



The Nanny Who Healed the Earl (Secrets and Passions of High Society #10)

Author: *Daphne Pierce*

Category: Historical

Description: Once the cherished daughter of a prosperous family, Ophelia Lockwood now faces a harsh reality. Stripped of her family's fortune by her ruthless uncle, she and her loved ones struggle to survive in a modest cottage in Kent. Desperate to secure a future for her family, Ophelia becomes the nanny for the enigmatic Earl of Sommers. As she steps into his world, she hopes for a lifeline but fears that her growing feelings for the Earl might be another cruel twist of fate.

Can she navigate this new role without losing herself—or her heart?

Edward Cavendish, tormented by the recent death of his sister and the burden of raising his niece Amy, finds solace in Ophelia's arrival. Her warmth and kindness begin to pierce through his sorrow, awakening a longing he thought was lost. As their connection deepens, Edward is torn between his growing affection for Ophelia and his fear that his past will only bring her pain.

Can he overcome his self-doubt and embrace a chance at love, or will his inner demons keep him from happiness?

As Ophelia and Edwards bond intensifies, they must confront external threats and internal conflicts that challenge their burgeoning romance. Lady Alice, with her own ambitions, will go to great lengths to keep Ophelia away from Edward. Their bond faces mounting challenges from both within and beyond. Will their growing affection prove strong enough to overcome the obstacles in their path, or will their love be overshadowed by the forces that seek to tear them apart?

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Page 1

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Chapter 1

“I have received a proposal from the local baker, and I was wondering if I should perhaps consider it.” Ophelia looked up from the book opened in front of her, her eyes wide as she registered her mother’s words.

A proposal from the local baker?

“What kind of a proposal?” she asked, even though she knew exactly what her mother meant. Since her father’s demise, her mother, who was still beautiful and exceedingly bright in her forties, had received several proposals from many widowers and older men about Kent. The baker was neither the first nor the last.

“He wishes to marry me.”

“And do you wish to marry him?” Ophelia knew the answer to this as well.

“My wishes hardly matter in this regard, my darling.” Her mother sighed, a sad smile gracing her lips. Ophelia looked closely, the extreme exhaustion on her mother’s face apparent. It was not simply exhaustion from doing work around the house but also the utter exhaustion she had undergone in the past four years since her father, Viscount Lockwood, passed away.

“Your wishes matter the most, Mother,” Ophelia insisted, holding both her mother’s hands across the kitchen counter, which also served as their dining table during meal times.

“We need the finances, Ophelia.”

What gave her the most sorrow was she knew her mother was right. For the past four years, they had suffered immensely, their funds rapidly dwindling. Whatever they had left now would not be enough for the whole year, and they would submerge into complete poverty.

How had life turned from a mansion in Hastings to a cottage in Kent? Ophelia did not understand.

She looked up at her mother once again, silently sipping her tea as she stared out into space even though her eyes rested on her three other children sitting in the small living room attached to the kitchen. Ophelia, too, turned around to look at Andrew, her three-year-old brother, playing by himself from some pieces of broken wood. Amelia and Sarah, her sisters, just fourteen and sixteen, were busy talking in whispers, both of them smiling.

It was heart-warming for Ophelia to see someone laughing despite the circumstances that had fallen upon them.

“Mother?” she turned back towards her mother, who had always been praised for her unmatched beauty. Ophelia had taken after her father but was still quite beautiful in her unique way. Amelia and Sarah, on the other hand, were exactly like their mother.

“Yes, my dear?”

“Are you considering the proposal seriously, then?” she asked, sighing deeply.

The burly form of the baker came into her mind, his pot belly hiding under the lumpy velvet coat he insisted on wearing no matter what the weather was. Inside his bakery, he was always dressed in simple shirts, the buttons open to his stomach, showing

things no one wanted to see.

However, what truly disturbed her was certainly not the physical appearance of the baker because that was something one could overlook entirely. What perturbed her was his unkind attitude and sour mood, which was so in contrast to her deceased father that Ophelia could never see her mother married to a man such as him. Her mother represented kindness and warmth, while the baker was the exact opposite of it all.

Ophelia did not even wish to picture them together.

“We have no money left, Ophelia.” The sadness in her mother’s voice was apparent, but she kept her voice deliberately low to keep the information from the other children. Ophelia was the only one who was aware of her mother’s troubles, and she wanted to do nothing more but somehow be of help.

“None at all?”

“A few months at best.” Her mother shrugged. “If everything had not been taken away from us, things would have been okay. Now, I am just a dowager viscountess, and you are the children of a viscount but without the money and resources which were rightfully ours. We have been left with nothing, and you know that.”

The simple fact that her mother was desperate enough even to consider such a proposal was enough indication for Ophelia that things were truly awful. In the past few years, her mother had been holding her own by doing small jobs and Ophelia had been helping her by doing the same. However, now, no small jobs would be able to help them since the financial instability was constantly growing.

“You cannot marry that man, Mama.” She shook her head, completely dismissing the idea. “I will not let you go to such extreme measures. We will think of something or

other to step out of this hole, but under no circumstances will I let you marry someone as selfish and unkind as that baker.”

“You do not understand, Ophelia.” Her mother shook her head. “I have to give you three a good life, and with no money, that will be impossible. Andrew will eventually grow into a young boy and will need to pursue a gentleman’s education just the way your father wished him to. How will we support that? How can we send him to Eton if we have no funds?”

Ophelia sighed. Her mother was right. Despite that, it did not mean Ophelia would let her make this large a sacrifice.

“Mama, I know how important a formal education was for father, but it does not mean that to provide that for Andrew, you have to marry someone you do not love. That is something I cannot allow you to do. It will break you, and in turn, it will break us as a family,” Ophelia insisted, a tear falling down her face.

“It’s not just Andrew, Ophelia. Sarah expressed her desire to become a teacher, and to pursue a teacher’s education, she, too, will need to go to school. Amelia wishes to get married, and we must have some money set aside for that,” her mother explained, controlling tears of her own. You must have some hopes and wishes as well, my darling. You are just twenty and so young. How can I take away your life from you? I want all of my daughters to make good matches in marriage and how will you be able to do that if we have no money for survival?”

“You have done everything to give us a good life even after Father passed away,” Ophelia reasoned, “if anything, I am grateful to you. But now, please let me try to help you so we can step out of this situation without you succumbing to a loveless marriage.”

“How? You know we cannot ask your Uncle Edgar for anything.”

The mere mention of his name was enough for Ophelia to feel angry all over again. Everything that had gone south in their lives was after the arrival of Uncle Edgar, their father's younger brother. After their father had passed away suddenly, leaving them alone in the world, Uncle Edgar had become the viscount and had taken everything away from them.

Their wealth.

Their house.

Their life.

Their position in society.

Their happiness.

And most of all, the happy memories they had of their father in the house they had grown up in.

He had deprived them in a way where Ophelia was sure she would never be able to forgive him for all he had done. While they had been forced to move out of their home and shift into a cottage meant for housekeepers and nannies, he did not even occupy the main house and left it under the supervision of maids while he stayed away in Hastings. The least he could have done was allow them to stay, but he refused even this small luxury.

"We won't ever ask him for anything," Ophelia said resolutely, trying to control the anger coursing through her.

"Do we have any other choice? If I do not remarry, we will certainly not be able to afford food very soon," her mother reasoned. But even though Ophelia knew she was

right, she was determined not to let it happen. She would go to any lengths to protect her mother from the utter ruin she was planning to throw herself into. This was her duty as her father's daughter, and she was not going to disappoint.

"Mother, do you trust me?"

"Absolutely, I do." She smiled, squeezing Ophelia's hand tightly.

"Then have a little faith in my word. I promise we will figure something out. We will work out a plan where you won't have to sacrifice yourself."

"What will you do, Ophelia?"

"I do not know that yet, but I am sure I will be able to find a job as a nanny or a governess to someone from the nobility," she said, smiling with determination shining in her hazel eyes, "And if not this, I will still be able to do something. Our lives have been snatched away from us, but I will not let my brother and sister suffer through it."

"I trust you," her mother reassured her, and Ophelia knew with her mother's faith, she just might find a solution to this problem.

She absolutely had to.

A knock on his study door forced Edward to stop his insistent pacing and stare at the closed wooden barrier between him and whoever was outside it. He had no desire to see anyone, but he had already been locked up inside since this morning and could not continue to ignore the world outside forever.

Had he been just anyone and not the Earl of Sommers, he could have stayed locked inside without anyone asking for him.

His title deprived him of the luxury of being invisible, even though all he wanted to be was just that. Invisible and unseen to anyone and everyone, at least until he wanted to emerge himself. Whenever that might be.

“It’s open,” he said loudly, walking towards the bar and opening the almost empty decanter of Scotch on the counter.

The door creaked open behind him, but he did not turn around, patiently pouring his Scotch into the glass from which he had already been drinking. How many glasses did he have since this morning? He could hardly recall. He needed to control his drinking, but the present condition he was trapped in did not give him a reason to do that either. He needed to forget. And what was better than Scotch?

“My Lord?”

“Yes, Mrs Bailey?” Edward asked, finally turning around to stare at the woman he had expected all along. She was old enough to be his mother and was always dressed in varying shades of grey, her appearance modest.

Edward had nothing against her, but he simply could not help creating distance between him and the world.

“I just came to inform you that Miss Amy has fallen asleep soundly, just like she does every night. She is a very calm child but gets fussy at times, considering she has no mother and no warmth in the world despite being as young as just two months old.”

Edward sighed deeply, unsure what he was supposed to do with this information. He did not care.

He did not care if his two-month-old niece, Amy, was well-fed or had slept on time. Yet, Mrs Bailey made an effort to provide him with every little detail of her day as if, as her guardian, he needed to know these things. His sister had died and had left him as the guardian of her one-month-old daughter.

His sister had died.

She was no more. And it had just been one month. All of it was extremely hard for Edward to believe and absorb, the wounds on his chest still fresh.

“Did I ask, Mrs Bailey?” He did not try to hide his annoyance through his words, making sure the housekeeper knew how he felt.

“It is my duty to inform you what is going on with the child since she is your niece, My Lord. She was completely fine all day, but she cried all evening and was checked by the village physician, but she is alright. He made her a potion, and now she is sound asleep,” she replied, not one bit affected by Edward’s sour attitude. He wondered if she had become so used to it in the past month that it hardly affected her anymore.

“I do not care,” he replied, emptying the glass in his hands in one gulp and slapping it back on the bar counter, “please do not come and waste my time with useless information regarding Amy. I am sure you are taking good care of her, which is all I actually need to know.”

“I have to discuss something important with you regarding Miss Amy, My Lord. Things are not as good as you think they are,” she added, and Edward sighed deeply. Was he even capable of having such a mature conversation?

It had been the entry of his niece into his life that had taken away his carefree bachelor’s life and handed him the responsibility of a child. His world has fallen apart

entirely, and everything about his position had changed. He could not help disliking the little girl even if she had done nothing. It was her mere presence that had turned into trouble.

“What is it?”

“We cannot continue the way we are going on with Miss Amy right now. It is unfair and unhealthy for a child as young as her who requires proper care by someone who has cared for children earlier and is both kind and responsible. A child is a lot of work.”

“What do you mean?” he asked, unable to understand.

“Miss Amy keeps being palmed off from servant to servant every day and night and cannot find motherly love and affection in this manner. The child is being deprived of the basic care she requires, which is beginning to show in her behaviour.”

“And what can I do about that?”

“We must hire a nanny for her to have a proper routine and just one person taking care of her. This will be much better for everyone in the household. The little girl must have some semblance of stability in her already turbulent life, and we must play an active part in ensuring it,” Mrs Bailey went on, staring Edward straight in the eyes, “both you and us.”

What is that supposed to mean?

However, the questions spilling from her eyes were enough to give Edward an idea of what she really wanted to say to him. Like every other servant in the household, every maid had been gossiping about what might be happening inside the main house and why Edward behaved this cruelly with a little girl. His mood yesterday had been

sour with everyone; hence, everyone recognized this change. He had never been this way before. This one incident had changed him.

Completely.

He had heard them whispering about how, as her uncle and only guardian, it was his duty to take care of her and spend time with her, although he would never be able to do that. Not with Amy. His sister had left this world, and Amy possessed a part of her, but Edward would never be able to access it. He had never come close to her, not even after she grew up and became a young woman.

“So you wish to hire a nanny to take care of Amy?”

“I believe that is the necessary course of action, My Lord, and the only one which might help Miss Amy grow and nourish in a healthier manner.”

“Well then that shall be done.” Edward nodded, entirely uninterested in the whole matter. “Do whatever is necessary. If you believe you must conduct interviews for the position, you can always advertise in the newspaper. Or if you already know someone, you can hire them.”

“I will conduct interviews for the position, My Lord,” Mrs Bailey replied formally, turning around with a curtsy before leaving the study. Edward watched as the door closed behind her, leaving him all alone with his grief yet again.

My grief. Will it ever lessen?

How could he ever forget the loss of his dear sister, one he loved and had the most precious childhood memories of? How could he be expected to emerge from that loss in the span of a month and focus all of his strength on taking care of a child?

A child.

She is just a child. A two-month-old baby. How can I be this mean to her? How could I have turned into the terrible person who has consumed my entire personality and filled me with unimaginable hatred towards an innocent little girl?

Edward truly wished he could explain this to himself or perhaps explain it to the servants, but it was impossible. They judged him for being cruel to his own niece, and they would forever do so since Edward had neither the heart nor the will to open up to the girl. He simply couldn't.

He sunk into the sofa, the darkness and solitude of the study feeling like a burden. Tears began to fall down his face uncontrollably as he once again remembered Margaret, his beautiful sister.

He was an awful man. He knew it.

I wish I could have you back for a few minutes, Margaret. I wish I could talk to you once before you left this world.

The choice had never been his to make. He placed both his hands on his head, his headache returning. He wanted to find a cure for his grief.

But there were none.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 2:37 am

Chapter 2

We are delighted to hear from you regarding the position of the governess we are seeking for our two young girls, and we are certain you will be an excellent match for this position. You are well educated and have impeccable manners, and your father, Viscount Lockwood, was a very dear friend of my husband, Baron Kent.

Despite that, we believe that as a member of the peerage, it would be wrong of us to hire you in a working position that is definitely not meant for someone of your status and position. We prefer to hire someone from the working class who can tackle the position more professionally due to experience.

We value you immensely. Thank you so much for showing interest.

Regards,

Lady Mingrove

“What does it say?” Amelia asked as soon as Ophelia was done reading the letter.

“Another rejection.”

Ophelia sat on the sofa beside her sisters who had been helping her find a working position in the peerage to secure some level of financial stability for the family. Although where Ophelia had been sure that her position as the daughter of a viscount and connection to the ton would help her earn a place much quicker, it had been the exact opposite. Any position she had applied for, had resulted in a letter marking

rejection without even interviewing her. Evidently, they had all been singling her out because of her former status as a lady of the ton.

“We have tried applying to every position in the nearby villages. I believe nothing is even left,” Sarah replied, and Ophelia knew her sister was right.

She had been so invested in finding a position as soon as possible that she had applied to every position within the closest distance. Despite that, no one had shown even the slightest interest in hiring her for any work. She had applied as both the governess and a nanny and even tried applying for the position of piano teacher. Her skills were rather decent at the piano despite her not having practiced for a while.

But she had only faced rejection after rejection.

However, Ophelia was not disheartened. She had already decided to find a job to make sure her siblings had a better life, and her mother felt no need to marry an odious man, and she was going to do just that. No matter how much harder and longer she had to try, she would continue the pursuit.

“What shall we do now, Ophelia?” Sarah asked as Ophelia picked up the newspaper in front of her again. She was determined.

“You will not find anything new in there. I have already looked,” Amelia said, but Ophelia still kept looking.

“Ophelia, you do not have to shoulder this responsibility alone,” Sarah chimed in, “we will all work small jobs, and together, we just might be able to afford a better lifestyle. We cannot let you slave away alone while we enjoy.”

“I will not be slaving away, Sarah.” Ophelia looked up at her sister, “I want to do this for my family so I can provide you two with bigger and better opportunities. Let me

try to help you.”

“Ophelia, we do not have much choice.”

“We do!” she exclaimed suddenly, her hand falling on another advertisement in the newspaper.

Sarah snatched away the papers from her lap and looked at where Ophelia was pointing before beginning to shake her head quickly. Ophelia had already expected this reaction, but she was not worried. She knew she had to do something for her mother and was determined enough to do it.

“Ophelia, this nanny position is for a little girl at the house of the Earl of Sommers. That is much too far from home!”

“How does it even matter? As the nanny, I will have to live in his mansion anyway, so I will not be returning home. And if I only have to return after such long periods, how does it matter if I stay far or closer?”

“You will at least be closer to us,” Amelia said, sounding concerned.

“I have not even applied yet. We must first do that and then worry about all else,” Ophelia reasoned, sitting down straight with her quill and parchment on the table. She knew that this time, she would need to word the letter smartly. She had already made the mistake of being rejected by everyone, but she could not afford to be rejected here.

“What is it you are thinking?” Sarah asked, sitting down beside Ophelia as she began to write.

“How to make sure they hire me.”

The Earl of Sommers,

I am writing to apply for the position of nanny in your household for the child in residence. I happened to come across the advertisement in a newspaper and deem myself fit for the position. I have never worked as a nanny before, but as the eldest sister of three siblings, I have cared for children of all ages and am adept at the task.

I am educated and compassionate and would appreciate this position to be of any possible help.

Regards,

Miss Jennings

“Miss Jennings?” Amelia asked as soon as Ophelia was done writing, who chuckled at the question.

“It is Mama’s maiden name,” Ophelia explained. “I have to appear like a commoner and cannot reveal my true identity. That information has already caused me so many jobs in the past and I absolutely cannot afford any such thing again. It is better if they are unaware of who I am.”

Ophelia sealed the envelope as her sisters looked at her worriedly, but she was filled with a newfound hope. It almost felt as if she was doing the right thing, and this time, she would definitely not be rejected. God would not be so unkind to her.

“Mr Brown!?” Ophelia ran inside the local solicitor’s office, the letter that had just been delivered to her still in her hand. She had been so excited after reading the letter that she knew she had come looking for the kind man in the village who was fond of

their family and had been there for them throughout.

“Miss Ophelia? Is everything alright?” he asked, standing up from his chair, the worry in his expression evident. Ophelia breathed deeply and smiled at him, trying to assure him he had no reason to be concerned.

“Everything is perfect,” she nodded, and he resumed his seat with a nod. Ophelia pulled out a chair and sat in front of him, still smiling from ear to ear.

“Now, to what do I owe the pleasure of this unexpected and rather ... excited visit?” he asked, pausing to find the right word.

Ophelia extended the letter towards him wordlessly as he read on, the smile on his face growing before he looked at her again.

“I applied for a nanny position at the Earl of Sommers’ household and have been selected to interview. However, the manor is rather far from here, and Mother will never let me travel alone, and she cannot accompany me and leave everyone else here alone. Will you be kind enough to come with me, Mr Brown?”

“First of all, I must congratulate you, Miss Ophelia. I had no idea you were searching for a job!”

“Mother needs financial help to run the house, and I would prefer if the help came from me rather than our family being indebted to someone. Hence, I decided to look for a job and have finally received good news. Please tell me you will come with me?”

Ophelia looked at him pleadingly, hoping for him to say yes. He was an extremely kind old man, and Ophelia had always felt close to him since his nature reminded her of her father. Hence, she knew he would rescue her now when she needed him.

Without a moment's delay, Mr Brown nodded, and Ophelia could not help squealing with delight.

"Truly? You will come?"

"Of course I will," he replied, chuckling, "when do we have to leave?"

"Well, it appears that the earl is in a hurry to hire a nanny and has invited me to attend as soon as possible. We must leave right now."

"Right now?"

"I cannot risk losing this opportunity, Mr Brown," she replied, standing up from the chair and carefully folding her letter. "I have already been rejected from other places, and this is the only option I have left now."

"You got rejected? Why so?"

"I introduced myself as the daughter of the deceased viscount and my mere linkage to the ton made the positions of a governess or a nanny unfit for me," Ophelia sighed, remembering the mistake she had made.

"It doesn't matter," Mr Brown replied, "I will hire a carriage, and we will leave right now. Go and inform your mother and return here as soon as you possibly can, and we shall leave at once."

"You are the kindest, Mr Brown."

Ophelia raced back home, the thought of her impending interview consuming her entirely. Her mother was already waiting for her to return, eager to know if Mr Brown had agreed to go or not, and Ophelia ran and hugged her in excitement. She

had not even received the job yet, but the mere idea of the interview made her feel excellent.

“I assume he has agreed?” her mother asked, laughing, and Ophelia nodded. Her happiness and enthusiasm had always been contagious, and she could see her mother just as happy about it as her.

“He has agreed,” she replied, walking into the small room she shared with her sisters, packing her satchel alongside as her mother followed after her. “He is hiring a carriage for the journey right now, and we will leave right away so I can be there quickly.”

“Oh Ophelia, you must thank him from me. He has never been unkind to us,” her mother said, “and once you have returned with good news, I shall go thank him myself.”

Ophelia kept everything she might need and went to stand before her mother, finally showing the nervousness she was beginning to feel about the whole ordeal. She had indeed pursued small jobs in the town, but she had never worked as a nanny. She did not know if she was even going to be right for the job, but still had to try.

“Do you truly believe I will return with happy news, Mother?”

“You are both smart and talented, my daughter, and you have never failed at anything. You are kind and warm, and that is exactly what a child requires. You will take care of this baby just like you took care of your siblings and will be able to secure the position. Just have faith in yourself.”

“Thank you so much, Mama.” Ophelia smiled. “Please pray for me.”

“I always do.”

Ophelia walked out of her room and hugged her sisters, quickly kissing Andrew's forehead as he eyed her curiously. She waved goodbye to everyone and raced back towards where Mr Brown was waiting for her outside his office. Her nervousness was still intact, but she was determined not to allow it to ruin her chances.

If there was someone who would be able to secure the job, it was her. She had no other choice. She saw Mr Brown standing beside a rented carriage as she drew closer, and he perked up upon seeing her, beginning to wave her closer.

“Are you ready?”

“As ready as I have ever been.”

She climbed inside the carriage, with nothing but hope in her heart and her mother's confidence. She knew she was doing the right thing.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 2:37 am

Chapter 3

The day had been perfect, but Edward had still been unable to find any pleasure in riding. It almost felt as if everything he had enjoyed just two months ago had somehow turned stale and unusable. Everything he had once treasured was now sinking under the weight of his emotions, which continued to rule him wherever he went.

He left his horse with the groom and made his way towards the mansion, walking inside. Just as he passed by the drawing room, he could hear voices from inside. He had not invited anyone, and no one was bound to come see him, especially after the way he had been cutting off from the ton since Margaret's demise.

He simply had no desire to meet with people.

"Who could it be?" he whispered to himself, taking slow, assured steps towards the drawing room, his gaze quickly falling on Mrs Bailey seated in front of a middle-aged woman. The middle-aged woman was dressed simply, but Edward had never seen her in the manor before. He moved a little closer, trying to listen in to the conversation going on between the two of them.

"Miss Phillips, your letter mentioned that you have held about five prior positions as a governess. Can you provide me with some details regarding them?" Mrs Bailey questioned.

Edward immediately understood. Mrs Bailey had informed him she would be conducting interviews to hire a nanny.

“Of course.” the other woman nodded. “I have worked as a governess for several members of the ton and have been employed for more than five years at each position. I took care of young girls and helped them with their basic education as they grew up into young women and went to either finishing schools or joined society as debutantes.”

“But you do realize that Miss Amy is just an infant, and you will be required as a nanny rather than a governess for the initial two years until she can finally begin learning something?”

“Yes, I realize that,” Miss Phillips answered.

Edward did not know why he was listening to the conversation when it did not concern him at all, considering he had already told Mrs Bailey that he did not care at all about this whole thing. Despite that, a part of him wished to know who was being hired as Amy’s nanny.

“So, how will you tackle such a position?” Mrs Bailey asked.

“I have taken care of young girls. I am sure caring for a child will not be any harder than that.”

Miss Phillips sounded much too old, and Edward was unsure if she would be the perfect fit for the nanny position. He knew he had no say in the matter, but he always imagined Amy being cared for by someone young and lively who could fill in the role of the young mother and provide the affection Miss Phillips clearly lacked. She sounded like a stern, disciplined woman who might not understand a child’s temperament.

Lost in his thoughts, Edward did not realize that the interview had already ended and continued to stand there until Mrs Bailey walked out of the drawing room, almost

crashing into him, but she stopped herself at the right moment.

“My Lord?”

“Mrs Bailey.” He nodded at her, trying to appear as if he had not been listening in, but he knew the attempt was futile.

“I was unaware that you had already returned from your riding. You are usually gone for hours.”

“I did not wish to extend it today,” he replied, glancing at Miss Phillips, who stood silently behind Mrs Bailey.

Edward had been right. She was much too old and too stern to be able to take care of a child. Despite not being invested in the process, he wanted Amy to have someone who could at least laugh and make her laugh as well. Not someone who would steal the joy out of the room. The manor was already dull and full of sorrow; he could not increase that curse.

“I was just conducting interviews for the nanny position for Miss Amy,” Mrs Bailey explained, and Edward nodded.

“I understand,” he replied, “I will be in my study.”

“If you can wait one second, My Lord?” she called out just as he turned away, and Edward stopped, looking at her curiously. He had never shared a sour relationship with Mrs Bailey, having been with her since he was just a child. She had been the mansion’s housekeeper for as long as he could remember, and he respected her immensely.

“Of course.”

“Thank you so much for coming today, Miss Phillips,” Mrs Bailey addressed her. “I will write to you once the decision has been made to inform you of whatever has been decided.”

“Thank you,” Miss Phillips nodded and walked away, leaving Edward alone with Mrs Bailey.

“My Lord, you are already aware I have been conducting interviews for Miss Amy. Would you prefer if I make a short list of candidates, and you might want to interview them as well?”

“Please do not concern yourself with such formalities, Mrs Bailey,” Edward quickly said, “I have no interest in the decision, as I already informed you. You can go ahead and hire whoever fits the position best. The decision is entirely yours.”

“Are you sure, My Lord? Because it will be no trouble at all if you are willing to go through it.”

“No, I am not troubled about it in any capacity,” he replied sternly, immediately regretting his words.

“Whatever your decision, My Lord,” the housekeeper said, “I will inform you once the decision has been made.”

“Perfect.”

“You must be Miss Jennings, I assume?” Ophelia nodded at the older woman standing in front of her, dressed in a modest grey dress. She was certain that the woman must be the housekeeper, considering how she was dressed and her general

demeanour.

“I am,” Ophelia answered confidently, “and you are?”

“Mrs Bailey. I am the housekeeper,” she answered, confirming Ophelia’s judgement, “please come inside.”

Both Ophelia and Mr Brown walked inside the manor, the grandeur reminding Ophelia of her own house, but she immediately shook her head to let go of such thoughts. She was here to embark on a new journey, and thoughts of the past would only slow her down and erode her confidence. She could not let that happen.

“Mr Brown, can you wait for me here?” Ophelia asked Mr Brown, motioning towards the sofas in the hall as Mrs Bailey ushered her towards the drawing room. Mr Brown nodded, smiling at her.

Ophelia was glad to have him beside her since his presence gave her much-needed confidence. She could not understand the reason behind her nervousness, but it was probably only because of her intense need for this job. She could not make a mistake at any cost. They entered the drawing room, and Ophelia waited for Mrs Bailey to sit before sitting right in front of her.

“Miss Jennings, you appear younger than I expected.”

“I am older than I might look,” she said with a smile, “and much wiser.”

“I do not doubt that.” The older woman smiled back. Ophelia could see she looked stern, but her expression still had affection and warmth, making her look kind. “Your letter mentioned that you have never worked as a nanny before. Have you held any other jobs?”

“Nothing of this magnitude,” Ophelia answered honestly, not wanting to begin or achieve something on the basis of a lie, “I have been working since I was seventeen, but all of them were smaller jobs about town. However, I am educated and have a vast general knowledge, and I believe I will be quite well suited to being a nanny or even a governess.”

“How do I believe you?”

“As my letter mentioned, I have grown up caring for my younger siblings. My brother is only three years old, and I have taken care of him since he was just an infant. I am rather adept at handling babies.”

“Miss Amy is a very special child, but unlike most children, she is an orphan. Both her parents have passed away, and her uncle, The Earl of Sommers, is her guardian. Hence, she is staying here at the manor. She has not received nurturing love or motherly affection since the beginning. Do you believe you can take care of her?”

“She is very young, Mrs Bailey, and I know what it feels like to lose a parent, considering I have lost my father. I think I can take care of her better than anyone else.”

Ophelia did not know where her confidence emerged from, but everything she said came directly from the heart. She believed she could take care of Amy, and she would prove herself no matter what it took.

“I admire your belief in yourself, Miss Jennings,” Mrs Bailey replied, “I hope these are not just empty words.”

“I am anything but a liar.” Ophelia smiled.

“I assume you are not located in the vicinity. Will you be alright with being so far

away from your family?”

“There is no harm in being away from one’s family if it is because of work.”

“You are very right, Miss Jennings.” Mrs Bailey nodded. “Do you have any questions for me?”

“Can I meet her?”

“Who?” Mrs Bailey asked, confused.

“Amy, of course,” Ophelia replied.

“Oh,” Mrs Bailey genuinely looked surprised, “no one else I interviewed asked me to meet Miss Amy. If you want to meet her, you most certainly can. Please come along.”

Ophelia silently followed Mrs Bailey as she led her up the stairs to where the nursery might be. Just as Ophelia had thought, they entered a delightfully decorated nursery, where a maid was seated with a baby in her arms, who continued to sob silently. Ophelia could see how distressed the maid looked.

“What is the matter, Martha?” Mrs Bailey asked the maid, who looked at them as they entered.

“She won’t stop crying, no matter what I do,” Martha replied.

Ophelia felt something tug in her heart as she saw the beautiful child wrapped tightly in sheets and walked ahead to take the baby from the maid’s hands. The maid did not resist as Ophelia took her, quickly loosening the sheets from around Amy’s chest and arms, giving her more room to breathe.

She softly put Amy on her shoulder, rubbing her back continuously as the sobbing ceased, and the little girl fell asleep within seconds. Ophelia carefully placed Amy back in her cradle, making sure she continued to sleep peacefully. Her heart was already invested in Amy, even though they had only met for a few minutes, but Ophelia felt as if she was meant to take care of this child. Something about her just felt familiar.

“We can go out now,” Ophelia whispered, looking at Mrs Bailey, who was still staring at Amy in wonder as the two stepped out of the nursery.

“You were rather efficient,” Mrs Bailey commented once they were outside.

“I do have a way with children.”

“She will need a lot of attention and care, Miss Jennings, and immense commitment. As of now, Miss Amy has no stability in her life, and as her nanny, you will need to stick with her. She has not had proper care and has no routine or schedule, which might be challenging for you initially.”

“I realize that.” Ophelia nodded.

“Well, in that case, when can you begin?”

Ophelia did not know if she had heard her right, and her eyes widened in confusion.

“What do you mean?”

“You are hired.” Mrs Bailey smiled. “When can you begin?”

“Truly?”

Mrs Bailey nodded.

“I can begin in a week,” Ophelia replied, trying to control the squealing laughter threatening to emerge out of her. Just then, she felt a heavy pair of eyes on her, and she looked towards a partially open door from where a man had been staring. Her back had been turned; hence, she knew he had not been able to see her, but the moment she looked at him, he looked away and walked back inside, leaving Ophelia to wonder who it was.

Although, none of it mattered right then.

She had been hired.

Page 4

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Chapter 4

Dearest Mama,

It is hard for me to believe that a week has passed since I arrived here. Time passed too quickly, and I have remained rather occupied with work. Although the simple fact that it has been eight days since I packed up my few belongings in a valise and left behind you, Amelia, Sarah, and Edward to come here is still a burden on my heart. I miss all of you immensely, but things have been going well here.

Amy is the sweetest little girl in the world, and it took me only two days to adjust her schedule. I can sense she is already attached to me, and we are beginning to have the best time together since taking care of her hardly feels like a chore. Her uncle, The Earl of Sommers, has been completely absent, and I am certain he is away. If he were in the manor, I would have met him by now. Perhaps his absence has ruined things for the little girl, but I am taking good care of her.

Meanwhile, Mrs Bailey has been taking good care of me!

I have fitted in well with all the servants, and everyone is kind. I believe I did the right thing by not revealing my true identity, for if everyone knew about it, I would have been treated rather differently, and I do not wish that to happen. Things are better this way, and I feel a part of the household.

The house, on the other hand, is beautiful. It keeps reminding me of our manor, but I try to keep thoughts of the past at bay. The only thing that disturbs me is the looming sadness over the house. It is filled with sorrow, Mama. Our little cottage might be

small, but it is happy, while this mansion can hardly be called a home. It is beautiful and grand but has no warmth and love to it. I wish I could somehow brighten it. I really hope I can.

Please give all my love to my beautiful sisters and Andrew. I miss you all, but I promise I will visit sooner rather than later.

With love,

Your Ophelia

Ophelia sealed the letter before skipping down the stairs to send it for posting through a maid. She had the afternoon to herself since Amy was taking a nap with Mrs Bailey, and Ophelia was free to spend her time however she wished. After an entire week, she had been able to find some time for herself, and she wanted to use it well.

She handed the letter to a maid and quickly made her way towards the kitchen, having developed a good friendship with the cook. He was a middle-aged man who was kind and courteous and was always insistent on feeding Ophelia, calling her too slim for her own good. He kept telling her how someone as beautiful as her must be a little fuller to complement that beauty.

Had everyone known she was a member of the ton, they would have never been able to develop such frankness towards her, and Ophelia would have felt singled out and alone. To survive here, she needed to have friends, and she had been able to find several of them amongst the help.

“Ophelia!” the cook greeted her as she entered, and she smiled at him. “Where is Miss Amy?”

“Asleep with Mrs Bailey; hence, I have the afternoon to myself,” she replied, sitting

on a chair that had already been pulled out.

“And how are you planning to spend it?”

“I was wondering if I could go out and stretch my legs a little. Do we have a market nearby?” she asked the cook, who nodded.

“Of course we do! You will have to go to the village, and if you are going to the village, would you be kind enough to bring me eggs and bread?”

“Absolutely.”

She was rather excited to be able to go out. She was missing the village.

Ophelia made her way across the gardens, walking back towards the mansion after her trip to the village. She had got the eggs and bread, which the cook had asked her to bring and definitely had an extremely enjoyable time making her way across the market. Even though she had been alone, her time had been extremely enjoyable. Despite that, she missed Amy and found herself wondering what Amy might be doing at several intervals of the day.

It was almost as if they were attached.

She continued to walk ahead when her gaze fell on a tall man, brushing down the most beautiful chestnut stallion. She switched her gaze away from the horse, only to realize that the man had been staring at her all along, his eyes narrowed.

Is something stuck to my face? Why is he staring?

She did not know what it was about him, but she flustered under his gaze, suddenly feeling more self-conscious than she had ever felt in her entire life. It was true he was rather good-looking, but Ophelia had never thought to be attracted to a stable boy or groom. He must certainly be either of those. Despite that, she could not understand why he continued to stare at her.

“Hello?” Ophelia greeted him from afar, quickly making her way towards him. His eyes widened at her greeting, clearly not having expected her to approach, but Ophelia had never been one to back away.

“Hello.”

“Is something stuck to my face or am I doing something wrong?” she questioned, still feeling self-conscious. He was much taller than her, his dark hair standing out in perfect contrast against his white skin. Ophelia could not deny his handsome looks, feeling a pull towards him.

Who is he?

“Why would you ask such a thing?” he asked, a small smile dancing on his lips as he stared at her.

“You have been staring.”

“Oh.” He nodded his head as if trying to think of a way to justify it. “I apologize for my rudeness. I did not mean to stare at you. It must have happened while I was not paying attention.”

It almost felt as if he had slapped Ophelia, but she maintained her composure.

“Of course.” She nodded. “Thank you for your apology.”

“It is no problem at all.”

“I am Ophelia by the way,” she introduced herself, immediately regretting her decision as his expression turned from confused to bored to stern. Ophelia did not understand how he was able to elicit such reactions in her, but she had no control over them. It was almost as if he was turning her into a different person.

“Are you a new maid?”

Ophelia’s eyes widened at his stern tone, unsure why he had he suddenly turned so rude towards her. She had only introduced herself out of courtesy, and here he was, acting as if she should not have even been talking to him. As the nanny, her station was far above that of a stable boy, but clearly the man in front of her did not understand that.

“As a stable boy or groom, whatever you are, I think you should mind your own business and not ask me if I am a new maid. Your arrogance is unsuitable and rather ugly,” she replied angrily, and his eyes widened at her insult.

She was glad at the reaction since it was exactly what she had hoped to achieve.

“As a groom?”

“That is what you are, isn’t it?” Ophelia asked, feeling high and mighty in front of him.

“Even if I am a groom, who gave you the right to converse with me in such a manner? You think this is allowed?”

“Absolutely. As someone stationed inside the house, I believe my position is well above yours, and you must keep that in mind. I only introduced myself and even took

the time to converse with you since you were staring at me, and I had no desire to appear unnecessarily rude.”

“Rude? You already appear unnecessarily rude to me. I can only imagine how much,” he retorted, his tone still reeking of arrogance.

What is it about him?

“I was being kind, but clearly, men like you do not even deserve kindness,” Ophelia rolled her eyes, wondering why she was conversing with such an utterly useless man.

“It is women like you who believe that every man is staring at you or somehow interested in you when no one is. I am not the one who must learn to be kind, but it is you!” he answered, and Ophelia had never felt this angry in a very long time.

“No one but you have ever accused me of anything but being on the opposite spectrum of unkindness,” Ophelia replied through gritted teeth, every second between them only making her angrier.

Everything about him angered her, but she still could not force herself to walk away, her heart wishing to learn more about him. It was as if an invisible string was pulling them together, and they had no choice but to stay close to one another.

“Now I have,” he replied angrily, “what will you do about it?”

“You sound like a loathsome human, and I truly wish I never have to interact with you again. Try not to come out of the stables because your presence annoys me,” Ophelia replied, quickly taking a deep breath to calm herself down.

He is useless and vile.

He is useless and vile.

He is useless and vile.

She kept repeating the chant to herself to feel a little less angry.

“If you are stationed inside the manor, you should probably stay there. Someone like you might not want to be caught out here speaking to a lowly groomsman, do you not think?”

“I will do exactly that,” Ophelia replied coolly, “have a good day, or perhaps don’t. I could not care less.”

With that, Ophelia turned around and walked inside the manor, never wanting to converse with him again. However, the attraction and chemistry she had felt towards him were unmatched by any other she might have ever felt. She wished she could understand the reason behind such a thing, but it was quickly becoming impossible to analyse.

All she needed to know was how they needed to stay away from one another. He incited a reaction in her that she did not want to surface, and she was glad he stayed outside the manor all day, and if she steered clear of the stables, she might never even run into him again.

She was going to do exactly that.

He had angered her so in their first meeting, and she was certain any future interactions would only be far worse than this. Despite all of it, his blue eyes refused to leave her memory, and Ophelia kept thinking about him.

Who was he, after all? Some part of her did want to see him again.

Chapter 5

“Do you need anything else, My Lord?”

Edward looked up from the papers on his study desk as Mrs Bailey addressed him.

She had disturbed his peace along with a maid to bring him the cup of tea he had asked for after dinner. He never liked the help coming inside his study, which was his sacred space, but sometimes he was left with no choice. He enjoyed maintaining his solitude when he was working, especially for the past few months.

“I have been meaning to ask you, when can I meet with Amy’s nanny?”

Edward immediately noticed the shock on Mrs Bailey’s face at his unexpected question. She had always been well aware and rather concerned of how Edward refused to take any interest in things pertaining to Amy and had been completely dismissive about the hiring of the nanny as well. However, now, he wanted to meet her. If Edward were in her position, he would have been just as stunned.

“You care to meet Miss Jennings?” Mrs Bailey finally asked, recovering from her shock.

“Yes.”

“Of course, My Lord.” She nodded. “I will send her here within the quarter of an hour. Miss Amy must be down for the night, and Miss Jennings should be about to retire. She can come see you now if that is alright with you?”

Edward nodded. "I will be waiting."

He watched as Mrs Bailey left with a curtsy, her expression still one of disbelief, but Edward had not been able to stop himself from making this request. Since the day he had interacted with Ophelia in the gardens when she had mistaken him for a stable boy, he had been intrigued. It was not as if his desire to meet her had sprung out from her beauty alone, for beautiful she was. He had never laid eyes on someone so perfectly created that she looked far better than most debutantes, even when dressed simply in a modest gown.

She had something about her spirit that had completely unnerved him. How she had greeted him without even knowing who he was and had continued to stand her ground of being positioned higher than him made him want to chuckle. In the past few months, nothing had made him feel that way. But above all, he was interested in witnessing her reaction once she discovered who he was.

A loud knock on the door pulled him out of his thoughts and he realized how the papers before him had been completely ignored.

"Who is it?" he asked, realizing fifteen minutes had already passed.

"Ophelia Jennings, My Lord," a familiar voice replied, bringing a smile to Edward's face.

He stood up from behind his desk and walked towards the shelves lined on the walls, trying to stay in the dark so Ophelia could not see him at once. He wanted the revelation and her realization to be slow, so he could savour it. A part of him did not understand why he was even going to such lengths, but he could not explain it even if he tried.

"You can come in," he called out before turning his face away from the door.

The wooden door creaked open, and he heard soft footsteps fading on the carpeted floor. Her presence had such an unusual effect on him that he could feel her eyes boring into his back, and he wanted to do nothing but turn around. To distract himself for a few seconds, he quickly picked a book from the shelf, flipping through the pages leisurely.

“My Lord, you asked to see me?”

Edward finally turned around at her question but remained concealed in the dark. He knew she could not see him, but he could clearly see her standing in the middle of the study. She was still beautiful after an entire day of work, as Edward was certain it could not be easy to care for a child.

“Yes, Miss Jennings, I did,” he replied, his gaze still stuck on her strawberry blonde hair tied in a loose braid over her shoulder. Her hazel eyes caught light through the candles shining beautifully on her fair face. Something about her was certainly endearing, but Edward knew he needed to stop staring.

“How can I be of assistance?” she asked, her hands gracefully folded before her.

“Well, you have been taking care of Amy, and I realized I needed to meet you personally,” Edward said, beginning to walk ahead as he shut the book in his hands.

“Of course, My Lord.” Ophelia nodded enthusiastically. “Anything you need to know; I am here for it.”

He nodded, placing the book on the table as he finally stepped completely in front of the candles, no part of his face hidden from her. Edward waited patiently as Ophelia’s hazel eyes, brimming with curiosity not moments ago, turned to confusion before recognition dawned in them. He was surprised by how expressive her eyes were and the shock that emerged in them as she finally realized who he was. Exactly what he

had been hoping for.

The range of emotions dancing on her face was extremely attractive to Edward, and he could not control the small smile it brought forth on his own. Ophelia opened her mouth, but before she could speak, Edward raised his hand to stop her. He could see she was beginning to apologize, but he felt no need for such words.

“If you are going to apologize for your behaviour with me in the gardens the other day, then don’t,” he said, but Ophelia was already shaking her head.

“I was terribly rude and uncouth, My Lord. I should have known better than to address you with such a rude disposition, but I certainly had no clue I was conversing with the Earl of Sommers himself and not some stable boy,” she explained, and Edward knew she was highly embarrassed. Her colour was high as her cheeks, tainted with red.

“You were unaware of my identity, Miss Jennings. Hence, it was nothing but an honest mistake. I am no way upset with you or have anything against you with how you talked to me. Please do not worry or guilt yourself over nothing,” Edward replied, not wanting her to worry.

It would only be natural if she were embarrassed, considering he was her employer, but Edward hardly cared.

“You have been entirely absent with Miss Amy and have not met her even once, My Lord,” she said hastily, her words jumbling, “I was almost certain that you had been away, or else you would have come to see her. Hence, when I saw you in the garden, I hardly even realized that you could also be the earl himself.”

Amy.

He was not surprised that even Ophelia had noticed his absent behaviour regarding Amy, for sooner or later, she was supposed to wonder about it. However, Edward could not be affectionate with that child or even see her. His emotions simply did not allow it. Amy reminded him too much of his sister and he was better off without reminders for the time being.

“I understand.” Edward nodded, trying to shake all dark thoughts away and focus on Ophelia instead, who was right before him.

“I am still deeply apologetic, My Lord,” she continued.

“As I said, you must not worry about it too much,” he said dismissively, “please take a seat, Miss Jennings.”

He strode towards the sofa and sat down at one end while Ophelia sat in front of him, finally beginning to get a little comfortable. He knew he had flustered her, but that had been his intention all along: to coax a reaction out of her, and he had been successful. Despite that, he did wish to know her better.

“I hope I am not keeping you from something important,” he said once she appeared a little more settled.

“Not at all.” She shook her head, “Amy has fallen asleep now, and I have no other chores for now.”

“Since we have not been formally introduced, Miss Jennings, I am Edward, the Earl of Sommers.”

“I am painfully aware of that, My Lord.” Ophelia smiled, making him chuckle with her witty reply. She had so much more to her than just a beautiful face, and Edward was intrigued to find out more. It almost felt as if she was drawing him in.

“I am glad,” he said with a laugh. “Where are you from, Miss Jennings?”

“Oh, me,” she said, her confusion returning, “I live with my family in a small town in the County of Kent.”

“That is a long way from here.”

“It is,” Ophelia nodded, “but I do not mind travelling for work; hence, this position worked out quite well for me.”

“And who else is in your family?”

“My mother, two younger sisters, and a younger brother. My father passed away a few years ago,” she replied, and Edward felt as if his heart was sinking at her reply.

She was much too young to bear such a loss, but she was bearing it rather well. Although, he was certain that the reason she had to work was to support her family, being the eldest daughter, especially now that her father had passed away as well. He could see why she had no trouble being away from her family for a job because she needed the income.

“What did your father used to do?”

“A lot of things, really,” Ophelia blinked several times. “He was a man about town.”

Edward could see how she continued to stay vague about her life and past, but he respected her decision. He knew she must have her reasons to act this way, and he was not going to probe deeply, especially since he, too, was staying concealed and revealing nothing about his past or the death of his sister. As Amy’s nanny, she had no need of knowing those things, and it was better if she stayed unaware.

“I hope you are enjoying it here?” he asked, noticing how Ophelia’s eyes kept diverting to the shelves of books behind him. He noticed how despite trying to control, herself, she still managed to continue staring from time to time when she thought he wasn’t looking.

“I have settled into the household, and things have been perfect, My Lord.” She smiled, her smile brightening up her face. “I have nothing to complain about for sure and have nothing I might need or wish for. You have a beautiful home here, and everyone has been wonderful to me.”

“I am glad to hear that,” he said. “If you ever need anything, you should not hesitate in asking me or Mrs Bailey.”

“Absolutely, My Lord,” she said with a nod. “Do you need anything else?”

“No.” Edward shook his head. “But if you wish to borrow a few books from my shelves, you are welcome to. You can take anything that might interest you.”

Her eyes lit up at his words, and he knew he had been right in guessing that she had been looking at the shelves. She evidently enjoyed reading, and Edward could not help wondering how educated she was. Her manners were perfect, and her speech was refined.

“I can?” she asked as Edward nodded in agreement.

“Of course.”

He stood up, strolling towards the bookshelves as she followed behind him, her eyes going over a few shelves. She ran her fingers through a few books before picking out two copies of Greek history and a book on the art of philosophy; all of them difficult and extravagant reads.

“Thank you so much, My Lord.” She smiled at him. “I shall return them as soon as I am done reading.”

“And then you can borrow some more. Consider them yours,” he assured her, rather glad to play a small part in her happiness.

“Thank you,” she replied, clutching the books to her chest.

She quickly curtsied and left his study but left him extremely confused with her mannerisms. Something about her was different, but Edward still could not understand what. Despite it all, she thoroughly intrigued him, and he knew he would be seeing her again much sooner than one might expect.

Page 6

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Chapter 6

“Amy is such a beautiful little baby!” Ophelia squealed, holding Amy in her arms as she continued conversing with her the way she had been doing for a few days.

Ophelia had noticed how Amy was an extremely talkative and interactive child who enjoyed conversations with Ophelia even though all she did in reply was smile or laugh or simply stare at Ophelia with a serious expression. Despite that, Ophelia had become used to this daily routine where she would simply talk about anything and everything with Amy, who was naturally the best secret keeper one could ask for.

“You are also such a good little angel,” Ophelia whispered as Amy continued to smile at her, softly cooing. “You slept through the entire night without making even the slightest of noises. Your Ophelia is extremely proud of you.”

Amy laughed softly.

When Ophelia had returned from her meeting with Edward, Amy had already been asleep and had not woken up even once; hence, Ophelia had slept as well. Although, now that she was awake, she could remember the conversation in painful detail and the realization that the very man she had considered a stable boy was none other than the Earl of Sommers himself.

How could I have been this blind?

In her defence, Edward had been dressed rather simply in a white shirt and breeches, and no one who did not already know him could have taken him for the earl.

Moreover, he had not corrected her mistake and simply went along with it. There was no way she could have known. Despite that, she had been terribly mean to him, and it was his goodness of heart that he had been so forgiving about it.

“Do you know, Amy,” Ophelia began, placing Amy back in her cradle but continuing to talk to her in soft whispers, “sometimes I wonder if I am as simple-minded as you because I am certain even at such a young age, you are far smarter than I am.”

Amy continued to stare at her seriously.

“I did a very stupid thing, Amy,” Ophelia said, making a crying face, which made Amy’s eyes widen even more than they already were.

“I met your handsome uncle,” Ophelia said, knowing Amy would never be able to comprehend this, but she was still her favourite and most trusted confidante, “and I thought him the stable boy.”

Amy began to smile widely.

“He must have been laughing at me, do you not think?” Ophelia asked, her voice turning softer as she nuzzled Amy in her stomach.

The child began to laugh, her beautiful, soft laughter filling up the entire room, and Ophelia felt as if she had finally achieved something. When she came for her interview, she saw Amy crying profusely, and now, here she was with the little girl who was laughing comfortably in her presence as if it was something she had always been doing.

Ophelia knew she was in the right direction, and Amy was truly well taken care of, exactly as she had intended her to be. She was finally able to give her some love, which Amy had never got from her mother.

“Miss Jennings?” Ophelia turned around as she heard Mrs Bailey enter the nursery and walk directly towards the cradle.

The old woman had a warm smile on her face as she looked at Amy, who was still laughing and moving her hands in the air as if playing with something invisible to both Ophelia and Mrs Bailey. The sight was extremely beautiful to watch, and Ophelia could see the surprise on Mrs Bailey’s face. She was taken aback.

“My goodness, Miss Jennings, you have truly worked some magic on our Miss Amy here,” Mrs Bailey said, staring affectionately at the baby.

Ophelia laughed. “Why do you say so, Mrs Bailey?”

“I have never before seen Miss Amy laugh and play in such a manner. She had only ever been a quiet child or had always been crying. You have brought out a different side of her that had not been there before.”

“I have only given her love and consistency, and she opened up rather easily,” Ophelia said honestly, “that was all she needed to settle down.”

“You are right.” Mrs Bailey nodded, “This is certainly the most beautiful sound I have heard. It almost feels as if Miss Amy’s laughter and your presence are already beginning to bring about a positive change in the manor. Everything feels lighter and brighter.”

“If this is actually the case, I am simply glad I can be of help. The manor is beautiful but a little too tightly wound around itself. It needs laughter and happiness and to keep running in a better manner,” Ophelia replied with a smile. She undoubtedly believed this since she had stepped foot here. The manor was nothing but a house and had never found anyone who could turn it into a home. She hoped Amy and her childish innocence might be able to achieve that.

“I hope that happens.” Mrs Bailey smiled.

“Mrs Bailey, I was wondering something,” Ophelia said, standing up from beside Amy so she could face the housekeeper.

“What is it?” she asked attentively.

“Now that I have officially been introduced to the earl, I suppose it is only right to include him in Amy’s routine and update him. He is her sole guardian; thus, he must be concerned about her and deserves to know how his niece is being brought up. The two of them must build a connection with each other.”

“I do not know if that will be such a wise idea, Miss Jennings,” Mrs Bailey replied, appearing hesitant.

Ophelia had already felt a distance between Amy and Edward since she had been completely confused about why he had not met Amy even once throughout the time Ophelia had been employed if he was still present at the manor. Yesterday, when the two of them had conversed, he had treated any mention of Amy like any other dismissive subject, and his face had almost darkened. Ophelia wanted all of it to be just a coincidence and to have an explanation for it, but there were none.

“Why do you think so?” she asked Mrs Bailey, carefully concealing her curiosity and disappointment.

“Lord Cavendish prefers his peace and solitude and is rather distant,” the housekeeper tried to explain, but Amy felt as if something was still not right about it, “he might have a problem with these constant calls on him regarding Miss Amy.”

“Perhaps just once a day? Only nightly? He must see her every day so she is familiar with his presence, or he will be a stranger to her,” Ophelia reasoned.

“If that is what you wish for, you can go ahead and try,” Mrs Bailey finally conceded.

“Thank you so much!” Ophelia replied, already looking forward to it.

She would definitely try.

“Are you ready to go see your Uncle Edward again, Amy? I know you have started to enjoy your nightly rituals of seeing him,” Ophelia cooed, making sure Amy’s clothes were devoid of any food stains, and she was completely clean.

The little girl looked beautiful, her eyes wide as Ophelia continued to converse with her.

“You look perfect,” Ophelia whispered again, kissing her forehead as she took Amy in her arms so they could quickly make their way towards the earl’s study.

Once she had asked Mrs Bailey’s permission, she had shown up at Edward’s study every night after dinner to make sure he had a few minutes with Amy. He had been surprised during the initial few days, but Ophelia’s determination to stay consistent despite his barely interested attitude had broken his resolve, and he had been warmer towards Amy.

It had only taken Amy a couple of days to grow familiar with him, and she would gladly go into his arms and wave him goodbye at Ophelia’s calling. Ophelia could not help wondering why Edward was so distant with the child, but she was determined to mitigate that distance and make sure Amy was not deprived of a loving childhood in any way at all.

“You are in such high spirits today, Amy,” Ophelia whispered as they stood outside Edward’s study. She quickly ran her fingers through her long, blonde hair, hoping she looked presentable enough for him.

In the past few days, she had seen him about the manor, making her realize that in the beginning he might have been deliberately hiding away. However, now, he was no longer hiding, and Ophelia ended up interacting with him one way or another as they ran into each other. He had started to show up for breakfast every morning, and they often ended up eating together. She also made sure to take Amy to him at other times of the day, but that was always uncertain. Despite that, their nightly routine was well maintained.

Ophelia knocked on his study door, familiar enough with his routine to know he would be nowhere else. He worked late into the night every single day after dinner, but sometimes Ophelia felt as if it was just an excuse to stay away from everyone. Something about him puzzled her and made her want to ask him questions, but she knew she could never do that.

She was no longer the Lady Ophelia he could court in a ballroom. Had they met in that setting, he might have asked her to dance, and Ophelia could have asked him anything she wished. They could have witty banter and playful conversations, but right now, she was painfully aware of her change in station. Ophelia was no more than a servant anymore, and Edward belonged to the nobility.

“Come in,” Edward called out, and Ophelia walked inside with Amy in her arms. She was glad to see how Edward did not appear surprised at all, as if he had been expecting them.

“My Lord,” Ophelia quickly curtsied, and Edward nodded at her before walking out from behind his desk.

Amy started jumping in Ophelia’s arms, as if rather excited to see Edward, the reaction extremely attractive to her. Ophelia could not help laughing softly, for as soon as Edward came closer, Amy lunged ahead, extending her hands towards him, coaxing him to take her into his arms.

Edward stayed in his place for a few seconds, but when Amy was almost on the verge of tears from being ignored, Ophelia saw his gaze soften, and he finally held her, keeping Amy close to his chest. She always enjoyed watching the two of them together since Amy appeared rather small in his arms, as he was tall and rather muscular. The sight of them together was enough to melt Ophelia, and she chuckled softly.

“What’s wrong?” Edward asked, and Ophelia shook her head.

“Nothing,” she said, “Amy seems to like you quite a lot.”

“I wonder why,” he replied, still emotionless.

Amy, who had been staring at Ophelia and Edward until now, began to laugh heartily, her soft giggles echoing through the study. The sound of them so enamoured Ophelia that she did not notice Edward’s face darken at the sound, his blue eyes turning stormy. Before she realized what was happening, Edward quickly moved Amy away from him, extending the child towards Ophelia, who took the little girl in her arms in extreme confusion.

“What is wrong?” Ophelia asked, noticing the shadows on Edward’s face. Amy began to cry just then, making Ophelia worry even further.

“Take her from here,” he said rudely, turning away from them both. “I do not wish to see her anymore, so please end this nightly routine. You shall not bring her to me again.”

“But why, My Lord?”

“I have never once pretended to even be slightly interested in Amy, and it is only you who keeps trying to act otherwise. I am tired now. Hence, this should come to an

end.”

Ophelia felt tears sting her eyes as she heard Edward’s harsh tone, especially due to which Amy only continued to cry further. Amy extended her hands towards Edward again, her small face filled with tear streaks, but Edward did not budge; his face completely turned away. The scene broke Ophelia’s heart so much that she quietly turned around, not wanting to stay in Edward’s study for even one more second.

“It’s alright, darling,” she whispered soothingly in Amy’s ears as they stepped out while, Ophelia too, tried to control her tears.

Why is he so cruel to her?

She could not believe that Edward was her uncle and only relative because it almost felt like he hated the little girl. Ophelia could not understand how he was capable of hating such a sweet child. How could he? But she knew it was best if she kept Amy away from him. It was one thing to be deprived of his love but completely another when he consciously rejected her.

And she was not going to let that happen.

As soon as the door of the study closed behind Ophelia, Edward felt his breathing quicken. He knew he had not done the right thing by being this careless with his words and emotions. He had been brutal towards Amy and Ophelia when neither of them deserved to be treated this way. But he had not been able to help it.

Amy’s smile is exactly like Margaret’s.

“I miss you so much, Margaret,” he whispered in the empty study, tears stinging his

eyes. He had not been able to picture anything else except his sister when he had seen Amy smile.

And that had made him lose control.

Edward had been the reason behind her smile throughout their childhood. He had loved, protected, and kept her safe from all troubles. However, it was he who had been the reason that Margaret had lost all her smiles.

He had been the reason she had lost her heart from anything and everything. He had brought her unhappiness and now he was doing the exact same thing to Amy. But he knew he could not bear being close to the little girl.

Not with the memories she jogged in him.

Even if he broke her heart, he had no choice.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 2:37 am

Chapter 7

“Miss Jennings, this letter just arrived for you.” A maid handed Ophelia a sealed envelope, and Ophelia quickly snatched it, already certain it must have arrived from home.

“Thank you,” she said to the maid who walked away while Amy, seated comfortably in Ophelia’s lap, tried to grab the letter from her while Ophelia kept it away.

Amy began to giggle, treating it like a game and jumping higher in Ophelia’s lap the more she kept it away. Mrs Bailey, sitting right there, started to laugh at the heartfelt scene, and Ophelia could not help laughing alongside, Amy’s antics beginning to grow naughtier every day. As the little girl was growing older and beginning to recognize those around her, she was getting more active. Ophelia was almost certain that it was all due to the love she had been receiving from everyone.

After the episode with Edward the week before, Ophelia resolved to ensure that she provided Amy with even more love than before since the child deserved it. Hence, Ophelia celebrated every single milestone Amy achieved and was the happiest in this change of attitude, which turned Amy into a playful little girl who was full of laughter. Her squeals could be heard throughout the day in the manor, but even those were not enough to draw Edward out.

I wish he had more of a heart.

But he clearly did not. In fact, he had stopped appearing in front of everyone once again, and where he once showed up for breakfast, he had stopped doing that as well.

Once again, Edward had retreated within himself and was refusing to interact with either Amy or Ophelia and the rest of the household. She failed to understand him.

“Has the letter arrived from home, Miss Jennings?” Mrs Bailey’s question brought Ophelia back to the present, and she quickly shook away her thoughts, not wanting to be absorbed in them.

“Yes,” Ophelia nodded, continuing to keep it away from Amy, “my mother has written to me.”

“If you wish to read it right now, you must go ahead,” Mrs Bailey said, “I will hold Amy for you.”

“That will be splendid!”

Mrs Bailey scooped the child from Ophelia’s arms, who took a deep breath and opened the letter before her. She had not heard from home in quite some time now and missed everyone, but despite that, she certainly did not feel the need to go see her family. Her relationship with Amy was only growing stronger and Ophelia was enjoying her time here. However, as she fetched the parchment from inside the envelope, her mother’s familiar scrawl almost made her tear up.

Dearest daughter,

If words could entrap the feelings of sorrow I experience at you being away from me for such a length of time, I would have written extensively. However, words, too, fail me. It is not as if I or anyone else in the house is unhappy but all of us terribly miss your infectious laughter and lively presence. You have always been the sunshine of our household, and nothing or no one else can ever take your place.

Andrew has been asking about you constantly, wondering when you will visit and

what you will bring for him. He loves you, considering you are the one who raised him. You are more his mother than I am, and this is shown in his loving nature and kindness of heart. He is exactly like you, affectionate and filled with love. Amelia and Sarah miss you just as much, both of them realizing your absence but taking up every responsibility that was once yours.

They have started to help around the house and are clearly turning into disciplined women from young girls. By the time you visit, you too will sense a change in them. Sarah has already started to study on her own, pursuing her teacher's education, and is even more determined than earlier to get into the school. With the effort she is putting into her studies, I am certain she will. Moreover, Amelia has been seeing a respectable young gentleman for a while now. He is the third son of a baron and is making a good living for himself. Moreover, he seems to be smitten by Amelia and has noble feelings towards her. She seems to like him quite a lot, and I am sure we will be hearing wedding bells in the future.

Despite all of it, I am happy to hear you are doing well and having a delightful time. Young Amy sounds like a loving little girl, and under your warmth and supervision, she will only grow into an excellent young woman. I have faith in your abilities to make sure that the child has ample love and care.

Especially since Amy has already suffered enough for such a young age. Your employer, The Earl of Sommers, is an excellent man, or so I have heard through others in the ton. It is extremely noble of him to take guardianship of his sister's daughter, Amy, after the tragic deaths of his sister and brother-in-law. Those deaths must have really shaken him to the core, especially since their parents have already passed away as well.

Please take good care of Amy. The little girl deserves the world. And take care of yourself because no matter how old you grow up to be, you will always be my little girl.

With love,

Mother

Ophelia sighed, closing the letter, as both confusion and sadness filled her heart. She was joyous upon the news of her family and how well they were doing. She missed her mother as much as her mother missed her, and Ophelia was certain she would meet them all soon enough. Till then, they had letters to communicate.

However, what confused her was the news about the Sommer household. Mrs Bailey had already told Ophelia that both of Amy's parents had passed away, leaving her uncle as her guardian, but Ophelia could not comprehend it. Amy is Edward's niece, the daughter of his sister, so why is he so cruel towards her? The mere remembrance of Edward's attitude towards Amy was enough to sadden Ophelia, and she decided not to think about it.

"Miss Jennings?"

"Yes, Mrs Bailey?" Ophelia asked, letting her thoughts go.

"Is everything alright at home? Your spirits suddenly appear glum."

"Oh yes, everything is perfect," Ophelia replied honestly, "my mother and siblings are good and doing well. They all miss me very much."

"You bring such a light to everyone's life; I am sure they do." Mrs Bailey smiled, "Do you mind if I ask you something?"

"Of course," Ophelia nodded.

"For the past few days, I have noticed that you have begun to look rather sad. I might

simply be misinterpreting or reading too much into it, but is something wrong? Is it because you miss home, or is something else the matter?"

Ophelia sighed, wondering what had given her away. She did not really want anyone to find out about her feelings, but she had clearly not been able to conceal them. Although, Mrs Bailey was an extremely observant woman, and Ophelia was not surprised she had already discerned her mood.

"It is not because I miss home, no." She shook her head. "But you are right. I have been feeling rather down lately."

"Will it be awfully private to ask why? I do not wish to intrude in your personal affairs, but as the housekeeper, it is also my duty to ensure everyone in the house feels their absolute best."

"Mrs Bailey," Ophelia began, unsure how to structure her words, "I do not know how to explain this, but I have been feeling as if Lord Cavendish hates or seriously dislikes Amy. He never comes to see her himself, and just last week, when she laughed in front of him, he asked me to immediately take her away and never bring her to him again. He has been unnecessarily harsh towards the poor child."

To Ophelia's surprise, Mrs Bailey neither looked alarmed nor rushed to dismiss her claims. In fact, her smile turned slightly sadder as if she had almost been expecting it.

"Truth be told, I knew it was only a matter of time before you noticed it," she replied, her expression one of pure sorrow.

"So it is true, and I have not just been imagining it?"

"I wish it were not true, Miss Jennings, at least for Miss Amy's sake, but you have

judged it rather correctly. Lord Cavendish has been distant from Miss Amy since her birth. He has never paid much attention or cared for the child in any way. We tried our best in the beginning, and I breached our boundary and blatantly asked him to be better with her, but he simply refused.”

“But why?” Ophelia questioned, her confusion growing.

“Honestly, I wish I had an explanation.” Mrs Bailey sighed. “Lady Margaret, Miss Amy’s mother and Lord Cavendish’s sister, was an extremely kind and sweet young woman, and Lord Cavendish loved her immensely. The two of them, not being much far apart in age, were extremely close growing up, and Lord Cavendish protected her with his life. Although, something happened ...” Mrs Bailey stopped speaking.

“What happened?”

“They grew apart once Lady Margaret got married, and the rift grew as the years passed. He only met her again when Miss Amy was soon to be born, but his sister died, and since then, he seems to despise the baby. He never explained or showed any reasons for disliking Miss Amy, but everyone in the household was well aware of his feelings. Hence, we decided to keep Miss Amy away from him since that would be better for both of them.”

Ophelia’s heart broke.

Her eyes fell on Amy, sitting on the sofa between her and Mrs Bailey, playing with the toy in her hands. She reeked of innocence and everything pure. Tears stung in Ophelia’s eyes as she realized how a small angel like her did not deserve such hatred. It was demonic.

“You are right; we should keep Amy away from him. That will be better for both of them,” she accepted. “I will take Amy into the gardens for a walk. She has started to

enjoy the outdoors and crawling on the grass.”

“You must!” Mrs Bailey replied enthusiastically. “Should I ask a maid to set up a picnic blanket for you, so it is a little easier?”

“Oh, that will be delightful!”

Ophelia waited as Mrs Bailey sent a maid running to the gardens with instructions while she took Amy in her arms and lazily walked towards the garden. Amy seemed content and wanted to get down on the floor, having finally learned how to crawl. Now that she was growing, she had also become more curious about things, and Ophelia always needed to be around her to make sure she did not hurt herself walking about. Luckily, no such incident had happened as of now.

“Miss Jennings!” the maid almost crashed into her, returning from the gardens.

“Yes, Susan?”

“I have set up a picnic blanket for you and Miss Amy under a large tree. You will find it quite easily,” she replied, and Ophelia smiled at her.

“Thank you so much, Susan,” Ophelia said graciously before heading towards the garden again.

Amy already looked excited being in the fresh air once again, even more enthusiastic to jump out of Ophelia’s lap and roam around on the grass below. Ophelia sighted the blanket and walked towards it, carefully leaving Amy on the ground, but it only took the little girl a few seconds to crawl away from the blanket and onto the freshly cut grass, her loud squeals of delight making Ophelia’s heart warm with love towards her.

She is the sweetest child I have ever seen. I wish she received all the love she deserves.

However, Ophelia knew even hoping for such a thing was impossible. Edward had his mind set on disliking Amy, and it almost felt as if no matter how much anyone tried to hold him accountable, he would never fully give in. Ophelia spread her legs onto the blanket, sadness filling her heart as she stared at Amy crawling about with ease.

“Amy, do not wander off!” Ophelia warned Amy, when she suddenly began to crawl away from the tree, her eyes focused somewhere particular.

Ophelia quickly stood up, taking hasty steps towards Amy, who was lunging in the other direction as if she was reaching for someone or something. Ophelia looked up just then, her eyes falling on Edward who was at some distance, clearly having a moment of fresh air in the garden. He had not seen Ophelia and Amy, but Amy had seen and recognized him, taken over by the urge to be in his arms.

She was already attached to her uncle, but Edward was still distant. Why is he so cruel?

He must have felt eyes boring in on him as he turned in their direction, his gaze falling on them, but to Ophelia’s utter horror, rather than making his way towards them or even smiling or waving, he turned backwards wordlessly, making for the manor as if he hadn’t even seen the two of them. Ophelia ran towards Amy, whose lips were trembling already, and her big, innocent eyes filled with tears as she watched her uncle retreating. Ophelia scooped her up, her heart broken even more, but she walked back towards the tree, making sure Amy’s attention was invested elsewhere so she would not burst into tears at this ignorance.

It was remarkable how even a little girl could feel the pain of not being loved, and it

was evident through Amy's tear-filled gaze.

"My darling, it's okay!" Ophelia said to her in her softest voice and threw Amy in the air before catching her again.

She continued to do this until Amy was distracted and dissolved in childish giggles, but Ophelia knew she could not witness Amy suffer every single day in this same manner. How long could Ophelia continue to distract her from her uncle's cruel behaviour? Sooner or later, she was bound to notice, especially as she grew older, and the distance would continually haunt her.

Ophelia needed to have a word with Edward, and she was resolved to do so even if it cost her this position. She could not stay quiet when such cruelty unfolded before her eyes. She was not going to.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 2:37 am

Chapter 8

“Who is it?” Edward asked, unsure of who was disturbing him after dinner.

Since he had asked Ophelia to keep Amy away from him, she had stopped bringing his niece to him for their good night ritual, thus no one else came to see him either after dinner. He already felt slightly annoyed today, his head consumed by thoughts. It was difficult for him to constantly see Amy throughout the manor or hear her laughing or someone calling out to her. He knew she was beginning to grow; he could see it himself, but he still did not want to see her.

“It’s Miss Jennings,” the soft voice called from behind the door.

Ophelia? Edward wondered what she wanted with him, but his heartbeat quickened slightly.

Now that he was distancing himself again, his interactions with her had also reduced, which was the only thing he disliked about the whole ordeal. He had begun to enjoy their candid conversations at breakfast and her presence around him when she brought Amy to visit. Something about her simply made him feel calmer. Hence, he could not help being a little intrigued at her visit.

“The door is open,” he replied, and it quickly opened, Ophelia walking inside.

She was dressed in a simple peach-coloured maxi dress, her blonde hair falling in soft waves behind her as they were only partly tied. Edward did not know why he found her beautiful, but her allure was disarming, especially since she was not even trying

to charm him. She was naturally beautiful and did not seem to realize it.

“My Lord,” she curtsied once the door had closed behind her, and Edward turned his attention in her direction.

“Did you need something?”

“A word with you,” she said, her words sounding a little firmer than usual.

Edward had always admired her courage, her strength of character, and belief in herself, far greater than just a nanny. He often wondered about her station, her confidence in herself, and how the two things hardly aligned. Something about Ophelia spoke of high breeding, and the way she spoke her mind, no matter the situation, was a clear sign of it.

“I am all ears,” he replied, already having an idea of what this was going to be about.

He knew she had seen him today when he had turned away from her and Amy in the gardens, not wanting to interact with the child. He had not expected her to want to have a conversation with him about it but was already looking forward to it.

“I am aware you saw Amy coming towards you today in the gardens, and the moment you saw her, you turned around and went back inside the manor as if you did not want to see her, so please do not deny the accusation.”

“The accusation?” Edward raised his voice at her word choice, unsure of how to react, “You are standing in my manor, inside my study, under my employment and holding me accountable for being ignorant towards my niece in the garden today?”

She was right, and Edward knew he had no reason to defend himself.

“Yes, My Lord,” she replied, surprising him even further with her courage, “Because, unlike most people, I cannot sit silently when I witness injustice being unfolded before me. I have a heart and so does Amy. The way you behaved towards her today by completely ignoring her when she clearly wished to be acknowledged by you is extremely cruel and undeserved. Why behave in this manner with an innocent child.”

“You have no right to question me, Miss Jennings,” Edward said, still unable to feel angry towards her.

“I have every right to question you, and I expect an answer,” she replied, refusing to back down.

“Might I ask who gave you this right? Where did it emerge from?”

“I have this right as Amy’s nanny who wishes the best for her and cannot see her unhappy. You are her uncle, her only living relative, and her guardian, and she deserves to have love from you, yet you continue to hold it back from her, which is painful to both suffer through and watch. I implore you to become better and let go of this at once, at least for Amy’s sake,” she said, stepping closer.

“You, Miss Jennings, are forgetting your place!” Edward replied, taking a few steps towards her in his own rage.

“I do not care!” Ophelia all but shouted, “You are an awful uncle, and you must be better for her. She has already lost her parents, My Lord, and I do not wish her to lose you as well. She does not deserve such brutality.”

“I did not ask for your comments and opinions on what Amy deserves and does not deserve, Miss Jennings. You have been hired to become her nanny, and it is about time you learn to respect the boundaries of your position and remember your place when conversing with me. I won’t tolerate disrespect!”

“I don’t care!” Ophelia thundered, stepping towards him until the two of them were face to face, their eyes boring in on each other. “I will give my opinions no matter what you think and believe, and it is your job as her last living relative to adhere to these opinions rather than act brashly.”

“Are you quite done speaking?”

“No, I am not!” she replied, Edward’s nonchalant behaviour working to make her angrier. “I won’t be done till you understand what you are doing is wrong.”

Edward opened his mouth to say something, but just then, she looked up, meeting his gaze as Edward felt a connection course through them. He did not know what was happening but neither of them could look away, the moment all too surreal. Her hazel eyes melted perfectly with her skin, making her appear even more beautiful in the candlelight.

Why can’t I seem to look away?

He could sense that she could feel it, too, as she stopped blinking, focusing on Edward alone. He could feel the heat between them, coursing into an electric tension as their hands slightly touched, with hardly any distance between their bodies.

Ophelia’s breathing quickened as the pair stayed completely silent, Edward’s mind going blank at the proximity. What was it about her that bothered him so much? Everything about the connection they shared seemed to feel deeper, growing constantly.

Just then, Ophelia blinked, backing away from him, and he backed away himself, the electric attraction that had been there moments ago still present. Although, he could sense how awkward she looked, and he, too, felt slightly vulnerable. The distance between them felt unnecessary, but Edward knew better than to try to come closer to

her again.

“It’s getting late. I will take my leave. Good night, My Lord,” she said hastily, curtsying as she turned around.

Edward could not even mutter a good night back but silently watched her retreating form till the door closed behind her. What had just happened? And why did he not dislike it one bit?

The ballroom was filled with chandeliers lighting up the entire place magnificently. Ophelia caught sight of herself in one of the mirrors lining the wall, realizing how beautiful she looked in her green gown, which only made her hazel eyes stand out. Her blonde hair was tied up in a neat chignon, a few tendrils framing her face to make it appear softer. She had never felt prettier.

She looked forward, and just as she had wanted, Edward stood before her, his tux fitting him to perfection. He extended a hand towards her, and she placed her gloved palm in it as Edward led her to the dance floor. The set began to play, and the pair danced rhythmically, the music only making them soar higher and higher.

“You look beautiful, Ophelia,” Edward whispered as she ran her hand over his black sleeve. He, too, was beautiful.

Ophelia opened her mouth, trying to tell him that, but she was so stuck in his enchanting blue eyes that words almost refused to come to her. He was everything she had ever wanted, and he was before her, holding her in his arms as they danced in front of the world.

She wanted to tell him she loved him, but the music was loud, and the thumping of

her heart even louder. He held her very close, his hands encircling her waist as they continued to dance, the entire floor empty around them.

Ophelia looked around, and the ballroom was completely empty as well, just her and Edward alone. His blue eyes shone brightly as he continued to stare at her as if whispering sweet nothings.

“Keep looking at me, Ophelia,” he whispered, his tone soft but demanding. “Keep staring here.”

She opened her mouth to reply, but speaking felt impossible once again as if all the words she ever knew had been taken away from her. What was happening?

How was it real? How was anything about this moment real?

How had she been granted her biggest wish?

The love of her life.

“Edw ...” She opened her mouth to speak, but her words drowned in the music, silence ensuing in her ears.

They continued to twirl around until her head began to grow dizzy, her eyes lost focus, and darkness filled her vision. Edward was beginning to fade, and Ophelia did not like that at all. Something was not right about this whole thing.

She opened her eyes, sweat beads forming on her skin as she continued to breathe heavily. Disappointment filled her, knowing that the ball had been nothing but a dream where she had been on the verge of losing everything anyway. She did not know if she should be glad it was only a dream, but it felt too real.

“Edward,” Ophelia whispered, realizing how, in the dream, she had loved him.

She had wanted to tell him she loved him, but she could not do that.

“No, no,” she said to herself firmly, “I do not love him. I cannot love him. It was nothing but a pathetic dream with no semblance of reality. I cannot love him.”

Her words felt like nothing but false reassurance as if she was trying to believe something that was not true, especially after what had happened today in his study. She did not know what had come over her in the moment, but it had been impossible to take her eyes off him, and he also felt the same way.

They had shared a moment.

“Oh God,” Ophelia stepped out of bed, wiping the sweat off her forehead as her eyes fell on Amy’s sleeping form. She was sleeping soundly, and the little girl’s presence allowed her to feel a little at ease with the whole solution. “I cannot begin to have feelings for Edward. Not now. Not ever.”

She knew how terribly wrong it would be if something happened between them, considering that for Edward, she would always just be a nanny, someone far beneath his own position. Although, the dream could simply be about the conversation they had today, which had grown heated in mere seconds, and their eye contact had ruined everything.

Despite that, she was still proud of herself for standing up for Amy and making sure that Edward knew he was in the wrong. That had been her genuine intention with the whole thing, and she had managed to make it happen. However, whatever dreams she had or whatever she might feel towards Edward were temporary.

She was never going to let it grow into anything.

Chapter 9

“Miss Jennings?” Edward’s gaze fell on Ophelia the moment he entered his study, her back facing the door, which had been left open. She jumped at his voice, clearly not expecting him to barge in on her in this manner, but Edward controlled his chuckle at her reaction.

She had been putting books back on the shelf as he knew she had been borrowing books from him since he had told her she could. He hardly had the time to read himself; hence, it felt good to him that his prized collection was at least coming into use by someone.

“My Lord,” she replied, out of breath with alarm, “I did not know you would be back so soon. I had no desire to come in your way!”

“You did no such thing,” he said dismissively, walking inside. “The weather was hardly apt for riding, and I decided to return early. I see you are returning the books you borrowed?”

Ophelia nodded. “And taking a few others.”

As he stepped closer, the familiar scent of roses exclusive to her and her alone wafted up his nose, reminding him of the time when the two of them had been unable to look away from one another in this study. It had been two weeks since that incident, and he had noticed how Ophelia had maintained her distance from him, clearly just as affected by the whole thing as he was. He, too, had wanted to stay away, even though he had missed her company.

“Yes, yes,” she replied. “I was done reading the ones I borrowed last week, so I just returned to take a few new books.”

“You never have to worry about me being here or not here. You are welcome whenever you wish to get more books, Miss Jennings.”

“That is very kind of you, My Lord,” she said, her smile making the dark study much brighter.

Something about her simply brought light alongside her, and Edward could not determine the cause of it. Her presence had a calming effect, the concept being entirely new but rather welcome to him. This was why he hated being distant from her; it took away the peace she had made him feel.

He walked closer, intrigued regarding her reading choice since the very beginning. When she had first borrowed books, he remembered her taking both history and philosophy, but since then, she had made sure to only come into the study in his absence.

“What are you planning to read this time?” he asked, standing at a good distance to avoid making her uncomfortable.

The argument they had last night lay forgotten between them, but the memories of the feelings of that night were still aptly present. As much as Edward wished to relive it, he knew he could not. Not when he had no space in mind or heart to worry about anything else besides Margaret. His sister consumed all his thoughts, and Edward had no desire to welcome anyone or anything else.

“You have a rather interesting collection of books based on geography. I have always been fond of travelling and wanting to explore the depths of this world, and these books have been helping me learn about it and travel, at least through my

imagination.” She chuckled softly, ringing her hands.

Edward wondered if she was shy or nervous or if her mind, too, was consumed by thoughts of their previous encounter.

“You have an extremely refined reading palette, Miss Jennings,” Edward replied. “Have you been reading long?”

“I have been reading for as long as I can remember!” she said enthusiastically. “Books have always been my refuge in both times of trouble and happiness. I enjoy the words and the imagination of the writers. It almost feels as if I am a part of a different world, even if for some time.”

“Did you borrow books from the baron’s library?”

Edward noticed confusion on her face as if she was trying to remember who the baron was, making him suspicious. When he had asked her about her eloquent use of vocabulary and manner of speaking, she had told him that since her childhood, she had been lucky enough to study with the daughter of a baron since her father had worked on his land. The reason had felt believable to him, but something about her still felt almost mysterious. She was too well-bred to be just an ordinary working-class girl, or perhaps Edward was reading too much into the whole thing.

“The baron,” she said, realization dawning on her face, “I did, I did, yes!”

“That sounds excellent. I am glad you always had the best kind of books available to read from. You seem extremely fond of them.” He smiled, and Ophelia nodded.

Was he reading too much into it or was she truly hiding something?

How can I find out?

Everything she had told him about her family had made him certain that she did indeed belong to the working class and both her parents always worked for a living. She was now working to support her family as well, but everything about her was ladylike. Her speech, word choice, how she carried herself, and even her idea of modesty. Edward had noticed how several maids were never uncomfortable with their skin showing or not wearing enough layers, but he had never once seen Ophelia in such a position. She was proper in her sitting and eating, and for someone so young who had never even worked in the position of a governess before, all of it was slightly unrealistic.

“Young women are hardly allowed a lot of luxuries, My Lord,” she said seriously, “Reading happens to be one of the things that society does not condemn for us; hence, I always made sure to exploit that source to learn as much as I possibly could.”

“You did the right thing.” Edward smiled. “Since you are interested in geography and travelling, have these books been helpful?”

“Nothing can be as helpful as the real experience of travelling, of course,” Ophelia said, leaning against his desk, her hands folded primly in front of her, “but I believe yes! I have only read the first two volumes yet, but they have provided me with detailed descriptions of Europe along with their historical elements, importance of land structures, and their general culture and living. I enjoyed them thoroughly.”

“That sounds fantastic,” Edward replied, realizing the more he got to know her, the more impressive she became. “I wished I had read them to contribute to your findings, but I believe I have travelled through the entirety of Europe, so that does give me some insight.”

“Truly? Throughout Europe?”

“And much beyond it.”

“Africa?” she asked, her eyes shining with unkempt excitement. “The next volume is outlining Africa, and I am terribly excited. I have wanted to visit the wilderness of the African forests for as long as I can remember.”

“Who told you about them?” Edward asked, a little surprised at the extent of her knowledge. It was evident she had a vast expanse of understanding on a lot of things, which was rather strange for someone in her position.

“My father did,” Ophelia replied, her eyes glossing over, “he had visited them in his youth, and he told me that the peace and serenity in those forests was far better than any luxury one can find in England or France. I have wished to visit ever since.”

“Your father is right,” Edward said, nodding, “Africa is as beautiful as a place can get, and I am lucky to have been there. I have been to various places, but I still have not been to India. I would love to go there someday.”

“India,” she sighed, “I have heard it is an exotic land.”

“So have I.” He shrugged. “I will find out once I visit.”

“Do you promise to write a letter and tell me all about it in grand detail?” she said, her eyes shining with humour.

“I promise,” Edward replied, completely serious. He could see she had never visited any of these places and a part of him wanted to make sure that she did visit each of them and he could witness her reactions when she saw the entire world before her.

A part of him kept whispering how she deserved everything good in the world, and Edward wondered how he could give it to her or if even thinking of such a thing was appropriate or not. Although, all he knew was that she was perfection in a person, and no one compared to Ophelia. Something about her simply broke all his barriers and

moved past. He could not remember ever having such a conversation with any young lady of the ton, and all of them had been instructed by tutors and sent to finishing schools to make sure they turned into the best versions of themselves.

However, here was Ophelia, who certainly had not been lucky enough to have any such privileges, yet she was smarter than most. Anyone who met her would be enthralled by her mind.

“Thank you for the promise, My Lord,” she said smiling, “I will take the books and be out of your way so you can resume work.”

“I was just off to bed,” Edward said, not having the heart to work tonight.

Ophelia nodded, quickly picking up the third volume of the book they had discussed and a large collection of poetic works by various poets. Silence filled the study as Edward waited for her, but he did not feel awkward in her presence. She was almost like his own self, subtle and calm, and he felt as if the two of them were in perfect harmony right now.

“I have them.” She smiled, curtsying. “Have a good night, My Lord.”

Edward watched her walk out before stepping out, heading straight towards his bedchamber, his mind still consumed by thoughts of Ophelia. He dismissed his valet, wanting to be alone and changed clothes himself, a certain sort of curious ease filling his heart. What was it about Ophelia that made him feel such things and was he right in believing that she might be hiding something?

He knew his suspicions were not baseless.

She was well-read and educated, and her person was too refined to be just anyone, but why would she ever lie about herself? Edward was confused.

Who are you, Ophelia?

He did not doubt her honesty, and he knew she was not a liar about anything; in fact, if anything, she was bold and compassionate, and her heart was too big. He remembered how she had stood up before him for Amy and how kind she was to everyone in the household. She had been courteous to him as well despite their argument.

What is it about her?

He got in bed, the darkness no longer nauseating as he could only think about Ophelia. Her hazel eyes and beautiful blonde hair always rested neatly on her shoulder or flowed behind her, reaching her waist. She was a sight no matter what time of the day, and Edward felt as if he could not get enough of her.

She had intrigued him in ways no one had been able to in quite some time, and he could not put a pin on this.

Ophelia.

He closed his eyes, his mind still completely consumed.

Ophelia.

It almost felt as if his heavy-lidded eyes were whispering her name, her image refusing to vanish from before him. He did not know if he was more entrapped by her beauty, by her mind, or perhaps by her bold spirit.

Though whatever it was, he could not shake the feeling that she had a hold on him.

And he had no desire to let go.

Page 10

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Chapter 10

If she had not been a woman of such strong character who completely abhorred the concept of crying, Ophelia would have broken down into tears. The pain in her right foot was unbearable and walking back to the manor felt like the most difficult task in the world.

Why did I even step out today?

She had known for weeks that both her boots were in a precarious condition, and she needed to either buy new ones or perhaps use the existing ones more carefully. She could hardly blame the boots since she had worn the same pair for years. These had been gifted to her by her father, and Ophelia was particularly attached to them. The good thing was that her height and foot size had not changed since, and she could still use them rather easily, but those days would soon end.

Both of them were now almost torn apart, the soles completely worn out. They provided no protection to her feet, and she was almost worried about her foot's condition at the moment. She could almost feel it was going to be awful.

The pain most certainly was.

“Just a few more minutes of walking, Ophelia. We will be home soon.” She sighed deeply, giving herself false hopes since the manor was still a full twenty minutes away and the street was entirely deserted.

She was certain no one was going to pass by here and see her in her misery or offer

her help. She had to endure this alone.

“But I have suffered through so much alone. What’s a pair of worn-out boots and a blister on my right foot? I can endure this for a little longer,” she told herself, forcing the tears to stay underneath her lashes as she took one painful step after the other.

I can do this.

I can do this.

I can do this.

A loud, thundering pair of horse hooves greeted her ears just then, and Ophelia’s head whipped in the direction, even though the carriage or the rider was nowhere in sight as of now. She was so overcome with happiness at the sound that she looked up at the sky as if thanking God for listening to her heart’s plea and bringing someone here.

“Oh, please let it be a carriage from the manor,” she whispered, still focused on the sound when a horse appeared in view, no carriage in sight.

Who is it?

To her surprise, it was none other than the one person she had never wanted to come across in such a terrible state: the earl himself. Ophelia looked back up at the sky, almost feeling betrayed since Edward’s presence was nothing but an illusion of help. Interacting with him was already one of the most difficult things she ever had to endure, and she did not doubt that he would immediately want to help the moment he saw her.

God, please let me disappear.

But God was clearly not listening to her.

Despite that, Ophelia turned around and continued to limp towards the manor, making sure to keep away all pressure from her right foot where the blister was ever-growing. She was not going to stop at the side of the street like a damsel and wait for Edward to help her like a handsome knight in his riding gear. It was more than her pride could handle.

Her heartbeat only accelerated as the horse grew closer, and she could sense the exact moment his eyes fell on her back, but Ophelia was determined not to turn around. Something about his gaze made her burn from head to toe, and electricity coursed through her as he looked, his horse slowing down beside her within seconds.

Please, please let him pass by without noticing me.

Although, it was impossible. He recognized her strawberry blonde hair all too well, especially since Ophelia had felt him staring one too many times. She was certain he either loved blonde or long hair since he seemed to have a liking towards it.

“Miss Jennings?” his smooth, honeyed voice called out to her from behind, and she had no choice but to turn around and answer. Even if she were still a lady from the ton in front of his eyes, she would have to answer him out of respect, and right now, she was under his employment, forcing her to be even more amiable.

“My Lord,” she curtsied as well as she could on her foot and turned to look at him.

Edward’s face was etched in deep concern, and he jumped down from his horse immediately, his focus entirely on Ophelia’s foot, which she rested a little above the ground, unable to keep it down fully. He must have noticed her limping even though Ophelia had magically wanted him to ignore it completely. Clearly, some things were too much to ask for her.

And God was refusing to listen.

“I cannot help noticing that you are walking differently. Are you hurt?” he asked, taking off his riding gloves as his beautiful chestnut stallion stood patiently, “What is the matter with your foot.”

Oh God, why?

“The sole of my boot tore apart, but I continued walking on it, hoping it would not be much of an issue. But the constant touch on gravel and uneven ground has caused a blister on my right foot. It is rather painful,” she replied honestly, her pain not allowing her to make up another excuse for it.

Even if she had wanted to hide the truth from him, she knew it was going to be entirely pointless.

“Miss Jennings, how long have you been walking on that foot, might I ask?”

“I was just returning from the village market,” she replied guiltily, suddenly feeling like a little girl being scolded by her father.

“You have walked all the way from the village market till here on a blistered foot!? You are remarkably thick-headed for someone so smart,” he scolded yet again, the concern in his eyes still evident.

“I was not left with much of a choice, My Lord.”

Edward sighed, making Ophelia wonder why he looked so deeply upset about her wounded foot. She wanted to ask him the exact question but could not go ahead at the risk of sounding too interrogative or personal. She needed to remember their respective positions and the fact that he was simply her employer and nothing else.

“May I take a look at your foot if you do not mind? I must survey the extent of damage already caused.”

“Take a look at my foot?”

Ophelia could not help being a little stunned at the question, feeling scandalized. She could not possibly take off her shoe and expose her foot in front of a man, for if someone found out she had gone to such lengths, it would be chaotic. Although, who was ever going to find out?

I am just a servant to him. Nothing more.

The idea would have been unfathomable if she were a lady, but she knew that for maids to show parts of their skin was completely normal. The strict idea of modesty that had been drilled into her mind since she was just a little girl emerged from her noble bearing, but she was no longer burdened by it.

“Yes,” Edward nodded, “if you are comfortable, of course.”

He must have sensed her hesitation.

“You can.”

“Can you sit down right here?” He motioned towards the ledge running by the edge of the entire street, separating the uneven forest ground from the gravelled pathway.

Ophelia backed away carefully, taking a few careful steps towards the ledge as she winced in pain. She could notice how Edward’s eyes scrunched up at her winces, the pain she was in making him uncomfortable as well. She still could not understand why he appeared so affected by it, but it felt heartwarming to have such concern.

“Should I take off my boots?” Ophelia asked, sitting down as Edward walked towards her.

“No, no, please do not bother yourself; you are already in such agony,” he quickly replied, moving towards her. “I can take them off for you if that is alright?”

“Of course.”

To her surprise, Edward sat down on one knee before her, the mere sight of him in such a position sending tingles down her spine. Ophelia could not understand how almost everything about him meant so much to her. He was quickly becoming much too important, and she did not like the progress of her feelings in regards to him, knowing how those feelings would never result in anything.

He carefully held her right foot in his hands and slowly removed the ankle-length boot, making sure to be extremely gentle with his touch. He did the same thing with her other boot as well before inspecting them closely, his eyebrows scrunched.

“These are excellent quality boots, Miss Jennings,” he remarked, “They have just been worn out with usage and time, I assume.”

“Yes,” she nodded fondly, “my father gifted those to me.”

Why did I just say that?

Edward gazed at her narrowly at the revelation but simply nodded without commenting. Ophelia could only imagine what he must be thinking knowing fully well that a working class man could never afford such expensive boots even after months of saving. She needed to be more alert about her replies and learn to lie better before the truth about her past came forward. That was the last thing she wanted.

“Your father had excellent taste.”

Ophelia smiled.

Edward picked up her stocking-clad foot in his hands, and Ophelia raised her dress just a little bit so he could easily remove the stocking. His hands on her naked leg suddenly felt like more than she could endure, but Ophelia remained steady. She needed to make sure she did not react at all or let him have any hint of how he affected her, but her leg trembled at the touch while he carefully removed both her stockings and handed them to her.

“I am afraid your foot seems to be in terrible condition,” he said, carefully holding her right foot from the ankle, his gaze drawn to the back of it.

Ophelia felt immensely better now that her foot was finally free of the boot and the stocking and away from the ground. The pain was still there, but it was no longer unbearable. Although, the moment she placed her foot on the ground, it would become awful again. She was already dreading returning to the manor.

“How bad?”

“You have a large blister on your right foot and several smaller sores on both of your feet. They are filled with pus; hence, we will have to call a physician to take a closer look and drain the pus out.”

“That sounds like a painful process,” she groaned involuntarily, already feeling jitters at the thought of it.

“Trust me, it will be much less painful than walking on wounded feet. I will take you back to the manor, and then we can send for the village physician. With a few days of rest and letting your feet be in the open, you will be immensely improved.”

“I do wish to get better immediately.”

“We shall return to the manor immediately.”

She stared at his extended hand before looking at her naked feet, confused as to how she was supposed to get home without her boots. She could wear them again, but she knew the pain would only get worse, and she was not ready for that. As if sensing her predicament, Edward crept closer, his proximity causing the hair on Ophelia's back to rise in nervousness.

“May I?”

She was unsure of what he was asking, but she nodded anyway, unable to deny him much.

Without any hesitation, Edward effortlessly picked her up in his arms, holding her close to his chest as Ophelia gasped. Her heart began to race, but she kept her breathing in control, making sure Edward could not feel her condition. Despite that, some part of her kept reminding her that he felt this way as well. Their proximity affected him, too, or perhaps she was reading too much into his supposed emotions.

They both stayed silent as Edward carefully placed her on the back of his horse before quickly climbing atop himself, his stallion's reins secured in his arms. Every inch of Ophelia's body was snug against his chest, almost to the point where she could feel his beating heart.

Edward.

She had to control the urge to raise her hands and touch his face, which suddenly felt much within her reach, as if she was allowed to grab it. Although she knew she couldn't. He looked down at her, their lips just inches away, and Ophelia felt her

throat drying up. She felt as if she had forgotten how to speak or act as they continued to stare, both of them unable to look away.

“Are you comfortable?” Edward finally broke the silence, blinking quickly.

“Absolutely.”

He nodded and pulled the reins softly, the stallion galloping forward with top speed. Ophelia thrust back from the mere force of it, coming even closer to Edward, but he did not seem to have a problem with it. Even though he was busy riding, he allowed Ophelia to settle better into his arms, and she held onto his waist tightly, hoping not to fall.

However, a part of her knew that Edward would never let her fall. She was under his care and protection, and he would never let harm come her way.

You are just a nanny, Ophelia. Just a nanny.

She had to keep reminding herself of her position before Edward not to lose herself in the fantasy of his love. She had nothing to dwell over or worry about since he was being nothing but kind towards her. Kinder than she could have ever imagined.

Could he be in love with me? Ophelia shook her head at the mere absurdity of the thought.

“We are home,” he whispered, and Ophelia turned to look at the other side of the mansion appearing before her.

She wished she could ask Edward to ride for a little longer so the two of them could stay this way, but she knew it was not proper. Even as a nanny, she had to maintain her distance and boundary with him as of now. He stopped the horse right by the

front gate, his gaze dropping on Ophelia.

“I will make sure the physician arrives promptly.”

Thank you, My Lord.”

He jumped down and helped Ophelia as she limped back inside the mansion, almost glad that her boots had torn off because otherwise, she would never have shared such a beautiful moment with Edward.

Edward felt restless.

In his heart, he knew the reason behind his restlessness, but he had no desire to accept it. Ophelia had not come down for dinner for the past two days, and he had been unable to converse with her. It was a routine he had come to enjoy, but she needed her rest.

The physician had been called, and Mrs Bailey had informed him that Ophelia’s foot was drained and bandaged, but she had been asked to rest and not walk unnecessarily for a few days at least. Hence, Edward was glad she had been resting. Just today, he had gone to town and bought her a new pair of buttery boots, their softness reminding him of Ophelia, and had sent them to her through a maid.

They were quite like her old boots, which had been worn out entirely.

He walked inside his study, his mind still on her beautiful blonde hair, when he found a small note placed under a paperweight on his desk. Edward quickly extracted it, the writing unfamiliar.

Thank you.

“Ophelia,” he whispered involuntarily, certain that it had been her behind the note. She must have understood that the boots came from him. A smile graced his lips, which immediately vanished as there was a knock on the door, and Mrs Bailey entered inside shortly after.

“My Lord,” she curtsied.

“Is everything alright?” he asked her, suddenly finding himself worried for Ophelia.

“Yes, of course, My Lord.”

Edward looked at her expectantly, knowing she would never trouble him without reason. She must have something to say.

“I came to inform you that Lady Rosalina sent a message today from London. She will arrive to see you here in three days.”

“Rosalina is coming?” Edward could not help being slightly excited, already looking forward to Rosalina’s arrival.

If he had a favourite relative, it had to be Rosalina, considering she had been his closest cousin and an excellent friend. As per the letter she sent him a few months ago, she had recently got engaged to Lord Randolph Syke, the only son of the Viscount of Kilfort. Edward had been ecstatic at the news, having studied with Randolph at Cambridge and knowing he was a man of excellent character and insight.

“Yes, she conveyed how she misses you and is quite excited to be coming soon.”

“Excellent!” Edward clapped his hands, feeling elated after several days. “Make sure

the preparations are up to mark and everything is to her liking.”

Mrs Bailey nodded and assured him she would do that before exiting the study. Edward was already looking forward to the next few days; with both Rosalina and Ophelia present, the house just might feel alive again.

Chapter 11

“Mrs Bailey?” Ophelia walked inside the kitchen, finding Mrs Bailey and the cook discussing something with staunch attention. Like the rest of the manor, the kitchen was a flurry of activity, with extreme preparations underway.

After almost five days of complete rest and being confined to her bedchamber, Ophelia finally stepped out, confused about what was happening in the house. However, the rest had completely healed her feet, and she was back to feeling perfect. She had even tried the new boots that Edward had given to her, and they looked extremely beautiful on her.

“Miss Jennings!” the cook exclaimed, seeing her, and Mrs Bailey, too, erupted into a smile.

“I see you are finally walking again. Are you feeling well?” Mrs Bailey asked her. Ophelia nodded, truly feeling her best. She had still been taking care of Amy throughout her rest, and both of them stayed confined inside the room unless Mrs Bailey or some other maid took Amy out for a stroll.

But Ophelia was glad she did not have to miss out on taking care of Amy, being extremely attached to the child.

“Much better,” Ophelia reassured.

“I am so glad to hear that, Miss Jennings,” Mrs Bailey remarked, affectionately holding Ophelia’s hand. “The house has come to life since your arrival, and everyone

was beginning to miss your banter and laughter.”

“We all did,” the cook chimed in, making Ophelia blush with their genuine compliments. “We all have come to love you so much in such little time, and we certainly hope you stay here with us for years to come.”

“I would love that, too,” Mrs Bailey added.

Ophelia’s heart warmed, for she, too, had no desire to leave the household, especially Amy. She had come to love the little girl with such passionate desperation that parting from her felt like an ache, and Ophelia was not ready for that. Not until it was absolutely necessary. She shook her head, removing all such thoughts from her mind, refusing to think of unnecessary things when the house was in such a frenzy.

“Thank you.” Ophelia smiled. “I came looking for you to ask if were expecting someone at the house? What are all these preparations for?”

“Oh yes, I completely forgot to tell you.” The housekeeper shook her head as if disappointed in herself, and Ophelia laughed at the dramatic expression. “Lady Rosaline, Lord Cavendish’s first cousin from his mother’s side, is visiting today. She must arrive anytime now.”

Lady Rosalina.

“I am sure she is delightful,” Ophelia said, unsure how to feel about it. A part of her had forgotten that the ton still existed outside of the small world she had created for herself, and Edward was a huge part of it.

“Mrs Bailey,” a maid walked in just then. “Lady Rosalina’s carriage has arrived.”

“Thank you.” Mrs Bailey immediately turned to look at Ophelia. “You must come

along and meet with her. I can assure you that the two of you will get along quite well.”

“I would love to meet her.”

Ophelia went ahead with Mrs Bailey, only because she wished to see Edward, who must have come out to receive his cousin as well. She had not met him since the day he had carried her back to the manor from the street, and she missed his presence. As they headed towards the door, Ophelia’s gaze fell on Edward as he placed a kiss on the head of a tall, beautiful woman with black hair tied in a chignon. Her black eyes and olive skin were nothing short of exotic, making her appear beautiful in her elegant, dark pink gown.

A pang of jealousy invaded Ophelia’s heart as she saw Edward smile at her but just then, the woman took off her left glove, a large rock decorating her ring finger.

She is engaged?

“Mrs Bailey!” the woman, who must be Rosalina exclaimed, hugging the housekeeper as if they were long lost friends.

The jealousy Ophelia had felt a few seconds ago dissipated entirely as she began to like Rosalina. Something about her was warm and kind, and Ophelia felt as if they just might get along, especially now that Ophelia knew she was engaged.

“Lady Rosalina, you must meet Miss Jennings.” Mrs Bailey’s introduction forced Ophelia to snap out of her thoughts and she smiled at the black haired beauty who immediately extended her hand towards Ophelia. “Miss Jennings is Miss Amy’s nanny.”

“Oh my,” Rosalina sighed, “I have been looking forward to meeting our Amy for too

long now. I cannot wait. You must make sure she loves me right away, Miss Jennings.”

“I will try my best.” Ophelia laughed.

Everyone looked up as the door opened again, and a shorter, petite young woman entered inside, her pale white skin standing out in her deep teal-coloured gown. She surveyed everyone with a sour expression full of haughtiness, and Ophelia did not know why she felt an immediate dislike towards the other woman. Something about her was simply hostile.

“It completely escaped my mind to inform you that when Lady Alice found out I was coming here to see Edward, she expressed her desire to come along and join me,” Lady Rosalina exclaimed, the smile vanishing.

“Of course,” Edward replied quickly when everyone else stayed silent. “You are always welcome, Lady Alice.”

Ophelia wondered if she had only imagined it or if Lady Rosalina and Mrs Bailey actually shared a knowing glance, both tending to roll their eyes. The pair clearly disliked Lady Alice, and Edward did not seem fond of her and her mere presence was enough to put Ophelia at edge. She was any other typical young lady from the ton who was clearly too full of herself and only had eyes for Edward.

Ophelia had never felt more jealous.

“My Lord, I missed you in London,” she addressed Edward, completely ignoring Mrs Bailey and Ophelia as if they were not even worthy of a greeting. “You left me no choice but to come here and see you myself.”

“You did the right thing, My Lady,” Edward replied, his face completely

expressionless.

Ophelia could not understand why Alice batting her eyelashes at Edward bothered her so much, but she could not deny that it did. Everything about this woman and her comfortable proximity with Edward as if she had a claim over him annoyed Ophelia immensely, but she knew she could do nothing about it. Alice was a lady, while Ophelia was just ... a nanny.

This world no longer belonged to her, and the sooner she accepted it, the better it would be.

“I must excuse myself,” she said, tearing her gaze away from Edward. “I am sure Amy needs me. I have left her alone too long.”

She needed to escape. She couldn't thank God enough to have Amy as a reason, or else she would end up saying or doing something she might regret.

“Will it be alright if I come along?” Rosalina asked, immediately perking up at the mention of Amy. “I do wish to see her.”

Ophelia nodded, knowing she had no reason to deny Rosalina the company of her cousin's child, “Absolutely. You should come with me.”

“That sounds great,” Lady Alice chimed in. “The two of you can busy yourselves with the child, and I will give company to Lord Cavendish. I am sure you quite like that prospect, don't you, My Lord?”

Ophelia felt her face heating up with anger but she kept herself in check.

I cannot react irrationally. I absolutely cannot.

Rosalina immediately walked ahead as the pair made their way towards the nursery on the upper floor, just beside Ophelia's bedchamber. Rosalina filled the silence with constant chatter as she narrated Ophelia about their entire journey and how Lady Alice, being the person she was, was first late and then continued to create problems along the way. Rosalina appeared ecstatic to have finally reached the mansion and was already dreading returning.

It was evident she was a comfortable conversationalist, and it immediately made Ophelia feel as if the two of them had been friends for the longest time. Hence, Ophelia felt completely at ease in her presence, and the two settled in quite easily. What Ophelia loved even more was how Rosalina seemed genuinely happy to see Amy, her expressions not made up at all.

"My darling Amy!" Rosalina picked up the little girl in her arms, bringing their faces together as she addressed Ophelia, "Now tell me has Amy inherited any of the family features?"

"I believe you two share a nose," Ophelia replied after careful analysis, and Rosalina nodded, agreeing.

"I think so, too!"

"You seem to love her quite a lot," Ophelia regarded, smiling affectionately as Rosalina continued to play with Amy.

Amy, being a friendly little girl, immediately meshed in with Rosalina, giggling beautifully as she was tossed in the air. Ophelia could not believe she could finally witness Amy receiving the love she should have had from the beginning. A family member loving her was exactly what Amy needed, and Rosalina was providing her just that.

“I did love her mother a lot.” Rosalina smiled sadly. ‘It is only fair I love Amy too. She reminds me of Margaret and all the beautiful memories I shared with her.’”

Ophelia’s heart sank at the reminder, but she tried to maintain a happy demeanour.

“I doubt any child in the world can be sweeter than Amy,” Ophelia replied, “she deserves all the love she can get.”

“Miss Jennings ...”

“Please call me Ophelia.”

“Only if you call me Rosalina.”

“I shall call you just that.” Ophelia nodded graciously.

“Ophelia,” Rosalina began again, “Mrs Bailey told me how difficult it was to take care of Amy and give a motherless child the love she deserved to have. You really took up the responsibility, and I can see how much you love Amy. That is a rather brave thing to do, and I cannot thank you enough for taking care of her.”

“I really have come to love Amy.” Ophelia felt herself tearing up but maintained composure, “My heart broke for her when I found out about her parents, and I decided to make sure that the love she receives from my end has nothing lacking, especially since Lord Cavendish has been ... distant.”

Rosalina looked up at the remark, nodding sadly but refusing to say anything. Ophelia felt as if she understood completely what Ophelia was referring to but was just as helpless in that regard.

“I believe you have done an excellent job at it, Ophelia.”

Ophelia felt her heart growing even softer towards Rosalina because even if they had nothing much in common, the two of them loved Amy immensely, and that was all that mattered.

“Ophelia! I am so glad you decided to join us at last!” Rosalina exclaimed as soon as Ophelia entered the drawing room.

“Clearly, you and Miss Jennings have become friends rather quickly,” Edward commented.

“What can I say? Good people find each other,” Rosalina replied, standing up to lace her arms with Ophelia’s as they stood at one end of the drawing room.

Just as Ophelia had expected, Lady Alice sat beside Edward, ignoring everyone else in the room since Mrs Bailey was also very much a part of the conversation. However, Ophelia promised herself not to be bothered by Alice since whatever went on between her and Edward was none of Ophelia’s business.

She had nothing to concern herself with regarding either of them.

“Now that you have finally decided to show up after I called you a thousand times,” Rosalina looked at her as they walked about the large drawing room, “I have managed to convince Edward to come to London and join me during my wedding preparations, and I wish you to come along as well.”

“I cannot possibly.”

“Why not?!”

“I have to make sure I am taking good care of Amy, and I cannot just let her be or take her to London.”

“Of course you can,” Rosalina reasoned, “Edward has a beautiful townhouse in London, which can easily provide a nursery for Amy, and you can be in London with her. Our extended family would love to meet the little girl as well, and I have come to enjoy your company. Please do not deprive me of it, Ophelia.”

“I do not know what to say,” Ophelia said, unable to say no to Rosalina.

She was sure no one could ever say no to this enigmatic woman who knew how to get her way.

“That means you are coming!”

“Well, in that case, I believe everyone will be in London soon enough,” Edward added with a sigh, and Ophelia wondered how in the world Rosalina had even convinced him.

It did indeed seem as if, everyone was going to London.

Chapter 12

“You two shall not worry about anything because I will be right ahead of the carriage,” Edward said for the one-hundredth time, his words forcing Ophelia and Rosalina to stare at one another with a knowing glance, “If you need anything, all you must do is stop me.”

“We understand very well, Edward,” Rosalina sighed. “You must stop worrying so much.”

Why was he worrying so much? Ophelia was unsure. Now that they were supposed to depart for London, Edward had decided to ride for a few hours while Rosalina, Ophelia, and Amy were travelling by carriage. Lady Alice had already returned to London a day earlier, being summoned by her family urgently as she had accompanied Rosalina to see Edward without informing anyone except her housekeeper.

Ophelia was certainly glad about that.

She would not have been able to tolerate Lady Alice’s company for an entire carriage ride and was glad that she was not expected to either. She and Rosalina had reached an initial stage of friendship, and Ophelia was beginning to feel comfortable, but no such relationship had been established with Lady Alice.

“I shall not worry further,” he said, nodding and opening the carriage door as Rosalina stepped inside.

Ophelia handed Amy to Rosalina, who easily cradled the little girl in her arms. Amy had already grown a fondness for Rosalina and was beginning to enjoy her company. Edward extended his hand towards Ophelia, who took it, stepped carefully on the steps, and settled inside the carriage. Her hand tingled with that familiar feeling of touch, but Ophelia made sure to keep all emotions at bay. She could not feel anything for Edward.

Especially not after seeing him with Lady Alice.

That had been an excellent reminder for Ophelia that Edward was expected only to share any and all relations with noble women who aligned with his own status. Ophelia was just the help, and she needed to remember that.

“Thank you, Edward,” Rosalina called out just before the carriage door closed, “we shall see you in London now.”

Edward nodded before walking away, leaving Rosalina, Ophelia, and Amy all alone in the carriage. Amy burst into laughter, making both Rosalina and Ophelia laugh alongside her, with no hints of tension or awkwardness in the carriage. Rosalina made Ophelia feel like she was back home with her sisters, the comfort being delightful.

“Isn’t this going to be Amy’s first time in London?” Ophelia asked.

“Oh no.” Rosalina shook her head, still playing with Amy, “Amy was born in London because that is where Margaret lived with her husband. Edward came to London at the birth, which was followed by Margaret’s death, and he brought Amy with him to the country because that is where he resided, and it is indeed the best place for bringing up a child.”

Ophelia realized how much she still did not know about Amy, her past, and her parents. All she knew was that both her parents had died, but no one had told her the

reasons behind it. It was still very much a mystery, and Ophelia had no desire to seem nosy by asking too many questions.

She would find out when the time was right, but as of now, she simply needed to make sure Amy was well taken care of.

“How about you, Ophelia?”

“What about me?” she asked, realizing she had not been focusing.

“When was the last time you were in London?”

“Oh, me?” Ophelia sighed, “Six years ago.”

She felt sick at the thought of returning after so much had changed. It was true no one was going to recognize her, considering she had not interacted with the ton in such a long time, but it was still a little overwhelming. A part of her might long for her old life, and Ophelia did not want to be unnecessarily upset over such a little thing.

However, if she only kept reminding herself that she was here for Amy, things might turn out to be just fine.

It was only a few days, after all.

“Six years, my goodness! You must be excited to be there again.”

I wish I could agree.

“London is a rather happening place to be at,” Ophelia agreed, unsure how to answer.

“Did you ever reside there? Or have you always lived in the country?”

“I have mostly lived in the country with my family, but we did visit London from time to time,” Ophelia answered, unable to construct lies.

Rosalina was friendly and open towards her, and Ophelia did not have the heart to deceive her with lies. Hence, she tried to keep her replies as close to the truth as possible, even if that was causing her to stumble on her thoughts. She needed to make sure she did not say something to make Rosalina suspicious of her identity.

“Mrs Bailey mentioned that you are from Kent?”

“Hasti—” Ophelia began speaking but quickly stopped herself, realizing her mistake. “I meant yes, I have always lived in Kent with my family.”

Rosalina nodded slowly, making Ophelia wonder if she had noticed the slip of her tongue.

“Are you feeling quite alright, Ophelia? You seem nervous.”

“Oh,” Ophelia sighed, extending her arms towards Amy, who was beginning to jump up and down in Rosalina’s lap, “I am not nervous, I can assure you.”

Amy immediately came into Ophelia’s arms, settling down once again.

“If you are worried about London, let me tell you that it is still as wonderful as it must have been for you six years ago. You will enjoy the social scene, the people, the beginning of the Season, and the beauty of everything.”

Ophelia smiled, wishing with all her heart to be as away from the social scene as possible. The very thought of being in the midst of it nauseated her, but she nodded subtly, as if in complete understanding. If Rosalina wanted to comfort her, it was all the better for Ophelia, who wished to hide the true reason behind her nerves anyway.

“I have no doubts about it.” She smiled, softly stroking Amy’s head.

“And I promise I will talk to Edward about giving you more time off so you can do some sightseeing and have a good time outside of the manor!”

That is the last thing I want.

“Oh, that is entirely unnecessary,” Ophelia said quickly, the very idea sounding horrible. “The Earl is already very kind and lenient towards me. I am sure he will consider this himself without you having to put in a good word for me. I do not mean to offend him.”

“If you do not want me to talk to him, I shall not,” Rosalina agreed, good-naturedly, “but I will not let you be without taking you out myself and making sure we go to the museums, Hyde Park, and the lake.”

“All of that sounds lovely,” Ophelia lied, maintaining her smile.

Lying to Rosalina made Ophelia feel exceedingly guilty, but she had no choice. She had been hoping to stay confined inside Edward’s townhouse and, more specifically, in the nursery just to be sure she did not come in contact with anyone who might recognize her. Rosalina, on the other hand, was determined to do the exact opposite.

“I wish I had found you earlier, Ophelia,” Rosalina sighed, “finding women in the ton who might turn out to be good friends is extremely difficult since everyone competes to make the best matches. You are lucky not to be subjected to that sort of cruelty.”

“But you have Lady Alice.”

“Alice?” Rosalina scoffed. “We have never been friends. She only tries to come close to me so she can get close to Edward.”

“But she and Lord Cavendish seem to share a friendship already.”

Ophelia knew she should not be making such remarks since it was not her place to be asking private questions. Although, Rosalina did not seem to notice or mind, and Ophelia really wanted to know the truth behind their relationship. She had no right to be jealous but still could not control her emotions when Edward was concerned.

“They are not friends. Not even one bit.” Rosalina shook her head. “Alice tries to keep close to Edward or somehow be seen with him so she can convince him to court her. She had her eyes set on him, considering he is the most eligible bachelor of the ton.”

Ophelia felt her heart shattering at the thought of Edward courting Alice.

What if he does begin courting her? Or what if he already is?

“But he is never going to court her,” Rosalina added, as if reading Ophelia’s mind. “She keeps deluding herself, believing that someday he might when she should focus her energy on someone else.”

“Why won’t he court her?”

Ophelia felt her question was rude, but Rosalina simply shrugged, her eyes closed as she rested comfortably in her seat. She hoped that the forwardness of her question would simply be marked by mere curiosity as her position as the nanny. Rosalina hardly seemed to be suspicious of Ophelia in any way, and she wished to keep it like that.

She had really come to enjoy Rosalina’s company and had no desire to let go of her.

“I do not know really,” Rosalina replied, “but Edward is extremely particular and has

never shown any interest in Alice. I am certain he has no feelings towards her and has never even thought about her in this manner.”

Ophelia felt her heart calming down at Rosalina’s words, and she rested her head against the carriage wall, closing her eyes. Amy had already fallen asleep in her lap, and Ophelia, too, felt slightly tired, the speed of the carriage lulling her. The simple news of Edward not being interested in Alice was enough to give her comfort, and before she realized what was happening, darkness took over.

“Ophelia?”

Edward’s arms were around her, holding her tightly as they stood in one another’s embrace. The warmth of his touch was so beautiful that Ophelia had no desire to let go of it.

“Ophelia!”

She tried turning her head away from the voice pulling her out of Edward’s arms when her head softly hit the wall, and her eyes opened immediately.

It was just a dream.

Ophelia blinked quickly, realizing the carriage had stopped, and Rosalina sat before her, appearing amused.

“Sounds like you were having a good dream.” She chuckled, and Ophelia turned scarlet, hoping she had not said anything that might be wrong.

“I do not remember what it was about,” she lied, but Rosalina did not press her for any details.

“Well, now that you are awake, we have reached London.”

Ophelia looked through the open carriage window and saw a beautiful townhouse before her eyes. They had indeed reached London, and she was certainly not looking forward to it.

Chapter 13

“Ophelia!” Rosalina’s loud exclaim brought a smile to Ophelia’s face, who was already beginning to get used to Rosalina’s rambunctious greetings. “You took so much time in coming. Everyone has been asking for you and Amy.”

“I had to make sure Amy was well-fed before I could come,” Ophelia replied apologetically, hearing voices from inside the drawing room.

It had just been two days since their arrival in London and Rosalina had already arranged for a large dinner party to be organized at Edward’s manor, including their families, to introduce everyone to Amy. Ophelia was already getting hints of Rosalina’s extremely friendly nature, and she was certain that in all their time in London, Rosalina would definitely be engaged in multiple such gatherings.

“Excellent.” She smiled. “Come, I shall introduce you to everyone.”

Ophelia had no reason to object, even when she felt extremely nervous before meeting Rosalina and Edward’s family. She simply needed to keep reminding herself that she was only Amy’s nanny and nothing else, which basically made her invisible. She had no reason to worry at all.

With a comfortable grace, Rosalina laced her arm with Ophelia’s and almost dragged her inside the drawing room, which was already filled with people. Everyone became momentarily silent as they entered, which was eventually followed by a loud cheer as a couple of young men and women made their way towards them, their arms extended towards Amy.

Ophelia was surprised at the easy love they showed, her gaze glancing towards Edward, who remained seated on the sofa, his expression withdrawn. He glanced at the spectacle but immediately looked away as if even the sight of it did not interest him. Ophelia did not doubt that. He was still completely distant, not having once visited Amy since they had come to London.

“Give her space to breathe,” Rosalina shouted, but everyone almost ignored her.

Amy began to laugh at the attention, a little surprised at first. Ophelia handed the little girl to one of the young women, unsure of who she was. However, her striking resemblance to Rosalina was enough indication of the two of them definitely being sisters. Since Amy had never been much of a reserved child, she easily settled in with everyone despite everyone being a perfect stranger to her, and her happy countenance rejuvenated everyone as she was showered with love.

“She is such a darling little girl,” the woman Ophelia thought was Rosalina’s sister commented, making everyone agree.

“She has always been that way,” Ophelia quickly added, continuing to stare lovingly at Amy. It was almost unreal how much more she was beginning to love her every day.

“Ophelia, I must introduce you to everyone,” Rosalina said as a lull in the conversation followed, pointing to those present one after the other, “And all of you must get acquainted with the most delightful person you will ever come across, Miss Ophelia Jennings, who is Amy’s nanny.”

Rosalina’s parents, the Baron and Baroness of Silvester, were extremely kind and welcoming, as were her younger sisters, Raina and Rowena. Her older brother, Lord Marcel, was just as warm as his sisters, and Ophelia did not feel uncomfortable in his presence at all. The extended cousins varied through ages, the youngest being Owen,

who was just twelve, and the oldest being Edward, who was the quietest among them all. Ophelia could not believe how he even survived in such a friendly and loud family, considering his own silent nature.

Or perhaps he had not always been this way?

Ophelia was unsure.

“Amy looks exactly like Margaret,” Rosalina’s mother commented when she finally had the chance to hold the child, making Rosalina wonder what Margaret must have looked like. Although the entire family shared similar features, so it was hardly much of a surprise.

Ophelia sat at one end of the large drawing room, her gaze constantly drawing towards Edward while he remained indifferent to the entire scene. Everyone else was occupied with Amy, but Edward kept his gaze averted as if he was not even a part of the room or was a stranger to everyone in attendance.

His attitude pained her.

“Miss Jennings, is it alright if I leave her on the floor?” Raina asked, trying to hold Amy in her arms while she kept trying to jump out of them.

“Yes, absolutely.” Ophelia smiled, knowing how much Amy loved crawling these days. “Now that she is growing, she wishes to be left alone all the time and always wants to crawl about. It is perfectly alright.”

Raina nodded, carefully leaving Amy on the floor, who immediately had a huge smile on her face at the freedom. She began to laugh loudly, making everyone around her stare at her in complete awe. Ophelia glanced at Edward, who was also staring at her, his expression completely neutral.

Every time she looked at him, she could not help remembering the dreams she kept on having almost every day. He had become a constant part of them, his presence almost magical and unreal as the pair were always extremely close to one another in such settings. Ophelia wanted to stop having them, but it was not under her control since thinking about him was not something she could just stop.

“Amy,” Rosalina called out to her from the sofa, and Amy began to crawl towards her just as Owen started calling out to her from the other end.

Ophelia laughed at the utter confusion on Amy’s face as everyone began to call out her name from around the drawing room, and she would only be halfway towards someone when someone else would call out. Amy had not had this much interaction with people since she was born, and Ophelia was glad to see that despite being around these many people for the first time, she did not seem troubled at all.

She was basking in the attention, clearly enjoying it.

“Amy,” Rosalina’s father, the baron called out again, and she began to move towards him but stopped midway when his attention faltered and he started talking to his son.

Amy looked up as Ophelia kept her eyes on her, making sure she did not accidentally hurt herself or crash into furniture when Amy began to make her way towards Edward, whose eyes widened as he noticed her. Although he did not turn her away or look elsewhere as Amy silently continued to crawl till she was at his feet, her hands raised slightly in the air as if urging him to pick her up.

Ophelia watched as Edward bent down, patting Amy softly on the back, a flash of love crossing his eyes momentarily.

Did I really see that? It truly happened?

She could not believe her eyes. The expression had been too brief, but she had witnessed it, and it was enough to give her hope. She could see that Edward did not hate Amy the way he pretended to, and a part of his heart just might have a soft corner for her somewhere. It only meant that if Ophelia tried hard enough, Edward just might allow his love for Amy to emerge and put aside everything he felt.

Ophelia knew it was going to be difficult, but definitely not impossible.

The drawing room was pushed open as the housekeeper entered, her eyes seeking Edward, “My Lord?”

“Yes, Mrs Connor?”

“Dinner has been served,” she informed. “All of you must make your way to the dining room.”

“We will be right there, Mrs Connor,” Rosalina replied before Edward could say anything.

Ophelia stood up from the sofa, quickly fetching Amy from the floor while she resisted all attempts at being held, quite comfortable in her position on the floor. Despite her attempts at escape, Ophelia managed to pick her up and quickly consoled her to stop the little girl from crying out loud.

“I will take Amy to the nursery,” Ophelia told Rosalina, who scrunched her eyes at the announcement, immediately beginning to shake her head.

“Absolutely not!”

“Do you want to hold her throughout dinner?” Ophelia asked, completely confused.

“No, I meant, you shall join us for dinner, and so will Amy,” Rosalina explained, “I can hold her while you eat. It is not going to be a problem at all.”

“Oh no, I do not wish to intrude upon your family dinner.”

“It is hardly an intrusion, Miss Jennings,” Rosalina’s father chimed in, “It is an informal family dinner, after all, and we will be pleased to have you join us.”

“It will only be a lot more work along with Amy,” Ophelia tried to object again, not wanting to take advantage of their hospitality.

She did not want anyone in the house to consider her as being too frank for just a nanny and trying to indulge with the family, considering such a thing would also be noticed by the servants. Rosalina and her entire family were extremely inviting, yet Ophelia had no wishes to overstep.

Edward stepped forward, his eyes trained on Ophelia, “You must join us, Miss Jennings.”

She stared at Edward, unsure how to deny him when he had not even posed it as a question. She was not capable of saying no to him; hence, she simply nodded in agreement.

“Of course, My Lord.”

“Marcel, you quite literally left me alone in front of all those goats!” Edward laughed, debating on a story his cousin had told in a completely false way to favour himself: “I had no way of going home. What was I supposed to do?”

“Walk home!” Owen added, laughing alongside everyone.

“I am sure that was the plan till he came across the carriage,” Rosalina said, “But only if he had taken help from that carriage, he would not have been between us right now.”

“Why not?” Ophelia asked, softly wiping the moisture from the corner of her eyes.

“That carriage belonged to Lady Cuthbert, and she was travelling alone,” Rosalina explained, “her husband happens to be a very possessive man, and had he seen Edward with her alone, Edward would have been challenged to a duel.”

“And,” Edward added, “I would have killed him in the duel, which is why I would still be present here.”

“Awfully confident, Cousin,” Raina remarked.

“So, how did you return home?” Ophelia asked, making Edward focus all his attention towards her.

He could see the surprise on her face since it was her first time witnessing this side of him. The playful side, where he took part in conversations and did not keep to himself. He could only wonder about the opinion she must be forming.

“I sneaked inside the carriage carrying her hefty amounts of trunks and hid myself till we reached back to London.”

Everyone burst out laughing at the explanation, including Ophelia, and Edward’s heart warmed watching her in this manner. She was beautiful and looked even more beautiful when laughing open-heartedly. It was immaculate to witness how she had meshed in with his family, completely comfortable. He could see how everyone

already adored her, and she was very much a part of the family, hardly appearing different or as if it was the first time she had met them.

Something about her presence was refreshing in a way where everyone liked her immediately.

He needed to stop thinking about her even though he had not been able to stop for days now. Ophelia had become a part of his thoughts like no other, and he could hardly do much about it. The path he was treading on was dangerous, and Edward needed to back away as soon as possible.

I cannot marry her. It is simply impossible.

He could never consider marrying a nanny. Not after what he had done to Margaret. Not after the way he had ruined her life.

Hence, trying to create distance between him and Ophelia was his only choice, and he would do that immediately.

Chapter 14

“I must say, the weather is perfect for a picnic,” Ophelia commented, staring at the perfect setting spread out before them at Hyde Park.

“I agree,” Rosalina replied, “Which is why I suggested coming out here, of course.”

Ophelia was almost certain that Rosalina had other reasons to suggest a picnic that morning after they had all had breakfast, but she stayed quiet. When Ophelia had brought down Amy, the little girl had continued to crawl towards Edward, who had tried to interact with her. Both Rosalina and Ophelia were surprised at this shift in attitude, and Rosalina immediately found a way to press on it by asking Edward to accompany them to Hyde Park for the picnic.

She had even gone ahead and made sure Edward took Amy to show the ducks and the far-off boats, which she had been curious about, and he had reluctantly agreed. Hence, the two of them were off while Rosalina and Ophelia remained seated under a large tree where they had spread out their picnic blanket, enjoying the beautiful day. Everything about today was perfect, and Ophelia could certainly not believe her eyes when she saw Edward being kind towards Amy. He was still not affectionate, but his kindness mattered just as much.

“I am sure Amy is enjoying herself with her uncle.” Ophelia smiled, trying to find them from afar, knowing it was still impossible.

“I hope so,” Rosalina sighed. “Ophelia, can I tell you something?”

“Of course.”

“Now that you and I have finally become friends, I do not wish you to think that the rest of the family or I am indifferent to Edward’s behaviour towards Amy. We are all well aware of it and wish to change it one way or the other. We have all known since the beginning.”

“You have?”

“Yes.” Rosalina nodded, “It has been right in front of us from the start, and I cannot even explain the sadness it gives me. I wish I could do something about it, but there is not much I can do. This is why I insisted that you and Amy come to London with us so Edward would not be parted from her.”

“Why can you not do something about it? Can none of you talk to Lord Cavendish and ask him to perhaps change his behaviour?”

“I wish. But Edward is completely opposed to the conversation and has no desire to partake in it. Everyone has tried their hand at talking to him, yet he refused. In fact, when Amy was born, and Margaret passed away, all of us offered to take guardianship of Amy and raise her, but Edward refused and took her to the country with him, saying it was his responsibility alone and he would take care of it. Otherwise, Amy could have been living with me or someone else in the family.”

“Oh,” Ophelia was a little disappointed, “Only if Lord Cavendish had no qualms with someone else taking care of Amy, she might have had a better childhood.”

“He forbade us to take her, Ophelia; hence, we were helpless.” Rosalina shrugged. “I know it was just his stubbornness, but we could not have gone against him. He clearly only wanted to stay distant and give her an unhappy childhood since he pretends he is incapable of loving her after Margaret’s death.”

“I pray every day for him to get better, but even if he does decide to come close to her, he pulls away just as quickly,” Ophelia replied, sighing.

“I can tell. But I am extremely glad to see how you shower her with love and affection, and I feel she is not lacking in anything. I understand how she will never be able to experience the pure love of parenthood, but she at least has you and the rest of the family to keep showing her the affection she deserves.”

Ophelia smiled, glad she could play a part in making Amy’s childhood better, “I am glad you feel this way.”

Rosalina began to say something, but Amy’s loud laughter reached their ears, and both young women looked ahead to see Edward and Amy returning, Edward comfortably holding the little girl in his arms as she jumped about.

She looked ecstatic.

Ophelia could not help staring at her lovingly as she witnessed how happy she looked with Edward and how perfect they looked together. Anyone who saw them right now would be certain that Edward was her father since Edward had the potential of being just that for Amy. Despite that, Ophelia knew he felt otherwise and preferred maintaining his distance.

“Amy!” Rosalina exclaimed as Edward carefully sat back down on the blanket, placing Amy down, who immediately began to crawl about again.

“How was the lake, darling?” Ophelia asked Amy, who continued to jump about happily as if she was truly having the time of her life.

“It looks like you enjoyed the lake with Uncle Edward,” Rosalina added.

Ophelia picked up the little girl in her arms, and Amy comfortably settled into her lap, beginning to look tired. Edward stayed quiet, his eyes constantly drawn towards Amy, and Ophelia could not help wondering what he might be thinking about. He seemed lost in his own world as if several thoughts were weighing on his head.

“Did you enjoy the lake, Uncle Edward?” Rosalina turned towards him.

“The lake was as beautifully dull as ever,” he said, shrugging, “I still do not see why I had to take her when either of you could have done just the same.”

“We already explained to you the mechanics of this arrangement.” Ophelia laughed, remembering their discussion when Edward denied taking Amy to see the ducks.

“Absolutely,” Rosalina added, “Ophelia and I could not have gone individually because why should a young woman have to take a child on such a long walk alone? And we could not have gone together and left you here alone because a young man having a solo picnic just appears rather sad and, quite frankly, a little pathetic.”

“Pathetic?” Edward scoffed.

“Precisely.” Ophelia laughed, watching how Rosalina and Edward fought like siblings, clearly sharing a deep bond despite just being cousins.

How deep must be the relationship he shared with his very own sister, Margaret?

Ophelia understood the beauty and depth of sibling love and did not hold Edward’s emotions against him. She knew that it could not be easy for him to emerge out of the shock of his sister’s passing, but the only thing she held against him was his unfair treatment of Amy because the little girl certainly did not deserve it. She deserved the world, and Edward was adamant about not giving her anything.

“Edward, can you look behind you and see if it is Lady Marlow?”

He turned around and looked, nodding slowly.

“In the purple hat?”

“Yes.”

“It does look like her.”

“Oh my,” Rosalina turned towards Ophelia, “she is an excellent acquaintance of mine since we spent the entire last Season together before she got married after finding a match. I will quickly greet her. Will that be alright?”

“Of course,” Ophelia nodded, wondering why Rosalina would even ask.

Rosalina stood up and left, leaving Ophelia alone with Edward, and Ophelia immediately understood the reason she had asked. Rosalina must have realized that leaving Ophelia alone with Edward might make things awkward between them, even though they had been alone countless times before. Despite that, it had never been done this publicly, and that too outside the house.

Ophelia continued to stroke Amy who had already fallen asleep, clearly tired from the picnic and the constant stream of activity she had been engaged in since this morning. She felt acutely aware of Edward’s gaze, which too was trained on Amy, the softness in his eyes betraying his emotions. Ophelia could sense a shift in his attitude as he spent more time with Amy, and nothing made her happier.

The pair stayed quiet as Edward sighed deeply, looking away from Amy and instead staring at the sky. His mere proximity was enough to make Ophelia slightly more aware of herself, unsure of how to take on this silence. The longer they sat together

without saying anything, the longer it continued to make her feel awkward. It was as if they had so much to say to one another yet silence was all they could muster.

Should I say something?

“My sister, Margaret, and I would often find shapes in clouds.”

Ophelia whipped her head to look at him, unsure that it was he who had spoken. Although he still continued to stare at the sky, his hand slightly raised to point towards it as he talked. It was indeed he who had spoken, and that too to talk about his sister with Ophelia. She couldn't wrap her head around it.

“Making shapes in the clouds is an excellent past time, I believe.” She smiled at him, trying to force away her shock and appear natural in the conversation.

“Have you ever done it?”

“Yes.” Ophelia laughed. “I have two younger sisters and one younger brother. Andrew is still very young, but my sisters and I are closer in age, and when we were all just children, we would lay out in the garden on a good day and do this.”

“Margaret and I did exactly this, too. She would always find the most practical shapes, such as a tree or a house, and to tease her, I would always pretend I was unable to see what she was trying to show. She got extremely mad at me after that and usually left and I had to run after her to appease her.”

The softness in Edward's voice as he talked about Margaret was not lost on Ophelia. His love for her was perfectly visible, and Ophelia was glad to see that he was making no attempts to hide it.

“Was she easily appeased?” Ophelia asked softly.

She wanted to get closer to him and hold his face in her hands as he talked to her, the emotion on his face making him even more attractive than he already was. She could see the pain he felt about his sister's death, and she wanted to do nothing more than comfort him. She wanted to hold his hand and make sure that he knew she was there for him through the pain. But she was in no position to do any such thing.

"Margaret loved me too much to ever be angry at me for long." Edward laughed, a genuine wave of tenderness gracing his beautiful eyes.

"Sisters do love their brothers the most," she said with a smile.

"Do you love your brother just as much?"

"More than I can ever explain through words," Ophelia replied honestly.

Edward nodded as the clouds shifted, revealing the sun once again. A ray of sunlight began to fall on Edward directly, and he moved away from it, coming to sit beside Ophelia under the tree. Just as he was settling, his hand brushed against Ophelia's, resting on the blanket, and they turned to stare at one another, unsure of what had happened.

A similar spark of electricity coursed through them, and Ophelia felt as if she had forgotten how to breathe.

What is it that he does to me?

She could feel nothing but immense tenderness for Edward, remembering the little boy who would play games with his sister and try to tease her. He was friendly and loving and certainly knew how to enjoy himself around others. Ophelia had seen that side of him at the dinner yesterday, and now she had seen this heartwarming, tender side of him, which loved his little sister very much.

He opened his mouth to say something, but just then, the leaves around them crunched, and they looked up to see Rosalina approaching.

“Are the two of you ready to leave? Should we head back?” she asked, completely oblivious to the moment they had just had.

The moment that was now broken.

“We should,” Edward nodded, standing up.

It really was time to head back and forget all about what could have happened. Ophelia had no time to dwell on it.

“Miss Jennings?”

“Yes?” Ophelia asked the maid who had called out to her.

“This just arrived for you.”

Ophelia quickly took the letter that had come from home, entering the nursery with Amy asleep in her other hand. She carefully placed Amy back in the cradle, making sure the little girl remained asleep before finally opening the letter and reading through it.

My darling Ophelia,

I wish I could explain how much it is that I miss you, but explaining such feelings is a rather impossible task. Everyone at home, including myself, is healthy and happy, yet we all feel empty in your absence. We know you are working hard for us, and we appreciate your efforts, especially since they have been beneficial to us. Sarah finally managed to get enrolled in correspondence courses to become a teacher and is

already quite happy with how her education is turning out to be.

Amelia, on the other hand, is still being courted by the baron's son and is extremely happy. I am sure we won't have to worry about Andrew's education before long since we will have saved enough, and things will be just perfect.

Now, I am simply waiting for that to come so you can finally leave your job and build a life for yourself. I cannot wait to see you again. Come home soon.

Love,

Mother

Ophelia closed the letter, a happy smile on her face as she realized she was finally able to help her family. The news from home did make her feel better, but the fact that her mother expected her to leave her job eventually was a little unnerving.

She could not imagine leaving Amy. Not anytime soon or until she had grown up enough not to need Ophelia anymore.

And Edward.

How could she possibly part from Edward even if their only relationship was strictly formal?

The very thought troubled her.

She sighed deeply, unsure of how the future might pan out, but she knew she had other things to worry about. For the time being, she should simply let this go.

Page 15

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Chapter 15

Edward was seething with anger as he sat up on his horse, refusing to return home in the carriage with Rosalina. He knew none of it was her fault, and she had no idea how ridiculous the soiree was going to be, but he still needed a few minutes to calm himself down. It had been his first large social gathering after returning to London, and it had turned into a massive failure.

I cannot believe how desperate the women of the ton can be.

He continued to ride just ahead of Rosalina's carriage, his mind still occupied with how the evening had unfolded. Where he had only wanted to step out to have some distance between him and Ophelia, his decision had been nothing but a mistake. When their hands had accidentally grazed against one another's the other day, at the picnic, Edward had felt something.

The feeling had been so foreign that he hardly recognized it and could certainly not give it a name, but it had been terrifying. He had no place in his life to feel such emotions, and it was for the best of both of them that he maintained his distance from Ophelia to prevent such occurrences. However, staying locked up in his study would have been a far better idea than subjecting himself to an evening with London nobility.

He was not going to put himself through that again.

Now or ever.

As soon as the manor came into view, Edward stepped down from his horse, hearing Rosalina's footsteps right behind him. She already looked guilty enough to force him into attending the party, and Edward did not want to blame her either. She had always been supportive and even tonight, she had tried to save him from every prying mama and young woman.

"Edward," Rosalina called out as he ascended the stairs. He stopped, turning towards her as she stood in the middle of the darkened hallway, considering it was already quite late in the night.

He hated how these things always ended so late.

"Rosalina, I am already quite done after tonight. Please."

"I am not saying that your annoyance is unjustified." She sighed, walking towards him. "But you must understand that you happen to be the most eligible bachelor of the Season, making you the prime catch. When you partake in social settings, you will be subjected to the exact same behaviour you had to witness tonight. You cannot do anything about it."

"Of course I can."

"Care to explain?"

"I will simply stop attending." He shrugged, completely unbothered. "When I do not mingle with the nobility, I will no longer be considered a prime catch because I am certainly not putting myself through that again."

"But Edw—"

"You are aware I only went tonight to have a good, peaceful time and meet a few old

friends since the Season is just beginning, but it turned into a marriage market.” He sighed. “Rosalina, I have no desire to get married and indulge myself in courting anyone. This is nothing but a headache for me.”

“Edward, you promised Mama that you would be attending a few balls and parties at least, and now that everyone knows you are in London, the invitations will come flooding in, and it will look rude if you do not attend,” she reasoned, “at least do it for the sake of that promise.”

“Did you not see how Lady Alice behaved the entire evening?” he asked, feeling annoyed once again.

The evening had already been awkward enough for him, but to add to the unpleasantness of it, he had a run-in with Lady Alice, who refused to leave his side the entire time. She even forced him to dance with her, and as a gentleman, he could not deny her constant insistence at the risk of appearing unnecessarily rude. Edward knew she wished him to court her, but he was never going to go through with it, and the sooner she accepted it, the better.

“Trust me, I have communicated to her enough times that you are simply not interested, but she fails to understand.”

“She will understand when she cannot even find me at a single ball.”

“Edward, you are very much a part of this ton. You cannot back off from everyone and simply maintain distance.”

“I cannot have women trying to scheme their way into my life and force themselves on me. I already have enough problems of my own, Rosalina. I cannot afford to have any more of them.” He sighed, feeling defeated.

He really was exhausted after this ordeal of an evening.

“Scheming reminds me that you must stay far away from Lady Arabelle and Lady Miranda,” Rosalina said, suddenly looking angry.

“Why?”

“I accidentally heard the two of them talking, and they were discussing how they will try to woo you and perhaps get caught in a scandal where you will be forced to offer marriage to one of them to appear honourable.”

Edward had never been more disgusted.

“Trust me, I won’t be caught up in any scandals. I am done with the ton already.”

“But Edward—”

“Good night, Rosalina.”

“Edward, I know you are extremely angry right now, but cutting yourself from the ton is hardly a good idea. You will have to interact with them during my wedding festivities anyway.”

He had already turned around to ascend the stairs, but Rosalina continued to follow him, trying to change his mind. Although Edward’s mind was already made up.

“I will interact with them during your wedding but not otherwise. My mind is made up, please do not waste your breath trying to reason with me.”

He looked at Rosalina’s disappointed face before entering his bedchamber, feeling slightly at peace.

Maintaining distance was his best option right now.

“Good morning, darling Cousin.”

Edward stared at Rosalina suspiciously, her bright smile and excellent spirits throwing him off a little mood. He had completely expected her to be sour and angry with him after their argument the previous night, but she seemed to have already recovered from it. Edward was surprised but glad to see she had accepted his decision and would not be pestering him to change his mind.

“Are you feeling alright, Rosalina?”

“Perfect.”

“I am quite ecstatic to see our argument has not turned your love for me into hatred, and you do not seem bitter about it at all. It appears you finally understand my position.”

“No, that is certainly not the case.” Rosalina laughed, sitting on the sofa beside him. “I actually have another reason to be feeling this confident.”

“Do tell,” Edward drawled lazily, returning his gaze to the newspaper open before his eyes.

He was certain how Rosalina would have devised a brilliant yet completely ridiculous plan the way she always did. She thought of herself as a genius, but everyone around her knew that was definitely not the case.

“I have hatched the perfect plan to make sure you continue to attend events and stay an active member of the ton while not being subjected to the young ladies, their mamas, and the undue attention, which you seem to loathe completely.”

“The perfect plan?” Edward scoffed, closing the newspaper. “Let’s hear it.”

“It is very simple,” she began speaking. “All you need to do is find one young lady who you will focus all of your attention on and appear to be courting. This way, no mama or young lady will bother you while you attend these events since now that you are almost committed, everyone will maintain their distance. Hence, to put it simply, you must openly woo someone to keep other women at bay.”

“Entirely impractical.” Edward rolled his eyes.”

“How!?”

“I will still be giving false hope to that one young lady when I have no desire to get married in the first place. That will be extremely unfair to the poor thing, and I am not that cruel.”

Loud footsteps followed by Amy’s laughter forced them both to turn their attention towards the staircase just as Ophelia stepped into the hall with Amy in her arms. Amy looked fresh and well slept, and Rosalina quickly got up to kiss Amy’s cheek. Edward stared at Ophelia but did not say much, the memory of their hands grazing against the other’s still alive in his memory. Ophelia did things to him that no one had ever been able to.

“My Lord,” she curtsied once Rosalina was done kissing Amy.

“Are you headed somewhere?” Rosalina asked, making Edward mentally appreciate her for asking a question he needed an answer to himself.

Ophelia looked beautiful in her simple, cream-coloured, gown, her hair braided up as the braid rested on her shoulders. He had yet to see a day when she did not look absolutely perfect to the eyes since something about her always made her look

attractive.

“I am taking Amy out for a walk in the gardens. She enjoys the outdoors.”

“That sounds excellent!” Rosalina said. “I will be here when you return.”

Ophelia nodded before heading out, but Rosalina stayed silent until she had left completely to begin the conversation again. Edward was still opposed to Rosalina’s plan, finding an obvious flaw in the execution.

“You are right, Cousin,” Rosalina nodded thoughtfully, “which is why we will be using someone who is already aware of the circumstances and how this is just an act. You can pretend to woo her, and she can pretend to be wooed when in reality, both of you are aware of the falsehood in this matter. For the rest of the ton, you two will be as much in love as any other couple, but it will just be an act.”

“And who exactly will agree to such an insane plan?”

“Ophelia,” Rosalina said triumphantly, victory written all over her face.

Edward could see how she prized herself for finding the perfect solution to his problem, but he still thought it nonsensical. It hardly made much sense at all, especially considering that Ophelia did not even belong to the ton, which meant they would have to provide her with a fake identity. How absurd would that be?

And why will Ophelia even agree to it?

Although, the simple thought of having to woo her and spending time with her at balls was enough to make Edward long for it. He knew it could turn out extremely well if they put in the necessary efforts, but would proximity with Ophelia in such a setting be a good idea for him? He was not sure.

“I do not think that is a very good idea,” Edward said, trying for his heart to calm down.

“Give me one reason why?”

Edward stayed quiet, unable to find a reason.

“See!” Rosalina pointed a finger at him. “You have no reasons.”

“I believe Miss Jennings will never agree to it, and we cannot force her. Hence, it is best to remove all such thoughts from your head and forget all about your little plan.”

“I shall talk to Ophelia and convince her without any force, I promise,” Rosalina said.

“And what if she does not agree still?”

“And what if she does?”

“If Miss Jennings agrees, I will go forward with it as well,” Edward gave in, standing up. He had already had enough of this conversation.

“You promise?” Rosalina asked gleefully.

“I promise,” he said, nodding, “but you cannot force her. This must be her decision entirely.”

“Agreed.”

Edward nodded, immediately exiting the hall. He had some friends to meet anyway.

Chapter 16

“I do not understand,” Ophelia said, completely confused.

She had been on her way back to the nursery when Rosalina had all but pounced on her, handing Amy to the housekeeper and dragging Ophelia into the drawing room. The demand Rosalina was making of her did not make much sense to Ophelia. She needed her to pretend to be a member of the ton and the woman Edward was wooing to make sure no other young lady tried to catch his attention with their elaborate schemes and left Edward alone.

“Ophelia, you must say yes,” Rosalina insisted once again, firmly holding both of Ophelia’s hands in her grasp.

“But why does Lord Cavendish even wish to keep young ladies away from him? If he is attending a ball, he is bound to receive such attention.”

“He fails to understand that,” Rosalina sighed, “I do not want him to isolate himself from the ton completely, which is exactly what he will do if this behaviour from the debutantes persists. Hence, I believe this plan will make him continue to be a part of the ton during the Season and keep all attention away from him.”

“The plan is excellent, Rosalina,” Ophelia agreed, “but I hardly think I am fit for it. I am Amy’s nanny, and I have to take care of her. What will happen to her at night when we have to attend social gatherings?”

“These gatherings begin and end very late, Ophelia,” Rosalina explained further, “and

Amy is a friendly child and will easily settle in with someone else as well. And you will be with her during the day anyway.”

“I still do not think it is a very great idea.”

“You must do it for me if you consider me a friend. Please.”

Rosalina certainly had a way of convincing others, and Ophelia felt completely cornered. It was as if saying no was no longer an option, even if she had initially wanted to. Although, she could not lie to herself and deny that a part of her was not already looking forward to it. Edward had been a constant part of her dreams and thoughts for days now, and the very idea of being wooed by him in front of the entire ton was enough to send her heart into a frenzy.

Would she really be able to take this?

“Alright,” she agreed, nodding at last, and Rosalina all but jumped in glee.

“You promise?” she asked excitedly, almost hugging Ophelia, who began to laugh at Rosalina’s contagious happiness.

“I promise.”

“Oh, this is divine!” Rosalina stood up, walking about the drawing room. “Now, we must make sure you are ready for the whole charade to begin. Can you dance?”

“Dance?” Ophelia could certainly not tell the truth. “Just a little bit, I think.”

“Nothing to worry about at all.” Rosalina extended a hand towards her. “I can teach you.”

Ophelia stared at her extended hand for a couple of seconds, finally placing her hand in hers and standing up. Rosalina pulled her to the middle of the drawing room, quickly placing their hands in the correct positions as they stood facing one another.

“We have no music,” Ophelia commented, unsure how this would pan out.

“I shall sing and dance simultaneously,” Rosalina replied, already beginning to sing.

Ophelia laughed at her terrible singing, but Rosalina immediately began to move, taking Ophelia along with her as they twirled around the open space, even though it was turning out to be disaster. Rosalina could definitely not focus on singing and dancing at the same time, and to make things easier for her, Ophelia did not try to mess up the dance purposefully. Instead, she danced comfortably, completely in control of her movements.

If Rosalina noticed, she did not comment on it, continuing to lead Ophelia along.

“If I am not intruding, may I ask what the two of you are trying to achieve?”

They immediately stopped dancing at the familiar voice, and to Ophelia’s surprise, Edward stood at the drawing room door, a smile dancing on his lips. She could not even imagine how long he must have been standing there, simply staring at them going about their terrible dancing, and the thought mortified her.

“Oh, Edward!” Rosalina dragged him inside, closing the door behind him, “I am so glad you are here. I cannot sing and dance together. Clearly.”

“But why exactly are you dancing for no reason?”

“I was teaching Ophelia, of course,” she replied as if it was the most obvious thing, “since she has agreed to become a part of our little charade.”

Edward's eyes widened, and Ophelia wondered if he had been expecting her to say no.

"You have? I hope Rosalina did not force you into it?"

"No." Ophelia shook her head. "She simply presented her case and reasoning, and I agreed."

"And now the two of you must dance together while I play a waltz for you at the piano," she added, making her way towards the grand piano and beginning to play.

Edward held Ophelia close to him; their eyes focused on one another as his hand slipped around her waist and her other hand remained tightly clasped in his. She could not believe this was really happening. The one thing she had dreamt of constantly was dancing with Edward and here they were in his drawing room, dancing together.

"Are you ready?"

Ophelia nodded.

He smiled at her, moving with an easy grace as he guided her along, even though she did not need much guidance. She had already been taught dancing in her early years by a tutor her father had hired, and Ophelia had enjoyed learning thoroughly. Never having been a part of the social Season in London, she hardly had an occasion to practice her skills, but they were still intact.

Despite that, dancing with Edward was easy. She hardly had to put in any effort as he easily helped her through the entire thing. He was extremely handsome, and part of her could not believe he held her in his arms this closely.

“No one can say you do not already know how to dance, Miss Jennings,” he said, twirling her.

“I have been taught a little here and there,” she replied, “but you are guiding me along really well, My Lord.”

“I believe then I can be a good teacher.”

“You are an excellent partner.” She smiled, replying thoughtlessly. Her eyes widened at what she had said, but Edward remained quiet and simply smiled.

His touch was still electric for Ophelia, making her feel things she did not even know she could feel at all. The softening of his gaze was enough to tell her he felt it, too. He had felt it the other day at the picnic, and he felt it today as well. The connection they shared was more than one could put a name to, and Ophelia did not know how to characterize it.

The music began to slow down, and Ophelia knew Rosalina was about to come to an end, and just after the final climax, the set ended. Ophelia backed away, curtsying as Edward bowed, the distance between them already beginning to bother her. She had come to crave the proximity in just a few minutes and wished to have it back.

“Ophelia, you are a beautiful dancer,” Rosalina said, standing up from the piano. “I hardly think you need any lessons at all. You are perfect as it is.”

“I agree,” Edward added, “that is exactly what I was telling Miss Jennings while we danced. It certainly does not seem as if it is the first time she has danced.”

Ophelia did not know if she was imagining it or if she could really hear suspicion in Edward’s voice. Could he see past her charade? She hoped for him not to. She felt safe in his invisibility and her hidden identity and had no desire for anyone to find out

her truth. She simply could not afford it. Not after she had settled in so well already.

“It does seem a great master has taught you, but I believe some people just have a natural talent,” Rosalina commented. “Now that this matter has come to an end, we must focus on other things.”

“What other things?” Ophelia asked, unsure of how far she would have to go for this charade.

“Tomorrow, we will be going to the modiste to get you an entirely new wardrobe for the season, and we must think of an elaborate story to introduce you, too.” Rosalina stayed quiet for a few seconds as Ophelia and Edward stared at her expectantly. “Yes! You shall be my old friend who moved to France in childhood and has returned just now. Can you speak French, Ophelia?”

“I can.” Ophelia sighed, wondering how things were falling into place this neatly.

“Well, in that case, I believe, everything is settled already.”

It seemed as if Ophelia was about to be thrust back into her old life while simultaneously balancing her new life alongside it. She only hoped she could do it.

She had no other choice.

Chapter 17

Edward watched Ophelia enter the ballroom, her eyes trained ahead and posture fit to perfection as she moved with the grace of a princess. No one in the ballroom could ever mistake her for anything but a lady of noble birth through her mannerisms and looks. She was perfect, in the most beautiful way.

“Lord Edward Cavendish, the Earl of Sommers, and Lady Ophelia Jennings,” the butler announced, ushering them in as everyone in the ballroom turned towards them.

Edward knew everyone was simply staring at the shock of watching him escorting a young lady into a ball. Rosalina’s elaborate plan had already worked since she had taken Ophelia with her on a walk to Hyde Park and introduced her to everyone present as her old friend, newly returned from France. It had not taken long before Ophelia began to receive invitations, and Edward was the perfect escort as Rosalina’s cousin.

“They are all staring,” Ophelia said, turning to him.

From up close, he could see the panic in her eyes, but to everyone else, she appeared calm and poised. When Edward had seen her dressed in a beautiful ocean blue gown with sequins all over it, he had not been able to remove his eyes. Her beautiful hair tied up in an elegant chignon only made her stand out even more, and he knew she looked perfect on his arm.

As if they were meant to be. It certainly felt so.

“They have every reason to stare.” Edward smiled. “You look beautiful.”

She turned scarlet at the compliment, her colour only rising and making her appear even more enthralling than she already was. Edward felt as if he was losing her heart to her. Rosalina had already arrived ahead of them and the moment they entered, she latched herself onto Ophelia’s other arm, guiding her through the ballroom.

However, Edward immediately realized the success of their plan.

Had he been alone right now, he would have already been swamped by young ladies and their mamas, but with Ophelia on his arm, no one dared to come close. It was as if they were forced to maintain their distance even if they did not wish to, and nothing made Edward happier. This was exactly what he had been hoping for.

Shortly after they had introduced Ophelia to almost half the ton, Rosalina turned towards Edward, victory shining in her eyes, and he knew exactly what she meant.

“Yes, yes, thank you,” Edward sighed, rolling his eyes as he chuckled.

“For what?” Ophelia chimed in, sipping her refreshment as she joined in their conversation.

“My plan worked. No one has approached him all night,” Rosalina explained.

“Oh yes.”

“Ophelia, you must not leave Edward’s side at all, or else I am sure several men from the ton will begin approaching you right away,” Rosalina said, and Edward knew she was right.

As much as it bothered him, he had been able to witness the looks from the

gentlemen of the ton as they had seen Ophelia. She was more beautiful than most women, and it was only natural they were drawn to her, but no one would come close till Edward was beside her.

That was because Rosalina had not failed to mention to almost everyone that Edward had finally given in to his ways after taking one look at Ophelia and had decided to court her. Rosalina had made it sound like the two of them were already almost betrothed, but Edward did not care. His simple motive was being met, and that was all that mattered.

“Why?” Ophelia asked, completely confused.

“Because you are beautiful, and every man has been staring at you longingly all night.”

Edward felt a sharp pain in his chest at the information, not wanting to know about it any further. He could not understand why he felt jealous when he was not even courting Ophelia in truth, and it was just a fa?ade. However, the thought of her being with someone else pained him, and he did not know how to navigate it.

“I highly doubt that,” Ophelia replied, clearly unaware of the commotion her presence had caused.

“My darling,” Rosalina began, “the men want you, and the women hate you because you have Edward on your arm. You are both the most loved and the most hated person in the entire ballroom right now. Have a little faith in your beauty.”

Ophelia laughed softly but stayed quiet.

How could she be so oblivious? The trait was endearing to Edward, who had never met a woman who was this unaware of her own beauty and charm. Ophelia was

innocent. Everything about her was simple.

Despite that, she had fit into the ton as if she belonged there. She had answered every question she had been asked about France with such confidence and poise that no one could tell she had never even been there. Edward could see how she had actually read the books she had borrowed and had in-depth knowledge of Europe and the customs and heritage of each place.

She simply fit into everything like a lost puzzle.

As if she was truly a part of the ton and being a nanny was the lie. What surprised him even more was how her presence only made him feel lighter and calmer, as if everything in the world was just right. He hated himself a little less with her around him, as if she was taking all the pain and guilt he felt away with her.

He felt happier.

“I shall take your word for it,” Ophelia replied.

Edward looked up as several couples began to make their way towards the dance floor. The first set was about to play, and he extended his hand towards Ophelia as if it was the most natural thing to do. The other day, when they danced in his drawing room, it definitely felt natural, and he wished to experience something similar in the ballroom as well.

“May I have the pleasure of this dance?”

Ophelia smiled. “Absolutely, My Lord.”

He led her to the dance floor, his hand easily sliding around her waist as he held her other hand tightly in his palm. She was slightly shorter and petite, almost appearing

fragile to Edward as if he could not clutch her too tight even if he wanted to.

“Are you having a good time?” he asked, holding her closely as they began to move to the soft music.

“I am.” She nodded. “Are you?”

“Surprisingly so, yes.”

He lifted her up alongside all the other couples and placed her back down after the twirl, a huge smile on Ophelia’s face. He had never felt so in sync with anyone before Ophelia during a dance at a ball, but something about her just fit right with him as if they were meant to be in every way possible.

“I am glad I could play a part in it,” she replied, coming in closer as they continued to dance.

Edward nodded, the pair staying quiet as Ophelia continued to stare into his eyes, her smile disappearing. He did not know what she was thinking, but he could almost feel her mood shift as her body became slightly more still during the dance, and her eyes filled with tears. Seeing her in such a position, Edward's heart sank, his worry suddenly increasing.

“Are you alright, Ophelia?”

He could see she was fighting tears.

“I am.” She nodded, blinking quickly.

“You hardly look alright,” he said, his tone as gentle as ever, “tell me what the matter is.”

“It really is nothing, My Lord,” she whispered. “You must not worry yourself on my account.”

Edward knew the set was coming to an end, and he could not let Ophelia go after. He had to make sure she was okay since only moments ago, she had appeared happy, but then tears had come into her eyes. Something must have been wrong, or perhaps she had just remembered something that had brought her sadness.

“Ophelia,” he whispered her name just as the music ended.

She quickly curtsied, almost running away from the dance floor. Edward turned after her, trying to follow, when Lady Alice suddenly appeared out of nowhere, blocking Edward’s path. He had every intention of pushing her out of the way, but within the ballroom with so many eyes on them, he knew he could not be improper. Although, he could think of nothing else but Ophelia, who had run towards the open glass doors of the balcony.

“My Lord,” Lady Alice’s falsely sweetened voice forced him to look at her, and he had to force himself to breathe to get calmer, “you must at least look at me while I am standing before you.”

“I have to be somewhere, Lady Alice,” he said curtly, “I will talk to you later.”

“You will hurt me very much if you move from here,” she replied, “as if you haven’t hurt me enough already tonight.”

“Pardon me?”

“Everyone in the ballroom believes you are wooing that ... that woman,” she said snidely, hatred dripping from her face.

She disgusted Edward.

“That woman is Lady Ophelia Jennings, and you must learn to be respectful, Lady Alice, or else this conversation is pointless.”

“I hardly believe she is fit for your company, My Lord.”

“I do not remember asking for your opinion, Lady Alice,” he said with a false smile, trying to keep the bite out of his tone, “and she does not have my company alone but all of my attention. Believe it or not, I am courting her and wooing her.”

“I thought we had established that you were to court me this Season?”

“I do not remember ever establishing that, Lady Alice,” Edward replied clearly.

“You must at least dance with me, My Lord,” she said, “you have ignored me all evening, and I will not be able to bear such ignorance anymore. A single dance will not be hurtful to anyone.”

Edward took deep breaths, trying to remain calm despite being thoroughly annoyed at her behaviour. He knew she would not let him go until he consented, and Edward had no desire to create an unnecessary scene in the middle of the ballroom. Lady Alice had always just been one to seek attention and would do anything for it. Hence, it was best that Edward gave into her demands to rid himself of her.

And then he would find Ophelia.

“Of course, Lady Alice,” he agreed, “we shall dance right now.”

Ophelia felt horrible as she stood at one end of the balcony, still in the well-lit area but quite far away from everyone else. She needed a moment to herself to collect her wits again and not be upset about such tiny matters. However, she should not have run away from Edward with such haste, especially since she knew he was already worried about her.

Extremely so.

She had seen the concern in his eyes as her mood shifted, and she stopped herself from crying. What had even happened to her? One minute, she had been perfect, and the very next minute, she had caught herself hoping for all of it to be real and true. She had remembered how despite being Edward's equal in terms of blood line and rank, she had posed herself as somehow lower and made him see her as that.

She would never be able to have her own Season, her own ball gowns, a man who would court her for who she was. She was never going to find a suitor or make a match or fall in love or get married. That fate was not meant for her, and Ophelia both knew and understood it perfectly well, no matter how painful the truth of it was.

Despite that, she had almost broken down at the thought of it.

It is all because of Edward. Just because of him.

She had never longed for those things or wished to have any of them, except after meeting Edward because his presence in her life made her wish to be equal to him just so they could be together outside of mere pretences.

But all of it was impossible, and the sooner she accepted it, the better.

“Ophelia?”

She quickly wiped her tears, hearing his voice behind her, and not wanting to appear weak,

“Lord Cavendish,” she said, turning around after she felt slightly composed.

“We already discussed how you must call me Edward if we are to make everyone believe we are courting.”

“Edward.” She managed to smile.

“Would you please tell me what happened back there on the dance floor? I am worried for you, Ophelia.” She looked up at him, his concern towards her making her heart even softer, but she controlled herself. She could not break down before him once again.

“I simply started missing home,” Ophelia lied, “I thought of my sisters who would love to be in a ballroom such as this and could not help missing them. I am sorry if I got you worried; that was never my intention.”

“You must never apologize,” he immediately said, stepping a little closer, and Ophelia looked up at him.

“I won’t,” she said with a smile, “thank you for fetching me and making sure I am doing okay. Your concern is very heartwarming, and I feel privileged to have it for myself.”

“Your emotions matter to me, Ophelia,” Edward replied, “always remember that.”

Her heart skipped a beat.

“Can we return home?”

“Absolutely,” he said. “You must stay here while I fetch the carriage, and I will send Rosalina to get you, and we can return together. Is that alright?”

“Of course,” Ophelia replied, watching him walk away quickly.

The moment Edward left, Ophelia felt a tap on her shoulder from the other side, a little surprised to find Lady Alice standing there. She had an instinctive reaction to hide her face in case Alice recognized her, but she knew that would only make her appear suspicious.

“Who are you?” Lady Alice asked, confusing Ophelia even further.

It was clear she did not remember Ophelia. How was that even possible?

“Lady Rosalina’s cousin, Ophelia Jennings,” Ophelia replied good-naturedly, despite the hatred and disdain dripping from Ophelia’s face, “and you?”

“It does not matter who I am, but you must remember that I entered Lord Cavendish’s life far before you did, and his entire family knows me. Rosalina and I happen to be friends, and Edward and I share a deep friendship and understanding. You cannot return from France one day and decide to claim Edward as your own!”

It all made sense. Alice was jealous.

“I never did any such thing,” Ophelia replied. “Edward took one look at me and decided to court me. Clearly, even after knowing you for years, he does not think you are good enough or worthy of being his wife.”

“Do not forget your place!” Alice almost shouted, belatedly realizing how they were in a ballroom and she needed to control both her voice and her manners.

Despite her insane ramblings, Ophelia remained calm. Alice hardly had any effect on her.

“Lady Alice, do you want something from me, or are you only here to try to establish your place somehow. Are you truly that insecure?”

“You must stop deluding yourself with my shortcomings when only you are delusional since you think Edward is going to court you. He fancies you for two days and will move on soon, and he is going to return to me, so please do not think you have won because Edward is mine.”

“Are you done, Alice?” Rosalina asked, emerging through the glass doors and standing beside Ophelia.

“Oh, Rosalina,” Alice said, suddenly appearing guilty.

Ophelia was glad about Rosalina’s arrival, saving her the trouble of replying since this entire conversation was entirely nonsensical. Ophelia had no desire to get involved in a match of power over who deserved Edward more. She knew how completely Edward disliked Alice. If anyone was deluding themselves, it was Alice.

“I have told you a million times before that Edward has no interest in courting you, Alice,” Rosalina said, sounding curt, “I do not know why you fail to believe it or if you are just unable to understand what I am saying, but I can assure you. Try all you want; you are never going to win here because it is Edward who has never been interested in marrying you. The sooner you accept that and move onto someone else, the better it will be.”

Ophelia stared at Alice, knowing she would not be able to move on anytime soon. The desperation she felt was marked all over her face.

“You clearly do not know what you are talking about,” Lady Alice said, turning around and scurrying away in a hurry.

Rosalina and Ophelia looked at one another before bursting into laughter, the entire scene being completely hilarious.

“I am sorry she reached you in this manner. Had I known, I would have stopped her,” Rosalina said, and Ophelia quickly shook her head.

“It hardly matters.”

“Edward told me you are not feeling alright. The carriage is waiting; let’s head back home.”

Ophelia laced her arms with Rosalina as they made their way out of the ballroom together, and at least at that moment, everything felt right again.

Chapter 18

Ophelia sat a little uncomfortably in the open carriage, feeling slightly awkward sitting beside Edward as the carriage driver took them towards the Park. She knew she looked beautiful in her pink dress, the colour appearing fresh in the morning. Her hair had been done in yet another elegant chignon, and she looked the part.

The perfect lady of the ton.

Rosalina had even made sure that Ophelia's gowns were immaculately designed to signal her advanced tastes, which she was bound to have, having lived in France all her life. Hence, she looked beautiful. However, all that made her feel out of place was being close to Edward when she should be maintaining her distance.

"Are you feeling quite alright, Ophelia?" Edward addressed her, and she looked at him, unsure how to respond. She did want to tell him the truth, but he might not understand the feelings she was going through.

"I am," she nodded, "are you?"

"Perfectly." He continued to stare at her. "Although you look slightly disturbed."

"Do I?" She tried to act indifferent, knowing she was failing miserably at it, and just decided to stick with the truth at last. "I am just awkward since I have never done these things before, but now I am doing them with you. I did not know Rosalina was going to make us go on a carriage ride in the morning, and I was just thrown off slightly."

“I understand,” he sighed. “She can be a bit demanding, but she means well. If we are not seen together once or twice during the day, no one will ever believe we are courting. It is only to solidify the ruse.”

“I am aware.” She smiled, looking at the scenery as the carriage finally reached the park. “She only wants what is best for you, and I am glad how she is looking out for you like any other sister would. I am sure if your own sister, Margaret, was alive, she would have done the exact same thing.”

Edward stayed quiet for several seconds, making Ophelia wonder if she had done the wrong thing by mentioning Margaret’s name. She felt that since Edward had talked to her about Margaret, she could mention his sister as well.

Even though she knew nothing about Edward, his life, his past, or his sister.

“Margaret would have been even more protective of me, I feel.” Edward finally smiled, his rational reaction making Ophelia feel comfortable again. “She had been protective towards me since we were just little children. Despite being younger than me, she would often fight with our father if he scolded me a little too much or if my lessons were much too difficult. She had a lot of fight in her and never backed down from a cause.”

“She sounds like quite the woman,” Ophelia replied, smiling, “I hope Amy turns out just like her mother.”

“If she does, she will have no troubles in life, I assure you.” Edward sighed. “Margaret knew how to stand up and fight for herself, and she had the extreme confidence to do so.”

“You really loved her, did you not?”

“I did,” he replied, his words having a tinge of sadness laced in them. “Only if my love had been a little stronger and had stayed, she might have been alive today, or at least her last day could have been much better.”

What does that mean?

“Death is written for each one of us, My Lord,” Ophelia replied, completely ignoring the scenery before her to look at Edward instead. “She left when her time came, and no matter what you did or how different the situation would have been, she still would have passed away.”

“You might be right,” he replied, motioning the carriage driver to turn back around, “but it still weighs heavily on me since I could have done a lot of things much differently, yet I did not.”

Ophelia noticed they were heading back, feeling a little more comfortable again as the eyes on them decreased once the park was behind them. Just as Rosalina had hoped, almost everyone present at the park had seen them ride together, and word would soon spread.

“I hope you can someday learn to let go of the guilt and allow yourself happiness. If you continue to blame yourself, it is never going to work,” Ophelia reasoned.

She could see how Edward blamed himself for Margaret’s death but did not have the courage to ask him why. She was certain the topic was already more than painful for him and Ophelia had no desire to bring out that pain unreasonably, making Edward feel even glummer than he already did.

They finally arrived back at the manor, Edward helping Ophelia step down from the carriage. They both noticed another carriage standing just by the door, indicating that there was a visitor. Edward treaded in carefully with Ophelia behind him as both of

them stayed silent until they stood right outside the drawing room where Ophelia could clearly hear Rosalina's voice, who was conversing with Alice.

Ophelia was certain she had only called on the house to find a way to spend time with Edward as she had only appeared increasingly desperate last night.

She would go to any lengths to get Edward, and this appeared to be one such instance.

"I will be in the nursery, so Lady Alice does not recognize me," Ophelia whispered, rushing away as Edward opened the door.

Ophelia stayed on the staircase for a few seconds, hearing everyone talk in the drawing room as Alice greeted Edward warmly, and he being a perfect gentleman, greeted her back. Ophelia knew all of it was just customary, and Edward felt nothing for Alice, yet a pang of jealousy stabbed through her heart, making her feel terrible.

I need to leave.

Everything she felt regarding Edward was always intense, and Ophelia needed to distance herself. Thankfully, she had Amy to escape to. She continued to stand there as Edward asked Alice about her health, and she replied to him in her softest voice.

I should not be feeling this way. This is wrong.

Despite that, Ophelia had no control over her feelings. She simply forced herself to walk away, making her way straight to Amy, where a maid was looking after her. Ophelia hugged the little girl, stroking her to sleep, finally feeling some semblance of peace again.

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Her growing feelings for Edward would only ever cause her problems, and Ophelia needed to find a solution for it, even if she had to maintain distance between her and the only man she had ever felt this way for.

Breathing a deep sigh of relief, Edward went inside his study, finally trying to tackle himself free from Alice and Rosalina. Alice had only come to call on him and hence did not wish him to leave, while Rosalina did not want to be alone with Alice and forced him to stay with her.

He was left with no choice, even when he hated every minute of it.

“Thank you for finally getting me out of there, God,” he whispered into the empty study, chuckling slightly at his own behaviour.

Although it was not his fault.

Lady Alice was as uninteresting as any person could be, and spending time in her company had never brought Edward any pleasure or happiness. In fact, she made him miserable and bored, and he always needed to maintain distance to find his sanity again. Although, he knew from experience that it was not just her fault and every woman of the ton was just as boring.

Do I really need to spend my life with one such woman? Just so I can have an heir when the time comes?

The very thought pained him.

His heart constantly kept whispering how it was entirely unnecessary, and he could just marry someone like Ophelia. Or perhaps, he could just marry Ophelia herself, but

he told himself it was impossible. It was simply a thought that could never be brought to life, considering the circumstances in which they were caught up.

He shook his head, not wishing to tread down that path again.

He picked up a large pile of letters placed on his desk, quickly beginning to go through them one after the other. Almost all of them were work-related, while some of them were invitations, which Edward knew he might end up ignoring. He tore open yet another letter, beginning to read.

My darling,

I sometimes wonder what we will ever do without you or what would we have done for the future. I received the money you sent a few days ago, and I am glad to inform you that we have paid the complete fee for Sara's correspondence course, and I have a hefty amount saved up for Andrew's education as well. Things are only getting better from—

Edward stopped reading, completely confused, wondering if his suspicions were right, considering those happened to be the names of Ophelia's siblings. He picked up the envelope and noticed Ophelia's name written, realizing that a letter addressed to her had accidentally made its way onto Edward's desk.

He knew he should not have read it, considering it a huge invasion of privacy. Although, he had only done it subconsciously, simply following a routine.

But the part he had read was enough to tell him all he needed to know. Ophelia was clearly working to support her family, and Edward's heart sank, realizing the hard work she put into her work every day. She had only been kind and loving towards Amy since the first day and had been providing her with affection and love that only a mother could ever provide.

And all this time, she had been away from her own family, missing out on the love they had to give her.

It pained Edward, and he knew he needed to do something about it.

“I cannot let her efforts go to waste,” he whispered to himself, unable to remove Ophelia’s face from before his eyes.

She had been asking him to be better with Amy, and all of it had been out of completely unselfish reasons. She had simply wished for Amy to have a better childhood, and Edward had been nothing but distant and problematic. He had been so wound up in himself that he had refused to take care of the needs of a little girl. A child.

The daughter of his very own sister whom he loved very much.

He sighed deeply, resolving to be better as he certainly could not go on disappointing Ophelia anymore. He had to become better and work as hard as she worked since that was the only way to be. If she could make an effort, so could he. He had to.

I have to stop being this selfish.

But the only thought that troubled him was his guilt. He was surrounded by the guilt, which consumed him and forced him to stray away from Amy. Only if his guilt disappeared one way or the other, he knew he could be a better uncle to Amy.

“I will try. I will,” he reassured himself, resolving to truly do it with conviction.

He quickly closed the letter, placing it back inside the envelope, knowing he had violated enough of Ophelia’s privacy and no more was necessary. In fact, he simply wrote down her house address, deciding to pay his solicitor a visit regarding the

matter.

He only wanted to help Ophelia, and he must find out more about her before he could go ahead with that.

Although, he knew he would find a way to help her. One way or the other.

Edward quickly wrote down the address from the letter, deciding to pay a visit to his solicitor.

Page 19

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Chapter 19

Ophelia made her way down the staircase as silently as possible, not wishing to wake anyone up at that late hour. With her sleeping robe tightened around her, she wondered why she had not been able to sleep during the night. Since the morning of the carriage ride just a few days ago, she had been dreaming of Edward and waking up from that dream just the same.

It was terrible.

Especially now that she had to attend balls with Rosalina and Edward, which went on till late in the night, and she lost most of her time to rest anyway. Ophelia could not help feeling exhausted, every single joint in her body aching.

“I hope some warm milk will help,” she whispered to herself in the empty hall, noiselessly walking towards the kitchen.

The entire house was immersed in darkness, only a few candles lit up here and there. Although, after being there for several weeks now, she was as familiar with the London townhouse as she had been with the country house. The servants here were just as welcoming, but everything was different in London, and Ophelia had not been able to make her place with the servants yet.

She was just seen as Amy’s nanny, a station above them, rather than an equal.

As she neared the kitchen, she heard someone talking inside; all the lights still lit up even though it was well past midnight. Wondering who might be inside, she hid by

the door, trying to listen.

“Don’t you miss what the house was like earlier? When everyone used to be here?”

Ophelia recognized it as the voice of the elderly cook. She was a friendly woman but a notorious gossip, and Rosalina had warned Ophelia never to reveal any private information to her if she wanted it to remain a secret.

“Lady Margaret, you mean?” Ophelia’s eyes widened as she realized it was none other than Mrs Connor, the housekeeper.

Everything she had heard about the servants in London being filled with information about their employers was proving to be right. Gossiping had still been common in the country, but Ophelia had never seen the servants, especially Mrs Bailey, involved in it as extensively as the servants in the townhouse.

“Yes,” the cook replied, “things were vastly different when Lady Margaret and the late earl and his wife were here. They used to make a happy family, all of them together. It all feels empty now, as if something is missing from the house.”

“Happiness is what is missing from the house.”

“I think so too,” the cook agreed with Mrs Connor.

“I really wish Lady Margaret was still alive and had not died in the consequences that she did. She was born with such promise and beauty, yet she had such a tragic end. It is extremely unfair.”

“It is, is it not?”

Ophelia was filled with curiosity at the remarks, Margaret’s death turning into an

even bigger mystery for her. She could see that Edward's sister was clearly well loved by all, and Edward loved her as well. But Ophelia still felt as if she hardly knew anything about the matter.

Not wanting to stand there and intrude on their conversation further, she emerged from the shadows and entered the kitchen. Both the cook and Mrs Connor stopped speaking the moment they entered, eyeing each other. Ophelia was certain they were wondering if she had heard anything, but she simply smiled at them, completely nonchalant.

"I could not fall asleep," she said when neither of them spoke. "I was hoping a glass of warm milk might help."

"Of course," the cook replied, immediately beginning to fetch a bottle.

"Oh, please do not worry about it," Ophelia quickly interjected, "I can warm it up myself."

"Do not worry, Miss Jennings. I will do it for you," the cook said warmly, already pouring the milk into a pan. "You stand there comfortably."

"Thank you so much." The ensuing silence in the kitchen made her uncomfortable, and she spoke again. "Why are the two of you awake at this hour? Is it not much too late?"

"It is." Mrs Connor nodded. "But we were just discussing how we miss the times when the house was filled with happiness and laughter, and Lady Margaret used to be alive."

The cook turned to pin Mrs Connor with a look, who shrugged as if it did not matter much and turned back to look at Ophelia.

“Amy’s mother, you mean?”

“Yes,” the cook chimed in, keeping the pan on the burning stove, “Lady Margaret was everything a young woman ought to be. She was beautiful and charming and always laughed. If you had met her, even you would have appreciated her kindness.”

“Lord Cavendish told me his sister was the sweetest young lady in the ton, and I truly hope Amy grows up to be just like her mother.”

“Lord Cavendish talked about Lady Margaret with you?” Mrs Connor asked, suddenly straightening.

Ophelia graciously took the glass of milk from the hands of the cook, sensing eyes on her. She wondered if she had said the wrong thing or why they even appeared shocked. Was it not normal for a brother to remember his sister fondly? Especially a sister who had passed away?

Ophelia was confused.

“Yes,” she said honestly, “Lord Cavendish has discussed his love for his sister with me. He sounds like an excellent brother, and they must have clearly shared a close relationship.”

Both Mrs Connor and the cook looked at one another at the exact same moment, clearly privy to something Ophelia did not know.

She could not understand what was happening.

What is this about?

“Oh, Miss Jennings, you truly do not know anything that has gone on in this house in

the past few years.”

Ophelia’s curiosity was piqued. She sat down at the table, sipping her milk while the cook sat beside her. Ophelia could see the sadness in their eyes, as if remembering those incidents was extremely painful. Mrs Connor finally spoke with a loud sigh.

“Lord Cavendish is correct, he did love Lady Margaret very much. While the late earl and his wife were still alive and Lord Cavendish and Lady Margaret were young, the house was always filled with chatter and noise from those two. They would play together and go out riding together. They would be seen involved in all kinds of mischief, and their parents loved them very much.”

“So what happened?”

“After the earl and his wife passed away, Lord Cavendish had the utmost love for his sister, and both were inseparable. They respected each other, and Lord Cavendish always took Lady Margaret’s advice into account on every matter. Eventually she turned of age, and he escorted her all through the Season, hoping for her to find the perfect gentleman to marry, but Lady Margaret liked no one.”

As Mrs Connor stopped speaking, the cook continued.

Ophelia listened to the two of them, completely enraptured.

“Eventually, one day, she informed Lord Cavendish that she had fallen in love with a doctor and wished to marry him. Lord Cavendish was horrified and completely against the match because the man was not of noble blood and below their station. That was the first time anyone had ever seen them involved in a fight, and everything deteriorated after that day.”

“He cut her off?” Ophelia asked, completely shocked.

That was the last thing she could have expected to hear.

“No.” Mrs Connor shook her head. “He told her he would never support this marriage, but Lady Margaret was firm in her decision and left the house herself. Lord Cavendish tried to stop her and convince her but her only condition was marrying the man she loved, which was the one condition Lord Cavendish refused to agree on. Hence, the two of them parted ways and completely cut ties.”

“They did not speak for one year,” the cook added.

“Eventually, one year later, Lady Margaret came home one day, and she was half the woman she had been when she had left. Her clothes were simple, and her spirit was down. She did not look like the same young lady she had been one year ago, but she came to tell her brother that she was pregnant.”

“With Amy,” Ophelia whispered, feeling her heart beginning to grieve for Margaret.

What could have happened in that one year to change her life so drastically? Or perhaps she could have still been the same if Edward had not cut off ties with her.

“Yes.” The cook nodded. “Lord Cavendish reconciled with her, but things were never the same again. A few months later, she gave birth but died while doing so, and just two days later, her husband died in a tragic carriage accident. That left Lord Cavendish as the guardian for Miss Amy.”

“Lord Cavendish must have been devastated.”

“He was,” Mrs Connor agreed with Ophelia, “but he wanted nothing to do with little Miss Amy. Lady Rosalina and every other relative offered to take up her guardianship, but he refused even that and took Miss Amy with him to the countryside. But we know he can never love the little girl.”

“Why?” Ophelia asked, almost afraid to hear the answer.

“It is a simple matter, Miss Jennings,” the cook said, “she reminds him of her father, who was below their status and not a noble lord. Lord Cavendish can never be accepting of that.”

The shock of the revelation was too much to bear, and Ophelia felt as if someone had slapped her.

She had known Edward had his differences with Amy, but she had never known the reason behind those differences was this. How could he be so cruel? How could he judge a child on the basis of her bloodline and hate her simply because she was below them?

Ophelia felt betrayed. As if she had never even known Edward’s true face.

“Thank you so much for letting me know. I had no idea.” She tried to smile at the pair, but she still could not get over the shock of the matter.

“Do drink your milk, dear,” the cook pointed.

Ophelia realized she had completely ignored her glass of milk. Despite no longer having an appetite for it, she downed the glass in one go not wanting Mrs Connor and the cook to be suspicious. Although, she knew that she would certainly not be able to sleep tonight.

“Thank you,” she said once again, “Good night. You two should sleep as well; it is rather late.”

Both Mrs Connor and the cook nodded while Ophelia quickly exited the kitchen. As she returned to her bedchamber upstairs, she still could not believe what she had

heard them say. Everything in her head came crashing down as she realized that she had completely misjudged Edward.

She had been developing feelings for him every day while he would never even look at her.

Ophelia was far beneath his status from what he knew, and if he could subject his sister to such rules, he would only apply the same rules to himself. He was even punishing a little girl because of his hatred towards her dead father, only because the man had been a hardworking doctor instead of a noble lord.

Ophelia entered her bedchamber, finding Amy still asleep in the cradle beside her bed.

She sat by the little girl, staring at her perfect face from up close. She was beautiful.

“Your mother must have been so beautiful, too,” Ophelia whispered as tears finally began to fall down her face.

She had no choice but to distance herself from Edward, or else she would only get very hurt.

Chapter 20

Edward had never been more annoyed, but being in the company of Lady Alice truly tested his patience. He cursed the moment he had not been able to hide himself from her when she had come to call and had forced him to accompany her for a few errands. He knew it was simply an excuse to spend time with him, especially at the market where several people from the ton would be able to see them.

Her diligent efforts to somehow make him court her were not lost on him.

But Edward had never been more uninterested. He was simply hoping for Lady Alice to finally get the hint and leave him alone. Standing at the little shop of ribbons, he tried to appear gentlemanly when every fibre in his body wished to do nothing but walk away.

“Lord Cavendish, do tell if I should choose the pink or the red,” she asked for the hundredth time, forcing Edward to make a decision.

She had already spent thirty minutes standing here, looking around as if she was planning to shop a plethora of ribbons but hadn’t even chosen one. Before that, she had wasted his time trying to post a letter when she clearly did not know what she was doing. Edward was certain even the letter was fake.

“I am sure Lord Cowley is a better judge of ribbons than I am,” Edward said, pointing to his friend.

The moment they had left in her carriage, Edward had promptly found Lord Cowley

walking just nearby and had forced him to join them. Being alone with Lady Alice was the last thing he had wished for and Lord Cowley, being a dear friend, had understood his predicament. He had immediately understood what Edward needed and had joined him.

Thank God. Edward had breathed a sigh of relief.

“He is right, Lady Alice,” Lord Cowley said enthusiastically, standing right between Edward and Lady Alice. At this point, Edward was certain that Lord Cowley was enjoying himself, considering he, too, disliked Lady Alice for her lack of manners and rudeness.

She had offended quite a lot of people in the ton.

Moreover, every time he came between Edward and Alice, Lady Alice would only become increasingly annoyed.

“So what do you suggest, Lord Cowley?” Edward controlled his smile as he watched Lady Alice trying to behave kindly, continuing to put on an act in front of Edward.

“I believe the red will suit your colouring and bold manner.”

“Thank you for your valuable suggestion,” she replied, putting both the ribbons away, “but I think I will just not buy anything today. Can we leave now, Lord Cavendish?”

Edward opened the shop door for her as they all stepped outside, and he and Cowley breathed a sigh of relief. Lady Alice was both overbearing and completely superficial. Spending a single minute in her company was nothing short of torture.

“I believe I must take your leave now, Lady Alice,” Lord Cowley said, “I have some work to attend to.”

“As do I,” Edward quickly said, not missing the golden chance to escape, “your carriage is waiting for you. I am sure you are already done with all your errands and are looking to return home. Please have a good day, Lady Alice.”

Before she could say anything, Edward bowed, as did Lord Cowley.

“You too, My Lord,” she finally replied, running out of excuses.

Lord Cowley excused himself while Edward quickly escorted Lady Alice towards her carriage and almost dashed away in case she remembered something else she needed assistance with. Once he was out of her clutches, he remembered the address he still had of Ophelia’s home and decided to pay a visit to his solicitor.

He was already nearby, and it would hardly take much time.

He knew exactly what he needed to do.

As he returned back home, Edward realized he had never felt lighter. Sending out the instructions with the solicitor pertaining to Ophelia’s family and address, he certainly felt like he had done a good thing. Something he needed to do and should have done a long time ago. Especially with the way Ophelia treated Amy like her own little girl, she deserved everything Edward could give her.

Amy.

“I need to see her smile,” he whispered to himself, walking into the empty hall. He did not know what it was about today, but he wished to do everything right.

And right now, he only wanted to see his niece. Her smile reminded him of Margaret, and for the first time in months, Edward knew that seeing that familiar smile on her face would only bring him immeasurable happiness. He quickly marched up towards

the nursery, but to his surprise, the room was completely empty, neither Amy nor Ophelia in sight.

“Mrs Connor?” Edward called out to the housekeeper, watching her passing by through the corridor.

She immediately stopped.

“Yes, My Lord?”

“Where is Amy?”

“Miss Jennings took Miss Amy in the gardens. The two of them must be there still.”

Edward thanked her before quickly marching back downstairs and making his way towards the garden. The fresh breeze made him feel even lighter, his eyes falling on Amy. Ophelia sat just by the tree as Amy crawled about, and for a few seconds, Edward could not look away. His heart leaped with joy at the sight of her strawberry blonde hair tied in a luxurious braid, which lay on her shoulder.

She was beautiful, and Edward could simply not get enough.

As Edward went ahead, Ophelia looked up at him, and Amy immediately began to crawl towards him as she had done several times in the past. His heart always melted, realizing how much she wanted to be held by him, but he remembered how he had completely ignored the little girl in several such instances.

He had been a terrible guardian, but he was going to be better.

He was determined to be better and do right by Amy.

“Miss Jennings,” he bowed to Ophelia, who barely smiled back, confusing Edward.

“Lord Cavendish.”

“Do you mind if I join you and Amy?”

He grabbed Amy in his arms, and she began to jump jubilantly, touching his face and hair. He could see she was already beginning to enjoy herself, her beautiful smile intact. Edward had needed exactly that – to see the smile that meant the world to him.

“Not at all,” Ophelia replied, moving a little to make more space for him on the blanket laid out on the ground.

Without wasting any time, Edward sat down on the grass, Amy still tightly clasped in his arms. The moment he sat down, she began to jump even more, clearly trying to escape from his arms. Carefully, Edward let her go, and she was once again at peace, beginning to crawl. He could see how much she enjoyed the grass and exploring her surroundings.

“Amy is growing up too quickly. Don’t you think?” he addressed Ophelia, who still hadn’t looked at him.

“She is.”

Edward was confused. He wondered if he had done something to offend Ophelia, but he had hardly interacted with her this morning except that he was sure she had seen him leave with Alice. Although why would something such as that offend Ophelia?

He could not understand.

“Are you feeling alright today, Miss Jennings?”

“Excellent,” she replied, “you?”

She still did not turn to look at him, her eyes stuck on Amy. Edward knew something was wrong. Her behaviour with him had never been this cold, and she always treated him with kindness. Although today, she was completely aloof as if Edward was nothing but a stranger when she had been dancing in his arms at a ball just a couple of nights ago.

What is the matter?

“I am well.”

Ophelia nodded.

“You did not come down to the dining room for breakfast this morning.”

“I ate in the nursery.”

Edward sighed, realizing how all his attempts at conversation were failing miserably. Just as he opened his mouth to say something, he noticed Ophelia’s eyes widening as she almost stood up. He looked at Amy instinctively and watched with a mix of surprise and fear as she stood up from the ground with the support of the tree at some distance from them.

“I will get her before she falls,” Edward said, but Ophelia vehemently shook her head, clearly against the decision.

“No,” she said in a whisper, “this is the first time she has tried to stand all on her own. She is supposed to learn to walk exactly this way.”

Edward sat back down, still ready to sprint if Amy fell. He did not know what it was

about her but suddenly felt extremely protective, not wanting the little girl to get hurt. He watched patiently as Ophelia's prediction came true, and Amy finally removed her hand from the tree, standing without any support.

"Oh good God," Ophelia gasped, and Edward could see the happiness she felt.

"Should we encourage her to walk towards us?"

"Yes!"

Edward sat down on his knees, extending his hands towards Amy, who was still standing, with a huge smile on her face. It almost looked like she was testing her feet, wondering if they could support her in the difficult quest she had started to make. Both Edward and Ophelia began to call out to her with their arms outspread, Amy's eyes darting from one to the other.

"Amy, darling, come to me," Edward said, nodding at her.

Amy started walking, taking slow, tentative steps, and Ophelia excitedly held Edward's hand. The moment their hands touched, they looked at each other, and Ophelia pulled her hand away, but it had been a moment too late. He had felt the shock of her touch, unable to understand why he felt this way whenever they were close.

"Come here, Amy."

He once again shifted his attention to Amy as Ophelia called out to her. His beautiful little niece was still taking one step at a time, and Edward could not help marvelling at her perfection. Even her first steps were filled with confidence, and he could clearly see Margaret's traits and nature shining within Amy. He was certain she was going to grow up just as strong-headed as his sister.

“Yes, Amy, we are waiting,” he called out.

Amy was just a few more steps away, but just as she picked up her right foot to step forward, her left foot wobbled on the ground, and she fell. Both Edward and Ophelia waited with bated breaths, but Amy straightened herself almost immediately, bursting into laughter.

Ophelia, too, began to laugh as the little girl crawled towards them, Edward laughing along. Both Amy and Ophelia had infectious laughter, and he could not help feeling just as ecstatic as them when with the two. Amy finally reached Ophelia, easily crawling into her lap while the two still chuckled.

Edward stared at them with love in his eyes, unable to believe how lucky he had got.

A sudden thought filled his head, and he wondered if he could just do something and be stuck in this moment forever. He wanted nothing but Ophelia and Amy in his life with their laughter, beauty, and courage.

He wanted them both. For good. But was that even possible?

Amy crawled into his lap next, and he easily took hold of her, as she snuggled into his neck while Edward held her. Ophelia continued to stroke Amy’s hair as they sat there, and Edward felt a pang of deep longing in his heart.

He already knew he would give anything to have this forever.

Page 21

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 2:37 am

Chapter 21

Ophelia was glad for the few uneventful days at the house when she did not have to see Alice, but luck could only be on her side for so long. As she walked inside the house, her eyes immediately fell on Lady Alice, who was standing just by the door, conversing with the housekeeper. Ophelia did not know how she had failed to notice Lady Alice's arrival from the gardens, but it must have happened when she had gone towards the back.

If it were up to her, she would never even see her face again, but that would be impossible.

Oh God.

Lady Alice absolutely must not see me.

Even though she had not been able to recognize Ophelia earlier, Ophelia was no longer sure that she would have the same luck. Alice was in constant contact with her due to being at balls every other night, and if she managed to look closely at Ophelia, recognition wouldn't be difficult.

Ophelia put Amy's head on her shoulder and silently began to walk away from beside Lady Alice and Mrs Connor, hoping that she was irrelevant enough not to be called by either of them. Just when she thought she had easily passed them without being noticed, an annoyingly fake accent called out from behind.

"You, nanny." You, nanny? Lady Alice clearly had a lot of class.

Ophelia had half a mind to completely ignore her as if she had not even heard her speaking and continue walking without turning around. Although, knowing how miserably hateful Alice was, she would probably march up to the nursery so Ophelia could apologize for the disrespect she had shown a noble lady. It would only increase suspicion when Ophelia wanted to avoid exactly that.

She turned around, noticing that Mrs Connor was already walking away. Ophelia had no doubts that Lady Alice must have probably angered her as well, just as she managed to do so with everyone. Although, right now, Ophelia only needed to focus on keeping her face down and staying as far away from the woman as possible.

“Yes, My Lady?”

“The housekeeper did not know when Lord Cavendish might return. Do you have any idea?”

How was Ophelia supposed to know being the nanny? She wondered if Alice was just thick-brained or refused to simply think at all.

“I have no idea. Will that be all?”

“Ye—” Ophelia gulped nervously when Alice stopped speaking mid-sentence as if she had suddenly remembered something. “Why do I feel like I know you?”

Ophelia still kept her face tucked away, hoping for her golden tendrils to continue framing her face.

“We met at the country house as well, My Lady, when you came to visit with Lady Rosalina.”

“No,” Alice whispered, stepping a little closer as Ophelia backed away, “my memory

is awful, but I never fail to remember a few faces. And it cannot be the face of an unimportant nanny in the countryside. Look up at me.”

Ophelia knew she would not be able to hide herself much longer.

She looked up.

“It is you!” Alice exclaimed, her hands shooting up to her mouth in surprise. “Lady Ophelia Jennings, are you not supposed to be Lady Rosalina’s friend from France?”

Alice began to chuckle, a little too loudly for it even to sound elegant. Ophelia stood there, refusing to react as Alice ran a cursory glance over her clothes and Amy, disdain and hatred shining in her eyes. Although, Ophelia did not mind any of that. The only thing she had a problem with was the victory shining in Alice’s eyes as if she had somehow won an important award.

“I cannot believe that I have been showing my hatred and anger to you when you are nothing but a simple nanny belonging to the working class,” Alice said, circling Ophelia, “this simple, ugly gown suits you far more than the gowns you wear in the evening when you are faking to be a noble lady belonging to the ton.”

“I do not know what you are talking about,” Ophelia sighed, still not accepting Alice’s words.

She knew Alice had recognized her and that lying was pointless, but Ophelia did not care. She was not going to give up so easily.

“You know exactly what I am talking about!” Alice exclaimed. “Tell me, how much Edward has been paying you for this act? This ruse where you and he are trying to fool the entire ton?”

“As I said, I do not know what you are talking about,” Ophelia replied flatly, refusing to show emotion on her face, “if you have anything important and relevant to say or ask, I am listening. Otherwise, do excuse me.”

“Oh no, you are not going anywhere,” Alice blocked her path, “not without answering me.”

“Answering what?”

“How much has Edward been paying you?”

“Lady Alice, all I can tell you is that Lord Cavendish is not home right now. You must call on him later. Now if you will excuse me, I have other things to attend to.”

“Those are the things you are actually meant to attend to and do. You are not meant for ball gowns, parties, or dancing the night away with Edward. It is nothing but a lie, and if you truly believe you will continue living this fantasy forever, let me remind you that you are nothing but a nanny, and Edward would have never even looked at you if you were not his accomplice in this lie.”

Ophelia breathed in at her words, refusing to be hurt by them.

She already knew Lady Alice was right, but she would in no way give that woman the satisfaction of causing pain to Ophelia.

Please, breathe. She cannot hurt you. Not over such little things.

“Whatever you say, Lady Alice,” Ophelia replied emotionlessly, “have a good day.”

“Oh my goodness, how had I not seen this before,” Alice whispered, continuing to block Ophelia’s path. “You have fallen in love with him, haven’t you?”

Fallen in love? Ophelia could not understand.

She knew she had not fallen in love with Edward. It was true she had started developing feelings for him, but those were the reasons she had resolved to maintain distance. Falling in love with Edward was something she could simply not afford, especially after learning about the way he had treated Margaret when she fell in love with a commoner.

“I have not.”

“You are so pathetic, Ophelia.” Alice laughed. “You truly think he will fall in love with you too and whisk you away from your life of misery and make you his wife? I can see the longing for it written all over your face, but I believe you are forgetting that you are nothing but a huge lie. You will never be good enough for him, and he will never ever choose you over a noble young lady of good bearing like I am.”

“Lady Alice, you can stand here and continue believing whatever you wish to believe, but leave me alone.”

Ophelia looked up just then, noticing Rosalina standing right by the house door, her eyes wide as if she must have heard the tail end of the conversation. Ophelia knew she could not stomach any more drama for today, her heart already aching at Alice’s insensitive comments.

Without another word or acknowledging Rosalina in any way, Ophelia walked away from the scene, quickly climbing the stairs to reach the safety of the nursery. She needed to be alone before breaking down into tears.

She could not let anyone see her crying.

Especially not Edward.

Rosalina could not understand if what Alice had predicted was correct or not, but as she watched Ophelia almost run up the stairs, she could see that the remarks hurt Ophelia. Rosalina understood the pain caused by those words, but Ophelia had also appeared flustered at the accusation of being in love with Edward.

Could it actually be true? Rosalina was unsure.

“Lady Rosalina,” Alice greeted her, a huge grin on her face as she turned around.

“Lady Alice.”

“I believe your little secret is out in the open. I am sure all this must have been your scheming to keep your brother away from me.”

“Trust me, Alice, I do not need to scheme to keep my brother away from you. He dislikes you enough already,” Rosalina replied.

Alice stood there fuming for a few seconds, finally storming outside the manor towards her waiting carriage. Good riddance, Rosalina thought, watching the woman hurry away. Alice only ever brought unnecessary drama along with her. Now armed with the knowledge of Ophelia only being a nanny and not Rosalina’s actual friend, one could only wonder what lengths she would reach to make this secret known to the ton.

“Could it be true?” Rosalina whispered to herself, walking inside the hall.

Could Ophelia really be falling in love with Edward?

A part of Rosalina kept saying it was true indeed, and this was evident through the

way Ophelia always interacted with Edward. She had been sweet, charming, and courteous, always keeping Edward before her from the beginning. Rosalina had noticed the look in Ophelia's eyes whenever she had been dancing with Edward at a ball.

It was the look of pure love.

Rosalina knew because she had the exact same look in her eyes when Randolph, her fiancé, was before her.

However, what intrigued Rosalina even more was how Edward often had the exact same look of longing in his eyes whenever he looked at Ophelia. He was also finally opening up again and beginning to get kinder towards Amy. Mrs Connor had told Rosalina that a few days ago, he had sought Amy out himself and had even played with her while Amy was in the gardens with Ophelia.

All of this could not be nothing.

Edward had always been excellent at hiding his feelings, and if not pushed to reveal them, he would never confess his love. However, Rosalina was not going to let go of it this easily. She had already made the decision to bring them together, and she would. Especially now that she realized how Edward felt the same way as Ophelia. The pair were meant to be.

Rosalina was sure.

“But what should I do about it?” She sat on the sofa, her mind working in multiple directions as she continued to think. All she needed to know was that she did have to do something for the two people who were rather dear to her. Both of them. And the best thing she could do was bring them closer to one another if what they shared was actually love.

Rosalina did not have another choice.

“How will I do that?”

Knowing the two of them, they would resist every single push; hence, Rosalina would need to be subtle about it. They were almost already in love and only required a slight nudge to walk in the right direction. Perhaps this was the only way to make sure Edward tried to become a better version of himself, letting go of the sadness and hatred in his heart.

It was about time.

And if there was someone who could help him with it, it was Ophelia.

And Amy.

“The Cartwright Ball!” Rosalina clapped her hand in excitement, remembering the biggest ball of the Season was about to arrive.

She knew what she had to do. She simply needed to present Ophelia in front of Edward in a new light until he confessed his love to her, and Ophelia confessed it back.

If someone deserved to have a fairy tale ending, it was the two of them, and Rosalina was ready to do everything in her power to make it happen. It was going to be the best thing for Edward and Ophelia, and the two coming together just might turn into the home that Amy needed to flourish and grow in.

Page 22

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 2:37 am

Chapter 22

“Oh, Ophelia,” Rosalina sighed, standing fully dressed behind her as she put a few finishing touches in Ophelia’s hair, “you look beautiful tonight.”

“Thank you.” Ophelia smiled at her through the looking glass, even though she felt she looked exactly the same as every other night.

Although she felt a little different. Rosalina had told her how the Cartwright ball was the biggest ball of the entire Season, and everyone dressed lavishly for it. Hence, Rosalina had made sure that Ophelia wore her best gown. Dressed in a bold pink gown, which was entirely sequined, Ophelia did indeed feel beautiful.

Rosalina had come to help Ophelia dress up, and the pair had got ready together. To Ophelia’s surprise, Rosalina had also brought her a beautiful necklace adorned with pink stones, which she had graciously placed on Ophelia’s neck.

Ophelia felt royal tonight.

“You must trust me when I tell you that someone is going to take one look at you tonight and will fall in love with you for a lifetime.”

Ophelia chuckled, her heart aching at those words.

The only person she wished to love her was the one who would never love her. Hence, it hardly mattered if someone else suddenly grew to have feelings for Ophelia. It was not in her fate to love them back anyway.

“How does it matter?” she sighed, standing up from the cushioned seat and turning around to face Rosalina. “Although, I am looking forward to one thing.”

“And what might that be?”

“Finally, being able to meet your beloved fiancé! I cannot believe Lord Syke is here.”

Rosalina blushed a pale pink at his name, laughing softly. “I almost cannot believe it myself. We have only been away for a few months, but it made me realize I can never live without him. Whoever said absence makes the heart fonder was absolutely right. I am never letting Randolph leave me again.”

“To have your heart with him must be the most precious thing to have, Rosalina.” Ophelia smiled, “He is a very lucky man.”

“He is indeed.” Rosalina returned to her charming manner, immediately laughing at her own comment.

Both the young women turned to look at themselves one last time, surveying their reflections before stepping downstairs, where the men were waiting to escort them to the ball. Ophelia felt slightly nervous, remembering that she was once again going to spend another evening with Edward. She also knew that Alice would be there, and now that she knew Ophelia’s secret, she would be even more annoying than she once was.

It was a disaster.

But Ophelia was not afraid. She was certain one evening could go by uneventfully. Or at least, that was what she hoped.

“Shall we get going?”

Ophelia nodded at Rosalina's question. "Absolutely. It would be horrifying if we make them wait any longer."

"Perhaps you are right."

They finally stepped out of Ophelia's bedchamber, straight towards the staircase as Rosalina stepped down first. Ophelia did not know what the matter was, but her heart kept beating loudly, as if she was almost scared to see Edward. She did not know why her expectations with him were growing every day, but she wanted him to find her beautiful tonight.

As if she had only got ready and dressed up for his eyes.

A part of her kept telling her that she had indeed got ready for him only.

As she finally reached the bottom of the stairs, Ophelia looked up, finding two young men standing in the hallway, one of them Edward. He looked exceptionally handsome in his tux, the perfect gentleman. His eyes were on her as she stepped down, and Ophelia could not help wondering if he did indeed find her beautiful.

Rosalina almost ran downstairs and jumped straight into Randolph's arms, who held her close. Ophelia's eyes melted at the love the two of them shared.

Although her gaze was still strictly stuck on Edward.

She hoped for nothing more but for him to show her even an ounce of affection or simply even tell her that she looked beautiful tonight. She needed to hear it from him and him alone. As she finally walked towards him, his face still remained expressionless, and Ophelia curtsied wordlessly.

"Good evening, Miss Jennings."

The smile on her face disappeared as she heard the coldness in Edward's voice, unsure what was wrong. She almost felt like weeping and returning to her room, but Ophelia was not going to be a sobbing mess over a man. A man that could never be hers because of the difference in their social standing.

She needed to keep control of herself. She had hoped for too much.

"Good evening, My Lord."

Rosalina walked towards them, perhaps sensing the unsaid tension swirling between them as they looked at one another. Hence, she immediately came to the rescue, Randolph right behind her.

"Ophelia, I must introduce you to my fiancé, Lord Randolph Syke."

"My Lord," Ophelia curtsied respectfully as the gentleman bowed.

He had immaculate manners, his smile just enough to keep Ophelia comfortable. He appeared both loving and charming, and just as Rosalina had defined, he was immaculately handsome. The two made the perfect couple. Ophelia could already picture them having an extremely happy life together. She felt happy for Rosalina even though she would never be able to have what Rosalina had.

"We should get going," Edward chimed in, presenting his elbow to Ophelia.

Ophelia placed her gloved palm over his arm, realizing how short-lived this feeling would be.

"Wait one moment," Randolph suddenly said, his eyebrows scrunching.

"Are you alright, my dearest?" Rosalina asked him, immediately growing concerned.

“Yes, yes,” he reassured her with a smile before turning back to look at Ophelia. “Have we met before, Miss Jennings? Why do I feel as if I already know you from somewhere?”

Ophelia’s heart began to race at his question, wondering if this were the moment everyone would find out the truth about her. That was the last thing she wanted; hence, despite being terrified, she forced herself to stay calm, placing a subtle smile on her lips. She needed to stay calm. She could not give herself away this easily, not until she absolutely had to.

“I do not think we have met, Lord Syke.”

“I am afraid my memory is failing me, but I am certain I have a rather strong recollection of seeing you somewhere or other. It is too significant to ignore for it to be nothing but a mistake.”

“My memory is excellent, My Lord.” Ophelia smiled. “Had we met, I would have certainly remembered you.”

Randolph nodded. “Perhaps you are right. We should get going for the ball, can’t leave Lady Cartwright waiting for our arrival.”

“Off to the ball,” Rosalina chimed in enthusiastically, already making her way outside with Randolph.

Away from his scrutinizing gaze, Ophelia finally felt she could breathe again. Her heart already felt too vulnerable right now and now she had another thing to worry about. Randolph. Alice would be waiting for her at the ball with her prying eyes and nasty words, and on top of it all, Edward was right beside her.

His sudden aloofness made Ophelia even more miserable.

She just needed to get through tonight.

Just a few more hours.

I can do it. Please, God, help me.

Ophelia quickly made her way towards the refreshment table, pouring herself lemonade. She was hardly thirsty, but being in Edward's arms and tolerating his silence was too much for her. They had already danced twice, but Edward had not uttered a word except for replying to Ophelia if she asked a question or tried to hold a conversation.

She continued to wonder if she had somehow offended him, but nothing came back to her.

It was a disaster. This entire evening.

What was even worse was she could constantly feel Randolph's gaze on her, worrying her even more. She knew he was still trying to place her, but Ophelia definitely had no recollection of ever meeting him. Although, the fact that he could have known her in her previous life made her feel as if she could not breathe in her corset.

It was too much.

"Lady Jennings!" Alice's sarcastically sweetened voice from behind her made Ophelia's blood boil, but she turned around anyway.

Facing Alice was inevitable no matter how much Ophelia tried to escape her.

"Lady Alice."

“The only difference between these greetings is that my greeting is based on complete, utter honesty, while yours is nothing but a lie,” Alice whispered with a chuckle. “Do you not find that funny?”

“Hilarious.” Ophelia stayed completely expressionless, deciding not to be affected by Alice.

Her presence was irrelevant, merely an annoyance rather than a serious harm. Ophelia knew that Alice could reveal her secret to the ton, but she had nothing to mull over. She could return back home and never even face these people again if the ordeal turned humiliating. She had nothing to lose.

“I cannot wait to reveal your secret to the ton,” Alice finally said, as per Ophelia’s expectations, “A maid dancing in the ball pretending to be a lady. It will be the gossip of the Season.”

“Everyone in the ton must be utterly useless and lead severely boring lives if the news of an unimportant maid is going to be the gossip of the ton.”

Alice frowned, not knowing what to say.

“You can see it however you want. You will know how humiliating it is to be paraded in the ton as nothing but trash when everyone finds out who you really are. Especially the way you have been keeping Edward away from the young debutantes, you will be hated by all.”

“I hardly care, Lady Alice. Go ahead and tell everyone. What are you waiting for?”

Ophelia did not know where she was finding her confidence, but she was tired and completely done. She had no patience for Alice and her threats, let alone anything else. The night was only midway, but Ophelia wanted to return home. She already

missed Amy. Everything stayed fine when she was in the nursery with Amy, away from the difficulties of surviving in the London nobility.

“I am simply enjoying myself.” Alice shrugged. “It feels rather nice to watch you twist and turn in anticipation, waiting for when I will finally reveal your secret. I am sure you are terrified of the consequences.”

“Not at all.” Ophelia smiled. “Although you should be terrified of the consequences.”

“What do you mean?” Alice straightened.

“If you reveal my secret to the ton, Lord Cavendish, who already does not find you likeable will begin to loathe you even more for ruining his reputation and parading his niece's nanny in this manner. As a respectable young lady, he would naturally expect you to keep a secret if you have come across it. It will hardly affect me, but you will lose all your chances of ever being with him.”

Ophelia could see shock on Alice's face, who had clearly not thought this through.

“You will see what I do.”

Alice walked away from her, still appearing angered, as Ophelia finally breathed a sigh of relief. She looked up, finding Randolph's eyes on her from across the room, his expression confused. Ophelia could see he was still trying to remember, and it scared her.

She turned around, making her way towards the open balcony door, away from the swirls and the haze of the ballroom. She had already had enough for the evening, and she needed fresh air. She stepped into the gardens, finally being able to breathe.

Keeping Alice away was hardly an issue for Ophelia, but she did not know what she

would do if Randolph found out who she was.

She needed to maintain her distance.

And return home as soon as possible.

Just a little longer.

Page 23

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 2:37 am

Chapter 23

Edward breathed a sigh of relief as the music began to fade, indicating he would finally be rid of Alice. If she had not asked him to dance with her in front of several members of the ton, he would never have agreed. However, she continued to insist on Edward spending time with her, especially in front of everyone.

He knew what she wanted, but he was never going to give it to her.

Instead, he just wanted to find Ophelia. He had already danced twice with Ophelia, and if they danced a third time, it would appear rather rude and suspicious to the ton, and he had no desire to have any unnecessary eyes on him. Despite everything, he simply could not stop looking at her, his heart accelerating since the moment she had descended the stairs to leave for the ball.

In her pink gown, she was a vision.

I have never wanted anyone as much as I want Ophelia.

However, she is the one thing I could never imagine having. After the way I treated Margaret and caused the death of my very own sister, I do not deserve happiness. The guilt consumes me in a way where even if I were to have Ophelia in my life, it might not bring me happiness. I was unnecessarily mean to my very own sister and deserve to suffer for that.

The set finally came to an end, and Edward bowed down.

“Thank you for the dance, Lady Alice.”

“Thank you, My Lord.” He watched as Alice curtsied, her leg suddenly twisting as she fell to the ground.

Edward immediately held her shoulders, trying to pick her up, but looking closely at her face made him realize she was only pretending to be hurt. He was certain she could have fallen on purpose as well, just to have Edward closer to her.

He wished to leave her there on the dance floor, but since everyone around them had already noticed Alice falling, he could not be ungentlemanly in any way.

“I feel extremely faint, My Lord,” Alice said, trying to sound in pain. “Will you please help me walk to the side?”

“Of course.”

He allowed her to drop her weight on his shoulder as she stood up, walking towards the side with Edward’s help. He wanted nothing to do with her, but he knew as the gentleman who had just been dancing with her and the one she was forcefully clinging to, he had no choice. He only hoped that Ophelia would not see him with her and draw wrong conclusions.

“Sit down here.” Edward cleared an unoccupied chair for Alice by the refreshment table, making her sit down while she continued to act as if she was in extreme pain. He brought her a glass of lemonade, and she took one sip before discarding it, beginning to rub her hand over her chest. Edward stayed completely silent, unwilling to be a party to this absurdity.

“Lord Cavendish, I am unable to breathe.”

“Pardon?”

“I feel constricted in the ballroom. It is much too dark, and I need fresh air, or I shall faint, and you will be to blame for not taking proper care of me. Will you please accompany me to the gardens?”

“Lady Alice, the ballroom is extremely airy, and I do not feel constricted at all. I believe you are imagining it.”

“Oh please, Lord Cavendish, you do not understand. If you were a lady, you would know how tightly they wound our corsets, making breathing impossible. My head hurts, and my chest is beginning to feel heavy. I must go into the fresh air right now, or I will pass out.” She fanned herself for added effect. “I am already feeling faint.”

“Of course, I will accompany you,” Edward sighed, never having felt more helpless in his life.

A smile suddenly came on her face, but she turned her expression, wounded again as if she was still in great pain. Holding onto Edward’s arm, Alice forced him to make their way to the open balcony doors, which led straight to the gardens. Edward was not planning to go any further than the balcony, but the moment they stepped foot on it, she started walking even further ahead.

“Here is just fine,” he said sternly, but Lady Alice, being the manipulator she was, almost began to cry.

“It is crowded with couples still. All I require is a few moments of peace so I can breathe in the open.”

Arguing with her had not proven effective until now, and knowing Alice, she could attempt another act, which was to faint right in front of everyone again. Hence, all

Edward needed to do was entertain her for a few more minutes before finally returning back inside. He wanted to look for Ophelia, realizing how horrible he had been to her during the dances.

His guilt had continued to consume him, making conversation impossible.

Edward breathed in deeply, realizing that in his daze, he had continued walking into the gardens beside Alice. They were already far away from the lights of the ball, right at the beginning of the dark hedges. Edward hastily stopped, not wishing to go any further. No one was around them, and if anyone found them here alone, things would be extremely unexplainable, only making the two of them seem guilty.

“We will be returning to the house now.” He started to turn around, but Lady Alice blocked his path, standing in front of him.

“We are already here, My Lord,” she smiled nauseatingly. “Just a little further from here won’t hurt anyone.”

Edward stared at her, completely confused. Every respectable lady of the ton was well aware of the consequences of being seen with a gentleman in the dark part of the garden. It damaged her reputation, and often, in most cases, they were forced to marry the men they were seen with to protect them from becoming complete social outcasts.

Oh good God.

He immediately understood her intentions, no longer fooled by her act. She was trying to do exactly what every young lady wished to avoid, which only meant that this was all her plan to trick Edward into marrying her. If they were discovered together and her reputation suffered because of him, he would have been too much of a gentleman not to marry her immediately, and Lady Alice would have been using

that. She would simply go to any lengths to convince Edward to marry.

“I am disgusted with you right now, Lady Alice,” his tone was stern, “we are going to return to the ball this instant, and I will pretend this did not happen.”

“No, we won’t.” Edward backed away from her as she stepped towards him, her words uttered with extreme firmness.

“We will.”

Edward began to walk back when she grabbed his arm, her other hand shooting up to his face as she pulled him closer. In his shock, Edward did not know how to fight her off for a few seconds, and she came even closer, standing on her tiptoes while she tried to kiss him. Once he realized what she was trying to do, he immediately pushed her away, walking back towards the house.

“Edward, stop!” she shouted, running towards him. She tried to stop him again, but Edward easily backed away, his anger rising.

“You need to stop with your scheming, Lady Alice,” he tried to control his voice, “your plans are not going to work on me. Not at all.”

“If you are not going to court me and marry me, I will have to find another way to make it happen.”

“What other way? For me to compromise you so you can guilt me into marriage? You think we will have a happy relationship after you force me to enter a marriage I have no desire for?”

“I do not care!” she shouted, “Once we are married, you will learn to love me.”

“Lady Alice, you must understand that I have never been interested in you in any capacity. I do not like who you are as a person, and I have never had any feelings for you. Your recent acts have only made me dislike you even more, and every time we are together, I cannot wait to get rid of you. I will never be happy with you or learn to love you.”

“You are not going to ruin my plan,” she said, clearly furious, “I am certain someone might have already seen us.”

“I can assure you no one has, and no one will,” he sighed, trying to calm down, “and if you do try to trick me into marriage through any means, I will make sure your reputation is torn to shreds, and you are ruined beyond repair. In any case, you will never be able to marry me. Remember that.”

Edward began to walk away when she shouted again.

“Are you doing all of this because of Ophelia? Because you are apparently courting that nanny in front of the ton?”

How does she even know?

“Whatever could you mean?”

He watched as Alice’s gaze narrowed, and she walked closer, appearing even angrier than she had moments ago.

“Oh my goodness, have you fallen in love with her?” she said insultingly, “how could you possibly love a servant?”

Edward immediately knew he shouldn’t have reacted in this manner. Lady Alice was both cunning and cruel, and if she got the slightest hint of Edward’s growing feelings

towards Ophelia, she might take drastic actions against her and Ophelia did not deserve to be at the receiving end of Alice's hatred.

I must shift her attention away from Ophelia. Right away.

"Of course, I do not love her. She is nothing but a fa?ade to keep women like you from the ton away from me."

"I am not the gullible little fool you think me to be, Lord Cavendish," Alice retorted, "I can see the look in your eyes at the mention of her name, and God forbid it speaks of love."

Edward scoffed.

"I am an earl, Lady Alice," he replied, "I am never going to fall in love with someone beneath my rank. She is entirely unmarriageable and will never be good enough for me. Not wanting to marry you had nothing to do with Ophelia and everything to do with you being the most boring, unkind, and entirely selfish person I have ever met."

"You lie," she said, smirking. "Clearly, you are losing your mind over her and cannot see the love I have to offer you."

"You have nothing to offer me. Period," Edward said with finality. "You are as boring and plain as a woman can be, and you pride yourself on your social standing. You are materialistic, opportunistic, and vile, and you only wish to marry me because I am the most eligible bachelor of the Season. Had there been someone else, you would have been interested in him."

"That is not true, My Lord," she began to plead, but even her expressions reeked of falsehood. "I do love you and have never wanted anything but to marry you."

“I have eyes, Lady Alice. Stay away from me and everyone in my family, or I will make sure you cannot find anyone to marry in all of London, much less France.”

Without waiting for her to reply, Edward turned around. He knew he had been harsh, but everything he said was true. However, he only hoped that Alice’s focus would no longer be on Ophelia. He could tolerate anything but something happening to her because of him. That was the last thing he wanted, and he would make sure to see to it himself.

He was never going to let her get hurt.

Chapter 24

Ophelia pulled away the heavy velvet curtain draped over the carriage window and looked out, realizing she was just a few minutes away from home. The prospect of returning was extremely joyful to her, especially with Amy, who was seated comfortably in her lap. Although, her heart still felt awfully sorrowful.

She did wish to return home, but not in these circumstances.

It was hard to believe that just yesterday, she had danced in Edward's arms at the Cartwright ball, and only he had meant to hurt her so terribly. When Ophelia had gone into the gardens for a few moments of peace, she had found Edward just a little further away with no one else but Alice.

I am never going to fall in love with someone beneath my rank. She is entirely unmarriageable and will never be good enough for me. The words he had used for her in front of Alice were burnt in Ophelia's memory.

She would never be able to forget them.

Although, all of it was her fault. She already knew how Edward had treated his sister when she fell in love with someone below their rank. Hence, it was understandable that he felt the same towards Ophelia. To him, she was just a maid who was never going to be his equal, and Ophelia would best accept that. But his words had been hurtful, all her fears confirmed.

"Miss Jennings, are we there?" the maid accompanying her asked, snapping Ophelia

out of her thoughts.

“Yes, just a few minutes away.”

After crying the entire night, Ophelia had decided it was best to take a break and return home to distance herself from Edward for a little while. The feelings she had for him were still intact, but she needed to let go of them to find peace.

The sooner she accepted that Edward would not feel for her the same way, the better it would be.

Thankfully, she did not have to speak to him since she had asked Rosalina to return home, who had been happy to let Ophelia go for a while. Upon asking if she could take Amy along with her, Rosalina had easily agreed. Ophelia was simply a little too attached to the little girl and had no desire to part from her, even if it was only for a few days.

The carriage stopped, and Ophelia knew they had arrived. She looked out the window, finding her house on the familiar streets of Kent.

“We are here.” Her heart already felt lighter.

Ophelia stepped out, hoping for someone to be home since she had not informed anyone of her arrival, having no time to do so. With Amy in her arms, Ophelia knocked on the door and her mother opened it, her eyes widening in surprise.

“Am I missing you so much that I have begun to hallucinate, or are you truly standing before me?”

“I am here, Mama.”

“Oh, my darling.”

The maid who had accompanied her, Selene, took Amy from Ophelia’s arms so she could greet her family, and Ophelia immediately hugged her mother. She wanted to break into tears at the comfort she felt upon being home again, but she knew it would only worry her mother, and that was the last thing she wanted. She was just here for a few days and had no desire to cause anyone worry.

“Who is it?” Amelia asked from behind their mother before exclaiming in surprise once her gaze landed on Ophelia, “Sister!”

Ophelia laughed, finally crying happy tears at the occasion as Sarah came outside as well, Andrew perched in her arms. Both the sisters refused to leave her until their mother finally ushered them inside the house after already making quite a commotion on the street. Ophelia was certain by now that all the neighbours must be aware of her arrival.

Her mother also brought Selene inside, immediately asking her to feel at home. Selene and Ophelia were already good friends, so it was hardly an issue. Both Sarah and Amelia had already taken Amy in their arms, playing with her. Amy, being a friendly little girl was laughing along with them, beginning to enjoy herself.

“I cannot believe you brought Amy along with you.” Amelia smiled as Andrew, too, began to play with Amy.

“Little baby,” he kept calling her, not leaving her hand for even one second.

Ophelia’s heart was already full, seeing how Amy had so easily adjusted in the midst of her siblings. Her heart was much lighter, and she could not believe how much she had missed her home. She had been far away for too long, and being back only made her feel at peace.

“Sweetheart,” her mother addressed her once they were all finally seated, “why did you not tell us you were coming? I would have cooked something you love.”

“The plan was very sudden, Mama,” Ophelia lied, not knowing what else to say. “I only decided last night that I was tired and must come home for a while. Hence, I came as quickly as I could.”

“I cannot tell you how delighted I am to see you.” Her mother sighed, tears stinging the corners of her eyes.

Ophelia immediately stood up and went to sit beside her mother, hugging her from the side.

”Oh, Mama, stop crying. I am here now.”

“I have missed you terribly, my child.”

“She really has, Ophelia,” Sarah chimed in, still sitting beside Amy, who was clearly fast friends with Andrew already as the two played together, “not a single day has gone by where she failed to mention you or how she wishes you to be here among us.”

“Is that so, Mama?” Ophelia laughed.

“I believe I am allowed to miss my daughter?”

“After all, you do love her the most,” Sarah said teasingly upon which her mother rolled her eyes.

Ophelia could not stop laughing.

“You two must stop being jealous of the love Mama has for me. I am the eldest daughter, after all, and bound to be her favourite.”

She stood up from beside her mother and went to stand behind the sofa her sisters were seated on. Amy began to jump when she saw Ophelia approach, already wanting to be in her arms. Ophelia picked up the child, placing a kiss on her cheek as Amy clung to her.

“Amy, come back,” Andrew motioned with his tiny hands towards Amy, who stared at him in surprise. “Come back, Amy.”

Everyone laughed when Amy extended her small hands back towards Andrew, clearly wanting to go back to him. Ophelia loved how, after only knowing each other for a few minutes, they interacted as if they had been playing together for ages. This was what she loved about children: the way they instantly chose to play together.

Sarah took Amy from her, once again seating her on the sofa so Andrew could play with her.

“I am so glad you brought her along,” Amelia said, “she is a delight.”

“She is an angel,” Ophelia sighed, “I have come to love her like my own.”

“You spend day and night with her, and knowing you, you give her the love only a mother would give a child,” her mother said. “It is heartwarming to see the two of you together.”

“You should see her at the manor,” Ophelia replied, “everyone in the household loves her.”

“Ophelia is right,” Selene, still sitting in the living room, said. “Everyone in the house

loves Amy from all their hearts, but no one loves her as much as Ophelia. She loves her even more than her own mother could have loved her.”

“Ophelia has always been loving,” Sarah replied, “she gave us siblings the same love as well. She is truly a jewel.”

“Everyone in the house will immediately agree,” Selene laughed.

“You all must stop singing my praises before it goes straight to my head.”

“I do not mind one bit, even if it goes to your head. You have come home after months, and I plan to spoil you with love.” Her mother hugged her once again, and Ophelia gave in to it.

“I am counting on it.”

She looked at the living room, which had come to life from the chatter and already felt worlds better. It was almost like her heart had found a home again after being lost for days. She had been emotionally exhausted and needed a place where she could keep her head and rest. That was all she needed.

And now that she was home, she had just that.

I will be fine soon.

All she needed to do was get over Edward as quickly as she could, and all would be well again. Her heart wouldn’t hurt ever again. At least, that was what she hoped for.

Chapter 25

“Are you sure you cannot stay for dinner, Randolph,” Edward asked for the tenth time, desperately in need of company.

“I am afraid I cannot, my friend,” he apologized, his arm locked in Rosalina’s embrace as they all sat in the drawing room, “Had I not already given the time to meet my solicitor today, I would have. But I must attend to some urgent work.”

“I understand.”

“Besides, I am still staying with you,” Rosalina chimed in, “do you not want my company? Am I beginning to bore you?”

“You can never bore me, dear cousin,” Edward managed the semblance of a smile. “You are always the brightest person in the room, making everyone around you feel at home at all times.”

“Precisely.”

Randolph stood up, “I must take my leave now. I will see you soon, Edward.”

“Come, I will see you out,” Edward said, standing up, but Rosalina shook her head.

“Oh no, you go wait for me in the dining room since Mrs Connor has already told us thrice that dinner has been served. I will quickly see Randolph out and join you shortly.”

Edward nodded wordlessly, understanding Rosalina's need to have a few solitary moments with her betrothed. Whenever he saw the two of them together, he could not be happier for them. The love they shared for one another was unquestionably beautiful, and Edward wished them nothing but even more happiness.

He made his way to the dining room, the silence of the house beginning to bother him once again. It had just been two days since Ophelia had left with Amy, but it already felt like two months had passed. When Rosalina had informed him of Ophelia's departure, he had been certain he would enjoy the peace now that Amy was gone.

But it had not been the case.

If anything, he hadn't felt this miserable in a very long time. Edward sat at the table, motioning the maids to wait to serve since Rosalina had still not returned. He sighed, unable to believe that Amy had become such a huge part of his life this quickly, and he missed her presence. Ophelia was an entirely different matter.

He missed her too, even if he was hesitant to accept it as the truth.

How long will I run away from myself?

"I am here now!" Edward looked up, watching Rosalina walk into the dining room, still her extremely bright self.

She sat down comfortably as the maids served them, leaving them alone in the dining room. Edward did wish to talk to Rosalina, but he was already filled with sorrow and unable to realize the cause of it. It almost felt as if something in his life was going terribly wrong, and he had no control over it. They continued eating in silence for a little longer, Edward still lost in thought when Rosalina put her fork down loud enough for Edward to turn and look at her.

“Is everything alright?”

“That is something I should be asking you,” she said meaningfully, looking him straight in the eye.

“Everything is perfect.”

“Lies,” she said, turning her chair completely. “Now try again.”

“I do not know what you mean, Rosalina.”

“Edward, I am done playing around trying to talk to you. So now, I will ask you one simple question and expect one simple answer. Do you understand?”

He nodded.

“Are you in love with Ophelia?”

Edward was stunned. He had expected Rosalina to ask several questions, but this was certainly not one of them, especially since he did not even know the answer to it himself. What he felt for Ophelia was both foreign and unexplainable, something he had never felt before, but he did not know if it could be called love.

Or perhaps he was simply in denial.

“I ...” He could not form words. “I do not know.”

“From what I can see, you are completely in love with her and simply refusing to both understand and accept it. You have not been yourself since she has left. You are upset and easily irritable, as if something important and meaningful is missing from your life. What else is this if not love?”

“Rosalina,” he sighed, pushing away his plate, “I do not know what to say.”

She stood up in frustration. “I want you to tell me the truth and nothing else. Do you feel something when you look at her?”

“I do.” He ran a hand through his hair, feeling cornered.

“Do you wish to converse with her, spend time with her?”

“I do.”

“Then tell me, Edward, what is this if not love? You do not seem yourself, and your life completely refuses to make sense in her absence. What is this if not love?” Rosalina was shouting now, both of them worked up.

“Yes, yes, I love her!” Edward shouted back. “Happy? Yes, I do love her. I have never loved anyone or anything more than I love her, and I have no clue what to do about it. I do not know how to let go of it. I just don’t.”

He kept his head on the table, a weight lifted off his chest.

He did love Ophelia. No matter how much he tried to run away from it.

“So why have you not told her yet?” she asked, sitting back down.

“I am not a good man, Rosalina,” Edward said, looking at her, “I have no right to love and no claim over happiness. I killed my sister. How could I live peacefully and happily after committing such a crime?”

Tears stung his eyes at the thought, but he forced himself to stay in control.

“What do you mean?” Rosalina appeared horrified. “How can you blame yourself for Margaret’s death?”

“Who else is to blame, Rosalina?”

“Anyone but you, Edward!” She was beginning to appear angry again, “You were there with her from the beginning till the end. You were the one who held her when she was sobbing with pain while her useless husband was absent. You were the one who went to look for a physician in the middle of the most terrible storm when she could not give birth with the help of the midwife. You were the one who held her hand while she gave birth and the one who held her while she could not continue to live any longer. You only tried your best to save her!”

“But what if I had been there with her since that morning, or what if I had just been a little quicker in getting a physician? She might have lived if I had hurried.”

“No, Edward,” Rosalina sighed, “her death was written, and no matter what you had done, it would have happened. The situation was not in your control one bit, and I know you tried your best. You loved her so much; you would never let her die without trying your very best.”

“I could have saved her still. The physician gave me a choice.”

“Edward, the choice was never yours,” Rosalina whispered, holding his hand, “Margaret kept asking you to save the baby instead of her when she heard only one of them could have been saved. It was her decision, not yours because I know if you had to decide, you would have always saved Margaret.”

“Only if she hadn’t asked me to do right by her and save her child, she could have been alive today.”

“And she would have despised you for not listening to her. She would have despised herself for being alive while her child was dead. You made the right choice, Edward. That was what was meant to happen, and you must not blame yourself for it. Please.”

“I had not even reconciled with her properly, Rosalina,” he whispered, his eyes far away as if he could see that day before his eyes. “She died without ever knowing how much I still loved her.”

“She knew, Edward.” Rosalina smiled. “She knew that you loved her, and she could always count on you despite the fight you two had at the time of her marriage. She loved you just the same, and if she ever found out that you blame yourself for her death, she would be devastated.”

“I wish I had been on time,” he sighed, his heart grieving still.

“You were,” Rosalina held his hand, “you must trust me when I say this. None of this is your fault. Had I known you blamed yourself for Margaret’s death, I would have told this to you earlier. You reached her the moment you found out she was giving birth, and you went to look for a physician the moment the complications began. You could have done nothing about the storm, and even in those terrible conditions, you found a physician. Only a brother who loves his sister immensely would battle this way for her. Trust me.”

“You really think I am faultless?”

“I know you are faultless.” She smiled. “If there is someone to blame for this, it is just her husband who left her knowing how precarious her condition was and did not even inform you. He left without caring about her one bit and was never good enough for her. I wish she had never married him.”

“I wish so, too. She might have been alive if she hadn’t.”

“Perhaps,” Rosalina sighed deeply, “but we are not to think of that. We have the future to think of, and you owe it to Margaret to let go of this guilt that consumes you and find happiness for yourself.

“How?” Edward asked seriously.

“You can begin by telling Ophelia of your feelings for her. That might be a good start.”

“You think she will reciprocate?”

Rosalina laughed.

“How will you know if you never tell her?”

“I will go to her at once.”

Edward knew he had to go to Ophelia. Rosalina was right; nothing made sense without her.

Chapter 26

Ophelia rested her back against the tree, comfortably seated on a picnic blanket with her mother. They had decided to bring Amy to the nearby park and the entire house had decided to accompany them; everyone was extremely fond of Amy. As Ophelia stared at all her sisters playing with Amy, she could not help remembering her picnics at the manor where Amy would be crawling about.

Now here, she had several people to play with, and Ophelia could see how the little girl was having the time of her life.

“What are you smiling at, dear?” Her mother, seated right beside her on the blanket asked, and Ophelia shook her head.

“Nothing, Mama,” she said. “Just glad to see how Amy is having such a good time with everyone around her. She has no one to play with in London or at the country house except me or if some other servant can find the time during their busy schedule. She usually ends up playing all by herself but now she has everyone around her.”

“She is such a beautiful little girl,” her mother sighed. “How can anyone not want to make time for her.”

“Lady Rosalina is both kind and loving towards Amy and always finds the time to play with her,” Ophelia explained, already missing Rosalina a little.

In the past few days, they had become such fast friends that Ophelia felt slightly

empty in her absence, hoping to have her around.

“And Lord Cavendish?”

“He remains busy a lot,” Ophelia lied, not wanting to portray Edward in a negative light. “He does play with her whenever he finds the time, but he has a lot of work to attend to and can hardly find much time to relax.”

“Being an earl is not an easy job after all.”

“That is true.” Ophelia nodded.

“I have some news for you, dear.” Ophelia turned to look at her mother, immediately curious. “I was going to write to you about it, but now that you are here, this is much better.”

“Is everything alright, Mother?” Ophelia was worried.

“Everything is excellent, darling,” her mother reassured. “Last week, we found out that the passing of a distant uncle of yours has left us with an inheritance of a very modest sum. It will comfortably hold us and help us, especially since Amelia is already planning to get married soon.”

Ophelia was overjoyed at the news, unable to believe her ears.

God worked in mysterious ways indeed.

“Who is the distant Uncle?”

“I have never heard of him, I am afraid,” her mother said. “According to the solicitor who visited us, he was an uncle from your father’s side, and I have never met him.

Although, having no one close, he generously left the money for us.”

“Mama, that is excellent news!”

“It is indeed.” Her mother laughed “Now you can quit your job and return home since we will be just fine. You must come back home and find a man to marry. You cannot continue working as a nanny forever and ignoring your whole life.”

Ophelia was speechless for a few seconds, unable to respond to her mother’s requests.

How was she to quit her job and let go of Amy? Even the thought pained her. And how was she going to give up running into Edward every single day? Leaving her job would make it all impossible for her, and Ophelia was not ready for it.

“Quit my job?”

“Yes, darling.” Her mother nodded. “You were only working to support us, but the inheritance helped.”

“But, Mama,” she objected, “I have grown truly attached to Amy in these few weeks, and leaving her will not be an easy feat for me. I do not think I will be able to accomplish that in any capacity. I cannot leave the job, at least.”

“Ophelia,” her mother sighed, “are you sure the reason behind not leaving your job is Amy alone? Or could there be something else? Something more?”

Her mother’s scrutinizing gaze made her vulnerable and exposed, and Ophelia felt as if all the secrets in her heart would come tumbling out, but telling her mother about them would only cause her to worry. Ophelia did not wish for that.

“Nothing more, Mother.” She tried to smile, but it didn’t reach her eyes. “Amy is the only reason, of course.”

“Then why do I feel like you are hiding something from me?”

Ophelia breathed in deeply, unsure of what to say. All she wanted to do was tell her mother the truth, but that was equivalent to opening the secrets of her heart, and Ophelia did not feel ready for it. Although, if there was someone in the world who could make it easier for her to understand her feelings, it was her mother.

“Mother,” she sighed, “it feels as if I have fallen in love.”

“Fallen in love?” Her mother looked confused.

“I have fallen in love with Lord Cavendish.”

Ophelia stopped for a few seconds, realizing what she had just accepted in front of her mother when she should have just kept it to herself.

“My goodness, Ophelia,” her mother sighed. “Have you really?”

“I believe I have, yes.” She nodded. “I do not know why or how it happened, but it kept happening, and I had no control over it. One day, he meant nothing to me, but then we began to have conversations about books, and I realized how absolutely intelligent he was. Although, what truly made me fall for him was his changing behaviour with Amy. When at first he hadn’t even wished to spend time with her, he was slowly beginning to get better.”

“Ophelia, then why do you not tell him?”

“Tell him?” Ophelia laughed humourlessly. “I cannot tell him, Mother.”

“And why is that, my dear?”

“I heard him tell someone that he can never love me because I am beneath him regarding social standing. I cannot marry a man or love a man who would never even consider me his equal. Hence, it is best if I simply do not tell him because it will mean nothing to him. He might just make fun of me for dreaming so high.”

“Oh, Ophelia.” Her mother hugged her from the side.

Ophelia breathed in deeply and lay comfortably on her mother’s lap.

“I simply need to fall out of love with him, and everything will be fine.”

“Or you can tell him the truth about who you are and that your bloodline is noble as well. He will never see you as anything else but his equal, and you will be able to have everything you want, my darling.”

“I do not want a love for which I have to prove the purity of my blood. If he cannot love me for who I am as a person right now, he will never be able to love me.”

“I know what you mean, darling,” her mother replied, running her hands through Ophelia’s hair. “But that does not mean you do not have a shot at happiness.”

“I have all the happiness I might need regarding my family and Amy. I do not require his presence in my life to feel happy. I only told you, Mama, so my heart feels a little lighter after sharing it with someone, but please understand, I will get over this love.”

“What if you cannot?”

“I have to.” Ophelia sat back down. “I do not have another choice but to fall out of love because he will never want me, and I will only be putting myself up for

heartbreak by telling him.”

Ophelia was sure of her decision, realizing she had taken the right choice.

‘Whatever it is you wish for, my dear, I will always be standing with you.’

“Thank you, Mama.” Ophelia kissed her mother’s hand, already feeling grateful.

She knew she was doing the right thing.

Chapter 27

As Edward rode towards Kent, finally ready to face Ophelia, he knew he needed to tell her the truth. About everything. He had come to tell her his feelings for her, but before he could do that, she needed to know everything about Margaret.

If she considered him faultless in the matter, she would have him.

If she loved him too.

His heart rate accelerated as the driver told him they were just a few minutes from Ophelia's house, unsure how to face her. This was the last place he had expected to find himself anytime soon, but life worked in mysterious ways. If Rosalina had not confronted him and forced him to confront his truth, he would have never found himself at Ophelia's doorstep, telling her he loved her.

But it was the truth. He could finally accept it, and the knowledge made him feel much happier.

"We have arrived, My Lord." Edward looked out the window at the driver's announcement, realizing they had stopped outside a small house.

He was not certain if the family had yet received the money he had sent them through his solicitor in the name of a deceased uncle leaving them an inheritance, but he hoped it was done. The money would help them secure the futures of all the siblings without Ophelia having to work tirelessly.

Edward stepped out of the carriage and knocked on the door, unsure how he would be received. He was hoping for Ophelia to open the door, but instead, it was Ophelia's older version, the resemblance between her and her mother, which was uncanny. No one could deny they were related because they looked so much like one another.

Confusion evident on her face, she stared at him with scrunched eyes, taking in his appearance.

"You must be Mrs Jennings," she still appeared confused, "I am Edward Cavendish, the Earl of Sommers."

Her eyes widened as if everything was clear to her all of a sudden, and she resumed her manners, "My Lord."

"Will it be alright if I come inside?"

Edward felt his question made her realize she still hadn't invited him inside, and she immediately appeared embarrassed. He had clearly surprised them with his sudden arrival but had no time to inform them about it. She moved away, letting him walk inside.

"Please come in."

"Thank you."

He stepped inside, the small cottage spread before him in the form of a modest living room with several bedrooms attached. The kitchen was slightly open at the back of the house, and Edward could view it from his vantage point. He could see they had no money; everything they owned was simple, but the house still had character. They were people with kind hearts and ample compassion.

“Amelia, Sarah,” Ophelia’s mother called out to the two young girls seated leisurely on the sofas completely unaware of Edward’s presence, “The Earl of Sommers is here.”

They looked up at him together, immediately shooting up from the couch as if something had bit them and quickly dropped in curtsies.

“My Lord,” the taller of the two said, picking up the stack of books on the table.

“What a pleasure to have you here, My Lord,” the other one added, a charming smile on her face. Her smile reminded him of Ophelia, and his heart ached.

He watched amusingly as they immediately began to tidy up the place, quickly picking up any stray knickknacks strewn about here or there, but Edward could hardly care about a little mess. He was only here to see Ophelia, but she was nowhere in sight. If she had been in one of the bedrooms, she would have emerged on hearing his name, but there was no Ophelia in sight. Her blonde hair in a braid, her bright eyes, and that smile still missing from his life.

Edward needed to see her.

“You must not bother yourself with all this,” he asked Amelia and Sarah, walking inside.

“Oh, hardly a bother, My Lord,” the one with the charming smile replied. “I am Amelia by the way and you happen to be rather handsome.”

“Amelia,” Mrs Jennings warned her, but Amelia simply shrugged. She walked away, carrying several glasses directly to the kitchen.

Edward looked up just as the other sister, Sarah, emerged out from the bedroom she

had been in to probably store the multitudes of books. She came forward and sat on the sofa opposite Edward, who was now seated as well. Mrs Jennings was just a few paces away, but he could see how awkward everyone in the house appeared. He needed to dispel the tension one way or the other.

“I cannot see Andrew, your son, Mrs Jennings.”

“He is asleep,” Amelia replied before her mother returned from the kitchen.

“I think I hardly need to clarify this, but I am here to see Ophelia,” he said, pausing as everyone looked at him. “And Amy, of course, my dear niece.”

He felt a little caught up as all three women in the house stared at him with knowing expressions, their smiles turning into smirks momentarily. It felt as if they already knew the reason behind his visit, making him feel vulnerable about his emotions.

“Ophelia has gone to the village, My Lord,” her mother replied, “and she has taken Amy along with her, and the two of them won’t be back for a few hours at least.”

“Will it be fine if I wait here for her?”

“Of course!” her mother said enthusiastically. “The way you have allowed Ophelia to make your home hers and have been so kind to her, we hope to return a fraction of that kindness back to you by showing you ample hospitality now that you are at our humble abode.”

“I have hardly done much, Mrs Jennings,” he replied honestly, his mind returning to Ophelia. “Ophelia is so bright and charming that she made the entire household fall in love with her, including Amy. You won’t find a single person who is not in awe of her as a person, and she has been wonderful to Amy as well.”

“You have still been exceptionally kind by offering her a job and letting her stay in your house, My Lord. Ophelia has always been loving and kind, and now that we have met Amy, who could not love that beautiful little girl? I finally see what Ophelia meant in her letters when she mentioned how she came to love Amy like a mother.”

Edward’s heart ached at Mrs Jennings’ words, feeling something he had never felt before. Ophelia truly did love Amy like no other, and Edward was quite happy to see that. It was a beautiful gesture of kindness, which only Ophelia was capable of.

“If there is anyone who deserves this, it is your daughter.”

Edward continued talking to Mrs Jennings, who had a knowing smile on her face as they conversed. He could not understand if he was simply imagining it or if Mrs Jennings certainly knew something he didn’t, making Edward wonder what it was she knew.

Although, he did not wish to worry about it. His entire focus was still on Ophelia and what he would say to her once she arrived.

The clinking of glass made him look ahead, and he noticed Sarah walking back into the living room with a tray in her hand. He had not even noticed when she had left, but he graciously smiled at her as she placed tea and biscuits before him, staring at him curiously.

“Thank you, Miss Sarah.”

“You know my name.”

“Your sister has told me about you and your passion for teaching,” he lied, not wanting to tell her he knew about her by accidentally reading the letter.

“She has?” Sarah looked surprised. “I have already started with the classes.”

“Are you enjoying them?”

“Very much so!” Edward was happy to see her quite invested in the pursuit, clearly having a passion for what she was pursuing. He respected that immensely.

“Can I ask you a question, Lord Cavendish?”

“Of course.”

“Are you here with a wish to get married to Ophelia?”

Edward was stunned, not knowing how to reply. Although, the last thing he wished was to lie to the people who could very well become his family if Ophelia agreed to have him.

“Sarah, could you stop embarrassing Lord Cavendish in this manner?” Mrs Jennings scolded. “I apologize on her behalf.”

“Oh, no, it is unnecessary,” he said, turning back towards Sarah. “Miss Sarah, I believe yes. I am here to ask Miss Jennings to marry me if she wishes to. Because I certainly would love to wed her.”

The surprised yet happy expressions on the faces of the three women were enough to tell him they supported the match. Now all that was left to see was whether Ophelia would agree to it or push Edward away.

He certainly hoped for the former.

Chapter 28

With Amy in her arms, Ophelia wandered in the village market, trying to find everything she needed to cook dinner for her family tonight. She had come home after so long and wished to treat her family as best as she could. Not having cooked in so long, she had a desire to make food for everyone. Hence, she had decided to come to the village to get everything required for the meal.

“It will only take a few hours, Amy,” she said to the little girl, “and then I will have you back home with your new friends.”

Amy giggled as if Ophelia had said something very funny. Ophelia’s heart melted at her beautiful innocence, making her realize how much she actually loved Amy. She could not imagine parting with her at all.

Although, something about the day just did not sit right with Ophelia. Since she arrived at the market, she could feel eyes on her as if someone had been looking. She knew they might just be her suspicions, and she should let them go, but it was an ever-present, ever-nagging feeling at the back of her head.

Who is it?

Ophelia looked around closely when her gaze suddenly fell on a bonnet, which was certainly out of place for the village market. The woman looked up, her gaze meeting with Ophelia when Ophelia finally realized who it was. The shock of seeing Lady Alice at the market immediately turned to anger because Alice could never have good intentions.

Without wasting another second, Ophelia marched towards her, ready to confront her.

“What are you doing here?”

“Miss Jennings,” Alice acted as if she had not even seen Ophelia, which was a clear lie, making Ophelia even more suspicious about her presence in the village. “What are you doing here?”

“I live here.” Ophelia looked at her accusingly, entirely distrustful of Alice, “What are you doing here?”

“I have come to see a friend.”

“You have a friend in this poor village?” Ophelia scoffed, knowing someone like Alice could never make friends who were socially below her. She was too malicious and cruel ever to consider those below her as her equals.

“Of course I do.”

“Please do not lie to me, Lady Alice,” Ophelia said, “Why are you in my village?”

“I am not answerable to you in any way at all, Miss Jennings. I am here to meet with a friend, and you are wasting my time. Now, if you will excuse me, I will be on my way again.”

Without another word, Alice walked away from Ophelia. She climbed inside a waiting carriage, and the carriage drove away only moments later, bringing comfort to Ophelia once again. Alice’s presence around her and Amy was not something Ophelia wished to have, and it was best that she had left.

Now, Ophelia would be able to shop in peace.

Ophelia looked at the list in her hand, realizing she had bought everything she needed except vegetables. Just one last stop and she would finally be able to return home even though Amy was clearly enjoying herself at the market. She had easily made friends with all the shopkeepers and had been looking at the people and the colours of spices and fruits all around her.

Every time she pointed at something, Ophelia let her explore it. This was why it had already been two hours, yet Ophelia had still not bought everything. Although she was glad that Alice had not appeared again, her presence had been entirely unwelcome.

“Perhaps she had not been lying after all,” Ophelia whispered to herself, walking towards the vegetable stall.

She placed Amy on the small holding at the side of the stall, placing a kiss on her forehead.

“Stay here comfortably, my darling. It will only take me a few minutes.”

Ophelia quickly began to pick up the vegetables, finding the freshest ones from the available batches. She wanted everything to be perfect for the dinner. After buying and paying for the vegetables, she turned back towards Amy and to her horror, Amy was no longer seated at the holding.

Her world came crashing down as panic filled her throat.

“Amy?” Ophelia began to call loudly, and everyone around her immediately became attentive.

“Amy?” she called again, looking here and there to see if she had wandered away to look at something, but Amy was nowhere to be found.

Ophelia already knew that Amy was not one to wander away unless someone was with her. She could barely even walk, and if she were crawling, Ophelia would have seen her. Hence, it was impossible for her to get away alone.

No, Amy couldn't have wandered off.

"What is the matter, Miss?" a young man asked as several people gathered around her.

"A little girl was with me. She has disappeared."

"Yes, she was just here a few moments ago," a woman said, "did anyone see her walk away?"

"Or did anyone see someone take her?" Ophelia asked, her fears coming true.

It could be no one but Alice. No one had anything to do with Amy except for Alice, and the simple fact that Alice was present in her village was enough to tell Ophelia that something was bound to go wrong.

"We will look throughout the market," another young man said as everyone divided, calling out to Amy.

Ophelia, too, continued to look, but she knew it was not going to be effective, since Alice had already taken the little girl. That was clearly the only explanation. Tears stung her eyes at the horror of the situation as she worried for Amy's well-being, but Ophelia knew she was not going to let anything happen to Amy, no matter what she had to do to make it happen.

She was going to find Amy, but for that, she needed to return home at once.

Edward had only taken a sip of his tea when a loud banging on the door shocked him and everyone else at the sound and urgency of it. Mrs Jennings stood up to open the door, but Edward stood before her, motioning for her to stay at the back so he could check who it was.

“I will see.”

He walked towards the door, opening it, and to his surprise, Ophelia stood there, her blonde braid pulled apart as golden tendrils framed her flushed face. Edward could see she had probably run here, her entire face a complete mess. Her eyes widened upon seeing him, but she was already worried about something else. His heart grew worried seeing her in this condition.

“What’s wrong?” he asked, suddenly realizing Amy was not with her.

His panic grew even more as he walked back inside, pulling Ophelia inside the house as well. Mrs Jennings, Sarah, and Amelia also crowded around her while Ophelia tried to catch her breath enough to speak. However, she simply turned towards Edward.

“Amy,” she whispered, words not coming to her as tears began to fall down her face.

“What happened to Amy?” Edward’s heart was beating fast, his fear escalating with every passing second.

He could not afford anything happening to Amy. He realized how much he had come to love her.

Oh God, please let her be alright.

“She ... she,” Ophelia could not stop crying. “Amy just—”

“Ophelia, calm down.” He held her shoulders, making her look him in the eyes. “Tell me what happened.”

“I was buying vegetables, and I placed her on the side. I turned back just a few minutes later, and she was gone. She was not in the market. Someone took her.”

Edward felt blood rush to his ears, his fear only rising.

“Did you look around the market?” He needed to stay calm.

“Yes, but she wasn’t there,” Ophelia explained, no longer crying at last. “Alice took her.”

“Lady Alice?” Edward was confused.

“Yes.” Ophelia nodded. “I saw her in the market, and I asked her what she was doing here. She told me she had come to meet a friend, but it was obviously a lie. She might have come to find me and take some sorry revenge, and she took it by kidnapping Amy. I am certain it was her.”

“You are right.” If someone was capable of stopping so low, it was only Alice.

“But she couldn’t have gone far. We must follow her so we can get Amy back. She was in a simple black carriage instead of the one she usually uses.”

“Ophelia, please breathe,” he said calmly, knowing he was going to get Amy back. “We will bring her back.”

Ophelia nodded, but Edward had already moved away. He hurried out of the house,

springing to action as he told his carriage driver what had happened. He had been travelling with no one but two footmen and his carriage driver, but Edward knew he could find Alice. If she had indeed kidnapped Amy, she would head back to London and nowhere else. He leapt inside his carriage, not letting panic take hold of him.

He was not going to let Alice get away.

“I will be back soon.” Ophelia nodded, tears still streaming down her face, but all Edward could think about right now was Amy. He could not let go of this last connection with his sister. He loved Amy too much to lose her. Even if he had to turn the entire area upside down, he was going to find Amy, and if Alice truly had her as Ophelia suspected, he would make sure she suffered immensely for trying to kidnap his beloved niece.

Right now, he simply needed to find her.

They had only been driving for about thirty minutes, finally reaching the outskirts of town, when Edward’s carriage driver informed him that he could see a black carriage just a little up ahead, stationed at the side of the road.

“Stop the carriage.”

Edward got out, walking to the front to sit beside the carriage driver as they approached. Surely enough, a black carriage was standing still on the road, the driver trying to do something with the wheel. Edward hopped down, striding up to the driver, who immediately left the wheel and came to Edward, continuing to glance at the carriage in fear. Edward immediately knew something was wrong. He could sense it.

“Who is inside the carriage?” he asked the driver, keeping his voice low.

“Sir, can I trust you? You look like an important man?” the driver asked, sweat dripping down his forehead.

“I am the Earl of Sommers; you can trust me. Now tell me at once who is inside the carriage.”

“It is a young woman, My Lord,” the driver immediately divulged. “I believe she has kidnapped a child from someone and is now running away. I pretended that the carriage had broken down and stopped here so someone might have been able to find us, and I could not let a small child get hurt. Are you aware of who she is?”

“She is exactly who I am looking for,” Edward replied, his anger only increasing. “Thank you for reacting intelligently, and I will make sure you are rewarded for it.”

He nodded at the man, making his way towards the carriage. As Edward opened the door, he found Alice seated inside, Amy clasped tightly in her arms. Amy was loudly crying, her sobs already beginning to pain Edward’s heart as he stared at Alice, who had gone speechless.

“Lord Cavendish,” she whispered, her eyes wide in horror.

“Get out.”

He took Amy from her arms, and the child immediately calmed down the moment her gaze fell on Edward. She smiled through her tear-streaked face, melting Edward’s heart as he realized she recognized him. He was filled with relief at finding her, finally feeling a little at peace. Ophelia had been right; it had been Alice.

“My Lord, I can explain.”

“Do not even try.” Edward raised his hand the moment Alice started to speak, “You

are going to be dealt with by the authorities.”

“Edward, please, I was only doing it all for you.”

She began sobbing, but Edward knew even her tears were fake.

“You kidnapped my niece for me? Please do not try to justify your wrongdoings with lies, Lady Alice. You have already done enough.”

“I just wanted to show you how irresponsible that Ophelia is so you could love me instead.”

“Your plan failed miserably just as it was bound to. I never want to see your face again. Please stay away from me and my family.”

Without another word, Edward motioned towards his men to deal with the matter and turned back towards his carriage to leave. He needed to return to Ophelia because he knew she was just as worried as he had been. Or perhaps even more.

No one loved Amy as Ophelia did, and Edward could not wait to reunite them.

Chapter 29

“Are you going to hold her all evening like that? She is already annoyed with you.” Sarah laughed, but Ophelia nodded at the question. She had no plans of letting Amy out of her grasp now that they were finally together again. The few hours Amy had been away from her, Ophelia had felt as if she had lost herself. As if she had lost an important part of her body.

She could never part from Amy. She knew that.

“I am never letting her go.”

“Your sister is right, Miss Jennings,” Edward smiled. “Amy does seem a little annoyed. She has been trying to struggle out of your lap for hours now.”

Ophelia sighed, letting Amy go at last, and the child immediately moved away from her, happily crawling once again. Amy was perfectly fine as if nothing had even happened to her, and Ophelia was glad to see that. That was all she had hoped for, and now that Amy was playing with Andrew as if nothing had even happened, Ophelia felt at peace.

She looked up and found Edward staring at her.

“Will you take a walk with me?”

Ophelia was surprised at the question but nodded, “Of course.”

She stood up and led Edward towards the back of the house to their small garden, the two standing by the few plants her mother had planted there. Ophelia could have taken him outside the house but she did not want any of the neighbours to see them walking together and preferred the privacy of her own house.

“Are you okay after today?” he asked, concern in his eyes.

“I am,” she nodded. “Are you not angry with me?”

“Why would I be angry?”

“I lost Amy.”

“And we found her. If this is anyone’s fault, it’s Alice’s and no one else.”

Ophelia smiled, simply happy that everything had settled down.

“You are right.”

“Truth be told, I ... I do not know how to phrase this correctly.”

“Whatever it is, you can tell me,” Ophelia comforted him.

“It’s just, I had a few things to say,” he finally stuttered out, still appearing slightly awkward. What could this be about? Ophelia wondered.

“I am listening.” She smiled again, hoping to make him feel better.

“I wanted to tell you a few things about myself. This is why I came here in the first place before all this happened.”

In her panic, Ophelia had completely forgotten to ask Edward why he had come looking for her, and she realized he had come to see her. Although she still did not understand the reason behind it. After what he had heard her tell Alice, she knew she did not want to be with him in a personal capacity, but he was still her employer.

“What things?”

He walked around the tiny space, unable to meet her gaze. “Do you remember you once asked me why I disliked Amy or did not want to play with her and treat her with love?”

“I remember.”

“I did not give you a proper reply at that moment, but it was mainly because Amy reminded me of Margaret.” He sighed. His gaze was filled with a questioning glance, and Ophelia could see he was seeking understanding within her. “And reminded me of the fact that Margaret died because of me. Hence, seeing her made me feel miserable.”

“What do you mean Margaret died because of you?” Ophelia was confused.

“I was there with Margaret when she was giving birth, and there were a few complications, so I had to go looking for a physician, but it was storming heavily, and I could not find a physician on time. The physician finally came, and he told me to save either Margaret or the baby, and I had to save the baby because that was what Margaret wanted. I killed my own sister.”

“Edward,” Ophelia whispered at the declaration, “you did not kill your sister. You did what she wanted, and you tried your best. How is it your fault?”

“I just wish I had been a better brother to her.” He shrugged, tears in his eyes.

“None of this is your fault. Believe me.”

Edward nodded. “I am trying my best to.”

“I always thought you hated Amy because you did not like her father since he was a commoner.”

“What? Who told you that?” Edward asked.

“The cook and Mrs Connor.”

“I did hate Margaret’s husband, but not because he was a commoner. I hated him because he was a drunkard and gambler and not good enough for Margaret. She had fallen in love and thought he would eventually get better, but that did not happen. She realized it much later, and she was already pregnant with Amy by then, so she had no choice but to stay with him.”

Ophelia was stunned. She had not expected that.

“Oh.”

“You must have such a low opinion of me,” Edward said, appearing pained.

“No, no, it is not that,” she tried to explain but knew it was useless.

“The reason I told you this about me, Ophelia, is to make sure that you know all my truth before I tell you what I came here to tell you.”

Ophelia looked up at him as he approached her, taking both her hands in his. Her heart began to race at the touch, but she stayed put, trying to control herself.

“What do you want to tell me?” her words came out in a whisper.

“I am in love with you.” Ophelia’s eyes widened at the confession, unable to believe her ears. “And I wish to marry you if you will have me. Please.”

Ophelia snatched her hands away, unable to believe what was happening. He loved her? But how could that be after everything he had said to Alice about her?

“I do not want you to love me out of pity, Edward. I heard what you said to Alice about not being able to love me because I am beneath you socially. Please do not saunter in here trying to prove your love when it doesn’t even exist.”

“What?” he looked shocked. “What was it that you heard?”

“Just the other night in the garden at the Cartwright ball, you were talking to Lady Alice in the gardens. I heard that.”

Tears stung her eyes, but she remained in control, trying not to break down.

“It was all a lie to turn Alice’s focus away from you because I was afraid she might want to hurt you if she found out that I had fallen in love with you. Which was precisely what she did.”

“You don’t have to lie, Edward,” Ophelia whispered, unable to believe that he actually loved her.

“I am not lying!” Edward exclaimed, holding both her hands in his.

Just then, a pot suddenly fell beside them, and they looked up, finding Ophelia’s mother standing at the threshold looking at them.

“He really is not lying, Ophelia,” her mother sighed. “I can see that he loves you, and this is not out of pity whatsoever.”

“Mama,” Ophelia whispered, tears falling from her eyes. She turned towards Edward, “And I have not been completely honest with you about myself either.”

“What do you mean?” He looked confused.

Ophelia could not understand what was happening to her.

Just then, the back door opened, and to everyone’s surprise, Rosalina walked inside, Randolph beside her. Rosalina’s eyes fell on Edward and Ophelia, the urgency in her eyes clearly imminent of her need to tell something. Ophelia was certain this was something about her. Had Rosalina somehow found out the truth?

“Edward!” Rosalina exclaimed.

“Lord Syke!” Ophelia’s mother clearly recognized Randolph, shocking Ophelia even more.

“Viscountess Lockwood,” Randolph smiled, the only one still in control of himself, “Thank goodness I was right. I thought I had lost my mind since meeting Miss Jennings and could not place her.”

“Viscountess?” Edward asked Randolph, turning to look at Ophelia in bewilderment.

“She is a Lady, Edward!” Rosalina said. “Randolph finally remembered how he knew Ophelia, and I had to rush to tell you so your decision would become even more firm!”

Oh, Rosalina.

“This is what you were hiding from me?” Ophelia nodded at Edward’s question.

“I am the daughter of Viscount Lockwood, but my father passed away before Andrew was born, and we lost the title and the inheritance. My uncle became viscount and turned us out, and we had to move to Kent, and our condition got worse. I never tell anyone my real identity because it makes finding work difficult, so I also had to lie to you. I am sorry, Edward.”

“My goodness.”

“I had met the viscountess once, and since Lady Ophelia looks exactly like her mother, I thought I had met her,” Randolph added.

“Lady Ophelia,” Edward whispered, turning to look at her.

“Yes.” Ophelia nodded, finally giving up her lie.

“Even if you were not a Lady, my proposal for marriage would have remained intact as it is now. Please believe me, this is not out of pity but pure love, Ophelia. The love I have for you.”

“Edward,” she whispered, unable to stop crying.

Ophelia could not believe that everything she had ever wanted was right in front of her eyes, and all she needed to do was get a hold of it. She needed to extend her hand and take it.

“Will you marry me?” he asked again, kneeling with Ophelia’s hand in his. “Please?”

“I will.”

She sobbed as Edward stood up, Ophelia's arms immediately going around his neck as they hugged one another. The moment they touched, she felt as if everything in the world was right again.

She had Edward.

Her Earl.

And she was finally going to be his Lady.

Epilogue

One month later...

Ophelia held Amy in her arms as she stood behind Rosalina at the altar, as her maid of honour while the happy bride – dressed luxuriously in white – said her vows. Edward stood on the other side behind Randolph, his eyes on Ophelia and Amy.

“I now pronounce you husband and wife. You may kiss the bride.”

Everyone cheered as Randolph took Rosalina in his arms, kissing her passionately in front of the entire church. Ophelia turned to look at Edward, already staring at her, love shining in his eyes. The past month had been absolutely beautiful for them, and Ophelia had never been more in love. She saw no one but Edward; her heart completely meant for him and him alone.

As Rosalina and Randolph moved ahead, the pair came together again. Edward took Amy from her arms, who looked beautiful in the pink frock Ophelia had dressed the little girl in.

“How are you feeling, my darling?” Edward asked, smiling at her.

Their engagement had already been announced in the papers, and everyone in the ton had already gushed over how much they loved one another. It was apparent to everyone around them, and Ophelia did not mind one bit. She finally had all the love she could ask for.

“I am feeling quite well. You?”

“Excellent!” Ophelia glanced at him, noticing the glint in his eyes.

They walked to one side as the guests began to mingle; Ophelia’s family also present at the ceremony.

“What is the matter? You look extremely happy,” she asked Edward, who nodded.

“I am,” he said, smiling. “I have obtained the special licence, and we are to be married in two weeks.”

Ophelia was stunned. “Truly?”

“Truly.”

“Oh, I am ecstatic!”

“Now that your family has shifted to my London residence, we will be directly moving to our country house till we leave for our honeymoon. Will that be alright?” he asked Ophelia, whose heart was already so full of love.

Edward had moved her family away from the cottage in Kent despite her mother’s protests and asked them to live in his London house instead. The way he had taken responsibility for everything in Ophelia’s life was both heartwarming and beautiful, and she could not be thankful enough for everything he was doing. She could see how much he loved her and cared for her.

“That will be perfect.” Ophelia smiled.

“I have other news,” he sighed, “Alice will be released by the authorities soon after a

short sentence, but I have made it clear that she is not to come near me, you, Amy, or even anyone in our family. In fact, I have said it is best if she moves to France.”

“She is already being released?”

“Her father is the Duke of Ashbourn. He arranged for it. But at least she will be moving, so that is going to work in our favour.”

“That will indeed be best for all of us. Everyone in the ton already knows what she has done, so no one here will be welcoming anyway.”

“You are right.”

They stood side by side, watching the wedding guests saunter out of the church to leave for the wedding breakfast at Randolph’s estate. Amy kept jumping in Ophelia’s arms, pointing at everyone leaving, and Edward laughed at her antics. She kept trying to form half-spoken words from her mouth, clearly talking in her own language. It was adorable.

“You want to go for the breakfast, darling?” Ophelia asked her as she continued pointing.

“Ma,” she suddenly said, staring at Ophelia.

“Is she trying to say what I think she is trying to say?” Edward whispered, both of their eyes wide.

“Ma ... ma.”

Ophelia was stunned.

“Mama,” Amy said more clearly, bringing tears to Ophelia’s eyes.

“Yes, my baby?” Edward began to laugh with happiness.

“Mama,” Amy repeated, giggling.

“Oh, Edward,” Ophelia sighed, kissing Amy on the cheek.

“I love you both so much,” he whispered, taking Ophelia’s hand in his.

“We love you too.”

They finally left the church as Ophelia felt like the happiest woman in all of London. She had the man who loved her beside her and a little girl who considered Ophelia to be her mother. Her heart had never been more full.

THE END

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Several years had passed since the day Ophelia had accepted Edward's proposal, and their lives together had blossomed into a storybook of happiness and love. The house, once somber and filled with Edward's grief over the loss of his sister, was now brimming with laughter and life.

Ophelia stood in the nursery, gazing fondly at her two children playing on the rug. Little Henry, their eldest son, was carefully stacking wooden blocks while his younger sister, Emma, watched in fascination, clapping her tiny hands every time one of Henry's towers toppled over. Emma was barely two, but she had already learned the art of cheering for her big brother, much to Ophelia's delight.

Amy, now seven, stood proudly next to them, watching over her younger siblings with a protective, almost maternal, instinct. Ever since Emma had been born, Amy had taken her role as big sister very seriously. "Careful, Henry," Amy said, crouching down beside him as he balanced another block atop his wobbly tower. "You don't want it to fall."

Henry grinned up at her, his brown curls tumbling into his eyes. "I got it, Amy! Watch!" He placed another block on top, and when the tower stood firm, he beamed with pride. Emma squealed in delight and clapped her chubby hands, making everyone in the room laugh.

Ophelia's heart swelled with love as she watched the scene. She was expecting another child in just a few months, and the thought of her growing family filled her with a joy she never could have imagined back when she first arrived at Wessex Manor as a simple governess. The life she shared with Edward was nothing short of a dream, and every day she felt gratitude for the love that had blossomed between

them.

The door creaked open, and Edward's familiar figure appeared in the doorway. His eyes softened as they fell upon the scene before him. "What have we here?" he asked, stepping into the room and kneeling beside Henry and Amy. He picked up Emma, who giggled as he lifted her into the air. "Is that another grand tower I see, Henry?"

"Yes, Papa!" Henry said excitedly. "I'm going to build it even higher next time!"

Edward chuckled, pulling Amy close with his free arm. "I have no doubt you will. And how is my Amy today?"

Amy smiled up at him. "I'm fine, Papa. I've been helping Henry, just like you said."

"You're the best big sister," Edward said, planting a kiss on her forehead. "I don't know what we'd do without you."

Ophelia moved to join them, her hand resting on her round belly as she approached. "I don't know what I would do without any of you," she said, her voice full of affection as she stood beside Edward.

Edward reached out to take her hand, giving it a gentle squeeze. His eyes met hers, and in that moment, the years of their love, their trials, and their triumphs were shared in silence between them. "We've come a long way, haven't we?" he whispered.

Ophelia smiled warmly. "We have, indeed."

As they stood together, surrounded by their children, Ophelia couldn't help but feel that their story, which had once seemed so uncertain, had found its perfect, happy conclusion. Yet, in her heart, she knew that their adventures together were far from over.

The weeks passed in a peaceful rhythm, each day filled with moments of joy, laughter, and the small but meaningful tasks that came with managing their family and estates. Life at Wessex Manor had settled into a contented routine, but there were always surprises waiting just around the corner.

One such surprise came when Edward received a letter from his solicitors, the contents of which had been eagerly anticipated for quite some time. He had long been working to ensure that Ophelia's family regained what was rightfully theirs—the title and estates that had been taken from them unjustly. Edgar, the uncle who had taken over the viscountcy after the death of Ophelia's father, had been unwilling to cede the lands and title to Andrew, the rightful heir. But Edward, determined to see justice done, had set his team of solicitors to the task of pursuing the matter relentlessly.

Sitting in his study, Edward's gaze fell on the letter as he opened it. A slow smile spread across his face as he read the words confirming what he had hoped for. It was done. Edgar had finally conceded, and the title of Viscount Lockwood would soon be returned to young Andrew, Ophelia's brother. Edward folded the letter and set it aside, leaning back in his chair with a deep sense of satisfaction.

He would share the news with Ophelia later that day, but for now, he simply relished the feeling of triumph. It was not about the title itself, but about restoring what had been taken from Ophelia and her family. Edward had always been a man of honor, and ensuring that justice was served brought him peace.

Later that evening, as the family gathered for dinner, Ophelia noticed the glimmer in Edward's eyes. "You look as though you have something on your mind," she said, smiling at him across the table as she helped Emma with her plate.

Edward chuckled, taking a sip of his wine. "I do, indeed." He paused for a moment, watching as the children chattered and laughed around them. "But it's not just on my mind—it's something I've been waiting to tell you for quite some time."

Ophelia tilted her head, curious. “Oh? And what might that be?”

Edward leaned forward slightly, his voice soft but filled with excitement. “It’s about Andrew and the title of Viscount. It’s been returned to him. Edgar has finally relinquished it.”

Ophelia’s hand flew to her mouth in surprise. “Edward... truly?”

“Truly.” He reached out and took her hand, his expression tender. “Andrew will be heading to Eton soon, and he’ll be managing the estate with my help until he’s of age. Everything that was taken from you and your family has been restored.”

Tears welled up in Ophelia’s eyes as she looked at her husband. “I don’t even know what to say. I never thought...”

“You don’t have to say anything,” Edward said gently. “It was the right thing to do, and now you and your family will finally have the justice you deserved.”

Ophelia smiled through her tears, overwhelmed by gratitude. Her mother would be overjoyed to hear the news, and Andrew—still so young—would have the future that had once seemed impossible.

As they sat together, their children playing happily around them, Ophelia felt a deep sense of peace. Life had been kind to her in ways she had never expected, and with Edward by her side, she knew that their future was as bright as the love they shared.

Ophelia’s mother, the Dowager Viscountess, was indeed overjoyed when she heard the news. The restoration of the title to young Andrew was a moment of great celebration for the family. She had always held her head high despite the injustices they had suffered, but now, surrounded by her grandchildren and the knowledge that her family’s rightful place had been restored, she seemed more content than ever.

The house was full of life that day, with Rosalina and her growing family visiting, along with Ophelia's siblings. The children were running about in the gardens, their laughter echoing through the air as they played, while the adults gathered inside for tea. Ophelia and Rosalina sat together on the terrace, watching the children.

"Look at them," Rosalina said with a soft smile, resting her hands on her growing belly. "It's like watching happiness in motion. They're so carefree."

Ophelia nodded, her eyes on Amy, who was leading a game of tag with the younger children. "They are, and I'm so grateful for it. I never imagined my life could be so full, so complete."

Rosalina chuckled, leaning back in her chair. "And soon, you'll have another little one to add to this chaos. How are you feeling?"

Ophelia placed a hand on her rounded belly, smiling. "Tired, mostly. But happy. Very happy."

Rosalina nodded, her gaze thoughtful. "I remember feeling the same with my second. There's something wonderful about watching your family grow, knowing that you've built something so strong and loving."

Ophelia smiled at her, appreciating the shared bond of motherhood between them. "You're right. I still can't believe how much everything has changed since those early days. To think, I was once just a governess in Edward's house, unsure of my place in the world."

"And now you're his countess, his wife, and the mother of his children," Rosalina said with a grin. "You've more than found your place, Ophelia. You've built a life full of love."

Just then, Edward and Randolph joined them on the terrace, deep in conversation about the latest developments at Eton, where Andrew was soon to attend. Edward had been taking an active role in preparing Andrew for the responsibilities of managing the estate, something that had become more real now that the title had been restored.

Andrew, despite his youth, showed a maturity beyond his years. He was eager to learn, and Edward had taken the boy under his wing, teaching him everything he needed to know. Edward had grown fond of his young brother-in-law, and their bond was becoming one of deep mutual respect.

As Edward sat down next to Ophelia, he placed a reassuring hand on her shoulder. “Andrew’s nearly ready for Eton. He’s excited, though a little nervous about leaving home.”

Ophelia smiled softly. “He’s young, but he’ll do well. I’m so proud of him. And of you, Edward, for helping him manage everything.”

Edward squeezed her hand. “He’s a good lad. He’ll grow into a fine Viscount.”

Their conversation was interrupted by Mrs. Bailey, who appeared from the doorway with a gentle smile on her face. She had long since retired from her official duties as housekeeper, but that hadn’t stopped her from keeping a close eye on things around the manor.

“You’re all out here chatting, while I see the housemaids are slacking off,” Mrs. Bailey said with a teasing tone, though the fondness in her voice was unmistakable. “I think I’ll need to remind them who’s really in charge around here.”

Ophelia laughed. “Mrs. Bailey, you’re supposed to be retired! Aren’t you supposed to be relaxing instead of bossing everyone around?”

Mrs. Bailey waved a hand dismissively. “Oh, nonsense, my lady. What would I do with myself if I didn’t keep everyone in line? Besides, I’ve got years of experience, and the new housekeeper could use my guidance.”

Edward smiled. “You’re indispensable, Mrs. Bailey. We’d be lost without you.”

The older woman huffed in mock protest but couldn’t hide her pleasure at Edward’s words. She had become like family to them, and the bond between her and Ophelia had only deepened over the years.

As they all sat together, surrounded by family and friends, Ophelia’s heart swelled with love. This, she realized, was what happiness truly looked like—a home filled with laughter, with love, and with the people she cherished most. The future was bright, and she couldn’t wait to see what it would bring.

As the sun began to set, casting a warm golden glow over the estate, the sound of children’s laughter still echoed in the garden. Ophelia and Edward sat side by side on the terrace, enjoying a moment of peace as the day began to wind down. Rosalina and Randolph had taken their children inside, and the house was bustling with the pleasant chaos of a large, happy family.

Ophelia leaned her head against Edward’s shoulder, letting out a contented sigh. “I never thought life could be this perfect,” she murmured. “Our children, our family... it feels like a dream.”

Edward wrapped an arm around her, drawing her closer. “It’s not a dream, my love. It’s the life we’ve built together. And I wouldn’t trade it for anything.”

Ophelia smiled, resting a hand on her belly where their third child would soon make an entrance into the world. “It’s hard to believe how far we’ve come. From the governess and the brooding earl to this... I couldn’t have imagined it.”

Edward chuckled softly. "I certainly never expected that you, of all people, would turn my life upside down. But I'm glad you did."

"Turned it upside down, did I?" Ophelia teased, lifting her head to look at him. "I seem to recall you being the one who didn't want to let me into your life at first."

Edward smiled, his eyes full of warmth and love. "You were right, though. You saw what I couldn't see. You helped me heal, and now... I can't imagine my life without you."

Ophelia's heart swelled at his words. She reached up to cup his face, her thumb brushing gently over his cheek. "And I can't imagine my life without you either, Edward. You've given me everything I never thought I could have."

Their moment was interrupted by the patter of little feet as Amy and Henry came running up to them, their faces flushed with excitement. Emma toddled behind them, giggling as she tried to keep up with her older siblings.

"Mama, Papa!" Amy called out, her eyes bright. "Can we show you the garden? Henry found some flowers, and we want to pick them for you!"

Edward smiled down at his children, his heart full. "Of course, my darlings. Let's go see what you've found."

He stood, offering his hand to Ophelia to help her up. Together, they followed their children into the garden, their steps slow and unhurried as they took in the beauty of the late afternoon.

As they wandered through the blooming flowers, Henry proudly presented a small bouquet of wildflowers to his mother. "For you, Mama," he said, his chest puffed out with pride.

Ophelia knelt down and kissed his forehead. “Thank you, Henry. They’re beautiful, just like you.”

Amy held Emma’s hand, helping her pick a few flowers of her own. “Here, Emma, these are for Mama too,” Amy said, smiling as she handed the little girl a bright yellow bloom.

Emma giggled, toddling over to Ophelia with the flower clutched in her tiny fist. “Mama!” she said proudly, holding it up.

Ophelia’s heart melted as she accepted the flower, her eyes filled with love for her children. She glanced over at Edward, who was watching them with a look of pure adoration.

“This,” Ophelia said softly, “is everything I ever wanted.”

Edward came to her side, wrapping an arm around her shoulders as he gazed out at their children playing in the garden. “It’s everything I wanted too,” he said quietly. “And more.”

As the evening light softened and the children’s laughter filled the air, Ophelia knew that their future was bright. The hardships of the past were behind them, and what lay ahead was a life full of love, laughter, and the joy of watching their family grow.

Edward leaned down and pressed a soft kiss to her temple. “I love you, Ophelia.”

She smiled up at him, her heart overflowing with happiness. “And I love you, Edward. Always.”

With their children around them and another little one on the way, Ophelia and Edward knew that they had found their happily ever after—not just in the pages of a

story, but in the life they shared every single day.

And it was more than enough.

THE END

Chapter 1

“Belle!” Lady Amelia Talbot’s sweet voice turned scolding for a moment, as she bent down to address the small dog clamoring at her feet. “You cannot come to the ball, you know!”

Amelia scooped up the dog, tickling her under the chin, gazing at her in mock irritation. She couldn’t really be angry with Belle, who was her very favorite of her three dogs—not that she would tell the others that, who were very sweet as well. But she had a definite soft spot for Belle, who had been the runt of her litter, and a bit sickly. Amelia had nursed her to health and the bond was strong. So strong, in fact, that little Belle couldn’t bear to be separated from her at all.

“I will not be gone for so very long, little one,” Amelia crooned, scratching her under the chin again. “I will be back home in no time at all...”

“What are you doing with that dog, Amelia?” Her brother, Charles, the Viscount Somersby, stepped out onto the front steps of their ancestral home, staring at his sister, with an amused look on his face. “She cannot wait in the carriage for us while we are at the ball. She will be bored senseless and make a huge mess.”

“I know, I know,” sighed Amelia, staring at Belle, who was gazing back at her in a mournful manner. The dog’s eyes were huge and black, and she was whining in the back her throat. “I do not know how she escaped and found me...”

“I will call for a maid to take her,” said Charles, beckoning to the butler, who walked off to fetch a maid. He took out his pocket watch, staring at it. He frowned. “We are

going to be late.”

Amelia shrugged. “We shall be fashionably late,” she said, her jaw tightening. “It does not matter so very much. The Duke and Duchess of Rochester will not even notice.” Her eyes flickered. “It is not as if we have very high status in the ton, Charles. You are an impoverished viscount, and I am the sister of one. If we decided not to go at all, I am sure very few people would notice.”

“Oh, come now, Millie, that is not like you,” replied Charles, taking the dog out of her arms and handing it to the maid who had just appeared. “You are normally so sunshiny and bright. Nothing ever bothers you. Why are you so glum this evening?”

Amelia shrugged again, turning away from her brother, watching the maid carry the dog back into the house. Her heart contracted. She didn’t want to go to this ball—she would much rather stay at home, sitting by the fire in the parlor, playing with the dogs as she did most evenings. She rarely wanted to be anywhere else.

But Charles had insisted that they go to this particular ball. He had said it would be good for her to socialize; that she was in danger of becoming a hermit and needed to get out of her shell. He had insinuated that she needed to socialize in order to find a husband, but he had not said it explicitly. Amelia was grateful for that, at least. Charles was never forceful about marrying her off, or—heaven forbid—one of those dreadful people who believed in arranged marriages. Her older brother was quite happy for her to find her own husband in her own time... though clearly, time was ticking, and he was ready to speed things along a bit.

I suppose I should not be surprised, thought Amelia, with a heavy sigh. I have just turned three and twenty, after all. I am in danger of becoming an old maid if I do not find a husband soon. My youthful looks shall fade like the rose on the vine.

“I am just not in the mood for it,” she said, in a curt voice, turning back to her

brother. “But I am resigned to it, nonetheless.” She let out another sigh. “Come on, let us get into the carriage and be away before I change my mind.”

“That is the spirit,” cried Charles, grinning at her, rushing past her toward the carriage. He looked back at her, a quizzical look upon his face. “By the way, you have dog fur all over your bodice, now. You might want to attend to that.”

Amelia glanced down at the bodice of her best ball gown. The peacock blue silk was covered in fine white dog fur. She sighed again, brushing it off with her fan as best she could, before making her way to the carriage, holding the footman’s hand as she scrambled inside of it.

As she sat back in the seat, hearing the driver crack the whip, and the wheels started turning, she took a deep breath. She must get through the coming evening as best she could. At least her best friend, Miss Louisa Sedgewick, would be there. That was a blessing. And it would only be a few hours until they could return home—Charles never liked a late night. That was a blessing, as well.

Amelia gazed out the carriage window. She had never expected that her life would turn out this way. She had never expected that she and Charles would be living together in their twenties, in their crumbling old ancestral home, Somersby Hall.

Her heart contracted. They were adult orphans, now. Their parents were gone forever, leaving them both virtually penniless, with only their esteemed family name and the old house. And they must make do as best as they could. That was just the way of it. The sooner she made peace with their reduced circumstances, the better.

I really should try to find a husband , she thought, mournfully . A wealthy husband, who can provide me with a better life. It would be the prudent thing to do.

Amelia pressed her face against the glass, feeling troubled. She knew she should do

it. But something always stopped her. She wished she knew why she couldn't do it. That would be half the battle. Sometimes, she had a twinge of awareness about her resistance, but then, it would fade away again.

She was so deep in her reverie about their perilous circumstances that she jumped when the carriage started to slow down, turning through huge gates and clattering down a long driveway.

Amelia's heart clenched. They were arriving at their destination—the grand, palatial ancestral home of the Duke and Duchess of Rochester, which resided just on the outskirts of Brighton, but had the feeling of being deep in the country.

Her breath caught in her throat as she gazed at the house. It was one of the most splendid estates in the district on five hundred sprawling acres. Her eyes flickered to the verdant green lawn, surrounded by rolling hills. So many old trees, bending their branches over the driveway, almost touching the top of the carriage like ghostly fingertips.

The duke and duchess were the cream of the ton in the district, as well; they ruled the local scene like a king and queen. One always knew who was fashionable in the district around Brighton by who the duke and duchess favored. If one did not receive an invitation to their grand ball, soirees or dinner parties, then one was definitely on the outer edge, and needed to curry favor immediately, for fear of being a social pariah.

I wish they decided that they did not like me , thought Amelia mutinously. Then I would never be forced to attend one of their boring balls ever again.

She bit her lip, reflecting that it was strange that she and her brother were continuously favored and always invited to the house. They were penniless, trading on their good name. But then, the Duke of Rochester had been good friends with their

late father, so she supposed that must have something to do with it.

The carriage skirted the driveway, trying to edge past the multitude of carriages parked on the side of the lawn near the house. Amelia's heart clenched as she saw the elegant guests walking into the house, dressed in their finest attire, suitable for a fine summer evening, chattering and laughing, looking like they didn't have a care in the world.

"Oh, there is Louisa and her mother," exclaimed Amelia, clapping her hands together in sudden glee as she spotted her best friend walking up the front steps of the house. She turned to Charles. "I had a secret fear that she would not be coming, and I would be forced to endure the evening without her."

Charles chuckled, scratching his chin. "You and Louisa are as close as sisters," he remarked. "You have been as thick as thieves since you were children." He arched his brows. "You are really a bit over attached to her you know, Millie. You take fright at the very thought of Louisa not being by your side at any ball or gathering."

"And what is wrong with that?" asked Amelia, bristling. "What is more natural in the world than wanting one's closest friend by one's side when one walks into the lion's den?"

Charles gave a bark of laughter. "The lion's den? Is that how you think of the Duke and Duchess of Rochester's grand residence?" He shook his head incredulously. "You are so whimsical, Amelia!"

Amelia pouted. She knew she was a bit odd by social conventional standards. She wasn't one of those social butterflies who flitted from group to group. She only had a few close friends who she stuck to like glue. But she couldn't be entirely alone—some other people must share her disdain for social events, surely?

Her eyes flickered toward her brother. Charles certainly wasn't one of them. Her older brother had always been the life and soul of the party. People were drawn to him like moths toward a flame. However, Charles had changed a little bit as he had aged—her brother was in his late twenties now, and rather than wanting to stay out all night playing cards or dice, he preferred to leave gatherings early.

Amelia rolled her eyes. Thank the Lord for small mercies.

Charles swung around, staring out the window. "What is the delay?" he said, in a slightly irritable voice. "There is another carriage blocking the entry, and it seems it is not in a hurry to move along." He kept staring out the window. "Who the deuce is it?"

Amelia didn't reply, tapping her fingers on the windowpane. She didn't care if the carriage in front of them blocked the front entrance for the entire night, really. The longer they stayed stationary there, the better, in her opinion.

Suddenly, Charles stiffened, craning his head out the window. "Oh, I say," he cried, turning back to his sister, his eyes shining with excitement. "It is old Pembroke! I did not know he was back in the district!"

"Who?" asked Amelia absently, focusing on her brother. "Who is it?"

He gaped at her. "You know old Pembroke! My old friend, George Fitzroy, the Duke of Pembroke." He frowned. "You must remember him, Millie. Somersby Hall was like his second home for quite a few years, before he left the district five years ago to live in London..."

Charles's voice started to fade away. Amelia leaned forward, gazing out the window. Her heart had started to pound uncomfortably.

Her breath caught in her throat. There he was, striding toward the house, dressed in a smart blue evening jacket, cream britches, and long black boots. Her eyes widened. Was he taller than she remembered?

Her heart started pounding harder. His dark brown hair was as unruly as ever. Her eyes travelled to his face. He had grown mutton chops, which suited him.

And then he turned, mid stride, looking straight at their carriage. His eyes were exactly the same shade of dark, piercing blue.

Amelia shrunk back into the carriage, feeling like she couldn't breathe.

The Duke of Pembroke. She had thought she would never see him again.

Chapter 2

“Pembroke! I thought it was you!”

George Fitzroy, the Duke of Pembroke, spun around at the sound of the male voice behind him. He had just finished being presented to the Duke and Duchess of Rochester and had managed to procure a glass of champagne, sipping it as he skirted the ballroom, eying the local ton. It seemed a lot longer than five years since he had been back in the district. It seemed a lifetime ago.

“Somersby!” George’s eyes widened, then he broke out into a wide grin, surging toward the other man. It was Charles Talbot, the Viscount Somersby, and one of his oldest friends. He had practically lived at Charles’s home when he had been a youth. “It is so good to see you, old chap!”

George clapped the Viscount on the back, gazing at him fondly. There were a lot of people assembled in this house that he didn’t particularly want to run into, but Charles wasn’t one of them. His old friend had always been the salt of the earth.

“When did you return?” asked Charles, grabbing a glass of champagne from a passing footman. “And why have you not called at Somersby Hall yet?”

“Steady on,” laughed George, taking another sip of his champagne. “I only got here late last night. Today has been settling into the old house and making it comfortable.” He took a deep breath. “It has not been used in many years and even though the servants have done their best, it is still a little rough around the edges.”

Charles rolled his eyes. “I could only imagine. These old houses with a hundred rooms take a lot of work to keep well maintained.” He grimaced. “Believe me. I know. Somersby Hall is starting to fall to pieces before my eyes.”

George smiled sympathetically. He knew that Somersby had a few issues with cash flow—his old friend had inherited the title and estate when his father had passed six years ago, but it hadn’t come with a large stipend. As far as he knew, poor Charles had to run that large estate on only a couple of thousand pounds a year, which was a pittance to maintain such a large house.

His old man was a secret gambler, thought George, feeling another stab of sympathy for the gentleman standing in front of him. He whittled away the family fortune, leaving Charles with practically nothing. It must be difficult for him.

He gazed at his friend. Charles had filled out a little—he was more thick set now. He also had a few crow’s feet at the corners of his eyes. Well, it had been five years since they had seen each other. He was sure he looked different, too, after so long.

“I am sorry to hear that, Somersby,” he said. “The Hall is a splendid old house.”

Charles shrugged, draining his glass. “We all have our crosses to bear in this life,” he said, grinning. “Maintaining that old house happens to be mine!” His grin widened. “But enough about me, Pembroke. Tell me, how are you, and why have you suddenly returned to the district after all these years away?”

George smiled. “I am well,” he replied slowly. “I am still enjoying my life in London at the townhouse on Grosvenor Square.” He paused. “It is far more cosmopolitan than dear old Brighton.”

“I am sure it is,” said Charles, grimacing slightly, before chuckling. “The dear old town has never been the epicenter of excitement. But I am fond of it just the same.”

He drew a deep breath. “What do you get up to in London?”

“I run a shipping business,” replied George, his smile widening. “I like the challenge and stimulation of it. A bit of a hobby. So much of my time is spent there.” He hesitated. “But in my spare time, I like the usual things—spending time at White’s, playing cards with the gentlemen, and going to Covent Garden. And so on.”

Charles arched an eyebrow. “And is there a duchess now? Have you thrown off the mantle of bachelorhood?”

George gave a bark of laughter. “Heavens, no! I have not yet met any lady I think superior enough to become my wife... although London society is filled with lots of lovely ladies, of course. I just have not found one that suits me particularly.” He shrugged.

Charles laughed. “You do not need to convince me,” he replied, gazing around the ballroom. “I have not yet met any lady who I find superior above all others, either. And I am unlikely to in this company. It is the same ladies from one social event to another.”

“You should come to London,” said George. “There is a far wider circle available there. Perhaps you would meet your match. You are very welcome to stay with me at Grosvenor Square any time you like, you know.”

“That is decent of you, Pembroke,” said Charles, grinning. “I might just take you up on that offer at some point.” He shrugged his shoulders. “Although, I am not confident I would find a lady there, as opposed to here. You have not, after all.”

George shrugged, conceding the point, gazing around the ballroom. There were a few attractive ladies in attendance, though they weren’t as beautiful or as sophisticated as the ladies in London, to be sure. But then, he had never expected that they would be.

He grimaced, pulling at the collar of his shirt. He didn't really know why he had accepted this invitation tonight—he supposed he must have been slightly curious about seeing the ton of Brighton once again, after all his years away. He had grown up there, after all. But after his father had died, he hadn't fancied rattling around that old house by himself, and he had always had a yen to live in the big city.

His heart shifted. And there hadn't been anything keeping him there. No matter how much he yearned for it to be different.

Why did you come back here? What on earth possessed you to think that you could do it?

George pulled at his collar again. He was starting to sweat. He gazed into the crowd, at all the fashionable ladies milling around, and his heart started to pound. None of them were her. But then again, would he even recognize her after all this time? It had been five years. She may look totally different now.

His eyes slid back to Charles. Should he ask? But how could he bring up the topic, without it sounding forced and affected? Would he color violently and give away that his enquiry wasn't as casual as it appeared to be?

He was just about to do it, when he balked, gazing over his old friend's shoulder, visibly gaping. He couldn't help it.

She was walking through the crowd toward them. He assumed that she must be walking, as he knew that she was a mere mortal like him and everyone else here, but to his eyes, she appeared to be gliding, as if she were skating on ice, or else moving through the air on invisible wings.

His heart somersaulted in his chest. He couldn't take his eyes off her. She was wearing a peacock blue silk gown, with ruffles on the bodice, and short puffed

sleeves, with a very high empire line, as was the current fashion. A single diamond necklace hung around her neck and matching diamonds hung from her earlobes. Her dark auburn hair was swept up into a high chignon, with tiny curls framing her face.

His eyes swept to her face. Her skin was as pale as he remembered, as smooth as alabaster, and as flawless. Her face was angular, with high cheekbones, and a pointed chin. Her eyes were warm brown, the color of honey, or molasses.

His heart flipped again. She had grown taller and more curvaceous. But then, that was probably to be expected—she had only been eighteen when he had last gazed upon her face. She had been a girl blossoming into womanhood then—now, she had blossomed into that woman. A beautiful woman... even more beautiful than he could ever have imagined she would be.

Amelia. The younger sister of the friend standing beside him.

He felt the sweat trickle down his neck. He wanted to turn and run away, but there was nowhere to run. She was almost upon them, and it would look pointed and rude if he just suddenly bolted. No, he had no choice but to endure it, however painful it was going to be.

“Ah, there you are, sister,” said Charles, drawing her into the circle. “I lost you as soon as we entered. Where have you been?”

Amelia’s eyes flickered toward George, then back to her brother. His heart contracted. Did she remember him, or had she forgotten him entirely?

“I have been socializing, brother,” she replied, with a small smile. “And catching up with Louisa.”

George felt his cheeks redden. She must be referring to Miss Louisa Sedgewick—he

recalled that they had always been close friends. It appeared that some things never changed... even as everything did.

He pulled at his collar, feeling more awkward than he had ever felt in his life. The desire to bolt intensified. When the deuce was Charles going to re-introduce them and be done with it so he could do just that?

Finally—mercifully—Charles turned his sister toward him, a slight smile upon his face.

“You remember my younger sister Amelia, do you not, Pembroke?”

Amelia swept into a low curtsy, before rising, looking him straight in the eye. “Your Grace.”

“Lady Amelia,” he said, his voice cracking just a little bit, inclining his head. “How charming to see you again.”

“She is all grown up now, is she not?” Charles was grinning from ear to ear. “I bet you hardly recognized her, Pembroke!”

“Indeed,” replied George, in a stiff voice. “You were quite a few years younger when we last saw each other, Lady Amelia.”

He knew that he sounded overtly formal and pompous, but he just couldn’t seem to help it. It seemed safer. He looked away, gazing pointedly over her shoulder, seeking his escape.

“You should ask Amelia to dance, Pembroke,” continued Charles, his grin widening. “For old times’ sake!”

There was a tense silence. Amelia looked mortified, glaring at her brother, but Charles was composed, looking completely unruffled. Clearly, he saw no harm in asking one of his oldest friends to dance with his younger sister, and indeed, why should he? It was a harmless enough gesture—in fact, it was quite chivalrous.

The silence lengthened. Amelia's cheeks turned pink. Damnation! He had to do something. He must respond. But the thought of standing up with her on the dance floor, enduring her proximity, was simply too much.

“I think not,” he said, in a stiff voice, inclining his head again. “I am afraid I am due to meet an old friend and cannot spare the time.”

Amelia's color deepened. Even Charles had picked up on the awkwardness and looked embarrassed, now, staring down at the floor, shifting on his feet, a frown on his face.

“Excuse me,” said George, bowing, before walking stiffly away.

He didn't look back.

When he had turned the corner, and was safely away from them, he sagged, leaning against a wall. People flitted past him, laughing brightly and chattering, but he didn't notice them at all. They looked as insubstantial as shadows to him.

I should never have come back to Brighton. I should never have come to this ball.

He pushed back his hair, mortified to find that his hand was shaking.

He had willingly done this to himself. He had stepped into the mouth of the lion. And he only had himself to blame.

Chapter 3

“I have never been so humiliated in my life!” Amelia’s voice ended in a sob as she turned toward Louisa, grabbing her best friend’s arm tightly. “Oh, it was dreadful, Louisa!”

Miss Louisa Sedgewick looked at her friend, raising her eyebrows, but didn’t ask what Amelia was talking about. She simply steered Amelia through the crowd, gently but firmly, out of the ballroom and through the French doors that were standing open, leading into the gardens, where lanterns flickered in the darkness, and courting couples promenaded, under the watchful eyes of their chaperones.

Amelia bit her lip, trying desperately not to burst into tears. The air was cooling upon her burning cheeks, lifting the curls that framed her face. She took a deep, shuddering breath. Dear Louisa always knew the right thing to do—already, she was feeling a little calmer.

They didn’t stop on the balcony. Louisa steered her down the wide path, among the flowerbeds, filled with lavender and blooming rose bushes, spilling their beautiful perfume into the air, and tall trees, with branches overhanging. Even Amelia, in her distressed state, was awed by the beauty of it. The Duke and Duchess of Rochester took such pride in their gardens, and it showed.

“Here,” said Louisa eventually, as they approached a vacant bench. “This is perfect. Do sit down, dearest.”

Amelia did as she was told, sitting down on the wooden seat, gazing into the distance.

It had always been like that between her and her best friend. Louisa was singularly unruffled, calm, and serene. Nothing seemed to bother her. She existed upon life's surface, paddling away, unconcerned if there was a maelstrom forming beneath her.

Not like me, thought Amelia ruefully. Papa and Mama always told me that I am far too emotional. I feel too deeply. But how do I change it?

Her hands balled into fists upon her lap. That question constantly tormented her. She was always deeply affected by things that happened in books, or if there was a strange mood between the servants, or anything, really. Mama had said that she was fey—a whimsical soul, stuck halfway between this world and the other. Could it be true?

“Now,” said Louisa, settling beside her, spreading the skirt of her ballgown around her, before folding her hands in her lap. “Tell me what happened. What has upset you?”

Amelia sighed, picking at the quick of her thumb. A bad habit that Mama had scolded her for, as well. The silence lengthened before Amelia took another deep breath, turning to her friend.

“It was the Duke of Pembroke,” she replied eventually, her voice catching. “He is back in the district. I do not know why.”

Louisa raised an eyebrow. “The Duke of Pembroke? Why, yes, I do believe I saw him in the crowd! But it has been so long since he has been here that I thought perhaps I might be mistaken.” She hesitated, looking at Amelia closely. “What did he do?”

Amelia took another deep breath. “He humiliated me,” she replied, picking at her thumb again. “I have not seen him in an age and went over to him and Charles just to say hello.” She hesitated, blinking back tears. “He was cold toward me... then Charles—embarrassingly—suggested that he ask me to dance... and he refused!”

Amelia couldn't manage to keep the note of outrage from her voice. She hadn't wanted to dance with him—it had been pushed by Charles and the invitation hadn't come from the duke at all—but still, she had never expected that he would simply refuse and walk away.

“How very odd,” said Louisa, fanning herself. “What did he say exactly?”

Amelia took another deep breath. “He said that he had a previous engagement—a likely story—then bowed and walked away.” Her face started to burn with humiliation again at the memory. “He does not like me, Louisa. He never has.”

Louisa shifted on the seat. “That is humiliating,” she agreed, shaking her head. “I can see why you are upset. For a gentleman to refuse an invitation to dance with a lady outright is almost unheard of.” She paused, staring at Amelia. “You believe it stems from dislike?”

“I know it,” Amelia replied, in a fervent voice. “He has always acted oddly toward me.” She shook her head. “He has been one of Charles's closest friends since boyhood, and was constantly at Somersby Hall, but he has never warmed toward me.” She frowned. “Sometimes, he would seek me out to talk with me, but most of the time he just ignored me, refusing to talk with me at all.”

Louisa nodded. “Yes, I do recall him being there quite a bit now,” she said. “He always ignored you?”

“Always,” said Amelia, her heart tightening. “Except for a few occasions when he would seek me out, as I just said. That always confused me, and I was never able to speak or act in a normal manner around him.” She paused. “I have never known where I stand with him. But now, after what just happened, I surely do. The gentleman despises me.”

“And what if he does?” Louisa looked at her closely. “I am not offering an opinion

either way as to the truth of your statement, as I would need to observe him with you, but what I want to know is why is it affecting you so much, dearest?"

"What do you mean?" Amelia bristled. "It is affecting me because I do not like to be humiliated. No one does, Louisa."

Louisa gave a heavy sigh. "If you did not care for his good opinion of you, and thought him utterly unworthy of your attention, then you would not have reacted the way that you have, Amelia." She hesitated. "Do you like him? Even just a little bit?"

Amelia's jaw dropped. She gaped at her friend. She tried to reply, but it seemed as if she had lost her voice entirely.

"If I may be so bold," continued Louisa, shifting on the seat again, "can I ask if perhaps there was a flirtation between the two of you? Or even a love affair?"

Amelia jolted, roused out of her shock over what her friend had just asked her. Vigorously, she shook her head.

"No, indeed," she declared, in a voice louder and more strident than she intended. "There has never been any such thing between us! How can you even suggest such a thing?"

Louisa shrugged. "You just seem very bothered by the way he is treating you. That is all. I thought perhaps there might be history between you, and you have never told me." She smiled slightly. "It does happen, Amelia. You may have been confused and never confided in me about it. I just want you to know that you can tell me now... if you feel safe to do so."

Amelia bit her lip, gazing in despair at her best friend, who was so calm and matter of fact about simply everything .

“Were you a sage in a past life?” she asked suddenly, gazing at her friend. “How did you come into the world so calm and wise, Louisa?”

Louisa burst out laughing. “That is not a very Christian thing to say, Amelia! A past life is an Oriental idea, is it not?” She looked at Amelia fondly. “Perhaps I was! But you are dodging the question. I shall not let you shirk it, you know.”

“I know, I know,” sighed Amelia, smiling ruefully. “But it is exactly as I have just told you. There was no love affair between us. No flirtation.” She took a heaving breath. “I am telling you the honest truth, Louisa. He has always seemed utterly indifferent toward me... but now, after what just happened, I think perhaps he actually despises me.”

“But do you like him?”

Amelia glared at her friend. She felt her color deepen. “I am indifferent to him,” she said, raising her chin, trying to sound lofty. “I admit that the way he treated me just now offended me, but other than that, I do not care for his good opinion of me, one way or the other.”

She kept staring at Louisa, trying not to drop her gaze. It was actually comforting staring into her friend’s calm, sea green eyes. Her eyes flickered over her friend. Louisa looked so pretty tonight, in a lily-white silk gown, with tiny white flowers threaded within her hair.

She always felt rather like a clumsy giantess next to her best friend. Louisa was as petite and tiny as a fairy with curly brown hair, which she tried hard to tame. But even now, a few curls had escaped Louisa’s bun, sticking out at odd angles. Amelia repressed the urge to lean over and dampen them down, feeling a wave of affection for her friend.

“I see,” said Louisa, in a dry voice. “He is very handsome—even I noticed how

handsome he is. So very tall and commanding.” A slight smile curled her lips. “It is a shame he is so cold and indifferent toward you, is it not?”

Amelia shrugged. “I do not care either way,” she lied. “Now that we have talked, and my blood has calmed a bit, it no longer concerns me.” She stared at Louisa. “I am indifferent to him. As indifferent to him as he is to me.”

Louisa’s smile widened, but she didn’t say a thing.

“Besides, I doubt whether I shall see much more of him before he returns to London,” she continued. “I have no idea how long he will be in residence at Pembroke Abbey, but I am sure it will not be for very long. He has a life in London now.”

Louisa nodded.