



Once Upon a Not at all Innocent Kiss (The Whickertons in Love #9)

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Category: Historical

Description: He saw her not as tarnished, but as gold.

BEATRICE HARTLEY, daughter to BARON BENTON, is in love and with child... yet not married—a scandal ripe enough to ruin reputations in Regency England. Spurned by the man she gave her heart to in a fleeting moment of passion, she confides in her parents, who hastily arrange a match to salvage her reputation and their family's honor. As Beatrice faces a loveless future, the light of hope dims...

... until CHARLES BEAUMONT, LORD HAWTHORNE, eldest son of LORD and LADY WHICKERTON, returns to England.

Not the hero she expected, but the one she needed.

At a glittering ball, he is struck not by the gaiety but by Beatrice's silent tears. Born to a family that weds for love, Charles is torn between tradition and the unexpected pull of a woman bound to another.

With one look, she became his everything.

Only love's course is seldom smooth, especially not for the Whickertons. In a society where the whims of the heart battle the weight of duty, will Charles's heart lead him to defy his family's expectations? Can love truly conquer scandal and set the course for a new destiny? In a world where reputation is everything, watch as one family dares to follow the heart against all odds.

Reputation may waver, but family love stands firm.

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London, England, early December 1771 (or a variation thereof)

Beatrice Hartley, eldest daughter to Baron Benton, was absolutely certain her heart would burst at any moment. With love or joy or excitement, she could not quite say. Perhaps it was all of them. Of course, she could not deny the nervous tingle that chased itself across her skin, making her hands tremble and her teeth gnaw upon her lower lip. Yes, she was definitely a bit nervous as well. Yet there was no need to be; after all, he loved her.

Following her parents into the large ballroom, Beatrice craned her neck, her eyes eager to catch a glimpse of him, Lord Strumpton. With his tall stature and the dark shine of his almost black hair, he stood out wherever he went. Yet it was the sparkling green of his eyes that dazzled Beatrice like nothing ever had before. He knew how to smile with his entire face, and she felt her knees grow weak at the mere memory of it.

Lord Tennyson's ball appeared to be a crushing success, his festively decorated townhouse sparkling with the joy of the season. Every corner of the grand ballroom was packed with guests, their laughter ringing in the air as they danced to the melody of the orchestra by the terrace doors. Glittering decorations adorned the walls while twinkling lights shone from every corner. The noise felt like a hum in Beatrice's ears, though, and for a moment, she was tempted to cover them with her hands and block out the sound. Of course, her parents would frown upon that, and so she endured the noise, her head still turning this way and that, her eyes eager to spy the man who possessed her heart.

"Is something wrong with your neck?" Beatrice's mother inquired with a frown upon

her face. “Indeed, you look quite odd standing there like that.” She took a step closer, her voice dropping to a whisper. “Is something the matter, dear?”

Quickly regaining her composure, Beatrice fixed a polite smile on her face. “No, nothing is wrong, Mother. It is simply so... so very exciting to be here. I don’t quite know where to look first.”

Her mother patted her hand, a warm smile upon her face. “I quite understand, dear. Yet it is not becoming for a young lady to be craning her neck like this. Above all, it is important to maintain an outward appearance of grace and composure.”

“Of course, Mother. I shall do my best.”

Beatrice’s mother cast her a reassuring smile before she hurried off, quickly vanishing into a circle of friends, their voices adding to the hum in Beatrice’s ears.

“I believe Miss Carlisle is over there,” Beatrice’s father remarked with a nod of his head toward the other end of the ballroom. “She seems most eager for your company.”

Beatrice nodded, grateful for this opportunity to slip away. Of course, she had come to this ball tonight eager for another’s company, yet judging from the excited expression upon Marianne’s face, Beatrice knew she could not simply pretend she had not seen her. In truth, Beatrice wished she could share her news with her best friend; still, it would be wise to wait and speak to Lord Strumpton first.

“There you are,” Marianne exclaimed, her dark curls dancing upon her shoulders as she all but bounced upon her feet. “Is this not the most exciting ball you’ve ever attended?” She clasped her hands together, beaming up at Beatrice.

Of course, Beatrice nodded. Yet she could not keep herself from gazing beyond her

friend's shoulder, her eyes still searching the bustling room. "It certainly is."

Fortunately, Marianne possessed the ability to hold entire conversations by herself. Only the occasional nod or monosyllabic response was necessary to keep her friend going, words rolling off her tongue without pause. And so, Beatrice remained by her friend's side, utterly unaware of the words that poured from her lips. Instead, her gaze swept the many dancers as well as those strolling around the large, vaulted chamber, exchanging pleasantries here and there. Indeed, she had never seen so many people in one place, their voices almost deafening.

And then Beatrice saw him, and her heart stuttered to a halt.

As enchanting and dazzling as she remembered, Lord Strumpton—Eugene!—waltzed across the dance floor only a few paces from where Beatrice stood, a golden-haired beauty in his arms.

Beatrice would have easily thought it no more than a societal obligation—after all, gentlemen often danced with a myriad of young ladies at these events, did they not?—if it had not been for the smile upon Lord Strumpton's face.

Indeed, it spoke not merely of politeness or even simple amusement. No, it was the sort of smile that had won him her heart months ago. It was the sort of smile that lit up his entire face, illuminating his dark brown eyes in a way that Beatrice felt certain she could see into his soul. It was the sort of smile she had been certain Lord Strumpton had reserved only for her.

All of a sudden, the room felt much too crowded, the air too thin and too hot. Beatrice's knees grew weak, yet not in the wonderful way they had before. Waves of nausea rolled through her middle, and she all but stumbled backward, her legs unable to support her.

“Are you well?” Marianne inquired with a worried expression upon her face before she clasped Beatrice’s arm and led her to a row of chairs by the far wall. “You look pale.”

Beatrice hardly knew what to say as her heart pounded in her ears. She could barely breathe, let alone form a coherent sentence. Oh, what a fool she had been.

Indeed, she had come here tonight with no thought for concern. Perhaps she had been a little nervous, but she had never truly felt worry, not even the slightest touch of uncertainty.

Now, she did.

Once I tell him, Beatrice thought, will he propose? Only moments ago, Beatrice had been certain of the outcome of this night. Now, she was no longer. Now, fear slowly crawled into her heart, tensing every muscle in her body. Does he truly love me? Or was I mistaken? Over the past few months, they had exchanged secret messages, whispered words of love to one another and—quite shockingly, yes!—met in private with no chaperone present. Of course, Beatrice had been hesitant at first, concerned for her reputation; but Eugene’s deep devotion had eventually won him her heart... and she had thrown caution to the wind.

“He is a gentleman.” The words slipped from Beatrice’s lips without thought. “He will do the honorable thing.” Her right hand settled upon her belly, where waves of nausea still rolled.

“Pardon me?” Marianne inquired, leaning closer. “What did you say?” She cast a disapproving glance at the orchestra nearby. “I’m afraid I did not hear you.”

Beatrice shook her head, barely able to look at her friend. He will propose, will he not? Yes, he will. I simply have to speak with him. Yes, all will be well. I’m certain

of it.

Yet as Beatrice continued to watch the man she loved dance with another woman, her heart grew heavy. Oh, God, what have I done?

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Chapter One

A SHAMEFUL SECRET

Every step Beatrice took down the long hallway toward the drawing room felt as though it was weighted down by lead. Dark shadows loomed this late in the day, every bit of cheer the Christmas season usually promised gone, and she wrapped her arms around herself, suddenly feeling cold. Yet there was no help for it. This was not a situation Beatrice knew how to handle herself. It was not something that would go away if only she ignored it steadfastly. No, she needed her parents' help... if it was not already too late for that.

Again, tears threatened, and Beatrice determinedly willed them away. She had to be strong. She knew that. Yet it was easier said than done. Never would she have thought her life would take such a drastic turn and lead her away from the dream she had always entertained.

A dream of love and marriage and family.

Breathing in deeply, Beatrice stared at the closed door, her limbs unwilling to move. Still, there was no choice, and it was that reminder that finally propelled her forward.

As Beatrice stepped into the drawing room, both her parents looked up. While her father had been immersed in one of his books, seated in a comfortable armchair near the fire, her mother had retreated to the settee, her latest work of embroidery in her hands. "Are you well?" her mother inquired, that slightly concerned frown once again upon her face. "You've been rather quiet these last few days." She exchanged a look

with her husband, who nodded in agreement before both turned their attention back to Beatrice.

With her hands clasped together almost painfully, Beatrice straightened, willing herself not to crumble before their eyes. After all, her parents had always been kind, their family born out of convenience, yes, but also respect and compassion. “I’m afraid there is something I need to tell you,” she began, her voice trembling ever so slightly. “I... I’ve made a grievous mistake.”

Her parents’ faces tensed, and they exchanged another concerned look. Then her mother set aside her embroidery and beckoned Beatrice forward, patting the spot upon the settee next to her. “Come. Tell us what has happened.”

Truthfully, Beatrice would have preferred to remain near the door. Somehow, being face-to-face with her parents, only an arm’s length or two separating them, made it harder to speak.

Seating herself on the far edge of the settee, Beatrice clasped her hands in her lap, her gaze downcast, her courage now all but gone. “There is... there is no good way to say this,” she murmured, still not daring to look up at her parents. “So, I will simply say it.” She closed her eyes and inhaled a deep breath. Then she lifted her chin and looked at her mother. “I am with child.”

For a moment, it appeared time had stopped, as though the world had ceased its rotation. There was not even a flicker of a reaction upon her mother’s face, her expression almost blank as she stared back at Beatrice.

A quick glance at her father told Beatrice that her news had stunned him as well. He barely blinked, his shoulders still as though he did not even dare draw breath.

“I’m so sorry,” Beatrice mumbled, bowing her head in shame. “I know I disappointed

you. I know I made a grievous mistake. I wish I—”

Her mother shot to her feet, and her mouth fell open as though she wished to speak. Yet no sound came out. Then, quick steps carried her around the room, her eyes wide and her hands clasped to her mouth. Long moments passed, before she spun around to face Beatrice. “Who? Who is—?” A muscle in her jaw twitched, and she glanced at her husband.

Beatrice’s father remained where he was, his expression now stern, his eyes moving as he no doubt thought of a way out of this predicament.

Swallowing hard, Beatrice met her mother’s eyes. “Lord Strumpton.”

Her mother’s eyes closed, and a heavy sigh left her lips as she bowed her head in what looked like resignation. “How could you have been such a fool?” she huffed, seeking Beatrice’s gaze, her own accusing. “The man’s a known rake. I assume he refused to marry you, is that not so?”

Unable to speak, Beatrice nodded in confirmation, tears blurring her vision as she recalled the moment she had shared her happy news with the man she loved.

It had been that very night at the Tennyson ball. Beatrice had waited for what felt like a small eternity until she had finally caught him alone.

Seeing him leave the ballroom, Beatrice had excused herself, telling Marianne that she was heading to the powder room and would be back within moments. Her friend had nodded in acknowledgment of her words before quickly turning back toward the dance floor, hope in her eyes to find herself out there among the dancing couples soon, too.

Quick steps had carried Beatrice out of the ballroom and toward the powder room.

There she had waited until no one had been nearby before rounding the next corner and hurrying after Lord Strumpton. She had not dared call out to him until the noise of the ballroom had faded away.

“Eugene!” Indeed, calling him by his given name had somehow reassured her, reminding her of the wonderful moments they had spent together, of all the precious things he had said to her.

Surprise had come to his face upon seeing her, and he had quickly drawn her aside, ushering her into an empty room. His lips had found hers without delay, her words stuck in her throat as he had drawn her into his arms. For a moment, Beatrice had forgotten the world around her, once more reassured that all would end well after all.

Reminding herself of the words that needed to be said, she had gained his attention, her heart full of hope once more. “Eugene, I am with child.”

His face had fallen instantly, and he had stumbled backwards a step or two, his hands falling from her arms, as though he could no longer bear the thought of even touching her. “Are... Are you certain?”

Beatrice had shrugged. “As certain as I can be.” In truth, she knew very little about these matters. All she knew she had overheard by sheer happenstance, drawing her own conclusions. Indeed, it could barely be considered knowledge at all.

His lips had thinned, his head shaking from side to side ever so slowly in denial.

Beatrice’s heart had broken in that moment, and yet she had forced herself to ask, “Will you not propose? After all,” her hands had settled upon her belly, “I am carrying your child.”

For a moment, his gaze had followed her movement and lingered upon her hands.

Then, however, he had shaken his head once more. "I'm afraid I cannot. My father seeks another match for me."

Tears had shot to Beatrice's eyes. "Eugene, you cannot mean that."

"It breaks my heart," Eugene had replied, his arms now linked behind his back, his feet retreating another step, "but I have an obligation to my family." He had inhaled a slow breath and then stepped around her and left the room.

All Beatrice had thought in that moment had been that he had not looked heartbroken at all.

"How could you not know?" Beatrice's mother demanded, disappointment in her eyes as she shook her head at Beatrice. "Did we not warn you to be wary of his kind? Of men like him? How could not see that—?" She pinched her lips together and shook her head in a gesture of utter defeat. "There is no point in lamenting what cannot be undone."

Beatrice dapped her handkerchief to the corner of her eye to hide the tear that lingered there. Of course, she had heard the whispers; and yet they had only been that: whispers. After all, whispers existed about almost everyone of the ton in one form or another.

Truth be told, one look into Eugen's eyes and Beatrice had known him to be different. Even if he was a rake, even if all the rumors were true, everything would change now that he had lost his heart to her. Beatrice had been certain of it.

Only she had been wrong.

His heart had never been hers.

Not even for a moment.

Silence lingered in the small drawing room as Beatrice's mother continued to pace. Beatrice could all but feel her parents trying to think of a way to remedy the mistake she had made, their anger at her momentarily subdued by the desperate need to preserve their family's reputation.

"We must find her a match," her mother stated firmly as her feet finally drew to a halt, her gaze meeting her husband's. "There is no point in trying to persuade Lord Strumpton to do the honorable thing."

Beatrice's father sighed, the expression in his eyes hesitant before he spoke. "I could call him out," he suggested in a feeble voice.

Beatrice's mother scoffed. "Don't be ridiculous! He would kill you, and then where would we be?" She shook her head in finality. "No, we must find her another match. And quickly. She must be married in a fortnight at the latest." Then her gaze swung around to Beatrice. "How long has it been since your last courses?"

Beatrice blushed profusely while her father cleared his throat uncomfortably before he rose to his feet and moved closer to the door. "Almost six weeks," Beatrice replied in a small voice.

A muttered curse flew from her mother's lips. "We can be certain she is with child," she murmured to herself before approaching her husband. "Who?"

For a long moment, Beatrice's parents looked at one another, not a word leaving their lips as they considered every option.

Beatrice felt sickened. Of course, like all young ladies, she had always dreamed of a love match, and for a time, she had thought she had found it. Now, though,

everything came crashing down around her. Yet despite the awful thought of being ruined in the eyes of society, Beatrice could not deny that a match of convenience was something almost as awful. What sort of man would her parents choose? Would they tell him the truth about her situation? What if they did not tell him and he found out?

All sorts of disconcerting thoughts raced through Beatrice's head as her parents considered their next step.

"John Carter."

Beatrice flinched at the sound of her father's voice as well as the name he spoke.

"Do you think he will agree?" her mother inquired, doubt in her voice. "Has he not said more than once that he does not desire another wife?"

"He has," her father confirmed. "Yet if I ask him as a friend, he might grant me this favor. After all, it need not be a true union."

Mr. John Carter had been a school friend of her father's. As the second son of a baron, he possessed no title, yet he was well respected. He had been married to his wife for almost two decades when he had suddenly lost her to a lung infection. The disease had moved swiftly, and Beatrice remembered the crestfallen expression upon Mr. Carter's face after losing the woman he had loved all his life. He had always been a kind man, and yet the thought of marrying him made Beatrice feel sick.

"Then send word to him," Beatrice's mother insisted. "Tonight. Now." She heaved a deep breath. "There is no time to lose."

Her father nodded and hurried from the drawing room, his receding footsteps echoing down the hall.

“No one must know,” her mother spoke in a calm and clear voice as she moved back to Beatrice’s side. “Do you understand?” She grasped Beatrice’s hands, her eyes insistent upon hers. “We will attend every function, every event as though... nothing happened.”

Beatrice nodded in agreement, fighting to hold back the tears that wished to rush forth. Yet this was her predicament. She had made a mistake, and now, she would have to pay for it. She had no one to blame but herself.

Indeed, Beatrice had been a fool to give her heart away so easily, to ignore the whispers, the tentative warnings she had heard in her head now and then. Yet her heart had been too full of love to heed them.

“Dance and smile and converse as always,” her mother instructed, one finger lifted in warning. “Do you understand? No one can know you’re with child.”

“You’re with child?”

Beatrice and her mother flinched at the sound of Francine’s squeaked exclamation, their heads whipping around to stare at the door.

With bare feet, Beatrice’s five-year-old sister stood in the doorway, her green eyes wide with excitement and her unruly blond curls falling into her face. “Truly?” She tiptoed closer. “You’re having a baby?”

Beatrice knew not what to say, her eyes darting to her mother, seeking support. Her mother, too, appeared shocked witless; however, she quickly recovered. “Come here, Darling.”

Francine bounced closer, and their mother pulled the girl onto her lap. “You were not meant to hear this,” their mother sighed, casting a fearful look at Beatrice. “However,

now that you know, it is important that you keep this a secret, do you understand?"

Francine frowned, her wide green eyes darting to Beatrice in question. "But why? Are you not happy?"

Beatrice almost laughed hysterically in that moment. And so, she quickly rose to her feet, turning her back to her sister, and hurried over to the window. Tears fell freely now, and she gritted her teeth against the sobs that rose in her throat as she listened to her mother's gentle voice, urging Francine to keep quiet.

Are you not happy? Francine's question echoed through Beatrice's head like an awful taunt. Indeed, happiness would not be hers now. She had taken one wrong step, and everything had come undone. At only nineteen years of age, all hope was now lost.

For good.

Chapter Two

AS WITH ALL GOOD PLANS

England was cold and wet, and Charles Beaumont, Viscount Hawthorne, eldest son to the Earl and Countess of Whickerton, wondered if the sun would ever shine again. Indeed, they had been gone from English soil for so long that he barely remembered his home country.

“I don’t like it here,” Elizabeth, his twelve-year-old sister pouted as they stood in front of the terrace doors of their London townhouse. “It always rains.”

Charles could not disagree.

Ever since their arrival barely a fortnight ago, it had rained constantly. If only temperatures were to drop a bit more... “Perhaps we’ll see snow soon,” he murmured, trying to cheer up his little sister. “Don’t you want to see snow?”

Lizzie’s face brightened as she looked up at him. “Yes,” she breathed, awe in her voice, before another cough wracked her little body.

Charles held her close, rubbing a soothing hand over her little back and murmuring words of comfort. When her coughing had calmed, Charles seated himself upon the floor and pulled Lizzie into his arms. “We won’t stay long,” he murmured, tickling the corners of her mouth to make her smile. “Only long enough for you to see snow.”

Since birth, Lizzie had suffered from a weakness of the lungs, which could not be

cured but was eased by warmer climates. Unfortunately, that was not something to be found in England.

Footsteps echoed closer, and then the door to the drawing room was flung open. “There you are,” Henry exclaimed, dressed in formal evening attire. He strode closer, then he laughed. “You look miserable,” he remarked with a grin.

Charles chuckled, casting a meaningful look at his brother, younger by three years. “And you look dashing.” He looked down at Lizzie, her eyes wide as she gazed at Henry. “We were talking about snow.”

Henry knelt down in front of their sister. “I heard temperatures are bound to drop any day now,” he told her, putting a smile onto her face.

Leaving Lizzie in Henry’s care, Charles hurried to dress for tonight’s ball. Indeed, despite his twenty-one years on this earth, it was his first, and he could not deny a touch of nervousness. In truth, he did not much care for the idea of being crammed in a room with a myriad of strangers. He preferred the country, the wide-open expanse as well as the quiet. Henry, though, could probably not wait to mingle.

Still, being back in England after all these years, Charles wanted to see the world his parents had grown up in, the world that would one day be his as well. Yes, he was determined to make the most of their time here.

As they arrived at Lord Atwood’s townhouse later that night, the sound of laughter, conversation, and music filled the hall, echoing off the walls and vibrating against Charles’s chest. He felt overwhelmed by the sudden noise, and a wave of anxiety washed over him.

“It is quite different, is it not?” his mother, Edith Beaumont, Countess of Whickerton, asked with a twinkle in her pale eyes. “Consider it a social study of a foreign culture.”

Charles chuckled, grateful for his mother's words. "I shall," he replied, not unaware of the expression in his father's eyes as he looked at his wife. Indeed, Charles's parents were the embodiment of true love, the bond between them transcending everything Charles had ever encountered. He had seen love in others before, but it had never come close to that which connected his parents. As far as he knew, there was not even a word in any language he had ever studied that would do it justice.

While his parents easily glided through the throng of guests, Charles and Henry remained behind. "What do you think?"

Henry shrugged, eager eyes sweeping over the crowd. "Not the greatest adventure I've ever imagined, but," he grinned at Charles, "it'll do for tonight." Then, he, too, disappeared into the crowd.

Charles could not deny that he enjoyed being on his own, even in a crowd. His brother had the tendency to speak without pause, and Charles often felt drained having to pay attention to his brother's endless stream of words. And so, instead, Charles retreated to a quiet corner—relatively quiet, at least—and watched, observing those around him with almost scientific interest. Indeed, customs differed greatly across cultures, and he wondered about the many nuances he had yet to learn.

Quite content, Charles spent the next hour upon the fringes of the ballroom, watching couples dance and lords and ladies interact. He saw young women bat their eyes, coy smiles upon their faces, and gentlemen square their shoulders, an air of importance surrounding them. Old matrons stood in one corner, watching everything with hawk's eyes, secretive words exchanged between them. Charles could not help but wonder what it was they saw when they looked at this ballroom, how different their experience was from his own. Almost entranced, Charles strolled along, his gaze sweeping over the many guests in attendance, with many more still arriving minute by minute. Their voices were now only a hum in the background, the meaning of their words lost to Charles. It was a soothing sound, and it made Charles feel more at

ease; after all, he was merely a spectator at tonight's ball, glad not to have any sort of active role in it.

In Charles's opinion, the evening could have progressed in this very manner until the time of their departure. However, as with all good plans, sometimes they took an unexpected twist.

Lost in his observations, Charles did not notice the young woman until they collided in a tangle of arms, his feet firmly planted upon the hem of her skirt, her fingers grasping his arms to regain her balance. The moment was upon him so abruptly that Charles felt his heart pause in his chest, his eyes staring down into her face in utter shock, the rest of the world momentarily lost to his senses.

Indeed, for a moment, all Charles saw...

... was her.

Wide blue eyes looked up into his. Indeed, it was the most astounding blue he had ever seen, and yet Charles could not quite say why that was the case. Indeed, it was a remarkable blue, a mixture of the sky on a bright summer's day and the deep, almost turquoise waters he had seen in the south of Europe. It was a color that held mystery and depth, a color that intrigued him and made him wish to know what lay beneath the waves.

And then Charles blinked, and he saw her face.

Not unlike his own, it held surprise, visible in the widening of her gaze. Yet beyond that, Charles saw deep sadness, anguish even. Tears clung to her lashes, and even after regaining her balance, her hands still clung to his arms, holding on, as though she feared she could not stand on her own. Indeed, an almost crushing weight seemed to rest upon her shoulders, and Charles felt a fierce need to protect her, to carry her

burden for her... whatever it might be.

It was the oddest feeling, for he did not even know her name.

“I’m sorry,” Charles managed to say after finally rediscovering his voice. Although it sounded rather like the croak of a frog than the voice of a human. He cleared his throat and tried again. “I’m sorry. I suppose I did not look where I was going. Are you all right?” As Charles took a step back to look into her eyes, the young lady’s hands slipped from his arms, and he instantly regretted the loss of her touch. Again, it was the oddest sensation.

Blinking her eyes fiercely, the young lady bowed her head, clearly struggling to regain her composure. Still, Charles was certain that it had not been their collision that had unbalanced her. Indeed, whatever had upset her had happened before their meeting. “I’m quite all right,” she replied in a small voice, her head still bowed, her eyes refusing to look back up into his.

More than anything, Charles wished to know what had happened to her. He took a careful step forward, his head slightly lowered, and whispered, “Is there anything I can do? Please.” Even to his own ears, his voice sounded pleading. Indeed, in that moment, he would have said anything to keep her by his side.

Unfortunately, the young lady had other plans, for she shook her head and retreated another step, reestablishing the distance between them. “No, I’m truly all right.” Then, slowly, ever so slowly, she lifted her chin, and it seemed to be a great effort to her. She met his eyes, and then the most ingenuine smile Charles had ever seen touched her lips. “Nothing happened. I’m... I’m fine.” She nodded to him as though in confirmation of her words and then slipped back into the crowd so fast that for a moment Charles felt as though he might have simply imagined her.

He still did not know her name. He could not even remember the color of her hair or

her dress. All he remembered were those wide blue eyes filled with sadness, and yet, strangely enough, he thought that in that moment he had seen her.

Truly seen her.

And he knew that it had changed everything.

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Chapter Three

A LIFE IN RUINS

Beatrice wished she could leave the Atwood ball. She wished she could run far away to a place where no one knew her, to a place where she did not feel trapped. Only she could not. This would be her life from now on, forced to pretend, to put a smile on her face no matter how loudly her heart sobbed.

“There you are,” her mother exclaimed, waving her closer.

Beatrice stumbled onward, barely aware of where she was going. Indeed, she ought to pay closer attention. Had she not just a moment ago collided with a young gentleman? And he had seen something in her eyes, had he not? Yes, Beatrice was certain of it. There had been concern in his voice, and the way he had stepped closer and tried to look into her eyes had deeply unsettled her. Every fiber of her being had screamed, He knows!

Of course, he could not know not the truth. Still, the way he had looked at her had brought fear to her heart.

As though she had witnessed her daughter’s abrupt encounter with the young gentleman, Beatrice’s mother eyed her disapprovingly. “Pretend better,” she whispered, leaning in so no one would overhear. “You look miserable.”

Indeed, Beatrice did feel miserable, and she felt even more miserable knowing that she would feel miserable for the rest of her life.

“Here he comes. Put on a smile.”

Heeding her mother’s words, Beatrice forced a smile on her face as she turned in the direction her mother was indicating. Indeed, her father was walking toward them, Mr. Carter at his side. He looked as Beatrice remembered him, tall and slender, his dark hair graying. Only the kindness she had always seen in his gaze was suddenly gone, for he fixed her with a hard stare. Yes, he knew. He knew the truth, and he was ashamed of it.

Beatrice wanted to sink into a hole in the ground. She wanted to run and flee this moment. Perhaps even her life. How had this happened? Only a few weeks past, everything had looked so promising. Her heart had been so full of hope. And now?

“Jonathan, you remember my daughter?” Beatrice’s father said by way of greeting. His gaze held hers, urging her to act with decorum.

“Indeed,” was all Mr. Carter said, his voice tight and his nose slightly wrinkled as he looked down at her.

“It is a pleasure to meet you again,” Beatrice forced past her lips then quickly bowed her head, not quite in deference but to avoid having to look at him.

Mr. Carter scoffed. “From now on, I expect you to follow society’s rules to a point,” he said in an almost threateningly low voice. “I have agreed to this only in service to an old friend. But I warn you— if you bring shame to my family, you shall regret it.”

Forcing her gaze upward, Beatrice looked at her father. Again, his gaze implored her to act as she had been taught, and so Beatrice nodded. “Of course. I thank you for your kindness.”

Fortunately, this concluded Beatrice’s part in their conversation. Turning their

attention to other matters, her father and Mr. Carter soon left their side, joining a small circle of elderly gentlemen on the other side of the ballroom.

“Mother,” Beatrice exclaimed, grasping her mother’s arms, her eyes imploring, “I cannot marry him.” Her voice was only a whisper, and yet it seemed to echo through the ballroom. “Please!”

Her mother heaved a deep breath, and for a moment, Beatrice thought to see regret and compassion in her eyes. Then, however, it vanished, and she spoke the words Beatrice had expected from the start. “I’m afraid there is no choice, dearest. If you do not, you doom us all.” A weak smile touched her lips as she placed a hand upon Beatrice’s cheek. “Trust me, this is the right choice.”

Beatrice almost laughed at her mother’s words. Had she not a moment ago said that there was no choice?

“Ah, Lady Benton!”

At the sound of their hostess’s voice, mother and daughter turned around to greet Lady Atwood. To Beatrice’s surprise, she was not alone but in the company of a couple the age of Beatrice’s parents as well as a young gentleman.

The very gentleman whom Beatrice had collided with only moments before.

“Allow me to introduce to you Lord and Lady Whickerton,” Lady Atwood intoned with a gracious smile, “as well as their eldest son, Charles Beaumont, Viscount Hawthorne.” Beatrice felt their hostess’s gaze linger upon her for a moment, the ghost of a frown crossing her face as though she, too, easily saw through Beatrice’s mask. “And this here are Lady Benton and her daughter, Miss Beatrice Hartley.”

Pleasantries were exchanged, and all the while, Beatrice could feel Viscount

Hawthorne's gaze upon her. She barely dared look up, afraid of what she would see in his eyes. Why was he here? Why this introduction? Clearly, Lady Atwood was not acting upon her own initiative. Had Lord Hawthorne asked to be introduced to her?

Under other circumstances, Beatrice would have felt flattered. Yet today, here, she felt terrified. The idea that someone looked at her this closely unsettled her, and she felt a wave of nausea roll through her belly.

Interestingly so, while their parents conversed with ease, Lord Hawthorne did not say a word. He simply continued to look at her. Only when Lady Whickerton suggested to Beatrice's mother that they fetch themselves a beverage and moved away did Lord Hawthorne step toward her. "I apologize for... this ambush," he said with a teasing smile, yet there was a touch of shyness in his dark brown eyes. "I simply wish to..." The smile faded from his face, and Beatrice could see that he did not quite know how to put his motivation into words.

"That is quite all right," Beatrice heard herself reply, that plastered smile returning to her face. "It was as much my fault as it was yours. I was not looking where I was going, either." She nodded to him and made to turn away, feeling the strain of this forced conversation.

"Are you...?" Lord Hawthorne reached out a hand toward her, pausing it a bare inch before his hand touched hers. "I apologize," he said again, a rather shy smile playing across his features. "I simply meant to ask if there is anything I can do. You... You seemed quite distraught."

Lifting her chin, Beatrice dove deeper into that plastered smile. "As I told you before, I am quite all right. There is nothing wrong. I assure you." She glanced beyond his shoulder, unsettled by the intensity in his gaze, as though he could unearth her secrets even if she was unwilling to share them. "I apologize, but I must see to my friend. Good day, my lord." And without another word, Beatrice hastened away, afraid of

what Lord Hawthorne might do if she did not escape him now.

The truly sad thing, though, was that if it were not for the fact that her life was in ruins, Beatrice would have liked him.

Chapter Four

TOO SOON

Charles cursed his directness. He ought not to have spoken to her in such a forward manner. Of course, he had upset her. After all, who would entrust a painful secret to a stranger? Yet Charles knew he could not simply walk away and forget what he had seen.

His gaze followed her as she moved away, her direction aimless, as though there was no friend in need, as though her sole motivation had been to escape his presence, his questions.

“My, you look as though all the rain clouds in England have suddenly taken up residence above your head,” Henry remarked with a laugh, his blue eyes full of amusement. “Is it because of her?” He nodded in Miss Hartley’s direction.

Charles gritted his teeth, unwilling to discuss this matter with his brother. He himself still felt too shaken by his encounter with Miss Hartley. Was he a fool to feel so protective of someone he had only just met? Why did he care? Charles could not quite say why, yet he knew it to be true.

“You look like a lovesick pup,” his brother remarked with a chuckle, clearly delighting in his observations. He slapped a hand on Charles’s shoulder. “You’re only one-and-twenty. You’re not already looking for a wife, are you?” He frowned, then he laughed, as though the thought was ludicrous. “It is much too soon for that. Now is the time for freedom and traveling. After all, we’re only back in England because of

father's responsibilities to the realm, not to see you hitched."

Charles sighed. "I cannot say what it is. But when I look at her, I..." Words still failed him. "I feel as though—" He broke off abruptly as he noticed the way Miss Hartley was trying not to look at a particular gentleman.

The man in question was strolling past her, a dark-haired lady upon his arm. He did not even glance at Miss Hartley, and even from a distance, Charles thought to see her heart breaking. He felt a touch of jealousy flare up in his veins at the thought that her heart might belong to this unknown lord; still, the most dominant emotion Charles experienced in that moment was rage.

Fury that this man had dared hurt her.

For he had to have. The expression in her eyes said it loud and clear, and Charles felt her heartbreak as though it were his own pain. Never had he experienced anything like it before.

"Do you know who that man is?" he asked his brother, nodding toward the couple making their way across the ballroom toward the dance floor.

"As far as I know," came their father's voice from behind them, "that man is Lord Strumpton." A question rested in his gaze as he looked at Charles.

"I'll be off," Henry declared after a moment of slightly tense silence and quickly disappeared into the crowd once more.

It was rather obvious that his parents were well aware of the direction of his thoughts.

Standing side by side, his mother's hand upon his father's arm, they eyed him curiously. While a touch of concern rested upon his father's face, his mother looked

rather amused.

“What do you know of Lord Strumpton?” Charles inquired, wishing to know everything he could, knowing that no matter what he did, his parents would draw their own conclusions.

“Why do you care?” his father asked in return, brows rising meaningfully.

Charles huffed out a deep breath, once more glancing over his shoulder at Miss Hartley. She looked utterly forlorn as she stood on the edge of the ballroom, clearly uncertain what to do with herself. She looked like a spooked deer wishing to flee, yet she clearly could not do so.

“She’s to be married soon,” his father said when Charles remained quiet.

Those few little words felt like a punch to his midsection, and Charles almost doubled over. His jaw dropped, and he stared at his parents in utter shock. “She... She is?” Again, his head whipped around, his gaze first seeking Miss Hartley and then Lord Strumpton, currently dancing with the dark-haired lady. “To him? To Lord Strumpton?” He looked back at his parents, not in the least caring what they thought of his passionate reaction and what conclusions they drew.

His father shook his head. “From what Lady Benton said, Miss Hartley is to be married to an old family friend. Soon.” Again, his father’s brows rose meaningfully, his expression saying more than the words he had spoken.

Suddenly, Charles felt weak, exhausted even. He felt as though he had stood in the warm sunshine before and was now abruptly plunged into the deepest winter. Indeed, it was odd! How could he care so deeply for someone he had only spoken a few words to? Yet, rational or not, he did.

“You’d do well to direct your attention elsewhere,” his father counseled, the look in his eyes deeply empathetic. “Besides, you’re much too young to make that choice right now. Dance and flirt and enjoy yourself.” He chuckled, and for a moment, Charles saw a deep resemblance between his father and his younger brother. “Eventually, you shall find the one lady who will steal your heart.” His father smiled at his mother, the look passing between them echoing the bond that had connected them for over twenty years now. “When the day finally comes, you shall know.” His father assured him. “I promise you.”

Charles knew that his father’s words were meant as a comfort. Yet they had the opposite effect. “Thank you for your counsel,” Charles said, then he turned around and marched straight toward Miss Hartley.

Indeed, she looked close to tears. Although the moment she saw him coming, fear stole into her expression, and she backed away until her back collided with the wall.

Charles stopped in his tracks, shocked by her reaction. Still, he doubted that she truly feared him. No, there had to be another explanation. And so, he continued onward, trying his best to smile at her reassuringly.

The moment he was within earshot, Miss Hartley stepped toward him, a frown upon her face. “What do you want now?” she snapped, immediately shocked by her own outburst. She bowed her head and briefly closed her eyes. “I’m sorry. I did not mean...” She exhaled a slow breath through her nose, clearly fighting for composure. “Please, leave me alone.”

“I am sorry to have upset you,” he began tentatively. “I assure you, it was not my intention.” He paused, encouraged when she dared to lift her eyes to his. “Yet I cannot walk away, knowing that you...” He shrugged. “You’re clearly distraught. Please, tell me what I can do.”

Tears brimmed in her eyes, and for a moment, Charles thought she would tell him. Then, however, her lips thinned, and she squared her shoulders. “It is nothing,” she echoed her earlier words, her face suddenly pale. Her hand flew to her middle, and she pressed her lips together in a way that Charles feared she might be sick.

“Are you well?” he inquired, inching forward. “Do you need rest? Or perhaps... a glass of water?”

With her eyes closed, Miss Hartley breathed in deeply. Once, then twice. Then her eyes opened and met his. “No, I don’t need anything. All I require is for you to leave me alone.” She fixed him with a pointed stare. “Please.”

Knowing that he was adding to her distress, Charles nodded. “Very well. However, if there is ever anything I can do for you, please do not hesitate to ask.” He offered her what he hoped to be a reassuring smile and then forced himself to turn away and walked back the way he had come.

His father’s words echoed through his head, and Charles realized that he already knew. He felt absolutely certain that he had already met the woman who would steal his heart... for she had already done so. It was insane, yes. Absolutely ludicrous. He had not even known she existed a few hours past, yet Charles knew she was the one.

There was no denying that.

Neither did he plan to.

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Chapter Five

A SHOOTING STAR

Beatrice felt as though she had spent the better part of the night weeping. The sun had not yet risen, and she felt exhausted in heart, mind, and body. That brief encounter with Mr. Carter had destroyed every last sliver of hope that her future husband would treat her kindly and not regard her with shame in his eyes. In fact, Beatrice felt certain that the look in Mr. Carter's eyes would remind her of the mistake she had made every day for the rest of her life.

Hugging her pillow, Beatrice curled up into a tight ball. In an odd way, she felt like a child, helpless and without power over her own life. At the same time, all the joys and innocence of childhood were now utterly gone, never to return.

Unable to sleep, Beatrice listened to the soft sounds of London slowly awakening, her pillow wet from the tears she had shed that night. How many more would there be? How many more nights like this one?

The echo of soft footsteps drifted to Beatrice's ears, and then the door slowly glided open. A moment later, a head full of blonde curls appeared in the gap. "Bea, are you awake?"

"How come you are awake?" Beatrice pushed herself up, resting her back against the headboard.

Francine tiptoed into her chamber, a small canvas in her hands. "I couldn't sleep."

Beatrice chuckled, and the sound felt almost alien to her ears. “Well, that seems obvious.”

Giggling, Francine jumped up onto her bed and crawled closer. “I made this for you.” She held out the canvas. It looked almost completely covered in black—especially considering the lack of light currently in the room. Yet there was a small splotch of something brighter right at its center. “You look so sad lately, and I don’t want you to be sad. So, I made you this.”

Beatrice smiled at her little sister. “That is very sweet of you, Frannie.” She glanced down at the canvas once more. “What... is it?”

“A shooting star!” Frannie exclaimed in a burst of exuberance. “I’m not allowed outside at night, so I can’t find you a real one but—”

“And yet you are here,” Beatrice interrupted, grinning at her sister. “Out of bed and in my chamber.”

Grinning mischievously, Francine shrugged, as though the fact that she was out of bed at night was not her fault at all but had simply been brought about by happenstance. “Go ahead. Make a wish.”

Beatrice stilled. “You made this for me so I could make... a wish?”

Francine nodded eagerly. “Yes, so you wouldn’t be so sad anymore.”

Setting the canvas aside, Beatrice held open her arms and hugged her little sister. “Thank you so much. I will treasure it. Always.”

“Don’t forget to make your wish,” Francine reminded her, and Beatrice wished with all her heart that her sister’s words held truth. If only there were some sort of fairy

godmother who would grant her a wish. If only she simply needed to scour the night sky for a shooting star and all her problems would be solved.

“Why are you sad?” Francine asked abruptly as she sat back and looked at Beatrice with wide, innocent eyes. “Are you not happy to be having a baby? And Mother says you are to be married, too.”

Beatrice did not quite know where to begin. How did one explain to a five-year-old the confinements of society? The expectations that ruled her life?

“The truth is,” Beatrice simply said, “that I do not wish to be married.”

For a moment, Francine simply looked at her. “Then why do you?”

“Because it is not my choice. Because I am with child, and... I have to be married.” Beatrice closed her eyes, for it felt good to voice her heart’s pain out loud.

“Why do you have to be married to have a baby?”

Beatrice groaned. Of course, she ought to have seen this question coming. In fact, Francine had never met a question she did not like to see answered. “Because... Because people do not like it. Because I cannot raise a child by myself.”

“But you wouldn’t be by yourself,” Francine insisted, a touch of indignation in her voice. “You have us. I’ll help you raise the baby. I’ll feed it and play with it and... and I’ll even share my toys with it.” She gave Beatrice a pointed look, as though she could not believe that Beatrice had not seen this rather simple solution to her problems.

Beatrice chuckled, fighting down tears. “Thank you for your most gracious offer.” If only there were a simple way for her to explain the world to her little sister. Indeed,

what Francine had said was true. Why could she not simply raise her child with the help of her family? Why should that ruin them all? It did feel wrong. Yet the world was what it was.

“You said you don’t wish to be married,” Francine reminded her, a quizzical expression upon her face, half-hidden in shadow. “Why? Brides always get lovely presents, and they get to wear a beautiful dress.” She sighed longingly. “And cake. Don’t they have cake at weddings?”

Even though tears streamed down Beatrice’s face, she could not subdue the laughter that rose in her throat. “Yes, I suppose there will be cake, and you shall have the biggest piece. I promise.”

Francine beamed with delight. Yet not even the promise of cake could make her forget her question. “Then why don’t you wish to be married?”

Beatrice heaved a deep sigh. “Because... Because I do not love the one I am to marry.” She brushed a curl behind her sister’s ear. “You’ll understand when you are older. Most people dream of marrying for love, and those that cannot...” She shrugged helplessly, once again overcome by utter sadness.

“Then don’t marry until you find someone you can love.”

Beatrice almost cringed at the sharp pain that shot through her heart. “I thought I had,” she admitted out loud, uncertain whether it was wise to speak to her little sister like this. “Only it turns out he did not love me back.”

“Can you not make him?” Francine frowned. “What makes people love one another?”

Beatrice shrugged, honestly at a loss. “I don’t know. I wish I did.”

“ I love you,” Francine told her solemnly, “and I always will.” She sank back into Beatrice’s arms, snuggling close. “I don’t know why he doesn’t love you. You’re so easy to love.”

Beatrice bit her lower lip to hold back the sobs that rose in her throat. She held her little sister tightly, wishing with all her heart and soul she could be five years old again. Indeed, life had been simple then.

Now, though, it seemed to get worse every day.

On the carriage ride home from the ball, Beatrice’s parents had informed her that her betrothed was determined to send her to the country after they had been wed. He wished for her to remain there and give birth in secret to avoid the shame of her transgression becoming known to society. With any luck, people would believe that her child had been born early.

Luck? Beatrice wondered. It was an odd thing to say, for she did not feel lucky at all.

Chapter Six

A FOOL FOR LOVE

Although Charles loved both his parents dearly, his father had a way of stating his opinion clearly, not leaving any doubt about what he thought was the right course of action. His mother, on the other hand, was different. While Charles did not doubt that his mother, too, possessed clear opinions, she rarely voiced them in a way that made others feel obliged to share them.

And so, the morning after the Atwood ball, Charles sought his mother in the drawing room. “Do you have a moment?” he inquired, closing the door behind him. “There is something I wish to ask you?”

His mother eyed him curiously but with a mischievous twinkle in her pale eyes. “It seems to be something secretive,” she remarked, glancing back at the closed door. “Those are my most favorite conversations. Come. Sit.” She settled herself into one of the armchairs by the fire while Charles took the other. “What is on your mind, dear? Is it about Miss Hartley?”

That was another thing about his mother. She had an uncanny ability to read people’s thoughts, knowing precisely what lived in their hearts and minds.

Charles nodded. “It is,” he admitted freely. “What do you know of her?”

For a moment, his mother remained quiet, and her pale eyes shifted in a way that Charles almost thought he could see the cogs in her head turning. “Well, as you are

aware, she is the eldest daughter to Lord and Lady Benton. She has a younger sister who goes by the name of Francine. As far as I know, the girl's only five years old." She tilted her head sideways, her eyes slightly narrowing as she watched him. "And she is set to marry a Mr. Jonathan Carter in a matter of days."

Charles felt an icy lump settle in his stomach, every muscle in his body tensing at the prospect.

"Mr. Carter and Lord Benton know each other from their time at school. Mr. Carter was married to his first wife for the past few decades and lost her only a few years past to a sudden fever. From the way people speak, he loved her dearly and never quite overcame her loss."

A part of Charles wondered how his mother had obtained all this information in a single night. Yet she had always had her ways. "Then why would he marry Miss Hartley now?" he thought out loud. "From what you just said, I would've suspected him determined to remain a widower. Does he... Does he need an heir?" Indeed, asking that question felt almost painful.

Holding his gaze, his mother shook her head. "He does not. He has three grown sons."

Charles frowned. "It sounds like a marriage of convenience, does it not?"

His mother nodded. "More than that," she murmured, holding his gaze as though waiting for him to draw his own conclusions.

Charles sat back, a jolt going through his body. "Do you think...?" He shook his head, disbelief echoing through his body. "Do you think her marriage is meant to cover some sort of... scandal?" Although Charles had spent most of his life far from English society, his parents had often spoken to their children of the rules that

governed the world they came from.

“I would not be surprised if it were so,” his mother agreed. Her gaze softened, and she looked at him in the way parents often did when they found themselves astounded to see their children grown up. “Why do you ask?”

Charles exhaled a deep breath. He knew his father would advise him to forget about Miss Hartley, especially under the circumstances. Yet every fiber of Charles’s being told him it would be a monumental mistake. “Can I ask you for a favor?” he said, instead of answering his mother’s question.

Smiling at him, she nodded. “Always.”

“Can you find out which function Miss Hartley will attend next and assure that we shall be invited also?”

Instead of once more inquiring after his motives, his mother merely nodded. “I shall see to it.”

Charles exhaled a breath of relief. “Thank you.”

That very night, Charles and Henry accompanied their parents to the ball of an old friend of theirs. As a young boy, Charles had even played with Lord Wilton’s son; though he could not remember it. Still, as he set foot inside their townhouse, vague memories returned.

“Welcome back on English shores,” Lord Wilton exclaimed, grasping Charles’s father’s hand. “It’s good to have you back.”

Charles’s father laughed. “Though it won’t be for long, I assure you. We find that a warmer climate suits us better.”

“How is dear Elizabeth?” Lady Wilton inquired, a compassionate expression in her brown eyes. “Is she any better?”

Charles’s mother shook her head. “The doctors agree that there is no way to cure her affliction; yet near the sea in southern Europe, she’s a changed child.” A deep smile shone upon her face, and Charles remembered how worried his parents had been after Lizzie had been born and the doctors had prophesied that she would not live long.

Yet they had found a way, and deep down, Charles had come to believe that no matter what, there was always a way.

Excusing himself, Charles ventured into the ballroom, his gaze sweeping the many guests in attendance. “You’re looking for her again, aren’t you?” his brother remarked with a chuckle. “What is so special about her?”

Charles looked at his brother then shrugged. “I don’t know. Everything.”

Laughing, Henry slapped his shoulder. “If you say so.” Then he caught sight of a group of young gentlemen, friends he had made only the night before, and was soon lost from sight.

Of course, Charles did not mind in the least. After all, he was on a mission of his own. First, though, he needed to find Miss Hartley. That, unfortunately, proved difficult. While he eventually spotted her parents as well as Mr. Carter, there seemed to be no sign of Miss Hartley herself.

As Charles ventured from one side of the ballroom to the other, peeking down darkened corridors, he feared that perhaps Miss Hartley was not in attendance tonight. Had something prevented her? Perhaps a headache or—?

Out of the corner of his eye, Charles suddenly caught a glimpse of her. It was only a

second. She was there and then gone. Yet every cell in his body knew that it had been her.

Quickening his steps, Charles hurried after her. He left the ballroom behind and hastened down the corridor. Women were walking in and out of the powder room to his right, their voices almost deafening in the comparative quiet of the hallway. Yet Miss Hartley seemed to have another destination in mind, for she quickly slipped past the powder room the moment no one was nearby.

Charles hung back, wondering where she was going. He could only see the back of her head and wondered if, once again, her heart was in peril. Was she in tears? Was she fleeing the ballroom to find solitude?

Turning around another corner, Charles saw her slip into a quiet alcove. From everything he had learned from his parents, he understood a young woman ought not be venturing along darkened corridors unchaperoned. If she were found, it could severely damage her reputation.

As though on cue, voices drifted closer. A group of young men was making their way down the corridor and straight toward where Miss Hartley was hiding.

Charles's heart sped up, his muscles tensing, before he rushed forward, ready to intercept them. Yet what ought he say? He had never been as nimble-witted as his brother, only that did not matter now. If he had to make a fool of himself in order to protect her, he would.

"I'm afraid you cannot be here," Charles stated the moment the group of young men came around the corner. They drew up short, surprised to see him, laughter dying on their lips. "This area is off-limits to guests." He squared his shoulders, meeting their eyes unflinchingly, praying that this would work.

Only a few steps behind him, he thought to hear Miss Hartley draw in a sharp breath, and he prayed she would stay where she was and not suddenly dash out of the alcove.

“Is that so?” one of the young men challenged, and rather belatedly, Charles recognized him as Lord Wilton’s son, his former playmate of childhood days long gone. “Who says so?”

Charles cleared his throat, wishing in that moment he had taken the time to refamiliarize himself with Lord Wilton and his family. “My name is Charles Beaumont, Viscount Hawthorne,” he replied, holding the young man’s gaze. “My parents are Lord and Lady Whickerton.”

At his parents’ title, a spark of recognition lit up the other man’s eyes, and Charles felt utter relief wash over him. Though it did not automatically solve his problem, perhaps Lord Wilton’s son—Edward, as far as Charles recalled—would grant him this favor.

“It has been some time,” Edward—if that was indeed his name—replied with a nod. “My father said that your family recently returned to these shores.” He cast a questioning gaze past Charles’s shoulder at the alcove before flashing him a bit of a teasing smile. “Welcome back, Charlie.”

Indeed, Charlie did ring a bell, and a vague image of chasing a dark-haired boy down these very corridors entered Charles’s mind. “Thank you.”

For a moment, none of them said a word, and Charles raked his mind for something to say, some excuse that would send them back in the direction they had come. Edward still eyed him most curiously while the other three men continued to look back and forth between them, clearly aware that something was going on.

“So,” Edward began, an oddly familiar looking smirk on his face, “why are you

trying to get rid of us?” His brows rose teasingly, and once again, he glanced past Charles’s shoulder. “Let me guess,” he continued before Charles could attempt any sort of reply. “You are in the company of a young lady and wish for a moment of intimate solitude with her.” He grinned widely. “Am I correct?”

Worried that Miss Hartley might hear every word they were saying, Charles felt mortified at the innuendo in his childhood friend’s words. Still, what else could he give by way of explanation?

And so, Charles nodded, unable to utter a single word.

Edward laughed good-naturedly then slapped his shoulder. “It’s good to have you back. Don’t be a stranger, you hear?” Then he stepped back and nodded to his friends, gesturing for them to return to the ballroom. “Good luck,” Edward called over his shoulder, another one of those smirks upon his face.

Charles exhaled a deep breath, every inch of him trembling, every inch of him in disbelief that this had truly worked. Indeed, penning words to paper with the time and leisure to think each and every one through had always come easily to Charles yet speaking words in the heat of the moment and making them coherent and rational and compelling eluded him. In truth, Charles knew it had been luck instead of competence that had saved him this night.

Still, it did not matter. All that mattered was that Miss Hartley had remained undiscovered.

Exhaling a deep breath, Charles turned around and carefully approached the alcove. “It is all right, Miss Hartley,” he said quietly, hoping his words would reassure her. “It is safe to come out.”

Chapter Seven

OF DAYS GONE BY

Beatrice's heart pounded in her chest, making her feel certain that her rib cage would crack at any moment. Her breath came fast as she stared through the small gap in the curtain, her feet rooted to the spot. Oh, once again, she had been a fool!

Yet back in the ballroom, she had felt tears coming and found herself unable to hold them back. Certain her parents as well as her betrothed would not look kindly upon them, Beatrice had been left with no choice but to flee from the ballroom. She had not known where to go but ran blindly along the corridors. For a moment, she had thought herself safe, a reprieve from the drone of the many voices in the ballroom, certain all she needed was a few moments to gather her wits before she could return.

Then, however, voices had drawn near—men's voices!—and every muscle in Beatrice's body had tightened in terror. Suddenly, being found crying in the ballroom had not been the worst she could have imagined. Indeed, if she were found out here in the darkened corridor with a group of young men...

Beatrice pinched her eyes shut, unwilling to imagine her parents' reaction, Mr. Carter's reaction, the ton's reaction.

And then another voice joined the others.

A voice that had rang with vague familiarity.

Holding her breath, Beatrice bit her lip, listening intently, trying to make out the words as a distant murmur drifted to her ears. For a second, she wondered if perhaps she could slip away while the others—whoever they were—were distracted. Yet those who faced the alcove would easily spot her if she were to try to make her escape. And so, despite her trembling nerves, Beatrice remained where she was.

“So, why are you trying to get rid of us?” one of the young men inquired of the man with the familiar voice, who stood with his back to the alcove, his face hidden from her. “Let me guess. You are in the company of a young lady and wish for a moment of intimate solitude with her. Am I correct?”

At the man’s suggestion, Beatrice’s hands curled into the curtain of the alcove, her body trembling with outrage and fear. And then, to her even greater shock, the man with the familiar voice nodded.

Beatrice stared at him. How could she not? She did not even know who he was. She did not even—

Her mind reeled when she—rather belatedly!—realized that the man had to be aware of her presence in the alcove. Indeed, had he not glanced over his shoulder at one point? Beatrice could not quite recall, her memory too blurred by the rampaging emotions racing through her body at present. Indeed, he had to be aware of her presence. Why else would he have confirmed the other man’s words? Only why had he done so? What motive could he have?

And then the group of young men turned away and headed back toward the ballroom. Beatrice exhaled a breath of relief while her gaze fixed upon the man with a familiar voice... or rather the back of his head. If only she could—

The moment he turned, Beatrice recognized him.

It was none other than Viscount Hawthorne, Lord and Lady Whickerton's son, the man who had been so insistent upon making her acquaintance the night before. What could he possibly want? Beatrice wondered in panic. Then she shrank back, deeper into the alcove, when Lord Hawthorne took a step toward it.

"It is all right, Miss Hartley," he said in a soft voice, barely louder than a whisper. Again, he cast a look over his shoulder, back toward the ballroom. "It is safe to come out."

For a long moment, Beatrice merely stared at him through the gap in the curtain, unable to move. Yet as she slowly drew air into her body, taking one deep breath after another, she realized she did not have a choice. After all, she could not spend the rest of the evening here. Other people could come upon her. Her parents would eventually miss her. All kinds of things could happen that would see her ruined. No, she had to step outside. At least, for the moment, there was only Lord Hawthorne there.

Tears still clung to Beatrice's eyes as she slipped through the curtain back into the hallway. Her gaze remained fixed upon Lord Hawthorne's face, trying to gauge his intention. He had to know what would happen if they were found here together.

Alone.

Why was he still here? What did he want? She wished he would simply leave so she could return to the ballroom. At the same time, Beatrice knew that she was far from presentable. If she returned now, everyone would see her distress, her heartbreak, her despair. No, somehow, she had to calm herself first. Yet how could she do so with him watching her?

"I know a place where no one will find you," Lord Hawthorne said suddenly, his voice still soft, his words barely making themselves heard. "Come. I'll show you."

He took a step to the side and gestured for her to follow him.

For a moment, Beatrice hesitated. Yet when Lord Hawthorne moved down the hallway, her feet carried her after him as though of their own volition. After all, what choice did she have? She could not stay here, and neither could she return to the ballroom like this. Even in this very moment, Beatrice could feel fresh sobs rising in her throat, her lips pressing together so hard to keep them at bay she was certain she would see them bruised.

Silently, they followed the long corridor and then turned a corner. Farther down on the right side, Lord Hawthorne opened a door and then beckoned her inside. Again, Beatrice hesitated yet for only a moment. Then she stepped after him, her eyes sweeping over the darkened chamber, recognizing it as a small sitting room in the back of the house, tall windows allowing a glimpse of the star-spangled night sky.

As the door closed, Beatrice spun around to find Lord Hawthorne on the inside. Perhaps she had been a fool to think that he would leave. “What do you want?” Beatrice demanded, her hands trembling as she eased backward.

At the tone of suspicion of her voice, Lord Hawthorne flinched, the shocked expression that came to his face reassuring Beatrice even more than the words he spoke next. “I assure you, you’ve nothing to fear for me. I am merely here to stand guard, to keep you safe.” He retreated a step until he stood with his back to the door, as far away as possible from her.

For a long moment, they looked at one another, and then Beatrice nodded. “Thank you,” she murmured because it felt appropriate to say so. Despite her suspicions, he had done nothing to harm her. Had he truly sent those men away in order to keep her safe? Had that been his motive? Did gentlemen exist, after all?

“If need be,” Lord Hawthorne said with a nod toward a wooden panel on the right, “if

anyone comes upon us here, you can escape through there. It is a secret passage that leads back out into the corridor farther down, closer to the ballroom. No one will see you. I shall stay behind and distract whoever might come.” He still stood with his back pressed to the door, an almost apologetic expression in his eyes as though any of what had happened tonight was his fault.

Beatrice nodded in acknowledgment of his words. “Thank you,” she said once more, for there was truly nothing else to be said, was there?

A stifling stillness fell over the chamber, and Beatrice felt her limbs grow heavy... and her heart as well. Her eyes closed, and for a brief moment, she swayed upon her feet.

“Are you all right?” came Lord Hawthorne’s concerned voice. “Perhaps you ought to seat yourself.”

When Beatrice opened her eyes, she saw he had taken a step toward her, his gaze watchful, his expression concerned. “I... I hardly know,” Beatrice admitted with a heavy sigh. Tears welled up in her eyes once more, and she felt them spill over and stream down her face, more chasing upon their heels. Instantly, she spun around, turning her back to him, not wishing him to see. Heavy sobs rose from her throat, and Beatrice all but sank forward, resting her forehead against the wall, her hands balled into fists as they came to rest against the smooth wallpaper.

“Please, what can I do?” Lord Hawthorne whispered, such a pleading and almost desperate tone in his voice that for a moment Beatrice thought he was the one in pain.

“Leave,” she managed to say, unable to move, frozen in this moment. “Please, leave me alone. Please, go.”

One moment stretched into another before Lord Hawthorne spoke again. “I’m sorry,

but I cannot do that. Please, let me help you.”

Beatrice heard him move closer, the sound of his footsteps sending an icy chill down her back. Perhaps she was being foolish again, allowing herself to be trapped in a situation like this with a man she did not know, alone and far away from the ballroom. She remembered the night Eugene had asked her for a stroll beneath the stars. She had been in love with him from the first moment they had met, and so it had been only too easy to ignore that voice of warning in her head. The cold had soon driven them back inside, and somehow, they had found their way to a darkened, empty chamber. It had been a ball at his townhouse, and he had assured her that no one would find them. He had spoken the most wonderful words, whispered them to her, and Beatrice had felt swept away by the moment, by the love in her heart.

Now Beatrice knew that her mother had been right all along. Apparently, young men did say whatever was necessary in order to seduce a young lady they desired. And it had been no more than desire, had it? He did not care for her. Not truly. Not beyond that one night.

“Who broke your heart?”

At the sound of Lord Hawthorne’s voice, Beatrice spun around, finding him standing only two arm’s length away. “How do you...?” Wiping the tears from her cheeks, she exhaled a deep breath. “How do you know?”

A sad smile came to his face, and he shrugged. “It is easy to see,” he replied, holding her gaze gently. “Is it Lord Strumpton?” Beatrice started, and he added, “I saw the way you looked at him, the way he ignored you.” As he spoke, the words seemed to cause him almost physical pain, the expression upon his face anguished.

Panic seized Beatrice’s heart. If Lord Hawthorne had seen so easily, did everyone else know as well?

“Do not worry,” Lord Hawthorne assured her. “No one knows, and I promise I will not breathe a word to anyone of what happened here tonight.” He held her gaze, and Beatrice was shocked to realize that she believed him.

“Thank you,” she said again, knowing that these two little words fell far short of what he had done for her tonight.

He nodded in acknowledgment. “Do you wish to speak about it?” he asked carefully, clearly having no intention of leaving her alone.

Oddly enough, Beatrice no longer wanted him to leave. Somehow, his presence eased her breathing, made her feel less alone. And as unwise as it was, yes, Beatrice did want to speak about it. “I cannot.” She closed her eyes and once more turned away.

Behind her, Lord Hawthorne inhaled a slow breath, and she all but sensed his conflict. “I should call him out,” he said unexpectedly, anger in his voice.

Whirling around, Beatrice stared at him. “What?” She shook her head, trying to clear it, wondering if she had misunderstood. “You cannot!”

Lord Hawthorne’s eyes narrowed, and he inched a step toward her. “Why not? He hurt you. I know he did.” A muscle in his jaw tensed, and Beatrice marveled at the anger she saw in his face. Why did he care?

“He did,” she finally admitted, and speaking those words out loud somehow did ease the ache in her heart. “Yet I cannot allow you to risk your life for me. It would be foolish, and it would change nothing.” She held his gaze and saw his shoulders slump, his anger fading, replaced by something more rational, something gentler.

Lord Hawthorne’s eyes blazed beneath the moonlight, a blue flame of intensity smoldering deep within. Beatrice could read a fierce determination in his gaze that

was tempered only by an unexpected compassion. Tall and proud, he stood before her, but with no sense of superiority. In that moment, he appeared to Beatrice like a knight of days gone by, brandishing his sword and ready to fight for her honor. “Perhaps not,” he said in reply to her objection. “Yet no one has the right to hurt you.” His gaze remained fixed upon hers. “No one.”

Beatrice felt her lips begin to tremble, tears once more blurring her vision. “It is not only his fault,” she said honestly. “I allowed myself to be fooled. I was gullible and careless.” She closed her eyes for a moment, then she moved over to the windows, her gaze seeking the stars’ faint light. “I should’ve known better.” She hung her head, and her tears dripped down onto her folded hands.

Again, one moment stretched into another before Lord Hawthorne spoke again. “Why are you to marry Mr. Carter? It is not your wish, is it?”

My wish? Beatrice thought, remembering the small image of a shooting star Francine had painted for her. What would be my wish?

Slowly, Beatrice turned to meet Lord Hawthorne’s eyes. “It is not.”

He nodded, looking down at her. “Why then?”

Beatrice knew she should not answer. In fact, she should not remain here with him a moment longer. Still, her feet would not move. Her lips, though, did.

Chapter Eight

HEART TO HEART

Tears glistened in her eyes and stained her cheeks, and the way Miss Hartley stood before him made Charles fear she might crumble to the floor at any moment. She looked so broken and hurt, her strength waning, that every cell in his body ached to protect her, to guard her from the ugliness of the world, from those who would seek to betray her.

“I am with child.” The moment the words left her lips, her eyes widened in shock, and her hands flew up to cover her mouth as though the movement could draw them back and hide them from him.

Utterly focused on her, Charles felt his own emotions delayed. At first, he simply heard her words, then slowly he understood their meaning. Yet it took a heartbeat or two for him to experience a measure of shock as well as disappointment and anger.

And... jealousy.

Of course, he was angry that Lord Strumpton had taken advantage of her so cruelly. Of course, he felt disappointment because a child meant marriage, did it not? Was that not precisely why her parents had rushed to secure another match? And... yes, a part of him loathed the thought that another had won her heart.

Still staring at him, Miss Hartley made an agonizing sound deep in her throat before her knees gave out. In the blink of an eye, she slumped down, her eyes closing as

though in defeat, in surrender.

Charles experienced that moment delayed once more, to his senses it was as though time had slowed, allowing him to see and hear and feel everything.

Allowing him to close that last step between them and pull her into his arms before she hit the floor.

Gently, he picked her up, marveling at the almost weightless feeling of her in his arms, and settled her upon the settee. He sat down beside her, surprised when she did not pull away but rested her head on his shoulder. Her eyes closed as tears rushed down her cheeks. Sobs fell from her lips, and he felt her fingers curl into his jacket, holding on, desperation clinging to her like a heavy blanket.

For a long time, they simply sat there, and Charles held her as she wept. He murmured words of comfort, doubting that she had heard any of them. Yet he wished for her to know that she was not alone. No matter what he would have to do to see her smile, Charles knew he would not hesitate. One day, he promised himself, he would see a true, genuine, utterly bewitching smile come to her face.

Indeed, never had he seen her smile. Never had he heard her laugh. He had only met her the day before, and yet she already meant the world to him.

Charles almost laughed at the notion. Even in his addled mind, it struck him as ludicrous. Yet there were people who fell in love within the space of mere moments, were there not? Indeed, his parents were those kind of people. To this day, his father delighted in telling them the story of how their mother had whispered to her best friend only moments after first laying eyes on him that he would be the one she would marry. She had known. But how? Perhaps no one quite knew how. Perhaps it simply did not matter, as long as one was certain.

“I thought he loved me as well,” Beatrice murmured once her sobs had died down; yet she did not retreat, her head still resting against his shoulder. “He said so. He said we would have a future together.” A heavy sigh drifted from her lips. “Yet truth be told, he never spoke of marriage. I simply assumed I suppose. I...” Another heavy sigh. “When I told him that... I was with child, he said he was obligated to marry another. He said... it broke his heart.”

Charles’s arm tightened upon her shoulders, holding her closer, anger welling up once more. How dare Lord Strumpton treat a sweet girl like Miss Hartley like that?

“He lied,” Beatrice continued, the tone in her voice distant, as though she was barely aware of his presence. “He was not heartbroken. I could see it in his face.” She shifted, raised her chin and looked up at him. “He never loved me. I was a fool to believe him.”

Her eyes closed, and a deep breath passed her lips. Then she straightened, and Charles was forced to remove his arm from around her shoulders. Her eyes shone in a deep blue, overshadowed with pain and anguish. He also saw a touch of shyness, of reproach, as though she felt ashamed for having allowed him to hold her. “Now, I am to marry Mr. Carter.” Her lower lip trembled, and she folded her hands in her lap. “He... He made it quite clear that I was to do nothing that would bring shame to his family.” A slightly hysterical chuckle fell from her lips as her gaze moved from Charles to the closed door and back. “Quite obviously, I have a talent for finding trouble.”

Pushing to her feet, Miss Hartley swayed briefly, so that Charles jumped up, holding out his hands to her. “No, I’m all right. Thank you.” She tried to smile at him, yet it fell far short of the kind of smile Charles hoped to see. “Will you... will you please help me return to the ballroom?” She wiped the tears from her eyes and cheeks, then she cleared her throat, struggling to regain her composure.

Charles knew that he simply ought to do as she had asked. Yet if he let her go now, he would lose her for good. She would marry Mr. Carter and spend the rest of her life in misery. He was certain of it. No, he had come here tonight on a mission of his own, and he would see it through.

Nothing had changed. His heart still beat for her, and that was all that mattered.

“Marry me,” Charles blurted out without preamble, without any sort of lead-up or explanation.

Miss Hartley stilled, her eyes going wide as she stared into his face. “Pardon me?” she murmured, her eyes blinking furiously as though she wondered if she was even truly awake. “What did you say?”

Charles swallowed hard, straightening his shoulders. “I asked you to marry me.” He held her gaze, needing her to know that he meant what he had said.

Another heartbeat passed, and Miss Hartley continued to stare at him. “You cannot mean that,” she exclaimed then, shaking her head in denial. “No, you cannot.” Her gaze narrowed, suspicion there now. “What are you playing at?” Almost fearful, she backed away.

Charles held up his hands to show that he meant her no harm. “I do mean every word I said,” he said slowly. “I wish to marry you.”

“You cannot. I just told you I—” She broke off, her eyes unblinking. “Why would you...?” Again, she shook her head.

“Because you deserve better,” Charles assured her, afraid that she would deny him, knowing deep in his bones that if he were to allow her to walk out of his life, he would regret it forever. “I promise, if you agree to marry me, I vow to keep you safe,

you and your child, and to do my utmost to see you happy again.” He inhaled a deep breath and took a step backward. “Of course, it is your decision. Though I urge you to think on it. Please.”

As though lightning had struck her, Miss Hartley stared at him, disbelief in her eyes. Yet there was no more fear, no more suspicion, and Charles was grateful for it. He had done what he came here to do, now he could only hope that she would accept him.

Chapter Nine

A MOMENT OF HOPE

“ You need to stop walking off on your own,” Beatrice’s mother chided her upon their return home that night. Of course, her absence had been noted. “We had a hard time convincing Mr. Carter,” she exchanged a look with her husband, “that you were not doing anything untoward, that you were merely in the powder room, possibly delayed because of all the many guests in attendance tonight.” Her mother’s gaze drilled into hers. “You need to pull yourself together, Beatrice. All our future depends on it.”

“Yes, Mother,” Beatrice replied before hurrying up the stairs to her chamber. More than anything, she wished to be alone, her emotions hung by a thread the very moment people crowded around her.

With a heavy sigh, she closed the door and leaned against it. Even now, Beatrice could not believe that Lord Hawthorne had offered to marry her. Yet in her mind’s eye, she still saw the honest expression upon his face. Indeed, he had meant what he had said, had he not?

Beginning to pace, Beatrice reminded herself that she ought never have told him the truth. Indeed, he had caught her in a moment of weakness, and now he knew her darkest secret. If he wished, he could ruin her. Yet instead, he had offered to save her.

Beatrice was certain that any other man would have been appalled to learn her secret. After all, Lord Hawthorne could not have guessed what it was when he had found her

in tears. Who knew what he thought had upset her? Still, recalling the moment she had foolishly shared her secret, Beatrice knew she had not seen judgment or disgust upon his face. No, there had been fury there, outrage. Only they had not been directed at her but at Lord Strumpton... because he had dared hurt her.

Again and again, Beatrice's mind replayed the moments she had shared with Lord Hawthorne, and even when her head finally hit the pillow, she was no closer to knowing what to do. She could not even contemplate it, for her mind continued to argue that he could not have possibly meant what he had said. Even if he had in that moment, come morning, he would change his mind. He was the heir to his father's title, and he could not marry a woman who carried another man's child. No gentleman would do so.

No lord would do so.

"Are you already sleeping?"

At Francine's whispered voice, Beatrice flinched. She had not even heard the door open, nor her sister tiptoe across the floor toward her bed. Yet when her eyes flew open, Francine stood right beside her, her eyes glowing in the dark like two stars. "What are you doing out of bed again?"

Francine shrugged and then nimbly scrambled up onto the bed, slipping under the blanket beside Beatrice. "I heard Mother and Father arguing," she said simply. "What happened? Did you do something to upset them?" Eagerness rang in her voice, and Beatrice knew her sister was hoping for a good story.

Pulling Francine into her arms, Beatrice replied, "No, nothing happened. It was a ball like any other."

Francine giggled. "You're lying," she declared triumphantly as she scrambled back

up into a sitting position. “Tell me. Tell me.”

Exhausted, Beatrice swung her right arm over her eyes. “I felt sad again tonight,” Beatrice said honestly, “and so I walked away from the ballroom to be by myself for a bit. Mother and Father did not like that.”

“And?”

“And what?”

“And then? What happened then?” Francine pressed, her hands reaching out to pull Beatrice’s arm away from her face. “I can hear in your voice that there’s more. Tell me.”

Beatrice chuckled. Somehow, her little sister always made her feel a little better. “Well, if you must know,” she murmured into the half-dark, “a... a friend asked me to marry him.” Briefly, Beatrice wondered if the word friend was appropriate. After all, she had met Lord Hawthorne only the day before. Yet the way he had acted today had clearly revealed him as a friend, an ally, someone who stood at her side.

Excitedly, Francine clapped her hands together. “Oh, what friend? Do I know him?” Then she frowned. “I thought you were supposed to marry Father’s old friend.” She paused then her frown deepened. “Is your friend old, too?”

Beatrice chuckled again. “No, he is not.” From the look of him, he was merely a few years older than her.

“What’s he like? Is he nice?”

Beatrice nodded. “Yes, he is nice. He helped me tonight and kept me safe. And he...” Staring up at the dark ceiling above her bed, Beatrice remembered the look in his

eyes. “He acted very honorably.” She grinned at her sister. “Like a knight from the ancient stories.”

Again, Francine clapped her hands together in delight. “He sounds great. Marry him. I would if I were you.”

Marry him . Francine’s words continued to echo through Beatrice’s mind all night. She barely slept a wink, and when morning came, she was still uncertain about what to do. Truth be told, Lord Hawthorne was a kind man and... and she liked him. Yet did that give her the right to be selfish? Would he not eventually come to regret his generous offer?

Knowing that time was short, Beatrice decided to put this question to her parents. And so, with Francine painting in the small studio her parents had set up for her, Beatrice forced herself to step into her father’s study after breakfast. Her mother was there as well, and from the few words she overheard, she knew they were discussing her upcoming marriage to Mr. Carter.

“There is something I need to speak to you about,” Beatrice said outright, closing the door firmly behind her. “There’s something I would appreciate your advice on.”

Her parents frowned, a touch of apprehension upon both their faces. Clearly, they were expecting nothing good.

Was what she had to say good news? Honestly, Beatrice could not say. “Last night, at the ball, I received a proposal.”

“A proposal?” her mother exclaimed, exchanging a rather dumbfounded expression with her father. “From Lord Strumpton?”

Beatrice shook her head. “No, not from him. From... someone else.”

“Who?” her father inquired, seating himself on the edge of his desk, his gaze fixed upon her. “Who would propose to you without speaking to your parents first?” He looked at his wife. “This sounds very untoward.”

“I do not wish to say,” Beatrice replied, uncertain why she was keeping Lord Hawthorne’s identity a secret. Was it perhaps because a small part of her still doubted him? Indeed, would she soon receive a letter informing her that he had made a mistake? It was far from unthinkable.

Her mother’s jaw dropped. “Why?” Her gaze narrowed, deep suspicion in her eyes. “Was it someone... disreputable?”

Beatrice shook her head. “No, he is a most respectable man, heir to an earldom.” In a few words, Beatrice explained to her parents how she had first met this respectable man two nights ago, how kind he had been and how distraught she had felt. She told them honestly that she had revealed her secret to him and how he had reacted.

“You’re a fool!” her mother huffed, spinning in circles, not quite knowing where to go with her anger. “He could ruin us! He could ruin us all!”

“That was far from wise, my dear,” Beatrice’s father agreed, shaking his head at her, clearly disappointed. “I hope you know that.”

Beatrice nodded, wringing her hands. “I do. I assure you. I do. Yet,” she looked from her mother to her father, “what am I to do? He is kind and—”

“I’ll tell you what to do,” her mother interrupted, her right forefinger lifted in warning. “You will wed Mr. Carter. Do you hear me? And you will tell this respectable man that you cannot marry him.”

Beatrice closed her eyes, surprised how heavy her heart felt. “But why?”

“Don’t be foolish again,” her mother snapped. “He probably did not mean it anyhow. What gentleman in his right mind offers to marry a woman carrying another man’s child?” She scoffed. “Besides, marrying Mr. Carter will ensure that your reputation remains intact. As long as a scandal is avoided, what does it matter who you marry?”

“Your mother is right,” her father agreed, his expression tense. “Mr. Carter was kind enough to agree to my request. We cannot dishonor his generosity by refusing him now. Do you understand?”

Beatrice nodded. “Yes, I understand.” Yet deep down, Beatrice knew that the reason she could not marry Lord Hawthorne was not her reputation or the risk to it if he were to change his mind. No, it was because he deserved better. Was that not what he had said to her the night before? Indeed, it was. And so did he. He deserved someone who loved him with all her heart, and if she allowed him to do this for her now, he would undoubtedly come to regret it one day.

Still, for a moment, it had felt good to have hope.

Chapter Ten

THE MEANING OF LOVE

“T here will never be snow, will there?” Lizzie pouted, arms crossed in front of her little chest as she glared at the gray skies outside the windows. “I want snow.” She turned to look over her shoulder at him, as though Charles could simply snap his fingers and make it happen.

If only , he thought. “Patience,” he counseled his little sister as well as himself. “Good things will come to those who wait.”

The scrunched-up expression upon Lizzie’s face told him quite clearly that she did not care for his advice. With another disappointed huff, she left the drawing room, grumbling under her breath.

“You look distracted today,” Charles’s mother remarked from her seat by the fireplace. “Is there anything on your mind?”

Somehow, Charles could not shake the feeling that his mother already knew. “I asked Miss Hartley to marry me,” he blurted out, once again not bothering to hide anything from his mother. She probably truly knew already, and he also cherished her advice.

“You did what?” came his father’s shocked voice from the doorway. His eyes were wide, and after a moment, he began shaking his head from side to side. “Surely, I must have misunderstood you. You couldn’t possibly have...” As he moved closer, his gaze moved back and forth between his wife and his son.

Charles straightened, aware of the amused curiosity in his mother's gaze. "I assure you; you did not misunderstand. I offered to marry Miss Hartley last night."

His father raked his hands through his hair, still staring at him. "Why? Why after only meeting her the day before? Why the rush?" He glanced at his wife, who sat comfortably in her chair, curiously observing everything.

Charles exhaled a deep breath. "You must give me your word that you will not share what I'm about to say with anyone." He looked from his father to his mother.

While his mother did not hesitate to provide her promise, his father frowned, suspicion coming to his eyes. Then, though, he sighed and nodded. "Very well. You have my word."

Charles swallowed. "It is as I suspected," he told his parents. "Miss Hartley is to marry Mr. Carter in order to prevent a scandal." He gritted his teeth, seeing the tension upon his father's face grow. "She's with child."

For a moment, Charles feared his father might explode, his face turning a shade of dark red that looked alarming. However, before he could say or do anything, Charles's mother simply asked, "Is the child Lord Strumpton's?"

"It is. She thought herself on the brink of matrimony and so..." He shrugged.

His father exhaled a deep breath then met his eyes. "Charles, I can see that you care for her, but that is not a reason to marry someone. Surely you must know this."

"I am not a child," Charles insisted, knowing very well that he was acting irrationally. Yet he could not help himself. Neither could he explain his actions in any way that would convince his father. Charles knew so. "I... I love her," he finally said, feeling an odd rush of warmth well up in his chest at saying so out loud. Indeed, he had

known from the first moment, and yet speaking the words somehow felt different.

His father laughed, a shocked sound, not one meant to ridicule. “How can you love her? You don’t even know her.” He shook his head. “And what of her? Does she love you?”

Charles gritted his teeth, knowing his answer only provided his father with further argument.

“I saw the way she kept looking at Lord Strumpton,” his father replied, his voice now gentler. “She cares for him, does she not? And she would marry him if only he were to propose.” He moved closer and placed his hands upon Charles’s shoulders, meeting his eyes. “You are not her choice. Please, understand. Do not throw your life away. It is a miserable fate to be married to a woman who loves another.”

Charles swallowed hard. “Perhaps... Perhaps her heart will change.”

“And what if not?” his father challenged. “And what of your heart? What if your heart changes? What if you sacrifice your life for this girl only to realize that what you feel right now is only an infatuation? You are young. How can you even know what love is?”

A spark of resentment flashed in Charles’s heart. Yet before he could say anything, he heard his mother chuckling.

“Something amusing, dear?” Charles’s father asked, looking at his wife through slightly narrowed eyes.

She smiled at him. “Indeed, darling, you are most amusing.”

Relaxing, Charles grinned and faced his father once more, all resentment now gone.

“Tell me, Father, how long did it take you to know that you loved Mother?” He lifted his brows challengingly.

Suddenly tightlipped, his father shook his head, then exchanged another one of those meaningful looks with his wife. “I don’t want you to get hurt,” he mumbled on a sigh, looking from his wife to his son. “Of course, though, this is your choice.”

A knock came on the door, and their butler entered, carrying a silver platter with a letter upon it. “For you, my lord,” he said, holding it out to Charles.

Inhaling a deep breath, Charles took it, his hands trembling. He did not recognize the handwriting. How could he? In his heart, though, he knew this letter was from Miss Hartley.

Lord Hawthorne,

I thank you for your kindness, yet I am afraid I must refuse your most generous offer. It would not be right for me to place this burden upon you. Still, I shall never forget the kindness you showed me.

Yours sincerely,

Beatrice Hartley

In a single heartbeat, all hope vanished, and Charles sank heavily into one of the armchairs. He did not even resist when his father took the letter from his limp fingers.

“At least the girl shows some sense,” his father remarked dryly, then passed the letter to his wife. “I am deeply sorry for your heartbreak, Son, but I cannot pretend that I am not relieved at this outcome.” He stepped closer and placed a hand upon Charles’s shoulder, squeezing it affectionately. “I believe, someday soon, you shall come to

understand.”

Charles hung his head, unwilling to listen to his father’s words. Indeed, he much preferred the gentle regret he saw in his mother’s eyes.

Chapter Eleven

A CHOICE OF ONE'S OWN

Standing in her bedchamber, Beatrice watched as her mother instructed the maids on what to pack for their imminent departure to the country. In only two days, Beatrice would find herself married to Mr. Carter. Everything had been arranged, a special license procured through the influence of a friend. Still, everything felt not quite real, as though Beatrice somehow drifted upon the edge of waking from a dream.

As hard as she tried, though, she remained stuck in it.

“Pardon me, my lady.” Their butler stood in the doorway, addressing her mother. “There is a visitor downstairs, asking to speak to Miss Hartley.”

Confused, Beatrice looked at her mother, a matching frown drawing down her brows as well. “A visitor?” her mother questioned, casting a suspicious glance in Beatrice’s direction. “Who is it?”

“Lady Whickerton.”

Beatrice almost flinched at the mention of her name and barely managed to meet her mother’s eyes when she stepped toward her. “Do you know what this is about?” her mother inquired with a frown.

Beatrice shook her head, unable to conjure any words whatsoever.

Her mother sighed. "Well, I suppose we better not keep her waiting. Come along." Together, they moved downstairs and into the drawing room where Lady Whickerton stood by the window, gazing out at the busy street. As they entered, she turned to smile at them.

"Lady Whickerton, how good to see you," Beatrice's mother greeted the other woman. "I admit I'm quite surprised by your visit. Would you care for some tea?"

Lady Whickerton shook her head. "That is too kind of you. However, I admit I must ask you for a moment to speak with your daughter in private." Beatrice's mother's eyes widened. "I assure you, you need not be concerned. It is a most... pleasant matter."

The moment Lady Whickerton smiled at her, as though they were in each other's confidence, Beatrice was certain she was about to faint.

Beatrice's mother hesitated, considering Lady Whickerton's request. Then, however, she nodded. "Very well." With another last look in Beatrice's direction, she left the drawing room, closing the door behind her.

"Come, my dear. Sit with me." Lady Whickerton seated herself in one of the armchairs, and after a moment of hesitation, Beatrice chose the other. "I came here today to speak to you. My son informed me of his proposal and also of your rejection of it."

Beatrice felt the air knocked out of her lungs by Lady Whickerton's direct approach. Indeed, she would never have expected Lord Hawthorne to speak so openly to his parents. Yet had she, Beatrice, not done so also?

"Is there a question in your words somewhere?" Beatrice inquired, uncertain what had brought Lady Whickerton here today.

The lady smiled, clearly not offended. “Indeed, there is.” She settled herself more comfortably in her chair, and Beatrice felt her pale blue eyes upon her features. “Why did you refuse my son?”

Beatrice inhaled a deep breath. What could she possibly say without betraying her secret? And why on earth did Lady Whickerton care? Had she not been shocked to learn that her son had proposed to a woman he had met only two days prior?

“You need not be worried, my dear,” Lady Whickerton continued when Beatrice remained quiet. “My son shared his reasons for proposing to you.” A meaningful expression rested in the lady’s eyes, and Beatrice gasped, realizing that she knew.

“He... he told you I...?” Words failed Beatrice.

Lady Whickerton leaned forward in her chair, her eyes kind. “Please, do not be alarmed. I promise I shall not breathe a word of this to anyone.”

Beatrice’s lips thinned. “Your son promised me the same,” she replied, disappointment heavy in her voice. Had she truly misjudged him? It seemed no one these days could be trusted.

“Do not be angry with him,” Lady Whickerton said gently. “We as a family never keep secrets from one another, only from those outside our home.” A warm smile came to her face. “He did not mean to betray you. He simply knew that your secret would be safe with us.”

“Why are you here?” Indeed, Beatrice thought it puzzling that Lady Whickerton spoke to her so kindly.

“As I said before, I am here to find out why you refused my son.” Lady Whickerton regarded her curiously. “How deeply do you still feel for Lord Strumpton?”

Caught off guard by the lady's direct words, Beatrice shrugged. "I thought him to be an entirely different man. Honestly, I don't quite know how I feel right now." The words simply poured from her lips, not unlike they had the night before in the presence of the lady's son. What was it about this family?

"And my son?" Lady Whickerton inquired. "Do you care about him?"

Beatrice shrugged. "I barely know him," she said honestly. "Yet... I know that he's one of a kind." She met the lady's gaze. "I've never met anyone like him." She closed her eyes. "Had I encountered anyone else that night..." Beatrice heaved a deep sigh. "Why do you wish to know this?"

"Because my son is determined to marry you," Lady Whickerton replied, and again those pale blue eyes of hers seemed to drill into Beatrice's soul. "Should you wish to accept him, I'm here to assure you that you have my blessing."

Utterly dumbfounded, Beatrice stared at Lady Whickerton, wondering what mother would support her son in something like this. Could she perhaps have misunderstood her? "I already sent my answer."

Lady Whickerton nodded. "Yes, you did. However, I am here to ensure that... your choice was your own. You see, my dear, what is most important in life is that we always remain true to ourselves. Others may advise you, but in the end, this is your life. Your choice." A warm smile came to her face. "As it is my son's. I would never dream of taking that from him."

Tears misted Beatrice's eyes, and she wondered what it might feel like to have such unconditional support from her parents.

"I can see that this is difficult for you, my dear. However, as I understand it, time is of the essence. You are to be married soon, correct?"

Beatrice nodded.

“Tonight, an hour before midnight,” Lady Whickerton stated calmly, her pale eyes imploring. “I shall send an unmarked carriage to your back gate. You have until then to decide what you want.” She rose to her feet and on her way to the door, paused beside Beatrice’s chair. “Forget what other people want, what others want you to do. Only ask after your own heart. It shall not lead you astray.”

And then Lady Whickerton was gone, and Beatrice remained behind, completely at a loss. Her sister’s innocent words, Marry him , still echoed through her head, and she knew that the thought of marrying her father’s old friend broke her heart. Of course, it would. He did not want her, neither did she want him. With Mr. Carter, there was no chance of finding love, eventually. With Charles, though, there was.

With him, there was a chance, and yet Beatrice knew that choosing Charles would be selfish. After all, a chance was not a guarantee.

Chapter Twelve

IN THE DARK OF NIGHT

Shadows fell over the world as Charles stood in his bedchamber, still one moment and then pacing the next, his mind circling, always returning to one thought in particular: Miss Hartley would be married soon. She would be married soon, and not to him. Perhaps in a day or two or three. In truth, it did not matter. What did matter was that she would be lost to him.

Never before had Charles felt such an agonizing pain deep in his chest. He could barely keep upon his feet, the urge to sink to the floor and weep almost overwhelming. At the same time, though, energy hummed in every muscle, frustration slipping into anger, making him move, making him pace, unable to rid himself of this buzzing hum. What was he to do?

Nothing. There was nothing he could do. She had made her choice, and she had decided against a life with him. Perhaps he ought not be surprised. They did not know each other after all. Yet Charles could not shake that overwhelming certainty that with time they would, and that with time, they would be happy. Was he a fool to believe so?

His father would certainly say so.

A knock upon his door roused Charles from his gloomy thoughts, and with a frown, he turned toward it, wondering who would seek him out this late. Quick strides carried him forward, and he opened the door, surprised to find his mother on the other

side.

“Do you have a moment?” she inquired, those watchful eyes of hers tracing every line upon his face.

Charles nodded and stepped aside to allow her entry. “Of course, Mother.” Closing the door, he watched her walk over to the window before turning to look at him. “What is it? Is something wrong?” For a moment, his heart paused in his chest and his thoughts inevitably drifted to Lizzie.

Soon, they would have to leave England again. Her health demanded it. And Charles never thought that he would be sad to leave it behind. Now, though, the world seemed an utterly different place.

“All is well,” his mother assured him, and Charles exhaled a tense breath. “I have come here to speak to you about Miss Hartley.”

Charles paused in midstep, his eyes narrowing. “Miss Hartley?” He shook his head. “Why?” He cleared his throat, his gaze falling, dropping to the floor beneath his feet, the weight upon his shoulder suddenly increasing. “There’s nothing to say, is there?”

A soft chuckle drifted from his mother’s lips. “Oh, there’s always something to say,” she remarked, amusement tinging her voice. Lifting his head, Charles regarded her most curiously. “Do you care for her?” his mother asked simply.

Taken aback, Charles frowned, moving another step closer. He could not shake the feeling that his mother knew something he did not. “Why would you ask me that? Have I not made it abundantly clear?”

His mother nodded. “So, you still wish to marry her?”

A tingle of excitement trailed down Charles's spine, and he all but held his breath. "Of course, I do. Why do you ask?" His eyes narrowed in suspicion, hope blossoming in his heart.

A deep smile came to his mother's face as she stepped toward him and grasped his hands, her pale blue eyes looking up into his. "All I ever wanted was to see you happy," she whispered, tears misting her eyes despite the smile that lingered. "This is your life, and these choices are your own. No one can make them for you." She cupped a hand to his cheek. "If she is your choice, then you have my blessing."

Staring at his mother, Charles felt dizzy, and he forced another breath down his lungs. "What are you saying?"

His mother took his hand and tugged him toward the window. There, she nodded toward a darkened carriage, unmarked, bare of any coat of arms, standing on the other side of the street, half-hidden in shadows. "Everything is arranged," she told him rather matter-of-factly, as though her interference had not suddenly changed his life. "It will take you to Gretna Green. I sent a messenger ahead to arrange for a quick wedding and a room at the local inn."

Charles could barely believe his ears. Words failed him completely as he stared down into his mother's face.

"Don't worry," she told him with a bit of a wicked grin. "I shall handle your father as well as Miss Hartley's parents." She squeezed his hands. "There's a bag by the front door with a few of your belongings packed. Take it and go." Her right eyebrow arched up just a tad. "If she is your choice."

Charles exhaled a long breath, his hands trembling, and he held his mother's hands tighter. "She is," he replied. In truth, there were countless things in life he was uncertain of; yet this one stirred no doubts within his chest. "She is."

His mother embraced him, holding him tightly for a moment. “Then go and be happy, the both of you.” Chuckling, she gave him a little push. “Be off. I’ll see you in a few days.”

Charles stumbled backwards toward the door, his gaze fixed upon his mother. Countless times, she had impressed him, for the stories he had heard about his parents’ courtship, about his mother securing the happiness of her oldest friend had always made her seem like some sort of fairytale creature granting wishes. As a boy, Charles had wholeheartedly believed that. Perhaps now, it was once again time to believe in fairytales. After all, there was always a way. Why on earth was he so surprised?

“Thank you,” he said, pausing in the doorway. “Thank you for everything.” Then he darted down the stairs to the ground floor, barely remembering to grab the bag his mother had had prepared for him, and dashed out the door toward the waiting carriage.

A stiff wind blew that night, its icy fingers raising goosebumps upon Charles’s skin. He shivered and pulled his coat tighter around his body as he approached the carriage, his heart pounding in his chest. Squinting his eyes, he tried and failed to glimpse Miss Hartley inside, wondering what she was thinking at this moment, what his mother had said to change her mind. He nodded to the coachman, who tipped his hat, and then opened the door.

The interior was dark, no lamp lit, as it was paramount to conceal their presence. Yet Charles’s eyes had grown accustomed to the half-dark of London’s streets, and he could make out the soft outline of her face. “Hello,” he forced from his lips, his throat dry as he climbed into the carriage, dropping the bag onto the seat beside him.

“Hello,” came Miss Hartley’s tentative reply, her voice trembling as much as his own.

Reaching out to close the door, Charles seated himself opposite her, and only a moment later, the carriage rumbled down the street.

Silence stretched between them, their ears attuned to the sounds from outside the carriage. It was the oddest feeling to be seated here together, shrouded in darkness, barely able to make out the other's face. Yet at the same time, they were on their way to be married. Charles felt compelled to speak, to say something to ease the tension. Yet try as he might, his mind could conjure nothing.

And so, the silence continued, grew thicker and heavier as the carriage's wheels kept turning, carrying them away from the life they had known toward a future they could not yet picture.

"Thank you," Miss Hartley said into the stillness. "Thank you for..." Even in the dark, Charles could see her shrug, no doubt overwhelmed as he was by these sudden events.

"There is no need," Charles assured her, grateful to have something to say even if it was nothing truly meaningful. "I assure you, I'm not being selfless." Indeed, he was doing this for himself as much as for her. He was doing this because not doing it would see his own life ruined, would see his own happiness snatched away. In truth, love could not be selfless, could it?

Again, silence stretched between them as they left London behind, heading north toward Scotland. Charles had never been there, as the climate of the northern countries was not beneficial to his sister's health.

"Please call me Charles," Charles blurted out when the silence once more became oppressive. "After all, we are to be husband and wife."

"Very well," Miss Hartley replied, and Charles thought to hear the touch of a smile in

her voice. “But only if you call me Beatrice.”

“Beatrice,” Charles repeated, delighting in the echo of her name. “Will you tell me a little about yourself? It feels a bit odd that we know almost nothing about one another.”

A sigh drifted from her lips, and Charles thought it rang more with relief than tension. “Yes, it does feel odd. Everything that has happened lately feels...” Again, she shrugged, the movement accompanied by another sigh. “I scarcely know how to find words.”

“I find myself quite overwhelmed as well,” Charles admitted, feeling the heavy boulder upon his chest slowly rise and lift away as he shared these open words with the woman he was to marry. “I never quite imagined our stay in England to take such a turn.” He chuckled. Of course, he had not. Who would have?

“That is not hard to believe,” Beatrice replied, her voice now lighter as well. “Well, what is there to tell you about me you do not already know?” She paused for a moment, and Charles remembered the intimate secrets she had shared with him only the night before.

“I have a little sister,” Beatrice began, a touch of laughter in her voice that told Charles that she cared about her sister as much as he cared about his own. “Her name is Francine, and she’s five years old. She loves to paint, and she’s quite good at it, especially for her age. She seems young, and yet sometimes there are moments when I think she’s a very old soul.” She paused, and Charles could not shake the feeling that there was more she wished to say but did not quite dare.

“In fact,” Beatrice continued with a chuckle, “she was the one who urged me to accept your proposal.”

“She was?” He sat back, feeling himself relax. “That is surprising. Do you always discuss your marriage proposals with your little sister?”

Beatrice laughed. “It might surprise you to hear it, but she has a very shrewd mind. Indeed, her advice on the matter of marriage was the best one I’ve received.” Again, she paused. “Perhaps aside from your mother’s.”

Laughing, Charles raked his hands through his hair. “Yes, my mother is a very... particular person. I can’t even quite say in what way. Yet she often surprises me.”

“She surprised me as well,” Beatrice admitted, a touch of seriousness back in her voice. “In my experience, mothers do not support their sons when they wish to marry women who...” She swallowed hard. “Women who carry another man’s child.”

Again, a heavy silence fell over them, and Charles raked his mind for what to say. A part of him wanted to blurt out that he loved her, that his mother had done what she had done in order to secure his happiness. And was that not precisely what parents ought to do for their children? Yet Charles sensed Beatrice was not yet ready to hear these words. Her heart still beat for Lord Strumpton, he reminded himself. He would need to be patient and be her friend first and foremost.

As they continued on through the night, Charles listened to the soft sounds of Beatrice’s breathing. At first, it sounded a bit strained, evidence of her own tense nerves. Then, however, it grew more relaxed, and he suspected she had fallen asleep. Indeed, her head seemed to drift forward ever so slightly. And then, when the carriage hit a hole in the road, Beatrice slumped forward.

Charles caught her in the nick of time before she could drop to the carriage floor. Oddly enough, she did not wake. She merely sighed and leaned into him, one hand upon his chest, her fingers curling into his coat.

For a moment, Charles ceased breathing, his gaze fixed upon her face hidden in shadows. Then he shifted gently, pulling her up and easing himself onto the seat beside her. He settled her in his embrace, her head coming to rest upon his shoulder, her hand still upon his chest as though it belonged there, right above his hammering heart.

In that moment, seated in a dark carriage with the woman he loved sleeping in his arms, Charles felt an overwhelming sense of being responsible for another's well-being and happiness. He silently vowed to protect her, to keep her safe, and do whatever necessary to make her smile.

For the rest of his life.

Chapter Thirteen

A TRUE SELF

Beatrice stirred in her sleep, feeling a slight swaying motion that seemed to come from deep within her. She remained still for a few seconds longer, her consciousness gradually shifting from the fog of sleep to the more tangible reality in which she found herself. A long moment passed as Beatrice struggled to form a coherent thought, her mind still foggy with sleep and confusion.

In that moment between sleeping and waking, Beatrice felt utterly disoriented, unable to account for the soft swaying motion that shook her gently. Distant sounds drifted into her mind, not helping to clear up the confusion but increasing it. She heard carriage wheels upon a dirt-packed road, the call of a bird as well as the howling of the wind.

Blinking her eyes open, Beatrice was blinded by light, its brightness like a painful stab. She groaned, her hands moving to shield her eyes, and in that moment, she finally realized that she was not in her bed at home.

On swift wings, the events of the previous day and night returned, and her eyes flew open once more. A moment later, Beatrice surged upward when she realized she had slept with her head in her betrothed's lap. "Oh, dear. I'm so sorry. I—" Her breath came fast, and she tried very hard not to meet her betrothed's eyes, her cheeks ablaze.

Charles, though, chuckled good-naturedly. "I am to be your husband," he said lightly. "Is it not my responsibility to ensure that you sleep well?"

Lifting her gaze tentatively, Beatrice found Charles grinning at her. As sensitive and kind and earnest as he was sometimes, there still was a bit of a devilish streak in him.

Beatrice rather like that.

Still, the reminder of their impending nuptials brought something else to mind. After all, a wedding implied a wedding night, did it not? When she had been set to marry Mr. Carter, Beatrice had been uncertain if her father's old friend would have insisted on consummating the union. Indeed, it had been a shuddering thought, and Beatrice was quite relieved to be rid of it. Yes, she did feel more at ease with Charles, but he was a stranger as well. They barely knew one another. Would he insist—?

“Would you tell me more of your sister?” Charles inquired as the carriage rumbled onward. “She sounds like quite the intriguing girl.” Another teasing grin touched his face.

“You first,” Beatrice insisted, welcoming this new lightness between them. “After all, I already spoke to you of Francine yesterday.”

“Very well,” Charles relented, tapping his chin with the forefinger of his right hand as he contemplated what to say. “I have a younger brother as well as younger sister. My brother, Henry, is three years younger than me and while I love him dearly, I rarely understand him.”

Beatrice laughed. “Why's that?”

Charles shrugged. “Because... Because he never seems to stand still. Wherever he is, he's quickly bored or eager for a new place to discover.” He scoffed good-naturedly. “Quite honestly, only looking at his life exhausts me.”

“My sister and I are quite different as well,” Beatrice volunteered, suddenly

remembering that Eugene—Lord Strumpton!—had never spoken to her like this. “Sometimes, she sits very still, and I wonder what goes through her mind. Then later, I see her sitting at her easel, paintbrush in hand, her teeth dug into her lower lip, a look of utter concentration on her face as she paints.” She sighed. “And she paints beautifully, not necessarily what she sees or what others see, but sometimes simply what could be.”

“She sounds like a truly marvelous little girl,” Charles replied, a deeply affectionate smile upon his face. “I cannot wait to meet her.”

“I know she will be fond of you,” Beatrice replied, remembering Francine’s questions about her new friend. She paused. “I shall miss her. Ever since the day she was born, we have not been apart.” A pang of sorrow touched her heart, and Beatrice thought herself a fool to not have thought of this earlier. After all, marriage always brought on a new life, a life that would not see her live side by side with her sister.

“I suppose it will not be the same,” Charles admitted, a kind expression upon his face as he dipped his head a fraction to peer into her downcast eyes. “Yet she will always be your sister, and she will always be welcome in our home.”

Beatrice found a glimmer of a smile as she looked at him. “And what of your sister?”

“Her name is Lizzie.” Love shone in his eyes, and yet Beatrice thought to see a touch of sadness. “She’s not well,” Charles finally said, a heavy sigh leaving his lips. “She was born with a weak lung, the doctors said. They prophesied she would not live long.”

Beatrice gasped, the thought of losing Francine crippling. She could not imagine how Charles’s family had taken this news. “I’m so sorry.”

A brave smile came to Charles’s face. “Yet she beat the odds,” he declared

triumphantly. “They gave her three years. Today, she is twelve, and she is still with us.” He cleared his throat. “Yet cold climates are not good for her. That is why my family left England over ten years ago.”

“Then why did you come back now?”

“As a peer of the realm, my father has certain responsibilities,” Charles explained. “He often went back on his own. Yet this time, we all wished to accompany him. Lizzie has been fine lately, and so we brought her along. Yet the moment she worsens...” He swallowed hard. “In any case, we never planned to stay long.” As the last word left his lips, his brown eyes sought hers. “Now, we need a new plan.”

Beatrice exhaled slowly. “Will you stay here even if your family leaves?” Oh, she had never thought of the possibility of leaving the country, having to bid her sister farewell for perhaps months or even years at a time.

“You are my family now, too.” Holding her gaze, Charles nodded. “We shall find a solution. I would never dream of taking you away from your sister.”

“And I would never dream of taking you away from yours,” Beatrice replied, surprised by the respect and compassion that seemed to come so naturally to Charles’s family. They truly did not seem to care about society’s rules or about how things were generally done. They made choices on their own, based on their own dreams and wishes and hopes, always respectful of one another.

With each word they spoke, Beatrice relaxed, even enjoyed herself, suddenly feeling free to be herself. There was no longer any need to pretend. It seemed what Charles truly wanted was to get to know her, the true her, not the girl she had always portrayed to society.

It made Beatrice wonder if perhaps agreeing to marry Charles had not been such a

bad idea after all. Most marriages were based on other things than love. And perhaps friendship and kindness promised a grander future than reputation and fortune. Perhaps, one day, they could be happy.

It was a thought that warmed Beatrice's heart, and she held onto it with all her might.

Chapter Fourteen

WITH PATIENCE

T wice, they stopped on their way to Scotland to change horses, stretch their legs and have a quick meal. Their coachman knew precisely where to go, and at every stop, it seemed that they had been awaited, everything prepared for them. Charles smiled, thinking of his mother, amazed by her thoroughness.

By the time they finally arrived in Gretna Green, it was already dark outside. The night was frosty and still as the carriage rattled its way into the village. The moon glowed in the night sky, illuminating their path and casting a gentle silver light over the countryside. The sound of an owl hooting in the distance filled the air, its ancient call echoing through the trees.

Gretna Green was nestled in a valley, surrounded by soft rolling hills and lush forests. The cottages and farmhouses were scattered irregularly, but it was still clear that the village was designed around a central square. As they drew closer, Charles could see many of the shutters were closed and smoke rose from some of the chimneys.

The horses slowed to a trot as they approached the village square, stirring up a cloud of dust in their wake. In front of the blacksmith's shop, the coachman drew their carriage to a halt before he jumped down to open the door for them.

Charles gazed across at his future wife, her face still, her eyes unblinking as she stared out the window. "Are you ready?" Charles asked gently.

Swallowing hard, Beatrice nodded. Then she met his gaze, the corners of her mouth curled upward in a brave smile. Her hands shook as she brushed them over her skirts, clearly seeking something to occupy them.

Charles could not deny that his own pulse had quickened, and he knew that lingering here would do neither of them any good. No, they had made their choice, and now, they needed to see it through. Without another moment of hesitation, he disembarked from the carriage and then held out his hand to Beatrice, an encouraging smile upon his face.

Beatrice followed him outside, turning her head to take in the peaceful atmosphere of the small village. Looking over his shoulder, Charles spotted the inn, laughter echoing out the door whenever it opened to allow another visitor in. Later, Charles thought. First, they needed to be married.

Stepping into the blacksmith's shop, Charles was not surprised to find the man ready for them. Everything was cast in shadow, a fire burning nearby, as the man gestured them forward, a heavy leather apron still tied around his neck. "Ye be Charles Beaumont and Beatrice Hartley?"

Charles nodded, and he felt Beatrice's hand tense upon his arm. He barely dared look at her, afraid that at the last moment she might change her mind.

The blacksmith wasted no time, words pouring from his mouth. Charles barely managed to follow them, catching one here and there, his thoughts taken in by the quietly trembling woman by his side. Was he making a mistake? Was he all but forcing her into this marriage? Yet what would be the alternative?

"I do."

Beatrice's softly spoken words startled Charles, and before he had a moment to

comprehend them, the very same question was put to him. His own I do followed swiftly, and then the blacksmith proclaimed them husband and wife.

Charles was overwhelmed and from the look of it, so was his bride. Everything had happened so fast that neither their minds nor their hearts had any chance of catching up. Perhaps that was the true purpose of rituals and ceremonies, to ease into change and not be dropped headlong into it. To make it feel real and true.

The blacksmith pointed them toward the inn, and Charles noticed that Beatrice seemed a bit uneasy as they went. Her fingers clutched hold of his sleeve, her grip never loosening. “Are you all right?”

She cast a tentative smile at him. “I suppose so.”

“It is the strangest feeling, is it not?” He frowned, shaking his head. “I am now a husband.” He scoffed, grinning at her. “Does it feel real to you?”

Another tentative smile appeared upon her face. “Not quite. I cannot help but feel as though... this is a play, and I am merely acting out a part.”

Charles nodded. “That is indeed a fitting description,” he remarked with a chuckle. He sighed. “I’m famished. What of you?”

Beatrice nodded, the hand that rested upon his arm no longer gripping it tightly. “I suppose I could eat.” She smiled at him.

Stepping into the inn together, Charles approached the proprietor and quickly learned that the grandest room in this modest establishment had been reserved for them. He could not deny a tingle of nervousness when he thought of his wedding night. Certainly, it would not be a true wedding night. It was much too soon for that. Yet the implications of a true wedding night lingered. Charles could see it Beatrice’s gaze.

Perhaps they ought to speak about what would happen next, yet it was an awkward topic, and he did not quite know how to broach it.

Without speaking a word, they followed a maid up the stairs and down the corridor toward their chamber. When the door swung open, Charles breathed a sigh of relief to see that it had two beds. Indeed, he saw the same relief upon his wife's face as she looked at him with questioning eyes.

"Do you mind sharing a room with me?" Charles asked quietly as the maid bustled about the chamber, filling the water pitcher and righting the beds.

Beatrice cast him a shy smile. "I do not," she replied, and he knew she was relieved to have a bed to herself this night. How his mother sometimes knew precisely what was needed was beyond Charles. Indeed, it had been the right gesture, saving him from an awkward conversation.

Still, he wished to put all Beatrice's concerns to bed, and as she made to step farther into the chamber, he held out his arm, his fingers touching her hand. She turned back to look at him, and he met her gaze, his voice once more dropping to a whisper. "This is a marriage of equals," he murmured, leaning a little closer, "and it shall always be. My wishes are no more important than yours, and hopefully together, we shall find some middle ground. Do you agree?"

In that moment, Beatrice's blue eyes glowed, the smile upon her face utterly overwhelming. "Yes, I agree," she breathed, her voice only a whisper.

"Yet, this is our wedding night," Charles added with a grin, "and it's supposed to be memorable, is it not?"

Beatrice stilled, uncertainty again in her gaze. Yet there was trust there as well, and Charles was glad for it.

“Stay here and wash up if you wish,” Charles said to her, following the maid out the door. “I shall procure us a feast worthy of this day.” He winked at her, delighting in the smile that came to her face, and then closed the door behind him. Yes, he loved her smile, and he promised himself that one day it would be the kind of smile that spoke of unadulterated happiness.

While Charles could not deny that he was curious to hold her and kiss her, he could wait. They had their whole lives ahead of them, and more than anything, he wanted to conquer her heart. He wanted what his parents had. He wanted his wife’s heart to belong to him, just as she possessed his. He wanted a great many things, and the only way to be granted them was through patience as well as respect and kindness.

As he ventured downstairs, Charles chuckled. After all, if there was one thing Charles knew how to do, it was how to be patient. Indeed, this challenge had been made for him.

Chapter Fifteen

TO WISH UPON A STAR

When the door opened next, maids bustled inside, carrying trays of food, bringing with them the delicious aroma of a hearty meal. Beatrice stared as they set the table, lit candles and the fire in the hearth. There were steaming plates of succulent roast beef with fresh fruits, like apples and honeyed melons, and chunks of delectable cheese. Next to the savory dishes, freshly baked pastries, golden brown, with a crispy top and a sweet interior, were spread across the table.

“What do you think?” Charles asked as he stepped back into the chamber. “Smells good, doesn’t it?”

Beatrice sighed, her stomach rumbling loudly. “It smells delicious.”

Beckoning her forward, Charles pulled out a chair for her, then he seated himself across the table. Slowly, they ate, filling their plates with many different delicious bites. Beatrice was grateful for the food. Not only because her body yearned for nourishment, but also because it gave her hands something to do.

“What is your favorite food?” Charles asked, his gaze sweeping over the laden table.

Beatrice grinned at him. “Chocolate.”

He laughed. “Chocolate? That’s your favorite food?”

“You did not ask for a traditional meal,” Beatrice pointed out with a stern expression. “You asked for my favorite food, and chocolate is most certainly food. After all, you can eat it, can you not?”

Charles regarded her curiously. “After that passionate speech, can I assume that in your opinion, there is nothing better in the world than chocolate?”

Beatrice laughed, half-choking on the grape she had plopped into her mouth. “You certainly can.”

To Beatrice’s delight, the evening continued like this, with light, teasing conversation as they slowly got to know one another, sharing bits and pieces about their past, about their lives.

“These days, all Lizzie wants is to see snow,” Charles remarked when they had both stopped eating, still tempted to sample a few more bites but utterly unable. “These past few days, she stood with her nose pressed to the window, glaring at the skies, as though her fury could make it open up and give her what she desired.” He heaved a deep sigh. “I pray she will not be disappointed.” His gaze met hers, and Beatrice could see deepest sadness there. “I do not think she will ever be able to return to England. This may well be her only chance.” He cast her a brief smile.

Without thinking, Beatrice reached out her hand and grasped his. “She’s lucky to have you, all of you. You cannot tell me she is not a happy girl.”

Charles laughed, and for a brief second, his gaze darted to her hand upon his. “No, I cannot. She has the most adorable laugh I have ever heard.” His hand moved beneath hers until they lay palm to palm, his fingers holding onto hers. “And she laughs a lot. At least, when she’s not pouting about not seeing snow.”

Easy laughter echoed between them, and Beatrice realized she did not mind Charles

holding her hand. Indeed, she was beginning to feel comfortable with him. Yes, friendship was a wonderful foundation for a life together. “Is there a place to call home down south? Or do you travel from place to place?”

“We travel a lot,” Charles replied as they seated themselves by the fire. “My brother simply cannot remain in one place for too long, and quite frankly, it is fascinating to see the world. Still, sometimes I wish for a home.” He met her gaze. “A true home.”

Beatrice nodded. “I’ve never been much for travel, either. Yet I have an aunt in France I would love to visit. She is my mother’s sister and married a Frenchman some time ago. We still write to one another, although I have not seen her in years.”

“You have never been to see her?”

Beatrice shook her head. “No, there always seemed to be some sort of reason why I couldn’t go. At first, I was too young, and then there were more important things to do. After all, my parents wanted me to make a good match.” Beatrice sighed, angry at herself because for a moment she had forgotten those past turbulent weeks full of heartbreak and regret. She had lived in the moment, here, with Charles, laughing and joking, and it had felt wonderful.

Charles heaved a deep breath. Then he leaned forward, his gaze seeking hers once more, the light of the flames in the hearth dancing across his countenance. “I am sorry for your heartbreak,” he murmured, not even a touch of accusation in his gaze. “I can only imagine what that must have felt like.”

Beatrice swallowed hard. “It was my own fault. I acted like a fool. I placed my trust where I should not have.”

Charles shook his head, his brown eyes warm and kind. “It is a sad world where promises cannot be trusted.”

For a long moment, Beatrice held his gaze, seeing all that he was, all he had done for her so selflessly. “What if...?” She inhaled deeply, not wishing to ruin the moment, and yet she knew she would not have peace of mind if she did not ask this. “What if I have a boy?”

Beatrice still struggled to believe that the Whickertons did not care. If she were to have a boy, he would be Charles’s heir. Another man’s child would inherit the Whickerton title. How could they not care? All the world cared. If anyone knew, it would be an outrage, a scandal, ruinous for them all. Had Charles, in his haste to protect her, forgotten all about it?

Preparing herself to see an expression of shock come to his face, Beatrice held her breath. Yet what she saw was merely a shrug, the look upon his face as relaxed as before, not at all clouded by her words. “Then we’ll have a son,” he said simply.

Beatrice regarded him curiously. “But will you not regret your gallant act, then?”

Charles shook his head, absolute certainty in his gaze. “There’s nothing more important in this world than love,” he told her valiantly, and once again Beatrice thought of the gallant knight in shining armor, upholding what was right against all the odds. “My parents taught me that. It is what they believe, and it is why they did not object to our union.”

Beatrice stared at her new husband, tears misting her eyes, her heart touched that such people truly existed. “My parents were first and foremost concerned with the possible scandal.” She tapped a finger to the corner of her eye to wipe away the tears that lingered there. “My mother even asked me why it mattered who I wed so long as my reputation remained intact.” For a moment, Beatrice thought she ought to feel a touch of shame at betraying her mother like this, yet she did not.

“When my parents were married, they swore their children would be allowed to

marry for love, just like them.”

Dread settled in Beatrice’s belly for robbing him of his chance to follow in his parents’ footsteps. “I’m sorry,” she murmured, wishing there was something else she could do besides apologize. “I’m sorry you could not.”

An odd look came to Charles’s face at her words, and he looked at her in a way that chased a shiver down Beatrice’s back. “But I did,” he whispered, his brown eyes never leaving hers.

Staring at him, Beatrice swallowed hard. “You cannot mean that. You cannot...” She shook her head. “Do you mean to say that you...?” She had thought him a gentleman, compelled to come to her rescue because his honor demanded it, because his kind character demanded it. She had never once contemplated the notion that he—

“You need not worry,” Charles told her gently. “I did not tell you this to put pressure on you. To love means to put another first, and I am prepared to do that with no regrets.”

Beatrice was speechless. Never had she known people like him, like his family. If only she had known that he loved her. But if she had, would she have chosen differently?

Blinking her eyes, she regarded him thoughtfully. Did he truly love her? Or was he mistaking a short-lived infatuation for love? Not that Beatrice herself knew the difference. After all, her own experience was fairly limited and had ended worse than she had ever imagined it might.

Still, she could not bring herself to regret her choice. Indeed, she liked Charles and felt safe with him. He was the kindest, most selfless man she had ever met. And perhaps, one day, she could love him.

In that moment, Beatrice knew what to wish for upon the shooting star Francine had given her.

And so she did.

Chapter Sixteen

AWAKENING

As they returned to London, Charles noticed Beatrice's apprehension returning. With each turn of the carriage's wheels, the ease that had grown between them in Scotland slowly slipped away. Her gaze remained fixed out the window, her hands clenched in her lap, her thoughts clearly occupied with something worrisome.

"Do you have regrets?" Charles asked carefully as the carriage turned a corner.

Beatrice blinked, and her gaze moved to meet his. Yet it took another moment for comprehension to light up her eyes. "No, of course not. I..." She swallowed, looking down at her clenched hands.

"Is it my family?" Charles inquired, wondering about this sudden change in her. "Or yours?" When she looked up, he smiled at her tentatively.

Beatrice sighed, and her shoulders relaxed, her hands unclenching. "My parents will be furious," she said with a chuckle, shaking her head as though she still could not believe what she had done. "They were quite..." She heaved a deep breath. "They will be furious." Her gaze held his, and Charles thought to see a question there.

"Mine will not," he told her firmly. "Whatever you might be worried about, my family will not be angry. After all, was it not my mother who arranged for us to be married?"

Smiling, Beatrice nodded. "And what of your father?" She paused, regarding him curiously. "He did not know, did he? In advance, I mean."

Charles shook his head. "He did not. But," he held her gaze, "even if he had, he would not have forbidden us. He might have argued against it." Which he had, Charles had to admit, at least to himself. "But he would not have taken this choice out of my hands."

"He can still be angry with you," Beatrice pointed out. Clearly, she was concerned about how she would be received.

"He is not one to hold a grudge," Charles replied with a chuckle. "He will glare at me for a moment, shake his head at me and then move past it. You'll see." Charles could only hope that he was right; after all, such a situation had never arisen before.

When they finally drew to a halt in front of his family's townhouse, Beatrice drew in a sharp breath, for Charles's family was awaiting them on the doorstep. While his parents stood back, their features rather inexpressive, Henry grinned from ear to ear and Lizzie waved at them, her eyes aglow with excitement.

"Everything will be fine," Charles assured his wife, then he alighted from the carriage and held out his hand to her. "I'll be by your side. Always."

A touched smile came to Beatrice's face, and Charles felt the breath lodge in his throat when her hand settled upon his arm. Indeed, she stayed close to his side as they passed through the small gate and then climbed the stairs toward the front door together, the chill in the air seeming to deepen with every step. It had been several weeks since the first frost of the season and yet, day after day, the sky remained gray and still, without even the tiniest snowflake in sight.

"Welcome home!" Lizzie exclaimed as she gazed up at Beatrice. "I always wanted a

sister.”

Caught off guard, Beatrice stilled, her jaw dropping ever so slightly, and a tremble shot up her arm. “Oh. That is...” She swallowed. “I am so delighted to meet you.”

With relief, Charles saw that, while his father did look at him with a touch of disapproval in his gaze, there was a welcoming smile upon his face, nonetheless.

“Come inside,” Charles’s mother exclaimed, rubbing her hands together. “It is too cold to be doing this out here.” She waved them through the door and into the entrance hall. “I’ll ring for tea and biscuits.”

Before long, they were all seated together in the drawing room, a touch of awkwardness lingering upon the chamber. Beatrice did not seem to know where to direct her gaze or what to say. So, she sat with her head bowed, and lifting her gaze every so often, offered a shy smile.

“We’ve readied a chamber for you,” Charles’s mother told his new wife with a smile. “I hope it is to your liking. But please feel free to make any changes you desire.” Her smile deepened and received a bit of a teasing quality. “It won’t hurt my feelings.”

“Thank you,” was all Beatrice managed to say, her hands still clenched in her lap.

Into the brief silence that followed, Henry exclaimed, “There will be a Christmas ball a sennight from today.”

Charles jerked around to look at his brother, rather disliking the wicked grin upon his face. “A Christmas ball?”

“Yes,” Henry replied with amused enthusiasm, ignoring their mother’s chiding look. “In your honor.” He chuckled. “Back in England for less than a month, and you’re

already the talk of the Season.” He clapped his hands. “I applaud you, big Brother.”

“Will you play with me?” Lizzie asked Beatrice abruptly, her eyes round and admiring.

Again, Beatrice’s jaw dropped a little, and Charles could tell that she did not quite know what to say, too overwhelmed was she with this new life. Yet before Charles could interfere, his mother spoke once more.

“There will be time for that later, my dear,” she told Lizzie, placing her hand upon her daughter’s. “Now, though, I suggest,” she turned to look at him and Beatrice, “you go speak to your parents. Better to get that done with soon.”

Another shiver gripped Beatrice, and Charles could tell that she dreaded the moment of coming face-to-face with her parents yet again. Still, after another cup of tea, they departed once more. Not a word left Beatrice’s lips the whole ride there, and Charles wondered what awaited them.

A butler showed them into the drawing room, where Beatrice immediately began to pace, wringing her hands and casting nervous glances at the door. The moment footsteps echoed to their ears, she stilled, her eyes going wide, and she stared at the door as though she were a deer, sensing a hunter closing in.

And then the door flew open, and for a split second, Charles thought Lady Benton would lash out at her daughter, her face red and outrage blazing in her eyes. The moment she spied Charles, though, she pulled to an abrupt halt. Her husband was a step behind her, an equally stunned expression upon his face. “Good... day, Lord Hawthorne.”

“Good day, my lady, my lord.” Charles offered a respectful nod, then he moved to Beatrice’s side. She met his gaze and drew closer to him as well.

Charles knew her movements only showed her need for support, for comfort, and yet Charles's heart soared.

"I apologize for the circumstances of our nuptials," Charles began, his voice steady and calm but insistent, the way his parents spoke when they faced opposition in some form and didn't want to give affront but also to remain steadfast in their position. "I admit I ought to have asked for your blessing beforehand. However, sometimes circumstances prevent us from acting on our best intentions."

Lord and Lady Benton listened quietly, their anger slowly subsiding; their expressions, though, remained tense.

Disapproving.

"We came here today to invite you to the Christmas ball my family is holding in our honor a sennight from today," Charles continued, smiling down at his new bride. "My parents are quite taken with Beatrice." His bride's gaze rose to meet his, and he could see doubt there. "They are eager to welcome her into our family. Hence, the ball."

"Ball? What ball?" exclaimed a young voice before the door was pushed open and a blond-haired girl of about five-years of age burst into the drawing room. Her green eyes were round as she stared at him, her features reminding him of her older sister, standing quietly by his side.

"Francine," Lady Benton exclaimed, "mind your manners."

Charles was delighted to see that the girl cared very little for her mother's rebuke. Instead, she danced toward them and threw herself into Beatrice's arms. "You left without saying a word," the girl complained, the tear-choked tone in her voice making it clear that she had missed her sister dearly these past few days.

“I’m sorry, Frannie,” Beatrice assured her sister, hugging her tightly to her chest. “I should have said something.”

“Yes, you should have,” the sisters’ mother agreed in a stern voice, her arms crossed over her chest as she glared at Beatrice.

“Can I come to the ball?” Francine asked, once again ignoring her mother, her eyes fixed upon Beatrice.

“Of course not,” Lady Benton exclaimed in a huff. “Balls are no place for children.”

Charles saw tears come to Francine’s eyes, and he kneeled down beside the sisters, meeting the girl’s gaze. “But we would love for you to come visit us any other time,” he told her with a smile, well aware of the relieved expression that came to his wife’s face. “Our door is always open to you.”

Wiping a tear from the corner of her eye, Francine beamed at him, and Charles could not shake the feeling that he had just made a friend. “Truly?”

“Truly,” Charles replied, both sisters’ eyes aglow.

By the time Beatrice and Charles said their goodbyes, the expression upon Beatrice’s face looked far more relaxed. “Would you care for a stroll?” Charles asked as they ventured down the stairs and stepped toward their waiting carriage. He felt the chill of the air in his lungs; the sharpness of winter had arrived. Still, it was invigorating.

Beatrice, too, breathed in deeply of the cold December air, then she smiled at him and nodded. “Yes, I would.”

After instructing the driver to return without them, Charles and Beatrice strolled down the street arm in arm. Indeed, it felt good to be alone with one another again,

and for a moment, they simply savored the comfortable silence between them.

“Thank you,” Beatrice exclaimed then, turning to look at him. “Thank you for coming with me today. Thank you for inviting Francine. You made her very happy. Me as well.”

“She is a wonderful girl,” Charles replied, not wishing to be thanked for something that was simply the right thing to do. “So exuberant.”

Beatrice laughed. “She can be quite tiresome in her excitement.”

Together, they strolled down the street, the cold air chilling their cheeks. Beatrice’s hand was warm upon Charles’s arm, and he enjoyed the peaceful way they walked arm in arm, no awkwardness between them.

“Look!” Beatrice suddenly exclaimed. “Snow!”

Charles blinked, and truly there were tiny snowflakes swirling through the air above them. Only a handful and rather far apart; still, it had been a long time since Charles had seen snow.

“Your sister will be delighted, will she not?” Beatrice exclaimed with shining eyes. “Let’s get back.” She pulled on his arm, and Charles allowed himself to be tugged along, a wide smile upon his face.

Chapter Seventeen

THE WONDERS OF FRIENDSHIP

After seeing the way Charles had spoken to Francine, Beatrice was suddenly inspired to make the best of everything. Determination surged through her, and she felt hopeful in a way she had not in a long time.

Quick steps carried them back to the Whickertons' townhouse, up the front steps and into the entry hall. "Lizzie!" Charles called, craning his neck, as Beatrice felt her heart hammering with excitement. "Lizzie, there is snow! Lizzie!"

For a moment, no sound could be heard besides their rapid breathing. Then, however, soft footsteps drifted to their ears, and a moment later, Lizzie appeared at the top of the stairs, her eyes wide in awe. "Snow?" she asked, hesitation in her voice as though she did not dare believe them.

"Yes!" Charles exclaimed, waving her forward. "Let's bundle up and head into the garden." He gathered Lizzie's coat, boots and mittens in his arms and rushed toward her, meeting her at the landing.

"Quick!" Lizzie exclaimed, clearly afraid that the snow would disappear before she could see it.

Beatrice felt herself bounce upon her feet, wishing Francine could be here. Hopefully, the coming days would bring her over frequently so that she could get to know the Whickertons alongside Beatrice. Perhaps this would truly be a wonderful new chapter

in all their lives.

With Lizzie finally bundled up warmly, they rushed outside.

The garden lay in silence, the air still and drifting in little clouds through the bare tree branches. Tiny snowflakes lingered, swirling here and there, giving the garden an ethereal quality. Even the birds seemed to sense the quiet as if they had forgotten their usual twitter and chirp.

In the stillness, time seemed to stand still, and Beatrice felt as though she could have remained in this moment forever, entranced by the winter sky, the soft whispers of the wind and the small crystals dancing down from the sky.

Lizzie, though, squealed with delight. “Snow! Look, Charlie, it’s snowing!” Spreading her arms wide, she twirled in circles, her head tilted back, and her eyes lifted to the heavens.

Charles laughed, and Beatrice knew that his heart soared seeing his little sister so carefree and happy. “Come.”

Beatrice blinked and saw Charles holding out his hand to her. “What?”

He nodded toward Lizzie then grasped Beatrice’s hand without warning and tugged her along. Only a moment later, they were twirling around the garden alongside Lizzie, and Beatrice had never felt so free.

It was as though this one moment changed everything. She no longer felt apprehensive or was plagued by doubts. No, instead, she embraced her new life wholeheartedly, and within a matter of days, Beatrice felt at home with the Whickertons.

Lizzie was a delight, and Beatrice loved seeing her and Francine together; and Francine did visit often. Sometimes even twice a day, coming over accompanied by her nursemaid. Although seven years separated the girls, they seemed drawn to one another. While Francine sensed that Lizzie's body was frailer, Lizzie had a way of imparting her wisdom in a way that made the girls seem like equals.

Henry possessed a certain fondness for poking fun at all those around him, never missing the opportunity to tease his siblings... as well as her and Francine, which made them feel included and gave them even more a feeling of belonging.

Lord and Lady Whickerton—or Jasper and Edith as they insisted Beatrice call them—were quite unlike Beatrice's own parents in one particular way. They, too, certainly had quite a number of duties to handle; yet they always made time to spend together as a family. Meals were shared, even including the children, and they never had that absent expression on their faces that suggested they wished to be elsewhere. No, when Charles's parents spent time with their children, they were truly there.

And then, two days before the Christmas ball, Beatrice walked by Jasper's study and overheard him speaking to Charles. She knew she ought not listen; yet when she heard her name mentioned, she simply could not walk away.

"I never had any objections against Beatrice," Jasper insisted, the tone in his voice suggesting that he was choosing his words most carefully. "She is indeed a wonderful, truly kind young woman, and I wish you two all the happiness in the world."

Beatrice barely breathed, every muscle in her body tensing despite the beautiful words she had just overheard.

"I know," Charles replied, his voice sounding so close that Beatrice flinched. "I never meant to suggest it. I only meant to ask your opinion of her."

A chill trailed down Beatrice's spine because she knew what Charles was asking, and it made her feel awful. Yes, she had settled into this family with an ease that surprised even her. She loved them all, and she felt certain that with time, she would only love them more. But Charles? He was a most wonderful man, and she truly cared for him. But was she in love with him? Would she ever be?

As though to echo her thoughts, Jasper said, "The reason I initially objected has not changed. I wish it had. Believe me." He exhaled a slow breath, and Beatrice could hear regret in his voice. "What worries me is that you are now married to a woman who might never love you back, at least not the way you love her."

Unable to listen to more, Beatrice silently moved away, her heart feeling heavy again. The lightness of the past few days disappeared, replaced by a most intense pressure to feel something for Charles because if she did not, he would be heartbroken. He deserved love, and more than anything, she wanted to give it. It was not something she could conjure by willpower alone, though. She cared for him, certainly... but love?

Still, Beatrice could not deny that time with Charles had become precious to her. Very precious, indeed. They rode out together, toured the city, walked in the park, and read by the fire. Although he often seemed serious, especially compared to his younger brother, Charles, too, possessed a carefree and almost whimsical side. Beatrice would never forget the way they had twirled and danced in the snow, laughing arm in arm like children, as though they had not a care in the world. Indeed, whenever he was nearby, Beatrice felt somehow lighter. He barely needed more than a few words to make her smile, and she never hesitated to go along when he suggested a midnight walk in the gardens to count the stars or to read a book backwards, starting with the last page. Oh, how they laughed!

At her childhood home, it had been ages since Beatrice had done anything remotely like these things. After all, she was no longer a child, and it was simply not ladylike.

The Whickertons, though, did not seem to mind.

“Are you getting tired?” Charles inquired with a grin as they sat in the library the night before the ball. The fire danced in the hearth, casting its orange-red glow across the tall, vaulted chamber.

Beatrice tried to hide a yawn behind her hand.

Charles chuckled. “Oh no, I saw that.” He rose from where he had sat upon the rug, half-leaning against the settee, and set aside the book he had read to her. “Off to bed with you. After all, tomorrow night’s ball is in our honor; therefore, we should try to attend.”

Beatrice held out her hand and allowed him to pull her to her feet. Strangely enough, it no longer felt odd when his fingers grasped hers, skin touching. “Do you enjoy balls?” she inquired, still curious to find out more about him. “Do you dance?”

Instead of replying to her question, Charles suddenly tugged her forward and into his arms, one hand settling upon her waist while the other held onto her hand.

Beatrice held her breath, staring into his eyes, suddenly overwhelmed to be so close. Of course, it was far from indecent—even if they had not been husband and wife. After all, throughout her Season, Beatrice had danced with many gentlemen at many balls. Yet being alone here with Charles in the library, the night surrounding them and the warmth of the flames in the hearth reaching out, the world suddenly seemed a different place.

“Do you know how to dance?” Charles challenged, a mischievous grin upon his face, before he hummed a sweet melody and his feet moved.

Easily falling back into the rhythm that had grown between them these past few days,

Beatrice smiled at him. “I’m realizing only now that I’ve never heard you sing,” she teased, delighting in the deep smile that came to his face. “Perhaps tomorrow, at the ball, you’ll grant us a small performance.” She arched an eyebrow at him.

Charles laughed. “Believe me, if you had heard me sing, you would not have just asked that.” He stilled, as though at a sudden thought. “Though, it might be a sure way to empty the house of guests should we tire of them.”

“It’s a plan then,” Beatrice declared, allowing him to twirl her in a small circle. “It is always good to have a—” All of a sudden, the world began to sway, and Beatrice blinked her eyes rapidly, trying to get it back into focus.

“Beatrice! Are you all right?” Charles’s voice sounded concerned and strangely far away. Yet when Beatrice felt her knees buckle, his arms grasped her, pulling her against his chest, keeping her safe.

Gently, he settled her upon the soft rug in front of the fireplace, fetching a small pillow to place beneath her head. All the while, he spoke to her, and although Beatrice barely understood a word he was saying, the sound of his voice was soothing. She closed her eyes, one hand clasped in his, and simply breathed.

“Shall I fetch the doctor?”

“No,” Beatrice managed to say. Then she opened her eyes once more, and the world was back in focus. She waited for another heartbeat or two, and when it remained where it was, she smiled up at her husband. “It has passed. It was merely a spell of dizziness. Nothing to worry about.”

Charles’s gaze still held concern. “Are you certain?”

She nodded. “Yes, I am. Please, help me up.”

With great care, Charles assisted her to her feet, his hands never leaving her arms, holding onto her in case she lost her balance once more. “Is the child all right? Do you have any way of knowing?”

Oddly enough, for a brief moment, Beatrice had even forgotten about the child. These past few days, she had felt wonderful, her mind so focused on this new beginning that she had barely thought of the new life growing within her.

Feeling tense, Beatrice looked at her husband. “I do believe it is fine.” Her gaze lingered upon Charles’s face, and as always she feared to see something dark descend upon his features, the child a reminder of what stood between them.

Yet it never did.

His hands held hers, and his eyes looked at her with the same deep concern and utter devotion that were simply his. He did not seem at all burdened by the reminder that she was carrying another man’s child.

“Is there anything you need?”

Beatrice sighed, deeply touched by his care, because everything he had said proved true. “Thank you for being you,” she whispered, tears pricking the backs of her eyes. “Thank you for... your friendship.” Beatrice knew that it was probably not what he wanted to hear; yet it was all she had to give.

No disappointment showed up on his face, though, and the smile that touched his lips looked utterly genuine. “Always.”

And then Beatrice sank into his arms, resting her head upon his shoulder, and it felt right, as though this spot had been made for her only.

Chapter Eighteen

NEVER STOP DANCING

On the night of the Christmas ball, Charles and his father stood downstairs, awaiting their wives. Henry, too, was present; he, however, paced rather impatiently. “Why is it that women always take so long to get ready?” he grumbled under his breath, casting an annoyed look up the stairs.

Though not saying a word, their father rolled his eyes at Henry’s flippant remark, and Charles chuckled under his breath. Indeed, he did not mind waiting, knowing the trouble women went through to look their best. According to his new wife, she, too, loathed the time it took to make herself presentable, often wishing it were unnecessary. Only the other day, they had talked at great length about things in life that bothered them, that they wished they could change.

Heaving a deep breath, Charles swept his gaze upward over the enormous staircase, imagining Beatrice standing there. It had been only a week since their wedding day in Scotland, and yet he already felt as though he knew her. Of course, there were still many delightful details to discover about her every day, and yet she was no longer a stranger. And more than that, he thought she felt the same way.

“You look happy,” his father remarked with an amused twinkle in his eyes. “It suits you.”

Charles could not help the smile that came to his face. He had never known he could smile as much as he had over the past week. He had always been happy; now, though,

what he felt went beyond simply being happy. “I suppose I am,” he murmured, still dumbfounded about how abruptly everything had changed and how unexpectedly these emotions had found him. “Was it the same for you,” he asked his father, “when you met Mother?”

A faraway look came to his father’s face. “Yes,” he said simply, a deep sigh moving his shoulders. “One moment, I had no notion she even existed, and in the next, she was all I could think about.” He grinned at his son. “Is that how you feel about Beatrice?”

Charles nodded. “You know, I always thought it odd whenever people described finding love like taking an arrow to the heart.” Frowning, he shook his head, remembering how he had always puzzled over this description. “Now, though, I suppose it is merely a way of describing this... abruptness, for lack of a better word, a change one did not see coming.”

His father was about to reply when he stopped and lifted his head, his gaze moving toward the top of the staircase. Charles turned, his eyes traveling upwards as well. There was not only his mother, dressed in her favorite Christmas gown, a deep maroon color with white pearls around her neck, but also Beatrice.

All grace, Beatrice standing at his mother’s side, looked resplendent in her shimmering emerald gown. The glistening fabric clung to her body, accentuating her curves and stature while the delicate lace trimmings around the collar and cuffs made her glow as though snowflakes clung to her. Her golden-brown hair had been carefully coiffed into an elegant updo, and her deep blue eyes shone with anticipation... as well as a touch of nervousness.

Charles knew precisely how she felt, for his own heart seemed to trip in his chest the moment he beheld her. She had always been beautiful to him; yet now that one look into her eyes showed him a person he had come to know, now that he could read

those subtle signs of her nerves upon her face, Charles thought her breathtaking.

More than ever, he prayed that, with time, he would win her heart.

“You look...” Words failed Charles when Beatrice finally stood before him, lifting her chin to look into his eyes.

“Yes?” she prodded with a teasing smile upon her face.

Charles chuckled. “There is no word to do you justice,” he said solemnly, meaning it. “I am so...” He exhaled a deep breath. “Having you here with me tonight, it... it is a dream come true.”

The smile faded from Beatrice’s face, and he could see a touch of discomfort in her eyes. He knew she cared for him, that she saw a friend in him, and that any reminder that he loved her brought her pain. Charles cursed himself, making a mental note not to speak like this to her again. She needed time, and she would have it.

As the first guests began to arrive for their impromptu Christmas ball, Charles and Beatrice stood alongside his parents and brother, welcoming them all and gracefully accepting their well-wishes and congratulations. Charles was well aware that most people believed theirs to be a love match, and it suited him just fine. He did not wish Beatrice’s reputation besmirched, people whispering about her behind her back. No, he wanted her happy and free of any rumors. He wanted the same for their child.

Truthfully, in the very beginning, after learning that Beatrice carried Lord Strumpton’s child, there had been a moment when Charles had been uncertain if he could accept the child as his own. At only one-and-twenty years of age, Charles had never spent much time around children, especially young children. He had never even held a baby in his arms. The only child he knew was his sister, and Lizzie was already twelve years old. Yet when he had met Francine, Charles had been instantly

dazzled by the little girl, his heart opening to her so easily that all his doubts of being able to love their child had vanished. He had remembered then what his parents had said from the moment he had been born: Love is all that matters.

Charles knew without a doubt that he loved Beatrice, that he would always love her. Now, when he looked at her and thought of the child, he imagined a little boy or girl, with wide eyes, full of trust and eagerness and his to protect, and it warmed Charles's heart immediately.

All would be well. He was certain of it. And not even the slightly disgruntled expression on the faces of Beatrice's parents could dissuade him. Of course, they had come to accept the match. How could they not? Yet they still seemed to hold a bit of a grudge, the smiles upon their faces not quite genuine and the words that fell from their lips as they spoke to their daughter, not quite reflecting their well-wishes.

"If you feel a need for rest," Charles whispered to his wife as he leaned in, "I shall spirit you away."

Instantly, the slightly forlorn expression upon Beatrice's face disappeared, and a dazzling smile appeared... and it made Charles's knees go weak. "Are you my knight in shining armor, then?"

Charles held her gaze, oblivious to all the other people in the room. "I shall be yours if you promise to be mine."

For a moment, she looked surprised; however, the glow in her eyes never dimmed. "I like that," she whispered, shifting upon her feet and moving closer to him. "I've always wanted to be a knight. It always seemed more preferable than a damsel in distress, wouldn't you agree?"

Charles chuckled, nodding. "Odd that the stories never speak of gentlemen in

distress,” he remarked with a grin. “Even in my limited experience, gentlemen do get into trouble quite a lot.”

Beatrice’s eyes danced with laughter. “Do tell.”

Together, they endured the long receiving line, and both were breathing a sigh of relief when they could finally step into the ballroom, alive with the cacophony of conversation, music, and laughter. Everywhere they looked, couples danced, flirted, and enjoyed themselves.

“May I have this dance?” Charles asked, holding out his hand to her.

For a moment, Beatrice simply looked into his eyes, and Charles felt his heart tense in apprehension. Was something wrong? Did she not wish to dance? He remembered their dance in the library the other night as well as the way they had twirled through the swirling snowflakes out in the garden. She had been quite enthusiastic then.

“Yes,” Beatrice said a breathless touch to her voice. It was only a single word, and yet suddenly it gave Charles pause. It made him look deeper into her eyes, and as he did so, the hope he held in his heart for the future grew in spades. Something more than friendship suddenly shimmered there, and Charles blinked, wondering if he was merely imagining it.

Arm in arm, they drifted onto the dance floor. Charles settled one hand upon Beatrice’s waist while the other cradled hers within his own. Their eyes locked, and they moved to the music with ease—spinning and twirling—as though they had been dancing together for years.

When the dance finally ended, Charles held on to her for a moment longer, and he leaned in to whisper in her ear. “Promise me we’ll never stop dancing.”

“I promise,” Beatrice whispered, her warm breath tickling the side of his neck. Then her blue gaze sought his, and Charles found himself mesmerized.

Abrupt applause ripped away the magic of the moment, and they both stepped apart. Her hand, though, remained within his.

“What is going on?” Beatrice asked, the expression in her eyes whispering of shyness once more as she looked around, not quite meeting his gaze.

Charles shrugged before his attention was drawn to a corner of the ballroom where a small crowd had gathered. A handful of guests were pointing upward at a small green branch dangling from the ceiling. “Mistletoe,” he murmured, suddenly overwhelmed by the desire to pull Beatrice forward and claim a kiss as well. Yet it was too soon for that. He needed to win her heart first, and he would not risk losing what they had simply to steal a kiss.

Chapter Nineteen

ONCE UPON A KISS

“Why didn’t you tell me you planned to elope?” Marianne demanded in a rather indignant huff. “You never even spoke to me about Lord Hawthorne. I did not know you were in love.” She crossed her arms over her chest, doing her utmost to glare at Beatrice.

Beatrice chuckled, grasping her friend’s hands. “I apologize,” she replied, grasping for words. After all, what was she to say? Theirs was not a love match, and yet she could not tell Marianne so. Certainly, they were friends and had been for a few years. Only Marianne had never been one to keep secrets, words flowing from her tongue with such speed that she often had trouble keeping confidences.

“And you were married in Gretna Green?” Marianne whispered confidently, linking one arm with Beatrice’s and pulling her toward a quiet corner, all anger suddenly forgotten. “What was that like?”

Beatrice did her best to satisfy her friend’s curiosity; still, she could tell that Marianne was disappointed with Beatrice’s explanations. Indeed, Marianne possessed a deeply romantic heart, as Beatrice supposed many young women did. While not wishing to disappoint her closest friend, Beatrice could also not bring herself to lie. She could not speak of love when there had been none.

“And your wedding night?” Marianne asked in hushed tones, her eyes glittering with curiosity. “What was it like?” Her nose was slightly crinkled, and her brows drawn

down into a tentative frown. “Was it as awful as we overheard Lady Torrington say last year? Or was it... wonderful?”

Beatrice cringed. “Well...” Beatrice wished with all her heart that she could escape this conversation. Only Marianne was determined to have her answer.

Yet as Beatrice thought back to the night of her wedding, a smile came to her face, and she remembered the wonderful supper she and Charles had shared, how they had laughed and spoken of so many things, getting to know one another in a way she had not expected.

Reading Beatrice’s expression, Marianne clasped her hands together in joy. “Oh, it was wonderful, wasn’t it?”

Beatrice nodded. “It was. He is a wonderful man, and I am so fortunate that he chose me.” Her gaze drifted across the ballroom to where Charles was speaking to his brother and a group of gentlemen. Their eyes met, and the smile that came to his face as he looked at her did odd things to Beatrice’s heart.

“And... what was it like?” Marianne inquired, her cheeks flushing a tentative red.

Beatrice cringed inwardly, not wishing to discuss these things. After all, she and Charles had not shared a bed. All she had to go on was the night she had made that foolish mistake with Lord Strumpton. His touch had been pleasant enough, and yet it had been rushed as they had feared discovery. Now, roughly two months later, Beatrice barely remembered what they had said to one another or the touch of his lips upon hers. Somehow, the memory was fading, and fading quickly.

And with a bit of shock, Beatrice realized she did not mind.

“Well?” Marianne prompted.

Fortunately, Beatrice was saved from having to fabricate any sort of answer by a young gentleman who bowed low and then asked Marianne onto the dance floor. Breathing a deep sigh of relief, Beatrice remained where she was, savoring a moment of peace and quiet, without having to choose her words carefully, simply breathing in and out.

Unfortunately, her moment of quiet ended rather abruptly when Henry suddenly appeared by her side. Indeed, her new brother-in-law had the tendency to show up in moments most inconvenient. “You look as though you could use a drink,” he remarked, raising his brows meaningfully and grinning quietly. “Not that I procured you one, mind you.”

Beatrice chuckled. “Sometimes you are truly impossible.”

“You are too kind to notice,” he said in reply, clearly delighted with the chiding expression upon her face. Inhaling a deep breath, he swept his gaze over the ballroom. “I suppose London is a nice enough place; however,” he glanced at her, “I can’t imagine staying for too long.”

“Charles mentioned your restlessness,” Beatrice replied as they began strolling around the ballroom. “Which place is it that captured your heart?”

Henry laughed, handing his empty glass to a footman as he hurried by. “I’m afraid there is no such place. Quite frankly, I never enjoyed staying in one place for too long.”

“So, you travel constantly, a new town, a new country every few weeks?” Beatrice could not fathom such a life. It intrigued her, and yet she doubted she would truly enjoy it.

Henry nodded enthusiastically. Then he laughed. “It seems you and my brother are

quite suited to one another.”

Beatrice frowned. “What makes you say that?”

“Well, he, too, always looks at me with this odd sort of scrunched-up expression whenever I wish to move on.” He chuckled. “I think he rather enjoys staying in England, especially now that he found you.” He winked at her wickedly.

Overwhelmed, Beatrice averted her gaze and found it colliding with her husband’s, a circumstance which immediately sent her heart into a little gallop. It was the oddest thing! Indeed, her heart seemed to pick up even more speed when Charles turned away from the group of gentlemen he had been conversing with and came toward them, a somewhat disconcerted expression upon his face as he eyed his brother.

“Ah, speak of the devil,” Henry exclaimed when Charles reached their side, “and he shall appear.”

Charles’s forehead furrowed harder. “You spoke of me?” he inquired, and his gaze moved to Beatrice.

“We only—” Beatrice began, but she was cut off when Henry said, “All bad things, I assure you.” He grinned at Charles.

To Beatrice’s relief, Charles shook his head at his brother good-naturedly. “I would have expected nothing less,” he retorted in kind, humor dancing in his eyes, before he once more turned to Beatrice. “If he annoys you, you must tell him so to his face. Otherwise, he will not understand. He seems to possess no intuition when it comes to these things.”

Beatrice chuckled, feeling herself relax once more. “I shall try,” she promised, wondering if she would have the chance, considering that Henry planned on leaving

England again soon.

“Would you mind stepping over here?” Henry inquired, gesturing them forward. “There is something I must show you.”

Beatrice frowned and exchanged a confused look with her husband. “What is it?” she asked as Charles offered her his arm and she took it.

“Something marvelous,” Henry insisted, yet the grin upon his face put a rather suspicious-looking expression upon Charles’s face.

Taking two steps forward, they looked at Henry expectantly. Still grinning, he then pointed toward the ceiling. “Look up.”

The very moment Beatrice spotted the mistletoe dangling above their heads, another round of applause went up, making it very clear that they were not the only ones to have discovered it.

“Henry,” Charles growled under his breath, his eyes hard and accusing as he glared at his brother.

“What?” Henry asked with an innocent and yet smug expression. “You ought to thank me.” Then he stepped back, joining the ranks of the surrounding onlookers.

As her heart beat unsteadily in her chest, Beatrice looked up at her husband, surprised to see an almost tortured expression upon his face. “Is something wrong?”

He sighed, casting a furtive glance at the cheering crowd around them. “We don’t have to do this,” he whispered, his hand still holding hers, his own trembling as much as her own. “My brother should never have—”

“No,” Beatrice interrupted him, placing a hand upon his chest. “It’s all right.” She nodded, giving her permission for him to kiss her, unable to say the words. Indeed, at his suggestion that they need not kiss, Beatrice had felt a sudden surge of disappointment.

It seemed she wanted to kiss him. Only she had not realized it until this very moment.

Although they had only met a fortnight ago, the time they had had together had been indescribable, and Beatrice found her curiosity piqued, wondering what else could be between them.

“Are you certain?” Charles whispered as he pulled her closer, the expression upon his face hesitant. Still, eagerness shone in his eyes, mingling with devotion and desire alike. The space between them dissipated as he stepped closer, and an inaudible sigh escaped his lips. He reached for her and Beatrice, without a moment’s hesitation, nodded. This would not be her first kiss, and yet somehow, oddly enough, it felt as though it were.

Gently, Charles cradled her face in his hands, his eyes never leaving hers. He leaned in, slowly and steadily, until his lips were inches away from hers. Then, finally, they both closed their eyes and their lips met.

The kiss was sweet and gentle, but it was also full of promise. Beatrice had not expected this. A mistletoe kiss was nothing more than a tradition fulfilled, a quick peck that was over almost before it had begun.

Their kiss, however, did not. It did not seem to end, and Beatrice realized she did not want it to. Each second felt like a lifetime, and with each passing one, Beatrice felt a little more of her heart stringing together with his. Charles, too, seemed lost in the moment, for he lingered, his lips upon hers, teasing and asking and revealing how deeply he cared for her.

When they finally parted, they were breathless, and Beatrice could barely manage to open her eyes, her heart in an uproar. Never had Eugene's kiss made her feel so unhinged, so cared for, so utterly bewitched. What on earth did this mean?

Overwhelmed, Beatrice stared at her husband as the crowd around them cheered with delight, her lips still tingling from his kiss.

"Are you all right?" Charles asked, concern upon his face.

Swallowing, Beatrice nodded. "I'm sorry. I..." She backed away. "I need a moment alone." Then she turned and fled the ballroom.

Chapter Twenty

TO KNOW ONE'S HEART

Shocked, Charles stared after his wife as quick steps carried her out of the ballroom. People were still cheering and then slowly drifted back onto the dance floor or toward the refreshment table. The moment Beatrice disappeared from sight, Charles spun around and glared at his brother. "What were you thinking?"

At least a hint of contrition showed upon Henry's face. "I thought it would be good for my brother to kiss his wife."

Charles felt a sudden overwhelming desire to plant his little brother a facer. "Thank you. What a wonderful plan," he snarled in mock gratitude, knowing that in truth he was the one to blame. Had he merely placed a chaste kiss upon Beatrice's lips, none of this would have happened. "You did see her run off, did you not?" Raking a hand through his hair, Charles contemplated what to do. Ought he go after her? Or did she wish to be alone?

"Yes, I did see her run off," Henry interjected, grasping Charles's arm and pulling him around so they faced one another. "Yet neither one of us knows why." His right eyebrow rose meaningfully.

Charles stilled, puzzled by the expression upon his brother's face. "She did not wish—" His lips pressed into a tight line as he gritted his teeth. "It was not your place to interfere. You—"

“Admit it,” Henry dared him in a hushed tone. “You wanted to kiss her.”

Charles glared at his brother. “Of course I did,” he snapped, surprised by his own words. He heaved a deep breath. “Yet she clearly did not.”

Henry chuckled. “Nothing is clear. You don’t know why she ran away.”

“Is it not obvious?”

Before Charles could say more, Henry interrupted once again. “No, it is not. Perhaps love made you blind. Perhaps you did not see the way she looked at you tonight.”

Charles stared at his brother, terrified of the small blossoms of hope that grew in his heart. Part of him wanted to know precisely what his brother meant while another feared the answer. Just when he had gathered the courage to ask, movement beyond his brother’s shoulder caught his attention. There, by the entrance to the ballroom, stood Lord Strumpton.

“What is it?” Henry inquired, turning to look at what Charles was staring. “Isn’t he—?”

“How dare you?” Charles growled, clasping his brother’s arm. “Did you do this?” He nodded in Lord Strumpton’s direction. “Did you invite him here tonight?”

His brother scoffed. “Why would I do that? Yes, I like to tease you from time to time, but I would never do anything to...” He exhaled slowly. “Charles, you are my brother and I want you to be happy.”

Charles felt dizzy from the way his pulse pounded in his veins. Yet his brother’s words made it through the fog that engulfed his head. “I know,” he murmured, then he loosened his grip upon his brother’s arm. “Then what is he doing here?”

Henry shrugged. "Let's go find out."

Together, the two brothers strode toward Lord Strumpton, and Charles realized how grateful he was to have his brother by his side, to know that he did not stand alone. "Lord Strumpton," he addressed the other man, "what brings you here tonight?"

At the icy tone in Charles's voice, Lord Strumpton's eyes narrowed. "Why, I was invited," he replied with a rather pleased expression upon his face. "I'm here tonight to congratulate you on your recent nuptials." The grin upon the man's face stretched even farther. "My best wishes to you and the new Lady Hawthorne." Charles could see that the superior expression upon the other man's face rose from Lord Strumpton's belief that Charles knew nothing of what had happened between his new wife and the man across from him.

Gritting his teeth, Charles met his brother's gaze, his brows rising questioningly.

As he had expected, Henry slowly shook his head, confirming that he was not the one who had invited Lord Strumpton. Who then?

Near the orchestra, Charles spotted his parents, whispered words passing between them, and without an explanation to Lord Strumpton, he set off toward them, Henry upon his heels.

"You do not truly think that...?" Henry inquired behind him, his half-finished question followed by an amused chuckle. "Of course, I wouldn't put it past her."

"Did you invite Lord Strumpton?" Charles demanded without preamble the moment he had reached his parents' side.

His father frowned at him. "Lord Strumpton?" He glanced past Charles's shoulder. "No, I did not." His frown deepened. "Is he not the man who...?"

Charles nodded, every muscle in his body tense to the point of breaking. What on earth was going on here?

“Mother?” he inquired then, wondering why she had aided him before, only to betray him now. Did she not wish for him to be happy with Beatrice?

An amused chuckle rumbled in his father’s throat, and he looked at his wife with questioning eyes. “You did this, did you not, my dear?”

Smiling, Charles’s mother nodded. “I did, yes.” As Charles’s jaw dropped in shock, his mother stepped toward him, her hands settling upon his chest as her pale eyes looked into his. “Listen to me, Charles.”

Shaking his head, Charles stared at her. “How could you do this? I thought you were on our side.”

“I am on your side,” his mother insisted, the expression in her eyes growing in intensity. “Always.”

“Listen to her,” his father urged as he moved to stand by his wife’s side. “If she invited Lord Strumpton, she had her reasons.”

The deep conviction in his father’s voice gave Charles pause, and he turned to his mother, nodding for her to continue.

“Sometimes it is not easy to start over,” his mother whispered softly, her words only meant for his ears, “to know one’s heart. Sometimes, a little help is needed.”

Charles frowned. “How does this help? Why would you bring him here?”

Her mother regarded him for a long moment. Then she asked, “Are you jealous? Do

you believe Beatrice is still in love with Lord Strumpton?"

Charles heaved a heavy breath, all his fears once again crowding around him. "I do not know," he finally admitted.

"Don't you wish you knew?" His mother inquired, the expression upon her face gentle and caring. "Or would you prefer to be left wondering?"

Charles bowed his head, knowing that his mother was not wrong. Of course, she was not. Yet he feared the answer he might receive, remembering how heartbroken Beatrice had looked when he had first seen her a fortnight ago. Was it possible for a heart to change within so short a time? Ought he not be more patient? Yet again, his own heart had known instantly.

"You better go find your wife," his mother said all of a sudden, urgency in her voice now. "Lord Strumpton seems to have disappeared from the ballroom." Her gaze held his, and Charles needed to hear no more to understand.

Without a moment of hesitation, he darted off in the direction that Beatrice had left, wondering what intentions Lord Strumpton might have, what had brought him here tonight. After all, he could have refused the invitation.

Yet he had not.

Chapter Twenty-One

IN THE LIBRARY

Be elatedly, Beatrice realized her feet had carried her to the library, the very place where she had read and danced with Charles. Her mind still circled around the kiss they had just shared, her heart overwhelmed by the deep emotions that seemed to pulse through every cell of her body. Almost from the first, Beatrice had liked Charles. She had come to care for him so quickly, so easily, and yet she had always only considered him a friend, worried that she could not love him. Had she been wrong?

Beatrice wished she could share her confusion with someone who might advise her. What did it feel like to be kissed by someone one loved? All Beatrice knew was that Charles's kiss had been different from Eugene's... yet in a good way. Was there anything more than love? Or was the only conclusion that she had never truly loved Eugene? Had she merely been in love with the idea of being in love, being courted by a dashing gentleman? Had she been even more of a fool than she had first thought?

As her head began to spin in circles, Beatrice strode up and down the length of the library, willing her limbs to cease trembling and her mind to clear. After all, she needed to return to the ballroom. This night was held in her honor, and she simply could not disappear. More than that, what was Charles thinking right now? He had kissed her so sweetly, and then she had dashed away.

A groan slipped from Beatrice's lips, and she closed her eyes, willing a deep breath into her lungs. "What am I to do?"

“Good evening, my dear.”

At Lord Strumpton’s voice, Beatrice whirled around. Oddly enough, she had not even contemplated the idea of seeing him here tonight. Perhaps that had been reasonable after all, for she doubted that Charles’s family would invite the man whose child she carried. Then what was he doing here? Here at the ball... and now here in the library?

Closing the door behind himself, Lord Strumpton moved toward her, an easy smile upon his lips. Only now, it failed to make Beatrice’s heart trip and stumble in her chest. “My lady, allow me to congratulate you on your wedding.” His grin widened. “I admit I never expected you to be so... resourceful in procuring a husband. How did you do it?”

Beatrice could do little else but stare at him, for the moment did not quite strike her as real, more like a nightmare one imagined on a gloomy day.

Coming to stand in front of her, Lord Strumpton met her eyes. “If it is possible, you’ve grown even more beautiful,” he whispered, an honest touch of awe in his voice. “I’ve missed you.”

Not long ago, Beatrice would have given anything to hear him say these words. Now, though, she felt not even a quiver of excitement at hearing them. Instead, his presence here in the library made her feel threatened. “You need to leave,” she told him, taking a step backward. “You’re not supposed to be here.”

Yet Lord Strumpton remained. “You cannot mean that,” he replied, looking hurt. “Only a fortnight ago, you spoke of love, and now you wish to send me away?” He shook his head, disappointment showing upon his features. The emotion did not reach his eyes, though.

Beatrice laughed. She could not help it, for his words struck her as ridiculous. “You

cannot mean what you just said,” she told him boldly, lifting her chin and meeting his eyes without flinching. “As I recall, you were the one to send me away first. You sent me away when I needed you the most.” She shook her head at him, finally realizing the kind of man he was. “You betrayed me. You promised me the world, and then you left me alone.”

“I am here now,” Lord Strumpton said simply, clearly unconcerned with anything he might have said before. “Perhaps this is a sign. Since you are now safely married, there is no reason for us to remain apart any longer.”

Aghast, Beatrice stared at him, uncertain how she had ever thought herself in love with him. How could she not have seen the cold selfishness in his gaze? “I want you to leave and never return,” Beatrice told him in a hard voice, not wanting there to be any doubt.

Unfortunately, Lord Strumpton remained unimpressed. “Do you truly think it wise to speak to me like this?” he inquired, cocking one eyebrow, a rather disconcerting grin coming to his face. “After all, your husband would be most disappointed to learn of your... misconduct, would he not?” The grin upon his face stretched into a deeply smug smile, heavy with self-importance and superiority that made Beatrice wonder how she could ever have cared for him.

“My husband knows,” Beatrice said slowly and calmly, enjoying the way Lord Strumpton’s expression froze before his smug smile slowly evaporated, replaced by something that resembled not merely surprise but rather stunned shock and perhaps a little concern. “I told him. I would never have married him otherwise.”

Lord Strumpton’s eyes bulged. “You told him before—?” He raked a hand through his hair, still staring at her as though she had suddenly sprouted wings. Clearly, in his world, he could not conceive why any man would marry a woman carrying another man’s child.

He loves me , Beatrice thought to herself, realizing only in that very moment what it truly meant. He truly and honestly loves me. What had Charles said? That to love meant to put another first? Indeed, he had every moment of every day. “My husband is a most honorable man,” Beatrice told Lord Strumpton, her voice heavy with accusation. “It is such a shame that so few true gentlemen remain these days.”

The look upon Lord Strumpton’s face suggested that her accusation had not escaped him, for his expression darkened, and for a moment, Beatrice doubted whether it had been wise to taunt him like this.

Fortunately, only a heartbeat later, Charles abruptly crashed through the library doors, his broad shoulders filling the frame. His eyes widened when they spotted Beatrice, and he lunged toward her with long strides. Lord Strumpton hastily stepped aside to let him pass, and Charles shot him a threatening stare before embracing Beatrice in a tight hug, the tension of the moment evident. Yet there was also a sense of pure relief on Charles’s face.

Overwhelmed, Beatrice clung to her husband, returning his almost desperate embrace. The way his arms wrapped around her made her feel safe, and she understood from the relief she had seen upon his face that he had been truly afraid for her. Clearly, he had somehow noted that Lord Strumpton had gone after her, and yet his thoughts had never strayed into the direction of betrayal. He had not doubted her, her loyalty to him.

Not even for a moment.

“Are you well?” Charles asked almost frantically, his eyes searching her face, his hands tight upon her arms as though he feared she could slip away.

“I am,” Beatrice replied in a trembling voice. “Truly, I am.” She sniffled as emotions tightened her throat, her gaze seeking his. “What are you doing here?”

Charles looked as though he were about to speak. Then, however, he closed his eyes, briefly shook his head and then straightened. When he looked at her once more, the expression in his eyes no longer burned with desperate concern, with emotions barely held in check. No, he had slipped on a mask, shielding himself from her gaze. “I noticed his absence from the ballroom,” he told her with a glare in Lord Strumpton’s direction, “and... and I was concerned for you.” He took a step back, and involuntarily, Beatrice’s hands grasped his, staying his retreat.

A look of utter confusion came to Charles’s face, and yet there was hope there as well.

Chapter Twenty-Two

HOME

All the way from the ballroom to the library, checking rooms left and right despite his sense of certainty where Beatrice would have retreated, Charles had reminded himself that it would not serve him to lash out at Lord Strumpton. If Beatrice still cared for him, he needed to tread carefully. Still, Lord Strumpton's intentions could not be good, and it was paramount that Charles rid them of this so-called gentleman.

Finding them together in the library momentarily knocked the air from Charles's lungs, fear rising in his heart that hers might be in peril once more. As much as he hated seeing her with Strumpton, Charles could simply not bear to see her in pain. Her heartbreak had been his, and although he wished to send Strumpton to the ends of the earth, he knew he could not do so if she begged him to refrain.

And then he had embraced her, his arms pressing her against his chest. He held her so tightly that he had felt her heart beat against his own, loath to release her. It had been an impulsive act, like their mistletoe kiss. He had never meant to hold her so tightly or for so long, yet he could not help himself.

And then, only belatedly, Charles had realized that she clung to him as well.

Instantly, his heart soared and hope flared to life in such a way that it terrified him. As much as he loved her, he needed to guard his heart until such a moment that her affection for him might deepen. And so, he reeled in his emotions, his mind focused on removing Lord Strumpton from their lives.

“I noticed his absence from the ballroom,” Charles growled under his breath, casting a hateful glare in Strumpton’s direction. “And... And I was concerned for you.” He took a step back, determined to face Strumpton here and now, when he felt Beatrice’s hands tighten upon his, holding him back.

Tears shimmered in her eyes, and yet the smile that touched her lips made him go weak in the knees. Again, hope flared, and Charles eyed her curiously, wondering what it was he was seeing, wondering if perhaps he was dreaming.

It was the sound of Lord Strumpton shifting upon his feet that drew Charles’s attention back to the other man in the room. One hand remained clasped in Beatrice’s as he turned to face his rival for his wife’s heart. “You’re a fool,” he told Lord Strumpton with a wide smile, noting the man’s surprise with satisfaction. “You lost her. You had your chance, and you wasted it.” His hand tightened possessively upon Beatrice’s, and to his utter surprise, she squeezed his in return. Yet Charles did not dare turn his head, his gaze fixed upon Lord Strumpton. “Now, she’s mine. Mine alone.” Oh, to speak so was boastful of him and petty and probably not very wise. Yet Charles could not help himself.

Lord Strumpton regarded him with an odd expression in his gaze. Then, a slow, almost devilish smile spread across his face. “The child she carries is mine, though,” he taunted Charles.

Behind him, Charles heard Beatrice draw in a sharp breath. He could feel her hand tremble and knew that she still blamed herself for what had happened. In truth, though, Charles wondered where they would be today if he had not come upon her in that heartbreaking moment, if it had never happened.

Holding Lord Strumpton’s gaze, Charles had never felt so certain in his life. “This child,” he told the other man, “is ours. Beatrice’s and mine. I will be his or her father, and if it is a boy, then he will be my heir, not yours.” A deep smile claimed his face,

and he knew he did not regret a single word he had spoken.

Aghast, Lord Strumpton stared at him, clearly not having expected this.

“Leave,” Charles insisted, nodding toward the door. “Now.”

The red of humiliation darkened Lord Strumpton’s cheeks, and he straightened his shoulders. “But I was invited,” he replied foolishly.

“I am revoking the invitation,” Charles snarled then once more nodded toward the door, exhaling a sigh of relief when Lord Strumpton turned upon his heel and stormed out, huffing and puffing indignantly as he went.

Then, slowly, Charles turned back around to face his wife. Tears still shimmered in her eyes, and the expression upon her face made him hope that...

“Did you truly mean what you said?” Beatrice asked, her voice trembling as she tapped a finger to the corner of her eye, catching a tear that spilled over. “About my child? About... our child?”

Charles nodded. “Yes, I did.” His hands wrapped tightly around hers.

“Listen,” Beatrice began, her gaze unsteady, “about before, about the... kiss,” she bit her lower lip. “I need to tell you that—”

Charles lifted a hand to stop her. “There is no need,” he assured her, worried about what she might say. She did not look offended or about to chide him for taking such liberties; yet Charles knew he had overstepped a line. “I apologize for what happened,” he said a bit sheepishly. “I never meant to... kiss you like that, but I was swept away in the moment, I suppose.”

Beatrice chuckled, her face transforming into an image of utter joy. Her hands slipped from his and grasped the sides of his face as she pushed closer, looking up into his eyes. “Don’t you dare apologize,” she whispered against his lips, brushing her mouth against his ever so softly. “I was swept away as well. I did not expect it, and it confused me. That’s why I rushed off. I’m sorry I did, but I needed a moment to myself.”

Thunderstruck, Charles stared at her, barely aware of how his hands settled upon her waist, drawing her ever closer.

“You’re a good man,” she told him, and inwardly, Charles cringed. “You’ve become the most wonderful friend to me.” Indeed, this was not what he wanted to hear. “Yet only when you kissed me did I realize how deeply I’ve come to care for you.” Disbelief lingered in her eyes. “I never even considered it after so short a time, after thinking my heart lost to another.” Her hands upon his face tightened. “Now, though, I realize that my heart only ever beat for you.”

Still staring at his wife, Charles knew not what to say. He could barely blink or breathe, let alone form any sort of coherent thought. Her words echoed through his mind, and yet he did not dare to believe them. Joy surged through him, and yet he willed it to back down, afraid to lose again what now seemed within arm’s reach. “There is no need,” Charles finally said, needing to be absolutely certain, “to pretend. I care for you, and I shall always care for you even if you cannot—”

“Did you not hear what I said?” Beatrice exclaimed, a touch of annoyance in her gaze now. “I love you, Charles. Can you hear the words I’m saying?”

Charles laughed. He could not help it. “Yes, I can. Only I’m afraid to believe them.” He exhaled slowly then rested his forehead against hers, both their eyes closing for a moment of peace. “Tell me what it is you want.”

“I want you,” Beatrice replied instantly, her voice strong and determined. “I want a life with you. I want what we had this past week. I want to laugh with you and dance with you in the snow or in the library. I want to be a family. All of us. I want everyone we love close by and never far apart. I want our child to be loved, truly loved, and find love one day as well.”

Charles chuckled. “Well, perhaps I haven’t told you yet,” he lifted his head and met her gaze, “however, it is a Whickerton family tradition to marry for love and nothing else.”

Beatrice loved the sound of that. “Truly?” she teased, remembering when he had first told her, remembering how awful she had felt to have robbed him of his own chance for love. “A tradition, you say? For how long?”

“Well, let me think.” His gaze shifted sideways as though he were calculating a rather complicated mathematical equation. “We are now the second generation to do so.” He grinned at her.

Beatrice laughed. “Already the second? That is quite an impressive record, I must say.”

Charles sighed, his gaze sobering. “You know I love you as well, but this, is this truly what you want?”

Beatrice nodded. “As long as you promise that we’ll never stop dancing in the snow, I’ll agree to anything.” She hugged him tightly, her arms slung around his neck, feeling the wonderful sensation of his heart beat in tandem with her own. “I might have another request, though.”

Charles’s brows rose in question, and Beatrice thought a smile teasing his lips suited him quite wonderfully.

“Will you kiss me again?” she asked, worrying her lower lip despite knowing that he would not deny her. “And again tomorrow? And the day after that? And a year from now?”

“Did I not promise to make you smile again?” Charles whispered against her lips. “To make you happy?”

“I do recall something of the kind, yes.”

“Well, then...” Charles kissed her gently, cradling her in his arms with infinite care. He tasted her lips as she closed her eyes, surrendering to the pleasure of his embrace. She felt the warmth of his body against hers, and the electricity of his touch coursing through her veins. He pulled her closer, their hearts beating in unison, and the world around them melted away. Nothing else mattered except them and this moment.

Their first.

She held him tightly, savoring the gentle caress of his fingertips, and the love that seemed to flow between them. She felt safe in his arms and finally allowed herself to simply be. Her spirit felt soothed, and the walls that encased her heart melted away. She was home.

Source Creation Date: August 9, 2025, 3:33 pm

Whickerton Grove, England, August 1772 (or a variation thereof)

Seven months later

Exhausted, Beatrice sank back into the pillows as her child's cries filled the chamber. Charles was at her side, placing a kiss upon her forehead, his pale face bathed in warm sunlight. "Are you all right?" His eyes searched her face before he craned his neck to look toward the doctor. "Is she all right?"

His voice was tight with concern, and Beatrice gathered her strength to reassure him. "I am fine. Merely... tired. So very tired." A chuckle drifted from her lips as she forced her eyes open once more. "Where's my child?" Indeed, she had never heard anything more wonderful than the soft wailing that drifted through their chamber.

With the babe bundled up warmly, the midwife stepped toward them, a wide smile upon her face as she looked from Beatrice to her husband. "It's a boy," she announced, beaming, no doubt certain that a boy was always most welcome to any peer of the realm. Of course, the midwife could not know the circumstances that had brought their family together, and months ago, Beatrice would have flinched at the thought that her child would be a boy.

Now, though, everything was different.

Gently, Charles took their son from the midwife's arms, his eyes aglow and fixed upon the boy's little face. As much as Beatrice longed to hold her child, she was utterly mesmerized by the sight before her eyes. Indeed, Charles looked like a father through and through, pride in his gaze and tears streaming down his cheeks.

Seating himself on the bed beside her, Charles handed her their son. “Here,” he whispered, awe tinging his voice. “Go to Mama.” He scooted closer, wrapping an arm around them both.

Beatrice cursed under her breath as tears streamed down her face, blurring her vision and all but hiding her son’s precious little face from her.

“He’s perfect,” Charles whispered beside her. “We are a family now.” He smiled down at her and placed a kiss upon her forehead.

Gently, Beatrice traced a finger down her son’s cheek and across his chin. She softly tapped it to his little nose, absolutely mesmerized to hold him in her arms, to look into his eyes and have him look back at her. These were his first moments, and she vowed she would do everything within her power to ensure that all the ones that came after were as happy as possible. “What shall we name him?” she whispered; her voice choked with tears as she looked up at her husband. “Any ideas?”

Charles sighed and thought for a moment. “What do you think of Troy?” he asked tentatively. “It is my father’s middle name.”

Beatrice nodded, deeply touched. “It sounds perfect.” Indeed, Troy was a wonderful name, and it proved beyond any doubt that Charles was Troy’s father in every way that mattered. Life truly could be perfect.

“I’m so grateful,” Beatrice murmured, seeking her husband’s gaze, “that you did not leave me alone that night at the ball when I told you to go.” She shook her head, unable to imagine what might have been if he had. “Thank you for being so adamant.”

Charles grinned at her wickedly. “I shall remind you of this the next time you call me stubborn.”

Beatrice laughed when a knock came on the door, and Lady Whickerton poked her head in only a second later. “May we come in?” she asked with a wide smile.

“You made it!” Charles exclaimed, waving them forward.

In the next instant, the door flew open, allowing in not only Lord and Lady Whickerton but also Lizzie following upon their heels. “Where’s the baby?” the girl exclaimed, bouncing as she walked.

“We’ve come to meet the next generation of Whickertons,” Jasper exclaimed, one arm wrapped around his wife, “and welcome him or her to the family.”

The three of them moved closer, peering expectantly at the little bundle in Beatrice’s arms.

“It’s a boy,” Charles told them proudly, and stepped aside to grant his little sister a better view. “We’ve named him Troy.”

Edith smiled while Jasper seemed a bit taken aback, his eyes suddenly misting with tears. “He’s beautiful,” Lizzie exclaimed. “May I hold him?” she asked pleadingly, her hands clasped together.

Beatrice nodded then gently laid her son into his aunt’s arms as the rest of the family crowded around them, every single face lit up with joy.

Indeed, the future was a bright one, and Beatrice could hardly wait.

THE END

Have you read the Whickerton saga yet? Of course, this is not the last time Lady Whickerton meddles to ensure her family’s happiness. There are many more loves to

be found in the Whickertons in Love series!

It is now the year 1801, and the legacy of Lady Edith's matchmaking prowess lives on through her grandchildren, particularly the fiery Lady Louisa. Much like her grandmother, Louisa finds herself entangled in the complexities of love and rivalry, albeit under very different circumstances.

In the heart of England's aristocracy, where every glance has meaning and every word carries the weight of reputation, Lady Louisa faces her own romantic turmoil. At an innocent ball, she is confronted with her most guarded secret by none other than Phineas Hawke, Viscount Barrington—a man whose dark eyes seem to see straight through her defenses. This encounter sets off a chain of events filled with teasing, challenges, and a begrudging attraction that neither Louisa nor Phineas can easily deny.

Echoing the tales of yesteryears, where Lady Edith once played the role of cupid for her friend, now Lady Louisa and Viscount Barrington find themselves caught in a dance of pride, passion, and a rivalry that could very well lead to love.

Join us as we delve into the enchanting world of the Whickertons once more, where past and present intertwine, and where the legacy of a grandmother's meddlesome yet loving ways guides the next generation towards finding happiness in the most unexpected places.

Read book 1, *Once Upon a Devilishly Enchanting Kiss*, a captivating enemies-to-lovers Regency romance!

Read on for a sneak-peek!

Source Creation Date: August 9, 2025, 3:33 pm

London, England 1800 (or a variation thereof)

“Anne, you look as though you’re about to faint,” Lady Louisa Beaumont, second eldest daughter to the Earl of Whickerton, commented upon seeing her cousin’s whitish, pale face and her huge, round eyes staring at the crowded ballroom as though facing a firing squad. “This is your first ball, not your execution.” Chuckling, Louisa squeezed Anne’s hand reassuringly. “You’ll be fine.”

Whether or not Anne believed her was unclear as she continued to eye her surroundings with wary caution, her shoulders tense and her steps all but steady.

Turning her head to look at her younger sister—by only one year, mind you—Louisa whispered over her shoulder, “She looks worse than you did, dearest Leo.” A sisterly snicker followed.

For a short moment, Leonora all but ignored Louisa’s comment. Then she remarked in a mere observational tone, “I comported myself in a perfectly appropriate fashion.”

Louisa nodded, unable to keep a grin from stealing onto her face. “Yes, you did, and you looked awfully uncomfortable the entire time.”

Leonora sighed and then looked past Louisa at their cousin. “Do not look at all those you do not know,” she advised. “Seek out those you are acquainted with and remind yourself that you’re not alone.” She moved to Anne’s other side and took ahold of her hand. “We are here.”

For a moment, Anne closed her eyes and inhaled a deep breath. Then she nodded, a

hesitant smile coming to her lips as she looked at her two cousins affectionately. “Thank you for being here for me.”

“What are cousins for?” Leonora smiled warmly.

“To tease each other mercilessly?” Louisa asked mockingly as she gently patted Anne’s hand.

“Not today!” Leonora stated, a warning tone in her voice and a rather authoritative look in her blue eyes.

Louisa nodded. “Very well.” She let her gaze sweep the crowded ballroom. “On the lookout for acquaintan—” Louisa flinched when Tobias Hawke all but materialized out of nowhere in front of them, his chocolate-brown eyes fixed on Anne as he held out his hand to her. “Care for a dance?”

Sighing, Anne seemed to relax on the spot, and her hand slipped into his without thought.

When Anne’s childhood friend pulled her onto the dance floor, a few whispered words left his lips and that endearing half-smile of his once more curled up the corners of his mouth.

Louisa moved closer to her sister, both watching the two of them stand up for the next dance. “There’s a couple in the making,” she remarked with absolute certainty. “Mark my words; this is Anne’s first and last Season.”

“You cannot know that,” Leonora objected, a slight frown upon her face as she regarded the young couple. “They’ve been friends for years and—”

“That is precisely what I mean,” Louisa interrupted her sister, wondering how to explain to Leonora the magic that could exist between two people; not that Louisa

herself had ever felt it. Since her own debut two years ago, she had frequented balls and picnics, concerts and plays, hoping to find the one man who would melt her heart.

All she had found had been disappointed hopes.

At least so far.

Still, Louisa understood well the smile she often saw on their parents' faces when they caught each other's eye across a crowded room. After over thirty years of marriage and six children born to them, Lord and Lady Whickerton were still as smitten with each other as on the day they had first met, at least according to Grandma Edie. Of course, Louisa and her siblings had not been born at the time so could not speak from experience.

But they all believed Grandma Edie; the woman had never been known to be wrong.

Ever.

Younger than Louisa by no more than a year, Leonora, however, had never been able to grasp the effect love could have upon one's life. She had a very rational way of looking at the world, even when it came to emotions. She was not cold or unfeeling, not at all; she possessed a truly watchful eye—not unlike Grandma Edie's—and knew how to spot the first sparks of love or the pangs of heartbreak. Still, for Leo, it was hard to calculate with something as unreliable as emotions. Yet, she was fascinated by them, perhaps even more so because they could not be added up like two and two.

Louisa, though, was the opposite in every way.

Like fire and water, day and night, the two sisters could not be more different. Where Leonora was rational and calculated, Louisa was passionate and spontaneous. She followed her heart, loved to feel the sun upon her skin and the sensation of twirling in

the open air until her head spun. Balls meant delightful company, dancing until dawn and people she cared for sharing in her joy. They also allowed her to mingle with eligible gentlemen, whispering of a match not unlike her parents’.

That had been Louisa’s dream ever since...

...ever since she could remember.

A man who would set her world on fire with a single look.

A man who—

“Lord Barrington is looking at you,” Leonora remarked with no more than a slight suggestion in her voice; indeed, for her, it was merely an observation. Nothing more, and nothing less. Or was it? Louisa had to admit that sometimes she was not certain what hid behind Leonora’s dark blue eyes.

At her sister’s words, Louisa stilled, then carefully glanced in the direction Leonora indicated. Of course, Louisa had taken note of him the second they had stepped into the ballroom.

Of course, she had.

She always did.

Tall, with raven-black hair and devilishly dark eyes, Phineas Hawke, Viscount Barrington, was an imposing man. Often, one could find a bit of a wicked grin upon his face and hear a daringly teasing remark fall from his lips.

Elder brother to Mr. Tobias Hawke, Anne’s childhood friend, Louisa had known him for years; however, they had never spent much time in each other’s company. Lately, though, she had felt his gaze linger upon her.

As it did now.

Louisa inhaled a slow breath as his dark gaze swept over her face before seeking hers with bold curiosity. Something in her stomach began to flutter, excitedly, teasingly, deliciously.

“Do you welcome his interest?” Leonora asked curiously beside her as she brushed a dark curl behind her ear as though it was obstructing her view, hindering an accurate observation.

Louisa sighed, then forced her gaze from Lord Barrington’s. “What interest?” she asked, displeased with her sister’s watchful attention. “He’s merely looking in our direction.”

Leonora’s gaze narrowed before she turned to observe the man in question more thoroughly.

Louisa wanted to sink into a hole in the ground. “Do not stare at him!” she hissed at her sister, urging her over to the side where two large refreshment tables were set up.

“Then you do care for his attention,” Leonora concluded, her blue eyes settling on Louisa before they narrowed once more. “What bothers you? Your interest in him? Or the fact that I observed it?”

Louisa sighed loudly, “Both. Neither.” She shook her head. “Would you mind seeing to Grandma Edie for a little bit so Jules can have a chance at dancing? The woman will end up an old maid with our dear grandmother glued to her side.”

Leonora nodded and hurried away to where their beloved grandmother sat on the fringes of the ballroom with their eldest sister Juliet—or Jules as their family called her. While Grandma Edie still possessed as sharp a mind as ever, her body was slowly failing her.

While Lord and Lady Whickerton had been blessed with six children, five of them were girls, which was a bit of a curiosity among the ton . Indeed, most believed that after welcoming a son, Troy, as their first-born, they had sought to provide a spare after procuring the heir without any difficulties at all. However, five girls had followed and even today Louisa sometimes saw a bit of a pitying glance from an old matron here and there.

Of course—as usual!—people could not be more wrong.

Carefully, Louisa glanced over her shoulder back at Lord Barrington to find him in conversation with another gentleman. A small stab of disappointment settled in her heart that surprised Louisa. Never had she thought of herself as dependent upon a man's attention; nevertheless, the temptingly dark look in Lord Barrington's gaze had never failed to stir her heart. Truth be told, she wished she were better acquainted with him. Perhaps Anne would help her in the matter.

At present, though, Anne was following her childhood friend out of the ballroom, a wide grin upon her face as he whispered something in her ear. Louisa smiled, seeing her prediction all but confirmed. If only she could say with the same certainty how the man's elder brother thought of her.

Gathering her courage, Louisa sidled across the ballroom, doing her utmost to appear inconspicuous. She smiled left and right, exchanged a word with an acquaintance here and there and accepted a glass of punch, her hands grateful to have something to occupy them.

And then, she had reached her destination, her feet coming to stand no more than an arm's length from where Lord Barrington was conversing with a friend. With her back to him and his to her, Louisa hung on every word as she pretended to observe the dancers.

“How is life treating you these days, Barrington?” the other gentleman inquired, the

tone in his voice suggesting the answer to his question was not of great interest to him.

“As expected,” Lord Barrington replied. “And yourself?”

The man sighed before he shuffled on his feet, turning back toward the dancers.

“Is something wrong, Lockton?” Lord Barrington asked, and Louisa noticed him shift from one foot onto the other out of the corner of her eye. She wished she could turn and look at him more directly; that, however, would reveal her interest, and at present she was not quite ready to do so.

“Are you looking for someone?” Lord Barrington asked his friend, a hint of exasperation in his voice as the man failed to answer.

“A moment ago, she was across the ballroom...”

Lord Barrington chuckled, a teasing, slightly dark sound that snaked its way down Louisa’s spine. “It is about a woman then? Who pray tell caught your eye?”

Lord Lockton sighed, “The Lady Louisa.”

Louisa stilled. He couldn’t possibly be talking about her, could he? Nevertheless, only moments ago, she had been across the ballroom...

“Lord Whickerton’s daughter?” Lord Barrington asked to clarify.

“The very one,” the other man confirmed, warmth in his voice. “She is remarkable, is she not?”

Louisa could barely keep herself from turning to look upon the gentleman’s face, who held her in such high esteem. His voice did not sound familiar, and she had only just

caught his name. Could she have made such an impression on someone she did not even know?

“Are you acquainted with her?” Lord Lockton inquired then.

Lord Barrington inhaled a slow breath. “A little,” he replied, his voice somewhat tense as though he wished to say more but did not dare.

Louisa felt a cold chill sneak down her spine, and her hands tensed upon the glass of punch she had all but forgotten.

The other man seemed to have noticed Lord Barrington’s reservations as well, for he asked, “Do you object to the lady?”

Again, Lord Barrington sighed, his shoulders rising and falling in a shrug. “I know you to be a man of many intellectual interests, which is why,” he sighed yet again, “I must advise you place your attentions elsewhere, yes.”

Louisa’s jaw clenched harder and harder until it felt as though it would break clear off.

“Although she is a beautiful woman,” Lord Barrington continued, “her mind deserves less adoration.” He cleared his throat and leaned toward the other man, his voice dropping to a whisper. “To be frank, she is a pretty head with nothing inside. I wouldn’t be surprised if she didn’t know how to read.”

“I had no idea,” the other man exclaimed in astonishment as Louisa felt her insides twist and turn painfully. Tears shot to her eyes, and her jaw felt as though it would splinter at any moment. The delicious flutter in her stomach had turned to a block of ice, and without another thought, Louisa fled the scene.

Her feet carried her out of the ballroom and into a deserted hallway where she sank

down in a puddle of misery, the glass of punch still clutched in her hands. Fortunately, no one came upon her there, giving her a much-needed moment to collect herself.

Still, the words she had overheard would forever be burnt into her memory for Lord Barrington had spoken the truth.

As much as it pained her to admit it—even if only to herself—Louisa did not know how to read. She could write her name, but not much more than that. Never had she been able to make sense of letters and words and their meaning.

Still, to this day, no one knew.

No one had ever suspected.

Until now.

Until Lord Barrington.

How had he discovered her secret? Or had it merely been a lucky guess?

Whatever it had been, it had shattered Louisa's delicate, little world. Somehow, she had found a way to stand tall even without the skills that everyone took for granted. She had developed ways to distract others where reading and writing were concerned. Somehow, she had always found a way. She was clever and ingenious and prided herself on her quick wit.

Still, deep down, Louisa had always thought of herself as inferior. In every other regard, she and her siblings were simply different. Different in many ways. Each had their own special talent. Each possessed a unique way of looking at the world. Each used their mind in different ways.

In this one regard, however, Louisa was inferior. She had always known it, and now Lord Barrington's words had confirmed what she had always known to be true.

Never would she forgive him for this off-hand remark.

Never.

Never again would she be able to look at him and not remember this crushing feeling of loss and disappointment.

To be considered wanting.

To not be worthy of another.

To be inferior.

Read on!