

A woman with brown hair styled in a bun, wearing a white Victorian-style dress with lace and ruffles, is seated and playing a large wooden harp. The scene is set in a sunlit room with a window in the background. The harp has a decorative top with a quill and leaves.

Aria Morton

REGAL QUILL
PUBLISHING

A Nursemaid's Song for the Duke

A Nursemaid's Song for the Duke

A REGENCY ROMANCE NOVEL

ARIA NORTON

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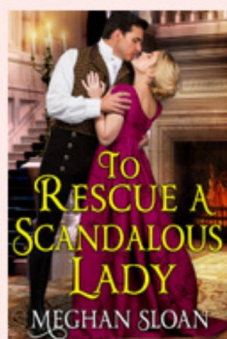
A Nursemaid's Song for the Duke

Introduction

After losing her fiancé and caring for her sick sister, Anna Cartwright has resigned herself to a life of duty as a nursemaid. When she arrives at Westford Manor to care for the Duke's niece, her harp playing soothes more than the baby—it begins to unguard the Duke's heart, stirring tender emotions within him. Will her melody unlock a future she never even dared to dream of?

Edward Sheldon, Duke of Westford, has long buried his emotions behind duty, haunted by his parents' loveless marriage. However, Anna's strength and tender music strike something deep within him, making him question for the first time the walls he has built to protect his heart. Will he put his heart before propriety for the sake of love?

As their bond grows, the weight of their pasts and the demands of their present loom large. Will Anna and Edward find the courage to defy convention for a future filled with love or will they be silenced by the weight of their responsibilities and fears?



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Chapter 1

So that was it.

Anna's new chapter was hardly off to a good beginning. The first hints of buttery yellow sunlight started to crest up over The White Horse Inn from which she had just been ousted. This journey seemed to keep taking one left turn and then another. However, she was bound and determined to remain positive.

Unable to afford another night at the inn and unable to match the higher price for the stagecoach presently disappearing into the early morning mist, she had a very long walk ahead of her.

She could not blame the driver for filling the remaining seats with gentlemen who could offer more coin than she could for the remaining Derby route. It was simply her luck, as it had always been. At least the weather was nice for her journey. That was something she had going for her.

All of Anna's meagre belongings were packed up in a carpet bag that she hefted up over one shoulder for ease of carrying as she set off on the three-mile walk toward her new position of employment at Westford Manor. It was not so much the walk that she minded but rather the fact that it would allow surplus time for her mind to wander.

Which was something she would do just about anything to avoid.

She walked slowly, the bag at her back just heavy enough to cause her to sway this way and that as she moved forward. The soft, rhythmic crunching of gravel beneath her feet only caused the static in her mind to expand and stretch. As much as she knew she needed this job, she dreaded it.

Never in her life had she been so far away from her younger sister, Emma. She had been raising the girl since she was sixteen, after all. Their relationship was far more like a mother and a daughter than mere sisters.

Being parted from her was not going to be an easy task, but there was no choice. The meagre savings that had been left to them when their mother passed all of those years ago were gone, and Emma's medical bills would not be afforded easily.

Every few steps her mind kept gravitating to her sister, what she must be doing right now. Hopefully, she was not still upset with her. The look on her face when Anna told her that she was actually leaving was something she couldn't get out of her mind.

"You needn't go," Emma had insisted, her voice thick as she had clung tightly to Anna's hands. For the first time in months, her hands had not been icy to the touch. The colour was slowly rising back into her cheeks.

It had been *years* since her sister's natural blush showed through her otherwise pallid pallor. Emma's heart condition often made her circulation very poor; that was what all the physicians kept saying about why her hands were so cold that her fingers would go numb.

But, at least, she had been sitting upright when she had said it.

That was the memory she was going to choose to focus on.

They both knew that she could not stay with their aunt. Emma was the one who was welcome there, and Anna had felt as if she had worn out her welcome a long time ago. The medical bills escalated with every visit, and now that they were actually starting to yield results, she could not allow them to stop. In desperation, Anna had chosen the best job she could get her hands on.

Their aunt's generosity in housing Emma would continue so long as Anna could send back whatever wages she could every quarter from working in Westford Manor. She had never worked that type of job before and was beyond grateful to have the opportunity. She would do her very best work and earn her place no matter what happened. With motivation as good as hers, there was no way she could lose.

Still, the memory of Emma's sunken features during her last serious decline made Anna's heart clench in her chest. She quickened her pace toward the estate. The sooner she got started, the sooner she could receive word from her sister. The more money she could send back, the better.

The sounds of crying had woken Edward before the sun had even risen in the sky. The shrill sounds had echoed through the walls and somehow managed to fill every nook and cranny with sound. There was no soothing the young Eleanor when she was worked up to this level.

He had made a valiant effort to endure for as long as he could. When the sunlight started to creep up over the rolling hills of his estate, Edward had found his way to the stables, mounted his favourite black stallion, and ridden out over the grounds, cutting through the morning mist.

The further away from the estate he was, the lighter the knot in his chest started to feel. He desperately wished there was a way for him to distance himself from his grief as well. Inside the house, duty overwhelmed him, and outside of it - there was no sufficient distraction to keep his thoughts at bay.

The stallion's footsteps thundered against his favourite riding track's hard, packed ground. In truth, these were the only breaks that he was allowed in the slightest. Riding like this in such casual attire, allowing himself to be dishevelled and free for a while, was invaluable to him.

His late father would have rolled over in his grave to know that his son and heir had ever stepped outside the house in such an embarrassing fashion. The late duke had insisted upon ducal attire all the time. Here, away from the strict protocols his father had ingrained so deeply in him, he did not have to worry about being the Duke of Westford. No, on these rides he was merely just Edward.

When he finished, he knew the scene that would await him. Juliana would be at the breakfast table, the deep bags under her eyes just that much worse from the lack of sleep she was getting. Eleanor, her daughter, would be there and squirming, unable to properly contain herself from the lack of sleep as well. He could not blame them.

Charles, her husband's death, had been so sudden that there was no time to adjust to the shock. The weight of Mother's stress and fulfilling her whims had been placed on his shoulders, and it was a burden he was only too happy to bear for the people in his life that he loved so dearly.

So long as he had these small moments of balance.

Edward's speed made the cold, biting morning wind cut straight through his clothes, chilling his skin, but still, he could not stop. It was easier to focus on that and the sensations alone than to think about any of the rest.

The stable hands had been sorely mistaken in their evaluation.

They had claimed that the horse was still far too new to be ridden like this and just barely broken. While, of course, he could handle a rider and was working through the circuits with good and reasonable ability.

But, truly, he was Edward's favourite. He was promising to be a wonderful steed and somehow seemed to be able to predict his movements before he could even give the command.

They charged into the forest, his breath blowing in clouds around his face as he lifted higher in his saddle, his gaze lifting upward to the canopy of trees overhead and how the light filtered in through the leaves and branches, dancing over the scene before him.

A small family of birds, startled by the sound of his horse whinnying, took flight overhead and stole his focus so completely that he did not notice the pheasant suddenly burst from the hedgerow.

He certainly did not adequately compensate as he was toppled off balance as his newly broken, favourite stallion reared up on his hindlegs, a loud protestation seeming to magnify in the enclosed space as his mount panicked.

Edward struggled for the reins to reclaim control over the situation. Panic clawed in his gut as the reins started to slip from his gloved hands, and his body tipped back, falling just as the stallion threatened to buck. His composure slipped as he closed his eyes and braced for impact.

Chapter 2

Up ahead, the sound of a horse's distress tore Anna out of her thoughts, the memories of the unfortunate circumstances under which she had embarked upon this journey in the first place. The frustrated whinny and sound of distress was something that she could not ignore.

Dropping her carpet bag where she stood, she hitched up her skirts and took off towards the horse. It could have been anything, but she was well prepared for it. James, her late fiancé, had taught her very well about horses. She rounded the corner, her legs already on fire from walking and the short jog, and the sorry sight greeted her.

A man, tangled up in his reins, his foot caught somehow from where he was on the ground as if he had been thrown from the saddle and improperly corrected himself. The handsome black stallion kept lifting and rearing, lifting the poor man from where he was on the ground as the man whispered placations with impossible calmness.

From his attire, he must have been a groom or perhaps a gentleman farmer with property somewhere just beyond these woods. Perhaps it was a new occupation, but from the artful way he kept dodging the stamping of the horse's feet, it implied a great ease with distressed horses.

James' steady voice echoed in her mind's eye. It seemed that it would be impossible to separate the past from her present today. Images of James' bright smile as he broke in another stallion, muttering about exposures and how to soothe a frightened horse.

Her late fiancé had an impossibly steady countenance. So much so that she knew a great many people found him boring or plain, but that was merely because they had never been given the privilege of hearing him speak about his passions. Anna could have listened to him gush about horses all day and night for how he managed to turn a subject that she had been seemingly disinterested in into something thrilling.

This gentleman knew enough to keep the frightened creature steady, but the constant jerking of his body weight against the reins would not end well. They needed to free his foot, and at once.

Anna did not wait for an invitation, nor did her heart feel a single ounce of fear as she grabbed a firm hold of the reins and pulled down, humming a soft melody that she hoped would soothe him. She was far too slight to combat his strength, but combined with the man's weight on the reins, it seemed to be helping the pair regain control over the situation.

Something similar to this had happened during one of her morning rides with James, so this was all too familiar. Their rides had been one of the few pleasures they had shared together before his fever had stolen him from her. He was the best horse master that London had ever seen, and she was willing to stake just about anything on that claim.

Working together, she helped the man untangle his foot, and he dropped heavily to the ground. Anna quickly grabbed the reins with both hands and applied a steady downward pressure as she hummed just that much louder.

"Thank you for your assistance. I was in a rather difficult position there!" the man said as he reached around her hand to grasp the reins, his other hand reaching for the horse's face and stroking comfortingly down his long muzzle. "He does not mean any harm, of course. This whole thing was my own fault."

"I should imagine so," Anna remarked without thinking, only to stop herself. "Oh, I mean, I did not mean to imply that you had done anything wrong, sir, I merely meant—"

She trailed off, cursing herself under her breath as she quickly relinquished her hold on the reins and put three paces of distance between them. The man in front of her was of average height but still nearly a good head taller than herself. He had broad shoulders that tapered down to a narrow waist.

However, it was the way that his bright blue eyes were such a striking contrast to his dark, unruly hair, styled a touch longer than was typically considered fashionable. The waves naturally curled away from his face, highlighting his high cheekbones and strong jaw. Handsome. Painfully so in such a disarming way. It was hard to speak properly when he looked at her; his bright smile only made him more charming.

“Please, go on. What did you mean?” he continued.

Timidly, she glanced up to take a better look at his features as she could not get a read on his tone. The man did not sound as if he were admonishing her but rather reserving his judgement as to whether he should be offended by her suggestion until she explained.

From his expression, he seemed genuinely curious to hear what she had to say, which was very refreshing considering that was not usually the reaction Anna got when she knew more than those she was speaking to.

“I only mean that if ...” she continued. “I fear there is not going to be a way for me to explain myself without digging the hole that I stand in even deeper.”

He almost smiled at that. Just the corner of his lip twitched upwards. “Please, speak freely.”

Did he mean that? Most people did not care to have her thoughts or opinions expressed so directly. “I only mean to say that for a frightened horse, it is best to sit deeply in your saddle.”

Her arms moved as her body mimicked the position she was speaking about. “Always try to gently guide your stallion’s head upwards to prevent bucking and then redirect in a circle ... it is how they can soothe themselves. It will help to bond you to your handsome stallion as well.”

She felt as if she were repeating James’ words almost completely, just as they had been said to her. It brought her comfort to know that she

was relaying accurate information. She always felt so much closer to his memory when she did, and if he had been here – he would have been most proud of her for speaking up.

Anna's chin lifted, a smile on her full lips – only to be met with the gentleman's guarded expression.

"I do not presume to tell you what to do, of course ... I only mean--" Anna tried to backtrack. Oh, she had truly embarrassed him by claiming to know more about his horse than he did himself, had she not? "I ... well, if you are quite all right, I shall just leave you to it ..."

Better to retreat quickly than to stick her foot further into her mouth.

Only, the man took a step towards her, halting her retreat. "It is very fortunate for me that you know what you do. I do not know what I would have done had you not come along. I do not mean to bristle at your helpful words. I suppose I am just dreadfully unaccustomed to taking advice from others."

"You mean advice from women?"

The man's eyes widened, and he shook his head. "No! That was not what I meant ... I only meant that you clearly have a very valuable skill set, and I am somewhat embarrassed that I do not know as much as you might."

"But then you are in the very fortunate position to learn more! Do you not find that prospect enthralling, sir?" Anna grinned. "But, I am sure that you wish to return to your ride, and I am afraid I also have matters to attend to." She dipped into a hasty curtsy. "Good morning to you, sir."

"Is there some way I can express my gratitude to you, miss?" the man continued. "Perhaps we could discuss how you have come

to know so much about horses over tea?”

“I wish that were possible, sir, but I truly do have an appointment to keep.”

He walked with her, keeping pace with his now calmed stallion, trailing behind them slowly. “A pressing issue?”

“Unfortunately, yes,” she answered as she collected her carpet bag and brushed the dirt from the fabric to the best of her ability. “I am to begin my employment as a nursemaid in the Westford Manor, and I should hate to be late.” She grinned brightly. “I wish to make a good impression upon my new employer, after all.”

“What a coincidence. I am headed in the same direction. These roads have been rumoured to have troubles recently, and I would be only too happy to accompany you.”

“I do not wish to trouble you!”

“I am happy to be troubled,” he answered with a grin as he held her gaze. “It is the least I can do for your saving my life.”

“I do not know about your *life*, sir, but perhaps your leg?”
Anna laughed.

He reached his hand towards her and took the carpet bag from her easily. “I would be useless without it.” He laughed as they started to walk slowly down the path towards the estate. “Does my rescuer have a name?”

“Anna.” She grinned. “Truly, you flatter me, but it is unnecessary. I was merely fortunate enough to have the skills needed at the right moment.”

“Edward,” he answered with a grin, and she noted that when he stood this close, she could see the flecks of green around his iris and the charming way his dimples indented his cheeks as he spoke.

“Perhaps it would surprise you to know that most people would run in the *opposite* direction instead of rushing quickly towards potential danger. Those in the estate will be most fortunate to have somebody with such instincts.”

“I certainly hope to be useful,” Anna continued. “If only there were a market for women grooms, then perhaps I would have really dazzled them.”

“I have no doubt they will be dazzled, no matter what skills you choose to exhibit for them.”

“Oh, I do hope so!” Anna answered. “Do you know anything about the family? Perhaps I am improperly asking for such information, but any tips or hints you could offer me would be greatly appreciated.”

As the gates of Westford Manor loomed close, she found herself reluctant to leave the man’s company. She found herself hoping that he worked here in the manor as well, as it would be lovely to have another friendly face around when she was going to surround herself with so many strangers.

“I shall leave you with this: do not fear; you will do a wonderful job, I can tell. If you have any natural affinity with children as you do with horses, then you shall thrive.”

“Thank you, and be careful with him!” She nodded towards the stallion. “He shall need slow exposure to whatever spooked him. I expect a full report on his progress the next time we meet!”

She turned to the gates, inviting herself inside and casting a single glance back over her shoulder to the man standing at the gate, hoping that she would, in fact, see him again.

Chapter 3

“Good Morning, dearie!” The woman at the door greeted her happily as soon as Anna was within earshot. She could only be the housekeeper, but it did bode very well that the first person Anna met from the house had such a bright, happy smile. She could not wait to get to know everybody inside and learn their names. More importantly, she looked forward to their opinions about their present employer.

“Good morning!” Anna greeted in return, extending out her hand for a firm handshake. The housekeeper seemed somewhat impressed by her solid grip and ushered her inside the house with another smile.

“I hope the journey was not too taxing on you, dear?”

“No, not at all,” Anna lied. She did not need to tell the woman the various struggles she’d had on the way here or that she had been forced to walk the last leg of the difficult journey, or how sad it made her to be this far from home.

No, she needed to keep things professional. That was the most important thing to remember. She was stepping into a whole new world, after all. “And to have such lovely weather as well, I was most fortunate.”

“Well, are you not a chipper young thing? I remember when I was young and still so bright-eyed,” the housekeeper continued with a wistful sigh. “I am Mrs Potter. Of course, you will have guessed that I am the housekeeper. I am going to move through things rather quickly so I hope you can keep up.”

“Yes ma’am,” Anna echoed obediently, only to realize that Mrs Potter seemed to mean her words quite literally as her pace quickened. The woman’s semi-advanced age seemed to hold no bearing whatsoever on her as she nearly jogged up the stairs. It was more difficult to keep pace with

her than she had assumed, but it was good to know the expectations she supposed.

“Now, I know you have not done this sort of work in an estate like this before, so feel free to ask me any questions you might have about the decorum of things or if you have a manners issue.

Our job is to be seen and not heard most of the time, but always to have our eyes and ears open! I run a tight ship here, and I know you will do your very best,” Mrs Potter continued, taking her down a series of turns that she had to hope and pray she would remember.

“Normally, you would have a room in the servants’ quarters with the rest of us, but as you are here for young Miss Eleanor, your room shall be directly beside hers in the nursery wing.”

Anna nearly bumped into the woman when she abruptly stopped walking and had to quickly compensate to keep her bag from hitting her. That would have been an embarrassment.

“Oh! Miss Cartwright! I beg your pardon. I was not expecting you here this early!” Mrs Potter said as she stepped into the room.

“That is quite all right. I was merely hoping to see my cou- *Anna!*” Rebecca Cartwright gushed, rushing over to Anna and wrapping her in her arms. Anna had no choice but to fling her bag to the side so she could embrace her cousin properly. It was all Rebecca’s kind-hearted doing that Anna had been gifted with the opportunity of this job in the first place.

They were fortunate enough that Rebecca’s mother and the duchess had been such good friends. Rebecca and Katherine had practically grown up together, and despite their differences in social standing, they had remained very close friends. Rebecca had been only too happy to come and stay here with Katherine while she navigated such a difficult time in her friend’s life.

“You did not have to come all this way here just to see my first day!” Anna giggled as they parted.

“Nonsense, of course, I had to come and see you! I wanted to be here when you met Katherine and Eleanor for the first time! Not that you have anything to worry about, of course, they will absolutely love you as I do!” Rebecca continued. She bent, scooped up Anna’s bag, and carried it to the bed.

“I shall leave you two to it and meet with you later this afternoon, Anna.” Mrs Potter grinned and excused herself from the room.

“Oh, but of course we must keep our distance in future, I suppose, hm? We need everything to be professional! At least in front of all the others,” Rebecca said, mostly to herself, as she started to unpack Anna’s bag on her behalf.

“You needn’t do that, really. I can take care of it.” Anna tried to pull the bag back, but Rebecca swatted her hands away. So, Anna took a moment to admire the room she had been given. Despite that this was likely considered one of the more humble rooms in the estate, it was still far larger than anything she had ever been afforded before.

A comfortable bed, a small dresser and a modest fireplace were the main focal points of the room, but what caught her eye was the beautiful double windowed doors that led out onto what seemed to be a very small balcony. She had never seen such a thing in a room like this and was *thrilled* to have such access. The whole room felt like a luxury to her.

Rebecca bustled about, putting her articles of clothing here and there. Anna noticed that when her cousin opened the wardrobe there were two gowns hanging inside that were no doubt going to be the uniform asked of her. Good, it would take the guesswork out of having to prepare herself in the mornings.

“Oh ...” Rebecca said softly, interrupting Anna’s appraisal of the room and capturing her attention.

“What is it?” Anna spun, but the moment she saw what was in her cousin’s hands, she understood. Anna walked over and lifted the small, framed portrait out of Rebecca’s hand and lovingly ran a finger down the wooden frame.

Anna leaned over to the bedside table, placing the picture of Emma there where it could always be close to her. Having her smiling face there would be a constant reminder of what she was doing this for, to keep her going.

“Is she in better health?” Rebecca asked.

“She is, but for her condition, it will be a lifetime battle. I am very hopeful that this latest physician’s treatment will give her more long-term relief though,” Anna answered easily. It was the same thing she always said when people asked about her sister. Given that Emma was Rebecca’s cousin too, she might be more empathetic, but Anna loathed when people gave her that pitying look.

“I do think that your position here will be very lucrative in assisting with expenses back home. I will not lie to you and say that your job is going to be an easy one, but I have faith that you will manage it.”

“That sounds rather ominous, cousin. What do you mean by that?” Anna asked, hoping it was just Rebecca’s exaggerating.

“I mean that poor Juliana has been at her wits’ end. As you were informed, her husband passed suddenly and her whole world was turned upside down. Never mind that Eleanor’s a very fussy child with ... shall we say a very healthy set of lungs.

She cries all the time, and no matter what has been tried, she is simply inconsolable any time that she is awake.” Rebecca sighed. “They

have already had two nursemaids quit because they were overwhelmed by her constant distress. Juliana is near desperate.”

“Surely you exaggerate slightly?” Anna asked, growing concerned.

“I wish that I were. It was how it was so easy to convince Juliana to hire you. I knew you needed a job from our correspondence, and despite having no formal training, she was willing to try anything.” Rebecca turned, taking Anna’s hand in her own. “Oh, that is not to say I have doubts about your skills, cousin.”

“No, I did not take it that way. Perhaps the other nursemaids simply lacked my dedication.” Anna patted Rebecca’s hand and shook her head. Surely, it cannot be any more difficult than soothing a wild mare. Eleanor was but eight months old, after all. How difficult could one baby be?

“I do hope that ends up being the case,” Rebecca said with a smile, but Anna noted how the expression did not quite meet her cousin’s eyes and could not help wondering if perhaps she might have got herself in over her head. It would not be the first time she had thrown herself into a situation she was not ready for.

But, then again, what choice did she truly have? No matter what happened, she would have to make this work.

“I suppose there will be plenty of time to get myself settled in later; might as well go ahead and get all the introductions over with!” Anna pushed off of the bed and waited for her cousin. The longer she waited around, the more likely she was going to start to fret over impossible things that had not yet happened.

No sooner had Rebecca stood up than an ear-splitting shriek resounded from down the hall.

Chapter 4

Two weeks of burying his head in books, and Marcus was no closer to an answer than he had been when he had arrived at Westford. He had arrived under the guise of an extended social visit to his oldest and dearest friend from his Oxford days, but a secret investigation and hopeful discovery was what his actual purpose was.

Fat lot of help that he had been thus far.

It was not as if the duke could spare an abundance of time for such matters, and even less so now that he was adjusting to managing his mother's stress and his sister's insurmountable grief all at the same time. Never mind the baby that was proving difficult.

It was Marcus' first real experience with a child so young, and it was bringing all sorts of things into question. Namely, what would he do when he had an heir of his own? It would be indecent to simply hide away in a library all hours of the day and night.

But, fortunately for him, Edward's library had nice, thick walls and nearly wall-to-wall bookshelves that housed many thick, noise-absorbent tomes.

If only the contents of said tomes held better insight into his current issues.

Charles had died; that much was a fact. The constables had ruled his death as accidental and unfortunate. Highway robbery gone wrong. However, his personal gut feeling was that it was only truly labelled as such so that his grieving widow would have something to hold onto. She could pretend that he had been some hero, making a grand last stand if she needed to.

Or, she could simply have a villain to place all her blame upon on the nights when things were the most difficult. Regardless, the simple facts did not align. Marcus and Edward had read and re-read the constables' reports, those from the mortuary, at least a dozen times over.

Perhaps they were merely grasping at straws, but he was willing to indulge his gut feeling for as long as necessary.

If it would have all been for nothing in the end, then at least they would be able to tell Juliana that they had tried their very best. Edward needed assistance, and it was the very least that Marcus could do to honour their longtime friendship; he knew that Edward would have done the same for him in a heartbeat.

But, if he were being honest, his enthusiasm for their quest did nothing to change the fact that he was starting to feel ill-equipped and out of his depth.

The opening of the library door was uncommon, as he seemed to be the only current resident of Westford who frequently had his nose buried in books. The very last thing he was expecting was for a tall, thin woman to come nearly floating into the room.

The striking young woman seemed to move as if she were being carried on the air itself. She had the sort of build that most professional dancers would envy: her angled features and elegantly sloping neck were accented by the way her blonde hair was styled not too tightly up on her head.

Single pearl droplet earrings caught the light from the sconces as she seemed wholly absorbed in reading the titles on every spine she passed -- wholly oblivious to him.

That would not do.

Marcus snapped his present book shut and placed it carefully on top of the journal in which he had been writing his notes and theories. He would have to take care to put that away properly again before he left. It was not the sort of thing that needed to be placed into the wrong hands.

The woman startled, spinning to see him with her bright blue eyes widened.

“Oh, forgive me, ma’am. I did not mean to startle you,” Marcus explained with a grin. It was mostly the truth. He was terrible at speaking to women. For all the books he read and the conversations he had observed, executing them himself was a whole other issue.

In his head, he was the most rakish savant that had ever graced the ton ... and then he opened his mouth. Every time he started interactions with high expectations, he disappointed himself each time.

This stunning woman? He could not allow his awkwardness to intervene. He would die.

“It is my mistake. I was unaware that the library was occupied. If you prefer to be alone, I could return another time?” the woman explained easily, gesturing to the door behind her.

“Stay!” Marcus blurted, realizing after he said it that the word sounded like a dog barking a command. “Er, I mean ... books, want you – recommend?”

She blinked at him, and he could have kicked himself. “Do you mean to ask what I am looking for?”

Marcus exhaled an anxious breath. Most women just laughed at him and walked away, muttering behind their fans as soon as he tried to speak to them. Oh, she was even more pretty up close. Her perfume was soft and floral, and her milky skin looked impossibly soft.

She might just be the prettiest woman he had ever laid eyes upon, and he could feel his otherwise brilliant mind turning into pudding the longer he gazed upon her. “Y-yes, that is what I ... words.”

The woman grinned, holding out her hand in the space between them. “I am Rebecca Cartwright, Lady Juliana’s friend. And you are?”

“Pretty,” Marcus said, not realizing the word he had said instead of his name until her smile widened. “Er, I am Marcus Rycroft, Baron of Higdon ...pleasured, pleased, I mean to make your acquaintance.”

“You are a friend of the duke’s?” she continued, leading the conversation, for which he might be forever grateful.

“Ah, yes. I am. Friend of mine from Oxford and we ... school ... together ...” Marcus trailed off. “Sorry.”

“Perhaps then you can help me locate a book on poems? I am hoping there might be a sonnet or two that could be soothing enough to serve as a nursery rhyme or lullaby?” Rebecca asked curiously.

Given a task, he was suddenly far more capable than he had been before. “Right this way, of course.” He rounded the corner, waiting for her to catch up; she moved so elegantly that it was hard to watch where he was going.

“I am not sure how many here would be suitable for children, but I do think there are some with gentler language. Love is love, after all, no matter familial or romantic.”

He was rambling and needed to control himself. He stopped in front of a book with lovely red binding and offered it to her.

“Do you read a lot of poetry then, Lord Higdon?” Rebecca asked, her eyes twinkling.

Oh, if he messed this up, he might never forgive himself.

“I, well ... yes. Not as much now as I did in my younger days when my head was still firmly in the clouds. That was a favourite of mine. Ah, Lord Bryon has a way of words very few can compare to. I think I shall recommend *Hebrew Melodies* for your particular purposes.”

“That is very helpful, Lord Higdon. I must say —”

The door to the library banged open again. If it was Edward coming to interrupt now of all times, he might throttle him. But, instead, Millie, the upstairs maid, rounded the corner quickly as if she had known exactly where to come looking for them.

“Lord Higdon! I have been looking everywhere for you!” Millie said quickly, slightly out of breath. She was such a petite thing and could not have stood an inch over five feet if he was being completely generous with his measurements.

Strawberry blonde hair and freckles, she was adorable but had such a fiery temper when she was put to a task that he had learned very quickly not to argue with her nor get in her way.

“Well ... you have found me.”

“His Grace is looking for you, said to fetch you at once,” Millie answered.

He did not doubt that if he refused her, she would have dragged him out of this library by his lapel.

“I suppose that I ought not to keep our host waiting then,” Marcus answered with his teeth clenched, still very reluctant to leave while they were in the middle of a conversation, but what choice did he truly have? “I hope to hear what you think when we meet again, Miss Cartwright.”

He turned on his heel before embarrassment could heat his face any further and left the library for Edward's study. Whatever he needed so urgently, it had better be good.

When Marcus was out of the library, Millie spun to Rebecca quickly with a giggle. Her hands cupped over the lower half of her mouth as she was clearly excited over what she had just walked in on.

While she could not pinpoint a reason, Rebecca felt her face warm as if she had been caught doing something she was not supposed to do. She was rather fond of Millie, having got to know her recently since arriving here. But, the girl certainly was not afraid of speaking her mind.

Usually, her opinions were harmless, just the same as any high-spirited young woman. Rebecca was not much of one for gossip, but this time, she could not deny the urge to ask the maid more about Lord Higdon. But, if she did, she knew it would backfire because word would spread around the house like wildfire. It was the last thing she needed.

"You know, Lord Higdon frequents the library more and more often as of late," Millie said with a bright smile.

"I would not know anything about that," Rebecca answered casually.

"If one wanted to find him again, then I think that one would merely have to search the library for him," Millie continued. "If one had an interesting conversation ... alone with a gentleman in the library, that is."

Rebecca's embarrassment heightened. "I have never even encountered him before. I would not have been alone on purpose ..."

“Oh! But it is not my place to comment on such things, of course. I just think that perhaps he might fancy you, perhaps. What a lovely thing to witness!” Millie giggled again.

“Nonsense, we are of such vastly different social standing that what you are hunting at is laughable, Millie. Please, do not pull at strings like this.”

“Of course, I beg your pardon,” Millie said, but her giggle did not diminish any more than her smile did.

“I merely wished for a book, and now I have one ... and ... that is all,” Rebecca said, turning her gaze down to the ground and walking around Millie carefully, not wanting to escalate the situation any further before hurrying out of the library.

Chapter 5

How could a day pass in the blink of an eye?

From this morning's ride to sitting here in his office, Edward felt as if no more than the timespan of a blink had passed. Marcus had poured them both glasses of brandy when he had arrived, and the glass sat on his desk, untouched. Edward had taken all his meals in his office today, and even those he had hardly been able to eat.

All he had wanted to do was locate the young woman from this morning to see how she was fitting in and how things were going for her. He could claim it was merely because he wanted to ensure that she was adjusting well and that the household was a good fit for her, but he really wanted to see her again because he had enjoyed their conversation so much.

It was so refreshing to encounter somebody who did not have to worry about the normal rigid social rules as he normally did.

But all those plans went out of the window the moment that the report he was presently staring at had arrived on his desk. The papers had been sealed, and the wax seal unbroken, delivered by Mr Phillips' personal messenger.

"Are you truly not going to open the document?" Marcus asked as he finished his first glass of brandy and reached for a second one.

Edward snapped himself out of the daze he was losing himself in and finally pulled his glass of brandy towards himself with a deep sigh. "I wanted to wait until you were here."

"You did not have to. I would have read it anyway when you were finished." Marcus sighed.

“I do not think there will be anything good inside that envelope,” Edward admitted, his fingers tapping against the glass in his hand. “The official account still has not changed, and I do not think the constables are taking my enquiries seriously any longer.”

“Yes, well, that is why you hired Mr Phillips in the first place, is it not? You hired him to be the go-between for exactly these instances so that he could get to the bottom of things. You must trust the process, friend,” Marcus advised gently, knowing how sensitive this subject was for him.

“I just cannot make the pieces make sense. I was even out riding on that same road this morning! As I have done countless times before, and there has never been any sort of issue whatsoever. Apart from this morning, I almost never see another person on my rides.

You truly mean to tell me that my brother-in-law, who rode that trail with me countless times, who knew every dip and twist in the path like the back of his hand – was beset upon by highwaymen and accosted to the point of murder?” Edward said with a huff.

“Accidents ... happen ...”

“If you thought that it was truly an accident, you would not have come all of this way.”

“Not so, I would have come simply because you asked me to,” Marcus countered, waving the bottle of brandy at him. “Drink takes the edge off of your nerves. We can only have the same conversation so many times over.”

“Well, I suppose that it will have to be at least once more.” Edward sighed and pulled the envelope closer towards himself. He broke the seal with a sigh and eyed the documents inside while sipping on the drink, relishing that it burned all the way down, filling his stomach with false warmth.

When he had finished glossing over the contents of the papers, he had tossed them right back across the desk to Marcus. “Nothing, another update that says absolutely nothing at all.”

“We will find something sooner or later,” Marcus said, but the words were not nearly as reassuring as they were likely meant to be.

“When has there ever been a highway robbery where there was nothing stolen but some papers? The only part of the carriage that was even touched was his satchel. The leather bag turned inside out, half of the contents still there, and then the other half had just been surrendered.

His signet ring and pocket watch left there when both could have fetched at least a little coin for a thief?” Edward sank heavily back into his chair and rubbed his temple with his free hand. “I fear that we are running out of options, and there is simply no way that I can present any of this information to my sister as it stands.”

Marcus looked over the paperwork and shook his head. “We will keep looking, no matter how long it takes.”

The Crown Inn near Derby was overly crowded that night, which suited Lord Sidney Windham just fine. The more patrons that were causing the general din of noise to grow louder, the better.

He had reserved one of the private dining rooms for himself and his daughter, Amelia, but one could never truly be too careful about those with prying ears. Caution was never a bad thing, in his opinion.

Amelia had opted not to have dinner this evening, which he also felt was wise. She needed to watch her figure anyway for the work they were

about to do. She needed to be at the very tip top of her game. She sat rigidly in her chair as he walked a half circle around his daughter.

“Do you remember the plan?” he asked, testing her. From the way she flinched slightly at the question, he knew that she was very well aware of the consequences that would await her should she fail in the mission he had tasked her with.

“Of course I do, Father,” Amelia said sweetly. To anyone and everyone who had ever seen her, she was nothing but the picture-perfect vision of a high-born lady. Her graces were perfect, and Sidney had invested countless hours and money to ensure his daughter was very well accomplished.

She would outshine any of her peers; he had ensured it. He had even taken the time to purchase more unsavoury lessons that would ensure that his daughter knew how to properly entice and keep a man, whatever man he had chosen for her.

Now the time had finally come, and his sights were set firmly on the Duke of Westford.

“I do not need to impress upon you the urgency of securing the duke’s proposal as swiftly as possible?” Sidney said again.

“No, Father. I know what is expected of me.”

It helped that he happened to be well aware of her fondness for said duke. He was not a wholly cruel or unforgiving man. It just so happened that his daughter was infatuated with a man who possessed all the things that Sidney needed.

“Good. I expect you to display yourself well and behave according to your station. Do not make me come to regret spending money on those new dresses for you,” Sidney explained, watching the guilt start to colour his daughter’s features.

“I shall not let you down, Father, I promise.”

“I know that you shall not, poppet, for you know what will happen if you fail,” Sidney said with an overly saccharine smile before taking his seat across from her where the full plate was still steaming hot.

The duke’s income would be more than sufficient to cover the costs of his mounting debts, never mind that an advantageous marriage would keep the social doors open and ensure his own continued access to the ton, no matter what else happened.

He would not allow his good name to be sullied and was willing to do just about anything for it.

Across from him, Amelia’s stomach growled, but she said nothing. Sidney covered his smirk with a particularly large bite of roast pheasant, and used his fork to gesture towards the door. “Now, why do you not run along and ready yourself for bed. Tomorrow is a very important day after all.”

Amelia’s gaze lingered on his plate, but she knew better than to ask. Instead, she silently rose from her chair. “Thank you for this opportunity, Father. I shall not let you down. I swear it.”

She leaned in to kiss his cheek only once before turning to retire for bed.

It would all be coming together soon. Soon, his future would be secured, and he would have nothing more to worry about. Yes, tomorrow marked the start of a very bright future indeed. He could feel it.

Chapter 6

“Cousin?” Rebecca’s voice wafted through the crack she had created in the door. Her head soon followed as she widened the door further, despite Anna giving her no permission to enter. The sun had not even risen in the sky, and everything outside of her bedroom still sounded quiet. “Cousin, you have to wake up!”

“Shhh,” Anna whined. While she likely needed to wake up, Rebecca likely had a very good point, but she was exhausted. It felt as if only a moment ago, she had shut her eyes. She was presently hunched uncomfortably over the books she had spread out across her bed.

Some of which were still open to the last pages she had been reading while others that she had not reached yet were still shut and buried under the rest. Anna had been up most of the night attempting to research why babies might cry nonstop. Her introductions yesterday had been halted because Lady Juliana had not been in the right mindset.

Though, from listening to the baby cry all night and all the things that she heard the other servants whispering about, she knew just what she needed to be doing. She just needed more insight, but at least the books she had read contained some valuable insight. “Five more minutes.”

“No more minutes, cousin.” Rebecca giggled and came further into the room, lighting the lamps and sconces as she moved closed to the bed. How anyone could have that much energy first thing in the morning was beyond her.

“If you wish to have any breakfast at all, you best hurry,” Rebecca advised as she strode towards the wardrobe to pull out her uniform.

Anna groaned and forced herself out of bed, grateful for Rebecca’s help even if she longed for just a few more minutes of sleep. Instead, she

staggered towards the washroom and allowed her cousin to help her get ready for the day.

In no time at all, Anna trailed diligently behind Mrs Potter as they were led through a labyrinth of corridors that she was nearly overwhelmed by. It was going to take a very concentrated effort not to get lost here as they made their way to the duchess' morning room.

“Now is your time to shine, dearie, make the first real impression count!” Mrs Potter advised with a tense, but kind smile. Even outside the room she could hear the sounds of warm laughter filtering through, and merry conversation.

But the sound of one familiar voice in particular, deeper than the others and very distinctly male, made her pulse quicken for reasons she could not place.

Mrs Potter opened the door and bustled inside. “Presenting Miss Anna Cartwright, the new nursemaid.”

When she was presented, Anna walked inside with a smile, curtsying to the room at large without truly taking in their faces at first.

“It is a pleasure to make your –” Anna’s voice stopped as her head lifted, finding herself face to face with the gentleman from the road yesterday. Only, today he was not in the humble attire of a groom, but rather the fine clothes of a duke. Was he ... what was he doing here?

Did he live here? Had she foolishly assumed he was a servant in employ when really he was her employer? For a very long minute, she could not seem to tear her eyes away from him or the glimmer of amusement in his eyes as he stood behind an older woman’s chair. It must be the dowager duchess that he stood behind ... making him ... oh, this was making her head hurt.

Edward stood so rigidly that it almost seemed as if the two versions of him that she was watching were in fact two wholly separate people entirely. Which was the correct one? Oh, if she had known who he was or had had any idea of what his station was she would never have spoken to him in the way that she had.

She would never have presumed to tell him *anything* about his horse. Had she managed to ruin this opportunity before she had even started?

Her face felt hot, impossibly so, as she curled her hands into fists. “To make your acquaintance,” she finished finally. “Thank you for having me here in your lovely house.”

“And thank you for travelling all this way here to us! I cannot tell you how pleased we are to have you here with us!” the older woman said, gesturing for her to move forward and join them. “We wish nothing more than for you to be at ease here, ideally as another member of our family!”

I am the Dowager Duchess of Westford, Katherine Sheldon, and my son here is the duke, Edward Sheldon.” The woman happily introduced them while gesturing over her shoulder to her son, who had not taken his eyes off her once. “But you will be working with my daughter, Juliana, and her daughter Eleanor.”

Anna noted that neither of them was in the room with them presently, but she did not think it was her place to question their whereabouts. “I am just happy to be of assistance.”

“I hope you will make yourself available to my daughter as she needs it; she has faced a very difficult year and will need a soft touch.”

“And young Eleanor, what information can you share with me in my duties regarding her?” Anna asked. “What is her daily routine? What time should she wake, nap, and go to bed?”

Lady Katherine laughed. “Well, that is part of the issue, is it not? We are trying to get her on a proper schedule, but it does take time with a newborn. Do you have children of your own?”

“No, Your Grace. I have not been so fortunate, but I do think of myself as very dedicated to whatever I put my mind to. I raised my younger sister, as well, so I have a bit of experience. Is she eating solid foods? Any allergies or things to avoid?” Anna asked practically, hoping that her age-appropriate behaviour research had been correct.

However, the dowager seemed to laugh it all off. “Well, all of that is more up to her mother.”

“Of course! I should not wish to disrupt your breakfast any further.” Anna’s gaze shifted to the duke while she was speaking despite herself. “I would love to meet my charge if you –”

The doors burst open, and Rebecca hurried in, bowing somewhat less than formally before speaking. “Apologies for my sudden intrusion; Lady Juliana is in quite a state, and young Eleanor will not stop crying.”

Rebecca gestured for Anna to follow quickly, so she curtsied and left a final lingering glance on the duke before hurrying out of the room behind her cousin.

“We do not have a cause for her distress; she never seems to have a cause. She has been fed, and burped, she is not too warm nor too cold ... poor Juliana is at her wits’ end,” Rebecca said softly as they hurried back up the stairs.

The nursery door was still open, and Juliana stood inside, her babe in her arms as she bounced Eleanor somewhat awkwardly and rocked back and forth. Poor Juliana looked so upset; the bags under her eyes were so dark, and the poor dear looked absolutely dishevelled.

Anna might not have ever had experience with that specific issue before, but she certainly understood the helpless feeling one had when raising a child. Emma might not have been quite so young when Anna had taken over her rearing, but the same drowning sensation was universal.

Poor Eleanor was red in the face from screaming, and Juliana looked almost moved to the point of tears. Anna moved forward, her arms lifted. It was only natural for her to want to help as she smiled reassuringly. Juliana hesitated, knowing that Anna was a stranger and her child was so clearly very precious to her.

“Please, may I?” Anna asked, accepting Eleanor as she was hesitantly extended towards her. Her body swayed naturally, even though the ear-splitting screams were far more shrill up front.

She swayed her body, cooing softly as she rubbed comforting circles into the young girl’s back. “Could you please have some dill water brought?” Anna asked Rebecca, who quickly ran off to comply.

Focus, she just needed to focus. She had read about this, which she needed to focus on. Tune out the screaming and focus instead on working through this issue one step at a time. She was perhaps grasping, but it was all she could do to try.

Anna moved to the changing table, laying Eleanor down and very carefully adjusting the way she was swaddled, and Rebecca returned with Millie and the dill water that Anna administered slowly, hoping against hope that it was going to work the way it was supposed to.

She lifted Eleanor back up - and almost crumbled in relief as the young girl’s pained screams hiccuped and lessened, the discomfort she had apparently been feeling starting to soothe. However, Juliana crumbled right into Rebecca’s arms as relief flooded her face.

Anna continued to hum softly, looking around the room at each face in turn. The dowager and the duke were standing in the doorway, watching

her. Approval danced in Katherine's eyes as she pressed her fingertips to her lips.

Beside her, the duke's carefully neutral expression dropped as he stepped forward to thank her, speaking softly as if not to break this sudden calm that Anna had brought to the room.

"Thank you, truly ... I, we ...I had almost forgotten what quiet sounded like," Edward praised with a soft grin.

Across the room, Juliana motioned for him to hush as if he were teasing her too much, and the rest of the room giggled softly as Eleanor looked from one familiar face to the next.

Maybe she was cut out for this after all.

Chapter 7

For the first time in days, Rebecca could hear herself think for longer than a single hour. The walls were not echoing cries, and Juliana was actually taking a nap! The fact that her friend was finally getting rest was everything that she could have wanted. It was the whole reason she was even here in the first place.

While Juliana was resting, Rebecca had taken it upon herself to finish a few necessary tasks, such as filing away Juliana's correspondence and mailing the letters waiting for the post. The book of poetry that Lord Higdon had recommended to her was clutched in the midst of it all.

She had spent far too many hours lying awake and poring over the pages. Since she had not been sleeping anyway, she had not seen any reason to avoid indulging in the book.

She had hurried into the library, hoping to accomplish at least one task while her friend was napping. Before Juliana had fallen asleep, the pair had come up with a grand plan about how they could even be ambitious and have tea together that afternoon.

She walked backwards into the room, opening the door with her hip. She spun, arms overladen - and ran smack dab into Lord Higdon. The collision was jarring because of how firmly they impacted one another. She rebounded, the contents of her arms flying up into the air as she gasped.

Lord Higdon's arms flew out, trying to steady her to the best of his ability, fingers brushing against her waist and shoulder to steady her, leaving her slightly breathless and startled as she steadied herself.

"Oh, Lord Higdon, please forgive me - I was not looking where I was going and was moving entirely too quickly to be sensible," Rebecca

gushed as she dropped to one knee, slowly starting to pull the letters back into a pile.

Lord Higdon knelt in front of her, shaking his head. “No, the fault is all mine ...I heard somebody coming and thought to open the door, and it ... I ...”

He fumbled over his words slowly as he also tried to pick up the letters. They both reached for the book of poetry at the same time, their fingers brushing against the red spine, and her breath hitched. She immediately pulled her hand back, waiting for him to grab the book and hold it out to her. She felt as if her face would catch on fire at any moment.

“Thank you, My Lord. You did not have to help me, but I am glad you have ...” Rebecca continued, ensuring that all the correspondence was facing the right way and settled in her little bundle so that this would not happen again. “I certainly did not mean to interrupt your work.”

“I ... you,” Lord Higdon swallowed tightly. “I mean, it is all right. Interrupt me any time.”

“The book that you recommended was lovely, by the way,” she said softly.

“This one? You have finished it already?” Lord Higdon said, sounding impressed.

“I know it is not always fashionable for a woman to read so much ... or perhaps it is too telling of me that I read it quickly, but I simply could not put it down,” Rebecca said with a gentle smile.

“I am glad! You know,” Lord Higdon rose to his feet, holding out a hand towards her and offering to help her up, which she was only too happy to accept. Though, she could not help wondering if he felt the same tingles in his hand as she did. He had such a lovely smile, even when he fumbled over his words as he did. “I would be happy to recommend another?”

“I would like that very much!” Rebecca was almost reluctant to give the book back, but she was excited to read whatever was about to come next. Clearly, he had very good taste in poems. She wanted to know more about him. Was it merely a passing hobby? Something that perhaps he had taken a course on at Oxford? She did not know much about such things but dearly wished to.

“This one is somewhat different, but I think if you enjoyed Byron, then Wordsworth will be the next stepping stone for you. They both have such accomplished works. I personally believe that Byron is more succinct, from time to time, than Wordsworth, but I would love to hear your thoughts when you are finished. *Tintern Abbey*, in particular.”

Lord Higdon crossed the room, reaching over his head for a very plain-looking black spined book, which she could not even see embossed letters. It was the smallest one on its shelf, but still far heavier than it looked when she pulled it into her hand. The weight was soothing, promising only good things inside, and the prospect filled her with excitement.

“It truly is a gift to have read so many things that you can recommend them with such ease. Tell me, Lord Higdon, are you a romantic at heart? A poet?”

She could have sworn that he blushed at her words.

“Neither; I am merely a man with too much time on his hands for his own good.”

“You are being modest, I can tell.”

“Surely you cannot expect a gentleman to own up to such a wealthy knowledge of poetry. I have a reputation to maintain,” Lord Higdon said with hints of sarcasm that made her laugh.

“Although, perhaps, if you do find that you truly enjoy that one, I would be happy to share another. Perhaps we could even arrange for a

picnic and a poetry reading?” Lord Higdon looked at the floor when he spoke.

Did he have any comprehension of how refreshing his bashfulness was? It was certainly not how most gentlemen in her life had chosen to speak to her. “I think that would do everyone some good! We have all been cooped up indoors that I fear I shall forget how delightful it feels to have the sun warm my face.” Rebecca giggled.

“Right, yes ... everyone ...” Lord Higdon trailed off, but it seemed to her that there was something else he was working on building up to speak, and she patiently waited. “The poems ... and appreciation of nature ... or ...”

He trailed off, the moment breaking as cries seemed to come crashing through the floor above them, followed by the quick slamming of doors that were no doubt Juliana rushing from her room, nap ruined. It would take some time to get used to the fact that she had assistance now.

“I should go,” Rebecca said softly, nodding to the floor. She should have just enough time to put the letters out for post before rushing upstairs. “Thank you again for the book.”

Rebecca turned quickly, gathering her skirt in her free hand and rushing out of the library.

Chapter 8

“Your Grace, guests are awaiting you in the parlour.” Benjamin, the stable hand, rushed to the stall where Edward was grooming his stallion. He had been working with him a little more every day to expose him to various birds, just as Anna had suggested. It seemed that she had a vast wealth of knowledge about many things and had yet to be proven wrong.

He could not get her out of his mind.

Even here in the stables, where he was seeking refuge from the chaos that his home kept slipping in and out of, she was still ever-present in his mind, and he had only encountered her twice!

Already, he was plotting little ways that he could run into her again that would not disrupt her duties. But that was also in direct opposition of everything that his father had impressed upon him.

He had been very insistent that when a man becomes a duke, that absolutely nothing and no one should ever come before his duties. He was to conduct himself a certain way, to move and speak with formality in regards to all things.

If still felt just as impossible of a standard to hold himself to now as it had back when his father had been alive. But the older man had lived by his advice, so it was certainly possible.

Never mind that it was not at all the life that Edward wished for himself.

“What do you mean in the parlour? Are these guests that my mother has invited in?” Edward asked, pulling the brush from his hand and moving forward his coat.

“No, Your Grace, they demanded to be shown a room to rest their weary feet from their ride.” The footman bowed deeply, no doubt worried that he would be in some sort of trouble for the part that he had played in all this. Edward pulled on his coat reluctantly and motioned for the footman to lead the way to whichever parlour these supposed guests were awaiting him in.

However, the moment the pair rounded the corner to see the carriage waiting in the drive, Edward’s stomach sank. The Wyndhams were well known to him in that they vexed him so greatly that he wanted nothing to do with them if he could help it. Yet, they had taken it upon themselves to come for a visit?

It was presumptuous at best and downright rude at worst. If his father had not had such a longstanding friendship with Sidney Wyndham, Edward would have simply asked them to leave. But, as it was, it felt like an insult to his father’s memory to deny them now.

Though, depending on Sidney’s attitude, he might still do just that.

Benjamin brought them into the parlour, and Sidney was on his feet the moment that Edward had crossed the room’s threshold.

“Eddie, my boy!” Sidney greeted loudly, his arms lifting as he used such an informal nickname that Edward had *never* given him permission to use. The older man moved towards him, long arms outstretched for an embrace, but Edward insistently stuck his hand between the pair.

He had no desire to stand there and pretend like the pair were friends when they were not. “What luck and fortune has brought me to your house! Rather, what *ill* fortune but twist of grace! My carriage has had a nasty little malfunction, and I knew that your estate was in the area ... we were so lucky to have made it here without serious injury.”

Edward glanced at his footman, nodding that the boy ought to run along and inspect the carriage himself. It certainly had not appeared to have

anything wrong with it where it was sitting, but duty and obligation insisted that he at least have his servants look at it.

“I thought I should appeal to your generous nature and request shelter for a few nights?” Sidney continued, impressing himself upon the room. “My darling Amelia is feeling quite uneasy after such a perilous trip, and you know I would do anything to make my darling daughter feel better.”

Sidney was pouting. How he was not embarrassed of himself, Edward had no idea.

But he followed the man’s gaze to where Amelia sat beside his mother. Katherine held Amelia’s small hand in both of her own, seemingly in the middle of comforting her ... all the while giving Edward a warning look. Having them here was the last thing he wanted.

The peace they were working towards in this house was tenuous at absolute best. He wanted to decline. He wished he could explain that his sister was in her mourning period and that they had a newborn to attend to and would be poor hosts ...

Father never would have allowed it. He would have insisted that Edward do his duty. His voice was there, nagging in the back of his mind that he needed to follow decorum no matter the personal expense. Edward’s answering smile was tense. “But of course, we should be happy to assist you in any way we can.”

Amelia’s face illuminated at the invitation, but she modestly downturned her chin to appear more meek when she smiled. She had always been the sort of lady who was a *lady* at every moment of every day. Edward had never seen her look less than perfect, not so much as a single hair out of place, even when they had been children.

She was constantly mindful of her presence and spoke so softly that in his own mind, he had likened her to a living doll on countless occasions.

He knew that his own father had placed high expectations on his shoulders, but he could not even imagine being so *on* at every moment of every single day.

Sidney laughed loudly and clapped Edward on the back happily. How the man managed to fill the whole room with his presence was beyond him. It was as if the gentleman was wholly allergic to subtlety. Ironical considering how reserved his own father was and how close he was with the Wyndhams when he was alive. Edward pressed his thumb to each one of his fingers in turn, focusing on the pressure sensation to keep himself steady.

“Mother, accompany me to inform Mrs Potter that we shall have additional guests for tea this afternoon and to have their rooms readied.” Edward inhaled sharply, spinning to address the Wyndhams.

“I assure you I will have only my finest men working on your carriage. If you will please wait here while I make arrangements? My housekeeper will fetch you for tea.”

There should be more than enough in the parlour for them to occupy themselves for an hour or so. Katherine seemed happy to have the excuse to leave their side and take off her hostess cap for a moment.

“Why did you invite them to stay?” she hissed the moment they were out of earshot. “I would never presume to question your judgement, my dear boy, but is this truly the wisest course of action?”

“You are not saying anything that I have not already questioned myself.” Edward sighed, letting his mother take his arm as they hurried down the stairs. “Do you honestly believe that Lord Wyndham would have taken no for an answer? In all the years you have known him, has that ever once been the case?”

Katherine sighed, “Well, not exactly ...”

“You are affirming my point.”

“Your sister is still in mourning; we are adjusting to new staff ... Eleanor is unwell,” Katherine continued to reason. They were all perfectly valid arguments, and he did not disagree with her.

“You know as well as I do that Father wished to align our houses. He would have invited them to stay, and therefore, I must as well.”

Katherine’s gaze lingered on him; he could feel her eyes boring a hole in the side of his head, but he would not look at her, not now, not about this.

She had been the one to discover the engagement contracts that father had had hidden in his drawer. Thankfully, nothing had been signed, and it seemed that it was only in the first draft stage of the contracts to engage him to Amelia.

A shudder ran down his spine at the notion of himself wed to perfect Amelia. He could not fathom her cherubic features, slow-eyed blinking at him from across the dining table for the rest of his life.

“You cannot possibly be implying what I think you are implying ...” Katherine asked hesitantly without outright asking.

Edward shook his head. “No, I merely do not mean to burn my father’s bridges. Nothing more, nothing less. The faster we can get them out of here, the better.”

As expected, tea was miserable.

Edward had moved his chair to the left no less than four times, and yet, somehow, every time he did – Amelia became seated just that much closer to his person as if being close to him was the only job she had in this world.

Outwardly, Amelia was everything a gentleman should look for in a woman. She was highly accomplished and more than capable. She was just well enough read to hold a conversation on any topic that you could think of, while also somehow not appearing too intimidatingly intelligent.

She was soft spoken, poised, and beautiful. Yet, Edward could not help finding her wholly ... well, boring.

Years ago, when he started to suspect that his father would push him towards Amelia as a prospective future bride, Marcus called him insane for being reluctant to consider her. No matter how many times he had explained their history together, Marcus had said he was being unreasonable.

Was it truly such a problem to wish to have a bride that he could be comfortable around? That he could be himself around? As much as he admired both of his parents, he did not see why he should have to subject himself to a loveless marriage of convenience unless he absolutely had to.

Even now, every gesture and comment she made was specifically tailored to draw him in. Had he never realized that her hidden talent of making a person feel as if they were the only person in the whole world when she spoke to them was not at all exclusive to him, he might still fall for it.

He did not even need to say a word for her to happily continue. He could feel both his mother's and Sidney's eyes on their every movement and word spoken. Yet, all the conversation was doing was proving to him without a shadow of a doubt that this whole 'carriage accident' had been utterly planned.

"Why do I even bother?" Sidney grinned at his daughter who had not lifted her head once the whole time they were speaking. He closed the distance, grabbed Amelia's chin firmly, and wrenched her face towards his

so she could feel his disappointment. “I gave you one job, one single job ... and you failed even to accomplish that?”

They had been given adjoining rooms in the guest wing of Westford estate, far too removed from the excitement for his own liking. He had a very specific goal in mind that Amelia was to accomplish and having her this far removed was going to make things all that much more difficult.

He did not care what it took, or what lengths it was that Amelia needed to go to in order to ensure that he got the connection he desired. She was simply going to have to do better.

“You have already failed me once today; you could not manage to engage the duke’s attention. It was like you were speaking to a wall. I do not know what you must do to find your common ground, but I am not leaving this estate without a proposal, do you understand me?”

“Yes, Father.” Amelia winced.

Sidney sneered and let her go. “Is that all you know how to say? No wonder he does not find you appealing.” He paced in front of her. “Do I need to remind you that if this fails, you will be putting the final nails in my coffin? Is that what you want? Are you trying to kill your father?”

“N-no, Father,” Amelia answered, looking back down at the ground.

“Look at me when I am speaking to you!” Sidney barked, making Amelia flinch. When she looked up at him, tears were welling in her eyes. “Now you are going to cry? You truly are a pathetic woman, are you not? Get out of my sight. I expect better from you tomorrow.”

Amelia rose and hurried out of the room, leaving Sidney to stew. If she wanted to be a failure, then he might just have to resort to more ... unconventional methods.

Chapter 9

Humming had only worked for a short time with young Eleanor. Now, it felt more like Anna was soothing herself than the babe in her arms. It certainly was not just her lungs that were strong; it was how she pushed at Anna when she did not like how she was holding her.

She paced back and forth so often in the nursery today that she was somewhat surprised that she had not yet worn a hole right in the carpet.

The dill water helped her discomfort until Eleanor's cries were only soft protests instead of the wailing bouts of pain that she had been before. But nothing that she could do or think of would soothe the poor girl. By this time, she must have absorbed every single detail of the space.

Three of the four walls were painted a creamy pale yellow, adorned with a few framed portraits, though it was obvious that one was missing. Anna had not yet brought herself to ask if it was a portrait of Eleanor's father or not, she supposed so – as the rest of her family's portraits hung proudly on the wall in order of age. The wall where Eleanor's crib was, had a pretty floral wallpaper featuring daisies and tulips of various colours.

A lovely stuffed lion and giraffe were in her crib, along with a pile of linen bedding that Anna did not think had ever been used. For as fussy as Eleanor was while being held, she was wholly unconsolable when she was put down.

Along the portrait wall was her changing table and a small rocking chair that Anna had been using on and off throughout the evening, hoping that some magical soothing combination could be found. Despite the strain in her arms starting to get the better of her, Anna did not stop rocking or bouncing for a single moment.

To keep herself from staring at the duke's portrait on the wall, she found herself drawn instead to the large gilded harp tucked in the other corner beside the crib. It was not poised to be playable; it was turned towards the wall, almost as if it had been shoved there and forgotten.

It was likely supposed to be a decorative piece, no doubt ... but she could not stop staring at it. The harp had been her late mother's favourite instrument. Never in her life had she seen somebody look so at peace while playing music.

Her mother had been built to be a harpist; there was no denying that. She had learned over the years, hoping that the shared hobby would have brought them closer together after Father died. Now, it was just a reminder of the parents that she had lost.

Perhaps she was going mad from the repetitive motions, but she could have sworn that every time they got closer to the harp, Eleanor's small hands reached for it with all five of her stubby fingers.

Mother had played the harp for hours and hours a day. Her talented fingers had nearly permanent grooves indented in them from plucking the strong strings and the hard skin that had formed around the repetitive motion.

The same that Anna had never had the dedication to the craft to have for herself. Even though it had been six years since Mother had passed, thinking of playing the harp brought all of that grief right back centre, fresh and burning.

She could not allow herself to cry. There was only room in this nursery for one crybaby and that was Eleanor.

But then again, on those long nights where they had all piled into Emma's room, the nights when Emma's fever was too high for her to settle or the racing in her chest simply would not settle ... the soft sounds of Mother's playing were the only thing to bring her comfort. If it had worked

for Emma, then perhaps it would work for Eleanor as well. She was desperate enough to try.

She gently laid Eleanor in her crib, and the crying started once more. The girl flipped over in the crib, grabbing hold of the slotted spaces and pulling herself up so she could look Anna accusingly in the face while she screamed herself red.

“Shh, sweet girl. It will only be a moment,” Anna assured her, glancing around for a seat and having to pull the rocking chair over to the harp with some difficulty. She had forgotten how cumbersome it could be to move a harp sometimes. It did not wish to turn easily on the carpeted floor, but she managed it and settled herself somewhat awkwardly behind it.

The rush of nostalgia was almost a blow to the chest. For a moment, she was not here, but she was back with Emma, playing the same lullabies that Mother always used to. Every night for months after Mother had passed, she had played and played for Emma -- only to cry herself to sleep after Emma finally passed out.

Swallowing hard against the thick knot of emotion in her chest, she lifted her weary arms and flexed her out- of-practice fingers. The first few notes came out rusty as she tuned the instrument to the key it was supposed to be in.

She plucked a few random notes before inhaling deeply and closing her eyes. Her body remembered the things that her mind had deemed far too painful to block out most of the time.

Eleanor stopped crying.

The agitated bouncing in her crib lessened, and slowly, she slipped down onto the mattress, her whimpers still shuddering her small frame, but after the second familiar song, Eleanor’s eyes started to drift shut.

How many times had she done exactly this for Emma? Anna knew she had not been here long enough for Emma to have had the time to write her a letter, but the depth in which she missed her sister was nearly overwhelming.

Anna pressed her cheek firmly against the harp, curling herself around it as much as she was able to and still continue playing as a single tear slipped down her cheek. She bit down on her bottom lip and allowed the memories to pass without looking too closely at them.

Instead, she focused more on the notes she was playing and hoped that at least someday, when Eleanor could remember this, she would have a happy memory of such music.

Edward had not meant to intrude; he truly had not intended to impress himself upon the scene in front of him. He had heard music and his curiosity had got the better of him. Anna must have been so lost in her playing that she had not even noticed he had opened the door. Just a crack at first, just to see what had happened ... but Eleanor was asleep.

She was in her own crib and sleeping without also being curled up on another's chest. She was a very attached baby, had been since birth, and it was not something that had got better as she aged.

This might be the very first night she had ever spent in her crib now that he was thinking about it.

Charles had gifted that harp to Juliana on their wedding day. It was just about the only thing that her husband had given her, apart from their daughter, that his sister had left.

When he had passed, she had wanted to throw it away. She had not wanted the constant reminder of her husband while her grief was still so fresh, and she had tried to throw it down the stairs in a fit.

Well, she had *tried*. Juliana could not seem to actually move the harp very far, which had suited him just fine because he knew that had she damaged the beautiful instrument, it would have been something she would have come to regret later in life.

The pain was fresh now, but it would not always be. At least, that was what he kept telling them over and over again, hoping that it would prove true someday.

Perhaps Anna felt the weight of his stare lingering on her pretty face, but her fingers slipped when she noticed him. Her face flushed the most adorable pale pink as her eyes widened. “I am sorry, Your Grace. I did not mean to wake you.”

“No, please, you did not at all.”

“I can stop if it is not all right that I play?” Anna whispered.

In the crib, Eleanor stirred from the sudden silence. “Not at all; I am glad that somebody can make some use of it. You play so beautifully. May I?”

Anna’s blush deepened. “It is your house, Your Grace.”

Edward moved closer, the nursery door clicking shut behind him as he crossed the room silently. “Please, continue,” he asked softly, squatting down against the wall close to where she was so his voice would not carry too loudly when he spoke.

Slowly, almost nervously, Anna started to pluck at the strings again. “Music was what brought my sister to her husband, Charles.”

He nodded towards the missing portrait on the wall. He had removed it himself when his sister would crumble into hysterics, even

glimpsing it. He would reinstall the portrait someday, but only when she was ready.

“They did not love one another at first, but they both had such a deep love of music that fate had decided they were meant to be well before either one could tolerate the other,” Edward continued as Anna played.

“Both were talented, of course, and I am biased towards my sister’s playing for familial obligation, but Charles ... he had a way with music that I wish everyone could have experienced.”

“He sounds lovely,” Anna offered kindly.

“He was. I had never thought I would find a man worthy of my sister, naturally. I think every brother would feel the same way about their sister, but Charles ... well, it was easy when they loathed one another. Their competitive natures made them fire and oil, fuelling one another during what I call a most unorthodox courtship ... until something snapped.

One day, they were screaming at one another in my parlour about sabotaged harp strings ... and then the next, he was asking me for her hand in marriage,” Edward said with a laugh, remembering how shocked he had been and how distinctly he had been so certain that Charles had been joking with them. But, he had been perfectly serious.

“From that day forward, there was never one without the other. A powerful, shining sort of love that apparently burnt far too brightly, far too fast.”

Anna’s fingers slipped, missing a note. It was enough to force him out of his own head.

“They ought to have had countless years together ... and now his daughter will never even know how beautifully he played. Never know his laugh or annoying old jokes.” Edward shook his head.

“I am...so sorry for your loss, Your Grace,” Anna said softly, her gaze lingering on him as the moment stretched. She was beautiful; there was no denying that. But her softness? The gentle way she spoke and how intelligent she had proven herself to be ... he wanted to know her better.

Unlike the dozens of times he had been offered condolences, she actually sounded as if she meant it – as if she understood what it was like to lose such a beloved person.

He found himself looking up at her from where he was, wholly ignoring the strain in his thighs as he lost himself momentarily in her hazel green eyes. Oh, he could stay here with her all night. How was she so easy to talk to? What was it about her that was so inviting?

Oh, what was he doing?

Snap out of it.

“Yes, well ...” Edward said abruptly, quieting down the moment that Eleanor stirred again. “I was merely checking in on my niece ... please, feel free to play as much as you like ... but perhaps only at night? One can only watch their sister cry so many times in a day. I am sure that you understand.”

When he rose to his proper height, his ducal mask was firmly back in place as he adjusted his waistcoat.

“O-oh- of course, Your Grace. Thank you,” Anna offered softly, her brow furrowing in confusion by his sudden shift in demeanour. He nodded abruptly and quickly left the room, the soft sounds of her playing dampening themselves as he shut the door behind him.

He needed to remember himself before he got himself into trouble. It was entirely too difficult to leave her company already.

Chapter 10

The following morning, Anna found her feet dragging just a little bit on the way back up to Eleanor's nursery. Once again, she had been coaxed out of bed in the wee hours of the morning, but this time, it was by Mrs Potter. For the third morning in a row, Mrs Potter gave Anna a tour as she made her daily rounds. If she were being honest, she was beyond grateful for the repetition.

The estate was so large, and it was so easy to get turned around. Most of all when she took into account the servants' passages and quarters that she needed to navigate around. It was all one big mess, so the repetition was wonderful. That, and Anna found that getting to know Mrs Potter while they readied the linens and things for the day was nice.

Strict as though she may be, it was only because she cared so deeply for the family she was serving. She had been with the Sheldon family for 'more years than she could count' as she liked to say. She had even decided that she liked Anna enough to start sharing her personal concoctions and remedies for Eleanor's griping. Anna had big hopes for them. She thought that if she could combine her reading and research, the dill water, and the remedies Mrs Potter had created, she might unlock the key to Eleanor's comfort ... and, therefore, the rest of the household as well.

If everybody got more and better sleep, she was very hopeful that the general mood would improve. Lady Juliana would be able to start her healing more effectively if she were well-rested.

Remedy bottle in hand, Anna made her way back up to the nursery where Eleanor was due to wake up any moment now, and Anna wanted to be there to ensure that she was comfortable when she did so. But, when she reached the top of the stairs, one of the other maids, Millie, was standing there waiting for her.

She was nearly vibrating as she shifted her weight from one foot back to the other anxiously or excitedly, with the strange smile that she wore, it could go either way.

“Good morning, Anna!” Millie said in a chipper voice. She seemed to be the sort of person so overflowing with positive energy that her petite frame simply could not hold it all. It must be why her movements continued to be somewhat frenetic.

“Good morning, Millie. Is there something I can do for you?”

Millie shook her head and looped her arm through Anna’s. “Nope!” she accented the ‘p’ when she spoke. “What do you have there? That’s a pretty blue colour!” She pointed at the bottle in Anna’s hands but didn’t wait for an answer before she continued speaking.

“I have been looking for the right moment to speak to you, you know! I had thought you might join the rest of us for dinner last night, but clearly you are too self-important to eat with the rest of the servants.”

Anna nearly tripped. “What? No! That is not —”

“I am only teasing. I do not mean any harm.” Millie giggled. “I just wanted to get to know you better! We are both assigned to the same floor and all! But I will have so much less to do now that Miss Eleanor is sleeping!”

“What do you mean?”

“Oh, well, Lady Juliana has been crying so much, and that means a lot of linen when she blows her nose! Now, she is sleeping more than crying! Do you understand?” Millie gushed like she was revealing some grand secret.

“I do not follow ...”

“It means that whatever you are doing, Miss Anna, it is working!” Millie nodded. “So! Since I do not have to wash linens this early, I reckon that means I owe you a favour! So, whenever you decide on what you want ... you come find me! Understand?!”

Anna’s eyes widened as the pair stopped just outside of the nursery. “Thank you, but you certainly do not need to –”

“Of course I do!” Millie giggled and pressed her index finger against Anna’s nose. “And I want to! Do not forget!” Millie checked the hallway on both sides to ensure that nobody from the family was watching her before skipping away down the hall.

Somehow, it felt as if the two of them just became friends.

Anna entered the room softly, humming so gently that it was nearly under her breath as she placed the remedy on the changing table before crossing over to where Eleanor was starting to wake. No doubt she would be hungry. Lady Juliana was very insistent that she fed Eleanor herself for as long as she could.

Ever so carefully, Anna scooped Eleanor into her arms, beyond pleased when the young girl started to wake gently. Her face turned, nuzzling into Anna’s chest and shoulder, seeking breakfast.

Anna knocked gently with her free hand on Lady Juliana’s door.

“Come in!”

When she pushed inside, Lady Juliana was already awake and upright in her bed, looking far more rested already. “I have a very hungry young miss!” Anna greeted Juliana happily as she held out her arms for her baby.

“I do not know what sort of magic that you are doing, but I cannot tell you how grateful I am that you are here. I have not slept through the night like that in eight months!”

“I am so happy to be of service!”

But every time she said those words, Emma’s face instantly swam to the forefront of her mind.

“Did she actually sleep?”

Remembering what Edward had said about the harp, Anna chose to leave that part out. “She did! Maybe she will grow out of the restlessness.”

“One can only hope! I have this constant fear that my ...” Lady Juliana’s fingers trailed down her nursing baby’s face lovingly as she took a moment to keep from crying. “I worry that somehow, some way, my sadness is rubbing off on her ... that I am the cause ...”

Anna sat on the edge of the bed, hoping she was not overstepping as she shook her head and took Lady Juliana’s free hand.

“I know why you feel that way, but blaming yourself for how you feel will help nothing. Please forgive me if I am overstepping, but I know when I lost those close to me ... It was so tempting to tell myself that I had far too many responsibilities to allow myself to be sad.” Anna forced a small smile. “It took a very long time to learn that I was wrong.”

Juliana started to speak, tears still shining silver on her waterline, when there was another knock on the door.

“Oh! Apologies, I did not know that you were already awake!” Lady Katherine smiled at both of them, her grin growing as she noticed Eleanor feeding. She took it upon herself to bustle about the room, picking out the dress she wished her daughter to wear for the day and then calling for her

ladies' maid to help prepare her. "No time to waste, dearie; the Wyndhams are waiting downstairs for us to join them for breakfast!"

"Eddie, my boy!"

Edward flinched, his eyes shutting as his hands paused the work they were doing. It was too early for this. It was far too early in the morning to subject himself to Sidney and his booming theatrics. Edward presently held a pastry in one hand and a quill in the other, half hunched over the estate papers he had been working on since last night.

He had chosen to have breakfast here, away from the family, so he could finish some work without Sidney's inquisition or Amelia's constant attention. She meant well; he knew that she did. She was a kind, sweet girl by nature, but it was so *exhausting*.

He almost considered ignoring the man, but he could *feel* his father's disapproving stare from beyond the grave. Could still recall the man's firm hand upside the back of his head, so he dropped everything that he was presently working on and held out his hand to shake Sidney's hand.

"Good morning, Lord Wyndham, I hope that you slept well and the accommodations were to your liking," Edward greeted perhaps a touch too formally.

"Please, Eddie, call me Sidney! Our families have been friends long enough for us to be a bit more familiar with one another, do you not agree?"

Edward's smile tightened, and he could not bring himself to answer.

Sidney's attention shifted from Edward's face to the work he was doing, reaching out as if he were going to pick up the papers in front of him and comment on them. As if that were any of his business. Edward slapped

his hand down on top of them, smooshing all of his work together with a sigh.

“Is there something I can do for you, Lord Wyndham? I do believe that formal breakfast is being served in the dining hall as we speak,” Edward offered, hoping the older man might take the hint. “I planned to make an enquiry about the status of your carriage when I was finished here.”

“Surely you know that those sorts of extensive repairs are bound to take a day or two! No matter how talented your staff undoubtedly are!” Sidney continued in a way that made Edward wonder if perhaps the damages had not only been intentional but also done by Sidney himself. It certainly would not surprise him.

“Nevertheless, I shall—”

“Are you truly going to mope about up here by yourself when my lovely daughter is expecting you downstairs?” Sidney leaned in conspiratorially. “She was quite keen to see you again after last night; I shall have you know. My daughter is quite the coveted and eligible young lady. I would not encourage just *anyone* to speak with her either.”

Edward nodded. “Yes, but I am quite busy, you understand.”

“Oh, pish posh!” Sidney huffed, shaking his head and flicking Edward’s papers. “One cannot live life to the fullest by being so serious all the time! Come, my boy, I insist that you be a proper host to my daughter and join us at once!”

He was truly starting to get on Edward’s nerves. He was not one to be commanded by anyone, least of all in his own house while abusing his own hospitality. “Lord Wyndham, I truly must insist that—”

“Your Grace?”

Sidney turned the same time that Edward did, as if his butler would have possibly had any reason to address Lord Wyndham directly. He tried to swallow back the irritation and be the bigger person, but it was more difficult than he liked to admit. “Yes?”

“There is a letter here for you,” the butler advised, lifting the envelope only enough for Edward to see the telltale wax seal of Mr Phillips, his private investigator. Edward’s stomach lurched uncomfortably. Every time he got an update, it was always met with anxiety and unrealistic amounts of hope.

“Ah, yes.” He hurried forward, glancing back at Sidney, who was already taking the two seconds of leverage to start rifling through Edward’s personal papers. “Please see that Lord Wyndham is *promptly* escorted to the dining hall.”

“Of course, sir,” the butler answered, quickly moving to where Sidney stood and gently shooing him in the requested direction. Not that Sidney cared much to have his overly obvious snooping interrupted.

“If you will excuse me ... I have to attend to this,” Edward said over his shoulder as he hastily made his way to his private office so that he would not be interrupted a second time. He ripped open the letter, unable to force himself to fetch Marcus or wait again lest this just be more of the same bad news.

He scanned the contents of the paper once, and then twice, and over again.

Mr Phillips was on his way here and would be arriving in only a few days with *pressing* information. Important enough that pressing had been underlined. The persistent feeling of hope blossomed in his chest – and he hurried to fetch Marcus.

Obligation was the only reason that Edward had allowed Marcus to drag the pair of them down to the breakfast room. His mother was doing her best to carry light-hearted conversation with the room at large, but Edward could not hear a single word she was saying. He could not focus. Under the table, his leg bounced anxiously as he kept his unfocused eyes turned to nothing in particular.

“Your Grace?”

Poor Amelia must have addressed him at least four times before he realized he was actually being spoken to. Even then, it was more because Marcus kicked him firmly in the shin than it was because he actually heard her speaking.

He could not stop thinking about the vital information that Mr Phillips could be bringing him. He hoped it was enough to bring closure to this whole situation, whatever that might be.

“Hm?” He hummed, looking for the person speaking to him, only to see that it was – of course – Amelia with a bright yet somehow demure smile on her portrait-perfect face. “I beg your pardon. I seem to be in my own world today.”

For all that her father vexed him endlessly, Amelia did seem to have a good heart, and it was not her fault that she had been born into the family she had been. None of them could choose their parentage, after all.

But he found disingenuous conversation topics and small talk so very draining, most of all recently with how little they had all been sleeping. They were going through enough as it was, and he still had the whole duchy to run.

“Apologies, Your Grace, I was merely commenting that the weather out here seems so much more preferable to the city. I feel that one can really enjoy being out of doors here without the high buildings all around. Do you

not agree? Is that why you choose to live here in the countryside?” Amelia asked in her sweet, small voice.

Edward had honestly never given it too much thought beyond the fact that he enjoyed having the rolling hills and forests so near to him. That way, he could indulge in all of his hobbies in peace. Well, he used to be able to, anyway. “Hm, well, I suppose. Though, this is the home I grew up in. Perhaps my mother would better understand why my father chose to put our estate here of all places?”

“Oh, right. I suppose that I could. She just ... she is so busy,” Amelia offered with a bashful smile that coloured her fair cheeks a rosy pink.

Edward did notice, however, the way that Sidney kept looking over at his daughter while in the middle of his conversation with Katherine as if gauging whether he needed to intervene. Edward did not care for the way that Amelia kept glancing at him for what looked to be approval.

“I do not know how you are so accomplished, Your Grace. I fear that if I lived somewhere as beautiful as this, I would never run out of beautiful things to admire,” Amelia tried again with another approach.

“Perhaps you should show her the gardens, Eddie boy!” Sidney interjected loudly as he took a large bite of his food. “My Amelia would love to see the flowers! She is so fond of pretty things! I know your father used to be quite proud of his lawns and properties! I am sure you have kept them up in his memory, boy?”

If he called him ‘boy’ again, this conversation would take a wholly different direction, and quickly.

Out of pity for Amelia’s situation and lack of any substantial reason to decline, Edward nodded. “Very well. I shall make some time this afternoon to give you a proper tour if you would like?”

Amelia seemed to breathe a sigh of relief before her dazzling smile lit the room. “I would like that very much, Your Grace. Thank you.”

He nodded, making a mental note to *ensure* their carriage was fixed as quickly as possible.

Chapter 11

That afternoon, Edward walked patiently beside Amelia as she spoke about everything under the sun. They covered the current gossip in London Society, her likes and dislikes, her father's impression of the political climate, and her hobbies.

They stopped and spoke about the flowers, how lovely the weather was, and how warm her skin felt. They spoke about anything and everything.

That is to say, Amelia spoke gracefully, and Edward listened.

Over the gardens and around the small glittering lake, they were careful to avoid the woods that she had remarked were far too 'scary' for her to even consider walking in, and how grateful she was that Edward was there to protect her.

They wound their way around the estate and down towards the stables, the last thing he could think to show her before taking her back into the house.

The longer she spoke, the more distinctly he was certain she was just as reluctant to go back and speak with her father as he was.

Were he not so certain that anything and everything that he said would be directly repeated to Sidney, he might have even been inclined to be more friendly and less reserved with her. How she was so sweet when her father was ... the way he was, was the mystery.

Edward's favourite black stallion was in the open paddock, jogging small laps around the circular enclosure, and Edward could not resist drawing closer. "Oh! Come and see, do you like horses? Or ride?"

But, they were not more than fifty feet away before Amelia paused, lifting her gloved hand to curl delicately under her nose as it wrinkled in distaste.

“Something the matter?” Edward asked, concerned.

“... the smell, Your Grace.”

He was confused. “Of ... of the stables?”

She nodded slightly. “I do not think that is a place for us to be. Is that not where the servants are supposed to work?”

Edward blinked, taking a moment to process what she was saying. Behind him, his stallion whinnied a greeting, now standing there at the edge of the paddock and waiting for him to greet him. “I am afraid that I do not catch your meaning?”

“The beasts ... they are unclean, are they not?” Amelia shook her head. “I do not want the smell on me, Your Grace.”

He tried not to be offended. He tried to give her the benefit of the doubt. No doubt, she had never had to deal with such things. “He is merely a horse, Lady Amelia. Come and see; he is quite friendly.”

Edward walked backward to his stallion, pivoting at the last minute to place his hand on his snout, rubbing two fingers against the flat space between his eyes as his stallion whinnied again, pleased. “I wish I had a sugar cube for you to give him; then you would change your opinion entirely.”

Amelia did not budge. She did not take so much as half a step closer to his horse. It did not seem as if she were *frightened*, more so that she would not. Perhaps she felt above such things.

“Your father never had you learn how to ride?” he asked, hoping to coax her further now they had something he actually enjoyed speaking about. Yet, the more reluctant she was, the more he was unintentionally drawing parallels between the intriguing woman inside the house and this one.

No doubt if Anna were here, she would already be in the paddock, embarrassing him by how much more she apparently knew about horses than he did.

“Papa says it is indecent for a lady to ride horses, even side saddle. He says that a true lady is too modest for such things,” Amelia answered casually, still not moving.

“What your father does not know will not hurt him.” Edward tried one last time. “It shall be our little secret.”

Amelia giggled, and he thought she would relent, but she merely shook her head. “Your Grace, you are so funny. My father knows everything, you know that.”

Of all the things he would have expected Amelia to have said on their walk, claiming that her father knew everything was not on the list.

He had been unable to counter it. He could not think of a single thing to say that would make the situation less uncomfortable. He could not refute it if that were her belief, and he certainly was not going to feed into it either. But no matter how he registered her words, it was strange for her to say.

“I see,” was the only thing he could think of to say. “Well, I suppose that concludes our tour then.” Edward reluctantly patted his stallion on the head and stepped away, despite the braying protest from the horse behind him that he would have much preferred to spend some more time with. “I shall escort you up to the house.”

And then he would come right back down to the stables.

“Have I offended you, Your Grace?” Amelia asked, hurrying to keep up with him as he walked past her.

“Not at all, but clearly, the stables have offended your nose, so it is best that we make haste so that you are not uncomfortable for a moment longer,” he explained, doing his very best to sound as if that was the only reason they were hurrying back, though she was likely only going to try to monopolize even more of his time. He smiled tightly, unsure of what to say as they moved back.

“Are you an avid hunter then, Your Grace? Is that why you like that horse?” Amelia tried. “Oh, you move so quickly, I can hardly keep up.” He waited until they were nearly back at the back doors of the house before he finally stopped and waved her forward.

“This is where I must leave you. I forgot that I still needed to check in on your carriage, but it is being kept by the stables. I am sure that my mother or sister shall be having tea shortly. Why do you not go on ahead inside and join them?” Edward said quickly.

Amelia was obviously crestfallen, but she could not come up with a sufficient reason to stay in his company. “Oh, of course, Your Grace. Thank you so much for taking time with me. I do hope that we can spend some more time together, perhaps this evening after dinner?”

He so badly wished to ask to what end? They clearly had little to nothing in common other than holding status in the ton. But, for propriety’s sake, he merely smiled and nodded.

The moment Amelia slowly started to amble back towards the house, he turned and started back to the stables. It was not a *lie* that he needed to check in on things, but it certainly was not the pressing issue that he claimed it was.

He hurriedly rounded the sharp bend in the path that would cut through the forest to the stables more quickly, only to collide with another body. His hands shot out automatically, gripping the woman in front of him by the waist firmly until he was certain that she was all right, only then to register that it was Anna with a handful of herbs she must have just foraged from the forest.

“I am so sorry, Your Grace, I did not mean ... I was distracted ...”

“No harm done,” Edward answered, his smile easy. His gaze lingered a moment too long on the way that the sunlight seemed to reflect off the hazel flecks and yellow dots in her otherwise bright green eyes. The sun did her chestnut hair favours as it seemed to add a whole other sheen missed by being indoors.

“...Your Grace?” Anna whispered, blinking up at him slowly.

“Oh,” Edward’s hands dropped, and he laughed nervously. “Forgive me.”

She smiled softly. “Nothing to forgive. I did not mean to interrupt you.”

Respectfully, she sidestepped the path to give him clearance to move ahead, just like anyone else working in his house would have done. But, for some reason, it deeply unsettled him when she did it. He did not wish her to leave. She was the one that he would much rather spend his afternoon speaking to.

“Actually, I would be honoured if you accompanied me down to the stables. I think that your knowledge could come in handy for me?” Edward asked, glancing down at the brown glass bottle in her hand. “Unless you are otherwise engaged in a pressing matter?”

Anna glanced down the path to the stables, and he could almost feel her longing to go with him and spend time around the animals she so

obviously loved. “I would be happy to, Your Grace, but I am afraid I need to get this gripe water up to the nursery for young Eleanor. Perhaps another time?”

He admired her dedication to her duties and did not wish his niece to be uncomfortable ... but he did not wish her to leave either. “I shall accompany you then.”

“I- are you sure?”

“There is nothing I would rather do,” Edward continued. He couldn’t help thinking back to when they met, where she had assisted him. It seemed the confidence she had with horses was also very applicable to all other areas in her life.

They walked in silence for a moment, and he felt the pressure to fill the space. He couldn’t get to know her any better by walking in silence with one another.

He wanted to know who she was, how she had come to be so educated about horses, how she had come to work here when she clearly had other fields of interest, ones that might be more lucrative to her if she could find a way to capitalize on them.

“Eleanor has shown such improvement since you have arrived,” Edward started. “Talented harpist, soothing to children, horse wrangler, I am starting to wonder if there is anything you cannot do.”

“You are far too kind to me, Your Grace. truly,” Anna answered, her cheeks flushing a pretty pink colour.

“Hardly, I am a man with very high standards, and you are more than deserving of the compliment,” Edward continued. “How do you manage to be so accomplished?”

“I am not sure what you mean? Perhaps it is just that I am naturally curious about things? I am sure that I have picked up more useless knowledge than practical over the years as a result of it.” Anna laughed softly as they walked.

The pathway opened back up on the way to the house, and Edward was thankful there was no sign of Amelia lurking around. He wanted to spend as much time with Anna as possible.

The grand oak tree in front of them on the path was encircled by a wrought iron bench and a wreath of flowers planted behind that. A perfect shady spot for a conversation or to read. But it seemed he was not the only person of that opinion today. Rebecca and Marcus were seated beneath the oak tree, a book open in Rebecca’s hands, but it seemed that they were far too engrossed in their conversation to worry about the contents of the book, or the fact that they were now being watched.

Anna’s hand touched his forearm, stopping the pair in their tracks. She seemed just as interested in the development in front of them as he was.

Marcus had been spending a good deal of time in the library, that was true, but for the last handful of meetings that the pair had, one book of poetry or another was tucked up under his arm.

This was also odd, given that after they had left school, Marcus seemed to have fallen out of love with love. The disillusionment that his friend had endured was nothing short of intense. To see him look so ... smitten? It was something he would have to ask Marcus about another time.

“Is there not another path we could take, Your Grace?” Anna whispered to him.

Edward understood her meaning, but the soft touch of her hand against his arm was highly distracting, and he could not seem to form words properly. He nodded once and turned them down another path.

But, sadly for him, this path was far shorter.

Chapter 12

“What do you suppose that is all about?” the duke asked and sounded so interested that she could not help laughing.

“Your Grace! Are you asking me to engage in gossip?” Anna said with mock affront. “How would that look for a new nursemaid to be caught gossiping by her employer?”

The duke paused, a gentle smile on his handsome face, and eyed her in a way that made her think that perhaps, for a foolish moment, he was not speaking to her as her employer at all. Heat crawled up her face, wondering if it was inappropriate to have teased him.

“I am merely asking you to comment on a shared experience ... something we both witnessed, of course,” he continued, choosing his words very carefully. “Surely you are just as interested in the things happening around here as I am.”

“Oh, but Your Grace, I am only interested in young Eleanor, of course.” She nodded sagely, pretending that she had no ulterior motives whatsoever.

“*Only* Eleanor?” the duke asked, pausing as he turned to face her. Something in the way he looked at her, a gentleness in his voice as he spoke, made her almost wish that her answer was something different. She could feel herself blushing, the heat in her face she wished she could will away.

Nobody had looked like that since she had been engaged. She had not thought that anybody would ever look at her that way again, and she was not entirely certain how to feel about it. All she knew was that when the duke was around ... she really enjoyed spending time with him.

Before now, any time that a gentleman looked at Anna or paid any attention to her since the loss of her fiancé, she had felt nothing but guilt. As if somehow, even considering another man would be a betrayal to his memory. She knew he would have wanted her to be happy. James would not have wanted her to spend the rest of her life alone; he would have abhorred that.

He had always been sure to tell her that, at some point, she would have to put herself first, given that she had such a strong tendency to put the needs of others above herself.

Anna waited for the guilt to come -- but it did not.

She wondered what that meant.

“Your Grace, I –” Anna could not even begin to unravel that string on the spot like that. There were no words for what she was feeling. She only knew that since James, the duke was the only man to seem to take true interest in what she had to say, the only one she had felt comfortable around in this capacity.

But their stations were so far apart; surely he didn’t mean ...

From the top of the stairs, a child’s cry split the tension in the room.

“I–” she continued, trailing off.

“I shall not keep you from your business,” the duke said. “Of course, I shall hold you to accompanying me to the stables at some point. Your duties keep dominating your focus.”

He was teasing her. It was more than a little flustering but in the best possible way.

“Well, if you wish to be the one to explain to Eleanor why I am otherwise occupied, Your Grace?” Anna teased right back.

“Oh, heavens no,” the duke answered with a shake of his head.

“That is what I thought,” she answered, lifting her skirt with her free hand to ascend the stairs quickly before Eleanor’s distress grew any more than it already was.

There was no option but to push the duke from her mind as she entered the nursery to a tear-streaked Lady Juliana, Eleanor in her arms, pushing away from her mother with everything that her small body could muster. Lady Juliana bounced her gently, hoping that perhaps the movement would help to alleviate her daughter’s painful gas.

“It is all right, I am here,” Anna said in a soothing voice, her arms outstretched for Eleanor.

“I do not know why I am so weepy,” Lady Juliana said, her eyes wide and grateful despite her crying. “She just looks so much like her father. And I just ...”

Anna nodded, un-stoppering the gripe water and tipping it down Eleanor’s mouth between her screams so that she would swallow it. It worked so quickly and was nothing short of a miracle as Eleanor started to settle in her arms. Lady Juliana wrapped her own arms tightly around herself with a sigh.

“I fear that my crying only makes her crying worse ... and I do not know how to stop myself,” Lady Juliana continued as she pulled her handkerchief from her pocket and blotted her eyes with it.

“You must not blame yourself for things you cannot help, My Lady,” Anna said, slowly lowering Eleanor into her crib and crouching down so that she could pat the young girl’s back until she started to drift to sleep. If they could even manage to get Eleanor to sleep on her own or

allow her to soothe herself just enough to sleep, that would be such a burden off Lady Juliana's shoulders.

As she did so, Juliana stopped in front of the harp in the corner and inhaled deeply. "Did the harp truly help her sleep?"

"I beg your pardon?" Anna asked, pretending not to know what she was speaking about, just like Edward had suggested she should. She did not wish to be the cause of a fresh wave of tears.

"I heard the lullaby the other night. At first, I thought I was merely dreaming, perhaps stuck in another painful memory. But I realized I was not dreaming because I could not wake myself no matter how hard I tried," Lady Juliana continued, her voice wistful.

"I am sorry. I did not mean to wake you."

Lady Juliana shook her head, her hand extending towards the harp but stopping just short of actually touching it before jerking her hand back. "It is such a beautiful instrument, is it not?"

"Stunning, truly."

"I am surprised that it was even still in tune. It has not been touched in such a long time ... unfair to leave something so beautiful to collect dust."

Anna did not know what to say. She did not know if she should hint at knowing the story behind the harp, or if that would be stepping too far out of her bounds. "Do you play? Eleanor seemed to really take to it."

"I know, I think that was part of my trouble sleeping in a strange way. I have grown so accustomed to waking when she cried ... but hearing nothing all night was also a cause for a different sort of distress." Lady Juliana smiled sadly. "You should play ... you play so well after all."

“Oh, I should have asked – I did not mean to be presumptuous or anything.”

“No, dear, I mean ... if it worked, then of course you should play if you desire to. Anything to help my daughter be more comfortable is more than welcome.”

It was still too early in the afternoon for Eleanor to be asleep for too many hours at once. They would be lucky if Lady Juliana could finish her afternoon tea before her daughter wished to nurse again.

“I could ... play for you, if you like, My Lady?” Anna offered, slowly pulling her hand from the crib.

“No!” Lady Juliana answered too quickly, too sharply.

Both women in the nursery held their breath as they waited to see if the sudden noise was going to wake the baby. Eleanor stirred, and Anna could not move, it was such a specific sort of apprehension when waiting to see how it would go. But, mercy and luck were on their side as Eleanor scrunched back up in her sleep and seemed to be at peace for a little while longer.

“I mean to say that I do not think I could listen, myself, just yet. I have ... a history with music, and all of my fondest memories are tied to my ...” She almost could not say the words. “Late husband. I fear I shall never have the same appreciation for something that used to be my passion ever again.”

“You must have loved him very dearly,” Anna answered, unsure how to comfort her. “You are fortunate to have known love like that.”

“Yes, I suppose I am,” Lady Juliana sighed, a fresh round of tears sliding down her cheeks. “It only makes the hurt all that sharper, I am afraid.” She blotted her eyes once more. “If you will excuse me? I think I shall try to lay down for a while ... just while she sleeps.”

Anna nodded. “Of course, My Lady.”

Chapter 13

It was nothing unusual for Marcus and the duke to meet in his office for drinks after a long day.

Today, of all days, the pair even had more to celebrate than other days, given the letter Edward had received about Mr Phillips coming to visit them. They both knew it would hopefully be something that could provide new insight if nothing else.

Yet, the two men sat in near silence with one another, sipping their brandy and staring mutely into the fireplace in front of them. The flames danced in pretty reds and oranges before the smoke curled up the fireplace, giving just enough of a glow to illuminate the two chairs they sat in.

Marcus was slumped low in his seat, running his finger around and around the top of his glass as if hoping that he could make the crystal sing for him and failing every pass to make a single sound. Though, his grunts of frustration seemed to be growing louder with each one.

Edward was the one to finally break the silence. “One of us has to speak.”

Marcus merely grunted his response and took another sip of his drink.

“Perhaps you would like to speak about Miss Cartwright?” Edward asked slyly as his gaze slid over to where his friend was seated.

“If I speak about her, then you shall have to speak about Amelia,” Marcus countered.

Edward groaned and sank deeper into his chair. If there was anyone he wished to speak about, it was certainly not her. Amelia was not the one that he could not get off his mind. “It is so difficult not to fault her for her suffocating ways ... I know they are not her own ideas, but the ideas of her father.”

“But if she is carrying out the old man’s will, then the desired outcome is the same. One can put a suggestion in another’s ear, but if it cannot plant roots – nothing grows.”

Edward snorted a laugh. “What sort of nonsense are you spouting now?”

Marcus laughed as well. “Perhaps the drink is going to my head. It made sense inside of my brain ...”

“She and I have nothing in common, something that she might disagree with, but there is no possible way that we will ever be able to make one another truly happy. Why would she wish to be trapped into a marriage with someone she cannot even converse with?” Edward sighed.

“It is all just too strange to me that they showed up uninvited and wormed their way into my home, and now Sidney is practically thrusting his daughter upon me!”

Edward’s hands jerked forward to punctuate what he was saying, and the contents of his glass started to slosh over the side and dribbled onto the carpet.

He hissed in irritation for having made a mess and quickly finished the contents of his glass.

“Shall I get you another?”

Edward shook his head, leaning forward to place the empty glass on the floor between his feet as he rested his elbows on his knees and pushed his hands through his hair, hoping that the movement might steady him at least a little bit.

“I just want to know the end goal. I want to know what happened to make him think that any of this was all right? To say that he is playing underhanded would be an understatement.”

“So, what are you going to do?” Marcus prodded.

Edward scrubbed his hands down his face once more. “Ask you about Miss Cartwright, obviously.”

“That is not fair!”

Edward smirked. “But is it not your duty as my friend to cheer me up and keep my mind clear?”

“Which means that not only do I have my hands full, but at some point or another, there shall be limits reached in regards to my patience.” Marcus laughed. “All I will say on the matter is that ... I find her very diverting.”

“You have been stuck with your nose in books of poetry, and that is the best you can do? That she is diverting?” Edward clicked his tongue against the roof of his mouth in faux admonishment.

“Oh, what would you know about it anyway?” Marcus waved his hand at him. “I could spout all the sonnets I can think of, and it would be lost on you anyway.”

“Just because my interests have always been more musical ...”

“And yet not at all lyrical.”

“And you call yourself my friend?” Edward chuckled, though he wondered if he could honestly say the same thing in regard to another woman who had caught his eye. What would Marcus say if he indicated he was interested in Anna?

Was it a deep enough infatuation to actually speak about? He feared that it might be. He could not seem to get her off his mind. “Perhaps I ought to turn in before I say something I might regret.”

He picked his glass up off the floor as he stood and placed it on his desk.

“Do you think Sidney is merely after a marriage between you and Amelia?” Marcus asked before he could leave.

Edward sighed and hung his head. “Let us hope that is the extent of his plan and that he does not take too poorly to rejection then.”

Chapter 14

“What did I tell you?” Rebecca whispered behind a piece of freshly baked gingerbread later that night. Anna had finally managed not only to get Eleanor to sleep, but she had *stayed* asleep for the last hour wholly on her own. Rebecca had insisted that such a milestone deserved a reward.

Which brought them here to the kitchen.

“You were right!” Anna admitted, dunking the last piece of her own cooking into their cup of milk.

“If you two are singing my praises, and you should be, you should at least be saying it to my face,” Mrs Hargrove, the cook, said as she waved a large wooden spoon in their direction.

“I promised Anna the best gingerbread I have ever had, and I am correct.”

“There is a compliment somewhere within your words, but you could certainly be more clear about it,” Mrs Hargrove continued.

“But now I am so full that I fear I cannot make it upstairs with the milk making me so sleepy.” Anna grinned.

“That is the whole point!” Mrs Hargrove grinned back. “Now, go on and get to bed. Both of you so that I can clean up my kitchen.”

“Yes, of course, thank you again!” Rebecca said, pushing away from the table with a yawn. She stretched her arms over her head before leaning over to peck Anna’s cheek with a familial kiss. “I am going to sneak up into my room, quiet as a mouse, just you wait and see.”

She was out of the kitchen before Anna could even summon the energy to lift from her chair. “They were truly spectacular; thank you, Mrs Hargrove.”

“You still need to be up on time tomorrow!” she called as Anna made her way out of the kitchen to the main staircase leading her up to her room. Her whole body felt heavy and yet wholly satisfied. But her heart was equally as heavy. How many times had she sat up late at night with Emma before she had come here?

Moreso, even recently, when her health had been more stable. They had sat in their modest little kitchen, huddled over the warm treats. She could practically still hear the echoes of her mother’s voice, calling them to bed or scolding them for staying up too late. It was something they had talked about before she left, knowing that Anna was leaving. Emma had said how she had missed their mother.

When Emma was sick, they swapped the treats for soups and broths, but the sentiment was always the same. It was such a simple little tradition for them to hold, feeling forbidden for being awake at such a strange hour. It had felt as if they had existed outside of time during those hours, just the two of them. Their whispered conversations were some that she would never forget.

The night before Anna left, the night Emma begged her not to go, she stole into Emma’s room with a modest plate of whatever it was that she had found in the kitchen, which had not been much at the time. She had tried to recreate the magic that their old kitchen had held, just once more, but Emma had been too upset.

Did she think that Anna had sullied the reputation with her timing? She had wanted to see her eyes light up, just for a moment. She had wanted to make them both forget how hard this was going to be, but now, looking back on those memories, all she could see were the shadows under Emma’s eyes.

Anna had yet to receive a letter from Emma.

She would write to her as soon as she got back to her room. That would be her plan, and then, she could mail the letter first thing in the morning. She would tell her all about the gingerbread and how things were going at Westford, and hope that Emma was not still cross with her for leaving.

As Anna walked past the parted open doors of the ballroom, the soft notes of a pianoforte drifted through the entryway from the darkened hallway. Who else could possibly be awake at this hour?

Perhaps it was Lady Juliana and her love for music that kept her awake at this hour. If she was feeling sad, perhaps she could talk or escort her back into her room. She knew it would not suit her to be alone, crying into the piano.

Her feet moved of their own accord down the hallway, following the haunting melody, low and sombre until she could peer into the ballroom where the long pianoforte rested, looking far too small for the size of the room that it was in. The duke sat with his back to her, half leaning over the instrument and picking at the keys slowly.

His formal jacket was discarded and the sleeves of his white linen shirt were rolled up to his elbows as his fingers picked up speed, seeming to play the song from memory alone.

The far wall had a large floor-to-ceiling window, and the drapes were still open. Somehow, they managed to beam moonlight onto Edward and the pianoforte, highlighting him as if he were a centre-stage act. She moved into the room slowly, letting the notes of the song fully register.

He was playing it far more slowly than it was supposed to be played, stretching out the notes, but after a moment of careful listening, she could recognize one of Mozart's more melancholic sonatas. Her mother had often played the same one.

Anna certainly would not have ever guessed him to be the musical type. During the day, any time that she witnessed him in a formal capacity, he seemed very no nonsense. Actually, it dawned on her, the only times that he did not seem wholly starched was when the pair of them were alone.

Closing her eyes, she leaned back against the wall beside the door, somewhat frozen as she listened to him play bit by bit, the music bringing back even more memories of her mother. While Anna had no natural talent for singing, her mother could have been a nightingale for how pretty she sounded. It was a trait that only Emma had inherited.

Well, at least it had been before the singing made Emma's cough so much worse. Despite the illness in her heart, it tended to put quite a strain on her lungs as well. It seemed that Anna would not be able to avoid the onslaught of memories this evening.

She was homesick for her sister, but she knew they needed the money above all else. Her care was not cheap, and their aunt would only be pressed so far in her hospitality.

There were far fewer memories of her father to dwell on, and even those were mostly just the ones that her mother had shared with her, as opposed to authentic memories of her own.

Her eyes opened slowly, studying the unguarded version of the duke in front of her. She did not know if she would have been able to be in the same position as he was, with so much grief and struggle in his family, and still handle it with a modicum of grace, as he was. Of course, he was buttoned up when anyone was looking.

Anna ought to leave him to it. She was blurring the lines of what was allowed befitting her station. She certainly had no right to spy on him. He deserved some time to decompress as much as any of the rest of them.

As much as she wished to linger and listen to him play -- she respected the privacy she had already infringed upon. With a soft smile, she

waited until he had finished the song and begun on the next before she turned to leave. She pulled the door open just slightly -- the hinge squealing this time and instantly giving her away.

Chapter 15

Edward turned when the door squeaked, a small jolt of anxiety spiking through him at the sudden interruption. He whirled in his chair, eyes widening as he noticed Anna and her guilty expression lingering in the doorway.

She seemed to be caught between fight and flight. For a moment, he waited to see if she was going to leave once more, as it was a very late hour.

When she did not, Edward scooted over on the bench to make room for her. “Do you play?”

Anna seemed to hesitate momentarily, and then mostly shut the door with another squeak before slowly moving towards him. She smoothed her skirts down and sat beside him. He could feel her warmth so close, the sweet smell that seemed to linger around her, something almost like chocolate. “I have not played in a very long time.”

Edward pressed a random key and angled slightly more towards her, stopping just short of his knee touching hers. “What has stopped you?”

Something akin to sadness crossed Anna’s pretty face for only the span of a blink before she pushed it back down again.

“Access to the instrument, perhaps? My mother sold ours when I was much younger,” she admitted far too casually. “I fear that I might be too rusty if I were to try to play again.”

“Nonsense, I am sure you will be very talented at this, just as you are talented at the harp,” Edward offered, hoping that she might be willing to indulge him for a moment.

“I have always loved music in all forms. I think that in another life, I would have been more dedicated to it.” Anna smiled sadly, her hands hovering over the keys as if afraid they would disappear. “I am very fortunate in that I tend to learn things very quickly? Or, perhaps it is simply that I am too inquisitive for my own good.”

Edward smiled. “I think a thirst for knowledge is important.”

“Knowledge and experiences,” Anna added wistfully with a nod. “My sister has been in poor health for almost all of her life. She could not be out of doors for very long, and I had to come up with ways to entertain her properly. She means the world to me.”

Edward nodded. He felt much the same about his own sister. “And music was a solace for you both?”

“Yes, Your Grace, my mother was even more talented than me. She filled the house with music every chance she got. Whether it was playing or singing, she had the most stunning voice. I will forever be covetous of it, as that was not a trait I inherited.

My sister, Emma, did get it -- but she is too ill to sing properly.” Anna pressed a single key, her focus turning to the sheet music in front of him, a different song than the one he had been playing earlier.

He had no idea that her family had struggled so much. He deeply admired her dedication to her sister and the seemingly bottomless well of kindness that she pulled from daily.

“My father was very much the opposite.” He sighed, pushing the sheet music towards her and dropping his hands into his lap. “He abhorred music or any hobby that did not have practical application. The arts were wholly lost on him.”

Anna almost laughed. “Irony then that both of his children seem to have such a talent for music.”

“Much to his dismay, yes. He did not take quite so much issue with my sister’s proclivities because she was not the heir; it was when I started to show skill that he attempted to have everything musical banished from the house. It is a mercy that my mother managed to talk him out of it. Life with him was ...”

He trailed off. Even now, after the man’s death, he was seemingly unable to speak a single unkind word about the man. His father had never said a kind word in his entire life, least of all to him ... so why did it feel like such a betrayal to even consider calling the man harsh out loud?

“Well, either way ... I used to sneak out of my room late at night like this and practice until my fingers ached. I would steal away back into my bed, sometimes only just an hour before the servants came to dress me in the mornings.” Edward chuckled. “I did that for as long as I could get away with it before the purple bags under my eyes became too prevalent.”

“But by then, you were hooked?”

“Absolutely.” Edward nodded, making sure to give Anna space to play as she aligned her hands.

“I lost my father when I was only seven years old, and my sister hardly has any memory of him at all. But from all the stories that my mother liked to tell us about him, I would like to think that he would have been very supportive of whatever dreams I had.

Even though most of them are not in fashion.” Anna flashed him a grin and then started to play. He wanted to push the subject and start to learn more about her, but he wanted to listen to her play as well.

She moved over the notes prettily, but her fingers were indeed a touch clumsy here and there as the piece began, though she was in perfect form as she seemed to hit her stride nearly halfway through the song. A peaceful smile transformed her face into something almost angelic,

something so beautiful that he could not look away from the joy shining in her eyes over playing a simple song.

The sound of footsteps in the hallway halted them both. Thick, heavy boot falls seemed to stop the moment Anna's hands paused over the keys. Edward's spine straightened stiffly, and he pushed his sleeves down as his ducal mask slipped back into place. It was such an easy transformation for him that he did it without even thinking.

Anna rose to stand at the same moment that he did. "I should return to my rooms in case Eleanor needs me," she muttered hastily and hurried from the room before he could say a single word. He had no idea who might have been in the hall, but they were clearly gone now, or she would have said something to them as she passed.

It left him in the ballroom alone, again, the echo of Anna's playing filling his head.

Sidney watched the brat hurry down the hall, her skirts in hands without even once looking back over her shoulder. Perhaps it was fortunate for him that she had not, for she would have seen him lurking in the shadows observing her.

He had not heard much of their conversation, but what he had glimpsed through the parted door was damning enough. The duke should not have any cause to be seated so close to the nursemaid.

She was going to become troublesome very quickly if he could not get her in hand.

Sidney did not personally give a damn one way or the other what the duke spent his nights doing. If he wanted to have the maid, then he was perfectly fine with that. He could have every maid and rake his way across London. Sidney might even like him better if he would.

But, at the end of the day, he needed to end up with Amelia. That was the only thing he cared about. He had specific goals in mind, and if that girl was going to get in his way ... well, he had ways of handling issues like that.

Amelia had been failing him enough as it was. He did not need to listen to her asinine apologies or pleading. She would simply have to do better. He made a mental note to study the maid. He would learn as much about her as he could, and then Amelia would simply have to copy the way that she did things until it was her that Edward was amused by.

The duke's conversation with the nursemaid had been anything but casual, and he would not stand by and watch it happen. Not on his watch. Quickly, he hurried back to his room to start planning.

Chapter 16

There was the easy solution, and then there was the far more annoying solution.

No matter how many times Sidney paced back and forth in front of his low-burning fireplace, he could not shake the feeling of dread welling inside him. He had been planning this whole thing for *months*. He was not about to let some grasping little harlot take things from him now that he was so close to getting everything he wanted!

Ideas rolled around inside Sidney's head, ranging from silly to inhumane, and he weighed each option with equal consideration. There was nothing he would not consider if it meant it would get him even fractionally closer to the future that he deserved, that he had *earned*.

Edward's obvious fascination with the nursemaid threatened to destroy *months* of careful planning. He kept looping back to that same fact over and over again. It would not stand. He was sorely tempted to drag Amelia out of her bed to demand answers. If she had been efficient in her time with the duke, then she might have his eye, but no. Why had he been cursed with such a useless daughter?

He polished off the contents of the glass in his hand and marched directly over to the small drink cart that had been provided to him in this room.

He set his drink down, un-stoppered the whisky bottle, and started to pour himself another glass with his trembling hands, but the rage inside of him knew it was going to take far more than just the one glass to settle his nerves. Instead, he took the whole bottle in hand by the neck and drank far too deeply from its contents.

If Amelia failed him, he did not know what he would do.

The debtors were getting more and more pushy with every passing week. There were limits to their patience, and while Sidney was talented at talking himself out of trouble in most situations, he could only dig himself out so much. He had escaped them, and that hasty retreat had ended them here far more clumsily than he had planned, but what choice did he have?

Amelia had no idea the sorts of things that he had done for her. She was just an ungrateful wretch. He was going so far out of his way to ensure that she had the best opportunities possible, and what did he have to show for it?

If only he had not gone into that damned inn three months ago.

More trouble than it was worth.

But the Crown Inn was where one went to have certain ... unsavoury issues resolved. It had all been so simple at the time, just a purse full of coins and a handshake. He had been *assured* that certain *problems* were going to be solved for him and fewer things for him to worry about.

He ought to have known it was too good to be true. He should have known better. The rough-looking man had been too efficient at soothing his nerves. Sidney had thought that a man who looked like that was guaranteed to have a certain reputation and capabilities.

Permanently solved.

That was what the bastard had said.

Sidney sank onto the edge of his bed, drinking more whisky until the excess liquid dribbled wetly down his chin and into the collar of his shirt. That had been a mistake, but he had learned from it, and that was never going to happen again. Because his debts only grew larger, and he needed Edward's fortune.

He needed access to the surplus funds his lucrative duchy had squirrelled away. He did not care how he accessed them, and he did not care how Amelia guaranteed that the coin and banknotes were in his hands ... he would not settle for less.

It had slipped through his fingers once, and he was not going to allow it to slip away again.

Chapter 17

“What will I do for the rest of the afternoon if you and Eleanor are outside?” Lady Juliana asked, rocking back and forth even though her daughter was presently in Anna’s arms and not her own.

“That is the beauty of a break, My Lady. You can do whatever you like,” Anna explained, and took a small step away from Lady Juliana.

“Whatever I like?” Lady Juliana echoed as if it were a wholly foreign concept to her. “You truly are a godsend, do you know that?”

Anna merely smiled. “I think that some light exercise would be good for her. Perhaps the sunshine and fresh air of the lovely day will benefit her even more.”

Lady Juliana nodded. “I trust you. I know that sunshine improves my mood a lot.”

“It is only normal to be anxious when letting your child try new things, but I promise I would never allow anything to happen to her,” Anna explained, and she meant every word.

Lady Juliana nodded once, then turned sharply on her heel and walked away before she could convince herself to stay or talk Anna out of her plans. Humming softly to Eleanor, she carried the girl outside. It should not have been surprising that Eleanor seemed absolutely fascinated with everything they passed.

Perhaps she could even help her have some lunch out here if she could keep Eleanor’s fast crawling under control anyway. She hoped to help Eleanor maybe identify the word *flower* if she could. Though with her

tummy issues, it was hard for her to stress herself too much before she was crying again.

They walked down the pathway she had walked with Edward the other day, the one that would lead her towards the stables and the large storehouse where they had advised her to keep the ingredients for the gripe water.

“It is a lovely day, is it not, Eleanor?” Anna spoke at a nonstop chatter that she had read would be best to do while caring for young children. She spoke about the trees they passed, the flowers they paused to admire, and any other natural fact she could think of.

She made sure to point out every bird she heard singing, poorly imitating the sounds to the best of her ability. Eleanor seemed to like that the best, as she giggled softly in her gentle way.

It always seemed that all her energy was saved for when she was screaming, and every time she was calm, she was nearly a perfect child. Sweet and even tempered, she reached for the tree bark most often, letting her small fingers rub over the rough bark as they passed down towards the stables.

Edward’s black stallion was out in the gated pasture, trotting in small circles. He looked up when the pair came closer to him. He seemed in good spirits. Hefting Eleanor up higher onto her hip, she smiled as she drew closer to the pen. She hoped that Edward had been keeping up with his training, as he was such a fine animal.

“Well, hello, handsome,” Anna called as the stallion approached them, whinnying softly. Eleanor cooed and reached towards him with both of her small hands outstretched. Anna knew that if the stallion was spooked by an unexpected stimulus, there was a good chance that he might also be spooked by children.

So, she moved forward carefully, cooing to Eleanor and the horse as she approached it. The moment they were within reach, Eleanor started squirming and reaching for the horse with a giggle, her fingers opening and closing quickly, grabbing for him.

Perhaps Eleanor would like the stables in general. At the last moment, the stallion bowed his head, eyeing them both carefully as they slowly walked past. “You know, Eleanor, I have the same interest in animals as you seem to have. You are going to love the foal they have in here, but you must not touch!”

She knew the girl could not answer her, but Anna was rather enjoying herself as she went on.

The fact that they were being watched by a man walking slowly only a few paces behind them was wholly lost on her until she had turned into the stables. Only then did Edward make himself known, her heart fluttering in her chest far more than it should have.

If he had to listen to another word out of Amelia’s mouth, he might have lost his patience. He just needed to get away from the house for a while. He had been trapped at breakfast for over an hour longer than his meals normally took because Amelia kept changing the conversation every time he attempted to stand up.

It did not matter what excuse he offered or reason he gave – Amelia seemed almost desperate for him to engage in conversation somehow. He had *tried* indulging her for a while, but she always offered the same inauthentic ramblings.

It was an increasingly forced feeling, and Sidney had sat there, slowly sipping his tea and taking the smallest bites of his scone that he could possibly consume at a time while he overly clung to each word spoken between them. His own mother was guilty of the same thing from

time to time. But it was because she was nosy, not because she practically demanded a certain response or outcome.

So, he just needed a moment alone. He had not even got his morning ride in today because his stallion was enduring more tolerance to those things that he feared, so he had not wanted to jeopardize that progress in any way.

He had rounded the bend when he heard Anna speaking, her sweet voice passionately speaking on and on about every thought in her head as she communicated with Eleanor. It looked so effortless, and it seemed natural for her to have a baby in her arms. That realization twisted something inside him in a pleasant way. A smile crept up on his face as he followed after them, wondering if he would ever have the natural ease around children as Anna seemed to. Things came so easily for her, and he could not seem to stop admiring her.

He watched Anna cross over to the foal only a few months old, still sleeping in her stall, curled up on the ground. Eleanor cooed and grabbed at the air, wanting to pet her as Anna giggled.

“What do you think of her?” Edward asked, and Anna jolted slightly in his direction.

“Oh! Your Grace! Sorry, I hope it is all right that we are in here?” Anna continued.

“Of course it is.” Edward grinned. “She’s one of the animals that I wanted to show you here. Perhaps your love of horses is going to rub off on my niece? It certainly seems like it!”

“Well she has quite some time before she is old enough for riding lessons, but perhaps she will be a natural! Everything I have read about says that a young child’s interests should be indulged from a young age to ensure that true talent is not squashed before it has a chance to grow.”

Oh, he loved the way she smiled when she spoke.

“Where did you come to learn about horses?” Edward asked, standing beside her in front of the stall, speaking low so that he did not wake the foal.

“No.” Anna grinned, lifting Eleanor to sit on the edge of the stall while she was still so content to watch the horse and everything around her. “I inherited my love of horses from James.” She seemed to catch herself after she started speaking.

A tendril of jealousy started to unfurl in Edward’s stomach at another man’s name on her lips. “My late fiance was a lovely horse master. The finest in all of England if I do say so myself.”

She glanced at him with a timid expression.

“We used to go for morning rides, and I would accompany him during some of his longer work hours from time to time ... I learned quickly,” she continued.

Late fiance? He had so many follow-up questions about her words.

“Your late fiance?” Edward asked, not sure if it was appropriate or not.

Anna’s chin dimpled as she nodded. “He was a wonderful man. I —” her breath caught. “I miss him dearly.”

Her heart had such a large capacity for love. It was so evident in everything she did. It was hard to be jealous of a dead man for anything beyond the fact that he had once possessed her whole attention. He did not wish to make an already difficult conversation more painful, and he hated for her to cry. He pulled his handkerchief from his pocket and held it over

to her, their fingers brushing for only a moment in the exchange. She took the fabric with a grateful nod before blotting her eyes gently.

He wanted to comfort her and to make her feel better ... but it was a heavy subject. He reached for her, hovering over the space between her shoulder blades before the worst possible sound that could have interrupted them did.

“Your Grace?!” Amelia’s voice repeated, the sound coming closer and then stopping. No doubt because of the ‘smell’ as she was likely pouting from the path, waiting for him to stop whatever he was doing here and go to her.

Anna extended the handkerchief back towards him, but he shook his head for her to keep it. He did not wish to leave her in favour of Amelia. Even five minutes with Anna was better than hours with Amelia.

“I shall leave you to your business, Your Grace.” Anna bowed her head in his direction and pulled Eleanor into her arms. “It is almost time for her feeding and nap anyway.”

He could not argue with that, not when it came to Eleanor’s schedule.

But, neither could he tear his eyes from her as she left the stables.

Chapter 18

Lady Juliana was lying down for a nap. Something that Rebecca likely ought to be doing herself. They had got so wrapped up in talking over tea that they had both forgotten everything else they were supposed to do that day.

Something that Rebecca was hoping to rectify before dinner so that she could enjoy as much of this peaceful period of Eleanor's as she possibly could. Everything on the estate was just so *quiet*.

At present, Rebecca had collected a small assembly of books that she had carefully piled up on the corner table, but it was missing the one she had been looking for specifically. Another collection of poems that she wished to read at Lord Higdon's urging.

She certainly had *not* come to the library hoping that he was here. She had *not* been seeking him out for company this afternoon; she was merely catching up on her reading. Besides, he must have been otherwise occupied as well, given that he was nowhere to be found in this library.

So, she had clambered up this ladder all on her own, her arm stretched out up over her head as she struggled to reach the highest shelf. She ought to request a longer ladder, perhaps. She had toyed with the idea of standing on one of the small tables, but she did not know if she trusted her own balance like that.

"Just a little bit ..." she breathed, arching up higher, and the ladder underneath her wobbled slightly, threatening to pull away from the shelf, and so she froze. Her hands gripped the top rung as her heart rate spiked anxiously. When she was certain she was stable, she reached forward again with more caution.

But, she could not have planned for the library door to burst open or for the low, grumbling man who thundered into the otherwise silent room to have been quite so distracting. She only caught a glimpse of Lord Higdon, and the way the neck of his shirt was unbuttoned -- and it was her undoing.

The ladder swayed, her weight shifted precariously, and that was the end of it.

The whole ladder came away from the bookshelf as she attempted to cling to it, her loud gasp the only sound of her distress before her whole body seemed to lock up with fear. Her eyes widened, and her fingers slipped as she fell.

It was truly lucky that Lord Higdon was there, as he was across the small space in the matter of a blink, his strong, steady arm wrapped around her as his other forearm deflected the falling ladder so that it hit the bookshelf and then clattered loudly to the floor.

Lord Higdon's face was only inches from her own. She could see the brown around his iris and every other part of his face. She could feel his chest moving when he breathed, and ... she could smell his cologne.

A musky, almost almond sweet...what was she doing? She could not be staying like this. This was improper. A fact that Lord Higdon seemed to realize at the exact same moment that she did as he hastily put her back onto her feet with a bashful grin that made even the tips of his ears turn pink.

He steadied her by her elbow, his mouth working as he struggled and failed to summon words to make the situation less tense, but she could still feel the warmth of his arm around her waist, and she could not get her heart to stop fluttering in her chest.

"T-thank you, My Lord. I do not know what I would have done if you had not been here," Rebecca stammered, her voice small because she could not seem to steady herself. "Well, I would have fallen, obviously ..."

Rebecca could not even hold his gaze because she was so flustered.

And, apparently, so was the woman spying on them from the doorway. Millie squeaked the moment Rebecca finished speaking and clamped both hands over her mouth as she danced from one foot to the other excitedly.

She almost looked as if she had just been witnessing a dramatic play and found something amusing. Millie's bright eyes danced from one to the other in the room, waiting to see what happened next. But, when neither of them moved once more, Millie visibly deflated.

"Propriety, propriety ..." she muttered and kicked her foot slightly.

How much had she seen? Clearly she had seen enough for her to think they were being indecent. Lord Higdon stepped forward to say something to Millie, but she giggled to herself, turned heel, and dashed down the hallway.

"What are the chances that she is simply hurrying off so she can keep this to herself?" Lord Higdon asked with a sigh.

Rebecca shook her head. For Millie? Those chances were absolutely none at all. Perhaps it were somebody else, but it was not. "I suspect that the whole house will know by dinner what has happened here and the poor impression she likely had just formed."

It was not as if Rebecca was fearful of anyone in the house thinking that Lord Higdon would have sullied her reputation or anything silly such as that. Well, not for *most* of the guests.

Chapter 19

The last thing Anna expected to find in the nursery was Lady Juliana seated at the small chair she had left near the harp. She must have forgotten to move the harp back up against the wall before they had gone outside. It was nearly time for Eleanor to take a nap, and being outside for so long, she was very overstimulated.

It would be good for her to have a small break from the excitement. Anna had thought that returning to her room would have been a perfect chance to let her tire herself out by crawling around some more.

But, with Lady Juliana sitting there, her trembling, clearly anxious hands hovering over the strings but not quite bringing herself to touch them yet, Anna almost felt as if she were intruding on something private.

Eleanor squirmed to be free of her arms as they stood in the nursery doorway, but Anna could not let her go, not yet, not until she knew if she ought to leave Lady Juliana to her playing.

Lady Juliana's eyes lifted to hers, almost silver with unshed tears, as she blinked over at Anna. "I ... I cannot..."

Anna nodded her head once and closed the door behind her. She started to hum the same lullaby that she had been playing on the harp the other night, the same one that had helped Eleanor to sleep. She carefully set the infant down so that Eleanor could explore the room while Anna trailed behind her, humming louder all the while.

Slowly, Lady Juliana started to pick and pluck at the strings, forming the cords that her fingers knew by muscle memory, even if her mind had not yet caught up. Her arms moved easily over the strings, finding the melody and picking up where Anna started to taper off. Watching her play was nothing short of transformative.

Lady Juliana laid her head against the harp, closing her eyes as the music seemed to pour through her. Tears started to stream down her face as she played, the lullaby shifting into something faster and strikingly beautiful. It was almost like getting to watch her mother play again, which brought sorrow to her in a way that she could not allow at a time like this.

Eleanor crawled over to where her mother was playing and stopped there on her hands and knees, watching her mother play with opened mouthed awe. Anna felt just as stunned by the song as Eleanor was. Yet, it was almost magical that Lady Juliana's face shifted into such a bright, happy smile despite the tears still in tracks down her face.

There had to be a whole myriad of emotions going through her mind. No doubt missing her husband but feeling connected to him simultaneously. Anna could understand. When she worked with horses, she felt the most connected to James' memory. It was a bittersweet feeling because she did truly love it, and she would still hold love for him until she died ... but at the same time ...

Eleanor sat up, gawking at her mother as drool bubbled with her babbling noises, almost as if she were attempting to sing along to the song.

Anna leant against the wall closest to the harp, letting the two of them have their sweet moment, when the door opened slightly. The duke peeked his head into the room with a soft smile. Anna lifted her finger to her lips, urging him to be quiet.

Nobody else in the room seemed to notice him at first, they were otherwise embroiled in their very own worlds in the best possible way. No doubt the duke must have thought she had been the one playing when he came up here. As flattered as she was that he would wish to see her play again, this was perhaps a much better sight for him to have stumbled upon.

The duke mostly shut the door behind him carefully, leaving it cracked so as not to disturb the room; Eleanor's babbling sounds grew

louder as Lady Juliana opened her eyes to see her daughter pulling up on the harp to touch the strings herself.

Anna had a strange, nearly overwhelming desire to pull him closer to her, to have his arm around her shoulder so that they might enjoy the moment together, but she knew better than to want such things.

The dowager duchess appeared in the cracked doorway with a stunned expression. Her fingers pressed against her lips as she stared at her daughter playing what was turning out to be a private concert for the whole household at this rate.

Was this Lady Juliana's first step towards healing that pain in her heart? Anna was grateful to have been allowed to be a part of it at least. Could she rediscover her love of music? Anna knew very well how healing that could be for the soul. Slowly, her gaze shifted from Lady Juliana and Eleanor to the man beside her.

She ought to excuse herself and allow this family moment to be just that ... family.

But oh, she wanted to stay.

Edward grinned and stood against the same wall she was leaning against as his mother pushed the door open just a touch wider so that she could see better. Her pathway to the door was now wholly blocked.

Her arms dropped, and the duke's did the same, their knuckles brushing against one another, sending a spark up her arm as her breath caught. Anna quickly tucked her arms behind her back as her heart fluttered.

The song Lady Juliana was playing wound to a close, and the dowager duchess erupted in uproarious applause. Lady Juliana startled, her

attention shifting from her daughter to her mother, then back to her daughter when Eleanor started to clap for her as well.

Chapter 20

“And I told Lord Hartness it was a sound investment,” Sidney explained loudly. He was on his third glass of wine for the evening, and his speech was starting to slur softly.

His lips were wet with too much red wine, and he seemed to grow louder and louder with each passing anecdote. “I would never steer him wrong, as my reputation for being a rather brilliant businessman precedes me everywhere I go.”

Sidney laughed at his own comment, gesturing to the table at large.

“But, I do not have to explain that to you all; you already know that very well.” Sidney nodded at Edward in particular. “Eddie, your father was well aware of that, too. I helped him with countless ventures here and there.”

Edward merely nodded along. He was not paying any more attention to the stories that Sidney was telling than anybody else at the table. Sidney did not care whether they liked his story so long as he got to keep his captive audience. The only person even pretending to hold eye contact was his daughter.

“That is just what happens, I suppose. Eddie, do not hesitate to let me examine your ledgers. I am certain that you must be very overwhelmed, and also to live here in a house full of women as well? I cannot imagine.”

Sidney only paused talking long enough to take another indulgent drink from his goblet and quickly motioned for another refill. The servant closest to him hurried forward to refill his cup before he started to get uncomfortable.

Dinner had been finished quite some time ago. Yet, Sidney kept talking, and Amelia kept interjecting, politely asking questions to keep her father talking. Every few minutes, she would reach over and place her hand on top of Edward's arm gently, asking him follow-up questions while wearing a gown of deep plum-coloured silk that was clearly chosen tonight with the express intention of capturing his attention and holding his focus.

Yet, whenever he was not asked a direct question, Edward found his mind drifting back to the scene he had walked into in the nursery that afternoon. He had been so certain that his sister would have been insistent in her desire never to play again.

Anna was perhaps the best thing that had happened to this estate in a very long time. He could not stop thinking about her. Since her arrival, pieces were slowly starting to fall back into their proper places. She did so with such effortless ease that it felt like she belonged there. Perhaps she did.

More than anything, Edward wanted to find a way to repay her, to do something that would allow him to properly express his gratitude. Though, from what little he did know about her, she likely would shy away from such grand gestures. She was so effortlessly authentic, and he wished to be as well.

Sidney's voice faded into the background, nothing more than static noise as Edward drifted deeper into thought. His thumb ran along his bottom lip as he ran through idea after idea, but none of them seemed suitable.

Not in any real way, at least. Further down the table, Mother's attention slipped as her head bobbed. It seemed that Sidney's incessant talking was putting her to sleep.

Even if Amelia had not been born into the family that she had, he could not help thinking that Anna's genuine emotion had touched him more than Amelia's practiced accomplishments ever could.

Meanwhile, sitting in her room and wholly unaware of the uncomfortable dinner happening downstairs, Anna was perched at her desk in front of a blank piece of paper. Her quill was poised in between her fingers, but the only words she had managed to write thus far were, 'My dearest Emma,' and then she was frozen.

There was so much that she could tell her. So many things had happened, and she had met such lovely people, but a part of her did not wish to convey how well she was doing lest it make her sister think that she did not want to return home or anything of the sort. She missed Emma every day.

There was a limited amount of time before Eleanor woke up. It was helpful to be in the room right next to the nursery so she could take this time to herself.

She dipped her quill in ink once more and started to write before she could talk herself out of it. It was difficult to talk about her position in the house without causing Emma to worry about her working too hard. The last thing that Emma needed was to be stressed over anything. So, instead, she chose to write about Eleanor.

She wrote to Emma about everything: the young girl's distress when she had first arrived and the progress she had made. She even made sure to tell her everything about the methods that she had tried. She was rather proud of the tonics she had made.

Before she knew it, she had prattled on for a full page about everything concerning Eleanor and how Emma had been when she was a child. She must have asked at least a dozen different questions about how Emma was feeling and what she was doing to keep her mind busy while still on bed rest.

She insisted that their aunt ought to be helping her stay as engaged as possible and that Emma was to tell her the moment the care started to slip.

In lesser detail, she wrote about Lady Juliana and how lovely she played the harp, how she reminded her of their mother, and how she simply lost herself in the music. But, she was very careful to only mention in passing how kind the duke was to her, lest her sister get the wrong impression.

It was important for Emma to know that she was working with kind-hearted people. But, Anna felt that if she started talking about the duke ... she might fill all the rest of her papers.

She stopped just short of relaying what had happened the morning at the stables. She had not meant to bring up James, least of all to the duke, but she did not know how else to explain her knowledge and ease with horses without mentioning him.

Her heart had been conflicted to bring James up in front of the duke. Oh, but that was foolish, was it not? She ought not to be conflicted when it was not as if ... it simply was not possible to ...

He had offered his handkerchief so gently. It was folded up on the corner of her desk at that very moment. Her gaze drifted to the initials embroidered on the corner. She wondered if Lady Juliana had made it for him or if it was his mother.

Being around the duke appeared to induce all these confusing feelings inside her. If she was being very honest with herself, it was not unlike the way that James had made her feel. He had been a very kind, gentle soul.

He never once raised his voice; he was a constant and steady presence in her life. She had never met anyone more patient, more

interested in her. But when he spoke about his horses ... it was almost the same as when the duke had been speaking about the pianoforte.

If she were even more honest, her feelings for the duke were starting to feel even more intense than those familiar ones she had harboured for James.

Chapter 21

Katherine, the Dowager Duchess of Westford, was losing her battle with her willpower. Listening to Sidney speak took more focus and energy than she was willing to expend.

She knew it was rude, but she had not heard a single word the man had said to her, nor any of them, this entire overly long dinner. She was starting to feel as if she were a prisoner inside of her own home, and she could not stand it.

Just how much longer was it going to take for his carriage to be repaired?

Katherine tried to focus. She tried to turn her attention to something better suited to her gaze, but she could not stop watching poor Lady Amelia attempting over and over again to garner her son's attention. But, apart from Sidney's unwelcome insistence on calling her son 'Eddie', Edward did not seem to have a single external reaction whatsoever.

It was nothing like the way he had been earlier. It had warmed her heart to see Juliana playing once more. Both her children were so accomplished, but their affinity for all things musical was truly spectacular. It was something that she had often got into fights with her husband about. The man was so rigid, cold, and distant most of the time.

He had hardly been a cruel man; that was not at all the right word to call him, but he was a man who was incredibly set in his ways. Once his mind had been made up about something or how things were supposed to go, then there was no changing it. No matter what was said or how well an argument might be presented to him.

Her late husband had tried to instill the same self-discipline in both her children. Naturally, Edward had absorbed the most. Over the years, he

had stopped his more rebellious ways and grown into the fine gentleman his father had demanded him to be.

Katherine had tried time and again to encourage Edward to have hobbies, to keep habits just for himself so that he would always be correctly balanced in his life. Any mother only wants the very best for her child.

Today in the nursery had been the first time in years that she had seen a glimpse of the man her son had once been. There had been light in his eyes, an almost smile on his features ... and it was all due to their new nursemaid. Perhaps he wished to hide the interest that he so clearly had in her, but compared to the blatant disinterest he was showing right now for Lady Amelia? There was no comparison.

But she did hope he was keeping a sound head on his shoulders. Infatuation was one thing, but she knew all too well the price of an unsuitable attachment. Her marriage to the duke had been one of arrangement, but it had certainly provided her with a very comfortable life. If nothing else, it had taught her the importance of appropriate alliances.

While Sidney himself might be a boil, his daughter was perfectly lovely. Albeit a touch dull. There were certainly far worse things to be than a little boring. It would mean that she would be steady, and predictable. Lady Amelia was unlikely to give her son any trouble whatsoever. She was well connected and thought of very favourably by everyone in the ton.

“Mama, did I tell you that Eleanor went to sleep on her own after you left?” Juliana leaned over, speaking happily in a hushed tone so that they could have a conversation of their own despite how Sidney was trying his very best to dominate the entirety of their conversation.

“No, you did not,” Katherine answered, angling herself more towards her daughter so she could hear her better.

Did Sidney know that his daughter had not touched a thing on her plate in the last three courses? Even though dinner was long over by this

point, the poor girl's dessert pudding was still whole and untouched in the bowl. Lady Amelia's hands had been in her lap delicately for the last hour.

Katherine was well aware that a lady ought to be mindful of how eagerly she ate in front of the man she wished was courting her, but that seemed excessive, in her opinion.

"She did! Mama, I have never felt so much relief. I had no idea that ... well, I suppose it does make sense for music to have been the missing key that I needed to allow my daughter to rest," Juliana continued.

Katherine reached over and patted her daughter's hand. She was very well aware of her husband's musical talent. She had been so in love, the depth of love that Katherine had never felt for herself.

"I think that all of the work Miss Anna has been doing with her has really improved her health. She is resting so much better of late, and I am so pleased. I, too, am feeling more at peace."

"Because you are sleeping better as well?" Katherine asked.

Juliana shook her head. "Well, not exactly. It helps, of course, but I think that finding my peace in playing once more is helping me to feel more connected to my husband's memory ... and Eleanor should know him through his music as well."

"Anything that helps lighten your heart, daughter, can only be something good," Katherine agreed, smiling softly.

However, if that sentiment were true for one of her children, would it not be the same for her other child? But Edward was the duke; he had more obligations than Juliana would ever have. Not just because he was the eldest child either. At least not only because of that.

“Would you like to accompany me upstairs? I would be happy to show you what I am working on?” Juliana offered, nodding her head towards the door.

Katherine’s eyes widened in understanding. “I would be honoured to.” She rose from her chair, turning to address the room at large. “If you will excuse my daughter and myself, I have business with my granddaughter.”

Edward’s eyes narrowed in accusation. No doubt he was silently cursing her at this exact moment for daring to leave him alone with Sidney. But he managed to get in a parting shot. “Very well, why does Lady Amelia not escort you as well?”

“Yes! Splendid idea!” Sidney boasted as if it had been his idea all along. “Eddie, my boy, I am ready for port and a cigar. Are you not?”

Edward sighed and shrugged a shoulder, but Sidney was already walking out of the dining room on his own, leaving Edward to trail miserably after him. He cast a final glance over his shoulder at Katherine before he left the room entirely. She would simply have to owe him one.

More hours of listening to Sidney’s talk was the last thing he wanted to do. He wanted nothing to do with the man. However, Edward believed that if he could indulge in a decent amount of whisky himself, then perhaps he might be able to tolerate the man’s incessant speaking.

If only Marcus had not been squirrelled away, hiding in the library researching, then at least he would have had some sort of backup when it came to this situation. But, as it was, he was stuck ... enduring Sidney. Alone.

Sidney helped himself to a bottle of port, pouring his glass so full that it was nearly overflowing before sitting in Edward's preferred chair. Edward sighed and relegated himself to the other chair that normally was reserved for Marcus.

He made a mental note to get even with Marcus for this slight, even though he had no knowledge of what he had done yet.

"Eddie, I should like to discuss your intentions with my daughter," Sidney started as flatly as he could. One might think from his tone of voice that it was more befitting of a father's speech when his daughter was caught in a compromising position. Edward had done nothing of the sort. He had not even wished to be alone with her for a moment.

"What do you mean?"

Sidney grinned over the brim of his glass. "Well, you must admit that my Amelia is a striking young lady. She is the height of decorum and more accomplished than any other woman you are likely to meet."

Edward dipped his head into a nod once. "That might be true, but I fail to grasp your purpose for pointing it out."

"The gentleman who manages to win my daughter's heart is going to be a very wealthy man indeed," Sidney continued. "And I happen to know that my daughter has taken quite a liking to you." Sidney winked to emphasize the point. "You do not need to contain your excitement. I know this is the news that you were waiting for."

Edward was at a loss for words. "Lady Amelia is quite refined; nobody is denying that. But I think that you have mistaken —"

"No need to be bashful, Eddie! I approve of this union. I know that you two have been spending quite a lot of time together as of late."

“I have only been spending so much time with her because there has been a delay in repairing your carriage. No other reason. If you recall, you were not summoned here nor invited,” Edward continued, trying his best not to sound too accusatory.

“Pish posh, one does not choose when the seeds of true love choose to flower! You have always been fond of my daughter; do not even try to deny it, Eddie,” Sidney continued, port sloshing out of his cup and onto the carpet.

Edward’s eyes narrowed. The limits of his patience had just about been reached.

Besides, Amelia was not at all the woman who had caught his attention. Not in the slightest. Even if there might have been a point in time when he might have been interested in Amelia, knowing who her father was would have squashed any possibly budding feelings.

But he knew that Amelia was the wiser choice. She was the choice far more befitting of his position. That much might be true ... but the feelings developing for his nursemaid were quickly becoming dangerous. Could he truly deny his own feelings to that extent? He knew what his father would say.

He knew that his father would say that he ought to do his duty and that none of the rest of it mattered in the slightest. Duty above all other matters. But the notion of marrying Amelia and having to see his nursemaid every day, denying himself until Eleanor came of age? It sounded like torture.

No matter his choice, he knew he was finished listening to Sidney. He would not sit here and allow himself to be trapped because Sidney had talked them in a circle.

“Good night, Sidney.” Edward cut the man off before he could continue.

“What do you mean? Eddie, we have plans to make!” Sidney spun in his chair as Edward started to leave the room. He had taken about all that he could. He needed space to think, and he was done listening to that man speak just for the sake of hearing his own damned voice.

Edward was tired of feeling like his hands were tied for the sake of his hospitality and obligation to propriety.

Chapter 22

The following morning, Edward took a longer morning ride than he had been doing. Far more was rolling around in his mind than he knew what to do with. So many things were taking a positive direction. Yet, he was still conflicted. Edward took his time in walking his stallion back to the stables.

More than anything, he was prolonging having to go back into the house because he knew what would be waiting for him at breakfast. He had slighted Sidney last night and did not wish to encounter him again just yet. He had every intention of taking the long path back until he could stop in the barn to check in yet again on Sidney's carriage.

The sooner that he had a reason for them to leave, the better.

It would be simpler to sort out his feelings if there was distance between himself and the problem. As much distance as possible.

Having circled his property twice, his head was refusing to uncloud. He started to dawdle his way back, allowing the stallion to walk slowly. But as he came across a clearing, he noticed a woman kneeling among the brightly coloured flowers. Anna.

The sunlight filtered in through the trees prettily, catching in her hair in a way that almost made her seem like she was glowing. How could he *not* stop and talk to her? She looked up when he dismounted, her smile just as bright as the sun rays up over their head. He tethered his stallion to the closest tree and stepped into the clearing with her.

"Mind if I join you for a moment?" he asked. It felt like their first meeting all over again, minus the near-death experience, at least.

“It is your land, Your Grace. You certainly do not need my permission!” Anna giggled.

“What have you got there?” he asked, nodding to the collection of plants and herbs gathered in her skirt, resting on her lap.

“Well, young Eleanor was sleeping so well this morning, I thought it would be a perfect time for me to come back and collect some more herbs just in case I need to make some more dill water or tonics for her. And then, on the way back to the estate, I saw these flowers and could not resist,” Anna admitted. “I hope that is all right?”

Edward nodded, squatting down beside her as her fingers trailed over the roses. Her presence among the blooms stirred something in him - a longing for simplicity he could rarely indulge.

“The yellow roses were my mother’s favourite,” Anna said as she bent to sniff the fragrant petals. “I personally think that the classic red rose is my favourite ... but these always remind me of her. She was such a bright light.”

Edward nodded; he could understand the sentiment. He thought the same thing about the woman in front of him. Though, unlike the other times they had encountered one another, there was sadness in her eyes.

The only other time he had seen that was the brief moment when she had spoken about her late fiancé. Wanting to make her smile, Edward twisted to pluck a perfect red rose in full bloom and extended it towards her with an understanding smile.

“Oh, thank you, Your Grace.” Anna accepted the rose, her fingers brushing against his around the stem, and lingered for a moment longer than propriety would allow ... but he could not bring himself to break the contact. He wanted to know what his name sounded like on her lips. His thumb brushed over the back of her hand, and he relished the way her breath caught.

For a moment, just a moment, it seemed like time froze, and it was just the pair of them and the warmth of her hand against his own. Could his feelings for her truly be all that bad when she had brought such peace to his home? It almost felt as if she were the missing piece they all desperately needed.

In the distance, further down the path, the thundering of rapidly approaching horse hooves broke them from their reverie. It was so rare that people came to visit him that Edward knew it could only be one person. Mr Philips.

His hand fell from Anna's as excitement thrummed louder in his chest. This was the moment he had been waiting days for now. Whatever promising news he had to bring with him would be in Edward's possession in a matter of minutes.

He needed to find Marcus so they could greet Mr Phillip properly. Momentarily forgetting the moment that was just shattered, he pushed back up to standing, his stallion seemingly restless at the approach as well.

"Would you like a ride back to the house, Miss Anna?" Edward asked, his focus split.

"No, there is still some more that I wish to gather ... but please, attend to your business," Anna said without meeting his gaze. He hated to leave her. He did not wish to end things on this note, but he could not make Mr Phillips delay either, not when he had come all this way to deliver his news in person.

Slipping back on his hardened ducal mask, he untethered his horse and mounted. With one last lingering look at Anna, bathed in sunlight, he rode back to the house.

Was it normal to miss him so quickly?

Anna stared into the opening in the trees where the duke had just left. She twirled the beautiful red rose in her fingers, careful to avoid the thorns on the stem. She rubbed her fingers against the soft petals, wishing that he could have stayed with her for just a little bit longer.

She liked the man he was when they were alone more and more every time she spent time with him. Carefully, she tucked the rose into the rest of her herbs and flowers and lifted the apron of her skirt into a makeshift basket as she rose to her feet. Anna walked back up to the house slowly, taking her time so she did not drop anything along the way.

Millie was waiting for her when she arrived back at the house. The younger girl had a knowing grin on her face. She struggled to keep the smile in check, but the difficulty she seemed to be having in containing herself was vibrating out of her whole body.

“Where have *you* been so early in the morning?” Millie asked, nearly skipping alongside Anna as she walked towards the kitchen. “Up before the rest of the house, sneaking around?”

“I am hardly *sneaking*.” Anna sighed.

“So you deny that part, but nothing else?” Millie’s eyes widened even further, like Anna was admitting to something scandalous.

“I feel like you are going to imply something over and above what happened?” Anna hedged, attempting to sidestep Millie so that she could escape wherever this conversation was heading.

“All I know is that I happened to witness his grace coming from the woods ... not unusual ...” Millie sing-songed. “And *then* what did my little eyes see? But *you*, coming from the same section of woods!”

“Coincidence and nothing more, I assure you.” Anna could feel herself flushing; she was going to incriminate herself for something that she had not even done.

“Deny it all you like. I can see that pretty pink blush under your cheeks!” Millie gasped and giggled, clapping softly. “What such wonderful news!”

“Millie, I beg of you, please stop whatever you are thinking; you are mistaken. There is nothing unsavoury ...”

“Oh no, you misunderstand. I am certain that it is *most* savoury,” Millie said, her tongue running over her teeth as if relishing the whole notion. “And what do I spy in your apron? Miss Anna?”

Millie craned her neck forward, her eyebrows waggling.

“Why, that looks like *roses*.”

“I merely wish to use the petals to make rose oil ... that is all ...” But the more Anna spoke, the more her face started to feel like it was on fire. The implications were too much. She could not think. She almost stumbled over her own feet as she hurried for the stairs.

“You will have to admit the truth sooner or later!” Millie called a touch too loudly for how early the hour was yet. She was still bouncing on the balls of her feet when Anna hit the second-floor landing and ran away from her and her accusations.

Chapter 23

“Do you have somewhere private that we can speak?” Mr Phillips wasted no time on formalities or pleasantries as he started pulling his coat off, handing it to the servant without even making eye contact with them.

He seemed to be in quite a rush to get down to business. Marcus had not even managed to make it all the way down the grand staircase before the rest of them were making their way back up again.

“My office is just up the stairs; we will be uninterrupted there,” Edward offered, glancing down the hall to see if anybody else was hanging around. Specifically, Sidney. There was just a feeling that he could not shake, no matter how hard he tried. Mercifully, the older man did not seem to be around.

Edward had to take the stairs two at a time to catch up with the men. Mr Phillips seemed to be examining every detail they passed, checking every painting and statue. Edward wondered if that just came with the territory of the man’s job.

Marcus pushed open the door to Edward’s office and gestured him inside, and Mr Phillips quickly gave the room a solid once over before inviting himself to sit down. He crossed his legs at the knee and waited for the other two men to join him, his hands laced and together over his bent knee.

He certainly was an odd fellow, but he was the very best at what he did, and his reputation spoke for itself.

He and Marcus exchanged a glance, and then they both took their seats. Mr Phillips did not speak right away, too busy admiring the room. It made the whole situation feel a touch tense.

“Are you sure you wish to discuss such important matters in front of an audience, Your Grace?” Mr Phillips asked.

He could only mean Marcus.

“Of course, he has been with me every step of this investigation. Anything that you have to say to me, you can absolutely say in front of him as well,” Edward answered.

Mr Phillips turned to look at Marcus more seriously then, his brow arched as if doubting the validity of those claims, but he did not verbalize any reservations he might have had. “Very well.” Mr Phillips pulled out an envelope and placed it on the desk in front of him. Edward started to reach for it, but the man held up his hand to stop him for a moment.

“Inside that envelope are transcriptions and notes I have compiled of the deceased’s final movements on the day of his death. I have finished interviewing everyone he spoke with, and it is the best possible reflection of his very last minutes.”

Edward could not breathe for the nerves he was feeling. If that were true, these could be the last bits of evidence that were even possible to find.

Depending on what was in those papers, this could be the end of the road. He had spent these last few weeks waiting for this moment to ensure he could look his sister in the face and tell her that there was absolutely nothing else to be done.

“I have personally gone to each of the Derby merchants that he visited with. Did your brother-in-law have a history of gambling?” Mr Phillips continued.

Edward shook his head. “No, he did not.”

“Are you certain? The majority of the people he met with were debtors or gambling hall managers. They all claimed that he asked them all different sets of questions and would not give me the total sum of debts owed. If he was not speaking about his own debts, he was very seriously looking into someone else’s debts. Perhaps his wife was in some sort of trouble?”

“My sister?” Edward laughed. “Absolutely not.”

“Are you so certain? People can be very different behind closed doors,” Mr Phillips advised.

Edward shook his head. “No, she would never put her family at risk like that. Never mind that she was either pregnant or with her newborn for the last year. When would she even have had the time?”

The private detective did not look wholly convinced but did not push any further.

“Then, approximately three in the afternoon, an altercation at the Crown Inn ended in agitation. The staff there were far more reluctant to speak about what happened, or what specifically the source of the initial brawl was ... but it ended with Lord Prescott leaving in a hurry and his carriage tearing back down the road to your property,” Mr Phillips concluded.

“But there are as many of the statements in those documents as you could obtain?” Marcus confirmed.

“Yes, that is what I have just said. I wanted to ensure that I placed these sensitive documents in your hands directly so that you might do with them what you will. I will complete the remainder of our contract, but I am no longer optimistic that I shall discover any additional information beyond this.”

“He just left the inn?” Edward sat back heavily in his chair, his hands scrubbing down his face. It did not make sense. Charles was hardly the man to insert himself into other people’s affairs, and Edward knew in his heart that his brother-in-law would never accrue that sort of gambling debt. If he had, he would have come to him for help. Edward was *sure* that he would have.

So why do this? It felt like every time they got more information, the less anything was making sense.

“If you were to ask my opinion, I would think that Lord Prescott was doing something very similar to what I am doing now in gathering evidence. The question, as you claim it could not be for his own debts, would be who the debts then belong to.” Mr Phillips nodded once as if concluding his limited speech.

It was even more difficult to think that Charles would go so far out of his way for somebody he was not close with.

“An affair, perhaps? If he had a lover, or a second residence?” Mr Phillips asked, and Edward shook his head again no.

“Impossible,” he said firmly, knowing that would never have happened. Juliana and Charles’ love was pure. He knew that in his bones.

“There is still a very good possibility that the person who the debts belonged to ... might not have liked Lord Prescott poking his nose into places where it was unwanted. People can be very touchy about their money, as I am certain that you are very well aware,” Mr Phillips added, rising from his seat.

“No need to escort me, Your Grace. I shall see myself out. But I do hope that you consider this business with Lord Prescott, given my additional sleuthing, might be prying into that same unwanted business.”

“That sounds vaguely like a threat ...”

“Not a threat, but, perhaps, a warning? If we cannot find the debt or the person who holds it ... they might find you first. Just take caution, Your Grace,” Mr Phillips finished and sharply turned on his heel to leave the room swiftly, not allowing for any additional comments.

Edward honestly had not even considered that as a possibility.

“Do you think there is merit in that warning?” Marcus asked, shifting anxiously in his seat.

“I cannot waste time worrying about such things. If it is true, and it was indeed sabotage paraded as highway robbery as we both have long suspected, then I hope that they do come looking for me.

I hope the fear that I am getting too close to discovering their secrets might cause them to make a mistake so that I can avenge my brother-in-law’s untimely death,” Edward seethed, the words spoken through clenched teeth as he pulled the envelope full of written statements towards himself.

He knew there was no way for him to brace himself for whatever he was about to read, and he would not assuage the dread in his stomach until he had read every single word on all the pages.

He divided the stack of statements in half and passed one half to Marcus so they could read simultaneously. It was just more evidence, like anything else, and he would give it the patience and dedication it deserved.

But the underlying new element of danger intrigued him. Perhaps he ought to be frightened. Whoever was behind this clearly was not only not afraid to get their hands dirty, but they were also wholly unafraid to be reckless.

Chapter 24

Strange visitors at all hours of the morning? How very curious indeed. Sidney stood next to the window on the second floor, the one with the best possible view of the front of the property, giving him a perfect view of who came and went from the estate.

Most of these, naturally, were just the normal assortment of servants going about their day and attending to their business.

But, the man was new. He was not somebody he recognized, which unsettled Sidney even more. But there was still something about the man's face that felt familiar, and it was driving him insane that he could not place where he might have seen him before. It left an itchy, unsettled feeling in Sidney's stomach.

First, he was slighted by Edward last night refusing to even *speak to him* about Amelia, or any future plans. Sidney could not, for the life of him, figure out why the boy was being so damned stubborn about it.

Sidney sat, stewing bitterly as he ran through a file of faces, hoping to figure out the man's acquaintances or any idea of why he would be there for such a short time this morning.

However, his contemplation was broken by the sound of soft sobs coming from down the hallway. Sidney sighed, rolling his eyes, knowing that it could only be his daughter causing such a headache so early in the

morning. What could she possibly have to be crying about? Other than her own failures, of course.

Sidney pushed wearily from his chair, heading down to his daughter's room. He walked in without bothering to knock, and Amelia at least had the decency to look startled at being discovered. There was nothing that he hated more than a woman crying and blubbering for attention.

"What is the matter with you?" Sidney asked, not bothering to pretend to be polite since they were in a private room.

"I ... I am sorry. I did not mean to bother you, Father." Amelia quickly reached for her handkerchief, blotting her splotchy face.

"Yes, well. Do not make me repeat myself again," he continued, slumping down on the chaise longue and rubbing his temples.

"I have just heard the most disturbing rumour, Father," she continued, barely keeping herself composed; he could hear it in her voice. "One of the maids said that she heard his grace in the garden with another member of the staff ... she says that the nursemaid even had a flower from him."

Sidney's patience was wearing thin as it was. He crossed the room to her, towering over where she sat at her vanity, and grabbed her by the wrist, tugging her around to face him properly. "What are you saying to me?"

Amelia winced, her whole body seeming to curl around her captured limb. As if he was even holding her that tightly. How did he manage to be cursed with such a weak, useless daughter?

“It sounds to me as if somebody is encroaching upon your business, and you are too pathetic to do anything about it. Are you truly going to sit here and cry about a woman who is no better than the dirt under my shoes?” Sidney seethed as he spoke through clenched teeth. “Are you truly so useless that you will sit here and be curtailed by a damned nursemaid?!”

He was struggling to contain the volume of his voice, but it was not working well for him. “You have already vexed me enough by failing to secure Eddie’s attention. Clearly, more drastic measures are necessary. Do I really have to do *everything* by myself?!”

“N-no, Father, please ...” Amelia whined.

Oh, he hated when she whined.

His grip tightened, relishing the way that she winced. Perhaps this was what was necessary to make her take her duties seriously. Perhaps, a little bit of pain was needed to motivate her properly. He was doing his best to ensure that her future was protected and comfortable, and the least that she could do was pull her own weight.

Sidney’s lip curled, and he released her forcefully enough that her slight frame toppled sideways onto the ground, where she did not bother trying to get back up again. At least she knew that much.

Perhaps this was all that she was good for. Smirking, Sidney adjusted the fit of his waistcoat and turned to leave her in her room.

“I shall handle it; just as I handle everything else.”

Of all the uncomfortable lunches that Edward had endured, this was by far the worst.

Another meal where Sidney boasted about his accomplishments and prattled on and on about his travels and business prowess while everybody else uncomfortably picked at their food. He was struggling even to pretend to pay attention to the words coming out of Sidney’s mouth because, in his mind, he was going over and over the written statements that Mr Phillips had left with him.

He and Marcus had managed to get them all placed into chronological order. He could track the path that his brother-in-law had taken that day, and the demands he had placed upon everybody he spoke to. Edward did not think of Charles as overly confrontational, but he knew that when he felt pushed or cornered, he was more than capable of pushing back.

Between that and Anna this morning, bathed in sunlight, he was more than a little distracted.

Edward’s focus shifted to where his mother sat, struggling to stay awake. She was normally the one with the staunchest social graces, but even she was bobbing her head as Sidney’s constant talking seemed to be

lulling her to sleep. Edward motioned for a servant. “Strong tea, for my mother please,” he whispered, and the servant nodded before quickly hurrying away.

Juliana lazily pushed her food around her plate while Amelia picked at her own. She looked as if she had suffered a very rough night before indeed. There were large sleep rings under her eyes, turning a pale purple from poor sleep. However, the way her eyes were reddened, puffy, and almost bloodshot captured his attention the most.

He wanted to ask if she was all right, but Sidney kept glancing at her every few moments. He was beyond tired of having that man in his home. His fingers drummed against the arm of his chair impatiently. The limits of his own patience were being stretched almost to the point of breaking.

Sidney gestured wide with his arm, making an expressive gesture to make whatever point he was trying to make about his travels ... and Amelia flinched. Suddenly, she had Edward’s complete and utter attention.

There were many things regarding Sidney and the way he must run his house that deeply bothered Edward, but there were lines that he could not cross. However, this was something that he could not and would not ignore.

The rest of the odd things, the way that Sidney seemed overly attentive to Amelia’s every move, the way that he was continuing to thrust them together at every opportunity.

The fact that he knew Sidney was controlling and had seemingly impossibly high standards for his daughter – those were things that were *technically* within his rights for his own home.

The fact that Amelia hardly ate anything and seemed to be growing more thin and frail by the day? He could even presume that was her and a need to present herself in a particular way. But flinching away from her father? That was something he would not ignore. Not under his roof. Not ever.

Chapter 25

Marcus did not wish to admit to himself that he was searching for a certain somebody: A certain ethereal woman who made his heart race and had not found herself in the library since her tumble off the ladder. He could understand that, he supposed, if the space would now hold an unpleasant memory. But Marcus was unwilling to have that be her last memory of him.

He just so happened to see her in the gardens out of one of the second storey windows. He *just so happened* to alter his plans and find himself with a free afternoon where he, too, could spend some time outdoors in the garden. If she happened to intersect his plans, then so be it. Certainly it was casual and unplanned. Naturally.

If Edward needed him again for the statements, he would come and find him. A little fresh air would help him clear his head, and then he could go back to the whole thing with a fresh perspective. Yes, that was all.

Miss Cartwright was arranging some fresh flowers near her favourite reading spot when he ‘happened’ upon her. She had a large blanket sprawled across the grass; the most recent book of poetry he had selected for her was open but face down beside her as she worked on her flowers. She had selected an array of impossibly pretty blue flowers mixed with some of the yellow roses he had seen blooming around the property.

“Good afternoon, Miss Cartwright,” he greeted with what he hoped was a charming smile, and not the grimace that it felt like he was making.

She looked up, the sun catching in her hair so prettily that it physically stole the breath from his lungs. He pressed a hand into his chest, swaying a little on the spot. Perhaps it was a touch dramatic, but from the way that she giggled at his antics, he would be more than willing to be as dramatic as she liked, as often as possible.

“Good afternoon, My Lord. Would you like to join me? Or is the wind going to blow you away?” she asked, a laugh still lingering in her voice.

Marcus did not feel like explaining *why* he had been literally swooning over her, so instead, he awkwardly thumped down onto the blanket beside her, landing half on the book that she had open, and had to uncomfortably scramble himself sideways like a crab so that there would be a proper distance between them. “Thank you; it is always so lovely to see you.”

Rebecca dipped her head, but he could see that stunning shade of rose pink start to colour the apples of her fair cheeks. He wondered what she would do when he told her he had a gift for her.

In truth, he had been working on it quite hard lately, and he was nearly beside himself with nerves over how it was going to be received. If she had thought that his swaying was cheesy, this might be even more so. He just prayed that she did not laugh at him when she read it.

Though, knowing he was seated beside an actual angel here on earth, he did not think she was actually going to laugh at him. That alone was enough to give him the courage to come forward with the gift in the first place.

“And you as well. I have been reading the book that you recommended, obviously,” she started, pulling the book closer and marking her page before closing the tome. “I think that I might have preferred Byron, but I do think that Wordsworth has plenty of merits of his own.”

“What good fortune of you to say that, actually.” He forced a tense grin as he fished inside the breast pocket of his waistcoat to produce a folded, slightly sweaty, square bit of paper. “I have something ... for you that I made, well, I wrote it ... and I thought that maybe I could share it with you?”

Rebecca’s eyes illuminated. Her whole posture shifted as she reoriented herself to face him better. “For me?”

“Mm,” Marcus hummed, nodding once. Now that he had started, his hands were starting to tremble, and his palms were growing even sweatier. How inconvenient. “I was inspired by Wordsworth, and I wanted to try my hand at capturing our shared appreciation ... of his ... well, his words.”

Why could he not seem to say a single eloquent word this afternoon? He had been practicing all morning for the things he was going to say to her when he saw her again. Edward had been most cross with him about the whole thing as it had been dividing his focus from the task they were working on, the mystery they were unravelling.

He thrust the paper at her unceremoniously, and she accepted it with her stunning, delicate fingers. Honestly, every move she made could have inspired artists worldwide.

She unfolded the paper, and his heart stopped, waiting for her to finish reading and trying with all his might to keep from saying anything

foolish to hurry her along. She pressed her fingertips to her lips, hiding a smile that he *hoped* meant something good for him.

“Oh, Lord Higdon, nobody has ever written something for me before.” She smiled kindly and refolded the paper. “Thank you. I shall cherish it forever.”

“Do you like it?” he blurted, knowing he was unlikely to like the answer.

“I can tell that you put a lot of work and dedication into this,” she answered.

Which was not an answer at all.

“You hate it.” He almost laughed. “You do! You are so impossibly kind that you cannot even admit that it is terrible! How can you lie to my face like that?”

Rebecca looked embarrassed for only a moment that she was called out on her obvious kindly intended words of placation. “I ... My Lord ...” She sighed. “It is terrible. It is ... truly and utterly terrible.” She laughed. “But that does not mean that I do not like it!”

Marcus sighed heavily, his shoulders slumping as he held his hand out for the poem back, only half as defeated as he was pretending to be.

“No!” Rebecca protested, holding the poem far out of his reach. “It was a gift; you cannot take it back!”

“You shall mock me forever with it,” Marcus said. “I only wished to express the imagery of nature and longing that Wordsworth does so very effortlessly.”

“And you have ... well, you have put quill to paper, and for that, you should feel very accomplished,” Rebecca continued. “That is more than most people ever do!” Then, almost as an afterthought, she muttered, “Perhaps for good reason.”

He gasped, pretending to be offended by her very obvious teasing. “Such words! This is why Edward discouraged all of my literary discussion classes; he knew that I did not have a single spark of talent in my body.”

She giggled, using the paper as a bookmark for the poems, and she hugged the book to her chest. “Perhaps if I had been able to continue my education on the subject, then I could have any room to speak on poems. I have never even attempted to write one.”

“You did not finish your education?” he asked curiously.

“I- well, far be it from me to openly discuss my shortcomings, but no. I did not finish my lessons in that subject. Anna and I were taught together by tutors hired by her mother’s constant hard work. But, unfortunately, due to circumstances beyond either of our control, they had to come to an end.”

“I always wished for a tutor in such matters. My father filled our library with history textbooks and countless documents recounting every war and battle you could ever imagine. He fancied himself as a sort of master war strategist when, in actuality, he was very far from it.

He could hardly hold a rifle without difficulty. Not a hunter by any means, either. But, I think it would have pleased him greatly had I grown to be a scholar or historian of some sort alongside the duties of my title, of course.” Marcus sighed.

His father was a good man. He was a kind, fair man. At least in most things. He had not been overly fond of the fact that nothing seemed to strike Marcus’ attention like the arts did. But, every time he attempted to venture into any medium, his father would ensure that his schedule would suddenly be too busy to learn such things.

“But when I attended university, he could not stop me from taking any class I chose, of course.” Marcus shrugged. “The learning curve was rather steep, as my knowledge base was so far behind the other students, but I think I tried my best.”

“I think that one ought always to pursue the object of their heart’s passion,” Rebecca added softly, her lashes fluttering as she spoke.

“I think your literary sensibilities have reawakened that passion inside me, Miss Cartwright. You have inspired so much more than that poem,” Marcus spoke in a trance, wholly lost in her pretty eyes as he spoke, not even wholly aware of what he was saying or how close his words were to an actual confession of his feelings.

Would that ... would that truly be so terrible if he were to confess to her?

Rebecca’s blush deepened from a rose pink to an almost crimson.

Before she could answer, a bell chimed from the open window on the second floor, and Rebecca startled. “Oh! That is Lady Juliana! My friend must need something.”

She almost sounded like she was stammering. She gathered up her book and flowers so quickly that he did not even have half of a chance to offer to help her. “Thank you again!” she called as she quickly left the blanket where he was sitting. He could not tear his eyes from her until she had disappeared into the house through the back door.

Oh, he was so in over his head. With a sigh, Marcus closed his eyes and flopped backwards onto the grass.

That evening, after everybody else was asleep, Rebecca snuck into her cousin’s room.

She was wholly unsurprised that Anna was still awake, sitting at the small desk provided for her and writing yet another letter back home to Emma. Yet, Rebecca still moved quietly, clicking the door shut behind her and tiptoeing across the room to crawl onto Anna’s bed, her light blue dressing gown wrapped around her legs as she waited impatiently for her cousin to finish writing.

“You still have not heard anything from her?” she asked after another long moment of silence from Anna.

Anna shook her head, folding up the paper she had just finished writing and setting small cubes of wax to melt to seal the letter.

“Is that common?”

“No, it is very unlike her. I thought I would have received something by now. I hope she is not still cross with me for leaving like this. I had no choice,” Anna said with a sigh.

“I know that, and even if she is cross with you, she will come to understand why you had to do what you did as well. Try not to worry too much about that. Things always have a way of working themselves out in the end, you know? Rebecca tried to sound as assured as possible. She would have thought that at least their aunt would have sent something by now if nothing else. “If something had happened, I am certain you would know.”

Perhaps, in this case, no news was good news.

“Speaking of,” Rebecca continued, “a little birdie told the whole house about your morning walk with the duke?”

Anna whipped around, the metal stamp nearly sliding out of her hands in shock. “What? What are you talking about?”

“Well, the first time that I heard the rumour, it was just that the pair of you went on a romantic morning walk together, and then the second time that I heard the rumour today, it was that you are soon to become the duke’s mistress,” Rebecca answered honestly. “Though, I would hope that if that were true, you would at least have the decency to tell me yourself!”

Anna’s mouth hung open, clearly shocked by what she was hearing. “I explicitly told her that nothing had happened!”

“You *were* out with the duke?!” Rebecca gasped.

“No! I was out this morning, picking herbs and flowers, and I *happened* to run into him on his morning ride, that is all!” Anna explained in one breath.

Rebecca’s eyes narrowed. “Do you have any idea how guilty you look right now?”

“But I have done nothing wrong!” Anna protested, setting her finished letter down and spinning in her chair. “I shall have to have a word with that scheming little minx.”

Rebecca flashed a smile. “Millie gets bored easily. I doubt that you could have done anything to stop her from fabricating a story eventually. She does not mean any harm but ... you ought to take care with what you tell her. Well, even if you *think* she might be around, listening in to your conversation ... actually ... you just ought to be careful. Millie has a way of popping up out of thin air sometimes.”

“That is the opposite of helpful advice. You do know that, do you not?” Anna huffed. “Did you come in here to make accusations?”

“Sort of. I did wonder if there was any sort of truth to the words. You cannot fault me for being curious. You are normally such a reserved, quiet sort that if somebody had caught your fancy ...” Rebecca trailed off.

Actually, she had not seen Anna take a liking to *any* man since James. The fact that she was blushing right now might actually mean

something, and the last thing Rebecca wanted to do was embarrass her. “Oh ... you have feelings for the duke?”

“What? Me? That is preposterous!” Anna protested instantly.

Rebecca’s expression softened as she looked at her cousin sadly. “He is a wonderful man, and there is no denying that. Lady Juliana is always singing his praises and talking about all the things he has done to help her in her life ... but, Anna, he is a duke ...”

Something that she needed to remind herself of, as well.

Earlier, it had been so easy to sit there and speak with Lord Higdon as if he were just a man and she were just a woman. But being summoned by a bell towards the friend with whom there was an obvious social imbalance? It did not matter how long she and Juliana had known one another, or how fond she was of her, or how close they were ... there would always be that degree of separation between them. Like it or not.

Same with Lord Higdon. What did she think was going to happen? He would have to return home soon, and his infatuation, if that were, in fact, what it was, would fade away. She would be forgotten and still be here while he went off and married a proper lady.

Rebecca swallowed dryly against the growing lump in her throat.

“I know perfectly well what his station is, of course. I am reminded every time that a conversation of ours is interrupted. It is almost like he is two different people,” Anna started, the words flowing out of her. “When we speak, it is so simple to forget what his title is, or how much he carries

on his shoulders. But, the moment that duty calls, it is like watching him pull a mask onto himself ... transforms himself into the *duke* and I ... I ...”

“I understand how alluring the appeal of men like this can be, cousin, but these sorts of things ... they are not meant for you and me,” Rebecca said more for herself than for Anna. “While they might entertain themselves with the idea of us ... at the end of the day, we are not the women they will end up with. You know that just as well as I do.”

Chapter 26

“Shall I take the stallion for training, Your Grace?” The stablehand asked Edward kindly, standing just inside the entrance to the stables.

“No, that shall not be necessary but thank you. I shall handle the training today,” Edward answered easily. Honestly, he was spending far too much time here as it was. Edward knew that he was going to be expected at the house at any moment, and he could only use the excuse of having his morning ride for a little while longer before things became excessive.

The company in the house was simply wearing on him too much. It was growing more and more difficult with every passing day to endure Sidney’s company.

Simply put, the weight of the Wyndhams’ presence and the heavy report that Phillip left with him was almost too much, it was weighing so heavily on his mind. Edward wanted to have proper time to clear his head, and working with his hands here in the stables was the only thing that he could think of to make that happen.

One way or another, he needed to uncover the truth about Charles’ death, and what he was investigating was driving him to madness. He was beyond pleased that the depth of his sister’s pain seemed to be lessening with the passing days and her renewing her love of music, but it wasn’t enough. They all needed closure, plain and simple.

Then, there was Anna.

No, he needed to push those thoughts away. It certainly was not as if he did not have more than enough to occupy his time with. He had no right to add in romance or additional feelings. Least of all now. Perhaps, once all the rest of it was sorted out properly, then he could dedicate the proper time to sorting his feelings for Anna.

But, despite logically knowing that was the wisest course of action, he could not seem to get her off his mind. Even now, he was picturing her here with him, helping to re-saddle his stallion for training. He could only imagine that she would have plenty of helpful comments and tricks to offer him to make this session go more smoothly.

Riding would help. He hoped. He would just need to focus on the one thing ahead of him. He mounted the stallion, the pair heading towards the training yard. But the moment he started trying to move through the basics and warming up, he could tell there was something wrong. Given the extra attention that his stallion had been receiving of late, their morning runs and other sessions had been going so very smoothly that he hadn't needed to worry about bucking or being unseated from his horse -- but there was something about today that felt a touch more unstable. He did not care for it.

Edward's hands tightened on the reins as they moved through a series of basic hurdles.

"What is the matter, hm?" Edward spoke to the stallion, leaning down and closer to his body so that they were more stable. "Can you feel a little bit of my exhaustion? Or, perhaps, is it my nerves you are picking up on?"

Neither of which would end well for him. Edward certainly did not mean to put any undue pressure on his horse than was strictly necessary.

“Come on, we can do this. No need to be upset,” Edward assured the beast, but he was not actually certain which of them he was assuring out of the pair of them, himself or the stallion. He could have easily gone either way with it. “Ride straight, my friend.”

But, the horse had absolutely no intentions of listening, it would seem. The stallion had clearly decided that it was done riding for today and did not want to cooperate. Edward knew that he should be slightly less stubborn, stable the horse, and allow him a break ... but still, he was attempting to power through the best he could.

Edward did not even notice Anna until his third awkward and almost painful loop around the training yard.

“You should ease on your posture, Your Grace,” Anna called, leaning over the fencing with a bright smile. He had no idea what she was doing down here, but out of the whole household, she was the only one he wished to see.

She was the only one he wanted to have in his company. He applied her advice instantly, and of course, she was correct. The change in his own attitude and the way that his stallion was moving was nearly instant.

Edward moved forward, heading over to join her at the fence so they could speak more easily without having to yell at one another. Did she have any idea how pretty she looked this morning? The early morning light caught in her chestnut hair and made it glow with almost a golden sheen. Her smile, so bright, pretty, and welcoming, made his heart so much lighter in his chest.

“I am so pleased you are here. I confess that I was having some trouble this morning,” Edward greeted as he drew closer to her.

“I am always happy to lend you my expertise, Your Grace,” Anna said with a bright smile.

“I think that he might be feeling some of the tension that I cannot seem to rid myself of this morning,” he admitted, knowing that perhaps it was somewhat inappropriate to share such information with her, but he couldn’t seem to stop himself either.

He watched as Anna hiked her skirt in an unladylike fashion so that she could sit on the top rung of the fence, making their conversation simpler because there was significantly less space left between them.

“Is that right? Perhaps loosen the grip, you can work through some tricks or routines he’s already familiar with perhaps? Then he will feel more at least and less guarded?” Anna offered, and Edward was only too happy to comply. He trusted her advice completely as she had not steered him wrong yet.

Anna watched, leaning forward with one hand cupped over her eyes to shield herself from the sun as she observed them, and just as he suspected, it did seem to help the stallion feel more at ease. It was far easier to walk together this way, and there were no harsh demands. Perhaps the horse needed a break just as much as he did.

“I thank you, as always, Ms Cartwright; you have been such a great help to me,” Edward thanked and smiled brightly as he came nearer to her again. The moment she was within reach, she lifted a hand to the stallion’s muzzle and started to pet him happily.

“Of course. Horses feel stress just like anyone else would in an uncomfortable situation.”

“I suppose that I am not helping things. I think that I am letting the pressures of my title weigh on me as of late,” Edward said honestly, and then immediately wished there was some way he could take it back, but of course, he couldn’t.

“What do you mean?”

Edward smiled awkwardly. “Far be it from me to complain.”

“I do not think of it as complaining, Your Grace, merely that you are willing to share the burdens of your title a touch,” Anna continued. “Not everybody is willing to do even that much; it takes a brave soul to accomplish such a thing.”

He did not feel very brave. “I suppose that I just cannot seem to get my late father’s voice out of my head, no matter how hard I try?” Edward found himself saying, and oh, did it feel good to say even just that much out loud when he normally would not share even the smallest bit – he felt that it was his to shoulder and his alone.

“My father would never have faltered in such a position as the one that I am in. I always looked at him, and he seemed always to have an answer for everything. No matter what the situation was, he was always just so capable. I naively thought as a child that the moment the title passed to me, I would somehow be granted that same surety and knowledge as my father possessed.”

“And you feel as if you are falling short somehow?” Anna asked.

“Always,” Edward confessed, his shoulders rounding forward as he spoke. “The expectations were exactly that, and I feel as if I am either making the consistently *wrong* choices or that I am just otherwise unsuitable.”

Anna nodded. “I can relate to that. It is hard to have so many lives depending on you.

But, I assure you, everybody in that house thinks you are doing an absolutely lovely job. They have placed their faith in you not because they were obligated to do so as a result of their station but because they trust you. I can see it every day when I watch you all interact with one another.”

“... you think so?”

“I know so,” Anna said confidently. So much so that it was almost impossible to believe anything contrary to what she said.

The blind faith that she had in him was almost overwhelming. She was smiling up at him so prettily, petting the nose of his stallion, looking perfectly at ease, and he could not shake the feeling that she simply belonged there. She belonged here, with him.

Before he truly knew what he was doing, he was leaning forward and closing the distance between them. Edward’s lips grazed against hers softly at first, and he only seemed to catch himself after the moment had frozen them both in place.

But, she was not pulling away; she was not making more space between them – and so he kissed her again. Edward's arm jutted forward, wrapping around Anna's waist and lifting, pulling her up onto the horse with him until she was seated sideways in front of him.

Anna wrapped her arms around his shoulders and pulled him closer, letting him pour all the things he did not have the words to say out loud into their kiss. All the things that he was not supposed to want and certainly was not supposed to think about the wonderful woman in his arms conveyed wordlessly into her lips as he deepened the kiss.

He did not know how he could have possibly got so lucky, but Edward knew that he never wanted this moment to end.

Sidney had been watching the whole horrible affair unfolding from the open window of the second-storey bedroom he had been assigned, a glass of brandy in his hand, clutched so tightly that his knuckles were turning white in his rage. He could not seem to make himself look away; he could not seem to stop himself from leering, cursing that insipid nurse's name.

She was ruining *everything*.

Sidney's hand trembled, the contents of the glass sloshing over his hands and falling to the carpeted floor under his feet as his teeth ground together in his rage. The thick glass threatened to crumble, but his grip just was not strong enough.

He cried out in frustration and rage before he pitched the brandy glass into the fireplace as swiftly as he could. The shattering crystal mirrored his crumbling plans as he helplessly watched the scene below him unfold.

Was it truly so much to wish for that the sky would open up into a torrential downpour at that exact moment? Perhaps lightning could strike the woman or the horse, and then there would be hope that Sidney's plans could somehow find a way back on track once again.

Growling in anger, Sidney stormed from the room – he was running out of options.

Outside, the moment stretched, sweet and forbidden. He knew better than to kiss her out in the open like this. Of course, it was a risk, and should anyone see them, they would be in a world of trouble. It was selfish to risk putting her reputation in danger like this, but he simply could not help himself.

Edward knew that he was never going to have enough of her.

In the distance, a gate closed, and a pen door then swung open moments later. If Edward new those sounds correctly, then the stable master would be riding out here shortly to start the daily exercise for the rest of the horses in the stable. Then, he and Anna would no longer be alone.

He broke from her lips reluctantly, knowing that the mask of being a duke was going to have to slip back on. Only the mask was getting heavier

and heavier with every passing day. Even more so around Anna.

“I should go, Your Grace, and ensure that I am not needed,” Anna whispered like she was afraid that the moment would break if she raised her voice. Perhaps it would, but he did not want her to go, either. Edward nodded and assisted her back down onto her feet, revelling in the smile that seemed glued to her face.

It was for the best that she be the one to walk away because he was not entirely certain that he could.

Chapter 27

Something was wrong.

Anna woke up to the sound of Eleanor's cries, much like she had grown rather accustomed to doing. Only tonight, it did not sound the same as Eleanor's normal cries. Of course, the child had a tendency to be more on the shrill side, but this was different to the point that Anna awoke, and her heart was instantly set to racing.

She stumbled from bed blearily, reaching for her dressing gown. She was almost in enough of a panic that she did not bother with it. Her hair was braided and flung over one shoulder, and she nearly caught her fingers in it as she tugged on her dressing gown but did not bother with the lace or bow as she stumbled through the darkness.

She left her bedroom door open and went into the next room, where Eleanor was standing on the side of her crib, small hands grasping the railing as she screamed and screamed. Anna moved toward her instantly, moving to pick her up out of the bed, only to gasp. "Oh, you poor thing, you are burning up!"

The door to the nursery burst open, and Lady Juliana nearly threw herself into the room. She must have been even more sleepy than Anna was feeling herself, for she was swaying in place on her feet, leaning this way and that as she tried to make it over to Eleanor.

"What is it? What has happened?" Lady Juliana asked, her arms outstretched for Eleanor.

“I think that she has a fever, My Lady,” Anna answered quickly, holding Eleanor out for her mother. Perhaps they would be able to soothe one another better than Anna could do on her own.

Anna knew that she would need to fetch cool water and rags as soon as she possibly could and get a salve or something similar to try to help break the fever that was so obviously mounting. But the moment that Lady Juliana was close enough to pick up Eleanor, the woman swayed once more on her feet -- and promptly collapsed on the floor.

Anna startled, and Eleanor’s screaming somehow pitched even louder and more frantic. Anna had absolutely no choice but to put poor, upset Eleanor back into her crib so that she could go to Lady Juliana’s side. She needed to fetch the housekeeper; that would be the first order of business, and then the butler to find the physician.

Anna knelt beside Lady Juliana, feeling her forehead and checking her pulse, only to find that it was racing. Panic started to ebb into her system, but she did not have time to allow it to win.

She knew what she needed to do, and she would just have to do it. It was harder because she was so worried. In her short time working in this household, she had come to care so greatly for them all. At least Lady Juliana had not hit her head on the way down; she needed to remember to thank God for that small blessing.

Gathering her skirts in her hands, Anna quickly ran out of the nursery and down the stairs into the servants’ quarters. She wasted no time in knocking firmly on the housekeeper’s bedroom door and rousing her. They were all trained to have just as quick response times as she did herself, and before she knew it, the staff were all awake and helping her under Anna’s guidance. She gathered a bunch of cloth and cool water, carrying it expertly in one arm and her skirt hiking in the other.

Anna could not even remember just how many times she had done this sort of thing for her sister. Waking up in the middle of the night to attend to her health, having to summon the physician and do everything in her power to keep her sister as comfortable as possible.

When she arrived back in the nursery, the housekeeper had Lady Juliana moved into her own room as carefully as possible, checking her over for injuries with the door open per Anna's request so that she could hear everything that was going on.

For her own part, Anna was expertly applying cooling clothes to young Eleanor and holding the child against as much of her bare chest as she could manage. She did not claim to know or understand why body heat could regulate the temperature in children, but she was willing to do just about anything if it meant that Eleanor's fever would lessen even a little bit.

Every few moments, one of the servants would pop in and give her an update, but the most important one was that the physician was on his way and should arrive within the hour. Eleanor was still highly uncomfortable, but the screaming had stopped.

Well, it had faded into hiccups that made her breathing still seem very erratic, and Anna did not like the way that her belly moved every time she gulped air into her system. It could not mean anything good that Eleanor could not seem to calm herself enough to breathe properly.

But Anna would not cry. She could not allow herself the luxury of taking the time to cry that she might have otherwise needed to do. She was still focused on her job and pacing around the room, attempting to rock her as she changed out one cooling cloth for another.

She had no idea how much time had passed by the time that Edward popped his head into the room. “I came as quickly as I heard the news. What can I do? How can I help?”

Anna was instantly relieved to see him there. “Just you being here is help enough.”

“Shall I summon the physician? Is Juliana all right?” Edward asked, his voice bordering on frantic with concern.

Anna shook her head. “No, everything has been handled. But would you stay here with us until he arrives?”

Edward nodded with a soft smile. “Of course, anything you need. Anything at all.”

Chapter 28

“It feels wrong to be sitting in here, poring over ledgers while there are two sick women in my house.” Edward sighed. He was beyond tired of staring at the same four walls of his office. He had memorized every bit of this over the last few months, but today it was particularly mundane.

The physician had arrived shortly after breakfast to attend to both Juliana and Eleanor. Juliana was at least resting comfortably. That was better than the alternative, he supposed. She needed to rest, and the physician had provided some medicine and tonics to give her every few hours. Eleanor, he had advised, was somewhat more difficult on account of how young she was. But, Anna had been able to help with that as well.

How had he got so truly lucky as to have a wonderful woman like her in his life?

Was it truly terrible to sit here and let his thoughts drift back to the kiss that he and Anna had shared this morning? Perhaps he was out of line to be thinking about such things at a moment like this, but his gratitude just seemed to be growing and growing.

A knock on the door was just the distraction that Edward needed to refocus himself on the task at hand. He ought to be better focused on the small stack of ledgers that needed his total focus. But instead, he was staring at the back of the door as it opened.

Mr Phillips walked in, pushing past Edward’s butler as he opened the door. The butler looked flustered at the rudeness of the gesture, but

Edward tried to placate him with an understanding smile. He lifted his hand to show that the intrusion, no matter how rude, was, in fact, welcome.

“Mr Phillips, I was not aware that you were coming back to call so soon! Perhaps I missed your letter,.” Edward said as a way of greeting. He rose from his chair, his hand extended out to him and shaking it quickly. Mr Phillips simply invited himself to sit down across from Edward.

“I found some rather interesting information,” Mr Phillips said without any further preamble. “I have been doing as I told you I would and investigating everything about Lord Prescott’s final days here. I have found some rather troubling information, so I thought it would be easiest to come here and tell you in person as quickly as possible.”

Edward leaned forward over the desk, lacing his fingers together. “Yes, Of course. I am very pleased that you came all of this way.”

Mr Phillips shrugged. “That is what you are paying me for, is it not?”

“Well, yes, I suppose it is,” Edward agreed. “But I appreciate your dedication nonetheless.”

Mr Phillips made a noncommittal hum, implying that the gratitude made him somewhat uncomfortable. Edward wanted to have Marcus here to hear the news, but he did not think he was going to have the time to summon him. Mr Phillips seemed always to be in a hurry, and Edward feared angering him by making him wait.

“I have been examining the witnesses listed in the reports I gave you over the last few days, as I said that I would be. I have found something

potentially disturbing from one of the workers at the Derby Inn a day before Lord Prescott's death.

They described a rather heated exchange between Lord Prescott and what they claimed to be a 'well-dressed' gentleman. The employee was most reluctant to give any information. I presume that she was very frightened of the gentleman or that he would somehow find out that she was the one who spoke up."

"I will happily pay whatever is needed to ensure her safety if this information is helpful to our cause," Edward offered instantly.

Mr Phillips shrugged again and continued speaking. "She said something about a carefully planned attack rather than some random highway robbery. The more I pressed her on the subject, the more distressed she became. Then, when she said that she was certain there was more than one planned attack, she was no longer willing to speak with me."

Edward nodded, his hands tightening on the desk as the weight of the revelation fully started to settle over him. It was a very, very dangerous truth that he was moving towards. Some part of him supposed that he always knew what had happened to Charles was anything but an accident, but now that he had proof – the information sat more heavily in his chest than he preferred.

Mr Phillips rose from his seat, adjusting his suit and nodding curtly at Edward. "Well, that was all I had to say on the subject. Now, I will be on my way."

Edward rose too, and he started to shake the man's hand once more, but the man was having none of it. Mr Phillips either did not wish to shake his hand or simply did not notice that Edward had his hand extended.

Though, Edward was almost certain that it was the latter of the two. He watched the private investigator leave the room, with a sinking feeling in his stomach growing.

Charles was a good man, and he was beloved by many. Who would want to harm him to the point of planning an attack on his life? It was almost impossible for Edward to fathom in the first place. Somebody that knew him well, at least well enough to know what carriage he would be in and what routes he was going to take.

When Mr Phillips figured out who it was, then what was going to come next? The anger that Edward suppressed in his chest threatened to bubble to the surface every time he thought about somebody harming his brother-in-law ... he could not fathom it.

Surrendering the person to the constables might not be enough.

That afternoon, the physician returned to do another check on the mother and daughter. However, he had been reluctant to do too much work on Eleanor, considering that she had actually managed to take a short nap.

But, as the physician examined Juliana, Edward lingered in her bedroom doorway, watching the man work. To his knowledge, Juliana had not awoken for longer than a moment or two when they were administering the medication prescribed that morning.

“Any changes?”

Edward glanced over his shoulder at his mother as she arrived, his hand lifting to cover the space on his shoulder where her hand now rested. Katherine did not enter the room; she did not seem to want to be any closer to the current issue than she already was. But the concern she felt for her daughter was abundantly obvious in her tone as she, too, lingered in the doorway.

“No, the physician is adding another tonic that he hopes will make her sleep more restorative,” Edward answered, focusing his attention back on his sister.

“Anything so long as she wakes up again,” Katherine said with no small amount of worry in her voice.

“He is the best physician in all of London. I promise you that, Mother.”

He knew his words were not going to help nearly as much as he wanted them to, but he was otherwise at a loss. This was the sort of thing that tended to go directly over his head. Katherine stepped up to his side, wrapping her arm around his tightly. He could feel the slight tremble of her fingertips that he did not know how to interpret.

“I am scared, son.” Katherine’s voice was barely more than a whisper as she spoke to him. This woman at his side, who was almost always composed and almost always had her best foot forward, to be trembling with fear and worry? He almost did not recognize her.

But at the same time, he knew he would give almost anything to ensure that his mother never had to feel this way ever again. “What if the potions do not work?”

“They will work,” Edward answered automatically. It was the only answer that he could accept. Plain and simple. He had already lost a brother-in-law, and he was not about to lose a sister, no matter what.

The blow was deep enough, so now he needed Juliana to awaken and say something quippy. He could not even fathom where her mysterious illness had come from. But more than that, even, he could not fathom the fact that she would not awaken.

“I cannot lose both my daughter and my granddaughter, Edward ... I will not be able to survive it,” Katherine continued. He hated to hear his mother cry.

He would be more than willing to do just about anything if it meant that she would never cry again. As if he did not have enough pressure on his shoulders from the duchy alone, never mind the investigation finally moving forward.

But now was not the time nor the place to be lamenting such personal nonsense. “You are not going to lose anybody; I promise you that.”

“I have never seen my daughter get sick like this, Edward. You know as well as I do just how robust her immune system has always been! Nothing ever seemed to touch her! So, forgive me if I happen to think that this is something to be taken seriously!” Katherine hastily wiped a tear that had started to fall down her cheeks as she spoke.

Edward wrapped his arm around her, pulling her into his body, and shook his head. “She will be all right. She must be.”

Edward stood in the doorway to Eleanor's nursery with a soft smile; he had wanted to come and speak with Anna about this morning, but there had not been a single moment of peace for them to have a proper conversation. Now was not even the right moment, but he did wish to check in with her. He could not stop thinking about her, even with everything else happening in the house today.

Anna was asleep in a chair beside Eleanor's crib, her hand draped over the lowered side with her hand on Eleanor's back. She kept moving every few moments, passing Eleanor when she stirred, softly attempting to keep her asleep.

It seemed more like a reflex than anything else. Edward wondered if she wanted children of her own – if she would be happy to share her life with somebody in that way. There was still so much about her that he just did not know.

Eleanor was asleep finally, likely cried herself out, but he was just happy that she looked so peaceful. Slowly, he crossed the room and pulled Eleanor's blanket gently up and over the sleeping child before placing another blanket over Anna herself.

He would have attempted to move her back into her room, but he knew that she would be unlikely to leave Eleanor's side easily. She would be here all night, so the blanket was likely the best that she was going to be able to accept.

Standing close to her, he could not seem to stop himself from brushing a loose strand of hair back away from her face and behind her ear. Anna's breath hitched, and she shifted in her chair just enough so that she had her hand back to herself once more.

Duty and desire waged war in his heart as he forced himself to move away from her. He did not know if he would ever properly deserve a woman like the one in front of him now, but he could not help wanting her. He wanted to spend the year getting to know her as best as possible.

Chapter 29

“I think that her fever has finally broken,” Anna announced to the man lingering in the doorway. Anna reached her hand down to Eleanor’s clammy forehead, feeling the cool skin under the sweat with an almost ecstatic smile. “I think that if her fever breaks like Lady Juliana’s does, then we should be in the clear!”

Edward pushed off of the door frame and walked into the room. “I would hope so, as it has been nearly five days where neither of them have been able to leave their rooms. Juliana has had nothing but broth for days now, so the fact that she is waking up seems like nothing short of a miracle.”

Anna nodded, unable to keep her smile away. “It was touch and go, that is what the physician called it – touch and go. But I think she will be all right. I cannot even begin to tell you how pleased it makes me to think that she will be awake and playing and back to her normal self soon.”

Edward chuckled. “I think that truly it has more to do with the fact that you have been attending to her bedside day and night, humming to her and keeping her company. It must have lifted her spirits. I know my sister is eternally grateful to have you here to help her handle things that she otherwise might not have been able to handle on her own.”

“You flatter me too much, Your Grace. I did very little. I just followed the physician’s instructions to the best of my ability,” Anna said quickly, feeling her face flush at the flattery.

“I do not flatter you nearly enough,” Edward said frankly as if it should have been the most obvious thing in the whole world to have noticed. He moved across the room quietly, keeping himself as quiet as possible so he could speak without risking Eleanor’s nap. He reached for Anna’s hands, pleased when she did not pull them from his grasp.

He held both of them together, allowing himself an indulgent moment to gaze deeply into her eyes. “I wish I was more eloquent or better with words in the way that some men tend to be.

But I do wish you to know just how deeply grateful I am that you came here and chose my home to work in – and breathe life into. If only you knew just how much good you have done for all of us here. Westford Manor would not be the same without you.”

Anna’s heart fluttered in her chest. He sounded so sincere, so tender with how he was speaking to her that it was almost surreal.

She had always prided herself on her work ethic and the ability to get things accomplished that she set her mind to -- but this was something even grander than that. Edward’s thumbs swept over the backs of her hands, sending goosebumps of anticipation up her arms.

Was he going to kiss her again? She had not allowed herself to think about their kiss while she was so busy attending to Eleanor and Lady Juliana because it felt inappropriate to do so with them being so ill.

But, there was no denying that when she was laying in bed at night, the few nights she had managed to be in her own bed instead of her restless slumber here in the chair in Eleanor’s nursery, she had been replaying that kiss over and over again in her mind.

There had been such a thrill inside her when he had pulled her up onto the horse with him. She had thought that her heart might up and burst from how happy she was.

It did not feel like the kiss of a fleeting fancy. It felt like the culmination of the dancing they had been doing around one another. She knew she would need to speak to him about it at some point if she could ever actually manage to summon the gumption or courage to have that conversation.

She would not be another notch in his bedpost, of course, but it did not feel like that was the intention behind it; she had seen the man behind the mask one too many times, and no part of her truly felt as if he could do such a thing to her.

Anna had been warned since infancy to protect her reputation at all costs. Only, she had never had any interest in marriage or men because of how busy her life always was – at least not until James had shown up and changed her world.

Not for the first time, it struck her that he was supposed to be the only chance she ever got. But now, standing here with her hands in Edward's ... she was unsure of what she ought to think.

One of Edward's hands started to slide up and under the curve of her bent arm, under her elbow and closer, nearly about to skip over the slight gap between her elbow and her waist when the door to the nursery squeaked.

The pair of them rebounded apart like opposing forces as they both turned to see who had just joined them so suddenly. Anna's heart was in her

throat as Millie appeared, extending her hand out with a note clutched in it.

“Pardon me, Your Grace, there has been an urgent letter.” Millie rocked up onto her toes despite the serious situation that the pair of them were presently in.

Edward stepped forward, his arm outstretched. “Of course, who is it from?”

Millie shook her head, and Anna could almost *see* the gears in her head turning as she artfully danced away from Edward’s hand and motioned the letter to Anna. “Is it for you, Miss Cartwright.”

Edward’s focus whipped to her, and Anna felt an all too familiar dread grip her stomach with absolutely no apparent desire to let go. There was only one person who could be writing to her – only one person who mattered to Anna in the slightest. For it to be marked as urgent? Her aunt would not go through the trouble of marking things as urgent unless she absolutely had no choice but to do so.

Anna’s hands trembled so badly that she almost could not unfold the letter without tearing it. Tears were already in her eyeline from the force of her worry alone as she read over her aunt’s hastily scribbled, desperate words. So rushed that Anna almost could not recognize the handwriting. Bile rose into her throat.

“I ... I have to go,” Anna said the moment she had finished reading. It was improper to walk off of a job the way that she was about to do, but what choice did she have?

“Miss Cartwright?” Edward asked, following after her as quickly as he could without stepping directly in front of her. “What has happened? Can I be of assistance to you? Anything that you need.”

Anna shook her head, rushing to her room and packing up only the things that she was going to need for the journey. She could not take the time to pack completely, not when Emma needed her. “My sister’s condition has worsened drastically my aunt says. I must return to London at once so that I can attend to her.”

“Of – of course you must. Let me lend you my carriage,” Edward said and disappeared out of the room. She was grateful to him; he certainly did not have to go out of his way to assist her when she was merely a servant in his house.

Anna hoped she would still have a position here when she got back, but she also supposed that they could always just throw out her belongings that she left here should they no longer wish to see her anymore.

That would have to be a bridge she crossed *after* she figured out what was happening with her sister. That was first and foremost, well, her only priority. Nothing came before Emma.

True to his word, Edward was waiting out the front with his carriage. The footman’s breath was labored, chest heaving from the haste in which they had prepared everything.

“Please do not skip Eleanor’s medications. I shall return at once if you will have me,” Anna said, unable to stop the tears from rolling down her face.

“Never you mind about any of that now. You attend to your sister, and we will handle everything else here. All right? If they were not unwell, I would be accompanying you myself,” Edward said, and she believed him.

It looked as if he were almost pained over the fact that she was leaving in the first place. He grabbed her hand and helped her into the carriage with a soft squeeze of her hand. He loaded up her single bag on the back, and they were off.

It would have been selfish to try to delay her trip long enough to go with her. He never would have allowed such a thing, were he in her position. Nothing would have ever kept him from his sister, either. Edward just had to hope against hope that she would update him on everything that happened when she returned.

He would write a letter to his physician in the hopes that the man who had just helped restore his own sister to health would be willing to make the trip into the city proper and perhaps lend Anna a hand as well.

The morning mist still clung to the ground as Edward watched Anna’s carriage disappear down the drive. The crunch of gravel behind him was the only indicator that Katherine had come to join him at all. He embraced her as she moved closer, a wistful sigh leaving her lips.

“It is far too early for heartbreak.”

“She is only going to attend to her sister, and then she will return. I am sure of it,” Edward said softly, not sure if he was attempting to convince

her or himself.

Katherine squeezed him tightly before stepping away. When Anna's carriage could no longer be seen, she turned to him – her gaze lingering on his own as if she were able to see clear inside of his head and pick out his thoughts. “Sometimes, love matters much more than duty, son.”

Edward's spine straightened uncomfortably as he blinked at her. How did she always know just what to say? Had he truly been that obvious? He had thought he was trying to be covert, but then again, he had never really been able to keep things from his mother, no matter how hard he tried.

Katherine dipped her chin into a nod and then turned to head back inside the house to have breakfast, and he trailed behind her.

Anna would come back, she had to.

Terror and longing sat in Anna's chest in equal measure as the carriage pulled away from Wyndham Manor. Anna missed her sister desperately. Not a day passed when she did not miss her sister. They had spent every day together for so long that being parted from her like this made her feel as if there was a part of her body missing as well. but what solutions were there?

If something happened to Emma while she was away, or if somehow Anna's absence caused this discomfort in her sister, and it was all her fault? She would never forgive herself.

But at the same time, Anna longed to stay. This life that she has created for herself was fulfilling and had a great many things she enjoyed. Taking care of young Eleanor gave her a sense of purpose. She liked the bond that was growing with them, with the whole family. She was truly starting to feel like she was a part of them.

Was that so terrible? And then whatever was blossoming between the duke and herself? It was something she wanted to explore, to learn more about, and now she wasn't entirely certain that she was going to get that chance.

But thinking about Edward was a very welcome distraction from the very real possibility that she was about to wander into a truly frightening situation at her aunt's house. If she sat here worrying about the what if's, she would be a nervous wreck by the time she arrived back there.

Surely, Rebecca would update her on anything important happening. She could only hope and pray that would be the case. She wished she had taken the time to say goodbye, but with how rushed everything had been when she left, it had not been possible. Rebecca had likely still been sound asleep when she left.

The sun was climbing higher in the sky now, and she was grateful for the way the carriage did not slow. They would make it there to London in record speed at this rate. If only her aunt had given her more information in the letter, perhaps she would not feel quite so overwhelmed.

She just had to remember to breathe, but even that felt like an impossible task.

Chapter 30

Sidney stood at the window of the manor's west parlour, feeling very pleased with himself. He had managed to procure a lot of brandy that he supposed was from the late duke's personal stores. He had always suspected that the bastard had been holding out on him.

The vintage was sweet, almost like cherries, with a lovely undertone of something richer, fuller, that he just could not place. It was the perfect celebratory drink if he did say so himself. Nothing like enjoying himself while an obstacle, nay, a pebble, lay in his shoe. Grateful that the trash was taking itself out if he was being perfectly honest.

It might be early yet, but it was only his third glass of the day. Sidney had every intention of enjoying the entirety of the bottle today. Now that Anna was no longer here, it would be the perfect opportunity for his useless daughter to simply slide on in and take the place that Anna was leaving. The hole that the duke might or might not have in his heartbreak, his daughter would fill. Or else.

Just a moment of lapse, no matter how small, and he could capitalize on it and ensure they were caught in a compromising position. He was positive about it.

“Good riddance to ... to bad,” Sidney could not seem to recall the rest of the turn of phrase at the moment, his words slurred as he smirked smugly to himself.

He turned his focus to Amelia, eyeing the way she sat like her spine was made of an iron rod. It was overly formal, cold, and unapproachable. She had yet another handkerchief in her hands, working over the fabric with her needle and today's pale green thread. He did not care who it was for or what design she might or might not be adding.

Overall, it was a perfectly respectable accomplishment to be so proficient at embroidery; the lace along the edges was starting to snag from her doing and undoing stitches, lulling on the fabric this way and that. She looked like a pathetic, anxious mess, and he could not stand it.

"What is the matter with you!?" he barked at her finally. He could not enjoy his brandy properly with her fretting and trembling all over the place like she was at present.

"I am sorry, Father. I do not mean to trouble you so," Amelia said in a tiny voice.

"Then do not trouble me," Sidney answered easily.

"It is just ... well, I think that perhaps," Amelia continued.

Was she talking back to him? She had never dared to do that before, and he certainly did not care for her to be doing it right now. She had no right to do so, and in fact, he wanted to stop that right here and now so that she never got such a stupid idea again.

"You think? Since when have I permitted you to start thinking?!" Sidney scoffed, more than a little vitriol in his voice.

His words came off harsher than intended, his lips wet with liquor, but he could not stop himself. She was ruining his good mood. How dare she!? And for what? Nothing. Nothing that was going to leave her lips would be worth listening to. She was just a little girl.

He should know better than to expect anything from her. She was only ever going to be capable of doing what she was told. Nothing more, nothing less.

The only thing you ought to be thinking about is how to rectify the mistakes that you seem insistent upon making! Sidney barked. The glass in his hand nearly slipped and fell. He fumbled artlessly, catching the glass at the last possible second and slurping the slightly spilled brandy off the side of the glass and his hand as well.

“We would not even be in this position if you had attempted to start thinking before this!” Sidney continued.

“Father, I only meant to say—”

Sidney cut her with a glare, and she silenced herself instantly. He could feel her blubbing from here. It made him sick.

“Honestly, if you had a better constitution, then perhaps you would be able to do what needs to be done. Need I remind you that our creditors do not have the patience that I have!? Amelia, what do you think will happen if you cannot perform and I am unable to protect you?”

“I – I don't know,” Amelia stuttered.

“Everything that I have done for you – balanced the growing debt of raising a debutante, giving you everything that you could have ever wanted. At great personal expense, I might add! Now, the time has run out. I have no patience, and neither do our creditors, And yet, you choose NOW to argue with me?

To pretend that you have a brain in that empty skull of yours? You are good for one thing and one thing only, Amelia, and it has nothing to do with *thinking*.”

Amelia was steadily crying, but it barely registered with Sidney. Even with his alcohol-addled brain, he could not recall the last time that he felt saddened by hurting her feelings, or her pain in general. Certainly, there had to have been a time somewhere. But, for the life of him, he could come up with nothing at all.

Sidney poured himself another glass and crossed the room to where Amelia was sitting. He tugged her handkerchief from her hands, smirking as she yelped. She must have pricked her finger on the needle. She ought to be more careful. She quickly sucked the finger into her mouth, knowing better than to make noise just because she was in pain.

Sidney slumped, downing the contents of the glass in one go and huffing in exasperation. “I gave you one task and one task only. Since you were wholly and utterly unable to accomplish that task on your own, once again, I have to step in.”

“I tried to gain his affection, Father, I really did!” Amelia blustered, and Sidney shook his head once more, so she silenced herself, biting down on her bottom lip in a way that looked painful.

“*Anything* necessary. Was that not what I asked you to do?” Sidney repeated.

“I cannot help it if the man has such obvious affection for the maid!” Amelia cried out, a single tear sliding down her face. Whether it was frustration, or desperation, he did not know.

Sidney set the empty brandy glass down on the table with as much gentleness as he could muster. “I shall create one last final opportunity for you, daughter of mine, and if you fail me ... you will not like what I do.”

Amelia’s chin dimpled, but he no longer had it in him to care.

“I shall create one final opportunity for you. A final act of kindness, or a test, as you will more likely come to see it as.” Sidney sighed, eyeing the last little bit in the bottle that he had liberated. He ought to save it so that he could celebrate the next leg of his journey, but he also did not know if it was not worth savouring right here and now. “I shall create a situation where the duke’s precious honour leaves him no choice but marriage.”

“Father, no – please,” Amelia pleaded.

“You have not even heard what it is that I plan to do yet!” Sidney had to stop himself from shouting as he spoke. “You do not have a choice. Am I understood?”

Amelia was practically trembling in her seat, but she nodded once. Sidney could see the understanding dawning on her, the implications of what he was demanding that she do. It was what she ought to have done the first time around. They were out of time in every possible aspect of their

lives. This was the only option he had left, and he was damned well going to do it.

There was a knock on the door, but whoever was on the other side of the door did not bother attempting to wait for him to answer before inviting herself inside.

“Good morning!” one of the servants greeted. What was her name again? She was impossibly annoying, but that was very likely on purpose. It had to be. Nobody could be that annoying by default. Oh, what was her name? Sidney tapped his fingers against his face as he tried to remember but was drawing a constant blank.

But, for once, Amelia seemed to remember something that was bordering on important.

“Thank you, Millie. That smells lovely,” Amelia said, ever the picture of grace and poise as she spoke. If only she could do that all the time, then Sidney might be in better shape.

Millie, the servant with the almost annoyingly chipper disposition, hummed as she walked into the room, setting everything up. She was at least smart enough not to try looking him in the eye as she worked. She was a pretty young thing, though. Perhaps he ought to have sent for her before now. He might have if he had remembered she was here.

He noticed the way that Millie seemed to pile up sweets onto Amelia’s plate and poured her tea first, which Sidney did not care for much. But he could hardly say something while she was in the room. At least Amelia was not foolish enough to eat the cakes in front of her.

The servant girl lingered, puttering about with the tea service and the items she had brought for a long moment before Sidney's patience evaporated, and he cleared his throat pointedly. Only then did she seem to realize how obnoxious she was being. Millie bowed deeply and hurried from the room.

Amelia lingered for just a moment and then rose from her chair. "I ... suppose I ought to go and get ready then."

Sidney nodded. Yes. Finally, all his plans were going to come to fruition, and finally, he was going to get what he deserved.

Chapter 31

Things with Emma were so much worse than her aunt had originally let on. Emma's fever felt almost as high as the one that Anna had just spent the last week helping to clear Lady Juliana of and young Eleanor. They had been given nearly around-the-clock physician care, and Anna knew perfectly well that her sister was not being afforded the same luxury.

Anna had been sending almost all her earnings back as often as she could to pay for Emma's care, but she had no *guaranteed* way to know where the funds were being allocated, or how often Emma was actually able to be treated directly because her letters had been so few and far between.

Had she truly allowed herself to become so self-involved as to have not seen how strange that was? Perhaps it had simply been easier to allow herself to think that her sister had simply continued to stay mad at her despite everything else.

Guilt gnawed at Anna's gut as she concluded that if she had only pressed the subject or come to visit when it had been too long of a gap between her sister's letters ... then perhaps it would have been different somehow. She knew her sister like the back of her hand, and she certainly should have known better than to have allowed something so obvious to skate by under the radar.

The moment that she arrived she had headed up to Emma's room, bursting past the servants and other staff who were likely wanting her to do things the proper way or be proprietary in any way, shape, or form -- but not when her sister's health was on the line.

Since then, she had been ordering them about, and she knew they were more than a little upset about the fact that she was, but she could not stop. Her aunt was least pleased of all, but Anna had not yet found it within herself to be able to talk to the woman properly.

She had too much frustration and anger inside her over how things had been going that she honestly did not trust herself to speak to her. Not until she knew Emma's fever was under control. As such, the older woman just kept floating around over her shoulder like a spectre.

A large bowl of milky water rested on the side of Emma's bedside, large chunks of ice floating within it to keep things chilled. Her aunt had, naturally, blustered at the prospect of her using such an expensive recourse for a fever, but Anna did not care. She would pay for it, as she had paid for everything else. She would make the money back, one way or another.

Emma groaned softly, attempting to roll over in bed and lacking the capability. Her skin was so pale, her lips dry and cracking, and her otherwise lovely hair was like straw despite how sweat-dampened her forehead remained.

Anna diligently applied the cool cloths to her forehead, back of her neck, and chest, anywhere that she could that would help her to feel better. That was all she wanted. She repeated the process, never leaving her sister's bedside for a single moment as she applied cloth after cloth until her arms were aching, but Emma's pained moaning lessened, and that was all that mattered.

It brought back memories of her mother and how she used to sit with Emma like this, and how her constant humming to soothe the girls never stopped, no matter the situation. Anna tried to muster that same courage, humming a familiar tune softly that their mother had always loved.

But, her voice was thick with emotion, and kept clogging her throat so she was forced to take breaks. Mother would have been stronger, she would have been able to handle this better ... but Mother was not here. Just Anna, and Emma, alone, like they always had been.

When Emma finally seemed to settle slightly, Anna paused her application of cooling cloths. If only she had access to the same medicines that the physician had. But while she knew that she was talented, some of the herbs that he had used were so completely foreign to her, and she did not know how to replicate them. However, she could sit here and hold Emma's hand.

No matter what happened, no matter what came next, she was going to be here.

“How could she possibly know that Anna is gone?” Rebecca asked her dear friend.

Juliana seemed to be struggling a great deal. Eleanor kept pushing her mother's arms, wanting to escape the cage of them and be off on her own, it would seem. She had been inconsolable since just after breakfast.

At first, Rebecca had been inclined to think it was because the young girl's schedule had been very disrupted, or even that she was still feeling some of the lingering effects of being so sick for so long ... but now that it had been hours, and she had not seemed to stop fighting everyone around her for even a single second? It was something more than that, something bigger.

“How should I know? There is no other explanation!” Juliana huffed, repositioning her daughter once again and bouncing from one side to the other gently. “We were doing so much better, she and I ... and now?”

Rebecca shook her head. “You must not think like that. You are both still weak from the illness you have endured. Things will get better because they must get better. Surely you can agree with that?”

Juliana nodded readily, but it was still obvious that she did not at all believe in what she was agreeing to. The mother and daughter had not had so much difficulty in relating to one another in quite some time; that much was true. Watching them struggle pained Rebecca, but she was also just as concerned about the well-being of her cousins.

It was almost as if she were being pulled in two separate directions and did not know what to do about that feeling. Anna was the one who was talented with kids, not herself.

“Perhaps there is something among the things she left behind that would be able to help me here?” Juliana continued, walking across the room to the various tonics and tinctures that Anna had prepared and carefully labelled.

None of them seemed to be what Rebecca had witnessed her using in times like this before, so when Juliana reached for one randomly out of desperation, Rebecca had no choice but to knock it out of her hand.

The bottle clattered to the floor, the stopper coming loose, and the scent of wild jasmine and lavender started to permeate the room quickly.

“Now look what you have done!” Juliana gasped, but Rebecca knew there was no animosity there. Still, Rebecca lowered to one knee to help dab up as much of the mess as she could, her skirt becoming soaked at the knee in the process. Still, it was better than Juliana attempting to do it herself.

“Perhaps I can fetch some of the books that Anna was researching from?”

“Look at my daughter,” Juliana said, nearly close to tears. “I do not have time to put her down and read. What will happen then? She will just continue to cry her eyes out.”

Rebecca could not remember the last time she had felt so wholly useless.

“Slow down, Your Grace. I cannot keep up with you!”

Marcus had never been anywhere near as strong a rider as Edward always had been, but he had insisted on coming along this morning. If their roles were reversed, Edward was certain that he would have done the same thing, too. But, as it was, Edward was barely keeping himself together. Anna had only been gone a week and already his previously peaceful and stable leaning home was falling apart.

The house was in shambles, and this was now the only time of day that he could rid himself of the barnacle Amelia had made of herself. It was

impossible to stay detached and away from her, and he hated it. Every time he turned around, there she was.

All hours of the day and night. He feared that he knew what she was trying to accomplish, and he was dreading the slim possibility that she might find a way to get away with it. But, when he mentioned it to Marcus, he implied that he was making a deal of nothing.

But Edward did not think that it was nothing. Quite the opposite, in fact. “You did not need to come, Marcus.”

Marcus grunted in frustration and doubled down on his efforts to get closer to him. “My stallion is not as trained as yours is, Your Grace.”

“Also, what is with the title business? Are we back on formal terms? Have I angered you in some way?” Edward practically yelled back and over his shoulder, but he could not bring himself to stop.

He knew he was riding rather recklessly, but with Anna gone, he needed these rides more than ever. He needed to be able to keep a distance between himself and his home. Though, it was not feeling like much of a home these days.

Marcus did not answer his question that time, only trying to keep up, but Edward was leaving him behind. The wind on his face was burning his eyes and stinging his skin, but his stallion moved ever onward. He felt as if he and the beast were finally as one. Edward leaned down closer to his neck, limiting the resistance so they could go just that much further.

Would it be wholly inappropriate to call upon her in London? Would his company be welcome when she was so very likely attending to business far more important than seeing him? He hoped that Anna's sister was all right and that his physician had arrived by now.

But there had simply been no word from any of them, and he did not know how to take that. He had thought that Anna would write, at least to Rebecca, given how close they were.

Every time he thought about the kiss they shared, it was overlaid by the memory of how damned scared she had looked in the nursery when she had received the letter about her sister. He could not seem to separate the two because she had been standing so close to him before Millie had interrupted.

"Hyah!" Edward spurred the stallion faster.

"Wait! Edward! You are going too fast!" Marcus called, but if he said anything else, the words were lost to the wind as he left his friend behind. Edward just needed to process. This was the only time he got to himself all day, and he just ... he needed that release of his mind going quiet. Just for a moment. Even just the smallest moment – but that calm feeling was getting harder and harder to find.

He was having to chase it far more recklessly, which he knew would not be able to last forever. He would have to find another coping mechanism, and he was dreading it because nothing had ever worked as well as this.

From the left corner of his vision, Edward noted movement – but he was too slow. The movement shot from the trees to their side, up and into

the air. No doubt their fast riding had spooked the poor pheasant as it struggled to lift into the air and then fell again – right into their path.

Everything happened so fast.

One moment, he was saddled, and the next moment, he was being lifted upright. His hands tightening on the reins, Edward tried to reach for his stallion's muzzle but could not manage it in the excitement. He knew what to do now; he knew how to prevent his stallion from bucking.

He could hear Anna's voice in his head as if she were standing directly next to him. Her confident voice, her natural understanding, everything about her. If only he had not reacted so slowly.

Edward was thrown into the air and cast off of the horse entirely. Only, this time, his foot and ankle were not caught; he was tossed from the stallion. The beast reared up, whinnying in distress and then jogging off a few paces.

Edward was lucky that he did not bolt completely. Then, he would have been forced to spend the rest of his day looking for him. A good and welcome distraction, to be sure, but inconvenient.

Edward's hip collided forcefully with the soft bushes to the side where the pheasant had come from. His elbow, wrist, and ribs all took the brunt of the sudden impact to the point that his air was almost knocked loose from his lungs.

Dazed as to how everything had happened so quickly, he almost did not register that Marcus had caught up with him and dismounted. He almost

did not register that the man was attempting to help him to his feet.

“What the hell happened?! I told you to slow down!” Marcus shouted, his words half fear and half chastisement. Edward accepted the help, testing the ability to put his weight on his leg as he shifted. At least his stallion had the decency to look guilty. As he should. “Can you walk? Ride? We should get back to the manor and summon the physician to check you over.”

Edward shook his head, stubbornly pulling his arm free from Marcus’ helpful grip. “I am fine.”

He felt more than a little jostled, and everything down to his bones hurt, but nothing appeared to be broken. That was the important thing, in his opinion. His pride was bruised most of all, but he would make it back to the house. He would just take his sweet time in going there. “Take my stallion back to the stables, would you? I would like to walk alone.”

“I do not think—”

“Marcus, please.” Edward insisted, and his friend reluctantly complied. There were a dozen or more burning questions in Marcus’ gaze; he could feel them, but mercifully, he said nothing. Marcus took the stallion beside his own, and Edward watched them walk away.

He seemed to be doing that a lot these days. With a frown, Edward started his slow, limping walk back to the manor and hoped against hope that he had something figured out by the time he got there.

Chapter 32

“Look what you made me do?!” Sidney shouted at Amelia’s prone form. “It has been two days! You have got nowhere!”

Somewhere in his mind, Sidney was aware of the fact that Amelia was trembling on the ground, clutching the side of her face with her hand. It was a line that he had not crossed before, no matter how tempted he might have been. Amelia’s silent, hiccuped sobs were only fuelling his anger.

The collection of empty bottles on the table was just further indication of how much he had tried to calm himself during the day and failed. He might have even drank all of the brandy in the house if he was not mistaken. But, his thirst still was not properly slaked.

“You are a useless, pathetic excuse for a daughter!” Sidney yelled, relishing in the power that he felt every time the girl on the ground flinched away from him. He could not help the satisfaction growing inside of him. “Now, I have to do everything again. Why do you make me work so hard? Have I not done enough for you? Sheltered and provided for you?”

Amelia did not meet his gaze; she merely stayed focused on the ground. It was not the reaction that he found himself craving. With a growl, he snatched up her face firmly in his hand, the one side all red and swollen.

“I have taken care of the creditors and the debts up until now, and you cannot even be bothered to attempt to hold up your end of the bargain? Perhaps you wish to meet the same fate as everybody else who dares to

cross me?! Need I remind you what happened to the last man who interfered with my business ventures?” Sidney continued.

“N-no, Father, I promise. I am trying—”

Sidney’s grip tightened on her face, and Amelia winced. The reaction was enough to let her go, thrusting her small frame away from him with the motion. It was not the *business* ventures that he had been involved with in the first place, but rather a little investment that might not have been very above board.

Sidney did not care for the word ‘fraudulent’ because then it implied that he was doing something wrong. Which he was not. He never did anything wrong. Seeking to expand one’s wealth was never *wrong*.

“A-are you going to kill me?” Amelia’s voice stuttered so badly over the words that she was almost unable to choke them out. There was such real, genuine fear on her face that Sidney almost laughed at her.

“Kill you? Stupid girl.” Sidney scoffed. What an insane question for her to ask of him as if she was not still worth monetary value to him. At least, for now, she was. If she refused to do what he was insisting, then that was a different animal entirely.

“L-like you did to that man?”

Sidney straightened, slightly amused. “Who, Charles?” He laughed right from his belly. “That bastard was a meddling fool who could not keep his nose in his own business. He deserved what he got. Why do you intend on sabotaging even *more* of my business deals?!”

Sidney only let that happen because he had no choice. Because he was backed into a corner with no recourse whatsoever. He had to do it, or else they were going to be far worse off.

“Father, please, you are frightening me!” Amelia sobbed, and Sidney rounded on her once more.

“You would not need to be frightened if you had only done what was asked of you! If I have to arrange a little accident for you as well, then you will have royally screwed up; do you not agree?” Sidney shouted. “This is the final time that I will tell you this. Am I understood?” Sidney said firmly as he squatted down in front of his daughter. She was having trouble keeping eye contact with him, and it was only making him just that much more angry.

“Tomorrow, you are going to find a way to get Edward on a walk in the garden. You are going to find a moment to seduce him, and you are going to ensure that whether or not he complies, you will put him into a compromising position.”

“Father ... I do not ...”

“What?!” Sidney scoffed, spit flying from his mouth as he laughed in her face. “You do not what? Have I not been clear about how I feel about your thoughts?”

Amelia scooted away from him, sliding across the floor slowly, and when there was enough distance between them, finally making eye contact. She was just out of arm’s reach, and he hated that she was making this more difficult than it needed to be.

“I-I have been corresponding with Maria. I ... well, Father, she has agreed to let me go and stay with her.”

Sidney’s eye twitched. He could not believe what he was hearing. “You think that you just get to leave?”

“I do not wish to do this! I do not wish to entrap anyone! I do not wish to be in a marriage with a man who cannot stand me, who does not love me. Do you not think that he will have cause to be a cruel husband to me if I do this?!” Amelia argued, fresh tears running down her swollen, reddened face.

“It is deception. I have done everything that you have ever asked, and it has never been enough. Well, Father, now I am saying that this is enough,” Amelia continued, even though her voice was trembling harder with every word.

“Oh, is that right?” Sidney rose to his full height again. “You are going to do nothing of the sort. You are going to do as you are told. You have been *nothing* but a burden upon me since your mother’s death. A waste of space, air, and resources!”

“Father, please – I–”

Sidney swung at her again, but Amelia was far enough away from him to keep out of his reach. Sidney spun in place from the force of how hard he had intended to hit her. Amelia screamed out, crawling back and away from him, but her foot snagged on her skirts.

Sidney staggered, twisting and collapsing to the ground with a thud so heavy that he could have sworn that the ground shook under him. His very bones seemed to rattle and shift inside of himself as a white-hot rage consumed him.

“Get the hell out of my sight!”

Amelia did not need to be told twice. She scrambled up to her feet quickly, pushing forward and running out of the room through the far door. Sidney crawled into an open chair. He upended the very last of his bottle, but nothing but droplets came out onto his tongue.

Go figure.

Ungrateful whelp.

“She just needs to get married, and then I can escape to America with their money. Is that truly so much to ask for?”

Chapter 33

Not a single thing about what Katherine heard sat right with her. For the most part, she did not wish to believe it. It was truly a miracle at all that dear Amelia had not seen her when she went running from the room.

Katherine knew that she might not always do the right things at the right times, but she did try her best to help those in need around her. She had come down the hall to the sound of Sidney's screaming, remembering how he and her late husband could get into heated arguments sometimes.

Katherine had not *known* that Amelia was in the room when she had started eavesdropping. She had wanted to step in, to say something, to put the bastard in his place when she had heard what had happened – everything within her wanted to run to the girl's side and protect her – but the things that Sidney started shouting at her stayed her feet in place.

It could not be true ... could it? It certainly could not be true ... those things that he implied ... if they were real ... then ...

Her hands were shaking. She could feel herself trembling down to her very bones with the weight of it all. She felt like she might be sick to her very stomach. He was going to entrap Edward, take their money, *and* abandon his daughter? She could not tell which offence bothered her more deeply than the rest of them.

Even now, she could hear Amelia's strangled sobs as she tried to keep herself quiet in the next room over. Katherine wanted to go to her, to

tell her that she was on her side and that she would help her with things ... but there was a choice to make. She could either help her or tell Edward what happened so that Sidney could be removed.

Katherine bit down on her bottom lip, considering the options – and also very seriously considered finding something to lock Sidney in the room. If only there were something close enough to barricade the door somehow. She needed to act quickly. Katherine gathered her skirts in her hands and rushed down to Edward's office.

He needed to fix this and quickly. Her hand flattened against the wallpaper-covered wall as she staggered away from the room Sidney occupied. She could not risk him hearing her and coming out here to speak with her. Not for anything. Her heart would not calm, and she felt like a rabbit had overtaken her chest.

Katherine did not even make it to the stairs before the weight of everything that she had just overheard fully started to settle over her. She clutched her chest, scrambling with her other hand to stay upright on her feet, but she felt as if her knees were starting to buckle.

Millie's humming announced her presence before Katherine could see the top of her head bounding up the stairs. She had that overly pleased look on her face that she was almost famous for, a full tray of evening tea and finger foods clutched in her hands.

"Oh, hello, Your Grace –" Millie greeted, but her entire expression changed the moment she looked up. Millie all but dropped the tray in her hands, the food toppling as she let it rest on the top of the staircase and rushed over to Katherine's side.

Immediately, her hand cupped under Katherine's elbow, and the other wrapped around the older woman's waist so that she could keep her stable. "What is the matter? Are you all right? Shall I call the physician?"

Katherine shook her head, wanting to force the words out, but the shock was building higher. "Fine, I am fine ... find my son at once."

"But, Your Grace, you do not seem well. You are very pale, at least let me assist you down the stairs?" Millie continued, seeming not to grasp the urgency of the situation fully.

"Now! Millie! Please!" Katherine said in a forced whisper, glancing anxiously over her shoulder, wanting to ensure that Sidney had not heard them. The door did not open, and his shouting did not return.

"I do not wish to leave you like this ..." Millie said softly, concern covering every inch of her face. But she slowly slipped her hands away from the dowager and started to edge backwards down the stairs.

"If you do not make haste, we will all be in a world of trouble," Katherine said, sliding down the wall to sit at the top of the stairs so that she might catch her breath. It was a touch undignified, but she had no choice. Millie finally turned and rushed away from the scene to go and locate Edward. He needed to be here and as quickly as he possibly could be.

Mr Phillips had been kind enough to leave behind written recollections of the statement he had come all this way to tell them about.

“Do you think this will be enough information to fully and properly convict the bastard?” Marcus said as he stood shoulder to shoulder with Edward, poring over the documents. Neither of them had spoken about what had happened this morning. Nor did Marcus comment on the fact that Edward seemed to be having a great deal of difficulty in moving around easily.

Paperwork covered the desk, and every inch of it had been pored over by the friends at least two times over.

“It is going to have to be enough. We simply do not have a choice in the matter. This matter must be resolved, and the constables need to be summoned at once. All we can do is present all the evidence we have, name our witnesses, and hope that it is enough to stick,” Edward said, though he did not care for the note of unease in his voice as he spoke to Marcus.

“Are you certain that now is the right moment? Perhaps Mr Phillips will find even more permanent evidence if we allow him a bit more time?”

“Every day that we allow this to continue, we are on borrowed time. Whoever did this could still do so again, to another person. I fear that this might be above even Mr Phillips’ capabilities, and he is the most talented in all of London,” Edward huffed, wishing that he felt more confident in his choice.

He could not shake the feeling that he was missing something, that something so obvious was right in front of him and he simply could not see it. He wanted to think that this nagging feeling of unease was simply because he was missing Anna so, or because of how Juliana and Eleanor seemed to be at odds with one another again, or any number of other issues that he was attempting to balance.

Marcus started to speak but was interrupted by the door to the office bursting open.

“Millie? This is most unorthodox!” Edward said, attempting to scoop the sensitive papers into a pile on his desk lest the nosy servant catch her observant gaze on something she ought not to see. But she did not seem to be in a snooping mood; this was something else.

“Forgive me, Your Grace, but you must come quickly. Your mother is in urgent need of assistance!” Millie panted, clearly having run the whole way there.

Something cold dropped into Edward’s gut, and he forgot all about the conversation he had been having. He immediately stepped out from behind the desk and nodded to the door. “Lead the way.”

Millie turned on her heel, quickly running back in the direction she had come from, and Edward was having a great deal of difficulty in attempting to keep up with her, given the pain radiating the left side of his body.

When the pair of them reached the top of the stairs, there was a silver tray with a tea service still waiting there, but his mother was nowhere to be seen.

“I do not understand ... she was just here ...” Millie explained, looking around for any indication of where she could have gone.

A moment later, a loud crash resounded from one of the guest rooms down the hall.

Millie and Edward both rushed towards the room, the door still ajar as Millie's shoulder barrelled into the wood, charging into the room with Edward swiftly behind her. However, he did not think that anything could have possibly prepared him for the scene that greeted him in that room.

Edward's gut churned sour, and Millie screamed before instantly backing away from the scene towards the wall beside the open door frame. She seemed intent on making herself as small as possible, and Edward certainly did not blame her for that in the slightest.

Sidney stood there, a broken crystal brandy decanter clutched in his shaking hand. The man could barely seem to stand on his own two feet. He was swaying from side to side so violently. Katherine stood almost directly in front of him with her arms outstretched wide as Amelia huddled in a ball on the floor just behind her.

The moment that he realized they had company Sidney rounded on the pair in the doorway, the decanter slipping from his hand and falling to the ground with just enough force to shatter completely.

Glass skittered across the floor in every direction, and Katherine yelped, jumping back towards where Amelia was huddled. It was clear that Sidney had turned upon his own daughter, and his mother was attempting to protect her. The drunken fool had run away with himself!

Amelia had tears running freely down her face, and while Edward could not see her very clearly from the place he was standing, he knew he was only going to be more upset upon seeing her up close. There should never be a reason for a woman to cry like that, let alone look that afraid of her own father.

In the flickering candlelight, Sidney's face shifted from drunken belligerence to dawning horror as he realized who had joined them and how bad the situation currently looked.

"What is the meaning of this?!" Edward demanded, his face full of fury. "Step away from them at once!"

Marcus appeared in the doorway behind him and yelped softly at the scene in front of him. He did not say a word, but Edward knew the moment that he needed his friend to step in, he would. "I have summoned the constables, Edward. The butler is fetching them as we speak."

Edward nodded, just enough for Marcus to know that he heard him. He would just need to buy enough time for them to get here then and ensure that Sidney did not do any more damage in the meantime.

"It was him!" Katherine gasped, making sure not to clear the pathway to Amelia behind her, despite how scared she looked to be. "He is the one who killed Charles!"

Edward knew that he heard his mother correctly. Of course, he had. She was not the sort of woman who would say things without having a fully based reason to have stated them. He did know that. He understood, but the information still felt so surreal that he was not certain how to process it. Sidney killed Charles?

"I heard him. He confessed everything to Amelia before he *struck her!* He is a danger to all of those around him! Edward, please, we must do something!" Katherine explained in a rushed, frantic voice. He could not remember the last time he ever remembered his mother sounding quite so frantic. Bordering in hysterics, and he could not stand it.

“Is this true?” Edward asked Amelia, who met his gaze and firmly nodded. She looked as if there was a great deal more she wished to say but simply did not know where to start. But there would be plenty of time to handle that layer.

There would be time plenty for why she withheld the information, or if this was something that happened to her often. Right now, his only priority was handling Sidney. At least the constables were already on their way.

Sidney seemed to pale, drooling slightly as he stumbled hastily towards the doors. Apparently, intending to charge like a bull right through the lot of them, but Edward and Marcus were ready for him when he yelled and barrelled forward. It was a mercy that they were unevenly numbered as Sidney was drunk, which gave him a good deal more strength than he otherwise ought to have.

Millie took the opportunity to rush across the room where Katherine's bravery was clearly wearing thin. She staggered, and Millie caught her by the elbow to stabilize her.

Katherine waved her off, and Millie quickly turned her attention to the woman on the ground to ensure that she was also all right. Edward wanted to ensure the same thing, but with Sidney thrashing and struggling against him, he was trapped.

Impossibly, the older man became a tangle of limbs as he grasped onto the door frame with everything that he had left in him, but it was not enough. Even though his current injuries forced Edward to be less than his best, he and Marcus still managed to subdue Sidney.

The older man was mumbling a constant string of nonsensical obscenities as Edward wrestled him to the ground with some difficulty. Marcus helped him to trap his hands behind his back.

The sound of heavy boots came thundering up the stairs and down the corridor, and Edward took that to mean the constables had finally arrived to assist them. It was A mercy that they were able to put all the pieces together with so little information from Marcus and himself.

Mere moments passed, and they had Sidney in irons, lifted up under his arms as he still tried to thrash and kick his way away from them. He was speaking frantically, but his words were so slurred together that nothing that he was saying seemed to make any sense.

The once proud Sidney Wyndham was reduced to nothing as they carted him off with Edward's promise to send all the evidence that he had after them.

Edward had wanted to know the answer to Charles' death, but he certainly had never thought that it would end like this.

Chapter 34

Emma had not slept in two days.

The poor dear could not seem to stop rolling around in her bed, moaning and clutching her stomach. It was as if somehow she had managed to develop wholly new symptoms that Anna had never seen her have before. It was breaking her heart, and she did not know what to do with it.

Every low moan that left her sister's lips was like a stab in the gut. She did not know how to help her. Because Emma was not sleeping, Anna could not sleep either. Emma had not been able to keep so much as broth down and Anna was starting to fear the worst.

"Perhaps, dear, at this point, it would be better to summon a priest instead of a physician," their aunt said from the doorway.

She would not come any further into the room, being convinced of some illness she would catch from being too close to Emma. Never mind that Anna had been in her sister's company fairly exclusively for the better part of a week now, and she was still just as healthy as she was before. Though her spirits were dampening by the moment.

She did not even know where to begin with the comment that her aunt made. Anna could not afford to cry any more than she already had. She felt as if she had been crying for weeks from how swollen her face felt and how red she knew her eyes must be. The words that her aunt dared to say to her were too cruel. It felt as if their aunt was condemning Emma to die, and

she could have none of it. It made her want to sob hysterically, and Emma needed every ounce of her focus.

No matter what happened, she was not going to give up, and she was not going to leave her sister's side for anything at all. No, she would be here.

Anna turned her back on her aunt. "How can you say that to me? Have you no heart?"

"No heart?!" Her aunt scoffed, sounding almost offended by her words. "There is nothing heartless about being practical!"

"Practical?!" Anna knew that she was being rude, her voice rising. "This is my sister's life! I know that you have thought the pair of us nothing but a burden, but you must understand that if this could have been prevented, this would be partially your fault as well!"

"Well, perhaps if you had sent more money then—" her aunt attempted to counter.

Anna was not one for losing her temper. She could not even recall the last time that she had been truly angry about anything at all. But, now? The words were triggering something within her that she did not know how to properly process.

She felt weak kneed and light-headed, but she struggled to lift herself up onto her feet, fully ready and willing to confront the woman who was supposed to have been helping Anna and clearly something was very, very wrong.

But, there was a knock, a rather insistent one. “Miss Cartwright?”

Anna could have crumbled with relief the moment she heard the voice on the other side of the door. Anna gasped, heading to greet the man on the other side.

“I hope this is the right place. I have been searching in vain for quite some time,” the older man on the other side of the door continued. “If this is not where I can find Miss Anna Cartwright, perhaps you could at least point me in the right direction?”

Anna wrenched the door open. She could have hugged the man; she was so beyond happy to see Edward’s physician that it was unreal. “Did his grace send you? How are you here?” Anna asked, already waving him inside her aunt’s home and not bothering to wait for permission.

She did not care how rude it was or was not either. She just wanted him to look at Emma and make her all better. The pair of them had been through so much already; they had been working together constantly over the past couple of weeks, and Anna had come to trust him completely.

“Oh, it is very good to see you indeed! His grace did send me!” the physician said as he followed Anna into the room. “Oh, poor dear, is this your sister?”

Anna nodded, wrapping her arms around herself tightly as she stopped at the foot of Emma’s bed, waiting with as much patience as she could muster as the physician set his medical bag down and started to go through his materials until he found what he was looking for.

He started his examination, and Anna could hardly breathe. She could not focus for the life of her as she swayed back and forth on her feet, waiting for news of any kind. If it was going to be bad news ... she did not know how she was going to take it, but she would have rather known than be taken by surprise.

The hours passed in a haze. Both too fast and painfully slow at the same time. Whatever magic that the physician managed to rub into the skin of Emma's stomach seemed to calm her groaning.

Then, the groaning started to slow, and little by little, she seemed to stop rolling around in discomfort the way that she was.

Then, the tonic that he had Anna coax down her throat seemed to make her feel better as well. In such a short time, she was sleeping. It might not last, she knew that, but it would allow her body time to recover, even if only a little bit. It was what she needed.

With great difficulty, the physician managed to coax her away from her sister's bedside just long enough to have a spot of tea with him. Anna knew that it was the least that she could do, given how he had come all this way for her. She was forever going to be in his debt.

The fact that the duke had sent him? He had no obligation to have done so, and there was still a very high chance that the man would have been better purposed at the house where Eleanor and Lady Juliana might still be in need of treatment.

"Never you mind about any of that. They were left in capable hands."

“I do not know that I am unable ever to stop worrying fully,” Anna admitted, rubbing her face and putting another sugar cube into her tea.

“You must fill your own cup before you can pour into others, you know?” the physician said. He had been very pointedly ignoring the questions that she kept posing to him about the other things happening at the house. He insisted that she had enough to worry about with her sister and that everything else would still be waiting for her when she returned.

His confidence did put her more at ease.

She was on her second cup of tea when there was another knock on the door, this time less urgent and nobody on the other side of the door started calling out to her repeatedly.

But when her aunt reluctantly got to the door, Anna was so shocked that she could have easily been knocked over with a feather. There, standing in the doorway, was the man that they were speaking about. Edward – the duke was there, looking concerned and out of breath.

“I am sure she is still sleeping, but I shall return to Emma so that I can ensure that nothing else is needed,” the physician said as he tapped the side of his nose. “Give you two some time to speak.”

The moment they were alone, the questions started to tumble from Anna’s mouth. “What are you doing here? How are you here?”

Whatever he had been about to say, whatever speech he might have otherwise been inclined to give her, seemed to die on his lips as Edward’s

shoulders softened. “I – well, would it be too pathetic to say that I have missed you?”

That mask she had seen him wear time and time again was nowhere to be seen. It was just the two of them and their real faces, seeing one another for what felt like the first time in far, far too long.

“Westford Manor feels so empty without you, Anna. I cannot explain it any better than that. With you so far from me,” Edward said. He took a deep breath to muster his courage before continuing, “I feel as if there is a part of me that left when you did, and standing here before you now, I feel whole again.”

Anna did not know what to say; the honesty in his words touched something inside her that she could not name.

“I cannot tell you how relieved I am to hear that from you,” Anna said, on the verge of tears. “I have felt so torn between my duty to my sister, who is everything to me ... and the feelings that I know are growing in my heart for you.”

If he did not feel the same, if he had only meant that he missed her working in his house, she might burst into flames right here in this very spot.

Edward closed the distance between them, and she desperately wanted to be inside of his embrace but did not have the words needed to ask.

He stood in front of her, the weight of all the questions that she wanted to ask, the things they had not yet said to one another, the logistics of their mismatched births, all of that meant nothing when Edward said the two words that she had been desperately longing to hear.

“Come home.”

Anna finally released the dam that she had held inside herself. All the fear, worry, and anxiety of handling things with Emma alone burst loose, and she rushed into Edward’s arms, burying her face in his chest as she could not seem to stop herself from sobbing.

Edward held her, with no intention of letting her go even as he started to speak. “Eleanor misses you so fiercely, and I fear that all of the confidence that you assisted my sister in building might be dwindling.

Millie, Amelia, and my mother have been nearly inseparable in that they never seem to leave my mother’s room, no matter how badly I wish they would. So much has happened in such a very, very short amount of time.”

Anna tightened her arms around him. She knew she needed to ask if this meant that Emma was allowed to come with him, and she knew that she needed to inform him that no changes could be made in the slightest until Emma was well enough to travel. But, in her heart, she was not afraid to say such things to him.

“It took me far too long to realize that rank, station, and titles mean very little compared to finding someone who can see me for who I truly am,” Edward said, his voice dropping softly as he pulled away from her just enough to look into her eyes as he spoke.

“Every moment that I spend with you, Anna, I find more and more things about you to love. The kind patience that you have with Eleanor, the unwavering support of all those around you during the fever crisis. Your selflessness seems to have almost no bounds.”

Anna only wished to cry even harder as Edward wiped her tears out from under her eyes. But, she must have been all cried out because while the urge was still there, she could not make another tear form.

“That is all I could have ever wanted you to say,” Anna said, her words coming out almost as soft as a whisper. Edward cupped her cheek, his thumb brushing out over the hollow in her cheek before caressing it softly. The way that he was gazing so deeply into her eyes as he spoke was nearly intimidating, but she never wanted to look away again.

When Edward kissed her this time, she melted into it entirely. Every part of her surrendered fully to the man that she loved. His lips were sweet, the kiss tender as he caressed her cheek.

The dread that had been living constantly in her gut for the last week shifted, turned to butterflies, and started to drift away as she realized the depth of what this meant -- she loved him more than she could say.

Emma’s soft groan floated through the room to where the pair of them stood, and the physician poked his head around the corner only a handful of moments later. At least the pair of them had the decency to move away from one another when caught, but the look in Edward’s eyes seemed to carry with it a promise of what was yet to come.

“You should come,” the physician said and hurried back down the narrow hall to Emma’s room.

Anna slipped her hand into Edward's as they followed the physician down the hall, already thinking of the planning of how their lives would need to change once they arrived at Westford.

Chapter 35

Two Weeks Later

For the first time Anna could remember, Emma actually had colour in her cheeks. Two weeks since returning to Westford Manor, and she felt as if she had stepped into a whole new life. Until now, she had such difficulty in admitting that things had been a struggle for her. Working so hard to keep everything in order, to ensure that Emma was taken care of, providing for everything that she could.

But she had never thought that having everybody under the same roof would be so helpful for her. Edward had been kind enough to offer Emma her own room. He had even asked her what colour she wanted and had everything in the room decorated in blue at Emma's request.

The physician had been kind enough to visit every other day so that he could ensure that everybody was getting better under Anna's watchful care. It was such a burden lifted off her shoulders to be able to go from one room to the next and see that everybody was progressing properly.

Everything that Anna needed was at one end of the hallway or another. Presently, Anna stood in the open doorway to Eleanor's nursery, thankful that the young girl was napping properly once again. The halls were all filled with a strange calm now that half of the house was sleeping. But Anna did not wish to go down to tea just yet, she was merely basking in all the accomplishments made thus far.

"I cannot tell you how happy I am that you have come home," Lady Juliana said, standing beside her in the doorway. She took half a step closer to Anna, linking their arms together before Juliana placed her head upon

Anna's shoulder. "I am even more pleased that we will soon become sisters. I do not know how to express how much I am grateful to you properly and for everything that you have done for our family."

Anna's face warmed under the attention, knowing that her cheeks were likely turning a shade of pink or even red. "I have not done any more than anyone else would have done."

"That is nonsense. You have gone above and beyond at every turn," Juliana insisted.

While Anna did not feel as if she had done anything particularly special, she did not say as much either. "I am pleased that they apprehended your late husband's murderer."

Juliana nodded, her grip tightening just a touch. "As am I. I did not have the same suspicion as Edward did this whole time about there being foul play. I think that in my grief I was blinded to it somewhat. But, at least, I can know that my husband's soul is at rest, given that the truth has come out.

He was taken from me far too young, and we did not have nearly enough time together." Juliana smiled sadly. "I think he would be happy to know that I am playing music again. I think that where he is looking down at us from heaven, it will bring his soul comfort to know that our daughter will be raised with the same love of music that the two of us always shared."

Despite herself, Anna's thoughts drifted to Edward, hoping that their future would be as bright as she wanted it to be. She could not imagine being in a place where she might ever lose him.

But she also knew that should something ever happen with them, he would want her to be happy as well. Anna patted the back of Juliana's hand. "I think every day she grows more and more in love with your music."

"Thank you, and Emma seems to like it as well!"

Anna nodded. "Yes, our mother always insisted that we be surrounded with music as well."

"Ah, and that is why you hum so often?"

Anna smiled slowly. "It is. I think it makes me feel closer to her memory, just like you playing the harp makes you feel closer to Charles."

"I hope that our home is always filled with music," Juliana admitted with a sigh.

"Me too," Anna agreed and meant it with her whole heart. Slowly, she pulled the pair of them away from the doorway so they could head down to tea. "I would like that more than I can say."

Mr Phillips stood in front of the fireplace in Edward's study, slowly eating a cookie with the smallest bites that Edward had ever seen a man make.

He had not spoken since one of the servants had arrived with a tea service. The man had selected a cookie and now stood there looking much

more akin to a hamster enjoying a treat than the hardened private investigator they had come to know.

Every few moments, Marcus would pointedly look in Edward's direction as the silence in the room stretched on and on.

Only after the private investigator had finished every morsel of the cookie did he speak again. "The trial date is set for a week from now. Given the severity of his crimes and the sheer number of debts that the man has, they felt as if it would be most beneficial to have Mr Wyndham sentenced and behind bars lest something happen to him while awaiting trial."

Marcus' eyes widened. "Is it truly that many?"

Mr Phillips nodded. "It is. A shocking sum of money. It is my personal opinion that when the man sees just how much evidence has been compiled against him, he is going to confess with hopes of getting a lesser sentence, but I assure you, that is not going to be the case. He will have to pay in full for his crimes and work off his debts to the best of his ability."

"How is he now?"

"Sobering up with great difficulty, I have been told," Mr Phillips answered with a shrug.

It was true that it was rather hard to feel empathetic for the bastard who not only had so callously ended another person's life but had been so cruel as to strike his own daughter.

“But you may rest assured, and please inform Lord Prescott’s widow that justice will be ensured for his murder. I have worked closely with the solicitor on the case. It will be done,” Mr Phillips assured them. He might have even attempted to smile at him if his strange expression was anything to go by.

“Thank you for all of your hard work, again, Mr Phillips, without you I –”

Edward was interrupted by a knock on the door.

The knock was quickly followed by Millie, now promoted to Anna’s lady’s maid in recognition of her loyalty and quick thinking, poking her head around the door.

“Dinner is ready in thirty minutes, Your Grace,” she said with a bright smile. The lass had been floating around the manor for days now, celebrating her promotion.

“Thank you, Millie, we will be down promptly,” Edward answered. She giggled and ran off to announce their imminent arrival. “Mr Phillips, would you care to stay and join us for dinner?”

He was only meaning to be polite, but the look that Marcus gave him the moment that he suggested it was almost comical. He never would have expected the man to eat as slowly as he did, and he could only imagine how long dinner courses with him would take as well.

“No, thank you for the invitation, but it is time for me to return home now. I just wanted to ensure that you knew everything for the trial

had been finalized, and Mr Wyndham will have little to no recourse for his actions.”

“Of course, you have my gratitude. Are you certain that I do not need to be there for the trial?” Edward asked.

“You are welcome to come if you wish to see the verdict for yourself, but it is simply not necessary. Please, enjoy your dinner, and congratulations again on your engagement.”

“Thank you, sir.” Edward could not keep the proud, overly excited smile from his face. It was the same every time he thought about the fact that Anna was going to be his bride, that the pair of them were going to be well and truly married, and he was over the moon.

Mr Phillips strode out of the room in the overly swift way they were accustomed to.

“Well, that was an experience,” Marcus said once the man was gone.

“He always is, is he not?” Edward concurred.

The silence lingered for just a moment, and then the pair of men stood at the same time. “Well, now that is all settled, do you not have a betrothed to return to?” Marcus said with a sly grin.

Edward’s face felt as if it were nearly going to split in half his smile was so wide. “Yes, yes, I do.”

Epilogue

One Month Later

Anna was a married woman.

Hand in hand, husband and wife, Anna and Edward walked out of the chapel following their short, intimate ceremony that had only been shared with their closest friends and family. They had both agreed upon Edward getting a special licence for their engagement to be swift.

Anna did not wish anything fancy; in fact, she preferred that it was more intimate. Vows and the eyes of God to bless their union.

There was nothing that she could have wished for more than what she had that day. It was the first time in months, no, years, that Emma had been out of the house. Whatever the physician had done to help her, paired with the fresh country air, had been nothing short of a miracle. She was as close to fully recovered as she could possibly be.

Emma had even taken to taking walks around the property with Juliana and Eleanor almost daily. It helped Eleanor to keep calm to have such a specific routine, and Emma and Juliana had formed a very close friendship with one another.

Katherine, standing in the front pew, clapped more loudly than anyone else in the room to congratulate her son on managing to find a love union instead of one of convenience.

She had been spending the last week with Amelia, ensuring that she had got properly settled into her cousin's house and making sure that she did not need anything else to help her get better established in her new life and newfound independence from her father.

It had taken a few weeks after the ordeal to have the physician clear Amelia for travel in the first place. The physical wounds that she had suffered at the hands of her father also seemed to pale somewhat in comparison to the mental damage that had been done to her.

Katherine was not sure how long it was going to be before she was comfortable eating normally again or any number of the other things that Mr Wyndham had forced her to adapt and endure for so many years of her life.

But now that she was safely established with her cousin – she could help her heart start to heal. Edward had promised Amelia that if and when the time ever came that she wished to take a husband for herself, he would be more than happy to sponsor her down the line.

Marcus and Rebecca had announced their engagement only the other night, and as soon as their own special licence was approved, they would be standing in this very church, saying their vows to one another before anybody knew what happened. Anna had never seen her cousin so happy before.

Even Millie had bagged to come with them so that she could enjoy their union. Anna and Millie had become even closer friends in the wake of everything that happened.

Now, Anna could not even imagine doing anything in her day-to-day life without Millie at her side. Despite the woman's penchant for gossip, she had never had a more loyal friend. In fact, Anna was not certain that she had ever had a true friend of her own at all.

Anna walked past stoic Mr Phillips, who inclined his head in her direction as they walked past, knowing that their carriage was waiting for them outside.

He had informed Edward and Marcus that morning that Sidney Wyndham had been convicted of murder and was awaiting transfer in

Derby gaol upon delayed sentencing while the judge had to take the time to finish accumulating the totals and sums of all of his debts to the various places across London who were insisting upon repayment.

But, for today, Anna was choosing to put all of those worries and cares aside. It was not often that she put herself first, but she knew that stepping into this new chapter, just the two of them, she was going to have to get better at doing exactly that.

Edward's hand was warm and steady as he helped her into their carriage; a long honeymoon had been planned for the pair of them to travel out to his family's hunting lodge just to ensure that they had privacy.

Two weeks of alone time had been hard for Anna to wrap her mind around at first, but knowing that everything was being taken care of was a new feeling for her that she was going to try to accustom herself.

Edward climbed into the carriage behind her, shutting the door, and they started into motion. She waved out the side of the carriage to all those who stood outside of the church, wishing them well, knowing that they would be waiting back at Westford Manor when their honeymoon was over.

Anna was a duchess now. The title meant not nearly half as much to her as being Edward's wife did.

They had not even made it out of the city before Edward shifted, sitting beside her and looping an arm around her shoulders to pull her into his side, where Anna was more than happy to be.

"Are you ready for the beginning of the rest of our lives, my love?" Edward whispered into her temple before kissing her there softly.

Anna's heart fluttered in her chest, and she nodded. "I am indeed."

THE END ?

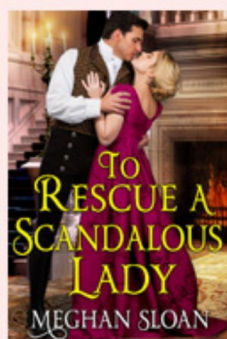
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REGAL QUILL
PUBLISHING

*A Masked
Lady for the
Marquess*

A Masked Lady for the Marquess

Introduction

Tragedy leaves Lady Emmeline Honeyfield orphaned, homeless, and at the mercy of cruel relatives. Reduced to a servant in her own home, she clings to dreams of freedom. Yet, a magical dance with a masked stranger sparks hope—but can she ever reclaim the happiness she deserves?

Frederick Ashburton, Marquess of Linslade, returns from war to investigate his late friend's sister's stolen inheritance. However, a masquerade ball brings him close with a masked beauty who captivates his mind and soul. Could she hold the key to the answers he seeks?

As secrets unravel and danger looms, Emmeline and Frederick are drawn together in a fight for love, freedom, and justice. Can they overcome the shadows that threaten to separate them? Or will time run out before they can reach their happily ever after?

Prologue

The great hall shone brightly, illuminated by soft candlelight, with the scent of damask roses drifting through the ancient manor house.

Emmeline heard the orchestra beginning to play in the ballroom, interspersed with laughter, as they tuned up in preparation for a musical evening of quadrilles and reels.

Her mama and papa stood next to Emmeline in the oak-panelled hall, and the three of them laughed together as guests began to arrive for a ball at Manningley Manor.

“Everything looks perfect,” said her mama. “Your first ball has to be special. You will dance till the early hours of the morning.”

Her dear papa had taken her in his arms and held her close. “You remind me of your mama,” he told her proudly. “We both hope you will find true love this season. It’s been the most important thing in our lives.”

“And it gave us you,” added her mama in her low, gentle voice. “During our very first dance, I knew that I loved your father.”

Emmeline spun around, twirling and whirling as if she danced a frantic waltz until she found herself standing in the middle of a dance floor in a ballroom. Before she could take a breath, her partner appeared and bowed elegantly.

His eyes met hers, shining with a curious green glow as if he were a supernatural creature from the land of the fey. Emmeline put her hands to her face and found that she was wearing a mask with the softness of silk.

Had they met before? She didn't think so. Yet the power of the connection between them felt so strong as if it had been there always, but she had only recognized it tonight.

"My dance, I believe," he told her as he reached for her hand. Emmeline found herself dancing in the arms of a mysterious stranger wearing an elegant dark mask with black feathers, which softened the outline.

I'm at a masquerade ball, she thought. Her hands trembled, and her heart raced as the dance began gently and then became fast and furious as they twirled around the dance floor.

I believe I've found true love. As the pace quickened, the room around her faded into the mists of memory. Everyone had gone. The ballroom was silent.

Emmeline looked around, trying to find a trace of the guests and the handsome stranger who had led her through a dance that had changed her life. Her fingers still tingled from the touch of his fingers holding her hand as they danced.

I stumbled across true love, and now I've lost it. Will I ever find it again?

When Emmeline awoke, realizing it had just been a dream, there was a tear on her cheek.

Chapter 1

Manningley Manor,

Hertfordshire

1815

Lady Emmeline Warwick's life had changed when she lost her parents, Geoffrey and Rosamund Warwick, the Viscount and Viscountess Welwyn, in an instant and her world of close, comfortable family love had ended.

Their coach had lost its grip on the icy road as they travelled back from an evening with friends, driving through the rolling Chiltern hills. Emmeline should have been with them but had a slight chill, and her mama had insisted she stay home by the fire.

The drop hadn't been far, but the road was isolated, and the carriage fell far enough to mean her parents had died in the wreck. She shuddered to think of their last, terrified moment as the carriage hurtled down the hillside before crashing into Garstead Woods. It was followed by the news that her brother had also died, fighting against Napoleon, leaving her without family, alone in Manningley.

Emmeline sat in her father's library when Mr Howcroft, the butler, announced she had visitors.

"Sir William and Lady Matilda Warwick have arrived, My Lady," he announced. "Shall I tell them you are in for visitors?"

Emmeline was not in the mood to talk to anyone. It was only a week since the funeral of her parents, but as these were relations, albeit ones she

was only aware of by reputation, she thought she should show willing and see them.

“Yes, Mr Howcroft, show them into the drawing room,” Emmeline replied.

As she walked to the drawing room, she could hear their loud voices, barking instructions to her house staff as if they were in charge of Manningley. When she entered to meet them, she found that their voices had made them seem so much larger than they were.

Emmeline steeled herself and greeted them cordially. “Sir William, Lady Matilda, welcome to Manningley. I’m so pleased to meet you.”

What came next totally shocked her.

“You don’t need to worry your pretty little head about Manningley and the estate anymore,” came the thin, reedy voice of Sir William, her father’s distant cousin. “I’m here to tell you that the property and title belong to me.”

Emmeline had stared at him in silence, feeling the impact of his words.

“But, Mr Jenkins, my father’s solicitor, has been through the will and financial paperwork with me, Sir William. You were not mentioned, as I recall.”

“Impertinent girl,” came Lady Matilda’s voice. “How dare you question your uncle this way. Your mama gave you far too much leeway.”

“Forgive me, Sir William, erm, Lady Matilda, but you have arrived at my home and appear to be claiming that it belongs to you and not me. I do not believe that asking questions is impertinent, and I do not believe Sir William is my uncle.”

“You must call us Aunt Matilda and Uncle William, for we are your dear family.”

“But ...”

“The legal documentation is all here, if you wish to look through it. If you wish to speak to your Mr Jenkins, then that is understandable, though I do believe you ought to trust your elders. We are your family, in fact. It’s a simple matter of your great grandfather’s will, my dear. After your father’s death, Manningley reverts to my side of the family.”

Emmeline stared at this man, feeling faint and looking around for something to hold onto. She found the edge of a table and clung to it, willing herself to stay calm.

‘I’ll set out the will in your father’s, or should I say, more correctly, my library.’ He looked towards her with an expression of distracted distaste. “You can study it there if you insist. You can ask your solicitor Mr Jenkins to look over it. You’ll find it is all above board and ship shape.”

“Oh, I do love it when you use those naval expressions, my dear,” gushed Lady Matilda.

Emmeline felt a reaction of complete dislike and a growing fear of this woman. She forced her hand to let go of the oak table, to which she had been clinging for support and stood as tall as she could make herself.

“That would seem to be a good idea, Sir William,” she said, trying to keep her voice steady.

“Uncle William!” came the sharp, shrill reminder from the florid-faced woman, whose face loomed before her.

I’m not going to faint, she thought. I need to keep my wits about me and work out what is happening here.

“Ah, a carriage is arriving. It must be the girls. Priscilla and Annabelle are here, my dear. Your daughters have arrived at their new home,” Sir William declared.

And with that, Sir William and Lady Matilda, now Viscount and Viscountess Welwyn, left the room without giving her a second glance.

Emmeline heard voices and laughter from the great hall. The last time there was laughter, it was Mama and Papa, before they left for that fateful dinner party at Camberley Court, from which they would never return.

Two Years later

The older woman looked at Emmeline in disgust. “You are so slow at everything I ask you to do. I expect you to clean all that silverware again.”

Emmeline stared at her aunt. It would be the third time she had to polish the silver cutlery her mother had received as a wedding present. The silver was spotless, and this was vicious.

“And when you have done that, you can help Annabelle prepare for the ball. The maid is busy with Priscilla’s preparations and then she will attend to me.”

“Very well, Aunt,” she replied, trying not to let her hatred of her aunt show.

“I can see your reluctance, Emmeline. You need to understand your station in this house. You do what I ask you to do when I ask you, with a glad heart.” She paused and looked at her niece with disdain. “Tomorrow,

you can check all the linen sheets and make a start on darning any holes. It's a job long overdue."

And with that, Aunt Matilda swept out of the room without glancing at her niece.

Why can't I accept my life and stop antagonizing Aunt Matilda? I make it worse for myself by refusing to accept the way she treats me.

Two years before, there had been a ball in this house that her parents had held for her coming out into society. She had worn a shimmering ivory silk gown and felt so close to her beloved parents as they greeted their guests.

How she had danced that night. Then, within three months, it was all over. Her parents were gone, and with them, her home and happiness.

After her uncle and aunt arrived and taken up residence at Manningley Manor with their two daughters, Annabella and Priscilla, hostility had been evident from the first meeting. Her father had been estranged from that side of his family, so they had not met for many years.

Emmeline had asked Mr Jenkins to check her grandfather's will, and he declared that, although it was highly unusual, it appeared to be in order.

The new family had sidelined their niece over a two-month period. "Don't bother yourself," her aunt had told her. "I'll take care of everything while you are in deep mourning."

When she emerged from mourning, everything had changed. She remembered asking if she could help her aunt with anything.

"Well, now that you mention it, Emmeline, I believe that Mrs Farley, could do with some assistance. We have a dinner party this week, and you can assist with arrangements."

“Of course, Aunt Matilda I’d be glad to be busy.”

“Oh, and I haven’t liked to mention this before, but would you move up to the third floor where you will have more room? There are several rooms in that old wing which would suit you better.”

“But Aunt Matilda, I’ve had that room ever since I can remember. I’d prefer not to change.”

She’d seen the steely look for the first time. “There have been changes, Emmeline. There will be more changes. I require your room for Priscilla. It’s far more suitable for her than for you.”

And so it had continued. Tonight, the ball was to honour her cousin Priscilla. She knew her aunt had the first twinges of concern that her elder daughter might be on the shelf, and holding a ball was part of her plan to get Priscilla settled with an offer of marriage during the next season.

As she handed the silverware to Martha, the parlour maid, to tidy away, she took a breath and looked out the window. It was a glorious summer day, and she so wanted to take a walk down to the river, take off her shoes, and dip her feet into the fast-flowing waters. She’d often done this secretly in the past. Now, her every move seemed watched.

As she made her way upstairs to help Annabelle dress and arrange her hair, she felt tiredness seeping into her body. I’m exhausted, she realized. If I don’t make the ball tonight, I really don’t mind. I’m glad I won’t be at the ball tonight. I just need to sleep.

As soon as her cousins and aunt left for London, she would put her plan into action to leave Manningley, her childhood home. She’d begun to write letters enquiring about positions as a governess or ladies’ companion with a view to being in a post before Christmas.

Despite the gruelling work she was given every day, she still loved Manningley, and the staff here still looked at her as their mistress. I can

endure a few more months, and I don't feel ready to leave quite yet.

Chapter 2

Frederick Ashburton, Marquess of Linslade, woke early. His valet, Jonathan, laid out a selection of clothes for him to choose from.

“What do you suggest?” Frederick asked Jonathan. “I’m so used to wearing my uniform that it’s hard to decide on clothes. And they are just clothes.”

“Indeed, My Lord,” agreed Jonathon.

“Though to see some of those dandies in town, and even quite sensible men, spending several hours a day sitting while their valet ties a waterfall cravat, it’s like some sort of competition.”

“Would you prefer the Mathematical, the Osbaldeston, the Napoleon, or the Gordion Knot today?” Jonathon enquired with a grin.

Frederick burst into laughter. “The simple knot, I think,” he replied. “I’ll wait till Mother arrives before branching out into Corinthian elegance.”

He selected the simplest breeches and his well-worn leather long coat, the look that he preferred in the country. After years of living the army life, he was fairly self-sufficient with no need for fashionable attire.

Jonathan had been with him throughout the Peninsula wars, and he’d offered him a post as valet when he’d resigned his commission. They were both trying to make sense of civilian life and finding it a challenge.

Here I am, Frederick Ashburton, Lord Colonel Linslade, living a civilian life with a mother who seems determined to help me rejoin the life of a gentleman in the ton. It isn’t going to happen. I’m never going to be one for society life, but I’ll go to an occasional ball or concert if it makes Mother happy.

He thought for a moment of Harry, who had been there alongside him on the Iberian Peninsula until one fateful day when he'd taken a bullet and was gone. Harry had met his last challenge bravely, and for a while they had thought he would pull through.

However, then he'd developed a fever and blood poisoning, a sort of rapid septicemia had set in and taken over his body, and he'd lost consciousness and drifted away several days later.

After Harry's death, he'd felt the sharp pain of loss. He knew he could have become angrier on the battlefield when leading his men, but the weary-looking French of Bonaparte's First French Empire looked tired, hungry, and forlorn as they followed orders and threw themselves into battle.

Frederick had focused on following orders and doing his best to keep his men alive so they could return to their families. As he walked away from Harry's makeshift grave, the sounds of cannon fire in the distance, he'd made himself a promise that one day he'd return to England to tell Harry's parents about their son's last battle.

He'd been devastated to receive a letter from his mother, telling him that Harry's parents had died together in an accident within a few weeks of their son, and it was unclear if news of Harry's death had ever reached them.

His mother, Harry's godmother, had taken a keen interest in Harry's achievements and had told Frederick she had always been grateful that he had a friend beside him in the regiment.

The Dowager Marchioness Linslade, his mother, lived in the wild uplands of the north of England, closer to the Scottish border than to London, rarely venturing south, instead choosing to devote herself to running their family estate. Bernicia Castle was steeped in history, bearing the ancient name of the province from the Dark Ages before it had become Northumberland.

His mother had continued to correspond with Harry's mother, and rarely did a month go by without a letter sharing family news since they had spent a season together in London.

When he'd finally returned to Bernicia Castle three months ago, his company of men disbanded, his mother had been preoccupied with what had happened to her friend Caroline. She showed him several letters, returned from Manningley Manor, with no covering letter, except the first stark words that had told her of her friend's death.

"And where is Emmeline? What has happened to her?" she asked him.

"I don't know Mama. Maybe she is quietly grieving for her family and doesn't want contact with the outside world."

"Balderdash. I've never heard such complete baloney. It's two years since her parents died," she told him with absolute conviction. "I wrote to Lady Gargrave, an acquaintance in Hertfordshire, and she told me that after the arrival of the new Viscount and Viscountess, no one has seen Emmeline except fleetingly. It's almost as though they roll her out occasionally to prove that she is still alive. Lady Gargrave called on the girl when she heard of Harry's death, but Viscountess Matilda Welwyn told her that Emmeline didn't wish to receive visitors," his mother continued.

Frederick, unsure what to answer, just waited for his mother to come to the point. "It's despicable, Frederick. I set Mr Dawkins, our solicitor in town, on it to see what he could ascertain, and his letter is here." She pushed several pieces of heavy vellum into his hands and waited a few minutes while he read the contents.

"It's unusual, I'll give you that," Frederick said after digesting the words.

"Indeed. No one had any idea about this second will, written by the grandfather apparently, which diverts the property to another branch of the

family if there is no male heir.”

She looked at him intently, concern etched across her face.

“If Caroline and Nathaniel had known about this, then they would have made proper provision for their daughter. Did Harry ever mention this to you?” she asked him.

He shook his head.

“No one knew anything of this, Frederick. That poor girl is alone and grieving for her whole family when, out of the blue, her father’s cousin arrives and takes over the house and estate.”

“He must have that right, Mama,” suggested Frederick.

“I disagree. Look at the last page of Mr Dawkins’ letter. The will has been accepted as bonafide, but he points out that the heir who had expected to inherit is a young woman under the age of majority. She would have no means of challenging this takeover of the Manningley estate.”

“Mother, you need to calm yourself. However, I agree it is a strange scenario, and the fact that no one has seen Harry’s sister in society is concerning.”

“Lady Gargrave writes that they see her only in the distance, wearing what appears to be the sort of dress that a housekeeper might wear.” She looked at him, and he began to realize she was very concerned about her god-daughter’s welfare.

“Even if there had been an entail, I know her parents would have provided for her in their will. And what’s more, Harry would have known about it as it would potentially have affected his own children in the future.”

He took a seat and looked at his mother thoughtfully. “Let’s assume you are right, and there is something untoward here. What do you want to do? I can tell there is something you have in mind.”

His mother stopped pacing around the room and came to sit opposite him.

“You wrote a year ago that you were considering renting an estate nearer London to give you a base in the south.”

He nodded.

“I remember thinking it seemed an excellent idea, as you need to be in society and meeting new people, and like your dear father, you would never be happy living in the London townhouse.”

“I don’t like town. Never have. And yes, I am thinking about renting an estate. Everything is well managed here by you and our estate manager. If I’m honest, I’d like to do something different rather than return here to Bernicia immediately.”

“And you do need to meet, er, people Frederick.”

“You mean eligible young ladies, Mama,” he replied with humour in his voice.

“Well, it is high time that you settled and produced an heir for Bernicia. However, that isn’t what I am thinking about.”

“I’d say you were always thinking about that,” he said with a laugh.

“Oh, very well, I’ll concede that point. No, I have been thinking about the possibility of you taking a property in Hertfordshire.”

“Ah, I think I’m starting to see your plan.”

“You could become part of local society, find Emmeline, and see if you can locate the original will,” she said in one breath before stopping and looking at him.

“I think you might need to repeat that ...” Frederick said in exasperation. “I am sure that we can make contact with Lady Emmeline, but I don’t see how I can search Manningley Manor and find the real will. If Viscount Welwyn has a grain of sense, then he will have burned it and any copies.”

“Oh, believe me, Lord Welwyn sounds like a total buffoon. I suspect the documents are most likely in a drawer in his study or on a table in the library. I doubt he would even have the sense to keep them under lock and key. Lady Gargrave says he sleeps most of the time.”

“Sleeps?”

“Sleeps and snores loudly, apparently.”

“It’s a long shot. Can’t we just stay in an inn, visit Manningley, and ask to see Emmeline?”

“And she would be watched during every minute of our visit. That’s providing we even get to see the girl. Now, are you, or are you not, planning on renting an estate in the south, within travelling distance of town?”

“Well, yes ...” Frederick hesitantly acknowledged.

“So, this is a perfect opportunity to investigate what has happened to my god-daughter,” said his mother.

“Mother, there probably isn’t a suitable property anywhere near Manningley. This seems like a ridiculous plan.”

“But there is a perfect property, Frederick,” she said.

Frederick sighed loudly. She really seemed serious about this. His mother continued, "If you look on that table over there, you will find details about a property that shares a boundary with Manningley Manor."

He reached for the document and swiftly scanned the contents.

"Will it do?" she asked him.

"You know very well that it is exactly the type of house and estate I want. Bramfield House seems perfect for my needs," Frederick replied with a note of frustrated exasperation in his voice at how he had been manipulated.

"Good. You can write and instruct Mr Dawkins to take it for you on lease. Once you are settled, then we will join you within the month."

"Mother," he cried with exasperation. "These things take time."

"Oh, very well, within two months. It makes little difference. You know exactly what I mean," his mother said.

"And you plan to join me there?"

"I do indeed. I shall travel south to Hertfordshire with your sister Phoebe," his mother told him. "I suspect Philip may choose to join us; that's up to your brother, but you can certainly ask that rather handsome baronet who often comes to stay with us. I suspect your sister likes him, and it will give Phoebe a chance to get to know him."

"You mean Stuart?"

She nodded, "Sir Stuart Mulgrave, Baronet of Wark, with an estate just a day south of Bernicia."

“Mother, I find it impossible to keep up with the number of schemes in your head,” said Frederick, exasperated. “I’m happy for Stuart to join us if he chooses to. The surprise is you are planning to travel south. You haven’t left Bernicia for ten years.”

She ignored his initial comment. “I feel this is my duty to my dear friend Caroline. I don’t enjoy London society, and I’m happy here, but if I’m honest, then I do regret not visiting Hertfordshire while she was alive.”

She paused and stared out the window for a second or two, looking sad. “It will do me good to blow some cobwebs away, and I can set up house for you at Bramfield.”

And so, he reflected, his life had changed as a result of a short conversation. He saw the positives. He had planned on taking a house further south for an extended period, and he’d actually anticipated that his mother might not approve of this plan.

As it turned out, she was encouraging it and had even found him the perfect property, saving him days of property hunting. And why not Hertfordshire?

“Very well. I’ll write to Mr Dawkins, asking him to act for me as solicitor, instructing him to take Bramfield House for twelve months,” agreed Frederick. “When I’m in town, I’ll call and see him about Manningley and talk with him about how Lady Emmeline seems to have been disinherited.”

She nodded. “And imprisoned.”

“Mother, we don't know that.”

“I may have exaggerated,” his mother acknowledged, “but there is something deeply unpleasant here. If the viscount and viscountess are not treating my goddaughter well, then she can come and stay here.”

“I’m beginning to think you are right, and Emmeline is Harry’s younger sister. I owe it to him to check that all is well,” Frederick said.

“The poor girl had the death of her parents, then news of Harry’s death in such a short space of time,” his mother said sadly. “There is something fraudulent about this whole business. We shall investigate, and the Ashburtons will uncover the truth.”

“I begin to feel as though we are living in the pages of a Mrs Radcliffe novel,” commented Frederick.

“She has always been my favourite author,” added his mama. “Perhaps I will take up writing when our investigations are completed.”

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