



# The Duke's Tempting Widow (Lust and Love in High Society)

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**Category:** Historical

**Description:** Lydia Russell, the widowed Dowager Countess of Hillsborough, has always put duty before desire. When a distant Duke threatens her home and family, she is determined to protect what holds dear at any cost. Yet, her actions spark a battle of wills and a passion she can not deny

Weston Howard, the rakish Duke of Somerfield, is used to scandal, but Lydias actions push him to his limits. Expecting compliance with his new inheritance, he is instead caught in her daring kidnapping scheme and he struggles to resist his growing attraction to the tempting widow.

When mistaken identities and rising tensions lead them on a scandalous adventure, Lydia and Weston must decide if they can trust each other. Will they lower their guards and work together, or remain prisoners of their own inhibitions?

The Dukes Tempting Widow is a historical romance novel of approximately 60,000 words. No cheating, no cliffhangers, and a guaranteed happily ever after.

Tropes: Widowed Heroine, Enemies to lovers, Reforming the Rake

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# Page 1

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## Chapter 1

### Nine Years Ago

Kitty was right, Lydia should not be there.

The words of warning seemed years away now instead of only a few hours. If Lydia had been wiser, then perhaps she never would have snuck out of the house in the first place. Father's wrath was not something to be trifled with. Somewhere in the back of her mind, Lydia knew that the consequences of her actions were going to be severe if she were to be found out.

Lingering somewhere behind Lydia was her ladies' maid to act as chaperone. A woman old enough to be Lydia's mother, but the woman was anything but motherly. Rather, she seemed the opposite. Her maid encouraged her to act in ways not conducive to society's standards.

If it weren't for her influence, Lydia would not have been able to come to the masquerade ball. Father had expressly forbidden it. He claimed that a woman ought not to ever have a reason to deceive a man and that a young lady would be tempting sin to pretend to be something other than herself.

"Do you have a favorite yet?" Martha, Lydia's maid, asked with a secret smile.

Lydia's face flushed at the implication of the words. "Even if I had decided on a favorite, it is not as if I should know who the gentleman truly is."

“Sometimes that is part of the fun, is it not?” Martha smirked and extended a hand with wiggling fingers for the glass of wine in Lydia’s hand. “A lady is only young once, and certainly has even fewer opportunities to be as mysterious and alluring as she could possibly wish. It is best if you capitalize on it while you can.”

Lydia laughed softly, as Martha sipped the wine she had just taken from her.

“It is rather exhilarating, I will admit.”

Lydia reached up to carefully adjust the lace and pearl mask that she wore to obscure her facial features from view as she looked out over the sea of bodies. If she were being honest, this particular ball did have an entirely different mood than the others that she had attended this season.

Given that it was her first year in the marriage mart, she had to uphold every one of her father’s very strict opinions on what it means to be a lady. Which left her very little room to have any fun. Even less so when father had given her a list of approved topics of conversation that she was not allowed to deviate from, no matter the circumstances.

Tonight, however, she could say anything that she wished. She could be anything that she liked.

She might still be a young girl of eighteen, but she knew her own mind. She knew her own wants and desires.

Martha had taken great care in getting her ready for this event tonight. They had carefully chosen pearl accents to pin in her hair and a deep purple lace that matched the plum color of her gown. White satin gloves came up over her elbows, and a hint of rouge on her cheeks was only barely visible under the bottom half of her mask.

“There is still one more spot open on your dance card, miss, I suggest that you choose carefully.” Martha advised and finished off the glass of wine before starting to look for another. A poor chaperone, at best, but it was needed at an event like this one.

Despite having grown up around these people, Lydia could not have named a single one. So long as they also could not name her, she was safe.

Besides, there was one man in particular that she did have her eye set on. The only man in the room who had both refused to drink and dance with anyone. Lydia could not help but take it as a challenge that his standards seemed so impossibly high. Though, standing as tall as he did, she supposed he had room to be choosy.

No doubt he was titled. She could see it in the confident way that he stood, watching everyone in the room with those enchanting eyes. Even through the black mask that he wore to conceal his identity, those striking gray eyes so light they were almost silver held her attention time and time again.

Timidly, she turned her gaze in the direction of the man with such an intense stare. Her breath caught in her throat when she realized that he was already looking in her direction. Lydia summoned more courage than she knew herself to have and straightened her posture, attempting to appear more... well, something.

The man in the black mask smiled, but it was not a kind gesture. It did not feel as if he were inviting her over; rather, challenging her to see if she was worthy of standing by his side. It felt like a test, the way that his head tilted ever so slightly to the side and never broke eye contact with her.

A thrill ran through her. A ripple of sensation that worked its way up from her spine to her chest and down around her fingertips. What might happen if she were to accept his challenge? What sort of prizes would lay there before her?

The choice clear. Stay there and enjoy the party then run home, or fully step into her ruse and see what might await her in his tempting gaze.

“If you don’t go, I will.” Martha chuckled from Lydia’s side, elbowing her softly in the ribs to encourage her.

It was all the push that she needed.

Lydia had never felt quite so powerful or important as when she took that first step and the man in the black mask’s smirk transformed into something she could only interpret as proud. Such a strange thing to wish to make a stranger proud. More than that, she wanted to impress him for reasons that she could not name.

When she reached his side, he stood at least a head taller than her, as she had to look up to see him properly. His broad stature was even more impressive up close. She could swear that she could see his muscles through the sleeves of his coat and yet, when he extended out a hand toward her, he did so with grace and softness.

“I was beginning to think that you were going to make me wait all night.” The man said, laughter in his voice despite the fact that his face no longer smiled.

Up close she could see that he could not be much older than her, only a couple of years perhaps.

“The proper thing would have been to come to my chaperone and ask for an introduction.” Lydia answered with a secret smile of her own.

“Yes, but allowing you the space to come to me gave me a lovely opportunity to get a feel for the sort of woman that you are. I can normally read most women at functions like this.” He said as he led her toward the dance floor.

The moment that her slippers crossed the threshold while holding this man's hand, whispers erupted around them. Lydia glanced around herself to those whispering behind their fans. She was no wallflower, but she was not accustomed to so many people talking about her either.

"Oh? And have you reached a conclusion as to what sort of woman I am?" Lydia asked.

"I shall let you know when I have finished making my assessment." He teased, pulling her just a touch closer than was strictly modest as he led her around the dance floor.

A woman was always supposed to follow the lead of a man, that's what father always said.

But father was not here tonight.

Lydia bit down on her bottom lip, and attempted to flip the direction of the dance so that she was in the lead. She knew that with so many eyes watching them, that he could not afford to make a scene here, but she was curious as to how he would handle it. He moved with surprising ease and swiftness considering how large of a man that he was. Though, he quickly resumed control of their moves with a chuckle.

"You shall have to try harder than that, my lady." He taunted. There was a glimmer in his eyes that she could not deny, the compulsion to compete was far too strong.

"Just keeping you on your toes... well, I do not know what I am supposed to address you as, sir." Lydia said as she took the lead once more.

"You can ask me my name, my lady, but I might lie. Is the allure of this evening not supposed to revolve around mystery?"

“True, I suppose that I could give you a false name as well.”

“Why stop there? Why not invent a whole new persona and backstory? It is certainly the time and place for such games.”

“Do not tempt me, sir. You will quickly come to find that I have a very expansive imagination.”

“You are going to make me regret that we only have tonight to spend together if you keep saying things like that.”

“You say such bold things, sir.” Lydia said while holding direct eye contact.

The man’s answer was to trail his hand down the curve of her spine, leaving a trail of gooseflesh in its wake. The air between them seemed to heat. She could read his intentions in the way he moved against her without him having to say a single word.

Their song was quickly coming to an end, and she did not wish to be parted from him so quickly. There was something electric about the way that he touched her and the moments where his fingers brushed against even the smallest patches of bare skin that seemed to set her on fire deep within her core. She had never felt such a connection to somebody before.

When the first song ended, an intimate waltz took its place. Feeling somewhat defeated, Lydia started to take a step away, but the mysterious man pulled her closer once more. It was hardly out of place. They were far from the only couple who was using the present anonymity to flirt far more than society’s standards would ever have allowed.

The masked man leaned down closer, whispering in her ear softly. “Come walk with me.”

It was more of a command than a question, but as he pulled her into a waltz pose, she could not think of anything that she would rather be doing.

As he pulled her upright, he winked. “Meet you outside.”

The choice was hers. But there was only one true option. Lydia had this feeling that if she did not go into that garden for a walk with him, that she would spend the whole rest of her life wondering ‘what if’.

Stepping outside she found something magical. The pathway down into the gardens was lined with rounded archways covered in vines and pretty flowers of bright colors. Small lamps illuminate the way to where the masked man waited for her.

Lydia walked slowly, letting her intuition guide her. She could hear others in the garden, hidden in small alcoves created by shrubs and bushes, making sounds that she had never heard before. Her same imagination could only wonder as to what they might have been up to.

Something that she might wish for herself.

Assuming, of course, that she could find the man in question. The further that she traveled into the garden maze, the harder it was to see. Lydia was moments away from pulling the mask off of her face when an arm caught her around the middle from behind, and pushed her mask right back down on her face.

“Leave it on,” he said.

Lydia waited for the nerves to settle in. Followed by that gnawing feeling that she normally got whenever she was about to do something that she knew that she wasn’t supposed to do, only it never came. The man’s hand cupped her neck softly as he stood behind her, the hand around her waist pulling her back into his firm body.



A thrill shot through her, and she bit her bottom lip as his fingers splayed over her stomach. She had certainly heard about her share of rakes in her years. Not only from Martha or the warnings from her father, but from the gossip mill that she always pretended that she did not cling to. She never thought that she would be alluring enough to tempt one of them, and wanted to capitalize on the experience.

On her own terms.

Lydia spun in the man's arms, placing a bold hand against his chest and pushing him back against a lamp pillar. A soft yellow glow encircled them boldly, and she had to hope that they were the only couple this deep into the maze. The man's arms encircled her, resting low on the backs of her hips, allowing her to have the control in this setting far more easily than he had on the dance floor. Her chin lifted, but her gaze dropped to his lips.

"Have you figured out what sort of woman that I am yet?" She asked, unable to stop herself as her gloved hand lifted, brushing her fingertips over his full bottom lip curiously.

The man hummed low in the back of his throat in response. "Perhaps you should show me the sort of woman that you are? If you continue this bewitchment, I shall be far too deeply under your spell to think for myself." He smiled then, a soft gesture of how pleased that he was to be in her company. Something inviting that she could not stop from returning.

Lydia lifted onto the tips of her toes, her lips nearly brushing his own, a witty response waiting to tumble from her—when he moved. He closed the distance and pulled her right off her feet. It was like something had unleashed in him the moment that she had been about to give the go ahead.

His kiss was unlike anything that she could have imagined. No amount of scandalous

stories or innuendos made by Martha would have properly prepared her for such feelings. How was it possible that she could feel the echoes of his kiss everywhere? What bliss would it be to have him kiss her elsewhere?

All rational thought left her mind. The words died unspoken on her lips as a world of new sensations was opened up to her. She fisted the lapel of his coat, pulling herself closer even as he lifted her to mold against his body. It was as if she had been made to fit against the firm planes of his body.

Somehow, her limbs seemed to know just what to do as, in this, she allowed him to have the lead. Lydia's arms wrapped around his neck, and she molded herself against the firm planes of his body, wanting more, needing more. The man's mask bumped against her own, threatening to lift and expose to her who just this mystery man was—

Somebody called her name.

In the distance a hushed, frantic voice called her name again. It seemed to be looming closer.

The man's mask started to slip as he kissed a heated path over the curve of her jaw and down the side of her neck. His hand shifted, holding her effortlessly with one arm while the other cupped her breast. Oh, she wanted to explore those feelings more than anything.

Martha, it was Martha.

Which meant that something bad had happened. The older woman never would have dared to interrupt what was happening for anything other than an emergency.

"Go," Lydia breathed. "I have to go. I am—forgive me."

“What?”

Lydia pushed out of his arms, leaving everything that the evening might have turned into behind her. The last thing to let go of was her hand, which the man seemed to wish to pull her back and keep her closer for as long as possible. She did not even see her handkerchief fall from where she had it as she hurried to Martha's side.

Perhaps leaving was the part that she was going to forget.

Perhaps this man will be the one who got away.

## Page 2

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### Chapter 2

Lydia Russell could not cry.

She knew that she ought to. She knew that all of those in mourning around her kept giving her sideways glances and expecting at least a couple of tears to slide down her veiled cheek. But no matter how hard she tried she simply could not bring herself to cry.

It was not as if she did not love her late husband. On the contrary, she had become quite fond of the man over the years. His ruddy cheeks and gasping laugh were things that had become comfortable. Routine, even. She supposed that she ought to have seen his health conditions coming. He was a man who always loved to indulge in excess.

But, as he was the man of the house, she did not think that it was her place to attempt to police what he did. He was a good man. He provided well, was an adequate conversationalist. All things considered. Yes, Jacob, the Earl of Hillsborough was very well liked by all that knew him. Nobody could say anything bad about him. He was just forgettable in his mundaneness.

Yes, Lydia could stand here at her late husband's gravesite and think of a great many things that she was going to miss about the man. But heartbroken? She was not.

"Will you truly use this as yet another excuse to humiliate me? Have you no shame?!" her father hissed bitterly from her side.

Lydia did not so much as turn her head to look at the bitter old man. She could only imagine what must be going through his head. Being married had been best for the fact that it had allowed her freedom to escape from her horribly smothering father. She could only presume that he was going to take this unfortunate event as a free ticket back into her life whether she wanted him there or not.

“For heaven’s sake, girl. You could at least pretend to be upset! Honestly, I should have known better than to think that you had a heart anywhere inside of that rebellious chest!” her father continued to hiss through his clenched, crooked teeth.

There would be a tongue lashing to come from him later, she already knew. Father would lecture her about how a widow ought to behave and just how long it was that she was going to be expected to wear her black dresses and veils. Father would seek to dictate every aspect of her life from here forward until such a day comes that he could attempt to profit off of her a second time through another advantageous marriage.

Having her father present was the only reason that Lydia had almost objected to having this large, fancy funeral in the heart of London. It was Jacob’s wish to be buried here, even though their home was in rural Northern England.

Furthermore, she did not wish to have to force her daughter and stepdaughter to be exposed to their grandfather for a second longer than they needed to be.

Lydia turned her focus across the way to the beautiful girls in question. They were so young to have lost their father. Being a parent was one aspect that Lydia could confidently say that Jacob truly shone at. It was a calling for him. Never once did he seem to begrudge the fact that he had no sons.

He prided himself in raising his daughters equally as princesses, and Lydia would endeavor to do the same for them going forward. Which would have to start with not

allowing her father to poison them and their opinions as he did to herself and her younger sister, Katherine. “Kitty” had lived with them the moment that she had been deemed a ‘useless spinster’ by their father.

Now she stood with a supportive arm around the eldest, Margaret’s, shoulders. They stood stoically, tears streaking down their faces as the pastor finished giving the last rights. The older man moved forward; a fistful of dirt clenched in his palm which he then sprinkled over the coffin before it would be buried.

Consumed by things that needed to happen quickly after Jacob’s death. Such things that she was hardly prepared for but would have no choice but to move with haste. There would not be any time allotted for her personal grief until the more pressing matters were attended to.

But Lydia had always been that way. The benefit and welfare of others had come before her own wants and desires well before she became a mother and a wife.

Distracted, Lydia did not realize that it was her turn to say her goodbyes and sprinkle her grave dirt until it was very apparent that all the guest’s eyes were on her expectantly.

Father’s elbow found her ribs, pushing her forward with an impatient cluck of his tongue.

How could she say goodbye to everything that her life had been with Jacob?

Methodically, as if she did not have proper control of her limbs, Lydia muttered a pathetic goodbye that was barely audible and dropped the grave dirt all in one go.

Then it hit.

Like a torrent unleashed inside of her, the truth that Jacob was well and truly gone overwhelmed her. Her knees threatened to buckle as she sucked in a large gulp of air. Everything was going to be gone. The estate, her security, her comfortable future. Everything was going to be upended if she was not very, very diligent. Jacob had become her friend, and now she was going to have to face the rest of the world alone and unprotected.

Still, she could not cry.

The rest of the funeral passed in what seemed to be a blur. Lydia's mind would not stop churning. This was a puzzle that she was going to have to solve. It was improper to stand graveside and wonder how she was going to take over the estate and which of the staff were going to leave in the transition.

It could be possible to take care of business. Before she knew it, she was standing in the parlor of her father's home with her sister. Both of her daughters had chosen to rest for the afternoon, as their emotions were wearing on them. It was for the best, in her opinion. The transition was going to be the hardest on them both. It would be her mission to keep them from feeling too unsettled in the interim.

"Nothing good happens when you get that look on your face, sister." Kitty said softly. It was rare to hear her younger sister speak loudly. She was far more reserved and shy. In fact, Lydia was fairly certain that the only person other than her daughters that her sister spoke to at all was herself.

"I am not sure what you mean by that." Lydia sighed and sank down onto the settee beside her sister. She pulled Kitty into her arms and hugged her tightly. It was a gesture that likely made herself feel better than it actually helped her sister at all.

"I mean that every time that I have ever seen you make that face where you seem so lost in thought, usually I have to break up a fight within the next twenty-four hours,

sister.” Kitty sighed and gently started to push Lydia’s arms off of her.

Lydia did not budge. “There is much to be done, and if I am going to be picking a fight with anybody, it will be father. Surely you know that.”

Kitty nodded. “That is what I hope to avoid, yes.”

“Why? Somebody needs to reason with him. It is not as if the man is capable of listening to reason. The whole carriage ride home while the girls were crying because they lost their own father, he was making uncomfortable noises and muttering about ‘womanly emotions’. Tell me, just how do you think staying in the same house with that man is going to end?” Lydia said.

“You know, most will expect you to move back into father’s home. It would be expected of all of us, actually.”

None of them wished for that outcome. If Lydia could prevent such a thing, then she was going to do it.

“How are you going to avoid such a thing, sister? It is only a matter of time before he starts to find marriages for us both all over again.” Kitty’s voice seemed to shrink at that. Inside Kitty’s chest beat a very soft heart.

The sort that could not endure a marriage of convenience as Lydia had. Kitty needed romance and tenderness. She needed to be cared for and swept off of her feet and would not be able to settle for anything less. Something that father would never and could never understand.

“I have rights as a widow you know.” Lydia finally released Kitty and smoothed her skirts down over her thighs.



“It will be a great deal more difficult without Jacob, of course. However, I am still entitled to a third of his estate. I might not own the property myself, but it is not as if he had a named next of kin that I will have to worry about. Nobody should come sniffing around the grounds looking for pieces to sell off. There are still a great many fulfilling things that we can do on our own. Nothing much has to change.”

At least, she hoped that it would not have to change.

“And if some distant cousin steps into the picture? Or, heaven forbid, our father decides that he wishes to assert himself in our lives once more? I do not... Lydia, you cannot let him force me to move back home. I do not think that I could endure living under the same roof as him again.” Kitty added softly.

Lydia could hear the tears in her voice despite the way that her sister refused to make eye contact with her.

She had spent the majority of her life under the thumb of men, and she had no intention of doing so any longer. She had done as she was supposed to. Jacob had allowed her to run the house as she saw fit with little intervention and for that, she would be forever grateful as it had allowed her to cultivate the skills that she was going to need going forward.

Furthermore, she wished to keep herself and her little family in their own home and not one of father's other estates. He had not yet voiced such desires to send her there, but no doubt it was coming. Already, she was dreading the conversation that they were going to have over dinner.

“My husband had no brothers, and I have to hope that finding an heir will be difficult. We could have weeks before the solicitor finds anyone. Even then, if they are anything like Jacob then they should be honorable enough to allow us all to continue to live there.” Lydia continued, patting her sister's hand in hopes that the gesture

would bring her some semblance of comfort.

As if on cue, her father's housekeeper entered the room to make an announcement. The solicitor had arrived, led into the drawing room moments after the announcement and accompanied by their father.

Something constricted in Lydia's throat as nerves bubbled in her stomach. The older man stood behind the solicitor with narrowed eyes. No doubt he had demanded to read the letter clutched in the solicitor's hands and had been denied. Under other circumstances, Lydia might have gloated about such a thing.

Instead, she somberly extended her hand for the letter.

When she read the contents, she wished that she had not.

Fury gripped her entire body so tightly that she nearly felt smothered by the anger. She crumpled the letter in her fist, and slammed it straight down on the table, causing everybody in the room to jump.

“That bastard! ”

## Page 3

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### Chapter 2

“Lydia!” her father shouted in astonished outrage.

Behind her, Kitty gasped in shock as she covered her mouth with her hands. Even the solicitor gaped at her as he had likely never heard such language from a woman before. It was a word that Lydia liked to think to herself, but never out loud. Certainly not around mixed company. And yet no other sentiment could possibly be fitting.

Lydia could not stop re-reading the document. Just how old was the paper in her hands? It must have been written well before they got married for both her and her daughter to have been so wholly excluded. As there had been no other updates, it appeared that everything was going to be left to the default letter of the law. Which left Lydia with little to no control over the future that lay before her.

Her father surged forward and snatched the letter out of her hand, quickly smoothing it out and skimming through the contents. “Ah, so the man had some sense after all. Good.” he said smugly before bowing his head to the solicitor. “If this is the entirety of the will, then you are free to go.”

“Yes, ah, well... should you have any questions please feel free to reach out to me at the office.” The solicitor said warily as he extended his calling card out to father who happily accepted it.

“I think that the document is very straight forward! I am happy to see it!” her father hummed to himself.

“What does it say, Father?” Kitty whispered.

Her father whipped around to face her, and Kitty flinched away from the direct attention and attempted to half step behind her sister so that she could not be fully seen.

“It states that Lydia’s husband was not such a weak chinned man after all. I feared that he would do something reckless like leave the property to your sister or fail to name a proper guardian for his daughters. I can see that I was wrong about him. I could not have been more pleased.

Children should not be left to only women to raise. While it is womanly work, they need a strong influence in their lives. You see, you two could not possibly ensure the girl’s safety or future matches. Women just are not suited for such tasks. Far better that this Duke of Somerfield gentleman is going to handle things.”

Their father rocked back and forth from the balls of his feet to his heels. He whistled a soft, jaunty tune as he left the room.

Lydia could hardly see clearly for the rage that was filling her head with smoke.

“Sister?” Kitty’s soft voice seemed to echo around the room as she reached forward and pulled softly on the skirt of Lydia’s dress. They were only three years apart in age, but Kitty always seemed to feel so much younger than herself. She did not wish to explode in her fit of anger around her sister. She did not wish to frighten her.

Lydia bit down on her bottom lip and willed herself to settle down. The girls were napping in their rooms under the care of their governess.

“I think that I need a bit of fresh air.” Lydia said through her clenched teeth. Things at the house should be fine while she stepped outside for a moment or two. That was

most important.

“I shall come with you.” Kitty offered.

“You do not need to trouble yourself.” Lydia dismissed her sister’s words and headed for the grand staircase. It was not as if she did not value her sister’s company; she only meant to shield her. Though, she was also wholly unsurprised when Kitty stepped up beside her and linked their arms together.

Emotion welled in her chest as they strode quickly to the back door and over the terrace. If she so much as exhaled too strongly then she was going to fall to pieces and she could not do it where father might see. Her pride simply would not allow it.

There was a large oak tree to the side of their property that the pair of them used to hide behind in their youth. It was the perfect spot for reading or a light picnic to enjoy the afternoon sun. Today it would be a place that allowed her to vent her frustrations into the air.

The moment that they were safely concealed, Lydia picked up a wadded bunch of her skirts into her hands and screamed into the fabric as loudly and as long as she could. She screamed until her lungs hurt and her chest ached. Her breath came in quick, frantic gulps as she lowered herself down into the leaves collected by the base of the tree. Only then did Kitty come to kneel in front of her.

“What did the letter say?” She asked timidly.

“The entirety of the estate will go to the Duke of Somerfield, Weston Howard. A distant cousin of Jacob’s, and one that he did not speak of in the kindest terms. Furthermore, he has been named the guardian of Margaret.” Lydia said in a hollow voice. She did not wish for it to be real.

She had raised Margaret for most of her life. She loved that little girl as if she were her own flesh and blood. Margaret and Juliet were sisters, and they loved one another as such. She could not imagine a world in which they might be parted. “How am I supposed to not only lose my home to a stranger, but also my daughter?”

“...it is not fair.” Kitty said, settling into the space beside her sister and drawing her knees up to her chest. There was no telling if the duke would allow Kitty to continue to reside there with them. He might think the extra bodies a burden in his home. He might send Lydia and Juliet away and then Kitty would be forced to live in one of father’s properties.

Lydia could not stand it. “I only agreed to marry the earl to help father resolve his debts! A fact that I think he forgot about the moment that he was given payment! He was never grateful for it to me, not one single time. Of course, I am blessed in that the earl was not a violent man!

Father kicked me into the world without a moment to acclimate myself. He certainly did not care for my health or happiness the moment he was no longer responsible for me. I guarantee you that he is sitting in that house right now, thinking of all the ways he can profit from this new contact.”

“Well, if the duke has any manner of intelligence, then he will not fall for any of father’s cons.”

“Perhaps that would be worse.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean if he does not fall for the cons, and sees right through him. What will he think of us? A conman’s daughters? An overly ambitious man who likely raised his daughters to be the same?”

“But we are nothing like him...”

“And you expect somebody to know that from a first impression?”

Lydia let her chin rest on the arms that she crossed over her bent knees. It was foolish of her to think that she would have time to do things on her own. She had never been allowed to pursue her own dreams or passions because she had dedicated her life to the service of others.

She did not wish to think that she was bitter. Through necessity, she had been motherly to her sister and helped raise Kitty as best as she could. Jacob traveled so often that she was fortunate enough to have the skills to run her own home and some control over the finances.

Had she become too comfortable?

It seemed so impossible to accept that the life that she had grown accustomed to was likely about to be ripped out from underneath her feet.

“Do you know anything about this duke? Did the earl ever speak of him to you?” Kitty asked. It sounded as if it were just a casual conversation, but Lydia could see it for what it was. She was attempting to discern what she was in for.

“Not much from my husband. He was never one to gossip or give a single piece of information more than was strictly necessary, you know that. But I have heard about him.” Lydia sighed. Nothing that she was about to say was going to put her sister more at ease. “A standoffish rake. That’s what they say about him.”

Well, it was far from all that she had heard about his rather colorful reputation, but it was all that she was going to share with Kitty.

There were a great many things that she kept from her sister. Sometimes she wished nothing more than to speak her mind freely and shed all the responsibilities on her shoulders, but she could not.

There had only been one time where she had been able to get away with that. The night that she had spent with the only rake that she liked to think about. To this day, she had never encountered those eyes again. Every time that she saw a man of equal height or stature, she still found herself wondering about the identity of the only man who had ever let her take control of herself, even if only for a moment.

If only she had not run from him that night, what might her life look like now? Sometimes she embarrassed herself with indulgent fantasies of how far she might have been willing to go that night. If he had taken her, as she sometimes desperately wished that he had... would she still be sitting here today like this? No, she knew the answer.

“Lydia?”

“Hm?” She had allowed herself to become lost in thought once more. “Sorry, what did you say?”

“I said, what do you plan to do?”

She had no idea. All Lydia knew was that she was never going to allow herself to be a slave to a man ever again. Nor will either of her daughters.

“I’m going to fix this.”



## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 10:58 am*

### Chapter 3

What bothersome news.

Weston leaned back in his worn leather armchair, staring at the opened letter sitting on his desk. Inheriting an estate always came with trouble. He could recall meeting the earl once or twice, but it was not as if they were friendly. He could not remember a single meaningful conversation that he had had with the man.

It was sad that he had passed at such a young age. It just was not how he wished to spend his summer months. There were a great many plans that he had for the warmer weather and none of those things were going to be possible if he was in the middle of the countryside, puttering about an estate that was not going to want him there.

The earl was a widower, and had at least one daughter with his late wife. Though, he seemed to remember seeing something about him remarrying and perhaps a birth announcement of a second child. Though, he was not certain how long ago that was or what their names were. All he knew was that the older daughter was now marked to be his ward.

Weston tapped the edge of his quill against his lips as he debated ignoring the letter as if he had never received it. Of course, such a thing was not even going to be fully possible, but it was sorely tempting. Though, the inheritance listed in the documents was sizeable, even to him. His dukedom was nothing to turn one's nose up at by any stretch of the imagination. But the earl must have taken great care in his estate to have grown his fortune as much as he had.

With a long-suffering sigh, Weston leaned forward and penned a reply that he would set out for Northern England post haste, and summoned his butler to send the letter out at first light. With any luck, it would arrive at the estate decently before him. It was going to take some time to sort through all the documents and books to ensure that everything was in order.

Then, he would be faced with the choice of what to do with the estate as well as its inhabitants. Such things were expected of a duke, of course. But at times like this, the weight of his title vexed him. With some luck, he would find a suitable steward for the estate quickly so that he could return home and to his own holdings before the year was over.

A knock at his office door was a welcome distraction from the parcel of solicitor's paperwork that he had no pressing desire to go through. He would, but after visiting with the baronet, Sir William Baxter. William was perhaps his closest and oldest friend; there was very little that he could not share with him.

They were so close, in fact, that the man took one good look at Weston and knew that something was troubling him. William did not stand quite so tall as Weston did himself, but he filled the doorway to the office well enough. He was thinner than Weston, given his proclivity for swimming as much and as often as he possibly could.

Though it was not his athletic build that tended to catch attention so much as the shock of copper hair on his head, collection of freckles that covered the upper part of his face and the thin fencing scar that ran along the curve of his jaw.

"If I am interrupting a wallowing session, I suppose that I could come back at a better time?" William said with a wry smile.

"I do not wallow." Weston answered as he fought the urge to roll his eyes. "If I were any less fond of you, I would have you thrown out for insinuating such a thing."

“It would hardly be the worst rumor that has spread about you, you know.” William teased, producing an apple from his pocket and taking a loud, wet bite before inviting himself to sit on the edge of Weston’s desk. He placed two fingers on the open letter and spun it around to face himself. “Ah, this must have to do with the large funeral in London this week? I did not know that you knew the bloke.”

“I did not. Well, not very well. But it seems that I am to get to know him rather well posthumously.” Weston said.

“Well, with your sparkling personality that might be for the best. From everything that I have read, he was a lovely man.”

“He had decent business acumen at the very least considering the size of his purse.”

“Are you worried that the acquisition of this property is going to make your duchy rather... unmanageable?” William asked.

“Careful, you are going to get sticky apple juice on my work.” Weston sighed.

“That is not an answer.”

“It is the only one that I have.”

“You could always send someone else?”

“Are you volunteering?” Weston asked, uncomfortably hopeful. “You are the only person that I would trust to act properly in my stead.”

“Absolutely not, with the season just around the corner. There will be far too many ladies that will need attention. As you know, I am wonderful at dotting attention on all of those I set my eyes on.” William grinned cheekily. “You included.”

“Yes, I have had you on me like a boil since you set your attentions on me.” Weston groused, but it was done with fondness. There were so few people that he could tolerate for longer than an evening. Even less that Weston truly felt as if he could trust them fully. Excluding the staff of his home and William, well, the list ended with William.

“You could join me? Come on! It will be fun! It has been far too long since we have played around the ton together. You have been markedly absent from all important social functions. While I get that you like your mystery to remain, you will have to take a wife sooner or later.” William reasoned.

Weston leaned back again, pinching the bridge of his nose in annoyance. There was absolutely only one face that constantly swam to the forefront of his mind any time that he even thought about taking a wife or upholding that particular set of duties.

Even more infuriating was that it was a face that he had not even properly seen. Just a thrilling woman with the softest skin that his lips had ever touched. He swore he could still smell the lilac and lily of her perfume if he allowed those memories to drift too far.

William set the apple core on the corner of Weston’s desk, snapping out of his daydream as he shook his head that the core needed to be removed. Swiftly.

William picked it up and eased off of the desk as he headed toward a waste bin. “You will have to produce an heir sooner or later. I mean, of course you are more than welcome to leave your immense fortune and holdings to me, but I should not like the task of upkeeping everything.”

“You always were opposed to hard work.”

“It is a good thing that I am handsome then, is it not?” William winked.

“Is there a purpose to this visit other than to irk me?”

“Yes, of course. I came to inform you that you have no choice but to attend no less than three balls with me this season. I shall become even more insufferable if you do not lend me your quiet strength.”

“I shall no-”

“I will not take no for an answer.” William said, suddenly in a hurry to leave so that he would be afforded the last word in their conversation. “I will summon you at times of my choosing and I shall be most cross with you if you deny me. You know that I do not ask you for much, and so you must come!”

Weston knew that he would have to. If William had truly decided to rejoin the ton this season, there had to be a good reason. Despite the way that he seemed rather outgoing and forward spoken in private, Weston knew the truth. In crowds of any size, William had trouble getting even the shortest of sentences out.

It was not that his mind could not produce worthy conversation, as Weston found the man to be very intelligent and charming. It was simply the fact that he became impossibly shy around those that he was not comfortable with. The balls in question that Weston was going to be ‘forced’ to, were no doubt going to be the only way that William would find the courage to attend.

Perhaps he had decided that it was time for himself to take a wife. It would make sense that he wished Weston to finally do the same so that they could embark on that journey together.

But Weston knew in his heart that his attentions always drifted back to that one woman from so many years ago.

Over the years that have passed, he has had many lovers that furthered the reputation that he had of being a bit of a rake. It was not something that he was going to deny, and he certainly was not ashamed of it.

But there was a large difference between finding a woman to pass the time with and finding one whom he wished to spend the daytime hours with. It was not as if he and the masked woman had even exchanged anything revolutionary in the short hours they spent together, but there was something about her that sparked something inside of him. Something that he had not felt before or since.

He opened the top drawer of his desk and pulled out the handkerchief that his mystery brunette had dropped all of those years ago. The two letters embroidered at the bottom corner in pale pink were the only hint that he had ever had about her true identity. For years he had wished that he had a chance to redo that night in a way that would not have had her called away so abruptly. Women were never so forward with him, least of all the women of the ton . She had been... refreshing. Weston did not have many regrets in his life, but not having more time with that fiery woman? That was one of the biggest.

“William?” Weston called out, knowing that his friend had not gotten too far.

Sure enough, the man popped his head around the corner. “Yes?”

“How about we strike up a deal? Accompany me to the north, and I shall agree to accompany you on your outings.”

William beamed. “You have yourself a deal!”

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 10:58 am*

### Chapter 4

Coming home was supposed to have been a comfort.

The carriage ride had been cramped and uncomfortable. They had been stopped by every delay known to man as well as had to endure annoying questions about not traveling with a man by the innkeeper that they had been forced to stop at halfway in their journey. As if it were not obvious by the three girls wearing black as to just why they might not be traveling with a man.

Lydia was sick and tired of hearing all the things that she needed a man to do.

She did not need a man. She was going to prove it.

She had no idea how she was going to prove it, but she was wholly determined. Every hour of the drive, the girls complained softly of their hunger or how uncomfortable the carriage ride was or how tired they were or how much they missed their father. Lydia needed space to breathe for herself, but there was still so much to do.

She practically had to carry Juliet out of the carriage and into the house when she arrived. It was so early in the morning that the sky was still dark all around them. The staff was in the middle of preparations and not standing outside to greet them as they had arrived earlier than planned.

When the housekeeper rushed outside to assist her with the girls and to help them back into bed or a warm bath, Lydia was happy to let them go. At least they would be able to be surrounded by familiar comforts during this transitional period. They

would get to sleep in their own beds in their own rooms. They had all of their toys and books so at least that should bring some comfort. At least until the duke arrived.

Even Kitty seemed to be more at ease here as she stumbled from the carriage. She gave her sister a brief hug before Kitty staggered, yawning, into the house. But Lydia lingered in the foyer, absorbing the house that she had worked so hard to make her home.

She had put forth so much time and effort into making this feel not so cold and drafty as it had seemed when she moved in. Now there were bright flowers everywhere and colorful paintings on the walls. The tapestries and rugs were warm and inviting and soft to the touch.

Would the duke, whoever he truly was, get rid of all of those touches? Would he make the place barren once more?

Those were problems for another time. For now, Lydia allowed herself to breathe in the familiar scents of her home as she wound her way up the stairs slowly toward her room. She paused before her door, and turned her focus down the hall to where Jacob's bedroom and office were.

The door to his office was still ajar, no doubt from the cat that he refused to admit he adored coming in and out of the space. The gray tabby loved nothing more than to sit in the middle of his paperwork when he was home. Though, Lydia had not seen the feline since Jacob's passing. She did not often come into the office when Lydia was working in there.

His bedroom, however, was a place that she very infrequently visited. It was the only room that had not been changed since she moved in after their wedding. It was the most 'Jacob' room in the house in that it only housed functional items.



Even in his office there was but one short bookcase that held reference texts and the extensive journals that he kept to document his travels. Despite bringing back gifts for the girls from all over the world, Jacob was not a collector of trinkets or anything other than experiences.

When he was around, he could always be counted on for a good story.

That was the true warmth that he brought to the home.

Was she even going to tolerate being in that room to clean out his things before the duke arrived? No doubt the man was going to insist on the main room of the house. Lydia cared not whether it was his right to or not, it was barbaric. What sort of man could come into another man's home and just presume that he belonged there and to change whatever he saw fit.

She was just going to have to sit the duke down and have a very stern talk with him.

This is her home, and she refused to give it up. The duke was going to have a real fight on his hands when he chose to arrive, she would ensure it.

"Shall we draw you a bath as well, my lady?" the housekeeper asked, pausing at the top of the stairs. "I could even have breakfast brought to your room if you should like?"

Times like this, Lydia dearly missed Martha. If only her old friend had been here, then she could have truly released a bit of steam. She would have felt better if she could have the space to speak her mind freely.

"Yes, that would be nice. Thank you." Lydia said with forced neutrality.

The housekeeper smiled softly, pulling the fresh towels in her arms tighter into her

chest. “I shall see it done, my lady. Which dress should you like us to prepare for you? I do apologize that we were unprepared, we thought that you would be arriving with the duke mid-morning.”

Lydia blanched. “I beg your pardon?”

“...the duke?” the housekeeper repeated.

“He is coming today?!”

“Yes, my lady. Did he not send word to your father’s house as well? I beg your pardon, but we assumed that was why you were leaving your father’s home so soon after the funeral. It is customary to—”

“Dash that, I do not need a lecture on what is customary.” Lydia interrupted, and then instantly felt badly for it. “Forgive my tone, it was a very long drive. Bring me the letter from the duke, I shall meet you in my bathing chambers.”

It felt sneaky and underhanded is what it did.

All through her bath she stewed. Lydia was unable to eat a single thing. She did not wish to get herself all dressed up for a man who was going to come up and disrupt her whole life. She did not wish to have anything to do with any of it. She simply wished to live the rest of her life in peace, pursuing anything that she so desired. She did not see how that could possibly be such a bad thing.

Halfway through getting dressed, the butler knocked on the door to announce the arrival of the duke.

“Already?!” Lydia hissed under her breath. She was not ready. She had not had sufficient time to prepare anything, let alone create a proper plan of action for how

she was supposed to handle this situation. The next thing she knew, Kitty was standing outside of her door, fretting as she waited for Lydia to join her so that they could head down into the parlor.

He was not as impressive of a man as his title would suggest. Standing in the doorway, the two sisters exchanged knowing looks. The duke was only a couple of inches taller than herself, and unassuming in build. Despite how fine the clothes that he wore were, it was obvious that either his tailor did not know what they were doing, or he had chosen a poorly fitting outfit.

Almost as if he wore clothes for a man thinner and taller than himself. The hair on his head and sides of his face was patchy and ill groomed. Overall, Lydia would not have given him a second glance were he not standing in her home holding her future in his hands.

“Your Grace,” She greeted, dipping into a low bow that her sister copied silently. Kitty moved in her shadow as Lydia walked into the room. The duke did not greet her back, rather he looked down his long nose at her as if he had the right to appraise her.

“So, you are the dowager countess?” He said, his brow arching.

No, she did not like him at all. He already seemed arrogant. That did not bode well for the two of them getting along well going forward.

Finally, he stepped forward, walking a tight circle around her, close enough that she could smell the oils in his hair. It did not suit him. Lydia had to fight to keep from wrinkling her nose as he examined her.

“As you know, I am the Duke of Somerfield,” he continued. He clasped his hands behind his back and started to look around the room more closely. She took that as dismissal enough and gestured for Kitty to take a seat. She did not like that he did not

even bother attempting to speak to Kitty. “And it appears that I truly have my work cut out for me here...there is much to do.”

Lydia’s eye twitched. “I apologize for not being here to greet you properly, Your Grace. I shall have rooms prepared for you at on-”

“The master suite, of course. I shall be in the main room. That is what you mean to say, is it not?”

“Your Grace, I have not yet cleared out my husbands-”

“What? What is the reason for the delay? No matter, I shall have them thrown out. He cannot make use of material items now anyway.” the duke said as he laughed at his own poor joke.

“That will not be necessary. We have a great many guest rooms that will be more than adequate. I shall have my housekeeper show you-”

“No. I insist on the rooms that are owed to me. I should like to get started right away.”

Kitty reached forward and clasped Lydia’s hand. “Perhaps we should allow His Grace to get settled in? The long ride from London could put anyone in poor spirits. We could discuss things over dinner?”

She had a point.

The duke spun; his light brown eyes locked on hers as if daring her to look away first. She could already tell this was to be a battle of wills. He would soon come to find out that she did not tolerate being spoken to in such condescending terms, and she was far more stubborn than he could ever hope to be.

The duke's brow arched, his lips twisting upward in a smirk because he knew that she had no choice but to give in.

"Very well," Lydia conceded. "We have had a long journey, Your Grace, and we had only just started to re- acclimate ourselves after the journey. Perhaps we could discuss the upcoming days over dinner this evening?"

"I hope that you have a good cook here, I have elevated taste," the duke said.

"You ought to go upstairs and get some rest, Kitty. I will follow shortly."

Kitty squeezed her hand softly, and then bowed to the duke who still seemed not able to see her.

The moment that Kitty was out of the room, she rounded on the duke. "You know, I have always heard that all men eventually let their titles run away with them. A case of overly inflated ego is almost inevitable."

"Excuse me?" The duke said, his smirk falling right off of his face. "I shall forgive your impertinence only once, young lady, I suggest that you march right up those stairs."

"I will not be spoken to like a child in my own home, Your Grace. Nor do I think that our business can wait for dinner."

The man laughed bitterly. "I do not think that there is anything that a woman could possibly have to say on the matters of business?"

"When they concern my home and my children's futures? I have a great deal to say." Lydia countered.

The duke all but rolled his eyes at her, snapping his fingers in the direction of the small drink cart positioned near the wall.

Lydia saw red. She was not to be commanded around like a dog, nor was she a servant in this household.

But then something caught her eye—just there on the second tier of the card was a small blue bottle with Jacob's laudanum in it. Perhaps there was something that she was able to do about her future.

Her hands moved without fear of consequence. Behind her, she could hear the duke snort with pleasure that she was doing as she was told. She brought him a fresh whiskey, strong enough to mask the subtle scent of the tonic. Licking his lips wetly, he opened his mouth to speak again—but no words came out.

Within moments, the man collapsed to the floor with a thud. Unconscious.

Lydia had never been so tempted to kick a man in her life.

Now she just needed to figure out what the hell to do with him. More than that, she needed to ensure that nobody was going to see anything suspicious.

Then the heavy front doors opened down the hall, and she heard her butler greeting at least two men, ushering them into the house. She needed to do something quickly. Think, Lydia, think. Only her now panicked mind was drawing a complete and utter blank.

Lydia swore. "Double damn."

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### Chapter 5

“It’s charming!” William gushed as he walked into the home as if it were his own. He started touching things right away. Something that Weston knew he likely should discourage, but he could not bring himself to do so.

He was merely happy to stretch his legs properly after such a long ride. He had yet to find a proper carriage that was built for a man of his height and size. He had almost been tempted to ride his personal horse the whole way. But it would have taken far longer to get anything accomplished.

Though, William did have a point. From the long-shaded drive and massive oak trees blocking the majority of the property from view, Weston could easily see the appeal. It was abundantly obvious as to why his cousin was so fond of this property.

The house was a good size, and he was fairly certain he saw an adequate stable right on the main property. With the woods so close, there would be plenty of space to have a hunting cabin installed if there was not one already.

“I beg your pardon, sir, what did you say your business here was?”

“Look, Your Grace, come and see this painting! I have never seen anything quite like it!” William said, inviting himself further down the hall.

Weston ignored him, and turned to face the butler with a polite smile. “I see that my letter did not reach you in time for preparations to be made, I do apologize for that. I am Weston Howard, Duke of Somerfield.”

He inclined his head politely, showing respect to the butler for the important position that he held. Weston had taken great care in choosing the staff for his own estate as he needed to be able to completely trust every single member. If he were to spend an extended amount of time here, then he was going to have to make sure that he did not rub them the wrong way. He needed them far too much for that.

Though, the moment that he gave his title, the butler looked at him as if he had grown a second head. The atmosphere suddenly felt strange and heavy for reasons that he did not know.

“I am sorry, your, uh, but the duke has already arrived. He and the dowager countess are having tea...”

The poor man clearly did not know what to do. William turned toward Weston, a plucked flower bud in his hand that he was toying with the petals of. He gave Weston a very confused look as if he had not heard the butler correctly.

“That is not possible,” Weston assured him. “I am standing right here, and I am not having tea.”

“The duke arrived a few hours ago...”

Clearly the man was at a loss of how to handle the situation. In truth, Weston was quite curious as to how this could be happening himself. Was there an imposter here? That was the only possible solution. Weston clapped a friendly hand on the butler’s shoulder and squeezed softly.

“Do not worry, I shall reach the bottom of this.”

“But I do not think that I should allow you in if there is question to your identity.”



“Which I respect, sir, but I am the duke and my letters of identification are in that satchel along with the summons from the earl’s solicitor. Feel free to verify so that you can put your mind at ease. I have no intentions of deceiving anyone.” Weston explained. Though, William was already two steps ahead of him as he walked down the hall in search of the parlor where tea would be served.

Weston was hot on his heels, only when they found the parlor there was nobody there. No tea service, no hint that a person had been in here in quite some time. Curious, and a little concerned, Weston and William explored the first floor in search of intruders. Grand sitting room, dining hall and library housed not a single other person.

About that time, the butler came to catch up with them. “I apologize for my suspicions, Your Grace, how can I assist you?”

“Take the afternoon off.” Weston said absently with a wave of his hand. “I should like all of the staff to take the rest of the afternoon off. Please, so that I can get to the bottom of this without interference. If you could leave a list of all those employed here in the foyer on your way out, I would most appreciate it.”

“Of course, Your Grace, right away.”

“What do you think is happening?” William asked softly, turning to look into another bedroom. It appeared as if the countess’s chambers had been readied along with a guest room. The layout of the home was nice, he thought absently.

“I am not certain, but I have a strange feeling about all of this.”

“Never a dull moment, eh old friend?” William was nearly skipping with joy as they headed further into the property.

“I think a dull moment or two would actually be nice to have instead of this as my first memory here.” Weston muttered.

A sound directly above them stopped the pair of men in their tracks.

“What was that?” William asked, stepping closer to Weston’s side.

Weston gave him a flat look. “How am I supposed to know? I lack the ability to see through the ceiling, William.”

William chuckled nervously. “Ah, right. Of course.”

Weston jogged toward the stairs, taking them two at a time as they came to another landing. It led to a hallway with three seemingly locked doors in front of them. With a bit of guesstimation, Weston picked the door that would have been right above them and tried the handle. It was locked. There was another heavy thud from inside of the room as well as a quick shuffle of footsteps.

Weston motioned for William to keep his distance—and then with a swift kick he burst the door open.

The door bounced off of the wall inside of the room, the frame splintering from the force of it as a startled yelp sounded from inside. Quickly, fearing something nefarious was happening, Weston and William both rushed into the room.

Only, he could never have guessed that this was what could have been hidden here.

A woman stood before him, holding a length of cloth in her hands. She appeared to be directly in the middle of blindfolding the stout man in front of her. Though, he was already tressed to the chair he was sat in rather effectively. Even from here he could see that the knots holding him were sound and sturdy. Despite the strangeness of the

situation, he was rather impressed. That did not happen often.

The man started to desperately appeal to them for help from behind the gag in his mouth. William shuffled behind Weston somewhat, as if he were afraid of the woman in the room. Perhaps he had good reason to be. Yet, Weston was only amused. This was better than he could have ever imagined. Perhaps his time here in the countryside was not going to be nearly as dull as he feared that it was going to be.

“Well, this is quite interesting.” He said as he attempted to keep his delight and curiosity from his expression. “Just what do we have here?”

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 10:58 am*

### Chapter 6

How was Lydia supposed to know that the man she had tied up was not the real duke?

She was equal parts relieved and mortified as she sat and sipped her tea. Her spine was rigid and uncomfortable as she refused to look the man across from her in the eye. Whatever his opinions were, he could keep them to himself. It was interesting to note that he had not demanded explanation from her, nor did he make any effort to untie the man who was posing to be him.

Lydia just needed to come up with a solid, plausible reason as to why she had done what she had done before the constables showed up. She had knocked him out wholly believing that he was the duke, after all. She had no true plan as to what would happen after she tied him up, but this was nowhere in the realm of consideration.

Kitty had shown up moments after the men had been escorted out by the baronet shortly after. She could not honestly guess which of them was more uncomfortable with that particular arrangement. Until today, Lydia had thought that her sister was the most socially uncomfortable person in all of London, but today she might have been proven wrong.

A tea service sat on the table between them, left by the housekeeper who had declined to take the afternoon off like the rest of the staff. Which was an issue in and of itself given that this new man was giving orders to her household. How was this her reality?

“So, are you truly not going to offer up a single word in your defense?” The duke said, breaking the silence.

Under different circumstances, she might have remarked to herself how lovely of a voice he had. Or, she could have possibly even thought that he was built impressively. But whether he was attractive or not changed absolutely nothing. She still did not want him there.

“And say something that you might twist into some confession of guilt? I think not.” Lydia answered sharply.

The duke chuckled. “Do you think that there was not enough circumstantial evidence to condemn you anyway?” He leaned forward, somewhat closing the distance between their two chairs. “We walked in on you about to blindfold the poor sod.”

Nearly in unison, they turned to look at the man still struggling against the bonds around him. No doubt he was cursing up a blue streak behind that gag. The imposter was practically frothing with rage and indignation.

“His name is Cassian Sinclair,” The real duke, Weston, answered. He had introduced himself before they had sat down to tea together. “He is another one of my cousins. Well, your late husband’s cousins as well technically. Though, this man is more leech than human, so we rarely are inclined to acknowledge him.”

It sounded like there was a story there. It took a great deal of self-control to keep from asking just what he could have meant by such a statement. Instead, Lydia finally picked up the cup of tea from in front of her that had long since gone cold.

Weston boldly winked at the man in ropes, which promptly started the man ranting anew.

“He is a man of no title, naturally. Though, he has always had a rather large chip on his shoulder as a result of that fact. He has always felt entitled to the use of our titles as he saw fit. He found that doors would not open for him otherwise. And, instead of developing a personality or work ethic... he is prone to doing these things. I do apologize for the trouble that he has caused you.”

Weston chuckled and leaned back into his chair.

“Though, I think this is the best dose of reality that he could have possibly hoped for.”

Lydia’s eyes finally lifted to him over the brim of her teacup. “That almost sounds like approval, Your Grace.”

Weston’s gaze cut to her, and she nearly dropped her cup of tea right out of her hands. Those eyes. Darker than the ones that so frequently haunted her dreams, but they were the closest that she had ever been to seeing their likeness.

“Of course it is approval, my lady. Cassian here has needed to be properly put into his place for a long time. I do try to make it a policy to never pick on those weaker than myself, so I was unable to retaliate in a manner which he deserved.”

Lydia could hardly breathe.

Suddenly the room felt ten degrees hotter, and she was uncomfortable in her own skin.

“What I cannot fathom, is how you managed to drag him, chair and all, up those stairs by yourself. Either you are far stronger than you look, or you had an accomplice.”

“Because I am a woman, I am incapable of lifting a man?” Lydia countered automatically, and then instantly wished that she had not.

Weston’s eyes sparked with challenge, and her knees felt weak.

Get a hold of yourself.

“Nothing of the sort, I assure you. I guess I am just attempting to get a clearer picture of events in my mind. I have no doubts whatsoever that my slimy cousin provoked you.”

That was an understatement.

Feigning nonchalance, Lydia sipped her tea. “It was rather simple, actually. My late husband was injured some years back while riding his horse. The physician left a supply of laudanum for when the pain got to be too bad. I simply slipped some into the greedy man’s whiskey.”

Weston shook his head. “If he was unconscious, then he would have been even more difficult to move. Dead weight is infinitely more difficult to maneuver.”

“And you would know that for a fact?”

Weston’s grin widened into something almost, well, she could not explain it. “Do I look as if I struggle lifting things, my lady?”

Lydia’s gaze dropped to the man’s broad chest and the slope of muscle hidden by his well-tailored clothes. Even the cut of his coat seemed unable to disguise the size of his arms. She could not even imagine what sort of life the man had to leave in order to have muscles like that. He could likely lift her with ease.

Memory flickered again.

She needed to get a hold of herself.

Obviously, she had had help, but she was never going to admit to such a thing out loud. She did not know this man, and she certainly had no reason to trust him whatsoever.

Even less reason to be honest with him about how she had enlisted her butler for help. She would never implicate her staff in something nefarious. If this stranger was going to attempt to use it as leverage against her, she would never allow it. They were far too important to her.

“Well, no. I suppose that such a thing would be simple for you...” she muttered, very deliberately not meeting his gaze once more.

“Cassian was a snake when we were children, and he is a snake now. Truthfully, I wondered if he was going to come sniffing around for a piece of the inheritance. Normally he comes crawling on his belly to me for money instead of impersonating my whole identity. Perhaps this will finally teach him his lesson. Though, I doubt it.”

Lydia could only imagine the history that the two of them had together. Yet, even as he spoke about Cassian his words were not cruel.

“And what, exactly, are you planning on doing with said inheritance Your Grace?” Lydia asked though she was afraid of the answer.

Weston slowly turned his focus back to her and it was difficult to withstand the intensity of his focused gaze. “Is this the portion of the meeting where we get down to business? Should we not handle one matter at a time?”



Lydia shook her head. “No, I think that it would be best if we handled these important matters quickly so that there is no time for you to get any delusions in your head about what should happen here.”

Weston’s brow arched. “Oh? Do go on.”

“I understand that because you are the male next of kin that you technically have been listed as the proprietor of this estate. I hope that you will not be the same sort of oily man as your cousin over there where you wish to come in and disrupt the life that we have built here. Least of all during our time of grieving.”

Lydia knew that it was possibly a low blow on her part to bring the widow angle into this, but she was willing to use anything at her disposal if it meant that she was going to get what she needed. “The estate should remain in my hands. At least informally. It is my home, and it is the home of my daughters. All of their familial memories are here, and I intend to finish raising them here. It is my right.”

“Because you are the dowager countess?” Weston asked, his thumb running along his full bottom lip as he questioned her.

“In exchange for your generosity and understanding,” Lydia continued to speak over him. She needed to get her proposition out before he stopped her. She had to at least try . “I will continue to run the estate for you, just as I have for the many years that my husband spent traveling.”

“That is... quite untraditional.” Weston countered.

She could not read his expression. Was he shutting her down? Was this some sort of counter? Was she just wasting her breath? She could not tell.

“So, you mean to kick us out? You mean to take my daughter from me?” Lydia rose

from her seat, her voice growing louder with every word.

Weston's smile faded, but his eyes were still alight. Why?

"Now, now, settle down."

There was nothing that she hated more than being told to settle down. She did not tolerate being made to feel as if her emotions were anything less than valid. Least of all from a man. Her father had done that her whole life and she had no choice but to obey him. When he basically sold her off to Jacob, she had no choice but to do his bidding. She would not allow such a fate for herself again.

Weston stood, towering over her and she was forced to lift her chin to look up at him. He fumbled over his words for just a moment as she held his gaze. Whatever he was originally going to say, it seemed as if he quickly changed his mind about it.

When he spoke, something inside of her withered. The last small kernel of hope that she had indulged in, perhaps.

"A steward will be placed here to take over everything. The earl's daughter shall be free to remain here to be raised under the care of a governess. It is simply how these things are done."

### Chapter 7

If there was one thing that she never would be again, it would be backed into a corner.

Fury and despair mixed together inside of her belly to form a noxious cocktail of emotions far too large for her body to handle. Her mind seemed determined to work overtime and supply her with myriad things that would be terrible to say out loud.

“Over my dead body.” Lydia seethed; the words pushed through her teeth as she glared up at the larger man.

To his credit, he seemed to blanch at the sheer vitriol in her words.

“I care not that it was not I who birthed her, Margaret is my daughter. She is every bit my daughter as my own Juliet. You will not take her from me. I assure you of that.” Lydia placed her hands on her hips, grasping her own sides tightly to keep from lashing out at the man in front of her. She had never felt so inclined to violence before. She was hardly a violent woman by nature. She was a nurturer. What was it about this man that made her feel this way?

The duke glanced over her shoulder to where Cassian was trussed up.

“Or you will sneak laudanum into my food?”

“Do not mock me, sir.” Lydia’s gaze narrowed.

“Then do not threaten me, my lady.”

“You are the one who is threatening me! This is my home! My life!” Lydia said, gesturing widely to the house around her. “Just because of my sex you think that you can honestly have the right to take such things from me? I think not! I will not meekly be shoved off onto another property to wither and die. I have run this house for years and very effectively too! You shall see when you check my books!”

Weston stepped closer, a retort on his lips as he gestured toward her. Whatever it was, she could take it. She could endure the strange gleam in his eye for whatever was about to come her way. She could do it.

Only he was standing so close to her. She could smell the cologne he wore and the after-shave oil on his face. She could see the subtle dimple in his chin and the various shades of gray and silver in his eyes. They almost seemed a pale, icy blue as she stood this close. Though, the more worked up he got it was almost as if they took on a quicksilver quality that was downright hypnotizing.

Lydia’s chest heaved, fully flustered from the alien effect that he seemed to have over her. She could not back down. They stood nearly chest to chest in the most indecent manner, and she would not allow herself to be intimidated by him.

Or, if she was being wholly honest, of the heated flush she felt radiating from her core. She would not allow anything else to be affected by his gaze either.

It should be a criminal offense to have lips that look like that.

The last time that she had been in a situation like this, she had kissed her masked man. Why were those memories coming to the surface now? It had to be because there were so many similarities between the two of them. Large figure, enchanting eyes and those lips inclined for sin. He was an infamous rake, after all. It was not as if

he did not know all of the most effective ways to get under a woman's skin. She was certain of that.

If she kissed him now, would that change things?

Cassian's chair squeaked behind them, and she was suddenly painfully aware of the fact that they were no longer alone in this space. Lydia forced her body back a pace at the same time that the duke seemed to realize the exact same thing.

Where had such passion come from? Was it just the argument? So rarely was she so unafraid to fully speak her mind like this. Perhaps she was wholly imagining things, but there seemed to be a flush on his face as well that had not been there before. Did he feel this strange pull between them as well? Was he only arguing with her to get this heated of a reaction?

"We should attend to the matter at hand, as it is more pressing." Weston said huskily, clearing his throat and running his index finger along his collar to loosen the neck of his shirt somewhat. "You will have plenty of time to tear my throat out later."

Lydia wrapped her arms around herself and put another step of distance between them. "I shall have the housekeeper summon the constables at once."

Getting out of this room and clearing her head from all of these troubling thoughts would be the most rational course of action.

"He is my cousin. It is not as if he could have gotten away with it in the first place. I think he has been humbled quite enough because he was so captured by a woman half his size." Weston said with a smirk. "Is that not correct, cousin? Try such a thing again and I shall let the dowager finish the work that she started?"

Interestingly enough, the man in the chair visibly paled at the very notion.

“A stern warning then, that women are not the easy targets that he clearly thinks that we are.” Lydia conceded. Though, she personally would have been gratified to see him in irons. Perhaps Cassian was simply the sort of dog whose bite was far worse than his bark.

“Or, perhaps because the constables would never believe what actually happened here. Besides, you would be in trouble for attacking a man and I find the whole thing far too amusing to allow you to actually be arrested.” Weston added conversationally.

She had not even considered that part.

Perhaps it was best to let him off with a warning, all things considered.

“Very well, but I will not be the one to untie him.” Lydia said before turning her back on the whole situation.

“He squats in a nearby town, I shall have my personal carriage return him and his bruised ego home. Never you worry about him.”

“I was not concerned in the slightest, I do not care what happens to a man such as him.” Lydia said as she started out of the room. She paused in the doorway and cast a last warning glance to the duke. “We are far from finished, Your Grace.”

“Oh, believe me, I am very much looking forward to encountering you again, my lady.”

Lydia’s cheeks flamed and she hurried out of the room, hoping against hope that he had not seen her blush.

### Chapter 8

No matter how hard he tried, Weston could not get Lydia's face out of his mind.

There was something here that he was missing. Something that he just could not put his finger on no matter how hard he tried. After his encounter with her, he had taken to the second-floor study to have some time alone with his thoughts. Of course, the housekeeper had shown him to the guest rooms that he and William were invited to occupy, and they were more than adequate.

But he just needed somewhere to sit that was a touch quieter. From the room he was staying in, he could hear Lydia's pacing feet, and it was distracting. To say the very least. She was a grieving woman, and she had every right to be angry with the changes that were coming.

However, despite her petition or even how much he might understand her plight, he was to uphold certain duties and obligations as well. He was honor bound as a gentleman to take certain steps and precautions. He did not relish the idea of separating sisters. But, by law, he was now the guardian of the earl's daughter, and he had to fulfill that role to the very best of his abilities.

Certainly, she would come to understand that and see things from his perspective in time, would she not?

From everything that he had seen of her fiery temper today, it did not seem so.

Her temper was unlike anything he had seen before. It was... intoxicating. In the very

best of ways. The meek, soft-spoken women of the ton rarely appealed to him. Certainly not like the woman in the other room did. Lydia, the dowager countess, was certainly no wallflower and that part of her personality was something that he longed to explore. He wanted to see where her limits were and where she was willing to be pushed.

She had been wondering the same thing for a moment, too. He had seen it in her eyes. Weston knew very well the look in the eye of a woman who wanted him. He found himself wondering about the possibilities. Would she be playful? Forceful?

Perhaps she wanted to be guided into submission. Nothing wrong with that. Weston got a deep thrill about earning a woman's submission. Even just wondering about what it might be like with her was delicious.

No, he needed to stop. He flexed his hands and then scrubbed them down his face. She was a widow. His cousin's widow and only barely a week into her mourning period. She had not yet had time to properly be bereaved as she had likely been so busy from the moment that the earl had passed. Weston had no rights to be thinking about her in such a manner. But there was something there. He knew it.

William's arrival was a very welcome intrusion. The man staggered into the room and nearly collapsed on the settee across from where Weston sat. William buried his face in his hands, and Weston waited for him to speak before breaking the silence.

"I think that we have made a mistake in coming here." William said suddenly.

The comment was strange enough to pull Weston out of his brooding for a moment. "What do you mean?"

William was silent for a long enough time that it was concerning. Then, instead of answering, he slapped his hands down on the tops of his thighs and stood abruptly. "I



think I need some fresh air, and you do as well. Come for a walk with me.”

Weston wanted to press his friend further, but his thoughts were his own business. William led him out into the hall, and his gaze automatically drifted to Lydia’s door. She was not pacing in there any longer. In fact, the whole place seemed a touch too quiet for now it had been earlier. He must have missed something.

Honestly, he had been waiting for dinner to be ambushed once again by Lydia’s temper. He had been attempting to mentally prepare himself for that. Now, he was unsettled. At least Cassian was gone. With some luck, it would be a nice long while before he was forced to deal with that grubby man again.

“The dowager’s sister, Kitty, introduced me to her nieces earlier.” William said with a soft smile. “They are lovely young girls. The littler one, Juliet, she is quite a remarkable painter. Apparently, Margaret is a very accomplished singer. I have been promised a concert after dinner. You will come too, of course.”

William always tended to ramble on when he was nervous.

“Are you uncomfortable here, friend? You do not have to stay if that is the case. When the carriage arrives back you could-”

“No, it is not that. Not at all. Besides, I promised to accompany you for this venture and so I will. Do not forget that I have some skin in the game here. If I do not uphold my end of the bargain, how can I expect you to do the same thing?”

“Have you ever known me to go back on my word like that?” Weston asked.

“No, never. But there is always a first time, and I do not intend for that to happen now.” William said.

If he was not nervous, then preoccupied perhaps. He did seem to be looking for something. At first, Weston had thought that he was merely admiring the scenery around them but now he seemed to be looking for something in particular.

“You are acting very strangely. Are you going to tell me what is going on, or?”

Weston stopped walking a few paces before William did. It seemed that there was a very large lake on the property after all. The water practically seemed to glitter in the afternoon sun. Trees banked every side of the large oblong lake.

A bit to his left a small family of ducks started crossing into the pond for a swim to the sound of nature around them. But, more importantly, both Lydia and her sister were sitting on a large picnic blanket with an array of sandwiches and cookies around them. William had conned him into having afternoon tea with them.

His stomach grumbled at the sight of food.

“Ah, I suppose that I should have seen this coming.” He sighed. William grinned sheepishly at him.

“Do not be cross.” William said as he walked backward toward the girls. “Kitty and I just think that you and the dowager might have gotten off on the wrong foot, is all. There is no reason that we cannot all be friendly toward one another.”

It only took one look in Lydia’s direction to see that this was obviously not her plan, and she must have been tricked into coming here as well.

“Besides, since there will be a group of us here with you, friend, then perhaps there will be less... shouting.” William smiled again as he wrapped an arm around Weston’s shoulders. Though, it made walking rather difficult as he was the shorter of the two of them. “There is so much to be talked about, and this will provide a nice,

neutral location.”

William released him as they grew closer to the blanket and then nearly skipped over to where Kitty sat. Weston bowed his head in greeting, which Kitty returned, and Lydia turned away from entirely.

Sadly, that meant that the pair of them had no choice but to sit together. Weston lowered himself onto the blanket while leaving as much space as possible between them. It was the least that he could do considering Lydia was looking at him as if he had leprosy.

“It is a lovely day, is it not?” Kitty said quickly, pouring a cup of tea for William and offering it to him. Then she offered Weston one, and he accepted it more out of manners than actual desire for tea. Oddly enough, William was the one to attempt to fill the silence and growing discomfort between himself and Lydia.

“I could not have asked for better weather. Perhaps I could trouble one or both of you for a tour later this evening or even tomorrow? I know that the girls are readying quite the evening. So, perhaps tomorrow would be best.” William amended quickly at the end.

Perhaps the pair of them would be a lovely match. It would be the best possible outcome. That, and then he would not have to endure any of the balls this season either.

In any other setting, Weston would have been thrilled to sit back and study the way that his normally introverted friend was glancing up at Kitty every handful of moments. There was no denying that she was an undeniably beautiful woman. But, sitting next to Lydia it was hard for anyone to seem like they shone properly.

There was quite a possibility that Weston was in well over his head when he could

not seem to banish such thoughts from his mind.

It must be simply because she had so many similarities to his mystery woman that he was so bamboozled. The sunlight seemed to catch her hair and make the brown seem to have hints of gold woven through it. It would have been an impossible chance for the woman sitting beside him to be the same person.

The handkerchief that she had left behind did have the initials 'L.R' in pink... perhaps her name could have been Lydia but as he had no idea what her maiden name could have possibly been, he was unwilling to make incorrect assumptions. It was very more likely that she was not the same woman and were he to say anything toward the effect, she would look at him like a crazy person. More so than she was already doing.

Even so, as he sat there listening to William and Kitty make mundane small talk, he could not help but to keep his attention turned to her. Even if he was only watching her out of the corner of his eye. It was as if he were drawn to her. Perhaps he should make more of an effort to correct their first encounter.

"I would appreciate the opportunity to take a look at the books that you mentioned earlier, whenever you have the time to show me. I did not wish to start poking around places that you would not like me to be." Weston said softly, intended only for Lydia.

"I should not like you anywhere in my home, Your Grace. Does that mean that you will leave?" Lydia countered, adding a sugar cube to her tea.

"I could not, even if I wanted to."

Lydia sighed. "Very well. Though, you simply could ask me. I know everything of importance about the estate and everything within it."

“You must have excelled at your studies when you were younger.”

“Do not patronize me!”

William and Kitty were staring. It was enough to make him reconsider what he was going to ask next. Instead, he backed off. “Yes, very well. I should appreciate your help then. I look forward to working with you.”

Weston tried to smile at her, hoping that William and Kitty would take the hint to continue their conversation.

Then, much to his surprise, Lydia smiled back.

### Chapter 9

Why did I smile at him?

Furthermore, why did she find his smile so enchanting? Lydia did not think of herself as the sort of woman to become too absorbed in a man's looks. She did not think that she was easily swayed by physical appearances. She was not prone to chasing fancy trinkets or baubles. Before today, she had liked to think of herself as far more practical than that. Apparently, she did not know herself nearly as well as she should like to think.

But, if he was willing to listen to her with the books, then perhaps he would be willing to listen to her when it came to other things as well. It could just be the tip of the iceberg, or it could amount to nothing. For her own sake, she was going to hope that this was merely a sign of good things yet to come. That was what she needed to hope for at least.

The duke started to remove his coat to combat the warm afternoon sun, and she could hardly tear her eyes from him as he did so. Impossibly, his arms seemed even more muscular like that. How could that even be possible? What would happen if she were to see under his shirt, would he be even more impressive then?

Against her better judgment, she found herself staring at his hands as he rolled up the sleeves of his shirt to his elbows and repositioned himself to be more comfortable on the blanket.

Noticeably, a good deal closer to her. She could have sworn that she felt his body

heat radiating toward her.

She needed to compose herself. Of course he was a handsome man, he was a known rake. He was unlikely to have seduced so many women as his reputation liked to suggest that he did, if he were not handsome. He knew what he was doing. She ought to be ashamed of herself for allowing herself to fall for such obvious tactics!

“You know, perhaps it would be best for you to stay for a while.” The duke said, picking up a cookie. “A month at least, just so that I can be sure that everything is in order? I should hate to do you a disservice by not taking all of the proper steps going forward.”

Lydia laughed. “Well of course, Your Grace. I shall be staying for the upcoming month, and then the one after that, and the one after that.” She made a circular gesture with her hand as if to say into perpetuity.

The duke held her gaze as he grinned. “Right, well. At least that shall give us sufficient time to get to know one another and for me to take over the duties that have been assigned to me.”

“Or you could save yourself the trouble.” Lydia mused playfully as she took another sip of her tea.

“I shall make you a bargain? Perhaps if you have sufficiently proven yourself to me by the end of that month, we will come to some sort of accord.” The duke said.

Something fluttered in Lydia’s chest. That ember of hope that she had thought to have been wholly snuffed out was back. Flickering small, just a little pilot light but it was more than enough for her to cling onto. Despite her insistence to the contrary, she had not actually expected to be given a single inch of leeway. He did not owe her anything, no matter how much she felt otherwise.

If only their father could see her now. As a widow, she did not need a chaperone with her. But father would have insisted that she have one as she was now unmarried in his eyes. Kitty would not count as a chaperone.

In fact, just seeing Kitty and William speaking to one another like they were would have had him desperately plotting marriage contracts. Yet another perfect reason as to why Kitty could not return to their father's home. She deserved to marry for love, and staying here with her was going to be the only way that she could absolutely ensure such a thing.

Besides, agreeing to a month of them all being civil to one another would afford Kitty the time to get to know the duke's friend even better.

Lydia did not think that she had ever seen her sister looking at a man in that way. Even if it was just a passing infatuation for both of them, Lydia was more than happy to facilitate such a thing. If Martha were still around, she would have been happy to see her carrying on her improper legacy.

"Are you a gambling man, Your Grace?" Lydia asked the man sitting beside her curiously.

"Only when I know that I have something to gain by my eventual victory."

"And what makes you so sure that you will be the one to come out on top?" Lydia asked, her lip quirking upward.

"Oh, top, bottom—whatever pleases you." The duke muttered softly, his gaze darkening as he spoke.

Lydia nearly spit out her tea.



She glanced over to see if her sister heard the words that he had just said, and mercifully she did not seem to have taken any notice of it. She did not know what she would have done if they had heard the clear insinuation. Though, glancing back at him he looked so casual that she almost felt as if she had imagined him saying such things to her.

“I would be happy to show you the collection!” Kitty said excitedly, hurrying to her feet. “Come, come quickly! It is the perfect time of day for such a thing!”

“What? What happened?” Lydia asked, moving to stand automatically. William hurried off after Lydia, chattering about something or another rather excitedly.

The duke was on his feet, holding out a hand to her, and she accepted. His hand was warm, and he had the callouses of somebody who trained extensively with swords. Though, there was perhaps something else too, the callouses that she could feel on his fingers made her think of a musician. Did he play an instrument as well?

“Where could they be off to so quickly?” The duke asked.

He had not yet let her hand go.

“Likely the arboretum. Kitty found a small bird’s nest recently and has been watching them hoping that they would hatch. She has a very proficient green thumb, so she spends a good amount of time there.”

“An unusual hobby for a lady of her station.”

“Yes, well. I am sure that it should come as no surprise to you that we do not always conform to the societal norms.” Lydia said, realizing as she looked up at him just how closely they were standing together.

“Really? I never would have guessed.” The duke chuckled.

His eyes truly seemed as if they could sparkle while she was standing this close. The quicksilver was back. How could that be possible?

Lydia caught herself, inhaling sharply and yanking her hand away from the duke. “Do not think that just because we have reached a truce that I will be any more helpful in your quest than I absolutely have to be. I worked very hard for what I have, and I... well... I thought that I would have a great deal longer to enjoy my time here.”

“I am truly sorry for the loss of your husband, my lady.”

Lydia nodded her head. She almost explained that while she and Jacob were far from a love match, that they were still very good friends.

“Thank you for your sentiments, Your Grace. I hope that when you marry, you shall have a long and prosperous future with whomever you marry. This is not a situation that I should wish upon anyone.”

The pair started to head up toward the house behind the chattering couple ahead of them, careful to give them a respectable distance so that it did not appear as if they were eavesdropping.

“I have no intentions of getting married any time soon, so perhaps I shall spare myself the pain altogether,” the duke answered.

It was a strange thing to hear. Normally, she thought that men such as him were only rakish up until a certain age. “You do not wish for an heir to your title?”

“It is expected of me, of course. But, well. Let’s just say that I have impossibly high

standards.” the duke said, staring off ahead of him wistfully.

“Oh? And what sort of standards should those be?”

He laughed humorlessly. “In so much as I compare every woman that I have encountered over the last years to a woman that shall never have another measure up to her. A woman who most days seems like a ghost or a figment of my imagination. Alas, she shall only ever live in my memory.”

“Some long-lost love? What happened to her?”

Why did she feel so painfully jealous all of a sudden? What a silly thing to feel!

“I have no idea.” The duke glanced at her almost sheepishly. Was that a blush that she spotted on his cheeks? “The closest thing that I have ever felt to what I believe to be love, was at a masquerade ball a great many years ago. Of course that seems silly, as I only knew her for a single evening, but it was more than enough. No matter how many women I have been with since then, none of them would have been a suitable wife. I think I have been chasing after an unobtainable spark ever since then.”

Something in Lydia’s gut twisted painfully. It sounded so much like her own story. But it was wholly impossible—was it not?

“Regardless, I have not loved any of the women that I spent time with. Nor have they been in love with me. I just keep hoping that someday the woman from my memories will find me miraculously and we will be gifted with the chance to make up for so much lost time.” The duke sounded so forlorn; it was hard not to feel sympathy for him.

It was too similar.

Almost as if he had reached inside of her own mind and pulled out the memory to play for her. Was he the masked man? Air was getting tighter. It was an impossibility. Wholly and utterly unfathomable. Was it not?

“This woman, you truly have no idea who she might be... or where she could have gone to?” Lydia spoke, hoping to keep the tremble of nerves out of her voice.

The duke shook his head. “No, all that I have is an embroidered handkerchief that she dropped that night - like Cinderella’s shoe.” He laughed. “It is the only thing that I have to prove that I did not imagine the whole thing.”

Lydia’s skin went cold with shock. She stopped walking. It was impossible.

The Duke of Somerfield was her masked man?

### Chapter 10

It was all too perfect. All of the pieces were exactly aligned with one another. Even the mention of the handkerchief was enough to trigger a vivid recollection of it in her mind. She could still picture the pink stitching. Lydia had thought that she had lost it, but she had always wondered if she had left it there or not.

“A handkerchief?” Lydia echoed, her steps faltering as she moved toward the house.

The duke nodded absently, not looking at her as he spoke next. “Yes, just two little initials on the bo—”

“What were they?”

The duke laughed, not wholly grasping how shocked the woman beside him had become. “Try as I might, I never could seem to find another woman with the initials L.R but I -”

Lydia could not take another step. “That was mine.”

The duke turned, blinking at her incredulously.

“My maiden name is Russell; my surname was naturally changed when I got married.” Lydia’s voice was almost a whisper. She took a step forward boldly, her hands lifting as she rose herself up onto her toes as high as she possibly could and hovered her hands over the upper half of his face.

Her head tilted, attempting to match up the current image with the one that lived inside of her memory so vibrantly. Here, the same image that had been at the forefront of every dream that she had had since that year.

Softly, Weston's hands closed around her wrists, lowering her hands from his face. His chest was so still that it did not appear that he was breathing. Could he feel it too? When she looked up into his eyes once more, she almost felt her eyes welling with tears. She had no hope that she would ever truly run into him again. She never thought that she would look into his eyes or be near enough for him to touch her.

His thumbs brushed over the insides of her wrists, studying her face as if he were seeing her for the first time.

"Come with me," he said, pulling her toward the nearby gardens. It felt surreal to be repeating the same sorts of events that she could remember so vividly. Lydia's hand twisted, pushing her fingers through the duke's boldly, linking their hands more properly until they were well ensconced in the garden where they might have a moment of privacy.

As soon as he was certain they were alone, the duke hovered his hand over the side of her face as if needing to commit this new version of her to memory. It was satisfying to know that the spark that she had felt while arguing with him before was not unfounded.

"This does not feel real." Lydia whispered with a soft smile. "I have thought about you nearly every night for the last nine years."

"I knew that the connection that I felt could not be mistaken. It could not be from nowhere." The duke spoke almost wistfully as if his mind would not still put together the pieces with enough speed. "After all those years of searching, you appear in the least likely of circumstances. It feels impossible."

Lydia's hands slipped from his, wrapping them around herself as she struggled with the abundance of emotions. What did this mean? Just because she now knew the identity of the only man who had ever made her feel quite that alive before, would things change for her? It did not change the will or the issues of the estate.

She was a widow now, with young children whom she was responsible for. Did she have the right to be here, hiding away in a garden with a man? Much less allowing him to stand so closely to her and touch her. Technically speaking, she was still in her mourning period. It would be wholly inappropriate for her to allow such feelings to resurface now.

Weston's finger curled under her chin, gently urging her to turn back and look at him properly. "I have dreamt of this moment so many times."

The smile that he offered her then was unlike anything that she could have imagined. Soft, gentle and almost hopeful. It was impossible not to feel the flutter of nerves and anticipation in her belly at the sight of how handsome it made his face.

"Of course, over the years there have been variations of how I might approach this moment, but almost all of them resulted in being able to finish that moment that we shared. I often wonder what might have happened if you had not been called away or if I had been swifter in convincing you to stay.

If the years had passed, would it have been just a fleeting moment in time, or something more?" Weston said softly, as if speaking too loudly would break the fragility of the moment that they found themselves in.

Everything that he said seemed to have been pulled from her own mind. She had wondered the same thing countless times. Weston's thumb brushed over the tip of her chin softly as he shook his head. Lydia knew that she could not look away, she was helplessly transfixed on his every word.

“But, now that I am standing here in front of you there is only one thing that I desire more than anything, and that is to feel your lips against mine once more.” Weston’s gaze dropped to her mouth, lingering as he traced the fullness of her bottom lip with his thumb next. “May I?”

Lydia knew that she should not. If she allowed this to happen, she would only become addicted all over again. Her body drew closer to him, pining to be pulled into his strong arms despite her mind rebelling against her impulsivity. Logically, she should say no... but she wanted him more than anything.

Perhaps it would be terrible. If it were nothing but a tangle of teeth and gnash of lips, then she could dispense with her fantasy. Surely, she would have built the memory up in her mind to be far more satisfying than it was, right? It was purely for academic reasons that she needed to kiss him. That was what she was going to tell herself. Just one kiss, and she would learn that it was not so impressive, and she could finally have some semblance of closure.

Lydia lied to herself so wholly that she dipped her chin into a nod, pretending that his kiss was not purely out of desire for him.

There was no collision of their mouths, there was no awkwardness or fumbling in the way that Weston cupped her face and pulled her closer to him. His lips were soft, and talented in the way they sampled her very essence. Lydia’s hands found their way to his chest, pulling him closer to her by the lapels of his waistcoat.

A soft sigh of pure, unfiltered yearning left her lips, only to be swallowed by his. Their tongues met, dancing together as they once had waltzed before. Lydia could feel him everywhere . Wholly enveloped in the heat and scent of him she could not get enough. Her hands could not touch him efficiently as she wanted to memorize each and every bit of him lest she be suddenly rudely awoken from this dream.



Breathless, the moment did not shatter. She was almost afraid to open her eyes. Weston's hands tightened around her waist, and his lips started to travel down the side of her neck. It was all happening so quickly that her mind would not stop reeling.

All of these years, and it was finally here. Her dreams manifested into reality. Her head fell back, safely held up by Weston as she savored each and every kiss against her heated skin. Then it shifted, one of his arms banding around her lower back to keep her upright and his other drifted toward her breast, massaging the skin softly.

The few times that she had ever lain with her late husband had been nothing like this. She hadn't been gasping and wanton, she had known that she had little to no choice in the matter because it was her wifely duty to him. After they had had their daughter, their coupling was twice a year at best.

It had been enough for her, as the encounters (while perfectly pleasant) never left her wanting more. The fulfillment and boundless pleasure that Martha had always advised her of simply had not been there. Lydia had resigned herself to thinking that such things just were not meant for her.

Turns out, her body was simply only responsive to this one man. Something she would no longer complain of.

If she were to lay with him, what would happen? Given that this man was now going to be in her life whether this happened or not, could she handle it if she were just another name in his little black book? If their union were only once, would that satisfy her?

She knew that it would not. One kiss had not been enough, and even this was not going to be enough. There was something addictive about his touch and the hungry way he looked at her. She had never felt more seen, more desired.

If it were to fade away?

Better to never know the depths of those feelings than to be left heartbroken.

With that, Lydia pushed the duke away from her.

Though there was little strength in her arms to fuel the action. It was not often that her impulses overrode her brain but now her faculties were back in control of her body.

“We should not, Your Grace.” Lydia panted, struggling to control her breathing. Her chest heaved; her face felt flush as looked anywhere but his face. “Please forgive me, I do wish to... but...”

Slowly, the duke removed his hands from her and then tugged his clothing back into place. He pointedly cleared his throat and chuckled under his breath. “Nothing to apologize for, my lady.”

What was she saying? There might not be another opportunity like this! She ought to seize the moment! It was such a rare thing that she was allowed to do anything for purely selfish reasons. Allowing herself this pleasure was something nobody could take from her... but if there were consequences, they could very well affect those that she loved the most.

The duke grabbed her hand, formally kissing the back of her palm before straightening. He took a moment to subtly adjust himself. He does not press the issue. She somehow knew that he was not going to attempt to make her uncomfortable.

“I am just glad to know who you are, my lady.” Weston smiles. “You know where to find me.”

Lydia could not even summon words to say goodbye. She merely turned on her heel and walked straight back up to the house.

That night, Lydia could not sleep—torn by her guilt, her desire to be free, and her desire for the duke. What would the future hold for her and her daughters? Is it possible that the duke could be part of it all?

### Chapter 11

The duke would meet the girls today. Both Lydia's own biological daughter as well as the one whom he was going to be charged with caring for moving forward. A prospect that was anxiety inducing on its own, let alone with the added tension of her own unsorted feelings toward the duke. Both girls were riddled with nerves.

It was the first day that either of them had felt up to leaving their rooms. They had been rather sequestered in their wing of the house with their governess during the worst parts of their mourning period. That, and Lydia had wanted to have some time to sort out her own feelings about the men in the home before risking introducing either of them to her children.

But it would be nice to have them in her arms once more. If they were feeling up for it, they might even take tea in the garden. The fresh air would do them all good. Lydia had hoped that the longer she was in the company of the duke that she might get a clearer head about things, but that was proving to not be the case. Her sister had become rather fond of both men.

That should have been enough for Lydia to give them more of a chance than she was presently doing. As it was, she felt like every moment that passed was simply her waiting for the other shoe to drop. As if something horrible might happen at any coming moment.

The best laid of Lydia's plans always had a wrench thrown in them.

When her daughters came bounding down the stairs shortly after breakfast in their

lovely gowns, begging to go into town, how could she ever say no to them? It was the first time that they wished to be out in public again after her husband had passed.

It was the least that she could do to indulge them. Even if she was still wearing her own mourning black, they girls did not need to stay sad because society dictated it. They would always miss their father. It was a loss that could not be filled, but perhaps a day of fun would cheer them.

Lydia and Kitty had quickly planned a whole day for the lot of them. Lunch would be served in a local tearoom that they had been known to favor. The establishment had a lovely selection of cookies and cakes that would be indulgent as well as one of Lydia's favorite blends of tea.

Then, if they so wished, they could go and allow the duke to buy them new ribbons and perhaps even a carriage ride through the countryside after. The weather was supposed to be splendid all day and if the clouds were any indication, they should be well met and without rain for the duration.

The whole carriage ride into town, her two girls had tucked themselves under her arms and nestled into her sides. It caused her ribs to ache, but she would never dare ask them to move. It was a lovely distraction from the work that she had been doing lately in avoiding the duke at all costs. It was becoming next to impossible to avoid him when they lived under the same roof.

"Do you think that we shall like him, Mama?" Juliet asked finally, inquiring to the man they were going to meet.

That was the question of the hour, was it not? She could feel Kitty's eyes on her. All of the unasked questions hanging between them. Kitty had been attempting to figure out her unexpected change in attitude since their picnic.

“Do you like him, Mama? Is the duke a good man?” Margaret asked.

Lydia hesitated. Not because she did not think of the duke as a good man but because she was stunned to realize that she had not even given him the chance to properly get to know her. Was she truly such a slave to her lust that she could not have the decency to have a proper conversation with the man? She was ashamed of herself.

“Of course he is.” Kitty interjected, answering on Lydia’s behalf. She quickly nodded along with the sentiment.

“I think that he shall have nothing but kind words to say to you and your sister both. It is important that you do not feel intimidated or frightened. He was your father’s cousin, and family to us as well. We shall have to treat him as such.” Lydia said evenly.

Kitty snorted. “All of us, sister?”

Lydia could have kicked her, if the girls would not have wanted to know why she was doing such a thing.

The carriage finally came to a stop in front of the local tea parlor. The girls were escorted out by their footman, and Lydia followed slowly after. She worried that sitting so close to the duke when she had not even been able to say two words to him would pose a challenge in and of itself.

Much to all of their surprise, the duke was already waiting for them inside of the tearoom. His friend, William came bounding out to greet the small group excitedly. Though, Lydia did not miss the fact that his attention seems to be focused on one person in particular. The same someone whose face tinted pink the moment that she felt William’s attention upon her. Truthfully, she could not recall the last time that she had seen her sister so effortlessly happy. It was a refreshing thing to see.

Lydia found herself looking over their shoulders, straining to see where the duke might have been.

“Mama, is that the duke?” Juliet asked, tugging softly on Lydia’s skirt.

“No, this is Sir William.” She answered after a moment, snapping out of her daze. “Remember? You met him once before.”

At Lydia’s reintroduction, he seemed to remember his manners and turned away from greeting Kitty to enthusiastically greet the two younger girls.

“Hello! It is so lovely to make your acquaintance! I hope that you will not find the duke and I’s presence in the home to be too intrusive. I should not wish to burden you in the slightest.” William said with a polite bow in their direction.

Juliet was the younger and shyer of the two, so she needed to ensure that nobody took her shyness for rudeness.

“I do believe that the duke is awaiting us inside of the shop, if you would allow me the privilege of escorting you?” William asked, extending his arms to Margaret and Juliet. Lydia appreciated the effort. It was difficult not to snatch them away. The impulse to keep firm control over them was intense, but she knew that she would have to loosen her hold on them a little, no matter which way all of this went.

The duke stood near their selected table in the shop, his spine rigid as he greeted them with an uncomfortably tight smile. Was he nervous? Had he suddenly changed his mind about wishing to meet the girls? How was he supposed to be so determined to be Margaret’s guardian when he could not even hold her gaze for longer than a few seconds at a time.

For a moment, the girls seem to be taken aback by the duke’s sheer size, hesitating

for a moment before remembering their manners and dropping into a curtsy.

“How do you do, Your Grace?” They both chimed in unison, and then Juliet promptly moved right back behind her mother’s skirts.

“Very well, thank you. It is my honor to meet you both.” The duke said in an overly formal tone. He stiffly gestured to their table that he had reserved. “If you should like to select your flavors, I would be pleased to order for us.”

The girls, happily tempted by sweet treats, took their seats and quickly started devouring the menu with their eyes. Lydia lingered a moment, watching the adorable way that the duke shuffled from one foot to another before both girls made their selections.

He dutifully moved away to uphold his end of the bargain while Lydia and Kitty took their seats as well. Though, she should not have been surprised that when the duke chose to return to the table, he chose the seat closest to Lydia. Such a tight fit, in fact, that his warm thigh was pressed tightly up against hers.

“You would think that he was frightened of them,” Kitty teased under her breath in a way that only Lydia was meant to hear. “It is rather comical, is it not? It makes him seem so much more human.”

Lydia suppressed a giggle at the duke’s expense. She could not bring herself to comment or acknowledge that what she was feeling was more than mere fondness.

“Your Grace, you did not get anything for yourself?” Margaret asked, slowly sipping her tea.

“No, I found that my nerves would not tolerate it.”



“You were nervous too? But we are just girls!” Margaret laughed, the sound so bright and pretty to Lydia’s ears. Again, she was reminded that in no world was she going to be able to leave her side. No, she loved her too much for that.

“I trust that your trip was standard?” The duke’s brow furrowed, and he chose to rephrase the question. “I mean to ask, how was your journey?”

Juliet and Margaret exchanged glances, but to their credit they did not giggle. If Lydia was not mistaken, she could see a hint of pink starting to color his cheeks. It was so refreshing to see him so disarmed when he was usually the one flustering her.

Just knowing that he is choosing to put forth so much effort warmed her heart. She could not help but to wonder if he had any experience with young children before this day. From the tense way he was holding himself she would presume that he had not.

Soft conversation flowed between him and the girls as he fumbled through attempting to get to know them. But all Lydia could focus on was the way he seemed ready to bolt the moment things became any more uncomfortable than they already were. The hints of red tinting the skin of his neck and ears was only a further testament to his mood. She could not help but wonder what it would take for her to elicit such a similar reaction from him.

“It was perfectly fine, Your Grace.” Juliet answers, though she does not look him in the eyes directly. Perhaps in time, she would warm up to him.

What was that I just thought?

Certainly, she could not wish for him to get along with her daughter when he was here to halt her personal goals. What did it matter if the girls liked him? It would actually benefit her further if they did not like him in the slightest. Then she would have even more reason to keep him at arm’s distance.

“We are to show you around the village after this, is that correct, Your Grace?” Margaret asks sweetly, finishing her tea.

Under the table, the duke’s hand found her hand, twining their fingers together and resting softly over her skirt but even just the proximity of his hand spread an uncomfortable warmth through her core. The sort that pooled directly between her legs.

Was she truly such a silly woman that she could not contain herself near him? This was exactly why she had been avoiding him. So that things like this would not happen.

“I would be delighted to be escorted. I have much to learn,” The duke answered, suddenly no longer fumbling over his words. His hand slips down the curve of her thigh, not seeking any higher but seeming to feel steadied by the fact that he was touching her. Perhaps knowing that he had transferred his fluster to her, he could operate more easily.

Coming to her senses, Lydia pulls her thigh from his grip and rises from the table. “Are we ready?”

“I think that I shall stay behind and finish my tea, if that is alright with you, sister?” Kitty says sweetly, holding Lydia’s gaze with such intensity that she had no choice but to allow her sister this favor. “It will allow you time with your daughters, and I can return to the house when I am finished to coordinate dinner with the staff? Would that suit you?”

Lydia could hardly believe what she was hearing. Her sister had never once offered to help with any of the household tasks. It had always been Lydia’s assumption that her sister merely did not realize the effort that it took or that such small tasks even needed to be handled.

Kitty was prone to daydreaming, and Lydia presumed that Kitty was under some delusion that those sorts of things just happened by themselves or some other silliness. To hear her willingly take on responsibilities? No matter how small? She was only too happy to oblige her.

Lydia nodded softly. “Of course, sister, thank you.”

It was not only a sign that she was finally growing into her age, but perhaps it was also the desire to seem more mature to a certain man who had apparently caught her eye.

### Chapter 12

Weston thought that he was a man with sufficient reserves of energy until today. It appeared that the endless stamina of youth was shaming him. He was going to have to work harder to keep up with them. Though, he was not one for going to shop after shop.

Weston's clothes were tailored for him personally at his manor and then delivered once it was finished. He socialized at the club and did not have to do so in ribbon shops or feel the need to peruse news stands for topics to discuss.

Neither girl seemed to have a shortage of things to speak about once they decided that they were not intimidated by him. Even their governess seemed to have some difficulty in curtailing them from wishing to be everywhere at once. Their arms were already laden with ribbons, and they were arm in arm in front of himself and Lydia as they moved down the street, smiling at everyone that they passed.

"I must thank you for this outing, Your Grace." Lydia said to him. It was the first thing that she had voluntarily spoken to him in many days. If they were not in company of others, he would have teased her for it.

Though, he knew the importance of pretending to still only be acquaintances. If only Lydia knew how poorly he had been sleeping these last few nights. So many years of searching for her and now to have her and still not be able to touch her as he wished? She was avoiding speaking to him, and it was nothing short of torture.

She would have to forgive him for the ice shop. He could not sit so near to her and

pretend that he did not feel anything for her. He had to touch her, as often as possible and anywhere that she would permit, or he felt as if he might go mad.

“What are you thanking me for?” He asked.

Lydia glanced at him out of the corner of her eye. Could she not at least look at him and put him out of this misery? “The girls have been filled with sadness since their father passed, this is the first time that I have seen them smile in weeks.”

“I am happy to be of assistance,” he said simply, as they came to a stop outside of a shoe store. He stood just outside, letting the warmth of the afternoon sun soak into his skin as the girls and their governess went inside to examine the wares. “Were they close with their father?”

Lydia bit down on her bottom lip, folding her hands delicately in front of herself as she considered her answer. “They were. My husband was a lovely father to them. He was very devoted in his paternal duties.”

“A better father than a husband, perhaps?”

He did not mean offense by the question, but from the look that she cut him, he was clearly treading in dangerous waters. “I will not abide any negative talk about the dead, Your Grace.”

“That was not my intention, not in the slightest,” Weston attempted to explain. He took a step to her, closing some of the icy distance between them. He almost expected her to move away. “Lydia, how am I supposed to get to know you any better if you will not even speak to me. Every conversation that I attempt is met with barbs.”

“Please do not address me so informally, Your Grace. Certainly not in such public spaces. I would not like people to get the wrong idea. I have been very diligent in my

reputation here. All of the shopkeepers know me and the work that I did for my husband, and—”

“And you do not wish me to embarrass you. Is that it?” Weston could not help himself from pushing just a little more. “There are far more pleasurable ways to bring that pretty pink to your skin, my lady, if only you would permit me.”

On cue, Lydia blushed the loveliest shade of pink that he had ever seen in his life.

The way her hands clenched into fists in front of her, he thought that if she had been holding a fan, she might have surrendered to the impulse to hit him with it.

“Mama, mama!” Juliet exclaimed as she came rushing out of the store. Did Lydia know how alike the pair of them looked? It was the strangest thing, both girls seemed to have Lydia’s same eyes despite that not even being possible for Margaret. The older daughter was holding a pair of satin slippers that were a lilac shade of purple with a blue bow on top. “Come and look at these!”

“No, these first! Look, they match my robe, mama!” Margaret said excitedly. Every time that Lydia was near either girl, they both seemed to crave her attention. The governess started explaining something about the shoes and a sale that was happening, but they walked too far for Weston to hear them properly.

It did not feel right to intrude on their moment. Though he was more than happy to fund their shopping trips, some part of him was certain that Lydia would be offended by the notion.

Watching them as they were, seeing Lydia smiling at her daughters brought about mixed feelings for Weston. On the one hand, he could not stomach the idea of removing a child from her mother.

Clearly, Margaret felt that Lydia was every bit her mother as the one who had passed away in his cousin's first marriage. Secondly, he could not separate sisters. It would be cruel. Given that the will was written so long before his present marriage, it left Weston in a difficult position.

It would be far easier to dream up solutions to that problem if he were not constantly wondering what Margaret and Juliet would look like if they shared his genetics instead of his cousins. A family was something that every titled man knows that he will eventually have to settle down and have, but shopping with the girls today was the first time that he could actually envision such a thing for himself.

More than that, watching the way Lydia's face lit up the moment that the girls started speaking to her... it was something else entirely. Even now as they showed her slipper after slipper, rapidly asking for her thoughts and opinions, she was laughing. It might be the most beautiful thing that he's ever seen in his life.

Could he have truly expected anything less from the fierce woman that he met all those years ago? A woman who was unafraid to go for what she desired without shame? Of course she would fight for her daughters now. Of course, she would pursue her happiness and wish to ensure their future.

Before this outing, Weston did not think that he ever would have thought that a maternal nature could be attractive. He had segregated women in his life, those whom he bedded and those whom he did not. They rarely ever crossed—and those with heavy maternal instincts were usually the ones that he did not .

Lydia broke each and every one of his rules and she did not even know it.

It only made him want her that much more.

The girls purchased their slippers, only this time they passed the bags to him with

bright smiles before heading down the street to yet another shop. A perfume maker if he was not mistaken. He had not thought that this village would have been quite so prosperous but there were far more businesses than he'd imagined.

Lydia had done such a wonderful job managing the estate and funneling funds into the town. The first two shops that they had entered today had seen her black mourning gown and almost refused to allow her to pay for a thing.

Lydia did not hang back to walk beside him this time as she trailed behind the girls and their governess, forcing him to jog to catch up to her.

"You have done a lovely job raising them. It is apparent that they are bright young women who know their own minds. They walk with their heads held high, it's lovely to see." Weston offered, hoping the honest compliment could be an olive branch between them.

Lydia glanced at him out of the corner of her eye. "Well, when one is raised with a father such as mine, one does everything in their power to ensure that their own children are not raised in the same environment.

As I said, my late husband was a wonderful father and very supportive of their academic and artistic whims. They were very fortunate to have somebody who loved them who could boost their confidence in such a way, for however long they were allowed it."

"You speak as though you were raised opposite?"

"Yes, my father... he is not at all like my late husband. For that I am deeply fortunate. If it were up to him, Kitty would have been placed in a nunnery for the sin of being a spinster, and I would be forced back into his house until I could continue to fulfill the only purpose that a woman is good for according to him." Lydia explained.



The fact that she could speak so casually about her father's transgressions was alarming. There was no malice to her voice, nothing more than simple statement of fact that it was the truth of his life. No wonder Kitty had come to live with her sister. Weston could feel his fists clenching at his side despite how he tried to remain calm.

"That is not to say that my husband and I had a perfect marriage, or that we did not butt heads. Of course we did. Any person who finds themselves in an arranged marriage is bound to have their differences. Some simply ran more deeply than others. I tried to fill the spaces that he lacked in. Of course, as a man," Lydia chuckled to herself.

"You lot tend to think that you are the only ones who know how to run things. Eventually, I think he came to like the challenge."

Weston could not help but smile. He wanted to ask if she had loved his cousin, but he feared the answer. He needed to remain respectful. She still was in mourning, and he was a scoundrel for constantly thinking of her in the way that he was.

"Whether it is fortune, or misfortune, my mother died at a very young age. I was granted the task of helping raise my sister. My father employed a governess, of course, but I had to take on many roles my mother might have filled. I went through the trial and error of parenting well before I had any children of my own." Lydia smiled up at him, a bright fleeting ray of sunshine before turning her gaze back at the girls ahead of them.

It was impressive that she did not seem to resent the burden placed on her shoulders in the slightest.

"I think I can understand, to a degree." Weston found himself saying, though he did not know why he felt such a powerful urge to have her properly understand him. "I was granted my title at a very young age. One sacrifices their youth in order to affix

their future in a positive light. I had to learn a great many things and grow up very quickly to fill my father's shoes."

"That must have been very difficult for you." Lydia said softly.

"No more difficult than having to raise another child while still being one yourself."

"I suppose that it made us stronger people." Lydia teased, jostling his arm with her shoulder.

"I suppose in the end it did." Weston agreed, thrilled with even the smallest of touches from her. "I resented my lot in life for such a long, long time. I do not know if I have fully prepared myself for all of the other implied duties that come with dukedom... I refused to be trapped into a marriage of political gain. Perhaps that is why I developed the reputation that I have."

He glanced at her, making sure that he was not sharing too much information with her. The last thing that he wished was to push her away.

"I cannot say that I regret my rakish reputation. If for no other reason than it allowed me to have those few precious hours with you all those years ago. But it originally stemmed from the rebellious need to not settle down. My parents controlled every aspect of my life, but that was the one habit that they could not curtail."

Lydia laughed. "I think that we did a swell job of raising ourselves, if we are able to stand here as prosperous as we are."

"Go back in time and tell that to my seven-year-old self. I think he would have a fit."

"I should like to meet your seven-year-old self, I would tell him my name and how to find me correctly in the future." Lydia laughed.

He wished more than anything that what she said could be true. Perhaps then he would not find himself to be so very lonely without her.

### Chapter 13

When Lydia got out of bed, she would not have been able to predict that this was how the day was going to go. Every step that she took at the duke's side made her feel more and more on edge. She ought not to be getting to know him. Allowing herself to grow closer to him was only going to end poorly for both of them. It was only going to end in pain and heartache if she could not keep him at arm's length for at the end of the day, they were going to have different goals.

They could not both have what they wanted. There was no middle ground that she could see.

Even worse was that she found herself empathizing with him. Their childhoods were wholly different and yet so similar at the same time. Looking back at her own youth, she could not remember having time to feel sorry for herself or wish for a more normal childhood because she was simply too busy. There was too much that needed to be done every day—it was not until she entered the marriage mart that she decided that she wanted something for herself.

It was what had led her to Weston.

If things had ended differently, what might their present look like? If he had taken her that night, and courted her after, ending in their own eventual marriage... would they still be walking here like this today? Would he have lost interest in her and resumed his rakish ways?

There was a very real fear in her heart that the only reason he coveted her so deeply

now was because she was forbidden, and the one who got away. Lydia needed to face this situation logically, no matter how much she sympathized with him.

But if he were to find a place within her family now? A real place by her side?

“Your Grace, Your Grace!” Margaret called back to them, stealing Weston’s focus and snapping Lydia out of her daydream.

The duke smiled at the young girl and moved quickly to her side.

“Look at this!” Margaret gushed, pressing her finger against the glass window of a shop and animatedly explaining why the different colors on the fan she was eyeing meant different things. She was showing off, Lydia understood. “And there are different ways to hold your fan, but I suppose you know that. Do you not, Your Grace? I have just learned about it. My governess says that I need to know before I enter the marriage mart in a few years!”

“Yes, there are a great many accomplishments that you will need to have before then. Though, I think that focusing on your skills will benefit you far more than fan dances.” The duke explained. “Any young woman needs to take great care in the partners that she selects when the time comes.”

“Yes, but such a pretty fan cannot hurt, yes?” Margaret said prettily, fully intended to con the duke into spoiling her with a pretty new fan. “A girl can never have too much practice, right, Your Grace?”

Lydia would chastise her for such tactics, but it did appear to be working. The way that the duke was able to converse with her daughter now was so much easier than the one from the ice shop. He seemed to enjoy the conversation, even headed inside with her to further examine the fan for themselves. If he purchased it for her...

Was it possible that he would be a decent, loving father... a loving husband?

Lydia's face flamed at the thought. What was the matter with her? She should not have been having such thoughts. She pressed the back of her hand into her cheek in hopes that it might calm her even slightly.

Weston caught her gaze through the open door of the shop. Leaving Juliet with her governess outside, Lydia headed inside to where the duke was beckoning her. Margaret snapped the fan open, gently wafting the brightly colored green and purple fan toward herself. Lydia did not think that the fan, if purchased today, was going to last long enough to make it to the marriage mart, but it might be something for the pair of them to bond over.

"Can I, Mama? Please?" Margaret asked sweetly.

Lydia glanced over to the duke who gave her a slight nod of approval that he was happy to do it, and a warm smile.

For the first time in years, Lydia almost felt light again.

"Of course, my dove." Lydia agreed, taking a step back to watch the final interaction so that she might absorb it properly. The duke headed to the clerk to purchase the fan while Margaret beamed at him from his side. She kept glancing back at Lydia with a gentle smile. Perhaps this might not all be as terrible as she first thought.

If it was not, then what happened next? What would that mean?

"Well, are you not a pretty little girl?"

Lydia knew that voice. It was oddly familiar.

“Mistress!” The girl’s governess whispered harshly from outside, and Lydia quickly gathered her skirt and headed outside. Their governess had Juliet by the forearm, holding her tightly and angled slightly behind her body.

“What is the matter? We are family, are we not? I can speak to the girl. Come now, do not be shy! There is just no reason for that!” The man said again.

Lydia spotted him, and her stomach twisted as Cassian looked up at her from the way that he was crouched with his hands on his knees, attempting to be eye level with her daughter. “Juliet, to me.”

Immediately, her daughter complied. It might not make much of a difference who she was hiding behind, but the man was slimy enough that she did not wish for him to be anywhere near her daughter if she could help it. The duke and Margaret exited the shop shortly after, Margaret coming up short behind Lydia.

The duke wasted no time in putting himself between Cassian and the others. A small gesture, but Lydia appreciated it all the same.

“You are not meant to be here, Cassian.” The duke said in a low warning voice, unlike anything that Lydia had ever heard from him before.

A shudder ran down her spine. The authoritative, protective nature of his voice sending tendrils of heat spiraling into her core.

“Why would I leave? We still have so much left that we need to discuss.” Cassian insisted, his gaze soulless and hard.

“We have nothing to discuss with you. It was a mercy to allow you the freedom to leave on your own. It is not a courtesy that I will extend to you a second time. I suggest that you reconsider your actions and leave at once. Do not ever speak to these

women again.” Weston warned.

“You dumped me here like a stray dog! I will not be treated in such a way! You cannot honestly expect me to leave here penniless? No, cousin, I think not. I will have what I’m owed.” Cassian says, his face taking on an almost sinister expression that frightened Lydia.

Weston laughed humorlessly. “You are not owed anything at all.”

“The inheritance.” Cassian said as if they were all stupid for not knowing what he meant before now. “Obviously.”

“My lady, why do you not return to the carriage at once, I shall meet you there. It seems that I must have another conversation with this fool.” Weston advised.

Lydia ushered the girls to their governess who quickly started to lead them away. She ought to go with them, but she did not feel comfortable leaving Weston on his own. Certainly, a man of his caliber was more than capable of handling himself in whatever situation that he might find himself in. However, something in her gut said told her she needed to remain by his side.

“It will be all right, my lady, go ahead.” Weston offered once more, with a soft nod and gentle smile to put her at ease.

Though it felt wrong, she decided that it would be best for her to join the girls. With a final look back at the duke, she hurried along.



### Chapter 14

Weston's temper was a fickle thing. Normally, he felt that he was a very well controlled sort of person, but in matters such as this... he was struggling to maintain his composure. The pure audacity that Cassian had to speak to him in such bold terms was grating on his nerves. The man was not entitled to a single bill, let alone an inheritance. He was so opposed to earning his own money that he expected to have something for nothing, and it was not going to suit him.

"Perhaps now that the two of us are alone, you will listen to reason, cousin." Cassian continued. There was such a haughty air about him that Weston could hardly abide.

"Is that right?" Weston refrained from rolling his eyes. Perhaps he ought to have called the constables in the first place. Perhaps it was too kind to presume that he would take his licks and be on his way. But apparently that was hoping for too much.

"Yes. I think that if you are wise, as I hope that you are, you will see the benefits of giving me what I'm due." Cassian folds his arms across his chest, looking every bit the cat who got the cream.

"And what, exactly, do you think that you are owed?"

It was likely a mistake to indulge him in this conversation, but he needed a moment or two to figure out what he was going to do with the bastard in the first place.

"The earldom should suffice for the pain and suffering that you have caused me."

Weston laughed outright. “Oh? Is that all? Why not gilded horses and a dragon’s trove of treasures as well?”

“You will give me what I want, cousin, or else I shall have to tell all of these lovely people as well as anyone with ears, that I was kidnapped and abused by the lady of the house. Is that the sort of rumor that you wish to have leaked?”

Weston saw red. The moment that Lydia was threatened, he wanted nothing more than to wrap his hand around his throat until the man’s face started to purple. The sudden violent impulses should have frightened Weston, but at the moment it felt perfectly logical to do.

“Choose your next words very carefully.” Weston warned. “Not that anyone will believe a single word that you say.”

“I know that the lady had help. I will find the witness, for she is far too small to transport and truss me up on her own. Either way, such violent rumors so shortly after her husband’s death? It is bound to spark all manner of rumors that will not be beneficial should she ever choose to remarry.

I will be more than happy to bring down an investigation should you attempt to refuse me.” Cassian continued with his smarmy tone. In his mind, he likely had already won the whole conversation. Weston was not one to give in to such things so easily.

“You do not have nearly the sway that you believe you do. You are an untitled man, who will be making baseless accusations without any evidence. Just how do you think that you are going to leverage me?”

Weston shook his head and turned around. It was best for all parties involved to simply walk away from this encounter. Any prolonged lingering in this setting was only going to ensure that Weston got into a physical altercation with Cassian. It

would not be the impression that he wanted to leave here today.

“I have not dismissed you!” Cassian shrieked shrilly. He sounded almost like a child throwing a tantrum.

“You presume to command me in any capacity?” Weston spun on the man quickly. At least Cassian had the sense to stumble back a couple of paces lest he be barreled into by Weston and his irritation. “What gives you such a right?”

“Because I am the one in control here.” Cassian lifted his chin, attempting to somehow make himself be larger than he was, but he could not hold a candle to Weston.

Weston sneered down his nose at the irritating man. “An act out of sheer desperation is hardly an indicator of a criminal. Besides, it is a far worse transgression that you were claiming to be me so that you could cheat a grieving widow out of her home and funds!”

“I would not have kicked her out, I am certain that she could be of some use to me.”

Weston’s knuckles cracked. His jaw felt painfully tense from the intense effort that he was putting into not putting his fist through Cassian’s face. “Watch your tongue.”

“I had rather hoped that you would take the easy route here and see sense, but since you will not, do not think that this is the only trick that I have up my sleeve.” Cassian continued. He was an annoying gnat floating around his head that Weston could not seem to swat away.

“I do not know what you mean, but I can assure you that whatever harebrained scheme that you think is going to work, it will not. I will put forth any means necessary to thwart you.”

If Cassian chose not to be intelligent enough to take the warning for the threat that it truly was, then the consequences would be on his own head.

“Do you not wish to know why I am so certain?” Cassian continued, nearly bouncing on his heels with glee. “And before I tell you, I shall assure you that I have proof for all of my claims. Whether you believe me or not.”

“I do not believe you.”

“The dowager’s reputation will be quite ruined when I expose the real reason that she was forced to marry the late earl with such haste. I know that you were not around for their wedding, but the whole reason that it was so pressed was due to the error in her sister’s ways.”

Cassian sneered. “As a younger woman, her little sister was caught in a compromising position with another member of the ton —only to have the dowager bail her out to cover the scandal. If memory serves, I believe that the earl had to pay quite a sum to smooth things over.”

Weston could not believe what he was hearing. It was not that he did not think that Lydia would do anything to get her sister out of trouble. However, Weston also was slowly coming to know Kitty for the woman that she truly was, and he could not fathom a situation where she would allow herself to be compromised in the slightest.

She seemed far too shy and reserved for such a thing. But was there a reason for that perhaps? It was not the sort of situation that he could simply ask them about.

“Would you like to know more? It was such an influential member, it might shock you that such a wallflower could be capable of such a thing.” Cassian laughed at his own comment. One would think that he was having the time of his life. “Such a strange thing for such a spinster to reside with her sister, is it not? I should hate for

her prospects of any future marriage be wholly ruined.”

“You call yourself a gentleman when you can make such threats against women? Have you no pride? No sense of honor?” Weston demanded, crowding his cousin’s personal space. If he would not see reason, he would have to force him one way or another.

Were they not in such a public setting, he would handle this situation right here and now. He would like nothing better than to personally remind Cassian of his proper place. But he knew that he could not make a scene no matter how badly he might wish it.

What he was certain of, was that he would not allow this to happen. No matter what happened, he would have to help her out of this situation. He would not abandon her to the crazed whims of such an obvious madman. But there was also no way that this could be resolved here and now.

“I shall consider your proposal.” Weston said through gritted teeth.

“I shall not wait forever to receive the money and title that I am owed, cousin. If you drag your feet for too long, I shall make my own arrangements.”

“Such things cannot be done overnight.” Weston hissed bitterly.

“Three months, cousin. That is all the time that I am willing to permit you to sort out all of the legalities. If you do not, three months and one day from now I will expose everything that I know to the ton .”

### Chapter 15

#### One Month Later

While the days are long, the time still seems to pass too quickly. Short nights spent getting to know one another were quickly coming to be some of Lydia's favorites even though she knew that the wiser course of action would be to keep her distance.

That night, they were all dressed up to attend their first public event together. As a group, they had spent so much time with the girls that it almost felt strange to be doing something without them present. An interesting opportunity to see if getting to know one another had been an effective way to suppress the feelings within her. Though, if sitting next to him in the carriage was any kind of indication, she was going to say no.

His thighs were spread just enough that she needed to keep her knees clamped tightly together. On the other side of the carriage, her sister kept giving her speculative looks and arching her eyebrow as if somehow Lydia was being too obvious with her current affliction. She could not help the fact that being near to the duke constantly physically affected her.

The conversation had been stilted over the last couple of hours, and they headed to the soiree at Lord Flaty's home, one of their closest neighbors. The governess was at home with the girls, and Lydia would have opted to stay home for the simple fact that her imagination was running wild.

What was she thinking, attending an event like this again with the duke? But Kitty

did technically need a chaperone for functions like this, spinster or not. Though, with the way that William kept looking at her, perhaps she was going to need the chaperone for an entirely different purpose.

Her sister was maturing right before her eyes, and she was allowing herself to be so distracted that she was missing milestones. Over the last few weeks, Kitty had been happily stepping up and performing more of the house duties so that Lydia had more free time on her hands to argue with Weston over the books and ledgers.

Which, naturally, left William and Kitty to get to know one another.

Lydia's impulse was to intervene, but she was determined to let them figure things out for themselves while they still had the opportunity to do so. At least she would be able to observe them while the pair socialized at the ball. Perhaps they might even share a dance or two. Lydia could not even recall the last time that she had seen her sister dancing with anyone.

What she did not like was the fact that from the moment she stepped out of the carriage, she seemed to be the center of attention in their small grouping. She could feel them looking at her in her black gown with pitying eyes. Lydia did not need, nor did she wish for, their pity.

Her grief was her own to shoulder and she did not wish to discuss it. However, not wearing the black dress would have been far more scandalous and would have caused far more people to speak about her.

Pleading that she needed to attend to her sister, she tried to circumvent their prying questions about the future of their estate and what she planned to do next. But following after Kitty and William caused her to lose the duke in the process.

Though, it was entirely possible that he was lost in the sea of people himself. It was

not every day that there was a duke to entertain. Some jealous part of her wondered just how many of the ambitious mamas and their eligible daughters will approach him with offers, or inquiries about his status.

What answer would he give them?

It should not matter. He was a free man; he could answer things however he liked. Yet knowing that did not abate the desire to know if he would indulge them or not. The attendees tended to be rather hungry for gossip and would be only too eager to speak to a duke with such an infamously rakish reputation.

She was not jealous. There was no room or time for her to be jealous.

“Good evening,” A voice from beside her said. Lydia turned slowly to see a tall man with sharp, symmetrical features and sandy blond hair. Deep brown eyes that were almost black and dark brows. Objectively, he was very handsome. But he simply was not her type. Certainly not when the literal man of her dreams was in the same ballroom as her.

“How do you do,” Lydia said politely with a nod of her head in his direction. She hoped that it would not be a lengthy conversation.

“Very well now that I am in the company of a beautiful woman such as yourself.” The man continued. His smile was pretty, and the flattery was always kind but for tonight... it was unwelcome.

Given the dress that she wore, there could only be one reason for him speaking to her—he was after whatever wealth that he believed her to have. Or worse, he was a rake and wished to take advantage of her apparent loneliness.

Lydia hummed noncommittally and turned her focus back to Kitty and William.



“Would you like to dance?” the man asked, seemingly unaffected by the fact that she did not engage in conversation with him. “I will not take no for an answer.”

Another girl would likely be charmed by his forwardness. Perhaps he would be a wallflowers dream partner as he cupped her elbow and guided her toward the dance floor. She was not even given the proper amount of time to react.

He placed his hands in respectable places, pulling her into a familiar dance despite the fact that her feet almost felt too heavy to complete the movements. She could not cause a scene or embarrass herself by storming off the floor. She had to endure it.

Was Weston watching her?

“It is so impressive for a woman in your situation to come out so soon.” The bachelor started, though Lydia did not think that it was a very good start to a conversation. “I cannot imagine how stressed you must be trying to shoulder the burden of her late husband’s fortune and navigating such uncharted waters without his guiding hand.”

She could feel the hairs on the back of her neck starting to prickle. Did he truly think that was a polite inquiry or statement to make? It was offensive. She smiled tightly, choosing not to answer him.

“Do you have plans to remarry? There are a great many eligible men here tonight. Though, I would like to say that I was the only one yet to have the gumption to approach you.”

The man chuckled, smiling with such a winning air about him that no doubt he was the sort of man who was highly accustomed to women falling at his feet. Did it not bother him that she had not even spoken more than a few words to him, or that he was carrying the whole conversation?

Irritation started to bubble within her as he took it upon himself to pull her closer. Lydia's hand braced against his upper arm, attempting to push him away from her but she was slipping.

Mercy found her in the form of the duke tapping the gentleman on the shoulder. "Might I cut in?"

"Actually—" the man started to protest.

"It was not actually a question." Weston insisted, shouldering the bachelor out of the way. The man gave an indignant frown and pouted right off of the floor. "I hope that you do not mind the intrusion."

"You have rescued me again, my lord." Lydia said with a quirked eyebrow.

"I could see the irritation radiating off of you in waves, my dear." Weston answered as he effortlessly stepped into the rhythm of the music. Silence fell between them for a long moment. It felt too familiar to be there in his arms. The setting was of course different; the dance, and the fact that she could see his face now... but it was still too familiar. She could not help but to allow herself to drift back to the memories that were imprinted upon her very being.

"Is that what it was?" Lydia could not resist teasing him. "I would have thought that you were jealous, Your Grace."

"Me? Jealous?" Weston said, pretending to not know what she was saying at first. "Absolutely."

She almost did not think that she heard him correctly. He added the acknowledgement in as almost an afterthought. This possessive side of him was something new. She should not find it so alluring that he wanted to have her all for

himself.

“Or, perhaps I only intervened to spare you from the odious man, I suppose you will never know the truth.” Weston added, and she could not help but smile up at him. “There was talk from some of the other ladies that that particular gentleman is something of a fortune hunter. I suppose that it would not be fair to call him a true gentleman.”

Lydia knew that Weston could say what he wished, but the grip of his hand against her waist and the fact that he seemed incapable of pulling his striking eyes from her own told her otherwise.

“If you ever choose to remarry, I hope that it is not too bold of me to offer my opinion, but it should not be to a man such as that.” Weston added, pulling her slightly close as they moved into the next section of the dance.

The air in her lungs felt as if it were growing thinner with every inch of space between them that was lost. She could not stop the question burning in her mind from tumbling out of her lips. “So, what sort of man should I marry, then?”

“Somebody who can handle you, obviously.”

He spoke as if the answer ought to have been obvious to her. The duke’s gaze upon her was fierce, steady, and she was helpless to keep her body from responding to him.

“You deserve a man who understands how intelligent you are. Somebody who can properly challenge your stubbornness and push you further.” Weston paused, the corner of his lip curling upward. “Perhaps an older man, wise... and experienced...” He leaned in closer to her, whispering in a way that let her feel his breath against her ear. “One who knows how to properly pleasure a woman.”

Lydia nearly tripped over her own feet at his forward words. Heat blossomed in her core and traveled lower. Instantly, she wished that they were not surrounded by others and that she might have the freedom to answer such words in the way that she wished. It was nearly impossible to conduct herself in the manner expected of her. Though, that was no doubt his intention. He did like getting such a rise out of her.

It only served to make her even more aware of the way that he was touching her—the hand that heated her skin through her dress, then dancing along the line of her waist as if promising that he was exactly the sort of man that she needed.

Once again, as she had so very many times before, her imagination supplied every way that she had ever fantasized about him, playing over and over in her mind. It was the least helpful thing to be thinking about when one is attempting to appear unbothered.

The dance came to an end and she swayed unsteadily on her feet the moment that he released her. She could still feel the ghost of his hands upon her, and wished desperately to know the feeling of them against her bare skin.

Weston took half a step back from her, bowing at the waist as he placed a chaste kiss to the back of her gloved hand. No doubt the man was delighted in rendering her speechless. Uncomfortable in her own overheated skin, she mutely curtsied before hurrying off the dance floor.

She needed to get a hold of herself, and quickly.

### Chapter 17

Something inside of Weston's chest threatened to cave the moment that Lydia walked away from him again. A sinking feeling that the past was somehow repeating itself. It was like a flashback that was overlaid on top of the present happenings.

He could envision her running away, chasing some voice that he had not been able to hear. All of those years ago, he had been wholly helpless to assist her. When he had come to his senses, he had chased after. He had spent the entire rest of the masquerade ball searching for her, but she had been nowhere to be found.

It did not matter that they were staying in the same home, or that he knew when she returned to that home that he was going to be in the same carriage as her. There was some part of him that just could not stomach the idea that he was going to be left behind by her again. His feet trailed after her, heading toward the ghost of her. There was no other option.

Weston followed her into a small library. He shut the door softly behind him. He could hear the soft sounds of her distressed breathing as if she were attempting to muffle the sound with her hands. The smell of books and incense was alluring, drawing him in further into the library in search of her. There was no way to know if she would be receptive to his attention or not, but he had to try.

He found her in a small opening toward the back of the room. Moonlight filtered in from the large window in the center of the room, and she paced to the left where there was a small seating area with a few circular tables.

A pretty arrangement with flowers and candles was unlit in the center of the largest table, which she carefully avoided as she walked from one side of the clearing to the other. Her hands were clasped to her chest, worrying at one another.

When she noticed him, Lydia looked up at him for only a fleeting moment. At least she did not tell him to instantly leave her alone. That had to be a good sign, at least he hoped that it was. Tentatively, he took a half step closer to her. The urge to touch her was nearly overwhelming but he could not bridge the gap, because he did not know if it would set her off or not.

“Lydia... are you all right?” Weston asked hesitantly. He was worried that somehow, he would say the wrong thing, or that speaking would spook her. He could not stand the thought of her running from him. It ached in his chest.

At first, she nodded her head in an almost frantic manner. Then, after a beat of silence she reconsidered. She shook her head that no, she was not all right. “I feel strange, and I am unaccustomed...”

She paused, inhaling sharply and stopping the pacing back and forth that was making him dizzy.

“I feel torn, if I am to be perfectly honest. The two parts of me have always been kept so very separated, but now, things are blending, and I am not certain how to move forward. It is... overwhelming,” Lydia said with a tight, uncomfortable smile.

“If I was too forward with you, my lady, I do apologize, it was not my intent...” Weston started, unsure where else to begin.

“That is not what I mean, Your Grace. It is not something that is being forced upon me.” She sighed and took a seat on the arm of the closest chair. “I am the issue here, Your Grace. Not anything that you have done or any inaction that you have. I should

know how to compose myself properly, I am a grown woman.”

Weston’s brow furrowed. “I do not follow your meaning.”

“Your forwardness is not the issue, Your Grace, because I feel the same desire that you do. The sensation is so strong that it nearly overwhelms me.” Lydia pressed her hand into her chest, as if she could externally push the feelings deep down inside of herself. “I am not sorry, and I know that a proper woman ought to be. I desire you, Your Grace, and I do not know if it is right.”

She gestured to the gown that she wore. Something tightened in Weston’s chest.

“We are here, in his home... and you are his cousin. I know that the pair of you were not necessarily close with one another in your youth, but is it not a betrayal to his memory to even consider something else so quickly after his death?” Lydia asked, her voice tapering off to a whisper the longer that she spoke.

Weston dipped his chin in understanding. Naturally, she would not wish to be disloyal to the memory of her husband. Was she right? Should he not feel some sort of inherent guilt for stepping so boldly toward his cousin’s widow?

He could see the pain in her eyes, Lydia was being pulled in two different directions. It was highly unlikely that he was helping matters. He wished that he could tell her that emotions are normal in a way that would make her believe him.

Would that make things better, or was his own selfishness justifying his desires?

Weston took a hesitant step closer to her and lowered himself down onto one knee. He knew that he had her complete and utter focus on his every movement. He could not turn that emotion away, or the feelings that he had for her. He would not apologize for attempting to pursue what he has spent so many years chasing after.

Touching her when she was so fragile was inappropriate. He knew that he could push the issue, that she would be receptive to seduction tactics in her vulnerable state, but he respected her too much for it. His hand lifted, so sorely did he crave her touch and the pain of not allowing it was difficult.

They were alone together so infrequently over the last week. He could see the flush of desire on the apples of her cheeks and the way her eyes were pleading with him to bridge the gap. He could go and lock the door and have her right here on this table, against the wall or the stacks. If that was his only target, then perhaps he could.

If he only desired closure from that one moment so long ago, he could have it. She would not tell him no, but he wanted so much more than that—no, he needed much more than that. He would not do anything that was not asked of him, he could not risk it. Not until she asked.

“There is no rush, my lady.” Weston said, daring to take her hand in his own. He brushed his thumb over the back of her gloved hand softly. “We have the gift of time. So many years might have been stolen from us for reasons out of our control, but we have all of the years in front of us now.”

He did not know what he expected her to say, but the silence somehow felt fitting. She did not pull her hand from his own, and she did not further the gesture. He could only hope that she truly heard and accepted his words for the offer that they were.

He could learn patience for her, there was no one more worthy of it than the woman in front of him. She has spent so many years of her life living for everybody around her, it would take time for her to learn what she truly wished. It would also take that same time for him to learn how to be the sort of man who deserved such a person.

“Shall I escort you back to the ballroom, perhaps?” Weston offered, rising back to his full height and offering her his arm. He did not realize how anxious he felt about such



an offer until she eased his worries and took his arm. Though, Weston was sure to take his leisurely time to head back into the ballroom.

It seemed that their absence was only minorly noted. It was a blessing as they started to move back into the room. Weston got her a glass of wine and offered it to her, which she accepted easily. Steadying her nerves would only help. Plus, it was an added excuse to keep her close to him. How strange it was that he could simply just enjoy standing next to her in this way.

Though, the peace that he was enjoying was ruined the moment that he heard the very last voice that he would have ever wished to hear in such a setting. Lydia's arm tightened around his, the wine glass paused halfway up to her lips. Her gaze was locked on somebody halfway across the dance floor, and Weston followed her gaze over to where Cassian stood in what he likely thought was his Sunday best.

The clothes that he wore must have been stolen from somebody, as they did not fit him properly, pulling tight in the wrong places and hanging loose in the others. He wore a large, greasy smile as he spoke loudly to any member of the ton that would stand still long enough to be pulled into whatever story he was choosing to tell.

"What is he up to now?" Weston hissed mainly under his breath. He had not told Lydia what Cassian planned, nor the demands that he was placing upon him.

Something sour was twisting in his stomach, a gnawing sense of dread. If Cassian changed his mind and decided to ruin Kitty and Lydia? He had more than enough audience to do so. Even if his claims were wholly baseless, it would still spark rumors that would be hard to dissuade. Their family is still coping with such a fragile circumstance.

There would come a time where he was going to need to ask Lydia about the accusations that Cassian had leveled against her. But that time had not yet come. Or

had it? If this was how Cassian was going to behave, he was going to have no choice but to tell Lydia about the blackmail attempt.

### Chapter 17

A fortnight later

Time passed in a blur. Speeding forward more quickly than he could properly process. The afternoons that they spent as a group on the lawns, or enjoying the gardens with Lydia and her girls felt almost as if he were becoming part of their small family. Watching Lydia with her children was something that Weston found himself quickly becoming addicted to.

Motherhood seemed to come so naturally to her. It certainly had not come that simply to his own mother. Perhaps should he be blessed enough for Lydia to grant him an heir, he would have time to right those wrongs of his childhood for his own son. Sometimes, it nearly felt as if there were too many emotions all at once.

If anything, he was starting to feel like they were living a dual life. Weston had been forced to step into the earl's position for the day and search for a suitable steward. Or re-train the current one for a whole host of new duties and all of the complications that came with that. Then at night, they were having to deal with constant inquiries that Cassian sent to the house, making demands.

The threat of exposure was keeping his stomach tied in knots.

But the girls were smiling again. They were running and playing, they had resumed all of their studies. Sometimes, on a random Thursday... Lydia would wear a gown in any color other than black. Even if it was only within the privacy of their own home.

Originally, when he had come to their home, he had thought that he was only going to be there for a month or so. He had figured that he would have already been finished with all of the difficult parts so that he could escort William to the season. Though, his dear friend had not mentioned such things since their residence here.

When one's life changes too quickly, one rarely sees the pieces moving until they have settled.

Weston was comfortable there, in a wholly different way than he was at home. Would he be able to go back into his previous life? Cassian's attempts at the inheritance that should only be meant for Lydia and her girls were far from over. It was a dangerous thing to even fathom letting his guard down to set the estate up to run without him, even if it was to fall back into Lydia's hands because he still felt that the other shoe could drop at absolutely any moment.

How could he grow any closer to Lydia or even try to act on his desires without overstepping his bounds? Since the library, he was choosing to take every moment that he could with Lydia, but those were falling few and far between with how much time they were spending as a unit.

There was a burning need inside of him to tell her the truth... but he was afraid of what might happen if she did not take the news well. How could she? How would anyone react to being threatened in such a way? Lydia was stubborn and strong as it was, but there were plenty of ways this could blow up in all of their faces.

Weston could lose her forever.

If Cassian were to win, if he were given the earldom, she would have to leave everything behind. If there was anything that Weston was positive about it was that this home and the estate meant everything to her.

He would not allow it to be removed from her, not even by himself. He wanted more than anything to figure things out without having to trouble her. He felt responsible for his cousin. This entitlement was a trait that Cassian had possessed from birth, and Weston needed to silence it.

The only reason that Weston was even considering keeping Cassian appeased with regard to Kitty's alleged background, was to keep scandal from their names. They both had their rights to their own secrets.

Lydia presently sat at the desk, her spine uncomfortably straight as she worked through yet another one of her late husband's ledgers. There had been a small supply of them that, apparently, he had kept locked away in his private bedroom, a place that she did not often go. It should not be such good news for Weston that she was not often intimate with her husband... but it was.

He had offered to be helpful, but she had almost shooed him out of the office when he had attempted to take one of the books out of her hands. She had not looked up in at least half an hour which had left Weston plenty of time to sit and admire her concentration and focus.

Tendrils of hair had come loose from the pins, as she kept using the heel of her palm to wipe the light sheen of sweat from her brow. It was warm in the office, and she said that opening the window would only tempt her to dally the day away outside.

There were a great many things that he could think about doing to her that would greatly ease the tension of her work. Things he would be only too happy and willing to do.

But if she took the news poorly, he might not be ever allowed to touch her again.

Lydia huffed and slammed the ledger closed. She pressed both of her palms into her

eyes and shook her head. “This is a whole travel log that he never even spoke to me about! It appears to be good things, trade deals in the Islands but those accounts were never transferred back to England! It is going to be such a headache in moving the funds.”

“Perhaps that is for the best.” Weston answered ominously. His remark strange enough that Lydia looked up at him quizzically.

“Why do you say that?”

“I have something to tell you that you are not going to like.” Weston sighed, fiddling with a piece of lint on the sleeve of his shirt. Anything but to look at the disappointment she was going to have in just a moment.

“I apologize in advance for not informing you sooner, I have been looking for any loophole or way out of this situation but as more money seems to be heading to the estate, it would be best to delay such transactions for as long as possible.”

“But why? Your Grace, you are frightening me.” Lydia whispered, all thoughts of her work gone.

“I wish to be nothing but honest with you, and I have not been.” Weston hesitated, now that he had started speaking it was becoming more difficult to continue forming words. “Was there a scandal with your sister around the time that you were married?”

From the way that Lydia’s face paled, he knew that it was the truth.

“Why would you ask me that?”

“Whatever happened, clearly has been out of public memory for long enough that I do not remember it, nor does William. I do not know if that will soothe you or not,

but whatever it was... it appears that our annoying flea Cassian does remember it. He says that he has proof and is willing to expose her if he is not given the earldom in its totality," Weston finished. Every nerve felt like a frayed wire. He could not breathe, not until she answered him.

"So... the imposter is what, blackmailing you? Us?" Lydia asked, her eyes narrowing to slits. Weston watched the way her fists tightened until her knuckles were white, and then she quickly tucked them under the desk to rest on her lap.

"Yes."

"For how long?"

"Since the day in town."

Lydia's nostrils flared, and she took another handful of moments to compose herself before speaking again. "It is true, about Kitty. Through no fault of her own. She did not invite nor welcome any advances, but she was caught with a man, and I helped her through it. I would do it again, I certainly do not regret my actions."

"It does not seem that there is anything to be ashamed of."

"Kitty would be absolutely mortified if she knew that you knew."

"I would never say a word."

"Does William know?" Lydia asked, her voice suddenly much more alarmed.

"Only that there was a scandal, I did not think—"

"Good. My sister would not wish for him to know. She has grown so very fond of

him...” Lydia said as she spun her chair around. Was it because she could not stomach the sight of him? Lord, he hoped that was not the case.



### Chapter 18

How could she turn her chair back around and face the man behind her? She could not stomach it. Not right away. Just a few moments were needed to compose herself and let the news sink in. He should have told her when it happened. The duke ought to have informed her what the weaselly man was attempting to do the day that it happened.

They had been alone together so many times since it had happened. He could have told her the night of the ball that they attended instead of quickly ushering the lot of them out of there and bringing them back home.

Through the window in the office, she could see a good view of the sprawling grounds to the back of the property and a lovely view of the gardens which were so lovingly cultivated. Even better, was the sight of her younger sister Kitty, walking beside William. Even from here she could see the bright way that the pair of them were smiling at one another.

There was absolutely nothing that she was not willing to do for her sister and her girls. Of course, it would not have been her first choice to have been placed into a marriage for profit, but it turned out just fine. She had even come to be very fond of Jacob.

Kitty deserved the chance to be happy, in whatever form that came for her. Just like when her girls come of age, Lydia did not have any true desire to marry them off without their consent. Those were patterns that she was unwilling to repeat.

“Are you planning on giving in to his request?” Lydia asked, dreading the answer.

“Of course not,” the duke answered, his voice heavy.

Lydia’s eyes closed, letting his words settle over her heavily for a long moment. There was no way that she was going to allow that terrible man into this home. He would not take up residence here and he certainly was not going to encroach upon her girl’s lives or her own. He had no right.

That terrible leech of a man would keep every penny for himself and not allow them a living. It would ruin them and her girl’s chance of future marriage. Or, worse, he would attempt to marry one of the four women himself. Be it now or when they were of age. Lydia’s stomach soured at the thought.

Over her dead body.

“I thought that I might take a visit to London for a short while. There is some research that I would like to conduct that might give us some options for handling Cassian. I would like to see what I can do to try to get ahead of this whole situation, ahead of the story or discredit him in some way before he has a chance to act on things.” Weston offered.

Lydia wondered what good it could possibly do? Was there a point? Kitty would have to be informed that her reputation might be ruined... or worse. A scandal coming out like this was going to bring shame to her late husband’s memory for being the one to fund everything that needed to happen at the time.

Jacob had paid off all of father’s debts as well as the silence of those who wished to ruin Kitty. All of that would be undone with a few words. Though, she could not imagine what sort of proof that the leech thought that he could actually have.

After another long moment of silence, she finally spun back around to face the duke, his remorse and concern etched into his handsome face. “I understand why you did what you did. I wish you would have told me, but I appreciate that you are telling me now. I certainly do not expect you to give up your inheritance just to save my sister.”

“You think that my concern is the money?” Weston half smiled, but it was not an amused expression.

“I do not care about the money, my lady, for I have more than enough funds for my life. I will not cave to his demands because I do not wish to see the estate to be taken out from under you. I cannot bear it. You have proven that you belong here, as do your daughters. This is their father’s home, and they love it. They will grow and thrive here; it is the only future that I will allow.”

He leaned forward, his elbows resting on his knees. “I would have hoped that you did not think so lowly of me in the time that we have gotten to know one another.” He trailed off for a moment and then shook his head, lifting out of the seat entirely.

If he had said such a thing to her yesterday, then she would have had an answer ready for him. She would have probably smiled at him, or even teased him about being unsure of her feelings when she thought that she had been perfectly clear about her desires even if she was not willing to act upon them.

She still fell asleep to fantasies of him each and every night. She awoke in the morning knowing that she had been dreaming of him. It was a restless, constant sort of desire that felt like an hourglass just waiting for the moment that the sand would run out and she would surrender to those impulses.

“The best way to ensure that the estate will be able to be left in your capable hands when this contestation is finished, will be to ensure that Cassian can never place a thin, greasy finger on the place.” Weston tried to smile down at her then, but the

reality of the situation was truly starting to sink in.

“What if he comes here while you are away, Your Grace? What am I supposed to do then?” Lydia asked as Weston came closer. He took a seat on the edge of the desk, so close that if she just turned the chair slightly, she would be able to feel his thigh against her own.

“He will not. At his core, he is a coward. That is why he is doing this. He does not have the honor or ability to seek his own fortune, and he would much rather steal the fortune of others. I shall do my best to return quickly.” Weston assured her. “He is the sort of man that my father would call ‘worm-bellied’. Though, perhaps if he had been raised by parents as strict and cold as my own, then he would wish to be a better man. A protector.”

Lydia bit down on her bottom lip softly. She nodded once, accepting his words even though the prospect of him leaving made her nervous.

“I will make this better, my lady, I promise it.” Weston said.

Lydia believed him. Emotion threatened to choke her as she leaned forward and grabbed Weston’s hand. She pressed her forehead into his hand, then let her cheek rest against it, savoring the contact for as long as she could allow it. Weston squeezes her hand softly in return.

“I should ready my things. I shall depart this evening after dinner.” Weston said.

It felt too soon. Such an influx of information so quickly that she could not absorb it. More than that, she did not wish to see him go. “Do not—” Lydia swallowed back the words, unsure if she trusted herself to keep speaking. She was angry, of course, but she was more afraid.

Frightened of losing this deal, frightened that Weston might decide that this was too much of a burden and simply never return from London—frightened for her sister and everything that might come crashing down around them.

Whatever was to come, she wished to face it with him at her side. It was such a simpler thing to think of having him here to support her, to hold her perhaps. Was she willing to give that up? No.

Lydia's eyes flicked upward to his, softening as she pulled on his hand slightly, urging him closer to her. "You cannot leave without a proper kiss goodbye."

### Chapter 19

Time froze and the air in the room seemed to grow thin as the seconds started to feel like years.

But Weston did not need to be told twice. He moved gracefully, cupping Lydia's face in his warm hands as he bent to let his lips brush against hers softly, as if afraid she might change her mind. Her eyes fluttered closed as she arched herself upward into the contact. She only wanted to feel like herself again. With so many things about to spin out of her control, she wished to have just one thing that she could hold in her grasp.

Her hands flattened against his chest. Weston would be gone for at least a month. With the travel alone it would take time to search for things and learn whatever it is that he is looking for. If for whatever reason he did not come back to her, would she be able to live with herself knowing that she finally had the opportunities that she had always dreamt of and still never acted upon it?

They were guaranteed privacy here in this office, that much she was certain of.

When the duke started to pull away from her, the soft kiss was not nearly enough. She pulled him closer by the waistcoat. Weston's hands fell to the arms of the chair that she sat on to keep from falling on top of her with the sudden force. She kissed him again, deeper, exploring the sensation of keeping him so close to her. Heat unfurled in her, the same kind that only he seemed to be able to stoke within her.

Was there truly any way that she was going to have her fill of him? It certainly did

not seem so. Every touch only made her desire more. The leather of the armchair creaked in protest as Weston's hands tightened over it. She wanted to know that he desired her too. Was it so simple for him to leave her? If only he would allow the self-restraint to fall by the wayside, then perhaps she could have been feeling this good the whole time.

A soft moan of pleasure filtered between their lips. She had not even meant to make it, but she tried to pull him down to herself again, her tongue running along the seam of his lips—and then he unleashed himself. His hands dropped to her hips, lifting her clear out of the chair and taking her seat in it instead, leaving her to straddle his hips, her knees digging into the back of the chair on either side of his body. Her skirts rode up indecently high on her legs, baring even her thighs to the air of the room. Her body felt as if it were on fire, sparking every time that he touched her.

His hands stayed on her waist, letting her body arch into his as she traced every line and curve of his face with the tips of her fingers. She was determined to commit this to memory, every sigh and hitch of his breath and she knew from the reverent way he mimicked the motions of her hands on his face against the fabric of her dress on her waist that he was doing the same thing.

Lydia grabbed Weston's hands, moving them from her waist to her thighs, breaking their kiss for only a moment as he gazed deeply into her eyes. Was he seeking further permission?

"I thought that you said I deserved a man who knew how to pleasure a woman, Your Grace?"

"Weston. When we are like this, call me by my name." His voice was lower, huskier than it normally was.

"Then give me what I want, Weston." Lydia challenged, the corner of her lip tilting

upward.

Weston's hands pushed up the soft skin of her thighs, dragging her skirt with it until it pooled around her waist. His thumbs indented the sensitive skin on her inner thighs, and she arched into him. She could not even remember just how long it had been since she had been touched this way by anybody other than herself.

She rocked her hips toward his hand encouragingly as she continued kissing him. Her mind started to stutter and stop, the feeling of finally experiencing what she had dreamt about so many times was heady and nearly overwhelming.

Weston kissed down her neck, letting her arch back to give him better access as her mind felt as if it shut off completely. No worries for the future, no thoughts of the house or her family. There was only Weston and the way his hand twisted, cupping her and letting his long middle finger run along the ready seam of her.

She had always admired his hands, but never so much as she did right then, as he slipped a finger inside of her, curling softly before working in and out of her gently. About the time that her hips started to rock against his hand in pace with him, he added a second finger.

"So responsive, you feel exactly how I imagined." Weston breathed against her skin. "Yet, it still feels like a dream."

Lydia could not stop the smile that stretched from ear to ear, her head falling back, another snarky remark ready to leave her lips but it was as if he read her mind—and silenced her comment before she could speak it. His hand shifted, his thumb brushing against the bundle of nerves that made her thighs clench and heat surge lower. Her hands clawed at his shoulders, her breathing uneven.

"That's right, you look so beautiful surrendering to your passion," Weston continued.



His words felt like a drug, pulling her higher.

Then it was gone. All sensation, the pleasure she was chasing so swiftly removed as he found her hips and lifted her up onto the edge of the desk. But he was not finished with her, not at all. He pushed her skirts back up and parted her thighs.

He lowered himself down onto his knees between her legs. Something new and uncharted for her. Lydia's eyes widened in near protest but then his mouth covered her sex, his tongue delving into her and she nearly shuddered back into the desk.

"West- oh ," Lydia moaned louder.

"Shhh, as lovely as your voice sounds—do you wish to be interrupted?" Weston teased before easing two fingers back inside of her, moving in opposition to the exploration of his skillful tongue. It was unlike anything that she had ever felt before.

Her hand found the crown of his head, fist clutching his hair while her other hand curled around the lip of the desk to hold herself upright. A shudder ran through her, heat pooling in her core as he feasted on her, seeming to savor every bit of her—from the low groan of pleasure that rumbled from him against her skin. She had to bite down firmly on her bottom lip to keep from crying out again.

Her pinnacle was within reach. But she wanted so much more. She would give anything to drag him into her bedroom and have her way with him until she could not think properly. She had never had such relations with her husband, but with this man? She wanted nothing more than to reenact each and every fantasy that she had had about her mystery man from the past.

Higher and higher until the inferno inside of her body could not take any more. Weston's fingers hit a spot inside of her that made stars explode across the back of her eyelids, her body tensed and clenched as Weston continued to move in exactly

that way until she imploded. Pleasure radiating from her core through every part of herself, as she could not stop from crying out.

Weston did not stop though. He did not stop until her hand in his hair physically forced him away from the skin that was so sensitive it was nearly painful. Though, from the dangerously dark look he gave her from between her legs, he did not much care for being deterred. He rose to his full, impressive height again, one palm flattening against the surface of the desk so he could lean over her, and the other he stuck his fingers into his mouth, cleaning her off of them.

Chest heaving, Lydia lifted a trembling hand to Weston's pants, hooking her fingers into the waist and pulling him closer again. Her chin lifted once more as she started to undo the buttons and laces that would free him from the confines of his trousers. If he thought that she was finished with him, he was sorely mistaken. She wanted him, all of him. The warm-up would not be nearly enough to tide her over.

But it seemed that Weston had the self-control of a monk. He grabbed her gently by the wrists, his lips just an inch from hers as he refused to close the distance between them. A low, needy whine of protest left her as she tried once more to seek what she desired so strongly.

"The anticipation shall make things so much sweeter upon my return." Weston whispered. "If I do not leave now, we shall be in this room all night until you are wholly unable to walk."

"Do not tease me, Weston, show me." Lydia pleaded, but he would not be swayed. He shook his head, smirking at her. She had found her pleasure, so why did it feel like she was losing their little game?

"When I return, you shall have all you desire and more."

“Promise me that you shall return swiftly then, I do not wish to be patient again.” Lydia said in a light voice, but there was a weight behind her words that started to sink within her. If he disappeared now, would it be another eight years? No, she would not allow it.

“I promise.” Weston paused at the door to the office, drumming his fingers against the wood like there was something more that he wished to say only then to think better of it and shut the door behind him.

Lydia waited for the guilt of what she had done to settle over her now that she was alone. She had worried that there would be a lingering sense of betrayal toward her husband for what she had done.

If she had acted against his memory, she would berate herself. But the sensation did not come. She slid her palms along her thighs, tracing the path that he had emblazoned on her skin. If they had slept together, would that mean that their marriage was assured? It must. Was that not what she wanted?

He would return, he had no choice.

She might have to hunt him down if he did not.

### Chapter 20

Lydia had waited in that office for longer than she cared to admit in order to compose herself. It pained her to think that in just a matter of hours, Weston was going to be gone. She knew that he was packing and readying his things in his room. She was rather proud of herself that she did not immediately go find him in those rooms and convince him to finish what they had started.

Instead, Lydia went in search of her sister. When she located her, Kitty was alone in the gardens. She sat on a bench under a large tree, flipping through the pages of a book on botany that Kitty must have read at least a dozen times by now.

“Have you truly not memorized those pages, sister?” Lydia asked, moving to sit on the bench beside her. Oh, she could still feel the ghost of Weston’s fingers the moment that she sat back down. There was a delicious strain in her inner thighs that she hoped would not fade anytime soon. Of course it would, but it would be nice to have a lingering reminder of him to tide her over in his absence.

“I like to compare the pictures with the flowers here, just to make sure that everything is thriving properly.” Kitty said with a smile. She seemed so much lighter on her feet the last few days, Lydia hated to be the one who was going to dim that light she had found. Lydia wished that it did not need to be her, but if the news came from anybody else it would not be as gentle.

“You ought to have taken Jacob up on his offer to have a greenhouse put in. You have such a green thumb; it would have been a lovely pastime.” Lydia mused, leaning back against the tree.

“It was just such an expense. I could not justify it when I would only do it for amusement. Not to mention I would be cooped up in there day and night. It was better that he did not.” Kitty sighed. “I would have been a terrible layabout if he had. Spending all of my time in the company of plants. It would not have made me a very good aunt.”

“The girls love you, no matter your hobbies. You know that.” Lydia answered easily, for it was the truth. She reached over and took one of her sister’s hands in her own, holding it on her lap with both of her hands. “I love you, sister.”

Kitty’s brow furrowed. “What is it?”

“I cannot tell you that I love you?”

“Of course you can, but you do not. So, I shall ask you again, what is it? Tell me what has happened, or I shall automatically assume the worst and I have a very expansive imagination.” Kitty said urgently, shifting her position so that she was oriented toward Lydia.

How to say it? How to inform her that something terrible could possibly happen? The very thing that Lydia had promised to spare her from all of those years ago.

Inhaling a deep breath, she squeezed Kitty’s hand for courage and started to speak. “You well know when the duke came to claim our home? Well, another man had come before him... one pretending to be His Grace and wishing to take advantage of a vulnerable situation.”

Over the course of the next half hour, she told her sister everything. Normally, Lydia would hold back details about certain things in the desire to protect her sister’s sensibilities from the often-harsh real world. But as she had shown so much growth as of late—she left out nothing.

She explained how she had tied him up, and how the duke had saved the day but that it all ended up in blackmail... and that the wretched man seemed absolutely intent on stealing their home and money through any means necessary.

There was absolutely nothing worse than seeing Kitty cry.

Her distress sent Lydia into a panic. She wished that she could fix each and every issue that her sister had ever had. She never wished Kitty to feel the weight of the world or the panic of that horrible incident coming back into her life. She quickly pulled her sister into her arms, holding her tightly against her chest as she bit down on her bottom lip.

“His grace is going to fix this, he promised. I will fix this.” Lydia promised, knowing that she possibly could not uphold that same promise. “Things will happen as they are meant to. We shall pray and expect good results. I have never steered you wrong before.”

“If this was all going to happen anyway, then what was the point?” Kitty sobbed into Lydia’s shoulder. “You never would have had to do any of this! You would not have had to pick up my pieces and be married if it was just going to come out and ruin me anyway! I am so sorry!”

In spite of herself, Lydia laughed. “Silly girl, that is what I mean, everything happened as it needed to. I would not have my beautiful girls if things had not happened this way. I shall never regret the choices that I made. I would do them all over again. Besides, I am a countess. I could have done far worse for myself.”

Kitty laughed, sitting up on her own and wiping away her tears with the back of her hand. “I just feel so very foolish. I should have just endured the scandal. The duke has been very pleasant while he has been here, but what reason does he have to help us? Would it not suit his ultimate goals?”

“Our goals might be more aligned than you think.” Lydia said softly, feeling her face flame uncomfortable. She averted her gaze, knowing that her attraction would be abundantly obvious, and she tried to delay the realization, but her observant sister picked up on it right away.

Kitty slapped the top of Lydia’s thigh playfully, the tense mood from a moment before breaking as a smile overtook her. “I knew it! I have wondered! William and I have been speculating but you were acting so coldly toward him for so long I feared that it was merely a one-sided interest!”

“Oh? You and William are close enough to gossip with one another, hm?” Lydia accused, watching her sister’s face blush as well. “Do not be embarrassed, sister, I think that the pair of you seem to be exceptionally well matched. It is well overdue for you.”

“I have not told him of my affections yet, I do not wish to have misunderstood our friendship or... well, I do not wish to be rejected.” Kitty admitted nervously, twisting her skirts around her anxiously.

“You truly believe that this is a normal friendship between the pair of you? I think not.”

“Well, he is to head to London with His Grace, is he not? What if he meets somebody else there that is more appealing, or younger? He is such a handsome man. But I do have a hope...”

“A hope?”

“I hope that he is accompanying His Grace to London to meet with father. How lovely would it be if he asked for father’s permission to propose to me? As much as I do not wish to leave such choices in the hands of our father, what other option do I

truly have?”

Kitty could not seem to stop moving, and Lydia could easily see just how badly she wanted such a thing. Another version of the future that she had never allowed herself to think about. She had never lived without Kitty before. Of course, she was not going to hold her sister back from anything, but it would be an adjustment.

Lydia flung her arms around her sister, hugging her tightly with a bright smile. “I am overjoyed for your happiness, sister.”

“Thank you, knowing that I have your support means absolutely everything to me.”

“But you cannot start your relationship based off of deceit, we will have to tell him everything that is happening. Do not fear, I shall be with you to hold your hand if you desire it. It is the moral thing to do, and if Cassian does make good on his threat, he might not ever forgive you for it.”

Lydia rubbed her hands supportively up and down Kitty’s upper arms.

“You have grown into such an exceptional woman. Do you know how proud I am of you? This last thing shall hopefully be the only bump in the road between here and your future.”

Kitty nodded somberly. “Everything must happen the way that it is intended.”

“That is right. If your feelings for one another run true, you will have to trust that William will marry you regardless of the past.”

“I’ll go now.” Kitty declared. “I will not be able to sit here and toil over his reactions for however long he is going to be in London. I have to do this now before I lose my nerve.”



With that, Kitty went off to seek William.

### Chapter 21

It would have been difficult to leave Lydia before, but now that he knew how she tasted? It was downright impossible. Even putting things back into his trunks to ready himself to leave for even a short time felt excessive. It was as if there was a magnetic force pulling him toward Lydia and he did not even know where she was at the present moment.

Weston did not realize that he was so consumed in his daydream of that office until his shirt fell onto the floor beside the trunk and William burst through the bedroom door.

“Might we delay our trip by a few hours?” William asked with a bright smile.

“What? Why?” Weston was disinclined to agree because he feared that any delay caused by the pair of them would result in him not wishing to leave whatsoever.

“Or, perhaps if the delay is inconvenient, you would be willing to go on ahead without me? I shall catch up with you.” William offered.

That was even more strange. Weston could not remember the last time that William was willingly offering to do anything on his own, let alone travel. Weston’s brow quirked. “What has happened? Why are you keeping secrets?”

William’s face split into a wide grin before he allowed himself to flop backward onto Weston’s bed. He sank into the lush bedding, looking every bit the starfish as he lay there smiling dopily. “I have just had a wonderfully enlightening conversation with

Kitty.”

“A first name basis as well?”

“She is a wonderful lady.” William gushed happily. “It has been such a delight in getting to know her better. I think asking me to accompany you on this trip might just be the very best thing that you have ever done.”

Weston snorted. “Well, can I presume that I no longer have to be forced to attend balls with you?”

“Do not be silly, of course you will. However, they will be attended with an entirely different motivation, I think. Who knew that I could be so fortunate?”

Seeing his dearest friend in this way was everything that Weston had ever wanted for him. He knew that William tended to have difficulty connecting with others on anything more than a superficial level. The pair of them had been friends since boyhood, so it was inevitable.

“And of the troubling news that we are going to investigate?” Weston asked carefully, wanting to know if that was a part of their conversation.

William’s expression darkened as he rolled over on the bed so that he could better see Weston. The look on his face was unlike anything that he had seen the man make before.

“Yes, we discussed that as well. Kitty was kind enough to fill me in on the information that Cassian seems to be holding over her head. She was very emotional. I know that she feared that I would take the news poorly but what sort of hypocrite would I be if I held her past against her?”

Weston was glad to hear it. “But she claims that the rumors are valid?”

“I care not for their validity. She does not know what alleged ‘proof’ that Cassian might or might not have against her. It could be something purely fabricated. If that is the case, then our trip to London will serve two purposes as I intend to find everything that I can to discredit him. Then, no matter what he says, it will not matter.” William insists firmly.

It would appear that they were wholly on the same page. Weston never doubted his friend for a moment.

“And if we cannot find said proof? What shall you do now?”

“Well, then I shall swiftly marry her so that she will be above reproach.” William said with a shrug, as if it were the most obvious answer in the world. “It is the only thing to do. If the truth ever comes out about her, no one will believe it and it shall not matter. She will be blissfully married to a baronet.”

Weston looked impressed as he retrieved the rest of the belongings that he needed and dropped them gracelessly into the open trunk at the foot of the bed that William lay upon.

“That is why I wish to delay a little while longer... I would like to discuss my plans with her. I would not wish to do something foolish like request an audience with her father if she does not wish me to...”

There it was, the uneasy way that William normally conducted himself.

Weston shook his head and dropped the lid of the trunk closed. “I have watched the pair of you together this whole visit, William. I have never seen you speak with a woman so comfortably. I certainly have not had the pleasure of watching you trail

behind any woman like a smitten pup. It is both endearing, and something that I plan to tease you for, for the rest of your life.”

William picked up the nearest pillow and hurled it at Weston with terrible aim. The taller man did not even have to dodge in order to keep from being hit. He merely tracked the motion of the pillow with his eyes, and gave his friend a look as if to say really ?

“Even with your terrible aim, I am very thankful for your company and everything that has happened so far. I think that your love might even defuse the bomb that Cassian is attempting to hold over our heads. But we must not underestimate how slippery of a git that he is. Having alternate options would only benefit us.”

Besides, Weston also needed to request an audience with Lydia’s father for reasons all his own.

“I agree. Now, if you are all ready? I shall see you to the door?”

“No need. I shall venture forth ahead of you and meet you at the inn a few hours down the path? We can set out again together in the morning.” Weston flipped the latch on his trunk closed and clapped William on the shoulder firmly as his friend sat up. “Congratulations, William. Truly.”

With that, he set out for the carriage while the servants finished loading everything up. The very last dredges of his self-control were set on not seeking Lydia out for a lengthy goodbye. He knew that if he did not leave now, that his resolve would waiver and this time he was intent on doing things in the proper order. Well, mostly.

Pulling on his pair of brown leather gloves he stepped up to the carriage and shut the door behind him.

The moment that the carriage pulled into motion, his thoughts drifted right back to Lydia. His hands itched to touch her. He longed for the taste of her on his tongue, to hear the sounds of her pleasure that she had so desperately attempted to muffle.

Everything about her was perfect. She was everything that he could have ever wanted or hoped for in a wife. Headstrong, capable, protective of her family and above all else passionate. The beautiful mystery woman that he had been completely obsessed with from the moment that her lips first touched hers, the only woman he had ever desired in such a way. One way or another, he would have to make her his own.

When he returned from London, and with her father's blessing, he would propose to her.

The return could not come quickly enough.

### Chapter 22

Lydia had spent so many years in this house on her own. She was accustomed to being the only person responsible for the daily tasks and ensuring that everything ran smoothly. It was often a thankless job, but she was happy to do it. It was gratifying work. At least, that was how she had always felt before.

So, why was it now that she felt such a gaping void in the absence of the duke?

Was it truly so simple to grow accustomed to something new so quickly? It was easier to think that she had managed to fall into a new routine as opposed to thinking that she was growing more and more fond of the duke. Being there every morning, spending time with her and aiding in all the tasks required to run a house had brought her so much comfort that without him here to share the load... it was heavier now than it had ever been before.

A true partnership, something that she never would have allowed herself to admit that she wanted. The duke's absence was so marked that every time she entered into an office or dining hall, she was half expecting to see him round the corner and make some pointed remark or another.

Even if he would just materialize for no other reason than to encroach upon her personal space, she certainly was not going to complain. He had such a remarkable way of blending responsibility and indulgence. Even the slightest touches that he managed to sneak were exhilarating. Poring over hours of ledgers was not nearly so taxing when Weston's handsome face would linger so close to her own.

The passion she had kindled for him all these years has been stoked into a strong flame and she could not, and would not, extinguish it. To feel like a woman, properly desired, after all of these years?

It was unlike anything that she had ever hoped to feel with her husband. Weston ignited her all those years ago and she never forgot. Her heart fluttered at the thought that he never did, either. For nearly a decade, they had been thinking of one another without even realizing it.

Even now, standing there in her late husband's office, she could not shake the ghost of Weston. So many miles away from her at present and yet she could not help but to feel as if he were still there with her. The memory of his hands, the way he spoke to her, sent a ripple of gooseflesh down her spine.

Slowly, Lydia trailed her arms over herself. Her touch was feather-light as she attempted to recreate that exciting feeling within herself. Her eyes slowly closed, feeling heavy within her own skin as she fell back onto the corner of the desk with a soft thump . Her breathing hitched as she replayed the way he spoke to her, the excitement that he had evoked.

If only they had not been interrupted by her lady's maid that night all of those years ago, there was no telling what might have happened. She was constantly torn between wishing him to become carried away with himself and take those final steps with her, and her inbred sense of modesty and duty.

Though, if anyone was to shake her sense of modesty, it would only be him.

Perhaps she ought to make more of a move than she had been. Perhaps that would be the best course of action. No doubt he was only attempting to be as respectful as he was capable of being.



When he returned, she promised herself that first night she would make her move. Even if the prospect was somewhat intimidating. What was so wrong with finally wanting something for herself? Was it truly asking for that much to allow herself the pleasures that she had been dreaming about since she was eighteen?

He would not rebuke her. Would he? After all of the advances that had been made, it seemed impossible that he would refuse any advances that she might make. Weston had been making the hints and certainly did not mind kissing her.

Lydia's skin heated. Tendrils of warmth sparked inside her, recalling exactly what it had felt like to have his lips on her skin. The intimate places that he had touched her... she wanted more. There was a craving for him that she did not think that she was ever going to be able to quench.

If for some reason the duke rebuked her—which she could not imagine that he would have cause to do—then at least she would have answers. They would be out of this insufferable limbo where she never got quite what she wished for. Her husband would wish for her happiness, that much she was certain of.

A knock on the cracked open office door nearly startled her out of her skin. Lydia's hands snapped down from where they had been roaming over her body indecently and her heart jackhammered in her chest. She could hardly breathe normally for the way her head swam at neatly being discovered in a compromising position.

Her voice was fragile and awkward as she called out to the intruder. “Y-yes?”

“My lady!” The familiar voice of her steward rushed, sounding frantic enough that the daydreaming portion of Lydia's brain shut right off.

She pushed up off of the desk and hurried to the door, hoping the flush of her skin was not noticeable.

“You must come quickly, there is an urgent visitor in the drawing room. Please, hurry.” The steward announced and Lydia allowed herself to quickly be escorted down from the office and down the stairs. Despite her very best efforts, her mind unhelpfully started to provide as many worst-case scenarios as she could possibly imagine in the short time it took to reach the drawing room.

That sinking feeling of dread in the pit of her stomach seemed to triple the moment that she saw the constable from the village standing in her drawing room. Her heart plummeted and her knees buckled. It was a mercy that her steward was there to catch her before she crumbled to the floor.

“My lady,” the constable nodded politely, and then started to fidget with his uniform. That meant that whatever he was going to say was going to make her feel even worse. Her lips pursed, Lydia was half tempted to beg him not to tell her whatever horrible news was about to pour of his mouth, but she felt frozen.

“There has been an accident.”

There were flashbacks to the news of her husband’s death all over again. The same hollow feeling of grief and hopelessness. She clung to her steward, who stood steadfast at her side. It meant more than she could verbally express.

“A-accident?” What sort of accident? Please, tell me quickly I cannot bear it.” Lydia stammered.

“We received a bandit attack earlier this morning, and when my men arrived at the road, we found an overturned carriage. One that we believe belongs to your patron, the Duke of Somerfield. The coat of arms on the doors matches that of our records, however--”

“And the duke? What of the occupant?” Lydia interrupted. She could lament about

her rudeness another time.

“The carriage was abandoned, my lady.” The constable said somberly. “The duke is presumed missing.”

Lydia shook her head. It was not possible. She would not allow it. “Take me there.”

“The road is not safe at the moment, my lady. The bandits who must have attacked the carriage are clearly still at large. It would not be the proper place for a lady such as yourself to be.” The constable explained, but Lydia was having none of it.

“I did not ask for your opinion on my personal safety, sir, I told you to take me to the carriage.”

She needed to see it for herself. There was absolutely no way that she was going to be able to spend the next few days thinking that she could have possibly lost the duke all over again without seeing it for herself. She turned to her steward, steeling herself against the hollow ache that was spreading inside of her. “Reach out to the men in the village, take Lord Baxter with you to enlist the help of any who can spare the time and are of able body.”

“Yes, my lady.” The steward answered quickly, though he seemed rather reluctant to move away from her. Part of her was grateful, she certainly did not feel very stable on her feet at the moment, but there was far too much to do for her to stand here and focus on herself or her own comfort. She could not lose him again.

“I want a search party assembled at once. I shall find my sister, please have the governess stay with the girls. I do not wish them to leave the house until all of this is sorted out. But do not frighten them. I do not need them to worry.”

Lydia said as she felt herself start to slide into the familiar fix it mode that she was so

used to operating within. She could fix this. Somehow. The duke could not be missing because there was no way that she could lose him again. She just needed to cling to that finally shred of hope, no matter what.

No matter how small the clue might be, she was going to find it.

### Chapter 23

It was well into the night before they found their first lead. The pub in town was not a place that Lydia had ever had any cause to attend herself. She was not even certain if her husband came here the few times that he was in town or not.

Given how often that he traveled, it was unlikely that he had made too many close friends there. But much to her fortune they all seemed to recognize her, even if they did not much care for the fact that she had a constable in tow.

“Greetings, my lady, can I get you a drink?” The man behind the counter offered. He had a kind face, ruddy features, and seemed perfectly pleasant as he wiped down a glass.

“No, thank you. I am here hoping that there will be somebody who can assist me in obtaining information.” Lydia spoke flatly. The stress of the day was heavily wearing on her, there was no denying that. However, she could not stop. Thinking that Weston might be out there alone, or injured... or worse? She simply could not stand for it. She could not allow it. It was all that her mind kept looping through every minute of the hours that had passed since she left her home.

The constable moved behind her, walking slowly into the pub and taking his time in looking at each and every face that he passed. It was an obvious intimidation tactic, but it was working.

“What sort of information do you need, my lady?” The bartender asked her, forcing her attention away from the constable.

“There was a bandit attack this afternoon on the main road. I am looking for information on the culprits or perhaps their last rumored locations? They have...” She swallowed thickly. “I will pay handsomely for anything that you can tell me.”

The bartender shook his head. “No need for that, my lady, if I had any information, then I would be happy to help you, but I am afraid that I have not heard rumors. It is the third attack this month, we are growing just as anxious as you likely are.”

Lydia pulled her bottom lip between her teeth. They had been pointed in this direction, and if nobody here knew anything then she had no idea what she was going to do. “The third attack?”

She glanced over her shoulder toward the constable who was still checking tables and patrons. One would think that if there had been so many attacks that something would have been done. Or at least she would have heard about it.

“Was anyone seriously injured?” Lydia asked, dreading the answer.

The bar keep shook his head. “No, that is the strangest part. The first two attacks nothing happened. There was no burglaries or injury done to any of the folk.”

That caught Lydia’s attention. What was that supposed to mean? It did not make the slightest bit of sense. “Then... what was the purpose?”

“Not sure. Folk been guessing that the bandit is either new, or working himself up for something... I guess for the duke.”

That made her feel so much worse. “I see.”

“I do not mean to frighten you, my lady.”

“You have not. At least, it is not myself that I am frightened for.” Lydia answered, pulling on the fabric of her dress out of need for something to do with her hands. Just then, the constable finally looked up at her, nudging his head toward a far table and heading over himself. He took a heavy seat at the table and grinned uncomfortably at the two men occupying it.

“Careful, my lady.” The barkeep warned gently as she started to make her way over to the table to join the constable. She did not wish to rub elbows with unsavory sort, but she did not think that she was going to have much choice. Not if she wanted to find out what she needed to in order to return Weston home.

Home to her.

She wiped off the corner of the table with her handkerchief and pulled up a chair to join the men at the table, trying to keep her face neutral and calm as she looked at the two men the constable was leering at. They did not seem the frightening sort, but she had heard all sorts of stories about how looks can be deceiving.

“I was just telling my friend here that we were looking for the bandit behind a carriage heist this afternoon. I hate to inform you, my lady, but our pal Anson here is rather known for having sticky fingers. He is only fresh out. I cannot help but to wonder if perhaps he has been consorting with some of his old pals again.” The constable continued.

Anson shifted awkwardly in his seat. “I have been doing nothing of the sort, sir.”

“And I am just supposed to believe you?”

Anson and the man sitting with him exchanged uncomfortable glances with one another.

“I will pay you.” Lydia interjects and the whole atmosphere of the table shifts.

“How much?”

“Depends on how useful the information is.” Lydia says firmly. From the warning glance the constable is giving her, it is clear that is not something that she is supposed to be doing but she is beyond caring. “I assure you that it will be worth your while.”

The men stare at her, no doubt attempting to determine if she was telling the truth or not. The constable was clearly uncomfortable with the notion of bribery, but she was beyond caring.

“Fine.” Anson says, leaning forward and speaking in a hushed voice. “There was a man a few nights back, called himself Sinclair. Do not know if that was his actual name or not. He was looking for a group of men for a job. Seemed real suspect.”

Lydia could not help herself; she leaned forward as she clung to every word that he said.

“But there was something off about the whole thing. Did not feel like a real job. Seemed like the sort of thing where you do all the work and then get no money at the end of it. I know he got a team of at least five strong men, promising a real payout once the delivery was made in London.” Anson continued.

“Yeah, but he would not say what was being moved or why. Given the carriage attacks, we figured that two and two had to make some sort of sense.” The other man agreed.

“This man, this Sinclair, could you tell me what he looked like? Had he been coming here very often?” Lydia pressured them just a touch further. Anything additional that they could provide could only help them further. At least, that was what she thought.



“He was a real strange looking fellow...like his bones did not sit quite right in his skin. Was... awkward when he moved. Real flighty like, talked with a high-pitched wheeze in his nose. My grandfather used to speak like that.” Anson added, rubbing the scruff on his face.

“If we had a sketch artist come and speak with you, would you be willing to make up a drawing?” The constable pressed.

“Certainly, for an additional fee. Being so helpful makes me thirsty.” Anson grinned, his yellow teeth glinting in the dim tavern light.

Lydia sighed and rolled her eyes. “I shall settle your tab for the night, gentlemen, never you mind about that.”

“Then I suppose that I will be able to remember a fair few more details.” Anson and his friend agreed with a laugh. The constable curled his lip at them, muttering a stern warning before heading off to find his coworker.

The sketch artist made rather quick work of the whole thing. In almost no time at all, there was a very crude sketch of a very familiar looking man. Lydia picked up the paper, knowing full well that this Sinclair that they were talking about was in fact Cassian. She never would have imagined that he was capable of being so dangerous. The accord that he allegedly had with Weston was far from being due—and to go to these lengths? He was an unstable man.

Lydia took care of the tab as she promised, and rushed out of the tavern before even the constable could catch up to her and ask her about the man that she so obviously recognized. She had to go to London to find the duke before it was too late.

She signaled for the fastest carriage that she could find, right about the time that Lord Baxter and Kitty caught up with her. Her mind was spinning, she felt like she was

going to be sick.

What if she was too late?

### Chapter 24

The trip to London was easily the longest and most stressful carriage ride of her entire life.

She had to hope and pray that since it had only been a few hours now since the attack that they would have some manner of luck. Worry was going to consume her entirely. There was no way to know which route Cassian might have taken his cousin on, or what his plan was going to be once he had finished with his abduction.

Could he truly be so foolish as to think that he could ransom the duke to get the inheritance that he was not owed? Did he think that Weston was the sort of man to be easily frightened? She could not imagine anyone being so foolish.

Every few moments, William poked his head out of the side of the carriage, scanning the darkness around them as if he would somehow be able to find a clue as to whether or not they had come this way. He kept straining to hear anything beyond the horses' galloping hooves and the sounds of the carriage.

Kitty held Lydia's hand tightly. It was her only present anchor to her sanity. She did not know what she was going to do if they arrived and found Weston was injured. She tried to settle herself and to keep her breathing even.

She did not mean to push her stress and anxiety onto those around her, but she had never felt like this before. This level of worry was overwhelming, and she felt so close to hysterics that in another circumstance, she would be ashamed of herself.

She hated to admit it, but Cassian seemed to have planned this encounter well. He would have taken enough time to cover his tracks, all things considered. If he were traveling with a kidnapped duke, it was not like Weston was going to make things easy on him.

If he planned to do something rash like..., she hated to think that he was capable of murdering his own cousin, but he must be a truly sick individual if he was capable of kidnapping anyone in the first place.

Greed made people do truly insane things.

Cassian might even be guilty of treason. Perhaps she ought to have brought the constable along after all. Though, there was no doubt in her mind whatsoever that he was likely very close behind them.

“Breathe, sister, he will be all right.” Kitty soothed, speaking in soft tones.

“What if we are too late?” Lydia asked, staring blankly ahead of herself.

“We must not think that way. While this situation is truly terrible, we must believe that things are going to work out. His Grace is a very capable man. Do not underestimate him. Have faith.” Kitty reassured her and tapped the back of her hand comfortingly.

Lydia nodded, even though the tightness in her chest was making it hard to breathe properly. Weston would be all right because there was simply no other alternative.

She had not even been given proper time to sort out her feelings toward him. It was so much more than the lust that she had allowed herself to dwell on for so many years. Getting to know him... expecting him to be around... had turned into something else. Something that she had wanted to pursue and at least give things a

chance between them. Even if it would not work in the long run, she knew the depth of her feelings was enough to frighten her.

No matter what her feelings for him were, she wished to have the time to figure it all out—and she wished to do it with Weston at her side.

When they finally arrived in London, the trio were exhausted and dirty.

The very last place that she wished to be while feeling as worked up as she presently did, was her father's home. But what choice did they truly have? They needed somewhere to shelter for the night and to plan their next move. As loathe as she was to admit it, her father did have a rather good sense for these things.

Despite his incredibly rigid ideas on gender roles and society, he was also the sort of man who paid great attention to the gossip of the ton and those who come in and out of London. Lydia had to hope against hope that if something had happened, he would have heard something about it at the very least.

As they caught him up to speed, her father had sat across the table as William filled him in on everything, with a blank, pensive stare. Of course, he had insisted on William being the one to tell him what was happening, he had remarked very plainly that he had no desire to have the facts polluted by the theatrics of women and their dramatic emotions.

The worry that had been consuming her was rapidly turning into fury.

Lydia sat, her knee bouncing in agitation and stress as she listened to William explain their circumstances as patiently as possible to her father. She waited, as respectfully as she could for her father to speak.

Though, her patience for his sexism was wearing painfully thin.

Had she not been the one out with the constable all day? She had been the one interviewing every lead and out there on the road searching for clues even when she had no idea what she was looking for. She knew that she could not sit idly by.

Father would not address her directly, would not even so much as look at her nor Kitty.

He likely had plenty to say on the fact that the pair of them had arrived frantically in the middle of the night with a man whom he had not personally vetted and approved.

“You should have written to me the moment that this unsavory character came into your life, Lydia. You should have known that you are not at all equipped to handle such a thing on your own. You ought to have gotten myself or Lord Baxter here involved from the beginning,” her father started.

Lydia knew that this would only result in a larger lecture. Her whole life had been comprised of lectures like this at the expense of her sanity and her dignity. It mattered not what she did or how she lived her life, it would always displease him in some fashion or another. No woman could ever be good enough for him. It was his life’s greatest lament that he was cursed with daughters instead of sons.

William leaned over and whispered something to Kitty, which also seemed to displease father. He cleared his throat loudly, as if commanding them to separate to a respectable distance from one another.

Before father had a chance to comment on it, however, William took back control of the conversation once more. “I believe that Cassian would try to take His Grace somewhere that is private. He would not wish to be interrupted in whatever it is that his plans are. Do you know of a place that would fit those needs?”

It had been hours yet and she still felt as if she were the only one who was beside

herself with worry. She could not sit still. A cold sweat of dread seemed to be constantly trickling down her spine. Every moment that passed was a moment that Weston was likely dead. London had never felt quite so vast as it did now that she was attempting to locate a needle in a haystack.

Lydia was never able to summon the sort of patience that Lord Baxter was showing her father. Perhaps that was why they butted heads so very often. Never mind that she had done everything that he had ever asked of her. The lingering resentment was there. She wished to find Weston, and quickly. Her father could lecture them all afterward if he was so moved to.

“Somewhere perhaps with little to no staff?” William continued, hoping to refocus the conversation to the task at hand.

Lydia’s father lingered his gaze upon her for a long moment, and she said nothing. Fighting with him would only ensure that she did not get his assistance, and they needed it.

“This Cassian fellow is a cousin of your late husband’s, as well as the duke’s, is he not?” her father asked.

Lydia nodded. “Yes, sir.”

His eye twitched. “Does he have a hunting lodge that would not need to be maintained? Perhaps another property or apartment here in the city? Not that the pair of you ever deign to come and visit me. Not even my unwed youngest daughter can be bothered to spend time with her father.”

She chose not to focus on those comments. She could not afford to rise to the bait that he was thrusting in her direction.

Kitty placed a hand on her thigh, tapping softly. “The earl did not care much for hunting, is that right, sister?”

Lydia nodded again. “No, he did not—but he did have a small home here in London. I cannot recall the last time that either of us had reason to visit. It was far too small for his liking, and we simply never got around to furnishing it properly for residence.”

As soon as she had finished speaking about the home, the dots connected.

“Oh, oh!” Lydia pushed away from the table. “Naturally, the duke would have inherited that as well... the deeds and keys, all of it. If Cassian somehow saw the papers... there is a very good chance that he could be there!”

“I would presume, given all of his fuss, that he has more than just glimpsed the papers detailing the duke’s inheritance.” William added, his anger seeping into his tone. “Quickly, let us go and retrieve our dear duke.”

Lydia nodded, gathering her skirts in her hands and shaking off any lingering tiredness that was plaguing her. There would be time to rest later. She did not care how much her legs ached or how heavy her eyes became, she was bound and determined to follow this lead. Weston’s very life could be depending on them finding him in time!

“The carriage is still out front.” Lydia exclaimed, leading the group of them out the front door. “Kitty, take father and go to the Bow Street Runners, tell them where we are going. I have a sinking feeling that we will need their assistance! Hurry!”

Kitty opened her mouth to protest, no likely unhappy to be left behind in the first place, but there was no stopping Lydia. Even William had to run to catch her carriage before it sped off.



She could think of nothing and nobody but Weston, and hope that he was all right.

### Chapter 25

Everything hurt.

Weston woke slowly, the throbbing ache in his skull making it very difficult to take inventory of the rest of his faculties. His shoulder joints ached, and he could tell that his hands were tied behind his back. The room he found himself in had little to no lighting and smelled strongly of dust and musk. Weston's ears strained in the darkness, listening for anything that might give him a clue as to where he was or how he got there.

What was the last thing that he could remember? He was setting off in the carriage, and the footman had cried out about an obstacle on the road. The boy had tried to slow the horses, but the carriage had too much momentum and turned straight on its side. He could remember being thrown sideways in the carriage and then... nothing.

He must have hit his head. There was even the chance that he might have thought that he was brought somewhere by a good Samaritan except for the fact that his hands were bound behind him. Whomever had found him did not have his best interests at heart.

The drapes in the room were drawn, and he could not tell the hour. Not knowing how much time had passed was a horribly disorienting feeling. Groaning softly, he attempted to move from where he was on the floor, pain radiating from his right leg up through his hip in the process. Weston grimaced, swallowing down the pain in favor of finding out where he was.

Though, when he moved—a heavy metal sound preceded the tug of the chain at his wrists. He moved toward what he hoped was a wall, feeling more unsettled with every step. The room was absolutely freezing. Perhaps those weren't drapes at all? Was he somewhere underground?

Slowly, as he attempted to gauge the size of the room and where the door was, memories slowly started to return to him. Flashes of images as he was pulled from the carriage by bandits who wore cloth coverings over the lower halves of their faces. He remembered fighting them, knowing that his large size gave him a distinct advantage over them, but he was sorely outnumbered.

Weston groaned in pain; thinking was only making the ache stronger. He leaned into the closest wall to him—with his chains he was only able to reach three of them before he ran out of slack.

Forehead to the cold wall he kept his eyes scrunched shut, attempting to relieve some of the ache that he had been feeling. What had happened next? Water, one carriage to the other he had been shuffled around—and then nothing. Weston felt like there was a thick fog settling in over his mind and that was also unsettling.

Inhaling sharply, he struggled against the fog for clarity—only to be interrupted by a sinister laugh.

He was not alone in this room.

“Who is there?” Weston demanded, his deep voice sounding more confident than he actually felt.

“I must say, it is so gratifying to see you stumbling about in chains, dear cousin.”

He knew that voice. How fitting that he was skulking around in the dark like the rat

that he truly was.

“Cassian.” Weston said his name like an accusation and a curse.

“You know, I have to say that I admire your new lover, even though she is quite vexing. I do not think that I would have ever had any cause to experiment with laudanum if it were not for her.” Cassian continued, speaking with a haughty air. “Despite how annoying the bulk of your dead weight has been to manipulate, you have been quite the docile little hostage with the proper dosage.”

“Where have you taken me?” Weston demanded once more. There was no part of him that actually feared his cousin. Even if this venture had been Cassian’s brainchild, there was certainly no way that he had done this by himself.

Which meant that there were others. Weston knew that he was going to need to coax more information from the rat before he could properly figure out an escape plan. He hated the very notion of playing into Cassian’s ego, but he might not have a choice.

“We have made it all of the way to London, cousin.” Cassian continued to gloat.

Days? He has been drugged for days? There was no telling what sort of long-term damage something like that could do. Annoyance bled into rage, and he tested the strength of his bonds behind his back. He had never been inclined to snap somebody’s neck before, not quite so much as he was tempted to do now.

“I suppose that you are quite upset with me, but it was necessary. You have humiliated me long enough, cousin. Now, your inheritance is all mine. Along with whatever else I choose to have you gift me. You have to understand, this is because I deserve it more than you do. Surely, you have to admit to that much.”

Weston’s lip curled. “You do not deserve anything other than a swift kick in the

teeth.”

“Ah, ah!” Cassian chastised. “You think you still have the upper hand here? You think that you are the one in control? That is amusing. I suppose that the drugs must have affected you more strongly than I had originally presumed if you think you have any power here.”

“Your delusions of grandeur are overwhelming you, Cassian. Stop this now before you make a mistake that you cannot take back.”

Cassian laughed, clearing feeling very untouchable. “All of my life, I have languished on the sidelines of the life that has been owed to me. Forced to live outside of the peerage and it is finally my turn! I will live the life that is owed to me! I will not struggle in the gentry another moment!”

“That is your plan? You covet a life that you have not worked for?”

“You were born into your title, what would you know of hard work?”

“I know that it does not consist of swindling grieving widows of their money. I also know that it certainly does not involve stealing from others!” Weston tried his best not to shout, but he was failing. “You truly have no honor at all.”

Cassian scoffs, clicking his tongue loudly. “If only you had been delayed, then I would have been able to handle this seamlessly. I would have stepped into your role and the earl’s title without issue. Then, I could have been rid of you and none would be the wiser!”

Weston could not stop himself from rolling his eyes. As if his friends and staff would not have realized that he was not home, and that a pretender was attempting to play act as the duke. It never would have worked.

“Then that barking mad widow showed up... she has ruined everything.” Cassian sneered. “I shall have to handle her too, sooner or later.”

“You cannot possibly think that your plan would have actually worked?”

“Posing as you? Why yes, I do think that it would work. You have been absent from society for quite some time cousin. With the quick moving gossip mill of the ton you have been long forgotten. If she had not drugged me, I would have simply slipped into your role.”

“And when I showed up, then what would have you done?” Weston scoffed.

Cassian certainly did not like that. He had always had such little tolerance for people talking down to him. “I would have killed you of course. Then I would be free to do as I liked. Obviously. The plan has been derailed, but it still happened. I shall just have to... silence the widow.”

Weston could tolerate a lot, having him threaten Lydia was not one of those things that he could tolerate. Not even for a moment. “I will kill you if you touch her.”

Cassian snorts a laugh. “Kill me? Do you...? Oh, cousin, how stupid you are. Though, perhaps I should not harm her. You are right. Perhaps some lines should not be crossed. She is still beautiful, after all, and young. She shall be at my mercy if she wishes a decent future for her existing daughters... and she will still have plenty of time to bear me many heirs.”

Weston snarled, a sound that he had never heard himself make before as his eyes snapped open in fury. He pulled so hard on his chains that for a moment, he heard them squeal in protest.

“Dare me to, cousin? I think you are still underestimating me. You ought to be

begging for my mercy.” Cassian taunted, standing close to where the duke strained against his bonds.

“Beg? You? Never.”

“Her husband begged.” Cassian grinned cheekily. “He pleaded for not his life, but the happiness of his family, before I killed him. Do you think that she will cry, when I force her to wed the man who murdered her husband and lover? I bet she is pretty when she cries. Fear not, I shall be there to soothe her tears.”

“The earl died of a heart attack.” Weston said, echoing the story that had been told to him.

“Well, that is what the papers think, yes. I could not very well have them come looking for a murderer when I intended to step in, now could I?”

“You are not capable.”

“Am I not?” Cassian snapped, getting in the duke’s face with fury twisting his features. “It was a simple enough task to hire a man to poison him. Stood over him in his last moments as the earl blubbered for help. He was the first obstacle to my getting the power and fortune that I deserve, and you are the final one. I tried to do this nicely, I tried to give you an option as blackmail is certainly more savory than murder, but now...”

Weston could not believe what he was hearing. Poison? The coward’s method through and through, and even then, he could not bother to poison the earl himself? A sad, pathetic little man on a power trip. He needed to find a way to free himself, and quickly before things got any further out of control than they already were.

“Of course you would never see reason,” Cassian continued. “You would never give

me what I am owed. So, when I learned that you were headed to London - I figured it would only be kind of me to, ah, escort you.”

The man laughed, a high-pitched, nasally sound as he thought himself clever.

“All I have to do is make your death look like a similar accident, and then I will be the only remaining, legal, heir to both of the fortunes! I will only need to wait for the solicitors to bring me the news! See? It is a flawless plan! Perfect execution!”

Cassian poured the two of them a drink from a bottle that Weston could not see in the dim lighting. But he could see well enough to notice that something was very obviously added to the second glass. The liquid started to fizz as Cassian finished the contents of his own glass in one gulp. He smacked his lips wetly as he carried Weston’s glass over to him.

“Well, I suppose that is all that there is left to say! Goodbye, cousin.” Cassian grabbed Weston’s face firmly by the chin and wrenched his head forward, placing the glass against his lips with force.

Weston had no desire to go easily. He tried to thrash, to get away from the liquid that was being forced against his lips, but there was nowhere to go. Cassian’s grip on his face turned bruising as he dug his fingers into Weston’s jaw, forcing his mouth open little by little.

He could feel it, the poison was going to be the death of him. Cloyingly sweet, the tainted liquid touched his lips, his tongue. He tried not to swallow, Cassian’s cruel mocking laughter as the liquid trickled down the back of his throat.

Somewhere in the distance, perhaps a death angel, he could swear that he could hear Lydia’s sweet voice calling out his name.



Clinging to it - Weston reared back in a swift motion and slammed his throbbing head into Cassian's right in front of him.

The glass fell to the floor and shattered.

The room spun, and he was only vaguely aware of Cassian stumbling backward as Lydia's voice called his name again. A fog consumed his mind as he struggled to keep his eyes open. Everything tilted sideways. It was too late. Just... a moment longer. He tried to hold on... he tried.

### Chapter 26

“Weston!” Lydia called out his name over and over again. She did not give a damn that she spoke informally of the duke, or who might overhear her yelling for him. The house was just as miserable as she remembered it. Of course, it had plenty of potential if she had been given the time and opportunity to dump resources into the place to make it more habitable, but she had not.

Now, after all of this mess was over and done with, she had a mind to sell the place, or allow it to rot into the ground. These were the sorts of memories that certainly did not need to be re-lived by having to revisit these places. William had chosen to take the top two floors on his own, his legs still more stable after all of this stress than she was feeling.

Lydia had been tasked with the first floor and the basement. She ran from room to room, slamming open the doors and calling out Weston’s name so loudly that her throat was starting to feel raw. It was a surreal feeling that she had in her gut.

She could feel him close, and there was absolutely no justifiable reason for her to think that. Yet, she was convinced that she was growing closer. There had been fresh hoof prints out front according to William. He had said when they arrived that there was every reason to believe that somebody had, in fact, come to her property recently.

“Weston!”

She hiked her skirts into her hands and headed down into the basement. The wet,

mossy smell of the roof cellar overtaking her for a few moments before turning into the servant's quarters, all wholly abandoned. She could not stop moving, no matter how her body protested every single movement that she was making.

Finally, voices! She ran toward them, nearly tripping over her own skirts in the process—stopping only when she heard the words more clearly. Cassian. Just as she presumed. It did not matter that she only caught the tail end of their conversation, she was certain that it would be enough proof—but first she needed to get into the room. The latch on the heavy door did not wish to open for her, but she yanked and pulled with all of her might until it swung free.

Cassian... and Weston in chains. Something about the sight made her want to lose the meager breakfast that had all but left her system.

It was something that she was never going to forget. Weston was bleeding from a cut just above his hairline and seemed rather uneasy on his feet. Cassian, clutching his forehead was leaning on one of the far walls for support. He seemed to be in a daze, and disoriented. Weston must have hit him somehow.

Without allowing herself to think about it, Lydia hurried to Weston's side, attempting to find where he was restrained so that she could liberate him.

"You... bastard..." Cassian wheezed, finally seeming to realize that they were not alone any longer.

"Stay away!" Lydia screamed at him. "I heard everything! You deplorable little roach!"

She only wished that she knew even worse words that she might have been able to throw at him. If ever she wished she knew the language of sailors, it was now.

Cassian's face twisted, slowly staggering toward them as Lydia desperately fiddled with the pin and release system on Weston's chains.

"The Bow Street Runners will be here at any moment! Stop! Before you make things worse for yourself!" Lydia screamed desperately as Cassian advanced.

Just when she thought that she got the chains—Cassian swung for her.

"Watch out!" Weston gasped, attempting to knock her out of the way with his shoulder.

Lydia screamed and fell to the side. She scrambled away from Cassian as he advanced on her.

"And when they arrive, they will find two dead bodies with only one witness. Guess things will work out for me after all!" Cassian hissed, sweat pouring down his face as he lunged for her, swinging madly.

Lydia curled in on herself, screaming in fear as she waited for the attack to land—but it never did.

Weston had finally freed himself. Whatever she had done must have been enough. She was still frozen, curled into her space by the wall as the two men fought. She had never heard the sounds of a man punching another quite that hard—and her stomach twisted all over again. She could not endure it.

Finally, with a sickening crunch—Weston landed a punch square on Cassian's jaw. His head snapped to the side, and he went down. She could have sworn that the ground shook when Cassian fell. It was almost comical how his tongue lolled out of the side of his mouth.

“Lydia,” Weston called to her.

Slowly, she turned look at him. It was obvious that this was not the first time that he must have called out her name. He had one arm braced on the wall over her head and the other extended out toward her.

Her hand trembled as she extended it toward him. Carefully, Weston pulled her to her feet, pulling her into his arms. She folded into his chest without resistance as she blinked blearily at Cassian’s unconscious form. Why could she not look away?

“Are you all right?” he asked, attempting to check her over. She could not answer. Weston carefully let her lean against the closest wall before he moved to chain Cassian with the same chains that he had used on him moments before. At least that would hold him for however long it took the Bow Street Runners to arrive.

“Lydia, look at me.” Weston asked softly, lifting her chin to focus on him instead of Cassian. Her heart fluttered in her chest, all of her emotions seeming to catch up with her the moment that her eyes locked onto his.

Tears swam in her vision as she sagged forward, and he enveloped her tightly in his arms. She had been so frightened. Clearly, she was right in thinking that something truly terrible could have happened to him if she had been only a little bit later than she was.

“You were right, you know.” Weston said after a while, teasing her softly. “He is far more pleasant unconscious like this.”

She hiccupped a laugh. It felt like a lifetime ago when she had tied him up. So much pain could have been avoided. What a terrible, terrible man.

Weston guided the two of them into the hallway where she finally felt as if she could

breathe again. She inhaled sharply, filling every bit of her lungs with air to try to steady herself. Weston lifted her chin to look at him once more, his eyes full of concern for her, as if he was the one who had not been in chains just moments ago.

She lifted her hand to cup his face, needing to make sure that he was truly here, and that she had made it here in time to save him. She had been so frightened. So many things wanted to roll off of her tongue, but she could not seem to utter a single one.

It was as if he could read her mind, pulling her closer until it left no space between them and slanting his lips over her own. Every panicked thought flew right out of her mind.

She twisted just enough to wrap her arms around his neck, pulling him down closer to her as she feverishly kissed him back. She could not stop the tears from running down her face despite her best efforts. She had come far too close to losing him. She did not know what she would have done if he had truly been lost to her once more.

Weston backed her against the closest wall, a comforting hand wrapped around the small of her back, keeping her close to him as he deepened the kiss. She needed to feel him against her, needed the heat of him to wrap around her fully so that every cell in her body could believe that he was here and safe.

A scandalized gasp breaks their kiss before things can get any more carried away.

Lydia turned her head to see Kitty and William standing at the foot of the stairs, her sister gawking at them both. Lydia's face flushed with heat; she knew that she was blushing furiously. Her sheepish smile not nearly enough to properly convey her emotions.

Slowly, Weston took a half step back from her so as to appear to be more respectful, but she mourned the loss of his warmth and stability right away. It was for the best,

for only a moment later her father and the Bow Street Runners all came rushing down the stairs, and Weston pointed them in the direction of where he had confined Cassian. Though, he was likely still very unconscious.

William guided the group of them back up the stairs, Kitty glancing back over her shoulder every few moments as she eagerly awaited an explanation from her sister as to what they just walked in on, but there were far more pressing matters at hand.

They stood in the foyer, nearly silent as Cassian's body was brought up by the Runners in a small cart, carrying him out to the carriage awaiting him out front. At least she would be able to sleep easily tonight knowing that Cassian would be in jail awaiting a proper inquest.

### Chapter 27

#### One Month Later

The inquest could not come quickly enough.

Lydia longed to return to her home in the countryside and reunite with her daughters. She felt their absence more and more keenly every day. Yet, there would still be some time left in London that they would need to remain. The primary reason, of course, would be that she needed to ensure that a certain bastard was going to rot away in jail for the rest of his life for his crimes.

Despite all of her best efforts, she had scarcely seen hide nor hair of Weston in the last couple of weeks. There was still far too much that was unsaid between them. Far too many things that they needed to reconcile and there had not been a single opportunity.

If she had had her way, she would have had her way with him right there in that hallway before they had been interrupted. She would have done so again in the carriage on her ride home, but instead, they had been parted.

It was with decent cause, she supposed.

Kitty and William had officially announced their engagement.

Father was more or less pleased, in the way that he was never truly pleased with anything. It mattered not to him that William was a Baronet, but that their courtship



had been so unorthodox. Then, paired with Kitty's advanced age and fact that William was all but outright refusing a dowry, father was finding the smallest things to become offended by.

Kitty and Lydia had been planning their official engagement soiree for weeks. It was not as if she was not happy for her sister. Kitty deserved everything in the world and then some. There was nobody that would be more supportive of their sister than Lydia was being.

Yet, she ached for the duke. She longed to have him nearer to her and he was going to be in attendance this evening. Which would be the opportunity to be closer with him again that she had been searching for. That night of Cassian's arrest they had reached an agreement.

Neither one of them was particularly pleased with it, but it was necessary. Lydia was still only a handful of months into her mourning period. It was too much of a risk for them to be seen together and as her lust for him was nearly impossible to contain... they had to keep their distance.

The ballroom of their father's home was decorated perfectly. The air scented with floral notes and a lemony tang from the refreshments. Kitty herself was in a pale-yellow gown, looking breathtakingly beautiful. William, constantly at her side, could hardly take his eyes off his soon to be bride.

Members of the ton meandered through the hall, some dancing and others loitering with conversation that Lydia simply could not seem to force herself to engage in. It had been too long since she had seen him, and her skin felt too tight over her bones. He should have arrived by then, and Lydia kept searching the room over and over for Weston. While simultaneously avoiding her father, of course.

Frustrated, she finally made her way back over to Kitty and William.

“You seem rather on edge, sister.” Kitty hummed into the brim of her goblet. “I cannot imagine why that might be.”

“Hush.” Lydia said, unable to keep a grin from her lips. “You are supposed to be only focusing on yourself and your happiness tonight. It is a celebration of your love.”

Kitty rolled her eyes. “I am perfectly capable of attending to my own happiness as well as yours.”

Yet, even as the wine colored her cheeks pink, Kitty kept glancing over at her betrothed. There was an almost hungry gleam in Kitty’s eye that she simply could not deny. She was only jealous in that she could not act on her own hunger. William kept glancing down at his fiancé’s arm on his, flicking his eyes up to Kitty between each guest that came up to them in order to give them well wishes.

“Besides, with how flighty you look searching for the duke, I cannot help but be distracted.” Kitty hummed again, smirking to herself. It seemed that since she was now engaged, she was becoming quite the bold creature.

“I am not flighty.”

“I do not see why the pair of you have been separate from one another. I know that you like to pretend that nothing happened, but I know what I saw. And that, my dear sister, was passion.” Kitty teased with a wink. “Honestly, the moment that we are wed I do not think that I shall be able to keep my hands from my husband. I do not know how you can kiss somebody like that and not act on it.”

Lydia hissed at her sister to hush. “You cannot just say things like that!”

“Nobody is going to overhear me, do not worry.”

“That is not the point!”

“Then why do you keep from him? Hm?”

“It is... complicated. I am still in mourning. I am a widow. People will get the wrong impression. Among other reasons.” Lydia sighed.

“What other reasons?”

How was she to tell her sister that one of the reasons that she was keeping her distance from the duke was to ensure that there was no scandal attached to their name? Kitty and William’s engagement would have been tainted by the fact that she was ending her mourning period so quickly.

“I still have quite some time before my year of mourning is up, Kitty.” Lydia sighed, hoping that the answer would suffice. “My reputation—and by extension your own—would be called into question. Why would I do that? You know I care for you above all else.”

Lydia said it as gently as possible. Though, the love that welled in her sister’s eyes was almost too much.

Kitty reached for her, slipping her hand from William’s arm and grasping her hand tightly. “You have to put yourself first at some point, sister. Your feelings for His Grace must be very deep indeed.”

She would, but only after all of the rest of those that she loved and cared for so deeply were properly taken care of. There was nothing wrong with that. Even if she did crave Weston’s hands upon her to the point that her skin ached.

“Whatever my feelings might or might not be is irrelevant, Kitty. I did love my

husband, in my own way, and I would not insult his memory by remarrying too quickly.”

Kitty gasped. “Marriage?!”

Lydia’s face flamed. “That is not... I mean...”

Kitty giggled and leaned forward, her nose rubbing against her sisters as she laughed. The wine was clearly going to her sister’s head. She had not made such an affectionate gesture like that since they were children.

“Oh, what happy news. I would be so thrilled! The duke seems like such a lovely man.”

“As does William.”

“I am still so shocked that he has chosen me. I told him everything, you know, before the duke had left for London. After all of the blackmailing business came to light, I felt that it was only right. I was so certain that he would turn his back to me, that the threat of scandal in such a sensitive society would be enough to send him running.”

Kitty said with a smile, glancing over her shoulder at William as if she could not bear the thought of being parted from him for too long. “He accepted me, all of it, and then informed me that he was going to ask our father for my hand in marriage.”

“Truly, I cannot have wished for anything better for you.” Lydia smiled.

“The earl would have wished for your happiness. He was a strange man, but he was affectionate in his way. He would have wished for you to fill your days with happiness, he always did. The fact that you could be blessed with a love match? You know he would have never stood in your way. He was your friend, that much was

obvious.”

She had a point. Their relationship had always been friendly, and their marital duties were low on the priority burner between the two of them. But it had been successful for them. It had been enough. Lydia could have remained married to him for the rest of her days and would not have regretted it—if it were not for those memories with the duke all of those years ago.

There was no point in lamenting over what might have been, should she have made different life choices, or where she and the duke might have been now. But she could do something about the way that her future was going to turn out.

“You should not wait. I care not what society might or might not say. There is no point of depriving yourself of happiness for their sake. What has the ton ever done for you?” Kitty said.

Even those words alone would have been considered scandalous. But she had a point.

One way or another, no matter how it ended, Lydia was going to find Weston that night.

### Chapter 28

Lydia's nerves did not fully set in until she saw him across the ballroom. Weston, as always, looked breathtakingly handsome. She expected nothing less. His large frame stood a head taller than those around him, and a small crowd of undoubtedly eligible young ladies were encircling him.

It was like a flashback happening right before her eyes. Weston did not seem the slightest bit interested in any of them. No, his gaze seemed to be searching for her just as she was searching for him.

She lingered, waiting for his beautiful eyes to find her, that familiar tendril of heat curling low in her belly the moment that she felt him looking at her. A soft, knowing smile on her face that echoed the one on his own. It was as if he could read her mind despite the distance between them. His gaze raked over her figure, from her neck to her chest, to the curve of her waist, and her heart fluttered in her chest. He was not even touching her. Not physically.

Weston's head tilted to the side, indicating that she should head that way, and she was only too happy to oblige. Her pulse spiked the closer that she made it to where he was slowly walking to meet her. Behind him, those who had been trying to speak to him were now pouting that he had dismissed them so quickly. Petty, perhaps, but it made her feel just that much more desired.

Whispers gathered as she found him while still wearing her black mourning dress. But Weston clearly paid them no mind as he offered her his hand. Well, they could speculate all that they liked. Lydia was not going to give them any more fuel for their

gossip. It was not as if they had not danced before.

She could not have named the moment where words no longer felt needed between them, but it was only too easy to accept his invitation to dance. It was almost as if they were rewriting their own history. Those moments from before that had been a focal point of all of her dreams being overlain by this very moment.

Weston's hand was warm and steady as she delicately placed her own in his. The callouses from many years of trained swordsmanship grated against the satin of her glove. She longed to feel his rough palms against her bare skin. Patience, she needed to remind herself to be patient.

Her skin burned everywhere that he touched her, even the soft and respectable hold that he placed on her waist. They moved together for the first part of the song, separating and spinning with the others on the dance floor as the song moved from one stanza to the next. They could not keep their eyes off of one another.

Kitty was right, she ought not to have waited to find him so long. The only person that was suffering by her clinging to the morals of society was herself. Agreement or no, she should have found him much sooner than this. Perhaps then the desire that moved her would have been slaked at least once or twice.

The dance transitioned into a waltz, and neither one of them made any indication that they should move off of the dance floor. Two dances were certainly not unheard of; it was not scandalous. Lydia was desperate to speak to him, to be closer to him. She wanted to breathe in his scent and bask in his warmth and she certainly did not think that was too much to ask for.

"I have missed you," Weston said softly the moment he was able to pull her into a waltz position.

For once, Lydia was more than willing to let him lead. Anything to be closer to him. “I am here in front of you and yet you are still too far away.”

Weston chuckled at her words, and she could feel the sound vibrating out of his chest as he pulled her just a bit closer. Any more and the whispers around them were going to grow shocked at her indecency. In the back of her mind, Lydia attempted to weigh whether or not it was going to be worth it to let them talk so that she could get what she wished.

Not at Kitty’s party. She could contain herself for just a little while longer. Could she not?

“Say the word and I shall whisk you out of this room at once.” Weston whispered.

Lydia wished that it had been whispered against the shell of her ear.

Slowly, she lifted her chin to look at him properly, still staring up at him through her lashes. “I was mistaken, I should not have sent you away. The inquest is taking far longer than my patience can allow.”

Weston did not say anything, so she continued to fill the tense silence.

“I know that things are moving forward, and that Cassian’s trial is only a matter of days away. I have full faith that the correct verdict shall be reached once the pair of us testify against him. I just... do not wish to continue to allow Cassian to be the wedge between us. I was frightened, but I am not any longer.”

Weston’s brow arched. “Is that so?”

Lydia pulled her bottom lip between her teeth, dipping her chin into a nod. They moved through the steps of the dance, and his hands never left her again. Every



sweep of his fingers against her back, or subtle squeeze to her hip had her heart racing. Her skin felt as if it were on fire. The room ceased to matter. They were the only two on the whole dance floor as far as she was concerned.

“I admit that I have wished to close that gap many times, Lydia... but I have not been idle.”

“Oh?” Lydia asked, unsure if she truly wished to hear what he had been doing. If the answer was anything other than spending sleepless nights with his hand occupied to thoughts of her, she was not sure if she could take it. It was how her nights had been spent. Heatedly writhing on her bed in frustration. No matter how she tried, she could not fall apart by herself at the same intensity as he had done.

“Yes, I have begun the paperwork that will set things right with the estate.” Weston added a touch too casually, looking anywhere other than at her.

“I beg your pardon?”

“Unnecessary,” Weston teased with a smirk. “When the solicitor of the estate is finished drafting everything, it will name you as the sole heir of the house and ensure that Margaret remains in your care. You are her mother. No matter what else happens, I am not the sort of man who will take a bright young lady from the only family that she has left.”

Lydia bit her lip once more to keep from saying that perhaps Weston could become her family too. It was not as if the girls were not both wholly fond of him.

She was going to become even more carried away with herself if she did not stop it.

“Besides, it would only be unfair to take her away? now. She is settled, and that is her home. All of your homes.”

Lydia's gaze lifted once more. "I feel as if you are leaving something out on purpose."

Weston's jaw tensed. "Well, once all of that is handled... I suppose that it would be right for me to return to my own duchy. I have been neglectful of my work during my time here. I have... responsibilities."

As he spoke, Lydia felt a bubble of panic rising within her. He could not leave. Not now. Not when they were so close. She had confessed that she had been wrong, did he not believe her? Did he not have ample reason to stay? Would she truly be willing to beg him to return to the estate with her?

"I am grateful about the paperwork, Your Grace." Lydia answered, what else could she say?

"Do not do that, I am not leaving by choice, Lydia."

She attempted to pull away from him, for she did not wish to cry.

"I would never leave you again by choice." He said softly, and damn it all, she believed him.

"Then do not go at all." Lydia's voice softened. She was pleading. She was surprised that she felt no shame at all in doing so. Whatever his responsibilities might be, whatever duties that he might have they could simply face them together. She knew that she had more than proven herself as being intelligent and capable. Surely, he knew that she would be a boon and not a burden.

Until the moment that it felt like it was going to be removed from her, Lydia had not realized that somewhere in the back of her mind she had begun imagining him in her future. To think that it could all be removed from her so easily, and without even

getting what she so desperately desired? She could not stand for it.

“Are you asking me to stay? How very forward of you.” Weston teased.

“I can be far more forward than this.”

She could have sworn that Weston blushed, recalling that she had no issues with making the first move. She knew what she wanted, and it was him.

“I would certainly like nothing better than to allow you to be as forward as you like. As soon as this trial business is over, Lydia, I promise you—I am all yours. I have only, ever, been all yours.”

### Chapter 29

“Could you have imagined that this was how our year was going to go?” William asked softly, his fingers drumming on the polished wood of Weston’s desk.

Weston, still feeling rather sore from the recent events, did not dignify that question with a response. He turned back to the stack of paperwork that he was reading, not truly processing any of the information. It was all trivial to him now. There was only one thing that he wished to do with his time, only one person that he wished to occupy himself with.

“I suppose that it was my goal to seek a wife this year, after all...” William trailed off, his gaze lingering on Weston.

He was angling for a specific response. If Weston had any idea what it was that he was angling for, then he would give it to him so that this conversation could be concluded. He had other, far more pressing plans to attend to. Never mind that Cassian’s trial was demanding so very much of his time and energy. Which was the very last thing that he wished to give that man. Cassian had taken enough from him as it was.

When the trial was over and he was sentenced, then he could breathe again.

It felt almost as if Weston needed to close that chapter in his life firmly before flipping to a new, fresh page that he could fill with the story of him and Lydia.

“Oh, come on, man!” William interjected loudly, nearly startling Weston.

He cut his eyes to his friend. “What?”

“Dispense with the sour attitude and tell me why you have not proposed to Lydia yet?!” William demanded, leaning forward in his seat as he did so.

A muscle in Weston’s jaw feathered as he contemplated the words. Silently, he reached into the top drawer of his desk and pulled out a green velvet ring box and placed it on the top of the desk. He gestured with his hand to the box as if telling William to go ahead and satisfy his curiosity.

“There has not been a proper moment yet.”

“Any moment can be the proper moment! You love her, do you not?”

Weston had never loved anything or anyone as much as he loved Lydia. It was so much more than just him owing his life to her—she was his everything. His obsession was nearly overwhelming. And yet, he had not been able to ask that most important question. Certainly not when she was insisting that they stay apart. He longed for nothing more than to be able to touch her, to hold her in his arms once more.

“You sly dog, you.” William grinned, nearly stretching ear to ear with how cheshire the expression looked. He snatched up the ring box happily and snapped it open. He whistled low at the ring inside and plucked it from the lining so that the stone might catch the light. “Where did you find this?”

“Family heirloom.” Weston admitted. He had searched the attic long and hard for that ring box. It had passed through many generations of his family. When his mother had first given it to him, he had laughed at the idea of taking a wife. He had thought that no woman would ever be worthy of such an important ring. Now? The ring was not nearly grand enough to Lydia. Not by half.

“So, what are you waiting for! Clearly you have given this some sort of thought or planning or else you would not have this! I cannot believe that I have had to drag this out of you!” William continued as he put the ring back into the box and snapped it shut.

Weston’s gaze settled on the closed ring box. It was not as if he were afraid of her rejection, not necessarily. “She is still in mourning. Lydia has made it abundantly clear that she does not wish to do anything that might upset her husband’s memory. With everything happening, I thought that it best to delay for the right moment.”

“Nonsense. If it is right, then it simply is.”

“You can say that because you are not in the situation.”

“Are you honestly telling me that you do not think that Lydia would not jump at the chance? Do you not think that she and Kitty have not been pouring themselves into wedding planning? I think that it would be the perfect distraction for her at a time like this!” William continued.

“I am not going to propose as a... distraction.”

“That was not what I meant, and you know it.” William said with an eye roll.

“I do not wish to overwhelm her. All of this business with Cassian is yet to be settled, and she is very aware that the eyes of the ton are upon us. I think that she would rather wait until after you and Kitty are happily settled into your own marriage. Lydia is always putting others before herself.” Weston sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose.

“All the more reason that you need to ensure that she is taking time for herself. I should not be the one giving you advice here, friend, you were always far more savvy

with women than I.”

“For a night, perhaps, but this is another notion entirely! Lydia is...”

Weston trailed off as he struggled and failed to come up with a way to describe Lydia that could be contained within a single word.

“She is my future. Plain as that.” Weston concluded after a long beat.

William’s grin somehow widened. “Of course she is! She is your match in every way! Stop letting society, or propriety, or whatever else you wish to blame things on get in your way! You deserve happiness as much as the next fellow. The pair of you have more than proven your love and devotion. Marry her quickly.”

Weston could no longer stop himself from returning his friend’s bright smile. “Enough about me! You came here to celebrate your good news and the approval of your marriage license, did you not?”

“I did!” William slid from his chair and moved over to the small beverage cart. He rummaged through the decanted bottles up top, then the still wax sealed bottles on the second shelf until he seemed to find what it was that he was seeking on the third shelf.

Of course. Weston ought to have known that he was going to use this as an excuse to drink from Weston’s late father’s private reserve. He supposed that this was as good of an occasion as any other, and did not stop William as he grabbed two glasses and set them on the desk.

William opened the bottle and sniffed at the contents, making a face momentarily before pouring them both two fingers of the fine cognac and lifting his glass. “To the next steps!”

“I shall drink to that happily,” Weston agreed, lifting his glass into the air to clink softly against William’s before taking a sip, relishing the flavors as they crossed his tongue.

He could not wait to see Lydia again.

Any proposal plans or grand gestures felt too frivolous for them when they had both been in such anticipation for one another for all of these years. She was all that mattered. Lydia, her girls, and everything that the future held in store for them both.



### Chapter 30

Sleep would not find her. Her bedroom at her father's house was no longer comforting to her. Tomorrow morning, she would awake to the final verdict of Cassian's sentencing. No doubt there was already some printer that knew the results at this very moment as they worked diligently to print out all of the necessary copies.

If she had any idea how to go about bribing a printer for early information, or even where to start, then she would be sorely tempted to do so. Instead, all she could do was roll around restlessly in her bed, hoping that somehow her body would surrender to sleep.

It simply would not happen.

She tried everything that she could think of, but her mind would not quiet. Every time that she managed to drift off into the lightest stages of sleep, horrible nightmares would flood her and force her right back awake again. Nightmares that Cassian escaped custody. Nightmares that she had been too late and that she had arrived to find Weston dead on the floor of her basement. Then it would twist into Weston rejecting her... or disappearing in the night like a sneak thief. Of course, the nightmares were implausible, but she could not seem to stop them.

Moonlight filtered in through the gaps in her drapes, her bare feet padding back and forth on the carpeted floor of her bedroom. Even when she had been a child, she had never quite felt fully at ease there. The estate was her home, and sleeping anywhere else was difficult for her now. She could not wait to return home to her daughters and tell them the good news that they would not have to leave their home.

But she wished to deliver the news with Weston at her side.

Kitty had been up late into the night with wedding plans and preparations. Lydia could not bring herself to wake her sister and attempt to talk things out with her. In truth, the only person that she truly wanted right at that moment, was Weston.

Surely it would be foolish to head over to his London home. He very well could be at a club, or out doing something with William. Perhaps he had business that she would be interrupting should she go over.

Lydia glanced at the small clock on the mantle of the fireplace in her room. No, surely at this hour he was at home. It would be indecent for a lady such as herself to go out on her own in the darkness... but staying there was making her feel restless to the point of feeling itchy in her own skin.

Lydia tied on her dressing gown before she gave herself the chance to logic herself out of chasing what she truly desired. She had had enough logic for one week. She silently slipped down the stairs, pulling a cloak on over her dressing gown to fight off the evening chill.

She did not ride horses often, but she certainly was not going to be caught walking in the middle of the night to the duke's house. She did not trust herself to handle a carriage on her own either, and hiring one was out of the question.

Her heart hammered in her chest as she made her way over to the duke's property. Tethering her horse carefully, she stole around the back of the house and snuck to the side door just so that she would not be easily seen by any passersby.

Lydia's nightmare kept replaying in her mind, over and over again. Weston, laying on the floor as whatever poison he had been forced to consume foamed out of his lips.

His skin, waxy and pale as he stared with unseeing eyes to where she stood in the doorway. Just moments too late, the shudders of his last breath being how she found him in the first place. Cassian's cruel, mocking laughter at his victory over them. The feeling of utter despair as her heart broke.

Her own screams, even if contained only in her mind, waking her.

If she could just lay eyes on him, then she would feel better. She simply needed to gaze upon him and know that he was all right. Perhaps then she would be able to sleep. Lydia knocked firmly on the door. She had to do so three more times before the butler finally cracked open the door.

"I need to see His Grace, please."

He looked at her like she was a madwoman.

"Do you have any concept of the hour? His Grace is resting, certainly not taking visitors."

"I insist. He shall wish to receive me, I promise."

"I cannot allow it, my lady, I shall order someone to escort you home."

"No!" Lydia said a touch too firmly, and then attempted to backpedal. "What I mean to say is, I cannot leave without seeing His Grace. I understand the uncomfortable position that I am placing you in, but I must."

The butler regarded her for a long moment before finally stepping to the side. He grabbed a candle from the small table behind the door and locked the door behind Lydia as she slipped inside. She hugged her cloak more tightly around herself as she followed the butler into the drawing room. She would have much rather been turned

loose in the house so that she could seek him out on her own.

“Remain here, and I shall return in a moment. If he refuses to see you...”

“I will leave... please.” Lydia agreed.

The butler pursed his lips and headed up the stairs slowly. It felt like forever before the duke finally came around the corner, his hair a mess and sleep still clinging to his features. He did look worse for the wear, but she could not stop herself. Her feet carried her across the room swiftly, her hands lifting to cup his face so that she could examine him properly. She turned his head this way and that, and mercifully he did not make any effort to stop her. She simply needed to be absolutely certain that he was all right and that it was merely sleep or something similar that bothered him.

“Are you going to tell me what this is about? Not that I am not thrilled to see you,” the duke grouched, his voice still rough with sleep.

“I had a horrible dream...” Lydia started, folding herself into his chest without waiting for his permission. Her arms tucked between them, she could not breathe properly... until she felt his arms envelope her.

“A dream that forced you to rush out here in the dead of night?” Weston chuckled softly, pulling her more tightly against himself. His chin rested on the top of her head, one hand coming to cup the back of her head and holding her even closer. Only then could she inhale comfortably.

“Yes. Is that all right?” Lydia said in a small voice.

“Of course it is all right, I only wish that you had not put yourself in danger to accomplish it.”

“I was careful.”

Weston said nothing for a long moment. She knew what he was thinking. One could only be so careful when it came to matters such as that. He had not even seen that she was not properly dressed yet, either.

“So, this bad dream?” Weston asked softly, allowing her the space to move back from him when she felt stable enough to do so. She looked up at him with tears welling in her eyes, her full bottom lip between her teeth. Where was she supposed to start?

“What if the news tomorrow is bad? What if... what if something has happened or... what if I had never reached you in time. I...”

Weston silenced her with a kiss to her forehead. “Your mind is running away with you again. I am here, and whatever happens tomorrow I shall happily face at your side.”

Hope fluttered in her chest. “You truly mean that?”

Weston gave her a wry smile, and bent just enough to scoop her up into his arms. He carried her over to the small couch in the drawing room and settled down on it, with her legs ending up draped over his thighs. It was not close enough. She pulled the string on her cloak, letting it fall off of her shoulders and into a wad of fabric behind her.

“In truth, Lydia, I should like to do everything at your side.” Weston continued as she lifted herself up onto one knee, draping the other across him. His hands easily settled on her thighs, pulling her onto his lap more comfortably as she straddled him. It was terribly intimate and exactly what she needed. Even now, sitting astride him, she could not feel enough of him.

“What do you mean?” Lydia asked, her focus shifting to his lips as her hands rested delicately on his shoulders.

“I mean, I would like to marry you, Lydia. Then we shall never have to be parted again.”

Her breath hitched, his words not registering for a full heartbeat before her mind stilled, the lusty haze and need for him dimmed for only a moment as she fully processed his words. “What?”

“Marry me.” He repeated.

Lydia’s heart fluttered. She could hardly imagine what he was saying. The small smile on her face spread rapidly to fully overtake her.

“This was not how I wished to ask you, of course, I had a whole thing planned but-”

Weston’s voice was cut off by her throwing her arms around his neck and holding to him tightly “Yes! Of course I will marry you!”

Hands skittered over her waist, banding around her back, unfurling heat inside of her that pooled low in her belly. Her hands cupped the back of his neck as she pulled back from him just enough to slant her lips over his. Something unleashed between them.

A flame that danced between their skin and coursed through her very veins. It was just the two of them now. Nobody to stop them, nobody to answer to or interrupt them. There was absolutely nowhere else that she wished to be. There was no space left between their bodies, every ragged breath that he took, she could feel against her chest.

Her hands shifted between them, tugging the strings of her dressing gown loose and shaking it down her shoulders so that she could feel him better through the thin fabric of her nightgown. The heat of his hands was everything, slowly sliding down her waist to grip her hips, tightening as she experimentally rolled her hips forward into him.

Weston hissed, his eyes snapping open as their kiss broke. “Careful, if we go down this path, I do not think that I will be able to stop.”

“Is this your attempt at being modest? You do not wish to deflower me before my wedding night?” Lydia teased, her breath gusting over the shell of his ear before letting her teeth close over the skin softly.

Perhaps he thought her a blushing bride, but she was more than happy to disillusion him from that notion. She had thought about all of the things that she wanted to do to him for years. There was not a single surface in her house that she had not fantasized about him taking her on.

Weston’s grip on her hips tightened as he flipped the pair of them, leaving him on top of her as she was laid out on the couch, his weight settled between her legs. She could feel him there, hard and ready as he pressed against her thigh. It was just so tempting to rush ahead—though it was not as if they would not have plenty of times to explore one another’s bodies in the future. But, then again, she did not wish to waste a single moment of time with him. No matter how desperately she craved him.

Her hands traced the lines of his chest, the thin white linen shirt that he wore hiding almost nothing away from her as she memorized the lines of his stomach and the contours of his muscles. Her thighs had to stretch to accommodate him. It was such a delicious sensation as his lips found hers once more, stealing the oxygen from her lungs as he wrapped his arms around her once more, lifting the small of her back just enough to encourage her to arch up into him.

Her nightgown drifted up her thighs as she hooked her feet behind his legs, wanting more—needing to feel all of him. She had imagined so many aspects of this but the thing that she had not been able to anticipate was how desperately needy she was going to feel. With each kiss she felt just a little bit more intoxicated by him—would it ever be enough? Was it possible to become drunk off of another person?

Weston's hand dropped to her knee, trailing along the curve of her leg, groaning softly at the feel of her. His thumb indented the hypersensitive skin of her inner thigh, massaging tight little circles higher and higher on her leg. It felt like the closer to her core that he became, the less steadily she was able to breathe. How did anyone ever do anything else when feelings like this were obtainable?

Lydia gasped softly as he found the slick wetness collected at the junction of her thighs, fingers stroking along her with expert deftness, just enough teasing to drive her mad. Lydia was not above begging, and would do so happily if she had any idea what to beg for. All she knew was that she wanted more.

“Weston,” She cried, his name was a sigh of pleasure on her lips.

“I think that might be my new favorite sound,” Weston groaned as his teeth scraped gently along the line of her jaw. He dipped a finger inside of her, curling softly and wresting another moan out of her, louder than the one before. “Though, that is a very close second.”

If the motion of his hand had not felt quite so good, she might have smacked him for his words. Then he added a second finger, and she realized that he could say anything that he liked so long as he kept touching her like that.

The sleeve of her nightgown dripped down her shoulder, and Weston took advantage of the opportunity, grabbing the fabric with his teeth and sliding it down far enough to expose her breast. He wasted no time at all in covering the newly exposed skin



with his lips.

“So soft,” he groaned, his thumb twisting so that he could circle that sensitive bundle of nerves. “So responsive.”

It might not be praise, but on his lips, it certainly sounded like it.

He worked her body like he knew it better than she ever possibly could. Perhaps he had been just as absorbed with thoughts of her as she had with him. It felt so right being there with him. Soon, she would never have to be parted from him again. The details could all be sorted later, for none of it truly mattered. He was hers, forever.

Lydia’s head tilted back, her breathing becoming more uneven as he worked her higher, and higher, her hips ground against his hand, chasing her pleasure as she gripped his arms with everything that she had, Her fingers slipped, fisting into the sleeves of his shirt and using that leverage like it was the only thing keeping her tethered to this world.

Teeth scraped against her nipple, pulling the peaked skin into his mouth and flicking the nub with his tongue. She was going to come undone, and she wanted to do it with him inside of her.

“Wes... please,” She breathed, unable to form the rest of the words needed.

“Yes, my dove?”

Oh, that voice dripped in power. He knew exactly what he was doing to her.

“More,” she breathed.

“Only because you look so stunning falling apart under me like this.” Weston agreed,

and his fingers left her for only a moment—she felt the absence keenly. She had never been so aware of just how empty she was without him.

Though, she did not have to wait long—the warm head of him pressed against her entrance. She did not need to look to know how endowed he was. She could not breathe at all as he started to ease into her slowly, the pinch of her body adjusting only uncomfortable for a moment.

Perfect. He was absolutely, utterly perfect.

Weston covered her lips with his, kissing her deeply and letting their tongues dance together. He kissed her like she was the only oxygen that he was ever going to need to breathe.

Then, he started moving—thrusting inside of her and almost making her slide up the couch with every movement. Hastily, she yanked and pulled his shirt up until it was gone, and she could finally feel every bit of his heated skin against her chest.

Her hips lifted to meet his, desperate for friction, to be joined with him—she was never going to have enough. Never.

“More,” she breathed again, seeing stars start to cloud the corners of her vision. “Mo—”

She could not speak as he gave her exactly what she asked for and then some. The way he filled her so completely was intoxicating, robbed her of all rational thought as heat overrode every one of her other senses. There was nothing but him and the friction he brought inside of her, bending her legs at the knees so that he could reach a deeper angle, the head of him brushing against something inside of her that made her swoon.

“We—” Oh she was going to implode, and that was before he dropped his hand between them, he hardly had to brush over the swollen bud before she came clear out of her skin. She was fairly certain that she shattered with his name on her lips, perhaps an expletive that she was not even aware that she knew before this moment—a rush and a high unlike anything she had ever felt before.

She squirmed, trying to run from the sensation but he clearly had no plans to allow such a thing. He kept her pinned, kept up his motions without pause.

“One more, my love... one more,” Weston breathed into the skin of her neck.

She could not possibly do such a thing, she felt herself spasming around him, the sensation building so quickly that it was almost painful, she was at his total and complete mercy. She tried to push his arms away, tried to futilely give herself a pause that she did not actually want—and then there it was.

She might have screamed his name that time.

Weston’s answering groan of pleasure pushed into the heated skin of her neck before he, too, came to pieces. She could feel the heat of him, thrusting deep inside of her, filling her in every possible way that she craved.

She was a boneless puddle on the couch, attempting to steady her breathing as she basked in the warm afterglow of her pinnacle.

Weston slipped from her, stepping off of the couch fluidly and scooping her up into his arms.

“Where are we going?” She asked weakly.

“To my bed, where I plan to finish what we have just begun.”

Her eyes snapped open, he could not possibly mean—but from that smirk he wore, apparently, he could.

Three Months Later

The day had finally arrived.

It had been difficult to postpone this special day until after her sister had already been married. Kitty and William had become engaged first, so it was only natural that her wedding be first. Though, there was no denying that there was something magical about being able to sit with her sister, who was also her best friend, and plan their respective weddings together.

Her first marriage had been rushed so quickly that there had been almost nobody in attendance. A special license had been procured given how swiftly everything had happened and then she had just been... married.

No pomp or circumstance, nothing fancy. It had been enough. Given that at the time she had looked upon it as nothing more than a business deal, a contract that she was entering into, it had not bothered her. Sometimes it frightened her just how feminine and over the top that she sometimes felt while she had been planning out every little detail of her wedding. With Weston, she wanted it to be memorable.

They kept the guest list small, since she was still a couple of months shy of technically being out of her mourning period. It was for the best, there were so few people that she actually wished to share one of her happiest days with. Both her sister and William were in attendance. They were seated prominently in the front pews of the church with Margaret, and Juliet seated between them.

Their governess, of course, was directly behind them. Lydia only took the smallest of

peeks out into the main hall of the church. She did not wish to see Weston in his suit until he could see her as well. It was strange to be wearing a white gown once more.

Pearls adorned her hair delicately and two teardrop shaped pearls hung from her ears. Simple, nothing extra was needed. She wore a very simple satin gown with gloves that came up to the middle of her biceps, and soft slippers to complete the ensemble.

The church was decorated with swaths of tulle and ribbon that tethered small bouquets of brightly colored flowers down the aisles. Kitty had insisted on making each of them herself. Including the one that was clutched in Lydia's nervous hands. It was not cold feet, she had never wanted anything, or anyone, more than the duke, and was overjoyed to start their new life together. Perhaps it was flutters of anticipation.

The quartet started playing music softly, and she knew that they would transition into the wedding march after a moment. It was at that moment that her father came around the corner and came to stand beside her. Lydia kept her head trained forward, not knowing if he was here to say something that would likely dampen her mood and if he was, she did not wish to hear it. Nothing was going to bring her down on her wedding day, she simply would not allow it.

He had lessened the comments about their duties in life since both of his daughters had become engaged. No doubt it was only a matter of time before he started in on the duties of his granddaughters too. She could endure his thoughtless comments when they were aimed at her, she was not going to tolerate them nearly as well if he attempted to aim them at her daughters.

"I am proud of you, for doing the right thing." he said so suddenly that she could hardly believe what she was hearing.

She turned to look at him as if he had suddenly grown a second head. Never before had he uttered those words to her—and saying them so suddenly affected her

emotions more than she was ready to admit.

Lydia knew that she should say something, anything, or at the very least she ought to thank him for the compliment but not a single word left her lips.

“I know that I have been... hard on you and your sister over the years, but I hope that you understand that everything that I do is for what is best for you... it is done with love.”

The way he said ‘love’ made it seem like just saying the word out loud was painful for him. Lydia was utterly transfixed, waiting to hear whatever else might come out of his mouth.

“Perhaps I was a touch too hard on you. Not that you did not adequately rise to the challenges that were set in front of you.” the older man continued. “I have seen how gracefully you have carried the weight on your shoulders, Lydia, even if I did not... acknowledge it as such.”

The moment felt too surreal to her, she did not know how to process what was happening.

“I hope that in time, you might come to forgive me for having been so harsh on you, I know that is why you keep your daughters from me. You do not...” He sighed. “What I mean to say, is that I apologize, and that you have grown into a fine young woman in spite of myself.”

Somewhere in the back of her mind, Lydia desperately wanted to inquire as to how deeply he must be in his cups to have said so many positive things all at the same time.

“I... thank you, father,” she whispered, her grip on her bouquet tightening.

He leaned over, kissing her on her temple awkwardly, a bump of his lips against her skin but it was still more outward affection than he had ever shown before.

She knew that she resented her father for the way that he treated her more often than not, but holding on to her anger would only hurt them further. If he had not been the way that he was, then perhaps she would not have been given the opportunity to be standing there today.

She would not be about to walk down the aisle and wake up tomorrow as a Duchess. She would not be marrying the man she truly loved, and who loved her back just as fiercely. Mending the relationship with her father was bound to take time, and a good deal of effort from both of them but she was more than willing to put in the work needed.

She smiled softly at him and slipped her hand into his as the wedding march started to play. They moved forward together like they were stepping into a new, brighter future for the whole family.

Their guests rose to their feet, turning to watch her walk down the aisle but she could not see them. A cursory glance was offered to her daughters, beaming at her in their pretty new dresses. Then her gaze met Weston's and had no intention of leaving again. Even when her father passed her hand from his own to the duke's, she could hardly breathe for how handsome he looked.

Butterflies took flight in her stomach, lifting her lips into a bright smile. She could not even focus on the words that were being said to her. She was aware that she was repeating the lines and making the promises as she was asked—but she wanted to kiss him so badly that it was almost painful.

The moment she was allowed to kiss him, she never wanted to stop. It took every ounce of her self-control to keep from being indecent in front of her beloved family.



Such a chaste kiss only left her burning for more.

The rest of the afternoon passed in a blur. Congratulations from their guests and family—her daughters both clinging to the duke and begging him to return home soon. For the last few weeks during the wedding preparations, the three of them had been bonding, growing closer to one another than ever before.

Lydia took comfort in knowing that the duke loved her children as his own, and would provide for them, which would mean that they would never have to experience any of the struggles that she had had to endure.

By the time that the sun started to set, the pair had loaded up into a carriage and set off on their honeymoon. Lydia had never been to Scotland before and was eager to make the trip if only for all of the alone time that it was going to provide for them both. Plenty of travel time, intimacy in carriages was difficult but she certainly was not opposed to it.

They did not arrive at the inn until well after dark, just the first of many. But Lydia was more than ready to stretch her legs. Rather, she was ready for Weston to and stretch them for her. She had been astride him for the last hour, and while her knees were still weak, she wanted to be in their suite as swiftly as possible.

Weston kissed her cheek, then hurried inside the inn to make all of the proper arrangements. She followed him up the stairs, and Weston could not scoop her up into his arms to carry her over the threshold of their room quickly enough.

Setting her on her feet, she took a look around the space. It was a simple enough room, with a large four poster bed as the focal point of the suite. A small dressing area was cordoned off with a room divider, she could just barely make out the wash basin behind it. A large couch was in front of the divider, and she presumed that the closed door all of the way to the left was an adjoining bathing room. It was tempting

to head there first, but she did not wish to wait.

Weston was her husband now, and she was never going to have to wait again. He was hers, and she could have the handsome man any time that she wished. The door clicked shut behind her, Weston twisting the key in the lock, and her pulse spiked.

Weston's hands found her hips, squeezing softly as he stood behind her. Calloused hands slipped up the curve of her waist, lingering there as he pushed her further into the room. Normally, she would fight him for control over the situation, but tonight? She was more than willing to be at his mercy.

"Hands on the bedpost," he urged in a low voice. Not quite a command but she wanted him too badly to even think about fighting him on it. Obediently, her hands wrapped around the bedpost, the intricate carvings catching her attention for only a moment before Weston's hands slipped to the strings keeping her dress in place. Knuckles brushed over the soft skin of her back as he took deliberate time in undoing the laces.

The fabric loosened, and her eyes closed—focusing on the sensation of his lips brushing over the exposed column of her neck from behind. Goosebumps erupted in the wake of their warmth, her grip tightening on the bedpost as anticipation built. Weston slowly pushed the dress lower on her shoulders, and then shifted his focus, only actually kissing the curve where her neck met her shoulder once.

It was not enough. She craved more, she needed him, and he was determined to draw it out.

A soft whine of disappointment filtered through her heavy breathing, only to be cut off the moment that his hands found her stocking covered ankles. Thigh high and a creamy white color, the blue ribbons at the top holding them in place were the only thing keeping his hands from touching her bare skin.

Weston took his time sliding his hands up her legs, pushing her dress up with it until he found the tops of her stockings. His long fingers toyed with the ribbon holding them in place, indenting just slightly into her soft thighs before he seemed to decide that he did not wish to remove them after all.

Warm air kissed the junction of her thighs as he pushed the dress up over her hips and held it there. He wrapped the excess fabric around her waist once to use as leverage to pull her hips back toward his face, forcing her to arch her back into him. She was so sorely tempted to move her hands and rip her own dress off of her wanton frame... but then he kissed her.

Intimately.

First the back of her thigh, and she did not have to be encouraged to arch herself further into the contact as he moved further up, his hands cupping her rear and parting her in a way that if she were not so intoxicated by it all, she might have had second thoughts about. His tongue finding her core a moment later, that pushed all thoughts of modesty far away as he feasted upon her.

Pleasure coiled low and tight in her core as his tongue explored her—all of her—until her legs were trembling. His tongue thrust inside of her with a deep, guttural groan of his own that vibrated against her skin in the best possible way. Her grip on the bedpost quickly became the only thing keeping her upright as her forehead fell to her forearms. Her eyes closed, focusing on his perfect, sinful tongue and the wickedly good way that he made her feel.

Two fingers slipped inside of her, replacing his tongue as he twisted, flicking his tongue higher as he worked his fingers deeper, stretching her—as if she was not always ready for him. They had years of this that they had missed, that she had been deprived of and she was diligently working to make up for the lost time.

Should she have been decent enough to wait for her wedding night to have had him for the first time? Perhaps. Was she sorry that she had not? Not in the slightest. It was something of a wonder that she was not already with his child for how she could not keep her hands off of him when she had been able to see him.

Going forward she could not imagine going even a few hours without his touch. An addiction, a craving. All of those fantasies had happened so often for all of those years... and now she did not have to fantasize, she could just act upon it.

“My wife tastes divine ,” Weston groaned into her skin.

Lydia could only manage a hummed assent to his words, her heart skipping a beat as he attempted a third finger, her body accommodating, somewhat slower than before, but she was determined. Everything that he could give to her, she would accept, and then some. If he was not careful, she would lose the ability to stand entirely as pleasure assaulted her—burning her from the inside out in the best possible way.

“Pl—” she began, the word pushed into the skin of her arms as she wiggled her hips back into him slowly.

“What was that, my love?”

She would be damned if she could not hear the smirk in his voice as he teased her, his movements slower than before, and she slowly started to drift away from the climax that he had been building her toward.

“Wes...”

“Not yet, my love,” he teased, using his thumb to stimulate her as he kissed a reverent curve over the inside of her thigh and worked his way back to her center. When he reached his thumb, his lips closed over that bundle of nerves, sucking softly and

flicking it with his tongue—and she almost buckled.

“Not yet,” he repeated, stopping once more to let her drift away. She was going to go mad if he did not stop the torture. She was going to let go of the bedpost, grab him by his hair and force him to do as she was craving. Her patience felt poised on a razor’s edge. Only when she could no longer stop the trembling in her thighs did he switch.

Weston rolled to his feet in a fluid motion, his hands never leaving her skin as his fingers raced up the back of her legs and over the soft curve of her rear, squeezing the flesh there firmly. She could feel herself damned near dripping down her legs. She attempted to entice him just a little, rolling her hips back in his direction.

The soft rustle of fabric as he pulled his shirt off and undid the front of his trousers was music to her ears. Lydia nearly buckled for a second time as she felt Weston free himself from his confines, the hard length of him slipping so easily between her thighs, where she was more than ready for him.

He took her slowly, pushing softly to the point that she was whimpering with need. It would be so simple to just reach back and pull him closer—she needed more .

“Impatient, my love?” he asked, pushing her dress up and over her waist, letting it be held in her hands once it was over her head. He kissed all along the curve of her spine, nipping softly at her skin here and there as he went. His hands explored upward, cupping her breasts and massaging as he fully entered her.

If he did not start moving and swiftly, she might very well lose her mind after all.

“Hold on tightly,” he encouraged, as his hands moved back to her hips, holding her firmly in place as he gave her everything that she wanted and then some. Lydia’s eyes nearly rolled into the back of her head and her grip tightened on the post... as he thrust into her again, and again.

Each snap of his hips felt like he was going impossibly deeper, the heat in her belly building higher and higher. Weston's strong, calloused hands slid down her hips and around her thighs, using one hand to keep her upright and still before the other stealthily moved for her swollen bundle of nerves.

It did not take much before she was wholly and utterly undone. She forgot how to breathe entirely as her orgasm ripped through her. Weston was the only thing keeping her upright, having been so close before and been denied, it was like the pleasure was heightened. His name left her lips in a scream as she clenched around him—and he followed soon after.

Still inside of her, he banded a hand around her waist, pulling her back into his chest as he pulled her hands off of the banister and her dress fell to the floor in a pool of satin. Weston slipped free, the dribble of the pair of their climaxes running down the inside of her thighs. Her legs were weak, but she knew that they were far from finished when he pulled her down onto the bed.

Every night, for the rest of her life she could have this. Have him. She would have it no other way.

THE END

### Three Years Later

The soft glow of candlelight flickered across the grand ballroom, casting a warm, golden hue on the polished marble floors. Lydia, Duchess of Somerfield, stood at the top of the sweeping staircase, her gaze drifting over the scene below. The room was alive with the gentle hum of conversation, the rustle of silk gowns, and the occasional trill of laughter as guests began to arrive, their faces obscured by elaborate masks. Tonight, the air was thick with anticipation, the thrill of secrecy that only a masquerade could inspire.

Lydia's heart swelled with a mix of pride and nostalgia. Though, she could not deny that the allure of the evening had her on edge in the best possible way. Even through the planning process she had not been able to stop herself from drifting into her memories and the desire to recreate that night all of those years ago. Nearly three years had passed since she and Weston had stood together at the altar, their vows sealing a union that had begun under the most unlikely of circumstances. And now, there they were, hosting their first annual masquerade ball, a tribute to the night that had changed everything. The villa on the Thames, with its stunning views, was the perfect setting. Magical.

The velvet mask she wore was adorned with intricate gold filigree, its design a perfect complement to the deep emerald gown that clung to her figure. The gown, made of the finest silk, shimmered with every movement, its color reminiscent of the rolling hills of Hillsborough, where she and Weston spent most of their time. But tonight, they were in London, embracing the city life that Weston had longed for her to share with him. It had taken time, and patience on his part, but Lydia had finally agreed to split their year between the estate and the capital, and she had to admit,

there was a certain charm to the bustling energy of London.

As she descended the staircase, her hand lightly trailing along the banister, Lydia could not help but think back to the night that had started it all. The memory was consuming her. Ever present. The masquerade where she had first encountered Weston—though, at the time, neither of them had known who the other truly was. The memory brought a smile to her lips. It had been a night of stolen glances, a single dance, and a kiss that had lingered in her thoughts for years. A night that had set her on a path she never could have imagined.

When she reached the bottom of the stairs, Lydia felt a familiar presence at her side. Weston seemed to materialize out of thin air, his hand warm as it settled on the small of her back. She turned to look up at him, her smile widening at the sight of him. He was as handsome as ever, his broad shoulders and tall frame a reassuring presence amid the swirling crowd. His mask, a simple black piece with silver accents, did little to hide the mischievous glint in his gray eyes.

“Are you ready for our guests, my love?” he asked, his voice a low murmur that only she could hear.

Lydia nodded, her heart fluttering with a mixture of excitement and contentment. “I believe I am. And you?”

He leaned down, pressing a kiss to her temple, his lips lingering just a moment longer than necessary. “With you by my side, Lydia, I am ready for anything.”

As the first strains of the orchestra began to play, signaling the official start of the evening, Lydia allowed herself to relax into the moment. Tonight was a celebration, not just of their past, but of the future they were building together. Their son had thrown a fit before bedtime earlier that evening, pleading to join the celebration, but as he was still only two years old, he had been easy enough to turn away. He had



been put to bed about the same time as Kitty's own two children. Margaret, however, was nearly old enough to enter society and was not one to be so easily dissuaded from attendance. She had needed to be convinced. It was still impossible to believe, at times, that their family had grown in the way that it had.

As the night unfolded, the masquerade blossomed into a spectacle far grander than the one that had initially entwined their fates. The ballroom glittered, from the grand chandeliers dripping with crystals to the lush floral arrangements adorning every surface. The guests, draped in rich fabrics and adorned with ornate masks, moved in a swirl of color and light, their laughter and conversation creating a symphony that filled the air. The music, a lively waltz, carried the dancers across the floor with practiced elegance, their steps perfectly in time with the rhythm of the night. Though all of it paled in comparison to the excited sparks of desire that Weston's every glance in her direction seemed to bring.

Lydia and Weston had greeted their guests with warmth and grace, exchanging pleasantries and polite conversation as they made their way through the throng of revelers. But now, as the evening wore on, they found themselves drawn to one another, seeking a moment of quiet amid the celebration. Hand in hand, they slipped away from the main ballroom, finding refuge in a secluded alcove just off the dance floor. The room was quieter here, the music a soft murmur in the background, the flickering candlelight casting a soft glow over their faces.

Weston drew Lydia into his arms, his hand resting gently on her waist as they swayed together, a slow, private dance meant only for them. Lydia leaned into him, resting her head against his chest, listening to the steady beat of his heart. For a moment, they simply existed together, content in the warmth of each other's embrace.

"It is hard to believe, is it not?" Weston murmured, his voice breaking the comfortable silence between them. "How far we have come. How much we have been through to get here."

Lydia lifted her head to look up at him, her eyes soft with the memories of their shared journey. “It feels like a lifetime ago that we were just two strangers at a masquerade. So much has changed since then... and yet, it all led us here.”

“I will forever be grateful that Cassian will spend the rest of his life behind bars. Though, I cannot deny that I am grateful for him and all of that nonsense bringing us together.” He nodded, his gaze steady as it held hers. “We have both sacrificed a great deal. You, especially. I often wonder if I am worth all that you have endured.”

The cheeky smile on his face sent desire pooling between her thighs.

A faint smile tugged at Lydia’s lips, though her eyes shone with a trace of sorrow. “You are, Weston. You have given me so much more than I ever imagined I could have. But it does not mean I don’t still grieve for what was lost.”

Weston’s hand tightened slightly on her waist, a silent offer of comfort. “Jacob was a good man,” he said quietly. “I know how much he meant to you. And to Margaret and Juliet.”

Lydia nodded, her throat tightening with emotion. “He was. He saved us in so many ways. And I shall always be grateful to him for that. But he was never my great love. He was my friend, and I miss him dearly, but what we have... it is different.”

Her words hung between them, a truth that had taken time to fully realize. The love she had for Weston was unlike anything she had ever experienced before. It was passionate, intense, and consuming in a way that both terrified and exhilarated her. But it was also healing, a balm to the wounds she had carried for so long.

“I think he would be happy for you,” Weston said softly. “For us. He would want you to find joy and love again. And I hope... I hope I can continue to give that to you.”

Lydia's smile widened, her heart swelling with affection for the man who had become her everything. "You already have, Weston. You have given me a second chance at happiness, at love. And for that, I will always be grateful."

They continued to sway together, lost in their own world as the masquerade carried on around them. The weight of the past still lingered, but it no longer overshadowed the present. Instead, it had shaped them, brought them closer, and made them stronger. Lydia knew she would always carry a part of Jacob with her, just as she would always honor his memory by raising his daughters with love and care. But the life she had now, with Weston by her side, was more than she ever dared to dream of.

"Shall we rejoin our guests?" Weston asked after a moment, his tone lightening as he leaned down to press a kiss to her forehead.

Lydia tilted her head back, meeting his gaze with a playful glint in her eyes. "I suppose we must. It would not do for the hosts to disappear for too long."

He chuckled, the sound warm and rich, as he released her from his embrace. "Very well, my love. But I do expect the next dance with you."

"Only if you can keep up," she teased, slipping her hand into his as they began to make their way back to the ballroom.

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As the final notes of the waltz echoed through the ballroom, signaling the end of the evening's festivities, Lydia and Weston exchanged a knowing glance. The masquerade had been a resounding success, their guests thoroughly entertained, but now, as the night drew to a close, both were eager for a moment of solitude away from the prying eyes and endless conversations.

Weston leaned close, his voice a low murmur in her ear. "Shall we steal away, my love? I believe the gardens are calling."

Lydia's heart skipped at the suggestion, her lips curving into a mischievous smile. "I thought you would never ask."

With the ease of long practice, they gracefully excused themselves from the remaining guests, their departure barely noticed amid the lingering revelry. Weston kept her hand firmly in his as they navigated through the grand villa, slipping past the ballroom and down a quiet corridor that led to the gardens.

Once outside, the cool night air enveloped them, a welcome contrast to the warmth and vibrancy of the ballroom. The garden stretched out before them, bathed in the soft glow of the moonlight. Tall hedges formed a labyrinth of paths, with blooming flowers and carefully trimmed bushes adding to the sense of seclusion. The scent of roses and jasmine lingered in the air, mingling with the distant sound of the river.

Weston led Lydia down a winding path, his steps unhurried. They passed through an archway adorned with ivy, emerging into a secluded clearing where a stone bench sat beneath an ancient oak tree. The branches of the tree spread out like a protective canopy, the leaves rustling gently in the breeze.

"Here we are," Weston said softly, turning to face her. His eyes gleamed with affection, a rare tenderness that he reserved for moments like this. "Privacy."

Lydia felt a warmth spread through her chest as she took in the sight of him, the man who had come to mean so much to her. "It's beautiful," she whispered, her voice filled with quiet awe.

"It is nothing compared to you," he replied, his tone sincere.

They stood there for a moment, simply gazing at one another, the tension between them tightening like a band about to snap. The night seemed to wrap around them, cocooning them in its stillness. Lydia stepped closer to him, her hands resting on his chest, feeling the steady rise and fall of his breath.

Lydia closed her eyes as he leaned down to kiss her, the touch of his lips against hers sending a shiver down her spine. The kiss was slow and unhurried, a gentle exploration that spoke of the deep bond they shared. It should have always been like this. She should have always been allowed to touch him, to kiss him. Slowly, Weston guided the pair of them over to the nearest bench, pulling her down on top of him so that her legs were on either side of his body. His hands at the small of her back encouraged her closer. Her own exploration moved from his chest, up to the mask that he wore. It felt so simple now, pulling the ornate thing off of his face. All of those years ago, if only she had just done that, she would have known who to look for even if she did not know his true name. She had been so desperate to have something of her own, to have a night that she could just be herself that the secrets had felt so necessary.

But it had swiftly come to bite her in the rear afterward.

She pushed the mask up over his brow and pulled it off of him entirely. She turned the thing over in her hand, the ribbons falling over her wrist as she shook her head. So simple.

Weston undid the bow keeping her own in place, even though her updo was entwined around the laces and he had to pull them free, though he did not seem to have the same nostalgia about it as she did. He cupped her chin in his hand, pulling her back to him before he kissed her with every single part of him. Need coiled in her belly, warming her against the night chill. It would have to be fast, and quiet—she knew that. But she could not deny the thrill that she felt for replacing that memory with this one.

Lydia rolled her hips down into her husband's, kissing along his jaw and over to his ear. It was such a thrill each and every time, knowing that she knew him so well—enough to know the places that made him burn just as hotly as she did. Her teeth closed over the shell of his ear, licking softly before she spoke. “You shall have to find a way to keep me quiet, will you not?”

She pulled back just in time to see Weston's eyes darken with arousal. “This is our home, after all, you are overestimating how much I care for the opinion of those inside of my own home.”

Lydia grinned wickedly, cupping her hands around the back of his neck and throwing her head back, moaning wantonly as she did so often in the throes of her pleasure.

The effect was immediate. Weston pulled her upright and cupped a hand over the lower half of her face. She could tell that this was a point in her favor. Called him out for his bluff so very quickly. She was not remorseful about it at all.

Weston seemed to take the hint, his hand reaching up for the neckline of her dress and pulling, her capped sleeve tugging on her shoulder for just a moment before the dress slid down her arm, baring her breast to the cold night air. She was not afforded a moment to fully register the sensation before Weston's mouth covered the pebbled peak. Teeth grazed softly against the skin, and she did not have to fake the sounds of pleasure that he brought out of her now. Slowly, he flicked over the surface of her nipple, the effects of which pooled heat between her thighs.

Needy and impatient, Lydia grabbed the wrist of his free hand and pulled his hand between her legs, grinding against his fingers the moment that they were within reach. Weston chuckled into her skin, but slipped two fingers inside of her, pulsating slowly. Weston rotated his hand at the wrist, the way she liked, working her body higher as his thumb rubbed small circles into her core.

If they had done this all of those years ago, then she would not have been able to have this. Weston had pleased her from day one, but now he knew the inner workings of her pleasure like his own. He coaxed her to finish far too easily. Drove her damned near to madness more often than not. Not that she would complain per se. Someday, she was beyond confident that she was going to be able to do the same to him.

“I need you, please.” She whispered into the cup of his palm over her face. She did not stop moving against his hand, even when he dropped the second one to his trousers, freeing the hard length of him up into her warmth. She did not wish to wait; they did not have long.

Something that Weston seemed to feel as well as he thrust up into her, letting her set the pace. He kept his thumb working in circles even as his lips found her breast again. Lydia bit down on her bottom lip, wantonly circling her hips as her head fell back. She clung to his neck and shoulders, keeping herself upright and anchored as she bit down harder to try to keep from making too much noise.

This was the part that she was never going to get used to—the pleasure. She felt so full and complete when he was inside her. It had not dulled for a day in all of their years of marriage. She did not think that she was ever going to get her fill of him.

Weston’s teeth bit into her soft breast, keeping from making noise himself as his free hand gripped her hip, encouraging her hips to move just a little bit faster. She was able to, with his help. The concrete of the bench that they sat in offered her no favors to her knees as she tried to get better leverage. Her need drove her harder, and faster. Her fingers dug into his skin as she grew closer. The fluid movements of her hips became more erratic and slightly less fluid the closer that she got. No talking. No teasing—only need.

Her thighs burned and her core ached, but she could not stop moving—not for a second—as she made love to him, her breath stuttering in her chest as she toppled

over her edge. She could not stop it. She did not wish to. Clenching around him until he had no choice but to follow after her. She could not even bring herself to care for the fact that when the pair of them did choose to go back inside that they were going to be a mess.

When the trembling stopped, and the warm afterglow of her climax started to dull, she kissed Weston on the tip of his nose. A soft, satisfied smile stretched her lips as she gazed deeply into his eyes.

They sat there, wrapped in each other's arms, savoring the peace and tranquility of the moment. The sounds of the masquerade had faded into the background, leaving only the rustle of leaves and the gentle lapping of the river against the shore.

Lydia looked up at Weston, her eyes shimmering with emotion. "Promise me we will always find time for moments like this," she said. "No matter what life throws at us."

Weston smiled, pressing a kiss to her forehead. "I promise," he whispered. "We will always find our way back to each other, no matter what."

The night was theirs, a perfect ending to a perfect evening, and as they sat there in the quiet, Lydia knew that no matter what the future held, she would always have Weston by her side.

THE END



### Chapter 1

London, England, Spring, 1817

“Look, mother. You can see Leo tonight. It’s just about the right time for it,” Olivia Colfax said, pointing up at the starry sky above, as her mother hustled her toward the waiting carriage.

“Oh, Olivia, there’s no time for that. Come along. We’ll be late if we don’t hurry,” she replied, but Olivia held back, standing mesmerized at the bottom of the steps leading up to the house.

It was a remarkable sight—the darkening spring sky revealing the stars in their alignment. There was the tail, triangularly traced out between three bright stars, and the lower body, with the hook above for the head.

It looked nothing like a lion, of course. But Olivia marveled at the sight of the distant stars, so far away, and yet shining like diamonds ready to be plucked from the heavens.

“But don’t you think it’s fascinating, mother?” she said, and her mother glared at her.

“No, Olivia. I don’t. What’s fascinating—or infuriating, rather—is your inability ever to be on time. We’re going to be late for the Eaton House Ball, and you know how much I detest being late for things. And where’s your father? He’s the one you get it from... oh, why can’t we ever be on time for anything?” she exclaimed.

Olivia's father, the Earl of Colfax, now emerged from the house. He seemed lost in thought and made no apology for his tardiness as he came haphazardly down the steps.

"Oh, there you are, Ethan. Come along," Olivia's mother said, urging both Olivia and her father toward the waiting carriage.

Olivia caught her father's arm, pointing, once again, up into the night sky at the constellation she had been observing.

"Look, Father, it's Leo, the lion. He's the lion of Nemea in the Greek myths. No weapon could kill the beast, but Hercules defeated him in the end," Olivia said.

She adored Greek mythology and was fascinated by the astronomical story the ancients had created in the sky. Her mother gave an exasperated exclamation.

"Oh, Olivia. No one cares about Hercules or Nemea or constellations. None of those things are going to get you a husband, are they?" she exclaimed, shaking her head as she bundled Olivia into the carriage.

Olivia shrugged. She cared about those things, and as for finding a husband, she was only interested in the sort of man who would be interested in the same things she was. Olivia had always known she was different.

As a child, she had always been far more interested in books and learning than in tea parties and dresses. And as she had grown up, such interests had led to a constant clash with her mother, who took a more traditional view toward the acceptable pursuits of young women in society.

"No man wants a bookish wife," she had said, and whenever Olivia expressed something of her intellectual passions, her mother would berate her for neglecting what was, in her opinion, the only concern of a woman of her rank and class...

marriage.

“What if I was to marry an astronomer?” Olivia retorted, sitting back in the carriage and folding her arms.

Her mother glared at her in the gathering gloom. Dusk was falling, and it would not be long before every constellation was visible in the night sky above.

“I doubt there’ll be any astronomers at Eaton House this evening. Please, for my sake, and your father’s, can’t you just be... normal, for once,” her mother said.

Olivia raised her eyebrows, folding her arms in a gesture of defiance. She did not know what her mother meant by “normal,” though she presumed she meant the same as everyone else—all those silly women, whose one obsession is the finding of a husband, and the comparison of his pocketbook.

But Olivia wanted something more. She had no intention of being part of that idly rich fraternity of women, who spend their married lives flitting between tea parties and salons, and after the birth of their daughters, ensuring they, too, can do the same. Olivia was different, and she knew it.

“Normal? But I don’t want to be normal, Mother. I like being different. And I don’t see anything wrong with being so,” Olivia retorted.

“Oh, Olivia. How you vex my nerves so. It wouldn’t be so bad if you had sisters, or even a brother,” she replied, pulling out her handkerchief and dabbing at her eyes. “But must you insist on going against my wishes in every way? Won’t you tell her, Ethan? She listens to you.”

Olivia’s father, who had been sitting in the corner of the carriage making no attempt to intervene now looked up from his thoughts.

“What? Oh... no, don’t involve me in this, Edwina. If Olivia wants to get married, so be it,” he said.

Olivia smiled to herself. She knew her father had little interest in affairs of the heart. Without a son, the title would pass to Olivia’s cousin, Patrick—a distant relative currently residing in Bath.

It hardly mattered to Olivia’s father who she married, and in more private moments between the two of them, he had made it clear she should seek happiness over her mother’s well-meaning intentions.

“Ethan... you can’t possibly... I simply despair. Very well, have it your way, Olivia. But don’t come complaining to me when you end up on the wall, a faded rose, seen as nothing more than a maiden aunt,” she said. “A woman only has but a few seasons before tongues start to wag, and some deficiency becomes assumed.”

Olivia made no reply. Her only deficiency was in refusing to be like all the rest, and Olivia considered that her greatest advantage. She was proud of her interests in subjects as diverse as botany, astronomy, and literature, and had recently published a study in the propagation of roses in a well-known botanical journal—under a man’s name, of course.

But none of this was of any interest to her mother, who would have far preferred her daughter to spend her days deciding which dresses to wear, and who best to make friends with for her own advancement.

“Now, remember, Olivia, tonight’s an important evening. You’ve got to make a good impression,” Olivia’s mother said, as the carriage pulled up outside Eaton House.

The countess said the same wherever they went, but the Eaton House Ball was of particular importance, marking as it did the opening of the London season. New debutantes were arriving with their parents or chaperones, and from the carriage

window, Olivia watched a stream of young women making their way excitedly up the steps, where liveried footmen stood stiffly at attention.

Beneath the burning torches lighting the way, a river of sparkling tiaras and glittering dresses made their procession, and Olivia wondered how she could possibly compete with such elegance, poise, and grace.

Not that I want to, she thought to herself, watching a tittering crowd of young women, all of whom had only one thing in mind...

“Come along, Olivia. We don’t want to be last in. Those presented last get only the dregs,” Olivia’s mother said, repeating one of her favorite sayings.

Stepping down from the carriage, Olivia found herself among a sea of faces, some she recognized, some she did not. This was her third season, and while many of her contemporaries were already married or engaged, Olivia was yet to make a suitable match—or even an unsuitable one. At first, on account of her debut, she had attracted the attentions of several would-be suitors.

There was Lord Halifax, who had sought to court her, only to realize she was not the sort of woman to say yes to every foolish thing he said, and then came the Baron Carmichael, whose attentions had proved so forward to be almost scandalous.

But neither of them—nor any of the others—had proved a match for Olivia’s intellect, and when it had become clear she wanted a man with who she could converse with, rather than simply agree, their interest had been lost.

“I hope Elizabeth’s going to be here,” Olivia said, as she followed her parents up the steps to the house.

“Don’t spend the whole evening talking to Elizabeth, Olivia. You’ll miss out on the dancing,” the countess replied, turning to Olivia with a pointed look on her face.

“But she’s my best friend, mother. I want to talk to her. Besides, you always say what a dear creature she is, and how you wish I’d be more like her,” Olivia said, using her mother’s own words against her.

The countess tutted.

“You could certainly learn a thing or two from Elizabeth, Olivia. At the Cutler Ball, I saw her dance with four different gentlemen, all of them eligible,” she said.

Olivia rolled her eyes. Her mother was right. Elizabeth did attract the attentions of any number of would-be suitors. She was pretty and vivacious, but with a kindness to match her beauty, and would make any man the perfect wife.

But like Olivia, Elizabeth was waiting to find the right match and had turned down three proposals in the past six months alone. Olivia, on the other hand, had received no proposals, hence the urgency in her mother’s tone.

“Well... Elizabeth’s... perfect,” Olivia replied.

She enjoyed the sight of her best friend’s success, and one thing she was not, was jealous. She adored Elizabeth, and Elizabeth adored her.

“And you could be, too, Olivia, if only you’d take your head out of your books for a moment. Men don’t want women who read books,” Olivia’s mother hissed.

They had reached the top of the steps, and a steward ushered them inside, through a pair of large double doors and into a brightly lit hallway. A black and white marbled floor stretched out toward a grand staircase leading up to a landing above, and the walls were lined with large portraits looking down on the throng of guests waiting to be announced.

Music came from the ballroom beyond, and the clink of glasses, along with the sound

of laughter and chatter, suggested Olivia and her parents were at the tail end of arrivals, as the excitable debutantes waited for their introductions.

“Look at this. I told you we were late,” the countess said.

“Patience, my dear,” Olivia’s father said, glancing at Olivia and smiling.

Olivia was looking around her, thoroughly bored by the evening already. Balls were all the same, and this one would be no different—she could tell simply by looking at the other guests, and from the sounds coming from the ballroom beyond. They would be introduced, greeted by their hosts, then find themselves caught up in inane chatter until the dancing began.

There would be those whose dance card was already marked, and those who would find themselves left on the wall. After a period of dancing, an interval would occur, during which refreshments would be served, only for the rest of the evening to proceed in just the same way as before, only now, there would be the added—and quite frankly dull—intrigues of who danced with who, and who had danced with them again.

“They say the Duke of Ellenbrough’s here. Wasn’t it terrible what happened to the duchess? But to lose his wife and child. It brings tears to one’s eyes, even after three years,” a woman standing in front of them was saying.

“Is it really three years?” her companion asked, and the first woman nodded.

“Three years since he’s been seen in society,” she replied.

Olivia listened with interest. She had read about the Duke of Ellenbrough, Gavin Nermore, in the society pages. His wife had died in childbirth, leaving him a widower. It was a tragic tale, and her mother had sent flowers to the duchess’ mother—an acquaintance of hers from her own coming out. But that had been some

years ago, and Olivia had entirely forgotten about the duke, whose tragic story had been replaced by whatever tale had come next in the annals of society life and intrigue.

“Simply terrible,” the countess had said, dabbing at the tears in her eyes with a handkerchief—Olivia could picture her in the drawing room at home, shaking her head and brushing a tear from her eyes.

But to hear the Duke of Ellenbrough would be at the ball aroused Olivia’s interest. His wife had been dead for three years, and yet it was said he remained in a state of mourning, living practically as a recluse. It seemed odd for such a man to attend such an occasion, though perhaps he was simply trying to relieve some of his sorrow through distraction.

There were those who had cruelly suggested it was high time he returned to society, but in Olivia’s mind, a heart did not mend simply because societal convention brought an end to the period of mourning.

“They say he’s heartbroken. It’s understandable, of course. How could one be consoled after such a tragedy?” the woman in front continued, shaking her head sadly.

Olivia agreed. It was a terrible tragedy, and she could only feel deeply sorry for a man who had lost so much and was now forced to live with that loss for the rest of his life.

“Did you hear that, mother? The Duke of Ellenbrough’s going to be here,” Olivia whispered.

Her mother raised her eyebrows.

“Isn’t he in mourning? I’d have thought a ball would be the last place he’d want to



be,” she replied.

Olivia shrugged. It did seem odd, and yet who knew how a person would respond under such circumstances? Olivia had never known the pain of loss—not of someone close to her—and she could only feel sorry for the duke and hope he would one day find some semblance of peace in his sorrows. She was curious to lay eyes on him, imagining a sullen, broken figure, whose face would display the terrible burden he carried.

It was almost their turn to be announced, and through the doors leading into the drawing room, Olivia caught sight of Elizabeth, catching her eye and grinning at her. Elizabeth was talking to a man dressed in the uniform of the militia, and Olivia did not know if her best friend needed rescuing or to be left alone...

“The Earl and Countess of Colfax, and Lady Olivia Colfax,” the master of ceremonies announced, and several heads turned to watch as Olivia and her parents entered the ballroom.

“Look at all these officers,” Olivia’s mother whispered, for the room did appear overly crowded with the distinctive red uniform of the militia.

But Olivia was not interested in officers—unless they happened to be interested in the same things she was. But in her experience, most men were the same, and there was little to differentiate them from one another, save the color of their hair or their eyes.

But it was the Duke of Ellenbrough who interested Olivia the most, and looking around her—having decided Elizabeth was best left alone with her handsome officer—she tried to discern who the unfortunate duke might be.

“Olivia, don’t keep looking around you like a startled deer,” her mother whispered.

“I was just wondering if the duke had arrived yet,” she asked.

Her mother narrowed her eyes.

“I don’t think so, no. Why? What does the duke have to do with you?” she asked.

“Nothing. I’m just... curious about him, that’s all,” Olivia replied.

Her mother tutted.

“And I’m sure he’s not interested in being the object of your curiosity, Olivia. The poor man’s a widower. He’s lost his wife and child. He doesn’t need your curiosity. Sympathize with him from afar, but don’t force yourself on him,” she said. “Really, I can’t understand why you don’t show an interest in someone eligible.”

But Olivia did not want to gawk at the duke. If anything, she felt terribly sorry for him, and wondered what sort of life he had lived in those three years since tragedy had struck. Could one ever be said to recover from such a terrible loss?

“But shouldn’t he be supported in returning to society? Olivia asked.

Her mother raised her eyebrows.

“Yes, he should be. But it’s hardly your business, is it, Olivia?” she replied.

Olivia did not argue, but again she glanced around the ballroom, curious to catch a glance of the duke when he arrived.

“I think I’ll go and talk to Elizabeth,” she said, noticing her friend was no longer in the company of the handsome officer, and before her mother could object, Olivia had slipped away through the throng, hoping the evening would not prove as dull as she feared it would be.