

LADY VIVIAN DEFIES A DUKE

26 August 1818

Dearest Vivian,

Foxhaven assures me Lord Ellis's visit to Brighthurst House is naught but to pay his respects. Nevertheless, I suspect the duke is sending him to gather information about you. Be on your guard and provide no grounds for Foxhaven to oppose the match. Our coach is being readied to return to the country as I compose this letter. Send word the moment Ellis departs, and do not omit any details. I must be prepared for the next interview with Foxhaven.

With deepest regards,

Ash

One

Lady Vivian Worth folded the sheet of foolscap and sighed. Her older brother had always shown a flair for dramatics, often predicting disaster where no risk existed. He had no reason to fret over a nobleman's visit to Brighthurst House. Vivi knew perfectly well how to behave like a lady. She'd had nineteen years of practice. Observing proper manners when no one was around to impress, however, was silly.

She tossed Ash's weekly letter beside her discarded gown, petticoats, and corset, then tore off across the damp grass, her unbound hair flying behind her. The previous night's heavy rain had swollen the spring cutting through Cousin Patrice's property to the ideal depth, and Vivi had always been powerless to resist a good swim.

Reaching the rocky ledge, she leaped into the air with a whoop, drawing her knees toward her chest. She hung weightless for a second, then dropped to the spring below with a loud splash, the water sucking her to the bottom. Vivi burrowed her toes into the pebbled spring bed, then shot upward to break through the surface again as eagerly as a newborn babe bursting into a bright new world.

Ah, sweet ecstasy. This was much better than mindless needlepoint.

Smiling, she stretched out on her back to admire the white clouds soaring like

mountains into the sky. Today the sun was brighter, the trees more lush, the birds harmonious in their songs.

Lucas Forest, the twelfth Duke of Foxhaven, was showing interest in her at last, even if he was sending an emissary to call on her.

Vivi had never been a patient person, and waiting for Foxhaven to claim her had been difficult indeed. Yet, she had not faulted him for postponing the final signing of their marital agreement. He had just lost his father suddenly, and she'd understood the magnitude of that kind of loss. By age seven, she was already an orphan and quickly becoming a burden to her brother.

She could also appreciate Foxhaven's shock upon learning of the secret negotiations between her brother and the former duke. She hadn't been consulted prior to their discussions either.

Nevertheless, thirteen months had proven to be a torturously long time for her to exist in a state of uncertainty. She was ready to have the matter settled between them and leave Bedfordshire behind.

When the duke's representative, Lord Ellis, arrived next week, she would give him no reason to find her lacking. She would be everything her brother had promised Foxhaven she would be: a gracious hostess, a proper lady, and an empty-headed ninny with no opinions.

Vivi flipped onto her stomach and swam with the current.

Claiming she had no opinions was perhaps unwise of her brother. Her opinions tended to sprout up like dandelions in a field, and she was often found eager to share her thoughts when others were not so eager to listen. But she would hold her tongue, even if she must bite it in the process.

Swimming to shallower water, Vivi stood and wobbled on the slippery rocks, her hands thrust out at her sides to find her balance. She had best make her way back to the house. Cook was still awaiting her approval of the meals for Lord Ellis's stay. Since Cousin Patrice had taken to her bed with a chill, the task had fallen to Vivi.

Were a gentleman's occupations as mind-numbing as a lady's? Likely not. Their reading selections certainly proved more entertaining. Perhaps she could afford to

sneak in another chapter of Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur* before addressing the kitchen staff.

She trudged upstream, her mind already preoccupied with the story she had abandoned earlier. She often lost herself in daydreams about handsome knights and being adored by one. It made her lonely days feel less... Well, *lonely*.

She is attending a tournament. Sir Launcelot stops his charger in front of her and declares himself as her champion. Vivi pulls the scarlet ribbon from her hair and presents it to him. Her brave knight holds her offering to his lips, his eyes shining brightly.

"My dearest Lady Vivian, you honor me with your gift. Might I beg of you a kiss as reward for my victory?"

Vivi touched her fingers to her lips. "Yes, my brave knight."

She laughed, embarrassed to still be engaging in girlish fancies. Her imagination was rather brilliant, however. She had been so lost in the moment she could have sworn she'd heard the whinny of Sir Launcelot's horse.

The smooth rocks shifted and she landed in the water with a plop. As she struggled to her feet, the snort of a horse— real, not imagined—made her head snap up.

A horse and rider appeared through the tree line ahead and approached the spring's edge.

She froze.

The man sat casually in his saddle, seemingly unaware of her presence, while his horse lowered his head for a drink. She sloshed around in search of someplace to hide, but there was nowhere to go. No bush, boulder, or tree near enough to shield her.

"Damnation!" The gentleman's surprised exclamation echoed off the stone ledge lining the opposite bank.

"Oh, look away. *Please*, look away." She attempted to run for deeper water, but her chemise twisted around her knees. Pitching forward, she landed face-first into the water, then came up coughing and sputtering, her hair in her eyes. The sounds of boots hitting the gravel and splashing made her heart leap into her throat.

She staggered to her feet, sweeping aside the curtain of hair obstructing her view. Hastily, she crossed her arms over her breasts. "Stop!"

The stranger drew to a halt, the water up to his knees. Dark brows lowered over the most striking blue eyes she had ever seen. "You aren't in need of rescue?"

She snorted. "Not from swimming."

His intense stare bathed her in heat, making her forget the affront he had just served her. She slowly began to back away. Water dripped from her nose, but she didn't dare expose herself to swipe at it. If anyone discovered her half-nude in the presence of a gentleman... Well, it would be a million times more disastrous than the situation with Owen, and that debacle could ruin her if word ever reached London.

His gaze didn't waver.

"Will you please stop gawking at me?"

"Sorry." He covered his eyes and his lips twitched upward. "Now that we have established you are in no danger, perhaps you can answer a question. Are you a water sprite or a manifestation of my overactive imagination?"

His voice sounded like he was holding back a smile. He wasn't taking their situation seriously enough in her estimation.

"The second one, so go away."

The gentleman laughed, but kept his eyes covered. "You seem real enough. Perhaps you're a milkmaid from a local farm. Does your employer know you are attempting to drown yourself instead of attending to your duties?"

"I wasn't drowning, and I haven't time to chat with unwanted trespassers."

She continued to ease toward the opposite bank, watching him for signs of pursuit. Her pulse slowed a fraction when he held his position and still didn't peek.

"Are there any other kind?" he asked.

Reaching deeper water, she submerged herself to her neck. "Any other kind of what?" "Trespassers. Are they ever wanted? By definition trespassing implies—"

"I *know* what it means. Now good day, sir."

He laughed again and dropped his hand by his side. "You're a cheeky one. What is your name?"

Vivi's eyes widened. A true gentleman would have pretended he had never seen

her, and if he did by chance discover her half- nude in a spring, he wouldn't insensitively request her name.

"I am no one of importance. Please just go away."

The last thing she needed was a guest of the neighboring estate spreading word of their embarrassing encounter. She would be the talk of Dunstable.

Again.

And Ash would be livid with her.

Again.

The man flashed a grin. "Spoiled your fun, did I? Perhaps before I go, you might assist me."

"I am certain I have no skill in whatever it is you require." She swam backward, putting more distance between them.

"It requires no skill."

He waded out of the spring, stood on one foot to tug off his boot, and poured water from it. "I just purchased these and now I've ruined them coming to your rescue."

"I didn't need rescuing." Truly, she was an excellent swimmer. Why wasn't he listening?

"Of course you didn't." His sarcastic tone got her back up, but before she could deliver a scathing set- down, his magnificent eyes locked on her again.

"I require directions to Brighthurst House. Do you know the way?"

"Brighthurst?" All the air rushed from her in a whoosh as her gaze swept over him. His expensively cut burgundy coat was dusty and his Hessians—well, they were likely ruined as he had said— but he was attired more fashionably than most gentlemen in the county.

Dear heavens, no!

This gentleman couldn't possibly be Lord Ellis. The earl wasn't due for several more days. Perhaps she had misheard him.

She cleared her throat. "Did— did you say Brighthurst House?"

"I must be close if the blacksmith is to be trusted."

Sweet strawberry jam! He had to be the earl. What was he doing at Brighthurst

House this early? And where was his coach? “Uh, I- I don’t— ”

He frowned as he mounted his horse. “Don’t tell me you are unfamiliar with Lady Brighthurst.”

She wouldn’t say she was unfamiliar with her, for it was best to avoid speaking falsehoods whenever possible. “You might have gone— ” She waggled her finger. “Go *that* way.”

His gaze followed her wavering finger. “Which way? The way I came?”

“Yes, I think. Maybe.”

“Yes or maybe?”

“Uh... Perhaps you should find someone else to ask.”

He raised a brow and looked pointedly around the area. “Ask someone else? Who, pray tell?”

“Forgive me, sir, but I really must go.” She swam for the opposite bank, reaching her destination and clinging to the rocky ledge.

“Just a moment. I require an answer. Do I go back the way I came or not?”

“Um, yes!” Dear Lord, she had just lied after all. To an earl. Vivi’s heart pounded in her ears, blocking out his reply. She blinked. “Pardon?”

“I asked if you would like something for your trouble. A shilling or two?”

“No!” Good heavens, no. She couldn’t take his money, too. Her knuckles ached as she fought against the current trying to sweep her downstream.

He walked his horse a little ways into the water. “Are you certain you don’t require assistance? You appear in danger of drowning again.”

“I *know* how to swim,” she said through clenched teeth.

The gentleman rubbed his forehead, appearing to mull over the wisdom of leaving her. She eyed the steep incline on her side of the creek. It would take a bit of effort, but she could scale the hill. If the gentleman would leave.

“Thank you for your concern, but you may go now.”

A slow smile eased across his mouth like honey dripping from a spoon. “You are too cheeky by half, chit. Take care when climbing to the top. I wouldn’t like to see you hurt.”

“I will be fine, but thank you again.”

With a shake of his head, he flicked the reins and turned his horse back toward the trees.

Lud! She didn't have much time. As soon as rider and horse disappeared from sight, Vivi levered her elbow against the rock ledge, flopped her leg on top, and then climbed from the water with a soft grunt.

Pushing to her feet, she kicked free of the chemise tangled around her legs and grabbed a large tree root dangling down the side of the embankment. She scurried up the hill hand over hand, her mind aw whirl.

What was Lord Ellis doing at Brighthurst this early? And why did he have to arrive at this exact moment? She had the worst luck of any person she knew.

Her feet slipped on the dark dirt, stirring up an earthy scent. She held tighter, ignoring the burn in her palms, and continued her climb. When she made it to the top, she dashed for her clothes.

Lord Ellis couldn't reach the house before her. He just couldn't. She needed a moment to think, to sort out what to do before he arrived. She had to find a way to salvage her situation, because she couldn't bear to be a disappointment to Cousin Patrice again.

In the distance, someone called her name. It was her maid.

"Lady Vivian, here you are. I have been searching everywhere for you." Winifred marched through the meadow in her direction. "It looks like another storm is blowing in. You better come back to the house."

A gust of wind sent the meadow grass into a frantic dance. Vivi snatched up her crumpled gown from the ground. "Winnie! Come quickly. Something awful has happened."

Her maid broke into a run. "My lady, what is it? Have you been injured?"

"No, nothing of the sort, but please help me with my dress." Winnie grabbed her corset and petticoats, but Vivi waved them away. "There isn't time. You may dress me properly once we reach my chambers."

"I don't understand, my lady. What happened?" Her maid draped the undergarments over her shoulder and tossed the gown over Vivi's head, yanking the skirts down her body inch by inch as the Indian muslin stuck to her wet skin.

When her head emerged, she saw a thick cloud dull the bright sun. The air seemed stagnant and heavy. In the distance, foreboding storm clouds hovered on the horizon as if getting into formation to launch an attack. It was moving in quickly, catching her unawares, much as Lord Ellis had.

Before her maid could fasten her gown, Vivi linked arms and dragged her through the meadow back toward Brighthurst House.

“Lady Vivian, what are you about?”

“Oh, Winnie. I’m in a real pickle. Lord Ellis will arrive at our front door in a matter of moments. We must hurry.”

“Lord Ellis? But he isn’t expected until next week.”

Winnie planted her feet, jerking Vivi to a stop. Her brow furrowed as she captured Vivi’s face and peered into her eyes. “You didn’t knock your head, did you?”

Vivi brushed her maid’s hands away. “I haven’t lost my senses. Let’s go.”

Fingers of lightning stretched toward the ground, and thunder made the earth below them shudder.

Her maid clung to her arm. “We should hurry, my lady.”

“That is what I’ve been trying to say. Lord Ellis ambushed me at the spring, and he is on his way to Brighthurst House.”

Winnie’s eyes grew as round as shillings. “Merciful heavens, the earl discovered you in your chemise? Oh dear. This is beyond horrifying.”

“You’re not comforting me.” Clasp hands, they ran for the dower house as the wind whipped through the meadow and plastered Vivi’s wet gown against her. The first raindrops splattered the dirt as they reached the house and slipped inside.

Vivi shivered, and her maid put an arm around her shoulders. “Come upstairs, Lady Vivian, before you catch your death.”

At this point, death might be the easier solution. “Ash will send me to the nunnery for certain this time.”

Winnie squeezed her tight. “Well then, he will have to send me too. I’ll not let you wreck havoc on those poor Sisters of Mercy alone.”

Vivi almost laughed, but it was hard to find much humor in her complete ruin. “You would do that for me, Win? Perhaps it wouldn’t be terrible if you were with

me.”

“Phoo!” Her maid flicked her hand. “We’ll come up with some way to get out of this. But first, let’s change you out of these wet clothes.”

They ascended the stairs side by side and bustled down the corridor to Vivi’s bedchamber. Once the door closed, Vivi wrestled with her damp gown.

Winnie hurried forward to assist. With her soiled gown discarded and a dry one donned, Vivi rushed to the window to search for signs of Lord Ellis. The gravel drive was deserted.

“Egads. It’s raining like the devil.”

A blinding flash and boom caused her to jump back with a scream. Rain pinged against the glass, deafening with its intensity, and dark clouds blotted out the sunlight.

“Tell everyone we must put lights in every window.”

“Yes, my lady.”

A deep rumble vibrated the windowpanes. Her heart hammered against her ribs. Surely Lord Ellis would throttle her for deceiving him.

If he survived.

End of Chapter

Would you like to keep reading LADY VIVIAN DEFIES A DUKE?

Ebook available through:

[Amazon](#) | [BAM!](#) | [Barnes&Noble](#) | [GooglePlay](#) | [iBooks](#) | [Kobo](#)