

London, England  
Winter 1821

Martha Whitworth knew everything about this had the makings of a terrible idea.

*All of it.*

After all, it wasn't every day that a woman who'd been made a bigamist by her late —'husband'— a man who'd been married with a legitimate family, found herself journeying to meet that same family.

Only, this was not about Martha. Not really. This was about her children: twin daughters, Creda and Iris and her son, Frederick, and their meeting their half-siblings.

Yes, she'd made peace with her circumstances: an accidental bigamist who'd been deceived by her late husband, the Viscount Waters. Where thoughts of the dastard had once filled her with a burning hatred and resentment, there was only peace in its place.

Because of him...

Of its own volition, her gaze slid to the figure seated next to her on the carriage bench—her new husband Lord Graham Whitworth.

Graham who was more handsome than any man had a right to be, and more honorable, devoted, and clever than she'd believed any many capable of being. In the short time they'd been together, he'd not only chased away her cynicism, but also that of her young son-Frederick. And he'd seen Martha reunited with the two daughters whom she'd sent away to protect from the scandal that would one day meet them through no fault of their own.

And just like that, reality intruded. Nay, not reality, rather her past.

Restless, Martha tugged back the curtains and stared out at the passing London streets; quiet with lords and ladies off in the country.

Her stomach muscles twisted.

She wanted to order the carriage back to Graham's family's winter house party. Back to where there had been laughter and caroling and beloved Christmastide traditions.

*And I voluntarily left all that comfort to meet Lord Waters' **legitimate** family.*

A hand came to rest on hers; warm and safe and secure, and just like that the fear receded.

Martha stared at her and her husband's interlocked fingers, and then up at him.

The sight of him had the same effect it always did; a fluttering unfurled in her belly.

Graham drew her knuckles to his mouth and brushed a kiss against them. Her heart fluttered. "It is going to be fine," he murmured in a melodious baritone.

Mayhap he was right. Mayhap it would be fine. Mayhap—

Frederick, her youngest child, and only son, snorted. "I'm only ten and even I know this is a bad idea. One doesn't—*oomph*." Glowering at Iris, one of his elder sisters, Frederick leaned down and rubbed the wounded flesh. "I'm only speaking the tru—" This time he was silenced by Creda.

"Unless you want to be kicked again, and this time harder, I'd suggest you not finish that word," Creda said cheerfully.

Frederick however, would not be silenced. "Do you *truly* believe they'll wish to see us?" he demanded, just as their carriage rolled to a stop outside the entrance of Hyde Park. "They're only half-siblings."

Creda scowled. "Silence your mouth this instant, Frederick Whitworth. They reached out to us and asked to meet. Whyever would they do that if they didn't wish to have some kind of relationship with us?"

"Oh, I don't know," Frederick shot back. "Perhaps to be polite. Perhaps because they know we'll move in the same social circles now."

"Do you not see me as family because I'm only your step-father?" Graham asked quietly.

Frederick's gaze swung back. "Of course, not," the response flew from him. Yes, he'd idolized Graham on sight.

"Family is more than blood," Graham reminded.

Just then a servant drew the door open and cold air blasted through the carriage. One by one, their children filed from the carriage. Graham followed behind them, and then held a hand up.

With her stomach churning, Martha slid her fingers into his; finding strength as he folded his palm over hers.

Either way, good idea or bad idea, or utterly mad one...they were here.

It was time for her children to meet their half-siblings.

\*\*\*

They were late.

Standing at the shore of the frozen river, Victoria Archer, the Countess of Exeter, scanned the horizon.

In the twenty minutes since she had arrived with her daughters, son, and husband, Nathaniel Archer, the Earl of Exeter, there hadn't been a single rider or visitor to Hyde Park.

Of course, most had retreated to their country estates for the winter season. Nonetheless, there was a barren emptiness to the heavily clouded landscape.

Cradling the slumbering child in her arms, she slid her gaze over to her children who also stood in wait.

Phoebe now a marchioness and Justina a duchess, conversed quietly. Periodically one of the sisters would say something, and the other would nod. Smiling. Both girls were smiling.

Nay, they were no longer girls. They were women grown with families of their own. Both knowing happy marriages that Victoria herself hadn't with her first husband, the black-hearted Viscount Waters.

"They're late," her son called out the obvious into the quiet. Andrew removed a cheroot from his pocket and set to light it with that peculiar invention he'd invested in, when Phoebe, his eldest sister, shoved an elbow into his arm. "It is just a cheroot," he muttered, his breath stirring a little cloud of white. "It is not as though I've taken out a flask."

"Since the carriage ride here," Justina said crisply. "It's hardly proper to go about smoking or drinking in front of children."

"We're all grown adults here," he pointed out.

"Ahem." Phoebe pointed off to the small child Victoria held in her arms.

And as her three grown children proceeded to debate one another on proper etiquette for such a meeting, Nathaniel lowered his lips close to her ear. "They are as spirited as their mother," he murmured, his warm breath tickling that sensitive spot her lobe met her neck.

"You're trying to distract me," she whispered, tipping her head up so she might meet his gaze directly.

“Is it working?” Her husband flashed a half-grin that still had the same effect it had on her heart when she’d first met him as a girl.

“It always does.”

The babe in her arms stirred.

Nathaniel reached for their son. “Here,” he murmured, gathering the child close. He rocked the boy back and forth until Anthony slumbered once more.

Victoria stared on a moment, peace settling in her breast at the sight of her husband. How at ease he was with their child. How...different than the bouncer who’d sired two of Victoria’s three grown children.

A bouncer who’d also sired children with another...

“Mayhap they aren’t coming,” Victoria murmured, as her husband and the love of her life, Nathaniel Archer shifted their child into the crook of one arm, and consulted his timepiece.

“Perhaps because they too, find this a terrible idea,” Andrew drawled.

In unison, Victoria Barrett and her two daughters spoke: “Hush.”

Her only son sank back in his seat. “Fine,” he muttered. “But you know I’m...”

Victoria quelled the remainder of her son’s words with a single look.

“This is absolutely the most peculiar family reunion,” Andrew mumbled.

A reunion...it implied a meeting a gathering of family...only these were family she’d not truly met. It was a woman who’d been wronged by Victoria’s late husband and who herself also had three children of her own.

Her new husband, the first love of her life, who’d now be the last love, too, slipped his hand into hers. Victoria stared at their interconnected fingers. “Have you changed your mind?” he asked quietly, in those hushed tones solely for her ears. “I can find a polite way of disentangling us from the meeting.” H

Victoria snorted. “In case I changed my mind?” she asked dryly. After all, this meeting had been entirely her idea. Oh, he’d supported her and helped coordinate the appointment with Lord Sheldon Graham Whitworth, or Graham as he went by amongst Polite Society. But it had all been at her behest.

Nathaniel gave her a sheepish look. "You are correct." He cleared his throat. "If, however, you'd rather not—"

In the end, the decision was made by another.

Or rather, five others.

A young woman on the arm of a tall gentleman, moved almost in concert with the trio of children at their side.

Twin girls and a boy.

Two girls who were smiling.

And one boy who, even with the slight distance separating them, eyed the group with suspicion in his eyes.

Victoria glanced back at her own children wearing those like expressions and then back to Lady Martha Whitworth as she approached. How...young the woman was. And despite the difference in their age, Victoria felt a kindred connection...they may have been strangers until this moment, but they'd shared a hellish first marriage. Her heart broke for what the late viscount had visited upon that young family.

Nathaniel rested a hand on her shoulder, and in that gentle touch, she found strength.

The family stopped before Victoria and Nathaniel. Everyone stood there in silence, eying one another.

Martha was the first to break the awkward impasse. She sank into a curtsy. "My la—"

"Please, just Victoria," she urged, sweeping over, with her palms stretched out.

Martha eyed them a moment and then placed her hands in Victoria's.

She gave a slight squeeze.

"M-Martha," the other woman whispered as tears filled her eyes. "I don't know what to say?"

Victoria leaned close. "Yes, well, for all the rules handed out by society, they don't give us anything to prepare us for anything that really matters."

A little laugh escaped Martha. And just like that, the tension was broken. "Please allow me to introduce you to my children." Martha motioned over the trio.

They immediately left Lord Sheldon's side and joined the two women.

After Martha performed introductions, Victoria sank to a knee. "Hullo," she greeted. "I am so very pleased to meet each of you. Would you allow me to introduce you to my...?" She paused, and looked to Martha for approval.

"Your siblings," Martha said gently.

"I told you she wouldn't be rude," Creda whispered to Frederick as Phoebe, Justina, and Andrew joined the gathering.

"*He* looks as rumped as Frederick," Iris said in hushed tones, giving a less than discreet wave at Andrew.

The half-brothers spoke at the same time. "I'm not rumped."

"Frederick is completely rumped," Creda allowed. "You, however, are a *bit* rumped." She peered up at Andrew. "You are also in desperate need of a shave."

"A shave," Andrew mouthed, running a hand down his cheek.

"And you have a smell of cheroots to you," Iris piped in.

"And brandy," Justina said under her breath. "He also has the smell of brandy to him."

Phoebe's shoulders shook. "It is so very wonderful to meet all of you." A mischievous glimmer lit her eyes. "Something tells me we're going to get on quite famously."

Frederick sidled over to Andrew. "Are *your* sisters--?"

"Always like this?" Andrew finished, speaking out the corner of his mouth. "Worse."

"Mine, too," Frederick groused.

Andrew patted the little boy between the shoulder blades in a commiserative display that sent tears to Victoria's eyes. She blinked them back, catching Martha wiping moisture from her cheeks.

Gathering up two pairs of forgotten ice skates, Andrew nudged his head toward the pond. "Shall we escape their needling?"

Frederick's eyes lit. "Yes!"

As the pair took themselves off, the younger girls joined Justina and Phoebe in laughter.

Victoria and Martha shared a smile over the tops of the heads of the smaller children.

*Everything is going to be all right, after all...*

The End