

A woman with red curly hair, wearing a teal Victorian dress and a pearl necklace, stands on a balcony. She is holding a large, ornate white fan. In the background, a large, multi-story stone building with many windows and a central entrance is visible, surrounded by greenery and a small pond. The sky is a soft, hazy blue and orange.

*The Lady  
Traveller's  
Guide to*

# Happily Ever After

*Victoria Alexander*

**Victoria Alexander**  
**Lady Traveller's Guide**  
**To Happily Ever After**  
Серия «Lady Travelers Society», книга 4

**Аннотация**

Can she find her Happily Ever After... #1 New York Times bestselling author For the past seven years, Viola Branham has enjoyed the luxury of traveling the world as an independent woman, and confining her awkward past to a distant, if painful, memory. But now she has been summoned home to England over a stipulation in the will of her late uncle, the Earl of Ellsworth, one that decrees she lose everything unless she reconciles with the man who broke her heart and ruined her life—her husband.

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Before there was a Lady Travelers Society, there was just one lady traveler...

Some marry for love. Some marry for money. But Violet Hagen's quick wedding to irresponsible James Branham, heir to the Earl of Ellsworth, was to avoid scandal.

Though her heart was broken when she learned James never wanted marriage or her, Violet found consolation in traveling the world, at his expense—finding adventure and enjoying an unconventional, independent life. And strenuously avoiding her husband.

But when James inherits the earldom it comes with a catch—Violet. To receive his legacy he and Violet must live together as husband and wife, convincing society that they are reconciled. It's a preposterous notion, complicated by the fact that Violet is no longer the quiet, meek woman he married. But then he's not the same man either.

Chasing Violet across Europe to earn her trust and prove his worth, James realizes with each passing day that a marriage begun in haste may be enjoyed at leisure. And that nothing may be as scandalous—or as perfect—as falling hopelessly in love. Especially with your wife.

The Lady Traveler's Guide to Happily Ever After  
Victoria Alexander

MILLS & BOON

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# THE LADY TRAVELER'S GUIDE TO HAPPILY EVER AFTER

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# PROLOGUE

*London, 1882*

RICHARD BRANHAM, THE EARL OF ELLSWORTH, stood at the window in his library gazing at the back gardens, his hands clasped behind his back. One could tell by the set of his shoulders this was to be one of those discussions. Said discussions usually centered around his nephew's—his heir's—poor behavior, lack of responsibility and questionable future. Although James Branham thought his future had been rather firmly settled yesterday.

“Uncle Richard?” James braced himself. “You asked to see me?”

Uncle Richard turned from the window, the late-morning light emphasizing the lines of aging in his face. But then the man had passed his seventy-fifth year. “I thought we should talk.”

“It seems to me we’ve done nothing but talk the last few days.”

His uncle studied him for a long moment. “I’m proud of you.”

“I beg your pardon?” Not exactly what James had expected.

“You did the right thing.” Uncle Richard crossed the room and took his usual seat behind his ancient mahogany desk. “It wasn’t easy.”

James shrugged and sat in the equally old wingback chair in front of the desk. They’d faced each other countless times across

this desk since James had come to live with his uncle at the age of nine when his parents had died. Fifteen years later, James's behavior was still a matter that warranted discussion.

"There wasn't much of a choice." It seemed to James it came down to his future, or hers. He would survive a scandal. Men with money and titles always did. Violet would have been ruined. And it was entirely his fault.

"You saved that girl from scandal and probably a life alone. A young woman's fate rests on her reputation."

"I am well aware of that." It didn't seem at all fair that Violet should have to suffer for his mistake. What had he been thinking? Or had he been thinking at all? Apparently, there was a great deal of guilt that went along with selfish errors of judgment, even when one ultimately did the right thing.

"Public indiscretions, even those we might deem minor, are rarely forgiven by society. Being kissed by a man whose engagement to another woman is about to be announced is not something that is easily forgotten."

"She did slap me," James pointed out. "Hard."

"Yes, I saw that as did everyone else." Uncle Richard's lips twitched as if he were holding back a smile. He met his nephew's gaze directly. "It *was* a mistake, wasn't it?"

"Yes, of course." James nodded, perhaps a bit too vehemently. There was no need to change his story now. He had kissed Violet Hagen on a dark terrace at the ball where his engagement to Marie Fredericks was to be announced. Admittedly, in the light

of day, one would never confuse Violet with Marie, but then it hadn't been the light of day. And he had possibly drunk more than was wise. And...

And marrying Marie had looked more and more like a fate worse than death. He should have come up with a better way to escape marriage to her but he'd tried to convince himself he was simply experiencing the kind of apprehension most men felt when coming face-to-face with an eternity tied to the same woman. Regardless, that night, with his engagement moments from being publicly announced, he could feel a noose tightening around his neck. A wiser man, a *better* man, would have simply called it off. Only a true idiot would have seen the silly challenge of his friends to kiss his almost-fiancée as a chance for escape. Only a stupid ass—or a coward—would have allowed the world to think he had mistakenly kissed the wrong woman, knowing full well that very public *mistake* would lead to calling off any engagement. It had seemed a brilliant idea.

He never for a moment thought it would also lead to a fast marriage with the mistake in question.

“Do you like her?” Uncle Richard said without warning.

James frowned in confusion. “Who?”

“Your wife?” A hard tone sounded in Richard's voice. “The one you married yesterday?”

“Ah, Violet.” He nodded. “Well, yes, certainly. She's quite pleasant. Quiet, rather shy I would say. But witty under that terribly reserved exterior, as well. And not unattractive.” Indeed,

as he had been courting Marie he'd grown to know Violet. The idea of kissing her had not been an entirely new one. But then that particular idea occurred to him with most of the women he knew.

“What do you intend to do now?”

“Now? Honestly, Uncle Richard.” James shook his head. “I have no idea. I don't think I am ready for marriage.”



VIOLET'S BREATH CAUGHT. She'd been about to enter the library to greet her new husband and his uncle. Obviously James had no idea she'd be up and about but then it was already late morning. She suspected James rarely rose before noon.

“And yet you are married,” Lord Ellsworth said.

What was one supposed to do when hearing one's husband of less than a day proclaim he was not ready for marriage? Violet Hagen—now Branham—was not given to eavesdropping under ordinary circumstances. These were scarcely ordinary.

“Well, yes but...”

Uncle Richard's voice hardened. “But?”

“None of this is Violet's fault. She shouldn't have to pay for it.” James paused. “I've legitimately made her my wife, given her my name. I was thinking Violet and I would have one of those modern marriages. You know, the sort where we go our separate ways for the most part.”

Violet bit back a gasp. Her heart twisted in her chest. *No!*

Twenty-one years of quiet, reserved, proper behavior, of not standing up for herself, of doing what was expected up to and including marrying a man who had no desire to marry her, shattered with his words.

“She and I could—”

“She and I could what?” Violet swept into the room.

Both men jumped to their feet.

“Good morning, Violet,” Lord Ellsworth said pleasantly. “I trust you slept well?”

“Quite, thank you, my lord.” She moved closer. “I couldn’t help overhearing. As you and James are discussing my marriage and my future, don’t you think I should be present?”

“Of course.” James offered her a chair.

“I’d prefer to stand.” She braced herself. “Correct me if I’m wrong, but you’re suggesting that you and I continue our lives as if we were not married? You go your way and I go mine?”

“Well, yes, something like that.”

“I see.” Good Lord! The man really didn’t want her. A lump lodged in her throat. She ignored it. Now was not the time to feel sorry for herself. She’d thought, she’d *hoped*, that he liked her well enough to make a success of this marriage. She more than liked him, she’d been secretly smitten with the man very nearly since the moment she’d met him. What an idiot she was. “Then last night was...” She steeled herself, not sure if she wanted the answer. Still, only a coward wouldn’t ask the question and the time for cowardliness was past. “An obligation? The

responsibility of a dutiful husband?”

“No, not entirely.” He paused to choose his words. “But last night does erase any question of the legality of our union. It protects you should something happen to me. Death or something of the like.”

“That’s certainly the best idea I’ve heard today,” she snapped. Lord Ellsworth cleared his throat.

“I say, Violet, that’s uncalled-for.” James frowned.

“Really? And I think that’s the very least that is called for!”

“Didn’t you say she was shy and reserved?” Lord Ellsworth said in an aside to James.

“She was.”

“Shy and reserved will not serve me well at the moment, my lord.” She clenched her fists by her side, as much to still the trembling of her hands as from anger.

The oddest look of what might have been admiration shone in the older man’s eyes. Any other time she would have reveled in it. Now, she was fighting for her future. Her husband—her *new* husband—was about to turn her into that most pathetic creature: a wife in name only. *Absolutely not!* She squared her shoulders. “I will not return to my family’s house.”

“We shall find you a house,” James said quickly.

“She shall stay here.” Lord Ellsworth shot him a hard glance. “This is her home now.”

“Yes, of course.” Unease shaded James’s words. He was no doubt thinking exactly what she was—being under the same

roof would be exceptionally awkward if indeed they were living separate lives.

“I’m not sure I wish to.” Violet crossed her arms over her chest. “In this marriage you’re proposing, you are free to continue your reckless and scandalous ways?”

“Yes, I suppose, although calling them reckless and scandalous does seem a bit harsh.”

She ignored him. “And I may do as I wish, as well?”

“I hadn’t really considered...” James’s brow furrowed in confusion. Obviously the man didn’t like the sound of that. Good. “I would think so.”

She smiled slowly. He didn’t seem to like that, either. “Now that we have agreed to the rules—” she turned to Lord Ellsworth “—I hate to be indelicate but I would like to discuss finances.”

His lordship nodded. “James will provide you with an allowance suitable for your position. Yours to spend as you please.”

James nodded.

She looked at her new husband for a long moment. Silly of her to think that simply because she had feelings for him, because they shared a certain friendship, that this sham of a marriage would succeed. She shifted her gaze back to his uncle. “Given our arrangement, London is going to be uncomfortable for both of us. I have always wanted to travel. Can that be arranged?”

“Yes, of course.” Lord Ellsworth glanced at his nephew. “Unless, you have any objection?”

“Whatever she wants,” James said quietly. It really was the least he could do and the man knew it. He’d ruined her life. Destroyed any real chance of a good match and put her at the center of scandal. Now he could make amends by financing her freedom.

“Very well then.” She met her husband’s gaze directly. “I do agree with you, James. I don’t think you’re ready for marriage. For that matter, I doubt you’re ready for any significant responsibility whatsoever.”

“Come now, Violet.” The man actually had the nerve to sound indignant. “I should be given some credit. I did marry you and in doing so saved you from ruin. One might say I rescued you.”

“After it was you who put me in an untenable situation in the first place.” She ignored the fact that she had kissed him back with all the enthusiasm of unrequited love. “And destroyed my life in the process.”

“Not deliberately,” James said as if that made a difference. “That was never my intention.”

“I’ll arrange an appointment with my solicitor.” Lord Ellsworth smiled at his new niece. “I know it’s difficult at the moment, but regardless of where your travels take you, I do hope you will consider Ellsworth House your home.”

She forced a smile. “Thank you, my lord.” She turned her attention back to James. Resolve hardened her voice. “As for you, I never want to see you again.”

“There will be occasions—”

“Never!” She fairly spat the word, ignoring the pain squeezing her heart. Apparently, this was what true heartbreak felt like. No doubt made worse by the hope that last night... She thrust the thought aside. “I’m quite serious, James. Never.”

He stared, a stunned look on his handsome face. As if only now did he realize the consequences of what he’d done, of how he’d crushed her hopes and her heart. “Very well, never.”

“Now, if you will excuse me.” Violet nodded and headed toward the door. It was all she should do to keep her pace calm and sedate when what she truly wanted was to flee and then weep. Possibly forever.

“That appears resolved,” his lordship said behind her. “I must say, I’m rather disappointed.”

Tears blurred her eyes and she started toward her rooms. This was not the future she’d envisioned yesterday when she’d said vows that apparently only she really meant.

“It’s for the best, uncle.” James’s voice trailed after her. Maybe in that at least, James was right.

# PART ONE

London

## CHAPTER ONE

### Nearly six years later...

“HAVE I TOLD you how fortunate I am to be dancing with the loveliest woman here?” Lord Westmont said in his most charming manner. A manner designed to persuade whatever lady he was speaking to that he had never said those words—or words at all like them—to any other woman.

“Why no, my lord, I don’t believe you have.” Violet Branham followed his lead flawlessly. Westmont was an excellent dancer but then so was she. She flashed him a knowing smile. “At least not tonight. Although you might have mentioned it last year when we danced together at this very ball. And I believe the year before that, as well.”

His eyes widened in surprise. Poor Evan never would have expected a woman—a mere woman no doubt—to be so horribly honest. It was not how the game was played. But then Violet was tired of playing games by other people’s rules.

A stunned moment later, he laughed. “Lady Ellsworth, you are as outspoken as ever. I don’t know why I didn’t notice how truly delightful you are years ago.”

“Years ago, I wasn’t particularly delightful. But you don’t recall meeting me years ago, do you?”

The most charming look of panic crossed his face.

“Goodness, Evan, we met some nine years ago during my first season and again during my second and third seasons, as well. You simply weren’t, oh, *aware* of me, I would say.”

He frowned. “That’s a dreadful accusation.”

“My apologies.” She widened her eyes in an innocent manner. “Was I supposed to be kind?”

“I’m beginning to suspect I don’t deserve kindness,” he said slowly.

“Not in that respect. It was indeed a dreadful thing to do, you know. At least it seemed so at the time.” She shrugged. “Although you were not alone in your complete lack of acknowledgment of my very existence.”

He winced. “My apologies, Violet. All I can say in my defense is that I was much younger, rather full of myself and somewhat stupid. Well, extremely stupid.” He paused. “You may object, should you feel the need.”

“Oh, no, please continue.”

It was rather fun, making Evan pay, as it were, for the rudeness of his youth. There was a time when she never would have thrown his vile behavior back in his face. But she was not the same girl he had ignored all those years ago. It wasn’t so much that she had blossomed as she had simply come into her own, aged like a fine wine. When she had first come out in society, she had been one of those vast numbers of girls who were not so pretty as to catch the eye of every available gentleman, but not so dull as to be considered a true wallflower. Admittedly, that changed with

every passing season as her prospects for marriage grew dimmer. There was hope for Violet, her mother had often said, if only Violet would pay more attention to her appearance and at least pretend to enjoy flirtatious chatter and social occasions even if she thought such things inane. No, much to Mother's annoyance, Violet preferred her own company and the solitude to write bad poetry or read Lord Byron's works or ride alone. No wonder men like Lord Westmont tended to overlook her.

Those days were past. Years of travel abroad, meeting fascinating people and having assorted adventures had polished her. Provided her with the kind of confidence one could only acquire from living life. And she knew it. She was not the girl she used to be. Nearly six years of a separated marriage was enough to change anyone. As well as force them to grow up and discard silly thoughts of love and romance and other such nonsense.

"And I was rather shallow as well it appears." Genuine regret shone in his eyes. Perhaps she wasn't the only one who had changed. "Once again, my apologies for my thoughtless behavior. But tonight, I do think you are the loveliest, as well as most interesting, woman in the room."

"And tonight, my lord," she said, and smiled up at him, "I will believe you."

"Am I forgiven then?"

"Perhaps."

He laughed then sobered. "Why don't you come back to England more often? Allow me to make up for the past."

“I am considering it.”

He gazed into her eyes and smiled. “Good.”

She returned his smile but was not so foolish as to believe his words. Evan was an outrageous flirt and Violet had no intention of becoming any man’s conquest.

In spite of any number of admittedly silly concerns, it was good to be back in London. It was always good to come home. Although the house in Mayfair she resided in when she was in the city was scarcely home. But as it was her husband’s house, it was hers, as well. She refused to stay with her parents. Returning to the house of her girlhood would be an admission that her marriage was a dreadful failure. It was true, of course, and everyone in London knew it, but she had no desire to listen to her mother tell her exactly what she had done wrong.

Violet knew all too well that she had allowed a bit of foolish girlhood longing and a remarkable kiss to sweep aside all reason, overcoming good sense and any sort of primal instinct of self-preservation.

The music faded. She stepped out of Evan’s arms, and he escorted her off the dance floor.

“In spite of your painful candor—” Evan raised her hand to his lips “—I would very much like to call on you. I would be honored if you would allow me the opportunity to make amends for my past stupidity.” He grinned. “I do so like a challenge.”

“You do realize I’m a married woman.”

He gasped in an overly dramatic manner. She doubted if

anyone in London was not aware of her sham of a marriage. How she and James had married and then gone their separate ways. It was a long time ago but society had a very long memory. “Violet, you misunderstand. I only wish to further our friendship.”

“You are no more than a breath away from becoming a true cad, aren’t you, Evan?”

He grinned, then caught sight of something over her shoulder and froze like a frightened bunny. And she knew.

“Lord Westmont,” the voice that shouldn’t be at all familiar and yet was recognized somewhere in the vicinity of her soul, sounded behind her. Her heart clenched.

“Ellsworth,” Evan said with far more composure than she would have thought he had a moment ago.

Violet summoned the most awful sense of determination. She had anticipated this moment, planned for it ever since she had finally accepted he had absolutely no interest in her whatsoever. She turned and smiled politely, ignoring the hitch in her throat. He had always been the handsomest man in the room with his dark hair and deep blue eyes. No doubt if she’d stayed with him, he would have broken her heart. Again. The man didn’t have a faithful bone in his body. “Lord Ellsworth.”

His gaze bore into hers. She refused to flinch.

“Lady Ellsworth.” He took her hand and raised it to his lips, his gaze never faltering from hers. If she were a fanciful sort, she would have thought a hush fell over the entire ballroom, all eyes on the estranged Lord and Lady Ellsworth. Once, the very

thought would have terrified her. Now, she didn't care. "Never is a very long time."

"Apparently, not long enough."

The look in his eyes was an interesting mix of caution, curiosity and challenge. But then they hadn't seen each other face-to-face in close to six years. God knew what her eyes were saying to him. "I believe this is our dance."

"Is it?" She tilted her head. He appeared exactly as she remembered. His shoulders were as broad, his gaze as endless, his hair as thick and dark and just the tiniest bit disarrayed—as if it was the last stronghold of the rebellious nature of his youth.

Oh, certainly, over the years she'd seen him on occasion from the window of her room as he was leaving the London house, scampering off to the country or wherever he went so as to avoid her during her visits home, thus keeping a promise he'd made long ago. But this was the closest they'd been to each other since the day after their wedding. On further consideration, he wasn't entirely unchanged. There were a few creases around the corners of his eyes but beyond that, something had shifted, matured perhaps. The look in his eye had once been carefree and flirtatious and brimming with ill-concealed amusement. Now it was direct, firm, compelling. His lighthearted manner six years ago was that of a young man with no particular cares or responsibilities. The air of assurance and confidence about him now was that of a man who had no doubt of his place in the world. This was no longer the happy-go-lucky young man she

been forced to wed when she had just turned twenty-one and he was twenty-four. But then she was not the quiet, pale creature she'd been then, either. "Are you sure you're not mistaken?"

"Violet," Evan interrupted. "Do you need my assistance?"

What a surprisingly gallant thing to say. Perhaps she had misjudged him.

"No, Evan, but I do appreciate your offer." She smiled in polite dismissal then paused. "Although might I request a favor?"

"Anything," he said with a smile.

"Do you see the young ladies over there?" She nodded toward a group of young women sitting together, desperately trying to appear as if they were having a wonderful time and not counting the minutes until they could flee for the safety of home. "They are no doubt reserved and quiet but are probably quite interesting and very nice. Would you ask at least one of them to dance?"

"I shall do better than that," Evan said gallantly. "I shall ask my brother and a few of my friends to dance with them, as well."

She cast him a brilliant smile. "In which case you are most certainly forgiven."

Evan grinned and took his leave.

Violet turned her attention back to James, who, as of two months ago when dear Uncle Richard had passed on, was now the Earl of Ellsworth. The man who had ruined her life. Her husband.

"There are any number of things I may be mistaken about. Nonetheless, this *is* our dance." James leaned in and spoke softly. "People are staring."

She laughed as if he had just said something amusing. “Of course they are, James. We’ve never been seen together in public before. No doubt everyone is expecting we’ll do something they can talk about for days. Now the question is—will we?”

“Shall we disappoint them instead?” He held out his arm. “Dance with me, Violet.”

“There’s nothing I’d rather do.” In truth, there were any number of things she’d rather do including walking on hot coals and being thrown into a lion’s den. There was little difference and little choice. She placed her hand on his arm and allowed him to escort her onto the floor.

Regardless of how often she’d practiced exactly what she’d say when this moment came she couldn’t quite summon the right words. Perhaps because it was deeply unsettling to be in his arms again where she never should have been in the first place.

Six years ago, on the night his engagement was to be announced to her friend Marie Fredericks, he had kissed quiet Violet Hagen on the shadowed terrace—later claiming he’d mistaken her for Marie as they were both red-haired and wearing blue gowns. Although really one was a sky blue and the other a sea foam, and Marie’s hair was more blond than red. Aside from that, Violet was decidedly taller and not as curved as Marie. His friends also admitted they had challenged him to give his fiancée a real kiss—the kind of kiss a man gives the woman he intends to marry—and had directed him to the terrace where they later swore they truly thought Marie was. There was as well far

more partaking of spirits than was perhaps wise. Unfortunately, in their zeal to witness this real kiss, they tangled in the draperies covering the windows overlooking the terrace, ripping them down in the process and directing the attention of everyone in the room to the *real kiss* currently in progress right outside.

It wasn't bad enough that he had kissed her but that she had kissed him back with a shocking amount of enthusiasm for a girl who had scarcely been kissed at all up to that point. And really did the hesitant brush of lips she'd experienced previously with two cautious young men even count as legitimate kisses? Admittedly, Violet had thought them rather thrilling until James had kissed her. She'd been shocked when he'd swept her into his arms. Then, with no more than a moment of hesitation, she had wrapped her arms around him, thinking surely he had realized Marie was the wrong match for him and Violet was so very right. When their lips met and his body pressed against hers, she'd discovered a passion she'd never imagined. It was a *real* kiss, or at least she had thought it was. She didn't question the why of it. Stupid, as it turned out. She had no idea he had mistaken her for Marie until he raised his head and realized what he'd done. And that was the first crack of her heart.

The second was the shock on his face and he'd uttered, "Bloody hell, it's you."

What could she do but slap him hard across his face?

Still, the damage was done. Which apparently, in the more scandal-prone minds of society, was in the intensity of the

embrace—just to add yet another layer of humiliation—rather than the slap. All in all it was the Holy Grail of gossip. A man whose engagement was about to be announced found in a compromising position with the friend of the intended fiancée. Her parents had then insisted on marriage as the scandal was such her mother warned she would never make a decent match now. James's uncle Richard, the Earl of Ellsworth, had left James's decision up to him but left unsaid the questions of honor and responsibility involved. In spite of James's devil-may-care reputation, no one had ever questioned his word. Violet had protested—obviously James had no desire to marry her. It was pointed out James no longer had a choice, nor did she. James did what was expected and two days later they were married.

Through the years Violet did wonder what might have happened if she had refused to marry him. If she had stood up for herself.

She certainly did the morning after their wedding night when she learned he intended for their marriage to be little more than a pretense. When her heart had shattered. Violet had truly thought, up until that moment, there was the possibility they might make the best of this. They had been friends of a sort. If she had, in the back of her mind, wanted more, well, that was a silly thought. But she absolutely would not stay with a man who didn't want her.

A week later, Violet engaged a companion—Mrs. Cleo Ryland, a delightful widow only a few years older than Violet—packed her bags and headed to Paris. James had provided her

with the resources she needed to see everything she had ever read about, everything she'd ever dreamed of seeing. If he did not intend to be her husband, she intended to take full advantage of his generosity.

She had earned it.



“IT’S BEEN A long time since we danced together,” James said mildly.

He had danced with Violet any number of times before their marriage as he couldn’t dance exclusively with Marie. There were rules about that sort of thing. Violet and other friends and acquaintances were always with James and Marie and the couple was quite properly never alone. Marie wanted a dashing, handsome husband with a respectable title and a tidy fortune to provide her an unsullied position in society. She was not about to let so much as a hint of impropriety jeopardize that. In Marie’s eyes, James was a perfect fit.

“It’s been a long time since we’ve spoken.” Violet summoned a nondescript smile.

“Pride is a cruel mistress, Violet.”

“One of many mistresses, no doubt,” she said lightly. Regardless of how rarely she was in London, gossip about his numerous liaisons inevitably reached her, thanks to her mother and a handful of well-meaning friends. She’d ignored them for the most part. He had his life and she had hers.

“Regardless of what you might think of me, I meant that with all due sincerity.” He paused. “I am trying to admit to my past mistakes.”

“And then what?”

“Then atone for them.” He met her gaze directly.

She drew her brows together. “I’m not quite sure what you’re trying to say, James, but I am certain the dance floor in the middle of Lady Brockwell’s annual ball is not the best place to do it.”

“On the contrary, my dear.” He grinned and for a moment she saw the man she’d married. “We would make Lady Brockwell’s ball the talk of London.”

“Oh, I’d rather not. I’ve never particularly liked her.”

“Are you staying at Ellsworth House?” he asked.

“I always do.” She paused. “You had warning, I sent a telegram from Lisbon.” Whenever she headed toward London she sent a telegram to Andrews, James’s butler, to give the household notice as to her impending arrival. And give James the time he needed to escape.

“Thoughtful of you as always.” He cast her his most charming smile. “Now, may I escort you home?”

“I’m not sure I am ready to leave.”

“Forgive me if it sounded like a question. It wasn’t.”

She raised a brow. “Is that an order, then?”

He hesitated then grimaced. “Of course not. Sorry, I’ve never dealt with a wife before.”

“Not one of your own, you mean.”

His eyes narrowed slightly, as if she had pushed him too far. Good.

“And I’ve never dealt with a husband. But one dance and then we’re off?” She shook her head. “Won’t that set them all to talking? *Why are Lord and Lady Ellsworth leaving so early? What do you think they’re up to?* That sort of thing.”

“Probably, but only until the next interesting tidbit comes along. Should be no more than a day or two.”

It really was pointless to argue with him. And they did have things to talk about that were best discussed in private. She wasn’t sure she was prepared to do so tonight, however.

The music ended and he tucked her hand in the crook of his arm and steered her in a relaxed manner toward the door, stopping here and there to exchange a word with acquaintances. As if there was nothing at all out of the ordinary for Lord and Lady Ellsworth to be in the same room together let alone departing as a couple.

Once they had settled in the carriage, Violet let out a resigned sigh. “You do realize my mother will hear of this and will probably be calling on us by morning.”

“My apologies.”

She chose her words carefully. “I’m not sure I would have attended the ball if I had known you were going to be there.”

“Whereas I knew you were going to be there and thought it better to greet you in public.”

“Oh?”

“I wasn’t sure you’d come,” he said abruptly. “To London, I mean.”

“I am here because of Uncle Richard, of course,” she said coolly, ignoring the catch in her throat. “I was so saddened to hear of his passing. I wish I had come to see him again.”

Uncle Richard had never thought it necessary to vacate the premises upon her visits home. He and Violet had spent long hours together during her stays, playing cards or chess, attending plays or lectures, and discussing whatever happened to pass through their minds. He’d been ill for some time but on her last visit a year ago, she’d thought he had improved. He was the only person who had ever accepted her for who she was rather than who she used to be or who she should be. Sorrow stabbed her at the thought of never seeing him again.

“You didn’t come when he died two months ago.”

“It seemed pointless.”

“I assume you received notice from his solicitor about tomorrow’s meeting?”

She nodded. The letter had insisted she return to London as soon as possible, as per Uncle Richard’s instructions. It was followed by a telegram confirming her attendance at tomorrow’s meeting. “Do you know what it’s regarding?”

“Uncle Richard’s final wishes.” He shrugged. “Beyond that, I have no idea.”

“Then we shall both be surprised,” she said under her breath.

While it did strike her as an ordinary conversation, tension fairly bounced off the walls of the carriage. Idle chatter seemed absurd. There was so much of importance to say, issues that needed to be resolved. And yet here and now, she couldn't bring herself to say anything. What did one say to a husband one hadn't spoken to in nearly six years? Silence was far wiser at the moment. But it was past time. One of them had to be honest enough to do what needed to be done. It was more than likely to be her. Goodness, hadn't she been working up her courage for years? Still, it might be better to hear what the solicitor had to say. Another day or two would make no real difference.

James helped her from the carriage and escorted her into the grand house near Grosvenor Square. Andrews greeted them, handed her wrap to a footman and promptly vanished, no doubt within calling distance should he be needed. The butler was the very soul of discretion. Regardless, Violet suspected he and any number of other servants were observing them from some unseen location.

"I usually have a glass of brandy in the library before bed," James said in an offhand manner. "Would you care to join me?"

"I'm afraid I've had a very long day. I would prefer to retire for the night." She smiled politely and turned toward the stairs. *Coward*, a voice whispered in the back of her head. A civilized brandy in the comfort of Uncle Richard's library would be the perfect opportunity for calm, rational discussion. Regardless, she simply wasn't ready. She'd assumed she wouldn't see him until

they met in the solicitor's office. She never imagined she'd see him, dance with him, tonight.

"I had hoped we could talk."

She turned back to him. "Now?" She narrowed her eyes. "Why?"

"It just seems like an opportune time. That's all." He paused. "We've never really talked."

"No, we haven't." *And whose fault is that?* She bit back the words and heaved a weary sigh. "It's been almost six years, James. Surely whatever you have to say can wait another day."

He gazed at her for a long moment then nodded. "Of course." He paused. "That was very nice of you. Encouraging Westmont to dance with those girls."

"I am very nice." Her gaze met his. "And I know how they feel."

"Yes, I suppose you do." He looked as if he wanted to say something else, then thought better of it. "Good night, Violet."

"Good night, James." She nodded and started up the grand staircase, refusing to look back at him. She knew he watched her, felt his gaze on her as if his eyes were burning into her back.

Her room was at the farthest end of the hall from his. Aside from a single night, she and James had never before slept under the same roof. That thought alone was enough to keep her from getting so much as a wink of sleep. Add to that, Uncle Richard's mysterious final wishes and her own desire to at last resolve things between them and move on with their lives and anything

approximating true rest was impossible.

Beyond all else, she couldn't get James's comment out of her head. Was he truly ready to face his past mistakes? Did those mistakes include her?

And how on earth did he intend to atone for that?

## CHAPTER TWO

“AND SHE’S BACK,” Ophelia Higginbotham said under her breath and resisted the urge to slide under the covers and pull them up over her head.

“How are you feeling, Effie?” Persephone Fitzhew-Wellmore sailed into the room like a ray of unrelenting sunshine. She glanced at Lady Guinevere Blodgett, sitting nearby in Effie’s bedroom and currently perusing the obituary section of the *Times* as she had done every day in recent years. “How is she?”

Gwen didn’t look up from the page. After all, it wasn’t as if she hadn’t been asked the question every time Poppy entered the room. “Much better I think.”

“I am.” Effie nodded in her healthiest manner. “Oh, I am indeed. I feel much, *much* better. Why, I daresay I’ll be out of bed in no time.”

“I doubt that.” Poppy’s brow furrowed and she eyed the other woman closely. “I think you look extremely pale. Doesn’t she, Gwen?”

“Oh my, yes,” Gwen murmured.

“There, you see? Gwen agrees with me,” Poppy said firmly. “They’ll be no more discussion about it. Although you may read today’s post if you feel up to it.” She set a small stack of correspondence on the tray on Effie’s lap.

“And I do.” Effie voice rang with eagerness. Even invoices

would be a respite from the endless boredom of being waited on hand and foot. Still, it couldn't be helped.

"We'll see how you feel tomorrow." Poppy shook her head in a chastising manner. "This is your third relapse of whatever illness has been plaguing you." She paused. "Perhaps we should have Dr. Wrenfield—"

"No," Gwen and Effie said at the same time.

"You know how Effie hates to be a bother," Gwen said quickly. "Besides, the doctor has been here once already and was unable to identify the true nature of her illness."

"Yes, but I wasn't here when he called," Poppy said. "Perhaps if I were to give him my observations, it might help him in determining what the problem is."

"I really can't afford another visit," Effie added.

It was the one thing Poppy couldn't argue with.

Finances were more and more distressing for the three widows. Their husbands had all died within the past few years—Gwen's Sir Charles and Poppy's Malcomb three years ago, followed the next year by Effie's dear William. The men, who had all lived lives of adventure and exploration and excitement, had been felled by the most ordinary of circumstances—Sir Charles had succumbed to a recurrent bout of malaria, Malcomb passed on in his chair in front of the fire so peacefully it took Poppy several hours to realize he had indeed left this life and Effie's dear William, having had a long and illustrious career in Her Majesty's army without scarcely a scrape, fell from a ladder

he shouldn't have been on in the first place. It was scant comfort to Effie that she'd told him not to climb the blasted ladder.

While they were excellent husbands—even if they were scarcely ever present, which, depending upon one's point of view, might have contributed to their long and happy marriages—they'd not given enough thought to providing for their wives' financial futures in the event of their demise. Gwen suspected, as they had survived any number of perilous adventures, they never imagined their days would be cut short in the relative safety of home. The end result of their lack of foresight was that their widows were slowly and inevitably running out of funds. The three friends had each saved some money through the years, and Effie did have a small military pension, but they estimated it would not be long before they would all be penniless. Being penniless as well as in one's seventies was not a pleasant prospect.

“Of course.” Poppy sighed. “We really have to do something about that.” She straightened her shoulders. “For now I shall see if your cook has the broth ready.”

“Oh, goody.” Effie forced a cheery smile. “Broth.”

“You're fortunate your cook is so skilled at broth.” Poppy cast Effie an encouraging smile and took her leave.

“Mm-mm, more broth,” Gwen said softly, the corners of her mouth twitching in an effort to hold back a laugh.

“I hate broth.” Effie let out a resigned breath. “This won't be nearly as funny next week when you're the one in bed.”

Gwen lowered the paper. “Oh, no. We agreed there should be

at least two to three weeks between illnesses so as not to arouse her suspicions.”

“I’m not sure I can do this again.” Effie shuffled through the envelopes on the tray. “There’s nothing worse than being forced to stay in bed when there’s nothing whatsoever wrong with you.”

“And who knows better than I?”

It had been Gwen’s bout with a persistent cold that had given them the idea of feigning illness in the first place. It had seemed a brilliant idea at the time. Neither of them had imagined how terribly draining acting ill could be. But it was all they could think of and they had agreed something must be done about Poppy’s melancholy state.

The three had been friends—no, sisters—for more than forty years now, drawn together by the absence of husbands wandering the world in search of adventure. Aside from Gwen’s niece and great-nephew, none of them had any real family nor had any of them been blessed with children. But through thick and thin, for most of their lives, they could count on each other. Now, Poppy needed them even if she would never admit it.

She was the youngest of the three by two years and had always been the cheeriest of the group. Nothing in Poppy’s estimation was so dire it would not ultimately work out for the best. Gwen was the most practical of the trio and Effie had long accepted she was the one more prone to sarcasm, snide comments and an often too-colorful vocabulary. She had once decided the three of them were very much like ancient Greek goddesses. Poppy was

the goddess of peace and love and all things bright and happy. Gwen was the goddess of wisdom and practicality. Effie was the goddess of war. She rather liked that.

But the bright light that was Poppy had dimmed since Malcomb's death. Oh, Effie and Gwen had mourned the loss of their husbands every bit as deeply. One would have thought, as they had lived much of their lives without their spouses, their passing would have been easier. But it was one thing to fear the man you loved might never come home and something else entirely to know that he wouldn't. Perhaps because Effie and Gwen did not see the world through the rose-colored haze that Poppy did, it was somewhat easier to face whatever life now had in store.

Gwen had thought, and Effie agreed, that it wasn't just Malcomb's death that had depressed Poppy's spirits. Her husband's passing had been followed that same year by Sir Charles and then William the following year. Gwen had likened it to a plague only without the locusts. She and Effie had agreed, unlike so many widows of their acquaintance, they at least knew how to take care of themselves. Of course, they hadn't realized the perilous state of their respective finances and they never expected Poppy's melancholy to linger.

It was quite by accident that they discovered when she was busy, she almost seemed her old self. They had then cunningly guided her into volunteering to reorganize the library and collections of the Explorers Club. That in itself took nearly a year

and far more of their own time than they had planned on. Who ever would have suspected Poppy had the talent of a general for barking orders and delegating tasks. Effie had always considered her a bit scattered. When one of the ladies on the board of the club's Ladies Committee resigned to move to York to be with her daughter's family, they had encouraged Poppy to stand for that seat. She was universally liked and no one ran against her but the position did not take up nearly as much of Poppy's time as Effie and Gwen had hoped. Then Gwen had come down with a nasty cold and Poppy had charged in to help with her care, and her friends realized this would indeed give her a project of sorts to fill her time. At least until they could come up with something better.

"We're going to have to think of something else soon, you know. Something to occupy her days and her mind." Effie sorted her mail into two stacks—the accounts due she could fortunately still pay, and correspondence of an interesting nature. That stack was sadly comprised of only one crisp, cream-colored envelope.

"I am trying to think of something. I have no desire to take to my bed again." Gwen returned to her study of the obituaries. "Oh look, that nice Mrs. Hackett died. What a shame."

"I thought you detested Mrs. Hackett." Effie picked up the envelope and examined it. The stationery was of excellent quality, the handwriting unfamiliar and a bit unsteady. She turned it over. Some sort of embossed seal was on the flap. How very interesting indeed.

"I did, but now she's dead." Gwen thought for a moment. "In the scheme of things, one could say I won."

"Whoever is left standing wins?" Effie slit the envelope with a letter opener, a replica of a sword her husband had owned.

"Something like that." Gwen settled back in her chair. "I don't know why I insist on reading these death notices. It seems there is at least one acquaintance listed nearly every day. Why, everyone we know is dropping dead."

"These things tend to happen when one reaches a certain age." Effie pulled several pages from the envelope and started to read.

*My dear Ophelia,*

*Forgive me for taking the liberty of calling you dear. In my heart, you have always been my dear Ophelia. But I knew the moment I introduced you to my good friend, William, on that summer night all those many years ago that I would never have the opportunity to call you my dear aloud.*

Effie's breath caught. *Richard.*

"Still, one does hate to be uninformed," Gwen continued. "Imagine if I were to have a party. It would be dreadfully awkward if I were to invite someone who is already dead." She paused. "Of course, they wouldn't come so it might not be so awkward at that."

*I hope you received my letter of condolence upon William's passing. He was a good, true friend and I have missed him. It is one of the many regrets of my life that we drifted apart.*

*What a pity it is to recognize your regrets when it's too late to do*

*anything about them. My greatest by far was not fighting for your affections. But the way you and William looked at one another on that very first meeting was as if there was no one else in the world. I knew any hope I had was futile. So I chose to step back. And while I still believe it was the right thing to do, I have discovered if one is haunted by any single word in life it is perhaps.*

Shock rippled through her. Surely she wasn't reading this correctly.

"Although a séance would be interesting," Gwen mused. "I wonder if one sends invitations to the dead."

*I have been ill for some time and I know my remaining days are few. I fear if you are reading this, I have breathed my last. This letter is in the form of my final request, which I am leaving in your capable hands.*

"That would be a great deal of fun," Gwen said thoughtfully. "Although I daresay we couldn't afford a real spiritualist. But I think Mrs. Addison has a cousin who dabbles in contacting the spirits from beyond. She's quite good at it from what I hear and I doubt she would charge a fee."

*I can do nothing about the past but, even from the grave, I may be able to influence the future. In my life I have witnessed three great loves. The first was between you and William. The second was my love for you. It seems I can confess in death what I never managed to say in life. Please do not allow my revelation to distress you. I refused to interfere with your happiness and knowing you were happy was enough.*

“Still,” Gwen continued, “the last thing Poppy needs is to see Malcomb again. I can’t imagine that would be the least bit helpful.”

*I am convinced I have seen one more great love even if those involved refuse to acknowledge it.*

“Gwen,” Effie said sharply. “In all those obituaries you read, have you seen a notice about the death of the Earl of Ellsworth?”

“Ellsworth? I’m not sure. It does sound vaguely familiar.” Gwen thought for a moment. “Yes, I think I did see that name. A few weeks ago perhaps? Or longer I suppose. Certainly within the last few months. Did you know him?”

Effie nodded. “I had once thought he might be the man I would marry but then I met William.”

Gwen’s eyes widened. “Oh?”

Effie scanned the rest of the letter. Good Lord. Surely the man wasn’t serious? She held it out to Gwen. “Read this.”

Gwen started to read then looked at Effie. “Are you sure you want me to read this? It seems rather personal.”

“I’d tell you everything it says anyway.”

“There is that.” Gwen returned her attention to the letter.

She was certainly taking her time. Still, Effie had been so shocked she had done little more than skim the rest of the letter. She drummed her fingers on the tray impatiently.

At last Gwen looked up. “This man spent his entire life in love with you.”

Effie winced. “I had no idea.”

“He never gave you a hint as to his feelings?”

“Of course not. Besides, William was like a brother to him, at least when they were young. They went their separate ways as the years went on. The army sent William all over the world and when he left the military, he followed on the heels of your husband. You know as well as I he was hardly ever here. I rarely saw Richard after William and I married.”

Although Effie supposed it was possible that it was difficult for Richard to see William given his feelings for her. “On those occasions when I ran into him he was cordial and pleasant, as any old friend would be, but nothing more than that.”

Gwen nodded. “How very noble of him not to let you know how he felt.”

“Yes, I suppose it was.” And if she had known of Richard’s feelings? “It would have been terribly uncomfortable if he had declared himself.”

“And would you have done anything differently had you known of his feelings?”

Effie shook her head. “No.”

“Did you ever once lead him to believe there could be anything between you once you met William?”

“Of course not.”

“Then you have nothing to feel guilty about.”

“I don’t feel guilty,” Effie said. “I had nothing to do with this. But I do feel badly for him. It’s quite sad, don’t you think?”

“Unrequited love usually is.”

“He was a wonderful man, very charming and quite nice. He was very nearly perfect I suppose. William wasn’t the least bit perfect.” Effie smiled.

“Are you going to take up this challenge he has set for you?”

“It does seem like a lot of effort.”

“It was a man’s dying wish. You really can’t say no to a dying man’s wish.” Gwen paused. “Besides, he says you’ll be paid for any expenses you incur as well as receive a stipend as he anticipates this will take a great deal of your time.” She grimaced. “Do you think he knew of your financial difficulties?”

“I hadn’t thought of that.” Effie shook her head. “I couldn’t possibly accept his money under those circumstances. I should have to return it.”

“You can’t return it—he’s dead.”

“Then I shall give it to charity,” Effie said staunchly.

“We’ll be charity in no more than a year ourselves,” Gwen pointed out.

For a few minutes, Effie had forgotten about their financial difficulties. “That does put it in a different light.”

“It also seems to me—” Gwen chose her words with care “—this man’s last thoughts were not for himself but for those he loved, which apparently included you.”

“If I agree to do this, I am to meet with his solicitor and the parties involved tomorrow.”

“And?”

“And I suppose when a man who is no longer with us wants to

do something rather lovely, it would be bad form for the living to refuse.”

Gwen adopted a casual tone. “You are doing it then?”

“Yes, I suppose I am. But I’m not doing it alone.”

“I wouldn’t expect you to.”

Effie drew her brows together. “Still, it’s a matter of love. It doesn’t seem like the sort of thing one should do for money.”

“You’re not doing it for the money. You’re doing it because a man who cared deeply for you has asked for your help. It’s the only thing he ever asked of you. The money is simply a delightful bonus. He doesn’t need it anymore but with any luck, it will sustain you until we can come up with a way to avoid destitution.”

“Sustain *us*,” Effie said firmly.

Gwen grinned. “Even better.”

Poppy stepped into the room, carrying a tray with the dreaded broth steaming in a large bowl. “What’s even better?”

Effie and Gwen traded glances.

“I believe, my dear old friend...” Effie smiled in a manner she had been told was more than a little wicked. “We have a new project.”

## CHAPTER THREE

“ARE YOU MAD?” The question blurted from James’s mouth before he could stop it. Still, if anything seemed to warrant the questioning of sanity it was the words the solicitor had just dropped like a sudden whiff of something unexpected and extremely unpleasant.

“This is not my idea, James,” Marcus Davies said in a patient manner. He had no doubt been practicing for this particular meeting. He and James had attended school together but hadn’t become friends until after James’s marriage, brought together initially by their shared affinity for raucous living and having a great deal of fun. A few years ago, both men put their respective pasts behind them as Marcus joined his father’s firm—the firm that had long handled Uncle Richard’s affairs—and James had become involved in Uncle Richard’s business interests and estate management. In short, they had grown up. While they had once been cohorts in disreputable antics, they had eventually discovered the advantage of respectable comportment. More’s the pity. “This is entirely your uncle’s doing.”

“He’d never do something so preposterous.”

“Don’t be absurd.” Violet shot him a look of chastisement or annoyance or exasperation or some twisted female combination of all that and more. Women had thrown him all kinds of looks in his life but they were usually far more pleasant and inviting.

“It’s exactly the kind of thing he’d do. I never paid a single visit here wherein he didn’t bring up how it was time to reconcile our differences. Indeed, it was his favorite topic.” She glanced at the older lady sitting in a chair strategically placed off to one side of Marcus’s desk. “Mrs. Higginbotham? What do you think?”

“I certainly don’t think Richard was mad, if that’s what you’re implying, my lord.” Mrs. Higginbotham cast him a look shockingly similar to Violet’s. “According to the letter he sent me, he wanted to, well, correct a mistake or right a wrong or prevent a great loss, something of that nature.” The widow was once apparently a good friend of Uncle Richard’s, although James couldn’t recall ever hearing her name. Regardless, his uncle had thought highly enough of this Ophelia Higginbotham to place James’s fate in the lady’s hands. She nodded at Marcus. “I suggest you continue as there will no doubt be further outbursts —” both ladies cast James that unnerving glance again “—and I daresay we don’t want this to go on longer than necessary.”

“Very well.” Marcus shot James a pointed look, a warning to keep his mouth shut. While his firm handled Uncle Richard’s affairs, Marcus personally managed all of James’s legal needs. He was at once James’s friend, legal advisor and, on occasion, protector. The solicitor cleared his throat. “As I was saying, while you do inherit your uncle’s title, his properties—including the country estate and the house in London, as well as his fortune—were his to do with as he pleased.”

James waved off the explanation. “We know all that. Go on.”

“I simply want to make certain you and Lady Ellsworth are clear on all the various aspects of your uncle’s will so there are no misunderstandings.” The others might not realize it but it was apparent to James that his old friend was somewhat amused by Uncle Richard’s will. They would have to discuss later how this was not the least bit amusing. “As his only heir, the argument can be made that you are certainly entitled to his property and his fortune but his lordship was very specific about the conditions under which you would receive it all.

“First, as I’m sure you remember my saying a minute ago—”

“Burned into my brain,” James muttered.

“—you and Lady Ellsworth are to reside together for a period of two years, eleven months, one week and three days. That length of time is based on the date of today’s meeting as per your uncle’s instructions. He wished this meeting to be held as soon after his death as possible. But as Lady Ellsworth was abroad, it did take some time to contact her.”

“Uncle Richard always knew exactly where I was,” Violet pointed out. “We corresponded regularly.”

“The blame for any delay falls entirely on us.” Marcus cast Violet an apologetic smile. “As I was saying, for two years, eleven —”

“Three years,” James said. “You might as well call it three years.”

“For the sake of expediency, very well, three years it is.” Marcus continued. “With no more than a total of fourteen days

spent apart during the course of any given year.”

“This residing together begins—” Violet held her breath “—when?”

“Today,” Marcus said. “From this moment on.”

“I see,” she said faintly.

“Secondly, you must appear as a couple—a cordial couple—several times a week—”

“Three,” Mrs. Higginbotham said.

Marcus nodded and continued. “Said appearances are to be in a public setting or in the presence of witnesses.”

James frowned. “What do you mean *the presence of witnesses*?”

“That is left to the discretion of Mrs. Higginbotham.” Marcus smirked.

“And we have to appear to be happy?” Violet asked.

“You certainly shouldn’t appear to be unhappy. Blatant unhappiness with each other in public would no doubt cause tongues to wag. You will want to avoid that as the third stipulation requires there be no scandal whatsoever. No hint of impropriety, no faint whiff of unpleasant gossip. No rumors, no innuendoes, no insinuations.” His gaze flicked to Violet. “Regarding either of you.” And back to James. “Do you understand?”

“Completely.” James shrugged. “That won’t be the least bit difficult.” Three pairs of skeptical eyes fixed on him. “My name has not been so much as whispered with regards to anything the least bit untoward in quite some time.” Quite some time being

defined rather loosely, at least in his definition.

“One more thing.” Marcus glanced down at the papers in front of him to hide his smile. “You are forbidden to mourn or to wear black.”

“He hated black,” Violet and James said in unison.

He glanced at her, but she ignored him.

Violet nodded at the elderly lady. “Is Mrs. Higginbotham the authority on what constitutes scandal, as well?”

Mrs. Higginbotham smiled.

“Mrs. Higginbotham is the sole judge and arbitrator in any dispute or query. In this matter, her power is absolute and she has a great deal of discretion. She may do exactly as she thinks best, even allow for an exemption to any of the stipulations should she deem it necessary. In the case of unforeseen emergencies and the like.” Marcus glanced at James, a note of apology in his voice. “His lordship was quite clear on this matter. He had no doubt Mrs. Higginbotham would wield the authority he has given her in a wise and competent manner as befitting the widow of a colonel and a woman he had long admired.”

“Let me make certain I do indeed understand,” Violet said thoughtfully. “In order for James to receive his inheritance we have to live together, appear as a congenial couple and avoid anything the least bit scandalous for two years, eleven months, one week and three days?”

“Three years,” James said under his breath.

Marcus nodded.

“And if we succeed?” Violet asked.

“James will inherit everything except for a few gifts for charitable institutions and his late lordship’s servants,” Marcus said. “And you, Lady Ellsworth, will receive double your current allowance as well as an annual stipend for expenses for the rest of your life. Your financial independence will be assured. The two of you will also be free to resume your lives as they have been up to this point.”

“I see.” Violet considered Marcus’s words for a moment. “And if we don’t manage this?”

“Then nearly everything goes to charity.” Marcus shrugged apologetically.

Violet slanted James a quick glance. “What if either of us refuses to abide by Uncle’s Richard’s conditions?”

“Again, charity will benefit.”

“So we have no choice,” James said flatly. This was not the least bit fair. Hadn’t he done everything he could to prove to Uncle Richard he was worthy to be his successor? He’d learned how to manage the estate, strategies for investment and all the sundry details of business and management. Why, hadn’t Richard’s fortune grown at James’s hand?

Still, James should have expected something like this. Uncle Richard had never made any secret of the fact that he considered James a bit of an idiot when it came to Violet. And of course he was right. But Uncle Richard was a good man who had never done anything disgraceful in his life. He could never comprehend

how the burden of guilt could trap a man and keep him immobile.

“I’ve had a copy of his lordship’s conditions made for each of you. There are some minor details we have not discussed but I assure you they are insignificant. Over the course of the next three years, your joint financial support will be substantially reduced as you will be supporting only one household. Other than that, your income and expenses will remain as they are now. Are there any questions?” Marcus glanced at the gathering.

Violet shook her head slowly. James could almost see the gears and flywheels of her brain sorting through the details of Uncle Richard’s terms. But then she had always been clever. It was one of the things James had liked about her. A familiar sliver of guilt stabbed him, as it tended to do whenever he thought about Violet.

“I daresay, there will be questions, Mr. Davies.” Mrs. Higginbotham glanced at Violet, then James. “At the moment, it’s clear Lord and Lady Ellsworth are still a bit stunned.” She stood, the gentlemen immediately springing to their feet, and pinned James with a firm look. “Might I suggest we join you for dinner tomorrow night at your residence? We shall discuss all of this and I will be able to answer any questions that may have come to mind between now and then. I shall bring my friends, who will be assisting me in this endeavor.” She turned to Marcus. “Perhaps you should join us as well, Mr. Davies.”

It wasn’t a question. Marcus smiled weakly. “I can’t think of anything I’d rather do.”

“Excellent.” She nodded at James. “When you return to

Ellsworth House you'll find your staff has prepared the master suite—with separate bedrooms of course—for the two of you, as per your uncle's instructions.”

If his uncle's ultimate purpose was in doubt, it certainly wasn't now. “Did he think of everything, Mrs. Higginbotham?”

“I would hope so, my lord, but we shall see.” She smiled pleasantly. “Until tomorrow evening, then. Good day.” She nodded and took her leave.

James waited until the door closed behind her. “Where on earth did Uncle Richard find her?”

“Apparently he knew her many years ago,” Marcus said thoughtfully. “Before she was married.”

James sank back down into his chair. “We don't need a governess, Marcus.”

“You don't have a choice.”

“I don't like putting my fate in the hands of a woman I don't know.”

“Again, no choice.”

“Why didn't you warn me about this?”

“Sorry, old man.” Marcus shrugged. “There are rules regarding confidentiality that even I hesitate to break. And your uncle specifically asked me not to say anything to you. I was fond of him, you know.”

“Everyone liked Uncle Richard.” James blew a frustrated breath. “Is there any way out of this? Contest the will or something of that nature?”

“I’m afraid not. We drafted it to your uncle’s specifications and made certain every detail was in order. My father and one of his brothers worked with your uncle for months to ensure it was exactly as he wanted as well as make certain it could not be challenged. They are very good. Even so, I am going over every detail.”

“What if we—”

“I beg your pardon.” Violet glared. “Perhaps you have forgotten but I am sitting right here. As this scheme cannot succeed without me, I suggest either include me in the conversation or shut up altogether.”

Both men stared. This was not the quiet, rather meek woman he’d married. His mind flashed back to the last time he’d seen her—the morning after their wedding. She hadn’t been the least bit meek when she’d informed him in no uncertain terms she never wanted to see him again. James hadn’t heard her raise her voice before. He didn’t know she could. His thoughts on occasion returned to that morning. Violet had been a tall, fire-haired tower of indignation and anger. There’d been a distinct touch of magnificence about her. Uncle Richard had noticed. Pity James hadn’t.

Her demeanor then was attributable to justifiable anger. Last night, it was obvious she was not the same girl he once knew. The difference in her manner was apparent in the set of her chin and the look in her eye. The way she carried herself said without words this was a woman confident of her own worth. This was

a woman who would hold her ground. She had changed in other ways, as well. He didn't remember her red hair being so glorious or her green eyes so captivating or her figure so enticing. There was somehow *more* to her now. As if she had once been a pencil drawing and was now a painting in oil. She was vibrant. Alive. Remarkable. And far lovelier than he remembered.

"Apparently you are not the only one without a choice," she said sharply, her eyes flashing with annoyance. "If I do not accept my role in this little farce, I will have virtually nothing to live on. Isn't that right, Mr. Davies?"

"Yes. Furthermore, there will be no more money for traveling —"

"Yes, yes, I understand that." She rose to her feet. "Mrs. Higginbotham was right. There will be questions." She pinned Marcus with a hard look. "Come prepared to answer them." She nodded curtly and strode out of the office.

James stared after her.

"I thought you said she was timid?" The vaguest hint of awe sounded in Marcus voice.

"She's changed."

Marcus chuckled. "Apparently." He paused. "You're going to have to stay on her good side, you know, if you want to pull this off."

"Yes, I know. She's not overly fond of me."

"From what you've told me, she has good reason for that." Marcus sat down. "This will certainly require a great deal of

effort on your part. It won't be easy for you."

"Your confidence in me is heartening." James retook his seat.

Marcus pulled open a desk drawer and pulled out a bottle of fine Scottish whiskey and two glasses. He filled one and passed it to James.

"I shouldn't. She's probably waiting for me in the carriage."

"Or she's taken the carriage and left you to fend for yourself."

Marcus chuckled. "I wouldn't put it past her."

"Nor would I." James sipped the whiskey. Nothing like good whiskey to put a thing in perspective. Although perhaps not today. "What am I going to do?"

"There's nothing you can do but abide by the terms of the will. I assure you, I have studied it thoroughly. As I said, my father and his brothers are very good." Marcus considered his friend for a moment. "She's quite lovely and you've always had an inexplicable charm for women. And she is your wife after all. Is there any possibility that you and she—"

"No. Maybe." James shook his head. "I don't know. It's been a long time." Even so, the memory of their wedding night—memories of Violet—had always dwelled in the back of his mind. No doubt the reason why he hadn't been with another woman in a very long time. "Uncle Richard thought Violet and I were destined for one another. That in my avoiding marriage to the wrong woman I had somehow ended up with the right woman. This is his way of forcing us together."

"He was nothing if not determined." Marcus paused. "May I

ask you something?”

“Why not?” James settled back in his chair.

“If I recall correctly, quite some time ago, in an inebriated state of maudlin self-pity, you told me Lady Ellsworth was the biggest regret of your life.”

“And?”

“And you said that on more than one occasion.”

“You must admit, it’s a rather significant regret.” He shrugged. “I ruined her life.”

“Yes, you’ve said that, as well.” Marcus eyed him thoughtfully. “You’ve also said you were young, stupid and about to be engaged to the wrong woman.”

“Hence the regret.”

“Understandable.” Marcus nodded. “But among all those things you’ve said about your ill-fated marriage, there’s one thing you’ve never said.”

“And what is that?”

Marcus met his gaze. “You’ve never once said it was a mistake.”



JAMES INSTRUCTED HIS driver, then climbed into the carriage. “I didn’t think you’d wait for me.”

“That would have been rude.” Violet smiled pleasantly. “I am never rude.”

“I wouldn’t think you were,” he said slowly.

“We have a decision to make.”

“I don’t see that we have a choice.”

“Of course we do,” she said. “There are always choices, some better than others. From what Uncle Richard has said about you in the last few years, you seem to have a talent for business. Should either of us decide not to abide by the terms of the will, you would have to seek employment.”

He had no doubt he could find employment of a sort. But if he’d learned nothing else about the world of business he had learned *who* you were was every bit as important as your skills or intelligence. A disinherited earl would not be especially sought after.

“I would indeed.” He shifted in his seat. It wasn’t just the fortune—although its loss would be painful—but losing the properties that had been in his family for generations twisted his soul. The country estate where his father had taught him to ride and to swim, as had his father before him. The London house Uncle Richard had made James’s haven. The places James had always called home. “My life would certainly change. As would yours.”

She hesitated. “Yes, of course.”

He had the oddest feeling there was something she didn’t wish to say.

“Although, as your husband, it would be my responsibility to provide your support.”

“You would have to find good employment.” She eyed him

thoughtfully. "You've been very generous through the years."

He shrugged off her comment. Generosity apparently went hand in hand with guilt.

"Was that at Uncle Richard's urging?"

Did she think so little of him? He couldn't blame her if she did but it was annoying nonetheless. "Would it matter if it was?"

"Perhaps not." She paused. "But it is something I have always wondered."

"You could have asked my uncle."

"I'm not sure he would have told me," she said with a sigh. "He was very fond of you and rather proud of the man you've become."

Good to know. "No, your financial support had nothing to do with Uncle Richard."

"I see." For a long moment she was silent. "You're asking for three more years of my life. It's a very long time."

"Perhaps it is better to think of it as two years, eleven months, one week and three days after all."

"Not really." She pinned him with a hard look. "You do realize the significance of two years, eleven months, one week and three days, don't you?"

He scoffed. "Of course I do." What the hell was she talking about?

"Oh?" She studied him closely. "Can you tell me why Uncle Richard stipulated two years, eleven months, one week and three days?"

“Of course I can.” At once the answer struck him and he wondered if Uncle Richard was looking after him from above. He leaned forward and met her gaze firmly. “Five years, ten months, two weeks and six days is—as of today—how long we’ve been married. Two years, eleven months, one week and three days is exactly half that. The stipulation was that the length of time be based on the date of today’s meeting.” He shrugged. “If you had returned to London sooner, the requirement would have been shorter.”

“Very good, James.” She nodded coolly. “Given your reaction in Mr. Davies’s office, one might have thought you didn’t realize that.”

“One would have been wrong,” he said in a superior manner and sent a silent prayer of gratitude to his uncle. “Still, it does seem excessive.”

“Uncle Richard probably considered it fitting. An appropriate penance of sorts.”

“Or a sentence?”

“Also appropriate, I suppose.” She shook her head. “Uncle Richard never failed to lecture me about the absurdity of our circumstances. Every time I saw him, he said this had gone on long enough and I should return to England to stay.” She met his gaze, and challenge shone in her eyes. “I told him I hadn’t been asked.”

“Would you have come back if I had?” It scarcely mattered now but it did seem important.

“It’s rather a pointless question. You didn’t ask.”

“But if I had?” he pressed.

She stared at him for a long moment. “I don’t know,” she said at last and shrugged. “It’s water under the bridge now. Nothing can be done about the past.”

“Better to move on from here, then,” he said. Still, there was a great deal of the past that remained to be resolved. “We should have expected something of this nature.” And really, hadn’t Uncle Richard warned him? Hadn’t he said on more than one occasion that if James wouldn’t do something about his marriage, someone should?

She smiled wryly. “He’s proving a point you know, even in death.”

James chuckled. “I am aware of that.”

“It seems that we have no choice.” She sighed. “Regardless, I shall have to consider this. If I agree to abide by the terms of the will, well, my life will be remarkably different.”

“Apparently my fate is now in your hands.”

“Yes, I suppose it is.” She settled back in her seat. “Rather ironic when you think about it,” she said under her breath and turned toward the window.

Violet continued to gaze silently at the passing streets, apparently lost in thought. He had no idea what she was thinking. Every now and then he caught a glimpse of her expression, at once serene and determined. He suspected it did not bode well. Beyond that, there was something she wasn’t telling him. Violet

was entirely too unconcerned about the potential loss of James's inheritance. After all, if he lost everything, so did she.

The moment they entered the house they were met by a blonde woman Violet introduced as Mrs. Ryland, her companion and secretary. A few years older than Violet, she was quite lovely, or she would have been had she not glared at James as if he were the devil incarnate. Violet announced they had errands to run and would be back late in the afternoon.

“Will you be joining me for dinner tonight?” he asked.

Violet glanced at the other woman. “I think we'll take dinner in our rooms tonight.”

He raised a brow. “Don't we have a great deal to talk about?”

“And I have a great deal to think about.” She smiled politely, nodded at Mrs. Ryland, and the ladies took their leave.

He stared after them. This was not the Violet he remembered. Not the girl he had known. He had liked the old Violet. This new Violet was an unknown. And most intriguing.

Violet Branham was a woman any man would be proud to have by his side. She was strong and confident, independent and elegant—a woman of the world. And a challenge. Six years ago he hadn't especially liked challenges but he was not the man he used to be, either. At the moment she didn't seem to like him. It was entirely possible she wouldn't agree to the terms of the will. But if she did... A lot could happen in the next two years, eleven months, one week and three days.

Violet Branham, the Countess of Ellsworth, *his wife* might

indeed be the right woman for him. Six years ago he'd been too young or too stupid or too scared to realize it or possibly accept it. Now, however...

For a fleeting moment, he could have sworn he heard Uncle Richard chuckling in the distance.

## CHAPTER FOUR

“APPARENTLY, JAMES HAS a legitimate office.” Violet stirred a dollop of cream into the Turkish coffee she preferred that Richard’s—or rather James’s or now her cook, she supposed—always had on hand for her visits. Thanks to a restless night, Violet had slept later than usual and it was nearly noon before she came downstairs to join Cleo in the cozy breakfast room where the widow was sorting through Violet’s correspondence. “And keeps business hours.”

“Who would have thought.” Cleo bit back a smile. Apparently, her companion found the fact that Uncle Richard’s comments in recent years about how much James had changed, the responsibilities he’d taken on, his head for management and business and his accompanying maturity did have a basis in fact and were not simply the ramblings of a loving uncle, to be most amusing.

Cleo Ryland had been Violet’s companion, secretary and dear friend almost from the very day Violet had hired her. A scant three years older than Violet, the pretty young widow had been the first person to answer Violet’s advertisement when she had decided to use James’s financial support to travel. Violet liked her immediately and the feeling was mutual. Cleo was well-educated, intelligent with a clever wit and a desire to do something with her life other than marry the first man who came along simply

for financial salvation. She was also tired of her family's—particularly her mother's—constant harping on how she needed to find a new husband before she was too old to do so. She and Violet had a great deal in common when it came to mothers. Within days, Violet had Cleo's references checked and the two women were off to see the world.

“It's most convenient, really. I'd prefer not to be around him every minute.” Especially as Violet had no desire to continue yesterday's discussion quite yet. Still, it had remained on her mind throughout the long night. As much as she hated to admit it, James was right. There was little choice but to abide by the terms of Uncle Richard's will. “Unless he was at one of his many clubs, my father was always in the house. Usually in his library.”

Violet glanced around the morning room. It could use a bit of freshening. In fact, the entire house could stand refurbishment. It had been a bachelor abode for entirely too long. That might be something she could take on during the next three years. She'd never been the mistress of a house and it sounded rather like fun. She had, after all, been trained for the position. It was the only thing she'd been expected to do with her life.

“In spite of the circumstances, I am glad to be back in London.” Violet sipped her coffee, savoring the hearty aroma and the deep flavor mellowed by the rich cream. “This time it feels different, as if I have indeed returned for good.”

“I suppose even the lure of the adventure to be found in travel pales in time.”

“Perhaps.” It had indeed been the grandest of adventures. “One does like to pause now and again. To catch one’s breath.”

“Three years is more than enough time to catch one’s breath.” Cleo studied her curiously. “You’re going to do it, aren’t you?”

Violet met her friend’s gaze. “I am.”

Cleo glanced at the door as if to make certain they were alone then lowered her voice. “What are you going to do about you-know-who?”

“Quite frankly,” Violet winced, “I haven’t given him a second thought.”

Cleo’s eyes widened. “That’s rather telling, isn’t it? I thought you and he were—”

“We’re not,” Violet said firmly. “Admittedly, we have discussed the possibility of something more, as well as the possibility of divorce, but there’s never really been anything more between us. I’ve been very clear about how I feel. He’s been a good friend and he’s a very nice man. And if I were free, well...” She shook her head. “I can’t ask him to wait three years in hopes that my feelings will become more significant than they are.”

“I see.” Cleo considered her. “But you *are* going to spend three years with a man you haven’t spoken to in nearly six?”

Violet knew Cleo wouldn’t understand. Cleo believed James had ruined Violet’s life and therefore was the root of all evil in the world. “I know you don’t like James—”

Cleo snorted.

“—but I owe him a great deal.”

“Nonsense.” Cleo sniffed. “You don’t owe him anything.”

“On the contrary, Cleo.” Violet blew a long breath. “He could have made my life miserable. You and I both know women whose husbands have tired of them or never especially wanted them in the first place. Their lives look fine on the surface but everyone knows how dreadfully unhappy they are. They are the subject of quiet ridicule and blatant pity. James saved me from that.” She shook her head. “He married me because of a silly mistake that nonetheless would have ruined my life. He deserves some credit for doing the right thing.”

“He married you and then went his own way. According to everything we’ve heard, he’s behaved exactly as he did before he was married.” Cleo pinned her with a firm look. “I think you should tell him to shove off.”

Violet laughed. “You are a good friend but in this, you’re wrong.” She thought for a moment. “In providing generous financial support, as well as freedom and independence, James gave me the world.

“I wouldn’t have become who I am and I certainly would never have met you, Cleo, had he insisted on my being an expected sort of wife. Think of the things we’ve seen, the things we’ve done, the people we’ve met and those we’ve helped in some small way. James made it all possible and for that I’m grateful.” She shrugged. “I didn’t say it would be easy and I’m not especially happy about it. And yes, three years is a long time, but James saved me once. Now it’s my turn to save him.”

“Are you going to tell him how you feel?”

“Don’t be absurd. I’ll tell him I’ve decided to abide by the terms of the will, but I certainly won’t say I’m grateful to him.” She adopted a wicked smile. “It would go straight to his head and that wouldn’t be any fun at all. Nor do I intend to make this easy for him.”

“That sounds something like revenge.”

“I prefer to think of it more as retribution. If he wants his inheritance, I intend to make him work for it. I’m not sure how at the moment, but I’m certain opportunities will arise.” She paused. “Besides, I like the idea of his being in my debt.”

“I hadn’t thought of that.” Cleo nodded. “Very clever.”

Violet sipped her coffee. “Aside from everything else, this was Uncle Richard’s last wish. I owe him, as well.”

Still, as grateful as she was for the life James had given her, there were some things she could not ignore. He never made any attempt at a real marriage with her. He never saw her, never spoke to her. Admittedly, she had said she never wanted to see him again, but that sort of thing did tend to mellow with the years. There were any number of times—especially in the first few years—when she would have been receptive to overtures, even reconciliation. When she might well have returned to truly be his wife. But he’d made no effort whatsoever. And he’d certainly never asked her to come home. Oh, she could have taken the first step toward him. Whether it was a matter of pride or simple stubbornness or apprehension, Violet refused to do so. James had

made the decision as to the type of marriage they'd have, he had determined the path of their lives and it was up to James to change that path.

She might be willing to give him three years but forgiveness was another question entirely. It scarcely mattered how much these years apart had changed either of them. The moment she saw him again, she knew somewhere deep inside she would have to keep her distance and guard against the resurfacing of any of those feelings she'd once thought she had for him. The man was not to be trusted, at least not with her heart. Regardless of his intent, and whether he realized it or not, he had broken her heart all those years ago. She would not allow him to do so again.

"It might even be fun." Violet grinned. "Being Lady Ellsworth, that is."

"One can only hope." Cleo smiled. "You are already in high demand. There are a number of invitations here to consider."

"So soon?"

"According to his lordship's secretary, the earl is routinely invited to nearly everything of note, although his attendance is rare. Even though you weren't here, invitations were always addressed to Mr. and Mrs. Branham and now, of course, to Lord and Lady Ellsworth." She paused. "Everyone in society is going to be talking about your reconciliation, you know. The attention on the two of you will be unrelenting."

"Thank you for the reminder." Violet had very nearly put the stipulation about appearing as a happy couple out of her head.

She knew full well there was no possible way for the two of them to appear in public without causing a tidal wave of gossip. Violet Branham may be clever, confident and sophisticated when it came to the rest of the world but here in London, she had always feared she might slip back into the docile creature she used to be. That when presented with the unforgiving, unrelenting judgmental nature of London society—of her mother and people exactly like her—time would reverse itself and she would again be the unassuming wallflower she had once been. Precisely why she never stayed long in England. That would be yet another challenge of the next three years. “Let’s wait to decide what to accept until we speak to Mrs. Higginbotham and her friends tonight. I’m sure they will have some suggestions.”

“Lady Ellsworth.” Andrews appeared at the door. “Lady Cranton is here.”

Cleo winced.

“Tell her I’m not at home,” Violet said.

A distinct look of distress washed over the butler’s face.

Violet grimaced. “She knows I’m here, doesn’t she?”

“I’m afraid so, my lady.”

“It can’t be helped I suppose.” Violet sighed. “Please show her into the parlor. Oh, and then ask the kitchen for tea and a tray of biscuits.” Violet glanced at Cleo. “You know how she’ll be if I don’t offer her something.”

Cleo shuddered.

“Anything else, my lady?” Andrews asked.

“A pot of coffee as well, I think.” Violet nodded. “That will do. Thank you, Andrews.”

The butler nodded and hurried off.

“You do realize, living in England for the next three years, seeing her will be unavoidable.”

“I hadn’t thought of that. Although that in itself is enough to make me change my mind,” Violet added and rose to her feet.

“Are you sure you want to talk to her alone?”

“Not really, but this is my house and I’m not going to put up with her nonsense in my own home.” She started toward the parlor. “But do say a little prayer for me, Cleo.”

“I daresay a single prayer will not be nearly enough.” Cleo’s words trailed after her.

Violet paused before the parlor doors, summoned every ounce of confidence she possessed, adopted a pleasant smile and pushed open the doors. “Good morning, Mother.”

Margaret, Viscountess Cranton, was as tall as her daughter with hair a few shades darker. That, Violet had always thought, was where the similarities ended. While Mother was still a fine figure of a woman, she was stern and unrelenting in her pursuit of what she deemed to be required or proper. Mother’s unyielding nature was evident in her manner and her speech and showed on her face. Mother, Violet had long suspected, had never been especially happy. She would have felt sorry for Father but he didn’t seem to care.

“Please God, Violet, have you at last come to your senses?”

“Delightful to see you again, Mother.” Violet smiled coolly. “I thought I’d see you before now. Lady Brockwell’s ball was the day before yesterday, after all.”

“I’ve been in the country. We returned last night.” Mother glared. “I demand to know what’s going on.”

“Do be seated, Mother.” Violet waved at the sofa, then settled in a nearby chair.

Mother glanced around the parlor, no doubt assessing the quality and cost of every item in the room. She probably hadn’t stepped foot in Ellsworth House since James’s ill-fated engagement party all those years ago.

“Well, go on.”

“I’m not sure what you want to know.”

“Don’t be evasive.” Mother’s brows drew together. “You know exactly what I’m asking.”

A discreet knock sounded at the parlor doors before they opened and Andrews rolled in a tea cart. Mother set her jaw impatiently. It would never do to be caught discussing private matters with servants present.

“Would you like me to pour, my lady?” Andrews asked.

“I’ll do it. Thank you, Andrews.” Violet smiled and nodded in dismissal.

Andrews took his leave, no doubt grateful to escape.

“Would you care for tea?” Violet said, even as she poured a cup.

“At least you haven’t forgotten everything you were taught.”

Mother accepted the cup and added sugar.

“I assure you, Mother, I’ve forgotten absolutely nothing.”

Violet poured herself a cup of coffee.

“Is that coffee?” Disapproval furrowed Mother’s brow.

“It is.” Violet widened her eyes innocently. “Oh, I do apologize. Did you prefer coffee?”

“Don’t be absurd.” Mother considered coffee a drink of the lower classes and therefore beneath her. “No doubt you picked up a taste for it in some godforsaken foreign coffeehouse.”

“No doubt.”

Mother cautiously selected two biscuits, as if she wanted to assure herself of their quality before indulging. Violet’s jaw tightened.

“Why are you here, Mother?”

“Instead of waiting for you to call on me?” Mother’s brow soared upward. “Who knows when that might happen.”

“Come now, Mother. I join you and Father and Caroline for dinner whenever I’m in London.” As much as neither Violet nor her mother enjoyed it, Violet always paid an obligatory call on her family, which usually included dinner. An ordeal no one especially enjoyed. Conversation inevitably centered around what a perfect daughter twenty-year-old Caroline was with her brilliant prospects for a match and the disastrous state of Violet’s own marriage. A failure that was obviously her fault. Truth was never especially important to Mother.

The fact of the matter was Mother had never forgiven

Violet for being the subject of scandal, compounded by her not becoming the perfect Mrs. Branham, now Lady Ellsworth, she was expected to be. She should have been a force in society, a renowned hostess and mother of a respectable number of offspring. A daughter an ambitious mother could be proud of. And Violet had never forgiven her mother for leaping at the chance to marry her off. Not merely because of a relatively minor scandal but because she thought this was Violet's only chance for an acceptable marriage. Which might well have been true but was beside the point nonetheless.

No one ever said aloud what the real problem was between mother and daughter. The true crux of the difficulty between them was simply that the day after her wedding, for the first time in twenty-one years, Violet Branham had at last found her courage, her voice and—thanks to James—her independence. There was nothing Mother hated more than a daughter she could not control.

“How is Father? And Caroline?”

“Your father never changes.” Mother shrugged. Father was a good enough sort, Violet supposed, although she barely knew the man. He might have had more of an interest in his children had they been born sons but as they were female he had abdicated all decisions regarding Violet and her sister to Mother.

“Caroline is about to be engaged to the son of a duke.” Mother paused. “Not his heir, mind you, but a younger son with three brothers ahead of him. Still, he has a significant income and one

never knows what might happen in the future. Your sister could be a duchess one day.”

“We can only hope,” Violet murmured. One did wonder if Caroline’s prospective fiancé’s family should be warned as Mother would cheerfully do away with an entire line of succession to achieve her ambitions. If she couldn’t be a duchess herself, a daughter for a duchess would do.

“The engagement will be officially announced at a ball next month, as befitting such an august match. I expect you to attend.” Mother pinned her with a firm look. “Will you still be here?”

“My plans are uncertain at the moment.” She was not about to tell her mother she would be staying in England before she told James.

“Your plans are always uncertain.” Disapproval rang in Mother’s voice. “You wander aimlessly around the world and rarely return to England—where you should be.”

“On the contrary, Mother. It’s not the least bit aimless.”

“It’s not the way a proper wife should behave.” Mother’s lips thinned. “There have been rumors you know.”

“Yes, I know, Mother. You never fail to write me about every rumor or bit of gossip about my husband, for which I am most grateful.”

“The rumors are not just about him.” A warning sounded in Mother’s voice.

“Oh, good. I would hate for him to have all the fun.”

For a long moment Mother glared and Violet glared right

back. There was a time when Violet would have backed down. Said something placating and apologized. It was easier and peace would be restored. She'd stopped that years ago when she'd realized capitulating to her mother would make no difference in their relationship but would make a great deal of difference in how Violet felt about herself.

"I assure you, Mother, any rumors about me are greatly exaggerated with no more than a morsel of truth in them at best."

"I should hope so!" Mother studied her intently. "You and Lord Ellsworth were seen dancing together."

"He's an excellent dancer and he *is* my husband."

"That has never seemed to matter to you before."

Violet shrugged. "You wanted me to have a husband and I have one. You never particularly cared how he and I felt about one another."

Mother ignored her. "And you left the ball together."

"We *are* married and we do reside in the same house."

"No one has ever seen you together before." Mother's eyes narrowed as if she were trying to see into her daughter's very soul. "Have you and your husband reconciled?"

"It's really none of your concern," Violet said blithely.

"Of course it's my concern. I am your mother. I have only your best interests at heart."

*Best interests?* It was all Violet could do to keep her temper in check. "Really, Mother? When did you begin having my best interests at heart?"

“I have always put you and your sister above all else,” Mother said in a lofty manner, which might have been most effective had Violet been able to recall even once when that was true.

“Did you put my interest above all else when you forced me to marry a man who didn’t want to marry me?” And there it was. The charge she had avoided making for almost six years.

“You were ruined!” Mother’s eyes widened in indignation. “My insistence on marriage saved you from a life of being alone.”

“And what do you think my life has been thus far?” The words were out of Violet’s mouth before she could stop them. She wasn’t sure why she’d said that. She hadn’t been alone these past years. Far from it. She’d had Cleo and any number of friends abroad. Why, she was the least alone person she knew. And if she didn’t have a husband who cared for her, well, that was the price to be paid for independence.

“Your life would have been perfect if you hadn’t been so headstrong.”

“You know nothing about my life, Mother.”

“I daresay I know far more than you suspect.” Mother stood. “Has your husband finally put his foot down and demanded you return home and pick up your responsibilities as his wife?”

Violet rose to her feet. “My husband does not put his foot down nor would I allow him to do so.”

“That might be one of the problems.” Mother sniffed.

“You simply will not accept that you forfeited the right to ask me anything when you forced me into marriage.”

“Nonetheless, I *am* asking if you and your husband—”

“Why do you care? What possible difference does it make to you?”

“People talk, Violet, and they’ve been talking about you for nearly six years. It’s a source of constant humiliation for the entire family. Why, we’re lucky your scandalous life hasn’t affected Caroline’s impending engagement!”

“Well, he is only a younger son, Mother.”

“If you and your husband would just come to your senses and—” Mother gasped. “Dear Lord, you’re here to ask for a divorce, aren’t you?”

“That is no concern of yours.”

Mother sucked in a sharp breath. “There has never been a divorce in this family. The scandal will ruin us all. I insist—”

“For God’s sakes, Mother,” Violet snapped, “that’s quite enough. I am not asking for a divorce and yes, I am back to stay.” She drew a deep breath. Mother was an expert at the art of gossip and might well be useful at dissipating any untoward rumors about Violet and James’s apparent reconciliation. “After all these years apart, James and I have at last acknowledged we share the kind of mad, passionate love every woman dreams of! There now, are you happy?”

“Not at all because that’s utter nonsense and I don’t believe you for a moment.” Mother huffed. “One doesn’t stay away for years then wake up one morning to discover true love was there all along.”

“Actually, Mother...” Violet raised her chin. “One does.”

“My dear, darling wife.” As if on cue, James strode into the room, pulled her into his arms and gazed deeply into her eyes. “It’s been but a few hours and yet it seems like an eternity since I left your side.”

“Does it?” What on earth was he doing? Violet gazed up into his blue eyes, dark and endless and...amused?

“When we’re apart, I count the minutes until we’re together again.” He lowered his head to hers as if he intended to kiss her.

Violet’s breath caught.

Mother cleared her throat.

“Oh, I am sorry. I had no idea anyone else was here.” He released Violet, but slid one arm around her waist in a blatant display of affection. Blatant displays of affection were every bit as bad in Mother’s view as wives not being *proper*.

“James, you remember my mother.”

“Yes of course.” His arm tightened around her in a manner that could only be called possessive. It was oddly satisfying.

“Lord Ellsworth.” Mother eyed him suspiciously. “I should take my leave.”

“Delightful to see you again.” He nodded toward the door. “Andrews will see you out.”

“Violet, I expect your attendance at your sister’s ball.”

“Good day, Mother.”

“Good day, Lady Cranton,” James said and nuzzled the side of Violet’s neck as if Mother wasn’t there. A shiver ran down her

spine. She really should protest but how would that look?

“Dear Lord,” Mother muttered and marched toward the door.

Violet steeled herself against the melting sensation of James’s lips against that surprisingly sensitive spot where her neck met her shoulder and waited until the parlor door closed behind her mother. Even then it was far harder to get the words out than one would expect. She drew a deep breath. “What do you think you’re doing?”

## CHAPTER FIVE

“I’M CONVINCING YOUR mother as to our reconciliation.” James kissed that delicious juncture of neck and shoulder. Her scent—an arousing mix of jasmine and spice—wrapped around him and it was all he could do not to pull her tighter against him. “As she is one of the most notorious gossips in London, it seemed an excellent idea.”

“Well, she’s gone now.” Violet pushed out of his arms. “You can stop that.”

He grinned. “I rather enjoyed it.”

“You would.”

Given the charming flush on her cheeks and the look in her eyes, so did she, although she’d never admit it. Still, it was interesting. His grin widened.

“Nonetheless, it was entirely inappropriate. This is a farce, James. Nothing more. You do need to remember that.” Her voice was firm even if there was the tiniest breathless quality to it. That too was interesting.

“Did you say that just to annoy your mother?”

“Probably.” Her brows drew together in confusion. “Say what?”

“That you and I had reconciled. That after all these years we share a mad, passionate love.”

“Surely I didn’t say anything of the sort.” A blush washed up

her face. Oh, he liked that. “Did I?”

“Your words exactly.”

“One says all sort of things when one fails to give due consideration to one’s words.” She blew a long breath. “Yes, I suppose I did say some of it to annoy her. But really, what one says in the heat of—”

“Passion?”

“*Annoyance* cannot be taken as irrefutable.” She cast him a questioning look. “So you remember my mother?”

“She continues to haunt my dreams.” He shivered. James would never forget how adamant Lady Cranton had been that they marry. How angry she’d been at him—justifiably—but how angry she’d been at Violet, as well. It wasn’t at all fair. As if any of this had been Violet’s fault.

“There is nothing my mother finds more scandalous or improper than mad, passionate love.”

“Actually, I was wondering about the rest of it.” He adopted a casual tone. “About staying in London. With your husband.” He held his breath. “Did you say that part to annoy her, as well?”

“No. I had already come to that decision.” She squared her shoulders. “I like my life, James. Three years seems a small enough price to pay for my independence and my freedom.”

“So you’ll do it for the money?” he said slowly. Relief mixed with a tinge of disappointment. Surely he couldn’t expect her to do it for any other reason. Still...it had been a long night and he’d done a great deal of thinking. All about her. Or rather, about

them. Although he'd never not thought about her in one way or another through the years.

In the beginning, he'd gone on with his life as if he'd never married at all. In truth, his drinking, carousing and meaningless encounters with women had increased after Violet left. James blamed it on guilt. It was easy to forget what a cad he was, how he had ruined her life, if he was inebriated or had an anonymous woman in his bed. After he passed the second anniversary of his marriage, the appeal of raucous behavior, random women and drunken stupors began to fade. It was around that time too that Uncle Richard had been struck by a violent but blessedly brief illness and James had begun learning what was required to follow in his uncle's footsteps. Upon later reflection, he acknowledged that was the true beginning of adulthood.

Violet raised a shoulder in a casual shrug as if money was as good a reason as any.

His brow rose. "You needn't act as if you were doing me a great favor."

"Oh, but I *am* doing you a great favor."

"You have as much to lose as I do."

She met his gaze directly. "No, I don't."

"Oh?"

She hesitated then shrugged. "It's not important at the moment." She turned and headed toward the stairs.

"It sounded important." He strode after her.

"I'm not going to discuss this now." She reached the grand

stairway and started up. “But I’m not agreeing to this because I have no other choice.”

“Yes, I’ve heard about your choices,” he called after her.

Violet Branham, Lady Ellsworth, *his wife*, might not be aware of it but there had been nearly as much gossip about her over the past six years as there had been about him. He knew the truth about his behavior, but he had no idea if the stories he’d heard about her were accurate. Of course, some came from Duncan, Viscount Welles, who had mentioned running into Violet somewhere in Europe in recent years. Welles was an old friend, one of the very men who had issued the ill-fated challenge to kiss his fiancée on that night six years ago. Even so, the information was not firsthand. Regardless, what James heard about Violet’s behavior had grown increasingly bothersome as his own conduct had become more respectable.

“*My choices?*” She swiveled on the stairs and glared down at him. “What do you mean by that?”

“Never mind.” He waved off her question. Discussing this now was a mistake. After all, they had three years ahead of them. “It doesn’t matter.”

“I suspect it does matter,” she snapped.

Apparently, she was not going to let the subject drop. Very well. Let the games begin. “You have not been entirely inconspicuous these past six years. There have been rumors, gossip.”

Her eyes narrowed. “What, exactly, have you heard?”

“You said yourself nothing can be done about the past.” It was his turn to adopt an offhand manner, as if none of this was of any significance. “What’s done is done.”

“Nonetheless, I would like to know what you have heard.”

“I doubt that.” He turned and strode toward the library. This was not the sort of talk a man had with his wife without the benefit of spirits.

“You cannot make vague, unsubstantiated charges and then just walk away,” she called after him.

“Actually, I can.” He stepped into the library, snapped the door closed behind him and crossed the room to the cabinet where Uncle Richard kept convenient bottles of brandy, whiskey and assorted spirits.

A moment later the door crashed open and he tried not to grin. He’d suspected this new Violet wouldn’t be able to resist continuing the conversation.

“If you want to start something like this at least have the courage to finish it!”

James took a bottle of whiskey and poured a glass. “Would you like a glass?”

“Goodness, James, it’s barely past noon.”

“If we’re going to start the first day of the next three years reliving our sordid pasts, I for one am going to need fortification.”

“No doubt.” She moved to him, plucked the glass from his hand and took a sip. “My past is not the least bit sordid, thank

you very much.”

He eyed the glass. “I believe that’s mine.”

“Not anymore.” She smirked and took another sip. “And I prefer to think of it as clearing the air. If we’re going to spend the next three years together as a *happy couple* in public, I daresay it’s best to get everything out in the open. To alleviate the possibility of untoward surprises.”

“We wouldn’t want that.” He poured a glass for himself.

“I’d rather not appear shocked when some well-meaning acquaintance decides it’s time I was informed of all of my husband’s indiscretions.”

He sipped his drink and studied her. As curious as he was about the rumors regarding her behavior, he wasn’t at all sure confessing his own transgressions was wise. Fuel on the fire and that sort of thing. “It seems to me, we have a great deal to discuss regarding the past six years. Are you certain you wish to start with this particular topic?”

“Why not?” A distinct challenge shone in her eyes. “I must say I’m surprised you’ve had the time to pay any attention to rumors about me when there’s been so much gossip about you.”

His tone sharpened. “One does tend to note gossip about one’s wife.”

“As one tends to note rumors about one’s husband.” Her voice hardened. “Something like, oh, say, his dalliance with an opera singer.”

“Or her liaison with a French count.”

Her teeth clenched. "His affair with an American actress."

"Hers with an Italian sculptor," he said sharply. That tidbit came straight from Welles.

"His with any number of merry widows!"

"Hers with some talentless Greek poet!"

Her eyes widened. Apparently he'd hit the mark with that charge. Not that it gave him any satisfaction. Until now, he wasn't sure he really believed any of the rumors. This was Violet, after all.

She choked back a laugh.

Although she had certainly changed. "You find this amusing?"

"Yes, actually I do." She grinned. "Don't you?"

"No!" he snapped. "I don't find any of this amusing."

"You used to find much of life amusing."

"I am not the same man I used to be."

She snorted in disbelief.

"I shall make a deal with you, Violet," he said evenly. "I won't throw your affairs in your face if you don't throw my affairs in mine. We'll leave the past in the past."

"I don't know. Throwing your indiscretions in your face sounds rather enjoyable to me." She sipped her whiskey and considered him. Apparently, she was not going to make this easy.

"What I'm proposing is a truce."

"I was unaware we were engaged in battle."

His gaze met hers directly. "We have been engaged in a game of warfare since the night I kissed you on a darkened terrace."

“Nonsense.” She scoffed. “We haven’t even seen each other.”

“Am I wrong?”

“I suppose it has been something of a battle albeit a silent one.”

He sipped his drink. “Perhaps we could be, well, friends again.”

“Unwilling partners perhaps but friends?” She tossed back the rest of her whiskey in a manner any man would be proud of. “I don’t think I can be your friend.”

“Nonetheless, you are my wife.”

“Six years ago, you didn’t want a wife.”

*Six years ago I was an idiot.* “And yet I have one who now apparently has to act like a wife.” He drew a deep breath. “As I intend to act like a husband.”

Her brow arched upward. “Do you?”

“It’s what Uncle Richard wanted.” He paused. “We were friends once, Violet, you and I.”

“Once was a very long time ago, James.” She set her glass down on a nearby table and headed for the door. “Lady Higginbotham and her friends will be here for dinner at half-past seven. Don’t be late. And do dress appropriately.”

“That sounded very much like a wife to me,” he called after her.

She glanced over her shoulder. “Oh, my dear James, that’s just the beginning.”



“EXCELLENT DINNER, LORD ELLSWORTH,” Lady Blodgett said with a pleasant smile. “Do give my compliments to your cook.”

“Mrs. Clarke will be pleased to hear you enjoyed it.” James smiled.

Lady Blodgett and Mrs. Fitzhew-Wellmore were the friends of Mrs. Higginbotham’s she’d said were going to help her oversee the conditions of the will. All three ladies were of advanced years although one could see they must have been quite lovely in their younger days. Marcus and Mrs. Ryland completed their company. Marcus had noted privately earlier in the evening how he and James were horribly outnumbered and they should be on their toes. If this was indeed a game there were three distinct factions as evidenced by the seating at the table. James sat at the head at the table, Violet opposite at the far end. Mrs. Ryland sat next to Violet and beside Marcus who was on James’s right. The three older ladies sat on the other side.

Mrs. Higginbotham proclaimed before they were seated that there would be no discussion of Uncle Richard’s will until after dinner. Both James and Marcus spent the better part of the meal doing their best to charm the females at the table. Which did seem to work well with the exception of Violet—who even while she directed the conversation around the table was cool and aloof at least toward James—and Mrs. Ryland, whose distaste for James was only barely concealed. Although she did not appear entirely immune to Marcus’s charms even if it did seem the

widow was trying to resist the engaging solicitor. Apparently, she was reluctant to throw her lot in with the enemy.

All in all the meal was pleasant enough if one ignored the superficial nature of the conversation and the currents eddying just below the surface.

“So.” Mrs. Higginbotham looked around the table. “Shall we begin?”

“Perhaps we should retire to the parlor,” Violet said in her best lady of the house manner. Her mother would be proud. James stifled a laugh.

“Oh, I think here at the table where we are all on equal footing is preferable,” Mrs. Higginbotham said and looked at James. “Unless you object?”

“Not at all, Mrs. Higginbotham.” He smiled at the older lady. No doubt the next three years would be fraught with problems regarding her interpretation of Uncle Richard’s stipulations. It was not too soon to try to get her in his corner.

Her eyes narrowed slightly as if she knew exactly what he was thinking. “Excellent.”

Violet signaled Andrews, who nodded and left the room, returning almost at once with decanters of brandy, port and sherry. Andrews obviously anticipated the company staying at the table and James wondered if Violet and Uncle Richard had done so during her visits.

Once the table was cleared and they all had glasses of brandy or port, the older ladies insisting they preferred the more

traditional lady's offering of sherry, Mrs. Higginbotham began. "I gather the two of you have agreed to abide by the terms of the will."

James met Violet's gaze and they nodded.

"Excellent." Mrs. Higginbotham looked at Marcus. "Shall we take Richard's stipulations one at a time?"

Marcus nodded. "Whatever you prefer."

"Very well." Mrs. Higginbotham thought for a moment. "First, is the requirement that you live together for the next two years, eleven months, one week and three days or rather two days now with no more than fourteen days spent apart in any given year." Mrs. Higginbotham's gaze circled the table.

"That seems fairly straightforward to me. Are there any questions?"

"Is there any requirement as to where we reside? Are we confined to England?" Violet asked.

"As long as the two of you are living together, under the same roof, not at all." Mrs. Higginbotham paused. "Although it would be most difficult for Lady Blodgett, Mrs. Fitzhew-Wellmore and myself to oversee the terms of the will if you chose to live abroad. In Rome for example."

"In which case, Effie, Poppy and I would feel it necessary to reside with you." Lady Blodgett smiled in an agreeable manner that in no way negated her threat.

"I for one have always wanted to live abroad." Excitement rang in Mrs. Fitzhew-Wellmore's voice.

“I don’t intend to live anywhere but England.” James’s tone was more than a little pompous. Where on earth had that come from? He’d never been even remotely pompous before. “And I don’t consider it confinement.”

Violet’s jaw tightened but her tone was cordial. “I wasn’t suggesting we *live* somewhere else. I was simply wondering if it was possible to travel.”

“Of course it is, dear.” Mrs. Fitzhew-Wellmore, who did seem the nicest of the older ladies, smiled at Violet. “You’d simply have to take him with you.”

“I have no desire to travel,” James said in an offhand manner. His reticence to travel had more to do with the violent reaction of his stomach to being on a ship than anything else. Even the rocking motion of lengthy train trips, especially those through mountainous areas, brought on a nasty queasiness. When he had discovered that tendency he had blamed it on an overindulgence in spirits. He really didn’t care to find out if he was right or not.

“Travel is the grandest of adventures, James,” Violet said. “There’s an entire world beyond England’s shores, you know.”

“I traveled the continent after I left school and found that more than sufficient.”

“Ah yes, the grand tour young men of privilege take to indulge in scandalous pursuits under the guise of culture.” Violet smiled pleasantly, belying the look in her eye that clearly indicated what she thought of young men on grand tours.

He ignored her. “Besides, I have entirely too many

responsibilities here to take the time needed for traveling.”

At once five pairs of skeptical eyes fixed on him. Marcus nodded encouragement. James smiled and sipped his brandy.

Violet opened her mouth to say something, then apparently thought better of it and pressed her lips together.

“The second condition,” Lady Blodgett began, “requires you to be seen as a couple three times a week.”

“That seems rather a lot,” Violet said.

James leaned forward and met her gaze. “Don’t you want to be seen with me?”

“Not particularly.”

He smiled slowly. “You don’t really have a choice.”

She ignored him and turned her gaze to Mrs. Higginbotham. “What constitutes an appearance as a couple?”

The ladies exchanged glances.

“We’ve been discussing that very thing,” Lady Blodgett began. “We don’t believe it’s necessary to attend a ball or soiree or anything of that nature three times a week.”

“That would be most exhausting,” Mrs. Fitzhew-Wellmore added.

“Appearing as a couple is not at all complicated,” Mrs. Higginbotham said. “Why, tonight’s dinner is certainly the two of you as a couple with others.”

“Perhaps you should have dinner with us every night,” James said wryly.

“Sarcasm, my lord?” Lady Blodgett pinned him with a hard

look, and James resisted the urge to squirm in his seat.

“Sorry,” he murmured.

“We couldn’t possibly be here every night,” Mrs. Fitzhew-Wellmore said then sighed. “Although the food was excellent.”

“We feel something as simple as guests for dinner would be acceptable to meet that obligation,” Mrs. Higginbotham said. “Especially in the beginning. We propose the three of us join you for dinner once a week although you may certainly invite other people. That takes care of one weekly appearance and will allow you to keep us informed as to the other two appearances, as well.”

“We have taken the liberty of asking your secretary, my lord,” Lady Blodgett said, “as well as Mrs. Ryland—”

Violet shot a surprised look at her friend who winced.

“—to gather the invitations you’ve received of late. We shall compile a list of those which would be suitable for your initial public appearances.”

James drew his brows together. “I think we are more than capable of handling our own social engagements.”

“No, she’s right.” Violet cast the older woman an admiring look. “While I have kept up on the comings and goings of London society there are no doubt nuances I have missed. And it might be best to ease our way into this new life rather than leap in headfirst.”

“I’ve always liked leaping in head first.” James smirked. Marcus bit back a grin.

“And that has proved to be so successful for you in the past,”

Violet said in an overly sweet tone.

“We also suggest rides in Hyde Park, either on horseback or in a carriage, visits to galleries, attendance at lectures, the theater, exhibitions, concerts, that sort of thing.” Lady Blodgett smiled. “It might be quite enjoyable.”

“That would be four hundred and twenty-four appearances as a couple. I figured it out.” Mrs. Fitzhew-Wellmore paused. “Well, four hundred and twenty-three given this evening counts as one.”

“I’m not sure it was necessary to calculate the number of appearances, Poppy.” Mrs. Higginbotham’s gaze shifted from Violet to James and back. “I believe you’ve frightened them.”

“It does sound rather overwhelming,” Lady Blodgett noted.

“Nonsense.” Mrs. Fitzhew-Wellmore waved off the comment. “I can’t imagine much of anything scares either Lord or Lady Ellsworth.”

“I’m certainly not afraid of spending time with my wife.” James met Violet’s gaze. “I cannot speak for Lady Ellsworth however.”

“Goodness, James,” Violet said coolly. “The last thing I’m afraid of is you.”

“Excellent.” Mrs. Fitzhew-Wellmore beamed. “Then the final stipulation is the one prohibiting scandal or gossip.” She paused. “Although gossip about how Lord and Lady Ellsworth have reconciled their differences and are apparently quite happy would certainly be acceptable. Agreeable gossip as opposed to

scandalous rumors. You understand.”

Mrs. Higginbotham’s gaze circled the table. “While neither Lady Blodgett, Mrs. Fitzhew-Wellmore or myself are prone to gossip—”

Mrs. Fitzhew-Wellmore choked. Lady Blodgett smiled serenely.

“—we are not without connections. We are well aware of the past gossip involving each of you. That is at an end.”

“I have no difficulty with that.” Violet smiled.

James nodded. “Nor do I.”

“To everyone outside of our little circle here, the two of you will appear to be happily reconciled. I believe it would be wise as well to keep the stipulations of the will private—to avoid undue gossip.” Mrs. Higginbotham turned to Violet. “You do understand that you will be taking up management of the household as per your position as Lady Ellsworth.”

Violet nodded. “I assumed as much.” She glanced at James. “Will I have a free hand? To manage the staff as I see fit? And with regards to all matters pertaining to the residences?”

“Of course,” James said. He really hadn’t considered that there was now a lady of the house. It was rather a nice idea. “Regardless of how little time you’ve spent here in the past, this is your home as is Ellsworth Manor. You are Lady Ellsworth, after all.”

“The first Lady Ellsworth in quite some time, given Richard never married,” Mrs. Higginbotham pointed out.

Violet smiled with satisfaction, a bit too much satisfaction

really.

“However, even the most loyal of servants do gossip you know,” Lady Blodgett said. “Which means even here you will have to behave in a cordial manner toward each other.”

Violet shook her head. “This feels like a poorly written French farce.”

“Then perhaps you need to rewrite it, dear.” Mrs. Fitzhew-Wellmore smiled pleasantly.

“I have no desire to lose the property that has been in my family for generations but aside from all else...” James chose his words with care. “This is what Uncle Richard wanted. I am not thrilled with the manner in which he is forcing us to abide by his wishes but if Violet is willing to do so, I am, as well.”

“I told his lordship earlier today, I would abide by the terms of the will. For Uncle Richard,” Violet added and smiled at Mrs. Higginbotham. “He really was a wonderful man.”

“Then allow me to propose a toast.” Marcus rose to his feet. “To his lordship, Richard Branham, the late Earl of Ellsworth.”

The toast echoed around the table and James swallowed against a lump in his throat. As much as he would have preferred Uncle Richard had found some other way to encourage a reconciliation with Violet, James knew the determined old man had only done what he thought was best. His methods were questionable but his heart was not.

“And here’s to Lord and Lady Ellsworth and the next three years,” Marcus added. The gathering responded with varying

degrees of enthusiasm. James was fairly certain only he heard the rest of Marcus's words. "God help you both."



"WASN'T IT NICE of his lordship to send us home in his carriage?" Poppy snuggled back against the tufted leather seats.

"I'd say it's the least he could do," Effie said. "We are, after all, the only thing that might save his future."

"Not, of course, the main purpose of his uncle's will," Gwen pointed out.

"Richard's letter was very clear on that point," Effie said. "There was no doubt in his mind that these two people potentially share a great love and belong together. I don't see it myself but we shall take Richard's conviction on faith. He has charged us with making certain that happens and has given us three years to accomplish it."

"Three years might not be enough. This is going to be harder than I thought." Gwen frowned. "I don't remember the last time I've attended a more awkward meal."

"But the food was excellent," Poppy murmured.

"Surely you didn't think Richard could simply throw them together and all would be well?" Effie scoffed.

"I had rather hoped that would be the case," Poppy said. "As his late lordship did think they were fated to be together it seems to me, fate really should lend a helping hand."

"One cannot count on fate," Gwen said. "Fate however, can

count on us.”

“No one said this would be easy.” Effie drew her brows together. “I agree that the evening was awkward and there was a palpable sense of tension in the air.”

Gwen nodded. “A great deal was left unsaid at that table.”

“At least they’re not at each other’s throats,” Poppy pointed out.

“That’s something, I suppose.” Gwen sighed.

“Actually, I don’t think it is.” Effie considered the evening. There was something missing... “There was no particular, oh, I don’t know, *spark* between them. There were moments of course but all in all, he was pleasant and she was polite. At least if they were arguing, if their blood was at a boil, that would indicate some sort of, well, passion.”

“Passion?” Poppy’s voice rose. “What on earth are you thinking?”

“She’s thinking’s there’s a fine line between the passion of anger and passion of another sort.” Gwen grinned. “I must say that’s brilliant.”

“There is nothing more satisfying than scratching a persistent itch.” Effie smirked.

“I don’t understand.” Poppy shook her head. “We’re going to make them itch?”

“In a manner of speaking,” Gwen said. “From tonight’s observation, I suspect James is more amenable to reconciliation than Violet. While they both seem quite stubborn, it would

appear Violet is extremely wary, as well. Perhaps our next step should be to determine how they really feel about each other.”

Effie nodded. “The more information we have, the quicker we can move this along. We would hate for them to fall into the habit of merely existing together. No, we need to strike while the iron is hot.”

“One does prefer to avoid being mercenary,” Poppy said slowly, “but the longer this takes, the more Effie will be paid.”

“That is a consideration,” Gwen added. “We do need the money.”

“Richard’s money is nothing more than a momentary respite.” Effie forced a note of confidence even she didn’t believe. “It simply gives us a bit of room to come up with a way to salvage our sagging finances. Nonetheless, financial considerations will not influence our efforts. And I will not have a dead man’s final wish hanging over my head for the next three years. Richard believed James and Violet belong together. And together they shall be.” Effie set her chin stubbornly. “Whether they like it or not.”

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