Blackwell stepped into the room in time to intercept Anne as she prepared to go for a walk with the children. “I’d like to speak with you for a few minutes.”

She looked at him with surprise, and no wonder since he had avoided her most of the day, and laid aside her pelisse. “If you will give me a moment to tell Danielle and Guy….”

“That will not be necessary. The Fentons have agreed to take them.” Even to his ears, it sounded brusque to the point of rudeness. He softened his voice and stance. “Please, sit down. It is important or I would not keep you from your walk.” The puzzled frown on her face faded, replaced by a wary look that caused him to curse silently. *Get it out, Westcott, before you make things worse—if possible!* He did not expect this conversation to end well.

“Very well, sir,” she said in a mild tone, as one would humour a child.

Surprisingly, the thought amused rather than irritated, and Blackwell took the chair opposite her with less effort than expected, given his urge to pace the room. “You are more patient than I deserve.” He laid his hands on his knees and leaned forward. “I have been less than truthful with you, Anne, something that must be remedied before my people arrive with my coach and the horses for Mr. Fenton and myself.”

“Your coach,” she echoed. “Are you trying to tell me you are a man of means? If so, I had already guessed as much.” She motioned at the elegant furnishings around them. “This establishment, the clothing you ordered for us, everything of the first stare….” She broke off at something in his expression. “There is more to it then?” A quizzical smile then and her eyes widened. “Will you not tell me, sir? I assure you that imagining what could be so dreadful is not in the least comfortable.”

Blackwell’s mouth tightened. He was being ridiculous. Most women would be ecstatic at marrying a peer. Why did he feel she would be different?

“Along with the wealth, I carry the title Viscount Westcott. You are a viscountess, Anne. Lady Westcott,” he told her after a long pause, in a voice devoid of any inflection at all.

She blinked several times, a dazed expression on her face. “You are a viscount?”

Her bewilderment changed to shock and anger when he did not deny it. “You did not feel it necessary to tell me this earlier? Before we wed?” The wounded look in her eyes cut him.

“It never came up! At first, I felt it not important since I expected to be gone in a few days. Then I was caught in my omission.” He stood and glared down at her. “When was I to toss it out? A casual, by the way, I just happen to be Viscount Westcott?”

Anne hurriedly stood and matched him glare for glare. “Before the ceremony would have been a good time,” she threw at him in a scathing voice. “No wonder you wanted me to sign the marriage documents first.”

“A courtesy,” he bit out. “My name *is* Nicholas Blackwell.” He let out a long breath. “There was so little time.” Then, a more quiet, “Would it have made any difference?” The answer was important to him, he realized. Cursing himself for a fool, he still waited impatiently for her reply.

The temper eased from her face as she stared up at him. An expression he could not decipher touched her eyes before she moved aside, walked across the room, then turned to face him. “No, I still would have married you, if that is what you are asking.” She lifted her hands in a weary gesture and then dropped them to her sides. “I would have preferred honesty.”

Her eyes held what? Reproach? Sorrow? He disliked whatever it was, and his voice was harsh with accusation. “As you were honest with me, Anne? I’ve yet to hear why you were in Portugal in the first place, nor a mention of the trouble you are in.” He hesitated at her sharp gasp, but seemed unable to halt voicing a last sarcastic question. “Would you care to tell me now, my lady?”

White-faced, her hands visibly shaking, Anne met his mocking gaze straightly. “It seems neither of us can lay claim to honesty, my lord. I prefer, however, to discuss this at another time. Now, if you will excuse me.” The last was a choked whisper, and she disappeared into her bedchamber before he could respond.