

A man and a woman in Regency-era clothing are shown in a close embrace, nearly kissing. The woman is wearing a vibrant green dress with a full skirt and a low neckline. The man is wearing a dark blue coat over a patterned waistcoat and a white cravat. They are standing in a library with tall bookshelves filled with books in the background. The lighting is warm and intimate.

USA Today Bestselling Author

Arietta  
Richmond

*The  
Last  
Letter*

*A His Majesty's Hounds Short Story  
Sweet and Clean Regency Romance*



# **The Lost Letter**

**A short story in the His Majesty's Hounds world.**

**Arietta Richmond**

ARIETTA RICHMOND



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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, organisations, events, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or used fictitiously.



## Dedication

For everyone who had the grace to be patient while this book, and every other book that I have written, was coming into existence, who provided cups of tea, and food, when the writing would not let me go, and endured countless times being asked for opinions.

For the readers who inspire me to continue writing, by buying my books! Especially for those of you who have taken the time to email me, or to leave reviews, and tell me what you love about my books, and what you'd like to see more of – thank you – I'm listening. I hope that you enjoy this series, just as much as my other books.

For my growing team of beta readers and advance reviewers – it's thanks to you that others can enjoy these books in the best presentation possible! (and if you are reading this and would like to join the team, let me know by a message through my website – I'd love to have your help!)

And for all the writers of Regency Historical Romance, whose books I read, who first inspired me to write in this fascinating period.

# Table of Contents

Dedication .....	v
Table of Contents .....	vi
Prologue .....	1
Chapter One .....	3
Chapter Two .....	9
Chapter Three .....	17
Chapter Four .....	21
Chapter Five .....	29
Chapter Six .....	33
Chapter Seven .....	39
Chapter Eight.....	45
Chapter Nine .....	49
Epilogue.....	57
About the Author .....	60
Here is your <b>preview</b> of Claiming the Heart of a Duke .....	62
Chapter One .....	63



Other Books from Arietta .....	71
Books in the A Duke's Daughters – the Elbury Bouquet Series.....	71
Books in the His Majesty's Hounds Series.....	72
Books in The Derbyshire Set .....	74
Books in 'The Duke of Traithewood's Legacy Series' .....	76
Books in the Regency Gothic Series .....	77
Books in the Regency Scandals Series.....	78
Books in the Nettlefold Chronicles .....	79
The Her Duke Collection .....	80
Themed Regency Collections .....	81
Regency Collections with Other Authors .....	82
Other Books from Arietta .....	84
Regency Colouring Books.....	84
Other Books from Dreamstone Publishing.....	85

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Claiming the Heart of a Duke	Intriguing the Viscount
Giving a Heart of Lace	Being Lady Harriet's Hero
Enchanting the Duke	Redeeming the Marquess
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## Prologue

**1809**

He sanded the letter and stared at it as it sat there on his desk, the ink becoming completely dry. Did he have the courage to send it? He flinched away from the thought – every time before, when he had tried to express his feelings, to tell her the truth of what was in his heart, his courage had failed him.

After all, what would she say? He had believed, for years, that she loved him, as he loved her, but recently, since his father's death and the weight of the title coming to rest on his shoulders, everything had become so uncertain. And now, here he was, dealing with estate matters, while she was off in London, having her Season, surrounded by avid suitors.

He was not, by nature, an effusive man, nor a romantic, but now, his heart ached within him at the thought that one of those suitors might charm her into marriage. He could not bear the idea of losing her. But... he had never expressly told her of his feelings for her, and she had not said anything specific to him, of her own care for him – well, not since they were children of five or so, that was.

Should he send this letter, this bald recitation of his feelings?

Or would that be foolish, and simply leave him open to even worse heartache than he suffered now?

Was it better not to know, to wait in hope that she might declare her feelings for him first? But if he didn't send it, then how could she know that he cared as he did?

His head ached from thinking about it.

He sighed, carefully folded the now dry letter, and slipped it into the somewhat maudlin book of love poems that he'd been reading, then set the book on the shelf beside his desk. He would consider the matter overnight, perhaps even for a few days, and then make a decision about sending it.

\*\*\*\*\*

***Two days later.***

He looked up from the book he was reading when the butler tapped on the door.

"A letter for you, my Lord, from your cousin in London. It came on today's mail coach, and Wilson collected it when he went into the village for supplies."

He regarded the letter curiously – his cousin rarely wrote to him. Shrugging, he set his book down, lifted the letter from the correspondence tray, and broke the seal. The butler quietly left the room.

The letter was short, and began with the ominous words '*I thought that you would wish to know...*' he didn't wish to know, not at all. But he'd read it now, so there was nothing he could do. He was too late. The letter he'd written could stay tucked into that apposite book of maudlin love poems till hell froze over. His cowardice had cost him everything – she'd gone and become betrothed to someone else.

His life, and his heart, would be forever empty.

## Chapter One

**1819**

Miss Lydia Bigglesworth sighed with relief when the bell above the door of Bigglesworth's Books jingled softly as a customer departed, leaving her alone once more amidst the towering shelves of leather-bound volumes and well-thumbed novels.

"At last! Now I can concentrate."

She muttered the words to herself, even as she lifted the next book from the pile in front of her. The shop had been busy all morning, but now, finally, it was quiet, save for the faint rustle of pages as Lydia turned them, her fingers brushing over the spines of the books with the reverence of someone who had spent a lifetime among them.

At twenty-two, Lydia was accustomed to the solitude of the shop, as her father was often in the back room, occupied with his ledgers, or the occasional visitors that she knew better than to ask about, and her aunt, Mrs. Henshaw, was busy with her embroidery in the small sitting room which was accessed from the dusty back corridor. That corridor also led to the door into their small narrow house next to the shop, and to the stairs that went up to the rooms above.

Lydia's world was, at least since she had come to London with her aunt, one of ink and parchment, of stories that transported her to far-off lands and grand adventures. Yet, for all the books she had read, her own life had been a quiet one.

It was marked by the loss of her mother when she was just twelve, and the subsequent years spent in the care of her aunt in the village of Blackbrook. When she'd left, the shop had been new, only started by her father when he'd retired from his previous role as a valet, but she had loved it from the first day that he'd opened its doors, she had missed it, every day that she'd spent in Blackbrook, no matter how much she liked the village. Only two years ago had she returned to London to assist her father in the shop, a place that felt both familiar and foreign after her years away.

Today, however, the shop held a new mystery. A large collection of secondhand books had arrived that morning, brought by the steward of a nobleman's estate. The man had been vague about the origin of the books, mentioning only that they had come from one of the Earl of Blackwood's smaller properties, which was being refurbished. Lydia had been tasked with cataloguing the collection, a job she relished for the opportunity it provided for her to uncover hidden treasures.

She sat at the small desk near the main counter, the afternoon light streaming in through the front door and catching the dust motes that danced in the air. The first few books had been unremarkable — a volume of sermons, a treatise on agriculture, a well-worn copy of *Robinson Crusoe*. But as she reached for the next book, a slim volume of poetry bound in faded blue cloth, something fluttered from its pages and landed softly on the desk.

For a moment, Lydia simply stared at it. It certainly wasn't a torn page, or anything like that, it looked like a folded note or letter of some kind. But there should be nothing like that in these books. People usually scrupulously checked for such accidental inclusions before they sold books.

But there it was, lying there, a mystery in itself, before she even looked at what it might contain.

Lydia picked it up, her brow furrowing as she unfolded the delicate sheet of paper. It was a letter, as she'd thought it might be, the ink slightly faded but still legible. The handwriting was elegant, the words flowing across the page with a practiced grace.



*'My dearest J,'*

it began, and Lydia's breath caught. Instantly, she could see that the letter was filled with raw emotion, a confession of love and regret that seemed to leap from the page.

*'I find myself at a loss for how to begin this letter, for the words I wish to say are tangled in my heart, uncertain and raw. I have heard whispers — nothing more than that, but enough to unsettle me — that you are being courted by another. If this is true, then I must speak now, before it is too late, before silence becomes my greatest regret.*

*You must know, though I have never dared to say it, how deeply I care for you. From the moment that we first met, I have been captivated by your wit, your kindness, your laughter that lights up even the darkest of rooms. Yet I have been a coward, hiding behind propriety and pride, afraid to risk what we have for the chance of something more. Now, faced with the possibility of losing you, I see the folly of my hesitation.*

*If there is even the slightest chance that your heart is still your own, that you might consider me as more than a friend, then I beg you to tell me. But if I am too late, if your affections have already turned elsewhere, then I will bear the weight of my silence, knowing that I alone am to blame for the loss of the happiness I might have had.*

*I do not know if I will send this letter. Perhaps I will tuck it away, as I have done with so many other words that I could not bring myself to say. But know this, J - no matter what happens, no matter where life takes you, you will always have my heart.*

*Yours, always and hopelessly,*

The letter was signed simply,

*'B'.*

Lydia's hands trembled as she read it again, her heart aching for the unnamed writer.

Who was 'B', and who was 'J'? What had kept them apart?

The letter was undated, but the paper felt old, the edges slightly yellowed. It had clearly been tucked away for some years, forgotten between the pages of the book.

She glanced at the volume of poetry, its title now seeming almost prophetic: *Sonnets of Love and Loss*.

The book itself was well-worn, the pages dog-eared and marked with faint pencil notes in the margins. Someone had loved this book, had pored over its verses with a heart full of longing.

Lydia's mind raced. The steward had said that the books came from the Earl of Blackwood's estate. Could 'B' be the Earl himself? Could that 'B' stand for Blackwood? She had heard whispers of the reclusive nobleman, a man who rarely ventured into society and was said to be haunted by some past sorrow, for his main residence was not far from Blackbrook village. But in her years there with her aunt, she had never seen him, not once. If this letter was his, then it was a piece of his soul, a secret he had never meant to share.

She felt a sudden, fierce determination. This letter was too precious to be left unclaimed, too full of emotion to be discarded. It deserved to be returned to its rightful owner – which was either the unknown 'J' it was addressed to, or the equally unknown 'B' who had written it. For the identity of 'J' she had no clues, but 'B' – it did seem likely that the writer might be the Earl of Blackwood.

"Father," she called, rising from her seat and clutching the letter tightly.

Mr. Bigglesworth emerged through the faded curtain that separated the main shop area from the back room, his spectacles perched on the end of his nose and a quill still in his hand.

"What is it, my dear?"

Lydia held out the letter.

"I found this in one of the books from the Earl of Blackwood's collection. It's a letter — a very personal one. I think it belongs to him. I don't like the idea of it just lying about in a book here, where anyone might see it. I think that we should return it to him."

Her father took the letter, his eyes scanning the words. After a moment, he handed it back, his expression thoughtful.

"You're right. This is not something to be left lying about. But the Earl is a very private man, Lydia. He may not appreciate a stranger intruding on his past."

"I know," Lydia said, her voice steady despite the flutter in her chest. "But I can't just ignore it. This letter — it's someone's heart, laid bare. It deserves to be returned."

Her father studied her for a moment, then nodded.

"Very well. But you must take your aunt with you. It wouldn't be proper for you to go alone. At least the Earl's estate is close to Blackbrook, and you've your aunt's cottage to stay in for the few days it may take you to persuade the earl to see you. I'll write you a letter to give him, confirming who you are, and giving you the authority to agree to purchase books from him, should he wish to sell more. It's best to never let an opportunity for business slip away."

Lydia nodded, already planning the journey in her mind. Blackwood Grange was indeed very near Blackbrook, the village where she had lived with her aunt. It would be a simple matter to return there, to deliver the letter and perhaps, in doing so, bring some measure of peace to the Earl — for she had to think that, had he found a happy ending to the situation in which he had written the letter, he would not, now, be alone and reclusive.

As she folded the letter carefully and tucked it into her pocket, Lydia felt a strange sense of purpose. This was more than just an errand - it was a chance to right a wrong, to mend a broken heart. Perhaps she was being a little dramatic about it, but it just seemed... fated.. that the letter had almost flung itself onto the desk in front of her, rather than being lost along the way somewhere.

And if it was fate, she wasn't going to fight it.

## Chapter Two

The morning sun cast a golden glow over the cobblestoned streets of London as Lydia and her aunt, Mrs. Henshaw, prepared for their journey to Blackbrook. The letter, carefully folded and tucked into Lydia's reticule, seemed to weigh more than it should, a tangible reminder of the task ahead. Lydia's father had seen them off with a mixture of pride and concern, his eyes lingering on his daughter as if he could sense the storm of emotions brewing within her.

"Are you certain about this, my dear?"

Mrs. Henshaw, her voice gentle but probing, asked the question of Lydia as they settled into the carriage, a carriage loaned to them for the journey by a 'very good friend' of her father's. She was a practical woman, her greying hair neatly pinned beneath her bonnet, her hands folded primly in her lap. Yet there was a warmth in her eyes that had always comforted Lydia, a reminder of the first years they had spent together in Blackbrook after her mother's death, when Lydia had needed that comfort dreadfully.

"I am," Lydia replied, though her voice wavered slightly. She gazed out the window as the carriage rumbled through the bustling streets, her fingers tightening around the strap of her reticule. "The letter... it feels wrong to even consider leaving it unclaimed. It's as if I've stumbled upon someone's deepest secret, and I can't just pretend that I didn't see it."

Mrs. Henshaw nodded, her expression thoughtful.

"I understand. But you must prepare yourself, Lydia. The Earl of Blackwood is not a man who welcomes intrusion. He may not thank you for bringing this to him."

Lydia's stomach twisted at the thought, but she pushed the unease aside.

"I know. But I have to try. If it were my letter, I would want someone to return it to me."

The journey passed in a blur of rolling countryside and quaint villages, the landscape shifting from the crowded streets of London to the open fields and wooded lanes of the countryside. Lydia's mind wandered as the carriage rolled on, and she allowed her thoughts to return, again and again, to the letter and the man who had written it.

Who was the Earl of Blackwood? The few whispers she had heard painted him as a recluse, a man who shunned society and kept to his estate. Some said he was haunted by a past tragedy, others that he was simply cold and unfeeling. But the letter suggested something else entirely — a man capable of deep emotion, of love and regret.

As the carriage approached Blackbrook, Lydia felt a familiar pang of nostalgia. The village was much as she remembered it: a cluster of cottages nestled in a valley, the church spire rising above the rooftops, the brook that gave the village its name winding lazily through the fields. It had been her home for so many years, a place of quiet comfort after the loss of her mother.

They arrived at her aunt's cottage late in the afternoon, the caretaker having kept it in good order during their absence. The familiar scent of beeswax and lavender greeted them as they stepped inside, the rooms small but cozy, filled with the memories of a life lived simply and well.

"We'll rest tonight," Mrs. Henshaw said, setting down her valise. "Tomorrow, we'll go to Blackwood Grange."

Lydia nodded, though her nerves were already fraying at the edges.

She spent the evening unpacking and preparing for the next day, her mind racing with questions and doubts.

What would the Earl say when she handed him the letter? Would he be angry? Grateful? Indifferent?

She simply couldn't know – but that didn't stop her worrying about it...

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The next morning dawned clear and bright, the air crisp with the promise of autumn. Lydia dressed carefully in her best gown, a simple but elegant muslin dress in a soft shade of blue, and pinned her hair into a neat chignon, then settled her bonnet with the blue ribbon over it. She wanted to make a good impression, to show the Earl that she was not some meddlesome intruder but someone who genuinely cared about returning what was his.

The walk to Blackwood Grange was short but nerve-wracking. The estate loomed ahead, its imposing stone façade framed by towering oaks and manicured gardens. Lydia's heart pounded as they approached the front door, her aunt's steady presence beside her the only thing keeping her from turning back.

A stern-faced butler answered their knock, his expression guarded as he took in their modest attire, and the fact that they had come on foot. Perhaps, Lydia thought, it would have been better if they had used the carriage... but it was too late now.

"May I help you?"

The butler's tone was rather severe, and Lydia felt instantly disapproved of.

"Yes," Lydia said, her voice trembling slightly despite her efforts to steady it. "I am Miss Lydia Bigglesworth. I'm here to see the Earl of Blackwood. I have found something that belongs to him, which I wish to give to him."

The butler's eyebrows rose, and he glanced over his shoulder as if hoping that someone would appear and rescue him from this unexpected intrusion.

"I'm afraid that His Lordship is not receiving visitors today."

Lydia's heart sank, but she squared her shoulders.

"Please, it's very important. I've come all the way from London to deliver this to him."

The butler's expression remained impassive.

"I'm sorry, Miss, but His Lordship's instructions are quite clear. He does not wish to be disturbed."

Mrs. Henshaw stepped forward, her voice firm but polite.

"My good man, we have travelled a considerable distance to return something of great personal value to the Earl. Surely you can make an exception."

The butler hesitated, clearly torn between his duty and the determination of the two women before him.

"I'm afraid I cannot, madam. His Lordship's orders are absolute."

Lydia felt a flicker of frustration, but she refused to give up.

"Please, just tell him that I've found something of his — something he may have thought lost forever. If he still refuses to see me after that, I will leave and trouble him no further."

The butler sighed, his resolve wavering.

"Very well. I will convey your message, but I cannot promise anything."

He disappeared into the house, leaving Lydia and her aunt standing on the doorstep. The minutes stretched on, each one feeling like an eternity. Lydia's hands clenched and unclenched at her sides, her nerves fraying with every passing second. Finally, the butler returned, his expression even more guarded than before.



"His Lordship has instructed me to inform you that he is not interested in whatever you have found. He asks that you leave at once."

Lydia's heart sank, but she refused to be dismissed so easily.

"Please, tell him again. Tell him it's a letter — a letter that he wrote years ago. He needs to see it."

The butler's patience was clearly wearing thin.

"Miss, I must insist—"

"What is the meaning of this commotion?"

The voice came from within the hall, sharp and commanding. A moment later, the Earl himself appeared in the doorway, his tall frame silhouetted against the light from within. Edward Wycliff, Earl of Blackwood, was younger than Lydia had expected, perhaps in his late twenties, with dark hair that fell in unruly waves and piercing blue eyes that seemed to see straight through her. His expression was one of irritation, his jaw set in a way that suggested that he was not accustomed to being disturbed.

The butler stepped aside, his face a mask of relief.

"My Lord, these ladies insist on seeing you. I have tried to turn them away, but they are most persistent."

The Earl's gaze swept over Lydia and her aunt, his eyes narrowing.

"What is it that you want?"

Lydia stepped forward, her heart pounding but her voice steady.

"My Lord, I found this among some books that were sold to my father's shop, by your steward from one of your properties, I was told. I have a letter from my father, confirming who I am and that I represent his shop, Bigglesworth's Books. I believe that this," she indicated the letter that she held, "Which I found in one of those books sold to us, belongs to you."

She held out the letter, her hand trembling slightly.

The Earl's eyes dropped to the folded paper, and for a moment, his expression was unreadable. Then, slowly, he reached out and took it, his fingers brushing against hers in a fleeting touch that sent a jolt of unexpected heat through her.

He unfolded the letter, his eyes scanning the words.

Lydia watched as his face changed, the cold mask slipping to reveal something raw and vulnerable beneath. His jaw tightened, and for a moment, he seemed to forget that she was there, his gaze fixed on the page as if he were seeing it for the first time.

Then, at last, he spoke, his voice low and strained.

"Where did you find this?"

"In a book of poetry," Lydia replied. "As I said before, it was part of a collection from one of your estates which was sold to my father's shop."

The Earl's eyes met hers, and for the first time, she saw something other than coldness in them — something that might have been gratitude, or perhaps regret.

"Thank you," he said quietly, folding the letter and tucking it into his coat. "This... means more than you can know."

Lydia nodded, her heart pounding. She had expected dismissal, perhaps even anger, but not this quiet intensity. It was as if she had handed him a piece of his own soul, and he was struggling to reconcile it with the man he had become.

"If there's nothing else..." he began, but Lydia found her voice before he could finish.

"My Lord, if I may... the letter... it's beautiful. I couldn't help but read it, and I... I just wanted to say that I hope that having it back brings you some peace."

The Earl's eyes narrowed, and for a moment, she thought that she had overstepped. But then he nodded, his expression softening ever so slightly.

"Perhaps it will," he said. Then, almost as an afterthought, he added, "You may call again, if you wish. There are other books I might part with, if, as I believe you said, you are authorised by your father to look at them, it would save my steward a journey to London."

Lydia's heart leapt, though she kept her expression calm.

"Thank you, my Lord. I would like that. I will be happy to examine them on my father's behalf."

As they turned to leave, Lydia felt a strange sense of accomplishment. She had done what she set out to do, but more than that, she had glimpsed the man behind the Earl's cold exterior. There was something about him, something about the vulnerability that she had seen in those first moments when he had opened the letter, which drew her to him. Perhaps it was just impertinent curiosity on her part, but... she knew that she would return – she simply had to know more of him.

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Edward stood in the doorway of his study, the letter clutched tightly in his hand. The sight of it had shaken him more than he cared to admit. He had not thought of that letter in years, had chosen to leave it buried, along with the memories that it carried. Yet here it was, returned to him by a stranger with wide, earnest eyes and a voice that trembled with sincerity.

He unfolded the letter again, his fingers tracing the familiar words. '*My dearest J...*' The ink had faded, but the emotions it carried were as sharp as the day that he had written it. He had been a fool then, young and afraid, newly come into his title, still grieving his father, and too proud to risk rejection. And now, years later, the regret still lingered, a dull ache which had never quite faded.

The sound of footsteps in the hall pulled him from his thoughts. He glanced up to see his butler, Jenkins, hovering in the doorway.

“My Lord, the young lady and her aunt have departed. Shall I ensure that they are not admitted again?”

Edward hesitated, his gaze returning to the letter. The girl — Miss Lydia Bigglesworth, she had said her name was — had been persistent, her determination bordering on impertinence.

Yet there had been something in her eyes, a quiet strength that had caught him off guard. And her words... *“I hope it brings you some peace.”*

“No,” he said at last, his voice low. “If she returns, admit her. I... may have further business with her — or at least with her father’s bookshop.”

Jenkins’ eyebrows rose, but he nodded and withdrew, leaving Edward alone with his thoughts.

## Chapter Three

The next morning, Lydia stood once more before the doors of Blackwood Grange, her heart pounding in her chest. She had not expected to return so soon, but Lord Blackwood's parting words had lingered in her mind, a tantalising invitation that she could not ignore. The butler opened the door, his expression carefully neutral.

"Miss Bigglesworth. His Lordship is expecting you."

Lydia's breath caught. He had remembered her name. She followed the butler through the grand hall, her eyes darting nervously over the opulent surroundings. The Blackwood Grange house was as imposing as she remembered from the day before, its high ceilings and dark wood panelling giving it an air of solemn grandeur. The butler led her, followed by her aunt, to the library, a vast room lined with floor-to-ceiling shelves filled with books. Lord Blackwood stood by the window, his back to her, his tall frame silhouetted against the light. He turned as she entered, his expression unreadable.

"Miss Bigglesworth, Mrs Henshaw," he said, his voice cool but not unkind. "I trust that you had no trouble finding your way back."

"No, my Lord, no trouble," Lydia replied, her voice steady despite the flutter in her chest. "Thank you for seeing me."

He nodded, his gaze sweeping over her.

"Do come in, and take a seat."

He motioned to the table which stood nearby, and the chairs further over, near the fireplace. Her aunt went and sat near the fireplace, obviously not interested in their discussion – as she had said to Lydia on the way there in the carriage, she was just there for propriety to be served.

“Thank you.”

Lydia, a little nervous at her own presumption, took a seat at the table. The Earl nodded, and settled into a chair opposite her.

“You mentioned other books. What is it you’re looking for?”

Lydia hesitated, her mind racing. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw her aunt pull out her knitting from her reticule. She brought her attention back to Lord Blackwood - she had not expected to be put on the spot so quickly.

“I... I’m not sure, my Lord. I thought perhaps you might have some volumes you no longer wished to keep. My father’s shop specialises in rare and unusual books, although he keeps a range which covers almost any topic that you can imagine.”

Lord Blackwood’s lips twitched with what she was certain was the faintest hint of a smile.

“Rare and unusual, you say? I suppose that depends on your definition.”

He turned and began to walk along the shelves, his fingers brushing over the spines of the books as if they were old friends. Lydia followed, her eyes widening as she took in the sheer volume of the collection. There were books in languages she did not recognise, their covers adorned with intricate designs, and others that looked ancient, their pages yellowed with age.

“You have an impressive library.”

She was unable to keep the awe from her voice. Lord Blackwood glanced at her, his expression softening ever so slightly.

“It was my father’s. He had a passion for books, though I’m not sure if he ever read half of them.”

Lydia smiled, her nerves easing slightly.

“And you? Do you share his passion?”

Lord Blackwood paused, his hand resting on a particularly worn volume.

"I suppose I do, though not in the same way. For me, books are... an escape. A way to lose myself in other worlds when this one becomes too much."

There was a note of bitterness in his voice, and Lydia felt a pang of sympathy. She had always felt the same way, though she had never put it into so many words.

"I understand," she said softly. "Books have always been my refuge too."

Lord Blackwood looked at her, his gaze searching. For a moment, neither of them spoke, the silence stretching between them like a thread pulled taut. Then he turned away, his expression shuttering once more.

"Well, Miss Bigglesworth, if you're here to discuss books, I suppose we should get to it. What sort of volumes would you be most interested in?"

Lydia hesitated, her mind a whirlwind of thoughts. She had not expected to be taken so seriously. After all, she was a woman, and men rarely thought women capable of any kind of business dealings, unless they carried out a 'female trade' such as being a modiste.

"I... I'm not sure, my Lord. Perhaps something with a story behind it. Something that has had meaning for you, even if you are now willing to part with it."

Lord Blackwood raised an eyebrow, his lips curving into a faint smile.

"You're an unusual woman, Miss Bigglesworth. Most people would be content with a simple transaction."

Lydia felt her cheeks flush, but she held his gaze.

"I believe that books are more than just objects, my Lord. They carry pieces of the people who owned them, who have read them. I think that's what makes them special."

Lord Blackwood studied her for a long moment, his expression unreadable. Then he nodded, as if coming to a decision.

"Very well. Follow me."

He led her to a corner of the library, where a small table was piled with books.

"These are some I've been meaning to part with. Take your pick."

Lydia stepped forward, her fingers trembling as she reached for the first book. It was a volume of poetry, its cover worn but still beautiful. She opened it, her eyes scanning the familiar verses.

"This one," she said, her voice barely above a whisper. "It's perfect."

Lord Blackwood watched her, his expression thoughtful.

"You have a good eye, Miss Bigglesworth. That was one of my favourites."

Lydia looked up, her heart pounding.

"Then why are you parting with it?"

Lord Blackwood's gaze darkened, and for a moment, she thought that he would not answer. Then he sighed, his shoulders slumping ever so slightly.

"Because it's time to let go of the past," he said quietly. "Some things are better left behind."

Lydia's breath caught, her eyes searching his. She wanted to ask more, to understand the pain that she saw in his eyes, but she knew it was not her place. Instead, she nodded, her fingers tightening around the book.

"Thank you, my Lord. I'll take good care of it. And we will find it a new home, with someone who will appreciate it."

Lord Blackwood's lips curved into a faint smile, though it did not reach his eyes.

"I'm sure that you will."

They looked at a few more of the books, and she chose two more that she thought her father would be glad to have in the shop, then they agreed on a price, to be sent to Lord Blackwood as a bank draft. Then, as she had hoped he might, he suggested that she return another day, to consider more of the books he wished to sell. As she turned to leave, Lydia felt a strange sense of connection, as if she had glimpsed a part of the Earl that few others ever saw. He was not the cold reclusive man that she had expected – not completely, anyway. She found herself eager to return, even before she had left the premises.



## Chapter Four

The fire crackled in the hearth of Blackwood Grange's library, casting amber light across the shelves as Lydia traced her fingers over a worn copy of *Gulliver's Travels*. Lord Blackwood stood a few paces away, his posture less rigid than their first meeting, though his eyes still carried shadows. Her aunt was tucked away in a small reading nook at the far end of the huge room, absorbed in her knitting. It felt as if Lydia was truly alone with Lord Blackwood.

She shivered a little at that thought.

"May I dare to ask you... to tell me about 'J' who you wrote the letter to? Just a little, for I admit that I am deeply curious."

Lord Blackwood hesitated, his gaze drifting to the rain-streaked windows. When he spoke, his voice was low, as if dredging memories from a long-sealed vault.

"We were neighbours. Her father's estate bordered mine."

"Oh..."

"Her name was Josephine, Miss Josephine Morwood," he said after a pause, his voice low and strained. "We grew up together, here in Blackbrook – her parents are Sir Henry Morwood and Agnes, Lady Morwood. She was... everything to me."

Lydia's breath caught at the raw emotion in his voice.

She had known that the letter was personal, and full of deep emotion, but somehow, hearing the story behind it made it all the more poignant.

She waited, silently urging him to continue.

Lord Blackwood turned to face her, his expression haunted.

"As children, we... we built forts in the woods and declared ourselves rulers of imaginary kingdoms." A faint smile tugged at his lips. "Once, after reading *Robinson Crusoe*, we vowed to run away to an island. I promised to build her a palace of driftwood. We were inseparable. We would play together in the gardens, pretending that we were explorers or knights on grand adventures. She was always so bold, so full of life. And I... I was content to follow her lead." He paused, his gaze distant, as if he were seeing those long-ago days play out before him. "We used to talk about the future, as children do. She would say, 'When we grow up, we'll marry each other, and we'll live in a grand house with a library full of books.' And I believed her. I believed it with all my heart."

Lydia's heart ached and her chest tightened at the tenderness in his voice. She could almost see the two of them as children, their laughter echoing through the halls of Blackwood Grange.

"You cared for her deeply."

"We were inseparable. But as we grew older..." He paused, his jaw tightening. "Propriety intervened. At sixteen, she was sent to London for her first Season. When she returned, everything had changed."

"Changed?"

He strode abruptly to a shelf, pulling down a slender volume of *Aesop's Fables* with a cracked spine. A dried wildflower, brittle with age, slipped from its pages. He caught it before it fell, his thumb brushing the petals.

"She gave me this," he said roughly. "The summer before her Season. I'd forgotten it was here."

Lydia stepped closer, her skirts whispering against the rug.

"What happened?"

"We grew older. Things changed. When it came time for her Season in London, we became... awkward with each other. I don't know why, really. Perhaps it was the weight of expectation, or the fear of what others might think. But I couldn't bring myself to speak to her as I once had. I couldn't tell her how I felt." He looked down, his hands clenched at his sides. "And then she went to London. She had her Season, and I was a fool." The words hung in the air, sharp with self-reproach. "At her first ball, I stood in the corner like a damned statue while others flocked to her. Every time I tried to speak, my tongue turned to lead. She thought I'd grown indifferent. I never gathered the courage to call on her... Instead, I returned here and buried in my books and my responsibilities, for my father had died just six months before she went away, and I was still discovering just how much I needed to do, as Earl. I told myself that it was for the best, that she deserved someone better than me. But the truth is, I was afraid. Afraid of rejection, afraid of losing her. So I said nothing. And by the time I found the courage to write that letter, it was too late."

"Oh..."

He snapped the book shut, the sound echoing through the room.

"Viscount Ashworth had proposed. I'd written that letter three days before, and tucked it into the book you found it in, while I tried to get up the courage to send it. Ashworth was twenty-five years her senior, but charming. Wealthy. *Certain*. I attended their wedding. Congratulated them."

Lydia's breath caught.

"You never sent it."

"No." His laugh was bitter. "What right had I to disrupt her life? She was betrothed, unbreakably committed to Ashworth. I'd had my chance. So I buried the past — or tried to."

Silence stretched between them, broken only by the hiss of embers. Lydia reached out, her fingers grazing the faded flower.

"You loved her," she murmured.

"I loved a ghost. A girl who existed before balls and Viscounts and duty. The woman she became..." He shook his head. "I don't know her anymore. She's widowed now – Ashworth died last year."

Lydia swallowed hard. If Josephine was widowed, then she was free to marry whoever she chose. The thought that Lord Blackwood might want that was like a knife to her chest. She pushed that thought aside – she could contemplate such things later. She studied his profile — the tension in his brow, the way that his throat moved as he swallowed. Without thinking, she whispered the words that had come into her mind.

"And what of the man *you* became?"

He turned sharply, his eyes searching hers. For a heartbeat, the air hummed with unspoken words. Then he looked away.

"A man who hides in libraries," he said wryly, replacing the book.

"Not always," she countered, emboldened. "You've opened this one to me."

A startled laugh escaped him — warm, genuine, transforming his austere features. Lydia's pulse quickened.

"So I have," he murmured.

They lingered among the shelves a little longer, trading stories of favourite novels. When Lydia mentioned *Pride and Prejudice*, he groaned.

"My sister adores it. She always claimed I was Mr. Darcy — brooding and socially inept."

"And are you?" Lydia teased, surprising herself.

His gaze turned mischievous.

"Do *you* find me brooding, Miss Bigglesworth?"

"Only when you're glowering at unsent letters."

He stilled, then sighed.

"You've an uncanny knack for disarming me."

Lord Blackwood walked her to the door.

"Return tomorrow," he said abruptly. "There's a first edition of *Paradise Lost* I think you'd appreciate."

"Is that a request or a command, my Lord?"

His lips quirked.

"A hope."

The carriage ride home passed in a blur. Aunt Henshaw dozed, oblivious, while Lydia pressed her forehead to the cool glass, replaying every word.

*He trusted me, she realised. With memories even his family doesn't know.*

Yet beneath the thrill coiled a quiet dread. What would happen when Josephine, Lady Ashworth returned — as Lydia now feared she must, because as a widow, she might well return to her parents' home, or the area she'd known before her marriage? Lord Blackwood's voice echoed in her mind: *I don't know her anymore.*

But did he know himself?

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The day following Lydia's third visit to Blackwood Grange she was filled with quiet anticipation. Each visit had been a careful dance of conversation and discovery, yet she felt as if things changed steadily — she wanted his company, there was no denying it, yet who was she to desire such a thing. Still, he had asked her to return, and return she did, to the library which she thought of as their special meeting place, its towering shelves and hushed atmosphere a sanctuary where the outside world seemed to fade away.

On this afternoon, the sun streamed through the library's tall windows, casting golden pools of light across the polished wooden floor. Lydia sat at a small table near the fireplace, a stack of books before her. Mrs Henshaw was back in the somewhat distant reading nook, and truthfully, Lydia had almost forgotten that she was there. Lord Blackwood stood near Lydia, his fingers trailing absently over the spines of the books in the nearby shelves as he spoke.

"This one," he said, pulling a volume from the shelf and handing it to her, "is a first edition of *Paradise Lost*. My father acquired it years ago, though I doubt he ever read it."

Lydia took the book carefully, her fingers brushing against the worn leather cover.

"It's a beautiful binding," she said, her voice soft with reverence. "I've always loved Milton's work. There's something so... timeless about it."

Lord Blackwood nodded, his gaze lingering on her face.

"Timeless, yes. But also tragic. The fall of man, the loss of paradise... it's a story of regret, isn't it?"

Lydia looked up, her eyes meeting his. There was a weight to his words, a sadness that seemed to echo in the quiet room.

"I suppose it is," she said slowly. "But it's also about redemption. About finding hope even in the darkest of places."

Lord Blackwood's expression softened, and for a moment, he seemed to forget himself.

"You see the world differently than most, Miss Bigglesworth. It's... refreshing."

Lydia felt her cheeks warm, but she held his gaze.

"I think the world is what we make of it, my Lord. We can choose to dwell on what we've lost, or we can find beauty in what remains."

Lord Blackwood's eyes darkened, and he turned away, his hand tightening on the edge of the shelf.

"Easier said than done, I'm afraid."

Lydia hesitated, her heart aching at the pain in his voice. She wanted to reach out, to offer some comfort, but she knew the boundaries of their relationship were fragile, easily broken.

Instead, she dared to speak softly, asking more of the questions which had been preying on her mind.

"Now... now that Lady Ashworth is widowed, will you... will you see her, socially, and the like?"

He turned his face to her, and it was almost as if he looked through her, into the past – then his attention refocussed, and he shrugged.

“I don’t know. It’s not as if I go about in society much at all, so probably not. Unless... unless she seeks me out. And I suspect that is unlikely.”

Part of her hoped that was true, for, shockingly, in that moment, she realised that she did not want these visits to end, that she wanted to be closer to him – and if he reunited with his lost love, then she would, of a certainty, lose this closeness. Yet Lydia's heart ached for him. She could see the pain etched into every line of his face, the regret that had haunted him for years.

“You’ve told me that you once loved her,” she said softly.

Lord Blackwood nodded, his jaw tightening.

“I did. But I was a fool, as I’ve also told you. I don’t know what I feel now – even if she might want to rekindle what we once had, I don’t know if I can. I don’t know if I should. But that’s all speculation – at this point, I’ve no idea what she wants.”

Lydia's fingers tightened around the book in her hands. She wanted to tell him that he deserved happiness, that he shouldn't let the past dictate his future. But the words caught in her throat. How could she, a commoner, presume to advise an Earl on matters of the heart? Instead, she said the only thing she could think of, which might help.

“You can't blame yourself for what might have been, my Lord. We all have regrets, but we can't let them define us.”

Lord Blackwood's eyes searched hers, as if looking for something he could not name.

“You speak as if you know something of regret, Miss Bigglesworth.”

Lydia looked down, her throat tightening.

“I do. My mother died when I was young, and I've always wondered if there was more I could have done to make her proud. But I've learned that dwelling on the past only keeps us from living in the present.”

Lord Blackwood was silent for a long moment, his gaze fixed on her face. Then he stepped closer, his voice barely above a whisper.

“You’re a remarkable woman, Miss Bigglesworth. I don’t think I’ve ever met anyone quite like you.”

Lydia’s breath caught, her heart pounding in her chest. She wanted to respond, to tell him how much his words meant to her, but the moment was shattered by the sound of footsteps in the hall.

Lord Blackwood stepped back, his expression closing off once more.

“I’m afraid I have business to attend to,” he said, his voice cool and distant. “But you’re welcome to stay and keep looking through the books. Jenkins will see you out when you’re ready.”

Lydia nodded, her heart sinking as he turned and left the room. She sat there for a long time, the book still clutched in her hands, her mind racing with thoughts and emotions she could not quite name.

Lord Blackwood’s pain was palpable, a wound that had never fully healed. And though she knew she could never replace what he had lost, she could not help but hope that, in some small way, she might help him find peace. But of course, her part in this was simple, and she had no right to his time or attention. If he chose to reacquaint himself with his Josephine, then the only thing that Lydia could do was go back to London, and forget about this week, as if it had never happened.

As she rose to leave, her eyes fell on the letter she had returned to him, now lying in a half open drawer of the desk. It was a reminder of the past, of the love and regret that had shaped the man he had become. But it was also a testament to the power of second chances, to the possibility of healing and hope.

She could only hope that something might bring that healing, that there was, for him at least, a light in the darkness that he had not expected to find. For herself, things looked rather darker.



## Chapter Five

The library at Blackwood Grange was a sanctuary of leather-bound books, polished wood, and the faint scent of aged paper. It was here that Lydia found herself once again, seated opposite Lord Blackwood, their conversation flowing as easily as the afternoon light streaming through the tall windows, even as her aunt dozed in the reading nook. Yet, beneath the surface of their shared love of literature, there was a growing tension, a pull between them that neither could fully ignore.

Lydia traced her fingers along the spine of a book, her thoughts wandering as Lord Blackwood spoke. He had been telling her about his father's collection, how the late Earl had been more interested in the appearance of the books than their contents. But as she listened, she found herself watching him — the way that his dark hair fell slightly over his forehead, the way that his hands moved as he spoke, the way that his eyes softened when he talked about something he loved.

She had never met anyone like him. He was so different from the men she had known in her quiet life — men who were either too loud or too dull, too self-assured or too timid. Lord Blackwood was none of those, but he was a man of contradictions: reserved yet passionate, guarded yet vulnerable. And it was that vulnerability, that glimpse of the man beneath the title, that drew her to him.

She found herself always curious about what he was thinking...

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Edward was captivated by Miss Bigglesworth. He had never expected to find himself so at ease with someone, least of all a woman, a commoner, and one who had appeared so unassuming at first glance. But there was something about her — her quiet strength, her gentle curiosity, her ability to see the world in a way that made him want to see it too. She had a manner of drawing him out, of making him feel as though he could share things with her that he had never shared with anyone else.

As they sat together in the library, Edward found himself revealing things to her in ways he hadn't anticipated. He told her about his childhood, about the long hours that he had spent in this very room, lost in books while his father attended to the business of the estate. He spoke of his mother, who had died when he was young, and how her absence had left a void that no one had ever been able to fill.

On this particular day, he found himself speaking of things that he would never have considered discussing with anyone else. With her, it felt safe — she was not a person of any social significance, and had no reason to ever reveal to anyone else what he might say — not that he thought she ever would, but still...

"Do you ever feel as though you're living someone else's life?"

He asked the question suddenly, his voice low and thoughtful.

Lydia looked up, surprised by the question.

"What do you mean?"

He hesitated, as if unsure whether to continue. Then, with a sigh, he went on.

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Lydia had listened intently to all that he had said, her heart aching for the boy he had been and the man he had become. She could see the weight of his responsibilities in the lines of his face, in the way that his shoulders seemed to carry the burden of his title. And yet, there was a lightness in him too, a spark of something that had been missing for so long. A spark which seemed, to her perception anyway, to have grown stronger over the time since she had first met him.

"Sometimes I feel as though I'm playing a part, as though the Earl of Blackwood is a character I've been cast to play, rather than who I truly am."

Lydia's heart ached at the vulnerability in his voice. She understood what he meant, though she had never put it into such words herself.

"I think that we all feel that way sometimes," she said softly. "As though we're expected to be something we're not."

Lord Blackwood looked at her, his eyes searching hers.

"And what about you, Miss Bigglesworth? Do you feel as though you're playing a part?"

Lydia hesitated, her fingers tightening around the book in her hands.

"Sometimes," she admitted. "But I think... I think it's easier to be myself when I'm with you."

The words hung in the air between them, heavy with unspoken meaning. For a moment, neither of them said anything at all, the silence stretching like a thread pulled taut. Then, slowly, Lord Blackwood reached out and took the book from her hands, his fingers brushing against hers in a fleeting touch that sent a surge of warmth through her.

"You're different from anyone I've ever known," he said, his voice barely above a whisper. "You make me feel... as though I don't have to pretend."

Lydia's breath caught, her heart pounding in her chest. She wanted to tell him that he made her feel the same way, that being with him was like coming home to a place she hadn't known she'd been searching for.

But before she could find the words, the sound of footsteps in the hall broke the spell.

Lord Blackwood stepped back, his expression shuttering once more, the stern reclusive Earl replacing the vulnerable man she had seen moments ago.

"I'm afraid that I, again, have business to attend to, so I must leave you now," he said, his manner distant. "Do return tomorrow, if it pleases you."

Lydia nodded, her heart sinking as he turned and left the room. Slowly, she reached out and again lifted the book that he had taken from her fingers such a short time ago, and then set aside. Perhaps she imagined it, but it felt as if it was still warm from his touch. She sat there for a long time, the book still clutched in her hands, her mind racing with thoughts and emotions she could not quite name.

As she rose to rouse her aunt, and leave, somehow unable to face continuing her examination of books without his presence, her eyes fell on the pile of books which still awaited her attention. They were, she realised, all books of love poetry, or plays based around the themes of love lost.

A small gasp escaped her.

Did this mean that he was intentionally disposing of the things that reminded him of the past, of what he had lost, of his regrets?

And if that was what he was doing, was that a good thing, or not?

## Chapter Six

The next day, Lydia sat in the library of Blackwood Grange, a book open on her lap, though she hadn't turned a page in nearly an hour. Her thoughts were elsewhere, tangled in the web of emotions that had been growing between her and Lord Blackwood. She couldn't deny it any longer — she was falling for him. The way he spoke to her, the way his eyes softened when he looked at her, the way he seemed to trust her with parts of himself he had kept hidden from the world — it all made her heart ache with a longing she had never known.

But it was a hopeless longing, she reminded herself. She was a bookshop assistant, a commoner, and he was an Earl. Even if he felt something for her, it could never be more than a fleeting connection. She had no place in his world, no right to dream of a future with him. Even her aunt's presence as a chaperone wasn't really necessary, for who would think that an Earl might dally with a commoner? Still, she owed it to her aunt and her father to be as proper as possible.

The sound of footsteps in the hall pulled her from her thoughts. She looked up, expecting to see Lord Blackwood, but instead, a woman entered the room. She was tall and elegant, her dark hair swept into an elaborate coiffure, her gown of deep green silk whispering against the floor as she moved. Her eyes, sharp and assessing, swept over Lydia with a cool detachment that made her feel suddenly small and insignificant.

"You must be Miss Bigglesworth," the woman said, her voice smooth and polished, like the surface of a mirror. "I've heard so much about you."

Lydia rose to her feet, her heart pounding.

"I'm afraid you have the advantage of me, my Lady."

The woman smiled, though it didn't reach her eyes.

"Forgive me. I am Josephine, Viscountess of Ashworth. I was a... dear friend of Lord Blackwood, many years ago."

Lydia's stomach twisted. Josephine. The woman from the letter. The woman the Earl had loved — still loved, perhaps — or perhaps not, she thought, remembering one of their conversations. This was the moment she had dreaded, ever since she had learned that Josephine was a widow. She forced herself to smile, though it felt brittle on her lips.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, my Lady."

The Viscountess tilted her head, studying Lydia with a gaze that seemed to see straight through her.

"The pleasure is mine. I must say, I'm surprised to find you here. Lord Blackwood isn't usually one for... visitors."

Lydia's cheeks burned, but she held her ground.

"We share a love of books, and my father owns one of London's finest bookshops. Lord Blackwood has been kind enough to allow me to explore his library."

"How fortunate for you," the Viscountess said, her tone implying anything but. She stepped closer, her eyes narrowing slightly. "Tell me, Miss Bigglesworth, do you often find yourself in the company of titled gentlemen?"

Lydia's hands clenched at her sides, but she kept her voice steady.

"No, my Lady. Bot apart from the short visits to the shop of my father's customers. This is... an exception."

The Viscountess smiled again, though there was a sharpness to it now.

"I see. Well, I'm sure that Lord Blackwood appreciates your company. He's always had a soft spot for those who are... out of their depth."

Before Lydia could respond, Lord Blackwood appeared in the doorway, his expression unreadable.

"Josephine," he said, his voice cool. "I wasn't aware you had returned to Blackbrook."

The Viscountess turned to him, her smile softening into something warmer, more intimate.

"I arrived just this morning — I am staying with my parents. You were the first person I thought to call on - I couldn't stay away any longer. Not when I heard that you were... entertaining guests."

Lydia's heart sank as she watched the exchange. There was a familiarity between them, a history that she could never hope to match. She felt like an intruder, a stranger in a story that had been written long before she arrived.

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Edward stood in the doorway, his gaze flickering between Lydia and Josephine. He had known that this moment would come — had dreaded it, in fact — but he hadn't expected it to feel so... unsettling. Josephine's presence was like the appearance of a ghost from his past, a reminder of everything that he had lost — and everything that he had tried to forget.

"Josephine," he said again, his voice carefully neutral. "What brings you back to Blackbrook?"

She stepped towards him, her smile as radiant as he remembered.

"You, of course. I've missed you, Edward."

The sound of his name on her lips sent a jolt through him, though he couldn't say whether it was pleasure or pain. He had loved her once, more than he had thought possible. But that love had been tainted by regret, by the knowledge that he had let her slip through his fingers – and also, that she had not, at any time then, reached out to him, either. Had she really cared for him?

"It's been a long time," he said, his tone guarded.

"Too long," she replied, her eyes searching his. "I've thought of you often. Especially after Ashworth's death, when I was so lonely. I've wondered how you were. And now that I'm here, I find you've been... busy."

Her gaze flicked toward Lydia, and Edward felt a surge of protectiveness. He didn't want Josephine to hurt her, to make her feel as though she didn't belong. Because the truth was, Lydia had become more important to him than he had realised until this moment. She had brought light into his life, a warmth that he hadn't known he was missing.

"Miss Bigglesworth is a friend," he said, his voice firm. "She's been kind enough to share her knowledge of books with me."

Josephine raised an eyebrow, her smile turning almost sly – was that how it had looked, all those years ago? His memory on the matter was uncertain.

"A friend? How... charming."

Edward's jaw tightened. He didn't like the way that she was looking at Lydia, as though she were a curiosity to be examined and dismissed.

"Is there something you wanted, Josephine?"

She stepped closer, her voice dropping to a whisper.

"I wanted to see you. To talk. There's so much that we need to say to each other."

Edward's chest tightened. He knew what she was implying, what she wanted. But he wasn't sure that he could give it to her. That he even wanted to. Not anymore.



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Lydia watched the exchange between Lord Blackwood and Lady Ashworth, her heart sinking with each passing moment. She had known, of course, that the Earl had a past — everyone did. But seeing it standing before her, so beautiful and confident, made her feel painfully inadequate.

She couldn't compete with Josephine, Lady Ashworth. She didn't belong in this world, with its titles and expectations and unspoken rules, no matter how much her father had taught her of it. She was an outsider, a temporary distraction at best.

"I should go," she said abruptly, her voice trembling slightly. "I've taken up enough of your time."

Lord Blackwood turned to her, his expression softening.

"You don't have to leave."

But Lydia shook her head, forcing a smile, happy to see her aunt appear around the end of a bank of shelves.

"It's getting late, and my aunt tires easily. Thank you for allowing me to visit your library, my Lord. It's been... a pleasure."

She hoped that Mrs Henshaw would forgive her the little lie, but really, what other excuse could she have given?

Before Lord Blackwood could respond, she turned, followed by her aunt, and hurried from the room, her heart pounding in her chest.

She didn't look back, didn't dare to.

If she did, she might see something in his eyes that would break her completely.

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Edward watched Lydia go, a pang of regret tightening his chest. He wanted to call her back, to tell her that she didn't have to leave, that she belonged here as much as anyone. But he couldn't. Not with Josephine standing there, her presence a reminder of everything he had lost — and everything he stood to lose.

"She's quite... charming," Josephine said, her tone light but her eyes sharp. "Though perhaps a little out of her depth."

Edward turned to her, his expression hardening.

"Be careful, Josephine. Miss Bigglesworth is under my protection."

Josephine's smile faltered, just for a moment. Then she stepped closer, her voice dropping to a whisper.

"And what about me, Edward? Am I under your protection as well?"

Edward's breath caught. He had loved her once, more than he had thought possible. But that love had been tainted by regret, by the knowledge that he had let her slip through his fingers, and that she had done nothing to stop that from happening.

And now, standing here with her, he wasn't sure if he could find his way back to that love, in any way at all.

## Chapter Seven

Lydia walked briskly down the gravel path that led away from Blackwood Grange, her chest tight and her eyes stinging with unshed tears. Her aunt trailed behind her, saying nothing – Lydia was sure that the observant woman understood just how she might be thinking. The encounter with the Viscountess had left her feeling raw, exposed in a way that she hadn't anticipated. She had known, of course, that the Earl had a past — everyone did, even if they didn't know all the details. But seeing Josephine in person, so elegant and confident, had driven home the reality of the situation in a way that no amount of rational thought could have prepared her for.

She didn't belong in his world. She never had. And now, with Josephine's return, it was clearer than ever. The Viscountess was everything that Lydia was not: poised, sophisticated, and effortlessly at ease in the world of the aristocracy. Lydia was just a bookshop assistant, a commoner with no claim to the Earl's attention or affection.

Her steps slowed as she reached the edge of the estate, where the path turned towards the village. She paused, glancing back at the looming house, its grand silhouette rising against the grey sky. For a moment, she allowed herself to imagine what it might have been like to stay, to fight for the connection she had begun to feel with Lord Blackwood. But the thought was fleeting, chased away by the memory of Josephine's cool, assessing gaze.

"It's for the best," she whispered to herself, though the words felt hollow.

She couldn't stay, not when her presence would only complicate things for him. He deserved a chance to reconcile with Josephine, to find happiness with someone who belonged in his world. And if that meant Lydia stepping aside, then so be it.

With a deep breath, she turned back away from the house and continued down the path, her heart heavy, but her resolve firm. She would return to London, to her father's bookshop, and try to forget the Earl and the brief, impossible hope he had awakened in her.

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Edward stood at the window of his study, his gaze fixed on the figure walking briskly down the path away from the house. Lydia. She hadn't even said goodbye, hadn't given him a chance to explain, or to reassure her. She had simply left, as though she believed her presence meant nothing to him.

But it did. It meant more than he had understood, until this moment, standing here watching her walk away. She had brought light into his life, a warmth and understanding he hadn't known he was missing. And now she was gone, leaving him alone with the ghost of his past.

Behind him, Josephine cleared her throat, pulling him from his thoughts.

"Edward," she said, her voice soft but insistent. "We need to talk."

He turned to face her, his expression guarded.

"About what, Josephine?"

She stepped closer, her eyes searching his.

"About us. About what happened between us. I know I hurt you when I married Ashworth, but I never stopped caring for you. And now that I'm free..."

Her voice trailed off, but the implication was clear. She wanted to rekindle what they had once had, to pick up the pieces of their broken past and try to make something new. But back then, they had been barely out of childhood... Now, standing here, as an adult, it all felt very different.

Edward's chest tightened. He had loved her once, more than he had thought possible. But that love had been tainted by regret, by the knowledge that he had let her slip through his fingers, by the fact that she had made no move to fight for it at the time. And now, standing here with her, he wasn't fairly sure that he couldn't find his way back to it.

"Josephine," he said, his voice low and measured, "what happened between us... it's in the past. We can't go back."

Her expression faltered, just for a moment, before she masked it with a smile.

"Of course we can't go back. But we can move forward. Together."

Edward shook his head, his thoughts drifting to Lydia. She had seen him, truly seen him, he realised, in a way that Josephine never had. She had listened to him, challenged him, made him feel as though he didn't have to pretend. And now she was gone, because of him.

"I can't," he said, his voice firm. "Not with you."

Josephine's smile faded, replaced by a look of disbelief.

"Edward, be reasonable. You can't possibly be serious about that... that girl. She's a commoner, for heaven's sake. What could she possibly offer you?"

Edward's jaw tightened, a flicker of anger sparking in his chest.

"She's more than you think. And she's offered me something you never could — honesty, understanding, and a chance to be myself."

Josephine's eyes narrowed, her voice sharpening.

"You're making a mistake, Edward. She doesn't belong in your world, and you know it."

Edward turned away, his gaze returning to the window. Lydia was gone now, her figure swallowed by the trees at the edge of the estate. But he could still see her in his mind's eye, her quiet strength, her gentle smile, the way that she had looked at him as though he were more than just a title.

"Perhaps," he said quietly, "but she belongs in my life. And I'm not going to let her go."

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Lydia sat in the carriage, her hands clasped tightly in her lap as the wheels rattled over the uneven road. Beside her sat a box of the books that she had chosen for the shop, from Lord Blackwood's library – books that now felt precious to her, in a completely different way. Opposite her, her aunt dozed already, rocked into the edges of sleep by the movement of the carriage.

Outside, the fields slipped past, the road taking her ever nearer to London, and ever further from where she actually wanted to be. She had left Blackbrook behind, but the ache in her chest remained, a constant reminder of what she had walked away from.

She told herself that it was for the best, that she was doing the right thing by stepping aside. But the thought brought her no comfort. All she could think of was Lord Blackwood, of the way that his eyes had softened when he looked at her, of the quiet moments that they had shared in the library, of the connection that she had felt with him — a connection she had never felt with anyone else.

But it didn't matter. She couldn't compete with Josephine, Lady Ashworth, couldn't offer him the life that he deserved. She was a commoner, a bookshop assistant, and he was an Earl. Their worlds were too far apart, and no amount of longing could bridge the gap.

As the carriage rolled on, Lydia closed her eyes, letting the tears she had been holding back finally fall.

She had found something precious at Blackwood Grange, something she hadn't known she was searching for.

And now, she had to let it go.

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Edward stood in the empty library, the silence pressing in on him like a weight. Lydia's absence was palpable, a void that seemed to echo through the room.

He had tried to convince himself that he could let her go, that perhaps it was for the best.

But the truth was, he couldn't. Not now, not after everything.

He had spent so much of his life hiding behind his title, burying his feelings beneath layers of duty and responsibility. But Lydia had seen through all of that, had seen the man beneath the title and accepted him for who he was. And now she was gone, because he had been too blind, too hesitant, to tell her how he truly felt.

Just like he had been too blind, too afraid with Josephine, all those years ago. That comparison made him wince, and he internally berated himself – was he going to stay a coward for the rest of his life? Was he going to spend his life alone? Because he wasn't going to spend it with Josephine, and he'd told her that, very clearly. She hadn't been impressed, to put it mildly. But her reactions, and her words, had shown him the kind of person she had grown into – and that definitely wasn't the kind of person he could love.

He couldn't let Lydia leaving be the end of it. He couldn't let her walk away without knowing how much she meant to him.

He'd sent a message this morning, to Mrs Henshaw's cottage, only to discover that Lydia and her aunt had left for London yesterday, almost as soon as they had reached the cottage after leaving Blackwood Grange.

Since the moment that his footman had returned with that news, he had stood here, his mind in turmoil.

But really, there was no question of what he should do, what he would do – for he could not face the idea of losing the one thing he actually cared about, of living that lonely life that seemed to stretch ahead of him, grey and miserable.

With a determined set to his jaw, Edward turned and strode from the library, his mind made up.

He would go to London.

He would find her.

And he would tell her the truth of his feelings, no matter the cost.



## Chapter Eight

The streets of London were bustling with the usual cacophony of carriages, vendors, and pedestrians, but Lydia barely noticed the noise as she sat in the back room of her father's bookshop, her hands trembling as she tried to focus on the ledger before her. It had been three days since she had left Blackwood Grange, three days since she had last seen Lord Blackwood. The ache in her chest had not lessened; if anything, it had grown sharper, more insistent.

She had told herself that she was doing the right thing, that stepping aside was the only way to ensure Lord Blackwood's happiness. But the truth was, she missed him — missed their quiet conversations in his library, the way that his eyes changed when he spoke of books, the rare moments when he let his guard down and allowed her to see the man beneath the title.

She had returned to London with her aunt, who had been surprisingly understanding, though she had gently chided Lydia for not giving Lord Blackwood a chance to speak for himself.

"You're too quick to assume that you know what others want, my dear," her aunt had said. "Sometimes, the heart knows what the mind cannot yet see."

Lydia had nodded, but she had not been able to shake the feeling that she had made the right decision.

Lord Blackwood deserved a second chance with the woman he had once loved, and Lydia, a commoner with no title or fortune, could never compete with a Viscountess. It was better this way, she told herself, even as her heart protested.

The bell above the shop door jingled, pulling Lydia from her thoughts.

She heard her father's voice, warm and welcoming, as he greeted a customer. She forced herself to focus on the ledger, her quill scratching against the paper as she tallied the day's sales. But then she heard a voice that made her heart stop — a deep, familiar voice that sent a shiver down her spine.

"Is Miss Bigglesworth here?"

Lydia froze, her quill slipping from her fingers and leaving a blot of ink on the page. She rose from her seat, her legs unsteady, and stepped into the main room of the shop. There, standing just inside the door, was the Earl of Blackwood.

He looked out of place in the modest bookshop, his tall frame and elegant attire drawing the attention of the few customers browsing the shelves. His dark hair was slightly dishevelled, as if he had travelled hard to reach London, with little rest, and his piercing blue eyes scanned the room until they landed on her. For a moment, they simply stared at each other, the air between them charged with unspoken words.

"My Lord," Lydia said, her voice barely above a whisper. "What are you doing here?"

Lord Blackwood stepped forward, his gaze never leaving hers.

"I came to find you," he said, his voice low and urgent. "You left without a word, without giving me a chance to explain."

Lydia's heart pounded in her chest. She glanced at her father, who was watching the scene with a mixture of curiosity and amusement, and at the other customers, a few of them of the aristocracy, who had paused in their browsing to observe the unexpected encounter. She felt a flush of embarrassment, but Lord Blackwood's presence was too overwhelming to ignore.

"I thought it was for the best," she said, her voice trembling. "You deserve a second chance with her, my Lord. I didn't want to stand in the way of your happiness."

Lord Blackwood's expression softened, and he took another step towards her.

"Lydia," he said, his voice filled with a tenderness that made her breath catch. "You are my happiness."

The words hung in the air, and for a moment, the shop seemed to fall silent. Lydia's eyes filled with tears, and she shook her head, unable to believe what she was hearing.

"But... the Viscountess..."

"Is my past," Lord Blackwood said firmly. "You are my present, and my future. I was a fool to let you go, to think that I could ever find what I have with you in anyone else."

Lydia's heart swelled with emotion, but she still hesitated.

"My Lord, I'm just a bookshop assistant. I have no title, no fortune. How could I possibly be enough for you?"

Lord Blackwood reached out and took her hand, his touch sending a jolt of warmth through her.

"You are more than enough, Lydia. You are everything. You've brought light back into my life, and I can't imagine a future without you."

The sincerity in his voice broke through her doubts, and she felt the walls she had built around her heart begin to crumble.

"But what will people say?" she asked, her voice barely a whisper. "A nobleman and a commoner..."

Lord Blackwood's lips curved into a faint smile.

"Let them say what they will. I don't care about their opinions. All I care about is you."

Lydia's eyes filled with tears, and she felt a surge of courage she hadn't known she possessed.

"I... I don't know what to say."

Lord Blackwood's smile widened and, still holding her hand he spoke with an intensity that reverberated through her.

"Say you'll marry me, Lydia. Say you'll be my wife, my partner, my equal in every way."

The shop erupted into murmurs of surprise, and Lydia's father stepped forward, his eyes shining with pride.

"Well, my dear," he said, his voice warm with affection. "It seems that the Earl has made his choice. The question is, will you make yours?"

Lydia looked at Lord Blackwood, at the man who had once been so cold and distant, now standing before her with his heart laid bare. She felt a surge of love and gratitude, and she knew, without a doubt, that she could not let him go.

"Yes," she said, her voice steady despite the tears streaming down her cheeks. "Yes, I'll marry you."

Lord Blackwood's face lit up with joy, and he rose to his feet, pulling her into his arms. The shop erupted into applause, and Lydia felt a sense of peace and happiness that she had never known before. In that moment, she knew that she had found her true home — not in a place, but in the arms of the man who loved her for who she was.

As Lord Blackwood held her close, Lydia realised that love was not about perfection or social status. It was about finding someone who saw you, truly saw you, and loved you for it. And in Lord Blackwood's embrace, she knew that she had found that love at last.

## Chapter Nine

The days that followed Lord Blackwood's proposal were a whirlwind of emotions and preparations. Lydia found herself caught between the joy of her newfound happiness and the lingering disbelief that this was truly happening. Lord Blackwood, for his part, seemed determined to prove his commitment to her, his every action a testament to the depth of his feelings.

They spent their days together in the bookshop, Lord Blackwood often arriving early in the morning to help Lydia with the day's tasks. He would sit at the small desk in the back room, poring over ledgers and catalogues with a focus that surprised her. It was as if he wanted to immerse himself in every aspect of her life, to understand the world that she had built for herself. He had basically barely seen his townhouse, had left his staff to maintain it as they had been, while he only went there to sleep.

Her father watched it all with quiet amusement, pleased, but not feeling the need to disrupt the time they spent together in his shop.

"You don't have to do this, you know," Lydia said one morning as she watched him carefully annotate a list of books. "You're an Earl. You have estates to manage, responsibilities..."

Lord Blackwood looked up, his blue eyes meeting hers with a warmth that made her heart skip a beat.

"And yet, there's nowhere I'd rather be," he said simply. "Besides, I find that I rather enjoy it. There's a certain satisfaction in seeing the numbers add up."

Lydia smiled, her heart swelling with affection. She had never imagined that the man she had once thought so cold and distant could be so... human. He had a way of surprising her, of revealing new facets of himself that made her fall in love with him all over again.

But it wasn't just the practicalities of the bookshop that brought them closer.

They spent hours talking, their conversations ranging from the books they loved to the dreams they had for the future. Lord Blackwood spoke of his plans to reopen the library at Blackwood Grange to others, to make it a place where scholars and book lovers could gather. Lydia, in turn, shared her hopes of helping her father to expand the bookshop, perhaps buying the shop next door to get more space, of creating a space where people could come together to share their love of literature. Maybe even adding a reading room.

"It's not just about the books," she said one evening as they sat together in the small sitting room of her father's little house next door, the fire crackling in the hearth. "It's about the connections they create. The way they bring people together."

Lord Blackwood nodded, his expression thoughtful.

"I've always thought of books as a refuge," he said. "A way to escape the world. But you've shown me that they can be so much more. They can be a bridge, a way to connect with others."

Lydia felt a surge of pride at his words, but also a flicker of uncertainty. She still struggled to believe that she, a commoner with no title or fortune, could be the one to inspire such change in him.

"Do you ever worry," she asked hesitantly, "that people will think less of you for marrying me?"

Lord Blackwood's expression softened, and he reached out to take her hand.

"Lydia," he said, his voice gentle but firm, "I've spent too much of my life worrying about what others think. I won't let their opinions dictate my happiness. You are the best thing that has ever happened to me, and I won't let anyone make you feel otherwise."

His words brought tears to her eyes, and she squeezed his hand tightly.

"I just... I don't want to hold you back," she whispered.

Lord Blackwood shook his head, his gaze steady.

"You could never hold me back. You've given me a reason to live again, to embrace the world instead of hiding from it. If anything, you've set me free."

Lydia's heart swelled with emotion, and she leaned into him, resting her head on his shoulder. For the first time in her life, she felt truly seen, truly valued. It was a feeling she had never known before, and it filled her with a sense of peace and contentment she had never thought possible.

But even as they grew closer, there were moments of doubt, moments when the weight of their differences seemed almost too much to bear. One afternoon, as they sat together in the bookshop, Lord Blackwood broached the subject of their wedding.

"I've been thinking," he said, his voice hesitant. "Perhaps we should marry in the small church in Blackbrook village. And then have a wedding breakfast at Blackwood Grange. It's my home, and I want to share it with you."

Lydia's heart leapt at the thought, but she couldn't help but feel a flicker of anxiety.

"But... what about your family? Your friends? Will they approve?"

Lord Blackwood's expression darkened, and he looked away.

"My family is... complicated," he said after a moment. "My father was a difficult man, and my mother... well, she was never one to mince words. But it doesn't matter. They are both gone, and my more distant relatives have no say in this. My sister will love you, I'm sure. This is our life, Lydia, not theirs."

Lydia nodded, but the doubt lingered. She had never met Lord Blackwood's family, but she had heard enough to know that they were not likely to welcome her with open arms. The thought of facing their disapproval was daunting, but she knew she couldn't let it dictate her happiness.

"I'll stand by you," she said softly. "No matter what."

Lord Blackwood's eyes met hers, and she saw the gratitude and love shining in them.

"And I'll stand by you," he said. "Always."

The next morning, Lord Blackwood sent off a message to the Vicar at Blackbrook, providing the details, and asking that the banns be called, each week for the next three weeks. After that, they would marry – neither of them wanted a large or ostentatious wedding.

As the days passed, Lydia found herself growing more confident in their relationship. Lord Blackwood's unwavering support and love gave her the strength to face the challenges ahead, and she began to believe that they could build a life together, no matter what obstacles they might face.

But there was still one thing that weighed on her mind — the Viscountess Ashworth. The woman who had once held Lord Blackwood's heart, who had been the subject of the letter that had brought them together. Lydia couldn't help but wonder if Lord Blackwood had truly let go of his past, or if there was still a part of him that longed for what might have been.

A few days later, Lydia gathered her courage and broached the subject.

"Do you ever think about her?" she asked, her voice tentative.

Lord Blackwood looked at her, his expression unreadable.

"About who?"

"Lady Ashworth," Lydia said softly. "The woman you wrote the letter to."



Lord Blackwood was silent for a long moment, and Lydia feared that she had overstepped. But then he sighed, his shoulders slumping slightly.

"I do," he admitted. "But not in the way that you might think. She was a part of my past, but she's not my future. You are."

Lydia's heart swelled with emotion, but she couldn't help but press further.

"Do you regret not sending the letter?"

Lord Blackwood shook his head.

"No," he said firmly. "If I had sent it, if things had turned out differently... I might never have met you. And that's a future I can't bear to imagine."

Lydia felt tears prick at the corners of her eyes, and she reached out to take his hand.

"I love you," she said, her voice trembling with emotion.

Lord Blackwood's eyes softened, and he pulled her into his arms. "And I love you," he said, his voice filled with a tenderness that made her heart ache, even as joy filled her. "More than anything."

As they sat together in the quiet of the bookshop, Lydia felt a sense of peace settle over her. The road ahead might be uncertain, but she knew that as long as they had each other, they could face anything. And in that moment, she allowed herself to believe in the future they were building together — a future filled with love, understanding, and the promise of a life shared.

It would be different from anything she had ever imagined for herself — but wonderful.

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The morning of the wedding dawned clear and bright, the sun casting a golden glow over Blackbrook village. Lydia stood in the small room adjacent to the chapel, her hands trembling as she adjusted the delicate lace of her gown. The dress was simple but elegant, its ivory fabric shimmering in the soft light. Her aunt stood behind her, carefully pinning a small wreath of delicate white flowers into her hair, the scent of the flowers surrounding them.

"You look beautiful, my dear," her aunt said, her voice filled with pride. "Lord Blackwood is a lucky man."

Lydia smiled, though her heart was racing. She could hardly believe that this was happening — that she, a simple bookshop assistant, was about to marry an Earl. The past few weeks had been a whirlwind of preparations, but now, as the moment approached, she felt a strange sense of calm.

She had chosen this path, and she was ready to walk it.

There was a soft knock at the door, and her father stepped inside, his eyes shining with emotion.

"Lydia," he said, his voice thick with pride. "You look... radiant."

Lydia felt tears prick at the corners of her eyes, and she stepped forward to embrace him.

"Thank you, Papa," she whispered. "For everything."

Her father held her tightly for a moment, then stepped back, his hands resting on her shoulders.

"I'm so proud of you," he said. "Your mother would be too."

The mention of her mother brought a fresh wave of emotion, and Lydia nodded, unable to speak. She had often wondered what her mother would think of this moment, of the life she had built for herself. She liked to think that her mother would have approved, that she would have been happy to see her daughter so loved.

"It's time," her aunt said gently, breaking the moment. "The Vicar is waiting."

Lydia took a deep breath, her heart pounding as she stepped out into the small church.

The church was filled with the soft coloured light which filtered through the stained-glass windows, and the air was fragrant with the scent of flowers. The guests — a small, intimate gathering of close friends and family, including, she noted with interest, Lord Setford, to whom her father had been valet for many years, before he had retired from that role and opened the bookshop — turned to watch as she walked down the aisle, their faces filled with warmth and joy.

At the front of the church stood Lord Blackwood, his tall frame silhouetted against the light which was streaming through the stained-glass windows. He turned as she approached, his blue eyes meeting hers with a look of such tenderness that it took her breath away. He was dressed in dark formal wear, his hair slightly tousled, and there was a softness in his expression that made her heart fill with joy.

As she reached his side, he took her hand, his touch sending a jolt of warmth through her.

“You look wonderful,” he whispered, his voice filled with awe.

Lydia smiled, her eyes shining with tears.

“So do you,” she said softly.

The ceremony was simple but heartfelt, the words of the vows echoing through the church with a quiet power. When the time came to exchange rings, Lord Blackwood’s hands trembled slightly as he slipped the band onto her finger. It was a simple gold ring, unadorned but elegant, and it felt like a promise — a symbol of the life that they were about to build together.

“I, Edward, take thee, Lydia, to be my wedded wife,” he said, his voice steady but filled with emotion. “To have and to hold from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death us do part.”

Lydia’s heart swelled as she repeated the vows, her voice trembling but clear.

"I, Lydia, take thee, Edward, to be my wedded husband. To have and to hold from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love, to obey and to cherish, till death us do part."

As the Vicar pronounced them husband and wife, Lord Blackwood leaned down to kiss her, his lips brushing against hers with a gentleness that somehow still promised so much more, for later. The church erupted into applause, and Lydia felt a surge of joy so profound it brought tears to her eyes.

The rest of the day passed in a blur of laughter and celebration. The Wedding Breakfast was held in the grand hall of Blackwood Grange, the room filled with happy conversation and the sound of music. When the orchestra played a waltz, Lydia and Edward danced together, their movements slow and intimate, their position scandalously close to each other, as if they were the only two people in the room.

Eventually the day passed, until finally, evening arrived, and Lydia found herself standing on the terrace, the cool night air a welcome relief from the warmth of the hall. Edward joined her, his hand slipping into hers as they looked out over the moonlit gardens.

"Are you happy?" he asked, his voice soft.

Lydia turned to him, her heart swelling with love.

"More than I ever thought possible," she said. "And you?"

Edward smiled, his eyes filled with warmth.

"I've never been happier," he said. "You've given me a second chance, Lydia. A chance to live again."

Lydia leaned into him, resting her head on his shoulder as they stood together in the quiet of the night. The future stretched out before them, filled with promise and possibility, and she knew that no matter what challenges they might face, they would face them together.

As the stars twinkled overhead, Lydia felt a sense of peace settle over her. She had found her true home — not in a place, but in the arms of the man who loved her for who she was.

## Epilogue

Nearly a year had passed since the wedding, and Blackwood Grange had transformed into a place of warmth and light. The once sombre halls now echoed with laughter and the soft rustle of pages turning. The library, once a forgotten sanctuary, had become the heart of the estate, its shelves filled with books that bore the marks of frequent use. Lydia stood in the centre of the room, her fingers trailing over the spines of the volumes as she smiled to herself. This was her favourite place in the world — a place where love and literature intertwined.

The Earl — Edward, as she now called him — had kept his promise. The library was no longer a relic of the past but a living, breathing space. Scholars and book lovers from across the country had begun to visit, drawn by Lord Blackwood's invitation to share in the treasures of his collection. Lydia had taken great joy in curating the space, adding her own touches, and ensuring that it felt welcoming to all who entered. It was a place of connection, just as she had always dreamed of creating.

Edward entered the library quietly, his footsteps soft against the polished wooden floor. He paused for a moment, watching her with a fondness that still made her heart flutter. She turned, sensing his presence, and smiled as she saw him holding a small, leather-bound book.

"What's that?" she asked, her curiosity piqued.

"A gift," he said, his voice warm. "For you. Today is the anniversary of the first day that you knocked on my door. I wanted to commemorate that momentous day."

Lydia took the book from him, her fingers brushing against his as she did. She opened it carefully, her eyes widening as she saw the familiar handwriting. It was a journal, filled with notes and musings on literature, philosophy, and life. The pages were filled with Edward's thoughts, his voice leaping from the page with a clarity and depth that took her breath away.

"Edward," she said, her voice trembling. "This is... incredible."

He smiled, a hint of shyness in his expression.

"I thought that you might like it. It's my way of sharing a part of myself with you — the part that loves books as much as you do."

Lydia felt tears prick at the corners of her eyes, and she reached out to take his hand.

"Thank you," she said softly. "It's the most beautiful gift I've ever received."

Edward's smile deepened, and he pulled her into his arms, holding her close.

"You've given me so much, Lydia. This is just a small way of showing you how much you mean to me."

They stood together in the quiet of the library, the world outside fading away. Lydia rested her head against his chest, listening to the steady rhythm of his heartbeat. It was a sound she had come to cherish, a reminder of the life that they had built together.

Over the past year, they had faced their share of challenges. Edward's more distant family had been slow to accept their marriage, and there had been moments of tension and doubt. But through it all, they had stood together, their love growing stronger with each passing day. Lydia had learned to trust in their bond, to believe in the future that they were creating.

As they stood there Lydia thought back to the day that she had first discovered the letter which had brought them together. It felt like a lifetime ago, and yet the memory was as vivid as ever. That letter had been the beginning of their story, a story that had unfolded in ways she could never have imagined.

“Do you ever think about the letter?” she asked, her voice soft.

Edward nodded, his expression thoughtful.

“Every day,” he said. “It’s a reminder of how far we’ve come. Of how lucky I am to have found you.”

Lydia smiled, her heart swelling with love.

“I think about it too,” she said. “It’s a part of us, just like this library. A part of our story.”

Edward leaned down to kiss her, his lips meeting hers tenderly, and then with an increasing intensity.

“Our story is just beginning,” he said. “And I can’t wait to see where it takes us.”

At that moment, surrounded by the books that they both loved, Lydia felt a sense of peace settle over her. This was her home — not just a place, but a life filled with love, understanding, and the promise of a future shared. She knew that their love would carry them through whatever lay ahead, and would only grow stronger with time.

They settled into their favourite chairs, and soon, the library was quiet, the only sound the soft rustle of pages turning as they sat together, lost in the world of books and each other. It was a moment of perfect contentment, a moment that would stay with them forever — a testament to the power of love, second chances, and the stories that bind us together.

## The End

## About the Author

USA Today Bestselling author Arietta Richmond has been a compulsive reader and writer all her life. Whilst her reading has covered an enormous range of topics, history has always fascinated her, and historical novels have been amongst her favourite reading. She has worked in many diverse industries and written a wide range of work, from business articles and other non-fiction works (published under a pen name) to various other genres of fiction, but regency fiction has always been a major part of her life.

Now, her main focus is Regency Historical Romance, and she has written more than 60 Regency books so far. These are in a number of series, with a few standalone novels as well, and she has multiple new series planned. The Derbyshire Set is comprised of 11 novels (9 released so far). The 'His Majesty's Hounds' series is comprised of 17 novels, all released. The Elbury Bouquet series is 8 novels, all released. The Nettlefold Chronicles series is seven novels, all released, the Regency Scandals series is four books so far, the Regency Gothic series is six books, and the Her Duke Collection is seven books. She also has a number of standalone novels released, and four new series of novels at various stages of planning.

She lives in Australia, and when not reading or writing, likes to travel, and to see in person the places where history happened.

Be the first to know about it when Arietta's next book is released! Her website is never entirely up to date, as writing keeps distracting her from updating the website – but you can sign up to Arietta's newsletter there, at: <http://www.ariettarichmond.com>

When you do, you will receive three free subscriber exclusive books - '**A Gift of Love**', which is a prequel to the Derbyshire Set series, and ends on the day that 'The Earl's Unexpected Bride' begins, '**Madame's Christmas Marquis**' which is an additional story in the His Majesty's Hounds series, and '**The Lost Letter**' which is also an additional story associated with the His Majesty's Hounds series.



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**Claiming the Heart of a Duke**



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## Chapter One

Having broken his fast at the inn that morning, Hunter Barrington, tenth Duke of Melton, had decided that he would ride for the last leg of his journey, because he was heartily sick of the stuffy carriage and of his valet's mournful mien.

This worthy, whom he had hired following his friend Raphael's advice (for it seemed that his business was a source of excellent information, not just imported goods), had vainly tried to turn him into a dandy during their short stay in London. Hunter smiled thinking of Bulwick's dismay when he had flatly refused to use the cane that Bulwick had tried to foist upon him, or to buy the inordinate number of fobs, which it was fashionable to attach to one's watch chain. After years in the field, his taste in dress was so simple that it could be called austere. Not so long ago, a day with clean clothes had been worth savouring, so all of this fuss seemed rather ridiculous to him.

Poor Bulwick had been horrified when he had declared his intention to ride.

"You can't possibly do that, my Lord," he had whispered.

"You will reach Meltonbrook Chase in a dishevelled and mussed condition. You will get a head cold, of a certainty. And, my Lord, if I may presume to comment further, the road is in very bad condition and frozen all over."

“Fustian!”

Hunter had exclaimed, shrugging away his valet’s concern.

“It will do me good. Look after my luggage, Felton. I’m off.”

The road, in his opinion, was quite good – certainly a vast improvement on trampled battlefields and roads in a war zone!

So, without further ado, he had swung onto his horse, leaving the bewildered valet with his mouth still open in protest.

For the first few miles, the ride had been exhilarating. Warmly clad in his greatcoat, beaver hat and fur lined gloves, astride his dapple grey stallion, he had delighted in the cold wind and in the speed-blurred landscape, as he let the stallion run off his energy.

The feeling of freedom, however, did not last long and had already vanished when Meltonbrook Chase appeared in the distance.

It was the first time he had seen his family estate since his father, the late Duke, had purchased a commission for him, as was traditional for a second son. Hunter could remember, perfectly well, his father’s stern admonitions, imparted before sending him on his way to London, and hence to the Peninsular and war.

“Honour first of all, my son. Honour means more than life to our family. Never tarnish it, never demean yourself, never show a streak of the yellow. Remember, an officer and a nobleman must be an example for his men. England must stand against the French tyrant. Your commitment must be wholehearted. Your days as a dissipated and wild young buck have ended. Do you understand?”

*‘I thought I understood, Father, but I didn’t. Only later, I did. Oh, yes, later I understood, all too well, what you meant.’* Hunter’s thought was wry, and a little sad.

He was so absorbed in his musings that he was barely registering the landscape. It took some time for him to realise that he was inside Meltonbrook Chase’s expansive park. He reined in his horse, and stopped to look at the wintry landscape around him.

The silence was profound, broken only by the cawing of a crow, somewhere in the woods, and by the soft murmuring of the nearby brook. The grounds were immaculate under the heavy pall of snow, the ice-traced tall poplars, which surrounded the lake, shining like silver filigree under the setting sun's slanting rays.

"I'm home." he thought, steeling himself for his first meeting with his family, after so many years.

Riding into the deserted stable yard, it seemed surreal that he was actually here – and even more surreal that his father and brother were gone, that all of this was his now.

He dismounted, the icy gravel crunching under his feet, as a brawny groom, in a leather coat, came running toward him.

"Master Hunter! Master Hunter! Is it you? Is it really you? At long last you're home again!" The man suddenly checked and lowered his head.

"Begging your pardon, Your Grace. I've been overfamiliar, but me happiness made me tongue run away with me, it did, old fool that I am."

"Never you mind, Nick. Master Hunter it is, if you wish it, as long as you keep it just between us. You know how stuffy my mother can be... Now, this is Nuage...." he gestured to the horse, which snuffled curiously at the old groom. "I bought him in France, and a valiant fellow he is. Take good care of him, will you? Go with Nick, my boy, he's a good one."

Nick stroked the horse's silky coat and took the reins.

"Always been a good judge of horseflesh, Master Hunter. Since you was a stripling, you was. Come along Nuage, a good rubdown is what you need right now. And what about some clean straw to lie on and some oats to chew?" Talking to the horse, the head groom disappeared around the corner toward the stable, as the carriage, bearing his valet, and his meagre luggage, drew up before the house.

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Nerissa looked at her reflection in the tall mirror and sighed.

She would never be an Incomparable, and that was that. Her colouring was all wrong, she was too tall and her face was too angular.

In the pale pastel colours that were deemed fashionable for young ladies, she faded into insignificance.

She sighed again, thinking of her sister Maria, an acknowledged Beauty, who had cut a triumphant swathe through the *ton* during the previous Season. It had been fashionable to be in love with Maria, with her flashing amber eyes, rich auburn hair and flawless creamy complexion. Thus, Maria had had the opportunity of choosing from amongst a veritable army of suitors and was now betrothed - very advantageously betrothed, to be sure, to a wealthy Earl, to their parents' delight.

Donning her fur lined pelisse and her velvet bonnet, Nerissa crossed the hall and stepped into the carriage with her maid, bound to Meltonbrook Chase, where she was to have tea with her bosom bow Alyse, the Duke of Melton's daughter.

No, not daughter, sister, she amended her thought. Hunter was Duke, now, after the untimely demise of his father and his elder brother.

She blushed. They hoped that Hunter would be home soon, for he had sent his family a message from London, but with the deep snow on the roads, he was likely delayed.

Would he recognise her? She did not think so. He had had scant interest to spare for her, to begin with, when he was a young man just back from his term in Oxford, and she was just a shy ten year old, all angles and elbows and not even a promise of feminine allure.

Nerissa leaned back on the carriage seat, closing her eyes. *'Much good it does me to wool-gather like that'*, she chided herself. *'I'll be lucky if I don't find myself married to some gouty old man before the Season is over.'*

She shivered, and not because of the sharp wind blowing and howling through the naked trees.



As Hunter approached the door, the butler, a delighted expression lighting his usually impassive features, opened it. Immediately regaining his formal demeanour, Jermyn schooled his expression to a more serious face, better suited to the Butler of a great house.

“Welcome home, my lord. The ladies are in the drawing room. Follow me, please.”

“No need, Jermyn, I know the way”, answered Hunter, secretly amused by the butler’s display of self-restraint, and almost ran to the drawing room doors, suddenly unable to wait any longer to see his family.

He opened the doors, and an instant of shocked silence followed his entrance.

Hunter scanned the tableau – a morning visit frozen before him. All of his family were there (although part of his mind still expected to see his father and Richard as well), and there was someone else.

A woman he did not know, a woman who was more beautiful than any he had seen.

She had burnished golden hair, surrounding her face with a profusion of waves and ringlets, a honey and gold complexion; long, almond shaped green gold eyes, fringed by thick burnished golden eyelashes and emphasized by high cheekbones, and a tall, shapely body.

The only feature detracting from perfection, but greatly adding to character, was a rather large, mobile mouth, much more capable of expressing feelings (and temper, he suspected!) than a proper prim little rosebud. He was captivated. Her eyes met his across the room, and for a moment, everything else faded away.

He was brought back to the moment when the silence was broken by his sister Alyse, who cried out: “Hunter! Hunter, you are back! Is it really you, Hunter?” and, without any further ado, threw herself at him.

His eye contact with the woman was broken, and he forgot her in the chaos that followed.

Hunter's mother, the Duchess Louisa, half-fainting, reclined on the sofa, fanning herself and calling for her vinaigrette. His sister Sybilla, almost jiggled around the table, before forcing herself to behave with greater propriety. His brother, Charles, obviously tried to be the cool gentleman, but could not help but step forward and embrace Hunter, his eyes shining with held back tears.

"At long last, my son," sobbed his mother.

"Come here, and let me look at you. Last time I saw you, you were a boy. Now you are a man. And what a man! Your father, God rest his soul, would be so proud of you..."

Moved despite himself, Hunter gathered his weeping mother into his arms.

"Shush, Mother, I'm here to stay. I'm so sorry I was not here when it would have really mattered. I feel that I have failed you all, yet it was at the time of Waterloo, and I did not even hear the news for months! I'm so sorry..."

The Duchess brushed her tears impatiently aside.

"I'm a foolish old woman, my son. This is not a time for weeping, but a time for rejoicing. God knows, we have been mourning long enough. And look who is here, Hunter. Do you remember Lady Nerissa Loughbridge, Lord Chester's youngest daughter?"

A faint recollection of a meddlesome brat, always trying to follow him around, vaguely stirred in Hunter's memory.

He turned his head and froze again, caught by her appearance.

Brat? She was not a brat anymore, she was a woman, and a very beautiful woman at that, more so because of her unusual colouring.

It was all he could do not to stare at her with his mouth agape. He tried to react in some polite way, and smiled, suddenly recalling one of Nerissa's youthful misdeeds.



"Nerissa? Was it you who hid inside your brother Kevin's portmanteau, because you wanted to come with us when we went to our hunting lodge near Cottesmore? And did we not discover you because you sneezed? Do you remember, Charles?"

Nerissa had not heard a single word.

Hunter's sudden appearance had completely stunned her.

All her childhood emotions flooded back, crowding her mind, amplified with new meaning and significance. A rosy blush washed upon her face as she dared to smile back.

"She's not a child anymore, Hunter," broke in Alyse.

"She is a dear friend to us all, and I really don't know how we would have managed without her. She is a sensible young woman, with a good head on her shoulders, and she gave us invaluable help when Mother was so ill after..." Alyse's voice faltered "...after the accident..."

Hunter looked at his family: his sisters, pretty, vivacious, eager to try out their wings during the London Season, his mother, with her gentle face marked by loss and sorrow, his brother, suddenly scowling and dark browed, and the enchanting stranger in their midst. He felt rather like he had stepped into the centre of a whirlwind.

Suddenly he felt mortally tired, in dire need of rest and solitude.

He went to his mother and kissed her gently on her cheek.

"Will you please excuse me, Mother? I have had a long and tiring journey and I'm much fatigued. I believe that, if you will forgive me, I will have a bath drawn and a tray sent to my room. I am not really up to a formal supper. Tomorrow, we can all begin to catch up."

"But of course, my dear. How thoughtless of me not having foreseen your needs... my happiness at seeing you again quite overwhelmed me. I have not all my wits about me, I'm sure... Jermyn, please, see His Grace to his apartments and make sure that his valet attends him."

"Yes, my Lady. Please follow me, Your Grace."

To his chagrin, Jermyn did not lead Hunter to his bachelor's quarters as he had unthinkingly expected, but to his father's apartments.

That was the precise moment at which the full import of his new condition crashed in upon him like a dark and overwhelming wave.

He was the Duke of Melton.

Not his father, nor his elder brother, both now dead after a freak carriage accident. Himself.

He had not wanted it, he had not coveted it, truth to tell, he had no idea how to go about being a Duke, but there it was, with all its implications and obligations, including the need to marry, and to sire heirs to the title.

It was like a bad dream, but it was not going to disappear at dawn.

**Continued...**

**Read the rest at:**

<https://ariettarichmond.com/go/claiming-the-heart-of-a-duke>

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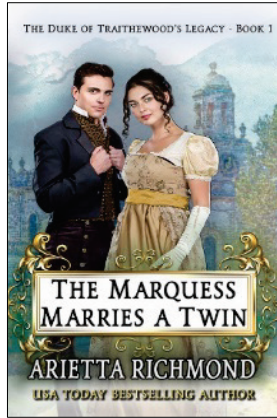
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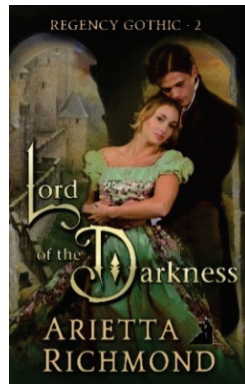
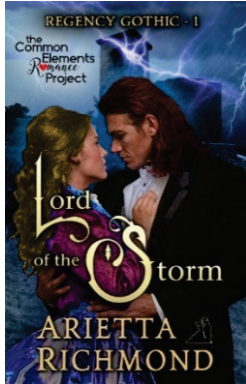


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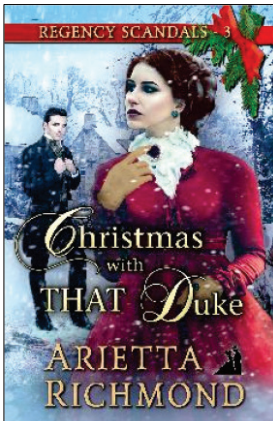
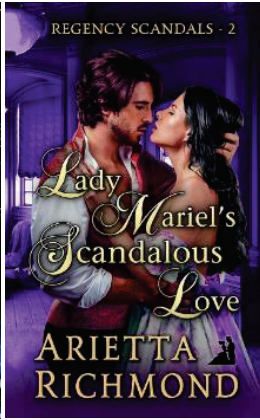
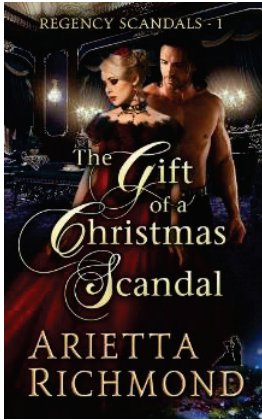




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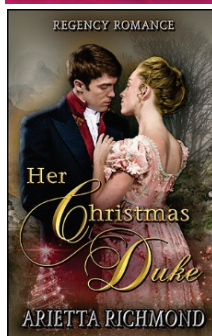
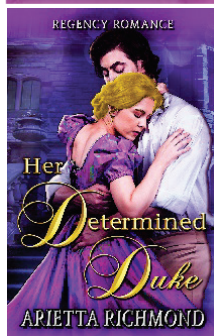
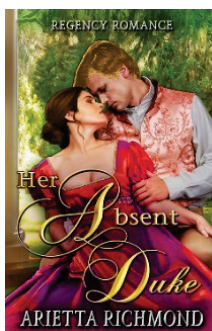
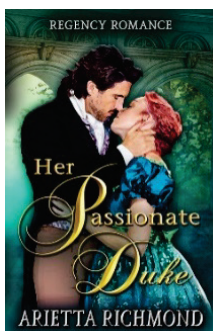
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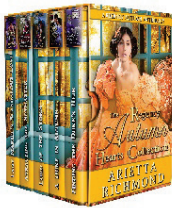
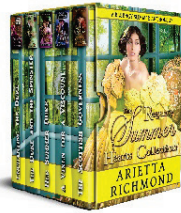
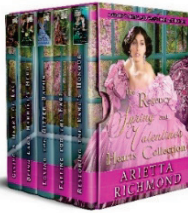
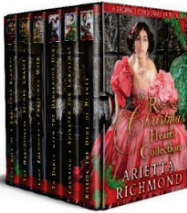


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