



Saved By the Lyon (The Lyon's Den Connected World)

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Category: Historical

Description: Only time will tell if spending her massive wealth to purchase Phillip Eversley, the Duke of Markham is the best or worst purchase Violet has ever made.

A wounded Major Phillip Eversley returns from the war to discover his father and brother are both dead and he is now the Duke of Markham. He also discovers that before their deaths, they went so deeply into debt that even if Phillip sells every unentailed property he now owns, he can never save the one property he loves most his grandmother's home, Parkland Estate.

Because of the massive wealth her father left her, Lady Violet Slushman becomes one of the wealthiest women in London. The former wallflower is now besieged with suitors desperate to marry her – but only for her money. She is left with no choice but to go to Mrs. Bessie Dove-Lyon, the black widow of Whitehall, renowned owner of the Lyon's Club. Mrs. Dove-Lyon is known throughout London as the one and only person who can find a way to erase any scandal and make a match for anyone seeking one. And Violet is desperate to find a husband to protect her from the money-hungry latches. She only has two requirements, that the man Bessie Dove-Lyon chooses for her puts her wealth to good use, and he is not so handsome that he makes her plainness more obvious.

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Cannon fire thundered all around him, the smoke so heavy he couldn't see a foot in front of himself, but Phillip Eversley refused to give up. He bellowed to his men, knowing only those nearest him could hear.

“Advance! Move forward!”

He took another agonizing step and tripped over a British flag the flagbearer had dropped when he went down. Eversley picked up the splintered pole and waved the flag defiantly.

“Onward! Onward!”

His men cheered, and he continued to take one pain-filled step after another, refusing to give any ground. They were so close to overtaking the French. They couldn't give up now.

Phillip fought with saber and bayonet. They were all he had. He'd run out of powder and lead a long time ago. He wasn't sure when. Sometime after he'd taken a saber cut to his leg.

He'd lost a lot of blood and was getting lightheaded, but he could still move, he could still fight.

He slashed his saber through the air and struck flesh. He tried not to think about how old or how young the French soldier that he'd just killed was. He was the enemy, although Phillip doubted he was even old enough to know what they were fighting for. Just as most of the men under his command were too young to know they fought

for anything more than queen and country.

Just then, a bloodcurdling scream rent the air, and Phillip turned in time to see two French soldiers barreling forward with their bayonets poised to skewer him.

“Major!” a voice called out in warning.

From the corner of his eye, Phillip became aware of a young British soldier leaping to his side. It was Jeremy Whitecliff. He and his twin brother had both signed up on the same day and joined Phillip’s unit, proudly proclaiming that they were going to kill as many of the French swine as they could.

The twins were rash farm boys and fought with a tenacity and fierceness that bordered on recklessness. Phillip had prayed that they would both survive this war, because he wasn’t sure how one would carry on without the other. They were that close, that connected in mind and spirit.

Phillip lifted his saber and slashed at the first French soldier that attacked him. The soldier fell to the ground, and Phillip stabbed a second. But more were coming at him from both sides.

Phillip knew there was no way he could fend off this many Frenchmen. He turned to face his enemy, braced his feet in a battle-ready pose, and prepared to die.

Another bloodcurdling cry pierced the smoke that shrouded the bloody melee, and Jeremy Whitecliff charged ahead. He had a sword in each hand and swung his weapons as if he could mow down every enemy on the face of the earth.

Phillip rushed forward to assist, but Jeremy was cutting them down with a force of his own.

Phillip killed one enemy, then a second, before he was stopped by a painful slash to his ribs. He went down at the same time several more French soldiers rushed in, followed by as many, if not more, British soldiers.

He tried to stay alert, but lost consciousness and his world went dark. When he finally woke, the battle was over and the French attackers lay dead all about him, along with only one British soldier—Jeremy Whitecliff.

Jeremy's brother Jamie knelt and cradled his twin's lifeless body in his arms. Jamie was as ferocious a fighter as his brother had been, but as he held his brother, the former immovable hulk of a man seemed to shrink. Tears streamed down his face as he rocked, sobbing uncontrollably.

Slowly, Jamie lifted his head, and his gaze locked with Phillip's.

“He died protecting you, Major. I hope your life was worth what he gave up, you bloody bastard.”

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Violet Slushman fastened the ribbons of her bonnet beneath her chin and drew on her gloves, then marched stoically from her room, down the length of the hallway. She paused at the top of the staircase and looked to the lower floor.

“Are you all right, Lady Violet?” her butler asked when she hadn’t moved for several seconds.

Violet lifted her gaze and forced a smile to her lips. “Yes, Wilbert. I’m perfectly fine.”

Violet made her way to the bottom of the stairs. When she was almost at the bottom, Wilbert took her hand and escorted her the rest of the way down.

“Are you sure you want to do this, my lady?”

“Yes, Wilbert. I’m sure. I have to examine all my options. I won’t be satisfied until I do.”

“Very well, my lady. Do you want me to accompany you?”

“No, that won’t be necessary. Is my carriage out front?”

“Yes, my lady. Milo will drive you.”

“Thank you, Wilbert.”

Violet walked to the front door, and Wilbert accompanied her to her carriage to help

her inside. When she was seated, Wilbert tapped the side of the carriage and Milo set the team of horses in motion.

Violet didn't stare out the window like she wanted to, instead leaning against the red velvet squabs and filling her mind with all the questions she wanted to ask the Black Widow of Whitehall. It was vital for her to focus on the information she must gather from the notorious woman. The establishment she intended to visit wasn't all that far from her Mayfair home, but getting to Westminster took them past Buckingham Palace, and that was always unpredictable.

As it happened, it was only a matter of minutes before the carriage slowed and Violet readied herself to disembark. She straightened her thick glasses on the bridge of her nose and adjusted the bow of the bonnet tied beneath her chin, then took a deep breath when Milo opened the door to assist her as she alighted from the carriage.

"I will wait right here until you return, my lady," Milo said as he escorted her to the door.

"Thank you, Milo. I'm not sure how long this will take."

"That doesn't matter, my lady. I'll be waiting right here for you."

Violet gave her driver an appreciative smile, then stood behind him while he knocked on the door.

"Yes?" a giant of a man said when he opened the door.

"Lady Violet Slushman to see Mrs. Dove-Lyon."

The doorman opened the door fully. "Have the lady come this way," he said. "You may remain outside," he said to Milo.

Milo stepped to the side as Violet entered the Lyon's Den. The doorman closed the door behind her, and she followed him across the foyer toward some stairs leading upward to the second floor.

Violet was fascinated by the main room of the gambling den. She'd never thought to see a gambling den, especially one so notorious as the Lyon's Den. She'd never expected to set foot in such an establishment in her lifetime, and wouldn't even have known such a place like the Lyon's Den existed if she hadn't been eavesdropping.

Though it was quite accidental, she'd overheard one of the ladies her mother had invited to tea tell the tale of the Duke of Riverdale's daughter. Evidently the girl had managed to get involved in a scandal that threatened to ruin their entire family. In an effort to resurrect the family's good name, they had hired the infamous Black Widow of Whitehall—otherwise known as Mrs. Bessie Dove-Lyon—to make the entire fiasco disappear.

Rumor had it that Mrs. Dove-Lyon had worked what Society considered a miracle by not only making the scandal evaporate, but allowing the ruined lady to come away from the debacle smelling like a rose.

Violet had never forgotten that piece of gossip, and although it had happened several years past, she'd remembered Mrs. Dove-Lyon's name and that she could perform miracles when it came to finding a perfect match for any unfortunate who Society considered unmatchable.

"Are you coming?" the burly doorman asked when he reached the top of the stairs and Violet was still halfway down on the landing.

"Yes. Yes," Violet said, then continued upward. When she reached the top of the stairs, she realized there was an older woman waiting to greet her.

“Lady Violet.”

“Yes. Mrs. Dove-Lyon?”

“Yes.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you,” Violet said with a polite bob.

“Please, follow me into my office.”

Mrs. Dove-Lyon opened the door, and Violet followed her. Once inside, she showed Violet to a place on a settee. Then she poured each of them a glass of wine and sat on a cushioned chair opposite Violet.

“Perhaps you’d like to start by telling me a little about yourself, my lady.”

Violet took a sip of her wine, then swallowed. She was surprised that Mrs. Dove-Lyon didn’t know all about her. The scandal associated with Violet’s family was all Society had talked about for more than a year now. Violet couldn’t believe a lady with Mrs. Dove-Lyon’s reputation wasn’t equally as knowledgeable about the Slushman family’s shame.

Perhaps the lady was familiar with Violet’s background but wanted to hear her own account of what happened.

“May I speak honestly and in the strictest confidence, Mrs. Dove-Lyon?”

“Of course,” the lady answered.

“As you may be aware, my brother, Lord Slushman, was brought up on charges and ordered to pay restitution for fathering several illegitimate children to women who

worked as maids in our household. As a result of his misdeeds, he was sentenced to a month's hard labor in a workhouse. Because of that sentence, he carried a grudge from which he couldn't free himself, and which resulted in his death."

Violet paused to take a deep breath. "Another fact I am sure you are aware of is that the ton can be quite unforgiving when they choose."

"Yes, they can," Mrs. Dove-Lyon agreed before taking another swallow of her wine.

"For myself, I could have survived without their approval. I have never cared much for the opinion of Society. My mother and sister were quite another matter, however. Mother lived for the approval of the ton. When our family was ostracized from Society, a part of her died.

"You see, from the time she had her come-out, she'd been proclaimed one of the most beautiful belles in Society. The same was later true of my sister. It was only fitting that Mother could live vicariously through Pauline. When my brother's shame stole that from my sister, Mother could not adjust to Society's rejection. She thought of nothing other than leaving London and starting over someplace else.

"Less than a year after my brother's death, Father sold every piece of land that wasn't entailed, and they sailed to America."

"You did not sail with them?" Mrs. Dove-Lyon asked.

Violet smiled. "There was no point in leaving a land I knew to go to a land I didn't know when nothing would have changed. Admitting that I am her daughter would have embarrassed Mother as much in American society as it had in British society."

"You were not accepted by your mother?"

“How could I be? I am as plain and ordinary as my sister was beautiful.”

“So, you remained in London.”

“Yes. And now I am thankful I did.”

A lump formed in Violet’s throat and tears filled her eyes. Although she’d told herself she would not show any emotion in front of Mrs. Dove-Lyon, her body betrayed her.

“I just received word that the ship my family sailed on went down and none of them survived.”

Mrs. Bessie Dove-Lyon’s eyes filled with sadness, and she extended her arm and placed her fingers over Violet’s hand. “I’m sorry, my dear. Is that why you have come to see me? Your family left you destitute, and now you are in need of a husband?”

Violet shook her head. “No, Mrs. Dove-Lyon. Just the opposite. My father left me one of the wealthiest women in the country, and I need help finding the right man to take care of my wealth.”

Mrs. Dove-Lyon rose to her feet and reached for a crystal decanter. “I think I need something stronger than wine,” she said, filling her glass. “Would you care for brandy, my lady?”

Violet smiled through her tears. “No, thank you. I’ve imbibed enough today.”

Mrs. Dove-Lyon took a sip from her glass, then turned her attention back to Violet. “Please explain what you meant when you said your father left you extremely wealthy.”

“My father had an excellent head for business, and over the years he purchased several estates when they went up for sale. None of these were entailed, so when Mother insisted she wanted to go to America, Father sold his unentailed properties. He wasn’t convinced that Mother would be happy in a strange land with strange customs concerning Society, so when he sold his unentailed estates, he left the money in my care. He did the same with several shipping and mining investments. The money was left in a bank account in my name.”

“He trusted you that explicitly?”

Violet nodded. “My brother had no interest in learning from Father, so Father took me under his wing at an early age and taught me everything about managing his estates and investing his money.”

“Your father must have been a very wise man.”

“He was. More than simply wise,” Violet said as more tears spilled from her eyes. “He was very special.”

“I can see that he was.” Mrs. Dove-Lyon took another small sip from her glass. “You said you were interested in finding the correct man to help you take care of your money. I assume that means you have certain stipulations?”

“Yes.” Violet reached into her reticule and drew out a paper, then unfolded it. “I am not expecting to marry a man for love.”

“You do not wish to fall in love?”

Violet felt a small blush rise to her cheeks. She was not accustomed to speaking of such things. “It’s not that I do not wish to fall in love. I simply do not expect the man I marry to love me. I have previously gone through two Seasons and know how

impossible it is for a man to have interest in a female as unattractive as I am. I learned long ago not to expect love.”

“Haven’t you heard the saying that beauty is in the eye of beholder?”

“Yes, but I also know that to be false.”

Mrs. Dove-Lyon smiled and took another sip of her liquor. “Very well. Is there anything else?”

“Yes, and this is important. I want a house filled with children.”

“You want several children?”

“Yes. You see, essentially, I grew up alone. I don’t want that for my children. And if the man I marry has a title, it will be important that he has an heir to inherit his title as well as his estates. And it’s important to have a spare or two in case something happens to the heir.”

Mrs. Dove-Lyon smiled. “Yes. That is important.”

“It is. I am living proof of that.”

“Is there anything else?”

Violet looked at her list. “Nothing of real consequence, although I intend to play an active role in the working of our estate. I require one of those estates to be in my name alone so it can never be taken away from me or my children. But these are all things I can work out with a willing suitor. He will find I am not a demanding woman. I only want to be treated fairly, considering the amount of money I am willing to hand over to him. I want him to be responsible and agree not to waste or

gamble away the money I give him.” Violet lifted her head, and her gaze locked with Mrs. Dove-Lyon’s. “I don’t think that is being unfair. Do you?”

Mrs. Dove-Lyon smiled. “No, that is not unfair at all. Now, do you have an amount of money that you are willing to relinquish?”

Violet opened her reticule and removed a second sheet of paper. “This is the amount my father’s solicitor wrote down. His signature is at the bottom of the page. If you need to verify anything, I’m sure he can answer any questions you might have.”

Mrs. Dove-Lyon reached for the paper Violet held out and looked at it. Her eyes opened wide then her jaw dropped.

“Bloody hell,” she said in a hushed whisper.

“Is there a problem?” Violet asked.

“No. The question is—how many husbands would you like me to acquire for you?”

Violet could do nothing but smile.

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Phillip Eversley, Earl of Markham, sat in the chair opposite his solicitor's tidy desk and stared at the papers Joshua Barnham had just given him.

"I assume these figures are all correct," Phillip said, hoping his solicitor would say they required further investigation. Instead, Barnham's answer sucked the air from Phillip's lungs.

"Unfortunately, I regret to say they are. I went over them several times."

Phillip rose and stepped into the room's window cove. He watched carriage after carriage drive by, carrying their passengers to their appointments, or simply to the shops, as if this were a regular day in London. But it was anything but ordinary for Phillip. His world had just come crashing down around his ears.

"I had no idea our financial situation was so dire."

"I was afraid that was the case, my lord, although with your fighting the war on the Continent, there would have been nothing you could have done about any of it."

Phillip pounded his fist against the window frame. "I could have tried to convince my father and brother to curb their spending. I could have tried to stop them both from gambling away everything they'd been given. I could have—"

Phillip raked his fingers through his hair, then lowered his head and released an agonized sigh.

"There was nothing you could have done, my lord. Your father and brother both had

a penchant for gambling away more money than they had available. They both thought they would win the next hand of cards or the next roll of the dice. What is regrettable is that you are left to contend with the losses they accrued.”

Phillip looked over his shoulder and focused on his solicitor. “Do you have any suggestions as to what I can do to extract myself from this travesty?”

Barnham rose from behind his desk and poured brandy into two glasses. He handed one to Phillip and motioned for him to sit, then took his own glass and resumed the seat behind his desk. “There are only two options open to you, as I see it. The first option is, of course, marriage.”

“No! I refuse to marry a wealthy woman just so I can use her money to pay off my father’s gambling debts. I swore a long time ago that I would never marry, and going to fight in the war only convinced me that my decision was correct.”

“Marriage is quite usual, my lord. Many impoverished gentlemen do it.”

“Well, I’m not one of those gentlemen.” Phillip took a long swallow of the brandy in his glass. “You said there was a second option. What is it?”

Barnham reached for a paper on his desk and handed it to Phillip. “This is a list of all the properties you own that are not entailed. These can be sold and the profits used to pay your debts. I regret to tell you, however, that even if you sell all your unentailed properties, it is doubtful that you will acquire enough to cover all debts. It will only make a dent in the amount.”

Phillip looked at the list of properties that were unentailed, and his stomach churned. He would be left with nothing except the estate he cared least about. The Markham family seat—Markham Valley.

And at the top of the list was the estate he would do anything he could to protect—his grandmother's estate, Parkwood Manor.

“Would you care if I took these papers with me and studied my options for a day or two?” Phillip asked.

“Of course not,” Barnham answered. “But you haven't much time to consider what you'd like to do.”

“One question, Mr. Barnham. Is it possible to sell my unentailed properties and use the money to save one or two properties?”

“That would all depend,” his solicitor answered.

“On what?”

“On who holds the debts and what property you are talking about.”

“I'm talking about Parkwood Manor.”

“That is a very sought-after estate. I'm sure that will go for more than you can make from the sale of your unentailed properties. It's just that...” The man paused and coughed, as if considering whether he should say more.

“Don't hold out on me, man. I've not the stomach for it at the moment.”

“Well, then, it's also possible that the same person holds more than one IOU. Or perhaps even all of them.”

“I see,” Phillip said. That would be disastrous. If one person held them all, he would never be able to strike a decent bargain.

“I’m sorry I couldn’t be of more help.”

“I appreciate all you’ve done, Mr. Barnham. Thank you,” Phillip said, then gathered all the information the solicitor had shared with him and walked toward the door. “I will return when I’ve considered what to do.”

Barnham rounded his desk and met his client at the door. He smiled and laid a hand on Phillip’s shoulder. “Make it soon, son. As soon as you possibly can.”

Phillip nodded and made a hasty retreat into the street. He didn’t know why he should want time to consider his plight. If he was staring at the only option he had open to him, his decision was obvious. He would have to sell everything he could and hope he received enough money to hold his creditors off long enough to find another way out of this mess. Or buy Parkwood Manor from his creditors.

Phillip Eversley, new Earl of Markham, walked away from his solicitor’s office with no direction in mind. He simply needed to walk, and think.

He arrived home several hours later, knowing he wouldn’t sleep. He had too many thoughts rolling around in his head. Unfortunately, he had no solutions for the nagging question that refused to go away: How was he going to save Parkwood Manor?

Phillip spent two sleepless nights walking the floor, then drinking whiskey to try to dull the anguish. He woke every morning the same as if he were still in the army, then rose and dressed and started a day that would end the same as the one before. He told himself that today would be different. Today he’d go see Barnham and tell him to start selling all his unentailed property. It would kill him to lose Parkwood Manor, but he’d get over it. He’d still have Markham Valley.

Phillip dressed, then went down to breakfast. At least he had enough food to last for a

while and wouldn't go hungry. He sat at the table and poured himself a cup of coffee just as his batman brought him a plate of food. The man had served him admirably throughout the war, and was doing a more than adequate job as butler, footman, and valet. Before he'd eaten the first mouthful, Jeffers reentered the room and held out a message.

"Thank you, Jeffers." Phillip took the message but didn't open it. He knew it couldn't be good. None of his acquaintances knew he was back in London, and he'd been gone so long, most of his friends from school had estates to manage that kept them away from the city.

If he had to guess, it was probably a reminder of one of his father's gambling debts, or an overdue bill from one of his brother's extravagant purchases.

Phillip put the missive on the table, intending not to open it, then changed his mind. Ignoring it wouldn't make it go away. He might as well know which blasted pile of impatient correspondence to put it in.

He looked at the wax seal but didn't recognize it, then opened the letter and scanned the contents.

Lord Markham,

I am Mrs. Bessie Dove-Lyon, owner of the Lyon's Den. We have never met, but I feel as though I know you. I was well acquainted with your father and your brother.

I know the difficulty in which you find yourself and can imagine your desperation to rid yourself of this ruinous dilemma.

Please, call on me at your earliest convenience. I have allotted a specific time to meet with you this afternoon at five o'clock.

Do not keep me waiting.

Mrs. Bessie Dove-Lyon

Phillip read the letter several times, then folded it and placed it in his pocket. If the woman thought she might help him, she clearly had no idea the extent of his indebtedness. She couldn't possibly know she was asking him to choose slow torture. Spewing the details in front of the woman would be like standing still on a bed of coals.

But what choice did he have? If the woman had information of which he was unaware, he'd be a fool to ignore her. Why else would she contact him? He would go and see what this Dove-Lyon woman was about.

Phillip noted the directions written on the bottom of the message, and several hours later found himself at the end of Cleveland Row. Ahead of him was a large five-story building known as the Lyon's Den. It stood out from its neighbors, not because of its size or architecture, but because some misguided owner had painted the whole thing a wretched shade of blue.

He was drawn to investigate the establishment, not only because he was intrigued by Mrs. Dove-Lyon's message, but also because it was a place his brother had frequented for gambling and female entertainment. He had no doubt that when he entered the place, he would be informed that the amount his father and brother owed their creditors had increased substantially. There would be a late payment fine, or some insane bit of interest. Enough time had passed that they would not have to be creative in their efforts to increase the sum owed.

But this was a day for discovery. Phillip adjusted his carelessly tied neckcloth and rapped with the massive brass door knocker.

“Your name?” a burly man asked after opening the door.

“Phillip Eversley, Earl of Markham.”

“Come in,” the fellow said, opening the door wider. “Wait here.” He gave Phillip a brutish look that clearly said, Don’t even think about following me, then trudged up the stairs to the second floor.

Phillip didn’t wait where he’d been told, but stepped over to the nearest table and watched the players lift their cards. The player in front of him had a fair hand. The player next to him had a losing hand, and the man opposite him had the best hand. But Phillip would bet everything he had that the dealer held the best hand of all. There was no way any of the card holders would win.

He watched as each player threw money to the center of the table, then waited for the second round to begin.

The play at the table reminded him vividly how his father and brother had played—having hands that were not winnable, yet continuing to bet more money on them as if the spots would change and a miracle would happen.

He continued to watch as if his father and brother would magically appear at the table and he could shake them to their senses and stop them from wagering more money on their losing hands.

Fortunately, he was cut short when the giant doorman returned.

“Follow me,” he ordered Phillip in a low, gruff voice. “Mrs. Dove-Lyon will see you now.”

The man turned, and Phillip was forced to follow him.

“Lord Markham,” a lady greeted him when they entered a well-appointed room. Phillip gathered this was Mrs. Dove-Lyon’s office. “It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

The lady wasn’t tall. In fact, she was rather petite. Nor was she young, but bordering on middle age. Her hair was expertly coiffed, and she was dressed as if she was about to attend a ball, or the opera. And Phillip was certain that the jewels on her wrist and around her neck could pay the entire amount of his debt. She looked exquisite. She appeared as if she could out-sparkle any queen.

“Thank you, Mrs. Dove-Lyon. Although I’m not sure how much of a pleasure it is, considering the amount of money my father and brother must owe you.” It seemed a matter of dignity for him to voice the embarrassing fact first.

The small lady lifted her lips to form a sincere smile. “I’m afraid that since returning from the war, you have had a shocking revelation considering the state in which your father left his properties.”

“That is without a doubt an understatement. I had no idea he and my brother were such incessant gamblers.”

“Do you share their enthusiasm for the tables, Lord Markham?”

Phillip wanted to laugh. Instead, he simply smiled. “I’m afraid you would quickly go out of business if you were to rely upon my patronage, Mrs. Dove-Lyon.”

The lady studied him for several minutes. “Has anyone told you that you are a very handsome man, my lord?”

Phillip’s eyebrows shot upward. “I have been out of Polite Society for so long that any female who mentions my looks isn’t the kind of woman I wish to look at twice. And I’m afraid I’d plant a facer on any soldier in my regiment who told me I was

handsome or commented on my looks.”

Mrs. Dove-Lyon laughed. “My goodness, a man with an abundance of good looks and a sense of humor.” The lady turned to a cupboard behind her and drew out a decanter of brandy. She filled two glasses and handed one to Phillip. “I venture being an officer in the army doesn’t preclude you from enjoying a drink, my lord.”

Phillip reached for the glass she handed him. “It does not,” he said, starting out slowly, but finishing the contents of his glass before Mrs. Dove-Lyon had finished hers. Without asking if he wanted more, she reached for her crystal decanter and refilled his glass.

“Thank you, Mrs. Dove-Lyon, but I prefer not giving you the impression that I’m overly fond of drinking. It’s just that your brandy is the finest I’ve tasted in a very long time.”

“It should be, Markham,” she said before taking another sip of her brandy. “It’s imported. There’s nothing I enjoy more after a long day than a good brandy.”

“That’s a positive way to end any day.” The Earl of Markham took another taste.

“So, my lord. What are you going to do?”

“Excuse me?” he said, feigning ignorance. He knew what the lady was asking, but he wasn’t quite sure how much he wanted to divulge. She was, after all, a stranger.

“That wasn’t a difficult question, my lord. Considering the enormous debt your father amassed, there are not many options open to you. You will have to marry a female with an extraordinary dowry to get you out of debt, or auction off every unentailed property at your disposal to come close to half of what you owe. So, which is it?”

The woman was impeccably informed, and Phillip fought to keep from squirming like a schoolboy.

“I have no intention of ever marrying. That is a decision I made long ago, and one I will have no difficulty keeping.”

“Is there a reason for your decision?”

“There is. It’s written down right here.” Phillip lifted the paper he’d received from Barnham. “The numbers are accurate. The amount I would have to spend of some innocent young wife’s inheritance would leave her destitute and force her to live in a state of penury for several years before I could begin to repay her.”

“What if I could assure you that I know of a certain woman who has just the amount you need, plus a little more?”

Phillip smiled a disbelieving grin. “I would question the veracity of your statement, Mrs. Dove-Lyon. You haven’t seen the staggering amount my father left me to pay. It’s beyond comprehension.”

“I don’t need to see it, my lord. I know the amount I am offering is several thousand pounds more than you owe.”

Phillip’s breath caught. “How can you know that?”

“I know all things, my lord. Especially when it comes to the amounts members who gamble in my establishment owe around Town.”

Phillip couldn’t help but be surprised. He’d asked around and heard several fantastic stories about Mrs. Dove-Lyon, but didn’t believe many of them because they seemed too implausible. Now he began to doubt his skepticism.

“Nevertheless, I decided a long time ago that marriage isn’t for me. And now I’ve become even more convinced of my decision after discovering how deeply into debt my father has taken my family. I am not a perfect man by any means, but I’m not sure I could live with myself if my only purpose for marrying was for the money I would get from the woman I took as my wife.”

“Do you not believe that you could learn to enjoy the company of the woman you marry?”

Phillip finished his brandy and set his empty glass on the corner of the desk. His thoughts shifted from the streets of London and the quaint little park he’d traveled through on his way here. There was a time when he’d dreamed of marrying and having children and thought that was the life he would live—on the edge of just such a park.

Until the war. That had changed everything.

He’d watched men who were still boys die on the battlefield, crying out for their mothers. That was when he realized he didn’t want to bring children up to watch them sacrifice their lives for no good reason. That was when he decided he didn’t want his heart to be ripped from his chest when one of his children died for a cause he wasn’t sure he believed in any longer. And yet...

He remembered the intense pride he experienced when he saw men in uniform march through the streets with their flags flying high and pride on their faces. But those were the same men whose blood soaked into the earth whether the battle was won or lost.

“What if I told you that you would be doing the woman a great favor by marrying her, that you were even rescuing her, saving her from a lifetime of heartache and suffering?”

“How can that be? How can I do a woman who has that amount of money a favor by marrying her?”

“That is something you will have to trust me to know, but when you hear her reasons for wanting to part with her money, I am sure you will understand.”

“No, my conscience will not allow me to throw away her money to pay for my father and brother’s folly.”

“Would you at least speak with this young lady?”

Phillip considered Mrs. Dove-Lyon’s words. “Very well, I will listen to her, but it will do no good. I will not agree to marry her. I’ve seen too much of the evil in this world, and I’m not sure I have any love left in me to give to anyone else.”

Mrs. Dove-Lyon smiled. “That is not a hindrance, since falling in love is not one of the lady’s requirements. The only stipulation is taking care of her money.”

Phillip thought over Mrs. Dove-Lyon’s request and, over his inner objections, decided to meet with the lady.

“Very well,” he said. “I will meet with her. But I cannot make any promises.”

“None are required. May I suggest a meeting tomorrow night, here at the Lyon’s Den? Eight o’clock.”

Phillip agreed, then left Mrs. Dove-Lyon. He walked past the gambling tables without pausing to watch any of the action. He had no desire to pay attention to other gamblers throwing away their money the same as the Markham men had done.

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Violet took extra time and care dressing and fashioning her hair for tonight's meeting. This might be the man who would eventually be her husband.

Her breath caught, and she said a silent prayer that he wouldn't be handsome. She only wanted a plain-looking man who didn't draw attention to her. An ordinary man who didn't make her appear uglier than she was, or make people wonder what he saw in her and know at a glance that he had married her for her money, because he surely didn't marry her for her looks.

When Violet was as ready as she would ever be, she seated her spectacles on her nose, then left her room and went down the stairs.

"You look very becoming, Lady Violet. You're sure to impress the gentleman Mrs. Dove-Lyon wishes for you to meet."

"Thank you, Wilbert. Is Milo out front?"

"Yes, my lady. He has the carriage ready and waiting."

"Thank you," Violet repeated, then donned a light shoulder cape and walked to the carriage. Milo had the step in place and helped her inside before taking his place on the high seat. He tapped the reins against the horses' flanks, and they began to move in the graceful way only a perfectly matched pair could.

Violet's sudden impulse was to stop the carriage and have Milo turn around and take her back. She wasn't brave enough to do this. She didn't have the courage she needed to meet a perfect stranger and implore him to marry her. This was the most

humiliating thing she'd ever done in her life.

It was also the most important thing she'd ever have to do.

After driving several long, agonizing minutes, the carriage slowed, then turned down a narrow street. Somehow moonlight had managed to turn the garish blue of the Lyon's Den into a more welcoming shade. Still, Violet's heart raced in her breast. The moment her carriage stopped, Milo dismounted and opened the carriage door.

The burly man she'd seen the first time she was here stood outside her carriage and waited to escort her inside.

"Good evening, my lady," he greeted her.

"Good evening, sir," she said, following him through a side entrance into the establishment.

"Lady Violet." Mrs. Dove-Lyon greeted her warmly as she entered the room at the top of the stairs. "It's a pleasure to see you again."

"Thank you, Mrs. Dove-Lyon. Am I the first to arrive?"

"Yes," she answered. "Actually, your prospective candidate won't arrive for another half-hour or so. I asked you to come first so we could go over a few details."

"Oh? What details?"

"Not details, exactly. More accurately, the main point you want to get across to the man you will meet. From speaking with him, I think it is holding him back from accepting your help outright."

“And what would that be?” Violet asked after she’d taken a chair Mrs. Dove-Lyon offered.

“His reluctance to use your money to pay the debts his father and brother amassed because of their gambling.”

“But he shouldn’t,” Violet argued. “I am getting as many benefits from our alliance.”

“That is a point you must get across to him. Tell him the danger you will be in if you do not have his name to protect you.”

Violet nodded. “Yes, of course. He must understand that it has only been three days since I was informed of the massive amount of my inheritance, and already several rooms in my house are filled with bouquets of flowers and gifts from men I don’t remember ever having met. Where I have never had a serious suitor in my life, they are now crawling out of the woodwork. And none of them suitable, or reputable. It is only a matter of time until one of them forces me into a compromising situation and I will be forced to marry a man who does not care for me or the good that could be done with my inheritance.”

“You are a wise woman, my lady. The gentleman I have chosen for you is equally as wise, I believe.”

Just then a knock was heard and the giant of a man opened the door.

Violet turned and got her first look at the most handsome man she had ever seen. It was as if she was given her first glimpse of an Olympian statue come to life.

The man’s broad shoulders and towering stature filled the doorframe. He stood stoically tall with his legs braced as if at attention in battle-ready posture, prepared to confront the enemy.

Violet prayed she would not see the disappointment on his face that she was so accustomed to seeing when first introduced to men, even men not as exceedingly good looking as this gentleman. But his disillusionment and disappointment were there, even though he struggled to hide his reaction.

“Phillip Eversley, Earl of Markham, allow me to introduce Lady Violet Slushman.”

“Lady Slushman.”

“Lord Markham,” Violet said, lowering her head. “It is a pleasure to meet you.”

“Likewise,” he said, lowering his head to execute a perfect bow.

As they spoke, an elderly maid entered pushing a tea cart.

Mrs. Dove-Lyon turned to Violet. “Would you be so kind as to pour, Lady Violet?”

“Of course,” she answered, and stood to pour tea as well as offer the wonderful array of pastries.

The three of them chatted about nothing in particular while they shared tea. Mrs. Dove-Lyon kept the conversation focused on innocent topics, such as the weather and the newest play at Covent Garden. Neither Lord Markham nor Violet had seen it, so that part of the conversation quickly died.

“Lady Violet,” Mrs. Dove-Lyon said when they’d finished their tea. “Why don’t you explain to Lord Markham your reason for wishing to marry?”

Violet set her cup and saucer down on the edge of a nearby table and looked at the stunning man seated opposite her. She clutched her hands in her lap and readied herself to convince the most attractive man she’d ever met that he would not die of

embarrassment to be seen with her on his arm. Even though she knew that was unlikely, if not impossible.

“Lord Markham,” she began, “I understand that you have very recently returned from fighting Napoleon’s army, so I am unsure how much of my family’s history you are familiar with. Let me assure you that it is not as pristine as I would like it to be. Though it is beyond unpleasant, we all work with what we are given.”

Lord Markham’s reaction was evident. His expression changed, and Violet couldn’t help but comment on the look she saw on his face.

“You understand what I mean, I think.”

“I do,” he replied.

Violet smiled, something she rarely did. “I want to explain the reason it is important for me to marry a good steward to care for my fortune.”

The beautiful man settled back in his chair. At least he appeared as though he intended to hear her out. She appreciated that much about him. She had been afraid he would cut her off without the courtesy of hearing what she had to say, but he at least let her continue.

“My brother, the late Viscount Slushman, was charged with some heinous crimes against the female workers in our household and thought he would get by with them because of his title and my father’s influence. But he did not. He spent one month in a workhouse. Unfortunately, he did not learn anything from it. When he was released, he took revenge on the people he thought were responsible for his incarceration, and, in so doing, he was killed. His death left my father without an heir and our family ostracized from Society.

“My mother could not live with being cut off by Society and convinced Father to take them to America, where she thought she and my sister, who was a regal beauty, would flourish. Unfortunately, my mother, father, and sister perished on the voyage to America when their ship was lost at sea.”

Violet was forced to swallow hard when speaking of their tragedy. For some reason, the reality of their having died affected her more each time she spoke of it.

“I’m sorry,” Lord Markham said softly.

Mrs. Dove-Lyon handed her a small glass of wine, and Violet accepted it.

“Thankfully, before they set sail, Father sold all his unentailed properties, as well as his shipping and mining ventures, and put the money from the sale of everything into an account in my name, with instructions that it was to be saved until they returned, which he was sure they would in time. He knew Mother would not be satisfied living away from England for long. The money is still in that account for me to manage.”

Violet reached into her reticule and took out the paper with the amount written on it. “As usual, it didn’t take long for all of Society to hear the details of my inheritance, and it has been chaotic since word got out.” She unfolded the paper and handed it to Lord Markham.

He looked at the total in what clearly was suppressed shock, then lifted his gaze and locked his surprised expression with hers.

“Yes, my lord. It is a massive amount. My father was a brilliant manager and investor.”

“Clearly, he was,” Markham admitted. “So, why do you want to give it away? Why don’t you want to keep it and use it?”

“I want to use some of it, but only a small portion. The rest I need to give away.”

“Why?”

Violet smiled. “If you would see my house, you would know why. I have more flowers than my staff can find places to put them. All from suitors who wish to marry me. Suitors I have never met in my life, but they all want to marry my money. Not me. Just my money.”

“I see,” he said.

“Yes. I think you do. Mrs. Dove-Lyon assured me that you are an honorable man and would use my father’s wealth to save the estates your father and brother gambled away.” She leaned toward him. “Don’t you see? If my family’s gain can restore your family’s loss, then their deaths will not have been in vain.”

“Surely a financier at the Bank of England could convene a consortium in whom you might have confidence, my lady. They could handle a massive estate such as yours admirably.”

Violet nodded. “Yes, of course they could. And I’m sure they would do so with an eye toward the amount they might charge me.”

“But you would expect some sort of fee—”

“My lord, that is hardly the point!” Violet caught herself and softened her tone. “My lord, surely you’re aware of the unscrupulous chicanery some men might resort to when lured by a fortune such as mine. How quickly might they trick me into some unsavory situation just long enough to compromise my virtue?” She paused, overcome by the images suddenly springing to her mind. “And then, my lord, how long before I met with some fatal accident, hmm?”

She watched his face, appalled at her own rash description of what might befall her at the hands of a fortune hunter. But it had turned his thinking. She could see it in his eyes and in the set of his jaw.

The Earl of Markham sat in silence for several long minutes, then lifted his gaze and looked at her. “I see, my lady, that you are more in need of a guardian than a husband. I would take it as a point of honor to serve as that guardian. But serving as husband is quite another thing.”

Again he paused, but Violet could see a measure of calm settle within him as he relaxed a bit into his chair.

He continued. “You have outlined quite succinctly what you are willing to offer me with your money. Now I would like to know what you demand in return.”

“That is only fair, my lord.” Violet maintained her poise even as her entire being was flooded with relief. “I have three stipulations for the money I am willing to put in your care. My first demand is the deed to one of the estates my money will save.”

“Is there an estate you have in mind, my lady?”

“No. That will be your choice. I do not expect the Markham country seat. I do not need anything so large, or grand.”

“You would be satisfied having whatever estate I choose to give you?”

“I would.” Violet wanted to laugh. “I am indifferent to opulence and grandeur. I do not anticipate our doing a great amount of entertaining.”

“You do not enjoy entertaining?”

“That was something my mother and sister truly enjoyed. Father and I preferred to spend quiet evenings at home.”

Violet looked at the surprised expression on his face and thought perhaps she'd disappointed him. Perhaps he was more like her mother and sister and enjoyed attending each and every ton event.

“Are you fond of spending the evenings of the Season attending balls and soirees? If so, you would be free to spend the Seasons in London without me.”

“No. Large gatherings do not interest me either. I enjoy a quieter lifestyle.”

“I am happy to hear that,” she said. “Although you would have free rein to come and go as you please.”

He seemed to think on that for a few moments. “Are you suggesting I find a mistress, my lady?”

Violet felt her cheeks grow hot. “No, my lord. Not at all. I simply know that is the way it is in some marriages, but I hope you will be satisfied with ours enough that you will not have need of other companionship.”

“I would hope the same,” he said softly.

Violet breathed a heavy sigh. She had a difficult time continuing. Markham helped her out.

“And your second demand?” he asked.

Violet hesitated. She was afraid he would take exception to this demand and was ready to explain her reasons.

She cleared her throat. “I would like children, my lord. Several children, in fact.”

“You want a house filled with children, Lady Violet?”

“Yes, my lord. I do.”

“May I ask why?”

“Mainly, I want several because I like children. I am very fond of them. And...because”—Violet paused and took a deep breath—“I was raised nearly the same as an only child and found it to be very lonely. I don’t want our children to be lonely. I want them to have several brothers and sisters to grow up with. And...”

“Yes? And?”

“I assume you will need an heir and at least one or two spares.”

“Yes. I would like more than one heir.”

Violet breathed a sigh of relief. She was glad that point was taken care of.

“Is there anything else?”

“Nothing major, my lord. Other than to inform you that I was raised more by my father than my mother, and he taught me everything there was to know about farming practices, as well as taking care of the ledgers. I’m sure you are well trained in these areas, too, so I will not presume to take over the running of your estates. I would, however, appreciate taking care of the running of the estate where I live.”

“That would be most agreeable, my lady. I am not as well trained in the running of an estate as you might think. I was shipped off to join Her Majesty’s army at a young

age and learned very little of farming practices. I should appreciate any help you can offer in this area.”

“It would be my pleasure,” Violet said.

“Is there anything else, my lady?” Mrs. Dove-Lyon asked. She wore a satisfied expression, as if she was very pleased with how this first meeting had progressed.

“No, Mrs. Dove-Lyon. I believe we covered the most important details.”

“And you, Lord Markham? Do we have anything more of your concerns to cover?”

“None that I can think of,” he said. “Although I was not as prepared as Lady Violet. May I have a day or two to think over this situation?”

“Of course. We will meet again in two days’ time.”

“Very well,” they both said, and rose to leave.

Violet left the room first and went out the way she’d come in. She didn’t wait for Lord Markham to walk with her. She was afraid that would force him to speak to her, and she wasn’t brave enough to carry on a conversation with him.

“Lord Markham,” Mrs. Dove-Lyon said, stopping him from leaving.

“Yes, Mrs. Dove-Lyon?”

“I know you have one property you are most insistent upon keeping in your possession. Parkwood Manor, I believe it’s called.”

“Yes,” he answered. “That was my grandmother’s estate.”

“Just a little incentive to encourage you to accept Lady Slushman’s offer. I own all of your father and brother’s markers.”

Lord Markham seemed to stagger the tiniest bit.

“You?”

“Yes. I have purchased them all. If you truly want to hold on to Parkwood Manor, you will accept Lady Slushman’s offer. Otherwise you will lose that property forever.”

“How did you—”

“Good day, Lord Markham. It has been a pleasure speaking with you.”

Mrs. Dove-Lyon walked to the door and held it open for him. He was dismissed.

Violet reached the bottom of the stairs and walked out into the cool night air. Milo was waiting across the street for her.

She’d only taken a step or two when several men approached her.

“It’s her,” one of the men said. “Lady Slushman.”

“Stop, my lady,” another man called out. “We’re here for your choosing. You can have any one of us. Just take your pick.”

Violet pushed back against one of the men. “Let me pass,” she said, struggling to make her way to Milo.

Before she could reach him, one of the men grabbed her and pulled her toward him.

“No!” she yelled as Milo pushed his way through the men to reach her, but one of the men swung and punched Milo in the jaw.

Violet felt herself getting pushed one way then the other. Suddenly, strong hands clasped her arms and pulled her toward him.

“Leave my wife alone!” a commanding voice bellowed, and Violet felt strong, masculine arms pull her against him and hold her.

“Your wife?” the first man said.

“You married her?” the second man said.

“You lucky bugger!” another man called out. “Do you know how much she’s worth? You’re bloody rich!”

“But you’re going to have to look at that face every day,” another man said, cackling.

“Come on,” Lord Markham ordered Violet, wrapping his arms around her. “Let’s get out of here,” he said, and pulled her to her carriage. He helped her inside, then stepped in after her.

“Follow us, George,” he said to his own driver, then closed the door to Violet’s carriage and knocked on the roof.

Milo slapped the reins, and the horses jolted the carriage forward. When they turned the corner to Violet’s townhouse, she saw a crowd of men holding flowers and standing in front of the house.

“Is this what you meant?” Markham asked.

“Yes.”

Milo didn't even slow down, but went several blocks further, then turned down an alley. He stopped the carriage when they reached the servants' entrance to her home.

Violet and Lord Markham descended and rushed into the house through the kitchen door.

“Oh, my lady,” Cook said, twisting her apron in her hands. “It's been a wild night, it has. Take yourself inside and I'll bring you some tea and sandwiches.”

“Never mind that, Cook,” Violet said. “We'll be in Mother's sitting room until it quiets down outside,” she said, and led the way up the back stairs.

The minute they entered the room, Violet turned to face Lord Markham.

“I'm so sorry I got you into this,” she said. “It's been like this ever since word was broadcast about my inheritance.”

“I'll go to Doctors' Commons first thing in the morning,” he said, “and apply for a special license, then bring a vicar back with me. We'll be married by noon and leave London shortly after.”

Violet locked her gaze with his and evaluated what she saw in his face—regret, defeat, dissatisfaction. “No, wait,” she said.

“Why?”

You're going to have to look at that face every day.

The unkind words rang in her ears, beating down the joy she had allowed herself to

feel for a moment.

“I’ve changed my mind. I don’t want to marry you.”

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Phillip felt as if she'd pulled the rug out from beneath him. "What did you say?"

"I said that I've changed my mind. You don't have to marry me."

Phillip walked across the room and poured brandy into a glass, then wine into another. He handed her the wine, then sat beside her on the settee. "Would you care to explain why you've changed your mind?"

The lady took a sip of her wine, but didn't immediately offer an explanation.

He took a healthy gulp of his brandy. "Then perhaps you'd allow me to tell you why I think you changed your mind."

"That's not necessary—"

"Oh, but it is, my lady, since it involves me as much as it does you."

She lowered her head and stared at her hands clutched in her lap. He placed his hand over hers.

"It's because of the rude comment one of the men made, isn't it?"

Lady Violet's cheeks turned red.

"You should never experience embarrassment because of what small-minded people say about you. They have faults of their own and point out others' shortcomings to draw attention away from their own inadequacies."

The expression on the lady's face turned from embarrassment to confusion.

"Oh," she said as if she suddenly understood his meaning and found it puzzling, then humorous. She tried to hide her reaction and covered her mouth to stifle her laughter.

"What?" Phillip asked. "I'm afraid I misunderstood something."

She giggled, and it was the lightest, most endearing sound.

"What?" he asked again.

"It's only that you thought I was embarrassed by what that uncouth man said about my looks, but that wasn't it at all. I have lived with such comments my entire life. I am used to them."

"Then what was it?"

"It was that you heard what he said."

"You thought I would be embarrassed by what he said?"

"Yes. I know you must be embarrassed to be seen with someone who looks like me."

He was puzzled. "How is it that you think you look?"

"It's no secret, my lord, that I am very plain, very ordinary. Not pretty in the least. And with these thick spectacles—well, the fact is that I can hardly see without them. I have spent my entire life being with men who avoid looking at me for fear someone might encourage them to dance with me. Or they refuse to sit in a chair next to me because they will have to speak to me, and their friends will taunt them with jokes that connect the two of us."

Phillip wanted to assure her that such would never be the case with him, but what she described hit too close to actions that he had committed. “We are an ill-mannered, cruel lot, aren’t we?”

She smiled. “Not intentionally, my lord. But it’s a known fact that the cream always rises to the top. The purpose of each Season is for the highest-ranking males to attract the attention of the females with the most exceptional looks and the fattest dowries. To the females who are thought to be diamonds of the first water.”

“How did you achieve such wisdom, my lady?”

“It was not difficult when you live in a house with a sister who is beautiful beyond compare. Who was rumored to become the diamond of the Season. I have always been found lacking when compared to her.”

They stayed on the settee for several long moments without speaking. Phillip finished the last of his brandy and set his empty glass on the table nearest to him. “So, my lady, how are we going to resolve our dilemma? Are you still of a mind to rescind your offer of marriage?”

“I feel it is only fair for me to give you the option of searching for a female who can complement your exceptional good looks.”

Phillip thought a moment, then spoke. “Perhaps we can list the qualities of the person we are each searching for to see how closely we match what the other person wants. If there are several requests that cannot be fulfilled, we will know we would not be a good match.”

“Very well,” she answered.

“I will go first, since you already know my main request. I would like enough money

to pay all the debts that my father and brother amassed.”

“And I have more than enough money to cover your debts. It would be yours to use however you want.”

He watched as a thoughtful expression covered her face. He found himself watching her lips, which formed each word carefully.

“My first request is for you to gift me an estate where I can live, and allow me to run it as I desire.”

“Which I heartily agree to do. The first thing we will do when we get to the country is tour my estates, and you may choose whichever one you wish as your home. I will then hand over the deed to that property, and it will be yours, free and clear.”

Phillip thought for several more moments. He hadn’t thought much past simply paying his father’s debts. He turned his attention back to Lady Violet. “I have no other requests to make. I will listen to yours and say whether I can comply or agree with them or not.”

“Are you sure?”

“Quite.”

“Very well. I have several more,” she said, and took a paper from her reticule. “As I said, I would like you to provide me with children. Several. I have always wanted a large family and never thought I would have one, but I believe that is now possible.”

“That is a reasonable request, and one I heartily agree with. I want an heir or two.”

“Is there any number of children you would like?”

He thought for a moment then shrugged. “Whatever we are blessed with.”

She nodded her agreement, then looked back down to the list in her hands. “And I would like a yearly income allotted to the estate where I will be living. This will be to pay for my household staff and expenses.”

“That is perfectly acceptable. How much would you like per annum?”

“That can be determined at a later date, after I know how much staff I will require.”

“You are bringing your staff from Town?”

“Yes. Is that a problem?”

Phillip shook his head. “No, that is brilliant. It will be much easier, since I have little or no staff left at any of my residences. The people you bring with you will already know your habits and expectations.”

“Yes, they are good and loyal servants and are already well trained in running a household.”

When she didn’t continue immediately, Phillip looked at her encouragingly. “Is there more?” he asked.

“One more item that I already mentioned when we were with Mrs. Dove-Lyon.”

“Yes?”

“I always helped Father with his estate books when he worked on them. If you wouldn’t mind, I would like to assist you, too, in taking care of the estate books.”

Phillip smiled. "I wouldn't mind at all, my lady. In fact, you would be a great help to me. Because of my past experience, I can plot and plan military maneuvers day in and day out, but I have to admit I've had very little experience running an estate, or keeping its books."

"And that is what I helped Father do while Mother and my sister were off attending garden parties and soirees."

"You did not accompany your mother and sister?"

"No, they always preferred I did not accompany them. Mother said my sister attracted many more suitable prospects when I wasn't close by."

Phillip wanted to ignore Lady Violet's comment, but he couldn't. "Your mother did you a great deal of harm, didn't she?"

"Not intentionally, I don't believe. She simply wanted what was best for my sister. She'd put all her hopes and dreams in Pauline and wanted her to have everything she'd always hoped for herself."

"Such as?"

"A grand title—duchess, at least. Her place in Society. Wealth and a husband with extraordinary good looks. Marriage into a family that held a prestigious place in Society. Pauline had all the makings of the perfect duchess."

"I wish I could have seen her," Phillip said. "I've never met anyone so perfect."

Violet stood. "Follow me," she said, walking out of her mother's sitting room and up another flight of stairs to a room devoted solely to paintings. "This was my sister," she said, looking up to a wall of paintings of a girl from infancy to a more recent

likeness.

Phillip stared in fascination. Pauline truly was the most remarkably beautiful female he had ever seen. Her hair was the perfect shade of golden blonde, and her eyes the most startling shade of blue. She possessed not one mark or blemish anywhere that he could see, and the smile on her face was remarkably ethereal. No wonder everyone considered her a diamond of the first water. No wonder everyone considered her the catch of the Season—until her brother ruined her family's reputation.

Phillip stared at her a moment longer, then turned to look at Violet. Instead of looking at a portrait of her sister, she was engrossed with a portrait of her family. It was a picture of her father and mother sitting side by side in blue velvet chairs, Violet with her hand on her father's shoulder and her sister standing at her mother's side with a hand on her shoulder. The difference between the two sisters was startling. Where Pauline was perfectly coiffed, and the smile on her face was frozen into place, as if she'd practiced it for hours, Violet held a natural pose with a natural smile that was as sincere as he knew her to be.

But it was her father who drew his attention. The expression on Violet's face when she looked at him nearly broke Phillip's heart. The love that he saw in her eyes tore through him unlike any emotion he'd experienced since he'd mourned the young men he'd lost on the battlefield.

"You loved him immensely, didn't you?"

She swiped at her eyes and nodded her head. "He was an amazing father. The best."

"I wish I had known him," Phillip whispered. "I wish I'd have had a father like him."

"What was your father like?"

“I think more like your mother. I was only the spare, so he devoted all of his time to my older brother—except instead of spending his time teaching him to care for the land and the tenants and the property we owned, he spent his time being his friend and having a good time with him. He taught him to drink, gamble, and chase women.”

“And you?”

“Oh, I didn’t fit into their lifestyle, so he sent me off to the army.”

“Do you miss him?”

“I wish I did, but I don’t. Not at all. It’s probably the same as you and your mother.”

Violet shifted her eyes from the portrait of her mother to lock her gaze with Phillip’s. There was little she could say. She didn’t wish to disparage her mother, and forming a loving thought was beyond her at the moment. All she could manage was a weak smile before turning to lead him back to the sitting room.

“Are we in agreement now?”

She felt her lower lip quiver. “I’m not sure what you mean.”

“Are we in agreement now that it is to our mutual benefit to marry and save each other? Have I convinced you that I have no intention of searching for anyone else to marry, and that I’ll be perfectly satisfied with you as my wife and helpmeet? That we both desire the same things from our marriage?”

“You know what I require from a marriage,” she said softly.

“And you know what I require,” he answered.

Her heart beat a wild tattoo in her chest. She would keep her word, and for some insane reason, she knew that this man she had known for a matter of a few hours would too.

“Then it is agreeable,” she answered.

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Violet went to bed shortly after Lord Markham departed. She had to sleep well because she had a thousand items to take care of tomorrow, including preparing for her wedding. Unfortunately, she had a difficult time falling asleep. She kept reliving her conversation with the man she was going to marry.

She didn't want his words to affect her, but they did. He was a gentleman in every sense of the word. He was considerate and took her feelings into account as they made their decision. He asked her opinion and seldom disagreed with her. But most importantly, he made it obvious that he was extremely grateful for the money she was willing to give to him, and he assured her he would only use it for good purposes.

It was obvious that he was an honest and responsible man and that he'd cared for the men under his command. The fact that he was a major in the army evidenced his leadership qualities and his intelligence. No matter how hard she tried, she couldn't find any faults to complain about, other than the fact that he was far too handsome for someone as lacking in looks as she was. The moment she closed her eyes, his handsome face appeared before her and interrupted her attempt to sleep.

After several restless hours, Violet rose from her bed. She donned a robe and slippers and went downstairs to the kitchen and made a pot of tea. She carried her tea into her father's study and sat behind his desk.

She often came in here when she needed to think. This was where she felt closest to him. Where she could go to pretend he wasn't really gone. That he was still alive and near her.

"Couldn't you sleep?" a masculine voice asked her from the doorway.

Violet released a startled squeak. “Oh!” she cried out, then clamped her hand over her mouth.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to startle you,” Lord Markham said, and entered the room.

“I didn’t know you were still here. I thought you were gone.”

“I was gone, but I returned. There were several gentlemen gathered near the house. I chased them off, but I wanted to make sure they didn’t return, and that none had entered your home.”

“Thank you,” she said. “Did they cause you any trouble?”

A smile lit his face. “As compared to what? I recently came home from the war. There was plenty of trouble there.”

She matched his smile. “I suppose you came up against worse fighting the French.”

“Yes. However, most of the French soldiers we fought against were sober when we confronted them.”

Violet couldn’t stop a laugh from escaping. “You have a very sharp sense of humor, my lord.”

“I like to hear you laugh. It’s such a happy sound. I don’t imagine you’ve done a lot of laughing lately.”

“No, I haven’t. There hasn’t been a lot to find humor in.”

Markham walked to the nearest settee. “Would you like to join me?” he asked.

Violet rose from behind her father's desk and took a seat near him. She had carried her cup of tea with her and waited while he poured himself a glass of brandy.

"Why couldn't you sleep?" he asked.

"I was thinking of the multitude of tasks I have to accomplish before we leave."

"Will you be ready to leave tomorrow, midafternoon, or would you like to wait one more day?"

Violet thought for a few minutes before answering. "Is it possible for us to see what the day brings before making a final decision?"

"Of course. We can leave the following day as well as tomorrow. We'll take it one day at a time."

"Most of what I have to do is to leave instructions for my staff. They will take care of packing and moving everything. Our main job will be to decide which estate to move it to." She paused and looked at him. "Do you have a preference as to where you'd like us to live?"

"The final choice will be left up to you, my lady, but I am going to show you my grandmother's estate first, Parkwood Manor. It's a favorite of mine, and should you choose to wrench it from me, I shall surely shed a tear."

"Oh dear. And if we choose to live there together?"

"Then I will be the happiest of fellows."

"I see. And does it actually have a park?"

“Yes. It was a beautiful park when I was young, with a wooded area at one end. I don’t imagine it looks similar now. That was years ago, and it has not had much care since then.”

“Perhaps not,” she said. “But perhaps it will not take many gardeners long to get it back to its original condition.”

“Then we will tour Parkwood Manor first, and if it meets with your approval, we will end our search, as the lesser estates are in various states of disrepair.”

Violet nodded her agreement.

“What else do you have on your list for the day?” he asked.

“I’m going to speak with Cook first to arrange food for our wedding feast, and food to take with us. I also want to ask Cook if she would be willing to go with us to our new home and work in our household. She is an excellent cook, and I would hate to lose her.”

“That’s a wonderful idea.”

“I’m also going to take a skeleton crew of staff to clean at least the bedrooms we’ll sleep in. I doubt the house has been cleaned in a long while. What is on your agenda?”

“First, I’m going to Doctors’ Commons to apply for a special license. Then I’ll contact a vicar and bring him back with me so he can marry us.”

Violet had heard of such things, obtaining a quick license at the place where legal dealings could be secured, but now the speed of it made her heart lurch.

“Do you have someone to stand up for you?” she asked.

“Not really. If I have time, I might stop at my solicitor’s and ask him to do the honors. What about you?”

She shook her head. “I have invited the staff to attend the ceremony as well as the wedding feast. I thought I would ask my lady’s maid to stand up with me.”

He turned a quizzical look toward her that made her think he disapproved.

“What? Are you afraid someone will find out you dined with the staff?”

He laughed—a robust, startled sound. “Good God no, woman. Quite the opposite. That is an excellent idea. I’m glad you thought to have the staff enjoy the feast, too.”

Phillip rose from beside her and walked to the window.

“Are our intruders gone?” she asked.

“Yes. It seems quiet outside. I’m glad.”

“Feel free to leave, my lord. It’s nearly sunrise. It should be quiet from now on as the word of our marriage spreads.”

Phillip studied her face. She truly did not seem worried.

“Yes, I think you are correct. I will gladly stay, though, if you’d like someone here with you.”

“No. The staff will be about before long. They will hear any unfamiliar noises and call for a footman. We will be safe. And you need to get some sleep. You won’t have

long, but at least you can rest for a bit.”

“Yes,” Phillip said, then walked to where the lady sat and offered her a hand as she stood.

“Thank you for watching over me, my lord.”

“My pleasure,” Phillip said, then placed his hands on her arms and brought her a little closer to him. “What is your Christian name, my lady?”

The woman he was going to marry later in the day lifted her gaze and smiled at him. The face he was becoming more accustomed to by the hour softened, and the features he’d earlier considered plain turned pleasantly agreeable.

“Violet, but my father always called me Lettie.”

“Lettie,” he said with a smile. “I like that. It’s a happy name.”

“What is your Christian name?” she asked.

“Phillip, and that’s what everyone called me, at least until I joined the army. I’ve been called Major for so long sometimes I forget my real name. Now, of course, I’m mostly called Markham.”

“Would you prefer to leave your army days in the past?”

“Yes, I believe I would.”

“Then I shall call you Markham.”

“That would be most satisfactory.” Phillip smiled at her, then kept his gaze locked

with hers. "I am going to kiss you, Lettie."

"That would be most satisfactory," she echoed.

"Have you ever been kissed?"

She shook her head.

"I haven't kissed anyone in a long while myself, so I might be painfully out of practice."

"That will make two of us," she answered, then met his lips when he lowered his head.

Phillip kept his kiss soft yet firm, with just enough passion so she would enjoy it. He didn't want to go too fast and alarm her.

He kissed her once, then broke it off and kissed her again.

She may be a novice, but she had an innate sense of what to do. She wrapped her arms around his neck and pressed against him.

He kissed her again and again, then turned his head to break the kiss. He needed to catch his breath, and so did she.

"Are you all right?" he asked when his breathing settled.

"Yes," she answered in a quavering voice.

He wrapped his arms around her to keep her steady on her feet. Her knees seemed to want to give out beneath her.

“You lied,” she whispered.

“About what?” he asked.

“You said you were painfully out of practice. If those kisses were out of practice, I’m going to have to work like the devil to catch up.”

Phillip laughed hard. She may not be the most beautiful woman in London, but her sense of humor surpassed that of any female he’d ever met.

He lowered his head and placed a kiss on her forehead, then left her and walked out the door. It wasn’t until he was almost home that he realized he still had a smile on his face.

Before noon, Phillip arrived at Doctors’ Commons and applied for a special license. It took a little longer than he thought it might, but he got it nevertheless. He had a few other errands to which to attend before he could return home, but at this rate their wedding wouldn’t run too late. His original plan was to leave for Parkwood Manor after the wedding, but the more he thought of it, the more convinced he was that he and Violet should spend the night in London and travel on to the country in the morning. That way they could arrive at Parkwood Manor in the sunlight and she could get a better look at the house.

He made it to the street and had taken one step into his carriage when a voice sounded behind him.

“Major!”

Phillip turned and smiled. “Captain DeLaney! I didn’t know you were in London.”

“Nor I, you. I thought you would be rustivating in the country.”

Phillip had served with Captain John DeLaney through most of his years in the army. He was an excellent officer and deserved every promotion he'd received.

"What are you doing in this part of London?" DeLaney asked.

"I have just come to acquire a special license." Phillip patted his chest where he'd put the official paper.

"Congratulations!" DeLaney said with a heartfelt pat on the back. "Who is the lucky woman?"

"Lady Violet Slushman."

DeLaney didn't react, so he must not have heard about her inheritance.

"And when is your wedding?"

"Today. If you have time, we would welcome your company."

"I would be delighted. Tell me where and when, and I will be there."

Phillip gave him directions to Violet's townhouse. They chatted a few moments longer, then he turned to leave.

"Oh, Major," Captain DeLaney said, stopping Phillip from getting into his carriage. He turned. "I'm not sure if you've heard, but Jamie Whitecliff has been looking for you."

Phillip's blood went cold. "No, I hadn't heard."

"He claims he has something for you."

“Do you know what?”

DeLaney shook his head. “But I can’t imagine it’s anything good. Word has it that he took his brother’s death hard and blames you for what happened.”

Phillip nodded. “I thought he might.”

“Just be careful, and watch your back.”

“Thanks for the warning, DeLaney. I’ll be careful. I didn’t survive Napoleon’s army just to be cut down by one of my own.”

“Good for you. I’ll see you in a few hours to meet your lovely bride.”

It was all Phillip could do not to wince at DeLaney’s words. The fellow would be meeting a woman who described herself not as lovely, but homely. Was it possible he might change her opinion of herself? Only time would tell.

Phillip said his final goodbyes and left. He had to go round to his solicitor’s and ask him to attend the ceremony, then pick up a few items to take with them to Parkwood Manor in the morning. After that, he would go to Violet’s townhouse and get married.

He realized that even though he hadn’t intended to be excited about the turn his life had taken, he was.

And pleased.

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Harriet helped Violet dress for her wedding, and when the lady's maid proclaimed her as lovely as any bride had ever been, she walked to the door and left her room.

She had to take several deep breaths to convince herself that this day was actually happening, but it was. She was going to be married to one exceedingly kind—and exceedingly handsome—man.

“Would you like me to help you down the stairs?” Harriet asked her when Violet stood at the top and didn't begin her descent.

“No, thank you, Harriet. You must go first.”

“Yes, my lady.”

Harriet, dressed in her Sunday best, walked around the bride and descended the stairs first. Violet followed. When she reached the midpoint of the stairs, she looked up to find the Earl of Markham standing by the newel post waiting for her.

“Would you like me to walk with you, my lady?”

Violet smiled. “Yes, my lord. That would be grand.”

He lifted his hand and took her fingers in his.

A spark of electricity ran through her arm and traveled all the way through her body. She looked at him and smiled, then drew even with him as they walked together to the library. The cherry-paneled room was her favorite, and that was where the

ceremony would take place.

“You are a stunning bride, my lady,” he said as sincerely as she knew he could.

“And you are a stunningly handsome groom, my lord. You outshine your bride as the sun outshines the moon.”

“Not today, my lady. No one can outshine a bride on her wedding day.”

“Thank you, my lord. I do feel like this is a special day.”

“It is. For both of us.”

They reached the vicar and stopped. Violet wanted to remember every second of today, but the ceremony was over before she could take it all in. They repeated their vows and exchanged rings. The vicar pronounced them man and wife, then said the groom could kiss the bride.

Phillip focused on her with a smile on his face. It was a look she would remember for the rest of her life. It wasn't a look of regret, but an expression that represented happiness and...admiration.

He lowered his head and pressed his lips to hers.

Violet kissed him in return, then her husband turned her to face the cheering guests.

She locked her gaze with Phillip's and smiled. He returned her smile, and the staff and guests cheered even louder.

When the cheers quieted, Wilbert stepped forward with instructions. A wedding feast had been laid out for all to enjoy. Once the staff had eaten their fill, they were

instructed to return to their jobs of packing up and closing the house, then packing up their personal belongings to take with them to Parkwood Manor. As the happy staff clucked over the sumptuous buffet, Wilbert led Phillip and Violet to a private table lavishly set.

“Thank you, Wilbert,” Violet said. “You and Mrs. Wilbert have made this a very special day.”

“It was our pleasure, my lady. We did no more than you have always done for all of us. Have you decided if you are going to leave today, or wait until tomorrow?”

Violet looked at Phillip. “Because of the lateness of the hour,” he said, “I think it would be wise to wait until tomorrow. It will give the staff more time to pack, and we’ll be able to arrive at our destination in the daylight.”

“That seems a wise decision, my lord.”

“Yes,” Violet agreed. “We will spend one last night here, then leave in the morning.”

Phillip turned toward the seats prepared for the Earl of Markham and his countess.

“Would you get me a plate of food, please, husband?” Violet asked. “Not too much. I’m too excited to eat a great deal.”

“I shall be delighted,” Phillip said, and went to do her bidding. When he returned, he placed a plate with entirely too much food in front of her.

“I’ll have to remember to make a more explicit request next time. I think you filled my plate as if you were going to eat from it, as well.”

“You forget—I’ve been feeding growing boys and robust men for a number of years.

We always eat everything that's put in front of us.”

Violet ate what she could, and when she finished, she walked about the ballroom and chatted with the staff as they ate. She thanked them for their service and for choosing to travel with them to Parkwood Manor. She was pleased that so many of them had decided to make the move.

When she'd made the rounds, she went to her rooms to oversee the packing of her personal items. She knew that would take several hours, and she was torn between excitement and regret at leaving what had been her home her whole life. But she was opening a new chapter and looked forward to what life had in store for her.

Violet sat in her bedroom waiting for her new husband to come to her. Tonight was her wedding night, a night she never thought she'd have. In moments when she had allowed herself to even contemplate such a thing, the idea of being bedded hadn't carried much that interested her. It would be, she had supposed, a few minutes she could manage to forget once it was over.

But now she'd met the man who would do the deed, and the very thought of him touching her made her blood race through her body and thrum at her wrists. Her breathing became oddly shallow, and she was suddenly intimately aware of the small bubbles of her breasts rising above the lace of her extravagantly expensive nightdress. The anticipation of his presence in her bedroom was wildly unexpected and thrilling to experience.

Violet issued herself a silent reprimand. Such things might be in store for pretty young brides, but she would do best to sink into quiet invisibility and let the poor man find what pleasure in her he might manage in the dark.

Still, Phillip Eversley, Earl of Markham, had been quite perfect in every way so far. He had been kind and thoughtful and interesting to talk to. He was intelligent and had

an engaging sense of humor. She had no reason to believe he would come to her bedroom as anything other than a good, kind man. And a handsome one, of course. A good, kind, handsome man.

That thought brought reality crashing home, and Violet swallowed hard. In the two short days she'd known him, she had felt even less attractive than she usually felt around people.

But here she was, ready to be the man's unattractive wife in the true sense of the word, and she was frightened to death. She clutched the bedcovers and took several deep breaths until she heard a soft knock on the door.

"Have I given you enough time?" her husband asked as he stepped into the room and closed the door behind him.

"If you'd have given me any more time I'd probably have bolted down the servants' stairs and out the kitchen door. I'm sure I would be in Scotland by now."

His laughter filled the room. "Oh, my lady. You never cease to delight me. Your humor is precious."

Violet clutched her hands in her lap and squeezed until her knuckles turned white.

"Here, now. Give me your hands," he said.

"Why?"

"Because I'm afraid you might bruise your fingers if you squeeze them any tighter."

Violet surrendered her hands, then smiled. "That feels much better. I hadn't realized I was squeezing them quite so brutally."

“I’d tell you to relax, and that you have nothing to be nervous over, but that wouldn’t be true. I don’t think there’s a bride alive who isn’t nervous on her wedding night.”

“How about husbands? Are they nervous about their wedding nights?”

“Of course we are. But we are men. We aren’t allowed to show our fear.”

“Oh,” she said, then turned her head and looked at him. “And why is that?”

“Because it’s our job to appear in control. We’re supposed to be experienced when we come to our brides on our wedding night.”

“So, are you?”

“In control?” he asked.

“No. Experienced.”

“Hush, now. You’re not supposed to ask a man that. You’re just supposed to assume we know what we’re doing because we’ve had numerous experiences bedding the opposite sex.”

“Then I will assume you are experienced. And I will assume that because you were in Her Majesty’s Army, and are extraordinarily handsome, you have had numerous opportunities to, um, rehearse.”

That made him laugh loud and long.

Violet breathed a heavy sigh that raised and lowered her shoulders. “Thank you, my lord. I feel ever so much better now that I know you are well in control of what we’re about to do.”

“Well, then.” He kissed her hand. “I shall endeavor not to bungle things too badly, wife.”

His smile was contagious, and Violet couldn’t stop a laugh from escaping her own lips. His eyes sparkled as he placed his hands on her arms and turned her to face him.

She locked her gaze with his, then watched him as he lowered his head and kissed her.

Violet had waited all day for him to kiss her the way he’d kissed her the previous evening. It spawned the most glorious emotion she’d ever experienced. She hadn’t known a man’s kiss could ignite the fire that raged through her. She hadn’t known kissing a man could stir the emotions his lips had kindled.

He wrapped his arms around her and gently shifted her until she lay in the middle of the bed. Without breaking their kiss, he stretched out beside her and let his hands move over places that came alive at his touch.

Violet’s flesh was on fire. She feared she would burst into flame if he continued—and then he more than continued. Cool air touched her flesh, and she realized he’d pulled the ribbon that released the gown from her shoulders, and she was bare to his touch.

His hands covered her breasts, his fingers found their peaks, and still he continued to kiss her.

Violet couldn’t lie still. It was as if she couldn’t control her body. Then his mouth moved to where his fingers had been and his hands traveled down her body, lower and lower.

Violet heard herself cry out, but she didn’t know what she was crying out for—until

he entered her. Then a sensation inside her body grew and grew until whatever it was seemed on the brink of exploding.

Then it did. It shattered and engulfed her with the most glorious feeling a woman could ever need or want or imagine.

Phillip lay on his side in the early morning hours just as the sun was coming up over the horizon and stared at the woman lying beside him. The woman who was his wife.

To the world she wasn't beautiful, would never be considered attractive, but to him she seemed the most perfect woman God had ever created. Because she had accepted him. Saved him. Welcomed him. Comforted and teased him. He was well and truly pleased with what had transpired in the dark hours of the night.

He didn't love her—he'd only known her three days, so it was impossible to say he loved her—but he did care for her.

He thought of all she had done for him, given him, shared with him, and his heart filled with something akin to gratitude and everlasting devotion. No, he couldn't say he loved her, but what he felt was a powerful emotion that could easily be described as affection.

He reached out his hand and brushed a stray hair that had fallen over her forehead. She turned her head and shifted slightly at his touch. She blinked once, then blinked again, then opened her eyes and looked at him.

Ever so slowly, she smiled at him, and his heart swelled in his chest.

"We've only been married a few short hours and you've already told me two lies, my lord."

“Two? What was my second lie?”

“It was a lie of omission, sir. You led me to assume that you were not an expert at lovemaking. You led me to believe that you were sorely out of practice with, hmm, shall we say, conjugal mysteries.”

“I did nothing of the sort. I only said I would do my best to pleasure you.”

“Then perhaps you did not lie to me, because you certainly did that much.”

“Were you pleased?”

“I was more than pleased. I didn’t know such feelings existed.”

“Did your mother never speak with you about your wedding night?”

Violet lowered her gaze and snuggled against him. “My mother never thought I would have a wedding night. I only overheard her speak with my sister about the eventuality.”

“What did she say?”

“She said that it wasn’t a pleasant experience but that the duty of every wife was to provide her husband with an heir and a spare. So, she had to endure the embarrassing act until she provided an heir. After that, the husband would more than likely leave her alone and would find a mistress to satisfy his baser needs.”

“Do you think that’s what your father did?”

Violet lifted her head, and her gaze was filled with such confusion that Phillip had to laugh.

“I don’t actually know, Markham. I’ve never thought of father doing this with another woman.”

Phillip gathered her closer to him and wrapped his arms around her.

“What about you, my lord? Is that what you will do?”

He reared back as if surprised by her question.

“Are you asking if I will find a mistress once you provide me with an heir?”

“Yes.”

“Then the answer is no , Lettie.”

“Society wouldn’t blame you.”

“Just because it’s something they would condone, doesn’t mean it’s something I would consider doing to you, or to our marriage.”

“How did you acquire such an upstanding sense of decency?”

“By watching the example my father and brother set and knowing I must do the opposite.”

“Then you’d best be very careful, my lord, or I will find myself caring for you a great deal more than you might wish me to.”

“Have no fear, my lady,” Phillip said on a hearty laugh. “You will find so much to disparage about me that it will dull any thought of admiration.”

Phillip was going to kiss her, but before he could lean down to press his lips to hers, his wife wrapped her arm around his neck and brought his face down to meet hers.

He touched his lips to hers and kissed her long and deep. Her eagerness aroused him, and suddenly he couldn't get enough of her, couldn't drink enough of her. Couldn't kiss enough of her.

He wanted to kiss more than her lips, but he knew where that would lead and couldn't go there. He'd made love to her twice during the night, and they had a three-hour journey to reach Parkwood Manor yet today. He wouldn't allow his lust to make the long carriage ride more uncomfortable for her than necessary.

"I wouldn't mind," she said, as if knowing what he was considering.

He shook his head. "You will be too sore by the time we arrive at Parkwood. I would rather enjoy our first night in our new home than make love again in your old home."

She pulled his head down and kissed him again. "You are very thoughtful." She snuggled back against him. "Do you think it's possible that we made a babe last night?"

"Possible, yet not probable. It often takes many more tries than one."

"I'm glad," she said. "I would not like to think of having to stop making love to you after I've just learned what it's all about."

"Oh, my lady. You have not learned half of what it's all about."

"I haven't?"

"No. I have much more to teach you, but not yet. We need to dress and ready our

staff. We have much to accomplish today.”

They slid from the rumpled bed and helped each other dress. It was the beginning of a new adventure for the both of them. If only things would remain as happy and euphoric as they had begun.

But that wasn't the way life was.

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Violet kept her gaze focused out the carriage window as they made their way through the English countryside. Phillip sat beside her, and whenever they passed something interesting, he would explain what she was seeing.

“What is that ahead of us?” she asked when she noticed several buildings together.

“That is the village of Willowbrook. I hear it’s growing so fast that it will soon be considered a town.”

“I’ve never heard of it before.”

“The town’s founder, the Duke of Willowbrook, bequeathed a rather large plot of land to a group of investors to start a town. Hence the name Willowbrook. It’s far enough from London for its residents to escape the smoke and the smog and the summer heat, yet travel to London to take in the culture and entertainment and return home in a matter of hours.”

“Oh my,” Violet said with appreciation. “It looks like a growing metropolis.”

“That’s exactly what it is, and rumor has it that there will soon be a railroad going right through it.”

Violet looked at Phillip and smiled. “How far is Parkwood from Willowbrook?”

“Less than an hour.”

“Does this road take us through the main thoroughfare so I can see what stores are

here?”

“Of course, Lettie. I can see the wheels spinning in your head. You’re planning a shopping excursion in the near future.”

“Of course. What am I to do with all the money at my fingertips?”

Phillip laughed uproariously.

“I love to hear you laugh, Markham. It’s the most enjoyable sound in the universe.”

“As enjoyable as your laughter. It’s as if you’ve stored up all those happy sounds just so I can revel in them.”

She leaned toward him and kissed his cheek. “Other than Papa, you’re the only person who has ever made me laugh.”

“Well, we will spend a great deal of time in our lives laughing. And we will teach our children to laugh right along with us.”

Phillip turned toward her and brought his mouth down over hers. He kissed her long and tenderly.

“Did you really consider refusing to marry me, Lettie? Would you have chosen a life alone rather than marry?”

“You are a unique person, Markham. Very unlike any other man in Society. You didn’t focus on the surface, but chose to look inside me to see what was of interest there.”

She reached for his hand and held it. “I was ready to spare you the disappointment of

having to look at my face and constantly find me lacking.”

“Silly girl. Your mother left you feeling so wanting that you always expect the worst of people. Especially men.”

“Yes, it’s true, but you have to admit you are different from most men.”

“Of course I am. You’ve already told me that I am unique.”

Violet hit him playfully on the arm, and he wrapped it around her shoulders and tucked her close to him.

They kept one another entertained, delving lightly into the many unknowns they wanted to explore, until at last Phillip said, “Look there, Lettie.” He pointed out the window. “We are on Parkwood Estate.”

“We are home? This is our land?”

“Yes, we are home. Look up ahead. You’ll be able to see the manor house as soon as we round this curve.”

“You love it here, don’t you, Markham?”

“It’s always been special to me. My grandmama was special to me. She was the one who instilled in me a sense of goodness and respect for the creatures God created. Including human beings.”

“You must have missed her terribly during the war. However did you survive?”

“It was sometimes difficult. But I think it served to teach me how precious each and every life is, and to not take any life for granted.”

“She sounds like someone I would like to have known.”

Phillip gave her a wistful smile, then pointed to a massive structure ahead of them.

“Oh, Markham. Is this our home?”

“It is,” he answered.

“It’s splendid! You didn’t tell me it was so grand, or so massive.”

“I wanted you to be surprised.”

“I am. Surprised and impressed.”

He leaned over and kissed the tip of her nose. “Wait until you see the inside.”

The carriage came to a halt, and Wilbert opened the door to greet them. “Welcome home, Lord and Lady Markham. We’re glad you arrived safely.”

“Thank you, Wilbert. Has everyone already arrived?” Violet asked.

“Yes, my lady. They are already hard at work readying your home for you. And may I say, everyone is more than impressed with our new living quarters.”

“I’m glad to hear that, Wilbert,” Phillip said with a look of pleasure on his face.

“Come with me, Lettie. Let me give you a quick tour of your new home.”

Phillip took her arm and led her from one room on the ground floor to the next. There was a library, a morning room, two salons, and the room his grandfather had used as a study.

“There are more rooms, but we’ll tour those tomorrow. Let me show you the first-floor rooms.”

They climbed the stairs and walked down a hall. “This was my grandmother’s sitting room and her dressing room. Through there was my grandmother’s bedchamber and a second sitting room. Beyond it was my grandfather’s set of rooms. They closely matched Grandmother’s rooms, although I don’t recall Grandfather ever sleeping anywhere but in her room.”

“They slept in the same bed?”

“They did. Theirs was a love match, you see.”

“Did you come here often when you were young?”

“Most all the time when school was out. Father and my brother didn’t want me with them. They said they had more fun without me. Now I know what they meant by fun , and I’m glad they excluded me.”

“That sounds like what my mother thought of having me travel with her and Pauline. They had a better time when I wasn’t with them.”

“It sounds like we were raised quite similarly,” Phillip said, and Violet agreed with him.

By the time three months at Parkwood Manor had passed, Violet was aghast. She couldn’t believe she and Phillip had been married that long. They had been three of the most perfect months of her life.

It had taken a lot of work, but every room would finally be furnished when the last wagonload of furniture arrived later that afternoon, and every room on all four floors

was polished until it shone. Their manor house was a beautiful example of perfection.

“The last of the bedrooms are all clean and aired out. Would you like to inspect them, my lady?”

Violet turned to the housekeeper. “No, Mrs. Wilbert. If you have already checked them over, I know they will be exemplary.”

“Thank you, my lady. ’Tis a beautiful house, it is. Thank you for bringing Wilbert and me with you. We’ve been with your family so long we would have hated having to find employment someplace else.”

“And I would have hated having to train a new butler and housekeeper.”

“I think everyone from your townhouse must have felt the same, because all but three of your staff came here with us. And that was because Mrs. Grady was of an age where her daughter didn’t want her to work any longer and wanted her to come live with them, and two of the upstairs maids found husbands and went to work at their places of employment.”

“I’m happy for them, and I’m so pleased that the rest of the staff came with us.”

“They were all happy to get out of London, and they know you to be a wonderful employer. As is Lord Markham.”

“I’m glad the staff feels that way,” Violet said. “Now, what is left to be done? The last wagon of furniture should arrive shortly.”

“Don’t worry. Everything will be ready for its arrival.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Wilbert,” Violet said, then left to speak with Cook. She wanted to

check if the kitchen had received all the supplies ordered from Willowbrook. If not, they'd have to go someplace further away for what they needed. Perhaps as far as London.

Violet was heading for the kitchen when her husband found her.

"I'm going to ride over the estate, Lettie. Would you like to come with me?"

"I'd love to, but you have to promise we'll be back by early afternoon. The last wagonload of furniture will be arriving."

"We'll be back in plenty of time. I promise."

"Very well, but I'm holding you to it."

She beamed, enjoying the smiles that came so very easily these days. Violet had never been happier. She and Lord Markham seemed to match in almost everything they did. They could talk for hours and never seemed to run out of things to say. And their lovemaking was eminently satisfying.

It should have been a hard adjustment. It should have been a time of acknowledging disappointments and getting past them. It should have been wary days of learning how not to upset one another.

But it wasn't. And Violet could not have been more grateful for the smooth transition into married life, because although she couldn't be sure yet, she thought she might be pregnant. She'd missed her natural courses last month and was late so far this month. She was sure that was what this meant.

She hadn't told anyone yet. And by "anyone," she meant Markham. She wasn't sure why she still thought of him more as Markham and less as Phillip, but it just seemed

more natural. It seemed to show greater respect.

Violet hurried to her room and collected a shawl and bonnet, then raced back down the stairs to where he waited for her.

“You look especially happy today,” he said, wrapping his arm around her waist and leading her out to the carriage. “You have a certain glow about you.”

“Of course I do. After today, our house will be complete. All the repairs are finished, the furniture is in and where it should be, and in seven months you will be a father.”

It only took him two steps before he caught the meaning of her words. When he did, he came to an abrupt halt and turned her to face him.

“What did you say?”

“I said that all the repairs—”

“No! Not that. The last part.”

“Oh, the part where I said that in seven months you are going to be a father?”

“A father?”

“Well, that’s usually what a man is called when his wife is going to have a baby.”

“Are you sure?”

“Fairly sure,” she said.

“Oh, Lettie.” He grabbed her and kissed her, then pulled her into his arms. “This is

wonderful. I'm so happy."

"I hoped you would be. I'm a little nervous myself."

"You can be nervous now, and I'll be nervous when it's time for the baby to come."

"What about me?"

"Oh, you won't be nervous then. You'll just be anxious to hold our baby in your arms."

"Yes," she said with a laugh. "That's a perfect way to think of it."

"Are you sure you want to tour the estate? Will a carriage ride be too much for you?"

"No, not at all. If it's too much for me now, how will I ever survive leaving the house in four or five months?"

"You are right. Shall we go?"

"Yes."

Phillip helped her into the carriage then climbed in after her and clapped the reins.

"I do have one question, though," she said.

"Yes, what is it?"

"Are you going to wear that smile for the next seven months?"

"Oh, not just the next seven months, but for the rest of my life."

He leaned closer to her and kissed her with more passion than ever.

That was when she knew it. That was when she knew without a doubt that she loved him, and she always would.

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Phillip made his way through the ground floor on his way to his study. He knew he'd find Violet there. That was where she always was at this time of day. You could set a clock by her schedule—she rose early each morning, no matter how late he'd kept her up during the night. Then she dressed and went down to the dining room to break her fast. When she finished eating, she would go to his study and start work on the estate ledgers.

Phillip made sure he always arrived to eat breakfast with her. If he didn't, he'd miss being with her during the best time of every day. This was when he would find out what her plans for the day were. If he wanted to keep up with her, he had to be on time, or he wasn't sure when he'd have a chance to be with her. Sometimes not until dinner.

Today was no different. He headed for the study and when he arrived, found her sitting behind the desk, hard at work.

She was getting larger every day. He had to smile. She couldn't push her chair close to the desk any longer, and had to prop the ledgers on a drawer to get them close enough.

"What are you staring at, Markham?" she asked without looking up from her work.

"I'm staring at the most beautiful woman in the world, and she's mine."

He caught Violet in a momentary blush before she placed her pen on the desk and lifted her gaze. "That is the most blatant lie you've told me since we met."

“No, not the most blatant lie. The most blatant lie was when I told you that Captain DeLaney and I single-handedly defeated Napoleon’s army in one day.”

Violet laughed. “Yes, but you were far from sober, as I recall. And Captain DeLaney was even worse. I hate to tell you, but I didn’t believe a word either of you said that whole evening.”

“You didn’t? But you congratulated me on a victory well won.”

“What else was I supposed to do, call you a liar in front of a fellow officer?”

“Oh, you are a jewel, Lettie.”

“I’m glad you realize that minor fact.”

“I’ve known it from the day we met.”

“How wise of you,” she said, then met his lips when he leaned down to kiss her.

Just then, Wilbert stood in the doorway and cleared his throat.

“Yes, Wilbert,” Markham said with a grin. “What is it?”

“You have a caller, my lord.”

“Who is it?”

“I’m afraid he wouldn’t give his name, my lord.”

“Did he say why he would not?”

“Because,” a deep voice said from the doorway, “I was afraid if I told you my name, you would not see me.”

Phillip’s blood turned to ice. This moment had lurked at the back of his mind for so long that he had almost convinced himself it would never happen. But it had, and all he could think of was Violet, his Violet. He looked from her to the towering hulk in the doorway and stepped closer to his wife to protect her.

“What do you want?” he said, standing between Violet and Jamie Whitecliff.

“To give you what you’re owed,” Whitecliff said.

Phillip looked around for anything he might use to protect his wife. The anguish this fellow had shown on the battlefield played clearly in his mind. An eye for an eye. That was what he had bellowed as they carried away his twin.

The giant of a man had raged and punched anyone who dared try to calm him. He’d lost his twin brother, and swore he would take revenge on anyone who had contributed to his sibling’s death. It was Phillip who had issued the order to advance. Phillip who had ordered Whitecliff’s brother to face the enemy. On that horrid day, Jamie Whitecliff had wished to see the Earl of Markham dead.

“You owe me nothing,” Phillip said in the calmest voice he could muster.

“I was afraid you’d feel that way, but my ma made me swear I’d give this to you.”

Whitecliff took several steps closer to the desk, then reached into his pocket.

“No!” Phillip yelled.

“Mr. Whitecliff,” Violet said as she rose from her chair. “Markham, I’m all right.”

“No, Whitecliff. Don’t you touch her.”

“I have no intention of hurting her,” Whitecliff replied.

Phillip didn’t relax his stance, but kept his battle-ready pose.

Violet, however, seemed eager to invite Whitecliff to make himself at home. “Please, won’t you join us for tea?”

Phillip reached out to stop Violet from getting near Whitecliff, but she eluded his grasp and stepped next to the man.

“Please, have a seat,” she said, pointing to a spot on the settee. “I imagine you would rather have something stronger than tea, though, wouldn’t you?”

“Do you have whiskey?”

“We do,” Violet said, then walked to the sideboard and poured Whitecliff a glass of whiskey.

“Thank you, my lady,” he said, taking the glass from her.

Phillip could see that Whitecliff had just figured out that Violet was expecting a baby. The expression on his face changed.

“Congratulations, Major,” he said, lifting his glass in salute.

“Thank you, Whitecliff.”

“What would you like, Markham?” Violet asked him with a smile.

“A brandy, sweetheart.”

She poured him a brandy, then took it to him. He helped her to the settee, then sat beside her.

“Markham, would you please introduce me to our guest?”

“Violet, this is Sergeant Jamie Whitecliff. Sergeant, allow me to present my wife, Lady Violet Markham.”

“My lady,” Whitecliff said, standing at his chair and bowing.

“Please, Sergeant. Do sit. We’re not that formal here.”

Their guest sat.

“I take it that you and Markham served together in the war.”

“Yes, my lady.”

“Was he a good officer?”

“Lettie!” Phillip said, trying to stop her from dredging up things that were better left unspoken.

“The best, my lady. He had the admiration and respect of every soldier under his command. To a man they would have laid down their lives for him.”

“I would have thought that,” she said, reaching for her husband’s hand. “So, who were you close to that laid down his life for Markham? I take it that’s why you are here.”

“Lettie,” Phillip whispered.

“Someone died that the sergeant was close to, Markham. I think that’s why Sergeant Whitecliff is here. He has something he’d like to say.”

“It was my brother, my lady,” Whitecliff said. “My twin brother.”

“Oh, Sergeant Whitecliff. I’m so sorry.”

“He was always the first in a scuffle, and when he saw the French rush the major, he jumped in to help without hesitating.”

“Is that where you got the saber wound to your thigh and the scar across your back?” she asked Phillip.

“Yes. Without the bravery of Sergeant Whitecliff’s brother, I wouldn’t be alive today.”

“Then I owe you a great debt,” Violet said, turning to their guest.

“And I owe the major a debt, or rather, an apology,” Whitecliff said. “In the throes of my grief, I said some words that I wish I could take back.”

“That’s not necessary, Whitecliff.” Phillip wasn’t sure he should believe Whitecliff, but the man seemed sincere. His voice was naturally gruff, but Phillip realized he heard no menace there.

“Just the same, I’d like to offer my apology.”

“Accepted,” Phillip said.

“And my mother sent along this memento. She wanted you to have it.”

Whitecliff handed Phillip a small piece of cloth. He unwrapped the cloth and found an embroidered patch tucked inside. Embroidered on the patch were the words: Sergeant Jeremy Whitecliff– Surrey, England.

“My ma made one for each of us in case something happened to one or both of us and the army needed to tell us apart.” Whitecliff held up his patch. The patches were identical except for the names.

“Oh, how special,” Violet said, standing up and giving Whitecliff a hug. When she sat down, Phillip noticed tears running down her cheeks. “Thank you, Sergeant. I appreciate your coming all this way to give me this.”

“Ma thought maybe when you have a son, you might want to give him this and tell him what a brave soldier our Jeremy was.”

“I’d be honored to tell him all about how brave your brother was. I’m honored that you made a trip all the way here to give me what your ma made for your brother.”

“To be honest, I had another reason for coming, but it didn’t work out like I’d hoped it would.”

“Oh, what other reason did you have?” she asked.

“I’m looking for a change, y’see. Our home holds too many memories of my brother for my ma to handle. I have a buyer for our land and want to get ma away from there. She spends most of every day crying, and it’s not good for her.”

“What do you do?”

“I was a land steward before the war. I answered an ad in the paper for a man not far from here who was in need of a steward, so I came to talk to him.”

“But you say it didn’t work out?”

“No. Farming practices and land management have changed so much just in the last few years that they are hardly recognizable,” Whitecliff replied. “The man I spoke with doesn’t want to change with the times. He insisted he wanted everything to stay the way it is and always has been.”

“And you don’t want to?”

“No. I want to modernize farming practices. If I put that much time and work in the land, I want something to show for it at the end.”

“That’s a wise attitude.”

Phillip rose from his chair, walked to the liquor cabinet, and brought back the whiskey decanter. After he filled their glasses, he sat down. “I happen to have an estate north of here that is in need of a steward. It hasn’t been run properly for several years, but in its heyday, it was quite profitable. It’s yours to work if you want the job. You can try any new methods you’d like and keep any of the profits for the first five years. If it shows improvement then, we’ll talk again. What do you think?”

“Is there a house on the grounds where my ma and I could live?” Whitecliff asked.

“Yes, although I’d have to provide a few servants. It’s rather a large estate and would be more than your mother could manage.”

“Could I look at it?”

“You may. It’s almost time for lunch. We’ll eat first, then I’ll send my land steward and overseer with you to check things over. How does that sound?”

“Perfect, Major. This day is turning out better than I thought.”

Violet started to rise. “I’ll tell Cook to expect one more for lunch.”

“You stay right there, dear,” Phillip said. “I’ll tell Cook, and then tell Wilbert to send for my land steward.”

“Very well,” Violet said as he left the room.

“Thank you,” Sergeant Whitecliff said. “This day is ending much better than it began.”

“Whatever happened in the war has bothered my husband since he returned home,” Violet said. “I’m glad you came to speak with him.”

“So am I. We left some business unsettled. It’s good to have it sorted.”

“That’s always for the best,” Violet said.

“The war affected everyone and left scars. The most painful are those that can’t be seen.”

“It’s obvious you know that personally,” Violet said.

“I do,” Whitecliff said. “My brother’s death left a wound almost more painful than any from which I could recover.”

“That’s often the way it is with those to whom we’re closest,” she said.

“I take it you’ve lost someone, too,” he said.

“My father, when his ship went down. We were very close,” Violet said. “Thankfully, I have Markham. We’re very happy.”

“I can see that. I’m glad,” Whitecliff said.

“So am I,” Violet said, and was more thankful than she ever thought she would be.

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“Has Biegert returned from taking Sergeant Whitecliff to tour Sea Home Manor?” Violet asked when Phillip walked into the room.

“I just spoke with him.”

“What did he say?”

“He said if I didn’t hire Jamie Whitecliff, I was a fool. He said a few other choice words that I can’t repeat in your presence, but his point was obvious.”

“Wonderful,” Violet said with a smile. “I hoped he would work out. I liked him very much.”

“So did I. He was an excellent soldier, except when he went a little crazy that last day. I expect him to be a conscientious steward.”

Phillip filled a snifter with brandy and sat down beside his wife. “You look tired,” he said. “Are you feeling well?”

“I’m feeling exceptionally well.”

“I’m glad.”

“I think, however, we might want to consider sending for the midwife in the next day or two,” Violet said. “Just in case.”

“Do you think our little private might decide to make an appearance already?”

“I just think I’d prefer to have the midwife here before our baby’s arrival rather than after. Otherwise, you’ll be delivering your son.”

A wave of panic washed over him. “That’s wise, Lettie. I’ll send for her yet today.”

Phillip leaned close and kissed her. “I love you, Lettie. I should have told you so a long time ago.”

“And I should have told you how much I love you,” she answered. “I feel like I wasted a lot of time knowing that I loved you instead of saying the words. You should have known how special you are to me a long time ago.”

He kissed her again, then stood and held out his hands. “Would you like to walk a bit outside?”

“I’d love to,” she answered.

“I want to find Wilbert and have him send someone to fetch the midwife.”

“Yes, then maybe we can walk through the back garden. More flowers have bloomed, and the park is especially beautiful.”

Violet and Phillip walked to the front of the house, where Wilbert could usually be found. A broad grin lit his features when Phillip told him what he needed him to do.

“Right away, my lord,” he answered, and went to find a footman to do his bidding.

From the front of the house, Phillip led Violet through the library to a set of French doors. From there, they crossed the terrace and went down the three steps that led to the center path in the garden.

“I can’t believe how ungainly I am,” Violet said when she nearly lost her footing. She braced her hand against her back. “I remind myself more of a duck trying to walk than a human female.”

Phillip couldn’t help but laugh. “I find I’m particularly fond of ducks, and you’re the most beautiful duck I’ve ever seen.”

“Flattery will get you everywhere, my lord. Oh, wait. It already has.”

He laughed again. “You have the most remarkable sense of humor, Lettie.”

“I have to have something to keep you interested in me, Markham. My extraordinary beauty isn’t going to be enough for very long.”

Phillip stopped along the path and turned her to face him. It was difficult to bring her close to him, but he wrapped his arms around her and brought her as close as he could.

“Lettie, don’t talk about yourself like you are some unsightly troll. You’re not. You have a loveliness about you that defies description. I see it. Everyone sees it. I owe you everything. More than I’ll ever be able to give you in return. I am the one who is lacking. Not you.”

Violet leaned forward to stand on her tiptoes and press her lips to his. She kissed him with a passion equal to the passion he felt for her.

“You’ve given me what I’ve always wanted, my love,” she said. “You make me smile. You spoil me terribly. And in a few days I’ll have the first of the many children I’ve always dreamed of having. I never thought I’d be so blessed.”

“Well, I’ve got you there. I knew so from the moment we first spoke. Then you

frightened me nearly to death when you said you'd changed your mind and no longer wished to marry me."

"That's only because I looked at your very handsome face and didn't want you to be horribly embarrassed every time we stepped out in public."

"I cannot conceive of any such thing ever happening. Ever," he said with a broad smile as he placed his hand on her stomach. "As you can see, I am the happiest, most content of husbands."

He leaned over and kissed her, then found a bench on the side of the path and they sat together. They had been there a short while when Wilbert approached.

"Yes, Wilbert?"

"May I have a word, my lord?"

"Of course," Phillip said. "Don't go anywhere, Lettie," he said, getting to his feet.

"As if I could travel far in this condition," she said. "Just plant me where you want me to be and I'll stay there and grow."

"That's my girl," he said with a laugh.

Phillip walked to where Wilbert had separated himself from Violet so they couldn't be overheard.

"Is something wrong, Wilbert?"

"I'm not sure, my lord. You have a visitor. Well, actually, her ladyship has a visitor."

“Who is it?”

“The gentleman says he’s Lady Markham’s father.”

Phillip turned to look at his wife. If this was a joke, it was a poor joke to say the least. And the timing couldn’t be worse.

“I’ll be right back, sweetheart,” he called.

“Very well,” she answered, clutching her back again, then leaning back against the wrought-iron bench.

“Take me to this man,” Phillip said, then followed Wilbert through the house. They stopped when they reached the blue salon. “Stay close, Wilbert.”

“Yes, my lord.”

Phillip took a deep breath, then turned the knob and opened the door. The man he’d come to see stood with his back to Phillip as he looked out the window.

“Lord Slushman?”

The man turned. He wore a smile—a smile that reminded Phillip so much of Violet’s.

“No. Slushman is the family name. I am the Earl of Pearlman.”

“Please, my lord. Have a seat.”

The earl stepped forward and sat on the nearest settee. Phillip walked to the sideboard and poured two brandies. He handed one snifter to the man who claimed to be Violet’s father.

“I hear that you married my Lettie,” he said after taking a sip of his brandy. His tone was stiff, almost accusatory.

“I did, my lord.”

“Dangle enough money in front of any man and he will jump at the chance to save himself, I suppose.”

The insult was directed at Phillip, but he felt it more sharply in the way it impugned Violet’s motive for marrying him. He was torn between defending their marriage and quickly returning to Violet, who waited for him in the garden. But the words were already spilling from his lips.

“You wrong your daughter, sir, but you could not know it. Violet’s only intention was to safeguard your fortune, to keep your properties out of the hands of unscrupulous blackguards.”

The earl scowled. “And has she done that?”

Phillip swallowed harsh words that rose to his tongue. “See for yourself, Pearlman.” He extended his arms, as if to take in the entirety of a well-run household. “But know this. Your daughter made the most selfless gesture a woman can make. She gave over your fortune to save my family’s legacy from its creditors. She has shown excellent sense and even greater compassion in her dealings with our mutual tenants. She is remarkable, sir. Remarkable. And it is the greatest gift of my life that she has chosen to share her life with me here at Parkwood.”

By the time the last word left his tongue, Phillip felt his heartbeat escalating. But the man just sat and looked at him, and as the seconds ticked by, Phillip saw the earl’s face soften.

“You love her. By God, you love her.” He sighed. “That’s all she ever wanted. To be loved.”

“I do love her, my lord. Very much.”

Pearlman closed his eyes and nodded his approval. “That’s all I can ask of you. Some time later I’ll have to hear your story.”

“Yes,” Phillip said. “But first I imagine you’d like to see your daughter.”

“Very much.”

“This is going to be a huge shock to her. She thinks you are dead.”

“I know. That’s why I asked to see you first, so you could break it to her as gently as possible.”

Phillip nodded. “I’ll bring her to you. She’s in a delicate state at the moment.”

“Lettie is presenting you with an heir?”

“Very possibly, my lord.”

Violet’s father’s face broke into a huge smile. “That was her fondest desire, you know. A house filled with children. I told her she didn’t know what she was asking for, unless they were all like her. But she said she wouldn’t let them grow up as spoiled as her sister Pauline, which was her mother’s doing.”

Phillip smiled, then got to his feet. “I’ll get Lettie now and bring her to you.”

“Thank you,” Pearlman said.

Phillip left the room.

“Do you think it’s her ladyship’s father, my lord?” Wilbert asked.

“Yes. It’s her ladyship’s father. There’s no doubt.”

“Oh, praise be. What a wonderful day. I’ll tell Cook to prepare something special for dinner.”

“Yes, Wilbert. Something very special.”

Phillip walked to the library, then out the French doors and down the center path. He stopped at the wrought-iron bench and sat beside his wife. “I think it’s time we went back inside, Lettie.”

“I think so, too,” she said, struggling to get to her feet.

Phillip took her arm and led her toward the house.

“What did Wilbert want with you? Did you have a caller?”

They walked across the terrace, then through the library, down the hall, and across the foyer. “Actually, the caller was for you.”

“Me?”

“Yes, you.”

“Is the caller still here?”

“Yes, and he’s very anxious to see you.”

“Well who is it, Markham?”

“You need to prepare yourself, Lettie. This is going to be quite a shock.”

“A good shock or a bad shock?”

“The best shock imaginable.”

“Oh, you have me intrigued.” She looked at him and smiled. “I know what it is. You got me a puppy.”

Phillip burst out laughing. “No, but do you want a puppy?”

“Someday, yes, but not today. I’m going to have a baby to take care of soon.”

“Yes, you are.”

They’d reached the blue salon, and Phillip stopped. “Are you ready?”

“Oh, you’re making me nervous, Markham.”

“Just calm down and prepare yourself.”

Violet reached for his hands and placed them on her stomach. “See, you have even made your son nervous. He’s kicking me unmercifully.”

“No, Lettie. He’s jumping for joy.”

“Why?”

“Because your father has returned to you.”

“My...my father?”

Phillip watched the color drain from Violet’s face, and then hope sprang into her eyes.

“Yes. Your father.”

Phillip opened the door to the blue salon, and Violet got her first look at the father she’d thought was dead.

“Papa?” she said as tears streamed down her cheeks. She rushed forward as quickly as her body would allow her to move. “Papa! Papa! It’s you! You’re alive!”

“Yes, my Lettie. It’s me.”

Father and daughter clutched each other as if they would never let each other go.

Phillip placed his arms around his wife and moved her to the settee. Her father sat beside her and took both her hands in his.

“How did you survive?” she asked. “I got word that you died. Are Mother and Pauline alive, too?”

Pearlman shook his head. “No, dear. I was the only one to survive. And it was a miracle that I did. When the ship went down, I managed to grab on to a piece of wood. I held on until another ship that was following us picked me up. I was injured and completely disoriented. Unconscious for many weeks then out of my mind, they say. I was kept in Boston until I was strong enough to sail back to England.”

Violet hugged her father again.

“Now,” Pearlman said. “Properly introduce me to my son-in-law and tell me how you met. I can’t imagine that you attended every ball that was held until you found him.”

“Papa, meet Lord Phillip Eversley, Earl of Markham.”

Phillip stood and bowed to his father-in-law. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Lord Pearlman.”

“Same to you, Markham. I was acquainted with your father.”

Phillip smiled. “Please, my lord. Don’t hold that against me.”

“Markham’s not anything like his father or his brother,” Violet said with a smile.

“Then how did you meet?” Pearlman asked.

“Actually,” Violet said, reaching for Phillip’s hand and holding it, “thanks to the money you left me, Papa, I bought him.”

“You what?”

“I bought him,” she repeated. “Well, actually, I paid Mrs. Bessie Dove-Lyon, who in turn bought and paid his father’s IOUs.”

“Well, I knew you wouldn’t find the man you would marry in a ballroom, but neither did I think you would find a husband at the infamous Lyon’s Den.”

Phillip lifted her hand and kissed her fingers. “You have quite a remarkable daughter, Lord Pearlman.”

“Yes, I’ve always been aware of that. She’s unique to a fault and has a good head on

her shoulders.”

“And you trained her well, my lord. She does the books as well as anyone I’ve ever seen.”

“That’s what she was trained to do,” her father said with a smile. “Now, tell me about this place.”

“This is Parkwood Manor, Papa,” Violet replied. “It’s ours, Markham’s and mine.”

“No,” Phillip corrected her. “The estate is yours. It was my grandmama’s estate, and one of the stipulations of our marriage contract was that Lettie got one of the estates your money made free and clear, and this is the estate she chose.”

“You chose well,” her father said. “I was impressed with the land as I traveled here.”

“It’s going to be very profitable in a few years, Papa,” Violet said. “And Markham has some excellent stewards to oversee all his properties.”

“I’m impressed with what you have done—both of you. I knew I wouldn’t have to worry about Lettie, even without the money I left her. She has a solid head for business, and I knew she’d find a way to support herself. I have one more question, though. What pushed you to go to Mrs. Dove-Lyon to ask her to find you a husband?”

“Actually, it was your money that pushed me.”

“The money?”

“Yes. I needed a husband’s name to protect me from all the money-hungry lechers out there. News of your tragedy and the immense fortune you left your only surviving

daughter was all over the front pages of every newspaper for a week. That brought them crawling out of the woodwork, and I knew it was only a matter of time before one of them compromised me and I was forced into a marriage I would regret.”

“I see,” her father said thoughtfully. “I didn’t consider that. But I also didn’t consider the ship we were on would go down on our voyage to America and I’d lose your mother and your sister.”

“I miss them, Papa. But at least I have you with me.”

“Yes, and soon you’ll have the next generation of Markham and Pearlman.”

Just then, Wilbert knocked on the door and announced dinner.

Phillip helped Lettie to her feet, then walked with her to the dining room.

“How do you feel, sweetheart?” he asked her. She seemed...different.

“I feel wonderful,” she answered. “Like I’m ready to meet our little private.”

Phillip paused and gave her a kiss. It wasn’t as passionate as he would have liked it to be, but how could it be with Violet’s father standing so nearby?

“We’ll eat dinner, then I’ll take you to your room and you can get ready to meet your son or daughter.”

“Oh, it is a boy, Markham. That’s what I promised you, and I intend to keep my promise.”

Phillip laughed. “Well, I will be happy with whatever you decide to deliver.”

“So will I,” Violet said. “But this first baby will be a boy.”

Phillip leaned down and kissed her again, then led her in to dinner.

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Violet decided to have her baby yet that night.

Phillip and her father waited together in the library while the midwife attended Violet.

“Does it always take this long?” Phillip asked his father-in-law.

“Sometimes much longer,” Pearlman answered. “It’s only been a couple of hours. In my experience, it sometimes takes a whole day.”

Phillip felt a knot grow in his stomach. He knew that Violet wanted a large family, but he wasn’t sure he wanted her to go through this several more times.

Just then, he heard another faint cry come from the floor above. He walked to the sideboard and poured two snifters of brandy. He took one back to Violet’s father and kept one for himself.

“I’ve always wondered,” he said when he was seated. “What made you keep your massive fortune in banks in England and leave it to Lettie, should anything happen to you?”

Pearlman smiled. “Lettie is the most responsible person I know. I trusted her to manage my wealth and keep it safe should something happen to me.”

“I imagine you can’t help but regret that she used it to pay my father’s debts and make his holdings debt free.”

Pearlman laughed. “Are you aware of how much our fortune has increased by making your properties debt free?”

Phillip shook his head.

“Lettie has almost doubled its worth with the purchase of the five estates made solvent with her fortune. And,” Pearlman continued, “Lettie told me that in only a few years you anticipate that all of your estates will be turning a profit.”

“Yes, that is our hope. But before that, we must return some of your funds. You’ll want to—”

The Earl of Pearlman waved a hand to interrupt and leaned toward Phillip. “Nonsense. I had set aside a grand sum for our new life in America, and purchased an estate outside Boston for my wife and daughter. I’ve since liquidated it and have more than enough to see me through. Don’t you put another thought to returning a single farthing.”

Phillip marveled at the man’s generosity. He had just taken another taste of his brandy when he heard Violet cry out again.

He shot to his feet and paced from one side of the room to the other. “I think I should go up and check on her,” he said, heading for the door.

“Why don’t you sit down with me for a moment first?” Pearlman said.

Phillip stopped where he was and returned. He sat on the sofa and swirled his brandy. The aroma wafting from the bowl of his snifter seemed to calm him.

“I want to discuss something I heard on my way here,” Violet’s father said. “I’m not sure it’s accurate, but if it is, it might affect you greatly.”

Phillip tried to concentrate on what Pearlman was saying because it sounded important, but it was difficult. He turned to face the man, and struggled to pay attention.

“I stopped to ask directions to Parkwood Manor at an inn in a growing town called Willowbrook, and the men at the inn were talking about the addition of a railroad that would be coming through the area. It would connect Willowbrook with London, and its construction would be a boon for this area. Have you heard where it will be located?”

“I’ve heard of the possibility of a railroad going through the area but haven’t heard where it would go. Wherever it is, it will mean additional revenue throughout the countryside.”

“That’s what I think, too,” Pearlman said. “It might even make sheep and cattle easier to send to market, therefore more profitable.”

“Why are you telling me this? Is there something you think needs to be done with this railroad?”

“Yes. No matter where they lay the rails, it will take a number of investors to pay for putting the tracks in. It would behoove us to be among those investors. In a big way.”

“Are you saying we should put money into the laying of this railroad?”

“I am saying that we should become major investors in this railroad.”

“Don’t you think that’s a big gamble?”

“When have you considered betting on a sure thing a gamble?” Pearlman asked.

“This is progress. We’re investing in progress, son.”

“I’ll keep my eyes and ears open. We should be hearing something more soon.”

“Yes, you do that.”

At that moment, Phillip heard Violet cry out again. This time her cry was louder, and he couldn’t ignore the pain he heard in her voice. He bolted from his chair and raced across the room, then across the foyer, and to the bottom of the stairs. He’d only gone up the first three stairs when Violet’s wail was followed by a baby’s cry. The sound of his son or daughter’s voice stopped him.

He paused on the step, then raced up the stairs, taking two steps at a time. When he reached the top, he ran down the hallway to Violet’s room.

He stopped before her bedroom, then reached for the knob and opened the door.

“Lettie?” he said, looking into the room and focusing on the bed. “Lettie?”

“Markham,” her weak voice whispered.

He raced across the room and knelt at her bedside. He reached for her hand and held it as tears streamed down his face. “Oh, Lettie. How are you, sweetheart?”

“I’m fine. Just fine,” she answered as one of the maids placed a small bundle wrapped in the blanket Violet had been knitting for the past few months in her arms. “Look, Markham. It’s your son. Your heir.”

Violet lifted him up so Phillip could hold him.

“He doesn’t weigh anything,” he said as he cradled his son in his arms and tears of joy ran down his face.

“Don’t worry. He’ll take after you soon enough and weigh more than either of us can carry around.”

“What shall we call him?” Phillip asked.

“I would like to call him Thomas,” she said. “After my father.”

“That would be most agreeable. Thomas Phillip Chandler Eversley, heir to the Earl of Markham.”

“Yes,” Violet said, struggling to keep her eyes open. “Heir to the Earl of Markham. But Chandler? Where did that come from?”

“My grandmother’s maiden name, dearest. The grande dame of Parkwood Manor. I’d like to keep her name part of my children’s heritage. What do you think?”

As Violet smiled her agreement, her father entered the room.

“Come meet your grandson, my lord,” Phillip said. “And your namesake, Thomas Phillip Chandler Eversley, the next Earl of Markham.”

Violet’s father grinned as his eyes filled with tears. “Little Thomas,” he said, looking down on the bundle in his arms with joy on his face.

After a moment, he handed the baby over to Phillip, who was eager to hold him again. The new father stared at his son and studied him for several long minutes. After a while, he handed the baby back to the nurse and turned to the door.

“I think we should go to the library and let my wife rest,” Phillip said. But first he walked to his wife and kissed her. “I love you, sweetheart,” he whispered. “I’m so glad you were brave enough to go to Mrs. Bessie Dove-Lyon and buy me. I don’t

know where I would be right now if you hadn't."

"You are the best purchase I ever made, Markham. I'll always be grateful for the bargain we struck."

"As will I," Phillip said.

Toward the end of the first week after Violet had recovered from Thomas's birth, she, Phillip, and her father finished dinner and retired to the library. Phillip couldn't get over how quickly she'd recovered. She was truly remarkable.

"Have you heard anything new concerning the railroad?" her father asked.

"What railroad?" Violet asked. "Is there talk of a railroad going through?"

"Yes, dear," Phillip answered her. "Your father heard mention of it before Thomas was born."

"What did they say about it?"

"Only that they wanted to build a railroad to connect Willowbrook to London."

"That's excellent," Violet said. "A railroad will open up all sorts of possibilities for expansion. Imagine the grain that can be shipped. And the livestock. And think how much faster people will be able to travel to London, and how much faster goods can be transported from London to Willowbrook."

Phillip laughed. "See how your daughter's mind works? She already has the railroad up and running and goods making their way from there to here."

"We don't even know where the railroad will go, Lettie," her father reminded her. It

might not come close to here. Or even if it does, it might not stop in Willowbrook.”

“Of course it will,” Violet argued. “And it only makes sense to lay the tracks right through Parkwood Estate.”

“She’s right,” Phillip said. “I was approached by a group of investors just today who asked if I wanted to invest in the new railroad that will go through on the east side of Parkwood.”

“What did you tell them?” Violet asked. Phillip could see the excitement building in his wife.

“I told them I had to talk it over with my wife, that it was her money and I had to get her approval before I could spend such a large amount.”

“You didn’t,” Violet said as she rolled her eyes.

“I did,” Phillip admitted.

She looked at her father. “What do you think, Papa?”

Lord Pearlman thought for less than a second, then said, “I think if you pass up the opportunity to invest in this railroad, you are very foolish indeed.”

“So do I, Papa,” Violet said, kissing her father on the cheek. “I’m very glad you came back to us.”

“So am I, Lettie. I’m not sure why God spared me, but I’m glad he did. And this gives me the opportunity to rebuild my fortune, since you spent my first fortune to buy yourself a husband.”

Phillip and Violet laughed, then he wrapped her in his arms and kissed her.

“As I’ve said repeatedly, Markham was the best purchase I’ve ever made.” And they kissed each other again, even though her father was there.

“How much do you think we should invest?” Phillip asked when the topic returned to the railroad.

“How much money do you have in the bank?” Pearlman asked.

“I’d have to add it up,” Violet said.

“Whatever you have, double it, then double it again. That’s what we’ll invest. For now. Maybe more later. We’ll see.”

“Are you serious, Papa?”

“Yes, Lettie. I’m dead serious.”

“Very well. When have you ever been wrong? I’m not going to start doubting you now.”

“I knew I raised you right,” Lord Pearlman said, and Violet leaned over and kissed her father on the cheek again. Then she turned to Phillip and kissed him.

Then kissed him again.

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Twelve years later

“P apa?” eight-year-old Rebecca said as she walked up to her father.

Phillip was sitting at a table on the terrace and could tell by the expression on her face that she had some weighty question to ask him. “Yes, pumpkin. What is it?”

“Are we rich?”

He blinked twice. That wasn’t the question he’d anticipated her asking.

“I’m not sure I know the answer to that question, pumpkin.”

“Why not?”

“Because I’m not sure I know what rich is. What do you mean by ‘rich’?”

“Well, do we have more money than anybody else?”

“Oh, that’s a much easier question to answer.” Phillip lifted his daughter onto his lap and wrapped her in his arms. “No. We don’t have more money than everybody else. There are many people with much more money than we have. Why did you ask that?”

“Because Thomas said we are the richest people in the world.”

“Then Thomas is incorrect. We have enough money to live comfortably, but that doesn’t make us rich.”

“How do you know if we have enough money to live comfortably?”

“Well, have you ever gone hungry because we didn’t have enough food to eat?”

“No, we always have more than enough to eat.”

“Have you ever gone without shoes because we couldn’t afford to buy you shoes?”

“No, I have more than enough shoes.”

“Did you ever have to stand on the side of the road to beg for money to buy something you wanted or needed?”

“No, because—” Rebecca stopped. “Would you ever make us stand on the side of the road to beg for money, Papa?”

“No. Absolutely not. You will never have to beg for money.”

“Then we have just enough money to live comfortably, but we’re not too rich.”

“That’s correct. We are very blessed to have just enough money.”

Phillip looked at his daughter and saw a frown still on her face. “Did you have another question, pumpkin?”

“Yes, Papa.”

“Well, what is it?”

“Is Mama going to have another baby?”

Phillip almost choked on his tea. “Well,” he said, struggling to come up with an

answer. "I don't know. Why do you ask?"

"Because if she is, I have a request to make."

"You do?"

"Yes."

"What is it?"

"Well, would it be possible for her to have a girl this time? I would really like a sister, and all she has is baby boys."

"I see."

Just then, Violet walked onto the terrace. "Oh, Lettie," he said with a smile on his face.

"I see you have the boys out on the lawn playing," she said with a smile in return. "Promise to keep them out there long enough to wear them out so they sleep for Mrs. Rumble tonight. She said she had a difficult time getting them to go to sleep last night."

"Very well," Phillip said as Violet walked over to where he sat and gave him a kiss on the cheek, then leaned down to give Rebecca a kiss.

"Hello, pumpkin," she greeted her daughter.

"We're so glad you're here, Lettie. Pumpkin has a question she wants to ask you. Well, actually, it's a favor she would like to ask of you."

"What is it, sweetheart?" Violet sat down in the chair next to them.

“I want to know if you are having another baby, Mama.”

Violet stammered and laughed. “Well, Rebecca, it’s possible that I am. I’m not positively sure yet, but it’s possible.”

“Then I would like to ask you a favor. Would you please give me a sister this time? I don’t think it’s fair that Thomas always gets another brother to play with and I never get a sister.”

“Do you think you have too many brothers?”

“Yes, don’t you?”

Phillip couldn’t help but laugh. His daughter looked so serious, and for the first time in his life, he noticed that his wife looked at a loss for words.

“Well, Mama?” he countered. “What do you think? I think Rebecca has a valid complaint.”

“Yes, Mama,” Rebecca agreed. “Thomas has four brothers, and I don’t have any sisters.”

“Yes, Lettie. That is quite a disparity,” Phillip teased.

He burst out laughing when his wife gave him a look that could have singed the hair from his head.

“I agree,” Violet admitted. “That doesn’t seem fair, does it?”

“No, Mama. Not at all.”

“Except for one thing,” Violet said. “I am not the one who determines whether you

get a baby brother or a baby sister.”

“You’re not?” Rebecca said with the biggest frown her parents had ever seen on their daughter’s face. “Who does?”

“God does, precious,” Violet answered.

Rebecca thought for a few moments and said, “Then I’ll just have to talk to God about that. I’m sure he’ll agree that I need a sister and give me one. Don’t you think?”

“I think it would be wise of you to ask,” Phillip said. “He has been known to give us numerous blessings when we ask Him for them.”

“Yes,” Rebecca agreed with a huge smile that lit her sweet face. “I’m going to go talk to God right now,” she said.

Phillip watched his daughter run into the house. “What are you going to do if you have another boy?” he asked his wife when Rebecca was out of earshot.

“Oh, I’m not worried, Markham, and you shouldn’t be either. You just need faith.”

Seven months later

“Is Mama all right?” Rebecca asked.

Phillip turned to the door and watched his daughter step into the room. “What are you doing out of bed at this hour, pumpkin?”

“Mama’s having the baby, isn’t she?”

“Yes, she is. Which is why you should be in bed. This is no place for you to be.”

“But I want to meet my sister.”

“Pumpkin, you know Mama can’t promise you that her baby will be a girl. It might be a little boy.”

“No, I talked to God, and He told me He would give me a sister.”

“If you say so,” Phillip said. “Just don’t be too disappointed if Mama doesn’t have a little girl.”

Just then, there was a tiny wail from above the stairs. “That’s my sister. I told you, Papa.”

Phillip waited with his daughter for one of the staff to come down to tell them they could go up, but before anyone came down, another baby cried. This baby’s cry was louder than the first one.

“There are two babies, Papa. I got two sisters!”

Poor Rebecca. She was going to be crushed if she got two brothers instead of two sisters.

Phillip stood close beside his daughter and placed his arm across her shoulders. He would be there for her if the news devastated her.

A short while later, an upstairs maid came down for them. “Her ladyship said for you to come up,” she said, and stood by the open door.

“Come on, Papa! Let’s go meet my sisters.”

Rebecca’s excitement was becoming contagious. Phillip was excited to meet another Markham offspring, even if it was a girl.

He and Rebecca walked to Violet's room and opened the door. His wife lay in bed with a newborn babe in each arm.

"Are these my sisters?" Rebecca asked, stepping as close as she could to the babies.

"Yes, pumpkin. These are your sisters," Violet replied. "Evidently God thought you were so far behind Thomas, he decided to send you two sisters so you could catch up."

"You don't have to have any more babies, Mama. As long as I'm not the only girl, I'm happy."

"I'm glad, pumpkin. Would you like to hold one of them?"

"Which one was born first?"

"This one," Violet said, lifting the baby in her right arm.

"Then I'll hold her first. Can we name her Annie?"

"Annie is a wonderful name. Don't you think so, Papa?"

"Wonderful," Phillip said through the tears streaming down his face.

"And what should we call your second sister?"

"I think Zoe. One with the first letter of the alphabet and the other with the last letter of the alphabet."

Phillip and Violet broke out in laughter.

"That's very ingenious of you, pumpkin. You take after your mother in more ways

than one.”

Rebecca held Annie, then held Zoe until her eyes struggled to stay open. When she drifted off to sleep, Phillip picked her up and carried her to bed.

“Thank you, Mama,” Rebecca said sleepily. “Thank you for giving me two sisters.”

“You’re welcome, pumpkin.”

Phillip carried her to her room, then returned to be with his wife. “I think Rebecca has an excellent idea concerning more babies. I think you’ve provided me with enough spares. I can’t ask any more from you.”

“I didn’t do that just for you, Markham. Remember, I told you I wanted a houseful of children.”

“And you have a houseful, Lettie. I think it’s time you sat back and enjoyed the children we have.”

“Perhaps you’re correct,” she answered. “If only I didn’t enjoy making them so much.”

Phillip burst out laughing. “I know. Me too. I love you, Lettie.”

“And I love you, Markham.”

“Thank you for buying me. This has been the best life imaginable. I couldn’t have asked to spend my life with anyone better than you.”