



Cobalt Fairy
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FOUR
RULES FOR THE
VISCOUNT

THE MATCHMAKING GAMES SERIES

DAPHNE BYRNE

FOUR RULES FOR THE
VISCOUNT

A STEAMY HISTORICAL REGENCY ROMANCE
NOVEL

THE MATCHMAKING GAMES

BOOK TWO



DAPHNE BYRNE



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BEFORE YOU START READING...

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ABOUT THE BOOK

She's the wife he never wanted...and the weakness he never saw coming.

The Viscount of Northfolk must marry before his next birthday or he risks losing his whole inheritance. And who better to find him a bride of convenience other than the matchmaker?

Her father's gambling and drinking have forced Margaret to take matters into her own hands. And marrying for love was never an option...

Craving the touch of his arranged bride was never his plan. And when he almost loses her, Evan would burn the world to taste her lips one more time...

CHAPTER 1



*W*hat am I going to do?

The thought that plagued her mind on a daily basis haunted her once again as her mind wandered to her sisters, who needed to eat. She couldn't simply fashion a breakfast for them out of thin air.

Catching a glimpse of her reflection in the kitchen window, she realized just how tired she looked. Her dark green eyes were filled with worry while her strawberry blonde hair was slicked back in a bun with a few loose strands that spoke of the frustration she felt.

Pushing herself up, she walked over to the cabinet where her father usually left the funds that were sorely needed for food. Standing on her toes, she reached for the tin at the top of the cupboard. Her hopes instantly sank when she realized how light the tin felt. Bringing it down to the counter, she said a silent prayer before lifting the lid.

Her fears were realized when she saw just how empty the tin was.

“Are we not going to have breakfast again?” Layla whined as she came into the kitchen, eyeing the empty table with contempt.

Placing the empty tin back in the cupboard, Margaret shut her eyes and leaned her forehead on the wood before turning to her sisters.

“Have you given any more thought to getting me a tutor?” her youngest sister asked as she pulled out a chair at the table and took a seat beside Layla. “You know all the other girls my age have tutors already; how will I ever get a husband when I’m left to my own devices all day?” Iris complained.

“I don’t know,” Margaret snapped at them as they continued to chatter and whine. “Perhaps you might try being a little more grateful for everything that I am trying to give you with very limited resources.”

She instantly regretted speaking to them in such a harsh manner when she caught sight of the shocked expressions on their faces. It wasn’t their fault that their father was a poor excuse of a man.

Lowering her arms in exasperation, Margaret took a deep breath as she looked at her younger sisters. She would do anything in the world to ensure they had everything they needed, but how could she do that when her hands were tied behind her back? Their father wasn't of any use when it came to providing. It was hard enough catching him at home on the rare occasions when he wasn't out.

She turned her head to look down the hall at the door of the study. The solid oak was firmly shut, signalling the fact that her father wanted to be left alone. There was no other avenue open to her at present.

Margaret quietly walked down the hall and gently pushed on the wood door. It silently swung open to reveal her father slumped over his desk with the blinds to the study still shut. His hand was clutching an empty bottle of whisky as a deep snore filled the air, adding to the eerie darkness.

Scrunching up her nose at the heavy scent of liquor that hung in the air, she tiptoed to her father's side, quietly placing her hand inside his jacket pocket. She could tell by the way he twitched in his sleep that he wouldn't be waking up any time soon. Nevertheless, she needed to be quiet and leave as soon as she found the money.

There.

Her fingers enclosed around the coins as she gently withdrew her hand, making her way back to the door. Her heart ached for the man she once knew as her father, who was now merely a shell of his former self thanks to the bottle he clung to for dear life.

What am I going to do with you?



The wicker basket swung from her arm as Margaret made her way down the busy London street. People were bustling about, going about their daily business without a care in the world.

She paused to take a deep breath and froze. Right there at her side, brighter than day, was the grandiose red door with the simple gold plaque on the front.

Marie Webster, Matchmaker.

She mouthed the words as Emma Crawford, now the Duchess of Saint Clair, popped into her mind. The ton had buzzed for months on end at the great success of her marriage. Marie Webster was quickly gaining the reputation of a skilled matchmaker who could handle the hardest of situations with ease.

The last thing she wanted was to marry a man for anything other than love, yet the light basket swinging at her side

reminded her of the fact that she needed to think of her sisters as well as herself. Their father was definitely not going to change any time soon.

Did I not promise them they would make good matches?

She fought her own thoughts and desires before making up her mind.

Shutting her eyes against the idea, she pursed her lips and plucked up her courage before stepping forward and turning the handle.

A small bell tinkled above the door.

CHAPTER 2



“Good day, Miss; did I forget about an appointment?” she asked with a frown. “I don’t think I did; I do apologize if it is an error on my part.”

Margaret admired the matchmaker’s sleek form and hourglass figure; she seemed like the epitome of elegance and grace. “I do apologize, Miss Webster,” Margaret demurred when she realized that she’d been staring without saying a word. She’d not only been thrown by the woman herself but by the elegant styling of the room.

A clean marble floor and white walls were elegantly accompanied by a few plants and a large wooden desk at the far end with three chairs — one for Marie and two for clients. The only other furnishings were set in a small corner as if to represent a café. White wicker chairs had been set up beside a matching table with red roses in a vase.

“I am afraid that I am at fault here; I did not have an appointment; my name is Margaret Benett,” Margaret hurriedly offered an explanation as she shifted her basket from

one arm to the other. “I came in here on a whim more than anything else really.”

“I see.” The woman’s face seemed to soften as she looked Margaret over with a glint in her eyes. “Why don’t we start with the reason you felt prompted to come in here,” Marie suggested kindly before taking her seat.

“Well...” Margaret took a deep breath and decided to cut to the chase. “I know that you have a reputation for making difficult matches, and the Duchess seems quite content with her marriage to the Duke.”

“Ah, yes, dearest Emma,” Marie smiled warmly. “Those two were quite difficult, but love found a way to triumph in the end.” Her eyes sparkled as she spoke. Margaret took an instant liking to the woman; if she seemed so happy about a match she made working out, then Margaret had hopes she would take care of her.

“That’s why I need your help,” Margaret explained boldly as she lifted her chin in the air. “I need a suitable match.”

“Very well,” Marie’s posture became straighter as she reached for her quill and dipped it into the ink before pulling a piece of parchment toward her. “Why don’t you start with what you would like to see in a partner — characteristics, mannerisms, and things like that.”

“Wait, is it that easy?” Margaret asked with a frown. “Don’t you need a payment or anything like that?”

Marie lowered her quill with a faint smile on her lips. “I like the look of you, Miss Benett. You have a lot of qualities that won’t make it hard to find a match. And as for payments, I know that your family has fallen on hard times, so let us call it a favor?” Her eyes were warm as she spoke. “We all need a helping hand from time to time.”

Margaret searched the woman’s face for any signs of sarcasm or trickery but found nothing but understanding and kindness. She took a breath and smoothed out her dress. Beggars couldn’t be choosers, but she had a few demands to make for her future husband.

“I have four things that I would like to see in a man,” she started, shifting in her seat once she decided that Marie could be trusted. “Number one, he must not drink... He can have the occasional glass of wine, but I do not want to be saddled with anyone that has a problem,” she stated most emphatically.

Marie bit on her lower lip in concentration as she wrote while listening to Margaret’s demands. Marie didn’t seem at all surprised at what Margaret was asking, and Margaret wondered if it was a very common theme amongst women. That would be sad.

“Secondly, he must not, under any circumstances, gamble. This point is just as important as the drinking to me,” she said after waiting for Marie to jot down her first demand.

“No drinking or gambling,” Marie said as her quill scratched across the page. “Next?” she asked without looking up. “What are the other two conditions?”

“As you know, my family has fallen on hard times, and I have no dowry. He must be willing to take care of myself as well as my sisters until they find matches of their own.”

“Got it,” Marie seemed to write faster than Margaret could speak.

“And finally...” She set her shoulders and lifted her chin. “He must not under any circumstances be allergic to cats and dogs.”

A mischievous grin spread over her lips as Marie returned her quill to the pot of ink. “Well, Miss Benett, you have given me a lot to work with. I think it is safe to say that it will not take me long at all to find you a suitable match. I will let you know as soon as I have one, and your first meeting should be here in the shop under my supervision.” She gestured to the table and chairs in the corner of the room.

“Yes, thank you.” Margaret stepped into the street as the bell tinkled again, signalling her departure with the closing of the door. Looking over her shoulder, she wondered what had happened and how on earth it had happened so fast.

Did I really just willingly give myself over to the whims of a matchmaker?



Clenching his jaw, he reached for the shiny handle on the bright red door and braced himself for the inevitable. Evan Sutherland had always thought that he would have been the last person on earth to enter a matchmaker’s office. The fact that he was doing it of his own accord made him even angrier.

The small bell tinkled enthusiastically as he stepped into the brightly lit room. The large window made for a great source of light, a stark contradiction to the way he was feeling inside.

“Ah, My Lord,” Marie Webster greeted as she came floating toward him as if on a cloud. He found her overly cheerful demeanor annoying at best. “Please come in; I will ring for tea at once.”

“I am afraid I do not have a lot of time,” he said gruffly as if a dark cloud was just about to burst over his head. “Could we cut to the chase and dispense with all the formalities of etiquette?” The sooner he got everything out of the way the better.

“I see,” she replied with a mischievous smile as she straightened her spine, clasping her hands in front of her dress. The confident look in her eyes made him slightly concerned as Marie sized him up. It was almost as if she was checking to see if he was properly dressed.

Running his hand through his neat blonde hair, Evan ensured that everything was in place. His bright blue eyes darted around the room which made him slightly claustrophobic beneath her gaze.

“You may take a seat then, My Lord.” She turned slightly to the left and gestured to the chair in front of her desk.

Gently tugging on his lapels to ensure that his jacket was straight, Evan made his way to the desk and took a seat.

“If I understand correctly from your letter, you want a marriage of convenience,” she clarified as she walked around her desk. “And preferably fast.” She took a seat and gently shifted her chair into place.

“I will not beat around the bush,” he said directly. “My hand is being forced by the fact that I need to marry before my next birthday.”

“Very well,” Marie replied with a puzzling smile that made him shift uncomfortably in his seat. “What are the qualities that you *think* a woman who is a perfect match for you would possess?”

There was something in the way she phrased the word ‘think’ that led Evan to believe he was in for a tough time with the woman who would pick his future bride. “She must be neat and well-spoken with good moral character and upbringing. Since we do not need to know each other in any other way, those are the only qualities that matter.”

“I only have two questions for you, My Lord,” Marie said after placing her quill back in its pot. “Number one, would it matter to you if the lady in question had no dowry to offer? She is the daughter of a Baron, so her lineage is not in question.” She spoke in the same direct manner that Evan had done when stating the qualities he desired.

“No,” he said with a frown. “Her financial status will not be an issue; I am willing to accommodate any of her monetary needs.”

“Wonderful,” Marie seemed to brighten. “There is only one final question that I have for you. Are you allergic to any animals such as dogs or cats?”

“No, I am not.” Evan was beginning to think that something more than just a match of convenience with a poor Baron’s

daughter was afoot. “But I must warn you, I am no lover of pets. I do not want any in my home.”

“Well, that is something that I cannot guarantee,” the matchmaker said with a cheeky grin. “You must remember, My Lord, that you have made it abundantly clear to all and sundry that you are not interested in just anyone. Most of the eligible young women of the ton avoid you like the plague because of your strong convictions. There may be a few things you have to accept about your bride.” She looked him in the eyes with fierce determination.

“I understand,” he agreed begrudgingly as his predicament came to mind. Beggars could not be choosers, especially when those beggars were being hurried along by the steady ticking of a clock. Making a match in haste on his own would only ensure more gossip from the ton; Marie at least could use her discretion.

“As luck would have it, I have the perfect match for you. Considering the fact that you are working within a tight time frame, I can set up the first meeting for tomorrow.”

Evan searched the woman’s face, wondering what he had gotten himself into.

CHAPTER 3



Taking a deep breath, Margaret braced herself to open the door. She hadn't thought that Marie would be able to find her a match so soon, let alone that she would be meeting the man the day after her impulsive decision. Her heart beat out of control as she made sure that her hair was still in place.

She'd taken the time to wear a nice dress and had even applied the appropriate amount of makeup and perfume, something that she rarely did these days with all of her chores around the house. There was a lot riding on the man she was about to meet. Her sister's disappointed faces swam in her mind as she finally worked up the courage to open the door and step inside.

Her presence was once again met with the sharp tinkling of a bell that did little to help her nerves.

"Miss Benett," Marie said kindly as she stood and welcomed her into the shop with a warm smile. "I hope you didn't have any trouble on your way here?"

Margaret's heart suddenly stopped beating as time stood still. The man sitting opposite the matchmaker was far more handsome than she had envisioned him to be since receiving the note. Not that his looks had anything to do with the match; she needed a husband, not a carving of a Greek God that could be shown off to the ton. She was simply taken aback by how strikingly good-looking she found him to be.

She briefly wondered why he hadn't made a match prior; there had to be something wrong with the man if the eligible ladies of London hadn't snapped him up by now.

The man's bright blonde hair was neatly slicked back and secured in place with a small amount of brill cream. His muscular stature and tall frame made him stand out against the backdrop of the shop. Yet his eyes stood out for Margaret the most. Their deep blue resembled the ocean on a clear summer's day with just a hint of a storm brewing on the horizon.

The coolness in his eyes lit a fire inside of her that both intrigued and frightened her at the same time. It was almost as if he had an aura of mystery around him that oozed a certain kind of sensuality as his eyes fell from her face, moving their way down her body in a slow and methodical manner.

"Not at all." She shook her head and came forward. "I'm sorry I'm late; there were a few unforeseen circumstances that needed to be taken care of," she explained cheerfully while

trying her best not to gawk at the man who seemed grumpier than her favorite cat and less approachable.

“Let me guess,” the mysterious man said in a cool voice and stepped forward before Marie could even think of making the introductions. He seemed exceptionally tall, making Margaret crane her neck at an odd angle to look at him properly. Her mouth blanched, and she almost did not register what the man said after. “You were undecided on what dress to wear or in what style your hair should be done?” he asked without a trace of irony in his voice.

The gall of that man! Who does he think he is?

“Because that is all that a lady could have possibly been occupied with, My Lord?” She narrowed her eyes as she took an instant dislike to him that further confused the fact that she found him utterly attractive. The fact was that she had been held back by making her sisters’ breakfast, and her father had forgotten to give her money again, forcing her to run to the market before she could even get ready.

“I think we should start with introductions.” the matchmaker suddenly stepped in when it was clear that Margaret and the arrogant suitor had reached a standoff. “My Lord, may I present Miss Margaret Benett, first-born daughter of Baron William Benett.”

“Pleased to make your acquaintance, My Lord.” Margaret gritted her teeth and bowed politely.

Marie gave her a cheeky grin as if she could read her thoughts of dislike toward the handsome stranger. “And Miss Benett, may I present Evan Sutherford, the Viscount of Northfork.”

“The pleasure is all mine, Miss Benett.” His voice was low and husky, sending a shiver of pleasure down her spine despite her best efforts to remain indifferent toward him. He bent and took her hand in his, giving a small chaste kiss on her gloved hand. The heat of his skin against the fabric made her shiver. His eyes seemed to have darkened when he looked at her again, like a storm was brewing inside his mind. He cleared his throat and stepped away, seemingly eager to stay as far away from her as possible.

Margaret discreetly smelled her hand in case it smelled like the fish she had cooked for breakfast. Thankfully, nothing but soap. Then what was his problem?

“Now that we are better acquainted, I suggest we have some tea while we discuss the finer points of the arrangement,” Marie suggested before walking over to her desk and retrieving a gold bell that she rang once before replacing it in the drawer. “If you would both care to have a seat?”

“Very well then.” The Viscount cleared his throat and shifted in his seat as if he were slightly uncomfortable with the

situation at hand. “I will begin. As the Viscountess of Northfork, you will be expected to act like a lady at all times. You will be punctual, elegant, and well-mannered. Your main duties will be to ensure that the family is properly represented in the eyes of the ton. Appearance is everything.”

Scoffing, Margaret sat back in her chair and rolled her eyes. The arrogance of the man didn't surprise her at all. She turned a defiant gaze at him and opened her mouth to share a piece of her mind.



Evan bit back the smile he felt tugging at the corner of his lips. He hadn't expected the woman Marie set him up with to be as feisty as she was, let alone breathtakingly beautiful. The elegance displayed in her pale-pink dress had taken him by surprise despite her lateness. Her slender figure and beguiling features were more than he could have hoped for in a future spouse.

But the best — or worst, depending on how one saw it — part was her face. While she looked tired, she had a feistiness that he had not seen before. Her gaze was heated as she looked at him, and her lips were pursed, like she had tasted something sour. For a moment he had the craziest desire to kiss those pouty lips — perhaps she would not look at him with such disdain then — but he shook himself out of his stupor.

“Very well, if it is a picture of perfection you desire, that is what you shall get, *My Lord*.” She crossed her arms over her chest and glared at him in a scintillating manner that made him want to burst out laughing. He coughed to hide over the chuckle that escaped him.

“And your demands?” he asked her in amusement as a smirk crept over his lips despite his best efforts.

“First and foremost, I need my sisters to be taken care of.” She unfolded her arms and leaned forward as she reached for her cup of tea.

“In what way?” Evan asked as he sat back in his chair and examined her aristocratic features. Something stirred inside him, and he realized that he felt again that spark of desire for the woman.

I haven't been with a woman in too long a time to be thinking like that.

“I need you to provide me with a weekly stipend that would be used to run the house as well as hiring a maid and a footman.” Her eyes suddenly became serious as she spoke. “This part of the deal is non-negotiable; they will be looked after properly up until they make matches of their own.”

Evan wondered what her circumstances were at home as he listened to her speak. She seemed to be in dire need of more finances, yet it baffled him as to why the daughter of a Baron would need assistance while their father was still living. At least, he assumed that her father was still alive. “That doesn’t seem too unreasonable,” he replied and sipped his tea. “I agree to your terms.”

“I’m not done.” Margaret surprised him as she set her cup back down on the table. “My sisters need a tutor, a decent one that will teach them French, the pianoforte, painting, and everything that a young woman would require to make a suitable match.”

He raised an eyebrow and saw the action repeated on Margaret’s face. The little minx challenged him.

You don’t know in what dangerous waters you tread, Miss Bennett.

“And I’m assuming there are a few more demands?”

“I do not hold with drink,” she said directly and locked onto his gaze. “Just as you wish me to be a model wife that will make you proud, I ask that you never drink to the point where you lose all sense of propriety.”

Feeling as if he understood her a little better, Evan wondered if her demands about drinking had anything to do with the situation at home that she was clearly trying to fix. He took pity on her and the fact that she seemed preoccupied with saving her sisters, so much so that she had turned to a matchmaker to find a way out. He thought it highly unlikely that a woman as elegant and feisty as she was had come to Marie looking for a love match.

“The final thing is that I absolutely forbid and despise gambling.” Her slender fingers tightened around the mug. “You may live your life and do as you please with your friends, but I refuse to live in a house where gambling affects the lives of those who live there.” The fierceness in her voice as she spoke let Evan know that she meant what she said.

“Very well, no gambling, and no drinking. I can agree to those terms if you promise to uphold your end of the deal and act as a model of perfection — in the eyes of the ton at least; you may do as you please behind closed doors in the mansion.” He bit back the smile that threatened his lips as he narrowed his eyes at her, placing his fist against his lips with his elbow on the table as he waited for her response.

The woman’s antics were nothing short of amusing, yet he needed her to understand her position in the ton and how important it was to keep up appearances. He couldn’t risk having a wife that was anything less than perfect, not in the wake of the scandal that already threatened his life.

Margaret held his gaze for a moment or two as her eyes filled with passion. “I can agree to those terms.” Evan felt his loins stirring at the passionate gaze Margaret was searing him with. He almost forgot where they were, and he was halfway out of his seat, intent on grabbing Margaret and kissing her until she yielded, before he was interrupted.

“Well...” Marie set her cup on the table once again, startling Margaret and Evan alike.

In all of their heated back and forth, it seemed as if they had both forgotten that she was even there.

“It seems as if we have reached an agreement then?” She looked from one to the other with a pleased glint in her eyes. “I guess the only question is when the wedding will be?” She paused to give them some time to consider.

“The wedding shall be held at the end of the week,” Evan spoke up.

“I hope you don’t mind a bit of animal fur on your clothes, now and then, My Lord,” Margaret replied with a polite curtsy and a wry smile then left him alone with Marie who bit on her lips and looked to the side with a twinkle in her eyes.

You don’t know what you’re getting yourself into, little minx.

CHAPTER 4



The kitchen was slightly livelier than usual as her sisters sat down to supper, tucking into the scraps of fish and bread she'd managed to save from breakfast. There was little to go around, but the girls had learned to share when food was scarce.

The door to the kitchen suddenly opened with force as William Bennett came stumbling into the kitchen, clearly disgruntled by his night of drinking.

The girls instantly stopped talking and sat in silence. They knew better than to talk unless their father asked them a direct question. He always said that their incessant chattering was worse than a hammer to his head when he'd had a 'bad night'.

"I hope you girls left me something to eat," he grumbled as he pulled out a chair and reached for the meager helpings of fish in the center of the table. "And why is it always fish; can't you cook something else for a change?" He directed his question at Margaret without looking at her.

“Fish is all we can afford,” Margaret said coolly, withholding the urge to speak her mind and say that he never provided enough money for anything else.

A slight grumble was all he gave in response as he began to pick at the fish and bread. “Why are you all so quiet in any case?” His voice was gruff and hoarse from lack of water as he deflected the conversation in a different direction. “It’s almost as if someone died in here.”

“I am to be married,” she blurted out before she lost her nerve again.

The silence that filled the room was thicker than the uncomfortable fog that had permeated the air before their father had come into the kitchen.

“To whom?” William asked angrily with the jug suspended mid-pour. “And how? You have no dowry which is beside the point. I don’t recall agreeing to any marriage settlements.” He frowned as he presumably tried his best to cut through the liquor fog that was undoubtedly still clouding his brain.

“That is because you didn’t. I went to a matchmaker. Marie Webster, as a matter of fact.” Her palms began to sweat as she saw the angry scowl on her father’s face. “And you need not worry — she offered her services free of charge.”

“What!?” William suddenly banged the jug down on the table, making everyone jump as water sloshed over the side. His nostrils flared as his chest rose and fell from anger. “I could not have heard you correctly,” he seethed beneath the collar of his soiled dress shirt as color crept up his chubby neck.

“You did hear me correctly, Papa.” Margaret clutched at her apron beneath the table. “And to answer your question, the man I am going to marry is Evan Sutherford, the Viscount of Northfork.”

“A Viscount,” Iris gasped as she raised her hands to her mouth in shock.

“Isn’t he that handsome one that refuses to marry for anything less than love?” Layla asked with her mouth hanging slightly open. “He’s one of the most eligible bachelors.”

“With a terrible reputation of being unapproachable,” Iris finished her sentence for her.

“I don’t know,” Margaret said with a frown. “I’ve only just met him. I couldn’t say if it’s the same Viscount.” She could easily see how Evan could be unapproachable, but she didn’t want to fuel any kind of gossip when she wasn’t sure of the facts.

“It doesn’t matter!” William slammed his fists on the table again to gain their attention. “Why would you do something like this without consulting me first? I cannot believe that you would be this insolent! What will the ton say when they hear that a daughter of mine had to use the services of an uppity little matchmaker to find her husband?” His round face suddenly became red as his anger grew.

“I had to do something to change our situation,” Margaret explained calmly as her anxiety and fear gave way to indignation. “Layla and Iris needed someone to step up and make a change. I made the decision for the good of the family. The Viscount has agreed to not only pay for a tutor but also to help me look after the girls until they marry.”

“I decide what is good for this family!” William suddenly became irate as he jumped to his feet, supporting his unsteady gate by placing his hands on the table. “How dare you go behind my back and ask another man for help!”

“We barely have enough food to eat!” Margaret jumped to her feet and faced her father, the years of lies came flooding back to her as she glared at him.

“I provide food for this family!” he retorted angrily. “Where did the money for the fish come from?” He thrust his hand in the air, gesturing over the table.

Iris shifted toward Layla for protection, cowering under her sister's arm like a bird in a nest. Placing her hand over her younger sister's cheek, Layla drew Iris's face close to her chest in a motherly gesture.

"I'll tell you where the money came from." Margaret placed her palms on the table in front of her as she stood her ground. "It came from your coat pocket. I had to sneak into your study again and remove it because you failed to place it in the tin, like always." She raised her voice slightly as the unfairness of the situation made her even angrier.

Here her father was yelling at her for bringing shame to their family while he was out all-night gambling away the little money they had left. The nerve he had to throw anything in her face astounded her.

William seemed hurt and taken aback as he looked at her with his mouth slightly ajar. He was acting as if she had slapped him in the face.

"You want more money?" he asked in a voice that was void of all emotions. "Here." He reached into his jacket pocket, producing a fistful of coins that he proceeded to toss onto the table.

The coins scattered in all directions as Margaret held his gaze, unfazed by the gasps of shock that had escaped her sisters' lips. She would comfort and reassure them once their father

had left, but there was no way she would back down now, not when so much was at stake.

“There is your money,” he said with an expressionless face. “I forbid you or either of your sisters from marrying any man that I have not personally chosen.” His eyes grew dark with anger. “And this is the last time I want to hear anything on the matter.”

Margaret shook her head and looked at the coins that lay scattered across the table. There was barely enough there to buy them breakfast the next day.

William stumbled from his chair as he made his way from the kitchen, pausing behind Margaret before reaching the door. “Buy something other than fish this time,” he whispered in contempt as a wave of whisky blew over Margaret. “I can’t stand this fish all the time.” He tumbled from the kitchen, slamming the door in his wake.

All three sisters waited for the sound of the front door slamming before Iris began to cry.

“Don’t worry,” Margaret said in a soothing voice as she came around the table and placed her arms around their shoulders. “Everything will be fine; I’ll make sure of that.”

“What are you going to do?” Layla looked up at her with eyes that were far too fearful for a girl of seventeen.

“I am going to marry the Viscount and ensure that you both have all that you need,” she said confidently.

CHAPTER 5



The arrow zipped through the air, hitting the target just to the side of its mark. The lawns of the Saint Clair Estate sprawled out before them like a painting with its lush greenery and well-kept flowerbeds.

“You’ve gone soft after marriage,” Evan teased with a smirk as he leaned on his bow and watched his friend. His cream breeches were tucked into his brown leather boots, and his white cotton shirt hung out on one side, giving him the distinctive look of someone who had been practicing archery for the entire afternoon.

“Happiness will do that to a man,” Nicholas agreed with an unbothered smile.

“I remember the days when you would have taken my head off for a comment like that,” Evan laughed. “What has Emma done to you? I miss our witty banter.”

The Duke of Saint Clair simply smiled again as he placed his bow against the barrel that held the arrows. The Duchess had

somehow softened the once arrogant man who would fight anyone for simply suggesting that he marry. His bright green eyes seemed lighter as they swam with the bliss of a happily married man. Even his black hair and tall stature somehow seemed more relaxed.

“Marriage changes a man; Evan, you would know if you weren’t so dead set on waiting for a fictitious woman to fall from the heavens and grace your lap,” he stated with some of the stubborn pride that still remained despite all the changes his love for his wife had brought.

“I have some news on that score.” Evan plucked up the courage to broach the subject with his friend of many years.

“Has the mystery woman finally materialized?” the Duke asked, intrigued, as he drew a white handkerchief from his breeches pocket and wiped the sweat from his brow. His attire resembled Evan’s in every way with the only exception being his black breeches that matched tall leather boots.

“Not exactly in those terms,” Evan admitted.

Nicholas stared at him for a moment with a quizzical brow of curiosity before responding. “I think we better take a seat and cool off.” He nodded toward a small table and chairs under a nearby tree that was set with refreshments.

Following his friend to the table, Evan thought of how he was going to break the news to Nicholas about his sudden change of heart regarding a matchmaker. He'd put up such a fuss about his friend's arranged marriage that Nicholas was bound to poke fun at him for doing the same. As it stood, his hands were tied in the matter; he had no other choice but to marry, and preferably soon if he was to avoid the scandal that loomed over his life like a foreboding cloud.

"So, who is she and how did she suddenly appear?" the Duke asked as he handed him a cup of tea.

"Before you have a go at me, I have been forced into this by circumstances beyond my control," Evan started, preparing to admit that he had gone to the very same matchmaker that he had berated Nicholas for visiting. Granted, the Duke had been forced by his grandmother, not unlike the difficult situation that Evan currently found himself facing, but Evan was being forced by the threat of losing everything he had ever known.

"Sounds quite uncomfortable," Nicholas said honestly without any kind of mockery in his voice.

"I have had to seek out the services of Miss Webster." He braced himself for his friend's reaction.

The Duke almost choked on his tea as drops of milky fluid sprayed his lap. "Did you just say that you willingly sought the

services of a matchmaker?” Nicholas managed to ask once he’d stopped coughing and regained his composure.

“I was not willing,” Evan huffed in his own defence. “Quite the contrary — I was forced by unforeseen circumstances. I was not willing,” he repeated hotly.

“Before I drag you across the coals for being a hypocrite, why don’t you explain to me in great detail what these circumstances were?” Nicholas asked quite irritably as he used his handkerchief to clean the tea from his lap.

Sitting back in his chair, Evan took a deep breath and braced himself. “As you know, I have always believed in love as a basis for marriage; I don’t think anyone should start a marriage on anything less.”

“But?” Nicholas raised one eyebrow with his head tilted to the side. “I know you are a stubborn arse, but get to the point.”

“My hand has been forced by a nosy relative in search of wealth and a title,” he explained begrudgingly. “There was no issue with me choosing my own bride in due time until the finer points of my grandfather’s will were pointed out to me and brought to light.”

“Ah, so there was a catch.”

Nodding slowly, Evan cracked his knuckles in frustration as he thought of the unfairness of his situation. “My grandfather’s will states that his estate and title would pass to my father and me as his successor, but only if we marry suitable women by the age of thirty. If we should fail to honor those terms, the title and everything along with it will pass to whoever is next in line.”

“And your nosy relative has seen his chances of gaining a fortune owing to your lack of having a wife,” Nicholas pieced everything together.

“This means that I must marry within the next year.” Evan clenched his jaw as he spoke.

“Surely that should provide you with ample time to meet a fine young woman and fall in love? Why the need to visit Marie Webster then?”

“My relative’s lawyers have found a loophole in everything. If he is to marry before I do, then he has grounds to claim the title even before my birthday. I am given to understand that he has already begun his search for a wife.”

“So, he’s forcing your hand.” The Duke’s voice held a note of understanding rather than mockery as he thoughtfully stroked his chin. “I can see how Marie was your last hope. You’ve scared off all the women of the ton already with your talk of waiting for the perfect woman.”

“I have not scared off all the women of the ton,” he snapped irritably, tapping his finger on the wicker arm of his chair. “Why does everyone keep saying that? Just because I know what I want and state it on a regular basis does not mean that I have ‘scared’ everyone off. Perhaps none of those women were right for me if they felt the need to flee for the hills after hearing how high my expectations were.”

Nicholas sat quietly for a moment as he allowed his friend to rant. “If I may offer you one piece of advice, Evan, before you start your marriage?” he spoke once Evan had finished.

“Go ahead then,” Evan grumbled and fell back in his chair like a child that had been told they were not allowed to have any ice cream before supper.

He just knew that Nicholas was about to give him a lecture on the merits of marital bliss and how Marie was a genius when it came to finding a match — none of which he was interested in hearing at present. Not after the fiasco that was the meeting with his bride-to-be.

Even the thought of Margaret made his blood boil and his breath hitch. What was the woman doing to him even before marriage?

“While I concede that the situation you are facing is unfortunate, you will still have to make the best of a bad

situation.” Nicholas intertwined his fingers on the table in front of him. “Meaning, let go of the notion that the perfect woman exists because the perfect woman for you may just be someone who is very... imperfect.”

Evan clenched his jaw while Nicholas spoke. His mother had been so consumed by the trouble in her marriage to his father that she hadn't paid much attention to her duties as a viscountess. Evan had sworn long ago that any woman he married would be nothing less than perfect when it came to her duties. While he was willing to concede that a love match was more than likely beyond his reach, he would not settle for anything less than perfection when it came to the title.

“Take this tea here for instance.” Nicholas gestured to the table where their glasses of whisky would usually be served. “I don't have the slightest inclination to drink tea after a round of archery, but Emma brings so much joy and love to my life that I am willing to make sacrifices for her — accepting even the parts of her that have me drinking tea in the middle of a hot day.”

“The difference is that you love Emma,” Evan retorted. “My marriage will be one of convenience. There will be no need for us to get in each other's space or force our habits on one another.” He thought of the discussion they had had in Marie Webster's office. He would simply go about his life, and she would go about hers; they would be married in name alone.

Maybe visiting her a night or two wouldn't be too awful.

Evan scolded himself mentally for such thoughts. There would be no marital relations between him and Margaret, no matter how much his body seemed to yearn for it. It would simply make things too complicated.

“Even so,” Nicholas added, “you are a fool if you think that compromises will not have to be made. She is helping you by agreeing to an arranged marriage; you will need to compromise on many things once she is under your roof.”

“The marriage will benefit her as well as myself.” He became increasingly irritable with the level way his friend was attempting to persuade him that more complications would arise that would need to be addressed. Was it not enough for everyone that he was already compromising his dream of marrying for love?

“That may be,” Nicholas raised his hands in surrender. “All I was trying to do is give you advice on how to have a peaceful marriage if not a loving one. What you do with that advice is entirely up to you.”

“I will think about your advice,” Evan said in an attempt to stop the conversation. “One of the reasons I came here today was to ask if you and Emma would be present at the wedding in a few days’ time as witnesses. We won’t make a grand affair of things, just a simple ceremony in the church.”

“I would be honored to be present,” the Duke accepted his request.

“Thank you.” He felt a wave of relief that someone he trusted was on his side, even if they didn’t see eye to eye on the matter.

“The last thing I will say is this,” Nicholas added, “I fully respect your views and beliefs. I just think that you shouldn’t give up on the notion of love with...” he paused when he realized that Evan hadn’t mentioned her name.

“Margaret Benett,” Evan filled him in. “She is the daughter of a Baron. I haven’t managed to find out anything about her family; it seems they have kept well out of the way of the ton for the past few years.”

“My kind of people,” Nicholas mumbled under his breath before continuing. “My point was that there is still every chance that your match with Margaret Benett could turn out to be one of love. I certainly wasn’t expecting to fall in love with Emma in the way that I did and still do,” he said with a glint in his eyes. “Marie Webster may be a bit of a bully, but there is a method to her madness.”

“Tell me about it,” Evan grumbled.

Evan's mind wandered to his future bride as he thought of his friend's advice. He highly doubted that he'd fall in love with the feisty albeit beautiful young woman, but he'd give the marriage his full attention, becoming the model husband that society expected him to be.

There was just one detail he needed to take care of before they tied the knot.

CHAPTER 6



Light shone through the colorful glass-stained windows of the chapel as Margaret stood in front of the altar with a small bouquet of white lilies in her hands. She'd chosen a simple dress of cream silk that lacked the usual pomp and embroidery that many brides of the ton preferred. Evan had sent her to the dressmaker with instructions to choose whatever she liked, something she hoped would bode well for the rest of their marriage.

She felt more comfortable not being the center of attention. Her hair was pulled back into a tight bun with a few loose strands left to frame her face. The only guests who had been asked to act as witnesses were her two sisters and a couple that Margaret recognized as the Duke and Duchess of Saint Clair. They must have been friends of Evan's.

The coincidence felt strange considering the fact that Emma's story was the one that had enticed her into the matchmaker's office to begin with.

“Do you promise to love, honor, and cherish this man all the days of your life?” The priest’s voice suddenly drew her attention back to the ceremony at hand. “Miss Benett?” the kind old man in his white robes asked her again with concern in his voice.

“I do.” She looked Evan in the eyes with a forced smile.

The way he was looking at her made her stomach flutter with a strange sensation of nervousness. His neat black tails made his bright blue eyes stand out against his handsome features. Yet it was the strange look in his eyes that had her wondering what was going through his mind. It was almost as if he was just as nervous as she was with an added hint of something extra.

Desire, perhaps?

The thought made her heart thump in her chest like a drum. She certainly found him desirable — there was no denying that — but she would not think further on that.

“And do you, Evan Sutherland, take this woman to be your lawfully wedded wife? In sickness and in health until death do you part?” The priest’s voice broke through her train of thought once again as she realized that she’d missed half of what he was saying.

Her heart began to race even faster when Evan hesitated for a moment, searching her face as if he were making his final decision.

“I do.”

Margaret quietly let out a breath of relief when he gave his answer.

“And do you either of you know of any reason, lawful or otherwise, as to why you should not be joined in holy matrimony?”

A tense silence filled the chapel as everyone waited for the bride and groom to give their answer.

“We do not,” they said in unison as the atmosphere relaxed once again.

“Then my dearly beloved...” The priest beamed down at them both. “I now pronounce you husband and wife. You may kiss your bride.” He stepped aside, giving them space to seal their union.

Margaret could feel the beat of her heart in her throat as she looked at Evan with a wide-eyed expression of nervousness mingled with anticipation as he slowly lifted her veil and leaned in.

The intoxicating scent of his skin filled her senses as she took a deep breath, holding it there for a few seconds as he brought his lips closer. Anticipating what his lips would feel like against hers, Margaret allowed her eyes to flutter closed just at the second as his lips brushed hers.

“I object!” The doors to the chapel suddenly burst open as William Bennett came stumbling into the aisle.

The witnesses turned in shock as they all gawked at the man in horror. His hair was completely disheveled along with his clothes as he drunkenly waved an empty bottle of liquor in the air.

“My daughter will not marry any sleaze without my approval!” His face turned purple as he yelled at the top of his lungs. “I do not give my permission!”

“Papa,” Margaret scolded sternly as she stepped forward, “this is not the time nor the place. We can talk about it later.” She balled her fists at her sides from anger but stood her ground and kept her cool.

“The time?” He looked at her as if she had just said something that was utterly absurd. “How do you expect me to wait for a better time when you’ve gone and arranged a marriage behind my back?” He slurred his words as he leaned on a pew for support. “The utter treachery... in my own house is

absolutely... unbelievable.” He hiccupped a few times as he spoke.

Margaret let out a breath as she stopped herself from flinging her bouquet of flowers through the air at his head. The absolute nerve of her father to barge in at her wedding and try to stop the proceedings!

“And what do we have here.” He swayed slightly as he spotted his two youngest daughters at the front of the chapel. “The treachery runs even deeper than I thought.”

Iris instantly slunk toward her sister under his gaze.

Margaret was about to come down the steps that led to the alter and defend her sister when Evan suddenly placed his hand on her arm, holding her back as he took a step forward.

“We haven’t met yet.” Evan stepped forward, approaching her father with a determined yet dark look on his face. Margaret felt relief coursing through her as she realized her husband was stepping in for her.

“No, we haven’t met yet,” William said almost angrily as it seemed as if he were trying to size the man up in his inebriated state. “And who’s fault is that? You were the one who went behind my back and se... seduced my daughter,” he hiccupped again.

“I can understand how all of this may come as a shock to you, My Lord,” Evan said respectfully as he continued to approach with firm steps and a confidence that Margaret admired. She was always afraid of her father when he was this drunk, but here was Evan, fearless and exuding such authority that even she felt the need to appease to his demands. Weird. “We can talk about this in the morning once you’ve had some rest.”

William stopped in the middle of the aisle when he suddenly realized that Evan was not going to let him pass. “Bah,” he grumbled and waved Evan away. “You can have the little minx; she has no dowry in any case.”

Her father’s words cut into her heart despite knowing that he wasn’t in his right mind.

“I thank you for your blessing, My Lord,” Evan said in a tone that dripped with danger, “but I think it is time that you left.”

Margaret felt a spark of desire for the man she had married. Never in her life had she ever had anyone defend her before, let alone place themselves between her and a threat. She suddenly started to see him in a completely different light that made him far more attractive than he had been before.

“Very well,” William slurred his words as he took a step back. “But my younger daughters are coming with me.” He held his hand out to Layla and Iris as he glared at them.

Her heart began to pound with fear again as Margaret readied herself to stop her sisters.

“I think your daughters would like to stay a while and enjoy their sister’s wedding,” Evan said more forcefully this time when it seemed as if William was about to get violent again.

“You think you are so high and mighty, don’t you?” the Baron spat bitterly. “Coming in here on your high horse and thinking you can just take control of my family.” He raised his voice again. “You don’t even have an inkling of how difficult it is to raise a family, Sir!” He poked Evan in the chest with a pudgy finger.

Evan moved faster than Margaret thought was possible as he gripped her father’s arm and spun him around, holding his arm behind his back and marching him toward the door.

“Just what the devil do you think you are doing?” William protested in his drunken slurry of words. “I’ll smack you upside the head faster than you can call for the royal guard to come to your aid!”

“I think we need to have a little chat outside, just the two of us,” Evan said before pushing William out the doors and around a corner.

“Margaret...” Iris started with tears in her eyes as she turned away from Layla.

“Please don’t worry,” Margaret assured soothingly as she came to hug her sisters. “Everything will work out just as it should; you will see,” she tried to convince herself along with her sisters.

“Is there anything we can do to help?” Margaret looked up as the Duchess came forward, speaking in a gentle voice.

The woman was shorter and chubbier than Margaret was with a bright smile and beautiful golden hair that complimented her rosy cheeks and large brown eyes. She gave off a gentle aura of sweetness that Margaret instantly found soothing.

“Thank you, Your Grace,” Margaret said kindly as she left her sisters to greet their guests.

“Please, call me Emma,” the woman replied with a kind smile. “I hope we will be great friends moving forward. Our husbands are inseparable after all.”

Margaret glanced past her shoulder to greet the man who gave her a curt nod.

“Now...” Emma drew her attention back to Margaret. “I understand that this must have been a very uncomfortable

situation for you. Is there anything at all that we can do to assist and make things better?" She smiled at Iris and Layla as well.

"That is very kind of you, but I don't think there is," Margaret responded just as the chapel doors opened again, revealing Evan on his own.

Looking him over with concern, Margaret noticed that it didn't seem as if a scuffle of any kind had ensued. His appearance was exactly as it had been before he had left.

"Everything is under control," he relayed to Margaret as he walked back up the aisle. "Your father has been placed inside a carriage and sent back home. My footman has been given strict instructions to ensure that he goes to bed after having something to eat."

A wave of gratefulness washed over her body as she made eye contact with Evan. "Thank you," she mouthed the words to him as the others began to chatter with relief.

"You're welcome," he mouthed back with a wink that melted her heart in a way that took her completely by surprise.

"I guess the two of you will be wanting to head back to your place now." Emma turned to Margaret and Evan after making

her introductions to Layla and Iris. “You will want to get settled in.”

“Please don’t send us back right now,” Iris murmured before Layla had a chance to shush her. “I don’t want to go back to the house without you when Papa is like that.” Her eyes filled with tears once again.

“I’m sure the girls could come back with us for a while,” Emma interrupted before Margaret could answer. She turned to her husband, who nodded with a kind smile. “If that’s all right with you, of course.” She looked at Margaret.

“I wouldn’t mind at all.” Margaret felt touched by the kind gesture of a woman she had only just met.

There were plenty of people that had known them for years that wouldn’t have shown them even a moment of kindness after the spectacle their father had just made.

“Would you girls like to come back to our house?” Emma turned to Layla and Iris with a bright smile. “There’s plenty to see in the gardens and stables; we could even take a walk in the orchards if you liked.” She looked from one to the other as the girls practically beamed with happiness.

“That would be wonderful,” Iris jumped excitedly.

“What she means to say,” Layla interrupted as she held her sister’s arm, “is that we would be honored, Your Grace.”

“It’s settled then,” Emma said happily, turning back to her husband as they began to make plans.

“You better be on your best behavior,” Margaret warned them both sternly when the Duke and Duchess were just out of earshot. Her sisters required a firm hand when it came to matters of social propriety, not that she hadn’t tried to instill a sense of good behavior in them. Their exuberant youth still shone through at the worst of times.

“We will.” Layla rolled her eyes, failing to hide the faint smile of excitement around her lips. It had been quite a few years since any of them had experienced anything other than the market and the confines of their own home.

“I want to let both of you know that things will change,” Evan suddenly spoke in a calmer voice as he addressed her sisters, a stony expression across his face. “I have taken a few steps and will be making sure to put a few more things in place that will ensure both your safety and your comfort.”

The girls seemed pleasantly surprised as they looked at one another and then at Margaret. Her heart suddenly began to beat a little faster again as she wondered what his motives were in marrying her.

What kind of man takes on a woman with no dowry and even offers to support her sisters?

In her mind, Evan was either a saint or someone she needed to be very careful around. His air of mystery only added to her questions.

“I’ll discuss the finer points with your sister.” He gave them each a dashing smile that made the pit of Margaret’s stomach flutter in a very strange way. “But for now, I think you should hurry along before your chaperones leave you behind.”

They both seemed startled to notice that Emma and Nicholas were already more than halfway to the door. The Duchess had looped her arm into her husband’s and was animatedly chattering in his ear as her bright green dress swayed at her hips.

“Hurry along,” Margaret laughed as she jerked her head toward the door, smiling at the way the Duke seemed to tolerate his wife’s chatter with a contented smile. She didn’t know them very well, but the Duke seemed like the kind of man who was cold to the rest of the world but would light a village on fire if anything happened to his wife. She hoped and prayed that Evan would be the same behind his cool and mysterious exterior.

“Thank you,” the girls said in unison before heading toward their chaperones, giggling to one another as they glanced back

at Evan.

“That was very kind of you.” Margaret turned to her husband. “I was very touched by the way you handled that situation.” She felt herself shying away from him again as yet another stony expression fell across his face.

Evan’s reaction took her by surprise as his eyes suddenly filled with passion. “Has your father ever hurt you or your sisters?” he asked almost angrily.

“No, I can’t say that he has,” she stammered, taken aback by his sudden line of questioning. “He only ever shouts. His bark is worse than his bite.” She took a deep breath and hoped he wouldn’t see the way she had flinched when he spoke. She had been worried that he would berate her for allowing her sisters around their father, but she was glad to see that he was protective rather than angry.

“Good,” he said as he raised his hand and stroked her cheek with the back of his knuckles. “I wasn’t comfortable sending your sisters back to his house if they were in danger, but if you say he never abuses them, there is no need for me to remove them, yet.”

Her breathing deepened as she watched the way he was willing to protect her sisters. The feeling of his knuckles against her skin was sending a strange feeling throughout her body.

“We can discuss the finer details of my plan in the carriage.” He lowered his hand with a strange look in his eyes. “There is a surprise waiting for you back home,” he said and turned to leave.

Margaret watched him go as she tried her best to steady the beating of her heart. His sudden change in behavior from being a grumpy and unapproachable bachelor to a kind and caring husband was leaving her feeling flustered and unsure of what to expect from their agreement.

The width of his broad shoulders disappeared into the light beyond the doors as Margaret hurried toward her husband and an unknown future.

CHAPTER 7



Evan examined his new bride's face as the carriage jolted into action. He'd been infuriated by the scene her father had made in the chapel. He understood now why she had asked him not to drink or gamble. Considering the fact that her father was a drunk, he didn't blame her for not wanting to live in a house where her husband drank in excessive amounts.

Her no-gambling request more than likely stemmed from the fact that her father gambled away any money they had. It made perfect sense that she was trying to ensure the well-being of her sisters. Evan admired her for that.

"I meant what I said in the chapel." He was first to break the awkward silence between them.

"I would have hoped you did." She turned her head to look at him with one eyebrow raised. "Marriage vows are not to be taken lightly."

"Not that." He fought the smile that threatened his lips once again. "I did mean those as well, but I meant the promise I

made to your sisters — I will ensure they are looked after in a bigger way from now on. I didn't know the situation with your father otherwise I would have taken a more proactive approach to making arrangements for them.”

A stony expression suddenly fell over Margaret's face as she looked at her lap.

Evan was worried that he had started their marriage by offending her, but his fears were laid to rest.

“What exactly did you have in mind?” She fidgeted for a moment or two with her dress before looking up with a vulnerable look in her eyes.

“Well...” He shifted his position on the seat. “The tutor I hired is well known to my family; she is a very stern woman that will ensure your sisters get a proper education. In addition to that, I will be hiring a butler to see to the running of the house as well as the footmen and the maids you requested. I would like a man I can trust to see to things in your absence.”

She sat stunned for a moment or two as she listened to him speak.

“Rest assured that there will be enough food for them to eat as well as a few luxuries to ensure their smooth re-entry into society,” he finished explaining.

“Why are you doing all of this?” she asked quietly as if she were in shock. “I only asked for a little, and you are doing far more than I expected.”

Looking out the window, Evan took a moment to gather his thoughts. The confines of the carriage were making it difficult for him to ignore just how attractive his new wife was. The dress she had chosen accentuated her figure in all of the right places, showing off her voluptuous and petite figure. His mind wandered to the mansion and what kind of arrangement they would have regarding their bedrooms. He had done the honorable thing and given her a room of her own, but part of him wanted to change that now that he had seen her in her dress.

“I want to start our marriage off on the right foot,” he said after a moment’s hesitation as he tried to steer his thoughts away from the desire he felt for her. The Duke’s talk had given him food for thought after their last meeting. “Just because we have a marriage of convenience does not mean that I am going to neglect your care and by extension, the care of your family.”

“Thank you,” was all she could say, using her gloved hand to move a strand of hair away from her neck. The sensual curve of her shoulder that was visible above her dress made him shift in his seat in an attempt to hide his desire.

“I want you to be able to ask me for anything in our marriage,” he followed up when he saw how touched she had been by his

gesture. “Anything at all that will ensure your comfort and happiness.”

“Never lie to me,” she requested as the horses and carriage came to a stop in front of his mansion that was just a stone’s throw away from London. Her eyes were serious as she held his gaze.

Her words felt odd to him as he watched the way she looked out the window with a far-off expression. Although she had not mentioned it as one of her requirements upon their meeting, lying was clearly something that she took very seriously.

There wasn’t any time to dwell on her words as a footman came forward and opened their carriage door.

“Good day, My Lord.” The young man with ginger hair and a livery bowed. “And My Lady, welcome to your new home.”

Margaret’s mouth nearly fell open from shock as she stepped from the carriage and looked at the home they would be sharing.

Evan had gotten used to the grandiose building with its high buttresses and towers. Even the marble steps that led up to the giant doors that were large enough to grant an elephant easy passage had become as normal to him as the sky is blue. He

took a moment to examine the lavish building with its grey stone carpentry and elegant craftsmanship. He supposed that it was rather jaw dropping to anyone that wasn't used to living in one of the largest estates in London.

Glancing at her face, he realized just how lavishly his footmen were dressed in their bright blue blazers and polished black shoes with perfectly white breeches.

“How many rooms are there?” She looked at him in astonishment as if she could not believe her eyes.

“I'm not sure actually,” Evan replied with a frown. “I've never counted. Less than thirty, I think.”

“Less than thirty?” She almost choked on the words.

“Judging by the number of windows,” he explained as he looked back at the home he had grown up in but never bothered to fully explore. “And excluding the rooms that I use on a daily basis...” He paused to do the calculations in his head. “Yes, less than thirty — twenty-seven if I had to wager a guess.”

“My goodness.” Her eyes were wide as she shook her head.

“Don't worry; you will have plenty of maids and other staff members to help you keep things running smoothly.”

“I should very well hope so!” she said incredulously. “You have another thing coming if you think I’m going to clean less than thirty rooms on my own!” she finished as she walked toward the house, leaving him to wonder what she had meant.

Her statement left him with a frown as he wondered what she had done in her father’s house.

Had she acted as a maid as well as a cook and a mother to her sisters?

Evan wasn’t left with much time to think as a slew of carriages came down the lane. Hurrying to keep up with her, he hastened to reach her side.

“Were you expecting any guests?” She looked at him with a frown, her foot freezing on the bottom step as she glanced at the string of carriages and horses.

“No,” he said brightly. “My gift to you on our wedding day is that I have had your things brought over so that you may settle in as soon as possible. I want you to be comfortable here,” he concluded triumphantly as she gaped at the footmen who came forward to retrieve her things.

“We were supposed to get my things within a week,” she replied softly while still eyeing the carriages.

“Surprise,” he said with a smug grin of satisfaction.

I don't know what Nicholas was on about; keeping a woman happy is a piece of cake.

“But how would you know what to bring?” She seemed slightly concerned.

“I sent my footmen with strict instructions to ask your sisters’ advice. They were singlehandedly responsible for ensuring that all of your belongings are here.”

“Does that mean...?” Her face suddenly filled with excitement as her words trailed off.

“Mean what?” he asked with a frown.

Their conversation was suddenly cut short as a commotion broke out in one of the carriages.

“What the devil?” Evan said as he took a step forward.

The door to the carriage suddenly burst open as a slew of animals came charging toward them with a startled footman in tow.

“My babies!” Margaret yelled joyfully as she opened her arms and sat on the steps.

Evan felt utterly confused by the entire situation as an overly large English bulldog thundered straight into his wife’s arms like a rhino that had been loosed from a cage. The brown and white blotchy fur that seemed to fall off in droves and cling to her dress was the least of his concerns. Strings of drool flowed from the animal’s droopy lips like a salivating old man, making him cringe inwardly as the dog licked Margaret’s hand.

“Did you miss me, my angels?” Margaret spoke in a smaller voice as she cooed over the dog and three cats that licked her face, complaining as if they had missed her more than she had missed them.

“I’m sorry, Me Lord,” the footman huffed as he came to a stop just in front of the steps. His face was red and sweaty as he bent over double, trying his best to catch his breath.

“What exactly is going on here?” Evan asked sharply as he turned back to Margaret, irate with the idea of having an entire zoo come from one of his carriages.

“These are my pets, of course,” Margaret said happily as she stroked one of the cats on her lap. “I was going to bring them over one at a time and acclimate them, but you beat me to it I

guess.” She laughed happily as the dog grunted with effort, rolling over onto his back so that Margaret could rub his chest.

“Oh God.” The blood suddenly drained from Evan’s face as he realized what she had meant when she had said that she hoped he didn’t mind a little animal fur on his clothes. Her animals more than likely slept in the house if not in her room.

“Stop it,” he suddenly said as a ginger cat with a white chest rubbed up against his leg. “Shoo.” He tried to nudge the animal away with his boot. “How do I get it to stop?” He looked back to Margaret.

Margaret looked up from what she was doing and laughed. “That’s Butter; she likes you.”

“Well, I don’t like her very much; call her off,” he grumbled as tufts of white and ginger fur stuck to the leg of his pants.

“I’m afraid I can’t do that,” she said apologetically. “Once Butter likes you, there is no stopping her. She will pet you until she’s satisfied,” she explained with a shrug.

“Pet me?” Evan stopped trying to keep his distance from the cat and looked at Margaret with his head cocked to the side.

“Oh, cats are very different from dogs,” she said knowledgeably.

“I know they are different animals,” he replied almost angrily. “What I meant is why did you say that he, she... it is petting me!” He sought for the right term to use.

Margaret laughed at the way he was struggling with the cat as she stood. “Dogs will allow you to pet them, but cats will only be pet under their own terms. Hence, I always say that they are petting you, and Butter is a she. All my cats are girls, and Ham is a boy.”

“Ham?” Evan felt exasperated as he tried his best to take in all that she was saying.

“Yes,” she pointed to each animal in turn. “Ham, Cheese, Vinnie, and Butter,” she took a deep breath. “Ham is my dog, I got him as a puppy along with Cheese, the tabby with the stripes...” She pointed to a grey cat that was striped like a tiger. “I found Cheese the day after I rescued Ham.” She smiled fondly at the cat as she watched the scene unfold.

The footman who had attempted to catch the animals gave up in his pursuit to catch the tabby as she slipped his grip and hid behind one of the large pillars that stood beside the steps. He looked to Evan for help but quickly gave up when Evan waved him away with a flick of his hand. Evan felt himself shying away from the animals that were very ineptly named after foods that he was sure he would be avoiding in the future. He wasn't about to chase a cat, not when he was outnumbered by the mangy beasts.

“You’ve already met Butter.” She smiled fondly at the ginger cat who was still wrapping herself around his legs and purring. “Her name is short for butterscotch, and finally there is Vinnie. My princess, her name is short for Venison, owing to the fact that she was found abandoned in the alley outside a butcher’s shop.”

The fluffy white cat with bright green eyes glared at him as it jumped onto the stairs and made itself comfortable as if to say, *What are you going to do about it, chump?*

Vinnie sauntered over to the footman, who seemed to be just as uncomfortable as Evan was. and swatted his shoe before meowing up at him with an annoying high-pitched yell.

“Fine,” Evan gave up with a sigh, relenting to the situation at hand. “As long as I don’t have to deal with them all of the time.”

“They won’t get in the way, will you?” She bent down and scratched the top of Ham’s head as a string of drool dripped from his lips. “Will you, my precious angels? Come, let’s go and explore our new home,” she said and gestured for them to follow before Evan could protest.

“No, no!” He sprinted up the stairs behind Margaret and her horde of creatures. “I will ask one of the footmen to make

them comfortable in the stables; they will be quite comfortable and safe out there.”

“Nonsense,” Margaret turned back to him with a frown once they were inside the house. “My animals have never slept outside, and I’m not about to kick them out just because you don’t have a heart,” she snapped at him.

“I have a heart!” he retorted angrily. “It’s just that my heart is for humans only! Not these smelly flea-infested animals you call your pets!” He grumbled at her. “Stop that!” he yelled at the dog as he suddenly flopped over on the bright red Persian rug that had been in Evan’s family since before he was born.

The dog ignored him completely and happily slobbered over the fibers.

“In the carriage you said that you wanted me to be happy.” Margaret narrowed her eyes at him. “This is what makes me happy, and my animals are not flea infested. They probably bathe more than most people of the ton,” she stated defensively.

Their angry outburst was suddenly interrupted as the footman who had come running from the carriage suddenly dove for a vase, catching it just in time before it hit the floor and shattered.

Evan looked up to see that Vinnie had climbed onto the hall table and was now sitting comfortably where the vase had been, quietly flicking her tail back and forth as she cleaned her paw.

“Do these animals really need to be inside the house?” he demanded angrily as he turned to her and glared. “Surely there are more comfortable lodgings for them on the estate.”

“They just need to get used to their new environment,” Margaret said adamantly, her cheeks flushing with indignation. “I promise to keep a closer eye on them.” She seemed agitated at the way he was glaring at her. “Unless you would like me to live in the barn with them because I will!” Her face suddenly became irate.

“No one will be living in the barn,” he said tiredly as he looked down at the ginger cat who was once again harassing his legs. “Just try to keep them from breaking things.” He turned to the footman who was holding the vase. “Go and get a few of the others to help you. Put away any heirlooms or things that cost more than you make in a week. The house will have to become a pet-friendly zone until they have been properly trained,” he grumbled as a headache began to spread over his temple. “I will be in my study; send one of the maids to help Lady Northfork settle into her room,” he said as he walked away from the chaos.

CHAPTER 8



*N*ursing the headache that shot through his temple like a knife that had been heated over the coals, Evan made his way up the staircase and turned down the hall that would lead to his study. He needed some time to think and just relax after everything he'd just seen and experienced.

He should have known that something was afoot when Marie Webster had asked him whether or not he was allergic to animals. Even then, he would have been fine with her having a small dog. Most of the ladies of the ton had poodles or those annoying little brown dogs with floppy ears that japed too much. Someone had referred to them as Spaniels once at a ball.

The slobbering bulldog was the last animal he had expected a lady to own. Heaving a sigh, he pushed the thoughts from his mind and entered his study. He'd have to learn how to live with the beasts if it meant that she'd be happy.

“What are you doing in here?” He stopped with his hand on the knob as he glared at the woman sitting on his desk with her

dress pulled up at the side, revealing her leg.

The day was only proving to worsen as he swallowed his anger. He'd taken steps to prevent anything from going wrong, steps that seem to have failed in a very annoying manner.

“Oh no, Evan,” she purred with a disappointed frown, “that’s no way to greet your favorite woman, now, is it?” She gave him a seductive grin as she gently swung her leg back and forth. “I’ve been waiting for you in here, and this is the welcome I receive. Poor form.” She winked and allowed the strap of her dress to fall down her shoulder before pulling it back up.

Evan looked her over with his jaw clenched. She was wearing a tight-fitting black dress that accentuated her hourglass figure and overly voluptuous hips. She was shorter than most women but made up for it with her curvier legs and buxom personality. Her bright blue eyes shone with mischief, and her full lips were painted red while her blonde hair hung in ringlets about her face.

“I sent you a letter explaining the situation,” Evan said once he stopped seething with rage and stepped into the room, shutting the door behind him. “You have no business being here. I made my stance clear.”

“Oh!” Her eyes widened in shock, an act that Evan didn’t buy for even a second. “Was that letter from you? I did receive a

letter,” she purred as she slipped from the table, biting on her lip as she swung her arms. “I just didn’t think it was from you; you’ve never spoken to me like that in the past.” Her voice was sharp with accusation as she sauntered toward him. “So, it’s true then? You’ve thrown me away for a little piece that’s supposed to keep you happy?”

“Stop it.” Evan gritted his teeth as she brought her cherry-red lips closer to his neck while standing on her toes. “How did you even get in here?” he asked as he held her at arm’s length, pushing her back despite her efforts to get closer.

“Dearest...” She faked confusion once again. “The servants know to let me in; they’ve done it for years. Why would they show me away all of a sudden?” Her smile broadened as he realized that he’d forgotten to instruct the staff — a fact that she clearly knew and relished.

“I don’t have time for this, Eloise,” he snapped and moved her out of the way before stomping over to his desk. “I have enough problems without you making things worse. You knew very well from the start that things could not go on forever; our relationship was one of mutual convenience. Nothing more.”

“And your sudden dismissal of me is not convenient for me,” she said darkly as she turned to look at him. “You’ve stopped paying for my lodgings and answering when I send for you. You haven’t even been to one of my performances in the last week.” She sauntered back over to the desk and placed her

hands on the surface, leaning forward until her breasts were nearly exposed.

Evan averted his eyes and fought the urge to call for the butler. Making a scene would only draw unwanted attention to the situation at hand, something that he wanted to avoid at all costs while Margaret was in the house. Her words from the carriage suddenly came to mind as he glanced back at the woman that was trying to lead him astray.

Don't ever lie to me...

Her voice echoed in his mind, accompanied by the serious look in her eyes. That look that spoke of past hurts where lying was concerned. He hadn't lied to her about his former mistress; he'd merely abstained from telling her. He saw no need in dredging up the past when he never intended to see his mistress again after he was married.

“What am I supposed to do now, Evan?” Eloise's voice broke through his thoughts like a serpent slithering into a house.

He'd seen her work her charms on men before — hell, he'd even fallen for them in the past — but there was something very off-putting about her now that he'd seen how Margaret was willing to sacrifice her own chances of a love-filled marriage just for her sisters.

Eloise was one of the most selfish and self-centered women on the face of the earth, a fact that hadn't bothered him until now.

Why am I comparing her to Margaret? We haven't even known each other for a week.

“What all Opera singers do I presume,” he snapped back as he sank into his chair, tired from the long day of conflicting emotions. “Go and find a new conquest; London is full of eager young men with shiny new inheritances burning a hole in their pockets.” He shut his eyes and massaged his temples before mumbling under his breath. “Lord knows it's how I found you.”

“This woman has changed you,” Eloise said bitterly as she straightened her spine.

“Perhaps I saw the light before I even met her.” He opened his eyes to glare at her. “Did I not hear from several men at Whites that I was not your only source of income and protection?”

“So that is what this is all about?” She lowered her voice to a sultry purr once again. “You got jealous of little old me receiving attention from other men.” She licked over her teeth and lips with the tip of her tongue before leaning on the desk in the same seductive manner as before.

“I don’t have time for this, Eloise,” he said tiredly, trying his best to keep his anger in check. “I am not now, nor have I ever been, jealous of the attentions you receive; you were nothing more than a distraction for me. I was clear from the start that you and I would not continue once I found a wife.” He looked her in the eyes to make his point.

“You were clear,” she said in her normal voice that was more palatable to Evan than the sultry purr she used on men. “I just didn’t think it would happen this quickly. You never even mentioned to me that you had met anyone. You could have at least given me fair warning before throwing me into the cold.” She thrust her arm in the air to mimic the way she had been treated.

“I do not have to explain my life to common Opera singers, let alone ask their permission.” He glowered at her with his hands folded in his lap before reaching for the space on the desk where his whisky decanters were usually kept. His hand froze in mid-air as he suddenly remembered the promise he had made to Margaret.

In an attempt to honor her wishes, Evan had instructed the butler to remove all of the liquor from the rooms and place the bottles in the cellar. They were only to be brought out when company was expected.

“Don’t bother,” Eloise said in a bored voice as she watched his hand hovering. “I wanted to have a drink while I was waiting,

but it seems as if your butler has dropped the ball. There isn't a drop of liquor to be seen for miles around."

Evan closed his fingers and retracted his hand under the watchful gaze of his former mistress.

"Is there something you'd like to tell me?" She propped her hip up on his desk and smiled at him with her arms folded over her chest. "Has the new Lady Sutherland placed restrictions on you already?" She laughed in a manner that grated on his ears before making her way around the desk. "I can't believe you have gone that soft already."

His body tensed again as she drew closer; the woman was harder to shake than a cold in the middle of winter. He'd been warned once by a man at Whites that Eloise was not a woman to be trifled with; her scorn was worse than the sting of a scorpion.

"You know, Evan, you might very well need a respite from your new life." She brought her lips closer and whispered in his ear as he shut his eyes, "It would be in your best interest to keep me around; I will always keep a bottle of whisky or two, just... for... you..." She made sure to slow down the words before kissing the tip of his ear.

Rage suddenly built in his chest as Evan saw red, jumping up in his chair. "Get out," he hissed at her. "I never want to see you again. And make sure you sneak out the back without my

wife seeing your face. The consequences will be very dire for you if you make a scene...” He meant every word as he searched her face. He would have done the honors of throwing her out himself if hadn’t been too risky.

“You can’t just throw me out,” she said indignantly with a dark scowl. “Do you think yourself better than me just because you’ve gotten me at a disadvantage? My bed has been more than good enough for you in the past.”

“Be careful how you speak to me, Eloise Button.” Evan narrowed his eyes as he confronted her with his finger raised to her face. “I have already withdrawn the funding for your room, but I’m still the one that put in a good word for you at the Opera house.” He reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out a purse full of coins, placing it in her hand.

Eloise looked back down at the purse before looking at him in disgust once again. She’d always batted her eyelids at him in the past, something that had attracted him to her at first, but he could see now that her true colors were less than rosy.

“There is more than enough money here for you to live comfortably for a while, granted you use it wisely. Now leave and never show your face in here ever again,” he repeated his threat from earlier. “I want to place you and everything you represented behind me where you belong.”

“Very well.” Eloise weighed the purse in her hand, tossing it in the air a few times before catching it again. Her long nails hooked on the strings as she closed her talons around her prize. “I shall leave...” She gave him a look that conveyed the fact that the conversation was far from over. “For now.”

Evan watched her saunter from the room before sinking into his chair once again and rubbing his face in the palms of his hand. The door slammed loudly in her wake, making him regret the day he’d laid eyes on her. He wished with all his might that he’d never met the blasted woman, but young men were foolish, especially when they came into money and a title.

He’d always known that he’d marry for love, but the promiscuity and wiles of his youth had led him to scratch an itch that should have been ignored.

His mind wandered to Margaret and what she would say if she found out that one of the most notorious Opera singers in London had been his mistress. He wanted to keep her happy as his wife, even if their union was based on a mutual agreement rather than love. Yet there had been that moment in the chapel where he had wanted to kiss her.

Shutting his eyes, he conjured up the image of her lips and how alluring they had been; he’d wanted to kiss her more than he’d wanted to kiss any other woman before in his life. The scent of her perfume in the air brought him back to the

moment. It was strange how he could recall the smell even though it had long since dissipated.

“What is it?” he asked angrily as a knock sounded at the door. He wasn’t in the mood to deal with any more interruptions for the evening.

Growing annoyed at the silence that ensued, he stood before walking over to the door and yanking on the handle.

CHAPTER 9



Margaret took a step back as she noticed the angry look on Evan's face. She'd come to his study in the hopes that he would show her around the house rather than one of the maids. She'd noticed the woman hurrying from the hall on her way up the stairs.

It had more than likely been a disgruntled maid who had been dismissed or an angry tenant that wanted Evan to lower the rent. The angry look on his face confirmed the fact that his meeting had not gone well, whomever the woman had been.

"Oh," he said more gently as he looked at her. "I didn't realize it was you. I apologize for my abruptness." He glanced down at the cat in her arms with a small amount of disdain.

It always took people time to warm up to Vinnie; she was Margaret's most ornery cat. It was this trait in particular that reminded Margaret of Evan.

"I'm sorry to disturb you," she cleared her throat. "I hope you weren't in a meeting."

Evan looked over her shoulder and down the hall with a worried expression that she chalked up to the fact that he was more than likely worried that the woman was still prowling around, ready to give him another piece of her mind.

“I just meant that I don’t want to disturb you.” She clutched her cat a little tighter in self-defense. Holding one of her animals had always been a way for her to feel safe.

“I didn’t mean to snap,” Evan apologised as he let out a breath. “It’s been a long day. Was there something you needed?”

“We...” she suddenly changed her wording as she noticed the way he narrowed his eyes. It would take a long time for Evan to warm up to the way she spoke to her pets. “I mean I was hoping that you would give me a tour of the house,” she requested hopefully.

“Did the footmen not send the housekeeper or one of the maids up to your room?” he asked with a frown.

“They did,” she added quickly, not wanting to get anyone into trouble. “I said that I would be asking you to give me a tour.” She left out the fact that she didn’t feel safe or comfortable meeting strangers without having at least one person she knew at her side. “I thought it would be a great way for us to bond as husband and wife on our first day together.”

“What did you need me to show you?” He shook his head in exasperation, causing her irritation to rise as well. He was treating her as if she were in his way when he was the one that had brought her here.

“I don’t know; perhaps you could introduce me to some of the servants, show me the rooms, or perhaps the cellars, so I could make myself scarce whenever you are around.”

“What?” he sounded even more exasperated.

“It seems like showing me around the mansion I am to call my home is too much for you; I wouldn’t want to be in your way.”

Evan lowered his head into his hand as he shook his head.

Margaret swore that she could see the faintest of smiles around his lips as he cleared his throat.

“Very well,” he conceded with a slightly less pained look on his face as he raised his head. “But does that creature have to come with us?” He glowered at the cat. “I can’t stand the way it stares at me.”

“She,” Margaret corrected him. “And Vinnie does not have to come. Off you pop little one,” she said lovingly as she lowered

the cat to the ground.

They both watched her saunter away down the hall with her little hips swaying as she walked.

“You know it’s the strangest thing...” Margaret broke the silence.

“What is?” Evan asked as they turned to walk down the hall.

“Vinnie hardly ever purrs when strangers are around, but she purrs up a storm when I’m with you.” She pondered on the matter as they made their way over the gallery and down the stairs. “She can’t stand my father; she hisses whenever he comes near.”

“I don’t blame her for that,” Evan agreed to her great surprise. “I’d hiss too if I had to live with him.”

Margaret laughed before continuing. “She barely tolerates my sisters, but with you around, she seems happy and content. I felt it on the steps earlier and even now when you opened the door.”

“Animals are strange,” he said gruffly and waved the conversation away. “I think I will take you to meet the butler first — he’s a crotchety old man with high morals, but he’s

harmless really. You will get used to his way of doing things in time.”

“Just like his employer,” Margaret mumbled under her breath as they entered a large room with elegant furnishings.

“What was that?” Evan shot her a dirty look.

“Nothing,” she said quickly in order to keep the peace. “I was just remarking on the beauty of this room.”

Evan gave her a look as if to say that he didn’t believe her but pushed the matter aside when a grumpy-looking old man with an enormous perturbing belly came into the room.

“Ah, Edwards,” Evan said gratefully as he spotted the man. “Just the person I was looking for.”

Taking her time to look around the room, Margaret noticed the elegant floral furnishings and fine wooden craftsmanship of the tables and chairs. It was very obviously a day room; she wondered how many guests had been received for tea in the past, and just how many disgruntled maids dropped a few sandwiches when no one was looking.

“I’m glad you are here, My Lord.” The man’s mustache bristled beneath his nose as his upper lip quivered. His overly large belly bounced as he spoke, giving the distinct impression

that he was carrying a ball of sorts beneath his shirt. “I think there has been an error.”

“What kind of error?” Evan asked with a frown.

“A gaggle of creatures have been released in the mansion, and the staff are trying to say that you have given orders for them to run free,” he spoke with indignation as if a more ludicrous thing could not have been said. “I knew at once that I had to come and find you, My Lord; we must rectify this problem immediately.” He thrust his nose in the air quite pompously as he finished his complaint.

“The members of staff are telling the truth,” Evan said begrudgingly before shaking his head. “The animals in question belong to the new Viscountess.”

“What?” The man seemed taken aback as his beady eyes shot open, surveying Margaret for the very first time. “I beg your pardon, My Lady; I did not mean to be rude.” He bowed humbly with great effort as he struggled to come back up. “I would not have mentioned anything about the animals if I had been told that they were yours, naturally.”

“None of us knew that they would be coming, Edwards; there are quite a few things we will all need to adjust to.”

“Naturally, My Lord.” The man placed his hands behind his back and stood to attention. “I will ensure that the maids and footmen act accordingly.”

“Thank you for your efforts, Edwards,” Margaret spoke up in an attempt to defuse the bad impression that the man undoubtedly had of her at present. “I have heard that no one can run this house as well as you do. I’m hoping to make great use of your knowledge in running this house as efficiently as I can.” She smiled at him.

The butler’s chest puffed out in pride as he accepted her praise with the flattery with which it was intended. “It would be an honor to guide you as you learn the ways of the house, My Lady.”

“That’s a relief to hear,” she said. “I don’t think I can run such a large house on my own. And I do hope that my animals won’t be too much of a bother for you.”

“We will all do our best to ensure that they are taken care of properly, My Lady. I am a cat man myself,” he suddenly changed his tune.

Evan gave her a strange look that held confusion mingled with surprise and awe.

“I knew I could count on you.” Margaret ignored Evan’s glances as she addressed the butler once again. “I will give you a little tip that will help you win the animals over before anyone else.”

Edwards leaned on closer with an excited glint in his eyes, overly eager to impress the new lady of the house.

“Carry a few pieces of cheese around in your pocket,” she whispered theatrically. “They will obey your every command if there is cheese in it for them.”

“Thank you, My Lady,” Edwards said with an unnecessary amount of awe and gratitude. “I shall cherish this sacred information and use it wisely.” He thrust his chest out once again with pride.

Evan rolled his eyes and shook his head with a pained expression that Margaret could see from the corner of her eye. Her stomach fluttered as she noticed just how handsome his profile was. “Thank you, Edwards,” he ended the conversation, clearly annoyed that Margaret had won the man over as quickly as she had.

“It is only a pleasure, My Lord. Supper will be served shortly,” Edwards added at the end.

“We will retire to our rooms until the gong in that case,” Evan finished as the man bowed and excused himself.

“You were saying something about how difficult the man was to handle?” she asked Evan with a smirk, trying to keep herself from thinking of the desire she felt toward the difficult and mysterious man she had married.

“Don’t get too cocky,” he warned her as he turned to leave, glancing at her lips before tearing his eyes away from her face. “You may have won him over with your trickery for now, but Edwards will not thank you if one of your beasts urinates on any furniture.”

“My animals are house-trained, thank you very much,” she snapped back as she hurried to keep up.

“I would believe you, but you also believe that they can understand you when you speak to them as if they were human children,” he shot back as they made their way up the stairs.

“Don’t you think animals can understand us?” Her irritation flared once again as he tested her. Her mind tried to focus on the conversation at hand as her thoughts jumped between irritation and desire. Evan’s shoulders were broad and muscular, visible even through the fabric of his shirt.

“No, I don’t think cats and dogs can speak English,” he said as a matter of fact, snapping her out of the admiration she had been feeling toward him.

“So only birds and deer then?” she said with a heavy note of sarcasm, trying to catch up to him so that she could see his face.

“Obviously not,” Evan barked over his shoulder as he walked ahead but not before he had glanced at her lips once again.

Why does he keep doing that?

She felt her pulse quickening as she wondered what he was thinking. “For the record, I don’t think that animals can understand conversation and language as you and I do,” she explained as she lifted the hem of her dress in an attempt to keep up with him. The main staircase of the mansion was far steeper than the one she was used to back at her father’s house.

“That’s a relief at least,” he matched her tone of sarcasm, a trait they both seemed to excel in as the heat between them grew.

“I do, however, think they can understand our feelings and behavior toward them,” she added and bit her lip, knowing full well that it would only fuel their argument.

“That’s even worse.” Evan stopped and gave her an incredulous look before allowing his eyes to fall to her lips for the third time. Margaret’s outlandish thinking when it came to animals was something that he couldn’t wrap his mind around, even if he tried.

“How is that worse?” She looked at him as if he were the one who had lost his mind. Their different opinions on animals were proving to be a stumbling block for both of them at present.

“It just is,” he replied as he placed his hand on a door and gently pushed it open. “Can we at least agree to let the matter rest once we are in our room?”

Margaret’s heart suddenly began to beat faster as she looked past his shoulder and into the room that was lavishly furnished. “This isn’t my room,” she said. “The servants showed me to an entirely different room earlier. I left most of my things in that room.”

A small amount of panic began to set in as she wondered what Evan expected of her regarding the marital duties between a husband and a wife. They had gotten so wrapped up in discussing the nitty-gritty of their arrangement that neither of them had bothered to broach the subject. Or at least she thought that they had forgotten to broach the subject; Evan could have had entirely different ideas for all she knew.

“You are correct, this is not your room. This is our room,” he said as he walked past the door and placed his hand on a second handle before pushing it open and stepping aside. “We have an adjoining door as is customary for a husband and wife.”

The door swung open to reveal a smaller dressing room with yet another door at the other end.

Relaxing a little, Margaret took a deep breath, a fact that did not go unnoticed by Evan as he kept his eyes on her face.

“You can rest assured, My Lady,” he said more formally, “you will not be forced to do anything that you do not desire. Our arrangement of being married in name alone still stands.” He placed his hands behind his back as he spoke. “My side of the door shall remain open, should you require assistance with anything at all. You are free to close and even lock your side as you see fit.”

Why am I slightly disappointed?

“Thank you,” she said almost sheepishly, feeling guilty for having accused him of wanting more without intending to. “I appreciate the gesture.”

“Now I think we should both get ready for supper,” he suggested gruffly and gestured toward her room.

Accepting the fact that she had been wrong, and not wanting to add any more fuel to the already awkward fire, Margaret made her way toward her door, placing her hand on the handle and giving the door a gentle push.

The wood remained firmly in place despite her efforts. "I think it's stuck," she observed after a few more attempts.

"I forgot that the door sometimes sticks," he said irritably as he came into the dressing room and gently nudged her aside. "You have to know how to handle it."

"Pun intended?" she asked in amusement.

"Not even slightly," he responded with no trace of amusement in his voice.

"I think you need to turn it a little harder," she added as he peered over his shoulder.

"I know what I'm doing," he shot back.

"Clearly not, or the door would have been open by now," she snapped back.

Leaving the handle, Evan suddenly took a step back. “You do it then if you are so handy.”

“I will,” she said stubbornly and pushed past him, failing after a few more attempts.

“You’re going to break the handle off if you carry on like that,” he huffed as he placed his hand over hers in an attempt to help.

“I’ve got it,” she said and turned to give him a piece of her mind.

The pair suddenly found themselves face to face with nowhere to turn as the atmosphere grew hotter. Margaret glanced down at his lips, and her breathing suddenly quickened. It was almost as if she couldn’t speak as she looked up into his eyes.

The heat from his breath sent a tingling sensation over her skin as she recalled the moment they had shared in the chapel right before her father had come barging in. She wanted him to kiss her just as much as she wanted to kiss him back and feel his body against hers.

She realized with sudden clarity that she desired the man she had married on a deeper level than just the convenience they had agreed to. It took everything inside of her not to tangle her fingers in his hair and draw him closer.

His hand suddenly came up, taking her by surprise as he gently placed it on her hip, warming her skin through the fabric of her dress.

Shutting his eyes this time as he leaned in closer, Evan opened his mouth slightly just as Margaret caught sight of something past his shoulder.

“Ham, no!” she shouted at the top of her lungs and thrust her arms into the air, but it was far too late for either of them to react.

The dog came barrelling into the tiny room as he launched himself at full speed against Evan’s back, sending the couple sprawling into the next room as the door suddenly gave way.

CHAPTER 10



The candles flickered against the dining room walls as Margaret and Evan ate their evening meal in silence. The interruption caused by Ham's sudden need to smother Evan in slobbery kisses had put him in a foul mood. Not that he was a ray of sunshine to begin with, but he somehow seemed even more unapproachable than before — a fact that hadn't been helped by Margaret bursting into a fit of giggles once they were on the floor.

Having only been married for a day, Margaret hadn't realized that taking the side of your beloved pet was frowned upon by most men of the ton. She had learned this when Evan seemed infuriated at her insistence that Ham was truly the innocent party in the fiasco; granted, it hadn't helped that she'd checked on Ham's wellbeing before asking Evan if he was all right.

Looking around the room, she noted the elegant floral wallpaper and brass mouldings, all in an attempt to avoid his accusing gaze. The large room was empty, apart from the two of them, as they sat at opposite sides of the long table. Margaret was grateful for the candle holders in the centre of the table that partially hid her from view.

“The soup is delicious,” she broke the silence after ladling a spoonful of the broth into her mouth. She couldn’t stand the atmosphere while they were ignoring one another; it reminded her of the times when her parents would argue. Their marriage had already withered away by the time her mother had passed from consumption, leaving many things unsaid.

“It is,” he said in an overly curt manner. “As long as one isn’t being harassed by vicious creatures.” He pursed his lips as he reached for the napkin to wipe his mouth, clearly still upset over the events from earlier.

“Ham is not vicious,” she said defensively. “He only wanted to play with you; how was he to know that you’re a stick in the mud?” she shot back before she could stop herself.

Glowering at her, Evan dropped his napkin beside his plate and fell back in his chair. “Why is it that you attribute human characteristics to animals all the time?” He cocked his head to the side in indignation. “As if ‘Ham’,” he stressed the word as if it caused him pain to say such a ridiculous name out loud, “could understand the quips of human propriety.”

“Because animals are more than capable of thinking and feeling,” she spoke to him as if he were a toddler that needed to learn the fundamental aspects of being alive. It was more than infuriating for her that she still found him attractive despite the many ways he seemed to work on her nerves. His

alluring nature and handsome features seemed to override the fact that he was just as stubborn and sarcastic as she was.

“I hardly think I am the one who is in need of any reality checks here,” he narrowed his eyes at her. “Where are the beasts now in any case?” he asked with a slight amount of hesitation in his voice as he glanced over his shoulder.

Seeing the way his jaw clenched, Margaret decided to stick to safer ground and bring up a topic they could discuss without wanting to throw soup in the other’s face. And they hadn’t been married for more than twelve hours by that point. How did couples that were together for more than ten, twenty years do it?

By not speaking to each other, Margaret mused.

“I closed them in my room.” She ate some more of her soup before speaking again. “I thought it might be nice for us to discuss anything that we needed to, this being our first night as a newlywed couple.” She tried to broach the subject of expectations as gently as she could.

Relaxing a little in his chair, Evan sat up straight and looked at her with a more diplomatic expression before reaching for his spoon once again. “I think I stated all of my concerns before we got married. Is there anything that you would like to bring up?”

“Well,” Margaret said, taking a deep breath, “nothing particularly pressing. It would be nice if we got to know each other a little better.” She swallowed and bit on her lower lip. There was no easy way to tell a man that she had just married how deep her trust issues actually went. She was caught in a battle of her own in her mind, fighting the memories of her father’s betrayal and wanting to trust the man she had married.

“Why don’t you tell me if there is anything you would like to know, and I will do my best to answer,” he suggested almost nervously as he dabbed at the corners of his mouth once again. “You could also tell me something about yourself that I do not know,” he added hurriedly and fidgeted with the napkin in his hand.

It seemed to Margaret as if he were concerned that she would ask him something he didn’t want to talk about, yet she brushed it off as the same kind of anxiousness that she was experiencing herself. Taking a deep breath, she braced herself. “I don’t trust very easily.” She straightened the fork beside her plate in an attempt to avoid looking at him. Conversations such as these where she had to open up to anyone never came easily to her.

“I see,” he said after a few moments of silence, shifting in his seat and adjusting his position.

Looking up, Margaret noticed that a veil had fallen over his face, hiding his true feelings about what she had just said. “It’s not that I don’t trust that you will always ensure a roof over

my head and food on the table,” she added quickly in case she had offended him. “It’s just hard for me to trust another individual fully.” She faked a smile as she glanced at his reaction.

Evan sat looking at her for a moment with an intense gaze in his eyes. “Is it because of your father?” he asked the question that made her palms sweat.

“Yes.” She decided that opening up to him would be better than him thinking that she was just delusional with issues of trusting another person. “I don’t know if you know this, but I was betrothed to another man a few years ago.” The words felt dry in her mouth as if she had swallowed cotton.

“I did not,” he said with a strange look in his eyes as if he were keeping his feelings at bay.

“He was the son of a Baron, Edgard Steward,” she said with a faint smile around her lips. “By all accounts, we would have been a perfect match if it hadn’t been for the lies my father told to his family in an attempt to marry me off.”

Evan sat pensively in his chair, listening to her speak as he rolled the tip of his finger against his thumb.

“My father had always said that there was a sizeable dowry for each of us. For many years, I believed the lies that he told —

that there was more than enough money to live off of and that his gambling was not affecting the family funds.” She felt a lump forming in her throat as she spoke. She hadn’t ever opened up to anyone about the life she had lived with her father.

The room filled with a tense silence, reflecting the discomfort and vulnerability she felt inside. It almost felt as if she were reliving the moments of pain she had experienced in her past.

“It wasn’t until a week before the wedding that Edgar and his family caught wind of the fact that there was no dowry…” Her voice trailed off as she recalled the embarrassment she had felt on that day. “Something that I myself was not aware of thanks to my naivety in believing my father. Naturally, they called the whole thing off. I don’t blame them, really.”

“I do,” Evan said angrily as he clenched his fist, placing it against his mouth.

Margaret looked up in shock to see the anger in his eyes. Her heart began to pound, wondering why she had suddenly made him so angry.



“I blame everyone involved in that scenario,” Evan said through a clenched jaw. Her confession of having been engaged to another man had left him feeling unreasonably irritable and jealous. “Your father should never have lied to

you and your sisters about dowries.” He shook his head as he looked down at the table. “And as for your former betrothed...” He waved the idea away with his hand out of anger more than anything else. “A real man would not have left a woman to the whims and embarrassment of the ton — especially not a week before the wedding was to take place.”

He felt a wave of disgust towards the man who would leave a woman high and dry simply because her dowry was lacking. He could understand feeling as if he had been done in by her father, but that wasn't her fault. It was unconscionable to throw a woman to the wolves, unless the man was a fortune seeker all along.

“If only everyone was as chivalrous as you are,” Margaret replied with a hint of a smile around her lips as she reached for her glass of water and took a sip, “the world would be a far better place.”

Evan felt his chest constrict at the grateful way she was glancing at him. The softness of her lashes brushing against her cheeks drove him wild with desire for her gentle beauty. How any man could have walked away from her was simply beyond his understanding. A single drop of water on her full lips drew his attention back to her mouth as her tongue flicked over the ruby flesh.

God, she's beautiful.

“I know we have a marriage of convenience,” she said almost shyly as she averted her gaze from his heated glances, “but I am truly grateful for the way you are treating me. I never imagined that a man could treat me with so much respect and dignity.” Her chest seemed to rise and fall in an uneven rhythm as her breathing quickened.

Searching her face as she spoke, Evan decided to reassure her of his loyalties and intentions to her. Although he did not think it a great idea to tell her about his past, he would endeavor to make her as comfortable as possible in his presence whenever he could.

“I have a great deal of sympathy for everything that you have gone through in the past, Margaret,” he replied honestly, addressing her in an informal manner in an attempt to put her at ease. “I can assure you that I will never intentionally cause you any pain or allow harm to come to you. You may rest assured on that score.” He tore his eyes away from her chest and looked into her beautiful eyes.

Her gaze swam with concern as she listened to the promises he made, the hurt from her past clearly written across her stunning features as she nervously chewed the inside of her cheek.

Evan could see that it would take a great deal of effort on his behalf to earn her trust which was something he intended to do as their marriage progressed. “I understand your need for honesty,” he smiled, trying his best to show her his intentions.

It put him at ease knowing that they were equally nervous in the situation that had been thrust in their laps. “We all have things that are important to us...” His voice trailed off as he thought of his own plight in giving up on love to save his title.

“Is there something that is just as important to you?” Margaret probed him gently as the silence ensued. It was almost as if she were trying to get him to open up to her as much as she had to him.

He pushed his plate aside as he decided to keep the walls up that had kept him safe for so long. “No,” Evan said gruffly as he pushed back his chair and stood. “I stated all of my concerns at our first meeting; as long as you endeavor to be the perfect wife in the eyes of the ton, everything will be fine. Now, it’s getting late. I think we should be headed to bed.”

Margaret sat thoughtfully chewing on her lips before she stood and followed suit. Silently following him up the stairs before they reached the landing that led to their adjoining room. Evan wanted to give her as much space as she needed to process their discussion and the promises he had made.

“I’ll let you get some rest then,” he said as he noticed the tension leave her face.

Did she think I would force her into my bed?

“Thank you, I’m sure you are just as tired as I am.” Her smile seemed more genuine this time as they stood in front of their bedroom doors. “And I am grateful for the understanding you have given me. I can’t say that my trust will ever be as it should, but I will try.” She fidgeted with her fingers in front of her abdomen as she spoke, looking down at the hall carpet.

Feeling an overwhelming desire to draw her body close to his and kiss her lips, Evan took a step forward. “Margaret,” he whispered her name in a gentle voice as he cupped her chin in his hand and lifted her face.

Margaret’s chest seemed to rise and fall at a quicker pace as her eyes searched his. Her mistrust was clearly evident to anyone that took the time to look at her, her eyes widening in shock as she hesitated at first.

“You never have to fear me hurting you,” he said after examining her face for a second.

The atmosphere between them grew hotter as Margaret shut her eyes and parted her lips, tilting her head to the side in anticipation.

Fighting the urge to kiss her with all the desire he felt building within his core, Evan drew her forward and gently placed a lingering kiss on her forehead before letting her go and stepping back. The last thing he wanted was to play with her emotions when their marriage was one of convenience.

Margaret seemed almost shocked as he drew back and released her chin.

“Goodnight,” he said after swallowing. “I hope you have a restful evening. My door will be unlocked if you need anything at all.”

“Goodnight,” she replied almost breathlessly as she turned to her room, lingering for just a second as if she didn’t know what to say.

Waiting until she had shut her door, Evan entered his own room, making his way to their shared dressing cupboard where he removed his dinner jacket and reached for his robe.

I must not touch her. I shall not touch her. This is just a convenience.

He pondered over the tender gesture that he’d never been prompted to do before. He had wanted her with a burning desire, but there was something in her eyes that made him hesitate. Whether it was her lack of trust or the fact that they had agreed to an arranged marriage, Evan felt the need to treat her with caution until she was willing to come to him first.

The gentle clicking of a lock made him turn to the door as he realized that she had locked the adjoining door from her side.

Heaving a sigh, he placed the robe on a chair and began to remove his clothes. Earning her trust would be a long and arduous process by the looks of it. Yet it was one that he would see through to the end, no matter how many nights she locked her side of the door.

CHAPTER 11



The sun shone down as Margaret and Sophia Braxton strolled along one of the more prominent promenade scenes of London. The surface of the Thames seemed to sparkle like diamonds, reflecting the late afternoon sun.

“I can’t believe you agreed to use the services of that woman.” Sophia turned her nose up in the air as they walked. Her light blue dress and gloves brought out the grey in her blue eyes as they walked with matching white parasols protecting their skin.

“Life sometimes throws us into situations where we have no other choice,” Margaret observed patiently as she listened to her friend rant about the negative effects that someone like Marie Webster had on society. “I know you have never been much of a rule follower,” she said to her friend with a sigh, “but desperate times call for desperate measure. We can’t all wait for the perfect love match to just fall into our laps when there is more than just our own happiness to consider.”

“I’m just saying that the last resort for any woman should not be to use the services of someone that preys on gossip for a living.” Her mahogany hair swayed gently in the breeze as a few strands escaped the pins at the back of her head. “There should be many other options for women in need, not just marriages of convenience.”

Frowning at her friend’s description of Marie, Margaret gently twisted the handle of her new parasol that matched her white dress. Evan had insisted on new clothes before she was allowed to promenade with her friend — a suggestion that she had protested at first, but she secretly relished having new clothes that weren’t in need of any repairs.

“I don’t think Marie is as bad as you make her out to be,” Margaret said in the woman’s defense; she had after all helped Margaret free of charge.

“Margaret Benett...” Sophia quickly shook her head and corrected herself. “I’m sorry, I mean Sutherland; I keep forgetting that you are married now,” she muttered under breath as if she couldn’t believe what she was saying. “My point is that you can’t be on her side now; you know her services are deplorable and demeaning.” Her eyes swam with passionate belief.

“I know you believe her to be bad, but she helped me. And after meeting her in person...” Margaret thought of the kind way she had been received. “I don’t think any of the gossip about her is justified. She never attends any balls or social

gatherings as far as I understand. You can't possibly accuse her of preying on gossip when she's never even present."

Sophia rolled her eyes and let her parasol slip to the side, exposing her fair skin. "Please don't tell me marriage has changed you that much that you are willing to conspire with the enemy."

"Marriage certainly has been an eye opener," Margaret said with a sigh as she thought of their argument just that morning before she had left. Evan had awoken with a scream of terror upon finding Vinnie asleep at the foot of his bed. How the cat had managed to get into his room was still a mystery to Margaret. The fluffy white cat seemed to have taken a liking to Evan despite his fervent protests that he did not like her or any other animal as a matter of fact.

"Has there been trouble?" Sophia asked with a frown as they passed a group of giggling women who glanced at them both and whispered behind their hands.

"Not in the way you are thinking," Margaret answered, ignoring the women who had passed. She was used to be the subject of gossip. "Evan is having a hard time adjusting to my animals," she admitted with a sigh.

"Has he asked you to throw them out?" Sophia's voice was thick with worry as she spoke. Everyone that knew Margaret on a personal level knew how important her pets were to her.

“He did suggest it at first, but he has accepted the fact that they will be living indoors. He only protests when they go near him.” She stifled a giggle at the memory of Evan yelling for help that morning. “There is a gentler side of him despite his gruff exterior.”

Sophia seemed to relax as she smiled at her friend with a knowing look. “Give him time then; I’m sure he will come around once he’s had some time to get used to the idea.” While Sophia was opposed to the idea of a matchmaker, she harbored no ill will against the institution of marriage of love.

“I hope so,” Margaret said honestly. “I’m afraid we will become one of those couples who lives in separate houses and only see each other twice a year to keep up appearances in the eyes of the ton.”

Despite knowing that their marriage was one of convenience, Margaret dreaded ending up like one of the hopeless couples she heard about all the time. She hoped that she and Evan would at least be able to build a lasting friendship between them if nothing else. Their constant bickering did little to give her hope, but there was still every chance that their witty exchanges would lead to a budding friendship.

Her heart began to beat slightly faster as she thought of the way he had held her face in the palm of his hand; the heat from his skin still radiated through her memory.

Did he want to kiss me?

She felt the heat spreading over her cheeks as she recalled the burning desire she'd experienced toward him at that moment. Not only had she wanted him to kiss her, but she had wanted to kiss him back. Swallowing hard she realized that she would have to be careful where her new husband was concerned. She harbored a deep desire for him that she hadn't noticed before.



Evan frowned, tapping his foot impatiently as he glanced out the drawing room window at the dark sky. Margaret had not yet returned from her promenade with a friend, causing him a great amount of worry and angst. It was in moments like this that he realized how stressful being married actually was.

He hadn't given her a curfew or insisted that she spend her days at his side; quite the contrary, he had given her leave to do as she pleased. What Evan hadn't realized at the time was that he'd look for her whenever he entered a room. Even more surprising than that was the annoying fact that he felt a sense of disappointment when she wasn't there.

You're just tired.

He shook his head as the intrusive thoughts took hold. There was no other possible explanation for his concern and worry.

“My Lord,” Edward’s voice broke through his thoughts as Evan turned to see the man standing in the doorway.

“Yes?” Evan asked in a hurry. He’d left instructions with all the staff to alert him as soon as Margaret arrived back home.

“The Lady of the house has returned, My Lord,” the man said respectfully as he bowed. “It would seem that she is in the kitchen preparing herself a meal.”

“Preparing a meal?” Evan asked in confusion. He’d expected his butler to say that she had met an accident or had run away. Cooking was the last thing he thought she would be doing.

“Yes, My Lord,” he confirmed. “One of the maids said that Lady Margaret is preparing soup for herself.” His mustache bristled as if he could not believe what he was saying.

“And the cook?” Evan asked with a frown. “What is the cook doing while Lady Margaret prepares her own meal?”

“The cook has retired for the evening, My Lord. One of the maids said that Lady Margaret instructed them to not disturb her at this hour.” He glanced at the clock on the wall that had just struck nine.

“Thank you, you may go, Edwards; I shall see to the matter.” Evan waved the man away as a wave of relief washed over his body, taking him by surprise. Although he had not been anticipating the fact that she would be cooking, he was at least relieved that she wasn’t harmed.

Making his way from the drawing room, Evan decided to confront her himself. He needed to see if she was all right with his own eyes — for his peace of mind if nothing else.

It wasn’t long before he had made his way down the hall and entered the kitchen where a delectable smell was permeating the air. He soon spotted Margaret in front of the fire with a spoon in her hand.

“Good evening,” he said in a gruff voice, making her jump as she clutched at her chest.

“Goodness, Evan, you nearly scared me to death.” She seemed irritable as she wiped a few drops of soup from her wrist. The ladle in her hand had evidently been used to stir the food she was making. “What are you doing down here?” she asked once she had regained her composure. She was wearing her new white dress with an old apron tied around her waist to protect the fabric.

He folded his arms across his chest as he leaned against the doorframe and glared at her, despite the relief he felt at her

presence. “Why are you cooking at this hour when we have a cook?” He bit back the desire to ask where she had been.

“I am perfectly capable of preparing my own food,” she said defensively. “I had to see Sophia home safely after our promenade, and the cook had already retired for the night. I instructed the maids to leave her be,” she explained as she turned her back to him and lifted the lid of the pot.

“I see.” He heaved a sigh of relief that there had been a reasonable explanation for her delayed arrival.

“You’re welcome to join me,” she offered as she ladled soup into two bowls without waiting for his reply and proceeded to place them on the kitchen table.

“Are you just going to eat in here?” He felt taken aback once again as he looked around the room with its pots and pans. He’d never so much as visited the kitchen for more than five minutes, let alone eaten at the table.

“Why?” She raised an eyebrow with a teasing expression. “Are you afraid that one of the servants will mistake you for one of them?” She shifted her stool in slightly and reached for a spoon. “If asked to polish any boots, you may decline the offer,” she smirked and bit her lips.

Rolling his eyes, Evan unfolded his arms and took a seat opposite her at the table, trying his best to get comfortable on the hard wooden stool. The chairs in the rest of the mansion were all padded with fabric, making for a far more comfortable seat. Maybe he needed to change these as well to help the servants feel more at ease.

“How is it that you know how to cook?” Evan asked as he eyed the brown broth with vegetables that lay before him on the table.

Margaret swallowed her mouthful of soup before looking at him. “Our mother passed away shortly after my father dismissed all of the staff. It was up to me to provide for my sisters. It took me a while, but I soon got the hang of boiling a few vegetables in broth.” She kept her eyes on her bowl after looking down.

Evan glanced down at the soup before reaching for a spoon. He had to admit that the aroma wafting up to his nose was far more appetising than anything his cook had placed before him in the past. Working up his courage, he ladled a spoonful of broth into his mouth, savouring the rich flavors that graced his tongue.

“Is it all right?” Her voice held a note of expectation despite her defiant nature.

Looking up, he noticed the vulnerability in her beautiful green eyes. “Well...” He lowered his spoon as his heart failed to keep its normal rhythm. “I think it’s safe to say that you can do more than just boil a few vegetables in broth.”

He felt a wave of warmth at the pleased expression on her face. He realized with a start that he enjoyed and needed to see her smile. What was more concerning than that was that he didn’t panic at the realization.

Well. Happy wife, happy life; isn't that what Nicholas always said?

“I’m glad you like it,” she said as she tucked a strand of hair behind her ear and continued to eat her soup. The shy way she was glancing at him made Evan want to get to know her better. He hadn’t been with a woman in a long time, but he’d never felt the desire to hear anyone talk as he did with Margaret.

“Is soup your favorite meal to prepare?” he asked the first question that came to mind.

Margaret seemed thoughtful as she glanced at him. “Well, I do enjoy making soup.” She placed her spoon to the side of the bowl. “But I’ve always wanted to attempt a cake,” she admitted.

“Why haven’t you?” He became enthralled by the enticing way she touched her collarbone with the tips of her fingers. He wanted nothing more than to kiss the soft flesh of her neck as she spoke.

“We never had any money by the time I learned how to cook. I had to stretch the meagre funds to ensure that we had enough to eat all the time.” Her eyes seemed sad as she glanced into the distance.

Evan felt his heart breaking for the hardships she had to endure because of her father’s decisions. He could strangle the man for putting his daughters through so much pain. “I’m not sure if the cook would want you interfering in her kitchen,” he said gruffly when he realised what kind of affect her presence was having on him yet again, “but I suppose you could attempt a cake on days when the kitchen isn’t busy.”

The last thing he wanted was for Margaret to think that he was a soft touch when it came to running the house; she already thought that she had gained the upper hand with the animals.

“I’ll be sure to stay out of the cook’s way.” Margaret rolled her eyes as she finished her soup and pushed the bowl aside. “I think I will retire to the drawing room now and read a book before bed,” she said as she pushed her stool back and stood, gathering their empty bowls.

“Thank you for the soup,” he replied coolly, vexed by the way she had received his permission to use the kitchen. “I think I will join you.”

Margaret turned to look at him in shock before placing the bowls in a bucket beside the fire. “Are you sure you don’t want to retire for the evening?” She seemed taken aback by his words. “It is getting quite late; I stay up reading, but you may go to bed as you usually do.”

“It is my house; I may go where I please,” he said in annoyance at her expression. “I will go to bed when I am good and ready.” He narrowed his eyes at her. “It’s not as if you know my routine.”

“I didn’t say you couldn’t.” She suddenly became irate as she loosened the strings of her apron and took it off, placing it over the back of a chair. “I simply trying to be kind and considerate! You need to not think I need a chaperone!” she said hotly as she stomped her foot.

“Very well then,” Evan said hotly as he waited for her to lead the way.

“Very well!” she retorted and stomped from the kitchen in a huff.

CHAPTER 12



Glancing over the top of her book, Margaret tried her best to see what Evan was up to without him noticing her. He'd finished writing his letters and was now sitting on the couch opposite hers with a book of his own in his hands. She ran the tips of her fingers over her lips as she glanced at the patch of his chest that was visible beneath the collar he had loosened.

The relaxed atmosphere in the room, as the fire crackled in the grate, did little to calm her nerves. She liked the room with its simple furnishings of leather seats and single tables, yet she felt far too distracted with Evan there to focus on the novel she was reading. Thoughts of what his muscles would feel like beneath her touch flooded her mind.

Why am I so nervous? she wondered as she took a deep breath, trying her best to steady her breathing. They hadn't said much to each other after their heated exchange in the kitchen, making their current situation even more awkward than it needed to be.

“No,” Evan grumbled, drawing her attention away from her own thoughts as he tried to push the ginger cat off of his lap.

Margaret lowered her book to see Butter, the cat who had tried to pet Evan on the first day, trying her best to sit on his lap. “She won’t stop until you let her,” she eventually intervened as Evan held the cat back at arm’s length with his book. “There’s no stopping her once she’s taken a liking to someone. Although I’m questioning her judgment at this point,” she muttered under her breath.

“What was that?” Evan narrowed his eyes at her as the cat slipped past his book and onto his lap with ease. The intense atmosphere that had begun to build between them was suddenly broken by the cat’s interruption.

“Nothing.” She averted her gaze and bit back her laughter at the sight of Butter turning in circles on his lap before getting comfortable.

Evan continued to glare at her as the cat curled into a ball and purred, tucking her tail into her legs. “Why is it making that sound?” He seemed concerned as he eyed the cat with caution as if it would explode at any second.

“What sound?” Margaret asked, enjoying the scene immensely.

“That sound like cogs turning but much softer.” He lowered his arms slightly as he became accustomed to the feeling of the cat on his knees.

“You mean purring?” she asked with a frown. “Have you never had a cat sleep on you before?” His discomfort only added to her mirth.

“No, the only animals I’ve ever had to deal with were horses, and I can assure you that none of them ever slept on my lap,” he huffed.

“It means she likes you,” Margaret rolled her eyes and shook her head. “It’s a good sign, trust me.” She picked up her book and pretended to read while keeping an eye on Evan and Butter.

Watching the cat for a moment, Evan eventually lifted his book once again and read. It wasn’t long before he reached out a hand and gently stroked her spine, causing the purring to deepen as she slept.

Margaret smiled to herself when the faintest of smiles spread over his lips. “Be careful,” she said before she could stop herself.

“Of what?” His head snapped up again as he stopped stroking the cat.

“One might think you actually like having the cat on your lap if anyone saw you,” Her eyes fell to the page once again as he glowered at her.

Why can't he just admit that he likes it?

“I didn't want the hassle of trying to fight her off all the time,” he grumbled in his own defense. “It is you that never taught your animals any manners.”

“I thought animals were incapable of human attributes such as learning.” She lowered her book and gave him a triumphant smirk. “Were those not your words?” She raised one eyebrow in a challenge. “That I shouldn't attribute human characteristics to animals?”

“Not exactly,” he seemed annoyed at her accusations. “But yes, I do think that you apply far too many human attributes to your pets. Horses are capable of being taught how to jump, and so cats and dogs should be able to learn basic principles such as no.”

She was about to state that she thought Evan's thinking was flawed when Ham came rushing into the room with something in his mouth. Stopping at the other end of the room, he happily slobbered over his prize and chewed as if they weren't there at all.

“What does that dog have, and why on earth does he wheeze like an old man on his deathbed?” Evan snapped the book shut and placed it beside him on the table with a loud thud.

“All dogs of his kind breathe like that,” Margaret answered him tiredly. His constant dislike of her animals was more annoying than his reluctance to admit the fact that he liked the feeling of Butter on his lap.

“Is that my shoe?” Evan shot up, sending Butter crashing to the floor as she hissed in protest, scampering from the room.

Closing her book, Margaret turned to see what Evan was yelling about. “Oh, Lord,” she let out a breath. “He must have gotten into our dressing room through the adjoining door. One of the maids must have left it open.”

“It is my shoe!” Evan yelled, irate with anger as his face turned red.

Margaret jumped to her feet and rushed toward Ham just as Evan lunged forward. If anyone was going to stop the dog from chewing a shoe, it had to be her, lest Evan lost his temper. She wasn’t afraid that he would hurt Ham, by any means — if he was such a person, he would have done it by now — but she wanted him to eventually like her pets, and right now, Ham wasn’t helping his case very much.

And Butter had been doing such a good job!

Ham unfortunately thought that Margaret and Evan fancied a game of chase as he lifted the shoe in slobber covered lips once again and ran, making his way around the room in haste.

“Stop this instant young man!” Margaret had to stop herself from laughing as he happily bounced from one corner of the room to the next with everyone in tow. “There will be no more cheese for you!” she threatened him half-heartedly.

It only took a few attempts for Evan to corner Ham with his arms splayed wide. “There you are, you little devil; drop the shoe, now!” He advanced with caution as Ham lowered his chest to the ground while keeping his butt in the air. “That’s it; just hand over the shoe...”

Margaret felt a wave of laughter bubbling in her chest as she watched the scene with Ham happily wiggling his butt in a playful manner.

“Dammit!” Evan yelled after lunging forward and missing the dog by an inch.

Ham simply slipped between his legs and ran in her direction toward the couch, presumably in an attempt to hide underneath.

Margaret was quick on her feet as she reached down in one swift motion and snatched the shoe from Ham's mouth.

Bouncing around joyfully, Ham barked a few times before turning tail and running from the room.

"If I lay my hands on him..." Evan spat angrily as he stomped toward Margaret and grabbed his shoe.

"You absolutely will not lay a hand on him," she shot back, keeping her grip on the shoe as she glared at him.

"Get that animal under control or else!" He seemed to search for the right words.

"Or else what?" she held on tightly to the shoe as she leaned in closer, matching his angry gaze and glancing down at his lips. The heat that had been building between them suddenly returned as her chest began to rise and fall with deeper breaths. "What will you do?" She felt her mind wandering back to her thoughts from earlier as he in turn glanced at her chest and back up to her lips.



Evan felt all the restraint he possessed leaving his body as he drew her into his arms, pressing his lips against hers in a passionate embrace. Her body was stiff and reluctant at first

but quickly yielded to his touch as a soft moan escaped her throat. It was almost as if all of her resolve had melted along with his.

The shoe fell to the floor as her arms came up and closed around his neck, drawing him closer as she hungrily responded to his kiss. Using the tips of her fingers to gently massage the back of his neck, Margaret pressed her body into his.

Bringing his hands to her hips, he gently guided her back until her bottom was pressed against the back of the couch. It was then that he felt her lips parting under the gentle probing of his tongue, allowing him entry into the warm depths of her mouth. His hands moved as if they possessed a life of their own, searching her body and feeling the curves through the fabric of her dress.

A surprised moan escaped her lips when Evan kissed a path over her jaw, ending at her earlobe before making his way to her neck. It was there in the soft skin of her neck that he allowed himself to linger for a moment, gently licking over the sweet-smelling flesh that set his heart ablaze with passion and desire.

She quickly brought her hands up to the back of his head where she tangled her fingers in his thick blonde hair, allowing him to lift her off the floor with his hands on her waist.

Evan was overcome by lust as she lifted her legs around his body with the help of the couch that bore her weight. Holding her thighs in each hand, he savored the moment as Margaret tilted her head to the side, exposing her neck as he nibbled and kissed a path to her chest.

Her breathing deepened beneath his touch as he felt the subtle difference beneath his lips. The glorious mounds of her breasts were moving inches away from his searching lips where the milky flesh swooped into the neckline of her dress.

“Margaret,” he breathed against her skin as one hand came up, cupping her breast through the fabric he wished wasn’t there.

Her sudden gasp of pleasure let him know that her enjoyment matched his, egging him on as he explored her chest.

Tilting her head back down, Margaret whispered in his ear, causing his skin to breakout in a wave of bumps that ran down his neck. “Evan,” she whimpered, “please don’t stop.”

Doing as she asked, he allowed his feelings to take over as he slipped a hand under her dress, massaging a path over the smooth skin of her thigh.

A sudden crash made them both stop, and Evan lowered his hand, turning to see if he could catch a glimpse of what had occurred.

The edge of a silky black dress disappeared from view as footsteps hurried away, fading into the distance. Looking out the door, Evan noticed the smashed vase that lay just to the left where the fabric had disappeared.

“It must have been one of the cats, Evan; I’m so sorry!” Margaret apologised after placing her hands over her mouth from the shock, seemingly unaware of the glimpse of the dress.

“No,” Evan said as he helped her from the couch, gently lowering her to the ground. “I don’t think it was.”

“Who was it then?” She hurriedly fixed her dress before turning her attention to her hair and neatening the strands.

“Probably just a draft or one of the maids,” he grumbled as he turned back to her, a sinking feeling in his chest. He had a sneaking suspicion that he knew exactly what had happened, but he hoped that he was wrong in his assumptions. “Stay here while I go and see,” he said with a frown.

Nodding slowly, Margaret did as he said, her cheeks still flushed and rosy from their kiss.

Evan hurried from the room. As he made his way toward the stairs, he caught sight of a woman in a black dress with a

shawl pulled over her head. She was hurrying down the stairs as he took them two at a time in an attempt to reach her side.

“What the devil do you think you are doing?” he angrily asked as he caught up to her at the bottom of the steps.

“Don’t touch me,” Eloise hissed at him as he gripped her wrist. “I’ll scream!”

“How did you get in this time?” He ignored her protests and dragged her into an alcove where it was less likely that they would be seen.

“I came to pay you a visit,” she said angrily as she yanked her wrist away from him.

“I gave you enough money to set you up for a year at least; what more do you want?” he hissed under his breath. The nerve of the woman to return to his house after he had cast her out was more than he could bear.

Narrowing her eyes, Eloise let go of the shawl she had used to hide her identity and brought her face closer to his. “I want my position back in your life, Evan Sutherland,” she glowered, poking him in the chest with a long finger. “You can’t simply pay for my silence and expect to never see me again. The world just doesn’t work that way, even for you.”

“You better leave before a call the constables!” he raised his voice as he gripped her hand, casting it aside. “I never want to see you around here again.”

“I’ll leave,” she hissed back at him. “You can go back to the little wench that you married.” Angry tears filled her eyes as she slipped under his arm and ran to the door before he could say anything in Margaret’s defence.

Shaking his head, Evan stepped from the alcove and back into the open. He hadn’t realized that Eloise would become so much of a problem once he let her go. He’d have to think of a more permanent way to keep her silent if he was to have a happy marriage with Margaret.

Margaret.

Her name echoed in his mind as he thought of the kiss they had shared. He was certain that things would have gone further if it hadn’t been for the interruption.

“Is everything all right?” Her voice was heavy with concern.

Evan looked up in shock to see Margaret’s worried face looking down at him from the top of the stairs. Glancing at the door, he hoped and prayed that she hadn’t seen Eloise fleeing.

“Just a disgruntled maid that had to be let go,” he decided to lie to her for the sake of their marriage.

His parent’s union hadn’t been one of love or happiness, owing to the fact that his father had paraded his mistresses in front of the ton as if it were something one could be proud of. Evan had vowed long ago to never be unfaithful in his marriage, a vow that he intended to keep no matter what.

“Oh, dear,” she said with a worried frown. “Was she the same one that was angry in the study?”

Evan suddenly realized that Margaret had been privy to Eloise’s presence on the day she arrived.

“Yes.” He pasted a fake smile on his lips and began climbing the stairs. “The very same one; she isn’t taking her dismissal very well, but not to worry. I’ll deal with her one way or another.”

The strange look of concern that she gave him made his heart beat faster from fear.

“Don’t fret,” he said as he reached her side and took her hand in his. “I’ll deal with the matter.”

Margaret searched his eyes as if she were looking for truth but said nothing further.

I'll have to think of a way to deal with this and soon.

CHAPTER 13



Margaret watched as her younger sisters fawned over Evan. He'd insisted on taking them shopping for new dresses as the London season approached. She was grateful for his help, but she couldn't shake the feelings of mistrust that plagued her mind. There was something odd about the situation that had occurred the previous night with the disgruntled maid.

"Is everything to your liking?" Evan surprised her as he came up from behind.

Quickly letting go of the ribbon she had been holding, Margaret cleared her throat. "Yes, thank you. The girls seem overjoyed with all the gifts you are lavishing them with."

"It's my pleasure," he said with a rare smile of contentment as he turned to look at the girls who were simply bursting with joy at the prospect of new dresses. "Part of our agreement was that I would help you look after your sisters until they made suitable marriages, and I will do everything within my power to ensue those matches."

Margaret felt touched at the amount of effort and thought he was putting into their agreement. Evan was shaping up to be far kinder than she had thought him to be. “Just don’t let them get the better of you; the last thing we need is spoiled sisters running around,” she teased.

Smiling at her with a brightness that melted her heart, Evan smirked. “I hardly think a few new dresses will bring about the fall of the Roman Empire.” He raised his eyebrows in a teasing gesture. “Perhaps the hats and gloves could be used as weapons but not the dresses.”

“Oh, you never know, My Lord,” she teased him back as she turned away from the ribbons and joined him at his side, looking at her sisters who giggled amongst themselves. “Young women can be formidable foes when it comes to fashion. You never know what one can accomplish with the right fabric.”

“Were you a formidable foe when you were a young debutant?” He smiled at her as they turned to one another.

“Most certainly not,” Margaret answered, enjoying the light atmosphere and banter between them. Thoughts of his body against her filled her mind as the world around them ceased to exist. It was almost as if they had entered a bubble when Evan gazed down at her.

“What kind of debutant were you then?” he asked in an alluring tone as he reached up and tucked a strand of hair behind her ear.

Her breath caught in her throat as her chest began to rise and fall at an even pace. “I was the kind who had to be coaxed into a fitting room by her mother.” She leaned against the corner of the shelf for support as her knees grew weak. She didn’t need to trust him fully in order to be attracted to him.

“I wish I had seen you as a debutant,” he said in a husky tone as he lowered his voice and leaned in closer.

“What would you have done? Asked me for every dance?” She tried her best to keep her breathing even as the scent of his skin intoxicated her senses.

“I would have found every opportunity to find you alone and keep you to myself.” His eyes were serious as he gazed at her, glancing down at her chest before smiling with a wolfish grin.

The room suddenly became hotter as Margaret felt a wave of heat filling her cheeks. She wanted to feel his body pressed against hers as she responded in kind. Tilting her head slightly up, she allowed her eyes to flutter shut as her lips parted.

“Evan!” Iris’ excitement drew Margaret from her bubble as she came bounding toward the couple. “The seamstress has

just shown us the most beautiful pink silk; do you think we could each have a dress with it?" Her eyes were wide with excitement as she gripped his hand and held it tight. "Please say yes."

"Iris," Margaret reprimanded her sister sharply as she came to her senses again, remembering that they were in the middle of a busy shop, "mind your manners."

Turning to her sister with a scowl, Iris continued to hold onto the sleeve of Evan's jacket. "Evan told us to address him by name instead of My Lord now that he's our brother," she pouted slightly.

"I did," Evan confessed in an amused tone when he caught sight of the annoyed look on Margaret's face. "And yes, you may both have a dress with the pink silk."

"Thank you!" Iris nearly burst from excitement before rushing off to share the good news with her sister.

Shaking her head, Margaret smiled at him with an ever-growing warmth in her chest. "You indulge them too much, My Lord..." she teased him.

"Not as much as I indulge you," he said in the same husky tone from earlier and placed his hand under her chin, guiding her face toward his.

Margaret felt her stomach fluttering in a way that she'd never experienced before as he gazed into her eyes and winked before lowering his hand and walking off. She suddenly felt confused as she watched him head toward her sisters.

What is this man doing to me?

The girls laughed at something he was saying as they hung on his every word. A sudden sadness filled her chest as she watched the way they trusted him with ease. Evan was a good man, but there was still something inside of her that was reluctant to take anything he said at face value.

“Are you ready?” Evan surprised her as he appeared at her side once again.

Noticing that she had been staring into space, Margaret quickly pasted a smile on her lips. “Are the girls done already?” she asked after peering over his shoulder.

Iris and Layla were gleefully heading toward the door, followed by a slew of footmen carrying their spoils.

“Yes,” Evan said with a frown as he searched her face. “The dresses will be delivered in a few days. There's just a few hats and gloves that the girls will be taking now.” His eyes never

left her face as he spoke. “Are you sure you are all right? You seemed a bit distracted. What were you thinking about?”

“I was just a bit worn out from looking after my sisters,” she lied. “I think it’s about time we all head home and get some rest.”

“I couldn’t agree more.” He held his arm out to her and nodded toward the door.

Margaret gracefully accepted his arm and allowed him to escort her from the shop and into the carriage where her younger sisters were excitedly waiting to be taken back to their father’s house.

Watching the scenery pass as the carriage jolted into motion, Margaret sat wondering about her future and if she would ever be able to trust anyone again like she had before her past betrothal. She envied the simple way her sisters trusted her husband.

Perhaps I can give him a chance.



The fire crackled in the grate as Margaret and Evan sat in the smaller drawing room with their books in their laps. It seemed as if reading after their evening meal would become the small nuance they could both enjoy in their marriage.

“I wanted to ask you something,” Evan’s voice interrupted her thoughts as she looked up.

“Hm?” she asked distractedly.

Closing his book in his hand, he looked at her. “You seemed very concerned earlier. What were you thinking about while I was talking to your sisters in the shop?” The concern in his eyes made her feel almost guilty about the fact that she had withheld her feelings and thoughts from him.

“Nothing much; just about life and how things have changed.” Her words held a semblance of truth without stating that she had been wondering whether or not it was safe to trust him.

Pushing himself up from his knees, Evan stood and came forward, settling down beside her.

Her heart began to beat faster as she wondered what he was about to do; their kiss from the night before still burned on her lips.

“I felt very distracted and sad by the expression on your face,” he said with a frown once he had turned to her. “I was hoping to relieve some of your fears in any way that I can.” He reached for her hand and held it in his.

He was watching me as much as I had been watching him.

The thought took her by surprise as she looked into his eyes. Was he just as confused as she was about her feelings for him? She felt her own desire growing again as she examined his handsome features from afar. The strong curve of his jaw made her lips tingle with a lustrous need.

A sudden feeling of illness washed over her body.

When did I start feeling confused about Evan?

She suddenly felt more conflicted than she had before as he sat beside her on the couch, gently squeezing her hand in his.

“I know it must be hard for you to see me interacting with your sisters in that way,” he said softly, “but I want you to know that I will never hurt them or you like your father did.”

Margaret felt her heart aching as she examined the honest look in his eyes. She wanted more than anything to believe him with every fiber of her being; her heart was calling out to the peace he was dangling in front of her like a carrot in front of a hungry horse.

The gentle way his thumb was stroking her skin made her heart jump in an uneven rhythm as she warmed to his presence and attention. The gentler side of him that he displayed

whenever they were alone was something that only added to her confusion.

“I’ll never hurt you intentionally,” his voice grew softer as he leaned in closer, placing his hand on her cheek while the other played with her fingers. “I hope you will be able to trust me in time,” he whispered with his lips nearly pressed against hers.

Allowing her eyes to flutter shut, she parted her lips lightly and kissed him ever so gently with a softness that took her breath away, lingering for a second before leaning in closer.

“Margaret!” The door suddenly burst open as the couple jumped apart.

“The most terrible thing has happened,” Iris cried as she ran into her sister’s arms, falling at her feet with her head on her lap.

“What has happened?” Evan asked as he stood, rushing forward to ensure that Layla was unhurt as she stood in the door.

The girls were both disheveled and flushed as if they had run all the way from their father’s house.

“Come now,” Margaret said firmly as she stroked her sister’s hair. Her heart was racing with panic and fear, but someone

had to take control and make them speak. “Tell us what happened.” She lifted Iris’ tear-stained face in her hands.

“It’s Papa,” the young girl whaled as even more tears spilled down her face.

“Has something happened to him?” She hurriedly searched Iris’ face before looking to Layla.

“Nothing has happened to him.” Layla seemed angry rather than sad as she folded her arms over her chest in a defensive manner and looked to the side.

“Did he do anything to you then?” A dark veil fell over his face as Evan clenched his jaw. Margaret could tell that nothing good would come of the situation if their father had indeed done something irrational like hit one of the girls. Evan was the kind of man who wouldn’t allow an act of injustice go unpunished.

“Not to us,” Layla spoke coolly as if she harbored a deep grudge that had never been there before.

Gently pushing her sister aside, Margaret stood and rang the bell that would summon the butler. She fully intended to leave and deal with her father the second she heard what had happened. Her sisters could stay the night while they made other arrangements.

“He took all of the fine hats and gloves that Evan bought for us. He said that they would do nicely to pay off some of the debts.”

Margaret felt her blood boiling with rage as she balled her fists at her side. The sheer nerve of the man to use the only happiness his daughters had experienced in the past few years for selfish means was more than even she had expected from him.

“Was he drunk when he left with all of the belongings?” Evan asked coolly with a dark look in his eyes.

“No,” Margaret said after looking her sister in the eyes and getting the confirmation she needed. “He never drinks before gambling; he always takes the money he wins and gets drunk.”

“Do you know which gambling den he frequents?” Evan spoke to Margaret, knowing that she would have all of the answers.

“The main one is just a few streets down from Whites; I’ve had to fetch him there once or twice when he’s had too much drink,” she said bitterly, recalling the times she’s been awoken in the middle of the night by a constable. “He would more than likely be there, but there are a few others.”

“I think I know where it is.” Evan nodded while clenching his jaw. “I have never been there myself, but the establishment is well known; proper gentlemen never go there. Even if he isn’t there, the gambling dens in London aren’t exactly well-hidden.”

“I beg your pardon for interrupting, My Lord.” Edwards stepped into the room with a polite bow.

“You are not interrupting, Edwards.” Margaret stepped forward. “Will you please see to it that my sisters are settled in one of the guest rooms for the night.” She took charge of the situation as she had always done. “Please have some warm milk and sandwiches sent to their room.”

Edward bowed and waited for the girls to make their way out of the room before following suit.

“Where do you think you are going?” Evan caught her hand and pulled her closer just as she was about to leave.

“Where do you think?” she said almost irritably. “I am going to give my father a piece of my mind like he deserves.”

“Not tonight,” Evan said gruffly as he reached up and tucked a loose strand of her hair behind her ear. “You have taken on the role of protector for far too long with your family. I will go

and see your father,” he declared calmly with a hint of authority so that she couldn’t argue.

Looking into his eyes, she felt the same fluttering sensation she had before their first kiss. She’d never been accustomed to anyone looking out for her before; the feeling was pleasant while only slightly unsettling.

“You stay here and take care of your sisters; they need you right now.” He leaned forward and kissed her forehead like he had before. “I’ll be back later and tell you what happened.” He paused to search her eyes. “If you are still awake — I’ll check to see if your door is locked.”

Margaret searched his face in turn before he turned to leave.

Is he asking permission to enter my room?

She felt her pulse quickening at the thought of leaving her room unlocked, uncertain if she was ready to take that step with him yet.

CHAPTER 14



Entering the smoke-filled room of Whites, Evan quickly spotted his friend from across the room. The Duke was enjoying a glass of whisky while sitting in the armchair he usually reserved, one of the many perks of being a man in his position.

“I didn’t think I would be seeing you here anytime soon,” Nicholas said with a smirk as he stood. “Has married life worn you out already?”

“And I didn’t think that I would see you having a drink in here again,” Evan retorted, but added more seriously, “but I am glad that you are here.”

“The Duchess has a few ladies over for dinner that I’m trying to avoid,” he said almost laughingly as he greeted his friend with a welcoming shake. “Is something the matter?” he asked with a frown when he noticed the serious look on Evan’s face.

“I would like you to accompany me to the gambling den down Elm Street,” Evan cut to the chase.

The frown deepened across his brow as Nicholas looked at his friend. “Isn’t that the street with the Devil’s Den?” His voice sounded almost shocked. “Not really a place for good men. Is there something I should know about? Have you managed to get into trouble?”

Elm Street had become notorious amongst the gamblers of London; no respectable man dared go in there unless he had wanted to ruin his reputation or lose all of his money. ‘The devil never let go of you once he’d gotten a hold’ was the saying that men often used when speaking of the place.

Clenching his jaw and looking around, Evan made sure that none of the other men were in earshot before leaning forward and whispering, “There has been a small situation with Margaret’s father.” He explained the situation with the girls before looking around once again. The last thing he wanted was to cause an even bigger fuss than what was necessary; half the ton already gossiped about their family in an unkind manner.

“Oh,” Nicholas nodded in agreement, “I can see why you came to find me first.” He clapped his friend on the shoulder. “That street is no place for a respectable man to be seen alone. It will be better if I am there to back up your story.”

“Thank you, Nicholas; I knew I could count on you,” Evan said gratefully. “We better get going before it gets too late. I’m given to understand that the Baron takes to drinking after he’s

been gambling. There is still a chance we could reason with him if we leave now and find him in a sober frame of mind.”

“We can take my carriage and leave it a few blocks away,” Nicholas suggested hurriedly as they made their way from the room. “It will lessen our chances of being spotted by anyone important enough to kick up a fuss.”



Evan glanced about the filthy street as he stepped over a puddle of brown water. Elm Street was a God-forsaken place that no man who valued his reputation visited without just cause. Ladies of questionable morals hung around in the shadows, their scantily clad bodies luring men into their bosoms.

“Let’s hurry,” Nicholas said by his side as they rounded a corner. “I didn’t like to be down here before I was married, but it’s much worse now that I know the love of a virtuous woman — if you catch my drift.” He glanced at a toothless woman as she blew him a kiss and laughed. Her skin was dirty and wrinkled from years of strong drink.

Evan nodded in agreement as he side-stepped a drunken man who lay snoring in the gutter, his arms splayed open like an eagle in flight. He shuddered to admit, even to himself, that he had met Eloise on Elm Street. He should have known back then that nothing good would have come from a secrete liaison

with an opera singer, especially not one that had started in that part of town.

Margaret's presence in his life had changed him to the point where he wondered what he had seen in places like this in his youth. The dangerous allure now seemed like cheap thrills that no longer held any sway for him.

"It's there up ahead," Nicholas broke into his thoughts.

Looking up, Evan followed his best friend's gaze to a lively little establishment with cigar smoke pouring from the windows along with off-tune piano music. "Let's get this over with," he said and hurried along. "I don't want to be seen down here."

Reaching the doors, Evan and Nicolas were greeted by an overly large man in a black coat who looked them up and down as if they were in the wrong place. His one eye was white with a scar running the length of his cheek, and his head was bald beneath the bowler hat that did little to conceal the skin on his head.

"Are you gentlemen in the right place?" he asked in a deep voice that carried across the street, making passersby look in their direction. The man couldn't whisper even if he tried.

“There is someone in there we need to see,” Evan said calmly, lifting his head defiantly as he rose to the man’s challenging presence.

The man looked them over for a moment before stepping aside with one hand on the handle. “I’m warning you gentlemen now, this may not be as fancy as White’s, but we won’t tolerate any violence or unruly outbursts. You take your business outside if it looks like things will get heated.” He glared at them both sternly before opening the door.

Evan and Nicholas were met with a strong odor of stale beer and cigars as they stepped into the dimly lit room. The room was filled with a handful of round tables that had been placed a respectable distance apart, giving the patrons the freedom to gamble in peace. A loud cheer broke out as a man at one of the tables won his hand, jumping into the air and yelling with pride as he scattered his cards over the heads of the men who had lost.

An overwhelming sense of disgust came over Evan as he realized the kind of people who frequented the establishment were not people he would allow near his home. The bad decisions they had made in life were clearly written across their drawn faces, and most of them were gentlemen who had fallen from grace.

“There he is,” Nicholas said after scanning the room. “I’m presuming that he is the same man who tried to stop your

wedding.” He nodded to a table in the corner that was almost entirely hidden in the shadows.

“That’s him all right,” Evan agreed in disgust.

William Bennet was trying his best to keep himself concealed with a large coat and matching black hat, yet his face was clearly visible whenever he lowered his collar to sip his drink.

“I think we should ask him to take a walk outside,” Evan whispered in a hushed tone. “I don’t want to draw any attention to us.”

Nicholas nodded in agreement as they made their way over to the table, weaving between the tables as their boots squelched over the sticky floor.

Evan shuddered at the thought of the unclean floor and wondered when last it had been cleaned. Years of beer and other unmentionable substances had merged into the wood, forming a crust wherever liquid was absent.

“My Lord,” Evan said as William looked up. He stood his ground with Nicholas by his side, glaring at anyone that looked at them.

The Baron looked up with a panicked expression on his face, his eyes darting around for an escape. “What do you want?” he

barked almost angrily as he realized that he was boxed in with nowhere to run.

“We want a word with you,” Evan said coolly as he did his best to remain calm; the arrogant way the man was speaking to him let him know that while the Baron was not drunk, he had already consumed more than what was good for him.

“I don’t have any words, only aces; try again.” He lowered his hand of cards to the table and smirked as the surrounding tables burst into raucous laughter.

“Very amusing,” Nicholas said as he took a step forward. “I think what my friend was trying to say...” he leaned on the table “...was that we would like you to step outside so that we may have a conversation with you.” He glanced around the table of rough-looking men who were glaring at them, unimpressed by having their game interrupted.

“You see now,” the Baron said grumpily, “that might be a problem. I have just played a hand, and the boys don’t like to stop once the game has started.” He looked at the faces around the table for support. “Isn’t that right, boys?”

A low susurrant of agreement erupted amongst the men as Evan lost his cool.

“I think it would be in your best interest to come along with us,” he said angrily and took a step forward before bringing his face closer to the Baron’s, allowing Nicholas to step aside. “Unless you would like me to tell all of your friend’s how it is that you came about the money you are using to gamble with this evening,” he finished in a threatening tone.

William looked around the table at the men who had begun to eye him with suspicion. Gambling dens were filled with men who stole and robbed just to get their money, but even there, taking from helpless girls would not be received very kindly, especially not if they heard that it had been his own daughters who were wronged.

Evan waited for his response without taking his eyes from the man’s pudgy face.

“Very well,” he said reluctantly as he pushed back his chair and stood, “but make it quick.” He turned to the men around the table. “Count me out of this one, boys; I’ll be back for the next hand.”

The men grumbled as they turned back to their game and threw their bets in the centre of the table.

Following William from the room as he almost drunkenly swayed, Evan and Nicholas wove their way through the tables amidst many judgemental glances.

The cool air flooded their lungs as they stepped into the street bringing with it the much-needed relief from smoke and stale air.

“What is it that you wanted?” William asked irritably as he turned to them in the street. “You are interrupting my evening.”

“Not as much as your daughters’ evening was interrupted,” Evan said angrily as he confronted him.

“How do you know what goes on in my house?” William’s face filled with shock as he looked the men over. “Have you instilled spies as well as servants under my roof?” he spat bitterly.

“It doesn’t matter how I know what goes on,” Evan said darkly. “What matters is that this occurrence never happens again.” He took a step forward, towering over the Baron. “This is the last time your daughters come crying to me.”

“Or what?” William swayed slightly on his feet as he tried to keep his balance.

Losing his temper with the man’s nearly intoxicated behavior, Evan gripped his collar with both hands, bringing his nose inches away from his. “Or you will live to regret it, Baron Benett.” He narrowed his eyes. “In fact, I will be showing you

just how difficult your life will be if you do not change your ways,” he growled as anger clouded his judgement. The situation was far beyond speaking nicely as the saddened and scared faces of Iris and Layla swam before his eyes.

“How dare you speak to me like that?” William seemed almost panicked as he clutched at Evan’s hands that were gripping his shirt.

“I will speak to you in whatever manner I choose.” Evan let go of the man’s shirt and shoved him back as Nicholas placed a warning hand on his shoulder.

Two constables had rounded the corner and were making their way down the street.

“This is what will happen next,” Evan said more calmly as he straightened his sleeves. “All three of your daughters will be living under my roof for the time being, and until you get a hold of yourself and fix your life,” he lowered his voice again as the constables drew nearer, “you will not so much as glance in the direction of your daughters. I will be withdrawing the services of my staff and the food that I have been providing until then.”

“What am I supposed to do in an empty house?” William asked in disbelief as he took a step back.

“That is your choice,” Evan said darkly as he looked the man over, fighting the wave of disgust that made him want to slap the Baron for his troubles.

“Hey!” William screamed after them as both Evan and Nicholas turned to leave. “You can’t just do that! Who will cook for me?!”

“The choice is yours, My Lord,” Evan called back as they left. “Hopefully we will be seeing you again in future when you’ve sobered up.”

“I think you did the right thing,” Nicholas said under his breath as the constables passed them on the street.

“I hope so.” Evan glanced up at the moon as he thought of Margaret and her sisters. He was beginning to cherish them as if they were his own flesh and blood. “I really hope I have done the right thing.”



Margaret lay in her bed with the covers pulled up to her face as she waited for Nicholas to return. She had taken a chance and left the door unlocked if only to hear what had transpired with her father.

It was shortly after midnight when footsteps coming up the stairs made her shoot up in bed.

What have I done?!

She began to panic as her eyes darted to her side of the shared dressing cupboard. Letting her husband into her room suddenly felt like an impossible step, so she threw off the covers and jumped from the bed. Trusting him to deal with her father was one thing but trusting him with her heart was another matter entirely.

Reaching the door just as she heard the door to his bedroom close, Margaret quickly turned the lock and let go.

The handle tilted slightly for a second before stopping all together. It was clear that Evan had been expecting her to leave her side open.

What have I done...

Her heart felt heavy as she heard him backing away from the door.

CHAPTER 15



Sighing heavily, Margaret placed the pillow she had been busy embroidering on her lap and watched her sisters argue over who had the better technique when it came to the piano forte. Both girls had begun their lessons since Margaret's marriage, and both still needed a lot of practice.

Looking down at her lap, she ran her fingers over the neat row of letters without taking any of them in. Embroidery hadn't been something that she particularly enjoyed, but she needed something to occupy her time as a married woman now that she no longer needed to clean. The inactivity was maddening to her at times as she watched the maids do the tasks that she usually preformed.

To make matters worse, Evan had not come down for breakfast but had sent for a tray. She hoped and prayed that he would not shun her forever; she had, after all, intended to leave her door unlocked. At least when she cleaned, she could vent her frustrations instead of having to sit with her thoughts.

Shutting her eyes, she recalled the sound of his footsteps retreating the night before. Her heart had ached the second she realized he'd left and gone to bed.

"I see you girls have found my mother's old piano," Evan's voice drew her attention as her head snapped up. He came into the drawing room with his hands behind his back. If he was mad at her, he was hiding it well.

"We thought you were never coming down," Iris said accusingly with a notable amount of excitement in her voice before Layla could elbow her in the side.

Evan merely smirked as he walked over to the couch opposite Margaret and took a seat. "I apologise for my absence at breakfast, ladies." He looked Margaret in the eyes for the first time. "There were a few letters that needed to be written before I could come down."

Margaret breathed a sigh of relief at the relaxed look in his eyes.

At least he's not mad at me.

She hoped he wasn't just humoring her in front of her sisters. "I hope you did at least eat the food that was sent up?" she asked him, hoping her question would serve as an offering of

peace as the ever-present sparks of desire begun to flare once again.

What was it about the man that made her want to behave in a certain kind of manner that would not be acceptable in public or social settings.

“I did; thank you.” He smiled at her with a thankful nod.

“Evan.” Iris bounced in her seat, trying to get his attention back on her. “You are in the perfect position to hear me play,” she said cheerfully as she pushed her sister to the edge of the seat. “Do listen to me play and tell Layla that my technique is far superior to hers?” She waited eagerly for his response with her fingers poised over the keys.

“Go ahead,” Evan called over his shoulder as he kept his eyes on Margaret.

Iris began to play off-key as she attempted a new rendition of one of the classics in a painstaking performance.

“I hope you know you have sentenced us all to hours of terrible playing,” Margaret whispered as she nervously tucked at the strands of her work. She wasn’t entirely sure if he held the previous night against her or not.

“There is a reason for my madness,” he said with a wolfish grin of triumph and moved to the seat that was directly next to hers. “I wanted a moment alone with you to discuss what happened last night with your father.” He glanced over his shoulder at the girls who were fully emersed in their playing. “I don’t have to ask anyone to leave if they are preoccupied.”

Margaret let out a breath as her nerves began to get the better of her once again. She’d been so nervous and hung up on what his reaction would be to her locking her side of the door that she’s almost forgotten about the situation with her family. “I hope things at least went well,” she asked with one eyebrow raised.

Evan seemed to clench his jaw and bite the inside of his cheek as he looked at her. “Yes and no,” he said honestly with a sigh.

Bracing herself for what he was about to say, she placed the half-embroidered pillow beside her and turned her full attention to him with her hands folded in her lap. There were many things that could have gone wrong when it came to her father; she wanted to be prepared for the worst.

“It went well in the sense that there was no fallout or fight of any kind. It wasn’t exactly easy to withdraw him from that God-forsaken place,” he said rather irritably, “but we got him out with little to no resistance in the end.”

“That is something, I guess,” she conceded. “What did you say to him after you had gotten him to leave with you?” Her mind swam with the millions of possibilities. Her father’s response would have depended on how much he’d had to drink before they’d arrived. He was a far more reasonable man when he wasn’t under the influence of strong drink. “Had he already sold the girl’s things?” she asked doubtfully. Knowing her father, he wouldn’t have wasted any time in flogging the very expensive belongings.

“I didn’t bother to ask, actually,” Evan said gruffly. “It didn’t matter to me if he had. I went there to establish the ground rules of how things would work going forward.” He waved his hand in the air as if he were chasing a fly. “The things can be replaced; I was more worried about the way your sisters were being treated.”

“Rules?” Margaret lifted an eyebrow as she looked at him.

“Yes, I’m sorry I didn’t consult you first,” he said apologetically. “I can see now that I should have run it by you first as the lady of the house, but I thought it best that your sisters stay with us for a while until your father has sorted himself out, and longer if he doesn’t.”

Margaret felt an overwhelming amount of gratitude toward Evan as she listened to him speak. She’d spent most of her time over breakfast wondering if Evan would agree to her sisters staying with them. The fact that he had gotten there first

and acted on the idea warmed her heart to an even greater degree than it had before.

“I hope you don’t mind,” he continued when she didn’t say anything. “I told your father that he would be allowed to see all of you again when he’d had some time to sober up and change his ways.” He glanced at her sisters before looking at her again. “I hope you don’t mind?” He seemed boyish, as if asking for her permission. He was so sweet right then that Margaret had to stop herself from kissing him.

“Mind?” she asked almost tearfully as her emotions began to overwhelm her. “I’m so grateful to you that I don’t know what to say.” She lifted a hand and quickly wiped at the tears that threatened to run down her cheeks. Her father had always admonished her as a child for crying in front of others — apparently it displayed a great deal of weakness to those who needed to respect you.

“Good,” Evan said with a light smile around his lips. The man was gruff and hard to approach at the best of times, but he sure knew how to melt her heart with his kind gestures. “I was afraid I would have to sleep in the barn with Ham if you weren’t pleased with my suggestion,” he said almost smugly as he stretched out his legs in front of him.

“I would never allow that,” she replied more calmly as she picked up her pillow once again. “The barn is much too cold for Ham; you would have to sleep there on your own.” She

smirked at him and bit on her lips in an attempt to suppress her laughter.

Rolling his eyes, Evan gave her a small grin before standing. “There is just one last thing...” he said as he turned to her before leaving.

“Yes?” Her heart began to race again as she wondered if he was going to address the fact that she had locked her side of the door.

“I dismissed the butler and maids that were hired to look after your father’s house.” He searched her face before adding quickly, “I thought the change would help him see the error of his ways.”

Margaret wasn’t sure if she was relieved or concerned by what Evan had said as she watched him leave. On the one hand, she was relieved that he hadn’t brought up the fact that she had locked her side of the door, but on the other, she feared for her father.

It wasn’t that he didn’t deserve what was happening to him; it was just that he’d never been alone in the house, even after their mother had died. One if not all of them had always been there to pick up the pieces and see that he still had everything he needed.

I hope this is the wakeup he needs.

She heaved another sigh before standing. Her father would have to see to his own choices in life at present, but she needed to tell her sisters the news. It seemed as if she would be a mother to her sisters again, at least for the foreseeable future.



“I don’t see the problem,” Nicholas said as he loosed another arrow, missing the target, and he grimaced before turning toward Evan and leaning on his bow. “You needed a marriage of convenience with a woman who would not want more than that; you have that with Margaret. Why all of the concern all of a sudden?”

Evan reached for an arrow before stepping forward to take his stance. He’d decided to pay the Duke a visit again and discuss the issues of trust he was experiencing with Margaret. If anyone knew how difficult an arranged marriage could be at the start, it was Nicholas. He and Emma had gotten off to a rocky start, but things had worked out for good in the end.

“When did you start caring about Margaret’s feelings toward you?” the Duke asked with a suggestive smile; he’d been implying all afternoon that Evan had begun to feel far more for Margaret than just a marriage of convenience.

When did I start caring about her feelings for me? he asked himself as he positioned the bow and arrow against his mouth. “It’s not that I care how she feels about me in that way,” he said defensively as his arrow hit its mark. “I want her to know that she can trust me. My parents lived their lives trapped in a horrible marriage because of my father’s infidelity. I want Margaret to be able to trust me at least.”

It was true that Evan’s father had been religiously unfaithful to his mother, a fact that had torn them apart in more ways than one. He’d sworn that he’d never treat his wife in that way if he ever married.

“In lieu of her loving you?” Nicholas looked at him with his eyebrows raised and grinned.

“Margaret and I aren’t you and Emma,” Evan said tiredly as he shook his head. “Love isn’t a question or even a possibility here. I want her to trust me as a friend so that she can be comfortable in the home I am providing for her,” he tried to convince himself as well as Nicholas.

Shaking his head in amusement, the Duke chuckled. “I can see that this whole affair is either going to end with you having your heart shattered into a million pieces or a love match that far exceeds even mine and Emma’s.” He searched Evan’s face before clearing his throat.

“I’m starting to regret coming to you for advice,” Evan said irritably as he contemplated leaving; there was only so much teasing he could take.

“I’ll leave it be.” Nicholas raised his hands in surrender. “If you want to win your wife’s trust,” he smirked, “if not her affections, you need to give her something that shows her that you care.”

“Like what? I’m not about to ride across the country on the back of a horse in less than a week just to gain her trust,” Evan said as he recalled the time the Duke had gone on a journey to fetch a pair of spectacles for Emma while they were courting.

“You mock me.” Nicholas tilted his head to the side. “But did she not trust me more after that?”

“It’s hard to say when I don’t know what other coercion you used,” Evan snapped back.

“My point is...” Nicholas rolled his eyes as he tossed his bow from one hand to the other. “...you need to do something that shows Margaret how much you care...” He corrected himself when Evan glared at him. “How much you appreciate her,” he finished.

Taking his friend’s words to heart, Evan wondered what he could do that would show Margaret that he was serious about

their marriage and honoring his vows.

“If I could give you a piece of advice,” Nicholas broke into his thoughts, “you married her in such a rush that you never had a proper wedding celebration. Why not throw a ball in her honor and show her off to the ton as your wife.”

Feeling as if Nicholas were onto something, Evan considered how quickly they had gotten married and how Margaret must have felt. He didn't think she cared too much for all the pomp and frivolity of weddings as other women did, but he tried to picture how she would feel if he did something grand for her. Would she feel special enough to him to open up and trust him?

“That's not a bad idea,” Evan conceded. “She will be able to see how much I appreciate her agreeing to the marriage, and the ton already talk about her family in an unfavorable manner. It gives me a chance to put everyone in their places as well.”

“There you go,” Nicholas said with a grin. “And just for the record, Evan,” he said as he picked another arrow and placed it against the string. “All of my ideas are good.”

Smirking, Evan watched his friend hit the target, missing the middle by an inch. “Actually,” he said as he positioned another arrow. “Sometimes your ideas are a bit delusional.” He released his arrow hitting the mark sure and true. “For instance, you had the absurd idea that you could beat me.”

Nicholas threw back his head and laughed from the pit of his stomach.

CHAPTER 16



“*I*t’s such a lovely day for a stroll,” Emma said as she turned her face up to the sun and allowed her parasol to slip to the side.

Sophia had asked Margaret to promenade once again, and Margaret had thought it a wonderful idea to have Emma join. She had regaled them with tales of her own match with the Duke and the time she had sought to save some ducks from mean-spirited boys.

Both she and Sophia had laughed when Emma mocked the way her now husband had looked after falling into the water.

Margaret marvelled at the free-spirited way the woman lived her life. She’d heard rumors through the ton’s many gossip mills that Emma had struggled to make a match because of her bookish ways. Yet, it was hard for Margaret to think why anyone would not love her the second they met her. She had certainly gained a fondness for the Duchess that she hadn’t expected.

“My mother said that the sun is very bad for your skin,” Sophia pointed out cautiously, eyeing the Duchess from the side as they walked in a line beside the lake. It seemed as if she was having a hard time warming up to the Duchess.

Glancing to the side, Emma smiled at the young girl, trying her best to gain her trust. “I think my mother is past the stage where she worries about the condition of my skin,” she said teasingly. “She firmly believes that I am the Duke’s problem now.” Her attempts at lightening the mood were met with an awkward silence.

Sophia seemed as if she didn’t know how to act in the presence of the Duchess. Coming to her aid, Margaret changed the subject.

“I hope you will be attending the ball next week,” Margaret intervened in the conversation. “I will need all the help I can get,” she sighed as she thought of all the anxiety that planning the ball would bring. She was certain that Evan had meant well, but he had thrust the idea onto her without asking if she even felt up to the task.

“Of course,” Emma beamed. “This will be your very first ball in the eyes of the ton. Nicholas told me about it.” She smiled as she mentioned her husband’s name. Their love seemed to bloom even when they weren’t together.

“Do you think it’s a bit too soon for me to be doing something as big as hosting a ball?” Margaret voiced her concerns. She hadn’t been married for very long, and she still wasn’t a favorite in the eyes of the ton. She glanced to the side where a group of young women were chattering as they looked at them.

Emma followed her gaze as she held her head high and walked. “Nonsense, I think it’s a great idea for you to host a ball. And don’t let anyone make you believe anything other than that.” She seemed to be referring to the group of young women without saying it. “You will do just fine; you’ll see.”

Margaret gave her a grateful smile. It wasn’t often that people stood up for her, but she was finding herself surrounded by supportive people ever since Evan had come into her life.

“I think I know a thing or two about being an outcast,” Emma added as she glared at the women. “You will come to find in time that gossip has a way of fizzling out. Just keep your head up until then.” She winked. “It gets better after a while, I promise.”

Feeling grateful toward the woman for all of her advice, Margaret found herself taking an even greater liking to Emma. Hosting a ball for the first time in the eyes of the ton was daunting enough, but even more so when nobody was on your side. Things would be easier if someone as influential as the Duchess had her back.

There was also the question of Evan and why he felt the need to suddenly host a ball. He had said that the reasoning behind it was a surprise, but Margaret had failed to mention to him that she had never liked surprises. The only surprises she had ever received in the past had never been good.

“Good day, My Lady.” The group of women suddenly came up to Margaret and curtsied before greeting the others as well.

“We were so excited to hear about your ball, weren’t we ladies?” A red-headed girl with freckles and an upturned nose addressed her first. Her face was sour and pinched, giving her the look of someone who had just sampled a slice of lemon for the very first time. She was pretty in the sense that her bright green eyes sparkled mischievously as she spoke.

Margaret would have thought of her as beautiful if it hadn’t been for the malicious intent that was written across her face.

“Oh, very excited,” her friend agreed with a devious smile as she threw her blonde braid over her shoulder and smirked. She was beautiful in the same way as her friend with light brown eyes and pale skin, but there was something very off-putting in the arrogant way that she carried herself.

Mother was right — a person’s heart truly does determine their beauty.

She recalled her mother's words from when she was younger.

"In fact, we had a few questions," the red-headed woman said as the rest of the girls in the group began to giggle. There had obviously been a discussion on the topic before the ladies had decided to approach. It was for these exact reasons that Margaret hated being part of the ton.

Emma rolled her eyes and shook her head, not caring if any of them could see her.

Margaret felt an anxious twinge in the pit of her stomach at the openly obvious way they were mocking her. The one thing she had appreciated about living a life that was separate from the ton was that she never had to deal with other women whose motives were not pure.

"It's just that we were wondering if we had to belong to your exclusive club in order to attend," the blonde purred as the rest of the girls with brown hair smirked. It seemed as if the groups consisted of two women who stood out and several who had all been chosen from the same barrel.

"Club?" Margaret frowned as she struggled to understand what they were getting at.

"The hopeless but lucky club," the redhead batted her eyelashes as she spoke. "I assumed that the Duchess here had

formed the club, and you had joined after your recent marriage.” She turned to Sophia and looked her up and down. “I presume this one will be joining once she seeks the help of Miss Nosy Webster as well.”

Sophia clenched her jaw as she glared at the woman, tightening her grip around the handle of her parasol. It seemed to Margaret as if she were trying her best not to use it as a weapon.

“You were the one that founded the club, weren’t you, Your Grace?” one of the girls with light brown hair finally spoke up.

The penny finally dropped when Margaret realized that the women were referring to the fact that she and Emma had used the services of the matchmaker.

“Not that there is anything wrong with being part of the club,” the blonde nearly laughed as she spoke. “We just wanted to know if we were hopeless enough to join. Or if the ball attendance would be affected by the fact that none of us belonged.” She turned to Margaret and addressed her directly rather than the group at large, “But then again, with your family history, you might be a good candidate for the leader; you better watch out, Your Grace.” She winked at Emma.

Margaret felt her stomach drop at the mention of her family’s past. She had known that it wouldn’t be long before someone

brought it up, but she hadn't thought they'd be as malicious as the women were being.

A ripple of giggles surfaced amongst the girls.

Smiling as she closed her parasol and gripped it firmly with both hands, Emma took a step forward. "I trust you have all received your invitations to the ball that were sent out?" she asked confidently as she looked each woman in the eyes.

"We have, Your Grace," they said uncertainly.

"Wonderful," Emma said cheerfully. "That does then mean that you are welcome, as these things usually go." She chuckled. "An invitation does mean that you are welcome." She suddenly rounded on the two women who seemed to be the leaders. "As for your inquiry about our little club, I don't think that you really want to join."

"We were only..." the blonde woman began but quickly backed off when Emma gripped her parasol even tighter.

"You were only thinking that you could make fun of women who have already surpassed you in rank and dignity," Emma said pointedly. "I know very well what you were doing, a bold move I must say..." She waited for her words to sink in. "... considering the fact that both of us outrank you."

“I was just about to say that,” Sophia suddenly spoke up, regaining her confidence as she spoke with fire and determination in her eyes. She may have hated the concept of the matchmaker, but the one thing she hated more than that, was the lack of kindness in the world when anyone was being treated unfairly.

“I don’t think I understand,” the redhead turned to her friend with a frown.

“Don’t you, Miss Talbert?” Emma cocked her head to the side. “Weren’t you one of the ladies who had pursued my husband relentlessly in the months leading up to our engagement? Yet here I am married to him while you’re still on the market. Yes, we discuss these kinds of things when we are spending time together in our home.” She laid it on thickly. “It’s one of the perks of making a happy match.”

Margaret nearly choked on thin air at the expression on the woman’s pinched face. Emma and Sophia were certainly putting them all in their places.

“The hopeless but lucky club seems pretty good to me from where I am standing right now,” Emma said happily. “None of you would qualify in any case as one of the requirements is basic manners.”

“And correct me if I am wrong,” Sophia added as she tapped the tip of the umbrella against her mouth before pointing it at

the group. "Aren't all of you still looking for husbands?"

The blonde looked as if she were about to lunge at Sophia and tear out chunks of her hair.

"Well spotted," Emma praised Sophia before turning back to the group. "Besides, I don't think you would do well in our group; we are all unique individuals." She winked at Margaret. "You seem to have surrounded yourselves with a bunch of yes-men rather than people who would actually tell you the truth when you're behaving like a spoiled child."

The other women in the group looked rather sheepish as they averted their eyes.

Looking at one another, the women turned and left without so much as another word, evidently upset by the way Emma and Sophia had spoken to them.

"I hope we will still see you all at the ball?" Margaret finally spoke up as she called after the women who hurried to get away.

"Bravo," Emma congratulated her with a bright smile. "You will learn to deal with women like that in the future," she said encouragingly as she looped her arm into both Margaret's and Sophia's. "I rather like the idea of the three of us being in a

club. We should think of a better name though.” She chewed her lip thoughtfully.

“I don’t know,” Margaret argued. “I think we should own the title; hopeless but lucky does describe us perfectly despite the way they may have meant it.”

Emma laughed. “It does.” She turned to Sophia. “Please don’t think I’m saying that you are hopeless. I only meant Margaret and I were hopeless before we were married.”

“None taken,” Sophia beamed happily. “I’m proud to be part of a club with such outstanding women who will stick up for one another.”

“Hear, hear!” Emma cheered as they continued their stroll through the park.

“I’m so sorry,” Margaret said as she bumped into a woman wearing a black dress. “I’m so clumsy; I didn’t see you there. It was my fault, really,” she apologized as she helped the woman to her feet.

“Not to worry, My Lady.” The woman looked up at Margaret. “We all stumble into situations where we don’t belong...” Her words seemed to carry more weight than the situation at hand.

Margaret tried to place the woman's face, but she couldn't think for the life of her if she had seen her anywhere before. She didn't even seem slightly familiar to her, but there was something about her dress that sparked a distant memory.

Turning with an overly confident smirk on her face, the woman swaggered away from the group.

"Do you suppose she's in mourning?" Margaret asked curiously as the woman sauntered off, her hips making her black dress sway.

"Don't you know who that was?" Sophia asked with a hint of shock in her voice as if everyone knew. "She always wears black; it's her signature style."

"No?" Margaret frowned as she looked back to the woman who had almost disappeared down the path.

"She's one of the most notorious opera singers in London," Emma said as she shook her head.

Sophia seemed to perk up at the prospect of being able to enlighten Margaret about the subject. "They say she has a rich man of high-status look after her, and when that relationship ends, she gets another." Her eyes beamed as she looked at the others. "It must be nice to have that kind of power over men without having to commit to them fully." Sophia's eyes grew

wide as she added quickly, “Not that I agree with having affairs.”

“We know what you meant,” Emma laughed as she gripped her arm and led the young girl away. “I was once a hopeful young girl with bright ideas of being independent of men,” she chatted happily as she they walked away.

Margaret watched them go before turning her attention back to the woman whom she’d knocked over. She wondered what it was like to live an unfulfilling life like that or at least in her opinion what must have been a very unfulfilling life.

Turning away, she walked down the path to her friends, wondering if Evan had ever had a secret dalliance with a woman like her. The thought was far too unsettling as she pushed it away and focussed on the upcoming ball.

CHAPTER 17



Evan couldn't believe his eyes as Margaret came down the stairs. Heads turned to look at her as people whispered, watching her make her grand entrance into the ball. He'd never seen anyone look as beautiful in a light pink gown as she did that evening.

Her strawberry-blonde hair had been pulled back into a tight bun with hundreds of pearls pinning the strands into place. Yet it was the loose curls that hung around her face that drew him in the most. Her neck and ears were adorned with bright pearls that he had bought for her as a gift to celebrate the ball.

"You look absolutely stunning," Evan said as he took her hand and gently kissed the skin, causing a light blush that matched her dress to spread over her cheeks.

"Thank you," she said almost breathlessly and held his hand.

Taking his time to examine his wife in her brand-new dresses, Evan felt a wave of desire for her unlike anything he'd felt

before. He wanted nothing more than to take her upstairs and remove the fabric, revealing her creamy skin.

“You look wonderful,” Emma interrupted his thoughts as she came forward and kissed Margaret on the cheek. “And I must say...” She retrieved a pair of spectacles from her bag that Margaret had never seen her use before. “...the mansion looks absolutely stunning.”

Evan had to concede that while he didn't care for flowers or garlands, Margaret had done a fine job of making the main hall look spectacular. White roses hung from every banister and available pillar, giving the white marbled floor a look of purity that he hadn't noticed before.

“Thank you, Your Grace,” Margaret said kindly after greeting Nicholas as well. “I didn't know that you needed spectacles,” she remarked curiously.

“Don't let her fool you into thinking she can see without them,” Nicholas said as he glanced fondly at his wife. “She's as blind as a bat, even with them on sometimes,” he teased.

“Oh, you.” Emma playfully swatted her husband's arm before turning back to Margaret. “I have trained myself to see a bit better if I concentrate on my surroundings,” she explained. “A skill that has improved immensely along with my confidence.”

“You should let them tell you the story of how the Duke traveled half-way across the country in an effort to purchase those spectacles,” Evan added gruffly, cranky from having his moment with his wife usurped.

Emma and Nicholas both laughed.

“You should tell your charming wife about the way you tried to convince us to stay away from each other,” Emma said teasingly as she gave Evan a pointed look of accusation.

“Did you really?” Margaret seemed shocked that he’d do something like that.

He didn’t know why, but he felt the need to defend himself in Margaret’s presence. If it had been anyone else, he would have simply walked away and let them make fun of him, Yet the need to prove himself burned in his conscience. “I was only trying to save them from themselves,” he said gruffly. “You should have seen how they behaved before they were married.” He nodded toward them in turn.

Emma seemed to bite on her lips in an attempt to stop herself from laughing while Margaret watched the entire scene with abject fascination.

“This one thought he was God’s gift to women while being afraid of a lake, and Emma couldn’t walk into a room without

knocking over all and sundry.” He glared at both of them in turn.

“Come, my love,” Nichilas leaned over and whispered in his wife’s ear, loud enough for Evan and Margaret to hear, “I think we hit a nerve.” He smiled triumphantly at his friend before guiding his wife away.

“Nicholas was afraid of a lake?” Margaret turned to him with an amused frown.

“It’s a long story,” Evan shook his head and shut his eyes as he pinched the bridge of his nose between his finger and thumb.

“I’d like to hear it sometime,” she said gently. “It sounds like a fascinating story.”

Evan opened his eyes to see the soft smile on her lips that melted his heart, washing his anger and frustration away. “Come.” He held out his hand to her. “I think it’s time we get the ball started,” he suggested as he led her into the middle of the floor.

Margaret glance around nervously as she mouthed the words. “What are you doing?”

“Ladies and gentlemen, if I may have just a moment of your time, please,” he raised his voice so that everyone could hear

what he was saying.

The guests all gathered around the edges of the dance floor as they looked on expectation.

“You may all be wondering why there is suddenly a ball tonight.” He looked around the room at all of the faces who had gathered. “The truth is that I have been remiss in celebrating my new wife. So, without further ado, ladies and gentlemen, I give you Lady Margaret Sutherford, Viscountess of Northfork.” He held her hand up high in his for all to see.



Feeling her stomach flutter with nerves as she watched the proud way that Evan showed her off to the ton, Margaret found herself taking a deep breath.

Did he really throw a ball just to celebrate our marriage?

She felt shocked and touched at the grand gesture that she hadn't been expecting at all.

“Would you care to share this dance with me, My Lady?” Evan asked with a smile as he turned to her.

“There isn't any music,” she whispered uncertainly amidst the thick silence that filled the air as everyone watched. Glancing

around the room, she noted the curious expressions on everyone's faces.

"There will be," Evan whispered back as he raised his hand in the air.

It was then that Margaret looked up to notice the string quartet that had been hiding above the guests on the balcony overlooking the floor.

Taking her hand as the music began to play, Evan took her in his arms and began to move about the room in a light dance that caught Margaret completely by surprise as the room erupted in a wave of applause. She would never have thought that Evan would be a dancer. She'd had him pegged as one of those men who clumsily danced only when forced.

"I hope you are enjoying your surprise." He drew her attention to him. "I wanted to show you how much I appreciated your presence in my life. It isn't every woman that would have agreed to a marriage of convenience and even less that would have pulled it off with the amount of grace that you display." His eyes seemed honest as he spoke.

Margaret's throat suddenly grew tight as tears filled her eyes. She was more than just touched that he'd made the effort to prove his loyalty and devotion to her. "Everything is perfect," she managed to breath as the rest of the world disappeared. All

she could see was his handsome features and the wild look in his eyes that seemed to ravage her body like a hungry wolf.

Tightening his grip on her waist, Evan winked at her. “I meant what I said; I will never hurt you on purpose.” His thumb gently massaged her wrist as he looked into her eyes with a look that made her breath catch in her chest.

Her skin tingled at the feel of his hand on her waist as they danced, spinning her away and pulling her back in with ease — much like the way they flirted and bickered with one another. It wasn’t long before more people had made their way onto the floor, dancing around them in pairs.

Evan looked into her eyes as the song came to an end. “Would you mind joining me in the study, Lady Sutherland?” he whispered in her ear, making a wave of bumps spread over her skin from his hot breath.

Feeling as if her heart would leap from her chest, Margaret allowed herself to be led from the floor and up the stairs. His subtle flirting was beginning to make her core shudder with desire. People watched as they left but quickly turned back to their conversations and drinks.

“What is the matter?” Margaret asked as Evan pulled her along the gallery.

“Is there something else you needed to show me?” She looked over her shoulder at the guests who were milling about. “We can’t be very long; the ball has just started.” She felt puzzled by his behavior as he led her into the study and shut the door behind them. “Evan there isn’t any light in here.”

“We don’t need light to talk...” he said in a husky voice as he advanced on her, resting one hand above her head as she pressed her back into the door. Placing his index finger beneath her chin, he gently tilted her mouth toward his as he leaned in closer.

“Evan...” Her heart beat at an uncontrollable pace as her lips parted. “The guests —” Her words were suddenly cut short by his lips as he pressed her back against the door, holding both of her hands above her head as they kissed.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered against her lips as he drew back. “I just can’t wait anymore.”

Margaret barely had any time to think as he kissed her again with even more passion than he had done at first, slipping his tongue into her mouth and searching the warm depths.

It wasn’t long until his hands were on her hips, massaging her body as he felt her skin through the fabric of her dress. A soft moan escaped her lips as his hands reached her breasts, gently squeezing the mounds.

“Do you want me to stop?” he asked in a husky tone before lowering his hands.

Placing her hands over his, Margaret guided them back to her breasts, completely overcome by all of the sensations he was creating in her body. “Don’t stop,” her voice was barely above a whisper in the dark room.

Taking his cue, Evan kissed her neck and continued to massage her breasts until her nipples were hard, poking through the sequined fabric of her dress.

Moaning in pleasure, she lay her head against the wood of the door and allowed her body to melt into his. Confusion filled her mind as she felt him drop to her knees in front of her on the carpet; they had only just begun their steamy dalliance, and she wasn’t sure what he could be doing. Her confusion suddenly turned to curiosity as Evan slipped his hands under her dress and pulled her stockings along with her undergarments to the ground.

Placing his hands on her ankles, Evan guided her one leg up and placed it over her shoulder, kissing the top of her foot before making his way up her calf and thigh with gentle kisses that sent waves of pleasure tingling over her skin.

Her mind became clouded with new sensations as he stopped at her inner thigh, nibbling the flesh with his lips and tongue before kissing his way to her core.

Sucking in a sharp breath through her teeth, Margaret opened her mouth and stared into the dark room as Evan's hot tongue filled her core with pleasure she hadn't thought was possible.

"Evan..." she breathed his name as her eyes rolled back in her head, and she used one arm for support behind her back on the door and the other on the top of his head.

The rhythmic motions he was using to explore her most intimate parts were sending her to heights she hadn't thought were possible as she began to pant and whimper from the sensations.

"Hmm," Evan moaned against her thigh before renewing his efforts with added passion and vigour.

Margaret suddenly felt as if she would explode as her body tensed in after each wave of pleasure. "Evan," she panted heavily as a fine sheen of sweat broke out over her skin. "My legs are starting to shake; I don't think I can stand like this any longer."

"I've got you," he said breathlessly against her folds, retracting his tongue for a second before licking again. "Just let go; your body will do the rest."

Feeling as if she were about to faint, Margaret placed her hand over her mouth and screamed as her body erupted in a fit of ecstasy that sent her over the edge with spasms after spasms of glorious pleasure.

Using his hands on her thighs to hold her steady, Evan continued to gently lick with tender strokes until her body shuddered and collapsed against the door. He gave her thigh a final kiss before coming to his feet and fixing her dress.

Margaret allowed herself to be held as she placed her head on his shoulder and shut her eyes. She was sure that her legs would have failed if it hadn't been for Evan holding her up. "Is that what it feels like between a man and a woman?" she asked in a whisper.

Music from the ball drifted up to them and penetrated the door as Evan held her tightly against his body, pressing kisses on the top of her head. People chatted happily and laughed, oblivious to the scene that had just taken place in the study.

Shutting her eyes, Margaret listened to the steady beating of his heart.

"It is sometimes," he eventually said in a distant voice as if he were lost in thought. "It isn't always that good. The man needs to be a skilled lover, and the woman needs to be receptive to what he is doing." He placed his cheek against the top of her

head as he gently swayed her in his arms as if he were lulling her to sleep.

“Thank you for showing me that,” she whispered against his chest, feeling completely at ease.

“You’re welcome,” he said as he swallowed and cleared his throat. “I think we should head back down; people might come looking for us.” He searched for her undergarments and helped her put them back on in silence.

Margaret’s legs still felt shaky and unsteady as she dressed. She’d wanted to stay like that in his arms, but a part of her knew that their presence was required downstairs. How was she going to be able to face her guests without thinking of what had just happened between them? She wished they had been in bed together so that she could lay on his chest, falling asleep in his arms as she listened to the steady beating of his heart.

Realizing with sudden shock that she had just been intimate with her husband, Margaret held back.

“Is anything the matter?” he asked with a frown as he came forward and stroked her cheek.

“No,” she lied. “I just need a moment to compose myself and make sure my hair and dress are in order.”

“Very well,” he placed a kiss on her forehead and lifted her chin. “I’ll be waiting downstairs for you when you are ready.”

Listening to his footsteps retreat down the hall, Margaret walked over to the desk and leaned against the cold wood. She knew what it meant for a man and a woman to be intimate with one another; she just didn’t know what it meant for her and Evan and their marriage of convenience.

How do I feel about him? she wondered in panic as her mind searched for an answer. There was a strong possibility that she was developing feelings for her husband.

CHAPTER 18



*B*right light spilled through the open drawing room windows as Margaret sat watching Evan from the opposite couch. His handsome features were angled down, looking at a letter as the light caught his face just right, illuminating his strong jaw. His blonde hair lit up like an angel, almost as if it were on fire.

Thoughts of their steamy moment together in the study on the night of the ball, filled her mind. He'd been so tender and gentle with her over the past few days that she'd felt an overwhelming warmth toward him.

So much so that she had endeavored to leave her side of the door unlocked. Whether he hadn't noticed yet or just felt the need to respect her privacy, she wasn't sure, but the door remained untouched. Lifting her hand to her neck, she gently massaged the tingling flesh as she recalled the way her body had felt beneath his touch.

"What are you making over there?" Evan's voice broke her train of thought as she quickly snapped out of the daze she had

been in. He'd taken a seat with a stack of letters in his hands that needed his attention.

Feeling a hot blush spread over her cheeks, she quickly lowered her eyes to the project in her lap. "Just a pattern for a baby ribbon," she quickly explained as she lifted the half-knitted bow for Evan to see.

A sudden look of shock came over his face as Evan lowered the letter he was reading, his face turning white. "Is one of your friends pregnant?" He swallowed hard before frowning.

"No, no, it's for Ham," she quickly explained when she realized that a lot had been left open to interpretation.

"Oh," he seemed relieved as his shoulders relaxed once again. Picking up the letter he had been holding, he searched the page for a second before frowning and lowering it back down. "Wait, I have a few more questions."

"Yes?" Margaret raised one eyebrow and smiled, fully expecting him to berate her for the idea.

"We are talking about Ham the dog?" He seemed to be searching the depths of his mind in an attempt to recall if he knew any people that were named after food.

“Yes.” She lowered her needles back down and shook her head ever so slightly. “My dog named Ham.”

“Ah,” he said and pursed his lips as if he were still trying to make sense of the matter. “Beyond that, is Ham not a boy?” He shifted uncomfortably in his seat for a moment. “I mean I did see his... you know,” his voice trailed off as he gestured with his hand, thrusting his finger in the air.

The uncomfortable and gruff manner that Evan was using to address the topic of knitting was highly amusing to Margaret as she did her best to try and hide her mirth. “Ham is a male dog, yes.”

“Other than the fact that you are knitting a bow intended for human infants for a dog...” He shook his head as if to say he was picking his battles. “Why is the bow pink?”

“I don’t have another color, and I did not feel like going to the market or shops once the idea occurred to me,” she explained her plight. “Besides, don’t you think pink would be a flattering color on Ham?” she teased.

The truth of the matter was that she had had a single ball of pink yarn left after attempting to knit a scarf, and the small bow was the only pattern she could find that would utilize the rest. She had only thought of Ham because the cats would attempt to remove her fingers if she tried it on one of them — a lesson she had learned the hard way when Iris had had the

bright idea to knit a sweater for Vinnie and tried to put it over her head.

“I...” Evan seemed at a loss for words.

“I beg your pardon, My Lord,” Edward came into the room, putting an end to the fun that Margaret was having with Evan. “My Lady,” he bowed politely to Margaret, “there is a gentleman at the door who says that he would like a word with you.”

“Did he give a name?” Edward asked more seriously, adapting his gruff persona once again.

“Baron William Benett,” Edward informed them as he placed his hands behind his back and held his head up high.

A sudden wave of nausea spread through Margaret’s body. There was every chance that her father was there to demand the return of his daughters. The last thing she wanted was to have a stand-off with him, not now that she and her sisters were beginning to settle into their new lives.

Glancing at her face, Evan seemed to consider his options before standing. “Thank you, Edwards; I shall see the gentleman outside on my own.”

“No,” Margaret said calmly as she pushed the needles and yarn aside, placing her hands in her lap and straightening her spine. “Allow him to come inside,” she addressed Edwards before turning to Evan. “I would like to receive him here in the drawing room.”

Evan seemed to hesitate for a moment before dismissing the butler with a nod. “Are you sure?” he asked her with a worried frown.

“I am,” She let out a deep breath. “I appreciate the way you have handled the situation with my father up until now, but I need to take a stand myself. It was only a matter of time until the matter resurfaced.”

Searching her face with a look of pride mixed with concern, Evan nodded again, almost as if he were relenting to the situation at hand and allowing her to take the lead.

Margaret felt nothing but gratitude toward him and the respect he was displaying toward her decision. She was beginning to realize that her husband was the kind of man who would take charge whenever it was necessary but still allow her the freedom of decision when it came to delicate matters.

“Baron William Benett,” Edwards announced at the door after a couple of minutes had passed.

Composing herself with a final deep breath, Margaret stood along with Evan and waited for her father to be shown into the room.

“I’m grateful that the two of you agreed to see me,” William said humbly as he removed his brown hat, holding it in his hands and fidgeting with the brim.

Evan waited for Margaret to take the lead, glancing in her direction.

“It’s good to see you looking well, Papa. How have you been?” she began on safer ground, testing the waters to see if he was sober. It was true that William looked better than he had the last few times that they had been together. While his clothes were in desperate need of ironing, he seemed sober enough to hold a conversation, and the little hair he possessed had been neatly slicked back.

“I’ve been better,” he said with a sad smile that displayed his age in the wrinkles around his eyes. “I was hoping that all of you would be here today,” he continued after a moment of silence. “I wanted a word with you and your sisters.” He quickly looked up at Evan. “And with you, of course, My Lord.”

Margaret snuck a peak at Evan’s face, noticing the way the muscle in his jaw jumped. It was obvious that he was having a hard time reading the situation at hand.

“I’m afraid that Iris and Layla are currently with their tutor,” she said firmly. “I wouldn’t like to disturb them at present.”

William seemed to panic slightly as he looked from one to the other, licking over his cracked lips. “I see.”

“You may address any concerns you have to Margaret and myself,” Evan said when he finally spoke up, taking charge as if he were their father. “Would you like to take a seat, My Lord?” He gestured to the couch in a respectful manner.

Margaret marvelled at the way Evan was handling the situation with dignity. Any other man would have thrown her father out after the way he had acted, but her husband was honorable enough to give him a second chance.

William seemed surprised at the level of respect he was receiving and kindly accepted the offer. “Thank you, My Lord,” he said to Evan and sat across from Margaret who tucked her dress beneath her knees and sat.

Evan chose to sit beside his wife rather than returning to his seat, placing an arm behind her back on top of the couch.

“I wanted to apologize for my behavior,” William began after clearing his throat. “My behavior hasn’t always been exemplary.”

A myriad of conflicting emotions ran through Margaret's mind as she looked at her father. She'd waited a long time to hear an apology from him, but the lack of trust she harbored in her heart was stopping her from taking him seriously. Not to mention the fact that he was making a blanket apology for everything he had done wrong.

"I know I don't have a right to expect your forgiveness." He wrung the brim of his hat between his fingers until the stiff fabric was almost wrinkled. "Especially not yours." His eyes moistened as he looked at his daughter.

"What..." Margaret shut her eyes and shook her head as the emotions began to overwhelm her. "What, may I ask, has brought on this sudden change?" She took a deep breath, struggling to believe a word he was saying.

"It wasn't sudden enough," William said with a sigh and leaned back in his seat, his shoulders slumping as if he had been defeated. "It's been a week since Evan..." He paused and nodded respectfully. "...since the Viscount came to see me. It took me a while to understand that he meant what he said." He swallowed hard. "It was not until the next day when I awoke to find your sisters and all of the staff gone that I realized what a fool I had been. I had to find food for myself. The silence in the house was almost deafening." He gave a half-hearted chuckle. "I even missed the snoring of that blasted dog of yours."

Margaret clutched the edge of her seat with her fingers until her knuckles turned white. Her father's words fell on dry soil as he looked into the distance with a tearful glint in his eyes. It would take her a long time to forgive him if his words were true. There had been far too much water that had passed under the bridge to allow for her to forgive him as easily as that.

"I guess you could say that the final realization of how badly I had messed up came this morning." He scratched the back of his neck. "The maid that had been in our employ since your mother had hired her..." He squinted as if he were trying to recall something. "...Melissa, I think her name was, left a note saying that she would no longer be staying on."

He misses being taken care of.

Reaching a final conclusion on whether or not she could trust her father, Margaret cleared her throat and placed her hands in her lap. "Her name was Betty," she said almost resentfully. "And I don't blame her for leaving — more than ten years of loyal service, even if it was just once a week, and her employer still can't remember her name."

William seemed shocked as he looked at his daughter, his mouth hanging slightly open as his hand stopped moving his hat. The rest of his body remained still as his chest rose and fell with anxiety. It was clear to them that he hadn't expected her not to accept his apology, despite him saying that he hadn't.

“I can appreciate the fact that you have had an awakening.” She intertwined her fingers on her lap and held back the angry tears that threatened to spill over. “But one simple apology in the space of one week isn’t enough to erase the years of difficulties that my sisters and I have had to endure.”

A single tear spilled down his cheek as her father sat looking at her, the hurt evident in his eyes.

“I will not speak for Iris or Layla, but I can say that I need a lot more time to consider your words before I can accept any kind of apology,” Margaret said honestly and stood. “I thank you for coming,” she concluded stiffly as she rang the small golden bell that would summon Edwards before replacing it on the small table. “Edwards will see you out. I will tell the girls that you would like to speak to them at their earliest convenience.”

William seemed stunned as he sat staring up at her for a few moments. Eventually coming to his senses, he pushed himself up and stood, keeping his hat in his hands. “I can see that I have raised a strong-willed and independent young woman,” he said in a hurt tone that was almost proud. “That is a good thing; it will serve you well in life.”

“Mother raised me,” she replied as directly as she could while holding back the flood of emotions that threatened to burst. “You were merely there in the background of my childhood, holding a bottle.”

“I see,” William’s eyes seemed to clear of all tears as if someone had thrown a bucket of cold water in his face. “I can only say that I deserved that, and I hope that in time you will find it in your heart to forgive me.” He dipped his head on his way out the door, disappearing around the corner just as the butler came to see him out.

Feeling as if the dam that had been filling for years had burst, she sunk back into her seat and hid her face in her hands as she began to sob.

“Let it all out,” Evan whispered above her head as strong arms enclosed around her shoulders, drawing her closer to his chest. “I’m so proud of you for how you handled that.” He kissed the top of her head as he gently stroked her hair. “It couldn’t have been easy to tell your father how you felt.”

Margaret felt a wave of relief course through her body as she finally found the validation she had been seeking throughout her adult life. It was almost as if Evan had hugged her broken pieces together again. She hoped and prayed she would someday find it in her heart to forgive the man who had let her down so many times before in her life, but for now, she had Evan on her side, and that was enough.

CHAPTER 19



Evan came downstairs the following day to be greeted by a scene of chaos that made his heart leap in his chest. Margaret had cried the previous night after her father had left, retiring to her room for rest. He'd thought that had been the end of things, but the scene that greeted his eyes made him wish he had checked on her at least once.

A line of servants ran past the bottom of the stairs in such a hurry that all he could see was a string of black with white frills from the maids' uniforms.

"What the devil is going on?" he yelled and rushed down the stairs, taking them two at a time in an attempt to find out what had happened.

People seemed to ignore his presence as they panicked and ran for dear life. Evan wasn't sure if they were running toward or from something. His heart raced, and his mind blurred with all the possibilities. He hadn't seen Margaret since she'd gone to bed. He'd never forgive himself if something had happened to her while he was sleeping.

“Stop him before he leaves the mansion!” a footman came screaming around the corner just as Evan reached the bottom step. Breaking into a run, he gave chase, passing servants as they looked at him in shock.

I should never have let him leave yesterday!

He berated himself for allowing the Baron into the mansion; he should have stuck to his original decision and seen him outside. There was no telling what the man would do if he was upset and under the influence. Shoving some of the footmen aside, Evan burst into the drawing room where a group of servants had gathered in a circle.

“Margaret!” he yelled at the top of his lungs and broke through the barrier of people.

“Yes?” She looked up at him with a puzzled expression, her cheeks flushed with color as a few strands of hair clung to her forehead. She was by all accounts perfectly safe and unharmed.

Halting in confusion, Evan looked up to see the servants giving him worried glances, backing away slightly in a respectful manner. “What is going on here?” he turned back to Margaret as he realized that the center of the circle consisted of his wife, Ham, and a very sheepish butler who was propped up on one knee.

Ham's giant pink tongue flopped from his mouth and lulled to the side, and he breathed heavily, seemingly pleased by whatever it was that he had done. The small pink bow hung from his neck like a bowtie, dangling on one side.

"I'm afraid it's my fault." Margaret straightened the pink bow around the dog's neck and stood. "I had attempted to place the bow on Ham." She gestured back to the dog who still seemed chuffed with life in general. "But I'm afraid he saw it as a bit of a game, so I asked one or two of the maids to help me hold him still."

Evan looked around the room at the flushed faces of his staff; some of them averted their eyes or pretended to pick a piece of lint from their uniforms.

"Well..." She bit her lower lip and wrung her hands in front of her dress. "...things got a little out of hand from there. It became a joint effort to put the bow on Ham."

"I can see that," Evan straightened and glared at one of the footmen who sniggered at the dog who flopped on his back, wiggling his overly large belly in the air. "You can all get back to work now," he reprimanded with a stern glance around the room.

A hurried susurrantion of throat clearing and coughing filled the room as maids and footmen alike scattered in haste, hurrying

from the room.

Turning back to the butler, Evan waited for an explanation.

“I’m afraid I got a bit carried away in the endeavor myself,” Edwards sniffed as he stood and straightened his jacket. “I do apologize, My Lord.”

Ham grunted as he turned to playfully bite the man’s shoe, eliciting a giggle from Margaret as the butler did his best to ignore the dog’s playful efforts.

“If I may, I will be getting on with my duties now, My Lord,” Edwards said stiffly then he waited for Evan to nod before walking from the room with a stiff leg as Ham hung on to his pant leg. It almost seemed as if his leg were made of wood as he moved it without bending his knee.

“Do you enjoy creating chaos in my house?” Evan narrowed his eyes and turned to Margaret with one eyebrow raised in question.

“I am so sorry Evan,” she said with her hands raised to her mouth, covering the fact that she was trying not to laugh at the way Edwards had to walk. “I honestly didn’t mean to create so much chaos.”

Heaving a sigh of relief, Evan felt his body relaxing. Things could have been much worse, having to deal with unruly pets and staff was preferable to what he had been imagining. “I thought that...” his words trailed off as his mind pushed the idea of something happening to her away.

“You thought what?” She sobered up from her laughter and lowered her hands, revealing a look of concern.

“Never mind.” He shook his head, not wanting to recall the fear he had felt at thinking he could have lost her. “Please try not to cause any more troubles with the staff; there are things that need to be done to ensure the smooth running of the household,” he instructed her in a gentle tone.

“I understand.” She seemed curious as she glanced at his face. “I didn’t mean to cause you any worry. You must have had a dreadful fright to come downstairs and find the staff in such disarray.” She placed her hands behind her back as she spoke.

“I thought something had happened to you.” He took a step forward as the anxiety he had felt over possibly losing her came rushing back. He hadn’t realized just how much her presence meant to him until that moment.

“Evan, I am sorry.” Her voice softened to a whisper as he raised his hand to stroke her cheek with the tips of his fingers.

“Please be careful...” he whispered. “You’ve become...” His voice trailed off as Ham came bounding into the room with the ribbon firmly secured around his neck.

Margaret kept her eyes on his face, her breathing deepening as she waited for him to say what he had meant.

Clearing his throat, Evan took a step back. “I just meant to say that you should be careful,” he said gruffly, avoiding her gaze. “I want to avoid accidents at all costs.”

What was I going to say?

He suddenly felt trapped by the change in his own feelings toward her. There was no reasonable explanation he could think of as to why he had reacted the way he had. Chalking it up to the fact that he felt a deep sense of duty toward her as his wife, he decided to change the subject. His mind kept wandering to her mouth and the subtle glances she was giving his lips. It was taking all of his resolve not to draw her into his arms and kiss the lips that tasted like heaven to him.

What power does this woman hold over me?

“There are a few things I need to see to before lunch,” he said firmly, feeling the confusion in her gaze. “I won’t keep you any longer; I know you probably have a lot to do as well.”

“I was actually wondering if you would like to take a walk with us this afternoon. It might help relax us all,” she spoke softly as if she had been disappointed by his reaction, glancing at his lips as she spoke.

“Us?” Evan asked tiredly as he rubbed his forehead with his finger and thumb. The morning had not started the way he had hoped, and he wasn’t in the mood to deal with any more animal shenanigans.

“Me, Ham, and the cats,” she replied with a frown as if she couldn’t understand why he was confused.

“You walk the cats?” he asked with another frown.

“Oh, yes, they love walking,” she said with a delighted smile.

“But...” He decided to leave his questions where they were. The chaos of the morning had already made him tired. “Very well, I shall join you for a walk this afternoon,” he accepted her offer in light of the fact that they needed to spend more time together as a married couple.

“Wonderful,” she gave him a smile. “I think it will be good for all of us.”

Evan watched as she turned, calling Ham behind her as she left the room with an air of disappointment.

What had she been expecting me to say?

Her deep sense of disappointment made him wonder if their night in the study had affected her in a way that he hadn't foreseen. He hadn't been able to stop thinking of her ever since they'd been together. He'd noticed that her side of the door remained unlocked, but he hadn't wanted to complicate things any further than they already had.

Their marriage of convenience was shaping up to be trickier and more complicated than he had imagined.



Margaret watched as Evan threw a stick for Ham, chuckling to himself as the dog bounded after his prize like a bear. He'd become so accustomed to the animals that Butter effortlessly wrapped her body around his legs without him even noticing what she was doing.

Even Vinnie had managed to secure a place on his lap during their evening reading sessions in the drawing room. It was strange how easily they had fallen into a routine as husband and wife and even stranger how he had taken a liking to the animals over time.

Her brow suddenly wrinkled into a frown as she recalled the moment before lunch when he'd stroked her cheek.

What did he mean to say before we were interrupted?

Her heart ached for an unknown reason as she watched the way he knelt down to retrieve the stick, petting Ham on the head before throwing it again. She wondered why he hadn't made use of the fact that she had left her side of the door unlocked. Her heart and mind were split in two, wondering whether she wanted him to consummate the marriage fully as husband and wife. His touches had left an indelible mark on her that she couldn't remove from her mind.

“He’s quite the little runner,” Evan laughed as she caught up to him.

“Ham has always liked playing fetch,” she pasted a sad smile on her face in an attempt to hide her thoughts. Wondering how he felt about her wasn't something she wanted to do in front of him, not when she was unable to hide her emotions.

“Do you do this with them every day?” he asked as he spotted Vinnie and Cheese weaving in and out of the tall grass that grew beside the small stream on the mansion property. One had to walk for fifteen minutes before the idyllic picture came into view, but it was almost like another world with the babbling brook and tall reeds.

“Only when I have a minute,” she said as she crossed her arms over her chest. “The maids take turns walking them when I

have other things to do. It's important for them to get adequate exercise instead of lying around the house all day. They only do it on their afternoons off of course," she added quickly, remembering his reaction to the staff helping her with Ham's bow.

The corner of Evan's mouth tilted up as he smiled at the way Ham splashed on the edge of the water.

"The water isn't too deep, is it?" she asked with concern as Ham went in a bit deeper to retrieve his stick. "He never learned how to swim."

"It's not too deep," Evan reassured her and nodded toward the left where the stream widened. "He would have to go far in order to be caught by any kind of current. The water is far too weak to allow a dog of his size to be swept away."

Feeling a deep sense of relief, Margaret relaxed as she brought her hand up to her throat, smiling at the way Ham splashed in the water.

"At least we won't have to worry about any of our cats being swept away," Evan laughed as he pointed toward Cheese. The grey-striped cat quickly retreated and shook her paw in disgust after venturing too close to the water's edge.

“Our cats?” Margaret raised an eyebrow as her heart suddenly fluttered with a strange sensation. Evan had always referred to the animals as hers in the past.

Evan’s face filled with panic as he looked at the ground with a frown. “They are ours,” he said after clearing his throat. “I mean, we are married, and I am responsible for you and your sisters. Naturally, I would be responsible for your animals as well.” He gently nudged Butter away as she brushed up against his leg again.

“Naturally.” Margaret bit on her lips and suppressed a giggle.

“I didn’t mean anything more than that,” he said gruffly as he glowered at the ginger cat that was purring away with a loving look in her eyes no matter how hard Evan attempted to shake her off. “I still think that animals belong in a barn or some form of a shed,” he tried his best to defend himself.

“Mm-hmm,” Margaret nodded in agreement, not wanting to burst his bubble. The truth was that Evan had warmed up to the animals in such a way that it was hard for him to deny the fact that he was becoming fond of them if not falling in love with their little personalities and quirks.

I wonder if he’s become fond of me in the same way.

“I think we better head back,” he interrupted her thoughts just as Ham came running back with the stick in his slobbery mouth. The dog was covered up to his neck in water and sand. “One of the footmen can give him a bath outside the kitchen when we get home. I don’t want him trudging over the carpets like that,” he grumbled sternly and set off in the direction of the house that was barely visible in the distance.

Margaret watched Ham and two of the cats follow Evan as Vinnie came to her side and meowed, tilting her fluffy white head to the side. Bending down, she lifted the cat in her arms and hugged her close to her chest. Vinnie had always been her little support cat, coming to her aid whenever she sensed that Margaret’s emotions were high.

“I don’t know what to make of him, Vinnie,” she whispered before placing a kiss on top of the cat’s head and watching Evan walk away.

The cat purred happily as she lay her head against Margaret’s chest and purred in an even, contented rhythm.

“At least you seem to trust him; perhaps I can too.” She kept her eyes on his broad shoulders as he left her behind. “Perhaps we all can.”

CHAPTER 20



“*I* beg your pardon, My Lady,” Edwards cleared his throat in an attempt to gain her attention as Margaret came down the stairs.

It had been a few days since Margaret and Evan had taken a walk together beside the river on the estate. Things had felt like a contented dream since then with the couple settling into married life and getting to know one another on a deeper level. She almost felt as if things were too good to be true. Every time anything had gone well in her life, something bad came creeping up from behind.

“Yes, Edwards?” she asked with a nervous smile as she reached the bottom step. The weather was dreary with soft rain and wind; she far preferred things when it was sunny.

The man seemed a bit flustered and red in the face, glancing at the building clouds that were visible through the open doors to his right. “I am afraid we have a bit of a situation, My Lady,” he said without looking her in the eyes.

“What kind of situation?” Her heart beat slightly faster as she wondered if she hadn’t been right in thinking that things were too good to be true. “Has anything happened to His Lordship?” Her mind instantly jumped to her husband who had gone out for the morning.

“His Lordship is in fine fettle, My Lady, I understand that he has taken the carriage into town for business.” Edwards cleared his throat once again and bristled his mustache. “I am sure he will be arriving back soon.”

A wave of relief washed over her body but was quickly replaced with angst as the sound of rumbling in the distance brought a heavy thickness to the air. “What else is it then?” her voice was filled with angst.

“One of the maids took Ham out for his afternoon walk, My Lady.” He seemed to hesitate.

“I did give them permission to walk with the animals on their afternoons off, Edwards.” She felt slightly annoyed at the way he was addressing the matter. Even maids deserved to have a few hours off every now and then.

“It’s not that, My Lady.” He took a deep breath. “The maid in question reported back to me upon her return. It seems as if Ham wandered off on the walk and is presently uncounted for.” His face filled with panic at having delivered the news.

“How long has he been missing?” She glanced at the grandfather clock in the hall that had just struck four in the afternoon. Afternoon walks usually commenced shortly after one; she hoped and prayed that he hadn’t been missing for hours. The thought of Ham being left alone to fend for himself while a storm was brewing was more than she could bare.

“That is just the thing, My Lady,” Edwards swallowed hard. “I had given the maids permission to take an earlier walk this morning, owing to the fact that all of their chores had been done. “Ham has been missing since noon.”

A sudden chill shot through her body as Margaret brought her hand up to her neck and clutched at her throat. “Oh, no,” she breathed heavily as panic began to set in.

“I have gotten all of the available footmen to search the estate, My Lady, but we haven’t been able to find him yet,” Edwards finished with a solemn voice, tightening the lid on the anxiety she was feeling.

“It’s mad just over the horizon,” Evan said, stepping into the hall and removing his gloves and hat as he interrupted their conversation. “I think we need to take storm precautions this evening.”

The butler and Margaret both turned to look at him with anxious glances; it was clear from his demeanor that none of the other servants had filled him in. She hoped and prayed that

he would not be angry when he learned that half the staff had been utilized to find Ham.

“What’s the matter?” His forehead wrinkled into a frown as he looked from one to the other.

“Ham has gone missing,” Margaret filled him in before the butler could speak. It was better if the news came from her; she didn’t want anyone else getting into trouble because of her dog.

Relaxing his shoulders slightly, Evan came forward, handing his hat and gloves to Edwards along with his riding crop. “I’m sure he’s just exploring,” he assured with an encouraging smile that did little to ease her concerns. “He’s a curious little fellow; it was only a matter of time before one of the animals wandered off for a bit.”

“That’s just the thing, My Lord. He was with one of the maids when he went missing. The girl said that she turned her back for a second, heard a splash, and when she turned back, the dog was missing,” Edwards replied, his voice catching in his throat as if he were implying that something terrible had happened.

The silence that ensued could be cut with a knife as they waited for more of an explanation.

“I did not wish to alarm anyone too soon as we thought that we could locate the dog on our own.” He cleared his throat once again and shifted on his feet. “We did not wish to cause a panic. I apologize if I was amiss in my actions,” he said humbly and bowed his head.

“Oh, no.” Margaret let out a gasp as she once again clutched at her throat, tears suddenly filling her eyes. She’d never forgive herself if anything bad had happened to Ham. It had always been her sole responsibility to keep her pets alive and well. There was every chance in her mind that the current at the bottom of the stream had swept him away.

“Let’s not jump to the worst conclusions.” Evan suddenly took charge as he stepped forward and gently touched her elbow. “We will search for him at once. I’m sure he’d just gotten a bit lost after chasing a squirrel or something.”

“The footmen have already been looking for him for quite some time.” She could barely control her emotions as she thought of all the horrible things that could have happened to Ham. He could have been swept away by the stream or caught in a fence somewhere, crying for help.

“Then we will carry on looking,” he turned to Edwards. “Gather the rest of the staff — I don’t care what they are busy with. Tell them to report to the front of the mansion at once. We need to maximize our efforts. The chores can wait for later, leave the cook with two maids, and have them prepare hot drinks for when the search parties return.”

“At once, My Lord.” Edwards sprang into action as he hurried away, his chubby belly wobbling from the effort.

“We won’t rest until we find him,” Evan said to her in a soothing tone, rubbing her upper arms and giving them a gentle squeeze that made her stomach flutter despite the seriousness of the situation she was facing.

Margaret took a deep breath and bit back her tears as she looked into his eyes. The overwhelming sense of hope that he was conveying set her slightly more at ease. He’d surprised her by the way he was taking control and relinquishing his staff for the sake of her beloved dog.

“I’ll go at once and gather the rest of the footmen along with Edwards,” he said as he turned to leave.

“But what about their duties?” She felt completely taken aback by his change in attitude.

“Duties can wait until later,” he said with a serious look in his eyes. “What matters now is that Ham is found safe and sound.” He took a moment to search her face before leaving.

Please find him, my love...

Lightning struck in the distance, leaving Margaret with a shaky feeling as she wrapped her arms around her waist. Life was suddenly more confusing than it had been a few moments prior.



“Take half of the footmen and go upstream,” Evan commanded Edwards. “The rest of us will go downstream.”

The wind was beginning to pick up, whipping tiny bits of sand in their faces as Evan used his arm to shield his face. It had taken half an hour to gather the search party, and there had still not been a trace of Ham.

I have to find him.

Evan’s heart ached as he thought of the look on Margaret’s face. He’d grown fond of the animals during the time that he had been married. Their furry personalities grew on a person like barnacles on the bottom of a boat that wouldn’t budge.

“My Lord!” an anguished voice drew his attention away from his thoughts and up the stream where footmen were trudging through the shallow sections in an attempt to reach the other side.

“What is it?” He quickly rushed forward to meet the sandy-haired young man who was red in the face and panting.

Bowing quickly the footman addressed him in hurried tones. "I beg your pardon, My Lord; I was one of the first group of footmen that went looking for Ham."

"Have you found anything?" Evan felt irritable with the young man's lengthy explanations. The dark clouds in the distance were only getting bigger as the wind brought them ever closer. They were working against time and nature.

"Not of the dog, My Lord, but Alice, the maid who had been walking Ham, let us know earlier that she saw a strange figure before leaving the mansion."

"What kind of strange figure?" Evan felt a sudden unease in the pit of his stomach. The chances that Ham had gone far enough down the stream to be swept away or even lost were slim to nothing. Not for a dog of his bulk and stature.

"She said that it was a hooded figure; she couldn't say much beyond that and chalked it up to someone that had been making a delivery to the castle," the footman continued to explain.

Eloise.

Evan hoped and prayed that she would not be so vindictive that she would have done anything to Ham. Images of their

last fight and the night in the study flashed before his eyes. Perhaps he had been too hasty in dismissing her without ensuring she had been looked after. He swore under his breath as he clenched his fists at his side. If only he had never met her on that day in an alley where she should never have been.

“You did well,” Evan snapped into action. “Are you too tired to continue with the search?” He looked the footman over with his flushed face, dishevelled hair, and sodden clothes.

“If it’s all right with you, My Lord, I would like to continue searching for Master Ham until we have found him.” He held his head up high with immense pride as he spoke of the dog.

“Master Ham?” Evan asked with a frown.

The footman blushed despite his already flushed face; he seemed to have forgotten himself for just a moment. “All of the members of staff have developed a kind of fondness for the animals, My Lord. We have taken to giving them titles.” He cleared his throat with a sheepish look on his face as he explained.

“I see.” Evan felt a wave of pride for the people who worked in his mansion. They were far more compassionate and loyal than he had ever realized. “As you wish; be sure to take a rest if you feel you must.” He dismissed the footman with a nod.

Watching the man hurry away to rejoin the rest of his party, Evan came up with a plan of his own. There was a nagging feeling in the pit of his stomach that he needed to search the section of trees beside the water upstream. If anyone, including his former mistress, were to hide anywhere, it would be in the abandoned shed. Nobody went there, save for the hunting parties, but hunting season was far from commencing.

Turning on his heels, Evan ran in the opposite direction to the rest of the men, cursing the way he had handled things in the past. He'd tried to protect Margaret as best as he could, but there was every chance that she would get hurt. If only Ham would show up...



Stopping to catch his breath, Evan wiped the soft drops of rain from his face. The abandoned shed lay just ahead on the opposite side of the stream, the wooden door swinging in the wind that was beginning to get out of hand. The water itself was just as turbulent as Evan trudged through the current, nearly slipping once as his boot caught in some rocks.

Reaching the other bank, he quickly made his way out, ignoring the icy chill that filled his boots and made his feet ache. The cabin seemed just as deserted as ever as he approached with caution, feeling his heart pound in his chest.

The door swung open again as the hinges creaked with effort, revealing a dirty floor and an abandoned room.

Frowning, Evan examined the marks as he stepped inside and hunkered down. It almost seemed as if there had been a scuffle of sorts. His heart sank completely when he spotted the large paw prints beside the prints of what seemed to be ladies' shoes with heels at the back — the kind that only one woman he knew of would wear.

Lightning struck as Evan shut his eyes against the fear that began to build. Pushing himself up from his knees, he dusted off his hands. Knowing Eloise, she would keep the animal for a few days and then bore of the game if he didn't act swiftly. He shuddered to think what would happen if she decided she no longer needed the dog.

Just then, a second bolt of lightning struck, illuminating the trees just beyond the shed door. A small piece of black fabric hung on a low-hanging branch, swaying ominously in the wind.

CHAPTER 21



Margaret felt her heart sinking into the pit of her stomach as she spotted the forlorn look on Evan's face. The storm had broken in full, forcing the men to return home with no trace of Ham as the sky drew darker. Visibility was poor beyond the front door, making it nearly impossible for the search to continue.

Tears suddenly spilled down her cheeks as Margaret realized that her worst fears may very well have come true.

"I'm so sorry, Margaret," Evan said as he approached her with his eyes downcast. "We've looked over the entire estate; I can't keep the footmen out any longer. We will have to search again in the morning."

"I... I understand." She could barely speak as a flood of hot tears flowed down her face. Pacing the halls for hours as she had awaited the news had left her tired and barely able to keep it together.

“Oh, Margaret,” Evan said gently as he took her into his arms and held her tight, allowing her to sob into his chest while he stroked her hair.

Evan’s attempts to soothe her wounded heart did little to ease her pain as Margaret began to tremble in his arms. Exhaustion had won the battle of her strength.

Why did I allow him to go without me?

She berated herself for having lost the dog that had kept her sane for a large portion of her life. Ham was far from being a puppy, but she had thought that she would have him for many more years to come. She’d never thought that she would be without his presence so soon in her life. The blow was greater than she could bear at present.

“You’re trembling.” Evan placed his hands on her upper arms and gently pushed her away. “Let’s get you upstairs.” He searched her face with a worried frown. “Tomorrow is a new day, I’m sure something will turn up.”

Margaret shut her eyes at the thought of what that something could be and allowed Evan to lead her up the stairs. She barely took note of anything at all until she was sitting on the foot of her bed. It was almost as if nothing else mattered if she couldn’t find Ham. The proverbial rug had been snatched from beneath her feet, and she was finding it hard to breathe.

“Would you like me to send for your maid?” Evan’s voice broke through her thoughts as she shook off her daze. “I think we should have you tucked into bed with a warm blanket,” he whispered before turning to leave.”

“Don’t go,” Margaret clutched at his sleeve. “Stay with me a while; I don’t want to be alone.”

Searching her face, Evan relented after a minute and sat beside her on the bed, placing his arm over her shoulders as she stared out the window at the fat drops of rain hitting the pane of glass in her bedroom.

“I think you should have a sip of this,” Evan said after reaching into his pocket and retrieving a flask. “It will help with the shock and warm you up a little.”

Accepting the flask without question, Margaret took a swig and pulled a face as the strong fluid burned her throat, making her wince.

“I know it’s not what you are used to,” Evan spoke again as he reached for the flask and placed it back in his coat pocket, “but it will take the edge off of the situation.”

“Is that how you deal with all of your problems?” she asked, placing the back of her hand against her lips and shaking her head. The cool liquid had given her system a jolt.

“No, but it does help when things get tough,” he replied. “I know you may not like drinking because of your father, but there are times when it is necessary.”

Looking out the window, she allowed her mind to drift to her father and the time she had convinced him to keep Ham. The memory was one of the few good ones she cherished from her life at home.

“I got Ham when he was just a puppy,” she began as the storm raged on, bringing with it an icy chill that filled the room. “It was shortly after my mother had passed. There was a group of children playing in the street with a homeless dog that had whelped. I took pity on her and her five pups. The children told me that she had always lived on the street. They had been taking turns feeding her with scraps from their table when they realized she was carrying a litter.”

Evan reached back and grabbed hold of the extra blanket behind them and draped it over her shoulders as she spoke and shivered, completely lost in a world of her own.

“I gathered all the pups along with their mother and walked the streets of the market in an attempt to find them homes.” A faint smile tugged at her lips as she recalled the day. “It wasn’t easy convincing people to take them in, but I managed to convince them. By the end of the day, I was left with the mother and the smallest pup.”

Drawing her closer, Evan kissed the top of her head as tears fell down her cheeks, inconsolable from the shock she'd received.

“I knew that my father would go crazy if I came home with a mother and her pup, so I decided to walk down to the docks. I got lucky when a fisherman saw me walking with the dogs. At first, I thought he would take the pup, but he said he needed a bigger dog to go with him on the ocean. Lillith, as he named her, ran straight to his arms before jumping on his boat that was docked.”

“And you were left with Ham,” Evan said with a heavy sigh as he laid his head against hers.

“I scooped the scrawny little pup into my basket, not realizing I had already purchased food.” Her laugh was light and unenthusiastic as she sniffed and wiped her cheeks with the palm of her hand. “He instantly tucked into the ham I had that was there.”

“So, you decided to name him Ham,” Evan said with a smile that was equally as sad and forlorn as hers.

“Starting a grand tradition of naming my pets after whatever food they fancied the most.” She finally tore her gaze away from the window and looked at him. She had been watching

the horizon in the hopes that Ham would come bounding over the hill.

“Not many people would have done what you did on that day,” Evan whispered as he laid his forehead against hers and shut his eyes. “It was an incredible thing that you did; it speaks volumes of your kind heart.”

“Sometimes I wish that I wasn’t so caring,” she whispered back in a broken tone. “It seems to get me hurt more often than not.”

Gently placing his finger and thumb beneath her chin, he tilted her face up to his until she was looking at him. “Please never say that again. You may be hurting right now, but your kind heart is one of the things that I admire most about you.”

Her heart began to beat again through the dull ache of her pain as she looked into his eyes. There was a warmth there that she knew she could rely on, no matter the outcome of her current situation.

“With great compassion comes great hurt, but that only shows how strong you really are.” He tenderly pressed a kiss on her forehead.

“Oh, Evan.” Margaret fell into his arms once again and sobbed. There was a great void in her heart as she began to

realize that there was little to no hope that Ham would return. "Please stay with me tonight," she said through her sobs before wiping her tears once again. "I don't want to be alone."

"I think that can be arranged," Evan agreed with a reassuring smile as he stood to remove his boots. Placing his sodden coat on the back of a chair, he walked over to the bed and lay on his side, patting the mattress next to him.

Margaret took a moment to compose herself before crawling to his side, laying her head on his chest as he held his arms open wide. The steady beating of his heart calmed her enough to shut her eyes and breathe.

"You know," Evan said as he adjusted his body to hers and held her close, "I never thought I could like, let alone love, an animal in the way that you do. I thought you were absolutely mad that day on the steps when your hoard came bounding toward me."

She giggled despite her sadness, snuggling into his chest as the tears began to ebb. The warming effects of whisky were beginning to take hold of her body.

"But that little slobber chops has crawled his way into my heart. Even that weird little thing that won't leave my legs alone, what's her name again?" He seemed to search his mind for an obscure food. "Peaches or tuna bait."

“Butter,” Margaret helped him as her body and mind began to relax.

“That’s the one.” He kissed the top of her head once again and pulled her against his chest. “Little annoying Butter.”

“Evan,” she said as her mind began to drift off.

“Yes?” he placed his warm cheek against her hair.

“I never thought I would be saying this, but I’m glad you are my husband. I didn’t think I would be content with how grumpy and unapproachable you were.”

“Hey...” He gently and playfully shook her in his arms. “I am not unapproachable,” he said gruffly.

Feeling herself being jolted awake once again, she smiled half-heartedly against his chest. “Not to me anymore; you’re very quickly becoming my friend.” She looked up with concern as his breathing changed. “What’s the matter?”

“Nothing,” Evan responded with his eyes shut.

“Your heart suddenly began to beat much faster.” She twisted her body to see his face at a better angle. His cheeks were

suddenly flushed. “I hope you aren’t getting sick from being out in the rain?”

“I think it was just the exhaustion of the day.” He cleared his throat. “Let’s try and get some sleep.”

Snuggling back down, she shut her eyes and listened to the beating of his heart. He seemed to react in a certain way when she’d said that he was quickly becoming her friend. A sigh escaped her lips when she realized that was not all that she had wanted to say.

You are becoming so much more than just my friend.



Evan awoke to find Margaret asleep on his chest. It seemed as if they hadn’t moved much during the night; the only difference was that the blanket had been pulled over their bodies.

Margaret must have awoken and covered us both.

His breathing deepened when he suddenly realized that the blanket meant that she must have chosen to return to his arms. His mind was a blur with all the possibilities as her words from the previous night came to him.

You are quickly becoming my friend.

There was something about that sentence that disturbed him in a deeply profound manner. He was glad that their bond was growing, but friend wasn't quite the word he would have used to describe what they meant to one another.

“Evan?”

He suddenly focused on her again when she stirred on his chest.

“What time is it?” she asked groggily as she rubbed her eyes with the back of her hand.

“I'm not sure.” He cleared his throat and sat up as she straightened. “The storm has passed; we must have slept in.”

“Has there been any word on Ham yet?” Her eyes were suddenly glazed with hope as she searched his face.

“I haven't been downstairs yet. I was just about to go and check.” He used his hand to smooth back his hair.

A knock sounded at the door as both Evan and Margaret turned to look.

“That could be news,” he said as he swung his legs from the bed.

Margaret was however quicker than he was as she rushed forward in her wrinkled dress and messy hair. “Is he back?” she immediately asked after opening the door.

Edwards kept his eyes on her feet and his hands behind his back with a solemn expression of sadness on his face before clearing his throat. “I am afraid that Ham has not returned, My Lady, but there has been some news.”

Pushing himself off of the bed, Evan came to her side, placing his hand on her shoulder. “What is it, Edwards?”

The man seemed to be holding back his tears as he slowly brought his hands forward and unclenched his fingers, revealing a small, knitted bow of bright pink wool.

“Oh, no.” Margaret burst into tears as she turned her face into Evan’s shoulder and cried with a gut-wrenching wail.

“The ribbon was found early this morning...” Edwards lifted his eyes to reveal the pain and grief he was feeling. “... floating in the deep end of the stream where the rocks are jagged. It must have been pulled there by the current.” He lowered the ribbon in his hands as Evan placed his arms around Margaret’s trembling shoulders.

“Thank you, Edwards,” he dismissed the butler.

“There is just one more matter, My Lord.” The man nervously glanced down at Margaret who was still hiding her face. “The footmen need to know if they are to carry on with the search after their discovery of the ribbon.” He cleared his throat uncomfortably. “While we were all fond of the dog, My Lord, none of us wish to shirk our duties.”

“Tell the men they are not to worry about their duties, they may continue the search.” Evan’s words were interrupted by Margaret gently pushing herself away from his arms.

“No, tell the footmen to return to their duties as normal. There is no need to waste any more time,” she said as she wiped her tears.

“There could still be hope,” Evan tried to reason with her despite the truth he knew in his heart. It would have taken a miracle for Ham to survive if he had been swept away by the current. A grown man could have been pulled under the water and drowned in conditions like the previous night. He also thought it unlikely that Eloise would have taken the dog further than the cabin, despite the evidence he had found. She would have given up the second that Ham showed the slightest bit of resistance.

“There is no need to protect me, Evan.” She looked at him with a waning strength that he knew she was only trying to muster in an attempt to be brave. “I know that Ham could not have survived.”

He was about to reach out to her again when she turned to the butler. “Edwards, kindly ask my maid to come up; I would like a bath before I start my day,” she said tiredly.

“Yes, My Lady, at once.” Edwards bowed politely.

“Just one last thing,” Margaret said and turned back to the door.

“Yes, My Lady, anything,” Edwards said in a compassionate manner that gave Evan a new respect for the man.

“I would like to keep his ribbon.” She held out her hand with a stony expression on her face.

The butler hesitated at first as if he thought the notion was not a good idea but relented after Evan nodded, placing the soaked ribbon in her waiting hands.

Margaret looked down at the ribbon, running her fingers over the neat stitches. “I think I should hang this out to dry,” she eventually said after biting her lips and pasting a smile on her face. “I will just leave it on the windowsill for the sun to dry

up.” Turning away from them, she walked over to the window and placed the ribbon on the ledge with care.

Edwards bowed politely and left as Evan turned to watch her running her fingers over the ribbon. “This is all I have of you now,” she whispered.

CHAPTER 22



“*W*hat brings you here this early?” Nicholas asked as he rubbed the stubble on his chin. “I was about to have my morning shave,” he complained in a hoarse voice that hinted at a night misspent.

Evan watched his friend complaining as he sat in the drawing room of Nicholas’ mansion. He’d left Margaret alone with Sophia while he stepped out to see to a few errands. He’d formulated a plan as soon as Edwards had shown him the ribbon. The small piece of black fabric burned a hole in his pocket as he bounced his leg impatiently.

“I didn’t mean to interrupt your morning routine.” He glanced at the clock on the wall. “So close to noon — old habits die hard, I guess.” His tone held a note of accusation.

Grumbling, Nicholas leaned forward and reached for his cup of tea. “You’ve only been married for a very short time, Evan; you don’t understand these kinds of things.”

“I thought Emma didn’t like to have strong drink in the house. Did you go to White’s last night?” he asked with a frown. Nicholas had been somewhat of a truant when it came to the school of life before his marriage, but Evan had honestly thought that he would have settled down by now. Finding the Duke on a morning after having over-indulged was not something that Evan had expected at present.

“Do you think I look like this because of drink?” his friend asked begrudgingly as he took a sip of his tea, glaring at Evan over the rim with bloodshot eyes.

“What else would make you look like you have been trampled by oxen?” Evan felt genuinely curious to know the answer. The only thing that had ever made him that grumpy first thing in the morning was the time he had decided that challenging his friends to see who could drink the most whisky in the space of an hour was a good idea.

“This, my friend, is the face of a man who spent the night talking about his feelings and listening to why he should never go to bed without settling an argument,” he said begrudgingly, sitting back in his chair and massaging his temples with his fingers.

Evan bit back the laughter that threatened to spill over, momentarily forgetting the reason he had come to pay his friend a visit. Having spent the night talking to his wife was the last thing that Evan had assumed. “And where is your wife at present?”

“Sleeping,” Nicholas grumbled again. “Something that I wish I could be doing at present. You will understand once you have been married for a while longer.” The Duke looked him in the eyes. “You will find yourself being willing to do anything for the woman you love,” he said with conviction.

Evan held Nicholas’ gaze as he suddenly recalled why he had come to pay his friend a visit. “There was actually something I needed to see you about this morning,” he cut to the chase. Time had already been wasted when he’d visited the apartment he’d paid for, only to have no one answer.

“Do tell.” Nicholas gave him a strange look and continued to sip his tea.

“There has been a bit of a tragedy; Margaret’s dog has gone missing.” He leaned forward and retrieved his own cup of tea, placing two cubes of sugar in the milky liquid and stirring.

“Ah, so you require a grand gesture,” Nicholas said with a nod. “Organize a search party and find the beast. You will be the hero even after many fights to come.” The Duke waved his nearly empty cup in the air. “You’ll come to understand that you need these little arrows of chivalry in your quiver.”

“I did; the dog is nowhere to be seen, and his knitted ribbon was found at the bottom of a stream that runs through my

property,” Evan explained, ignoring the fact that his friend was still implying that he was trying to win Margaret over.

Am I trying to win her over, or am I trying to right a wrong?

His thoughts were interrupted by Nicholas placing his cup back on the tray that sat beside his chair.

“Knitted ribbon?” the Duke asked with a frown.

“It’s a long story; don’t ask,” Evan replied and shook his head. Not only was there no time to discuss the issue of his wife treating the animals like human babies, but he also wanted to avoid the mockery that would surely follow.

“He’s more than likely drowned, poor beggar,” Nicholas conceded. “So, go and fetch her a new one. There are plenty of ladies that breed the slobbering beasts. Surely you could find a replacement within a few hours,” he suggested nonchalantly. “Women care very deeply about these things; I recall the time I took Emma to see the animals at London Tower. She had wanted to rescue each and every one of them.”

Evan recalled the story from the day when the Duke and Emma had gone to London Tower. He’d told Evan afterward that she’d thought it a good idea to keep the lions and wolves on her lawn, roaming free like pets.

“Margaret would never accept a replacement — not so soon in any case.” He thought of the way she regarded her animals as a part of the family and had to admit to himself that no other dog could creep into his heart as quickly as Ham had done. He shook his head to clear his thoughts. “The reason I’m here is that I need a favor from you.”

“What kind of favor?” Nicholas lifted his brow in question and folded his arms over his chest.

“I need a key to one of the apartments you let on Fifth Street,” he began. “Surely, as the custodian of the buildings that your grandmother handed over to you, you should have spare keys.”

“I do, but why on earth would you need a key? You aren’t to my knowledge renting any of the rooms? I can’t just hand over keys — that would be a breach of ethics.”

Evan realized that coming clean was the only way he would get anywhere with his friend. “I am renting one of the rooms from you.” He pursed his lips as he spoke, utterly ashamed by what he was about to admit. “Just because you don’t receive the money directly from my hand does not mean that it isn’t coming from me.”

Frowning, the Duke tried to recall all of the names he had memorized on the list of people who paid him rent. “I don’t understand what it is you are trying to imply, Evan.”

“You let rooms to opera singers and women who are being kept by men of higher standing who wish to keep their affairs a secret,” he confessed to his friend without saying the actual words. He found it easier to talk of the matter in a roundabout fashion rather than admitting his folly.

Nicholas frowned before suddenly looking up at his friend. “Oh, I never had you pegged as the type who would keep a mistress. I must confess that I am surprised, Evan. With all of your talk about waiting for the right woman to fall into your lap, you had a mistress all along,” His frown deepened as he glanced at the floor before looking at Evan once again. “I hope this affair is something in the past?”

“Men have needs, Nicholas. Even ones that are waiting for love. I am ashamed to admit that I kept a woman in an apartment, but I fell into the old cliché and am now in need of help.” He clenched his jaw. “I used to sneak around behind closed doors under the cover of night, but all of that ended as soon as I decided to pay Marie Webster a visit.”

Nicholas seemed satisfied with Evan’s answer as his shoulders relaxed a little. “I’m sure I could make an exception for you, but I don’t understand why you would need a key.” Nicholas rubbed over his stubble once again. “Surely, if you are paying the rent, you can gain entry on your own terms, even if the woman in question does not answer your call.”

“Eloise Button is a woman scorned; I have my suspicions that she had something to do with the disappearance of the dog. I

went by her apartment this morning, and there is no answer. I need to confront her about her behavior before things get even more out of hand. I can't waste any more time; there is no telling what she will do next."

"You had Eloise Button as a mistress?" Nicholas seemed shocked while still being impressed. "Isn't she the most notorious opera singer in London? Men have fought in Whites over the right to take her to bed."

"Yes, and one of the most venomous opera singers — her bite is far worse than her bark," Evan said bitterly. "Those men who didn't bed her dodged a bullet. I can assure you of that."

"I will go with you to Miss Button's apartment." Nicholas readied himself to stand. "Not only out of curiosity for this remarkable side of you I never knew existed, but also so that you may have an alibi if you get caught. As the custodian, I can say that I was alerted to the smell of smoke or something like that if we happen to be caught in the act." He stood and straightened his shirt.

Evan looked at his friend in a new light as Nicholas left the room to fetch the key. He'd matured a lot and come out of his shell since marrying Emma. There had once been a time when the Duke would have laughed in his face and made fun of him instead of helping. His mind drifted to Margaret and how she had changed him in the short time they had known one another.

Weeks ago, he would never have dreamed of having animals in his house, yet here he was doing his utmost to protect his wife and the rest of her pets. It was almost as if he too were grieving the loss of Ham, not that he'd ever admit to anyone that he missed the slobbering behemoth.



Evan accepted the key from the Duke as he turned the handle and unlocked the door, looking down the hall in every direction to ensure that no one was watching.

“You must be very familiar with these halls then?” Nicholas threw in his first jab after finding out that Evan had been keeping a mistress for all the years. He'd kept his peace at the mansion and even on the ride over, but it was just too good of an opportunity to pass up.

Rolling his eyes and shaking his head, Evan pushed on the wood and stepped into the room.

“Now this I was not expecting,” Nicholas said with his eyebrows raised. “I know that opera singers aren't the classiest of women, but she could really benefit from having a maid come in once or twice a week.”

“She used to have a maid; I stopped paying for her services,” Evan confessed as he shut the door behind their backs. Clearly, Eloise had relied on the services far more than he had expected.

“You really gave the woman reason for a grudge.” Nicholas looked around the messy room with its meager furnishings. Feather boas and black dresses lay scattered across the furnishings in a haphazard manner. Empty wine glasses and dirty plates with fish bones occupied every available surface.

One dress, in particular, caught his attention, and he walked over to the couch and ran the torn seam through his fingers. The hole matched the piece of fabric he carried in his pocket.

“This isn’t half bad,” Nicholas remarked as he looked around the room, drawing Evan’s attention away from the dress. “I forgot what these rooms looked like inside.”

The small apartment consisted of a lounge that doubled as a drawing room and a bedroom with a kitchenette on the side. Even the bedroom that was visible through the open door was a mess. The bed was unmade, and undergarments lay scattered about the floor. The only hint of class was the expensive furnishings that Evan had provided her with.

“Do you think she left in a hurry?” Nicholas asked as he lifted an old newspaper. There on the front was an article announcing the wedding of Viscount Northfork to Miss Margaret Benett.

“I doubt it,” Evan said as he took the newspaper from his friend and looked at the heading. Eloise would never leave

London without having the final say; even if she was laying low, she would bide her time before making an appearance again. Her fixation with Evan seemed to border on obsession as he looked at her dresser, spotting a miniature portrait of himself that could have been taken from the house.

Whistling through his teeth, Nicholas let out a breath. “I don’t think this woman considered herself just a mistress to you, Evan.” He looked back to his friend after examining the portrait. “I think she was in love.”

“Eloise Button does not know what true love is.” Evan folded the newspaper back up and placed it on the floor exactly as they had found it. There was a small part of him that felt guilty for never having considered whether she had been in love with him or not, but his guilt was quickly replaced by anger once again.

There had always been an understanding between them that it was purely a relationship of convenience. Yet even if she had fallen in love with him, there was no excuse for her actions. Ham and Margaret had done nothing to her.

“Aren’t you going to take the portrait?” Nicholas asked as Evan made his way back to the door, treading carefully so as not to disturb anything.

“No,” he said with a final glimpse back into the apartment. Too many memories haunted him from within the walls. The

urge to run as quickly and as far as he could pressed down on him like a crushing weight. “I don’t want her to know that I was here. I’ll send a man to keep an eye on the place and confront her when she resurfaces again.”

“On your head be it,” Nicholas said as he walked past his friend.

Looking back before shutting the door, Evan thought of the fun times he had in the apartment in the past. Those things seemed cheaper and far less fun now that he had been with Margaret, not that he had been with her in the sense of a husband and a wife. The pure intimacy he had experienced with her in the study far outweighed anything he had experienced in the past.

“Are you coming?” the Duke called over his shoulder.

“Yes,” Evan cleared his throat and shut the door, locking it firmly before tossing the keys to his friend. He’d briefly begun to wonder what it would be like to lay with Margaret as husband and wife. It hadn’t bothered him too much before when he had resigned himself to his marriage of convenience, but now that he had held her in his arms and tasted her skin, he wanted more.

He wanted to know her in every sense of the word, what she thought about, what she hoped for the future, and what it would feel like if their bodies were one. Swallowing hard, he

pushed back the thoughts that had entered his mind like damn wall that had suddenly been broken. He needed to focus on solving their problems before he could take things any further.

CHAPTER 23



Margaret sighed as she looked out the window of the drawing room. All three cats were trying their best to cheer her up, but all she could do was stroke their heads as if she had rehearsed the motion her entire life. They continued to brush against her knees, purring with soft meows. It had been two days since Ham had gone missing. She knew by now that he had more than likely been swept away and killed, but her heart and mind were still unwilling to accept the truth.

Every second she stared out the window was a second, she prayed for his safe return.

“I brought you something to drink,” Evan said gently as he came into the room holding a cup of tea. “I thought you might be thirsty.”

“You didn’t have to do that,” She smiled kindly because of the care he was displaying toward her. He’d been very attentive and caring in the days following Ham’s disappearance, but she couldn’t quite bring herself to perk up. “You could have asked one of the maids to bring it in,” She accepted the cup with

grateful hands as the warm porcelain heated her skin. Her skin seemed to permanently remain in an icy state for no good reason.

“I wanted the chance to bring it to you myself,” he said as he sat on the arm of the chair beside her. “How else will I get my morning dose of sarcasm?” he attempted to tease her. “I miss our witty back banter.”

Vinnie suddenly began to purr as if she had swallowed the inner workings of a clock, climbing onto Evan’s lap as he stroked her fur.

Margaret simply smiled as she looked down at her lap, moving her hands around the cup. “I’m not sure why, but my body can’t seem to retain any heat these past few days.”

“It’s from the shock,” Evan said more seriously as he came to her side, gently pushing Vinnie onto the floor. “I’m worried about you; you need to rest more. I will have to send for the doctor if you don’t come right.”

“I think I might just shrivel up and cease existing altogether if I rest anymore,” she said with a heavy sigh. “No, I can’t stay in my room any longer. There comes a time when you need to face the world and all its problems, no matter how difficult those problems may be.” She shook her head. “Please don’t send for the doctor; it won’t do any good. He can’t fix what ails me, I’m afraid.”

“I wish I could make things better for you,” Evan said as he reached for her hand and gave it a gentle squeeze. “I’d do anything to turn back time and save him for both of us.” The sincere look that he gave her was so filled with love that she felt a fluttering in her heart.

Butter and Cheese suddenly jumped onto his lap, fighting for a place as he allowed them both to sit down. It amazed Margaret just how much he had changed over the course of a few weeks. The Evan she had first met would have had a heart attack if both cats had jumped onto his lap at the same time.

“I appreciate how much you care for me, Evan, truly I do.” She felt a slight amount of guilt at the way he was trying to cheer her up. “I’m sorry I’m not great company right now.” Her heart fluttered again as she looked into his bright blue eyes.

“I know, why don’t we go for a walk?” he said enthusiastically as he brightened up. “A bit of fresh air will do us all some good.”

Her chest suddenly constricted as panic filled her body. There was absolutely no way she could handle walking their old route where Ham had disappeared. She would go into full shock or have a mental breakdown.

“I didn’t mean by the stream,” he added quickly when she almost began to cry. “I meant we could walk around the rose garden. You haven’t seen it yet, have you? It’s quite special. I’m no expert on the matter, but I have been told that is one of the biggest in England.” He considered his words for a moment. “Well, possibly in London.”

“I haven’t,” she sighed as she let out her breath. The panic had set in so quickly that she hadn’t even noticed she had been holding her breath.

“Please come with me.” He squeezed her hand a little tighter. “This is for me as much as it is for you.” His eyes pleaded with her.

“All right,” she relented for his sake. She’d wanted to stay in the drawing room as she had done the day before, but the angst on his face made her realize just how worried he had been. There was no way she could refuse his request, not when he was putting in as much effort as he was. “We can have a short walk around the rose garden.”

“I promise to throw myself into the nearest bush if you don’t have a good time,” he teased.

“I might just throw you in if I don’t.” She tried her best to be playful but couldn’t quite bring herself to join in. Her wit and sarcasm had undoubtedly been dulled by the trauma she’d experienced.

“Perhaps we can sharpen your sense of humor amongst the thorns,” he teased her again as he pushed the cats from his lap and stood, holding his hand out to her.

Margaret hesitated at first but decided to take a leap of faith as she placed her hand in his. How much harm could a simple walk around the rose garden do anyway?



The sun shone down on them, doing little to drive the chill from Margaret’s bones as she walked beside him on the green lawn. The rose garden lay before them, displaying a multitude of colors that were both pleasing to the eyes as well as the senses. Wrapping the corners of her light blue shawl around her shoulders, she fought off the chill that plagued her body.

“My mother planted this garden,” Evan attempted to make conversation as they strolled along, admiring the beds of different colored roses that stretched out in a maze.

“What was your mother like?” She became genuinely curious about his past. They hadn’t talked much about their lives before the marriage of convenience, not unless it was about her.

Rubbing the back of his neck with his hand, Evan looked at his feet before lifting his gaze once again. “I didn’t have a very

good relationship with either of my parents,” he confessed.

“I’m sorry to hear that.” Margaret felt guilty for broaching the subject that obviously caused him a great deal of pain.

“Don’t be.” He smiled at her and placed his hands behind his back. “Their behavior toward one another made me look at life in a very different light. I swore I would never treat anyone the way they treated each other or allow anyone to treat me in that way as a matter of fact.”

“Is that why you had such high hopes for making a love match?” she asked as she stopped to smell a fragrant pink rose. Evan had been right — although she was not entirely up to throwing a ball, the walk in the garden was helping to take her mind off matters.

“I didn’t know you knew about that?” he said almost gruffly as he reverted to his unapproachable mannerisms. He didn’t seem too pleased by the notion that people had been discussing his affairs.

Feeling amused at his change in behavior, she wrapped her arms around her waist. “Sophia and Emma told me all about the things you used to say to women.” She recalled their promenade conversations and the negative stance Sophia had taken against his beliefs, yet the man she spoke of was not the man that Margaret had come to know.

“Such as?” He seemed grumpy as he clenched his jaw.

“That you were waiting for the perfect woman, and you would never settle for anything less than true love.” She shot him a cheeky glance. Their match of convenience was a far cry from what he’d had in mind for himself.

“How long were you waiting to ambush me with that information?” he asked as he narrowed his eyes at her.

“I wasn’t waiting.” She feigned innocence, feeling a little more like her old self once again. “They told me right from the start what you had been saying to women,” she then admitted sheepishly.

“Well, what they said is the truth.” He looked ahead as they continued walking. “My parents never had a happy marriage; they were unnecessarily cruel to one another, and infidelity played a very big part. I swore as a young man that my marriage would be one of love, respect, and mutual adoration.”

Her mind filled with all kinds of thoughts as they walked. Although they were never cruel to one another, and she was sure that neither of them had ever cheated, she couldn’t help but wonder if he was content with her.

“I know for some people my ideals may seem a bit harsh and unnecessary, but none of those people had to face the perils of growing up in a home that was devoid of love.”

“I can understand why you wanted to make a love match,” she said with a sigh. “I guess it’s the same reason I never want to drink or gamble.”

Evan suddenly gave her a strange look; it was almost as if he appreciated her understanding.

Feeling her stomach flutter again, she decided to ask him how he felt their marriage was going. “I know this wasn’t exactly what you had in mind.” She felt her nerves faltering. “But I hope you are at least content with our arrangement?”

A veil seemed to fall over his face as Evan looked ahead. “Do you worry about our marriage?”

“Not in that way.” She suddenly became flustered. “I just wanted to know if you still hoped for a love match?” Her cheeks filled with heat as she realized what she had asked him.

A smile tugged at his lips as Evan stopped; reaching for a rose on a nearby bush, he plucked the blood-red flower and held it out to her. “Margaret, you never have to worry about me not being content with you. In the words of someone I know very well, you are fast becoming the only person I want to know.”

Her heart beat faster as she accepted the rose. “Thank you,” was all she could manage to say as she sniffed the sweet-smelling flower.

What had I hoped he would say?

“You don’t seem pleased with my answer?” he asked with a worried frown.

“Your answer was perfect,” she faked a smile. “I’m just a bit tired after the walk.” She twirled the rose in her fingers, realizing that she had wanted him to say that he loved her. That he had fallen hopelessly and irrevocably in love with her and nobody else. “Ouch,” she suddenly dropped the rose on the grass as a drop of blood appeared on the tip of her finger.

“What’s the matter?” He stepped forward and took her fingers in his hand, causing her heart to skip a beat.

“It... it was just a thorn,” she stammered, keeping her eyes on his face.

Taking a handkerchief from his pocket, he wiped the drop of blood from her finger. “There,” he said as he examined the tip of her finger. “I don’t think there will be any lasting damage.”

“No, I dare say there won’t,” she replied as her breath caught in her throat. A wave of clarity washed over her body as she realized the reason she had wanted him to say that he loved her was because she loved him. She had loved him for a very long time.

“Are you all right?” he asked her, rubbing her fingers with his thumb. “You suddenly got very quiet.”

“Just the shock,” she said. “I wasn’t expecting the thorn to be so sharp. It felt a little like a bee sting.”

“I’m sorry,” he whispered softly as he bent his head, gently brushing the tip of her finger with his lips. “I hope that makes it feel better.” He breathed against her skin as he continued to kiss her hand, making his way to her wrist.

Margaret gasped with pleasure as he turned her hand over, kissing her palm and then her wrist. “Evan, I...” Her words were suddenly cut short as he drew her into his arms, placing his lips against hers in a passionate embrace. Her body melted against his as the kiss deepened, her lips parting as if they possessed a life of their own, allowing him access to the warm recesses of her mouth.

Their tongues danced together in glorious waltz as the rest of the world suddenly faded away. A soft moan escaped her lips as he gently bit on her lip, placing his hands on her hips and drawing her body closer to his.

Images of the night in the study filled her mind, spurring her on as she brought her hands up to cup the back of his head, eliciting a gruff moan from his throat.

“Margaret,” he whispered against her lips before kissing a path over her chin and neck.

A wave of goosebumps spread over her skin as his tongue shot out, adding to her pleasure.

“Evan,” she gasped in reciprocation, “I want you.”

His kisses suddenly intensified as Evan placed his hands on the small of her back, drawing her in until her pelvis was pressed completely against his. The pleasurable sensations she experienced from having her body pressed against his were unlike any she had experienced before.

Stopping suddenly, Evan pulled away, his face flustered as he looked at her with a wildness in his eyes that she’d never seen before. “I think we should go inside,” he said as he smoothed back his hair. “I don’t want you to get too tired.”

“I’ll be right in,” she said nearly out of breath as her chest rose and fell. Turning, she noticed the men who worked in the gardens coming around a corner. It didn’t seem as if they had

noticed Evan and Margaret as they went about their business, carrying bags of weeds.

“Don’t be too long,” he turned to leave, taking lengthy strides toward the house.

Margaret watched him leave before reaching down to retrieve the rose that had fallen on the grass. The rose that he had given her as a sign of their marriage and friendship. The only problem now was that she was more certain than ever that she was in love with the man she had married — a fact that would not have posed a problem under any other circumstances, but their marriage was one of convenience.

“Very problematic convenience,” she whispered to herself before taking a deep breath.

CHAPTER 24



Evan watched Margaret as she sat in the rocking chair, lazily rocking back and forth as she stared at the wool basket beside her chair. The light filtering through the windows of the sunroom lit up the strands of gold in her strawberry hair. A plethora of ferns and other plotted plants greeted the eyes as soon as you stepped into the room, yet the atmosphere was far from relaxed as Margaret sat with her thoughts.

They hadn't spoken much since their kiss the previous day, and Evan was beginning to wonder if he hadn't made a mistake, acting as impulsively as he did. He knew she was still grieving, but he had been overcome by his feelings for her in the moment.

What are my feelings for her?

He found himself asking the question that had been plaguing him ever since she had moved into his mansion. His adoration for her far exceeded that of a friend, but was it enough to say that he loved her?

“Did you bring me another cup of tea?” She slowly turned her head toward him. “I am quite parched at present.” Her skin was pale with black circles beneath her eyes.

“I’m afraid I did not,” he admitted as he came into the room, taking a deep breath as he composed herself. He hadn’t stayed with her in her room as she had requested on the first night that Ham had disappeared, but he could still hear her tossing all night, making him worry that her grief was beginning to make her ill.

“That’s a pity,” she attempted a smile. “You seem to be losing your touch.”

“On the contrary, My Lady,” he teased her half-heartedly, worrying about the tiredness in her voice, “I did something even better than bringing you a cup of tea.”

“What could that be?” She lay her head back in the chair, clearly exhausted by her efforts.

“I have sent for your friend, Emma, and ordered a tray of cakes and tea. I thought you might enjoy a little company this afternoon.” The truth was that Evan had hoped that a visit from Emma would cheer her up enough that she’d venture from her chair. Her withdrawal was beginning to extend to even her cats — a fact that was worrying the staff as well as himself.

“That was kind of you, Evan, but I’m not sure if I’m up to seeing anyone today.” Her head swayed back and forth as her eyes threatened to close.

“I’m sorry I didn’t check with you first,” he said gently before reaching out and touching her hair. The strands were coarse from a lack of brushing, adding to his concern that she was giving up on everything and everyone. “But it’s Emma; she cares deeply about you and wanted to see you.” He left out the fact that he had reached out to her in an attempt to draw his wife from her shell.

“I suppose I haven’t seen her in a while,” she conceded with a heavy sigh. “She does always cheer me up with her antics.” A faint smile spread over her lips.

“She wasn’t always that outgoing you know,” he attempted to distract her with conversation until her friend arrived.

“Really? She seems like such a bubbly person; I would have sworn that that was her natural demeanor. We were confronted by some ladies on our walk one day, and she handled them with such grace and ease that even Sophia began to admire her.”

“She was a timid wallflower when her mother forced her into the matchmaker’s office.” He shook his head and waved the memory away with disgust as if he were swatting a fly in front

of his face. “Always bumping into things and making a scene in public.”

“You say that as if it were a bad thing?” She rocked herself gently as a timid laugh escaped her throat.

“I found it very taxing; why Nicholas became so enthralled with her, I do not know.” He frowned before smiling again. “What I do know is that they suit each other like no one else ever could. And they have been good for each other. Emma has gained her self-confidence and came out of her shell while Nicholas has settled down.”

“I wish I could have witnessed their love story unfold like you did.” There was something sad about her eyes as she spoke. “Marie Webster may be seen as a pariah of the ton, but she knows a match when she sees one.”

“I hate to admit it but looking at them and the way they suit one another, it does seem like she knew what she was talking about.” He gave her a lazy smile as he thought of their own match and how well they were suited for one another. He could see himself being content with her for the rest of his life.

“I beg your pardon, My Lord.” Edwards came into the room before glancing at Margaret with sympathy. “My Lady.” He bowed politely, wavering a little longer than he usually did. The entire mansion was worried about her and the state of her health.

“Yes, Edwards?” Evan stood, grateful for the interruption as he hoped that Emma had arrived.

“The Duchess of St. Clair has arrived, My Lord,” he said with a polite bow.

“Thank you, Edwards; I will be leaving now that the Duchess has arrived. Please have the tea sent in as soon as it is ready.”

Evan waited for the butler to leave before turning to Margaret. “I have a few errands to run, but I will be back before you know it.” He hesitated for a second at her side before bending over and kissing the top of her head. “Please feel better soon.”

Margaret smiled at him but said nothing as she rocked in her chair.

Leaving the room with a growing concern for his wife, Evan made his way to the front door. He was of two minds about sending for the doctor. He’d have no choice if her condition worsened any further.



“You look tired,” Emma said to Margaret as she sipped her tea, reaching for another scone and clotted cream with raspberry jam. Margaret had noticed that they seemed to be a favorite of hers. While the Duchess was by no means chubby, her cheeks

were full and round, and she had a curvaceous and voluptuous body.

“I haven’t been sleeping very well since Ham went missing,” Margaret admitted with a heavy heart. She couldn’t ask Evan to stay with her either out of fear that she loved him more than what his feelings were for her.

“Have you tried a tonic?” Emma asked as she washed her scone down with tea. “I know my mother uses a fabulous tonic to help her sleep when her nerves begin to get the better of her.” She rolled her eyes and shook her head. “Lord knows she says she needed it with me when she was trying to find me a husband.”

“I don’t like relying on substances for help,” Margaret replied almost begrudgingly as her head began to ache. The lack of sleep was beginning to have an effect on her.

“I understand,” the Duchess said more seriously as she placed her cup of tea back on the tray.

The ton knew of Margaret’s father’s drinking problem. How could they not after his years of gambling and borrowing money to feed his habits? She hadn’t heard from him since the day he had paid them a visit, and she was sure she wouldn’t any time soon.

“How are things with you and Evan?” Emma asked with a note of caution in her voice. “Are you both settling into married life?”

Taking a deep breath, she sought a satisfactory answer that would not only placate the Duchess but stop her from asking any further questions. The question of her feelings for Evan was not a topic she relished, not when she was still grieving the loss of her beloved Ham.

“I think I can see the answer to my question,” Emma said sympathetically as she pursed her lips. “You are in love with him.”

Hearing the words out loud from another person caught Margaret off-guard, and she stopped rocking herself back and forth.

“There is no need to be so alarmed.” She reached out a white-gloved hand and gently touched her arm. “I won’t say anything; I’ll keep it just between the two of us,” she winked.

“But how did you know?” Margaret relaxed a little and let out a breath.

“It’s as plain as the nose on your face,” the Duchess answered with a smile. “I probably wouldn’t have noticed it if I hadn’t gone through it myself, but you have the same kind of

panicked and forlorn look that I had while we were courting.” She smiled fondly as she recalled the memories. “I was frightened to death when my best friend Abigail realized that I was in love,” she giggled.

“Why is it so frightening to fall in love?” Margaret asked, hoping to gain some understanding and insight into her own heart.

“Simply put, we do not wish to get hurt. Being fond of someone is easy, but real love requires a vulnerability that could lead to very real heartache.” She sighed. “I ran away from Nicholas at first when I realized I loved him, but of course, your situation is a little different — you are already married.”

“How do I know if he loves me back?” She swallowed hard as she asked the question that had been plaguing her mind in the hours when she wasn’t thinking of Ham.

Sitting up straight, Emma fixed the skirts of her white dress before neatly folding her hands in her lap. “Well, there are a few things like grand gestures, changed behavior, and an unwillingness to leave your side.” She looked Margaret in the eyes. “But the only way you will know for sure is if you ask him how he feels.”

Margaret’s throat suddenly became dry as she thought of having a very difficult conversation with Evan.

What if he says he is only fond of me as a friend?

Her world would be shattered beyond repair if he rejected her feelings. A shiver of fear ran down her spine as the chill that had been plaguing her body suddenly set in once again.

“Have there been any grand gestures?” Emma asked curiously, “Or an unwillingness to leave your side?”

Thinking of the day that Ham had first gone missing, she recalled the way that Evan had sacrificed his staff in an attempt to find her dog. “You could say that he has also spent all of his evenings with me since we’ve been married.”

“Hasn’t he gone out to Whites for an evening or anything like that?” Emma tilted her head to the side in curiosity and chewed the inside of her cheek.

“Not that I can think of. He’s been here with me every evening. The only times he goes out is to run errands during the day.” She suddenly felt strange as she thought of his behavior and the way he had stuck by her side through everything.

What if Evan actually has feelings for me?

Her heart suddenly began to beat faster, and her palms began to sweat. She'd read in novels that falling in love could feel like an illness, but she hadn't been expecting it to be true. The physical manifestation of her feelings made her light-headed and slightly sick with worry that she might get hurt.

Or things could work out, and we could be deliriously happy together.

She felt strange that there was a glimmer of hope in the darkness. Yet a part of her was hesitant to move on with her life when there was no real finality with Ham and what had happened to him. Her mind was stuck on the fact that he was gone, but the reality was that she couldn't quite bring herself to believe it.

"I can see you have a lot to think about." Emma's kind voice interrupted her thoughts. "I'll thank you for the wonderful time and leave you to ponder on my words for the rest of the afternoon." She reached out and squeezed Margaret's hand. "Let your mind think of happy things, and do not dwell on the things that have been lost." Her eyes searched Margaret's face for a moment before she stood. "I will call again."

Taking a deep breath and shutting her eyes, Margaret began to gently rock herself back and forth once again, thinking of the kiss with Evan as her mind fought a war against itself. A war she was losing as Ham waddled back into her mind, bringing with him the guilt that she should have done more to save his life.



Evan knocked on her bedroom door, and he waited for her reply. The maids had said that she'd gone straight to her room after the Duchess had left. He hoped that she hadn't gone to bed while the sun was still up; her mental and emotional health was beginning to concern him more and more as the days dragged on.

Hearing no reply, he gently turned the handle and pushed open the door.

Margaret was sitting on the windowsill with Ham's pink ribbon on her lap. Her eyes were almost glazed over with tears as she stared into the distance.

"Margaret?" he said gently as he placed his hand on her shoulder.

Turning her head, she slowly looked up at him. "Evan, how long have you been there?" She blinked a few times as her eyes adjusted to the dimmer light of the room.

"I just came in," he said with a deep frown that wrinkled his brow. "Didn't you hear me coming in?" He glanced at the tired bags beneath her eyes. "How long have you been sitting here?"

“I’m not sure,” She shook her head in an attempt to search her memory. “Since Emma left, I guess. I’m not even sure when it was that I came up here. I think I wanted to fetch a shawl.”

Evan raised his hand to her face and stroked her cheek with the back of his fingers. “I’m worried about you, Margaret; I think you need to get some proper rest.”

“Thank you for worrying about me,” she placed her hand over his and gently kissed his fingers. “I’m feeling quite tired; I think I will have a rest if you don’t mind.”

The unexpected gesture caught him off guard as Evan searched her face. Her pale skin and dull eyes made his pulse race with concern.

“All I need is a good sleep,” she said in a tired voice as she stood and made her way over to the bed, climbing under the covers without removing her dress or her shoes.

“I’ll be back in a few minutes to check on you,” he said as he quietly left the room, wondering what he was going to do with her.

CHAPTER 25



“*I*s Her Ladyship not out of bed yet?” Evan asked Edwards as he carried a tray of fruit into the dining room. He’d allowed her to sleep in for a while, but the morning was quickly drawing to an end, making him worry more than he already had.

“No, My Lord,” the butler answered as he placed the tray on the side table. “Mable, her maid, said that Her Ladyship was still fast asleep when she went to wake her this morning.” His face was drawn and tired with worry.

“Right,” Evan said as he used his legs to push back his chair. “Keep the breakfast warm, Edwards, and listen for the bell. I might need to send for the doctor soon. Send a note to the Duke and Duchess of Saint Clair; say that I request their presence as a matter of urgency.”

“As you wish, My Lord.” The man seemed relieved as he picked up the pot of tea, ready to take it back downstairs along with the rest of the food.

Hurrying from the dining room, Evan sprinted to the stairs, taking them two at a time. He should have done something about her condition days ago, but he'd been foolish enough to give her space.

One doesn't simply give the woman you married space to grieve.

He berated himself on the way up the stairs for not having taken better care of her.

Reaching her bedroom door, he stopped to compose himself before turning the handle. The hinges creaked from the pressure as he stepped into the dimly lit room. Nobody had bothered to open the curtains as Margaret lay motionless on the bed, a pile of blankets atop the mattress.

“Margaret,” he said in a gentle voice. “Are you ill?”

The deafening silence that met his words was more than enough to make his heart race with fear. Hurrying toward the bed, he sat on the edge and searched the covers, feeling for any discernible limb. “Margaret?” he tried again as he finally found her head buried beneath the layers of fabric. Placing his hand beneath her cheek, he gently guided her face toward his. “Can you hear me?”

Groaning slightly, she allowed her eyes to flutter open. “Evan? What time is it?”

“It’s almost noon,” he said as his eyes searched her face. “You’ve been asleep all night and all morning.” Brushing her hair behind her ears, he used the back of his hand to check her temperature. “You’re a little warm; how is your head?”

“I feel a little groggy but not too ill,” she moaned before bringing the back of her hand up to her forehead.

“I’m going to send for the doctor,” he whispered, feeling the full weight of his emotions as tears began to well in his eyes for the very first time in his adult life.

“That’s not necessary, Evan,” she said as her eyes fluttered shut once again. “I’ll be fine after I’ve had more rest.

“I can’t leave you like this,” he said as he bit back the fear that threatened to boil over.

Falling asleep once again, her chest began to rise and fall in rhythmic motions.

I can't lose you as well, not now that I have found you.

He pushed himself up from the bed and looked down at her, bringing the covers back up to her chin.

“Evan,” Emma said as she poked her head around the door.

“I’ll be out in just a second.” He cleared his throat and blinked to clear his eyes after the Duchess’ head disappeared back around the door. Having regained control over his emotions, he made his way out of the room and into the hall where he closed the door behind his back.

“I thought it might be Margaret when we received your note,” Emma said with concern as Nicholas stood by her side.

“Has anything happened?” the Duke asked with a worried frown.

“I’m sure Emma has filled you in on the state Margaret was in yesterday. She has taken a turn for the worst and now refuses to get out of bed. I was just about to send for the doctor when you both arrived.”

“I’m ahead of you there,” Emma said as she straightened her spine and wrapped her arms around her waist. “I met Edwards downstairs and asked him to send for the doctor already; she was looking a little peaky when I left her yesterday.”

“Thank you for that.” Evan gently touched her arm in an act of gratitude.

“There is one thing we have to ask you.” She seemed a little flustered as her cheeks filled with heat. “It’s just...”

“I think what Emma is trying to say...” Nicholas came forward and placed his hand on her elbow. “...is that we were wondering if Margaret was not perhaps ill because she is with child?” He coughed in an attempt to clear his throat and hide his embarrassment.

“She can’t be with child,” Evan said coolly, growing increasingly uncomfortable with their line of questioning. His personal life was not a topic he ever relished discussing with others unless it was a matter of necessity.

“Are you sure?” Emma seemed to regain her confidence. “Sometimes it’s hard to tell right at the start; the early signs can often be mistaken for an illness.

“There is no chance that she is with child,” he said gruffly, glancing from one to the other before averting his gaze. “Our marriage is one of convenience as you both know.”

“Oh,” Emma’s lips formed a perfect ‘O’ as she looked at her husband. “I see; well in that case, it’s best that the doctor sees her. She may very well have picked up a cold. Things like that

can happen when one's body is terribly run down from stress or anxiety."

Their conversation was interrupted by a commotion downstairs as an old man came rushing into the hall. "I am Doctor Folley," he said in a hurried manner, pushing his large spectacles up his snub nose. "I hear the lady of the house has taken ill?" He looked at them all without waiting for anyone to introduce themselves.

Evan sized up the man as he looked him over. Folley's skin was papery thin as it clung to his old bones. There was barely any fat on the man's body, and his knees stuck out of his trouser legs like two eyes on a wobbly stick figure. The only hair on his head seemed to migrate to his ears rather than congregate on his head.

"Are we waiting for the patient to materialize before our eyes?" he barked at them in a raspy voice when nobody replied.

"I do apologize," Evan said as he snapped himself out of the daze. "I am Viscount Sutherford, and this is the Duke and Duchess of St. Clair." He gestured toward Nicholas and Emma who seemed to shy away from the man.

"My dear fellow, you could be the queen of England, and it would not make a difference to me. I have one case of consumption and another dropsy of the heart to see to after

your wife. Now would you kindly show me the way to the patient so that I may venture an opinion as to what is wrong with the lady? You are lucky that one of your footmen tracked me down on my way to a farm. Now, let's not dilly dally."

"She's in there," Emma jerked her thumb toward the door as she looked at the man with a wide-eyed expression.

"Thank you," Doctor Folley said as he pushed past the group and entered the room, shutting the door behind him as he went.

"I wouldn't want to be ill if he was my doctor," Nicholas whistled through his teeth.

"I think that's exactly why he's a good doctor; patients are too afraid to fall ill while he's in charge." Emma glanced up at her husband.

Evan shook his head at their conversation; he couldn't bring himself to join in on their jesting as he awaited the news of what was ailing his wife. It seemed like an eternity passed before Nicholas spoke up again.

"I'm sure things will work out, Evan; it's more than likely just the loss of her beloved dog that has taken its toll on her."

"I should have done more to try and find him." Evan stopped pacing as he leaned against the wall with his forehead and beat

his fist against the cool stone.

“More?” Nicholas came forward. “You searched for most of the night trying to find the beast. You ordered your staff to leave their duties, all in an attempt to find him. You couldn’t have done more if you searched every inch of London.”

“Nicholas is right.” Emma came to his side as well. “You did everything you could, Evan. This wasn’t anyone’s fault...”

Her words fell on deaf ears as Eloise Button instantly came to his mind. He’d never be able to forgive her or himself if anything happened to Margaret; he was already finding it hard not to act on his anger because of Ham.

The door suddenly opened, causing Evan to jump and whip around.

“You may calm yourself, My Lord.” The man said the title as if he were being forced. It was evident that status meant little to nothing to him in the face of saving people’s lives. “I have examined the young lady and found that she is coming down with a cold. I understand that she has lost a pet, and with women, I find that an inability to control their emotions often leads to weakening of the body and spirit.”

Evan saw the way Emma flinched out of the corner of his eye before Nicholas placed a hand on her shoulder to hold her

back.

“All the lady needs is some rest, a small tonic that I left by the side of her bed, and good food.” He turned to leave before pausing. “A change of scenery may very well do her good — help her put the matter of the dog from her head,” he suggested before rushing away once again.

“That’s a relief, at least,” Evan said as his shoulders drooped. He’d begun to worry that he’d need to send her away to a hospital for treatment if she didn’t improve; rest and a vacation seemed like a reasonable treatment to him.

“I think you should take her away, Evan,” Emma said gently. “Take her somewhere far enough so that she may put this whole ordeal behind her and come back feeling refreshed.”

“There is a vacation home in Brighton that you could use,” Nicholas suggested. “My grandmother likes to stay there, but it’s empty at the moment as she is visiting relatives.”

Evan chewed his bottom lip as he thought about what they were saying. A trip may very well be the thing to help them both heal; he’d begun to feel tired himself from worrying. “She might not want to go because of her cats,” he suggested as Butter, Vinnie, and Cheese came to his mind.

“I know the staff have become very fond of them. I can also check in every day and even have them spend some time with me,” Emma replied confidently.

Nicholas seemed as if he were about to open his mouth but quickly pursed his lips when his wife smiled at him.

“You wouldn’t mind if we have guests for a while, would you Nicholas?” Her eyes beamed.

“I just remembered,” Evan frowned, “Iris and Layla will be back in a few days from their trip to Brighton; they don’t know anything about the dog or the fact that their sister has taken ill.”

“Don’t worry about that.” It was Nicholas who spoke up. “We will see to everything while you are away.” He placed a hand on Evan’s shoulder. “All you need to worry about is getting your wife better.”

“I appreciate the way you two always stand by my side,” he said earnestly.

“Don’t even mention it.” Emma smiled as she looped her arm into her husband’s. “We will see ourselves out; go and check on Margaret.”

Evan took a deep breath as he watched them leave, turning to the door with a sense of relief. Things seemed better when there was a plan in action. Opening the door, he stepped into the room as bright light seeped through the now open curtains.

Margaret was sitting up in bed with the blankets tucked over her lap. “The doctor said I should get some light,” she said as Evan blinked a few times. “Apparently I have been a tad dramatic,” she continued with a half-hearted smile that didn’t quite reach her eyes.

“It’s not dramatic to mourn the loss of someone you loved,” he replied as he came to her side and sat on the edge of the bed. “I hear the doctor said that you may be coming down with a cold.” He examined her sallow face that seemed to only have improved by a fraction with color.

“Yes, he’s given me this horrid tonic to drink and warned me against the lasting effects of pneumonia should I not take care of myself.”

“I think we better heed his advice then, don’t you?” He gave her a smile, grateful that she wasn’t still tucked under the covers. “He has also suggested I take you away for a while,” he broached the subject. “Nicholas and Emma have offered us their house in Brighton.”

“When were they here?” she asked with a confused frown.

“Just a few minutes ago; they didn’t wish to disturb you while you were resting.”

“I don’t think I can go away Evan; what about the cats? They are already so uncertain since Ham disappeared.”

Reaching for her hand, he gave it a gentle squeeze of reassurance. “Emma has offered to take care of our cats as well as your sisters once they return.”

“Oh Lord, I forgot all about Iris and Layla in all of this.” She shut her eyes and shook her head with her hand on her forehead.

“You don’t have to worry about any of that; all you have to worry about is getting better. A little time away will do us both some good.”

Margaret seemed to consider his words as she looked at him. “Evan, I’m sorry I’m causing you so much trouble,” she apologized.

“I vowed to look after you in sickness and in health,” he said gently. “This is the sickness part.” He could see on her face that his words had touched her heart. Evan felt a strange fluttering sensation in the pit of his stomach as he looked into her eyes. Things had somehow changed between them; he just wasn’t sure how or why.

“I think I might like a rest in Brighton,” she agreed with a small smile that made his heart soften.

CHAPTER 26



*M*argaret watched the scenery rushing by as the carriage rattled and bumped over the uneven road. The lush trees and salty sting of the vibrant sea air did little to keep her mind away from the sadness within. She wanted nothing more than to make peace with what had happened but found herself incapable of thinking of anything else.

“I hope you don’t mind that we won’t be anywhere near any of the big attractions.” Evan’s voice broke through her train of thought, bringing her mind back to the jostling cabin they found themselves in.

“Hmmm?” She blinked a few times as her eyes adjusted to the dimmer light inside the carriage. She had been looking out the window for so long that she’d almost forgotten her husband sitting across from her. His fists were clenched over his cream breaches, turning his knuckles white.

Giving her a sympathetic smile as if he understood her plight, Evan glanced out the window. “The house where we will be staying isn’t near any other country homes or the famous pier

for promenades. You will be stuck with me for two days.” He looked back at her with a smile. “Unless you would like to use the carriage to see all the sights,” he added quickly.

Margaret was amazed at how much he had changed since they had met. His usual grumpiness and stubborn nature had been tempered by an unexpected sweetness that caught her off-guard. “I don’t mind.” She smiled at him as the carriage jostled her about once again. “I quite like the sound of silence and solitude.” She was finding it increasingly hard to hold onto the edge of her seat.

Evan seemed placated by her answer as the corner of his mouth lifted in a lazy smile, adding to the mysterious charm that Margaret had come to love. He tore his eyes away from her and looked out the window once again.

I love him.

The thought occurred to her once again as she examined his profile. The strong line of his jaw made her lips part slightly, and she wondered what it would be like to kiss a path over that line. It was strange to her that while she had thought of all the possible difficulties that having a marriage of convenience would bring, falling in love had not been one of them.

The carriage wheel suddenly hit a bump, sending Margaret sprawling forward into Evan’s lap. Her hands gripped his thighs as she struggled to steady herself.

“Are you all right?” he asked with concern as he gripped her upper arms and held her steady.

“I... I think I am,” she stammered, realizing that her face was inches away from his manhood. The clearly visible bump that showed through his trousers made her gulp as he helped her sit up.

“These roads can be quite treacherous at times,” he said softly, allowing his fingertips to fall down her arms and clasp her fingers as she came into her seat once again.

The nearness of his lips and the feel of his hands on her skin made her heart beat faster. Her mind drifted to uncharted territory as she thought of what consummating their marriage would feel like.

“Did you get hurt?” His voice was filled with concern as he gave her hands a gentle squeeze.

“I did not,” she said quickly, realizing that she had been distracted by her own thoughts.

I can't think of things like that, she scolded herself.

And why not? We are married. It wouldn't be the worst thing in the world.

She waged an inner war with herself. They were about to spend a few nights alone in a house by the sea; naturally, the thought of their marital bed would occur, she reasoned with herself, wondering if Evan was considering the same thing.

Heat instantly filled her cheeks. Did he think of her naked when they kissed? Or had there been a time or even moment where he had wanted to take their relationship further?

“We will be there soon.” He gave her another lazy smile that did little to stop the heat that was rising in her core. “You seem a little flushed. I’m sure we can have a lovely cup of tea while the servants get everything settled. The Duke was nice enough to let his staff know that we would be coming for two days.”

“That... that would be nice,” she stammered again, feeling foolish about the way she was behaving.

You are a married woman for pity's sake! There is nothing to be ashamed of.

Her chest rose and fell with panic, her mind completely pushing the matter with Ham aside. Margaret had heard some of the more experienced women at balls whispering about

lovmaking and how much it had hurt the first time but how pleasurable it could be if your lover was good.

She thought of Evan and the way he had kissed her. Surely a man who kissed like that had had experience in the past, or perhaps it was just because she loved him that she enjoyed it that much. Either way, she couldn't help but want him now that she had sampled the pleasure of his touch.

“Here we are,” he said as the carriage came to a stop. “I have been here once before with the Duke on business, but I had forgotten how picturesque the house was.”

Trying her best to keep her mind focussed, Margaret looked out the window just as the carriage door was opened by a footman in bright blue livery.

“Welcome to Staten house, My Lord and My Lady,” the man with blonde hair, a long nose, and a pale complexion greeted them both with a bow.

“Staten house?” Margaret whispered to Evan out the side of her mouth. “I thought Nicholas was the Duke of Saint Clair.”

“Staten was his grandmother's maiden name; this house had been in her family for many generations,” he explained helpfully.

“Oh,” she nodded. “That makes sense.” She waited for Evan to step out of the carriage before following suit.

Margaret’s eyes were greeted by a breathtaking sight that made her stop in her tracks with her hands on the carriage door.

Staten House was a solid brick building, three stories high. While it was not an overly lavish house, it was idyllic, nestled between a grove of birch and oak trees. Bright green vines of ivy snaked up the bricks in untamed patterns. The sixteen windows that could be seen from the front of the house were all polished and gleaming with pure white drapes on the other side of the glass. The cobbled path leading up to the simple wooden door was neatly kept with red rose bushes on either side of the path.

Margaret’s mind was drawn back to the kiss they had shared back home.

“It’s not much, but it will at least allow us to live in comfort while we rest.” Evan held his hand out to her as she exited the carriage.

“I think it’s lovely,” she said almost breathlessly, recalling the feel of his lips on hers as she placed her hand in his.

“I’m glad you like it,” he beamed as if he had accomplished a goal that he’d had in mind. “You may have tea sent up to the drawing room as soon as it is ready,” he instructed the footman before leading Margaret up the path.



Evan took a deep breath, feeling the salty air fill his lungs through the open drawing-room window. He’d always loved the smell of the sea as a child; it reminded him of holidays and good times — not that there had been many good times in his youth — but the very few times his parents had been able to leave their affairs behind, they had spent time together as a family beside the sea.

“This tea is delicious.” Margaret drew his attention back to the present.

He turned away from the window to see her tongue flicking over her bottom lip, presumably in search of the final drops of tea. Heat filled his body at the sight as he recalled how close her face had been to his lap. “Yes.” He cleared his throat in an attempt to push the thoughts aside. “One of the perks of living so close to a port like Brighton is that you often have new variants of tea from the ships before anyone else in London.”

“I’d like to take some home with us if we can,” she requested as she took another sip and licked over her bottom lip before biting down, a habit that Evan had never noted before but now

wished she would stop doing. The sight of her tongue running over her luscious lip drove him wild with lust.

“That can definitely be arranged,” he agreed as he made his way over to the couch and took a seat, shifting his body to hide the fact that he had been aroused. “Was there something you wanted to do before we settled in for the night?”

She seemed thoughtful for a second, reaching behind her head to scratch a section of her neck where a single tendril of hair teased her skin.

Evan wasn't sure if it was the incident in the carriage or the change of scenery, but he felt himself being inexplicably drawn to her. His mind was filled with thoughts of her lips and what it would feel like to run his hands over her shoulders and...

“I think I would like a hot bath and supper,” she finally said, providing a welcome distraction for Evan.

Why am I suddenly plagued with these thoughts?

Deep down, he knew that it wasn't morally wrong for him to desire the woman he had married. On the contrary, it was encouraged if not required in most conventional marriages. Yet their marriage was not conventional; the agreement had been one of mutual benefit and convenience. He couldn't

expect her to fulfil her marital duties if she didn't desire him as much as he desired her.

Does she desire me?

“Was there something that you wanted to do before we turned in for the night?” she interrupted his train of thought once again.

Many things...

The words crossed his mind but were quickly pressed aside as he shook his head. “I think a bath and supper is exactly what we need,” he said with a sigh. He'd have to do something to keep his mind off of what he really wanted to do. “Perhaps we could take a walk beside the sea tomorrow if you are up for it.”

“I think that would be nice,” she said with a grimace as she rubbed the back of her neck once again.

“Is something the matter?” he examined the pain on her face.

“My neck is just a bit stiff from the carriage ride; I think I might have injured it when the carriage jolted like that.” She rolled her neck from side to side with her fingers interlaced behind her neck for support. “Do you think you could rub just over here?” she asked as she ran her fingers over the nape of

her neck just above her collarbone. “One of the maids used to rub my mother’s neck whenever her muscles were tight; it seemed to help her.”

Evan shut his eyes and swallowed hard before answering. Rubbing her delicate neck and feeling the softness of her skin was the last thing he needed to be doing at present. Yet there was no feasible excuse he could give as to why he couldn’t or shouldn’t. “I can try,” he replied as he stood and made his way around the couch to her back. “I’ve never massaged anyone’s muscles before.”

“It’s very simple,” she said before straightening her spine and assuming a better position. “You mainly use your thumbs to gently apply pressure over the skin.”

Think unattractive thoughts.

He tried his best to look at the ceiling and ornate moldings as he placed his hands on her shoulders and began to massage. The softness of her beautiful skin made him think of her body and what she would look like without her dress.

Think of the time you saw a pig farm.

His mind panicked as a soft moan escaped her lips.

“That’s wonderful, Evan; your fingers are magic.” Her voice was barely above a whisper as her head lulled back.

Picking up the pace, he allowed his fingers to wander just beneath the fabric of her dress, exploring the skin that was hardly ever exposed.

“Mmmm, I could sit here forever while you did that.” Her moan was long and drawn out.

I could do this forever.

The thought crossed his mind as his thumbs hooked the shoulders of her white traveling dress and slipped them down slightly. Her bare shoulders were just as milky and smooth as the rest of her body. Dipping his head, Evan brought his lips closer to her neck. “Do you like this?” he asked in a tone that was barely above a whisper. The sweet scent of her silky skin was filling his senses and clouding his judgment.

“I do...” she whispered back. “Please don’t stop.”

Losing the battle of his will, Evan parted his lips slightly and placed them against the nape of her neck, allowing his hands to wander down her sides. The feel of her skin through the fabric of her dress was more exciting than anything he had experienced before.

A sudden knock at the door made him jump back as Margaret quickly pulled her dress over her shoulders.

“The baths have been drawn, My Lady,” the same footman from earlier announced as he came into the room. “Dinner will be ready shortly after.

“Thank you,” Evan said breathlessly as he struggled to regain control of his breathing. “We will be up shortly.”

“As you wish, My Lord,” the man bowed, respectfully backing out of the room once again before shutting the door.

“I think we should go up before the water gets cold,” Margaret suggested, fixing her dress and tucking a few strands of hair back into place. Her face was flushed and red, and her eyes were clouded by a look that Evan could only describe as wild.

“I think that might be a good idea.” He searched her face for a second before taking a deep breath. His fingers had brushed the bottom of her breasts right before the footman had interrupted. The fullness of the warm, full flesh had been evident even through her dress.

“Please excuse me; I think a hot bath will do me good,” Margaret suddenly said as she rushed from the room.

Evan was left wondering if he hadn't gone too far, yet the way she had responded to his touches had led him to believe that she had wanted him to continue.

Please don't stop...

Her words echoed in his mind, bringing with them a heat he was barely able to contain. He'd have to watch himself around her; there was no telling what would happen if they were left alone in a situation like that again.

CHAPTER 27



The wind picked up as Margaret pulled a few strands of hair from her face. The sky was dark and clouded, but it hadn't stopped Evan from suggesting a walk. The beach was empty and clean, devoid of any visitors, or as Margaret liked to think, devoid of people with common sense.

"I've always loved walks along the beach," Evan spoke up as the wind whipped sand in all directions. The deafening sound of the waves crashing against the shore was more than enough to keep Margaret's mind from the things that were still haunting her at night.

"There has always been something very cathartic about visiting the ocean," she agreed. "I guess it's why doctors always suggested having a vacation here in places like this."

"There definitely is something very restorative about the salty air." His lips curled into a contented smile she'd never seen before. His handsome features always stood out the most when he was happy.

Evan had never been unattractive to her; she'd thought him handsome from the very first moment she'd laid eyes on him at Marie Webster's shop. Yet his face seemed more open and welcoming now as if a veil had somehow fallen. What it was that had brought this change about in him, she wasn't sure, but she hoped that things would stay that way.

"The footman let me know before he left that we will have the house all to ourselves tonight," he informed her as they strolled along. "Apparently the Duke's mother is in Brighton and needs her staff to help at a ball. I'm afraid that means the cook will also be missing in action, but I can go into Brighton and enquire about any women that are willing to help out for tonight."

"Don't do that," Margaret spoke up quickly.

Evan frowned as he looked at her, the quickness of her response leaving him puzzled.

"I will cook for us this evening. I know it's a bit unconventional, but I've missed preparing meals. I'd like to prepare something of my own again," she clarified her response, hoping that he would understand. Parts of her that longed for the life she'd had when she'd been in charge of preparing the meals. There was something satisfying about eating food that had cooked yourself.

“If you are sure?” He hesitated for a second. “This holiday is so that you may rest.”

“I find cooking very soothing,” she confessed as her shoulders relaxed a little. The more she spent time in his presence, the more she felt at ease.

“As you wish then,” he said before looking out over the waves that were beginning to crash against the shore with growing ferocity. “I think we should head back soon; there seems to be a storm brewing on the horizon.

Margaret’s mind suddenly filled with dread as she recalled the day that Ham had disappeared; nothing ever good happened in the wake of a storm.

“What’s the matter?” Evan suddenly looked back to see that Margaret had frozen in her tracks.

“I... I...” Her words caught in her throat; her mind was saying run while her heart was grieving.

Glancing at the lighting on the horizon, Evan quickly came to her side, reaching for her hand. “I understand.” He searched her face. “We will go back to the house at once.”

A sudden crack of thunder over the ocean made her flinch as her heart leaped into her throat.

Acting swiftly, Evan tightened his grip on her hand, pulling her away from the beach and toward the house. The clouds burst, releasing from their confines a fine mist of rain that quickly soaked their clothes. Margaret was shivering by the time they reached the front door.

Their only saving grace was the fact that the ocean was less than a stone's throw away from the house.

Bursting through the door, Evan quickly shut it behind him and leaned against the wood, panting slightly from their sprint. "That was a close call," he said as he looked at her.

A shiver ran down her spine as the water seeped through the layers of her dress and touched her skin.

"I think we better remove these clothes before the cold you were getting returns," Evan said as he looked at her. "I think the fires in the bedrooms were lit before the footman left."

"I think that's a good idea." Her breathing was ragged as she wrapped her arms around her waist.

Nodding, Evan pushed himself off of the door and made his way up the stairs.

Not wanting to undergo another visit from an angry old man who clearly held a grudge against women, Margaret followed suit, lifting her sodden dress as they walked up the stairs to the upper floor. Doctor Folley was definitely a good doctor in the sense that patients were too scared to get sick again after having him examine them even once.

“I’ll meet you downstairs once we are both dressed and warm,” Evan suggested with his hand on the handle of his bedroom door. Their rooms were connected by an adjoining door just like it was back home.”

“I’ll make us some tea as soon as I’m done,” she offered and pushed her way into her own room.

Margaret was met with a delightful warmth as soon as the door was shut. True to his word, the footman had left the fires lit. The gentle flames licked at the air as they snapped and crackled behind the grate, bringing with them a welcoming change from the rain outside.

Not wanting to waste any time, Margaret quickly sat in a chair in front of the dresser and began to untie her boots. The laces took long, but she was finally able to remove her stockinged feet from their icy prisons. Standing, she placed a hand behind her back in an attempt to undo the ribbons that held her dress in place. It took a few moments of grunting and groaning before she realized that the dress would not be coming off without any assistance.

“Evan,” she stopped trying to untie the ribbons and shut her eyes as she called to the door that joined their rooms.

It wasn't long before she was met with a concerned reply. “Yes?” he called back.

“I know you said that the footman and cook left, but is there any chance that one of the maids stayed behind?” She waited with bated breath for his response as she bit on her lips, her hand still gripping the ribbon.

“I think we are completely alone,” he came back to her after a brief pause.

Margaret hung her head in disappointment; it was going to be a far longer and more difficult night than just cooking. It was shocking how much a lady needed the help of other women; even in her father's house, she and her sisters would help each other dress and undress.

“Is something the matter?” he called through the wood again, his voice a little closer than it had been before.

“No.” She plucked up the will to try again and yanked on the ribbon, giving up quickly again when she realized just how tight the loops had been tied. “Actually,” she shut her eyes and cringed, “I'm stuck in my dress and can't get out.”

“I can come and help you,” he responded quicker than before.

Margaret felt her heart leap into her throat at the thought of Evan helping her undress.

“It’s not like I’m not allowed to,” he pointed out hesitantly. “We are married after all.”

“I know we are married,” she called back with a sigh, realizing that she didn’t have much of a choice. “You can help me if you promise not to peek.”

“At what?” his voice sounded amused.

“You know very well what,” she said sharply.

Laughing, Evan turned the handle and opened the door by just a crack. “I promise not to do anything untoward or to peek at anything.”

“Very well.” She held her breath as he stepped into the room and shut the door behind him. The chiselled muscles of his chest and abdomen were fully exposed as his damp shirt clung to his skin. It was evident that he’d been in the process of removing his shirt when she’d called. “I’m sorry I’m improperly dressed, but you did catch me at an inconvenient time,” he teased as he came toward her.

Margaret quickly swallowed and cleared her mind as she tore her eyes away from his skin, turning her back, so he could undo the ribbons.

“What are we dealing with here?” he asked in a tone that was somewhat confused.

“Undo the ribbons and pull them out of the loops. I will take it from there,” she explained quickly, not wanting him to stick around once her dress was loose.

“Understood,” he said and set to work on the ribbons.

Her breathing quickened as she could feel him tugging on the fabric of her dress, making her mind wander to dangerous places.

“There,” he said after a few moments when the final ribbon had been dealt with.

Readying herself to turn and thank him, Margaret was stopped by the feeling of his fingers working her corset. “What are you doing?” she asked, almost panicked, and she placed her hands over her abdomen.

“I thought you might need a bit of help with the loops in your corset as well,” he explained as the fabric around and beneath her breasts suddenly gave way. “I can stop if you like?”

“No,” she decided after a moment’s hesitation, realizing that she would not have been able to remove the garment on her own. “I appreciate the help.” She brought her hands up to cup her breasts, just in case the dress along with the corset fell to the ground.

“There,” he said as the last loop was dismantled.

“Thank you...” Her voice petered off into a whisper as she felt the tips of his fingers on her back, gently stroking her bare skin.

“Has anyone ever told you that you have the softest skin?” he asked in a husky tone.

“No,” she stammered again and held her breath, shutting her eyes as the pleasurable sensations grew.

“Well, you do...” His hands slipped under the fabric of her corset and gently felt her waist. “It feels like velvet.”

Margaret shut her eyes and leaned her head back as he brought her body closer to his, feeling her skin beneath her undergarments as he gently guided her hips.

“I could get lost in the feeling of your skin,” he whispered against her neck before gently pressing a kiss on the tender flesh.

A silent gasp escaped her lips from the feeling of his tongue, the back of her head fully resting on his shoulder as he supported her weight against his chest. It wasn't long until she could feel her dress slipping down her body, exposing her back, shoulders, and arms.

Looping his fingers into the fabric, Evan pushed her dress to the floor, gently moving her arms out of the way.

Feeling a sudden burst of modesty, Margaret quickly covered her breasts with her hands, feeling the hardness of her own nipples against her palms.

“You don't have to be shy around me,” he breathed in her ear and brought his hands up to cup hers. “You are more beautiful to me than any mythical being in a painting.”

Her breath caught in her chest once again as she felt his hands begin to move over hers, rolling her breasts in circular motions. Her mind suddenly focussed on the fact that the skin on her back was pressed against his chiselled abs, sending a wave of pleasure down her spine.

Moving her hands away, he gently placed them at her side before kissing her neck. His fingers slowly worked their way up her hips and over her ribs before cupping her breasts without the hindrance of her hands.

“Evan,” she gasped with pleasure as he took control of her body, pressing his groin into her buttocks.

“Yes?” he growled in her ear with more passion, sending a wave of goosebumps over her skin. “Do you want me to stop?”

“No...” she breathed as her breath began to come in shorter gasps.

“Good,” was all he said before turning her body around with lightning speed. His lips were on hers within seconds, searching the depths of her mouth with a searing passion that rippled through her core. The sensation of his lips ravishing hers was unlike any experience she’d ever had before.

A loud gasp of surprise escaped her lips when Evan gripped her buttocks, guiding her legs around his waist. Her body was fully supported by his arms as he carried her over to her bed, kissing her neck and chest as he went. Allowing herself to be lowered onto the mattress, she lay her head back on the bed, gazing up at him with a wild look of longing. Her heart nearly beat a hole in her chest as her excitement grew, creating an insatiable heat between her thighs.

Evan stopped to look at her for a second before slowly removing his shirt and stepping out of his breeches.

Heat filled her face as Evan's manhood came into view for the very first time, leaving nothing to her limited imagination.

"You are exquisitely beautiful, Margaret," he said quietly as he climbed onto the bed, hovering above her as he ran his fingers down her side. "I have wanted this for a very long time."

Her lips parted in shock as she heard the words she'd wanted to hear for a very long time. It felt like a lifetime since she'd realized she'd fallen in love with him, and every inch of her body was aching for his touch. "I need you," she suddenly said, placing her arms around his neck and drawing him down.

Allowing her to set the pace, Evan lowered his body into hers, taking her into his arms and kissing her with all of the pent-up passion and lust that had built between them.

Her thighs parted beneath his weight, allowing him access to her most intimate parts. Anxiety suddenly filled her face and mind as he positioned himself between her legs.

"Shhh," he said gently as he noticed the change in her body. "I promise it will only hurt for a second."

Deciding that she could trust him, she nodded slowly, waiting for the searing pain as he focussed his attention back on the task at hand. A sudden pain like a heated knife shot through her loins as Evan began to move; the sensation was almost unbearable for a moment but quickly gave way to new sensations of bliss.

“There,” Evan gasped as he looked down at her, moving her body in rhythm with his thrusts. The look of pure ecstasy on his face was enough to make Margaret fall in love with him all over again as she began to gasp and pant.

“Oh, my love,” Evan moaned as he lowered himself into her, placing his full weight on her body.

Margaret’s fingers tangled in his hair as she allowed herself to be swept away on a wave of pleasure. “Oh, Evan!” she cried out loud as her pleasure began to grow, knotting in her core like a dam that was about to burst.

Evan groaned loudly as his body went rigid, his face contorting with pleasure.

The sudden burst came to Margaret, more tense and explosive than it had been on the night in the study. Her body writhed and contorted with bliss until her screams subsided, leaving her panting for breath.

Propping himself up on his elbow, Evan rolled aside, allowing her the space to breathe as he watched her recover. “How do you feel?” he asked her, running the tips of his fingers over her naked arms.

“Like I never knew what pleasure was before,” she said almost breathlessly.

A deep chuckle escaped his throat as he leaned down and kissed her forehead. “Good,” he repeated his sentiment from earlier.

“Evan,” she said seriously when she had regained her composure.

“Yes?” His smile was more vibrant than she had ever seen it before.

“Have you always had that mark on your thigh? The one shaped like a strawberry?” She watched his face redden slightly.

“Yes.” He touched the tip of her nose with his finger. “I was born with it, and don’t you go around telling anyone,” he teased with a wink. “I’ll know it was you if all of the men in London suddenly start calling me fruity loins.”

She felt her heart warming toward him. “I suddenly feel like I can trust you with anything.” She paused for a second as her heartbeat slowed to an even pace. “I never thought I would say that to anyone ever again in my life, but I truly feel as if I can.”

“That’s because you can.” He placed his index finger under her chin and lifted her face to his, gently kissing her lips before pulling away again. “You can trust me with absolutely everything.”

Feeling content, Margaret snuggled under his arm, allowing Evan to pull her close to his chest where she could breathe in the manly scent of his skin.

The storm raged on outside the window, ravaging the earth with its chaos, yet the storm within Margaret began to subside. She felt for the first time in her life as if nothing at all could go wrong. Shutting her eyes, she allowed herself to drift off to sleep, lulled by the steady beating of Evan’s heart.

CHAPTER 28



Margaret smiled at the people passing as she strolled alongside Sophia in the park. The sun was shining brightly as she maneuvered her parasol in an attempt to shield her face. It may have been her imagination, but the birds singing seemed far sweeter than she had remembered. Or had she simply never taken the time to listen to them? Her mind was filled with trivial questions that seemed far more important than they ever had before.

“I take it you enjoyed your little vacation?” Sophia asked with a smirk. “You haven’t been able to stop smiling since you returned.” They walked at a leisurely pace as they spoke.

“I guess you could say that.” Margaret blushed despite her best efforts.

“And where is Prince Charming now? I hope he didn’t ride away into the sunset without you?” her friend teased her and bumped her side with her elbow.

“He’s gone to deal with his properties and other estate matters,” she replied, saddened by the fact that he’d had to leave her behind. Things had changed drastically for them since the night they spent together. Evan was far more loving while she felt blissful at the fact that she could trust another person again. “He said I would find the journey far too tiring, but that he would bring back a souvenir in two days’ time.”

“Well,” Sophia said with a sigh, “you know this shoots a giant hole in my vendetta against the matchmaker. Not that I would ever choose her services for myself,” she added quickly, “but even I have to admit that two successful matches in a row add credibility to her profession.”

“I’m glad to hear it,” Margaret laughed. “She definitely knows what she is doing.” Her smile faded into a frown as she spotted a woman sitting by herself on a bench. She seemed to be watching them with a great deal of interest.

“What’s the matter?” Her friend followed her gaze.

“It’s that woman in black. I remember her from before, but I can’t quite recall her name. There is something about the way she keeps watching us.” She kept her eyes on the woman while walking.

“Ah,” Sophia said in acknowledgment. “That’s Eloise Button; I think she’s lost her mind. I keep seeing her here in the park on that bench whenever I promenade. It’s almost as if she is

waiting for someone or something.” She frowned. “Rumor has it that she’s been scorned, her lover left her high and dry, and she’s out for revenge.” Sophia shuddered slightly. “I’d hate to be the woman she’s after. She’s got a mean streak in her that one.”

Margaret felt a strange sensation in the pit of her stomach as her eyes locked with Eloise’s. There was definitely a coldness there that spoke of hurt and betrayal. Margaret pitied her for a moment before Sophia suddenly drew her attention back to herself.

“Serves her well for a woman of ill-repute,” she said with a shrug. “I have to be going now Margaret; my chaperone is waiting for me at the tea shop.” She kissed Margaret on the cheek. “But I am absolutely thrilled to see how happy you are, even if it came through Miss Nosey Webster.”

Rolling her eyes, Margaret smiled and said goodbye to her friend, watching her walk away with a small hop in her step. No matter how hard the world tried to stamp it out of her, Sophia would remain true at heart. Glancing back at the park bench, Margaret frowned when she noticed that the infamous opera singer had vanished.

“Looking for someone?”

Margaret jumped as a sultry voice spoke right by her side. “I... I was not,” she stammered as her heart thumped in

uneven beats.

Eloise Button was standing right by her side with a cold look in her eyes, the wind whipping her blonde hair about her face. “You think you know who I am, Margaret Benett, but you know nothing at all,” she spat almost bitterly.

“I beg your pardon?” Margaret recoiled from the venom in her voice. “And my name is Lady Margaret Sutherford.” She stood her ground in the face of the woman’s cheek and nerve. There was something very off-putting about the way she carried herself now that they were face to face.

Laughing in a mocking tone that grated on Margaret’s nerves, Eloise rolled her eyes. “You think you have that leash tied pretty tightly around his neck, don’t you honey?” she purred. “Little do you know that I was the one whose bed he was warming before you came traipsing along.” She smiled sardonically.

“That’s not true.” Margaret felt a wave of nausea wash over her body. Evan had promised her that he would never hurt her intentionally. He detested external marital affairs because of his parents; there is no way he would have kept a woman like Eloise Button as his mistress. Her mind wandered involuntarily to her friend’s words.

She’s a woman scorned; rumor has it that her lover dropped her.

“I see there is some doubt in your eyes, but you aren’t quite convinced,” Eloise said coolly when Margaret remained quiet. “I think you might be more convinced when I tell you that the maid Evan dismissed was not a maid at all.” She narrowed her eyes and took a step forward. “That’s right — I was in your house the day you moved as well as the day you had your little escapade on the back of the couch.”

The inside of her mouth suddenly tasted like bile as Margaret swallowed hard, recalling the times she had seen a glimpse of a maid’s dress. “You could have gotten that information from anyone; maids and servants talk all the time,” she said as her defenses came up, unwilling to believe that Evan would have had an affair with a woman like her. “Why are you doing this?”

“Because I was cast aside,” she spat venomously once again as if the bitterness she felt inside could not be contained. “He was mine first.”

“I refuse to listen to any of this,” Margaret snapped as she turned to leave, lifting her dress before trying to storm away.

“Not so fast!” Eloise’s hand shot out and gripped her wrist, holding her back with a vice-like grip despite the woman’s small stature.

“Let go of me at once!” Margaret rounded on her.

“Not until you’ve heard what I have to say.” She yanked her arm until Margaret’s face was level to hers. “How do you like that birthmark on his thigh,” she whispered slowly in her ear. “You know, the one shaped like a strawberry.”

Margaret’s eyes widened in shock as she stared blankly ahead. There was no way that Eloise could have known that detail unless she had been in his bed.

“I see the truth has finally sunk in,” Eloise said snugly, taking a step back. “It didn’t have to come to this, but I could see that you were far more stubborn than you looked.”

Tears suddenly filled her eyes as Margaret fell to her knees, shrouded in a thick fog of disbelief.

How could I have been so foolish as to trust him?

“There’s no need to cry honey.” Eloise’s voice dropped to a more sympathetic tone as she reached for Margaret’s arm and helped her up. “We’ve both been there with Evan where we’ve wanted to believe the lies he told. You aren’t the first, and I can assure you, you won’t be the last.” She pursed her lips and folded her arms over her chest as Margaret came to her feet.

Placing her hand over her abdomen, Margaret tried her best to stave off the rush of nausea that rushed through her body. The

rug had suddenly been snatched from beneath her feet, and she wanted nothing more than to just disappear. “What do I do now?” she whispered as she tried her best to make sense of things.

“Now don’t go all faint on me.” Eloise rolled her eyes and reached for Margaret’s arms when it seemed as if she were about to sway. “Everyone is starting to look at us for pity’s sake; pull yourself together.”

Margaret shut her eyes as the world began to spin.

“I’ll tell you what,” Eloise did her best to soothe her, “I can see that you have had a nasty shock. My apartment is not too far from here; why don’t you come over and have a cup of tea? You can decide what to do from there.”

Allowing herself to be led from the park, Margaret felt her world crumbling.

How could he have done this to me?

Her mind filled with questions she couldn’t answer.

How could I have trusted him?

Her mind suddenly filled with hundreds of questions. How long had the relationship continued after their marriage? She recalled Eloise's words from earlier and all of the times she had glimpsed the so-called disgruntled maid.



Margaret sat on the couch of the small apartment she had been led into. Her mind was only just beginning to clear from the shock as she looked around the dirty little room. Black dresses and all manner of clothing items lay scattered in a haphazard manner, making her wish she had gone anywhere else.

“I hope you don't mind if your tea has no milk or sugar,” Eloise said bitterly as she came into the room carrying a cup. “I find myself in need of many essentials these days.” She pursed her lips as she handed the cup to Margaret.

“It's fine,” Margaret said reluctantly as she accepted the cup, looking around the room again as her host took a seat on the opposite couch. Her eyes suddenly fell on a miniature portrait of Evan.

“He gave me that one night when he paid me a visit,” Eloise nodded toward the portrait. “Said he would love me forever and that I would never have to worry about being taken care of ever again.”

Margaret felt the nausea rising once again as she sipped the bitter tea. It was a far cry from the tea she drank in Brighton or

even the one she had been used to at home, but it made for a welcome distraction.

“I bet he’s told you those things as well.” Eloise rolled her eyes in a bored manner. “I bet you’ve heard that he loves you, that he would always be faithful to you, and that you would never hurt you on purpose,” she rambled off a list that made Margaret want to wretch. “You can stop me when you hear one that he never said to you.”

He said he loved her.

The words stuck in her mind like a buzzing fly that wouldn’t leave as she gulped back the rest of her tea. She placed the cup beside her on a table that served as a cupboard for undergarments. Margaret wasn’t entirely sure why Eloise was smiling at her, but she couldn’t be bothered to find out as she suddenly became light-headed.

“You know, it was such a bore waiting for you in the park like that, day after day,” Eloise’s voice dripped with spite as her demeanor changed once again. Placing her hand on the armrest, she leaned her cheek against her fist. “It was almost enough to make me take up reading,” she scoffed.

“What are you talking about?” Margaret’s vision began to swim as she tried to maintain her focus.

“I’m just grateful that you were so shocked that you came up here with hardly any resistance. I thought I was going to have to break into your house and slip the sleeping draft into your tea.”

“What slee...” Margaret’s world spun to the side as her vision suddenly faded to black.

CHAPTER 29



The world began to slowly swim back into focus as Margaret opened her eyes, blinking in the dim light that filtered through the dingy window. Her mouth felt as if someone had used a cloth to remove all the moisture when she tried to swallow.

Where am I?

Her mind fought against the dull ache that shot through her head like a bolt of lightning. The flesh around her wrists was raw and tender as something that felt like ropes bit into her skin. Looking to her left she tried her best to ascertain where she was. Someone had taken a newspaper and tried to cover the only window, but a single corner had lifted from the pane, allowing a small ray of light to filter into the space.

It seemed to Margaret as if she were in a single room with no furnishings at all. The floor was dusty, and cobwebs hung from every corner and crevice, causing a shiver of fear to travel down her spine. Her wrists and ankles were bound together as she lay on an old blanket that smelled of animals.

“Hello, is anyone there?” she attempted to call out, but her throat was dry and scratchy. She’d tried her best to recall how she had come to the tiny room, but it was almost as if her mind was weighed down beneath a cinderblock of pain.

“I thought I heard something.” The door creaked open to reveal the smug figure of Eloise Button carrying a glass of water. “You had me concerned there for a while, My Lady.” Her voice dripped with sarcasm as she came into the room, her heels clicking on the dirty wooden floor. “I almost thought I had slipped you a bit too much of my sleeping draft,” she sniggered. “Now that would have been a terrible loss. You were almost asleep for twenty-four hours.”

The day before came rushing back to Margaret. She had been in the park with Sophia when Eloise had confronted her.

Evan’s Mistress.

She recalled the reason she had been so upset. Eloise must have drugged her with the tea and somehow smuggled her away. She strained her ears to try and discern any sounds, but all she could hear was the gentle flow of water and the steady chirping of birds. The sound no longer sounded sweet to her; all it reminded her of now was the betrayal and loss she had felt.

“I thought you might be thirsty after taking such a long nap.” Eloise’s sharp voice broke into her thoughts once again like an intruder into her personal world.

Bending down, Eloise placed the glass of water beside Margaret on the ground. “You might want to drink this before you become dehydrated. All that crying you did in the park will more than likely make you ill.” She stood again and looked down at Margaret with a mean look in her eyes. “I can’t stand women who make such public displays of emotions,” she glowered down at her.

“I can’t reach the water,” Margaret said as she struggled against her restraints; the ropes around her wrists and ankles were so tight that she could hardly move.

“Oops,” Eloise shrugged. “I forgot all about those little ropes; I guess you will have to figure something out then.” She turned to leave with a bright smile. “Just like you figured out how to catch a man like Evan — you are a crafty little minx.”

“Wait,” Margaret croaked as she licked over her cracked lips that were beginning to hurt. She was absolutely parched and in desperate need of a drink.

“Did you say something, honey?” Eloise turned back, swaying her black dress across the dirty floor as she spun.

The resulting cloud of dust made Margaret cough and splutter. “Could you just give me a sip?” she managed to speak in a hoarse voice through the pain.

“I’m sorry, honey,” she said sweetly as she beamed at her. “I have an appointment to keep. A little birdie told me that Evan will be home today, and I think he will welcome a bit of comfort from little old me when he finds the note saying you just couldn’t pretend to love him anymore.”

“You can’t possibly be that evil.” Margaret looked at her with a wide-eyed expression of shock. “Nobody can be that evil...”

“I guess you would think that.” Eloise’s voice suddenly became cold once again. “Having had it easy all of your life, you wouldn’t understand the lengths one has to go to ensure your own happiness,” she said bitterly. “I’ve had to fight for everything I have in life.”

“Things don’t have to be this way,” Margaret tried to reason with her, fearing the consequences of being left alone to die. She just knew that she’d suffer a horrible death by herself if nobody came to her aid.

“But I’m afraid they do, honey,” Eloise purred. “You see, Evan has always been mine, and you almost got in the way of that. I can’t allow you to interfere anymore.” She shook her head.

Tears stung her eyes as Margaret thought of Evan and how much she loved him; she would have done anything for him just the day before. Yet now she was left to die on the floor of a dirty cabin because of her love.

“Don’t cry, honey; you can say hello to your slobbering little friend in a few hours when your body gives out.” Her voice slashed through the fog in Margaret’s mind like a heated knife through butter.

“What did you do to Ham?” Her tears turned to rivers as the pain in her chest intensified.

“Let’s just say that you and the dog will be sharing the same unfortunate fate in this cabin.” She looked around the room with a smile on her lips. “This at least will bring you a little closer to the mutt.” She laughed from the pit of her stomach and spun around, shutting the door behind her as she sauntered from the room.

My Ham, I’m so sorry, I failed you.

She shut her eyes against the tears that stung her dry cheeks. Her own tears felt like rivers of scolding lava as she lay on the floor, lamenting the day she had left her father’s house. All seemed lost in the wake of Eloise Button, yet it was herself that she blamed more than anyone else. None of this would be happening if she’d stuck to her guns and never trusted anyone.



Evan stepped into the front hall of his mansion, removing his top hat and gloves. There was an eerie silence he didn't like: none of the staff were bustling about, and even the cats were missing in action. "Margaret," he called up the stairs as he reached the bottom step.

His ears were met with nothing but the eerie silence he had heard before. Taking the steps two at a time, Evan began to run, his heart pounding fiercely in his chest.

Why did I leave her alone? I should have taken her with me.

He berated himself for thinking that nothing would happen to her in his absence. Hoping and praying that she was in one of the rooms, he burst open each door he found before stopping at her bedroom.

"Please be in there," he whispered and shook his head, bracing himself. "Margaret?" he asked more quietly as he pushed open the door. He didn't want to disturb her just in case she was lying down.

All three cats instantly began to meow in panicked choruses as they rushed his legs, jumping from the empty bed. His heart sank once again as he looked around the room. Margaret was nowhere to be seen.

“Why are you guys locked in here?” he asked them, bending down to try and soothe them. “You aren’t supposed to be in here at this time of day. Where is your mother?”

It was Vinnie who puffed out his tail in an angry gesture and sauntered past Evan into the hallway. Feeling an instinctive pull to follow the cat, he made his way up the hall and toward the study. It was only when Vinnie paused at the study door that he hissed angrily and looked back to Evan.

“What’s the matter?” he asked with a frown, taking a few steps toward the door and turning the handle.

Vinnie instantly hissed more aggressively at the room before running away.

That’s strange.

The door creaked open under the weight of his hand, revealing a dark room with the drapes pulled shut. Clenching his fists at his sides, Evan stepped into his study, blinking a few times as his eyes tried to adjust to the dim lighting of the room. “Margaret, are you in here?” he asked cautiously, searching the room for any signs of movement.

“Evan, I am so glad you finally came.” Eloise suddenly flung her arms around his neck, holding on tight as she buried her

face in his chest. “I came here to apologize for my behavior in the past, only to find the mansion abandoned and empty. I think Margaret must have taken everything and dismissed the staff,” she whaled.

“What?” It took Evan a few minutes to process all that she was saying. “What are you talking about?” He suddenly felt his body filling with revulsion as he pushed her away. “Where is Margaret?”

Eloise pouted slightly in the dimly lit room like a child that had been rejected. “See for yourself,” she nodded toward the desk and jerked her thumb over her shoulder.

Frowning, Evan looked toward the desk and back at Eloise before making his way to the drapes and ripping them open. The bright light that filled the room blinded him momentarily before he was able to make his way to the desk.

There, neatly placed in the center of the polished wood was a handwritten note. Feeling his heart thump in his chest, Evan began to read before he even picked it up.

My dearest Evan,

I'm sorry that things had to end this way, I just couldn't pretend to love you anymore. The marriage was a farce and should never have taken place to begin with. I have given the

staff a few days off in your absence with the instructions to look for new employment if you do not return soon. Edwards will be able to provide the note with my written consent.

I have taken any money I could find and left the cats in your care; I just won't be able to take care of them where I am going. I wish you all the happiness in the world and hope in time that you will be able to forgive me.

Yours sincerely, Margaret Benett.

P.S. Please do not try and look for me. This process has been painful enough, and I do not wish to see you ever again.

Feeling as if the blood had drained from his face, Evan allowed the note to fall from his hands and stared ahead. His jaw clenched in anger.

“Oh, Evan, I am so sorry this has happened to you,” Eloise said as she came around the desk and placed her arms around his neck, drawing him down into her embrace. “I just knew when I saw that note that I needed to be here for you; you shouldn't be alone at a time like this,” she purred against his neck.

Evan felt his body stiffening beneath her touch; his mind couldn't come to grasp what he had read. The fact that any woman would go to so many lengths to cause him pain sat in

the pit of his stomach like a rock that he had swallowed. The sickeningly sweet smell of her perfume filled his nostrils with anger and contempt.

“Don’t worry, baby,” she cooed with her lips against his neck. “Forget about that little piece. You still have me, and I am willing to forgive you and go back to the way things were before. You can return to my bed now that she’s gone.” Her hand slipped down his jaw, drawing a path over his neck before entering his shirt between the buttons.

“Eloise,” he said her name as if he had rehearsed it in his mind at least a thousand times.

“Yes, my love,” she replied happily as she lay her cheek against his chest, running the tip of her finger over the line of his jaw once again with her free hand while the other massaged his chest like she had done countless times before.

“Thank you for being here,” he said as he placed his hands on her upper arms, gripping her tightly before pushing her away at arm’s length.

“I will never leave you,” she purred with a triumphant look in her eyes. “You know I have always looked after you, Evan. You can leave this place and stay with me like you used to do in the past. Don’t you miss the times I used to look after all of your needs?” she asked smugly with a look of satisfaction in her eyes. “I missed the way you looked after me, and I don’t

just mean with the apartment.” Her voice dropped to a seductive purr.

“There is just one thing you didn’t realize,” he said calmly, pushing down the bile that was building in his throat every time she touched him.

“What is that?” she asked, still smiling like a cat that had gotten at the cream.

“Margaret may very well have left me — I’m not that vain that I would think myself irreplaceable in any woman’s life.” He waited for his words to sink in as she searched his face with growing panic. “I may not have been married long enough to recognize her handwriting, but Margaret would die before she left one of her pets behind.”

Eloise’s eyes suddenly widened with shock as she stared at him, the blood draining from her face as her skin went cold.

CHAPTER 30



Evan tightened his grip on her arms as Eloise began to squirm. He'd had more than enough of her shenanigans to simply allow her to slip away now that he had her in his grasp. He'd find out what she had done to Margaret, come hell or high water. They had been through far too much together for him to just give up now.

"I don't understand," she pleaded as she tried to get away from him. "You're hurting me, Evan. It's Margaret that left you, not me," she complained with no remorse in her voice. "You read the note; you're just delusional from the shock," she tried to sweet talk him again. "Let go of me, and we can talk about this." She squirmed her shoulders back and forth.

Laughing in an attempt to keep his anger at bay, Evan shook his head. "You still don't get it Eloise. I love Margaret, and she means the world to me. You knew very well from the start that you were a fling." His eyes darkened. "What have you done with Margaret?"

Eloise's eyes filled with shock as if he had just been slapped, Evan guessed that she hadn't been expecting him to say that he loved his wife. Even hadn't been expecting to love her, but he'd realized his feelings for her the second they had lain together as husband and wife. He had finally felt in that moment as if he fully understood what it meant to be one. He wanted to live the rest of his life making love to her and ensuring her happiness, no matter the cost.

"I didn't do anything," she stuck to her story, attempting to get away. "She's the pig that came in and ruined what we had! We were perfectly content in our own little world until she came along and disrupted things with that farce of a marriage!" She spewed the hatred she felt inside, unable to escape her bitterness any longer.

"Don't you dare call her names." He shook her angrily, careful not to hurt her. Eloise Button may have been a hateful and detestable woman, but he'd be damned if he'd hurt a woman. "Now tell me what you did with her!" he demanded angrily and held on tight.

Eloise suddenly lost her temper as she ripped her arms from his grip, fleeing toward the door with lightning speed as soon as she was free.

Evan, however, was quicker than her; he bolted toward the door, blocking her path with his body as he spread his arms over the threshold. "You will not leave this house until you tell

me what you did with my wife!” he yelled at her, taking a stance that let her know that he meant what he said.

“Just let me go!” Eloise balled her fists at her sides as she shut her eyes and yelled at the top of her lungs, turning red in the face before beating her fists against his chest. “Why couldn’t you just love me!” She fell to her knees on the carpet, wrapping her arms around her waist and sobbing as she rocked herself back and forth. It seemed as if she had reached the end of her rope and finally snapped. Her cool demeanor was nowhere to be seen.

Slowly lowering his arms, Evan looked at her with pity; it seemed almost as if she were a former shell of herself as she sat on the floor at his feet. Her tears did little to soften his hard heart though; too much water had passed under the bridge to allow him any emotions other than pity and hatred where she was concerned. “I don’t care for you like that,” he said quietly, hoping his words would reach her.

“I just wanted you to love me,” she uttered quietly as she sat on the floor crying, gently rocking herself back and forth. “Why couldn’t you love me back?” Her voice suddenly became choked with tears. “I did everything to make you see me; why couldn’t you just love me back?”

“Eloise...” Evan came forward and hunkered down before her on his haunches. “You knew what we were from the start. I was a young man looking for an outlet for my lust; we discussed this. I never meant to hurt you, but I can’t lie to you

either. That wouldn't be fair to you." He realized just how broken she was as she sat on the carpet. She was less a woman scorned and more a woman broken.

"I know," she snapped at him before dropping her head once again. "I can't help it if my heart wants you; you can't expect a woman to not develop any feelings for you after spending months on end in her bed, Evan." She turned her face away from him. "Don't think I want to feel this way about you because I don't. I promised myself a long time ago that I would never allow myself to feel anything for the men I bedded, but you were different... My love for you drove me insane; the things I did were out of love for you."

Examining the honesty on her face, Evan felt little to no sympathy for her plight while Margaret was still unaccounted for. "I'm sorry you feel that way Eloise, but you had no right to kill an innocent animal to get what you want," he seethed with anger as he looked at her. "Our dog never deserved to die."

"I didn't kill that slobbering beast," she snapped at him once again. "I left him in the shed to teach Margaret a lesson; it was the storm that did him in, in the end. I don't control the weather, now do I?" Her face became irate with anger once again. "I thought someone would find him, and you would realize that you needed to come back to your senses."

Biting back the words he wanted to yell in her face, Evan composed himself. He'd never told her what had happened

with his parents; he could only blame himself for the picture he had created of himself in her mind. He'd put up such a front of chivalry and true love with the rest of the world that he had forgotten what he was portraying in his mistress' eyes.

Eloise glanced at his face before heaving a sigh and shaking her head. She remained to Evan one of the biggest mistakes he had ever made in life.

There was no time to dwell on the things he couldn't change. He needed to know where Margaret was. "I'm assuming you took Margaret to teach me a lesson," he said coolly. "I have learned my lesson, and I am pretty sure that you have learned yours," he continued with a bitter note of resentment in his words. "Tell me where she is so that we can end things here."

Eloise clenched her jaw and averted her eyes, refusing to look at him as she stubbornly crossed her arms over her chest like a pouting child who hadn't gotten her way.

"I love Margaret," Evan said honestly, letting go of the anger he felt toward her. "I never loved you. I'm sorry that you have gotten hurt like this, but harming her won't make me love you." He gripped her jaw and carefully moved her face toward his, taking care not to hurt her. "If you truly love me, you will tell me where Margaret is. I won't ever forgive you if anything happens to her," he said honestly.

Her eyes suddenly filled with tears as Eloise looked at him. "She is in the same place I left that dog," she confessed after a few moments of contemplation.

"Thank you," Evan nodded and let go of her face, pushing himself up from his knees. "I trust this matter is settled now, and I won't have to deal with this again," he said coolly as he looked down at her. "Your apartment will be paid in full until the end of the year. I owe you that much, but after that, you must find another means of making a living. You can see yourself out once I have left." He shook his head from anger and turned to leave.

"Evan," Eloise said in a broken voice, pleading with him.

Pausing with his hand on the door, Evan waited to hear her final words.

"You might want to hurry; she wasn't in very good shape when I left her," she suggested in a voice that sounded resigned to the situation at hand. "I hope you know that all I ever wanted was for you to love me back." Her voice was dry, devoid of any emotion or tears. "I dreamed that you and I would run away together and start a new life somewhere in France or Italy." She laughed. "Call me a fool if you like, but my love was true."

"You don't know how to love, Eloise Button. Loving another person means doing what is best for them and not yourself.

And above all else, it never involves taking another's life, especially an innocent life." He shut the door behind his back and hurried from the hall, rushing down the stairs.

Please wait for me, Margaret; I am coming.

He shut the door to his past firmly behind him, racing toward the future he wanted with the woman he loved.



Bursting into the cabin, Evan felt his blood turn to ice in his veins. There in the middle of the floor lay the still figure of his wife atop a soiled blanket. Her wrists and ankles were tied with ropes, and her lips were cracked and bleeding. The only other object in the room was a glass of water that had been spilled, lying empty beside her body with a wet stain on the wood.

"Margaret!" he yelled and rushed to her side, pulling her into his arms as gently as he could. There was every chance that she was in a great deal of pain.

Margaret's head lulled to the side as her body lay limp in his arms, sending a shiver of panic down his spine.

Oh, no, I'm not too late. Please tell me I am not too late.

Quickly placing his ear against her chest, he listened carefully for any sign of life. A wave of relief washed over his body as the steady thumping in her chest let him know she was still alive. The sound was fainter than it should have been, but at least it was there. “Margaret,” he said again as he reached for the ropes and undid the knots, releasing her wrists and ankles before taking her into his arms once again.

The long tendrils of her strawberry blonde hair clung to her pale face, making his heart beat faster with panic.

“I’m so sorry my love,” he whispered in her neck before burying his face in her hair. “I should never have left you alone.” Hot tears fell on her neck. “You are in this position because of me; I should have taken better care of you.” He tightened his grip around her body, drawing her close to him.

A soft groan of pain escaped her lips, letting him know that she was responsive.

“Margaret,” he said in a panic as his head shot up. “Can you hear me, my love? Please tell me you can hear me.” He used the tips of his fingers to remove the hair from her face as he looked down at her.

“Evan,” she parted her lips and licked over the cracks.

“Yes,” he said with relief as she cradled her against his chest.
“I’m here.”

“I need water,” she rasped in a hoarse voice.

“Of course,” he said quickly, remembering the glass that lay beside him on the floor. Gently laying her back down on the blanket, he picked up the glass and retrieved some fresh water from the flowing stream. “Here you are.” He carefully placed the glass beside her on the floor before lifting her in his arms once again.

Margaret groaned in pain as he nestled her head against his chest, allowing her enough support to drink as he lifted the glass to her lips. “Here you are,” he repeated, gently tilting the water into her mouth.

It took a few moments for her to get the hang of drinking again, but she quickly began to gulp the water, smacking her lips and allowing the cool liquid to soothe her.

“There,” he said with a sigh of relief as she opened her eyes and looked at him. The pain he saw reflected there tore at his heart. “I’m going to take you home and call the doctor,” he told her reassuringly as he stroked her cheek with the back of his knuckles. “You will be right as rain again before you know it.”

“No,” she said as her eyes fluttered shut once again.

“I think you’re still confused,” Evan said as he examined her face. “I must get you home so you can rest.” He began to lift her in his arms.

“No,” she repeated her objection as he stood. “Don’t take me back to the mansion. I want to go to my father’s house.” She opened her eyes to look at him. “Don’t take me back to your home.”

Realization suddenly dawned on Evan as he looked into her eyes. Eloise must have told her about their relationship before his marriage. The hurt and betrayal that he saw in her soul made him feel as if his body would never know the loving touch of warmth ever gain. “Margaret,” he tried to reason with her, “let’s discuss the matter once you’ve had some rest. You won’t be able to think properly right now.”

“Just take me to my father’s house,” she said in a tone that let him know she understood what she was saying. “I don’t need any time to understand that I made a mistake in trusting you.” Her eyes fluttered shut once again as her voice trailed off to a whisper. “I don’t want to go back to your house.”

“Please, Margaret, I love you,” he panicked as she once again lost consciousness. “I never meant to hurt you. Oh, Lord no,” he sobbed as he carried her from the cabin, crossing the stream with caution before rushing to his horse. Evan did his best to

carefully lay her over the saddle before pulling himself up and positioning her body in his arms.

“Help is coming, my love,” he whispered against her hair and kissed the top of her head.” He flicked the reins and urged his horse forward.

Please forgive me for hurting you.

His heart ached at the memory of her words.

I will make it up to you as soon as you are better... Or I will die trying.

CHAPTER 31



“*I* need help,” Evan shouted as he burst through the door of Margaret’s childhood home, carrying her limp body in his arms. He left the horse unattended or even tethered in the street. All he cared about at present was Margaret and her well-being.

“What the devil?” William stuck his head around the study door, gasping the second he caught sight of his daughter in Evan’s arms. “What has happened?” He took a few steps into the hallway.

“Send for the doctor; she’s had an accident,” he hurriedly explained. “Which bedroom should I lay her down in?” he enquired, glancing up the stairs. “She needs to rest until the doctor arrives.”

“Evan?” Layla asked as she stuck her head around the study door as well, pushing past her father. “What has happened?” she asked in shock, bringing her hands up to her mouth as she caught sight of her sister.

“There is no time to explain,” he hurried them all along. “Someone needs to fetch the doctor. Margaret needs to be put to bed at once!” He unintentionally raised his voice, making them both jump into action.

“I’ll go and fetch him myself; you can explain later,” William said, rushing past Evan and grabbing his hat and coat.

“I left my horse out front; feel free to use him if you think it will make the process go any faster,” he called after William before turning back to Layla.

The girl seemed to snap out of her daze as she lifted her skirt and hurried toward the stairs. “Follow me, I’ll show you to her old room,” she ordered and began to climb the stairs as quickly as she could.

Making sure not to bump Margaret’s head, Evan carefully carried her up the stairs, following Layla into one of the first rooms at the top of the landing.

“Lay her down here; I’ll see to having her cleaned up before the doctor comes.” Layla seemed to have matured a lot as she took charge of the situation, rushing to close the drapes and fetch some towels.

Evan did as he was told, carefully placing his wife on the pristinely crisp, white bed and ensuring that her head was

secured. He couldn't help but look at her bruised lips and pale face as he gently brushed the hair from her cheeks.

This is all my fault.

“You may wait outside while I change her clothes,” Layla took charge once again as she lay a few fresh towels and clothing at the foot of the bed.

“I would like to stay if that's fine with you,” Evan requested, sitting on the edge of the bed and taking her hand in his. He wanted to stay at his wife's side while still respecting the fact that it wasn't his house. “She is my wife, after all.”

Nodding her approval, Layla busied herself with removing her sister's dress, methodically peeling back the fabric and carefully ensuring that she didn't cause any more harm. The way she worked spoke of care and affection while still being precise enough to get the task done.

“Where did you learn to do all of this?” Evan asked her after watching the way she carefully slipped her sister's dress from her body.

Margaret was breathing much easier now as her chest began to rise and fall in shallow motions. Her lips were still cracked and bloody, but some of the color had returned to her face after the water she had drank.

“Well,” Layla said with a faint smile after she checked her sister’s pulse, “since you so graciously helped us back into society, I have become friends with some of the other young ladies my age. Quite a few of them with poor prospects look after the elderly ladies of the ton as their companions. I would never have considered it before myself, but watching my friend Ethel care for her lady, I quite like the idea of being able to help another person in that way.”

Evan felt stunned at her confession. He hadn’t thought that any young woman would consider a life like that when there were more conventionally acceptable options.

“It’s actually why I am back home; I wanted to run the idea by my father before I committed myself to anything permanent.” She stopped what she was doing and looked at him. “He’s doing so much better these days you know.”

“You know you never have to worry about making a match,” Evan said as he shifted to the side in an attempt to give her more room to care for Margaret. “I promised your sister that I would look after you and Iris, and that is a promise I intend to keep.” He glanced at his wife’s face as she slept, groaning a few times as Layla moved her arms. “That promise extends to professions as well; I will look after the two of you even if you never wish to marry.”

“I know,” Layla answered with a smile. “It’s not that I think I’ll never make a match, but rather, it brings me a great

amount of joy and fulfilment to think that I can help another person. I think it's quite a noble goal to set for oneself."

Evan watched the way her face flushed with pride as Margaret lay peacefully on her bed with her arms at her sides. He couldn't have been prouder of Layla if she had been his own flesh and blood. "I think it suits you," he said encouragingly. "Please let me know if there is anything I can do to help you accomplish that dream. If there are any schools you would like to attend or people you need to meet."

"That's very kind of you, Evan." She glanced at her sister's sleeping face. "Margaret is very lucky to have found a husband like you." Her smile was genuine and pure.

Looking back at his wife as he tightened his grip on her hand, he suddenly felt the weight of the situation come crashing down on him. "I think I am the lucky one. I have failed her today and every day since we married by not seeing how much she actually meant to me," he confessed in a shaky voice. He wished with all of his might that he had told her the truth from the start.

Layla took a step forward, placing a hand on his shoulder. "I don't know what happened, Evan, but I do know that you would never have allowed any harm to come to her on purpose. Whatever it is, I know the two of you will be able to sort it out in time."

“Thank you,” he said as voices coming up the stairs drew their attention to the door.

“Out of my way, out of my way,” Doctor Folley ordered as he came bursting into the room with his leather case in hand. “I meant what I said last time — if she didn’t take better care of herself, she would end up back under my care,” he complained almost begrudgingly as he placed his case at the foot of the bed and looked at Layla. “You, fetch me some boiled water and clean towels.” He looked at William and Evan. “The rest of you, out,” he commanded with an air of finality.

Wanting what was best for his wife, Evan swallowed his pride and followed William from the room, allowing Margaret the privacy she needed with the doctor.

“Thank you for bringing her back here,” William said with his hat in his hands. “I don’t know if you have heard, but I have not touched a drink or been to any kind of gambling establishment since that day you took my daughters away from me.”

Evan examined the man’s tired face and the waxy quality of his skin. He’d seen men before who had left drink and knew that it was a long and hard road to recovery.

“Not that there is any resentment of course,” he added quickly. “We all reach a point in our lives when we receive a wake-up call. Being rejected by my eldest daughter on that day in your

home was just the call I needed.” He gave Evan a sad smile. “I am grateful for everything you have done for my daughters. I hear that Iris is flourishing in the finishing school you were kind enough to send her to.”

I haven't been the best to all of your daughters, Evan thought with a deep sadness. He would never be able to forgive himself if Margaret attained lasting damage from the ordeal she had faced. He wished with all his heart once again that he had been more proactive in dealing with his mistress. Or perhaps he should have told Margaret from the start who Eloise was to him. Perhaps then she could have avoided her. He'd tried so hard to not be like his parents that he had ended up making foolish mistakes of his own.

“I'm afraid I don't have a maid anymore, but I have become quite adept in seeing to myself over the past few weeks,” William spoke up again. “I think a nice cup of tea will do us all some good,” he suggested encouragingly. “Would you like to join me downstairs while the doctor is busy?”

“Thank you, but I think I would like to be here as soon as the doctor is done,” Evan replied as he sank to the floor with his back against the wall.

“As it should be when you are in love,” William agreed with an understanding look in his eyes. “I will bring you a cup of tea as soon as it is ready.” He left Evan alone in the hall.

Placing the back of his head against the wall, Evan allowed his mind to drift as he waited for the doctor. There had been so many times he wished he could go back in time and make different choices but none more than the day he had met Eloise Button on that God-forsaken Street.

He could still recall the glint in her eyes when he'd accidentally bumped into her carrying a basket of fruit in her arms. She had just begun her career as an Opera singer, and he had just come into his position as the Viscount.

What attracted me to her on that day?

She had been pretty — any man with two functioning eyes in his head could see that she was an attractive woman. Evan had to admit to himself that it had been the forbidden fruit she had represented at the time. Being hellbent on making a match of love also meant that he needed to abstain from infidelity, and Eloise represented the exact opposite of that.

It seemed as if ages had passed before the door opened once again, revealing the doctor with his brown leather case in hand. Standing quickly, Evan pushed himself up from the floor and dusted off his pants. “Is she all right?” he asked the man who seemed less than pleased.

“She will survive,” the doctor said before pursing his lips. “She needs to take in an adequate amount of fluids over the next few days; an overdose of sleeping draft like that can have

lasting effects. I observe these kinds of symptoms quite often amongst the aristocracy.” He narrowed his beady little eyes behind the lenses of his spectacles.

“May I suggest that the next time your wife has trouble sleeping, you make her a cup of warm milk?” His voice held a note of accusation that didn’t sit right with Evan. “It may be preferable to her overindulging with hysterics.”

Taking a step toward the doctor, Evan balled his fists at his side. “I am not sure what it is that you think you are implying, doctor, but may I suggest that you gather the facts before coming to any conclusions.”

The man paled visibly as Evan towered above him.

“I would be careful what I insinuated if I were you, Doctor Folley.” Evan lowered his voice to a threatening tone. “I can assure you that my wife’s ingestion of sleeping draft was accidental.” He decided to leave out any other explanation as it may have raised more questions that he could not answer.

“I beg your pardon, My Lord,” the doctor stammered. “I didn’t mean to offend; I’m sure that Lady Sutherford is an upstanding member of society.” He cleared his throat. “I have left instructions for recovery with the very capable young lady in there.” He nodded toward the door. “Now if you would excuse me, My Lord, I have a few more patients to see to.” The man ducked past Evan and hurried away down the hall.

Evan shook his head and turned his attention back to the situation at hand. It made sense that Eloise would have used a sleeping draft to drug Margaret; she drank the stuff on a nightly basis to keep her restlessness at bay. He was about to push open the door when Layla suddenly stepped into the hall and shut the door behind her back.

“She’s awake,” Layla said with a sad smile, keeping her back to the door. “Not just yet,” she told him and shifted her body in front of him, blocking his path with her hands behind her back. “I’m not sure what has happened between the two of you, Evan, but Margaret has asked that you not go in just yet,” she continued apologetically. “I think we should do our best to not upset her at present. Why don’t you go home and come back in the morning once she has had some rest?”

Evan took a deep breath and shut his eyes. He knew very well that he had done wrong by keeping the situation with Eloise from his wife, but he at least wanted the chance to explain himself to her in person. “Fine,” he agreed with a sigh after opening his eyes. “I will respect her wishes.” He walked back over to the other side of the hall and slid his back down the wall. “But I won’t be going anywhere.” He folded his arms over his chest and made himself as comfortable as he could be.

Layla sighed and gave him a sympathetic smile. “Evan...” she said softly in a tone that conveyed the exasperation she felt.

“Do you hear that, Margaret?” he raised his voice to a level that he hoped she could hear. ‘I’m not going anywhere; I’ll be here right outside your door when you are ready to talk to me.’”

Shutting his eyes, Evan prepared himself for a nap. If trekking across the country in a grand gesture is what it took for Emma to realize that Nicholas loved her more than anyone else, then Evan was prepared to do the exact opposite. He would wait outside her bedroom door, even if it meant the rest of his life. That was what he was willing to do to prove his love for the woman he had married.

CHAPTER 32



Margaret heaved a sigh as she rolled her head to the side, looking out the window of her childhood bedroom. As far as she knew, Evan was still camped outside her door, waiting for a chance to talk to her. A chance she hadn't granted him in two days. She still loved him dearly; she just wasn't sure if she could ever trust him again.

The whole ordeal with Eloise had left her feeling as if the rug could be pulled from under her feet at any second in life if she ever dared to be happy. She wasn't willing to take a chance like that again if it meant that her heart was at stake.

"Is the patient awake yet?" Layla poked her head around the corner with an encouraging smile. She had been nursing Margaret back to health like a dutiful nurse ever since the doctor had left.

"Almost," Margaret sighed again and pushed herself up, feeling the strain on her muscles from her ordeal. If she ever saw that woman again in her life, she would give her a piece

of her mind. Eloise Button was worse than any person that Margaret had ever met before.

“How are you feeling this morning?” Layla asked as she came into the room carrying a tray of tea.

Margaret could see Evan craning his neck around the door just before it shut. “He’s still out there?” she asked almost sheepishly, feeling guilty that he was camped on the hall floor. It couldn’t have been comfortable to sit on the floor for so long, let alone sleep there.

“He is,” Layla confirmed with a sigh that matched hers. “I’ve tried to reason with him, but he said it’s his grand gesture or something like that. I brought him a pillow and blanket last night just so that he wouldn’t catch a cold.”

“I thought I caught a glimpse of bedding,” she said as Layla placed the tray on her bedside table and began to tuck the blanket around her legs.

“You’re going to have to talk to him sometime, you know.” Layla pursed her lips before reaching for the tray and placing it on her sister’s lap. “You can’t avoid him forever; he is your husband after all. It’s where the whole ‘until death do us part’ thing comes in.” She sat on the edge of the bed.

“You don’t know what happened,” Margaret argued defensively as she reached for her cup of tea. Her appetite had taken a while to return, but once it had, she felt herself being able to ravage anything that was placed before her.

“Well, I am here right now; do you have anywhere else to be?” she asked Margaret with a knowing look as she made herself comfortable. “Sometimes an outside opinion can give us a new perspective on matters.”

Margaret searched her sister’s face for a moment. “When did you become so wise and mature?” She felt as if she could hardly recognize her sister at all. Gone was the giggling young girl who complained about not having everything she needed in life, and in her place was a well-rounded and mature young lady. Beautiful and wise, just like their mother had been.

“I’ve had many years of watching you try and raise Iris and myself,” she said with a smile. “Believe it or not, the example you set was more than sufficient to give us everything we needed.” She gave Margaret another pointed look with her hands clasped in her lap.

“Very well,” Margaret sighed as she placed her half-eaten piece of toast back on the plate and dusted her hands. “It’s a bit of a long story; you might want to make yourself comfortable.”

“Like I said...” Layla reached for a pillow and placed it on her lap. “...I don’t have anywhere else to go.”

Margaret started at the beginning and opened up to her sister about how she had lost trust in everyone because of her father’s dowry lie and ended with the fact Evan had kept his pre-marital liaison from her — a lie that had led to her current predicament and the renewed breaking of her trust.

Layla sat in silence for a moment or two as she processed everything that Margaret had said. “If you forgive me for venturing an opinion on the matter,” she began cautiously, “did Evan not end this liaison before you got married?”

“We’ve never discussed it in detail, but I do not think he was involved with her in that way while we were married.” Her mind wandered back to the times Eloise had claimed she had been the disgruntled maid.

“All the more reason for you to talk to him and gain some clarity.” Layla placed her hand on Margaret’s leg over the blanket. “It sounds to me very much like the two of you could benefit from a good talk.” She waited for Margaret to finish rolling her eyes. “And it also sounds to me like his gesture of keeping the liaison from you was done out of love.” She held her hand up to silence her sister when it seemed like Margaret was about to argue.

Pursing her lips in annoyance, Margaret bit back her words.

“It may not seem like he did it out of love to you, but I think that he held it back out of fear of you leaving. I do not condone lying, but sometimes people withhold information for the sake of keeping other people in their lives.”

Margaret couldn't help but sigh again for the millionth time since she had been placed in her bed. Everything that her sister was saying made sense, but how could she bring herself to believe anything he said?

Love conquers all.

She heard the answer in her mind as if someone were speaking in her ear. If only she knew that Evan truly loved her, she would be able to believe everything else he said. Realizing that she had not spoken in a while, she looked at her sister. “I hate how mature you have become,” she said with a half-hearted smile.

“And I love the fact that you are very quickly returning to your old, snarky, and sarcastic self,” Layla laughed before standing and pressing a kiss on her head. “Get some more rest and consider speaking to your husband,” she advised before leaving the room.

Finishing the rest of her breakfast, Margaret wondered if she shouldn't just let Evan have his say — the man had been camping in a hallway for two days straight in an attempt to

prove his loyalty to her. Yet she couldn't quite bring herself to stop thinking of Eloise Button and the fact that Evan had hidden her existence from her.

“Margaret?” Evan's voice came through the door. He sounded tired and worn out. “You don't have to answer me, but I have got something here that might cheer you up.” There was a moment of silence before he spoke again. “And just so you know, I haven't left this spot. Your father helped me to arrange this. I'm going to open the door now, but I will still respect your privacy and not come in.”

The door creaked open slightly, revealing the grumpy face of Vinnie who was quickly followed by Cheese and Butter as they came slinking into the room.

Feeling a sudden wave of excitement, she placed her tray on the bedside table and patted the bed for her cats to jump up. She was greeted by many happy meows and vibrant purring as they rubbed their bodies against her.

The door shut again as she stared at the handle.

“I hope this small gesture proves to you how much your happiness means to me,” he said. “I want nothing more than to make you happy.” His voice trailed off again for a few seconds. “And I just want you to know that I can't hear everything you discuss in your room, but I did hear the part about Eloise. I want you to know that I ended the relationship

with her before we were married. I wanted to step into my marriage with you on a clear footing. I have never so much as looked at another woman since we met.”

Margaret felt angry and confused. She hated the fact that he had been able to hear her conversation, but she felt a certain amount of relief that the liaison had ended before their marriage. If what he was saying was true, it meant that their marriage bed, at least, had not been tainted by that woman.

The cats made themselves comfortable on her legs as she settled back down.

“I’m not going anywhere, Margaret; I will stay out here for as long as it takes to prove my loyalty to you.” His voice trailed off again before the sound of footsteps making a very short trek across the hall let her know that he had settled back down.

“I don’t know what to do, Vinnie,” she whispered to her fluffy white cat as he purred on her lap. “Do you think I should trust him again?”

A second knock suddenly sounded at the door. “Margaret, it’s your father,” William said after clearing his throat. “I would like a word with you if you don’t mind?”

“Come in,” she replied after a moment’s hesitation.

William opened turned the handle and stepped inside, shutting the door behind him, but not before Margaret caught a glimpse of Evan sitting patiently in the hall with his arms crossed over his chest and his legs crossed at the ankle.

“I see your visitors have arrived,” he said cheerfully as he came to her bed. “May I?” he asked and gestured to the blanket.

“Of course,” she replied politely and allowed him to sit.

“It seems like ages since I’ve sat at the foot of your bed like this,” he said with a sad smile. “Do you remember the times I used to sit here when you were a child? You used to love talking to me before you went to sleep.”

She suddenly felt her body going rigid once again. The good memories of her childhood were few and far between. Deep down, she knew that her father was attempting to turn a new leaf, but she didn’t feel up to talking about the past at present. There was more than enough on her plate already.

“I know you probably do not wish to hear how sorry I am,” he told her with tears in his eyes that surprised her. “Heaven knows that I haven’t been the world’s best father. Believe it or not, one of the reasons that I started drinking was because I couldn’t cope with the fact that I had failed you as a father. The irony of the matter is that once I realized I had messed up

with the gambling debts and needed to fix it, I started drinking to numb the pain of what a failure I had become.”

She felt the tears welling up in her own eyes as she watched her father cry. She had never realized that he thought of himself as a failure as a father.

“I am working very hard to settle all of my debts and get back into the swing of things. I want to be able to provide reasonable if not sizeable dowries for your sisters.” He laughed despite the tears falling down his cheeks. “Although, at this point, it seems like Layla may not need a dowry. She has asked if I would agree to allow her the choice of becoming a lady’s companion.” He shook his head in disbelief. “Can you believe it, one of my daughters asking for my blessing. Miracles do happen even after everything I have done wrong.”

Margaret felt her heart clenching for the broken man she saw before her; although he still had a long way to go, he was making leaps and bounds in life that he didn’t even realize.

“You are doing better than you think,” Margaret said softly as tears fell down her cheeks.

William looked at his daughter for a moment before reaching for her hand. “I may never have told you this before, but I couldn’t be prouder of the way you stepped up and looked after your sisters. They are fine young women thanks to you.”

“Papa,” she used the word she had refused to say for a very long time. “I’m sorry that I never knew how much you were hurting inside. I didn’t realize that you felt like a failure.”

“Thank you.” William suddenly began to sob, all of his brokenness showing on his face. “I don’t deserve your forgiveness; I feel like such a lucky man to have daughters that will accept me back.”

Margaret couldn’t help but embrace her father, and she threw her arms around his neck. They cried in each other’s arms for a few moments before drawing back.

“Thank you, Margaret.” He wiped his cheeks with the back of his hand. “I’ll never understand how you found it in your heart to forgive me, but I am so glad that you did.” He took a deep breath and regained his composure. “If there is just one thing I can ask of you...” He leaned over and gave her hand a gentle squeeze once again. “...find it in your heart to talk to your husband. I may not have been his biggest fan when you married, but he’s a good man.”

Margaret watched as he stood to leave, pausing at the other side end of her bed. “I should know — I have been a wretched man that was unworthy of forgiveness for most of my life.” He pursed his lips and winked at her. “Evan is one of the good ones.” He turned and left the room, leaving Margaret to think over what he had said.

It was true that Evan's transgression wasn't as bad as what her father had done in the past. Evan had kept the truth from her in an attempt to start their marriage on good footing, but she had trusted him more than anyone else. The transgression felt bigger because of the love she felt for him. That night in Brighton had made her give herself to him in every sense of the word. Their lovemaking had formed an unbreakable bond that had tethered her heart to his for the rest of her life.

Staring at the door that was once again firmly shut, she felt a thawing in her heart that scared her more than anything else.

What if I trust him again and get hurt?

She took a deep breath.

But what if I never forgive him and lose the love I feel for him?

She felt conflicted as she lay back on her pillows.

CHAPTER 33



Three days had passed since Margaret had come back to her father's house. Evan had been camping relentlessly in front of her bedroom door. His mere presence there had brought her a strange amount of comfort that she hadn't been expecting.

She currently found herself seated in front of her dresser, brushing her hair before putting it into a bun. Evan had been right in bringing the cats to her; they had helped her get out of bed. And while she wasn't willing to venture beyond her bedroom door just yet, she felt the need to get dressed and at least sit at her window.

"Margaret," Evan's voice came through the door after a gentle knock. He had spoken to her at least once a day since the whole ordeal had started. She'd come to rely on his pleas for forgiveness like the grandfather clock downstairs. "I know you still aren't speaking to me, but I have a gift here."

She placed the brush back on the dresser and turned to the door her curiosity getting the better of her as she waited to see

what he had.

“Please don’t think that this gift is meant to replace what you lost in the past. I know it might be a little painful, but I hoped it would symbolize a new beginning for all of us.” His voice trailed off again as it always did when he was giving her a moment to process. “I’m going to open the door now,” he said, “but as always, I will respect the fact that you do not wish to see me right now.”

Margaret braced herself as the door creaked open. It took a few moments before anything happened, but she was soon sent into a state of shock when the tinniest of chubby bulldogs came waddling into the room out of sheer curiosity. Her heart instantly melted when Margaret caught sight of the fat rolls and flat snout. She hadn’t thought it possible to find a dog smaller than Ham as a puppy, but this one was barely bigger than a wedge of cheese.

Dropping to her knees, she opened her arms and allowed the puppy to waddle onto her lap. The softness of its fur and new puppy smell instantly took her back to the time she had found Ham and his mother. It was then that she realized with a smile that she could love again, holding onto the good memories of how much joy he had brought into her life while releasing the bad.

Although it still hurt a great deal to think about Ham and the tragic way his life had ended, she knew deep down that she would be able to build her life again. She thought of the grief

she had felt with her mother's passing and how she had learned to cope. While the hurt remained the same as the years passed, she had learned to build her life around the sadness as she grew stronger.

"In case you are wondering," Evan spoke up once again through the door while she played with the puppy, "I recalled the story you told me about how you had given Ham's mother to a fisherman at the docks."

Margaret stopped playing with the puppy and looked at the shut door.

It's not possible...

"While I could not recall the name of the dog you gave to him, it took me a while to track down any fisherman who kept dogs on their boats." He paused for a moment. "Again, I did not leave this spot."

Margaret found herself suppressing a laugh at the way he felt a constant need to reassure her that he had never left that spot.

"I enlisted the help of Nicholas who was less than pleased at the notion of interviewing people who smelled of fish."

She pictured how the Duke would have grumbled at the request and wondered if Emma had convinced him to help.

The Duchess was after all just as crazy about animals as she was.

“It was Emma in the end who convinced him to help me find the man,” he confirmed her thoughts. “Anyway, the dog you are holding in your hands is Ham’s sister. It seems that his mother was very young when you found her on the street, and she has gone on to have many more litters. Call it fortuitous that little Taffy there was the last puppy who needed a home.”

Margaret looked down at the dog who was nibbling happily on her fingers with her very sharp puppy teeth. She was amazed that Evan had remembered her penchant for naming dogs after obscure food. Taffy seemed to suit her perfectly as she chewed away. The name even matched her light brown coloring.

“And yes, she was the runt of the litter, and I asked Emma to let me know what the first food was that the puppy ate. Apparently, the cheeky little blighter is a bit of a thief and stole a piece of taffy from Emma’s purse.”

Tears began to spill down her cheeks as Margaret listened to all the details of how Evan had managed to get her a puppy — not just any puppy but Ham’s sister.

“Margaret,” he said in a pleading voice, “can you please just give me any small indication that what I am saying to you is making a difference at all?” The pain in his voice tugged at her heart. “I know you don’t want to see me, but I need to know

that all is not lost. I can't go on knowing that you will never speak to me again."

She sat back on her haunches and cried as Taffy waddled away from her in pursuit of something to chew. His words and efforts touched her in a way that she couldn't deny anymore. Never in her life before had anyone put in the effort that he was currently displaying.

"I probably should have said this before..." He seemed to hesitate. "...but I love you, Margaret. I have loved you for far longer than I care to admit."

She laughed quietly as a flood of tears flowed from her eyes.

"I have loved you ever since that day in Miss Webster's shop when you made your ridiculous demands. There was something about the fierceness in your eyes that let me know you would be the perfect match, even if I didn't realize it then. You didn't disrupt my life with all of you animals and strange obsessions with treating them like children." His voice became choked as if he were crying. "You turned my world the right way up."

Margaret pushed herself up from her knees and stood, making her way to the door where she turned the handle without hesitation and looked at the man she had married.

Evan's ruggedly handsome face filled with shock as he stared at her. A light stubble had caused a five-o'clock shadow on the lower half his face, covering his jawline and cheeks. His hair was dishevelled, and his clothes were wrinkled. Margaret found him to be far more handsome than he had ever been before.

"Viscount Evan Sutherland," she said in a shaky voice with tears running down her cheeks, "you have been camped outside my bedroom door for days, spouting the biggest load of nonsense that any woman has ever had to endure."

He seemed hesitant as he stood there listening to what she had to say after three days of silence.

"You have driven me crazy with your persistent and stubborn plan to win me over." She bit on her lower lip in an attempt to keep it from quivering as she cried. "And all of this time, you had been keeping the most important part from me," she said almost angrily.

"I have apologized for not telling you about Eloise," he argued earnestly. "But I will apologize for that for the rest of my life if that's what it will take for you to trust me again."

Shaking her head, she shut her eyes before looking at him again. "It's not that." She took a deep breath. "You have never once before since we were married told me that you love me."

Evan's jaw dropped slightly as he looked at her, unable to speak as he searched her face. "I have only recently realized how much I love you; please forgive this most grievous oversight on my behalf."

Allowing the joy she had been feeling inside to explode across her face, she took a step forward and threw her arms around his neck, kissing him with all of the passion she had been suppressing for three long days. Her world suddenly fell into place once again as Evan lifted his arms and pressed his fingers into the small of her back.

Drawing back slightly, she whispered against his lips. "In case you were wondering, I love you too."

Evan smiled brighter than she had ever seen him smile before. "I feel like I have been waiting my whole life to hear those words," he said almost tearfully. "Here I was waiting for the perfect woman to fall from the sky, when all of this time, she was rescuing slobbering dogs on the streets of London."

Margaret threw back her head and laughed from the pit of her stomach. "You really are something else, Evan Sutherland." She kissed him again.

"I think there was a Viscount in there before, wasn't there?" he teased her before drawing her in for another kiss.

A sudden commotion from downstairs made them stop kissing as they frowned at one another.

“What do you think is going on now?” Evan asked, unwilling to remove his arms from around her body as she held onto him with equal conviction.

Turning their heads at the same time, they looked into the room to see all three cats playing with Taffy on the rug.

“Well, it wasn’t one of them,” Margaret said as she looked at Evan with her eyebrows raised.

The couple finally let their arms slip down when a flushed and breathless Edwards came bounding up the stairs, nearly falling on the top step.

“Edwards?” Evan asked with concern as he watched the man haul himself up the top step.

“My Lord,” he panted out of breath. “My Lady,” he suddenly noticed Margaret standing there. “There has been news that couldn’t wait; I came here as soon as I could.”

“Has anyone been hurt?” Margaret asked with concern.

“On the contrary,” Edwards said before he was sent sprawling onto the carpet face first.

“Ham!?” Margaret squealed in disbelief as he came bounding toward her and Evan.

“I can’t believe it!” Evan laughed as he hunkered down beside his wife and accepted the many slobbery kisses that the dog had to offer.

“I don’t understand,” Margaret sobbed as she hugged her dog. “I thought he had drowned.”

“So did I,” Evan raked his fingers through his hair as he tried to make sense of what had happened.

“I think I can explain,” Edwards lifted his face from the carpet and looked at them. Pushing himself up, he stood and dusted off his jacket. “It would seem that Master Ham did indeed get washed away by the stream.” He picked a piece of lint from his jacket. “One of the village children found him a day or so later stranded on a piece of land beyond the property.”

“Poor thing.” Margaret kissed him on top of his dirty head and hugged him tight. “You must have been terrified to be all alone in the middle of a storm.”

“The boy said that they looked for his owners for a while but eventually gave up. It wasn’t until one of the maids spotted him playing with the children on the street one day that she approached them.”

“Did you happen to get the boy’s name?” Evan asked as he came up straight, dusting off the mud from his hands that had been caked on Ham’s fur.

“I did, My Lord.” His eyes sparkled mischievously. “I thought you might want to thank the lad in person.”

“Thank him?” Evan said with a smirk. “That boy is about to get the biggest gift he has ever received.”

Nodding with a huge smile on his face, Edwards placed his hands behind his back and watched the joyous reunion unfold.

“So, I guess we will be sticking with Master Ham then?” he asked the butler out of the corner of his mouth while Margaret fussed over her dog.

“If it is all right with you, My Lord,” Edwards replied with his nose in the air.

“I think these things are no longer in my hands, Edwards,” Evan said with a twinkle in his eyes as he turned to see his wife playing with her pets.

The cats suddenly came rushing into the hall, realizing that Ham had returned.

“My Lord?” Edwards asked after clearing his throat.

“Yes, Edwards?” Evan replied.

“While I am overjoyed at the prospect of Master Ham having returned, who may I ask is busy attacking my shoe?”

Evan looked down to see Taffy viciously assaulting the butler’s shoe as she shook her head and growled. Realizing that he had added another animal to the fold, Evan heaved a massive sigh and shook his head with his eyes shut. “That, Edwards, is the newest addition to our family. I’m afraid that I didn’t quite think my grand gesture through.”

“Very well, My Lord,” the butler said as he dragged the pup across the carpet with his leg straight.

Taffy hung on for dear life and growled as if she were winning a fight.

Shaking his head in disbelief, Evan threw his head back and laughed from the pit of his stomach like Margaret had done.

“What’s so amusing?” Margaret asked.

“Nothing.” He shook his head again and came walking toward her. “I just realized that all of this is my own doing. I’m going to live in a menagerie for the rest of my life.”

“Is that a bad thing?” she asked with her head tilted to the side.

“No.” He kneeled down and kissed her cheek. “It’s a very, very, good thing. Now, Lady Sutherland, I have one last question to ask you.” He winked at her.

“What is that Lord Sutherland?” She returned his teasing look.

“May I finally take you home now?”

Pausing for a moment as she searched his face, Margaret stood. “May I think about it for a few days?” she asked teasingly.

Evan laughed again before drawing her into his arms for a giant kiss. “Do not make me pick you up and carry you back to our home, Viscountess.”

“That sounds like a good plan to me.” Margaret returned his kiss.

EPILOGUE



*M*argaret stood in front of Evan as the fire crackled in her bedroom. They had come straight home from her father's house with the intention of spending the night together.

Slowly peeling her dress from her shoulders, Evan allowed the fabric to slip to the ground. "Have I ever told you that you have the most beautiful body on the face of the earth?" he asked her huskily as he placed his fingers beneath her chin and drew her in for a kiss.

"You have not," she whispered back between kisses as she shimmied her undergarments down her legs and stepped out of them.

"Well then..." He looked her over once again before placing his hands on her naked hips. "...let me be the one to tell you that your body is exquisitely beautiful." He dipped his head and kissed a path down her chest, stopping to cup her breasts in his hands before taking one of her nipples into his mouth.

“Evan...” Margaret breathed as she tilted her head back in ecstasy, shutting her eyes as she enjoyed the warm sensation of his tongue exploring her flesh.

He took his time on one nipple before moving to the next and repeating his gentle sucking motion.

Margaret felt as if she were about to explode as Evan kissed his way back up her chest and nibbled her neck. “That feels wonderful,” she said breathlessly.

“If you like that...” He drew back and looked into her eyes with a mischievous glint. “...you’re about to enjoy this a whole lot more.” He laughed softly before removing his clothes and guiding her over to the bed.

Margaret was about to get into bed when Evan stopped her, gently holding her back.

“Not so fast, Lady Sutherland,” he teased and sat on the edge. “Come here,” he ordered and guided her onto his lap as he sat on the edge of the bed, placing her knees on either side of his hips. “I want to show you just how fun things can be.” He kissed her chest once again before taking her nipples into his mouth in turns.

Moaning with pleasure, Margaret allowed herself to enjoy the new position as she shut her eyes, placing her hands behind his

neck for support.

Evan waited until her body was moving against his before he lifted his mouth from her breasts and repositioned her on his lap.

The warm pleasure she felt as soon he entered her made her gasp with pleasure as they began to move. Placing his hands behind her back for support, he kissed and sucked on her flesh while she took control, moving her hips in time with his.

It wasn't long before Evan's breathing synchronized with hers. The low susurrations of grunts that escaped his throat drove her wild as she clung to this neck and moved at an ever-growing pace. The blissful sensations that flowed through her body sent a wave of goosebumps over her body.

"Margaret..." Evan was the first to gasp as he whispered her name. Moving quickly, Evan lifted her in his arms and flipped her over onto the bed while still maintaining the rhythm and speed of his thrusts. Reaching down, he brought her legs up to his shoulders and held on tightly to her calves as his face contorted with pleasure.

Margaret could feel the tension building in her core and abdomen as she began to pant and whimper with pleasure.

“My love,” he said breathlessly before his muscles tightened in pure bliss, releasing the tension that had been building between them.

“Evan!” Margaret yelled his name as her body spasmed in the blissful manner it had done the previous time. Her legs shuddered and went limp against his body as wave after wave of pleasure spread through her body like wildfire.

Gently placing her legs back down, Evan crawled beside her onto the bed and drew her body closer to his.

“I didn’t know it could feel like that,” she panted with her eyes shut before kissing his chest and snuggling into his arms.

“I think marriage is going to be a pleasant surprise to you from now on,” he chuckled deeply.

Drawing slightly back, Margaret propped herself up on her elbow and looked down at him. “Do you mean to tell me that things can get even better than that?” She ran her finger over his muscular chest.

“Is that a challenge?” He cocked his head to the side and looked at her.

“If you want it to be.” She pursed her lips and looked away.

“I’ll show you just how good things can get,” Evan said as he flipped her over onto her back once again and tickled her sides.

“Evan stop!” she laughed until she turned red in the face.

Leaning down, Evan kissed her lips. “Margaret,” he said when she stopped laughing.

“Yes, my love?” She looked at him lovingly.

“I want us to have children.” He looked her in the eyes.

Feeling slightly stunned, she bit on her lips. “But what would we do with all of the animals if we had children?” She waited for him to realize that she was teasing.

“They will just have to get used to it,” he teased her back. “But I think I should be in charge of naming the babies.”

“I don’t know, I think Strawberry is quite a nice name for a child,” she suggested.

“What am I going to do with you, Margaret Sutherland?” He began to tickle her again until she couldn’t breathe.

“Love me,” she said once she had caught her breath again.
“Love me for the rest of our lives until we grow old and frail.”

“Now that is something that can be arranged,” he agreed before leaning down and kissing her lips. “The real challenge will be keeping my hands off of you.” He gave her a cheeky smile before parting her lips with his tongue and kissing her deeply.

The End?

EXTENDED EPILOGUE



Eager to learn how **Margaret and Evan's** relationship evolved? Then enjoy this complimentary short story featuring the beloved couple.

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Turn on to the next page to read the first chapters of *Five Dates with the Duke*, one of my best stories so far, and the first standalone in the series!



PREVIEW: FIVE DATES WITH
THE DUKE



CHAPTER 1



“*R*ise and shine, Your Grace.”

Nicholas winced, raising an arm to shield his eyes against the intrusive light that flooded his room. His head was pounding, and the inside of his mouth tasted like a stale old cloth. “Please, do not call me that, Grandmama,” he complained groggily.

“One of us has to remind you that you are in fact a duke,” his grandmother said reproachfully. “A fact that you seem to forget when you are galivanting with those morally corrupt young men you refer to as friends.”

“Is there a specific reason why you are harassing me from my sleep?”

“The early bird catches the worm,” Elena Galloway spoke as she continued to yank open the thick drapes in his chambers. “Or in your case—” She turned and leaned on her cane as she glared at his figure sprawled across the bed in a mess of tangled sheets. “The late owl catches the pains brought on by a night misspent.” She pursed her lips in disapproval.

Rolling his eyes, Nicholas sat back on his pillows. “What is it that you need this early in the morning, Grandmama?” He stifled a yawn with the back of his hand.

“Early! Huh!” Elena rapped her cane sharply on the floor in front of her. “It is nearing noon, Nicholas, you would know that if you cared to answer your door when the maids came to wake you from your precious slumber.” She shook her head with a tired sigh. “I am not here to argue with you this morning or debate how you choose to spend your life.”

“Well done, you are doing a fantastic job of avoiding those subjects.” His voice dripped with sarcasm as he once again sat up in bed, running his fingers through his mess of black hair that stood up in all manner of directions.

“I shall ignore your insolence and deal with you later,” she said sharply, glaring at him before softening her face. Elena had always harbored a special place in her heart for the grandson that she had raised as her own. “I simply wanted to come and ask if you would consider accompanying me to town this morning.” She raised her hand to still his words before he had a chance to speak. “Hear me out, I promise there are no schemes to meet any eager mamas or their willing daughters.”

He looked her over with suspicion but held his tongue and allowed her to speak. Nicholas knew, from years of growing up under his grandmother’s care, that there was a time and a place to argue against her plans. The morning after he’d spent a night in town was, for example, not the right time to take her on. He needed a clear mind to go head-to-head with Elena Galloway.

“Can one of your many friends accompany you around the *ton*?” he asked grumpily, trying his best to keep his grandmother and her many attempts at finding him a wife at bay. He could just imagine all the unpleasant meetings he’d have to endure if he agreed to her outing. As much as he loved

his grandmother, he dreaded the forwardness of ladies that wanted a good match for their daughters.

“I am hurt, Nicholas,” she said and placed her bony fingers over her heart. “Do you really not wish to spend any time with your dearest, and *only* living, grandmother?” She looked appalled as she drove her point home. “Who knows how many years I still have left?” She sniffed and looked away from him.

He knew very well that she was playing on his emotions to get her way but decided that arguing the point was not worth his time at present. There were far more entertaining things he wished to be doing with his friends. The sooner he let his grandmother have her way, the sooner he could get back to living the life he chose.

“I warn you, Grandmama.” He squinted his olive-green eyes to convey his threat. “Should there be even the slightest hint of a tiresome lady or an unmarried daughter, I will be retreating to spend my day in a more gainful manner.”

“Wonderful!” Elena seemed to perk up considerably. “It’s settled then, I promise that you shall not so much as talk to a single potential match today,” she said earnestly, nodding with conviction.

“Very well, I shall be ready and downstairs in half an hour,” he agreed, watching as she hobbled toward the door on her cane, her long black dress dragging on the floor behind her frail figure.

“Oh, and, dear.” She turned back to him with a mischievous grin. “Please look presentable, just because I am not flinging you at any of the presentable young ladies of the *ton*,”—she looked him up and down in his disheveled state—“does not mean that I do not want to show you off to the public at large.”

She laughed over her shoulder as she made her way down the hall.

Taking a deep breath, Nicholas shut his eyes and shook his head. The chances of his grandmother not wanting to set him up with a suitable match while he was back in London for a very limited time were slim to none.

Throwing the sheets off his legs, he got out of bed and walked over to the clothes that had been set out by one of the footmen the night before.

Running his hand over the stubble that had formed on his chin, he looked himself over in the floor-length mirror. His grandmother had a point in saying that he needed to clean up, the late nights in London had left him looking a little off-kilter. He continued to turn his square jaw from side to side as he thought of the possible schemes that his grandmother most likely had in mind.

He'd indulge his grandmother for the time being but knew it was a hopeless endeavor on her part. There was no woman alive—or any mama, for a matter of fact—that could ever convince him to take a wife.



The palms of her hands began to sweat as Emma Crawford wiped the perspiration on the sides of her pale-yellow dress. She squinted intently at the sign casually swinging above the grandiose red door of the matchmaker's office. The crowds chattered around her with the latest gossip as she tried her best to make out the infamous words on the moving wood.

Everyone in London knew what lay behind the obscure door: a last-ditch effort at outrunning the beckoning call of

spinsterhood. A call that Emma was more than willing to ignore if only her mother would allow her to.

“For pity’s sake, Emma, do not loiter so,” Eloise Crawford, Lady Wynstone, scolded her daughter as she straightened her spine and casually smiled at the people passing in the street. “It’s bad enough that we have to be seen here, let us not make a spectacle of ourselves.” She gingerly patted the back of her dark brown hair to ensure that every strand was in place.

“I wouldn’t have to stare for so long if you would only allow me to wear a pair of spectacles, Mama,” Emma retorted under her breath.

“You know how I feel about those blasted things.” Eloise continued to smile at everyone around in an attempt to stop them from staring. “Spectacles are for old women who have already made satisfactory matches in life. How do you expect to find a husband with a contraption glued to your face?”

“I can assure you that I would be able to find him a great deal quicker if you’d allow me to see, Mama.” Emma’s sweet voice dripped with a hint of amused sarcasm that grated on her mother’s nerves.

“For heaven’s sake.” Eloise began to panic as more ladies stopped and whispered behind their fans. “You know it’s the matchmaker’s office, it’s the only red door on the street. Just get inside,” she snapped and nudged her daughter in the direction of the doorway, causing her to bump into the door before she could reach for the handle.

A couple of ladies who had been standing nearby giggled and quickly walked off when Lady Wynstone shot them a pointed look.

Emma regained her balance and quickly stepped into the shop, nearly stumbling over the step as she went.

The inside of the matchmaker's shop was neat and pleasant with a marbled floor and a solid mahogany desk in the corner that boasted a single vase of pure white roses on its gleaming surface.

Emma felt as if she had stepped into a room of the Queen's palace with gold trimmings and sparkling surfaces. She'd never met the infamous Marie Webster, but it seemed as if the woman was the epitome of class and elegance itself, despite the rumors of gossip collecting to fuel her business.

"I see we are right on time this morning." A beautifully slim and radiant lady stepped through a door at the back of the room. Her powder blue dress swayed around her ankles as she walked.

"I always say that being on time lets others know that you value their time in return," Lady Wynstone said sweetly as she came forward and greeted the woman.

Emma instantly noticed how lovely and elegant the lady was in person, her bright blonde hair curled in the most delicate fashion as strands escaped from the loose bun at the back of her head. Her skin was porcelain-smooth and light. Her wisp-like features and slightly upturned nose all lead to the focus of her brilliant blue eyes that shone with flecks of green.

"I wholeheartedly concur." Marie Webster clasped her hands in front of her chest. "And this must be the lovely young lady who is looking for a match." She gave Emma a radiant smile. "Welcome to what will hopefully be the start to the rest of your happily ever after."

“This is my daughter.” Eloise rushed forward and placed her hand on her daughter’s elbow, ushering her forward, eager to get the business underway before Emma could chime in. “Emma Crawford.”

“Yes, I see.” Marie’s voice was sweet and welcoming as she spoke, putting Emma at ease. “Shall we get started, then?” she asked with a warm smile. “I’d like to begin by seeing what we have to work with here,” she explained as she cocked her head to the side and stared at Emma.

She took her time and looked Emma over, scrutinizing the details of her body from her head to her toes.

Emma shifted on her feet, slightly uneasy about the unwelcome attention she was receiving from the woman. Her mother had often commented from time to time that Emma was slightly chubbier than she would have liked her to be. While not overweight, she was pleasantly plump, as she liked to describe herself whenever the topic arose. The fact that she was at least a head shorter than her mother didn’t help matters at all.

“Yes.” Marie nodded in approval, to Emma’s surprise. “Such lovely honey-blond hair. I’m sure you must be the envy of many ladies.” Her smile was genuine as she walked around Emma in a circle, gently touching her long, straight hair with the tips of her fingers. “And those gorgeous brown eyes with your rosy cheeks and perfect skin.” She nodded vigorously in approval.

Her cheeks filled with color as Emma accepted the compliments with a shy smile. It wasn’t often that she found herself being the belle of the ball.

Emma far preferred standing aside and allowing the more outgoing girls to lap up all of the attention while she watched

and wished she could remain unseen.

“Not to worry.” Marie stopped in front of her once again when she noticed how uncomfortable Emma was becoming. “I have already compiled a list of suitable matches. We shall start at the top and work our way down from there if either of you is not agreeable to the match.” She smiled at Eloise. “But I am sure that will not happen, the duke I have in mind has been without a match for quite some time.”

“A duke...” Eloise raised her hand to her throat and turned to her daughter in pleasant surprise. “Did you hear that, dear? A duke!” Her face brightened visibly at the thought of having her daughter marry a man with such a grand title.

Trying her best not to roll her eyes, Emma gently shook her head. “I did hear, thank you, Mama. I am near of sight, not hard of hearing,” she said as politely as she could.

Marie bit her lip in an attempt to hide her amusement at the exchange.

“I beg your pardon, Marie,” Eloise quickly chimed in, growing flustered at the cheek her daughter was giving her in the presence of a stranger. “I’m afraid the Viscount and I have indulged Emma a little too much over the years. She doesn’t seem to know when to hold her tongue and when to speak.” Her deep brown eyes darkened as she glared at her daughter.

“That’s quite all right, Lady Wynstone. I take all of these things into consideration when suggesting the matches.” Marie winked at Emma. “As you know, I am a businesswoman, but I do want to help my girls succeed.”

“Thank you,” Emma mouthed the words to her when her mother wasn’t looking. She liked the woman more now that she had met her in person.

The *ton* had buzzed with news of the new nosy matchmaker ever since she had announced the opening of her doors a few months prior. Yet, she was up to be one of the nicest people that Emma had met in a while.

“Well, I hope you have a match with a duke that can tolerate her reading.” Eloise pursed her lips and gave her daughter a rather disapproving look. “I should have forced her to focus a bit more on her accomplishments rather than books.”

Emma smiled to herself and looked out the window to hide the fact that she knew her mother would never force her to do anything that she never wanted to do.

The only reason they had ended up at the matchmaker’s office was simply to indulge her parents in their search to find her a husband that would look after her needs after they passed. Something that Emma hoped was far off in the future. She’d stall getting a husband and focus on her reading for as long as she could.

“I think the Duke may come as a surprise,” Marie said with a mischievous glint in her eyes that didn’t go unnoticed by Emma. “You can rest assured, Lady Wynstone, the match has been considered with all due diligence. As a matter of fact, I will be seeing him this afternoon. If all goes well, we can go ahead and set up a meeting at a teashop on Sunday. How does that sound?” She beamed from ear to ear, overly confident in the hopes that she’d made a good match.

Emma was about to open her mouth and say that the whole idea sounded like too much effort for a Sunday afternoon when her mother quickly stepped in and took her by the arm.

“That sounds lovely, we thank you for your time, Marie,” Eloise said politely as she began to pull her daughter from the room before she had a chance to protest.

“I shall be in touch soon,” Marie called to them as Emma felt herself being yanked through the door.

“Slow down, Mama,” Emma complained as they stepped into the warm air of the busy street. “You shall make us bump into someone if you keep—” Her words caught in her throat as her mother froze on the spot.

“Lady Wynstone,” a sleek voice dripping with oil greeted them as Emma looked up.

“Lady Portsworth,” Eloise said coolly as her demeanor instantly changed.

For all of her mother’s rushing and attempts to get them away, she’d gone and bumped into one of the most notorious snobs in all of London. Hazel Ambrose, Lady Portsworth, was definitely one of the people that needed to be avoided when it came to matters of gossip.

“I see we are seeking a bit of help.” She gave them a nasty sneer as she glanced up at the sign hanging over the door.

Her daughter hid behind her with a sheepish look on her face as she curtsied politely and looked away. Emma had often thought they could have been friends if her mother hadn’t been such a tyrannical elitist.

“Oh, yes.” Eloise perked up as she saw her chance at getting her own back. “I can highly recommend Marie, she’s taken such care in selecting a duke for our Emma.” She raised one eyebrow and looked the woman in her beady black eyes. “Perhaps she will be able to help you as well.”

Lady Portsworth spluttered in disbelief as she took a step back and looked Eloise up and down.

It had been well known in the *ton* that Lady Portsworth had wanted her daughter to marry one of the most eligible dukes in

all of England. While the match had been approved by his grandmother, the man himself had declined the offer without even meeting her daughter.

“It is still early days, Lady Wynstone.” Lady Portsworth glowered at her. “One must learn to not count one’s chickens before they hatch.” She returned Eloise’s smile. “The Duke has not even had a chance to meet our Beatrice as of yet, I’m sure he will change his mind as soon as the meeting can be arranged. He is in India at the moment and will be joining us for dinner upon his return.” She curtsied politely before turning her nose in the air and sauntering off with her daughter in tow.

“Most odious woman that ever lived,” Eloise whispered under her breath to her daughter. “But never mind that now, let’s hurry home and tell your father the good news!” She beamed from ear to ear. “Can you imagine? A duke! While I’m sure he may not be the most sought-after duke in England, such as lady Portsworth had her beady little black eyes set upon, his title will work just the same.”

Emma glanced over her shoulder at the mousy girl who returned her look of anguish as both of their mothers dragged them into futures they didn’t want.

CHAPTER 2



Marie stared out the window at the ladies passing each other in the street as she placed her arms around her waist. Emma Crawford was a lovely young lady with a feisty yet sweet spirit that she hoped would tame the wayward ways of the Duke. She desperately needed the match to work if she was going to make a good name for herself amongst the *ton*.

She'd used all of the money left to her by her parents to buy the shop and start her business. Things would get off to a great start if her very first match was a duke. Getting the *ton* to trust her was proving to be far more difficult than she'd expected. The nobility of London relied on a matchmaker's good reputation more than anything else, a reputation that she was yet to build.

"What do we think of the young lady, then?"

Marie turned to see her assistant stepping into the single room with a bucket and a mop. Janey had been a servant in her parents' house before they had passed; she hated the thought of the girl being cast out onto the streets and had taken her on as her maid and assistant in the hopes that it would give her a better chance in life.

"I think she's lovely," she answered with a smile, hiding her concerns from the girl.

“But isn’t she the one who likes to read a lot?” Janey asked in her improper accent. “I’ve seen the Duke walking in the streets before.” Her big brown eyes widened as she spoke. “Right frightful man that one. I wouldn’t care to be matched with him, I wouldn’t.”

Marie smiled at her and placed one hand on her hip with the other draped over her waist. “That is exactly what makes them perfect for each other, Janey. From my observations, opposites attract better than people who are more alike.” She turned back to the window and watched as Emma and her mother walked away.

Lady Wynstone was hurriedly dragging her poor daughter down the road by her arm.

“What do you mean, Miss?” Janey asked and tucked a loose strand of her long brown hair beneath her white maid’s cap.

“Look at the Viscountess and her husband.” Marie nodded toward the pair walking down the street. “Lady Wynstone is as prim and proper as they come, yet her husband is the most jovial man you would ever hope to meet.”

“I guess that’s true.” Janey twitched her button nose. “The Viscount is a very friendly man, he once gave me a penny just for fetching his hat that had been blown away by the wind.” She smiled as she made a motion with her hand in an attempt to depict the gust.

“Exactly.” Marie smiled and turned back to the room. “Emma Crawford’s bookish ways together with her sweet, kind, and gentle nature is exactly what the broodish rake of a Duke needs. Their personalities will complement each other nicely.”

“Well, I hope you are right, Miss.” Janey shrugged and hummed to herself as she went about her chores.

I hope so too.

Marie said a silent prayer in her heart. There was a lot riding on the match between Emma and the Duke.



Nicholas ducked behind a cart of flowers as his grandmother looked around with a puzzled expression on her face. The early afternoon had gone off without a hitch, his grandmother had done her shopping and no further mention was made of finding a wife, as was her tradition whenever he found himself on the bustling streets of London.

“What on earth are you doing?” Elena asked with a frown when she finally spotted him hunkering down behind a barrel of roses.

“It’s Lady Portsworth,” he whispered and pointed up the street to Hazel Ambrose and her daughter.

“I see,” Elena said, confusion still wrinkling her brow. “And what of her presence?” She looked the woman over as she spoke to another lady and a girl that was presumably her daughter. “You declined the match with her daughter. Why are you hiding? Is there a secret dalliance in the works that I should know of?”

“Lady Portsworth,” he hissed through his teeth, ducking back when he thought they were looking in their direction, “has hounded me with invitations for dinner since the day I turned down her daughter.” He quickly slunk back when it seemed as if the conversation with the other ladies had ended. “She believes me to be in India, at present.”

“I see,” Elena repeated with more understanding. “There now, they are headed in the opposite direction.” She looked back at her grandson. “You may stop acting like a fool and come out of hiding,” she said in a bored tone and rolled her eyes. “One would swear you were five and your governess caught you with a handful of sweets before dinner.”

“I wouldn’t have to hide if you would cease your efforts in finding me a wife,” Nicholas complained as he came back up and straightened the collar of his navy-blue jacket.

His grandmother waved the remark away as if it were a bothersome insect. “Come now, let us not quibble over nonsense when we’ve spent such a lovely morning together, Nicholas.” She held out her arm to him. “Have I not been true to my word? You have not met with a single mama or any of their tiresome daughters this morning, as you so graciously put it.”

“I have to concede that you have not acted on any of your whims at present,” he said begrudgingly as he looked over his grandmother’s shoulder to ensure that the offending ladies were well on their way.

“Well then.” She held his gaze with an eager look in her eyes while holding her arm a little higher. “Shall we?”

Sighing internally, Nicholas took her arm and began to cautiously walk toward the shops where Lady Portsworth and her daughter had been speaking to others. He mentally plotted any escapes if the need to run presented itself, dignity and decorum were out the window in his books when it came to the persistent Countess.

“I only have one more errand to run, then you can be as free as a bird,” Elena began as the tip of her cane clicked on the pavement while they walked. “After that, you may galivant

with those rakes you refer to as your friends until your heart is content. Paint the town red if that is what you wish.” She raised her cane off the ground as she over-dramatized her own words. “Sail a ship to India if you must.”

“I am so happy I have your permission, Grandmama.” Nicholas shook his head in annoyance as they crossed the street. There was something brewing in the back of his grandmother’s head, he could feel the tension growing as they walked.

“I’ve been quite excited about this meeting for a while now,” she explained, ignoring his lack of interest in the conversation at hand. “So, don’t you go and bungle it up, I’m warning you, Nicholas.” She stopped in front of him on the pavement and shut one eye as she glowered at him. “Any funny business at all, and you will feel my wrath.”

“Why on earth would I ruin your appoint...” his words trailed off as he caught sight of the sign above the door, gently swaying in the breeze as if it felt the need to convey a lack of guilt. *Marie Webster, Matchmaker extraordinaire*. The slanted golden letters mocked him from above.

“Grandmama!” he spluttered as he looked at her in anger.

“Your Grace!” She raised her voice and matched his tone in anger and indignation. “I am warning you, you may not like it, but you will be on your best behavior, or else!”

“Or else what?” he asked defiantly, ready to storm off and be done with his grandmother’s shenanigans.

“Or I shall withdraw my help here in London and leave you to run the house’s affairs as you should!” She continued to glare at him with her finger raised to his nose.

Nicholas knew that she had him there. His grandmother had played an important role in taking care of the affairs in London, allowing him the freedom to stay at their country estate and avoid the house that haunted his dreams.

“Do not think that I will hesitate to make a scene,” she warned him again. “Have I ever held back in the past when it’s come to embarrassing you in public?”

“No, I dare say that you have not.” He squinted his eyes and glared at his grandmother.

“Well?” she asked triumphantly, placing her hand back on her cane and raising an eyebrow. “Will you be staying for the appointment?”

Nicholas looked from the bright red door to the people on the street who had begun to give them curious looks. It was a cheap trick of his grandmother’s to use his hatred of embarrassment against him.

“I’ll stay,” he grumbled under his breath.

“Impeccable decision-making,” she said and nodded her approval, before turning toward the door.

“So much for not forcing any ladies upon me today,” he grumbled behind her back as he followed her up the step.

Stopping in her tracks, Elena turned to look at him with both of her eyebrows raised in challenge. “I promised that you would not meet a single mama or any of their daughters today, did I not?” She waited for him to clench his jaw as he glared at her. “Marie Webster is neither a mama nor a daughter that you could potentially be marrying. I call that game, set, and match.”

Nicholas swore under his breath as the bright red door swung on its hinges, beckoning them into the deep recesses of the

shop that could spell his doom for the rest of his life.



Nicholas leaned against the deep mahogany desk with his hip as his grandmother chatted to the woman who would be sealing his fate. They had been in the matchmaker's shop for over an hour, discussing the plans for a date that Nicholas himself seemed to have little to no say in having.

“Would you like a cup of tea, Your Grace?” Marie Webster asked his grandmother and led her over to one of the plush green chairs that sat in front of the desk.

“That would be wonderful, dear,” Elena happily accepted her offer and hobbled over to the chair on her cane. “Planning this most fortuitous meeting is thirsty work.”

Nicholas rolled his eyes and scoffed as his grandmother aimed for the back of his knee with her cane.

“I told you that he's a stubborn one,” his grandmother said, missing his leg by an inch before taking her seat.

Marie opened a drawer in her desk and retrieved a small gold bell that she proceeded to ring before placing it back and taking her seat. “I can assure you that I do not shy away from a challenge, Your Grace,” she answered his grandmother while giving Nicholas a pointed look with her mesmerizingly blue eyes set on his face. Her gaze quickly fell to his hip, which was firmly pressed against the edge of her desk.

There was something about the woman that made him want to stand up straight and mind his manners. She was far more intimidating than his grandmother ever could have been.

Swallowing hard, he pushed himself off the desk and took his seat beside his grandmother.

“Ah, the tea,” Marie said as the only door at the back of the room opened to reveal a plain girl in a cap and apron carrying a tray. “Thank you, Janey.” She smiled at the girl before excusing her again when the tray was securely placed on the table.

“May I have the honor of pouring your tea, Your Grace?” she asked Elena in a sweet tone.

“Thank you, my dear, that is most kind of you.” Elena nodded her approval and accepted the white porcelain cup with pink tulips on the rim.

Nicholas took a moment to survey the room with its elegant furnishings, down to the last fancy tea set that the woman used. He’d heard rumors that Marie Webster had lost her parents a year prior to opening her doors. A last-ditch effort to earn a living for herself without having to marry a man. Judging by the quality of the cups, she must have used every last penny she had to start her business.

“How many sugars would you like in your tea, Your Grace?” Marie looked up at him with a gaze that wasn’t unkind yet lacked the sweet tone she had used with his grandmother.

“I will not be having any tea at present,” he declined politely and lifted his leg over the other, making a square on his lap with his knee hanging in the air. “I have other places to be once this meeting is done,” he explained in a dismissive manner.

Elena stopped mid-sip and looked at him with her cup suspended in mid-air.

Marie glanced down at his leg and back up at his face once again. “One lump or two, Your Grace?” she asked him again without skipping a beat.

“One, thank you,” he finally said and lowered his leg to the ground.

He hadn’t the energy to argue with either the woman or his grandmother. The sooner he complied with everything they were saying, the sooner he would be able to leave.

“Wonderful tea,” Elena said with a happy grin and sipped her cup.

“Now, Your Grace,” Marie began as she walked back around the desk and took her seat. “I think you will be pleased to know that I have compiled a list of five matches for you. Starting with the most likely to succeed, and eligible, of course.” She interlaced her slender fingers and placed her hands on her desk.

Nicholas weighed his options and returned her gaze. There was no plausible way out of the situation he currently found himself in, other than to humor the situation at hand.

“Let’s hear it, then. Who is my first match that is most likely to become my wife?” He tried but failed to keep the scorn from his voice.

“Our first candidate—” She pulled a stack of papers from her desk drawer. “Is a lovely young lady that I am sure you will find most beguiling once you have a conversation with her,” she explained and shuffled through the papers.

I doubt that.

He kept his thoughts to himself and sighed. “Let’s hear it, then. Who is she?”

“Miss Emma Crawford.” Marie looked up from her stack of papers to judge his reaction.

“Can’t say that I’ve heard of her,” he said honestly with a frown.

Elena sighed and placed her cup back on the saucer. “You would if you bothered to attend any of the balls that I’ve gone to great lengths to arrange in the past five Seasons,” she complained.

“Five Seasons,” he said with a smirk. “Perhaps the lady is as interested in making a match as I am. She may just be a sensible woman, at least. Marriage is a senseless institute,” he remarked but quickly regretted his words when Marie shot him a defensive look.

“Perhaps you should not mistake a lady knowing her own mind for a lack of interest from men.” She cocked her head to the side. “The young lady in question has had more marriage proposals than any other young lady of her age.” She paused for effect and allowed her words to sink in. “She knows what she wants and won’t settle for anything less.”

Nicholas knew that the woman’s words were meant to bait him, but he took offense, nonetheless. It wasn’t every day that someone insinuated that a lady would be less than pleased to take him as her husband. He was far more used to women throwing themselves at his feet.

“When shall we meet?” He rose to her challenge.

“Tomorrow.” She perked up once again. “If you are both willing and agreeable, I will send a note to the young lady and her mother asking them for tea in the morning.”

“Wonderful.” Elena leaned forward and placed her cup and saucer back on the tray. “You may go ahead and send the note

at once.”

“I thought you might agree to the match,” Marie once again addressed his grandmother.

“I’m not sure why I never thought of her.” Elena frowned as she looked at her lap. “The daughter of a viscount is more than suitable for a duke.”

“The young lady is very reserved,” Marie explained before turning to Nicholas. “But don’t let her quiet demeanor fool you, she’s very passionate and vocal on matters that pique her interest.”

“And what matters might those be?” he asked, his own curiosity getting the better of him.

“I think that is something that you can learn over tea,” Elena said as she used her cane to support her weight and stood. “I am rather tired and would like to return to my house before my bones turn to dust where I sit.” She gave a tired sigh. “It was far too much work dragging you from shop to shop.”

“You wouldn’t be tired if you weren’t constantly coming up with schemes,” Nicholas muttered under his breath.

“And we wouldn’t have had to go to these lengths if you did as you should and chose a wife for yourself,” she said as a matter of fact. “That’s what you get for turning away one of the most eligible and sought-after ladies of the Season.” She stopped as she was about to leave and looked him in the eye. “Even if her mother is one of the most odious women to ever walk to the face of the earth.”

CHAPTER 3



“*S*top fussing with your dress,” Eloise hissed at her daughter under her breath.

“Honestly, Mama, nobody can even see me from outside the carriage.” Emma continued to wince as she tried her best to adjust the stiff corset that her mother had forced her into. The breath had practically left her body when the maid had tightened the laces.

“You wouldn’t be so uncomfortable if you simply wore your corset on a daily basis,” her mother reprimanded her. “A corset can become a comfortable garment for a lady if she wears one often enough.”

“Why on earth would anyone want to wear something so uncomfortable on a daily basis?” Emma shimmied in her seat. The fabric of the light pink dress that her mother had chosen for her itched against her skin where the corset pushed on her ribs. “I can hardly breathe.”

“A corset is meant to make a lady appear slimmer than what she really is,” Eloise said with pride as if disfiguring one’s frame was a form of accomplishment.

“Is that not a type of trickery?” Emma asked as she gave up on her efforts to adjust her clothes and sank back into the seat.

“Should a man not love you just the way you are? Why should I make anyone believe that I look any different?”

“Ha!” Eloise laughed. “Love enters through the eyes, and it can also leave through the eyes,” she said as she looked at her lap, flicking a piece of lint onto the carriage floor. “Men are fickle creatures. They very seldom love a woman unless the bloom is still on the rose.”

“Does Papa not love you just as you are?” Emma asked with concern as her nerves began to get the better of her.

“He does now.” Eloise’s face and voice softened slightly. “But that is something that comes after many years of marriage when you’ve both had enough time to get to know one another. Even your father and I had to jump through the hoops of Society before we got to where we are today.”

“But I thought that one gets to know one’s future partner before the marriage. Is that not why we spend time together?” Emma’s palms began to sweat once again as she thought of the way the Duke might react when he sees her in the shop and realizes that the matchmaker had made an awful mistake.

“You will be just fine, my darling.” Eloise leaned forward and placed her hand on her daughter’s cheek as the carriage came to a stop.

Emma felt her heart pounding in her chest as she tried to compose herself. The carriage door suddenly opened as a footman in a bright blue livery held it open and stepped aside.

“Go on, then.” Her mother nodded toward the door.

Gulping back the anguish that she felt, Emma descended the carriage steps and took a deep breath as she squinted at the sign above the shop door. The blurry wooden carving of a teapot stood still in the heat of the summer afternoon. She

wished with all her might that her mother would allow her to use a pair of spectacles, the thought of meeting someone new when she couldn't read the expressions on his face was daunting enough without the prospect of making a match.

"Emma," her mother called to her in an urgent tone before giving a polite laugh that Emma knew was meant to hide her true intentions from those around them.

Turning around, she looked to see her mother leaning over her seat.

"Stop squinting and go inside." Eloise laughed again and smiled when a group of ladies walked by. "Just go inside, dear." She cleared her throat and sat back in her seat as the footman shut the door.

"You can do this," Emma whispered to herself as she held her head high and clutched her pink silk bag. Taking a few steps, she made her way to the door and stepped inside. A maid wearing a crisp white uniform held open the door as a light breeze blew a few strands of her coppery hair into her face.

A small bell tinkled over the frame of the door as the maid shut her path of escape, sealing her fate and welcoming her inside with a warm smile. "Are you here to meet anyone, My Lady?" The slight girl with ginger hair curtsied.

"Miss Crawford to see the Duke of St. Claire," Emma explained in a quiet voice, recalling the name her mother had read to her from the note that had been delivered the day before.

"Right away My Lady," the girl replied with a friendly smile and showed her through the tables of ladies and gentlemen having their afternoon tea.

Emma took a moment to squint around the shop at the elegant floral décor. White wicker chairs and matching tables were set in a circle around the clustered room, with bushels of white roses and baby's breath set in vases. She could feel her heart pounding in her chest as she realized that the maid was leading her to a single table in the corner of the room where a man sat on his own.

Everyone else seemed to have their partners, apart from the black-haired man with a muscular frame and cleanly shaven face. Her breathing quickened when she realized that the Duke was far more handsome than any of the other men in the room. His features slowly came into focus the closer she got, revealing a perfectly sculpted face with a square jaw and olive-green eyes. The mere sight of him made her pulse quicken as he used his thumb to trace a path over his bottom lip.

Time stood still as the Duke stood and locked eyes with Emma from across the room.



Nicholas stood as he realized that the maid was walking in his direction. He'd reluctantly dragged himself out of bed and prepared for the date, for no other reason than wanting to keep his grandmother at bay. The sooner he proved the matchmaker wrong, the sooner he could leave London and continue his life as usual.

He frowned slightly when he struggled to see what the woman walking behind the maid was doing. She seemed to be trying her best to remain out of sight as her blonde head bobbed up and down as she walked.

“Miss Crawford, Your Grace.” The ginger-haired maid with a spray of freckles across her face gave him a gallant smile as she stepped aside.

Nicholas smiled despite himself when he realized that Emma Crawford was at least a head shorter than all of the other ladies in the room. Her brown eyes were downcast, allowing her long lashes to sweep over her cheeks. She was pretty to him in an unconventional way that piqued his interest. Her presence was like the first breath of spring when all one knew was winter for months on end. He quickly shook his head when he realized he’d thought something strange that he’d never thought before.

“Pleased to make your acquaintance, Your Grace.” The lady curtsied politely without lifting her head.

“The pleasure is all mine, Miss Crawford.” He gave her a polite bow and held out her chair.

“Miss!” the maid gasped under her breath as Emma bumped into the back of her chair.

Thinking fast, Nicholas reached out and gripped her arm. The feeling of her soft and warm skin against his fingertips made his heart jolt with excitement. He imagined what it would feel like to hold her body close to his as he kept her from falling over while she stared up at him with a wide-eyed expression of shock.

He noticed her beautiful brown eyes for the first time, they were flecked with specks of brilliant gold. Her perfectly smooth skin seemed like the outer layer of a peach as his eyes dipped down, and he noticed her plump and perfectly round breasts that strained against the neckline of her dress. He hurriedly averted his gaze to prevent her from seeing how he had been taking note of her curves.

“I... I’m sorry.” Her voice was sweet and breathy as she spoke.

“That’s quite all right,” he answered as he helped her straighten and showed her to her chair.

A deep blush had spread across her cheeks, showing the embarrassment she felt at having stumbled over her own feet.

“That’s quite all right,” he said again, and he cleared his throat and straightened his jacket when he realized that he’d been staring at her. Taking his seat, he waited for her to catch her breath before signaling for the maid to take their order. “Do you know what tea you would like?” he asked her as she was removing the ribbon of her purse from her arm.

“Oh...” She seemed taken off-guard once again as she fidgeted with her purse on her lap. Reaching for one of the small menus that sat on the table, she bumped into the vase of flowers, sending it tumbling over.

Reaching out as fast as he could, Nicholas grabbed the vase just as a drop of water was about to spill over the rim. Nearby tables gasped as they watched the spectacle from the sides.

“I’m so sorry!” Emma gasped and lifted her hands to her pink cheeks. “I didn’t mean to!” She quickly reached out and gripped the other end of the vase, sending a small fork clattering to the ground as she bumped the table with her elbow.

Shaking his head, Nicholas straightened the vase as Emma sat back in her chair with her hands in her lap, her cheeks growing redder by the second.

“Why don’t you just bring us a pot of black tea?” he said gruffly as everyone in the shop turned back to their companions.

He instantly took note of the way she hated the attention of others, a trait that they seemed to share. Nicholas hated it whenever anyone caused a scene in public, something that his grandmother often did on purpose to cause him as much embarrassment as she could. The sudden urge to protect Emma washed over his body in an unexpected wave.

“I beg your pardon, Your Grace,” she apologized once again with her eyes downcast.

He felt a bit of pity for the woman who seemed to be trying her best to not make a spectacle of herself but failed at every attempt.

“No matter.” He forced a smile in an attempt to make her feel at ease. The sooner he got the meeting over with, the sooner he could leave and get his grandmother off his back. “What is it that you like to do in your spare time, Miss Crawford?” He searched her face as she stumbled over her words.

“Oh, a little bit of everything,” she said without lifting her eyes from the floral printed cloth over the table. “I like to read a lot,” she added and placed her purse a little too hard on the table, making her teaspoon clink loudly against the plate.

“What on earth are you carrying?” he asked before he could stop himself. He noticed for the first time that her purse was rather packed and bulging on all sides.

“It’s nothing.” She looked up with her beautiful brown eyes, giving him a sheepish look before explaining when he raised his eyebrows in question. “I like to carry a book with me wherever I go, in case I happen to have a moment to read.”

“Just one?” He became amused as his eyes fell back on the shape of her purse.

“One,” she said through a deep breath. “From each of my favorite authors. I never know when I will be needing a backup.”

He began to relax as he enjoyed the way she reluctantly answered his questions with honesty.

“And you thought that the meeting today would require more than one backup?” The corner of his mouth curved into a teasing smile.

“Of course not, Your Grace!” she replied in astonishment. “I only meant that it’s what I usually do. One could call it a force of habit more than anything else.”

“I see,” he said as the maid returned and placed the pot of tea in the center of the table.

“Shall I pour the tea now, or come back in a few minutes, Your Grace?” She batted her ginger eyelashes as she spoke.

Nicholas noticed how the maid’s dismissal of Emma was making her shift in her chair. “I think we will be just fine for now,” he said more gruffly, not wanting the girl to think that he was receptive to her flirting. He may not intend to marry Emma, but he wasn’t about to let her think that he’d disrespect her like that. “I’m sure the lady would like to do the honor of pouring our tea.” He gave his companion an encouraging smile.

“Me?” Emma suddenly asked and sat up straight.

“Yes.”

He held back the amusement he felt at her unpracticed and unladylike reactions. He had to admit that she was different from all of the other women that had been thrust under his nose. There was an air of kindness about her that wasn’t hampered by her constant clumsy attempts at propriety.

“Do you think that’s a good idea?” She gave him a nervous look before glancing at the maid.

“I would be more than happy to pour the tea.” The young girl seemed to stiffen as she spoke, clearly offended by this dismissal.

“We will be fine for now, thank you,” he dismissed the maid and smiled at Emma as the girl walked away from the table. “Please.” He gestured to the pot with a sweep of his hand. “Do the honors.”

“I...” Emma stammered at first before hesitantly reaching for the handle of the pot.

Nicholas frowned slightly when she missed on the first go, but she quickly managed to grasp the porcelain pot and lift the item with a shaky hand. He suddenly noticed that a group of ladies to their left sniggered as she trembled, making the stream of amber liquid slosh into the cups. Reaching over, he placed his hand over hers in an attempt to steady her grip.

Emma froze, her eyes widening as she looked into his own with a shocked look on her face. “I...” she stammered again as her hand rested beneath his, the softness of her causing a warmth to spread over his palm.

“Yes?” he prompted with a smile that he was sure would put her at ease.

“I have to leave,” she suddenly said and placed the pot back on the table. “This meeting was a mistake.”

“I beg your pardon?” he asked indignantly. Never before in his life had a woman ever referred to a meeting with him as a mistake.

“I thank you for your time, Your Grace, but I do not think that we are a match.” She stood and pushed her chair back with her

knees, forcing him to stand, as propriety dictated, while she hurried away from the table with her purse full of books in hand.

Felling slightly speechless and embarrassed, Nicholas sat back down and tried his best to shake off the feeling of people staring at him. Being jilted in public was a brand-new feeling for the handsome Duke. It was a feeling that didn't sit quite right in his mind.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

A California girl born and raised, Daphne Byrne's ancestry holds from the gloomy English countryside, but she loves the sunny weather that California offers. She can often be found exploring the picturesque hills of nature with her hyperactive puppy dog named Freddie, daydreaming of ghosts of the past.

Hopped on a plane to London to study Creative Writing, Daphne put her imagination to the test. Countless efforts, friends, heartbreaks, tears and laughs, she returned back to California armed with a writing degree and an English husband, to live the rest of her life putting the stories in her head on paper.

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