

BRINGING DOWN THE DUKE




A WEDDING STORY




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"A man does not recover from such devotion of the heart to such a woman! He ought not; he does not." – Persuasion



Oxford, February 1879

"I cannot thank you enough for calling on me."

Annabelle stared into the dark depth of her teacup before making herself look at her friends. This was not a simple social call - this was her doing a rare and awkward thing: crying for help. Lucie, Hattie, and Catriona had promptly gathered round in her new drawing room at Oxford's Randolph Hotel. She had not seen them since making headlines across British newspapers three days ago. Three days ago, she had agreed to cause scandal and marry a duke.

A duke.

The eery wail of a gray winter wind came down through the chimney and raised the fine hairs on her arms.

"Of course we came to call on you," Hattie said cheerfully. "We were worried. We were hoping to see you as soon as possible." Catriona nodded, her blue eyes alert behind her glasses. Lucie just arched a brow. None of them had touched their teacup yet.

"There is no 'of-course' about it," Annabelle said. "Prudent women would do well to avoid my company for a while." At least until the Queen of England had smoothed her feathers. Her Majesty had refrained from publicly banishing Sebastian for his multitude of sins committed – laying down his public office! Denouncing the Tory party! Marrying a vicar's daughter! - but privately, she was fuming and everyone of standing knew. Such scandal was socially debilitating and as contagious as the plague.

Lucie's smile was a little evil. "Some would say it was very prudent of us to call on you," she said. "Unless they are sent to the Tower, dukes never truly fall. It's probably wiser to remain in the good graces of a duchess-to-be than to give her the cold shoulder."

"It isn't funny," Annabelle managed.

"Blimey, don't look so shocked – I was jesting!"

"It really isn't," Hattie said to Lucie, her usually impish expression fierce. Catriona was quietly glowering.

Lucie scowled. "Fine, I apologise, I do. But no one will cut you for long. Unless the queen outright demands that you and Montgomery leave the country, the sycophants shall come scurrying in good time."

“Such charming prospects,” murmured Annabelle. “Please, help yourselves.” She gestured at the tea table, at the tiered platter with colourful macarons, hastily collected from the bakery on St Giles by John the footman. Yes, she had her own staff now, including a lovely French lady’s maid called Nanette. She shuddered. Three days ago, saying *yes* had seemed the right and only thing to do. It had been a *yes* to Sebastian Devereux the *man*, to his beloved pale eyes beneath rain-dampened lashes and the feel of his protective arm around her back. But now Sebastian had vanished to France, and ever since she had moved her belongings into her plush new lodgings last night, she had been wondering what had possessed her. *Yes*. The small but mighty syllable had forever changed both her destiny and that of a large dukedom and thinking of it made her chest squeeze with an overwhelming emotion. As of this morning, it had begun to feel suspiciously close to panic.

Hattie reached for the tongs to select not one but two pink macarons, and Catriona took a sip of her tea and stretched out her legs. *Finally*. Apart from enraging the queen, accepting Sebastian’s proposal had catapulted her from a respectable, lowly rung of the social ladder to the top, and she had hoped her friends would not secretly harbour complicated feelings about the change. Minute differences in station mattered in their circles and each came with their own etiquette. Many a young woman’s personal happiness depended upon being entitled to enter a room ahead of the queue. As Sebastian’s wife, only members of the royal family had precedence over her. But it seemed her friends were already easing back into their old informality. That was one worry off the list, then. She clasped and unclasped her hands in her lap. “I’m afraid I need your help.”

“You are thinking of renegeing on the engagement?” asked Lucie, looking so keen, Annabelle burst out laughing. Not one sycophantic bone in Lucie’s body, was there. “You could at least try to not sound so hopeful,” she said.

An unrepentant shrug. As a leader of the suffragist movement, it was Lucie’s prerogative to balk at the legal trap that was marriage for a woman; as a fiercely free spirit, she was doubly wary of men who appeared as commanding and in charge as Sebastian...

“On the contrary,” Annabelle said. “I need your advice on the wedding. I’m terribly ill-prepared for the day.” *And for all the days thereafter*.

Hattie’s brown eyes were at once shiny with purpose. “What date is the wedding?”

“In twelve days, at eleven o’clock.”

“Twelve days,” Hattie said. “Montgomery must have given a Notice of Marriage on the same day he proposed.”

He had. He had gone to the civil Register Office straight from stormy Parliament Square in his drenched clothes. To make it harder for *himself* to renege? No. No, Sebastian did not make decisions he regretted. He planned his moves, he must; it was how she had found her place at Oxford restored upon her return from London and an apartment befitting a duchess waiting for her. You were rather confident that I would accept you, she had told him when he had presented her with the keys. I wasn’t, he had replied, but just in case of the unlikely event you’d say yes, I wanted everything to be ready for

you. Then he had left for Brittany to appease society, and she had had to stay behind because they were not married yet.

Marriage. The wedding. *Help.*

“I have nothing to wear,” she said. “And there is very little time to have a dress made. I don’t even know which kind of dress is appropriate.”

“As long as you have a generous budget, there is time, nearly a fortnight,” Hattie said, literally on the edge of her seat and looking overjoyed at the unexpected opportunity to plan a wedding. “But what do you mean by appropriate?”

“It is a ducal wedding, which normally takes place with much fanfare, doesn’t it? But this one needs to take place in an office, and discreetly. And I haven’t a clue about the current fashion for wedding dresses. I never expected to marry until three days ago.”

“White,” Hattie said quickly, “white heavy silk satin, princess cut, with an overlay of Devonshire lace – every fashionable bride would move heaven and earth for such a dress.”

“Every bride keen on imitating Queen Victoria on her wedding day forty years ago,” said Lucie as she leaned in to fill her plate with pastries. “May I just gently draw attention to the fact that Her Majesty opposes our cause and as such our rights as people?”

Hattie made a face, but Annabelle nodded. “Then again, if I don’t follow the dress standard she has set, would she not see it as yet another affront? I can hardly afford to add to the tally.”
“Hmm.”

“And since white signals purity, if I don’t wear white... well I don’t need any more tongues wagging about how exactly I made poor Montgomery *lose his mind.*”

“But if you do wear white, they’ll call it a brazen and desperate attempt to convince people of your virtue,” Lucie said between bites. “The lady doth protest too much, they will say.”

“Ugh,” said Hattie, “why must a wedding gown be political.”

Catriona gave her a pointed look. “Is there anything that isn’t political?”

“Not if you go snooping for it, determined to see it everywhere.”

Annabelle couldn’t help a cynical smile. “Do you see why I require assistance?”

“Why not pick a colour from Montgomery’s coat of arms,” Catriona suggested. “One cannot fault you for choosing to show your loyalty to him above all else. But trim it with Devonshire lace.”

“And have a circlet of orange blossoms as a headdress instead of a tiara, like the queen did,” Hattie added quickly. “Orange blossoms symbolize chastity, but more subtly than white. Oh, I like the idea.”

“So do I,” Annabelle said, the pressure in her chest easing a little. “Have you any dressmaker recommendations?”

“You should be safe in the hands of Celeste,” Hattie said, “and don’t forget: you also need something old to wear, and something borrowed, and something blue.”

“Right...”

“Most importantly, a sixpence in your shoe.”

“I hope you are joking,” muttered Lucie, and Catriona’s face was contorting from the effort to keep from laughing.

Hattie ignored them, her nose up high. “What else is on your list?”

“Trouble,” Annabelle said darkly. “Tradition demands my closest of male kin escort me to the altar. But this leaves me with my Cousin Gilbert.”

Her friends drew back in one repulsed motion. They knew enough of Gilbert to understand that she wouldn’t wish him even in the vicinity of the venue.

“And... will you ask him?” Hattie ventured.

“Certainly not.” He was one of the few parts of her old life she would not miss. “But I’m not well acquainted with any other men.”

“Following the logic underpinning this tradition, you should walk unaccompanied,” said Lucie, “you are the one who looked after yourself most of your life. And we all agree that women shouldn’t be passed from man to man like chattel. You should be free to give yourself away.”

“That would be logical,” Annabelle agreed, “but hardly proper. If it were just my day, fine, but I don’t wish to cause Montgomery any more embarrassment.”

A brooding silence settled as they sifted through the names of possible escorts in their minds.

“What about Lord Peregrine?” Hattie finally said.

Annabelle shook her head. “I understand he is already Montgomery’s witness and best man.”

She was prepared to defer the issue for a few more days when Catriona said: “I could ask my father.”

“Your father?”

Catriona was shifting on the settee. “He’s a peer of the realm, but as a Scot he’s not as embroiled in society, nor does he care. And he thinks highly of you.”

That was surprising. She had met the Earl of Wester Ross only once, in the arcades of St John’s where he lived and worked as a fellow. He was a tall dark Scotsman, more academic than peer with his hair shot through with silver and his tweed jacket carefully darned in multiple places.

“I would be honoured,” Annabelle said, still baffled, “but I don’t recall having had the chance to impress him.”

An apologetic smile curved Catriona’s lip. “I told him about you. He has great respect for self-made scholars. And he knows you are my friend. He seems fond of any woman with whom I make friends – I suspect it assures him he raised me competently enough after all.”

“Thank you – “

“I can’t promise he will be available,” Catriona warned. “He might have an engagement elsewhere in the country.”

Still, the boulder was gradually lifting from her shoulders. “If he agrees, still one problem remains.” She looked from one to the other. “I need a maid of honour who will also be my witness. I

want it to be one of you - but I can't possibly choose. And while we will keep the ceremony private, details might still get out and there is a risk you become associated with the scandal if you stand up with me."

Her friends exchanged glances.

"We could draw straws," Hattie suggested after a pause.

Lucie slowly shook her head. "It would be an honour to be your witness and I wouldn't mind disgruntling the peerage. But since I'm so outspoken against the whole institution of marriage, it would be hypocritical of me to claim the position. Allow me to let the others put themselves forward first if they wish."

"I'm already involved in the production of the gown," Hattie said with a reluctance she failed to hide. "It would be greedy if I nabbed the position as maid of honour as well, wouldn't it. Besides, I'm not yet off age. I suppose that makes Catriona the best choice."

Catriona looked startled. "Well yes. Of course, I will do it. However, I'm Catholic – am I eligible at all?"

She hadn't known Catriona was Catholic. "That should pose no problem," she said. "Not in a register office marriage."

"Lucky you," Hattie murmured at Catriona.

Catriona's shoulders were tense beneath her shawl. "Please, help me? I shall sign the registry, but everything else, keeping the dress and the bouquet in order– "

Hattie was beaming "I should be the happiest woman in Oxford." She glanced at Annabelle. "Shouldn't we employ some assistance for organizing the lunch? And perhaps, an etiquette tutor?"

"There won't be a lunch," Annabelle said. "Montgomery and I will leave for France immediately after the ceremony. And he did employ a tutor, but today, I needed to speak to you – people who know both the etiquette and my heart."

Lucie's expression was mildly amused. "You mean friends."

She swallowed hard. "Yes. Friends." So much had changed in so little time, but it seemed their precious friendship would endure.

There was still some sadness and an odd sense of finality in Lucie's embrace when they took their leave. It was in fact the first time Lucie had ever embraced her, and the feel of it lingered after the door had closed behind her friends. She knew what made Lucie apprehensive: legally, marriage annihilated a woman's personhood. In Lucie's eyes, she was about to become the possession of a man who happened to be one of the most indomitable in the country. She rubbed her upper arms; the temperature must have dropped, and the room was too spacious, or perhaps she was too small. Lucie had no real notion of the equally powerful trap of poverty, she told herself. Nor had Lucie ever seen Sebastian undone. Annabelle alone knew the reverential lightness of his touch; his yearning need to drown in her when they were skin to skin; his gasps of surrender when he was in her arms... Surely she could trust him; both because of the man he was, and because of the sacrifices he had made for

them to be together. While a duke might never truly fall, breaking with everything one had once considered honourable and important required immense mental fortitude. And it always came with a price. The sacrifice was uncommonly mutual.

You are thinking of reneging on the engagement? She wasn't; how could she?

But what if he was?

A shiver ran down her spine. It was the solitude that made her mind stray that way, the being alone again with the howling wind and dying fire. It was his absence, manifesting as a physical ache in her limbs and a nervous hollowness in her stomach. And she remembered too well the days when she had been a bitter disappointment for her loved ones. She never wanted to feel that way again. She did not want to disappoint him.

She curled her hand to feel the comforting weight of her engagement ring on her finger; a mine-cut sapphire encircled by two-and-twenty tiny diamonds. It matched the sapphire on his signet ring, a visible proof of their connection. Still. He had left three days ago, and she hadn't received word from him since.



Outside the castle's upper dining room windows, the Breton countryside was turning dusky. The sinking sun had lit the horizon on fire, and as the waters of the inner moat below took on the sky's fiery shades of orange and red, Château Malo seemed surrounded by a ring of liquid lava. Sebastian blinked. He was imagining things. Protracted euphoria was apparently followed by crashing exhaustion, and it was taking its toll on his body - he had nearly fallen asleep in the old-fashioned copper tub after his arrival a few hours ago.

Château Malo. At some point, it had been state-of-the-art, now it was... rustic at best. The dining room's stonewalls were exposed and the musty smell of fading tapestries hung in the air. Still, no enemy had ever passed the drawbridge leading to the main gate. The castle had survived the years of The Terror during the French Revolution unscathed, and later, it had been spared the worst of his father's irresponsible management of the Montgomery estates. No, the worst insult to happen to the place was - he himself. Because he had chosen her. *Annabelle*. His heart was beating faster as an image of her lovely face replaced the view. He could almost smell her alluring jasmine scent... he gave a shake. He could only hope that his letter, sent during a stop in Normandy to inform her about the delays, had found its way across the unruly channel on time...

"I presume you are here to take the jewels," came a cool female voice from behind him.

He turned. She stood in the doorway with her chin raised at a sharp angle. Her slender figure was draped in grey and purple, the colours of half-mourning, when normally she had no patience for dramatics.

He bowed his head low, a greeting reserved for her and the queen. "Good evening, Mother. I think you underestimate the pleasure of your company."

She raked him with a haughty glare. “You excel at many things, but charm - or feigning it - is not one of them.”

He glanced at the footmen lining the walls, quiet as statues. “Leave us.”

His mother did not move an inch as the men filed past her. He walked to the head of the dining table, took a footman’s position behind her chair, and waited.

She finally glided into the room, so smoothly there wasn’t a rustle of silk.

Another glare when he pulled back the chair for her. She sat, with her spine straight enough for her to safely balance a Ming vase on her head for the duration of the meal. She seemed to look right through him when he seated himself across her at the foot of the table. He knew he had dealt her a terrible blow, but the people of Brittany had long called her *La Reine des Glaces* - Ice Queen. A moniker that owed much to both her impenetrable demeanour as well as her appearance: silver-blond hair, pale blue eyes, imperious features. In appearance, he was her male mirror image. Until recently, he had thought he equalled her in disposition, too.

“I had expected you sooner,” she said after footmen had returned with the terrines for the first course.

“I was delayed by a day and a half.” His stomach growled when the scent of well-seasoned meat teased his nose. He did not recall his last full meal. “The tracks were flooded a few miles South of Calais,” he said. “I had to stay in an inn for the night, then we were re-routed East toward Paris before finally taking course back up toward the coast.”

“You are not normally so chatty,” his mother said, her cutlery still untouched. “Has everything changed?”

He inclined his head. “Much has changed.” *He* had changed. There was no turning back.

She picked up the knife and sliced into her slab of lamb. “I tried my utmost to quell your father’s propensity to act on base emotions in your character. It appears I failed after all.”

His plate was swimming in blood after one bite. The soon-to-be dowager duchess had picked up the French custom of eating the meat raw.

He looked up from the scene of carnage. “Where are they?”

She paused. “Truly. You cannot possibly mean for a necklace which once graced the neck of Katherine of Aragon to pass into the hands of such a person.”

He put down his fork. “That *person* will be my duchess,” he said softly. “She will have everything.”

She sucked in a breath as if to gather momentum for a tirade.

“Everything,” he repeated.

Her scorn was so palpable, it hit its mark and would have shattered a less steadfast resolve. But he knew what he had asked of Annabelle: that she abandon much of her independence when she cherished it fiercely, and there was nothing he could do about it because even he could not change the law quickly...he’d asked that she fall from grace with him; that she forever be known as the

scandalous duchess; that she endure relentless scrutiny and malicious whispers in her future social circles for years to come. To pledge herself to him in an office building because he was divorced, when she had been raised by a man of the Church of England. Whatever compensation for her sacrifices he could give her, he would. The family jewels she was owed were but the beginning.

His mother was pale. “I see you are determined to break every rule of propriety and common decency.”

“If required,” he said, “I would break a kingdom for her.”

She blanched. She said not a word until dessert had been served.

“Grandmother Elfriede’s tiara and the emeralds are here,” she then said. “All other pieces are in the bank in Edinburgh.”

“Edinburgh.” He failed to keep the surprise from his voice.

Her pale eyes narrowed. “Well. After you chose your bride so poorly the last time, my impulse must have been to keep the heirlooms far away from London and Wiltshire.”

That was a problem. Only she and he himself could access the vaults quickly but travelling to Scotland in the current winter weather would take too long for his liking. A swift return to London was already in jeopardy; there were the flooded tracks, and no guarantee the ferries across the channel operated on schedule... He gritted his teeth. It was unwise, being away from Annabelle for long during such a precarious time, a time between scandal and the altar. Would she get cold feet? Which bride wouldn’t, under the circumstances? If he were to retrieve the jewels, he would have to send word and then pray that it arrived on time. Next to the raw lamb, an uncomfortable emotion writhed in the pit of his stomach.



“Oh Annabelle, it’s beautiful.” Hattie was circling the mannequin with the wedding gown like a shark uncertain where to bite first. Her fingers fluttered over the delicate, transparent muslin sleeves, the pearl-encrusted collar and cuffs, the line of shimmering pearl buttons down the sleek front of the silk jacket. “You will look like the queen of all the fairies.”

“How lucky that Montgomery’s colours are red and green,” said Lucie from her corner of the dressing room. “The green happens to suit you very well indeed.”

It did. It was a rich, mossy green, and the rows and trimmings of intricate Devonshire lace looked like freshly fallen snow on skirt and cuffs. It might not be the usual colour of a wedding dress, but Celeste had done her name justice and created something ethereal. The tiny diamonds woven into the gauzy fabric of the veil glimmered like stars.

Hattie turned. “Are you pleased with it?”

“I couldn’t be more pleased.” Her breath had caught in her throat when she had seen herself in the mirror. She had laughed when presented with the lacy scraps Celeste said were her undergarments: “these to wear beneath the gown, and these for the wedding night, *n’est-ce pas?*” It had been a

moment of much needed elation in a row of increasingly dreary days. It was March now, and apart from letters informing her about Sebastian's unexpected journey to Scotland, she had not seen her husband-to-be in person in nearly a fortnight. He must be travelling incognito, too, for the press wasn't running any headlines about him audaciously returning to Britain...

Hattie broke into a wide smile. "If you are pleased, then we should celebrate."

Catriona put down one of the white satin gloves. "Celebrate?"

"Your father agreed to escort her, did he not?"

"He did, yes."

"And a most beautiful dress was finished on time. Most importantly, these are Annabelle's last few days as a *feme sole*, a single woman."

"Hear, hear," Lucie said.

"I suppose so," Annabelle said. "My days are numbered." *As long as Sebastian returns before the wedding in two days' time.* His last message was a telegram from York, saying he would come and see her tomorrow morning. Her belly clenched nervously. A dozen more hours or so, and she'd see his face again. She would smell his crisp clean scent, feel his soft mouth against her own, his hard shoulders beneath her palms... She cleared her throat. "I'd enjoy a celebration, but is it appropriate for you all to stay?" The fifteen minutes of a social call were already over.

Hattie looked a little guilty. "I added two instead of one dash of cognac to Aunty's tea," she said, "perhaps three. She should be fast asleep and not miss me much at all."

"My father has no notion of the passing of time," said Catriona.

Lucie shrugged. "I am my own woman."

Hattie clapped her hands. "To the drawing room, then." There she began unlatching the large picnic basket she had brought up from her apartment on the floor below. They were all peering over her shoulder when she lifted the lid. "Voilà!"

"It's wine," Lucie said, sounding disappointed at the sight of the two large bottles and four sturdy glasses.

Hattie sniffed. "It's not just wine."

"Then what is it?" Lucie took a bottle and smelled the sealed cork.

"This is dry, white Sherry from Jerez," Hattie said in a solemn tone. "One for us to share, one for Annabelle to keep as a gift."

"Jerez?"

"A town near Cádiz. The birthplace of European Sherry. My aunt is a very discerning sherry drinker, and she saves this for special occasions. This," she gestured widely, "is a special occasion."

Annabelle gave her an incredulous look. "Did you... loot your aunt's special sherry stash?"

"No," Catriona said and pushed her glasses back up her nose. "First, she sedated her, *then* she stole her stash."

"Out of the four of us, you are easily the most depraved, Hattie. Now, who will uncork the bottle?"

Catriona did, with one of the various tools Lucie carried in her skirt pockets, and Hattie poured the wine to the brim.

“To Annabelle,” she said, and raised her glass. “May her marriage be blessed.”

“To Annabelle,” said Lucie. “A valiant woman.”

Catriona nodded. “To Annabelle, and our friendship – may it be steadfast.”

“To the women of Britain,” Annabelle said. “And a future with liberty and equality for all.”

They clinked glasses as if they were sailors in a tavern and sipped.

When the sherry filled Annabelle’s mouth, she made a noise despite herself. There was no bite of alcohol; what unfolded was a rich, smooth, pleasantly burning sweetness. Like liquid candy. Like heaven from a bottle.

“Now this,” she said when she could breathe again, “this is dangerous, Hattie.”

A wink. “Isn’t it?”

Catriona’s cheeks were already flushed. “It’s very good.”

Lucie was wrinkling her nose.

“And?” Hattie nudged her.

“I’m trying to determine whether it’s too sweet for my taste.” She held out the glass. “May I have some more. Just to be certain.”

“Of course.”

Catriona drank. “It has a salty note,” she said.

“I understand the wine region is right by the sea,” Hattie said, and re-filled her glass generously.

Lucie looked sceptical. “I haven’t tasted any salt.”

“Try again, then,” Hattie said.

Soon, they settled deeply into the divan and Lucie into the armchair, their faces rosy and their eyes suspiciously bright.

“Annabelle,” Hattie said, and put a small hand on her arm. “We mean to share the results of some research with you.”

She lowered her glass. “Research?”

“Yes,” came Lucie’s voice. “About dukes and kings who married, erm, outside their class.”

“Kings!”

Catriona nodded. “In 1464, Elizabeth Woodville, a commoner and widow, secretly wed King Edward IV.”

She considered herself well-versed in history, but this was news. “Astounding. But if it happened in secret, how do you know?”

“Because she proceeded to be queen consort until her husband’s death near twenty years later.”

“Oh.”

“1660,” said Lucie. “Commoner Anne Hyde marries the Duke of York. Sadly, she died before he became King James II.”

“And in the 18th century, Prince Henry married Anne Horton, again a widow and commoner,” said Hattie, “which, admittedly, resulted in the Royal Marriage Act, which meant henceforth, the ruling monarch had to approve royal spouses first.”

Annabelle giggled. Why was she giggling? “But Montgomery is a non-royal duke.”

“More sherry?” asked Hattie.

“I might as well, thank you, dear.”

“We did find evidence of non-royal dukes following their hearts,” Catriona said. “The Duke of Bolton married his mistress Lavinia Fenton after his wife’s death in the 1750s. Prior to the marriage she was known as Polly Peachum, which was a role she had played on stage.”

“An actress,” Annabelle said. “Oh my.”

“Why are you laughing?”

She wiped a tear from the corner of her eye. “Because these stories are centuries old, and they are still being told.”

When they still looked confused, she toasted them. “Don’t you see? I shall be scandalous for eternity. *Prior to the marriage, she was known as Annabelle Archer, vicar’s daughter and bluestocking.*”

“It sounds almost as exciting as Polly Peachum,” Hattie allowed.

Annabelle clinked her glass to hers again and took Catriona’s soft warm hand to give it a squeeze.

“Thank you. Truly, I thank you. I shall rest easy now, knowing we are not setting a precedent with our scandal.”

More importantly though, had Lavinia Fenton been happy? Had Bolton regretted his decision? Had the princes loved their wives until the end, and had the wives thrived? She could not seem to think it through - at some point during the conversation, they had opened the second bottle, and she had sunk back into the silken pillows of the divan with sherry sliding down her throat. “I can feel the heat of Southern Spain in this wine,” she said, and raised the glass toward the blurry ceiling.

Hattie smacked her lips. “And I the sweetness of Andalusian orange blossoms in April.”

“In April, you say,” drawled Lucie. “You, my dear friends, are intoxicated.”

“You, my dear friend, lack imagination.”

“You do,” Catriona agreed, and leaned against Hattie. She had lost her glasses a while ago. “It clearly tastes like the Jerez harbour, bustling busily since the days of the Phoenicians.”

Lucie shot her a look of disbelief. “You, too?”

“Try, it, spoilsport.”

“Fine.” Lucie swirled the wine in her glass, drank deep, and closed her eyes. “Wild Andalusian horses,” she finally said, “They are galloping past me on a sandy beach with their white manes fluttering, no, *dancing*, in the wind.”

“Oh, well done!”

“Bravo!”

“A warm, southerly wind,” Annabelle added.

“And here’s fishermen’s barges rocking on azure blue waves.”

“Grilled fish with lemon drizzle, mmmh.”

“Spanish boys with wild black curls and mischief in their eyes.”

“I thought you liked fair, shy gentlemen best, Hattie.”

“Hush.”

“Definitely horses,” Lucie purred, her eyes still closed. “I can see the play of powerful muscles beneath sweat-slicked coats.”

Confounded silence.

“Erm,” said Catriona, and laughter pearled up Annabelle’s throat again.

They were a giggling, disorderly heap when a hard knock sounded on the door to the corridor.

John the footman appeared, an expression of blank panic on his face.

“Your pardon,” he stammered.

Annabelle heaved herself into a sitting position, alarm trickling down her spine. “What is it?”

“His Grace, the Duke of Montgomery.”

She was on her feet. “What happened?”

John’s throat moved. “You pardon. His Grace is here, Miss Archer...”

“What?”

Indeed, he was. Already looming behind John’s shoulder, his blond hair ruffled as if he had arrived by way of the cool spring breeze.

Several things happened quickly and all at once: Sebastian’s expression turning from eager to confused to assessing; Annabelle becoming as sober as a stone; the girls making a heroic effort to stand up straight. John the footman fled.

“Miss Archer,” Sebastian said, and shocked her again by bowing his head. “Lady Lucinda, Lady Catriona, Miss Greenfield.”

Their curtseys wobbled like gelatine pudding. “Your Grace.”

He was here. Really here. Her heart was hot and hammering wildly against her ribs, the inevitable reaction to his tall familiar form. *Why* was he here? It wasn’t tomorrow morning yet, or was it? Her body was rooted to the spot, torn between flinging herself into his arms and running the opposite way because while she might *feel* sober, she was clearly drunk like a Chorleywood working man on pay day.

“My apologies,” Sebastian said. He had a large black valise in his right hand and made no sign of setting it down or of entering the room. “It seems my visit comes at an inopportune time. I shall return later -”

“Oh, no,” Hattie blurted. “We were in the process of leaving. Your Grace.”

“Yes,” Lucie said, “we were as good as gone.”

Sebastian’s lips twitched as though he had trouble to keep from chuckling.

“Please, come in,” Annabelle said with deceptive calm while a scramble for misplaced glasses and lost hairpins ensued next to her on the divan, and “May I offer you some tea?” when he strolled closer.

His gaze fell onto the tea table. “How about some Jerez Sherry.”

She made a noise, half laugh, half groan.

Catriona, Hattie, and Lucie left in a dishevelled gaggle. The moment the door had closed behind them, the valise was on the floor, Sebastian was in front of her, and she was in his arms. All went silent. There was only the solid feel of his chest. The delicious scent of his neck mixed with the cold from outside. The quiet strength of his embrace, melding their bodies together at last. She was dizzy, from sudden closeness, from sherry, from a fortnight of yearning. She raised her face the moment his fingers curved around her nape, and their mouths met, hard. The raw sound Sebastian made deep in his throat pulsed through her like a current and curled her toes. She was clutching his shoulders, his nape, the silk of his hair. His teeth caught her bottom lip in a gentle bite, then a soft lick, and she gave a tiny moan.

He drew back, his breathing ragged. “I should not have left you for so long,” he said as his light eyes searched hers. “I never meant to disturb your sherry party, but I arrived much sooner than expected and could not wait to see you.”

His warm hands were framing her face. Despite the wine, she could taste him on her lips. The best taste in the world, and only to be had from him.

“I’m afraid I’m a little intoxicated,” she said.

He gave a low laugh. “Obviously.” His thumbs lightly brushed over her cheekbones. “You are very pink.”

She hid behind her hands. He laced his fingers through hers and pulled them away from her face, then placed them flat against the sleek surface of his waistcoat. His heart was beating steadily but fast beneath her right palm.

“My love.” His expression was the ducal version of contrite. “The weather delayed me at every turn. Forgive me.”

She plucked at one of the buttons of his vest. “I understand you had to leave to appease society. What confused me was learning you had returned and gone to Scotland, but not why.”

He caught her hand and pressed a kiss to her wrist. “I’m afraid it would have been reckless to leave a paper trail about the details of my mission.”

She frowned. He released her with some reluctance and went to drag the valise next to the divan.

She watched with rounding eyes as he lifted a large black velvet box from the valise. She gasped despite herself when he opened the lid of the box to reveal a diamond necklace with emerald pendants the size of a baby’s fist.

“What is the meaning of this?” she managed.

“The emerald necklace from the family jewel collection.”

She was still half-blinded by the unexpected splendour. She eyed the valise. “Are there... more of these?”

“Yes.”

“But – “

“I wanted you to be able to choose something on time for the wedding.”

She shook her head, utterly bewildered. “You were gone... all this time... not in exile, but to fetch jewels?”

“Not just any jewels,” he said warily. “They are symbols. Heirlooms. And for now, they are rightfully yours – every Montgomery woman wears part of the collection on her wedding day.”

Heirlooms. Priceless, no doubt. They would be hers until their firstborn son became duke and took a wife. She wasn’t prepared for the speed at which the future rushed at her then. Children. Her children’s wedding days... grandchildren... *What if I cannot give us a son? What if? What if.* Her hand was in his, the warm pressure of his grip anchoring her.

“What is it, Chérie?” His voice was calm, but his gaze had narrowed. “You seem disturbed.”

She was. I don’t want to fail you, she thought, I don’t want us to have regrets. I’m prepared to navigate this strange new world but what if they won’t allow us to be happy? The sherry roiled in her stomach. *Deep breaths.* He was here now, he had come back, and she was about to pile her worries high at his feet. Hardly the mettle of a duchess. “A case of the nerves,” she said. This wasn’t a lie.

He was clearly deliberating, weighing whether he should press for more. Finally, he said: “I’m aware of what I asked of you. I’m aware I asked a lot.” His eyes flicked sideways, toward the necklace sparkling quietly on its red velvet bed.

Her heart squeezed with sudden understanding. She entangled her fingers with his. “You must know that I’d rather have a day with you than a valise full of diamonds.”

His smile was very soft. “I know.” The way he said it held the weight of a hundred more words. It sounded like a declaration of love.

A tension eased in her chest that had been there all day, no, since the day they had had to part. It had been there underneath her joy over the dress and buried beneath her laughter while she had been drinking sherry. She smiled. “Emeralds would suit my dress very well,” she said. “Are there any earrings in the style of the necklace?”

After helping her secure the earrings in her bedroom vault, he took his leave. Too soon. By an unspoken agreement, they were not sharing a bed again until they well and truly belonged to each other.



“One could think we were about to rob a bank rather than attend a wedding” muttered Hattie while she tried to observe Westminster City through the netting that veiled the carriage window. An unmarked carriage, one of four, each one approaching the register office via a different route. They were to enter the building through the side entrance under the protection of black umbrellas – not to

keep them dry from an unexpected downpour, but to shield them from any journalists who had ferreted out the date and location of this most scandalous wedding. How Hattie had managed to convince her mother to be part of her entourage, no one knew. More likely, she had secretly stolen away. She glanced back at Annabelle, her brown eyes curious. “How does it feel, to be on your way to a forever?”

She gave a strangled little laugh. *It will be fine.* Her palms were damp inside the white satin gloves. Her bodice was too snug, she acutely felt every nervous thud of her heart. Forever. The thought was so enormous, it edged the air out of the carriage compartment. Next to her, Catriona reached for her hand. Deep breaths. She went dizzy from the sweet scent of her orange blossom circlet.

When they alighted at the register office, the sun was peeking out from behind the clouds and the warm breeze smelled of spring. Hattie and Catriona were murmuring together what a terrifically good omen this was. Lucie and Wester Ross awaited them in the foyer, Lucie with a wistful smile, the earl with a twinkle in his gray eyes. His arm was reassuringly solid beneath her hand as he led her down a corridor to the heavy door. The last bastion between her and saying *I do*.

The door swung back as if by magic, and she blinked against the brightness. Sunlight slanted into the room through tall windows left and right. It cast fuzzy haloes around the blond heads of the two men facing the desk ahead. Her mouth turned dry. The man to the right was obviously Lord Peregrine, wide-shouldered but still of a lankier build than his brother. The man to the left was hers. From nowhere, the warm song of a violin cello filled the air.

All sound faded when Sebastian turned, and the world narrowed to the familiar lines and angles of his face. She saw the light catching on the crescents of his lashes, making the tips golden. The dark rings of his irises containing the icy-blue depths of him. The handful of pale freckles scattered across the straight bridge of his nose. Every beloved detail in close focus when she was still more than a dozen feet away. Her soul must have hurried ahead to meet him as if neither the dictates of time nor space could keep them apart. As she stood free from the boundaries of her body for a beat, the sunbeams moved through her and she was one with the warmth and the light. She would see Sebastian’s face, like this, during the dim moments of her last breaths. *Forever*. Now it was a promise, hovering between them as their gazes locked; an assurance that a part of them, the one that loved the other, would exist untouched by time, beyond the relentlessly transitory nature of the world and everything in it. This was right. They were right.

She must have floated toward him. All she would later remember was the assuring feeling of his ring sliding onto her finger and the look of pure exaltation in his eyes when she said: “I do”.



In the privacy of the ducal railway coach, the bright haze of the ceremony gave way to a visceral tension. It was in the touch of Sebastian’s hand on the small of her back; it throbbed in her throat and

low in her belly. She retreated to her partition where her lady's maid was waiting, but the dark intensity in her husband's eyes said that he wouldn't leave her alone for long.

Nanette asked that she sit on the swivel-chair before the vanity table so she could help her undress. A light travel gown was already laid out on the luxurious bed to her right.

In the mirror, Annabelle's cheeks were flushed. Beneath her feet the train wheels were in motion, carrying her toward a new and splendid period of life. They'd start with two months on the continent. She would miss Hattie, Lucie, and Catriona – they had embraced her so tightly, their rose and lemon and lavender scents still clung to her gown. She would miss her studies and campaign work and Oxford's dreaming spires – she had an entire valise packed with just books and writing paper. But right now, her skin felt prickling hot with anticipation.

“Are you excited to return to France,” she asked Nanette as the girl diligently removed veil and flower circlet. “Yes Ma'am.” A happy smile lit her assistant's blue eyes. “The Bretagne is so charming in spring. Would you raise your arms please, Ma'am.”

She sighed when the weight of the gown finally lifted from her shoulders. The sun pouring in through the near window warmed her, and her undergarments were blissfully light and airy. A knowing smile curved Nannette's lips at the sight of the frivolously transparent petticoat and chemise. She made to loosen the pretty corset when a knock sounded, and the door opened.

That was quick.

Sebastian leaned against the doorjamb, already stripped of his jacket and cravat. His eyes were hooded, and when they met hers in the mirror, heat licked through her body in response.

Nanette gave her a hasty glance.

“Why don't you take some time for yourself, Nanette,” Annabelle murmured. The girl vanished faster than lightning.

She looked back over her shoulder as Sebastian stalked closer. “We are not even in Dover yet,” she said, unable to keep the laughter and the longing from her voice.

He halted close enough behind her for the warmth of his body to touch her skin. The mirror framed their motionless reflections; they could have been a painting so quietly they were drinking each other in. Marvelling at a most unlikely thing having come true.

Sebastian's fingers hovered, then carefully shaped around the bare curve of her shoulder. “Finally,” he said. His voice was rough. He bent and kissed her neck. Soft mouth, sensitive spot. Her lips parted on a silent gasp. She couldn't look away, couldn't stop watching in the mirror how his lashes lowered as he slowly kissed a path up the sensitive side of her throat, then along the line of her jaw. Too slow... she turned her head, needing to feel his tongue in her mouth. His grip on her tightened and he gave her what she wanted. The coach blurred. There was only warm arousal and a yearning pull so deep it took her breath away. At some point, she felt the corset loosen. She raised her lashes and found Sebastian looking down at her. His eyes were hazy. “My wife,” he murmured.

Her little laugh sounded like a sob. “Yes.”

“My life,” he said.

The corset fell away, and it felt as though wings she hadn't known she had unfurled.

Sebastian straightened, and she leaned her forehead against the hard plane of his stomach, needing a moment.

His fingers tangled soothingly in her hair. “Where is this from?” He sounded curious. She looked, and he nodded at the bejewelled hair comb on the table that had pinned her flower circlet in place.

“Lucie,” she whispered. Nothing went past his eyes unnoticed, did it. And she loved him so for it. “She loaned it to me – something borrowed, you see.”

The corner of his mouth tipped up. “Ah. I thought it might be an heirloom of sorts. I assume the dress was something new?”

“Yes.”

He gently drew a stray petal from one of her locks. “What is the old part, then?”

She touched an emerald earring, still heavy on her ear.

“Of course. And the something blue?”

She smiled slowly and said nothing.

Azure fire lit in his eyes. “I see,” he murmured.

Her pulse began to flutter again when he turned her chair so she would face him fully. Her mouth turned dry when he sank to his knees before her.

Whatever she had expected him to do, he confounded her by lifting her feet from her shoes; pretty, decorative, uncomfortable new shoes. She gave a helpless moan when his thumb pressed into the sole of her left foot.

“I like it when you do that,” he said, watching her intently. “I intend to make you do it often in the next couple of years.”

“How could I object,” she sighed. Why on earth would she want to?

“You can and should object any time you wish,” he said, his tone serious.

She laid a hand against his cheek. “I know.”

He was quiet for a moment, concentrating on delicately massaging the sides of her foot, then he nudged his fingertips between her toes as far as the silken stocking allowed. A soft pulse started up between her legs. She bit her lip to bear it without moving.

“I'm glad,” she heard him say.

“About what?” she asked, sounding drunk on sherry all over again.

A rueful smile played over his lips. “I wasn't entirely certain you would show today.”

She blinked. “What makes you say such a thing?”

“When I brought the jewels to you two days ago, you looked notably distraught.”

“Well, I was a little distraught,” she admitted after a pause.

“Worse, you were keeping your troubles from me.”

“I was, yes.” She held his gaze. “I was afraid.” Finally, it felt safe to say it. Finally, it felt safe to tell him anything. “I was afraid of disappointing you. That I would fail us. I have disappointed loved ones before... I was afraid you would have regrets, or that I would lose myself after all and become unhappy.”

His warm hand closed securely around her ankle. “You know your strength,” he said. “You won’t lose yourself. But you will disappoint me at times, as I will disappoint you. It will not make me regret a thing.”

“You sound very confident.”

He shook his head. “We will share a life. I think it is inevitable that we will cause each other disappointment on occasion as we are by each other's side year after year. I think as long as respect guides us, all can be forgiven.”

“I suppose it would be exhausting, always being circumspect and on one’s best behaviour,” she allowed.

His eyes were a hundred miles deep. “The world is exhausting enough, Chérie,” he said. “Let our love be a place where we can just be.”

The sweetest ache spread through her chest.

She put her foot in his lap.

Sebastian stilled. With his head bent, he watched her stockings toes drag slowly over the hard length of his own arousal. When he looked back up at her, the hunger in his expression scorched her cheeks.

“What are your thoughts on making love on a train?” he asked hoarsely.

“In bright daylight, your Grace?”

“The better to see you.” He was already sliding layers of gauzy undergarments up, and up, until they bunched around her waist; then he slowly pushed her knees apart.

“I think,” she said, “I think it is a necessity.”

“Scandalous, your Grace,” he said, and with a smirk she had never before seen on his face: “I found it.” His head lowered, and she felt the soft hot glide of his tongue along the frothy blue garter high up on her thigh. Her hand curled around his nape. Her heart was full.

It did not matter where they were, what time of the day it was, or where they were going.

When their bodies finally slid together a while later, she was home.