

A woman with dark hair pulled back, wearing a teal Regency-style dress with a purple sash, stands in a lush garden. The background features classical stone columns and a fountain. The scene is bathed in a soft, ethereal light.

# London Stranger

Historical Regency Romance



Heirs of London

*Joyce Alec*

# **LONDON STRANGER**

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JOYCE ALEC

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London Stranger

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# Love Light Faith

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# 1

The carriage bounced over an uneven part of the road and Juliet winced, gritting her teeth as she held on to the strap. The many hours she had spent in the carriage were beginning to take its toll and Juliet did not know how she was meant to endure much more. Her body ached and she was weary and exhausted. It was all very well for her father, who had chosen to hire a horse so that he might ride the last stretch to London, and her companion—one Mrs. Grey—was sound asleep in the opposite corner of the carriage, her mouth ajar as her dark grey head bobbed with every jostle of the carriage. Juliet could not even think of sleeping at present, even though she was thoroughly exhausted. Their last inn, whilst pleasant enough, had not had the softest of beds and Juliet had spent the night tossing and turning whilst, again, Mrs. Grey slept soundly and without complaint. It had all been most irritating.

It will be worth it, she told herself, thinking of London and society and all that came with it. Once you are back in London, it will all be worth it. A small smile captured her mouth as she thought of what awaited her. Last Season, she had made her debut and had enjoyed her time in London, being introduced to various gentlemen and ladies, conversing with them, dancing with the gentlemen, and trying to make herself known amongst the beau monde. Her Season had not lasted as long as she had hoped, however, for her companion had become gravely ill and, once she had improved enough to travel, they had all returned to her father's estate so that Mrs. Grey might continue her recovery there.

Juliet prayed that this year, she would be able to stay in London for the entirety of the Season.

"Whoa there!"

The carriage, much to Juliet's astonishment, suddenly began to slow. She frowned and looked out of the window, wondering why they were doing so. London was still some distance away and they certainly had not arranged to take any respite in between, not unless her father's horse required it.

Unable to see anything of interest, Juliet waited as the carriage came to a complete stop, astonished to hear her father's loud voice calling up toward the driver. Wondering what it was he had discovered, Juliet opened her carriage door without hesitation, but the driver jumped down from his perch and then came toward her at once, his face flushed from the heat of the sun.

"My lady, the master has stopped us," the driver told her as the other servants climbed down to join him. "He states that it is best that you remain in the carriage, however. He gave no instructions to say you should join him."

"Hurry up, man!"

Juliet winced, hearing the firmness in her father's voice. The driver dipped his head and then hurried away, leaving Juliet and Mrs. Grey to sit—or sleep on—in the carriage.

Frustration lit Juliet's soul. Why had her father demanded such a thing? Surely he knew just how difficult it was to sit in the carriage for a long period. Questions burned in her mind as she heard the murmur of low voices drifting toward her, her brow furrowing as she strained to listen through the open carriage door. What was it they had discovered? And why must she remain in the carriage? Had they discovered something that would put her 'delicate constitution', as her father so often called it, at risk? Irritation grasped a hold of her heart and Juliet glanced toward Mrs. Grey, noting that the lady slept on, seemingly all the better now that the carriage had stopped. With a small sigh of exasperation, Juliet climbed out carefully and stood on the grassy verge, permitting herself a long stretch as her muscles began to complain about what she had been doing. The thought of climbing back into the carriage was not one she relished and thus Juliet was quite determined to make the most of this opportunity.

"Juliet!"

The moment she came into view, the horses still between herself and her father, the Earl of Lansbury immediately began to rail at her.

"I gave specific instructions that you were to remain in the carriage."

"I am aware of that, Father," Juliet replied calmly, "but I need to take a short walk. It has been a rather difficult journey and I am tired."

Her father glared at her, his dark grey eyes fixed to her face, but Juliet ignored him entirely. The earl might have a good deal of bluster, but it never amounted to anything. No doubt she frustrated him entirely by refusing to do as he asked, but on this occasion at least, Juliet felt entirely justified.

"Do not come near," the earl said after a moment or two. "Juliet, I beg of you to listen to me, even though a father ought never to have to beg anything of his child." Clicking his tongue, he looked back at Juliet steadily, waiting for her answer, and something in his gaze caught Juliet's attention.

"Yes, Father," she said slowly, looking at him carefully and wondering at the dark frown on his face. "What is it that you have discovered?"

The earl blew out a breath and looked away. "It is best you do not know, Juliet."

"Please, Father," she said, a tremor running through her at the clear upset in her father's face. "It is something truly terrible?"

Again, her father did not immediately answer, his gaze still fixed on a point in the horizon. "It appears, Juliet," he said eventually, "that some highwaymen have been along this road."

All of Juliet's determination and eagerness washed away in an instant and she could almost feel the color draining from her cheeks. Without even meaning to do so, she took a small step to her right, horrified to see the outline of a man lying on the ground behind



her father. His eyes were closed and his skin grey. It was clear that there was no life left within him.

Putting out one hand, Juliet leaned on the carriage itself for support, hearing the horses whinny nervously as she turned away. She ought not to have come out of the carriage. Her father, seeing clearly that his daughter was overcome, came closer to speak to her over the horses' backs.

"Highwaymen?" she whispered, and the earl nodded, his mouth in a tight line. "How can you be certain?"

"I cannot be certain that it was, but what other reason would someone have to discard people by the side of the road without any of their jewelry left on them?" the earl asked bluntly. "As I have said, Juliet, I think you should have remained in the carriage. What you have observed already is more than enough. This is not a sight you ought to see."

Juliet wanted to argue, wanted to state that she was quite all right and that he did not need to mollycoddle her, but she could not deny that even the small glimpse of what the highwaymen had left behind had turned her stomach. With a tight nod, she turned back to where she had come from, although she did not instantly climb back inside. Instead, she kept one hand on the door, breathing hard and forcing the fright out of herself. She would not give in to it, not when they were so close to London, and surely no highwaymen would attempt to do anything given just how close they were to the city.

Except they have clearly been at work in this very spot, she said to herself, sickened at the thought. It is not as safe as you might have hoped.

Whilst Juliet had heard stories of highwaymen and knew that the tales were, for the most part, quite true, she had never permitted herself to linger on such stories whenever they had set out to travel, knowing that she was well protected by her father's staff. But now to hear that they had almost driven past those who had been attacked by highwaymen and had lost their lives because of it made things all the more real to her. She felt sick, breathing hard so that she would not cast up her accounts by the side of the road. There was more mettle in her than this, surely.

"My lady?"

She turned to see the driver returning.

"We are to make haste to London," the driver told her gently, his kind face telling her that he knew she was feeling quite ill at ease. "Might you climb back inside?"

Juliet nodded and accepted his hand, climbing back into the apparent safety of the carriage and letting out her breath slowly, feeling it rattle out of her as she tried to grasp a hold of her courage. Sitting back down, she waited for the driver to close the door, only for him to step away quickly as the earl suddenly appeared.

"You are quite all right, Juliet?" he asked, showing her more compassion than usual. "I know such things are distressing but just be glad that you did not see anything too grotesque."

This did not help her nerves in any way, making her stomach twist in a most alarming fashion. "There is no hope for any of them?"

The earl hesitated. "Not for two of them, the poor devils," he said, his face holding a

good deal more anger than Juliet had expected. "The third is still breathing and, whilst in a great deal of pain and distress, has life left within him. I have done what I can for them. A young lad came near to us as we were discussing what to do and I have sent him back to the nearest village to fetch those who might be able to not only remove the bodies but bury them also. He will also bring whatever country doctor he can find, just in case the third can be saved."

Juliet swallowed the nausea that rose in her throat. "Then we are to stay here at present?"

"I shall," the earl replied firmly, "but you are to carry on to London. You and Mrs. Grey—" he glanced at the sleeping woman before he continued, a slight flicker of mirth in his eyes now. "You are both to set yourselves up in the townhouse and make certain that you are both settled and rested. We will not go out into London until either the morrow or the day after."

Had they not found such a dreadful sight and had Juliet's stomach not been battling to keep a hold of itself, Juliet might have argued with her father that she could very easily go out into society come the morrow, but given just how ill she now felt, she lapsed into a quiet agreement of silence.

"And there is one more thing," the earl said quietly, speaking now very seriously indeed. "There was a letter in the gentleman's pockets, Juliet. The one who still breathes. I should like you to take it back to the townhouse with you."

Juliet's head lifted and she stared at her father, who was nodding encouragingly.

"You mean to say that you looked through their clothes?" she asked, a little repulsed. "Why would you—?"

"The driver did so," the earl replied, interrupting her. "And I had him do so in order to make quite certain that it was highwaymen and not some other thing. It confirmed to me that yes, it must have been highwaymen who had done such a dreadful thing, given that everything of value is gone from them. It was only by chance that I discovered this note and, whilst I have not yet read it, I think it would be wise to take it back to London in case it yields something of importance. I do not know if this gentleman will ever recover and if he does not, then who will ever know of it?" A flare of anger burned in his eyes and he looked away for a moment, his hand whitening as he pulled the letter out from his pocket. "Recall, Juliet," he said, looking back at her and clearly keeping his voice constrained with an effort, "that we do not know the name of that man, or of those who lie dead."

Juliet nodded, reaching out to take the letter from her father without any further hesitation, realizing what he meant and why the letter might be of such great importance. Those who had perished at the hands of the highwaymen were, at present, entirely without name or identity. The people from the nearby village might know them, if they had passed through, but if they did not and if the third passed away also, then it would be nothing but three unmarked graves. Families would be left bereft, uncertain as to where their beloved son or husband or brother had gone. It was up to Juliet and her father to do the very best they could for them.

"I thank you, Juliet," her father said gently before closing the carriage door. "Now, off

to London with you. And do not stop until you reach the townhouse."

She nodded. "Yes, Father," she promised, looking down at the letter in her hand and then glancing across at Mrs. Grey, who was still sound asleep. With a jolt that made no difference to her companion, the carriage moved away again, jostling Juliet hard as she looked steadfastly out of her window, refusing to turn her head for fear of what she might see out of the opposite window. Her hands tightened on the letter she held, her breathing uneven as she fought rising nausea. Looking down at the letter, she caught her breath before having to suck in air desperately, horrified at the roiling of her stomach. She could not cast up her accounts here, not when her father had told her not to stop until they reached London. But as she glanced back down at it again, Juliet felt a horror begin to creep over her skin, her heart pounding and her fear growing steadily.

The letter was flecked with blood.



\* \* \*

It was a sennight before Juliet felt ready to step out into society. After the journey to her father's townhouse, Juliet had grown all the more weary and tired, finding that there had been none of the exhilaration she had hoped for in returning to London. Instead, she had taken to her bed and had rested for some days, whilst her father fretted that she would become just as ill as her companion had been last Season and that they would have to return to his estate before the Season had even begun.

This, however, had not been the case. Juliet had increased her strength daily and had finally managed to push all thoughts of highwaymen and the horrors they had witnessed from her mind, leaving her only to push aside a straying memory or two whenever they came to her.

The letter, however, had been very little help. Her father had opened it almost the moment he had returned to London, only to discover that there was nothing within. Juliet had taken it from him with a frown, turning it this way and that but discovering that it was entirely empty. Her father had muttered about throwing it in the fire but, for whatever reason, Juliet had kept it in her bedchamber, as though it might yield its secrets to her if she could only wish for it hard enough.

"Let me see you, then."

Juliet blushed as she walked into the drawing room, seeing her father waiting for her. He waggled a finger and Juliet turned slowly, praying that he would be satisfied with her gown for the evening.

Thankfully it appeared he was more than contented.

"You look very lovely, my dear," he said kindly. "That gown was an excellent choice for your first ball of the Season."

Juliet smiled back at her father, thinking him to be a very kind gentleman in his way.

He had never expressed any great fondness for her but, in his own way, made certain that she realized she was of importance to him. Whilst he preferred to bury himself in business, read a great many books, and take long, solitary walks, Juliet found herself desperate for company, for conversation, and for laughter with friends and companions. Mrs. Grey did not provide such things, although Juliet was very grateful for her indeed. This evening, she might be able to reacquaint herself with one or two of the other ladies whom she had met last Season. That, she was sure, would help her re-establish herself in society.

"You will be careful to do all that Mrs. Grey says," the earl continued, his tone now a little more firm. "Everything she insists you do, you do without question or hesitation. Is that clear?"

"Yes, Father," Juliet replied quickly, aware that, whilst she might find Mrs. Grey's presence a little irritating at times, she was only there to ensure that Juliet behaved with all propriety and that gentlemen, too, treated Juliet with the respect she deserved. Whilst Juliet was all too aware of the presence of rogues and rakes within society, she had not met any as yet and that, certainly, was not a source of disappointment to her. Some young ladies wanted nothing more than to be introduced to such a gentleman, but Juliet was not one of them. She wanted to find herself a sensible, kind-hearted gentleman that would suit her very well. That was both her own and her father's intention for her this Season and Juliet wanted very much to fulfill it.

"And you will inform me of any gentlemen of note, Mrs. Grey," the earl continued as Juliet's companion nodded quickly. "Particularly if they seem interested in my daughter. She must be protected."

"I quite understand, my lord," the lady replied, curtsying quickly in evident deference. "I will make sure to do so."

Becoming frustrated with her father's evident unwillingness to hurry them to the carriage and, instead, to talk with them both about what his expectations were—expectations that were already very well established, given that Juliet had heard them many times before—she gave her father a pointed look.

He understood it immediately, a small smile spreading across his face and making his dark grey eyes twinkle.

"Yes, yes, we shall depart," he said with a wave of his hand that instructed Juliet to make for the door. "I shall, of course, be there to make certain you are welcomed by the host but, thereafter, I do intend to find the card room just as soon as I can."

Juliet smiled up at her father as she passed him, feeling no concern whatsoever that he would be seeking out the card room. He was not a father who had ever shown great concern for his offspring. There had been a great concern for her older brother, of course, given that he was the heir, but now that he was wed and settled, her father had shown no great interest in Juliet's future. No doubt he expected her to find someone suitable, but there was no need for him to be involved in any great detail, hence why she now had Mrs. Grey as her companion. Hurrying to the carriage, Juliet climbed inside carefully, making certain not to wrinkle her gown.

"A very fine evening this is to be, I am sure," Mrs. Grey said, sitting down with a small

sigh. "And plenty of eligible gentlemen."

Juliet laughed. "I will be happy just to reacquaint myself with those I met last Season," she said as her father joined them. "That will suit me very well." Her hands tightened in her lap as the carriage pulled away from the house, a knot of excitement squirreling into her belly. A sudden thought came to her and she looked at her father. "Have you heard anything from Mr. Johnson?" she asked, having been told the name of the man who had taken on the responsibility of caring for the third man they had found, as well as the burial of the other two.

Her father shook his head. "There is very little change," he replied, a hint of sorrow in his voice. "The third man hovers between consciousness and unconsciousness, eating very little and having said nothing at all." After a moment, he reached across and patted Juliet's hand. "But you must not think of that now. London is waiting for you and you shall be at the very heart of all there is to enjoy."

Juliet nodded and returned her gaze to the window. The horror of what she had seen, the fear of the highwaymen, and the dreadful thoughts that had filled her mind for so long no longer troubled her to the same extent. In fact, she was able to push them aside without any great difficulty given the excitement of what was before her. Her first ball of the Season. It was, as Mrs. Grey had said, sure to be a very fine evening, and Juliet could hardly wait until they arrived.



\* \* \*

"I thank you." Juliet smiled briefly at their host and then turned to Mrs. Grey, aware that both she and her father were now waiting for her.

"You did very well, Juliet," Mrs. Grey murmured as the earl cleared his throat, looking all about him and paying Juliet very little attention. "Lord Fauster is well known for making some uncomfortable and disconcerting remarks at times, but I presume that he did not say anything of note to you?"

"Nothing at all," Juliet replied happily. "His wife appeared to be keeping a sharp eye on his behavior and his words, however." She smiled as Mrs. Grey chuckled, making their way together toward the ballroom, her anticipation building with every step. "I do hope that all will go well this evening."

"You have your dance card?" Mrs. Grey asked, her blue eyes turning to Juliet with a sudden worry dancing in them. "You have not forgotten to tie it around your wrist?"

In answer, Juliet lifted her arm and allowed Mrs. Grey to see the dance card dangling from it, the silk ribbon slipping over her glove as she did so.

"I am glad to see it," Mrs. Grey replied as two footmen opened the ballroom doors for them so that they might walk inside. "For I am quite certain, Juliet, that you shall have your dance card filled very soon."

"I do hope so," Juliet said, walking into the ballroom and clasping her hands together with the sheer joy of being back in society. The orchestra was playing, some couples were dancing a quadrille, and all around her were small groups of guests conversing together. Overwhelmed with the sheer joy that filled her at being back amongst it all, Juliet let out a sigh of contentment, pausing in her steps for a few moments simply so that she might look all about her.

"Yes, yes, it is all quite wonderful," Mrs. Grey said, laughing as she grasped Juliet's elbow gently. "But come, we must make our way through the crowd and find someone that we are acquainted with."

"But of course," Juliet replied happily, following Mrs. Grey. It did not take long for them to discover an old acquaintance and, very soon, Juliet was talking cheerfully with one Lord Stevenson, one Lady Richmond, and one Miss Swettenham, whose mother stood only a few steps away, keeping a sharp eye on her daughter. Soon afterwards, she had Lord Stevenson asking to sign her dance card and, with a nod of agreement and a heart filled with delight, she gave him her consent. Within the hour, Juliet found herself practically surrounded by old acquaintances and, just as Mrs. Grey had hoped, her dance card filled completely. Smiling and laughing, Juliet felt her heart lift free of the remaining strains of fear and worry that lingered there, finding herself filled with a great happiness that chased all adverse emotions away. She was back within society, back in London, and there was nothing to take that joy away from her.



"Might I have the pleasure of introducing my daughter to you?"

Duncan cleared his throat but forced a smile to his face. "But of course, Lord Haskett," he replied, forcing some sort of warmth into his voice as the older gentleman beamed at him, before turning to beckon a young lady over toward him. "I should be very glad indeed to become acquainted with her."

"Capital!" Lord Haskett exclaimed as a young lady with soft brown eyes and ringlet curls falling gently over her shoulder came near. She was, Duncan had to admit, rather pretty but he did so very much hate being forced into considering a young lady simply because of her outward merits. A lady's title and dowry were important, of course, but he would not be forced into considering a lady just because he might find her beautiful.

"My dear, might I introduce the Earl of Strickland," Lord Haskett said, gesturing toward Duncan. "Lord Strickland, this is my daughter, Miss Sarah Poole."

"My very great pleasure, Miss Poole," Duncan murmured as he bent low into a bow. "I do hope that you have found this evening to be enjoyable thus far?"

Miss Poole nodded, her smile big and bright and lighting up her features completely. "It has been very lovely indeed," she said, her voice not at all as quiet as Duncan had expected. "Although I do wish for some dancing. I always like a bit of dancing, Lord Strickland."

He smiled back at her although inwardly thinking that he would prefer a quiet evening given that there were balls almost every evening at present. Balls where he would be hounded by young ladies or their mothers in the hope of him striking up an interest in one of them. "You are fond of dancing, then, Miss Poole?" he asked, and she nodded fervently. "Is there anything else that you enjoy?"

This seemed to stump Miss Poole for a short time, and she considered this question for so long that Duncan began to wonder if she would ever answer him at all. Lord Haskett said nothing but rather smiled down at his daughter fondly, making Duncan think that he was well used to his daughter's long silences.

"I can only say, Lord Strickland, that dancing is my very favorite pastime," Miss Poole announced in a rather dramatic fashion. "I may read upon occasion or do other such activities that are expected of young ladies, but to my mind, there is nothing better than being out amongst society and enjoying the company and conversation of others." She smiled and a gleam came into her eye. "Particularly when one is able to make new

acquaintances.”

This did not make Duncan smile, however, for he could hear the gentle flirtation in the lady's voice and could see the fluttering of her lashes as she looked back at him. He was not at all inclined toward Miss Poole, just as he was not at all inclined to any young lady who sought him out in such an obvious fashion.

“Indeed, Miss Poole,” he replied in a somewhat firm voice, wondering how to extract himself from the conversation without appearing rude. “I am sure that there are a good many gentlemen and ladies within the ton that will be glad to make your acquaintance, Miss Poole. This is your first Season, is it not?”

“It is,” Miss Poole replied, blushing now at the apparent compliment Duncan had given her. “You are very kind to say such a thing. In fact, I—”

“I should be glad to introduce you to any of my acquaintances,” Duncan interrupted, quickly grabbing the attention of Lord Jennings, who was meandering across the room without any obvious intention. “Ah, Lord Jennings,” he continued loudly, as Miss Poole looked at him with astonishment—although it seemed that her father was quite delighted given the broad smile settled on his face. “Might I introduce you to a new acquaintance of mine?”

Thankfully, Lord Jennings appeared to be more than willing to do as Duncan asked, coming toward them at once and bowing to Miss Poole after greeting her father. Duncan quickly introduced them both and then, his duty done given that he knew Lord Jennings would be able and willing to converse with Miss Poole for some time, he excused himself quietly.

A long sigh escaped him as he crossed the room, praying that he would not be greeted by any other gentleman or lady wishing to introduce him to their daughters. He had endured quite enough already, and he had only been back in London for a sennight. Unfortunately for Duncan, it was well known that he was the richest earl in all of England, whose wealth outstripped even the Marquess of Longbridge. This was not a truth that he had shared with anyone but rather one that his own mother had been very delighted to express to all who would listen, in the hope that this would encourage Duncan to find a suitable wife.

It had done the exact opposite, however. Instead of encouraging him toward a particular lady, he had found himself doing all he could to avoid the young ladies that sought him out. They wanted his attention solely so that they could have the chance, as they saw it, to wed a gentleman with a great deal of money so that they could live in such a way as to satisfy their every indulgence and whim. It was not because of his own character that they had any particular interest but rather that they saw only his title and his fortune—and those sorts of young ladies meant very little to Duncan.

“Good evening, Lord Strickland.”

With a small groan, Duncan turned around expecting to be met with another young lady being presented to him for, indeed, it seemed as though this evening's gathering was filled with debutantes, but much to his relief, it was none other than Lady Richmond, whose eyes were dancing with mirth.

“You are not trying to escape from anyone, are you?” she asked as Duncan gave her a

wry smile. "My husband is nearby somewhere, and I am sure he would be able to steal you away to a game of cards or some such thing, if you are already struggling."

"You know of my difficulties," Duncan muttered, a little darkly, "and yet I believe you mock me."

Lady Richmond only laughed, not at all influenced by his irritated expression. "I know very well what such a situation is like, Lord Strickland," she reminded him, one eyebrow lifted. "Do you not recall that I had a very great dowry which, it seemed, the ton in its entirety knew of?"

Duncan let out a heavy breath. "I do," he said, still frustrated with the eagerness of Lord Haskett to introduce his daughter to him. "And yes, you well know what such a struggle is like." Throwing up his hands, he shook his head. "But it was easier for you, was it not? Your father, seeing what occurred, sought out a gentleman or two who had no need of your dowry." He arched one eyebrow, recalling how his friend, Lord Richmond, had found himself quite caught up with the lady and had been unable to even go an hour without mentioning her.

"That is true, I suppose," Lady Richmond replied dreamily. "Lord Richmond is a most exceptional gentleman."

"And now you are quite contented," Duncan said as Lady Richmond smiled back at him. "But I am struggling desperately to find a young lady that has no awareness of who I am or what I have. It seems as though they all come to London with the full knowledge of the gentlemen within society who are the wealthiest and, therefore, the most eligible."

"You did not decide to linger in the continent, however," Lady Richmond murmured, a flicker of interest in her eyes. "I had thought you had meant to reside there for the year."

Duncan hesitated. After last Season, he had left for the continent almost at once, thinking that he would remain there for some time until everything that had irritated and frustrated him about the Season had washed from him. "I found it unbearable," he said hoarsely. "The heat. The company—or the lack thereof."

"And this is better?"

A wry smile tipped Duncan's lips. "Perhaps I hoped things would have changed this Season—even just a little. But it seems, thus far, that I have been entirely mistaken."

For a few moments, Lady Richmond said nothing, studying Duncan with a rather thoughtful expression. Duncan frowned, wondering what it was Lady Richmond was thinking, only for her to smile softly at him.

"If it is any comfort, I could introduce you to a lady that I am certain has no knowledge—or interest—in your wealth," she said, surprising him. "I know that you are rather tired of being introduced to various young ladies, but I am certain that she will be rather refreshing."

Duncan frowned hard as he considered what was best to do. Lady Richmond was quite correct—he did not want to be introduced to any further ladies who would look at him with greedy eyes but, at the same time, if she had no awareness of his fortune, would that not be exactly what he sought?

"Come now, you cannot refuse after complaining as you have done," Lady Richmond laughed, slipping her arm through Duncan's and beginning to walk across the room, with

Duncan having no other choice but to join her. "Besides which, you must know that Lord Richmond and I care a great deal about your welfare. I would not introduce her to you if I thought her to be in any way unsuitable."

Aware of this, Duncan nodded and glanced at her. "I should prefer to go and find a card game," he said, a little brusquely, but Lady Richmond only smiled and looked away, evidently thoroughly resolved to do as she had suggested. Duncan gave himself up to her determined spirit, permitting her to take him to a quieter part of the room where a young lady was speaking with another, two older ladies near to them. Lady Richmond waited until one of the young ladies and her chaperone or mother, whoever she was, turned away, before quickly stepping forward to greet the remaining young lady.

"Ah, good evening," Lady Richmond said, letting go of Duncan's arm as she bobbed a quick curtsy. "Good evening, Mrs. Grey, Lady Juliet."

A trifle interested given the lady's title, Duncan stood mute as the conversation continued without him although he did not miss the older lady, Mrs. Grey, quickly assessing him as he stood tall, his hands clasped behind his back.

"I do hope you will allow me to introduce a friend of mine, Lady Juliet," Lady Richmond said quickly, turning back toward Duncan. "I claim him as my friend, you understand, even though he was dear friends with my husband first."

Duncan could not help but chuckle at this, noting now the young lady looked at him with curiosity flickering in her eyes. She was, he considered, rather pretty. She had very dark hair, with gentle curls brushing her temples, and, from what he could see, blue eyes that appeared to be flecked with gold. A delicate oval face, gentle sloping nose, and full lips added to his consideration of her beauty, although he did not allow himself any further thoughts given that he knew very little about her.

"This is the Earl of Strickland," Lady Richmond continued, gesturing to him. "Lord Strickland, might I present Lady Juliet, daughter to the Earl of Lansbury." She smiled at the older lady, who was waiting patiently for a further introduction to be made. "And her companion and chaperone, Mrs. Grey."

There was no immediate flare of recognition in Lady Juliet's eyes. She did not catch her breath, smile with delight, and curtsy beautifully, before batting her eyelashes at him, as so many other young ladies had done. Rather, her expression remained quite open as she curtsied, looking back at him without any hint of awareness as to who he was.

"I am very glad to make your acquaintance, Lord Strickland," she said, her voice quiet and calm. "Are you in London for the Season?"

"I am," he replied, ignoring the very broad smile on Lady Richmond's face, evidently rather pleased with herself for her choice of young lady. "And you? Is this your first Season?"

The young lady blushed. "No, it is my second," she replied, clearly a little embarrassed that she might have given the impression of being a debutante. "Last Season, however, I had to return home a little early due to an illness."

Duncan's interest stirred. "I hope you recovered well."

"It was not I who was unwell but my companion," she replied quickly, gesturing to Mrs. Grey. "I thank you for your concern, however."

"As do I, Lord Strickland," Mrs. Grey added, a glimmer of appreciation in her eyes. "I was disappointed that, for my sake, Lady Juliet had to return to her father's estate, but she would not hear of me returning alone."

This caught Duncan's interest, for if such a statement was true, then it spoke very highly of Lady Juliet's character.

"There is no need to make mention of such things," Lady Juliet interrupted briskly. "Lord Strickland, what of your estate? Where do you reside?"

Duncan smiled to himself, daring a glance toward Lady Richmond, who now looked all the more delighted with herself. It was very clear that Lady Juliet had no knowledge of him whatsoever and Duncan had to admit that he was glad Lady Richmond had been proven correct. Quickly, he told her about his estate, some distance north from London. She asked him some further questions about it and showed a genuine interest in all that he said. Much to his astonishment, Duncan realized that he was actually enjoying this particular conversation, even though he had not expected to.

"My mother, Lady Strickland, resides in the Dower house," he finished, a little offhandedly. "Some might consider her residence there a little premature since I myself am unwed, but it was for the best." A small, rather sad smile graced his lips. "I believe she found my father's absence very difficult."

A look of astonishment grew on Lady Richmond's face, leaving Duncan rather embarrassed as he realized what he had said, wondering why he had found himself speaking so openly with a young lady he had only just been introduced to.

"I can quite understand," Lady Juliet replied without any sign of embarrassment. "My own dear mother passed some years ago and I still feel her loss very greatly. Even if I see something that I know she loved very dearly, it brings an ache to my heart."

Duncan blinked and nodded, not quite certain what he ought to say next. He had never once spoken of his late father to any of his new acquaintances and why he had done so now, when Lady Juliet was still only a stranger to him, he simply could not say.

"Lady Juliet!"

Duncan half turned, seeing a young lady, a gentleman, and another older lady approaching. Recognizing them and seeing that it was quite apparent that they wished to speak to Lady Juliet rather than to him, Duncan quickly took his leave.

"It was very good to meet you, Lady Juliet," he said quickly. "I do hope that we will meet again soon."

"As do I," Lady Juliet replied sweetly, before turning her attention to her approaching acquaintances. Lady Richmond took her leave and together, both she and Duncan stepped away from the lady.

"You need not look so superior," Duncan muttered as Lady Richmond beamed with obvious pleasure at her success. "Yes, you did very well indeed, Lady Richmond. It was a new experience, I feel, to speak to a young lady who knew nothing of me."

Lady Richmond arched one eyebrow and looked at him. "And is that why you mentioned your mother in such a way?" she asked, clearly still surprised at what he had said. "I did not think that you would ever speak with such frankness to a new acquaintance."

"Nor did I," Duncan admitted ruefully. "Yes, I was quite astonished with myself, Lady Richmond, but I am sure it is simply because I am unused to having conversations with young ladies who are not doing all they can to have me take notice of them."

This made Lady Richmond laugh, catching the attention of her husband, who had been busy conversing with their host.

"I see you have stolen my wife away, Strickland," Lord Richmond grinned, coming to join them. "She looks very pleased with your company, however."

Chuckling, Duncan shook his head. "Lady Richmond insisted that I was introduced to a particular young lady who, it seems, has no knowledge of my vast fortune and eligibility."

Lord Richmond's brows rose. "Oh?"

"It went very well," Lady Richmond gushed, taking her husband's arm. "You will have to make certain that he asks her to dance at the next ball."

Duncan was about to protest that he could very well make certain of such a thing himself, only for Lord Richmond to say the very same thing to his wife, patting her hand with a tenderness that spoke of the great affection he had for her. Duncan lapsed into silence, a slight tug of jealousy in his heart as he watched his friend. It was not that he despised the friendship and the obvious affection between Lord and Lady Richmond, but rather that he was beginning to wonder if he would ever find such a thing for himself.

"How long shall you linger this evening?" Lord Richmond asked, looking up at Duncan. "Are you soon to tire of the lack of good company?"

Duncan chuckled. "If you are asking if I intend to make my way to White's this evening, then I can assure you that I fully expect to do so. It is not far from here, so I have already sent my driver home. I will either walk or hail a hackney."

"Then I may very well join you," Lord Richmond replied, daring a glance at his wife, who, much to Duncan's relief, did not look at all put out. "I shall look forward to hearing all about this new acquaintance of yours."



\* \* \*

Having decided to walk the short distance to White's—mostly so that he might have a few moments of quiet in between what had been an evening of conversation and laughter and now would be a few hours of merriment—Duncan considered the young lady he had met earlier that night. Lady Juliet appeared to be just as Lady Richmond had described her. She was unaware of his wealth and quietly interested in his situation, and asked no particular questions about his fortune or made any attempt to discover whether or not he was seeking a wife. There had been no flirtation, no longing glances, no overt displays of interest. Rather, she had behaved very properly, and Duncan found himself all the more glad for it. It had been a relief to speak to her, even if he had been a little too open with what he had said.



"Hoy! You there!"

The shout came from nowhere and Duncan stopped dead, his eyes searching the streets, the dim lamps giving very little light to him. Taking a few steps forward, he tried to see where the shout had come from, when suddenly something came crashing down behind him.

Right where he had been standing.

For a moment, Duncan could not breathe. Turning slowly, he saw someone dart out in front of him, pick up whatever object it was on the ground, and then hurry off with it, giving him no opportunity to discover what it was or where it had come from. A sudden scrape to his left had him starting in surprise, but he could not work out where it had come from or what had made it. In fact, he was still rather dazed about what had happened, realizing, with horror, that had he been hit by whatever the object had been, he could easily have been knocked to the ground either unconscious or worse.

"That was a very near miss," he muttered to himself, hurrying forward on somewhat shaky legs as he made his way along the pavement. Quite what had been going on around him, he had no idea, but he thanked his lucky stars that he had not been injured.

Within a few minutes, Duncan was within a few yards of White's. Letting out a long breath of relief, he hurried toward the entrance and stepped in through the door held open for him by the footman.

"I did wonder whether or not you were coming," Lord Richmond cheered, only a few steps away from the door. "Goodness, what happened to you?"

Duncan frowned, looking down at himself. "What do you mean?"

"You look rather pale," Lord Richmond said, snapping his fingers at the footman so that he might have another brandy brought. "And there is, if you will forgive me for saying it, a good deal of dust on your shoulders." He moved around behind Duncan. "And, indeed, your back."

Shrugging out of his jacket, Duncan handed it to another footman with a request that it be brushed clean. A little embarrassed, he accepted the brandy from Lord Richmond and took a sip.

"Something occurred as I was walking here," he said, by way of explanation. "I think I must have been caught up in a ridiculous escapade by some foolish street urchins or some such thing."

Lord Richmond's eyes widened. "You were not hurt?"

"No, not in the least, although I might well have been," Duncan replied, quickly explaining all that had occurred before taking another sip of his brandy. The fright which had taken a hold of him at the realization of what he had narrowly avoided finally began to dissipate.

"Perhaps you should tell me about Lady Juliet instead of thinking of this most unfortunate encounter," Lord Richmond said with a sudden smile. "It would certainly take your mind from your troubles."

Duncan chuckled and gestured for Lord Richmond to find a seat for them both. "I do not think I have very much to say about her," he said with a wry smile. "She was pleasant enough, certainly."

"And beautiful, I believe," Lord Richmond said over his shoulder as he found them both a quieter corner of White's so they might discuss things without being forced to raise their voices too loudly. "That must have caught your notice."

Duncan shrugged and settled himself down in his seat, feeling the last of his fright disappear entirely. "As I have said, it was most refreshing," he said determinedly. "But that is all I shall say about her at present."

Lord Richmond chuckled. "Very wise, very wise," he said with a grin. "It is not as though everyone can be as I, finding myself deeply in love with a lady the moment I set eyes upon her."

"Indeed not," Duncan agreed, picking up his brandy glass and bringing it to his lips. Letting the heat of it spread through his chest, he rested his head back and closed his eyes for a moment. It had been both an interesting and tiring evening and now Duncan found himself quite weary. Perhaps he would not linger here for long after all.

# 3

Before she knew it, a fortnight had passed and Juliet found herself enjoying London society more and more. She was often asked to dance and did not struggle to find conversation or acquaintances but, as yet, there was no gentleman that caught her attention. And, it seemed, none that were particularly interested in her either. Yes, she had enjoyed some afternoon calls and yes, she had often been sought out at a ball so that her dance card might be scrutinized by a gentleman but, as yet, no one appeared to be eager to continue developing an acquaintance with her.

Mrs. Grey had told her not to worry and Juliet was doing her very best to obey. Part of her began to grow anxious over this lack of interest from other gentlemen, but she did not allow herself to continue on in such thoughts. Instead, she was determined to enjoy the Season without restraint, although she silently prayed that she would have at least one gentleman eager to court her by the month's end.

"And what do you think of Lord Strickland?"

Juliet meandered slowly through the London streets with Mrs. Grey beside her. "I am not certain who you mean, Mrs. Grey."

"Yes, yes, you are!" Mrs. Grey exclaimed, looking up sharply at her. "The gentleman who was introduced to you at the evening soiree. Lady Richmond introduced him. He has asked you to dance upon occasion, I think."

Juliet searched her memory and then instantly recalled whom Mrs. Grey meant.

"Oh yes, I do recall," she said as Mrs. Grey smiled. "The Earl of Strickland, is it not?" She considered him carefully, spying a bookshop ahead of her and wondering if Mrs. Grey might be persuaded to go in to peruse it for a short time. "Yes, he is..." Nothing came to mind as she thought of him. "He is handsome, certainly, and can converse well." That could be said about any number of gentlemen who called upon her, but Juliet did not want to say such a thing to Mrs. Grey, given that the lady was clearly eager for Juliet to have more than a little interest in this gentleman.

"Well," Mrs. Grey said excitedly, "I have heard that he is a gentleman of great wealth. They say that he is richer than the Marquess of Longbridge, if you can believe it."

Given that Juliet had no notion as to who the Marquess of Longbridge was or just how much wealth that gentleman had, this did not make much of an impact.

"He has every young lady in London flocking to him," Mrs. Grey continued, sounding rather pleased, "and yet he has been seeking you out upon occasion, has he not?"

Juliet laughed, although this stole away some of the eager excitement that was so visible on Mrs. Grey's expression.

"I hardly think that a dance or two and a few minutes of conversation mean that he has any more interest in me than any other," she told her companion. "And to be truthful, Mrs. Grey, I do not think I have any real interest in him either. Wealth does not make a gentleman any more eligible than another, I think."

Much to her surprise, Mrs. Grey laughed heartily at this remark, as though Juliet had said something mirthful.

"I think you are one of the very few young ladies who would say such a thing, my dear," she said as a slight flush of embarrassment crept into Juliet's cheeks. "Every other young lady seeks out a gentleman of both high title and excellent fortune. In fact, the greater his wealth, the more eligible he becomes."

"Well, not I," Juliet declared, despite the touch of embarrassment she felt. "If he is able to provide a comfortable situation for both himself and me, then I will be most content with that." Wanting to change the subject entirely, she gestured toward the bookshop. "Might we step inside for a short time?"

Mrs. Grey nodded at once. "Yes, of course," she said, much to Juliet's relief, glad that Mrs. Grey was not about to insist that they remain out of doors so that they might meet any particular acquaintances. "But only for a short time, Juliet. I should like to go to Gunter's."

Now it was Juliet's turn to laugh. "So that we might meet any eligible gentlemen present?" she asked as Mrs. Grey shot her a knowing look. "Thank you, Mrs. Grey. I shall be glad to attend there with you, of course."



\* \* \*

The bookshop had that wonderful, almost inexplicable smell that Juliet had come to love so much last Season. It reminded her of old books, of quiet corners and whispered conversations, making her smile with gentle delight as she followed Mrs. Grey inside. There was a peace here that could not be found in any other part of London and Juliet had come to relish it. Last Season, she had found it a quiet haven, where she might peruse for as long as she wished, her thoughts wandering from one thing to the next.

"Pray do not leave the shop without coming in search of me, Juliet," Mrs. Grey warned, and Juliet nodded. "But I will leave you to your searching."

Juliet smiled and turned away, glad that Mrs. Grey had remembered just how much Juliet liked to be alone in such a place as this. The bookshop appeared rather quiet, devoid of other patrons, although this did not disturb Juliet at all. Picking up a novel, she opened it to the first page and looked at both the title and the author, before beginning the first chapter. It was, she discovered, a little dull and, after a few moments, she set it

back down again on the shelf.

He has every young lady in London flocking to him.

Why such a remark by Mrs. Grey should come back to her now, Juliet could not understand. She had no need to think of Lord Strickland, no need to even consider him at present. Yes, he had asked her to dance and yes, she had conversed with him on a few occasions, but Juliet did not think that such an acquaintance would come to anything. It irritated her somewhat that Mrs. Grey considered her to be so fickle as to want to wed someone with a vast fortune and title, without ever considering his character and temperament. It was true that, whilst she would be glad to have a husband who could provide for her comfortably, she did not require one who had more wealth than almost anyone else in England. Besides which, she considered, picking up another book and opening the cover, she did not know very much about Lord Strickland at all. He had told her a little about his mother and his estate, but aside from that, what awareness did she have about his character? Was he a kind gentleman? Or was his temper inclined to flare at any moment?

"You did not succeed with Strickland."

Juliet looked up, looking all about her and wondering if she had heard Lord Strickland's name or if it had only been her thoughts confusing her with another matter.

"That is hardly my fault," came another voice, low and quiet in the apparent hope that they would not be overheard. "My aim was true. He stepped forward when we did not expect it."

The first voice came again and Juliet's heart began to pound furiously, realizing that she ought to move away but fearing that, if she did so, she might be overheard.

"I need him removed," said the first, clearly a lady of quality speaking. "You know very well why it must be done."

"And as I have said," the second voice said, sounding now a little irritated, "it was unexpected that he moved in such a way. Otherwise I would have succeeded."

"But that is the second time you have failed," said the first voice, clearly now quite angry with the second. "How long am I to wait?"

There came no reply from the second person and Juliet turned slowly to move away, her whole body rippling with a tension she could not push from herself. A mixture of fear and embarrassment plagued her as, on gentle feet, she began to take slow steps back toward the front of the shop. Her mind was swirling with terrified thoughts, wondering if what she had overheard could be true. Was someone attempting to injure Lord Strickland? And for what purpose?

"Ah, there you are." Mrs. Grey emerged from another part of the bookshop, coming toward Juliet quickly. "Have you found something you wish to purchase?"

Juliet did not immediately answer, her mouth going dry as she stared at Mrs. Grey, too overcome with horror to speak. What was she to do? Should she linger, waiting for those who had been speaking to emerge so that she might identify them? Or should she hasten from the bookshop out of fear that they would see her pale cheeks and realize that she had overheard them, and then bring her into their dark plans?

"You look a little unwell, Juliet," Mrs. Grey said, frowning. "Perhaps we ought to return

home. Gunter's can wait."

"No, no, of course not," Juliet managed to say, forcing a smile to her lips that barely lifted the corners of her mouth. "Here, I have found something I should like to purchase. And then, of course, we can make our way to Gunter's." She tried to speak in her normal voice, but she could tell that Mrs. Grey was not entirely convinced, given the searching look in her eyes.

"Are you quite certain you are well, Juliet?" Mrs. Grey asked, quietly, putting one hand on Juliet's arm. "You look a little overcome."

Hearing a noise coming from behind her and fearing that the two perpetrators would soon be upon her, Juliet shook her head and, her book still in her hand, made her way to the proprietor. The purchase was quickly made, with the bill being sent to her father, although Mrs. Grey still watched her with a growing sense of concern.

"To Gunter's, then?" Juliet asked brightly, turning to look at Mrs. Grey and, to her horror, noting a lady and a gentleman emerging from where Juliet herself had been standing only a few minutes before. "It sounds like an excellent idea, Mrs. Grey." She did not wait for her companion to speak or to agree but rather hurried toward the door at once, leaving Mrs. Grey to follow after her in a state of great confusion.

Once outside, Juliet did not stop to even catch her breath but turned in the direction of Gunter's and continued along her path with quick steps. Mrs. Grey caught up with her after only a few moments, but the hand on Juliet's arm told her that she was not about to go any further without some sort of explanation.

"Something has occurred, has it not?" Mrs. Grey asked as Juliet turned to face her, her heart still pounding furiously. "What is it, Juliet?"

"We must keep walking," Juliet replied tightly. "I will explain all, Mrs. Grey, but we must hurry on."

For a moment, she feared that Mrs. Grey would refuse, but then her companion nodded and began to walk again, albeit at a slower pace.

"Well?" Mrs. Grey asked quietly. "Did someone say something to you, Juliet? If there was a gentleman within making some sort of inappropriate advances, then I do not think I can permit you to wander through a bookshop alone again."

Juliet shook her head. "I would have much preferred it if it was something such as that, Mrs. Grey," she said unsteadily, dread still burning through her. "I have overheard something that has greatly concerned me."

Mrs. Grey's eyes widened. "Indeed?"

"In the bookshop," Juliet clarified. "There were two others present speaking in rather hushed tones. I did not mean to eavesdrop, of course, but I confess I did so without being aware of it."

"That is not of any particular concern to me," Mrs. Grey said firmly, clearly not at all bothered that Juliet had heard something not meant for her ears. "What was said?"

Feeling a little off balance, Juliet took a moment to catch her breath before she spoke, steadying herself inwardly. "I am sure that what was spoken of was to do with Lord Strickland," she said slowly. "From what I heard, it seems as though they are quite intent on...injuring him rather severely."



Mrs. Grey gasped, her steps slowing all the more. "Are you quite certain?"

"I am," Juliet replied, swallowing hard. "The words were harsh and direct, with the lady appearing more than a little angry that the task had not yet been fulfilled."

"The task?" Mrs. Grey asked as Juliet shuddered.

"The task of having Lord Strickland removed, whatever that means," she said, her voice tremulous. "I could not say whether they meant to have him gone from London or.." She could not bring herself to finish, the horror of even the thought shaking her to her core.

"I see," Mrs. Grey said softly, clearly not needing Juliet to explain any further. "Then we must, of course, speak to Lord Strickland about what you heard, Juliet."

Juliet blinked, looking at her companion quickly. "Do you think that is best?"

"Of course it is," Mrs. Grey replied practically. "He must know that there is a particular danger dancing around him and you, my dear Juliet, must be the one to inform him of it. Whether he believes you or not does not matter. You will have done your duty at least."

Juliet nodded, Mrs. Grey's words bringing a calmness to her heart. "Very well, Mrs. Grey," she said quietly. "Although quite how to go about such a conversation, I have not the faintest idea."

"You will manage," Mrs. Grey replied confidently. "And let us hope that Lord Strickland takes your words with all seriousness else who knows what shall happen?"

"And have you danced with any young ladies of note?"

Duncan resisted the urge to roll his eyes. "If you are asking me whether or not I have sought out Lady Juliet, then I can assure you that I have not," he said firmly. "We have danced on occasion and I have enjoyed conversation with her certainly, but as yet, I do not have any intention of pursuing anything further."

"And why would that be?" Lady Richmond asked as her husband chuckled quietly. "She is, as you have said, a refreshing change from the other young ladies of the ton."

Duncan hesitated, not quite certain how to express his seeming inability to even consider what he might do as regarded Lady Juliet. These last few days, he had found himself thinking of her very often and realizing just how much he enjoyed being in her company, but he also noted the fact that she showed such little interest in his excessive wealth. However, doubts had begun to creep into his mind for, surely by now, she would have heard all about his fortune from other acquaintances. Was she, perhaps, pretending that she cared nothing about it in the hope that he might continue her acquaintance with her? Given the fact that Duncan had been surrounded with young ladies who wanted nothing more than to claim him as their own for the sake of his wealth, it was now proving difficult to think of Lady Juliet in any other light.

"You cannot explain, I see," Lady Richmond said gently. "I will not press you, then. Although I shall say that I will be very glad to discuss any such matters with you should the time come."

Relieved, Duncan gave her a quick smile. "You are most discerning, Lady Richmond."

She laughed, turning away from both him and Lord Richmond. "And you are most complimentary, Lord Strickland."

Duncan smiled to himself and watched her walk away, turning his head to catch Lord Richmond doing the very same—save for the fact that he was watching the lady with a clear and obvious affection.

Duncan sighed.

"That is it, you see," he said plainly. "You care for Lady Richmond very deeply. She cares for you. I have spent many hours wishing for something akin to what you share with your wife, but it has always felt very far out of reach, given my circumstances."

Lord Richmond's brows rose, perhaps a little surprised at the openness with which Duncan had spoken, but Duncan did not regret saying such words. Instead, he merely

shrugged and shook his head to himself, blowing out a long breath as the conversations around them continued to flow.

"And you do not think you could find such a thing with Lady Juliet?" Lord Richmond asked after a moment or two, appearing a little confused. "She is quite lovely in every sense, with a sweet and gentle character." Seeing Duncan's sharp look, he grinned broadly. "My wife has been making gentle enquiries," he said, by way of explanation. "She is quite set on the lady."

"I see," Duncan replied with a small smile. "Whilst I admit that I might very well be able to have a relationship with a young lady such as Lady Juliet, I am beginning to worry that she is just the same as every other."

Lord Richmond frowned. "In what way?"

Trying to find the words to express his thoughts, Duncan paused for a moment, thinking quickly. "It will have been told to her by now that I am a gentleman of some means," he said carefully. "What if her lack of interest in my wealth now comes from a desire to make herself all the more desirable to me?"

"That would make her very deceitful, certainly," Lord Richmond responded at once, "but the only way to make certain of such a thing would be to remain a little longer in her company. Perhaps show a little more interest than you are at present." His broad smile made Duncan wince, irritated that his friend knew him so well. "I think that you have been considering her for some time, Strickland, even if you do not wish to admit it."

Duncan made to answer but then his gaze snagged on someone of interest. They were not looking at either Duncan or Lord Richmond and certainly did not show any intent of coming toward them. But regardless, their presence at the ball made a deep frown form across Duncan's forehead, his brows knotting together as a grimace pulled at his lips.

"Good gracious!" Lord Richmond exclaimed, giving a half-turn in the direction Duncan was now looking. "Whatever have you seen that would make you frown so?" A grin split his features as he leaned closer. "Is it that you have seen Lady Juliet being led from the dance floor with another gentleman?"

Duncan's frown did not lift even for a moment.

"It is Lady Ridgedale," he said slowly as the smile instantly fell from Lord Richmond's face. "I am surprised to see her here. I thought her mourning period would not yet be over."

Lord Richmond glanced toward the lady, the same dark look appearing on his own features. "I knew she had returned to London, but I did not think she would so quickly reintroduce herself to society," he said with a shake of his head. "That being said, given what I know of Lady Ridgedale, I do not think that the lady would have waited for any longer than was required of her before doing so."

Duncan snorted with disdain, thinking that he would prefer to remain as far from the lady as possible. "Lord Ridgedale did not choose his bride well."

"He did not," Lord Richmond agreed starkly. "But he would not be the first to have his heart captured by a beautiful face and an apparently welcoming heart."

"To the point that he did not listen to any of the whispers that ran through society

about her?" Duncan asked, a hard line forming around his mouth. "The number of times I have had to..." He did not finish his sentence, shaking his head with the memories of the unfortunate lady before turning his gaze away from her. "You know what her character is like."

"I do indeed," Lord Richmond muttered. "A grasping, cruel creature who seeks only her own good."

Duncan bit his tongue not to say more, recalling the many times that Lady Ridgedale had attempted to make her way into his favors. The idea, he presumed, had been that she might become his mistress and, in doing so, would gain some financial freedom of her own. Her husband, he knew, had not at all been inclined to purchase his wife fripperies or jewelry or any such thing and Lady Ridgedale had chafed against his seeming lack of desire to spend his wealth. Of course, Duncan had made it quite plain that he was not the sort of gentleman who toyed with other men's wives and although Lady Ridgedale had used all of her charms against him, he had remained entirely disinterested.

Then had come the anger.

"She dislikes me intensely, I am sure," Duncan commented quietly. "She must be back in London in the hope of securing another husband."

Lord Richmond shook his head. "From what I understand, I believe she has enough wealth to keep her in good standing," he said, surprising Duncan. "Lord Ridgeland kept his wealth far from his wife whilst he lived but left her a significant portion in his will." One shoulder lifted in a half-shrug. "That is what I have heard, of course. It may not be true."

"Regardless," Duncan remarked, turning away from the lady entirely. "I have no desire to remain anywhere near her. Might we take a—oh."

His embarrassment at turning so swiftly and almost walking directly into another young lady's path was multiplied all the more when he realized that the young lady in question was none other than Lady Juliet. Covering his embarrassment with a quick bow, he straightened and tried to smile.

"Good evening, Lady Juliet, Mrs. Grey," he said quickly. "Do forgive my haste." He made no explanation as to why he had been behaving so and, instead, waited for them to speak.

Thankfully, Lady Juliet did not appear to be at all embarrassed over his evident mistake.

"Good evening, Lord Strickland. Good evening, Lord Richmond," she said, curtsying quickly. "I am sorry if I have prevented you from making your escape from something." Her eyes twinkled with good humor and, despite himself, Duncan found himself smiling. "I shall not stand in your way any longer, however." Making a small sidestep, she gestured for him to move past her, but Duncan shook his head, as Lord Richmond chuckled.

"It is quite all right," Lord Richmond said promptly. "It was only that we thought to go in search of another brandy, so you have not interrupted us at all."

The next few minutes were spent in general conversation, with Duncan fully aware of

the glances that Lord Richmond was sending toward him in a most regular fashion. It was quite clear that he expected him to ask Lady Juliet if she wished to dance and yet the obvious way in which he was doing it made Duncan rather embarrassed.

"Lady Juliet," he found himself saying, suddenly desperate to do so simply in order to stop Lord Richmond from behaving in such an overt fashion. "I do hope you have some remaining dances on your card? I would very much like to peruse it, if I may?"

Lady Juliet smiled and handed it to him without another word, although Duncan was rather surprised to see that most of the dances were taken. In fact, the only two remaining were the quadrille, which was due to happen within the next few minutes, and the country dance. Sighing inwardly, he wrote his name in both spaces, knowing that it would be foolish not to do so. Two dances would not be noticed by anyone, given that other gentlemen were doing the very same. Lord Jennings, he noticed, had written his name down for both the supper dance and the cotillion, making him wonder if the gentleman had a penchant for the lady. After all, the supper dance meant that he would spend a little more time in Lady Juliet's company, making certain to sit with her once the dance was at an end. A twinge of jealousy spread through Duncan's heart although he dismissed it quickly enough. There was no need to feel such things when it came to Lady Juliet. He would be satisfied with the quadrille and the country dance.

"I thank you," Lady Juliet murmured, taking a small step closer to him as Mrs. Grey quickly began to engage Lord Richmond in conversation. "However, Lord Strickland, there is something I must ask you. Something that you will, I am sure, think is both unusual and very forward."

Taken aback by both her words and her secretive tone, Duncan cleared his throat and gave her a small smile. "But of course, Lady Juliet," he said, as though such a request was to be expected and hiding his very great confusion. "Whatever it is you wish to ask, I will be happy to listen."

"I thank you," she replied with such a look of relief spreading across her face that Duncan immediately began to wonder what it could be that she wanted to discuss with him. "I will also assure you that Mrs. Grey is fully aware of what I am to ask and is in agreement with it." Taking a moment, she looked to her companion and then back to him, her face now flushed as she continued to speak. "I must ask you, Lord Strickland, if you would be willing to call upon me at your earliest convenience." Her face flushed all the more as words began to trip over each other in their eagerness to be spoken. "It is not at all because I wish you to show me some sort of attention, nor is it in any way a manipulation to force you into my company, but rather because there is something of the greatest importance that I must share with you."

Duncan did not quite know how to respond. From the color in the lady's cheeks and the way her gaze continued to dart from one place to the next, he could tell that she felt very awkward indeed but, to his mind, he could not be sure that she spoke the truth.

"I am certain that you will think me very improper and rather rude, Lord Strickland," Lady Juliet continued, her eyes now fastening themselves to his as though through sheer effort she might be able to convince him. "I know this request does appear to be for my benefit, but I assure you that it is not." For a moment, her eyes left his and turned to the

right and then to the left, as though afraid someone would overhear her.

"Then speak of it now," he said with a small frown. "Why could you not speak of it now to me, Lady Juliet?"

She shook her head, closing her eyes. "I cannot," she breathed, opening her eyes and looking at him steadily. "It is too dangerous."

The word shot through him with sudden force, making his frown deepen as he watched her, seeing the concern in her eyes and wondering if there was any possibility that she was telling the truth. The usual doubts rose in his mind, making him believe that, most likely, she was just as every other young lady of his acquaintance and was doing whatever she could to manipulate him into showing regard for her, even with the outward appearance of being entirely disinterested in his wealth. Yet there was something in her voice and expression that spoke of warning and a true concern for him that he could not simply turn away from.

"Mrs. Grey," Lady Juliet said, turning quickly to her companion and, in doing so, interrupting the conversation between her and Lord Richmond. "Pray forgive the interruption but I must ask you to express to Lord Strickland the urgency behind my request."

Mrs. Grey lifted her chin and looked sternly back at Duncan, making him feel as though he were a young boy being chastised by a governess.

"Lady Juliet is doing all she can to protect you, Lord Strickland," Mrs. Grey said firmly. "I am well aware that you might suspect ulterior motivations in her request, but I can assure you it is not so. I give you my word, such as it is, that there is a true desire to help you, although as yet, of course, you are entirely unaware of your need for it."

Duncan blinked in surprise and cleared his throat, finding himself a little more convinced by Mrs. Grey's demeanor than he had expected.

"Very well, Lady Juliet," he said slowly, aware of Lord Richmond's curious expression. "I will call upon you tomorrow, if I may?"

Lady Juliet let out a long breath of relief and nodded, her smile returning and making Duncan fear that he had made the wrong decision.

"I thank you, Lord Strickland, for your willingness to trust me," she said as Duncan inclined his head, unwilling to state that, as yet, he had not fully done so. "I know it must be most unusual to hear a request such as this."

Duncan cleared his throat, fully aware that he would have to explain everything to Lord Richmond once the lady had departed. "I understand, Lady Juliet," he replied without being fully convinced of her words. "Tomorrow afternoon, then."

"Tomorrow afternoon," she replied, making to take her leave, only for their dance then to be announced. With a question in her eyes, she looked back at him and Duncan found himself a little uncomfortable, holding out his hand to her and wondering at his own state of emotion.

Why did he feel such a sense of nervousness, simply because it was now their turn to dance together? Was it because of what he had just agreed to? Had he just allowed her some great victory that would then bring her a great benefit but mortify him completely? Part of him still feared that he would call upon Lady Juliet tomorrow and find that her



important news was of no significance whatsoever. The ton would, no doubt, hear of his visit to her and, given that he was now to dance with her twice this evening, would then go on to whisper that his interest in the lady was rather marked. A cold hand grasped his heart as he stepped out with Lady Juliet, but he forced himself forward. He could not refuse to fulfill his dance with her now.

"I can tell that you are having some difficulty in believing what I have said, Lord Strickland," came Lady Juliet's quiet voice, making Duncan look down at her in surprise. A small, sad smile crossed her lips as she held his gaze for a moment.

"You must fear that I am doing all I can in order to gain your attention for my own purpose," she continued, practically speaking every word within his heart as though she could see it without any difficulty. "I am sure that you have had many a young lady attempt to manipulate you so and thus, I shall not hold such sentiment against you." They came to join a set and he let go of her arm, turning to bow toward her as she curtsied.

"But my words are true," she murmured, her voice low enough so only he could hear. "And I will prove it to you come the morrow." Her eyes were practically glowing with determination now, holding to his with such force that Duncan could not look away. He felt his heart soften just a little, felt the anxious thoughts begin to leave his mind as he looked back at her, finding himself somewhat comforted by her manner and her words of conviction.

The music began and there was nothing further for him to say. Following the steps of the dance, Duncan allowed himself to continue to puzzle over Lady Juliet, finding his thoughts quite taken up with the lady. Dare he permit himself to believe her? Dare he hope that she might be speaking the truth? And what will that change within your own heart if it is proven so? said a quiet voice in his head. Will you think better of her? Will you permit yourself to consider what might flourish between you, if only you would let it?

It was not a question Duncan could immediately answer, finding it such an unknown situation that he did not know what to think. But somewhere deep within him there ignited a tiny flame of hope. A flame that Duncan knew Lady Juliet might either encourage or blow out entirely, depending on what she said to him the morrow.

He would have to simply wait to know what she would do.

# 5

**"I**f you continue to pace, then your father will be most displeased at having to replace the carpet."

Juliet did not even glance up as Mrs. Grey spoke and thus, missed the twinkle in the older lady's eye. She was nervous beyond expression, anxious that Lord Strickland would not attend as he had said, fearful that he would give in to the clear belief that she was not as she made out to be. There had been such an apparent distrust in his expression and his words last evening that Juliet knew there would be a great deal of difficulty in convincing him to call on her. Trying to explain to him that there was a great seriousness in her request had been a struggle and even now, Juliet was not at all convinced that he not only believed her but would do as she had asked.

"He will call," Mrs. Grey said gently. "You need not be so anxious, Juliet."

"He may not," Juliet replied quickly. "I saw the distrust in his eyes, Mrs. Grey. I saw that he did not want to do as I asked. Had I not turned to you, then I am quite certain he would have refused."

Mrs. Grey let out a small sigh. "But he agreed in the end, did he not?" she said, setting her needlework down. "And he is a gentleman who keeps his word, I am sure of it."

Juliet did not say anything to either agree or disagree, continuing to pace up and down the drawing room, worrying her lip as she did so. She had danced twice with Lord Strickland last evening but neither dance had been one of enjoyment. Instead, she had found herself lacking conversation, unable to find anything particular to say, and Lord Strickland himself made no effort to converse with her at all either. It had been two somewhat awkward dances and Juliet had found herself both frustrated and upset over the matter, wishing she had been able to convince Lord Strickland without any great effort and yet fully understanding why he did not trust her so.

"He thinks me eager to impress him in any way I can," she said, rather sadly. "I am sure of it, Mrs. Grey. He believes that I have told him this in order to urge him to my father's townhouse which will, of course, be noted by someone in the beau monde."

"He will attend you, just as he has said," Mrs. Grey interrupted, before Juliet could continue. "Stop your anxious thoughts, Juliet. It will do you no good."

Juliet opened her mouth to say that she could not help it, but before she could do so, a scratch came at the door.

A scratch that had Juliet's heart leaping wildly, her hands pressing to her lips for a

moment as Mrs. Grey called the butler to enter.

"Lord Strickland, my lady," the butler murmured, handing Juliet his card and returning to the door. "Shall I have refreshments brought?"

"Juliet," Mrs. Grey hissed, beckoning her toward a chair. "Juliet, do hurry."

It was with leaden limbs that Juliet walked toward a vacant chair, standing in front of it as though she had only just risen from it. "If you please," she said to the butler, her heart hammering furiously as he nodded and then stepped back out into the hallway for a moment, ready to bring in Lord Strickland. He had come, then. He had attended her, just as he had agreed and just as Mrs. Grey had stated. Now all that remained was for her to tell him precisely what she had overheard, showing him that she had spoken the truth in her request.

Lord Strickland came into the room with his head held high, his shoulders set, and a rather grim look settled into his expression, as though he was quite convinced that she would immediately be disingenuous. Juliet curtsied quickly as he bowed, struggling to put a smile on her face as she lifted her eyes to his.

Lord Strickland's gaze was hard, his lips pulled thin and a coolness in his eyes that told her he was not at all convinced as yet.

"I thank you for calling," Juliet said, a little breathlessly. "Please, do sit down, Lord Strickland. The butler has just now seen to some refreshments. They will be here momentarily."

Clearing his throat, Lord Strickland gave her a tight smile. "I should prefer that we discuss whatever matter it is that has brought you so much concern, Lady Juliet," he said, his eyes fixed to hers. There was ice within the blue orbs, a clear and apparent disbelief that anything she had to say would be of any true interest.

"Very well," she told him, finding her mouth now dry as she tried to find the words to express to him what it was she had overheard. "It was some two days ago, Lord Strickland. I was in a bookshop with Mrs. Grey, merely perusing the books and without any real interest in any of them." She could see his brow furrowing and knew that he must now believe her to be telling him nothing but a foolish story. "This is of significance, I assure you." Taking in a breath, she let it out again slowly. "Mrs. Grey was in one part of the shop and I in entirely another. There was, as you might expect, a quietness there that is not often found in any other part of London and thus, enjoying that silence, I continued to meander without any true intention."

Lord Strickland sighed and sat back in his chair a little more, brushing back his fair hair from across his forehead. "Indeed," he said in a dull, bored voice. "And in what way does this relate to me?"

"If you would but listen without interruption, then I believe you would find out."

Juliet blinked in astonishment at Mrs. Grey, whose sharp words had shot across the room and hit Lord Strickland directly. Mrs. Grey was frowning fiercely, her eyes sparkling with a clear anger that Juliet was surprised to see. There was no immediate response from Lord Strickland, who appeared to be just as astonished as Juliet, although he cleared his throat and sat up a little more, a touch of color coming into his face. Juliet found herself struggling to find the right words to say next and was all the more relieved

when the door opened and a tea tray was brought in. It gave her a few moments to gather herself and to consider what she was to say next.

"I thank you," she murmured as Mrs. Grey offered to pour the tea, leaving Juliet to finish what she was saying. "Yes, Lord Strickland," she continued, finding a fresh boldness beginning to fill her. "This does relate to you entirely, for as I was in the bookshop, in the quieter part of it, I overheard two people talking." Taking in a deep breath, she lifted her chin a notch and looked back at him. "They spoke of you."

The change that came into Lord Strickland's expression was immediate. His eyes flared and he leaned forward in his chair, his eyes now searching her face. "Indeed?"

"They spoke of you in a manner that has me quite convinced they intend to do you a great deal of harm," Juliet continued, managing to tell him, almost verbatim, what had been said. "In short, Lord Strickland, whilst I cannot be entirely convinced as to what it is they intend to do, I am entirely certain that you are in great danger."

Lord Strickland did not say anything for some minutes. In the silence, Mrs. Grey handed Juliet her teacup, leaving her to sip at it as Lord Strickland remained sitting quietly, his eyes now staring blankly at something on the wall behind Juliet's head, his face paler than before.

"And you are sure that they spoke of a failure?" he said abruptly, turning his eyes to Juliet once more. "They said something about having failed already?"

Frowning, Juliet tried her best to recall the exact words. "I believe the lady in question, whoever she was, told the fellow that he had failed. He then expressed to her that it was not his doing, as his aim had been true but that you had stepped forward unexpectedly." Seeing the color drain all the more from Lord Strickland's face, Juliet glanced toward Mrs. Grey, who was now watching Lord Strickland with a growing concern. "Does that mean something to you, Lord Strickland?"

The gentleman nodded slowly, his hands tightening together as he clasped them in his lap. "It does, Lady Juliet," he said hoarsely. "In fact, I must now apologize to you for refusing to believe that you had anything of true significance to tell me. I can see now that this is of the greatest importance and, had you not told me of it, then I would have continued on believing that what occurred was nothing more than an accident and that I was simply in the wrong place when such an event occurred."

Not at all sure as to what he was referring, Juliet held back the questions on her lips and waited for him to say more, glancing toward Mrs. Grey, who looked back at her with the same confused expression. There was clearly more to this situation than she had expected, with Lord Strickland seemingly aware of something she was not. Whether he would share it with her, Juliet did not yet know, although she was fully aware that he had no need to do so.

"Lady Juliet, do you think you would be able to recognize the voice of either the gentleman or the lady again, should you hear them?"

Juliet thought hard, her brows furrowing. "I wish I could tell you that I would do so without struggle, but the truth is I am not at all sure I would succeed," she said honestly, seeing the disappointment on his face. "I was, as you might imagine, quite horrified to hear such things and, to be truthful, quite afraid that I would be discovered. The thought

of what might occur should they find out that I had overheard their plans was quite terrifying and I made my way to Mrs. Grey's side as soon as I could. Thereafter, we departed the bookshop."

"We might have lingered in order to watch those who departed from the shop, certainly," Mrs. Grey added in, as though she anticipated that Lord Strickland would make such a remark. "But it is as Lady Juliet has just said. We had to ensure that she was not noticed in any way, that she was kept safe given what she had overheard."

Lord Strickland nodded, one hand now rubbing his chin. "I shall not berate you for that, Lady Juliet," he said softly. "You could easily have been threatened also, had you not done such a thing."

"Then you believe the threat to be real?" she asked, surprised at the strain that was in her voice. "You know there to be significance in what I overheard?"

Nodding, Lord Strickland dragged his gaze to hers. "An incident occurred some days ago," he said slowly. "I was walking from a soiree toward White's. The distance was not far. However, as I walked, I heard a shout. A shout that had me stop dead for a moment or two, before I decided to continue on my way." He paused, then closed his eyes. "Something came flying toward me and would have hit me hard, had I not been already out of its path," he continued, his explanation now showing her precisely why he had gone so very pale after what she had related to him. "Someone's aim was true indeed, but I moved forward just in time."

Juliet caught her breath, realizing now why he had been so horrified with what she had said.

"At the time, I took it to be nothing more than an accident, believing myself to be very fortunate," Lord Strickland continued, running one hand over his eyes. "I can see now that I was more than fortunate. That was meant for me."

"Would it have thrown you to the ground?" Mrs. Grey asked quietly, and Lord Strickland nodded. "Knocked you senseless?"

"I believe it would have, yes," he told her as Juliet bit her lip, hard. "I do not know what their intention is, or why they seek to injure me so, but I am very grateful indeed to you for your willingness to inform me of this, Lady Juliet."

"But of course," she said quickly. "Lord Strickland, there must be more that I can do. I might not be certain that I would recognize the voice again, but I am very sure that the lady who spoke was one of the beau monde." She picked up her teacup and took a long sip, praying it would steady her nerves a little. "You are in danger; I am quite sure of it."

"And why they would wish for me to be struck down so, I cannot yet understand," he added, half to himself. "I do not know why..." He trailed off, then looked up at her sharply. "It is, in fact, the second occasion that has troubled me this Season."

Juliet stared at him, her hand trembling just a little as she set her cup down. "The second time?"

"The first occurred on my way to London," Lord Strickland told her, his eyes now wide with evident understanding and concern. "I had thought to take my carriage to London, rather than to ride, and had told my servants and the proprietor of the inn I was residing in of my intentions. However, on the morning I rose, I changed my mind, choosing

instead to ride on ahead and allow my carriage to follow after. It was not until my driver made it to London and to the townhouse that I discovered it had very nearly been ambushed by highwaymen."

In an instant, the vision of what she had seen trapped Juliet in a flurry of horror and fright. She reached for her teacup blindly, bringing it to her lips and closing her eyes as she swallowed, not allowing her mind to be overcome with the reminder of what she had seen. Bile rose in her throat and she took another sip, before setting her teacup back down again. When she turned to Lord Strickland, she saw him looking at her with a mixture of both confusion and concern written in his eyes.

"It is only that, as my father, Mrs. Grey, and I made our way to London, we came upon a scene of such vile cruelty that even the thought of it turns my stomach, Lord Strickland," she said hoarsely. "The highwaymen, as you say, were behind this particular attack, according to my father."

Lord Strickland said nothing for some moments before lowering his head and running one hand across his forehead. "Then mayhap it was nothing more than that," he said quietly. "If there are highwaymen at work, then it cannot be an attack on myself personally, as I first thought, terrible though it may be."

Juliet tried to push her memories of that day far from her, shuddering slightly as she did so. "Whether or not it was, my main concern at present is that you are in great danger from an enemy as yet unidentified," she said, forcing herself to return to the task at hand. "What is it that can be done?"

Lord Strickland frowned. "You need not concern yourself with this matter any longer, Lady Juliet," he returned, obviously a little surprised that she evidently expected to do just that. "You have informed me of it, for which I am very grateful, but you need not continue with the burden of it."

"Oh, but I must!" Juliet exclaimed, surprising herself at her vehemence. "It may very well be that I am able to identify the voice of those speaking, Lord Strickland, and besides which, you cannot face this alone."

"I—I shall speak to Lord and Lady Richmond, of course," he said, floundering just a little. "I should not like to put you in any difficulty, Lady Juliet."

A small flare of anger lit her soul and Juliet found herself frowning heavily, her eyes narrowing just a fraction as she looked back at Lord Strickland. Was he truly trying to protect her in some way? Or was there more to his disinclination than there appeared?

"Lord Strickland, it would be wise to allow Lady Juliet to assist you in some small way," Mrs. Grey said gently. "She was, as she has told you, the one to overhear this particular conversation and, whilst it might seem difficult to her at present to know whether or not she could identify the voices again, it may be that, in helping you resolve this matter, she will be able to do so, thus saving you a good deal of difficulty."

There was not an immediate agreement from Lord Strickland but rather a clearing of his throat and a small, jerky nod that did not state anything particular. The flame that had lit itself in Juliet's heart began to grow all the hotter, making her brow furrow deeply.

"If you believe that I am asking such a thing in order to pursue you in some sort of ridiculous fashion, then I can assure you I am not at all inclined toward you," she stated

loudly, her words sharp and filled with anger. "I fear that your reluctance to accept my help is due only to your concern that I, like many other young ladies, seek to force myself into your affections. Is that not so?" Holding her head high, she arched one eyebrow and saw him turn his head away, realizing that she had been correct in her assumptions. "Then might I take this opportunity, Lord Strickland, to state quite clearly that I care nothing for your fortune, for your great wealth, and for all that such a thing might mean to a young lady of quality. I have no great desire to wed a gentleman with a vast fortune, for I have already determined that I shall be quite content with a husband who is able to provide for us both comfortably, but without a great deal of excess."

Lord Strickland lifted his head and tilted it to the left, eyeing her as though she were a creature of interest that he had never seen before, as if she were a brightly colored bird that he wanted to study a little longer. Juliet's blush rose in her cheeks, but she did not look away from him, keeping her gaze steady and holding her tongue before she said anything more.

"Is that so, Lady Juliet?" Lord Strickland murmured, disbelief flickering in his eyes and an edge of mockery in his words. "Then you are one of the most unusual young ladies I believe I have ever met, for what else must one seek in a husband if not a decent fortune and excellent title?"

Juliet's hand curled into a fist, finding Lord Strickland, in this moment, to be most dislikeable. "I think, Lord Strickland, that a gentleman's character speaks more of him than what he possesses," she replied tightly.

Lord Strickland's slightly sardonic smile began to fade as he kept her gaze, only for him to then drop his head back into his hands and let out a small groan.

"Very well, Lady Juliet, very well," he said, abruptly rising to his feet and looking down at her with evident superiority. "That is not to say that I entirely trust your motivations, but I suppose that I must use whatever assistance I can gain in this situation." He bowed stiffly, first to Mrs. Grey and then to her. "I thank you for speaking with me. I should take my leave now as I am sure you will have a good many other gentlemen seeking to call upon you this afternoon."

Juliet was forced to rise to her feet in haste, looking at Mrs. Grey, who was watching Lord Strickland with a sharp eye, her lips flattened and her brows low over her eyes. It appeared that she, too, was just as displeased with his response to Juliet as she was, although she was much too polite to say so.

"Good afternoon, Lord Strickland," Juliet said, keeping her tone even and calm as she curtsied. "I do hope you have an enjoyable evening, whatever it is you are doing."

"I am to attend Lord Courthaven's soiree," he said with a quick look toward her. "And you will be in attendance also, I believe."

"Perhaps we might speak to Lord Richmond then," Mrs. Grey added as Juliet felt anger flare up within her cheeks at his manner, finding that he appeared to believe himself to be quite superior to her, as though he was quite certain that what he thought of her was entirely true. "Good afternoon, Lord Strickland."

Bowing at the waist, Lord Strickland turned on his heel and took his leave, quitting the room at once. Juliet flung herself back into her chair, sighing heavily as she shook her

head, both relieved and frustrated with the meeting.

"Lord Strickland took your words with all seriousness at least," Mrs. Grey said, sitting down and reaching for the teapot. "On that account, you must be glad."

"I am," Juliet replied begrudgingly. "It is only that I wish he would not consider me to be just as every other young lady of his acquaintance seems to be."

"You can hardly begrudge him that," Mrs. Grey replied calmly as she beckoned for Juliet to hand her the teacup so that she might refill it. "Consider what his situation must be like at present. Many gentlemen would find themselves greatly pleased with such attentions, seeking even to take advantage of their situation. However, Lord Strickland has not done so, it seems. Instead, he has tried his best to behave with all propriety."

Juliet tossed her head. "I will not permit that as an excuse for his own lack of good manners," she said firmly, making Mrs. Grey laugh. "He spoke very harshly to me, Mrs. Grey."

"But he has agreed to your assistance, has he not?" Mrs. Grey pointed out, and Juliet sighed and nodded, her anger beginning to dissipate. "In time, he will come to see that you are not the sort of young lady he believes you to be."

"Well, I do believe that he should be more gracious for my assistance, rather than accepting it begrudgingly," Juliet muttered, taking a sip of her tea and finding it to be quite satisfactory. Lord Strickland's pompous demeanor was most disconcerting. After all, she had already warned him. She had done her duty. After another deep breath, she felt a little more herself.

Still, she feared that if she did not continue to help him, then the worst might occur. And if something dire did happen to him, she would feel a great burden of guilt. She had to assist him, even if he did not like the idea. "I do appreciate your willingness to permit me to be involved in such a way, Mrs. Grey," she finished as the older lady smiled back at her. "I am quite certain that Father would not approve, however, should he come to know of it."

Mrs. Grey's smile grew and her eyes twinkled, as though she had some great intention behind all of this, making Juliet's brows flicker into a frown for a moment.

"I am sure it will all come about right in the end," Mrs. Grey answered mysteriously. "And you will certainly have made an impression upon Lord Strickland, Juliet."

Juliet's frown deepened. "I have already made it quite clear that I have no particular interest in him, Mrs. Grey," she said slowly, praying that her companion did not think that Lord Strickland would suit her. "Surely you cannot think—"

Another scratch at the door came and Juliet found her question cut short, with the butler announcing that she had another gentleman caller. Pushing aside her frustration about Lord Strickland, Juliet forced a gentle smile to her face and rose to her feet, ready to greet her guest. For the time being, at least, she was going to have to play the part of an eligible young lady of the ton, unburdened by any other thoughts and glad to converse with whatever gentleman came to call.

And then I shall see Lord Strickland again this evening, she reminded herself as Lord Rivers came into the room, bowing toward her. Let us hope that he is in better spirits than this afternoon. This thought brought a warm smile to her face which served only to



delight Lord Rivers, who beamed at her in return. Juliet gestured for him to sit down and sent for a fresh tea tray, preparing herself for what might feel like a very long afternoon indeed.

# 6

Walking into the drawing room, Duncan took a deep breath and forced his hands to uncurl, aware that his nails had been pressing hard into his palms. This was nothing more than another soiree, he told himself, trying to find a calmness that had eluded him ever since he had left Lady Juliet's presence. The revelation of what she had overheard had come as something of a shock for he had never once expected to hear such a thing. The incident that had occurred a few days ago, the night he had narrowly missed being struck, now came to him in a fresh light. It was not a mere accident, it had not been something that he had only just narrowly avoided. It had been deliberate, determined, and sure. Whoever was responsible had wanted to injure him severely and they had almost succeeded.

"Good evening, Lord Strickland."

Jerking slightly with the surprise of being pulled from his own thoughts and addressed in a loud manner, Duncan quickly covered his reaction and bowed toward his host. After a few minutes of genial conversation, he was directed to join the rest of the guests, who were spread out through the house, it seemed. The library, the drawing room, and the music room were open to them all. Lord Courthaven owned one of the best townhouses in all of London and was not shy in showing off all that he possessed.

"I thank you," Duncan murmured, before turning to make his way toward the waiting footman, taking a brandy from his tray and then meandering across the room in the hope of finding someone to converse with. Someone who would not press their daughter upon him or make mention of their eligible sister.

Unfortunately, he was not to have what he desired.

"How wonderful to see you, Lord Strickland."

Duncan groaned inwardly, forced to greet Lady Montague. She had long been acquainted with Duncan and had attempted to foist first her eldest daughter upon him and, now that she was wed, was trying to do the same with her second.

"Good evening, Lady Montague," he said with not even a hint of enthusiasm in his voice. "And how do you fare this evening?"

"Very well, very well indeed," Lady Montague said, beckoning to someone who stood behind Duncan. "I do hope you remember my daughter, Miss Winters?" She smiled brightly up at him as the young lady came to join her mother with another young lady in tow. "And her friend, Miss Johnson." This last introduction was said with much less fervor,

with Lady Montague clearly displeased that her daughter had chosen to bring her friend into Duncan's company.

"Yes, yes, of course," Duncan replied, having met both young ladies before. "Good evening, Miss Winters, Miss Johnson. I do hope you are both enjoying the evening."

Both girls blushed and looked at each other, a giggle escaping from Miss Winters' lips as she darted her gaze up toward him.

"I am so very glad you recall our acquaintance, Lord Strickland," she said, practically cooing at him as she spoke. "I have only just returned to London with Mama and have been very much looking forward to greeting you again."

I cannot say the same, Duncan thought to himself, clearing his throat gently and trying to find something to say. He had no eagerness to encourage the young lady and certainly did not want to say anything that might give her the impression that he, too, had been hopeful of acquainting himself with her again.

"I am sure that there are a good many gentlemen who would be eager to reacquaint themselves with you, Miss Winters," he said, seeing the spark fade from her eyes. "And you also, Miss Johnson."

"You are too kind, Lord Strickland," Miss Johnson giggled, her cheeks still warm. "We must hope that you are one of those gentlemen."

Irritation rose in Duncan's chest, but before he could say anything, someone drew near to him, catching his attention—and it was with relief that Duncan bowed toward her.

"Ah, good evening, Lady Juliet," he said as the three other ladies turned toward her with equal expressions of frustration and disappointment. "I had hoped to see you this evening."

Those words seemed to have a great and terrible effect upon the young ladies, as well as upon Lady Montague. They all turned toward him with wide eyes, and he was certain he heard a gasp come from one of them. Lady Juliet, on the other hand, remained quite serene, smiling at him gently although it did not quite reach her eyes.

"Good evening, Lord Strickland," she said, before greeting the ladies in turn. "I do hope that you have all been enjoying this wonderful evening. Does not Lord Courthaven have the most wonderful townhouse?"

There were murmurs of agreement but nothing that could constitute a conversation. In fact, it did not surprise Duncan at all when Lady Montague took her leave of them both, dragging her daughter and Miss Johnson along with her.

Lady Juliet watched them depart with a look of surprise forming slowly across her face, her eyes widening gently and her eyebrows lifting. "Did I say something wrong?" she asked as Mrs. Grey, who had been staying a few steps away, moved a little closer although she did not seem to find any need to speak or interrupt her charge. "I did not mean to drive them away." Her eyes turned to his. "It is only that I thought you might be struggling to converse with someone such as Lady Montague, given her reputation."

Duncan gave her a half-smile. "You know of her reputation, then?"

Lady Juliet laughed and, much to his surprise, Duncan found himself smiling, the sound ringing through the air around him and seeming to warm it. "Yes, indeed," she said brightly. "For it is well known amongst the ton that she has done all she can to encourage

both her daughters to wed as best they can. I am sure," she continued with a wry smile, "that you have been one of the gentlemen she has sought out?"

"I have been, yes," Duncan replied with a chuckle. "Lady Montague first attempted to encourage me toward her eldest daughter, although I made it very clear indeed that I was not at all interested in continuing an acquaintance with her."

"She is wed now, I think?" Lady Juliet asked, and Duncan nodded. "And I must now presume, therefore, that she is pushing her second daughter toward you?"

"Indeed," Duncan replied with a shake of his head. "I am grateful to you for coming to join our conversation. I am afraid I was already floundering."

Lady Juliet laughed softly and Duncan's smile remained quite fixed in place, making him realize that he had perhaps misjudged Lady Juliet from the first. This afternoon's conversation had ended badly, even though he had felt quite justified in his lack of willingness to engage her support any further. Now, however, he felt a little awkward given that she had come to aid him in such a fashion.

"I should apologize, Lady Juliet, for speaking to you in what I believe was a somewhat insulting manner earlier this afternoon," he said slowly. "I have been uncertain of your motives and yet, even when you told me the truth of them, even when you made it quite plain that you were doing all you could to help me with a very difficult matter, I remained reluctant. I apologize for that."

One shoulder lifted, her blue eyes glinting with gold. "Then might I surmise that you believe my intentions are not to pursue you in the hopes that you might court me?" she asked bluntly. "Or is there still that suspicion within you?"

"I will be honest with you and state that it has not entirely left me as yet," he said truthfully. "But in time, I hope it will dissipate completely, perhaps once our acquaintance grows."

"I hope that also," she replied calmly with a small smile. "Although, I must let you know that I do not feel the need to persuade you that I am true of heart. You can either accept me for my willingness to help, or you can turn me away. It will not make a difference to me either way. I feel no need to prove myself to you."

Duncan was surprised by her forwardness, and he watched as Mrs. Grey's eyes widened in astonishment and disapproval at Lady Juliet's words. He could not hold back a smirk. Her willingness to speak her mind made him respect Lady Juliet all the more.

Lady Juliet continued, "Now, if you will excuse me, I think I shall take a small turn to the library. I have heard that there are some excellent books in our host's library, and I should like to see them for myself." She bobbed a quick curtsy and made to leave but Duncan held out a hand, surprising them both at his action.

He took a breath, wondering at what he had done and why he had done so. With a quick smile, he spread his hands. "Perhaps I might join you, Lady Juliet?" he said as Mrs. Grey smiled on in approval. "The library may not be of particular interest to me, but I am sure that your company will save me from any further conversations with others such as Lady Montague."

Lady Juliet did not immediately accept him, as he had expected. Instead, she looked back at him steadily for a few moments, clearly thinking about what he had suggested.

Mrs. Grey said nothing, although, from the way she bit her lip, Duncan was quite certain that she would have encouraged her charge to accept him, should she be willing to speak.

"Very well, Lord Strickland." Lady Juliet's voice was soft, her touch on his arm very gentle indeed, although from her expression, she still appeared a little uncertain. Quite as to why, Duncan did not know, although he was glad that she had accepted him. Together, they walked from the drawing room and toward the library, following the footmen who stood to attention at various points along the hallway in case a guest should need them. Mrs. Grey came only a step or two after them, making certain to remain close by for the sake of propriety.

"You are reluctant to be seen in my company, Lady Juliet?" Duncan found himself asking as they made their way into the library.

Her smile was brittle. "Not reluctant, I assure you," she replied tightly. "But rather I find myself praying that such attentions will not be noticed by the ton, Lord Strickland."

"Oh?"

Again, her eyes met his only to dart away. "It is well known that you are a gentleman who does not seek out any particular company. You have shown no interest in any young lady of your acquaintance. Whilst we must be in each other's company in order to make certain of your safety, I think we must also be wise in just how often the ton sees us in such a fashion. Otherwise suggestions will be made, and rumors will run wild. I do not wish for such a thing."

It was as though she had struck him hard across the face, although Duncan could not help but chuckle to himself. He had been so very afraid that she was the one determined to be in his company, eager to push herself into his affections and attentions in any way she could, only for him now to realize that she had no such desire whatsoever. In fact, it sounded as though she disliked even the idea of such a thing.

"Whatever you have said to make Lord Strickland laugh so, I must hear it." The jovial voice of Lord Richmond drew near to them before Duncan could respond and he turned to his friend at once, glad to see both him and Lady Richmond coming to join them. Lady Juliet also appeared relieved, for she greeted Lady Richmond fervently, striking up a conversation almost at once.

"It is of no importance," Duncan replied with another quiet chuckle as Lord Richmond eyed him suspiciously. "Lady Juliet is excellent company, that is all."

"I am glad to hear it," Lord Richmond replied, glancing toward the lady. "Although I am surprised to see you so contented, given that you stated quite clearly that you did not think you would be eagerly pursuing her company."

Duncan hesitated, his smile fading. He had not yet told Lord Richmond about what Lady Juliet had seen, nor had he said anything about the threat that he now felt hanging over his head. Was now the time to do so?

"There is something you are not telling me," Lord Richmond stated, a grin spreading across his face. "If you have changed your mind, then please, do inform me at once so that my wife and I might gloat about such things together."

"I am afraid no gloating can take place as yet," Duncan replied as the two ladies

continued to talk, with Mrs. Grey watching on. "But before I tell you everything, perhaps we might..." Seeing a footman, he caught his attention and quickly sent him off in search of a brandy for both himself and Lord Richmond.

"It is something rather serious, then," Lord Richmond said slowly, eyeing Duncan with concern. "Although quite what Lady Juliet has to do with it all, I cannot imagine."

Lady Juliet, clearly overhearing him, turned toward Lord Richmond with an enquiring look on her face, one eyebrow lifted gently. "You are speaking of me, Lord Richmond?"

Lord Richmond inclined his head, clearing his throat as he lifted his gaze back to Lady Juliet, clearly embarrassed by what she had overheard.

"It is only that Lord Strickland was about to tell me something of significance," he said, keeping his voice a good deal lower than before. "I was merely wondering aloud what it could be that involved you, Lady Juliet."

"I see," she replied, tilting her head just a little. "Well, I presume Lord Strickland is to tell you?"

A little embarrassed, Duncan took the brandy brought to him by the footman, only to catch his arm. "Where is the one for Lord Richmond?" he asked, with the footman then immediately apologizing and hurrying away again. Aware that Mrs. Grey, Lord and Lady Richmond, and Lady Juliet were looking at him, Duncan waved a hand and took a small sip of his brandy. "Please, go ahead, Lady Juliet." His lip curled and he looked down at his brandy, a trifle confused.

"Is something wrong, Lord Strickland?" Lady Juliet asked, taking a small step forward. "Is there—?"

"No, no, it is quite all right," Duncan replied, taking another sip and giving her a small smile. "It was only that I thought this brandy tasted a little...unusual, but I am sure I was just being foolish. Lord Courthaven always has the very best, and I should not like to complain."

This seemed to satisfy Lord Richmond, who turned back to Lady Juliet, looking at her expectantly.

"If you are quite certain," Lady Juliet replied cautiously, before quickly explaining to Lord and Lady Richmond what she had overheard. Duncan watched as their expressions changed from joviality to horror, turning to look at him with wide eyes.

"Thus, Lady Juliet and I shall find a way to discover the truth about this particular lady," he said, lifting the brandy to his lips again. "Although what we are to do next, I cannot imagine."

Lord Richmond frowned hard and made to say something, but the footman interrupted him with his own glass of brandy. Taking it quickly, Lord Richmond brought it to his lips and took a sip, before shaking his head in Duncan's direction.

"It is quite as you would expect," he said, gesturing to Duncan's brandy. "Whatever is wrong with yours, it is not the case with mine."

Duncan opened his mouth to answer, only for a sudden pain to slice through his stomach, before another sharp pain ran across his forehead. Rubbing at it hard, he gave himself a slight shake in order to regain his composure, only for the pain to come yet again.

"What is wrong, Lord Strickland?" Lady Juliet asked as the others looked at him in surprise, evidently seeing the grimace that he could not hide from his expression.

"Nothing is the matter," he lied, his stomach tightening with another stab of pain. Pressing one hand to it for a moment, he straightened and gave Lady Juliet a quick smile. "I am—"

He could not finish his sentence, squeezing his eyes shut as the pain in his head doubled. Whatever was the matter with him? Thinking to throw back the rest of his brandy in the hope that it might ease whatever trouble was going on within him, he lifted the brandy glass to his lips, only to be stopped by a loud exclamation.

"Lord Strickland!" Lady Juliet reached for him, tugging the brandy glass from his hand before he could drink it. "Wait a moment."

He looked at her, confused, wincing hard as another pain shot through his head, his stomach still tight and sore.

"Did you not just say that someone is attempting to injure you in the most severe manner?" Lady Richmond asked, speaking very slowly indeed but a look of realization beginning to sweep across her features. "What is wrong, Lord Strickland?"

Duncan shook his head, then squeezed his eyes tightly shut as another stab of pain ran through his head. "Nothing," he muttered, not wanting to appear in any way foolish. "My head is a little painful, that is all. My stomach..."

"And this has only affected you after you had taken some of your brandy," Lady Juliet remarked, looking down at it and then back at him. "Lord Richmond believes there is nothing wrong with his, whereas you believe that it tastes a little unusual."

Frowning hard, half from the pain and half from trying to understand what Lady Juliet meant, Duncan rubbed one hand across his forehead. "I am mistaken, I am sure," he said but Lady Juliet shook her head, then handed the glass to Lord Richmond.

"If you might, Lord Richmond," she said as he reached to take it from her. "If there is any difference, I presume you will notice."

Lord Richmond nodded, his expression grim. Taking the smallest taste of Duncan's brandy, he screwed up his face and shook his head.

"There is something very odd about that," he said, looking toward Duncan. "That might very well be why the footman brought us one glass and then the next. So that they could be certain you could have this particular brandy."

Lady Juliet took the glass from Lord Richmond and held it in her hand, lifting it a little higher so that she might scrutinize it. Her lips pursed as she studied it carefully. The pain in Duncan's head slowly began to lessen, as did the cramps in his stomach, and he stood up straight again, his frown remaining in place.

"I cannot imagine what would have occurred had you taken all of it, Lord Strickland," she said slowly, looking up at him. "I am certain that someone has placed something within your brandy in order to bring you pain and suffering."

Blinking hard and feeling sweat break out across his forehead, Duncan pulled out his handkerchief and dabbed it away. "You believe that someone has deliberately placed something in my brandy?" he asked, looking around the room as his heart began to pound furiously. "Someone present this evening?"

"I believe so," Lord Richmond said, and Lady Richmond's eyes widened in astonishment. "It appears that Lady Juliet has been quite correct in her considerations yet again, Lord Strickland. If you had decided to throw back the entire measure of brandy, then I cannot imagine how ill you would have become."

A sudden shudder passed through Duncan's frame as he looked at the brandy in Lady Juliet's hand, glad that the pain was fading all the more. He found himself taking in a deep breath, gazing into her eyes and finding himself more than a little relieved that Lady Juliet had seen danger in the brandy glass where he had not.

"They must be here this evening," Mrs. Grey interjected, catching everyone's attention. "And we must speak to the footman who brought you the brandy."

Duncan nodded slowly. "That would be wise," he agreed, looking all about him. "Someone must have made certain that I was given a particular glass."

Lady Juliet let out a heavy sigh. "There are so many guests, however," she said, her lips pursing for a moment as she looked all about her. "Just how are we meant to discern who it could be, given that Lord Courthaven has invited so many guests this evening?"

"We cannot," Lady Richmond answered, shaking her head. "There are too many of them. What we must do, therefore, is seek out the footman that served your brandy, Lord Strickland. Do you recall him?"

Trying to remember, Duncan fought for clarity. "I did not pay much attention," he replied, a little awkwardly. "However, I am sure that if I saw him again, I would recall him."

"Then you must look about the house at once," Mrs. Grey said firmly. "Take Lady Juliet's arm, Lord Strickland, and make your way around this room and, thereafter, to the hallway, the music room, and then the drawing room." She gave him a firm nod as though all was decided. "I will attend with you, of course."

Duncan blinked rapidly and then, seeing the urgency of the situation, offered Lady Juliet his arm. She accepted it at once, her hand tight on his arm as they turned and walked together. Nothing was discussed, no words were said, but rather they walked in silence, looking not at the guests but at the footmen that stood around the room. Some were making their way from one guest to another, trays of refreshments in their hands, whereas others stood quietly to one side, waiting for a summons from one of the guests or to fix their attention to some duty or other.

"Are any of them recognizable?" Lady Juliet asked, her voice low. "None of their faces spark any awareness?"

"None," Duncan replied, frustrated with his own lack of alertness. "To be truthful, I do not often pay great attention to the servants or the like." He gave her a rueful smile. "Mayhap I should do so in the future."

"If you are to be poisoned in a brandy glass, then yes, I should think you ought to," Lady Juliet replied with a small smile, glancing up in his direction. "Perhaps we should go to the music room? He might be there?"

Duncan suddenly caught his breath, his eyes catching sight of one particular footman. A footman that was, he noticed, now quickly making his way from the room, glancing behind him in Duncan's direction.



“There,” he said, keeping his voice low although he did not miss Lady Juliet’s swift intake of breath. “I believe that is he. Come now, Lady Juliet. We must catch him.”

Juliet stumbled after Lord Strickland, her hand tight on his arm. She had feared that Lord Strickland would be unable to identify the correct footman but now, it seemed, he had recognized him. Lord Strickland walked quickly, making his way through the guests without hesitation and, no doubt, gaining attention from some of them. She did not allow herself to be embarrassed by this, however, making certain to do just as he asked her, her heart pounding furiously as they followed the footman.

She had felt herself growing all the more anxious as she had slowly begun to realize the truth about Lord Strickland's brandy. What would have occurred if he had drunk the full glass, she was not at all sure, although she had begun to question whether it was merely injury that the as yet unknown lady now sought for Lord Strickland.

"There, he has gone away from the library and is making his way through the house," Lord Strickland said hoarsely as the footman's strides quickened all the more. "Lady Juliet, I should leave you and—"

"Mrs. Grey remains behind us," she said hastily, not wanting him to even consider for a moment for fear that he would take his eyes from the footman. "Please, Lord Strickland, we must hurry. Go after him. We will come after you."

This appeared to make all the difference for Lord Strickland did not so much as glance behind him to make certain Mrs. Grey was following. Rather, he simply let go of her arm but continued to stride after the footman, making his way past the drawing room and hurrying down the hallway. Juliet went after him without hesitation, Mrs. Grey joining her now, as Lord Strickland shouted aloud in an attempt to stop the footman from hurrying away.

"You there! Stop!"

The footman turned his head and looked back at Lord Strickland, his eyes widening with fear. He stared for a moment, making Juliet wonder if he would remain where he was as Lord Strickland had asked—only for him to turn on his heel and break into a run. Lord Strickland did so also, hurrying after him and leaving Juliet and Mrs. Grey to catch up. Juliet's heart began to burn as they rushed forward, knowing what would occur should the footman disappear below stairs. They would lose him for good, unable to simply make their way to the servants' quarters and demand to see all the footmen present.

The footman disappeared through a door and Lord Strickland went after him, only a moment or two behind.

"There!" Mrs. Grey exclaimed, hearing a loud shout. "He has him now, I am sure."

Juliet did not reply, her heart still pounding furiously as they hurried in through the door, only to see Lord Strickland standing in front of the footman, who now appeared to be utterly terrified of the consequences that Lord Strickland might bring. There was a small fire in the grate, candles lit on almost every surface and a few small tables set about the room. It took Juliet a moment to realize that they had entered a small parlor which, she presumed, had been prepared for any of Lord Courthaven's guests who wished to play cards. Perhaps some gentlemen would do so later in the evening.

"It was you who gave me that brandy, was it not?"

Lord Strickland's voice spread out across the room, shattering the silence and making the footman step back from him, his hands held up in a defensive gesture.

"There is no need to deny it," Lord Strickland continued, his voice hard. "You did not expect me to be able to come after you in such a fashion, I presume, given that I was meant to be in so much pain that I would either be already on my way to my own townhouse, or unconscious from it all, is that not so?"

The footman's eyes were huge, his face as pale as milk as he took another step back, his eyes drifting to something to his right. Juliet frowned hard, noticing at once that there was another door there. Clearing her throat, she caught Lord Strickland's attention and gestured toward it.

"And there is no need to attempt to escape from me again," Lord Strickland continued, making his way to the second door and leaving Juliet and Mrs. Grey to stand in front of the first. "I will have the truth from you, in any way I can."

"You may as well speak it," Juliet told the footman quietly. "There will be consequences piled upon your head if you do not."

"That is what he said," the footman groaned, seeming now to shrink before them as his way of escape was quickly cut off by Lord Strickland. "If I did not, then I would have my employment here brought to a swift end. I wouldn't get any references. I need my position here, my lord." His eyes flew to Lord Strickland, as though he might understand. "What else was I to do?"

Juliet saw Lord Strickland frown, feeling her stomach twist furiously within her.

"Then it was not a lady, as we thought," Mrs. Grey said quietly, and Juliet nodded.

"It must have been the gentleman I heard speak," she said, reminding her companion of who she had overheard in the bookshop that day. "As you might recall, I spoke of two that were present."

"What did this fellow look like?" Lord Strickland demanded, his tone giving no leeway for the footman to avoid the question. "When did he approach you?"

The footman dropped his head. "I will lose everything I have here if I tell you," he said hoarsely. "I have done as he asked but if I speak of it—"

"If you do not speak of it, then it will be all the worse for you," Lord Strickland interrupted harshly. "You may have caused me a great deal of agony by your actions and, whilst you were threatened into doing such a thing, you are still responsible. I must know."

Juliet held her breath, her fingers pressing together in front of her as she watched the

footman lower his head, his shoulders slumping.

"The servants' entrance is at the back of the townhouse, as you would expect," he said, speaking in a dull voice as though he had given up and lost all hope. "I was making my way back inside when a fellow stepped out of the shadows and grasped my arm. I didn't know what was happening, until I felt the tip of a knife at my throat."

A chill ran over Juliet's frame as she heard Mrs. Grey catch her breath. It seemed that the people responsible for this attack on Lord Strickland were ruthless and determined, ready to do whatever was necessary to gain what they required.

"He told me that I was to watch for you, Lord Strickland," he said heavily. "That I was to put a vial into your brandy. That is all I know. I have been keeping a close watch on you since the moment you arrived, fearful of what I must do and yet knowing there was no other choice for me but to do it."

Lord Strickland laughed harshly. "You mean to say that you did not know anything about what the vial contained?" he asked, as though he could hardly believe what was being said. "That you were unaware of the consequences?"

"I did not!" The footman lifted his head and turned to face Lord Strickland, his voice holding more determination than before. "I swear to you I did not. But the man threatened me with such violence and with the loss of my employ that I had no other choice. If I am thrown from this house without reference, then what future is there for me?" His voice broke and, despite herself, Juliet felt a swell of sympathy pulling through her heart. "I had hoped to become a butler one day. But if I did not obey, then even my position as footman would be taken from me."

Nothing was said for some moments with the quiet crackling of the fire being the only sound. Juliet looked toward Lord Strickland, who was watching the footman with hard eyes, his jaw working furiously and his eyes narrowed. She did not want to tell him what to say or what to do but silently prayed that he would realize, as she had done, that this footman had not been eagerly participating in the attack upon his life. She could well understand the fear that must have entered the man's heart upon hearing that everything he knew, everything that was a security for him, would be pulled away in a moment.

"The vial."

Lord Strickland's words were quiet and filled with a wrath Juliet could well understand.

"The vial," he said again, a little more loudly. "Where is it?"

The footman stared at Lord Strickland for a moment as though he was entirely unaware of what the man was saying, only to give himself a slight shake and begin to fumble about in his pockets. Juliet caught her breath as a small, clear vial was brought out and handed directly to Lord Strickland, making her heart quail for a moment as she saw Lord Strickland open the top and take a sniff, wrinkling his nose as he did so.

"It appears you have failed in your task," he said, looking back at the footman. "I am meant to be grievously ill now, am I not?"

Again the footman spread his hands. "I do not know, my lord," he said helplessly. "I have no knowledge of what was in that vial, nor did I even imagine what the consequences might be. Instead, I simply did as I was asked."

"Then how was this fellow—the one with the knife to your neck—meant to know that

you had succeeded?" Lord Strickland asked as the footman's eyes widened. "How could he be certain that you had done as you were instructed?"

The footman stared back at Lord Strickland without answering, leaving Juliet to glance from Lord Strickland to Mrs. Grey and back again, quickly coming to the very same conclusion as they, given the expressions of understanding on their faces.

"Then he is present this evening," Juliet said softly as Lord Strickland nodded tersely. "That is the only way he could be certain of the success of it all. He would be watching closely, making sure that you did as you were instructed and thereafter, watching Lord Strickland for the after-effects of imbibing whatever is within that vial."

The footman dropped his head. "I am sorry, my lord," he muttered heavily. "I did not know what it would do to you, but I couldn't allow myself to be removed from my position here."

"I believe you," Juliet found herself saying as Lord Strickland turned to her, his eyes narrowed. "It does not excuse what you have done but it can certainly bring a little understanding as to why you did such a thing." Glancing at Mrs. Grey, she found herself frowning suddenly. "Given that there is someone here expecting you to have collapsed to the ground, Lord Strickland, I do not know what would be best to do."

Lord Strickland moved away from the second door and came toward them, not even glancing at the footman.

"You are dismissed," he barked, and, like a small, terrified child, the footman scrambled away, his head held low and his whole body seeming to shrink as he passed them. Juliet wanted to say something of comfort to him but knew she could not.

"You are correct, Lady Juliet," Lord Strickland said slowly. "There will be someone present who will be looking for something to occur with me. Something that they can then congratulate themselves upon, in the belief that they have managed to achieve their aim."

"But you are not as they expect," Mrs. Grey pointed out. "You are quite well. Juliet was quickly able to discern the cause of your pain and thus, you drank nothing more from the brandy."

"The brandy which will, I am sure, have been disposed of by now," Juliet added, knowing that Lord and Lady Richmond would not simply have held it back for them.

Lord Strickland rubbed at his forehead. "I could continue on as I am and, in doing so, prove to the person responsible that I am not unwell as they had hoped. Or.." He trailed off, tilting his head and twisting his lips for a moment, his brow furrowing hard. "Or I could make quite certain that they believe that they have achieved what they wish, in the hope that either yourself, Lady Juliet, or Mrs. Grey, or Lord and Lady Richmond are able to identify the gentleman present who has been carefully watching me."

"That seems like an impossible task," Mrs. Grey remarked, sounding anxious. "There are so many guests."

"Therefore, with a brandy in my hand, I shall walk from one room to the next, slowly and with great care," Lord Strickland continued, warming to his plan. "We shall walk together, in fact. Lord and Lady Richmond can watch carefully, for surely the person responsible will have to join me in whatever room I step into, simply to make certain that

I am drinking the poisoned brandy."

"And to watch for your reaction," Juliet added slowly, her eyes widening just a little. "It is certainly an idea, Lord Strickland, but what if it does not succeed?"

"It is better than doing nothing," Lord Strickland replied with a lift of one shoulder. "If I remain as I am, then the evening's plan will have failed and the gentleman will only try again, albeit in an entirely different manner. Is it not best to try and discover them now?"

Juliet nodded, finding agreement in his planned actions and, thus, she found herself walking back along to the library, her hand again on Lord Strickland's arm and Mrs. Grey behind them. Lord Strickland walked purposefully, his intentions determined, and Juliet could not help but feel a little anxious. Anxious that she would not be able to do as he hoped in watching for anyone who might take great notice of Lord Strickland's health, that she would fail in her playacting when it came to Lord Strickland's feigned illness. That nothing would come of it and that they would have to depart this evening without having any awareness of who was behind it all.

"Strickland!"

Lord and Lady Richmond were still in the library, the glass of offending brandy still sitting on the small table to Lady Richmond's right. They looked with wide eyes toward Lord Strickland, clearly hoping that he had found success in his endeavors with the footman.

"I must have another brandy," Lord Strickland murmured, having quickly told Lord and Lady Richmond of their intentions. "But I cannot be seen to have requested it."

"No matter," Lord Richmond replied, handing his own, half-drunk glass to Lady Richmond before quickly catching the attention of a footman and requesting another one. He gave Juliet a small smile. "You have done very well this evening, it seems, Lady Juliet," he said kindly. "I do hope Lord Strickland is grateful to you for what you have done."

Heat rose in her cheeks. "He has been, of course, very grateful," she said, fully aware that Lord Strickland was beside her, "but that is not of importance at present. We must begin to make our way from the library and then to the drawing room. We cannot linger for too long."

Lord Strickland cleared his throat and nodded, waiting until Lord Richmond had been given another glass of brandy, and then reached for the glass of poisoned brandy, which was sitting on the table, waiting for him to do so. With a small clearing of his throat, he took the brandy from Lord Richmond and then handed him the poisoned one, which was then swapped with the one Lady Richmond held.

"I will make certain to have this removed," Lady Richmond said quietly as Juliet looked on. "The gentleman will not be watching us, and certainly will not take any notice of a lady who sets down a glass upon a footman's tray."

"It could be any gentleman," he said as Lord and Lady Richmond nodded fervently. "They will, we hope, come to join us in whatever room we attend, wanting to make quite certain that I have drunk whatever concoction they believe is in this glass."

"And when it comes time for your dramatic illness, then we shall all watch carefully for those who hurry toward you," Mrs. Grey remarked, but Juliet shook her head.

"No," she disagreed. "We must watch for whomever it is that lingers behind, staying away from it all but making certain to watch it without fear. They will not rush forward, not wanting to be seen, but will, I think, remain a little further away."

Lord Strickland looked at her steadily for a moment or two before he smiled, making the heat in Juliet's face rise back up in an instant.

"You are very wise indeed, Lady Juliet," he said quietly. "Then yes, you and Mrs. Grey will remain close to me, watching those who draw near, but Lord and Lady Richmond, might you do as Lady Juliet has suggested?"

They agreed without hesitation and thus, there was nothing to do but begin to carry out their plan. With a small smile placed gently on her lips, Juliet took Lord Strickland's arm and, together, they began to walk.

"I fear, Lady Juliet, that your eagerness to remain quite unacknowledged by the beau monde will not be successful today," Lord Strickland murmured as they walked together. "I am aware that you did not want to be noticed, did not want the ton to believe that I am showing a particular interest in you, but I fear that it may be too late now."

She did not quite know what to say to this, looking at him for a long moment before finally allowing herself a small smile.

"I think that my desires are not what is of the greatest importance at present, Lord Strickland," she told him, suddenly very aware that there would be many of the guests watching them walk together, having forgotten entirely about the rumors that would then be spoken about them both should she linger in his company. It seemed of such little consequence now that she knew the truth. "We must try to do all that we can in order to keep you safe from those who wish to harm you." Her brows furrowed. "Might I ask if you know what is within that vial?"

Lord Strickland shook his head. "I do not," he said honestly, "but it is offensive to smell, certainly. I shall, of course, ask an opinion of someone who might identify it better than I, but I cannot make any particular guess at present."

"It is all a little frightening, in one way," Juliet admitted. "To know that there is someone within the beau monde who is desperately trying to injure you in some way must be rather horrifying."

"I do not know why they would wish to do such a thing," Lord Strickland told her with a shake of his head. "I do not believe that I have ever done a great wrong to anyone." A grimace tugged at his lips. "Unless you count the many young ladies I have evidently sorely disappointed due to my lack of interest in them—and their mothers also."

Juliet could not help but smile, her worries alleviated for only a moment. "I hardly think any of them would wish to injure you so."

"You have not met all of them," he retorted, making her laugh as they walked into the music room. "But yes, I shall agree with you on that point, at least. I do not believe that there is any real threat from any such young lady or her mother. Although who else it might be, I cannot imagine."

Juliet hesitated. "Might I ask if there is someone within your family line who would inherit, should the worst happen to you?" Her question burned on her lips, her heart pounding furiously as she began to worry that she had insulted him by asking such a

question. "I am not trying to suggest that there could be someone within your family line responsible, only to make the suggestion that—"

"It is a wise question," Lord Strickland interrupted, making her catch her breath with relief. "Pray, do not worry." His brow furrowed as they continued to walk slowly through the room, with Juliet entirely unaware of the many glances that were being sent in their direction, given just how much she was focused on Lord Strickland. He did not speak for a few more minutes but, when he did so, there was a heaviness about his words that spoke of a troubled heart.

"There is a cousin who would inherit," he said eventually. "But I have made certain that, due to my significant wealth, none within my family—my extended family—are left without. He is wed, settled in a fine house, and has borne two children already. He has an excellent living and, from what I understand, is very contented. I have never once thought him eager to claim the title, for he has shown no such interest."

"I see," Juliet murmured, relieved to hear such a thing. "Then we must surmise that there is someone set against you for entirely their own purposes."

Lord Strickland sighed heavily. "Purposes that I do not, as yet, fully understand," he replied, taking another sip of his brandy before making for the door. "Shall we make our way to the drawing room?"

She nodded, feeling a slight tension rising within her. "It is there that you will...?"

Glancing across at her, Lord Strickland nodded, a glimmer of a smile playing about his mouth and a warmth in his eyes that she had never seen there before. "There, we shall begin our little performance, Lady Juliet," he answered, lifting his brandy glass as though to toast their success. "Let us hope that something remarkable will come from it."



Duncan let out a groan as he lifted his head from the back of the chair where he had been resting. The butler immediately began to apologize for disturbing him, but Duncan shook his head and beckoned him in.

"Lady Juliet, Mrs. Grey, and Lord and Lady Richmond are settled in the drawing room," he told Duncan, who nodded quickly and then immediately winced. Last evening's fall to the floor, accompanied with whatever effects had lingered due to the poisoned brandy he had drunk, had left him with a rather painful head.

"I will join them at once," he said, rising from his chair. "Refreshments have been brought, I presume?"

"Yes, my lord," the butler murmured, and Duncan rose from his chair and made his way to the door which the butler held open for him. "Excellent," he said, garnering a small smile from the butler. "Now, recall that we are not to be disturbed until their time here is at an end."

The butler inclined his head. "But of course," he said quietly as Duncan nodded and then strode along the hallway to the drawing room.

Stepping inside, he was immediately greeted by Lord and Lady Richmond, Mrs. Grey, and Lady Juliet, who all rose to their feet at once with equal words of concern flying from their lips as he entered.

"I am quite all right," he assured them, a broad smile spreading across his face at the concern in each and every face. "Did my acting last evening convince even you?"

Lady Juliet flushed just a little, looking away from him as she sat back down. "I think you did very well last evening, Lord Strickland," she replied as the others took their seats again. "Everyone was very concerned for you, certainly."

"And the fact that they had to practically lift you to your carriage was an excellent addition," Lord Richmond grinned, clearly no longer as concerned about Duncan's state of health. "You did very well indeed."

Duncan chuckled and rose to pour himself and Lord Richmond a whisky.

"I have had enough of brandy for the moment," he quipped as he handed a glass to Lord Richmond. "And please, Lady Juliet, you are more than welcome to pour the tea for yourself and the other ladies." Sitting down, he let out a long, contented sigh, looking with a sense of great gladness and relief toward Lady Juliet. "Might I say again, Lady Juliet—for I do not believe that I made it particularly clear last evening—that I am

profoundly grateful to you for your wisdom and insight. Had you not made the association between the striking pain in my head and the brandy, then I am sure I would not have noticed at all and certainly would have drunk the full measure, simply so as not to appear rude."

Lady Juliet smiled back at him, although her face held a little more color than usual. "You are most welcome," she said softly.

"You did very well, Lady Juliet," Lady Richmond replied, making Lady Juliet look down at the floor with evident embarrassment. "And I believe, Lord Strickland, that your performance last evening has brought us a little insight."

This piqued Duncan's interest almost at once. "Oh?"

"There were three gentlemen who went after you and Lady Juliet as you made your way through the house," Lord Richmond said, his expression now grave. "We could not be sure of their motives and, indeed, some might have been entirely unaware of their actions, but the three gentlemen all stood at the back and watched what was occurring, although all with equal expressions of horror."

"Which might very well have been nothing more than an act, just as yours was, Lord Strickland," Mrs. Grey said quietly. "Might I ask the names of these gentlemen?"

Lord Richmond nodded. "Of course. There was the Earl of Redford, Viscount Haverstock, and Viscount Brookmire."

Duncan frowned. "I do not believe I am at all acquainted with the latter," he said slowly, searching his memory. "The Earl of Redford is a well-established acquaintance, however, and Viscount Haverstock I have known since last Season."

"And neither of them hold any grudge against you?" Lady Richmond asked as Duncan shook his head. "Then I suppose we must consider all of them."

"I suppose we must," Lady Juliet agreed quietly, studying Duncan with a careful eye. "Although how are we to surmise if they have anything against you, Lord Strickland?"

No one said anything for a moment and then, much to Duncan's surprise, Lady Richmond flew from her chair, her eyes bright and her hands clasped together.

"You must do it, Lady Juliet!" she exclaimed, beginning to pace up and down before them all. "Do you not see? You have been seen on Lord Strickland's arm. Everyone noticed it last evening and, no doubt, the ton will be speaking of it today. Therefore, it would be natural for his name to come up in conversation between you and whoever else you wish to discuss it with...say, Lord Haverstock or Lord Redford."

"Yes, indeed," Mrs. Grey said, sounding much more enthusiastic than Lady Juliet appeared to be. "You are meant to be introducing yourself to as many eligible gentlemen as possible." Her eyes slid toward Duncan. "Neither of those gentlemen are wed, I hope?"

"No, they are not," Duncan replied, feeling himself rather unsettled by such a suggestion and how quickly Mrs. Grey was agreeing to it. "But to push Lady Juliet forward in such a manner—"

"All you would have to do," Lady Richmond interrupted as though she knew what Duncan would say to protest, "is to acquaint yourself with each gentleman in turn. No doubt, they will mention your acquaintance with Lord Strickland and, should they do so, you must shake your head and sigh, stating that you found him to be most disagreeable,

although you were flattered by his attention—or some such thing.”

Lady Juliet blinked rapidly, the color gone from her cheeks. “And you hope that this will encourage them to speak openly about Lord Strickland?”

“Enough to give us an idea as to whether or not they think well of him, yes,” Lord Richmond said as his wife beamed at him, clearly delighted with his quick agreement. “It may mean that you will have to entertain their acquaintance a little longer than perhaps you might wish to, but I am sure that, in time, you will be able to garner an opinion about their thoughts toward Lord Strickland.”

Duncan shook his head. “I do not think that such a burden is particularly fair to Lady Juliet,” he said firmly. “Yes, she may have alerted me to this particular danger, and she has already saved me from a great deal of pain, but to ask her to do more seems entirely unfair.”

Lady Juliet did not appear to hear him. “And it might very well be that I recognize the voice of either the Earl of Redford or Viscount Haverstock from the bookshop,” she said, looking up at Lady Richmond with a hint of excitement in her voice.

“Lady Juliet.” Duncan rose from his chair, commanding the room with his presence. Lady Juliet’s smile faded as she turned to look at him, the light fading from her eyes. “Lady Juliet, whilst I have agreed for your input in this matter, surely you cannot be asked to do this.” He looked around the room, half expecting Mrs. Grey and Lord Richmond to agree with him, but neither of them did so. “You have your own Season, do you not? You are meant to be enjoying all that London has to offer you and instead, you are sitting here, trying to come up with a solution that will be of aid to me rather than to you.” He found himself frowning hard, trying to express to her exactly how he felt. “I am more than grateful for all that you have done thus far, but pray do not turn away from your own responsibilities for my sake.”

The room grew silent as everyone turned toward Lady Juliet. She was looking at him with a glimmer of something yet unexpressed in her eyes.

“I will not have you pushed into this for my sake alone,” he finished, sitting back down and feeling a little embarrassed that he had spoken so decisively in front of the others. “Pray understand, Lady Juliet, I seek what is best for you.”

“As I do for you,” came the quiet reply. “As much as I appreciate your concern for me, you must know that I put such a threat toward you far above my own need to find a suitor and enjoy the Season.” A tiny smile tugged at her mouth and Duncan found himself suddenly transfixed, unable to look away from her. “Mrs. Grey is in agreement with my desire to be of aid to you, Lord Strickland, and given that I am the only one who could possibly identify the gentleman based on his voice alone, it is not as though I could simply turn around and refuse to be of help to you.”

Lady Richmond let out a small, contented sigh and looked at Duncan with a softly lifted eyebrow. He knew very well what she was trying to say, telling him that he would not find another creature like Lady Juliet, no matter how hard he searched, and yet Duncan did not even permit his thoughts to turn in that particular direction.

“Then I am greatly in your debt,” he said quietly. “Are you quite sure I cannot convince you?”

Lady Juliet laughed softly, tilting her head in an almost bird-like fashion. "I am quite certain you could not," she replied as the tension in the room suddenly dissipated. "Your life is of much greater importance than a few weeks of the Season." One shoulder lifted. "Besides which, I am sure that I will have plenty of time left to enjoy dancing and courting and the like, once you have made certain of your safety."

Duncan swallowed hard, nodding toward her but finding his heart suddenly pained at the thought of Lady Juliet being courted by another gentleman. Quite why he should have such a thought, he did not know, nor could he understand why it would bring him such displeasure. Quickly, he thrust it away from him entirely, leaving him to turn his mind back to the situation at hand.

"Very well," he replied, a trifle gruffly. "Then I suppose there is nothing for it but to wish you well, Lady Juliet."

"I shall be sure to inform you the moment I hear anything of interest from either gentleman," she promised, reaching for her teacup and giving no sign of intending to leave. "And you will linger here, I presume? Giving the impression that you are very ill indeed?" Seeing him nod, she gave a small shake of her head. "That is three times now that you have been in danger, Lord Strickland. Mayhap you ought to remain in your townhouse more often."

This made Duncan laugh, although he did not miss the frown that appeared on Lord Richmond's face.

"Three times?" Lord Richmond repeated, frowning. "I thought there was only the night after the soiree and then last evening."

Lady Juliet waved a hand. "Forgive me," she said with a rueful smile. "I forgot that the highwaymen were not something to consider."

"Highwaymen?" Lady Richmond repeated, and Duncan was forced to explain all that had occurred.

"My father and I came across a most dreadful scene the day we made our way to London," Lady Juliet added quickly, her color draining away just a little. "We have no knowledge of those who were left for dead, save for an empty letter that my father insisted we take with us in the hope that it might contain something that would be of assistance. It was not until we returned home that we discovered it empty. Two of the men attacked have been buried, and one, from what we have heard, still lingers between life and death. But," she continued with a small shrug, "it is not a particular consequence for Lord Strickland, given that it has happened to others."

"Besides which, I was lucky enough to avoid it," Duncan added hastily. "I rode rather than taking my carriage. Had I been in my carriage, then I might well have been stopped."

"But you were not," Lord Richmond replied, a frown still lingering on his brow. "Because you were riding rather than being in your carriage."

Duncan let out a snort. "Because of the skill of my driver," he answered honestly. "Even if I had been within the carriage, I believe from what was told to me thereafter that my driver managed to evade the highwaymen, although he may not have driven so wildly had I been inside."

"And what day was this?" Lady Richmond asked, looking from one to the next, her brows lifting in surprise as both Duncan and Lady Juliet spoke of the same day.

Silence ran across the room as Duncan's gaze slowly returned to Lady Juliet. He had never expected that they would have made their way to London on the very same day.

Lady Juliet frowned, biting her lip for a moment. "Did your driver mention whether or not he passed anyone else on the road?" she asked slowly, looking at him with a small frown flickering across her brow.

"He did not mention it," Duncan answered honestly. "Might I ask why?"

Shaking her head, Lady Juliet did not immediately answer but then, glancing at Mrs. Grey, expressed her thoughts. "It is only that I have always wondered about that strange letter," she said quietly. "I do not know if I have mentioned it to you before, Lord Strickland, but my father recovered a letter from one of the... unfortunate souls that had been struck down by the highwaymen." Her brow furrowed all the more. "I have it back at my father's townhouse for he requested I take it back with us—but to my surprise, when it was opened, there was nothing written inside."

Duncan did not quite understand what she meant. "The letter was without any words written inside it? And no name on the front?"

"None," Lady Juliet replied. "I have kept it, of course, for it is a question that does not yet have an answer. The reason I ask about your driver is to know whether or not he passed any other carriage on the road. Or if he, too, saw the same scene as my father."

"I did not ask him," Duncan repeated, spreading his hands. "I certainly can do. In fact..." Rising, he made his way to ring the bell. "I will send for him at once and see what he says."



\* \* \*

It took only a few minutes for the driver to arrive, looking rather anxious as he stepped in through the door.

"You are not to be corrected or berated, George," Duncan said hastily, not wanting to upset his driver. "It is only that I must ask you something about the day we arrived in London."

The driver nodded, his hands tight together in front of him as he cleared his throat. "Yes, my lord?" He glanced nervously about the room before looking back at Duncan.

"There were highwaymen set waiting for you, were there not?" Duncan asked, and the driver nodded. "And you managed to avoid them. Tell me," he continued as the driver shuffled his feet, "was there anything else—anyone else—that you noticed?"

The driver frowned. "What do you mean, my lord?"

"Lady Juliet," Duncan explained, gesturing to the lady, "came to London on the very same day. Her father and driver stopped to help some who had, it appeared, been

attacked by highwaymen but who had not managed to escape as you did. She wishes to know whether or not you saw them also."

A dark frown crossed the driver's face. "My lord, there was another carriage by the side of the road," he said slowly. "The horses were gone. I didn't see if there was anyone inside and, given the threat, I had no other choice but to keep going. I could not stop."

Lady Juliet sucked in a breath and Duncan frowned heavily, looking toward her. It meant that the highwaymen had, most likely, attacked the carriage before Duncan's had arrived, and then, for whatever reason, had disappeared before Lady Juliet's had driven by.

"I do not blame you, of course," Lady Juliet said quickly, speaking to the driver. "You had to make sure of your own safety. Of course you could not stop."

"Thank you, my lady," the driver replied, keeping his eyes low as he looked at Duncan, as though expecting him to say something entirely different. "I did what I thought was right."

"It was the correct course of action," Duncan replied honestly. "Thank you, George. You can return to your duties now."

The man looked thoroughly relieved and made his way from the room without hesitation. Lady Juliet sat back in her chair as the others simply looked at each other, perhaps all wondering as to what this might mean.

"Is there a possibility," Mrs. Grey said slowly, "that the highwaymen were waiting for you, Lord Strickland?"

"No," Duncan said quickly, "that cannot be. They attacked a carriage before attempting to do so to my own. That is precisely what I would expect."

"But they did not succeed," Lady Juliet said softly. "Why, then, should they disperse? Surely they would linger to take on the next carriage? The one that I was in?"

Duncan shook his head. "I do not think it means anything," he said firmly. "It is an unfortunate event, certainly, but perhaps not one that is in any way related to the ongoing situation as regards my safety."

"I would not be so quick to ignore it," Lord Richmond replied solemnly, surprising Duncan. "Let us not throw it from our minds entirely. We must consider all possibilities and, in fact, Lady Juliet, I should very much like to see this letter of yours. The letter that bears no mark." His lips quirked. "It is interesting, certainly."

Lady Juliet smiled at him and Duncan felt his heart twist in his chest, dropping his gaze to the floor so that he might hide whatever emotion threw itself into his expression.

"I should be very glad to," he heard Lady Juliet say. "Thank you for your willingness, Lord Richmond."

Duncan cleared his throat, finding himself speaking before he even had any reasonable thought. "I should like to see it also." A little embarrassed, he shrugged. "That is, if you do not mind."

Ignoring the broad grin that spread across Lord Richmond's face, Duncan waited for Lady Juliet to speak, more than relieved when she accepted his offer without hesitation.

"I would be more than glad to show you," she said, looking reassured. "Thank you, Lord Strickland. Would tomorrow be suitable?"

"More than suitable," he agreed, surprised at the fervor in his voice. "I look forward to seeing it, Lady Juliet."

Mrs. Grey rose to her feet. "And now we should take our leave," she said briskly, although Duncan did not miss the knowing gleam in her eye. "You will be present this evening, I presume?"

"At Lord Whittaker's ball?" Duncan asked, and Lady Juliet nodded, her eyes suddenly darting away from his, pink in her cheeks. "Yes, I shall be in attendance."

Lady Juliet threw him a quick smile. "Until this evening then, Lord Strickland. And I shall make certain to speak to both Lord Redford and Lord Haverstock."

Recollecting what she was to do that evening, Duncan felt the smile fade from his face, the warmth in his heart fading slightly. "Yes, of course," he said, bowing as the ladies bobbed a quick curtsy. "Until then, Lady Juliet."

# 9

Juliet took a breath as she stepped into Lord Whittaker's ballroom. It was a large, spacious room that was already filled with guests. The hubbub of conversation and laughter rang all round her and yet she felt nothing but anxiety. She had a duty to perform this evening rather than simply enjoying herself.

This afternoon's meeting had gone quite well, all things considered. What had been most disturbing to her, however, was the fact that she had felt strange stirrings within her heart toward Lord Strickland. He had been behaving more warmly toward her than ever before and the resistance she had felt to being often in his company—for fear of what the ton would say—was no longer a concern. It was as though she simply did not care, wanting now to discover who was behind this disgusting desire to attack him in such a way and why. She recalled just how ill he had appeared when he had drunk some of the poisoned brandy, how her heart had slammed furiously into her chest with fright as she realized what had taken place. It had been in that moment that she had cared nothing for what the beau monde would say. Her only concern had been for Lord Strickland. In fact, the more time she spent in his company, the more her concern for him grew.

"Recall that your father is present this evening, Juliet," Mrs. Grey murmured, and Juliet nodded. "He will expect to see you dancing."

"I will," Juliet promised. "Although I am sure he is only here for the game of cards that will take place later this evening." She glanced toward her companion, who could not hide her smile. "He has asked me about whether or not I have had any particular interest from any gentlemen of the ton although he did not appear to be all too eager to hear the answer." She smiled fondly at the thought of her father. "He does try to be interested, Mrs. Grey, but I believe he is quite certain that I shall make a decent match entirely without his help."

"For which we should be very grateful," Mrs. Grey replied firmly. "Else I do not think you would be at all able to help Lord Strickland as you are doing at present." Her eyes narrowed just a little as she studied Juliet. "Although it may yet turn out just as your father hopes."

Heat rose in Juliet's cheeks, but she did not answer her companion. It was clear that Mrs. Grey had hope, if not expectation, that Juliet might yet make a match with Lord Strickland and, try as she might, Juliet could not push such a thought away. They had



only been acquainted for a short time, but in these last few days, there had grown the beginnings of an intimacy between them which Juliet could not deny.

"Now," Mrs. Grey continued briskly. "Let us consider how we are to introduce you to these two gentlemen. I, unfortunately, am not yet acquainted with either and thus—"

"Perhaps I could be of aid, then."

Juliet's blush deepened all the more as she turned to see Lord Strickland bowing toward them both. She dropped into a curtsy, lingering for a moment longer in the hope that her face would not be so red by the time she rose.

"Good evening, Lord Strickland," she murmured as he smiled at her. "You think to introduce me to Lord Redford and Lord Haverstock?"

"Indeed," he replied with a twinkle in his eye. "I cannot introduce both at once, of course, but perhaps one at this present moment and one later this evening? That would mean that there should be no difficulty in continuing an acquaintance with either."

Juliet nodded. "That would be most helpful, Lord Strickland," she answered as Mrs. Grey watched with a small smile spreading across her face. "We were only just wondering what we were to do in order to ensure an introduction."

Lord Strickland inclined his head. "Might I be so bold as to be the first to write my name upon your dance card, Lady Juliet?" he asked, surprising her. "I should not like to introduce you to Lord Redford without having taken at least one of your dances, else he will think it very strange indeed."

Quickly handing it to him, Juliet watched Lord Strickland closely as he wrote his name in two separate spaces. "You think the earl will wish to dance with me?" she asked as Lord Strickland handed it back to her. "Upon only our first introduction?"

"I fully expect him to ask you to dance within the first few moments," Lord Strickland laughed as he offered her his arm. "He is the most incorrigible flirt, I am afraid, although he means nothing by it. He is not a rogue or a scoundrel, but rather one who simply enjoys behaving in such a fashion with the young ladies of the ton. Thus, it was important for me to make certain that I stole the very best of dances from him, so that he could not take them from me."

She did not know what to say to this, finding his change in demeanor almost overwhelming. No longer was he pushing her back, frowning and shaking his head at even the thought of having a prolonged acquaintance with her. Rather, he was seemingly eager to have her in his company and was now speaking as though he wanted nothing more than to linger there. Was it an act? A staged performance, set out to ensure that both the earl and Viscount Haverstock were aware of his supposed interest in her, so that they might speak of him to her without hesitation? Or was there any truth within his actions?

"He is not too far," Lord Strickland murmured as Mrs. Grey fell into step beside Juliet. "I am sure he will catch my attention without me even attempting to speak to him. He is that sort of gentleman."

Juliet did not know what Lord Strickland meant, only to hear a loud voice calling his name, seeming to boom across toward them. Blinking in surprise, she looked up at Lord Strickland and saw him grin.

"It is as I have said, is it not?" he murmured to her, before turning toward a small group of guests who were, by now, all turning toward her.

"Lord Redford," Lord Strickland called as they approached. "Good evening. It is not like you to shout so loudly. Is something the matter?"

This made the earl laugh, his small eyes crinkling so much they looked almost entirely closed. He was a larger man than Lord Strickland, both taller and broader than he. The foppish clothes did not hide his paunch but there was a jolliness to his expression that warmed Juliet's heart toward him almost in an instant.

"I could not help but exclaim at the sight of you with a beautiful young lady on your arm," the earl said beaming, turning his gaze to Juliet. "Whatever have you done, my lady?"

Juliet did not know what he meant, stammering awkwardly as she tried to reply. "I—I have done nothing, my lord," she replied, only for Lord Redford to guffaw with laughter.

"You have done something, certainly," he said with a broad smile and a wink in her direction. "Do you not know that Lord Strickland has never once shown any interest in any young lady of the ton? And now here he is, walking with you through the ballroom. Most extraordinary."

Juliet blushed but Lord Strickland took the opportunity to quickly make introductions, freeing Juliet's arm and allowing her to curtsy.

"I am very pleased to make your acquaintance," the earl said, still smiling at her. "I must ask if your dance card is available to me, Lady Juliet, for there must be something about you that has captured Lord Strickland so, and I have to discover it for myself."

"You are much too kind, Lord Redford, but I can assure you there is nothing at all such as you have described within me," she replied, slipping off her dance card and handing it to him. "Lord Strickland is merely being a gentleman, that is all."

Lord Redford did not appear to believe this, guffawing loudly as though he knew all too well that Juliet did not speak the truth. With a twinkle in his eye, he held her gaze for a moment before dropping his attention to her dance card.

"Now, you can hardly expect me to believe such a thing when I can see from this that Lord Strickland has taken the supper dance," he said, writing his name with a flourish. "Although I shall take your first waltz, if I may?"

She smiled at him, rather glad that Lord Strickland had warned her about Lord Redford's flirtatious nature. Was he the sort of gentleman who would want to injure Lord Strickland in some way? And if so, for what reason? The man seemed much too jolly to want to harm anyone and yet Juliet knew that such demeanors could be an outward appearance only. However, she had to admit that there was something very likeable about the gentleman, finding her smile remaining steady as he continued to speak.

"I look forward to dancing with you, Lady Juliet," he said with a small bow as he handed her back her dance card. "Although I shall confess to being rather jealous that Lord Strickland has stolen the supper dance from me."

"No doubt you will find many other young ladies willing to step forward and offer you their supper dance, Lord Redford," Lord Strickland answered dryly. "Just so that you are not too disappointed."

Lord Redford chuckled at this remark, no hint of malice or annoyance in his expression.

"I hope you have noticed the arrival of one Lady Ridgedale, Lord Strickland," Lord Redford said suddenly, the smile on his face beginning to fade as a new seriousness came into his eyes. "She has not spoken to you as yet?"

"No," Lord Strickland replied, a tightness coming into his expression, his lips flattening and his jaw working for a moment. "She has not greeted me, and I have no intention of doing so either."

Juliet did not know what to make of this, a little confused as to who Lady Ridgedale might be and why she appeared to be so entirely disagreeable to Lord Strickland. Keeping her questions to herself for the moment, she dropped her gaze to the floor, making sure to show no particular interest.

"That is a wise choice," came Lord Redford's reply. "I think much of the ton are a little wary of her and it would not do your reputation any good to be seen in her company."

"Given just how much she clearly dislikes me, I do not think that such a thing shall ever occur," Lord Strickland replied firmly. "But I thank you for your concern, Lord Redford."

Lord Redford nodded sagely. "But of course," he said, only for the music to strike up for the next dance, leaving him to turn bright eyes toward Juliet.

"Ah, it is our waltz, Lady Juliet," he stated, holding out one hand to her. "Shall we take to the floor?"



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Much to Juliet's relief, Lord Redford was an excellent dancer. She had no difficulty remaining in step with him and he appeared almost effortless, gliding around the floor with ease as he maintained a conversation with her.

"Lord Strickland did not tell me just how proficient a dancer you were," Lord Redford said with a broad smile on his face. "You must have many excellent qualities, I am sure."

Juliet laughed, becoming a little more used to the gentleman's many—and seemingly continuous—compliments.

"Lord Redford, there is merely an acquaintance between myself and Lord Strickland, I can assure you," she said warmly. "Besides which, I confess that I do not know the gentleman very well at all as yet." Keeping her smile in place, she tilted her head just a little as he twirled her around. "Is there anything untoward about him that I ought to know?"

Lord Redford chuckled, his hand holding hers a little more tightly. "Indeed there is not," he said with seeming honesty. "There is nothing that I can think of that would make Lord Strickland lacking in your eyes. You should take great pride in knowing that you are

the first young lady he has ever shown any particular interest in, which speaks very highly of you, I am sure."

Again, he returns to complimenting me, Juliet thought to herself, a little irritated that he would not say anything more about Lord Strickland. "You are too kind, Lord Redford," she murmured as the dance came to a close. "Then there is nothing you would warn me of? Nothing that I might come to discover about Lord Strickland that would push me from him?" She sighed heavily as he bowed, curtsying beautifully toward him. "I should not like to continue in our acquaintance only to discover something much too late."

Lord Redford's smile faded and, to her relief, he appeared to be a good deal more serious. "Please, Lady Juliet," he said, offering her his arm so that they might return to Mrs. Grey, "have no fear. Lord Strickland is just as he appears. He is not a rogue or a scoundrel. He has nothing in his history that would bring you any sort of pain. In fact, I believe him to be one of the very best gentlemen of my acquaintance." Reaching across with his free hand, he patted hers gently as it rested on his arm, as though they were very old friends. "You need only to know how he behaved with Lady Ridgedale to be sure of that."

Juliet blinked, tilting her head up toward him. "I know nothing of Lady Ridgedale," she said in a slightly plaintive tone. "Is that someone of importance?"

Looking down at her, Lord Redford made to speak, only to stop himself and shake his head. "You must speak to Lord Strickland directly," he said firmly. "It is not my story to tell, but I can assure you, that he was more than wise in such an acquaintance."

"That is a relief to know," Juliet murmured, her mind filling with questions as to who this Lady Ridgedale might be and precisely why she was so important to Lord Strickland. "Thank you, Lord Redford."

He grinned at her, the twinkle back in his eyes almost at once. "It was wonderful to dance with you, Lady Juliet," he told her. "I do hope that I might have the pleasure of doing so again very soon."



\* \* \*

The supper dance was quite wonderful. To be in Lord Strickland's arms seemed, to Juliet, to be the most delightful thing in all the world. It was not as though they had not danced before, but something had changed in their acquaintance—as well as within Juliet's own heart.

"Lord Redford said too much, then, and Lord Haverstock too little."

Juliet looked up into Lord Strickland's eyes and saw him frown, silently praying that anyone watching would not think that he was displeased with her dancing.

"Lord Haverstock danced the cotillion," she reminded him gently. "And there is not much opportunity to speak as one might do in the waltz."

The frown lifted just a fraction from Lord Strickland's face. "Of course," he said, his eyes turning back toward her as the corner of his mouth lifted. "I was expecting too much from the first meeting, I think."

Juliet searched his blue eyes, looking for any sign of discontent within them, worried that he had thought her something of a failure in her endeavors. But there was none there, and for that, she was grateful. Once more, she was struck by the handsomeness of his features for, when he smiled, his face transformed entirely. Light came into his eyes, his brows lifted, and there was no longer any heaviness about him. Juliet could not help but smile back in return.

"You were studying me," Lord Strickland murmured as the dance ended and he released her gently. "Is there something you wish to ask me?"

Juliet curtsied quickly, hoping to hide her embarrassment. She could not very well tell him that she had been thinking just how handsome he was, or just how much his expression changed when he smiled.

"Well?" he asked, a teasing note in his voice as he offered her his arm. "You will not say?"

A little frantic to find an answer, Juliet looked away. "It is only that I was thinking about Lord Redford," she said, scrambling to find any sort of explanation. "He spoke very highly of you." Lord Haverstock, on the other hand, had not said a word about Lord Strickland, although he had spoken well to both her and to Lord Strickland when it came to conversation. Mrs. Grey herself had thought both gentlemen to be just as she would have expected, although had remarked that a little more might come from either gentleman upon further acquaintance.

"Lord Redford speaks well of everyone," Lord Strickland remarked with a small smile. "He is known not to speak poorly of those he is acquainted with, unless they have, of course, behaved in such a poor way that the entirety of the beau monde recognizes it."

Juliet was about to ask whether or not Lady Ridgedale was one such person, only for Lord Strickland to offer her his arm and lead her on through to the refreshments in the dining room, where tables and chairs sat waiting for them. Mrs. Grey, ever present, remained nearby, sitting next to Juliet as Lord Strickland showed her to a table.

"If you will permit me?" he asked, and Juliet nodded her thanks as he poured them all some wine. Looking at the many dishes, he quickly served both Juliet and Mrs. Grey and then himself, whilst other guests joined them at the table. Juliet felt herself becoming quite contented with how the evening had gone. This was more than delightful for her, to be sitting in Lord Strickland's company and enjoying a pleasant meal and excellent conversation. The threat that surrounded Lord Strickland no longer seemed to be of great importance, no longer felt as significant, even though she knew it to be so. These few moments were more than a little satisfying and Juliet felt herself sigh with a renewed sense of happiness.

"If you will excuse me for a few minutes."

Lord Strickland sent her an apologetic smile and rose from the table. Thinking nothing of it—for it was not the done thing to give a reason to excuse oneself—Juliet turned to Mrs. Grey and continued their conversation.

"The only other gentleman we must introduce ourselves to, if we can, is Lord Brookmire," Mrs. Grey remarked with a lift of one eyebrow. "I am aware that Lord Strickland is not acquainted with him in any way, but it might well be wise to be introduced to him regardless."

"Indeed," Juliet agreed thoughtfully. "Although it would seem very strange to me to have a gentleman eager to bring pain and suffering to Lord Strickland if he is not even acquainted with him. What purpose would he have?"

Mrs. Grey frowned, taking a small sip of her wine before setting it back down. "From what you said, it appears that the gentleman in question, whoever he might be, is doing all of this at the behest of a lady of the ton," she said slowly. "What if there is some sort of agreement between that lady and himself? Might it be then that he is hoping to receive some sort of benefit from her rather than having anything specific against Lord Strickland himself?"

A loud, raucous laugh caught Juliet's attention before she could answer and, turning her head, she saw Lord Redford guffawing loudly at some remark another at his table had made. Lord Haverstock sat near to him and there was nothing akin to enjoyment on his face but rather a look of tired acceptance. With a small, knowing smile, she turned back to Mrs. Grey. "That is a wise suggestion," she admitted as Lord Redford finally subsided. "I do wonder if—"

"Lady Juliet?"

A footman came toward them, bowing quickly but speaking with such sharpness that Juliet was a little taken aback.

"If you and Mrs. Grey would join me at once, Lord Strickland is in need of your assistance," the footman said quietly, so that none of the other guests would overhear. "This way."

There was not any suggestion as to what particular assistance Lord Strickland required but Juliet, with a glance toward Mrs. Grey, rose quickly and followed the footman, noting, with dismay, that Lord and Lady Richmond were following after them.

"Do you know what is the matter?" Lady Richmond asked as she fell into step beside Juliet. "What has happened to Lord Strickland?"

"He has fallen down the staircase," the footman replied, turning toward them for a moment, clearly having overheard their conversation. "I directed him to the gentleman's retiring room and I believe an incident occurred as he made to return to the drawing room."

Juliet's heart began to pound as she stared at the footman, with Lady Richmond's hand tightening on her arm. She could not take another step forward, suddenly dreadfully afraid of what she would find.

"Is he badly injured?" Lord Richmond demanded, one hand slipping around his wife's waist as they all came to a stop, horrified to hear such news. "Whatever happened?"

"He has asked for us," Mrs. Grey said quietly, "so he must be at least conscious."

The footman nodded. "I think it would be best if you spoke to him yourself, my lord," he said, clearly eager to hurry them along. "He was most specific and demanded that I did not inform my master of his injuries either."

"Then let us hurry at once!" Juliet exclaimed, her legs weak but her eagerness to see Lord Strickland for herself growing within her. "Please." She gestured for the footman to lead them on and, with a swift nod, he turned and continued walking along the hallway back in the direction of the ballroom. Her heart in her throat, Juliet hurried after him, her mind filled with dread as she wondered in just what state they would find Lord Strickland.

# 10

Making his way from the retiring room, Duncan allowed himself a small smile as he thought of returning to Lady Juliet. She was, much to his surprise, becoming more and more important to him with every moment spent together, to the point that he was struggling to even consider what his life would be like without her company. But that was within his future, he supposed, for given that his acquaintance with Lady Juliet had come about simply because of what she had overheard and her seeming eagerness to do all she could to help him, it was reasonable to expect that their acquaintance would fade once the matter was at an end. Was that something he wanted? Musing to himself, Duncan did not see a shadow suddenly step out from behind him, did not feel the hands pushing hard at him until it was almost too late.

He reacted at once. One hand shot out, his body twisting as he flailed backwards, trying to find something—anything—to hold onto. His hand grasped onto clothing and he managed to pull himself forward, with the fellow behind him gasping for breath as they fought.

“Unhand me!” Duncan exclaimed, his voice echoing through the otherwise empty hallway, but there was no immediate effect. The man snarled, his face and expression a blur as Duncan fought to regain control. Pain shot through Duncan’s stomach as the man punched him hard, one leg slipping down onto the first stair and his ankle twisting painfully.

“You may have escaped thrice, Strickland, but you will not escape again.”

With a hard shove, the man freed himself from Duncan’s grasp and pushed him back, hard. With a cry, Duncan found himself stumbling forward, hurtling down the staircase without managing to catch himself. His hands flew out in front of him, but it was not enough to stop him from falling, finding almost every part of his body burning with pain as he tumbled to the floor.

“My lord!”

A voice drew near to him as Duncan tried to recover himself, realizing, dazedly, that he was no longer falling. Everything ached, his head pounding furiously as he tried to breathe at a steady pace, making every attempt to work out where he was.

“Did you fall?” said the voice, a gentle hand settling upon his shoulder. “Can you rise, my lord? I will fetch another footman to be of assistance to you.”

Realizing that it was a footman, Duncan slowly attempted to sit up, finding his head



aching all the more as he lifted it from the cold floor, his arms shaking slightly as he did so. It took a great deal of effort but, eventually, he was able to stand. Another footman joined them, helping Duncan to make his way across the hallway as he fought to clear his vision. He could not put his full weight on his right leg, his ankle still burning painfully.

"There is a small parlor here, my lord," said the first footman, sounding more than a little anxious. The two footmen helped him into the room, settling him into a chair although Duncan could not help but groan as he sat down. The second footman hurried around the room, lighting candles and wondering aloud whether or not they ought to light a fire in order to keep Duncan warm. Duncan closed his eyes and murmured no, leaving both footmen to look at each other, wondering what they were to do next.

"Shall I send for a doctor?" said the first as Duncan opened his eyes. "I should also inform the master, I—"

"Do not do so," Duncan bit out, hardly able to speak, such was the pain coursing through him. "I must see Lord and Lady Richmond, and Lady Juliet also."

The second footman hurried off the moment Duncan had finished speaking, leaving the first to continue to question what he could bring and what he could do for Duncan. Reiterating that there was no need to bother the master of the house and stating that a whisky would suit him very well indeed, Duncan placed his head back against the chair and let out a long breath, trying to unsuccessfully blow away some of his pain. The footman pressed a whisky into his hand and then stood there anxiously, clearly very concerned for Duncan's health.

You may have escaped thrice.

The words the man had shouted before he had successfully managed to throw Duncan down the staircase echoed around his mind. Three times? That made very little sense to him, for he could only recall the time he had avoided the object thrown at him and thereafter, the incident with the poisoned brandy. What could have been the third?

"Lord Strickland!"

The door to the parlor flew open and four figures hurried in one after the other.

"Lord Strickland, are you quite all right?" Lady Juliet cried, hurrying toward him, her eyes wide with fright. "You fell down the staircase?"

Lord and Lady Richmond were just behind her, their faces etched with worry.

"I did not fall," Duncan replied, shifting his weight from one side of the chair to the other, wincing as he did so. "I was pushed."

A gasp of astonishment pulled itself from the assembled group as the two footmen stood by the door, glancing at each other.

"You saw the person in question?" Lord Richmond demanded before turning on his heel to look at the two footmen. "Did either of you?"

Duncan closed his eyes and took in another long breath, very aware of the pain that was beginning to settle in his ribs, his ankle, and the side of his head. "I did not," he replied heavily. "I was taken by surprise and in the struggle, did not see the gentleman's face clearly."

"I saw nothing, my lord," the first footman replied, his eyes flaring with obvious fright. "I heard a commotion and hurried to the bottom of the staircase, where I saw Lord..."

Lord..."

"Lord Strickland," Lady Richmond reminded him and the footman nodded, gesturing toward Duncan.

"I saw Lord Strickland lying at the bottom of the staircase but neither heard nor saw anything more."

Duncan, who had expected as much, nodded carefully so that he would not compound the pain in his head. "I did not think there was anyone else present," he said as Lady Juliet dropped into a chair, Mrs. Grey following suit. "This gentleman, whoever he was, remained above stairs once I had fallen. I am sure he has returned to the ball now."

Lady Juliet closed her eyes and ran one hand over her forehead, clearly distraught. "It could not have been Lord Redford or Lord Haverstock," she said quietly as Lady Richmond sent the footmen away for something to eat and drink for them all, given that they had been required to leave the dining room so quickly. "They were both sitting near to us during your absence."

Duncan held her gaze, seeing the paleness of her cheeks and wondering just how he appeared at present. "Then we have only one gentleman left to consider," he said somberly, glad that both footmen had left the room so that he might speak openly. "A gentleman that I do not know and have never once been acquainted with."

Lady Juliet nodded as Lord and Lady Richmond sat down, their faces still etched with concern.

"Viscount Brookmire," Mrs. Grey murmured as Lady Richmond nodded. "I do wonder, Lord Strickland, if it is not Lord Brookmire's dislike of you—for whatever reason—that presses him into action, but rather the lady's promise of reward."

"It very well may be," Duncan agreed heavily, feeling his heart quail just a little. There was so much that he did not understand, so much that he could not make sense of, and it felt as though he was on the threshold of a great and terrible danger that he could not fully anticipate. "Whilst I will not go into the details of what occurred, what I will mention is that this particular fellow, whoever he is, shouted something about my escaping from him three times, along with the promise that I should not manage a fourth time."

Lord Richmond let out a hard laugh. "Then it seems you have proved him wrong," he said with a grimace. "But three times?"

Lady Juliet caught her breath. "The highwaymen," she spoke as everyone turned toward her. "I did wonder if there was something more to the fact that you and I had both come to London on the same day, having both seen the efforts of the highwaymen, as well as the fact that they attempted to attack your carriage but, being unsuccessful, did not linger to attempt another upon my carriage also."

A frown creased Duncan's brow, bringing with it a fresh stab of pain. "You mean to say that you believe the highwaymen sought only me?" he asked doubtfully. "That cannot be so, given what occurred to the unfortunate souls that your father discovered."

This brought a look of confusion to Lady Juliet's expression, her eyes narrowing for a moment as she looked at the floor, her lip caught between her teeth.

"Perhaps there is something of more significance to that strange letter than we have

first thought," Lord Richmond suggested. "You are to study it tomorrow, are you not?"

"I am," Duncan replied, hardly daring to hope that such a thing might be. "Although quite what I am to discover from it, I cannot imagine given that Lady Juliet has already studied it at length."

Lady Juliet took in a deep breath and let it out slowly, her eyes still flickering from one place to the next, apparently still struggling to connect what had been said by the man who had attacked Duncan with what she now believed.

"I should return home," Duncan said, trying to shift himself out of the chair and finding the pain too great to move too much. Embarrassment raced through him as he reached for his brandy, clearing his throat awkwardly. "I do not think it is necessary to alert Lord Whittaker to what has happened, however."

"I have sent for refreshments to be brought," Lady Richmond reminded him. "I think it would be best if you ate something before you even try to make your way to your carriage."

Duncan hesitated, then nodded. "Very well," he agreed, aware that there was now a slight tremble taking a hold of his frame as he sank back into the chair. "I will wait."

As though they had been waiting for him to say such a thing, the door opened and the two footmen returned, laden with refreshments which they set down carefully for the small, assembled group.

"What else might we fetch for you, Lord Strickland?" one asked as they stood to attention. "What is it that you require?"

"I would know if Viscount Brookmire is present this evening," Duncan replied, and the two footmen glanced at each other. "That is all I need at present." He gave them both a curt nod. "You will have plenty of other duties this evening and I will be quite recovered in a short while, I am sure of it. Pray do not feel the need to linger or to inform Lord Whittaker of this situation. There is no need to trouble him given that the rest of the evening has gone as well as it has."

The two footmen nodded, promised that one of them would return with news about Lord Brookmire, and then swiftly departed, leaving Duncan to look around the room at the others, seeing their severe expressions.

"Then it must be Lord Brookmire," Lord Richmond said heavily. "And the highwaymen must have been the first attempt to injure you."

"It may not even have been highwaymen," Lady Juliet murmured, tilting her head and looking at him with questions burning in her eyes. "It could have been a mere pretense, set up to appear as though it were such a thing but intent solely on injuring you."

Mrs. Grey cleared her throat gently, catching their attention. "It may very well be that they wished to remove your life from this world entirely, Lord Strickland," she said as the others simply sat quietly, in obvious agreement. "You must take a great deal more care now, I believe. If you had fallen harder, if you had..." She trailed off and looked away, her face pale. "It could have been a great deal worse."

"But it was not," he answered, refusing to let any fear take a hold of his heart. "And whilst I will not be grateful for the pain that now lingers, I am glad that there is now very little doubt as to which gentleman it was that attempted such a thing."

"Lord Brookmire," Lady Juliet murmured as everyone else nodded. "Then, if we are aware of it, the question now comes as to what we are to do next?"

Duncan's lips twisted. "Indeed, Lady Juliet," he agreed softly. "Just what are we to do?"



\* \* \*

The following afternoon, Duncan's ankle was a little better, but he was still unable to walk without support. The rest of his body burned with pain no matter how he sat or stood. It had been difficult to rise from his bed and to have to request help from his staff had been somewhat embarrassing. However, after dressing and eating a hearty breakfast, he felt a good deal better.

You have escaped thrice.

Those words had not left him. They had been spoken with anger and vehemence, making him realize—as Mrs. Grey had said herself—that he was in a good deal more danger than he had ever anticipated. Lord Brookmire, if it was he who was doing such things, appeared to be more than a little furious that Duncan had thus far managed to escape from severe injury—or worse. That thought had been a sobering one. If his life was to be taken from him, then what was the purpose behind it? His cousin was the one who would take the title and Duncan was more than certain that there was no such dark vehemence within the man.

Unless I have been mistaken about that, he mused to himself, sitting down rather heavily in an overstuffed chair in the drawing room, letting his body relax against the cushions. The footman set out a stool for his ankle and Duncan nodded to him, gesturing to him that he might leave him now. Closing his eyes, he let his mind return to his cousin. Did he know him so little? Was there a hidden eagerness within him that would go so far as to take Duncan's life from him simply to gain the title? Try as he might, Duncan simply could not find it in his heart to believe it.

"My lord, you have visitors."

Duncan did not even open his eyes. "Of course," he murmured, trying to find the strength to push himself to his feet. "Show them in at once." With an effort, he opened his eyes and put his hands on the arms of the chair, about to attempt to push himself to his feet, when Lady Juliet stepped into the room and let out a startled exclamation.

"Lord Strickland, pray do not," she said, hurrying toward him. "You are still in pain, are you not?"

Gratefully, Duncan sank back down into his chair as Mrs. Grey and Lord and Lady Richmond came in after Lady Juliet. "You can tell as much simply by looking at me, Lady Juliet?" he asked, a small smile tugging at his lips. "Do I truly look that terrible?"

Lady Juliet hesitated, then smiled, although her eyes still lingered on him. "You are a

little grey," she answered honestly. "And the way you set your jaw made it quite apparent that you were in a little difficulty." She sat down, smoothing her skirts as she did so. "Besides which, there is no need for any ceremony," she finished. "Not when we know what you have endured."

"Indeed," Lord Richmond muttered, tilting his head as he looked at Duncan. "You are a little recovered, at least?"

"I am still in some pain, but I can walk, at least," Duncan replied with a wry smile. "Although I thank you for your assistance last evening, Lord Richmond." Lord Richmond had been required to help Duncan to his carriage, which had been most embarrassing, but, much to Duncan's relief, had been achieved without either of them being spotted by any other guests.

Lord Richmond waved a hand, dismissing Duncan's thanks. "Now, this letter, Lady Juliet," he said as maids came in to set out tea and cakes for them all. "Did you bring it with you?"

Lady Juliet nodded and quickly extracted it from her person. "Here," she said, glancing from Duncan to Lord Richmond, as though uncertain as to who she was to give it to. "As I have said, there is nothing within it."

Seeing Lord Richmond gesture that she ought to give to Duncan rather than to himself, Duncan again attempted to rise so that Lady Juliet would not have to do so, only for her to hurry across to him in a flurry of skirts, a sharp look in her eye. With a murmur of thanks, Duncan took it and then sat back down, whilst Lady Juliet asked if she might pour the tea. With a nod, Duncan looked down at the letter, seeing the flecks of blood that stained the outside. His stomach turned over. It was not that the blood itself made him feel so, but rather the thought of what had happened in order for it to occur in the first place. Grimacing, he turned it over and saw the broken seal, lifting it first and then spreading the letter out.

It was just as Lady Juliet had said. There was nothing written there, nothing that he could see at all. His heart sank. Whilst he had known that Lady Juliet had stated very clearly that there were no words written there, part of him had hoped that there would be something present that he could distinguish, something that she had missed.

But there was not.

"Might I?" Lord Richmond asked, getting up to take the letter from Duncan's outstretched hand. "There is nothing there, then?"

"Nothing," Duncan replied heavily, before smiling gratefully at Lady Juliet as she set a teacup on the small table beside him. "It is exactly as Lady Juliet has said."

"Which is to be expected," Lady Richmond said dryly. "Were you hoping for something else, Lord Strickland?"

Duncan allowed a heavy sigh to pass through his lips. "I do not know what I was hoping for, Lady Richmond," he said honestly. "To know that the highwaymen were not merely a group of men set on doing harm to anyone they could but, instead, that they were present solely to bring harm to me has made my mind and heart very heavy indeed."

"I can well understand that," Lady Richmond answered gently. "It is very strange that

one of the men in the carriage before you was attacked in such a cruel fashion, however, if they were only waiting for you."

"Perhaps it was meant to be proof that they were highwaymen," Lady Juliet suggested with a frown. "Although we shall know more soon, I hope."

Duncan's brows rose. "Oh?"

"My father has been in correspondence with a Mr. Johnson," she said, by way of explanation. "It is he who has been taking care of the third man we found, who was, I believe, barely alive when they found him." Her lips turned downwards, her eyes glistening as memories returned to her. "He was also responsible for burying the two others."

"A good man," Lord Richmond rumbled as Duncan nodded. "And you say that he has been in correspondence with your father?"

"Yes, that is so," Lady Juliet replied with a small, sad smile. "My father was greatly troubled by what we discovered and has, I believe, been quite hopeful that the third man, whoever he is, will recover to the point of being able to not only say what occurred but perhaps describe those who attacked him. The letter was on his person also, although my father is unaware that I have it still. I know that my father wishes to know the moment the unfortunate soul is able to speak without restraint or difficulty."

A new admiration rose in Duncan's chest for Lord Lansbury. "That is very good of your father."

"Mr. Johnson wrote only this morning to state that the man has begun to recover somewhat," Lady Juliet continued, sounding quite relieved. "He was, for some time, between life and death and we were not certain that he would recover. But now, it seems, that he is well on the way to recovery and will soon be able to tell us a little more, once he has recovered his strength."

Duncan nodded slowly, rubbing his chin for a moment. "Then we might be able to discover something more about these highwaymen very soon," he said hopefully. "I cannot be certain whether or not this man's description of those who attacked him will bring anything more to light, but we can certainly make sense of why he was carrying such a strange letter."

"Might I ask if there is knowledge of this man's name?" Lady Richmond asked, and Lady Juliet began to frown hard, looking toward Mrs. Grey. "I presume he was so grievously injured that, as yet, he has been unable to say more than a word or two."

"I—I believe he did," Lady Juliet said slowly as Mrs. Grey nodded. "My father told me of it this morning. I cannot be certain, but I believe it was one Mr. Ayles?" She looked again to Mrs. Grey, who twisted her lips for a moment and then confirmed it.

"Yes, I believe that was correct," she said quietly. "A Mr. Ayles. We know nothing more, however. The poor fellow has been unable to say more than a word or two, apparently, given his lack of strength."

Duncan stared at Lady Juliet, his heart thundering furiously as he felt all of his strength beginning to drain from him. It could not be. It could not be.

"Lord Strickland?"

Lady Juliet was watching him now, her brow furrowing as she leaned forward in her

chair, looking at him carefully, clearly aware that there was something troubling him.

"Is something wrong, Strickland?" Lord Richmond asked as Lady Richmond and Mrs. Grey looked on, clearly perplexed. "You look as though you have had a great shock."

Duncan closed his eyes and forced himself to speak. "You said a Mr. Ayles, Lady Juliet?" he asked, opening his eyes to see her nodding, her blue eyes wide with astonishment. "Are you quite certain?"

"I believe I am, yes," she replied anxiously. "Why, Lord Strickland? Is that man known to you?"

Nodding, Duncan felt an ache rise in his heart, horrified to realize that the man who was now recovering from a great and severe attack was, in fact, well known to him.

"Mr. Ayles, if it is one and the same, is my cousin," he said slowly, aware of the gasps of astonishment that came from almost every quarter. "Mr. and Mrs. Ayles live in the country, in a very pretty little house. Mr. Ayles has excellent employment and both he and I have kept in correspondence over the years, although it is not entirely regular." He shook his head, reaching for his teacup as though that might help push aside his shock a little more. "My own cousin. I—I cannot imagine..." Swallowing hard, he looked up at them all. "I must go to him at once."

There was a short silence before Lord Richmond spoke up, shaking his head. "You cannot, Strickland, not when you are still recovering yourself," he said decisively. "Believe me, I well understand the desire to go at once, but if he is only just able to speak a few words, then he will not have the strength for some days to enter into conversation."

Lady Juliet nodded. "Mr. Johnson is doing all he can for him," she said earnestly. "He will write to my father the moment that there is any improvement. I am sure it will be only a few days—perhaps a sennight—before things will improve."

Duncan shook his head, ignoring the stab of pain that flashed through his head. "I must go at once."

"You cannot," Lord Richmond said sharply. "You must recover first, Strickland."

"And I am sure that Lord Brookmire believes that he is gone from this world," Lady Richmond said gently. "There is no immediate threat."

Lowering his head for a moment, Duncan passed one hand over his eyes. He was battling hard against the desire to call for his carriage and to leave at once, discovering the location of where his cousin was from Lady Juliet herself. And yet, given that he was struggling with a good deal of pain still, he knew in his heart that it was wise for him to wait.

"What if Lord Brookmire hears that my cousin is recovering?" he asked hoarsely, looking up at them all. "The letter too—why was my cousin carrying such a thing? Who was it for? What might it mean?"

There was no immediate answer. His friends looked back at him with a gentle frown on each of their faces. They could not give him the responses he sought, could not tell him what he wanted to know.

"We will hear from Mr. Ayles himself very soon, I am sure," Lady Juliet said gently, clearly trying to encourage him. "He will be able to give you the answers you seek."

"And in the meantime?" Duncan asked, speaking more sharply than he had intended.

"What am I to do? Sit here and recover whilst I worry about my cousin?" Squeezing his eyes closed, he ran one hand across his forehead. "What of his wife? His children? Are they now living alone, uncertain and afraid as to where he is gone?"

"I cannot answer that," Lord Richmond said quietly. "And by all means, write to her if you wish it, but I cannot advise that you travel when you are still recovering. Lady Juliet will tell us the moment news comes from Mr. Johnson and we will travel together to speak to your cousin."

"Or even have him brought to London, if he is well enough," Lady Juliet suggested, and Duncan let out a quiet groan, wishing that he was just as strong and able as he usually was. Had he not been thrown down the staircase last evening, then he would have been able to walk without difficulty and could have traveled to see Ayles without hesitation.

"Very well," he said eventually. "But there must be something more we can do in the meantime."

"Of course there is," Lady Juliet said firmly. "I will be introducing myself to Lord Brookmire."

Duncan's eyes flew to hers, a protest burning on his lips.

"I am aware that you will tell me there is a danger in acquainting myself with him, but it will be quite all right," Lady Juliet continued, sounding quite determined. "It may be that something he says or someone he is acquainted with will catch my attention."

"And I will be with her, of course," Mrs. Grey added as Lord and Lady Richmond nodded.

Letting out a long breath, Duncan spread his hands. "It seems it is all agreed on, then," he said without any sense of contentment. "I am merely to stay here and do what I can to recover in the meantime."

Lady Juliet smiled at him gently. "You may use your time to consider the letter," she suggested, as though she could see his frustration and wanted to help. "There is mayhap a secret there that the rest of us have not yet discovered."

With a twist of his lips, Duncan nodded. "Very well," he said as the others looked on with evident relief in all of their expressions. "And you will inform me the moment your father receives word from Mr. Johnson?"

With a nod, Lady Juliet held his gaze. "Of course, Lord Strickland," she said. "Of course I will."



# 11

"How very good to meet you."

The knot of anxiety that had settled in Juliet's chest did not depart from her but rather grew in strength as she curtsied, lifting her gaze to Lord Brookmire as she forced a smile to her lips. Lord Brookmire appeared to be rather bored with such an introduction, for he did not show any particular interest in greeting her and there was not even a pleasant smile on his face as she looked back at him.

"And are you in London for the Season, Lord Brookmire?" she asked as the other guests around her quietly kept to their own conversations. "Or do you intend to go elsewhere during these months? I have heard that Bath is quite lovely during the summer and some of the ton make their way there."

Lord Brookmire's lip curled as though she had asked the most ridiculous question. "Of course I shall remain in London," he said as Lady Thornton stood by Juliet's side, having been the one to introduce them both. "There is much more enjoyment to be found in London than in Bath." He snorted, his eyes flashing with what appeared to be a good deal of mirth. Mirth that came at Juliet's expense.

Instantly, Juliet felt a swell of dislike rise in her chest, but she forced her expression to remain entirely devoid of such a feeling.

"Then you must tell me what you enjoy the most about London, Lord Brookmire," she said, desperately hoping to find a way to continue the conversation despite his apparent boredom at being introduced to her. "I confess that I very much enjoy the theater, although I have not been very often."

Lord Brookmire let out a long and heavy sigh, as though he was greatly irritated with her conversation already. "The theater is pleasant enough," he said with a wry smile. "But there is often very poor company to be found there." He eyed her in a most unpleasant manner and Juliet found her anger beginning to burn. Whatever he was trying to imply, it was not anything kind.

You must do what you can, for Lord Strickland's sake.

Steeling herself, she put a small smile on her face and kept her voice light. "Then might I ask, Lord Brookmire, what occasions do you consider hold the best company?"

This question appeared to intrigue him and, much to Juliet's relief, he stood silently for a few moments with an evident attempt to think of an answer.

"I suppose I should say a dinner party," he replied eventually. "For then one can

choose one's company directly and not be forced into conversation with those one would rather avoid."

Rather than abating her frustration with his reply, Lord Brookmire's response only added to it. Juliet clenched her hands hard, the nails cutting into her skin as she forced herself to remain precisely where she was, and held back the sharp response she wanted to fling at him. Whether or not he was being deliberately rude, she did not know, but there was nothing about this gentleman that made her want to remain in his company for even a moment longer. She could not think of anything to say, her mind filled with nothing but anger as she looked up at him, seeing the arrogant smile on his face, as though he knew the precise effect he was having upon her.

"Oh, you must excuse me," Lady Thornton cried, cutting through the growing tension between Juliet and Lord Brookmire. "I must go and speak to Lady Sheffield."

"But of course," Mrs. Grey murmured as Juliet managed to smile and thank her, seeing the dark glance that was sent Lord Brookmire's way and finding herself rather satisfied that Lady Thornton was just as displeased with him as she was herself. Clearing her throat gently and wondering just how she was to turn the conversation to Lord Strickland, Juliet tilted her head and studied the gentleman again, relieved that she had managed to take the edge off her anger.

"And might I ask—" she began, only for a tall, slender lady dressed in a dark blue gown to walk past Juliet and stand directly in front of Lord Brookmire, greeting him as though Juliet and Mrs. Grey were not present.

"Lord Brookmire," she heard the lady say. "Good evening." Her words were sharp, tense—like fiery darts that were being flung one after the other. "Might I ask what occurred last evening? I thought that you—"

"It appears I am to take my leave," Juliet said loudly, not allowing the lady's rudeness to simply interrupt her in such a fashion. "Do excuse us, Lord Brookmire."

She made to turn away, but then the lady in question turned her head sharply and looked at her directly. A coldness about her pierced Juliet instantly, and even when the lady smiled there was no flicker of warmth in her gaze.

"Do excuse me," she uttered with a false brightness, as though she had only just realized what she had done. "You were in conversation with Lord Brookmire, were you not? Forgive me, my dear, I was not even aware."

Juliet did not know what to say to this, for surely the lady would have noticed the two ladies that stood directly in front of Lord Brookmire.

Lord Brookmire cleared his throat. "Might I introduce Lady Juliet, daughter to the Earl of Lansbury," he said quickly, as though eager to have such a conversation ended as he gestured to the lady. "And Lady Ridgedale."

Finding the introduction rather abrupt, Juliet hesitated for a moment before curtsying quickly. "How very good to meet you," she murmured, a little awkwardly. "Pray, excuse me. Our conversation was almost at an end."

Lady Ridgedale laughed and shook her head, although Juliet did not miss the coldness that lingered in the lady's eyes. "Nay, it was nothing of importance," she said, turning a little more toward Lord Brookmire. "A foolish matter, truly."

Mrs. Grey touched Juliet's elbow, murmuring something to her, and Juliet, grateful for the excuse, simply shook her head. "I must excuse myself," she said quietly. "I do hope you both enjoy the rest of the evening." She turned to her chaperone, who led her across the room, making certain not to even glance back at Lord Brookmire and Lady Ridgedale. Her irritation at their behavior, her anger at Lord Brookmire's rudeness, and her intense dislike of their characters rolled up into a tight ball within her, her breathing faster than usual and her hands still curled up into fists.

"You did very well, my dear," Mrs. Grey murmured as they came into the company of Lord and Lady Richmond, who were both talking to another young lady and her mother. Juliet remained to one side for a few moments with Mrs. Grey, making certain not to interrupt the conversation but rather to wait until there was an opportune moment for her to join them. It also gave her the chance to calm herself somewhat, to take in long breaths and to let her hands relax as she blew out some of her ire.

"They were both exceptionally rude," she said, only just managing to keep her voice low as Mrs. Grey nodded, clearly just as unhappy as she at the behavior exhibited by Lord Brookmire and Lady Ridgedale.

"Quite what Lady Ridgedale thought she was doing by interrupting us both in such a manner, I cannot imagine," Mrs. Grey huffed. "And to pretend that she did not even realize we were speaking to Lord Brookmire is utter nonsense, I am sure."

"Indeed," Juliet replied as Lord and Lady Richmond ended their conversation and came quickly to join Juliet and Mrs. Grey. "I found myself most upset with them both."

A smile settled upon Lord Richmond's face as he approached, evidently overhearing her. "You have been upset by something, Lady Juliet?" he asked as Lady Richmond's face filled with concern. "Then let both my wife and me restore your good spirits."

Juliet found herself smiling despite herself. "You are both very kind," she said honestly. "Lord Brookmire, on the other hand, was one of the rudest gentlemen I believe I have ever met. His manner and his conversation were both ill-judged and rather insulting at times."

"Only for us then to be interrupted by another lady, who came to stand directly in front of Juliet in order to speak to Lord Brookmire," Mrs. Grey said with a shake of her head. "Can you imagine it? She claimed she did not see us both, but I can hardly believe that."

Lady Richmond laughed and settled a hand on Juliet's arm for a moment in a comforting gesture. "That does sound quite awful. I presume Lord Brookmire said nothing about Lord Strickland?"

"I did not even manage to mention him," Juliet replied with a sigh. "Lord Brookmire was clearly entirely unwilling to speak with me for long, although I must say he appeared more than eager to converse with Lady Ridgedale."

The moment she mentioned Lady Ridgedale's name, the smiles fell from both Lord and Lady Richmond's faces. With a quick glance toward each other, they then turned back to Juliet, who was looking at them with great confusion as to why they appeared so altered.

"Did you state that Lady Ridgedale was in conversation with Lord Brookmire?" Lord

Richmond asked, a dark frown coursing across his brow. "That they appeared to know each other?"

"There was not any need for introduction, if that is what you mean," Juliet replied, still not fully understanding why they appeared to be so interested in Lady Ridgedale. "I thought her most discourteous, however, for as was said, she simply strode in front of Lord Brookmire and spoke to him as though Mrs. Grey and I were not present."

"Goodness," Lady Richmond murmured, looking at her husband with wide eyes. "We should inform Lord Strickland of this at once."

Juliet frowned, then looked to Mrs. Grey before returning her gaze to the Richmonds. "I do not understand," she said, spreading her hands. "Lady Ridgedale's connection to Lord Brookmire is worthy of note?"

Lord Richmond nodded. "Indeed it is," he said quietly, his eyes sliding from the right to the left and then back again, as though he was afraid of who might overhear him.

"It has not been just young ladies that have sought out Lord Strickland's attention, you understand," Lady Richmond said delicately, and Juliet quickly realized what she meant, a swirl of embarrassment heating her cheeks. "Lady Ridgedale was also very interested in a...connection of sorts, even though she was wed to Lord Ridgedale."

"I see," Juliet replied, wishing the color would dissipate from her face. "Is Lord Ridgedale not a wealthy gentleman?"

Lord and Lady Richmond exchanged glances.

"He was a wealthy gentleman," Lord Richmond replied quietly. "Lady Ridgedale is now a widow. When he was alive, I believe he was not overly generous toward his wife and Lady Ridgedale chafed against such restraints. Therefore, she sought out an intimacy with Lord Strickland in the hope that he would give her what she wished for the most—some wealth of her own."

"Whether that be in jewelry, in gifts, or in other small favors," Lady Richmond added quickly. "Lord Strickland, of course, refused to even countenance such a thing."

"Which," Juliet interrupted, realizing the reason for their interest, "did not please Lady Ridgedale at all."

Lady Richmond nodded. "I believe she was very angry and deeply frustrated," she said quietly. "I know that the rumor is that she has gained a good deal of wealth from her husband's passing, for it seems that he made provision for her in his will."

"Meaning that she has no need to make any sort of connection with Lord Strickland—or any other," Juliet added slowly, to which Lord and Lady Richmond nodded. "She has the wealth she now requires." Her frown deepened again as she saw the same discontent flickering in Lady Richmond's eyes. "Yet you believe that there might be something of importance in her acquaintance with Lord Brookmire?"

Lord Richmond let out a long breath. "It may very well mean nothing, but it does interest me that there is a connection between her and Lord Brookmire," he said with a small shrug. "She was, as I have said, very angry and upset with Lord Strickland for refusing to give in to her supposed charms and, in his refusal, denying her what she so desperately wanted from him."

A note of fear struck Juliet's heart. "And do you believe that she might have held onto

such anger?" she asked, and Lady Richmond began to nod. "And that, in all that she felt, she then decided to punish Lord Strickland in some way?"

There was silence for a moment as Lord and Lady Richmond considered her question. Then, with a small sigh, Lord Richmond spread his hands. "It is a possibility," he conceded, "and not one that I have considered before when, in fact, I should have done. Lady Ridgedale is a vindictive, spiteful creature who has no regard for the opinions or considerations of others."

"And she has the wealth to ensure that it is not she who is involved in any way," Lady Richmond added. "If Lord Brookmire has been promised something from her, whether that be payment in either coin or favors, then he is the one responsible for attempting to injure Lord Strickland. But behind it may well be Lady Ridgedale."

Juliet took in a long breath, feeling herself shudder, her eyes closing tightly as she fought to control the panic that suddenly took hold of her. She had been so close to Lady Ridgedale, so near to the very person that might be the one responsible for all that had happened to Lord Strickland. "Then what do we do?" she asked, opening her eyes to see Lord Richmond frowning darkly. "Might we speak to her this evening?"

"I do not think that would be wise," Mrs. Grey said, speaking for what was the first time. "You ought not to do such a thing, Juliet, for fear of arousing her suspicion. After all, it was quite clear to her that we thought her most improper in her manner. She will not expect us to return to her company again."

"It may very well be that such an outcome is precisely what she wanted," Lord Richmond replied grimly. "We can do nothing this evening. We must speak to Lord Strickland and, thereafter, decide what it is we shall do."

"I would agree," Lady Richmond said, with Juliet feeling it best to do whatever they considered right, given just how much they knew compared to her. "And the sooner he knows, the better."

Juliet pressed her lips together and darted a quick look toward Mrs. Grey. There was a rather bold suggestion in her mind and whether or not she dared to speak it aloud, she was not yet sure. Would Mrs. Grey concur? Or would she be upset at such an idea?

"Might I suggest," she began, choosing her words with great care and finding her heart quickening just a little, "that if it is of such great urgency, we take our leave from here and call upon Lord Strickland?" Seeing the look of surprise that jumped onto Mrs. Grey's expression, Juliet continued quickly before her chaperone could interrupt. "Surely we must inform him just as soon as we can? And, thereafter, we will need to form a plan of what we are to do next."

"It would be wise," Lord Richmond agreed slowly. "What say you, Mrs. Grey?"

Juliet held her breath, her gaze swiveling toward her chaperone, who sighed and shot her a rueful look.

"Very well, but I must have Lady Juliet returned to her father at the proper time," she said, somewhat reluctantly. Lord and Lady Richmond nodded and turned to take their leave, but Mrs. Grey put a hand on Juliet's arm.

"You must be careful, Juliet," she warned firmly. "I have been, perhaps, unwise in permitting you to behave in this fashion thus far, but I will state that it comes from a

desire not only to aid Lord Strickland but also to see a match created between the two of you. A match that, I believe, is still possible. However, I fear that the danger that encircles Lord Strickland is beginning to pull you in also and, in that, perhaps I should insist upon removing you from it."

Juliet's heart lurched. "Please, do not," she said urgently. "Mrs. Grey, I cannot even imagine leaving Lord Strickland in such a situation, not when there is more I can do. I know you have been not only understanding but also more than willing to step outside of what one is expected to do during the London Season, and for that I shall always be very grateful indeed."

Mrs. Grey's lips twisted, and she studied Juliet for some moments. "Do you care for Lord Strickland?"

The question was not only blunt but rather direct and Juliet felt embarrassment flood her soul as she dropped her gaze to the floor.

"I do care for him," she said softly, knowing that it was best to be honest with her chaperone, even if it was deeply discomfiting to do so. "I, of course, wish him to be free from Lord Brookmire and whoever else is involved, but once the matter is at an end, I cannot help but wonder..." She trailed off, unable to finish the sentence and praying that her chaperone would know what she meant.

"Then I am satisfied," Mrs. Grey said with a broad smile, surprising Juliet somewhat. "For I am quite certain that Lord Strickland has hopes similar to your own, my dear."

Juliet's eyes flared. "Truly?"

Mrs. Grey laughed and patted Juliet's arm. "Let us just wait and see what happens," she said, turning Juliet toward the door. "But I am very sure indeed that Lord Strickland will not simply thank you and turn from your acquaintance—which will, of course, make a good many people very happy indeed."

"Lord Strickland?"

Juliet stepped into the room, relieved not only that Lord Strickland appeared glad to see them all but that he was looking a good deal better than before.

"Please, do not rise," Lord Richmond said with a chuckle. "Your ankle?"

"Recovering," Lord Strickland replied, although his eyes lingered on Juliet's face. "You have something of importance to say to me, mayhap? It is not that I am not glad to have evening visitors since I am confined here for the present, but this is certainly not a usual occurrence."

"Indeed, it is not," Juliet replied, sitting down carefully. "It is that I have met someone that Lord and Lady Richmond believe to be of importance." Her gaze slid toward Lady Richmond, who was sitting down carefully. "Lord Brookmire, I must say, was not particularly gentlemanly and I certainly did not enjoy conversing with him."

Lord Strickland grinned, his expression amused as his eyes lit up. "No?"

"And that was without even mentioning your name, Lord Strickland," Mrs. Grey remarked, her eyes twinkling. "I must admit that I, too, found him very rude, for some of his remarks were..." She broke off, shaking her head. "He was not at all the sort of gentleman I would ever permit Lady Juliet to acquaint herself with. Although the lady in

question was all the more improper."

Juliet watched as Lord Strickland's smile faded. "And which lady might that be?"

She took a breath. "Lady Ridgedale," she said quietly, seeing how the astonishment at her statement caused Lord Strickland's eyes to flare wide. "She interrupted the conversation—such as it was—between myself and Lord Brookmire without any hesitation, and then attempted to profusely apologize, pretending as though she had not been aware of my presence."

"Which," Mrs. Grey added thoughtfully, "might well have been the case, given just how determined she was to speak to Lord Brookmire."

Pressing her lips together for a moment, Juliet leaned forward in her chair, looking earnestly at Lord Strickland. "Lord Richmond has told us of her attentions toward you, and how you rebuffed them," she said hastily, seeing how Lord Strickland opened his mouth in what was perhaps an attempt to say precisely that. "Might it be that her dislike of you now could push her to such cruelty?"

Lord Strickland said nothing for some minutes. In fact, the entire room fell silent as everyone within it watched him, waiting for him to give his opinion on what Juliet had suggested. Eventually, he let out a heavy sigh and raked one hand through his hair, which made it fall at random, burning like gold in the candlelight.

"It may be," he said as Juliet's stomach lurched. "The vehemence of her anger at my refusal is something that I shall never forget."

Lord Richmond rose to his feet, walking across the room to pour brandies. "Then we have a connection between Lord Brookmire and Lady Ridgedale which makes sense," he said as Juliet nodded. "What must we do next?"

Lord Strickland shook his head. "I do not know," he answered, before reaching for the letter that Juliet had left with him earlier. "We might have to wait until my cousin recovers himself before anything further can be done." Another sigh left his lips. "If only I knew why my cousin carried such a letter with him. It might then—"

His words trailed off as something seemed to occur to him, and he held the letter to the candle by his side. For a moment, Juliet thought he was to burn it, but then realized that Lord Strickland was, apparently, warming the page.

"Good gracious."

Lord Strickland's whisper tore through the room like a thunderclap. With a gasp of astonishment, he rose to his feet, holding out the letter toward Juliet.

"Look!"

She took it from him, a little confused, only for a gasp of astonishment to leave her lips as she saw, for the first time, words appearing on the page.

"How can this be?" she whispered as Lord and Lady Richmond rose to come toward her, their eyes wide as they looked at the letter. "How did it come about?"

Lord Strickland ran one hand through his hair, letting out a long breath as he moved back toward his seat, his leg still paining him too much to remain standing. "It appears that my cousin was afraid for his life," he said heavily as Juliet began to read the letter. "He used this technique—one that he and I used upon occasion during our childhood—in order to ensure that what he wrote was kept secret from anyone who might come across

it. No doubt he intended to send it to me once he arrived in London, without having to come to speak to me in person, fearful of what would occur if he did so and yet desperate to make certain I was safe." Closing his eyes, he let out a groan. "I should have remembered that this was what we used to do as children. It was something my grandfather showed me. A childish game but one that we both loved."

Juliet shook her head. "You did not know it was he that had sent it," she said hoarsely, her whole body burning with the shock of what she had just read. "How could you know that your cousin was coming to speak to you?" Her eyes returned to the paper. "His poor wife..."

"I pray he will recover," Lord Richmond said firmly, "so that he might return to his wife and children. He sounds, Strickland, a very courageous man."

"He is."

Juliet shook her head, looking at the paper again and reading the words. The words that told them so much and now filled her with horror. "'Lady Ridgedale seeks to end your life,'" she read aloud. "'Do not ask me yet how I know such a thing, but it is true. My own life has been threatened, but I cannot leave you to face your doom without making you aware of it.'" Letting out a long breath, Juliet looked up at Lord Strickland again, seeing the grief and upset on his face. "A very courageous man, Lord Strickland."

"He knows all, it seems," Lord Strickland replied, rubbing one hand across his forehead. "I need to speak to him."

"You may well be able to soon," Mrs. Grey said, pushing hope into her voice. "Only a few days and then..."

Juliet saw the hope in Lord Strickland's eyes but knew that was all it could be. Hope. Hope that his cousin would recover enough to speak of all that he knew, to tell him everything about Lady Ridgedale.

"I must meet with Lady Ridgedale," Lord Strickland murmured, and Juliet's audible gasp echoed around the room. "There must be something I can say to her, something that I can do that will make her say—"

"It is not wise," Lord Richmond interrupted. "If you plan anything specific with Lady Ridgedale, then she might very well make use of such an opportunity."

"An opportunity to do you harm," Lady Richmond finished as Juliet nodded fervently. "You must be wise in this, Lord Strickland."

It was not as Juliet had hoped. She had expected him to come up with some sort of resounding plan, had hoped that he would know precisely what to do now that they had discovered Lady Ridgedale's involvement with Lord Brookmire, but it seemed now that it was not to be.

"Perhaps," Mrs. Grey murmured quietly, "we might meet again come the morrow. This must be something of a shock for you, Lord Strickland."

He looked up, his eyes searching Juliet's face rather than responding to Mrs. Grey.

"This is a rather improper request, Mrs. Grey," he said quietly. "But might I have a few moments with Lady Juliet? I swear I shall only speak with her, but I must make some things quite clear." Slowly, his eyes turned to Mrs. Grey and, as they did so, Juliet felt her heart slam hard into her chest. Her breath hitched as she glanced to her companion,



utterly astonished when Mrs. Grey nodded.

"A few moments, Lord Strickland," she said firmly as she rose from her chair. "I will be just outside the door."

Juliet did not know what to do or say, her hands tightening on the arms of the chair as the room emptied, save for herself and Lord Strickland. What was it he wanted to tell her? Certain that he could hear the thumping of her heart, Juliet dropped her gaze to the floor, pressing her lips together hard.

"Lady Juliet."

Lord Strickland's voice was quiet and gentle, holding a tenderness she had never once expected to hear.

"You have already become far too involved in this matter," he continued as she slowly lifted her eyes to his. "There is nothing more you need do. It is entirely at an end now. I have discovered the truth, I am sure of it, and for your own safety, I must urge you to step back from me—from this."

Juliet shook her head, a sudden fear clutching at her heart. "I do not wish to, Lord Strickland."

"But you must," he declared, rising from his chair in spite of the obvious pain he was in. "You have done more than enough, Lady Juliet. Return to the joys and the delights of the Season, rather than wasting your time with me. I wish only to protect you, to push you back into the life you ought to have been enjoying thus far here in London."

Now she rose also, coming a little closer to him and feeling tension rippling down her spine as she looked at him. His eyes held such warmth and yet such desperation that, for some moments, she could not look away.

"I cannot," she answered quietly. "I will not."

Lord Strickland dropped his head and let out a long breath, sounding more than a little frustrated. "Why?"

Lifting his head, he looked back at her steadily, waiting for an answer that she was not certain she could give. How could she explain the desperate urge to remain by his side? How could she express all that she felt when she could not even fully understand it herself?

"Why, Lady Juliet?" he asked again, taking another small step forward so that he was only a few inches away from her. "What is it that will keep you here with me?"

"You."

The word seemed to rip the room apart, making her chest tighten and her eyes widen with the shock of what she had said. Breathing heavily, she stared up into his face, feeling her whole body tingle with both embarrassment and the awareness that what she had said could not be taken back. Lord Strickland did not respond, nor did he seem surprised, his eyes holding hers with a gentleness that Juliet could practically feel emanating from him.

"Lady Juliet?"

Mrs. Grey's voice broke through the swirling of Juliet's frantic thoughts, her quiet words forcing Juliet to look away from Lord Strickland and toward her chaperone.

"We must depart," her chaperone said, taking a few steps into the room. "Come now."

Juliet nodded, looking back at Lord Strickland and feeling her face burn with embarrassment. He had said nothing to her since she had given that one, single exclamation and she had no knowledge as to what he was thinking at present.

"Good evening, Lord Strickland," she murmured, bobbing into a curtsy and dropping her gaze. Turning back toward the door, she made to follow Mrs. Grey out of the room, only for Lord Strickland to catch her hand.

Astonishment flared in her chest as he took her hand in his and lifted it to his mouth, heat running from her hand to her arm until it coursed all through her as his lips touched the back of her hand. His eyes held a good deal of unspoken emotion and yet Juliet was too afraid, too uncertain, to ask him what he felt.

"Good evening, Lady Juliet," he murmured, lowering her hand from his mouth but still holding it tightly, his fingers gently pressing hers. "And might I thank you for your honesty. It..." Letting go of her hand with seeming reluctance, he smiled at her again. "It has brought my heart a great deal of joy."

Uncertain as to what to make of this but finding that she was, for some reason, smiling back at him with a great sense of happiness flooding her, Juliet held his gaze for another few moments before unwillingly turning back toward the door so that she might take her leave. But the smile did not leave her face and her heart did not lose its joy for the rest of the evening until, finally, she fell into a wonderful, delighted slumber.

# 12

Duncan could not remove Lady Juliet from his thoughts. He spent half the night tossing and turning, the echo of her voice spinning around his mind, the memory of how she had looked as she had spoken filling his thinking until he gave himself up to it, allowing his heart and mind to open entirely toward her and, for the first time, thinking about what she might one day be to him.

It had been clear that she had not intended to speak in such a way, had not meant to be as honest with him as she had been, and yet he was glad indeed that she had done so. Whilst she had not expressed it fully, he was certain now that there was a desire within Lady Juliet's heart that was much akin to his own. For whatever reason, he wanted nothing more than to be in her company, to linger there and to have her as a part of his life. He did not think that he would have any satisfaction in continuing on without her and certainly, there was no eagerness to depart from her in any way. He had only said such a thing to her for her own safety, wanting to make certain that she felt no obligation toward him when there was none. What he had discovered instead was that there was more than just a determination for determination's sake. Rather, there was clearly an eagerness to remain near to him. She wanted to be by his side, wanted to do all she could to bring this matter to an end so that...

Duncan frowned. So that they might continue their acquaintance without hinderance? So that they might then consider what the future could hold for them both? Slowly, his frown lifted as he realized that this in itself was precisely what he wanted. He was almost desperate to find that happiness and contentment that had eluded him for so long. No longer would he have to worry about what wicked scheme would next be thrown at him, no longer would he have to try and consider what he was to do next. In fact, he would not even have to worry about which young lady he would be forced into conversation with next, not when he had Lady Juliet.

A smile spread across his face and he sat back in his chair, resting his head and allowing a sense of contentment to fill him. He would ask Lord Lansbury for his permission to court Lady Juliet and, thereafter, would allow himself to finally consider a future that he had never even felt was anywhere near his reach before.

A scratch at the door alerted him to the butler's presence, drawing his thoughts away from Lady Juliet for the time being.

"Come in."

Sitting up straighter and relieved that his body was a little less painful today, Duncan waited until the butler stepped into the room, reaching for the letter that the butler held out to him on a silver tray.

"Might I fetch you something to eat, my lord?" the butler asked, but Duncan shook his head.

"No, I am quite all right at present," he said, turning the letter over and noticing the seal, aware of how his heart leapt wildly in his chest. "Was there any requirement for me to reply quickly?"

The butler shook his head and Duncan dismissed him so that he might read the note from Lady Juliet in peace. Would she speak of last evening? Would she give further explanation as to what she had said? With a broad smile settling across his face, he opened the note and read the page eagerly, only for his heart to slow suddenly, his smile fading to an astonished expression.

Your cousin has regained some strength, the note said. It seems he has insisted on returning to London. He will be here this very afternoon, brought to my father's townhouse. Pray, join us if you have the strength.

That was all it said. There was no more, no expression of hope that they might be able to speak again privately at another time, no reiterating of what she had said last evening, but Duncan did not even permit himself to feel any disappointment. Instead, his anticipation instantly began to build.

He pushed himself from his chair and limped toward the door, throwing it open and forcing himself back toward his bedchamber with as much haste as he could. There was no time to waste. He would have to dress and prepare himself to call upon Lady Juliet in the hope that he would be present for his cousin's arrival. Once more, he felt his heart fill with gratitude toward the Earl of Lansbury, grateful that the gentleman was the sort of man who would not simply stand aside whilst other men lay injured. Quite how he would explain to Lord Lansbury what had happened to his cousin and his knowledge of it, Duncan was not yet sure, but for the moment, that did not matter. All he wanted was to see his cousin again and to, finally, hear all that had taken place these last few, dreadful weeks.



\* \* \*

"Lord Strickland."

Lady Juliet practically breathed his name as he limped into the drawing room, rising quickly and making her way toward him, one hand outstretched. Whether or not she meant for him to take it, to kiss it as he had done last evening, Duncan was not certain, although, of course, he was more than eager to do so.

"Lady Juliet," he replied, embarrassed when she caught his arm and made to help him

to a chair. "I am quite all right, I assure you."

She laughed softly and tilted her head so that she might look him in the eye a little better. "Your face is quite grey and there is a good deal of strain written upon it," she told him with a knowing smile. "Do not think that you can hide the truth from me, Lord Strickland."

He grimaced but allowed himself to chuckle as she twinkled up at him, only just realizing that they were alone. Once he had sat down, he looked back at her as she settled herself into a seat near to him, finding himself most contented to be in her company again.

"Mrs. Grey?" he inquired, and her cheeks burned a sudden, hot red.

"She is just about to join us," she said, looking away from him as though embarrassed that he had noticed. "We will wait for refreshments until Lord and Lady Richmond arrive, however, if that is suitable for you?"

He nodded, not wanting her to feel any sort of mortification that her chaperone was not yet present but rather eager to make the most of such an opportunity.

"I am glad that we have a few moments with which to speak, Lady Juliet," he told her, seeing how she looked back at him tentatively. "After last evening, I have been quite unable to remove you from my thoughts. They have swirled furiously all night, filling me with regret that I did not respond to you when you spoke to me last evening."

Her gaze molded to his, a hope burning within her blue eyes as one dark curl fell forward across her cheek, as though everything within her was eager to hear what he had to say.

"Had I the wits, I would have told you, Lady Juliet, that I am more than delighted at your desire to remain so close to me," he said honestly. "It is more than I could have ever hoped for. The truth is, I find myself eager for this matter to be at an end, not only for my own safety but also to give me the freedom to consider what I might now wish to pursue."

A small, flickering frown danced across her brow. "What you would wish to pursue, Lord Strickland?"

A smile spread across his face before he could prevent it. "Indeed, Lady Juliet," he answered gently, leaning a little closer to her. "To consider my future. To consider what it is I now hope for, what I might be eager enough to seek out."

"Oh." Her color faded to a gentle pink, adding to her beauty. Duncan smiled delightedly at her, feeling his heart warming all the more to the idea of being closer to her than ever before.

"Would you be amenable to such considerations, Lady Juliet?" he asked hopefully. "Once this matter is resolved, I had thought to speak to your father, to determine whether or not he might be willing to allow me to court you."

Her eyes dropped to her hands that she now clasped so tightly in her lap, but Duncan did not miss the broad smile that spread across her face, the way that her cheeks warmed a little more. Settling back in his chair with a sigh of contentment, he waited for her to speak.

"I think, Lord Strickland, that I would be very glad of such a thing," she answered after

a few moments of quiet. "In fact, it would make my heart very happy indeed." Finally, she looked back at him, her eyes glowing, her smile dazzling him, and Duncan felt his contentment grow all the more.

"Wonderful," he found himself saying, as though he had been searching for the right words but had been quite unable to find more than one. "Then let us hope, Lady Juliet, that this will soon all be behind us so that we might consider the future together."



\* \* \*

"I shall leave you, of course."

Duncan made to rise but the earl gestured for him to remain sitting.

"You will have many questions to ask of your cousin, I am sure," Lord Lansbury continued as he made his way to the door. "Had it not been that I have many pressing matters of business, then I would have remained a little longer, but as things are at present..." He shrugged but Duncan could not help but feel a great deal of relief.

"I thank you, Lord Lansbury," he replied gratefully. "You have shown my cousin great kindness and, had it not been for Lady Juliet and I being so acquainted, it might have been some time before I came to know of his presence here in London."

The earl nodded and smiled toward his daughter who, much to Duncan's delight, was sitting in a most demure fashion, looking back at her father with a small smile gracing her lips. She said nothing to him, did not give a hint that there might have been more to her acquaintance than Lord Lansbury knew, but instead simply watched her father depart. The moment he left the room, however, Duncan felt relief wash all across the room, flooding each and every person as they sat a little more easily in their chairs.

Ayles, however, did not look as relieved as Duncan might have hoped. In fact, he had been rather shocked by the appearance of his cousin when he had first arrived, taking in the man's pale face, the dark shadows around his eyes, and the way that he had been helped into a chair by not one but two footmen. It had been a struggle for him to remain sitting straight, for Duncan had seen the strain ripple across his cousin's face, but he had been silently proud of such determination.

"Please, Mr. Ayles, do not feel you need to sit on ceremony any longer."

Lady Juliet's voice was kind, making Duncan wonder if she, too, was aware of the struggle that Mr. Ayles was currently enduring.

"Sit back, if you wish," she continued kindly. "I can see that you are fatigued and, after what you have endured, there is no shame in resting a little."

It took a moment but Ayles eventually did as she suggested, sitting back with a sigh and resting his head on the back of the chair.

"You are very kind, Lady Juliet," he rasped, his voice thick with tiredness and pain. "Very kind indeed." Slowly, his gaze returned to Duncan's, giving Duncan the impression

that his cousin was desperate for a moment to speak to him alone.

"I received your letter," Duncan began, seeing how his cousin's eyes widened. "Although I only discovered the truth of it yesterday."

Mr. Ayles smiled painfully. "I had hoped that it would remind you of what we did as boys, whenever our fathers had reason to call upon each other," he said as Duncan nodded. "Then you know you are in danger?"

"I do," Duncan replied, noting how Ayles' eyes went around the room. "But Lady Juliet was the one to overhear it being spoken at the first. She informed me of it, and with Lord and Lady Richmond's help, we have surmised that it is Lady Ridgedale who wishes to bring harm to me." Seeing his cousin nod, Duncan leaned forward in his chair. "Might I ask how you discovered it?"

"I received a note," Ayles replied, his voice still hoarse. "She requested to know whether or not you were returned from the continent, although gave no indication as to why. I did not respond to her, however, for there was something about the note that did not sit well with me." He shifted a little in his chair, a grimace pulling at his mouth. "I soon received another, which was, in its tone, a good deal more demanding. I did respond to that one, telling Lady Ridgedale that I was not at all certain of your plans." Shaking his head, he closed his eyes. "It was then that she came to call upon me."

There was a moment or two of silence.

"You mean to say that Lady Ridgedale called upon you to speak to you about Lord Strickland?" Lady Richmond asked, breaking the quiet. "What was she asking you about?"

Ayles' lips tipped in a wry expression. "There was the belief that I might wish to take on the title," he said heavily. "Lady Ridgedale made it quite plain that she thought very poorly of my cousin and insisted that I should be much better suited to such a thing. I believe she was quite astonished when I refused."

"You are a good man, Ayles," Duncan murmured, but Ayles shook his head.

"I should have written to you of her visit almost at once," he said softly. "Then you would have been aware of it. But I believed her to be quite foolish—almost, perhaps, a little mad. And thus, I dismissed it. It was not until I received another note from her, warning me away from speaking to you of her visit and her intentions, that I realized the truth."

"That she fully intended to remove me from this earth," Duncan muttered, and his cousin nodded. "You could not know, of course, that she held a great deal of anger toward me." Seeing his cousin frown, he quickly explained all that Lady Ridgedale had sought from him and how he had refused time and again, leaving her to become rather furious with his lack of agreement.

"And her anger has become so great that she wishes to take on some sort of revenge," he finished as Ayles' eyes widened with shock. "I did not expect it, of course, and had it not been for Lady Juliet, then I might well have succumbed to one of her schemes."

Ayles blew out a long breath and ran one shaky hand across his forehead. "I wrote to you," he said heavily. "I wrote many a letter, but I did not receive a reply. Afraid that my letters were being stopped by someone as yet unknown, I took leave of my wife and

children and made my way to London in the hope that you would be there for the Season." A wry smile lifted one side of his mouth. "As I said to Lady Ridgedale, I was quite uncertain as to whether or not you would be in London this year. But I went in the hope that you would be present and that I might warn you of her intentions."

"But you were prevented from doing so," Lady Juliet added as Ayles' turned his head toward her. "Highwaymen?"

Nodding slowly, Ayles frowned hard. "I believed them to be, yes," he said slowly. "Although one did not appear to be so. He stood behind as the other three men attacked me, as well as the other men within the carriage." His voice became thin with anger, his eyes narrowing as he looked away from them all, his gaze fixed to the floor. "We were all left for dead and, indeed, I believed myself to be so."

"Except," Duncan said quietly, "I do not think it was highwaymen, Ayles."

His cousin looked up sharply. "No?"

"No," Lord Richmond said, getting up from his chair in order to refill brandy glasses. "We believe it now to have been Lady Ridgedale's intention to prevent you from reaching London. Someone must have been watching all that you were doing, Mr. Ayles. Someone must have prevented your letters from reaching Lord Strickland. And someone, knowing of your intentions to come to London, made every preparation to stop you."

"All on Lady Ridgedale's orders," Duncan muttered darkly. "And I believe I know precisely who it was."

His cousin sucked in a breath, his eyes wide. "Then you are able to prevent them from injuring you further?"

"More than that," Duncan replied, a flare of anger burning in his chest. "I have every intention of making quite certain that their plans come to nothing but failure, Ayles. It is time that the truth is made known in its entirety. And I have just the way to do it."



\* \* \*

"Might you take my arm?"

Lady Juliet nodded but did not smile and Duncan could feel the tension radiating from her.

"It shall all be well," he assured her as best he could, taking in the seriousness of her gaze as she looked up at him. "Nothing can go wrong this evening."

"But it may still be that..." She swallowed hard but did not finish her sentence, slipping her hand under his arm.

"All will be well," he said again in an attempt to reassure her. "All I need do is make certain that Lord Brookmire hears what I have to say. He will not attempt to injure me here, not in front of so many patrons."

Lady Juliet let out her breath slowly, nodding as she did so. Her eyes roved around



the drawing room as though searching for those who might step out to attack him at any moment.

"You must try and smile, my dear lady, else no one here will think you glad to be in my company."

This brought a lightness to her expression that had not been there before, her lips quirking gently. "And surely that must apply to you also, Lord Strickland?" she asked as he grinned at her.

"I have no difficulty in expressing my delight in having you on my arm, Lady Juliet," he replied truthfully. "In fact, I shall be very glad indeed to walk about this room with you next to me. I shall not care one whit if anyone remarks upon it, for I am glad to be beside you."

This made her expression light up and Duncan smiled back at her, seeing the happiness in her eyes despite the tension that she must still surely feel.

"Then shall we make our way to what is certainly the loudest group of gentlemen and ladies that are present this evening?" she asked, tilting her head just a little. "They will, no doubt, be more than willing to listen to what you have to say and, in a short time, will spread it throughout everyone in this room."

Duncan laughed and patted her hand with his free one, fully aware that Mrs. Grey would remain close by, just as she was at present. "Very good, Lady Juliet," he said, beginning to walk across the room, his limp only slight as he pushed aside any pain that came with each step. "Then let us begin our plan."

Making his way slowly toward the large group and quickly spotting at least one gentleman he was acquainted with, Duncan bowed quickly and greeted him, being quickly welcomed into the group. Introducing Lady Juliet and fully aware of the knowing glances that were quickly shot between one lady and the next, he listened for a few moments to the amicable conversation, before managing to inject himself into it.

"Speaking of matters of interest," he said, quickly commanding the conversation, "I have only just discovered something that has greatly distressed me."

This, of course, caught almost everyone's attention and Duncan was left with a most attentive audience who all watched him with interest flickering in their eyes.

"My cousin—one Mr. Ayles—has only just written to me to inform me that he has been attacked on his way to London," he began as one or two ladies let out a startled exclamation. "He was left for dead but has, thankfully, begun to recover." Taking a small step forward, he leaned in a little more, keeping his voice low. "He states that he has something of great importance to tell me but that he cannot write of it, such is its seriousness."

"Good gracious!" one lady exclaimed, her eyes wide. "Whatever shall you do, Lord Strickland?"

"I am to go to him tomorrow afternoon, of course," Duncan replied as murmurs immediately began to rise from those within the group, speaking to each other about what he had only just revealed. "He is too unwell to travel to London and thus I am to make my way to an inn named 'The Owl and the Hound' which, I have been informed, is not too far from London. Less than a day's travel, I believe."

Lord Miller cleared his throat, his expression grave. "I do hope that you find him recovering well, Lord Strickland," he said. "Is there any suggestion as to what this dire news might be?"

Duncan shrugged and shook his head. "No, I have very little idea," he lied. "But I am eager to find out what it is, of course."

"Then might we wish you every success," said another young lady who then immediately shot a dark look toward Lady Juliet, which Duncan did not miss.

"I thank you," he replied, before excusing himself and, taking Lady Juliet with him, he stepped away from the group.

Lady Juliet swallowed hard, looking at him. "Do you believe it is done?"

With a quick look over his shoulder, Duncan nodded, chuckling at the sight of the ladies already removing themselves from the cluster of gentlemen so that they might all talk together.

"I believe all is as we had hoped," he told her. "Within the hour, Lord Brookmire shall know of it."

"And then, Lady Ridgedale," Lady Juliet murmured as he nodded. "Let us hope that they will act as you expect, Lord Strickland."

There was not even a flicker of doubt in Duncan's mind. "I have no doubt that they shall," he said firmly, pressing her hand lightly. "And then, my dear Lady Juliet, we shall have other things to speak of." Smiling at her, he saw her blush and the light that burned in her eyes. "A great many other things indeed."

# 13

"Juliet?"

Juliet lifted her head from her book, which she had not quite managed to read even though she had been staring at the page for at least ten minutes. "Yes, Mrs. Grey?" she asked, her anxiety growing steadily as she saw the look in the lady's eyes. "Is something the matter?" Closing the book, she rose to her feet.

Mrs. Grey shook her head. "All is well," she said gently. "Your father is aware that you are to spend the afternoon with Lord Strickland. He is already gone from the house so will not miss your prolonged absence. However," she continued as Juliet pressed one hand lightly to her stomach, "I continually question myself as to whether or not I am doing the right thing as your chaperone, Juliet. I know that you care for Lord Strickland, but he is right to suggest that you step back from this." Her eyes searched Juliet's face. "I have permitted more than perhaps I ought to have done already and I could not bear to have you placed in any sort of danger." Looking away, she sighed heavily, clearly troubled. "Might you not wait here for his return? I could not imagine having to tell your father the truth, should you be injured."

Panic began to clasp a hold of Juliet's heart. "I must be present," she said, stepping forward. "How can I stay at home when there is such a moment at hand?" Trying to express herself as best she could, she gave a small shake of her head. "I cannot linger here, hoping and wondering as to what is occurring. I have to be a part of this."

Mrs. Grey's lips twisted, her eyes thoughtful. Juliet knew that all that her chaperone had said was quite right, for she had given Juliet a good many more freedoms than other chaperones would ever have done. And yet there still lingered this desperation to be with Lord Strickland, to be beside him when the moment of his freedom came.

"You care for Lord Strickland, Juliet?"

"I love him!"

The words flung themselves out from her, but Juliet felt no shame in speaking them. There was no embarrassment, no sense of mortification. Rather, she felt relieved, as though she was glad to have said them to Mrs. Grey.

"You care for him greatly, then," Mrs. Grey murmured, rather thoughtfully. She said nothing for some minutes as Juliet remained precisely where she was, her stomach tightening with anxiety. It all rested on Mrs. Grey and her decision, for Juliet could not simply set out with Lord Strickland without her.

Mrs. Grey sighed. "Against my better judgment, I shall permit it," she said eventually as Juliet closed her eyes with relief. "Come, then, we must have you dressed and ready for Lord Strickland's arrival."

"Thank you, Mrs. Grey," Juliet breathed, a slight weakness catching her limbs. "Thank you, with all of my heart."

The drive to the inn did not take as long as Juliet had expected. Lord Strickland explained that he had chosen one just on the outskirts of London but near to where the supposed highwaymen had attacked the carriage. Very little had been said on their journey and, from the tight expression on Lord Strickland's face, Juliet knew that he was somewhat apprehensive, praying that all should go as he hoped.

"There is a private parlor waiting for us all," Lord Strickland murmured as the carriage came to a stop. "Lord and Lady Richmond may well be waiting for us already."

Juliet nodded and accepted his hand as she climbed out of the carriage, holding his gaze for a few moments and seeing the glint of steel in his eye. A shiver ran through her as she waited for Mrs. Grey to descend, her anticipation turning to nervousness. Within a few minutes, they had stepped inside the gloomy inn and been directed toward the private parlor, which, much to Juliet's surprise, was very finely decorated indeed.

"You have arrived, then." Lady Richmond rose from where she had been sitting by the window, a bright smile on her face. "I am quite certain that all shall go as planned, Lord Strickland, for the news of your cousin's attack and the supposed secret that he is to tell you has gone all around London at great speed."

"I believe even our servants were speaking of it," Lord Richmond grinned, clasping Lord Strickland's hand in a welcoming gesture. "And, as per your suggestion, I am able to confirm that Lord Brookmire and Lady Ridgedale were in discussion last evening for some time." He grinned as Juliet looked at him in surprise. "Do you believe Lord Brookmire will come alone? From what was overheard, I myself do not think it likely."

"With my presence expected here also?" Lord Strickland replied as Juliet sat down by Lady Richmond. "No, I highly doubt it. I think that Lady Ridgedale will see it as her opportunity to avenge the injustice she has long borne within herself and will arrive with Lord Brookmire."

Another shudder ran through Juliet's frame as she thought of what Lady Ridgedale intended for Lord Strickland. It was not as though she believed she would succeed but the intent alone was horrifying.

"Then all we can do at present is wait," Lord Richmond said, sitting down with a satisfactory sigh escaping him. "Thankfully, they have quite delicious meals here, should you wish it, although I must hope it will not be of long duration."

"I must hope so also," Lord Strickland replied, turning to look at Juliet before he sat down. "The sooner this matter is at an end, the better."



\* \* \*

It was some time before anyone came to speak to them. The scratch at the door made Juliet start violently, her eyes widening as a servant came in and quickly spoke to Lord Strickland. When he left, Lord Strickland drew in a long breath and looked at them all.

"Lord Brookmire and Lady Ridgedale are here," he said quietly. "My servant recognized them both."

Juliet clutched the arms of her chair. "So what are we do to?"

Lord Strickland smiled at her. "Remain where you are, with Lady Richmond and Mrs. Grey," he said calmly. "Lord Richmond and I will greet whoever steps through the door and, be quite assured, Lady Juliet, they will bring you no harm." His smile remained in place, encouraging her. "Recall that they believe me to be traveling here this afternoon and thus now expect me to arrive much later in the day. The innkeeper will direct them to the room that is supposedly held by Mr. Ayles, which is connected to this private parlor." One shoulder lifted. "No doubt they will hope to ambush me upon my arrival but, if it goes as I have hoped, they will be the ones taken by surprise."

Juliet swallowed hard and nodded, glancing to Mrs. Grey, who looked very anxious indeed. For some minutes, there was not a single sound amongst them. Lord Strickland and Lord Richmond were standing by the door, whilst she, Lady Richmond, and Mrs. Grey remained where they were, each looking equally nervous.

"Thank you very much."

Lady Ridgedale's voice was quite clear as it came from behind the door.

"I am sure Mr. Ayles is expecting us," she continued, clearly dismissing the servant who had directed her. "I thank you."

The door opened and Juliet's heart began to pound furiously, her hands gripping the arms of the chair with great force. Lady Ridgedale walked confidently into the room, only to stop dead as she caught sight of Juliet, Lady Richmond, and Mrs. Grey. Lord Brookmire came in afterwards, letting out a loud exclamation just as Lord Strickland shut the door hard.

"I am certain that you were not expecting me, Lady Ridgedale," he said, his voice filling the room as Lady Ridgedale gasped and clutched at her chest, turning around swiftly. "You thought I should arrive later, did you not?"

Lord Brookmire took a step back, his voice filling the room. "Strickland," he boomed, although Juliet noticed the paleness of his cheeks. "I—no, you are quite mistaken. Lady Ridgedale and I..."

"What is it that you are doing here?" Lord Richmond asked as he stood by Lord Strickland. "I believe you said, only a few moments ago, Lady Ridgedale, that Mr. Ayles was expecting you." One eyebrow lifted. "Mr. Ayles, unfortunately, is not here."

Silence rang around the room for some minutes as Lady Ridgedale and Lord

Brookmire struggled to find an answer to Lord Richmond's question. A glance was thrown between them although neither of them said a word. Juliet dragged in a breath, lifting her chin and forcing herself to speak.

"I overheard you and Lord Brookmire speaking, Lady Ridgedale," she said, her voice shaking rather than being filled with the confidence she had hoped to project. "You have set yourself against him."

"As he set himself against me!" Lady Ridgedale screamed, her anger at being discovered suddenly seeming to set herself alight. "When I needed his assistance, when I was desperate for his help, he refused me."

"As he had every right to do," Lady Richmond replied calmly. "You were a married woman, Lady Ridgedale. Your dislike of your husband's frugal ways were nothing to do with him."

Lady Ridgedale's face was scarlet with ire, her eyes narrowed with hate. "Lord Ridgedale knew what I had done," she hissed furiously. "Lord Ridgedale heard of Lord Strickland's refusal and he punished me for my actions. Punished me." She shook her head, her lip curling. "He never once laid a hand to me, but he refused to give me anything I asked for. Kept at home, occasions forgotten, with no company but my own?" She sliced the air with her hand, her whole body shaking with evident rage. "And it was all because of Lord Strickland."

"It was all because of you," Lord Strickland replied mildly. "You made such choices, Lady Ridgedale. I will not take any responsibility." Pushing himself away from the door, he took a few steps toward her. "But what you have done to my cousin and attempted to do to me will not be tolerated."

Lady Ridgedale narrowed her eyes all the more. "It is what you deserve," she hissed furiously. "Nothing less." Her eyes turned to Lord Brookmire. "Brookmire, do what you must."

Juliet's hand flew to her mouth, fearing what Lord Brookmire intended to do, only for the gentleman to take a small step away from the lady, his hands raised and a look of fear wrapping across his expression.

"I cannot, Lady Ridgedale," he said haltingly. "To do so would be most foolish indeed."

Lord Strickland tilted his head. "Then you admit that you have been in league with Lady Ridgedale?" he asked quietly. "You have been doing her bidding?"

Lord Brookmire, it seemed, was not a gentleman with a good deal of mettle. He began to stammer, stepping back from them all with his hands lifted and his eyes wide.

"I—"

"Say nothing, Brookmire," Lady Ridgedale demanded furiously. "You shall say not a word."

Lord Brookmire swallowed hard, his strength clearly ebbing from him as he realized just how much danger he was now in. Lord Strickland and Lord Richmond both wore equal expressions of fury, their eyes narrowing all the more as they watched him, their arms folded and their stance strong.

"She—she promised me that all my debts would be paid," he cried, stepping back from them once more, only for his back to hit the mantelpiece, rendering him unable to walk

any further away. "As well as..." he swallowed and looked away, "as well as other favors." His eyes rose to Lord Strickland's. "I did what I had to. I have barely anything left."

Juliet sucked in a breath. "Then you were the one who attempted to attack Lord Strickland on the road to London," she said quietly. "Who missed a second attempt in London in the darkness of the night. Who put a vial in his brandy, who threw him down the staircase?"

Lord Brookmire shook his head vehemently. "I did not do all that you have said," he cried, as though such an admittance would somehow relieve him of his guilt. "I was not the one who employed those men to attack Mr. Ayles. I did not put the poison in his brandy." He dropped his head. "I was to remain to make certain of his demise, yes. The other claims you have put to me, however, I will not deny."

Juliet looked at Lord Strickland, whose brow was raised.

"Then it was you, Lady Ridgedale," he said softly, a chill running down Juliet's spine as he spoke. "You were the one who hired rogues to attack my carriage."

She laughed harshly. "Not only you but to watch for Mr. Ayles," she replied, as though proud of what she had done. "If that meant stopping every carriage on the way, then so be it." She shrugged. "Although I should not have paid them so handsomely, given that your cousin still lives." Her gaze sifted to his. "He does live, does he not?"

"Your threats mean nothing any longer," Lord Strickland told her quietly. "You have admitted to everything, Lady Ridgedale. And you, Lord Brookmire, you weak, insufferable man, I have nothing but disgrace to heap upon your head."

Reaching back toward the door, he rapped upon it sharply, and much to Juliet's astonishment, four men came into the room. Men that Juliet did not recognize.

"Mr. Ayles will return to his family, where he will live out the rest of his days in safety," Lord Strickland continued as Lady Ridgedale lifted her chin and looked at him with a supercilious smile on her face as though, in some way, she had won. "What a rumor Lord and Lady Richmond will have to tell back in London, about how they found themselves in the very same inn as Lord Brookmire and Lady Ridgedale—which will be all the more shocking given that you were discovered in the same room on the premises." He shook his head in an almost pitying fashion, ignoring the smirk on Lady Ridgedale's face. "And, due to your shame, you will choose to depart from here and make your way to the continent, where you will settle for the rest of your days." Leaning forward, he glared hard at Lady Ridgedale and Juliet was satisfied to see the smile drop from her face.

"It is at an end, Lady Ridgedale," he said quietly. "Your victory has been snatched from you. You shall not be satisfied."

Lady Ridgedale opened her mouth to speak, only to close it again, silence her only response. The hard look was still in her eyes, the anger clear in her expression, but Juliet knew that there was nothing but defeat left for her now. The matter was quite at an end and everyone present in the room knew it.

"I shall not go," Lady Ridgedale hissed, but Lord Strickland held up one hand.

"Yes, you shall," he stated calmly. "By force or by intention, you will board the boat and you will not return, Lady Ridgedale. For I fully intend to tell everyone in the ton

precisely what you and Lord Brookmire have done. You will never again be welcome in society. You will never be able to even lift your head. And that, Lady Ridgedale, are the consequences that will follow you for the rest of your life."



\* \* \*

It was some minutes later that Juliet, Mrs. Grey, Lady Richmond, and Lord Strickland stood outside the inn. Juliet felt rather dazed, as though the entire world had shifted beneath her feet, and yet, with it came such a sense of freedom that she wanted to laugh aloud.

"It is done," Lord Strickland said softly, his hand slipping about Juliet's waist as he pulled her lightly toward him, despite the fact that they stood with Lady Richmond and Mrs. Grey. "It is over."

"It seems so," Lady Richmond replied with a small smile. "I am sure that Lord Richmond and the others will make certain both reach their destination very safely indeed."

Lord Strickland's smile was a little tight. "Indeed," he said with a small shake of his head. "Wealth, it seems, has some benefits." He said nothing more but looked down toward Juliet, who did not want to ask him what he had been required to do to find such men. "The consequences, I feel, were appropriate."

"More than appropriate," Mrs. Grey replied firmly. "You have been fair, Lord Strickland. More fair than others might have been."

"I would agree," Juliet said softly. "And now there is nothing for you to do but recover yourself."

"And to return my cousin to his family," he reminded her, turning toward her a little more as Mrs. Grey and Lady Richmond began to speak quietly, leaving them both to face each other without interruption. "Thereafter, Lady Juliet, I should like to speak to your father."

Her heart quickened. "My father?"

"I cannot imagine my life without your presence in it," he told her, his voice quiet so that only she could hear. "I have such a relief flooding over me that it opens up the entirety of my life all over again—and I do not wish to return to it as it was. I want you to be as you are now, as you have been these last days. To be beside me, to be often in my company, and for me to share my innermost thoughts and hopes with you." He frowned suddenly, looking away as though embarrassed. "Perhaps I have spoken out of turn. Perhaps you do not feel as I do."

The urge to reassure him was on her in a moment. "I feel just the same, if not more," she said, one hand pressed lightly against his chest as he looked down at her, hope burning in his eyes. "Truly, Lord Strickland. My fear has been that our acquaintance will



end and that I shall no longer be in your company as we have been these last days. But to know that it is not so, that you seek the very same as I..." Her smile began to spread slowly across her face, her heart racing as he captured her hand where it rested against his heart. "It is more wonderful than I could ever have imagined."

Lord Strickland drew in a long breath. "Then in a few days, I shall seek an audience with your father, Lady Juliet," he murmured, lifting her hand to his lips and kissing it gently. "So that we do not have to face that fear that has captured both of our hearts, it seems." His smile began to grow steadily, a relief and a happiness in his eyes that had been absent for so long. "Thank you, Lady Juliet, for all you have done. I do not think I could have survived this Season without you."

# Epilogue

“Lady Juliet.”

Juliet rose from her chair and held out her hands to Lord Strickland. “It went well?”

“Your father was most amenable,” he told her, much to Juliet’s relief. “But I confess that I did not ask him only to court you, Lady Juliet.”

Her hands caught his, squeezing them gently as she looked up into his face. “Oh?”

He smiled at her and Juliet’s heart lifted with anticipation. “Throughout this ordeal, I have found you a constant,” he told her. “You have remained steadfastly by my side, determined to do all you can to help me and making quite certain that I would not be lost to the cruelty of Lady Ridgedale. You have shown an entire disregard for my life of wealth and instead sought to know me just as I am.”

“And what I have found has been wonderful,” she told him, glad beyond measure that Mrs. Grey had left them alone for a few moments. “You have become very dear to me indeed, Lord Strickland. I confess that there is a love for you within my heart that has grown with every moment I have been in your company. I—”

He held up one hand, silencing her.

“If I might,” he murmured, his hand now slipping around her waist. “I want to tell you, Lady Juliet, that my heart now belongs to you. I have never met any lady such as you and I am certain that I shall not do so again. How can I let you go now? How could I turn away from you when my heart yearns for you, when it cries out for you?” His other hand tugged from hers so that he might pull her a little closer and Juliet’s heart soared to the skies, her anticipation and hope mounting with every second. “I love you, Lady Juliet. I want not only to court you, but to marry you.” The words fell from his lips directly onto her heart, making her want to cry out with joy. Her hands went around his neck, her head tipping back so that she might look into his eyes.

“If you will ask me, Lord Strickland,” she murmured, her eyes dancing, “then I shall give you my answer.”

A wry smile pulled at one corner of his mouth. “Will you marry me, Juliet?”

She sighed contentedly as his head began to lower. “My dear Lord Strickland,” she replied, filled with a happiness that she had never felt before, “what answer can I give but to say yes?”



\* \* \*

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