



The Duke's Bluestocking

(Smugglers Run #4)

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Category: Historical

Description: If you still want me when I return, then we'll decide what happens. But to be clear, Lydia, I will never ask you to be my mistress. That is not something I will consider. Ever. I would never disgrace you by asking or dishonor you by making such an arrangement.

Lydia Abbington vows revenge for her best friend's death, but time is a cruel mistress. Certain her best friend isn't at peace yet, Lydia struggles with the secrets she's been sworn to keep once that chance for revenge passes. Matters are only complicated when her friend's brother returns after years at sea as a privateer. While she's attracted to the man who left when she was little more than a girl, she's uncertain she can trust him with the truth of his sister's death.

Keith MacNeil escaped his abusive father as soon as he was old enough to set sail. Unbeknownst to him, his sister bore the brunt of their father's wrath. With his privateering days over, Keith is ready to retire the Blond Marauder moniker for a quiet life as the Duke of Dorset. However, those plans change when an elusive young woman keeps slipping into his library. He knows Lydia harbors secrets about his sister, but Keith must build her trust before she's ready to share the pain she shoulders.

Drawn away from home by the ever present and ominous East India Company, Keith must work with Lydia's family to protect the smuggling ring that runs along England's southern coast. When he returns to discover an unwanted suitor threatens to steal Lydia from Keith, he'll stop at nothing to end his rival's claim. Once he sets his sights on making Lydia his, Keith swears to protect her at any cost. The Blond Marauder never surrendered at sea, and he won't surrender on land once Lydia places her trust in him.

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PROLOGUE

1811

Forde Abbey, Dorset, England

Lydia Abbington stood beside her best friend's grave. No eighteen-year-old girl should lie in a coffin, grave diggers prepared to toss earth into it, but Kelsey MacNeil no longer walked among the living. Lydia stood across from Kelsey's father, the Duke of Dorset, and clenched her fists. The man looked put out, as though his daughter's funeral interrupted his day. He glanced frequently toward his stables as if he wished to ride away. It wasn't grief that made him want to escape. No. That would mean the Duke cared about his only daughter.

Lydia bowed her head and clasped her hands in front of her as though she were in prayer. But the words that ran through her head were a different conversation than one she might have held with God.

I will make him pay for what he did. I know the truth, and I will make sure in time everyone else does as well. It wasn't your fault, Kels. I fear you came here today still believing it was. I wish you believed me instead. I promise this isn't over.

"Lydia, it's time to go." Sarla Abbington slid her arm around her daughter's waist and tried to draw her younger child into her embrace, but Lydia stood rigid, staring into the grave. It lay among the MacNeils' ancestors, since their family's crypt was already full. With a sigh, her shoulders drooped, and she turned inward to her mother. Even at eighteen, her mother's arms still cured most of the ills of the world. The two

women joined William Abbington, Lydia's father and Sarla's husband. It was a short walk to Abbington House, but the three did it in silence. Will and Sarla understood their daughter was lost in thought and mourning.

Lydia and Kelsey had been the closest of friends since childhood. They'd played together near Lydia's home since Kelsey always had been eager to escape her own family's misery. Kelsey's older brother, Keith, had escaped by accepting a commission in the Royal Navy, then Letters of Marque as a privateer. Two years had passed since anyone last saw Keith, but they'd heard the stories of the Blond Marauder. All Lydia knew of her friend's brother was that he sailed frequently to the Caribbean, much like her cousin Rajesh de Redvers.

As Lydia left Forde Abbey, Kelsey's lifelong home, she didn't notice the man standing among the trees watching. His gaze focused on the tomb throughout the Anglican funeral, but it shifted as Lydia lifted her veil. He memorized every detail of the young woman, fascinated by her toffee-colored skin, thick black tresses, and her confident bearing despite her obvious grief. He couldn't see her face during the service, but he'd seen how she tensed every time she looked toward the Duke. He wondered what caused such animosity to radiate from her. As he'd swept his gaze over the handful of people both times she clenched her fists, he realized no one else sensed her pulsating hatred.

Lydia and her parents walked through the Forde Abbey gates and down the path that separated their property from that of the Duke of Dorset. With the enigmatic woman gone, Keith MacNeil turned toward the coast and his ship. He longed to return to the sea, but he had one obligation he could not avoid. Keith's gaze followed his father as the older man hurried toward his waiting horse, vaulting into the saddle and spurring the animal. Keith guessed where the Duke headed, but he knew he shouldn't leave until the two had spoken.

It was nearly four hours later when Keith could wait no longer. The tide would soon

turn, and he wouldn't be able to set sail. He had no intention of spending a single night in or near Forde Abbey. He'd sworn he would never do so again, and he intended to keep that promise he made to his father. Since his father refused to return to his home to mourn his only daughter, Keith no longer felt compelled to meet with him. He hadn't made his presence known at Kelsey's funeral, so he intended to leave unnoticed.

There wasn't much Keith regretted about his choices, but guilt clawed at him as he turned back to look once more at Kelsey's chamber. It still smelled like his little sister, her belongings still in their places, just as he remembered them. He'd been so adamant about escaping his abusive father that he'd left Kelsey behind to fend for herself. He thought she was safe, unnoticed by their father. Now he had his doubts after watching the young woman at the funeral. Had he abandoned his sister to the fate from which he'd run?

On the silent feet only a hunter or a pirate could possess, Keith crept down the main staircase, cautious no one see or hear him. He wanted no one to announce his visit to his father since he forewent an audience with the Duke. He made his way toward the garden doors in the drawing room when he heard a noise from his father's library. He placed his ear to the door and heard the dim sound of a voice. A woman's voice. He knew his father kept mistresses and assumed that's to whom he'd ridden. He eased the door open an inch and placed his ear to the crack. Curious about who'd entered his father's sanctum, he shifted and placed his eye to the space.

"Kels, I miss you so much already. My heart has a hole in it I don't think will ever mend. What am I supposed to fill it with if you're not here? I should have done something. I should have found your brother or told Rajesh or Arjun. Now there's nothing I can do. I'm so, so sorry. You will always be the sister I wished I had."

Keith sucked in a breath as he watched the young woman from the funeral. He tried to recall who she was, something tickling his memory. His eyes widened as it dawned

on him. Before him was a beautiful young woman, but he had vague memories of her as a spindly child chasing after Kelsey and squealing as his sister chased her. He hadn't seen her in years. He'd left for school and rarely came home, and it wasn't long after his Grand Tour that he accepted his commission.

Little Lydia Abbington. How did I not realize her right away? I should have known the moment I saw her with her parents. But I could barely think straight. I'm sorry, too, Kelsey. I should have been here. I wish I'd known sooner. I would have come back for you. I would have been by your bedside instead of learning you'd wasted away of consumption. If Raj hadn't told me in time...I would have come back for you, despite the old bastard. What did she mean she should have found me?

Keith placed his hand on the door, ready to push it open to ask Lydia that burning question. But he watched her press a brick near the hearth, and a door opened on soundless hinges. His brow furrowed, unaware there were tunnels in his childhood home. He rushed forward as the door closed. He ran his hand over the wall, trying to find the latch. By the time he did, the tunnel was pitch black and empty. He considered marching over to Abbington House to demand an explanation, but he'd intruded on Lydia's private moment.

He couldn't bring himself to admit what he'd done. Her grief was too obvious to deprive her of what she clearly meant to be a conversation with just her memory. He crossed the library and exited. He hurried down to the beach and to the dinghy he'd dragged onto the sand. He rowed himself back to his ship and ordered the sails hoisted. He told himself not to look back, but he couldn't help it. He spied a lone figure on the sand. He knew who watched his ship depart.

CHAPTER 1

1816, Five years later

Forde Abbey, Dorset, England

Lydia led her cousin Rajesh and her new cousin-in-law, Benjamin Pedrick, toward the Forde Abbey crypt. She knew the way from years of secretly entering the former monastery. She and Kelsey used it to sneak in and out when they were children. It had been a while since she'd used this tunnel, so she hoped it was still passable. She opened a tomb door that should have had a coffin in it. Instead, it was an entry to the warren that hid beneath the family mausoleum and within Forde Abbey.

Rajesh and Ben went ahead of her, but her whispers guided them until they reached the former monks' dormitory. Forde Abbey hadn't been a monastic house in two hundred years, not since the Crown gifted it to the Gwyns, Keith and Kelsey's maternal family. Their father married into it and inherited the dukedom upon Elise's father's death.

As they stepped into the cell, a voice made them all freeze. Rajesh and Ben turned toward it, but Lydia stood like a statue.

"Rajesh, I'd hoped you would come. Maybe I will live to see tomorrow."

Lydia knew who owned that baritone, and a wave of conflicting emotions crashed over her. Ben's feelings were obvious as he lunged toward Keith, snarling at the privateer about taking Ben's wife. That was why they were there. Keith had

kidnapped Lydia's cousin Jemima, who was Ben's bride. They'd only been married a few hours when Keith landed near Jemma's family home in Polruan, Cornwall. He'd abducted Jemma after his men beat Ben.

With his family and Jemma's assembled for their wedding, Ben enlisted Rajesh's help to travel from Polruan to Lime Regis and find his wife, who was Rajesh's cousin just like she was Lydia's. Three maharaja's daughters married three East India Company men, and each family eventually made their home along the southern coast of England. Rajesh's, Jemma's, and Lydia's mothers were sisters.

From his years at sea, Rajesh already knew Keith, but he never expected the man would kidnap his cousin. Ben was familiar with Keith, having run contraband along the coast for years with his family. Rajesh was not only Lydia and Jemma's cousin, but he was also Ben's brother-in-law.

Before either Rajesh or Ben could inflict their rage on Keith, the cell door leading to the corridor slammed open, and Jemma flew into Ben's arms. He picked her up off her feet as they shared a passionate kiss. Lydia's attention wasn't on the reunited couple. She watched Keith just as he watched her.

"MacNeil, explain." Rajesh pulled his pistol from his lower back. "You knew she's my cousin."

"I did. And I know Windsor-Clive set a bounty on their heads. No one in your family could be involved, Raj. At least not at first. He needed to be away from Cornwall before anyone could deal with him. People already suspect you from the last time your families tangled. It would be too obvious if the lackwit disappeared from Polruan or Swain Cove. He was going to have her taken one way or another. I made sure she was safe."

Zachary Windsor-Clive, the adult son of Rajesh's wife and Ben's sister, attempted to

assault her the night Rajesh met Charlotte. She employed as a governess to Zachary's younger half-siblings. It hadn't gone well for Zachary when he and Ben clashed not long before Ben and Jemma's wedding. Everyone in the Forde Abbey undercroft knew Zachary wanted revenge for being thwarted several times.

"Where is he?" Ben snarled.

"Three doors down." Keith lifted iron keys from beside him on the cot upon which he sat. Ben was quick to grab them before kissing Jemma again.

Ben released her, and Rajesh reached to embrace her, drawing her farther away from Keith. Ben instructed Rajesh, "Take her away from here."

It was Ben's turn to draw a pistol, checking he'd loaded it. No one doubted it was. Ben hurried from the cell while Rajesh, Jemma, Lydia, and Keith followed. The others didn't notice how Lydia and Keith observed one another.

"Lady Lydia, I suspected you knew the way in. I suppose my sister showed you."

"She did." Lydia notched up her chin, defiance oozing from her.

He'd returned to Forde Abbey and made it his home once more nearly eighteen months before, when he inherited the title from his father. But he'd been away as much as he could during that time, still sailing but limiting most of his voyages to the English Channel instead of across the Atlantic. When he was in residence, salvaging his family's estate engrossed him. His father left it in shambles and near bankruptcy. It was what drove Keith to remain a privateer. He couldn't afford to quit.

"Let's be away from here." Keith offered his arm as Ben's voice echoed in the empty dormitory. His curses and threats rang in the air. They took the last step when a shot pierced the air. Lydia tried to twist toward the sound, but Keith steered her out of the

former monks' quarters. It had served as his dungeon many times, but it was somewhere he loathed to linger. It unnerved him how unbothered Lydia appeared within a space that made his skin crawl. It relieved him to step into the library, having found the hidden latch several months after taking up residence again in his ancestral home.

"I still am not satisfied with your explanation." Rajesh glowered at his friend as Ben and Jemma practically ran to the chamber Jemma occupied for two days before Lydia, Ben, and Rajesh arrived.

"Zachary Windsor-Clive was as much a menace as his father. He would have done unthinkable things to Jemma if he'd found someone else to take her. He already had two other men waiting if I failed. I learned of his plan by chance. I had no time to tell you, and I couldn't reach Ben or Theo before the bastard intended to strike. The only reason he hired me was because I said I could get him the gunpowder."

Lydia listened as Keith explained his rationale, and she had to admit she could understand. Rajesh confronted Zachary's father the previous year about the senior Windsor-Clive's insistence that Rajesh knew about the smuggled gunpowder Ben's family made. The English East India Company had a monopoly on saltpeter exported from Bombay. Ben's older brother, Steven, devised a formula to make saltpeter at their home in Bedruthan Steps. The Windsor-Clives were heavy investors in the East India Company and couldn't afford for the Company to lose its stronghold. The Cornish and Dorsetine smugglers traded the gunpowder to the English navy and army, who fought Napoleon and the Americans along the west coast near Canada.

"I'm glad the bastard is dead," Rajesh declared. "For what he planned to do to Jemma and for what he attempted to do to Charlie while she was governess to his brothers and sister. It was Ben's right, but I wish I'd had a turn before he shot the blighter."

"I doubt this is done, Raj. They might be gone, but the Company isn't. They know

about the smuggling. I'm certain of it, so they won't stop as long as you and your family continue to sell gunpowder. They employed Theo and Will too long for them to forgive this. Your father already died for it." Keith looked at Lydia but continued to speak to Rajesh. "They nearly killed your wife and cousin. They're watching both your uncles. They're doing the same to Ben's family. It's a tangled web you and Jemma created by marrying a brother and sister, because now you're doubly connected to the Pedricks. They won't kill Steven because they want his knowledge. But they will kill whoever gets in the way of their profits. They're targeting the women. Lady Lydia will be next."

Lydia watched heat flare in Keith's eyes as he swept his gaze over her while he spoke. Their gazes locked as he made his last pronouncement. It wasn't an idea foreign to her. She'd already thought about it several times since learning about Rajesh's wife, Charlotte, and her encounters with the Windsor-Clives. Charlie was safe, and now so was Jemma. But she wondered when it would be her turn. Zachary wasn't a stranger to her.

"Lyddie." Lydia tore her gaze from Keith and looked at her cousin. "I'll walk you home."

"I need to do something before I go." Lydia swiveled on her heel and hurried from the library before either man could stop her. She gathered her skirts and ran up the stairs. She had only one destination in mind. In the early years after Kelsey's death, she'd been too grief stricken to want to enter her friend's chamber, but she'd had to pack away the dead girl's belongings. She hadn't been back to the chamber since that dreadful day, but she had a dream the previous night. Kelsey appeared often during Lydia's slumber, but this time, her friend urged her to search the abandoned chamber. She slipped into the room and turned the key in the lock.

She hurried to the armoire and pulled it away from the wall. Empty, it was far easier to move than it had been when Kelsey was alive. It used to take both of them to

maneuver it. The enormous piece of furniture scraped along the floor, making Lydia wince at its volume. She hadn't moved the monster when she'd packed away its contents, so no one had disturbed it in years. As it came away from the wall, something landed on the floor. Lydia looked down and found a book at the armoire's feet. She stooped as someone jiggled the doorknob. She glanced at the portal before scooping up the book. She flipped it open and immediately recognized Kelsey's neat script. The date at the top of the page clued Lydia to it being her friend's diary. She was quick to move the massive wooden piece back into place as Keith knocked and called out to her.

Lydia looked around, knowing she couldn't smuggle the journal out without Keith seeing it. She was reticent to hand it over until she knew there was nothing in it Kelsey didn't want her brother to read. She scurried to the bed and tucked it under the mattress before she unlocked the door.

"Yes." Lydia cocked an eyebrow as though Keith disturbed her in her own chamber.

"Why must you be so defiant when I'm not stopping you from anything?" Keith gazed down at her. His blond hair laid across his shoulders. Coupled with his impressive height and muscular build, he looked more like a Viking than a duke. It was clear how he'd earned his moniker as the Blond Marauder. He looked like he'd come to pillage and plunder—her. The heat returned to his gaze, catching her off guard. A flutter took root in her belly as her skin heated. He was still the most handsome man she'd ever seen, and she'd seen him frequently in the time since he returned to Forde Abbey. But they'd never once spoken before that day.

"I sneaked into your home and now you find me in your sister's chamber with the door locked. I expect that bothers you."

"You expect wrong, Lady Lydia." Keith pressed on the door, but only hard enough for Lydia to know he wished for it to open. He watched as her deep inhale expanded

her chest, pressing her breasts against the neckline of her gown. They were far too enticing, just like the rest of her. He'd seen her walking on the beach from his chamber window. He'd watched her on Sundays as her family rode past on their way to church. He'd noticed her in the village when he took his horse to the blacksmith or needed to visit the milliner to sell some of the textiles his ships brought in. He knew she'd seen him, too. He'd recognized her curiosity, since it matched his.

"You're not bothered that I know secret ways into your home or that I come and go from your sister's chamber as I please?"

"No. But you aren't leaving yet." Keith stepped fully into the chamber and closed the door.

"Rajesh won't?—"

"He knows I'm up here. And he knows, despite what happened with your cousin, I won't harm you. There are things even I won't do, and I most assuredly don't defile women. What I want to know is why you're here."

"I had a dream last night, and it made me miss Kelsey even more. I just wanted to come to where I can feel her spirit."

"You feel her spirit?" Keith swept his gaze around the room. He'd jested with Jemma when she arrived two days earlier and a draft wafted around their ankles. He'd claimed it might be Margaret Gwyn, his ancestor whose husband was granted a title and the lands by the Crown. Since moving back in, he'd often felt an unsettled presence, but he'd never known what it was. He'd wondered if it was his father's ghost come to haunt him, but it didn't feel malevolent enough for the dead duke.

"All the time." Lydia's voice lowered, but there was no timidity in it. It was more like reverence. "It feels like she's still here. I can't explain it, but it feels like she walks

beside me, just like when we were children. As though our shoulders might bump, but she's never really there."

"I never imagined it was still so hard for you, that your grief was still so strong."

"I saw her nearly every day since I was five. We knew everything about each other. She knew me better than even my sister did."

"I miss her, too," Keith whispered. "I did while I was away. And now, not only do I live with missing her, I live with regret that I ever left her here alone with him."

Keith watched as something flickered across Lydia's face before she recovered. It was as though she thought of someone, then realized Keith meant his father. It reminded him of what he'd overheard the day of Kelsey's funeral.

"I should go. Rajesh will wonder what's keeping us. Ben and Jemma are—occupied." Lydia pressed her lips together to keep from smiling. She knew virgins like her weren't supposed to know what passed between a married couple, but she'd visited India many times during her childhood. It was a long voyage, but her mother and father insisted they raise their children with their Indian heritage valued as much as their English. They stayed with her grandmother, Chandra, but spent much of their time with Rajesh and Jemma's families, since their mothers were the daughters of Maharaja Surat Singh.

The maharaja's daughters were princesses, making Lydia and Jemma princesses as well. Jemma's father, Theo, held the same rank as her own father, Will. Both men were baronets who had married far above their station. Rajesh inherited his earldom from his older brother, who'd inherited it from their father.

Keith stepped closer. "What do you know about that?" His voice wrapped around her like honey.

“Enough. India isn’t as prudish and hypocritical as England.”

Keith nudged her chin up with his forefinger, and his thumb swept her jaw. “I told the truth earlier. I don’t take advantage of women. I will never take what isn’t offered. So, I will ask you, Lydia. May I kiss you?” He held his breath, praying he hadn’t misread her interest.

“And if I allow it, what will you expect next?” Lydia tried to keep the breathlessness from her voice, but he overwhelmed her senses. The feel of his hand on her face and the heat from his body. The scent of his bergamot soap filled her nostrils. His silky voice made her insides quiver. His handsome visage was all she saw. The only thing missing was discovering his taste.

“I told you before. I expect nothing.”

Lydia considered his answer almost too long. When she saw him withdraw, rejection in his eyes, she placed her hands on his chest. The shirt he wore did little to buffer the heat. It didn’t surprise her to find him without a coat or waistcoat, since he rarely wore them at home. She knew from seeing him in the gardens and on the beach. But she hadn’t expected him to veritably scorch her palms and fingers. His muscles were taut and harder than she’d imagined. It was like resting her hand on a brick wall. She tilted her chin up further and parted her lips.

Keith watched as she decided. He absorbed every moment of how she looked up at him, her expression open and curious. She was the most beautiful woman he’d ever seen. He’d longed for her from a distance since he returned home. He’d thought of her often during the years after his sister’s death and while he sailed. Fantasized would be more accurate. He’d closed his eyes with more than one woman and pictured Lydia in her stead. Now she would permit him to kiss her. He intended to make it one she wouldn’t soon forget.

He lowered his mouth to hers, brushing his lips across hers twice before bringing them together. She opened to him without hesitation, which made him wonder who else she'd kissed. But her inexperience soon became clear. Her hands fisted his shirt as though she needed to hold on to keep from floating away. She sucked in a breath as his tongue entered her mouth. It drew him in and made him think of what else she might do with her mouth, but he knew it was from surprise and not a hint. She stood still for several heartbeats before she pressed back against his lips and tangled her tongue with his.

It took all the restraint he could muster not to wrap her legs around his waist and press her against the wall, not to rock her against his rod that pulsed beneath his breeches, unhappy with the constraint. He settled for wrapping his arm around her waist while his other hand cupped her jaw. He hungered for far more now he'd had a taste, but despite spending more than half a decade as a legal pirate, he always kept his word. Usually, it was a promise of retribution, but he wouldn't take advantage of Lydia or deceive his friend.

Lydia's imagination had failed. The kiss was better than anything she'd daydreamed. Even her dreams at night that centered on him and what they might do together were nothing compared to the consuming kiss they shared. She slid her arms around his neck and came onto her toes. When his arm tightened around her waist and the other slid up between her shoulder blades to cup her skull, she leaned into him. The lengths of their bodies pressed together, and both moaned at the feeling's rightness.

"Lyddie." It was Rajesh calling her. They pulled apart breathless, their gazes passion filled.

"I need to go." Lydia didn't move. She couldn't. It was as though Keith's embrace and how he looked at her ensnared her. She wanted to stay just as they were, or better yet, much, much closer.

“Lydia.” Rajesh’s voice was more strident and closer.

Keith released her but slid his hand into hers and brought it to his lips. His deep-blue eyes watched her as he bent his head. There was promise in them that made dew coat her inner thighs. She pressed them together, hoping to ease the ache, but it only made her more aware of her arousal. Keith was quick to open the door only moments before Rajesh appeared. His eyes narrowed as he looked between Keith and Lydia.

“Yes, Raj.” Lydia stepped around Keith and stood before her cousin. He was eight years her senior and had always seemed so worldly, even when they were children. Now he looked more like a disapproving father. He’d been raising his two nieces for the past couple of years, and he had his own child on the way. Lydia didn’t care for it in the least. She canted her head and shot him a challenging expression.

“I’ll walk you home.”

“Thank you, but I can go on my own.”

“No. Not with more of Windsor-Clive’s men still lurking.”

“He’s dead now, so he can’t bother me anymore. Without him paying, they won’t do anything.”

“Bother you.” Keith grasped Lydia’s upper arm and turned her toward him. His hold was gentle, so she didn’t fight him. “What do you mean anymore?”

Lydia gritted her teeth. She hadn’t thought before she spoke. “Zachary pursued Kelsey. They met when she went to London for her coming out. She wasn’t interested, but he persisted. Once she died, his attention turned to me. I believe his interest in us was because of our connections to smugglers. He called on me a few times and sent me letters. My father knows, and he kept Zachary away from me.”

She wouldn't mention the times he tried to kiss and grope her, or how he'd pinned her against walls and tried to press his body against her. She'd kneed him once and called to anyone she thought might hear the other times. He intimidated her, but never forced her. She'd sensed he had a limit.

Keith glanced back at Rajesh, and something passed between the two men. Rajesh looked annoyed, but he said nothing. Keith turned his attention back to Lydia. "Did he do anything to you?"

Lydia shook her head. "No. He wouldn't dare. My father scared him the most. Uncle Theo's known for how protective he is of Aunt Vinita and Jemma, but he's a pussycat compared to my father. A man tried to pull me out to the gardens during my first Season. My father challenged him to a duel to the death. As you know, my father is still breathing."

"It's dark. I don't like the idea of you walking home, even with Rajesh with you. He doesn't know the land like I do. I'll take you."

Lydia shook her head. "There's a tunnel that runs to the edge of your property. It'll bring me out in the trees that separate our lands. You know my home is just outside the copse. I can get home without being in the open for more than a couple of minutes. My family can see the trees from the drawing room. They know to watch for me. Rajesh can stay here, and he can leave with Jemma and Ben in the morning."

"How many tunnels are there?" Keith wondered aloud. He knew of the one from the beach into his home, and he knew about the ones in the library and dormitory.

"Many. The monks used them during the time of Henry VIII when he dissolved the monasteries. They dug them in case they had to flee. I don't know who re-enforced them or expanded them over the years, but I don't think they all date back that long ago. There are books in the library about the abbey, but I haven't seen any that tell

who dug or maintained them since then.”

Rajesh and Keith looked at each other, neither appearing eager to accept Lydia’s suggestion. Rajesh spoke up first. “I’d like to have a little more time with you and your family. Aunt Sarla invited me to spend the night.” He looked at Keith, warning in his voice. “I trust Ben and Jemma are safe here for the night.”

“In that case, just give me a couple more minutes in here, please. I’m not ready to go.” Lydia smiled at Rajesh before she looked at Keith. “Goodnight, Your Grace.”

Keith glowered. He thought them well past his formal title. He’d been ready to carry her off and make love to her all night. He didn’t care for the distance she put between them. It stung.

“Goodnight, Lady Lydia, Raj.” He spun on his heel and walked away. It took all his resolve not to look back. And Lydia fought the urge to step into the corridor to watch him.

“What happened between you two? Tell me the truth, Lydia.”

“Rajesh, he kept his word. He didn’t defile me. He wondered why I came here, and I told him. I miss Kelsey and being in here makes me feel better. I had a dream last night that she wanted me to find something. I did.” Lydia went to the bed and withdrew the journal from beneath the mattress. After that kiss, she could almost forget why she’d hidden it. But Kelsey hadn’t revealed herself or her diary to Keith. Her friend only wanted her to know.

“What’s that?”

“Kelsey’s diary. She told me in my dream how to find it. I don’t think she wants anyone else to have it, at least not until I’ve seen it. If she didn’t want me to read it,

she wouldn't have led me here."

Rajesh looked around the room. "Do you believe she's a bhut?"

Rajesh spent his life in India until his early twenties and was raised Hindu. He was well versed in the Anglican faith and held no objections to it. But his beliefs followed the Hindu teachings. He wondered if his cousin's dead friend was a restless ghost. People believed bhut were spirits who weren't at peace because they'd died a violent or untimely death or were denied burial rights.

"I don't know. But I sense her with me whenever I come here. She's never with me off the abbey grounds, except in my dreams. Are you going to tell Keith I found this?" She held up the leather-bound journal.

"No. I don't think you should take it since it's his now, but I won't say anything."

"I'm certain she wants me to read it, Raj. I can't come back here to do it."

"That's why you agreed to me walking you home. You wanted more time, so you could grab it, and you didn't want MacNeil to see."

"Back to calling him by his surname? Are you angry at him?"

"You used his title. He's a friend, but he's not as close as he once was."

Lydia nearly defended Keith, but she opted to remain quiet. She led her cousin to the tunnel and guided him through it, one hand stretched in front of her since they had no torches. She knew her way around by counting her steps. They were soon in the copse of trees. Before they stepped out, Lydia looked back toward Forde Abbey, nearly certain she could see Keith watching them from the front drawing room window.

CHAPTER 2

A month passed from Keith's adventure with Jemma and the kiss he shared with Lydia. He hadn't talked to her since, but he'd seen her daily. His chamber overlooked the beach where she walked every day. He watched her wrap a long piece of fabric over her head on windy days, but it usually sat over her left shoulder. Some days, she wore a long flowing skirt with a hip-length tunic. Other days, she wore the tightly fitted pants he'd learned from Rajesh long ago were called churidar . Over them, she wore tunics that came to her midthigh. He only saw her in gowns when she was in the nearby village of Lyme Regis. He'd seen her reading in the garden a week after their brief interlude, but nothing about her posture invited him to approach.

However, as the days drew on, he grew ever more miserable keeping his distance. She intrigued him in ways no one else, woman or man, ever had. It wasn't just her connection to his sister, though he wanted to learn more about it. It was the intelligence she clearly possessed. She often sat and read on the beach, and he knew she finished books quickly by their different sizes. He was much too far away to see any specific details, but every couple of days, they changed.

He'd resolved that morning to join her on the beach and finally talk to her. He needed to know if their kiss meant anything to her. He needed to know if he pined for nothing. He needed to hear her, to just be close to her. She arrived at the beach nearly the same time every day, so he hurried through the tunnel and out through the cave. He wanted to arrive before her, perhaps making it look like a coincidence. But time ticked by, and she never arrived. He looked at his pocket watch incessantly. After an hour and a half, he turned back to the cave. His heart ached, and he wondered if she knew he was there and avoided him. He sighed as he pressed the latch to enter his

library. He recognized the voice he heard immediately, but he hesitated to announce his presence. He waited instead.

* * *

Lydia carried the stack of books she'd most recently borrowed from Forde Abbey. The former duke hadn't cared that she borrowed them at her leisure. He'd laughed at her when she'd asked permission as a child, mocking her since she was a girl who could read. He was a man who refused to acknowledge her royal lineage, adamant it didn't count for savages. He'd said hateful things that still rang in her ears when she recalled them. It had only made her more determined. Kelsey often helped her pick out books, and they would share recommendations.

For all the old duke's bluster, he possessed a collection of Indian books that explicitly illustrated various sexual activities for two or more partners. It had titillated the girls at age twelve, but it hadn't been much later that Lydia's courses began and Sarla unknowingly explained what Lydia had seen. She never admitted to her mother about the books, but she'd listened to her mother's advice about the wonders of being with a loving husband and how to avoid men without scruples or intentions of marrying her.

Curiosity brought the girls back to the books more than once, and the images remained etched in Lydia's mind. The near-acrobatics had played out in her mind every night for the past month. Every dream featured Keith as her partner as they explored her erotic imaginings. They tempted her to revisit the books as she eased into the library. She'd seen Keith on horseback early that morning. He often rode at dawn, his blond hair streaming behind him as the wind caught his locks. He looked at one with the beast, but it only elicited mental pictures of him straddling her.

As she put the first book back, she chided herself for her unchaste thoughts. She was lewd, and she knew it. She feared she would scandalize her parents and sister, and she

would certainly wind up in prayer if Father Adams ever learned of her thoughts. The Anglican priest was stern about fornication and often preached of its dangers. She'd never felt like the sermons meant much until this past month. Two out of the past four Sundays had felt like he spoke to her directly. She also felt guilty that she lusted for her friend's brother. She'd read the diary more than once, and she knew Kelsey had held conflicting feelings for her brother. She wasn't certain Kelsey would approve.

Lydia finished shelving the books she'd borrowed before she browsed for ones she hadn't yet read. She slid the ladder along the rails at the top and middle of the floor to ceiling bookshelves that lined two walls. She often wondered who'd accumulated the magnificent collection. It was clear it had happened over the centuries, but she was curious if one person contributed to it more than others.

"Kels, what should I read next? I've gotten through most of what interests me. I don't wish to read about agriculture or animal husbandry. I'm not interested in any of the husbandry my father keeps pushing me toward. Not one of them appeals to me. Have you seen who's been by lately? What do you think? None seem right. Ah. Here's something."

Lydia pulled out a book she'd never noticed before. She turned it over before looking at the front cover again.

Travels into Several Remote Nations of the World. In Four Parts. By Lemuel Gulliver, First a Surgeon, and then a Captain of Several Ships

Her brow furrowed as she tried to recall if she knew the story, but nothing came to mind. She looked at the other books near it and found ones she'd already read.

"Candide is a little too close to the truth for something satirical. Voltaire is also a bit dry. Mother might forgive me for bringing home *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*, but I don't think Father would. That's why I read it on the beach. Have you heard of this

Gulliver and his travels, Kels? I need something witty after the secrets you told me. I failed you on both accounts. I swore he would pay. Now I discover it was so much worse, and they're both dead. I never got the justice you deserve. Is that why you're still here? They're gone, but you're not. What am I supposed to do?"

Lydia rested her head against the shelf and closed her eyes. Tears leaked from them, just as they had every day since she'd finished reading Kelsey's journal. There was much Lydia already knew, but it broke her heart to discover what her best friend had hidden, even from her. There'd been a moment of hurt that Kelsey hadn't fully confided in her, but she reminded herself they were her secrets to keep but not her secrets to tell. It was Kelsey's choice what she shared.

A draft wafted around her, making her straighten and look around.

Kelsey?

But it wasn't her friend she spied. Keith was nearly to her by the time she saw him. He said nothing but pulled her into his arms. She hesitated, but when he eased her head against his chest, she melted. She felt safe for the first time in ages. His physical size shielded her from the world, but his entire presence made her feel untouchable, protected, and cherished. She knew her father would always safeguard her, but Keith's embrace couldn't be more different from the paternal ones Will offered.

"Lydia, what's wrong? What did you mean just now?" Keith held her, but she tried to jerk away. She could have broken free if she tried harder, but as much as she didn't wish to answer those questions, neither did she want to leave his arms. Every moment of self-denial welled inside her and threatened to overwhelm her. She wanted to savor being next to Keith, not answer his inquiries.

"I can't say, Keith. Please don't ask it of me. I don't want to lie."

“Do you really believe you have to keep secrets from me? Do you believe I would betray you?” It hurt Keith to think she so distrusted him, despite how she leaned into his embrace again. Her actions contradicted her words.

“They aren’t my secrets to tell. She didn’t even tell them to me until after she died.”

“Do you truly believe Kelsey haunts this home?”

“Haunts seems so ominous, but she’s here. I feel like a fool saying it, but I’m certain of it. She is not at rest, and I don’t know how to help her.”

“And you won’t let me help you.”

Lydia tilted her head back to look up at him. Her anguished expression matched his. She swallowed, forcing herself to remain quiet when all she wanted was to divulge everything. She shook her head as more tears streamed down her cheeks. Keith brushed them away with the pad of his thumb. He kissed each cheek, then her forehead. She sighed with her eyes closed.

“I don’t know what to do,” she whispered.

“Cry if you need to. Whatever’s happened recently has caused you new grief.”

“I don’t want to be?—”

“Whatever you’re going to say, don’t. I won’t think less of you.” Keith swept her into his arms and walked to the settee before the fire. Despite the spring air, it was still chilly so near the coast. He sat and drew her closer as she settled on his lap. She burrowed her face against his chest and sobbed. He cooed and stroked her back, kissing her forehead and crown until she calmed.

Lydia finally wiped her eyes and sat up. She twisted to look at Keith, his sympathy tearing at her heart. She cupped his jaw and leaned forward, tentative at first. When he didn't draw away, she initiated the kiss. She waited for him to take the lead, but he only returned the pressure. She grew braver and slid her tongue along his lips. He opened, his tongue drawing hers into his mouth. His hand, at first resting on her shoulder blade, caressed down her back until it cupped her backside. He groaned to feel the ample flesh. Lydia was short of stature but not petite. He relished the feel of her softness and kneaded her buttock. She twisted, shifting onto her hip, allowing both of his hands to grasp her bottom.

Keith knew she felt his length pressed first against her hip and now against her belly. It tempted him to move her, so she straddled him, but he feared the desire to do more. But it wasn't long before Lydia grew restless, and he knew her frustration.

"I want to touch you, sweetling. I want to bring you pleasure and ease the ache. I won't do anything you don't agree to."

"I'd agree to anything right now. I want to touch you too. I need you to touch me. I understand, but I don't." Lydia knew she made little sense, but she knew she was aroused and why. She'd read enough and Sarla had explained it, but she didn't know what to do to satisfy the need without coupling. She wasn't prepared for that, even if it was what she wanted now.

"I know, little one." Keith gathered her tunic and pulled it high enough for his hand to slip underneath. He relished not finding stays beneath her clothes. If she were his wife, he would ban her from ever wearing the blasted contraptions. As he gazed down at the woman staring up at him with such trusting eyes, he realized he wanted a life with her. The thought nipped at him constantly, but he pushed it away. This was the first time he let it take hold, and he doubted it would ever let go.

His hand covered her breast, and he feared he would spill his seed. He'd been with

women of all sizes and shapes from various locales, starting in his early twenties on his Grand Tour through to his early thirties as a privateer. He'd gravitated toward the endowed when they flaunted their attributes. But for the first time, he preferred Lydia's smaller breasts since they fit perfectly in his hand. He felt a wave of possessiveness as he grasped them as though they were his and made for him.

He squeezed with increasing firmness as she arched toward him. He feared he would hurt her, but she tugged at his hair and shook her head as they kissed when he tried to draw his hand away. His free hand slid down the back of her pants and cupped her backside. The silky skin made him wonder if she rubbed oil into her flesh. His little finger grazed along the divide, but she didn't flinch. However, he couldn't reach the place he desired. He released her breast and was quick to slip his hand down the front of her churidar. His fingers ran through the tuft on her mons before they slipped between her legs. His first and third finger brushed her nether lips as his second finger dipped along her seam.

Lydia's moan made him catch his breath as lust coursed through him, sapping his control. Need pulsed in his cock as it begged to replace his fingers and thrust into her. He'd coupled with women for entertainment and to ease a physical desire. But his neediness went beyond mere attraction. He wanted all of her: heart, mind, and soul. And his reason was simple; he wished to give her all of him.

"Keith," she breathed.

"I know, sweetling. I want to make you climax. Do you know what that means, Lyddie?"

She nodded her head. "I found books in here a long time ago, and my mother explained it."

Keith chuckled. "I should have known you'd be curious. I would explore everything

with you. But for today, I wish to bring you to release, then hold you again.”

“What about you?”

“No, sweetling. I will ease my ache alone and later. I want you to take without worrying about giving.”

“But that must be uncomf?—”

“Shh, little one, or I shall kiss you to make you quiet. Don’t argue.” Keith’s smile softened his words.

“Kiss me anyway?” Lydia couldn’t believe she asked that, but then it seemed rather benign considering the man had his hand down her pants, and his fingers dipping inside her.

“You never need to ask, Lydia. I give them to you, and only you, freely.”

She would sort out what he meant later. It was too much to work through now. The sensations he stirred consumed her attention as his thumb stroked her pearl. She recalled images she’d seen of a man doing this to a woman. She wished they were bare, so she could watch. Her mind jumped to the illustrations that had followed of the couple pleasuring one another with their mouths.

If I were his wife, would he do such things to me? Do Englishmen do that? I imagine so. At least, Keith probably does since he’s been so many places. But do Englishwomen let their men do that? What would he think of me?

Lydia’s thoughts flew away as his fingers eased farther into her entrance. The feeling had her lifting her hips, trying to draw his digits into her even more. His thumb worked faster as a familiar sensation tightened her belly. She’d learned much from

those books and experimented as much as she could without puncturing her maidenhead.

“More,” she whispered. Without thinking, her hand slid beneath her waistband and covered Keith’s. She guided him with expertise that made his heart skip a beat. “Those books had pictures of people alone.”

She hoped he understood her meaning, and she assumed he did when he rubbed harder and faster. His kiss was wild and devouring. She withdrew her hand, as she needed both to cling to him. Neither realized she moved, and that he guided her until her mons rubbed against his cock. She straddled his lap, her hips undulating against his hand and his rod. Her head tipped back as she rode his fingers. Her hair tickled his kneecaps, and her fingers bit into his shoulders.

His free hand worked the buttons down the front of her tunic until he could push it off her shoulders. He dove in and feasted on one breast, then the other, alternating as though he hadn’t eaten in ages. Her release swept her away as though it was a sea wave spinning her over and over, tumbling her until she didn’t know which way was up. Her only lifeline was clinging to Keith. She cared not that the servants likely heard her as she moaned through her climax. She fell forward, her head resting on his shoulder as the euphoria faded. But the feel of his rigid length still rubbing against her pearl left her unsated.

Keith flipped them, so Lydia rested on her back. He ripped her pants down to her ankles before he settled his shoulders between her thighs. “Do you know what I’m going to do next?”

“God, I hope you do. Keith, I’ve never done any of this before. I swear I only know because of the books and what my mother told me.”

“I never doubted that, Lydia. But I don’t care about anything but being with you right

now.”

“You’d care later if you thought I was a wanton, that I was soiled.”

Keith surged upward and grasped her throat, but his hold was light, not at all threatening. It was more possessive, yet gentle. “Don’t say that. I do not think less of you for wanting me. How could I? I know you haven’t been with a man because I felt your maidenhead. But even if it wasn’t there, I don’t care. You’re here with me now. No other man has you beneath him, Lydia. You don’t strike me as a woman who would share, so I won’t make you. But know that I am not a man who shares, either.”

Before she could respond, Keith’s body thrust backward, and his tongue was at her entrance. He worked her plump petals, inhaling her scent that went straight to his head. She smelled womanly, but there were elements of jasmine, patchouli, and rose. He breathed her in as his tongue flicked her pearl. He watched her as she watched him. Her breasts rose and fell, tempting him away, but he wouldn’t be distracted. He suckled on her nub as his fingers continued to work her. With a moan that seemed to come from her core, she squeezed her thighs against his head, lifted her hips, and shattered.

When she clawed at him, he shifted over her once more, but only after he suckled each breast until her nipples were distended. He pinched and twisted, but not enough to hurt. She guided his head toward hers, hungry for a kiss. Her taste lingered on his tongue, but she cared not. A steely arm slipped beneath her before she gasped as he flipped them. She found herself draped across him. She thought she’d had her fill, but once more, his cock pressed against her, reigniting the fire.

“Little one, I shall spill if you keep moving like that.”

“And if that’s what I want? If I don’t accept your refusal?” Lydia grinned.

“It was half-hearted at best. I meant what I said, but you feel better than anything I’ve ever experienced.” He watched as a seductive gleam entered her eye. He knew it pleased her to hear that declaration, and he knew she understood what he meant. He wanted her to know he desired her above all others. He exaggerated not at all. He enjoyed seeing her pride after seeing her sorrow.

He grasped her bottom once again, certain his hands had found where they belonged permanently. He helped her rock on his length until he couldn’t repress his thrusts. If they didn’t have his smalls and breeches between them, he would claim her and plant his seed inside her core. Instead, he felt his cock pulse before his release took control. When she glanced down between them, he was certain she realized what happened. When their eyes met again, wonder replaced the seductiveness.

“Come here, sweetling. Let me catch my breath while I hold you.”

They lay together as the minutes ticked by on the mantle clock. They both watched the flames in the hearth, neither worried about the world beyond the library. But as the sun shifted and cast longer shadows, they knew Lydia had to return home. She eased away, but her eyes gravitated to the stain on the front of his breeches. She looked up at him and found him observing her. He sat up and helped her off the settee before she straightened her clothes. Once she had her tunic buttoned again, he opened his knees and guided her to sit again, her legs between his.

“Lydia, I must leave in the morning for a fortnight. I never dreaded leaving Forde Abbey before, but I loathe the idea now. But I have no choice. I have people expecting me who need what I have.”

“I’m guessing it isn’t tea.”

“That’s what I will tell people if they look, but don’t get too close. I’m meeting Rajesh at Powderham, picking up the cargo, and sailing to Calais.” Keith brushed hair

back from her face and drew locks from over her shoulder before smoothing it down her back. “I don’t want to share this with you, then have you think I walked away—or sailed away—with ease. This meant everything to me.”

“I don’t want to regret any of this, but it’s hard not to wonder if it was a mistake if you’re leaving right away.”

“I’m coming back, Lyddie. I’m coming back to you if that’s what you want.”

Lydia glanced down and nodded. She felt vulnerable admitting that, even when he’d already told her more than once he wanted her. How did she know if he was telling the truth? She wanted to believe him. She wanted to trust he wasn’t spinning a tale. But she was in over her head, having shared no type of intimacy with a man, let alone coming so close to coupling.

“I want that.” Their eyes met as she responded.

“This isn’t over between us, little one. At least, I don’t want it to be. Think about what you want while I’m gone. If you change your mind, I will respect that. What happened here is only for us to know.”

Lydia snickered. “And all your servants. They’re likely already talking about it.”

“They don’t know it was you if they know anything at all. They work for a smuggling duke. They’re paid exceptionally well for their silence.” Keith feathered a kiss against her lips. “If you still want me when I return, then we’ll decide what happens. But to be clear, Lydia, I will never ask you to be my mistress. That is not something I will consider. Ever. I would never disgrace you by asking or dishonor you by making such an arrangement.”

Lydia nodded, too tongue tied to say anything. He hadn’t proposed or even asked to

court her, but she could only assume that's what he meant. Her visceral reaction was to scream yes, but she wouldn't until she was clear about his intentions, and he actually asked. She finally gathered her thoughts and responded.

"I could never agree to such. My parents would kill us both." As Keith listened, he knew only one of them would wind up dead, and it wasn't the daughter of the baronet and the princess. "I wouldn't shame my family that way."

"I know, sweetling. You must go before it grows dark. I detest thinking about you walking alone as often as you do, but especially at night."

"I know I'm safe during the day."

"Daylight is no guarantee."

"But you are. I know you watch me, Keith. I've seen you in the window. I didn't go to the beach nearly as often before we truly met. Even from a distance, I know I'm safe with you."

"Lydia, I might see someone approach you, but I could never get there fast enough. It's not my right to tell you what you can and can't do. I never want to be that controlling, but I wish you wouldn't be alone so much. It frightens me."

"You, the Blond Marauder, frightened?" Lydia chuckled, hoping to ease some of his seriousness.

"Terrified, Lyddie. After what happened to Jemma and Ben, I really wish you wouldn't. He was armed, and I was still able to overpower him because I came with my men. I won't speak ill of your parents, but I don't agree with them."

"Next time you see me down there, look east to the third hillock before the bend. I'm

not really alone. I always have an armed groom with me, usually two, so they don't grow too bored while they wait."

Keith's brow furrowed. He'd always scanned the surroundings when she appeared, and he'd seen no one nearby. It's to that he objected. "I've looked, sweetling. I've never seen anyone. I'm not convinced they are where you believe."

"You can't see the far side from the abbey. But you can on the beach. I promise, I'm not alone." Lydia stood, and Keith followed. She rose onto her toes and kissed his jaw. Keith gave a resigned nod. He didn't want to argue, but he was unconvinced. "I won't go down there without my groom with me while you're gone. I don't want to distract you with worry."

"Thank you, because I would worry. I will anyway, but this eases it a touch." They walked to the wall with the hidden latch, but Keith remembered why'd she'd originally come to the library. He gathered the book she had selected and brought it to her. "Today was the first time I found you in here. You're quite stealthy. You come from good smuggling stock. But I suspected you visited. I hoped you would find this. I put it there for you."

Lydia accepted the book, staring at the cover.

Travels. It's to remind me of him. That he's traveled far afield.

She squeezed it to her chest before rising on her toes once more. Keith lifted her off her feet for a final kiss before she slipped into the tunnel, a torch in hand this time.

CHAPTER 3

Keith wiped sweat from his brow as he and his crew unloaded the last barrel of gunpowder. He stood on a makeshift dock near the Calais harbor. He couldn't sail directly into the French port, since the British government banned its merchants from trading with the French. But it wasn't a francophone with whom he did business. It was a member of the Royal Navy desperate for ammunition the British government didn't supply. The East India Company failed to produce enough to meet the demand, so it created a need Keith willingly supplied.

"When can you return with more?" Captain Smithers asked.

"In a month, maybe two. The next batch heads to the Americas. Our soldiers need the tea along the west coast." No one ever spoke the truth aloud, always using a code. With this sailor, Keith kept it simple.

"That's more dangerous than coming to France. If the Company learns what you're doing, they'll have you hanged for treason."

"It's not as though I supply the Yanks."

"But you are making them unnecessary. If they can't justify being there, then how will they gain a western route to China?" The captain dipped his chin and raised his eyebrows. It was the single most important reason Keith and his connections worked in secret, and it was the gravest danger the Pedricks faced as the manufacturers.

"I will take care." Keith reached out his hand and accepted the silver-filled pouch. It

was money the British government paid to quartermasters for bribes. The government knew it was a necessity, but they didn't realize the money went into the hands of smugglers who undercut the need for the East India Company.

Keith watched as his men continued to toil. They loaded one barrel after another of the black powder that only at a glance resembled black tea leaves. Anyone who looked—or sniffed—too closely would easily recognize the gun powder for what it was. In the past, when he knew he faced the greatest danger conveying his cargo to his ship in England, he packed the gun powder between grain, filling the bottom third of the barrel with the seeds, then the gun powder, then a final layer of grain. It meant the recipient had to sift through the contents, but it disguised it from the excisemen when they insisted upon prying the lids off barrels. He often soaked the burlap sacks in tea, absorbing the scent into the fabric. When the tea smell permeated the sacks, it gave the impression the leaves filled the sack when it was really gun powder. With his Letters of Marque, making him a legal privateer according to the English government, he would claim he'd confiscated the tea and was returning it to the East India Company. When he truly carried tea, it was smuggled from France to England. He'd gotten creative over the years.

Time slipped by as he rejoined his men. Once they'd unloaded their illegal cargo, they filled the hull with Champagne, lace and silks, cocoa, and tobacco. The lace and silks he hid in his cabin in his trunks' false bottoms. While he risked crushing any poorly made crate, he'd hid the bottle of spirits and wine at the bottom of stacks. He knew the excisemen gave up when the top half of the stack contained legal goods he carried as a diversion.

Keith said his farewells before he and his crew were once more underway. He sailed west for another day before making landfall. He accepted barrels of brandy that would fetch a price higher than gold once Rajesh received them. His friend and fellow privateer hadn't known his family's involvement in the south coast smuggling ring before being earl. While he'd actively sailed, he'd brought goods to his now-

dead brother, Arjun, who was then the Earl of Devon. Arjun kept Rajesh uninformed, so he thought his brother engaged in legitimate trade. It wasn't until Rajesh inherited the earldom that the truth emerged.

His brother's and sister-in-law's untimely deaths never felt like an accident to Rajesh. Investigating led him to documents his father and brother hid. Even now he wondered if his brother ever planned to share their family secrets with him. He knew his brother well enough to be certain Arjun believed he took care of his younger brother by not making him aware of the illegal activities. Being a privateer was already dangerous enough without adding smuggler to the mix. He still owned five ships that privateered, so Rajesh soon accepted the role of a nobleman smuggler.

The weather grew uncooperative, and it took him three days to sail home. The journey back to England was always slower than when he left. But for those long days at sea, the winds assailed him, rocking his ship more like a dinghy than a brigantine. His ship had two masts and was large enough to carry a crew of one-hundred-and-twenty-five men. That day, he sailed with only three dozen, but the sturdy and speedy ship shouldn't have fought the currents as much as it did. Waves crashed over the rails, and there were times when the crew lashed themselves to the masts. Keith avoided his cabin since he was little more than a pea rattling around in a tin can.

The delay frustrated him since he wished to return to Lydia. Guilt plagued him for leaving her after such an intimate interlude. He knew she understood, but he still felt like a cad. He knew how momentous the time together was for him, so he imagined it left Lydia unsettled since she lacked experience. At least, he hoped she shared his sentiments about their brief but passionate tryst.

He'd already been gone more than a fortnight, and he was restless to return to her. He feared she changed her mind while he was gone. In contrast, he'd only grown more resolved that he wished to make her his duchess. He would ask Rajesh's advice on

how to approach his uncle about courting Lydia. It was with a sigh of relief that he dropped anchor near the beach below Powderham Castle.

“You look knackered.” Keith grinned as he walked up the cliff side path to meet Rajesh.

“And you look—and smell—like shite.” Rajesh extended his hand, which Keith gladly accepted. They’d repaired their friendship when Keith arrived two weeks earlier for the gunpowder. “Charlie isn’t sleeping well now that she’s so close to her confinement. I feel badly for her, so I stay awake until she falls asleep again.”

“You’re a good husband.” Keith wondered if he would do as well as Rajesh. He knew his friend had sworn for years he would never marry. At least, he would never marry an Englishwoman. He’d avoided the matrimonial noose with a mistress he’d kept in Antigua for years. But Rajesh had fallen in love with Charlie almost immediately. Keith hadn’t believed it at first, but it hadn’t taken long to realize the couple was devoted to one another. A twinge of jealousy pinched his chest whenever he thought of them and how he was uncertain Lydia would want him once he returned. “What news do you have?”

Rajesh hesitated as they walked to the house. He stopped and turned toward Keith. He’d sensed Keith’s interest in Lydia when he sneaked into Forde Abbey. His friend confirmed it during his last visit. He loathed telling him what he knew. “Uncle Will persists in introducing Lydia to more suitors. He promised her it would ultimately be her choice, but he’s pressuring her more. His last letter, which arrived two days ago, insinuated he’d found someone he thought was an undeniably good candidate. I don’t know who.” Rajesh raised his hand as Keith opened his mouth to demand that information.

“Bloody hell. It’s another day’s sailing from here since the wind’s been against us. She could be betrothed by now.” Keith gazed east as though he could see all the way

to Lyme Regis and Abbington House. It tempted him to set sail that very minute.

“The tide won’t turn for another three hours. Come in and eat. A bath wouldn’t be remiss if you intend to storm their gates and claim her.”

Keith scowled, finding no humor when Rajesh’s grin widened. He nodded his agreement, and he soon found himself in a guest chamber with a tub of steaming water before him. The maids offered what they believed were enticing smiles, one going as far as to hold the soap hostage and cocking her eyebrow. But he ordered them gone. It only irritated him when they delayed him even a minute. As he slipped into the warm water, it tempted him to soak and ease his tense muscles. But then he recalled why he was so tense. He scrubbed himself until his skin was pink.

“Even if her father betrothed her the minute you set sail, they still haven’t posted the banns three times. She’s not married,” Charlie reassured as she held her swollen belly. In the fortnight since he’d last seen her, Keith was convinced her waist had expanded twofold. He didn’t doubt she was uncomfortable.

“I’d rather not take the risk that Abbington settles for a common license and foregoes the banns. You two did.” Keith took his seat for the midday meal, but he found no interest in his food.

“I doubt that. Uncle Will is a stickler for propriety with his daughters. He refuses to do anything that might cause gossip or give anyone reason to look down at Lydia and her sister.” Rajesh set down his fork. “Don’t glower at me. I’m not the one who’d speak against them.”

While there were Indians in England, they were a small population. People outside of London or other trade towns were less familiar with the culture or the people. Even in such a diverse city as London, with foreigners coming and going, Lydia’s family could cause a stir. While most people were polite, at least only staring but not talking

to them, some were brazen and insulted the family. Rajesh's uncles, Theo and Will, were fiercely protective of their wives and children. His own father had been the same way.

"No one should dare." Keith felt his temper spiking, and it was utterly unusual for him. He'd learned to control his temper as a child, forced to accept his father's beatings without a sound. The old duke had tormented him and struck him anytime he showed a moment of emotion. Each time he'd flinched had resulted in a birch branch across his backside when he was six. Not that he felt no emotions now; he'd learned to mask them and keep them under a tight rein. But the thought of Lydia marrying another man sent him in a tailspin.

Keith ate with such haste he nearly dribbled sauce down the front of his shirt. He caught it with his napkin in time. The last thing he needed was to arrive at the Abbingtons' door with soiled clothing and looking disheveled. When the meal ended, he did his best to be gracious to his host and hostess, but he practically sprinted back to the dinghy that would ferry him to his ship. He bellowed orders for them to get underway while he climbed the rope ladder to board his vessel. When the shoreline alerted him they were near home, he donned a fresh set of clothes, appearing more like a duke than a privateer with his hair pulled back in a queue, ruffled cuffs, and a starched cravat. He loathed the attire, but he would make a good impression on Will. He intended to go directly to Abbington House without detour.

His moment of ease lasted only that. As he approached Abbington House, he spied a carriage. As he drew closer to it, he recognized the crest.

"No. It can't be. Not him of all bloody people."

* * *

Lydia fought not to roll her eyes as her father paraded yet another suitor before her.

She'd alluded to her interest in Keith and that he reciprocated, but her father's face turned into a thundercloud. Apparently, the baronet took no issue with smugglers, but he drew the line at Viking-looking pirates. He argued Keith's reputation set him apart from men like Rajesh, who merely boarded Spanish galleons and removed their cargo. Keith was known to sink ships—with crews still aboard. He had a reputation for brawling in taverns on Caribbean islands, and he'd supposedly left a trail of broken hearts throughout the Lesser Antilles. That was the single detail that wounded Lydia.

Keith had been away two days, and her father had spared no time, ensuring a new prospective husband presented himself before her. At first, she'd had a niggling feeling the man appeared familiar as she watched him enter the drawing room. The moment their eyes met she'd known. She wasn't certain how, but Keith and the new arrival were related. She'd cast an accusing glare at her father, but he studiously ignored her as he introduced the newcomer as Oliver Gwyn, Viscount Sackville. The moment she heard the name, a wave of loathing washed over her. Her gaze hardened to a glower, surprising the young man. He smiled and appeared charming, but Lydia trusted him not at all.

“Lady Lydia, it is a pleasure to make your acquaintance.”

“Thank you.” Lydia knew her succinct answer was rude, but she refused to lie and say she reciprocated his sentiment. It was the furthest thing from a pleasure.

“Lord Oliver, would you care for tea?” Sarla offered, shocked by her daughter's curtness. Even when Lydia had encountered people in the past for whom she didn't care, she'd never been impolite.

“That would be lovely, Lady Abbington.” Oliver smiled at the woman, and Lydia fought not to curl her nose at his saccharine tone. To her, he sounded like a supercilious toad.

Sarla rang for tea, and it wasn't long before a maid arrived with a tray that included a plate of biscuits. The food and drink gave Lydia an excuse for not joining the conversation. Each time she feared Oliver would speak to her, she'd take a bite. By the time they finished, she'd eaten half the plate and drunk two cups of tea. She excused herself to dress for dinner and fled.

The evening meal was uneventful; except Oliver was far too solicitous even for Will's taste. He knew the young man attempted to ingratiate himself, but his tactic was far too much for having only met Lydia a few hours earlier. It had come as a surprise when Oliver sent a letter to Will inquiring about Lydia's hand in marriage and requesting an opportunity to see if they might suite. He'd written that he would like to meet Lydia and get to know her before he would do anything so formal as court her. But it took only their introduction for Will to deduced the lord intended to woo Lydia from the start.

Lydia's predicament only worsened when she discovered the Viscount would be their extended guest. It didn't take long to realize that, unlike the other suitors her father introduced but always assured were her choice to decline, it was obvious Will expected her to choose Oliver. He wouldn't say it outright, since he'd promised it would ultimately be her decision who she married. But she couldn't escape the undeniable determination in her father's expressions.

It forced her to go for daily walks on her family's grounds. She took tea with him both in the morning and the afternoon and sat next to him at every meal. It was excessive, and by the time the second week drew to an end, Lydia was beside herself. She cried to her mother, who sided with her daughter. She beseeched her father to reconsider, but when he demanded a reason, she couldn't share one. To all appearances, Oliver Gwyn was the model of gentility and charm. He was handsome, but he did nothing for her. Even if she hadn't known what she did, he wouldn't appeal to her. Not after what she and Keith had shared in his library.

Whenever she could escape, she went to the beach. She stood for ages looking out to sea, hoping to spy a ship's mast. But one never came. Her heart ached with disappointment each time the sun forced her to return home. She excused herself early each night, claiming fatigue from their walks and the spring air. Everyone in her household knew she had a hardy constitution, but none would disagree with her once she spoke in front of Oliver. Even her father didn't press the issue after the first three nights.

Now she sat in the music room as she played the piano. They'd been to church that morning, her family riding in the Viscount's coach. They'd only returned five minutes earlier, but Oliver had practically demanded she entertain him.

"Lady Lydia, your talent exceeds most young ladies. It would be an honor to listen to you play. It lightens the soul to hear such melodic tones. I'm certain you will play better than ever."

Lydia masked her disgust as she turned away. When her gaze met her father's she glowered. It shocked him to receive such a hostile stare from his usually mild-mannered daughter. He wondered if Oliver said or did something untoward during one of their walks.

In public, he was cordial to her family and gallant to her. But when it was only a servant as her chaperone, he was demanding. He expected her attention to be fully on him when they went walking. So much so she'd stumbled more than once, wrenching her ankle badly during an afternoon stroll.

She'd dissuaded him from kissing her each time he tried, reminding him a servant watched. The maid or groom reported to her father, so it would behoove Oliver not to do anything that might anger her father. Will had made his expectation that Oliver keep his hands to himself clear, but it hadn't convinced the young man not to try.

Lydia's fingers froze above the keys as a forceful knock sounded at the front door. Her heart raced as she imagined it might be Keith finally returned. She wondered if the Viscount's carriage remained in the drive. She didn't doubt Keith would recognize it immediately. She had her answer as he burst into the music room, the butler scurrying to get ahead and announce him. Keith glared at the man a head shorter than him as he entered the chamber.

Lydia rose without realizing what she did. She stepped around the bench as Keith approached. He took her hand before she could offer it, bringing it to his lips. He pressed them against the satiny skin, propriety be damned. He wouldn't let his cousin take what he wanted. He rued not approaching Will about Lydia before he left. He never imagined Lydia's father would so aggressively push his daughter toward a man. Keith's housekeeper reported she'd seen Oliver and Lydia walking every day, but she also noted she frequently spotted Lydia on the beach staring out to sea. It was all he needed to hear as he passed through his home on his way to the Abbingtons.

"Lady Lydia, you look beautiful." Keith wouldn't mince words. He'd seen Will and Oliver's stunned expressions, and he sensed Oliver moving closer. But he kept his attention fully on Lydia.

"Thank you, Your Grace. The sun and fresh air suit you." Lydia's eyes twinkled as she met Keith's gaze. It was a most forward comment, but she cared not. Now that she knew he'd returned, and his intentions were clear, she harbored no more fear he no longer wanted her. The heat in his gaze told her everything, even if his greeting hadn't.

"Your Grace." Oliver's voice permeated the bubble into which the couple had stepped. "Cousin, I didn't expect you."

Keith released Lydia's hand but wrapped her arm around his. He continued to stake his claim as he nodded to Will, then Oliver. "I returned in the past half-hour."

“You came straight here?” Lydia whispered. Keith returned his gaze to hers.

“I couldn’t stay away, little one. I won’t stay away.” Keith kept his voice equally low. He looked at Will, ignoring Oliver. “Have you betrothed your daughter to him?”

“No. I?—”

“Then I formally request Lady Lydia’s hand in marriage.” Keith covered Lydia’s hand on his arm with his.

“Wait now, Cousin. I have been courting the lady for a fortnight. You cannot merely swoop in and take what is mine.” At Will’s throat clearing, Oliver rephrased. “What I wish to be mine.”

Sarla stepped forward, having silently watched the scene since before Keith arrived. She’d seen how uncomfortable Oliver made her daughter, but she knew not why. Lydia had been evasive, but she’d told her mother she didn’t trust Oliver and feared he would hurt her if they married. She’d warned her husband, but he’d sworn he could still protect Lydia, even after she became another man’s property in the law’s eye.

She watched Keith approach Lydia and seen how her daughter blossomed as soon as they touched. She recalled being the same while Will courted her, and she recalled her father having similar objections. The maharaja had another man, an Indian man, in mind. But it hadn’t taken Surat long to realize he fought a losing battle. All three of his daughters were destined to make a life with Englishmen. Sarla saw her daughter was destined to be with Keith.

“My daughter belongs to no one but herself, my lord.” Sarla stood on the other side of Lydia, daring the viscount to disagree. Her lineage was no secret. While she’d married a man well below a viscount, her poise and confidence spoke to being a

princess. The younger man might outrank her in England, but he was wise not to argue.

“My apologies, Lady Abbington.” Oliver turned to Lydia, and she watched as he nearly reached out to her but thought better of it. She knew he feared she would reject him, and she would. “Lady Lydia, I have grown fond of you over the past fortnight. I can’t help but think of you beside me.”

The edge in his voice made his words sound like a veiled command. She leaned against Keith unknowingly, but they both felt it when their shoulders brushed. It took every ounce of decorum Keith could dredge not to wrap his arm around Lydia as though she were already his wife.

“Your Grace, as you can see, Lord Sackville has already made his intentions clear. I have already considered his suit. You are too late.” Will’s stare was unwavering as he looked at Keith. The younger man couldn’t understand why, from a business perspective, Lydia’s father would choose to bring a man into the Abbington family who wasn’t aware of Will’s less-than-legal dealings. Keith was certain Oliver wasn’t a smuggler. He’d heard his cousin speak out against it. It led him to wonder what Oliver knew or had done to gain Will’s support.

“You said your daughter isn’t betrothed. Lest she’s married, it’s not too late.” Keith’s bearing spoke to a man who’d been reared to be a duke from the cradle. His time spent captaining his ships and raiding the Spanish only added to his confidence and commanding presence. He looked down his nose at his cousin. He hadn’t been able to stand Oliver when they were children. Oliver had been conniving and vicious when he didn’t get his way. Even if Keith wasn’t interested in a future with Lydia, he wouldn’t relegate her to one with Oliver. He feared for her, knowing his cousin’s propensity to violence when deterred.

“Your Grace—” Will began.

“Father.” Lydia swayed before crumbling, trusting Keith would catch her. She’d never swooned before, so she hoped she appeared believable. She kept her eyes closed despite hearing the panic in Keith’s voice.

“Lyddie,” Keith begged as he cupped her cheek, kneeling as he cradled her upper body in his arms. The way she’d collapsed trapped her hand between Keith’s arm and her belly. She tapped her forefinger, knowing he could feel it rising against his sleeve. She felt some of the tension ease as he understood her sign. He scooped her into his arms and turned toward the door.

“Where do you think you’re going?” Oliver demanded.

“To take Lady Lydia to her chamber. Lady Abbington, please show me the way.”

“You can’t do that,” Oliver hissed.

Keith paused, dramatically turning toward his cousin with Lydia in his arms. “I’m a bloody duke. I can do whatever the hell I want.”

Lydia turned her head toward Keith’s chest, hiding her grin. She hoped one day she was a duchess and could tell him that in private as she stripped him. His hand under her voluminous skirts twisted from her leg to her backside. He squeezed, then rested it there, where he was certain no one could see. He turned back toward the door and followed Sarla up the stairs. At Lydia’s door, her mother opened it and walked to her daughter’s bedside. She watched every moment of Keith carrying Lydia across the chamber, then lowering her to the bed.

“Lydia, you can open your eyes.” Sarla crossed her arms and sighed. “That may have ended that scene, but it hardly solved this situation. Your Grace, you might refrain from antagonizing my husband or your cousin. You may be a duke, but Will is her father.”

“And I’ve reached my majority, Mother. No one can force me to marry someone I refuse.”

“We all know that, Lydia. But that hardly remedies the problem right now. You have two men willing to fight over you, and your father has already picked sides. This was never a simple matter, and now it has grown mighty complicated.”

“Lady Abbington, I intend to marry Lady Lydia. I was remiss in not saying anything before my last journey. None of you should think you can dismiss me.” Keith looked at Lydia before he kneeled on one knee. “What do you want, Lydia? Tell the truth. It’s only your wishes I will consider.”

“You.”

The single word rang in the air as the couple forgot about Sarla. They gazed at one another as Keith wrapped his hand around Lydia’s and brought it to his mouth. He kissed her knuckles before he brought the back of her hand to his cheek. It hid half his profile as he mouthed, “Tonight.”

Lydia had already decided to seek him once everyone else retired. She couldn’t react with her mother watching, but she knew Keith understood her silent agreement. He rose, then leaned forward to kiss her forehead. Sarla exhaled her disapproval loudly, but she said nothing. She gave her daughter a long stare before following Keith from the chamber. Once in the passageway and out of Lydia’s earshot, she stopped Keith.

“I’ve never said anything to Will or Lydia, but I saw you at the funeral. I saw your grief as they lowered the coffin. I saw how you despised your father. I also saw you notice Lydia and the moment you recognized her. I’ve observed you when you see each other in the village. I know she frequents the beach even more often than before Rajesh and the others came. You appreciate my daughter’s attractiveness, but I see there is more to it than that. Do not prove me wrong when I say I give you my

blessing. I will do what I can with Will.”

It wasn't often that Will and Sarla were at odds. She understood her husband's rationale for endorsing Oliver, and she knew he didn't support the Viscount as much as he'd pretended to in the music room. But she couldn't guarantee Will would accept her suggestions this time or Keith's intentions. For once, there was more at stake than their daughter's happiness when choosing a mate.

“That's all I can ask for, Lady Abbington.”

“If we become family one day, I hope you will call me Sarla. Your mother always did.” She spoke softly, a kindness in her voice Keith hadn't heard since he was a child. The sound flooded his memory. He went rigid at the mention of his mother, having not spoken about her in two decades. But now he recalled Sarla coming to visit and how it was the only time his mother laughed besides when she was with Keith and Kelsey.

“I would like that, my lady. Be prepared. It will be soon, but not soon enough.” Keith followed the woman he hoped would become his mother-in-law as she led him to the door. He had nothing more to say to Will or Oliver, at least nothing productive. He wouldn't let it devolve into a shouting match, which it would become if he didn't cool his temper before seeing his cousin again.

Oliver stepped out of the music room as Sarla and Keith passed the doorway. The malice in Oliver's gaze was impossible to miss. Keith sensed Sarla was ill at ease as Oliver approached. He angled himself to shield Sarla if the need arose.

“Lady Abbington, I would know how Lady Lydia fares.” It was a demand, not a request made from concern. “We are due for our promenade in a quarter-hour. The air in the garden will do her good.”

“I hadn’t realized you’d nursed many people back to health, Oliver.” Keith once more looked down his nose at his cousin. While Oliver was nearly as tall as Keith, he lacked the girth Keith had developed from years of sailing. His chest was half the width of Keith’s, especially when Keith put his hands on his hips. “I never pictured you as a nursemaid.”

“Common sense, Cousin. One who has any would know that.” Oliver stepped forward, not at all intimidated by Keith.

More fool is he if he thinks we’re the same as we were as children. I accepted your tantrums and spoiled attitude because fighting you wasn’t worth the beating I would have received. There is no one bigger than me now. Test me, you little prick. I dare you to.

Keith continued to stare at Oliver until his cousin finally realized he’d poked the bear too hard. When Keith leaned slightly forward, Oliver appeared rooted to the spot.

“You may have gotten what you wanted when we were children because I didn’t care enough about what I had, and you had nothing I wanted. But I will protect what’s mine now. Do not doubt that. I could have beaten your arse then, and I’m certain we all know I can do it now. Change your tone when you address Lady Abbington and Lady Lydia. I will know if you don’t. The walls have ears.”

Keith turned to Sarla and bowed before he left. He didn’t look back until he rounded the house. He looked up at what he knew was Lydia’s window. She stood there and waved. He smiled to her, his only outward acknowledgement. They would share a private reunion that night.

CHAPTER 4

Lydia entered the crypt and looked back at the path. She'd sensed someone there but saw no one. It made her wonder if Oliver somehow knew about the secret tunnels, but she didn't think he did. She hurried to shut the door before she sprinted across the mausoleum. She opened the hatch leading to the hidden passageway and closed it just before she heard the building's main door open. Someone had followed her. She waited, confident this was the one entrance no one would stumble upon. Few would dare poke around where the dead laid to rest. Superstition and a sense of the morbid would deter most people. Those who overcame that wouldn't find the latch, since it was miniscule and part of the carved decoration on the center of the slot's door.

She couldn't see who it was, but she was certain it was Oliver. No one had ever followed her in the more than fifteen years she'd been sneaking into Forde Abbey. It made a shiver run the length of her spine to know he'd been watching her door. It was the only way he could have known. His chamber faced the front of the house, and she hadn't exited in that direction. She'd left through the kitchen and crept through the shadows of the arbor. Only someone watching her door, or the back of the house, would know she'd left. If he hadn't been lurking near her door, then he'd lurked somewhere on the first floor, expecting her to slip away.

She heard muttering before the outside door slammed shut. She hurried through the tunnel until she reached the abandoned monks' dormitory. She entered the cell to torch light illuminating the area. Keith opened his arms to her, and she flew into them. Their mouths crashed together, and he lifted her off her feet. Once more, she wore pants, having abandoned the gown she wore to dinner. She'd appeared at the evening meal, hoping to appease Will and Oliver. She endured Oliver's alternating

glares and patronizing smiles. Now she was where she belonged.

Keith wrapped Lydia's legs around his waist and walked them to the wall. He pressed her against it and devoured her. His hands gripped her bottom as his tongue thrust into her mouth, mimicking what he wished to do with his cock. She ground her mons against his length, her fingers fisting his hair as she tried to gain more friction.

"I missed you, sweetling," Keith said when they came up for air. He kissed her neck and collarbone. "However, I haven't missed being down here."

He didn't release her as he walked to the door. He carried her as she clung to him. She only let go once they entered his library. He locked the door and laid her on the settee where'd they'd trysted the last time she was there.

"I missed you, too." Lydia giggled and shook her head. "I cannot imagine calling you Bunbury or boop. They're such ridiculous sounding words for a man. I would call you darling if you like."

"I'd more than like that, Lydia. I hope to hear that until I can hear no more."

"I'd like to call you that until I can speak no more."

Keith eased back, propping himself on one forearm and against the back of the settee. He wrapped his hand around hers, just as he had earlier in the day, but he brought them to rest against his heart. "I've assumed a lot today, Lyddie. I was as bad as my cousin and your father to presume I could speak for you. What do you want?"

"You."

It was the same unequivocal answer she'd given the last time he'd asked. She'd held no doubts about her wishes while he was gone, but she hadn't been able to

combat all the doubts that taunted her. His abrupt arrival and unmistakable intentions when he spoke to Oliver and Will reassured her she'd made the right choice. When he'd caught her in her pretend stupor and carried her with such gentleness, she'd known his feelings were genuine. The way he'd kissed her hand and her forehead had been too reverent for a man pretending at affection.

“You know I want the same, Lydia. Being away from you was hell. I missed your smile and your laughter, which I haven't heard nearly enough of. I wondered what books you'd read, and I longed to talk to you about them. I pictured you on the beach and wished I was beside you, perhaps reading aloud to you or enjoying companionable silence with my own book. I worried about you walking alone, but I never worried someone might be here courting you. My only fear was I would return, and you would regret what we'd done.”

Lydia reached up and cupped his cheek. “It might surprise you to know what I've learned about you in the time since you returned and became duke. I know you're the patron of the almshouse and the orphanage. That was not part of your family's legacy. You did that on your own. I'm certain you've more than tithed, and you're why the rectory has a new roof. I've watched you carry things for the elderly when you could have easily walked past.”

“You've seen that?”

Lydia nodded. “I may not have seen you aboard your ship, but I assume you love being on the water. I have seen you riding that great beast of yours. You're gentle and patient with him, and in turn, it's obvious he's devoted to you. I've known for years your father ignored your tenants and the repairs their homes needed. I'd long suspected he spent the money on his mistresses instead of this estate. You have brought it back from the brink. Since you returned, I've heard of your reputation, and it fazes me not a bit. I'd rather you killed than be killed.”

“Time didn’t prepare me for the gangly child I’d known as my sister’s best friend to be a stunning woman when I returned for her funeral.” He stopped when Lydia’s mouth dropped open. He seized the opportunity, nipping at her bottom lip before kissing her. “I hid in the trees and watched. I didn’t want to distract from her funeral, so I stayed back. I heard you in the library that day, Lyddie. I wanted to know what you meant, but you were gone before I could ask. I sailed away that afternoon, but you were never far from my thoughts. It was always you I wanted.”

Keith paused to watch her reaction to knowing he’d spied on her. She didn’t bat an eyelash.

“When I returned, I watched you. I couldn’t help it. I knew you sneaked in here, but other than that first time, I never caught you. But I could smell your fragrance. I would follow it until I could guess what books you’d taken or returned. I saw you with the village children, how you laughed and sang to them. You play games with them on Sundays while their parents socialize. I’m not the only one generous with my money. I know you must give away much of your pin money. I’ve seen the pride on your parents’ faces when you do. I may not have talked to you, but I feel like I know you well.”

“I feel the same,” smiled Lydia. “Being with you feels natural, like it’s always been meant to be. In India, people believe we each have a purpose in life and a destiny. What we do, and how we act, determines what happens to us in the afterlife. I thought my purpose was solely to make up for not doing enough for Kelsey while she was alive. Now I think my purpose is more than just that.”

“Do you think it might be as my wife?”

“I hope so, Keith. That’s what I want.”

“I want you by my side, Lydia. You’re intelligent and well read. You’re practical and

kind. There have been many times since I returned when I've wondered what advice you would give me about the estate. I suspect your parents trained you well to run a household and beyond."

"They have. My father insisted my sister and I learn all that we could. He feared what might happen if our husband became incapacitated or turned out to be a ne'er-do-well. I always worried no man would appreciate my opinions."

"I want them. I think, at times, I need them." Keith kissed the tip of her nose. There was one thing he wanted to know, and he wouldn't let her evade it any longer. "You've mentioned it before. What do you mean you didn't do enough for Kelsey? You once said you would get justice for her. Then, years later, you said you'd missed your opportunity."

Lydia shrank back against the pillow beneath her head. She closed her eyes, pain slashing through her as she thought about what Kelsey endured. She'd been of two minds about whether she should tell Keith what she learned from her friend's diary. She knew if she divulged everything, it would hurt him. She considered what to say before she began.

"Your father lied about your mother, Keith." Lydia winced as he jerked away, then sat up. She followed him, curling her legs beside her as she twisted to look at him. "She wasn't unwell. She'd threatened to leave with you and Kelsey because she couldn't tolerate the way he abused you. They argued several times. He knew he couldn't kill her because it would mean Kelsey inherited what your grandfather had set aside for any daughters in your parents' marriage contract. It would have entitled him to manage the money, but a groom would expect there to be a dowry. With your mother alive, he could do as he pleased with the money, and he assumed no one would be the wiser. When it was time for Kelsey to marry, he would claim your mother left nothing for her. Since she had to live, he committed her to Bedlam for being uncooperative."

Keith leaped from the settee and fisted his hands as he paced before the fireplace. His father committed his mother nearly twenty years earlier, swearing she was a danger to herself and her children. He'd forbidden Keith and Kelsey from having any contact with her. They certainly could not visit, and he knew his father burned the missives he tried to send. Kelsey was too young to even remember their mother.

"How did Kelsey know this?" Keith spun toward Lydia.

"She found your mother's diaries when we were fifteen. They were in a trunk in the attic. She showed them to me. You weren't the only one your father abused. Your mother poured all her thoughts and misery into those pages. There were vivid descriptions of what he did to her in and out of their bedchamber."

"Did he do that to Kelsey? Did he—" Keith couldn't finish the thought. He feared he would vomit if Lydia answered in the affirmative.

"No. He didn't molest her, but he abused her. I heard the things he said the first few years after you left. I didn't understand all of it, and Kelsey swore me to secrecy. I told her my father could protect her, but she insisted a baronet was no match for a duke. She feared your father would kill my whole family and me. Those were childhood fears, but he confirmed them by what we read in your mother's diaries." Lydia rose and came to stand before Keith. She didn't touch him, uncertain what he wanted. But she continued to tell what she dared. "He was livid when she refused Windsor-Clive. The night he requested her hand, Kelsey refused. She answered for her father. He struck her, and I saw it. I didn't fear your father once I grew old enough to understand his nature. He might have thought me little more than a savage, but the rest of the ton knows my lineage. I threatened to tell everyone what I saw. He let me take her away, but he exacted his revenge that night. He beat her so badly she couldn't have any visitors for a week. He claimed she had the ague, but we were already adept at sneaking in and out of anywhere we went. I saw her in your family's Mayfair townhouse each night."

Lydia closed her eyes as memories danced before her eyes. Her head fell forward as she fought the threatening tears. She didn't want to become a watering pot. She wanted to finish what she had to say while she could.

"Once back here, he began beating her for no reason other than he enjoyed it. After that first time in London, he made sure he never left a mark people could see while she was dressed. But I saw it. She showed me." Lydia drew in a whistling breath. "It was worse than I knew, Keith. There were things she never told me. He tortured her. I learned about it from her diary."

"What do you mean?" His voice cracked as he asked a question to which he only partly wanted to know the answer.

"He would deprive her of food, have her locked in the cellar for hours, he would make her crawl before the servants, and he tied her to her bed at night." Lydia stopped there. The rest she couldn't bring herself to admit. She hadn't lied when she told Keith the old duke never molested his daughter. But he'd allowed other things to happen Lydia wasn't convinced Keith should ever know. Things she only learned when she read the diary.

"I would kill him if he weren't already dead. It's my fault she suffered for even a moment."

Lydia couldn't deny what he said, and she wouldn't give him false platitudes. Kelsey's treatment likely wouldn't have been so severe if Keith hadn't left her alone with their father. All she could offer was a slight reassurance from his total culpability.

"He would have done many of those things regardless of whether you were here. He'd begun while you were on your Grand Tour before you'd decided to leave."

Keith shook his head. “No. I insisted upon the tour because I already knew I wanted to leave. I used that time to arrange for my commission. I knew I couldn’t do it with him watching me. I did this to her.”

“You did not do it to her.” Lydia’s voice was adamant. “There is a difference between you not staying here or coming back and the things he did. You never could have totally protected her, not even if you were here.”

“What does that mean?” Keith sensed there was far more Lydia kept from him. “Do not hold secrets from me, Lydia. I never want to doubt I can trust you. I know there’s more.”

Lydia squeezed her eyes shut and shook her head. “I can’t. I don’t want to deceive you or hide things from you, but I swore to Kelsey I would never tell. I can’t renege on that. There are things she didn’t want you to know, Keith. Please don’t ask me to betray her. Please don’t think I’m betraying you.”

“She won’t know if?—”

They turned toward the fire as a log burst into sparks and hissed. The flames leaped high into the flume. Embers flew onto the carpet and took hold. Keith pushed Lydia away from where the fire continued to roar with a ferocity that appeared menacing. He stomped on the carpet, putting out each potential fire.

Lydia backed away as the flames licked the side of the fireplaces, threatening to set the surrounding wood ablaze. She looked around, terrified. She’d never seen a fire behave in such a way, as though it possessed its own mind and anger.

“Kelsey?” Lydia whispered. Another log popped, as though it answered Lydia. Her voice grew stronger and clearer over the crackling blaze. “Kels, I’m sorry. I won’t tell.”

Immediately, the fire settled. It was as though nothing had stoked it only moments ago. Lydia looked around, trying to determine if a draft somehow fed the flames. But the air was completely still. Keith walked to her and engulfed her in his embrace. She trembled as she continued to watch the fire. She accepted his reassurance they were fine, but she couldn't remain in his arms yet. She pushed away.

"Kelsey, what do you want me to do? I won't tell, but neither can I live with this forever and keep it from my husband. Are you angry your brother and I wish to marry?"

"Lydia?" Keith didn't know what to make of her talking to his dead sister or what happened with the fire. Was it possible Kelsey was still among them? He was about to deny his sister's ghost lingered in the library, but a scratching at the door distracted him. He and Lydia turned toward it before Lydia hurried to open the portal to the interior hallway. She looked down and blinked several times. A cat nuzzled her legs and walked between them. She scooped him up.

"Marauder, what are you doing here?"

"You named the cat Marauder?" Keith was incredulous as he came to stand beside Lydia.

"The cat's fur is so blond it's nearly white, and he was a mouser since practically the day he was born. Kelsey gave him to me, but we both knew he was always meant to be a stable cat. I teased that he reminded me of your reputation. She suggested I name him Keith, but I said that was ridiculous. I settled for your moniker."

"Why's he here?"

Lydia was about to respond that she had no idea, but suddenly she knew. She walked back to the fire, which now was a cheery source of heat, not fear. "You gave him to

me and told me to name him after your brother. You tried to give me Keith. Now Marauder shows up where he's never been before. Are you telling me you're all right with us being together?"

The cat meowed loudly before yawning. He settled against Lydia's chest and sighed. She scratched his head as she looked back at Keith. She'd spent years feeling as though Kelsey was still her constant companion, but this was the first time she'd feared her friend's spirit or been thoroughly convinced it even existed. She was certain it was no longer the product of her imagination.

"I think she's giving her consent to that. But if she agrees we should marry, then she must know you should tell me everything." Keith couldn't believe he spoke about his sister as though she were still alive. At his assertion, the flames once more grew. The blue nearest the heart of the fire glowed brilliantly.

"I won't tell, Kels." Lydia reached out and gripped Keith's shirt. As soon as she finished speaking, the fire settled again. She looked up at Keith and shook her head. "Can you live with me not telling you everything?"

Keith kissed her, drawing her closer until Marauder complained and wiggled to get down, not appreciating being trapped between their bodies. Lydia wrapped her arms around his waist. "I can live with it, Lyddie. I can't live without you."

Lydia rested her cheek against his chest, listening to his heart. The tension eased from her body the longer Keith held her. Much still unsettled her about what just happened, and she felt unresolved about keeping Kelsey's secrets. She feared as much as she wanted to, circumstances would force her to tell Keith. She would do her best to delay, but she was no longer as confident as she'd once been.

"We need to be caught together. If it appears like your compromised me, then there will be no choice but for us to marry." Lydia leaned back far enough to look up at

Keith. “There’s an assembly tomorrow night. People must find us together. And it can’t be something simply explained away as though we happened to be in the same place or that we were merely talking.”

“If you mean I need to ravage you, then I’ll happily oblige.” Keith grinned for the first time in what felt like a lifetime. He wagged his brow and winked.

“Perhaps you could save ravaging me to the privacy of our chamber, but—” Lydia’s face flushed as she snapped her mouth shut. “That was presumptuous of me. I’m sorry.”

“What was? That we would share a chamber? Lydia, from the day we wed until the day one of us dies, I will have no chamber but the one I share with you. I do not want you sleeping apart from me. I will not visit you as though we’re practically strangers. You will not be a guest in a chamber within your own home.”

“I suppose the lord’s bed is large enough for two.”

“It is, but I intend to find the smallest one I can. Then you shall have no choice but to lie next to me. There won’t be room for you to get away.” Keith’s hands slipped down to her backside as she went up on her toes. Their kisses grew wild as their hands roamed. Keith unfastened the first three buttons on Lydia’s tunic and pushed it over her shoulders. But a log shifted and caught their attention. It was clear it moved because most of it had burned away. However, it was a reminder they’d encountered Kelsey’s spirit not even a quarter of an hour ago. It dampened their ardor as they looked around, searching for anyone who might spy them.

“You should return before anyone realizes you’re gone.”

Lydia nodded but couldn’t meet his eye. When he squeezed her waist, prompting her, she admitted, “I think Oliver followed me to the crypt. He couldn’t find where I went,

so he gave up.”

“He’s likely waiting for you then, expecting you to return home before daylight.”

“You could truly compromise me, and I could stay here. Let the servants find us together in our bed.”

“Your father would put a bullet between my eyes before we made it to the altar.” Keith didn’t exaggerate, and Lydia knew it. “Tomorrow night will be soon enough. I’ll walk you back. We take the tunnel to the trees and sneak you back from there.”

Lydia agreed, and soon she led the way with a torch raised to illuminate their path. Keith saw her to the kitchen’s door and waited. She’d agreed to wave from her window before he would leave. He breathed easier, seeing her smile from above. He was almost to his own door when Oliver appeared. Keith sighed, knowing nothing good would come of this conversation. He wanted it over with so he could retire. The events in the library exhausted him, and he wanted to sort through how he felt about the idea that Kelsey’s ghost inhabited the abbey. He wondered what other spirits might lurk there.

“What do you want?”

“Leave her alone, Cousin.” Oliver cocked a pistol and raised his arm.

“What will you do, Ollie?” Keith knew he despised the diminutive. He’d used it as a child to goad Oliver when he was fed up with his cousin and wished for him to get in enough trouble with his own father it would force him to leave Keith alone. “Will you shoot a duke on his own land? You aren’t high enough in line to inherit. Do you think anyone will believe I’ve just gone missing when my ship is in the bay and my horse is in the stables? Hell, even if you stole my horse, he’s too recognizable to pass for yours. Go back to bed.”

Keith stood in the shadows, so he had darkness on his side. He withdrew his gun from the small of his back and the knife he kept at his hip. When he had both weapons at the ready, he stepped into the moonlight, cocking, and raising the pistol. He raised his other hand, and the moon reflected off the blade.

“Only one of us has experience killing and disposing of bodies, Ollie. And we know it isn’t you, so go back to bed.” Keith took another step forward, his longer arm practically pushing the barrel into Oliver’s chest.

“You always had to have everything,” Oliver whined.

“A bastard father, a haunted old heap of bricks, being up to my ears in hock. Oh yes, do tell me how I have everything. She isn’t a toy we’re squabbling over. You are the one who will stay away.” Keith pulled the pistol back, giving Oliver space to turn around. The man glared at Keith for a protracted moment before he huffed and left. Keith watched him walk away. When his cousin was nearly out of sight, he followed. He wasn’t at ease leaving Lydia in the house with Oliver.

He crept into the kitchen behind Oliver, waiting until he was certain his cousin would have crossed the enormous expanse. He hurried inside and climbed the servants’ stairs while Oliver took the main ones. Keith watched him pause at Lydia’s door before going to his own. Keith slid to the floor and spent the night tucked into the corner, watching the corridor. He sneaked out when he heard the first servants mustering at dawn.

CHAPTER 5

The next fortnight continued much as the last had. Oliver continued to demand Lydia's time, insisting that they walk the gardens, that she play the piano for him, and that he haltingly read poetry to her. She didn't care for overly flowery poetry, so enduring his poor yet excessively effusive reading frequently gave her headaches. More than once, she requested a tray for the evening meal at just the right moment, pleading ongoing exhaustion from their daily promenades. While no one believed she was anything but the picture of good health, no one refused her to avoid a scene. Her parents knew she was often on the cusp of saying something she couldn't retract.

It was early mornings when she found solace from Oliver's unrelenting attention. She slipped down to the beach with her guards, and Keith was often already there. Her men kept an appropriate distance, but she knew they approved of Keith far more than Oliver. They never interrupted the couple when they stole a few moments behind a bend in the cliffs.

They both were far earlier risers than Oliver, so they spent two or three hours together. Her parents knew where she went, and she was certain her guards reported to her father. But she suspected they were selective in what they shared and that they didn't mention Keith was there every day. She couldn't see how her father would permit it otherwise.

"Lyddie, did you enjoy your latest book?"

"I did. It seems to have magically appeared since Emma was only recently published, and the spine on the copy I found hadn't been broken. However did it wind up in your

library?”

“Fairies.”

Lydia stared at Keith for a moment before she laughed hard enough to snort. She covered her mouth, but mirth danced in her eyes. Eventually, she stopped trying to conceal her smile.

“A fairy? One who’s about yay tall.” She stretched onto her toes and lifted her arm above her head. “I didn’t know water nymphs came so big.”

Keith captured her around the waist and hauled her against him as he walked backwards until they were out of the guards’ sight. His lips pressed to hers, but it was her tongue that flicked against his lips. She’d been a quick study and caught onto kissing with little tutelage. She was always as amorous as Keith, both starved for the brief moments of lust and affection they could share. With anyone possibly seeing them, they knew they risked much just by kissing. By tacit agreement, they kept their hands on the outside of one another’s clothes, resting on each other’s waists.

“I loved the story, darling. It was refreshing to read a woman storyteller. There were moments of humor but insightful narratives that made me realize how fortunate I am to know my family is well cared for if anything should happen to my father.”

“I will make such provisions for you and any children we have. I will make sure you have a home and all the things you need should I pass before you. I won’t leave you to beg for your supper or as a ward to someone like Oliver.”

Lydia patted Keith’s chest as she stretched to kiss his jaw. “I know you wouldn’t. It was an entertaining story, but it also seemed a sad commentary at times. I wonder who the author is. She’s only ever named as ‘A Lady.’ I’ve loved her other books, *Sense and Sensibility*, *Pride and Prejudice*, and *Mansfield Park*. I hope she continues

to write more.”

“When she does, I will ensure you have one of the earliest copies.”

“You would risk your life and limb to get me a book? Of all the things you might trade for, a book is not one I expected.”

“I would trade the world for a book if it would make you happy. But, alas, I ordered that from London as soon as I returned from France.”

Lydia playfully slapped his chest. In turn, Keith nipped at her neck and grazed his teeth up her throat to just below her jaw. He savored the sweet scent and taste that belonged to no other woman he knew. His hand cupped her jaw, and more passed between them than they were ready to say. But they both understood.

* * *

Keith was certain he would murder his cousin. It was only Sarla’s frown that kept him from doing it. While he didn’t pay a visit to the Abbingtons every day, he never let more than two go by between his appearances. For the first week, he made it appear like a coincidence that he rode his horse past their home while Lydia and Oliver strolled in the garden. Politeness required the couple to stop, and Keith found something—anything—to chat about until Oliver and Lydia had no choice but to return to the house rather than continue the walk.

However, after he watched his cousin berate Lydia about something, he no longer held any pretenses. He’d dismounted and stalked over to them. Oliver hadn’t noticed Keith’s approach until Lydia’s eyes widened. He’d spun around, certain who approached. For once, he was prudent and remained silent. While Lydia downplayed the exchange both there and the next morning at the beach, Keith ensured he interrupted their walks before they began, or one of his grooms watched from a tree

that overlooked the Abbingtons' gardens.

During the second week after his return, he found reasons to meet with Will to discuss land matters, their neighboring tenants, issues he would bring before the House of Lords, and any other topic that came to his mind. On those days, Oliver was too curious to leave the house while Keith had Will's ear. He'd insinuate himself into the conversation or try to eavesdrop from the drawing room all the way to Will's study. Some days Lydia was forced to accept Oliver's company in the drawing room, but many days she found things to do in the nearby village. While she wished she could spend the time with Keith since he was at her home, she escaped to avoid Oliver.

The past week had been the most onerous of them all. While a fortnight hadn't seemed an unreasonable length for Oliver's visit to get to know Lydia, moving into the fourth week of hosting him strained Sarla's patience. She was far more hospitable than her daughter, but the long Oliver stayed the more entitled he grew. What began as preferences at the meals became requests that soon verged on demands. He would tell the servants what he wanted and instructed them to pass it along to Sarla rather than ask her. He knew if he did, she would turn him down, so he wished to save face. She refused to honor all that he asked, but she agreed to enough to keep the peace.

"Will, he shall drive me to Bedlam. It would be more peaceful than his constant presence. You cannot mean to marry Lydia to him. You cannot wish him to be our son-in-law."

"He may be annoying, but he has a solid reputation and can provide for Lydia."

"If that were the only requirements for a happy marriage, I'd be wed to the man my father chose for me." Sarla crossed her arms and peered up at her husband. His lips twitched, which made his wife roll her eyes and shake her head.

“You know I enjoy when you look at me like that. It reminds me of my good fortune to find a princess who loves me despite her parents’ early objections.”

“Seems a rather familiar situation, don’t you think?”

“I don’t disapprove of Oliver.”

“Do not be obtuse, Will. You’ve spent far too many years proving how intelligent you are for me to ever believe you now. You know who I mean.”

Will’s body stiffened when Sarla alluded to Keith. He wasn’t unaware of the similarities between his courtship with Sarla and how Keith and Lydia wished to be together. But the situations were different. It was a different place and different time. While it hadn’t been simple being a man awaiting his inheritance and title marrying a princess, but they’d been far from the trappings of life in England. Here existed complication connections and associations Will couldn’t ignore.

“I haven’t drafted any contracts, so it’s not as though they’ll walk down the aisle tomorrow. But you know MacNeil’s reputation. You know what he’s capable of.”

“I do. The traits our daughter is falling in love with are the very ones I fell in love with because you have them in spades, my darling. You’ve always said she and I are two peas in a pod. Can you blame her for finding a man as brave and determined as her father?”

Will drew his wife into his arms and pressed a soft kiss to her lips. “We have time. No one will rush a decision. We’ll see whether Lydia warms to Oliver as they continue to get to know each other.”

“You’d best pray she doesn’t stab him through the throat. I’m certain she’s been tempted many times.” Sarla rested her head against her husband’s chest. She hadn’t

pressed for a full explanation of why Will agreed to Oliver courting their daughter. He was a man with myriad secrets as a smuggler, but he'd never kept them from Sarla. She knew there were things he wasn't sharing with her, but she trusted he had a sound reason for it. She knew, if nothing else, he was protecting his family from something worse than the obnoxious Lord Oliver Gwyn, Viscount Sackville.

* * *

Keith dueled an imaginary foe in his formal dining room, taking advantage of the room's length as he practiced to keep his fighting skills honed. The room hadn't hosted an event since he took up residence at the abbey again. Rather he used it to thrust and parry against enemies only he could see. Besides riding his horse, there was little for Keith to do to expand his restless energy.

The hours of open time tempted him to ride out and tour his extensive property, but it would take him away from Lydia for more than a couple days. He loathed being away from her for more than a few hours. He bore the frustration of it, but he didn't trust Oliver not to pounce if Keith remained away for a day or more. He didn't trust his cousin not to compromise Lydia since he grew more desperate by the day. Rising hours after sunrise meant Oliver never caught Lydia and Keith on the beach together, but Oliver was certain they met alone.

It baffled Keith how Oliver didn't merely awaken earlier if he so wished to catch Lydia and him in some illicit act. But he was far too self-indulgent to believe he needed to catch them. He assumed all would work out in his favor, and he'd come out the victor.

Keith jabbed forward, his feet traveling with the momentum of his sword. As he progressed across the length of the massive room, he pictured his sword's tip piercing Oliver's skin repeatedly.

“He must be dead by now.”

Keith whirled around at Lydia’s voice. She leaned within the doorframe, watching and appreciating the view. He wiped his forehead with his shirt as he walked past the chair upon which he’d laid it. He placed his sword on the table in front of the chair.

“I must always be prepared to defend my fair lady from dastardly pirates.”

“I can think of one pirate I’d go with willingly.”

“I’m no pirate, sweetling.” Even he couldn’t say that with a straight face, so he winked instead.

“Then I suppose you’ll never plunder or pillage me.” She waggled her eyebrows, then squealed as he wrapped his arms around her waist, drawing her inside so he could push the door closed. He backed her against it, and neither held back. She could taste the salt from his sweat on his lips, yet he still smelled of the soap he must have bathed with that morning.

It was the first time they’d truly been alone since the night Lydia slipped into his house after he returned from France. They’d agreed it was too dangerous for Lydia to traverse the distance between their homes. Keith admitted he’d followed her that night and that Oliver confront him. He even confessed to sleeping at the top of the servants’ stairs, so he could watch her chamber door.

Since they were limited to comparatively chaste kisses on the beach, they were starved for more. Their hands roamed along each other’s bodies, desiring far more than mere kisses. Keith drew Lydia’s left leg over his hip, notching his length against her core. Their hips rocked as their need grew insatiable. They both wished she’d worn pants rather than her skirt with the yards of material to gather and hold out of the way. Beautiful as she appeared in her India clothes, Keith was ready to forbid her

from the ghagra . An English gown wasn't much better once he considered it. Once he wed Lydia, he would insist she only wear the trousers. He would concede to that since he knew his wife couldn't parade around their home naked all day, every day.

He lifted her, and her legs wrapped around his waist. Their kisses bursting out of control as each step rubbed his rod against her entrance. He laid her back on the table, pushing her tunic up. She wore no chemise since her kurta was thick enough to be appropriate without the undergarment. He kissed a line down between her breasts. Then he sprinkled kisses over her left breast before toying with her nipple, licking, sucking, and flicking with his tongue. He slid his hands beneath her skirts and wrapped his forearms around the back of her thighs from beneath before tugging her hips to the edge of the table.

“Would it shock you if I made love to you here one day?”

“Only for one day? That seems rather disappointing. I should like it at least once a week. I think I shall be quite a demanding wife.”

“I shall do my best to fulfill all those demands. I would hate to leave my wife longing for anything.”

She glanced down to where their bodies would join if their clothes weren't in the way. Her heated expression made Keith's cock twitch. Her gaze darted up to his when she felt it move.

“Did you make it do that?”

“I can, but no. That was on its own. Your curiosity and acceptance of the intimate things we do spurs my lust, Lyddie. I fear being too rough with you when we finally make love.”

“I’ve been told I’m the sturdy sort, so you needn’t worry.”

“I will always worry about you. You mean too much to me not to take your wellbeing seriously.” He wanted to confess his feelings for her, but he wasn’t convinced her affection ran as deep as his. He feared that because she had no man to compare him with except for Oliver, she thought her feelings ran deeper than they did. That this was only infatuation. That one day she would realize she’d been too impetuous and didn’t love Keith like he was certain he loved her. From the look in her eyes as she brushed a sun-bleached lock of hair from his forehead, Keith thought his feelings weren’t unrequited.

The moment of intimacy tempted her to reassure him that she knew she was always safe with him. That she would never be too far from him since she couldn’t bear the thought of being apart from the man she loved. That she longed to do more wifely things and share her affection with him beyond moving his hair out of his eyes.

Mindful of the time slipping away, neither wished to lose themselves in thought. They wished to enjoy each other’s company. Keith’s hands ran up and down her satiny skin from knee to hip. He suckled her breast as his fingers found her wet heat. He groaned to discover her wet and ready for him. His body screamed to take possession of hers. To make her his in a way no one could refute.

They’d spoken more about being caught together, and it often seemed like their only recourse. But they would need an event that was public. If they attempted it at her family’s home, it would be too easy for her parents and Oliver to brush away their lapse in judgement. They needed somewhere that would make Lydia being compromised irrefutable.

“Let me do something for you, Keith. The last time we were alone like this, you pleased me. I want to know how to return the favor.”

“You don’t have to, little one.”

“I know. All the more reason I want to.” She didn’t doubt a man like Oliver would insist he was entitled to all her attention in any way he wanted it. She was certain Keith would never be like that. He would never force his husbandly rights upon her like she was certain Oliver would. She feared nothing about coupling with Keith; whereas, the same act with Oliver made her wish to jump off a cliff and swim out to sea. She would meet Keith’s ship out there, and they could sail away.

Keith knew he couldn’t unfasten the front of his trousers while Lydia’s entrance rested against him. The temptation to slip inside her would undoubtedly get the better of him. They couldn’t both be bear, or Lydia wouldn’t leave his home the way she arrived. He would proclaim her his wife like his Highlander and Hebridean ancestors did with a handfast. He knew no one would recognize such a declaration here, even if it was still a legal practice in Scotland. He would do things properly lest Will shoot him or whisk his daughter away from Keith.

He pushed her skirts down before he unfastened the buttons on the fall of his breeches. He hadn’t donned his shirt, so she enjoyed the way the muscles in his chest and abdomen rippled with each movement. She watched the peaks and valleys over his belly move faster as she pushed open his pantaloons until she saw the thatch of hair and the tip of the promised land. Her mouth watered as she thought of the many illustrations she’d viewed in the books that still sat upon shelves in Keith’s library.

“When you look at me that way, Lyddie, you’re nothing short of a siren luring me to you.”

“But not your death.”

“The French call a climax *un petit morte* .” A little death.

“Yes. Such euphoria that it’s as though you’re no longer on this earthly plane.”

“I’m certain it will be nothing short of heaven.”

Keith helped her ease his trousers farther down his hips until he sprung loose. He watched the fascination, trepidation, and excitement morph across Lydia’s face. She reached for him; her gaze locked his. When he nodded, she tentatively wrapped her hand around his sword wishing that she could be its sheath. She was hesitant at first, unsure how tightly she should hold him or how quickly she should stroke him, but she knew what to do.

Keith marveled at her lack of timidity. She wasn’t like he assumed other virgins were. He’d avoided them like the plague, preferring to seek company only with experienced women. He needed no mothers matching making or fathers chasing him with a gun pointed at his head. It was refreshing to be with Lydia, seeing things as she did. It was an act he’d performed on himself and received countless other times, but it felt wholly different with Lydia. He knew it was because his feelings for her were unprecedented. He’d never had an emotional connection with his past partners, not even women who’d been his mistresses.

Lydia took her time acquainting herself with the girthy rod in her hand. If the images in the books had been drawn to scale, she knew she was far luckier than the women in the books she’d studied while Keith was away. She’d slipped into his library not only for novels to take home with her but to revisit the books she and Kelsey used to giggle over. She found them informative in a way she hadn’t before.

She conjured images and remembered the text written next them. She varied the speed as she pumped his shaft, her thumb sometimes sweeping over the bulbous head. She felt him pulse against her palm a few times, and from the way the muscles strained in Keith’s neck, she suspected he fought valiantly to keep from letting un petite morte carry him away. Her free hand wandered across his chest and belly

absentmindedly until another thought barged into her mind and refused to leave. She pressed on his chest, pushing him away. Keith's brow furrowed as he stepped back. Lydia didn't release him, instead continuing to stroke him as she came to her feet.

He was unprepared for her to drop to her knees in one graceful motion and lower her chin, so she could lick the tip. After the initial swipe, she swirled her tongue over it, flicking at the slit on top. Keith groaned as he tried to pull her onto her feet.

"You don't have to do this, Lyddie."

"I know I don't. But whether I had to or not, I want to. I know the pleasure I felt when you put your mouth on me. I know this is something natural a couple can share. Or is this something only whores do?"

"It is not. But this a lot for you."

"Yes, it is." She licked her lips before licking his length. She'd refused to stand despite how he urged her to. "Keith, unless you don't wish me to do this, then I'd like to try. More than one book stated this could be pleasurable for both partners. I want to do this for you."

As Keith peered into her deep, soulful brown eyes, he doubted he could refuse her anything. He'd thought they might work up to her taking him in her mouth. Apparently, Lydia was an apt student with a thirst for knowledge. He gathered her hair in his right hand while his left gripped the table as her mouth descended his length. He watched in fascination as she concentrated, her brow furrowed in thought. He hoped she didn't regret her choice. When she worked him farther into her mouth until he reached her throat, he feared he would spill that moment.

Lydia took her time, breathing through her nose and relaxing her throat. She didn't wish to gag, so she moved slowly, taking him farther into her mouth an inch at a time.

When it was too much for her to stay that way, she pulled back and wrapped her hand around his exposed length. Her mouth and hand worked in tandem to create the singularly most erotic experience of either of their lives, surpassing either of their imaginations.

“Lyddie, I cannot last much longer. Let go.” Keith gently pressed against her shoulder, but she shook her head. “Lyddie.”

Her eyes opened and peered up at him. She’d heard the command in his tone, and it tempted her to test him. It made her curious to discover what he would do if she disobeyed. In no way did she fear his reaction. Just the opposite. She suspected she would enjoy whatever punishment he doled out. Intriguing as the possibilities were, she wished to know something else. She leaned back on her heels and stroked him until his cock erupted. It fascinated her to see and feel a man’s climax. When she was certain no more of the creamy liquid would come out, she licked some off where it splattered against his lower belly. She hadn’t known what to expect. While it wasn’t a favorite taste, it wasn’t one she minded. She intended to finish the way she started the next time she had the opportunity to offer him something so personal.

Keith adjusted his trousers before lifting her to sit on the table. He was about to have his own feast when someone knocked on the door. They’d spoken softly enough for no one outside the dining room to hear. However, it would be disastrous if they were found together. Lydia scrambled to put her clothes to rights.

“There’s a tunnel from here. I’ll go that way.”

“I hate?—”

“I know. But this isn’t the time.”

Keith sighed and nodded. He grabbed his shirt from where he’d left it on the table

beside where Lydia had sat. He grabbed his fencing sword too before heading to the door. A moment after Lydia disappeared into the abyss, he opened the door.

“Where is she?”

“Why are you in my home uninvited, Oliver?”

“Where is my soon-to-be betrothed? I know she’s here.”

“You can see I’m alone.”

“She has some warren of tunnels she uses. I’m certain of it. Where is she?”

Keith jabbed his finger into Oliver’s chest as he prowled forward, forcing Oliver to retreat. He steered his ferret faced cousin toward his front door. The doorman scrabbled to get it open in time. Oliver kept walking backward until they stood upon the stoop.

“We were equals as children. Both boys waiting to inherit their titles. How easily you forget how far above your station you reach when you antagonize me. Do you know why I ignored you when we were children? To react to you would have ensured a beating from my father. By not reacting to you, you earned a thrashing from your father. I enjoyed your screams each and every time. It’s been a long time since I’ve heard you. What say you? Shall I make you scream for the sake of nostalgia.”

Keith drew back his fist, but Oliver raised his hands in surrender.

“Lady Lydia’s whereabouts are not your concern. They are Sir and Lady Abbingtons’. Do not presume to enter my home without invitation, or you shall find your accommodations most lacking. If I should misplace the key to your cell, it would be most unfortunate. Since I so rarely go to the dungeon, I would miss most of

those screams. Small price to pay for you no longer annoying me.”

He was still ready to thrust his fist into Oliver’s eye, but the man spun on his heels and raced down the steps to his waiting horse. From his glower, Keith was certain his threats were only a temporary fix. He needed to either marry Lydia or kill his cousin. Either would solve his problem permanently. As he watched his interloping cousin ride off his property and back to the one only a short distance away, he knew whatever action he took, it needed to be soon.

“Your days of being a blight on this earth, a boil on mankind’s arse, are limited. One way or another, it’s time for you to be gone.” Keith murmured his thoughts, but it was more a pledge than idle musing.

CHAPTER 6

“What the devil are you wearing? Go change.” Oliver glowered at Lydia as she descended the stairs in a traditional Indian ensemble. She knew it would scandalize the attendees at the assembly, but she intended to draw plenty of attention to herself that night. It would make it easier for more people to catch sight of her with Keith, and it would only make the gossip untenable for Oliver. He would have no choice but to recant his insistence that he marry her. He’d droned on about their future ad nauseam that day to where even Will grew irritated and suggested Oliver take his horse for a ride.

“I will not. I am an Indian woman wearing Indian clothes.”

“You are not an Indian woman.” His assertion was ridiculous, given Lydia’s physical features. He spat his words just as Sarla and Will entered the foyer.

“She is,” Will corrected. “Do you take issue with that, my lord? Had you not noticed before this?”

“Lady Lydia has always been a presentable Englishwoman before tonight. This is obscene.”

“Lady Abbington, Lady Howe, and the late Countess of Devon all wore clothing of this style when they married. Are you calling my wife and sisters-in-law obscene?” Will was tired of the repugnant man, but he forced himself not to expel the miscreant from his house and onto his arse. There was more to lose than to gain if he rejected his daughter’s suitor too soon. But it was growing nigh on impossible to advocate any

redeeming qualities for Oliver, and Will couldn't blame Lydia for soundly rejecting Oliver in public and in private. However, he couldn't afford for Lydia to chase the man away.

"No. In that place, I suppose all of them parade about like this." He waved his hand up and down in Lydia's direction. "But we are in England. We know better."

"My lord, this is a formal ensemble for a special occasion. But this style is how I dress when I'm at home. Will you forbid me to be Indian?" Lydia's voice was soft and falsely innocent. Oliver knew he wouldn't win with Lydia's parents staring at him. "Perhaps you would feel better if you understood what I'm wearing. This skirt is a ghagra , and the tunic is a kurta . My mother and I both wear odhni as a sash that could be a shawl if the air turns cool."

"I care not what any of that is, Lady Lydia." Oliver stepped up to offer his arm. He turned his back to her parents and kept his voice low. "Wear this when we marry, and I will burn it. From here on out you will appear as a civilized viscountess."

Lydia glanced down at the proffered arm, then up to Oliver's eyes. "I'll remain an uncivilized princess." She walked past Oliver and through the open front door. She slid into the landau, taking a seat before her mother joined her. The women sat beside each other before the men boarded and sat across from them. It would have been more comfortable if they'd sat as couples, but neither Sarla nor Will thought it a good idea. Lydia was glad for it.

The party of four rode in silence along the drive. Then Sarla attempted to draw Oliver into conversation. Once she maneuvered it to be about him, the pugnacious man rambled on until they reached Lyme Regis and the town's assembly hall.

"I have it on very good authority Prinny intends to remove Liverpool as War Secretary. The Marchioness of Hertford attended a soiree I was at just a month ago

and said as much.”

The Prince Regent’s current senior mistress was a staunch Tory, and so was the Earl of Liverpool. Oliver spewed nonsense. While the women held sway over her younger lover, in his mid-forties, the king knew Liverpool was the best person for the job. If anything, the Earl of Liverpool was likely to be the next Prime Minister.

“Interesting,” Will mused.

“Yes. George feels the war is dragging on far too long. I’ve been quite vocal in the House of Lords. He’s taken note of many of my suggestions, passed along by my peers.”

Lydia gazed off to her right, averting her face, so no one could see her expression. While plenty of people informally referred to the Prince Regent as Prinny, Oliver was certainly not in a position to address the king by his first name. Even if they were one-hundred-and-fifty miles apart, and the prince would be no wiser, it was far above his station to be so familiar. She doubted Oliver ever said anything of use, and anything passed along to Prinny was done to mock Oliver.

“Lady Lydia, you will have the chance to dine at the palace once we are wed.” Oliver’s declaration forced her to look at him again. Her uncle, then both cousins were the Earl of Devon. She’d been to the palace on more than one occasion and dined there each time. She was not impressed.

“How nice.” Lydia couldn’t be free of the insufferable man quickly enough. She offered a tight smile to offset some of the sharpness to her words. Oliver hardly looked please, but he wouldn’t remonstrate her where her parents could hear. He would save that for when they were on the dance floor, and she was forced to be near him.

Oliver offered Lydia his hand as she disembarked from the carriage. She had no choice but to accept, for appearances and because her skirts made it risky for her to step down on her own. As if by her thoughts alone, Keith materialized on horseback. She realized his timing was not accidental. He'd followed them.

Lydia, Oliver, and her parents joined the receiving line behind Keith. Lydia's eyes roamed over his broad back, down to his trim waist and hips. She knew the feel of his muscled buttocks, and she wished to rest her hands there again. As though he sensed her perusal, Keith twisted as though he meant to look at the people already inside, but he met her gaze from the corner of his eye. The left side of Lydia's mouth twitched as she repressed her smile. She felt no guilt being caught. However, she endeavored to keep Oliver, who stood to her right, from seeing her reaction to Keith.

"His Grace, Lord Keith MacNeil, the Duke of Dorset."

Keith stepped forward as the majordomo announced him. All in attendance riveted their attention on the entrance. He'd never attended an assembly before. He watched as the flock of mamas tittered and nudged their virgin daughters. He recalled why he'd always avoided them, even as a young man. He'd attended Almack's in his younger days and been to various balls during the Season. He'd enjoyed none of them, so he hadn't missed a moment of pretentious socializing while he sailed.

"Lord Oliver Gwyn, Viscount Sackville. Lord and Lady Abbington, and their daughter, Lady Lydia Abbington."

Lydia scanned the gathering and spied people she knew since childhood. She noticed her attire shocked some, amused others, and confused many. While plenty of people had seen Sarla and her wear odhni over the years, very few ever saw the two women in full traditional clothing. Both she and Sarla preferred it when they were at home and not available to callers.

“Lady Lydia, I request your first dance.” Keith handed her the dance card with her name on it. He’d easily spotted it among the others on the table near the receiving line. He’d already penciled his name on it.

“But—” Oliver tried to object; however, Keith turned his back to his cousin. He would use his standing as a duke to get what he wanted, and he felt not a moment’s hesitation. Oliver wouldn’t make a scene arguing, and few people would correct Keith that Oliver was entitled to the first dance, since it was obvious Oliver had escorted Lydia to the event.

“Thank you, Your Grace. I shall endeavor not to stomp on your toes.”

“I fear not, my lady.” Keith led Lydia to a place among the dancers as they lined up for a quadrille. The couple who formed the other half of their square were married and disinterested in their partners. However, plenty of other people watched as Keith and Lydia danced together. Unbeknownst to them, they’d already begun the rumors. While Lydia’s attire certainly drew attention, and Keith’s mere attendance caused a stir, it was how they moved together. They appeared as though they’d partnered for years. There was an ease and gracefulness between them that came from a level of comfort and trust in their partnership. By the time the dance ended, they were both breathing hard and had eyes only for one another.

Oliver shattered the moment by insisting upon the next dance. The evening progressed with Oliver vying for every other dance, making his intentions clear when he tried to claim Lydia from each of her partners.

“I believe it is now my turn, Lady Lydia.” Oliver veritably snatched her hand from Keith’s, which earned him a menacing growl from his cousin. Oliver gentled his touch but not by much. He tried to hold her too close for their dance, but Lydia’s stiff body made it impossible to draw her into his arms without making it clear he had to yank her to do so.

“You are being very contrary tonight, my dear. It isn’t pleasant. You wouldn’t want anyone to think it’s a sign of your poor breeding.”

Lydia had plenty to say in response, but she kept her lips pressed firmly together. Instead, she cast him such a gaze of distaste and dislike that Oliver misstepped. The gathered people kept him from lashing out with his palm to her face, but he didn’t hold back his words.

“You may make of fool of yourself now, but when you are my wife, you will behave to my exacting expectations. You will dress properly and conduct yourself as a viscountess should. I will burn these close simply because I can. You come to heel, or you will discover what a man can do when he owns his wife.”

“We are not wed. We are not even betrothed. I would not be so certain of yourself so soon. While my father may favor you, and he might even accept your offer, you still must get the words out of my mouth at the altar. You would do well to tread lightly since you do not know what those words might be.”

Oliver opened his mouth to say more, but as they twirled, he caught sight of Keith. It made his blood boil, but he wouldn’t risk his cousin figuring out just how angry Lydia had become. He would prove to Keith and everyone else that Lydia already belonged to him.

Lydia feared people would perceive Oliver’s insistence they dance so frequently as a virtual betrothal announcement. She avoided him as best she could, claiming she’d already promised the next dance to another partner. Once he’d danced with her twice, Lydia knew she couldn’t wait much longer to escape with Keith.

Keith watched from a spot against the wall as Lydia danced with Oliver and the other men. He couldn’t peel his eyes away. She was stunning on an average day, but she was breathtaking as she laughed and twirled, her hair and skirts flying around her.

He'd assumed he would grow jealous watching her in other men's arms, but he realized he trusted her implicitly, which came as a surprise since secrets still existed between them. He supposed he didn't fear her affections laying elsewhere, especially since she watched him through most of the dances. He danced with her a second time when he grew frustrated with the debutantes who kept passing him and giggling.

"Lyddie," Keith sighed as she stepped into his embrace for a waltz. Her exhalation matched his as relief coursed through her now that she wouldn't partner with anyone else for what people considered an almost scandalously intimate dance. He held her far too close, but neither cared. While both knew it would further the rumors, the gossips didn't motivate them. They simply wanted to be close. As the music began, Keith led her through the steps, rotating and revolving them around the dance floor. With each turn, his hold tightened until their bodies pressed together.

"I've waited all night for this dance. I knew you'd rescue me, but I feared a few times that another man—Oliver—wouldn't let go of me and would insist I dance the next one with him and that it would be a waltz."

"I wouldn't have let that happen. No man shall hold you as close as I am now."

"I don't want any other man to hold me this close. I kept telling myself I needed to get through one more dance, and each one put me closer to when I could dance with you again."

"We're together now, and I might never let you go, sweetling."

By the end, some couples had ceased dancing to watch the duke and princess. They stepped apart when the music faded. Keith snared them glasses of warm ratafia. The almond-flavored liqueur was bitter, and the hints of apple and apricot did nothing to disguise the taste. They also did nothing to refresh the couple. Their skin glowed with traces of perspiration.

“Let’s go outside. It’s too warm in here, anyway.” Keith offered Lydia his arm, and the crowd parted at though he were Moses escorting the Ten Commandments through the Red Sea. They stepped onto the terrace, knowing people gawked. They kept an appropriate distance, appearing to enjoy the cool air. It would be ridiculous for them to fling themselves at one another, despite how much they wanted to do just that.

“How long should we appear as though we’re innocently taking the air?”

“A few more minutes. I’m watching, and people are losing interest. When just enough are still watching to catch us, then I’ll do what I’ve longed to all night.”

“And what’s that, Your Grace?” Lydia purred as she swayed toward him but didn’t let them touch.

“Devour you, my lady.”

“Promise?”

“Every day for the rest of my life, Lydia. Once we do this, there is no going back. Are you certain?”

“Even if he weren’t here, I would want this. I’m not agreeing to this as my escape, Keith. I want us.”

“So do I, sweetling.” Keith brought both of Lydia’s hands to his mouth. He no longer paid attention to anyone else. “I thought much about how I feel while I was away. I wondered if it was just lust or infatuation. It’s not, Lydia.”

“I’d be a liar if I said I didn’t desire you. We both know I do. I am not infatuated with you, Keith. I see your faults and recognize choices you made I don’t agree with. But I don’t doubt you’re a good man. The one I wish to be with.”

“I love you, Lydia.” Keith waited with bated breath. He’d never come close to uttering such a profession. He’d said it to his mother the day they’d taken her away to Bedlam, and he’d said it the day he left Kelsey behind. Those were the only two times he could recall. But he planned to say it over and over to Lydia.

“I love you, Keith.” Nothing had felt righter than making that confession.

Her toes curled as she watched him beam at her admission. He pulled her into his arms, neither caring whether it was a strategic moment. They only cared about one another. Keith lowered his mouth to hers and feasted. He did as he promised. He devoured her. Kissing along her jaw and down her throat before returning to her mouth. His tongue thrust into hers, and he nearly spent when she sucked on it. One hand tangled in her hair while the other gripped her backside. Lydia clutched his jacket as she arched her back, pressing her hips into his. Her hands slid beneath his waistcoat and over his shoulders, annoyed that his shirt was in the way. They were in a world that belonged only to them. They heard nothing but the sound of their own pleasure.

“Lady Lydia!” A woman’s scandalized shriek finally permeated their love fog. They pulled apart and turned their heads to the rector’s wife. She stood aghast, fanning herself with a peacock plume. They sensed Mrs. Adams had called Lydia’s name more than once before it registered with them.

“Your Grace, what are you about with Lady Lydia?” Mrs. Henry, the blacksmith’s wife, demanded before she recalled to whom she spoke. Keith didn’t have a chance to answer because a neighboring baron pushed forward.

“I say, Your Grace, this is disgraceful. Taking advantage of the young lady. What would your father say?”

Lydia felt Keith’s anger. It came to life the moment the man uttered the word

“father.” Lydia pressed against him, keeping him from lunging at the unsuspecting baron.

“He’d likely say something crude about what he would do with a young lady. But I am celebrating my betrothal. Lady Lydia has consented to be my wife.”

“No!” Oliver’s voice rang out over the murmurs. He elbowed his way to the front, Sarla and Will close behind. “I was courting Lady Lydia. You’re a cad who debauched my future betrothed.”

“I am hardly debauched, my lord.” Lydia raised her chin. “I don’t have a stitch out of place.”

If anything, it was Keith who looked disheveled. His coat hung too wide and was off-center at the shoulders. His waistcoat bowed in front of his shoulders from where Lydia rested her hands. She looked up at Keith and smothered her giggle. He looked like the one who’d been ravished.

“I demand justice. I made my wish to marry Lady Lydia clear, Abbington.”

“And I believe Lady Lydia made her preference clear,” Father Adams pronounced. “My lady, you’ve made a choice you will have to live with. Are you prepared for that?”

“Yes, Father. I knew what I risked.”

“Your Grace, I would have expected more from a man so worldly as you,” Father Adams chided. But his wife elbowed him and shot him a warning glance before she looked back at the Duke. It was his benevolence that kept them dry from the rain, with a new roof.

“I’ve already explained.” Keith turned to Will and Sarla. “Lady Lydia accepted my proposal. We were celebrating our betrothal.”

“But—”

“But nothing,” Will interrupted Oliver. His pinched expression made Keith and Lydia wonder why he disapproved of their match. “We found my daughter and His Grace in a compromising situation. There is little choice but for them to marry. I’m sorry, my lord. My daughter did not heed my choice, but what is done is done.”

Lydia watched her father, stunned by how unsupportive he was. She’d assumed he would come around once they forced his hand. She should have known better. She’d been naïve, but she would learn why her father appeared so miserable. She knew he’d liked and respected Keith before this, even if he disapproved of a pirate courting his daughter. Her father was hardly a social climber, but it was far more advantageous that his daughter marry a duke than a viscount. And she couldn’t understand why he would want Oliver anywhere near her when Will was a smuggler.

“I will be by tomorrow with the contract, Abbington.” Keith turned to the parish priest. He observed how the man’s wife leaned toward him, almost timid under his attention. While he was hardly a devout man, he could admit he appreciated that Anglican priests married. It made more sense to him that a married man initiate him into matrimony than one who practiced celibacy. He suspected Father Adams would offer unsolicited but kindly intended counsel about Keith’s and Lydia’s impending nuptials.

“I will see you at the rectory after you meet with Sir Abbington. We will arrange for the banns, and I would have a word with you, Your Grace.”

Keith nodded, prepared for the man’s pronouncement. He looked down at Lydia as she tilted her head back. They’d done as they planned, and it succeeded. He wished

they were alone, so they might celebrate with more than just a kiss.

“Lydia, I think it is time we depart for the evening.” Sarla spoke softly as she came to stand beside her daughter. She’d remained quiet, observing. It came as no surprise the couple had forced her hand and Will’s. It was history repeating itself. Her daughter was a replica of her in every way. She and Will had done something similar when her father continued to hint at arranging a marriage to a local man. However, they caught Will and her doing far more than kissing and just a little less than coupling. She intended her daughters to never learn of that. Only Theo and Vinita were also alive to tell anyone in England, and her mother would never tell a soul in India.

Lydia nodded, but she continued to gaze at Keith. He brushed his nose against hers before kissing her temple. She sighed, content to stand with Keith. But she knew it was best that she and her parents leave and allow the gossip to play out. If she remained with Keith, it would appear as though they flaunted being caught.

“I love you, sweetling.” Keith cared not who heard him. “Sweet dreams.”

“Sweet dreams to you too, darling. I love you.” Lydia stood on her toes and gave him a peck on his lips before she withdrew and stepped between her parents.

“I demand justice!” Oliver had grown quiet, but now he made a stand.

“Have done, Cousin. There is no justice to be had. You had no written agreement with Sir Abbington, so there has been no breach. You may have expressed an interest, but I staked my claim.” Keith stepped up to Oliver, so they stood facing one another, their opposite shoulders pressing together. He lowered his voice to a menacing whisper. “Stand down, Oliver. I will destroy you if you don’t.”

Keith pushed past until he could follow the Abbingtons from the assembly hall. He mounted his horse as he waited for Oliver to climb into the carriage, too. He didn’t

envy Lydia the awkwardness of her ride home. He wished he'd had the forethought to bring her onto his horse's back and save her the discomfort. But the landau was under way, so his horse trotted behind it.

When they neared the turn onto the Abbingtons' drive, Keith was forced to stop as one of his footmen ran toward him. The man waved something in the air.

"Your Grace, a letter just arrived from Powderham. The messenger practically ran his horse into the ground." The footman handed Keith the folded piece of parchment. He ran his thumb over the seal, recognizing the Earl of Devon's crest. He wondered what Rajesh wanted. He nudged his horse forward at a walk, not wishing to leave his footman behind. When they arrived at the abbey's entrance, he handed off the reins to the man and went to his library. He broke the seal and unfolded the paper.

They're drawing closer. I need to move the pepper now. My ships aren't close. Can you come? I want them nowhere near as Charlie's confinement is imminent. I can't be away from her.

Keith ran his hand over his face and looked toward the window that faced Abbington House. He knew Rajesh meant the East India Company. The pepper to which he referred was their code for gunpowder. They would all hang if the excisemen discovered their contraband. If any East Indiamen found it, they'd be shot on the spot. He didn't wish to leave Lydia, especially not while Oliver remained, but neither could he ignore Rajesh's request for help. He was closer than the Pedricks or Howes, and he was the only one with ships.

He went to his desk and scribbled a note. He would dispatch a footman to deliver it in the morning.

My love, I must leave for a few days. A family obligation. A cousin has pepper to trade, and he wishes me to take it lest it be stolen. He fears someone intends to

interfere. I will return as soon as I can. Know that I'd rather remain with you, but I will meet you at the altar with a license in hand when I return. I hope you'll wear to our wedding what you wore tonight. No one has ever been lovelier.

Yours always,

KMN

CHAPTER 7

Lydia rolled over to the sound of her maid stirring the fireplace. She opened her eyes a crack and sighed. She'd dreamed about Keith the entire night. Some could only be described as lewd while others were glimpses into a future as an old married couple. They were all vivid. She wished she could roll over and return to her slumber wonderland.

"My lady, this arrived for you." Ellie handed Lydia a folded piece of parchment. Lydia recognized the Duke of Dorset's insignia. She wondered if Keith sent her a love letter. She pulled the wax free and read it. Her heart sank as she realized he'd left to see Rajesh. She knew it meant her cousin and his family were in danger from the East India Company. While she could appreciate Keith going to his friend's aid, she found her stomach roiled at the idea of him being in danger.

She threw back the covers and hurried to dress, selecting a mid-thigh length kurta and churidar. She glanced toward the door, a scowl emerging as she considered Oliver sleeping a few doors away. She chose her clothes purposefully. She would make herself as unappealing as she could. She'd found something that deemed her unworthy in Oliver's eyes, so she would play it to her advantage. She'd done her best to convince her father Oliver was a horrible choice without disclosing what she knew about the man. She prayed something so trivial as clothing would dissuade her suitor. Otherwise, she feared what Keith would do to his cousin and that she would have to disclose the truth to her father. One thing of which she was certain: she wasn't marrying Oliver Gwyn.

She sat while Ellie brushed her hair and tied it back with a ribbon that matched her

tunic and trousers. She glanced in the mirror once she'd washed her face and cleaned her teeth. She was ready to face the day. She made her way to the dining room, pleased to see her parents already at the table. She filled her plate from the buffet and slid into her seat. When she heard Oliver approaching, she returned for more food than she needed, but she would make certain he saw her in her full ensemble. She plastered the same sugary smile she always wore as she turned her head toward him. She watched his gaze skim her, his displeasure clear in his eyes even if the rest of his face remained neutral.

"Good morning, my lord." Lydia dipped a curtsy before turning her back to him and returning to her chair.

"Good morning, my lady. We shall take the air when we finish our breakfast." Oliver's pronouncement irritated Lydia. She cast her eyes toward her father, glowering, while Oliver couldn't see her. She noticed her father appeared wearier than usual. He shot her a quelling glance before greeting their guest. The meal progressed with banal conversation until Oliver came to stand beside Lydia's chair. When she rose, he held out his arm. "Come along, my lady."

Lydia wanted to bare her teeth and snap them, annoyed that his tone was the same someone would use with a dog or horse. She accepted the proffered arm but didn't move. "We won't be long, Mama. I know you wish to go into the village. I won't keep you waiting."

They had no such plan, but she knew her mother wouldn't contradict her in front of their guest. Lydia would find a reason to leave their home and escape Oliver. Knowing Keith left ratcheted her fear. She'd felt more at ease when she knew he was returning a fortnight after his last departure. She had no idea when he would return from this voyage.

Oliver guided her out of the house and along the path toward Forde Abbey. Lydia

wondered for what purpose. She didn't fight her escort, but her senses were on alert. Something felt amiss. There was no reason for them to wander this way, and they hadn't in the past. Just the opposite. Oliver had always studiously avoided drawing close to his cousin's home. She remained quiet, her eyes scanning their surroundings. They skirted the front drive and walked toward the garden. She searched for any of the servants who might be near the stables or working among the flora. She saw no one.

"Come, Lydia. Don't make me drag you." Oliver's voice held a new degree of threat. He'd called her by her given name without her permission countless times when they were walking. She tried to glance over her shoulder to Ellie, who trailed a discreet distance behind her, but Oliver yanked her arm.

"You may release me, Oliver." She tried to pull her arm free, but his fingers of his free hand bit into her flesh. He increased their pace, and he drew her closer to the beach path. They were nearly to the sand when she heard a muffled scream. She pushed Oliver's chest and spun around. A man had his hand over Ellie's mouth and a knife to her throat. "Ellie!"

Lydia glanced at Oliver, expecting him to move to her maid's defense. Yet, it didn't surprise her when he did nothing. She made to run to Ellie's aid, but Oliver's arm wrapped around her waist and hoisted her off the ground. She flailed her arms and legs, striking him in the shins with her heels and his ribs with her elbows. She thrust her head backward, her skull cracking his nose. When his hand went around her throat and squeezed mercilessly, she ceased her struggle. She needed to conserve the air in her lungs and her energy.

"You shamed me last night, and I will not tolerate a whoring wife. I know you went to him before that. How you got in, I don't know. But I saw you come and go. I know he lurked all night, but he shouldn't have assumed daylight would deter me." Oliver put her on her feet, but he kept one hand around her throat, and the other fisted her

hair, pushing her forward. He steered her to the shore, where three dinghies full of rough-looking men waited. She knew if she got within arm's reach of the men, she wouldn't have any chance of escape.

She redoubled her efforts to break free. She reached back and gouged Oliver's eyes with her thumbs. He released her, and she bolted. She knew she couldn't make it back up the path faster than the men, so she ran toward the cave. She prayed it was close enough she could enter the secret tunnel before the men caught her. If they followed her in, she trusted they would get lost before they could grab her.

Unfortunately, the sand and her slippers made it difficult to run. She let them fall from her feet, allowing her to pick up her pace. Three men emerged from the cave, clearly prepared for her to run toward it. One snagged her around the waist and hauled her over his shoulder. She continued to fight, but to no avail. When Oliver told the man who carried her to put her down, he approached with a malevolent smile.

"You may as well stop resisting, Lydia. I will see you tomorrow. Once I convince your parents the bastard absconded with you, I will join you. We will marry tomorrow afternoon, and I'll plow you tomorrow night. Make no mistake, my dear. You are as good as my wife and my property. I will do as I please with you."

"Like you did with Kelsey?" Lydia spat.

Oliver's gaze hardened as he stepped forward and lashed out at her. Except she was ready. She ducked her head and kicked out her foot. She drove it into his groin and watched him double over. He roared with rage, but he could do nothing to retaliate, his discomfort too great to straighten. The man who'd carried her flung her back over his shoulder. She was without recourse as she landed first in a dinghy, then on the deck of a ship that had already weighed anchor and had its sails hoisted. They were underway the moment the men secured the last dinghy.

Scrambling to her feet, Lydia didn't hesitate to charge toward the rail. She was nearly over the side and free when someone snatched a handful of her hair and tugged. She landed hard, sprawled across the deck.

"My lady, you will be dead before you're off this ship." A dark-haired man with a grizzly beard and missing teeth stood over her. "Make your choice about how you travel. Do I grant you the freedom of being in a cabin where my men can't touch you? Or do I tie you to the center mast and let them do as they please with that mouth of yours?"

"You'll have a crew without cocks if they come near me. My bite is far worse than my bark." Lydia parroted a grin as she showed her teeth. But wisdom told her it wasn't the right time to continue her fight. She didn't resist as the captain thrust her into a cabin and locked the door from the outside. She was certain it wasn't his, since it appeared like little more than a storage room. She surveyed her surroundings and her situation.

There's little you can do now. Oliver shall spin a tale this is Keith's doing, but I pray my father understands it isn't. But what can he do? It'll take him two days to ride to Rajesh's. Who knows where we will be by then? Wherever it is can't be far if Oliver plans to meet us and drag me before a priest tomorrow. He meant his threat about forcing me, and I know he won't wait until we're married. He'll be convinced bedding me will force me to marry him. I won't. No priest will marry an unwilling bride, not even at a viscount's insistence. Keith, where are you? I need you.

Lydia slumped against the wall, resting her head against it as she slid to the floor. Time wasn't on her side, but she believed, despite the captain's threats, none of the men would touch her. Oliver wouldn't allow it, and they were pirates who worked for coin. Money they wouldn't receive if she arrived soiled in Oliver's eyes. He was already fuming about Keith. He was liable to be lethal if he thought another man touched her. She closed her eyes and determined to wait out the time until she knew

the next event in her fate.

* * *

Keith greeted Rajesh on the cliffs above where he'd docked his ship. His friend appeared even more exhausted than the last time he'd seen him. This time, Keith was certain it wasn't entirely Charlie's pregnancy.

"What's happened?" Keith asked as they shook hands.

"They attacked Ben during his last run. He shot one and wounded two with his sword. They didn't expect him to have it buried beneath the hay. Before they made their move, they told him the East India Company sends its regards. They demanded the gunpowder they believed he carried. He'd already delivered it to Theo and only had brandy on his wagon."

"Was he hurt?"

"A sliced shoulder, but that's it. It was deep enough for stitches, but he hasn't developed a fever."

"How's Charlie taking this?"

"She was beside herself when he arrived covered in blood, most of which wasn't his. Now she's livid he took such a risk traveling at night. She tends to him as a doting sister, but she's barely said a word since it became clear he would recover with ease."

"And how are you?"

"In the middle and frustrated. But not by them. They sound just like Arjun and I did. It's realizing just how close the Company is to closing in on us. Ben won't be able to

continue transporting the goods. He's too recognizable. That means sailing, which makes us vulnerable to pirates. There's no good solution."

"What do you need from me?" Keith didn't want to ask because he didn't want to be there. But Rajesh had saved his life more than once while they were privateers. He felt obligated.

"I know you wish you were home. I saw how you and Lydia were. I suspect more has progressed since I left."

"She accepted my betrothal, but my cousin refuses to relent."

"Cousin?"

"Oliver. Turns out he started courting her while I was away. We were caught kissing and half the village saw us. He still demands he's entitled to her hand."

"Sackville?" Rajesh looked past Keith to the docked ship. "He was a friend of Zachary Windsor-Clive. I had a missive from a business partner in London. Both men invested heavily in the Company. Apparently, he went on a tear when word reached him Windsor-Clive died."

"And he happens to show up on the Abbingtons' doorstep right after it happened. He must know about Will."

"I don't doubt it. If Windsor-Clive shared his suspicions, which I'm sure he did, then your cousin knows about the gunpowder and saltpeter. It wouldn't surprise me if he's blackmailing Will into letting him marry Lydia."

"I never imagined Will would be so weak."

“We don’t know for sure. And if Sackville is pressuring Will, we don’t know what he’s using to force my uncle’s hand. It could be Lydia’s or Sarla’s lives. It might even be Lydia’s sister and her family. She has a newborn.”

“True.” Keith raked his hand through his hair and turned toward his ship. “I want to help, but now I don’t trust Lydia and her family are safe.”

“Go back. We’ll sort things here.”

“I feel badly.”

“Don’t. The gunpowder is important, but not more important than my family’s lives. No one will fault you.”

“If I leave now, I can catch the tide.” Keith said his farewells before returning to his ship and a confused crew. He was curt as he explained why they would return to Forde Abbey. He stood at the prow as they sailed away from Powderham. He paced the deck throughout the night when he didn’t take his turn at the helm. His first mate finally convinced him to retire to his cabin for a few hours. He woke to bellowing and cannon fire.

“What the bloody hell is happening?” Keith roared as he came on deck. His first mate pointed to a nearby ship with smoking cannons jutting out from its side. He squinted until he was certain of what he saw. “He has Lydia.”

“We know, Captain. He’s making ready to board us. We didn’t dare fire back with the lady aboard.”

“Let them come. I want the fight on this ship and away from Lydia.” Keith spun to a crate that held weapons and loaded as many pistols as he could carry, ordering his men to do the same. He dashed to his cabin and retrieved his sword, which he

sheathed at his left hip. He returned to the deck as the first grappling hook dragged along the planks.

“Ahoy, Marauder!”

Keith couldn't believe who stood with Lydia pinned to his side. The pirate had been the bane of his existence for years, often trying to plunder Keith's pillaged cargo. He trained his eyes on the man, his face a thundercloud. Nicholas La Grange, more often known as Le Sabordeur or The Scuttler, grinned at him. La Grange sank every ship he didn't bring into his armada, and he usually did it with the surviving crew tied to the gunwales. Keith refused to consider that as his fate.

“How much did he pay you?” Keith wouldn't prevaricate.

“One hundred pounds silver. How much will you pay me?”

Keith met Lydia's eyes, assessing how she appeared. She had a visible bruise on her cheek, and her clothes were crumpled. But she looked better than he'd feared. He darted his eyes away from La Grange, praying she understood. She stomped on the pirate's foot and lurched away. Keith seized the moment and fired his gun. The bullet landed in the center of his enemy's throat.

All hell broke loose as The Scuttler's crew realized their leader was dead. They poured over the rails and onto Keith's boat. Some swung from ropes, others used boards to cross, and a few jumped. Keith did his best to know where Lydia was throughout the sea battle, but there were times when he had to turn away. His men maintained control and slowly plowed their way through their attackers. When a bullet whizzed past him, perforating his sleeve, he had no time to react before the culprit's head exploded from a bullet to the back of his skull. As the dead man collapsed, he found Lydia standing with a smoking gun. She raised another and shot again without hesitation, killing a man who ran toward her. Keith was agog that she

hesitated not at all and appeared unfazed by the battle or her actions.

He had little time to remain in his stupor as his enemy continued to fight his crew. He swung his sword as he fought to reach his enemy's ship and Lydia, but each time he advanced, another one of The Scuttler's crew surged toward him. Fortified by the knowledge that Lydia defended herself and him, he kept her in his sights but continued to battle the men seeking to avenge their dead captain. Sweat dripped from his brow, and it relieved him to watch Lydia scurry to hide behind a stack of crates and barrels. It placed her back to the far rail, so no one could slip behind her. Once he knew she was better protected, he focused entirely on the fight. He cut through one after another alongside his men.

Keith and his men prevailed. As his men cheered their victory, Keith dashed across a plank and swept Lydia into his arms. Their kiss was frantic as their hands roamed, reassuring one another they were each in one piece. Fear still hammered their hearts, but the moments spent in each other's arms quietened their panic. When they could no longer go without drawing air deep into their lungs, they pulled apart.

"Lyddie, my love." Keith kissed her cheeks, her jaw, her forehead, her lips, and her cheeks again. Never had he felt so relieved to see anyone.

"I'm all right, Keith. A little banged about and sore, but nothing serious."

"What happened?" Keith cupped her face, her calm mien easing his fear for her life but heating his temper as he thought about who perpetrated her abduction.

"Oliver insisted we go for a walk. He brought me to the beach while one of his men restrained Ellie. I fought and tried to get away, but there were too many men on the beach. He told the captain he would meet us later today. He still insists we'll marry."

"He won't be insisting anything from the grave." Keith turned toward his first mate

and called out orders. He would remain upon The Scuttler's ship and captain it. With one hand on the wheel and the other holding Lydia at his side, they returned to Forde Abbey. Keith's entire crew escorted them to Abbington House. No one knew what to expect, but it was a relief to Keith and Lydia to learn Oliver departed the day before but had been captured. He'd claimed he was going to rescue Lydia from Keith. However, neither of her parents believed their neighbor was to blame, so Will sent men to follow Oliver. Keith's cousin awaited him in the monks' dormitory, his makeshift dungeon.

"Why did you ever consider marrying me to him, Father?" Lydia held each of her parents' hands as they stood together in the drawing room.

"He knows everything. He's been spying on the Pedricks for months, and what he didn't learn from his own informants, Windsor-Clive told him before he died. He's practically in hock from what he invested in the Company. He threatened to expose all of us. He said he would be a benevolent husband if I didn't contest his suit, but he would kill you if I stood in his way."

Will drew his daughter back into his embrace before wrapping his arms around Lydia and Sarla. Both women melted against him as he kissed each forehead.

"Lyddie, you never would have married him. I just needed time. I didn't expect His Grace getting involved. It certainly complicated things. I have men gathering information about Sackville. Apparently, there's a rumor he and Windsor-Clive assaulted a woman several years ago, and she disappeared. No one knows who. Windsor-Clive is already dead, but I intend to make an example of Sackville."

Lydia pulled away, wrapping her arms around her waist as tears poured forth. "It was Kelsey." She choked out each word. Will reached for her, but she turned toward Keith, who could only shoot her father a stunned expression. Keith embraced Lydia as she sobbed. She released years of grief.

“Lyddie?” Keith stroked her back until she unfurled her arms that were tucked between them. She wrapped them around his waist and shook her head. She wasn’t ready. She cried for another five minutes, then finally exhaled a shuddering breath. Keith led her to a settee, but rather than guiding her to sit beside him, he pulled her onto his lap. He cared not whether Sarla and Will approved. He was determined Lydia would be his wife by that night if she consented.

“That was my secret, Keith. The one I didn’t want to tell. I knew what Zachary did to her. I found her that night. It was at the Countess of Hartford’s ball. I was dancing and lost sight of Kels. By the time I disengaged myself from my partner, she was nowhere in the ballroom. I searched the retiring room, the card room, the dining room, and back into the ballroom. I finally stepped onto the terrace and saw Zachary returning as he tucked his shirt in. A moment later, Kelsey emerged from the shadows. It took no guessing to understand what happened. What I didn’t know until I read her diary was that Oliver was involved, too. I never saw him.”

Lydia looked up at Keith, her heart breaking as she spoke. But she was about to hammer the last nail into the proverbial coffin.

“Mother, Father, you may recall I claimed a headache and said Kelsey would see me home since we stayed with them. It was the other way around. I took her home and got her into bed. We told everyone she was the one to come down with the ague. What we needed was time for her bruises to fade. Her father never visited. You might remember he stayed in London when we returned here. I was at Forde Abbey the day the old duke came home. He grabbed Kelsey by the hair while we sat in the garden. He ranted about her being a whore and that he wouldn’t tolerate her disgracing the family.”

Lydia wiped away more tears as she tried to compose herself to continue. She never imagined how much it would hurt to recount what she’d learned and witnessed.

“That’s when he started tying her to the bed at night. I didn’t know this until I read the diary, but, Keith, your father—he let his friends—do things when they visited. We went for a walk after church one Sunday, and that was the last time I saw her alive. The Duke claimed it was consumption, but she was never sick. He said her weak constitution meant she succumbed quickly. Keith, your father beat your sister to death. There is no explanation for the bruising I saw. I sneaked in to say my private goodbyes. I witnessed the aftermath of what he did. What you heard me say that day was my pledge to mete justice to your father and Zachary. I didn’t know about Oliver until six weeks ago.”

“Bloody hell, Lydia!” Will roared. “You put yourself in harm’s way day after day. You should have told me. I would have killed him before letting him touch you twice. How could you keep that from us? How could you endanger yourself like that?”

“I didn’t know why, but I knew there had to be a reason for you to consider him. I feared what he’d do at first if I blatantly refused him. Once Keith returned, my fear lessened. While Oliver is a viscount, and you’re a baronet, Keith is a duke. I never imagined Oliver would abduct me.”

“I didn’t either, but I should have. I’ve known him my entire life. He never shared and often tried to hurt Kelsey when we were little. I left her to fend for herself. I left her vulnerable, and now she’s dead, but not at peace.” Keith hung his head as an invisible fist wrapped around his chest and threatened to squeeze so hard his heart would surely stop.

Lydia twisted and wrapped her arms around Keith’s shoulders, drawing his head to her chest. It was her turn to offer comfort. She rested her cheek against his crown. His arms tightened around her as though she were all that kept him from falling apart.

“It wasn’t your fault, Keith. I think they would have hurt her regardless of whether you even attended that ball. They weren’t afraid of being caught. They believed they

were untouchable. Oliver clearly still thinks that if he believes he could take me from you. I was there. I should have done more. I should have told my parents. I should have gotten a Bow Street Runner to investigate and track them. Once Kelsey died, I didn't want to dishonor her memory or betray the secrets she swore me to keep. I had good intentions, but then the path to hell is paved with them."

Keith leaned to look around Lydia, meeting Sarla's gaze, then Will's. "If Lydia agrees, I want us to marry today. I don't want to spend another day without knowing she's my wife, to have and to hold. I will deal with my cousin tomorrow, but today I want to make Lydia my bride."

"I want that, too." Lydia looked at her parents, who were already nodding.

"I'll call for a bath, and we can pick out something for you to wear."

"Mama, I don't need anything special. I'd rather we just go to the vicar now."

Sarla walked over to Lydia and Keith, her hand cupping Lydia's bruised cheek but putting no pressure against it. "You'll want to look back at today with fond memories. Start your marriage fresh, not with remnants of your ordeal. You'll feel better for it."

Lydia glanced at Keith and knew her mother spoke the truth. It wasn't about her clothes or her appearance. She wanted to wash away the feel of Oliver and the pirates. She wanted to feel presentable to those who would be present. She wanted to put Oliver and all he represented in the past.

"Thank you, Mama." Lydia rose, and Keith followed her. "Should we meet you at the church?"

Keith gazed down at Lydia and knew that wasn't where either of them wanted to

wed. While so many horrid memories lingered at the abbey, it was to be their home. They both wanted to bring joy back to it, and they both wanted Kelsey to be part of it.

“Come home, sweetling.”

CHAPTER 8

Within an hour and a half, Lydia and Keith were dressed in their finest clothing. Father Adams stood before them in Forde Abbey's drawing room, with Will, Sarla, and a handful of village friends in attendance. They exchanged their vows as though no one else existed. They spoke each word from their heart. As they kissed, a murmur passed through the spectators. The couple pulled apart but found no one watched them.

A kaleidoscope of butterflies fluttered by the window, with a bluebird sitting on the ledge. Lydia approached slowly and peered through the glass. The bird chirped before flying away, but the butterflies remained. She looked at Keith, who'd stepped behind her and wrapped his arms around her waist.

"She's at peace, Keith. She knows Oliver will pay for what he did."

"Are you certain?"

"Bluebirds were her favorite. We used to watch the butterflies each spring and make up stories about where they would travel to. Those were among our happiest memories. She's telling me she's no longer restless. She's going where she belongs."

Keith kissed her behind the ear before they joined everyone for the wedding breakfast. The meal passed merrily, but it felt like an eternity to the newlyweds.

There'd been time for Lydia's sister and her family to arrive before the ceremony. She wished her brothers could have attended, but one departed for his Grand Tour

just before Lydia and Keith's romance began, and the other brother was away at school. She also wished her cousins and their families could have attended, but it would have taken days for them to arrive. Charlie was due any day, so it wouldn't have been possible for her to make the journey.

"We shall have a party soon to properly celebrate with everyone we love most, sweetling." Keith lifted her hand and brought it to his lips.

"How did you know what I was thinking? Your servants laid the table, so there are no empty chairs."

"Because I miss them too. It was Raj who warned me both times that I needed to return here with haste. It was Jemma who brought you into the abbey and to me. I hardly think anyone would appreciate me thanking them for kidnapping Jemma, but I don't know how else we would have come together."

"We would have found a way. Kelsey would have done it." Lydia gazed out the window and remembered the happiest times she and her best friend spent in the garden together, from chasing each other as children to tittering over the books they sneaked to wondering who they'd marry one day. When she shifted her focus to Keith, she saw her love for him mirrored in his eyes as he watched her.

She'd never been one to believe in superstitions or ghosts, but she would vow to her last breath that her friend remained there until that day. She prayed Kelsey's spirit would find peace in heaven or be one step closer to nirvana. While she'd been raised Anglican, her mother's Hindu faith was never at odds for Lydia. She saw the overlap and gladly accepted either could be the right path. All she wanted was for Kelsey to know her life had meaning and that even after death, she was still Lydia's best friend.

"I believe you're right." Keith recalled the fire and the unexpected visit from Marauder, the cat. He couldn't explain either beyond believing it was his sister who

guided him to Lydia. He would be eternally grateful. “There has been great loss here, but you and I will create the happy family that should have always lived here.”

Lydia’s mind filled with lurid images of what she and Keith might do that night. Her gaze darted to the doorway, picturing the stairs on the other side. She pressed her legs together, embarrassed that her thoughts should jump to something so intimate after thinking about her friend, who was also Keith’s sister. But she was certain her friend wouldn’t have faulted her, rather likely encouraging her.

“I can guess what you’re thinking,” Keith whispered as he brought his lips near her ear. “You shall make me so eager that every guest here will know what I want the moment I stand.”

“Perhaps that would make them leave sooner.” Lydia turned to look at Keith, and it brought their lips together. They exchanged a kiss that barely met the bounds of propriety, remembering at the last moment they were not yet alone. Their gazes promised more later.

Sarla watched the young couple throughout the meal, so she was the one who finally ushered everyone out of the front door, leaving the couple alone. Keith swung Lydia into his arms, taking the stairs two at a time until he reached the lord’s chamber.

“I haven’t had time to switch the bed to something smaller,” Keith jested as he put Lydia on her feet.

“You shall just have to chase me across that massive thing.” Lydia canted her head toward the bed as she began to unfasten the buttons on Keith’s waistcoat. It wasn’t long before she’d shed her more ornately stitched kurta and ghagra , and Keith stood bare, too.

“Lydia, you take my breath away.” Keith skimmed the back of his fingers down her

shoulder and arm. She stepped forward and placed her hands on his chest. She grazed her nails over his abdomen, making the muscles twitch. Every ridge and groove fascinated her.

“I shall say the same about you, Keith. I never imagined a man could so resemble the ancient statues the Romans and Greeks chiseled.”

Keith chuckled. “Are you saying I’m made like a god?”

“Neptune, perhaps.” She stepped around him, observing all that she could see as she trailed her hand over his back and buttocks. When she came to stand before him again, Keith twirled her around and drew her back against him, his arousal resting between her buttocks.

“I shall endeavor not to disappoint, little one.” Keith kissed her neck before leading her to the bed. While he knew she was a maiden, he didn’t fear sharing any intimacy with her since she knew what to expect. His only worry was hurting her, since he was so much larger than her. While she wasn’t slender, her stature was significantly smaller than his. He was a sizable man everywhere. “If there’s anything you don’t enjoy, we stop.”

Lydia reclined against the pillows, opening her legs, and reaching for him. She wrapped her arms around his neck, her wrists crossing against his nape. Wicked promises filled their kisses, but when Keith attempted to slide down her body, she shook her head. “Next time. I want what we haven’t had yet.”

Keith thought he might expire. His rod pressed against her entrance as they kissed, and it proved almost too much temptation to thrust into Lydia and claim her as his wife. He’d thought about prolonging their foreplay to give his eagerness time to subside. He feared his anticipation would cause him to finish before Lydia got started. But he couldn’t resist when she tilted her hips in invitation. He nudged her

entrance with the tip of his cock, drawing it through the gathered dew and between her petals. He pressed into her, accustoming her to the feel.

He suckled her breast as he rocked against her with shallow thrusts. His thumb worked her pearl until she writhed beneath him, begging for them to join. Resting on his forearms, he captured her hands, entwining their fingers above her head. They shared a searing kiss before Keith thrust into her. She froze, her nails digging into the back of his hand, but she soon relaxed. She realized it wasn't pain so much as shock that caused her response. The feeling of Keith buried to the hilt inside her was pleasurable, but foreign. As she adjusted to the sensation, she moved beneath him.

"Lyddie, I don't want to hurt you, but holy hell, I need to move."

"You aren't hurting me. I want what comes next."

Keith released her hands and scooped his under her shoulder blades and then onto her shoulders as her hands slid to his backside. They moved together, synchronicity born of intuition and shared by soulmates. Each surge of Keith's cock felt as though it might touch her womb. She'd never imagined the feeling of being so full or having something so deep within. She flexed her core's muscles, eliciting groans from her husband. Each one made her more brazen. They were soon glistening as perspiration made their bodies slick.

"Keith," Lydia moaned. "So close."

"Me too. Come with me, sweetling." Keith pistoned his hips as she pulled his head down for a kiss. They reached the edge together and tumbled over it into coital bliss. They laid panting and cuddling until neither could keep their eyes open. They knew they were both where they belonged.

* * *

One week later

“You’ve been my guest for seven days, Cousin. I no longer wish to house or feed you.” Keith stood before Oliver, who cowered in the cell. His clothes and body were filthy, and he’d clearly lost weight since Keith granted him only enough sustenance to keep him alive. He’d intended on dealing with his cousin the day after his wedding, but it took three days for the newlyweds to emerge from their chamber. Once they returned to the outside world, he read Kelsey’s diary. Lydia believed it was finally time. It took him four days to finish it. He had to set it aside frequently. He spoke little during those days, except to ask Lydia to ride with him or walk along the beach. He talked only when they were alone at night.

When he finished reading his sister’s recitations of her misery and what befell her, he’d needed the morning to convince himself not to torture Oliver. He decided that while his cousin didn’t deserve a quick death, he wouldn’t prolong it, since it agitated Lydia that he was in his makeshift dungeon. He didn’t want to upset her or make her fear something would go awry.

“I know what you did to my sister. I know every detail because I read about it. I know how you hurt her, how you ignored her pleas to stop, how you laughed as you kicked her while you buttoned the fall of your pants. I know it was your idea, not Windsor-Clive’s. I know you’re a sick bastard to assault your own cousin. She might as well have been your sister for how close we are on the family tree.”

Keith drew back his booted foot and slammed it into Oliver’s ribs, just as the man had done to Kelsey that night in the garden. He plowed his fist into his prisoner’s face and gut, pulling him onto his feet for the blow, then allowing him to crumple to the floor. He did it five times before he withdrew his knife.

“You hurt my sister, and you thought to hurt the woman you knew I would marry. Now I shall hurt you.” Keith whipped the knife across Oliver’s groin. He waited only

long enough for his cousin to howl once. Then he slashed the man's throat. He stepped back, looking at the dead body. He felt not a moment of remorse.

Keith had already contacted the necessary parties in government to ensure no one investigated his role in Oliver's demise. The repugnant man would soon be forgotten, no one caring he was no longer among the living since his parents were dead. Keith signaled his waiting men to dispose of Oliver, and he went abovestairs but to a guest chamber where he'd requested a bath. He didn't want Lydia to see him with the inevitable blood splatter. But he should have known better than to think she would hide. She awaited him, naked. He stripped and soon joined her in the tub. He was truthful about what happened, knowing his wife could handle the gruesome tale. After all, he'd seen her shoot two men.

It wasn't long before Keith's storytelling ended, and they found more pleasurable ways to spend their time. As they moved together, Keith recalled seeing Lydia at Kelsey's funeral. He'd been intrigued with the mystery woman. She still intrigued him, but she was no longer the enigma she'd once been. Instead, he called her wife.

"I love you," they panted together as they embraced. Pleasure, love, and promise filled the air as the duke and his bluestocking bride enjoyed the peace-filled moment.

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“Would you cease?” Lydia laughed as Keith squeezed her backside. “Someone will see.”

“As though our children, nieces, and nephews aren’t aware. They’ve all seen us and your cousins.” Keith pulled Lydia into his arms. He brushed her gray locks back from her shoulders. They’d spent four decades chasing one another around their chamber and along the beach, where they now picnicked with their adult children and extended family. They stood away from where most of the family lounged on blankets. They watched as their relatives passed food among themselves, and laughter floated to them.

A breeze made the loose fabric of Lydia’s salwar billow around her legs. Neither she nor Jemma ceased wearing their traditional Indian clothing. Charlie often wore them too, insisting they were far more comfortable and practical than day and evening gowns. The sleeves of Keith’s shirt flapped as he pulled her closer.

“We’ve made a good life with our family, my darling. I should have sneaked into your library when I knew you were there. I might have brought us together sooner.” It was a sentiment Lydia shared often throughout their marriage.

“And I should have met you down here and whisked you away on my ship, sweetling.” Keith always responded with the same suggestion.

The sun dipped toward the western horizon as they shared a kiss that still made their toes curl. While the daylight might fade, nothing about their love ever had. It was a beacon that had guided them for years, and it burned just as hotly.

“I love you.” They smiled as they spoke as one. It was just as they lived. One heart, and one soul.