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Chapter 26

Lucille gave a little start of amazement as she realised that she was not alone in the brougham. She reached out for the check-cord, but a strong hand held hers.

"My dear Lucille," a familiar voice exclaimed, "why this alarm? Is it your nerves or your eyesight which is failing you?"

Her hand dropped. She turned towards him.

"It is you, then, Prince!" she said. "But why are you here? I do not understand."

The Prince shrugged his shoulders.

"It is so simple," he said. "We are all very anxious indeed to hear the result of your interview with Brott - and apart from that, I personally have too few opportunities to act as your escort to let a chance go by. I trust that my presence is not displeasing to you?"

She laughed a little uneasily.

"It is at any rate unnecessary," she answered. "But since you are here I may as well make my confession. I have failed."

"It is incredible," the Prince murmured.

"As you will - but it is true," she answered. "I have done my very best, or rather my worst, and the result has been failure. Mr. Brott has a great friend - a man named Grahame, whose influence prevailed against mine. He has gone to Scotland."

"That is serious news," the Prince said quietly.

Lucille leaned back amongst the cushions.

"After all," she declared, "we are all out of place in this country. There is no scope whatever for such schemes and intrigues as you and all the rest of them delight in. In France and Russia, even in Austria, it is different. The working of all great organisation there is underground - it is easy enough to meet plot by counterplot, to suborn, to deceive, to undermine. But here all the great games of life seem to be played with the cards upon the table. We are hopelessly out of place. I cannot think, Prince, what ill chance led you to ever contemplate making your headquarters in London."

The Prince stroked his long moustache.

"That is all very well, Lucille," he said, "but you must remember that in England we have very large subscriptions to the Order. These people will not go on paying for nothing. There was a meeting of the London branch a few months ago, and it was decided that unless some practical work was done in this country all English subscriptions should cease. We had no alternative but to come over and attempt something. Brott is of course the bete noire of our friends here. He is distinctly the man to be struck at."

"And what evil stroke of fortune," Lucille asked, "induced you to send for me?"

"That is a very cruel speech, dear lady," the Prince murmured.

"I hope," Lucille said, "that you have never for a moment imagined that I find any pleasure in what I am called upon to do."

"Why not? It must be interesting. You can have had no sympathy with Brott - a hopeless plebeian, a very paragon of Anglo-Saxon stupidity?"

Lucille laughed scornfully.

"Reginald Brott is a man, at any rate, and an honest one," she answered. "But I am too selfish to think much of him. It is myself whom I pity. I have a home, Prince, and a husband. I want them both."

"You amaze me," the Prince said slowly. "Lucille, indeed, you amaze me. You have been buried alive for three years. Positively we believed that our summons would sound to you like a message from Heaven."

Lucille was silent for a moment. She rubbed the mist from the carriage window and looked out into the streets.

"Well," she said, "I hope that you realise now how completely you have misunderstood me. I was perfectly happy in America. I have been perfectly miserable here. I suppose that I have grown too old for intrigues and adventures."

"Too old, Lucille," the Prince murmured, leaning a little towards her. "Lucille, you are the most beautiful woman in London. Many others may have told you so, but there is no one, Lucille, who is so devotedly, so hopelessly your slave as I."

She drew her hand away, and sat back in her corner. The man's hot breath fell upon her cheek, his eyes seemed almost phosphorescent in the darkness. Lucille could scarcely keep the biting words from her tongue.

"You do not answer me, Lucille. You do not speak even a single kind word to me. Come! Surely we are old friends. We should understand one another. It is not a great deal that I ask from your kindness - not a great deal to you, but it is all the difference between happiness and misery for me."

"This is a very worn-out game, Prince," Lucille said coldly. "You have been making love to women in very much the same manner for twenty years, and I - well, to be frank, I am utterly weary of being made love to like a doll. Laugh at me as you will, my husband is the only man who interests me in the slightest. My failure to-day is almost welcome to me. It has at least brought my work here to a close. Come, Prince, if you want to earn my eternal gratitude, tell me now that I am a free woman."

"You give me credit," the Prince said slowly, "for great generosity. If I let you go it seems to me that I shall lose you altogether. You will go to your husband. He will take you away!"

"Why not?" Lucille asked. "I want to go. I am tired of London. You cannot lose what you never possessed - what you never had the slightest chance of possessing."

The Prince laughed softly - not a pleasant laugh, not even a mirthful one.

"Dear lady," he said, "you speak not wisely. For I am very much in earnest when I say that I love you, and until you are kinder to me I shall not let you go."

"That is rather a dangerous threat, is it not?" Lucille asked. "You dare to tell me openly that you will abuse your position, that you will keep me bound a servant to the cause, because of this foolish fancy of yours?"

The Prince smiled at her through the gloom - a white, set smile.

"It is no foolish fancy, Lucille. You will find that out before long. You have been cold to me all your life. Yet you would find me a better friend than enemy."

"If I am to choose," she said steadily, "I shall choose the latter."

"As you will," he answered. "In time you will change your mind."

The carriage had stopped. The Prince alighted and held out his hand. Lucille half rose, and then with her foot upon the step she paused and looked around.

"Where are we?" she exclaimed. "This is not Dorset House."

"No, we are in Grosvenor Square," the Prince answered. "I forgot to tell you that we have a meeting arranged for here this evening. Permit me." But Lucille resumed her seat in the carriage.

"It is your house, is it not?" she asked.

"Yes. My house assuredly."

"Very well," Lucille said. "I will come in when the Duchess of Dorset shows herself at the window or the front door - or Felix, or even De Brouillae."

The Prince still held open the carriage door.

"They will all be here," he assured her. "We are a few minutes early."

"Then I will drive round to Dorset House and fetch the Duchess. It is only a few yards."

The Prince hesitated. His cheeks were very white, and something like a scowl was blackening his heavy, insipid face.

"Lucille," he said, "you are very foolish. It is not much I ask of you, but that little I will have or I pledge my word to it that things shall go ill with you and your husband. There is plain speech for you. Do not be absurd. Come within, and let us talk. What do you fear? The house is full of servants, and the carriage can wait for you here."

Lucille smiled at him - a maddening smile.

"I am not a child," she said, "and such conversations as I am forced to hold with you will not be under your own roof. Be so good as to tell the coachman to drive to Dorset House."

The Prince turned on his heel with a furious oath.

"He can drive you to Hell," he answered thickly.

Lucille found the Duchess and Lady Carey together at Dorset House. She looked from one to the other.

"I thought that there was a meeting to-night," she remarked.

The Duchess shook her head.

"Not to-night," she answered. "It would not be possible. General Dolinski is dining at Marlborough House, and De Brouillae is in Paris. Now tell us all about Mr. Brott."

"He has gone to Scotland," Lucille answered. "I have failed."

Lady Carey looked up from the depths of the chair in which she was lounging.

"And the prince?" she asked. "He went to meet you!"

"He also failed," Lucille answered.

