



Prudence's Mystery

Historical Regency Romance



London Temptations

Joyce Alec

PRUDENCE'S MYSTERY

LONDON TEMPTATIONS BOOK TWO

JOYCE ALEC

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Prudence's Mystery

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PROLOGUE

“Thank you for the dance, Lady Prudence. I do look forward to being in your company again.”

Prudence smiled and curtsied toward the gentleman but chose, wisely, to say nothing. The truth was, she had not enjoyed dancing with him, for his hands had been much too tight and he had once stepped on her slipper, without even being aware of it. She was rather annoyed with his lack of consideration and skill and thus did not want to give him even the slightest encouragement that she would accept a dance from him again. He walked alongside her from the dance floor until she was safely back with her mother, Lady Devonshire.

“I thank you,” Prudence murmured as the gentleman bowed again, his eyes bright with a feverish hope that Prudence would not encourage. “I very much hope you enjoy the rest of the evening.”

The man’s smile faded at once, the light in his eyes blown out in a moment. It seemed he now realized that she would not be inclined toward conversing with him further or improving their acquaintance. With evident reluctance, the gentleman inclined his head and then turned away, walking through the crowd of guests until Prudence could no longer glimpse him.

“Thank heavens,” she said as her mother looked on with a touch of disapproval playing about her mouth. “I have such a painful foot; I am not certain I shall be able to dance again this evening.” Wincing, Prudence resisted the urge to sit down and rub her foot with her hands, knowing that such actions would be considered most improper. “The fool was ridiculous, Mama.”

“What did you say his title was?” Lady Devonshire asked, now looking a little frustrated rather than disapproving. “I do not recall.”

A mischievous twitch of Prudence’s lips gave Lady Devonshire her answer before she even had need to ask.

“You mean to say that you have forgotten his name entirely?” Prudence’s mother asked, throwing up her hands in evident horror. “Good gracious, Prudence. How can you behave in such a way?”

Without the least bit of embarrassment, Prudence shrugged her shoulders and looked out again at the crowd. “That particular gentleman did not capture my attention in any

way," she said plainly. "And you know very well that I shall not give my time to such a fellow. There are plenty of gentlemen within the ballroom this evening whom I am acquainted with and whose names I remember very well indeed." She smiled at her mother. "But as for the other gentlemen, I forget their names so that there is no requirement for me to ever be in their company again."

Lady Devonshire tutted and shook her head, but Prudence only laughed. This was now her second Season and she was determined to bring herself as much enjoyment as possible. Yes, there was the requirement that she find a husband, but her father, Lord Devonshire, was in no particular hurry to push his daughter into a hasty match. Rather, he seemed inclined to allow her to become acquainted with as many gentlemen as she wished—perhaps in the hope that she would be able to find a suitable match of her own volition.

Her mother, however, was rather displeased with such a situation and continued to push Prudence in the direction of gentlemen that she thought to be more than suitable, even though Prudence had very little interest in them whatsoever.

"I think Lord Stutton," her mother said with emphasis, "might have been an excellent sort of fellow, even if he was not a particularly good dancer."

"And yet, I have no interest in him," Prudence replied firmly. She could not quite say why there was no interest on her part, given that the gentleman had been rather handsome and with impeccable manners—save for his lack of dancing ability. However, she certainly was not going to consider him. Her foot still ached, and she had not enjoyed a moment of being in his company.

"Is that not your late cousin's husband?" Lady Devonshire asked, momentarily distracted from her thoughts of Prudence's lack of interest in Lord Stutton. "Whatever is he doing here?"

Prudence, a little surprised, looked in the direction of her mother's gaze and immediately spotted the gentleman. Baron Yardley had married Prudence's cousin, Mary, some two years ago, only for Mary herself to take ill a few short months after the wedding. The illness had been prolonged, and Prudence knew that Baron Yardley had been distraught over his wife's pain. When she had visited them both, Prudence had been touched by Lord Yardley's tenderness toward his wife, recalling the agony in his face and the sadness in his eyes as he had cared for his frail young wife. When she had passed away, Prudence had heard that Baron Yardley had become something of a recluse, which made it all the more surprising that he was now present here in London.

"I presume he might be here to enjoy the Season, Mama," Prudence answered slowly, wondering if she ought to make her way toward him and greet him. "It has been over a year since Mary's passing. He will need a wife to give him an heir."

Lady Devonshire tutted as though such a statement was more than she could bear, even though Prudence knew she spoke the truth.

"Perhaps we should go to greet him," Prudence suggested, moving forward before her mother could pull her back or prevent her from doing so. After a moment, Prudence felt her mother's presence beside her, although one glance into Lady Devonshire's face told her that her mother was not particularly pleased with Prudence's intention.

Lord Yardley glanced in their direction, then turned a little more fully and held his arms out as though he intended to embrace them both.

"Lady Devonshire!" he exclaimed, his handsome face warm with evident delight. "And Lady Prudence, how wonderful to see you both."

Prudence curtsied quickly, smiling warmly at Lord Yardley as she rose. "You are in London, Lord Yardley," she said as Lady Devonshire murmured a hurried greeting. "Are you here for the Season?"

Lord Yardley shrugged. "That is my intention, yes," he replied, a small frown pulling his smile from his lips as though he expected a criticism to fly from either Prudence or Lady Devonshire's lips. "It has been a difficult few months and I confess I hoped to find a little joy and a little relief back in London."

"But of course," Prudence said quickly, before her mother could say a word. "I understand." Hoping her smile was an encouraging one, she gestured to the rest of the ballroom. "And this ball has lifted your spirits somewhat, then?"

Lord Yardley smiled back at her. "Indeed it has," he said with such a fervor in his voice that Prudence wanted to believe him to be speaking the truth. "It is good to be in society and to be in company again. It removes some of the sorrow from my heart and mind, although I am certain now that it shall never completely depart from me."

Not quite sure what to say to this, Prudence merely nodded, aware that, from what Lord Yardley said, he had truly cared for Mary. Whilst that was what she herself eagerly desired, Prudence realized that with such strong emotions could also come great sorrow and sadness. The burden on Lord Yardley's soul must now be very heavy indeed.

"But we shall speak of no more sorrowful things," Lord Yardley said briskly, shattering the atmosphere of melancholy that had begun to creep over them. "Should you like to dance, Lady Prudence? I am certain that your dance card is full already but if there is a single dance remaining, I should be very glad to have it."

"And you must come to take tea, or to dinner," Lady Devonshire said as Prudence eagerly handed her dance card to Lord Yardley, glad that her mother had chosen to be welcoming rather than silently judgmental. "I shall have my husband make arrangements with you."

At this, Lord Yardley's smile grew all the more, the last few strands of tension leaving his expression. "I should be very glad of that, Lady Devonshire," he told her. "Truly grateful indeed."

"Excellent," Lady Devonshire said brightly. "And I am certain that Prudence would be very glad indeed to dance with you—provided that you do not tread on her feet."

Prudence laughed, looking up at her mother and seeing her lips twitch. Lord Yardley, a little mystified in his expression, promised solemnly not to do so and then handed Prudence back her card. She smiled as she saw his name down for both the country dance and, later, the quadrille.

"You are very kind," she told him, but Lord Yardley merely waved a hand.

"It is I who am honored to have a dance with you," he answered, making her blush just a little. "I look forward to it, Lady Prudence."

"As do I," Prudence answered truthfully. "Thank you, Lord Yardley."

She did not have time to speak further for another gentleman approached her, reminding her by his presence that she was now due to dance the cotillion. Excusing herself, she left her mother and Lord Yardley to converse and stepped out to dance once more, feeling quite satisfied with herself. Whether or not she found herself a suitable gentleman, whether or not she even accepted the court of an interested party, Prudence was certain that this Season was going to be a very enjoyable one indeed.

Dinner with Lord Yardley had gone very well indeed. Lord Devonshire had quickly made an invitation and, only two days after the ball, he had come to join the family for dinner. The evening had been an excellent one, for Lord Yardley had been in high spirits and had made wonderful conversation with them all. Even Lady Devonshire had lost her lingering haughtiness, evidently charmed by Lord Yardley's company and conversation.

The following morning, however, Prudence was rather rudely awakened, despite her eagerness to remain abed for a little longer. While she had still been in the depths of slumber, some maids had hurried into the room and had set about making certain that Prudence was not able to linger there. The drapes had been flung open, the sunlight streaming through, and a breakfast tray then set out for her. Prudence had groaned and had forced herself to sit up, only to be met with the presence of her mother, who had reminded her that they had afternoon calls very soon and that Prudence had to be prepared for them. Thus, Prudence had chosen not to lie back down and curl up into sleep once more but had instead determined to prepare herself for what she hoped would be a most enjoyable afternoon.

"You do look rather fatigued still," Lady Devonshire murmured as Prudence sat primly in her chair, ready for the first of their afternoon callers to arrive. "You should not have remained abed so long."

Prudence laughed and shook her head. "Mama, I should not have perhaps lingered in wakefulness last evening before retiring to bed," she told her mother, who arched one eyebrow. "I found that, despite the lateness of the hour, my thoughts were still tied to Lord Yardley and my late cousin, Mary—to the point that I simply could not close my eyes for some time."

Lady Devonshire shook her head and sighed in a most discontented fashion. "Prudence, you are ridiculous," she said firmly. "You state that there is no particular gentleman that interests you and yet you then think very deeply about Lord Yardley, who is entirely unsuitable, to the point of remaining awake instead of resting." She clicked her tongue in exasperation. "Pray, do not tell me that you intend to seek out Lord Yardley, Prudence. He is much too low in title to be suitable for you. Surely you can understand that?"

Again, Prudence chuckled, shaking her head at her mother's folly. "I am not at all eager to further my acquaintance with Lord Yardley, Mama," she told her, speaking with both honesty and the awareness that, should she ever find any gentleman of interest, she certainly would not speak to her mother about such things. Only if it came to the point of courtship would Prudence consider speaking to her mother about how she felt. "I was merely considering the loss that he has endured and wondering if he should ever find such happiness again. I should, I think, like him to do so—although I have no intention of filling such a role myself."

"I see," Lady Devonshire murmured, a small gleam in her eye betraying the fact that, mayhap, she did not quite believe Prudence to be speaking the truth. "Whilst I will confess I am glad to hear it and hope that you speak honestly, I should also remind you that you have received a few gifts this morning." She indicated the bunches of flowers that were sitting proudly in various decorative vases. "To receive such a thing after yesterday's afternoon calls speaks rather highly of a gentleman's regard for you, Prudence."

Having not noticed them before, Prudence looked at them with little interest. "I do not recall who came to visit yesterday, Mama."

With a sigh of evident disapproval, Lady Devonshire quickly reeled off the names of the gentlemen who had sent Prudence flowers, watching her daughter carefully in case Prudence should give any indication that the names meant something to her. Prudence ignored this entirely, choosing for the moment to remain silent, her hands settling in her lap as she waited for their first afternoon caller. The flowers were very beautiful indeed and she certainly appreciated the generosity, but her heart was not going to be swayed by a mere gift. None of the gentlemen were of any real interest to her, none had captured her interest in even the smallest manner, and therefore, she was not about to feign any sort of delight about being in their company again when she did not feel it within her heart.

"And so we are to have Lord Stutton calling upon us again, I believe."

Prudence's eyes flared wide and she looked sharply at her mother, who only laughed.

"It seems you have been paying very little attention to what I have told you, Prudence," Lady Devonshire continued. "Did you not know that Lord Stutton is to call upon you again?" Her smile lingered, transforming her usual severe expression into something a little brighter. "Even if you have no desire to consider him, it seems that he is all the more eager to consider you."

Groaning inwardly, Prudence closed her eyes and felt her shoulders sink low. It was not as though she had expected this afternoon to be of any real interest to her, but she had anticipated there would be some enjoyment in it—although with gentlemen such as Lord Stutton calling upon her, Prudence was no longer sure that she would have even a moment of enjoyment. Lord Stutton had called only yesterday and now would be doing so again. Why did the man not realize that she was not at all interested in his presence?

The door opened and the butler announced Lord Stutton's name.

"Stand up, Prudence," Lady Devonshire hissed as Prudence reluctantly opened her eyes. "And smile, for heaven's sake."

Forcing her lips to curve into a rather lackluster expression of welcome, Prudence sighed heavily as Lord Stutton walked into the room. The way he looked at her made her skin prickle with distaste, for there was that gleam of hope and eagerness in his eyes, as well as a slightly lewd smile that she disliked intensely.

"Lord Stutton," Lady Devonshire said warmly. "Do come in and sit down. How very good of you to call on us."

"Very good," Prudence echoed, before sitting down quickly in her chair and praying that the rest of the afternoon would not be as torturous as this.



"THE CARRIAGE WILL BE WAITING, MAMA."

A trifle exasperated, Prudence paced the hallway with the expectation that her mother would soon appear and permit them both to climb into the carriage so that they could attend Hyde Park's fashionable hour. It was something that Prudence greatly enjoyed, for even though the park was very busy at such a time, there was an excitement about being amongst the nobility. One might speak a little more freely in Hyde Park, for there was so much conversation and noise that one could dare to be a little less discreet.

"Mama."

Her calls remained unanswered and Prudence bit her lip, wondering if her mother was punishing her for being less than welcoming to the gentlemen that had come to call.

It was not as though Prudence had been rude, for she had behaved and spoken well, but rather that she had given no encouragement to any of the gentlemen who had sought to further their acquaintance with her. When they had stated that they hoped to dance with her at the next ball, she had only smiled rather than echo the sentiment back to them. When they had suggested that one day, she might like to take a walk through Saint James's Park with them, Prudence had told them that she preferred Hyde Park's fashionable hour, which she and her mother were soon to attend. And when they had taken their leave, Prudence did not express any eagerness that they call again or give them any hope that such a sentiment might one day be expressed.

Lady Devonshire had not appeared to be cross with her, although there had been very little said thereafter. She had merely ushered Prudence out to prepare for their carriage ride and had stated nothing about what Prudence had said or done during the course of the afternoon calls.

But now, her tardiness and Prudence's growing frustration made Prudence believe that this was some sort of punishment, some obvious sign that Lady Devonshire had not been pleased with what had occurred. Sighing heavily, Prudence meandered to the front door and looked out at the waiting carriage, the butler standing to attention and waiting, as she was, for Lady Devonshire to appear.

Whatever is keeping you, Mama?

There was no point in calling for her mother again, no use in hurrying up the staircase in search of her. Lady Devonshire would come when she was prepared and not a moment sooner—whether she was doing it as a way to punish Prudence or not. Closing her eyes,

Prudence pushed aside her frustration and tried to breathe calmly. Irritation would do nothing but upset her further.

"Lady Prudence?"

Her eyes flew open as she heard someone speak her name. Blinking rapidly, she was astonished to see none other than Lord Yardley approaching, hurrying up the steps toward her and looking over his shoulder as though he expected someone to be following him.

"Lord Yardley," she said with a smile, thoroughly delighted to see him. "Good afternoon. Are you coming to call?" She gestured to the carriage. "I would have been very glad to see you, but we are, I am afraid, about to—"

Lord Yardley shook his head, cutting her off as he stepped past her into the house, moving so that he stood in the shadow of the door. Prudence had no other choice but to go with him, finding herself very confused by this strange behavior.

"Lady Prudence, I must beg something of you," Lord Yardley said, looking at her with wide, frightened eyes. "Pray, do not ask me what it is, for it is best that you know very little."

It was as though a heavy cloud had come to linger over the both of them, for in that moment, Prudence felt the sun fade away and the lightness in her heart begin to darken. "Lord Yardley," she murmured, taking in his pale face, his disheveled hair, and feeling her heart begin to quicken with worry. "Whatever do you mean?"

Lord Yardley let out a long breath, closing his eyes for a moment as a tremor ran visibly through him. "I can only apologize for bringing this to you, for involving you in this way, Lady Prudence," he said, his voice low and quiet. "Believe me when I tell you I have no other choice. There is no one else that I can trust."

Prudence found herself nodding, the urge to reassure the gentleman growing within her. "Whatever it is, I am glad to be of assistance to you," she said quickly. "Truly, Lord Yardley, there is nothing that I would not do to help you in whatever circumstance you find yourself in."

Lord Yardley nodded, but then looked over his shoulder again. When his gaze returned to hers, Prudence noted the sweat that had broken out on his brow and felt her stomach drop. Whatever Lord Yardley was involved with, whatever he was to ask of her, this was very grave indeed.

"Here."

From his pocket, Lord Yardley pulled out something wrapped in blue cloth. He pressed it into her hands, his eyes searching hers.

"Keep it hidden for me, Lady Prudence," he told her, without any explanation as to what it was. "Do not allow another living soul to see it. Not even your own parents. Can you promise me that you will do so?"

For a moment, Prudence wanted to push the item back into Lord Yardley's hands, to refuse to help him, to state that she wanted nothing to do with whatever he was involved in. But then she remembered Mary and just how much Lord Yardley had cared for his wife and knew that she could do nothing but what he asked.

"Of course," she said slowly, taking it from him. "Do you mean to say that there are

those who wish to take this from you?"

Closing his eyes in evident relief, Lord Yardley sagged back for a moment, saying nothing more. Prudence watched him closely, confused as to why he had come to her and why he appeared so afraid.

"I must go," Lord Yardley said softly, opening his eyes and looking at her again. "I must not be seen here. You must be protected. I—I will return for this." He pressed his fingers to the package. "I will return for it soon, when it is safe."

Prudence found herself nodding, even though her heart had slammed hard against her chest at his words. "What else can I do, Lord Yardley?" she asked, but the gentleman was already shaking his head.

"You have done enough, Lady Prudence," he said heavily, reaching out to press her shoulder for a moment. "More than I should ever have asked of you. But I know so few in London and you are the only one I can trust." He swallowed hard and then, after another moment, turned and walked out the door. Prudence, still holding the package, made to step out after him, only to recall that Lord Yardley had begged her to keep it both safe and hidden. A little embarrassed that she had forgotten so quickly, she turned and gave it to a waiting footman, who had been standing out of earshot.

"Take this to my room at once, and place it under the pillow of my bed," she said firmly. "And be quick about it."

The footman did as she asked at once and Prudence hurried back to the door, wanting to make quite certain that Lord Yardley was safe. Coming down the stone steps, she watched as he made his way along the pavement, his shoulders hunched and his steps determined. Glancing over his shoulder again, he then stepped out into the road, ready to cross to the other side.

But just as he began to make his way across, a carriage turned the corner and began to hurtle toward him as fast as it could go. The driver was busy encouraging the horses, urging them on—and Prudence already knew what was going to happen.

A scream lodged in her throat as she stumbled forward, seeking to prevent the disaster from occurring somehow, but she already knew it would be much too late. Still, she hurried forward, hearing the loud, tortured cry that came from Lord Yardley's lips, her vision blurred as she saw him disappear under the legs of the horses. The screams of other passersby filled the air and she found herself joining in, now trying to make her way toward the crumpled figure of Lord Yardley.

"No, my lady."

A strong arm grasped hers and pulled her back. Prudence did not know what to do, finding herself held back from where she wanted to go.

"You must not," the voice continued, firm but with an edge of gentleness. "There are many going to him now. Your presence might add to scandal."

Prudence sagged heavily back, her strength fading from her, her legs buckling underneath her. The gentleman who had stopped her had no other choice but to catch her in his arms, to hold her tightly and to pull her back to the pavement as Prudence struggled against the pain that overwhelmed her.

"He is dead," she gasped, her breath painful as she tried to take in what she had

seen. "Lord Yardley is gone."

"I think it must be so," the gentleman replied, rather gruffly, as she found her hands digging into his upper arms, trying desperately to hold onto him and find the strength she needed to stand on her own. "I would not hide the truth from you, my lady."

Prudence closed her eyes and felt herself shudder. "He spoke to me only minutes before," she said, her legs still too weak to hold her. "He gave me that parcel and begged me to hide it. What if I..." She could not bring herself to say it, looking up into the gentleman's face and feeling a coldness wash over her heart. Certain that Lord Yardley had been deliberately killed, she now feared that the same might happen to her, even though she did not yet know why.

Do not allow another living soul to see it.

Horrified, Prudence clapped her hand over her mouth, realizing she had just spoken to a complete stranger about the package that had been given her. She had failed Lord Yardley already and it had only been a few minutes since they had spoken.

"You are very upset," the gentleman said quietly. "Tell me, my lady, where is your carriage?"

"Prudence?"

Prudence let out a shuddering breath, turning her head to see her mother standing at the bottom of the steps, staring with shock at the scene before her.

"Mama," Prudence breathed, trying to step toward her only to find herself still without strength.

"If you will permit me, my lady?" the gentleman asked, looking down into her eyes, and Prudence could only nod.

Hearing the shriek from her mother as the gentleman bent to bodily lift Prudence from the ground, his arm under her knees and her head on his shoulder, Prudence closed her eyes and felt her thoughts begin to swim together, pushing her closer and closer to a welcoming darkness.

"Prudence, what is the meaning of this?" she heard her mother say, even though her voice now appeared to be coming from very far away. Giving herself up to the dark, Prudence felt her head fall back but could not prevent it, dropping into a deep and heavy faint that pulled her away, at least for the moment, from the terrible circumstance that had only just overtaken her.

Felix looked down at the young lady in his arms as he moved toward the older lady who he presumed was the young lady's mother. He wondered just who she was and why she had been following that most unfortunate gentleman out into the middle of the road in such a fashion. Had she been attempting to save him? The poor fellow had been knocked to the ground with such force that Felix was quite certain there was nothing to be done.

"Whatever have you done to my daughter?" the lady screeched, flying toward Felix, her hands raised as though she thought to strike him. "Whatever have you done to her?"

Felix lifted one eyebrow and fixed the lady with a stern gaze, relieved that she then dropped her hands. "I have done nothing to your daughter other than to pull her back from a most unfortunate circumstance," he said gravely. "She has fainted from the shock of it." He glanced toward the townhouse to his right. "Is this where I ought to take her?"

The lady did not seem to know what to say for a moment, staring down at her daughter before lifting her eyes to the commotion that was now just behind Felix.

"What—what has happened?" she asked hoarsely, her face suddenly greying. "Is my daughter...injured in some way?"

"No," Felix replied firmly. "But I must take her indoors."

This seemed to make the lady recollect herself somewhat, for she nodded, turned, and gestured for him to make his way up toward the house. Felix mounted the steps carefully, glancing down again at the young lady and recalling how she had spoken of some strange package, then clasped one hand to her mouth and stared at him in horror. Something within him told him that he ought not to mention this to the lady's mother, for it had evidently been something he was not meant to know of, and he did not want to bring the lady's wrath down upon his head.

"Please, take her in here," the older lady said, hurrying ahead of him and opening a door to what Felix presumed was the drawing room. Seeing a chaise longue ahead of him, he set the lady down carefully and, making certain that she would not fall, stepped back and surveyed her.

"I should send for a doctor," her mother said, wringing her hands as she came to stand beside Felix. "My husband is out in town at present otherwise I—"

"I think smelling salts will do," Felix replied gently. "And I should also introduce myself

to you." He gave a small bow. "The Marquess of Stoneleigh, at your service."

The lady stared at him for a moment, her eyes wide as though she had not expected him to be a gentleman. Then, she closed her eyes, let out a sigh of relief, and nodded.

"Lord Stoneleigh," she said wearily. "Thank you for what you have done for my daughter—Lady Prudence." She did not bob a curtsy but rather went to a small corner table in the very back of the room, clearly looking for something of importance. "I am Lady Devonshire. My husband is the Earl of Devonshire."

Felix cleared his throat and put his hands behind his back. "I am glad to make your acquaintance, Lady Devonshire, although I am sorry for the circumstances behind it."

Lady Devonshire, having found what she sought, rose back to her full height and gave him a rather wan smile as she came back toward her daughter. "Indeed, Lord Stoneleigh," she answered. "Now, if you would care to wait, I am certain that my daughter will wish to speak to you and thank you for what you have done."

Felix hesitated. He did not want to be present in the room when the lady came around, for she might be disoriented and somewhat embarrassed to be seen in such a way, but at the same time, he did not wish to remove himself entirely.

"I should send a quick message to my friend, who is expecting me," he said, making for the door. "If you would excuse me for a few minutes, Lady Devonshire."

The lady did not even acknowledge his response, bending down to her daughter. Slipping from the room, Felix made his way back outside—and remembered the horrifying scene that had unfolded before him.

There was even more of a crowd standing around the unfortunate gentleman now, although it appeared as though someone was attempting to remove the fellow from the road by way of a rather crude stretcher.

"Lord Yardley, it is Lord Yardley," he heard someone say as he strode toward the crowd. "Can you believe it?"

Having never been acquainted with the gentleman, Felix was able to look down at the fellow somewhat dispassionately, although he certainly found his stomach turning over on itself as he took in the broken and bloodied form of the man on the stretcher.

"He is dead, then?" he asked as one of the men carrying the stretcher glanced at him. "There is no hope?"

"None," the man replied firmly. "He had four horses and a carriage run right over him. I cannot think how anyone would have managed to survive such an accident."

It was certainly put rather crudely, and Felix found himself struggling at the way it had been stated, but at least there was a certainty over the fellow's passing.

"How horrible," he murmured as the two men carrying the stretcher made their way past. "Where will you take him now?"

The second man spoke. "To his townhouse, where the staff will have to prepare him," he replied with a shrug. "At least someone knew who he was. Plenty times I have had to pick someone up without the least idea as to where they called home."

Felix watched the men go with a heavy heart, all too aware of the procession that seemed to join them as they walked away. He would not join it, not when he had seen the man's broken body and knew all too well that there would be nothing here for him

now.

Lord Yardley.

The name was obviously known to Lady Prudence, and certainly would be to Lady Devonshire as well. From what Felix had witnessed, it appeared as though Lord Yardley had merely been crossing from one side of the street to the other when he had been struck, whereas Lady Prudence seemed to believe it had been a deliberate act.

Could it be so?

Shaking his head to himself and muttering a quiet prayer for the deceased, Felix quickly grasped the arm of a young lad and asked if he wanted to deliver a message.

With the note sent to Lord Claverhouse, Felix turned and made his way back into Lord Devonshire's home, hoping that he would not be too long delayed. He would ensure that the lady was well, that she was not overly upset, and then he would take his leave. There were matters he wished to discuss with Lord Claverhouse that were of significance and, despite the upset of his afternoon thus far, Felix did not want to miss the opportunity to do so entirely.

Clearing his throat and feeling a trifle awkward, Felix made his way back to the drawing room, seeing the door ajar and hearing the quiet murmurs of what he hoped were two voices. Pushing the door open a little more, he stepped inside and was heartily glad to see the young lady sitting up in her seat, a glass of what looked like wine clasped in her hand.

"Oh, Lord Stoneleigh, you have returned," Lady Devonshire exclaimed, rising from her chair at once and coming toward him. "My daughter has told me what you did in saving her from that dreadful crowd. I am not at all surprised that she was so overcome with shock upon seeing that accident." She shook her head and gestured for him to sit down. "You must have witnessed it also."

"I did," Felix replied, looking into the face of Lady Prudence and noting just how white she was still. "It was most unfortunate."

Lady Devonshire shook her head again and sat down. "A dreadful accident," she said again as Lady Prudence dropped her gaze to the floor. "Might I ask if you are aware of the name of the unfortunate soul?"

Felix frowned, shooting a glance toward Lady Prudence as he quickly realized that she herself had not given the name of Lord Yardley to her mother.

"I do, in fact," he said slowly. "It was one Lord Yardley, although I myself am not acquainted with him."

Lady Devonshire suddenly went very pale, her hands tight together in her lap as she stared at him, leaving Felix to wonder whether or not he ought to ring the bell for another glass of wine for Lady Devonshire herself.

"I am sorry to bring this news to you," Felix continued slowly. "I presume you knew the gentleman?"

Lady Devonshire closed her eyes and nodded, her voice hoarse. "I did," she answered shakily. "He was married to my sister's daughter. She passed away some time ago—an illness, you see—and now you say that he, too, has...?" She could not seem to speak the last few words, looking at Felix with such a sense of desperation in her eyes that he

wanted to beg her not to have him speak such news again.

"I am afraid that he was the one who was hit by the carriage, yes," he said gently, and Lady Prudence let out a quiet sob. "They have taken him back to his townhouse so that the staff can take care of preparations from there."

"Goodness, how awful," Lady Devonshire whispered as Lady Prudence hid her face in a handkerchief. "Thank you for informing me, Lord Stoneleigh. And again, I thank you for what you did in coming to the aid of my daughter." A slight note of embarrassment entered her voice. "I must apologize for shouting at you as I did at first. That was rather improper."

Felix rose to his feet, thinking it best to take his leave when the young lady was clearly so distressed. "Think nothing of it, Lady Devonshire." Letting his eyes alight again on Lady Prudence, he gave her a small, encouraging smile which she did not return. "I only hope that, in time, the shock removes itself from you and that you recover fully, Lady Prudence. I should take my leave of you now." Bowing, he turned to Lady Devonshire. "Thank you, Lady Devonshire. If you will excuse me."

"But of course," Lady Devonshire replied quickly. "But we shall make arrangements to have you join us for dinner one evening soon, Lord Stoneleigh."

He held up one hand, palm facing the lady. "There is no need, Lady Devonshire, I assure you."

"But I insist," Lady Devonshire replied with a note of steel in her voice that told Felix he could not argue. "After what you have done, we must find a way to thank you, even if it is only to have you join us for dinner."

This frustrated his plans somewhat, but Felix had no other choice but to nod and to smile, before thanking Lady Devonshire again. Quickly taking his leave of the two ladies, he marched outside again and averted his eyes from the remnants of the accident to his left. Turning his whole body away, he walked with hurried steps down the street, making his way to Lord Claverhouse's townhouse, which was not a great distance away. Whilst he could very easily have taken his carriage or, at the very least, hailed a hackney, Felix had been eager to walk through London, with the intention, as he had set out, of it being one of the last times he would do so this Season.

Perhaps he would not be able to escape London as quickly as he had first intended, he realized, sighing heavily and rubbing his forehead with the back of his hand for a moment. With Lady Devonshire's firm intention to have him join them for dinner one evening soon, he could not simply depart from London and return to his estate as he had planned, for that would be seen as very rude indeed.

Besides which, were he honest with himself, Felix was a little concerned for Lady Prudence. He recalled how she had looked into his face with her vivid green eyes, her dark hair peeking out from under her bonnet. She had seemed so small, so vulnerable, and he had to admit there was a small part of him that wanted to ensure that she was recovered. The shock had evidently been a great one given that she had fainted in such a fashion.

"And there was that package she mentioned," Felix murmured to himself, turning up another street as Lord Claverhouse's townhouse came into view. That was something of a

mystery, and he could not simply push that thought to the back of his mind and forget about it. He wanted to find out a little more, wanted to discover if there was something further that Lady Prudence had to tell him about this particular parcel and why Lord Yardley had given it to her.

Surely it could not be the cause of his death?

The thought hit him hard, making him stumble as he tried to catch his breath. It was as though he had been punched hard in the chest, his eyes widening with the shock that came with such an astonishing thought.

"It was an accident," he said aloud, remembering how Lady Devonshire had spoken such words on two occasions. "It was nothing more than that, no matter what Lady Prudence might think."

She was obviously mistaken in her belief that Lord Yardley's life had been taken from him purposefully, Felix decided, climbing the stone steps and then rapping smartly on Lord Claverhouse's door. The shock had overcome her sense and made her believe something that simply could not be true. That was the full measure of it, Felix was certain. He would wait until a dinner invitation was given him, ensure that Lady Prudence was well and fully recovered, and thus satisfied, make preparations to return to his estate. Satisfied, he waited for the door to open and then stepped inside, ready to greet Lord Claverhouse. He need not give Lady Prudence another thought.



"WHAT DO YOU MEAN, you intend to quit London?"

Felix grinned as his friend poured him another glass of brandy, as though such a gesture would incline Felix to change his mind.

"I have found nothing of interest here in London," he said, accepting the glass from Lord Claverhouse with a nod of gratitude. "I have given it some three weeks now and nothing has changed. Therefore, I shall simply return to my estate and then, perhaps in the little Season, try again."

Lord Claverhouse, who had now sat down heavily opposite Felix and was studying him with a somewhat beady eye, gave a loud sigh before tutting in disdain.

"I am not being arrogant or any of the other names you might wish to level at me," Felix continued with a wave of his hand. "It is simply that I have found nothing of interest."

"You mean to say that no young lady has grasped your attention with enough force for you to remain and seek her acquaintance further," Lord Claverhouse said pointedly. "Is that not so?"

Felix shrugged. "It may be the truth, yes, but it is not of any significance."

"I think it is significant," Lord Claverhouse argued, rolling his eyes at Felix. "You are being pernicky."

Laughing, Felix shook his head. "I am not being overly choosy," he argued as Lord Claverhouse took a large sip of his brandy. "But I will not simply pick a lady as my wife because there is a requirement for me to have one." He shrugged one shoulder. "There

must be something about the lady that sparks an interest deep within my heart—one that will continue to linger throughout the rest of our lives. And as yet, I have not found a single young lady who has brought about such a feeling within me. In fact," he said, bringing his glass to his lips, "I have found them almost all exactly the same."

Lord Claverhouse pressed one hand to his heart in mock horror. "You cannot be speaking the truth," he said loudly as Felix chuckled. "All the same? That cannot be. I can think of at least three young ladies who are quite individual."

Felix arched one eyebrow. "Indeed?"

This brought Lord Claverhouse's speech to a sudden end, for he looked back at Felix with a half-open mouth, evidently having meant to list the names of such ladies, only for them all to suddenly escape him.

"You see?" Felix laughed as he swirled the last of his brandy around his glass. "You have just as much difficulty as I."

"That is not so," Lord Claverhouse stated firmly. "I had momentarily forgotten the ladies' names, that is all." Clearing his throat, he listed three individual ladies, each of whom Felix knew, without a doubt, were already wed. A grin spread across his face as Lord Claverhouse expressed the virtues of the final lady—a Lady Brookmire, who, apparently, was something of a bluestocking but very well spoken and highly thought of.

"Yes," Felix said with an air of consideration. "Yes, Lady Brookmire. An excellent suggestion, Lord Claverhouse...were she not already wed to Viscount Brookmire." He laughed aloud as Lord Claverhouse's expression darkened and he made a frustrated sound in the back of his throat. "In fact, I am quite certain that each of the ladies you have mentioned are already wed. I confess I am a little surprised that you did not mention your own dear wife, since she is also a very remarkable lady—although, sadly, already wed and therefore entirely unavailable for my courting." He eyed Lord Claverhouse. "I have not seen your wife a good deal, however." A sudden worry captured his heart. "Is she well?"

Lord Claverhouse waved a hand. "She is well enough, although feeling a little unenthusiastic about making her way into society as yet." Something came into his expression that Felix could not quite work out, frowning hard as he watched his friend. Lord Claverhouse sighed and rose to his feet, splashing a little more brandy into his glass before coming toward Felix in order to add more to his glass also.

"But we are not here to talk about my wife," he declared firmly. "I am not as much in society as I was last year, but I am certain that returning to your estate is a poor choice. There must be one lady amongst all the others that had piqued your interest even a little."

Felix opened his mouth to deny it, only to suddenly recall that Lady Prudence had, in fact, been someone of particular interest to him. It was not, of course, because he knew anything about her or because he found her company to be warm and inviting, but rather because of what had occurred and what she had said. In the silence that followed, Felix heard Lord Claverhouse begin to chuckle and, looking back at his friend, could not help but laugh along.

"It is not for the reasons you think," he stated, as though such a thing was worthy of

explanation. "I have barely spoken to the lady."

"Sometimes a mere glance at a lady is all that is required," Lord Claverhouse grinned, now looking satisfied with himself. "I knew there was a lady within London who would not rush easily from your mind. Which means," he finished with evident determination, "you cannot simply return to your estate and leave London behind as you have planned. You must remain and seek out her company again until you are quite convinced one way or the other."

"It seems that I have no choice in the matter, even if I wished to depart this very afternoon," Felix muttered, his once mirthful appearance now fading to seriousness. "The lady's mother has invited me to dine with the family very soon and I did not refuse her invitation."

Lord Claverhouse smiled broadly. "In that case, I look forward to learning the lady's name very soon," he said with a wink. "Finally, a lady who has caught Lord Stoneleigh's eye. I can hardly wait to meet her."

Why her mother had insisted that Prudence attend an evening soiree only a day after she had witnessed the terrible death of Lord Yardley, Prudence did not know. It was not an enjoyable evening, for she could barely raise a smile to any of the other guests and found herself close to tears on many occasions, without any sort of explanation for her sorrow.

Her mother, given that she was in the same room as Prudence, had allowed her to go on alone without standing directly by her side and, thankfully, Prudence had found a group of acquaintances who were eager to talk but less eager to listen. Thus, she had stood in silence and allowed the conversation to flow around her without truly listening to anything that was being said.

"You are quite lost in thought, Lady Prudence."

She jerked to attention, looking up at Lord Brunswick as he grinned down at her.

"I must hope," he continued, one hand pressed against his heart, "that I am the object of your thoughts, Lady Prudence. Were there dancing this evening, then I should have asked for your company at once."

"That is very kind," Prudence replied, aware that others in the group were now looking at her. "I am a little lost in thought, as you say, Lord Brunswick."

"And yet you do not say that such thoughts are centered upon me," Lord Brunswick sighed heavily. "Although I should not allow my heart to be injured so, given that I am now betrothed." He grinned at her, but Prudence did not smile back. She disliked that Lord Brunswick would behave in such a flirtatious manner when he was already engaged.

"Might I enquire as to which particular gentleman you are thinking of with such a forlorn expression?" Lord Brunswick continued, eyeing her speculatively. "Or will you keep such a secret within your own heart?"

Some of the ladies in the group tittered behind their hands, their eyes darting from one face to the next as Lord Brunswick's wide grin held a touch of mockery. Her cheeks warm, Prudence lifted her chin and looked directly into Lord Brunswick's handsome face. He would soon see that she was not the sort of lady who was easily shamed, particularly when there was something so serious on her mind.

"I was thinking of the tragic death of Lord Yardley," she said, watching as the smiles fell from the faces of those around her. "It was only yesterday and given that he was

once wed to my cousin, I have found the news to be a very heavy weight upon my mind, Lord Brunswick."

There was no lingering grin left on Lord Brunswick's face as he dropped his gaze and cleared his throat, clearly now embarrassed that he had spoken so.

"That must be very trying for you, Lady Prudence," said one of the ladies, as though she had not been laughing only a few moments before. "I heard it was a dreadful accident."

Prudence bit her lip, resisting the urge to tell them all that it had been no accident and that she was quite certain that it had been done deliberately. She had already voiced as much to her mother, who had immediately disregarded such a notion with a stern warning that she ought not to mention it again. It was, however, both frustrating and rather upsetting to feel so alone in her belief. She had not dared tell her mother about the parcel that Lord Yardley had given her. She had already made the mistake of speaking to Lord Stoneleigh of it, and she did not want to do so again.

"It must have been all the more painful, given that you were, in a way, related to him," said another young lady. "I am very sorry for the loss your family must be enduring at present."

"You are very kind," Prudence replied, glad that she had managed to keep her thoughts to herself. She said nothing more, her gaze drifting away from the rest of the group. Conversation resumed—albeit rather quietly—around her but again, Prudence did not give even the slightest attention to it. Lord Brunswick eventually took his leave, perhaps still embarrassed by what he had said, and Prudence herself stepped away, meandering to a quieter corner of the room. Picking up another glass of champagne, she sipped it as she lingered alone for a few moments, wishing that her mother had not forced her to attend.

"Lady Prudence?"

The voice was hesitant and gentle and, as Prudence turned around, she saw a tall man with a shock of light brown hair bowing before her. When he lifted his head, she recognized him immediately—and felt her stomach drop to the floor.

"I do not mean to alarm you," Lord Stoneleigh said, evidently recognizing the shock on her face. "I shall depart, if that is what you would prefer."

Finding her voice, Prudence found herself putting out one hand and holding tightly to his arm. "No, please," she said, her voice barely loud enough for him to hear. "I—I am glad to see you."

That was, of course, a true sentiment, for she was desperate to ensure that he did not tell another person what she had accidentally revealed about Lord Yardley and the package.

Lord Stoneleigh blinked in surprise, his eyes drifting to her hand as it rested on his arm. Embarrassed, Prudence dropped her hand at once, aware of the heat in her cheeks as she took a small step back.

"I have been wanting to ensure that you are quite recovered, Lady Prudence," Lord Stoneleigh told her, his voice a little gruff. "It appears you must be, given that you are present this evening."

Prudence shook her head. "I do not wish to be here, Lord Stoneleigh," she found herself saying. "My mother was eager for me to attend and therefore, you find me present." She closed her eyes for a moment, wondering what it was about Lord Stoneleigh that had her speaking the truth without having had any intention to do so.

"I well understand the pressures of society, Lady Prudence," Lord Stoneleigh said kindly. "Might I ask how you are faring, then?"

Opening her eyes, Prudence looked up at him. "Lord Stoneleigh, there is one significant matter that I must speak to you about," she said, glancing over her shoulder to ensure that she could not be overheard. "It is to do with yesterday afternoon and the death of Lord Yardley."

"But of course," Lord Stoneleigh said quietly. "Do you wish to discuss it with me here?"

"No," Prudence said quickly, fully aware that anyone could overhear them speaking at any time. "Might you and I meet together at some point? I know it is rather rude to ask for such a thing when we are barely acquainted, but it is of the greatest importance."

She waited for his response, holding his gaze and trying her best not to twist her fingers as she clasped them together in front of her. It was rather brazen to suggest that a gentleman meet with her for no other reason than because she asked it of him, but she hoped that after what he had witnessed along with her, he would accept.

"If that is what you would like, Lady Prudence, then I certainly shall not refuse," he said eventually, inclining his head. "Perhaps I could call upon you?"

"No."

She spoke a little too abruptly, a little too forcefully, but Lord Stoneleigh only blinked momentarily before spreading his hands and smiling at her.

"I do not mean to be rude, Lord Stoneleigh, but even my mother cannot hear what I have to speak of," she said, her cheeks warm as she dropped her gaze to the floor. "If we, perhaps, went for a short walk together, my mother would, most likely, be distracted by a friend or an acquaintance and allow us the few moments we need to speak."

Lord Stoneleigh nodded. "Then I shall call for you tomorrow, Lady Prudence," he said, and Prudence let out a breath of relief. "Ah, I believe your mother is approaching."

Utterly relieved that she had managed to arrange something before her mother joined them, Prudence turned around and smiled quickly at Lady Devonshire.

"Mama," she began, but Lady Devonshire only had eyes for Lord Stoneleigh.

"Lord Stoneleigh," Lady Devonshire exclaimed, holding out her hand to him so that he could bow over it. "I am so glad to see you again, I confess. We have not arranged dinner as yet, but—"

"There is plenty of time for such things," Lord Stoneleigh replied with a broad smile. "I will be glad to attend whenever you should wish to invite me, Lady Devonshire."

Lady Devonshire smiled and then looked pointedly at Prudence.

"I believe there is to be some sort of musical performance," Lady Devonshire continued, lifting one hand toward the door. "Oh look, I see we are being asked to attend."

Prudence, fully aware of what her mother was hoping for, began to turn around and make her way toward the door, when she heard Lord Stoneleigh speak directly to her.

"Perhaps I could accompany you, Lady Prudence?" he suggested, falling into step beside her as Lady Devonshire looked on approvingly. "I do hope that you might play?"

The thought of playing the pianoforte in front of Lord Stoneleigh sent a shudder of anxiety through Prudence and even though he looked warmly at her, she could not bring herself to agree.

"Mayhap I shall do so another evening," Prudence replied, hearing her mother click her tongue in disapproval from behind her. "I am afraid I shall have to disappoint you tonight."

"Then I shall look forward to when I can hear you play, for I am sure you are very proficient," Lord Stoneleigh replied quietly. "And for the moment, I shall be glad to be in your company."

Prudence smiled at this, thinking to herself that there was something rather kind about Lord Stoneleigh. Perhaps she ought to have known it from how he had come to her rescue, how he had insisted on helping her when she had been lost in shock and grief, but now she was convinced of it. Lord Stoneleigh, it seemed, was a very generous man.

The only question was, could she trust him?



"YOU MUST NOT THINK anything of it, Mama," Prudence murmured as they waited for Lord Stoneleigh to arrive in his carriage. "This is merely a walk, nothing more."

Lady Devonshire laughed breezily and patted Prudence's arm. "It is the first gentleman that you have ever entertained, Prudence. I shall allow myself to be a little pleased, whether you wish it or not."

Prudence closed her eyes, wishing that her mother would not behave in such a fashion, not when she herself was still so upset over what had occurred with Lord Yardley. The funeral was to take place very soon, but her parents had insisted that there was no need for them to attend, for Lord Yardley had not truly been family. Yes, he had been wed to their cousin, but that did not mean that they were required to leave London and attend the funeral, or to undertake a period of mourning. Prudence had not known what to say to this, her mind too filled with confusion and anxiety from what had occurred.

"He is here," Lady Devonshire said with a slightly raised voice, her hand tight on Prudence's arm. "Now, I shall make sure to walk a little behind so that you might speak in peace. You need not fear that I shall impinge on your conversation with Lord Stoneleigh."

Relieved, but unwilling to say anything further—anything that might encourage her mother—Prudence pasted a smile on her face and stepped forward, her heart thumping furiously as she saw Lord Stoneleigh come down from the carriage, his eyes meeting hers.

"Good afternoon, Lady Prudence," he said warmly. "Lady Devonshire. It is a very fine day indeed. I think we shall enjoy our short stroll around Saint James's Park."

"I am certain we will," Lady Devonshire replied as Prudence took Lord Stoneleigh's hand as he helped her into the carriage. "I am sure it will be an excellent afternoon

indeed."



"YOUR MOTHER IS REMAINING a few steps behind, Lady Prudence."

Prudence allowed herself a small smile, glancing over her shoulder and seeing her mother smiling broadly. "Indeed she is," she agreed softly. "I suppose I should tell you the truth, Lord Stoneleigh, for you have been so willing to agree to my very odd demands."

Lord Stoneleigh chuckled. "It is not odd at all, Lady Prudence. There is nothing a gentleman likes more than to walk with a beautiful lady on a warm summer's day."

She blushed at this but did not look at him. "You are kind to say so, Lord Stoneleigh, but there is something of great importance that I must speak to you about."

"And it is to do with the death of Lord Yardley?"

Nodding, Prudence dared a glance up at him and saw the serious expression that had crept into his features. His jaw was a little tight, his brows low over his hazel eyes. Evidently, he was more than willing to listen to her.

"Lord Yardley came to speak to me, only a few moments before he was knocked down by the carriage," she began, aware that her voice was already breaking with emotion. "He gave me something and told me that I was to keep it hidden without mentioning it to anyone else. And, within a few minutes, I found myself doing precisely what he had asked me not to do."

Lord Stoneleigh seemed to understand at once. "Because you spoke to me about it."

Shame crept up on her. "I did," she agreed. "I was in a great deal of turmoil over what I had seen, and I did not keep a guard over my mouth as I should have."

"That is nothing to be ashamed of," Lord Stoneleigh replied, glancing down at her. "Given what you saw, I am not in the least bit surprised that shock and fear overtook you."

Prudence shook her head, dropping her gaze from his face. "Everyone keeps insisting that it was a mere accident, but I cannot allow myself to believe it. I am certain that it was a deliberate act that took Lord Yardley from this earth." No sooner had she finished speaking than Prudence realized what she had said—and wondered precisely what Lord Stoneleigh thought of such a statement. Hurriedly, she tried to return to the subject at hand. "But that does not matter, I suppose. I only sought to ask you to keep what I said to yourself." Swallowing hard, she looked up at him again, seeing the frown that lingered on his face as he glanced down at her. "That is all I wished to say."

Lord Stoneleigh said nothing for a few minutes as they walked together in silence. Prudence's stomach was roiling with a swell of tension, fearful that Lord Stoneleigh would refuse, would demand to know what was in the package, and would, in fact, turn out to be something of a cruel fellow. Her fears were not founded, however. Instead, she found herself listening to his gentle tone as he spoke to her, as he offered her more than she had ever expected.

"I will, of course, do as you ask, Lady Prudence," Lord Stoneleigh began, "but I will

confess to being somewhat intrigued by what has occurred." A small sigh escaped him. "I am aware that the incident has been called nothing more than an accident, but I think I am inclined to consider that it might not have been so, not after what you have told me about this strange parcel and his eagerness for it to remain hidden."

Prudence let out a slow breath, surprised that she felt relieved instead of wary. Was she so willing to simply believe Lord Stoneleigh's good intentions?

"In addition, Lady Prudence, I fear that you may well be in danger," Lord Stoneleigh continued, his voice now grave with concern. "If Lord Yardley was attacked, as you believe, then there must have been a reason for it. Perhaps that reason is to do with what he gave you to protect."

A shiver sent gooseflesh all over Prudence's skin. "There were so many people over him when he was knocked down," she murmured, remembering how people had swarmed to Lord Yardley. She had presumed that they were doing all they could to help him, but what if their intentions had been something more? "Could it be that one of them was looking for what he handed me?"

There came a short silence, during which Lord Stoneleigh considered what she had said and then slowly began to nod. "I think that is a wise thought, Lady Prudence," he agreed quietly. "I will not pry, however. If you wish for my help, I would be glad to give it—but this is entirely your decision." Hesitating, he caught her gaze as she lifted her eyes to his, and Prudence was a little astonished to see the fervor in his face. "I will not press you to allow me in, to permit me to know as much as you do. However, I am offering to come alongside you and to seek the truth about Lord Yardley's death. And, in a way, perhaps protect you from meeting the same fate."

Prudence turned her head away, suddenly overcome by all that she saw in his expression. There was an eagerness to help her, she was sure of it, and yet it was all very sudden. She had barely known the gentleman for two full days and yet now he was offering to do all he could to help her? Was it truly that he had a kind and willing heart, or was there more to his intentions?

What if he was involved in Lord Yardley's death? The thought was a shocking one and she stumbled, making Lord Stoneleigh reach out to catch her arm, helping her to steady herself again.

Embarrassment hit her as she glanced up at him. "I thank you, Lord Stoneleigh."

To her surprise, he did not let go of her arm for a moment, his hazel eyes searching her face as though he wanted to make certain she was well.

"You have been through a great ordeal, Lady Prudence," he said, his fingers lifting from her arm as he dropped his hand to his side again. "I cannot imagine what emotions must torment your soul at this moment."

Prudence found herself sighing heavily, for his words had pressed directly against her heart and reminded her of all that she now felt.

"Indeed," she murmured, still looking away from him. "It has been a heavy burden upon my heart. Lord Yardley was, in many respects, a gentleman that I respected. He cared for my cousin very dearly and I am certain that the affection he showed her in the months before her death was genuine." Her expression softened as memories overtook

her. "He loved my cousin Mary. I am certain of it."

"It sounds as though he was the best sort of gentleman," Lord Stoneleigh replied quietly. "Which, I confess, makes me question all the more what he had become involved in."

It was a question that Prudence herself had been considering over the last two days. She dared another glance toward Lord Stoneleigh and saw how his brows furrowed and his jaw tightened as he let his thoughts continue to run through him. The urge to tell him everything, to allow him into her private considerations, began to overtake her. Could she truly continue along this path alone? What if Lord Stoneleigh was correct and she was in danger? There was a risk in telling him, yes, but was it one she was willing to take?

"Lord Stoneleigh," she began slowly. "I fear trusting you."

Lord Stoneleigh's brows flew upwards as he looked at her sharply.

"I am afraid that, if I should tell you all, you might, in fact, have differing motives from what you currently present."

Understanding cleared Lord Stoneleigh's shocked expression. "You are worried that I am somehow involved."

"I am."

Lord Stoneleigh considered this for a moment, then nodded. "That is understandable. And a wise thought, Lady Prudence." Lifting one shoulder, he gave her a half-shrug. "If it is any consolation, were it not for the fact that I had come across you in the way I had done, I would, by now, be making my way back to my estate."

Prudence frowned. "What do you mean?"

Again, Lord Stoneleigh shrugged. "I had grown tired of London—and yes, I am aware that it has only been a few weeks since the beginning of the Season, but I was determined to return home. I was making my way to my friend's townhouse, in fact, knowing that he would try to convince me to remain in London."

"But he did not succeed?" Prudence found herself asking, wondering why a gentleman such as Lord Stoneleigh would wish to leave London before the Season had even truly had a chance to begin. "Are you still to leave London?"

Lord Stoneleigh laughed and, to her surprise, Prudence found herself smiling in response.

"I am afraid he did not succeed, Lady Prudence, but your mother, however, has."

She looked at him in surprise. "My mother?"

Nodding, Lord Stoneleigh chuckled as he glanced over his shoulder. "In insisting that I come to dinner, I have found myself forced to remain in London. And, if I am to tell the entire truth, I have discovered my interest piqued by what occurred, Lady Prudence, as well as by what you yourself have told me. Therefore, it seems that I shall stay in London for as long as you require me."

Wondering if she would be able to speak to this Lord Claverhouse and discover whether this was the truth, Prudence looked up at Lord Stoneleigh again. "And if I decide not to speak to you of what I know?"

Lord Stoneleigh shrugged. "Then I shall return to my estate," he replied with a small smile. "I shall not pressure you or force you to tell me everything. This is entirely your

decision. I merely offer you my support and my help, in the hope that you will accept it. I fear for your safety in dealing with this alone."

Prudence let out a long, slow breath, considering things carefully. Lord Stoneleigh had been very kind to her thus far, had helped her when she was nothing more than a stranger to him. Now he was continuing with such kindness by offering himself as a confidante, as someone she could rely on as she struggled to comprehend all that had happened with Lord Yardley. Either she could allow herself to trust him, given what she knew of the man, or she could choose to ignore his offer of help out of fear and, thus, continue alone in this dilemma.

She had to allow her courage to come forth, to choose to find support even if she was not entirely certain of him. Her choice would be proven right or wrong in the end, no matter what she decided.

"Then I should be glad of your help, Lord Stoneleigh," she found herself saying as Lord Stoneleigh's lips curled into a smile. "You are correct. To continue alone in this matter is not something that I wish to do."

Lord Stoneleigh nodded, his eyes holding hers as their steps slowed. "I promise to do all I can to help you, Lady Prudence," he said quietly. "Might I ask if you have opened the parcel Lord Yardley gave to you?"

She hesitated, knowing that this was the first step in her need to trust another living soul with what Lord Yardley had given her. "I—I have not," she told him honestly. "I have been too upset, perhaps too afraid to do so."

"That is quite understandable," Lord Stoneleigh told her. "But if you are to find out more, if we are to come closer to some sort of understanding, then I must suggest that you do so at once."

Swallowing hard, Prudence tried to smile but found herself too anxious to do so. "I will open it the moment I return home," she told him. "And I shall send a note to you about what I have found."

To her surprise, Lord Stoneleigh shook his head fervently. "Pray do not," he begged. "For a note can be intercepted. Far better for us to speak in private—or at least, as privately as we can." His smile returned. "Are you to attend Lord Heseltine's ball tomorrow evening?" Seeing her nod, he offered her his arm and she took it, beginning to walk alongside him again. "Then perhaps we might dance together there, Lady Prudence?"

Realizing what he meant, Prudence found herself nodding, her heart feeling a little less anxious now that she had someone to confide in. "I would be glad to, Lord Stoneleigh," she said, looking up at him. "And thank you."

It was with a great swell of relief in his chest that Felix accompanied Lady Prudence and Lady Devonshire back toward his carriage. The knowledge that Lady Prudence now trusted him and that she had taken him into her confidence was both something he appreciated and something he swore to honor. Lady Prudence would have nothing but his loyalty and his sheer determination to do whatever he could to both help and protect her.

He could not quite state where such an emotion had come from, but it remained in him regardless. Any other gentleman might merely have thought of Lady Prudence as someone who was in need of help, and then easily set any further thoughts of the lady aside. But that was not so for Felix. For whatever reason, Lady Prudence and her present difficulties were not something that Felix could ignore. There was a desire within him to be of aid, to remain alongside her in her troubles, when no one else could. Had she not told him of this strange parcel, then he might have thought nothing of it and merely left the acquaintance where it stood, but given what he knew now, there was no choice for him but to do what he could to help her.

“Do you have any further engagements for the rest of the afternoon, Lord Stoneleigh?”

Felix smiled warmly at Lady Devonshire. He was rather grateful that she had walked behind both himself and Lady Prudence in the way she had done, for it had meant that their conversation had been both private and of some duration.

“I have no other engagements, Lady Devonshire, save for a card game this evening,” he told her.

“Then you must come to take some refreshment with us before you depart,” Lady Devonshire said, her eyes wide with evident astonishment that he had no other places to go to. “Whilst it has been very pleasant to walk in the sunshine, it has been rather hot. I am sure you will not refuse a refreshing glass of lemonade?”

Felix hesitated, glancing at Lady Prudence, but saw that she was staring out of the window. It was very obvious that Lady Devonshire was delighted with the fact that Felix had paid attention to her daughter—even if she did not know the true reason for such attention—but he did not want to continue to give Lady Devonshire the wrong impression. When this particular matter came to an end, there would be nothing further

that either he or Lady Prudence required of each other.

But, then again, perhaps he would be able to see this mysterious package for himself, should he be willing to attend.

"I would not wish to overstay my welcome," he said carefully, but Lady Devonshire laughed and waved a hand.

"You would not be overstaying, Lord Stoneleigh, since it is I that have invited you," she declared, sitting back and casting a quick glance toward her daughter. "And since you have nothing to keep you from us, I shall promise to make certain that you receive the very best lemonade and some wonderful cakes and the like to ensure you are not fatigued after your walk in the heat."

Felix inclined his head. "You are very kind, Lady Devonshire," he said, aware that Lady Prudence's cheeks had begun to turn a gentle shade of pink. "I will not stay too long, however."

"Any time you can spare will be more than enough," Lady Devonshire said with a contented smile. "I am certain that my daughter will be very glad indeed to keep you company."

Lady Prudence threw him a look that told Felix she was rather embarrassed by her mother's eagerness. "But of course," she answered calmly. "A glass of lemonade sounds lovely, Mama."

Lady Devonshire looked all the more satisfied. "Then mayhap you will wish to take it in the gardens—under the shade, of course." She smiled to herself and then looked out of the window. "It has been a very fine day indeed."



"YOU MUST FORGIVE my mother's eagerness."

Felix chuckled as he sat down in a waiting garden chair, finding himself contented to be in Lady Prudence's company for this prolonged length of time. "Pray do not become anxious, Lady Prudence," he told her. "I consider your mother's approval of me to be a very generous attitude, given that she does not know me particularly well."

Lady Prudence sighed and shook her head, sitting down opposite him. "My father does not push me in the way that my mother does," she said, a little sadly. "He is content to remain at home or go about his business, trusting that I shall find my own path. My mother, however, is continually pushing me in one direction or the next, encouraging some things and discouraging others." Her fingers fluttered across her brow. "It can be a little trying."

Felix did not say anything to this particular remark, looking steadily at Lady Prudence and taking her in. She was, he realized, a very beautiful young lady. Her emerald eyes were all the more vivid in the sunshine, her very dark hair now free of the bonnet she had worn. With her gentle sloping nose and curved cheeks, she appeared very elegant in almost every single one of her movements. Little doubt, then, that her mother would be seeking an excellent match for her daughter. Lady Prudence was both beautiful and the daughter of an earl, which meant she had excellent prospects—even though it appeared

that she herself had no particular eagerness to pursue them.

"I have done it again," Lady Prudence sighed, rubbing one finger across the bridge of her nose. "How foolish of me."

Frowning, Felix sat a little further forward in his chair. "What do you mean, Lady Prudence?"

A wry smile tugged at the corner of her mouth. "I mean to say that I find myself speaking more truths to you than I do to anybody, Lord Stoneleigh," she answered, a dullness about her voice that made him realize she was not at all pleased about this state of affairs but rather, in fact, a little frustrated.

"I will not betray any confidences, Lady Prudence," he promised. "You may speak as you wish, and I shall not be offended or astonished." Glancing over his shoulder and seeing the maid approaching with a tray of refreshments, he grasped the opportunity. "Might I also suggest that you bring down the parcel, Lady Prudence? If your mother has not yet attended us and has, instead, sent a maid as a chaperone until she is prepared to join us, would that not give us enough time to look at the contents of the parcel?"

Lady Prudence smiled softly, her eyes bright. "It would indeed, Lord Stoneleigh, which is why I have already fetched it from my rooms." She waited until the maid had set out the refreshments and then moved to sit a little further away from them both—her back to them, however—before she began.

"I have placed it in my pocket for the moment, although it is not a particularly small piece," she said, standing up and turning herself away for a moment or two. "I have not opened this, as I have said, since Lord Yardley gave it to me."

Felix said nothing, seeing Lady Prudence's expression become anxious again as she turned back to him. Her eyes were a little wider than before, searching his face as though she was afraid she was about to make the wrong decision. Her shoulders were lifted, her hands grasping tightly a wrapped object that Felix knew was what Lord Yardley had given her. Her lips were pressed tightly together and, as he watched, he saw her bite her lower lip, clearly worried that she was now about to make a grave mistake.

"This is your decision," he reminded her gently. "I shall not demand anything from you."

This seemed to have something of a sobering effect upon the lady, for she started visibly, closed her eyes, and set her shoulders, before returning to her seat.

"Lord Yardley pressed this into my hands," she said, setting down the item that was wrapped in blue cloth. "I have not even taken the cloth from it as yet."

Felix nodded. "It is tied with string, then?"

"A small black ribbon," Lady Prudence corrected, turning the object over and undoing the ribbon which she then slid free from the object. The blue cloth remained in place and, after only a momentary hesitation, Lady Prudence pulled it back to reveal what secrets it held.

A little surprised, Felix blinked rapidly as he saw nothing other than a plain wooden box. It had a clasp on one side but, aside from that, there was nothing ornamental or unusual about it.

"Oh," Lady Prudence murmured, looking at it. "It is a box."

Felix chuckled. "With something within, certainly."

Lady Prudence blushed. "I thought," she began, a little awkwardly. "That is, what I mean to say is that I had expected it to be a little more...ornate. That it might have some sort of wonderful decoration all over it, or that it in itself might be a clue as to why it was of such great importance."

A little ashamed that he had made her blush so, Felix tried to smile. "I did not mean to embarrass you, Lady Prudence," he said as she dropped her gaze back to the box. "I, too, am a little surprised." Glancing over his shoulder and relieved that Lady Devonshire was, as yet, nowhere to be seen, he turned back to Lady Prudence. "Might you wish to open it to see what is within? We may not have a great deal of time."

Lady Prudence nodded but said nothing. Turning the box toward her, she lifted up the clasp, which pushed itself back with a gentle click. Taking a hold of the lid with one hand and holding the bottom of the box with the other, she took a breath and then pushed it back.

Felix, who could not see what was within, could only guess from the utterly astonished expression that wrapped itself around Lady Prudence's features that whatever was contained within was of great significance. Her eyes were huge, her mouth a little ajar, and the color had drained from her cheeks in an instant.

"I—I do not understand," Lady Prudence breathed, setting the box down carefully on the small table that was between them. Turning it toward him, Felix was finally able to see what was within—and the sight of it took his breath from his body.

"Why should Lord Yardley have diamonds such as these?" Lady Prudence murmured as Felix reached out and gently touched the diamond earbobs that sat nestled in the middle of the box. "They are clearly not something that he himself would have possessed, for he would not have had need to hide them so."

"There is a diamond pendant here too," Felix murmured, picking it up and lifting it from the box. He eyed it carefully, a little worried that the diamonds were paste, only to come to the conclusion that they were genuine. Not only that, but they were rather large diamonds indeed, which meant that any lady wearing such jewelry as this would certainly be noticed. He could not imagine just how much such items would cost.

"Look!"

His eyes lifted from the diamond pendant to what Lady Prudence was pointing to. Watching as she pulled something small from the box, his eyes flared wide with surprise as she revealed to him a small, gold key. And on the very end of the key was a small crest.

"Whatever does this mean?" Lady Prudence breathed as Felix hastily put the pendant back in the box. "This is not Lord Yardley's crest, I am sure of it."

"May I?" Felix held out his hand to Lady Prudence and she gave him the key without hesitation, setting it gently in his hand. Felix held it a little more closely, looking hard at the crest and realizing, with a jolt, that he knew precisely whose crest this belonged to.

"I believe this is the Viscount Brunswick's crest," he murmured slowly. "Although I am not entirely certain."

Lady Prudence's eyes flared wide and she sat back in her chair. "Lord Brunswick?" she

repeated, as though she could not quite believe it. "I—I am acquainted with him."

"As am I," Felix replied, thinking silently that he had not taken much of a liking to the young man, finding him arrogant and rather conceited. "I could not say definitely, but I am sure that it is his crest." He hesitated, wondering if he ought to ask whether or not he might keep the key for a day or so, in order to make quite certain of it, but then chose not to do so. Lady Prudence had already trusted him with this, and he would not push her to do even more.

"Do you think you might be able to confirm this, Lord Stoneleigh?" Lady Prudence asked, holding her hand back out for the key, which he gave to her at once. "I—I am acquainted with him, as I say, but I do not think I would be easily able to discover such a thing."

"But of course," he said quickly. "I can certainly make sure of it by tomorrow evening's ball?"

She put the key back in the box and then closed the lid, covering it again with the blue cloth. "Thank you, Lord Stoneleigh," she answered, putting the ribbon back around the cloth again. "That would be very helpful indeed."

Felix watched her delicate fingers tie the ribbon neatly, remembering just how astonished he had been to see the diamonds nestled neatly in the box. "Do you have any thought as to why Lord Yardley would have these diamonds?" he asked, reaching for his glass of lemonade. "They are clearly worth a great deal."

Lady Prudence shook her head. "I cannot understand it," she said heavily, pushing the box pack into her pocket before sitting down. "I do not know why he had it in the first place, or why he gave it to me to hide. The key with the crest is the greatest mystery, for surely that means that the diamonds themselves belong to Lord Brunswick?"

It was a considered thought, Felix had to admit. "I would not like to say," he replied carefully. "It might appear that way, certainly, but I must admit to wondering what this key opens."

A small smile lit Lady Prudence's eyes. "I do not intend to make my way into Lord Brunswick's house and attempt to find the place for this particular key, Lord Stoneleigh, I must confess."

Felix laughed but did not immediately state that he would not do such a thing, for the truth was that, should it come to it, he was willing to do whatever was required.

"I suppose," Lady Prudence continued, her expression becoming more serious, "that we must first confirm that the seal is that of Lord Brunswick—although what I should do thereafter, I confess I cannot even imagine." Her eyes dimmed and her brows lowered over her eyes. "I feel as though I have a great burden of responsibility and very little thought as to what I ought to do to help Lord Yardley."

Surprised at the sudden urge within him to go to her, to kneel by her side and to take her hand in his so that he might comfort her, Felix satisfied his desire to do so by merely leaning forward in his chair and fixing her with a warm gaze.

"Lady Prudence," he said quietly. "You need not fear. We shall walk through this together. Once we have discovered whether or not it is truly the crest of Lord Brunswick, we might then start to seek a little more information about the gentleman himself. That

may, in turn, lead us to uncovering the mystery behind the diamonds." Finishing his lemonade and knowing that it was best for him to take his leave, he rose and bowed. "I shall speak to you again tomorrow evening, then?"

Lady Prudence, who had hastily risen to her feet also, bobbed a curtsy. "I look forward to it, Lord Stoneleigh."

"As do I," Felix found himself saying, rather astonished to realize, as he took his leave of her, that he truly meant every single word.



STRIDING INTO WHITE'S, Felix looked all around him and instantly found the gentleman he had been looking for. Lord Claverhouse was busy in conversation with another fellow, a brandy in his hand and, from the broad grin on his face, clearly having enjoyed an excellent evening thus far.

"And here you are," Lord Claverhouse said as Felix made his way forward. "The game is almost ready to begin now. We only wait for Lord Seaton and then we will be able to start."

"I am glad I was not late," Felix replied, sitting down in a chair next to Lord Claverhouse and greeting the other gentlemen with a nod. "I have had something of a busy afternoon, I confess."

Lord Claverhouse waggled his eyebrows as his eyes began to twinkle. "I have heard that you were walking in the park with a particular young lady," he said, loud enough for the other gentlemen to hear. "Perhaps it is that you have found a reason at last to stay in London?"

Felix closed his eyes for a moment and let out a pained sigh, giving Lord Claverhouse no doubt that he was frustrated with the conversation—but as he looked at his friend again, he realized that he was not going to be easily able to convince him to drop that particular topic of conversation.

"I took Lady Prudence and her mother, Lady Devonshire, for a short walk around Saint James's Park, that is all," he replied steadily. "There is nothing in it, Lord Claverhouse, I assure you."

The other gentlemen next to Lord Claverhouse exchanged glances with each other whilst Lord Claverhouse himself laughed in a rather uproarious manner, making Felix wince inwardly. Clearly, his friend had already had a little too much liquor, which meant that any attempt to quieten him would fail completely.

"And what other young ladies, pray tell, have you ever taken to Saint James's Park?" Lord Claverhouse asked, still chuckling away. "I have been your friend for some time and cannot think of a single occasion where you showed any interest in any young lady of your acquaintance."

"Be that as it may," Felix replied evenly, "there is nothing worthy of notice here, Lord Claverhouse." He lifted one shoulder in a half-shrug. "Lady Prudence is a very kind young lady, with a gentle manner—"

"And certainly very beautiful," interjected another gentleman. "In fact, she has shown

no preference to any advances from anyone thus far. I should consider yourself rather blessed, Lord Stoneleigh.”

A small, dark muttering came from the gentleman beside him, which made the first grin broadly.

“Lord Stutton has been one rejected in such a manner,” he said, by way of explanation. “But I am sure he is very pleased that you have managed to succeed where he has not.”

From the dark look on the gentleman’s face, Felix did not consider that to be true, but he merely shrugged and allowed himself to relax just a little. It was not worth trying to explain that he was only considering Lady Prudence because he enjoyed conversing with her—or whatever other excuse he could give—for Lord Claverhouse would merely laugh and shake his head and state that he had never seen Felix do such a thing before. This, in turn, would then lead to the suggestion that Felix was rather taken with the lady and if he were to continue to deny it whilst going on to spend further time in Lady Prudence’s company, then that would only complicate matters further.

Perhaps it was best just to allow them to think that he had intentions of courtship toward the lady. Nothing would come of it, of course, for he certainly did not think that he would ever truly be interested in marriage with Lady Prudence, surely?

Why ever not?

The thought made his brow furrow hard as Lord Claverhouse began to speak about something trivial to which Felix paid no attention. He had only known the lady for a few days and yet there was bound to be a relationship of a long duration between them, given what had been found in the box and what they would now have to do to discover the truth. What would happen once all was at an end? Would he be content to simply return to his estate, to leave Lady Prudence back in London and see her betrothed and wed to another?

“I think there is more going on in your heart as regards Lady Prudence than you wish to admit,” Lord Claverhouse said, although he leaned toward Felix as he said this and kept his voice low. “You do not wish to tell me, however.”

“I do not wish to speak of it to anyone,” Felix replied firmly. “Now, are we to play this game or not?”

Focusing his attention on the game at hand rather than on Lady Prudence, Felix forced himself to remove all thought of her from his mind. There was no need to consider such things at present. All he was doing was assisting her with what could be a rather dangerous situation, were Lady Prudence not careful. What came after that, he did not know and, at present, he had no need to know either.

One thing at a time, he told himself as the cards were dealt. You need only take one thing at a time.

"Good evening, Lady Prudence."

Prudence turned to greet whoever had spoken to her, her stomach twisting suddenly as she saw Lord Brunswick standing before her.

"Good evening, Lord Brunswick." She curtsied as best she could, forcing all anxiety from her limbs as she tried to smile. There was no need for her to feel any sort of nervousness, just because she had found a key with his crest on it in the box from Lord Yardley. To be so was nothing less than foolish.

"I do hope you will favor me with a dance," he said, an easy smile on his face. "Unless you have been inundated with gentlemen already?"

Forcing a laugh, Prudence took her dance card from her wrist and handed it to Lord Brunswick. "I am sure you will find a dance to suit you, Lord Brunswick," she said.

"I am certain I will," he replied with a broad smile, looking down at her dance card and then signing his name on not one but two dances. Normally, Prudence would not have minded such a thing, knowing Lord Brunswick was something of a flirt and liked to dance with as many young ladies as possible, even though he was already betrothed.

"I hope that will satisfy you, Lady Prudence," he told her, handing the dance card back with a flourish. "Two dances this evening."

"How very generous," she replied, already not looking forward to being his partner. "I should be honored to be so favored, I suppose."

Lord Brunswick laughed at her apparent levity and Prudence forced herself to smile.

"You jest, Lady Prudence, I know, but I appreciate your humor," he answered with a twinkle in his eye. "There are not many young ladies who would speak to me so."

Prudence did not know what to make of this but tilted her head and looked at him. "And your betrothed, I hope, does not mind that you dance twice with me this evening?" She did not know much about Lord Brunswick's betrothed, having never met the young lady given that she was not yet in London.

Lifting one eyebrow in silent challenge, Lord Brunswick's smile did not remain.

"My betrothed is not present this evening, Lady Prudence. In fact, she is not present even in London and thus, she cannot say whether or not she is pleased with my conduct."

"I am sorry she is not here with you," Prudence replied honestly. "Does the lady intend to come to London for the Season?" She kept her tone conversational, a little

surprised at his reaction to her first question.

"She does not," Lord Brunswick replied tersely. "There is no need. Our marriage will take place at the end of the Season and given that we are to be wed in her home parish, there is no requirement for her to attend London."

Still finding Lord Brunswick's manner to be a trifle odd, Prudence smiled in the hope that he would not think her either rude or deliberately antagonistic. "I think, Lord Brunswick that I do not even know your dear lady's name," she said, one hand pressed against her heart. "I am truly sorry, Lord Brunswick, I have been rude in never once asking you such a thing."

Lord Brunswick did not smile or immediately answer her. Instead, he simply studied her, his eyes hooded and a tightness about his mouth as though he was uncertain of her motives in asking such a thing.

"Lady Josephine, the daughter of Lord and Lady Haydock," came the mumbled reply. "I am not certain you will have—"

"The Earl of Haydock," Prudence said with her eyes widening, remembering the rumors that Lord Brunswick had made an excellent and very beneficial match indeed. "Yes, of course. I recall that he and his daughter were in London last Season, for that was also my very first Season also." The Earl of Haydock was, Prudence knew, very wealthy and his daughter certainly would bring with her an excellent dowry and income of her own. "From what I remember, she seemed to be a very gentle lady, with a warm smile for everyone."

This seemed to soften Lord Brunswick somewhat, for he smiled at her and nodded. "Indeed, you have described her very well," he said, his eyes then drifting to someone approaching from behind Prudence. "I should excuse myself now. There are others who seek your attention now, I think."

Prudence smiled and bid him farewell, thanking him for the dances and then, finally, turning to see none other than Lord Stoneleigh approaching. For whatever reason, her heart leapt furiously in her chest at the sight of him and her face warmed. Hoping desperately that he would put her appearance down to the heat of the ballroom, Prudence dropped into a quick curtsy and smiled at him as she rose.

"Good evening, Lord Stoneleigh."

"You were speaking to Lord Brunswick, I see," he said, without even greeting her. "He was being cordial to you, I hope?"

"He sought to dance with me," Prudence answered, surprised by the abruptness of his question. "I did speak to him about his betrothed, but he did not appear particularly eager to talk about her. Not until the end of the conversation, where I spoke well of her, did he finally relent from his less than favorable attitude toward me."

Lord Stoneleigh frowned. "That is very odd," he remarked quietly. "I wonder why a gentleman such as he would behave in such a fashion."

Prudence hesitated before giving voice to her thoughts. "I wonder if it has something to do with a sense of embarrassment due to her lack of willingness to attend the London Season—or perhaps she is being prevented from doing so by her father. I mentioned that I was a little surprised to hear that she was not present and he, thereafter, became a

little defensive about why she ought to remain at home."

This did not seem to satisfy Lord Stoneleigh for his frown only deepened and his jaw tightened in evident frustration.

"The diamonds and the key are, I think, connected to him," he told her, and Prudence's heart turned over in surprise. "I have made quite certain of it. The crest is that of Lord Brunswick's. There can be no doubt."

She caught her breath, one hand pressed against her heart. "Are you certain?"

His smile was bright, and she dropped her hand, finding herself smiling back at him.

"I am," he said, taking a small step closer. "I have spoken to not only one but three separate gentlemen—very carefully, of course—and they have all said the same thing." His smile spread. "They each described it exactly as we saw it and as I myself remember. I am quite certain that the key belongs to something owned by Lord Brunswick."

Her breath rattled out of her slowly as Prudence took in what this meant. Lord Stoneleigh moved closer to her and, to her surprise, reached out to briefly touch her hand.

"I think that whatever Lord Yardley had the item for, this key will open something in Lord Brunswick's home," he said quietly. "I am not suggesting that we search his home or any such thing, for I do not think we would achieve much and certainly would cause a great scandal, but we must consider what we are to do next."

"Could we not just ask him?" Prudence suggested, passing one hand over her eyes at the realization that she was in the dark when it came to what she was to do next, given the mystery and confusion that surrounded her on every side. "Surely that would be the easiest solution."

Lord Stoneleigh shook his head, his eyes holding what Prudence supposed was compassion.

"I can understand why you would think such a thing, Lady Prudence, but what if Lord Brunswick is involved in what occurred with Lord Yardley?" he asked gently. "I am not suggesting for one moment that I believe such a thing, but we must surely consider the possibility." He held Prudence's gaze as she found herself struggling with the idea, remembering with fresh horror what had happened to Lord Yardley. "This is precisely the reason that I sought to aid you in this, Lady Prudence. I want to do all I can to protect you, so that what happened to Lord Yardley does not even come close to you."

Closing her eyes, Prudence swallowed hard, realizing precisely what Lord Stoneleigh meant. She had been rather foolish in suggesting such a thing but had only done so because she could not think of anything else.

"Shall we dance mayhap, Lady Prudence?"

Lord Stoneleigh touched her hand and, in a moment, Prudence found herself in the middle of the ballroom with Lord Stoneleigh standing directly in front of her. It was not until the music began that she realized it was the waltz, which, thankfully, had not been promised to another. Lord Stoneleigh touched her hand, holding it in his own before his other hand settled on her waist.

A slight tremble caught her frame as she waited for the music to begin. It had all happened so quickly, before she had even realized what was occurring, and yet there was

something within her heart that was glad to be dancing with Lord Stoneleigh.

"You looked rather shocked and I did not want you to remain so," Lord Stoneleigh murmured as the music began and they started to waltz. "Besides which, I am afraid that your mother was watching us both and certainly would have expected this, given that we had been speaking for such a great length of time."

"There is no need to explain, Lord Stoneleigh, I am very well contented," she replied as they danced effortlessly together. "In truth, my mind is filled with questions that I fear do not, at present, have any sort of answer." Her breathing quickening, she looked up at him. "It was foolish to suggest speaking to Lord Brunswick. Thank you for your advice, Lord Stoneleigh."

The gentleman smiled at her and she was captured for a moment by the warmth that was swirling in his eyes. Evidently, he did not think her foolish in any way.

"You are still recovering from the shock, Lady Prudence, and will be for some time," he said as they continued to spin around the room. "I am very glad indeed to be of assistance. Although I will confess that I am a little uncertain myself as to what we should do next."

Prudence tried to smile. "Perhaps it will become clear in the next few days," she suggested. "But for the moment, at least, we must continue on as we are. Considering, pondering, and studying what choices lie before us."

"You must be careful," he said, his fingers clasping hers a little more tightly. "I cannot imagine what—"

"I am sure nothing untoward will occur," Prudence interrupted. "Nothing has happened thus far, and I am sure that no one is even aware that Lord Yardley gave me the box."

This did not seem to convince Lord Stoneleigh, for his slight frown and searching gaze spoke of ongoing concern. However, there was no further opportunity for talking, for the dance came to an end and they were forced to separate.

"I think I shall take my leave, Lady Prudence—at least, for the time being," Lord Stoneleigh said as he bowed. "I shall look forward to being in your company once more very soon." His lips quirked. "Especially given that I have now an invitation to join you all for dinner in two days' time."

Prudence laughed, glad that, for the moment, the tension between them was gone. "I will be glad to see you again," she said truthfully. "And perhaps, by then, we might have come up with an idea for what to do next."

Lord Stoneleigh gave her a somewhat rueful smile. "Let us hope so, Lady Prudence," he answered quietly. "But for the moment, good evening."

She smiled. "Good evening, Lord Stoneleigh."



"DID I see you dancing with Lord Stoneleigh, Lady Prudence?"

Prudence looked up in surprise at Lord Brunswick. "Indeed I was," she answered, a little taken aback that he had asked her such a thing. "But then again, I have also danced with four other gentlemen since, including yourself." She laughed teasingly. "Should you

like me to name the other gentlemen also?"

Thankfully, Lord Brunswick laughed. "Indeed not. The reason I mention Lord Stoneleigh is because I had heard he was leaving London." He arched one eyebrow at Prudence. "It seems now that he has decided to stay, although why he might make such a decision, I cannot say. Perhaps it was because he has found some excellent company—company that might walk with him in the park?"

The lift of his brow and the knowing look in his eye told Prudence that Lord Brunswick knew precisely what he was inferring. She did not want to deny it, for to do so might make Lord Brunswick suspicious as to why she and Lord Stoneleigh had been seen so often together. Heat climbed up her spine as she looked at Lord Brunswick, seeing the curiosity on his face. It was clear that news of her walk with Lord Stoneleigh had made its way around society already.

"Lord Stoneleigh accompanied me for a short walk in the park, Lord Brunswick, that is all," she said, as primly as she could. "Although I do not understand why it is of such an interest to so many."

A chuckle from Lord Brunswick caught her attention. "That is because, my dear Lady Prudence, Lord Stoneleigh has never once shown any interest in any lady within society before. In fact, he is known to be very choosy indeed." A smile played about his mouth. "It seems you have caught a gentleman whom no one else could."

"I would not go so far as that," Prudence replied with a laugh. "Although I will confess to being a little flattered."

"It certainly seems to have removed you from your sorrows," Lord Brunswick replied, his eyes searching hers again as his smile disappeared. "You were greatly upset by the death of Lord Yardley, from what I recall."

The name of Lord Yardley on Lord Brunswick's lips sent a shudder through Prudence's heart. "Yes, that is so," she answered truthfully, surprised that he had changed the conversation toward Lord Yardley in such a fashion. "I am recovering, certainly, but the shock will take a little more time to dissipate."

"You were present at the time, were you not?" Lord Brunswick asked, reaching out to take a glass of champagne from a footman and handing the glass to Prudence. "I know that you were well acquainted through the marriage of your cousin. Was Lord Yardley accompanying you somewhere at the time?"

"No, not at all," Prudence answered honestly, although her heart was beginning to quicken with fright as she wondered why Lord Brunswick was asking her such questions. "I was about to take the carriage with my mother when I saw Lord Yardley cross from one side of the street to the other." Her throat constricted as the scene unfolded in her mind all over again. "It was truly terrible."

Lord Brunswick nodded and reached out to press Prudence's arm gently. "To have not only seen what occurred, but to also recognized the gentleman in question must have been very difficult indeed."

She nodded. "It has been a very trying few days, Lord Brunswick. My mother has been encouraging me back into society, however, and that has helped somewhat."

"A terrible accident," Lord Brunswick murmured, shaking his head. "And he was merely

making his way from one side of the street to the other."

"I only wish I had been given the opportunity to speak to him beforehand, to call out to warn him," Prudence lied, knowing full well that she had spoken at length with Lord Yardley but wanting to ensure that Lord Brunswick did not think such a thing had occurred. There was something about his questions that was making her uncomfortable and she felt herself growing rather tense in his presence. "I thought very highly of Lord Yardley, you understand. I did not know him particularly well, but what I did know of him spoke of his excellent character."

Lord Brunswick shook his head again as a heavy sigh was pulled from him. It was in stark contrast to the joviality and laughter that echoed all around them at present and Prudence had to confess that she could not be certain that Lord Brunswick's evident sorrow was truly genuine.

"I must hope that you will recover entirely very soon," Lord Brunswick said kindly. "Good evening, Lady Prudence. I look forward to our second dance later this evening."

"As do I," Prudence lied, smiling at him as he took his leave. The moment he stepped away, Prudence felt herself relax, realizing that her hands were curled tightly into fists and that her breathing was rather rapid. Her eyes followed Lord Brunswick as he made his way across the room, only for her stomach to tighten with anxiety again as she saw him incline his head to none other than her own father. What was it that he wanted to speak to her father about? Was it that he merely wanted to confirm what she herself had told him about Lord Yardley?"

"Lord Brunswick is a very good sort of gentleman, I think."

Prudence closed her eyes momentarily and then turned her head to look at her mother.

"I did not want to interrupt your conversation, although, of course, I stood nearby," Lady Devonshire continued with a small sigh. "What a shame it is that he is already engaged."

"Even if he were not, I should not have any interest in him, Mama," Prudence replied firmly. "You must not allow yourself to think on things that can never be." Forcing a smile to her lips, she turned a little further toward her mother. "I am very contented as I am."

Lady Devonshire drew in a long breath and then smiled, nodding her head gently. "But how could you not be when you have the interest of Lord Stoneleigh?" she said, her eyes twinkling. "I am very eager to speak to him during our dinner party. I think he is wonderful, Prudence."

Prudence pressed her lips together for a moment, wishing she could find something to say that would deny what her mother had just stated, but finding that she could not. To say that she did not think Lord Stoneleigh to be an excellent sort of gentleman would be nothing short of a lie, and yet to tell the truth would only make her mother's hope grow all the more.

"Prudence?"

She let out a slow breath. "Yes, Mama," she admitted, albeit reluctantly. "I believe that Lord Stoneleigh is just as you describe." Her eyes met those of Lady Devonshire's and she could not help but smile softly. "Wonderful in every way."

Felix laughed heartily as Lord Marchington finished the end of his story which involved a very foolish endeavor by his brother and what Lord Marchington himself had been required to do in order to pull his brother from it.

The dinner party had been going very well indeed. As he had arrived at the house, he had feared that he would be the only guest that evening. Thankfully, however, as he had walked into the drawing room, he had been very glad to find that he was not the only guest and that there were, in fact, eight other guests, which brought the total to twelve. He had not, however, managed to speak at length to Lady Prudence as yet, which was a little frustrating, for he had been eager to do so. Lady Prudence had been in a good many conversations with other guests and although seated not too far from him, was still too distant from him to lean across and speak to in private.

"That does mean that you had to be very generous, does it not?" a gentleman asked, addressing Lord Marchington. "I do not think that I would have so easily given so much coin to someone so foolish—even if it were my brother."

Felix frowned, looking a little further down the table to see who was speaking, only to realize that it was none other than Lord Brunswick. He had been somewhat displeased to see the gentleman at first, wondering why he had been invited, but had then come to the conclusion that it might suit them very well to have him present, for mayhap either himself or Lady Prudence would be able to discover something more about the gentleman that could give them a clue as to the diamonds and the key. It was a faint hope, however, but one that brought a little levity to Felix's attitude toward Lord Brunswick's presence.

"I cannot help my generous heart," Lord Marchington said with one hand against his heart. "It is my greatest foible."

"And not a foible at that," Lady Devonshire answered, making the other guests smile. "Now, ladies, shall we adjourn to the drawing room and leave the gentlemen to their port?" She rose and the other ladies followed immediately, gathering their skirts gently and moving back behind the gentlemen before turning to quit the room. Felix could not help but attempt to catch Lady Prudence's eye, but unfortunately, her gaze was fixed to the lady in front of her and she did not even glance in his direction.

A trifle disappointed, Felix cleared his throat and shifted a little in his chair, praying

that none of the other gentlemen had noticed his actions. There was, he had to confess, an eagerness to be in Lady Prudence's presence again. It seemed to gnaw gently at him, an ache deep within himself that would only disappear when he finally had an opportunity to speak to her.

Resisting the urge to shake his head to himself in order to dislodge such thoughts, Felix picked up his glass of port and took a large sip, thinking that the liquor might remove such feelings from within him. He was eager to help Lady Prudence and nothing more. This was, he reminded himself, nothing more than a practical acquaintance, one that was solely for this particularly difficult matter. There was no need to have any particular affection for her within his heart and Felix silently determined not to allow such things to grow for surely that might, in fact, cloud his judgment as he fought to solve this mystery.

"And when are you to be wed, Lord Brunswick?"

Felix lifted his head and looked at Lord Brunswick, wondering what his response would be to such a question. Everyone in society seemed to know that Lord Brunswick was betrothed but there was no particular knowledge about when the wedding would take place.

"Oh, not for some time," Lord Brunswick replied, waving one hand as he slumped back in his chair. "My betrothed is very particular and must have enough time to make all the arrangements."

"What is her name, might I ask?" Lord Devonshire asked, sounding mildly interested. "I confess I am entirely unaware of such things."

Lord Brunswick took on a bored expression. "She is the daughter of Lord and Lady Haydock," he said, without giving the lady's name directly. "She was present last Season, Lord Devonshire. Your daughter is acquainted with her, I believe."

Lord Devonshire looked a little surprised. "I see," he said, picking up his glass of port. "Then might I wish you happy when the time comes, Lord Brunswick."

Saying nothing, Lord Brunswick held up his glass of port in silent thanks, and for a short time thereafter, the conversation merged into other, less interesting topics. Felix allowed himself to be drawn into a discussion about the merits of one particular way of farming the fields at one's estate, but the entire time, he was considering what Lord Brunswick had said. He appeared to be less than eager about his upcoming marriage, which Felix had to admit was not at all unusual. There were a good number of gentlemen who chose a wife based on their own particular requirements as well as the lady's own status. Her character was of very little interest, it seemed. That was not what Felix wished for, however. If he was to choose someone to wed, then he was certain that a lady's character would be very important indeed.

"Perhaps we should join the ladies," Lord Devonshire said presently, before drinking the last of his port. "There is also excellent brandy there, which perhaps will be something of an enticement for some of you present."

There were chuckles at this and the gentlemen rose from the table as one. Some were a little worse for wear already, although Felix himself was determined to keep his head this evening and not imbibe too much. Making his way from the room and following

Lord Devonshire, he was suddenly caught by a commotion coming from behind him.

"What in heaven's name—?"

His words were stopped by the sight of Lord Nethergate falling backwards, collapsing into Lord Brunswick who also fell backwards and hit his head hard against the wall.

"Goodness!" Lord Devonshire exclaimed, pushing his way past Felix to make his way to the gentlemen. One or two footmen hurried to help the two gentlemen also, leaving Felix and the remaining guests to wonder whether or not they should remain or, in fact, go to help the fallen gentlemen.

"Please, continue to the drawing room," Lord Devonshire said, his voice carrying up the hallway toward them. "We shall join you soon."

A little shocked by what had occurred, it took a moment for Felix to make his way to the drawing room. He had no real understanding of what had happened, but he was fairly certain that it came from Lord Nethergate drinking a little too much over the course of the evening.

"Ah, you have all come to join us at last," Lady Devonshire declared, welcoming them all in. "Come, please."

Quickly, Felix moved forward and found a seat very close to Lady Prudence. She glanced at him and allowed herself a small smile in his direction which, for whatever reason, cheered Felix heartily. Perhaps with all the other conversation, the music, and the laughter that would soon rise up within the drawing room, he might be able to speak openly to Lady Prudence at some point soon.

Lord Devonshire appeared only a few minutes later, looking contented and not giving any indication of what had occurred only a few minutes before. Lord Brunswick and Lord Nethergate did not follow, however, leaving Felix to wonder if either gentleman had injured themselves when they fell back.

"Brandy, Lord Stoneleigh?"

Within a few minutes, everyone was settled, and the conversation began to grow steadily. Felix allowed it to wash over him for a few minutes, not turning to speak directly to Lady Prudence for fear of garnering too much attention. He did not want to make himself too obvious about his attentions, even though he was certain that, by now, everyone in the room would be much too distracted by their own conversations to notice his.

"Lord Stoneleigh?"

Lady Prudence's soft voice met his ears and he turned to her with a warm smile.

"I do hope you are enjoying this evening," she said, although her eyes were a trifle anxious. "I believe that we are to have some music very soon."

"It has been an excellent evening thus far," he told her, slightly surprised when it did not pull the worry from her expression. "I have enjoyed myself very much indeed."

Lady Prudence nodded, her gaze flickering across the others in the room as if to ensure that none of them would overhear her.

"I—I must tell you something, Lord Stoneleigh," she said, her voice quieter than before. "When we were at the ball, Lord Brunswick had cause to come and speak to me at length." She hesitated, biting her lip for a moment. "He spoke to me about Lord

Yardley."

Immediately, everything within Felix grew steady and watchful, all joviality gone from him. "He did?"

Lady Prudence nodded. "There were a few questions about the time of Lord Yardley's supposed accident, and whether or not he had been with me beforehand. Of course, I did not tell Lord Brunswick the truth, but I had the impression thereafter that he was not entirely certain that I had told him everything. I watched as he made his way directly toward my father." Again, she hesitated and Felix felt an increasing sense of foreboding rising up within him. "They spoke of Lord Yardley also, it seems, for I asked my father later what it was they had discussed." She leaned toward him a little more, keeping her voice low. "He was not meant to be at this dinner party at the first, Lord Stoneleigh. Whatever Lord Brunswick said somehow convinced my father to invite him this evening."

"I see," Felix murmured, his brow furrowing as he took in Lady Prudence's countenance and feeling the same sense of alarm within him that was written into her expression. "Might I ask if you know precisely what your father said of Lord Yardley?"

Lady Prudence closed her eyes for a moment, evidently frustrated. "No, he did not speak to me of the specifics, I am afraid," she said, opening her eyes to look at him again. "I think he found my questions rather odd, but he did state that he had told Lord Brunswick that, whilst he was certain that Lord Yardley had not called upon my mother and me that day, he had enjoyed a very pleasant evening with Lord Yardley the night before, when he had come to dinner." Swallowing hard, Lady Prudence shook her head, her voice all the quieter now. "That was something I had neglected to tell Lord Brunswick myself, although I do not know why I feel so anxious that he should know of it now."

A frown darkened Felix's brow. "Because there is no need for Lord Brunswick to seek out such information from both yourself and your father. It does make it sound as though he was not entirely sure that you did speak the truth, Lady Prudence, although why he should then go to Lord Devonshire and ask the very same questions, I cannot imagine."

"Where is Lord Brunswick?" Lady Prudence asked, sitting up straighter as she looked around the room. "Did he not come in with you and the other guests?"

Shaking his head, Felix shrugged. "Lord Nethergate had imbibed a little too much and fell backwards as he made his way to the drawing room—although quite how that occurred, I cannot say," he began, by way of explanation. "He fell directly into Lord Brunswick, who must have been behind him. It appeared that Lord Brunswick hit his head rather badly. I am sure that he..." Trailing off, Felix felt something hard kick inside his stomach as a feeling of dread began to wash over him. His eyes met those of Lady Prudence, who stared back at him with wide eyes. He had the impression that she, too, had suddenly had the very same thought as he.

"I am sure that he is merely with a footman," Lady Prudence said slowly, although her tone lacked conviction. "That he is being cared for, alongside Lord Nethergate."

"I should go in search of him," Felix muttered as Lady Prudence's eyes held his, her sudden anxiety flooding into her features. Her lips were pressed tightly together, the color had gone from her cheeks, and even her vivid green eyes seemed a little dulled. "I do not know your father's house particularly well, but if anyone should question me, I can

say that I have merely become lost while going in search of a private room."

A slight flush caught Lady Prudence's cheeks, but she nodded. "I could not make the same excuse," she murmured, giving a slight shake of her head as she struggled to think of another reason to quit the drawing room. "I could then go with you as we search—although it may be that Lord Brunswick is merely sitting quietly with a very painful head, whilst perhaps his carriage has been called. I—"

She did not manage to finish speaking for, as Lord Sayers made his way from one side of the room to the other, he suddenly stumbled—yet another casualty of too much good port followed by excellent brandy. Throwing his hands out to make certain that he did not fall directly forward into anyone, the brandy in his glass flew out of its confines and splashed untidily on the floor and, unfortunately, onto Lady Prudence's skirts.

Felix heard her swift intake of breath as one or two other gentlemen immediately rose to their feet to ensure that Lord Sayers was not about to fall forward into Lady Prudence's lap. Looking down at her splashed skirts, he saw the color rising quickly into Lady Prudence's cheeks—only for her to pause and remain still for just a few moments, before turning her head and throwing him a quick glance.

Understanding matters at once, Felix got to his feet and pretended to brush some liquid from himself.

"If you will excuse me, Lady Devonshire, I must go in search of a little aid for my boots," he said quietly, a hubbub beginning to grow around him as everyone saw the state of Lady Prudence's gown. "Pray, do not trouble yourself to ring the bell. I shall find a footman out in the hallway and ensure that all is taken care of."

Lady Devonshire's cheeks had turned a flaming red and she looked greatly embarrassed.

"I am so very sorry, Lord Stoneleigh," she said, as she, too, got to her feet to go to the aid of her daughter. "I do hope you are not too upset."

Felix smiled. "Not in the least," he said, knowing that with the commotion behind him, he would not garner any sort of attention from the rest of the guests as he slipped out the door. In fact, they most likely would not notice if he was away for a good length of time, for they would all begin to speak of Lord Sayers' poor behavior and perhaps might even have the young ladies play and sing for them, as a distraction from what had just occurred.

Making his way back along the hallway in the direction he had come and fully expecting to see Lord Nethergate and Lord Brunswick at any moment, he was rather surprised to see the dining room quiet and empty. Frowning, he closed the door again and stood for a moment, wondering where they might have gone. Had they been taken somewhere in order for the staff to take better care of their injuries?

The sound of another door closing caught his ears and he turned his head to listen, before striding along the hallway a little further still. Seeing a footman standing outside another door, he immediately made his way toward the fellow.

"How does Lord Nethergate fare?" he asked as the footman snapped to attention. "Are both gentlemen within?"

The footman frowned for a moment, then gestured to the door. "Please, enter if you

wish, my lord," he said, without giving any real explanation as to why he had not answered the question. "I am sorry for any difficulties this might have caused you this evening."

Felix waved the remark away and, as the footman opened the door for him, stepped inside.

Lord Nethergate was lying on a chaise longue in the small parlor, his eyes closed and his hands resting loosely across his chest. He did not open his eyes as Felix walked into the room and it took Felix a moment or two to realize that the man had fallen asleep.

He shook his head. Evidently, Lord Nethergate was not as injured as he had feared.

"Nethergate," he said loudly, striding forward and reaching down to shake the man's shoulder, hard. "Whatever are you doing?" He looked over his shoulder, fully expecting to see Lord Brunswick somewhere but discovering, to his surprise and dismay, that the man was not present. "Nethergate!"

The man groaned and finally opened his eyes. It took a few moments for him to realize who was looking at him, and another few to realize where he was, but after a short while, he cleared his throat and immediately sat up, his brows knotting together.

"You are tired, it seems," Felix said without mirth. "Where is Lord Brunswick?"

"Brunswick?" Lord Nethergate repeated slowly. "I—I do not know. They put me in here until my head stopped thundering like a thousand horses, and I must have fallen asleep." His speech was no longer slurred, his voice a good deal steadier than before. "Whatever was it that pulled me back in such a fashion?"

Blinking rapidly, Felix stared at the man. "What do you mean, pulled you back?"

"That was how I fell," Lord Nethergate replied, rubbing the back of his head. "Most painful, I can assure you—and now I have embarrassed myself still further by falling asleep." Shame washed over him as he buried his head in his hands, a groan escaping his lips.

"I will say nothing of it," Felix promised, his heart suddenly quickening as he realized that Lord Nethergate had not stumbled but rather had been pulled backwards to knock into Lord Brunswick, who had then fallen also. Had Lord Brunswick done so deliberately? And for what cause? "I think that you should return to the other guests, however. Lord Devonshire will want to make certain that you are fully recovered."

Lord Nethergate groaned again but Felix did not linger. He had no time to reassure the fellow for he knew now that he needed desperately to find Lord Brunswick. Excusing himself hastily, he left the door ajar and told the footman to help Lord Nethergate find his way back to the drawing room. With quickened steps, Felix started to his way back—only to stumble almost directly into Lady Prudence.

"Lord Brunswick?" she asked, one hand reaching out to grasp his, her eyes wide as they searched his face. "Did you find him?"

Felix shook his head, worry beginning to climb up inside his chest. "He is not in the parlor with Lord Nethergate. In addition, I believe that Lord Brunswick ensured that the supposed accident was deliberate—although for what reason, I cannot imagine."

Lady Prudence went sheet-white. "The box," she said, her fingers tightening on his. "What if he is searching for the box? That is why he spoke to my father about Lord

Yardley visiting us and why he was so eager to know whether or not I had spoken to the gentleman before he was killed." Closing her eyes tightly for a moment, she swayed suddenly and Felix feared he would have to catch her. However, her eyes opened, and she drew in a long breath, steadying herself somewhat. "He must be within the house, taking the opportunity to look for what he believes to be his."

Felix nodded tersely, his hand still holding hers. "Then we must go and look for him," he told her. "Come, Lady Prudence. There is no time to waste."

Alarm rose in Prudence's heart as she hurried ahead of Lord Stoneleigh. Ever since she had spoken to her father and he had reluctantly told her what Lord Brunswick had asked of him, she had felt ill at ease. To know that her father had told Lord Brunswick that Lord Yardley had not only been at their house but had enjoyed an evening with the family had struck a heavy warning within her heart, as though she somehow knew that Lord Brunswick's questions were not merely those of an interested party.

Her heart hammered as they approached her father's study. They did not have long. She would have to make her way to her bedchamber to change her gown, since it was so very badly stained, and Lord Stoneleigh would have to return to the drawing room well in advance of her. She could not risk being seen with Lord Stoneleigh by any of the other guests and certainly needed to make sure her father's staff did not see her either. They would spread whispers throughout the townhouse which would, invariably, make their way out to all of London until all of society had knowledge of it.

"Wait a moment."

Lord Stoneleigh held himself back as Prudence rounded the corner, ensuring that there were no footmen near to her father's study. The hallway was still lit with a few candles, giving her plenty of light to see by, but there was no sign of any of the servants.

"Come."

Her whispered word brought Lord Stoneleigh forth and together, they made their way to the study door. Lord Stoneleigh stepped ahead of her, grasping the door handle and turning it, pushing the door as he did so—but the door did not move an inch. He turned to her.

"Locked."

Prudence thought for a moment. "Mayhap Lord Brunswick has returned to the drawing room?" she suggested. "In trying my father's study and discovering it barred, he would have had no other choice but to make his way back to the other guests." She frowned, her thoughts smudging into each other. "Unless he has gone to search in other rooms."

"Which ones?" Lord Stoneleigh asked, his eyes searching hers. "The library, mayhap?"

Hesitating, Prudence shrugged. "I suppose wherever he might think that such an item could be hidden," she said slowly, only for a terrible thought to enter her head. With a gasp, she pressed one hand to her heart whilst the other reached out to press heavily

against the wall.

Lord Stoneleigh was by her side in an instant, one hand on her waist as she lifted her hand from the wall and set it on his shoulder, using him to steady herself.

"My bedchamber," she whispered, horrified at the idea and yet fully aware that this might well be something that Lord Brunswick would consider, depending on how desperate he was to find the box. "Do you think that he could be...?" She could not finish her sentence for a coldness swept over her that left her feeling weak. Her bedchamber was her own private sanctuary, her place of refuge. To think that a gentleman had made his way into her room in order to go through her things made her feel sick to her stomach.

Lord Stoneleigh drew in a long breath but did not immediately disagree with her. Instead, he began to nod slowly, perhaps satisfying himself that her suggestion was, in fact, a wise one.

"I am meant to be going to change," Prudence said hoarsely, aware of the strength that was coming from Lord Stoneleigh as he held her. "What if he is—"

"If you will permit me," Lord Stoneleigh interrupted, "I will accompany you. But only to see if the danger has passed, Lady Prudence. If there is no sign of him, then I shall leave you at once."

Prudence shut her eyes. The thought of having a gentleman step into her bedchamber was both embarrassing and worrying, but she knew that she could not go into it alone, not if Lord Brunswick was going to be present.

"I shall not do anything other than ensure you are safe, Lady Prudence," Lord Stoneleigh said gently, as though he knew the worries that were now flowing through her mind. "I shall not linger; I swear it to you."

Prudence nodded and turned on her heel, still feeling a little wary and uncertain, but determined to do whatever was required.

"Might I ask if the box is kept in your bedchamber, Lady Prudence?" Lord Stoneleigh murmured as they quietly made their way toward Prudence's bedchamber, which was up the large staircase and toward the back of the house. "Is there any chance that Lord Brunswick will be able to discover it?"

To this point, Prudence was glad to be able to answer in the negative. "I have hidden it away very securely, Lord Stoneleigh," she told him, glancing back at him. "It is not in my bedchamber, no. Neither is it in my father's study or in the library."

She was glad when Lord Stoneleigh did not demand to know where the box had been placed, seeing only the relief on his face as she reassured him all was well. There was a trust in her heart when it came to Lord Stoneleigh, she realized, taking great care as she climbed the staircase for fear of being seen by someone.

"I will have to change and then quickly return," she whispered, making very little sound as she made her way toward her bedchamber. "My mother will notice if I am tardy."

Lord Stoneleigh nodded. "Once I am certain that Lord Brunswick is not within, I shall return at once," he said quietly. "There will be a good deal of time between our arrivals, Lady Prudence. You need not fear."

Indicating her bedchamber door, Prudence held back. "Do you think we should wait?" she asked, keeping her voice low for fear that Lord Brunswick, should he be within, would hear her. "What if he comes out unexpectedly?"

Lord Stoneleigh shook his head. "Surprise might be our only advantage. If you will permit me, might I go in ahead of you to look?" he asked softly. "I can assure you I will only stand at the threshold."

She nodded, anxiety tightening around her heart as she watched Lord Stoneleigh step forward. He hesitated for a moment, then opened the door swiftly, pushing it back but not allowing it to bang hard against the wall behind. Prudence pressed her hands together and rested her fingers against her lips as she waited for him to speak, suddenly afraid that she would hear a loud exclamation from within.

Instead, Lord Stoneleigh backed out of the room and relief flooded her as he turned toward her, shaking his head. But when she held his gaze, she was rather troubled to see that his brow was furrowed, his eyes dark and his jaw set.

"Might you take a look within?" he asked quietly. "I would not like to state unequivocally, but I fear that there has been someone within."

Prudence stepped forward, swallowing hard as she looked at her bedchamber. It was certainly not as she had left it.

"Someone has been here," she whispered, seeing drawers left open and some items knocked from their place. "They have been here searching for something."

Lord Stoneleigh let out what sounded like a small growl.

"I will return to the drawing room at once," he said, rather angrily. "Lord Brunswick will, no doubt, be within but if he is not, then I must find him at once." His hand touched her arm and she started violently, her skin clammy with the shock of what she had discovered.

"Will you be all right?" Lord Stoneleigh asked, no anger in his voice now but rather a gentleness that reached out and sent a little warmth over her chilled skin. "I know this is something of a shock, but I—"

"I will be quite all right," she answered, giving herself a small shake as she tried to regain some of her composure. "I am a little astonished, certainly, but I must continue to behave as is expected of me." She swallowed hard but lifted her chin and tried to smile. "I am sure that, already, my mother will be wondering what has become of me."

Lord Stoneleigh held her gaze for another moment before nodding and stepping back out into the hallway. "We must speak again soon," he said quietly. "Might you be able to accept a call from me tomorrow?"

Trying to recall all that she had planned for the following day, Prudence nodded. "Certainly," she said softly. "Although my mother may remain."

"I will find a way to have a few minutes of conversation," he told her. "Now, I must hurry."

She nodded, her throat constricting as she saw him walk away. With slow steps, she went to close the door and, soon after, rang the bell for her maid. Turning back to look at her bedchamber, Prudence felt her skin crawl at the realization that a gentleman had been present without her permission, searching through all her things, all her personal

and private items. There was very little doubt in her mind that it was Lord Brunswick who had done so, for everything that had occurred thus far seemed to point to one person and one person only.

"Yes, my lady?"

Prudence turned quickly and looked at her maid, who was taking in Prudence's stained gown.

"Yes, I must change," Prudence said hurriedly, gesturing to her gown. "And these stains must be washed out at once."

The maid nodded, stepping forward but then stopping again, her eyes roving around the untidy room.

"Quickly, if you please," Prudence commanded, not wanting to come up with an excuse as to why her room was now this way, and knowing her mother would begin to wonder where she was. "I must get back to the guests."

The maid bobbed a quick curtsy and then hurried to Prudence's wardrobe, clearly deciding—wisely so—to keep any comment about the state of the room to herself. Within a few minutes, Prudence was changed and prepared to return to her guests. Casting a final glance behind her at her bedchamber and seeing the maid already beginning to tidy things away, Prudence drew in a deep breath and set her shoulders. She was going to have to return to the drawing room and behave just as normal. Lord Brunswick would not have known that she would return quickly to her room to change and perhaps might react to her changed gown, but she was certain that Lord Stoneleigh would be watching him closely. She herself had to give no indication that she had any suspicion about Lord Brunswick, ensuring that she appeared contented and happy throughout the rest of the evening.

Lifting her chin, Prudence left her bedchamber and descended the staircase before making her way back toward the drawing room. Hearing the laughter and the conversation did nothing to ease her anxiety, but she forced a smile to her lips as she entered the room, seeing how her mother's eyes sought hers almost the moment she stepped inside.

"You are a little tardy, Prudence," Lady Devonshire murmured, coming across to greet her daughter. "Whatever took you so long?"

Prudence sighed and shook her head. "My curls began to unpin as I was changing my gown, Mama," she said, frustrated that she had to lie but knowing that it was the only thing she could do. "My maid has restored my appearance, however, and all is well."

This seemed to satisfy Lady Devonshire, for she smiled and gestured for Prudence to sit down.

"Now that we are all together again," Lady Devonshire said, her voice carrying over the other conversations and bringing them to an end, "perhaps we might have a little music?" She looked pointedly at Prudence but Prudence, feeling much too on edge to play for the group, kept her face turned away from her mother's and did nothing to acknowledge the look.

"I should be glad to play, if no one else wishes to do so first," piped up Lady Sarah, who was, by reputation, known to be very accomplished at the pianoforte.

"I would be very glad to hear you," Lady Devonshire replied with a quick smile as murmurs of agreement came from a few others. "Thank you, Lady Sarah."

Prudence let out her breath slowly as she waited for Lady Sarah to begin to play. With all eyes turned toward the lady at the piano, she allowed her gaze to rove around the room, seeing how Lord Brunswick sat near to her father, an easy smile on his face as he listened to Lady Sarah's performance. Her stomach tightened as she caught sight of Lord Stoneleigh, who was watching Lord Brunswick closely, his eyes narrowed. Her nerves began to swirl once more but she forced them to settle, placing her hands in her lap and turning her attention fully toward Lady Sarah. The music seemed to steal away some of her worry and she rested back in her chair, feeling suddenly quite exhausted. This had been a very trying evening indeed.



"GOOD AFTERNOON, LORD STONELEIGH."

Prudence rose to her feet at once as her mother greeted the gentleman. Quickly, she dropped into a curtsy and then looked up to see Lord Stoneleigh studying her with dark, watchful eyes.

"Good afternoon," he said in a rather grave voice. "Thank you for allowing me to call."

"Oh, but of course," Lady Devonshire said with a smile. "You are always welcome, Lord Stoneleigh." Pointing to a seat near Prudence, she smiled brightly at him. "Perhaps you would care to sit."

An idea quickly came to Prudence and she stepped forward. "Although I do recall how taken you were with the seats out in the garden," she interrupted, aware of the astonishment in her mother's eyes. "Perhaps we might adjourn there for a short time?"

Lord Stoneleigh smiled and some of the darkness seemed to be pulled from his hazel eyes. "You are kind to recall such a thing, Lady Prudence," he told her. "But only if that would not be too much trouble. I would very much like to return to the gardens. They are very lovely indeed, Lady Devonshire."

This seemed to please Lady Devonshire greatly, for she nodded eagerly and quickly rose again. "My daughter will take you, of course," she said with a broad smile. "I must fetch a parasol for I feel it is very warm today."

"But of course." Lord Stoneleigh inclined his head and then looked expectantly toward Prudence. "I thank you, Lady Devonshire—and you, Lady Prudence, for your very kind suggestion."

"Certainly," Prudence murmured, hoping that her eagerness to speak with Lord Stoneleigh was not too apparent to her mother. "You will join us soon, Mama?"

Lady Devonshire frowned at her daughter from behind Lord Stoneleigh's back and made an impatient gesture with her hand. "But of course," she said quickly. "I will not be a moment."

Prudence did not say a single word to Lord Stoneleigh as they made their way through the house and then out to the gardens. The staff had clearly been quickly informed that trays of refreshments were to be taken to the gardens for no sooner had Prudence sat

down than trays were laid out for them both. Lord Stoneleigh sat down opposite her and smiled, although there was a touch of concern in his gaze.

"How do you fare today, Lady Prudence?"

She smiled back at him. "I am glad to have you here, Lord Stoneleigh," she answered honestly. "After last evening, there is a good deal we must discuss, I think."

Lord Stoneleigh's smile was rueful. "I think there can be little doubt that it was Lord Brunswick, Lady Prudence," he told her. "When I returned to the drawing room, Lord Stephenson mentioned to me that I had only just come a few short minutes after Lord Brunswick." One shoulder lifted. "Of course, the explanation was that he was recovering from his fall, although I cannot believe that to be true given that I saw Lord Nethergate in that room but not Lord Brunswick."

"And Lord Nethergate was so dazed, he would not have known whether or not Lord Brunswick was meant to be present in the room with him," Prudence added as Lord Stoneleigh nodded again. "Then we conclude that Lord Brunswick is seeking the box?"

Lord Stoneleigh hesitated and then nodded. "I must believe so," he told her. "I think that the way he has gone about such a thing speaks of a desperation that concerns me."

A stone dropped into Prudence's stomach. "It concerns you?"

"It does indeed," Lord Stoneleigh replied gravely. "Could not Lord Brunswick have simply asked you whether or not Lord Yardley had given you something for safekeeping, if it was not of particular importance? He would not have to explain himself a good deal to you but might simply have stated that Lord Yardley had taken into his care something that belonged to him and he was now looking for it."

"I suppose he could have done, yes," Prudence murmured. "But instead, he has behaved in a surreptitious manner and, if I am truthful, a rather threatening manner also."

Lord Stoneleigh pressed his lips tightly together, then let out a small sigh. "I should also inform you that I went to Lord Yardley's townhouse and spoke to the staff still present there. In short, I asked whether or not Lord Brunswick had been present in Lord Yardley's home to pay his respects and the butler told me that yes, Lord Brunswick had been present twice. The first time was shortly after the accident—apparently the man was horrified and wanted to make certain that it was true—and the second time was some days later."

Prudence swallowed hard, her heart quickening into a panicked rhythm. "You believe he was looking for the box?"

"I think so," Lord Stoneleigh answered quietly. "The butler did tell me that Lord Brunswick had been left alone for a short time within the house so that the gentleman might console himself and gain some composure, given the state of his grief." His brow furrowed hard and a flash of anger came into his eyes. "No doubt it was entirely staged in order to gain the butler's sympathies. I am certain Lord Brunswick did nothing more than search what he could of the house and, since he did not find it, then began to consider who might have been given the box for safe keeping."

"And he turned to me, given that Lord Yardley was married to my cousin and we were a little better acquainted than others," Prudence finished. "Goodness, Lord Stoneleigh,

whatever are we to do next?"

Lord Stoneleigh did not immediately answer. Prudence resisted the urge to say more, to state that she was quite at a loss and feeling entirely useless. Instead, she waited for Lord Stoneleigh to speak, praying that her mother would not choose this very moment to come and join them.

"I think, Lady Prudence, that we must do nothing for a short time," he said eventually. "Lord Brunswick is obviously suspicious of you and even though he has searched the house, I am not convinced that he is simply going to give up considering you. Therefore, you must simply behave as normal and carry on without any thought of the box or what it contains."

Prudence let out her breath slowly, looking up at Lord Stoneleigh. "And you?"

"I should like to continue with our acquaintance such as it is," he said, surprising her. "Would you consent to that, Lady Prudence?"

Aware that her cheeks were warm and that his eyes were lingering on her, Prudence dropped her gaze to her hands. "I would be glad to," she murmured, feeling rather abashed. There was, she realized, a growing affection for Lord Stoneleigh. He had done so much for her and had made such a great impression upon her heart that to hear him ask her such a thing sent a wave of delight rushing straight through her.

"I am glad to hear it," Lord Stoneleigh said, although with a little more firmness than she had expected. "It would look rather odd if we were no longer in each other's company for a time, only to come back together again in a sennight or so."

Prudence blinked rapidly, now feeling rather foolish. "I see," she said slowly, looking up at him and seeing, much to her frustration, her mother now coming toward them both. "Yes, of course, Lord Stoneleigh. I quite understand."

"Wonderful." His smile was still as warm as ever, but Prudence did not feel it enter her heart. Instead, she reached forward to pick up the refreshments and to offer them to Lord Stoneleigh, just as her mother took her seat. Her cheeks were still hot, but it was not from the delight that had warmed her only a few moments before. Rather it was from the embarrassment of allowing herself to believe that Lord Stoneleigh was eager for her company.

The beginnings of affection were within her heart and now she felt all the more foolish for allowing them to even begin to take root. She could not permit them to grow any further, particularly now that she knew how he felt. For the next week or so, she would consider him as nothing more than a close acquaintance, someone who would soon be gone from her life entirely. There was no need to allow herself to feel any more than that.

The guilt that had flared in his heart as he had spoken to Lady Prudence had still not left him some two days later. He had told her that he thought they ought to do nothing for the time being, that she should leave Lord Brunswick to his own considerations and go on as usual. That, of course, had been the truth, but he had not mentioned to her that he himself had intentions to do quite the opposite. In fact, he was fully determined to go on with things in his own way, to make certain that Lady Prudence was kept out of danger.

Having been sure that Lady Prudence would have been eager to involve herself in whatever it was that he might propose, Felix had chosen to remain silent about his own plans. He did not need to find the key and take it with him, but he certainly would find a way to search for what it might open. Now being quite certain that the answer to why those items in the box were of such great importance lay with the key, Felix was fully determined to do whatever he could to discover the truth.

Meandering into White's—fully aware that Lord Brunswick was present thanks to a quick question to one of the footmen—Felix made his way a little further inside, immediately spotting the gentleman in question. Lord Claverhouse, whom Felix had asked to aid him in this particular matter, was already seated next to Lord Brunswick and was evidently deep in conversation with him. Raising a hand, Felix immediately caught Lord Claverhouse's attention and heard the man call him over almost immediately.

"Good evening, Lord Claverhouse." Felix picked up a glass of brandy and came to sit down next to his friend. "And how did Lord Soames' little soiree go this evening?"

Lord Claverhouse chuckled as Felix nodded toward Lord Brunswick in greeting. "It went rather well," he said with a grin. "My dear wife was called upon to sing and did very well indeed. Almost everyone was very well behaved, I must say."

Felix arched one eyebrow, a smile playing about his mouth. "Almost everyone?" he asked, and Lord Claverhouse laughed again. "Might I be wise to suggest that Lord Soames himself was the one who did not manage to behave as expected?"

Lord Brunswick suddenly interjected, a broad smile on his face. "Lord Soames is known for his lack of wisdom when it comes to his favorite port," he said as Lord Claverhouse, evidently remembering something that had occurred that evening, broke into another round of laughter. "This evening he was not on his best behavior, I am

afraid." He caught the attention of the footman, who quickly came over with more brandy, before gesturing to Lord Claverhouse to speak.

Felix listened as Lord Claverhouse recounted what had occurred, making sure to laugh and smile at the appropriate points. Lord Soames, it seemed, had made something of a fool of himself at his very own soiree, which was not entirely unexpected. Being fully aware of Lord Brunswick's good mood and grateful that Lord Claverhouse had managed to sit by the fellow and engage him in conversation, Felix tried to find an appropriate point to introduce the matter weighing most heavily on his mind.

"I was, I am afraid, in something of a similar difficulty when I attended Lord Devonshire's dinner party a few days ago," he said with a chuckle. "I do not know if you recall, Lord Brunswick, but one particular gentleman—whom I shall not name for fear of bringing further embarrassment to him—quite lost his balance and practically threw his glass of brandy all over Lady Prudence's skirts and my boots."

Lord Claverhouse laughed uproariously at this and even Lord Brunswick grinned before taking a large mouthful of brandy.

"I had to go at once to find something to clean my boots," Felix continued with a wry shake of his head. "When I returned, there was no sign of Lady Prudence. She appeared a short time later in an entirely different gown."

Hearing Lord Claverhouse groan and roll his eyes, Felix forced himself to chuckle ruefully. "The poor lady must have been very embarrassed." He glanced at Lord Brunswick. "You know of which gentleman I speak, of course."

"I cannot say that I do," Lord Brunswick said, his easy countenance no doubt due to the amount of brandy he had imbibed thus far. "Do you not recall what occurred after our port?"

Frowning hard, Felix feigned difficulty in remembering what precisely had happened. "I cannot quite—"

"Lord Nethergate had imbibed far too much port," Lord Brunswick sighed, passing one hand over his eyes as though remembering the story was very troubling indeed. "As we were making our way to the drawing room to join the ladies, he stumbled back very heavily and knocked directly into me."

Instantly, Felix rearranged his expression into one of concern, as did Lord Claverhouse.

"I had forgotten," he said as Lord Brunswick pressed one hand to the back of his head, wincing as he rubbed it gently. "Of course, you would not have been present. Do forgive me."

"It is of no consequence," Lord Brunswick said with a shrug, tipping back the rest of his brandy into his mouth before putting down the glass with a satisfied clink. "Lord Nethergate was very apologetic, once he had revived himself a little."

Lord Claverhouse took a sip of his whisky and then leaned forward, surveying Lord Brunswick with evident concern. "You were injured also then, Lord Brunswick?"

"I was," Lord Brunswick sighed, shaking his head. "My head struck the wall as I fell and I confess, much to my embarrassment, that I lost consciousness for a short time."

"Goodness," Felix murmured, quite certain that the gentleman was lying and that he

had only pretended to do such a thing in order to gain the attention of Lord Devonshire. "You were well taken care of, however?"

"Oh, of course," Lord Brunswick replied with a wave of his hand. "Lord Devonshire had his staff take both myself and Lord Nethergate to a smaller room. Lord Nethergate was not as injured as myself, however, given that he had fallen into me rather than into anything substantial."

"I understand," Felix replied with what he hoped was a compassionate expression. "You recovered yourself, however?" He quickly gestured to the nearby footman, who came with more liquor which Lord Brunswick accepted without hesitation.

Lord Brunswick nodded. "I did," he said with a heavy sigh. "I awoke to find Lord Nethergate asleep on the chaise lounge. I instantly believed that he was injured in some way and thus, I made my way to him at once to awaken him."

"And that was when he apologized to you?" Lord Claverhouse asked, and Lord Brunswick nodded, picking up his fresh glass. "That is good that he was willing to admit his foolishness, Lord Brunswick."

"And that you were able to return to the drawing room with the other guests for the remainder of the evening," Felix replied, knowing full well that Lord Brunswick did not speak the truth. "Your head still pains you, however?"

Lord Brunswick shrugged, taking another sip. "A little but it is of no consequence. It will pass soon enough." Holding Felix's gaze, Lord Brunswick cleared his throat before leaning forward in a surreptitious manner, although his grin remained. "The truth is, Lord Stoneleigh, I did not want to remain at the house. In fact, I wanted desperately to call my carriage and to return home in order to recover, but I also did not want Lord Devonshire to be either upset or ashamed by my absence. Thus, I forced myself forward, returning to the group for a short time."

Felix nodded as Lord Claverhouse murmured something about how he was sure Lord Devonshire would have appreciated such a gesture. Looking quite satisfied with himself, Lord Brunswick sat back in his chair and threw back the rest of his brandy. Fully assured now that Lord Brunswick was a gentleman who hid a good deal and told many lies, Felix said nothing for a short time, allowing a silence to grow between the three of them. More brandy was brought and still, the silence grew.

And then, Lord Brunswick spoke.

"You are courting Lady Prudence, I think."

There was not a question in that particular statement and Felix found himself a little taken aback by the remark.

"I—I am interested in the lady, certainly," he admitted as Lord Brunswick lifted one eyebrow in his direction. "Although I have not yet asked for her father's permission to court her."

Lord Claverhouse chortled and leaned across to Lord Brunswick. "Did you know that Lord Stoneleigh was quite determined to leave London and try his luck again during the little Season, only to be introduced to Lady Prudence and thereafter, to change his plans entirely?"

Felix shot his friend a warning glance, knowing that such a statement might make

Lord Brunswick wonder if there was more than just a mere attraction toward Lady Prudence that had made Felix remain in London.

"I do not think your friend appreciates you stating such a thing," Lord Brunswick chuckled, picking up his glass and gesturing toward Felix. "Indeed, I am sure of it." Felix found himself a little embarrassed, which was an emotion he had not expected to feel, rolling his eyes and shaking his head at Lord Claverhouse, just as Lord Brunswick continued to speak. "Look now, how he drops his head in such a discomfited fashion."

"I am not embarrassed," Felix replied firmly, lifting his head quickly. "Although I would be much obliged, Lord Claverhouse, if you would no longer allow yourself to speak so freely about what you know of me."

This seemed to bring Lord Claverhouse back to his senses somewhat, for he stopped laughing and cleared his throat, now looking a little ashamed of himself.

"But of course," he said gruffly. "Forgive me, Lord Stoneleigh." He lifted his glass. "You can blame my loosened tongue on this, as well as my lack of good sense."

Lord Brunswick chuckled, although his eyes remained thoughtful as he returned his gaze to Felix, brandy still in hand.

"There is no shame in being drawn to such a beautiful lady," he said as Felix sat back in his chair, signaling to the footman that they required another drink. "Lady Prudence is very lovely, by all accounts. Although she has been a little sorrowful over the death of Lord Yardley." He lifted one shoulder and looked toward Felix. "I am acquainted with the lady, you understand. Rather well acquainted, which is why I know that she has felt this way."

Felix's ears pricked up at the mention of Lord Yardley, but he did not give any outward response to Lord Brunswick's remark.

"He was wed to her cousin, I believe," Lord Claverhouse said with a small sigh. "From what I understand, Lady Prudence's cousin died only a short time after her marriage to Lord Yardley."

Lord Brunswick nodded. "Yes, that is so," he answered, his confidence surprising Felix. "Lord Yardley was absent from society from some time thereafter, only to return this Season."

"And to be knocked down by a carriage," Felix interjected, shaking his head. "Little wonder that Lady Prudence has been so sorrowful."

Lord Brunswick nodded, then looked at Felix carefully. "She was still quite well acquainted with Lord Yardley, I believe," he said, his tone light with just a hint of curiosity, as though he did not really wish to find the answer. "Has she ever spoken to you of him? I confess that I did not know the gentleman very well at all."

Felix shook his head, although inwardly, his heart was racing at the questions Lord Brunswick was asking. "She has rarely mentioned his name, I am afraid," he said slowly. "I myself was never acquainted with the fellow."

Lord Brunswick grunted, his eyes shifting to the other side of the room as he sipped his brandy. Felix said nothing, glancing toward Lord Claverhouse, who lifted his brows in evident awareness that Lord Brunswick's questions were certainly of interest. Felix prayed that the brandy had done its work by encouraging Lord Brunswick to speak a little more

openly than he might do otherwise.

"I only ask," Lord Brunswick said slowly, his words beginning to run together now, "because I allowed Lord Yardley to borrow something of great importance to me—even though I did not know him particularly well." Spreading his hands, he looked back at Felix, his head tilted just a little. "I wanted to show generosity, I suppose, for I am certain that he wanted to use the items to impress a particular young lady." Both brows lowered over his eyes as he looked pointedly at Felix, who found himself frowning in return.

"That was very good of you," Felix said slowly, wondering what Lord Brunswick was attempting to say but also very glad that the copious amounts of brandy had done what both he and Lord Claverhouse had hoped.

"I did wonder if he had given it to Lady Prudence," Lord Brunswick continued with a wave of his hand. "It is a very important item, Lord Stoneleigh." His eyes flared with evident excitement and he pointed toward Felix in a sudden agitation. "If Lady Prudence should ever mention such a thing, might you inform me of it? I am sure that the lady herself does not know that such an item is mine and thus, would not want to return it to me and therefore—"

"Certainly, I shall," Felix said quickly, relieved that he had been correct in his belief that Lady Prudence was still being considered by Lord Brunswick. For the moment, it was best for her to remain entirely silent and unobserved until they could work out where the key might go. "Might I ask what the item is?"

Lord Brunswick's eyes closed and he sat back in his chair. "Diamonds," he said simply. "Diamonds that I allowed Lord Yardley to use so that he might impress a lady with his evident wealth. Namely, Lady Prudence, if my assumptions are correct." He opened his eyes and looked directly back at Felix. "But I never once expected him to keep them, or that the lady in question would do so either."

Lord Claverhouse nodded in apparent understanding. "And if she believes they are Lord Yardley's, then she will not know to return them to you."

"Most likely, she will not know what to do with them at all," Felix said as Lord Brunswick began to smile, picking up his glass and holding it out in a toast.

"Thank you, Lord Stoneleigh," he boomed, his words still a little slurred. "You have taken a great weight from my mind. I insist that both you and Lord Claverhouse join me for a dinner party this week—a dinner party that Lady Prudence herself is attending."

"I would be honored," Felix replied, and Lord Claverhouse murmured his thanks. "And I do hope everything will come to rights for you very soon."

"As do I," Lord Claverhouse echoed, lifting his glass. Lord Brunswick cheered them both and clinked his glass against Lord Claverhouse's before lifting it in Felix's direction. Felix returned the gesture, wondering if Lord Brunswick had even the slightest understanding that, despite his careful questions and his foolish excuses, he had revealed to Felix that there was something more going on. Something that Felix fully intended to find out.



"GOOD EVENING, LADY PRUDENCE."

Felix bowed, having not made any pretense that he was not interested in greeting Lady Prudence but choosing to go directly toward her. After all, Lord Brunswick now knew that Felix was eager to further his acquaintance with the lady and thus, he had no need to pretend.

"Lord Stoneleigh." She smiled at him, but her smile was a little lackluster, as it had been the day before when he had visited her in an afternoon call. "Good evening."

He took her in, aware that his chest had become a little tighter at the mere sight of the lady. Her gaze was already drifting away from his and he found himself suddenly eager to have her attention fixed to him again.

"You look very lovely this evening."

A little surprised that the compliment had come from his lips without having had any intention of it doing so, Felix instead found himself very glad that he had said such a thing. Lady Prudence blushed, dropping her head just a little, although he was certain that he saw a glimmer of a smile on her lips.

"I am very glad to see you," he continued, speaking quietly so that their conversation would not be overheard. "And to be able to speak to you without interruption."

Lady Prudence lifted her head and looked at him with a searching gaze. "You have something of importance to tell me?" she asked, a small flicker of a frown between her brows. "Something I do not already know?"

He shook his head. "No, that is not what I meant," he said, knowing full well that he had no intention of telling her what he had learned from Lord Brunswick as yet. "It is somewhat frustrating for me, Lady Prudence, that I cannot be alone with you and in your company." His mouth curved upwards on one side. "Although I know that such a thing would be quite improper."

"Very improper," she told him, her eyes now tied to his and crimson remaining fixed in her cheeks. "Although perhaps I share the very same sentiment, Lord Stoneleigh."

This cheered him greatly to hear her say such a thing, growing aware of the changes within his own heart toward the lady. When she smiled at him, heat ran across his skin and his heart felt as though it turned over in his chest.

"Perhaps I shall allow myself to hope that we might sit near to each other at dinner," he said, speaking so quietly that only she could hear him. "It would please me very much if that were the case."

"Then mayhap you shall have your wish granted," she murmured, looking at him as though she did not fully understand why he was speaking to her in such a way, why he was complimenting her so. In truth, Felix was rather astonished himself, but there had come a sudden strong desire to speak to her like this, to see her smile at him without hesitation.

And he had meant every word.

Prudence was not at all certain what Lord Stoneleigh had meant by such compliments and whilst she had accepted them, whilst she had found herself to be almost a little embarrassed by his words, there was still a sense of confusion that lingered. When he had called on her yesterday for afternoon tea, he had been filled with good conversation and had been very jovial and amiable but had not mentioned a single thing about Lord Brunswick. Of course, she ought not to have expected such a thing given that her mother was there and, in addition, that he had asked her to leave the matter alone for a short time, but it had been a very strange afternoon.

Or, she considered, as they all walked through to the dining room, perhaps it had been her own foolishness, her own regret at allowing her heart to feel anything for the gentleman that had made her feel so awkward.

Does he know what I have done?

Prudence let a shiver run down her spine as she was shown to her seat. Being invited to Lord Brunswick's townhouse for dinner was one thing and, in knowing that Lord Stoneleigh would be present also, she had decided that she could not simply leave the opportunity to fade away from her.

And thus, she had done something that would make him perhaps a little angry with her. But the key with Lord Brunswick's crest was now held securely in a folded handkerchief tied with a ribbon and placed securely in the deep pocket of her gown.

"It seems that you somehow knew that I was to be granted my dearest wish," Lord Stoneleigh murmured as he sat down in the seat next to her.

"I am a little surprised," Prudence answered truthfully. "I did not think that Lord Brunswick would—"

"You can thank Lord Claverhouse for such a thing, Lady Prudence," Lord Stoneleigh interrupted with a lopsided smile. "When we sat in White's with Lord Brunswick a few days ago, Lord Claverhouse was less than careful with what he said."

Shock lanced her heart. "You sat with Lord Brunswick?" she repeated, making certain to lower her voice. "I knew that you were acquainted with him, but I did not think that you would be so eager to be in his company."

Lord Stoneleigh smiled. "I had my purpose in doing so," he said, his eyes holding a confidence that Prudence did not feel. "You need not worry."

Still rather astonished to hear what Lord Brunswick had done, Prudence kept her own counsel and did not say anything more, turning to speak to Lady Cheltenham who sat on her other side. The first course was served and Prudence made certain to behave just as would be expected. She joined in conversation upon occasion and noticed that Lord Brunswick was watching both herself and Lord Stoneleigh with a good deal of interest. In fact, whenever her eyes lifted to Lord Brunswick, she had to pull them away again almost immediately, given that he was looking directly back at her.

"You are aware of his scrutiny, then?"

She glanced up toward Lord Stoneleigh. "I am," she murmured as the conversation and laughter flowed around them. "I do not understand it."

Lord Stoneleigh's lips quirked. "He thinks that I might be able to discover something from you as regards the box," he said very quietly, explaining the conversation that had taken place at White's. Prudence listened with quiet astonishment, keeping her gaze fixed to her plate and continuing to eat as she tried to take in what Lord Stoneleigh told her.

"So, then, he is still considering me," Prudence murmured. "It is as you said." The key in her pocket suddenly felt a good deal heavier and heat spread across her chest as she wondered whether or not she ought to tell Lord Stoneleigh about it.

"You must do nothing other than continue to be as you are at present," Lord Stoneleigh said after a few moments. "I will attempt to continue garnering a closer acquaintance with Lord Brunswick in the hope that—"

He was cut off by a loud guffaw by Lord Brunswick, which then was added to by yet another and then another gentleman. Taking a breath, Prudence looked up into Lord Stoneleigh's face.

"I have brought the key."

Lord Stoneleigh froze, his face a little slack as he stared back at her.

"I should not have done so, perhaps, but there is an opportunity here that I do not think we can simply ignore."

"Good gracious," Lord Stoneleigh murmured, turning his head away and looking at the other guests around the table, so that no one would notice how he stared. Prudence said nothing more, continuing to eat as though everything was just as normal. In fact, she even joined in another conversation on her left rather than speak again with Lord Stoneleigh. Her stomach began to twist uncomfortably, suddenly afraid that Lord Stoneleigh would be greatly displeased with her actions.

"An excellent meal," a gentleman cried as the dishes were cleared away. "And now we look forward to the rest of the evening."

Lord Brunswick grinned. "And I have the most excellent of entertainments prepared for you all," he said with a gleam in his eye. "But first, port."

The ladies rose as one and Prudence had no other choice but to remove herself from the table. Lord Stoneleigh caught her gaze as she did so and, much to her relief, gave her a quick smile. She returned this but then made her way away from the table, leaving the gentlemen to converse together.

Could you arrange for some commotion, as Lord Brunswick had? she thought to herself, remembering what had supposedly happened to Lord Nethergate and then to

Lord Brunswick. Would that give you an opportunity to search Lord Brunswick's study?

The thought sent a chill straight through her. The house was large and she had no particular idea as to where she ought to look first. And if she was caught, then that would bring with it the greatest of scandals. But could she simply return home without even having tried?



"AND NOW FOR the entertainment I have promised you."

Prudence sat quietly in her chair as Lord Brunswick—clearly a little worse for wear after the port he had shared with the other gentlemen—swayed slightly as he threw his arms out wide. "I have for you this evening both a group of wonderful musicians, who shall play for us and for your listening ears, and thereafter, a man who shall do all sorts of tricks to amuse and delight you all."

This, Prudence considered, was in fact a very excellent entertainment and certainly one that she would normally have enjoyed, had she not been feeling rather anxious about the key and whether or not there would be any opportunity to make use of it.

The door opened and, with a footman leading the way, the musicians came into the room. There were four of them, each carrying a different instrument. It was only then that Prudence noticed the four chairs left empty next to the pianoforte, realizing that they had been left solely for the musicians.

"Lady Prudence."

Lord Stoneleigh had moved carefully toward her, standing now just behind her chair with a glass of brandy in his hand.

"I might excuse myself for a short time," he murmured as the ladies next to Prudence began to speak loudly to each other. "If I return and look directly at you, it may be that I require a particular item."

Prudence swallowed hard, her hands curling tightly into fists as she attempted to keep a hold of her nerves. "I quite understand," she said, not looking at him but rather bringing a swift end to their conversation. She did not know when Lord Stoneleigh moved away but when the musicians were ready to play, one quick glance behind her told her that he was already gone.

She dared not search the room with her eyes for fear of drawing Lord Brunswick's notice. Instead, she forced herself to watch the musicians, to listen carefully as they played, and to let the notes soothe her fractious thoughts. They were excellent, of course, and the music rose in a great swell of sound, a crescendo that seemed to fill the entire room. And then it grew quieter and softer, the notes holding a hint of sadness as a sigh escaped her. The music seemed to echo the sentiments of her heart, making her think of one thing and one thing only—the truth of what she felt for Lord Stoneleigh.

The first piece over, Prudence looked around the room and smiled at her mother, who was clearly enjoying the evening given the broad smile on her face and the brightness of her eyes. There was no sign of Lord Stoneleigh, however. When the music began again, Prudence made certain to focus upon it, so that she would not be seen to be distracted in

any way. And thus, the music held her attention for close to an hour before, finally, it came to an end.

Lord Brunswick let out a loud exclamation of delight as he practically sprang to his feet, coming to stand in the center of the room.

"And now," he declared, clearly delighted with the performances he had chosen, "we shall have the most astonishing of all fellows, the most wonderful of..."

Something suddenly seemed to catch Prudence's eye and she turned her head away from Lord Brunswick as he continued to throw out accolades about their next entertainment. Lord Stoneleigh had slipped back into the room and was now leaning back against the wall. Had she not been aware that he might return, Prudence might have missed him entirely, such had been his stealth. He looked back at her with a fixed gaze, before giving her a tiny nod. Prudence caught her breath and turned back to Lord Brunswick, who had only just finished his introduction.

Prudence rose just before Lord Brunswick sat down, making her way toward her mother, who also got to her feet, a frown dotting her brow.

"I must make my way to the retiring room, Mama," Prudence murmured quietly. "Should you wish to attend with me?"

Lady Devonshire glanced over Prudence's shoulder toward the lithe young fellow who had stepped forward and was now greeting the guests in a most animated fashion. The atmosphere in the room had changed somewhat, from relaxed and calm to now holding both anticipation and excitement and it was this that Prudence hoped would keep her mother present in the room.

"I am contented to go alone, Mama," Prudence added as her mother still hesitated. "I shall not be long."

Lady Devonshire waited for a moment or two longer before, finally, she nodded.

"If you would, Prudence," she said with a nod. "But do not be tardy."

With the entertainer now beginning his first trick, Prudence was easily able to slip from the room. Her face heated somewhat as she stepped out into the hallway, knowing that she could not take a great deal of time.

"Lady Prudence!"

Lord Stoneleigh's voice whispered toward her and she turned quickly to see him striding out of the shadows, having clearly slipped from the room before her.

"Lord Stoneleigh," she answered, keeping her voice low. "I presume you have found something?"

Lord Stoneleigh nodded, his hand held out toward her, and, without any sort of hesitation, Prudence took it.

"It has taken me the best part of an hour, but I have discovered something that I believe might be opened by the key," he said quietly, hurrying her along the passageway. "If it does not, then I cannot continue to search any longer. Lord Brunswick will, I am certain, notice my absence even if he is already a little in his cups."

"And I am sure he will notice mine, given that I am the one he is currently watching very closely," Prudence murmured, her hand tight in his. "I cannot be too long. My mother will be waiting for my return."

Lord Stoneleigh nodded and then, much to her surprise, opened the door to the library and stepped inside. Prudence followed him at once, looking up into his face in astonishment.

"You mean to say it is not in Lord Brunswick's study? Or his rooms?"

A wry smile tipped Lord Stoneleigh's lips, his eyes gleaming with good humor. "I searched both rooms first," he told her, leading her toward the left-hand side of the room. "I could not think where else to look and then I wondered about the library. This is a very large room indeed and had I not been somewhat blessed in discovering it, I do not think I should have had enough time to look through every little nook and cranny, for it is very large indeed."

Prudence glanced around the room, taking in the high shelves filled with books, the tables, chests, and drawers that seemed to be fitted into every corner of the room. There were a good many chairs and a large, unlit fire, although, for whatever reason, the room itself was well lit with candlesticks.

"Perhaps Lord Brunswick intends to make this room open to his guests later in the evening," she murmured as Lord Stoneleigh climbed up a small ladder and pulled out what appeared to be a book. "Why else should it be so well lit?"

Lord Stoneleigh climbed down carefully and held it out to her. "I must presume so," he said quietly. "I was very lucky in my search, and had it not been for the strangeness of the cover—so plain and dull in comparison to the others with their gold print and decoration—I might have missed it entirely."

Prudence looked doubtfully down at the book in Lord Stoneleigh's hand, then caught her breath as she realized it was not a book after all. In fact, it was a small wooden box with a tiny lock on one side. It was the very same size and shape as a book and had Lord Stoneleigh not held it out to her for her scrutiny, her eyes would simply have passed over it without consideration.

"We must make haste," Lord Stoneleigh said, the urgency in his tone reminding her that they had no time to linger. "If Lord Brunswick should come in search of you, then..."

He did not need to finish his sentence, for Prudence knew precisely what would occur should that happen. A sudden trembling took a hold of her and she pulled the neatly wrapped package from her pocket, her fingers struggling to take it all apart, such was her anxiety.

And then, the key was in her hand. With a deep breath, Prudence pressed it into the lock, marveling that such a delicate key should fit such a small lock. Turning it carefully, it moved willingly and, upon hearing a small 'click', she let it go.

Lord Stoneleigh wasted no time. Opening the box carefully, he held it out toward her, leaving Prudence to be the first to notice what was within.

Her heart sank with disappointment.

"There is nothing more than a few papers here," she said, picking up the folded pieces and looking up blankly at Lord Stoneleigh. "What if—"

A sudden sound caught her ears and instantly, fright took a hold of Prudence's heart.

"Put them in your pocket," Lord Stoneleigh urged, closing the box and removing the key, which he handed back to her quickly. "We must depart this room at once, Lady

Prudence. You will have time to peruse them later.” Climbing back up the ladder, he placed the box back where he had found it, whilst Prudence hastily wrapped the key back up and placed both it and the papers deep into the pocket of her gown. Lord Stoneleigh moved the ladder away from where he had been searching, whilst Prudence hastily made her way to the door.

Her heart was pounding furiously and she struggled to catch her breath, terrified that at any moment, Lord Brunswick would throw open the door and demand to know what she and Lord Stoneleigh were doing within. What would she say? Would he know, somehow, that they had found the box and had been able to open it?

“Have no fear.” Lord Stoneleigh came up behind her and turned the handle carefully. “I will go first, to ensure there is no difficulty. Should Lord Brunswick appear, I shall make certain to turn him back from this room, so that you can escape without being seen.”

Prudence nodded, her anxiety rising steadily within her as she looked up into Lord Stoneleigh’s eyes.

“We have done very well this evening,” he said, suddenly catching her hand and pressing it gently. “I must confess to being rather intrigued to know what is contained within those papers.

Without another word, he slipped from the room and she heard his footsteps making their way carefully back toward the drawing room. Hearing no exclamation of surprise or shout of astonishment, Prudence carefully stepped out into the hallway and closed the door behind her. The papers in her pocket seemed to burn through her skirts but she ignored them completely, lifting her chin and walking with great deliberation, as though she was meant to have been in the library and had every permission to be there.

Suddenly, she heard a door opening and the sound of Lord Brunswick’s loud voice echoing up toward her. Her heart began to pound furiously in her chest, her hands clammy as she hesitated. Should she simply continue on her way, with the excuse that she had been in the retiring room? But what of Lord Stoneleigh? Surely Lord Brunswick would see him first and would know at once that there was something rather odd about both Lord Stoneleigh and her being found together away from the drawing room?

Before she could think of what to do, Lord Stoneleigh was back by her side. His hands pulled her gently into the shadows in the hallway before slipping about her waist. Her back was pressed against the wall, her head tipping up toward his, and as footsteps suddenly drew closer, she found her lips captured in the most wonderful and most astonishing of kisses.

Her heart began to slow, only to then fling itself into a frantic rhythm as she became aware of what was happening to her. Lord Stoneleigh was kissing her gently and she was responding to him—albeit rather slowly. Her hands were pressed against his chest whilst his arms were wrapped about her waist, pulling her closer to him. And then, his lips were gone from hers, his breath dancing across her cheek.

“You have made me the happiest of gentlemen,” he said, his words loud enough for Lord Brunswick to hear. “I shall have to speak to your father first, of course. It was quite foolish of me not to have done so already, but when I saw you quit the drawing room, I knew I could not waste my opportunity.”

Prudence could barely find the words to answer him for she was still so overcome with what he had done and what she herself felt that it was a struggle just to form any sort of response.

"I—I am sure he will give you his consent," she whispered as Lord Stoneleigh brushed his lips across her forehead. "I am honored that you should ask me, my lord."

Lord Stoneleigh sighed heavily and let go of her with obvious reluctance. "I should let you return to the drawing room," he said quietly, "before your absence is noticed. I shall make my way back into the room a few minutes later, so that none shall take notice."

Prudence nodded, aware that she was trembling all over. Her fingers were caught in Lord Stoneleigh's for a moment and he pressed them lightly, his strength flowing into her and giving her the courage she needed to do as he suggested.

"I look forward to speaking with you again tomorrow," she said, her voice no longer a mere whisper. "This night has been quite wonderful."

"Indeed it has," he replied, his words heavy with meaning. "Now hurry, Lady Prudence. Before anything is said."

She nodded and began to make her way toward the drawing room. Without hesitating, she turned the handle and stepped inside, catching her mother's sharp look toward her, which faded almost at once as Prudence entered alone. The entertainer was drawing gasps of astonishment and cries of delight from the assembled guests, leaving Prudence to sit down again in her seat, barely noticed by the others. Her heart was still burning in her chest, her body hot all over as she tried to compose herself. Lord Stoneleigh had just kissed her and, from what she understood, it now seemed as though they were engaged. Although whether or not he intended to truly speak to her father she could not be sure. Mayhap it had been nothing more than an act, put on solely for Lord Brunswick.

When the door opened again, Prudence could not help but look toward it. Lord Brunswick came in first, a broad grin on his face, and soon after followed Lord Stoneleigh. He, too, was smiling broadly, as though he and Lord Brunswick had shared a moment of good humor that he could not keep to himself. When his eyes met hers, Prudence felt a flood of relief crash all through her. When he smiled, she let out a long breath she had not known she had been holding. It seemed that, for the moment at least, everything was going to be all right.

Reflecting on the evening that had only just passed, Felix let out a long sigh as he studied himself in the mirror. The morning had brought with it both relief and expectation as well as a hint of gladness, which, he had to admit, he had not expected to feel at all. Last evening, he had been close to exultant with what they had discovered, even though he had not had a chance to look at the papers themselves. The mere fact that the key had not only fit but also turned in the lock had made his heart leap with hope and expectation, but there had not been time to scrutinize what was within.

The sound of Lord Brunswick laughing loudly as he stood in the doorway of the drawing room had sent Felix into a mild panic. Hearing the door being closed and knowing full well that Lady Prudence was, most likely, somewhere behind him, he had done the only thing he could think of. He had taken her into his arms and had kissed her with all the urgency and desperation that had welled up within him.

Why he had done so, Felix still did not know. Perhaps, if he had even given himself an extra moment to consider, he might have been able to pull Lady Prudence into another room—although he might well have been discovered by Lord Brunswick there anyway and would have had to do as he had done regardless. It had been very strange indeed to find himself oddly glad that he had kissed her, finding his heart suddenly thrilled with delight at her embrace, at her willingness to return his affections. And thus, knowing that Lord Brunswick was in the shadows, most likely watching and listening to what was going on in front of him, Felix had done the only thing possible and had pretended that he had only just asked Lady Prudence to wed him and that she had accepted.

Thankfully, Lady Prudence had gone along with the plan, her eyes wide and her voice a breathy whisper—and Felix knew that he could not go back on his word. Lord Brunswick would expect an engagement announcement very soon, which meant that Felix was now tied to Lady Prudence in a way that he had never expected.

Much to his astonishment, it was not a feeling of irritation that came to his mind as he considered this, but rather a sense of satisfaction and contentment. No matter what happened next, no matter what they discovered in those papers, it seemed that he was to have Lady Prudence as his wife and that, surprisingly, was rather pleasing to him.

Those papers, he thought to himself as his valet finished. I cannot imagine what they contain. He had not had much sleep the previous night, for there had been plenty on his

mind. First, he had wondered about what Lady Prudence had thought of what had occurred, and then he had reflected on his own feelings. Thereafter, he had considered how relieved he had been that Lord Brunswick seemed to have taken what he had seen to be absolutely genuine—for the gentleman had appeared suddenly once Lady Prudence had returned to the drawing room and had spent a good few minutes congratulating him—and then had found himself wondering what could possibly be within those papers and why they were of such great importance. All in all, it had not been a particularly restful night, but surprisingly, Felix did not feel overly tired. In fact, he was filled with a sense of anticipation, knowing that in speaking to Lord Devonshire this afternoon, he would be making a rather permanent arrangement for his future. Lady Prudence would be his bride and that, he considered, was a truly wonderful thought.



“I MUST CONFESS, Lord Stoneleigh, I am both a little taken aback and truly delighted to hear of your intention.”

Felix smiled at Lord Devonshire, relieved at the gentleman’s reaction. “I have been in your daughter’s company for some time now, Lord Devonshire, and I find myself quite taken with her,” he said, knowing that each word he spoke was entirely honest. “I will admit to having spoken to her of my intentions already and she has, I am glad to state, been content to accept—but of course, this is entirely dependent on what you yourself think. Forgive my eagerness in speaking to your daughter first.”

Thankfully, Lord Devonshire did not appear to be in the least bit put out by this revelation. Instead, he chuckled, rose from his chair, and reached to shake Felix’s hand.

“I would be very glad to give you my consent, Lord Stoneleigh,” he said with a broad, beaming smile. “It is wonderful to hear, truly. My daughter is a lady with her own mind in many respects and we have allowed her some time to make her own choice in such matters—and thus, she has done so. This has brought me a good deal of satisfaction and I am certain that Lady Devonshire shall be very pleased also.”

“Wonderful,” Felix said, letting out a breath of relief as he shook Lord Devonshire’s hand. “I am very thankful, Lord Devonshire. I can assure you that I will treat your daughter with the greatest of respect. Throughout our marriage, I shall never do anything that will cause her harm or hurt. I care for Lady Prudence and I am certain such feelings will only grow.”

Lord Devonshire let go of Felix’s hand and smiled. “I am certain you will make her very happy indeed,” he said, gesturing toward the door. “Now, I am sure that my daughter will be waiting to hear from you, so you need not hesitate any longer. Please, allow her to know of the good news.”

“I shall, at once,” Felix answered, hurriedly making his way out the door and then toward the drawing room, where he knew Lady Prudence and her mother would be waiting.

A swirl of anticipation and a touch of nervousness flooded him as he stepped inside, his eyes immediately finding Lady Prudence as she immediately rose to her feet, her eyes

holding concern.

"Lady Prudence, Lady Devonshire," Felix murmured, bowing low. "Good afternoon."

"Good afternoon, Lord Stoneleigh," Lady Devonshire murmured, her eyes aglow as she looked at him steadily, sitting back down in her chair. "I take it you have spoken to my husband?"

Felix smiled. "I have," he replied with a slight bow. "Might I speak to Lady Prudence alone for a few minutes, Lady Devonshire? I know it is a little presumptive but—"

Lady Devonshire was up from her chair in a moment, her skirts rustling as she hurried past him. "But of course, Lord Stoneleigh," she said, barely hesitating as she passed him. "A few minutes, of course."

Felix blinked in surprise at Lady Devonshire's hasty exit, before turning slowly toward Lady Prudence, who was still staring at him with wide eyes.

"Lady Prudence," he said gently. "How do you fare this morning?"

Lady Prudence hesitated, then answered him in a soft voice. "I am a little overwhelmed, Lord Stoneleigh."

"I am not at all surprised," he answered, coming to sit down beside her. "There were a good deal of...unexpected surprises last evening, Lady Prudence." He smiled at her. "I did not expect to find myself in a situation such as this, but I confess that I am very pleased."

This seemed to astonish Lady Prudence greatly, for she looked at him with evident shock written all over her face.

"You are surprised?" he said gently, and Lady Prudence turned her head away. Looking at her profile carefully, Felix did not allow himself to say anything more, studying her with great deliberateness and wishing that he knew what she was feeling at this present moment.

"I am astonished, Lord Stoneleigh," Lady Prudence said eventually. "I did not think that you would have any pleasure in having to submit yourself to a marriage such as this."

"Then you are mistaken," he said, rather concerned to see her eyes glistening with tears as she looked back at him. "I am truly very glad indeed, Lady Prudence. I have a great respect for you. I think very highly of you and your dedication to facing and resolving the troubles you have faced." Reaching across, he settled his hand over hers and looked deeply into her eyes. "You are a beautiful young lady, with charm and elegance and great kindness within you. How could I not feel an affection for you? I look forward to our wedding, for it will be a fulfillment of a great hope that has been rising up within me for some time. A hope that I shall marry a lady that I care for, and who, I must hope, cares for me also."

Lady Prudence smiled, but as she did so, a tear trickled down her cheek. Frowning, Felix leaned forward and made to say something more, but Lady Prudence shook her head and smiled at him again.

"I have a great affection for you, Lord Stoneleigh," she said, her voice tremulous. "I have not been certain of my own feelings, however, for I have been rather afraid that they would come to naught." Another tear fell from her eye, but she made no attempt to

wipe it away. "I thought you considered me nothing more than an acquaintance—a close acquaintance, mayhap—but to know now that you...that you..." She could not say anything more, looking at him with such beauty in her green eyes that Felix wanted to clasp her close to him and hold her until no tears remained.

"I speak the truth," he told her tenderly. "I have an affection for you of my own, that I hope will grow into something all the more profound, the longer we are settled together."

Lady Prudence smiled and it lit up her features entirely. Her other hand lifted to settle on his and Felix felt his heart begin to race. All he had to do was lean a little closer and he would be able once more to press his lips to hers. The urge to kiss her was so overwhelming that he found himself leaning toward her without even having a moment of consideration.

Thankfully, it appeared as though Lady Prudence had been expecting him to do so, had been ready for him to do so, for she met him with great eagerness, her hands going about his neck and her fingers twining into his hair. Felix felt a curl of heat begin to swirl through him and he forced himself to move backward, breaking their kiss. Lady Prudence took a moment to open her eyes, and when she did so, the happiness in her expression cheered him immensely.

"I can hardly believe it," she murmured, looking up at him. "This is truly wonderful."

"It is," he agreed, easing himself back a little more for fear that he would do nothing more than think of kissing Lady Prudence's sweet lips again. "And whilst I do not wish to drag the conversation from this very pleasant subject, there is something else we must discuss."

It took a moment, but Lady Prudence quickly recalled what he meant.

"I have the papers here," she said, rising quickly and then carefully extracting them from her gown pocket. "I confess that I have not yet looked at them."

Surprised, he looked at her as she set the papers out on the small table in front of them. "You did not open them?" he said, and Lady Prudence shook her head. "Why ever not?"

A small flush came into Lady Prudence's cheeks. "I did not because I found my thoughts a little distracted last evening, and again this morning," she admitted, a little more quietly. "And because I thought you might wish to be present when we did so."

Felix smiled at her, a sense of gratitude rising up within him. "That is most considerate of you, Lady Prudence."

"Although we shall have to be quick," she reminded him, glancing at the open door. "My mother might very soon return."

Nodding, Felix turned his attention back to the papers. "Then shall we look?" he asked, and Lady Prudence reached forward and began to unfold the paper. There were, Felix realized, two pieces of paper. Lady Prudence spread out the first and then brushed her fingers gently across it in order to straighten it a little more before reaching for the second piece and doing the very same.

"Good gracious."

Felix blinked in surprise as he saw, written there clearly and distinctly, the name of Lord Brunswick and, below it, the name of a lady he did not know.

"It is a certificate of marriage," Lady Prudence murmured, looking at the first piece of paper with wide eyes. "But Lord Brunswick is engaged at present, is he not?"

"He is," Felix replied, frowning hard. "But it appears he cannot be so, given that he is already wed."

"To a Miss Elizabeth Somers," Lady Prudence read, frowning. "I do not know—" She gasped and sat up, her eyes huge and her hand at her mouth. Felix held his breath, aware of just how loudly his blood was roaring in his ears as he waited for her to speak, seeing that she knew something he did not yet understand.

"I know who Miss Somers is," she whispered, dropping her hand from her mouth. "She is Lord Yardley's sister."

Her words hung in the air before Felix could truly take them in. When he did so, the clarity that came with them hit him with such force that it felt as though he had been knocked senseless.

"Lord Yardley knew that Lord Brunswick was already married," he said as Lady Prudence nodded, her face now pale. "Therefore, he could not be engaged to Lady Josephine."

Lady Prudence drew in a long breath. "Then are we stating that we believe Lord Brunswick arranged for the death of Lord Yardley, so that he would not speak of what he knew to anyone?"

Felix hesitated, thinking hard. "I do not think we can agree to such a thing as yet. It may be as you say, but we must first attempt to discover where the current Lady Brunswick is at present. Once we have found her, we must..." He trailed off, not quite certain what else to say.

"Once we have found her, we must ask whether the diamonds belong to her," Lady Prudence said, picking up the second paper. "Look, Lord Stoneleigh." Handing him the piece of paper, she waited until he had glanced at it before she spoke again. "It details a transaction between Lord Yardley and Lord Brunswick. There was a great deal of money exchanged, it seems."

Frowning, Felix studied the paper. "That is rather surprising, is it not?" he asked, surprised when Lady Prudence shook her head. "Do you mean to say that Lord Yardley was rather wealthy?" He was a little taken aback to hear that, for Lord Yardley had only been a baron and barons were not usually known for their great wealth.

"Lord Yardley had a vast fortune," Lady Prudence told him, picking up the papers and folding them away again. "It is rare, yes, but there have been occasions, I have heard, where a gentleman of a lower title has had a good deal more wealth than those who are of a higher title." She lifted one shoulder as she placed the papers back in her pocket. "Lord Yardley was one of those gentlemen."

"And did you know his sister?"

Lady Prudence frowned and shook her head, a line forming between her brows. "I knew of her but never once met her," she said slowly, as though trying her best to remember something. "She must have been at Lord Yardley's wedding to my cousin, Mary, but I do not recall ever setting eyes on her. Lord Yardley mentioned her, of course, but that was all."

"Then we have no way of knowing where she might be," Felix muttered, passing one hand over his eyes as he fought to establish what they ought to do next. "She could be anywhere in the whole of England and—"

"She would not be at his estate," Lady Prudence mused, interrupting him. "Else he would not be able to take his new wife there." Her eyes shot to his. "But Lord Yardley might have known of her whereabouts. After all, perhaps he came to London expecting to see her and, when he heard Lord Brunswick was to marry, went to confront him."

"And when he would not relent from his path, did Lord Yardley then take the box with the diamonds and the key, knowing what it contained? Knowing that, should he then find the box, he would be able to prove to others that Lord Brunswick was already wed," Felix added, feeling his heart grow sorrowful on behalf of Lord Yardley, who must have endured a great deal of pain in discovering that his sister was not present in London and that Lord Brunswick was now engaged to another. He spread his hands. "Perhaps he intended to find the box, perhaps he had every intention of going back to Lord Brunswick's townhouse and finding the papers, but he was cut down before he could do so."

Lady Prudence nodded slowly, her eyes beginning to fill with tears as, no doubt, memories of that fateful afternoon came back to her. "He begged me to take great care of it, speaking to me within the shadow of the doorway, so that he would not be seen. I wonder if he knew he was being pursued."

Felix reached for her hand. "No doubt he did," he answered quietly. "And he hoped to shake his pursuer and then return for the box. He obviously trusted you, Lady Prudence. Of that, you can be certain."

Taking in a deep breath, Lady Prudence let it out slowly and then looked back into his eyes, her expression serious. "That is kind of you to say, Lord Stoneleigh. Although I feel an even greater burden now. A burden toward his sister, who must be in deep distress." Her head tilted just a little. "If Lord Yardley came to London expecting to see his sister, only to discover that she was not present with her husband, then might he have written to her to ensure she was safe?"

It was an idea, certainly. "I could make my way to Lord Yardley's home and speak to the butler," Felix answered, seeing a fresh light in Lady Prudence's eyes. "Or mayhap, if your mother would permit it, we might go together?"

Lady Prudence beamed at him. "I am certain she will permit me a short walk with my betrothed," she said, a blush warming her cheeks. "And I shall encourage her to give me my maid as a chaperone. Will you give me a few minutes, Lord Stoneleigh?"

His smile was immediate, the thought of being even longer in Lady Prudence's company a most pleasant one. "I shall indeed," he told her. "Let us hope that soon, we will be able to do all that Lord Yardley could not."

"For his sake, and for that of his sister," Lady Prudence replied solemnly, before quickly quitting the room.

It did not take a great deal of convincing for her mother to permit Prudence to take a short walk with Lord Stoneleigh. Nor did she have to beg to be accompanied only by her maid, for it appeared that Lady Devonshire herself was most eager to spread the news of her daughter's engagement and wanted very much to quickly call upon a very dear friend of hers, who was also a notorious gossip.

Thus, Prudence found herself walking alongside Lord Stoneleigh, making their way in the direction of Lord Yardley's townhouse. He had suggested that they might take his carriage there and back again, but Prudence had declined the suggestion. She found herself eager to linger in Lord Stoneleigh's company, for now that she knew the truth about his affections, she had nothing but happiness in being with him. How quickly things had changed. When he had spoken to her but a few days ago, she had cursed her own foolishness for feeling such an affection for him when he felt none in return, only to realize that she had been quite mistaken. When he had kissed her, she had felt such hope, such wonderful, astonishing hope, that it had filled her heart and not released her until she had spoken to Lord Stoneleigh again.

And now she knew the truth of his heart and it was more beautiful than anything she could ever imagine.

"I do hope that Lord Yardley's townhouse will not yet be shut up," she mused, looking up into Lord Stoneleigh's face and seeing the knot of his brows as he considered what she had said. "It has been some time since and I worry that the place will have been sealed and settled for whoever is next in line."

"Then let us hope that the next Baron Yardley has agreed to keep on a small staff within the townhouse," Lord Stoneleigh replied, a trifle gruffly. "I do not know what we shall do otherwise." His gaze caught hers, the brownish hues in the depths of his green eyes seeming to swirl about, as if distant thoughts were coming to the fore, only to be caught up in all the others that had gone before. "Although I am certain you would have thought of something else to do, Lady Prudence. Your determination to see this through speaks well of you."

She smiled, aware of the warmth in her face that even a single word from him now seemed to bring. "Let us pray I shall not need to," she replied as they turned the corner to approach the house. "Even if only the butler remains, I shall be very contented

indeed."

Despite her determined words, Prudence could not help but feel a little anxious as they climbed the stone steps. Lord Stoneleigh rapped sharply and took a small step back, as did Prudence. Prudence's maid remained at the bottom of the steps, waiting for her mistress to return, whilst Prudence herself prayed desperately that their knock would be answered.

Eventually, someone came to the door.

"Yes?"

Quickly, Lord Stoneleigh explained who they were and what they sought. Prudence stood quietly beside Lord Stoneleigh, fully aware of the amount of scrutiny that the butler was now giving to her.

"I was cousin to Mary, Lady Yardley," she said, wondering if the butler knew her. "Lord Yardley was a gentleman I was well acquainted with."

The door opened at once. "I remember, my lady," the butler said, bowing low before gesturing for them to come inside. "I was with the master during the time his wife became ill. After she died, he sent me here, to make certain the townhouse was prepared for him." A small, sad smile crept over his face. "I believe seeing even the staff around him who had looked after his wife was too much to bear."

"I think you are correct," Prudence answered, rather surprised that the butler should show so much feeling over his late master and mistress. It was true, it seemed, that a good master could bring about a sense of loyalty and even affection from one's staff. "Thank you for allowing us in. As Lord Stoneleigh has said, I am seeking a way to contact Lord Yardley's sister."

A frown instantly crept over the butler's expression. "Lady Brunswick?" he asked with a shake of his head. "There is something very wrong going on with that particular matter, Lady Prudence, if it is not too bold to say. Lord Brunswick himself appeared here shortly after Lord Yardley's demise and made up some story that I knew not to be true. He called himself Lord Hawksworth, but I recognized his face for I had seen him before at Lord Yardley's estate, when he came to make arrangements for the marriage." He shook his head. "I could not say that I knew very well who he was, but I was greatly unsettled by his presence."

Prudence glanced at Lord Stoneleigh, who was, by now, frowning very hard indeed, a dark anger seeming to flood into his expression. The butler was more forthcoming than either of them had expected and Prudence had to admit that she was very grateful. Taking a moment, she decided that she would be forthright also, making certain to explain what she could to the butler in hope of his assistance.

"The reason we seek Lady Brunswick is because of a situation that has come to our attention," she said, lifting her chin just a little. "You may be aware already, but Lord Brunswick is engaged. I am concerned about what has occurred to Lady Brunswick, for I have had no report of her death."

The butler held her gaze steadily, which was most unusual for a servant to do. "You speak the same words that Lord Yardley himself spoke, Lady Prudence," he said after a moment or two, his voice shaking with unexpressed emotion. "He appeared at the house

one evening and I had never seen him as upset as he was then." Shaking his head, he pulled a large, white handkerchief from his pocket and dabbed at his eyes. Prudence's heart ached for him.

"The master wrote a letter to his sister that evening, Lady Prudence," the butler continued, managing to collect himself. "He said he had only just discovered where she was and intended to ride out to her the following day. Only that he had to first speak to Lord Brunswick once more."

Prudence closed her eyes and a shudder ran through her. "But he did not return," she said slowly, and the butler made a noise of agreement. "Pray, do you know the address that was on the letter Lord Yardley wrote?"

Opening her eyes, she saw the butler dabbing at his eyes again. "I did not send the letter, Lady Prudence," he said hoarsely. "I meant to do so the following day, for it was much too late that night to do so...but with all that occurred with the master, I did not have the chance to. And then to discover he was gone and that he would not set foot in this house again—I...I dared not send it to her."

"You will find no blame on our lips," Lord Stoneleigh answered reassuringly. "But might you find the letter and give it to Lady Prudence? It is of the utmost importance that we seek out Lady Brunswick at once."

The butler nodded, hesitated, then moved away. Prudence let out a long breath of relief, although such was the sorrow within her that she could not speak. The poor Lady Brunswick did not even know that her brother was gone, and now Prudence herself was to go and seek her out. Was she to be the one to impart such dreadful news?

"Here, my lady." The butler handed the sealed letter to her with a small bow. "Please, give my condolences to the lady when you see her. On behalf of all the staff here."

"I shall, of course."

Lord Stoneleigh cleared his throat. "Is the new Lord Yardley to take up residence here?" he asked, and the butler nodded. "So soon, it seems."

The butler's expression lit with a ghost of a smile. "He is to come and inspect all of his property," he said with a wry smile. "But he is a good man, from what I know of him. A relation of the late Lord Yardley's that I have met once before. I am hopeful that he will be a good master."

"You do Lord Yardley a great honor in remembering him so," Prudence said, seeing the man's eyes fill with tears again. "I wish you well." She held the letter close to her chest. "And I thank you."



IT WAS NOT until they had rounded the corner that would lead them back to Lord Devonshire's townhouse that Prudence dared look at the letter. Lord Stoneleigh paused also, reading the address quickly and then looking at her with astonishment.

"That is less than a day's ride from here," he said, and Prudence blinked in surprise, staring at the address as though she thought it might change before her very eyes. "Can that be so?"

"It must be," Prudence answered weakly. "Lady Brunswick, so close to London and yet so unaware of all that is going on."

Lord Stoneleigh let out a strangled sound, which Prudence took to be both frustration and anger at what Lord Brunswick had done.

"I must go to her," Prudence said quietly. "I will convince Mama that we must travel to see her at once, to comfort her at this difficult time."

"But will she go?" Lord Stoneleigh asked, looking a little doubtful. "After all, your engagement has only just been made certain. Surely she will want to—"

"I will convince her," Prudence replied firmly. "There is nothing else for me to do but that." Looking up at Lord Stoneleigh, she held his gaze and felt her fortitude rise up within her. "Have no doubt, Lord Stoneleigh. I will go to her, and I will discover the truth."

Lord Stoneleigh nodded slowly, a glimmer in his eyes that she hoped came from a trust and a belief in her that she could do as she said. "Then return swiftly, Lady Prudence," he told her, reaching out to touch her cheek gently. "For I will not be contented until you are back in London and again by my side."

Her heart flooded with delight and she smiled up at him, her worries disappearing as she saw the tenderness in his eyes.

"I will return as quickly as I can," she promised. "For I will spend every moment longing to return to you."

Despite the fact that they stood in the middle of a London street where a good many people could see them, Lord Stoneleigh caught her hand and brought it to his lips. Prudence blushed all the more as she felt the warmth of his lips on her hand, knowing full well that, should things continue as they were at present, she would find herself quite in love with Lord Stoneleigh. And that, she thought, would truly be the most wonderful thing in all the world.



IT HAD TAKEN a great deal of convincing for Lady Devonshire to agree to this strange trip that Prudence was so eager to make, but it had helped that Lord Stoneleigh had been there when Prudence had asked. He had stated that he thought Lady Prudence to be more than generous in her desire to be a comfort to the lady and therefore, after a few moments more of deliberation, Lady Devonshire had agreed.

"We will return very late indeed," Lady Devonshire complained as the carriage turned into a small, secluded village which seemed to have nothing of particular interest within it whatsoever. "And I had to awaken much too early also."

"I am sure you will manage, Mama," Prudence replied calmly. "We are going to be there very soon, and I shall only take an hour or so to speak to the lady."

Lady Devonshire sniffed and shook her head in evident disdain. "There is no need for you to speak to a lady unknown to you, Prudence," she said firmly. "Even if Lord Stoneleigh thinks you kind and gracious to want to give your condolences in person, I confess that I think you to be ridiculous. You should be in London, garnering all the

attention that you can."

"That is not at all my desire, Mama," Prudence protested, knowing that she could not very well tell her mother the truth. Not as yet, anyway. "I feel a strong desire to speak to Miss Somers to give her my condolences before I can fully indulge in my own happiness." She shrugged. "If you so wish, you might stay in the carriage and wait for me to return."

Lady Devonshire's lips turned down. "I can hardly imagine doing something such as that, not when I have been sitting already for a good many hours," she complained. "I shall be utterly weary come the morrow."

Prudence did not reply, allowing her mother to complain a little longer as she herself watched out of the carriage window, looking at where they were going. The village was now far behind them and they seemed to be following a winding track. Wherever this place lay, it was very far away indeed.

Finally, they reached what appeared to be a country house. It had well-maintained gardens, and whilst the house itself was not overly large, it certainly appeared to be a fine and very suitable establishment for a lady of quality.

"This is where Miss Somers lives at present?" Lady Devonshire asked, sounding very surprised. "The sister of a mere baron?"

Prudence gave her a quick smile. "Lord Yardley was a very wealthy gentleman, Mama, despite his lower title. You would be surprised to hear of the extent of his wealth, I think." She said nothing more until the carriage pulled up at the door, glancing once at her mother before she stepped outside.

There came no one immediately to answer them as both she and Lady Devonshire stood by the carriage. The large wooden door was firmly closed, and Prudence could see no sign of anyone within.

"Whatever is this, Prudence?" Lady Devonshire said with obvious exasperation. "Did you bring us here solely to stand outside an empty house?"

Prudence made to retort, but bit back her reply. Instead, she walked toward the door and lifted her hand to rap sharply, only for the door to open. Stumbling back, she saw a tall, rather thin man standing in the doorway, dressed in a butler's livery.

"I must apologize for the tardiness in answering, my lady," he said, bowing low as a footman rushed out to hold the door open for them both. "Lady Brunswick did not expect anyone today."

"She is not expecting me," Prudence replied, glad that her mother had been too far away to hear him speak Lady Brunswick's name. "But might you ask if she will take an audience with me? Her brother married my cousin and I would be glad to speak to her again." She smiled softly. "I am Lady Prudence and my mother is Lady Devonshire."

"I will take tea in a private parlor," Lady Devonshire told the butler, marching straight into the house. "It is my daughter who wishes to speak to your mistress, not I."

Both embarrassed and, frankly, relieved that her mother would not be present, Prudence smiled apologetically at the butler and followed Lady Devonshire into the house.

"If you will wait here for a few moments," the butler murmured, having shown them both into a small parlor, "I will just go and prepare my mistress for your arrival."

Prudence nodded and the butler quit the room at once. She waited for him to return but did not say anything to her mother, who was looking all about the room with an expression of disdain. Prudence tightened her hands together in her lap, feeling a good deal more anxiety than she had expected. She had never once met Lady Brunswick but now she was to sit with the lady, take tea with her, and ask her a good many personal questions which the lady had no cause to answer.

"If you would come with me, Lady Prudence."

Prudence rose at once and followed the butler, just as a maid came in with a tea tray for Lady Devonshire. Her chest tightened as she walked along the hallway, worrying that she would see a frail young lady or someone unable to give her any sort of clear answer about anything.

"Lady Prudence, my lady."

The moment was upon her. Prudence stepped into the room and saw, much to her astonishment, a young lady with bright blue eyes and golden hair looking back at her. As Prudence moved forward, the lady rose and greeted her cordially, with as much gentility and elegance as any of Prudence's other acquaintances.

"You look a little surprised, Lady Prudence, but I confess that I, too, feel much the same," Lady Brunswick began as Prudence flushed with embarrassment and went to sit down in the seat offered to her. "I do not think we have met."

Prudence shook her head. "We have not, Lady Brunswick," she answered quietly. "But I knew your brother, Lord Yardley, for he wed my cousin, Mary. I—I wanted to come to..." She trailed off, struggling to find the right words to express what she wanted to say.

Lady Brunswick sat up a little straighter. "Do you mean to say you came this long way in order to express your condolences?" she asked, her voice a little tremulous. "Goodness, Lady Prudence. You must be a very kind soul indeed."

It was with an effort that Prudence managed to stop herself from exclaiming aloud. She had thought that Lady Brunswick would have remained entirely cut off from the world and would have no knowledge, as yet, of what had occurred. Instead, she took a few moments to collect herself before she replied, which allowed Lady Brunswick a chance to pour tea for them both. Prudence took it from her with a small smile and murmur of thanks.

"You are aware of what occurred, then?" Prudence asked softly. "I thought that, perhaps being away from London, you might not yet have been informed."

Lady Brunswick smiled sadly. "My husband informed me of it," she said, a little dully. "He wrote to me the moment he heard the news—a day after the event, I believe."

"I see," Prudence murmured, tilting her head just a fraction. "That would have been the twenty-first, I think." She watched Lady Brunswick closely, her heart beginning to hammer hard within her chest.

"The day before, in fact," Lady Brunswick sighed as a tight hand clasped around Prudence's heart. "I recall that he wrote the date as the twentieth at the top of his letter." A small sigh escaped her. "You are very kind to come all this way to visit me."

Prudence said nothing for a moment, studying the lady carefully. There appeared to be no guile in her, nothing that would make Prudence believe that there was any sort of

falsehood to her manner. The desire to tell her what Lord Brunswick was doing was still deep within her heart, but Prudence knew she could not. It would only break the lady's heart when she was already in the depths of sorrow.

"You did not want to come to London yourself, with Lord Brunswick?" she asked, picking up and sipping her tea.

Lady Brunswick shook her head. "I thought about attending, but I confess I have always had a sensitive constitution. My health can be, at times, rather frail and my husband thought it best for me to remain here." She smiled fondly at the thought of her husband, astonishing Prudence somewhat. "Besides which, I am soon to go into confinement. Thus, I did not want to hold him back from the enjoyments of the Season. I look forward to his return."

Prudence blinked in surprise before quickly congratulating the lady. With such a thin figure, she had never once suspected that the lady was with child, but it seemed that she was so and very happy with it. "I must admit that I had not heard of your marriage," Prudence said, hoping she had not insulted the lady with such a statement. "Lord Yardley did not once mention it to me."

Lady Brunswick nodded. "It was all kept rather quiet," she said, a faint blush in her cheeks. "I shall not tell you all, Lady Prudence, for it is to my own shame that the marriage took place so hastily. But it is all settled now, at least, and for that I am very grateful indeed."

Prudence hesitated for a moment, then pressed on with a question that she knew might very well have the lady no longer eager for her company.

"You must forgive my rudeness, Lady Brunswick, but might I ask you a particularly sensitive question? You will think me very rude indeed, but I can assure you it is for good reason." She did not wait for Lady Brunswick to agree but continued regardless. "Might I ask if Lord Brunswick has had any financial difficulties of late?"

Instantly, Lady Brunswick's expression changed. Her brows drew low over her eyes and her lips pulled thin.

"The reason I ask," Prudence said hastily, quickly forced to come up with some excuse, "is that my betrothed, one Lord Stoneleigh, has noticed that Lord Brunswick has been gambling heavily and despite his encouragements not to do so, Lord Brunswick seems determined to believe that his luck will soon change."

Lady Brunswick's expression crumpled. Her eyes filled with tears and her lower lip trembled. There was a pallor in her cheeks now that had not been there before and as Prudence watched, she felt such a deep sense of guilt rising up within her that she did not know what to do.

"My husband has lost a good deal of money," Lady Brunswick whispered, reaching for her tea as though that would fortify her. "He made some investments which have not come through. He has tried desperately to regain what was lost for the sake of the estate and for me but has not yet been able to do so." Her eyes shut and she let out a ragged breath. "To know that he is now gambling with the little he has left—"

"I think he has had some success," Prudence interrupted quickly, in the hope of encouraging Lady Brunswick somewhat. "From what I remember, Lord Yardley told me

that he made certain you had an expensive dowry." She smiled warmly at Lady Brunswick, hating that she was lying yet again. "And diamonds to go with them."

Lady Brunswick smiled, a faraway look in her eyes. "That is so," she answered, rather sadly. "My brother was a very wealthy gentleman, which surprised a good many people since he was only a baron. When the arrangement was made with Lord Brunswick, my brother made certain that I would be well taken care of. The dowry was great and the diamonds..." She shook her head. "I still recall seeing them. My brother gave me the most wonderful and astonishing of gifts on the occasion of my marriage. The kindness of him, I shall never forget."

"I should like to see them one day," Prudence told her, and the lady nodded.

"Then you must attend a ball or a dinner party here one day," she told her. "For those are the only times I am permitted to wear such expensive items." A quiet laugh escaped her. "My husband is very particular about such matters, but I do not mind. Just knowing that this was what my brother did is more than enough for me at present."

Feeling the atmosphere turn sorrowful once more, Prudence rose to her feet. The time for her visit was now at an end. "I am glad to have met you at last, Lady Brunswick," she said honestly. "I am truly sorry for what you have lost. It must be a great pain to your soul."

Lady Brunswick rose also, holding out one hand to Prudence, and, when she gave it to her, pressing it gently.

"Your visit has encouraged me, Lady Prudence," she said, making Prudence's guilt flare all the more. "Thank you for traveling such a long distance to speak to me. I am truly grateful."

"Thank you for receiving me," Prudence replied, wondering if Lady Brunswick would still feel the same when the truth of Lord Brunswick's actions and Prudence's part in revealing them was shown to her. "Good afternoon, Lady Brunswick."

"Good afternoon, Lady Prudence."

Despite knowing that Lady Prudence had returned from her short trip to visit Lady Brunswick, Felix now found himself forced to wait until his dear lady had rested and recovered enough to see him. However, the note she had sent him had told him everything he needed to know. Lady Brunswick was alive and well, with all of her faculties and only a frailness of health keeping her from London. Lady Prudence had also stated that the lady in question appeared to be very fond of her husband and had spoken well of him, leaving him in no doubt that Lord Brunswick had not revealed his true character to his wife. Lady Prudence had also written to inform him that the diamonds were those of Lady Brunswick's, given to her by Lord Yardley as part of the betrothal agreement, and that Lady Brunswick had also stated that her husband was in financial constraints. Armed with this knowledge, Felix made his way to White's, knowing that Lord Brunswick liked to frequent the place most evenings. Lord Claverhouse had assured him that he would be able to make certain that Lord Brunswick attended there this evening, given that they were both to be at the same soiree beforehand. Perhaps, Felix mused, it was now time to speak to Lord Brunswick a little more openly.

"Stoneleigh, why did you not tell me about your betrothal?"

Lord Claverhouse rose and came toward him the moment Felix set foot inside the establishment.

"I confess that I quite forgot," Felix told him airily, as Lord Claverhouse threw his head back and laughed. "In truth, Claverhouse, it was not as expected as you might think." Seeing how the smile began to fade from his friend's face, Felix allowed himself a broad smile. "It is not that I am not pleased, however, for I am truly delighted to have found myself engaged." Taking a small step closer, he lowered his voice. "It is only that neither Lady Prudence nor I had ever even considered such a thing, nor even allowed ourselves to discuss it. She and I were in search of something, only for Lord Brunswick to appear in the distance." His shoulders lifted into a shrug and he spread his hands. "What else could I do?"

Lord Claverhouse gaped at him. "You mean to tell me that this was nothing more than a mistake?"

"Not a mistake at all. It was a wonderful surprise," Felix assured him. "I find myself in love with Lady Prudence, I confess—and she, I hope, with me, although we have not

spoken in such open terms as yet." Chuckling, he put one hand on his friend's arm. "So you see, you were quite correct. I did find something remarkable in Lady Prudence. She is the only one who has ever truly caught my interest in the way I had always hoped. I am quite taken with her, Claverhouse. I look forward to making her my bride."

Lord Claverhouse lifted his brows in surprise, then grinned. "I am glad to hear it," he said firmly. "And I shall wish you happy, Lord Stoneleigh, for it is the greatest gift a man can have to find a wife who not only intrigues him but who fills his heart with affection, compassion, and adoration." Making his way back toward where he had come from, he looked at Felix over his shoulder. "When does the wedding take place?"

Felix sat down with a contented sigh. "I cannot be certain as yet, for the lady was away on a short visit. I am to call upon her tomorrow so that preparations might begin."

Lord Claverhouse smiled and gestured to the footman, who nodded and stepped away. "I look forward to attending," he said, and Felix thanked him. "Now, Lord Brunswick is not here as yet, but I am certain that he will attend soon. There is to be a game of cards tonight, it seems, and Lord Brunswick is eager to join them. It seems that his betrothed is to make her appearance in London tomorrow, in order to shop for her trousseau." He tilted his head and looked at Felix. "It is odd that none in society know of Lord Brunswick's marriage. I would have thought that someone might have heard of it."

"Lady Prudence wrote to me, stating that from what Lady Brunswick said, there appeared to be some sort of scandal around the time of their engagement." He shrugged again. "I presume they were both caught in an indelicate position and plans were put in place almost at once."

"And Lord Brunswick has not had any eagerness to speak of it to anyone," Lord Claverhouse mused. "And given that Lady Brunswick is nothing more than the sister of a baron, she will not have had any particularly lofty acquaintances to inform."

"Meaning that it is all quite unknown," Felix answered with a shake of his head. "I have already decided what we must do next, however. I shall speak to Lord Brunswick myself this evening and tell him that I believe Lady Prudence has whatever it is he has been looking for." A small smile tugged at the corner of his mouth, although his brows furrowed. "The man shall know that Lady Prudence has the box, which will, no doubt, make him quite determined to retrieve it from her. I shall invite him to meet with us both, to convince him that I can fetch him the box and bring it with me, and the rest, I think, shall naturally follow."

"But what shall be the consequences for him?" Lord Claverhouse asked, frowning. "If you have only Lady Prudence present, then Lord Brunswick can continue just as he is at present. He will feel no urgency to speak of what he has done to anyone, and even if both you and Lady Prudence speak of it to others, Lord Brunswick might be able to convince his wife-to-be and her family that there is no truth in what you say. If you bring Lady Brunswick with you, however, that might force his hand."

Felix frowned but shook his head. "I cannot do so," he said slowly, realizing what Lord Claverhouse meant and that, evidently, there was a good deal of merit to it. "His betrothed's father is a Lord Haydock, I believe."

Lord Claverhouse nodded. "A very wealthy gentleman."

"Which might very well be why Lord Brunswick seeks to wed her," Felix mused. "I shall have to meet with Lord Haydock privately. He will need to be present when we meet, else the whole situation might be for naught." Making to say more, a sudden movement caught his eye and he shut his mouth tightly, seeing Lord Brunswick enter the room. His hat was pulled low over his eyes and, even when he removed it, the sense of shadow did not leave the gentleman's expression. There was no happiness in his eyes, no smile upon his lips. Instead, there was nothing more than a sense of frustration, of anger, and perhaps, a little pain.

"Good evening, Brunswick."

Lord Claverhouse's cheery voice seemed to fill the room. "You have made it, then."

Lord Brunswick inclined his head. "I have," he answered without intonation. "Good evening, Lord Stoneleigh. You are to join the game of cards also?" His eyes searched Felix's face but Felix shook his head, unwilling to tie himself down to a game that would last the remainder of the evening and well into the following day.

"I will not," he said, with what he hoped was evident sorrow. "Although, when you have a moment, might I speak with you?" Picking up the glass the footman brought over on a tray, Felix turned his gaze back to Lord Brunswick. "It is a matter of some importance, I think."

This captured Lord Brunswick's attention in a moment, for his eyes flared, his jaw set, and he gave a terse nod as though he already knew what Felix wanted to discuss.

"I will gladly excuse myself and fetch another drink," Lord Claverhouse said, rising from his chair with an easy smile on his face. "Can I bring you a brandy, Lord Brunswick?"

Lord Brunswick murmured a word of thanks and then sat down in the vacated chair. He looked steadily at Felix, his gaze fixed and unmoving.

"I think, Lord Brunswick, that I might know what Lord Yardley has given to Lady Prudence," Felix began, keeping his voice low. "We are betrothed now, as you well know, and that has brought about a closer intimacy between myself and Lady Prudence. She has told me about Lord Yardley, about how he was rather dear to her since, I believe, she witnessed his great care toward Mary, his late wife."

"Who was Lady Prudence's cousin, from what I understand," Lord Brunswick muttered, his expression still much the same. "Do you mean to state that Lady Prudence had informed you that Lord Yardley gave her something of importance?"

Felix nodded. "I believe so, yes. She told me that he asked her to keep something for him, for safekeeping." He shrugged one shoulder in what he hoped was a nonchalant manner. "She did not tell me what it was, however, and I am not at all certain that she herself knows, for she is not the sort of creature to simply open up a parcel for the sake of knowing what is within."

"And she has not given the box back to the estate?" Lord Brunswick asked, but Felix shook his head.

"I think she is waiting for the new Lord Yardley to come to town—he is to make arrangements to do so shortly, I understand—and will then give the parcel to him instead, along with the explanation of how she came to receive it."

Lord Brunswick nodded slowly, his gaze darting away from Felix for a moment. "I see,"

he said, speaking with such care that Felix could practically see the thoughts turning over one another. "And do you think, Lord Stoneleigh, that you might be able to convince Lady Prudence to return this box to me? Once she hears my explanation, I am sure that—"

"I would be glad to have her meet with you, of course," Felix interrupted as Lord Claverhouse came back toward them. "I think it would make a good deal more sense to her if you were to explain it all, Lord Brunswick. I fear that I would forget an important detail or be unable to give her the full explanation that she requires."

Lord Brunswick agreed in a moment. "Excellent. I should be glad to do so."

"Are you attending Lord Claverhouse's ball in two days' time?" Felix asked, glancing up at Lord Claverhouse, who had handed Lord Brunswick a drink. "Why not arrange to have a quiet discussion with her there? I am sure Lord Claverhouse would be glad to give us a small parlor so that we can talk over the matter. I am certain that once Lady Prudence hears what you have to say, she will completely understand."

This seemed to bring a great deal of relief to Lord Brunswick, for he nodded and let out a long breath, settling back into the chair a little more.

"That would be very pleasing," he said, and Lord Claverhouse quickly expressed that he would do whatever was required. "Thank you both. You do not know just how glad I am to hear such news. It is a great weight from my heart."

Felix smiled and rose. "I shall leave you both to your game of cards," he said with a quick bow. "Until the ball, Lord Claverhouse, Lord Brunswick. I wish you both the very best of luck."



"IT IS VERY good to see you again, Lady Prudence."

She smiled up at him, a happiness in her eyes that he felt himself within the depths of his heart.

"I am glad to be returned to you," she said, her arm looped through his. "And Mama is quite contented to send the maid with us, now that we are betrothed."

Felix laughed, knowing just how relieved he was himself that Lady Devonshire was not with them this afternoon. "Indeed," he chuckled as Lady Prudence blushed prettily. "And are you quite certain of the arrangements for this afternoon?"

Lady Prudence nodded, her cheeks still holding a little color as one or two dark curls escaped from her bonnet and danced around her temples in the breeze. "As you are aware, I met Lady Josephine yesterday afternoon—by chance, I must say, for we both stepped into the bookshop at the same time and came into quite a discussion about our favorite novels of late."

"And she said she would be here this afternoon. With her parents."

"With her mother, at least," Prudence replied, a trifle anxiously. "But you did say that Lord Claverhouse had made certain to introduce himself to Lord Haydock already?"

Felix chuckled. "Yes, Lord Claverhouse has been very busy on our behalf, Lady Prudence. He made certain to greet Lord Haydock and quickly issued an invitation to his ball tomorrow evening." Tilting his head, Felix looked down at his bride-to-be. "So long as

I can garner an introduction today with either Lord Haydock or Lady Haydock, then all will be well, I am sure."

Lady Prudence let out a long breath, her smile fading slightly. "I confess to feeling rather anxious about the situation, Lord Stoneleigh. We are very close to bringing the truth to Lord Brunswick, to making certain that both Lord Haydock and the ton are aware of his marriage to Lady Brunswick, but in my heart, I feel a great sorrow for Lady Brunswick herself. I do not want to bring her any sort of distress, and yet I am certain that we will have to do so."

Taking a moment to consider his response, Felix reached across and settled his hand over Lady Prudence's for a moment, as it rested on his arm. "It will not be either you or I that brings Lady Brunswick distress," he told Lady Prudence. "Rather, it will be her husband. Her husband has been the one to do so thus far. Lord Brunswick's lies and mistakes and cruel choices are what will bring Lady Brunswick distress, nothing else."

Lady Prudence let out a heavy sigh but gave him a brief nod, smiling up at him for just a moment before she returned her attention to Hyde Park. Felix said nothing more, allowing a comfortable silence to envelop them both. They were so very close to reaching the end of things, of bringing it all to a close. What happiness would be waiting for them once it had all come to a conclusion. They could begin to consider their own wedding day, to allow themselves to become buried in the details of what would be the most important and most treasured days of his life. They were so very close now. So close that Felix could almost feel the contentment that he knew was waiting for them both, just out of reach.

"There!"

The excitement in Lady Prudence's voice pulled him back to the present at once.

"She is walking toward us," Lady Prudence half whispered, her hand tight on his arm. "I knew that she would be in the park this afternoon, but I did not think we would come across her so easily."

"It seems our intentions are blessed," Felix remarked, narrowing his eyes just a fraction so that he might have a better look at the three people approaching. It appeared to be a young lady, walking alongside her mother, and, if he was correct, Lord Haydock was the gentleman walking behind. "Are you able to make introductions, Lady Prudence?"

She beamed at him. "Of course."

Within a few minutes, Felix found himself being introduced first to Lady Josephine, who was, much to his surprise, a rather plain-looking young lady, with a soft-spoken voice and a very quiet manner. She showed no eagerness in being introduced to him but rather greeted him politely and asked him no questions thereafter. It was the job of Lady Haydock to do so, for she stepped in almost at once and asked a good many questions of him before he had the opportunity to be introduced to Lord Haydock.

The man was not overly tall but was rather stocky in appearance, with broad shoulders and a jacket that seemed to strain over his chest as he greeted Felix. With greying hair and a thick moustache, lines around his eyes and across his forehead, he gave the appearance of being a gentleman of severe character, which, Felix considered, boded rather well for what would soon follow.

“Capital to meet you,” Lord Haydock said, his voice low and gruff. “You are betrothed to Lady Prudence, I understand.” His eyes turned to Lady Prudence, who was now deep in conversation with Lady Josephine and Lady Haydock. Her maid stood only a few steps behind.

“I am, yes,” Felix answered, a sense of pride filling his chest. “And very happy indeed.”

Lord Haydock did not immediately answer but studied Felix carefully, as though he did not believe such a sentiment to be true. After a moment, however, he gave a small shrug and then turned his attention back toward his daughter.

“Lady Josephine is also engaged,” he said, rather importantly. “I did not think she would ever marry, for whilst she has a good nature, she is rather plain and does not make excellent conversation, as I would wish.” He heaved a great sigh as though his daughter was nothing more than a disappointment to him. “But then we were fortunate to meet with Lord Brunswick—I am certain you are acquainted with him—and the match was made very quickly indeed.”

Felix nodded, feeling a tightness in his lungs but refusing to give in to it. “I am well acquainted with Lord Brunswick,” he replied honestly. “As for the engagement—yes, I have heard of it.” He eyed Lord Haydock for a long moment, wondering what to say and how best to say it. “In fact, tomorrow evening, there is to be a game of cards between myself, Lord Brunswick, and Lord Claverhouse, as well as one or two others. I should be honored if you would join us.”

Lord Haydock lifted one thick eyebrow. “You mean to say there will be a card room during the ball?” he said, sounding rather pleased. “Capital! I should be very glad to join you.”

“Then I shall make sure someone is sent to bring you to the game when we are ready to play,” Felix replied, his heart swelling with relief. “I should return to Lady Prudence now, Lord Haydock. If you will excuse me.”

Lord Haydock nodded and bade Felix farewell—although whether or not the man was smiling, Felix could not tell given that the great, grey moustache hid most of the man’s mouth. With a quick word of farewell to Lady Josephine and Lady Haydock, he offered Lady Prudence his arm and together, they continued along their path.

“Well?” Lady Prudence asked, her voice quiet and her eyes filled with hope. “Did you achieve what you wished?”

He nodded, looking down into her eyes and wishing desperately that he might take her into his arms and hold her tight against him, such was his relief.

“I have,” he said, and she let out a soft exclamation of gladness. “All we need do now is wait for tomorrow evening.” Patting her hand, he felt anticipation grow steadily within his heart. “And then, finally, all will become clear.”

Prudence had to admit that she was a little anxious. Lord Claverhouse's ball was in full swing and she had behaved just as normal, knowing that to do anything else would draw the attention of either her mother or others around her. Thus, she had accepted dances from many gentlemen, already danced a good many, and had found herself laughing and smiling, even though she felt like doing no such thing. All the while, she had been looking out for Lord Stoneleigh, worrying what would happen when they finally all met together and whether or not Lord Brunswick would actually admit to what he had done. Lord Claverhouse, Lady Claverhouse, Lord Stoneleigh, and she had met together last evening for a short time to discuss what would occur this evening and, whilst Prudence was certain as to what was expected of her, she still felt a good deal of apprehension.

"Lady Prudence."

Turning her head, she felt her tight chest relax just a fraction. "Lord Claverhouse."

She curtsied as the gentleman approached her, his eyes warm as Lady Claverhouse walked alongside him.

"My dear Lady Prudence," Lady Claverhouse said, reaching out to take Lady Prudence's hands. "How very good to see you again." Her eyes were gentle, as though she knew what Prudence was struggling with. "After Lord Claverhouse explained all to me last evening, I have felt a great burden for you. How much you have endured! You must forgive my absence from society of late. I have been quite unwell, you see...although it is all for a good reason." She shot a glance toward Lord Claverhouse, who puffed out his chest and beamed with delight.

At once, Prudence realized what was being said. "My congratulations, Lady Claverhouse," she said as Lady Claverhouse flushed a little with delight. "I am very happy for you both."

"I thank you," Lady Claverhouse replied, just as Prudence caught sight of her mother approaching. "Now, shall we perhaps go to prepare?"

Prudence took in a deep breath, giving a quick nod to Lady Claverhouse before turning to her mother.

"Mama," she said, smiling at Lady Devonshire. "Lady Claverhouse has asked me to take a turn with her about the room. Might I go?"

Lady Devonshire did not hesitate but beamed with evident delight and practically shooed Prudence toward Lady Claverhouse.

"That is very kind of you, Lady Claverhouse," Lady Devonshire said, leaving Prudence solely in Lady Claverhouse's care. "I am certain Prudence would be glad to be in your company for as long as you wish to have her within it."

Lady Claverhouse laughed and assured Lady Devonshire that she would safely return Lady Prudence to her later in the evening and it was with this reassurance that Prudence turned away from her mother and began to walk alongside the lady.

"The parlor is ready and waiting," Lord Claverhouse murmured quietly. "I believe Lord Stoneleigh is speaking to Lord Haydock at the moment. It will not be long now."

"I can take Lady Prudence to the parlor, my dear," Lady Claverhouse said, looking at her husband. "Are you not to go in search of Lord Brunswick?"

"I am," Lord Claverhouse admitted, looking over his shoulder. "Ah, there is Lord Stoneleigh now." He smiled at his wife and then at Prudence, but Prudence saw the hint of steel in his eyes. "Excuse me for a moment, if you would. And be bold, Lady Prudence. The end is within sight."



"YOU ARE NERVOUS?"

Prudence reached across and took Lord Stoneleigh's hand. "I am," she admitted softly as Lady Claverhouse took her seat at the back of the room. "I know what I must say and what I must do, but what if Lord Brunswick does not admit to what we know is the truth?"

"We must believe that he will," Lord Stoneleigh told her calmly. "And if he will not admit it to us, then I am certain he will do so when Lord Haydock arrives." He glanced at the door. "I have already spoken to Lord Haydock and informed him that Lord Claverhouse will come to bring him to the supposed card game within a few minutes. When he arrives, I am sure that Lord Brunswick will have no other choice but to speak the truth."

Prudence made to say more, only to stop as she heard two voices approaching them. Her heart began to pound but she forced herself to rise, her hands now held in front of her, her fingers twining together as she lifted her chin while taking in a deep breath to steady herself.

"Ah, good evening, Lord Stoneleigh, Lady Prudence," Lord Brunswick said, entering the room with a broad smile spreading across his face. "How very good to see you. Thank you, Lord Stoneleigh, for arranging this meeting. I am truly grateful." He bowed toward Lord Stoneleigh, who merely smiled and gestured to a chair.

Prudence sat down quickly, feeling her legs begin to shake beneath her. Taking steadying breaths, she sat with a straight back and her shoulders down, trying to appear calm and prepared for what was about to take place.

"You will excuse Lady Claverhouse's presence, Lord Brunswick," Lord Claverhouse said, smiling at his wife before sitting down in a chair near to the door of the parlor. "For propriety, you understand."

Lord Brunswick nodded. "Of course. We would not want anything untoward to be said of Lady Prudence."

Trying to smile, Prudence inclined her head. "I thank you for your understanding, Lord Brunswick, and for your consideration, Lord Claverhouse."

Silence followed her answer and Prudence's heart began to beat a little more quickly. It felt as though someone was tying a band across her chest and was slowly pulling it tighter and tighter, until Prudence feared that her anxiety would become quite obvious to all who were in the room.

"Lady Prudence," Lord Brunswick began, leaning forward in his chair and placing his elbows on his knees, his hands clasped together just below his chin. "I think Lord Stoneleigh has spoken to you about what Lord Yardley entrusted you with?"

Prudence took in a deep breath. "Yes," she said, glancing at Lord Stoneleigh, who gave her a small nod of encouragement. "He has spoken to me about the fact that what Lord Yardley gave to me was not his to give." She tilted her head just a fraction and narrowed her eyes. "I might ask, however, why he had it and why he then gave it to me?"

Lord Brunswick sighed heavily and shook his head. "The latter, I cannot say," he said with evident sorrow. "However, as to the former, I can tell you that I allowed Lord Yardley to borrow the items within the box that he gave you, so that he might impress a particular young lady."

Prudence frowned. "That makes very little sense," she said, drawing strength from Lord Stoneleigh's presence beside her. "Why should he show the lady diamonds that she would never own? That would not be much of an impression, given that he would have to take them away from her and then return them to you."

Again, Lord Brunswick let out a long sigh. "I cannot tell you precisely what it was that he wanted with them, Lady Prudence. I was, as I hope you understand, simply trying to be gentlemanly."

Saying nothing, Prudence continued to consider Lord Brunswick's profile. He appeared quite at his ease, speaking calmly and with evident honesty, even though she knew all too well that he spoke nothing but mistruths.

"You opened the box, then?" Lord Brunswick murmured, breaking the silence. "Lord Stoneleigh thought that you had not done so."

The explanation she had prepared the evening before came to her lips without hesitation. "When Lord Stoneleigh spoke to me about your claim of owning whatever was within, I confess that curiosity took a hold of me and I could not help but look within." She frowned hard. "Although, Lord Brunswick, can I be certain that the diamonds are yours, as you claim?"

Lord Brunswick did not appear to be in the least bit ruffled at her question. "There was a key within the box, was there not?" he said with confidence. "That key bears my symbol."

"And why was such a key with the diamonds?" Lord Stoneleigh asked as Lord Claverhouse quietly slipped from the room. Lord Brunswick glanced at the door but did not appear to be in any way disturbed by this. Instead, he turned back to Lord Stoneleigh

and answered his question.

"I placed it there simply to remind Lord Yardley that the diamonds were to be returned to me," he answered quietly. "The key itself bears no significance."

Prudence and Lord Stoneleigh exchanged a glance.

"I can assure you that those diamonds belong to me," Lord Brunswick said, a little more forcefully. "I thought you said, Lord Stoneleigh, that Lady Prudence would be willing to return them to me?"

Lord Stoneleigh took a long breath, rose to his feet, and wandered around to stand behind Prudence. She felt his presence behind her, warm and comforting, and felt some of the tension disappear from her. Lord Claverhouse would be back in only a few minutes and that was when the crux of the matter would come to the fore.

"That is what I said, yes," Lord Stoneleigh said, one hand now settling on Prudence's shoulder. "But perhaps I should not have spoken with such haste." Seeing Lord Brunswick frown, the calm expression beginning to fade from his face, Prudence tightened her fingers, forcing herself to take steadying breaths. Soon, everything would be said and Lord Brunswick would have to choose between speaking the truth and clinging to his lies. Either way, Prudence was certain that Lord Haydock would no longer allow his daughter to wed Lord Brunswick and that, at least, would be a relief.

"I do not understand what you mean," Lord Brunswick said, his brows furrowing and his eyes narrowing. "I thought, Lady Prudence, that you understood."

"I do understand," Prudence replied, just as the door opened to reveal first, Lord Haydock, and then Lord Claverhouse. "I understand more than you might know, Lord Brunswick." She looked at Lord Haydock who, having come into the room, was now looking from Lord Brunswick to Lord Stoneleigh and back again, a look of confusion on his face. Lord Claverhouse shut the door tightly and, with a small smile, leaned back against it and folded his arms across his chest.

Instantly, it felt as though storm clouds now swirled above their heads. Lord Haydock was grimacing, deep grooves forming in his forehead, and Lord Brunswick was now gripping the arms of the chair with every appearance of being fully prepared to depart.

"Lord Stoneleigh?" Lord Haydock asked gruffly. "I thought there was to be cards."

Lord Stoneleigh's hand pressed Prudence's shoulder gently. "That was what I said, Lord Haydock, but I confess that I did not tell you the truth, for fear that you would go to Lord Brunswick to demand to know what I was going to say."

"I do not understand," Lord Haydock began, but Lord Stoneleigh held out one hand, palm facing him, and, much to Prudence's relief, Lord Haydock lapsed into silence.

"Please, do be seated, Lord Haydock," Lord Claverhouse interjected, still standing by the door. "It is for the best, I assure you."

Much to Prudence's surprise—for Lord Haydock did not look like the sort of gentleman who would do what was asked of him without explanation—Lord Haydock made his way to a chair and sat down heavily, although he now wore an air of suspicion which was, Prudence considered, aimed directly toward Lord Stoneleigh.

"What is the meaning of this, Stoneleigh?" Lord Brunswick grated, his voice thin with anger. "There is no reason for you to—"

"Lord Haydock," Prudence interrupted, turning her face away from Lord Brunswick and looking directly at Lord Haydock. "I must tell you something of great importance. It concerns Lord Brunswick and, in doing so, concerns your daughter also."

Hearing a sudden gasp from Lord Brunswick, Prudence kept her eyes on Lord Haydock rather than looking back at him, even though every part of her wished to do so.

"It is to do with my late cousin's husband, Lord Yardley," she continued as Lord Haydock remained entirely still, looking at Prudence as though he was not quite certain what to make of her. "Lord Yardley was married to my cousin, Mary. She sadly died and, tragically, Lord Yardley followed her into the next life only a short time ago."

Lord Haydock ran one finger down his moustache and looked at her with a sharp eye. "I had heard of such a thing," he said without any inflection of sympathy in his voice. "That has nothing to do with Lord Brunswick, however."

Prudence allowed herself a long look in Lord Brunswick's direction. His expression was one of deep frustration and fury, but Prudence was not dissuaded from what she had to do.

"If you would allow me to explain, Lord Haydock, then I will tell you why this does, in fact, involve Lord Brunswick which, in turn, will influence your consideration of him as a suitable match for your daughter."

Lord Haydock's brows rose to a great height, his eyes widening and a look of utter astonishment creeping over his face.

"It is true, Lord Haydock," Lord Stoneleigh interrupted, before Lord Haydock could say anything. "It will take you a few minutes but all you need do is listen."

Lord Haydock glanced toward Lord Brunswick, who was, Prudence noticed, still staring furiously at her.

"Very well," he said, after a long few moments. "I will do nothing but listen and shall make no judgment until you are finished."

Gratified, Prudence turned her head to look up at Lord Stoneleigh. He nodded, gave her a tight smile, and gestured for her to continue.

"Lord Yardley approached me the day that he died," she began, aware that there was a good deal of emotion within her as she spoke of this but doing all she could to speak with clarity and calmness. "He came into the house and begged me to take care of something of great importance. When I accepted it from him, he hurried from the house, made his way to the street, and then went to cross it." Shuddering, she closed her eyes. "I did not speak to him again."

Lord Claverhouse cleared his throat. "Lord Yardley was struck by a fast-moving carriage," he said, in case Lord Haydock had not heard. "Everyone considered it an accident—save for Lady Prudence."

Again, Lord Haydock's brows shot up and he turned back to look at Prudence, who kept herself quite still under his gaze. "Indeed?" he queried, clearly disbelieving, given the twitch of his moustache. "You think that it was purposeful?"

"I do," Prudence replied firmly, looking toward Lord Brunswick. "And I believe that Lord Brunswick made quite certain that Lord Yardley never breathed air again."

"And why should I do that?" Lord Brunswick laughed, his voice filled with mockery.

“There is no good reason for—”

“Because of what Lord Yardley gave me,” Prudence replied, not allowing him to finish speaking. “The box that contained both very expensive diamonds and, of course, a small key that I was certain opened something within your house.”

Clearly scoffing, Lord Brunswick threw his head back and laughed heartily, making heat flare in Prudence’s cheeks.

“I know that it has done so,” she continued, speaking loudly over the top of Lord Brunswick’s laughter. “For both Lord Stoneleigh and I discovered what the key opened, Lord Brunswick.” Instantly, the laughter died away and, as Lord Brunswick sat up properly to look at her, she saw the change in his demeanor. “We know the truth, Lord Brunswick.” Taking in a quick breath, she steadied her gaze on Lord Brunswick, seeing the color beginning to drain from his face. “In fact, both Lord Stoneleigh and I know everything.”

Felix could tell that Lord Brunswick was rattled but he himself felt a slow growing sense of triumph. Now they came to the conclusion of the matter and Felix felt his heart quicken with both anticipation and a touch of nervousness. It all hinged on what Lord Brunswick would admit to.

"I—I do not know what you speak of," Lord Brunswick said, although the slight stammer betrayed his worry. "You are being quite foolish, Lady Prudence."

"I am not the foolish one," came the quick retort, her determination astonishing both Felix and, from the look on his face, Lord Brunswick. "You are the one who has behaved with cruelty and selfishness, thinking that others will do your bidding without question. And Lord Yardley, when he threatened to let society know the truth, was cut down before he could do so."

Clearing his throat, Lord Haydock grabbed the room's attention. "I do not understand," he said, directing his words to Lady Prudence. "What was it that Lord Yardley gave you?"

Lady Prudence took in a long breath and then began, her voice shaking only a little. She was doing remarkably well and Felix could not help but be proud of her.

"Lord Yardley gave me a box, Lord Haydock.

"I offered to assist Lady Prudence in her difficulty," Felix interjected, "and she was bold enough to trust me. When we opened the box, we discovered a set of diamonds—large, expensive ones—and a small key which bore a crest."

Lord Haydock blinked slowly, as though it was taking him some time to take in what was being said. "A crest?"

"Lord Brunswick's crest," Lady Prudence said softly, as all eyes turned once more to the gentleman in question. "What you do not know, Lord Brunswick, I am certain, is that Lord Stoneleigh discovered what box that particular small key opened."

The color immediately drained from Lord Brunswick's face. His hands remained clasped to the chair, his knuckles white, but he did not say a single word.

"I knew that you had not discovered our theft," Felix continued, speaking into the silence that was now edged with tension. "If you had known of it, you would not have been so eager to meet with us this evening. But you were foolish, Lord Brunswick. You should have made certain that the box was just as you had left it, even if it meant breaking it to pieces."

Again, Lord Haydock cleared his throat, but Lady Prudence rose to her feet, silencing the question before it had even been spoken. She held out one hand, a finger pointed toward Lord Brunswick, her other hand curling into a fist. Felix knew that she was racked with emotion, the pain of witnessing the death of Lord Yardley coming to the forefront of her mind once more.

"I know that it was you who made certain of Lord Yardley's death," she said hoarsely. "I know that you have been fighting to keep this knowledge from all of society. I know that you have been lost in debts, that the money you gained from the dowry has gone completely. I know that your only plan by which you might regain some of that wealth was to marry again, and I know that you are unable to legally do so."

Lord Brunswick placed one hand against his chest and gasped for air, clearly overwhelmed with shock. Felix moved to stand beside Lady Prudence, seeing the utter astonishment on Lord Haydock's face.

"You hid your first marriage from everyone," he said quietly. "There was a scandal, was there not? And thus, Lord Yardley made certain that his sister was wed to you."

"And no doubt, he did so by making sure there was a monetary reward," Lady Prudence added, her whole body trembling with what Felix considered was anger. "The agreement between you both gave you a good deal of coin, Lord Brunswick. And the diamonds were a gift to Lady Brunswick from her brother, on the occasion of her marriage. Diamonds that you intended to sell in order to cover some of your debts."

"I do not understand," Lord Haydock said, his voice much quieter now. "Do you mean to tell me that Lord Brunswick is already married?"

Lady Prudence turned to the older gentleman. "That is what I have discovered, yes," she said, her voice filling the room. "Lord Brunswick married Miss Elizabeth Somers a little over two years ago. There was some impropriety at the time of their meeting and thus, the marriage was kept very quiet. However, Lord Yardley made certain to ensure the marriage went ahead by giving Lord Brunswick a great deal of money, for he was a very wealthy gentleman indeed." She took in a shuddering breath, closing her eyes for just a moment. "In addition, Lord Yardley gave his sister a set of diamond jewelry, which are of great worth. And thus, he himself then married and considered both himself and his sister quite settled."

"But Lord Brunswick is not a wise gentleman," Felix added, taking another step forward and pointing hard at Lord Brunswick, who was now almost grey with fright. "This newfound wealth, rather than use it wisely, he decided to behave with foolishness and selfishness. I am certain that he has a great many debts which he simply cannot pay."

Lady Prudence shook her head. "And then, Lord Brunswick was introduced to you, Lord Haydock, and your unmarried daughter," she said, as a slightly glazed expression came over Lord Haydock's face. "I presume you spoke to him about what any gentleman who wed Lady Josephine would receive from you, in the hope that he might be persuaded to consider her."

Lord Haydock huffed out a breath or two, his eyes slowly turning toward Lord Brunswick. "I did precisely that," he agreed, his voice so quiet that Felix struggled to hear him. "Lord Brunswick presented himself as a bachelor and spoke kindly to my daughter.

She is so quiet, so dull and drab, that I did not think she would ever succeed in finding a suitable match."

Felix felt Lady Prudence stiffen beside him, clearly distressed to hear Lady Josephine being spoken of in such a way, and he reached out and took her hand in his. Now was not the time for her to speak to Lord Haydock of his daughter. They had to focus entirely on Lord Brunswick.

"When I spoke to Lord Brunswick of what I could give him in terms of the marriage agreement and her dowry, I was greatly pleased because Lord Brunswick appeared to be very keen to marry my daughter," Lord Haydock finished, closing his eyes tightly, clearly distressed now. "And thus, the engagement was made."

"And because no one but Lord Yardley knew of Lord Brunswick's previous marriage, he believed he would be able to do just as he pleased, particularly because Lord Yardley himself had not been in London and was not expected to be present for the Season either," Felix added, seeing Lord Brunswick take in a deep breath, dropping his head and lowering his shoulders so that his gaze was fixed to the floor. "Is that not so, Lord Brunswick?"

Everyone turned to look at the gentleman, but he said nothing. In fact, he did not even move and as the minutes ticked by, Felix was aware of a thin edge of anger beginning to push its way into his heart. Lord Brunswick, it seemed, was so much of a coward that he would not even admit to what he had done.

"Lord Yardley was in London, however." Lady Prudence's voice was soft, each word gently spoken but it seemed to flood the room entirely. "He came to see you. He came in the hope of greeting his sister, but you told him that she was not in London or at your estate. No doubt you were forced to tell him of where you had hidden Lady Brunswick, and Lord Yardley knew that something was wrong."

"He came in the room just as I had the diamonds in view." These were the first words Lord Brunswick had said in some time and his voice was hoarse and rasping, each word labored. "I placed them back in the box, but I knew that he had seen them."

Felix shook his head, disgusted by Lord Brunswick's actions. "He did not know the full extent of what you were intending, but being a good judge of character, he knew that something was wrong. Why else would you remove your wife to a small, country house far away from your estate?"

"He took the box from you before you could prevent him," Lady Prudence said, moving forward toward Lord Brunswick, who was now looking up at her with a dull, resigned expression. "No doubt he soon discovered news of your engagement. After all, society knew of it and thus, it would have been easy enough to find out."

Lord Haydock rose suddenly, his face white. "Do not tell me that you intended to remove Lord Yardley from this earth?" he demanded, striding toward Lord Brunswick. "Did you threaten him?"

"I had no choice!" Lord Brunswick squeaked as Lord Haydock stood over him, a threatening and intimidating figure. "I have no coin left. I have nothing. I needed Lady Josephine. I—"

"You needed my wealth and her dowry," Lord Haydock roared, his voice filled with the

very same anger that now filled Felix. "You treated her callously. You have treated your wife with such cruelty that I cannot imagine what she will think of you. And you have taken the life of a man who did nothing other than want to protect his sister and make certain my daughter was not involved in a scandal." Reaching out, he grabbed Lord Brunswick by the collar, shaking him furiously. "How dare you!"

Felix did not know what to do. Lord Haydock had every right to be furious, but still he watched the situation closely. There was justice to be served, yes, but it could not be meted out without consideration.

"He threatened Lord Yardley, and thus, Lord Yardley came to me," Lady Prudence said quietly, her hands now wrapped around his arm as she looked up into his face. "Lord Yardley must have known that he was in danger."

"And he was right," Felix murmured as Lord Haydock finally released Lord Brunswick. "Lord Brunswick acted quickly. He took Lord Yardley's life without hesitation, even though I am certain he did not drive the carriage himself." Closing his eyes, he drew in a long breath. "And now justice must be done."

Lady Prudence stared at him with wide eyes, but Felix gave her a quick smile and then stepped forward.

"You have done a great wrong, Brunswick," he said darkly. "There are consequences for what you have done. Your debts, no doubt, will chase after you, but you will also face the challenge from the new Lord Yardley. He will, I am certain, demand retribution."

Lord Brunswick pressed himself back into his chair, his eyes wide with horror. He was entirely undone, unable to refute a single thing that had been laid at his feet. Felix felt no sympathy for him, but only a great sense of relief that not only was Lady Josephine safe, but also the matter was, finally, at a close.

"I have already written to him," Felix continued, aware of the tense anger that flooded every part of him. "Once he is in London, I shall tell him all. He will demand you meet him in a duel, Brunswick."

"As do I," Lord Haydock grated. "For the shame you have brought to my family name, and for what your lack of respect and consideration will do to my daughter." Stepping back, he lifted his chin. "I will have my retribution, Brunswick."

A whimper came from Lord Brunswick, but Felix's lip curled with distaste. The man was nothing but a coward and even now, could not admit to what he had done.

"We shall leave you now," he stated, coming back to Lady Prudence and slipping an arm about her waist. "But have no doubt. All of society will know of this. Your name will be dragged through the mud. Your debts will come snapping at your heels. There is nothing left here for you."

"No, no, please!"

Lord Brunswick seemed to fall out of his chair, his knees hitting the floor, his hands held up beseechingly.

"For the sake of my wife and my unborn child, do not."

Lord Haydock let out a harsh bark of laughter. "You did not spare my daughter, or Lord Yardley," he said furiously. "Why should we now consider you?"

Lord Brunswick's eyes were huge with desperation and fear. "I shall leave," he said

hoarsely. "I shall leave for the continent and never return. Only, I pray, do not let my wife know of this."

There was something rather pitiful in Lord Brunswick's manner, Felix considered, looking at Lord Haydock. And yet, the motivation he could not question. To leave England and to hide away would mean that the debts Lord Brunswick had accrued would never follow him—but it would also mean that his wife would be spared the horror of knowing what he had done and, indeed, that Lady Josephine would be kept from the gossip and rumors that would fly all around her soon after.

"It is not my choice to make," Felix said, gesturing to Lady Prudence and to Lord Haydock. "What say you both?"

Lady Prudence lifted her chin and stepped closer. "I have met your wife, Lord Brunswick," she said quietly. "You are not worthy of her. But for her sake, I will accept your offer. But you are to be gone by the end of the sennight."

"And should you return, then it will be the end of you," Lord Haydock grated. "My son will know of this. We shall keep watch at the docks for years, if we must. But I must never hear your name again, else the justice you have escaped at this moment will be brought down upon you without hesitation."

Felix saw Lord Brunswick collapse to the floor, his forehead resting on his hands, but he said nothing more. Turning to Lady Prudence, he smiled at her and held out his hand.

"It is over," Lady Prudence breathed, taking it at once. "It is at an end."

"And I am in your debt," Lord Haydock replied, seemingly now a little more in control of himself. "I do not know what I shall say to Josephine, but I must—"

"Spare her the truth," Lady Prudence interrupted, putting one hand on Lord Haydock's arm. "And please, if you will allow me, I would be glad to befriend her and guide her through society. I can think of at least three worthy gentlemen who might be willing to consider her." Her smile was a little tremulous, but it remained regardless. "There is still hope, Lord Haydock."

Lord Haydock said nothing for a moment and, much to Felix's astonishment, he saw tears flood the older gentleman's eyes.

"You are very kind, Lady Prudence," Lord Haydock said, his voice breaking with emotion. "I should be glad to welcome you into my daughter's company whenever you can spare the time."

Lady Prudence smiled, nodded, and turned back to Felix. He was in awe of her at this moment, finding her kindness and gentle spirit to be more beautiful than anything he had ever felt or seen before. He was almost humbled before her, feeling himself entirely inadequate.

"Shall we return to the ball, Lord Stoneleigh?" she asked, seemingly quite calm. "I think it will soon be our time to waltz."

"Gladly, Lady Prudence," he told her, wishing he could tell her in this moment just how much his heart held for her. "I can think of nothing better."

EPILOGUE

Prudence held out her hands to Lord Stoneleigh as he came into the gardens. He took them both in his and lifted them to his lips, kissing them gently.

"Oh, Felix," Prudence murmured, immediately stepping into his embrace the moment he let go of her hands. "I have been so very eager to see you."

Lord Stoneleigh smiled and bent his head to kiss her cheek. "How do you fare, Prudence?"

Reaching up, she touched his face gently, marveling at the sense of freedom that filled her. "I am contented at long last," she answered truthfully. "My only concern is Lady Brunswick and her unborn child." Her brow furrowed. "If it is a son, then he will be the new heir. What will he come into? Debts? Losses? Shame and embarrassment?"

"Then you have nothing to concern yourself with," Lord Stoneleigh told her gently. "I have decided to aid Lady Brunswick as best I can."

She could not quite catch her breath, staring up into his face, struggling to believe what she had heard.

"I have seen your kindness and your generosity, Prudence," Lord Stoneleigh continued, his voice soft. "I want to emulate your character and thus, I have decided to do what I can for her. After all, Lady Brunswick has done nothing worthy of punishment—and because I know that Lord Yardley meant a great deal to you."

Prudence found she could not speak. Throwing her arms about Lord Stoneleigh's neck, she held him close to her, tears beginning to press through her lashes as her heart swelled with love for him.

"You are the most wonderful of gentlemen," she told him, closing her eyes tightly. "I could not have ever reached this place of happiness and relief without you."

When she loosened her arms, Lord Stoneleigh was there, looking deeply into her eyes.

"You are my example, Prudence," he told her, making a tear slip from her eyes. "You have had courage, determination, strength, and kindness. You have captured my heart, my very soul. There is nothing more that I want other than to be your husband, so that I can spend every day in your company, every moment trying to bring you the very same happiness you now bring to me."

Before she could stop herself, Prudence pressed herself up on her toes and lifted her face closer to his. His lips were on hers in a moment, their kiss one of joy and gladness,

carrying a promise that their future together would hold a happiness that, as yet, Prudence had never once experienced.

"I love you, Felix," she whispered against his mouth, her arms now around his neck. "You have been a tower of strength to me, right from the very first moment we met. I do not think that I could pass a single day without you, for without your company and presence, I find no joy."

His smile was tender. "Then you speak of my heart also, Prudence," he told her. "My love for you shall never fade, it shall never wither away. Instead, it will grow and flourish until it is wrapped all around you, holding you tight to my heart, so that you are always assured of my love."

Prudence smiled softly and let herself kiss him again. She had been through such an ordeal, such a struggle, but Lord Stoneleigh had never once allowed her to battle alone. Without him, she would never have found the truth. How much she had to be grateful for, how much she owed him—and how much her heart loved him, for he truly was the best of men.

"I love you," she whispered, reluctantly untangling herself from Lord Stoneleigh's embrace as she heard her mother's footsteps approaching. "And I shall do so every day, for the rest of my life."



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