

**Hidden No More, A Lady Forsaken Book Four**  
**Excerpt**

**Prologue**

London, England  
March, 1816

Andrew Penton, the Marquis of Drake, lifted his eyelids, heavy from the many years of undue turmoil he'd endured, to gaze into the emerald green eyes of one of his only offspring, his youngest daughter. Ellington's eyes—so much like his own—were the only feature about the girl that resembled him. The rest was inherited from a mother she'd never known... a woman Andrew had barely known himself. Nor one he had shown any mercy to in her darkest hour.

He was resigned to an eternity in hell for his callous existence.

How he regretted so many of the decisions he'd made, the people he'd hurt, and that he hadn't honored Lorelei's memory as was proper. She would never know how deep his love for her truly was because he'd wasted his years punishing himself and those around him. And too late, he'd realized it would not have been what she'd have wanted for him. No, if given the opportunity, Andrew would have done everything differently; he would have loved the children he'd been blessed with, not misspent years searching and longing for the child who belonged only to Lorelei, his long-lost beloved.

Lorelei's babe with no blood tie to him or the Marquise, a boy with no knowledge of the havoc his mother had brought to the marquis' life...nor the utter destruction and agony she left in her wake.

But his Lorelei was gone...had been gone for what seemed an eternity. Yet, he was eager to be reunited with her...if there were something awaiting either of them on the other side of death.

Certainly, no place was reserved for him at Lorelei's side—heaven was too great a hope for a man as cruel as he.

For now, he was left here with his youngest child; her misery rolling off her in waves. Emotionally collapsed in upon herself, she was broken. And he was responsible. So young, only seventeen summers, yet he'd forced her to live out the emotions of someone three times her age...all because...Andrew had no excuse for what he'd put her through, at least not one that made sense in this moment.

There was not enough time for him to tell his daughter everything she needed to hear, let alone time to summon her older sister.

And he was wasting the precious time he *did* have. The words that needed to be spoken were stuck in his throat, playing through his head, yet never passing his lips.

So many years he'd searched for Peter.

So many years he'd denied the existence of Ruby.

And all the while, he'd ignored the child before him.

Ellington.

He'd so infrequently spoken—or even thought—the name that it sounded foreign even in his mind. Her heart-shaped face, red hair, and freckled nose were as distant in his recollection as so many other things he'd put from his awareness in recent years.

What he did recognize was the loathing radiating from her very person, the hatred in her stare, and the aloofness she donned to mask it all.

Because, when he'd been able to stand and look in a mirror, her character appeared the spitting image of the man who'd sired her.

The Marquis of Drake.

As steadfastly as he'd denied it to Mrs. Bee and himself over the years, his blood ran heavy in Ellington's veins.

She flaunted her superiority.

She fought with passion.

She argued relentlessly.

She made all the mistakes her father did. And she would pay for them, too—with loneliness, grief, and a life unlived.

What scared him the most was her propensity for doing exactly as she pleased. The girl did not think he noticed her comings and goings, but he was aware of everything going on in his household, even though he hadn't left his bed in days.

He knew when the day came and she gave her heart to another, she'd love him with all her being; every ounce of her existence would be given to that person. But he feared that man would not know her worth or her loyalty. Andrew didn't trust another to mend her broken heart...return the soul he'd stolen from her. He didn't think anyone *could*.

She would cease to live if the man she finally came to trust and love were taken from her.

Much like himself...or, more accurately, the man the marquis used to be.

A memory so distant, Andrew wasn't sure he'd ever truly been that man.

The man he was now was certainly not one his ancestors would be proud to count in their lineage—one future generations would wipe from every wall in his large home.

He knew his time was near, for his breath became increasingly hard to draw in; he realized these were his last moments. He needed to tell Ellington, show her that she was his. Convince her of the mistakes he'd made and admit to her how sorry he was for...everything.

He'd found and brought Peter to her.

At first, he'd been unconvinced of the child's identity, but one look at the boy and Andrew had known his true parentage—his Lorelei...and Lord Chastain, the man Andrew had considered his friend for more years than he could count.

But he'd fought the realization for so long that there was no time left to tell the boy of his mother and the great love Andrew had shared with her, fleeting as their physical relationship had been.

It was only now, as he listened to his own death rattle in his chest, he realized that the boy's deformities were no longer of import; that the physical abilities of a man were not more significant than the willpower and fortitude one possessed.

It was his heart that mattered most.

Andrew had spent hours...days, watching the young man in his duties. For his limited years, just six months older than Ellington, the boy was good with the horses and cared much for his fellow man. The other stable hands respected him and his abilities with the livestock.

"My daughter—" His words were barely understandable as he felt his lucidity fading. He should remain quiet and take his secrets to his grave without burdening anyone further. It would be the kindest thing he could do for his child, but his history had proven that he was anything but a kind man.

Ellington's fingers tightened where she gripped his hand, warmer than the noonday sun upon his icy skin.

"Do not—" She cut off his words. "Not now, after all this time."

"I must." He pushed through the heaviness in his chest. "There is so much to say."

"It is too late."

Suddenly, Andrew was in a different time, another place...holding the dying form of the only woman

he could say with certainty he'd loved. "I know what too late is, and we have not reached that point."

"What could you say to me now that you have been unable to say in the past?" Ellington whispered. Her grip on his hand faltered before tightening once more. "You have been quite clear about how you feel toward me."

"It is not your fault."

She wrenched back in shock. "You think I ever believed that your treatment—your resentment—of me was *my* fault?" She stumbled over her words. "You are a sad, pathetic man."

"I did not mean—"

"The meaning behind your words has never been anything but perfectly clear." Ellington leaned in close to him once more, her eyes narrowing as she spoke, "You have made it well-known that I am only the daughter of a whore, not worthy of your time or your name."

His words thrown back in his face stung a thousand times worse than any bee sting could.

"I am a bastard, left upon your doorstep by a woman who'd secured her own death by spreading her legs for any man with enough shillings."

Andrew would not, could not, deny that he'd said those exact words many times over. His main goal had been to keep her at bay, suppress his own longing for love and acceptance. In truth, he didn't deserve her love nor any forgiveness found this day. If he hadn't become ill, it was likely he'd have continued to treat her harshly. Keeping her close for selfish reasons and forbidding her from finding her own way in the world. Andrew had promised Ellington no future except her measly existence under his roof.

Several times, he'd caught her sneaking into his house from God knows where at late hours of the night. He'd accused her of visiting those women of her mother's ilk, women of the night at Craven House.

And Ellington had never denied it.

He'd feared that Ellington would leave him. Abandon him to be taken in by that group of harlots. The same set who'd sent the girl's mother to seduce Drake in his time of weakness after his one true love wed another.

But Ellington had always returned to him.

Andrew had long wondered why his daughter would return to a man who gave her nothing and a home that would never be her own.

Maybe, just maybe, the one thing his daughter possessed was the only thing Andrew lacked himself.

The strength to persevere and the ability to make the best of one's situation.

Andrew had given up long ago.

But now, he had one last chance to do right by her.

"Ellie," he said, returning his look to her. He'd drifted off without knowing it, and he struggled to keep himself in the here and now and not ponder what awaited him, or dwell on what was long past. "Alex, you must trust him."

"The stable boy?" Confusion clouded her face. "Whatever does he have to do with...anything?"

"He will care for you."

"Certainly, you jest!" Her indignation at his words was exactly as he'd expected. "Have you promised me to a stable boy, Father? Is that to be my lot in life?"

She'd called him Father, something she'd only done once—and had been punished severely for, yet now, the words sounded sweet to his ears; a part of him being filled after so many years.

"Am I to live in a one-room hell with naught but what his meager salary will afford as we struggle to feed ourselves and the babies that keep coming?"

She said it as if it were far worse than death, though Andrew knew death—or the death of a loved one—was far worse. "If that were the case, would it be so terrible?"

Ellington looked around the darkened room; her eyes taking in the splendor that Andrew had always surrounded himself with. Crystal hung from the ceiling, vases adorned every table, and the best oil paintings money and influence could buy hung upon every wall.

“You never meant for me to have any of this, did you?” Ellington stood, the chair she’d sat in toppling over behind her and striking a framed landscape that leaned against the wall, nicking the wooden frame.

“No, I did not.” He would not lie to her, not in his last moments. “But that is not to say I have not planned for your future.”

“A stable boy...that is what you planned?” The accusation in her question cut him deeply. “You would keep my existence hidden for all eternity.”

“That is untrue, I only wish for you to trust Alex.” Everything was sounding so far from what he’d wanted to say to her. What he’d *planned* to say. “Ellington, my daughter, you are the only one strong enough to help him find who he truly is—it will determine not only his future but yours, as well.”

Andrew hoped he hadn’t made the direst mistake of his life by keeping Alex’s true past hidden; he feared the boy would never discover that he was so much more than an orphan raised amongst a horde of misfortunate souls.

But with Ellington by Alex’s side, he stood a greater chance than ever before.

## Chapter One

London, England

March, 1817

Lady Ellington peered through the slatted railing in the loft of the stables and down on the stable hands below as they hurried to and fro; mucking out stalls, polishing horse tack, and brushing the sweat from a matching pair of greys after their daily exercise.

The activity was relatively extensive for a residence in mourning, and therefore, a household in little need of horses or carriages. Since the marquis' death, the stable had gone largely unused except for the rare occasion when Ellington's older sister, Ruby, had stayed past dark and requested a carriage ride home.

Scanning the group below, Ellie spotted the man she searched for. Up until a year ago, she'd viewed him as not much more than a boy...and a crippled boy, at that. But since the marquis had mentioned him on his deathbed, her interest in him had been renewed.

Her curiosity only escalating after their brief sojourn to Lady Haversham's Christmastide gathering.

Ember, her orange tabby, pushed into Ellie's hand, demanding attention; with a quick pat to the cat's head, Ellie went back to watching below.

Alex, two hooks in hand, swung a bale of straw out of sight below the high platform Ellie laid on, the loose straw hiding her from view. One would never know that he had one hand—and part of his arm—that were ever so slightly smaller than the other side, nor that he walked with a slight limp. In fact, all that she noticed at the moment was his bare chest and the corded muscles that ran the length of his back as he swung another heavy bale.

She must have made some audible sound, because just then, Alex looked up in her direction.

Quickly, Ellie pushed back from the railing, sliding across the dirty floor as the wooden boards below her groaned, her dress snagging on a splintered board as Ember walked the edge of the loft and mewled with vigor, exposing her presence to the men below.

Alex offered the cat a greeting from below. Ember's tail flipped back and forth as she hurried to the ladder and navigated the rungs down to the stable floor.

"Traitor," Ellie mumbled, pushing farther back into the shadows to hide from view.

It had become almost a ritual for her, lying high above the stable floor, watching and listening to the men jest about women, work, and cards, among other less thrilling topics—although Alex never said much. He kept silent when the men complained about their harping wives or the aches in their bones from their long day's work.

In the time Ellie had been watching Alex, she'd learned absolutely nothing about him besides his affection for his nursemaid, Mrs. Dutton. On his one afternoon off each week, he normally spent it reading, reciting the books aloud, even with no one about to listen. On occasion, he'd taken the brisk walk to Lord Haversham's townhouse. Ellie hadn't the faintest idea what he did inside because she hadn't wanted the task of explaining to her sister, Ruby, or Lady Haversham why she was there—they'd never believe she'd come on a social call without first being summoned.

No, until she found out exactly what her father had meant by his last words—that she should trust Alex—she wasn't about to let her sister and her bosom friend, Lady Haversham, in on anything. It was enough that they barged into her home every other day to 'make sure she fared well' after she'd been less than cordial at Lady Haversham's holiday gathering. They didn't understand Ellie's need to keep her distance after their return.

Ellie scooted once more toward the rail and peered down. Alex sat on a wooden bench, his shirt returned to his body—shame, that—and drank from a large jug. The container could only contain house water, for Ellie

also knew that Alex did not partake in spirits as the other men did. His character was so at odds with every other man she'd known. It made no sense, but the fact drew her to him further.

Finally, a bell tolled and the men set down whatever they were working with and left the stables for noonday repast. This gave Ellie the opportunity to hurry down the ladder, out a side door used for kitchen deliveries, and make her way toward the main house.

"Miss?" Ellie paused, looking toward a man, possibly ten years her senior. "I am looking for a young woman—about your age." He shielded his eyes as he spoke, slowly walking toward her.

"Ah, well." Ellie looked about, noting she was startlingly alone in the yard between the stable and the back entrance to the manor. "I am the mistress here. Maybe I can help you find whomever you seek." She'd never seen the man before, but he appeared well-dressed and acted the gentleman.

"I would be grateful for any help." He looked about the yard as if noticing for the first time how alone and inappropriate the situation was. "My wife has been missing for several months and I have heard she may be here."

Alarm bells went off in Ellie's head—a missing wife...a few months gone...in her home.

"Oh." She took a tentative step backwards toward the closed kitchen door. "I am certain there is no one in my household that hasn't been in my employ for many years."

"Are you positive?" he continued. "She may be working as a maid, or maybe in the kitchen?"

Another few paces and she'd be within reach of the kitchen door, or at least hearing range of her servants within. "No, you have the wrong house. I hope you haven't traveled too far in your search."

Without her noticing, he'd kept pace with her across the yard, his steps twice the length of hers. They were mere feet apart, and if he tried, he could reach out and grab her.

"You have not even heard her name." He grinned, probably thinking it would comfort her—gain her trust—but it only sent a shiver down her spine. "Daphne."

"What?" she asked.

"I am Sir Gregory, my lady. Her name," he continued. "It is Daphne."

Her back hit the doorframe, the knob digging into her back. "I think you should leave." Her voice was too shrill, terror most certainly showing on her face. "There is no one here by that name."

"In this entire grand house? Can you know all that work in your home?"

"I do," Ellie lied. However, she did know what Daphne he referred to—and he'd have to step over her cold, lifeless body to reach the girl.

"Maybe you should ask about the house," he continued. He'd stopped about three feet from her, and the distance at least gave her a measure of security. "I can come inside and we can ask—maybe your housekeeper will know her."

"I said leave. Now." Ellie stood straight from where she'd leaned against the door. Certainly, someone within could see her—and more importantly, notice that she was in need of assistance.

"I am not going anywhere until I have Daphne," he sneered. "She is my property. I am her husband."

"You will not have her." Her quickly spoken words were confirmation; there would be no denying her knowledge of Daphne any longer.

"My lady?" Ellie looked up, terror surely etched her face from what had almost transpired. "May I assist you with something?"

Alex was at her side in an instant, a barrier between her and the man.

"Is something amiss?" The stable hand spoke to her, but glared at the intruder.

"Your mistress was about to run inside and collect—"

"I most certainly was not about to do anything of the sort." She took a confident step forward. "This man was just leaving."

Alex looked the man up and down, relaxing his menacing posture when he noticed he carried the upper hand; obviously sensing the dandy would be no match for him if anything turned physical. “Then you are both in luck. I am headed down the drive now. I can make sure you get on your way.”

“Thank you,” Ellie whispered close to his ear. “I am grateful.”

“It is my honor, my lady. You may return to the house.” Normally, she’d take offense to being ordered about, but all she could think about was getting to her room and making certain Daphne was safe. “Come, sir.”

The man pulled away when Alex attempted to grab his arm.

“I suppose I may be mistaken about her whereabouts.” He gave Ellie a curt bow as if mocking her. “Pardon the intrusion.”

Ellie didn’t pause long to watch the men make their way toward the main drive—Alex keeping pace with the man, yet behind to make sure he didn’t try to turn back.

She made little sound as she raced through the kitchen and up the flight of stairs used by the household staff. Servants lowered their heads as she hurried past, none uttering even a simple greeting.

She entered her room and listened for Daphne. Thankfully, she heard the girl musing something in Ellie’s dressing closet. Ellie stripped the dusty, black fabric she was currently wearing from her body. The crushing cocoon of sorrow finally falling away with the heavy brocade mourning dress she’d donned for the last moments of sadness she’d attribute to the late Marquis of Drake.

She’d almost forgotten what day it was when she’d first woken.

It had officially been one year since the death of her *father*.

One year since she’d told her sister of their relationship, one year since Harold Jakeston, now her sister’s husband, had helped to bury the awful man, and one long year where she’d lived in fear someone would come and take the only home she’d ever known.

But no one had come to claim the title or the house as his. The marquisate had continued to lay dormant with no one stepping forward—and Ellington, the unofficial ward of the Marquis of Drake, hadn’t been appointed a guardian.

Her father, Andrew Penton, was forever gone—never would she be summoned to his room to be berated over her choice of gown, or driven from her home when he over imbibed and thought it entertaining to break all the furniture in a certain room.

“Lady Ellington?” Daphne called. “I brought the gown you requested.”

Looking over her shoulder, Ellie smiled at the girl, happy to see her safe and content.

When the girl returned her grin, Ellie decided it wouldn’t be wise to tell her maid of the man’s visit; Daphne would likely do something ill-advised and depart Drake House, not wishing to cause her mistress any trouble.

Draped across her maid’s arms was a walking dress made of the palest blue she’d ever seen, the bodice of the gown had been fitted to Ellington perfectly months before. Since then, she’d dreamed of wearing it about town, walking into Gunther’s and ordering the largest ice her coin could buy.

She’d loved the color so much she’d had an evening gown commissioned in the exact color. It was unlikely she’d attend a grand ball, but the dress would have been perfectly suited to Lord and Lady Haversham’s Christmastide gathering. She would save the formal dress for next holiday season.

“You are a gem, Daphne!”

With a small smile, her maid moved to Ellie’s dressing room to hang the gown and Ellie followed. After her father’s funeral—and when no distant relative had come to claim the estate and title—Ellington had settled into her role as lady of the manor. She’d quickly hired a proper lady’s maid, took over meal planning, and made sure the house ran smoothly. It had taken a fortnight for her to realize the household hadn’t continued on with her because of any loyalty to the deceased marquis *or* to Ellie, but because their salaries continued to be paid. By whom, Ellie hadn’t a clue. If only she had someone she trusted who could help her. Her sister would only

insist, for the thousandth time, that Ellie live with her and Harold at the Haversham townhouse.

“You will look stunning, Lady Ellington,” Daphne gushed. “Where will you go first?”

“I haven’t the first clue.” Ellie trailed her fingers down the gown and over the intricate beading about the high waist. “And how many times must I ask you to call me Ellie?”

“It is not done, Lady Ellington.”

She admired the girl’s resolve to be the best lady’s maid she could be, but most days, Ellington only wanted a friend. She’d met the girl—a few months younger than she—at Craven House, where Daphne had fled when her parents refused to take action against the maid’s foul husband. Daphne had been injured physically, but harmed more internally, both emotionally and mentally, from all the man had put her through. With little recourse, Daphne had been pushed to disappear into the night.

The girl’s experience only solidified in Ellie’s mind that all men were the same—cruel, offensive, and uncaring; just as her father had been to her. She thought of her sister, Ruby, with her doting husband, Harold, but pushed it away. That was a rare thing, indeed. Ellie certainly could not believe that a dear husband lay in her future—which made her resolve strengthen to not even ponder the possibility.

But Ellington had felt a kindred spirit in the girl straight off, and begged Marce to allow her to live at the marquis’ townhouse—Ellie’s townhouse, as of now.

Daphne hadn’t spoken of her past, nor whom her relations were, but Ellie sensed from her speech that she’d been raised a proper lady; and today proved it all the more. The man who’d come for her was dressed the proper gentleman, though Ellie knew his finely tailored clothes hid a rotting, black heart.

There was no question, Daphne did not need to know her husband had come looking for her—and Ellie was determined to never again allow the man control over the girl.

“Can I help you into the gown?” Daphne asked, resuming her role as the lady of the house’s personal maid. “The new shifts you commissioned arrived yesterday and have been pressed and hung, as you requested.”

Ellie couldn’t wait to do away with the rough, coarse shifts she’d always been given and had donned until her year of mourning was up—a penance, if you will, for praying every day for the marquis’ demise.

But the time had come to do away with her black garb.

Unfortunately, Ellie wouldn’t slip into the fine blue material today. “No, the lavender muslin gown will suit well for the day.” She watched, her gaze a bit downcast, as Daphne eyed the blue gown one last time before exiting with a sensible, sturdy violet dress with a white apron accompaniment. The dress was also a recent acquisition from the modiste on Bond Street.

Daphne lifted the gown high and slid it down Ellie’s body with the nimble hands of a woman who’d dressed ladies for decades, though in truth, the maid had probably never dressed another until a few short months ago. Ellie slipped her arms into the appropriate holes and the fabric settled around her waist as Daphne began the process of buttoning the back.

“Lady Ellington?”

“Yes,” she answered, shifting slightly to look over her shoulder as the maid’s hands stilled.

“Is this straw in your hair?”

“Oh, poppycock!” Ellie pushed the maid’s fingers away and ran her own through her long, red locks, snagging not one, not two, but four long, reedy strands of hay.

“Have you been sneaking a peek at that stable boy again?”

As if on cue, Ember pushed open the door and mewled her presence.

The conspiratorial tone in her maid’s voice had Ellie on the defensive. “I was most certainly not spying on that stable *man*,” Ellie said, putting emphasis on the man part. “I only passed through the stables on my way back from Craven House.”

She hadn’t been to Craven House in nearly a fortnight, but she hoped Daphne hadn’t been keeping that

close of watch on her comings and goings.

“Will you be leaving the house again today, Lady Ellington?”

Ellie turned a stern look upon the girl. “That is none of your concern, and I will have you know that...” Daphne held up two pairs of shoes, one a soft cloth unsuitable for outdoor activities and another with a hard, wooden sole. “My apologies, Daphne.”

“Whatever for?” the maid inquired. “Today is a hard day for you, being the year mark of your father’s passing. I will forgive you your foul mood, but only today.” The girl smirked at her own cleverness.

Ellie wanted to hug the girl for giving her the perfect excuse for her unladylike behavioral outburst.

Luckily for them both, Ellie did not find delight in embracing others—ever.

Instead, she turned and Daphne continued to button the back of her dress in silence. When she was done, Ellie thanked her, bid her to tidy Ellie’s chambers then find her own noonday meal, and left the room. Taking the main stairs, Ellie made her way to the morning salon, prepared to receive any visitor who might show up to give their condolences once more on the passing of the Marquis of Drake.

The servants had seen fit to prepare the room for the day; a plate of sweetmeats and cheese sat on the sideboard next to several fine teacups.

The teacups would fetch a nice amount of coin if she sold them at the local market. She must remember to snatch a pair before her next trip to Cheapside. She’d stumbled upon the tiny shop long before the marquis had passed; the proprietor willing to give her generous coin for anything she brought round. It gave her the allowance her father denied her—and now, she’d moved to bigger, more valuable things. If she were thrown from her home, she wouldn’t go penniless.

Ellie wasn’t hungry, nor did she relish the idea of spending the day discussing the unexpected passing of that vile man, the marquis. She ran through responses in her head to people’s kind words, ‘*Oh, do not fear. I have not missed that despicable man a day*’ or ‘*Certainly, you are the only one mourning his death. I’d hoped he’d take his last breath long before he actually did, more’s the pity.*’

The afternoon went on, the only company being the one-sided conversation Ellie held in her own head. Not a single visitor had shown to pay their respects on the anniversary of the marquis’ death.

Not even her sister and her devoted husband, Harold, had come.

That was the only shocking part of the entire day.

Ellie looked down at her lovely gown, no longer a varying shade of black or grey.

A light tap sounded at the door.

*Finally*, she thought, she hadn’t donned her lovely gown for naught.

“Enter,” she called, standing to greet her guest. She put on a timid smile, one that said, ‘thank you for coming on this final day of sorrow,’ and watched as the door swung open.

Before her stood not a long-standing business associate of the marquis’, or her sister with husband in tow, but rather Alex, the same man she’d spent all morning watching—not spying on, mind you—and her nights dreaming of. The servant who’d escorted her to Foldger’s Hall at Christmastide—and given her Ember. She’d tried to push their time together from her mind, tell herself he didn’t matter, for how could a stable hand be of significance to her. It mattered little that he’d comforted her on many occasions since his arrival at Drake House over a year before. Ellie wouldn’t dwell on the fact that they’d been forced together—first by her father and then by Lady Haversham as she’d insisted he accompany her carriage to the country.

“Lady Ellington.” He bowed slightly before entering the room, Ember close on his heels. “This letter arrived for you.”

“To the stables?” She paused, collecting her scattered wits. “I mean to say...” Her words trailed off because she had no idea what she’d meant to say at all.

“No, I was returning from Haversham townhouse—I took my repast there today, with Lady Haversham

and baby Neill.” He readily delivered his excuse, though Ellie was unconcerned with where he took his meals. Or, at least, that should be the case. “When I was walking up the drive, this note came by hired post.”

“Thank you.” Ellie took the proffered letter from him and turned it over in her hands. “Are you sure this is for me?”

“Whomever else could it be for?” he asked.

“Very true.” Ellie had spent weeks asserting herself as the new lady of the house, much to the dismay of the servants. Though her intent had not been for their benefit, but for anyone who would eventually come to claim the house and the title, Marquis of Drake. For she knew, someone had to come.

“You may go,” she said, dismissing him curtly. Her hours spent watching him, familiarizing herself with his actions and movements, likely showed on her face. When he only stared at her, she asked, “Is there something else?”

Alex stood tall in the doorway with his hands clasped behind his back, his shoulders squared, and all she could picture was him swinging a bale of straw like it was as light as a feather. “Yes, your sister requests your presence.”

“Requests my presence? Did she summon you to Lord Haversham’s only for you to bring the message back to me?” Ellie prodded, sudden memories of her required attendance at the holiday gathering flashing through her thoughts. “You are aware that you work for the Drake household, not my sister nor Lord Haversham? If Ruby seeks my presence, she may call upon me herself.”

Ellie sounded the petulant child, the exact impression she’d worked hard to change since Christmas. She was an adult, and as an adult she needed to command the respect of her servants, not act the spoiled youngster who threw fits to gain what she wanted.

Alex bowed. “I must return to my work, Lady Ellington. I bid you good day.”

“To you, as well,” she mumbled.

“And please be careful climbing up and down that rickety ladder,” he cautioned before turning on his heels—like the most trained gentlemen of the *ton*—and silently closing the door. His footfalls echoed down the corridor toward the kitchen, his limp undecipherable.

The aloof attitude she donned to mask her unease at his presence fell away as his footsteps faded. Her folly at thinking she’d managed to keep her visits to the stables hidden irritated her greatly—and to think he’d known all along and got enjoyment out of her childish clambering about in the rafters.

And the only thing she’d managed to learn was how laborious it was to remove all the entangled straw from her long hair.