

CHAPTER 1



Standing next to the marble fireplace, Lady Beatrice Rowley clasped her hands together under her bosom and gave her husband a pointed look.

“Are we agreed, then?” she asked.

Lord Harold Rowley’s forehead crumpled with discomfort. He rose from the settee, crossed the drawing room and reached for Lady Rowley. Cradling her small, soft hands in his own, he very much hoped to appeal to her sense of compassion.

“Darling, do you not feel that the course of action you’re proposing is perhaps a bit extreme?” he asked.

“No, I most certainly do not!” she cried, wrenching her hands from her husband’s grasp. Pacing back and forth along the Turkish carpet, she said, “At this point, I feel it is the only course of action left for us to take. And I cannot stress how important it is that you truly realize this. I need your full support on this matter, Harold, and I need you to be firm and unbending when we deliver the news. With all due respect, my lord, we would not be in this predicament if you didn’t indulge the child so.”

With a sigh, Lord Rowley removed his spectacles to rub his weary eyes. Lady Rowley was right. He was indeed guilty of

spoiling his only daughter. At a very early age, Olivia had learned how to bat her eyes and bewitch her Papa in such a way that he was willing to move Heaven and Earth to indulge her every whim.

More often than not, these whims often had to do with Olivia's desire to participate in activities that were not customarily befitting of a young lady. She couldn't understand why her three brothers were permitted to hunt, shoot and fish while she was expected to stay inside and work on her sampler. Much to Lady Rowley's chagrin, Lord Rowley granted Olivia the privilege of accompanying her brothers on hunting excursions and such, and as a result, she developed into somewhat of a tomboy.

This is not to say that she wasn't beautiful. With her glossy, tumbling, honey brown locks, crystal blue eyes and a finely featured face, Olivia was indeed a beauty. But the years of horsing around with her brothers had given her a distinctive edge—a roughness, perhaps—that even Lord Rowley had to admit some might find off-putting.

And he was all too aware that for years poor Lady Rowley had been fighting an uphill battle as far as Olivia was concerned. He knew how difficult it was for her to shape their daughter into a respectable young lady whilst he was allowing her to run rampant and do whatever she wanted.

After putting his spectacles back on, Lord Rowley swept the lace curtain aside and glanced out the window. Olivia and her brother, George, were currently engaged in a game of lawn tennis on the green behind Worthington Hall. Lord Rowley watched as his daughter darted this way and that, smacking the ball that George kept lobbing at her again and again. She was a good player; they both were. Lord Rowley watched the game with a sense of fatherly pride. Sadly, this feeling of contentment did not last.

George knocked the ball and sent it zooming well out of Olivia's reach. Olivia, however, was undeterred. She raced through the grass at lightning speed, determined to knock that ball back over to George. But that ball was moving faster than her legs could carry

her, so she did what she had to do. She took a flying leap forward with her arm outstretched, her racket poised for the impact of the ball.

Despite her valiant effort, the ball sailed right over Olivia's racket, and she landed in a graceless heap on the dewy green grass.

Springing to her feet, Olivia threw her racket down on the lawn and immediately launched into an angry diatribe. George doubled over with laughter as his sister carried on with her verbal attack, which, it has to be said, was sprinkled with profanities.

Lord Rowley watched in horror as his delightful young daughter stomped around on the lawn. Her face was flushed. Her hair had come loose, which gave her the look of a wild woman. Worst of all, her lovely white dress had a big, muddy brown streak down the side of it where she had dove for the ball. There were even some clumps of grass attached to the mud streak.

Olivia's angry ranting, together with her disheveled appearance, was too extreme to ignore. It was with a heavy heart that Lord Rowley admitted to himself that at the moment, his daughter looked like a bona fide lunatic.

Lord Rowley felt his wife's presence beside him, and he turned to face her. She, too, was gazing out the window at their daughter.

"If we don't take immediate action, her fate will be sealed," Lady Rowley murmured. "Childlike behavior is endearing when it comes to children. When it comes to grown up ladies, it's as pitiful as it is irksome. If we fail to take immediate action, Olivia will come to be known far and wide as an eccentric, and she will most certainly die a spinster."

"Surely not," he said. "What man wouldn't be overjoyed at the prospect of wedding such a beautiful, charming and vivacious young lady?"

Lady Rowley fixed him with a knowing look.

"Try to set aside the fact that you are her doting father for a moment and consider this: what man would desire a foul-mouthed

wife who pleases only herself and cares nothing about the rules of society?" she asked.

Lord Rowley answered with a weary sigh.

"I understand what you're saying, Beatrice, but unlike you, I do not feel this is our only option. I'm quite certain that Olivia intends to honor her promise to us and will travel to London next season," he said.

"Well," said Lady Rowley with an angry flash in her bright blue eyes. "More fool you."

He flashed an angry look back at her, but deep down, he had to admit that she was probably right. Even as he uttered the words about Olivia honoring her promise to them, they clearly rang false. The truth is that they wouldn't get their daughter down to London without a fight.

For years Lady Rowley had spoke fondly of the season, and of the thrill and the excitement that lay in store for Olivia when she came of age. Even though she had not experienced it personally, Lady Rowley spun a rich, colorful tale of all the parties, balls and other delightful events that her daughter would one day enjoy. Lady Rowley expertly glossed over the real purpose of these social events, which was to find a husband.

Olivia was a terribly clever girl, and she could see right through her mother's colorfully descriptive language to the reality lurking beneath the words. To her, the London season meant suffering through a whole slew of social events with a bunch of stuffy old biddies who were nosy to boot. What's more, the season signified the end of the only life she'd ever known. If she were indeed to become engaged and then married, she would be ripped away from the family, from the life she loved so dearly, and thrown into unfamiliar surroundings.

And so when Olivia reached the age of eighteen and it was expected that she would travel to London for her debut, she did everything she could to stop the course of events. Crying and carrying on

for days on end, she lamented about how much she loved her family, how much she loved Worthington Hall, and how much the idea of leaving both her home and her family tore her to pieces. Knowing full well that her father had a weakness when it came to her wants and desires, she appealed primarily to him and after a fortnight of tears and frustration and the exchange of angry words, it was decided. Olivia would sit out the season and travel to London the following year.

Well, when the next year rolled around, she was no more willing to comply to her parents' wishes as far as the season was concerned. This time, however, the crying and carrying on proved to be ineffective, even when it came to her doting father. Olivia had no choice but to dig her heels in and to steadfastly refuse to participate in the season.

Lord Rowley would never forget the sight of his darling daughter standing before Lady Rowley and himself, shouting about how she would sooner burn in the fiery pits of hell before allowing herself to be paraded around London like a vapid show pony for the enjoyment of a bunch of withered old crones. What outrageous language the girl used to convey her conviction!

Olivia's face was flushed, her eyes bright and shiny with angry, unshed tears. She shrieked and hollered and kicked up a terrible fuss. It was all too much to endure.

Lord Rowley half expected Lady Rowley to box the girl's ears, or to call for one of the servants to send up a willow stick, which she would then—quite justifiably—use to strike Olivia's bottom.

On the contrary, Lady Rowley simply shook her head with resignation, gazing at her daughter with a terrible sadness in her eyes. She then retreated to her bedchambers, and later that day she was in a carriage en route to visit her sister in Shropshire.

When Lady Rowley returned after a fortnight away, Olivia was as sweet as could be. She apologized to her mother for being such a disagreeable nightmare, and she promised she would travel to London for the following season. Lady Rowley smiled thinly and

accepted Olivia's apology, although she didn't believe for one second that Olivia intended to honor her promise.

Lord Rowley, however, was still holding onto a morsel of hope that their daughter was sincere in her promise.

"Heaven knows I understand your misgivings, my dear Beatrice, but shan't we give Olivia the chance to do the honorable thing?" he asked. "The upcoming season is still several months away. Perhaps by the time it rolls around again, she will genuinely want to attend. It could be that she's simply not mature enough yet to desire a marital union, but that she will gravitate naturally in that direction if we don't force her."

"But what if this doesn't happen?" Lady Rowley asked. "Even if she does willingly travel to London next season, she will be two years older than the other young ladies, which puts her at a noted disadvantage. And if we have a repeat performance of last year and she doesn't participate for a third year after reaching the age of eligibility, well...I'm afraid her fate will be sealed."

Sadly, this was true. As much as Lord Rowley hated to admit it, Olivia's refusal to partake in these conventional social practices would most likely ensure her fate as an eccentric spinster.

Lord Rowley gazed out the window just in time to see Olivia send the tennis ball soaring over George's head. As George ran across the lawn to retrieve the ball, his sister whooped and hollered, punching the air and jumping up and down in a most unladylike fashion.

With a sigh, Lord Rowley said, "I'm afraid you may be right, my dear."

Lady Rowley laced her fingers through his, and offered him a gentle smile.

"It's settled, then," she said. "Our Olivia will be the wife of Lord Armand Bainbridge by the end of the month."



“No!” Olivia cried, gazing upon her parents in horror. “Never! I won’t do it and you can’t make me!”

Burying her face in her hands, she fell to her knees and released a mournful cry. She simply could not comprehend the enormity of what was being said. What had been a most pleasant late summer day had quickly transformed into a waking nightmare.

“Olivia, that is quite enough,” Lady Rowley said, wrapping her fingers around Olivia’s upper arm and pulling her roughly to her feet. “Enough with the dramatics. This childish behavior of yours has got stop.”

“Your mother is right, darling. You have been a grown up lady for several years now, and it’s time for you to start acting like one,” Lord Rowley chimed in.

“But what you’re proposing is gruesome! It’s barbaric!” she cried.

“Hogwash,” Lady Rowley scoffed. “A thoughtful arrangement of marriage is a time-honored tradition. Why, your father and I had an arranged marriage, and one cannot deny that it has been a successful union.”

Lord Rowley smiled. “Indeed it has, my dear.”

“But, but...” Olivia sputtered as she searched for the right words. “But that was a hundred years ago. One does not enter into a union that has been arranged anymore. One chooses a husband or a wife on one’s own!”

“And you have had ample opportunities to do so, Olivia, but since you refused to travel to London for the season not once but twice, I’m afraid the option of marrying for love is no longer a possibility for you. You have left your father and me with no choice but to arrange a marriage for you ourselves,” Lady Rowley said.

It was at that very moment the gravity of the situation well and truly sunk in. Olivia was to be bound to some strange man she had never set eyes upon for the remainder of her life. Oh, what a ghastly thought! A wave of despair crashed over her, and she sobbed with abandon, tears rolling down her cheeks.

“But I promised to go to London next season!” she sobbed.

“You and I both know that was a lie,” Lady Rowley said. “And so does your father.”

Olivia spun around to face Lord Rowley and collapsed into his arms. Gazing at him through teary eyes, she willed him to be the voice of reason.

“Please, Papa, please. I beg of you to call the whole ghastly thing off. I implore you; I beseech you.” She dropped to her knees again and clasped her hands together under her chin as if in prayer. “I swear upon my eternal soul: not only will I willingly participate in the next season’s events, I will be the most respectful and the most obedient daughter I can possibly be. I am begging you, dear Papa. Please don’t banish me from Worthington Hall as if I were nothing more than a thieving servant.”

Olivia could see the hesitation flow over her father’s face, but a moment later, it had vanished. With a stoic air, Lord Rowley reached down and pulled Olivia to her feet.

“My darling, we are doing no such thing. Your mother and I have made the arrangements for you to marry into one of the oldest and most honorable noble families in Berkshire. Once you’ve calmed down a bit, you will see that the upcoming union is truly a cause for celebration,” he said.

“It’s a lie!” Olivia said, breaking free from her father’s arms. She dove face-first onto the settee and buried her face in a velvet pillow as she sobbed her heart out.

“I won’t do it,” she declared, her voice muffled by the pillow. “I won’t marry some crusty old windbag.”

“Oh, yes, you will,” said Lady Rowley, grabbing Olivia by the shoulders and pulling her upright.

For a woman with such small stature, Lady Rowley was remarkably strong. And she evidently had a rather keen sense of hearing, too. Olivia had counted on the velvet pillow to render her words indecipherable, but it seemed that her mother had heard every word.

“As it happens, your intended is not a crusty old windbag,” she said, her face void of expression. “In fact, he is six-and-twenty years of age.”

Six-and-twenty? Was he really? For a moment, Olivia wasn’t sure how to respond. She’d been certain the gentleman in question would be her father’s age or round about. The fact that he was six-and-twenty made absolutely no sense. Unless...

“Well, then, there must be something terribly wrong with him!” she shrieked. “Young gentlemen in want of a wife take it upon themselves to travel to London for the season. They do not arrange marriages for themselves with young ladies, sight unseen.”

“As it happens, the arrangements were made between Lady Bainbridge and myself upon the behalf of our children,” Lady Rowley said. “Young Lord Bainbridge, your intended, has taken no part in the arrangements whatsoever.”

Olivia gazed at her mother in horror. This nightmare was getting worse and worse by the moment. What sort of gentleman, in this day and age, relies upon his mother to arrange a wife for him? Only one who was defective in one way or another; of that, she was certain. She felt her spirits sink lower and lower as the possibilities entered her mind.

Without a doubt, she was convinced that Lord Bainbridge would be unpleasant to look at. She could only pray that he was merely unattractive, rather than grotesque or deformed. If, by some faint chance, he was mildly passable as far as his appearance went, there would surely be some other character flaw that explained why his mother was taking charge of his love life.

Perhaps he was simple minded. Olivia’s heart sank at the thought of living the rest of her life with a husband who could not match her in terms of wit and knowledge.

Or perhaps he was violent. An image of herself—battered, bruised and cowering in fear suddenly flashed through her mind. The thought of spending her days taking great care not to set off a

volatile monster of a husband was not something she could cope with.

It would be a fate worse than death.

Suddenly overcome by the hopeless existence that would soon become her reality, a fresh batch of tears welled up in her eyes and spilled over her cheeks. With her body wracked with sobs and her spirits sinking down to subterranean levels, Olivia felt that her life was well and truly over.

"I'll kill myself," she declared, gazing through her tears into her mother's eyes. "I mean it, Mother. I will climb up onto the roof and throw myself to the ground."

Lady Rowley sighed. "No, you won't. I've had quite enough of your theatrics, Olivia. You must conduct yourself with grace and maturity. Be advised that we leave for Berkshire on Wednesday morn to meet your betrothed and his family. I shall see you at dinner."

And with that, Lady Rowley spun on her heel and left the drawing room.

For a moment Olivia was rendered both frozen and speechless by the carefree mannerisms of her mother. It was as if Lady Rowley hadn't just sentenced her only daughter to a lifetime of misery!

Once she recovered her wits, Olivia turned to her father. She clasped her hands together and held them to her heart.

"Oh, please, Papa," she beseeched him. "I am begging you. If you care about me even the tiniest bit, please do everything within your power to put a stop to this tragedy."

She dropped to her knees yet again and gazed up at Lord Rowley with desperation shining through her teary eyes.

"Please, Papa. I'll do anything you ask of me, but please don't force me into a loveless marriage with a man we know nothing about—a man who could be simple or ugly or worse. Please, Papa, please. I'm begging you."

Lord Rowley squeezed his eyes shut tight, and for a moment, Olivia thought she had got through to him. For one magical

moment, she was convinced that she'd lured her father over to her side and that he would surely call a halt to this absurd arrangement.

But when he opened his eyes, Lord Rowley gazed down upon her with a look that could best be described as stern.

"I am truly sorry that you're so unhappy, my darling, but you must learn to cope. What's more, you must trust that your mother has made a wise and beneficial match, as I trust that she has," he said.

"But Papa—" Olivia said in a mournful voice.

"Enough," he said, interrupting her. "That's enough, Olivia. It is time for you to grow up."

And with that, he left the room.