The dowager Countess Sheldrake alit from the carriage without looking at the man who steadied her descent. The carriage with her trunks rolled past, her maid peering out the window as if she had expected her mistress to call for her.

Max stepped forward to greet his mother.

“My son,” she said, using the round tones of pompous importance that Max despised. “Where is my daughter-in-law?”

“She is riding this morning.” He didn’t add an excuse. His mother would twist any answer into his displeasure with his new wife. He gave a curt nod to the man standing silent behind his mother’s shoulder.

Warner Beldreccan returned his stiff nod. This morning, a yellow-striped waistcoat relieved his habitual somber colors, a concession to the dowager’s love of vibrant colors. Beldreccan lifted his gaze to the three-storied central façade of the hall.

The crunching gravel warned Max that someone approached from the house, and his mother’s pickled expression meant that she was not pleased with the person.

“Riding,” she repeated. “When guests are expected?” She tilted up her nose. “Miss Beale. You are a bright beacon on this rainy morning. How do you do?”

The doctor’s sister rose from her curtsey and extended a hand to Beldreccan while she answered the dowager. “Good morning, Lady Sheldrake. I expected you after luncheon.”

“Mr. Beldreccan convinced me to come earlier. I believe he is eager to meet your new wife, Sheldrake. Yet she is not here. She is riding.”

Again, Max avoided any comment. “You have not yet met my lady wife, sir? We returned from London almost three weeks ago.”

“Business in Liverpool called me away. I returned Monday. The dowager explained that I missed the best opportunity to meet your new wife.”

He heard an inference in that *best opportunity* but couldn’t divine it. His mother’s habit of sharp insult and sly innuendo often caused his ears to prick when no slight was intended.

Miss Beale chuckled. “Every opportunity to meet the new Lady Sheldrake is the best opportunity, sir. She is no match for Cressida’s beauty or Rowena’s wit, but—.”

“She is her own self,” Max interposed, “comparable to neither of them.” He turned on his heel and marched to the door, unwilling to stand idly while his mother and Miss Beale dissected his wife for Beldreccan while heavy clouds threatened more rain.

The butler and three footmen waited at the door. They bowed as the dowager passed. Chepstow had served the dowager for many years, under her direct management except during the years when Max’s first then second wives had charge. Yet she walked past the butler without acknowledgement. She drew off her gloves. “Who has arrived?”

Max refused to answer. After a speaking glance his way, Miss Beale hurried in with “You are last to arrive, Lady Sheldrake. I believe you are in the Yellow Suite.”

“Is that correct, Chepstow?” Max snapped, disliking the spinster’s assumption that she served as hostess in his wife’s absence.

“Yes, my lord, as per Lady Sheldrake’s instructions.” The butler accepted the dowager’s gloves and handed them to a footman. “The dowager countess should find her maid and trunks soon there.”

“I wish tea in my room and luncheon, at half-past the mark.”

“Of course, my lady, as that is your habit.” The butler lifted an eyebrow, and a footman retreated on silent feet.

“I trust your wife will greet me when she returns from gallivanting over the estate.” She didn’t wait for Max’s response. She turned and extended a hand to Warner Beldreccan. “I quite enjoyed your company on our all too brief journey.”

He bent over the dowager’s hand. “At your service, Lady Sheldrake.”

“Pretty manners,” she praised then glided off.

Chepstow and a second footman followed. The third hovered, waiting to attend Beldreccan.

Miss Beale watched the dowager’s ascent of the curving staircase to the first floor, with its Grecian columns supporting fanciful arches. “I can never manage that floating ascent. I must add that to one of my books. A heroine who glides and floats.” She flounced one of the ruffles on her yellow gown. “Now, I shall take my bright beacon self once again to the morning room. Do you join us, Mr. Beldreccan? Or will you retreat to the smoking room with the squire?”

“How shall I choose between such delightful temptations?”

“Flatterer. I know you want to breathe that foul air.”

He shook his head. “The whiskey offered before noon is the attraction.”

She gave her hearty chuckle and walked away.

“Women.” Beldreccan clasped his hands behind his back and jutted his chin. “Your wife’s invitation arrived while I was gone.”

Max’s shoulders tightened. He wanted the man’s presence at the Hall to mean nothing.

Beldreccan’s background was obscure. He’d arrived in the neighborhood several years ago, renting a manor situated along the river road between Sheldrake Hall and the village. During the weeks that Max courted and won Cressida, he encountered Beldreccan several times. The man attached himself to her court of admirers, and he maintained that rôle after her marriage to Max. He avoided becoming one of her thralls and seemed not too overset when she committed suicide from the tower.

His second wife Rowena had more discretion with her flirtations, yet her tantrums were fiercer. She had a calculated volatility designed to force the world into the tracks se wanted, and she wanted Beldreccan and Julius Cavell and a couple of others of her court at her beck and call. They were underfoot so often that Max wished them all to perdition. Her affaire with Cavell became so notorious that Max let her have the bit and run while he quietly contacted his man of business about documents of separation.

Beldreccan was responsible for neither Cressida’s chaotic temperament nor Rowena’s explosiveness. As far as Max knew, he hadn’t had an *affaire* with either woman … although he might have enjoyed a few privileges.

Max disliked him, and Beldreccan returned the emotion. He lifted a single shoulder in a mock shrug. “My aunt Forness decided the guest list for her birthday celebration, as she always does. Your attendance is a given since the day you entered the district. Neither my wife nor I had a choice in the guest list.”

“That sounds as if you would deny me the house.”

“I am not so autocratic, sir.”

“As you say, my lord,” he murmured, mimicking a servant. “Will I enjoy meeting your new wife? She does know that she is your third wife, doesn’t she? Is she aware of the tragic ends of your first two wives? I might be tempted to call you *Bluebeard*.”

“I informed her of the manner of their deaths before I proposed.”

“How honorable,” Beldreccan muttered. He jutted his chin, as if he knew Max wanted to punch him.

“Your enjoyment in her presence resides with you.” He recalled Julius Cavell’s dissatisfaction last evening, when the ghost stories designed to terrify a young bride had failed. “I will say only that our local artist is not enamored of her.”

“*Yet*. He is not enamored of her *yet*. Perhaps one cannot expect Cavell to love all three of your wives.”

His fist clenched. He forced his hand to open before Beldreccan saw the reaction and gloated over it. “Enjoy your stay at the Hall,” he gritted and stalked away.

Beldreccan had the last word. “I certainly shall, especially once I meet your third wife.”

Max slammed the study door then regretted unleashing his temper. More than a half-dozen of his guests would relish any glimpse of his anger, no matter its direction.

Beldreccan’s animosity was veiled in public. The sharper jabs occurred when no one served as witness.

Julius Cavell’s hatred came from his love of Rowena. Her fall down the stairs had precipitated early labor. Neither she nor the babe survived. Cavell blamed Max—even though he was in London, consulting with Mr. Cosgrove.

Miss Beale was another sharp-tongued guest. She aimed her skewers at everyone equally. She esteemed the dowager, wishing to emulate those easy piercing stabs.

Yesterday, as the guests arrived for the party, his tension wound tighter and tighter. Who would be the first to start a flirtation with his new wife? His cousin Reginald? Who would be first to inform her of his many flaws? Mrs. Ogden, in the guise of giving advice to smooth their marriage? Who would spend an hour in close conversation with her to discover the many differences between the new couple? Miss Beale?

He had hoped Lady Forness would be an ally. In London, during the weeks before and after the wedding, his aunt Forness pretended a mother-daughter relationship with Vivienne. In the three weeks since their return to Sheldrake, however, Lady Forness had neither visited nor sent a note. She had abandoned Vivienne. Forness Manor was an hour’s drive. A visit would create a pleasant afternoon for Vivienne, tossed into a world where the only person she knew was her husband.

Although his wife said little, his aunt’s defection had clearly surprised her. She asked only a few questions, and those stopped when Max told her that “We haven’t many visits between the Hall and Forness Manor.” Nor had the dowager countess welcomed the new bride of Sheldrake Hall.

Vivienne’s mother had died a decade ago. She might have envisioned a rosy relationship with her mother-in-law. During the twice-weekly dinners, however, the dowager’s biting tongue revealed her thorny personality. Vivienne endured silently—just as he did.

He didn’t blame her for riding off rather than greeting the dowager.

He wished he’d known that she planned to ride this morning. She’d apparently told only a few—her maid who informed the cook, the housekeeper, and the butler. As she left the house, she encountered his cousin Reggie, the Paton Stanbroughs heading for their own ride, Lord Davitton Hurst on an early errand for Cavell who employed him, and Miss Beale who apparently awakened with an idea for her next novel and needed paper and ink from the library.

The Stanbroughs and Hurst had returned a half-hour ago followed by a few other guests who had braved the morning. All had exclaimed that the storm cloud hastened their return.

What had delayed Vivienne?