



It Happened at Christmas (Headstrong Heroines)

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Category: Historical

Description: A widow needing attachment. An earl searching for hope. A young girl wanting a family. A handful of days to change everything...

Lady Lydia Kingston has pretended for years; it was easier that way. As headmistress and owner of a finishing school in London, people trusted her because they thought she was a proper woman of the ton, except all of that was a lie, but when her sordid past collides with the present she's worked to build, scandal follows and sends her to Scotland despite the imminent holiday season. No longer does she believe in that magic.

Jackson Ramsay, the Earl of Greystone, has no patience for what the season demands. London lost its polish and draw, neither is he in the mood for revelry or festivities and he certainly doesn't want a woman to complicate everything. Spending the holidays with his daughter brings difficult memories, and not wanting her to be exposed to the emptiness that is the beau monde, he takes her on a holiday to his estate near the Scottish Highlands. The joy of Christmastide has long been forgotten.

Misfortune throws the earl and Lydia together, but the forced proximity of a shared road trip sparks a strong attraction between them, and a yearning for more. In the Lake District, a fierce snowstorm strands them; necessity has the three essentially playing house until the roads clear. Desire consumes the couple, but her secrets and his might just destroy the love they both desperately need and deserve before unexpected traditions can be born.

... showing that magic and miracles can happen on Christmas if they only believe.

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A lady should always hold herself above scandal.

December 18, 1817

Near Windermere

Lake District, England

“Hold there!” The shout from one of the drivers preceded an ominous sharp snapping noise from the vicinity of the rear of the traveling coach. Followed by the even more concerning, “Hang on!”

Then a loud crack echoed through the silence. Seconds later, the traveling coach tilted drunkenly to the left, and she slid across the bench to slam against the side of the vehicle.

Lady Lydia Kingston—for that was part of the persona she’d fashioned for herself four years ago by necessity—braced herself, but when she tried to keep herself upright, the disabled coach lurched again, and this time she was thrown to the floorboards when it landed on its side. Clearly, something had gone terribly wrong. The intermittent snow and rain coupled with the rutted and oftentimes muddy roads, it wasn’t unexpected.

In all her eight and twenty years, she’d never had a carriage or coach disabled, but then, she wasn’t that seasoned of a traveler. In fact, the only place she had ever been was London. She was from the Lake District. Her father had been a hunting guide for highflyers in the beau monde . He used to take parties out into the Highlands during

every hunting season, and thus there were weeks when he'd hardly been home. Her mother had been a Scottish baker in the town of Ambleside, and according to family lore, she'd enchanted Lydia's father the second he'd laid eyes on her.

Of course, that was her real history, not the bit of fiction she'd wrapped around herself like a shield, in an effort to remain safe. Still, it was a story of love and romance she aspired to in her life, and it hadn't yet happened for her.

Perhaps it never would at this rate, when she was essentially living in hiding.

Living in Town as an alleged lady of the beau monde had been a bit absurd, but it had always brought worry to her every time she went out into society. During that time, apparently no one had thought to check her history or her claims, but then, so many times, people were lazy and many believe what they had been told. Especially when the lies were given with such confidence there was no cause to doubt them.

For all intents and purposes, she'd still been married, bolder though he was, so she didn't try to call attention to herself from the opposite sex. If a chap happened too close, she kept him at arm's length. The last thing she'd wanted was another man, even if she'd been interested in an affair, but since her husband had soured her on trusting any of them, it was simply better to play up the story she'd put out of being an unwanted spinster.

Shouts from the drivers outside yanked Lydia from her thoughts. Fighting off the lap blanket and in a flurry of skirting, she awkwardly righted herself the best she could inside the sideways coach. "Someone help! I'm stuck inside!"

"Once we unhitch the horses, we'll come for you, my lady!" the first driver called out.

She nodded though the men obviously couldn't see the gesture. Her hair had come

loose from some of their pins. Locks of the dark tresses tumbled down around her shoulders, but her fingers were too cold to try and restore her usually put together appearance. Long ago, her husband had said she was the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen. He'd plied her with compliments and endearments, showered her with gifts, all to ensnare her, but six months after they were wed, he changed, or rather, he'd returned to the horrid man he'd always been.

And she'd been too stupid to realize it.

Gathering her reticule from the upended floor, she wrapped the strings about her wrist. Because she was forever wary due to her past, some of her valuables had been sewn into the hem of the traveling dress she wore as well as the collar of her cloak. It had been one of the only ways to keep her meager pieces of jewelry or the coin she had away from her reprobate husband at the time.

Old habits died hard.

Not that she didn't trust the drivers, but she didn't know them. Seen them about Town, surely, for her finishing school was located in Mayfair, but she wasn't acquainted personally with them, and why would she be? Daughters of earls didn't hold court with coach drivers.

Long moments went by where she couldn't hear much conversation between the two men. There were a few loud thumps from the rear of the disabled vehicle, some muffled directives she couldn't hear properly, followed by the whinny of horses.

With a sigh, she attempted to glance out the window, but since the coach had tipped onto its side, the only thing she saw clearly was the overcast sky and a few winter-bare branches of trees at the roadside. Banging on the side wall, she called out again. "Please help me out!"

“In one moment, my lady,” the second driver responded.

Truly, these two were not very efficient. Since there was nothing to do except wait, Lydia retreated into her thoughts.

Over the handful of years that she’d run the finishing school, she’d comprised a list of twenty rules every young lady should learn before she graduated. The first being: a lady should always hold herself above scandal.

If there were ever a rule to break, she’d probably broken it—especially that one—but since she had never been a lady to begin with... No, society being what it was, rules were in place to control women. Of that she was certain. No matter what class males landed in, they could act as they pleased, indulge in whatever scandalous act or vice they wanted, and nothing was said, yet if a woman stumbled into trouble, she was immediately branded fast, loose, sullied, or a pariah, with all the punishments society could hand down.

It didn’t matter if said woman had done everything correctly within the bounds of those societal rules, they were still punished for those decisions. That was when she’d taken matters into her own hands. Fearing that she wouldn’t have the chance to meet any of her dreams, she’d left her abusive husband and had fled to London. Not once had she regretted that decision.

Until last week.

The only living soul she’d told of her new direction—one of her mother’s friends from the bakery—had written to her and enclosed a letter from a solicitor telling her that her reprobate husband had died and that the cottage they’d lived in had been left in her name though his brother was challenging that decision. He’d also said that if she wanted any of the personal belongings within the dwelling or if she wished to sell the property, she needed to return to the Lake District and at least sign paperwork that

would give him permission to take care of that in her stead.

Though the last thing she wished to do was travel to the Cumbrian region of England during the Christmastide season, there was nothing for it. She'd closed the finishing school so her students could spend the next few weeks with their families, and since she wouldn't be afforded another clear time on her schedule until the end of the next term, she was determined to finally close that chapter of her life.

Except there was every possibility she could be stranded in this forsaken stretch of country due to the disabled coach, and that meant her schedule would fall to pieces. That was unacceptable; she didn't enjoy not being in control.

When the door above her head opened, she was once more thrust back into reality.

"Give me your hand, my lady." The driver's head appeared in the gap. "I'll pull you out."

"Thank you." When she followed instructions, the driver grasped her glove-covered hand. With a grunt, he tugged her up and out of the coach then handed her down to the other driver who waited on the ground. At some point, the snow they'd started with had changed to a light rain, and coupled with the cold temperatures, it made for miserable moments outside of the protection of the coach. "Well, this isn't exactly better, is it?" With a shiver, she pulled the folds of her cloak more tightly about her.

The driver wouldn't look her in the eye as he jumped down from the tipped coach. "It's horrid enough, and the nearest village is nigh onto five miles away, or so Sam tells me."

"Ah." It certainly wasn't a hardship to walk that length, but in the rain and fighting with the mud in the road, it would prove a miserable trip. An unfortunate situation to fit the whole reason why she was traveling to the Lake District in the first place. As

she glanced about, she saw her trunks and bags spilled out onto the road. What was more, they'd been opened, the contents rifled through, and others dumped out onto the ground. "What happened to my luggage?"

Sam, the second driver, joined them, and what was more, he had a pistol in his hand, trained on her. "Apologies, my lady, but since the axel is broken along with the wheel, we'll lose our backs on this little venture, so we're robbing you."

The first driver nodded. "You made a mistake in traveling alone. Should have a man with you or at the least a maid."

The second driver chuckled. "Not that we would have respected a maid either."

"What?" Shock smacked into her chest as she bounced her gaze between the two of them, quickly followed by cold fear that twisted up her spine. "After everything you'll rob me and leave me here?"

"Only way to recoup our losses," the first driver said with a wry look. "Hand over your reticule, if you please."

"What if I don't please?" This was outside of enough, and exactly the reason she'd learned long ago to hide valuables in the hems of her clothes. Men were not to be trusted. Over the years since she'd fled from her bounder of a husband, she wondered if all men were reprobates or if she was just unlucky. Did she want another husband? That would largely depend on the man. When the drivers didn't immediately answer her inquiry, she lifted an eyebrow. "Well?"

Sam gestured with the pistol. "I'm afraid it won't be good."

With a huff of annoyance, she crossed her arms beneath her breasts. Being bossed by men had grown tiring long ago. "The reticule is all I have." Neither of them needed to

know that was an untruth, yet there were still things inside it would pain her to lose.

“We can’t help that, my lady.” This from the first driver.

She stood her ground and huffed. “My answer is firmly no.”

The men looked at each other then shrugged.

It was Sam who answered. “We’ll take it by force.”

Everything happened quickly after that. The first driver—whose name she never knew—sprang at her. She fought against his hold, but Sam yanked the reticule from her wrist, which resulted in a scratch from the strings being tangled. Further struggling resulted in receiving more than a few bruises. Angry, she went after Sam. Unfortunately, that man was more cunning than his partner, for he lashed out with the pistol, caught the side of her head, the temple specifically, with the butt of the weapon.

Pain exploded inside her head. She stumbled backward, landing on her arse in the muddy road. Thank goodness for the cloak that kept the worst of the damp from her skirting. As she stared up at the two men, her vision wavered in and out as consciousness drifted.

“Stop. You can’t leave me here...” Alone and injured and completely without resources.

Of course the drivers turned thieves didn’t heed the order. With a bulging pack slung over one of the horse’s backs, they never once looked at her. Not only had they stolen some of her personal things, but they’d also taken the coin she’d offered to drive her to the Lake District to begin with.

As the effort of remaining somewhat upright became too much for her jumbled sense, she tumbled to her side on the wet, muddy road. Reaction set in and made her stomach shiver with fear and alarm. Once again, the violent actions of a man put her in a vulnerable position. She couldn't help but watch with darkening vision as the former drivers mounted the horses and then road off in the direction the coach had been heading, leaving her with the disabled coach that loomed like a giant dead beetle nearby.

Why did she have such trouble with men in her life, even on the periphery? Is it too much to ask that I meet a man who is the same as he portrays to the outside world? That he is as good and honorable as I have always dreamed?

Eventually, remaining conscious became too much, and with a pain-filled whimper, Lydia slipped into the void. At least there she wouldn't feel the pain or the cold.

By the time she came to awareness again, it was to the feeling of rain on her face as well as the sensation of someone gently tapping her cheeks.

“Miss? Miss? Can you hear me?”

The deep, soothing timbre of a male voice rang in her ears, but there was enough residual pain banging around her head from being hit with the butt of her driver's pistol that she couldn't quite concentrate on what was happening.

When she opened her eyes and a face swam into vision, she couldn't make sense of it. What was such a man doing here, in the middle of nowhere, kneeling on the muddy road next to her? For that matter, how had he even found her?

“Can you speak? Are you well?” Concern threaded through the cool, commanding tones as he continued to tap her cheek with gloved fingers. Then his features became clearer, and she couldn't help but stare. “How long have you been lying here?”

“I... I don’t know,” she finally managed to whisper, for all her concentration was focused on studying his face.

Dark brown hair, styled in a popular fashion, had the tendency to curl, making him all the more attractive. Intense blue eyes with a darker blue ring around the iris bored in hers with questions shadowing those cool depths. Sensual lips had downturned with a frown, but she had a feeling he was one of those men who could make brooding look attractive. Even though the light rain softly falling on her face was annoying and the smell of mud vomit-inducing, the faint scent of his shaving soap or cologne wafted to her nose from such close quarters, and she turned her head toward him to better get another whiff of that evergreen, mint, and snow aroma. The hint of dark stubble that clung to his cheeks and jaw fascinated her so much that she lifted a hand, hoping to feel that roughness, only to recall she wore gloves and have him catch that hand in his.

Remarkably, he chuckled, and the sound reverberated deep in her chest. “Was that answer in regard to how you feel or your current circumstances?” He traced her cheek and temple with a fingertip. “There is a bruise forming here and the skin has been broken slightly. The blood has already clotted, so you’ve been here at least a couple of hours.”

How dreadfully embarrassing to know that no one had come along this stretch of road in that long and that she’d laid here crumpled in a heap while it rained. Heat filled her cheeks. When she attempted to sit up, the world spun around her, and she groaned. “My head aches. So does my cheek. And there is a bit of dizziness.”

“I’ll wager it does.” He held her propped against his chest. “From the looks of the disabled coach over there and belongings strewn about, I’ll wager you were robbed.”

She snorted in derision, but that made her head ache all the more. “By my drivers. One pulled a pistol on me, and when I fought against having my reticule taken, he hit

me.” She raised a hand to explore the tender area with her fingertips, but couldn’t feel anything through the gloves and the numbness. A shiver ripped down her spine. “I’m quite cold.”

“That settles it. You need to ride with me and my daughter.” Then the man grinned, and her world suddenly went topsy turvy, which had nothing to do with her head injury.

“I couldn’t possibly impose. Let me find my own way.”

“Alone?” He shook his head. “Come. Let me help you to stand. Once you are warm and settled, we will make plans.” Seconds after he struggled to his feet, he extended a hand to her.

Wary but bemused, Lydia slipped her fingers into his palm. In no time, she was pulled upright, but another round of lightheadedness assailed her, and she stumbled. “Oh, dear.” The feeling of falling fell over her, but before she could tumble back into the mud, he scooped her up in his arms, heedless of her dirty state that would soon mar the pristine condition of his dark gray greatcoat.

“You are in no condition to go anywhere, so I am making the decision to take you to wherever your destination lies. Or to the nearest posting inn so you can make other plans.” When his gaze crashed into hers, a powerful gale blew against the gates she’d built around herself for protection. “Consider it my gift to you this Christmastide. If you believe in such miracles.”

“Uh, I do not, but thank you for this boon. I was in need of a rescue.”

But could she trust him? Only time would tell.

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A lady should never find herself alone with a man.

December 18, 1817

Dratted rain that turned to snow and turned back into rain again. Pick a side!

Jackson Ramsay, the Earl of Greystone, huffed out his displeasure as he stared out the window glass of his traveling coach.

“Why do we have to make this atrocious trip, Papa?” This from his daughter, Elsbeth, who, at the age of sixteen, had asked him the same question at some point every day since they’d departed London. “It seems unnecessary and petty.”

He bit the inside of his cheek to keep from speaking sharply to the young lady, for he’d given her the same answer the last string of days. “I want to spend Christmastide away from London. Town has grown stale.”

Perhaps he’d undertaken a fool’s journey traveling this close to Christmas, but it couldn’t be helped. It had become critical that both he and his daughter leave London so they could bond again and grow closer. Ever since he’d lost his wife a few years ago, he hadn’t been the same, had felt her loss keenly, and perhaps unconsciously had drifted apart from his only child.

So in a bid to control things and help them both remember what truly mattered in life, Jackson had announced their departure abruptly to the staff. A few days later, two traveling coaches were loaded with luggage and people. They left soon after for his property in the Scottish Highlands.

As part of his titled holdings, the estate in Scotland was located between Gretna Green and Lockerbie, with a large, forested area to the east. Though it wasn't a large estate, perhaps a hundred acres or so, it was his only real sanctuary. His father had used it as a hunting lodge, for the hunting was good, fishing also, but it was more of a retreat than anything else. The manor was an old Medieval style with ivy growing on one side in the summer, moss in the fall. There were more sheep than people through the tenant farms, and also cows. So many blooming Highland coos, until a man could grow mad just from looking at them. It was a parcel of land left to him from his mother, which his father couldn't touch, but he used it often enough. Mama adored it in the Highlands, said she missed the clear air there and the open spaces, that she often felt crowded and caged in London.

And he couldn't blame her. There was something special about being in the Highlands, something he had never been able to find anywhere else in the world, so Jackson used the estate when he wanted to be left alone and think or evade his feelings.

To date, it hadn't worked.

"Papa, have you even listened to anything I've said in the last ten minutes?" Annoyance wove through Elsbeth's voice. She frowned at him from the opposite bench. "You never listen."

This time, he did sigh, and when he focused his attention on his daughter, he was a tad worried that she appeared so distressed. "I am aware you find this an inconvenience, but once we arrive, you will thank me. Your grandmother wished to keep the old Scottish traditions alive, and since we both need some time away—"

"No, you need time away," she said with a petulant frown. "I don't want to leave my friends in exchange for being on an isolated Scottish property. There's nothing to do and no one to talk to."

Trying to summon patience to the forefront proved a challenge, but he refused to snap at his daughter when her only crime was being bored. “Are you certain they’re your friends? Every time you see them, you end up in tears over something they said or did to you. Friends don’t do that to each other.”

Thus, one of the reasons he wished to remove her at least through Twelfth Night.

When she blew out a breath, it ruffled the light brown curls on her forehead. “You don’t understand what it’s like being this age, Papa.”

“Perhaps I don’t since I’m so ancient.” Apparently, the age of seven and thirty was too far gone, and he had one foot in the grave. “However, I know that if I remove you from that scenario, you will have a good three weeks to discover who you are away from those girls.” He nodded, as if trying to convince himself. “It is my right as your father.” And in lieu of his wife, he would do everything he could to bring Elsbeth up as a strong woman with confidence and someone who knew the difference between people who were true opposed to ones who were fair-weather friends.

She shook her head as she stared out the window at the passing scenery. “Why do we need to be in Scotland for Christmastide? It’s going to be so boring. I’d much rather stay home.”

Enough of the same argument day after day. Some of his patience slipped. “And what would you have been doing in London? Moping about the house? Reading? Lamenting that your life is a collection of unrealized dreams?” Perhaps it was legitimate ennui, but most likely it was a young girl in her adolescent years attempting to gain sympathy from anyone who would listen. At that age, everything was done for attention.

A pink blush spread over her cheeks. “Not all the time. There are outings.”

“Well, there will be the same at Dove Cottage.” It had been named that by his mother, apparently in the early days of her marriage to his father. Since the moniker was cute, it had stuck throughout the years.

“I rather doubt that. Didn’t you say it’s naught but a hunting lodge?”

“Among other things.”

She huffed again. “Why couldn’t we spend the holiday season at Greystone Hall in Sussex? I wouldn’t have minded walking the seashore. At least then I could search for shells and perhaps sea glass.”

As much as he adored his country estate, it was still far too close to London for his liking just now, and it had been one of the places that his wife had loved above all others. He wasn’t strong enough for those memories.

“You can take walks and hikes in the Highlands. Occasionally, people find Roman coins or other artifacts.” Though it hadn’t happened to him, he knew of others who’d found such things. “Though everything is all dependent on the weather. Things have been odd this year.”

The summer had been a wet one across England and Wales, but to be fair, the year 1817 was also a bad year across Scotland. Early autumnal frosts had damaged or delayed the harvests, which resulted in much hardship in the rural and highland areas. Whether the disturbances were a consequence of the cold, disturbed patterns induced by the Tambora volcanic eruption from the year before or some other mishap from nature, he couldn’t say, for such things weren’t in his purview, but he tried to help the tenant farms in his care when he could.

“Besides, we haven’t been to the cottage for nearly three years. Not since...”

“...before Mama died,” Elsbeth quietly finished for him. When she regarded him and their gazes met, a trace of sadness clouded the blue depths of her eyes. Though her features were much like her mother’s, her eyes and hair were all his.

“Yes.” The word was propelled on a choked whisper. He’d lost his wife almost three years before, but there were days when it seemed like yesterday, and he didn’t believe he could move forward with his life without her. Yet there were other days when he looked back with fondness, was glad for the years he had with her, and thought he might be ready to move forward with whatever life would bring. “You and I needed to remove from London for a while so we can enjoy each other’s company and realize what is most important to us. We have gotten off track a bit since your mother left us.”

“Do stop.” Briefly, she pointed her gaze to the roof of the coach then transferred it out the window once more. “You are just annoyed you don’t have a cause or charity to keep you occupied. And since you rarely attend your club any longer out of some misguided sense that I need constant supervision, you are bored, among other things.”

He frowned. “What does that mean?”

“Don’t be coy, Papa.” A trace of a smile curved her lips. “You live to fix people. You are the collector of broken things. Ever since Mama died, you have made it your unspoken mission to champion the cause of other people who you have deemed broken, to help put their lives back together so you won’t need to attend the cracks and shards of your own.”

“What? Surely not.” Yet she wasn’t wrong. Because of his wife’s urging, he had involved himself in those sorts of causes over the years. They—and she—had changed him into the man that he was today, which made him more patient and understanding to the plights of others around him. But was he as broken as his daughter made it sound? While annoyed, he was impressed with how mature her

accusation was. “That might be true. However, I am not confirming or denying that, so why do you think that?”

Another huff escaped her, but she glanced his way again and this time she held his gaze. Suddenly, he saw her as the young woman she was instead of the girl he’d thought of her for so long. A young woman on the verge of stepping into her adult life complete with all the hopes and dreams and heartaches that would invariably go along with that. And he could only protect her from hurt for so long.

“Papa, I love you, but you are the type of man who needs a project, who needs to concentrate on someone else as a distraction from grief or loneliness or whatever else you currently struggle with.”

Quiet reigned in the coach’s interior for the space of a few heartbeats, for it was quite a definitive statement.

“Uh, how could you possibly know that?”

Elsbeth shrugged, but there was a grin brimming of confidence about her. “I am a student of philosophy and psychology. The last is a rather new concept, of course, but my tutor says it’s a fascinating subject that has been studied in other countries for hundreds of years. It would serve me well in life, no matter what I choose to do with my future. Above that, it will help me understand the intricacies of finishing school.”

“I see.” He and his wife had made the decision to hire tutors for Elsbeth on many different subjects to give her the sort of education she deserved as an earl’s daughter. They hadn’t wanted her to believe the only recourse she had available to her was to marry, have children, or run a household. “I must say, I’m rather impressed. The world is constantly changing and growing. The more we understand of it, the better we can serve those who need our help.”

“There you go again, Papa, wanting to fix people.”

“I can’t seem to help it. When you come from wealth and privilege, you should be compelled to make life easier for others.” It was something both of his parents impressed upon him. They said if God’s blessings fell on a person, it was their responsibility to pass them on.

“It’s a wonderful trait, of course, but don’t neglect your own needs in the process.” She leaned forward and laid a hand on his knee. “You are worthy of receiving love and help too. I know how much you loved Mama, but she wouldn’t want you to spend the rest of your life alone. It is perfectly all right if you wish to marry again.”

“I haven’t it given thought, to be honest.” He swallowed down the ball of emotion in his throat. Aside from a disastrous relationship with a mistress a year ago, he’d not gone out of his way to seek out companionship from a woman.

When he married at the age of twenty, he’d barely had time alone with his wife before they discovered she was with child and then was delivered of the babe. Ever since then, it had always been the three of them, and he’d always wished they’d had time to explore their marriage before starting their family. “I’m not certain I want to marry again.”

Yet a second time around might prove different than the first, but could he open himself up to the risk? Could he give away his heart a second time and then potentially go through the grieving process all over again? Despite what the heart might want, fate was an exacting task master who didn’t always play fair.

The thoughts were destined to not be answered just then, for the coach came to an abrupt halt that jostled them both on their benches.

“Ho there!” The driver’s call quickly followed the stop of forward momentum. “Your

Lordship, there is an issue in the road!”

Apprehension went down Jackson’s spine. “What is amiss?”

“Uh, I think you need to come out and take a look.”

He looked at his daughter, who shrugged.

“You go ahead. I’m tired and wish to nap.” So saying, she stretched out on the bench with her back to him, apparently ready and willing to sleep regardless of what was happening around her.

Ah, to be young again. “I’m going outside to see what the problem is.” Since there was no answer from his daughter, Jackson shoved open the door, kicked down the steps, then exited the vehicle... only to be confronted with cold rain and a colder breeze.

Shock smacked into his chest when he reached the spot where one of his drivers stood. “What the devil?” The roadway was littered with dresses and unmentionables. A few slippers and various other personal affects decorated the ground.

“I’d guess a robbery. See how the coach is on its side and no horses? I think the drivers robbed her and left her for dead.”

“Bloody hell.”

John nodded. “Think she’s dead?”

“I would have no idea.” Slowly, he approached the form of a woman lying crumped in the road with a cloak wrapped around her body. Her skirting had come up to nearly the knee on one leg revealing a completely damp stocking and a well-turned ankle

and calf. Regardless, she wasn't moving. When he dropped to his knees in the road despite the mud and the wet, he eased the woman onto her back. "She's young-ish. Probably around five and twenty or so." The naturally arched black eyebrows and bone structure spoke of a strong personality. Locks of black hair had escaped the pins. There was no bonnet close by, so perhaps it was still in the coach.

"I'll give it a once over."

"Thank you." Still concerned, Jackson continued to evaluate the woman. Her chest rose and fell, so she was merely unconscious. "Miss? Miss? Can you hear me?" Gently, he tapped her cheek with his gloved fingertips. How long had she been in the road with no one to care for her or look after her? As he brushed the hair away from the left side of her face, he gasped, for there was an angry bruise forming as well as broken skin that had already begun to scab over, definitely an indication that she'd been there for some time. The dark arcs of her lashes fanned over her pale cheeks, leaving a poignant picture behind. "Miss?"

Seconds later, she opened her eyes, and he nearly fell into such dark brown depths they resembled rich, strong coffee. Shock and confusion reflected in those eyes and her pale lips formed a slight "o" as she stared up at him.

"Can you speak? Are you well?" As he continued to tap her cheek, he couldn't help the note of command in his voice. It was in his nature to take charge. Even though he'd never served in the military, managing people was his talent; by necessity, for his father suffered a decline of the mind for many years before finally succumbing to the disease. In that time, Jackson had stepped in. "How long have you been lying here?"

"I... I don't know," she finally managed to whisper as she continued to peer into his face.

Despite the rain falling steadily, he tried to shield her from the worst of the precipitation with his shoulders the best he could. When she lifted a hand, he caught it in his. She frowned at the impasse, and slowly the color returned to her cheeks and lips, all of which were quite red.

As he continued to stare, he chuckled. “Was that answer in regard to how you feel or your current circumstances?” He traced her cheek and temple with a fingertip. “There is a bruise forming here and the skin has been broken slightly. The blood has already clotted, so you’ve been here at least a couple of hours.” The poor woman had to be freezing by this point. Anyone would if they were left in the rain and the cold.

An intense blush colored her cheeks. When she attempted to sit, she groaned. “My head aches. So does my cheek. And there is a bit of dizziness.”

“I’ll wager it does.” Not wanting her to move around too much, Jackson held her upper body propped against his chest. “From the looks of the disabled coach over there and belongings strewn about, I’ll wager you were robbed.”

She snorted. “By my drivers.”

“That’s what my driver suspected.”

“One pulled a pistol on me, and when I fought against having my reticule taken, he hit me.” She raised a hand to explore the tender area with her fingertips, but her body was racked by a shiver. “I’m quite cold.”

From the notes of culture in her dulcet tones, she was most likely part of the ton . How she came to be traveling alone only added to the mystery surrounding her. “That settles it. You need to ride with me and my daughter.” What sort of gentleman would he be if he didn’t try and protect her? When she stared, he grinned.

Perhaps his daughter was right.

“I couldn’t possibly impose. Let me find my own way.”

“Alone?” He shook his head. “Come. Let me help you to stand. Once you are warm and settled, we will make plans.” Seconds after he gained his footing, he extended a hand to her.

With an expression of wariness, the woman slipped her fingers into his palm. As soon as he closed his fingers around hers, an odd, charged sensation bolted to his elbow. When she stumbled, he was there. “Oh, dear.” Before she could tumble into the mud, Jackson lifted her into his arms, regardless of her dirty state. If the mud marred his greatcoat, it was a small price to pay.

“You are in no condition to go anywhere, so I am making the decision to take you to wherever your destination lies. Or to the nearest posting inn so you can make other plans.” When his gaze crashed into hers, awareness swept over him as a silent connection formed between them. It was something he hadn’t experienced since the early days of his marriage. “Consider it my gift to you this Christmastide. If you believe in such miracles.”

“Uh, I do not, but thank you for this boon. I was in need of a rescue.”

“Then I’m glad I came along when I did.” To John, who came away from the disabled coach with a book in hand, he said, “Gather the garments and things that don’t look to be completely damaged. We will take them with us.”

“At once, Your Lordship.”

Now the trip north had suddenly become more interesting.

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A lady should never do anything with a man who hasn't been introduced to her.

Lydia sighed with relief as she was lifted into a traveling coach and placed on a well-squabbed bench. When the man who'd rescued her climbed in after her, she scooted over until she was by the window. Immediately, the clean, crisp, wintery scent of him wafted to her nose.

"Ready?"

She shrugged, for she couldn't really say definitively about anything. "I'm sorry."

"For what?" With a nod, he brought up the steps then closed the door, which put an end to the intrusive cold air as well as the rain.

"Transferring mud onto the bench. It's already all over the front of your greatcoat." As she spoke, she glanced over at him when he settled onto the bench beside her. Dear heavens, he was easy on the eyes. Realizing that made her heated merely thinking about it.

"It is nothing. Saving your life was more important than the state of my clothing." A thud from the rear of the coach caused him to grin. The gesture completely transformed his expression and took a few years from his face. "My driver must have found some redeemable clothing items in your things that were strewn about the road."

"At least there is that." Though she'd need to have them laundered or find a way to do the chore herself.

“I’m sorry your reticule was stolen. I’d imagine your coin and other important items were inside?”

“Very little, I’m afraid.”

“Why is that?”

“The small amount of coin and jewelry I own has been sewn into the hem of this skirt and cloak. Those drivers will be disappointed at the pence they find in the reticule.” Would the ache in her head ever cease? Her fingers and toes felt as if they would snap off from the cold.

He watched her with that intense blue gaze, and dear heavens she wanted to hide herself in those pools. Would he judge her for who she truly was? It almost pained her to know that when he invariably asked about her history, she would give him nothing but lies. There was nothing for it, and it was habit by now.

“By the by, I’m Jackson Ramsay. The Earl of Greystone, actually.” One of his dark brown eyebrows rose in question. “That is my daughter Elsbeth. She’s currently sleeping, or so she wants me to believe.”

Lydia nodded as she glanced at the bench across the narrow aisle at the young lady whose back was to her. A bonnet rested at her feet and a pretty pelisse of light blue brocade hid most of her form from view. “To be fair, girls her age do tend to need more sleep than a full adult.”

“Hmm.” When he continued to regard her, she finally realized that she’d been remiss in introducing herself.

Thank goodness his daughter wasn’t enrolled in her school, for he seemed far too clever, and that meant she probably was as well. “I’m Lady Lydia Kingston.” It was a

bit trickier to cling to the fiction she'd invented for herself when talking directly with a member of the beau monde , and an earl at that. He would be apt to know the peerage more intimately than perhaps the parents of her students.

"A lady? Then your father is highly titled? A duke, perhaps?" Interest wove through the question.

Drat, drat, drat.

"The Earl of Mountfort." In the moment, it didn't matter the name was completely pulled from her imagination, and had been for years, but she hoped he wouldn't dwell overly much on that or try to trace the ancestry of that fictitious name. "I, uh, am the headmistress and owner of Kingston's Academy for Young Ladies in London."

"London? Now that is an interesting tidbit. How did that come about?" When he half-turned toward her, his knee accidentally knocked her leg. Tingling awareness zipped up that limb and lodged in her lower belly.

"Well, I'm a spinster." Heat slapped at her cheeks, for the lie made her sound far more innocent and wholesome than she was. "To fill my time, I decided to open a finishing school." One would think the story she'd invented for herself would simply trip off her tongue with ease, but that was never the case. It was a struggle each time she told it, especially to this man for whatever reason. "My father left me his townhouse. The one next door sat empty for a long time, so I convinced a friend to help me buy it. The complicated paperwork was obviously beyond me—" it wasn't, "—and a few greased palms later, I'd doubled my real estate investment." She shrugged and refrained from looking directly at him. "It took six months, but I finally started a finishing school for a very limited number of young ladies whose families might not have coin enough to send their children to a school on the Continent or to Bath or Brighton."

At least that was the truth. The rest was... complicated.

Respect lined his face. "What motivated such a plan? You seem far too young to remain on the shelf in order to run a finishing school."

Oh, dear. This wasn't a question she was usually asked, so she didn't have a rehearsed answer. "Uh, I suppose I had such a positive experience of my own at finishing school." Her brain was still a bit fuzzy from the stint of unconsciousness. "The friendships I'd formed and the teachers I learned from were not to be forgotten. I wished to provide a positive experience to other young ladies, but what hinders many is the prohibitive cost of finishing schools away from London."

Movement from the bench across from her location threw light on the fact that Lady Elsbeth might not be fully asleep, but the girl remained quiet and her breathing even, so Lydia couldn't be certain.

The earl softly cleared his throat. "I don't wish to move her because she can get grouchy and I am not in the mood to traverse that road again."

"This is fine." Her lips twitched with the want to smile. Men with a sense of humor were so much more attractive than those without. "I don't mind the close proximity." Which was true enough, for the warmth of him called out to her.

"I agree, yet you never answered my question regarding the fact though you may be past the first and second blooms of youth, you are still quite young to open a school. It is a great responsibility." That dratted eyebrow rose again. Had he found the holes in her story already?

"Oh." More heat invaded her cheeks, but most of that came from the intensity of his gaze and the way his eyes occasionally dropped to her mouth. "I'm eight and twenty, and once my parents died, I was left very much alone in the world. Since I had

independent means, I did this to have people around me.”

“Who does your books?”

“I do. Trust is difficult to come by.” That slipped out before she could recall it.

A light of curiosity flared in his eyes. “And you are unmarried why?”

“For the same reason.” Not a lie. She doubted she would ever go beneath a man’s thumb again without serious thought. Why wouldn’t he let the subject go? “As to why I am unattached? It is because no one asked me.” If the words had an underlying tone of annoyance, she couldn’t help it.

Please believe me.

Of course she couldn’t tell him the truth, that six years ago, she’d married a man she thought would love her forever but in fact had turned out to be the worst sort of bounder—a man who hit her to make himself feel better and, in a sense, to control every aspect of her life while pickling his brain with cheap ale and gin.

“I see, though those men must not have, for you hardly resemble a dog’s breakfast, even with all the mud.”

“Thank you for the honesty.” Had the girl on the bench shook with suppressed laughter? It was difficult to tell, for she didn’t make another move.

Another swath of silence brewed inside the coach. When she couldn’t stand the force of his gaze any longer, Lydia turned her face to the window to watch the slowly passing scenery and hopefully forget how cold she was. “I rather think it will prove a cold winter.”

“Indeed, especially after how dismal the autumn has been.” Eventually, the rustle of fabric indicated he’d switched positions. “Why are you traveling by yourself?”

An easy enough inquiry. “My maid refused to go to the Lake District with me.”

“Ah, where in the Lake District? Elsbeth and I are going into the Highlands, a couple of days south of Edinburgh.”

Then it seemed they would travel together for a bit. What alternative did she have? “Near Ambleside. I have a cottage there that I need to set to rights in order to have it sold.”

“Interesting. It seems for a relatively young, unmarried woman, you have quite a lot of real estate. Why is that, I wonder?”

Lydia ignored the heat that had returned to her cheeks. “Merely fortunate.” What would she do if he asked about the provenance of the cottage? There hadn’t been a lie to explain that away, for it hadn’t been part of her new identity when she’d fled. “Uh, when we arrive at the next posting inn, I shall try to make arrangements to go forward on my own. You needn’t trouble yourself with my presence any longer.” And it would prevent him from delving deeper into her intricate web of made-up history.

“Nonsense. Ambleside is hardly out of our way. It’s two days from here. You can accompany us as far as that, and at least I’ll have the satisfaction of knowing I was able to help you on the journey.”

Well, drat.

“I appreciate that,” she said in a faint voice as she racked her mind for something else to say that would bounce the conversation from her. “Where are your valet and her maid?”

“All necessary staff for the journey is in the coach that is coming behind us with the luggage. We’re headed to my property in the Highlands. A hunting lodge, really, to spend Christmastide together and strengthen our familial bond.”

“That is a lovely way to spend the season.” Never had her own loneliness been driven home quite so hard. Usually, during the term break, she could survive knowing the girls would return in January, but in this moment, sitting in someone else’s traveling coach, hearing of his plans to be with family, a pang of longing went through her chest. “Where is your wife? Has she gone ahead or remained behind in London?”

The recent joviality faded from his expression and the light dimmed from his eyes. “Uh, no. Unfortunately, my wife died almost three years ago from complications of childbirth. She perished in early January.”

“Oh, dear.”

Sorrow clouded his eyes, but to his credit, he didn’t look away. “It was an unexpected pregnancy, obviously, since my daughter is sixteen. The midwife warned that due to her advanced age there was the chance for issues...” His swallow was audible. “One moment she was fine, about six months along, so I left the house to take a meeting with my man-of-affairs, and the next... Well, when I returned home, I was given the news that she’d been found by her maid on the drawing room floor, dead from severe hemorrhaging with the babe born prematurely. Neither survived.” There was so much emotion in the words that her own chest tightened.

“I am so sorry for your loss, Your Lordship,” Lydia whispered, for she wasn’t a stranger to that type of grief. No one knew the extent of her suffering and pain—again by necessity—and her loss hadn’t been an act of God or nature. It had been precipitated by her husband’s fists, but that didn’t matter. The result had been the same. “Losing a child—let alone a spouse—so immediately and so horrifically, is something that changes a person.”

When there was no movement from the bench opposite, she assumed Lady Elsbeth had indeed fallen asleep. Perhaps that was for the best, but part of her agonized that she couldn't say why she emphasized, for it wasn't part of the facade she'd drawn around herself.

He nodded, and his Adam's apple bobbed. "My greatest regret was not being there for her in that horrible hour as well as not being able to say goodbye. That has haunted me."

It was an odd admission between strangers, but she understood why he would have spoken such a thing aloud. "I am sure she understood, and that she knew you loved her." Though the lack of closure would leave a person bereft. And why the devil couldn't she stop staring at his mouth? Of course, she'd be a ninny if she didn't wonder what a kiss would feel like from him, but she was also a ninny for thinking such a thing in the first place. "Now I know why you wished to get away for the holidays with your daughter."

"I fear if we didn't escape London for a bit, I will lose Elsbeth as well. Not to death but to the evils contained within society. It is so empty and vapid at times, and I don't want that for her." He glanced at his daughter then back at Lydia. "At the back of my mind is the fact that she'll go to a finishing school next fall, and then shortly after that, she'll have her Come Out. It's overwhelming to know that soon she'll skate out of my life."

With this glimpse into his life, her heart went out to him, for he was taking care of this alone without a woman to guide him or even his daughter. "Though it might feel difficult, I think you're a good father. Young ladies are becoming increasingly thrust into the real world far too soon. There is far too much pressure for them to misbehave, or worse, marry early. I'm aware futures for women are limited, but I firmly believe young ladies shouldn't be expected only to do what society dictates."

Surprise jumped into his eyes. “That is a rather shocking stance for the headmistress of a finishing school. Isn’t your job to ready these girls for that same society for the purposes of bringing a titled man up to scratch?”

“Yes, there is that, but I make certain that the women I employ as intensive teachers instill confidence and bravery in the young ladies at my school. I want them all to know there is more to life than the domestic.” She held up a hand, palm outward. “There is nothing wrong with wishing to be a wife, a mother, or a hostess, of course, but that is not the only thing one can aspire to.”

Would he think her too radical? Definitively put her out at the next posting inn?

“I am glad for that.” Easily, he took her hand in his, and another wave of heated awareness shivered over her. Why would he do such a thing? “In many ways, I believe that the future of this country will be shaped, at least in part, by women. Whether or not that is in a leadership capacity remains to be seen, but women should have more ownership in their lives.”

For long moments, she rested her gaze on the earl. “It’s reassuring and somewhat hopeful that someone so high on the instep is forward thinking. Perhaps with more of that, laws will change in parliament and the consensus regarding women will change.”

“It will be slow going, for the men in charge can often prove pigheaded, but there must be change if England is to continue being a powerful nation.” He tightened his hold on her hand, and in fact, he tugged her a tiny bit closer. “It’s a pity you have never married, Lady Lydia. You could have proved a valuable asset to someone.”

She snorted even as cold wariness circled through her belly, for men weren’t to be trusted. “I don’t want to be an asset or a prop or something that enhances a husband, Your Lordship. I want to be a partner, on equal footing with my own thoughts and

intentions.”

“Somehow, I can see that about you. Much different than the kind of woman my wife was.” When she narrowed her eyes, he hastened to add, “That is not necessarily a bad thing.”

“Ah.” It was difficult to breathe, suddenly, as the space inside the coach shrank or rather his presence filled it thoroughly, and all she could concentrate on was him. At least he distracted her from the pain in the side of her head.

“Since we are traveling companions, in private, do refer to me as Greystone or even Jackson should you wish,” he said in a soft voice as he tugged her another bit closer.

Lydia nodded. “I appreciate that.” She’d lowered her voice to match his pitch. “You may drop the lady if you’d like.”

“I do, in fact, like much about this.” Before she could wonder about the innuendo, he tugged her even closer and seconds later, he claimed her lips with his.

Shock and a hint of panic went through her all at once, and when she rested her free hand against his hard chest, she pulled back slightly in order to search his gaze with hers. Would he attempt to molest her merely because he could or thought his title afforded him that? But nothing in his eyes indicated a malicious interest. In fact, those blue depths had darkened slightly with desire, the same feelings that had been unaccountably awakened in her belly the second he’d scooped her into his arms and carried her to this coach.

Slowly, she nodded, and then tamped the urge to sigh at the luxurious feel of his soft but firm lips on hers as he once more kissed her, almost as if he were introducing himself to her in a more intimate way than conversing alone could. He didn’t push for more, didn’t demand entrance or surrender, he simply moved gently over her mouth

before pulling away and putting a bit of space between them on the bench.

Shock went through his expression before vanishing behind a well-conditioned mask he'd no doubt learned from a young age. "Well, Lydia, the next few days should prove interesting as we travel together."

"No doubt you are correct," she said in a voice that shook even as butterflies awoke in her belly in a reaction that she thought had been murdered a long time ago.

God help her to keep her wits about her and stick with the lies she'd needed to tell, for the alternative was terrifying.

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A lady should always be pleasant.

A few hours later, with shadows lengthening in the overcast skies as dusk came upon them, the traveling coach pulled into the yard of the Old Brown Mare Inn. While Jackson was glad they'd reached the posting inn without further incident, he was slightly apprehensive about the accommodations.

Even more so when he told the ladies to remain in the coach while he reserved a pair of rooms. Would the two of them get along? Would they be frostily polite to each other? God only knew, but he had a responsibility to protect them both for wildly different reasons.

A quarter of an hour later, he made his way back to the inn yard with less than pleasant information, but at least the rain had stopped... for now.

After opening the door, he popped his head in. Lydia was on one bench while his daughter occupied the other, and from the looks of things, they hadn't really conversed, for the recalcitrant expression on Elsbeth's face testified to that fact.

"Well, we are in luck. There was one last private room available, so I reserved it," he said with forced cheerfulness in his voice as he held up a brass key. "However, that was the only private room left, so unless we wish for Lady Lydia to share a public room with up to four or five other people in the same bed, we will all need to get along in the one private room."

A faint shiver racked her shoulders while faint fear sprang to her eyes, gone with her next blink.

Why?

Yes, sharing a room with her might prove disastrous, for after he'd apparently lost his mind earlier and had shared an exploratory kiss with the woman who was naught but a stranger, the initial desire he'd felt hadn't faded.

Not that anything would happen with his daughter in the room, thank God. He wasn't searching for a new romance.

Was he?

"Do you mean to tell me that you are contemplating staying in the same room as a stranger? Someone you just picked up off the side of the road?" Indignation quivered in Elsbeth's voice. "Are you mad?"

He frowned. "I'm not contemplating it; rather, it's done. I've booked the room. You and Lydia can take the bed I shall sleep on the floor." As he spoke, Jackson put down the steps and then thrust in a hand to help one of them out.

Of course it was his daughter who came down first. She regarded him as if he'd suddenly grown two heads. "She could murder us both," Elsbeth said in a fierce whisper.

To her credit, Lydia did little more than huff. "I am not in the habit of killing people I don't know."

Elsbeth popped her hands on her hips while she gawked at the headmistress as he handed Lydia out of the vehicle. "Then if you did know me, you'd do so?"

He exchanged a speaking glance with his main driver.

“That largely depends on how nasty you continue to act toward me.” With that slightly elevated eyebrow and the tone of an educator, he could completely see her in the role of a head mistress. “There is no need for panic or worry, Lady Elsbeth. We will rub on famously if we treat each other with respect.”

Jackson’s admiration for the woman rose. Perhaps what his daughter needed was to be taken in hand by a woman with a strong will who could guide her out of the tendency to act spoiled. “Unless you two wish to scratch each other’s eyes out in the stable yard, we should make inroads to going inside and out of the cold. I’m quite looking forward to thawing in front of a fire.”

While Lydia’s lips twitched, she didn’t fully smile, but she nodded. “I would enjoy that as well. I can’t remember when last I felt warm.”

Well, he could, and it was during that impromptu kiss. Had it affected her at all? For that matter, why the hell had he done that? Tamping on the urge to grin, he led the two of them into the common room of the inn. He’d kissed her because he’d wanted to, because those ruby red lips of hers had practically demanded it, because there’d been a spark between them he was intrigued by.

Despite all that, he sensed she was withholding something but couldn’t put his finger on it. There were secrets and shadows in her eyes that made her all the more intriguing. Additionally, she had a certain something about her that enhanced the attraction and awareness already brewing between them.

Had she felt it as well?

That remained to be seen, but at least they were all safe and would have tea—preferably laced with brandy—sooner rather than later.

Fifteen minutes later, he sat at a scarred and scratched heavy wooden table with

Lydia and Elsbeth. They both had tea while he nursed a glass of brandy. A fire blazed cheerfully in the nearby hearth, and everyone had a warm dinner, which they tucked into with varying degrees of enjoyment.

Not much had been said, but that suited him fine, for he didn't fancy playing peacemaker between the two women. Would his wife have been disappointed in what he'd let their daughter become? That was destined to remain a mystery, but he hoped not. He'd done the best he could by Elsbeth, but he feared it wasn't enough, even for the daughter of an earl.

"Lady Elsbeth, how do you feel about traveling so close to Christmas?" The inquiry from Lydia was most unexpected, and Jackson waited with bated breath for the answer, even though the girl would probably complain. "Most young ladies I have in my school looked forward to spending time with friends and family doing the usual activities to prepare for the holiday."

Surprise widened his daughter's eyes. She bounced her gaze between him and Lydia before finally setting down her fork and knife. "I wasn't pleased when Papa announced the travel plans. What is so wrong with staying in London?"

"Where your friends are?" Lydia continued as she cut her roast beef into evenly divided squares before spearing one with the tines of her fork.

"Yes." The girl nodded but she didn't glance his way. "Papa says they aren't a good influence on me, that they are silver-tongued vipers who've nothing better to do than cut down others in the beau monde with gossip and rumor or go on indiscriminate shopping trips in Mayfair. He doesn't think that is a good environment for me."

"Mmmhmm." Lydia chewed the bite of meat thoughtfully before swallowing. "I can't say whether that is true since I don't know them or you, so perhaps you could tell me how you wished to spend your holiday from your studies?"

What was this? An angle he hadn't thought to employ on his daughter.

"Well, I..." Elsbeth temporarily bit her bottom lip. "If I wasn't with my friends, I suppose I'd spend that time reading or painting, perhaps convincing Papa to leave the house. There is a night circus that sets up in Covent Garden during Christmastide. That might have been fun to see. Or perhaps the menagerie at the Tower."

"True, but certainly you have already seen those things. No doubt a governess took you when you were younger." And the headmistress continued to methodically and delicately eat her dinner with graceful manners.

"Of course, but when one sees such things at different ages, one realizes a new and different appreciation for them," his daughter countered with an eyebrow raised in challenge.

Just when Jackson thought there might be tension exploding between the two, Lydia nodded. A faint smile curved those damned kissable lips. "Very good, Elsbeth. Not many people your age can appreciate the subtleties and nuances of meeting experiences again. In fact, you will think that way another two times during your life, I'll wager. And that is a good thing."

Miracle of miracle, his daughter grinned. "Thank you." She pushed the food around on her plate. "Papa means well, of course."

"Or course," he echoed in a soft voice, for it was almost as if he didn't exist during that conversation.

Lydia glanced at him with amusement in her dark eyes but then gave her full attention to Elsbeth. "Parents usually do, unless they are monsters or ogres." She took a sip of tea. "However, I can imagine you are disappointed to be so far away from civilization as you know it. Perhaps you had invitations to social events?"

“Uh, not exactly.” Elsbeth fixed her gaze on her plate. A faint blush stained her cheeks. “I am only sixteen and haven’t had my Come Out yet.”

“But?” Lydia took a bite of her roast.

“But it would be great fun to attend a dance, even if my dancing instructor has said I’m hopeless at the steps in all the sets. I think I need a different teacher, someone who believes in me instead of belittles me.”

“That would certainly make a difference.” The headmistress nodded. “Fortunately, I am an excellent dancer and would be happy to teach you the finer points of all the usual sets.”

Excitement went through his daughter’s expression, and that was something he hadn’t seen in a very long time. “I would like that very much. Thank you.”

Here was the break he’d been waiting for since the two of them had ignored him. “Does that mean you agree to travel with us until Ambleside, Lady Lydia?”

This time, the blush was in her cheeks. “I suppose I do. However, you should let me pay for my own passage.” When her gaze crashed into his, there was a certain longing, a certain... craving for lack of a better word into those dark depths he couldn’t understand but recognized. “I can pay to share a public room.”

“Bite your tongue. Never let it be said that I sent the daughter of an earl to share a room at a posting inn with the hodgepodge of humanity that might turn up.” He shook his head. “And an unaccompanied innocent at that.”

“Oh. That hadn’t occurred to me.” Her blush deepened. “I have been alone for some years now.”

“Ah.” Maidenly reserve? How interesting, for there had been a banked response to her kiss earlier, as if she’d wanted to let herself go, to surrender to the embrace, but she’d held back for whatever reason. And he wanted to know why. “The only obvious answer is to stay with us. Don’t you agree, Elsbeth?”

They both glanced at the girl.

“I suppose it is the only way for us to maintain some sense of propriety.” Then her eyes widened again. “As long as we don’t pretend Lady Lydia is my mother.”

The woman in question cut another square of her roast, put it into her mouth, and daintily chewed before swallowing. “I’d imagine you aren’t ready for your father to marry again?”

“Actually, that isn’t true at all.” Elsbeth peered at him with a grin. “In fact, recently I have pestered Papa to put himself out in society in the hopes he would meet a lady who might thoroughly charm him.”

“How lovely of you.” The headmistress also gave him a look. “Then it’s you who is opposed to a second marriage? Perhaps that indicates you are still in love with your wife?”

There was a certain comfort in her no-nonsense demeanor. It spoke to a directness he admired. The fact that she might know her own mind instead of parroting things back to people was refreshing. “I was devastated when she died, of course. And yes, I miss her at times.” He nodded at his daughter, who watched him with a sheen of tears in her eyes. “But I can admit that I have found myself lonely in recent days.”

With the grace of a duchess, Lydia laid her knife and fork across her plate with a nod. “You are an earl, Your Lordship. Surely such a title wouldn’t prove a hindrance to meeting people.”

Elsbeth snorted. “He is afraid. Which is why he is running to the Highlands instead of remaining in London.” She slid her gaze to Lydia. “He doesn’t want to confront his feelings, is forever clinging to the past, longing for a world that no longer exists, I think.”

“Well, your daughter isn’t wrong. So much has changed since I was her age or even when she was a young girl. It’s both exciting and terrifying.”

“Even Lady Lydia knows answers are found in the future.” She shrugged with the attitude only a sixteen-year-old girl could. “Honestly, Papa, if you weren’t happy with your lot in London, you won’t be happy with it at the cottage.”

When he looked to Lydia, her expression suggested she found no fault with that either. One of her eyebrows rose. “She’s not wrong, Your Lordship. People and things are ephemeral. Only you can steer your own ship.” Oddly enough, her voice wavered. “Relying on others for your happiness—for love—is stupid, at best, for they will only disappoint and hurt you.”

What the devil happened in her life to make her think this way? For that matter, why had he never heard of her father? Perhaps he’d lived his life abroad? The mystery deepened.

His daughter nodded with enthusiasm. “Mama certainly wouldn’t want you to waste your life running.” With a sigh, she put a hand over his. “She might have been the shy and retiring type, never one to raise her voice or offer protest, but she would be the first to tell you that it is time to move on, to be happy again.”

“Or at the very least, fulfilled, to find purpose,” Lydia said in a soft voice as she glanced at him. “I know what it feels like to be adrift,” she added with a nod. “It is not a comfortable sensation.”

What the deuce did that mean? What secrets was she hiding, and why did he want to drag them out of her? To be honest, she might prove as broken as he, as broken as everyone he had rescued and tried to help over the years since losing his wife, but was there a crime in that? The longer he stared at her, the more awareness shivered over his skin, worked its way through his shaft, and damn if he didn't want her in his bed merely for the distraction.

Not knowing what else to do, Jackson cleared his throat. "If you both are done attempting to tear me apart with lashes from your tongues, perhaps you should retire to the room. We'll need to leave at first light." Perhaps that was an unfortunate choice in words, for imagining what the lady might do to him with her tongue if they had a chance nearly became his undoing.

In front of his daughter, even.

Elsbeth and Lydia exchanged amused glances. His daughter nodded. "I'll go up since I'm tired anyway. If the two of you decide to talk when you come up, please don't disturb me. Hopefully my maid has laid out my things." Then she stood, bent to buss his cheek, took the key from where he'd rested it on the table, and finally left the common room without a backward glance.

"I'm afraid she's becoming spoiled, and I don't know what to do about it," he admitted to Lydia once his daughter was out of earshot.

She nodded. "I can see why you are worried. It's a fine line to walk, especially when the child in question is without a parent."

"What should I do?"

"Find connection with her again. Taking her away for Christmastide is a good start." She drained her teacup. "There is every possibility she feels she is losing her father as

she grows into an adult. I see it all the time at the finishing school.” After she dabbed the corners of her mouth with the linen napkin, she laid it on the table. “That being said, try to understand her as best you can. Play upon the traditions you and your wife used to have with her. Make new ones, and try to have this Christmastide season be a foundation stone in her memory.”

For long moments, he regarded her. How odd was it that he just met her and yet now sought her counsel? “Thank you.” Daring much, he touched one of her hands with his on the tabletop. “May I be honest with you?” Everyone else in the common room fell away, for there was only him and her in that moment as fear trembled down his spine, for this was so far out of his mode of comfort he gasped at himself.

“Of course.” The blush had returned to her cheeks.

How could she be an innocent and a siren in the same breath? “If you and I were alone, I would kiss you again, and this time I wouldn’t keep it chaste.”

What the devil was wrong with him?

A mix of emotions played through her expression, but her eyes darkened and her gaze dropped to his mouth, which only served to further harden his shaft. “Why did you kiss me earlier? It’s baffling, to be honest.”

Did she truly not know how attractive she was in a vulnerable sort of way? “I wanted to.”

“So that gave you permission to steal one from me? Are you one of those men who think women are only on this earth to serve you in whatever capacity you demand?”

While he appreciated her penchant for plain speaking, the thought behind it was completely wrong. “I am not, and if you tell me that you didn’t enjoy it also, I give

you my word, I will not pester you with such an advance again.”

“Oh, I...” The blush intensified. “I did enjoy it, though it took me by surprise.”

“Why? Have you never been kissed before?”

“I have.” She glanced at something over his left shoulder. “To be honest, those kisses were not pleasing, and some of them were forced.” A shiver racked her shoulders as she returned her gaze to his. A trace of fear reflected in those dark depths. “Intimacy and closeness in any capacity with a man is something I’m striving to reconcile myself to.”

Again with the mystery, but now he desperately wanted to solve it. “You shouldn’t need to do that. With the right man, such things won’t seem like a chore or something to be endured.”

Did he want to be that man? There was no way to answer that at this time.

For the space of a heartbeat, Lydia stared at him. Finally, she nodded. “Thank you for the kindness of allowing me to travel with you and Elsbeth. That will go a long way into restoring my faith in humanity... and men in particular. Now, if you will excuse me? I’m going upstairs. This has been a trying day, and I would like to see the damage to my face and hope you have managed to ignore my injuries.”

“Trust me, Lydia, I didn’t notice once we were engaged in conversation.” That was how distracting she was. “I shall come up a bit later. I still need time to decompress from traveling.”

“I will make you a pallet, so you needn’t fuss later.” With a half smile, she left him alone with his thoughts, as torturous and revealing as they were.

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Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 11:32 am

A lady should never indulge in things that will show her in a scandalous light.

December 19, 1817

Gold Acorn Posting Inn

Lydia yawned, for it had been another long day on the road, and traveling had been slowed by more rain and muddy thoroughfares. Conversation had been light. Jackson and his daughter had napped on and off, and when they were awake, she'd done the same. Which had been fine by her; that meant no one was delving into her past and history. It also meant a surcease of the strong awareness she had of him, but as soon as she woke, there it was again, and it made her long for something she didn't understand nor have any right to.

By the time they'd arrived at the posting inn, the temperatures were dropping, which didn't bode well for the next day. It could either switch to ice or, if they were more fortunate, snow.

It didn't matter now. They were safe, and wonder of wonders, there had been two private rooms available since this stretch of road didn't see many travelers. It was certainly a boon, for last night, with all three of them in one room, had been interesting. The earl had slept on the floor, but he had a tendency to snore, and Elsbeth muttered in her sleep. That made fitful slumber for her, and would continue to do so until she became acclimated to her new roommates and traveling companions.

She could escape being in his all-consuming company and at the mercy of his intense

eyes that urged her to give up all her secrets for good or for ill.

Barely had she the appetite for dinner, but she'd eaten because it was required to keep up her strength. Shortly afterward, she announced she would like to retire to the room she'd share with Elsbeth.

The girl shot to her feet as well. "I'll go with you. Papa can be by himself for a bit, as is his custom." There was an intensity to her eyes that reminded Lydia of her father. "Besides, we haven't truly talked yet on this trip, and I think it's time. Don't you?"

"Well, I..." She glanced at the earl, who shrugged with a grin flirting at his lips.

In short order, they removed upstairs to a rather spartan room, but it had the essentials needed to rest and refresh, and that was all she could ask for. By the time they'd both changed into nightdresses, the young lady seemed ready to droop.

"Do you enjoy being the headmistress of a finishing school?"

The question took Lydia by surprise. She paused in the task of finger combing her hair, since her drivers had stolen her silver-backed toilette set. "I suppose. It is something to fill my time, and I do honestly adore my students."

"Papa says my friends aren't truly my friends. Do you..." She moistened her lips. "Do you think that you might introduce me to a few of the girls? I might wish to cultivate better friends who might be more acceptable to my father."

Lydia's eyebrows rose with her surprise. "When we are both returned to London and term comes back in session, I would be delighted to introduce you to some of the girls. And it's wise that you are learning the difference between who is good for you and who is not." Quickly, she braided her hair. "I struggled with that too at your age and beyond."

“Did you eventually find who you were looking for?”

That all depended on the viewpoint. “Yes and no, but everything will work out for you, and you’ll inherently know what path is for you.”

The girl nodded. She slipped beneath the bedclothes. “Have you ever been in love?”

Drat. Another difficult question. “I was once. A long time ago. I’m afraid it wasn’t true love, for the relationship didn’t last and there was no happy ending.” That was as much as she dared to say for fear of discovery. Then a new thought occurred to her. “Do you fancy a young man, then?”

A blush spread over Elsbeth’s cheek. “No, of course not! I’m not about to ruin my life for a man just yet. I was merely curious.”

That prompted a smile on Lydia’s part. “Good. There is plenty of time for all that. Your life is just getting started and you have the world at your feet.” She huffed out a breath. “I wish I’d had someone in my life to tell me the same. Perhaps things would have turned out differently.”

Except, if they’d had, she wouldn’t be here now spending time with an earl and his curious daughter.

“You are an interesting person, Lydia. I’m glad we met.” Elsbeth offered a genuine smile. “And it is ever so lovely having a woman about to talk with. Papa is sweet, of course, but he doesn’t give advice like a woman.”

“Right again.” This time, her smile was wider as she tied off the end of her braid with a ribbon. “I’m going to wash my face then I’ll settle in for slumber. Do you need anything else before then?”

“No, except...” The girl heaved a sigh that sounded as if it had come from her toes. “Do you think Mama remembers me if she is in heaven?”

Oh, dear. “I believe that a mother’s love transcends the bounds of time and space. Wherever your mama is, I know she remembers you and she is watching you with pride.”

That came from the heart, for she would never forget her own child that she never got to hold or be a mother to.

Slowly, Elsbeth nodded. “Thank you. That is helpful.” Then she snuggled into the bedding while Lydia blew out the candle at the bedside.

“Goodnight, Elsbeth. Dream well.”

“Goodnight. I hope your dreams are equally sweet.”

After Lydia finished with the necessary and washing her face and chest, she returned to bed, but Elsbeth was completely lost to slumber. For a few seconds, she considered lighting the candle once more so she could read, but then a slight knocking at the door scattered those thoughts. The floor was cold on her bare feet as she crossed the room, and cracking the panel open, she softly gasped to find the earl standing in the corridor.

Immediately, worry tightened her chest. In a whisper, she asked, “Your Lordship. Is all well?”

“Yes, yes.” He put a finger to his lips. “Is Elsbeth settled?”

She nodded. “Already asleep.”

“Good. Come with me.”

Lydia frowned. “Where?”

“My room, across the hall.” Dressed in his breeches and fine lawn shirt rolled up to the elbows, clearly he’d been in the process of readying to retire.

A gasp escaped her even as anticipation climbed her spine. “Why?”

One of his dark eyebrows rose as if in challenge. “To talk where we won’t disturb my daughter? Perhaps indulge in a kiss or two?”

Heat filled her cheeks, for she wasn’t about to deny the heated connection between them, but she also needed to remain wary. Was it folly to go with him? Perhaps, but she was curious, and the kiss they’d already shared had ignited something deep inside her that her husband had never managed to fire. “All right.” With one last look at Elsbeth, who hadn’t moved since she’d fallen asleep, Lydia moved quietly into the narrow corridor and closed the door softly behind her. “Why did you...?”

In silence, he tugged on her hand, brought her into his room across the corridor, and no sooner had he closed the door which plunged the room into darkness for he hadn’t lit a candle, he took her into his arms, trapping her between the wooden panel and the hard wall of his chest. The kiss he gave her was as intense as the man himself, and it made her want things she had no idea how to ask for.

And she knew she shouldn’t to begin with, but then nothing mattered as her fingers curled into the fabric of his shirt.

When he eased away, she could breathe again. “I have wanted to do that since the first one we shared.”

“To be honest, so have I.” But why? She hadn’t felt anything remotely like that with her husband. Perhaps she’d been blinded by infatuation, for she’d been young, but there was none of this insane throbbing deep within her body to know the touch of a man.

This man.

“Good. It is somewhat comforting to know I’m not alone in this madness.” Once more, he took her hand, pulled her over to the bed, and then gently encouraged her to sit on the mattress tick. “While I do wish to converse, we have ample time to do that over the next day or so, so I want to communicate in a different way if you are of the same mind.”

“Are you saying you wish to...” It was unfathomable that a man would want her. Hadn’t her husband told her time out of hand she was ugly and that no one would bed her, that she should be grateful for him?

“I want to kiss you, explore your body and see where that takes us, but only with your permission.” As he spoke, his eyes darkened with the same spiking desire that had turned the blood in her veins to molten need. “I can assure you I’m not a deviant; I just haven’t been able to evict you from my mind since I found you on the road. And I want to know why.”

“I can understand that.” And having forced proximity had only enhanced that relentless need. “You are quite like a knight of old.”

“Be that as it may, I don’t want you in this capacity out of gratitude. I want you to want me too.”

That was different than anything she’d been given from her husband. “I do.” At least it was the truth. Then he was on the bench beside her; when had he even moved? His

hand was in her hair, wrapping her braid about it, and he dragged her roughly to him, claimed her lips in a kiss designed to tease, to tell her he was in command.

Lydia didn't mind, for she liked that he wasn't afraid to take the lead; oddly enough, it made her feel safe. When her husband wanted attention, he swaggered in drunk with fumbles and slobbering. This embrace from the earl? It exceeded her wildest fantasies, the ones she'd told herself in her lonely bed after she was finally away from the horror of her marriage. As her fingers curled into his shirt once more, she returned his kisses as best she could while inwardly shivering with the effort of removing the images of her husband from her mind.

"Bloody hell." As the earl wrenched away, his breathing was as ragged as hers. His eyes were as dark as midnight, the blue irises a deep sapphire in the weak moonlight coming in through the window, but there was a certain hunger in those depths that made her breathless. "Will you let me do wicked things to you?" Unidentified emotion graveled his words as he kneeled on the floor before her.

This was the second time he asked, which meant he was giving her the chance to beg off. Her respect for him rose, and she slowly nodded. "Yes." The whispered word seemed to vanish into muffled sounds in the surrounding rooms as well as the corridor.

"Good." With a grin that somehow disarmed her, he leaned into her, put his hands to her shoulders, hooked his fingers in the bodice of her nightdress, and then he yanked the upper portion of the garment down.

While her throat went dry, she shivered as the cooler ambient air wafted over her suddenly bared skin. "It has been a long time—" At the last second, she cut off her own words, for that was confessing to her real past, one he wasn't privy to.

"You are not the innocent you want everyone to believe?" There was no judgment in

his voice, only inquiry.

Fear twisted down her spine as Lydia held his gaze, but behind that fear? She knew the earl was different. Daring much, she grabbed his shirt and tugged him closer. “Yes, I keep secrets because I must, but I think you keep some as well. Eventually, perhaps, we will share them, but not now.”

“You are so damned fascinating.” Interest flickered in his eyes. He took her breasts in his hands, and the odd combination of the chilly air coupled with the warmth of his skin against hers made her gasp.

The more he squeezed and massaged those globes, the more fires erupted in her blood, but when he brushed the pads of his thumbs along her nipples, they immediately hardened into tight little buds, and wild sensation streaked through her body to lodge in her core. “Oh!” Was she that responsive to the scandal? For she’d had physical relations before, but she hadn’t quite felt them so powerfully.

“So beautiful,” he whispered, but that didn’t distract him from continuing to tease her breasts. “They fill my palms perfectly.”

“Did you say the same to your wife?” Lydia managed to pant out while pleasurable feelings coursed through her.

“Yes. The naked female form is mysterious and wonderful.” His own whisper brimmed with emotion.

She nodded. “Are you doing this to me tonight to hide from your feelings as Elsbeth said the other day?” Did it matter, when every strum of his fingers on those sensitive tips ushered her closer to heaven?

“I don’t know.” The shock in his eyes was noticeable before he shuttered it behind a

blank expression. “I only know I want this, the heat that is between us.” Then he applied himself to teasing and torturing her nipples. “Do you trust me?”

“I don’t know you well enough for that, but I do know you won’t hurt me,” she gasped when he closed his lips around one turgid tip, and as he swiped his tongue along the surface of that nipple, she nearly lost her grip on reality.

“What has happened to you, Lydia, to make you hide?”

“I can ask the same of you.” When he didn’t answer, she continued. “Grief and guilt and anger take many forms. That I can tell you as truth.” Then her words dissolved into moans as she concentrated on what he was doing to her.

“What if those distractions are no longer enough?” he asked in a low voice as he rolled her nipples in his fingers. “And the memories, the guilt, the second guessing comes anyway?”

This was beyond anything she’d imagined. Bobbing in the sea of passion in her mind was a thread of commonsense, yet a shiver of need went down her spine. “Then one must make do the best one can, do what he must until he can find peace.”

“Which is why you and I are here right now.” He kissed her with a savagery that merely made her crave his touch more. As he did so, he continued to tease her. The longer he worried her nipples, the more unrelenting pressure built and stacked low in her belly.

The unfamiliar sensations left her adrift, stole away her breath. This was much different than any time she’d ever been with her husband. And now that she knew what she’d missed, she was appalled with herself for staying as long as she had.

With a hand about her nape, he drew her against him and plundered her mouth with

another string of deep, drugging kisses while the other hand continued to roll and pinch one of her nipples until she was gasping, drowning in a myriad of sensations she couldn't quite keep ahead of. Slowly, he drew up the lawn skirting of her nightdress while nipping her sensitive nipples.

"You must leave off," she gasped out, for if he didn't, she would surely dissolve into a melted puddle on the floor.

"I believe you need this as much as I do, so we will not stop until you have been sent flying," he said as he pushed her backward on the bed and encouraged her legs to part. The fabric of her skirting bunched at her waist, which put the lower portion of her body on full display to his gaze, as much as was possible in the dark. "This strong connection between us vexes me."

"Agreed." She shivered in anticipation. "Lust, perhaps."

"It's all one needs, at times."

Because at the end of the day, she was a woman and he a man, and they both would benefit from a dip into scandal. Lydia's whole body trembled. "It's been my experience that men who brag about themselves are usually less than skilled in this arena."

He grinned, and for fleeting seconds, the gesture took years from his face. "Let us put that to the test, hmm?" The dratted man glided his fingers along her flesh made slick from his teasing, back and forth in a mesmerizing rhythm. "You are all too ready. Another clue that you aren't an innocent." Before she could utter a response, he'd coaxed her swelling nubbin out of hiding and rubbed it.

This was horribly scandalous by every stretch and especially for a headmistress, but with each pass of those talented fingers, shivers of raw need danced over her skin,

fracturing throughout her body into every nerve ending. If he could bring her that close to the edge without much effort, what else could he do?

“Cat got your tongue, my dear headmistress?” Over and over, he worked that tiny bundle of nerves, and when she couldn’t hold back a moan, he grinned.

“Do hush,” she managed to gasp out and curled the fingers of one hand around his nape. How was it that he had nearly sent her into bliss with hardly a touch? And what did that say about herself?

“Ah, Lydia.” Jackson gripped her inner thighs and splayed her open. “Damn, but you are magnificent.”

Why had her husband never said anything that complimentary? Those words filled her with warmth. Anticipation battled with worry in her belly. If she wasn’t careful, she’d let herself develop feelings for this man. And that was dangerous. “You plan to put your mouth on me?” Lydia buried the fingers of one hand into his hair, and oh it was thick and luxurious!

“Oh, yes.”

Not even her reprobate husband had done that. “But, I—” Her voice cut off in a squeak as he put his mouth to her button.

He chuckled and the vibrations sent her into another level of delight and wonder. “I’ll wager you’ll enjoy this.” And he began the next stage of his seduction.

From the moment he employed his lips and hot tongue to her most sensitive, private parts, Lydia lost the last vestiges of her sanity. “This is...” She couldn’t catch her breath, for with each nibble, every nip, all the swipes and strokes of his tongue, she was hurled higher and higher into pleasure, into a world she was unfamiliar with but

had always longed for.

Wild sensation coursed through her body. She shook from it. Tears unashamedly fell to her cheeks; she had been cheated of this before in her marriage. Never once did the earl shy away from his work. He was a man bent on tossing her over, and she hovered there, trapped, waiting with a hammering heart for him to give her up into that dark void.

But he didn't. Not even when she begged him in a strained, hoarse whisper. "Jackson, please leave off!"

The dratted man kept her poised on the razor's edge, pinning her there again and again with every penetrating stroke of his tongue, each calculated nibble, every new torment of suction on that swollen button until she squirmed on the bed and prayed for some sort of relief. She curled her hand into his hair alternately to shove him away and cease the exquisite torment but also to hold him to her tighter, guide him to exactly where she needed him.

And it was the most glorious thing she'd ever experienced.

"Oh, oh, oh..." Her body shook; the relentless pressure in her lower belly built and coiled and stacked. Fearing she would break apart, Lydia squirmed, but he gripped her thighs tighter to keep her in place.

When he chuckled against her flesh, it was almost the end of her, but he kept on as if his only mission in life was to send her flying.

"Jackson!" She shook as tears of pleasure and wonder rolled down her cheeks. Not even in her dreams could she imagine such marvelous feelings. Her back arched of its own accord, which put her deeper into his care. "Oh, I am going to break."

“That is the purpose of this exercise.” Then he followed the comment with a particularly strong bit of suction.

“Ah!” The dam holding back the mounting pressure within broke. For the first time in her life, Lydia shattered, and in spectacular fashion. She fell into that black void full of the most wonderful bliss as her inner walls convulsed with a violent release and the fact it came from the attentions of this man made her squirm all the more. A half-muffled scream left her throat, for it was so incredibly glorious.

The earl glanced up, but she was barely aware as she floated in a realm not bound to Earth. “Why do I feel as though this is uncharted territory for you?” When she didn’t answer—couldn’t—he chuckled. “Come again for me, merely so I can watch you hit release a second time.”

Despite the fact her body shook as if she’d shoot right off the bed and into the heavens, Jackson continued to worry her swollen, hypersensitive nubbin. When he inserted two fingers, pumping them in and out of her convulsing passage, she bucked against his hand while imagining those fingers were his length spearing into her. Then he twisted those digits in order to massage a spot on her spasming flesh that completely separated her soul from her body.

“Jackson!” The word was long and drawn out in a keening wail that was probably audible to anyone within shouting distance. Was this how a headmistress should act? But thinking was beyond her as Lydia hurtled over the edge where her breath stalled, and she was rendered temporarily unable to move. Her thighs trembled in time to her racing pulse, while over and over flutters ran riot through her core as strong contractions rocked through her. Finally, when the earl was finished, he withdrew his fingers and pulled away. She could do nothing else but collapse backward onto the mattress tick and revel in this boon.

“God, you are so responsive.” There was no mistaking the smugness in his voice, the

approval even. “My wife, though she enjoyed carnal activities, rarely made a sound. This was... quite satisfying.”

Heat went through her cheeks. “In that, I can honestly agree with you.” How would she be able to look him in the eye come the morrow after such scandalous and shameless behavior?

“Thank you for sharing this—your body—with me.” The earl stood then took up a handkerchief from the bedside table. “Go back to your room, Lydia.”

“What?” Confusion tripped into her mind to brush away some of the lethargy. “You don’t wish for me to return the favor?”

“Not tonight, but at least I have a few more answers to my questions surrounding you.” He sat beside her with his hair in disarray while he wiped his face with the handkerchief, yet there was sadness and smugness in his expression. “Gave me even more questions, but I can live with that for the time being. If you continue to be here, I can’t promise I won’t ravish you, because my need hasn’t nearly been met.”

As reality returned, Lydia sat up and put her clothing to rights. “Jackson?” She laid a hand on his arm. Immediately, the muscles went taut.

“Hmm?”

“My trust in you has gone up exponentially after tonight.” Though difficult in the dark, she met his gaze. “Thank you.” When her chin trembled, she hurriedly stood. “How you treated me? It makes all the difference.” Then, because she didn’t want him to see her cry, she left the room, closing the door behind her.

Once she’d hid herself away behind her own closed door and slipped into bed beside Elsbeth, who apparently hadn’t moved or awakened during her absence, she lay on

her side and let the tears flow.

For the first time in her life, she'd felt wanted, almost cherished by a man, and that only made the years she'd wasted in her horrid marriage all the more ridiculous. Beyond that, she was still caught in the lies with no way out.

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A lady should never practice dissembling, for it is a direct reflection on her character.

December 20, 1817

Thistle Cottage

Near Ambleside,

Cumbria, England

The longer Jackson stared at Lydia where she sat on the bench opposite him with Elsbeth where they chatted about books they'd read, the more he mentally berated himself.

Why the devil did I do such wicked things to her last night?

Because he was weak, because he'd wanted to see how far she would let him go, because she'd gotten under his skin and he'd needed to touch her, taste her, watch her as she hit release. But when she'd unexpectedly revealed a couple things about herself, he'd been even more intrigued.

Who was she, truly?

And still, he wanted her in ways he hadn't thought to be with a woman since he lost his wife. Did that mean he was betraying her memory? But she had been gone for nearly three years. If he moved forward with his life, would he cease being haunted by guilt and grief?

It was all baffling, but he stood by the thoughts he'd had yesterday. If he opened up to her and gave her tidbits or history about his past, she might feel comfortable enough to do the same for him.

Not long afterward, the coach came to a halt in front of an isolated cottage that needed repairs here and there. What was more, the ever-present rain had turned to a light, fluffy snow, while the dark, swollen clouds on the horizon hinted that a storm would soon be in the offing.

He heaved out a sigh, for finding the answers to his plethora of questions wouldn't prove forthcoming immediately. "This is your cottage?" he asked Lydia.

"Yes." Suddenly, the animation she'd shown before while talking to his daughter faded beneath a mask of apprehension. "I haven't been here for at least six years." She glanced out the window, and in the dim illumination, fear briefly reflected in her brown eyes. "It's, uh... Well, it should be interesting going back inside."

Why did he have the feeling this cottage didn't once belong to either of her parents?

"Let's go inside. If there are no supplies, one of us will need to go out for them, and if there is no wood for fires, I'll chop it myself." The coach rocked as the drivers climbed down from the box. "Is there a barn or stable nearby?"

"There is a barn, but I can't speak to the condition." She waved a hand to encompass someplace in the west. "There should be three stalls. I would imagine the horses were sold long ago. As well as the gig."

"Has there been no one here caretaking the place?" Surely if it had been given to her from her father the earl or even handed down by a countess in a will, they would have provided for a caretaker.

“I can’t fathom there was.” Her swallow was audible, but she didn’t look at him. “The last, uh, caretaker was quite negligent.”

“Right.” By the time the coach door swung open, and Robert put down the steps, Jackson’s muscles had tensed. Perhaps he should at least walk the perimeter of the property or ask the drivers to do so. Clearly, something about this cottage had discomfited Lydia. As soon as he exited the vehicle, he handed his daughter out then did the same for her. If his hold on her hand lingered a few extra moments, he couldn’t help it. “Let us see what we’re working with.” He winked at her, merely to set her at ease, but it had no effect. “I could use a cuppa as well.”

“I could as well, Papa,” Elsbeth said. “I’m glad to be off the road. The coach is so cramped.”

“Yes, well, if you need to stretch your legs, there is plenty of land on which to do that, though I would prefer you do that with one of us.” Before he went inside, he strode toward the other traveling coach that followed, explained the situation, and then sent it onward so they could hopefully gain the nearest posting inn before the storm descended. It wouldn’t kill him or his daughter to do without their servants or the bulk of their possessions for a few days, and perhaps it would help teach Elsbeth humility.

Lydia led the way to the cottage’s front door while Jackson spoke softly to the drivers. After they put away the horses and parked the coach, they would do a cursory check of the property. After fumbling with an interior pocket of her cloak, she withdrew a key and then unlocked the mechanism on the door.

Despite hinges creaking on the panel as it opened, the interior of the cottage was nice enough. Honey-colored brickwork gave way to a wooden-tiled roof. Simply shaped into two stories with plenty of windows, it would no doubt host three or four rooms on the upper floor and the same on the lower. A small extension in the back was

either for a kitchen or live-in staff.

As they stepped inside, he was pleased to see it was tidy if a bit stale and dusty, yet there were sheets over many pieces of furniture. Obviously, someone had been in during the past year to put the cottage to rights. Unfortunately, that meant the pantry wouldn't have much.

What made him frown was the snow that continued. There was a certain scent to the air beyond the aroma of fires that he knew deep down in his bones signaled that a storm was on the way, and the precipitation would be snow instead of rain.

"I will leave you ladies here to put the cottage to rights. We'll pass the night here before deciding tomorrow morning on whether or not to continue." Once more he glanced outside. "I'm going to chop wood. Surely there is an old tree stump or mounting block nearby, and there's no shortage of trees." He looked at Elsbeth. "Would you like to come with me?"

Her expression suggested he was a nodcock. "Absolutely not. It's snowing." As if that were the definitive answer to everything.

"Very well." With a nod to Lydia, he left the cottage. Soon enough, he discovered an axe in the barn to which the coach drivers had just returned. It was a solid wooden building, and there was dry straw—old though it might be—in the loft. Currently, both horses were in stalls, eating their fill. "Is the area secured?"

"As far as it can be," Robert replied with a shrug. "No recent footprints and no sign of any sort of habitation."

"Good. Did you want to bed down here or in the cottage?" In the cold, there was no divide of classes, at least as far as he was concerned.

The men exchanged glances, but both shook their heads.

“We’ll be fine here,” Robert assured him. “And I’d rather guard the horses and coach. I’ve got a bad feeling.”

Jackson nodded. “As do I, but I don’t know why just yet.” He blew out a breath. “After I chop wood, one of you will need to accompany me into the village for supplies. I fear there’s a storm bearing down upon us.”

The second driver—John—nodded. “I can feel it in me knees, Your Lordship.”

“Very good. I’ll return shortly.”

Eventually he discovered a spot within the wooded area where several trees had fallen, whether from storms and wind, or some other reason, but it suited his needs perfectly. After removing his greatcoat and jacket, he laid them on yet another fallen tree then fell to work methodically chopping one of the trees into manageable split logs he could carry inside.

As he worked, he retreated into his thoughts, and most of the centered around the mysterious headmistress. His body heated with the exercise, but the cold temperature and the errant wind kept him moderately comfortable.

“Do you want some company?”

The dulcet sound of Lydia’s voice wrenched him out of his thoughts. Jackson paused and wiped his forehead with his sleeve. He glanced at her, and beneath the overcast skies, she appeared even more pale with haunted shadows in her eyes.

“I’d welcome that, of course.” To say nothing of the fact that they should probably talk anyway considering they got up to scandal yesterday at the inn. Merely thinking

about what he'd done to her, how surprised she'd been when she hit release, had interest shivering along his shaft again.

"Tell me about the cottage. How did you come into possession of it?"

"Oh..." She wrapped the folds of her mud-stained cloak more tightly about herself. "It once belonged to my mother. When she died, she left it for me, but it wasn't until my father passed that I made use of it." As she frowned, she watched him split another long. "Though it's isolated here, I enjoy the tranquility and peace. Much different from London."

"Indeed. There is something about this section of England that makes a body breathe easier and gives them a fire to go further north and explore the Highlands." However, her story sounded far too rehearsed, as if it wasn't the truth, but if that were so, why continue to tell him lies? When she remained silent, he rested the axe on the fallen tree he'd been using as a table. "Listen, Lydia. I don't know you all that well, but I believe I know you well enough to say this. I don't know what you're hiding or why, but I won't do anything to hurt you. In fact, I would do most anything to keep you safe, the same as I would with my daughter." When she raised her gaze to his, shadows still haunted her. "If you are in some sort of trouble, I will do my level best to help you through it. I hope you know that you can trust me."

For several moments, she was silent. Her chin trembled and tears filled her eyes. "That is such a lovely sentiment. You've been so kind to me and so naughty." A blush stained her cheeks. "I've been rendered speechless by you more than one time, but I am afraid."

"I can see it in your eyes." His chest tightened from her distress. There was one thing above all others he needed to know. "Have you told me the truth at any time since we met?" It wasn't that he didn't trust her or didn't believe she had a good reason for what she did, but eventually the stories would need to be told. He couldn't continue

to travel with a stranger.

“I don’t want to answer that.” She brushed at an escaped tear on her cheek. “You will surely think less of me.”

“I promise that I won’t. Everyone has something they are afraid or ashamed of.” What the devil was she hiding? And what had spooked her that she would continue to keep it? Perhaps she was traumatized so badly she couldn’t talk about it. “However, I want to help you.” Once more, he took up his axe and continued to chop wood.

“Sometimes I wonder if I am beyond help,” she said in a soft voice as her breath clouded about her head in the cold.

“Let us see what happens.” He brought the axe down on another log. When it split, a feeling of satisfaction went through him. “Are you truly a headmistress?”

“Yes.”

“And you own a finishing school?”

“Yes.”

It was a start. “For how many years?”

“Five. The first two were rather difficult until it began making an income and students filled the slots in the roster.”

Fair enough. “Another truth—you aren’t an innocent.”

The blush renewed itself in her cheeks. “I am not.”

When she didn't expand upon that, he tamped on the urge to huff in frustration. "I'll wager at some point in your past, you came into contact with a man who didn't treat you well. Who made you wary of all men." He cocked one of his eyebrows. "Is that correct?"

"Perhaps." Lydia had taken to pacing with her arms wrapped about herself, which sent a clear message that she was closing herself off.

He kept his own counsel, for pushing her might cause her to shut him out completely. Another few logs were split before Jackson spoke again. "I don't know what you're keeping from me, nor do I know why, but I can imagine enough. However, I also can't fix it if you don't share with me." For the space of a few heartbeats, he waited, but when she remained reticent, he nodded. "There are good, decent, honorable men in the world. Hell, even in England, but you must be willing to let them in so they can repair the broken pieces you struggle with."

It was a chance, but he said it anyway. If she chose to end their association because of it, so be it.

With a sniff, she dashed at the tears on her cheeks. Each one made his chest tighten further. "At the risk of being hurt? Both physically and emotionally?"

Ah, another clue. Poor thing. "It is a risk for both people involved, no matter how they are. In order to make a relationship effective, both parties must be willing to show they are vulnerable, frightened, but wish to go forward anyway. Together."

Did that mean himself as well?

"If only I could have such courage," she said softly. "Trust is a difficult thing."

"Agreed, but sometimes, you must step out in faith else you'll never know anything

different. Fear is often what keeps us from merely existing instead of living.”

Again, another truth about how he’d been keeping himself. Even his daughter was beginning to see it.

Eventually, he finished with the wood chopping and then laid the axe to the side of the fallen tree. “What was Elsbeth doing when you came out here?”

“Exploring the cottage. She’s already claimed one of the rooms upstairs.” A delicate shrug lifted one of her shoulders, and her rigid posture relaxed somewhat. “Do you think the weather will clear or are we in for a storm?”

“It’s difficult to say. The Lake District has always hosted interesting weather patterns.” If they were stranded, it would be a difficult few days, but at least they would be together. “I intend to ride to Ambleside in the event it does turn bad. We’ll need supplies.”

A frown tugged at the corners of her highly kissable lips. “You would do that?”

“Why not?” Truly, he was baffled at her surprise.

“You’re an earl.”

He snorted. “I’m a man and a father, first and foremost. I look after those in my care. That’s a promise I would never break.”

“Sometimes I think you stepped out of a dream, for surely you can’t be real. Men simply aren’t as you have shown to be.” Yet that particular longing appeared in her eyes again, and it tugged at his heart.

“Ah, my doubting Lydia.” Needing to reassure her, he closed the distance between

them and took her hands in his. “Let me say again, you are safe. Do you hear me?” As he peered into her eyes, those dark depths filled with tears. “You are safe. I won’t let anyone hurt you. Not now, not tomorrow, and especially not from your past.”

“Oh!” Her hands trembled in his, and what the devil had she done with her gloves?

“If you don’t believe my words, watch my actions.” It was becoming ever clearer that he rather liked her more than was good for him. It was folly, of course, and probably an excess of emotion brought on by the road trip and their close proximity, but he couldn’t discount it.

“You have already shown me in a hundred different ways in the few days I have known you.” The words rang with truth. “My story is dismal at best.”

“That doesn’t matter. We are all human. According to my daughter, that means we all fail but have the great capacity to rise again.”

She nodded. “The telling of it might change the way you view me.”

“I very much doubt that.”

A shuddering sigh escaped her. Tears wet her cheeks. “I’m not strong enough to relate the tale right now. Please understand. I wouldn’t even know where to start. And I especially don’t want to put you or Elsbeth in danger because of it.”

“I do understand that.” It was something, and it was more than he had yesterday. “We shall talk more in depth soon.” Then, daring much, he gently tugged her into his arms and simply held her. He would need to go slowly with her, show her that she had nothing to fear from him, that he would indeed protect her, but in the end, he suspected once he relieved her fears, the results would be spectacular. “I’m going to take one of the drivers and ride into town. Will you be all right with the other driver

and my daughter for a couple of hours?”

“I think so.” She pulled away enough to peer up into his face. “Thank you for doing this.”

“It is my privilege.” Another truth, and he looked forward to proving further useful. It was something he’d missed since his wife had died. “Do you know how to fight?”

She snorted in apparent amusement. “I’ve held my own when it was necessary.”

Again, he wondered at her past and vowed to go after whomever had hurt her. “I’ll return as soon as I can, but I need to get on with it. Those clouds don’t look forgiving.” Before he released her, he pressed a kiss into her forehead. “Try not to fret. All will be well.”

She nodded as he left her and loped off in the direction of the barn, but the sight of those haunted eyes would forever remain seared into his soul.

No one should need to carry a weight alone.

Three hours later, as the snow came down in earnest, Jackson returned. The moment he entered the cottage, Lydia glanced at him. Her whole face lit with a grin and happiness reflected in her eyes. While Elsbeth swooped over and bussed his cheek in greeting, he couldn’t stop from watching the headmistress’ face as she continued to regard him with a soft smile.

Damn, but he rather enjoyed that reception and the light in her eyes. Even Elsbeth’s happiness pushed warmth throughout his person. It was almost as if they were a family, and this moment was suspended in time.

Is this what I’ve missed, then? Lack of connection and loneliness are the cause of my

ennui?

He cleared his throat in an effort to hide his sudden emotion. “We’ll have cheese and bread and sliced meat for dinner tonight. Dusk is nearly upon us since it took rather more time to go into the village than I’d anticipated.”

Lydia nodded. “I’ll cook tomorrow if we’re stranded here for a time.”

It was all too domestic, and far too enticing, but he was hopeful.

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A lady should never give in to hysterics. She should remain calm and demure at all times.

The snap and crackle from the fire in the large fireplace in the common room worked to put Lydia at ease. Even though this was the place she'd spent the first three years of her marriage and memories—both good and bad—haunted her at every turn, being here with a different set of people seemed beneficial for outlook.

In the gathering shadows of dusk, Jackson had gone outside to see if he couldn't do a few minor repairs to the cottage before the storm really got underway while the drivers were making sure the horses would be protected enough in the barn. That left her alone with Elsbeth.

They were upstairs together, dressing mattress ticks with fresh sheets that had been stored in a cupboard. When she'd left her husband and his abuse, she had no idea what he would do to keep the house and neither did she care. Obviously, he must have had a housekeeper or perhaps he'd abandoned the house altogether. There was no way to tell, but everything in the cottage had been put away just so and everything had a place.

"Is all well with you?" she asked the girl as she fluffed one of the pillows. At least mice hadn't gotten into the bedding. "You seem a bit maudlin this evening."

"Oh." Sadness shadowed the girl's eyes. "I was just remembering my mother. She used to oversee the maids sometimes when they dressed the beds."

"Sometimes memories sneak up on us, catch us by surprise, and bring with them far

too many emotions.”

“Yes.” Elsbeth nodded. “I miss her so much.”

“That’s understandable. A mother is an essential part of anyone’s life.”

She lost her mother shortly after her marriage, around the same time that her husband had begun to show his true colors. Of course, when she’d mentioned to her mother what that man was doing, she had said it was just a woman’s cross to bear.

After that, she’d stopped talking to her mother about her husband’s temper and abuse, but in her heart of hearts, she knew that advice had been wrong. No woman should settle for such treatment merely because she was married to a monster.

Or any man.

None of that let her escape her guilt after her mother died.

“Mama and I sometimes used to have late night talks,” the girl said as she drew a hand over a pillow slip. “We would talk about everything. Even if I thought it was silly at the time.” Then she glanced out the window where the snow continued to come down quickly in fat flakes. “But the coziest of those chats were at Christmastide. We would plan out what we would do for Boxing Day and where we would distribute our items for charity. Once, she let me wear my prettiest dress and peek out from the back parlor at all the ladies and gentlemen who came to a Christmas ball that year when we were in the country.”

“Your mother sounds as if she was a very special person.” When she was Elsbeth’s age, she had no idea that three years later she’d be so enamored with a liar that she would plead with her father to let her marry him.

“She was.” Elsbeth sat on the edge of the bed, still peering out the window. “Mama always loved the snow.”

“Why?” It usually causes chaos and problems.

The girl shrugged. “She used to say that the blanket of fresh white covered all the ugliness, especially in Town. It was the only time of year where London looked new and pristine, that the snow gave everything a new start.” A grin curved her lips. “Sometimes she would make me go out to the back garden near the square and we would run about in the snow as if we were children. Once she showed me how to catch snowflakes on my tongue. And three years ago, we went to the Frost Fair on the Thames. That was so much fun though freezing cold.”

Lydia smiled. “I remember that year. Dear heavens, it was so cold.” She’d been in London, hoping and praying that her finishing school would prove popular, which it did the following autumn term. Though she’d been alone and terrified her husband would find her, she hadn’t the courage to venture to the fair herself, but she gladly listened to the stories from her students.

“Do you think my mother knew I loved her? I couldn’t say goodbye to her when she died. I was...” Her voice broke. “I was away in Surrey with one of my friends, spending Christmastide there because Papa said Mama might enjoy some quiet time.”

Ah, that would account for her penchant for needling her father and why she retreated into silence or sleep so often.

“Here is what I know for certain.” Daring much, Lydia sat next to the girl. “There is no doubt in my mind that your mother knew how much you loved her. I also firmly believe you will see your mother again in the life beyond this one.” At least that was the hope. “Please don’t blame your father for what he thought was the right decision at the time. No one could have known your mother’s pregnancy would go so horribly

wrong, and he's battling the same grief, besides."

"You are wise. I like that." With hesitant movements, Elsbeth reached for her hand and then quickly grasped it. "I'm glad you are here. It makes me feel less alone."

"I feel that as well." Warmth went through her chest. "If it continues to snow, we'll be stuck here, and if that's so, would you like to do a few things to usher in the holiday with me?" Never had she thought she would need to live beneath this roof again, but oddly enough, the thought of spending time in the cottage with Elsbeth and her father didn't seem so grim.

"You would let me?" Interest lit the girl's blue eyes that were not quite as dark sapphire as the earl's.

"Of course. We're together. It's the time of miracles and of friendship and understanding. We should make the best of it." She stood to resume dressing the bed. "I wasn't looking forward to Christmastide this year for various reasons, but now it won't be so bad."

"Thank you, Lydia." The girl squeezed her fingers before releasing her. Then, with a sly grin, she said, "I think Papa is enjoying your company as well."

"Oh?" Heat went into her cheeks. "Human connection is a powerful thing. Perhaps it is good we were thrown together. I rather think you and your father would have been at each other's throats by now if I hadn't needed rescued."

"You might be correct. I detest travelling."

Then they both shared a laugh. Suddenly, the next few days brought her a sense of excitement and anticipation.

How very odd.

The sound of glass breaking woke Lydia from her fitful slumber. Immediately, her heartbeat accelerated and the hair on her nape prickled with alarm.

By the time she'd donned the thin robe and drew it over her nightdress, movement reached her ears from the narrow corridor beyond the door to the room she'd chosen. As soon as she swung the door quietly open, she was confronted by both the earl and his daughter.

Jackson put a finger to his lips. In a pair of dark breeches and a loose shirt that hadn't been tucked, he was the epitome of rugged manliness, especially with the shadow of dark stubble clinging to his cheeks and chin. "I'm going downstairs to see what happened. For all we know, it could be the wind," he said in a barely audible whisper.

Lydia nodded. "Definitely a storm," she said in a matching whisper, but she clutched at Elsbeth's hands.

"You two stay safe. I mean it." Then he left them, descended the narrow wooden staircase as quietly as he could.

Despite her racing heartbeat and the fears gaining strength and shape at the back of her mind, Lydia softly reassured his daughter as they crept silently toward the stairs. When Jackson shouted and the sounds of a struggle drifted to her ears, she detached her hand from Elsbeth's. "Your father is in trouble."

"You intend to go down there? Surely, he can take care of whoever has broken in." Fear flashed in the girl's eyes in the dim light.

"I refuse to leave him alone." Not even to fight my battles.

The crash of a dish to the floor spurred Lydia into action. Soon enough, she gained the lower level where she was in time to see the earl catch an unknown assailant in a headlock and urge him toward the front door, pausing every now and again to grapple with the other man as he fought.

They exchanged a few words, and through the gloom, she squinted to have a look at the intruder just as Jackson tossed him out of the house. Her heart dropped, for by the size and shape of him, the pronounced Scottish burr in his voice, and the jagged white scar on the left side of his face when Elsbeth lit a candle, she had every confidence it was her husband's brother, the one who'd contested the marriage, the man who quite loudly and strenuously said he should have inherited the cottage and land when their father died.

With a huff of annoyance from the earl when he spied her and his daughter, he growled out, "Going to make certain he's gone." Seconds later, he barreled outside into the storm despite not having his boots or any other protective wear.

"Dear heavens," Lydia whispered to the girl as she quickly went to close the door and keep some of the warmth inside the cottage. "I'd best put the kettle on. He'll be frozen to bone when he comes back."

"Right." Elsbeth cleared her throat. "I'll put another piece of wood on the fire. He can sit there and thaw." From her bearing and the fact there was no more petulance in her tone, it was clear the young lady had matured in that moment.

"That is quite helpful." As she went into what served as a dining room with a small stove, her chest felt far too tight.

It was essential that she keep her secret, but everywhere she looked, there are memories of her marriage and how horrid it turned six months into it. While Elsbeth took care of the fire, Lydia busied herself with filling the kettle with water, lighting

the stove, and putting the kettle on. When she reached for a mug from a cupboard, she caught sight of one that still had the crack in the handle from where her husband had slammed it on the stout oak table because she'd dared to ask him of his plans for an evening.

That question had guaranteed her a fist to the cheek before he'd stormed out.

As her breath became labored, she went to the doorway to watch as Elsbeth replaced the plain metal grate in front of the cheerful flames. With a toe, she nudged aside a corner of a rug in the common room. There, on the hardwood, was a stain. Quite faint but there, of blood from where he'd punched her, beat her down, and had knocked loose a back tooth that had bled copiously onto the floor while she'd flitted in and out of consciousness.

Stifling a cry, she felt the void in her mouth with her tongue where she'd had to have the remainder of the tooth pulled out the day after the beating. The man who'd done it—oddly enough the owner of a stable in the village who also had human patients—had been kind and understanding. He'd not asked questions and hadn't remarked on her tears. Instead, he'd given her laudanum for the pain, or to help with the blessed escape into sleep, and had then sent her across the street to the small cottage where he lived with his mother.

That older woman had sat with her until she was clear-headed enough to drive the gig home, had given her tea and cold water, and had also told her of a village woman who could give her enough poison to kill her oaf of a husband should she wish to be permanently rid of him.

God, how Lydia had thought about doing just that. Instead, knowing she could never kill someone, she had fled after six months of abuse.

"Lydia? Are you all right?" The concern in Elsbeth's voice wrenched her from her

thoughts.

“Yes, why?”

“You suddenly went white as a sheet and your fist is clenched.”

“Oh.” Telling herself to relax, she nodded. “I’m fine. Thank you.” Then she went into the dining room to fix a tray of tea.

Just as she brought the tray into the common room and set it on a low table, the door opened, and the earl staggered in. Snow lay upon his head and shoulders. His feet, hands, and nose were bright red with cold. In the dim illumination of the couple of candles Elsbeth had lit, a bruise was already forming on the right side of his face. The knuckles of his right hand were a bit bloodied as well.

“Papa!” The girl was across the room, closing the door behind him before ushering him over to a chair near the fire. “Sit and get warm. Lydia has made tea.”

“Good.” A shiver racked his body as his daughter gently pushed him into the chair. Lydia plucked a crocheted blanket up and put it around his shoulders. “Thank you.” When she gave him a mug of tea, their fingers brushed. Awareness tingled up to her elbow. “As best as I could see, the man ran away. I couldn’t find him near the cottage or barn, and I told the drivers to be wary. They have pistols.”

“Do you hurt, Papa?” Elsbeth bussed his unmarred cheek.

“I’ve had worse.” He grinned at his daughter.

“Elsbeth, fetch a basin of water. I’ll tear some strips from old sheets to bandage his hand and perhaps his forehead. More to clean the wounds.”

He caught her hand, held it briefly. “Don’t go to any trouble.”

“It is no trouble.” She glanced at Elsbeth and nodded. “Basin of water, please.”

“Of course.” The girl scuttled into the other room.

Lydia lingered. “There might be laudanum somewhere around if you should need it.”

“I do not.” Then he released her hand. “Thank you for the kindness.”

Flutters erupted in her belly. “It’s the least I can do.” After she joined Elsbeth, and as the young lady filled a small porcelain basin, she moved to the stairs, lightly ran up them, and rummaged in a cupboard for one of the more worn sheets that featured a ragged hem and a hole in one corner. Once she’d torn the fabric into several strips, she brought them down to the common room where Elsbeth was once more sitting next to her father in the matching chair.

Lydia situated herself on a hard ottoman at the earl’s feet. “If you are finished with your tea, I’ll clean your wounds.”

“Do I have a choice?” He bounced his gaze between them.

“No, Papa. Let Lydia do this.” She frowned. “I was so worried; I’m still worried.”

“Easy, poppet. It’s nothing that some bandages and whisky can’t cure. Why don’t you go back to bed? There’s nothing more you can do tonight.”

Elsbeth glanced at Lydia with questions in her eyes. “What do you think, Lydia?”

She dipped a strip of linen into the water then wrung it out. “I’m going to clean and patch him up. No doubt he’ll retire afterward.” With a shrug, she took his battered

hand into hers. “There’s nothing exciting about that.”

The girl frowned as she stared at her father. “Are you sure you’ll be all right?”

“I am.”

“Are we safe?”

“You are. I would never let anything happen to you or Lydia.” He bounced his gaze to her. “I really need to nail a board over the broken window. We’ll freeze if I don’t.”

“Why don’t you go do that before I clean your wounds. Otherwise, I’ll have to do it twice.”

“Right.” With a groan, he gained his feet, bent over his daughter, and kissed the top of her head. “Go to bed, love. I promise you, these are tiny injuries.” Then he patted her head and moved into what had once been used as a stillroom, which was how the intruder had gained access to the cottage.

A sigh escaped Lydia. “Men are stubborn, my dear. What can I say? They always want to show us their strength so we won’t fall into hysterics.”

“Well, it’s a bother.” She stood and when she drew close the Lydia, Elsbeth rested a hand on her shoulder. “Thank you for caring for him. Sleep well.”

She nodded. “You, too. Tomorrow we shall make bread together.”

The ghost of a smile graced the girl’s lips. “I look forward to it.”

Twenty minutes later, the earl returned to his chair. Once he poured out a second cup of tea, Lydia resumed her task of cleaning his reddened knuckles.

“How did you really come by this cottage?” he asked in a soft voice in between sips of tea. That intense gaze rested on her, sought hers out, and something deep inside her knew he wouldn’t take another round of lying lightly.

Apprehension twisted down her spine. “I...” It would seem time had run out, and perhaps she did need to tell him at least part of the truth. “When I told you I wasn’t an innocent, that was the truth.”

“So I surmised.” He nodded but his expression didn’t change. No, he wouldn’t give quarter. “And?”

She heaved a sigh as she dipped the strip of linen back into the water. “I was married. At the young age of nineteen,” she said in a soft whisper. After she wrung out the fabric, she folded it, leaned forward, and began to dab at the broken and bloodied skin at the top of his left cheek. “My husband was a Scotsman, quick to anger, surly at times, but very easy on the eyes. I was a desperate young girl with no experience of the world, and he completely charmed me.”

“It makes sense you met a young, strapping Scot since this property was in your family.” He took a sip of tea. “Your father didn’t approve of the match.” It wasn’t a question.

“Not at first.” She avoided his gaze while she cleaned the skin. “Truly, he probably didn’t approve of it later either, but I thought Duncan was who I wanted to spend the rest of my life with; I’d convinced myself I was in love with him.”

“I’ll wager things didn’t go well?”

“They did... at first. But I suppose he was still hiding his true nature.” She pressed her lips together to keep them from trembling. “Six months into the union, that was when the trouble began.”

When one of his eyebrows rose in question, she tamped on the urge to cry. “Such as?”

“At first, it was a smack here or there. Then, when he gained more confidence in his domination, he moved onto punching and shoving. There was never a time when I wasn’t bruised or hurting. But he always apologized, always convinced me that it had been an accident, a result of too much whisky when he’d been drunk, that he wouldn’t do it again.”

“It was lies.”

“Everything was, I think.” When she dropped the strip of linen back into the basin of water on the floor, she focused her gaze on the open placket of his shirt, on the black hairs poking through the vee. “Verbal abuse followed. I endured it all for a year after that, for at that time, I discovered I was increasing. Which was amazing, for he didn’t bed me that often; said I was a cold fish, and he had better by the wench at the local tavern.”

The earl’s lower jaw dropped. “Good God, please don’t go further.”

“I must. You wished to know, and I want you to realize why I did what I did.” As she clenched her fingers together in her lap to keep them from shaking, she raised her gaze to his. Compassion and horror fought for dominance in those cool pools. “Duncan wasn’t at all pleased. A baby would mean the attention would transfer from him to the infant.”

“Lydia...”

“No.” She shook her head, held up a hand. “I must,” she said in a choked whisper. “He was enraged when I told him. Knocked me about quite violently that night, ending it with a few punches to my belly.” Her voice caught on a sob, for grief never

came at a convenient time. “Of course I miscarried the following morning. All he did was step over my body lying on the floor from where I’d collapsed on his way out to go lay bricks.”

“Bloody hell.” For the space of a few heartbeats, he stared.

“I lost my mother shortly before that, and she’d been indifferent about the abuse, so when I lost my baby too, I’m afraid I fell into a dark place.”

“Quite understandable.” His mouth worked, but no sound came out. Finally, he nodded. “What happened then?”

“To heal, I was told by a midwife to stay in bed as much as I could for two months. So I did, but Duncan was livid about having, what he called a ‘layabout’ for a wife. There was a day when he yanked me out, punched me so hard I lost a tooth, and said no wife of his would continue to be an embarrassment. I didn’t see him for three nights after that.” This time, tears welled in her eyes, for her history was just so... banal and pathetic.

And she hadn’t even told him all of it.

“It’s not often I’m rendered speechless, but you’ve managed it.”

“Some stories don’t have happy endings.” She shrugged. “It took me a handful of months after that to gather my courage, to save enough coin to be able to escape, but I knew I wanted a better life for myself, knew what he did wasn’t acceptable even if most people turned their heads so they couldn’t see.”

“You couldn’t write to your father, ask him to help get you out? Surely an earl would have some clout in such matters.”

Ah, the lies she'd told would now be the rope she hung from. "It wasn't an option." That would need to suffice. Brushing at the tears, she folded the remaining strips of linen. "One night in the winter near Christmas, I simply... left. I had a friend in the village, she worked in the bakery, who gave me some coin, enough to hire a spot on the post coach, so I took whatever belongings I could fit into a valise and fled to London."

"It is why you don't enjoy the Christmastide holidays." It wasn't a question.

"I never said that."

His eyes were kind. "You didn't have to." For long moments, he was silent. "I imagine your father was glad of that and welcomed you with open arms."

Dear lord, I can't continue to lie to this man. She ignored the mention of her fictitious "earl" father. "It took me a year to sort myself before I finally had the idea to open a finishing school." Her real father had died of a heart attack within that year, and from all accounts, he'd been enraged when she'd walked out on her marriage, had deeply embarrassed him, and he'd made sure the village knew exactly what sort of woman she was. "To start my new life," she added in a whisper.

"I can't fathom all that you've survived and then have the will to open a school." There was more than a little awe in his voice.

"We do what we must. I was deceived by Duncan, and when it became apparent my life was in danger, I had to do something, to disappear, to start over. Become someone else."

Which she'd done, quite successfully, until that dratted letter from the solicitor arrived.

“Where is he?” Anger twisted into his expression. “Where is your bastard husband? I’ll kill him myself.”

Was he angry at her? Had he thought he’d done wicked things to a married woman and had been deceived? A queer pain shivered around her heart. That hadn’t been her intention. “Duncan is dead.”

“How long ago?”

“I’m not certain.” She shrugged, and the fabric of her night clothes scraped over her hardened nipples, whether from the cold or the conversation or his proximity, she couldn’t say. “Six months. Maybe more. I only just received a letter from a solicitor, which was the reason for the ill-fated trip. To find out if I wanted to keep the cottage or sell it.”

The earl’s nod was curt. “Did you kill him?”

“Ha.” Her bark of laughter was short and harsh and bitter. “No, but don’t think I didn’t want to do just that. He apparently died in a tavern fight. No doubt over the attentions of yet another barmaid. According to the letter from my friend in the village, his friends buried him in the village cemetery. Then promptly forgot about him.”

It served the bounder right.

For long moments, the crack and pop of the fire, as well as the whistle of the wind outside, were the only sounds in the room.

Then Jackson stirred. “Do you still love him?”

Shock thrust her from the maudlin thoughts. “Are you mad? Of course not. Any such

feelings went by the wayside a year into our union. I have been running ever since.”

I’m so tired of hiding, of rebuilding.

“He’s dead, Lydia.” The earl took her hand in his. “You can stop running.”

“Perhaps. One never can be certain.” That connection, that feeling of her fingers gliding over his left her with the familiar longing burning inside her. “He has a brother who spoke out against our marriage, who wants control of the cottage and the bit of coin my husband left, though it wasn’t much, and it certainly wasn’t included with the letter from the solicitor.”

“I’d imagine the man took it to pay for his services.”

“He’s welcome to it. I want nothing else to do with my husband or his brother.”

“Ah. That was probably the intruder from the tonight.”

“I don’t doubt it.” A shiver racked her shoulders. “He’ll try again, Jackson, and that frightens me, for we’ll probably be stuck here a few days due to the storm.”

“He’s welcome to try. I’ll clean his clock next time.” Then, he stood and brought her up with him. “I don’t wish to talk of such unsavory things any longer.”

“Oh?” Again, her heartbeat kicked into a rapid rhythm, but it wasn’t due to fear.

“What... uh, what do you want to do?”

“To show you that your husband was a proper nodcock to not see you for the gem you are.” While she stood rooted to the thin carpet, the earl extinguished the two lit candles in the room. The orange, copper glow of the fire lent a cozy, almost magical illumination to the space. Then he closed the distance between them, tugged her

roughly into his arms. “No man has the right to lay hands on a woman in anger or anything else outside of love and respect. And if I need to tell you, to show you that in as many different ways as you need to hear it or learn it, I will, because he was so bloody wrong.”

Then he brought his mouth crashing down on hers in a kiss so intense it would surely be seared into her brain for the rest of her life. Seconds later, Lydia sighed, looped her arms about his shoulders, and melted into the embrace.

Why am I so weak around handsome men? Yet the earl was different in every conceivable way, and it sent her world upside down.

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Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 11:32 am

A lady must never fall for a man's charm, especially when they're alone, for that will lead to scandal.

After that horrible story Lydia had told him as well as her admission that she'd been married, undeniable protection for her welled. He wanted to shield her from every bad thing she might still encounter in life, carry her away to somewhere beautiful so that she might forget the abuse she'd gone through.

How the devil had she gotten beneath his skin so quickly? He wasn't the sort of man to fall for every woman he met, yet with Lydia, it was different. An intriguing mix of vulnerability and mystery, he couldn't help but want to discover all her secrets.

Wrenching away briefly merely to do something as pedestrian as breathe, he met her gaze. "I want you." There was no sense in dancing about that fact. It had been coming since the moment he'd met her and had built onward from the night he'd brought her to pleasure with his fingers and mouth.

At least in this he could make her feel wanted and desired where apparently her husband had done a slipshod job of it.

Her eyes darkened even further, and the heat of her body seeped into his. "I want you as well, and that is not a lie." When she moved a palm to rest upon his chest, his pulse quickened. "What of your daughter? Surely, she would hear if we retire upstairs."

"Firstly, Elsbeth is a deep sleeper, and she falls into dreamland quickly. And second, I have no intention of moving." So saying, he tugged her over to a low sofa, and once he dropped onto it, he urged her onto his lap, arranging her legs until she straddled

him. “This inevitability has been chasing us from the moment I rescued you.”

“There is no rational explanation for this.” Yet she slipped a hand to his nape to furrow her fingers through the hair there. “I am not a siren.”

“You doubt the power you already wield.” Needing to touch her, Jackson tugged the ribbon from the end of her braid. Then he buried his fingers into her thick tresses, unraveled the plaiting until the black waterfall of her hair tumbled about her back and shoulders. The faint scent of lavender wafted to his nose, and it would forever remind him of her, of this moment. “You are bewitching, Lydia, and what is more, you are worthy of finding happiness and fulfillment.”

Tears sprang to her eyes. The illumination from the fire lent her a burnished glow. “I fear you are far too charming for your own good.”

“Such gammon,” he whispered right before he claimed her lips and put every ounce of emotion coursing through his veins into that one kiss.

“Rogue,” she said against his lips, but she clung to him, held him as fiercely as he did her, and when she returned his embrace, Jackson was lost. There was no going back from this; nor did he wish to. In this one perfect moment, Lydia was his and he could well imagine her in his life in some capacity, but he wasn’t ready to commit to what just now.

Apparently, she felt daring, for she pressed kisses beneath his jaw, rained them along his neck, nipped and nibbled a path back up to his jawline while caressing a hand over his chest. Each new kiss and touch drove him closer to a loss of control, but he didn’t want to do anything that would dissuade her.

But he wanted to caress and explore her as well.

Slowly, oh so slowly, he undid the tie that kept her thin robe closed. As he glided his palms down her sides, he made love to her mouth as if he had all the leisure time in the world. Perhaps he did with the storm raging outside. Over and over, Jackson drank from her lips, moved over them with care so she wouldn't spook or frighten, so she would know how valued she was, how he wished to worship the woman she was. The moment he drew the tip of his tongue along the seam of her lips, she sighed into him, and he took full advantage by deepening the kiss. They dueled for dominance, until they were both so carried away with passion their teeth clinked together.

And damn if her hunger transferred to him as she surged upward, pressing her body into his as she chased his kisses, pushed to further deepen them.

The woman is a powder keg.

It left him in awe. With a soft growl, he again tangled his fingers in her hair and kissed her—gently this time, tenderly, but it wasn't enough.

I need so much more.

“Let me see you, Lydia. All of you.” Was it too bold a request?

Her eyes were clouded with the same passion coursing through his veins. “Only if you disrobe as well.”

“Do you plan to do wicked things to me?” The whispered quip further encouraged the hardening of his shaft when she gave him a smoky laugh. As quickly as he could, Jackson tugged the fine lawn shirt up and off his head. Seconds after he'd tossed it away, he turned his attention to separating Lydia from her clothes, and damn if his hands didn't shake. When he'd been with his wife, everything was easy, perhaps uninspired for she wasn't enthusiastic about participation, but Lydia was, and now he was suffering from bloody nerves.

She didn't seem to mind, for she pressed a line of feather-weighted kisses beneath his jaw as she spread her hands over the expanse of his bare chest. "So handsome, so manly. I wish you could always go about like this."

"We'd surely land into scandal. Imagine, a half-dressed earl and a naked earl's daughter."

A gasp escaped her. "Not naked yet." Then she dragged her lips down the column of his throat.

"You will be in a twinkling." He gathered handfuls of her nightclothes. A few tugs and her lifting onto her knees brought the garments up and over her head. When they were off her body, they hovered on his finger before finally falling to the floor to join his shirt. "So damned lovely." Was there anything better than seeing a woman in the skin she was born with? His pulse thundered through his veins. "I can't wait to explore." Almost giddy with anticipation, he slipped his arms around her, and as he kissed her, he couldn't help but slide a hand to the delectable curve of her arse.

Hell, he'd dreamed about doing just that since she'd looked at him from the road with those fathomless brown eyes.

"I won't bid you nay, since you have already been intimately acquainted with me." She walked her fingers down his chest and past the waist of his breeches, but when she went to fondle his hardening shaft through the fabric, he tsked his tongue and stayed her fingers.

"Patience." While she pouted, he planted his hands on either side of her waist and lifted her, quickly planting her on the sofa. "I'll be one second." After he'd shed his breeches, he joined her. Unbidden, a sigh left him, and it didn't matter that the sofa cushions were old and worn, and there was a spring working its way out of the back. "I am going to worship you now, no matter how long it takes."

Desire sparkled in her eyes. “Amaze me, Greystone. I haven’t been impressed by a man for a long time.”

“Remembering your face the other night after I was through with you rather renders that statement moot.”

“Yes, but we didn’t go further, did we?” Then her arms were around him and she drew him close, kissed his lips while she danced her fingers down his spine.

Each caress and sweep of her hands over his skin raised his awareness of her and sent him closer to that ultimate edge. Ignoring his own need, Jackson explored every inch of her body as he’d wanted to do for far too long. Lips, tongue, and fingers played along her curves as he learned her secrets, discovered how she enjoyed being touched and pleased, even though he’d already pleased her earlier in the week. The warmth of her urged him onward; the faint floral scent of her teased him, and through it all, he couldn’t have enough.

This woman has become my addiction.

As he hovered over one taut, dark pink nipple, she squirmed, and with a grin, he finally took that peak into his mouth. A moan from her was his reward, so he worried that tip with his tongue before applying suction enough to make her wild. To drive home the point of how much he wanted her, he rolled the other nipple between his thumb and forefinger starting at the root and slowly moving upward. She shivered beneath him, arched her back, which put those lovely charms more fully into his care.

“I’ll admit, the first time between us, how you make me feel, wasn’t an accident. You are quite skilled.”

“Ha.” The words fed his ego, and he wanted to give her a far better showing this time.

Minutes, possibly hours went by while he explored, and the wind whistled outside. As he licked, nibbled, and fondled, Lydia did the same, and it was inevitable he would wait—teetering—on the edge of bliss, but he gritted his teeth and ignored the insistent throbbing through his painfully hard shaft.

“Your husband was a damned nodcock.” When he slipped a hand between her splayed thighs, she uttered a moan mixed with a sigh.

Passion-drugged eyes looked up at him, and she gave him a tremulous smile that went straight to his soul. “Though it was a horrible time in my life, I’d like to hope I’ve learned from it.”

“You certainly picked a better second man to join you in bed.” While he nuzzled the crook of her neck, Jackson parted her heated flesh until the swollen bud at her center came out of hiding. At the first strum of his fingers to that button, a shuddering sigh left her throat. Dear God, he remembered how she felt from the time before and vowed he could lose himself for days in her body. She moaned again, and that tiny sound hurled him closer to disaster, but he ignored the unrelenting need in order to bedevil that nubbin with varying degrees of pressure.

“I’m aware that we cannot be overly loud, but I want to know you are finding pleasure with me.” He teased one of her breasts while experimenting with friction and circling that all-important bundle of nerves.

“How can you... Heavens, that feels good.” Lydia dug her fingers into his shoulders as her hips bucked and she moved into his hand. Then she threw her head back onto the shabby decorative pillow as a surprised half-stifled scream of completion was released into the air. For a few seconds, her body went pliant, but it was the expression of bliss flitting over her face which held him captive. “Better than even the last time and took less time.” Admiration lay stamped on her face to mix with pleasure.

Damn, she was amazing. “I want you to remember me,” he managed to whisper through the tightness of his throat.

“How could I not? You have essentially rescued me twice, shown me I was wrong to judge all men by who my husband was.” Honesty shone in the brown depths of her eyes, and for one second, he couldn’t breathe. Slowly, she drifted a hand between them to cup his equipment, and he gasped. “I rather doubt you will leave my memories any time soon. And soon, you and I will part ways...” Her voice broke.

Christ, but he hadn’t realized this cottage was her destination, and that she wouldn’t be continuing on with him and Elsbeth to the Highlands. A wad of emotion lodged in his throat. “I refuse to speak on that in this moment.” Feelings graveled his voice.

“Right.” When she wrapped her fingers around his aching shaft, and a hiss of warning escaped him. “Gently, I’m nearly gone.”

“All the more reason to continue, don’t you think, Your Lordship?” While holding his gaze the whole time, the maddening woman pumped her hand up and down his length, apparently in an effort to drive him insane. That coupled with his title nearly had him prematurely spending.

“Lydia...”

With each stroke, acute tingling went through his stones to enhance his need. Not to be outdone, he contented himself with teasing her nipples. All too soon, they both panted with mutual need. He kissed her with such intensity, he was afraid he would throw himself over that edge, but with every plunge of his tongue into her mouth, he told her exactly what he would do to her body in mere seconds. She left off manipulating his shaft in favor of clutching his shoulders, and each time she bumped her hips into his, her body brushed against his straining member.

Soon he would be lost.

After repositioning himself between her bent knees, it was a natural progression to position his tip at her opening, and at her nod of encouragement, he flexed his hips. There was something to be said of bedding a widow instead of an innocent; it made everything easier. With a sigh, he penetrated her, sank stones-deep into her honeyed heat, and their moans blended together. The welcome from her humbled him so greatly that he paused, snug inside her passage, and rested his forehead against hers.

“Thank you for this. We both needed it, I think.”

She laid a palm against his cheek. “It has certainly helped me heal, and that was something I never expected on this journey.”

The sensation of falling, pin-wheeling, tumbling assailed him as he came to another truth. If he wasn’t careful, he would fall in love with this woman, and he didn’t know if he wanted that for his life.

A gentle bump of her hips into his jostled his shaft and focused his thoughts. Now was not the time or the place to lose himself in his thoughts.

“Jackson.” She nipped at the side of his neck. “I want to feel you moving in me.”

The whisper was all the permission he needed. “Of course.” Taking her hands, he threaded their fingers together and pinned hers to the pillow. Only then did he begin to stroke slowly into her, and with each silky glide of his body against hers, the tumble down that slippery slope began again.

She watched him, and he stared back. In those moments when they moved together in a dance older than time, he could swear their souls connected, bonded, were somehow exchanged until they temporarily became one. What he wouldn’t give for

the right to protect this woman, to continue showing her she was more valuable than what her husband had made her feel.

All too soon, the tingling need in his stones grew so that he could no longer ignore the rawness of it. His rhythm shifted and changed, became more frantic. Deeper and faster his thrusts grew. Lydia held him in the cradle of her thighs by wrapping her legs around his, and his strokes went ever faster, even more frantic until their bodies crashed against each other. The sound of flesh hitting flesh echoed in the air to blend with their moans and sighs. When a large gust of wind traveled down the chimney to scatter a handful of embers into the room, it was merely the image of how joining with her was making his body feel.

When she inhaled, probably to scream, he kissed her and took the sound into himself. The last thing they needed was for Elsbeth to come downstairs. Lydia went over the edge with such force the contractions in her core coerced him to join her before he was quite ready.

Release rushed over him, plowed through him with such intense pleasure that he caught his breath. At the last second, he tamped the urge to shout her name, but he repeated it in a whisper against her lips like a litany. For several seconds, his heart pounded while he was lost to the glory of that world where only lovers inhabited, a void of brilliant light before coming back to himself with a racing heartbeat and sweat cooling his back.

“Dear God, that was amazing,” he whispered against her neck before rolling onto his side and taking her with him. “You are amazing.”

“I have no words just yet.” Lydia snuggled into his chest with one arm about his waist and her legs tangled with his. “I am still enjoying tiny little flutters.”

“Good.” He wrapped his arms around her and reveled in the luxury of holding her.

For long moments they remained like that, existing in the silence with the wind and the snap of the fire. “Please know I will protect you, for as long as you should have need.”

“I appreciate that. Knowing Malcolm, he will not have been frightened off permanently.” When she huffed, the warmth of her breath skated over his chest to tighten his muscles. “The stupid thing about it is, if he just asked, I would have given him the cottage. I don’t want it.” She shook her head. “This place is full of horrible memories, of blood stains and cracks, of broken dreams.”

“You have dreamed and fulfilled new ones,” he reminded her then nuzzled the crook of her shoulder. “If this is the last tie to your past, snip it. Make a clean break. You never know what your future might hold, and then you won’t have to worry or hide.”

“I will think over every avenue during the storm. Hopefully, by the time you and Elsbeth must leave, I’ll have an idea of what I need to do.” Sadness reflected in her expressive eyes. “But I shouldn’t rush my fences, as the saying goes.”

“Right.” He nearly choked on the word, for the very real possibility of them separating pressed in upon him. “For the time being, we will make the best of it.”

She didn’t answer with words. Instead, she put a hand to his nape, urged his lips down to hers, and then kissed him.

And the slide began all over again.

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Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 11:32 am

A lady should always make herself useful in all things domestic.

December 21, 1817

Night was just falling as Jackson came into the cottage from bringing in another load of cut wood for the fireplaces. Lydia nodded to him as he dropped a few split logs in the basket next to the stove, for they had finished dinner not too long ago.

“You should be in the other room, sitting with the drivers. They apparently unearthed a bottle of whisky hidden in the barn, and I said they could keep warm by the fire until it was time to retire.”

They’d all shared dinner around the oaken table, for Elsbeth had been so proud that she’d helped to prepare it. The remains of the two loaves of bread and a hearty hunter’s stew still littered the table, but she’d lingered in her chair, sipping tea and allowing her thoughts to overtake her. The wind still whipped about, but it appeared that the snow which had bedeviled the landscape last night might stop sometime during the upcoming night.

Then they would need to wait for the roads to clear before she would need to bid the earl and his daughter goodbye.

“I don’t mind. The physical exercise is good for me.” He glanced about the small space. “Where is Elsbeth? I wanted to tell her again how lovely dinner was.”

“She went upstairs to read and write a couple of letters. I’ll join her in an hour so we can search the attics for a trace of Christmas decorations.” Lydia wiped her hands on

a length of linen that served as a towel. “I didn’t wish for her to be alone in the common room with the drivers since she’s a young lady ready to attend finishing school. If she had to admit to that, for whatever the reason or circumstance, it might hurt her chances of getting into the better ones.”

“While I appreciate that, I have the final say on where she will go, and I happen to know a rather outstanding headmistress of a finishing school in Mayfair.” When he winked, flutters went through her lower belly.

Would he still think that when—or if—he discovered she wasn’t an earl’s daughter? That she had absolutely no connection to the beau monde at all? That he’d essentially coupled with a low-born half-Englishwoman who’d had no future a handful of years ago?

While pressing her lips together, she nodded. “I would be happy to have Elsbeth on my roster for next autumn’s term.”

“Is something wrong?”

“No, of course not.” How could she begin to tell him that what they’d done last night had helped vanquish the unsavory memories of her husband? That she’d felt closer to him than she’d ever felt to anyone else in her life? That it was a foolish thing she’d done, and if she didn’t watch herself, she would start to fall in love with him?

Nothing good could ever come from that.

“I can see you’re bothered by something.”

She frowned. The man was too observant for his own good. “It’s nothing.” If she were honest with herself, she’d rather enjoyed having a champion and someone to protect her. It made her struggles worthwhile.

“Let me grab another load of wood for the house then we’ll talk.” Seconds later, he went out into the cold once more, the hem of his greatcoat flapping.

With a sigh, Lydia went to the door that adjoined the common room. “Are you certain the two of you don’t want another bowl of stew? If not, I’m going to put the dining room to rights.”

They both groaned.

Robert shook his head. “I don’t think I could eat another bite, my lady.”

The other man grinned. “I’m stuffed, and that’s a fact, but I sure do appreciate you letting us share in the meal.”

“You are both quite welcome. In times like these, everyone survives together.” Additionally, she liked having them both around, for that would help keep Malcolm off the property. What she would do after they left her alone, she couldn’t begin to fathom. Then the door to the kitchen opened, and the earl came back into the house. “You’ll freeze if you’re not careful,” she said as she came around him to close the door since his arms were full of wood.

“True, but that just means I might sneak into your room later tonight so you can warm me,” he shot back in a barely audible whisper. “Let me put this in the other room. I’ll return in a twinkling.”

As the muted rumble of male voices reached her ears, Lydia tidied up the detritus of dinner left on the table. She put the lid on the pot of stew and set it on the back of the stove in the event the earl might wish for another bowl later. He could warm it himself. After wrapping the remainder of the bread with a clean rag, she swept the crumbs from the floor, tossed them outside, and then put out the lantern.

By the time she entered the common room, the drivers were on their way out, with the excuse that they would be keeping the horses calm and mucking out stalls. Jackson thanked them, warned them to stay vigilant, and after, he closed and locked the door behind them.

“Today has been all too domestic.” Once he’d removed his greatcoat, he draped it over one of the chairs near the fire, no doubt to dry it out from the snow. “I don’t mind saying that I rather enjoyed it. Quite the change from day-to-day life.”

She nodded. “I would imagine, though, after a few days of living like this, you would grow frantic to return to your life in London, one where servants do everything for you and reclining on furniture that isn’t worn or broken.”

“Ah, so you think me arrogant, possibly spoiled.” There was no animosity in the inquiry, just humor as he seated himself on the other chair.

“No, I think you are an earl who has grown used to a certain way of life. There is nothing wrong with that.” Not wanting to go upstairs quite yet, Lydia perched on the edge of the sofa near his location. “A life like this would soon prove dull for you, and you wouldn’t enjoy all the physical labor involved in such an existence.”

“I’m capable, you know.”

“Oh, I know.” She roved her gaze over his face, and the hint of the evening stubble clinging to his cheeks and chin sent heated prickles of awareness over her skin. “You are quite virile and strong, but living here, being removed from society and everything your title allows... this isn’t what you were born for.”

A hint of a frown touched his lips. “Neither are you.”

Lydia glanced away from him lest he see the tears welling in her eyes. “I wouldn’t be

so certain. Being back here, walking through each of these rooms where it took me nearly three years to find the courage to leave.” She shook her head. “To be honest, I want nothing else to do with this property. I miss London. If I ever returned to the Lake District it will be too soon.”

“That’s understandable but let me give you a different perspective.” The earl moved from his chair to the sofa next to her. “Give it time. You never thought you would let a man close, yet you have been quite receptive to what you and I have done together.”

Heat went through her cheeks. “True.”

“And you must trust me, because you haven’t shied away from any of my advances,” he said in a whisper as he leaned into her and brushed his lips over hers. “You have even made some of your own.”

“I never said I didn’t enjoy carnal exercise; I merely didn’t like it with Duncan. For obvious reasons.” That fleeting touch of his lips on hers was enough to make her want to fall into his arms and let him continue to protect her. But that wasn’t how life worked.

“Would you ever consider marriage again?”

For long moments, she frowned at him before speaking. Did she want to give up the freedom she’d found from being alone, from hiding? Yet traveling with the earl had been a surprising endeavor, and she’d found she liked having him about. “That would largely depend on the man.” When her gaze collided with his, the emotions therein were unreadable. “Would you marry again?”

As he shrugged, his shoulder brushed hers. Again, awareness made itself known. “My answer is the same as yours. It would depend on the woman.” His stare was intense. “And there is Elsbeth to consider.”

“Of course. Children are important when it comes to second marriages.” Her insides shivered as grief once more slammed into her and stole her breath. “My first marriage was full of regrets, Jackson, but one of the largest ones was losing my babe.” Then another thought occurred. “I’m not certain I will ever have another chance to be a mother.”

She’d never admitted that to anyone. Yet she’d coupled with the earl last night, and he’d not taken measures to prevent a pregnancy, though it was unlikely since she’d finished with her menses the day before she’d embarked upon the journey north.

On the off chance that a child did result, what would happen? A disgraced headmistress would be certain to cause scandal and ruin.

Immediately, he slipped his arms about her. “You are young yet. Don’t paint your future with a brush that isn’t yours any longer.” When he did nothing more than hold her, another round of tears formed in her eyes. “If there is a chance that—”

“Hush.” She closed her eyes to enjoy leaning on his strength. “I would never want any man out of obligation, for I am worth more than a responsibility.”

“On that I agree with you. However, I—”

Lydia stemmed his flow of words with a finger to his lips. “No. Don’t even try to convince me of something that would probably prove folly on both our parts. It hasn’t even been a week, and I’m not in the habit of trapping men, especially those who hold titles.” For the space of a few heartbeats, she held his gaze. “You are a good man, Jackson, but there are only so many times you can rescue me before you start to resent it. Do you understand?”

“Yes.” Then the dratted man took her hand and kissed the back. “As long as you understand that I couldn’t bear knowing there was a child in the world who belonged

to me but wasn't legally mine." Though there was a note of command in his voice, it didn't frighten her like her husband's need for control had. In the earl, she knew he merely wished to protect those around him, and she appreciated that.

"When you do marry again—and you will—be true to yourself and make certain it is for love above all else. Life is too short for anything else." Daring much, Lydia leaned into him and kissed him, but before it could become too heated, she pulled away. "Now I'll leave you to your drink of choice—not that there is much here—because I made a promise to your daughter."

Two hours later, she and Elsbeth were completing their rooting through the attic space. They had been fortunate enough to locate two small boxes containing ribbons and some tin bells that were dinged and dented, but another box bearing glass baubles and balls proved mostly broken. Whether they'd been broken and then put into the boxes or shattered due to changes in weather, she couldn't say.

"Oh, Lydia, look here in this one." The girl showed her a box that she'd just taken a lid from. "There are dried citrus fruits as well as pinecones. We can use those."

"Absolutely we can." A swath of memories hit her, and she tried hard to tamp them back. She remembered slicing the oranges and one precious lemon the first Christmas she'd celebrated with her husband. Her mother had come over to help with the preparations. Some of the slices they'd candied in a bit of sugar but the rest they'd dried. Afterward, they'd slipped them onto evergreen branches over the mantel for a bit of color, and in the right light, the slices had looked like stained glass. "At this point, anything will be better than nothing."

"May I ask you a question?" Elsbeth's gaze was on her face, but her expression was difficult to read.

"Of course. What's on your mind?"

“Do you find my father attractive?”

Ah, straight to the point. Lydia appreciated that about the girl. Being forthright would serve her well as she grew into adulthood. Of course, it could lead to problems too, but there was time enough to teach her discernment. “He is a handsome man. That is undeniable.” She tightened her fingers around the box in her hands. “Why do you ask?”

“No reason, I suppose.” With a shrug, Elsbeth picked her way through the attic until she’d reached the narrow and steep wooden staircase. “Just that you and he seemed chummy earlier this evening while talking. I couldn’t hear what you were saying, but I did spy him holding you at one point.”

“Oh.” She bit back a gasp. “You were watching us?” That was quite disconcerting.

“I didn’t mean to.” A frown tugged at the corners of her mouth. “I wanted to come down and ask about the attics, but when I saw that and noted you seemed a little upset, I came back upstairs.” As she paused, she tilted her head slightly. “I already lost my mother; it would break my heart if I lost my father too, not to death but to the machinations of a woman who is still much a stranger that he pulled off the road a handful of days ago.” She cleared her throat. “Regardless of how I want him to marry again so that he might find peace.”

Though the words were a tad harsh, they were no less than the truth. Easily she could see the situation from the young girl’s eyes. “I understand exactly why you are worried. The connection or attraction if you will between your father and me is inexplicable, which causes me to worry as well.”

“You feel he isn’t thinking of romance?”

Heat slapped at her cheeks. “Perhaps. He has much on his mind, I think.” Was it

romance? Most likely not. Lust, definitely, and certainly desire.

“I’ve seen how he looks at you, though. Sometimes, it makes me embarrassed, but it also makes me happy that he might be finally coming out of mourning and self-exile.”

“Ah.” Not for worlds would she show her delight at the news. She laid a hand on Elsbeth’s shoulder. “You have my word that I would never pull him away from you. Even still, once the storm ends and the roads clear, you and he will be on your way.”

Surprise jumped into her eyes. “You aren’t travelling onward with us?”

“This cottage was my destination all along. I would have no reason to accompany you both to Scotland.” Quite frankly, she had more respect for herself than to become mistress to an earl, despite her budding feelings for him. Even then, they were suspect; they could very well have sprung up due to him rescuing her. After all, she had a finishing school to keep running and a reputation to remain sterling.

At least as far as her false persona went.

“I didn’t realize that,” Elsbeth said in a soft voice. “It’s so sad, for you were a lovely companion; I was learning much from you, us both being daughters of earls, you see.”

Cold guilt coiled in Lydia’s belly. “I’m sorry.” For many things, but exclusively for the lies she’d been forced to share.

“I didn’t mean to cause you upset.” Elsbeth clutched her free hand. “You would be a good match for him, and I will tell him so when the time is right.”

It was quite difficult to gauge the girl’s moods and emotions, for they swung wildly.

She could only nod. “Let us get these boxes downstairs. After breakfast tomorrow, we’ll do some decorating. Perhaps if the storm is over, we can convince your father to go out with us to gather greenery.”

“That will be a fun outing.” Just like that, the worry and annoyance in her expression cleared, and she was all smiles as they carefully descended the steps to the second floor.

Good thing Lydia was well versed in adolescent behavior else she might have taken that talk personally. Still, it bothered her, this lie that she’d indulged in. Even though she’d told Jackson some of it, she hadn’t come completely clean, and now it seemed both he and his daughter would be collateral damage before too much longer.

When they reached the common room, she didn’t immediately see the earl. Seconds later, he came in from outside, brushing the snow off the shoulders of his greatcoat.

“What happened?”

He shrugged as he closed the door. “I thought I spied a shadow moving about near the windows, so I went outside to investigate and do rounds.”

Icy fear played its fingers down her spine. “And?” She could hardly force the word out as she rested her box of decorations on a nearby table.

“There were footprints, but I didn’t find human life. Nothing but a fox and a herd of deer.” After he removed his greatcoat, he draped it over the chair. “I’ll continue to monitor the situation.”

“Thank you.” There was every possibility the footprints belonged to her brother-in-law, and apparently, he wouldn’t rest until he’d gained the cottage.

Not for the first time was she grateful the earl was there, and she lost a piece of her heart to him merely because he thought nothing of protecting her and this property, when neither of them meant anything to him.

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Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 11:32 am

A lady should never kiss anyone in a public place

December 22, 1817

By mid-morning, the wind had died, and the snow had stopped. By midday, the sun decided to peek out for a bit. Jackson's daughter had actually squealed when she apparently saw the turn in the weather. Now, she and Lydia were outside, waiting for him, because they'd decided the cottage simply needed decorating, so they wanted him to bring the axe and cut down pine boughs and other holiday greenery.

He watched them from the window in the bedchamber he'd chosen as he shoved his arms into the sleeves of a jacket of sapphire superfine. Elsbeth's scarlet cloak was brilliant against the blanket of fresh white snow while Lydia's black and muddied cloak was no less of a contrast, but it didn't draw the eye like his daughter's.

Yet his attention kept returning to the headmistress. Though she wore a bonnet that didn't have much ornamentation, but he knew it hid black hair that had wave and curl to it. Even now, he could feel the soft thickness of the tresses on his fingers. Then his thoughts jogged to how her body had responded to his caresses, how he'd chased the heat of her skin with his fingertips, how the sounds of pleasure she'd made had fired his own need.

What the devil was he playing at continuing to be scandalous with a woman he'd only met a handful of days ago?

He couldn't say; hell, he'd never been put in such a position before, and neither had his head been so turned by such an interesting woman. Yes, he'd loved his wife with

everything that he was, but Lydia was so different, so vibrant, so... mysterious.

By the time he'd made his way outside, blinking against the sunlight, he rested the axe over his shoulder, and he joked about with the drivers, who'd decided to come along on the outing in an effort to stave off boredom.

At some point, Lydia glanced over her shoulder at him. Her ruby lips curved into a grin to match the red stain on her cheeks from the cold. "Hurry, and don't dally, Your Lordship. The snow isn't that deep."

True, it wasn't. Perhaps six inches of sparkling snow covered the landscape. With the sunlight glittering all over the surface, it had the look of a wonderland or something straight out of a fairy story. "I'm doing my best!" He chuckled and sent Robert a speaking glance.

The other man indulged in a laugh of his own, for there was a festive spirit in the air.

Inside the wooded area, the snow hadn't penetrated that deeply due to the trees, especially the oaks that still had dead, brown leaves clinging to the branches, and the evergreen shrubs and trees which kept the snow from parts of the forest floor. It was easier going here, and his toes didn't feel quite so frozen.

"All right, ladies. We three are at your disposal. If you find greenery that is especially toothsome, just let us know and we will procure it for you."

Elsbeth ran back to join him. She latched onto his arm and pulled him with her. "Come. I saw the most glorious pine tree that will give over the most beautiful boughs. They will look so lovely on the mantel."

"Lead on." It was amusing to see his daughter so enthusiastic about decorating a cottage that didn't belong to her for a holiday she hadn't shown an interest in since

losing her mother. Had the presence of Lydia made the difference?

She certainly has in my life.

“When Lydia and I were in the attics yesterday, we found some ribbons and things that we’ll use to decorate the swags before putting them around the cottage.” As she continued to chatter on about dried oranges and a few trunks with old clothing in them, Jackson couldn’t help but smile. Whatever had happened during the past several days, it had brought his daughter out of her petulant mood. Perhaps it was a temporary aberration, but he would enjoy it while such a thing lasted.

“Are you planning to spend Christmas here? After all, why bother decorating a place we will leave as soon as the roads are passable?” The thought of continuing onto Scotland without Lydia in their midst left his chest tight with worry and imminent loss.

“Well, I...” Some of Elsbeth’s good humor faded. “I suppose I assumed we would linger here a bit. And Lydia is here. If we go and leave her behind, she will spend the holiday alone, and without a horse or vehicle, how will she get to the village for supplies? How will she come back to London when the term continues in January?”

“You are worried about her.” It wasn’t a question.

“Of course I am.” Elsbeth dropped her voice as they winded their way through the trees. “She has no one, Papa. Whether she stays here or goes back to London, there is no one for her to talk with, no one will welcome her home.” When she blew out a breath, the exhalation clouded about her head. “I don’t know what happened in her life before you and I met her, but sometimes I can feel sadness about her, as if she lived a thousand lives she doesn’t talk about. I don’t want her to go through any more of that.”

His heart squeezed, for his daughter was maturing right before his eyes. “I agree with your sentiment. Perhaps we should put forth the idea that she should travel on to Scotland with us when we leave. She can celebrate the holidays with us, and then return to London as well.” Then he wouldn’t worry about her on her own. Lydia didn’t deserve to be left to the wolves and be prey for her boulder brother-in-law. “No one should be alone for the Christmastide season.”

Especially when that someone grew far too close to not only him but his daughter.

“I will be sure to mention it to her a few times, but you must as well.” Elsbeth’s eyes were filled with mischief as she peered up at him. “It might have a greater impact from you.”

That caught him by surprise. “Why would you say that?”

“Don’t be coy, Papa. I’m not blind and neither am I a small child any longer.” Her giggle didn’t bode well for him. “I can see how you look at Lydia; I even saw you hold her yesterday, so that indicates you are either trying to fix her brokenness or you feel something for her.”

“What?” Shock plowed through his chest. “You saw us?” Dear God, how much had she witnessed? Then he focused on her words. “Yes, I was comforting her after she told me of an especially hard bit from her past, a season of grief where she doubted herself.”

“That’s what I thought, and it was a sweet moment.” Elsbeth patted his arm. “When I realized neither of you were cognizant I was there, I went back upstairs and resumed letter writing.” She shrugged as her gaze trained to where Lydia had paused by a long hedgerow. Included within the shrubbery was what looked like holly bushes. “If you were to choose, don’t you think she might prove a lovely candidate for a second wife?”

“What?” When had he been reduced to one-word utterances? Quickly, he lowered his voice as he stared at his daughter and brought her to a halt. “You truly believe I want to marry again, let alone ask Lydia such a question?”

“As I said before, you are the type of man who lives to fix broken things or help broken people heal. I suspect Lydia is broken far more than she’s let on, but the two of you are well-matched, she’s familiar with London, is quite respectable due to being a headmistress, and from all I’ve seen, she’s a good influence and an even better listener.”

“Perhaps, but I have known her a week.” Did that matter? “I’m not certain how I feel. With your mother, we enjoyed a six-month engagement period.”

Elsbeth gave him a faux frown. “Have you told her how gutted you were when Mama died? How lost you’ve been without a woman in your life?”

“Uh, somewhat, but you believe I should go deeper?” What had happened in his life that he was now seeking the counsel of his daughter?

“Papa.” She regarded him as if he hadn’t a brain in his head. “How can anyone learn about anyone if they don’t talk? Besides, she has made a big shepherd’s pie for supper, and that was quite a feat. I wonder where she learned how to cook?” Again, she heaved a sigh. “Thank her by speaking from the heart. When you release those feelings, you’ll have room for new ones.”

“You are growing into a fine young lady; did you know that?” Pride swelled his chest when he looked at her. “I’m glad to be your father.” Would she benefit by spending more time in Lydia’s company? It was one of the plethora of questions bouncing through his head.

“Sometimes you are so silly, Papa.” Again, she tugged at his arm. “Come. We have

pine boughs to collect.” She lowered her voice further. “And if you find mistletoe, you should definitely try to steal a kiss.”

He ignored the heat creeping up the back of his neck. “Thank you for the advice. I’ll take it under consideration.”

For the next hour or so, he followed Elsbeth and Lydia around, sawing boughs and fir limbs each time they pointed them out. The drivers were kept busy with the requests, and among the three of them, they gathered quite a bit. Then they moved on for some branches of holly, including the scarlet berries, and finally, the group went on the hunt for mistletoe.

The drivers laughed and joked with both Lydia and Elsbeth until the area rang with joviality and a spirit of camaraderie. Jackson stood back at one point while they threw snowballs at each other, and he couldn’t help but grin. Yes, it had been quite odd being stranded in the cottage with Lydia and her obvious demons, but being here made them all into a cohesive unit, almost like a family, and he was rather keen on that.

God, I’ve missed this so much.

It felt good and right, almost as if he’d slipped on a favorite glove, as if he were always meant to be here.

Until a snowball came sailing his way and smacked him right in the head, knocking off his beaver felt top hat.

“Come on, Papa! Fight back!” The taunt by his daughter was followed by a giggle.

He chuckled. “Well, then. War has just been declared.” Trading his axe for a snowball of his own, he hurled the cold wad in his daughter’s direction.

When it found its mark on her left shoulder, he laughed outright.

A rousing game ensued, and no one was immune to being tagged with snow with the exception of one of the drivers, who'd volunteered to climb a nearby oak tree, for he'd spied a sprig of mistletoe. By the time he gave a shout of acknowledgement in finding the parasitic plant, the snowball fight had died down enough that the novelty of it had worn off.

Lydia drifted close to the tree and tipped her head back to peer at the driver. "Be careful. I rather doubt we have enough supplies, or me enough skill, to patch up a broken limb."

"I'll wager we all believe you to have magical powers," Jackson said as he came abreast of her while dusting snow from his shoulders and the front of his greatcoat. "You have that ability, you see."

"Such gammon." But a blush stained her cheeks, over and above the redness already there from the cold. "I simply know how to talk with people."

"No, it's much more than that." He would have reached for her hand if they'd been alone, but as it was, Elsbeth had joined them, and Robert was waiting to help if his friend needed assistance in coming down from the tree. "There is something about you that makes folks want to know you better."

She snorted. "I'm sure I don't know what that is, and I certainly don't feel that back here, where my adult life began," she said in such a low voice, he doubted anyone except for himself heard it.

John sat atop a stout branch about fifteen feet up from the ground. "I found mistletoe, Your Lordship."

“I can see that. Thank you.” He gazed up at the man with a bemused grin. “Perhaps you can buss Robert’s cheek when you climb down.”

Before the driver could respond, Elsbeth jumped up and down as if she were a small child. “Don’t be silly, Papa! You should kiss me and Lydia. That’s the tradition. Kissing unmatched ladies beneath the mistletoe.”

Through it all, John dangled the sprig of mistletoe while wearing a huge grin.

Both Lydia and his daughter rested their gazes on Jackson.

With a sigh, he nodded. “I guess I don’t have a choice. Can’t buck tradition, hmm?” Then he positioned Elsbeth beneath the plant and bussed both of her cheeks. After that, he turned to Lydia. “Fancy a kiss, my dear?”

“I…”

Elsbeth jostled his arm. “Not on the cheek, Papa. That’s bad form.”

Both drivers chuckled.

Heat went up the back of Jackson’s neck. “All right.” Once more, he glanced at Lydia, who gave him a shy nod. “Since you are all instigators, I suppose you’ll want to bear witness to this.”

The three of them stared back with matching expressions of expectation.

Seeing no other choice, Jackson gently tugged Lydia into his arms. Her eyes sparkled with amusement, but there was an air of anticipation in her expression he couldn’t help but feel as well. Slowly, he lowered his head to hers and claimed her lips. As always, those soft pillows of flesh welcomed his, and when she laid a palm on his

chest, he had every intention to deepen the embrace, but at the last second remembered their audience. Stifling a groan of disappointment, he pulled away from her and released her.

“Does that satisfy the mistletoe requirements, Elsbeth?” he asked, but desire graveled his voice, and he rather hoped she didn’t notice.

“Yes!” His daughter clasped her hands together and grinned. “It was festive and romantic.” Then she took Lydia’s hand and tugged her away from the scene. “Come. I want to show you the pinecones I found, and a bit of dried leaves we might incorporate into a centerpiece for tonight’s supper.”

He glanced into the tree as John dropped the plant down to him. “So much for that kiss, hmm?”

The driver laughed. “Women are mysterious creatures, Your Lordship.”

“That they are.” And Lydia definitely fit that description. “Best gather the greenery, men. The ladies don’t appear to be waiting for us.”

“Of course not.” Robert chuckled. “Since the snow is fine and fluffy, if we have another day of sun, the roads shouldn’t be too bad to resume travel.”

“Yes, we’ll need to go when we can, for we’re two days out from our destination.” Yet a large part of him didn’t wish to leave, and much of that had to do with Lydia’s presence.

Once he tucked the mistletoe into a pocket of his greatcoat, he took up a load of the pine branches and began the trek back to the cottage. Ahead of him, his daughter and Lydia were pouring over the collection of forest treasures Elsbeth had found.

A breeze blew the light, fluffy snow from the branches of the trees, and when Lydia glanced upward at it, she grinned. The gesture completely transformed her face and for a moment, she looked years younger. The perpetual worry she carried vanished.

“Oh, Elsbeth, look. It is sort of snowing. Do you think you should perhaps try to catch the flakes on your tongue while you can?”

Jackson paused as the words cycled through his brain. How had she known that is what his daughter used to do with her mother? Perhaps the girl had told her.

“You’re right.” Elsbeth tipped up her head and stuck out her pink tongue. “Oh! I got one. You try it.”

As Lydia stuck out her own tongue, Jackson couldn’t help but smile. “I think I caught one too. Perhaps that means we’ll have good luck throughout the rest of the day.”

“I think so too.” Then the ladies continued.

Some distance behind them, he took in a shuddering breath and let it out as his heart trembled. In that moment, he lost a piece of it to Lydia, and it started a crumbling of the wall he’d subconsciously built around that organ. The fact that his daughter was apparently bonding with Lydia set him at ease. Was it a sign that he should seriously consider thinking of her as a potential second wife? As a new mother for his daughter, who could help guide her through the next few years as well as support her through her Come Out?

He didn’t know, but it was uppermost in his mind. The only way to know was to spend more time with her, and to do that, she would need to travel with them to his property in Scotland.

Briefly, he glanced into the skies. Send me a sign. Let me know that you would

support me perhaps marrying again and moving forward in this life.

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 11:32 am

When dancing, a lady should always portray herself in a meek and mild manner.

Later that evening

After dinner had concluded and the drivers had gone back out to the barn, Lydia slipped upstairs. Since some of her more expensive clothing had been stolen by her coach drivers, she had been forced to ferret through the trunks of garments in the attics, for she wanted to appear at least somewhat fancier tonight.

Changing outfits after dinner perhaps made her a silly goose, but she couldn't help it. Elsbeth wanted dancing lessons before retiring, and Lydia wished to wear a gown that would flare and swish about her ankles. Did it matter that the style was at least five years out of date or that the bust was slightly tighter than it had been when she'd worn it before? Absolutely not. It still made her feel attractive and perhaps it would catch the earl's eye.

Vain? Perhaps slightly, but she couldn't help it. He'd made an impression on her, made her feel wanted, somehow convinced her that she was important, that she wasn't merely a nobody from a small village near the Scottish border, born to middle to low class parents whom the ton knew nothing about.

In the earl, she unexpectedly found hope again when she'd been certain it had been lost. So she'd chosen a gown of cranberry taffeta with a fine white lawn overskirt that had been embroidered around the edges with holly berries and leaves.

Five years ago, she'd saved coin from selling eggs from her chickens and ducks. It was the third year of her ill-fated marriage, and though she was making plans—along

with her friend who ran the bakery in the village—she had decided to attend the Christmas dance in Ambleside by herself, for she'd wanted nothing more than to dance the night away, to enjoy the festivities, and basically eat, drink, and be merry.

Unfortunately, by the time the gown had been finished at the first of the month, her husband had grown more belligerent and unyielding. It had been imperative that she leave him and the area immediately, so she'd carefully folded the new gown and put it away in the attic, hoping that someday she might retrieve it.

Perhaps today was that day.

Without the aid of a maid, it was difficult to style her hair, but she managed it somehow. There weren't enough pins to make an elaborate creation, so she pulled her hair back into a loose chignon and secured it with the few she had. And because she felt almost giddy with the opportunity to finally wear the gown, she took a sprig of holly and pinned it as well as the berries just over her right ear. A quick glance into a cloudy mirror above her washbasin proved her finished, so she made her way down to the common room.

"Oh, Lydia!" Surprised approval threaded through Elsbeth's voice. "You are beautiful in that gown!" She sprang out of her chair and closed the distance between them. "Was this from the attic?"

"It was. I thought it appropriate for teaching you to dance, or at least refreshing the lessons you've already had."

"I adore how you think." The girl giggled. "Help me move some of the furniture out of the way so we have room to dance."

Lydia frowned. "Where is your father?"

The other girl frowned seconds before she shoved one of the chairs to the side of the space. “He said he was going to try and have a quick bath; he heated a few buckets of water on the fire, and I guess he found a wooden tub somewhere upstairs.”

Lucky. “It’s hardly big enough for an adult to recline in. He’d need to merely sit there with his knees bent.” Though her imagination danced in an effort to picture him nude and dripping water as he stood up... “Actually, it sounds lovely. I wonder if he would heat and haul water upstairs for me.”

“I certainly would.” Both she and Elsbeth turned at the sound of Jackson’s voice. Flutters filled her lower belly as she took in his freshly bathed appearance. “That’s not fair.”

“What isn’t?”

“How wonderful you look with limited wardrobe choices.” Lydia waved a hand to encompass his form. His still-damp dark hair had been combed, and good heavens, he smelled simply delicious, just like he had on the first day she’d met him. “I had to search out clothing five years old while here you are turned out as if you just entered a drawing room.”

“Well, that was a lovely compliment.” He winked. “I suppose men don’t need as many pieces of clothing as women, or else my valet packed my valise within an inch of its life. Though, I do miss having the choices currently contained in my trunks... in the other coach.”

“You are quite handsome tonight, Papa,” Elsbeth said as she crossed the space to buss his cheek. “Now, come dance with me as soon as we move the rest of the furniture.”

“As if I could ever deny you anything, poppet.” Then he glanced at Lydia, and his grin was slow and wide. “That gown is lovely, but seeing it on you is what makes it

truly beautiful.” He winked, which made Elsbeth giggle. “The holly in your hair is clever.”

“Thank you.” Heat filled her cheeks. “I wanted to be a bit more special since we shall be dancing.” But she managed a smile that stretched her cheeks. “It is not a gown in the latest style, but since it’s just us here, no one will know.” She met his gaze and wished to dive deep into the cool pools of his blue eyes. “Shall we begin? Or is it a fool’s gambit without music?”

“We don’t need music. Dancing is more a feeling.” Then he threw a look about the space where candles guttered on the mantel in tarnished brass holders and the fir boughs had been decorated with ribbons and dried fruit as well as tin bells. “Did you do this?” With a hand, he gestured to encompass all of it.

“I did, along with your daughter. She has quite the eye for handiwork and crafting.”

“When?”

Lydia shrugged. “We worked on it a bit before dinner and then finished it while you were having a bath. Afterward, I went to dress.”

“It’s wonderful, and I didn’t properly appreciate it until just now.” When he grinned, flutters loosed in her lower belly. “Well done, the both of you.”

Elsbeth smiled, and she seemed uncommonly happy. “It was fun. I’m glad for Lydia. She brought Christmas back to me. Perhaps she will to you, too.”

“That would be a feat.” The earl snorted. “The magic of Christmastide has been missing for far too long.”

Would he finally tell her a bit more about his wife? That remained to be seen.

“Well, shall we begin our dance?” Lydia hid her shaking hands in the folds of her gown. “Unless you want me to invite Robert and John inside?”

“I do not want to dance with those fellows,” Elsbeth said with a shudder. “They aren’t bad people but as dance partners?”

“I understand,” she said with a pat to the girl’s shoulder.

“Since it’s only the three of us, most of the sets won’t work with such a small number of participants. So, we will practice the Continental waltz.”

Elsbeth did a little bounce in place. “Imagine me in a ballroom performing a waltz with an elegant gentleman!”

A slight wince went over Jackson’s expression, gone at his next blink, but Lydia shared in the worry. It sometimes wasn’t the storybook romances girls read about.

“Yes, well, for tonight, we will only concentrate on the steps. When you go to finishing school next autumn, you will only need to enhance your skills.” He glanced at her. “Can you sing?”

“Ha!” She shook her head. “Only if you want to summon crows. It is not a talent I possess, sadly.”

The grin he flashed sent a wave of awareness over her skin. “Music is not needed, not while instruction is being had.”

Turning away on the excuse of making more space in the common room, her heartbeat raced. This man, with his own grief and his own secrets oddly had the capacity to heal her heart. Suddenly, she didn’t want that feeling of lightness and excitement to end. To her, he felt a bit like Christmas, with the warmth and goodwill,

the protection and generosity he'd already shown her.

And it had the power to change... everything.

For the next half hour, she watched with indulgence as the earl instructed his daughter on the steps of the waltz. Oh, he was so patient with her when she stumbled and stamped on his toes. And that grin of his had the power to turn her knees into the strength of cooked porridge. As they moved about the floor, the breadth of his shoulders provoked shivers of need down her spine. Was there anything more splendid than watching a handsome man dance with his daughter?

"Drat it!" The outburst came from Elsbeth as she wrenched out of his arms. "I just don't understand how to move my feet in conjunction with yours. My body simply doesn't flow as it's supposed to."

"Then let me show you in a different way," Jackson said with a glance to Lydia. "Perhaps you will learn better if you watch." With a grin that would prove devastating if she wasn't careful, he came her way with an outstretched hand. "Lady Lydia, do me the honor of dancing a set with me." He held out a hand to her and waited with bated breath for her answer.

Not in her wildest dreams did she ever see herself dancing with an earl. Shock tightened her chest. "Now?"

"Yes. How else can Elsbeth see the steps?" He wiggled his fingers. "As a headmistress, you do want your students to have the best of instruction, yes?"

So very charming. "I suppose that's true." She slipped her hand into his, and heated tingles went up to her elbow. "This is probably the only time I will indulge in dancing, so I might as well enjoy myself."

A tiny frown tugged at the corners of his sensual lips. "I can't fathom why. You are an earl's daughter as well as a headmistress. Moving within the ton is part of your life. Even more so if you need greater enrollment numbers."

Those damned lies that kept coming back to haunt her. Before she could respond, he tugged her into his arms and encouraged her to position her hands in the proper posture. "Perhaps."

"And if you would believe in yourself, you would set Town on its ear." He set them in motion while humming a few bars of a popular waltz. "Now Elsbeth, here is where you made your mistake. Dancing shouldn't be a chore; it should be like flying. With the right partner, you will feel as if your feet never touch the floor."

"You certainly have a talent for the waltz," Lydia said in a breathless voice.

"I wasn't joking when I said the right partner makes the difference," he said in a low voice as he met her gaze. While he continued to hum a few strains, he guided her through the first circuit of the room.

"Perhaps it does." Despite her reservations, despite trying to ignore the connection between them, she could no longer deny the fact that there was every possibility she was falling in love with this man. That was both terrifying and exciting.

Yet a man had steered her wrong before after he'd plied her with charm until she fell, and when she'd professed love, he'd turned horrid.

Was Jackson that sort?

As her skirts swirled about her ankles, her movements flowed with his as if her body was tied to his by an invisible string. The longer she peered into his eyes, the more she felt as if she were drowning in those blue pools, but there was no fear because he

would be there to rescue her, just as he'd always been this week.

"Elsbeth, do you think you might wish to try again?" But when she glanced at the spot where she'd last seen the girl, she wasn't there. In fact, Lydia was very much alone with the earl. "Where did she go?"

"Upstairs. A few moments ago." Jackson drew them to a halt.

"Yet you continued to dance with me?"

"Why not? Your eyes don't lie; you were enjoying yourself, and perhaps my daughter didn't want to intrude."

"On what? We were demonstrating the waltz."

"She is quite clever," he said in a low voice. "But now I can do this, which is what I've wanted since the mistletoe this afternoon." He caught her head between his palms and kissed her.

The sensation of falling, of tumbling, of flying assailed her as she fought the urge to melt into him. With each new meeting of their lips, with every touch of their tongues, the kiss grew more heated. That was how it always was for them. As she uttered a tiny moan, Lydia held onto his lapels, but she matched him kiss for kiss, and his hunger, his desire, fed her own. Oh, how she wanted this man! When he dared to cup her breasts, dared even more to worry her nipples through the fabric of her gown, shivers of need twisted down her spine. As if she were shameless, she layered herself against him, and as he tightened his arms around her, she thrilled.

"Jackson..." When her nipples hardened and she gasped, he chuckled. The sound tickled through her chest, but his daughter was upstairs and not even asleep. She put a hand to his chest and gave him a bit of a shove. "We shouldn't continue this, no

matter how much both of us want it.” The breathless quality of her words spoke to her need. “Elsbeth could come down.”

Perhaps I’m a bit mad after all. Widows had glorious freedom in society, and he was far too skilled in carnal endeavors to deflect those attentions.

“True.” Briefly, he rested his forehead against hers. When he blew out a breath of apparent frustration, his warm breath skated across her cheek. “Now that the storm is over, the roads will be passable soon. I would like you to come with Elsbeth and me to Scotland, spend the Christmastide holidays there.”

“What?” Surprise bounced through her chest. “This cottage was always my destination.”

“I know that, but I don’t like thinking of you here alone with your brother-in-law lurking about. You’d be stranded with no horse and no vehicle. No way to summon help.” He cupped her cheek then the back of her head, reeling her into his embrace once more. “I can’t let that happen. If anything were to befall you, I’d never forgive myself.” As if he couldn’t bear being parted from her, he kissed her, drank from her, told her without words what he truly wished to do to her if they had been alone.

Exactly mirroring her own thoughts.

“I couldn’t intrude on your family time.” Needing far more of him, she looped her arms about his shoulders and melted into him. When he walked her backward over the floor until a wall at her back prevented further movement, she shivered with anticipation. “You wished to take your daughter away to bond with her. My presence would hinder that.”

“You won’t be intruding. We’ve already spent a week together.” Every word he whispered brushed his lips against hers. “I think she adores you more than she’s let

on.”

Do you?

“And after the holidays?” Suddenly, she might want things she had no right to. They hadn’t spoken of feelings for each other or even the future. Everything they’d done had been firmly in the present.

“You can come back to London with us. Then we will talk and go from there.”

It would be all too easy to agree with his plans, to fall beneath his spell, to confess everything, but it might destroy what was building between them. But if her lies kept stretching and growing... “Oh, I...”

“I’m very persuasive, Lydia. If you don’t agree, I’ll simply keep trying.” Slowly, ever so slowly, he drew up her skirting, slipped a hand along her thigh to squeeze an arse cheek. “There is something between us; don’t let it dissolve because you might be frightened from your past.” When she squealed with surprise and need darkened his eyes, she sighed, brushed her lips along his. He kissed her tenderly but then released her seconds later. “Think about it, hmm?”

“I will. I promise.” Because he was far too great a temptation, she stepped away from him, but not before noting the impressive bulge at the front of his breeches. There was something to be said of knowing she could inflame this man so quickly. “I’m going to retire. It has been a rather busy day.”

“Of course.” The earl nodded but there was a grin playing at his lips that tugged an answering one from her. “Sleep well, Lydia.”

“You too, Jackson.” As if she wouldn’t lay in bed with her thoughts in a freefall in the dark, all due to this one man and his penchant for acting the knight in shining

armor.

What am I going to do?

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A lady should never deport themselves in a vulgar fashion.

December 23, 1817

Two hours before dawn

A dull thud from somewhere outside the cottage woke Jackson from a fitful dose. Ever since that dance with Lydia the evening before it had turned quite sensual, he'd been thinking about her in various degrees of undress. And that hadn't translated well to restorative slumber.

So when he heard a sound that shouldn't have been there, he was out of bed in a flash. As soon as she pulled on a pair of breeches and a loose shirt, he shoved his feet into his boots, and once they were pulled up, he left his bedchamber as quietly as he could. The two doors across the narrow corridor from his remained closed, and he didn't hear movement behind them. Hopefully, that meant the ladies still slept.

The stairs were more challenging, for some of the treads squeaked and squealed, but he managed well enough without making a huge racket. Though the interior of the cottage was still dark and filled with murky shadows, he investigated the few rooms on the lower level. The fire in the common room hearth had burned to embers and didn't give off much illumination.

Then the thud and thump came again, as if someone were trying to gain access through the door in the kitchen and dining room.

He crept into that area then was obliged to tamp on an exhalation when the door latch

rattled, and slowly, so damned slowly, the locking mechanism turned—the bloody intruder had a key! The second the door was pushed inward, Jackson pounced. The momentum as he plowed into the other man knocked them both backward into the garden, and he hoped to hell the commotion didn't wake the others.

“Why the devil are you here?” he demanded of the intruder while trying to straddle the man's middle so he could land him a facer.

“Nothing you need to know about, mate.” A heavy Scottish burr wove through his voice. He shoved Jackson off his body then scrambled to his feet. “I want the woman.”

Ah, then he'd go ahead and tell me his intentions anyway. Nodcock.

Scrambling upright, Jackson continued to poke and prod him away from the house. It was bracingly cold in the darkness, but he put that to the back of his mind, for his first thought was to defend the cottage against the threat. At least they were in the rear of the garden and well away from the side where the ladies still slept.

“Too damned bad. She isn't yours.” When he threw out a punch, which connected with the man's jaw and shoved him further into the garden. “You aren't wanted here.”

“This isn't your property. It's mine.” The man came barreling back and threw a punch of his own.

Pain exploded through Jackson's midsection as the breath whooshed from him. With a hand to his stomach, he continued advancing on his opponent. “I beg to differ. It belongs to the lady, left to her from her bounder of a husband.” This time when he swung out a fist, it connected with the other man's beefy shoulder, spinning him about.

The man stumbled back toward where he stood. “Blackguard!” He rushed, then, and when he plowed into Jackson, they both once more went flying and landed hard on the snow-covered ground. “My arse of a brother gave Bess to me, and I won her in a card game, besides.”

What the devil was this man on about? And who the deuce was Bess? “Gammon. I’ve heard her story.”

“Then she’s a liar, friend. Clever in the head, but I have always lusted after her. She’s got an air about her, manners and attitude that make her better than other women around. Too good for me brother, for sure, but I’ll beat that out of her.” He scrambled into an upright position once more then aimed a kick at Jackson’s ribcage.

Luckily, he rolled away and to his feet. “Touch her and die.”

“She don’t want a nob like you, and there ain’t no room for haughtiness ‘round here. Scots don’t take kindly to their womenfolk wanting to be English, to act like English. She’ll learn soon enough.”

“Absolutely not. She is under my protection.” Without warning, Jackson punched him in the face hard enough to break the bloke’s nose. “I’m half Scottish, you lout, and there is nothing wrong with her.”

His opponent spat blood from his mouth then wiped his streaming nose on the sleeve of his greatcoat. “Ah she’s whored herself out to you, hmm?”

Heat went up the back of his neck. What they had between them was far more special than such a derogatory term. “No, I—”

“Then I’ll beat you too for trying to steal my soon-to-be wife.”

“Like hell you will.” With a low growl, Jackson threw himself at the intruder. Though the other man delivered a powerful punch to his gut, he came back with a return right hook to the man’s jaw that had him stumbling backward. “If you ever come around here again, I will shoot you. In the event you don’t understand, I will aim between your eyes, and it will be a kill shot.” He shoved at the man’s chest even as pain throbbed through his own body. “Now go. I’m not of a mind for murder this night.”

“Bess is mine by rights. I won her. Not you.” He retreated further into the shadows. “I’ll be back, and next time I’ll bring my pistol.”

“If you do, I’ll meet you with mine.” Not that he had one in the sparse luggage he’d brought with him to the cottage, but he would borrow one from Robert. “This will be the last time you’ll walk away from this property. I promise you that.” He waited until the intruder limped away before going back inside the cottage.

One thing was abundantly certain: Lydia could not stay here alone. He wouldn’t allow it, not as a gentleman, not as a man who was coming to have feelings for her, and it all confused the hell out of him.

After he’d closed the door behind him, he made certain to lock it and remove the key from the mechanism. If the bugger wished to return, he would need to break in again, but hopefully they would all be gone before that happened.

As he stood listening in the quiet darkness, he breathed a sigh of relief, for there was no movement in the cottage. The contretemps in the garden didn’t wake the ladies.

“Jackson.”

He frowned at the whisper, for he had come from the stillroom where he’d been forced to board up the broken window glass from the last time the bouncer had

called. Slowly, he moved into that room, his gaze fell upon Lydia's form that was much like a ghost in the gloom. Clad in her thin nightdress, she resembled that sort of wraith, especially with her dark hair down and wild about her back.

"What are you doing here?"

"I heard noises and came to investigate." She paced back and forth well away from the window where cool air seeped in, her bare feet making no sound on the hardwood.

"There was an intruder, your brother-in-law. I gave him a beating and ran him off with a warning." His shrug reminded him of everywhere he hurt. "Where is Elsbeth?"

"Still sleeping. I checked on her before I came down."

He nodded. "Thank goodness she is a heavy sleeper and won't rise until a few hours after sunrise." Then he stared at her again through the darkness and shadows, grateful for another living body with him after what had just happened. "God, you're beautiful, an angel in the dark." It didn't matter it was a nodcock thing to say, especially now; he couldn't help it. And he was all the more grateful he'd run the intruder off. There was no way he would allow her to return to this life. "Lydia, I..."

With a muffled cry, she closed the distance between them. "Are you hurt?"

Selfishly, he enjoyed her worry, but he shrugged, wincing. "I've gone through worse. And recently, for you."

Soft laughter echoed in his ears. "You poor thing." Those whispered words, coupled with the glance of her fingertips along the side of his face sent shivers of arousal along his shaft. "You shouldn't have done that."

“What, defend your honor? The louse thinks he has the right to marry you because his brother said he could.” He kept his own counsel about the name the man used to refer to her. That could come later.

“I would rather die.” A shiver racked her body, which gave him a glimpse of her hardened nipples against the fabric of her nightdress.

“Which is why I cleaned his clock.” Needing to touch her, assure himself he’d done the right thing, Jackson tugged on a lock of her hair, briefly encouraged it to curl around his forefinger. “At least I didn’t lose a jacket to the fight. Just the shirt and breeches, and in the event you wondered, the blood is his. I broke his nose.” He couldn’t keep the smug pride from his voice.

“You are a good man.” Gently, she embraced him, chuckling when he groaned, and she kissed him everywhere in an apparent bid to search out all his injuries. Then she retrieved a wet rag and cleaned his bloody cuts.

“Careful. I fought off an intruder for you.” Would she eventually confess to the rest of whatever she hid from him? Did it matter?

“I apologize, but I’m trying to catalogue your injuries,” she said while nipping at the underside of his jaw. Somehow, he wasn’t certain how, she relieved him of his shirt, and as her fingertips glanced over his skin, he gasped, and his muscles went taut. “You are going to be full of bruises by evening.”

“A small price to pay, surely.” Jackson couldn’t help it. He tugged her into his arms, kissed her soundly because she was there, and she clearly required his protection. Need pulsed through his shaft, and the arousal pressed painfully against the front of his breeches. “Whatever your husband was, he apparently was rubbish at gambling. He lost you in a game of cards to his brother.”

“I want no part of his family nor his property,” she said between kisses as she caressed her hands over his chest and shoulders. “It needs to be sold so that whole sordid time can be consigned to the past.”

“If you wish it, I can help you, engage my man-of-affairs on your behalf if you don’t have your own.” He cleared his throat in an effort to dislodge the ball of emotion stuck there. “I’m happy to help.”

“I would appreciate that. It grows tiresome taking care of everything by myself,” she said in a soft voice as she laid a palm on his chest. “You truly delight in rescuing me. Why is that?”

“Elsbeth says I like helping broken people, enjoy collecting broken things.” Her lips were so soft, so welcoming. “But I have never met a woman who needs rescuing as much as you do.” If he were honest, he would continue to do that for as long as she would let him.

“I hope you find what you are looking for soon; I believe you are hiding in your causes.” She raised her gaze to his. “But then, we are all hiding to some degree.”

“Perhaps.” The longer he was with her, the more that elusive thing was coming into focus. The heat from that innocent touch sent a wave of awareness over him that wrenched him from the musings.

“All of that to say, I’m glad you weren’t hurt worse than you were.” She smoothed her hand over the expanse of his chest, and when she came to one of his nipples, Lydia teased it into a hard bud by flicking it with a fingernail.

Immediate reaction streaked through his veins for that deliberate exploration had caught him unawares. Tiny fires erupted in his blood. Interest shivered through his shaft as he remembered how her lush curves had felt nestled against his body when

they'd come together a couple of nights prior.

"Lydia, I want..."

"So do I," she said in a barely there whisper as she walked her fingers down his torso and then after a slight pause and a trace of confusion in her eyes, she proceeded to brush those fingers over his hard member. "Let me do something for you." Seconds later, she dropped to her knees in front of him.

"But the glass from the other night..."

"Hush, Greystone, I swept up the worst of it, and I will be careful." With fingers that trembled, she slowly worked each button from its hole of his frontfalls and then encouraged the placket down. When his engorged shaft sprang out, she gasped. "You are so lovely and large. I wasn't able to see you like this the other night but I felt it."

Amused but curious, Jackson remained as still as he could. If she wished to explore, he would let her, for how else would she learn or become comfortable with him?

"Does that mean you were pleased?"

"Oh, yes." She frowned at his shaft, and the intense scrutiny only made him harder. Tentatively, cautiously, she traced a fingertip along the side of his member. "Shall I proceed?"

The light touch paired with her tart mouth and inquisitive nature made her irresistible. "Only if you wish it." For a few seconds, he watched her through the dark and shadows. There was something oddly sacred even if the pending act was directly the opposite.

"Apologies if I'm rubbish at this. I have only done it once." She wrapped her hand about his stiffening length, but it was her words that made him more randy than he'd

been in a while. “Because my husband... demanded it of me.”

God, he wanted to kill that bugger all over it. “You don’t need to service me like this. I’d rather we—”

“I need to, to banish him and reclaim more of myself.” Then she held him more firmly and drew her curled fingers up and down his shaft.

Bloody hell. He sucked in a sharp breath, for her fumbling strokes and caresses had awareness and need shivering down his spine faster than the touch of a more experienced woman. “Let me show you.” Gently, so she wouldn’t think he tried to take control, he settled his hand over hers, guided her in how to hold his length to maximum advantage. “Go slowly. These things don’t respond well to rough handling.”

After a few minutes of experimentation, a faint smile curved her lips. “It helps that you are firmer and thicker than Duncan was. He drank far too much for all of that.” Soon she was stroking his flesh as if she’d been doing it all her life. Up and down her fingers went, and at the tip, she gently twisted her wrist and flexed her fingers that had heated reaction streaking through his member and into his stones.

Need tingled in his stones, but just when he suggested she stop, the cheeky woman cupped them in her other hand, squeezed them with a firm insistence that had his eyes ready to cross.

“Should I go further?” she breathed as she glanced up at him with shining eyes in the shadows.

“Only if you are enjoying this as well,” he managed to say through a tight throat.

“Good.” With a husky chuckle, she leaned forward and closed her kiss-swollen lips

around the head of his shaft.

Damnation!

Jackson's whole body jerked as if it had come awake from a shock. She giggled, and the vibrations buzzed around his length, enhancing the exquisite torture she'd already given him. Still holding his stones in her hand, Lydia moved closer to him and slowly, so damn slowly he thought he might die, she took his member into her mouth as far as he could go until his tip hit the back of her throat.

Then, she swallowed, and the contracting muscles gently squeezed his prick. He nearly shot his wad right there but tried to center his thoughts on something else.

Anything else.

Unfortunately, nothing worked.

"Lydia..."

She drew off his shaft with a slight pop and another giggle. "Hmm?" When she released his stones, and he knew a moment's relief, but it was short-lived, for she slipped that hand around the back of his thigh and took him once more into the warm cavern of her mouth.

"I..." His thoughts scattered. In seconds, he was lost in the wonder that was this woman who apparently reveled in her inexperience, this woman who pulled secrets around herself like a cloak, as she proceeded to suck him off.

It took her a bit to find a rhythm, but once she did, he was doomed. As he remained helpless in her hold, she worked him over with both her hand and her mouth. Where the devil had she learned that thing with her tongue? How she swirled it beneath the

head of his shaft, how she tickled his length with said tongue and teeth? Yet she was clever enough to think it up all on her own.

There was no more thinking after that. With a groan, he buried his hands in her soft hair, tangled his fingers in those tresses and because he couldn't help it, needed relief, Jackson thrust gently into her mouth.

For one fleeting moment, she paused and confusion once more flashed in her eyes. Had her husband never done that either? Then she accepted the new addition, and her fingers delved tighter into the flesh of his thigh. The faster and deeper he stroked, the more frantic she worked him over, and the sight of her dark head bobbing on his shaft was enough to hurtle him toward the point of no return.

“Bloody hell. Lydia, stop.” Warning tingled through his stones. His muscles bunched and stiffened.

She pulled off him with a frown. “At least let me finish you with my hands. I want to give you the same pleasure you did to me that night you put your mouth on me.”

How could he forget? It was seared into his brain. With a quick shake of his head, he tugged up into a standing position rather more roughly than he'd anticipated. “I'd rather we come together, but remember not to scream. Elsbeth shouldn't know what her depraved father is doing.”

“You are hardly depraved, Jackson. Healthy male with a carnal appetite, more truthfully.”

Was it any wonder he was coming to adore her? Beyond that, he wanted her to know that she was his. That he would do anything for her, despite her continued secrets.

Or lies.

Once more, he took her into his embrace, and he kissed her so forcefully they crashed against the wall with her snugly trapped between him and it. Damn if she didn't feel good—right—in his arms, as if she alone could prove the balm he'd needed for quite some time since he lost his wife. As if he'd finally found the missing part of himself.

He couldn't have enough.

Jackson kissed her, drank from her again and again, dragged his lips along the silky side of her throat while she clung to his shoulders. Too far gone and nearly at that edge, he yanked down the bodice of her nightdress, and when the perfect globes of her breasts were bared, he took one in hand while urging the nipple of the other into his mouth.

“Oh.” A shuddering sigh escaped her. She arched her back, putting herself more securely into his care. “Jackson, I...” Her words were lost to a moan as he pleased those pebbled tips with tongue and teeth and fingers.

“I need more of you,” he whispered against the crook of her shoulder as he slid a hand down her side and then gathered handfuls of her skirting.

“Please. I have wanted another round with you since the first one,” she responded in an equally soft and throaty voice. “I can't seem to evict you from my mind.”

“Dear God how I understand that sentiment.” He growled and kissed her again, shared breath with her, wanted to show his possession so she would be more receptive to traveling to Scotland with him and Elsbeth. Perhaps more. When he'd bunched the fabric of her skirting between them, he eased his hands beneath the cotton lawn to clutch the rounded curves of her buttocks. A surprised squeal came from her, and the sound made him grin. Tempting, indeed, even if he'd already claimed her a couple of times in different ways.

He still desperately craved her. “Tell me you want me, Lydia. I need to hear the words.” Already, his prick pulsed with pain-tipped pleasure. He’d explode soon and embarrass himself if she declined.

But the damned woman looked up at him with passion-drugged eyes and kiss-swollen lips, and he knew . Beyond everything that made sense, she held a place in his future, but he didn’t know how just now. The same need etched upon her features fired through his blood. “I do want you. Right now, in this moment, because you can’t help it. Because you’re out of your mind with desire for me.”

“I won’t deny it.” Urgency pulsed through his erect shaft. “What are you doing to me?” The whisper was barely audible. He encouraged one of her legs up, and as she hooked it around his hip, the tip of his hardened shaft brushed against her center. “Not even in the beginnings of my marriage was I as full of need and lust as I am with you right now.”

It was a puzzle to be sure.

“People are different; women are different.” She looped her arms around his shoulders and her lips glanced along the underside of his jaw. Her fingers at his nape encouraged him with slight pressure, and she sought his lips, lightly nipping the bottom one.

Oh, God.

That little gesture nearly sent him over. With one flex of his hips, he penetrated her body, buried his shaft deep in her warmth, and the breath they shared turned into a blended moan. “You feel so good, tight.” And damn if she wasn’t already so wet. “Better than the last time, I think.”

Never had anything been so wonderfully right or refreshing. She was beautiful in that

moment, when she had the world at her feet—him at her bidding—with pleasure mirrored in her eyes, and her lips slightly parted.

“I adore this moment.” She wriggled her hips to better accommodate his girth, and that movement nearly became his ruination. “Let me feel you moving inside me, Jackson. Oddly enough, I’ve wanted nothing else since I met you.”

Then she’d felt that inexplicable pull as well.

“How do you always know what to say and have it mirror my thoughts?”

Then there were no more words, for he couldn’t spare the energy. He dug his fingers into the soft flesh of her thigh, and as need raced down his spine and tingled through his stones, he pulled out of her lush body merely for the heady rush that thrusting into her honeyed heat brought.

Over and over, he stroked into her, taking, claiming, fusing... possibly loving. There was no doubt that he was lost in the glory that was Lydia, the woman he’d rescued from certain death on that muddied road, the woman who remained a mystery to him, the woman he desperately wanted inside and out if only she would trust him with her truth. The deeper he went, the more frantic and intense his thrusts became.

Her eyes shuttered. Twin spots of high color stained her cheeks. She met his movements as best she could as they danced in a frantic, fevered rhythm. A few tendrils of hair tumbled from their pins. She burrowed her fingernails into his shoulders, and he welcomed the prick of pain, for it kept him as focused as he could be while losing himself in her bliss. When she encouraged him closer to her with her heel at the small of his back, his hold on control snapped.

He pushed with more fervor. The need to claim her, to show her she was his, became greater than everything else. “Tell me you’re close.” His words were raw, ragged,

propelled into being by emotions he refused to acknowledge.

“Yes, nearly there.” She restlessly tossed her head while her inner muscles fluttered around his shaft, ushering in the beginning of the end. “Touch me.”

“Gladly.” Nearly gone, Jackson clenched his jaw, held back the urge to finish in order to slide a hand between their bodies. When he found the slippery, swollen button at her center, he rubbed his fingers over it with varying degrees of friction.

“Yes...” Lydia’s eyes rolled back in her head. The movement of her hips crashing into his left him breathless and buried him ever deeper. He hissed out a warning. “I... I... Oh, Jackson!” The half-stifled cry startled them both, but there was nothing for it. If his daughter came to investigate, they would surely be embarrassed and found out.

As she fell into that release, he renewed his hold on her and gave himself over to finishing in spectacular fashion. His strokes were frantic and hard, so damned deep, and all too soon hot sensation raced through his stones and shaft. He pumped for all he was worth, hoping she’d reach bliss, and when her body stiffened and she clutched at him with pleasure in her eyes, he grinned and claimed her mouth, taking her cry of completion into himself.

Release crashed over him, through him, roaring along every nerve ending like a voracious beast—changing him. Again and again, he pumped into her contracting passage even as his prick pulsed and jumped. For long seconds, he lost himself to the act of spending. Once his body had ceased the mad torment, he held her close, keeping her safe between himself and the wall, willing her to realize he would always protect her.

No matter what.

As his heartbeat returned to a normal pace and his breathing evened, he pulled

slightly back from her to peer into her face. A pink flush had overtaken her chest and cheeks, and when he would have spoken, she smiled, and he swore that gesture could light darkness.

“What?”

She shrugged and slowly let her leg fall back into place. “This, you and I... What we enjoy together?” Her huff of breath warmed his chin. “It’s almost magical, unexplainable. I’m not sure it can possibly be real after the horror of my marriage.”

Was there ever a more endearing woman? “Perhaps that is the power of Christmastide. Or perhaps it is fate taking a hand?”

“How could we know? Fate hasn’t exactly worked in my favor or yours in our previous lives.”

“Don’t overthink it, sweeting.” Bloody hell. Would she notice his slip? He hadn’t planned to use the endearment so soon, not until he was very certain. “Whatever it is, we are in the midst of its grip. Do we ride out the wave or ignore what might happen?” At the back of his mind, she knew she would be the perfect countess. Her status and his would blend perfectly.

“I’ll admit, part of me is curious.”

“Good.” He kissed her, slowly and deeply, then set her away from him a bit. “Does this mean you will travel to Scotland with Elsbeth and me?”

“Jackson, I don’t...” She frowned as she put her nightdress to rights.

“Think it over. We will talk again at breakfast.” When she nodded, he stuffed his flaccid length into his breeches and then did up the buttons. “Go upstairs and try to

get back to sleep. I'm going to go outside and check the immediate area one last time before I do the same."

Tears welled in her eyes, making them overly bright. "I don't know what I did in the whole of my sordid past to warrant finding you—a hero I never could imagine existing outside of a story book—but I'm glad for it." With an awkward wave, she hurried from the room.

When the sound of her bare feet on the stair treads reached his ears, Jackson pressed a hand to his chest where his heart squeezed, for another piece of it flew into her keeping.

There was no sense in denying it to himself... he was falling, tumbling, sliding down that slope into love with her, and he didn't mind at all.

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 11:32 am

A lady should never dissemble and should be honest in all aspects of her life.

December 23, 1817

Lydia was rather late in rising that morning, for obvious reasons, but when she did wake, she spent more than a few moments luxuriating in her bed before starting the day. Her body still tingled when she remembered her steamy session with the earl last night, and her mind was perhaps foolishly building castles in the air.

Come back to earth, Lydia. He is not for you beyond the folly of this trip.

By the time she'd finished making porridge for all of them, Elsbeth had wandered downstairs, and Jackson had come in from outside where he'd gathered yet another armful of split wood for the fireplace.

"Good morning," she greeted as she put a bowl down at the table for the girl. "Did you sleep well?" As far as Lydia knew, Elsbeth didn't stir, but then, she had been quite distracted by the delicious carnal endeavors of the earl.

"Yes." She shrugged as she slipped into a chair at the table. "I thought I heard something outside at some point, but when I looked out the window, there was nothing there and the snow was pristine, so I went back to sleep."

After Jackson deposited the logs in the common room, he returned to the dining room, taking off his greatcoat as he went. "As a matter of fact, there was a commotion outside last night," he said as he hung the coat on a wooden peg on the wall. "An intruder attempted to break into the house again, but I dealt with him

accordingly. Sent him off with a few punches.”

Elsbeth gasped. “Papa, you look a fright!” When she would have pushed away from the table, he waved her back into her chair. “Are you hurt?”

“Cuts and bruises, thankfully.” As he sat at the chair he’d claimed as his since they’d been at Thistle Cottage, he shared a glance with Lydia. “After I ran him off, I cleaned up in the stillroom. Later, I came upstairs for bed.”

In silence, she set a bowl of porridge in front of him. “Eat while it’s still hot. I’ve already brought the drivers their breakfast before the two of you came down.”

“Thank you.” As he picked up a spoon, his eyes sparkled. “Looks to be a beautiful day. The sun isn’t exactly out, but at least it’s not snowing or raining.”

With her chest tight, Lydia turned back to the stove. “I suppose the two of you will head out for the road today?”

Slowly, the earl nodded. “When I was out retrieving wood, I discussed the possibility with Robert and John. They’re going to walk down the lane and see about the conditions. If favorable, Elsbeth and I will leave around noon.”

After everything they’d shared together last night, done together, he would just walk out of her life without warning? “Best do what you can not to miss the pause in the weather.” An ache had set up around her heart, and she wanted to gasp from the pain, but instead, she tamped down on it, stuffed it down where she hid all her other emotions, all the lies she’d had to tell in order to gloss over her pathetic life.

He cleared his throat. The faint clink of a spoon against the side of ceramic bowl seemed overly loud in the silence. “Since the intruder tried again to come inside last night, the best course of action is to have you accompany us to my Scotland property.

For your own safety.”

“But...” They had already had this conversation last night between kisses and caresses. When she turned to face the two people at the table, the only two people in her world that had inadvertently become her family, her chin trembled. “This cottage is part of my past.”

“And a barrier to stepping into your future, unless I miss my guess?” One of his dark eyebrows rose in question as he and his daughter continued to eat their porridge. “Leave it behind, Lydia. No one will be able to hurt you once you walk away and never return.”

As I should have done before now. I should have stayed away.

But if that had happened, she would never have met either of them. “I suppose the woman I was when I lived here no longer exists,” she said in a low voice.

“Indeed.” Jackson nodded. “All the more reason to shake the dust of this place from your boot soles and come with us.”

“What do you think, Elsbeth?” If the young lady didn’t agree to their continued presence together, she wouldn’t go. “Should I cast my lot with you through the Christmastide holidays?” She tried to inject a note of cheerfulness into her voice, but suspected she failed miserably.

The girl bounced her gaze between Lydia and her father. Finally, she sighed and gave her a grin that didn’t reach her eyes. “It is two days until Christmas, and no one should be alone for that sacred day.” She nodded. “Come. I’ll have someone to talk to beside Papa. At least once we arrive, I won’t need to eat porridge for breakfast. I loathe it.”

Lydia smiled. "I'm afraid I don't have the proper clothing to mingle amidst members of the beau monde that will no doubt be a part of your holidays." She cleared her throat lest they ask more questions. "Due to my luggage being stolen."

"When we arrive at the hunting lodge, we can plan a shopping party into Carlisle to replace what you need." Jackson's grin was quite different than his daughter's, for there was pleasure in his expression, and his eyes twinkled with anticipation. "For what it's worth, I detest porridge as well, and have quite missed hamsteak and eggs. However, I deeply appreciate the efforts you have gone through to keep both of us and the drivers alive."

"As do I," Elsbeth said as she rose to her feet. "Cooking is an impressive skill for the daughter of an earl. I'm afraid I don't even know who works in our kitchens or even how to boil water in a kettle."

For long moments, Lydia rested her gaze on the young lady. "Where did you go yesterday when we were dancing?"

A blush stained Elsbeth's cheeks. "Oh, uh, you and Papa seemed quite... content with each other, and when it began to feel awkward with me being there, I went upstairs to read."

So the girl must have an inkling of the attraction between them. "I'm sorry we made you feel unwanted."

"Oh, it wasn't that. I figured you could do with some time alone, and I wasn't of a mind for dancing anyway. There is plenty of time for all that." Then she came over, scooped up one of Lydia's hands, and briefly rested against her cheek. "I'm going to pack my things. Shall I pack yours as well?"

She nodded. "I would appreciate that. There isn't much, I'm afraid." Once left alone

with the earl, she brought her teacup to the table and sat in one of the chairs. “You don’t need to continue protecting me.”

“I do. You don’t belong here, and I’m certainly not going to hand you off to that oaf who seems to think you’ll marry him.” Exchanging his spoon for a teacup, he sighed. “Honestly, I don’t think our story is done being written; there are still secrets to discover,” he added in a low voice.

“Stories not designed to inspire, surely.” The longer she went without confessing the full truth to him, the more the ache around her heart grew. Once everything came out, the odd sort of bubble surrounding them would burst, and he would send her home on a post chaise as soon as he could arrange a ticket.

“That depends. Inspiration can come from anywhere, and perhaps someone else can learn from your mistakes.” He held up a hand when she would have retorted. “Before you fly into the boughs, consider this. You married your husband because you were truly convinced you loved him. There is no fault there, but you have a cautionary tale to tell your students and empower them to use their own judgment over the urge to marry.”

Heat seeped into her cheeks. “They don’t know my history.”

Shock went through his expression, but he nodded. “I suppose you couldn’t say that out of necessity and fear.”

“Yes.”

“I’m still of a mind that it could only help.”

She dropped her gaze to her teacup. “I’m not that brave.”

For long moments, he kept his own counsel. Then he stirred. “I met my wife in a ballroom. She was the daughter of a viscount; our fathers were friends. Though I knew the union would be a sound investment and venture, I was genuinely fond of her. Mary was the embodiment of what a daughter of the beau monde should be.”

“You were well-matched.” Of course his wife would be everything Lydia was not.

“Yes.” He nodded. “After a six-month engagement, we were married. Quite young, the both of us, but I would be an earl someday and I wanted my family life sorted by then.” A frown tugged at the corners of his mouth. “As I said before, Elsbeth came along rather sooner in our marriage than we’d anticipated, but she was a celebrated addition. Mary and I always thought we would grow old together, and that our family was complete at three. But then the surprise pregnancy came about.”

“The beginning of the end,” she whispered, for him talking about his loss made hers rush to the forefront of her mind.

“A bit.” Moisture gathered in his eyes. He pressed his lips together as he fought against the emotions. “When they both died, I agonized over losing them. That hope and anticipation I’d had of expanding my family was suddenly gone, as was the only person I could talk to about the grief and anger I was feeling.”

“That must have been a horrible time for you. Left with a young daughter and your life in upheaval. Certainly not the future you had in mind.” Tears welled in her eyes from hearing and seeing his emotions. “I understand that all too well, and when faced with that, you have no idea where to turn.”

“Exactly, and for a long time, I didn’t think I would ever be ready to move forward, to live again and enjoy my life.” When he met her gaze, the intensity in his eyes had returned, and she nearly fell into those sapphire pools. “Until recently.”

“Oh?” Heat went through her cheeks once more. “Don’t flatter me and say it is because of me.”

“It isn’t flattery if it’s true.” When he laid a hand over hers and then he flipped it over to caress his fingers along the inside of her wrist, shivers of need twisted down her spine. “I fully believe it’s time for something new, to spend time with someone completely different.”

“I...” Confusion came over her and her pulse accelerated. What was he trying to convey?

He nodded. “You have given me back a zest for life. This week has chased away some of my ennui, has caused me to look at... everything differently, and I have found myself a bit addicted.”

Oh, heavens.

That remembered feeling of falling in love assailed her, and for a few seconds, she let herself revel in that before responding to his statement. “Because of my husband and what he became—or what he always was and then chose to show me his real self—I worry about how men often trick women with charm and lies. It’s why I’ve been reluctant to marry again. I’m not certain I could survive if a new union turned horrid as well.” Slowly, she shook her head, and when she tried to pull her hand away from his, he gently tightened his grip. “These are things I try to have my teachers instill into our girls at the school. Those young ladies need to be aware and taught not to settle and certainly not to jump at the first man who perhaps says pretty things to them.”

“Perhaps ten years ago, I would say you were wrong and perhaps jaded, but now? As a father to a young woman who will make her Come Out in three years? I very much hope that someone will teach her discernment and the ability to think for herself.”

Some of the color leached from his face. “I worry over who she might eventually choose to marry. My daughter is already learning so much from you.”

“Despite my issues with trust, I firmly believe that fate puts the people in our paths we need to meet, whether to teach us a lesson or serve as a warning.” Daring much, she held his hand tighter. “The difficult thing is to puzzle out which.”

“Sometimes it is making that differential that is the most terrifying thing, for that leaves room for mistakes.” The longer he held her gaze, the more Lydia tumbled into the cool pools of his eyes. He dropped his voice. “In the event you wondered, you are not a mistake.”

Unexpectedly, a sob rose in her throat, and she stifled it the best she could. “Do you know how lovely it is to hear that? After my husband showed his true personality, all he ever told me was that I had no brain, that I didn’t know how to do anything right, that he’d made a mistake in marrying me.”

Jackson huffed. “That means he probably thought your father’s coin would somehow find its way to him if he hung on long enough... until you left.”

“I’m not so sure about that.” Tears welled in her eyes, because that wasn’t the truth at all, and this wonderful man deserved honesty from her. But how could she do that now when the time had passed for her to reveal all naturally? He would surely despise her if she said something at this late date after everything they had done together, after everything they meant to each other.

Or were coming to.

“Don’t ask me how I know, but everything will come out right as rain.” Jackson pushed out of his chair, came around to her side of the table, and tugged Lydia to her feet. “We have all been through much these past several years. Isn’t it time that we

had something to look forward to as well as the Christmastide holidays?”

“Yes, but there is so much you don’t know...”

“It doesn’t matter. I know enough to trust you.” When he pulled her into the welcoming shelter of his arms, Lydia uttered a soft cry and let him simply hold her. “And I hope you know me well enough that you can trust me too.”

They stood like that for a long time before Elsbeth came down.

“Lydia, are you well?”

She sprang apart from the earl as if he were a fire and burned her. “Yes, of course.” When she met Lydia’s gaze, cold disappointment went through her belly. Though she was happy Jackson shared his feelings, the look behind Elsbeth’s expression gave her pause. Surely the girl wasn’t jealous of her? She had been the one pushing Lydia at the earl. “Your father and I were merely sharing stories of grief. I became a watering pot... he thought to comfort me.”

“Ah.” But Elsbeth didn’t appear convinced. “I just thought you both would like to know I’ve packed my things and Lydia’s.”

“Thank you.” Adolescent girls were unstable at times, and their moods mercurial. She would need to go carefully with Elsbeth until the mood shifted once more. “Well, I’m going to put the cottage to rights. No sense in leaving a mess for someone else to clean later.”

“You are quite thoughtful.” Jackson then moved toward his daughter. “And thank you for being helpful. I’ll just pack my things then I’ll inform the drivers of our wish to depart.”

Laughing Crane Inn

Four hours north

It had been slow going due to the road conditions, but as long as the weather held, they should be able to travel a full day tomorrow and nearly gain the earl's hunting box. During the trip, Elsbeth had remained quiet and sullen. She kept her gaze trained on the window, when she wasn't sleeping, or at least pretending to do so. The earl had read. Conversation between them had been sporadic, but she'd welcomed the quiet.

There was much to think about.

Not long after arriving, Lydia hadn't been one for conversation or dinner. Since it had been an emotional day, she went directly up to their private room.

Something had changed, something subtle she couldn't quite put her finger upon, but it left her with foreboding sitting cold in her belly. Perhaps tomorrow everything would come back to what had been considered normal. Until then, she would try not to worry.

Regardless, she was asleep by the time either of them came in.

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Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 11:32 am

A lady should never show her emotions in mixed company. It is rather vulgar.

December 24, 1817

Christmas Eve

Red Fox Inn

Thirty miles south and west of Carlisle

Jackson hid a yawn behind taking a sip of brandy.

They'd arrived at the posting inn in good time. There was only perhaps three more hours of traveling until arriving at his hunting box, but he didn't want to push the horseflesh tonight. Besides, it was Christmas Eve, and everyone deserved to participate in some sort of festivities.

He sat at a round oak table near one of the large hearths in the common room, which was surprisingly crowded. Perhaps everyone wanted to mingle with their fellow man on this Christmas Eve night, or perhaps they just wanted to imbibe and relax away their aches and pains from being on the road. Whatever it was, there seemed to be people everywhere. His daughter sat next to him with a long-suffering expression while Lydia nursed a glass of red wine and looked just as bored.

The one thing to chase away boredom was the one thing he couldn't indulge in for the simple fact that there were so many guests and their only room they shared with his daughter. Nudging Elsbeth's shoulder with his, he said, "I can see about procuring a

deck of cards if you'd like until dinner. It will help to pass the time."

She let out a huff and stared at him as if he'd asked her to dive into a horse trough. "I don't wish to play cards, Papa."

When the corners of Lydia's lips twitched, he tamped on the urge to grin as well. "Fair enough." Then he glanced at the headmistress. What the devil was wrong with him in that he wanted to spirit her away merely to kiss the hell out of her? "What of you, Lady Lydia? Care to take me on in a game of faro or even whist?"

"I'm not of a mind to play cards just now, Greystone. In fact, I'm wondering if we shouldn't order dinner before the rush."

He nodded. "There are no private dining rooms available."

"That matters not. We can take it upstairs and eat at our leisure. I'm certain the three of us can find an interesting topic on which to create a discourse."

"Another evening cloistered in the room?" Elsbeth made a gagging sort of noise to express her disgust as only a sixteen-year-old girl could. As she happened to glance across the crowded common room, she sucked in a breath. "Dear heavens, surely that can't be Miss Lexington." She clambered to her feet and continued to stare. "It is!"

"Who is Miss Lexington?" No matter how hard he looked, he couldn't see the person in question.

"She is a girl my age who shares my French tutor. We sometimes have lessons together if it includes an outing." Her eyes rounded and her expression suddenly turned saccharine sweet. "Papa, may I go over and talk to her?"

Too tired to say something that would amount to an argument, Jackson nodded. "Go

ahead, but then come back here. We're going to take dinner soon."

Before he could introduce a conversation with Lydia, Elsbeth dashed back to their table.

"Papa, Miss Lexington's mother invited me to share dinner with them tonight. They have a private dining room. May I?"

He looked at Lydia, who shrugged. "That would be acceptable. Mind that you are pleasant and remember your manners. Don't dally afterward and come upstairs straightaway."

"Thank you!" Elsbeth kissed his cheek, gave Lydia a wave, and then she darted through patrons and tables to join with her friend.

"She is quite exhausting at times," he said in a low voice then finished his brandy.

Lydia chuckled. "Such is the life of a young lady. Imagine having a school with twenty girls around that age."

"I'd rather not, thank you. Clearly, you are made of sterner stuff than me." With a chuckle of his own, he stood. "If you'd like, I'll order the food then meet you upstairs?"

"That would be lovely. It's rather loud and boisterous down here, and I'm craving quiet." She shook her head as she rose to her feet. "How is it Christmas Eve already? Time has flown lately."

"Must be the company we keep," he couldn't help but say in a barely audible voice.

Surprise briefly lit her eyes before she nodded. Then she wended her way through the

crush of people in the common room toward the wooden stairs in the back corner.

By the time Jackson gained their shared room—each time he was forced to do such a thing, he wondered if the innkeepers questioned the relationship between the three of them, but none of them had asked—his appetite had fled.

Well, if he were to amend that state for himself, his appetite for food had fled. He still wanted Lydia, and no, it didn't make sense. He only knew that when he was with her, everything was... better.

After closing the door, he glanced at Lydia, who sat at the small square table. She was reading a book by candlelight, and the flame sent burnished copper highlights into her black hair and gave her skin a faint golden glow. "Dinner has been ordered. It should arrive soon."

"Good, though I must tell you I'm more tired than hungry." Then she regarded him with an inscrutable expression, his chest tightened. "Why are you looking at me like that?"

"How am I looking at you?" It took next to no time to divest himself of his jacket, cuffs, collar, and cravat. The garments he tossed toward the foot of the bed, and he did care if they made it or not.

"Like you wish to scoop me up and devour me..." Her eyes were round, filled with both confusion and longing as she gazed at him. "I don't know how to interpret that."

"Don't be coy, Lydia. That connection between us hasn't yet played out."

A knock sounded at the door, and as he crossed the room, Jackson removed his waistcoat and tossed it toward the bed. When he wrenched the panel open, slight annoyance filled his chest to find a barmaid holding a tray of dishes covered with a

stained linen rag.

“Your dinner, Your Lordship,” she said in a whispered voice.

“Thank you.” He frowned when she scampered down the corridor, and after he closed the door with a booted foot, he brought the tray over to the table and then set it down as Lydia rose to her feet. Granted, the savory smells from the food were heavenly, but he had other things on his mind. “Where were we?” He prowled toward her while she retreated to the window.

“Do stop, Greystone. Your daughter will finish dinner soon.”

“She is not here now.” The only reason he paused was to tug off his boots. They fell to the hardwood floor with two dull thuds.

The window at her back prevented further flight. “You have mischief on your mind, I think.” Those expressive eyes darkened, and her desire fed his need.

Surely, I am slowly descending into madness.

“It’s not my mind you need to worry about, because where you are concerned, pleasure is always a good idea.” Seeing her in that white gown from the other night, the one with the embroidered holly leaves and berries made him want to do very wicked things to her.

“We should...” That protest was weak at best as she watched him.

For a long time afterward, he was never certain which of them moved first, but then she was in his arms, and he kissed her as if he hadn’t seen a woman for a decade. Oh, she was so soft and warm, and the faint taste of the wine she’d had earlier came away on her lips and made the embrace that much sweeter.

The way she twined her hands about his neck, the press of her body against his, the faint scent of lavender on her skin, the plushness of her lips on his as she kissed him back all worked to remove him from the remainder of his common sense. Over and over, he drank from her like a man possessed, and when that wasn't enough, Jackson held her head between his hands to better deepen the kiss as he chased her tongue with his, and when he needed more, he plucked the pins from her hair. They pinged slightly as they fell to the floor, but once her black tresses tumbled about her back and shoulders, he fisted his hands into the thick mass and kissed her anew.

It was all too easy to tug her bodice down as well as free her breasts from the stays and shift beneath. "Ah, Lydia..." As she pressed her lips to the underside of his jaw, the side of his neck, and then shoved her hands beneath his fine lawn shirt once she'd tugged it from his breeches, the hold on his control began to crumble.

"Why do I have no willpower when I'm around you?" Lydia brushed a fingertip over one of his nipples, and sensation rushed through him, making him hiss with need. The same desire bedeviling him clouded her eyes as she peered up at him.

"Perhaps it's fate, but I feel the same way." He brushed his knuckles over her pebbled nipples, chuckling when she gasped. "You are beautiful, and I can't have enough."

"If I didn't know better, I would say you are in your cups." The whispered protest sounded overly loud in the silence of the room. "I am well aware of what I look like."

He slipped a hand about her waist and pulled her closer. "I have never been more sober in my life." Jackson gently claimed her lips, kissed away her worries and doubts—he thought—and as he sought to bring her comfort, his heart squeezed. There was something about this woman, and he wanted her in all the ways that mattered.

Damn. The realization rocked him to his core, but he could no longer deny it.

She plucked at his shirt. "Remove this. I want to explore you."

"Not before I do the same to you." He removed the garment with alacrity and tossed it away. "Tonight, is for your pleasure, not mine."

"But—"

"No," he interrupted and then escorted her to the side of the bed. "We only have a small amount of time before my daughter returns." Jackson kissed her while making her sit. He kneeled before her. "I want to show you that you aren't just a carnal plaything or a distraction while on this trip."

A blush went through her cheeks. "I never thought that... much." She braced herself with her palms on the mattress behind her, which put her breasts on display, the dark pink tips erect and all too tempting.

"Such a refreshing change you are." As he regarded her, Lydia watched him with wide eyes and slightly parted lips, and the picture she made further hardened his length.

"Gammon. Well, get on with it, then. I'm curious as to what you'll do in such an abbreviated time." As he cupped her breasts, pressed himself closer between her naturally splayed legs, a shuddering breath escaped her. "You are quite... a lot."

"In a good way, I'll wager?" When she nodded, he brushed the pads of his thumbs over her nipples and grinned when a shiver racked her shoulders. He dipped his head, licked one of those lovely buds, and then took it into his mouth.

A long moan issued from her and one of her hands fisted in the bedclothes.

"I wish we were elsewhere, for each time we've come together, we cannot make

much noise, and I desperately want to know if you are a screamer.” For the next few moments, Jackson explored her breasts with his fingers, his tongue, and his lips. By the time he tugged her to the edge of the bed and encouraged her to recline backward as her skirting bunched about her thighs and waist, he was so hard he didn’t know if he’d be able to bring her to release without spending in his breeches. Yet, this night was for her alone. Putting all thought to his own comfort to the back of his mind, Jackson caressed the inside of her thighs, urged them as far apart as they could comfortably go. “Gorgeous.”

“You must be slightly mad.” Those creamy thighs quivered. Anticipation and worry mixed in her brown eyes.

“Perhaps we need to be in order to survive this life.” He winked. “I rather enjoy pleasuring you this way.”

“You already had me this way a few days ago.”

“Can I help it if I know exactly what I like?”

“Oh!” Her squeal of surprise when he licked that warm flesh at her center tugged a grin from him.

The act of pleasuring a woman orally was something he secretly enjoyed, but his wife hadn’t let him do it often. From all accounts, Lydia approved of this type of play—at least with him—for she’d rested a hand at the back of his head and urged him closer.

As he spread her open with one hand, he continued to caress the inside of her thighs with the other. Easily he found the pearl at her center, teased it with his tongue, and she shook with the ministrations. Soon, he settled on a rhythm he liked, and he repeated the cycle of teasing, suckling, and licking. The half-stifled sounds Lydia made would drive him mad, and each one was more frantic than the last. Tiny

pinpricks of pain kept him on the edge as she pulled his hair and squirmed in his hold and enhanced his own desire. When she bucked her hips against his mouth, he grinned, hummed at her flesh for she was close.

“Jackson ...” Her body shook and she tossed her head. “Make me fly.”

“I am endeavoring to do just that.” Again, he applied himself with renewed effort at that slippery button and dared to penetrate her passage with first one finger and then another. Her gasp of surprise echoed in the air. Damn but he wished he could feel that honeyed heat snug around his member.

Perhaps another time.

Perhaps for the rest of his life.

A strangled sort of scream ripped from her throat the second he suckled hard at the nubbin, and he grinned as Lydia fell into release. Gentle contractions tremored around his fingers, and his shaft pulsed in response. Damn, he’d never been so hard, but the discomfort was forgotten as he watched the expressions flit over her face—wonder, pleasure, amazement, exhaustion. Though he’d thought her beautiful before; now she was completely not of this earth in that bliss when her back arched and she squirmed while he continued to tease that tiny bundle of nerves.

“Jackson!” Near hysterical, Lydia collapsed fully onto her back. One hand drifted to a breast to pluck at a nipple, and he almost shot his wad right there. “How do you manage to send me over so quickly? It took my husband an eternity, but most times, the couplings didn’t result in completion.”

“Frankly, the man was a buffoon.” He couldn’t help but grin. No matter where their paths led or what the future held, they would both remember these moments.

But he wanted so many more with her beyond the bedroom.

“That was merely one tiny part of what I want from you tonight,” he whispered as he climbed onto the bed to join her. In her lethargy, she glanced at him, and there was such heated invitation in those eyes, he had no recourse except to bite the inside of his cheek and ignore the throbbing need in his highly aroused shaft.

“Good heavens.” She crawled up and then collapsed against the pillows.

“Indeed.” Needing the distraction, Jackson covered her body with his. He kissed her as if there was nothing else to do in this life and alternately as if he were running out of time. Her hands were everywhere on him, caressing, touching, exploring despite the fact he still wore his breeches, and he did the same to her around her gown. Though it would take years to learn the secrets of her body, he set out to at least try, and whenever he touched or nibbled at a part of her that made her cry out in pleasure, he was eager to find the next.

I need to know everything about you... even the remainder of your history.

Wanting to make her spend once more, he slipped a hand between her thighs. The damp curls shrouding her sex sent a shiver of pure desire down his spine, for he desperately wanted to join with her, but there was insufficient time, and he didn't want another rushed coupling. He strummed his fingers over her swollen button while he teased a breast with his tongue and lips.

She shattered more quickly this time, and more spectacularly. When she would have screamed, he slammed his mouth onto hers in the attempt to take the sound into himself. The last thing he wanted was for anyone to overhear, more importantly his daughter. Not until he could sort out how to get on with the rest of his life.

With Lydia.

There was no doubt that she was completely lost on waves of pleasure, but so was he, only on something entirely different. Was it indeed love? He rather thought he was well on that track. Never had he been so caught up in a woman as he was with Lydia. It was raw, and real, and unmistakable. She'd truly consumed him mind, body, and soul.

When her body came down from the heights of bliss and her trembles receded, Jackson rolled onto his back, as exhausted as if he'd coupled with her. To be sure, his shaft throbbed with unfulfilled need, but he was oddly content. She blew out a breath, looked at him with such hunger in her eyes that he had to bear down in order to stave off spending. "You are quite something."

"I could say the same of you." Since time was of the essence, he left the bed, and began the task of putting his clothing back on. "Would there was time to claim you as I wished."

Softly, she chuckled while tugging her bodice back into place. "We have already done that twice on this trip. I thought you would have tired of me by now." Then she tamed her wild hair into a loose chignon and secured it with the missing pins.

"Never." God, never. "In fact, I've rather enjoyed having you along on this journey. If the weather holds and doesn't bury us with snow, I would adore taking you hiking through the Highlands, showing you some of the sights. It was my mother's favorite place in all the world." He struggled with the waistcoat then shot her a grin when she joined him and did the laces at the back. "My wife didn't care to travel so far north, but I have a feeling you will prove different."

As she had in so many ways already.

She watched him with glittering eyes and assisted him into the remainder of his clothing in silence.

After donning his boots, he sat at the table with her, and they tucked into the now lukewarm food as well as two brown bottles of ale and one of whisky.

When his wife was alive, they used to throw lavish parties, either in London or at his country estate, where loads of their friends and family would gather for festivities and games and more food than an army could eat. Yet somehow, sharing this quiet meal with Lydia with the one candle lit on the table and a companionable silence gathering around them was just as fulfilling if not more special.

“Happy Christmas, Lydia,” he said in a barely audible whisper.

The smile she offered could have lit up the night like the fabled Christmas star. “It is not yet midnight.”

“Does it matter?”

“No.” Briefly, her gaze dropped to his mouth, and once more heightened awareness shivered over him. “Happy Christmas, Jackson. I hope everything you’ve wished for comes to fruition.”

“Thank you.” As he leaned toward her, fully intending to kiss her, a rattling at the door made him spring apart and take up a bottle of ale as Elsbeth sailed into the room fairly quivering with excitement and anticipation. Thinking she’d had a lovely time with her friend, he offered a grin. “Did you have a good chat?”

“Yes, and Miss Lexington told me something I thought surely must be gossip for all the outrageous turns the story took, but when her mother confirmed it as truth, I was shocked.”

“Oh? What’s that.”

Instead of looking at him, Elsbeth concentrated her gaze on Lydia. “It seems that Lydia is not the daughter of an earl as she’s claimed. There is no such person as the Earl of Mountfort.” Tears welled in the girl’s eyes as the color drained from Lydia’s face. “In fact, she’s not a lady at all, has no connection to the ton , not even remotely.”

“What?” Cold foreboding twisted down his spine, for at the back of his mind, he’d known this all along. And it fit with the tale Lydia had already told him; he just hadn’t wanted to see it. Especially since her brother-in-law had called her by a different name. “Who is she, then?”

Lydia rose shakily to her feet. “Elsbeth, please. I’m begging you. Stop this. I need to tell him myself, in my own way.”

“No.” His daughter shied away from Lydia’s touch, which was odd, for they had been fast friends during the week. “I admired you, Lydia—or whatever your real name is—I thought we were the same, both daughters of earls. I was taken with you and your strength, thought I could do great things with my life just like you, but you lied. How can I trust you?” Those tears fell to Elsbeth’s cheeks. Splotchy color appeared on her face, a testament to her emotional state. She turned her back to Lydia to address him. “Apparently, the headmistress is a nobody from the Lake District who married a blacksmith from Scotland. She couldn’t keep a man, cried foul, ran out on her marriage and fled.” A hiccupping sort of sound escaped the girl. “Because she’s a coward.”

“That is not true.”

Elsbeth snorted. “Nothing you have ever said has been true. Has it?”

“Yes, of course, but...” Lydia sighed when Elsbeth flounced to the bed and threw herself upon it in tears. When she met his gaze, tears filled her eyes. “It was only a

matter of time until the remainder of the truth came out,” she said in a whisper.

Stunned, he gawked at her and staggered a bit as if he'd been hit with a blow. “Let us remove to the corridor for a bit of privacy.” Without waiting for her agreement, Jackson strode across the room with a tight chest. Once she joined him and pulled the door nearly closed behind her, he demanded answers. “What the hell is going on? Is what Elsbeth said correct?”

“Yes.” She dropped her gaze to the loose knot of his cravat. “I had already told you most of my story. It was merely my origins I hadn't shared.”

“You aren't an earl's daughter.” It wasn't a question. Aggravation fought with disappointment in his chest, for he'd thought they were well matched, but at least all her secrets had been revealed.

“I am not. My father was a Scottish bricklayer; my mother an English dancer, both from a small village just over the border into Scotland.” Her shrug only lifted one shoulder. Finally, she met his gaze. Shame reflected in those dark depths, but also a modicum of relief. No doubt it had been heavy carrying that burden. “It was how I met my husband, but your daughter is correct. I am no one of consequence.”

“But you live in London. You are a headmistress.” More emotions battered him, threatened to steal his breath. “Unless that is a lie too.”

“It is not.” When she pressed her lips together, he desperately wished to kiss her, to offer her what comfort he could, but he hesitated. Was what they'd had together real? Everything was questionable now. She huffed. “What are you most disappointed about, Your Lordship, the fact I'm a widow with scandal trailing behind me, a woman who escaped abuse, that I have no pedigree at all, or that I'm not the virginal innocent headmistress you have dallied with during the time we've been together?”

“What? I...” With thoughts too jumbled to puzzle out in the moment, he latched onto his anger, and had to dig deep for that. “I’m most disappointed that you didn’t trust me with this knowledge to begin with. Everyone has a story. Everyone started out somewhere. Everyone has experienced hardship and grief.”

“Would you have offered to have me share your travels if you knew my whole story upfront?”

“I...” He only hesitated because he wanted to say the right words in this heated moment.

“Ah, there. You have your answer.” Slowly, she shook her head as disappointment shadowed her eyes. “It has been my habit to keep these secrets for years; I had to keep myself safe. So when I met you, I told you what you needed to know.”

“You lied to me!” When the accusation was a bit too loud even though the corridor was empty, he cleared his throat and lowered his voice. “You made me believe—”

“I made you do nothing.” The longer she peered at him, the more vulnerable she appeared. Her chin trembled. Tears welled in her eyes. “Tell me what you would have done in my position. No one would have wanted their children to attend a school run by a nobody, a woman with absolutely no value in the ton, or a woman so weak that she let herself be abused.”

“No.” Emotion graveled his voice, stuck in his throat in a wad. “That wasn’t your fault, and women who survive such are not weak. Just the opposite.” Anger rang in his voice, for he was still consumed by shock, yet he wasn’t angry at her.

Mostly.

The bulk of the anger and recrimination was pointed at him, for letting himself be

carried away, for being lost in her without knowing her full story.

Lydia shrugged. “So I fabricated a story and put myself in the beau monde . Because people would accept me then, and I would blend in.” She crossed her arms at her chest, and he felt her building an invisible wall between them, shutting herself off... for protection. “Suddenly doors began opening for me. I finally could become independent, have a life away from my abusive husband. I wouldn’t need to go back to that existence.” Her voice caught. “I had the ability to teach my students how to be wary, how to think for themselves, how to value themselves and see themselves as more than property.”

So many thoughts chased about in his mind, he didn’t know which way was up any longer, but the strongest notion was that he wanted the right to protect her. He couldn’t let her go back alone to that cottage where she would be bedeviled by her brother-in-law, where she might be beaten again.

Or worse.

“I don’t know what to say, quite frankly.” Yes, he was angry and confused, but the longer those two things burned in his chest, he realized why. Not because she’d lied, but because she’d been forced to, because their world wasn’t kind to women, because he was coming to care for her far too much.

“That is your prerogative, Your Lordship.” Clearly, returning to her headmistress attitude was a way of protecting herself. “But do not think to judge me unless you have been in my same circumstances.” A tear fell to her cheek, and she immediately dashed it away. “What now? Will you turn me out into the night like that long-ago rejected Mary at the inn?”

His heart squeezed as if were in a vice. “Of course not.” Rubbing a hand along the side of his face, Jackson shook his head. “I’m going down to the common room for a

drink. You may return to the room. Go to bed, Lydia.”

“But—”

“Do it!” he said in a hissed command. “Stay with Elsbeth. I rather doubt she’ll let you comfort her just now, but I don’t want her running off due to high emotion.” Resting his gaze on her, he tamped the urge to cry out in frustration. “Or you. I’ll return... sometime.”

“Jackson, I...” When she briefly touched his arm, he gasped and shook off her touch lest he rush his fences and make a cake of himself before thinking it all through. “Go. We will leave shortly after breakfast on the morrow, even if I have to pay double for the drivers and horses.”

Except, he didn’t plan to return to the room that night. He would usher in Christmas Day by himself like the damned fool he was.

Had Lydia lied about the connection between them? Had her responses and reactions to their carnal play, to their bonding in the quiet times, all been a ruse? And if so, for what purpose?

Was she a title seeker? A gold digger? Surely not. That went against everything he knew of her.

Which apparently wasn’t much, but did that matter? Did any of it matter when love might be in the offing?

This wasn’t how he thought he would meet Christmas.

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 11:32 am

A lady should never let emotions guide her actions.

December 25, 1817

Christmas Day

Stable yard

Lydia could hardly breathe her chest was so tight. And if it wasn't that, the ache around her heart—in her heart—was so great she truly thought she wouldn't be able to go on. Not today day, not any day.

She stood off to one side as the traveling coach was brought around and the horses' harnesses, bits, and reins were inspected. The earl and his daughter stepped out of the inn and into the softly falling snow. Perhaps it was fitting that the weather had decided to turn foul again. It was a reflection of the state of her heart.

As a shiver went through her body, she pulled the folds of her cloak tightly about her, closing herself off, just as she should have done before ever becoming involved with the Earl of Greystone. But he'd been so charming and genuine and compassionate. She'd fallen for him like a ninny, and now that bit of glimmering hope had been yanked away from her, smashed into a million bits as if someone had thrown a champagne flute against the wall.

By accident, her gaze crashed into his as he and Elsbeth approached. He didn't grin or do anything at all to give her a bit of reassurance, but his daughter seemed as upset as Lydia felt. It was obvious she'd been crying. When Lydia had left the room, the

girl was awake but had refused to rise at that time.

As for the earl? He'd never returned last night, and from the looks of him, he'd slept in his clothing in the common room. Dark stubble clung to his cheeks and chin. His cravat was loosened. Wrinkles stamped his jacket beneath the greatcoat. And from the way he moved, it seemed as if he suffered a megrim, which meant he'd drunk far more than was good for him.

Not that she could blame him.

When the two of them finally reached the space where she stood, the tension between them fairly crackled and was quite thick. John took their bags and then quickly loaded them into the coach.

To her, he said, "Where is your valise?" Those were the first words he'd said to her since the conversation in the corridor last night.

"I gave it to Robert." It hurt to say words aloud because her throat was clogged with unshed tears. "But thank you for offering."

His nod was curt. "Please get in the coach with Elsbeth." When he encompassed them both in his stormy, intense gaze, she bit back the urge to sob. "I intend to ride alongside the coach instead of inside of it. The fresh air will do me good."

Elsbeth snorted. "It's biting cold and snowing, Papa. Don't be a nodcock."

"Inside the coach." With a gloved hand, he indicated the vehicle with the open door and John standing beside it. "Now." Once his daughter did as he bid, he looked at Lydia once more, but he had been too well-schooled in hiding his emotions. "I need to be alone with my thoughts. Besides, this journey won't be long. It is less than three hours to Dove Cottage."

“That’s all to the good. Traveling doesn’t agree with me, and it will be lovely to settle again, at least for a day or so.” It was more than obvious she couldn’t pass the Christmastide holidays in his company any longer. The tension would prove too unbearable. Whatever had been between them over the past week and that special, cozy time at her cottage had either vanished or was buried under far too much emotion. Nothing would ever be the same. “For what it’s worth, I appreciate you offering your protection and demanding I travel with you and your daughter. It’s...” She cleared her throat and tamped on the urge to cry. “It is pleasant not to be alone on Christmas, such as it is this year.”

“It was my privilege,” he said in a choked sort of whisper. Then his Adam’s apple bobbed with a hard swallow. Truly, he looked wretched. “About what I said last night—”

Lydia held up a hand. “Don’t. There is nothing more to say, let alone here in the stable yard.” Possibly never. “Words were said. Events unfolded. That is life.” Then, not wanting to talk any longer, she took her skirting in hand, accepted John’s assistance to climb into the coach, and more or less collapsed on the bench opposite Elsbeth.

The girl never glanced her way.

A few moments later, the steps were put up and the door closed. The sound echoed with a finality deep in her soul. She watched as Jackson mounted a horse and trotted past the window to pause by the driver’s box. Despite her heartbreak, she admitted to herself that he was quite handsome as he rode with his back ramrod straight and his top hat covering his dark hair and the hem of his greatcoat flapping.

As the vehicle lurched into motion, Elsbeth turned her tear-streaked face to Lydia. “Was anything real? When you were kind and polite to me, when you did those things with me at the cottage, was that because you truly liked me or was it naught

but an act? An extension of your false persona?"

Fair enough.

Inside, she was proud of how mature the girl was and how she'd grown in the short time Lydia had been with her, but outwardly, her chin trembled, and tears filled her own eyes. "Yes, it was real. I am genuinely fond of you. That was never a lie. This last week has been one of the most memorable I have ever spent."

Another truth.

"How could you do what you did?" the girl asked in a choked whisper. "How could you pretend to be someone else entirely, to fool everyone who trusted you, without an ounce of apparent remorse?"

Now that was crossing a line. "What makes you think I don't have remorse or that I didn't spend the past six years racked with shame and doubt?" When Elsbeth didn't answer, Lydia pushed on. "Consider yourself grateful that you don't know what it feels like to fear for your life every night when your husband comes home, most of the time in his cups." She wasn't angry at the girl; she was just disappointed in herself for landing in this mess to begin with. "I feared for my life, so I left, for I refused to die at the hand of a man. And I convinced myself that if I wanted a better life, a life where I felt safe, I needed to leave. The rest of the story perhaps doesn't matter, and you don't need to be privy to it, but suffice it to say, I was proud of what I'd made myself into after I escaped the horrors I'd lived through."

"Oh, I didn't realize..." Elsbeth dabbed at her tears with a handkerchief she pulled from her reticule.

"Thus, the reason for keeping secrets, which is different from lying, but perhaps not from your viewpoint. Or that of your father's." The ball of tears rose in her throat,

and she quickly forced it back down. “How did Miss Lexington’s mother find out?”

A blush stained the girl’s cheeks. “It was her mother’s cousin-in-law. I told them we were traveling with a headmistress of a London finishing school. When I pointed you out, the cousin said she recognized you. I guess she is originally from the village where you lived, and then she told us of your history and your real name.”

“Ah.” Lydia frowned. “Bess Campbell. There is nothing at all interesting about me in that persona.” A widow, unwanted, a liar, and after the scandal got back to London, the owner of a defunct finishing school. “I suppose it was all too good to last, and I should have lowered my expectations, but why shouldn’t I finally have a happy ending?” Her voice broke then, and a few tears slipped down her cheeks.

“What happens now?” Elsbeth asked but had her face turned to the window.

“I don’t know. I can honestly say I don’t know.” Frankly, she didn’t want to contemplate that, for it would only make her more emotional. “I want you to know that—”

The girl shook her head. “If you don’t mind, I don’t want to talk anymore. I just want to sleep.” So saying, she changed positions to lay on her bench with her back toward Lydia. A cowardly way to escape, but then, who was she to judge another on how they dealt with the pain in their life?

Silence was welcome, for Lydia was very nearly a watering pot and she wasn’t good company. There was no amount of apologizing she could do to win back Elsbeth’s trust or that of her father. It was her fault everything was ruined, and perhaps she deserved whatever punishment would come her way. Besides, the chances of having a future—beyond scandal—with the earl had been naught but a dream, and a silly one at that. It was best she act coolly detached from him from this point forward.

Except, her heart was even more bruised and battered from this than it had been when she realized her husband had been a bounder.

Dove Cottage

Near Westloch

Scotland

The coach came to a stop in front of the earl's hunting lodge around noon that day. It was a lovely building, stately like a Georgian-style mansion but with a cottage roof. Brown ivy vines and leaves clung to the front brickwork. For miles around the dwelling, all she could see were rolling hills and heavily wooded areas. The mountains in the background were quite impressive.

She and Elsbeth had slept for most of the journey, but arriving didn't negate the fact that they were both tired, hungry, cold, and out of sorts. To say nothing of Jackson's expression resembling a thunderstorm.

At the door, the party was met by a man and a woman she assumed was the butler and a housekeeper. They were both familiar with the earl and his daughter. Lydia stood in the background merely to observe. Not once did Jackson speak directly to her; neither did Elsbeth, and that rejection hurt all the way down into her soul.

Briefly, the earl explained that she had been traveling with them and would require a room immediately and a bath soon after, as well as clean clothing in her size if they had it. If they did not, she would make do with what she had.

At least there was that kindness.

After he issued the orders, he left her and Elsbeth in the entry hall, and heaven only

knew where he took himself off to. With nothing else to do, she and the young lady went upstairs and were shown into separate rooms. A suite with double doors was at the end of the corridor where she assumed the earl would stay.

There was a flurry of activity as servants brought in a porcelain bathtub with claw feet and took care of the business of filling it with wonderfully hot water that was then scented with some sort of rose perfume. A bar of finely milled French soap of the same aroma was procured as well as a sponge, with promises that fresh clothing would arrive following her bath and perhaps tea and a nap, for dinner was served at six. Then she was left alone in the room with its cheerful fire dancing behind a metal grate.

As she sank into the water to rest her travel weary bones and emotionally wrecked soul, tears filled Lydia's eyes. Perhaps she could walk into a nearby village and purchase a ticket on the post chaise tomorrow or the next day. She didn't know what she would do with her life after that, but obviously current circumstances weren't ideal. How long would it be before the gossip reached London and the parents of her students pulled their girls from the next term?

How did everything crumble so quickly?

Not able to make heads nor tails of the mess, Lydia sat in the scented water and had a good, cathartic cry. It was much needed from the events of the journey. Afterward, she oddly felt a bit better, so she washed her hair and body with the soap and waited until the water in the bath had turned cold before leaving the tub.

By five o'clock, she'd had a nap, enjoyed tea and sliced meats, cheese, and bread, then sorted through her meager possessions—wherein the housekeeper insisted on taking away the muddy clothing and seeing it laundered—and then was assisted into a beautiful green satin gown by a maid who also did her hair, even though Lydia said she wasn't going down to dinner.

To be fair, the gown was gorgeous in a bright vibrant green with capped sleeves and a full skirt. New underclothes had somehow been procured, and though she was wildly grateful for them, she couldn't help but wonder where they'd come from. Yes, the gown brought her a modicum of joy as did having her hair styled, her heart continued to ache. She didn't belong here, apparently didn't belong anywhere except her dull beginnings where there'd been no hope.

Not long after her toilette was complete, a faint knock sounded on the door. Flutters of excitement went through her belly, but when the door opened, Elsbeth came in and cold disappointment flooded her being.

"What do you want?" she asked, and if there was more annoyance in her tone, she couldn't help it. "I don't particularly wish to talk to anyone right now."

"I imagine you don't," the girl said in a soft voice as she approached the winged-back chair where Lydia sat with a book in hand. "Will you come down for dinner? It's Christmas. We should all be together. Especially after what happened." Sadness shadowed her eyes, and a frown tugged at the corners of her mouth, but in a gown of white taffeta lined with white rabbit fur, she was the embodiment of winter.

"I don't think so. We are not a family. After everything, I rather think your father doesn't wish to see me in any capacity." Her chest ached to say the words aloud, but there was nothing for it.

A half-stifled sob issued from Elsbeth. "I'm dreadfully sorry, Lydia. I didn't think the rumor was real and I certainly didn't think Papa would react so strongly to it, for he admires you."

If that had once been true, it wasn't now. "Don't worry about it. Eventually, lies will catch up to a person. I knew that but had to proceed out of necessity." If she were honest, she was tired of having to live her whole life in a lie. It didn't matter that her

husband was dead, and she didn't need to keep hiding, but the fact that she'd created a persona and history for herself still stood, and with that bit of fiction, she'd opened the finishing school.

Would she lose it all anyway after her hard work and sacrifices?

Elsbeth sighed. "I shouldn't have told Papa what I'd found out. I should have come to you first and talked it over."

"You are maturing into a lovely young lady. I know you'll use this as a learning tool in the future." The ache around Lydia's heart intensified, for she would never know what became of the girl, nor would she be able to see her grow further.

"I don't know how mature I am. When you and Papa were spending so much time together, I thought he liked being with you more than he did with me." Emotion made her voice higher than usual. "I'm afraid I was a bit jealous, and in that moment, I wanted to destroy you, so when Miss Lexington and her mother's cousin said such horrid things about you..."

Ah, so that was what precipitated it. "Please, don't trouble yourself about it any longer. I was living on borrowed time anyway."

"How can you be so accepting of this? You will lose everything, even your good name because of what I did."

"A good name only in pretend, hmm?" Lydia shrugged, but talking about it helped. "We all make choices in life, some good and some bad, but all of them have consequences. We can't escape that."

"You are so wise and... mother-like. I miss that so much, and now..." The delicate tendons in her throat worked with a hard swallow. Tears sprang into Elsbeth's eyes.

“For what it’s worth, I think you’re lovely and I told Papa so. I also told him he’d be a nodcock not to see how good you two are together.”

“While I thank you for that, I rather think there’s more involved in a romance than just that.” She offered a wobbly smile. “I’m certain your father will find someone who gets on with him equally well, and who is a lady to boot.”

All the things she was not.

A tear fell to the girl’s cheek. “Do you hate me? I have ruined everything.”

With her heart threatening to explode from pain and love, Lydia shook her head. She set down her book. “Of course not. We all make mistakes. Mine was lying and pretending. Yours was not discerning whether to indulge in gossip or not without thinking it through. But we are not our mistakes, Elsbeth. There is always an opportunity to rise above them.”

Could she once the scandal of everything hit London?

The younger woman sniffled. “I truly enjoy your company. I hope Papa realizes... Well, I just hope he won’t act the arse or fall back on old habits. He needs someone like you in his life.” Briefly, Elsbeth grabbed one of Lydia’s hands and squeezed her fingers. “Please don’t leave us. Everyone else has, and I think we both want someone to be there...” Her voice broke and she stepped away. “Well, I should go down for dinner.”

“Right.” Lydia nodded. “I’ll ring for a tray, but I hope you enjoy yourself. Happy Christmas, Elsbeth.”

“Oh.” Another few tears fell to the girl’s cheeks. “Happy Christmas, Lydia.”

Once she left, Lydia was once more alone with her torturous thoughts.

Why the deuce had she let herself fall in love with the earl? It was a stupid thing to do, especially after the mess of her marriage. One would think that at this age she'd be more sensible, but there was nothing sensible or logical about love.

It just... was.

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 11:32 am

When all else fails, a lady should always follow her heart.

The carriage-style clock on the drawing room mantel softly chimed the eleven o'clock hour. Since Jackson hadn't been of a mind to sleep after dinner, when Elsbeth retired, he chose not to go abovestairs and instead retreated once more into his thoughts.

What to do about Lydia?

Hell, that wasn't even her name. Elsbeth had confided in him that she'd been given Lydia's real name—Bess Campbell. She would always be Lydia to him, and what was more, his own daughter had given him a serious talk during dinner on how she should have held her tongue, on how she should never have repeated gossip before going directly to Lydia for clarification or explanation. Then she told him that he would essentially be a nodcock if he didn't marry the woman and start enjoying life again in a second marriage.

Because he needed a wife and she desperately wanted another mother, for everything had been better when Lydia was in their midst during those few days at Thistle Cottage when it had felt they were a real family.

And she had belonged to someone again.

Since he'd not done his duty as a father to Elsbeth for far too long, he'd suffered an emotional break at the dinner table, for all of that had been a revelation. He hadn't known his daughter was flailing while he'd been lost to his own grief and confusion, but there had been something adamantly and completely correct—Lydia had made

everything better. They'd shared tears and talking after that, and at the end, by the time the figgy pudding made an appearance at the table, they had bonded even closer.

And he made Elsbeth a promise, that he would try his best to sort his future.

Now, here he sat, after telling the servants to seek their own beds, contemplating what the hell he should do if he could only gather his courage. He rubbed a hand over his face. An hour ago, he'd removed his jacket, waistcoat, and cravat. If a man was to think about things, he didn't need to be confined. Then he'd taken to pacing for a bit as he went through every conceivable scenario, even the ones inundated with scandal. When he was done, he retreated into the memories made with Lydia since the day he'd met her on that muddy road.

And slowly, his courage built.

There was no doubt in his mind he had fallen hard for the headmistress and that he was quite possibly addicted to her. Yet she wasn't who he had thought, wasn't the daughter of an earl, didn't carry the title of lady, wasn't even part of the ton .

Did it matter?

As he stared at the clock face while the second hand relentlessly kept its time, and then with a nod, he scrambled to his feet. Nothing mattered except convincing her they belonged together, that she was good enough to be his countess.

My wife.

It was time to stop delaying. If he wanted a future with her, he needed to talk things out with her instead of relying on speculation and wondering.

A few minutes later saw him upstairs and hesitating at the closed door to her

bedchamber. After a soft knock, he entered the room and let his eyes adjust to the darkness. “Lydia?” Not receiving an answer, he crept quietly over the floor, his boots making almost no sound as he reached the carpet. “Lydia?” It appeared she’d fallen asleep in a winged-back chair, but damn she was beautiful in that rich emerald gown with her black hair upswept and secured with pins. The dark arcs of her lashes against her pale cheeks were like brush strokes on an artist’s canvas, the ruby lips were a much-needed splash of color. “Lydia.” When he touched a hand to hers, she awoke with a start. “Easy.”

“Jackson?” A blush stained her cheeks, nearly difficult to discern in the darkness, for the candle at the table near her chair had burned out long ago. “Er, I mean Your Lordship.”

“Stop.” This situation had grown wildly out of hand. “Come with me.” He held out a hand. “We need to talk.”

“We do not.” She shook her head, determined to be stubborn to the last. “I shall make arrangements to leave on the morrow.”

“Doubtful. It will be Boxing Day. No one will be about.”

A huff escaped her. “Then I will do so on the next for the same reasons.” When her chin trembled, his chest tightened. “I won’t linger where I’m not wanted.”

God, he admired her determination and spirit. Jackson wriggled his fingers. “Who says you’re not wanted? Now, come with me to a more private place that doesn’t have my daughter’s room right next door.”

Slowly, she put her fingers into his palm, and he tugged the headmistress to her feet. “Where, then?”

“My suite.” In silence, Jackson led her from the chamber, closed the door quietly behind them, and then guided her along the corridor. Once inside his apartment and that panel was firmly shut, he turned her about to face him. The room was no less dark than hers, but he didn’t need illumination to peer into the fathomless depths of her eyes and see the truth. “I’ve behaved horribly, but you should know, I wasn’t angry at you. I was angry at the life you led that made you do such a thing, at society for making it so difficult for women to escape such situations or even live independently of a man.” He took both of her hands in his. “Please forgive me.”

For long moments, she frowned at him. Finally, she sighed. “There’s nothing to forgive. I should seek the same from you. I lied.”

“Because you had to. I absolutely understood why you did so, and...”

“And?” One of her dark eyebrows rose with inquiry, and he wanted nothing more except to kiss that arch.

“And I was angry yesterday because I didn’t have the right to protect you as I want to, I didn’t have the right to claim you as mine for the rest of my life.”

“You are only speaking out of guilt, out of pity, or perhaps sympathy.” When she shook her head and tried to pull her hands from his, he tightened his hold. “Clearly, we are not well matched, and now that you are aware of the vast differences between us, you should steer clear.” Her chin quivered again. “For the good of everyone.”

“Why do you assume that you going away is best for Elsbeth, for me?” he asked in a soft voice. “When our lives have only been enhanced since meeting you? When it doesn’t matter one whit to me where the devil you came from or that you don’t hold the title of lady?”

“What?” Shock propelled that one word from her throat.

He nodded as a rush of joy filled his chest. “I can fix that.” Perhaps Elsbeth was correct all along in that he enjoyed fixing broken people, and if he could do that for her—and himself—by joining them as one, why shouldn’t he?

Because he loved her to distraction.

Lydia’s nerves felt strung too tight. Here the earl was, looking like sin and scandal in breeches, loose shirt, and boots, and he smelled so good! That clean scent of evergreen with a hint of snow and mint wafted to her nose, and despite the emotional strain she’d labored beneath, tiny flutters erupted in her lower belly.

“What are you trying to say?” She could hardly speak because his presence filled the space and the intensity in his eyes threatened to dissolve the strength in her knees.

“Perhaps I should show you instead of continuing to give you words you refuse to believe.”

“Fine.” Against her better judgment, Lydia allowed him to tug her over to the crushed velvet bench at the foot of his massive four-poster bed, the draperies and counterpane done in shades of navy and cream. The earl sat first but he still held her hand, and when he looked up at her, the emotions in his sapphire eyes were inscrutable. “What now?” Why couldn’t she read his intent? If he were merely playing with her, she couldn’t bear it; the ache around her heart was already too great.

“I’ve done much thinking this week, and tonight, after speaking with Elsbeth, I came to a conclusion. Which is why I’ve been distant from you during the last leg of our journey.”

“What does that mean?” Truly, she was baffled, for he’d told her nothing.

As his grin widened, flutters erupted in her lower belly. It was one of the things that

had first drawn her notice of him when she'd come to on that muddy road. "I want you to marry me."

"What?" This is outrageous! Surely, she hadn't heard him correctly.

He nodded. "Marry me."

"I... I don't know what to say." In fact, she gawked at him with a slightly opened jaw.

"You may answer me when I'm finished." Jackson winked. He raked his gaze down her form with such languid perusal that renewed awareness prickled her skin. "You are quite ravishing in that gown." He flicked his gaze to hers. "I sent my butler out to the village to buy you all the things you would need."

Heat went through her cheeks. "It is far too much, but to be honest, I adore the gown, and the new unmentionables are quite appreciated."

"Good. I can't wait to separate you from them." And still he hadn't released her hand. "Be warned, I intend to take full advantage tonight."

Merciful heavens. A shiver careened down her spine, but she couldn't resist teasing him. "That assumes I will allow you access. It has been a very trying twenty-four hours or so."

His laugh mixed with a growl. "Oh, you'll allow it and then some, Lydia... or should I call you Bess?"

"I haven't been that woman for many years, so I would prefer Lydia," she said on a choked whisper, for this was a heady conversation indeed.

“Or I can refer to you as sweeting if you’d rather.” Not giving her time to reply, the earl tugged on her hand, pulled her into his lap. Before she knew what he was about, he’d put her back against his chest and had her legs straddling the outside of his thighs.

Anticipation swirled through her belly. “What have you planned?” Lydia could barely force out the question from a suddenly tight throat, so great was her excitement and wariness. Had he truly meant the endearment?

“Everything, my dear. I want to plan everything, see it all anew.” The rumble of his baritone in her ear sent gooseflesh racing over her skin as he loosened the laces at the back of her gown. “Perhaps usher in a new aspect to our relationship, if you’re of a mind?”

“You speak of marriage; you were in earnest just now.” It wasn’t a question. “You wish to marry a woman so far unsuited to your station it’s almost laughable.” She half-twisted about to look into his face. “Scandal will touch your name, swirl about both you and Elsbeth.”

His eyes darkened. “Let me combat what might come our way.” Slowly, firmly, he tugged and pulled down her bodice as well as the underthings beneath until her breasts popped free of the fabric. “I am an earl and not without some power within the beau monde.”

A shiver moved down her spine from the chill in the air. “But...”

“And right now, I intend to use that power on you.”

Tingles shot through her core. He was quite potent and very different than he’d been the past day or so. “Feel free to begin your seduction. I look forward to your persuasive argument.”

“Ha. You know I will win.” He nuzzled the crook of her shoulder and at the same time, he lightly danced his fingers over her breasts, slowly, oh so slowly, bringing her nipples into tight buds.

A soft moan sneaked out, seemingly overly loud in the silence. Her back arched of its own accord, which put her bosom more firmly into his hands. “Lovely opening salvo.”

“I thought so.” He chuckled. Using his palms, he caressed those sensitive buds, brought them into a frenzy that had pleasure zipping between them and her core. Need pulsed at the apex of her thighs, and no matter how much she wanted him to take her in a firmer grip, he merely continued to tease with the lightest of touches.

It was almost as if he wished to bring her to the brink of pleasure through her breasts alone. Was that even possible? Never had she met a man like the earl.

“This is... nice.”

“Only? Then obviously I’m not doing it correctly.” With his lips at her nape and the rasp of his evening stubble providing enhanced erotic sensations, Jackson edged the gown from her shoulders and arms, pulling it down until it pooled at her waist. Then he began teasing her breasts as well as her nipples all over again, and this time, the friction and heat from his skin added another layer to the play.

“Oh!” Lydia’s eyes shuttered closed. Once more her back arched. Need throbbed through her body; her breath came in shallow pants. Blissful sensations darted over her skin. Fires turned her blood molten. She was nearly at that edge, hovering, waiting, seconds away from flying just from his fingers. “More,” she gasped out and lifted a hand to wrap around his nape, encourage his head closer to hers. “I need more convincing, Greystone.”

The sound of his chuckle reverberated in her chest. “Still a managing baggage, especially in carnal endeavors. I rather adore that.”

Before she could respond, he drew up the skirting and then his hand was between her thighs, his fingers burrowing through her curls. Always skilled, he strummed those talented digits along her flesh, back and forth, and when she whimpered and put a hand over his to guide him to where she needed him, he found her swollen button, encouraged it out of hiding, and then applied friction to that nubbin as if that was his only purpose.

Shivery sensations raced along her spine, pushed into every nerve ending. She held his hand tight to her pearl, clutched his nape with her other hand as if she were a wanton widow. He kissed her neck but didn’t leave off with his frenzied friction, glided his lips over her cheek, and when he bit her earlobe, streaks of need slammed through her core to heighten the feelings already crashing through her body.

“Jackson...” She squirmed on his lap. The hard ridge of his arousal pressed against her bottom. “I’m nearly there...” Drat it, she couldn’t concentrate on words any longer, and if he didn’t finish her, she’d melt into a puddle at his feet.

“Then let me help you over.” The man pinched her nipple, rolled that hardened tip. The pleasure-pain sent her hurtling toward that glimmering edge. His chuckle was all too satisfied as he increased the pressure. “Don’t fight it, Lydia. Let me see you come undone because it’s perfection... you are perfection.”

Those words made her shatter, and the more she relaxed, the greater the wave of bliss smacked into her, carried her to that void where sound and light didn’t exist. For the first time since they’d started coming together in scandal, Lydia screamed out her pleasure. She writhed on his lap, held his hand tighter to her button while contractions pulsed through her core.

“I knew you would enjoy that,” he whispered against the shell of her ear.

Eventually, she came back to herself with only enough strength to slump against him.

“I don’t know how you manage to do this to me so quickly.”

“Fate, sweeting. It’s all fate.” He nuzzled the crook of her shoulder again before he eased her off his lap. “I’m not nearly done tonight.” He stood, caught her hand and then divested her of the rest of her clothing. “Beautiful. I’ll never have enough of seeing you thusly.”

“Do stop.” Lydia fought off a blush as he raked his gaze up and down her nude body.

“You’ve seen me before.”

“Not nearly as much as I would like.” He tugged her into his arms and claimed her lips in a series of gentle kisses that left her reeling and as weak-kneed as if he’d sent her flying again. “I am trying to show you how cherished you are, how valuable you are to me despite your origins, despite the need to concoct a false history, to show you that your husband was completely and heinously wrong.”

“I am beginning to see that... believe that.” The reality of that stunned her. Everything was different with him than with her husband. How could she discount that? She trailed her fingers down his chest, plucking at the lawn of his shirt.

“Perhaps you should remove this, hmm? I am at a disadvantage.”

“As if that is a bad thing.” Yet Jackson stepped back from her while Lydia slipped into bed.

The shadows of the room shrouded him as she unashamedly watched him undress. As soon as his chest was bare, she sucked in a breath of appreciation. Her heartbeat accelerated, for he truly was an attractive man.

Shadows contoured the ridges of his mostly flat abdomen. A mat of black hair spread over his chest in an abstract butterfly pattern. How well she remembered what that coarse design felt like against her sensitive nipples from their previous couplings. Delicious tingles danced through her lower belly as he removed his boots and finally his breeches to reveal lean, muscled thighs and calves. His engorged length sprang from a nest of black curls. For the space of a few heartbeats, he stood immobile as if giving her time to properly appreciate him.

“Do you wish for me to pose?”

“That isn’t necessary. You already know how much I adore your form.” Restless hunger coiled within her body. If he didn’t join with her soon, she’d surely explode. “Come.”

“That is the general idea.” With a cheeky grin, he joined her on the bed, covering her body with his.

She sighed, for the familiar weight of him, the scent of him, the touch of his hands on her skin brought back so many memories gleaned in merely a week, yet this was slightly different. When she reached for his shaft, he caught her wrists and pinned them above her head with one hand.

“None of that. This night is for your pleasure.”

“You said that the last time we were together.”

“It is no less true now.”

“But I want to—”

“Later, for if I have my way, this won’t be the only time you share my bed tonight.”

No more words were spoken, for he set out to explore every inch of her body with his lips, tongue, and teeth, and when he finally released her wrists, his hands and fingers were seemingly everywhere.

By the time he returned to her lips, she balanced on the edge of bliss and insanity. It wouldn't take much to make her come undone, and she shook from the sensations that swamped her. "I can take no more of this teasing." Her voice sounded raspy from the force of the emotions swirling through her body. She tugged on his shoulders to bring him closer, caught his head between her palms to kiss him and perhaps urge him to finally penetrate her, bring a surcease to the throbbing need between her thighs.

"How much do you want me, Lydia?" he murmured against the side of her neck before pressing a line of baby-fine kisses beneath her jaw.

"I want you now and always because..." Lydia squirmed beneath him, shoved a hand between them to take him in hand. The silky hardness of him sent her ever closer to release as she guided him to where she wanted him the most. The wide head of his shaft glanced over her highly sensitive button, and she shuddered from the exquisite sensations.

"Because?" Then he followed the inquiry with a nip to one of her nipples.

Pleasure pinwheeled through her body. "Because I'm quite a ninny and I've fallen in love with you as if I haven't the sense God gave a goose."

"I feel I must inform you that geese are quite intelligent, love." But he settled between her bent knees and kept her within the cage of his arms. With a powerful flex of his hips, he speared into her and didn't stop until she was fully impaled. "Ah, Lydia, you have no idea how much I adore you," he whispered against the shell of her ear.

“Meaning?” She wanted to be very sure as she looped her arms about his broad shoulders, lifted her legs and fitted them around his waist. The thick girth of him filled her all too well, and as he pulled back only to repeat that movement, a satisfied sigh escaped her.

“You don’t know, can’t feel it, see it in everything I do?” The earl brushed his lips over hers. “From the moment I found you on that road, you have captivated me, and once you and I became involved in a carnal relationship, I fell a bit harder, but after hearing your story, seeing how you survived, witnessing your strength and determination, knowing that you truly care for Elsbeth, I knew it was inevitable I would continue that fall into love.”

It was almost as if he’d come right out of a story book to sweep her away, and she loved him even more for it. “You are a romantic.”

“Perhaps.” And then he moved, treating her to gentle, languid strokes that only served to enhance the feelings of madness flitting about the perimeter of her consciousness. The coupling went beyond mere intercourse. Jackson made love to her. Never before had he joined with her in such care and devotion. The change brought tears to her eyes, and she gave herself over to the beauty of the ancient dance.

Over and over, he thrust. Their bodies rocked together. For long moments, they communed only through touches and caresses. Sighs and moans broke the silence, and each little exploration sent frissons of need throughout her nerve endings. Then his pace changed. More force and friction were applied. He gripped her hips tight while his pumped, and the root of his shaft rubbed that all-important bundle of nerves at her center. With each renewed stroke, every frantic push, Lydia was hurtled closer and closer to that looming cliff where she’d learn to fly all over again.

Then she couldn’t tamp the sensations any longer in favor of drawing them out. He thrust again and with authority; the emotions deep down in his eyes were startling for

all they promised. She caught her breath. Her body tensed, and then down, down, down she fell, into that void filled with nothing except white light and intense bliss.

“Jackson!” At the last second, she tamped that keening cry as best she could.

“So damned beautiful.” The earl grunted and then groaned as he followed into his own release. His member pulsed and jerked. Warmth spilled into her core, and as he ground his pelvis into hers to prolong the coupling, she trembled and went gently over the edge once more.

“You are mine, Lydia,” he whispered against the side of her neck while he collapsed on top of her. “There is no one I want more than you.”

“So charming.” Completely spent, she clung to him, not quite ready to lose that heated intimacy. When his arms came around her and he rolled them onto their sides, she sighed. “Yes,” she said as a clock somewhere in the room softly chimed the midnight hour.

“I beg your pardon?”

“Yes.”

“To what? I’m afraid I’m going to have to be an arse here and demand specifics.” But a chuckle followed the request.

She kissed his lips. “Yes, I will marry you. I have never met a man like you, Jackson. The kindness and respect you’ve given me, the way you’ve never judged me through every installment of my horrible past...” A sigh escaped her. “Sometimes I’m fearful that this is a dream and when I wake, you will be gone.”

“That will never happen.”

“Though I have reservations—”

“No doubts, no regrets, no reservations,” he whispered, and in between each phrase, he kissed her. “This is raw and real, and that is exactly what life should be, so we can experience everything, so that we know we’re alive. Together, we’ll meet whatever challenge comes our way, and will be better equipped for it because we have already, indeed, lived a life separately. That’s wisdom.” Taking her left hand in his, he brought it to his lips. “Marry me, Lydia. Be my wife, my countess, my lover. Help me continue to work for change, to raise Elsbeth into the young lady she needs to be, let me help you in making your finishing school bigger and better, for one day, women will change the world.”

Tears filled her eyes. “Perhaps not in our lifetime or even Elsbeth’s but yes, they certainly will, and governments will be all the better for it.” Her hand trembled in his, and she gasped. “What if Elsbeth objects?”

“She won’t. In fact, it was her pushing me tonight that allowed me to find my courage and ask for your hand.”

“Truly?”

“Yes.” When he flashed his customary grin, she chuckled.

“Very well. I have already agreed to marry you. How else should I convince you?”

“If I can procure the proper license, marry me on Twelfth Night, before we venture back to London. Once we arrive in Town, I want everything proper so we can begin our life together immediately.” Then he slipped the signet ring off his pinky finger and pushed it onto the fourth finger of her left hand. It was a bit big, but the sentiment was there. “As soon as the shops open, I’ll procure a different ring, something symbolic, or I’ll have you go through the estate jewels in London for one you truly

favor.”

She never had a ring from her first husband. But then, she never had his respect or love either. “Twelfth Night sounds like a lovely time to begin our life together as long as it doesn’t become a farce as Shakespeare wrote about.”

“Never. An adventure, quite possibly, and a heated one at that, but never a farce, sweetie. Never that.” He kissed her, and for long moments after that, she was lost to the distraction of him.

Of them together.

And it was everything she’d ever dreamed of in the days when she’d been lost. Thankfully, she was no longer that, for it happened at Christmas, this falling in love, and it was even better the second time around. This time marriage would prove so much different, and she couldn’t wait.

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A lady shouldn't worry over the opinions of others. Life happens as it should.

December 24, 1820

Christmas Eve Ball

Greystone Hall

Sussex, England

Lydia Ramsay, Countess of Greystone, stood to one side of the ballroom as her husband partnered Elsbeth in her first public waltz, unofficially introducing the newly turned nineteen-year-old young lady to society ahead of her Come Out which would be in the spring.

It was wonderous how their lives had changed in three years. Elsbeth was a beautiful young woman, as lithe and graceful as any earl's daughter should be. And Jackson seemed about to burst with pride as the waltz wound to a close. After Lydia married him, Elsbeth had done everything she could to make her transition from headmistress to countess easier.

It also helped that she'd been enrolled in her finishing school, which she continued to run despite the small storm of gossip that nearly closed it three years before. But since she'd married the earl and had not only his protection but his fierce defense of her verbally and Elsbeth's support as well, the expected fallout had never quite occurred. Yes, she'd lost a few students over the kerfuffle, but there had been many more families who'd lined up in order to place their girls in her school.

For the results of each girl she prepared to launch into society were quite impressive. Some had gone on to match brilliant matches while others were on track to become movers and shakers within the ton .

As for Lydia and Jackson, they would soon celebrate their third wedding anniversary, but in the meanwhile, they had decided to spend the Christmastide season in Sussex at his country estate, and in the fashion since they'd married, Jackson had revived the tradition of throwing a ball on Christmas Eve.

"Did you see me?" Elsbeth asked with breathless excitement and stars in her eyes as she lightly ran over to where Lydia stood. "My first public waltz and I didn't miss one step."

"You were amazing." As she smiled, Lydia gave the girl a hug. "I knew you would master it eventually."

"The trick is not to think about what my feet are doing," the young woman gushed as Jackson joined them. "And having a lovely partner who is a decent conversationalist."

"Ah, good. At least she gave me a compliment," the earl said with a smirk. "You've earned yourself some punch, and unless I miss my guess, there is a gaggle of young ladies near the door who have been trying to gain your attention for several minutes now."

Elsbeth craned her neck as she glanced in that direction. "Oh! It's some of the girls from finishing school. I invited them but didn't know if they would come from London." After she bussed his cheek, the girl moved to join them.

"How are you doing?" she quietly asked her husband. "Suffering from melancholy?" He'd struggled over the past few years knowing his daughter would soon be grown and making inroads into starting her own life.

“A bit, but each time I remember that Elsbeth is enjoying an exciting time of her life, and then I remember that I have you.” There was no denying the fondness in those intense sapphire eyes. “That takes away the sting and the apprehension.”

She couldn't help but smile. Was it any wonder that she loved him so much? “Do you have a moment? I would like a private word with you.”

Immediately, concern jumped into his eyes. “Is all well?”

“Yes.” With a nod and a hand on his arm, she hoped to set him at ease. “As well as it can be, I suppose, in this situation.” In fact, she couldn't quite believe it herself.

“Come with me.” As he slipped her hand through the crook of his elbow, Jackson led her through a side door that opened into his study, which waited on the far side of the ballroom. Once that thick oak panel closed behind them, he guided her toward his desk, and a few moments after lighting a candle, he turned to her. “What is amiss? You wouldn't have wanted a private word if all was well.”

“Perhaps I merely wished to share a few moments alone with my handsome husband. There is no shame in that.” Over the years, there had been plenty of times they'd sneaked away into a private room to share kisses and scandalous caresses either while attending society events or dodging Elsbeth's knowing gazes.

“Is that what this is, then?” he asked with his eyes darkening in desire and a barely audible growl in his lowered voice. “If it is nothing, I have no qualms in fulfilling any need you should have, for I am still quite addicted to you, Lydia.”

Flutters danced through her lower belly, but she would attend to her ever-present need of him in a moment. “Do you recall a few weeks ago when I didn't feel my best and we assumed that I'd contracted a stomach ailment?”

“Yes. Are you still feeling poorly?” Concern shadowed his eyes.

“I am, but shortly before we left London for this estate, I had a midwife in because I suspected I might be increasing. There are many of the same symptoms from the last time...”

“What?” His eyes rounded as he stared at her. “Are you saying...?”

She nodded. “Yes. After we assumed that I couldn’t conceive after what happened in my past with my first husband, I am with child. The midwife suggested I’m over three months along and that I should be showing soon.” But as she smoothed her palms along the front of her red velvet gown, already there was a bit of a bump there. “In early June, we should expect an infant in our midst.”

“A child. To be a father again.” Shock lay etched on his face while awe lingered in his voice. He took her hands in his, pulled her close, and peered into her eyes. “Are you certain?”

“Yes. My menses have been absent for a while, and the midwife said the symptoms were a definite sign the pregnancy was strong.” She swallowed around the lump of emotions in her throat. “I never thought it possible, but now that it has been confirmed, I feel as if I’m in a dream.” Cold worry coiled in her belly. “Are you happy?”

“Absolutely, I am. I’ve always wanted another child.”

“Perhaps an heir?”

“If fate is kind.” He nodded as a wide grin took possession of his sensual lips. “Bloody hell but I don’t know how to properly act. I want to shout this news from the rooftop.” When he tugged her into his arms, she looped her arms about his shoulders. “Have you told Elsbeth?”

“No, because I wanted to do that together. Besides, she deserves to have this moment

to herself tonight.” She frowned. “I hope she’ll be happy.”

“How could she not?” Then he chuckled. “The late spring shall prove busy for us, I think with a baby and launching Elsbeth into society.” Seconds later, he kissed her, and she gave herself up to the sheer bliss of being in his arms. When he pulled slightly away, he pressed his lips to her forehead. “You will make a wonderful mother. Elsbeth simply adores you.”

Quick tears stung her eyes. “Thank you. It has been a long time coming, but I am so excited.” Because she could, Lydia held his head between her palms and kissed him again. “I can’t wait to enter into this next phase of our future.”

“Neither can I.” His eyes sparkled in the dim illumination. “To think that none of this would have happened if I hadn’t come along that muddy road all those years ago and met you.” Seconds later, he bundled her into his embrace and simply held her. “Thank you for changing my life.”

She smiled. “Thank you for saving mine. Perhaps it was Christmas magic all along.”

At times, fate could be cruel, and that was when one needed to have faith and hope, for the times when fate played nicely, it was wonderful.

The End