



# Lusting for the Duke's Kiss (Lust and Longing of the Ton)

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**Category:** Historical

**Description:** Henrietta Arnold could have never imagined how easily her happiness would turn into disaster. When her husband deserts her a few hours after their wedding, her world is shattered in a million pieces. Feeling completely humiliated and disgraced, she vows to seal her heart and never let a man hurt her again. But little did she know that she would soon find herself surrendering a Duke's loving arms... Will her undeniable desire for him end up destroying her life once again?

Being the Duke of Warwick, Louis Montague is a wickedly handsome man who never bothered himself with foolish love stories. Even though his first encounter with Henrietta made his heart shiver, destiny wanted them to be apart until many years later. The moment he discovers the devastating fate of her marriage, the sparks inside him cannot be denied. While his passion for her flares inside him, he becomes more than determined to possess her. Will he ever convince her that he is an honorable man who would not settle for something less than true love?

As Henrietta tries to lay aside any doubts for a second chance at love, Louis holds a long buried secret that looms over their heads threatening to drive them apart once and for all. Will their passionate affair survive the exhausting battle with the ghosts of their past? Or will their delicate hearts be forever trapped in a vast net of secrets?

Lusting for the Dukes Kiss is a historical romance novel of approximately 60,000 words. No cheating, no cliffhangers, and a guaranteed happily ever after.

**Total Pages (Source):** 24

# Page 1

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## Chapter 1

She walked to the window, staring out at the unfamiliar garden. This was supposed to be her home. And now, there was no telling what was going to happen.

Breathe, Hetty , she told herself, as panic began to rise in her breast, once again. Just breathe.

But it was becoming increasingly difficult to know how to do that most basic of functions. Ever since she had awoken this morning to find that her husband of less than twenty-four hours had abandoned her.

She walked back to the desk, where the hastily scrawled note was still lying. She had found it this morning when she had awoken. Frank had insisted last night when they had retired, that they stay in separate rooms. Just for the night, he had told her, his blue eyes creased with concern. She was tired after their wedding and would appreciate a good night's sleep by herself. She had not argued with him, being nervous about her wedding night and all that it would entail. She had felt as if she were being given a reprieve that she had never expected.

She picked up the note, staring down at it, her eyes skimming over it without taking in a word. He must have stolen into her chambers, either last night after she was asleep, or early this morning, and left it there. She had not heard him.

I am supposed to be a newly married woman , she thought, in wonder. The start of her married life, as Mrs Henrietta Blackmore. A new woman. She had thought that she was leaving Miss Henrietta Arnold behind, forever. And now, everything had

been turned upside down, and she was reeling.

Focus , she told herself fiercely. Read it again. Perhaps it is not as bad as you think.

Taking a deep, ragged breath, she focused on the black ink, trying to turn it into words, rather than meaningless hieroglyphics. Frank's hand was not easy to read at the best of times, and this was the worst of them.

My Dear Hetty,

Sorry that I wasn't able to tell you this in person. I have discovered that I have changed my mind about being married. I simply cannot do it. I have grappled with a growing unease about our nuptials for months now but felt I was in too deep to back out of the arrangements.

Now, the reality of what we have done has sunk in, and I cannot keep on this path. I wish you the very best for the future. I truly do.

Frank

Her eyes blurred with tears as a fresh surge of pain stabbed at her heart. In fury, she screwed up the note, throwing it into the fire. She watched the parchment curling, blackening until it disappeared into ashes. She sank to the floor, the skirt of her gown spilling out around her, putting her face into her hands, as a low moan of pain forced its way out of her throat.

How could he have done this to me?

Desperately, she grappled to make sense of the situation. Frank Blackmore had given no indication of cold feet, despite what he said in the note. He had been an attentive, polite suitor. There had been no passion between them, but Hetty had not been raised

to expect that, anyway. All that she had wanted was a good husband who would take care of her.

Frank had seemed to tick every box in that regard. He was moderately wealthy, charming, and pragmatic. He had purchased a new townhouse for them, in the village of Derrington, in her home county of Wiltshire. It wasn't that far from the country estate where she had been raised.

Hetty shuddered, her hands slowly falling away from her face, as she gazed around the room. The furniture, all newly purchased, for their life together. This was not a room she was familiar with at all. She had only been through the house once, before her wedding day, and Frank had dragged her quickly through it. It wasn't her home. Not yet. And now, she was all alone here amongst strangers. She wasn't even familiar with the servants, yet.

I am abandoned. I am an abandoned wife. What is to become of me? The shame of it. The scandal.

Hetty jumped at a sharp rap on the chamber door. Hastily wiping away the tears with the back of her hand, she quickly stood up, taking a deep breath. Her mother had taught her that no matter the situation, no matter how heavy the heart, one must never show it, especially not to the servants.

The door opened, and Dickinson, the butler, stood there, gazing at her impassively.

"Mrs Blackmore," he said, in a slightly gravelly voice. "There is a gentleman at the door, who says that he must speak with you urgently." The butler handed over a white card, stepping back.

Hetty stared down at the card. Mr Joseph Baldwin , it read. Solicitor.

Her heart clenched. Why was a solicitor at her door, asking to speak to her urgently? As she followed Dickinson down the stairs, her heart thumping painfully in her chest, she had a premonition that it wasn't about anything good.

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Mr Joseph Baldwin was a portly man with a florid complexion and wiry white hair. Sitting on the edge of the green chaise longue in the drawing room, he balanced a cup of tea in one hand, staring at her with eagle sharp eyes.

“You are very silent, Mrs Blackmore,” he said slowly. “Have you quite understood what I have just told you?”

Hetty felt as if she were going to faint. Desperately, she dug her nails into her forearm. She simply could not believe what he had just said.

Frank had sold the townhouse. Their newly purchased house that she had only spent one night in as its mistress was no longer her home. Not that it had ever been given a chance to be one. The speed of the events – Frank's abandonment of her, and now selling the house, without her knowledge or consent – was simply too much to take in.

She sat there, stunned, staring at the man who had just delivered the news.

“I ... I understand, what you have told me,” she said eventually. “What I do not understand is how this has happened. When it happened.”

The solicitor cleared his throat, looking uncomfortable. “Mr Blackmore, your husband approached my solicitor's office a week ago,” he said, fidgeting on the edge of the longue. “He told me that he needed to sell this house urgently and would be open to offers. I was able to secure a buyer who wishes to take possession of the

house immediately.”

“Immediately?” she echoed, hearing her voice as if from far away. “What does that mean for me?”

The man’s eyes boggled. “It means, madam, that you must vacate this house within fourteen days from today’s date,” he said, his mouth twisting. “Your husband has not intimated this to you at all?”

Hetty’s face flushed painfully. “My husband has walked out on me, Mr Baldwin,” she replied. “He left a note for me, informing me of his abandonment. I woke up this morning and found it.” She took a deep, shuddering breath. “He did not tell me anything in this note, about the fact he had sold the house without my knowledge. He has not seen fit to tell me anything.”

Mr Baldwin looked shocked. “I thought it odd that he wanted me to come here and tell you myself,” he said. “Most irregular, but I agreed. You have the note, informing you that he has abandoned you?”

Hetty’s heart sank, thinking of the note, which was now ashes in the fire. She had been too impetuous in doing that. She hadn’t thought that perhaps she might need proof of what he had done to her. What he was still doing.

She shook her head. “I ... I burnt it in a fit of passion,” she said, appalled to hear the tremor in her voice. “I was not thinking clearly. Mr Baldwin, is there any way – any way at all – that this sale can be reversed?”

He shook his head slowly, his face creased in sympathy. “I am afraid not, Mrs Blackmore. The legalities have all been completed.” He cleared his throat again. “Mr and Mrs Howe are now the legal owners of the property. I am afraid that you have no choice but to vacate as soon as possible.”

Hetty was silent as she digested this. Not only was she an abandoned wife, but now she had no home, as well. He had taken everything away from her.

Why? Why has he done this to me?

“It is a pity that you burnt that note,” continued the solicitor, shaking his head. “Even though your husband’s abandonment is obvious, you do not have proof that was his intention, now ... if you decide to appeal to the courts, to seek a divorce, that is ...”

Hetty looked at him so horrified that for a moment she simply could not speak. The word hung in the air between them like a dirty piece of laundry. Divorce.

Her mind reeled once more. No, she could not do such a thing. Divorce was virtually unheard of amongst her class. The taint of it was so foul that she doubted any lady could recover from it. It was bad enough being abandoned, but divorced?

Her life was over. She would never recover from this scandal.

Mr Baldwin sighed heavily. “Of course, there is proof that your husband sought sale of this property prior to your wedding day,” he said thoughtfully. “There may be just cause to claim that such an act shows that he intended to do this. That it was a calculated act ...”

Hetty’s colour deepened. The shame of it. Of course, it was all calculated. Frank had claimed in the note that he had only just realised he could not go through with the marriage – that even though he had been having cold feet in the lead up to it, that his decision to flee was spontaneous.

He had lied. He had been lying to her for quite a while.

He had planned this. He had calculatingly sold their house without her knowledge

before they had even exchanged their vows. He had intended to desert her. He had just been waiting until they were legally wed, to do it.

Why? For the love of God ... why?

She cast her mind back, desperately, searching for clues. Trying to piece together the puzzle. But there was simply nothing that she could think of. He had always acted as if he were thrilled to be marrying her, in a muted way, of course.

He had always been a proper gentleman, never trying to take liberties with her, as she had heard that some fiancés did. Frank had never even tried to kiss her. A dry peck on the cheek was the most intimate contact that they had ever had.

It had pleased her during their engagement that he was such a gentleman. She had thought that it showed how much respect he had for her, that he was unwilling to compromise her before their wedding. But now, it didn't seem that way at all. Now, with the benefit of hindsight, it seemed that Frank had no desire for her.

He had never cared for her. He had never intended to live alongside her, as husband and wife. This had all been part of a larger plan. He had been pretending all along.

Her humiliation was complete.

Quickly, she stood up. "Mr Baldwin, thank you for coming here," she said quietly. "But I am afraid that I must lie down now. I am sure you will understand the shock of what you have just told me, and what else has happened to me today." She took a deep breath. "I shall vacate the property within the fourteen days that you have specified."

The solicitor stood up hastily, almost spilling his cup as he placed it on a side table. "Of course, of course Mrs Blackmore," he said. "Quite understandable in the



circumstances.” He paused. “You have my sympathy. That Mr Blackmore could do such a thing to such a charming and lovely lady as yourself ...”

Hetty took a deep breath. “Yes, well, it has happened, and I just have to deal with it now. Good day, Mr Baldwin. I am sure you have done everything that you must.”

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After the solicitor had taken his leave, Hetty wandered around the silent house, going into every room. She trailed a hand over the furniture. She was growing detached now; she had never had a chance to make any of this her own, and soon, it would all be gone, at any rate. Best that she had not grown attached. To be ripped out of this house at a later time would be even worse.

Eventually, she returned to her chamber, firmly shutting the door behind her. She was so weary; all that she wanted to do was lie down and drift into sleep. But she couldn't do that yet. First, she had to write a letter and inform her parents as to what had happened. She only had fourteen days before she had to leave this house.

She sat down at the desk, dipping the quill in the inkpot. Her bottom lip trembled as she began to write, her hand racing across the parchment.

Dear Papa and Mama,

I write to you with a heavy heart. Something most grievous has occurred, which I am still trying to process. I find that I need your help.

Frank, my husband, has deserted me. I woke up this morning to a brief note, saying that he could not stay married to me. More than that, a solicitor arrived on my doorstep, informing me that he sold the house a week ago. I have only fourteen days before I must vacate the premises before the new owners take possession.

To say that I am shocked by the brutality of these events is an understatement. That my new husband could have been so callous, so cruel, simply takes my breath away. I am trying very hard to keep functioning, but it is all becoming so very hard. I simply do not know what to do.

Please, can you come to me, and assist me?

Your loving daughter,

Henrietta

She folded the letter, sealing it. She would take it to Dickinson, soon, and he would make sure that it was sent. But she couldn't do it right now. Her limbs felt so heavy she didn't even know how she would walk to the bed.

She sat at the desk for a long time, staring at the wall before dragging herself across the room and collapsing on the bed.

She curled herself into a ball, her shoulders heaving. Hot, salty tears streamed down her face. She sobbed, piteously, letting out all of the pain and confusion of the morning. It felt cathartic, almost cleansing.

She couldn't deny the truth any longer. Frank had never wanted to marry her – or not for herself, at any rate. All of his charm had been a front. She recalled all the times he had complimented her, saying she was beautiful and so very clever. How much he was looking forward to making her his wife. All lies.

She sobbed harder, staring down at her hand, where her new wedding band gleamed gold. It was important to him that she was legally his wife. So, it had all been for her dowry. He had wanted her money, that was all.

The nest egg her father had been keeping for her to assure her protection throughout her life. She knew that it had already been released to Frank. As soon as he had it, he had enacted his plan, setting the wheels in motion.

She was disgraced, an abandoned wife, without even a roof over her head. A wave of pure anger swept through her. She hated him, more than she hated anyone in her life. Better that he had died than done this. Better that he had left her a widow, than this. At least there was honour in being a widow. At least she would have status, even if she would still have been an object of pity.

She sobbed, shaking with rage. She had trusted a man, a charming man, who had promised her the world. And now, her life was lying in ashes around her.

I will never trust a man again, she vowed, as another wave of anger threatened to choke her. I will never put my life in the hands of a man again except for my father.

She curled up into a tighter ball, repeating the vow to herself as if it were a prayer.

## Page 2

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### Chapter 2

Hetty sat in the corner of the room as her mother moved around the space, huffing as she packed her trunk. The older lady's chin wobbled with disbelief as she carefully folded the gowns, and Hetty could see that her hands were shaking.

"My poor daughter," she breathed, pausing to look at Hetty. "To think that he has done this to you! The shame of it!"

Hetty's heart twisted. She didn't know whether she felt better that her parents were finally here. They had arrived just this morning, two days after she had sent her letter to them, informing them of her dire situation. They had swept into the house, taking control.

At first, she had been relieved. But now, it was as if their presence was underlining it was real. Her shame, and the scandal, that she was about to be enveloped in.

Her father had been curt, as was his habit, and immediately sprang into practical action. He was out in Derrington now, arranging for the sale of all the household furniture. He had already been to see Mr Baldwin, the solicitor, to confirm the sale of the house. He had been tight-lipped with anger when he had returned from that meeting.

And now, her mother was helping Hetty pack her clothes. They were taking her back to Hillsworth House, their country estate, first thing in the morning. They had informed her that it was happening, and she hadn't put up any argument. She felt that she was simply riding a wave, a passive thing, being swept away by circumstances

beyond her control.

Her mother mumbled under her breath, returning to the packing. She held up a gown in her arms, her lips thinning.

“Part of your trousseau,” she said, shaking her head. “Along with so many of these new gowns. How can it be that only weeks ago we were at the dressmakers getting these made.” She paused, staring at Hetty again. “You were so happy. I was so happy, thinking of my only daughter, married at last. And now, it is a whole sorry mess. I do not know what to make of it at all.”

Hetty took a deep breath. “I do not know what to make of it either, Mama. It is far worse for me than it is for you.” Her heart started to pound in her chest, and she felt a sick wave of shame wash over her. “I am ruined now. Frank has abandoned me. I have no home of my own. How do you think I feel? I am disgraced.”

“Oh, Hetty,” said her mother, tears springing into her eyes. “I did not mean to be insensitive, my dearest. I just feel so affronted, on your behalf.” She sighed deeply. “We were all hoodwinked by Frank Blackmore. He comes from a good family, and there was no indication he was the rake he turned out to be. How could any of us have known that this would happen?”

“No one could,” whispered Hetty. “Frank could charm the birds off the trees. He pretended he was sincere in the regard that he had for me. He pretended that he respected me and sincerely wanted me as his wife.”

“It is no reflection on you, Hetty,” said her mother fiercely. “You are a credit to your father and I. Frank Blackmore did not deserve you.” Her voice dropped to a whisper. “Just between us, I argued with your father at the beginning of your engagement that we could have done better for you. You had many suitors, after all, some who were better placed than Mr Blackmore. But your father insisted that he was the best suitor,

and now look at what has happened ...”

Hetty felt tears spring into her eyes again, but she bit her lip, determined not to cry. She had cried so much in the last few days she was weary of it. It didn't help. It didn't help her situation. No amount of tears was going to change the fact that she was deserted, without a home, forced to crawl back to her parents with her tail between her legs.

This was never supposed to happen to her. She was five and twenty; she had waited so long for a suitable suitor. Her mother was right – since her debut, gentlemen had flocked around her, but she had been cautious, not wanting to rush into anything. It wasn't the possibility of love that had consumed her – she had never been particularly romantic, and besides, there had only been one brief encounter with a gentleman, years ago, that had ever made her heart quicken. She had accepted that perhaps she was just not meant for romantic love; perhaps she was just too practical for such an emotion.

Frank Blackmore had been different. For starters, he wooed her gradually, seeming to sense her caution. And while she had never fallen wildly in love with him, she had respected him, thinking that he was a fine gentleman.

She had believed that he would protect her and provide for her. And there had been a small voice in the back of her mind that had whispered to her that she wasn't getting any younger. That if she was too fussy, she might just end up on the shelf.

And so, she had taken the plunge. And look where it had got her. A deserted wife, with nothing. She did not know how she was going to bear it.

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It was a subdued dinner that night. They all sat around the new dining table, which

would soon belong to someone else, picking at the roasted beef that the cook had prepared.

Hetty suddenly realised that she had to deal with the staff, as well. She needed to tell them that their services were no longer required, that they should seek other positions. She could feel a slight ache begin to throb in her temples. She would do it first thing tomorrow morning.

She glanced at her father, who was sitting at the head of the table, a grim look on his face. He stabbed viciously at his meat.

“If I see that man again,” he suddenly announced in a booming voice, which caused both Hetty and her mother to jump, “I am going to challenge him to a duel. I want to run a blade through his black heart.”

“Husband,” said her mother, looking shocked. “There is no need for such language!”

“Is there not?” asked her father, frowning as he stared at her. “The man abandoned our daughter the day after her wedding. He sold their home from beneath her. I think they are two very good reasons for colourful language regarding the scoundrel.”

Hetty stared at her father. “Papa, I understand how frustrated you are,” she said in a trembling voice. “I am sorry that you have been put in this position. That this shame has been put upon you ...”

“Henrietta,” he said, raising his voice again. “I do not want to hear you talk like that! The shame is that man’s alone. You are innocent in all of this. Do not ever feel that you are in any way responsible for this debacle.”

Hetty hung her head so that he could not see the tears, which suddenly stung her eyes. She couldn’t ask for more supportive parents. And yet, even though her father was

vehement in his denial that this was in any way her fault, a small kernel of doubt was lodged firmly in her chest, and she could not get rid of it.

Was there something deficit in her that had caused Frank to act in such a brutal way? Had she said the wrong thing, done the wrong thing, to make this happen? If she had been a different woman, might this not have occurred? She had thought that he admired her greatly, that he respected her, even if he wasn't passionately in love with her. But he had treated her worse than he would treat a stray dog that had just wandered onto his doorstep.

Perhaps it was her fault, in some way that she could not understand.

"The trunks are all packed," said her mother, picking up her wine glass. "Everything is in order. We will be ready to leave first thing in the morning." She paused, gazing around the dining room with sad eyes. "That it has come to this. The solicitor was quite adamant that there was no way to reverse the sale of the house, even in these extraordinary circumstances?"

Her father shook his head, grimly. "The scoundrel was clever," he said bitterly. "He has done everything by the book. As soon as he had secured Hetty's dowry, he went ahead with the sale. It is all legally binding, and there is no recourse. Frank Blackmore had the right to sell this house, without Hetty's consent, of course. That is the law of the land."

Her mother sighed heavily. "Well, I doubt that Hetty would want to live here alone anyway after what has happened." She turned to her daughter. "It is best that you come home, my dearest. We can protect you from the full force of the scandal, which shall inevitably come, once word gets out as to what has happened here."

"Of course it is for the best that Hetty returns to us," said her father, irritably. "There is no question of that. But it still makes my blood boil that he has got away with this.



That he has sailed off into the sunset with Hetty's dowry as well as the money from this house." He turned to Hetty, staring at her with intense eyes. "He never hinted at anything that foreshadowed this? Any mention of someone that might have spurred him on to do such a drastic thing?"

Hetty's blood ran cold. "What do you mean, Papa?"

Her father's mouth twisted. "I am not sure exactly. But rest assured, I shall be making enquiries as to where he is and what he is doing now. I shall find the rat and find out what he is up to. There is more to this story than meets the eye."

There was a strained silence in the room, as they all contemplated what had driven Frank Blackmore to such extreme actions.

"He did not say anything much in the note he left me," said Hetty, in a trembling voice. "Only that he had been having doubts about the marriage in the months leading up to it. He claimed that his decision to flee was spontaneous, that he simply could not go ahead with it."

"Poppycok," growled her father. "We all understand that this was a calculated act. The sale of the house prior to the wedding proves it. He made very sure that he had secured your dowry and that the marriage certificate was signed before he acted, making anything that was yours legally his own. This was no spur of the moment choice. He could have backed out of the engagement at any point, but he chose not to."

"I shall never speak to the Blackmore family again," declared her mother, in a high, thready voice. "They are dead to us now. To think that one of their members acted in this detestable way. His mother will die of the shame of it. We are not the only ones who will suffer from that man's actions."

“I do not wish to associate with them, either,” said her father thoughtfully. “However, they may be useful, right now. As soon as we return to Hillsworth House, I shall be calling on them. Mrs Blackmore might know something about him that we do not. I shall press on her that it is in her benefit, as well as our own, to confess if there is anything about that man they have been hiding.”

“Such as?” asked her mother with wide eyes.

Her father sighed deeply. “Who knows, wife? He might be hiding any number of things. Perhaps he is a degenerate gambler or drinker. Perhaps he needed a large sum of money for dark purposes. It is possible.”

Hetty felt her heart thump painfully in her chest. She had never considered such things, but then, why would she? Frank Blackmore had appeared to be a perfectly respectable gentleman. And she was a young lady, who was sheltered from the seedy parts of life that her father had just spoken of. She had read her share of Gothic novels but believed that it could not be true, that people in real life could be so degenerate.

She had been sheltered and cossetted, but that was expected, for a young lady of her class. It was not unusual, in the least. It might have continued that way for the rest of her life if this had not happened to her.

She almost wished that it was true. That he was a degenerate, in some manner, and it would dissolve this kernel of doubt that this was somehow her fault. That if she had just been more charming, more beautiful, or more gifted, he would not have done this to her. He would not have rejected her in such a brutal manner. He would not have made her a laughingstock, an object of pity, in this appalling way.

She repeated the vow to herself. This would never happen to her again. No man would ever get the chance to humiliate her like this in the future.

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The next day, she climbed into the carriage, settling herself beside her mother. Her trunks, containing all of her personal items, had been tied to it half an hour ago. She was ready, at last, to leave it all behind.

She gazed out at the townhouse, with a yearning, heavy heart. She knew that she would never see it again, or if she did, only as she passed by. She tried to imagine herself passing it at some future point, and how she would feel. Would she have to avert her eyes, the pain still as strong as it was, now? Or would the passage of time heal her fully, and she would be able to gaze upon it without a flicker of emotion?

Her eyes stung with tears as she stared at it. A two-storey sandstone house, with long windows. A high wrought-iron fence. A manicured front garden, with a line of rose bushes flanking the path towards the front door. Her new home that had been snatched from her before she had even had a chance to become familiar with it.

She heard the crack of the coachman's whip, and they were away, the wheels slowly turning. Resolutely, she turned to the front, not looking back.

It had only been a few days ago that she had been a blushing bride, tripping down the aisle in her ivory wedding dress, a train of gossamer trailing behind her. Frank had stood at the altar, gazing at her approvingly as she had made her way slowly towards him. She had never imagined, in her wildest dreams, what was about to happen. How the dream was about to come crashing down around her.

She was still Mrs Frank Blackmore, but in name only. How could she claim to be a married lady? Because she had exchanged vows and signed a piece of paper? Frank had not even lain with her on their wedding night. She was still a maiden, as innocent as ever. In all respects, she was still Miss Henrietta Arnold. But the world did not see her that way any longer.

As the carriage turned the corner, heading out of Derrington, she contemplated what lay ahead of her. Back to her old life, as a dependent in her parents' home, withering away, year by year. She suddenly knew that she could not endure it, but equally, what alternative was there?

She was a married woman. Divorce was out of the question. She could never marry again. She had entered a strange nether world, where she was neither married nor single. What was to become of her?

She bit her lip so hard that she almost drew blood. She must secure her future, in some way. She just had to think it through as to how that was going to be possible.

There were so few options open to women. If she were a man, she could take off, seek her fortune somewhere else, leave the past behind her. But that was not possible for a lady of her class. She was bound as surely as if she were a bird in a gilded cage.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 1:16 am*

### Chapter 3

Hetty wandered down the garden path, staring at the familiar rolling green fields, in the distance. Hillsworth House was nestled in a valley. When she was a girl, she had happily explored those fields, without a care in the world.

Della, the family cocker spaniel, trailed at her feet, gazing up at her adoringly. She smiled, reaching down to caress the dog's silky golden ears.

"What do you think," she whispered. "Shall we go further afield today? Shall we go to the apple tree?"

The dog yelped excitedly as if she understood every word that the woman had just said. Hetty laughed, suddenly feeling her spirits lift, just a little. It would be good to go for a longer walk; she would not feel so constrained by the atmosphere in the house. Her mother's eyes constantly watching her, anxiously, as she moved about. Her father, trying to jolly her out of her low spirits. It was becoming just a little tedious.

She opened the gate, stepping beyond the boundary, her heart lifting further at the beauty of the day. A bright summer's day, with a clear blue sky and a sun so bright that she had to squint slightly as she walked, shielding her face with her hand. Della ran ahead, as excited as she was, to be let loose.

It had been three weeks since she had returned to Hillsworth House. Three weeks, in which she had thought constantly, almost obsessively, about what her future held. And now, a plan was forming in her mind. A plan that would protect her from ever

being hurt in the way that Frank Blackmore had hurt her.

It was only last night that the epiphany had come to her, as she had been kneeling at the foot of her bed, saying her nightly prayers. It was as if God himself had reached down, placing a hand upon her forehead, and whispered it into her ear.

You could become a nun, that voice had whispered. You could join a convent. You would never have to deal with the world and all its pain and misery again.

She thought about it as she strode through the field towards the large apple tree in the distance. It was perfect, the perfect solution to the conundrum that she found herself in. If she joined an order and took the vows to become a nun, then she would have her own life, free of being dependent on her parents.

She could never marry again. That path had gone. And besides, she didn't want to marry again. She never wanted to be vulnerable in that way; to be at the mercy of a man. Even if she was free to do so, she still would not want to do it. The very thought of it was anathema to her.

She reached the apple tree, panting slightly from the exertion. Della started to run in circles around the large trunk, barking ecstatically, almost delirious with the freedom of stretching her legs. Hetty looked up, contemplating the tree. The branches were almost overladen with their fruit, shiny, bright red apples, so large and tempting that she smiled in delight. Carefully, she reached up, picking a perfect specimen. It felt heavy and hot in her hand.

She sat down against the tree, leaning against the trunk as she took the first bite of the fruit. It was juicy and delicious. For several moments, she contentedly chewed, gazing out over the valley and Hillsworth House in the distance. It looked like a giant black square, from this vantage point, spreading out before her eyes.

Her gaze drifted to the tree. There was the remnant of an old swing that her father had built for her, back when she was little, swinging from a low branch. He had taken her here often, in those days. They would walk side by side and pick apples together before he would push her on the swing. She could still recall the wind whipping her pigtails behind her, as she had soared into the air, imagining that she was a bird with wings.

The swing was old and weathered, now, the rope fraying. For a moment, she saw herself as a little girl, laughing delightedly as she swung upon it, that feeling of pure freedom. There was no way that she could do that now. The rope would break clean away, with her weight, even if she managed to fit herself onto the wooden seat.

All things go , she thought, a trifle sadly, her mood evaporating, just a little . You can never go back to the way that things were.

It was true. She no longer belonged here in her family home. Oh, she knew that her parents would violently disagree with her and claim that this was her home forever if she wanted it to be. But the truth was she had outgrown it, just like the swing. She didn't want to be a dependent here, aging alongside her parents, as much as she fiercely loved the place. She wanted to carve out her own life.

Only weeks ago, she had thought she finally had the chance to do it. She was ready to become a wife and the mistress of her own home. But that chance had been snatched away from her for good. God had other plans for her.

It wasn't that she was particularly religious. She believed in God, of course, and faithfully attended Sunday services. She prayed nightly. But the thought of joining a religious order, and taking the veil, had never occurred to her before. She was honest enough with herself to know that she did not have a pure vocation for that life.

But what opportunities were available to women who desired to carve out their own

way in the world? Hardly any, particularly for one of her class. Besides, a convent would be like a sanctuary for her. Within its walls, she would be safe from the pain of what lay beyond.

She could dedicate herself to good work on behalf of the needy. It would be a rewarding life, far more fulfilling than attending the tedious rounds of afternoon teas in district homes, on the arm of her mother, whispered about behind hands.

She chewed the apple thoughtfully. Out here, in the wide world, she would forever be tainted by that scandal, an object of pity. But inside the walls of a convent, she could shed it all, like a snake shedding its skin. She could become herself, once again.

She thought of her parents and how they would react when she told them. She knew they would be opposed to the idea, but she was a woman of five and twenty, after all. She was old enough to make up her own mind about her own life. And they would not stop her, once they saw how determined she was. They probably would not even blame her.

Her father had been true to his word in the ensuing weeks since she had returned here. He had called upon Mrs Blackmore, Frank's mother, to inform her what her son had done to his daughter, and to try to ascertain if he had been hiding something sinister from them all, that had spurred him on to do what he had done.

Mrs Blackmore had been horrified, weeping copiously, barely able to speak. She had not known anything about why her son would behave in such a way. Or at least, that was what she had claimed.

Her father had hired a private investigator, trying to track where her errant husband was now. But so far, they had not had any success. Frank seemed to have disappeared entirely, fallen off the face of the earth. Hetty didn't know if she was disappointed or glad that she would never have to confront him again.



It was over. She might never have any answers to what had been done. It was up to her, now, to pick herself up, dust herself off, and continue with her life to the best of her capabilities.

She would be a victim of circumstance no longer.

She jumped slightly at the feel of a soft head suddenly falling into her lap. Della was panting hard, her pink tongue lolling out of her mouth. Hetty reached down, caressing her, pulling at the long, velvety ears.

“Well, we should get back,” she said, gazing at the dog. “I have reached a decision, Della. And I really shouldn’t delay in telling Papa and Mama.”

The dog gazed at her, with large, limpid brown eyes, for all the world looking as if she was smiling. As if she was privy to the secret that was burning in Hetty’s chest.

They set off across the green field. Hetty tossed the apple core into the distance. Her soul expanded slightly.

She could become the master of her own destiny. She just had to convince her parents that it was a good idea.

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She arrived back just in time for luncheon, barely having time to wash her hands before she entered the long dining room. Sometimes, if Papa were out, she and her mother would simply eat a quick luncheon in the kitchen, but if he was here, it was always more formal.

“There you are, Hetty,” said her mother, frowning slightly. “Where did you disappear to? I looked out of the window, expecting to see you in the garden, but you were

nowhere in sight.”

Hetty suppressed the irritation that rose instinctively in her breast at her mother’s words. Mama meant well, but she wasn’t ten years old anymore. It was yet another reason why she needed to leave and carve out her own life.

You will have more rules and regulations in a convent , said a small voice, in her head. You will not be freer there than you are here.

Firmly, she ignored it. She couldn’t afford to think along those lines.

“I am sorry, Mama,” she said, as she sat down, unfolding her napkin. “It is such a beautiful day, and I felt like stretching my legs. I journeyed to the apple tree.”

Her father smiled indulgently. “Is that old swing still there that I made you all those years ago?”

Hetty smiled, too. “It is, Papa. But it is a little worse for wear now. However, the apples on the tree are as delicious as they always have been.”

There was no further conversation, for several moments, as they commenced eating. Hetty felt her heart start to quicken. She needed to tell them, but how could she bring it up?

Just do it , she told herself fiercely.

She took a deep breath. “I have been thinking long and hard about my future,” she started, gazing from one to the other.

They both looked up from their soup.

“What do you mean, dear?” asked her mother in a distracted voice.

“I do not wish to burden you for an indefinite period,” she continued, her heart racing harder. “All of this has been so unexpected. I appreciate the fact that you both have helped me, in my worst of moments, but I do not wish to reside at Hillsworth House for the rest of my life.”

They both looked stunned.

“Henrietta,” said her father, frowning. “There is simply nowhere else for you to go at the moment. And you are safe and protected in our home. It is your home, too. Never forget that.”

She took another deep breath. “I know, and I am so very grateful for it. But I have made a decision.” She paused momentarily. “I have decided that I wish to join a convent. I wish to become a nun.”

If they had looked stunned before, it was as nothing compared to the shock on their faces now. For a moment, no one spoke.

“A nun?” her mother whispered, looking horrified. “You wish to join a religious order, for the rest of your life?”

Hetty nodded. “I do, Mama.”

“Henrietta,” said her father, his frown deepening. “This is utter madness. I understand that you desire to escape from what has happened, but this is not the answer ...”

“Papa,” she interrupted. “With respect, I believe it is very much the answer. I would live a life of contemplation and service. It would be a selfless path, and it is one that I desire very much.”

Her mother looked doubtful. “Hetty, you have no vocation,” she said, in a shocked voice. “You are not called by God for such a life. It would stifle you ...”

She felt another flash of irritation. “Mama, I must disagree with you. While I am not the most pious of ladies, my faith in God is absolute. What could be nobler than sacrificing one’s own ego at the altar?”

“It is not about that, my girl,” said her father tartly. “Your mother is right. You have no vocation for such a life. You never once mentioned a calling to it prior to your marriage.” He paused, gazing at her intently. “You are hurt and grieving, Hetty. That scoundrel Blackmore did you wrong. But running away to a convent – throwing your life away – is wrong. You would regret it for the rest of your days ...”

“What else is open to me?” she burst out, feeling on the verge of tears. “I do not wish to be dependent on you forever. I am an abandoned wife with no hope of ever marrying again. Must I sit here, every day of my life, withering away, through lack of purpose?” She took a deep, ragged breath. “This is the only course available for me, where I could lead a somewhat fulfilling life. If I stay here, I am forever branded as the deserted wife, enshrouded in scandal. I cannot endure it ...”

Her parents were silent, gazing at her sadly.

“Please,” she begged, fighting back the tears. “I know that this is hard for you to understand. But I am a grown woman, and it grieves me, feeling as if I am trapped like a dragonfly in amber in this house.” She paused. “You have both raised me to be an independent thinker, despite my sex. I am grateful for it. And that independence of thought is what brings me to this choice, now. I am capable of making decisions about my own life.”

Her mother picked up her napkin, dabbing her eyes. Her father continued to gaze at her sorrowfully. A weight of emotion fell over the table, so thick that it was almost

like a black cloud.

She did not want to hurt her parents or make them feel that they had not done the very best for her in this awful situation. They had. But appeasing them was not what she could focus on at the moment. And she should have a say in how her own life was going to unfurl, from this point onwards.

She understood their concerns, particularly about whether she was suitable for the life of a nun. She knew that they were only trying to save her from a potentially wrong decision made in the heat of the moment. But it was not their decision to make, and they had to understand that.

“Perhaps you should sleep on it a little further,” said her father eventually. “Do not rush into anything, Hetty. There is no time frame. You might feel very differently about it in a few weeks’ time, than now. I know that you think you will not, but it is possible.”

Hetty nodded cautiously. “I will reflect on it further, but I must stress that I am resolved to this path,” she said slowly. “Do I have your permission, at least, to write to some convents, to enquire about the possibility? I promise that I shall weigh up all options carefully.”

Her father nodded. “You can enquire if that is what you desire,” he said, frowning a little. “There is no harm in that. I just do not want you to commit to this path immediately. Will you promise me that?”

Hetty sighed deeply. “I promise, Papa. And thank you for your understanding.” She looked down into her half-eaten soup bowl. She had lost her appetite. “Could I be excused from the table?”

Her father nodded. “Of course.”

Her mother refused to look at her. Hetty could see she was still struggling not to cry.

Her heart lurched. Her mother had wanted her only daughter married. She had hoped that she would have grandchildren one day. She had been looking forward to it so very much.

And now, that hope was gone, forever. Just as her own hopes and dreams were gone, as well.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 1:16 am*

### Chapter 4

Hetty gazed out the drawing room window. There was a messenger approaching the front door, and she could see that he held several letters in his hand. Her heart started to pound in her chest, and she turned and ran out of the room to open the door herself before Milton, the butler, could get there.

The man looked surprised as she reeled the door open. He obviously wasn't used to being greeted by young ladies of the house. Before he could say anything, she took the letters, smiling vaguely. She had already forgotten about him by the time she closed the door, running back into the drawing room. She realised that her hands were shaking.

Quickly, she sorted through them. Two were for her father, but three of the letters were addressed to her. Her heartbeat quickened further. They were surely the first responses to the letters that she had sent out to various convents, last week, requesting information on their communities, and the process of joining their orders.

With trembling hands, she broke the seal on the first letter, sinking into a seat to read it through properly. This one was from the Sisters of the Blessed Virgin, who had a large convent in Surrey. In a neat hand, the letter outlined the order's chief work was tending the local poor community, and the steps to become a member of the order. It was signed by a woman called Mother Agnes.

The other two letters were equally informative; one was from the Sisters of St Cecilia, who had a convent in Essex, and the other from one further away, close to the Scottish border, in Northumbria. All three letters seemed enthusiastic about

accepting her to their orders.

She set them down, her mind whirring. It was hard to make a decision about which one would be the best, but make a decision she must. However, she had promised her father that she would not act rashly. She had written to two other orders, and she should wait for their replies before she took it any further. In the meantime, she could pore over these letters at her leisure, to try to ascertain which seemed more suitable.

Her parents hadn't talked about it with her since she had made her announcement at luncheon that day. Perhaps they believed that if they left the topic alone, she would lose enthusiasm for the idea. But instead, the idea to join an order had grown in her mind and her heart. She was fervently convinced now that it was the only path for her.

Sometimes, she would get a twinge of misgiving. Once, she had thought about the fact that she would never become a mother, and her heart had twisted. But then, she had recovered herself. She couldn't become a mother now, anyway. It was best to put that desire firmly behind her. Besides, if she chose well, she might be able to work with children, which would satisfy her thwarted maternal instincts.

Another night, just as she had been drifting off to sleep, she had started awake, her heart pounding. She realised that she would die a maiden, that she would never know what it was like to be touched intimately by a man. But then, that concern had lessened, too, when she remembered the talk her mother had with her the night before her wedding day.

Mama had been red with embarrassment, but ploughed on, talking about doing her duty for her husband, and that it was often uncomfortable and awkward, but that it was just what a married lady had to do. And she would be rewarded at the end with a beautiful baby for her trouble.



Hetty sighed now, thinking about that conversation. Her mother had not intimated at all that there was any pleasure in the act for the lady. But sometimes, she awoke out of sleep, her heart racing, feeling a peculiar yearning for something she did not understand. Her body would be flushed and restless. Perhaps it was just dreaming; she really wasn't sure.

She hadn't even been kissed by a gentleman. Frank had always demurred, insisting that he respected her too much to compromise her in any manner. There had been no passion between them, and quite frankly, she was convinced now that the rumoured physical love that could exist between a man and a woman was just a myth. A story. Something that was invented by novelists and poets.

She carefully folded the letters. She was not going to miss out on anything by becoming a nun. The physical act, between a man and a woman, was for the man's pleasure alone. She had probably been saved a great trial by Frank's desertion. And better to remain chaste and celibate than risk her life lying in tatters again, at any rate. It wasn't as if she had any choice in that matter, regardless.

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That afternoon, Hetty took Della for another long walk, past the apple tree, and into the next field. It was another glorious day; the sun was high in the sky, and there were fields of wild irises in the distance, wilting beneath the summer sun, the purple of their blooms seeming to melt before her vision. It was so very beautiful that she forgot everything, sprinting into the midst of it, her heart hammering.

Suddenly, she stopped. There would be no opportunity to do such things when she became a nun. That little voice at the back of her mind saying she would find no more freedom in a convent surged to life again. Convents were sticklers for order and routine. They demanded total conformity from their members. She could not walk at leisure through fields and run amongst the flowers with a veil upon her head and a

wimple around her chin.

It would be a life of rigorous dedication, where everything about herself – the things that made her uniquely her – would be scrubbed away. Her heart clenched. Could she do it? Could she adhere to a life of such strict discipline? Yes, there would be safety there, but it would also be hard. So very hard.

She took a deep breath, trying to quieten the misgiving. She reminded herself that she had few options in life anymore. Either the life of a disgraced abandoned wife, forever living in her parental home or that of a nun. They were the only two choices available to her now. And better a life of work and service, where she might feel marginally fulfilled, than the alternative.

But the small, traitorous voice had stripped the afternoon of its glory. With a slightly dejected heart, she headed back towards the house. It would be afternoon teatime soon, anyway, and her mother was a stickler for it.

Hanging her bonnet on the hook at the back door, she was just washing her hands when Clarrie, the parlour maid, approached her, telling her that her parents were requesting her company in the drawing room.

Frowning, Hetty made her way there, wondering idly what was going on. Papa usually locked himself away in his study at afternoon teatime, and she and her mother liked to have it in the garden during good weather.

They were both sitting down, not speaking when she entered. And they both stood up formally, gazing at her expectantly.

She frowned slightly. “Is there something wrong?”

Her father hesitated. “Sit down, Hetty. Your mother and I wish to speak with you

about an important matter.” He paused. “The tea will be along presently.”

She did as she was bid. It was only after the tea had been served, and they were all holding a cup, that her father spoke again.

“I saw that you received letters this morning,” he said slowly. “Were they replies to the letters that you sent out last week?”

Hetty jumped in surprise. She had no idea that her father was even aware that she had sent the letters, nor that he was watching her when she had received replies this morning. But then, why shouldn’t he be aware? The servants would tell him everything.

She nodded. “Yes, I received replies from three different orders.” She paused. “They all seem eager to have me within their ranks. It is just a matter of choosing which one.” She paused. “But I will wait for others to arrive. I promised you that I shall not act rashly.”

Her father took a sip of tea, then sat down the cup on the side table, decisively. Hetty glanced at her mother. She was staring at the rug on the floor looking uncomfortable. Her heart shifted in her chest. Were they about to inform her that they had changed their mind and that she no longer had their blessing to join an order?

“That is good,” said her father slowly. “I promised you, also that I would let you write the letters which I have. But there is something else that has come along in the meantime, which can change those plans, quite significantly.”

Hetty gazed sharply at him. “What do you mean? What has come along?”

Her father smiled. “Hetty, there has been an offer put in for your hand in marriage.” He paused. “A very good offer. An offer which makes me think you would be a

foolish girl, indeed, not even to consider it.”

She stared at him, dumbfounded. “An offer of marriage?” Her voice rose high. “How can you say such a thing? I am obviously already married, Papa! You escorted me down the aisle towards my future husband. Have you forgotten?”

His nostrils flared slightly. “I am very well aware of that, Hetty. Please, remember to show respect.”

Hetty coloured. “I am sorry, Papa. But I am so very confused ...”

“Yes, of course you are,” he said. “And to be frank, I was astounded when the gentleman approached me. We had a long talk, where I told him that you are legally wed, although you have been deserted. Any offer of marriage was conditional on being able to free you of the marriage to Frank Blackmore.” He paused. “He accepted those terms. In fact, his eagerness to marry you is such that he is prepared to wait for you.”

Hetty gasped, her head spinning. She simply could not believe what her father was telling her.

“Who is this gentleman?” she breathed.

Her father took a deep breath. “He is Louis Montague, the Duke of Warwick.” He stopped, letting his words sink in.

Hetty felt even more confused . A duke? A duke wanted to marry her ? She was disgraced. It made no sense whatsoever.

She had never heard of the Duke of Warwick, whoever he was. At least, she didn’t think that she had ever heard of him. The name did not sound familiar to her at all.

Why on earth would a grand duke, who could marry any lady that he liked, seek her out, and put in an offer of marriage, knowing that she was not free to marry?

“I still do not understand,” she said eventually, shaking her head. “Papa, did you seek him out, in some way? How could he even have known about what has happened and that my husband deserted me?”

“He heard the rumours,” replied her father, staring at her steadily. “You must realise that this could not be contained indefinitely, Hetty. Your mother and I have avoided most social situations, so as not to be forced to talk about it, but the wider community do know. Frank Blackmore’s family know, and we cannot control who they speak to about it.”

Hetty’s flush deepened. Of course, she should have known that. She did know it. But she had not wanted to think about it. To think that her personal life was being bandied about the community, that the scandal was spreading. She had wanted to put her head into the sand and ignore it entirely. But it was part of the reason that she wanted to join a convent so fiercely – she knew that it could not be contained forever. She wanted to run ahead of it before it engulfed her entirely.

“Why?” she whispered. “Why does this gentleman want to marry me?”

Her father smiled slightly. “He claims that he has met you, Hetty, and was charmed by you,” he said slowly. “Unfortunately, he was not in a position to offer for your hand, previous to your engagement. But now that your .... Circumstances ... have changed, he wanted to put in the offer immediately.”

Hetty was dumbfounded again. She racked her mind, trying to remember if she had ever met the gentleman. She would have thought she would recall quite clearly if she had been introduced to a duke. But once more, she came up with nothing.

“It is a great honour,” said her father, looking pleased. “A great honour, indeed. And a far cry above the life of servitude which would await you at a nunnery. You would have prestige and honour above anything that you could imagine, Hetty. Just think.”

“Is that what this is all about?” she said quickly. “Restoring my reputation? You are embarrassed by me, I know ...”

Her father sighed heavily. “Hetty, you know that would never be my primary concern. Your welfare is far more important.” He paused. “But we may be able to kill two birds with one stone, so to speak. We can contain the scandal, through a new engagement, and increase your status at the same time. We could douse the scandal when it is still an ember before it flares into a fire ...”

She felt a chill fall through her. He wanted to place her in the hands of another man. A man that he knew nothing about. A man who could do the same thing to her that Frank Blackmore had done. A man who even if he did not do that, might treat her badly in other ways.

She could not endure it. She could not endure any further pain at the hands of a man.

“No,” she said, shaking her head vigorously, as a surge of panic overtook her. “No, I cannot do it. You cannot ask it of me, after what was done to me ...”

“Hetty, listen,” said her father sharply. “His Grace is not Frank Blackmore. He is a peer of the realm, well respected, with a vast estate just over the county border, in Hampshire. If you agree to marry him, you will be well protected, wealthy, and have status above your wildest dreams. You would sacrifice that, to go to a convent, to take on a life that I know you do not truly want?”

“You do not know anything about what I want!” she cried, feeling as if her heart was about to break in two, once again. “I trusted Frank Blackmore. I thought that I would

be married until the day that I die. And he lied to me.” Her eyes were wild. “He lied to me the whole time that we were engaged. He discarded me like refuse. He never cared about me. All that he wanted was my money. And you expect that I would smile delightedly, at the thought of being handed over to another man, who I know even less about than I did my husband?”

“You cannot think that every man is like your rake of a husband, Hetty,” said her mother, looking stricken. “Not all are untrustworthy. Most are honourable, my daughter. And with this marriage, you could redeem your reputation! You could become the wife and mother that you always wanted to be!”

“I no longer want those things, Mama,” she said, her voice shaking with emotion. “I have spent the past weeks since my desertion, dealing with the fact that I will never have them. I am resigned to the fact that I shall never be a wife and mother. And now you wish to turn it all around, in an instant, and think that I should be grateful?”

There was silence in the room. And then, her father sighed. “His Grace is here now, Hetty. He arrived while you were on your walk. He is waiting in my study to speak to you.”

Hetty felt her mind begin to reel again. In the space of fifteen minutes, they had told her that this gentleman wanted to marry her and that they wanted her to consider it seriously. That was shocking enough. But now, they were telling her that the gentleman himself was in their home and had been here the whole time.

But before she could open her mouth to say that she would not see him, there was a noise at the doorway.

They all turned around, shocked. A man was standing there. A tall man with dark hair and flashing green eyes.

“Please excuse me,” he said slowly. “I hope that I have not startled you.”



## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 1:16 am*

### Chapter 5

Louis Montague, the Duke of Warwick, hovered uncertainly in the doorway. He wasn't sure at all if he should have intruded in this manner. Mr Arnold had asked him to stay in the study so that he and his wife could talk to their daughter about his proposal prior to him seeing her. But he had grown restless, and the temptation of seeing her again had become too much, in the end.

He wasn't disappointed. She was still one of the most beautiful women he had ever laid eyes on. Her thick, chestnut coloured hair hung in a long plait over one shoulder. She was dressed simply, in a pale primrose yellow day gown, suitable for home. Her complexion was luminous, flawless, so pale that it resembled porcelain. And she turned shocked blue eyes on him, now.

He saw those eyes widen in sudden recognition. So, she did remember him. They had only met once, many years ago, and then only briefly. But the image of her had stayed with him ever since, almost burnt upon his retinas.

Suddenly, he was back there, in that ballroom. A grand ball at a country estate, miles from here. He had not even been sure that he was going to attend it until the last minute. But he had been eternally grateful that he had decided to travel to that house. The memory of her had been one of the few things that had got him through the last, troubled years.

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Louis had not been flush with wealth in that year. His father had only died six months

prior, leaving the duchy of Warwick in vast debt. While the title was old and revered, he knew that things were dire. If he could not turn it around, very soon, then he would be forced to sell off his ancestral estate, piece by piece.

The thought of it almost killed him.

On that November night, that year, he had been staying at a friend's house, in Wiltshire, feeling about as low as he had ever felt in his life. It had been Gatwick's idea, to attend the ball, springing it on him at the last minute. He had resisted, for a long time, knowing that he wasn't in the mood for dancing and socialising. But his friend had insisted, and eventually, he had relented.

The house they had gone to had been crowded, heaving with the local community, all done up in their finest. He had sighed, heavily. He knew what these provincial balls were like. Soon, he would be swamped by people, all eager to fawn over him, as soon as they realised that a duke was in their midst.

That was when the idea suddenly occurred to him to introduce himself as someone else entirely.

In a flash, he had informed Gatwick. It would be a lark to pretend to be a commoner. No one in this district knew who he truly was, and he would probably never see any of them again, anyway. He wasn't in the mood to be the centre of attention. Gatwick had smiled, playing along. They had come up with a nom de plume – Mr Vincent Cassidy, from Hampshire – and so the game had begun.

They had woven through the crowd towards the ballroom. And that was when he had seen her.

She was standing slightly away from the crowd, staring at the dance floor, with an abstracted expression on her face. He could still recall in minute detail what she had

been wearing. A lavender silk gown, with a high bodice. Her chestnut hair was curled over one shoulder, scattered with tiny white flowers. At that moment, she had turned around, staring straight at him.

His heart had dropped to the ground.

Her face. It was heart-shaped, with high cheekbones, and full, rosy red lips. But it was her eyes, which arrested him the most. They were large, cornflower blue, with long, curling dark lashes. Those eyes seemed to reach into his very most soul.

He hadn't waited a second longer. His legs had taken him towards her before his mind even registered it.

She watched him as he walked across the floor towards her. She didn't blink, and she didn't smile. She simply gazed at him curiously.

He was right in front of her, bowing slightly. "I am sorry for the intrusion," he said in a low voice. "I do realise that I should wait for a formal introduction. But the sight of you has compelled me to dispense with the usual formalities."

She kept gazing at him, her head tilted to one side as if she could not quite make out who or what he was.

"My name is Mr Vincent Cassidy," he said slowly, voicing the lie for the first time. "From Hampshire. And you are?"

She blinked those long, curling lashes. "Miss Henrietta Arnold, sir. I reside in this district. My family home is only miles away from here."

"Miss Arnold," he said, bowing again, his heart thumping uncomfortably in his chest. "Might I have the pleasure of this dance?"

She hesitated, gazing at him steadily. For one heart-stopping moment, he thought that she might refuse him. But then, she inclined her head slightly. He held out his arm, and after another moment's hesitation, she took it.

The dance was a quadrille. They barely touched, as they moved through the familiar steps of the dance, but he felt like they were in some kind of bubble, where everyone else melted away, and only the two of them existed. He could not keep his eyes off her the whole time. Other things about her were coming into sharp focus, now: the tilt of her chin, her long neck, her hands with delicate, slender fingers, as they rested upon his arm.

The dance ended, as it always did, and they clapped politely. He only took his eyes away from her for a second, as Gatwick descended upon him, dragging an acquaintance over to meet him. In the time it took to be introduced to the gentleman, she slipped away. When he turned back to speak to her, she was gone.

His heart had plummeted with sour disappointment. And even though he searched for her throughout the rest of the evening, everywhere, he could not find her. She must have left almost immediately after their dance. It was the only explanation for why he could not see her anywhere.

He had tried to forget her, for the moment, at least. For starters, with the duchy in such a woeful state, he was in no position to seriously court any lady for marriage. Nor did he have the time, while he investigated various investments, and other schemes, that would build back his wealth, without having to resort to selling off pieces of the estate. That was what he told himself, at least. When he had done so, he would find Miss Henrietta Arnold and pursue her relentlessly.

He did not doubt that she was the woman who would become his duchess. It was ridiculous, ludicrous, to have this certainty, on so short an acquaintance. He had barely spoken to her, after all. And yet, his certainty and feelings for her grew, rather

than dissipated, as time passed by. He had heard of love at first sight but never believed it before. Now, he knew that it was true.

He put his head down and worked hard to get the duchy in a good position. He had a clear goal, now. Once he had built his wealth, he could woo her and put in an offer for her hand. But one investment that was promised to be a sure-fire winner, in wool manufacturing, turned sour. He was still a long way from being able to offer for her.

And then, on the grapevine, he heard that she had become engaged.

It was an awful day. His despair was absolute. How could he have not seen that this might happen? He had been waiting to woo her until he was financially solvent again, but he had waited too long. Now, she was promised to another. He had missed his chance.

That night, he had attended a grand function, while in London. The champagne had flowed freely, and in his melancholy, he had overindulged, just a bit. Suddenly, he spotted a lady through the crowd. For a moment, he had thought it was her. It was only when he got closer that he realised it wasn't. The lady resembled her, in colouring and build, but she did not have the same luminous beauty.

But he was in his cups, and melancholy, thinking he had lost her forever. He was lonely. And the lady did look like her, quite a bit. Her name was Miss Rachel Carter. He shouldn't have done it, but he did.

It took only one night for his life to change forever.

In the gardens of the estate, he took her, hard and fast, against a wall. Rachel was as eager as he was, and a passionate woman, biting and scratching. She most certainly wasn't a maiden. In fact, he was sure she had done this quite a few times before.

The next day, with a painful headache, he had regretted his lack of self-control. But he had been in extremis, after all. Everyone made mistakes. Best to just chalk it up to experience, and try to forget about it, entirely.

Except he couldn't forget about it. Because three weeks later, when he was back at Warwick Manor, in Hampshire, she had suddenly shown up on his doorstep, tearfully claiming that she was with child.

She could have been lying, of course. But what was a gentleman to do? She claimed that she was carrying his child. He set her up in a small house, close to the estate. He was in no position to marry her yet, but he could modestly support her in secrecy, for the duration of her confinement. He knew that he was as trapped as a mouse in a cage.

The dream was well and truly dead. Henrietta Arnold, the woman he had so inexplicably fallen in love with at first sight, was taken, promised to another. And now, the woman he had made love to because of her resemblance to Henrietta, was carrying his child. He was honour bound to marry her when he was able to do so.

Rachel, however, was not happy with the arrangement. She felt as if she was being shunted off, hidden away. She did not believe him when he told her he would marry her one day, but that she must be patient.

She bitterly told him that he was a cad, who had taken his pleasure, and now she was being forced to give birth to his bastard. She tearfully claimed that she had been an innocent maiden when he had taken her and that she had been powerless to resist his onslaught, even though she had wanted to.

Lies. All lies. For as the months progressed, and Rachel's belly swelled with the child, he heard the rumours about her. Miss Rachel Carter made a habit of sleeping with noblemen, hoping to snag one. He was only one in a long line of titled

gentlemen.

But still, he intended to marry her, when he could. He didn't love her, but he would do the right thing by her. That was his pledge.

His son Benjamin arrived early, howling into the world. The moment that he had held the tiny boy in his arms, he had been smitten. A fierce love had engulfed him, and he worked harder, determined that he would legitimise him. He told Rachel that he was very close to being able to marry her.

But as the months passed, and Benjamin grew into a smiling, chubby delight, she became less convinced of his desire to do the right thing by her. She harped at him, all the time when he came to visit them. When was he going to make an honest woman of her? Hadn't she borne him a fine son? She barely acknowledged the boy, promptly handing him over to the wet nurse.

He should have known what was coming. But it had hit him like a sledgehammer, on the day, when he was informed that Miss Rachel Carter had packed her belongings and disappeared into the night, leaving her four-month-old son behind.

He searched for her, desperately. How could a mother abandon her child, as she had? But the truth of it slowly made itself clear: Rachel Carter only wanted the title. She did not care a jot for her son, or him, for that matter. He had never once deluded himself that he was in love with her, or she with him, but still, he had hoped that one day they might become a family, for the sake of their son.

And so, he had cared for Benjamin, ever since. The boy was illegitimate, but he was still his son, and he loved him dearly. He would never inherit the title now, of course. But Louis fiercely protected him, bringing him up in fine style. Six months after Rachel fled, a few of his investments finally came through, and the duchy's coffers swelled once more. Now, he was one of the wealthiest men in Hampshire.

He had never forgotten Henrietta, of course. But he knew that he had lost her. He had missed his chance, and it was just something he must live with.

It was only a week ago, that word had filtered through to him, that she had been abandoned by her new husband, the day after her wedding. The rake had sold their home without her knowledge, forcing her to return to her parents' home. Benjamin had just turned two years old.

It was as if a light had suddenly come into the room. He had a chance again to claim her. A slim chance, but a chance, nonetheless. She was still legally a married woman, but they could procure a divorce for her in some way, surely?

He had acted immediately. He wasn't going to make the same mistake again. And now, he was wealthy and could afford to marry her.

He just didn't know how he was going to tell her that he had an illegitimate son, and what she would think of him when she found out.

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She kept staring at him incredulously. And suddenly, he remembered that he had lied when he had introduced himself to her, all those years ago. The lark, to pretend to be a commoner. He had simply forgotten all about it.

Mr Arnold cleared his throat uncomfortably. "Your Grace. I am sorry that we have kept you waiting. We were just about to come to you ..."

Henrietta raised her chin, staring at him. Those beautiful blue eyes were as cold as ice.

"Your Grace, is it?" she hissed. "Funny, I thought your name was Mr Vincent



Cassidy. At least, that is what I recall when we met so briefly all those years ago.”

He smiled weakly, his heart pounding. “It was just a joke, for the night,” he said, swallowing a lump in his throat. “So that I would not attract undue attention ...”

“Really?” she said, her voice curt. She turned to her father. “I have said all that I will say on the matter. And now, you must all excuse me. I find that I have a headache coming on.”

“Hetty,” warned her father, but it was too late. She swept out of the room, brushing past Louis without even looking at him.

There was an awkward silence in the room.

“Give her time,” said Mr Arnold, turning to him. “She is very hurt, Your Grace. But I am fully convinced that we can make her see that this is the way forward for her ...”

Louis’s heart flipped over in his chest. He had waited so long for her. But this had not been the promising beginning that he had hoped for at all.

She was so very hurt, as her father said. It would be hard to build her trust. Especially because he had deluded her as to who he truly was.

Damn that silly game , he thought fiercely. It might just ruin everything.

### Chapter 6

Hetty was almost to her room when she felt a hand on her arm, spinning her around. She was staring into the face of the man again. Louis Montague, the Duke of Warwick. The man that she remembered as Vincent Cassidy.

She couldn't stop the tremble that suddenly swept through her body at their close proximity. Her mouth went dry. Oh, she remembered him, alright. The tall, handsome dark-haired stranger, who had asked her to dance at the Farnham's ball all those years ago. She still recalled those penetrating green eyes that had seemed to reach into her very soul.

He was older now, of course. A slight smattering of grey, along his hairline, looking like streaks of silver in the raven darkness. When he smiled, there were more creases around his eyes. But he was still the most devastatingly handsome man she had ever laid eyes upon.

She had only been one and twenty at the time. The engagement with Frank was at least a year away. They had shared one dance before her good friend, Annabelle, had approached her, claiming that she was sick, and they had to leave at once.

The handsome stranger had been busy talking with people, and Annabelle had been insistent, pale and sweating. She'd had no choice but to leave, guiding her friend to the carriage. As she was staying the night at Annabelle's estate, there wasn't even the option to go back and see him again.

It had only been a brief moment, and they had barely spoken. For months afterwards,

she had looked eagerly into crowds whenever she had been socialising. He was never there. The disappointment was sour, but it was the way it was. She recalled he had told her he was from Hampshire. Perhaps his visit to Wiltshire was a one-off. And what did it matter, anyway? It wasn't as if she knew a thing about what kind of man he was.

And so, she had forgotten all about him. At least, she thought she had. But on those strange nights, when she sometimes woke up with a peculiar yearning, it was his green eyes that she saw in the darkness.

And now, here he was, materialising out of the ether, like a bizarre phantom, offering for her hand in marriage. It was all so very strange and shocking that she could not make head nor tail of it.

He had laughed off his lie about who he was, claiming it was just a joke for the night. But she knew nothing about him. And she was sick to death of being lied to by men. How could she trust a single word that came out of his mouth?

"Your Grace," she said through gritted teeth. "I thought that I was clear in saying that I have a headache ..."

"Please," he said, staring down at her imploringly. "I know that we got off to a bad start. I had forgotten that I had introduced myself as someone different, all those years ago. I do not usually do that kind of thing, and I do not know what possessed me to do such a thing then ..."

She took a deep breath, still trembling, trying to fight the feelings that were rising in her. The feelings that he was provoking by being so close to her.

"Your Grace," she said slowly. "I am flattered, of course, that you remember me from such a brief encounter, and have offered for my hand." She paused. "But you must

realise that even if I wanted to accept it, I cannot. I am a legally married woman. An abandoned married woman, but still married. How can you believe that it could ever change?"

He didn't answer for a moment. He just kept gazing down at her, his green eyes magnetically drawing her in. Her heart was racing now. She shifted uncomfortably from foot to foot, desperate to get away from him.

"I know your circumstances," he said eventually, in a quiet voice. "All I am asking is for a chance. It may be possible to free you from the marriage that you are in. It is remote, but not unheard of. Would you be willing to try?"

She stared at him, so astonished that he was still pursuing this, that she simply could not think of a thing to say.

He took a deep breath. "Your father has said that I can stay here for a few days so that we can get to know each other better." He paused. "I am not asking you to make a decision, right at this moment. But will you at least think about it?"

She looked down at the ground. Her heart was racing so fast she could barely breathe. She needed to get away from him before he saw what he was doing to her. She hastily stepped back.

"I will think about it," she stammered. "But now, I must lie down ..."

His eyes lit up with hope. "Thank you." He hesitated. "I hope that your headache eases soon. I will be waiting for you ..."

She nodded quickly, turning on her heel, and almost fleeing to her chamber. She could barely grip the door handle. Once inside, she slammed it shut, leaning against it, her heart hammering as if she had just escaped the clutches of a wolf.

What was wrong with her? This physical response to him was almost overwhelming. So very shocking that it was shameful.

She didn't want to be married again, even if they could procure a divorce for her, which was unlikely in the extreme. She didn't want to be with any man. They were all liars. Had this man not proved that he was one, already? He was not to be trusted, any more than Frank could be. He had claimed that his lie about his identity was a one-off joke, but how did she know that?

He probably did it at all the engagements he went to, out of his district, hoping to charm any lady, then leave her for dust, with no consequences. Any lady would be searching for Vincent Cassidy, not the Duke of Warwick. A cad, through and through.

The sooner she could get to a convent and put all of this behind her, the better. Only then would she be safe.

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She was almost going to send down her excuses for dinner, that her headache still raged, and she could not possibly attend, when something stopped her. She didn't know what it was. Curiosity? A desire to understand why this man had shockingly arrived on her doorstep, determined to marry her, after such a brief encounter years ago.

She didn't take any extra care with her toilette, that evening, before she drifted down the stairs again to the dining room. She didn't even bother to change her gown. She was not going to dress up to please him or her parents.

But his eyes still widened in admiration as she swept into the room, taking her usual seat. He was seated opposite her, a wine glass already in front of him, filled with her

father's best claret. Papa and Mama had gone to an effort for him. The table was covered with the best tablecloth, white and pristine, and Hetty noted that they were using the best silver, as well. Lord only knew what paroxysms her mother had gone into when deciding upon the menu for the evening.

Mama was wearing one of her very best gowns, a peacock blue silk dress, normally reserved for fine dinner parties. And Papa had made a very big effort, too, slicking back his hair into a sleek silver cap, rather than the usual slightly wild curls. Nobody spoke as she unfolded her napkin, placing it on her lap. The butler filled up her empty wine glass, and she took it, drinking deeply.

"I hope that your headache is better," said the Duke, clearing his throat as he gazed at her.

"Much better, I thank you," she replied, putting down her wine glass.

There was an awkward silence.

Her father rushed in. "His Grace was telling me this afternoon about his ancestral home, Hetty," he said quickly. "One hundred acres, on the border of our county and Hampshire."

"Hampshire?" She raised a quizzical eyebrow at the man, sitting across from her. "So, you told the truth about where you reside, at any rate, when we last met. I suppose I should be very grateful for that."

He didn't look ashamed. He didn't colour, or slide his eyes away, towards the floor. Instead, he looked at her almost challengingly, his green eyes speculative.

"No, I did not lie about that," he replied slowly. "Warwick Manor is located just over the county border, as your father said." A pause. "It has been in my family for

centuries. We acquired the land just after Henry Tudor defeated the Plantagenets at the Battle of Bosworth in 1485.”

She nodded. “Your family benefited, then, from the change of monarchy,” she said in a crisp voice. “I assume they were Lancastrians, then? Henry Tudor would hardly have allowed one hundred acres to be given to his enemy. The War of the Roses was bitter, and allegiances were fierce.”

He looked surprised. She felt a sharp stab of triumph. He obviously thought that she was a vacant headed woman, who only knew about embroidery and pressing flowers into books. Usually, she never talked about her love of history in company. And never to gentlemen. Her mother had told her long ago that gentlemen did not like ladies to be knowledgeable, in case they were contradicted. Best to stick to safe subjects when speaking to them.

But she did not care about any of that, now. She was not out to impress him; in fact, it was the very opposite. Maybe he would be discouraged by her tongue. Maybe he would think her too clever a woman, and back right away. Most gentlemen preferred a docile, vacuous lady, who looked pretty but who didn’t speak out of turn. A painted doll, to prop on their arm.

“You surprise me,” he said eventually, picking up his wine glass and sipping it thoughtfully. “Is English history a passion of yours?”

She nodded, staring at him steadily. “It is. I also like French history. Mama is always scolding me for having my head in a book. She tells me that I shall ruin my eyesight and that no man likes a learned woman.”

“Hetty,” said her mother, colouring. “I have said no such thing ...”

The Duke smiled, turning to her mother. “Do not be alarmed, Mrs Arnold. It is only

what most mothers tell their daughters, after all.” He turned back to Hetty. “It is true, for the most part. Most gentlemen do not like learned women. But I have always marched to the beat of a different drum. My own mother, God rest her soul, was a passionate reader, and highly educated. My sister, Catherine, took after her, and we often have spirited debates about various topics.”

Hetty took a deep gulp of wine to hide her surprise. He was probably only saying such things to try and impress her, now that he knew that she liked learning. It was probably another lie.

“English history is also a passion of mine,” he continued, leaning back in his chair and fixing her with an intense gaze. “I have an extensive library at Warwick Manor, and a large section of it is devoted to English history. I have many rare books, on the War of the Roses, and some dating back to William the Conqueror.”

She gazed at him, not knowing what to say, as she felt a quick stab of excitement. What she wouldn’t give to be able to peruse such a library. What treasures would be stored in there? It would be like being in Aladdin’s cave, finding a trunk load of rare and precious jewels.

“Warwick Manor is almost like going back in time,” he continued. “As things were so unstable when it was built, my ancestor, the third Duke of Warwick, made sure that many hidden passageways were constructed within it. In case any within needed to flee quickly, or hide, if there was an overthrow of power, and we were on the wrong side of it.”

“You have hidden passages?” asked Hetty, unable to stop herself. “I have heard of them but never been into a house that has them. Does it also have a secret room, where mass could be heard, after the Reformation?”

He nodded. “It does. My family were Catholics, for a long time, and tried to stay true



to their faith. But when Henry the Eighth went on his path of destruction, destroying churches, monasteries, and the like, one of my ancestors built a wall, which hid a room, so mass could be said in secret.” He paused. “Perhaps you might like to see it if you come to the manor. I would very much like to give you a tour ...”

She was saved a reply by the arrival of the first course. While Clarrie served it, she looked down at the table, overcome by confusion.

Louis Montague, the Duke of Warwick, was a surprise. She could not deny that he seemed a clever and knowledgeable man. An interesting man.

She pulled herself up. He was just a man. And men lied. She would do well to keep remembering that and stop herself from being drawn into his web of charm.

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That night, in bed, she turned over the extraordinary events of the day in her mind, trying desperately to make sense of them.

The Duke of Warwick was in the house, now. He was sleeping in one of the guest chambers down the hallway. He had kissed her hand briefly when they had all retired for the evening, not lingering over it. But she had seen the ardent look in his eyes, nonetheless. It still made her shiver, just thinking about it.

She had tried to stay immune to him, as they had chatted after dinner in the drawing room. He had tried to draw her into conversation again about history. But she had made sure to temper her replies so that he could not see how interested she was in what he was discussing. Her father had tried to keep up with the conversation, but history had never been his forte. Mama, who didn't know Richard Plantagenet from Oliver Cromwell, retreated into her embroidery, not offering a word.

He is charming , she thought suddenly. Very charming. And clever. As well as being handsome.

She turned over in the bed, thumping the pillow, restlessly. He had turned everything upside down. Only this morning, she had received the replies to her letters from the convents. Her course had been set. And now, the Duke of Warwick was staying in the house, determined to marry her and upset the applecart entirely.

It wasn't that she believed she couldn't resist him. It was the fact that her parents, having been thrown this lifeline, were now committed to it. Before he had arrived, they had been willing to let her enquire about becoming a nun, even though they hadn't liked the idea. She felt sure that if the Duke had not arrived, they would eventually have let her go.

But now ... now, everything was different. What parents could resist a duke, with a grand ancestral estate, and wealth, for their only daughter? It would give them high status by association. They would try to move heaven and earth to make it happen.

She sighed deeply, staring at the ceiling. She had one thing going in her favour. Papa and Mama wanted her to marry the Duke. The Duke wanted to marry her.

But, she was not free to marry.

They could all go on about getting a divorce for her, but she knew the laws of this land. Divorce was a rare thing and rarely granted. It certainly was not a given that it would happen. In fact, it was the opposite. She would probably be Mrs Frank Blackmore for the rest of her life.

A cold shiver ran through her. She didn't want the name of her errant husband. But equally, she didn't want the name of the Duke of Warwick, no matter how much prestige it may bring.

A single tear trickled down her cheek. She just wanted to be left alone. She just wanted to heal, in her own time, and in peace. Why could no one understand that? And why could they not accept that she never wanted to stand at the altar, beside a man, ever again?

## Page 7

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### Chapter 7

The Duke was already sitting at the table when she came into the dining room the next morning, as were her parents. She had slept badly, tossing and turning. She couldn't get it out of her mind that the gentleman was just down the hallway. That he was lying in the guest chamber, only metres away from her.

"Good morning," she said, in a bright voice, sitting down.

"Good morning," said the Duke, sipping his tea. "I hope that you slept well."

"Never better," she lied, rubbing her neck. "Like a dream."

"Hetty," said her father slowly, a spoon hovering over his boiled egg, "we should talk. About what can be done to procure a divorce for you."

Straight to it, she thought, ruefully. Not even a chance to make the usual small talk.

She shrugged, picking up a piece of toast, and smearing it liberally with gooseberry jam. "What is there to say about it?" Her knife scraped against the dry bread. "We all know that they do not like to give them. That it is a hard road to go down, which is the reason why people usually do not."

Her father cleared his throat. "His Grace and I have been discussing it, at some length," he continued. "We believe that the best course is to appeal to the Ecclesiastical Court. If we can prove Frank Blackmore's desertion was intentional, then we just might have a case against him."

Hetty put down her toast, turning to her father. “The Ecclesiastical Court? But they rarely give divorces in favour of the woman. I do not know of any, at all ...”

“There has been one,” said the Duke, gazing at her steadily. “Not a good track record, but there is precedent. We would try to obtain the divorce on the grounds of desertion and procure a settlement for you, from your estranged husband. Either the return of your entire dowry or something similar.”

Hetty stared at him. The use of the term ‘we’ rankled her. It was as if he and her father were in cahoots, and she was just tagging along for the ride. The fact that her father had placed all of his trust in this man, who he knew nothing about, rankled her too. Duke or not, he was still a man, but her father was blinded by his title and could not see clearly, at all.

Papa had done no background checks on this gentleman. For all he knew, the Duke of Warwick could be secretly insolvent or be hiding any number of dark secrets. She was irritated that after the experience with Frank Blackmore, that her father would take such a chance, so quickly. To place all of his faith in this man, to solve the problem of her.

Her mother had pointed out that most men were honourable and respectable. But even though she knew many who were, she could not feel the truth of that, any longer. For her, all men felt like a threat. It was an instinctive, deeply felt reaction.

“Even if such an action succeeded,” she said slowly, gazing at the Duke, “there would still be a considerable delay before I was free to marry again, with the posting of bans ...”

“I have thought of that,” he interrupted, his green eyes gleaming. “If we are successful, we could travel to Gretna Green or some other place in Scotland where a quick marriage is possible. That would circumvent the need to post bans, and thus

delay proceedings.”

She gazed at him, open-mouthed. He truly had thought of everything. And once again, she wondered why he was so eager to marry her, despite it all. She was an abandoned wife, a pariah. If a motion were presented before the court and were successful, she would be a divorcee, which was even lower on the social ladder.

And he was a duke. A peer of the realm who could marry anyone.

She kept gazing at him, prickling with suspicion. It made no sense. Why would he choose her when he could have a lady who was unblemished, free of scandal? Perhaps he was secretly insolvent. He had mentioned the return of her dowry, or a settlement. Did he need money? Was he so eager to wed her because he would get her dowry, the same way that Frank had got it?

But underneath the suspicion, rising like lava, was a small excitement. She didn't want to marry him – not at all – but she didn't want to be married to Frank Blackmore anymore, either. If she managed to procure a divorce, then she would be free of her estranged husband, forever. And more than that, if they could get the return of her dowry, justice would be done.

Frank thought he could walk away from me without any consequences, she thought fiercely. He thought he could take my money and run. I want to show him that I will not lay down and play dead. I will not be treated this way.

The Duke was looking at her expectantly. As were her father and mother.

“So be it,” she said, her resolve glowing within her like a fire. “Let us take him to court and show him that he cannot get away with it.”

Her mother clapped in delight. Her father beamed. The Duke kept gazing at her

steadily, not outwardly showing any emotion. But those impossibly green eyes of his were glowing with pleasure.

They all thought that she had consented to marry the Duke if it became possible. But she knew differently. It served her purpose to try to get the divorce. In the meantime, while they waited for proceedings to commence, she would quietly continue her search for the best convent.

It was still her intention to take the veil. But she would have to be surreptitious about it, from now on. If she could enter a convent as a free woman, legally unencumbered by her past, then so much the better.

She knew the possibility of success was remote. But now, she was fired up, and she had to try. At the very least, Frank would be publicly held accountable for his actions. The world would hear the full truth of what he had done to her.

Frank will pay , she thought bitterly. He will pay for the suffering he has caused me.

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Hetty glanced sideways at the Duke, as they walked in a stilted fashion down the garden path. He was quiet, not saying much at all. It was her mother, who had suggested this walk together after breakfast was finally over, and the plan was put in place to go ahead with trying to get a divorce.

Hetty turned around, feeling eyes upon them. The kitchen curtain was twitching slightly. She smiled to herself. It would be Mama, proud as punch that her poor suffering daughter had at last consented to being courted by a duke.

She could almost feel her mother's longing, that this dark part of their lives be swept away. That the slate be wiped clean. In Mama's mind, the answer to the problem of a

man was always another.

Her smile twisted. She did not think that way at all. The problem of Frank could not be solved by the Duke of Warwick. It was up to her alone to procure her happiness.

Suddenly, Della came rushing out the back door towards them. Hetty squatted down, her arms wide as the small, golden dog came running to her.

Della leapt on her, trying to lick her face in a frenzy of excitement. Hetty laughed delightedly, caressing the dog.

“Oh, you are a darling,” she crooned. “My little joy ...”

“How long have you had her?” asked the Duke, smiling down at them.

“Della is four years old,” she said, laughing harder as the dog eagerly licked her hands. “We got her from a farmer who lives close by.” She smiled, remembering. “I was the one who chose her. There were six puppies, all squirming over their mother, trying to feed. But Della popped her head up and came to me. I knew then that she was the one.”

“They are a joy, aren’t they?” he said, leaning down and petting the dog. “I have three house dogs, in addition to the hounds that are kept for hunting. My mother always liked Scottish terriers, and so the three I keep are that breed.”

“What are their names?” she asked, gazing at him.

His smile widened. “There is Atlas, who is a grouchy fellow, but is partial to a tickle under the chin,” he said. “Caesar, who is a big softie, always wanting cuddles. And the last is Athena, who is like the mother hen, always nipping and growling at the others to keep them in line.”



Hetty laughed. "They sound like they are quite a pack," she said. "Pets are a joy. I sometimes think that Della understands me more than anyone else. She is the one who comforts me if I am feeling low." She hesitated. "It was hard for me to leave her when I married. Do not tell my parents this, but I thought I would miss her more than I would even miss them."

He gazed at her steadily. "Your secret is safe with me."

There was a tense silence as they gazed at each other. Hetty was the first to look away, her heart pounding.

At that moment, Della sprinted off, leaping and barking down the garden path. A bird was flying low that had captured her attention. To Hetty's dismay, the dog nudged her way through a hole in the back fence and sprinted off into the field in hot pursuit of it.

"Della, no!" she cried, running down the path.

But the dog did not even look back at her. She was sprinting harder, now, barking excitedly at the bird.

The Duke was by her side. "We should go after her," he said.

Hetty nodded. Without another word, she pushed open the gate, and they were running through the field, calling the dog's name. It took them five minutes before Della finally stopped, panting hard.

"No," scolded Hetty, leaning down and scooping her up. "You are not allowed to run off by yourself. You could get lost."

Della whined, not liking her mistress's tone.

“Perhaps we should give her the opportunity for a longer walk,” said the Duke, staring at them both. “She is probably feeling a bit housebound. It cannot hurt.”

Hetty hesitated. They were already far from the house. But after a moment, she nodded, putting the dog back down. Della yelped delightedly, sprinting off again, and they commenced walking, following her path.

They were almost to the apple tree. The Duke smiled, staring up at the old tree and its low branches, heaving with fruit.

“What a delightful spot,” he said, gazing up at it. He reached up to a branch, picking two apples, and handed one to her, before sitting down near the trunk, taking a bite of his own.

Hetty hesitated again, but shrugged, sitting down beside him. She took a bite of her apple. It was juicy and delicious, as they always were from this tree if a little past its prime. The only sound was munching for a moment.

“Is this your father’s land?” he asked, swallowing a bite as he gazed around, down the valley at the fields beyond.

She nodded. “Yes. We own five acres, beyond the house.” She smiled. “I know these fields like the back of my hand. My father used to take me on long walks when I was a girl. There is a small lake, further up, which is beautiful. One of my best memories is swimming in it, when I was young, and feeding the ducks.”

“You will have to take me there, one day,” he said, glancing sideways at her. “I am fond of feeding ducks, myself. And a dip in the water is always pleasant, on a hot summer’s day.”

Hetty flushed. A vision of him, striding into the water, and swimming, pushing

through the watery depths, suddenly appeared in her mind's eye. It was so vivid that she could even see his wet black hair and droplets of water spilling into the air, as he moved within it.

She shivered, despite the heat of the day. Looking down at her arm, she was appalled to find goose flesh had appeared. What was wrong with her? Firmly, she tried to dispel the image, but it persisted, causing her flush to deepen.

“Is that a swing?” he asked suddenly, finishing the last bite of his apple, and tossing the core away.

She took a deep breath, trying to calm herself. “Yes. My father made it for me when I was a little girl.” She laughed self-consciously. “I am afraid it is rather weathered. I would not be able to swing on it, now.”

He turned to her, gazing at her intently. “You could try. Let me push you.”

Before she could protest, he jumped to his feet, holding out his hand to her. There was a challenging look in his eyes.

She took another deep breath, taking his hand. There was a crackle as their flesh connected, but she ignored it. He pulled her to her feet, and the next minute, she was trying to sit on the old wooden swing, wiggling herself to fit, feeling just slightly ridiculous. What on earth was she doing?

He stood close behind her, and abruptly, she felt his hands on her back, pushing her. The branch creaked ominously as she was suddenly airborne. The wind loosened her hair, and she felt it streaming behind her. She closed her eyes, relishing the sensation of the sun on her face, and the wind in her hair.

He pushed her again, a mighty push, and she was flying higher. A laugh of pure

delight escaped her lips. She had not felt like this since she was a little girl. It had been years since she had sat on this swing. Probably over ten years. She missed it.

The world was spinning, the sky seemingly dipping to reach her, so intense a blue that it seemed to consume her. She pushed back, willing herself higher when suddenly, the rope broke, and she landed on her backside with a thud.

The Duke rushed to her side, his eyes creased with concern, as he leant over her. “Are you alright?”

She nodded instinctively, not sure yet. But then, a laugh suddenly bubbled up within her chest. It broke out, and she was suddenly heaving with it, bent over, doubled up with hilarity.

He stared at her, stunned, for a moment. But then his mouth started to twitch, and he joined in. His laugh was deep and rich. She clutched her belly, unable to stop it. It almost felt as good as swinging through the air had, moments ago. As liberating and intoxicating.

He pulled her to her feet as they kept laughing breathlessly.

When the laughter finally died down, he hesitantly reached out, pulling something from her hair.

“A twig,” he whispered.

She tried to breathe, but strangely found she couldn’t.

“Your hair is beautiful,” he said, his eyes darkening. “It looks like silk, streaming behind you ...”

She still couldn't breathe. She felt as if she was drowning, within his eyes, losing herself, in some strange, bewitching way. But then, her lungs suddenly contracted, and she took a deep, sudden breath.

"We should go," she whispered. "Back to the house. Mama will be wondering ..."

"Of course," he said quickly.

She called Della, who was skulking around the trunk of the apple tree, sniffing something, and they set off, back down the field. They didn't say a word to each other, but somehow, she felt different. As if something had passed between them that she could not even name.

She felt his eyes on her from time to time but refused to look at him. She was coming back to earth now. Those sweet moments were gone. In them, she had forgotten entirely who she was and what had happened to her. She had forgotten that she was an abandoned wife and the misery of her life.

But it all rushed back to her, now. As did the knowledge that she did not know this man at all, nor his motivations, for suddenly asking her to marry him.

She could not afford to let her guard down. Those sweet moments were an illusion, a passing amnesia. He was a stranger to her, and she was on a path that did not include him at all. She must remember that. She could not afford ever to forget it.

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 1:16 am*

### Chapter 8

Hetty gazed out the window of the drawing room. He had said that he would be returning today. She did not want to admit to herself that she was waiting for him.

Sighing restlessly, she dropped the curtain, walking to the pianoforte. She would practise. That would take up some time. With grim determination, she raised her fingers, striking the keys. For a few moments, she played a tune, before sighing again, stopping.

She did not feel like playing the pianoforte. She did not know what she wanted to do at all.

It had been six weeks since the Duke of Warwick had landed so alarmingly on the doorstep of Hillsworth House, claiming that he wanted to marry her, come hell or highwater. In that time, he had assisted her father to start the divorce proceedings. He had travelled to London, on her behalf, to file the necessary documents. Now, it was just a waiting game, to see if and when the Ecclesiastical court would schedule a hearing.

The Duke came back and forth, staying for days at a time, before heading back to his manor, in Hampshire. He never told her why he had to leave. But he would start to get a little quiet and withdrawn, staring off into space. The next moment, he would announce that he had pressing business, at home, and take off, flying down the country lane outside Hillsworth House on his horse, sending pebbles flying into the air. She would watch him from the drawing room window. It looked like the hounds of hell were pursuing him.

He was hiding something. She was almost certain of it. How else to explain the abrupt mood changes, the urgency of his departures?

He was always charming, and fully committed, when he returned to Hillsworth House. Almost as if he had slaked an itch. Her mind, of course, turned to dark reasons. Did he have a mistress that he was seeing? Or several of them? Her father insisted that the Duke was an important man, with business to attend to, that was why he left so abruptly. But even though Hetty knew that was a perfectly plausible reason, she still could not help thinking there was more to it than that. There was something that he was not telling her.

In the meantime, she was still poring over the letters from the convents. Two more had arrived, and she had sent another enquiry to one in Dorset. But she was almost certain that she had arrived at a decision.

The Sisters of the Holy Cross were an old order, located in Shropshire. They had an abbey, just outside the town of Shrewsbury. Their mission was to educate the children of the local farming population. They even had a small schoolhouse. If she joined them, she would be surrounded by children. She had never contemplated teaching before, but it would be a noble pursuit, wouldn't it?

Her hand itched to write to them, tell them that she desired to join them, but she knew that it wasn't time, yet. First, she must see what was going to happen with the divorce. She was committed to it now and could not back away from it. Frank must be held accountable for what he had done. Once she knew what was happening with it, then she could make her plans.

In the meantime, she had to endure the attentions of the Duke, pretending that she was seriously contemplating marrying him if the divorce came through. For she had finally understood that with him behind her, the court would be more likely to schedule a hearing, than if her family did it alone. He was a peer of the realm, after

all, whereas they were only gentry. Privilege opened a lot of doors in this world.

She was still no closer to understanding why he was insisting on marrying her and going to so much trouble on her behalf. But it hardly mattered. It wasn't as if she ever intended to go through with it, after all, even if it was successful, which she very much doubted.

Suddenly, she jumped. She could hear horse's hooves thundering down the lane towards the house. Was it him?

She rushed to the window. Yes, she could see him on his black stallion, just turning through the gates into the estate. Her heart flipped over in her chest, and to her dismay, she could see that her hand was trembling where it gripped the lace curtain.

She took a deep breath, trying to stop the involuntary physical reaction. She loathed it that her body seemed to have a mind of its own, where he was concerned. She didn't want to feel this way, when she saw him or was near him. And yet, it persisted, growing even worse, the longer she spent in his company.

He was at the front of the house, now. She watched him dismount, taking off his hat and running a hand through his dark hair. Suddenly, he looked at the window, where she was standing. Their eyes met.

He smiled tentatively. Hastily, she dropped the curtain, stepping away. Her heart was thumping in her chest.

She had to stop doing this. No more rushing to the window when he arrived or waiting at it to see if he was coming. She must get herself under control.

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After the serving of morning tea, the Duke balanced his teacup on one knee, fixing his gaze on her mother.

“What about a picnic today, near the lake, that I have heard so much about?” He smiled. “The weather is glorious, after all. A shame to be cooped up inside, on such a day.” He turned to Hetty. “What do you think?”

Hetty felt a stab of excitement but quickly masked it, shrugging her shoulders as if she didn’t care. Her mother, however, clapped her hands together in glee, saying it was a simply marvellous idea. She rushed out of the room, saying that she would tell Cook to prepare a picnic hamper this instant.

There was a strained silence in the room. The Duke took a sip of his tea, then put down the cup, turning to her.

“It is good to see you, Hetty,” he said quietly. “I find every time that I leave Hillsworth House, the more eager I am to return here.”

She didn’t say anything for a moment. But her heart lurched, once again.

“You have never told me why you need to leave so abruptly, in the way that you do,” she said slowly, gazing at him steadily. “What is this business that has you flying out of here as if you are being pursued by the Devil himself?”

He flushed slightly. “I did not realise that I was quite so manic in my exits.” He paused as if gathering his thoughts. “It is only as I have told you. I have business as well as the usual overseeing of my estate. A property that large does not run itself ...”

“But surely, you have an overseer,” she persisted. “Someone who runs your estate in your absence and takes on the day to day decision making it entails. There would be no need to urgently go there if you have a competent person. These grand houses are

often left vacant for months at a time ...”

“Do you miss me when I am gone?” he asked softly, a small smile playing around his lips.

Hetty coloured. She had not meant to infer that at all. But of course, he would think that was her motivation for asking him about it. He was a man, after all, and they all seemed to think that the sun rose and set around them.

“I am merely making conversation,” she said, gritting her teeth. “Enquiring, as one does, about your life beyond this house ...”

“Of course,” he said, looking so disappointed that her heart flipped over in her chest once again. “I have several investments that I need to keep an eye on. They manufacture wealth for me in a multitude of ways. I guess I have not elaborated upon it before because I thought that it would surely bore you to tears. But if you wish to hear about the ins and outs of it, then I would be more than happy to oblige ...”

“There is no need,” she said quickly, not wanting to hear about his shares in wool or rail. It would bore her to tears. “Excuse me for my impertinence.”

Before he could reply, her mother rushed into the room again, beaming. “Cook is preparing a hamper,” she said excitedly. “We can leave for the lake in fifteen minutes if you are so inclined.”

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The day was glorious, thought Hetty, as they walked up the hill towards the lake. The sky was a clear, crystalline blue, and the sun a perfect golden orb within it. She could smell the scent of wild roses in the distance, and there was the faint warbling of birds in the trees.

Della was rushing ahead, excited to be stretching her legs as always. The Duke carried the wicker picnic basket in one hand, and a rug in the other. She twirled her green parasol, watching him out of the corner of her eye. He seemed glad to be outdoors in nature. He often requested that they go for a walk in the fields. Being indoors seemed to irritate him.

They scaled the hill, and then, she saw it, in the near distance. The lake. A shimmering pool of turquoise blue, with a few yellow ducks swimming around on the surface. She spied a pair of white swans, as well, gliding through the reeds. She turned to the Duke, covertly watching his reaction.

He seemed pleased, his eyes skimming over the lake. She felt a surge of pride. It was beautiful, one of the most beautiful spots in the district, in her opinion. She was glad that he seemed to appreciate it.

They quickly set up the picnic, unfurling the rug, and opening the basket. Her mother set to work, taking out a plate of sandwiches, and a whole poppyseed lemon cake. Her father had not been able to come as he had a pressing appointment in the village. So it was just the three of them.

She got up to chase Della, who was harassing some ducks, scolding the dog gently. All of a sudden, she felt a presence behind her. She turned to see the Duke standing there, watching her.

“She likes to chase birds,” he said quietly, bending down to pet the small golden dog. “It is the same with mine. As soon as they are out of the manor, they run like mad things, chasing their own tails, but also any bird that happens within their path.”

She nodded. “Yes, it is quite common. But Della needs to know that she cannot do it. I am afraid that one day she will hurt one if not kill one.”

He smiled slightly. "You have a very soft heart, Hetty. Have you never gone on a hunt?"

She shuddered. "I could not do it. For me, all animals are sacred, and I could not watch, while one was killed." She paused. "Perhaps I am too soft-hearted. I am sure that you would say that I am. I realise that my views are not conventional. Hunting, after all, is a revered pastime ..."

He shook his head, staring at her intently. "I am not mocking you."

Her mother called out to them that the food was ready, and they turned away, walking back towards the rug. Hetty felt another shiver fall through her, at being so close to him, despite the heat of the day. She had a strange urge to cry and simply had no idea why.

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After the picnic, they wandered along the far side of the lake, her mother trailing them at a discreet distance. The sun shone on the surface of the lake, turning it almost into a looking glass. She could smell the sweet scent of lilac and saw honeysuckle and forget-me-nots blooming with abandon in the near distance.

The Duke reached down, picking a small scarlet pimpernel, handing it to her with a smile. "I realise they are considered weeds," he said drily. "But I have always found them charming."

Hetty took the flower, twisting it between her fingers. "I like the scarlet pimpernel, too," she said slowly. "Just because they bloom easily, should not make them any less admired." She hesitated. "Thank you."

They kept walking in silence for a moment before he turned to her abruptly.

“How did you meet your estranged husband?” he asked quickly.

She smothered her surprise that he had asked her anything about her relationship with Frank. Up until now, he had studiously avoided mentioning her husband, unless it was in a general way, regarding the possible upcoming divorce hearing.

“I met him at a dinner party at a mutual friend’s house,” she said, feeling a lump form in her throat. “I was seated next to him, and we started talking, as you do.” She hesitated. “He seemed charming and was easy going. Not long after, he requested to call on me. And the rest is history.” She felt tears sting behind her eyes.

He stopped, turning to her, a solemn look on his face. “Were you in love with him?”

She blinked rapidly, stunned that he would ask her such a question. It was on the tip of her tongue to tell him tartly that it was none of his business. But then, the sorrow of the whole situation overtook her once more, and the desire to speak of it – with someone – was almost overwhelming.

She had no one in whom to confide. Her mother and father only wanted to talk about the possible divorce, but not how she felt about the sudden, shocking end of her short-lived marriage. She couldn’t see any of her friends, who she might confide in, and weep on their shoulder, like Annabelle. She had made the decision as soon as she had returned to Hillsworth House that she would lay low and not socialise, to protect herself. The thought of having to talk about it with anyone but her close friends was simply too much, and she would have to see others if she went out, even if it was only her friends’ parents.

Annabelle, and her other closest friend, Florence, had sent letters of support to her, which had touched her, and she greatly appreciated. She would see them again, one day, but it was still too raw at the moment.

“I greatly admired and respected him,” she replied quietly. “I thought that he would make a fine husband. He was charming and treated me well.” She hesitated. “But to answer your question – no, I was never in love with him.”

He was silent for a moment, digesting this. “Why did you agree to marry him if you never loved him?”

She gasped. “You ask me this question? It is a common enough thing in the society that we live in. Hardly any of the marriages that I know are love matches. Mostly it is arranged by parents, or others ...”

“Yes, I am well aware of that,” he said, smiling slightly. “My own mother tried very hard to arrange a marriage for me when I was younger. And I do not blame people for accepting arranged marriages. Often, they are compelled, and have little choice in the matter.” He hesitated. “But your own engagement was not arranged, nor were you compelled to become engaged to the gentleman. That is the only reason that I ask. I am just curious that if you could have waited for a love match, why you did not.”

She shrugged, feeling like she wanted to burst into tears. “I did not expect love, I suppose. I have never been in love ... I think I believed that it was just a myth.” She turned her face away, staring over the water as she battled the tears. “You think that I made a mistake in not being in love with him, and he not being in love with me?”

“I am not judging you, Hetty,” he said in a quiet voice. “Not in the least. It just surprises me, that a lady as beautiful, clever, and charming as you are, would not wish for it. You deserve it.” He paused, gazing at her intently. “Do you truly believe that love between a man and a woman is a myth?”

She shrugged again, helplessly. “I do not know. I have never felt it, so to me, it is not real,” she said, her heart beating hard in her chest.

He kept gazing at her, a peculiar yearning expression on his face. Her heart skipped a beat. She could not help it. A single tear trickled down her cheek.

He reached out slowly and wiped it away with his thumb. She shuddered. The touch made her skin tingle, but more than that, his kindness took her breath away. He had told her that she deserved love. He had told her that she was beautiful and charming and clever.

“You did not deserve what happened to you,” he said roughly, his hand dropping to his side, his face grim. “If I knew where the man was, I would run him through, for what he has done to you.”

She couldn’t suppress a sob. Quickly, she looked away.

She knew that he was probably lying. She knew that he was probably just saying these things without really meaning them. But her soul expanded to hear him speak.

The small kernel of doubt – that Frank had deserted her because something was lacking in her – started to dissolve, and it was the man standing beside her that had made it happen.

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 1:16 am*

### Chapter 9

Louis strode into Warwick Manor, feeling as weary as he had ever felt in his life. He had just spent two days at Hillsworth House, trying to woo Hetty. But as soon as he felt that he was making some headway – that he was breaking down the barrier between them, that she had erected – she would grow wary and close down, leaving him bereft.

He walked into his study, pouring himself a stiff whisky, thinking about it. Any other man would walk away, give up, admit defeat. His jaw clenched. He couldn't do it. He couldn't walk away from her, no matter how much she tried to push him away.

As he sipped his whisky, he contemplated her. She had thawed slightly towards him in the six weeks since he had been visiting Hillsworth House, but it was infinitesimal. It was as if she froze the moment that she realised she was enjoying herself or became lost in the moment. He had seen it on his first visit when they had shared a close moment, when the swing had broken, and it had been happening ever since.

He sighed, downing the drink in one gulp. No, he couldn't walk away from her. Because the truth of it was, he was more in love with her now than he had ever been.

Spending time with her had only deepened the way that he felt about her. She was not only the most beautiful woman he had ever beheld but clever and witty, as well. They shared interests in many things, even if she almost killed herself trying to stifle her response in their conversations. She was also tender-hearted.

She was simply everything that he had ever desired in a woman.



He refilled his glass, sitting down in an armchair. He had taken the documents, lodging her application for a divorce, to the Ecclesiastical court himself. But he had heard nothing since. Even as a peer of the realm, taking an interest, it was not a sure-fire thing that it would even proceed to court. There might be a letter, any day, saying that they would not even consider it.

He sipped the drink, feeling low about the chances. The law was always in favour of the man. That was how it was set up. Just because Frank Blackmore had blatantly deserted her, did not mean that the court would think it enough reason to consider divorce.

Even if the man was openly living with another woman, it still might not be enough. The court had a very broad-minded attitude towards the infidelity of men. They were rather less forgiving if it was proved that a woman had been unfaithful.

He grimaced. Hetty didn't know why her husband had deserted her. He had only told her he had been having cold feet in the months leading up to the wedding and could not commit to the marriage. The man had planned it, though. He had sold their house a week before the wedding. He had intended to desert her.

Rage built up in his chest, thinking about the cad, and what he had done to her. How he had devastated her. Hetty was like a wounded bird, desperately trying to hide her pain, closing up whenever anybody tried to get close.

At first, he had assumed that she must have been in love with him, which had been hard enough to deal with. But she had told him, just the other day, that it had never been a love match. Frank Blackmore had not been in love with her, and she had not been in love with him.

She had also told him that she didn't believe in love.

It had killed him to hear her utter those words so calmly. He wanted to tell her how he felt about her so much. But he knew that it was too soon. If he told her now, she would take fright. She wouldn't believe it, nor would she accept it. Her father had already taken him aside saying that she had wanted to join a convent, such was her desire to escape the world and her pain.

He couldn't imagine her as a nun. What a waste of a woman.

His loins stirred. A woman like that was made to be touched by a man. He closed his eyes for a moment, imagining what it would be like to slowly undress her, to see the lines of her body. This fantasy had been tantalising him since the very first moment he had walked into the drawing room at Hillsworth House, and saw her again, after all these years.

He knew that she was attracted to him, although she tried very hard to hide it. It was there, in the sudden dilation of her pupils when they accidentally brushed against each other. It was there, in the way she trembled when he was close to her. He longed to kiss her, to claim those soft, full lips for his own, but he had not dared yet. The last thing he wanted to do was panic her, making her retreat into her shell, any further.

He downed the rest of the whisky. He was so eager for her, to make her his own, that he was almost on a trigger point of frustration. But he knew that the only thing that was going to win the day for him was patience. He had to wait for her to open her heart and for word from the court, as well.

He stared into his empty glass, morose, for a moment. Even if he could get her to open her heart to him, they might never have the chance to marry. He knew by now that Hetty was a fiercely moral woman. There would be no chance, at all, that she would consider any arrangement with him that was not a legal marriage. She would not consent to become his mistress. Nor would he ever put her in that position.

If the application for a divorce were not successful, then all would be lost.

There was a soft knock on the study door. He roused himself, placing the glass on the side table. "Come in."

The door opened. Benjamin was standing there, holding the hand of his nanny, Mrs Friel. His boy. His golden curls shone like a halo around his head, and his green eyes, exactly the same colour as his own, were bright.

"Papa," he said, suddenly letting go of the woman's hand and running towards him.

"How is my boy?" he cried, scooping him up and hugging him fiercely. "Have you been good for Mrs Friel, while I have been gone?"

The boy nodded solemnly, suddenly absorbed in the buttons of his jacket, twisting them around with his chubby fingers.

"I apologise for the disturbance, Your Grace," said Mrs Friel. "But the little one saw you arrive from the nursery window, and he was ever so keen to come and see you."

"It is no disturbance." Louis smiled, kissing the top of his son's head. "I was just about to come up to the nursery, anyway." He paused, staring at the older woman. "How has he been?"

"Very well, Your Grace," said the nanny, smiling calmly. "He had a slight sniffle the day before yesterday, but he is as right as rain now. We have been going on long walks around the estate. He is very eager to go to the stables and pet the horses."

"That's my boy," said Louis, gazing at his son. "You will be a fine horseman, just like Papa, one day. But you must be very careful around the horses now, Benjamin. You are not old enough to begin riding lessons, quite yet."

The boy nodded again, staring at him intently. "Papa stay home?"

Louis's heart contracted. "I always come home, do I not, Ben? But Papa is a busy man and often must be away. It is just the way of it."

He shifted, a little guiltily, in his chair. If he had his way, he would be in constant residence at Warwick Manor, spending time with his son. But he had to keep going back to Hillsworth House, at the moment. If he didn't keep trying with Hetty, he would never win her heart.

She was a bit suspicious about why he abruptly left her home the way that he did. He hadn't even realised that his eagerness to see his son was so apparent when he left her. When she had questioned him about his business the other day, it had been on the tip of his tongue to tell her about Benjamin. But something had stopped him, yet again.

He sincerely had no idea how she would take the news that he had an illegitimate child, who he was committed to raising. A small voice in his head insisted that the longer he delayed in telling her, the worse it might become. But he would always brush it aside, telling himself that he was just waiting for the right moment. The moment when he had won her trust enough that she would accept the news.

He stirred uneasily again. Hetty was a deeply moral woman. She had been seriously considering joining a nunnery. She might not be understanding, at all, about the fact he had fathered a bastard. Nor that he was raising the child. Would she be so conventional that she would not be able to tolerate it, at all?

He gazed at his son, feeling a fierce love sweep over him. He was not ashamed of Benjamin. The circumstances of his birth were not his fault. He was an innocent in all of it. He hadn't asked for any of it. His mother had abandoned him. It was his moral duty to look after the boy, even if it went against the dictates of society.

But not everyone thought the same way as he did. And Hetty might just be one of them.

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That night, in the nursery, he read a bedtime story to Benjamin, sitting in the rocking chair, next to the window. The little fellow was asleep, snuggled into his chest, with his mouth open, before Louis had even finished the story.

Louis closed the book, gazing at his son. He was still a baby, even though he could walk and talk, now. His face was still chubby. Gently, he traced a finger down the line of Ben's face. The boy stirred but did not wake.

A fierce wave of protectiveness swept over him. How could Rachel have walked away from him? She had given birth to him. She had carried him, within her own body, for months, feeling him grow, and kick, and take on form. And yet, she had never had that maternal instinct with him, right from the moment of his birth. Even during the months of her confinement, she had never expressed excitement at the thought of meeting her baby. She had been detached, even then.

He vividly remembered a time when he had visited the house on his estate where they had been living just after Ben's birth. The wet nurse was on a break, and Rachel was alone with their son.

He heard the baby's howling before he even entered the house. He had rushed in, wondering what was happening. The boy had been in his crib, crying desperately, small hands waving in the air in his distress. While Rachel was standing at a window, looking out, not even acknowledging the baby's cries in any way. He had picked up the baby, soothing him, holding him close. That had been the first warning for him that she was not attached to Ben in the way that she should have been.

Gently, carefully, he stood up, clutching the sleeping boy, so as not to wake him. When he laid Ben in his small bed, pulling the blankets up, the boy opened his eyes for just a moment.

“Papa,” he mumbled before promptly falling back to sleep again.

Louis’s heart clenched. No, he would never regret that this beautiful boy had come into his life. He was just so very sorry that he couldn’t legitimise him. That Ben would always be considered a bastard to the world at large.

And yet, the fact that Rachel had abandoned the boy meant that he was now free to pursue Hetty. If Rachel had stayed, he did not doubt that he would be married to her now. It had always been his intention to wed her once he was financially secure enough to do so. He would have sacrificed everything, so that his son could be legitimate.

A cold shiver ran through him at the thought of being married to Rachel. It would not have been a happy union. He had not loved her, but more than that, Rachel was a cold woman, in her heart of hearts. Nor had they ever had anything in common.

He remembered their stilted conversations, during the months of her confinement, and after Ben’s birth. They had no shared interests, nothing to connect them. A brief moment of passion was the only thing that had ever tied them together.

He straightened, thinking about Hetty. It was completely different with her. Their connection was obvious to him, even if she was still fighting it. It wasn’t just about physical desire. There was a lot more to it than that.

He sighed deeply. If he had pursued her after they had first met, they might be happily married now. It would have saved them both a world of pain. And yet, he could not wish it. For if they had married back then, and he had never met Rachel,

then Ben would never have existed.

He sighed again. It was a conundrum. But he needed to stop looking back. The present was what mattered now. He had been given a second chance with her, and he was determined not to blow it. Even if he had to have the patience of a saint.

His resolve was strengthening again. He would win her heart. And they would procure the divorce for her. He had to believe that there was light at the end of this tunnel, or else, what had it all been for?

### Chapter 10

Hetty's heart skipped a beat as she walked alongside the Duke towards the top of the hill. He had returned. She had told herself that she was not waiting for him, but she would be a fool, now, to say that it wasn't a pleasant thing when he came back to Hillsworth House. How much he brightened her days.

When he left, thundering down the lane away from her home, the days seemed colourless and insipid and grey. She would pace the house restlessly, unable to put her mind to any pursuit. She could not focus on embroidery, or the pianoforte, or even any of her books, which usually absorbed her.

The days when he was back were totally different. They seemed to exist in bright colour. The sun shone brighter; the sky was bluer, and there were more movements and sounds. He never told her much about the essential business that he had just returned from. But he would fill the room, almost overtaking it, with the charm of his personality, and his commanding physical presence.

Today, when he had returned, he had carried two big books, which he had presented to her, eagerly watching her reaction as she took them, studying them intently.

"Thank you," she had whispered, a bit overcome. They were old books about the Plantagenet princes in the Tower of London, who had disappeared centuries ago. "I cannot wait to read them!"

He had grinned. "They are from my collection, in the library at Warwick Manor," he said. "You can have them on loan." He hesitated, staring at her intently. "I hope that



when you finish reading them, you can return them yourself.”

She had blushed, not knowing what to say at all to that.

And now, they were out on an excursion. They had travelled by carriage to get here. An excursion to see Wardour Castle, an ancient site in Wiltshire. She had been unable to suppress her cry of delight when he had told her where they were going.

The carriage was parked in a country lane, and they were walking now to reach the top of the hill, where the castle’s ruins stood. She had heard about Wardour Castle but had never been here before. She glanced back at her mother and father, who had accompanied them. They were puffing slightly at the walk. She had surged ahead, eager to get there, and the Duke had kept pace with her, not even breaking a sweat.

Now, they were here. The grey castle loomed in front of them. They stopped, for a moment, taking it in.

And then, as if they had spoken, they both started walking eagerly towards it.

The castle was three storeys high, almost like a long box, on the hillside. There were windows, long arches. They went inside. Cobwebs hung like necklaces from the corners, so thick that the Duke stepped ahead, clearing some so that she could walk unhindered.

“It is truly wondrous,” she said, gazing around. “To think that once, this castle would have been full of people going about their daily business, and now, it is just a shell of its former self.”

“It is wondrous,” said the Duke, slowly walking through the debris that was scattered along the ground. “Do you know much about the history of the castle?”

She shook her head, smiling. “No. I do not.”

He nodded. “I have a book about castles of Wiltshire, in my library, that I read once, many years ago,” he said. “Wardour Castle was built in the early medieval time. In the 1390s, if I recall correctly.”

“Who built it?” she asked, turning to him.

“A man called Baron Lovell,” he said. “It remained in the Lovell family for many years, before they fell from grace, during the War of the Roses. It was confiscated by the crown because the Lovells supported the Lancastrians.” He paused. “And then, it had several owners, through the years. One notable point was when it was owned by Sir Thomas Arundell. He was executed for treason in 1552, as he was a staunch Roman Catholic, at a time when it was not popular to be so, and the castle was taken away from his family.”

Hetty nodded. “A fate that befell many a noble family.”

He smiled. “Sir Thomas’s son repurchased it in 1570, but it was sacked during the civil war,” he continued. “And so it remains, now, a permanent reminder of times long past.”

Hetty blinked, wandering slowly around the room. She touched one grey stone. It was cold. “I can almost feel it,” she whispered, shivering slightly. “The people who once lived here. Do you believe in ghosts, Your Grace?”

He smiled. “I do not know if I believe in ghosts, as such, but I believe that an energy lingers in certain places, especially when much has happened within its walls.” He gazed at her curiously. “Do you believe in the supernatural, Hetty?”

She shrugged. “I have never seen evidence of it, but that does not mean it does not

exist, of course.” She smiled slightly. “I try to keep as open a mind as possible. There is more to this life than we can ever know. I am sure of it.”

He walked towards her, slowly, so that they were merely metres apart. “Your father told me that you were contemplating joining a convent, after your husband’s desertion,” he said, in a quiet voice. “Are you very religious, then?”

Her heart started to thud at his close proximity. “I am not especially pious,” she replied. Her eyes filled with sudden tears. “But my faith was a rock that helped me through that awful time. It still helps me.”

He was silent for a moment, gazing down at her, almost searchingly.

“It is good to have faith,” he said in the same quiet voice. “But there are many ways to show devotion. I cannot imagine you as a nun at all. I cannot think of it as anything but a waste ...”

“How so?” she asked, turning away from him, almost clawing the wall. “How can it be a waste to serve God?”

He took a deep breath. “There are many who have a true vocation for the religious life,” he said slowly. “But there are many who retreat behind its walls because they are running from something. Either themselves or someone else. It is not a true calling.”

Her eyes flashed. “You think that of me?”

He took another deep breath. “I think that you are hurt and angry. I do not blame you for seeing the allure of such a life.” He blinked rapidly. “There have been times in my life, where it would have been nice if I could have run away. I understand the lure of it. But it is not the answer, Hetty. Surely, you see that now?”

The tears stung behind her eyes. She drew a deep, shuddering breath. She would not cry. She had done enough crying to last her a lifetime.

“It would be a waste, for a woman such as yourself,” he whispered, reaching out to trail a hand down the side of her face. “You are so very beautiful. Any man would be privileged to say that he was your husband. Do not blame yourself, Hetty. That rake would have done what he did to anyone. It is his character that should be judged, not yours.”

She bit her lip, desperately trying to keep the tears at bay. “He shamed me,” she whispered. “We had only been married for a day. What kind of man does that to his wife? What had I done that was so wrong that he could not bear to stay married to me?”

The words were painful as they left her mouth. She felt the heaviness of them. They were like rocks, hitting the ground with a thump.

He kept stroking her face gently, his eyes never leaving hers. “You do not know what his motivation was,” he said in a steady voice. “There could be a multitude of reasons why he did what he did, and none of them involving you. It is not your fault, Hetty. You must stop wearing this hairshirt.”

“How can I?” she cried. “I am the one tainted by his actions. He is free to do whatever he pleases, whereas I must bear the brunt of it all. It is not fair!”

“No, it is not,” he said quietly. “But it is what it is.” He took a deep breath. “And I am glad that Frank Blackmore deserted you, Hetty.”

She gasped. “Why?”

“Because I would not be standing with you, now, if he had not,” he said. “I have a

chance to make you my wife that I would never have had.” He paused. “And if I can marry you, Hetty, I promise that I will never hurt you like he did. I promise that I will be a good and faithful husband to you ...”

“Why?” she whispered, staring at him entreatingly. “For the love of God, why do you want me as your wife so much? I am ruined ...”

He was silent for a moment. And then, his voice came in an ardent whisper. “Surely, you must know?”

Her mouth fell open as she gazed at him. His hand dropped to his side, and his face was solemn. The moment stretched between them, taut as a string. But before she could say anything, her father and mother walked into the space. They jumped apart, almost guiltily.

“Well, that was quite a hike,” puffed her father, leaning against a wall for support. “I thought that I was going to have apoplexy for a moment there.”

Her mother was fanning herself vigorously, gazing around. “It is so very old,” she said, not sounding impressed, at all. “I wonder why people like to look at such things. It is only a pile of stones to me.”

Hetty gazed back at the Duke. He smiled slightly. She smiled, too. It was as if they were sharing a secret that no one else was privy to.

There wasn’t a chance to talk privately for the rest of the excursion. But Hetty could feel his eyes upon her, from time to time, and that shared sense of connection throbbed between them again.

She felt as if a glow had settled around her. A halo, enshrouding her, almost in a protective way. And she knew that it was all because of him.

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Back at Hillsworth House, they had a late dinner, before retiring to the drawing room. Her mother was openly yawning after the exertions of the day, and her father looked quite weary, too. Both called an early evening.

In her bedchamber, she sat at her dressing table, as her maid brushed her hair, readying her for sleep. When Bessie finally left, closing the door firmly behind her, she stared at the bed. She didn't feel like retiring, yet. Strangely, she was not tired at all. She was possessed of a curious energy, which swirled around her body like a wind.

Placing a shawl around her shoulders, she crept out of the room, making her way quietly down the stairs. There was a full moon tonight. Sometimes, when she could not sleep, she would sit on a garden bench, staring up at the stars. Somehow, it always settled her.

The garden path was brightly lit as she stole her way down the path and sat down, gazing up at the heavens. There were a thousand or more stars, blinking, looking like fireflies in the navy sky. The moon hung low, so white and luminous that she felt like she could almost reach out and touch it.

She sat there, lost in contemplation, for several moments. The stars were glittering so brightly. For some reason, she was reminded of something that Shakespeare had written in *The Tempest* .

We are such stuff as dreams are made on; and our little life is rounded with a sleep.

Abruptly, she jumped when she heard a rustling just behind her. The sharp snap of a twig.

“Who is there?” she whispered, a little fearfully.

A figure stepped out of the shadows. It was the Duke.

“Can you not sleep, either?” he asked, in a quiet voice, sitting beside her. “I find that I am not tired in the least. Which is odd, given we walked up that hill, and for a few miles around the castle.”

She smiled faintly. “No, I am not tired,” she said, shaking her head. “On the contrary. I feel as if I could sprint through the fields.” She laughed a little self-consciously. “I have this strange desire to run as if I might somehow catch the moon, within my grasp.”

He nodded, staring up into the night sky. “It is a splendid moon this evening,” he said, almost wistfully. “A most wondrous sight. On nights like these, it seems a crying shame to be inside and not a part of it.”

“Would it not be pleasant,” she mused, lost in the fullness of the moon, once again, “to just keep going? To leave all of it behind ...”

He reached out, suddenly, taking her hand within his own. Her heart quickened. The touch – the feel of his hand – was warm and comforting. But it was also disturbing her. She shuddered, feeling that warm glow again that had enshrouded her when they had been at the castle.

“You do not need to leave the world behind, Hetty,” he whispered, squeezing her hand. “It can still be a safe place if you are in the right hands.” He hesitated. “I want you to feel that you are safe with me. That I shall always be here for you.”

She did not know what to say to him. A strong desire suddenly burned in her chest. A desire to believe him. A desire to believe that there was good in this world and good

people. That the man sitting beside her was a good man who would never do her wrong.

But there was still so much that she didn't know about him. She thought of the impetuous way that he always left Hillsworth House. The vagueness about what he was doing when he wasn't here. It could be nothing, of course. She was probably overly suspicious. But still, the sense of unease lingered when she thought about it. She was almost certain that there was something that he wasn't telling her, and there didn't seem to be a way to approach the subject, where she could get any clear answers from him.

Was he hiding something? Was there something in his past, or his present, that he did not wish to talk with her about?

"You said that your mother once tried to arrange a marriage for you," she said slowly, staring down at their joined hands. "Why did you not want it? Was there someone else that you wished to marry?"

He shrugged, but she sensed a sudden tension within him. "The lady my mother tried to betroth me to was not someone I was interested in," he replied eventually. "And I was a younger man at the time. I had no desire to marry, then."

She took a deep breath. "And there has been no one since then, who you have desired to marry? A lady who you have been fond of?"

He shook his head. "No. There was only ever one woman for me. But I lost my chance with her, many years ago, and have been ruining it, ever since." He gazed at her intently, as the words left his mouth. She felt a sudden jolt run through her, from where their hands were joined.

She stood up quickly, breaking the contact.



“I find that I am weary now,” she said, not looking at him. “I must retire. And besides, it is not proper to sit out here with you, unchaperoned. I am sure my mother would scold me soundly if she were aware of it.”

He gazed up at her, sadly. “Of course. Good night, Hetty. I think I shall stay out here for a little while longer.”

She nodded, almost running down the garden path, back into the house.

In the hallway, at the top of the stairs, she stopped, looking out the window at him, still sitting on the garden bench. His back was to her, so she could not see his face. He was so still he could almost be a statue. What was he thinking?

Her heart yearned, almost heaved, with a strange, almost bittersweet longing. What was happening to her? She knew that if she had stayed out there any longer with him, they would have grown more intimate with each other. If he had leaned over to kiss her at that moment, she would not have pulled away.

A single tear coursed down her cheek. This was not supposed to be happening. She was going to a convent as soon as her divorce was worked out, either way. She would either be going to it as a free woman or as a still married one. But either way, she was going. She had been steadfast in her resolve that it was what she wanted to do with her life.

But now ... now, she was not so sure. He was arousing feelings in her that she had never experienced before. She wanted to be with him and around him. She had never felt this way about a man. She certainly had never felt this way around Frank.

She sighed heavily. It was all so very confusing. She simply did not know what to do about it at all. She only knew that the thought of leaving Louis Montague, the Duke of Warwick, behind, when she finally entered a convent, was more than she could

bear.

## Page 11

*Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 1:16 am*

### Chapter 11

Hetty ran down the steps of the house, just as the carriage was pulling to a stop. She was so excited that she could barely contain it.

The carriage door opened and out stepped her best friend in the whole world. Miss Annabelle Foster squealed in delight, her golden ringlets shaking on either side of her face, opening her arms.

“There you are!” she cried, enveloping Hetty in a warm embrace. “It has been so long, my dearest. Why, I have not seen you since your wedding day ...” She bit her lip, trailing off awkwardly.

Hetty sighed. She knew that it was going to be like this when she finally saw Annabelle again. But she didn’t care anymore. The awkwardness of what had happened to her was dwarfed by the pleasure of finally seeing her closest friend again.

“You simply must tell me everything,” whispered Annabelle, as they walked, arm in arm, into the house. “I shall not be satisfied until you do.”

Hetty sighed again. “It shall be a long tale, I fear,” she said, gripping Annabelle’s arm tightly.

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They settled on the table and chairs in the garden with their tea. Della scurried around

their feet. Annabelle reached down, petting the dog, before she turned to Hetty, fixing her with a steady gaze.

“I want to start by saying that I am sorry,” said Annabelle slowly. “I am sorry that you felt that you could not see me during this awful time ...”

Hetty shook her head firmly. “It was not that I did not wish to see you, Annabelle. I have missed you so very much.” She paused, biting her lip. “It is just that I would not have been very good company at all. And I had no desire to go anywhere or see anyone who might speak of ... my shame. Not even your parents, as good as they are.”

Her friend sighed. “I could have come here, to Hillsworth House, to visit, just as I am doing now,” she said slowly. “You should have leant on me, Hetty. That is what friends are for.”

Hetty nodded, biting her lip harder. Perhaps she had been too cautious in not reaching out to people.

“It warms my heart to hear you say it, Annabelle,” she said slowly. “I was afraid. Afraid that you might not wish to know me, after what Frank did to me. That you might not want to associate with a ruined woman ...”

“What nonsense,” said Annabelle, snorting. “I do not care what society thinks about what has been done to you. It was none of your doing. The fault lies entirely with that rake, who you call a husband.” She glowered. “I never liked him you know. Not that I would have told you before.”

“You didn’t?” asked Hetty, surprised.

Annabelle shook her head. “No. Too smarmy and smooth, in my book. Frank

Blackmore always tried a little bit too hard.” She paused. “But having said that, I never expected this, for a moment. That he would do what he has done to you. Have you had any word from him or know where he is and what he is doing now?”

Hetty shook her head. “Nothing. Papa hired a private investigator, but so far, there have been no sightings of him. It is all a mystery.”

“And he simply walked out on you the day after your wedding?”

Hetty nodded. “He left a note on a table in my bedroom. Later in the morning, a solicitor arrived, informing me the house had been sold a week prior, and that I must vacate ...”

Annabelle flushed with anger. “The swine! How could he have done this to you? I swear before God Almighty that I shall punch him in the nose if I ever have the misfortune of seeing his miserable face again.”

Hetty laughed. “Do not do that, dearest. You might get into trouble.” She sighed. “I am resigned to it now. It still hurts but not as bad as it did ...”

Annabelle picked up her tea, sipping thoughtfully. Then she put down the cup, staring at her friend.

“I have heard other rumours,” she said slowly. “That a duke, no less, has been staying here, on and off, paying you attention. Is it true, Hetty?”

Hetty blushed. “It is true. I could not believe it when he arrived on our doorstep, proposing marriage ...”

“But you are still married,” breathed Annabelle, her eyes wide. “Did he not realise that?”

“He knows,” said Hetty, shaking her head. “But he does not care. He has helped Papa to apply for a divorce on my behalf and claims that he shall wait for me.” She hesitated. “He is the gentleman who I was dancing with at the Farnhams’ ball when you became sick, all those years ago. Do you remember me telling you about him?”

Annabelle gasped. “Yes, I do! The wickedly handsome one, with green eyes, and dark hair? But you did not say he was a duke ...”

“That was because I did not know,” said Hetty, frowning slightly. “He lied to me, that night, introducing himself as someone else entirely. He claims it was just a lark, for the evening, but I do not know.” She hesitated. “Something about him does not add up. I think that he might be hiding something from me ...”

“Oh, Hetty, do not be so suspicious,” breathed Annabelle, her eyes shining. “He has remembered you, through all these years, and is intent on marrying you, despite what has happened, and the fact that you may never get a divorce.” She paused. “I know how impressed you were at the time by him. You should give him a chance. Has he declared his love for you?”

Hetty shook her head. “No. But he spends a lot of time with me and treats me very well.” She bit her lip. “But Annabelle, I cannot marry him, even if my divorce does come through. I vowed never to trust a man again, after what Frank did to me. I simply cannot let myself be vulnerable, in such a way, ever again ...”

Annabelle looked shocked. “Hetty, he is a duke ,” she breathed. “You would have such high status. Your life would be so very privileged. And I can tell that you like him, just by the way you are speaking about him.” She gazed at Hetty sadly. “Not all gentlemen are cut from the same cloth as Frank Blackmore, dearest. I know that you have been wronged so very badly, but that does not mean this man will do the same thing to you ...”

Hetty's frown deepened. This was agony. She so wanted to believe what Annabelle was saying to her. But every time she started to soften towards the Duke, she began to panic. It was as if a defensive wall was suddenly erected inside her, and she could not hope to scale it.

"I wish to join a convent," she said, looking Annabelle in the eye. "I want to be a nun."

"What?" snorted Annabelle, spilling her tea. "A nun ? You are joking with me, surely?"

Hetty miserably shook her head. "It is no joke. I wish to be in control of my own life and not be a burden on my parents for the rest of my days. I cannot marry ever again, even if I obtain a divorce. And in the world, I am a ruined woman. I do not wish to carry around the taint of scandal forever ..."

"Hetty, you are not thinking clearly," said Annabelle, looking shocked. "You are hurt and heartbroken by what Frank has done to you. I do not blame you for that, but you simply cannot throw your life away in a convent. I know you, and you would make a terrible nun. Believe me."

Hetty felt offended. "I think I would be quite competent ..."

"No, you would not," said Annabelle quickly. "I do not wish to rain on your parade, dearest, but it is the simple truth of it. You are much too spirited. You would be arguing with the mother superior on the first day. You are not subservient enough for such a life, Hetty. And you are far too clever." She paused, gazing at Hetty thoughtfully. "Did Frank ... make love to you on your wedding night?"

Hetty blushed again. "No, he would not even sleep next to me, in the same bed. He claimed that I was tired, and he wanted to give me space ..."

Annabelle sighed heavily. “You have not even been touched by a man, Hetty. Do you not think you would regret that if you took the veil? You would never be able to live freely again. That chance would be gone forever.” She paused. “And I can tell that you like this duke, in that certain way. You would not be blushing so fiercely every time we mention him if you did not.”

Hetty was silent. She shifted uneasily in her chair, contemplating Annabelle’s words.

It was true. She longed for the Duke to touch her. It was like a fire that had been slowly growing within her, the more time they spent together. Sometimes, if he accidentally brushed against her, it leapt to life, as if it had a life of its own.

Imagine what it would be like to be touched by him all the time. Every night of my life, lying in his arms ...

She shuddered, feeling that fire stirring within her once again. It was kindling to life, leaping and flickering, so fierce that she was scared that it would engulf her, entirely.

“Where is the Duke now?” asked Annabelle, quickly gazing around. “Is he here?”

Hetty shook her head. “No. He comes and goes, back and forth, between his estate in Hampshire, and here.” She frowned. “It is strange, Annabelle. He grows moody, after a few days here, and then suddenly announces he must leave within the hour. I am sure he is hiding something from me ...”

Annabelle sighed again. “Hetty, if you want my advice, I think you should just let it happen, as it will,” she said slowly. “Stop trying to fight what you feel. Learn to trust again. And do not run away to a convent, dearest. You would look simply hideous in a nun’s habit.”

Hetty burst out laughing. Annabelle joined in, and suddenly, they were both



hysterical. Della jumped excitedly, eager to be a part of the hilarity.

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After Annabelle had left, Hetty sat in the drawing room, trying to read one of the books that the Duke had leant her. But her heart wasn't in it. Restlessly, she put the book down, wandering through the house, like a lost soul.

Was her friend right? Should she give the Duke a chance and give up the thought of entering a convent entirely?

Suddenly, there was a knock on the door. Hetty took a deep breath, then walked swiftly towards it. She was closest, after all, and it would save the butler the long walk from the kitchen.

There was a messenger standing there. Without a word, he put a letter into her hands and left.

Hetty stared down at it, her blood running cold.

It was addressed to her. And it was written in Frank Blackmore's hand. She would recognise that scrawl anywhere.

She almost dropped the letter. He had written to her. Fearfully, she gazed at it as if it might suddenly explode.

He had turned her whole world upside down. What on earth was the letter going to say? For a moment, she was tempted to throw it to the wind.

But then, she stopped herself. She had to be brave. She must face this.

With a heart full of dread, she trailed up the stairs to her room to read it privately. Her legs were shaking so much Hetty was surprised that she didn't fall down entirely.

Her past had returned. And she knew, with deep certainty, that this letter was not going to contain anything good.

## Page 12

*Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 1:16 am*

### Chapter 12

Louis knew instantly that something had changed the minute he walked back into Hillsworth House.

Hetty seemed subdued, even more than she usually was. She sat on the chaise longue in the drawing room, dressed in a sober dark blue gown, as severe as a nun's habit. Her rich chestnut hair was styled in a plain bun at the back of her head; there were no curls framing her face. She glanced quickly at him, then dropped her gaze to the floor.

Mrs Arnold was sitting opposite her, looking solemn, as well. There was no sign of Mr Arnold.

He gazed from one to the other. "Has something happened?"

Mrs Arnold cleared her throat. "I think I shall go to the kitchen and order some tea," she said, standing up. "Perhaps Hetty might inform you of what has occurred while I do so, Your Grace." She hesitated for a moment, glancing at her daughter, but when Hetty did not respond, she quickly left the room.

Louis sat down on the chair that Mrs Arnold had just vacated, gazing closely at Hetty. She was pale, even paler than normal.

"Hetty," he said, in a low voice. "What is it?"

She sighed deeply, finally raising her head and gazing steadily at him.

“I received a letter from Frank,” she said slowly. “It arrived just yesterday afternoon.”

Louis felt his heart constrict. The rake had finally got in contact with her. And judging by the look on her face, what he had imparted was not good.

“What did he say?” he asked gently.

Hetty stood up abruptly, pacing the floor. “He informed me that he has left the country,” she said, in a strangled voice. “He is currently in France. He said that he sailed there as soon as he left our own home ...”

“France?” Louis frowned. “He sailed there to avoid the fallout from the scandal I take it?”

Hetty stopped, gazing at him with a bitter look on her face. “One might assume so, but it is a bit more complicated than that,” she said. “Frank informed me that he has a mistress. Her name is Amelie Marchand, a French native.” She took a deep, shuddering breath. “Mademoiselle Marchand wanted to return to her home, and her family, as she is in a delicate condition.”

Louis’s blood ran cold. “She is ...”

Hetty took another deep breath. “Yes, she is with child, and Frank claims her child as his own,” she said, her face twisting. “Mademoiselle Marchand was his mistress, the whole time that we were engaged, you see. He claims that he always loved her, and that he never loved me.” She paused. “As if I did not always know that he held no great affection for me. But still, the fact that he had a mistress the whole time is still a great shock, as you can imagine.”

Louis nodded. The unspeakable scoundrel. Frank Blackmore had married Hetty, while involved in a close liaison with another woman. More than that, he had always

been intending to desert Hetty, to be with this other woman. He had just been waiting to get her money before he did so.

“Frank claims that he wishes to start afresh, in France,” she continued, her voice bitter. “And reading between the lines, it is obvious that the funds from my dowry and the sale of our house is funding his little love nest.” Her face twisted again. “While I sit here, in my parents’ home, bearing the brunt of his desertion, he has sailed off into the sunset with his lover and their coming child, laughing all the way to the bank.”

Louis stood up, slowly approaching her. He reached out, taking her hand. He was heartened to see that she did not try to snatch it away.

“At least you know,” he said, in a quiet voice. “At least you have the reason, now, why he did what he did. It does not make it any less painful to bear, but it clears up a few questions.”

“Indeed,” said Hetty, her eyes flashing. “I simply have no idea why he condescended to finally write to me to inform me of it. Perhaps he does have a small conscience after all. Perhaps he wants absolution from me, for what he has done. Confession does ease the soul, after all.”

Louis frowned. “Hetty, I know how painful this is for you,” he said. “But it means that you can move on.” He gazed at her closely. “Please tell me that you have not destroyed the letter. It is proof of his permanent desertion and that he was calculated in what he did to you. We can present it as evidence to the court when the time comes.”

Hetty smiled faintly. “Oh, believe me, I have not destroyed it,” she replied. “I made that mistake with the note that he left me at our house, hurling it into the fire, in my pain and rage.” She took a deep breath. “I am keeping this one. It is in a very safe

place, and I shall present it as evidence if the court decides ever to grant me a hearing.”

He squeezed her hand. “It will happen,” he declared fervently. “The wheels of the process are slow turning, but I am confident, as you should be, as well. We shall make Frank Blackmore pay for what he has done to you. But more than that, you shall be a free woman again, Hetty.”

She gazed at him, her eyes filling with tears. “How could he have done it to me?” she whispered, in anguish. “How could he have been so mercenary as to marry me just for my money, all the while knowing that he was going to discard me like a used rag?”

“There are no words for such a man,” he said, his face darkening with anger. “He has no honour. To treat you in such a cavalier fashion ... when you deserve the world ... when you are the epitome of loveliness, in a woman...”

He was so close to her now. He could smell the scent of her hair; a lemony fragrance, wafting up towards him, so very inviting. He could pull her into his arms so easily. A mere slight tug and she would be encircled within them ...

But at that moment, the maid arrived, carrying the tea tray. He stepped back, away from her, severing the connection between them.

It wasn't time, yet. And now she was wounded anew. Would Frank Blackmore's declaration sever completely the fragile bond that they had established? The bond that he had worked so hard to build between them?

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Later that day, they walked together through the gardens, her dog at their heels. She

was silent and subdued. He could tell that her mind was very far away.

“Shall we go further?” he asked quietly. “To the apple tree again?”

She sighed. “As you wish.”

Della yelped delightedly when he opened the back gate, sprinting off over the field. They walked in further silence towards the large tree. It had shed the majority of its fruit, the apples lying on the ground around it, rotting. But there were still a few on the tree, and he reached up now, picking two.

He handed one to her, and they sat down, side by side, leaning against the trunk. The broken wooden seat of the swing was still lying on the ground, in exactly the same position. Vividly, he remembered when she had crashed to earth, and he had rushed to her, concerned she had hurt herself. And then, to his surprise, she had started laughing. The sound of it still reverberated in his head.

Hetty stared at her apple, contemplating it as if it might hold the answers to the meaning of life. “I will never be free of him, will I?” she asked quietly. “The court will never grant me a divorce. That man will haunt me forever.”

“You do not know that,” he said, gazing at her, feeling uneasy. “The court moves slowly, as I said before. Have faith, Hetty. It will happen.”

She shook her head. “No, I do not think it will,” she said, in a small voice. “I am enough of a realist to know that.” She paused, gazing over the landscape with sad eyes. “If Frank was petitioning for the divorce, and I was the one who had deserted him, carrying on with a lover, then they would quickly grant it. But the fact that he is the one who has done it all, makes a huge difference. The law does not regard a man’s infidelity the same way as it regards a woman’s. There are separate rules for each sex.”

He was silent for a moment, his heart sinking. She was speaking the truth. The law was very forgiving of a man's infidelity to his lawfully wedded wife, almost condoning it. A woman was expected to be faithful, though, as so much was at stake through it. If a woman was unfaithful during her marriage, then the question of a child's rightful paternity could be raised, among other considerations. The law protected the man, but not the woman, in so many ways.

He briefly thought of Benjamin. He did not know, for sure, that the child was his. Rachel could have slept with another man, either immediately before or after, the one time they had made love. He had discovered later that she was not chaste, in any way.

He knew that Ben was his, in his heart: the boy looked like him, had his eyes. But it could have been different. Paternity was not easy to establish, in such cases. He had taken her word and did the honourable thing by her. Another man might have cast her aside, telling her that he had no proof that the child was his, and the law would have backed him up.

Women were vulnerable in this society. Look at what had happened to Hetty.

But he must believe that the court would grant her divorce. The alternative could not be borne. That he had got so close to finally making her his own, only having to admit that she could never be his.

He could barely endure the thought.

"I will go to a convent," she said suddenly, her face twisted in pain. "If I cannot get divorced, then that is my plan ..."

"Hetty, no," he said, appalled. "I could not bear it. To think of you locked away in a convent, forever denied to me ..."



She was trembling, gazing at him. "What are you suggesting? Do you think for a moment that I would submit to an unlawful union with you? The same thing as what this Amelie Marchand has done with my husband?" Her eyes glittered dangerously. "If you are suggesting such a thing, then let me tell you now, and you can be away: I will do no such thing."

Louis flinched as if she had struck him. "I am not suggesting any such thing," he whispered. "I would never dishonour you in such a way." He took a deep breath. "All I am saying is that I cannot bear the thought of you in a convent. We will fight, together, for your divorce. If the court denies it, then we shall appeal. I will wait years for you."

She gazed at him, dumbfounded. "You would wait years for me? Even though I might never obtain a divorce and be a free woman?"

He nodded slowly, his heart aching, with love for her. "I will wait forever, Hetty."

She was silent for a moment, gazing out over the hills in the distance. "I cannot believe it," she whispered. "Why would you sacrifice your life for me on the slim hope that I might one day be free to marry you?"

"Why do you think?" he said in an anguished whisper. "Can you not see how much you mean to me? I have been trying to show you all this time. I have been trying to win your trust, trying to show you that it is only you, Hetty. It has only ever been you."

She looked amazed, her mouth dropping open slightly, as she turned to him. He swore underneath his breath, his heart yearning for her, so much that he could barely contain it.

He had exposed himself. It was too late, now, to take the words back. Would she

jump to her feet and run away? Had he scared her off, once and for all, with his declaration?

But she didn't move an inch. She looked like she was rooted to the spot. Their eyes met and held, a magnetic cord pulling between them.

And then, he was reaching for her, eagerly taking her in his arms, his mouth descending upon her own, for the very first time.

Her lips were as soft as he had dreamt they would be and so very sweet. He moaned, underneath his breath, pulling her closer. He waited for her to pull away, but she didn't. Instead, he felt her lips open, beneath his own, blossoming to life as she kissed him back.

The kiss deepened. He couldn't help it. His hands caressed her, exploring her curves. The rounded hips, the small waist, the fullness of her breasts. He could not get enough of her. He wanted to gather her up, take her beneath this tree, claim her for his own, once and for all. He was so giddy with desire he could barely breathe.

He trailed feverish kisses down the curve of her long neck, tasting the sweetness of her skin, as he caressed her breasts, feeling the nipples beneath the fabric of her gown grow hard for him. He tilted her back in his arms, pulling aside the bodice of her gown. Hungrily, his eyes registered the creamy fullness of her breasts, the rosy aureoles, before his lips descended upon one, drawing the nipple deep into his mouth as he suckled her. He heard her low moan, thick with desire, as she arched her back to accommodate him.

She was trembling, now, her skin mottled with pink. He reached down, seeking her centre, briefly touching her through the gown. She shivered convulsively as he kept caressing her gently, then with firmer, more confident, strokes. He suckled harder, raising his eyes to watch her. Her head had tilted back, and her eyes were closed in

ecstasy. He felt the answering throb deep in his loins.

But suddenly, Della leapt upon them, barking ferociously. Hetty leapt back as if scalded, laughing hysterically as the dog licked her face. He started laughing, too. The moment was well and truly broken.

“Down, Della!” she commanded, barely able to draw breath. “Down, girl!”

He leapt to his feet, his heart expanding with love for her. He reached out a hand, pulling her up. Tenderly, he adjusted the bodice of her gown, tucking away those magnificent breasts. She stood as impassive as a doll while he tidied her. She had stopped laughing, now, and gazed up at him, her blue eyes impossibly large.

Gently, he kissed her forehead, his eyes never leaving hers for a second.

“Do you believe me, now?” he whispered. “Do you believe me that it has only ever been for you?”

She sighed deeply. She did not answer, biting her lip.

He held her hand as they walked back towards the house. They didn’t speak any more than they had when they had started on the walk through the field to the apple tree. But whereas that first walk had been fraught with tension because of Frank Blackmore’s letter, this time it was different. Something had changed between them, forever.

He still didn’t know if he had finally earned her trust. He didn’t know if she felt the same way about him as he did about her. But he had felt the leap of her response to him, the way that her flesh had answered his. She desired him that much was obvious. She had felt that same pull of fierce, deep attraction, that he felt for her.

And it was enough, for the moment.

He felt like he was in a dream as they entered the house. Luncheon was about to be served. They separated, to wash. Already, he felt the loss of her, wishing her back by his side.

Sitting across the dining table from her, he could barely eat. Vividly, he replayed their passionate encounter over and over in his mind. The feel of her. The taste of her. The agony, of wanting her, almost more than life itself.

It was time to take her to Warwick Manor. It was time to finally introduce her to Benjamin. He still had no idea what her reaction to his illegitimate son would be. It was risky. He might lose her forever when he had just tentatively claimed her for his own.

But he could not lie, by omission, to her any longer. He wanted her for his wife, come hell or high water, and she had to know the truth of what his life was. Hopefully, their connection was strong enough now that she would accept the situation.

They both reached for the pepper shaker, sitting in the middle of the table, at the same time, their hands connecting. She smiled shyly, pulling back, letting him take it. She flushed, looking down into her soup bowl.

His heart contracted. He had never loved a woman the way that he loved her. And he would make her his wife. He vowed it to himself, trembling with desire, once again.

Hetty was his. She had always been his. It had just taken an awfully long time for him to get to her. He thought about her desire to join a nunnery. The sheer waste of it. Hetty was made for love. She belonged in his arms, forever.

He fervently prayed that it would be possible. That they were not destined to never be

together because another man had managed to put a ring on her finger before him.

### Chapter 13

Hetty gazed around the vast foyer of Warwick Manor, trying hard not to show how impressed she was. The ceiling was so high she had to crane her neck to see it properly. It was intricately carved. The floor beneath her feet was white marble.

Her mother looked as gobsmacked as she felt. “Oh, this is so very grand,” she whispered, almost fearfully. “It makes Hillsworth House look like a doll’s house.”

The Duke came up to them, smiling. “Welcome to my home,” he said, in a satisfied voice. “I will get the butler to show you to your rooms, where you can rest after the journey.” His eyes lingered on Hetty. “I hope you will find the accommodation to your satisfaction.”

Hetty shivered, seeing the desire in his eyes. They were almost burning with it. Hastily, she looked away, pretending to be absorbed in contemplation of the house. She tried to ignore the leap of response she felt as her mother thanked him.

She had been surprised when he had invited them to stay in his home. He had merely said that he was eager to show her Warwick Manor. He mentioned his vast collection of books in his library, and that he could show her the hidden passageways that he had talked about previously. Her parents had been eager to accept his offer on her behalf. Papa had been unable to accompany them, but her mother was here, as chaperone.

As she studied the three-tiered chandelier, falling dramatically from the ceiling, she couldn’t quite believe that if her divorce came through, and she did agree to marry

him, this house might one day be her home. That she would be a duchess, living on a vast estate, in a home built centuries ago.

She hardly knew how she felt about that possibility, now. Ever since the day that he had kissed her, so passionately, beneath the apple tree. She blushed, thinking about it, the feel of his lips on her own, the way his hands had caressed the most intimate parts of her body. He had suckled one of her breasts, causing such torment within her that she had not known what to do. And then, his hand had touched her, down there. She shuddered, thinking of the sensations that had coursed through her body as he had caressed her ...

The butler arrived, and the Duke excused himself. The next moment, they were following the man up the grand, winding staircase, towards their rooms. But as her eyes swept over the hallway at the top of the stairs, taking in the intricate wood panelling of the walls and the exquisite rose and white Abyssinian hall runner on the floor, she frowned. She must not get overwhelmed by all of this.

Yes, he was a duke, with an impressive home. And yes, he made her shiver with desire. He claimed that he would wait forever to make her his wife. That he was sincere in his regard for her. But there were still unanswered questions about him. His moodiness, and his haste to leave Hillsworth House in the months that he had been courting her. Things that made her uneasy to fully trust him.

As they walked down the hallway, she resolved to herself that she would confront him about it, once and for all. It would be easy, so very easy, to get swept away by him, to forget her plan to join a convent. She had to make sure that he was worth it. She must make sure that if she put her life into his hands, that he was worthy of it. She simply could not endure being wronged by another man.

Her heart lurched. Especially this man. She did not know if she would survive it at all.

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In her room, as she rested before luncheon, she took out the letter. Frank's letter. She had brought it with her to peruse again if she felt like it, even though she had read it a hundred times, now, and probably could recite the words verbatim if anyone asked her.

But the shock of it, the sheer rage, was still the same as the day she had first read it.

My dear Hetty,

I trust you are well. I heard that you had returned to your parents' home.

I write to you to inform you of my current circumstances. I am in the town of Villefranche-sur-Mer, in the region of Provence, France. A truly beautiful town, a fishing village, on the edge of the sea. It is the hometown of my mistress, Mademoiselle Amelie Marchand. The lady that I have always been in love with, I am sorry to say. I know that this will hurt you, but I must be truthful with you, at long last.

We have come to Villefranche-sur-Mer as Amelie desires to be close to her family at this time. She is expecting our child and naturally wishes to have her confinement here, amongst loved ones. And it is a chance for us to start afresh without the weight of what has happened between you and I. England is too small a place for scandal, after all.

It is our intention to settle here. I will not be returning, Hetty, and there is no chance that we will be reconciled. It is Amelie, who I love, and have always loved. With her, I feel that I can truly breathe. We are as two hearts, beating as one, and always shall be.



I wish the best for you, I truly do. I hope that one day you will find it in your heart to forgive me and understand that I had no choice but to act as I did. I had to follow my heart, come what may.

Au revoir, my dear. I do not think we will have occasion to meet again in this life.

Frank

Her heart lurched, and she suddenly threw the letter on the floor as if it had burst into flames.

She didn't know what hurt the most. The fact that Frank had a mistress, the whole time that they were engaged, or the fact that he was so casually dismissive of her. The fact that he and his mistress were starting afresh in France to escape the scandal he had made, while she was left here, licking her wounds, her life in ruins around her.

But, there was some good in his letter. As the Duke had said, it was proof that she could bring before the court. And her father had looked triumphant, noting that Frank had revealed where he was hiding out. He claimed that it would not take much work to locate his current address now, and then, if and when the court set a date for proceedings, he could be informed.

Hetty's eyes filled with tears of frustration. There was still no word from the court. It had been months since the Duke and her father had lodged the application. The silence was growing ominous. Would she ever be free of her husband? Would she ever be able to make him suffer for what he had done to her?

She suddenly heard footsteps walking down the hallway outside her room. There was the sound of murmuring through the wall. A child's high laugh quickly suppressed.

She frowned. What was a child doing in this manor walking the top hallway?

Quickly, she walked to the door, opening it, and peering down the hallway. But whoever had passed by was gone, now. There wasn't a sign that anyone had ever been there.

Her frown deepening, she closed the door. She must have imagined the sound of a child. None of the servants would be walking their children along this section of the house, or even have them in residence. Perhaps she was going just a little crazy.

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That afternoon, the Duke took her on a long walk of the estate, her mother trailing behind. The grounds were extensive, with crisscrossing paths, flanked on either side by tall, white statues of Greek gods and goddesses. The gardens were glorious, too, tended to by a team of gardeners, all busy at work, digging and trimming.

It was hot, the air filled with the humming of bees that seemed to form a cloud above the flowers and bushes.

"What do you think?" he asked her, smiling. "Does Warwick Manor pass muster?"

She smiled back, cautiously. "It is truly beautiful. You must be very proud to be the owner of such a historic residence."

"I am," he said slowly. "Very proud. But it was touch and go for a while on whether I would be able to keep all of it intact."

"Why?" she asked curiously.

He sighed. "My father was not a wise man when it came to money," he said slowly. "He bled the coffers dry, with his extravagance." He paused. "His legacy to me when he died was little wealth, and much debt. It took me years to pay it all off and recoup

it. For a while, I thought I might be reduced to selling off portions of the estate, to keep afloat. It would have broken my heart.”

“How awful,” she said, in a quiet voice.

He took a deep breath. “Yes, well, I just had to get on with it.” He glanced at her sideways. “It was the reason that I never tried to find you and court you after we met at that ball. I could not offer for your hand when I was in such a precarious position. But I never forgot you, Hetty, not for a moment.”

She smothered her surprise at his words, remembering her father saying the Duke had been charmed by her but was unable to pursue her in the past.

“I did not forget you, either,” she said slowly, her heart beating fast. “I searched for you for months when I was out at parties and balls. But you were never there ...”

He stopped abruptly, gazing down at her, a solemn expression on his face. “Is it true?” he whispered. “That you thought about me, as well?”

She nodded, her face burning. “You made an impression upon me,” she admitted. “But then Frank came along, and I thought that I would never see you again ...”

He was silent for a moment, his green eyes glittering as he kept gazing at her. Her heart flipped over in her chest.

Desperate for reprieve from the intensity thickening between them, she forced herself to look away, her eyes trailing the grounds. She saw a small cottage in the distance.

“Is that house part of your estate?” she asked, to change the subject.

He jumped, a little, almost in alarm. “Yes. I own it ...”

Curious, she stared at him. Why was he reacting this way to such a benign enquiry?

She was just about to keep walking when he laid a hand on her arm, stopping her.

“Hetty,” he said gravely. “There is something that you must know. Something that I must tell you.”

She felt herself grow cold, all over. She knew it. Her instinct had been right. There was something that he was hiding from her.

She gazed at him, feeling goose flesh breaking out on her skin, despite the heat of the day. He looked almost as if he was about to be sick. Pale, with beads of sweat, along his hairline.

Her heart fell to the ground. “What is it that you want to tell me?”

He looked away, for a moment, staring into the distance. But then, he took a deep breath and turned back to her.

“You must believe me that it is you that I always wanted,” he said in a strangled voice. “I fell in love with you, at first sight. I could not get you out of my mind.” He gave a short laugh. “I told myself it was ridiculous to feel such a way towards a lady I had barely spoken to. But the image of you was so strong, so powerful ...”

She gasped in shock. “You claim that you have always been in love with me?”

He laughed shortly. “You must know. I told you, the day that I held you in my arms, that for me, there has only ever been one woman.” He paused, gazing down at her, intently. “But I was not in the position, as I just said, to court you. I told myself that I would do it when I had recouped my wealth. Only then, could I put in an offer for your hand.”

She was silent as the words sank in. Yes, it was true. She had always known that he loved her. She had just been running from the truth of it, not willing to admit it to herself. She had been too scared, too hurt, fighting him, at every turn.

“But it took longer than I expected,” he said in a strangled voice. “Much longer. And then I heard that you were engaged, to Frank Blackmore. That my chance was gone.” He blinked back tears. “I was devastated that I had lost you before I ever had the opportunity to have you. I made a silly mistake ...”

She gazed at him, feeling another shudder fall through her.

“I ... made love to a lady,” he whispered. “I was lonely, mourning that my chance with you had gone, and she looked like you ... just a little.” He hesitated. “I regretted it the next day. But that one encounter had far-reaching consequences. Three weeks later, she arrived on my doorstep, claiming that she was with child ...”

Hetty gasped, her head reeling. “What?”

He took a deep, ragged breath. “It was true. I was not in a position to marry her any more than I was in a position to marry you, but I set her up in that cottage that you just asked me about.” He paused. “I told her I would marry her when I was able to. She spent her confinement there, but she was not happy.”

Hetty was silent. She simply did not know what to say.

“She gave birth to my son, Benjamin, there,” he continued quietly. “But she did not believe me when I told her I intended to marry her when I could. She grew bitter, claiming that I was toying with her.” He paused. “One day, when our son was only months old, she disappeared, abandoning him.”

He gazed out towards the cottage with eyes full of sorrow. “Ben is the light of my

life,” he said quietly. “I would never abandon him like his mother has. I can never legitimise him, now, but he is still my son, and always shall be. He lives with me here, at the manor.”

“You have an illegitimate child, who lives with you?” Her voice was thready.

He nodded. “Yes, I do. And I do not resent it, for it would mean that I regret his existence, which is impossible.” He hesitated. “When I heard that you had been deserted, Hetty, I seized my chance to court you. You must believe that it has always been you. You are the only woman that I have ever loved, or shall ever love ...”

His voice was fading in and out, now. She staggered a little. He reached out to support her, but she snatched her arm away, quite violently.

“So that is what this has all been about,” she said, her voice bitter. “You need a mother for your illegitimate child. A disgraced, abandoned wife would not be fussy, would she? She would accept anything, and be grateful for it ...”

“No,” he moaned, in agony. “No. I love you. I love you , body and soul. It was never about that.” His eyes pleaded with her. “I do not care if you are disgraced, Hetty. I would love you still, if the whole world rose up condemning me for it. I would still choose you, and it is not because I need a mother for my son ...”

But she wasn’t listening to him, anymore. A fury had risen in her chest, so deep that she could barely contain it.

She knew he had been hiding something from her. And all of these mincing words about love, and the fact that he had always wanted her, were just lies. She should have known. She should never have opened up to him at all. She should never have let him hold her and kiss her, and do all those other things.

She should never have fallen in love with him.

Because she knew, at that moment, that she had. She had fallen hook, line, and sinker. She had been fighting it for so long that she had not been able to even admit it to herself. Desperately trying not to look out the window for him when he was about to return to Hillsworth House. Desperately trying to thwart her body's traitorous reaction to him. Trying so hard to keep her dignity and self-respect, after another man had trampled all over them.

She took off, running, down the path, back towards the house, desperate to get away from him. She heard him call her name but ignored it. It was imperative that she escape.

She flew past her mother, who gazed at her, shocked. But she didn't stop to reassure her. Tears were already blinding her vision, and she could not have talked without sobbing, anyway.

And now she knew that she had not imagined that child's laugh in the hallway. It had belonged to his son. His illegitimate son that he had been hiding from her this whole time.

All men were liars. She didn't know why she had ever forgotten it.

### Chapter 14

Hetty tore into the chamber that she was staying in, slamming the door behind her. The door thumped so loudly that a painting hanging on a wall adjacent to it suddenly crashed to the floor, lying awkwardly on the ground.

She stared at the painting, appalled that she might have inadvertently damaged it. Hastily, she picked it up. It was still in one piece, without a scratch on it. Taking a deep, ragged breath, she hung it back where it had been, her hands shaking as she adjusted it.

She was too upset and needed to calm down.

The tears that she had been holding at bay started to fall. Her hands in her face, she sobbed for a full minute, letting out all of her shock and sorrow. Eventually, she calmed down, just a little, enough to breathe easier.

She sat down on the edge of the bed, staring out the window at the grounds beyond. Why had he even brought her here? Had it been with the intention of telling her about his illegitimate son?

It was too much. The fact was, he had a bastard son, who he was raising in this house. If she were ever in a position to marry him, she must take that child on, as well. His morality, the essence of who he was, was murky, now.

He had told her that it had only been one time, that he had made love to the child's mother, and that he instantly regretted it. But how did she know if that was true? How



did she know that the lady was not actually his mistress that he had been keeping the whole time? How did she know that he didn't have a string of them scattered around the countryside?

She took a deep breath. He was probably a lothario, a womaniser, who charmed the ladies and had his way with them, just like Frank. A man with no morals in that regard. How could she trust that he had told her the whole truth and had not coloured it, tweaked it, to make himself look better? Had the child's mother actually abandoned the Duke and her child, or had he cast her off? He had told her that he intended to do the honourable thing and marry the lady, but he never had.

She took a deep breath. And the fact was he had a child. A child that she would be morally responsible for if she married him. A bastard child. How could she take on such a thing, especially with what she had just discovered, about Frank? How could he even ask it of her?

A mistress. A bastard child. It was all sounding too similar.

The Duke of Warwick, and Frank Blackmore, were cut from the same cloth.

She took another deep breath. She would speak to Mama and tell her that they had to leave Warwick Manor, immediately. Her mother would protest, of course, but once she told her about the Duke's revelation, she would understand. They had all been hoodwinked by him.

Her heart lurched violently. She would never see the Duke again. That much was clear. And even though she knew it was the right, proper course of action, her heart was telling her a different thing, entirely.

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Her heart was heavy, as she packed her trunk with shaking hands. It was late afternoon, now. The shadows were lengthening outside the window. Soon, it would be dusk.

Mama had knocked on her door demanding to know what was going on, but Hetty had not been able to speak to her. Not yet. She would leave it until the morning when she could speak calmly without breaking down, and then they could be away, straight after breakfast. She had heard nothing from the Duke.

But suddenly, there was a knock at the door, soft but insistent. Hetty took a deep breath, approaching it cautiously. “Who is it?”

“It is me,” said a deep voice on the other side. “Please, Hetty, will you open the door? There is something that I must show you.”

She hesitated. What was he talking about, now?

But before she could respond, the door opened. The Duke was standing there, a solemn expression on his face, holding the hand of a small child, who couldn’t have been more than two years old.

Hetty gasped, staring at the child. He was beautiful, with golden curls framing his head like a halo. He looked like a cherub that had just fallen from heaven. He had big, green eyes, the exact same shade as the Duke’s. And he had other similarities, as well. It was obvious that the man was his father.

“Benjamin,” said the Duke, squatting down to speak to his son, “say hello.”

“Hello,” said the boy shyly, ducking his head.

“Please, Hetty,” begged the Duke, staring up at her. “Can we come in?”

How could she refuse, with the boy on his hand tugging at her heartstrings? Slowly, she nodded her head, feeling once again that she was at risk of bursting into a frenzy of tears.

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Benjamin hugged his father's leg, peering up at her, hesitantly. She couldn't help it. She smiled at the boy and was rewarded with a coy smile back before he ducked his head, burying it into his father's leg.

"He is beautiful," she said, in a trembling voice. "A credit to you."

The Duke smiled wryly. "He is shy with you because he does not know you, but he can be a little tearaway," he said, ruffling his son's curls. "He runs rings around his nanny and all the other servants. And he is stubborn if he cannot get what he wants."

She gazed at him sadly. "His mother wants nothing to do with him at all?"

The Duke shook his head. "I have not heard from her since she fled when he was only months old," he said, his face twisting in pain, for a moment. "I made discreet enquiries, as to her whereabouts. She is safe, back with her previously estranged family." He took a deep breath. "She knows where he is, and that I would never abandon him. But I shall not force her to have a relationship with him if she does not want it. It could do more damage to him in the long term than the clean break he has now ..."

She sighed heavily, feeling so very sorry, for this little boy. "He is young," she said, in as steady a voice as she could muster. "He probably will have no memory of her at all. That is a blessing, at least."

He nodded wearily. "Yes, I console myself with that knowledge."

The boy was looking at her more boldly, now, with open curiosity.

“You are pretty,” he said abruptly, in a high voice.

She laughed. The Duke laughed, too, nodding his agreement.

“Hetty is very pretty,” he said, gazing at her intently. “A pretty lady, and a kind one, too, Ben.”

The boy ducked his head shyly again, tugging at his father’s britches. “Want Nanny,” he said, looking woebegone.

“Of course,” said his father, scooping him up into his arms. He looked at Hetty. “It is very close to his bedtime. He has a strict routine, of tea, bath, and bed, at this time of night. I should return him to the nursery now.”

“It was very nice to meet you, Ben,” said Hetty, feeling as if she was going to burst into tears, once more. The sight of the small boy with the golden curls had touched her in a way that she had not expected.

It had been so very easy to dismiss him as a bastard child, as society taught. But seeing the reality of this small child, abandoned by his mother, pulled at her heartstrings. The circumstances of his birth were not his fault, nor was the fact that his mother did not want to have anything to do with him. In God’s eyes, he was an innocent.

And she knew what it felt like to be abandoned. It had only been her husband, who had done it to her – a man who she had never really loved, anyway. How much worse would it be to be abandoned by a mother, who was the one person on earth who was supposed to love you, no matter what?

Suddenly, her own situation seemed so much better by comparison. She had been dwelling in her misery over it, but seeing this little child, who might have ended up in an orphanage, poor and unloved if it wasn't for the man in front of her, cleared it completely.

“Bye,” said the boy, waving a chubby hand.

“Bye,” she said, smiling.

The Duke walked out of the room, closing the door softly behind him. He shot her a look of gratitude, just before he closed it. Their eyes met, and held, for just a second.

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He returned to her in just under an hour, knocking on the door again. When she opened it this time, she was glad that he was there. Without a word, she let him in.

There was a strained silence, for a moment, before he turned to her, his green eyes intense.

“I know that it was a cheap trick to bring Ben to you,” he said in a strangled voice. “But I had to make you see that he is just a small child, and not the demon that society would have you believe.”

Hetty felt utterly ashamed of herself. “Of course he is just a child,” she said, her voice trembling. “And he deserves extra love because of what has happened to him. I do not blame him in any way for the circumstances of his birth. You must believe me.”

He looked touched. “Thank you,” he said. “It has been a hard road. There are some who would have nothing to do with him because he is illegitimate. He will face prejudice, wherever he goes in life, even if he is the son of a duke.”

She nodded. "You shall bring him up to believe in himself, I am sure ..."

He stepped closer to her, taking her hand in his. "I want both of us to bring him up," he said softly, his eyes ardent. "I shall stand by you regardless, Hetty. But will you stand by me?"

She felt a deep yearning in her innermost soul.

"How can I trust you?" she whispered. "Why did you not tell me of his existence, before?"

"How could I?" he whispered back. "You were so very hurt, and distrustful of me. I thought that if I told you about Ben, straight away, that you would never consider me as a suitor. That I would never get the chance to woo you."

She took a deep breath. "And you have told me the whole truth, now? You swear it?"

He nodded, his eyes shining. "I swear it, Hetty," he whispered. "Everything that I told you in the garden today is the truth. The way that I met Rachel, our relationship, her abandonment of our child ... everything." He hesitated. "And the way that I have always felt about you. My desire to get the chance to love you properly, and marry you."

She couldn't help it. A single tear coursed down her cheek. Her heart swelled with love for him.

Could she do it? Could she cross that bridge and truly trust him? Believe in his love for her, and her for him? Suddenly, she wanted to, so very much. She wanted to believe that he was telling her the truth and that it was possible that she could be loved and love in return. That her experience with Frank Blackmore was not the end of her, and she had to bury herself in a convent, scared of life and love.

Hesitantly, slowly, he reached out, stroking her face. The touch was tender. She moaned, turning her face into his palm, and kissing it.

The effect was immediate. He scooped her up in his arms, kissing her desperately. She responded with alacrity, kissing him back so that they were twisted in passion. Her body felt like it had suddenly been set on fire.

“I love you so much, Hetty,” he whispered. “You are the only woman for me. I would walk over hot coals, for you ...”

“I love you, too,” she whispered back, her voice choking.

The words, once released, felt incredibly freeing. As if she had just lifted a great weight off her shoulders.

She had never dreamt that such love was possible. Nor that it could be so hard to get to it. All of her doubts and her fears suddenly melted away like ice underneath the sun. She physically felt them unravelling within her.

Yes, he had lied by omission to her. But for good reason. And she realised now that this man’s honour was not in question. He had brought his illegitimate son into his home, caring for him, after his mother abandoned him, flying in the face of convention. If that was not the action of a good man, then she did not know what was.

And he was determined to win her despite her own disgrace and the low probability that she would ever be divorced. He did not care about what society thought of her, any more than he did not care what society thought about his illegitimate son. He was brave, and he was courageous. He had the heart of a lion.

Suddenly, he scooped her up, sweeping her off the ground as if she were as light as a feather. Tenderly, he placed her upon the bed, his mouth never leaving hers.

And then, he was trailing kisses down her neck, finding her breasts. She moaned, deep in her throat, as his mouth descended on a nipple, sucking and nipping. Instinctively, she arched her back, filled with a fire that she was scared would consume her entirely.

His mouth travelled lower, and suddenly – shockingly – he buried his head beneath her gown, pulling at her undergarments. She gasped as she felt his mouth touch her in her most intimate place. There was the hot wetness of his tongue against her flesh. He was licking her, lapping at her. She turned her head, putting her fist into her mouth as the most incredible sensations started to rise within her, growing stronger with every moment.

She heard a moan, realising with shock that it had come from her own mouth. He licked her harder, almost in a frenzy. She felt a hot burst of wetness seep out of her. She had never dreamt that such a thing was possible. How had she never heard of it?

She twisted on the bed almost in agony, clutching the bed covering, her hands balled into fists. He reached up, putting his hands over hers, forcing them down as he continued his bewildering attentions.

She felt like she was climbing, soaring, towards something that she did not know nor understand. An incredible sweetness. It was growing ever stronger, more intense, so fierce, that she cried out.

Abruptly, suddenly, the feelings peaked, a potent rush of sweetness that she could barely endure. She cried out again, twisting on the bed, as she felt a hot sweat break out all over her. For one dizzying moment, she hovered in the halls of ecstasy before she felt the sensations slowly subsiding.

It was over. She slowly opened her eyes, confused. It was as if she had lost all sense of time and place. Outside the window, it was dark now. An indigo sky, almost like a



bruise. She knew that she would never forget it.

He held her in his arms, gazing down at her tenderly, reaching out to pull a stray hair off her face, tucking it behind her ear.

“Happy?” he whispered, his eyes trailing over her face.

“Very happy,” she whispered back, blushing. “I simply had no idea that such pleasure was possible. That you could make me feel such things ...”

He laughed softly. “I am glad that you experienced it for the first time with me, Hetty,” he whispered, tenderly kissing her on the cheek. “It is the love between a man and a woman. Part of the many things that can happen when we lie together. There is so much more to explore, so much more to discover.” He hesitated. “But now is not the time. It is almost the hour for dinner, and I do not want your mother knocking on the door, demanding to know what is going on.”

Hetty gazed at him, in wonder. How was it possible that he could do that to her? And suddenly, she knew, without a shred of doubt, that she would never have experienced anything like this if she was still with Frank. That it would have been the chore that her mother spoke about the night before her wedding.

Because it was his love that had unleashed it. It was his hands, alone. It was the way that he held her, so tenderly, and every look that he gave her. It was a million things that added to the total. He did truly love her. It was there, in every touch.

And it was her love for him, as well. Her love for this honourable man, who had worked patiently to win her trust and her heart.

“You have made me the happiest man in the world,” he said, his voice shaking slightly. “It has been worth everything to see you here like this, shaking with

pleasure. Everything , Hetty.”

She reached up, kissing him ardently. Lost in him, once again.

She knew that the chances were slim that she would ever get her divorce. She knew that she might never end up as this man’s wife.

But suddenly, she was willing to risk it all, for that slim chance. For the possibility of lying in this man’s arms like this, every single night of her life.

### Chapter 15

Hetty walked down the path, with Della nipping at her heels. She barely noticed. Her legs felt like they had suddenly turned to jelly. Quickly, she found a chair, sinking into it gratefully.

They had just been informed that the court was granting her petition for a divorce. The hearing was scheduled to happen in three weeks' time.

She took a deep breath, trying to process how she felt. The truth was since she had returned to Hillsworth House, she had barely thought about it. She had been too preoccupied with her newfound love for Louis. It had consumed her thoughts, every waking hour of the day, deepening by the moment. She had managed to push the possibility of the hearing far away in her mind, as she lived in the moment, revelling in their love.

Of course, it had always been there, like a nagging toothache, at the back of her mind. The fear that it might never happen. That she would never have the chance to marry Louis. That it had taken so long for her to admit her love for him, and that it would wither on the vine, never have the chance to blossom, the way that it should.

And now, it was here. It was coming. Her chance to move on, once and for all.

She didn't know whether to laugh or cry.

She stared out over the landscape, lost in contemplation. It was probably a good thing that Louis wasn't here at this moment. Ben had a small cold, and he was worried

about the boy and wanted to be with him, which she understood completely. She needed time to be alone, and reflect on what was about to happen, anyway. To prepare herself for the emotional onslaught of it.

Her father was in his study, at this very moment, penning a letter to Frank Blackmore, in France, informing him of the date of the hearing. Frank would have a chance to be there, and to respond, as was his right. They were doing everything scrupulously by the book. They did not want the petition thrown out, or dismissed, on any slight technicality.

She trembled at the thought of facing Frank in court for the first time since he had deserted her.

Would she not be able to speak, with his presence? Would she become tongue-tied, and lose her courage? Would her emotions overwhelm her again, the fierce anger, and hurt, when she needed to be focused and calm? It was so difficult to know. But one thing was certain: she had to face it, whatever it might be.

Her father had warned her that they would ask difficult questions. Perhaps they would ask intimate questions. It was all part of their process to establish what had happened and what had gone wrong in the short marriage. She must brace herself for it. She must stay calm and answer truthfully and to the best of her ability.

If she were successful, then she would be a divorcee. The first divorcee in her district. No other lady that she knew of had ever taken such a step before. It was instant social death, even more than being abandoned.

Most couples who could not live together as man and wife, for whatever reason, never officially divorced. And they were few and far between, anyway. Most people stayed together, even if they were unhappy. Even if the lady was miserable and treated abominably because the price of freedom was simply too high.

I shall be a divorcee , she thought, turning the word over in her mind . A shamed woman. A fallen woman.

She took a deep breath, trying to quell the unease in her chest. It was worth it, if she could be free of Frank Blackmore, once and for all, and right the wrong that had been done to her. Besides, if she was successful, Louis had promised to marry her, straight away. They would travel to Gretna Green so that they didn't have to post the bans. She would only be a divorcee for a very little while, after all.

She thought of the alternative. The divorce could be denied. And instead of dealing with the shame of being a divorcee, she would be forever known as Mrs Blackmore and never able to marry Louis, at all. Her heart clenched at the very thought of it.

He claimed that he loved her, had always loved her, and would wait for her forever. But how long could he be expected to do such a thing if this petition was not successful? They could appeal, and appeal again, but still, it might never happen. He would be wasting his life, and his youth, on her. Because she knew that she could never live with him, as his mistress.

And he had Ben to think about. The young boy needed a mother. Would it be kinder, if it dragged on indefinitely, to simply set Louis free, and let him love again? Her heart ached at the very thought of it, but she had to face that prospect, as well. She would not let him give up his life for her. It would be too cruel.

She knew that there was no possibility of joining a convent now. Not since they had declared their love for each other. Come what may, she was committed to him, and would not run away to escape the scandal.

He had made a woman out of her. He had loved her and touched her most profoundly, bringing her to life. A life that she could just glimpse, over the horizon. Was it truly possible that they could get there? That there was a rainbow, just for them,

shimmering with colour, leading them to that pot of gold? Or were they destined never to be together?

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The next day, he came thundering through the gates of Hillsworth House on his horse. Before she could even get to the door, he burst through it, his eyes anxiously scanning the room. When he saw her, he strode to her, not even bothering to take off his hat.

“Is it true?” he whispered, his eyes searching her face. “Has a date been set for the hearing?”

She nodded. “It is true,” she answered, her heart quickening. “How did you know?”

He smiled wryly. “Your father sent me a letter, by urgent messenger,” he said, taking off his hat and throwing it on the hallstand in the corner. He was peeling off his gloves, too. “I received it just this morning. I had to come to you ...”

She bit her lip. “I am glad that you are here,” she whispered. “How is Ben?”

His smile widened. “Sitting up in his bed, demanding cake,” he said, rolling his eyes. “His sniffles are gone, as is his cough. He shall be tearing around the nursery before the day is out, I shouldn’t wonder.”

She smiled. “I am glad to hear it,” she said, a little wistfully. “I wish that I could be there, with him ...”

“He misses you,” said Louis. “Only yesterday, he asked when Hetty is coming back. You made an impression on him in the short time you were at Warwick Manor.” He paused. “But that is no wonder. You make an impression wherever you go, my love.”

She blushed, inordinately pleased to hear that Ben missed her. She had spent hours with the small child in the few days she had been at Warwick Manor. One morning, she had taken him on a short walk through the gardens, stopping to pick up a ladybug, smiling at the look of complete wonder on his face. Another day, they had played with his toy soldiers on the nursery floor, setting up a battlefield.

He was a sweet child with an infectious laugh. Sometimes, he could be stubborn and wilful, as his father had said. Once, he had thrown himself to the ground, kicking and screaming, because he had been denied a sweet. But on the whole, he was good-natured. It was easy to see that he was adored by everyone around him. His father, and his nanny, and all of the servants.

“Oh, Louis,” she said, her heart thumping. “Do you think it is ever going to happen? That we can legally be together, and become a family?”

He gazed at her steadily. “Of course it will happen,” he said slowly. “How can you doubt it?”

But, to her appalled surprise, she suddenly burst into tears, running away from him. She felt like her heart was about to break.

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He followed her outside to the garden, intercepting her, twisting her around. She almost collided with him.

“Hetty,” he said, frowning. “Why are you crying?”

She sighed heavily, sniffing, as she hastily wiped away her tears with her lace handkerchief. “I do not rightly know,” she said, in a sad voice. “It is just so hard, I guess. The chances are slim that they will grant me the divorce.” She paused, gazing

at him. "And I cannot bear the thought that we cannot be together. Not after it has taken me so long to realise how much I love you."

His face twisted. "Hetty, you must have faith," he said quietly. "I have it. And besides, I will wait for you, even if they do not grant it this time. We will appeal it, and appeal it again if need be. Eventually, we will be a family ..."

She gasped. "Louis, I cannot do it to you," she said, her face stricken. "Please, promise me that if this does not work, that you shall forget all about me. That you will move on, and love again, and give Ben the mother that he deserves ..."

He looked at her, shocked. "How can you say such a thing? I will not marry anyone, but you. Do you think I am so shallow that I will give up on us at the first hurdle? That I would simply shrug my shoulders and marry the next pretty lady that I see?"

She sobbed, pressing herself against him. Even hearing the words, made her heart break. The thought of him courting someone else was torture for her. But she had to be strong and make her point.

"I know that you are not shallow," she whispered against his chest. "I know that you will stand by me, through thick and thin." She gazed up at him beseechingly. "I just do not wish to be a burden to you. I do not wish you to waste your life on a love that can go nowhere. A love that can never be ..."

"It is my life to waste," he declared fiercely, staring down at her. "And if I choose to waste it, loving you, then I would consider it time well spent. Do not push me away, Hetty. Not now, after all that it has taken, for us to be as one mind."

She squeezed her eyes shut. If only she had never married Frank Blackmore. If only they had courted before she had ever met the man. Why was life so cruel?



She had met the love of her life at the Farnham's ball all those years ago. They could have been happily married, all of this time. It was only a twist of fate that they had lost each other. She knew now that they had always been meant to be together ...

But suddenly, she stopped herself, going along that train of thought. If they had married, all those years ago, then Ben would not be here. It had been meant to happen the way that it did.

Fate worked in mysterious ways. And she had to believe, once and for all, that they were fated to be together now. She must believe it, or else, what was it all for?

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He came to her that night after the house had retired for the evening, sneaking through her chamber door, a candle held high in his hand.

They didn't say anything. He simply took her in his arms, kissing her passionately. She received his lips like a prayer. And then, he led her to the bed, her arms twined around him.

"Will it be alright?" she whispered, wanting so hard to believe it.

"Yes," he whispered back. "We will be together, Hetty. Nothing will ever tear us apart." He gazed at her. "I want to make love to you. I want to so badly that it hurts. But to show how committed I am to you, and how much I believe that we will be married, one day, I am willing to wait. I will not make love to you, in full, until our wedding night, my darling."

She felt a lump form in her throat. "You would do that for me?"

He nodded, his green eyes intense in the darkness. "I would do that for you. I will do

it for both of us. I hope that you want it as much as I do.”

She blushed. “I ... I do, want to make love to you,” she whispered. “I never thought that I would say those words. But you have shown me that the physical side of love, between a man and a woman, can be wonderful.” She hesitated, her eyes shining. “I am looking forward to our wedding night, so much ...”

He kissed her again, pushing her back onto the mattress, gently. “We may not be able to fully make love,” he whispered against her cheek, “but luckily, there is so much more that we can do besides ...”

Suddenly, they stilled, hearing a creaking in the hallway. A pool of light from a lantern or a candle bobbing through the cracks in the door. He gazed down at her, regretfully.

“I think I should go,” he whispered. “It isn’t safe to visit you like this. Any of the servants could notice.” He paused, frowning. “We must be careful, Hetty. We do not want there to be any talk that we have been together intimately. Someone might report it to the court, and it would compromise you. You are still a married woman, after all.”

She nodded, but inside, she was devastated. She wanted him to hold her for just a little while longer. She knew that they could not make love, that Louis was saving that as a promise that they would eventually be married. But they could do other things. They could kiss, and he could touch her, and make those wild sensations sweep over her, once again.

But slowly, she came to her senses. He was right. She was still a married woman, even if it was in name only. But in the eyes of the law, she was committing adultery by even kissing Louis. If even a whisper of their intimate relationship got to the court, it could ruin everything.

That Frank was living with his mistress in sin, and they were expecting a child together, would be as nothing compared to the onslaught of abuse that would be heaped upon her. They would probably stone her if they got the chance.

It was a man's world, where the law was concerned. She burnt with the injustice of it. But there was simply nothing she could do to change it. And so, they must be very, very careful. It might mean the difference between getting the divorce and not getting it.

He stared into her face. "It will not be long until we can be together, my darling. You must believe that."

She tried to smile before kissing him good night. He crept out of her room as silently as he had entered it, closing the door firmly behind him.

She sighed, sliding down into the bed, staring at the wall.

She just wished that it was all over. She just wished that she knew either way what was going to happen. Whether she would end up marrying the love of her life, or whether she was doomed to forever be alone.

Louis might be waiting an awfully long time to finally make love to her. The promise that it would only happen on their wedding night seemed slightly ominous. She pictured them, old and grey, denying themselves through the years until they could officially wed. Would she have to leap over Frank's grave to make it possible?

Despite what he said, he could not wait forever. She could not deny him the right to marry and provide a mother for Ben. And he was still young, able to have other children, as well. He would be giving up such a lot for her. It was too much. Way too much.

She took a deep breath. She would know very soon if this petition were successful. And if it weren't, then she would make a decision, then. A decision for both their sakes.

He would never let her go. She knew that he would keep his promise, and stay by her side, forever if necessary. But she was simply not willing to force him to do that.

Her heart clenched. She would quietly disappear, go somewhere that he could never find her. The thought of a convent no longer appealed to her, but perhaps it might be an option. It would be for the best, after all.

Her eyes filled with tears at the thought of it. It would break her heart, clean in two. And she couldn't even bear to think about his young son and the fact that another woman would be abandoning him, even if she was not a permanent fixture in his life yet.

None of them deserved this. But if fate decreed that was the path they must follow, then there was simply nothing that she could do about it, anyway.

## Page 16

*Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 1:16 am*

### Chapter 16

Louis gazed across the foyer of the building, his heart in his mouth. Hetty was standing there, flanked by her parents. He yearned to cross the few metres that separated them but did not dare. He knew how risky it would be to do such a thing when they were so close to the hearing.

He studied her covertly. She looked calm and composed, but he knew that it was all a show. Only last night, he had spoken to her, and she had been almost sick with nerves, reiterating her wild idea that if she was not granted this divorce now, then he should abandon her. Give up on her and start afresh.

He had assured her, yet again, that he would do no such thing, that his heart was hers for all eternity. That they would eventually get her divorce, and that they would be together. She had seemed to accept his declaration, but he was still deeply uneasy that she would act rashly if they were not successful at this hearing.

He knew that he must be patient with her, that it was overwhelming her. They had waited so long, even to be informed, that this petition was going to be heard. But instead of assuring her that success was one step closer, it had rattled her to the core, dredging up all her insecurities and fears about the process. She simply had no idea of what was about to unfold, and that fact frightened her to the core. She had convinced herself that they were doomed to failure.

He took a deep breath, his heart flooding with love and desire as he beheld her. She had dressed simply, in a modest grey gown, with a high cream lace collar, and long sleeves. It looked too warm, as the day was already gathering heat. Beads of sweat

were already breaking out on her forehead, dampening the glossy chestnut curls framing her face. He closed his eyes for a moment, imagining himself kissing that forehead, tasting the salt of her sweat ...

He opened his eyes, shifting uneasily. He must banish such thoughts, at least for the moment. They were an indulgence, and they weakened him when he had to be sharp as a tack, for her sake. For the sake of the woman, who was the love of his life, and who he was determined to make his wife, once and for all.

He still couldn't quite believe that she had finally given her heart to him. That he had convinced her, at long last, of his devotion to her. The revelation about his illegitimate child had almost driven her away from him, but her heart had melted when she beheld Ben in the flesh. When she realised what a divine little boy he was, and that there was no way that he could have abandoned him. She finally realised that he had done the right thing, even if society deemed it wrong.

He had promised her that he would not fully make love to her until their wedding night, and he intended to keep that vow. To show her how committed he was to her. But his hunger for her was growing, day by day. When he held her in his arms in stolen moments and kissed her, it was growing harder not to make her completely his. Sometimes, it was just easier to avoid those situations, so that the temptation was not there.

And there was another reason to avoid that temptation, of course. She was a married woman. If anyone discovered their dalliances or even suspected them, it could ruin every chance that she would be granted this divorce. So much was at stake. Once again, he had to draw on those deep reserves of patience that he had almost depleted when he had been trying to woo her.

The only thing that was getting him through it was the shining light that she would one day be free, and they could finally be together.

There was movement. The door opened, and Hetty and her parents were ushered through it. He followed at a discreet distance. There was a gallery where he could sit and listen to proceedings.

She glanced back at him, quickly, her blue eyes large with fright. He tried to smile reassuringly but felt his face crack with the effort. His heart was racing and his palms slick with sweat. The day, and the hour, had finally come, and now, he was as beset by doubt and fear, as she was.

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He sat down in the chair, gazing around. There were three judges, all high clerics in the church. One wore the robes of a bishop. This particular gentleman sat in the middle, flanked by his fellow clerics, his face as impassive as stone. He did not look particularly impressed as he gazed at Hetty.

Louis felt a quick stab of fear. These men were God's servants. They were indoctrinated to believe that woman was the originator of sin in this world. A woman must be humble, meek, and accept her lot in life. They would not look kindly on a woman who dared to challenge the sanctity of marriage, even if she had good cause to do so.

"Madam," said the bishop, in a sharp voice. "You have petitioned this court for a dissolution of your marriage." His gaze turned sharp, and his lip curled. "This is a grave and serious thing that you have undertaken. The church must uphold the vows of marriage, and it is only in exceptional circumstances that they can be broken. Do you understand?"

Hetty was pale. "Yes, my lord," she whispered, almost swaying in her chair. "I understand the severity of what I am requesting."

“You come here, in sound mind?” he barked.

“I do,” she said.

The bishop’s gaze swivelled to Mr. Arnold. “Sir, you testify that your daughter is of sound mind, and fully able, to petition the court, for the dissolution of her marriage? And that she has your blessing, to do so?”

Hetty’s father nodded grimly. “I do, my lord.”

The bishop looked sour as if he had suddenly sucked upon a lemon. His lips pursed. “So be it, then. We shall hear your testimony, Mrs Blackmore. But I must stress that it pains me and my fellow brothers in Christ that it has come to this.” He paused, his eyes cold, as he beheld Hetty. “That you have felt compelled to do this when a good Christian woman should meekly accept what the good Lord has seen fit to bestow upon her.”

Hetty bridled a little. A mutinous expression crossed her face before she composed herself, and the mask slipped back into place. Louis felt another stab of uneasiness. It was going to be hard for Hetty to listen to such platitudes and not express her distaste for them. Could she do it? So much was resting on her ability to do so. These men of God would not take kindly to being challenged in that regard.

The bishop gazed around the room. “Is Mr Blackmore present? I take it he was informed of these proceedings?”

“He was, my lord,” said Mr Arnold, clearing his throat. “I wrote a letter to him, at his current address, as soon as we had word that it was going ahead.”

The bishop nodded. “All is as it should be in that regard, then. We cannot wait for his arrival, but I must impress upon you that if he arrives, we are compelled to listen to



his testimony and take it into account.”

Louis held his breath. He had been waiting, for Frank Blackmore to make an appearance, but the man had not seen fit to show his face. That, at least, was a good omen. Perhaps he simply did not care that Hetty was trying to divorce him. Perhaps he simply wanted to be rid of the marriage as well, so that he could be free to marry his mistress and legitimise his coming child. Perhaps it was not his intention to challenge it, at all.

But another wave of uneasiness swept over him. It would not be in Frank Blackmore’s interest to end the marriage if he wanted to keep Hetty’s dowry. Yes, he might want to marry his mistress, but surely the desire to fund his love nest in France was stronger than that. It was money, after all, and most men would fight tooth and nail to keep it.

His mistress was French, and they had more liberal ideas about adulterous unions in that country, apart from the fact that he could simply be lying, claiming that they were legally wed. He was residing in a foreign country. How was anyone there to know if he and his mistress were married, or not?

His eyes slid to the door, waiting for the moment when Frank Blackmore would breeze through it. But it remained firmly closed. He let out his breath, more relieved than he could say. Hopefully, if the man had decided to come, an ill wind had blown his ship off course, and he would be too late.

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Hetty’s voice was firm, if a little soft, as she related the background of her marriage.

“I exchanged vows with Mr Frank Blackmore on April the second of this year,” she said slowly. “We were married in the parish of Alderbury, at St Peter’s church, in the

village of Derrington, Wiltshire.”

The bishop held a piece of parchment in his hand, studying it closely, before handing it to the colleague on his left. “Yes, the marriage document is in order,” he said crisply. “You then proceeded to your marital home, in the same village?”

Hetty nodded. “We left the church and travelled to our newly purchased home,” she continued slowly. “The very next day, I awoke to find a note informing me that he was leaving me. He claimed that he had been having doubts for months and that he could not proceed with the marriage ...”

The bishop gazed at her steadily. “Do you still have this note?”

Hetty looked dismayed. “No, my lord. In a fit of anger, I burnt it. I regret my haste.”

The bishop smiled faintly. “Anger is never becoming in a woman, madam.” He paused. “Continue.”

Hetty’s jaw tightened. “That same morning, I was visited by a solicitor, Mr Joseph Baldwin, who informed me that our home was sold, and had been for over a week, at least. I was told that I had no legal recourse and that I must vacate the house within fourteen days.” Her voice trembled slightly. “I believe that this act shows that my new husband intended to desert me, well before our wedding day. That he was only waiting for us to exchange vows before he did so.”

“We shall be the judge of that, madam,” said the bishop curtly. “We are only interested in facts, at the moment. Please continue.”

Hetty took a deep breath. “I was devastated, of course, and not sure how to proceed. I penned a letter to my parents, requesting assistance, and they came promptly.” She hesitated. “My father went to see the solicitor to confirm the sale of the property. He

arranged disposal of the furniture. And then, they took me back to their home.”

“Is this true, Mr Arnold?” The judge raised his eyebrows.

“It is true, my lord,” said Hetty’s father, in a strained voice. “The sale of the property was watertight. There seemed nothing else for it but to dissolve the household and take my daughter back to our family home.”

The bishop nodded. He picked up another piece of parchment, studying it intently. “I have a letter from Mr Joseph Baldwin, solicitor, confirming the sale of the property, and the date on which it occurred.” He looked up at them. “The date was indeed a week prior to your wedding day, Mrs Blackmore.”

Louis felt elated. Frank Blackmore had overplayed his hand in that regard. In his haste to be gone from Hetty, and into his mistress’s arms, he had made a tactical error in selling off the property before their wedding day. Hopefully, he would live to regret it. It proved, in his opinion at least, that Blackmore had fully intended to desert her. Why else would he sell off their newly purchased home without another one waiting in the wings to take his wife to?

The bishop looked grave. “This is, indeed, a dishonourable act on the part of Mr Blackmore,” he said slowly. “You assert that you did not know that the property had been sold before Mr Baldwin informed you of it?”

Hetty shook her head. “None whatsoever, my lord. It was a shock to me. My husband never intimated it in the note that he left, nor did he speak of it to me prior.”

“It is, of course, a gentleman’s right to sell off his own property,” piped up another judge. “He is under no legal obligation to inform his wife.”

There was silence in the room. Hetty looked angry, but she managed to control it.

Louis let out a breath in relief.

“And you have had no correspondence from your husband since that day?” asked the bishop, his voice hard. “You have not been in contact with him at all?”

“I received one letter,” said Hetty. “In it, he informed me that we could never be reconciled and that he is currently residing in France.” She took a deep, ragged breath. “He told me that he has a mistress, a Mademoiselle Amelie Marchand, and that he was involved with the lady the whole time that we were engaged. They are currently expecting a child.”

The bishop raised his eyebrows. “I hope that you did not burn this letter, madam. Do you have it to present to the court?”

Hetty nodded, passing the letter along until it reached the judges. The bishop read it thoroughly before passing it to his colleagues, who each read it in turn. The court was so quiet, Louis could almost hear his own breath coming in and out of his lungs.

The bishop sighed deeply, staring at Hetty. “Madam, the fact that your husband has admitted his infidelity to you is not a gross impediment to the sanctity of your marriage.” He smiled condescendingly. “The church recognises that gentlemen often have mistresses and that their needs are stronger, in that regard ...”

Hetty’s blue eyes flashed with anger. “He has broken our marriage vows! He deserted me, to live with his mistress, and was fully intending to do so the whole time that we were betrothed to one another!” Her chest heaved. “He betrayed me, leaving me to disgrace, while he has set up a new home with another woman in another country. It is shameful!”

Hetty’s father reached out a placating hand on her arm. He gazed at her, shaking his head. Mrs Arnold, who was seated on the other side, paled, looking as if she were

about to faint clean away.

“If your outburst is quite done, madam,” said the bishop coldly, “then I might continue, with what I was saying.” He paused. “While the court does not believe it to be a gross impediment, it does not condone it. The fact that your estranged husband admits that he shall never be reconciled with you does make for a stronger case, however.”

“I should not be so concerned about the infidelity,” said another judge thoughtfully. “What I am concerned about is the fact it appears that he always intended to desert you. The sale of the property is proof of this, in my opinion. Mr Blackmore’s letter confirms that he has no intention to return to you, and take care of you, as a good and proper husband should. And as the gentleman himself is not here to put his side of the case, well ...”

Louis’s heart quickened as the judges conferred with each other, huddling in whispers. It was looking good. They had accepted that Blackmore was always intending to desert her and was not intending to return to his marriage.

He glanced at Hetty. She was pale, so very pale, but her blue eyes were sparkling with sudden hope. Suddenly, she gazed back at him. His heart beat faster still. He could barely restrain himself from leaping into the air and hollering in triumph.

She shouldn’t have confronted the judges about their flippant attitude towards her husband’s infidelity. She knew that they would have a casual approach to it; they had spoken about it often in the lead up to the hearing. That there was one rule for men, in that regard, and quite another, for a woman. No, it wasn’t fair, but it was the way of it, and confronting the judges about it would not accomplish anything and could, in fact, hinder her chances.

But while the bishop had censured her about her outburst, it seemed that luck was on

their side. They were not going to punish her for it. He switched his gaze back to them. They were still whispering. One judge was frowning, looking displeased. The others were trying to convince him of something. They went back and forth for several more minutes. Was it ever going to end?

Abruptly, they disbanded. The bishop cleared his throat. He turned to Hetty.

“Mrs Blackmore,” he said slowly. “We have discussed what you have presented before us...”

But before he could get any further, the door opened. A man stood there, dressed in sombre, dark clothes. Louis’s eyes widened as he studied him. Who was he?

“Yes?” barked the bishop. “Who are you?”

“My lord,” said the man, in a polished, calm voice. “My name is Mr Derrick Mitchell. I am a solicitor.” He took a deep breath. “I am representing Mr Frank Blackmore in this petition. And I think the court would be very interested to hear my client’s side of this.”

### Chapter 17

Hetty felt her mouth drop open. She went cold all over as she stared at the man who had just walked through the door.

She had been hoping and praying that Frank would not make an appearance. And it had seemed that her prayers had been answered in that regard. But now, his legal representative had just waltzed into the room, as cool as a cucumber, claiming that the court would like to hear Frank's version of events that had led to his desertion of her.

Suddenly, a wave of heat swept over her. A wave of anger, so intense that she wouldn't have been surprised if she started to steam out of her nostrils, like a raging bull.

He was a coward, through and through. He had decided that he couldn't, or wouldn't, face her in this court. Instead, he had sent a solicitor. It was not Mr Baldwin, who had negotiated the sale of their house, and was well acquainted with the weasel that her husband was. No, he had employed another man. A younger man, who looked so very slick and confident in what he was about to say.

The bishop cleared his throat. "Mr Mitchell. We were wondering why Mr Blackmore had not seen fit, to be here ..."

"My client regretfully cannot attend today's proceedings," said the solicitor smoothly. "He was not given sufficient notice in which to book passage back to England. All of the ships sailing were full." He paused. "He wrote to me, informing me in detail

about what had happened within his marriage, and prior to it, that led him to the decision to leave his lawfully wedded wife. May I present this to the court?"

The bishop nodded. "If you would, Mr Mitchell. We would like to hear Mr Blackmore's side of it before we make a final decision."

The solicitor bowed, smiling. "Thank you, my lord."

Hetty glared at the man, whose eyes swept over her without even taking her in at all. He cleared his throat, producing a letter, which he tended to the court. As it was handed to the bishop, she could clearly see the familiar scrawl of Frank's handwriting.

The solicitor produced another letter from his pocket, unfolding it. "What I have presented to you, my lords is the original letter, which Mr. Frank Blackmore sent to me," he said slowly. "I have copied it for my own perusal, so I may refer to it as I speak."

The bishop nodded. "Go on."

"Firstly, my client expresses his deep regret at any pain that he has caused Mrs Blackmore," he said, frowning slightly. "He still holds her in regard, and does not wish to cause her distress, despite the extenuating circumstances that led to his desertion of her." He paused dramatically. "He asserts that he has forgiven her, as a good Christian man should, but can no longer trust her ..."

Hetty's head started to spin with horror. She felt herself sway. What on earth was Frank claiming? And how dare he say that he had forgiven her, when he was the one that had caused all of this pain and upheaval?

The bishop was skimming the letter as the solicitor spoke. "Please continue, Mr



Mitchell.”

The solicitor stared down at the copy of the letter in his hand for a moment. He then raised his head, his eyes boring into Hetty. He sighed deeply, shaking his head.

“There is nothing as detestable as an unchaste woman,” declared the solicitor in an almost regretful tone. “My client greatly admired his wife when he was first betrothed to her. And there is obviously much to admire. We can all see that she is a beautiful, well brought up young lady, from a proper home.” He paused. “Mr Blackmore had high hopes that she would be a good wife to him. But he had deep concerns about her throughout their engagement. He heard many rumours that she was behaving unchastely with other gentlemen ...”

Hetty stood up, her chest heaving. “That is a lie!”

“Mrs Blackmore,” boomed the bishop, fixing her with a withering look. “Please, take your seat, and do not interrupt this court again.”

Hetty sank down with her heart hammering. She felt so sick that she could barely breathe. Her father looked outraged, his lips thinned, but he said nothing. Her mother looked as shocked and sickened as she felt.

She could feel Louis’s eyes on her, but she didn’t dare to look at him for fear of seeing confusion and revulsion in his face. That there might even be a shred of doubt about her, now, and that she had lied to him about her engagement and marriage.

“Many people told him that Miss Arnold was running around behind his back,” continued Mr Mitchell, without a pause. “There were sightings of her with other gentlemen. Once, she was observed to be in a passionate embrace at a public gathering.” He sighed heavily. “But the worst was when he was told that she had been seen leaving a different gentleman’s chamber in the middle of the night, at a

house party ...”

Hetty stifled a sob of pure rage. Her hands balled into fists. So, this was the tactic he had decided to take. To try to discredit her, smear her name in front of this court. That he had somehow been justified in deserting her.

It wasn't bad enough, what he had done to her, the shame and misery he had unleashed upon her. Now, he was grinding in his heel. He was determined that she be utterly destroyed so that he could walk away from this looking like the long-suffering fiancé and husband. So that he could smell of roses while she was crucified.

And there was another reason, as well, of course. The money. If he could prove that he had been justified in abandoning her, that he had no choice, then her dowry would remain with him.

She was simply amazed. It had never occurred to her that he might stoop to this level. That he might try to put the blame for all of this back on her by lying about what she had done and how she had behaved.

He was crafty, and he was cunning. He would be very well aware that the Ecclesiastical court took a far grimmer view of a woman's infidelity than that of a man's. That he could perhaps get away with his glaring infidelity to her, while all he needed to do was suggest hers, and she would be blamed for all of it.

And the worst of it was, she had to sit here and grit her teeth while he assassinated her character to the court. While he presented her as the whore of Babylon, a woman of insatiable sexual appetite, who had been unfaithful to him with not just one man, but several.

“My client felt like he was trapped inside the engagement,” continued Mr Mitchell, sighing heavily. “He wanted to believe the best of Miss Arnold and ignored the

rumours. He was fully committed to making her his wife, despite her rumoured dalliances with other gentlemen.” He paused, his eyes appealing, as he gazed at the judges. “He knew Miss Marchand, his current mistress, during his engagement to Miss Arnold but swears they did not have a physical relationship during that time. However, he would often confide in her, his concerns, about Miss Arnold, and her impropriety. He started to fall in love with Miss Marchand but felt honour bound to marry Miss Arnold ...”

Hetty’s chest was so tight that she could barely breathe. The solicitor was doing a superlative job of presenting Frank as the hard done by, long-suffering fiancé, who only turned to his mistress for comfort.

“These are very serious allegations, indeed,” said the bishop, looking appalled. “For as it says in the Proverbs: ‘a prostitute is a deep pit, and an adulteress is a narrow well.’” He paused, gazing at the solicitor. “Your client writes fluently about these rumours surrounding Miss Arnold prior to their marriage. But do you have any evidence that she did these things?”

The solicitor sighed again. “Unfortunately, because my client so desired to believe that they were not true, he did not investigate them as he should, and thus, has no proof of her infidelities.” He hesitated. “But they alarmed him enough that after they had exchanged their vows, he suddenly realised he could not go ahead with the marriage, that he must flee it. In his despair, he re-connected with Miss Marchand, who showed him what the love of a good woman was. He knew that he could never return to his wife, given her loose morals, for fear that he would always be played for a cuckold, and most likely never be confident that the children they might have would indeed be his. It is the only reason that he betrayed his marriage vows ...”

Her father suddenly put his hand in the air. “May I speak, my lord?”

The bishop nodded. “Yes, Mr Arnold?”

“This is rather ridiculous, my lord,” he said, his voice full of ice. “Mr Blackmore seeks to blacken the name of my daughter and excuse his actions against her without a shred of proof that she was ever unfaithful to him, or behaved in the wanton manner suggested.” He glared at the solicitor.

“Your client is living in mortal sin with a woman who is not his wife. He is expecting a bastard child from this unholy union. His adultery is plain for the world to see. Whereas I can produce any number of people, who can swear that my daughter, Henrietta, always behaved appropriately during her betrothal. Where are these people who attest to the actions you insist she committed? I demand you produce them.”

“You have no authority here to demand any such thing, sir,” said the bishop, frowning deeply. “It is up to this court to carry out such investigations if it deems it is necessary. I ask you to sit down, sir, and let the court do its work.”

Her father turned bright red but did as he was instructed, muttering to himself. Hetty’s eyes filled with tears as she gazed at him. He was the best father in the world and would defend her like a tiger, but he was as helpless in this situation as she was. His hands were tied.

She glanced at Louis, who was still sitting in the gallery, listening to all this. He was pale and looked as appalled as she felt. Her heart lurched. What must he be thinking? But there was nothing he could do about any of this, as well. He might be a peer of the realm, but he was powerless here, too.

It was all slipping away from her. Only a short time ago, she had been quietly confident that perhaps the court would grant her the divorce. It had looked so promising. And now, it had been turned on its head, flipped over, and she was being presented as the one at fault, who had driven her husband away.

She would never get to marry him. She would never be a free woman.

And it was even worse than that. For not only could she never marry the man that she loved more than life itself, but Frank had made sure that she would always carry the shame of this. Word would get out about his wild accusations, the fact that he had accused her of being little better than a whore. He had tripled her disgrace if the court found in his favour. How could she ever return to her home and live again in society?

She took a deep, shuddering breath as she felt her whole world come crashing down around her. She was doomed. She should never have petitioned to this court. She should have run off to a convent as she had wanted to. She wished to God that her parents and Louis had never talked her out of it.

Maybe it would have been better if Louis had never approached her father, seeking her hand. For it had set them all on this course, now. It had given her hope, and there was none. None at all.

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That night, in the small inn near the court, where her family had booked rooms for the evening, he came to her, sneaking into her room after dinner, wearing a dark cloak with a deep hood.

It had been a wearying day. The judges had been unable to agree on a verdict, in the end, and had instructed them to return the next morning. She knew that it was merely a stay of execution; that in the morning, they would find in Frank's favour. Their eyes had been cold when they rested upon her. She could almost hear the accusations swimming around in their heads.

Whore. Jezebel. Strumpet. Adulteress.

"You should not be here," she whispered desperately. "Anyone could have seen you. And it will only confirm that I am the whore that they are making me out to be ..."

her voice trailed away on a sob.

“Hetty,” he whispered, his green eyes glittering in the darkness, “you know I do not believe any of it, don’t you? I know that it is all lies, cooked up by a desperate man, eager to keep your dowry. He is angry with you that you dare to call him out on what he has done, and he is getting his revenge ...”

She sobbed again. “Well, it is working. Those judges want to believe the worst of me. They want to believe that Frank had no choice but to leave me.” She shuddered. “All is lost, Louis. All is lost .”

He grabbed her fiercely, pulling her into his arms, kissing the top of her head. She buried her face into his chest, unable to stop the torrent of tears from spilling over.

“How dare he,” she whispered, beating her hands against his chest. “How dare that man blacken my name with his lies. He knows that those judges will always believe the man over the woman. That they do not take much persuasion to condemn me as an adulteress ...”

Louis sighed heavily, stroking her hair. “It is true, my love. Look at what Henry the Eighth did to get rid of the wives that he no longer wanted.” He paused. “He made up all manner of things about them, accused them of the most shocking things in order to get his way, knowing that once a woman’s name is besmirched in that manner, that the mud sticks ...”

Hetty pulled away from him, gazing at him. “Yes, he did. He could never prove his allegations against Anne Boleyn, but it did not matter in the end. Everyone wanted to believe that she was guilty, and so it was done.” She paused, pensive. “He also claimed that his marriage to his first wife, Catherine of Aragon, was never valid, either, because she had first been married to his brother. He managed to procure an annulment because of it ...”

Hetty's heart started to quicken. Something was forming in her mind. Something that might just convince the court that she was telling the truth about everything. Something that might just manage to fix all the damage that had been done today.

"Hetty, what is it?" asked Louis, frowning. "You look as if you have suddenly found a fortune."

She couldn't tell him. Not yet. It might not work, and besides, she didn't want to get his hopes up. She needed to think it through thoroughly.

"You should go," she whispered, her eyes shining. "It is not safe."

They kissed passionately, and then he stole out of the room as silently as he had arrived. Hetty walked over to the window, staring down at the unfamiliar streets of the city where they were staying. Her mind was whirring like a cog in a wheel, and she could not hope to rest, yet, even though she was so very weary.

She thought about Frank, safely ensconced with his mistress, in the small fishing village, in Provence. He had been so very confident that he hadn't even bothered to make the journey back to England. He had thought that all he needed to do was pen some lies about her, and he would be home and hosed.

He thought wrong.

Because there was one little thing that Frank had forgotten about. He could call her all the names under the sun, but he couldn't prove a word of it. He was counting on the fact that the law almost always believed the man over the woman. But she did have proof that his lies were just that.

She thought of Louis, patient, kind Louis, who had told her he was willing to wait to make love to her, until their wedding night, as a sign of his commitment to her. She

had been impatient, wanting to make love with him, but now, she was very glad – so very glad – that they hadn't. That Louis had insisted that they wait.

She almost laughed out loud. Her love of history was proving very beneficial indeed.

Good old Henry the Eighth. He had been a clever man. He almost always got what he wanted, in one way, or the other. His queens had been clever women, too. And she was about to take a leaf out of all of their books, and use her mind, and her knowledge, to pull out her trump card.

She took a deep, shuddering breath. Frank Blackmore was going to rue the day that he had decided to take her on. Because he was going to be made to pay for all that he had done to her in spades. And no amount of lies, on his side, was going to change it.



### Chapter 18

Hetty gazed steadily at the bishop, sitting in the middle of the three judges, trying to ignore Louis, who had already taken the same seat in the gallery that he had occupied the day before. She needed not to be distracted by his presence. She must focus on what she must do for both of their sakes, or else, they had no chance of ever forging a life together.

She was weary, so very weary. She had barely slept the night before, after formulating her plan, tossing and turning. Once, she had awoken with a start, after a particularly vivid dream of her wedding day.

She shuddered, thinking about it. She had been walking down the aisle of the church she had been married in, on her father's arm. She could clearly see the expectant faces of the congregation, smiling at her as she drifted past them. She could see the figure waiting for her at the altar, his back to her. Frank.

But something changed in the strangest of ways. A dark shadow fell over the church, almost blackening the happy faces of the people. And suddenly – sickeningly – she gazed down at herself, appalled to find that instead of wearing her beautiful, expensive wedding gown, she was, in fact, wearing nothing at all.

The happy faces of the congregation abruptly changed. As she tried frantically to cover herself, they started mocking and jeering her. And then, the figure at the altar slowly turned around to watch her. She screamed as she realised that he had no face at all ...

The memory of that terrible dream lingered now like a bad smell around her. It had been haunting her all morning as she dressed and breakfasted and made her way with her parents, back to this building, to face the court, once again. She didn't know what to make of it. Was it a bad omen?

She took a deep breath, pushing it out of her mind. She mustn't think about it. It was just her worries and fears, roaming her mind, while she was asleep, emerging in her dreams. It was no bad omen, no premonition, of what was to come. She must believe that.

And now, the time was coming, when maybe – just maybe – she might be able to lay all of those worries and fears to rest.

She raised her hand. The bishop frowned slightly. “Yes, Mrs Blackmore. You wish to speak?”

She took another deep breath for courage. “Yes, my lord. There is something that has occurred to me that has not been put before this court,” she said slowly. “Something that I believe could change the course of these proceedings entirely.”

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Mr Mitchell, Frank's solicitor, gazed at her curiously as she stood up. She knew that he had been hoping for a quick verdict this morning. She had already seen him glance impatiently at his fob watch, pulling it out of his pocket, and frowning. He had obviously been expecting that his client's letter, tended to the court the day before, would stitch up this case quickly, and was put out that it had not. Perhaps he had other pressing appointments to attend.

Her father and mother looked surprised as she stood. She had not informed them of what she was about to do or what she was going to say. The last thing that she needed

was them trying to dissuade her from this course of action. Mama, in particular, might be horrified that she was about to share something so personal, and she couldn't imagine that Papa would be particularly thrilled to hear it, either.

But say it she must. There was no recourse now. Frank had pushed her into a corner, and she was about to fight her way out of it.

"My lords," she said, addressing all three of the clerics, her gaze slowly drifting from one to the other. "I gave you an account yesterday of my brief marriage. My wedding day, and the aftermath, where my husband and I returned to our new home, to start our married life together. But there was something significant, which I failed to mention, that happened in that space of time."

The bishop raised his eyebrows. "Well, what is it, Mrs Blackmore?"

Hetty took a deep, ragged breath. Her heart was racing so fast she could almost hear it, like the beat of a drum, filling the room.

"When the time came to retire for the evening," she continued slowly, "my husband took my hand and informed me that he intended to stay in the guest-chamber, that night. He said that it had been a long, wearying day and that I must be very tired." She paused. "He said that he would not be claiming his conjugal rights, that night, out of respect and concern for me. I was surprised but did not argue since I was, in fact, tired, and quite a bit anxious about my wedding night, and what would be required of me, as I am sure you will all understand ..."

There was a shocked silence in the room. Hetty felt her face redden. Despite her resolve, it was still difficult to talk about such things in front of all these people. The judges, who were all high clerical figures, and her parents. Frank's solicitor, and the scribe, who was furiously writing all that was said. And Louis, who sat in the gallery, almost in shadow. She kept her gaze firmly on the judges.

The bishop leaned forward in his seat, gazing at her keenly, rather like a hawk.

“What exactly are you claiming, Mrs Blackmore?” he asked. “I need you to be rather explicit about it if you please.”

Hetty took another deep breath. “I am claiming, my lord, that my husband did not take his conjugal rights with me that evening or in the morning before he fled the house, and the marriage,” she said, her voice crisp. “I am still *virgo intacta*, my lords. I am a maiden still, and I am willing to undergo an examination to prove it.”

She heard the strangled gasp of horror from her mother. The judges all shifted uneasily in their seats. She didn’t dare turn her head to see the reaction that Louis was having to her declaration, nor did she want to see the face of her father, who surely would be suffering mightily, at hearing his daughter say such a thing.

“You claim that you are still a maiden?” repeated the bishop, his voice harsh. “There are penalties for lying to this court, madam. And do not think that I would not order an examination to make sure of the truth of what you say.”

Hetty raised her chin, staring at him steadily. “I swear, before God Almighty, that I am as I came out of my mother’s womb, untouched by man.” She paused. “I would hardly claim such a thing if I could not prove it. Frank Blackmore never laid with me as a husband. He was never a husband to me, in that way, nor I a wife to him.”

The bishop sighed heavily. “Well, this does change things, quite significantly ...”

“Yes, I believe that it does, my lord,” she said in a stronger voice. “The reason that I did not mention it yesterday, when recounting our brief marriage was my modesty, in that regard. No lady likes to talk about such intimate things.” She paused. “Nor did I fully realise, at that moment, how significantly it does change things, but I have thought about it, now, and wish to change my petition to this court.”

“How so, madam?” asked the bishop.

“I wish to seek an annulment,” she said slowly. “Not a divorce. On the grounds that since the marriage was never consummated, it does not count as a marriage at all. Frank Blackmore was never my husband, and I was never his wife; therefore, the marriage is null and void.”

The judges stared at her, gaping. They were obviously not used to a woman talking so confidently about marital law.

“I believe that this declaration, and my willingness to undergo an examination to prove it, also puts to rest what Frank Blackmore has asserted about my character,” she continued. “I did not lay with any other gentleman while I was engaged to Mr Blackmore. I was a virgin on my wedding day, as I still am now.”

Mr Mitchell, the solicitor, looked pained. “Even if what Mrs Blackmore says is true, my lords, she might still have done other ... things with those gentlemen,” he declared, rolling his eyes. “We all know that the actual act of intercourse is not the only act that can compromise a lady’s reputation ...”

“Enough, Mr Mitchell,” said the bishop, quite sharply. “I think that we have heard quite enough on that count. Your client makes many claims about the lady but cannot prove any of them.” His face was like thunder. “Your client also shows disrespect to this court by not making the effort to attend these proceedings ...”

“My client did try, my lord,” interjected the solicitor. “He was unable to book passage ...”

“Fiddlesticks,” said the bishop, his voice contemptuous. “He could have been here if he wanted to. He fled the country, with his mistress, and does not even have the decency to face the wife that he abandoned to account for his actions ...”

The solicitor swallowed, quite visibly. He didn't look comfortable at all.

"We shall reconvene in an hour," said the bishop crisply. "I shall confer with my colleagues about these latest developments." He paused, pursing his lips. "We shall present our findings, then, on this whole sorry mess."

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Louis pulled her aside as they waited in the foyer, while the judges convened. His green eyes were sparkling with joy. It took all of her willpower to stop herself from flinging her arms around him.

"You clever girl," he breathed, gazing at her with admiration. "I do believe that you have turned the tables quite nicely." He paused. "How did you think of it?"

She smiled slowly. "Well, it is the truth," she replied. "I am still a virgin, and I can prove it if they make me. But I never put two and two together, that it is grounds for an annulment, rather than a divorce until you mentioned Henry the Eighth, last evening."

His smile widened. "I was wondering why you looked so happy all of a sudden when you had been weeping in my arms, just seconds before..."

Her eyes glittered, with fierce triumph. "It was talking about the king's first marriage, to Catherine of Aragon, that it suddenly struck me," she said. "The king tried to claim that she had not been a virgin when he married her, as she had been previously married to his late brother. She asserted that she was, that her marriage to his brother was never valid, as they had not lain together, as he had been sickly. And that was when it came to me that I could argue for an annulment on the grounds that I was a virgin ..."

He shook his head in wonder. “A brilliant tactic,” he whispered. “And I must say, just as an aside, that it warmed my heart to hear that the rake of a husband of yours never lay with you.” He lowered his voice. “That you will truly be mine, on our wedding night ...”

She shivered at his words, her heart soaring with hope. Was it possible? Had she done enough to lay this to rest once and for all, and finally be free to get on with her life the way that she yearned to?

“We must not celebrate yet,” she said quietly. “They are still convening. And I have learnt the hard way that we must assume nothing of life.”

She gazed towards the closed door. A flurry of butterflies leapt to life in her belly. Every minute, every second, was agony now until it opened again, and they could walk back in and hear what the judges had decided.

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The judges were grim-faced, as they walked back into the court. Hetty shivered in sudden fear. She couldn’t read a thing from their expressions.

When they were settled, the bishop took a deep breath. He turned and addressed her.

“This has been a rather messy business,” he declared. “As I said at the beginning of these proceedings, the Church values the sanctity of marriage, and extenuating circumstances must be proven beyond a shadow of a doubt, for the holy vows between a man and a woman to be broken, in the eyes of God.” He paused for a long time, gazing at her steadily. “My colleagues and I were rather divided after your revelations this morning, madam. I must inform you that before you spoke, we had made the decision that your marriage should be upheld ...”

Hetty's heart flipped over in her chest.

"One of my colleagues argued that your reputation is still compromised by the allegations Mr Blackmore made against you," he continued. "That there is no smoke without fire, and that there is the strongest possibility that he did believe you were unchaste and acted accordingly. This court, as you know, takes a grim view of a woman's infidelity. In the matter of marriage, we must be scrupulous on this count. The question of paternity of offspring arises. A man must know that his children are his own, without a shadow of a doubt, or else it rips asunder the very fabric of civilised society."

Hetty's felt a flickering of anger. After all that she had said, they still doubted her chasteness?

"My colleague argued that we should compel you to undergo an examination, to prove that you are, indeed, still a maiden, as you claim," he said slowly. "He also argued that we should dig deeper, to investigate Mr Blackmore's assertions about you, and put before this court anyone who has witnessed you acting in the way that Mr Blackmore described in his letter."

Hetty's heart sank. This was not sounding good. If they did that, this could drag on for many more months. But then, she rallied. She had truth on her side. If they made her take an examination, it would prove that she was not lying. And there was no one who could claim she had acted inappropriately while she was engaged because she hadn't.

"But I have vetoed all of that," he continued in a firm voice. "As bishop, I have the final say, and it is my will, that you should not be subjected to an examination, madam." He paused. "I believe that you have endured enough and that your testimony is sufficient. I believe that you are telling the truth and that you are still a maiden. I also believe that there is sufficient evidence that your husband intended to



desert you, to live with his mistress, and that what he wrote in his letter about your infidelities, and the fact that he was not involved with his mistress at the time of your engagement, are all lies.”

Hetty’s heart began to swell. She reeled, almost swooning. Her mother let out a little yelp of joy. Her father grasped her arm tightly.

The bishop took a deep breath. “It is the finding of this court that Miss Henrietta Arnold’s marriage to Mr Frank Blackmore was never consummated, and therefore, is not valid,” he declared. “The court declares that Mr Blackmore is required, by law, to return Miss Arnold’s dowry to her father, so that she has proper funds in which to secure a new marriage if she so desires.” He paused, gazing steadily at Hetty. “The marriage is declared annulled, as of today’s date. Good luck, Miss Arnold. I rather think that you deserve it.”

Hetty smiled at him, tremulously, her eyes filling with tears. The bishop smiled back. And then all three clerics stood, sweeping out of the room without another word.

She was free. The bishop had just declared it. He had called her Miss Arnold. She was no longer Mrs Frank Blackmore. The past had been erased as if it had never existed at all. As if it had been merely chalk scribbles on a slate, wiped clean by a rag.

She was on her feet now, being embraced by her mother and father. They squeezed her tightly. The tears started to flow as she sobbed in their arms. They had never given up on her. They had been the ones who had fought for this victory, alongside her. They had picked her up, when she had been at her lowest ebb, and protected her. She was the luckiest woman in the world to have such parents.

Through her tears, she saw Mr Mitchell, Frank’s solicitor, walk out of the room, a grim look on his face. No doubt, he was not looking forward to writing to his client

and informing him of what had happened here today. The man had been so very confident that his character assassination of her would work. He might have even suggested it to Frank, that it was the only way to win this case.

She took a deep breath. She no longer cared whether Frank hated her, or was indifferent to her, or what he thought about her at all. He could have his French mistress, and his child, and his new home in another country. It was no longer any of her business.

She was free. She was free!

Finally, her eyes found him. Louis. He was standing in the gallery. Just watching her. His face was resplendent with joy.

It was not the time to embrace him publicly. Not yet. But that time was coming very soon. And she simply could not wait for it.

He had saved her. He had brought her back to life. And she simply couldn't live without him now. She knew that, in the depths of her innermost heart.

## Page 19

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### Chapter 19

Hetty swung the basket against her hip as she walked down the garden path. It was officially the last day of summer. Tomorrow, it would be a new month and a new season. Tomorrow, it would be autumn, and the leaves on the apple tree would slowly start to change colour and fall to the ground.

She hummed softly under her breath as she swung the rusty old garden gate open. Della, who was trotting at her heels, barked suddenly, scrambling in her haste, to run through the field. Hetty laughed, so full of joy that she could barely contain it.

She looked down at her gown and the white apron that covered it. A day at home, at Hillsworth Manor, before she left the house, forever. She did not know when Louis would arrive to claim her, to whisk her away to Scotland, so that they could get married, but she knew that it was going to happen. She had patience, and she had faith.

As she walked slowly, basking in the rays of the sun on her skin, she thought of Louis, at Warwick Manor, with Ben. The last day of the hearing, when the court had decided that her marriage to Frank Blackmore was to be annulled, he had received a letter by urgent messenger. Benjamin had taken ill again, and was fretful, wanting his father. Louis had been torn between wanting to spend the day with her, celebrating, and wishing to see his son.

“Go,” she had urged him. “There is plenty of time for us to be together now. Ben needs you, more than I do, at the moment.”

He had left her, regretfully. That had been over a week ago. She received letters from him every day, telling her how much he missed her, how much he longed for her, and how Ben was improving, but still wasn't fully recovered. The physician thought he might have croup; apparently, he had a barking cough that would become uncontrollable, and he would struggle for breath. The physician had assured him that many young children caught it and recovered. But Hetty could read between the lines of Louis's letters, that he was worried.

She was worried about Ben, too. But since she was not there, at Warwick Manor, she could not ascertain with her own eyes how serious it was. And she knew that Louis panicked about his son, as was normal. Her mother had told her that Hetty had suffered croup as a baby, and made a full recovery. She had prayed for the little boy, but there was little else she could do.

It had been on her mind, daily, to just journey to Warwick Manor, so that she could help nurse him. But her father had shaken his head, saying that even though the court had announced her annulment, there was still the slight possibility that Frank Blackmore might lodge an objection. She could not risk journeying to Warwick Manor, as he might get wind of it, and use it against her. They would only be safe once Louis had finally put that ring on her finger to make her his wife.

She was almost to the apple tree. She stopped, gazing upon it. The apples were nearly gone; most had fallen to the ground, and there were very few good ones left, the ones that remained on the branches mostly rotting, or picked clean, by birds. The cycle of fruition was almost over for another year.

She kept walking, feeling a slight breeze ruffling her hair. She would miss this place and all it had meant to her. She smiled faintly, thinking about Louis, again.

The apple tree had always been a favourite place of hers since childhood. But it had taken on new meaning now. Vividly, she remembered when Louis had pushed her on

the swing, and it had collapsed. How they had laughed together as he pulled her to her feet, and they had shared a special moment of connection. It had been the very first time that had foreshadowed how deeply they would come to feel about each other.

She blushed. And there was another memory, of when he had kissed her, for the very first time, beneath this tree. How he had fiercely gathered her up in his arms and explored her body, giving her the first inclination that there was hunger of another sort. That touch was a language, all of its own. Once she had opened her ears to the words of that language, it was as if she was born again, as a new person, entirely.

She sat against the tree trunk, gazing into the distance, the basket on her arm discarded. She had a vague inclination when she left the house to pick the last of the good fruit on the tree for the cook to make into apple cobbler. But now that she was here, a lethargy had overtaken her, and all that she wanted to do was watch the rolling green hills and be at one with the day.

The last day of summer. All things pass.

Della ran off, nose to the ground, possibly following the scent of a rabbit. Hetty closed her eyes for a brief moment. There was the low rumble of thunder in the distance. She opened her eyes again, frowning slightly as she saw the grey clouds rolling over the horizon, marring the perfect blue of the sky. But it was far off and might pass over, in any case. She had time, still, to enjoy the day before she returned to the house.

It was done. It was over. She was a free woman.

Every day, as soon as she opened her eyes, and the fog of sleep passed, those same words rushed into her head. She would feel the same overwhelming relief that she had felt, in that court, when the bishop had finally proclaimed that she was no longer

a married woman. The sheer, overwhelming joy of it that she had managed to pull it off.

She still couldn't quite believe it. She had to pinch herself that it was real, and that she was finally free to marry Louis. She wanted it, more than life itself. But there was also pure joy in the vindication that she had cleared her name, as well.

That she was no longer the abandoned wife, the disgraced wife, the woman who had been made a fool of. Now, she had never been married at all. She was not divorced. Her marriage had been annulled, been declared null and void. For all intents and purposes, it was as if it had never happened.

She breathed deeply, overwhelmed with that sweet relief and joy, once more. Perhaps the joy of it would never truly leave her, even as the days turned into weeks and the weeks into months. Even after she had left all of this behind, and it was just a dim memory, perhaps a kernel of that pure joy would still be there, buried deep within her.

She had been given the chance to live again.

Her eyelids started to droop slightly. It was warm beneath the sun, despite those ominous rumblings of thunder from far away. She heard the drone of bees buzzing, collecting their nectar from the last wildflowers in the field, and the trill of birds in the trees. She closed her eyes, her head tilting against the rough bark of the tree.

I miss Louis so much, she thought, as her mind began to drift. I know that I shall see him again very soon, but it does not change the fact. When, oh when, can we finally be together?

She shivered beneath the warm sun, missing him so very badly that it was like a physical ache in her chest. It had only been a week, but it felt like a year. She

shivered again, thinking of his hands touching her body. His lips, searing her skin. How she wanted him. How much she would give to be lying in his arms now, and for his mouth to be drifting down her body like a chain of fire, scorching her flesh ...

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She woke suddenly, jolting upright, her heart pounding hard within her chest. Where was she?

Slowly, consciousness returned, and with it, an ache in her back and neck. Ruefully, she massaged her neck, releasing the muscles. She gazed around. She had fallen asleep beneath the apple tree. Della was asleep, too, snoring gently, her golden head upon her lap. Hetty let out a sigh of relief. The dog could easily have run away into the hills.

She blinked. The sky had changed. It was no longer the deep, pure blue it had been, marred by the grey clouds. Now, it was almost completely metallic grey, the colour of a musket, and just as foreboding. A single raindrop fell on her forearm. She should get back to the house before it started pelting down.

She got up abruptly, causing Della to awake with a yelp, shaking herself. Heading down the track, that same yearning for Louis nipped at her. Another lonely night without him. How could she endure it?

But her footsteps started to slow slightly as she gazed ahead. Someone was walking through the back gate of her house towards her. A tall figure dressed in green britches, a black jacket, and a crisp white shirt. High riding boots and ruffled, unruly dark hair.

Her heart clenched. It was Louis.

She didn't hesitate for a moment. She picked up the hem of her gown and started to run towards him, panting in her haste. He was here. He had come to her. At last.

He was running, now, too, striding towards her. It seemed to take forever to get to him. It seemed that her legs could not carry her fast enough towards him.

But eventually, they met, almost colliding in their haste to get to one another. He picked her up, as if she were a doll, twirling her around in the air. She laughed breathlessly, her heart pounding in her chest. He laughed, too, a joyous sound that seemed to fill the air.

Finally, he put her down, his arms still around her, gazing down at her intently. She gazed up at him, her eyes eagerly taking in every little thing about him. The black stubble, just visible, beneath his jawline. The circles of weariness beneath his eyes. The way that he was smiling, a little wearily, but with relief, as well.

"You came," she said, breathless, feeling almost like a blathering fool.

"I came," he said, laughing again as he gazed at her.

"How is Ben?" she asked, reaching up, to stroke his face.

"He is much better," he said, his smile widening. "He got up today and was running around, tearing around the nursery like a spinning top. The physician saw him this afternoon, and said that there was no need to attend him any longer." He paused. "No need for me not to come to you, at long last, my Hetty. Oh, it feels like it has been years since I last saw your face ..."

She gasped, her eyes filling with tears. "It has been exactly the same for me! I almost felt like I could not remember your face, anymore, even though it is etched upon my mind, for all of eternity ..."



They kissed, then, lingeringly. His lips felt like coming home. When at last the kiss ended, she clung to him, burying her face into his chest. She never wanted to let him go.

He pulled back, staring at her, oddly. “Hetty,” he said, in a stiff, almost formal voice. “There is something that I need to say to you.” He paused. “Something that I need to ask you ...”

“Well, what is it?” she said with a laugh, still breathless with happiness.

He suddenly knelt down on one knee, taking her hand. “I know that I have already asked for your hand in marriage,” he said, his voice thready with nervousness. “But I have not done it properly. Not at all. You deserve a proper proposal ...”

Her heart soared, and her eyes filled with tears as she gazed down upon him.

“Henrietta Arnold,” he said, in a quiet voice, his eyes intensely green. “Will you do me the great honour of becoming my wife?”

She couldn’t help it, then. The tears started to stream down her face. She didn’t even bother to wipe them away.

This man. This man, who had waited so patiently for her to fall in love with him. This man, who claimed that he had loved her from the moment he had laid eyes upon her, all those years ago. This man, who had stood by her side, during the darkest period of her life, while she had tried to push him away in her pain, never giving up on her, or their love. This man, who had vowed he would wait for her for years, if necessary. For the rest of his life.

This man was the real thing. This man had given her the world. This man had given her back her life.

How she loved him. How she would love him forever.

“Yes,” she whispered, nodding her head. “Yes, yes, yes!”

At that moment, there was a large crack of thunder, so close that Della yelped in distress. The rain started pouring down, soaking them. He leapt to his feet. They were both laughing so hard that they could barely breathe.

“What?” he yelled. “What did you say?”

“I said yes,” she yelled back, laughing harder.

He kissed her, deliriously, hungrily, as if the rain was not pelting down upon them, plastering their hair to their scalps, soaking them to the core. After a few moments, they slowly parted, staring at each other.

“You had better get used to this,” he yelled, wiping the rain from his eyes. “I have heard that it rains a lot in Scotland.” He paused. “The carriage is waiting to take us there. Right now.”

She laughed harder, almost delirious with joy, gazing down at her sodden gown. “Do we have time to change?”

He grinned. “Yes. But don’t tarry. I cannot wait to make you my wife, Miss Henrietta Arnold. We must set off before I lose my mind entirely ...”

He grabbed her hand, and they started to run through the rain together, jumping the rapidly forming puddles on the ground. Della looked like a drowned rat, leaping around, almost chasing her own tail. They were almost to the gate. She could see Mama’s face, a pale oval, peering through the back window, looking worried.

She stopped suddenly, letting go of his hand.

“What?” he yelled, gazing at her.

She took a deep breath. “There is something else that I need to do.”

Quickly, she loosened the gold ring that still encircled her finger. Her wedding finger. The gold ring that Frank had slipped on claiming her for his own, all those months ago. It seemed like a lifetime ago, now. She had been another woman entirely. Had it truly been she, who had stood at the altar beside him, vowing to love, honour, and obey, for the rest of her life? She would not recognise that woman at all, now. She did not know her in the slightest.

It was a little bit tight. She tugged at it before it suddenly came off her finger, lying in the palm of her hand.

She stared down at it for a moment, as the rain kept falling around them. It felt good to have it off her finger. She didn’t know why she hadn’t done it months ago.

And then, she hurled it, throwing it, with all of her might. She could see it spinning like a top in the air, the glint of gold against the grey sky, before the rain subsumed it entirely, almost swallowing it, so she had no idea where it landed.

It was gone forever. Just like her first marriage was gone. She was glad that she had not kept it as a memento, for there was nothing to feel nostalgic about. The court had officially ruled that her first marriage no longer existed, but it had always been that way. She had never been a married woman, in any manner. She had certainly never loved the man.

She smiled slowly, thinking about how scared and alone she had felt, the morning she had discovered that Frank had deserted her, thinking that her life was over. If only

she had known what was ahead. If only she had known that another man was about to step out of the shadows, blinding her entirely. A man who was finally going to show her what real love was. A real man who knew how to love and be loved, in return.

“Come on,” he yelled, gazing at her as if she had gone crazy. “Time is ticking ...”

She laughed again. And then, she took his hand once more, running into the house, and into the future, that awaited them both.

She simply could not wait.

### Chapter 20

Hetty gazed out the window of the carriage, feeling as if she were in some kind of trance. The landscape had changed; they had been on the road for hours, now, heading through England, towards Scotland. The hills were not so green, here; almost tawny brown, in colour, and rocky. So very different to the verdant green of her home county in southern England.

Louis leant close to her, peering over her shoulder, out the window. “We are almost there,” he said in a low voice. “We are just about to cross the border into Scotland, from Northumberland.” He paused, gazing at her steadily. “Not long now to Gretna Green, my love.”

She felt a low thrum of excitement building within her at his words. She had heard of Gretna Green often, over the years, of course. It was the place where lovers fled to, to marry, without their parents’ consent, if they were underage, or did not have permission, for whatever reason. The name of the town had always had a slightly romantic, dangerous ring to it. When she was younger, she could not imagine why anyone would do such a drastic thing. She hadn’t understood, then, how desperate people in love could become.

She understood it now.

She sighed, nestling into Louis’s shoulder. She knew that if he could have, he would have given her a full church wedding, with all the trimmings, surrounded by family and friends. He wouldn’t have made her flee to Scotland to marry over the blacksmith’s anvil, in secrecy. She prodded her feelings gently, surprised to discover

that there were no residual feelings of shame about this. That, in fact, she was so very pleased that they were taking this trip together, and that it would only be the two of them when they finally exchanged their vows.

She had once had the full church wedding that had cost her father a small fortune. She had been dressed in an expensive wedding gown, and there had been over a hundred people at her fancy wedding breakfast. And look where it had ended up. A proper wedding did not mean that the marriage was going to be good, at all.

She much preferred what was to come, as long as this man was by her side.

She gazed out the window again. They were just about to cross the border into another country. And she felt as if she were crossing another threshold, as well. The threshold between her old life and her new one.

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She sat in the corner of the old inn, in Gretna Green, waiting for Louis, who was speaking to the blacksmith, arranging their ceremony. Even though it was dark, now, and they were both weary from the journey, he told her that he could not wait for morning. They would be married, this night, even if he had to pay double what was normally the rate for the services of an anvil priest.

She sighed, peering out the window of the inn. She could not see much of the town in the dark, but what she had seen surprised her. It was so very small, only a few shops and houses scattered around. Somehow, because the town was so notorious, she had expected it to be bigger.

She squirmed impatiently. Louis was taking longer than he had told her. Was something wrong? Perhaps he could not find a priest to perform the ceremony, so late into the evening. Perhaps they would have to wait until morning, despite his best

efforts.

She smiled slowly. Even though she was as eager to marry him as he was to marry her, that would not be so tragic, after all. They had waited a long time for this chance to arrive. Another night would not mean anything in the end.

And there was another pressing reason why she would not be too disappointed if they could not wed tonight. She knew that despite their weariness after the long journey, that he would want to take her immediately. He had vowed that he would wait until their wedding night to fully make love to her, and she knew, by the hungriness in his eyes, that his patience in that regard was wearing very thin.

She trembled with that old fear. As much as she wanted to make love to him, just as much as he wanted to make love to her, she was still a maiden, and she did not know what to expect. Her mother had intimated to her the night before her first wedding that she should expect some pain the first time. But she simply had no idea how painful it would be. Would she cry out and push him away, instinctively? She desired him so much, but would it be different at that pivotal moment?

She knew that it must happen, but she was apprehensive. If they had to wait another night, she could compose herself, just a little more. She hadn't been expecting this today, after all, and hadn't had time to prepare herself. Perhaps it would be a good thing if they were forced to wait.

But at that moment, she saw him walking quickly out of the blacksmith's shop. She saw, by the spring in his step, that he had secured the priest.

Her mouth suddenly went dry. They were about to be married. The time had finally arrived.

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Hetty gasped as she ducked her head, walking into the blacksmith's shop, gazing around in sheer wonder.

It was clearly a working blacksmith's shop. The brick walls were blackened with soot, mostly surrounding the hearth, in the centre of the room. There was a multitude of tools, hanging from hooks, and many horseshoes secured to a rafter. Everything that she would have expected in such a working environment.

But what she hadn't been expecting was the transformation that Louis had obviously undertaken to complete before she stepped into the shop. There were white candles everywhere, all lit, glowing, in the darkness. He had even managed to find some flowers, which were strewn over every available surface.

Her eyes filled with tears. It was so very beautiful, almost ethereal. How had he managed to do it in such a short time?

Briefly, she recalled the expensive, intricate decorations at the church, where she had wed Frank. The hours of preparation that had been put into it. But it was as nothing, compared to what Louis had done, here. It could not compare at all.

He was standing next to the anvil, waiting for her. The priest looked tired and a little grumpy. Two witnesses – a man and a woman, who Louis had found at the inn, and paid for this service – were standing to the right of them. They both looked rather weary, too, as if they wanted to be anywhere but here, on this dark, cold night.

She thought of her bevy of bridesmaids, led by Annabelle, at her first wedding. She smiled. Even though she loved her friends, she would not wish them here. These weary strangers seemed an integral part of this whole, new, magical experience.

She blinked back the tears. It was perfect. She wanted to remember this scene, forever.



Louis smiled, holding out his hand towards her. She took a deep breath and stepped towards him, towards the anvil, and this new life, with him by her side for all eternity.

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They walked into the small lodging room, at the same inn, hand in hand. They had not spoken a word to one another since they had completed their vows in the blacksmith's shop and kissed beneath a garland of wild heather that he had picked from the fields.

Hetty gazed around the room, her heart thumping. It was very small. The bed in the centre of the room seemed to dwarf the space; there was barely room for any other furniture. Her mouth went dry. It would be on this bed, with its threadbare quilt, that they would finally consummate the love between them.

He turned her to him, gazing down at her, intently. "My wife," he whispered, almost in wonder. "At last. You do not know how much I have yearned for this moment, my one and only love."

She blinked rapidly, gazing up at him, her heart overflowing. "My husband. I have yearned for this moment, as much as you have." She shuddered. "I feared it would never come ..."

He brushed a hand over her face, softly, his eyes full of such love that her heart somersaulted over in her chest.

"I feared that it would never come, either," he admitted. "I knew that you would never consent to be with me if your marriage to Blackmore was not dissolved." He took a deep breath. "I knew that I was on the brink of losing you forever if we weren't successful."

She shuddered again, leaning into him. It could so easily have gone the other way. It was only by the grace of God that it hadn't. So many applications for divorce were denied.

She squeezed her eyes shut, offering up a silent prayer of gratitude.

Thank you, Lord. Thank you for giving me this man. Thank you for seeing fit to let me live again.

"It is time, Hetty," he whispered in her ear, his breath warm. "Are you ready?"

A frisson of nervousness swept through her. But as she gazed into his face, seeing the love and desire there, it suddenly started to dissolve. Anticipation of what was to come replaced it. He was her husband, now, and they were going to become man and wife in the true sense of the word.

She took a deep breath. "I am ready."

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He undressed her slowly, peeling off her clothes, layer by layer. Her gown fell to the ground, and then her undergarments until she was standing there naked before him, illuminated by a single ray of moonlight shining through the crack in the curtain.

She shivered, repressing the instinctual urge to cover herself. And then a fierce blush rose up over her body, flooding her face. What would he think of her?

He didn't say a thing. He just kept gazing at her intently, his eyes taking their fill. They started at her face, and then slowly swept down, taking in her breasts, the dip of her waist, the spread of her hips, to the dark triangle of hair between her legs. He let out a strangled moan.

“You are far more beautiful than I even imagined,” he whispered in a voice thickened by desire. “The most beautiful of women ...”

She shuddered with pure delight at his words. He walked slowly around her body so that he was behind her. She jumped slightly at the feel of his hands on her hair. Slowly, gently, he undid it, taking out the pins, so that it fell, undulating in waves around her shoulders, and down her back.

She could barely breathe, feeling his breath on her neck. And then, his arms snaked around her, taking her breasts in both hands. She moaned, closing her eyes, leaning back into him as he kneaded them, tweaking the nipples until they grew hard and swollen beneath his touch.

She did not open her eyes as his hands slowly dipped lower, skimming her waist and her hips, stopping at her buttocks. She heard his strangled breath as he caressed them, firmly, his touch strong and sure. She was in an agony of desire, feeling sensations sparking through her as if her skin was on fire.

Without warning, he suddenly scooped her up in his arms, carrying her to the bed. He laid her gently upon the quilt, his eyes never leaving hers as he quickly undressed. Suddenly, he was as naked as she was. Her eyes widened in shock. She had never seen a naked man before.

He was beautiful, built like Adonis. His shoulders were broad, and his chest, with its smattering of dark hair, wide. Her eyes travelled down over his stomach to the nest of dark hair, and the evidence of his manhood standing proudly to attention. Her eyes widened further. It was hard and long. So very big. She simply had no idea that a man could swell to such proportions. How on earth was it going to fit within her? A flickering of alarm swept through her.

But before it could blossom into full blown fright, he was upon her, caressing her

again, murmuring words of love into her ear. His lips found hers, and they kissed, long and deep. She relaxed again, beneath the onslaught. The heat was growing between them, once again, to a fire that was threatening to consume her, entirely.

His lips found a nipple, suckling fiercely. She arched her back instinctively, seeking to draw him closer, filled with a wild, urgent need. Tentatively, her hands caressed him, as he nipped and sucked, sweeping over the broad expanse of his back. His skin felt like velvet beneath her touch. She had never imagined that the skin of a man could be so soft.

His lips journeyed down her body, hot, brief kisses, over her stomach, until they arrived at her centre. She strangled a moan as he gently pulled her legs apart. And then, he was kissing her again, burying his face deep within her moist folds, his tongue like a darting flame, within the depths.

A hot wetness flooded out of her as he continued licking and sucking, bringing her to the brink of ecstasy. Waves of it crashed over her, again and again, each one stronger than the last. She felt a sweat break out over her entire body, her body consumed by this agonising fever. She heard herself moaning as if from far away.

But suddenly, he broke the contact. She could barely open her eyes. In her delirium, she watched him, kneeling between her legs, gazing down in hunger at her centre point. She didn't have the strength to move a muscle as he positioned himself. And then, there was a hot, searing pain, as she felt him enter her for the very first time.

He was still, for a moment, gazing at her. She felt the strange fullness, within her, expanding, second by second. And then, ever so gently, he started to rock against her, his pelvis thrusting, bit by bit. She cried out in bewilderment. It felt so good. She wanted him to keep doing it, never to stop.

His movements quickened to the point that he was slamming against her, widening

her legs with every thrust. For a moment, she thought that it was impossible, that she would split in two, that he could not go any deeper than he had been. But every time, her body seemed to accommodate him, flowering open beneath him until she thought that he was about to climb inside her, entirely.

Those wild sensations were blossoming to life, once more. The brief pain was gone, replaced with this delirious pleasure. With every thrust, it intensified. She started moaning again, tossing her head, from side to side. He looked like a dark angel, raging above her, delivering her in shackles to the foot of heaven itself.

Surely, it couldn't build to any greater height. And yet, it did. Suddenly, she hovered on the brink, in a frenzy of sensation, before it crashed over her, again and again. She cried out, twisting beneath him, almost unable to endure such ecstasy. Feeling that she would surely die or melt clean away.

Suddenly, he gripped her, his face contorted. With a long groan, she felt him release himself within her. The sensations that had just been starting to taper off within her gathered again, in one mighty burst of light.

It was done. With one final cry, one last twist, he fell upon her, his body bathed in sweat. Her heart slowed down as she gathered him in her arms. A delicious lethargy was consuming her, now. Little aftershocks of pleasure, slowly diminishing, second by second.

So, that is what it is all about , she thought, in sheer wonder . I am a maiden no more. I could never have guessed, in a hundred years, that it could be so beautiful.

His breath was slowing down. He looked at her, his green eyes glowing in the darkness.

“My dearest love,” he whispered in a strangled voice. “It was worth the wait. I feel

that I am reborn in your arms ...”

“As I am, in yours,” she whispered back, a lump forming in her throat. “I never imagined that it could be so glorious. That you could do those things to me, make me feel so alive in a way that I have never felt before ...”

He smiled. “I told you we were meant to be together, Hetty. It just took an awfully long time for us to finally be with each other.” He paused, looking like he was struggling for words. “I will never forget this. I will never forget the first time that you came to me. That you became mine for eternity. My one, and only, love.”

The next moment, he was abruptly asleep, his eyes closed, still hugging her tightly.

She smiled. It had been an awfully long day. Weariness was sweeping over her, too, dragging her away. But she fought it for just a little while longer, staring at the window, beyond the bed, and the thin sliver of moonlight shining through it.

She was a married woman once more, and a duchess, this time. She raised her left hand, staring at the new circle of gold on her finger, replacing the one that she had thrown away. The one that lay abandoned in a field at her parents’ home, just like her first marriage had been discarded. As if it had never existed at all.

It had all been worth it, every agonising second of it. The journey to get here. The journey that had led her here, to be laying in this man’s arms, replete with love. She couldn’t imagine now, being locked away in a convent somewhere, bitter and despairing of life itself.

She couldn’t imagine how she had ever thought it a possibility. Nor could she imagine still being married to her first husband. The stranger, who had betrayed her and could never have given her the pleasure that she had just felt, nor be the husband that the man who lay so sweetly in her arms was going to be.

She was exactly where she was meant to be. As her thoughts started to scatter, and she closed her eyes on her second wedding day, she knew without a shadow of a doubt that she would be awakening tomorrow far differently to how she had awoken after her last wedding night.

It would be a new day. A new life. And with this man by her side, it could only get better.

### Epilogue

Hetty threw the ball far into the distance, watching as the little boy toddled after it, laughing. The three dogs that were their constant companions set off after it, too, barking with delight.

She laughed, picking up the hem of her gown and running after them. If she weren't careful, one of the dogs would pick up the ball and spirit it away. She had already played tug of war with them several times this morning. And Ben so enjoyed being the victor, in any case.

She was panting slightly by the time she got to them.

"Down," she commanded the dogs. They looked at her a bit grumpily, but they obeyed. Ben laughed with delight, picking up the ball and flinging it. It bounced for a moment before settling a short distance away. Ben still couldn't throw very far, but he was always determined to try.

"Well done," she said, smiling down at the golden-haired child. "You are getting better every day."

He smiled, pleased with himself, basking in her praise.

"Shall we return to the house?" she asked. "I think that Cook has made your favourite for luncheon."

His eyes lit up. He started clapping. "Yes!"



She scooped him up, settling him on one hip for the short walk back to the manor, the three Scottish terrier dogs trotting at her feet. Ben snuggled against her, putting his thumb into his mouth. Her heart surged with love for the boy, and she leaned down, kissing the top of his head. She had never imagined that she could feel such love as she felt for this child.

It was different from the way that she felt about his father, though no less strong. It was a deeply maternal, protective love. If he fell and hurt himself, howling, her heart would lurch. If there were only a second where he was out of her sight while they played hide and seek, her mouth would go dry in sheer panic.

In the five months that had passed since she and Louis had married, and she had become the mistress of Warwick Manor, her feelings for his illegitimate son had grown, day by day. At first, she had been nervous, wondering what kind of stepmother she would be to this child. She had no experience with children at all. Would she fail, make some terrible mistake that could not be rectified?

But Louis had laughed at her fears, taking her hand. “You will be wonderful,” he had said, confidently. “All you need to do is love him, and the rest will take care of itself.”

Hetty thought about Louis’s words to her as they walked into the house, now. He had been right, as he had been right about everything. It was one of the reasons she loved him so much – that quiet confidence, that firm will, that everything would sort itself out in its own time. It had been that confidence that had broken down her defences and made her love him. She was sure of it.

Her heart leapt as she saw him waiting for them at the side door to the manor. It never changed, the way that her heart leapt when she saw her husband again, even if it had only been an hour since they had last been in one another’s company.

“He looks tuckered out,” Louis said, smiling, as they approached him. “It looks like he has been enjoying himself.”

Hetty nodded. “He has been running for over half an hour,” she said. “He has been chasing the ball.” She looked down at the dogs, milling around her feet. “It was a wonder he could get to it at all with these three in hot pursuit.”

Louis leaned over to take the child. “He must be getting heavy,” he said. “Let me take him.”

But as Hetty went to pass Ben to her husband, the child suddenly clung to her, vigorously shaking his head. “No,” he wailed. “Want Mama.”

Hetty stilled. So did Louis. They both looked at each other, tears welling in their eyes. Hetty stared down at the golden head of the child, her heart lurching again. It was all she could do to keep composed.

Mama. He called me Mama.

It was the very first time that the word had passed his lips.

When they had returned to Warwick Manor after their short honeymoon in Scotland, Louis had gently asked her what she wanted Ben to call her. He preferred if she was referred to as Ben’s mother, right from the start, but he would not force it upon her if she did not feel comfortable with the title.

She had agreed that she would like the boy to think of her as his mother and refer to her as such. But no matter how many times they asked him to call her Mama, not Hetty, he stubbornly refused. She had tried not to show how hurt she was. She knew that it would take time for him to accept her, even though he had no memory of his real mother and had never called anyone by the title.

Until now.

There was a silence, thickened by emotion. Ben was the only one who seemed unaware of the importance of the moment. He buried his face into her shoulder, rubbing his eyes. She could see that he was almost ready for his afternoon nap.

Louis took a deep breath. "Of course you can stay with Mama," he said, his voice shaking only slightly. "But I think that your luncheon is ready, in the nursery, now. We should go there."

They started walking slowly, not looking at each other. But Hetty knew that her husband realised how profound the moment was, as well.

He put an arm around her shoulder. She gazed up at him. And so, they kept walking with the child in her arms towards the nursery. She knew, at that moment, that they had finally become the family that they both had longed for.

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Later that evening after dinner was over and Ben was fast asleep, tucked up in his small bed, they wandered together across the lawn of the gardens. It had become a habit of theirs to walk of an evening before they retired indoors to the flaming fire of the drawing room. Winter was upon them, now, and it became very cold at this time of night.

Louis carried a small lantern in his right hand, and intriguingly, a bag, in his other. He had refused to tell her what was inside it, only smiling and saying that all would be revealed. She glanced at the bag, now, curious. But she knew better than to ask him. He would only smile slyly, refusing to answer until he was ready.

"Brrrr." He stomped his feet. "I do not think we will be able to do this of a night for

much longer. The snow will be too thick, and I do not have a toboggan to lead you back to our home, my love.”

She laughed, watching the frigid breath emerging like smoke from her mouth. “I think you are right,” she said. “But think, Louis. All that we can do in the dead of winter.” She paused, warming to the idea. “We can make snowmen, with Ben. We can have snowball fights ...”

“Do not forget snow angels,” he interrupted, smiling. “I always enjoyed making them, when the snow was heavy enough, when I was a lad. My sister Catherine and I used to compete to see who could spread their arms the widest and make the largest wings.”

Hetty smiled ruefully. “The pleasures of having a sibling,” she said slowly. “As an only child, I had to make my own amusement. I should have loved to have a companion to trawl the fields when it snowed.”

They kept walking, both lost in their memories. A full moon hung above them, illuminating their path. Hetty gazed up at it, remembering that night at Hillsworth House when Louis had been courting her, and they had sat outside, watching a moon, just like this one.

She had been so cautious of him, then, still so very hurt by all that had happened. Distrustful of him, and of everyone. It still sometimes amazed her that she was here, in his home, and that they were man and wife. That he had managed to break down her defences in the sweetest of ways. It had been a big job. Most men would have buckled beneath the weight of it.

She glanced at her husband. He was made of sterner stuff than that. Louis was tenacious, and he was patient. Besides, she hadn’t known at that point when they had sat side by side beneath the moonlight, that he had always been in love with her. That

the memory of their one brief encounter had fuelled his life ever since.

Suddenly, they rounded a bend, and the small lake that lay to the east of the estate, was upon them. It was frozen over, now, looking like a glazed mirror in the moonlight. Without speaking, they headed towards it.

Hetty took a deep breath. It was so very beautiful. In summer, she knew that it would be teeming with birdlife. Now, in the darkness, it was silent, the birdlife gone to warmer climates. The trees that surrounded it looked like dark skeletons, with not a leaf on any of their branches. It was eerily lovely.

They sat down, side by side, staring at it. Hetty sighed deeply. While it was beautiful, it was also very cold. She didn't think they would be out long this evening before the lure of the warm manor drew them back in like moths to a flame.

Louis fiddled in the bag, and suddenly, he pulled out two pairs of ice skates, holding them aloft, as proudly as a hunter that had just snagged a prize.

"Louis, no," she breathed, her eyes widening. "It is too dark to go ice skating!" Her eyes drifted doubtfully towards the lake. "Besides, how do you know that the ice is hard enough to hold our weight? We could end up fighting for life in that frozen water when we fall straight through ..."

He smiled a bit cheekily. "We will not fall through," he said confidently. "Remember, I know this lake. I have skated upon it since I was young, not much older than Ben is now." He paused. "And I have waited until the full moon, so we have enough light to guide us. Come on, Hetty. Or are you too scared?"

The challenge lay between them. She felt her heart beat faster as she gazed doubtfully at the lake. She wasn't sure at all.

But then, she looked back at her husband. He wouldn't put her at any risk. She trusted him, implicitly. And how much fun would it be to glide around the lake on skates underneath the moonlight?

She took a deep breath. "I am not too scared," she said, smiling slowly.

His smile widened. "Come on, then. Let's get these skates on and do it."

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He held her hand as they drifted around the lake. Hetty was hesitant, at first. It had been a long time since she had ice skated, and she still wasn't entirely convinced that the ice was thick enough to hold their weight.

But after a while, she relaxed, letting him guide her around and around. It was as if they were slow dancing, the only music the soft sound of an owl hooting in the distance. His hand was cold, but firm, in her own. She knew that if she slipped, he would be there to hold her up.

After a while, she started to fall into a kind of trance. Their fogged breaths followed them like a trail of smoke. He twirled her around. Once. Twice. She staggered, a little, and he pulled her into his arms, enveloping her in his warmth.

They stayed like that for the longest time, the moon shedding its brilliance, upon them. He gazed down at her, suddenly solemn, frowning, just a little.

"Ben has accepted you," he said, at last. "I told you it was only a matter of time before it happened." He paused. "You are his mother now, Hetty. You will be the only mother that he will ever know."

She blinked back tears. It was the first time that they had spoken of what had

happened today. Of that magical moment when the little boy had called her his mother for the very first time.

She sighed deeply. “I love him as if he were my own,” she said, in a quiet, serious voice. “I love him as if I had carried him within my body and birthed him.” She hesitated. “I cannot understand, for the life of me, how his real mother could have abandoned him. How she could have made that decision, to leave his life forever.”

“She is not you,” he replied slowly. “She is not half the woman that you are, Hetty. That is how she made that decision.” He paused. “But it does not matter, any longer. He has you, now, and he will never know the lack of a mother, because of the woman that you are.”

She took a deep breath. “He is a very lucky boy to have you as a father,” she said, struggling now not to cry. “Any child would be lucky to have you as a father ...” She shuddered suddenly, feeling the cold starting to permeate into her bones.

“Hetty, what is it?” he asked, tilting her chin higher with one hand.

She laughed self-consciously. “I did not wish to tell you yet,” she said in a trembling voice. “It is still early days, and I am not entirely confident ...”

“Tell me what?” His voice sounded alarmed.

She took a deep breath, staring straight at him. “I think that I am with child,” she said, the breath leaving her body in a rush. “I think that I am having our child, Louis ...”

He picked her up, abruptly, spinning her around, his eyes full of joy. And then, slowly, tenderly, he put her back down.

“You should have told me before,” he said, alarm in his voice. “I wouldn’t have made

you skate like this. It is dangerous. If you fell ...”

She laughed softly. “I know, my dearest. I thought of it myself.” She hesitated. “But I knew that you would not let me fall. It took me a long time to trust you, Louis, but now I do, implicitly. I would trust you with my life. You would never let any harm come to me or any of us. Ben, or the coming child ...”

He swore softly, wrapping his arms around her, protectively. “Let us get onto safe ground.”

They skated slowly, cautiously, to the edge, where they took off the skates. They didn’t speak again as they walked back to the house. Once inside, in front of the drawing room fire, he turned to her, kneeling at her feet, gazing up at her with such solemnity that her breath caught in her throat.

“You have made me the happiest man in the world,” he said slowly. “I truly did not think I could be any happier than I have been since I married you. I thought that it was enough, having you and Ben ...” He took a deep breath. “But it has shaken me to the core the thought that we have created a child out of our love for each other. It is as if our little family is being cemented by this little one that is on its way ...”

She sighed as he took her in his arms, hugging her so fiercely that for a moment she could not breathe. Laughing, she gently pushed him away.

“I love you, Hetty,” he said, his eyes moist. “I cannot imagine life without you. I knew that you were the one the moment that I laid eyes upon you. I did not know how I would get you, and it was a long, hard road, but we have made it, in the end.” He smiled ruefully. “Is it too much to say that I thank the Lord daily that Frank Blackmore deserted you?”

She laughed, a little overcome. “No, it is not too much to say it. Because I feel the



same way, my darling.” She smiled. “I would never have imagined it at the time, but yes, I thank the Lord, too, that Frank never loved me, and fled our marriage. Because none of this would have been possible. It led me to you and Ben. There is no other road that I could have taken.”

They kissed, then, long and lingering, full of love and desire. A desire that she knew would build and soon lead them to leave the drawing room and retire early to their chambers to reach for each other, as always. That insatiable desire that still burnt as bright as a candle, just as fiercely as it had on their wedding night.

They were a family. And soon, that family would expand again. The years stretched before them, glittering like gold.

Yes, she was very glad that Frank Blackmore had deserted her. If she could, she would thank him from the bottom of her heart.

THE END

### Prologue

London, Summer, 1814

The woman stumbled slightly as she walked down the cobblestone alley. It was dark, and she squinted as she tried to make out the names of the shops. They were all hanging on wooden signs, which were squeaking and rocking in the wind. She felt her heart pounding harder. What if she could not find it?

The wind had created a tunnel, twisting and howling through the narrow alley. It was so ferocious that her bonnet suddenly flew off her head, as if a hand had reached down from the heavens and snatched it away. She stumbled more, as she awkwardly chased it, tumbling along the ground.

Eventually, she managed to pounce on it, picking it up with shaking hands, and tying the tattered ribbons beneath her chin tightly, to secure it.

She was tired. So tired, that she could barely put one foot in front of the other. Her eyes hurt, stinging with fatigue. All that she wanted to do was lie down and close her eyes. She wasn't even fussy where at this point, as long as blessed sleep could overtake her, and she could rest, at long last.

She jumped at the sound of a cat mewling loudly behind her. She turned her head and watched the thin wretched creature dart past her legs. It was marmalade, with high pointed ears and large, almost haunted, green eyes. In its mouth it carried the skeleton of a fish, obviously pilfered from scraps that were lying all around. It did not even acknowledge her as it ran away, disappearing into the shadows with its prize.

Her heart started to slow down, just a little. She was jumping at everything. It was only a stray cat. It could do her no harm.

She kept walking, quicker now, staring at the wooden signs. She had never been in a place like this before and she was scared. Oh, she had heard all about the bad areas of London, the places that no respectable soul would ever enter. Her father had told her all about them when she was a little girl, although her mother had scolded him for scaring her afterwards.

There was the area known as the Mint, he told her, which was the very worst. A slum, only ten minutes from London Bridge. A former genteel area that had collapsed into ruins and now was a pit of squalor, housing at least three thousand unfortunate souls. And then, there was the Almonry, near Westminster Abbey, known colloquially as The Devil's Acre. Another was called the Rookery, or Little Dublin, on account of the high proportion of starving Irish who filled its putrid buildings.

She could still remember some of the street names of these notorious London slums. They had made her shiver in horror. Cat's Hole, Dark Entry and Pillory Lane. It was a whole other world, a dark story that she had never imagined she would even glimpse, let alone be walking the streets.

London was an entirely different world for her. She had not been to the great city many times, but they still shone in her memory, like precious jewels. A matinee at Covent Garden, when she was ten years old, to see the ballet. A visit to the Royal Academy of the Arts, to view an exhibition. An afternoon at a genteel tearoom, where she and her mother had sipped the finest brew in white china cups, watching the parade of fine ladies and gentlemen strolling the pavement.

It was all a far cry from where she was now.

Her eyes widened in alarm as she saw two figures leaning against a lamppost. A gas

lamppost that her father told her had only been introduced to the city this very year. The gas hissed and sputtered in its glass enclosure, flickering dimly, casting a wan light over the wet, grey cobblestones.

The figures were two women, she noted, as she drew closer. Young women dressed in garish gowns, their knotted hair hanging loose around their shoulders. One had a bright green feather boa wrapped around her neck. The other had hair an unusually bright shade of yellow. They stopped talking, watching her, as she walked by.

“Ooh, well, aren’t you a fine lady, then,” called the one with the yellow hair in a mocking tone. “Did your carriage break down, duckie?”

The two women laughed. It sounded like the cackles of witches in the night. She raised her chin higher. She would ignore them.

“Cat got your tongue?” called the other woman, with the feather boa. She turned to her companion. “She thinks she’s high and mighty, this one. We should teach her a lesson, bringing her airs and graces down Gilley Lane.”

They peeled themselves away from the lamppost, approaching her, almost circling her, like prowling cats. She felt a shiver of pure fear as her head whipped around watching them.

“Please,” she said in a small voice. “Please, will you tell me where the Black Swan Inn is?”

“The Black Swan?” said the woman with the feather boa. “Now, why would a fine lady like you want to know where that gambling den is?”

“It ain’t for the likes of you,” said the other, still circling her. “They play cards all night there and would sell their mother’s soul for an ale. Why do you want to go

there? Are you selling trade?"

"That's it," said the feather boa woman, with delight in her voice. "It's a trick, so it is! She's dolled up like a fine lady to get custom. Some punters like to think they are with a bit of quality, don't they?"

She stared at them, appalled, blushing fiercely. She finally realised what they were talking about. They were insinuating that she was a prostitute. As she stared at their garish gowns and painted faces, she suddenly knew that she was consorting with common whores.

A frisson of horror shuddered through her. She should have known straight away, of course. Why else would they be in this lane at night, leaning against a lamppost, looking like they did? But then, nothing in her sheltered upbringing had prepared her for such an encounter. She was in unknown, uncharted territory, without a map to guide her.

She knew she had to bluff it out. To show fear to them would be her undoing. Perhaps she should play along. It might be the only way to get to her destination.

She took a deep breath, raising her chin again. "That's right," she said slowly. "It's all an act. And I have someone there who is waiting for me and willing to pay good coin. Could you tell me where it is, and I can be on my way?"

The woman with the yellow hair smiled suddenly, exposing a row of rotten teeth. "Well, aren't you the clever one, then?" Her eyes, which had previously been cold, were now shining with admiration. "Do you pay extra to get the fancy clothes? It must be worth it. And your accent is ever so good."

She took another deep breath. "Yes, I practice it, during the day. I talk with it all the time now. Makes it easier, you know?"

The woman with feather boa nodded. "I knew a girl who did that once. Called herself Lady Clara and acted like a toff to draw in a certain clientele." Her smile faded. "I can't do that, though. Can't afford the coin for the good clothes, and besides, everyone around here knows that I am just Nellie from Little Row Lane. Where are you from, then?"

Her heart started pounding harder. That was the problem with lying. It often became so complicated. She couldn't tell these common whores the truth. Suddenly, her mind flashed on an area of London that her father had told her about, the day he had talked about the slums.

"There are slightly better areas, of course," he had said, frowning slightly. "Certainly not genteel, but not slums, either. Lambeth is one. Labourers and artisans live there, semi respectably. They are not rich, but neither are they thieves and scoundrels, like in the Mint, or The Devil's Acre."

The two whores were waiting for an answer. She took a deep breath.

"Lambeth," she said. "I am from Lambeth. Meeting a client, at the Black Swan. I am already late, and he won't be happy..." Suddenly, she knew how she could extract herself from this situation. "I can give you both a shilling, if you take me there. He pays well, and I got some, in advance."

The women looked at each other. Then the one with the yellow hair nodded slowly.

"We will take you there, for a shilling each," she said slowly. "Trade is slow tonight, and that wind is killing my ears. Besides, us working girls have to look after each other, don't we?"

She smiled at them, so relieved that she almost felt like kissing their painted faces.

They didn't talk any further. They simply started walking down the lane. She hesitated for a moment then followed them. She would simply have to trust that they would be as good as their word. She had been wandering these lanes for over half an hour now, looking for the Black Swan Inn, and she was growing anxious.

They all looked the same, with their grey cobblestones and shabby storefronts. It was like a maze. And she simply could not remember the name of the street or lane that the inn was located on. All she recalled was the name of it.

The woman with the feather boa glanced back to see that she was following. Then they turned, ducking into a narrower lane. She held her breath as she smelt something putrid rising to her nostrils. It smelt like burnt cabbage left out in the rain. A terrible, rotting smell, that she somehow knew she would never forget.

This lane was even darker, not even lit by a lamp. But suddenly she heard singing in the distance. An old folk song that she had heard the servants singing from time-to-time. This rendition was clumsy and raucous. And the voices were all deep and masculine. There was a hiccup or two amongst the words.

They are in their cups, she thought, a shiver of fear falling through her. They are so deep in them that they are stumbling over the words.

She almost felt like turning back and fleeing. She had never been around people who were the worse for strong drink, but she had heard about it. Her own parents were temperate, never allowing alcohol in the house, not even a glass of wine at dinner.

But she had come so far. And she knew it was all too late now. The die had been cast. She was on this journey, for better or worse.

They were almost there. She saw the men stumbling out of the inn, singing loudly. The wooden sign above the tavern declared it to be the Black Swan, and there was a

rough painting of a black swan beneath it. She was here at long last. She had made it.

Her heart leapt with sudden, wild joy. It had all been worth it, all the uncomfortable travel, the weary search through the putrid lanes. Soon, she would be safe again. Soon, all the plans that had been made would spring into action, like a wound-up doll.

She was almost there. The two women were approaching the doorway now, to a chorus of catcalls and jeers from the drinking men.

But then, suddenly, she saw a figure. A tall, black figure, emerging like a ghost, from a darkened hole. Creeping like a phantom from the shadows towards her.

The figure was upon her before she could even react. A long black cloak, with a deep hood, drawn low over the face.

The figure gripped her wrist, tightly. She screamed with all her might.



### Chapter 1

Bath, Winter, 1814

Alice ran down the stairs, taking them two at a time. She knew that her mother would scold her if she saw, reminding her that she was not a little girl anymore. Young ladies were supposed to walk daintily down staircases. But Mama was out for the morning, at a new art exhibition that had just come to the town, and was not around to see, was she?

At the bottom she ran along the polished marble floor towards her father's study. The request that she join him had just been delivered by Betty, her maid. This was unusual. Professor Reginald Sinclair was not in the habit of wanting to be disturbed when he was in his study, especially of a morning.

Alice knew that was when he perused the latest natural science journals that had just arrived in the morning's post, hoarding them in his study, rather like a jackdaw hoarding shiny trinkets for its nest.

She thought about her father as she approached the door. Her dear Papa had retired just six months earlier from his teaching position at the local university, and she thought that he was rather at a loss what to do with his time now. He had made grand plans to travel to Scotland and Wales on hunting expeditions for the rocks and gemstones that he so loved. But so far he hadn't moved from his study all that much.

It was driving her mother to distraction. Mrs. Honora Sinclair was used to having the house to herself, after all. Papa had declared her ladies' painter group, which

assembled here every Tuesday afternoon, as too rowdy for him to read in his study. So, her dear mother had started to go out more, to other people's houses. The ladies' painter group that her mother so cherished was now held at Mrs. Ingram's house.

Alice took a deep breath, knocking softly. A gruff voice emerged. "Enter."

She walked through the door. Her father was sitting behind his desk, his head in a book as always. She walked slowly into the room, gazing around as she waited for him to finish the paragraph and acknowledge her.

Her father's study was the same as it always was. It never changed. If she closed her eyes, she could be five years old again, or ten, or fourteen, rather than the twenty she now was. It was as if time itself stood still in here.

Her father was an avid collector. There were tall mahogany bookcases, stuffed to overflowing with natural science tomes. There were other shelves as well, holding rocks and gemstones, shells, strange insects, and creepy sea creatures with hard shells. There were other items that were too odd to even name, although her father would know, of course.

A thick layer of dust had settled on many of the collections, a fact that she knew irritated her mother. Papa would only let Jean, the maid, into the room to dust every fortnight, and then only for ten minutes. Jean simply could not get to every shelf, there was too many and they were too high for her. Papa knew this. All of it was exactly the way he liked it. He did not like this room disturbed at all.

"Ah, Alice," he said, snapping the book shut and peering at her over the rims of his round spectacles. "You have arrived. Have a seat, my dear."

Alice did as he commanded, settling herself into a grey armchair, near the roaring fire. Her father stood up, placing the book down on the desk. Alice read the title, on

the spine: A History of the Molluscs of Cornwall. She barely suppressed a laugh. She didn't know how her father could endure to read such a dry topic. It would bore her to tears.

He walked to the mantelpiece, leant against it, and gazed at her. She could see that he was still in the thrall of the book, by the faraway look in his eyes. Mama often said that her dear husband lived half in this world and half in another entirely.

"Do you remember," he began, in a warm voice, "the time that we went exploring along the Cornwall coastline, many years ago? You always did love to run along the sand, collecting shells. They are good memories, my Alice bear."

Alice smiled. "I remember it well, Papa. I got sunburnt, and Mama scolded you afterwards for being so careless with my skin. You had forgotten my parasol."

"So I did," said Professor Sinclair, looking a little shamefaced. "I never have been good at remembering practical things like that. But we had fun, did we not?" He paused, gazing at her a little sadly. "It only seems like yesterday that you were my girl, running alongside me."

"We had lots of fun," said Alice warmly. "I will treasure those memories of our explorations forever, dear Papa."

He nodded, staring into the fire. "And now you have become a young lady," he said with a sigh, turning back to her. "A beautiful young lady. You are not my little Alice bear anymore, it seems. And I suppose I must let that little girl go, once and for all."

Alice stared at him. It was not like Papa to be melancholy. "I will always be your little girl," she said in a low voice. "You know that. Papa, whatever is the matter?"

He sighed deeply, sitting down in the armchair opposite her. She noticed that he kept

pulling at the fabric of his britches, near the knees, a nervous habit she had noticed since she was a little girl.

“It seems that others have noticed that you are no longer a little girl, Alice,” he said in a slightly mortified voice. “How old are you now? Twenty? Or one and twenty?”

She rolled her eyes. Trust her absent-minded father to not remember how old she was. “Twenty, Papa.”

“Of course.” He looked at her apologetically. He coughed slightly. “There comes a time in a young lady’s life when thoughts drift towards matrimony. And it seems as if that time has come for you, my Alice.”

She gaped at him. “What do you mean?”

He coughed again. “I mean...that there has been an offer put in for you, Alice. For your hand.” He hesitated. “Your mother and I received the offer only two days ago. It came from the Wilmington family, on behalf of their eldest son, Silas.”

She kept staring at him. She simply didn’t know what to say. Nothing had prepared her for this moment, it seemed, even though she had been dreaming of it since she was eight years old.

She had always loved the idea of marriage. As an only child, she had no one else to play with a lot of the time, and so her dolls and her bears were her play companions. Her favourite game in the world had been dressing them up, as if they were attending a wedding. Rosie, her favourite doll, was always bride, and Wilco, her tatty old bear with one eye missing, was groom.

As she had grown into a young lady, she would devour the Gothic romances of the day, reading them late into the night. Her favourite moment was always when the

lead characters married. She would dream, then, about what her future husband would look like. She would dream, too, of her wedding gown, walking down the aisle, towards her husband-to-be. She simply knew it would be the happiest day of her life.

But for a girl who dreamt fervently of weddings and being married, she had been poor on suitors. None of the young gentlemen that she encountered appealed to her, and none of them pursued her, either. She was mortified that perhaps she might never have one, that she might grow up into that most pitiful of characters, an old maid.

And now, her dear Papa was gazing at her earnestly, telling her that an offer had been put in for her hand. From a gentleman called Silas Wilmington.

Alice frowned. She wasn't acquainted with the gentleman, but surely, she had heard his name somewhere before? She scowled, trying to grasp it, but it was elusive, skirting around the corners of her mind.

"Silas Wilmington," she said aloud, rolling the syllables of the name over her tongue. "I have heard the name. How have I heard the name?"

Her father coughed into his hand again. "I daresay you have heard him mentioned on the social circuit," he said quickly. "His family are well-respected, in the Bath community. His father is a magistrate, and they have one of the best houses in the town, and a country estate as well. They are very wealthy..."

She kept frowning. She didn't think she had heard him mentioned just in passing. There was something about the name that had been gossiped about for a long time. She had even heard such gossip when she had attended balls and the assembly rooms, even though she tried her hardest not to listen to idle gossip, finding it boring in the extreme.

Suddenly, it fell into her mind, clicking into place like a well-oiled wheel. There had indeed been gossip about Silas Wilmington. A tragic story. She had felt rather sorry for the poor gentleman, when she had heard it.

In her excitement at recalling it, she stood up, her eyes alight.

“I remember!” she exclaimed. “Silas Wilmington. He is the one who lost his fiancée. They were all set to be married, and then she suddenly vanished, without trace. Her family searched for her for months, to no avail. Am I right?”

Her father sighed deeply, looking pained. “Indeed, you are correct, Alice. There was a dark cloud hanging over both families for months. The Wilmington’s and the St. George family.”

Alice gasped. Further details were slotting into her mind now. The name of the missing fiancée was Marina St. George. Apparently, the lady was only a year older than herself, when she disappeared, more than six months ago now.

She had even noticed Marina St. George at a few balls. It was hard not to. The lady was simply stunning. She was revered as a great beauty in Bath society. She was always the belle of the ball. Apparently, a famous painter from London had come to Bath to ask her to sit for him.

She was larger than life, in all ways. A willowy, statuesque lady, with flaxen gold hair and the most astonishing eyes, which were such a deep, intense shade of blue that they were almost purple. Marina St. George’s violet eyes were legendary.

She was also flamboyant, very dramatic, always seeking and becoming the centre of attention. Miss St. George had a hundred suitors, all falling at her feet, but for some reason, she had chosen Mr. Silas Wilmington. The engagement had proceeded without a hitch, and they were a month short of their wedding day when she suddenly

vanished, never to be heard of again.

The rumour mill had gone wild with speculation about what had happened to her, of course. There was talk of white slave traders, highwaymen, or foul play. Mr. St. George, her father, had hired a private investigator to find his daughter, but all to no avail. There had been no sighting of Marina since she had left her house one morning telling the maid that she was going shopping for gloves.

It was the talk of the town. It was the talk of the district. Even now, six months after the event, there were still pockets of people churning it over, trying to find out what had happened. In the local newspaper they termed it ‘The Mystery of Marina’.

Alice frowned. “Papa, I have heard all the gossip,” she said, sinking down into her chair again. “Silas Wilmington was heartbroken over the loss of Miss St. George. There are whispers that he is a shell of the man that he once was. He has never recovered.”

“Pfft,” said her father dismissively. “That is gossip, pure and simple! Well, he was upset about Miss St. George’s disappearance, of course, but his father assures me that his son is eager and ready to join the matrimonial game once again.”

Alice’s heart sank into her shoes. She could tell by the blustery quality of her father’s voice that it wasn’t as simple as that.

More than likely, Silas Wilmington did not want to become engaged again, but his family were pushing him into it. For she knew from the gossip, too, that his engagement to Marina St. George had been a love match.

Old biddies, in corners at balls, sighed dramatically when they talked about it. Silas Wilmington had been head-over-heels in love with the lady, even seeking her out at her home to serenade her on her balcony, like Romeo did in Romeo and Juliet. He

had been so enamoured of her that he had pushed forward the wedding date by two months, eager to make her his bride.

And now her father was expecting her to believe that he wanted to marry her, a lady he had never even met before.

It was his family behind it, pure and simple.

“Papa,” she said, gazing at him anxiously. “It is not that I am adverse to the idea of marriage. You know very well that I have been dreaming of the day since I was a young girl...”

Her father beamed. “You and your doll weddings!”

“But,” she said, leaning forward in the chair, “I do not wish to marry someone who truly does not wish to marry me. It might be an arranged marriage, rather than a love match, but I still want my fiancé to go into it with a pure heart, ready and willing to accept me as his bride.”

Her father wilted. “You think that he is not over his lost fiancée, as the Wilmingtons claim.”

“Indeed I do not,” said Alice, in a tight voice. “I know it was a love match, and he was simply heartbroken over losing her. I do not want to play second fiddle to any woman. How do you think I would feel, knowing that my fiancé was always comparing me to another woman and that I would never measure up?”

Her father gazed at her sadly. “It would be hard.” He paused. “And I would not put you in a terrible situation like that, my Alice. I sat down with Silas Wilmington myself, in this very room, and he assured me that he is a willing participant in this proposal. He told me that he just wants to move on with his life and has heard that



you are charming.”

Alice gazed at him doubtfully. Marina St. George’s beauty and charm were legendary. And who was she? She was only boring Alice Sinclair, who had not done much at all. There were no poems praising her beauty, nor oil portraits of her on gallery walls. Why, Miss St. George was almost famous, in a strange kind of way, even before she had vanished into thin air.

How on earth could she compete with that?

Why on earth would she even want to?

Her frown deepened. “I do not know,” she said, feeling conflicted. “It seems odd, that his heart would have mended so quickly, if he loved her as well as I have heard...”

“Do not underestimate the power of recovery,” said her father, in a quiet voice. “He may have loved the young lady well and true, but it has been six months, Alice. He is a young man who desires to wed, as any young man does. No one knows what happened to Miss St. George – she could have met with foul play. Should he be expected to pine over the lady and not wed for the rest of his life?”

Alice gazed at her father steadily. There was truth to that. She would not want a young gentleman to make his life a shrine to his lost love. Perhaps Silas Wilmington did, indeed, just want to move on with his life, and this was part of that process.

Her heart flipped over in her chest just thinking about him. Poor man. It must be a terrible thing to live with, knowing that the woman you loved with your whole heart was gone, probably forever.

Tears filled her eyes. She had yearned for a love match, too, just like Silas had with Marina. Just like all the lovers in her Gothic romances. But Alice was practical, too.

She knew that most marriages in her society were formally arranged.

And there had been no ardent lovers fighting over her hand, like Marina had.

She might never have an offer again. If she refused this one, she might wilt away and turn into the dreaded old maid. The thought of it made her shudder.

She sighed deeply. “All right, Papa. You can inform the Wilmington family that I am receptive to the offer.” She stood up, smoothing down the creases in her gown.

He looked happy, standing up and taking her hand. “You know I only want the best for you, my Alice bear,” he said slowly, tears in his eyes. “The Wilmington family are well-respected and wealthy. You will want for nothing in this life, my dear.”

Alice nodded slowly. It seemed that she had set the wheels in motion now, and she knew how it would run. There would be no time to change her mind, without causing offence. She was committed, as surely as if he had already slipped a ring onto her finger.

But a small corner of her heart screamed out, shaking her to the core.

What about love, Alice? Do you not deserve to have that in your life, too?

### Chapter 2

Silas Wilmington managed to run into not one but two couples as he hurried down the street towards the club rooms. He sighed, irritated. Bath at this time of year was overrun with visitors, all eager to take the spa. The population of the town swelled exponentially, and always did. It was frustrating, going about business, but it had been ever thus, since the Roman baths that had been built here had been restored back in 1755.

He pondered as he walked on. His father had told him that Bath had once been unremarkable, until the baths had been restored. Now, the well-to-do flocked from London and other areas of England, eager to take the waters. The Pump Room, an elegant chamber above the baths, was the epicentre of it, for the ton. They would congregate there daily, ostensibly to take the waters, but mostly to see and be seen, and to gossip, to their hearts' content.

He was almost there. Taking the steps two at a time he arrived, shaking off light snowflakes that were sprinkled like fairy dust on his black coat. He handed his hat and coat to the waiter, and then proceeded in.

It was as warm as toast in the grand room. That was courtesy of two roaring fires at either end that were piled high with logs. It was promising to be a cold winter. Even though it was only the start of December he had noticed it.

My first winter without her.

The thought slid into his mind, uninvited. He never intended to think of her now. In

fact, he tried very, very hard not to think of her. But it was as if his unconscious self just couldn't help it, even now. Even six months after she had vanished into thin air, she was still in the very air around him, haunting him.

Marina, with the violet eyes.

His face tightened as he strode into the grand room. Those eyes. He remembered the first time he had ever seen them, across a crowded room at the assemblies. He had felt as though he had been struck by lightning, as if a bolt of it had scissored out of the sky and struck him, right in the heart.

For a moment he savoured the memory, despite his best intentions not to think of her. She had looked like a queen standing there, dressed in regal purple. Her golden hair had been piled atop her head and she even had a small tiara affixed there. And then she had turned around and he had been struck by those eyes, rendered more vivid by the colour of her gown.

He had never seen a more beautiful woman in his life.

He shook off the memory, like a dog shaking droplets of rain from its coat. An unbearable sadness entered his soul. Why was he still tormenting himself like this? She was gone. She was gone forever, as surely as if she had died and was lying now in the churchyard for eternity.

He had hoped, for a long time. But he knew that six months was too long. If she was going to return it would have happened by now. No, something sinister had happened to Marina. Her father had hired a private investigator, but the man had found nothing. And he knew that if she was still alive, and able to, she would have made her way home by now.

He was conscious of eyes upon him as he made his way towards the settee at the far end of the room. He smiled in a noncommittal way, but all the gentlemen coughed,

embarrassed, and slid their eyes away. He was infamous now, it seemed. The gossip had been intense, and still it lingered. Like a noxious smell.

His fists tightened. Did they think he had something to do with her disappearance, either intentionally, or unintentionally? Was that the reason they looked at him the way they did and then cast their eyes to the floor?

He was almost to the settee. And there was his father, in his usual position. The newspaper was spread out around him, and the tea service was on the small table in front of the settee. The older man raised his eyebrows, folding the paper carefully, as he sat opposite him.

“You are on time,” said Mr. Wilmington. “A good thing. You are improving, Silas.”

Silas forced a smile onto his face. His father was a stickler for routine and punctuality, courtesy of being an army man when he was young. He had always run his own household as if it were a military camp and his three sons were the foot soldiers within it.

Silas grimaced at the memory. His older brothers Tobias and David were naturally compliant and had not had many problems with it. But he had always resented it, deep down, wishing that his father was not so rigid. Edwin Wilmington was a stickler for rules and regulations and took his office of magistrate very seriously. Silas and his brothers had been lectured endlessly about the necessity of order and proper process.

Tobias and David were gone now, married with their own households, and no longer had to endure it. But he, Silas, was not so lucky. He was still stuck in the childhood home, like some kind of man-child, even though he was six and twenty, following his father’s rules. It was like a straitjacket binding him, and it only got tighter, year by year.

He swallowed down his frustration. If Marina had not vanished...well, they would

have been man and wife by now. A big midsummer wedding had been planned, when the weather was perfect, the days long and golden and full of promise. They would have set up their own home – he had almost secured a modest house for them, before she had disappeared. Afterwards, he had let the deal go. Why purchase a house for a non-existent wife?

Yes, his life would have been very different if everything had panned out the way that it should have. He couldn't bear to think about it.

“Thank you, Father,” he said now, through gritted teeth.

His father picked up his teacup, sipping thoughtfully. “Word has come through from the professor,” he said slowly, eying his son. “Miss Sinclair is receptive to the offer. The Sinclairs have invited us all to dinner, so that you can be formally introduced to her. If all goes well, the engagement will be announced in due course.”

Silas felt his heart sinking into his boots. He had known that this was going to happen, of course. He was a willing participant. He had accompanied his father to the Sinclair home, on Darling Street, to talk to Professor Reginald Sinclair about offering for his only daughter's hand in marriage. He had even re-assured the man that he was steadfast and earnest in his offer.

But now that it was real, he wanted to jump up and run as fast as he could. He wanted to run out of Bath entirely and not stop, until he reached the very tip of Scotland.

“That is good,” he said slowly, his cheeks aching with the effort of maintaining a smile. “When is the dinner?”

Mr. Wilmington put down his teacup. “Tomorrow evening,” he said with satisfaction. “We thought that it was best not to delay it.” He paused, gazing at his son steadily. “Best to get it over and done with, hey? Like ripping off a bandage. It is for the best, Silas. It is high time that you carry on with your life and leave all that messy business

behind.”

Silas felt a lump form in his throat, a tightening, of sorrow and anger. His father was talking about Marina as if she were something shameful that had to be swept aside. And even as he knew that it was necessary to move on, and that he needed to, for his own sanity, something in his innermost soul howled in protest.

How can you take a wife who is anyone but her?

He had loved her fervently, to the point of madness. He had simply not been able to believe that a lady as beautiful and charming as she would ever have picked him, and it had been an astonishing delight when she had. His nights had been filled with longing for the moment she would be finally his, and he could take her in his arms, forever...

But all of it lay like ashes around his feet now.

“Very good,” he said in a forced jovial voice. “I am eager to meet Miss Sinclair.”

His father shot him a weary look. “I do realise that you are not eager, Silas,” he said. “You do not need to pretend for my sake. But it is good enough that you are willing and that you have seen the necessity of it.” He paused. “From all accounts, Miss Sinclair is an attractive girl, modest, and chaste. Exactly what you need, after...” He let his voice trail off.

Anger flared in him again. He knew that his father had never really liked Marina, and why would he? Marina had been dramatic and fiery, almost larger than life. She wasn’t a quiet, compliant mouse, eager to become a proper young lady, in the way his father wanted all ladies to be.

Marina had danced all hours until her feet were almost bleeding. Marina had attended bohemian parties, where they served exotic drinks, and talked of poetry and

philosophy. Marina had posed for an oil portrait by an up-and-coming London artist, dressed as a Roman goddess. Marina was way too much for a man like his father.

She had almost been too much for a man like himself.

He had loved her for her flamboyance, not wanting to change a single thing. But he had anticipated that it would be hard after they were married. Marina was like a wild bird and he had no desire to cage her. Would she start to resent the upper-middle-class life, that they would lead?

It was something that he would never know.

His thoughts drifted to Miss Alice Sinclair. The lady who was about to become his new fiancée. He had never heard of her before his father had approached him with his scheme. He couldn't recall ever having seen her on the social circuit. Nor had he heard her name mentioned by any of his friends or acquaintances.

She was twenty years old, he had been told. The only child of a professor of natural history, who had recently retired. They were a respectable family, moderately wealthy, courtesy of a stipend her father received from a deceased relative. Mrs. Sinclair had artistic inclinations, apparently, attending a great many exhibitions in London, and was a member of a local group for lady painters.

He had mentioned her name to people over the last few days, curious to see what people would say about Miss Alice Sinclair. But no one had any opinion. She was not noteworthy in any way, it seemed, although that could just be because no one had met her.

His father insisted that she was an attractive girl. Apparently, he had met her briefly at a garden party, more than a year ago now. He had known the Sinclair family for quite a few years, although not well. But enough to approach the professor for his daughter's hand.



His father, in his regimented way, had approached the task of finding Silas a new fiancée like a military drill. Lists had been drawn-up of all the eligible ladies of a certain age within their acquaintance circle and crossed out one-by-one. The reason Mr. Wilmington had eventually chosen Alice Sinclair was not for her supposed attractiveness, but because she was so self-effacing, in a social way. The exact opposite of Marina.

“We need a steady girl,” his father had told him. “There has been enough controversy. A steady girl will mean the gossip will all die down. She will not draw attention to herself, and the engagement can proceed without incident.”

Silas had shrugged his shoulders through all of it. What did he care who he married if it was not Marina? A strange indifference had settled over him, as if he was walking through life in a bubble. And he had to admit, the thought of getting out of his father’s house, and his control, was appealing. If he married someone else, at least there was that.

It had all happened quickly. The next thing they were calling upon Professor Sinclair. He had vaguely hoped that he might spot Alice Sinclair while they were at the house. But she had been out, shopping with her mother. So, he was going into this engagement without ever having seen his new fiancée’s face.

He did not know her at all. And somehow that was exactly what he needed. A fresh start, in every way imaginable.

Perhaps one day it would all go away. Perhaps his broken heart would finally mend. He intended to be as gracious to Alice Sinclair as he could manage. It wasn’t her fault, was it, that his heart was dead, as dead as the trees were now, shed of their leaves, as the long winter approached.