his heart ached. “He is. You’ll like him, I’m sure.”

They stepped out onto the front porch, where Judith called for the carriage to be brought around. Then, as they climbed in, an uncomfortable silence fell over them.

Aaron cursed himself for ever taking on this horrible task at Oliver’s request. For never in his life had he felt something for a woman as he did now, and never had he been so sure that it would all end in disaster if he followed his true desires.

CHAPTER 21

The Lord Chancellor's home was an imposing edifice of Tudor architecture, with tall, grand columns framing the entrance and expansive windows that glowed warmly with the light from within. The driveway was lined with meticulously trimmed hedges and ornate lampposts, leading up to a large, elaborately carved front door.

As Aaron and Judith approached, the door opened to reveal Lord Eldridge, the Lord Chancellor himself. He was a tall, dignified man with a stern but welcoming countenance. His powdered wig and formal attire gave him an air of authority and gravitas.

Aaron paused, for it was unusual for a peer to wear this attire to a ball, but Lord Eldridge had always had a reputation for being rather eccentric. A man beside him whispered something in his ear, no doubt their names, and he quickly greeted them.

"Your Grace, Lady Judith," Lord Eldridge greeted, bowing slightly. "Welcome to my home. I trust you will have a delightful evening."

"Thank you, Lord Eldridge," Aaron replied, returning the bow. "It is an honor to be here."

Judith curtsied gracefully. "Thank you for having us, Lord Eldridge."

Lord Eldridge nodded, motioning for them to enter. "Please, make yourselves at home. The ballroom is just through those doors."

Aaron escorted Judith inside, the opulent interior of the house capturing their attention. Crystal chandeliers hung from the high ceilings, casting a brilliant light over the marble floors. The walls were adorned with rich tapestries and portraits of notable figures, giving the space an air of elegance and refinement.

As they moved through the throng of guests, Aaron spotted Graham standing near the grand staircase, deep in conversation with a group of gentlemen.

“There is my friend. Would you excuse me?” he asked.

“Of course,” Judith said and then made her way toward her friend, Joanna, who was standing by the window.

“Graham!” Aaron called out, a genuine smile on his face.

Graham turned, his eyes lighting up. “Aaron, there you are! I wasn’t certain you’d come. You indicated in the negative. Well, it is good to see you.”

They exchanged a firm handshake and the customary pleasantries before Aaron got to the point.

“I’d like to introduce you to someone,” he began. “That is why I am here. Otherwise, I would not have come this evening.”

Graham raised an eyebrow, intrigued. “Oh? And who might that be? She must be quite special, for you to change your plans.”

Aaron took a deep breath. “The woman you spoke to at Green Park.”

Graham’s eyes widened with recognition. “You found her? How did you manage that?”

Aaron cleared his throat, bracing himself to lie to his dear friend. “Well, as it turns out, I know her quite well. She is Lady Judith Birks, the daughter of the late Lord Worcester. The current Lord Worcester is my friend, Oliver.”

“Oliver’s sister? I had no idea. I know Oliver well but have never met his sister.” Graham cleared his throat and looked around the room eagerly. “And how did you figure out that it was her I spoke to?”

“Well, I was actually at the park with her,” Aaron said, glancing back toward Judith. “Oliver has entrusted me with the task of finding her a suitable husband. I took her to the park to promenade that day and lost sight of her. As it turns out, when I told her I had a friend I wanted to introduce her to, she informed me she’d already had the pleasure, and thus I put two and two together.”

The lie rolled off his lips easily, to his great relief and shame.

Graham’s intrigue turned into a delighted smile. “What good fortune, indeed! I had no idea she was Oliver’s sister, and such a charming lady at that.”

Aaron forced a smile, feeling a pang of guilt. “When you mentioned you’d spoken to a lady at the park, I didn’t realize it was her. I apologize for not making the connection sooner.”

Graham waved off the apology. “No harm done. I’m just glad to have the opportunity now. Shall we?”

Aaron nodded and led him through the crowd, his mind racing. Despite his misgivings, he knew this was the right thing to do. Introducing Judith to a good man like Graham was what she needed.

As they approached her, he hoped fervently that she would find happiness, even if it

meant his own heart would shatter under the weight of his unspoken feelings.

“Judith,” Aaron said as they reached her. “May I present to you Graham Baxter, the Earl of Leeds.”

Graham bowed deeply. “Lady Judith, it is a pleasure to meet you again. Our last meeting was so suddenly interrupted.”

Judith curtsied, a warm smile on her face. “The pleasure is mine, Lord Leeds. Again. How fortunate that we both know His Grace here.”

“Indeed,” Graham said and looked at Aaron with genuine gratitude in his eyes.

However, he then turned slightly so that he was standing between Judith and Aaron, and Aaron recognized the sign that his assistance was no longer needed.

Slowly, he stepped back, knowing it was now time for fate to play its part. All he could do was stand and watch from a distance while the woman he loved fell for one of his best friends.

Judith felt a twinge of sadness as Aaron stepped back, his presence a comforting but elusive shadow in her peripheral vision. Graham’s voice brought her back to the present.

“Lady Judith, it is truly a delight to see you again,” Lord Leeds said warmly, his bright blue eyes sparkling with genuine pleasure. “I feared I had lost my chance to speak with you further when I couldn’t catch your name at the park. What good fortune that Aaron knows you.”

Judith smiled politely, though her heart ached a little. “Yes, it is fortunate, indeed.”

Lord Leeds' expression grew more serious. "May I ask what happened that day? You hastened away so quickly, I was quite concerned."

Judith took a deep breath, pushing thoughts of Aaron to the back of her mind. "My brother, John, had an accident at Eton. He broke his leg, and we had to rush to fetch him from school."

Lord Leeds' expression softened with sympathy. "I'm sorry to hear that. I hope he is doing well now."

"He is, thank you," Judith replied, genuinely touched by his concern.

Lord Leeds gave a charming, boyish grin. "You know, I once broke my foot when I was a boy. I was attempting to climb a tree that was far too high for me."

Judith chuckled softly. "And how did you manage that?"

"Well," Lord Leeds said, his tone light as he recounted the tale, "I was convinced there was a bird's nest at the top, and I wanted to see if there were any eggs. Of course, I didn't get very far before I lost my footing and tumbled down. The next few weeks were spent with my foot elevated, being pampered by my mother and sisters. They didn't let me forget my folly for a long time, however. My sister took to calling me egghead because I had only eggs on my mind, according to her."

Judith laughed, genuinely amused. "It seems boys are the same everywhere, always finding ways to worry their mothers. John broke his during a riding lesson."

Lord Leeds laughed with her, and for a moment, she felt a warmth toward him. He was charming and kind, his demeanor pleasant and easy. But from the corner of her eye, she kept watching Aaron, who stood a little distance away, his expression unreadable.

As Lord Leeds continued talking, Judith found herself torn. The Earl was undoubtedly a good man, and any woman would be fortunate to have his attention. Yet, her heart kept yearning for Aaron, the man who had been there for her in her moments of need, the man who made her feel a flutter of emotions she couldn't quite understand or control.

She tried to focus on Lord Leeds, to give him the attention he deserved, but a part of her couldn't help but wish that it was Aaron standing before her, speaking with her, making her laugh.

She sighed inwardly, knowing that she was in a complicated position, caught between duty and desire, between what was expected of her and what her heart longed for.

As the music swelled, Lord Leeds extended his hand to her. "Would you do me the honor of this dance, Lady Judith?"

She nodded, grateful it wasn't the waltz. "Of course, My Lord."

She took his hand, and they lined up with the other dancers. When it came time to step onto the dance floor, he easily took her hands, and they moved gracefully across the dance floor, joining the others in a lively quadrille.

"You are a divine dancer," he remarked.

"I thank you. Aaron—His Grace helped me, for I had been quite rusty, given my father's passing."

"Ah, I had heard. My condolences for your loss," Lord Leeds offered. His face reflected his words, showing her they were not empty as such words often were. "One can never know when life will come to a sudden end. My father's passing made me realize that. I hadn't planned on being Earl so soon."

“Is that why you are looking to start a family soon?” Judith asked, knowing it was blunt, but they both knew why they had been introduced.

Lord Leeds’ light conversation floated over the music. “Indeed, I decided it was time. I recently purchased a new house in Mayfair. It’s a beautiful property, and I hope to start a family there soon.”

Judith smiled politely, trying to engage. “That sounds lovely. Mayfair is such a charming place. May I ask where exactly the house is?”

Lord Leeds described the house and its location in detail, but Judith found her thoughts wandering. She knew she should be more interested, should be more engaged, but her mind kept drifting back to Aaron. She longed to be with him, to hear his voice, to feel the comfort of his presence.

“Lady Judith, are you quite alright?” Lord Leeds’ concerned voice broke through her reverie. “You seem a bit quiet, perhaps even sad.”

She sighed softly. “No, it’s just... lingering upset over the incident at my brother John’s school.”

He tilted his head to the side. “Pray, what happened?”

She sighed deeply with frustration. “When we tried to remove him from school, the headmaster refused us on account of our gender. Women cannot remove a child from school without a man’s presence, even if they are his family. Aaron—His Grace had to step in.”

Lord Leeds frowned, clearly displeased. “That’s outrageous. Women should be treated far better than they are. I might be considered a bit too forward-thinking for my time, but I believe women should even have equal rights. Aaron feels the same

way, you know. I wish there were more of us.”

Judith’s heart swelled at this revelation. “Does he? I’m pleased to hear it.”

At that moment, the music signaled a partner change, and Judith found herself face-to-face with Lord Pembroke. His enthusiasm was immediate and overwhelming.

“Lady Judith!” he exclaimed, his eyes sweeping over her in a way that made her uncomfortable. “You look absolutely stunning this evening. I missed you at Almack’s.”

Not wanting to repeat the ordeal they had undergone with John, she simply smiled at him.

“Thank you, Lord Pembroke,” she replied politely, though she found his gaze unsettling.

“I had hoped to see you. I have had much good fortune recently and found myself the winner of not one, not two, but three curricule races,” he said.

“Is that so?” she uttered.

There was little she disliked more than curricule races. A reckless undertaking that served no purpose but to bolster the ego of those partaking—she thought it a useless activity. Of course, she knew better than to say that. Instead, she did what Aaron had taught her to do—she encouraged her partner’s interests.

However, as they danced, Lord Pembroke talked incessantly about himself, his wealth, and his connections. Judith nodded politely but felt a growing sense of unease. His conversation was self-centered, his demeanor arrogant. She couldn’t wait for the dance to end.

When the partners changed again, she was back with Lord Leeds. Relief washed over her as she returned to his familiar and kind presence.

“Are you alright?” he asked, noticing her discomfort.

“Yes, thank you,” she said, more sincerely this time.

She realized then that Graham was indeed a very decent man. His kindness and forward-thinking nature were admirable. Indeed, if she hadn’t met Aaron, Lord Leeds was exactly the sort of man she would have hoped for. She didn’t feel any romantic attachment to him, but she could imagine this might change in time. Even if it did not, he was pleasant. And that was more than many wives could ask for.

Determined to push thoughts of Aaron away, she focused on Lord Leeds, allowing herself to be more outgoing. She focused on each word he said, and when he made a witty remark about the Lord Chancellor’s penchant for overly grandiose decorations, she chuckled almost naturally.

When the music ended, he escorted her off the dance floor as their conversation continued. Still, even then, when she caught Aaron’s eyes across the room, she felt a pang of longing.

No. Lord Leeds is the type of man I need. He wants a family. He offers stability and kindness. Aaron offers nothing, he’d made that clear.

She focused on the man before her, who might be her future. But even as she laughed with Lord Leeds, she couldn’t shake the feeling that her heart was elsewhere, with the man who had always been there for her, silently supporting her.

CHAPTER 22

Aaron sat quietly on a chair at the edge of the dance floor, a flute of sparkling wine in hand.

“Looks like I’m going to have to pay up,” a familiar voice said.

He looked up to see Henry standing there.

His friend plopped down into the seat beside him and waved a lazy index finger in the direction of the dancers. “I should have had a rule that you cannot fix her up with one of your friends. That seems awfully unfair, but since I did not bring it up before, I suppose I shouldn’t bring it up now,” he said.

Aaron grunted, having already forgotten about the wager.

He saw Judith gliding across the dance floor on the arm of Graham and felt nothing but bitterness clawing up his throat. Yes, he would win his wager. If the way Graham looked at her now was anything to go by, there would most certainly be an official courtship, and they might even be married by the end of the season.

He had watched Graham carefully as he danced with her. Not because he had worried that his friend would be anything but an upstanding gentleman to her, but because he had hoped against hope that he would not care for her. He had hoped that Judith would make a mistake, bungle his name, present herself awkwardly, or perhaps even step on his toes. But he had taught her well.

She was charm and grace personified. Indeed, she was a diamond of the first water. None of the other women at the dance floor compared to her in any way. This was his doing—he knew this.

She had turned from the awkward young woman who was trapped in a state of limbo of her own making into what could be described as a swan. Other gentlemen watched her also, and not with the curious smirk they had looked at her with at the park.

They looked at her in a pleased kind of way—the way a man looked at a woman he admired.

When Judith had switched partners, Graham had continued to look at her. He carried a silly smile on his lips, which only made it clearer that Aaron had been right. Graham was smitten with Judith, and soon she would be smitten with him.

“What’s wrong with you?” Henry scoffed, ripping him out of his contemplation. “You do not look happy at the prospect of winning your wager. What happened? Are you over her? Have you fallen for your charge?”

The mocking tone in his friend’s voice told him that Henry did not really believe this. No wonder, everybody knew that Aaron had little to no desire to get married.

“Nothing is wrong, I am simply tired, that is all.”

“Ah well, if that is all, I will leave you to it. I must find Lady Annabella—she has promised me the quadrille, and I cannot pass that up. She is truly one of the fairest ladies in the land. And not difficult to charm either, I hear.”

Henry winked at Aaron and then departed, leaving him alone, though only for a minute, for the dance ended.

Graham and Judith spoke briefly, their smiles letting everyone know that they cared for one another. Or perhaps just Aaron, for nobody else appeared interested in them.

He got up and straightened his waistcoat, then ran a hand through his hair. As he approached her, he glanced into the mirror and adjusted his cravat. He wanted to look handsome—for her. Although that should not matter right now.

“Aaron,” she said as she caught up to him, her eyes bright and a soft smile on her lips. “Graham is a true gentleman,” she gushed. “He asked to dance with me again. Should I? People might think there is something between us.”

Aaron’s heart sank, the bitterness from earlier now twisting painfully in his throat.

He forced a smile, trying to mask the storm inside him. “You need to do what is right for you, Judith,” he replied, his voice strained.

Judith tilted her head, her brow furrowed in confusion. “What do you mean, Aaron?”

Aaron felt a storm of emotions brewing within him, each one tearing at his resolve. He wanted to see Judith happy, but the thought of her with Graham was unbearable.

He struggled to find the right words, his hands clenching into fists as he fought the urge to confess his love. His mind raced, weighing the consequences of his feelings and the possible repercussions for her.

“Judith, come to the library with me,” he finally said.

He had been to the Lord Chancellor’s house before and knew where the library was, although what he was going to say once they got there was anyone’s guess. Aaron certainly did not know. It was as if his mind had gone to sleep and his heart and secret desires had taken over.

“Aaron?” Judith pressed, her tone giving away her confusion. “What is wrong?”

They walked down the hall, past an array of other guests, though none paid them any mind. The library, which was located at the far end of the hall, was a secluded place where they could talk privately without fear of being overheard or interrupted.

They walked inside, and Aaron blinked, for he forgot how grand the library was. Mahogany shelves stretched up to the ceiling, and stools were placed at the front of each row. A fire was crackling in the grate, and the sweet scent of cedar filled the air, while the smell of old books added to the pleasant atmosphere.

Despite the setting, Aaron was tormented.

“Aaron, why are you acting so strange?” Judith asked, her voice soft yet insistent.

He avoided her eyes, his heart pounding. Every instinct screamed at him to hold back, to maintain the carefully constructed facade he had built around his feelings. But the storm within him was relentless, and he could no longer keep it contained.

He took a step closer to her, his breath hitching in his throat.

“You want to know what the problem is?” he whispered as he cupped her face in his hands. “This is the problem.”

Before he could second-guess himself, he closed the distance between them and kissed her.

The moment their lips met, everything else faded away. The world outside ceased to exist. The chatter that had drifted into the room disappeared. There was only Judith, and the overwhelming rush of emotions flooding through him.

The kiss was gentle at first, tentative, as if he feared she might pull away. But when she didn't, when she responded with equal passion, something within him broke free. He poured all his unspoken feelings into the kiss, his thumbs caressing her cheeks, his fingers trembling against her skin.

Despite having kissed many ladies before, this was different. This was unlike anything he had ever felt. It was as if every other kiss had been a mere shadow, a pale imitation of this intense, thrilling connection. His heart soared, every nerve ending alive with sensation. He felt as though he were falling yet held safely in the warmth of Judith's embrace.

When the kiss finally ended, Aaron drew back, his breaths coming in ragged gasps. His heart hammered in his chest, his mind reeling from the intensity of what had just happened. He stared at Judith, her eyes wide, her lips slightly parted.

The realization of what he had done crashed over him, and guilt twisted in his gut. Suddenly, images of Amelia flashed before his eyes, and he thought back to the box of trinkets under his bed.

Why had he kissed Judith? He was bad for her, bad for any lady. Aaron had sworn to protect her, but here he was, about to ruin what could be the night that changed her life.

"I'm sorry," he stammered, his words raw with emotion. "I shouldn't have done that."

Judith blinked, confusion and hurt flickering across her face. "Why, Aaron? Why shouldn't you have kissed me?"

He looked away, unable to meet her gaze. "Because I can't give you what you want. I can't marry you."

Her confusion deepened, turning into frustration. “Then why did you kiss me?”

Aaron struggled to find the right words, his thoughts a tangled mess. “Because I couldn’t stop myself. But marriage... it’s something I can’t offer. I’ve never wanted it, and I don’t think I ever will. You deserve someone who can give you everything, and I’m not that man.”

“Then why... I... Aaron. I... I do not understand you,” she stuttered, her tone betraying her frustration.

“I do not understand myself,” he replied quietly.

“We must?—”

She stopped before he could figure out what she wanted to say, for they heard the sound of approaching footsteps. Aaron’s head snapped up, panic flaring in his chest.

“Someone’s coming,” he whispered urgently.

Judith’s eyes flashed with equal anger and sorrow, but she nodded. Without another word, she turned and hurried out of the library, leaving him standing alone in the flickering firelight.

As the door closed behind her, Aaron knew he had crossed a line, and there was no going back. His heart ached with a longing he had never known, and the bitter taste of regret lingered on his lips.

CHAPTER 23

J udith rushed away from the library, her breathing ragged, her mind a whirlwind. She barely noticed where she was going, her legs carrying her through the opulent hallways and out into the garden. The cool night air hit her face, but it did little to calm the storm inside her.

She found a secluded bench amidst the blooming daffodils and collapsed onto it, her heart pounding.

Why did he do this? Why did he kiss me?

The questions raced in her mind, each one twisting her emotions further. She had been so sure that Aaron saw her only as a friend, as a charge . But that kiss had shattered everything she thought she knew.

She buried her face in her hands, trying to gather herself, when she heard footsteps approaching. She looked up to see Joanna, her friend and confidante, hurrying toward her, her face etched with concern.

“Judith! Are you alright?” Joanna asked, alarmed. “I came to tell you that my husband and I are leaving, but what’s happened?”

Judith took a deep, shuddering breath, trying to compose herself. “Joanna, I... Aaron kissed me.”

Joanna’s eyes widened in surprise. “Aaron? But I thought... I thought he was just

your friend.”

Judith recounted the events of the evening to Joanna with a trembling voice. As she spoke, she found some solace in her friend’s steady presence.

Joanna listened intently, her brow furrowed in thought. “Judith, it sounds to me like the Duke is making excuses. Any gentleman would want to marry, even if just to secure their line, and the Duke has no younger brothers or cousins to inherit the title.”

Judith sighed, her hands twisting in her lap. “He’s never wanted to marry, Joanna. He doesn’t believe in the institution.”

Joanna shook her head. “It still sounds like he is making excuses. There must be something else stopping him. But what matters most is what you want.”

Judith’s eyes filled with uncertainty. “This evening, I was resolved to make a match with someone, and Lord Leeds is a good man, but my heart wants Aaron. What if Lord Leeds and I become closer and... What if we... What if my heart can never let go of Aaron?”

Joanna nodded thoughtfully. “From personal experience, I’m inclined to advise you to follow your heart, but that’s not right for everyone. You need to be sure of what you want and what you can live with.”

A distant bird chirped, the sound oddly soothing in the night air.

Judith took a deep breath, letting the sound anchor her. “You’re right,” she said finally. “I need to think about it. I can’t make a decision tonight.”

Joanna squeezed her hand reassuringly. “Take your time. Maybe say you have a megrim, go home, and give yourself space to think.”

Judith nodded, feeling a sense of clarity amidst the confusion. “I will. I’ll go home and think things through. Perhaps I’ll talk with Matilda as well.”

The friends hugged, their bond offering Judith a moment of peace.

She sat back down on the bench, replaying the moment Aaron kissed her in her mind. She could still feel the warmth of his lips, the intensity of his touch. Her heart ached with the longing she felt, knowing deep down that she wanted him and only him.

But she needed time to think, to understand her own heart and what she truly wanted. With a deep breath, she stood up and made her way back toward the house.

As she approached, she saw Aaron sitting on the steps, with Lord Leeds beside him. If he was going to confide in anyone other than Oliver about his true feelings, it would be his friend. Her curiosity piqued, she moved closer, hoping to catch what they were saying.

Aaron sat on the steps outside the ballroom, shaken by what he had done. Kissing Judith had felt so good and wonderful, yet it filled him with a gnawing dread. His thoughts kept drifting back to Amelia and her brother.

Thomas Cornell had been so vehement in his hatred of him that he’d been willing to ruin Judith rather than see her align with him.

How rotten a man was Aaron to have driven Amelia and her brother to such lengths? The thought of ever causing Judith such pain was unbearable. He couldn’t trust himself, not with her heart. He couldn’t imagine never loving her, but what if he did? What if he got bored? What then?

Lost in his thoughts, Aaron barely noticed Graham approaching until he sat down beside him.

Graham's enthusiastic voice broke through his inner turmoil. "Aaron," he said, "I must thank you, for Lady Judith is truly a marvel. She is what I had hoped for in a wife."

"That is good news," Aaron murmured, but he knew he didn't sound enthusiastic. This did not escape his friend's attention.

"Aaron, may I ask you something?"

Aaron forced himself to focus. "What is it?"

Graham hesitated, glancing at him. "I've noticed how you look at Lady Judith. I think maybe you're interested in her."

A sharp pang shot through Aaron's chest, but he quickly masked it with a dismissive laugh. "Interested? In Judith? No, Graham. I'm just looking out for her. She's like a sister to me, nothing more."

Graham looked skeptical. "Are you sure? Because it seems like there's more to it."

Aaron should have known he could not fool his friend. He'd known Graham for a long time, and aside from Oliver, he was the one who knew him best. He'd have to be more convincing.

His heart pounded, but he kept his voice cold and detached.

"Trust me, Graham. I am not interested in her at all. To tell you the truth, while she is lovely—and I think you could be very happy with her—she has been a bit of a burden to me. I've been so busy trying to help her find a match that I've not been able to enjoy my time in London at all. You'd do me a favor if you wish to court her."

“I see. So when I saw you looking at her, that meant what?” Graham asked.

“That meant I was making sure she was in good hands, that’s all. I have to report to Oliver when he returns, as you know. I have to keep an eye on her. But I will not be sad when I no longer have to be a governess of sorts to her,” Aaron said, recalling the words she’d spoken upon first hearing of this arrangement. “Besides, I’ve never wanted to marry, and I’m certainly not going to change my mind now.”

The words felt like shards of glass in his throat, each one sharper than the last. He had to make Graham believe him, even if it meant sounding cruel.

He could see the surprise and confusion in Graham’s eyes, but it was necessary. He couldn’t risk his friend suspecting the truth.

Graham slowly nodded, accepting Aaron’s words at face value. “Alright, if you say so. In that case, I think I’ll ask Lady Judith to promenade with me and perhaps visit the opera.”

Aaron forced a smile. “You should. Judith deserves someone who can make her happy.”

Graham smiled back, clearly relieved. “Thanks, Aaron. I’ll do my very best to do just that. I will most certainly pursue her.”

“You should. The two of you are perfectly matched,” Aaron urged.

As Graham walked away, Aaron felt a crushing weight settle in his chest. He had pushed Judith away and encouraged his friend to court her. The bitterness and sorrow mixed within him, leaving him feeling worse than ever. He knew he had done what he believed was best for Judith, but it didn’t make the pain any easier to bear.

Inside, his heart screamed in protest, torn between love and the fear of causing her harm. And so, he sat alone on the steps, the memory of their kiss still burning on his lips, and the bitter taste of regret lingering long after.

CHAPTER 24

J udith pressed her hand against her mouth as she listened to Aaron's words. How could she have been so wrong? She had truly believed that their kiss had meant something to him. It wasn't entirely meaningless.

She had been a fool. All along, she had known that his reputation was that of a rake. One of the worst rakes, in fact. He was known for his conquests. Wasn't one of the reasons she had chosen him to help her find a husband because he knew how to charm the ladies and thus teach a lady how to charm a gentleman?

And she had fallen for it. She had truly believed that he cared for her. How dumb. How incredibly foolish .

That kiss... it had felt so magical, so right. But no, it hadn't been. Perhaps she, in her delirious thoughts, had imagined it was special, but it hadn't been. It had been just another kiss stolen from another young lady.

Had she truly learned nothing from Amelia? From her brother? Should she not have listened to them?

"Well, I shall most certainly pursue her," Graham said as tears streamed down her face, caught by the back of her hand, which was still pressed against her mouth.

She stood up, her entire body shaking as she held onto the stone wall to her left.

"You should," Aaron urged. "The two of you are perfectly matched."

All this talk of him not being good for her had been nothing but poppycock. He had only said it to make himself feel better. To justify how he had allowed himself to fall back into his rakish ways.

Judith dropped her hand, and the tears continued streaming down her face. What was she to do now? Should she tell Oliver what his friend had done to her?

No, that wouldn't do any good. They might end up having a falling out, to be sure, but what good would that do? No. The best thing she could do right now was to pull herself together, find a mirror, fix up her face, and find Lord Leeds.

At the very least, what she had learned during this conversation was that Graham was genuine. He really did care about her. Unlike Aaron, who saw her as nothing but a nuisance, a plaything. Something that occupied his time longer than he would have liked.

She pulled her shoulders back and rushed deeper into the garden, in search of the back door. When she found it, she hastened inside and discovered that, fortunately, the Lord Chancellor and his wife had a great number of mirrors in their house.

She dabbed a handkerchief against her face, removing the streaks that the dark charcoal she'd applied around her eyes had left on her cheeks. It had carved rivers into her crushed white pearl powder, and it took some doing to fix it, but she managed.

Having fixed herself up, she squared her shoulders and raised her head, before making her way back into the ball.

She spotted Aaron in the corner, and he raised his hand to draw her attention, but she ignored him. Instead, she walked straight to Lord Leeds.

“Lady Judith,” he said, swallowing down whatever it was he had just eaten. “There you are. I was looking for you. I have to ask you if you wouldn’t mind joining me this weekend. I thought we could promenade at Hyde Park and perhaps go to the opera?”

“Of course. I would like nothing more. It is so wonderful to meet a gentleman who appreciates music as much as I do. But pray, I wish to ask... that is, if I am not being forward,” she ventured, batting her eyelashes at him the way Aaron had taught her. “You mentioned earlier you wanted to dance again?”

His eyes widened, and a smile appeared on his lips. “I would love to dance with you again. I was afraid I was the one who was being forward.”

“Not at all,” she assured him. “How does the floor sound?”

He nodded his head firmly. “That sounds rather wonderful. Pray, I just ate a little cheese, but I am still rather famished. Would you care to accompany me to the banquet room to see what is on offer?”

Judith was not hungry in the least. In fact, she wasn’t sure how she was going to get anything down, but she had to keep up appearances. She was going to show Aaron that he would not break her. She was not a burden. And if she felt she was a burden, then... well, she would unburden him by securing a wonderful match for herself.

The only thing that bothered her was that Lord Leeds was an upstanding, good man, one who hoped to make a life with a woman who loved him, and Judith was not entirely sure if she would ever be able to truly open her heart to him.

CHAPTER 25

J udith sighed as she read Rosy's letter for the third time. Her friend had arrived in Spain on the day the letter was posted, and it had been waiting for her. As usual, her good friend had replied immediately.

Of course, by the time Rosy's letter arrived, it was too late.

A fortnight had passed since the ball at the Lord Chancellor's house, and Judith hadn't seen Aaron. He'd called on her the day after, but she'd pretended she was suffering from a megrim, and after that, she'd ensured she was out of the house frequently, either to see Joanna or Lord Leeds—or Graham as he insisted that she call him. Anything to not see Aaron again.

She'd relayed a message to him via Matilda that she was courting Lord Leeds, and eventually, he'd ceased coming. In essence, his task was over. She was in a courtship, and she was certain Graham had told him as much. Therefore, Aaron had no business at her home until Oliver returned in two weeks.

Thus, Rosy's advice to follow her heart, to tell Aaron how she felt, had been for naught. Aaron didn't want her. He was nothing but a rake who'd played with her, that was all.

With a sigh, Judith sat at her desk, ready to reply. She dipped her quill into the inkwell and began writing.

Dearest Rosy,

I received your letter, and I am glad you have arrived safe and sound. As for me... I have been miserable.

She set the quill down and rested her head in her hands, the weight of her emotions pressing down on her. After a moment, she picked up the quill again, pushed the draft she had just started aside, and lowered her quill to the paper to attempt a second draft.

Dearest Rosy,

I received your letter and was grateful for your kind words and advice. However, things have not gone as I hoped. Aaron... You see, I have found that he is indeed the worst sort of person. He ? —

Judith paused, her hand trembling. She stared at the unfinished sentence, then abruptly crumpled the paper and threw it away, getting ink on her fingers. Frustration and sadness welled up inside her, and she stood up, heading to the basin to clean her hands.

As she scrubbed at the ink stains, her hands ached with the force she used to remove the evidence of her most recent activity. Tears blurred her vision. She tried to hold them back, not wanting to give Aaron the satisfaction of making her cry even if he wasn't here to see it. She hadn't cried at all these past two weeks. Instead, she'd stoically held the sadness in, not wanting anyone to know of her humiliation.

Alas, the dam broke, and she started to cry in earnest. The pain of Aaron's rejection, the feeling of being played with, overwhelmed her. Her shoulders shook, and she dropped the wash ball into the water, splashing the surrounding surface with droplets of water that sparkled in the sunlight streaming in.

Then, a wave of rage overcame her, and she gripped the wet wash ball and tossed it across the room, where it bounced against her sideboard and knocked down one of

her favorite patch boxes, which shattered on the floor.

“You fool!” she shouted at herself and stomped one foot, clenching her fists so hard that her nails dug into her palms.

She wiped her face, trying to compose herself, when a knock sounded at the door.

“Judith?” Matilda’s voice came through, filled with concern. “Judith? What’s wrong?”

Judith quickly dried her tears and opened the door, forcing a smile. “It’s nothing, Matilda. Just a bit of ink trouble and...” She glanced at the mess behind her, shards of porcelain on the floor and the burst wash ball in bits.

Matilda looked at her with knowing eyes. “It’s more than ink, isn’t it? Tell me what happened.”

“I threw my wash ball, and the patch box broke, and... I was so angry. I am so...”

Judith’s resolve crumbled. She stepped aside and let Matilda in.

“It’s Aaron,” she began, her voice shaky. “I thought... I thought he cared for me, but I was wrong. He’s horrible, and he thinks me nothing but a burden.”

Matilda’s face softened with sympathy. “Oh, Judith. I’m so sorry. Tell me everything.”

With a heavy heart, Judith did just that.

“Goodness, Judith. I am ever so sorry to hear this. It must’ve been so confusing for you to see him first kiss you and then hear him say such things. I have half a mind to

go to his home and have a word with him. Would you like me to do?" Matilda asked.

Judith immediately waved both of her hands in the air. "Please, do not do such a thing. It would make things worse," she pleaded, dreading the upheaval this would cause.

"Very well," Matilda conceded. "It certainly explains why you have not wanted to see him. I thought it rather strange that you avoided him these past two weeks. You were together so much before then."

"Yes, that is exactly why. I cannot look at him. I know I will see the person he truly is, and I think it will be too painful. It will only remind me of how silly I've been. Besides, he no longer needs to be around me now that I am courting," Judith mumbled, looking down at her hands.

"You have not been silly at all," Matilda said with a force in her voice that took her by surprise. "You have done nothing wrong. He did. He should never have kissed you. It is so improper, and if anybody had seen it, it would've ruined your chances with any other gentleman." She took a deep breath and fixed Judith with a determined look. "Speaking of other gentlemen. What about Lord Leeds? What do you feel for him? I've seen a lot of him recently. Marianne said she accompanied you several times."

Judith sat down on the settee and let out a deep breath. What did she feel for Graham?

He was kind, and he certainly liked her very much. They had gone together to promenade in the park as they had planned, and he had entertained her with stories of his travels. Two days later, they had gone to the opera, and he turned out to be a lover of music, just as she and Aaron were. She had enjoyed the evening; he was pleasant company, and the opera was amazing.

Still, despite his lovely personality, when he had taken her arm to walk her back to the carriage, she hadn't felt like walking close to him or accidentally brushing her hip against his, the way Aaron had taught her. It felt wrong. He hadn't minded, of course. In fact, he'd been the perfect gentleman and had not demanded anything of her other than her company, which she freely gave.

Well, she gave it because she had to, out of a sense of obligation rather than because she truly wanted to. Indeed, if she never saw Graham again, she would certainly not be distraught.

That was awfully unkind, wasn't it? It was rather clear that he wished to make a life with her if she let him.

Since the opera, they had met twice more. Once at a ball, and another time, they had gone down to Bond Street so she could purchase a birthday present for Matilda. He had taken an entire afternoon to walk to various shops with her to find the perfect gift. Not many gentlemen would have done such a thing.

He was considerate, charming, and handsome. He was everything a man should be, and yet she felt nothing for him.

She looked at Matilda and shared her thoughts. When she was done, Matilda said, "He sounds as though he is perfect for you, Judith. It is possible that your heart and your mind are not aligned, and that is why you cannot allow yourself to feel anything for Lord Leeds, but that doesn't mean it will always be like this. In time, you might forget about the Duke and what he has done. You will even grow to love Lord Leeds. He certainly sounds like the sort of man you could love."

Judith nodded. "He does. Indeed, I care for him and would not want to hurt him, but I cannot love him. I do not think I am capable of it. Perhaps if I had met him first. I can see myself developing genuine feelings for a person like him, but I did not meet him

first. I met Aaron, and I cannot forget or forgive myself—or him.”

“Judith, only you can know what will make you happy. My offer to speak to Oliver on your behalf still stands, as does my offer to take you into the dower house should things go badly with your brother. But you must ask yourself, what is it you want?”

“Matilda, two weeks ago I would’ve said what I want is Aaron. Especially after he kissed me. But now, I do not know. Now, I wish I could crawl back into my bed and stay there, but I must do the opposite. I don’t know what to do. I know what I must do. I know what the right thing would be. It would be to spend more time with Graham. It would be to accept an offer if he made one. For I know that I will not find another gentleman who is as compatible with me as he is.”

“You’re right. I think that is exactly what you should do. Do not forget, Judith, love can grow over time. Sometimes these attractions we feel for other people are just that—attractions—and they never turn into true love. We never know what the future holds, but I think the only thing we know with certainty is that the Duke has said some very unkind things about you behind your back and has not acted like the gentleman he ought to be. This is a fact.”

Indeed, it was a fact, and one Judith could not deny.

She nodded her head once. “You are right. I will continue to court Graham and do my best to forget about Aaron altogether. And if I am lucky, in due time, he will disappear from my life again as he has done before, and I shall never have to see him again.”

After all, he’d spent much of his life traveling, and she hadn’t seen him for what felt like ages before he’d so suddenly returned. Maybe he could do both of them a favor and disappear once more—this time for good.

CHAPTER 26

“... a

nd she adores music,” Graham said, his eyes twinkling, “and she dances like an angel. Her sense of humor is something to behold, and she’s such a vivid storyteller.”

He went on while Aaron sat beside him and opened his snuff box. He inserted his thumb and index finger into the snuff, then sniffed it up his nose, allowing it to tickle his nostrils and down his throat. Then he took his glass of brandy and emptied it in two swallows, before motioning for the waiter to bring another.

“That is wonderful, indeed. I am glad you are enjoying her company so much. You have seen a lot of her, haven’t you?”

Graham nodded. “Yes, I have seen her four times in the last two weeks, and I’m seeing her again tonight. I’m taking her to the theater. They are playing both a comedy and a drama. I thought I could not go wrong with that. She’s bound to enjoy at least one of them.”

“She will enjoy both, I am certain. She loves the theater,” Aaron said, wishing that he was in his friend’s stead.

“Are you quite certain you are not bothered by my courting her? You seem a little sullen.”

Aaron shook his head. “No, I am quite glad that you are getting along so well. I am

only sullen because I am bored. I have been cooped up inside for six weeks now, and I find it dull. I miss feeling the wind on my face. I have half a mind to travel to Italy. Would you care to join me?"

Graham had occasionally joined Aaron and Oliver on their journeys, but he hadn't for some time. Judging by his expression, he wasn't about to now.

"I think not. I have just met a woman I care for. I am not about to abandon her. No, my dear friend, I intend to spend as much time with Judith as she is willing to give me. And, if all goes well, I will make an offer soon. I plan to introduce her to my parents next week."

"Introduce her to your parents? Is it not a little soon?"

"I think not. I will see her a few more times before then. I will make sure it is a simple tea, not a formal dinner. But in time."

Aaron forced a smile, feeling the sting of his words. "That sounds like a good plan, Graham. I wish you both the best."

He heard the words come out of his mouth but knew he did not mean them. He wanted Judith at his side. He missed her more and more with each day. He'd hoped to see her after the ball, but she'd declined to see him time and again.

Why did he kiss her?

He could not understand himself. It had to have been the kiss that made her turn away from him. Well, in a way, it was good that he had done it because now he knew that she truly would not have wanted to be with him had he dared ask her. He hadn't seen her in almost two weeks now, and he felt her absence in his life acutely.

He had come to call on her the day after the ball, only to have Lady Worcester turn him away, telling him that Judith had gone to meet a friend. The following day, he happened to see her in the park with Graham and didn't even bother to approach her. Lady Worcester was with them, of course, acting as a chaperone. As he watched Judith and Graham walking and chatting, he wondered why she didn't let him know she was going to see his friend. But then he had to remind himself that he no longer played a role in her life.

He had been tasked with finding her a husband, or at least someone who had caught her interest by the time Oliver returned, and he had done that. She no longer needed him. It was painful to know how quickly she had turned on him. She had mentioned at the Lord Chancellor's ball that she and Graham were going to see one another regularly, but he had simply assumed he would guide her through the next few weeks.

Of course, a part of him had known that it wasn't necessary, but perhaps she might have allowed him to be around, to give her advice still. Yes, he was sure she would have because they had been friendly. He had come to regard her as a true friend, a true...

He rubbed his temples as Graham continued extolling Judith's virtues.

He knew she would have allowed him to remain in her life at least until Oliver returned, but he had ruined that when he kissed her.

Why did I do such a foolish thing? Why did I give in to my impulses?

He knew very well, given her behavior and lack of interaction, exactly how idiotic he had been.

It hadn't felt foolish at the time. It felt like nothing he had ever experienced, but the moment he stepped back and looked at her, all he saw was Amelia's face, and her

brother's twisted in anger. He was a bad influence on any woman, and he had to remind himself of that.

"I think it would be splendid, eh wot?" Graham asked and slapped him on the knee with a grin.

Aaron looked up, drawn from his thoughts. "I beg your pardon, I did not sleep well. What did you say?"

Graham took a gulp of his whiskey, his Adam's apple bobbing in his throat. He placed the glass down with a thud and carefully wiped the spilled liquid with his handkerchief.

"I said once you find yourself a young lady, we could all take a trip together—you and your lady, and me and Lady Judith. Maybe her brother could come. I am sure at his age, he is going to be looking for a wife as well. Especially now that he is already a marquess."

Aaron nodded. "Of course. We could do that. The Duke of Wells has sent me an invitation some while ago."

Of course, these were hollow words. He had no intention of going on any trips with anybody except for perhaps Oliver. Graham was right. Oliver, as much as he loved to embrace life, would find a wife now. He hadn't wanted to be a marquess, but now that he was, he would do what was expected. He'd find a wife, produce an heir, join Parliament... All the things Aaron should be doing.

My life will be awfully empty.

The thought occurred to him out of nowhere, but it had gotten its grip on him. He couldn't ignore it. Oliver would be married, and so would Graham. He had other

friends, but most of them were already married or turned out to be rather unpleasant, like Henry and Marius.

He would be alone, wouldn't he? His chest clenched as he tried to dislodge the unpleasant thought.

"I do not know... I mean, I'm not meant to be married. I don't think..." he said, hearing his words falter as they came out of his mouth.

"Why not? I know that your engagement with Lady Lundgren was a failure, but surely there are other young women. I know you always say that you think marriage will be boring, but I also know that you do not want to grow into an old, bitter man, do you?"

Aaron got up and poured himself another glass of whiskey, before downing it. He felt a little dizzy already, and the fact that he hadn't eaten anything or drunk anything but spirits did not bode well for him. He made his way back to the chair, slumping down into it more than anything else, and looked at his friend.

"Graham, you do not know this because you were away, but my breaking off my engagement with Lady Lundgren has put her in a terrible position."

Graham tilted his head to the side, indicating for him to continue.

Aaron made a full report of what transpired, including the fact that Thomas Cornell, in his anger at him, had been willing to ruin Judith instead of seeing her friendly with him. Thomas had been enraged and blinded by his anger—anger Aaron had caused.

"Ruin Judith?" Graham hissed. "How dare he? I should plant a facer on him."

"I already did," Aaron said. "He will not go near her again. But what I wanted to tell

you is that Amelia is unhappy in her marriage, and her brother blames me for it. Can you imagine how miserable she must be for her brother to act this way toward Judith, just because she is a mere acquaintance of mine?"

Graham steepled his fingers and stretched his shoulders as though he was preparing for a fight.

"None of this makes any sense, Aaron. Amelia was not ruined because you ended your engagement. It was unfortunate, but it certainly did not ruin her. She did not have to marry the Marquess of Lundgren. She could've married somebody else. Somebody younger."

"No, she couldn't," Aaron said. "I helped ruin her reputation. She was so shamed, nobody else would even look at her."

He relayed what Amelia had told him.

"That is not true. Pray, Aaron, do you really not know this?"

Aaron sat up straight and blinked at his friend. "What in the world are you talking about?"

"She turned down proposals after you ended things with her and then traveled to the Continent. Her parents engaged a matchmaker. I should know because I was one of the gentlemen who courted her."

"You courted Amelia?"

Graham shrugged and waved a hand dismissively.

"I would not even call it courting. I danced with her at a ball, and I sat beside her at a

dinner hosted by her parents. However, after the dinner, I was informed by the matchmaker that Lady Lundgren had set her sights on higher-ranked gentlemen. At the time, it did not bother me. I didn't even want to court her—I did it because my mother insisted. I wasn't ready then.

“But in any case, I do know that the Earl of Westcott was interested in her and was told a similar thing, as was the Baron Langley. While you were away, Amelia gained a reputation for being picky and difficult. The reason she did not find a match was that she spent the whole Season after you left turning down every gentleman who was not ranked highly enough—in her opinion.”

Aaron was shocked. “Is this true? You are certain?”

“Absolutely. You did not ruin Amelia. She ruined herself. Likely, her brother's reaction is due to him not wanting his sister to be blamed, and he has just embraced the idea that it is all because of you. He might not even know what she did.”

The revelation was like a punch to the gut, knocking the breath out of him and leaving him grappling for clarity. He couldn't sit there any longer, drowning in his tumultuous emotions.

“Graham, I—I'll be right back,” Aaron stammered, rising unsteadily to his feet. “I just need a moment.”

“Of course,” Graham replied, a concerned look on his face as he watched his friend walk away.

Aaron quickly made his way to his bedchamber, each step feeling heavier than the last. As soon as he entered the room, he closed the door behind him and leaned against it, his breaths coming in short, ragged gasps. He could feel his heart pounding in his chest, the weight of the truth pressing down on him.

“What have I done?” he whispered to himself, running a hand through his hair.

He moved to his bed, his eyes drawn to the box hidden beneath it. His hands trembled as he reached for it, dragging it out from its hiding place. He needed to remember that he wasn’t a good husband for Judith or anyone else. Even if Amelia had lied about the circumstances leading to her current marriage.

He looked at the trinkets but felt nothing but hollowness inside his chest. So what if he had been a rake? Judith hadn’t cared... Or maybe she had? She hadn’t spoken to him since he kissed her, after all. So that had to mean she wasn’t interested, right?

But maybe if he hadn’t struggled so much with his trepidations, he might have confessed his love to her another way, a more delicate way that wouldn’t have pushed her away.

It didn’t matter anymore anyway, he told himself. She was with Graham now. With his good friend. It was over.

He dropped to box onto the ground and glared into it, seeing his past—and his only possible future.

Gripped by rage, he kicked the box, sending assorted ribbons and patch boxes across the floor. He heard the telltale sound of porcelain breaking, but he didn’t care.

He’d ruined any chance of ever confessing his true feelings for her. He’d fulfilled his duty to her brother and found her a match—that was all he had to do. It was over now.

Judith didn’t need him anymore, and the only thing left for him to do was to embrace the life he’d lived before her. The only life he’d known. One that was free of obligations—and one that now seemed so empty that it made his stomach twist with

regret and dread of the future.

CHAPTER 27

Judith and Graham exited the box at the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, where they had just enjoyed a performance of Richard Brinsley Sheridan's *The School for Scandal*. The theater was a bustling hive of excitement, the air filled with the buzz of conversations as patrons discussed the play. The scent of perfume and cigars mingled with the faint aroma of greasepaint from the stage.

The streets outside the theater were lit by flickering gas lamps, casting a warm, golden glow on the cobblestone streets. Carriages lined up to collect the theatergoers, and the sounds of hoofbeats and murmured voices filled the night air.

As they walked toward Graham's carriage, he kept close to her side. Judith could smell his cologne, a subtle blend of sandalwood and citrus, pleasant and refined. It was a scent that matched his personality perfectly—for he was always pleasant.

She had enjoyed the performance and his company, but as they strolled along, she couldn't help but reflect on the past four weeks since they had begun courting. Everything had been very... pleasant. And that was the word that seemed to define her feelings for Graham. Pleasant.

Nothing more, nothing less. Her stomach did not flutter when she thought of him, she didn't feverishly anticipate their reunions once they had parted, nor did she sit and imagine her future with him. Their courtship simply was what it was. A part of her life. No more or less exciting than her daily dressing routine or dinner.

"Did you enjoy the play?" Graham asked, breaking the comfortable silence between

them.

“Yes, very much,” Judith replied with a smile. “The wit and humor were delightful, and the actors did a splendid job.”

“I’m glad to hear that. Sheridan’s plays always have a way of bringing out the best in both performers and audiences,” Graham commented. “I’ve always admired his work.”

Judith nodded in agreement, though her thoughts were elsewhere. As much as she tried to focus on the enjoyable evening, her mind kept wandering back to Aaron and the confusing emotions he stirred within her.

She had been determined to move on, to give her attention to Graham, but despite his many admirable qualities, she felt no spark, no excitement. Not the way she’d felt with Aaron before his unkind words had extinguished that spark. Well, mostly. There were still nights when she lay in her bed and looked out the window, wondering what he was doing.

She hadn’t seen him aside from by happenstance at an outing, but she’d not spoken to him if she could avoid it. A forced “good day,” or civil whiskers, that had been all. She’d noted the way he’d looked at her, sad and sullen. But why that was, she didn’t know.

She expected he’d soon leave again for faraway lands. Good. She did not want to continue running into him by chance. It made it much harder to forget the feelings she’d harbored for him.

“There is our carriage,” Graham said, pulling her out of her thoughts. He was about to open the door for her when he snapped his fingers. “Lady Judith, I’ve forgotten my gloves in the box. I would not normally bother retrieving them, but I bought them in

Italy, and they are expensive.”

“Please, go get them. I can wait here. Or I can join you if you want,” she offered.

He shook his head. “I’ll just be a moment. Please wait here,” he said, before hurrying back to the theater entrance.

Judith watched him go, then turned to look around. The night was cool but not uncomfortable, and the open air was a welcome change from the stuffy confines of the carriage. She stepped onto the pavement to stretch her legs and take in the sights of Drury Lane.

The street was alive with people, the theater patrons mingling with street vendors and the occasional late-night reveler. She could hear the distant strains of music from a nearby tavern, adding to the lively atmosphere.

As she stood there, enjoying the scene, her gaze was drawn to a couple walking toward her. Her heart skipped a beat when she recognized they were no couple at all but instead Lady Lundgren and her brother, Thomas Cornell. They were approaching her, and she felt a sudden urge to flee but found herself rooted to the spot.

Lady Lundgren’s eyes widened with recognition as they drew nearer. “I know you,” she muttered, stopping before her. “You were with Aaron at Almack’s,” she said, her voice dripping with condescension. “Fancy seeing you here.”

Thomas Cornell, whose stern expression mirrored his sister’s disdain, added, “Lady Judith, isn’t it? Indeed, it is you.”

Judith’s heart pounded in her chest. She remembered all too well how Thomas had forced himself on her, and now here he was again, with his haughty sister.

“Yes, it is,” she replied, trying to keep her voice steady.

She looked at the theater’s entrance, wishing Graham would hurry up and get out. She calculated how long it would take him to get back inside, past the stragglers and up the stairs to his box, then down again. He might be gone a little while longer.

Lady Lundgren looked her up and down, her lips curling into a faint, disapproving smile. “I hope you’re not still keeping company with that arrogant man.”

Judith felt a surge of anger and a desire to defend Aaron, but she caught herself. Why should she feel any loyalty toward a man who had kissed her and then dismissed her as nothing but trouble?

“I am here with Lord Leeds,” she stated, lifting her chin slightly. “We were just leaving the theater.”

“Good,” Lady Lundgren uttered with a nod of approval. “You shouldn’t waste yourself on an aloof, arrogant duke when you can have a decent earl.”

“Indeed, Lady Judith. I am glad you escaped the situation unscathed,” Thomas said.

“Not thanks to you,” Judith snapped.

He blinked at her as if wounded. “Anything I did, I did to protect you,” he said quickly while his sister looked at him with surprise.

Lady Lundgren didn’t know, did she? How did she think he ended up with a split lip that night?

“You attempted to ruin me because you did not like my being with Aaron—I would not call that helping,” Judith countered in as snippy a tone as she could muster.

“You did what?” Lady Lundgren gasped.

“You did not tell her? You forced yourself on me, and if not for Aaron, you would have ruined my reputation,” Judith hissed.

Thomas gulped before turning to his sister. “Nonsense,” he huffed. “Let us go.”

“You told me he attacked you at random,” Lady Lundgren said as her brother dragged her away from the scene.

Judith watched them walk away, a knot forming in her stomach. She felt dreadful, though she couldn’t quite understand why. Was it because of the disdain in Amelia’s voice? Or perhaps it was the reminder of how Aaron had treated her, dismissing her so easily after that kiss.

She was still lost in her thoughts when Graham returned, gloves in hand.

“Shall we?” he asked with a warm smile, extending his arm to her.

Judith forced a smile and took his arm, allowing him to help her into the carriage. The last thing she wanted was for him to notice something was amiss. As they settled into their seats, the carriage began to move, and Graham struck up a conversation about the play. Judith responded politely, but her mind was elsewhere.

The carriage ride back to her home was uneventful and filled with more pleasant conversation. Graham was charming and considerate as always, making her laugh with a few anecdotes about his childhood. But beneath the surface, Judith’s thoughts churned with confusion and doubt.

When they finally arrived at her home, Graham helped her out of the carriage.

“Thank you for a wonderful evening, Lady Judith,” he said, looking into her eyes. “I hope we can do this again soon. Perhaps on Sunday?”

“Yes, that would be lovely. Oliver will be back on Monday, by the way. I had a letter from him this morning,” she revealed, having forgotten all about it.

“Ah, very well.” Graham smiled. “Then I shall be sure to call on him. Now, I will collect you after church on Sunday, and we can go to Hyde Park with my sister and mother, yes?”

She’d met his mother and sister twice, and they were nice enough, though she was in no rush to see them again. Alas, she had no good reason to say no and thus nodded.

“Of course,” Judith replied with a smile, though her heart wasn’t in it.

She watched as the carriage drove away, then turned around and walked slowly toward her front door.

Inside, the house was quiet, the servants having retired for the night. Judith made her way to her chamber, feeling a strange mix of emotions. She was grateful for Graham’s attention and kindness, but she couldn’t shake the feeling that something was missing.

She closed the door behind her and leaned against it, taking a deep breath. Her thoughts drifted back to her encounter with Lady Lundgren and her brother. She felt a pang of anger at how they had spoken about Aaron. But even more than that, she felt a sense of loss.

Judith crossed the room to her dressing table and sat down, staring at her reflection in the mirror. She could see the confusion in her eyes, the uncertainty about her feelings. Why did she still care for this man? Why did she miss him? It made no sense. She

should be happy and focus on the future. As Lady Leeds, she could have a good life. She'd have children and a grand home to live in... Yet, it all felt empty.

Oliver would be back soon. Graham would want to see him, and no doubt he'd make an offer. He'd hinted at it for a few days now. Judith ought to be delighted, but she wasn't. A part of her wanted to decline, to embrace Matilda's offer to take her into the dower house, but she knew she couldn't. It wouldn't be right.

Judith stood up and walked to the window, looking down at the quiet street below. The moon cast a soft glow over the cobblestones, and she felt a sense of calm wash over her. She knew she couldn't rush this decision, that she needed to take her time and really think about what she wanted.

As she stood there, lost in thought, she made a silent promise to herself. She would make the best of this. If Graham proposed, she'd accept. She'd have a grand wedding at St. George's of Hanover in London, she'd move into his beautiful, big house in Mayfair, and she'd have children. The sound of laughing children would fill their home, and she'd grow old at Graham's side. They'd be grandparents. Maybe even great-grandparents. They'd go to dinners, balls, the opera. They might travel. It would be a good life. A pleasant life.

"Oh!" she gasped when she felt wetness roll down her cheeks. Had she been crying?

I cry when imagining the ideal life. What is wrong with me?

But of course, she knew what was wrong. She might be imagining the perfect life, but it wasn't with the man she had fallen in love with.

Curse that Aaron Fitzwilliam, for he'd put a spell on her heart, one she found impossible to break—but one she knew she had to break anyhow, or else her life, picture perfect as it might be, would be miserable indeed.

CHAPTER 28

Aaron wrapped his hands around his glass of whiskey, the sound of laughter and chatter filling the room around him. It was a Friday night at the Goose and Gander, and the approaching Season had made it particularly busy. Many of the lords and ladies who wintered in the countryside had returned, anticipating the start of the parliamentary and social seasons. Aaron would not be here for that. He had already booked passage on a ship to Italy in a month's time, with no desire to be present during the upcoming Season.

"I hear Lord Markham is looking for a husband for his youngest," Henry said, looking up with a mischievous grin. "Anyone here in need of a wife? Aaron? Are you interested?"

"You know I'm not," Aaron replied curtly.

Henry chuckled. "Well, good. I suppose a duke could do better. Markham's daughter is not what you would call a diamond of the first water. A little stuck-up, if you ask me, and her skin..." He lowered his voice as he laughed.

The three other gentlemen, with whom Aaron was only vaguely familiar, burst into laughter as well.

Aaron pushed his chair back so quickly that it almost toppled over. He had no patience for their superficial chatter, especially since all they seemed capable of were insults toward otherwise perfectly respectable young ladies.

“What is it? Have I offended your sensibilities?” Henry asked, raising an eyebrow. “You used to be one of the first chaps to join such chatter.”

“I most certainly never joined with slanderous comments aimed at innocent young ladies, and you know this.”

Henry rolled his eyes. “You certainly think you are holier than thou, don’t you? Is it not enough that you’re going to win a substantial amount of money once your ward gets married?”

“She is not my ward, and I regret the wager. It was uncouth,” Aaron said.

Although in the back of his head, he wondered if the wager might not be a chance to talk to Judith once more. He owed her half of whatever money he would earn, after all. But then again, he’d only earn it if she was in a steady courtship with marriage on the horizon—and he didn’t want that... He’d rather lose the money.

“What is this wager?” one of the men asked, his eyebrows raised.

“His Grace here bet me a healthy sum that he could get the Marquess of Worcester’s sister married before Worcester returns. I bet that he couldn’t. Familiar with the young lady and her questionable charms, I was wrong. She has been courting Lord Leeds for the last few weeks, and rumor has it that he will make an offer once Lord Worcester returns. This will deprive me of a substantial sum.”

Aaron’s hands shook at his friend’s words. “She does not have questionable charms,” he fired back. “She is a lovely young lady, and the fact that she is about to be married should be all the proof you need.”

Henry snorted. “You have fallen for your charge. Well, I will say you have done a commendable job—she has been rather more pleasant of late. Better put together, too.

You have worked your charm. But I dare say that the man who claimed to ‘not be easily charmed by a lady’ has indeed been charmed.” He chuckled, elbowing the men to his left and right. “Although why you chose her, I do not understand. We should not have to put so much work into a lady one is interested in. They say Leeds will make her his bride, but she will likely revert to her stuttering, gauche, unsophisticated self.”

Aaron didn’t quite know what had come over him, but he stormed around the table and grabbed Henry by the collar before he could stop himself. He marched forward, forcing him to back up until the wall brought them both to a halt.

“I will not have you talking about her in such a manner. Judith is a lovely young lady, and I will not have men like you sully her good name—or any other lady’s. I would remind you that you are almost thirty years old and have yet to find a bride. Perhaps it is you who is charmless and in need of etiquette lessons.”

Henry stared at him, his eyes bulging as he struggled to free himself. “Let go this instant. Illingsworth, Garner, do something!” he called to the two men who had been sitting with him.

However, they only stared, while the third, whose name Aaron couldn’t remember, had half-risen from his seat, his buttocks hanging in mid-air as he seemed to debate what to do.

Finally, the third man decided to sit back down after some contemplation and smirked.

“Quite a brave band of brothers you have,” Aaron drawled, releasing Henry and shoving him into the wall once more for good measure.

He finished his drink, grabbed his jacket and top hat, and walked out, followed by

Henry's curses, which grew louder as he walked away.

Out in the night, Aaron stopped at the corner, doubling over as he pressed his hands to his knees to catch his breath. It hadn't been his first fight in a tavern or a club, far from it, but he had never fought with someone he had regarded as a friend. Seeing Henry's true colors now, Aaron wondered why he had ever considered him a friend.

How had he ever kept company with such a vile man? It seemed unconscionable to him now. He had never spoken about any lady in such a disparaging manner, nor would he ever. But he had kept company with men who did, which spoke poorly of his character.

Judith was fortunate that she had decided to shun him in favor of Graham. Graham was not the sort of man who spoke of ladies in the manner Henry had. Neither was Oliver. The two young gentlemen, his dearest friends, were upstanding, though they each had their own faults.

"Graham!" a voice sounded, interrupting his thoughts.

He looked up to see a carriage pulling up beside him, the window lowering to reveal a familiar face.

"Oliver?" Aaron called out, hardly believing his eyes.

He crossed the road, taking care not to be run over by one of the curricles speeding down the street, and Oliver threw his carriage door open.

"I have just returned," Oliver announced with a broad smile. "What are you doing out here?"

"I was at the tavern with friends. They collected me at my house, but we had a bit of

a quarrel, so I am going to have to take a hackney home,” Aaron replied, still confused to see his friend here.

“Well, get in. I’ll give you a ride to Hyde Park Corner. I would say I will take you home, but I have business in town before I go home,” Oliver said, pulling the carriage door open.

Aaron climbed into the carriage, and then they took off. The interior of the carriage was plush and warm, a stark contrast to the chilly evening air outside.

“I cannot believe you are back. It seems like you left yesterday . France, right?” Aaron asked, settling into his seat and allowing the soft leather to cradle his back.

“Yes, I was there to talk to some suppliers about imports,” Oliver replied. “I am glad the wretched war is over and the ban on French imports lifted. I went to Italy as well, I’ll have you know. It’s been a productive trip. Met a young woman in Italy, actually. Thinking of bringing her back to England.”

“Really?” Aaron said, intrigued.

Oliver often met ladies who piqued his interest during his travels, but he never had the desire to bring one home to make his wife.

“Tell me about her.”

“Her name is Elizabeta. I call her Lizzy. She’s the daughter of a merchant I was dealing with. Intelligent, charming, and quite lovely. I’m considering courting her.”

“Sounds promising, although a merchant’s daughter? Won’t that be frowned upon?”

“Perhaps, but her uncle is a count, so there is that. Besides, the English nobility will

be too dazzled by her charm and beauty to notice,” Oliver said with a chuckle.

As they continued to chat about Oliver’s trip, Aaron felt a growing sense of unease. Oliver described his journey through the Continent in vivid detail—the bustling markets of Paris, the picturesque canals of Venice, and the rustic charm of the Italian countryside. Aaron listened, but his mind kept wandering back to Judith. He couldn’t shake the image of her face, her smile, and the sound of her laughter. And soon, Oliver would ask about her, and he’d have to tell him the truth.

As long as Oliver was away, there was a chance that things might still go wrong with Graham and Judith, but now it was inevitable.

“I actually met Elizabeta in Florence,” Oliver was saying. “She was at a social gathering hosted by one of the local merchants. We struck up a conversation, and the rest, as they say, is history. She’s well-educated and speaks several languages. Quite impressive, really. She came with me to Paris, and I must say, the city is indeed for lovers.”

“She sounds wonderful,” Aaron noted, though his heart wasn’t in it.

Oliver noticed his friend’s distraction. “How have you been, Aaron? You seem a bit... off.”

“I’m fine,” Aaron replied quickly. “Just tired, I suppose. It’s been a long day.”

“Understandable.” Oliver nodded. “But do take care of yourself. I’ve missed our conversations.”

Aaron managed a small smile. “I’ve missed them too.”

“Now that I’ve told you all about my love life, what about my sister? Did you do as I

asked?” Oliver inquired, concern lacing his voice.

Aaron’s stomach dropped. Here it was. The dreaded question.

He braced himself and nodded. “Yes, she’s in a courtship,” he confirmed, keeping his voice steady.

“Is that so? And with whom? I hope she is not with some baron—or worse, a baronet.”

“No, she is courting Graham Baxter,” Aaron replied quickly, getting it out of the way.

“Old Graham? Well done, I would have chosen him too had I known he was in town and looking,” Oliver said, nodding appreciatively.

Aaron nodded. “Yes, she’s been courting him for the past few weeks. She seems happy. Though I’ve not seen her much since.”

“Good,” Oliver uttered, a smile playing on his lips. “Any troubles? Is he going to make an offer?”

“You should ask her yourself,” Aaron replied, feeling a pang of something he couldn’t quite identify. “She will gladly tell you.”

As they neared a busy intersection, Aaron felt an overwhelming urge to be alone. Fortunately, they were almost at their destination.

“I’m going to catch a hackney home,” he said abruptly.

Oliver looked at him with concern but nodded. “Very well, take care of yourself, Aaron.”

Aaron was about to get out of the carriage when his friend grabbed his arm.

“Pray, will you do me one more favor? Call on me tomorrow. I want to talk to you and Judith together.”

“I don’t think that is necessary,” Aaron said quickly, not wanting to admit just how badly things had gone.

Suddenly, he worried Judith might tell her brother about the kiss. But that didn’t make sense. Why would she do such a thing? It would make things more awkward for everyone.

“Yes, I insist. I also want to share some of the delicacies I’ve brought back with me. That’s the least I can do. Call on us at one o’clock. I’ll have tea ready. I’ll hear no argument,” Oliver insisted.

Aaron nodded reluctantly before he stepped out of the carriage and watched as it drove away. He hailed a hackney, his mind awl with thoughts of Judith, Graham, and the path his life seemed to be taking. As he settled into the seat and gave the driver his address, he couldn’t shake the feeling that everything was slipping through his fingers.

The night air was cool and crisp, the city alive with activity. The hackney rumbled along the cobblestone streets, passing rows of townhouses and shops. Aaron leaned back, closing his eyes for a moment, trying to quell his inner turmoil.

His thoughts kept returning to the conversation he had just had with Oliver, and the realization that he had been more affected by Judith’s courtship than he cared to admit. How could he have allowed himself to fall in love with her?

Stupid...

He remembered the way Judith used to look at him, the way her eyes would light up when he entered the room. He had dismissed those feelings, convinced that he was doing what was best for her. But now, he couldn't help but wonder if he had made a terrible mistake.

As the hackney drew closer to his home, Aaron felt a sense of dread settle over him. He paid the driver and stepped out, standing on the steps of his London townhouse. It had always struck him as excessive to own a home in Brixton, on the outskirts of town, and a townhouse, but the townhouse was convenient for times such as this, when he couldn't be bothered to return to the country so late at night.

With a heavy heart, he entered his home, the door closing behind him with a soft click, leaving the noise and chaos of the city outside.

CHAPTER 29

The next morning, Judith woke up with a start. The room was filled with the soft morning light. She didn't bother ringing for Marianne and dressed herself quickly, having taken a bath the night before. Her hair had a slight wave to it, and she made sure to let a few curls frame her face.

As she headed out into the hall, she could hear the faint sounds of activity downstairs. John had recovered quicker than expected and returned to Eton the previous week, and Matilda wasn't in the habit of coming into the manor house so early.

Curious, she made her way to the landing, stopping only to stretch, feeling the friendly ache of a good night's rest, and slowly made her way down the grand staircase. As she neared the bottom, she heard the voices coming from the drawing room.

"John has recovered now and gone back to Eton, but it was quite the disaster. Without your friend, we would not have been able to bring him home—it was rather unfortunate." Matilda's voice drifted to her ears. "That incident at Eton was entirely unacceptable. What if he hadn't been there to help us?"

"I know," came Oliver's familiar voice.

Judith let out a yelp, clapping her hand over her mouth. She'd known he'd be back any day now, but to hear his voice first thing in the morning shook her. He had to have arrived in the middle of the night.

“I’ll speak to the headmaster and make sure that you are authorized to remove John if need be. But in any case, once Judith is married, we will have her husband on hand to help, should I have to go out of the country again,” Oliver explained.

“Good, I do not think it was right what happened,” Matilda reiterated.

Judith was pleased to hear her stepmother had stood up to Oliver already.

“And it will not, I assure you. I am very grateful you were here to look after him. I’ll visit him next week,” Oliver said.

Judith smiled as she listened to her brother. She hadn’t realized how much she had missed him until she heard his voice. Theirs had been a complicated relationship, but he was her family, and Aaron’s words regarding Oliver’s reluctance to be a marquess and his fears of not being as well regarded as their father had softened her toward him.

Excitement bubbled up inside her, and she rushed down the remaining steps, her slippers barely making a sound on the polished wood.

She burst into the drawing room, her eyes wide with joy. “Oliver!”

Oliver turned, a broad smile spreading across his face. “Judith!” he exclaimed, opening his arms wide.

She threw herself into his embrace, feeling the familiar comfort and warmth. “I’ve missed you so much,” she said, her voice muffled against his shoulder.

He chuckled, holding her tightly. “And I’ve missed you too. Truly, I never thought I would, but I did.”

She would have been offended by his less-than-praising words, but she knew exactly what he'd meant. In the past, she'd never missed him when he was away nor dreaded his departure, but this time, she had missed him. Perhaps it was because they no longer had parents to look out for them, forcing them to rely on one another and Matilda, their stepmother.

Judith pulled back, her cheeks flushed with happiness. "How was your trip?" she asked eagerly.

Oliver's eyes sparkled with amusement. "It was quite the adventure, but I'll tell you all about it over breakfast." He glanced at Matilda, who was watching the reunion with a fond smile. "Shall we?"

Matilda nodded. "Of course. Let's move to the breakfast room."

As they walked together, Judith couldn't help but feel a sense of relief and contentment. Having Oliver back felt like a missing piece of her life had been restored. The house seemed brighter, the air lighter.

Once seated around the breakfast table, Oliver began recounting his travels.

"The Continent is as lively as ever," he started, buttering a slice of toast. "I had some successful meetings with suppliers about new imports. And I met a young woman, Elizabeta, in Florence. She's the daughter of a merchant I was dealing with."

"Elizabeta?" Judith echoed, intrigued. "Tell me more about her."

"She's intelligent, charming, and quite lovely," Oliver said with a smile. "I'm considering bringing her back to England."

Judith's eyes widened. "Really? That sounds wonderful, Oliver. I can't wait to meet

her.”

Oliver nodded, but his expression grew serious. “And how have you been, Judith? I heard you’re courting Lord Leeds.”

Judith felt a strange mix of emotions at the mention of Graham. “Yes, we’ve been courting for a few weeks now. He’s very kind and respectable.”

Oliver studied her for a moment. “And are you happy?”

Judith hesitated, then nodded. “I think so. It’s all been very pleasant.”

There was that wretched word again. Pleasant . Could she not think of a better way to think of her suitor or at least to talk about him with more enthusiasm?

“Pleasant?” Oliver repeated, raising an eyebrow. “You deserve more than just pleasant, Judith.”

She cringed, for she’d hoped her brother would not have noticed. Although, why did he care? He was the one who’d pushed her into all of this.

She looked down at her plate, feeling a bit unsettled. “I know. But it’s still early days.”

“Oliver, we ought to be happy that Judith likes him. Besides, you wanted her to wed, did you not?” Matilda chimed in and winked at Judith, who felt a rush of warmth flood her. She had an ally at this table, at least.

Oliver reached across the table and took his sister’s hand in his own. “Well, yes. I do want you to get married. Can’t have you turn into an ape leader, after all, eh wot?” he said with a laugh, and for a second, Judith saw the old Oliver again. “But I do think it

is important that you find him agreeable.”

Judith looked up and met his gaze, feeling the sincerity in his words. “I do. And do not worry, I shall not become an ape leader.”

As they continued their meal, the conversation shifted to lighter topics, and Judith found herself laughing and smiling more than she had in weeks. Having Oliver back had lifted her spirits, and for the first time in a long while, she felt genuinely hopeful about the future.

After breakfast, Oliver excused himself to take care of some business, leaving Judith and Matilda alone.

Matilda looked at Judith with a knowing smile. “It’s good to have him back, isn’t it?”

Judith nodded. “Yes, it really is.”

“Now, what are your plans for the day?” Matilda asked, changing the subject.

“I think I’ll take a walk in the garden,” Judith said, standing up. “Would you like to join me?”

Matilda shook her head. “No, you go ahead. I have some letters to write.”

Judith made her way to the garden, the cool morning air refreshing against her skin. She wandered among the flowers, her thoughts drifting to Oliver, Lord Leeds, and the future. For the first time in a while, she felt a sense of clarity.

The garden door opened then, and her brother stepped out, motioning for her to wait.

“Judith, is everything quite alright? Did Aaron take good care of you while I was

away? There were no issues, were there?”

Issues? Well, Aaron had kissed her and then called her a burden after placing a wager on her ability to find a husband. And that was after he’d humiliated her in front of his cocky friends. And then there was the trouble with Thomas Cornell...

It had been an eventful few weeks, but none of this mattered now. Thus, Judith simply nodded, feeling a wave of awkwardness wash over her. She didn’t want to talk about Aaron at all, so she quickly changed the subject.

“Lord Leeds has been very attentive.”

Oliver furrowed his brow slightly, but he let her redirect the conversation. “Do you think he will propose soon?”

“Yes,” Judith replied, trying to sound enthusiastic. “I believe he will.”

However, the lack of genuine excitement in her voice was evident, even to her own ears.

Oliver sighed, leaning back in his chair. “I had a lot of time to think during my trip. I’m sorry if I pushed you too hard about finding a suitor. Elizabeta has been an influence on me when it comes to matters of the heart,” he admitted, his cheeks reddening.

Whoever this young woman was, she’d changed her brother.

“I just wanted what’s best for you. I love you, Judith.”

Judith was taken aback, feeling a warmth spread through her. “I love you too, Oliver,” she said, her voice soft with emotion. “It means a lot to hear you say that.

And I want you to know that you do not need to worry. You will make a wonderful Marquess of Worcester. I know Father has left large shoes to fill, but you will fill them well. And Matilda will help.”

“I see Aaron has spoken out of turn,” he said and grimaced, but then he smiled again. “I do thank you for your trust in me. But I am worried. Father was so popular. I always aspired to be like him, but I fear I never will get there...”

“You will,” she repeated. “But you must be your own man. There is no point in aspiring to be him—you must be yourself, and people will follow.”

“You’re right. I must say, both you and Matilda are quite changed. She is more direct than she has ever been before, and you are bolder than you were when I left. Have you learned that from her?”

They sat in comfortable silence for a moment before Judith said, “Matilda and I get along very well now. We’ve grown quite close.”

Oliver smiled. “I’m glad to hear that. Family is important, and I want us all to be closer and to listen to one another.”

Judith nodded. “I want that, too.”

Their conversation was interrupted when a carriage rolled down the drive and Judith spotted the crest of the Duke of Nottingham. Her heart skipped a beat, and a flurry of emotions surged through her.

“I have dallied too long. I need to get ready,” she stated quickly, rising from the bench.

“You’re leaving? But I invited Aaron to have tea with us to talk about the last few

months,” her brother said, genuinely surprised.

Judith chewed on her bottom lip and shrugged. “I do beg your pardon, but I made my plans before I knew you were returning. I’m seeing Joanna this morning.”

Oliver looked slightly disappointed but understanding. “Well, alright. I suppose if you made commitments. But wait. I invited Aaron here, so the least you could do is greet him before you go.”

Judith hesitated but nodded, knowing she could not get out of this. “Alright. But I must make haste.”

Oliver got up from his chair, and together they walked toward the carriage just as Aaron stepped out.

“Aaron,” Oliver called in an excited tone. “You are here! I am afraid I made a miscalculation when I told you to have tea with the both of us. It seems my sister already has plans of her own with the Duchess of Wells.”

“What a shame,” Aaron said and looked at Judith. His eyes penetrated her walls, and she felt that familiar rush that had come over her every time he was near. “I’ve been looking forward to talking to you again. It has been a while, Lady Judith.”

Chiding herself for it, she took a deep breath and made herself look at him. Their eyes met for a brief, awkward moment. “It cannot be helped, Your Grace,” she replied softly, avoiding his gaze.

“Your Grace? Lady Judith? Are you telling me the two of you have been calling one another by your titles this entire time?” Oliver sounded genuinely aghast.

Aaron flashed a small smile. “Judith,” he said hesitantly.

“Aaron,” Judith returned, but she said nothing further.

Fortunately, Oliver had taken charge of the conversation, thus breaking the silence that threatened to settle between them.

She nodded once more, then quickly excused herself. “Right, well. I am expected at my friend’s home. Enjoy your tea.”

She slipped away before the tension became unbearable.

As she made her way upstairs to prepare for her visit with Joanna, Judith couldn’t help but reflect on the jumble of feelings that had surfaced upon seeing Aaron again.

She realized that despite everything, her feelings for him hadn’t faded. But with Graham’s impending proposal and the expectations placed upon her, the path ahead felt more uncertain than ever.

CHAPTER 30

Aaron and Oliver entered the grand house, their footsteps echoing in the spacious foyer. The butler took their coats and hats, and they moved toward the drawing room, where tea had been set up.

Aaron couldn't help but glance repeatedly into the great hall, hoping to catch another glimpse of Judith. Seeing her again after so long was both a delight and a torture. Her beauty and grace were undiminished, but the cold anger in her eyes made his heart ache.

They settled into the plush chairs, the warmth of the tea a stark contrast to the chill in Aaron's heart. He regretted the kiss that had ruined their friendship, the kiss that had driven a wedge between them. It had been a moment of weakness, a slip that had cost him dearly.

As he sipped his tea, he heard Judith's soft voice drifting down the staircase. She was speaking to her maid, her tone light and casual, a stark contrast to the tension he felt. He leaned forward slightly, straining to hear more, his heart pounding in his chest.

Judith...

His hands itched with the urge to go after her, to explain himself, to make amends. The sound of her footsteps descending the stairs filled him with desperate hope, but then hers and the maid's voices faded away as they walked out the front door.

His opportunity was slipping away again.

Just then, the butler entered the drawing room, his expression one of mild distress. “My Lord, I beg your pardon for the interruption, but it is urgent.”

“What is it?” Oliver asked, looking up at him.

“There has been an accident in the kitchen, My Lord,” the butler explained. “The cook is hurt.”

Oliver immediately rose to his feet. “I must tend to it,” he said, concern etched on his face.

Aaron saw his chance and seized it. “It’s quite alright, Oliver. We can have dinner at the club this evening.”

Oliver nodded, already halfway to the door. “Very well, Aaron. I’ll take care of this.”

As Oliver hurried away to the kitchen, Aaron stood up, leaving his top hat behind in his haste. He rushed to the front door, his heart racing. He couldn’t let Judith leave without speaking to her.

Bursting out into the courtyard, he saw her just ahead, her delicate figure framed by the soft light of the afternoon.

“Judith!” he called out, his voice filled with urgency.

She turned, surprise flickering across her face before it hardened into a mask of indifference.

“Yes, Your Grace?” she asked coolly. Her use of his title was a deliberate stab to the heart.

Aaron took a deep breath, stepping closer. “I need to speak with you,” he said. “Please, give me a moment.”

Judith hesitated, her eyes scanning his face as if searching for something. Finally, she nodded, though her expression remained guarded.

“Very well. What is it you wish to say?”

Aaron’s heart pounded as he prepared to pour out his regrets and hopes, to find a way to mend what he had broken.

“I wanted to apologize for the kiss, I should not have done it. I didn’t mean to upset you,” he began, trying to keep his voice steady.

“The kiss? You already apologized the night it happened. Why must you bring this unfortunate situation up again?” Her tone was cold like an icy bucket of water.

“I think it’s the reason you’re upset with me. You stopped speaking to me the day after this happened, and you’ve been avoiding me ever since.”

Judith’s eyes flashed with a fiery intensity. “You think that’s why I’m upset? You’re wrong, Aaron. It’s not just the kiss.”

His apprehension grew, and a lump formed in his throat. “Then what is it?” he asked, desperate to understand, his mind racing with regret. “I do not understand.”

“What do you not understand? I do not know why you thought you would have a role in my life still. You were to find me a husband. You did. That is all,” she snapped, while her maid glanced out of the carriage, her eyebrows raised.

“But I thought we had become close—friends, at least,” he said, knowing how stupid

it sounded even as he spoke the words.

“Friends? That is what we were in your eyes? That is how you treat your friends? Aaron, you wish to know why I am angry with you? Very well. You played with my emotions,” Judith accused, her voice trembling with hurt. “You made me fall in love with you, you kissed me, and then you told Graham that you could never be with a woman like me. That I am nothing but a burden. What kind of man does that?”

Aaron felt a wave of despair wash over him. This was why she’d rejected even his friendship. She’d heard his cold words, words he hadn’t meant then and even less so now. She must have overheard their conversation.

He struggled to find the right words. “Judith, I didn’t mean any of it. I only said those things to protect you. I never would have said any of it had I known you would hear.”

“Oh, I understand those words were not meant for me. I understand very well,” she all but sneered and looked away, as if it disgusted her to look into his eyes. “And protect me? From what?” she demanded, her hands curled into fists.

Aaron took a deep breath, his chest tightening. “I believed I would never be a good husband. And... I thought that by kissing you, I might have implied that I wanted more, and then I was... I... I didn’t mean any of it. I’ve only ever tried to protect you from getting hurt by me.”

Judith shook her head, her tears spilling over. “Well, you’ve done a fine job of that, haven’t you? Now you can rest easy, knowing that my husband-to-be will protect me from now on. You have done your job, and you are free of the burden. Please, enjoy your freedom, for you have rightly earned it.”

She spun around and climbed into the carriage. Aaron’s heart shattered as he watched her disappear from view. Every step she took felt like a dagger to his heart.

The door closed, and the carriage started to move away. He stood there, feeling utterly defeated, as the woman he loved slipped further and further out of his reach. His mind, his body, his whole being was awash with regret and sorrow, the realization that his misguided attempts to protect her had only caused more pain.

As the carriage disappeared down the street, Aaron felt an overwhelming sense of loss. He had tried to do the right thing, but in the end, he had only driven her away. The image of Judith's tear-streaked face lingered in his mind, a haunting reminder of the love he had pushed away.

He returned to his estate, his mind in turmoil. He had made a grave mistake, one that seemed irreparable now. He couldn't push the image of Judith's angry face out of his mind, and her words rang in his ears. Every step he took through the grand halls of his home felt heavy with regret.

Pacing through the estate, he found himself unable to settle. The walls seemed to close in on him, each room a reminder of the choices he had made. He wandered aimlessly until he reached the gallery, where a painting of his parents hung. He stopped in front of it, staring at their stern faces.

He clenched his fists, the weight of his realization pressing down on him. Amelia had spun a web of lies, convincing him that his actions had ruined her life. In his guilt and confusion, he had allowed those lies to influence his decisions, to shape his fears about his potential for happiness.

As he gazed at the painting, another thought struck him. Had he, in his desire to rebel against his parents, sabotaged his own happiness? His parents had always been strict, their expectations high and unwavering, their marriage unhappy. He had spent his life trying to defy them, to prove that he could live on his own terms. But in doing so, had he simply chosen a path of self-destruction?

“I’ve been such a fool,” he whispered, his voice breaking. “I let my fear and anger drive me to push away the one person who made me truly happy.”

The realization was like a punch to the gut. He had been so focused on proving to himself that marriage was boring and only a bachelor’s life was worth living while running from his parents’ influence that he hadn’t seen the opportunity for genuine happiness standing right in front of him.

Judith had been that opportunity, and he had let her slip through his fingers.

He sank into a nearby chair, his head in his hands. The weight of his mistakes felt almost too much to bear. How could he have been so blind? So foolish?

He knew now that he needed to make things right. He couldn’t change the past, but perhaps he could change the future. He needed to find a way to show Judith how much she meant to him, to prove that he was worthy of her love.

With renewed determination, Aaron stood up and began to pace again, this time with purpose. He needed a plan, a way to win Judith back. And he knew he wouldn’t rest until he had done everything in his power to make things right.

CHAPTER 31

The soft peals of laughter filled the parlor as Judith, Rosy, and Joanna gathered for tea in Rosy's elegantly decorated sitting room. The sun streamed through the large windows, casting a warm glow over the floral wallpaper and antique furniture.

Rosy's home was the epitome of grace and comfort, a sanctuary where the three friends often gathered to share their lives' joys and challenges.

Rosy and George had just returned from their trip to Spain, which had been cut short due to an impending flood. Despite the abrupt end to their travels, Rosy was in high spirits, delighted to be back among friends. Joanna, ever the lively one, recounted the latest Society gossip with her usual flair, her eyes sparkling with amusement.

However, once they had caught up on the latest events in town, Rosy turned to Judith, and the latter's shoulders tensed up.

Judith had told Rosy all about her feelings for Aaron, and thus far they hadn't had a chance to talk about it. Of course, Rosy had to have heard the latest news about Judith courting Graham.

"So, Judith," Rosy began, turning her attention to her friend. "You must tell me how you came to court Lord Leeds. The last time you wrote to me, you said that you were fond of the Duke of Nottingham."

"Aaron? I did not know you cared for him!" Joanna exclaimed. "I thought that the two of you looked at one another in a certain way, but I didn't think that you and he

would... I am perplexed.”

Judith wetted her lips and looked out the window. “I was silly, I should not have written that. It was a moment of weakness because I thought I’d be alone forever and he was there for me. I thought if I could be with him, my problems would be resolved, but no. I was silly, and now I am courting someone who truly cares for me and I for them.”

But then a thought came to her—the second letter! She’d written to Rosy after the kiss in the library and given her a full report. She’d been interrupted by Matilda, but she’d finished writing it and sent it. Rosy never mentioned receiving it and therefore apparently did not know what had happened after.

Should she ask her about it? No, if Rosy hadn’t received the letter while in Spain, there was little chance she would now. It was best to let it go, and if she ever did receive it by chance, Judith could dismiss it. By then, she’d be married already.

“You mean Lord Leeds? I’ve heard about this,” Rosy said. “Is it really serious? Do you think he’ll ask you to marry him?”

Judith hesitated for a moment, then took a deep breath. “Well, actually, Lord Leeds has spoken to Oliver,” she explained, trying to keep her voice steady. “He wants to marry me, indeed.”

Rosy and Joanna gasped with delight, their faces lighting up with joy.

“That’s wonderful news!” Joanna gushed, clapping her hands together. “I remember when Kenneth spoke to Father about our marriage. It was such a thrilling time.”

“And George,” Rosy added, a fond smile on her lips. “He was so nervous when he asked for Father’s permission. It seems like only yesterday.”

“Was Lord Leeds’ proposal romantic?” Joanna asked, leaning forward with interest. “You must tell us all about it!”

Judith forced a smile, though she felt a heavy weight in her chest. “It was,” she replied. “He proposed after a concert in the carriage, and I said yes.”

She smiled, but it never reached her eyes. It had been sweet and would have been romantic if she loved Graham in any way, but she didn’t. And thus, it meant little. Already, the memory was becoming blurry.

Rosy and Joanna exchanged delighted glances.

“How wonderful!” Rosy beamed. “But, Judith, you don’t seem very excited. Is something the matter?”

Judith shrugged, trying to sound nonchalant. “It’s a good match, and I am pleased with it,” she said. “Lord Leeds is a fine man, and I know we will have a good life together.”

Her friends looked at her with confusion, sensing there was more beneath the surface.

“But are you happy?” Joanna asked hesitantly. “You don’t seem as overjoyed as we expected.”

Judith avoided their gazes, focusing on her teacup. “I am content,” she stated. “And that is enough.”

“Is content truly enough?” Joanna asked gently.

“I think it will need to be,” Judith replied. “I already said yes, after all. And besides, I am four-and-twenty and already not well regarded in Society due to my age and past

broken engagement. I must be realistic, and Lord Leeds is the best match I can hope for. I assure you, I will be fine.”

The sisters looked at one another, and she felt that they didn’t believe her.

“The two of you were lucky to find love. Not everyone is. And I’ve come to understand that if I want to have security in the future, I need to have a husband who can provide it.”

The mood was dampened a little after this declaration, and Judith knew that she would be at odds with her friends, who had both married men they loved. Although not without tribulations of their own.

They finished their tea and moved on to less vexing subjects, though Judith felt the heaviness in the air still. Perhaps it was merely due to her own mood. She ought to be happy she was getting married, but she didn’t feel it. There was no excitement, no desire to plan the venue, the music, the wedding breakfast. Nothing.

It was Rosy who suddenly interrupted the silence that had settled over them when she snapped her fingers.

Her eyes lit up with amusement. “I received a letter from you this morning,” she said, picking an envelope from the table beside the chaise.

“What?” Judith sputtered, her lips parting as she recognized her own handwriting on the letter. The cursed letter that mentioned the kiss between her and Aaron, and his betrayal.

“It was forwarded to me from Spain, and I thought it would be fun to read it together now that we are all reunited.”

Judith's heart sank, her stomach twisting into knots. "No, Rosy... really, there's no need. I already told you everything that is in the letter." she stammered, reaching out to take the letter from her.

But Rosy, ever the playful one, held it out of reach with a mischievous smile. "Nonsense! It's been a while since I received a letter from you, Judith. I'm sure it will be full of interesting news you haven't shared yet."

Judith's face flushed with panic as Rosy began to unfold the letter. Desperate, she reached for it again, but Rosy held firm.

"Rosy, please," Judith pleaded, her voice trembling. "It's private."

Rosy looked at her friend, her playful expression softening. "Private? What do you mean?" She glanced at Joanna, who sat upright.

"Oh, does it contain something about me?" Joanna asked, sounding genuinely dismayed.

"No," Judith said. "I'd never write anything disparaging about you to Rosy or anyone else."

"Then what's the matter?" Joanna asked, concerned. "If it's truly private, I can leave. But why didn't you say so earlier?"

"It's not that... It's..." Judith bit her lip, feeling a lump rise in her throat. "I... I didn't want to burden you with my worries," she admitted, tears welling up in her eyes.

Joanna leaned closer, her face full of sympathy. "Judith, we're your friends. You can tell us anything."

Judith took a deep breath, trying to steady herself. “The letter... it’s about Aaron,” she confessed. “I wrote it when I was feeling lost and confused.”

Rosy nodded, understanding flickering in her eyes. “I see, I had a feeling there was more to it than you let on,” she said gently. “Why don’t you tell us what it says? You don’t have to read it if you’re uncomfortable.”

Judith hesitated, then nodded, knowing she owed them some explanation. “The night Aaron took me to the Lord Chancellor’s home to introduce me to Lord Leeds, he kissed me.”

Both her friends gasped, and Rosy clapped a hand over her mouth. “Kissed you? Goodness, but then why are you with Lord Leeds?” she asked.

“Because he apologized immediately, and I felt so confused because I realized then that I really loved him. I didn’t realize it fully until after he kissed me, and then... everything fell apart. I went to find him and overheard him in the garden, telling Lord Leeds that I was nothing but a burden to him.”

“A burden? But why kiss you if you were only a burden?” Joanna frowned.

“What a scoundrel,” Rosy hissed.

“I don’t know, but I understood right then that I was a fool and that he just kissed me because he is a rake and he saw his chance and... He didn’t care for me at all. So I stopped speaking to him. I avoided him and kept my distance. Instead, I courted Lord Leeds,” Judith explained miserably.

“I knew there was a change in you lately—even Kenneth noticed it,” Joanna admitted. “But I didn’t want to pressure you into telling me what had happened. Oh, Judith,” she sighed, reaching for her friend’s hand. “Why didn’t you tell me sooner?”

Judith shook her head, feeling the weight of her emotions pressing down on her. “I thought it was hopeless,” she mumbled. “He told Lord Leeds he could never be with a woman like me. I felt so betrayed and hurt.”

Rosy’s eyes softened with understanding. “I’m so sorry, Judith,” she said. “But you should have told Joanna, even if I was away. I wish I had been back sooner. We could have helped you through it.”

Judith nodded, wiping away a tear. “I know. But now, with Lord Leeds’ proposal... I just want to move on. I need to move on.”

Joanna squeezed her hand reassuringly. “We’ll support you no matter what, Judith. But you deserve to be truly happy. Don’t settle for less.”

Judith smiled weakly, grateful for her friends’ support. “Thank you,” she said. “I just need to find a way to make peace with it all.”

“Judith,” Rosy began softly, setting her teacup down and looking at her friend with concern. “How do you really feel about him now? The Duke, that is.”

Judith hesitated, her fingers nervously tracing the rim of her teacup. The question struck deep, and she felt a wave of emotions surge up, threatening to overwhelm her. She tried to speak, but her throat tightened, and tears welled up in her eyes.

Before she could stop herself, she buried her face in her hands and burst into tears.

“I don’t know,” she sobbed. “I’m so angry, Rosy. One moment I think I hate him, and then the next I long for him and think I love him. It’s tearing me apart. I feel so rotten for being torn over it, when I have a good man who wants to share his life with me.”

Rosy and Joanna immediately moved closer, their faces filled with sympathy. Joanna

wrapped an arm around Judith's shoulders, offering silent support, while Rosy handed her a handkerchief.

"You're not a bad person for feeling this way," Rosy said gently. "It's natural to have conflicting emotions, especially given everything that's happened."

Judith sniffled, wiping her tears with the handkerchief. "But Lord Leeds ... I feel like I'm betraying him by having these feelings."

Joanna squeezed her shoulder reassuringly. "Judith, you deserve to be happy too. You shouldn't marry someone just because it's expected or because you feel obligated."

Judith looked at her friends, their kindness and understanding touching her deeply. "But what should I do?" she asked, her voice trembling. "I don't want to hurt Lord Leeds, but I also don't want to live a life full of regrets."

Rosy took Judith's hands in hers, looking at her earnestly. "You need to follow your heart, Judith. Do what feels right for you, not what everyone else expects. If you have doubts, it's important to address them now, before you make any decisions."

"And if you would rather be alone, then that is your right," Joanna added. "People may judge you, but you must decide what is best for you. Not them."

Judith nodded, taking a deep breath as she tried to calm herself. The truth in Rosy's words resonated with her, and she knew she had to find the courage to face her true feelings.

"Thank you," she murmured, her voice steadier. "I needed to hear that. I've been so caught up in what everyone else wants that I forgot to think about what I truly want."

Joanna smiled warmly. "We're here for you, no matter what you decide. You don't

have to go through this alone.”

Judith felt relief wash over her. She had been carrying the weight of her emotions in silence for so long, and finally sharing her struggles with her friends made her feel lighter. She knew the path ahead wouldn't be easy, but with Rosy and Joanna by her side, she felt more capable of navigating it.

As the conversation shifted back to lighter topics, Judith found herself smiling and laughing more genuinely. She still had a lot to sort out, but she felt more hopeful than she had in weeks. Her friends' support had given her the strength to face her feelings head-on, and she knew she would find a way to make the right decision for her future.

For now, she decided to take things one day at a time, focusing on her happiness and well-being. With Rosy and Joanna's encouragement, she felt ready to confront her emotions and find her path to true happiness.

CHAPTER 32

Aaron strolled through Hyde Park, his thoughts a whirlwind of regret and longing. The crisp morning air did little to soothe his troubled mind. He was haunted by the memory of Judith's pained expression and her words that cut deeper than any blade.

He had spent the past week replaying every moment, every mistake, wishing he could turn back time and undo the harm he had caused.

As he rounded a corner, he spotted Rosy and her husband, George, in the distance. His first instinct was to turn and walk the other way, avoiding a confrontation he knew was inevitable. But it was too late, Rosy had already seen him.

"Duke!" her voice rang out, sharp and unyielding.

George, looking slightly apprehensive, followed her as she marched toward Aaron.

Aaron steeled himself, knowing there was no escaping this encounter.

"Good morning, Duke." He nodded to the Duke of Cambridge, and then turned to his wife. "And you, Duchess. It is good to see you again."

He shook hands with George and then bowed to Rosy.

"We need to talk," she demanded, her eyes blazing with anger. "I can't believe how you mistreated Judith."

Aaron blinked, utterly taken aback by her outburst. He did not know any of Judith's friends well, and certainly not well enough to speak with them so intimately.

George put a hand on Rosy's arm, attempting to calm her. "Rosy, perhaps we should discuss this privately," he suggested.

"No, George," she snapped. "This needs to be addressed now."

Aaron felt his heart sink. He had expected this, but it didn't make the reality any easier to face. "Duchess, I know you're angry, and you have every right to be," he began, his voice low.

"Angry?" Rosy scoffed. "I'm beyond angry. I know everything you did—kissing her and then telling Lord Leeds that she was nothing but a burden."

Aaron took a deep breath, feeling the weight of his guilt pressing down on him. He looked around. A great many spectators were around them, but he knew he had to answer the young woman—and maybe find out how Judith was doing at the same time.

He'd been pondering what to do for days now, and more than once he had mounted his horse to ride to Worcester House to confess his feelings, but he'd not dared. He feared ruining something truly decent for Judith by inserting himself into her courtship. Besides, she'd been clear how she felt about him the last time they spoke.

"I was foolish, Duchess," he admitted.

For a split second, he wondered if he ought to tell them the truth or not, but then it came to him—it didn't matter anymore. The situation could not possibly get any worse.

“However, the truth is that I kissed her because I truly love her.”

Rosy’s eyes widened in surprise. “You love her? Then why did you say those horrible things?”

Aaron hesitated, struggling to find the right words. “I was scared. My parents had a terrible marriage—cold, distant, and boring. I was always afraid of getting trapped in something like that. And then there was Lady Lundgren...”

Saying it all out loud felt oddly good, freeing.

“Lady Lundgren?” Rosy echoed, confusion mixing with her anger.

“Yes. Lady Lundgren and I were betrothed. I broke off our engagement, and she married another man. I thought she was happy, but when I met her again recently, she let me know that her life was rather miserable because I ruined her chances of a good match. She said she was forced to marry a man much older than her, and I felt dreadful. I thought it was completely my fault, and I didn’t want to do the same to Judith,” he explained.

George, who had been listening intently, finally spoke up. “That explains your fear, but it doesn’t explain why you would speak badly about Judith to Lord Leeds. It makes no sense.”

Aaron nodded, feeling a pang of shame. “Graham—that is Lord Leeds—suspected there was something between me and Judith. I thought if I convinced him that there was nothing between us, he would court her and be the man she deserves. I wanted her to be happy, even if it wasn’t with me.”

Rosy’s expression softened slightly, though her eyes still held a hint of anger. “You don’t sound like you think that was such a good idea anymore.”

Aaron looked down, his hands clenching into fists. “No, it wasn’t. I’ve been a wreck since they started courting, because I love her, Duchess. And I’ve come to find out that Lady Lundgren lied to me. She ruined herself by chasing after high-ranking gentlemen. It had nothing to do with me at all. She ruined herself but blames me for it, and I believed her.”

Rosy and George exchanged a glance, their anger giving way to a more profound understanding.

“I have done much thinking and self-reflection these last few weeks, and I understand now,” Aaron continued, “that not every marriage ends up boring and cold. I also know now that I’m not a terrible man who ruined a woman’s happiness, and I could have been happy with Judith. But now she doesn’t want me anymore. She hates me.”

Rosy’s anger finally melted away, replaced by a sadness that mirrored his own. “You need to tell her all of this,” she urged softly. “She deserves to know the truth. And you are wrong. She does not hate you.”

Aaron shook his head, his eyes filled with despair. “I disagree. I attempted to speak to her, and she refused. She doesn’t want to see me. She made that clear. I’ve lost her.”

“Not for good. I spoke to her just yesterday, and she is torn over what has happened. She loves you, I know she does. She will marry Lord Leeds if you do not stop her because she believes it is the right thing to do, given her age and circumstances, and because she thinks you spoke badly about her because you do not value her. You must tell her the truth.”

George stepped forward, placing a hand on Aaron’s shoulder. “You owe it to her—and to yourself—to try. Don’t give up on love because of your past mistakes. I almost did, and it would have cost me everything.”

He looked at his wife so tenderly that Aaron felt the love between them.

Something inside him shifted as their words sank in. Judith loved him still?

“You truly believe she would forgive me?”

“If you explain it to her, yes,” Rosy said with absolute conviction. “And Lord Leeds deserves better than to have a wife who can never love him because she is in love with someone else.”

Aaron looked at George, then back at Rosy. “I’ll try,” he promised, his voice resolute despite the fear that still gnawed at him. “I owe her that much.”

Rosy nodded, a small smile touching her lips. “It’s not too late, Duke. Show her that you truly care. But go now. I happen to know she is to plan the wedding this afternoon—she will be at home.”

As they parted ways, Aaron felt a glimmer of hope amidst the overwhelming guilt and regret. He knew he had a difficult path ahead, but he was determined to make things right. For Judith, and for himself.

CHAPTER 33

Judith sat in the drawing room, surrounded by the hum of conversation. Sunlight streamed through the tall windows, casting a golden glow over the polished wooden floors and the elegant furniture.

The room was decorated with fresh flowers, their scent mingling with the faint aroma of the tea that had been laid out on a low table between them. The chatter around her was lively and cheerful, but she struggled to keep her mind on the discussion.

Graham, Oliver, and Matilda were animatedly talking about the details of her upcoming wedding. Graham, ever enthusiastic, held up sketches of floral arrangements, his eyes sparkling with excitement.

“Lady Judith, what do you think of these bouquets?” he asked eagerly.

Judith forced a smile and nodded. “They look lovely, My Lord,” she replied, her voice sounding distant even to her own ears.

“Which is your favorite? I quite like the roses, but if you’d rather have tulips...”

“No, the roses are lovely,” she assured him, pointing at the drawing.

“Very well, roses it is,” Graham said.

Oliver, who was sitting beside Matilda, nodded approvingly. “A splendid choice, Graham. These arrangements will add a touch of elegance to the ceremony.”

Matilda glanced at Judith and mouthed, “Are you alright?”

Judith quickly nodded, not trusting herself to speak.

Matilda gave her a small, concerned smile before turning back to the conversation.

Oliver and Graham were getting along famously, discussing every detail with a camaraderie that should have warmed Judith’s heart. Instead, it only added to her guilt.

“I was thinking we could have a string quartet for the wedding breakfast,” Graham continued, oblivious to her inner turmoil. “It would be perfect, don’t you think?”

“Yes, that sounds wonderful,” Judith replied, though her thoughts were elsewhere.

She felt a pang of guilt for not being more present, for not sharing in his excitement.

“Excellent! I’ll arrange for them right away,” Graham declared, jotting down a note. “I will ask for the quartet that played at Lord Laurel’s dinner. Do you remember them?”

Judith nodded, though she could not recall the details. The days and their outings had bled one into the other, and she could no longer distinguish between them.

Matilda noticed her distracted expression. “Judith, what do you think about the venue decorations? We have a few options here.”

Judith glanced at the sketches her stepmother handed her, but the lines and colors blurred before her eyes. “They’re all beautiful. I’m sure whatever you choose will be perfect.”

Matilda frowned slightly but let it go, turning her attention back to Graham and Oliver, who were discussing the guest list.

“And for a maid of honor? Do you think you will choose the Duchess of Cambridge?” Graham asked.

“Rosy? Yes, yes, I should think so,” Judith replied. Although, in reality, she hadn’t wasted a moment thinking about bridesmaids and such.

“And who will be your best man?” Oliver asked with a wink. “I shall say I have an idea.”

Graham grinned. “Of course, it will have to be Aaron. I’ve not asked him yet, but I shall.”

At the mention of Aaron’s name, Judith sat upright and blinked.

“He will be at the wedding?” she blurted out without meaning to.

Oliver and Graham looked at her with surprise, while Matilda’s face paled slightly.

“Of course,” Graham said. “After all, Aaron brought us together,” he reminded her, chuckling.

“Really, Judith. You need to stop being so unkind to him. I know you do not like him and he teased you when you were children, but you were quite terrible to him as well. Besides, you are adults now,” Oliver chided her.

If only you knew the truth.

“It was a true miracle that he brought us together, Lady Judith. Without him, I might

not have found you again. He is quite fond of you, I will say,” Graham assured her. “So much so that I remember thinking for a moment that Aaron wanted to keep you for himself because I was sure he saw us talking in the park, but he denied it.”

Judith’s heart skipped a beat. She knew for certain that Aaron had seen her talking to Graham—he had been the one to tell her to stand there and feed the birds. Why would he deny knowing who she was? Could it be that he had feelings for her, after all?

No, no, she had to stop these foolish thoughts.

Graham noticed her reaction and looked at her quizzically. “Is everything alright, Lady Judith?”

Judith managed a weak smile. “Yes, of course. I was just... thinking about how fortunate we are.”

Matilda gave her another concerned look, but Judith couldn’t bring herself to explain. She felt trapped, torn between her love for Aaron and her desire not to hurt Graham. She knew that marrying Graham while still in love with Aaron would be unfair to him, yet the thought of calling off the wedding and facing the scandal was daunting.

And what was wrong with her anyhow? Why could she not let go of this man, who’d made it clear that she was nothing but a burden to him?

“Let’s go over the menu for the reception,” Oliver suggested, trying to keep the conversation light. “Judith, do you have any preferences?”

Judith shook her head. “Whatever you all decide will be fine. I’m not picky.”

Graham looked at her with a mix of concern and confusion. “Are you sure, Lady

Judith? This is your special day. I want it to be perfect for you.”

She nodded, swallowing past the lump in her throat. “Yes, I’m sure. I trust your judgment.”

The conversation continued around her, but Judith felt more and more detached. She knew she should be excited, should be fully engaged in the planning of her own wedding, but all she could think about was Aaron and the conflicting emotions that tore at her heart.

Matilda tried to draw her in again. “Judith, how about the cake? Do you have a favorite flavor?”

Judith blinked, trying to focus. “Oh, um... maybe something simple, like vanilla.”

Matilda exchanged a glance with Oliver, clearly worried. “Very well, vanilla it is.”

Graham reached over and took Judith’s hand. “I just want you to be happy, Lady Judith. If there’s anything you want, please don’t hesitate to say so.”

She squeezed his hand, feeling a wave of guilt wash over her. “Thank you, My Lord. I appreciate it.”

Their conversation was interrupted by the sound of the butler’s footsteps marching down the hall. The steady, deliberate sound filled the room, drawing everyone’s attention to the door.

The butler, a tall man with a dignified bearing, paused just inside the threshold and looked at Oliver. “Excuse me, My Lord. The Duke of Nottingham is here.”

Judith felt her heart stop. She grew pale, her thoughts racing. Why was Aaron here?

What could he possibly want?

Oliver glanced at her, noticing the sudden change in her demeanor. “Judith, were you expecting him?”

“No, surely he must be here to see you,” she replied.

“Aaron is always good for a surprise,” Graham chimed in with a chuckle. “I’m sure he heard we’re planning the wedding and wanted to give us his advice—particularly when it comes to which spirits and sweetmeats to serve.”

Graham meant well, but Judith could not shake the feeling of dread in her stomach.

Oliver stood up. “I’ll go and see what Aaron wants. After that, we should go and meet with old Lady Leeds. She is meeting us at the Mayfair house to plan the wedding breakfast. We’ll let her know our decisions and then move on with the planning. You go ahead and get ready, Judith.”

Judith stood up as he stepped out into the hall.

“Judith, you do not seem very happy with the planning,” Graham noted, drawing her attention away from the door. “Are you sure you are not unwell? It is quite normal to feel that way. I can ask my mother to take over more of the planning. She will gladly do it.”

His mother... Judith thought she might throw up. She’d met Lady Leeds numerous times, and while she was a tall, robust, and thus intimidating lady, she was also kind and sweet. There were so many more people involved in this now than just Judith and Graham...

She could not let Aaron deter or confuse her. Not that she had any reason to believe

that was why he'd come. Still, Judith needed to know why he was there.

"I assure you," she replied, "I am well. I simply do not have many ideas for the wedding. I was never the sort of girl to plan her wedding with her friends, fantasizing."

That was a lie. For she'd spent hours with her friends planning their perfect weddings. She simply didn't want to admit that it was their wedding she had no interest in planning.

"If that is all, I can understand," Graham relented.

She felt a strange anger rising within her.

Did he have to be so perfect and understanding all the time? If there was a bad quality in him, she might not feel so terrible.

What a strange thought. I must have lost my mind.

"It is," she said. "Now, let me collect my gloves from upstairs."

She hurriedly left the room, her mind reeling. She needed to get away, needed to clear her head. As she exited, she caught Matilda's glance and knew right away that her stepmother knew there was more to this—and soon she'd confront her. And then, her web of lies would grow even more intricate because she could not admit to anyone that her heart, her silly heart, still yearned for the man who'd wronged her so badly.

Aaron held his breath as he saw Oliver striding purposefully toward him.

His friend smiled at him, but then he furrowed his brow. Aaron's presence clearly surprised him.

“Aaron, now isn’t a good time,” Oliver said, his voice firm and unyielding. “My family and I are meeting with Graham about the wedding.”

Aaron clenched his fists, his heart pounding. “It can’t wait, Oliver. I need to talk to you about Judith.”

Oliver frowned, frustration and concern etched on his features. “What about Judith?”

Aaron took a deep breath, detecting the scent of lavender and roses in the air. “It is of a personal nature. Could we step into the…” he trailed off as he saw Judith make her way toward the stairs.

She suddenly stopped and turned around, as if she’d changed her mind about her destination.

“Aaron?” Oliver called.

Before Aaron could answer, Judith made her way toward them. She looked stunning in a light blue silk gown that flowed elegantly around her, accentuating her graceful figure. Her hair was swept up in an intricate chignon, with a few delicate curls framing her face. Her eyes, however, were filled with confusion and apprehension as they met Aaron’s.

“Aaron, why are you here?” she asked, her voice full of surprise and tension.

Aaron’s heart ached at the sight of her. He took a deep breath, trying to steady his nerves. “I need to talk to you both.”

“I have nothing to say to you,” she declared.

“Judy,” Oliver interjected, even more perplexed, “what has happened between the

two of you? You are so... odd around one another.”

“Nothing happened,” Judith said. “It does not matter. Aaron, I do not need to talk to you about anything.”

“Yes, you do,” Aaron insisted, balling his hands into fists until his nails dug into his palms. “Judith, you can’t marry Graham.”

Oliver’s expression darkened with anger. “What are you talking about? You’re the one who set up this match.”

Aaron shook his head. “I made a mistake. Judith shouldn’t marry Graham. She doesn’t love him, and he doesn’t love her. But I... I love her.”

The hall fell silent, the weight of his confession hanging heavily in the air.

Oliver’s face contorted with rage. “You have some nerve, Aaron. After everything, you come here and say this? Get out of my house.”

“No,” Aaron said firmly, standing his ground. “I won’t leave. Not until you understand.”

Oliver stepped forward, his fists clenched. “You dare to defy me in my own home? You are my dearest friend, but I will not have this. Judith is happy to marry Graham, and I will not let you ruin this for her for whatever strange reasons you have.”

“I thought you would have been happy to win your wager now,” Judith scoffed.

Oliver rounded on Aaron. “Wager? You placed a wager on my sister?” he spat.

“It was a silly game. Judith, please, do not make this more... Please. I just want to

talk to you, that is all.”

“He placed a wager on my getting married by the time you returned. Although I suspect you changed it now to make it that I won’t get married? Or what is this? I do not understand,” Judith huffed, her words tumbling out one over the other.

Aaron met his friend’s gaze, the tension between them escalating. “The wager was a mistake. Much of what I did was a mistake, but not this. Oliver, I care about Judith. I can’t stand by and watch her make a mistake. Listen to me, please. Hear me out. I ask for five minutes of your time, not more.”

Just as it seemed the situation might escalate further, Oliver took a deep breath and gestured toward the parlor. “Fine. We have been friends all our lives, I suppose I can allow that.”

“Oliver,” Judith said, desperation creeping into her words.

“No, we will talk about whatever this is and get it out of the way.” Oliver pointed at the door. “Follow me.”

Aaron nodded, grateful for the chance to explain.

As they entered the parlor, the tension remained thick. The grandeur of the room, with its heavy drapes and ornate furniture, seemed to close in on him.

Judith followed her brother in, her eyes wary and filled with curiosity and panic.

“It is Judith I want to talk to,” Aaron insisted again.

Oliver sighed deeply. “Very well, I shall sit over yonder, but I will not leave the two of you alone, unless Judith wants it,” he relented, looking at his sister.

“Stay,” she said quietly.

Oliver nodded, taking a seat next to an old knight’s armor which stood at the back of the room.

Aaron’s heart raced as Judith approached. She looked more beautiful than ever, but the look in her eyes was one of pain and betrayal.

“Aaron, what is this about?” she asked.

Aaron took a deep breath, his hands shaking. “Judith, I need to tell you the truth. About everything.”

She crossed her arms, clearly trying to protect herself. “I’m listening.”

Aaron looked down, gathering his thoughts. “It is true that I kissed you because I love you. I couldn’t help myself. I’d felt it for a while, and I was struggling to contain those feelings, but that night, when I introduced you to Graham, I couldn’t hold it in anymore. I knew you would make a good match and that I’d lose you.”

She tilted her head to the side. “So, the day you saw me talking to him at the lake, you told him you did not know who I was?”

“I didn’t want to tell him because I wanted to keep our close connection.”

“But why didn’t you just tell me?” she asked.

Aaron felt Oliver stare daggers into his back. “I was afraid, Judith. Afraid of ending up like my parents. Their marriage was so lifeless, so boring. I didn’t want that for myself, or for you.”

Judith's eyes softened slightly, but she remained silent.

"And then there was Amelia," Aaron continued, his voice heavy with regret. "I believed that I had ruined her life. She made me think that I caused her downfall, that I was destined to fail anyone I married. I thought I was protecting you by pushing you away. But then I could not stop myself from kissing you, after all."

Judith's brow furrowed in confusion. "But why did you say those awful things to Graham about me?"

Aaron sighed, his heart aching at the memory. "I thought if Graham believed there was nothing between us, he would court you. I wanted you to have a chance at happiness, with someone who wasn't as flawed as I believed myself to be."

Judith shook her head, tears welling up in her eyes. "Aaron, that doesn't make any sense. You hurt me so deeply."

"I know," Aaron sighed. "I never would have said any of it had I known you would overhear us. I was a fool. I kissed you because I love you, Judith. I've loved you for so long. But I was too scared to admit it, even to myself."

Judith took a step back, clearly struggling with her emotions. "What's changed, Aaron? Why are you telling me this now?"

Aaron looked up, his eyes filled with desperation. "I found out that Amelia lied. She wasn't ruined by me. And it made me realize that I was wrong about everything. I should have told you how I felt from the beginning. I should have fought for you."

Judith's tears began to fall, but she remained silent, waiting for him to continue.

"Please, Judith," Aaron said. "I'm begging you to forgive me. I love you, and I want

to make things right. I'm not perfect, I know that, but I do love you, and I know you... at least I think you feel the same."

Judith looked at him, her eyes searching his.

For a moment, the room was silent. Aaron's heart pounded as he waited for her response, every second feeling like an eternity.

Finally, Judith spoke, her voice barely above a whisper. "Aaron, I... I don't know what to say. You've hurt me so much. And I am engaged. I am to be married. You told me Lord Leeds was a wonderful match for me."

"He is, but I can't stand by and watch you marry him, knowing you are not doing it out of love. Or are you? Do you love him?" he asked as the thought suddenly crept up on him.

He hadn't even considered this. What if she had fallen in love with his friend?

"No, I do not love him," she said swiftly, and instant relief washed over him.

Aaron stepped closer. "I promise you, I will spend the rest of my life making it up to you if you'll let me."

Judith's eyes locked onto his, the pain and confusion evident in them. "How can I trust you, Aaron? How do I know you won't hurt me again?"

Aaron swallowed hard. "I would rather die than see you unhappy. I was a coward before, but I've learned from my mistakes. Please, give me a chance to prove it to you."

The room fell silent once more, the weight of his words hanging heavily between

them. Judith took a deep breath, her eyes never leaving his.

“I need time, Aaron,” she murmured. “Time to think, to understand all of this.”

Aaron nodded, his heart aching with equal hope and fear. “Take all the time you need, Judith. I’ll be here, waiting for you. No matter how long it takes. I will accept whatever decision you make. If you marry him, then I wish you happiness. But if you choose to forgive me, I will be here, waiting with open arms.”

Judith gave a small nod, her eyes still filled with uncertainty.

As she turned to leave, Aaron felt a glimmer of hope. He knew that whatever happened next was out of his hands. All he could do was wait and hope that Judith would find her way back to him.

CHAPTER 34

“Judy,” Oliver called as he followed his sister, who’d stumbled out of the room on unsteady legs. “What is this all about?”

“I... I should have told you, but I was so confused and...”

“Do you love him?” Oliver asked, surprising her because she’d expected a lecture of some sort, at the very least.

Did she love Aaron? Yes. But...

“Oliver, please, I do not feel well. I need to take the air, please let me.”

He sighed deeply but walked her to the garden door to let her out.

“Very well, but you must make a decision, Judith. If this wedding needs to be canceled, then we will do it, but I need to know what you want. Do not make decisions based on anything but what you want and what is right for you,” he urged, shocking her once more.

Given that this had all started because of him, his words meant a great deal to her. How people could change.

As she made her way into the garden, she pondered what happened over the last few days. If Oliver could change so much, surely so could Aaron. Maybe everything he’d said was true. But did that matter now? Wasn’t it too late?

The cool air hit her face, but it did little to calm the storm inside her. She gasped for breath, her heart pounding in her chest.

Aaron loved her.

The words echoed in her mind, clashing against the reality of her situation. She loved him too, but there was Graham. Kind, dependable Graham, who had done nothing but care for her.

Her thoughts were a whirlwind of elation and shock. Aaron's confession had turned her world upside down. She felt as if she were standing on the edge of a precipice, unsure of whether to leap or step back. The garden, usually a place of solace, now seemed fraught with uncertainty. The scent of blooming roses mixed with the earthy aroma of the freshly watered ground, but it offered no comfort.

The front door creaked open behind her. Judith turned around, her breath catching as she spotted Graham stepping into the garden. His expression was unreadable, but his eyes held a depth of understanding that pierced through her inner turmoil.

"Lady Judith," he said softly, coming closer. His presence was like a gentle anchor, stabilizing her chaotic emotions for a brief moment. "I overheard some of what Aaron said to you in the great hall before you went into the parlor."

Her heart sank, guilt washing over her. She opened her mouth to speak, but no words came.

Graham reached out, gently taking her hand in his. His touch was warm and steady, a stark contrast to her trembling fingers.

"We need to talk," he said, guiding her to a stone bench near the blooming roses.

They sat in silence for a moment, the tension between them palpable.

“My Lord, I—” Judith began, but he held up a hand to stop her.

“Judith, Aaron is right,” he admitted, his voice steady but filled with quiet resignation. “I care for you greatly, and I think we could have a wonderful life together, but I don’t love you. Not in the way a husband should love his wife. I think, in time, I might grow to love you, and perhaps you could grow to love me as well. But there are no guarantees.”

Tears welled up in her eyes, blurring her vision. “I’m so sorry. I never wanted to hurt you.”

He shook his head, a gentle smile on his lips. “You don’t need to apologize. This isn’t anyone’s fault. We entered into this arrangement thinking it was the best for both of us. But sometimes, things don’t work out the way we plan.”

She looked down, her hands shaking in her lap. The delicate lace of her dress seemed to mock her with its fragility.

“So, you do not want to get married anymore?” she asked, though she already knew the answer.

“Not if you love Aaron. If you do not—for I did not hear what you said to him—then I am willing to move forward with this wedding. Love is not a prerequisite for marriage, after all. But if you do...”

“I do love Aaron,” she confessed, the words spilling out. “I’ve loved him for a long time.”

Graham nodded, his expression thoughtful. “I suspected as much. Then you need to

do what is right for you, Judith. I'd hate myself if we got married and you were unhappy because you love someone else. I want you to be happy. And selfishly, I want to be loved as well. Or at least have the affection of my wife rather than just her respect."

Was this it? Was this engagement over so quickly and so easily? And, dare she think it, so pleasantly?

Judith's tears began to fall, and she squeezed his hand. "Thank you for understanding. You're a good man, Graham. I hope you find someone who can love you the way you deserve."

He smiled again, this time with a hint of sadness. "Maybe I will. But right now, you have someone to catch. I saw Aaron and Oliver talking after you went out, and Aaron said he was going home and would await your answer to whatever you discussed there."

She looked at him in confusion until he nodded toward the house.

"Aaron's leaving. You should go after him."

Her heart leapt into her throat. She stood up, her legs shaky but determined. "Thank you, Graham. Truly."

"Go," he urged gently. "Don't let this chance slip away."

With one last grateful look, Judith turned and rushed toward the house. She burst through the door and saw Aaron just as he was about to leave. His back was to her, his shoulders slumped as if the weight of the world rested on them.

"Aaron!" she called, her voice breaking.

He froze, then slowly turned around. The pain in his eyes was evident, but there was also a glimmer of hope. The soft light from the hallway cast shadows on his face, highlighting the depth of his emotions.

Judith took a deep breath, her emotions a tangled mess of fear, love, and desperation. “Aaron, wait.”

He took a step toward her, his eyes searching hers. “Judith, I’m so sorry for everything. I?—”

She shook her head, cutting him off. “No, Aaron. I need to say this. I love you. I’ve always loved you. And I don’t want to spend another moment pretending otherwise.”

Relief and disbelief washed over his face. He crossed the distance between them in a few strides, taking her hands in his. His touch sent a jolt through her, a reminder of the connection they shared.

“Judith, do you mean it? After everything I’ve done...”

She nodded, tears streaming down her cheeks. “Yes, I mean it. I was afraid too, but I don’t want to live in fear anymore. I want to be with you.”

Aaron’s eyes shone with unshed tears. “I love you, Judith. I promise I will spend the rest of my life making it up to you, proving to you that we can be happy together.”

Judith smiled through her tears, a sense of peace settling over her for the first time in weeks. “I believe you, Aaron.”

He pulled her into his arms, holding her tightly as if he would never let go. Judith buried her face in his shoulder, feeling his heartbeat against her own. The world around them seemed to fade away, leaving only the two of them in that moment of

pure, unadulterated love.

At that moment, Judith knew they would face whatever challenges came their way, together. The warmth of his embrace, the steady beating of his heart against hers, told her that this was where she belonged. No more doubts, no more fears.

“Aaron,” she whispered, her voice muffled against his chest. “I was so scared. Scared that you didn’t truly care, scared that I would end up alone.”

He pulled back slightly, looking into her eyes with an intensity that made her heart skip a beat. “I was scared too, Judith. Scared of becoming my parents, of repeating past mistakes. But I know now that we can forge our own path, make our own happiness.”

Judith nodded, her fingers clutching the fabric of his coat. “I believe in us. I want to build a future with you.”

He smiled, the expression lighting up his face in a way that made her heart swell with love. “And I want to build that future with you. From this moment on, we face everything together.”

As they stood there, wrapped in each other’s embrace, Judith felt a weight lift from her shoulders. She had made the right choice. And for the first time in a long while, she felt hopeful about the future.

She glanced toward the house, where Graham stood watching from a distance. He gave her a small nod—a gesture of encouragement and understanding. She knew she would always be grateful for his kindness and selflessness.

Turning back to Aaron, she felt a surge of determination. “Let’s go inside. We have a lot to talk about and plan.”

He nodded, taking her hand in his. “Yes, we do. But as long as we’re together, I know we can handle anything.”

They walked back toward the house, hand in hand, ready to face whatever the future held. Together.

As they entered the drawing room, Judith felt a sense of peace wash over her. She had found her place, her home, and it was with Aaron. No matter what challenges lay ahead, she knew they would face them side by side, their love a beacon guiding them through the darkest of times.

The future was theirs, and they would embrace it with open hearts, ready to write the next chapter of their lives together.

EPILOGUE

Eight Months Later

At the front of the church, the couple looked out at the audience and back again. Light streamed in through the tall windows and bathed the young couple in a warm glow, making them appear truly angelic.

Judith sat in the front row and beamed at her stepmother, who grabbed her hand and squeezed it.

“How I wish your father was alive to see this,” Matilda said quietly through suppressed tears.

Judith nodded. “But I think he is with us.”

She wasn’t sure why she always looked up at the sky when she thought of her father. She felt that he and her mother were always around her. Maybe it was because of the light shining down on Elizabeta—whom Judith had taken to calling Lizzy—and Oliver like a glow from heaven.

Only six months had passed since the Italian beauty had come to England to be with him. Judith had immediately liked her sister-in-law. Elizabeta was beautiful and serene, but more importantly, she was kind and sweet and genuinely cared about her brother. Both her brothers, in fact, because when John had come home from Eton, Elizabeta had immediately taken to him as well. Matilda had welcomed her into the family right away, as had Judith.

It was wonderful to have a sister, at last. Judith cherished her friendship with Elizabeta, having always wanted a sister, and now she had one.

She glanced over her shoulder to see Joanna sitting beside Sally, who was sitting next to Leonard, who was sitting next to the sisters' parents, Lord and Lady Carlisle. Looking directly behind her, she caught the eye of her best friend, Rosy, who was sitting beside her husband.

Rosy's stomach was rounded, and she would soon have her first child, which was a blessing, as that meant their children would be born very close to each other and might become very good friends. Judith could hardly believe she was with child herself.

She had only been married for four months, but she had been blessed. She placed a hand on her stomach and then put the other one on top of Aaron's arm.

"Can you believe it was us just a few months ago?" she whispered.

He nodded. "Time flies, does it not?" he whispered, and Judith took a deep breath. "And soon we will be back for our little one's Christening."

"We will, but I am so torn. I want to be Rosy's child's godmother, but won't that cause offense?"

"She or he can always have more godparents. Better too many than too few," he said. "I would like to ask Graham."

Judith bit her bottom lip because the truth was, while Graham had been extremely gracious, he was still the man she had almost married. She looked to her right, where he was seated a few rows back, and he nodded at her. He had a smile on his lips and did not seem to hold a grudge. She knew he had never loved her in that way, but still,

she had felt bad.

“Do you not think it would be cruel,” she asked Aaron, “to make him the godfather of the child of the woman he almost married? Especially since he is still not married, and we know that is his dream.”

“It might be if I did not think he would be married by then, but I think he will be. He is determined. Besides, he mentioned earlier that the young lady sitting next to him is someone he has had his eye on for many years.”

“Many years?” Judith echoed, genuinely surprised.

“Yes, many years ago, but she was engaged to somebody else. He was delighted to see her here at the wedding. I dare say, maybe...” he trailed off.

“We have to make sure that they have plenty of time together. We can’t miss the opportunity,” Judith urged. “I hope you understand that I genuinely want him to be happy. I feel guilty for what happened, but that is not what I wish for my friend—he is a decent man.”

She couldn’t deny that she still carried some guilt.

At the altar, the vicar declared her brother and Elizabeta husband and wife. Cheers erupted in the church, and she saw the look of surprise on her brother’s face when he looked back and saw the congregation. It was almost as if he had forgotten how many people had come to his wedding.

It was true. Oliver had been extremely worried about not being able to replicate his father’s success, both as a peer and in managing the estate. He had instituted monthly meetings at the estate with their tenants, where they were given the opportunity to voice their grievances directly with him and the steward. This was something the late

Marquess of Worcester had talked about but never implemented.

Doing so had immediately endeared Oliver to those who lived on his estate, especially because he was always quick to listen and take action to address their issues.

His wife, likewise, was adored by their tenants. Although Judith was almost certain they did not know her well, she said quietly as her brother and sister-in-law stepped out of the church, “I am so pleased that Oliver stuck to his resolve to marry Elizabeta, even though there was some resistance.”

“I wasn’t surprised that people were against it, given that she’s a commoner and he’s a marquess, but I think you give your brother too little credit. He has always had resolve. He has always known what he wanted. He just didn’t know how to get it. Elizabeta is good for him, and I think he knows that, which is why he did not allow anybody to come between them. Although I think perhaps he learned that lesson from my mistakes.”

Judith and Aaron followed everyone out of the church, walking hand in hand. As they stepped into the sunlight, Judith’s heart swelled with joy. The guests gathered outside, showering the newlyweds with congratulations and good wishes.

She couldn’t help but smile, thinking of her own wedding just a few months ago.

Back at her childhood home, Judith found the ballroom bustling with activity for the wedding breakfast. She looked around, taking in the grandeur of the event. The tables were laden with arrays of delicacies, from pastries and fruits to assortments of meats and cheeses. The room was filled with the chatter and laughter of guests, many of whom were higher-ranking members of society.

Judith compared it to her own wedding breakfast, which had been much smaller and

was held at Aaron's home, where she now lived. She had wanted a small, intimate gathering with just their closest friends, and it had been perfect. But Oliver, being a marquess, had felt the need for a larger event, as was expected of his station.

As Judith scanned the room, her eyes landed on the Lord Chancellor, who was deep in conversation with her brother. She smiled, pleased to see Oliver handling his new role with such grace.

Just then, Graham approached her, and she felt a twinge of awkwardness. She hadn't talked to him for a while. He would spend time with Aaron or Oliver or both, but she was not usually a party to those gatherings. In addition, he had been out of town for several months, busy with selling some of the businesses he'd inherited from his father.

"Judith," he said warmly, "it's good to see you."

"Graham," she returned, trying to hide her unease. "I'm happy to see you, too. You seem well."

"I am," he said, looking genuinely pleased. "And I'm happy to see you happy."

His eyes flicked to her stomach, and she instinctively placed a hand there.

"Thank you." She smiled softly. "I'm sorry again for what happened between us."

He held up a hand to stop her. "There's no need for apologies, Judith. I believe everything happens for a reason." He nodded toward a young lady across the room who smiled at them. "I think all will be well."

Judith followed his gaze and felt a wave of relief. "I'm glad to hear that. And thank you for coming. It means a lot to us."

“I just wanted to congratulate you on your brother’s marriage and your impending addition to the family,” he offered sincerely.

“Thank you, Graham,” she said, smiling. “I hope our difficult past won’t stop you from being friends with Aaron.”

He laughed, a genuine, hearty sound. “It would take a team of three-hundred oxen to tear Aaron and me apart. In fact, I hope we will all be close friends.”

Judith felt a weight lift from her shoulders. “That would be wonderful.”

With a nod, Graham took his leave, and she watched him go, feeling a sense of closure.

She then joined Rosy, who was seated at a nearby table, a slice of cake already in front of her.

“Would you like to share?” Rosy asked, her eyes twinkling.

Judith smiled and took a fork. “Of course. Though I must admit, I could go for something savory too.”

Rosy laughed. “And maybe something else sweet afterward. I always thought other ladies were exaggerating when they told tales about being with child, but now I know they were right.”

Judith nodded, savoring a bite of cake. “It’s true. The cravings are real and constant!”

The two friends fell silent, enjoying the cake and each other’s company.

“It’s wonderful, isn’t it?” Rosy asked softly. “Knowing our children will grow up

together.”

Judith’s heart swelled at her words. “Yes, it is. I couldn’t ask for more. I feel so blessed.”

Rosy reached over and squeezed her friend’s hand. “We’re both so happy, Judith. It’s everything we dreamed of.”

Judith nodded, her eyes misting slightly. “It is. And to think, just a year ago, everything seemed so different.”

Before they could delve further into their conversation, Oliver approached them with a gentle smile. “Judith, may I have a moment of your time?”

Judith looked at Rosy, who nodded encouragingly. “Of course, Oliver,” she replied, standing up.

As Judith followed Oliver to a quieter corner of the room, she glanced back at Rosy, who gave her an understanding smile. She wondered what her brother wanted to discuss.

They found a quiet corner, away from the chatter and the clinking of cutlery.

“Judith, I just wanted to thank you for everything. I couldn’t have made it through these past months without you,” Oliver said softly.

Judith smiled, touched by his words. “We’re family, Oliver. We stick together.”

Oliver’s expression grew wistful. “I just wish our parents could be here to see this. To see us.”

Judith nodded, her eyes glistening with unshed tears. “I wish that too, every day. But I believe they’re watching over us, proud of what we’ve become.”

They stood in silence for a moment, both lost in memories of their parents. Then, Matilda joined them, her face filled with warmth and affection.

“What are you two talking about?” she asked, slipping an arm around Judith’s waist.

“Just wishing Mama and Papa were here,” Judith sighed.

Matilda nodded, her eyes softening. “They would be so proud of all of us. And we must keep their spirits alive by being there for each other.”

Just then, John ran up to them, his face flushed with excitement. “What are you all talking about? Can I join?”

“We were just talking about how Mama and Papa would want us to always be together as a family,” Oliver explained.

John pressed his lips together. “I miss them,” he admitted.

Judith crouched down to his eye level, taking his hands in hers. “We all do. But we’ll always have each other, and we’ll always be there for one another.”

Matilda placed a hand on Judith’s shoulder and looked around at her siblings. “Let’s make a vow. No matter what happens, we will always stick together. We will always be a family.”

Oliver nodded, his eyes bright with emotion. “Agreed. We face everything together.”

John looked up at his older siblings, his face serious. “I promise too.”

Judith straightened up, feeling a surge of love and gratitude for her siblings. “To family,” she said, her voice firm.

“To family,” they all echoed.

As they stood there, Judith felt a deep sense of peace. Despite the challenges and the losses they had faced, they had each other. And that was more than enough.

After their heartfelt moment, the siblings parted ways, each returning to their respective guests.

Judith made her way back to Aaron, who was waiting for her with a curious look on his face.

“What was that all about?” he asked as she approached.

She smiled warmly. “We’ve vowed to do better as a family. To always be there for each other.”

Aaron’s expression softened, and he took her hands in his. “I’m glad to hear it. I’m happy to be a part of your family again.”

Judith looked up at him, her heart swelling with love. “And I’m happy you’re part of our family, too.”

Aaron gently caressed her cheek, his eyes filled with love. “I can’t believe I almost lost you.”

She shook her head, holding his gaze. “Nothing will ever tear us apart again, Aaron. I promise.”

They stood there for a moment, lost in each other's eyes. The noise and bustle of the wedding breakfast faded into the background as they focused solely on one another.

"I love you, Judith," Aaron whispered.

"And I love you, Aaron," she whispered back, feeling the depth of her love for him in every word.

They leaned in and kissed, sealing their vows with a tender, heartfelt embrace. As they pulled back, Judith felt a sense of completeness, knowing that with Aaron by her side, she could face anything.

Hand in hand, they rejoined the festivities, ready to face their future together.

Surrounded by family and friends, they knew they were truly blessed. Their love, strong and unwavering, would carry them through any challenges life might throw at them.

As the celebration continued around them, Judith and Aaron held each other close, cherishing the love they shared and the family that bound them together. It was a perfect moment, filled with hope and promise for the future.

Judith took a deep breath, feeling the warmth of the day and the love that surrounded her. She knew that life would bring its share of challenges, but with Aaron and her family by her side, she felt ready to face whatever came their way.

In the midst of the celebration, Judith found a quiet moment to reflect on the journey that had brought them here. The past year had been filled with ups and downs, with moments of joy and sorrow. But standing here today, she realized how much she had grown and how much she had learned about love, resilience, and the importance of family.

As the day turned into evening, and the guests began to depart, Judith and Aaron stood together, watching the sunset. The sky was painted in orange and pink hues, a beautiful end to a perfect day.

“Shall we go home?” Aaron asked, his voice gentle.

Judith nodded, feeling a sense of peace and contentment. “Yes, let’s go home.”

Hand in hand, they walked toward their carriage, ready to begin the next chapter of their life together.

As they rode home, Judith rested her head on Aaron’s chest, feeling the steady rhythm of his heartbeat. She closed her eyes, imagining the future they would build together—a future filled with love, laughter, and the unbreakable bond of family.

At that moment, Judith knew that no matter what the future held, she would always cherish the love that had brought them together and the family that would sustain them through it all.

The End?

CHAPTER 1

THE MARVELS OF THE MOORS

The English Countryside, 1799

Bridget Ramsburry, the daughter of the Earl of Lincoln, rode her horse across the beautiful moors. There was an open landscape as far as the eye could see: rolling hills, thick patches of heather, the occasional tree dotting the landscape, and dew-stained green grass.

Covering it all was a two-foot layer of mist, undulating across the moors like a great grey sea. A sea that Bridget navigated on her majestic horse, its dark brown coat in stark contrast to the pale landscape and weather.

Bridget was naturally athletic and stood a little, not sitting on the saddle, pushing her horse faster and faster. Her long, blond hair, which was not covered by a thick leather riding cap, fluttered in the breeze created by the speed of her horse. She was a vision of grace and strength, with her long, flowing hair the color of golden wheat, her emerald-green eyes sparkling with determination, and her tall, lithe figure commanding attention.

She was free. It was the only place she could go to get away from her troubles. When she was out there, come rain or shine, her soul was cleansed.

Bridget looked up at the sky, seeing the outline of the sun behind the thick clouds. Rain was coming, but not for a while. She was not late yet, but with the time it would

take to get back, she might be. If she rode hastily, she could make it.

Bridget turned her horse to begin her return to Ramsbury Manor when she spotted someone else on the moors.

She might not have been intrigued if it were a group of riders, but a solitary rider like her piqued her interest. She did not spur her horse just yet, watching the gentleman ride at speed. It was impressive how fast he was able to push his horse, streaking toward her.

Not quite toward her. He was set to pass her by at some distance but diverted his course and slowed on approach. Bridget might have been afraid to be approached by a man alone on the moors, but she had respect for anyone who rode alone. Besides, she could tell by the way he treated his horse that he was no threat to her.

The man came at pace, only slowing when he was very close, and even then, he had to turn his horse at the last moment and circle her a couple of times before he was able to calm the animal.

“Good day,” he greeted, touching a finger to his riding cap.

“Good day,” Bridget replied.

She had to constantly turn her head to keep track of the man as he circled her. She was slightly annoyed by his energy and the fact that he did not fully stop, but there was also something about him she could not quite put her finger on.

“I don’t often see women out here alone,” the gentleman noted.

“It is not so unusual,” Bridget said.

It was unusual, but she was on a mission to make the unusual more usual for women. Just because she was a woman did not mean she could not ride her horse alone or do a dozen other things.

“Quite,” the gentleman uttered with a smile. He looked at her knowingly, as if they had met before.

“Your horse is beautiful,” Bridget noted.

She looked from the animal to the gentleman. He might be considered beautiful, too, if she was currently focused on such things. He had green eyes like her, thick black hair, and a commanding presence. Sitting atop a horse always made a man look larger and more powerful, but she could see the gentleman was all of that without the horse.

“Yes, beautiful beasts out on the moors,” the gentleman agreed, looking her up and down.

The look both irritated and intrigued her, and she blatantly looked him up and down.

The gentleman laughed, his face brightening instantly.

She could tell he was well-to-do in some way by his riding attire. He wore an elegant riding habit covered in a flowing black cloak. He flexed his fingers beneath his riding gloves, keeping a tight hold of the reins.

He circled her again, fully checking her out, and while Bridget didn’t want to be on show for a man, there was something about a clandestine meeting in the moors—even though it was not really clandestine—that intrigued her.

“I must ride!” he announced suddenly. “I have somewhere to be.”

“Don’t we all,” Bridget replied.

The gentleman touched a finger to his riding cap again. “It was a pleasure to meet you. I hope we bump into each other again.”

“Yes.” Bridget swallowed.

She did not know why she replied in the affirmative when she did not need to run into him again. He had been a curiosity, but the conversation had not been interesting. He was a man, and most men were only interested in one thing, even if they were from the upper class.

The man spurred his horse into action, and both rider and animal took off at a speed that Bridget’s horse could never match. She watched them become smaller and smaller in the distance. She was not fascinated by him, she decided, but by the overall picture. He was a lone rider on a magnificent beast that galloped like the wind.

She watched them until they became a pinpoint on the horizon.

It was at that moment that Bridget realized she would be late. She had become distracted for no good reason. She spurred her horse into action, pushing the animal as fast as it could go, unable to match the amazing speed of the mysterious rider.

Her hair fluttered more furiously behind her, strands of gold reaching out for the past. Her body was a maelstrom of sharp angles and tight curves as she steered her horse home. She would have angered her mother already, but the quicker she returned, the less severe that anger would be.

She blamed the lone rider on the moors. Perhaps he was an imp from the forest, sent to play tricks on her. Bridget did not believe any of that, but she would rather have someone else to blame than herself. She had lost track of time, and that was that.

She rode through the large arch at the rear of the estate and headed straight for the stables. She pulled on the reins to halt her horse, and a stablehand emerged from the stone building to take the reins from her as she dismounted.

She nodded her head to him in a quick thanks and strode as quickly as she could into Ramsbury Manor.

She shouldn't have gone out riding that morning—she knew that now, but she needed to clear her head. With her father's circumstances and her sister being all too happy about getting married soon, she needed an escape from real life. Her mother always hated her riding off to the moors alone, but Bridget had never been one to conform.

Her parents had given up on her, turning their attention to her younger sister, Margaret. They had given up on their dreams of their oldest daughter marrying first, and at twenty-six, it was unlikely she ever would.

That suited Bridget just fine. She might have wed at some point if she had found a man who respected her as she deserved and loved her as she desired, but modern life in England did not always work that way. She was quite happy to be a spinster, educating and bettering herself.

"There you are," her mother, Penelope Ramsbury, said witheringly. She was a tall and stern woman with pointed features like a bird.

Penelope walked at speed toward her daughter, much like the man on the moors had ridden with haste.

"I'm here now, Mother," Bridget replied, preparing for an argument.

"You are late!" Penelope snapped, coming to a stop right in front of her. "Your sister is getting married, and you are late."

“She is not getting married today, Mother,” Bridget pointed out.

Penelope tilted her head and tightened her lips. She glared at her daughter.

“No, she is not getting married today,” she returned slowly. “Thank you for reminding me of what I have been planning for months, Bridget. No, today is the day we set off to our family estate on the coast to better get to know Lord Michael Harrington and his family before the wedding. The fine, young gentleman has been waiting patiently in the sitting room with your sister for the past hour.”

“I am not an hour late!” Bridget exclaimed.

“I didn’t say you were an hour late,” Penelope retorted. “I am only informing you of how early Lord Michael came here. You could take a page out of his book.”

“Should I also marry my sister?” Bridget asked.

“Don’t be facetious, Bridget. It is not becoming of you. I don’t know why you have to go out on the moors so often, when there is so much to do around here, and I have enough problems to deal with.”

Bridget knew that was true, but it was not only her mother who was dealing with the problems. Bridget and Margaret had to deal with them too, even if the latter did not know the full truth. Bridget had not set out to cause trouble that morning, but she had brought it home with her from the moors.

“This would never have happened if you had found a good man and settled down,” Penelope continued.

“Oh, here we go again,” Bridget moaned. “You think that is the answer to all of my problems. I am a nuisance, but that would have been solved if I had married. Having

a man by your side is not always the answer, Mother, and you know it. I don't have a man, neither do I need one. I am happy as I am, and you must be happy too."

"I get no grandchildren, and you die alone. That is what is best for you?"

"Mother, stop! What does it matter who is by my side when I die? All that matters is living a happy life, and I can assure you I do that. I find much more pleasure in educating myself and promoting the importance of women than I will ever find in a man. And you need not worry about grandchildren. Margaret will give you some. Do you have a target you must hit? If you do not have six grandchildren, will you be shunned by Society?"

"Oh, I don't care about myself or Society!" Penelope shouted. "I only care about you and your happiness."

"And I am telling you I am happy," Bridget insisted.

"Will the two of you please stop shouting," Margaret hissed, appearing in the hallway. "Today is the day you all meet Lord Michael's family for the first time, and we can hear you from the sitting room. Bridget, you are already late, and, Mother, why do you insist on arguing?"

"I apologize," Bridget said quickly. It was not intention to trouble anyone, especially not her younger sister.

"Yes," Penelope uttered.

Bridget could not tell if that was an apology from her mother to Margaret, or if her mother was agreeing with Bridget's apology.

"I will change as quickly as I can and join you all in the sitting room," Bridget said.

“No, there is no time now.” Margaret shook her head. “There has been enough delay, and you look fine. I am the one getting married, and if you don’t look your best, then I look better for it.”

Bridget smiled, and the tension was broken. She did not care how she looked before any man, and if she could make her younger sister look better, then she would gladly do it.

“Yes, let’s return to the sitting room,” their mother added.

The three women strode confidently through the manor. They might fight and bicker, but the events of the past few years had brought them closer together. The main cause of any tension in the manor was the fact that one of them would soon be leaving.

It would be both sad and joyous.

They reached the sitting room, and Margaret entered first. She was followed by Penelope and then Bridget.

Bridget looked straight at the man on the settee, and her eyes widened.

“You!” she exclaimed, pointing at him.

CHAPTER 2

A SCANDALOUS MAN

Bridget stood in the sitting room with her finger pointed toward the man she had encountered on the moors.

“Bridget, what are you doing?” her mother demanded.

Bridget found herself caught in a rare situation where she had no control over anything. She had walked into a room, pointed at a man, and shouted at him. She struggled to comprehend what was happening.

She lowered her arm and looked around, spotting Michael, the man her sister was to wed. Yet, the gentleman from earlier was here, too, and it made no sense. Perhaps he had stumbled upon the estate and stopped for some hay for his horse, but why would he be in the sitting room with her family?

The mystery man was the first to react. He rose from the settee and approached Bridget, extending his hand. She had no option but to take it, and she found herself feeling his strong, warm hand around hers as he introduced himself.

“Allow me to introduce myself. Nicholas Harrington, the Duke of Sheffield,” he said.

Bridget had heard that name somewhere before.

“My brother is to marry your sister,” Nicholas continued.

It all made sense again.

“Yes, yes,” Bridget stammered. “It is a pleasure to meet you, Your Grace.”

“She is surprised to see me again,” Nicholas explained to the room, still holding her hand. “We met on the moors earlier on my ride here. I did not know who you were, or I might have introduced myself then.”

“His Grace was able to make it here on time,” Penelope noted.

Bridget looked into his green eyes once more, knowing the handshake had gone on far too long. She might not know much about him, but she could see he was a man who liked to make trouble and got what he wanted. He was also a man she was now inextricably linked to.

“I did not realize you were Lord Michael’s older brother,” Bridget said, withdrawing her hand.

“There are so many Harringtons in the area now that it can be hard to keep track of who is who,” Nicholas admitted.

Bridget tried to remember where she had heard that name, and as she was thinking, she became painfully aware that she and the Duke were still standing in the center of the room, and they were also still the center of attention.

Bridget removed her riding cap when she realized that it was still on her head. First impressions were everything, and while she did not care what the Duke thought of her, she was making a bit of a fool of herself. She was usually calm and collected, but she had made her way into the sitting room with bluster.

“It is wonderful we can all be together before my sister is wed,” Bridget said, smiling

wide. "I am glad our families can come together."

"Thank you, Bridget," Margaret piped up, becoming the center of attention again. "Yes, we shall get to know each other really well over the coming two weeks. I wish to thank my betrothed for agreeing to this."

Michael Harrington stood up and went to Margaret in the center of the room. He took her hand, and it gave Bridget and Nicholas a chance not to be the focus of attention.

"I am happy to do such a thing for such a fine woman." Michael smiled. "So often, a man and a woman are thrust together without knowing one another, and while I have had the pleasure of spending time with Lady Margaret, this time I am excited to really get to know her before our wedding day."

Margaret smiled sweetly. It was all that mattered now to Bridget. If her sister were happy, then her mother would be happy, and when her family was happy, Bridget was happy.

Bridget didn't see her mother sidling up to her until she felt fingers dig into her arm.

"What has gotten into you?" Penelope hissed. "What is this about meeting men on the moors and then being late because of it?"

Bridget could not help but look across at the Duke. He was devilishly handsome, but the focus was on the devilish part. She had not known it on the moors, but she knew it now. He was trouble. The way he had held her hand for far too long was inappropriate, and he knew it. He had done it purposely to get a rise out of her, but she was better than that.

And who was he to be cutting it so fine to be riding at full speed across the moors to arrive at their manor? Bridget was only annoyed about that part because he had

beaten her there.

The Duke looked back at her with a smile.

Bridget turned back to her mother. "I was not meeting men on the moors. I was out riding, and he happened to pass me by, and he might have stopped."

Penelope placed the back of her hand on her forehead. "My goodness, conversing with a man with no chaperone around. What might you do next, Bridget?"

"I won't do anything next," Bridget hissed.

Once again, she was the center of attention, having argued with her mother a little too loudly. She looked at Margaret and gave her an apologetic look.

"We shall depart soon for the estate on the coast," Margaret informed everyone. Her lips twitched as she tried to hide the smile, but it overpowered her and she grinned for a few seconds before she brought herself under control. "I will ride with my betrothed, and Mother will accompany us. We shall meet with the Dowager Duchess of Sheffield when we arrive."

Bridget looked over at the Duke again, and he was thankfully not looking back at her this time. He was too handsome for his own good, and he knew it from the way he acted. He had a confident air about him, and Bridget could see how a woman might be taken with him.

She was not such a woman. She had no interest in any man, and certainly not him.

Goodness me!

Bridget knew where she knew the name. Nicholas Harrington, the Duke of Sheffield.

If she had spoken to Margaret more about her betrothed and his family, she might have been able to...

Warn her? No, she does not need to be warned. She is not marrying the Duke but his brother.

Bridget had already become irritated by the handsome Duke in a short period of time, and now she thoroughly disliked him based on his reputation alone.

She did not concern herself too often with the scandal sheets, but she had either read his name in them at one point or heard talk of him. He had a reputation for being a gambler, a drunkard, and a rake.

Oh, Margaret!

When Bridget thought about it, she realized her sister was no fool. If Margaret had dedicated herself to Michael, then he must be a good person. Margaret was an idealist, but she was not oblivious. They must be opposites: Michael, a good man, and Nicholas, a rogue.

Bridget did not need to tell her sister any of this. The Duke would not affect her, and Bridget would only be accused of causing trouble if she spoke of the Duke's reputation during the time they were all supposed to be getting to know each other. Perhaps her sister already knew about the Duke.

"Bridget, will you accompany me to get ready for the coach ride?" Margaret asked.

Once more, Bridget became caught in the act when the Duke turned to look at her, catching her eye again. She flinched and looked at her sister.

"Of course, Margaret," Bridget replied.

“I shall come too,” Penelope announced. “I must ensure I have everything packed. We all know your father will have forgotten most of what he needs.”

“I shall help you with that, Mother,” Bridget offered.

Penelope turned to look at Bridget, and for the briefest moment, all the friction between them disappeared. Bridget saw her mother’s weariness and then her gratitude. The moment was only fleeting, but it meant a lot to Bridget.

The three women left the room and headed toward the stairs.

“Oh, my goodness,” Bridget whispered to her sister. “I left my riding cap in there. I shall retrieve it and meet you in your room.”

Margaret nodded and quickly ascended the stairs on her tiptoes. As Bridget watched, she realized she had to make an effort for her sister’s sake. This time was all about Margaret, and it would culminate in a wedding, and Margaret would have everything she had ever wanted.

As Bridget walked back to the sitting room, she had second thoughts. She did not want to see the Duke again. Now that she knew of his reputation, she feared what he might say in front of her. And he had caught her riding alone in the moors. What did he think of her reputation?

She could not avoid it. She had to return with her riding cap. If she hoped the brothers would have left the sitting room when she got there, then she was sorely mistaken. She heard them talking when she reached the doorway.

Bridget knew eavesdropping was wrong, but she was compelled to do it all the same.

“I am blessed,” Michael said. “Blessed, I tell you.”

“I am happy for you, Brother,” Nicholas replied.

“The more you get to know her, the more you will see just how much of an angel she is. When she came to me with the idea of spending more time together before the wedding, I leaped at the chance,” Michael revealed, the happiness evident in his voice. “I want to spend every waking moment with that woman. I simply cannot wait until we are married.”

It warmed Bridget’s heart to hear someone talk about her sister in that way, and she was glad she had stopped to eavesdrop. It confirmed what she had hoped: Micheal was nothing like his older brother.

“You deserve it, Micheal,” Nicholas said. “You will make a fine husband and an even finer father. It goes a long way toward showing the type of man you are.”

“I could not have done it without you,” Michael noted.

“Yes, that is likely true,” Nicholas agreed.

The brothers laughed together.

“I never thought I would be here,” Michael admitted with some levity. “I assumed that someday I would wed, but I never expected to fall so head over heels in love with a woman. I thought there would be some arrangements made, and I would deal with the emotional side of it later. Margaret is my soul mate.”

Bridget almost burst into tears.

“The two of you are perfect together,” Nicholas agreed. “And for every brother like me, there is a sister like hers.”

“What do you mean?” Michael asked.

Bridget realized the Duke was talking about her.

“Let’s just say I am glad to have Margaret as a sister-in-law rather than Bridget,” Nicholas clarified.

“Please play nice, Brother,” Michael begged.

“Oh, I will,” Nicholas assured him. “As long as she does. Did you hear the awful racket she made when she arrived late? She was squawking like a crow. And you should have seen the way she glared at me in the room earlier. I don’t mind strong women, and I have had their company many times in the past, but she is extremely tiresome.”

“She is my betrothed’s sister,” Michael hissed, trying to talk some sense into his brother.

“I am fully aware, but I say it how I see it. That woman is the worst sort of trouble, and I will have to be around her for a long time when we go to their estate. Still, I will be on my best behavior.”

“Thank you,” Michael said.

“I strive to be the bigger and better person,” Nicholas told him. “She can do all she wants to try and cause problems and annoy me, but I will simply ignore her. I will not let her personality ruin the time we are all spending together.”

Bridget took one step forward and caught herself. She wanted to storm into the room and give him a piece of her mind, but that would only prove his point. She balled her fists and took a breath. She was not calm, but she had enough sense to leave and go

find her sister. She could retrieve her riding cap another time.

He is the rogue and blackguard! If he wishes to ignore me, then I will gladly ignore him!

CHAPTER 3

A CLASH OF PERSONALITIES

Finchbury Estate, Cornwall

N icholas looked into the library to find his mother reading.

“There you are, Mother. How are you feeling? How was the trip here?” he asked.

“Oh, fine, fine,” Rebecca Harrington, the Dowager Duchess of Sheffield, replied. “Everyone here has treated me very well since I arrived. Is it not a wonderful estate? And have you seen the view?”

“I have,” Nicholas replied, walking into the room.

He went over to the window and looked out at the pale sand and the sea beyond. It was dull and grey for now, but it was supposed to brighten later.

“Where is your brother and his betrothed?” Rebecca asked.

“They are about somewhere,” Nicholas murmured. “They are inseparable now.”

“It is fine to see Michael so happy,” Rebecca noted.

“It is,” Nicholas agreed.

He took his mother in. The sea air would do her good. She did not get out a lot, and the break was not only a chance for her to meet her youngest son's new family but also to relax. She had a weariness and strain that she often tried to hide.

"I shall go for a walk on the beach if you would like to accompany me," Nicholas offered.

"Perhaps later," she said. "For now, I am rather enjoying this book."

"As you wish." The Duke nodded once.

He left the library and then the building. A saltiness hung in the air from the seawater, and gulls squawked in the distance. Farther out were more gulls, not the ones that could be heard, and they dived down every so often to try and spear a fish for lunch.

The Duke took a deep breath, filling his lungs with the fresh sea air, and set out along the shoreline.

He had worn his taller boots so he could walk in the sand and not have the sand get into his footwear. He was a busy man and had little time to visit the beach, so it was a pleasant respite.

Spring had only just started, and the large homes along the coast were for holidaymakers. The beach would be packed in the summer, but it was quiet now—not another soul in sight.

Nicholas ascended a sandbank and went down the other side into a thicket of bushes. He would have remained on the path, but it was much more fun to take the path less traveled. He pushed a branch to the side and stepped between two thick bushes, almost bumping into a woman.

"You must excuse me," the Duke said, taking hold of her waist so they did not collide

with each other.

“You!” Bridget shouted.

“Ah, your favorite greeting,” the Duke drawled.

“Take your hands off me!”

“Oh, gladly.” Nicholas removed his hands from her waist and held them up in the air in surrender. He stepped back and could not help the amusement that crossed his features.

“What are you doing out here?” Bridget asked.

Nicholas raised an eyebrow. “Are you always this friendly and agreeable?”

“Oh, don’t talk like that,” Bridget huffed. “As if I don’t know who you are and what you say behind people’s backs.”

“So, my reputation does precede me,” the Duke said. “And I have no problem saying what I wish to people’s faces, though they seem to have trouble with it often.”

“I came out here to have some time to myself, and you have ruined that, just as you ruined my day earlier.”

Nicholas sighed, and that seemed to irritate Bridget more.

“You are angry at me because you met me on the moors? I did not make you late for the meeting between our families.”

Bridget placed her hands on her hips. “That is not why I am annoyed at you.”

It took all the Duke's energy not to laugh or smile at the sight of the woman scorned before him. If she did not have a permanent scowl on her face, she would have cut a very beautiful figure. She was tall and athletic, with long blonde hair. Her features were small enough to be cute, and her lips were plump without being overly full.

"Then why are you annoyed at me?" the Duke asked.

"Because I overheard you talking about me in our sitting room with your brother."

Nicholas smiled. "Ah, you were eavesdropping on us?"

"I was doing nothing of the sort. You were speaking loudly enough for the entire house to hear," Bridget retorted.

"As I said, I have no qualms about talking about people to their faces. What was it you heard that was untrue? What might have upset you?"

"I'm not upset," Bridget claimed. "Don't try to boil this down to emotion. You think because I am a woman, I must have run off and cried about it. I don't care what you say about me. I only care about people speaking behind my back."

"Then we have no disagreement," the Duke pointed out.

"You hate that I have opinions of my own, don't you?" Bridget accused.

"Nothing of the sort," Nicholas replied. "I believe you can have any opinion you like."

"And I did not glare at you from across the room," Bridget stated. "I looked at you, and that was all."

"You either glared or stared romantically," Nicholas pushed.

“Oh, you wish,” Bridget snapped. “And for your information, I don’t sound like a squawking crow.”

“Well, you are not making a very good argument against that right now,” the Duke pointed out.

“If anyone will cause trouble here, it is you,” Bridget stated. “My sister might not know the sort of things you get up to, but I certainly do. A rake and a rogue. Would that be an apt description?”

“Sounds like fun.” Nicholas smirked.

There was something about her intense anger that intrigued him, and he wanted to remain by her side.

“I am glad your brother is nothing like you,” Bridget scoffed.

“And I am glad you are nothing like your sister,” the Duke returned.

“Yes, well—what? What do you mean?” Bridget asked, caught off guard.

“Your sister is perfectly pleasant and makes a fine match for my brother, but you are much more fun. I would loathe to spend a week with someone who wants to talk all about flowers and the future.”

“Oh, you are insufferable,” Bridget snarled.

“What is going on here?” Margaret asked, appearing through the bushes. “Bridget, are you arguing again?”

“I was... debating,” Bridget assured her.

“Nicholas, I thought you were to be on your best behavior,” Michael stated, appearing behind his betrothed.

“I am trying my best to be extremely pleasant.” Nicholas turned back to face Bridget. “Nothing quite like being scolded by your younger siblings, no?”

Bridget huffed and shook her head. “What are the two of you doing out here alone?”

“We are not alone,” Margaret clarified. “My lady’s maid is on the path. We were taking a walk together and heard an almighty fuss in the bushes, and we knew who it was. We had to wade in here to ensure you did not come to blows.”

“And what might the two of you be doing out here alone?” Michael asked.

“Oh, wouldn’t you like to know?” Nicholas drawled.

Bridget shook her head. “We are doing nothing. I was out for a walk, and His Grace must have followed me here to irk me some more.”

Michael flashed her half a smile. “He does have a tendency to do that.”

“Who’s side are you on, dear brother?” Nicholas asked.

“This is supposed to be a happy time for us all,” Margaret interjected. She looked like she might start to cry. “I only want for everyone to get along.”

“Oh, my dear,” Bridget said, placing a hand on her sister’s shoulder. “We are getting along. It wasn’t really an argument. It really was a debate.”

“No, it wasn’t,” Margaret moaned. “I heard the two of you.”

“No, really,” Bridget assured her. “We bumped into each other and started talking.

His Grace has never heard of Fanny Burney or Mary Wollstonecraft, and they are two of my favorite writers. Well, I had to explain who they were, and I might have gotten a little loud and animated. That was all.”

“But I know them now,” the Duke added. “Your sister is very passionate.”

“Yes, she is,” Margaret agreed.

“This time together will be magical,” Nicholas said. “I promise there will be no arguments. Your sister and I will be on our very best behavior the entire time.”

Margaret finally smiled. “I’m sorry for the misunderstanding. I am a little stressed, what with the wedding approaching.”

“You have nothing to worry about,” Bridget told her.

“That makes me happy,” Margaret said.

Nicholas looked over to see his younger brother shooting him a knowing look.

“Lunch will be ready soon, and I look forward to everyone showing just how polite and agreeable they can be,” Michael said.