



Cobalt Fairy  
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Tempting  
the  
Rakish Duke



A GENTLEMAN'S VOW

SALLY VIXEN

# TEMPTING THE RAKISH DUKE

A STEAMY HISTORICAL REGENCY ROMANCE NOVEL

A GENTLEMAN'S VOW



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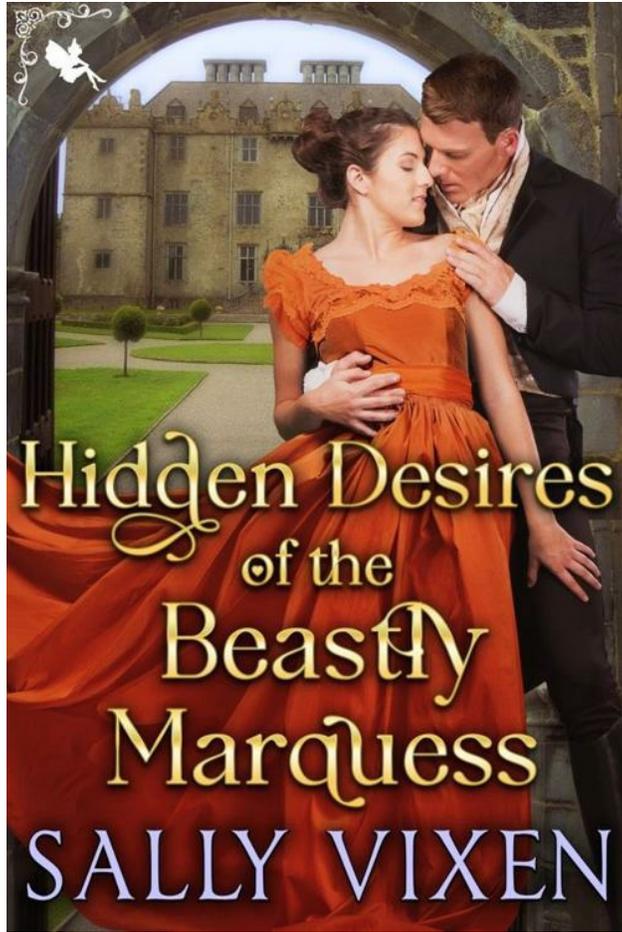
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## A SPECIAL GIFT FOR YOU

I truly appreciate your unwavering support for my efforts. Having you by my side means the world to me, and I couldn't ask for more!

As a token of my gratitude, I'd like to offer you a special thank you gift - **a free book!** *Hidden Desires of the Beastly Marquess* is exclusively available to those who have downloaded any of my books, and you can claim your **free** copy by clicking on the image below or using this [link here!](#)



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## ABOUT THE BOOK

***“You will be the death of me...”***

Rebellious Emily knows firsthand rakes are not to be trusted. That’s why she’s so adamant to protect her sister from her intended, a dangerous rogue their parents chose for her. So why can’t she get him out of her head?

Jacob knows he cannot be a rake forever. Bound by the vow he made to his mother long ago, he is determined to find a suitable bride of convenience. And he has found the perfect candidate. If only her sister wasn’t haunting his every thought...

Both swear to stay away from each other. Until they accidentally get caught up in a scandal, and they realize this is just the beginning...

## CHAPTER 1



*London, England*

“*A*re you certain this is a wise idea?”

“Emily, I do believe you are starting to sound like our oldest sister.” Bridget abruptly stopped walking and turned to look at her sister.

Emily was used to the tired looks her older sister gave her by now. Bridget was sweet in nature, softly spoken, and would hardly ever dare speak too loudly, or say boo to a goose. Emily rather thought Bridget wouldn’t even dare whisper to a goose, she was so demure in nature. In contrast, Emily had no such qualms. Yet something Bridget did permit herself was such exasperated looks.

“Me?” Emily laid an innocent hand on her chest. “Do you mean that I am sounding increasingly like a watchful mother, inclined to usher you hither and thither, and warn you when you make the simplest of errors, like a clucking hen?”

“She is not that bad,” Bridget laughed warmly and threaded a hand through Emily’s arm, drawing her further into the ball. “Besides, even you must admit our sister’s attentions have been somewhat divided as of late, now she has her son and her husband to concern herself with.”

“That she does,” Emily agreed with a slow nod.

“And I know you miss her attentions too.”

“Oh, what a thing to say!” Emily declared in mock horror and threw a white-gloved hand over her lips. The ball gown she wore contrasted strongly with her gloves. Whereas the gloves were pristine white, the dress was a rich, bold blue, quite daring even, for the fashionable pastel colors of the season. In contrast, Bridget’s gown was a pale pink that suited her delicate features, small lips and light brown hair rather beautifully. “Do you mean to suggest I am missing my sister’s mothering ways now I am a little freer of them?”

Bridget did not need to answer but arched her eyebrows in Emily’s direction.

“Well, maybe we do both know it is the truth, but pray, do not let Rachel hear you say that. It will make her day,” Emily said in a rush.

“She and Daniel are not here tonight anyway,” Bridget explained, nodding her head at the ballroom. “They had... other things to attend to.”

“What other things? Their son?”

“Being happily married, I believe.” Bridget repressed a mischievous smile and blushed bright red instead. Emily tipped her chin back and laughed raucously.

“Who would have thought our saintly sister, who was so eager to ever avoid a scandal from me, had her own, and now throws herself into marriage and er, the... marriage chamber,” she added in a whisper, earning a dark glare from Bridget.

“Behave. Come, tonight is about something else entirely.”

“Yes, that is why I began this conversation in the first place, for I wished to issue a caution. Oomph!” Emily was not permitted to say anymore.

Their father, Edward Lock, the Earl of Pratt, arrived behind them in the ballroom, having finished his introductions with their hosts for the evening. He had barreled headlong into them and nearly knocked them both over. Fortunately, Bridget was always so sure of her composure and standing that she didn’t waver, even when Emily was in danger of pulling them both over.

“Now, girls, to business I think,” he said matter-of-factly.

“Business indeed,” Emily muttered wryly. “I am still not certain about this.”

“We discussed this, Emily.” Her father walked around her, revealing the same rich brown hair tones that could be seen in both Rachel’s and Bridget’s hair.

There were aspects of his face that Emily thought were a little more like her own. The sloping nose and high cheekbones were much the same as hers. Whereas these features aided him to age very well, on Emily, they were rather fine, not that she thought herself any great beauty. She merely knew she was at least not the most awful-looking lady of the *ton*.

“Yes, I remember discussing it,” Emily said tightly, forcing a smile for her father’s sake and Bridget’s. Both Edward and Bridget looked at one another with amused smiles. “I do not remember agreeing to the conclusions you two drew.”

“Do you think it hurts her? To hold such an expression for so long?” Edward asked mischievously, pretending to whisper to Bridget.

“She would never own it if it did,” Bridget laughed and shook her head. “Do smile properly, Emily, or as Mother Rachel would say, the wind will change, and you’ll be stuck that way forever.”

“Fine, then I shall do this instead.” She revealed a harsh frown indeed. “I am not convinced, Father, that you are ushering Bridget into the best of marriage betrothals.”

*There! I have said my piece.*

Yet Emily had plenty more she would gladly add to the discussion. When Edward had first posited the idea that it was time Bridget married, now that Rachel had been wedded for a year, everyone had been eager to see a match,

even Bridget in her own timid way. Their brother-in-law, Daniel, had been interested in the idea too, but issued caution for Bridget's sake.

“Our brother-in-law never uttered such wise words as when he declared that your husband should be a man of wisdom, Bridget. Who else would appreciate you for who you are? Anyone gregarious, or God forbid, foolish! Well, they would not do for you.”

“And she thinks Rachel is the protective sister,” Edward pointed out to Bridget, who laughed once more.

“Father, please—”

“I see they are here already.” Edward looked somewhere off through the ballroom. “He is here now with his mother.”

Emily at once craned her neck, desperate for a view of the man that was to marry her sister. She'd heard much of him, especially from those in her friendship group that were fond of gossip and the scandal sheets, but she had never seen him herself.

“I will be back shortly, girls.” Edward left before Emily could voice any further complaints. She tried her best to catch a glimpse of the mysterious man but had no luck. All she could see were the sea of heads, both of ladies and gentlemen, as they hurried either to the dance floor or to enjoy the vast displays of food and liquor that had been laid out in crystal glasses and great towering cake stands, built like towers.

“Can you see him?” Emily whispered.

“No, but I shall see him soon enough.” In contrast, Bridget did not seem too interested in searching for her betrothed. She looked down instead, hung her head and adjusted the sleeves of her gloves in her usual self-conscious way.

“How tempted are you to run to the shadows of the room where you usually like to hide?” Emily asked her, knowing her sister well. Bridget didn’t answer but offered a knowing smile. “Yes, yes, I know. I know you too well.”

Sensing her opportunity, Emily pulled on her sister’s arm tighter and led her to one such dark corner of the room, away from the prying eyes of anyone new that could be walking into the ballroom.

“Sister, please, I beg you to reconsider this. Marrying this man... oh, there is so much that could go wrong.” All of the complaints that had come before fell from her lips again now. Before, they had been brushed under the carpet, either by her father, Rachel, or even Daniel; at least alone, she could speak to Bridget and know her words would be heard. “He is a known rake.”

“Yes, everyone has told me as such,” Bridget said, though there was a tightness around her lips that suggested she was not completely comfortable with the idea. “He needs to marry. He has agreed to the match.”

“Yet what of your own happiness?” Emily asked, gesturing wildly. “Believe me, sister. Rakes are amusing company. Yes indeed, they know how to flirt, how to make a lady smile, and...” She trailed off as Bridget quirked her

eyebrow. “Do not look at me like that.”

“I fear now I am the one turning into Rachel. I’m wondering exactly how many dark corners of your own you have crept off into and come across a rake. If I knew the answer, would you be married already?” Bridget asked, that smile returning.

“I am not answering that question,” Emily shook her head firmly.

Even from her debut ball, Emily hadn’t seen what all the fuss was about and was happy to stay completely still like a statue in ballrooms or ignore interesting men’s company. More than once had she entertained the idea of a courtship that had not come to pass, and it would be a lie to say she did not know what a kiss was like. She’d had a couple, and that’s all she would admit to, though even the memory of the second incident was a little hazy.

*I am part to blame for that one.*

“The point is that rakes do not make good husbands. The chances of them being faithful to you are slim indeed. I know you have read the stories about this gentleman as much as I have. Pray, tell me you realize what situation you are agreeing to if you go ahead with this match?” Emily waited with bated breath, desperate to have her sister’s agreement.

“I know what I have agreed to,” Bridget adopted a serious tone and reached for Emily’s hand, patting it between her own. “Do not make yourself ill with your concern for me.”

“That’s like telling Rachel not to be worried. As impossible as it is not to breathe.”

“Yes, I take your point,” Bridget continued tapping her hand and stepped forward farther still. She was exceedingly pretty, to the point that though Emily had often been called the beautiful sister, she thought Bridget was actually the prettiest. She had a sweetness to her face that neither she nor Rachel had, in her bold if rather unorthodox, good looks. Along with Bridget’s excessively good heart, her benevolence and her humility, Emily knew she deserved the best gentleman in the world.

*That gentleman, whomever he may be, will certainly be no rake!*

“You must not worry about me. I have agreed to the match, as has he. Not everyone ends up in as loving or as happy a marriage as our sister has. Believe me, Emily, I am perfectly content.”

“Then I shall do all the worrying for you.”

“I thought you might.”

“I shall,” Emily said again, with emphasis, drawing another laugh from her sister’s lips.

“Worry for yourself.” Bridget nodded her head across the ballroom. “For there is one coming your way this minute who we both know will be more than a little *forward* when he reaches you.”

Emily didn't need to hear the name or see the face to know who was coming, but she looked around on an impulse regardless.

"You remember when we went to see Shakespeare's *Midsummer Night's Dream*?" Emily asked, wrinkling her nose as she stared at the gentleman walking toward her. He was over twice her age, with an excessively long face, and a chin that was more akin to a horse's snout.

"Of course."

"Well, the character of Bottom does rather remind me of Lord Gilchrist. Especially when his head is transformed into that of a donkey."

Bridget laughed into her hand, in a way that showed she knew she shouldn't find such audacious things funny, but she truly did.

"Forgive me whilst I escape, sister," Emily whispered to her. "I will not risk another dance with him again. The last time, goodness, if Father had seen where he reached for me then we would be arranging my marriage right now."

"Then run, swiftly, and when you return, I shall have met my husband-to-be."

The words gave Emily pause. She hesitated, looking back at her sister, then tried to contend with Bridget's insistent tone.

*She is content to marry this man, even if I fear it will be a disaster. Oh, my poor sister. I pray you are the one who is right and that I am wrong.*

Emily turned on her heel, and before the overzealous attentions of Lord Gilchrist could find her, she slipped out of the ballroom side door and into a darkened corridor.



“Now, the time is here, my darling. I hope you are ready.”

“As ready as you are when I invite you to play a game of shuttlecock,” Jacob said tightly. His sarcasm didn’t get him far. His mother, Catarina, turned to the nearest drinks table and poured a rather excessively large glass of claret.

“Drink that. They call it Dutch courage and it might give you some right now.”

“Thanks.” Jacob took a hearty gulp of the claret.

*Why did I agree to this again?*

Despite the complaint, he remembered why he had said yes to marrying a woman he had never met in his life. It had nothing to do with the lady or her own situation, and everything to do with his own.

*It must be done, even if I am dreading this moment.*

“You make it sound as if I am about to introduce you to Medusa herself,” Catarina glared at him.

She was tall, just like him, though he was taller still. Her blue eyes were a mirror image of his own, but their hair was shockingly different and captured attention for different reasons. Where Catrina had dark auburn hair, that was still not graying despite her advanced years, Jacob bore rich dark brown hair. It had a habit of always falling perfectly, without him having to try very much, tangling around his ears a little longer than many gentlemen thought was fashionable.

“Medusa? God, I hope not.” Jacob shook his head and looked down at the claret glass in his hand, startled to find it was empty in his palm. “Did I drink all of this already?”

“Yes,” Catarina took the glass sharply out of his grasp. “You have the red wine mustache to prove it.”

He chuckled and lifted a handkerchief from the pocket of his tailcoat, dabbing his bare upper lip to get rid of the wine smudge.

“You remember why you agreed to this, do you not?” Catarina asked, not looking at him, but returning the glass to the table. She did something he had so often seen her do, ever since he was a child. She readjusted the glasses on the table, until they were all perfectly aligned. One glass seemed more difficult than the others to place, and she moved it repeatedly until it was

perfectly placed, with no wrinkles in the tablecloth around it.

“I remember.” His voice grew deep and somber. Quite frankly, he would have agreed to anything if it meant assuaging his mother’s nervous habits after all this time, but he doubted even marriage would help at this point.

When she picked up another empty glass and laid it in a perfect line alongside the others, he laid a hand over the rims of the glasses, capturing her attention. The shallow wrinkles in the skin of her cheeks suddenly furrowed deeper.

“I know. I’m doing it again.” She released the glasses completely.

“It does not matter.” Jacob tried to brush it off.

The only other person he’d spoken to in this world about his mother’s fears for him and her nervous habits was his good friend, Seth Miller, the Marquess of Ramsbury. Seth had pointed out long ago that the more Jacob drew attention to such things, the more it made his mother panic about what she did. Best to downplay it and make it seem like no great matter at all.

Nevertheless, Jacob shifted the glasses away from her, so she could not do it again.

“Now. You should come and meet her. It’s time.” His mother turned to face him, clasping her hands together, her excitement palpable.

“I need five minutes first.” The words escaped his lips before he really knew what he was doing. “Just to gather myself, a breath of fresh air, you know.”

“I rather hoped the claret would have made you courageous enough. I pray you are not planning to make a run for it the moment you are outside.” Her beady eyes narrowed on him, that glacial blue rather shocking, like glass marbles.

“I promise to return. I just need a minute.” He laid a hand on his mother’s shoulder in reassurance. “There is nothing to worry about. I shall be back soon.”

His mother waited, said nothing, and offered one of those tight-lipped looks that told him her mind was full of all her nervous worries again, then she magically shifted them and offered a small nod with a smile.

“Yes, of course. I shall see you in a minute or two then.”

Jacob turned and left his mother’s side, hurrying across the insanely busy room as he aimed for a door. As he went, faces turned toward him. Many ladies’ eyes shifted to admire him. He’d seen those looks before and knew what they meant. Either they hoped to be the one woman that could saddle him into marriage, or they knew his reputation and dreamed of one night only with him.

*I cannot think of such things tonight. From now on... I will be a married man.*

Uncertain what to think or feel about the situation, he hurried rapidly through a door, moving so quickly that he barely noticed he was suddenly in a completely pitch-black corridor, with no candles or footmen. Evidently, it was a door that guests were not supposed to use.

He strode through it, sighing heavily and glad to have escaped his mother for a few minutes, but in the darkness, he could not see where he was going. There was merely a sliver of moonlight at the end of the corridor, filtering through a window. The soft gray light fell on the bottom of the stairs and what he perceived to be some sort of marble statue.

Then he tripped on something and fell straight into the statue.

“Oh!”

*Wait... that is no statue.*

## CHAPTER 2



“*W*hat the...” Jacob trailed off, freezing completely as he tried to make sense of his bearings.

“I thought you would have shifted your hands by now,” a rather husky voice said.

*Oh, that voice.*

It was sultry. The kind of voice that he expected to hear from some actress on the stage. One of those actresses that took the part of the ‘other woman’ in the play, the one who was tempting the hero to look the other way. Yes indeed, he could imagine walking across a stage to that voice and being ensnared by her.

“What exactly am I—oh!” He lifted his hands, realizing that in his attempt to stay standing as he had walked into this mysterious lady, one of his hands had found her hip and the other her shoulder. Well, he said shoulder, but that was just what his fingertips caressed. The bottom part of his palm could distinctly feel the curve of a breast. “My apologies.”

He removed his hands and stood up straight, only to find that he was standing on the hem of her gown. As he reached for the bottom rail of the nearby staircase, its outline barely visible, his boot hooked her hem, dragging her with him.

“What the devil!” she cried then fell straight into him, her hands finding the center of his chest.

“It is a good job I am strong, ma’am,” he said, suddenly aware in the darkness how close the lady was. “An ounce weaker and you could have knocked us both over until we were rolling around on this floor together.”

He may not have been able to see her face in this darkness, but he could just decipher the top curve of her head and some curls in the faint light from the window. Her scent lingered too. It was rather exotic, unlike the light floral scents that so many ladies in the ballroom preferred; something infinitely headier, and there was a touch of spice to it too.

“Ha!” she laughed deeply. “Does such a statement induce many ladies to fall into your arms and go ahead with such rolling around on the floor?” She continued to laugh at him.

He raised his hands and softly tapped her fingers that still rested on his chest.

“Perhaps I should just point out that you are the one who launched yourself into my arms.”

“Yes, completely intentionally,” she said wryly and pushed harshly against his chest, stumbling back from him. “What are you doing out here?”

“I could ask you such a thing. The ball is back through there.” He pointed in the direction he had come from, though with such little light, he realized that she probably couldn’t see his gesture.

“I asked first.”

“Hmm, is this a court of law? I was not aware I had to play fairly,” he said teasingly. There was something altogether exciting about this whole situation. It wasn’t just the fact that they had stumbled into one another, and had no idea what one another looked like, but there was something witty in her turn of phrase, that voice, that scent... She was attractive indeed, even without seeing her face.

“You prefer to play foul, stranger?” she asked, rather tartly with a challenge in her voice. From the way her body shifted, and the outline he could see, he thought she might have leaned back on the wall opposite him.

“Not foul, just... with cleverness.”

“Clever? Oh, this is a rather vain meeting, is it not?” she said, that witty tone still present. “We have known each other for what must amount to less than two minutes, and you have already declared that I should wish to fall into your arms and that you are deeply clever indeed. Any other boasts I should know of?”

*What is happening here?*

He couldn't resist. Part of him knew he should be returning to the ball, meeting the woman he was supposed to be marrying, yet he stayed here. Rather than heading to the ball, he took a step toward the lady instead. She didn't move, despite the fact she must have heard the sound.

"I know that it is probably unwise for a lady to be alone with me in such a dark corridor. My reputation, ma'am... it is no fine thing when it comes to dancing with just one lady in a night." The flirtation was obvious as he bent his head a little down toward her, wanting to be nearer that scent.

"Now that is a boast indeed. You are supposing more than one lady wishes to dance with you in a night?" she said, her voice rather breathy, making that husky sound deeper. When she angled her head to the side, as if readying herself for a kiss, he mirrored the image the other way, placing his hands on the wall either side of her.

*What has come over me?*

He might have been wayward, a rake, a cad, yes! Yet every lady he had been with, even kissed, he'd looked in the eye. They knew exactly who he was. This lady did not. It was as if they were drawn together by something beyond the promises of his reputation and how he could fill a lady's night with pleasure.

*This is another draw entirely.*

“I wasn’t exactly referring to dancing when I said ‘dancing’.” His voice grew deeper still.

“Then what were you talking of?” She was clearly enjoying challenging him, for he could hear the humor in her voice. She was tempting him to say the actual words, testing him to see if he would.

“You are bold, my lady. Very bold indeed.” He angled his head further to the side, coming so near that his cheek practically brushed hers.

“Hmm, do you know what a hypocrite is, stranger?”

He laughed deeply at her words and pulled an inch back from her.

“Forgive me,” he whispered, his hands still firmly on the wall though he kept a little distance between them now. “I would blame the claret for drawing me toward you, but I could not put my hand on my heart and say that I did.”

“Not your eagerness to have another lady to... *dance* with tonight then?” At her words, they laughed together, a soft sound.

“Tempting indeed, ma’am,” he whispered. When he shifted his hands on the wall this time, he felt the brush of where she had planted her arms to the wall too. He caught the hint of the fine long gloves that reached her elbows. It was the evidence that he needed, though he could not see her face and dress

clearly—she was a lady of the *ton*. “Yet I have a rule.”

“What is that? Flirting with ladies in dark corridors is allowed, but anything more is off limits?” she asked, that flirtatious huskiness growing. Once more, she tilted her head to the side. He caught it in the way the soft gray light fell through the window, enough to see the movement of her hair at the side of her head.

“I do not get involved with ladies of the ton.”

“Oh? How interesting.” She flattened her head to the wall again. “Well, in a dark corridor, I could be anyone, could I not? Just as easily as you may well be a footman or a cook right now, and I would not know.”

“That is true.” There was something exhilarating about that idea to Jacob. This stranger, she was drawn to him, flirting with him, when she didn’t even know what his position was. He didn’t doubt most ladies went to his bed because they thought they could get something else from him— money. Yet this lady was looking for a momentary thrill. Was he one to deny her that?

“What if we just said that for tonight, in this corridor, I’m no lady of the ton,” she whispered, tilting her head up a little toward his.

“Tempting indeed,” he said, and moved his lips toward hers.

The brush of their lips together was soft at first, merely a test of boundaries. When her lips molded to his, showing she knew what to do in a kiss, he

pushed the boundary further. They moved their lips together, experimenting, then when his hands slid along the wall, his wrists coming up to brush the curve of her waist, she arched toward him.

That's when Jacob lost his self-control. In that moment, he didn't care about restraint, or why he was at the ball tonight. All he thought about was this momentary escape with this stranger.

*I'm damn well going to enjoy it whilst I can. It will be fleeting!*

He deepened the kiss, playfully biting her bottom lip to get a response from her. She parted her lips, giving him entry, and as he delved beyond, tangling their tongues in a tease, her hands reached up. She splayed her fingers across his chest. The intimacy of that touch was enough to drive him mad, even without that kiss.

Then there was a thud in the distant part of the corridor. Jacob pulled back from the mysterious lady, his hands still on the wall as he looked down the corridor. Someone else had escaped the ballroom, and they had a candle with them—they were in danger of lighting the pair of them, locked in their scandalous kiss.

“Do not move,” Jacob whispered to the lady, turning his head back toward her. The candle was so distant, it cast no light upon them. He strained in that light, desperate to see something of the lady that had kissed him with such skill and passion, but he saw nothing. He simply grew aware of the way her hands shifted on his chest, moving down a little to his stomach and then his hips. “That is moving, ma'am,” he whispered again in her ear.

“Oops.” Though her playful tone showed she knew exactly what she had done to tease him.

Holding his whole body still, Jacob stared down the corridor, fearful of discovery. If he turned and fled now, it would simply draw attention to the pair of them. His best chance was to stay very still and let the intruder pass away without ever discovering they were there.

The candle seemed to bob about in the room, its bearer uncertain where to go, then the candle drifted the other way down the hallway, slowly disappearing. The moment it was gone, the lady sighed heavily in relief and released Jacob, flattening herself against the wall once again.

“A near miss,” Jacob remarked, his hands still on the wall.

“And a reminder how risky meetings with gentlemen such as yourself are.” Her tone was still playful as she slipped under one of his arms, escaping him with ease. “If you would excuse me, stranger.”

“Wait... that’s it?” Jacob turned, leaning on the wall. “One kiss like that, and no more?”

“Did you expect any more?” She laughed from the darkness. “I have not come here to *dance* with you, stranger. Oh no, the kiss was enough to tantalize the senses, but there will be no more. Goodnight.” She turned in the darkness. He caught sight of the silver light from the window falling on the hem of her gown. Was that a shade of blue? He could not be certain.

Then she was gone, with the door to the ballroom closing softly behind her.

After she left, Jacob was filled with a rush of excitement at what he had done. He chuckled, leaned back on the wall and thrust a hand into his hair.

“I should not have done that,” he murmured aloud.

His head argued against what he had done. Every rational thought knew that it was not only risky, and scandalous, and that they could have found themselves hastily betrothed if they’d been discovered, but his heart also knew it was a betrayal.

*Maybe I am not capable of devotion to a lady, but in that ballroom, a young lady is waiting for me. And what have I done whilst she waits for me? I have kissed another...*

“Ah, no wonder my mother despairs of me.” He thrust a hand into his hair one last time, his nervous habits returning, then he breathed deeply and pushed himself off the wall. He had to make sure the thrill the stranger had given him had well and truly passed, or he risked returning to that ball with his evident arousal straining at his breeches.

As he stepped back into the ballroom, despite every good thought and intention to return to his mother’s side, his eyes involuntarily worked against him. He searched for another instead. He hunted out every blue-hemmed gown he could see, and every lady with curls that escaped their updos. Unfortunately, that meant a lot of ladies in the room! Yet had that lady’s gown not been bolder in color? Something beyond the usual pastel shades.

He couldn't detect that exotic scent again, not on any of the ladies that walked by him now.

“Jacob! There you are.” Catarina's hand launched itself at his arm and gripped hard.

“Ow, Mother. Careful. Are you trying to take my arm off?” he said jokingly, trying to ease the tension he saw at once in her face. With her other hand, she was already straightening things, only this time, it was him. She adjusted the lapels of his jacket, the position of his cravat, and the creases in his waistcoat. “Mother, I'm a man, not a boy.”

“Sorry,” she murmured, turning her attention to the creases in her own gown. “Where did you go? Lord Pratt came to introduce his daughter and you were nowhere to be found. You were longer than I expected, Jacob. It is embarrassing indeed!”

“I'm sorry. You are right, I should not have taken so long.” He laid a hand on his mother's shoulder again, knowing it comforted her. She breathed deeply and nodded.

Jacob had a distinct memory of being a child when he had seen his father do such a thing, laying a hand on his mother's shoulder to comfort her. He supposed that was why he did it. He was so like his father, in many respects, and who knew just how far that similarity went.

“You must come and meet her now.” Catarina took his arm. “There must be

no further delay.”

“Yes, Mother. You are right. Let’s get this over and done with.” He added the latter sentence to himself in a deeper tone.

*I have to marry; I know I do. I can’t live forever on stolen kisses and excitement with ladies in dark corridors. I promised my mother I would produce children. I must keep to that vow.*

They crossed the room together and came upon Lord Pratt, a man who Jacob had met several times over the previous months.

“Lord Pratt.” Jacob bowed deeply in greeting. The kindly gentleman turned at once and bowed too.

“Your Grace, it is so good to see you again.” He smiled warmly. “We thought we had lost you for the night.”

“Yes, my son has a habit of scampering off,” Catarina said tightly.

“An old habit of mine to explore, forgive me,” Jacob said with ease. Lord Pratt didn’t seem to mind. If anything, he smiled a little more.

“Allow me to introduce my daughter to you at last, Your Grace. Bridget?” he called, turning to look around the other end of the drinks table. A young lady removed herself from a group of other ladies and walked forward, moving to

her father's side quickly. "Bridget, permit me to introduce His Grace, Jacob Browning, the Duke of Thorne to you."

"How do you do, Your Grace?" Her voice was light and melodic as she curtsied to him.

At once, Jacob saw the fair face. She was excessively pretty, and demure too from the way she barely raised her eyes at him. The dark curls that framed her face were done expertly and her full lips pressed together rather quickly. It was easy to see she was a nervous soul, but she knew her duty, and stood tall.

*She is a good sort of woman. That is what I wanted, was it not? A lady to wed and produce children. I was not looking for anything more.*

"It is a pleasure to meet you, Lady Bridget." Jacob bowed to her and took her hand, raising it to his lips to kiss it. So often when he offered such a kiss, he saw a blush tinging the lady's cheeks or a flicker of her eyes that danced across him, but Lady Bridget was more reserved than that. There was no blush, no dancing of the eyes; in fact, he'd almost go as far to suggest it was possible that she was unaffected by him at all, and not at all attracted.

*She is hardly the lady from the corridor...*

Abruptly, he was transported back there, to that feeling in the corridor, the excitement, the heat, the mischief, and oh, how he longed to see that lady again, but he knew it was not to be.

“And you.” Lady Bridget retrieved her hand and offered a polite smile.

“I am so glad we have had this meeting at last,” Catarina said, before Jacob could think of a word to say to the demure lady. “A marriage! Oh, such a thing will make me very happy indeed.”

“All of us, Your Grace, will be happy, I assure you,” Lord Pratt said with ease while offering his arm to Catarina. “Shall we find something to drink and let the betrothed couple get to know one another?”

“Yes, of course.” They walked off in a not-so-subtle way. Catarina glanced back with enough harshness in her eyes to let Jacob know he had better be on his best behavior.

He laughed and turned to Lady Bridget, raising his eyebrows.

“An interesting meeting, eh, Lady Bridget?”

“Yes, I suppose so.” She looked away. There was no humor, no connection, nothing of the kind.

*I am here to do my duty, not to run away with ladies in dark corridors. I must marry Lady Bridget as I agreed to. Nothing else matters now.*

## CHAPTER 3



The baby squealed and screamed in Emily's arms, refusing to settle. He wriggled madly, so much so that Emily struggled, uncertain how to hold her little nephew.

"Do you realize how bad you are making us look, little Joey?" she whispered to the boy, as if he would understand her. "Rachel will take you out of my arms within seconds if you continue to cry."

As if in response, the baby cried harder.

Emily's stomach knotted tightly at the red face of her nephew. More than anything she wanted to be a good aunt to Joey. They all loved him so much, the newest bundle of joy in their lives, but Emily had to admit she had little to no experience with children and did not even know how to hold her nephew. She usually settled herself with buying him good gifts.

Chewing on her lip, she looked around the parlor, searching across the space to see her sisters sitting together by a low-lying dumbwaiter table, carved out of mahogany wood. They'd been pouring tea and enjoying fresh bread and

butter, but now both looked up and winced as Joey cried harder.

“Did you drop him or something?” Rachel asked with a heavy laugh.

“No!” Emily said hurriedly. “I just don’t know how to...” She shifted her nephew once more, trying to cradle him better in her arms, then he wailed louder. “Oh, this is hopeless. Maybe I am just no good with children.”

“Don’t be silly.” Rachel stood and crossed the room. With her tall figure and bold features, she commanded attention in many rooms, not that she was aware of it.

More than once over the years, Emily had seen Rachel’s modesty matched only by her motherly nature. She was always mothering anyone she could get her hands on, even their own father. It was a good job she had ended up married to Daniel, for the two were a perfect match with her motherly nature and his protective ways.

“When it is your own child someday, you’ll be a natural, I’m sure,” Rachel said sweetly and took Joey out of her arms. Emily sighed heavily and blew a lock of her blonde hair out of her eyes.

“My child!?” she spluttered, realizing what Rachel had said. “I’m not the one getting married.” She glanced across the room to where Bridget calmly sipped her tea, as if the conversation did not affect her at all.

*So much happened at that ball last night...*

Emily longed to ask about Bridget's meeting with the Duke of Thorne, but so far, her mind had been entirely taken up with another thought.

*Who was that gentleman in the darkness?*

When she had first taken refuge in that corridor, she had not thought for a second that someone would find her there, let alone for them to walk straight into her and end up entangled with her. He was plainly a cad. She could acknowledge that openly from the skill with which he flirted with her, but despite it all, she had been drawn to him.

There was something different about the gentleman in the darkness. There was a rush of heat and excitement, for they had both known what they were doing was scandalous when they had kissed, but she had taken the risk regardless...

"Here, try holding him like this." Rachel rearranged Joey and he stopped crying, then she returned the baby to Emily's arms. Emily stiffened, fearful of dropping her nephew or making him cry again. This time, the boy lay peacefully in the crook of her arm, swaddled in various silks and linens. He didn't cry, but blinked up at her, then closed his eyes and drifted off to sleep. "See? You just need a little guidance. That is all."

"I am not the one who needs guidance." Yet Emily smiled all the same, thrilled at the feeling of carrying the boy safely. She crossed the room, as delicately as she could, with Rachel following protectively behind her. Sitting down in a chair opposite Bridget, she placed the boy in her lap, continuing to support his head.

“You think *I* am the one who needs guidance, do you not?” Bridget asked, peering over the rim of the cup.

“You have not said a word about meeting your betrothed yet.” Emily rolled her eyes. “You are not singing his praises. Last time I checked, that is no good thing.”

“Emily is right.” Rachel sat down on a rococo settee beside Bridget. “Come, tell us all. What was he like?”

“He was... different.” Bridget scrunched her nose, hardly looking thrilled at the idea. “Yes, he was certainly charming.”

“Rakes generally are,” Emily muttered darkly. “They do not make good husbands though.”

Rachel looked sharply at her.

“You do not know that...”

“Do I not?” Emily teased her.

“Don’t ask her about her experience,” Bridget said hurriedly. “It will certainly displease you; I am sure.”

Emily smiled proudly at Rachel, seeing the same worried look she had so often seen in her sister's features. She had no intention of revealing to Rachel or Bridget what had passed in that dark corridor the night before. It was a moment's madness and fleeting excitement. It would not be returned to or built upon.

*It will be my secret memory to keep.*

"Tell us about the Duke." Emily shifted her nephew, adjusting the swaddling around him, then turned her focus on her sister. "What was your meeting like?"

"It was perfectly polite and amicable," Bridget said hurriedly as if she was reeling off a shopping list rather than describing a gentleman. "He was tall and had a fair face. I noticed many ladies staring at him. He dresses well and is clearly conscious of his position as a duke, yet he was able to make conversation with ease too."

"She does not smile," Rachel said, addressing Emily alone.

"Neither does she blush," Emily noted. "Bridget, did you even admire this gentleman you are to marry?"

Bridget did not answer at first. She sipped her tea then returned the teacup to its saucer on the table between them, the sound chinking quietly in the air.

“No.”

“Well, that’s settled then,” Emily said pointedly. “How are you supposed to marry a man you do not admire?”

“Sister, take care,” Rachel said, her voice somber. “You have seen as well as the rest of us that choice in marriage is not something we always have.”

“Yes, I had front-row seats to your own betrothal, thank you,” Emily whispered with a smile, showing she was teasing her sister. Rachel narrowed her eyes, nevertheless. “At least you got something wonderful out of it.” Emily bent down and kissed her nephew’s forehead. He wriggled in his sleep, then fell still again.

“I got two wonderful things,” Rachel said hurriedly. “Joey, and Daniel.” She smiled broadly. At once, Emily saw the transformation in her sister’s expression. There was a delight and happiness that always came with saying her husband’s name these days.

“Yes, yes, I know,” Emily added tiredly. “Forgive me if I do not sit around to hear you perform an ode on how wonderful your husband is.” She stood up with her nephew and walked up and down, rocking him gently to sleep.

“All I was trying to say is that love or admiration does not necessarily come before marriage, but can come after,” Rachel explained. “I would be a fool, Bridget, to tell you that you should wait for love when evidently, I did not. Yet I am not unhappy with the choices I made.”

“I know.” Bridget laid a hand over Rachel’s and the two smiled together.

Emily stood at some distance from the room, watching her sisters together. Occasionally, she felt as if Bridget and Rachel had a connection that she did not. She had always put it down to when she was a child, being the youngest of the three of them. She supposed too that was sometimes why she had acted out and been so rebellious, for it certainly got her attention. These days, she just enjoyed making mischief for its own sake, without getting any attention for it.

*Like that kiss last night.*

She longed to know what the mysterious gentleman had looked like, but she supposed now she would never know. As time went on, she would forget the tone of his voice and the scent he wore. The memory would fade.

“Maybe I just need to be patient,” Bridget said as she shrugged. “If I take the time to know the gentleman a little more, then perhaps I can feel some admiration for his handsome face or his charming ways.” As she spoke, she wrinkled her nose again, her expression defying her words.

“She’s convincing, is she not?” Rachel called to Emily who laughed warmly.

“As convincing as the moon is out right now.” She nodded her head out of the window at the bright sunlight, for the moon was not out yet. Her wryness earned her a dark glare from Bridget.

“I cannot expect love at first sight,” Bridget explained in a rush. “I have never believed in such a thing, and my mind will not be changed on the matter now.”

“Then you are being wise indeed.” Rachel smiled warmly, clearly proud of her, and reached to top up their tea.

“I just do not see why you should be betrothed to a man you feel nothing for, and who is likely not to feel anything for you either,” Emily said as she returned to sit with her sisters.

“You do not know he feels nothing for her, Em,” Rachel warned in a low tone.

“Oh? Am I the only one who has taken note of the fact that his name has been spread across the scandal sheets regularly? Is he even capable of devoting himself to one woman?” Emily’s tartness made Bridget wriggle in her seat, growing increasingly uncomfortable.

“Em,” Rachel’s tone grew harsher as she nodded at Bridget.

“I am not disparaging Bridget, not in any way,” Emily said as hurriedly as she could. “You misunderstand me if you think that is what I am doing. I simply want Bridget to marry someone worthy of her, and I am not convinced the Duke of Thorne is that gentleman.”

“Time will tell, I suppose,” Bridget murmured, her spine slumping a little.

“Just promise me that if you decide you are strongly against him then you will speak to our father about it. Better yet, tell me to speak to him. I will happily make my feelings known,” Emily said as she adjusted her nephew in her lap, for he wriggled, perhaps dreaming in his sleep.

“I don’t doubt you would make your feelings known, without hesitation or guile.” Rachel’s tone deepened, and they shared a challenging glare across the table, before Emily cracked and smiled at her sister.

She loved Rachel deeply, but they were not sisters who always saw eye to eye.

“Where did you run off to last night anyway?” Bridget asked and reached for her teacup again. “After you escaped Lord Gilchrist, I did not see you for some time.”

“Escaping Lord Gilchrist takes art indeed,” Emily said with mock pride. “I was practically dancing around the ballroom and hiding in every shadow I could find to avoid him.”

*And in dark corridors...*

“Look at that smirk.” Rachel was the first one to see it. She nodded her head at Emily then abruptly put down her teacup.

“What?” Emily asked, attempting an innocent tone.

“Your acting skills are not as fine as you think.” Rachel stood and rounded the table, collecting her son out of Emily’s hands. “You were up to no good, I know it.”

“I was not.” Emily still refused to give in, but when both sisters glared at her, she cracked, but only a little. “Oh, so I have a secret, leave it with me.” She laughed, the mischief taking over. “I did nothing wrong, believe me.”

“I don’t. That is the problem,” Rachel said, returning to her seat with her son.

“Let us talk of something else,” Bridget declared. “How about the dinner party tomorrow night? The Duke of Thorne and his mother are to come.”



“Here you are, Your Grace.” The butler presented Jacob with a sheet of paper as he hovered by the entrance to the carriage, awaiting his mother so they could leave.

“Thank you, Payton.” Jacob smiled at the butler and took the paper, opening it and holding it up a little, so he could read the names on the list in the moonlight.

*Who could she be?*

Despite his endeavors to be good, to hold true to his betrothal to Lady Bridget, he had not been able to get the mysterious lady out of his mind from that dark corridor. One thing he knew for certain was that she was a lady of the *ton*, for she had worn fine gloves and a gown. She had been invited to that event.

Payton had expertly retrieved a list of the guests for Jacob, and he looked over it now, hoping somehow that a name would leap up at him off the list and reveal itself as belonging to the lady. He wasn't even certain why he thought this would work. They hadn't discussed names.

"Right, I am ready." Catarina appeared in the doorway to the house.

Fumbling, Jacob thrust the guest list into the pocket of his tailcoat, before his mother could see it and ask what it was. Despite her statement, Catarina stood in the doorway of the house, fidgeting. She rearranged her pelisse three times, then even reached to Payton beside her and adjusted the handkerchief in his top pocket. Payton smiled kindly, clearly used to her ways after so many years.

"Mother..." Jacob's tone deepened. She stiffened, clearly noting what she was doing, then hurried to his side at the carriage. "Payton does not need organizing the way you do a table full of crystalware."

"I cannot help it." She took his offered hand and stepped into the carriage. Jacob followed her then tapped the wall of the coach, showing they were ready to set off. As they traveled down the driveway, tipping side to side in the potholes, he stared at his mother. The lantern that was fastened above them cast a burnt orange light about her. "I have always been the same. It is just who I am."

He didn't argue with her, though he knew it was not the truth. When he was very young, he had no memories at all of her excessively tidying things until everything was at a perpendicular or parallel angle to one another. He'd even ventured to ask Payton and the housekeeper, Mrs. Wright, if she had been this way before his father had died.

The answer had been a resounding no: this behavior developed after the late Duke's death.

Chewing the side of his mouth so that he did not argue with his mother, he looked out of the window, thinking of his father. The candlelight cast a ghost of his reflection on the glass beside him, and for a brief second, he was convinced his father sat there beside him, but he wasn't. It was only Jacob's reflection.

When they reached the Earl of Pratt's house, Jacob stepped down first and offered a hand to assist his mother. Despite her hurried steps toward the door of the house, he did not race to the door.

*Remember why I am doing this, remember...*

He thought back to the vow he had made to his mother long ago. There would be a marriage and children, yes, and now he was thirty, he had no choice but to make it happen. That was the deal. He could not be a rake forever.

“Come, Jacob. Your betrothed will be waiting for you.” She beckoned him from the doorway.

He nodded and followed, bounding up the steps though he could feel no excitement about seeing Lady Bridget again. She had been nice, certainly, polite and everything a lady should be. Yet his admiration for her went no further.

*I hoped at least my bride and I could enjoy the responsibilities of the marriage chamber.*

“Ah, you’re here.” The warm voice of the Earl of Pratt greeted them as the door was flung open and rich warm candlelight fell out. Catarina was ushered inside first, with Jacob following behind.

In the grand hallway stood the Earl of Pratt and his daughter, Lady Bridget. They both stepped forward and bowed and curtsied in turn. Feeling the glare of his mother’s eyes burrowing into him, Jacob swiftly took Lady Bridget’s hand in greeting, trying to find some warmth in her eyes or expression, but she looked away and retrieved her hand fast.

*It is definite. She feels nothing for me yet.*

“I am so glad you could come tonight,” the Earl of Pratt said, launching into a great speech about the dinner that had been prepared for them. Catarina took part, oohing and aahing at the appropriate moments and saying how delicious it all sounded.

“Goodness, Father, are you still singing the praises of all our food tonight?”  
Another voice joined them.

*Wait, that voice.*

Jacob could have been back in that corridor. It was the same sultry and husky tone that he’d heard before. Behind Lady Bridget, another lady entered the hallway, evidently her younger sister.

“We’ll be worshipping the dinner rather than eating it at this rate,” the lady said, prompting Lady Bridget to smile fully for the first time in Jacob’s presence yet.

His eyes shot toward the lady, for he knew that tone at once and would not mistake it.

*It’s her. It is the lady I kissed in that corridor!*

## CHAPTER 4



Jacob tipped the claret glass back to his lips, taking something of a rather large gulp, though fortunately no one seemed to be paying attention. Conversation at the dinner table was mostly taken up by Catarina and the Earl of Pratt. On more than one occasion they both attempted to persuade Lady Bridget to talk of herself, though she did very little.

Jacob was far too distracted to talk with any ease, for his eyes kept flicking toward the lady he had now been formally introduced to, Lady Emily.

He couldn't doubt who she was as she sat at the dining table beside him, that exotic and sweet scent with a hint of spices wafting toward him.

*This is very inconvenient!*

He didn't know what to be more frustrated about. Was it the fact that he had already kissed his betrothed's sister, proving what an awful man, he was after all? Or perhaps it was the fact that Lady Emily was very beautiful, much more so than he anticipated from in that corridor? Or maybe it had something to do with how she plainly did not recognize him. She looked through him,

rather than at him, and scarcely made conversation with him at all.

*She does not recognize my voice.*

He looked at her as the others talked, his eyes appraising her. The blonde hair was startling in its paleness, curled beautifully at the side of her cheeks and framing those classical features with the sloping nose and the bold green eyes. So often in the past he'd been attracted to women of different beauty. Her rather classical features had left him dumbstruck.

“Well, Jacob, what do you say?” Catarina called toward him, trying to ensnare him in conversation. He looked at her, blinked, and the blank expression on his face must have shown he had not been paying attention. She cleared her throat and went on, trying to smooth over the awkwardness. “We were talking of Lady Bridget’s love of reading, dearest.”

“Ah, yes, an excellent hobby,” he forced a smile, uncertain what more he should say. “What reading do you like to do?”

As Lady Bridget discussed her reading habits, Lady Emily excused herself from the table. Jacob was so aware of her leaving he did not concentrate at all on what Lady Bridget had said and it left him feeling even more awful than before.

*How am I supposed to marry someone when I am constantly thinking of their sister? This is unbearable!*

After some minutes of smiling and forcing himself to make stilted conversation, Jacob made a plan. If he could just talk to Lady Emily about what had happened, then perhaps he could brush it under the carpet and forget that kiss.

He excused himself from the table as well and pretended to go in search of the privy. Instead, he found his way to the corridor and thrust a hand into his hair, pulling on the tendrils in stress, then he turned around on the spot, multiple times. He searched the alcoves, the doorways, and the stairs that led above, waiting for Lady Emily's appearance.

She did eventually appear, hurrying down the steps with ease. She didn't notice him, but seemed intent on returning to the dining room, practically hopping down the last of the steps. He moved into the center of the hallway and when she looked up, she walked straight into him.

"Oh, my goodness," she leaped back from him, her hands momentarily finding his chest before she scurried away. That touch reminded him of how her hands had been planted on his chest during their kiss. "God's wounds, you gave me a fright, Your Grace."

"You and I seem to be making a habit of this," he muttered wryly, crossing his arms in front of him as his eyes danced over her.

*She is most inconveniently attractive. This was not the way things were supposed to be!*

"A habit?" she murmured in surprise, and laid a hand to her stomach, as if

trying to quell a feeling there. A fluttering sensation, perhaps? Butterflies? Her cheeks blushed. It was the very thing he had been missing in Lady Bridget's face. When her eyes danced over him, he smiled, recognizing she was attracted at once. He quirked his eyebrows at her, and she returned to look him in the eye, clearing her throat and plainly intending to ignore how she had just looked at him. "What do you mean?"

"Well, I can see you do not recognize me."

"Recognize you? That is because we have not met before, Your Grace." She laughed and walked around him, evidently giving him a wide berth. She intended to return to the dining room, and from her pace, she wished to do it as fast as she could.

He let her take two steps past him before he said the very words that he knew would bring back that night.

"I suppose you are a lady of the ton then, after all." He made his tone huskier as well.

Abruptly, she fell still in the middle of the hall rug. Facing away from him, she froze, as solid as one of the marble busts on the pedestals that lined each side of the hallway.

He chuckled, his humor escaping him as she staunchly refused to turn and look at him.

“Well, the illusion could only last for that night, I suppose,” he went on.

Now, she flung herself around, spinning on her heel. She looked in danger of tripping on the rug beneath her, but managed to stay standing, her lips parted as she stared.

“Ah, remember me now?” he said with some triumph, raising his eyebrows high as he walked toward her.

“You stalk like you’re a hunter, Your Grace.” She backed up an inch and he froze.

“No hunter,” he said, shaking his head. “You and I were something else to one another in that corridor.”

“Shh!” She waved her hands madly and looked around the corridor, clearly fearful of discovery. “Oh, my goodness, this is bad, bad indeed.”

“An understatement,” he muttered, returning to folding his arms. “Imagine my alarm walking into this house tonight. I have come to meet my betrothed and her sister—”

“I know, you do not need to spell it out.” She stepped toward him, waving her arms for him to be quiet again. She came so near that the exotic scent wafted nearer. He couldn’t help smirking at that proximity.

*There is that heat again.*

“You needed reminding a few minutes ago,” he said simply. “Part of me thought perhaps you had not only forgotten meeting me but what passed between us.”

“Heavens! Where are your manners? We should not be talking about that.” She blushed bright red and then hid her face in her hands.

“My manners? There were two people there that night in that corridor, My Lady. You and me. Two people, two people flirting, and two people who ki —”

“That’s enough.” She looked up sharply from her hands, hissing in her whispered tone. “I do not need you repeating exactly what we did. What if someone hears?”

“I cannot believe you didn’t recognize me.” He shook his head, laughing, though there was no real humor in it, more frustration and anger. She was equally irked, glaring at him.

“Well, that’s what happens in dark corridors.”

“I knew your voice. I knew it at once,” he reminded her. She jerked her head back a little, a trace of humor in her expression though it did not last long. “Yet you did not recognize mine.”

“It wasn’t as deep as you’re now making it.”

“Maybe it becomes deeper when flirting.”

“This is not flirting.” She stepped toward him again. Despite her insistence, she came very close. He pointedly looked down at the little gap there was now between them. “This is arguing!”

“Then do not come so close, My Lady. You remind me of things I should not be thinking about.”

“Oh, no wonder you are a known rake.” She backed up from him, waving a hand in the air once more, but she did not return to the dining room, not yet, clearly too flustered. She turned in a circle, her hands over her cheeks. “Is that what you do with all ladies?”

“Kiss in dark corridors? Sometimes.”

“You *dance* with them too?” she said sardonically and lifted her head.

“It’s been known.” He didn’t deny it, for what would be the point? She was a woman who knew things, that were plain; certainly no complete innocent from the way she had kissed him that night.

*Why does that thrill me?*

He longed to kiss her again, to push the boundaries and know more of what she had done before, perhaps introduce her to things she did not know.

*What is wrong with me?*

“That does not matter, none of it.” He shook his head sharply. “I am betrothed to your sister now.”

“Some betrothal! When you were supposed to be meeting her, you escaped her and you...” She gestured to herself, blushed, then tipped her head to the heavens. “Oh, good Lord, what I have done. It is inexcusable.”

“You were simply mischievous, My Lady. Rebellious.”

“With my sister’s betrothed!”

“Neither of us knew it at the time.”

“Then you should have found a way to warn me sooner.”

“I did not know.” He was the one to close the distance between them this time. This argument was getting increasingly out of hand, and they ran the risk of someone overhearing the two of them. He stopped in front of her, noting the way her eyes raked over him again. “And do not keep looking at

me like that if you wish me to desist thinking of what passed in that corridor.”

“You see things in my eyes that are not there. I am looking at you with disdain.”

“Disdain? Pah!” he scoffed. “I know what the expression was. It was far from disdain.”

“One kiss does not mean you know everything about me,” she said hurriedly, sizing up to him. She was smaller than him, curvaceous and alluring but the way she challenged him, her hands on her hips and standing tall as if trying to challenge his height made her even more alluring still. “This is pure disdain.” She nodded at him. “My poor sister, betrothed to a rake that was kissing another when he should have been meeting her and praising the ground she walks on.”

“Yes, yes, I know. I’m a cad, an awful human being, everything.” Then he smiled, remembering all that had passed that night. “Yet I am not the only one who has made an error here. You kissed me back, Lady Emily. Do not forget that.”

Her eyes flicked down to look at his lips. The moment she made the movement, his stomach tightened. He wanted that kiss again, but he wished to be bolder now, to reach for her gown, those curves, to tip back that chin and explore the perfectly angled neck.

*What is wrong with me!?*

She must have realized at the same time that they were staring at one another, breathing heavily.

“Oh! This is awful.” She backed up, hurrying away. “We shall never speak of this again, Your Grace. Never. You understand? It did not happen!”

“Watch for the...” He was too slow, and she tripped on the edge of the rug. He reached for her to steady her, his hand gripping her arm. She brushed him off, nearly falling flat on her face in the movement, though she plainly hardly cared, then she stalked off, heading back to the dining room. “It never happened, eh?” he murmured into the emptiness after she left. “I’m not sure I can pretend that.”



Emily stared through the window, watching the Duke of Thorne’s carriage leave. Repeatedly, she wrung her hands together, fidgeting, not knowing what to do with herself. All evening a heat had overtaken her body, one she could not quell.

Through the window, she watched as the Duke of Thorne paused by the door of his carriage, offering a hand to his mother who he helped inside, then he looked back, his eyes finding Emily’s through the window.

*Do not look at me like that. Better yet never look at me again!*

He was an attractive man indeed. That fact meant everything made sense—why he was such a rake, and why he had been so adept at flirting with her in

that dark corridor.

The rich dark brown hair that curled around his ears, effortlessly defying the fashion of the day yet suited his features. He was tall, well-built with strong shoulders and shockingly bright blue eyes that had the habit of pinning Emily to the spot. The strong jawline was a contrast to the slightness of his nose and the fairness of his other features. All in all, he was as well made as a painted face, adoringly created by an artist.

He continued to look at her through that glass, reminding Emily of the awkwardness throughout dinner. Sat beside one another, they had refused to make conversation with each other, managing only to talk to Bridget.

“Emily?”

“Oh.” Emily swung round with her hand on her heart, feeling it jolt in her chest as Bridget reached her side. There was a smile of humor in Bridget’s features as she stopped beside her. “You made me jump.”

“Almost out of your skin, it seems.” Bridget stopped and looked through the window too, just as the Duke of Thorne stepped into the carriage and left.

As the coach pulled down the driveway, a huge sigh of relief escaped Emily. She leaned on the window frame, keeping herself standing straight.

*Goodness, Rachel was right. One of these days, my rebellious nature was bound to get me in trouble. No more so than now!*

“What did you think of the Duke’s company?” Emily asked, clearing her throat and trying to sound a little more like her normal self.

“Well enough. He was pleasant, but I do not know him, so I do not feel able to judge his character, not yet.” She shook her head.

“Hmm.” Emily could have happily told her sister why the Duke of Thorne was not a man to be trusted, but she feared what Bridget would say. Would she be furious? Surely! Would she demand that Emily marry the Duke instead? God, Emily hoped not. The safest thing seemed to be to say nothing for the present time.

“You were unusually quiet through dinner,” Bridget said, looking away from the drive and the retreating carriage, turning her focus on Emily.

“A stomachache,” Emily lied, rubbing her stomach. “That is all.”

“I see.” Bridget looked between Emily and the coach, for Emily hadn’t yet taken her eyes off it.

*This could not be worse!*

When she’d realized who the Duke of Thorne was, she hadn’t known whether to feel heat, recalling that kiss, or fury.

*Fury. I should definitely be feeling fury!*

“So, you do not know if you like him yet or not?” Emily asked, turning her back on the coach and fixing her gaze on Bridget. “I would urge caution.”

“You keep doing so.”

“I just wish you to be happy.”

“I know,” Bridget smiled softly. “I will be glad to be led by your advice. So, tell me, sister, what did you think of the Duke of Thorne?”

“Oh, I...” Emily trailed off and turned, looking out to the drive again. She caught a glimmer of the carriage turning at the end of the drive in the moonlight, then it was gone, disappearing into the darkness. “I didn’t like him; not at all, I’m afraid.”

“Really?” Bridget seemed most surprised. She perched on the edge of the windowsill, smiling.

“Why do you smile?” Emily asked tightly.

“I just thought that perhaps you did like the Duke. Come, Emily, you and I both know you are one for a handsome face, and I am hardly made of stone.” Bridget laughed at the idea. “He is indeed handsome.”

“Handsome? You play it down,” Emily laughed, then realized what she had done. “Looks are not all that beguiles in a man, and yes, though he may be fair of face, my objections to him as your suitor are not because of his looks. I do not think he deserves you.”

*Now more than ever before.*

It didn't seem to matter that Emily had loved that kiss with him, and the argument they had shared that evening had certainly had a thrill to it. Any man who would be kissing *her* when he should have been meeting Bridget did not deserve her.

*She deserves someone so much better.*

“I think you should be wary, sister, that is all,” Emily whispered, softening her voice.

“Strange.” Bridget stood off the windowsill, that knowing smile returning. “For a minute or two tonight, I was certain that you did in fact like him.”

“What do you mean?” Emily asked, her body flinching.

“There was a moment as the dessert wine was poured tonight where you and the Duke stared at one another. It was almost as if no one else was in the room.” Bridget raised an eyebrow.

“Pa!” Emily laughed loudly. “What nonsense, you are seeing things, sister.” She laughed even louder, until it sounded completely ridiculous, even to her own ears. “No indeed, I was merely looking at him and trying to judge if he was good enough for you. In conclusion, he is not.”

Emily turned and walked away; her body still heated as she thought of that look.

*Good Lord, Bridget saw that look.*

She had noticed it too, and the Duke of Thorne had stared at her over the rim of his wine glass, without blinking, those intense blue eyes.

*What did that look even mean?*

## CHAPTER 5



“*T*oday, everything will be as it should be,” Jacob spoke to himself as he walked into Almack’s Assembly Rooms. His mother was not accompanying him tonight, for she had said she wished Jacob to spend time alone with his betrothed, so they could get to know one another properly.

*That means forgetting her sister.*

Jacob was completely resolved to forget Lady Emily and think only of Lady Bridget. He would not be defying his mother’s promise now, not when he had already turned thirty. He intended to see it through.

Striding into the assembly rooms, he soon saw a face he recognized well. Seth was standing in a corner, talking sweetly with a young lady who seemed intent on giving him her attention. When Jacob caught his eye, Seth made his excuses to the lady and hurried over.

“Thank God you are finally here.” Seth flicked his head, the dark blond hair dancing away from his forehead. “This assembly has been rather dull.”

“You seemed to be enjoying it,” Jacob nodded at the young lady.

“You know our rules.” Seth winked and laughed. “Fun to flirt with, but we would not compromise a lady’s reputation now, would we?”

“No, indeed.” At the words, a face shot into his mind. He thought of Lady Emily and the way he had kissed her in that dark corridor.

*Maybe I’ve bent the rules a little.*

“Speaking of dull times, I’ve got a story to entertain you.” Jacob took his friend’s shoulder and steered him to a corner. He and Seth knew each other’s secrets. There was scarcely a thing they did not tell one another, so Seth knew all about Jacob’s betrothal to Lady Bridget.

Once they were secluded, both with brandies in their hands and hiding in a corner, he revealed his misdemeanor with Lady Emily. Unfortunately, it had the opposite reaction from what he intended. Seth tipped back his head and roared with laughter.

“Remind me again why you’re my friend,” Jacob muttered darkly.

“Because you and I are so alike,” Seth reminded him and chinked their brandy glasses together. “To breaking the rules, eh?”

“I can’t drink to that. Not now.” Jacob put the brandy glass down on a ledge nearby. “Seth, can’t you see the mess I have gotten myself into here?”

“What does it matter if you have resolved to forget what passed between you and Lady Emily? You can apologize to her and move on,” Seth said, with surprising calmness. “The only thing that would be stopping you is a suggestion that in fact you do not wish to forget what passed between you, eh?”

Jacob didn’t reply. Suddenly, he wanted that brandy glass back and reached for it again.

“I thought as much.”

“Seth, this is not helping.”

“Oh, I think I’m a great help to you,” Seth smiled, making the cropped beard on his chin shift. “I’m helping you see that your misdemeanor might not be as easy to brush under a rug as you think.”

“I thought friends were supposed to tell each other such ridiculous pleasantries as ‘everything will be all right,’” he muttered as he sipped his brandy.

“Some friends, but true friends are honest,” Seth said, that smile becoming strangely somber. “If you cannot forget it, Jacob, then there must be a reason for it.”

Jacob looked up, angered by the words. The only reason he was struggling to forget it was the fact that the kiss had been so good. The moment had been a thrill, yes, but ordinarily he would have been able to forget it. Lady Emily being Lady Bridget's sister was the thing that made her impossible to forget.

"Time to straighten your face and look more serious, Jacob," Seth clapped him on the shoulder. "Your future brother-in-law is coming this way."

Jacob looked around as Daniel Warren, the Duke of Elbridge, approached. They'd moved in the same circles for some time, and though they had been distant friends, they'd not been excessively close. Jacob had put it down to the fact that the Duke of Elbridge had spent much of his adult life as a soldier. They hadn't had the time to become any closer as friends.

"Your Grace, how are you?" The Duke stopped at his side and bowed. "Lord Ramsbury, I didn't see you there. You drunk already?" he teased knowingly and gestured at the glass in Seth's hand.

"Give me another and I shall be," Seth said with a laugh. "How does married life suit you, Your Grace?"

"Surprisingly well." It seemed to be an honest answer, one that Jacob noticed from the twitch of the Duke's lips and the way he smiled. "Though I think my wife will be glad when our son starts sleeping through the whole night."

"Of course, you are a father now," Jacob smiled at the thought, thinking of children.

*I promised to have children, and I will.*

It was hardly unusual for him to imagine what those children would be like, but he was always terrified of becoming too attached. Who knew what the future held, and what would become of them all. After all, his father had died when he was just thirty-five years of age. Jacob had barely had the chance to know his father.

“I am,” the Duke of Elbridge smiled warmly, “and if he grows up with my wife’s mind rather than my own, then he will be fortunate indeed. Speaking of which,” the Duke paused and leaned toward Jacob, “my wife and her sisters are waiting on your company, I believe.” He nodded across the assembly rooms.

Jacob followed that gesture, looking toward the ladies. He only saw the Duchess of Elbridge and Lady Bridget, but Lady Emily was nowhere to be seen. He found himself searching for her, in vain.

“Do not leave your betrothed waiting too long,” the Duke said encouragingly then patted him on the shoulder.

“I’ll be there in a minute.” Jacob forced a smile. As the Duke turned and walked away, the smile slipped, and Jacob turned to face his good friend. “I’m appalling, aren’t I?”

Seth sniggered, not quite agreeing with or denying that statement.

“You were looking for the sister, were you not?” Seth said, plainly having seen what Jacob had done.

“No more of this.” Jacob looked away and put down his glass, making up his mind. He had to go and see Lady Bridget, he had to.

*That kiss with Lady Emily must be forgotten.*

“Good luck,” Seth whispered before Jacob left and headed straight to Lady Bridget.

He greeted the ladies warmly and invited Lady Bridget to dance. The whole way through the dance, not a word was passed between them, nothing of the kind, and there were merely occasional polite smiles. Without a single spark of attraction between them, Jacob struggled.

“Well, I apologize I am not a finer dancer,” Jacob said in full honesty to Lady Bridget as they stepped off the floor and he led her away. “I would have liked to have seen you smile fully, My Lady.”

“I am the one who should apologize. For some reason, I find myself out of sorts.” Lady Bridget avoided looking him in the eye. “If you would excuse me for a minute, I will return soon.” She curtsied and swiftly left him. Her presence was like a passing breeze. She was gone, leaving no other mark of having been there.

He was beginning to suspect his presence was just as dull to her.

“We are not a good match,” Jacob confessed aloud, though no one else was around to hear him.

Despite his determination not to look for Lady Emily, he did regardless. At last, he caught sight of her across the room. Her blonde hair was curled exquisitely once more, and she had worn a dark red gown. It may not have been the height of fashion, but she made it work indeed and more than one gentleman looked toward her, including Lord Gilchrist, who seemed to be following her.

Lady Emily took evasive action and spilled a glass of wine on Lord Gilchrist’s shoes. Jacob hid his laughter behind a hand, watching as Lady Emily dropped a handkerchief, pretending to assist Lord Gilchrist with the mess, whereas she really was providing a distraction for her escape. As Lord Gilchrist bent down to use the handkerchief to mop up the mess, Lady Emily hurried for a door in the ballroom that led outside into the garden.

Without thinking much of what he was doing, Jacob followed her.

*I have to talk to her again.*

He slipped out, being careful to look around over his shoulder, and ensure no one noticed him leave. Striding out across the garden, he caught sight of a group of ladies standing by the edge of a patio. Like gagging geese, they tittered and gossiped, laughing behind the fans they raised to their lips.

Lady Emily was not amongst them, but he caught sight of the silk of her red gown slipping between two tall, towering statues that guarded a path deeper into the garden.

Jacob was careful to make sure none of the gossiping ladies watched him, then he took off in pursuit of Lady Emily. The gravel path grew thinner, then bent around a corner of yew bushes and opened out into a small courtyard. On either end were two marble benches and in the middle was a short statue of a cherubim figure, holding onto a bow and arrow that was pointed at the sky.

“Are you following me?” Lady Emily’s voice made him spin around.



Emily could not believe the Duke of Thorne had dared to follow her, yet he stood unashamedly in this courtyard, a single brown eyebrow raised as he looked at her. When his eyes danced over her, her stomach knotted. She tried not to like that look.

*It seems my body is betraying my mind.*

In an effort to put distance between them, she walked forward from the shadows of the courtyard, looking at him warily, then dropped down onto one of the two benches.

“Perhaps,” The Duke of Thorne answered her. His smile was momentary. Rather than following her, he sat down on the other one, so that they stared at each other, over the statue. “You and I need to talk.”

“Why do we?” She stiffened, her gaze darkening. “Forgive me, Your Grace, but I would have thought after what passed you would agree it is best that we do not talk at all. We should certainly not be alone.” She gestured to how alone they were in this courtyard.

*Why am I not running back to the ballroom?*

“You could leave and return.” He nodded at the path then leaned forward and rested his elbows on his knees, something of a knowing smile in his expression. “Yet you are not going anywhere.”

“Lord Gilchrist is back there,” she said exasperatedly.

“You avoided him quite expertly just now. Smooth indeed.”

“Evidently not or I would not be hiding in a garden in *your* company.” She spoke in challenge, hoping that she would drive him away.

*The further away from the Duke of Thorne I stay, the better. He is to marry Bridget!*

“Hmm, something tells me you do not dislike my company half so much as you pretend to.” That smirk of satisfaction was there again. She groaned at his expression and looked away.

“Please leave,” she begged.

“I cannot. We must talk.”

“About what?”

“About your sister.” His words captured her attention now, and she looked back at him, over the arrow the statue held.

“You do not deserve her.” Emily found the words slipping from her lips. Slowly, she stood. “My sister has the most benevolent heart in this world.”

“I daresay you’re right.” He met her gaze, though he didn’t stand, giving her the superior height. “I shall break off the betrothal.”

“Good!” Emily said, then spun around in a perfect circle. “Wait, what did you say?”

“I shall break it off.” He shrugged, as if it was no great matter. “I was determined to marry, Lady Emily, but even I can see that what I have done already is a betrayal of her trust.”

“Beyond that. It was abominable!” Emily rounded the cherubim and came face to face with the Duke, standing before him. “I would never let my sister marry a man that was off kissing another when he should have been meeting her.”

“I didn’t even know her.” He suddenly matched her tone in sharpness, and he stood, towering over her with his greater height. “I didn’t know you, nor her, and I was marrying purely for convenience. So, what I choose to do in my spare time outside of my marriage is hardly any business of yours, Lady Emily.”

“Not my business!?” she spluttered as he walked away from her, rounding the bench. Emily followed him, uncertain why she did it, but she couldn’t stand him turning his back on her. “That was my sister you were betraying, and with me, and yet it is not my business? Do you realize how mad that sounds? You were to marry her.”

“It was intended as a marriage of convenience.” He turned sharply back to face her. “I do not ever intend to marry for love or give my heart to any woman, so no, I hardly thought of hearts when agreeing to marry your sister.”

“Cold and callous indeed.”

“That is hardly cold, but practical.” He stood tall over her once again. Everything in Emily knew she should be retreating, but she could not. She was too angry, too full of fury for him. “Not everyone marries because of devotion, Lady Emily. You must know that.”

“My sister deserves respect, respect that she evidently is not going to get from you.”

“What more do you want from me?” He held his arms open wide. “I have just agreed to break off the betrothal from her.”

“Good.”

“Fine.”

“Then our business is at an end,” Emily said sharply, moving her hands to cross her arms over her chest. “You have no reason to be out here anymore, and you shall leave me to my peace.”

“Shall I?” he asked, his eyebrows arching once more.

“Yes!”

They both fell silent, staring at one another, mirroring each other’s positions with their arms folded.

*Say something, you fool!*

Yet Emily merely continued to stare, aggravated that he was so handsome even when he was angry. She told herself she hated him, yes, that’s what this feeling was. After all, it was the only thing that made sense.

“I wish to be alone,” she broke the silence between them eventually.

“Then go and find your own peaceful spot.”

“I was here first!”

“Peaceful indeed, eh?” he teased her sardonically, that challenging look still in his eyes. “Look, you have what you wanted from me, Lady Emily, so you can be the one to leave. I will not marry your sister.”

“You said it was to be a marriage of convenience.”

“Yes, are we now to repeat the whole of our argument? Is that what you want from me?” he asked, holding his arms out once more.

“You said you could never marry with your heart.” She spoke his words back to him, quickly, noting there seemed to be something he was avoiding speaking of.

“Yes.” He said no more.

“Why not?”

“What?”

“Why would you never marry the choice of your own heart, Your Grace?” she asked. When he said nothing, but continued to stare back at her, the air grew tense between them. She felt the corner of her lips turning up into the smallest of smiles. “Have I alighted on a secret?”

“No.” He took a step toward her, coming so close that they were almost as near as they had been the night they kissed. It would have been easy to kiss him now, to transgress once again, but she held herself back, knowing how awful a betrayal that would have been. “Most marriages are for convenience. They are not what it says in the romantic books you no doubt are fond of reading—”

“You are fond of disparaging, it seems.”

“I speak the truth. I am practical,” he said sharply. “I give myself to many women, not just one.”

“Oh, and those women are so fortunate, are they not?” she said with full sarcasm, finding her hatred building. “To have a minute of your time. Oh! Fortunate us!” She threw her hands into the air as if she was praising God.

“You seemed to enjoy my time the other night—”

“We agreed not to speak of that again.” Emily raised a hand, stopping him before he said anymore.

They had been arguing so much that Emily hadn't noticed the snap of a twig underfoot, though she registered the Duke looked away.

"Shh," he said.

"I will not be silenced like a lapdog!"

"Emily!" Another voice joined them suddenly, the voice booming.

Emily looked around, her eyes darting to the bearer of that voice. Standing at the entrance to the courtyard was Daniel. He looked between them, his eyes sharp and unblinking.

*Oh no... we are discovered, alone and arguing, unchaperoned!*

"Your Grace," the Duke of Thorne began.

"Do not say a word," Daniel's voice was deathly dark as he spoke between gritted teeth. Behind him, two more appeared in the courtyard, a few steps behind. It was Rachel and Bridget.

The way they both looked at Emily left her pinned to the spot, longing for the patio to open up beneath her and swallow her whole. Rachel's frown was unlike anything Emily had ever seen before and Bridget's expression was completely unreadable.

*God's wounds. What will my sisters think of me now?*

## CHAPTER 6



“Nothing happened.” The words were out of Emily’s mouth before she could think much of them.

The way she and the Duke of Thorne had stood so close together implied the opposite. The Duke backed up from her, stumbling and sitting down on the bench he’d vacated just minutes before. He hung his head forward in his hands, his heavy sigh filling the air between them all.

Guilt raged within Emily. She tried to swallow, but her mouth was suddenly dry. She looked at Daniel and Rachel, feeling their palpable disappointment. Emily would have happily reminded them of their own meeting in a garden that had led to their marriage, but now was not the time.

Rachel’s glare became so strong that Emily shifted, her hands fidgeting as she stared at her sister in the moonlight.

“I’ll tell you later,” she managed to mouth to Rachel, who clearly found it was not enough. She shook her head and stepped forward, reaching her husband’s side.

“An explanation is in order. Now,” she commanded. There was such strength in her tone that the Duke of Thorne looked up from the cover of his hands.

“My wife is right.” Daniel shifted his hands to his hips.

“Daniel, I —” Emily began but Daniel matched his wife’s glare.

“Not now, Emily.” He looked back at the Duke of Thorne, clearly demanding some sort of explanation from him.

“Nothing happened,” the Duke seconded Emily’s words. “We were merely talking. Arguing, actually.”

“Alone in a garden,” Daniel said pointedly. “You are no fool. Hence you have managed to avoid complete scandal for years despite your reputation.”

“I am speaking the truth.” The Duke lifted his head and looked at Bridget. “I know I have hardly covered myself in glory here, but Lady Bridget, believe me. We were just arguing.”

“It’s true, Bridget.” Emily looked at Bridget but met a gaze that was still as unreadable as before. Bridget had barely blinked, but beyond that, Emily could tell nothing. She didn’t fidget or shift her feet, but stared forward, as still as the cherubim statue that stood between them.

A strong curse escaped Daniel's lips, one so violent that Rachel offered him a censured look, one he ignored.

"Oh, come on. I'm hardly going to be dancing for joy right now, am I?" Daniel challenged his wife. "Had anyone but us seen them..."

"I know." Rachel agreed with him. "Fortunately, we are the only ones that have seen them out here together. No one else needs to know of it."

Emily backed up, hurrying around the cherubim statue with her hands over her mouth as she realized the full implications of what had passed. Had she and the Duke of Thorne been seen out here by anyone else, then they could have found themselves in a hasty marriage. Clearly, her family now hoped to avoid that eventuality.

"Bridget?" Daniel moved to her side. "You are content for the betrothal between you and the Duke to be called off?"

"Most content," Bridget said tightly. Emily looked at her sister again, trying to put as much apology as she could in her gaze, but Bridget didn't return that look. She stared elsewhere instead.

"Your Grace?" Daniel appealed to the Duke of Thorne who nodded.

"Yes, but I do not wish there to be a scandal. For Bridget's sake," the Duke said, motioning toward Bridget who flinched at that hand.

“And Emily’s,” Rachel pointed out, her voice deep. Emily now shifted her focus to Rachel, finding herself on the end of such a censoring glare that her spine crumpled. She dropped down onto the other stone bench, her body feeling strangely cold.

“Then this is what we shall do,” Daniel stepped forward, taking control of the situation. “We’ll explain to Lord Pratt and your mother, Your Grace, that you have both decided on reflection upon meeting one another that though you respect one another...” he paused.

“Some respect,” Rachel murmured.

“Yes, thank you,” Daniel said wryly to his wife, then continued with his original statement. “That you two are not suited to one another. We’ll explain it to friends and simply say that you decided to be friends. With a little luck, the scandal sheet writers will accept it for what it is, and they won’t go hunting for any hint of scandal. Is that agreed?”

Bridget was already nodding, clearly eager for this meeting to be over as hurriedly as possible. The Duke of Thorne stood and nodded too.

“May I extend my apologies to Lady Bridget?” He asked for permission. Daniel waved a hand, urging him forward, but unsurprisingly, Rachel stood in the way and blocked his path to her. “Ah...”

“I protect my sisters with ferocity, Your Grace.” Rachel held her own, her chin lifted and her presence formidable. Not for the first time Emily was reminded just how strong her sister was, though at that moment, her visible

strength made Emily feel weaker still. Her whole body crumpled on the bench, and she laid a hand beside her, trying to keep herself in some semblance of an upright position. “You can say your apologies from here, but do not think I am letting you near my sister again.”

“That is understandable.” The Duke of Thorne’s eyes flicked to Bridget over Rachel’s shoulder. “I am truly sorry, Lady Bridget. I know none of our conversations have been as smooth or as easy as we both would have liked, but believe me when I say, I had not wished it to end like this.”

“I appreciate your honesty.” Bridget managed the smallest of polite smiles and bowed her head in acknowledgment of his words.

“I shall take my leave then.” The Duke of Thorne made ready to leave when Rachel moved in his way again. “Or not?”

“Certainly not.” She shook her head.

“There is another matter here to discuss.” Daniel moved to stand beside his wife and folded his arms, then he looked in Emily’s direction.

She flinched at the strength in that stare. Everyone turned to gaze at her, in much the same way. She felt hated all at once and looked down at her hand clutching the bench.

*What sort of sister am I?*

She kept wondering about the different ways she should have acted. Should she have told Bridget the moment she realized? No. That was not the answer. Rachel's disapproval was enough to tell Emily everything she had done wrong.

*It was my mischief in the first place. I never should have gone into that corridor and never should have kissed the Duke of Thorne.*

"What exactly was happening out here?" Daniel asked, his voice raising a notch in irritation.

"Shh," Bridget reminded him, glancing away down one of the pathways.

"I may have protected one sister-in-law from your ways, but clearly have not protected the other." The sharpness in Daniel's tone earned Emily's attention and she looked up from the bench. "What exactly passed between you and Emily?"

"Nothing," the Duke of Thorne insisted. "She escaped Lord Gilchrist's rather forward attentions and came out here. I wished to speak to her so followed, and we ended up arguing. That is the truth of the matter."

"You wished to speak?" Rachel said, raising her eyebrows. "About what?"

"Do not tell us some guff about your betrothal to Bridget," Daniel added. "I thought you a good man, Your Grace."

“You and I have known each other for many years,” the Duke said, the words escaping him in a rush. “You know I am no saint, but even I am not the foul man you suspect me of being right now. Since I met Lady Bridget, I have pursued no other. That is the honest truth.”

Emily hung her head, thinking of that moment *before* he had met Bridget. He’d been wayward then, and she’d been enticed by him.

“Then what passed between the two of you?” Daniel asked, his questions relentless.

“Nothing!” The Duke of Thorne insisted so loudly that she looked up, watching him closely. He was red in the face, that pallor visible in the moonlight as he waved his hands, rather manically. “There is nothing between Lady Emily and I, nothing at all beyond cold, hard stares, and a disagreement.”

*Nothing.*

Emily felt wounded, as if she had been kicked in the gut. She moved to her feet, restless, uncertain why the idea of him dismissing any connection between them hurt her so. It shouldn’t have hurt. She was ready to despise him a few minutes ago. What was wrong with her?

“Now, I have said my piece.” The Duke sighed. “I will do as you ask and explain the cancellation of the betrothal, but I am no great monster. Please, believe that.” The Duke looked between Daniel and Rachel, but he got no answer.

In the end, Daniel nodded for him to take his leave down the garden path. He stepped around the pair and walked away, leaving them alone in the courtyard.

Emily stared after the Duke, uncertain why it disappointed her when he did not look back at her.

“Bridget,” Emily murmured, striding toward her sister.

“Later.” Rachel intercepted Emily and took her arm. “We’re leaving. Now.”



“What happened?” Seth strode away from the lady he had been speaking to and hurried to Jacob’s side.

“Where’s that brandy? I need another.”

“Take this. I haven’t drunk from it yet.” He pushed his own brandy glass into Jacob’s hands. Jacob downed it. “Woah...” Seth followed this with a whistle. “I’ve seen you in scrapes before, but I’ve never seen you so *jittery*.”

Jacob wiped his top lip with the sleeve of his jacket, aware that he’d nearly spilled half of the brandy over his face in his effort to drink it.

“I’m a fool. No, not just that. A prize...” He used such a strong curse that a lady nearby heard it and gasped, turning to face him.

“Forgive him,” Seth adopted an easy smile, but took Jacob’s arm rather sharply. “A touch of a fever, would you excuse us?” He dragged Jacob to the door of the assembly rooms. “Something tells me it is time for us to leave.”

“Most definitely.” Jacob put the glass down on a table as they hurried to the side of the assembly rooms. He was in such a rush to leave that he didn’t stop to pick up his frock coat from the doorman but jumped down the front step and hurried to the carriage that awaited him in the street. Seth retrieved the coats instead and caught up with him on the road.

It was just starting to rain, a light drizzle that came down and wet him through, despite its lightness. Seth passed him the coat, but he made no effort to put it on. He merely pushed back the damp hair from his forehead.

“Tell me all,” Seth said and waved a hand at Jacob’s carriage. They both got inside where Jacob revealed being caught in the garden alone with Emily. It didn’t matter that they had not transgressed that night. The Duke of Elbridge and his wife had looked at him with equal fury, as if he had done so.

“What of your betrothed?”

“We are no longer betrothed.” Jacob shook his head as the carriage tossed them from side to side. “I couldn’t even read her expression. That poor lady. How she must despise me. That is not something I intended, Seth. Never.”

“I know.” Seth nodded. “There’s a reason why you always stuck to theatre and opera girls, even shop ladies, is there not? They knew you never intended to offer more than a few nights’ company. You rather feared this eventuality, yes?”

“Yes,” Jacob said tightly. He’d done the very thing he’d hoped not to do. He’d promised marriage and hurt a woman. “I never thought I was this much of a careless, heartless man. Clearly, I am.”

“Are you?” Seth said, sitting back and tapping his head on the wall of the carriage.

“Have you not been listening to everything I have been saying?”

“I was just wondering why you followed Lady Emily out this evening. For I do not believe you intended to go and seduce her, did you?”

“No, of course I didn’t. I just...” He trailed off, watching as Seth smiled a little. Now, he realized what Seth was hinting at. “I do not like Lady Emily, Seth.”

“You kissed her.”

“That was one night’s transgression.”

“And couldn’t stay away even when you knew you should.” Seth’s plain way

of speaking frustrated Jacob now. He tossed the wet frock coat onto the floor of the carriage between them. “Drawn to her, eh?”

“Those are not the words I would use.”

“Fair enough. Those are the words I will just think then.”



“Out with it. All of it.” Rachel flicked her fingers at Emily and sat beside her on the chaise longue in her bedchamber.

Emily only had eyes for Bridget at that moment. Her sister sat at the end of the bed on a coffer, plaiting her long dark hair. Both she and Emily had undressed from their fine gowns into their night clothes, ready to retire, but it seemed Rachel was not leaving any time soon.

In a distant part of the house, Daniel was talking to their father. They knew from the promises Daniel had made in the carriage on their return that he did not intend to tell Edward everything that had truly passed that night. He sought simply to explain an end to the betrothal by drawing the conclusion that Bridget and the Duke of Thorne were not suited.

“Bridget, please look at me,” Emily begged, her hands falling still on top of the nightgown in her lap. Bridget looked up from where she had been plaiting her hair.

“In case you have not noticed, Emily, I am hardly in the throes of heartbreak,

am I?” Bridget asked. “My pride is wounded, certainly, but it is nothing more than that. And pride is for fools anyway, who needs it?”

“You have the best heart I know,” Emily whispered.

Rachel flicked her fingers at Emily again, making her flinch.

“See? When you praise our sister so much, it baffles me that you would willingly be alone with the gentleman that she was going to marry.” Rachel’s expression was unhindered by its anger.

“Hate me for it. I hate myself too,” Emily said in a rush. “I cannot explain it, no more than you can.”

“You certainly can explain something.” Rachel sat forward, unrelenting. “Is what the Duke said true about how you ended up outside tonight?”

“Yes. I thought if I escaped Lord Gilchrist, then I could find a few minutes of peace in the garden. The Duke followed me and we ended up... arguing.”

“Thank God you added that word,” Rachel said tightly. Bridget managed the smallest of smiles.

“I thought she was going to say something else entirely.”

Emily looked at Bridget, startled by her reaction. She had truly thought Bridget would lash out more and certainly be more upset than this.

“Oh please,” Rachel waved a hand at Emily. “A gentleman does not follow a lady outside for the two of them to just spontaneously argue. Something must have led to this.”

“Perhaps,” Emily looked at Bridget again, waiting for her to be done with plaiting her hair.

“Emily!”

“Oh, calm yourself, Mama Rachel, mother bear.” Emily waved a hand at her sister and stood, crossing the room. She moved to Bridget’s side and sat beside her on the coffer. What she had to say was for Bridget, more so than for Rachel. “The first night I met him was the ball when you met.”

“You didn’t say,” Bridget murmured, chewing on her lip.

“Because I did not know it was him. I had no idea that the gentleman I had met that night was the Duke of Thorne.”

“Met?” Rachel queried. “What passed between you? Just conversation?”

“Yes.” Emily lied and avoided looking Rachel in the eye, focusing on Bridget instead. She certainly didn’t want to end up married to the Duke of Thorne

because of this whole mess, so she intended to be artful with the truth. “I will not deny, Bridget, then when I met him, there was an...”

“Go on.” Bridget encouraged her.

“An attraction,” Emily whispered, wishing that Rachel wasn’t in the room with them. Rachel heard it regardless and huffed, sitting back on the chaise longue as she threw her hands at the heavens.

“Well, this is a turn-up for the books.”

“Yes, I know, sister.” Emily’s voice grew sharp as she looked at Rachel. “So often you have warned me that my rebellious nature will get me into trouble, and believe me, I am paying the price for it now, but I did not know who he was.” She turned back to face Bridget. “I am so sorry. The moment I realized it was him, I tried to shut down the attraction. Truly, I did.”

“And he is attracted to you too?” Bridget asked, returning to plait the other half of her hair.

*How is she so calm throughout all of this?*

“Why else does a gentleman follow a lady into a garden?” Rachel asked, not looking up from the chaise longue.

“Shall I remind you of how you and Daniel married?” Emily’s tone grew tart.

“I have explained that a hundred times or more.” Rachel sat up hurriedly now.

“Enough.” Bridget’s voice was calm. She paused with the plait and looked at Emily. “So, he has an attraction for you too?”

“So it would seem.”

“I knew it.” Bridget smiled.

“Yet believe me, it will not be an attraction that matters much to him, not when he is a man of that reputation, wait...” Emily cut herself off and sat taller, staring at her sister in wonder. “Did you just say, you knew it? What!?”

“It was the way you two stared at one another at dinner the other night,” Bridget said with a smile of satisfaction. “Oh, the air crackled! Even I could see it.”

“It is not that strong an attraction. Believe me.”

“Is it not?”

## CHAPTER 7



Emily held tightly to baby Joey as she wandered the garden. The rainfall from the night before had left the ground soaked, with the water creeping up the hem of her gown, but she hardly cared. Joey was comfortable in her arms today, his head resting on her shoulder as he snored in his sleep. She walked back and forth with him, over the same paths, and patted him on the back, soothingly.

At least Joey could not judge her for what she had done. There was something comforting in her nephew's presence this morning, something she longed for, as she glanced back at the house.

Inside, she knew, Daniel was speaking with her father once again. Edward had accepted the explanation of the fallout of the betrothal, with few questions, but evidently Daniel and Rachel had been called back for Edward to discuss other options for Bridget to marry. He clearly feared that scandal may follow Bridget now, as gentlemen might consider her unworthy of marriage.

He often sought Rachel's good opinion and wise advice in life, and it seemed that Daniel had become an increasingly important confidante to him now too. They were in his study with him, talking at great length, and Emily had been

left in charge of Joey.

She hadn't seen Bridget since breakfast that morning.

"May you grow up wiser than your foolish aunt, dear Joey," she said softly, cooing in Joey's ear. "May you be as clever as your parents instead, though they have made their own errors in life. Do not be like me. It is too painful."

She felt the dull ache in her chest constantly, but it came from a myriad of different sources. She was angry at herself for betraying her sister's trust. That mixed with the guilt of being the reason Bridget's betrothal fell apart was enough to make tears spring to her eyes. She kept blinking them away, trying to stop them from falling.

There was another feeling too, lodged deep within her. She tried not to dwell on it, or even examine it in any great detail, but it came back to her.

*The Duke of Thorne denied any connection at all between us last night and did not even look at me as he left. He is a true rake.*

The thought that the kiss they had shared really hadn't affected him in the slightest hurt, even when she knew it should not matter.

"Do you intend to walk out here all day?" Bridget's voice urged Emily to turn around. She found Bridget walking toward her through the garden. "Or have you come walking for Joey's benefit?"

“I feel as if he is the only one that I haven’t wronged,” Emily murmured, holding him tight. “I like his company.”

“You haven’t wronged anyone.”

“Do not be so benevolent, Bridget, please, I could not bear it.”

“Then here, let me try this instead.” Bridget stepped forward and adjusted the cap on Joey’s head, pulling it tighter around his ears. “Come, let us walk further into the garden, away from the puddles you have been treading through. Joey seems to enjoy being in your arms today.”

Emily managed the smallest of smiles and nodded, turning to follow her sister down a paved path as she stepped off the lawn and out of the puddles. They walked a little distance in silence until Emily could not bear it anymore. Each time she glanced at her sister’s expression she saw the same impassivity she had seen the night before.

“I’m so sorry,” Emily whispered.

“You said that many times last night.” Bridget smiled and looked toward her. “You need not say it anymore.”

“I feel as if I do.”

“What exactly do you have to apologize for?” Bridget asked calmly. “Emily,

you met a man at a ball that you were attracted to, a mutual feeling, and you endeavored to think no more about it. Then, when you found him in our house and discovered he was the gentleman that I was to marry, you tried to shut it down. To the point that you and the Duke of Thorne argued in a garden. You both pushed attraction away until it became hatred and threw it at one another.”

“Well... yes.” Emily couldn’t deny that was what had happened. “That doesn’t make it right.”

“It doesn’t make it within your control either,” Bridget said simply and shrugged. “Emily, it was hardly your choice to like the man I was to marry. I can hardly blame you for it. He was handsome, but I felt nothing for him at all.”

“Wait. Nothing?” Emily stalled on the path. She knew before that Bridget had kept saying there was no spark, but she had excused the matter so much as just not knowing the man, Emily hadn’t been certain what to think.

Bridget stopped a few steps ahead of Emily on the path, turning back to face her.

“Nothing.” Bridget shook her head. “He seems able to be polite and nice enough when he wishes to be, and I’d say he was a man that was marrying me out of duty rather than anything else.”

Emily felt sickened, reminded of the way the Duke of Thorne had insisted he was marrying Bridget for the sake of convenience the night before.

“It turns out that is not the sort of man for me after all.” Bridget went on, her tone soft as she stepped back toward Emily.

When Joey made a sound in his sleep, Emily patted his back and Bridget reached forward, adjusting the cap that had become misaligned in their walk once again.

“What kind of sister would I be if I resented you being drawn to a man, Em?” Bridget asked. “No good sister at all.”

“Your kindness is beyond anything anyone else is capable of, sister,” Emily said, a sudden helpless laugh escaping her, though it didn’t last long. “I would not have blamed you for despising me, for attacking me, anything!”

“I have no need to attack you.” Bridget laughed off the idea. “I saw that night when he came for dinner there was something between you. I was prepared for it, so you need not think of me as the wounded individual in all this mess. I can see you have been hurt by all of this, more so than me.”

Emily’s lips parted, startled that Bridget could see the pain she was going through so easily.

“Now, come.” Bridget waved a hand back down the path they had walked down. “If you truly are irked at the way the Duke of Thorne disparaged any hint of a connection between the two of you last night, then I shall endeavor to distract you.”

“You are the best of sisters.”

“Stop praising me so much. You’ll make me vain indeed.” Bridget giggled at the idea. “I have some gifts for Joey. Let us return to the house and give him his gifts once he wakes up.”

“Thank you. I’d like that.” Emily smiled, holding onto her nephew lovingly as they returned to the house. Once they got near, she caught a glimpse of Rachel through one of the windows. She stared out at them, evidently awaiting their return.

Emily halted, her eyes shooting to meet her sister’s gaze through the glass.

“Fear not.” Bridget laid an arm around Emily’s shoulders and steered her forward. “Rachel is not half as disapproving of all of this as you think.”

“Were we not in the same room last night?” Emily asked, remembering the anger in Rachel’s expression. “She’s always said my nature will get me into trouble. I thought mothers were the ones who were always supposed to be right, not sisters that just take on that role.”

“Rachel is hardly ever wrong,” Bridget agreed with a giggle. “Yet she and I spoke for a few minutes this morning. She can see too in the light of day that this mess was not truly of your making. It was accidental.”

*Thank God they know nothing of that kiss.*

Despite their reassurance, the guilt lingered, for Emily knew she had done more than they thought. If it hadn't been for that kiss, then maybe Emily would have felt nothing for the Duke of Thorne when she had met him. Either way, it was impossible to undo the past now.

Their meeting in that dark corridor had bound her to him with that shared, exciting memory. No matter what she did, she could not forget that feeling of heat and passion, just as she could not forget the sadness when he had marched away the night before, staunchly refusing to glance back at her.



“So, are you here to behave tonight?” Seth asked and passed Jacob a glass of brandy.

With a heavy sigh, Jacob took the smallest of sips, fearing just how much the liquor could affect him if he had too much.

“Enough ribbing,” Jacob muttered, earning a deep laugh from Seth. “I’ve had my mother yelling in my ear for the last two days. I do not need you pointing out the error of my ways too.”

“You do not need me to. You know it, regardless. On the contrary, I’m here to distract you.” Seth took his shoulder and steered him around to face the ballroom, so they were no longer looking at the tables stacked high with crystalware.

*Distraction, I need that!*

When Jacob had explained to his mother that he would not be marrying Lady Bridget after all, Catarina had thrown herself into one of her despairs. He'd called for the doctor, fearing how sick she would make herself, but she had refused to see him.

It started with her rearranging everything she could get her hands on in the house, trying to lay it all out perfectly. Whenever Jacob had come near her, she had reminded him of the promise he had made.

*“You are thirty, Jacob. Thirty! Goodness knows what could happen to you after this age. Have you forgotten your father?”*

The image of his father came back to him now, laughing deeply, with true happiness in his smile. It was one of the few memories he had of his father.

His mother had raged at him in her anger and despair for a little longer before she returned to her chamber and locked herself inside. Concerned, Jacob had sent for a local healer woman instead, whom his mother plainly trusted more than the doctor. To his relief, Catarina let the woman into the chamber and was comforted by her presence. He didn't know how long Catarina intended to keep to her chamber, but it was hardly a surprise that she had not come out to the ball tonight.

“Ah, don't look that way.” Seth angled Jacob around, turning him from looking at one side of the room.

“What? Why not?” Jacob asked, stumbling under the strength of Seth steering him away.

“It doesn’t matter.”

“You’re up to something.”

“I am protecting you.”

“I can look after myself,” Jacob said simply then looked at the part of the ballroom Seth had been attempting to steer him away from. “Ah, I see.”

“See? Knew you’d regret it.”

Under the swathes of cloth that had been tied to the ceiling and the chandeliers overhead, a family entered the ballroom, with the candlelight flickering on the jewelry they wore. The Duke of Elbridge and his wife led the way, with the Earl of Pratt beside them.

Behind them stood Lady Bridget and Lady Emily.

*Ah, Lady Emily.*

Jacob watched, unashamedly. The family didn’t appear to notice his gaze, for their heads never once turned in his direction. Instead, the Earl of Pratt led his family across the room to gather drinks, and within minutes, the Duke of Elbridge and his wife took to the dance floor to dance the cotillion, leaving

the sisters quite alone. Soon enough, the Earl of Pratt wandered off too, talking to gentlemen on the far side of the room.

“Have I become just a blurry shape to you now? Something in the background, perhaps?” Seth waved a hand in front of Jacob’s face.

Jacob started, turning to face his friend and prompting a heavy laugh.

“What?” Jacob said with pretended innocence.

“I don’t think I’ve ever seen you like this before.”

“I don’t know what you mean.” Jacob gulped from his glass, no longer worried about taking it slowly.

“I mean I’ve seen you lust after a woman, yes, but stare so long that you do not even notice I am talking to you?” Seth grimaced. “Hmm, now that is not something you usually do.”

“It means nothing,” Jacob insisted. So what if Lady Emily had gotten under his skin? He could shake her off. He’d left many ladies behind in the past; he had no intention of letting Emily change matters now.

Despite his words, his gaze returned to her, and the moment his eyes flicked away, Seth guffawed.

“I’m beginning to wonder why exactly you are my friend,” Jacob hissed at Seth.

“Because I speak the truth to you.” Seth clapped him on the shoulder and walked around him. “This isn’t going to go away, Jacob. I think you’re going to have to do something about it.”

“Like what?”

Yet Seth didn’t answer him. He merely raised his eyebrows and walked off, waving to a young widow across the room whom he’d been charming for some time. Jacob’s gaze hurriedly returned to Lady Emily, where he saw she was no longer accompanied by her sister. Instead, another gentleman was beside her. He feared at once it would be Lord Gilchrist, but no. This gentleman was young, handsome, and dapper.

Lady Emily smiled so boldly up at him that Jacob’s hand tightened around his glass.

*Who is that?*

The gentleman touched Lady Emily’s arm. It was such an affectionate touch that Jacob could not compose himself. The pinkening of Lady Emily’s cheeks merely made matters worse. Jacob downed what was in glass, stiffened and made his spine rigid, then he marched across the room toward the pair.

When he grew nearer, he listened to part of their conversation, eager to hear what their conversation was about.

“You are fond of dancing then, Lady Emily?” the gentleman asked, clearly trying to gauge whether she would say yes to his invitation to dance.

“Of course,” she answered eagerly. “Though you may find me a partner that lacks certain skills, I shall smile all the way through.” Her self-mockery had the gentleman laughing.

“I’m sure you do yourself a disservice.” He flicked his fair hair back past his ears and offered his hand, ready to dance with her.

*I cannot let this happen.*

Without thinking of why it irked him so much, or why he had to stop it, Jacob stepped forward.

“Forgive me, sir, but Lady Emily is engaged for the next two dances.” Jacob stepped to her side and discretely took hold of the dance card on her wrist, making sure it remained closed so the gentleman could not see his name was not written on the card.

“Oh.” The gentleman’s hand fell at his side. He must have known who Jacob was, for his eyes widened.

“I beg your pardon?” Lady Emily rounded on Jacob at once, her head flicking toward him.

“Let us pray it is a dramatic quadrille, shall we?” Jacob said teasingly. “At least then it would be a dance that suits you and me, Lady Emily.”

“But I—”

“I see I have interrupted something here.” The gentleman backed up. “If you would excuse me.” He bowed to Lady Emily.

“Wait, no, Sir Walter,” she said swiftly, trying to get him to stay.

*Sir Walter?*

Jacob looked at the gentleman with a sneer, knowing now who the man was.

*No, he is not good enough for a woman like Lady Emily.*

“My apologies,” the gentleman said again, hurrying away and slipping through the crowds. The moment he was gone, Lady Emily turned to look at Jacob, with fire in her eyes.

“You should be thanking me,” he whispered in a low tone, the two of them

still standing close together thanks to the grip he had on her dance card.

“Should I?” she said, in a dramatic and over-the-top gasp. “Should I be dropping to my knees and worshipping the ground you walk on?”

“I wouldn’t go that far—” He was cut off as she snatched her dance card out of his grasp.

“Enough.” She barked at him. “What is the matter with you, Your Grace? I was having a perfectly nice conversation with Sir Walter. Why did you interfere when you and I both know you have no intention of dancing with me whatsoever?”

He couldn’t deny it. He scratched the back of his neck, unsure what to say or do now.

“See?” She waved an angry hand at him.

“He is not good enough for you,” Jacob hissed and stepped toward her, glad they stood in the shadows of the room between the standing candelabras. It would be more difficult for the likes of the Duke of Elbridge and the Earl of Pratt to see the two of them together here.

“And you think you know who is good enough for me, do you?” She raised her eyebrows, her disdain evident. “I am not your business, Your Grace.”

“Of course, you are,” he snapped, the words falling from his mouth, “and I could not stand the way that gentleman looked at you just now.”

*Wait... what have I just said?*

## CHAPTER 8



“*W*hat did you say?” Emily blinked, certain that this had to be some sort of dream or wild imagining.

The Duke of Thorne looked away from her and brushed back his wild brown hair, haphazardly. He refused to look at her but turned frantically on the spot.

“Wait, are you jealous, Your Grace?” Emily said, an involuntary smile growing on her lips.

“I do not get jealous.” The words were snapped in a low breath as he turned back to face her again. “It is not an emotion I am party to.”

“No? Then explain what just took place.” She motioned to the short distance between them, suddenly aware that he had stepped toward her, and she had to tilt her head up to look at him.

*Where did that heat come from? It certainly isn't from the candles!*

Yet the heat was growing up her neck and into her cheeks, so strongly that she adjusted her white gloves as they reached her elbows.

“I cannot.” He held her gaze, not once blinking.

“Then there is something here you are not telling me.” Her breath stuttered; her chest rising and falling. When his eyes flicked down to look at her chest, that heat merely grew worse. He groaned aloud and looked away from her, pressing his back to the wall nearby. “Your Grace?”

“It is nothing.” His voice was sharp once more. “Let us stick with the fact that a man like Sir Walter is not good enough for you.”

“What makes you say such a thing?”

“You have read the scandal sheets, have you not?” he asked, raising a single eyebrow. “Well, there are more scandals concerning that man than he wants people to be party to. He owes money to every gambling hall in town, even as far as Margate. I urge you, Emily, not to set your cap at a man like him.”

“You didn’t call me ‘Lady Emily’.”

“What?”

She simply raised her eyebrows, in emphasis. He didn't answer her, but looked away once more, staring at the crowds.

*Well, that is no good.*

As much as Emily had been enjoying the company of Sir Walter, she had to agree that a man who owed money to every gambling hall in London must only be looking at her out of consideration of her dowry. That was not what she wanted.

“Was it the advice of a friend that urged you to come and intervene? Or... something more?” Emily waited with bated breath, remembering the moment at the ball a few days ago, when the Duke had denied there was anything between the pair of them at all. He'd hurried off, not glancing back at her. If he confessed there was something now, it would make up for it—at least then this jitteriness inside of her might stop.

“Merely advice from an acquaintance. That is all.” The cold words and the way he crossed his arms over his chest put her in her place.

*I mean nothing to him at all.*

The kiss meant naught, plainly, and despite all the heat, the attraction of their previous arguments, it had culminated in nothing. So much so that he'd simply called her an acquaintance.

She curtsied hurriedly.

“Where are you going?” he asked, darting his head toward her.

“I wish to spend the evening in the company of friends, not *acquaintances*.” She emphasized the word and turned away as quickly as she could, crossing the room to get away from him. He didn’t follow her, though she glanced back once out of curiosity to see what his response was. He watched her go, his eyes never blinking, but he did not move.

*He is a baffling man.*

Emily busied herself by the refreshments table, grasping at canapes she had no wish to eat just for something to do when a shadow passed over her. The older form of Lord Gilchrist stopped beside her, the smile on his sickeningly long face somehow more eager than it usually was.

“Lady Emily, may I request—”

“Forgive me, Lord Gilchrist.” She knew it was rude to interrupt him, but she couldn’t stand another conversation with him just now, not after everything that had just happened with the Duke. Her heart would not be still, and her hands were clammy. “I am afraid I have a headache and intend to take some air.”

“Then let me accompany you.”

“No, that will not be necessary. I thank you for your kindness.” She curtsied and dropped the canapes to the table, praying that she had adopted some of Rachel’s propriety in her tone, so she did not sound too rude.

Leaving the canapes and Lord Gilchrist behind, she hurried to the side of the ballroom and reached for a door. It led out into a hallway, frustratingly, for she was desperate for some air. Picking a direction at random, she hurried past more standing candelabras and down a corridor, looking desperately for another door.

She found one at last that led outside, the glass insets revealing the night sky beyond. Thrusting open the door, she stumbled out, barely looking where she was going. She only took a few steps then tilted her head up to the sky and took deep breaths. Her lungs filled with the clean and fresh air.

At once, she felt less jittery. Her hands were no longer clammy and as she stared up at the stars that blinked down at her, she was able to put into perspective what had just happened with the Duke of Thorne.

*It does not matter. He means nothing to me, as I mean nothing to him. Our acquaintance is so fleeting that within days, I will have forgotten him.*

Yet her heart denied her own words.

“Lady Emily?”

She froze. Her gloved hands balled into fists at her side as she prayed the

voice was in her imagination, but it was not.

“Lady Emily.” Lord Gilchrist had followed her. He tried to take her hand, but she snatched it out of his grasp and backed up, now concerned at the predicament she was in.

She’d stumbled out onto a side path from the house, narrowed, and bordered by curved yew bushes. Lord Gilchrist had closed the side door in his pursuit of her and reached out to her again, the heavy lines and growing wrinkles on his face noticeable in the moonlight. When his eyes raked over her, it was nothing like the heated and exciting look of the Duke of Thorne. This look made bile rise in her throat.

“If you would excuse me, My Lord. We should not be out here without a chaperone. I shall return to the ball.” She attempted to step past him, but he blocked her path, forcing her to back up from him a little down the path, with her hands clinging to the skirts of her gown.

“Now, Lady Emily,” Lord Gilchrist smiled, something quite wicked in that look. “What fool would miss out on a chance like this?”

“A chance of what? To be caught unchaperoned?”

When his smile grew worse, Emily backed up.

“I will not be trapped into a marriage.” She hurried away. Turning on her heel, she tried to run across the garden, further down the path, but her shoes

were slippery and threatened to come off, forcing her to satisfy herself with a quick walk instead.

“My Lady, all I want is a minute alone, is that so much to ask?” Lord Gilchrist followed her constantly. “You are a tease.”

“A tease?” she spluttered, glancing back at him as he pursued her. “Pah! I have never sought your admiration.”

“Oh, but you have.” He cut in front of her. Out of fear of walking into him, she halted, her shoes skidding on the gravel path beneath her. “You constantly have.” He tilted his head to the side, smiling so much that his teeth gleamed in the moonlight. “Beautiful Lady Emily, the one who dances just out of reach.” He stretched a hand out toward her, and she struck it away.

The sharp smack of her palm across his made his expression change. He no longer smiled but glowered.

“Well, you shall have to be punished for that.”

“Punished!?” She backed up as he advanced toward her, but there was a yew bush in the way. “Do not you dare, my Lord. I... I shall scream.”

“And call witnesses to us? I thought you did not want to be trapped into marriage, Lady Emily.” He reached for her, just as she pressed her body into the yew bush, desperate for an escape.



“What the hell is going on now?” Jacob muttered as he strode through the side door of the house and marched down the path. He was certain he’d seen Lady Emily come this way, but so had Lord Gilchrist. That man was so odious, Jacob knew she would not have come out here to ensnare such a man.

*Something else is afoot.*

“No. No!” It was Emily’s voice. She was tussling with someone, her frightened cry so sudden that Jacob froze on the path, listening for which direction it came from. “Leave me at once, or I swear...”

“You’ll what?”

“No!”

There was a fumble, sounds of gravel being trodden underfoot and twigs snapping.

Jacob ran down the path, heading into the depths of the garden, heading toward those voices. In front of him, lit by the moonlight, were Emily and Lord Gilchrist. She was practically caged in against a yew bush, though her hands grappled with Lord Gilchrist as she tried to force him back from her. With a heavy tread, she stamped down on his toe. He yelped, but it only made him release her for a second.

She tried to push past him, to escape deeper into the garden, but he caught her by the back of her skirt and flung her back. Such a frightened shout escaped her, Jacob could not contain himself.

It was no longer just jealousy he felt, but anger, pure and simple rage. How dare someone try to touch Emily in this way? How dare a man like Lord Gilchrist try to force her into *this*?

Jacob ran toward the pair of them. When he caught up to Lord Gilchrist, he took the back of the man's jacket and heaved him away.

"What the..." Lord Gilchrist spun around, just as Jacob raised his fist. In the white light, Lord Gilchrist's eyes widened in fear, but he wasn't quick enough to dodge the blow.

Jacob struck the man straight in the nose. Bone cracked audibly and Lord Gilchrist swayed backward on his heels, his eyes closing.

Emily yelped and jumped out of the way, a hand to her lips as Lord Gilchrist fell to the ground. He struck the gravel, scattering the dust, completely unconscious.

"Emily?" Jacob scarcely spared a glance for the man. He looked down, seeing Lord Gilchrist was alive and truly just knocked out, then he stepped over the unconscious form and stretched out a hand toward Emily.

"I..." she lowered her hand, anger flashing in her eyes. "I didn't need your

help.” She spun away, so swiftly that Jacob blinked, startled at the sudden vigor in her tone. She marched further down the path.

“No?” He said in bemusement, following her deeper into the garden. “From what I saw, you were very much in need of help.”

“I could have handled it myself.” She took two turns in the path, ending up on an open lawn completely bordered by lime trees. She strode out across the lawn, her gown shimmering in the moonlight and Jacob followed her.

“Yes, yes, of course you could have done it,” Jacob said in a wry tone. “That’s why, when I came upon the pair of you, you were yelping in need of help, was it not?”

She glanced back, that anger still making her eyes bright.

“Stop following me,” she ordered.

“No.”

“Why not?”

“You think I am going to leave you out here alone after what has just happened? Completely isolated? What if he comes after you again, hmm? Then what?” he demanded to know, needing her to acknowledge the danger of the situation she had just been in.

She stumbled beside one of the lime trees, reaching out for the twisted bark, she clung to it, her palms flat to the bark. Jacob stopped beside her, resting his hand on the bark too, just to be near her. His fingers were mere inches from hers, as she faced away, refusing to look back at him. He looked at her golden hair, watching it quiver as she took heavy breaths.

“I didn’t need you,” she managed eventually.

“It’s not about needing,” he muttered, his hand moving closer to hers.

*Why am I here? Why don’t I move back?*

Yet Jacob couldn’t. All that had happened between him, and Emily felt like it was leading to this moment. He couldn’t turn away from her now.

“Please, Emily,” he whispered, “just look at me.”

Her head jerked up, but she didn’t turn to face him, not yet.

“It’s not about whether you needed me or could take care of yourself,” he said hurriedly. “I’m just glad I was there to help.”

This time, she turned to face him. Slowly, her hand left the bark of the lime

tree, and she faced him, her lips parted. When he saw her eyes were wet with unshed tears, glistening, he reached for her, unable to hold himself back. One of his hands took her cheek and he tilted her head up a little, looking into those eyes.

“That snake of a man,” he muttered hurriedly as his other hand reached for her waist, holding her to him.

*She is not pulling back.*

“You were there,” she murmured. “Why were you there?”

“I saw you leave, then I saw him follow you,” he whispered, angling his head toward her. It was as if something pulled him to her, something he could not resist.

“You knocked him unconscious, Your Grace! Good lord!”

“I’ll do it again if he ever dares lay a finger on you.” His voice deepened as his lips hovered over hers. They were so near to another one of those kisses now. It felt so long since that first kiss. He was desperate for another kiss; something to sustain him in his desire for her. “I’ll make it worse next time if he comes near you.”

“Your Grace...” Her voice turned breathy as she raised her hands between them and reached for his waistcoat, clinging to the opening. “I am not your responsibility.”

“No, but you are something to me,” he muttered.

It seemed to remove a wall between them. Something in what he said had her raising on her toes. Seeing her come toward him, he couldn't resist and pressed his lips to hers.

The kiss was sudden and fast, with fierce passion. His lips moved against hers, claiming her kiss as his own. When she nibbled playfully at his bottom lip, he could have sworn he was on the verge of madness.

With his hand that was still on her waist, he angled her around, so that her back was pressed to the lime tree, and he was in front of her. Molding his body to hers, he kissed her against that tree, wanting more and more. The deeper he delved with his tongue, exploring her, the more her hands clung to him. They went from his waistcoat to reaching beneath, pressing his shirt across his body.

Such heat traveled through him that he didn't want it to stop. It couldn't stop. He needed more of her, to indulge in this attraction to her at last without restraint, and without fear of what would happen next.

“Whoa! There's a man down out here!” a voice called at a distance.

They broke apart. Jacob's hands moved to either side of Emily on the tree as she released him too. They both stood there, panting as they caught their breath, their eyes connected and not once looking away.

“Lord Gilchrist...” he began.

“He’s been found.” She nodded.

“He won’t say what’s happened. He wouldn’t dare, for fear of his attack on you being made public by me.”

“What if we’re found?” She glanced over his shoulder, looking across the lawn.

The mere idea of this moment being over already was unbearable. He needed to indulge a little more, to have this moment, uninterrupted.

“There is somewhere we could go,” he whispered, speaking slowly, out of fear of what she would say next. Her eyes flitted toward him.

“Speak quickly you fool, or we’ll be found!” Her urgency had him smiling, attracted to her bold ways.

“There’s an orangery in these gardens.” He nodded in the direction, beyond the lime trees and toward the corner of the estate. “If you didn’t want to return to the ball just yet, Emily, we could hide there for a while.”

“Hide?” she whispered, her gaze flitting down to his lips again.

“Hide or do something more.” He moved his lips to hers, finding it impossible to resist. That kiss was just growing passionate again, with her hands reaching beneath his tailcoat to his shoulders when they heard footsteps nearby. “We have to go, now,” he muttered, pulling back from her as he looked around, fearful of discovery.

“Then lead the way,” she waved her hand impatiently, urging him to go.

He grasped that hand and pulled her behind the lime tree, just as others passed at the edge of the lawn. They remained unseen.

## CHAPTER 9



Emily stood back, her insides quivering as she was wondering what exactly she was doing agreeing to run off alone with the Duke of Thorne. If Rachel ever discovered she was intentionally going to an orangery alone with the Duke, she would be furious. Emily could picture it now, the rage, the rampage, and the disappointment, yet despite it all, Emily didn't want this moment to be over.

She wanted more kisses, all of it, to be in the Duke's arms and no longer feel as if they were just acquaintances to each other, yet something more.

With his hand in hers, they moved through the lime trees and out onto a formal path in the distant regions of the garden. He glanced back toward the house, as did she, following his gaze to look at the windows. They were so far away now that it would be difficult for anyone to see them from the windows. They were on the distant side of the house to the ballroom anyway, so with luck, no one would even glimpse two figures in this part of the garden.

"This way." He led her to the orangery, set against the rear wall of the garden. The door was locked, but Jacob jiggled the door enough that it popped out of the lock and allowed them inside.

Emily gasped as she stepped into the building. It was warm, warmer than outside, and with so many plants trailing the walls and in pots, it was a stunning place to be. In the middle of the red-brick building, topped with glass, there was a circle of small orange trees in pots, and between them, three wicker chairs.

“Your Grace,” Emily whispered, reaching for him again.

He kicked the door shut behind them and advanced toward her. Before she could say anymore, he kissed her, with such fierceness that she backed up, nearly walking into one of the orange trees in her surprise. His fingers tangled in her hair, angling her head back as he deepened the kiss.

*Oh... so this is what true kisses can be like.*

It made the stolen kisses she’d had with other men all pale in comparison. This was something else entirely. The passion, the excitement, and even the thrill that passed through her body made her a quivering mess. Her hands trembled as she reached for the Duke’s arms and held onto him. As he pulled her body into his, their hips brushed together, and she could have sworn a wetness developed between her legs.

“Your Grace,” she managed to murmur again as he moved his lips from hers down her neck. With his hand tangled in her hair, he tilted her head back further, setting such kisses on her neck that she gasped, wanting more of this feeling.

“No more of that,” he whispered between kisses.

“What?”

“No more of ‘Your Grace’. I can’t have you moaning that in here.” He raised himself a little again, hovering his lips over hers, but not quite giving her another kiss, even as she reached up toward him, wanting it. “My name is Jacob, Emily. Moan that instead.”

“Jacob...” Her voice was breathy, astonished that he would ask for such an intimacy between them. His name on her lips seemed to do something. His expression changed, and he practically growled under his breath. He shifted her body and moved her toward one of the wicker chairs, moving over her and kissing her again.

As he moved his kisses down her neck, she leaned back in the chair, unsure what he was doing but just not wanting it to stop. He kissed her across her chest, even her breasts, through the covering of her gown. He paid particular attention to moving his hands across her waist, his fingers skimming the undersides of her breasts, then he went for her hips, shifting her so that she sat on the very edge of the wicker chair.

“Can’t stay away from you, can I?” he whispered, his voice deep.

“You can’t?” Her hands gripped the side of the chair as he abruptly kneeled down in front of her. He took her knees and then moved them to the side, creating a space for him to kneel between them. Her voice grew breathy, and she forgot what she’d even asked as she rested an arm across his shoulders,

longing for him to kiss her again.

“Impossible.” He moved their lips together, yet the kiss was slower this time, somehow more sensual than the last. One of his hands brushed her thigh through her gown, shifting the silk against her skin so that it teased her. He started to gather the skirt together, shifting it so that it bunched around her hips, with her legs slowly being exposed.

*Impossible indeed.*

Emily pulled back from their kiss and allowed him to pepper more kisses across her collarbone, fleeting, like the caress of a butterfly’s wings, until he reached her cleavage above her gown. There, he set a deeper kiss, nipping her, then laving her with his tongue.

She didn’t care how scandalous this was, nor how wrong. It would be outrageous if her sisters ever found out. All she wanted was more of the Duke of Thorne.

*Jacob. He is Jacob to me now.*

He reached beneath the last covering of her skirt, the backs of his fingers caressing her bare hip. As a breathy moan escaped her lips, it seemed to encourage him and make him bolder with his touches. He turned his hand over and explored her hip fully, even gripping her hip with his fingers and using it to pull her toward him. The friction it created between their bodies had her seeking out his lips again for another deep kiss.

She was toying with his lips, making his left-hand cling to her hair as his other hand moved from her hips to somewhere between. When he lowered his touch down, getting increasingly closer to her center, her breathing grew faster.

She did not know what to expect, but something she was very aware of in her mind was that Jacob had a reputation. He was a known rake. Surely that meant... he knew how to please a woman?

She shuddered in excitement, just as his fingers reached her center. The first touch was a soft one, almost experimental. Finding her own body was wet, as if she was ready for his touches, she pulled back from his kiss just an inch, to look him in the eye.

There was heat in his blue eyes, so intense, she could not look away from it.

He grew bolder, that first touch changing to something stronger as he brushed outside of her. Such a thrill passed through her body that her legs quivered either side of his hips. His fingers slid across her then inside her. The sudden pleasure was so foreign to her, something so new that she tipped her head back, his name on her lips as she gasped.

His hand left her hair and he shifted it across her stomach and waist, angling her back so that she was leaning away across the wicker chair, opening herself up to him. He looked down, seemingly distracted by watching what he was doing to her. She watched him the whole time, seeing his arm move as his hand drove against her, pleasuring her with just his fingers alone. His expression was hooded with desire, those blue eyes seemingly silver in the light of the moon that shone through the orangery glass.

His movements grew faster, firmer, until her whole body was shuddering, needing more of this feeling. It seemed to coil in her lower stomach, repeatedly flinging out across her body until her toes curled with the pleasure, wanting him.

She started to imagine what it would be like if Jacob was not just using his hand to pleasure her, but if they shared their entire bodies with one another in this room. What if he did indeed make love to her on this chair? What if that was what drove her to such pleasure? Would it be as intense as she had heard? As thrilling?

When his hand grew faster, her thoughts shot away from her imagination, and she stared at him instead. He was no longer watching what he was doing to her body, but looking directly into her eyes, as if mesmerized. He leaned down over her, kissing her, though the kiss was slow, and passionate, making her moan into that kiss.

His other hand raised up and took hold of her thigh, gently holding her open wide as his other hand continued to drive her mad. She was certain she was on the edge of something, for her body seemed to be ascending to some great height, when he abruptly left her lips.

She moaned, wanting his kiss again, but he merely chuckled and winked. There was something about the sound of that laugh that let her know she was safe with him. She was doing this with the man she had met that night in the darkened corridor, who she'd been drawn to ever since, who had defended her against Lord Gilchrist.

He looked down at their connection, then shifted his hand slightly. His fingers still pleased her, but he lowered his lips to her core so swiftly, she

was not prepared for it. When he kissed her in her more intimate area, she thrust her hands down onto the arms of the chair and pulled herself up a little, desperate to see what he was doing to her.

The thrill shifted now to one that was dual, both inside and out. His eyes watched her as he pleased her with his tongue.

That ascension of pleasure was faster now. It grew so quickly, that coil of pleasure in her lower abdomen seemed to expel suddenly. She felt struck by a wall of pleasure as she closed her eyes.

“Jacob...” His name left her lips as he continued to pleasure her, never once stopping. Her body was jittery, and she could not stop quivering in that chair as he moved with her, as she came down from her climax.

Her hands released the chair and she fell against the back, panting to catch her breath as he eventually released her. He looked up then leaned down over her. His lips found hers swiftly and they kissed, though it was a slow and sensual one, as her hands reached for him and tangled in his hair, angling his face toward her. With his hips sliding against her own, it was all too easy to imagine what it could be like to share herself completely with Jacob.

His hard length was even pressed against her through his trousers, as a firm reminder of what could happen.

When he shifted back from her a little, there was a smile on his lips.

“You look far too pleased with yourself,” she said jokingly, loving the moment when he laughed at her words.

“Can you blame me?” he whispered. “That was something, Emily.”

“Yet...” She closed her eyes as a sudden realization entered her mind. She had indulged in this thrill with Jacob, been excited by him, and oh, how she didn’t regret that pleasure, but there was something here she had to be aware of. “We should not have done it, should we?” she asked in a small voice. “You are a rake, and what have I done?” She released him, laying her hands back across the chair and laughing at her own foolishness. “I have gone into the rake’s arms.”

“It wasn’t so bad, was it?” he said teasingly and moved his lips to her chest. He kissed down her exposed skin above the neckline of her gown, then over her breasts and her stomach, making her writhe and want more of his touches, despite her words.

“Couldn’t you tell it wasn’t bad?”

“I might have had a little idea.” One of his fingers caressed the inside of her thigh, coming so close to her center again that she twitched, and he chuckled. “See? We just couldn’t help it, Emily.”

“No, we couldn’t.” She gazed up at him, realizing what a tangled mess the two of them had been since they had first met in that dark corridor, unable to see one another. They’d been drawn to one another even when they couldn’t see each other’s face, the attraction palpable, the pull inescapable.

*I could never have known it would culminate in this.*

He bent over her again and kissed her forehead, a surprisingly tender touch that startled her. Her hands gripped his shoulders, wanting to keep him there for a beat longer.

“You make me wonder about something,” she muttered, her mind working fast.

“What is that?” he asked, raising his lips from hers but not his body. They were molded together in that chair, with him still kneeling before the wicker seat yet bent completely over her.

“You are a rake.”

“Thank you for the reminder,” he said with a humored smile.

“And clearly, you have this in you...” She paused and drew a hand down his chest. He trembled at that touch, as if she had touched his bare skin. “This passion.”

“I do,” he answered, his voice so deep it seemed to make her insides quake, wanting him to show her such pleasure and passion again.

“It baffles me when you are capable of all of this, yet you talked of wanting to marry my sister out of convenience.” Her words made him stiffen above her. She continued with her hand, drawing patterns on the cover of his waistcoat, until his body softened. “It’s hard to imagine you speaking of marrying for convenience now, after what just passed between us.”

“Perhaps it is.” He shifted them abruptly. He moved up then took hold of her waist and lifted her out of the chair, shifting them around so he was sitting in the chair, and she ended up straddling his lap.

“That was swift!”

“Well, I quite like you in this position,” he said with a smile, his eyes drifting down her. “I rather like it too much.”

She playfully tapped him around the chest in reprimand and he chuckled.

“Ah, such ideas in my head.” He tipped his chin up and rested his head on the backrest of the seat, apparently trying to tear his gaze away from her. “Maybe passion means more to me than *convenience*, Emily, but we all have to make arrangements sometimes for a reason.”

“And what was your reason?” Emily was desperate to know something more about him, to have a glimpse into the heart of who Jacob truly was.

“Let us say that I wished to please my mother,” he said slowly, raising his head enough to look at her again.

“That is not all, is it?”

“What? You can read my mind now after what we have shared?” He waggled his eyebrows at her. “Then I best be careful of what I think.”

She laughed at him and drew her hands up his chest, slipping her fingers beneath his tailcoat and clinging onto his shoulders. That grip must have done something, for he inhaled deeply, smiling.

“Maybe there is more to it,” he confessed eventually.

“More that you are not willing to speak of. You will not share secrets with me?”

“You and I have shared something tonight,” he reminded her with a mischievous smile.

“One secret,” she pleaded, leaning toward him.

“In exchange for one from you?” he asked, his voice deep. She nodded. “Very well. I wished to marry in order to have children. Yes, I am a man of passion, but I did not factor it into the equation when I considered marriage. The purpose was for children.”

Emily was reminded so much of her nephew Joey; she pictured herself in the garden again, carrying a small boy around in the glowing sunlight. Yet in that picture, she was no longer holding Joey, but a different boy entirely. What if it was *her* son? What if it was hers and Jacob's?

*Oh, I should not think such things.*

Even as her mind told her not to, she could not help it. After what she had just shared with Jacob after all, it was only natural.

“And you?” he whispered, lifting his head a little more. “Tell me a secret of yours, Emily.”

“What do you wish to know?”

“Why do you hide in dark corridors, or why you run off into gardens alone at night? You are clearly not afraid of a little...” he paused, clearly thinking of his next words carefully, “rebellion.”

“I'm not.” Emily sat back a little, her core moving against Jacob's length in such a way that they both gasped in surprise.

“If you wish me to behave, don't do that again,” Jacob pleaded, holding up a hand. She laughed, uncertain whether she wished him to behave or not.

“My sister has always called me rebellious,” she said softly. “My mother died

many years ago, Jacob. After she passed away, my elder sister, Rachel, practically took her place. I love my sister dearly, but sometimes I have grown frustrated with the way she watches over me. Rather than a mother hen, she's like an eagle-eyed hawk." She narrowed her eyes, as if mirroring Rachel, and drew a laugh from Jacob. "My rebellions are sometimes my wish to escape her hold."

"It is good to have a sister who loves you so much she wishes to protect you," Jacob said softly, his hands reaching for her. When he took hold of her hips, Emily was distracted and found it hard to concentrate on what they were discussing.

"I-I know," she stammered, watching what he was doing as he touched her. "I love her, but sometimes... one just wants a little freedom."

"Hmm, freedom. I know that feeling." When he moved her hips, urging her to move against him, they both gasped another time.

Their eyes connected, and Emily thought they would do something more, something else to share in their attraction, when there was a sound beyond the orangery door, of footsteps.

"We'll be discovered," Jacob said suddenly and helped her off him.

Emily scrambled to set her gown and hair straight as Jacob peered beyond the door.

“He’s walked on, but he could be back. Emily, you go to the ballroom, and I’ll follow behind you. If Lord Gilchrist approaches you, I’ll be there.”

She nodded, somehow relieved that he would be watching over her despite her earlier anger. As she passed him in the doorway, she laid a hand on his chest, reluctant to let the passion leave them. He closed his eyes, as if indulging in that touch, then she was gone, running through the garden and heading back to the ballroom.

As the chilly night breeze struck her, her mind woke up to exactly what she had done. She had risked her virtue, all for Jacob.

*What happens now?*

## CHAPTER 10



“One, two, three...” The doctor counted out Jacob’s pulse as he rested his fingers on Jacob’s wrist.

Jacob sat back in the armchair in his front parlor, at ease with his shirt sleeves rolled up to his elbows and his jacket slung across the back of a nearby chair. It was always the same. Once a month, his mother insisted that he had a checkup from a doctor. It had been once a year when he was young, but for the last three or four years now, his mother had insisted on it more regularly.

As the doctor continued to count, Jacob turned his head to look for his mother. She stood by the fireplace, frantically rearranging the ornaments on the hearth, then she arranged them a second time, apparently unhappy with her work.

At least now she was leaving her bedchamber again. The local healer woman had given her some tonics that kept her calm.

*Not calm enough.*

Jacob kept the thought to himself as his mother arranged the wooden spills in a small vase in the center of the mantelpiece.

“Well, all seems to be in order.” Doctor Rainer released Jacob’s hand and stepped back, his pudgy cheeks smiling.

“Are you certain?” Catarina stepped away from the fireplace, coming to Jacob’s side. “You can find nothing? You said that last time.”

“And the time before that,” Doctor Rainer reminded her.

“And the time before that, and so on,” Jacob muttered, more to himself for he knew his mother would not pay attention.

It was always the way. Doctor Rainer found nothing wrong, but Catarina insisted he came back anyway to check on Jacob.

“He is thirty now,” Catarina said sharply, her hand gripping Jacob’s shoulder so tight he actually winced.

Doctor Rainer halted in putting his apparatus away in his leather satchel and looked back at Catarina.

“I might need something now,” Jacob said, pointing at the fresh bruise he had on his shoulder. Doctor Rainer smiled then shook his head.

“The Duke of Thorne is not his father, Your Grace.” Doctor Rainer’s words were soft and kindly spoken, but they plainly didn’t help matters.

Catarina released Jacob’s shoulder suddenly and bustled to the side of the room, with her hands on her hips as she stared out across the grounds of the estate, through the window. Jacob exchanged an easy look with Doctor Rainer as he stood.

“Thank you, doctor,” Jacob said and bowed his head to him as he rolled down his sleeves. Rainer bowed fully with an easy smile.

“The only thing I’d say, Your Grace, is that you seem a little tired. Otherwise, you are in perfect health.”

*No wonder I am tired.*

Jacob had barely slept a wink the night before after what had passed between him and Emily. He had thought of it constantly, not just the thrill and excitement of it, but also the intimacy between them after they had sat that in the orangery together, sharing secrets. It was not something he normally did with any woman he took to bed.

*Yet Emily is not just any other woman, is she?*

“Thank you again.”

“I shall return in a month.” Doctor Rainer bowed and sent a wary glare Catarina’s way. “I shall see you soon, Your Grace.”

Catarina was plainly so caught up in her own thoughts that she didn’t turn to say goodbye to the doctor. Jacob smiled at him and waved him off. The moment the door was closed, Jacob moved to stand by his mother. He leaned against the windowsill, catching her eye, to see that she no longer had her hands on her hips but was adjusting the sleeves of her gown to make sure they sat straight.

“Mother.” Jacob’s voice captured her attention. “Is this not good news? I am still perfectly healthy.”

“I know,” she smiled, and the sight of it lifted his heart, “yet for how long I, wonder.” She looked away from him and gazed out of the window at the grounds. The way she discarded the good news so fast, her cheeks falling as that smile slipped away, cut him deeply. “You said you would marry, Jacob.”

“I know I did.”

“And now what?” she asked sharply. “No marriage, no children, nothing! Who knows how long you have—”

“Mother, enough.” His voice was sharp as he stood away from the windowsill. It startled his mother so much that her jaw slackened. “I cannot talk of this. Not now.”

“Whyever not?”

He didn't answer her and reached for his jacket he had slung across one of the chairs, pulling it on over his shoulders distractedly. He could go riding today, check on his tenants and do some work with the steward. Yes, all such things would help to distract him, to stop him thinking of one person in particular.

“Surely you can find another woman to marry?” Catarina crossed the room toward him. “Jacob?”

One woman firmly entered Jacob's mind. It was Emily.

An errant picture entered his head of Emily walking down the aisle toward him in a white lace gown, her blonde hair gathered at the back of her head and those strong eyes fixed on him.

*Oh, Emily.*

Then that picture changed. They were in the position they'd occupied the night before, with her straddling him, yet they wore nothing and were in his bedchamber, astride his bed. He could picture Emily's moans of pleasure as she thrust back her head as she rode him, driving them both into an abyss of pleasure.

*No!*

He turned away from his mother and strode to the door as he pushed the thought of Emily from his mind.

“I can think of no woman at this time, Mother.”

“None?” she spluttered, rounding the armchair he had been sitting in before and trying to reach him.

He knew after what he and Emily had done the night before he should marry her. He could even take his horse right now and ride to the Earl of Pratt’s house, begging for his blessing to be shifted from the elder daughter to the younger, so that his imaginings could be made real. Yet it was not something he could do.

What if in the midst of all of his mother’s nervous behaviors, she actually had a point? What if in a few years’ time Jacob fell ill and lost his life as swiftly as his own father did, the suddenness a shocking wrench?

If he’d married a woman who did not care for him, it would have been easier. They could have produced a child, and then she could have gone on to marry again, maybe for love next time, and not grieve him too strongly. That would certainly be an easier life to live.

If he married Emily, then everything changed. This connection between them, whatever it was, was strong. If he died, how would Emily cope if they’d only been married a few years prior?

She had a strong heart, a passionate one, he'd glimpsed that. If she had a heart that could form such a firm attachment to him, what would become of her then after she had to stand by his coffin and watch it lowered into the ground? No. The thought was just too painful to think of.

"Jacob?" Catarina called, reaching him at last. "Please, just think about it. Consider marrying someone else, I beg of you."

"I'll consider it," he answered but without any real strength in his words. He flicked up the collar of his jacket and strode through the hallway, heading to the entrance of the house and around to the stables. When the strong wind struck him outside, a certainty came with that chilly feeling.

Emily had too good a heart for it to be broken by marrying him. The best thing he could do for her now was to protect her—from himself.



"Emily?"

The voice was so sudden, disturbing Emily's thoughts, that she jerked her head up. She was walking through the garden, trailing her fingers through the flowers and admiring the blooms. Ordinarily, the garden was her favorite place on the estate. It could bring her such happiness and contentment, but today, it was as if something was missing from the garden.

*It is because I cannot stop thinking of last night.*

Her thoughts dwelled on Jacob rather than on the flowers, and what they had shared in that orangery.

“Emily?” the voice said again.

Emily jerked around, looking for the source of the voice. Rachel strode out of the house with such a firmness and purpose in her step that Emily actually backed up.

*Oh, God. Does she know?*

Rachel’s nostrils practically flared, and her cheeks were tinged dark red, a sure sign of her anger.

Emily turned on the spot, snatching up one of the dahlia flowers nearby and pulling on the petals haphazardly, hoping desperately that it would help calm her mind. She took a step away, somehow hoping and praying that Rachel would change her mind about talking to her.

“Don’t you dare walk away from me now,” Rachel’s voice was so firm that Emily had no choice but to turn back to face her sister.

She forced a cheerful smile, one so strained that her cheeks ached. Rachel stopped a short distance in front of her and folded her arms.

“Well?” she said, her manner sharp.

“Well, what?” Emily fought hard to maintain that awkward smile. “Did you bring Joey with you?” She looked around with excitement, hoping to see her nephew, but her prayer was not answered.

“He’s at home with Daniel.” Rachel stepped toward Emily and beckoned her to follow her.

“Where are we going?”

“You are fond of the garden, are you not?” Rachel said with a shrug. “So, let’s do what you like best as we talk. Let us walk.”

“Talk? About what?” Emily hurried to walk alongside her sister. They walked by a border of dahlias and azaleas, the rich orange and red hues bright in the morning sunlight.

“I wish to talk about last night.”

Emily’s stomach tightened into a knot. The dahlia with so few petals left she judged as being useless now, so she dropped it and picked another bloom.

“Why are you ruining the garden you like so much?” Rachel asked, pointing at the two flower heads.

“No reason.” Emily walked ahead, doing her best to ignore the border and stare straight in front of her at the lawn. “What about last night do you wish to discuss?”

“Well, a couple of things.” Rachel swept an arm to the side and urged Emily to follow her as they walked across the open lawn. “First, did you hear of what happened to Lord Gilchrist last night? Did you even see it?”

“See what?” Emily pretended innocence, fidgeting more and more with that dahlia head.

“He was struck down in the garden. He was found unconscious and taken indoors. It seems someone attacked him,” Rachel said hurriedly. “He had a broken nose, but the news this morning is that the physicians have checked him and he’ll be fine. Strange though, is it not? For someone to attack him so openly in a garden.”

“I suppose so,” Emily murmured, still refusing to meet her sister’s gaze. “He is a forceful man, rather demanding. It wouldn’t surprise me to hear that Lord Gilchrist had brought such a thing on himself.”

“What does that mean?” Rachel caught her arm and dragged her back. Now, Emily was forced to look her sister in the eye. “You know something of this. Do you not?”

“No.”

“You are a poor liar.”

“I am not lying.”

“Emily!” Rachel snapped, her tone sharp. “You think I cannot tell when you are lying by now? You think I did not see the way you lied when we were children, hiding the squirrel you had snuck into the house?”

“I had forgotten that,” Emily forced a laugh. “Is that what I did?”

“Oh, desist.” Rachel released her arm and waved a hand at her. “I know you know something about this.”

“What persuades you to think I do?”

“Because Lord Gilchrist has been pestering you for months now.” At Rachel’s words, Emily walked on, with such a purposeful stride that Rachel struggled to keep up behind her. “It would not surprise me if he followed you outside and pestered you too, though I struggle to see how you could cause such an injury to him, were he to—”

“Enough.” Emily turned back sharply to face her sister. She clearly startled Rachel, who tottered on her toes and stepped back again. “Maybe something did happen last night, Mother Rachel, but it is no concern of yours or anyone else’s.”

“How can you say that?” Rachel spluttered, waving her hands madly at Emily. “You are my sister. You *are* my concern!”

“And what would you make of the matter if I were to say that I was alone in the company of a man such as Lord Gilchrist?”

“Oh lord—” Rachel flung her hands over her face.

“That is not what I am saying,” Emily explained hurriedly. “But you see the dilemma. I will not confirm anything that could have me rushed up an aisle of a church. Do you understand?”

“That sharp tone.” Rachel lowered her hands from her face. “You sound a little like me, Em.”

Emily turned away and walked on, hurrying down the lawn and toward the thicket of trees at the bottom of the garden.

“Where were you then?” Rachel called as she followed her.

“What?”

“For the rest of the night, where were you?” Rachel asked impatiently. “Bridget and I noticed you had gone missing quite early in the evening, and Daniel kept an eye out for you. You were not seen for some time, Em. You must have been somewhere.”

“I was nowhere.”

“It is impossible for a person to be nowhere.”

“Rachel, enough please.” Emily stopped walking again, this time under the shade of a great oak tree. “I hid in the shadows of the ballroom for I was tired of Lord Gilchrist’s attentions, and I was avoiding another. There, does that satisfy you?”

“Another?” Rachel crossed her arms in front of her chest, a single eyebrow raised. “Would this ‘other’ be the very gentleman we caught you in the company of the other night?”

“I am avoiding him. Surely you agree that is a wise course of action?” Even as Emily said the words, two emotions warred within her. There was the guilt of lying to her sister, and the mistrust of her own feelings, for she wanted more than anything to see Jacob again.

“Very wise,” Rachel nodded firmly.

“Good, then we understand each other.” Emily spun on her heel, crushing acorns beneath her shoes as she went to walk away.

“Yet baffling when the Duke of Thorne was also perceived to be missing from the ballroom last night.” Rachel’s words had her faltering. She tripped

on those acorns and hurried in a circle to face her sister. Rachel's expression was calculating, her eyes narrowed and the wind barely buffeting her hair at all. "Were you with him?"

"No!" Emily denied it, perhaps too loudly, for Rachel's eyebrows shot up. "No, I was not with him. I told you; I was hiding from him and Lord Gilchrist."

"Oh, God." Rachel covered her face with her hand. "I fear what the truth is."

"I am telling you the truth," Emily said through gritted teeth, the guilt seething inside her all the more.

"Yes, yes, of course you are," Rachel said in clear derision. "Let me tell you something, sister." She dropped her hand and moved toward Emily, with a finger pointed toward her. "You have always been rebellious, yes, lashing out when I think it ill-advised to do so. Yet if you were in the company of the Duke of Thorne last night then you have proved yourself a greater fool than I ever thought you capable of being."

Rachel stepped away, heading back toward the house.

*How dare she!?*

"Rachel!" Emily snapped and walked after her, but Rachel showed no sign of stopping. "You would insult me so?"

“I’m trying to get you to wake up and see what risks you are taking Em. If you were in the company of the Duke, as I suspect you were—”

“I was not!” The lie sounded awful, even to Emily’s own ears.

“Then you could be risking your reputation hugely.” Rachel flung back around to face her.

“And you’d know all about that, wouldn’t you?” Emily reminded her, the words tart.

Rachel had said repeatedly that the events which had led to her own marriage were all a mistake, but that was not how the *ton* perceived it. The *ton* perceived her initial meeting with Daniel to be a scandalous thing indeed.

Rachel blushed crimson red and her lips fell apart in horror.

“I didn’t mean it like that,” Emily muttered hurriedly.

“Yes, you did,” Rachel stepped toward her. “I have come here to try and protect you, Em. Even if that means sometimes trying to protect you from your own foolishness.”

“I do not need your protection,” Emily insisted. “You are not my mother, Rachel.”

She might as well have struck her sister for the suddenness of the response. Rachel backed up, her eyes turning to the ground. They could have filled with tears, but Emily wasn't sure, for she could not see them clearly.

"Have it your way," Rachel muttered, her voice dark and sad. "Look after yourself from now on." She turned on her heel and left so quickly that Emily stared after her.

Something about the words conjured a feeling of just how alone Emily was in this garden, isolated.

*I should not have said that.*

Yet the words had tumbled from her lips. She looked to the drive that she could glimpse from the garden, praying a carriage would arrive; that Jacob would come and after all they had shared the night before, propose, but the drive stayed empty.

*Perhaps Rachel is right.*

## CHAPTER 11



“*I* do not think you listened to the music at all.”

“I beg your pardon?” Jacob asked, turning around to face Seth who passed him a glass of claret.

“I’ll rephrase that. You did not only *not* listen to the music, but now you are not taking in a word I am saying,” Seth sighed, exasperated.

“I am sorry,” Jacob said genuinely. “I am just so...”

“Distracted?” Seth offered, to which Jacob nodded, for he couldn’t deny it.

He had not particularly wanted to come to the violin concert this evening. He was enjoying being outdoors at present, his riding, the garden, everything was helping to take his mind off the matter of his mother and her worries, but she had insisted that he came tonight for the concert.

*“You never know. Perhaps you will find a woman to marry tonight?”*

Her strange optimism in the face of all of her nervous habits was a baffling thing to him. Once more that evening, he'd left her in the company of the local healer woman, who was doing much to raise Catarina's spirits.

“May I hazard a guess as to the reason you are so distracted?” Seth leaned against one of the marble pillars around the guildhall that had been set up for the concert. With his gloved hand, he gestured across the room and Jacob followed that look.

Across the chairs that had been set out in the room for the performance, on the other side of the room, was the Earl of Pratt's family.

He intently talked with Lady Bridget, as, beside them, the Duke and Duchess of Elbridge whispered together. Left out of the group was Lady Emily who herself seemed distracted, toying with the empty glass in her hand. She did not look at the violinists who were taking an interval, and neither had she paid much attention during the performance—Jacob had recognized that.

Most of the time the violinists had been playing in the first half, Emily had stared down into her glass or looked elsewhere around the room.

“Perhaps,” Jacob admitted to his friend.

“May I ask you a rather bold question?” Seth said, leaning against the pillar once more.

“I never thought you’d do anything else,” Jacob said with a smile, prompting his friend to laugh.

“Are you still a rake?”

“What?”

“Well, I cannot remember the last time you talked of another lady.” Seth waved a hand around the room. “Ordinarily, many ladies here tonight might have taken your fancy. Equally, by now you would have told me some story about a widow you had bedded for the night –”

“Shh,” Jacob urged, rather nervous of the group that was walking past them overhearing their conversation.

“Yet you haven’t.” Seth shrugged. “When was the last time you thought of another lady other than the one that has you so distracted at present?”

“I am not having this conversation.”

“Why not?”

“Because it is ridiculous,” Jacob hissed. “I know what you are trying to suggest, and I will not entertain it.”

“What?” Seth laid a hand on his chest, adopting an innocent air. “You think I am suggesting that what is between you and Lady Emily is more than just your frustration at not being able to bed her?”

“God’s blood man, would you be quiet?” Jacob was forced to smile at a dowager countess who passed them by, curling her nose as she must have overheard at least the ‘bedding’ part of what Seth had said. “Are you trying to make the scandal sheets tomorrow covered in our names?”

“I’m speaking plainly.”

“You always do,” Jacob muttered and drank from his claret glass.

“You are not answering the question, Jacob.”

“I wasn’t aware there was a question,” Jacob narrowed his eyes at Seth. “This is passing, fleeting, that is all.”

“The distraction of Lady Emily?”

“Yes!”

“Then tell me about another lady that is here tonight. Any lady,” Seth said

with a self-satisfied smile, as if he knew he had already won.

“Her sisters,” Jacob answered swiftly.

“Anyone else?”

Jacob had not bothered to look. He looked around the two of them now and Seth guffawed with laughter at his panicked look.

“See? I do not need you to answer anymore, Jacob. I think I know what is happening to you.”

“Don’t say it,” Jacob hissed, taking his friend’s arm in warning.

“Well, I’ll just think it instead.” Seth still laughed as he shook his arm out of Jacob’s hold. “What’s the harm in it, Jacob? So what if you have developed a fondness for the lady? Nothing wrong with that.”

Seth walked off, heading toward a group of ladies that clucked and chatted together, like gagging geese. Jacob watched his friend retreat, baffled that he could say there was nothing wrong with this situation.

*There is so much that is wrong.*

Emily moved across the room. Noticing it at once, Jacob looked toward her as she crossed to the back of the room where the tables displaying the drinks were prepared. He downed what was in his claret glass and moved toward her, creating an excuse to bump into her at the drinks table.

As he stopped beside her, neither of them said anything, but he could tell at once she knew it was him. She sighed, her hand tightening around the carafe of wine before her. He sighed deeply at her reaction, remembering the way her body had quivered in the chair in the orangery as he had introduced her to pleasure.

Such imaginings filled his mind with Emily in them that he struggled to speak or do anything at all. His hand grew so clammy around his glass, that he was in danger of dropping it.

He thought of the two of them back in that orangery, but he imagined him entering her properly, showing her what lovemaking truly was. He thought of her moaning his name in that breathy way, clinging to his chest and exploring him. Would her thighs shudder around his hips again? Would she climax as she had done, her body tightening and releasing in that most delicious way? Would she straddle him and ride him, just as he had glimpsed that she had the passion to do so that night?

“Why are you here?” Emily broke the silence between them. She didn’t look at him as he stopped beside her, their arms practically brushing as she lifted the carafe.

When the carafe nearly slipped out of her hand, he took it from her and filled her glass for her, and then his own.

“As we deduced the other night,” he whispered. “It seems you and I cannot stay away from one another.” She looked at him then, those green eyes wide and pinning him to the spot.

“Oh? You’ve managed it perfectly well the last couple of days.”

He sighed, realizing what her frustration was now. He could have called on her, yes, it would have been obvious to do so after what had passed between them.

*I cannot do that. I cannot marry her.*

“And what would your family have said to that?” he reminded her, placing the carafe down on the table in front of them.

“It is a fair point.”

“Exactly.” He nudged her arm, desperate to have her look at him again. “What did you make of the music?”

“Oh,” she sighed heavily. “I do not think I get much enjoyment out of things like this.”

“You looked bored.”

“You noticed?” She turned her head toward him. So glad to have those green eyes on him again, he shifted his body completely to face her, leaning on the table beside them. She did the same, the two of them mirror images of one another in their stance.

“I may have noticed,” he whispered, lowering his voice further. “You stared at everything but the musicians,” he said with a laugh. “Those poor violinists. If they had jumped up and performed a jig, you might have noticed them then.”

“I prefer the theatre, farces, something to laugh at. Or, better yet, I like being outside entirely.” Her words struck him so much that he stared at her, waiting for her to go on. “Give me the garden or a good walk any day.”

“You enjoy exploring, Emily?” he whispered.

“Who does not?” She laughed at the idea. “Though knowing my sister,” she rolled her eyes, “she would probably laugh at what a state I end up in if I go walking some days when it’s wild and rainy. I make quite a spectacle of myself.”

“Now that is a pleasant image,” he whispered.

“What is?”

“You all sodden in the rain, with your gown...” He broke off, his eyes looking down at her. She narrowed her gaze at him. “I said something

wrong?” his voice deepened, and they both moved a step toward each other.

*What is happening? Why can I not stay away from her?*

“You are reminding me of what passed the other night.”

“Is that so wrong?”

“Very wrong, you rake,” she said, almost accusingly, though her glare was playful. He chuckled at her response. They both lifted their glasses to their lips and took a sip, neither one of them breaking their gaze. “How about you, Your Grace?” She’d returned to his title, which was disappointing after hearing her moan his name in such a breathy way earlier in the week.

“Are you asking me if I am reminded of the other night?”

“No,” she laughed at his teasing, “I’m asking if you enjoyed the music.” She motioned to the violinists who were already preparing for their second half. Some people returned to their seats, but most didn’t and continued to mill around the room, talking with other guests.

“I found it...” Jacob struggled for the right word. The musicians were highly skilled, and he appreciated that, but he’d barely listened to a note of it. “I did not truthfully pay much attention.”

“Oh? Why not?” Emily asked.

He raised his glass to his lips, taking a gulp as he stared at her, not needing to say the words.

“Oh.” She made that sound again, but this time with more understanding. “You are not supposed to be doing this.” She thrust a finger toward him.

“Do what?”

“After what passed the other night, you and I have not seen each other, have we?”

“No.” He had not called, that was what irked her so.

*For I cannot marry you, Emily.*

“Is it so wrong to be drawn to you?”

“Do not say such things,” she pleaded and turned away, looking out toward the musicians, as if eagerly waiting for them to begin again. “You will be the death of me.”

“Me?” He laughed at the mere idea, once more mirroring her stance and turning to look at the musicians. Their arms brushed together and they both

flinched, but neither of them moved away. “There seems to be an irony to your words when you are the one that I cannot stay away from.”

“You should see things from my perspective.”

“I’m a little distracted with seeing it from my own.”

“Oh, you are infuriating.”

“As are you,” he said simply. “On many counts.”

“Then leave my side and return to your friend.” She waved a hand toward Seth across the room. “At least then we are both away from temptation.”

“That I fear I cannot do.” He looked at her then, and she did a double take, her chin turning back toward him twice. As the violinists started again, many stayed in their position around the room, listening attentively from their positions. Jacob had one more thing to say, so he mouthed the words to Emily. “Can’t... stay... away.”

She seemed to shudder; he could feel that shiver with her arm against his own, though she looked away swiftly.

“I...” she attempted to say something, then a lady nearby frowned at her for being too loud. Emily fell silent and they pretended to listen to the first song of the second half, though Jacob knew she paid as little attention as he did.

They both kept glancing at one another, all too aware of how close they stood together.

When the song finished and the applause began, Jacob whispered in her ear.

“Excuse yourself for the privy in a minute or so and meet me in the corridor.”

“I cannot,” she hissed.

“Please.” He bowed his head to her, as if in parting, then put his claret glass down on the table and moved to the door of the guildhall, walking slowly and calmly out.

He passed under an archway into a smaller antechamber. It was where people had left their pelisses and Spencer jackets, along with hats placed on hooks. He paced up and down in the room, hoping that Emily would soon follow.

Another violin piece passed, and he heard the applause echo down the corridor, then she appeared in the hallway, looking for him, her blonde hair shimmering in the moonlight.

“Psst!” he hissed, calling to her. She turned toward the archway and then moved toward him, her movements swift.

“I should not be here,” she whispered.

“Then why come?” he asked.

“Because you are infuriating!”

“That is not a convincing answer.” He chuckled. “Surely you’d be running from me then.”

“I should be running.” Yet she walked closer toward him. He reached for her hands, toying with them in his grasp and turning one of them over. He lifted it to his lips and pulled down the long glove, getting access to her wrist where he kissed the back.

“Neither of us are running,” he reminded her. When she closed her eyes, clearly wanting more, he couldn’t resist. He lowered her hand between them and shifted his palm to her waist, sliding it across her back to pull him into her.

He kissed her, with such passion and fierceness that she fell into him, her hands gripping his biceps tightly. His mind was full of images, thinking of her gripping his arms in such a way, as if he were to press her up against the wall of this cloakroom and lift her skirt, entering her. What a feeling that would be! Intoxicating to the senses.

He deepened the kiss further, pressing the boundaries, and she made no sign of resistance. Her hands shifted beneath his tailcoat, reaching for more of him as his hands took hold of her back and her waist, his fingers splaying outward with the need to get closer to her, to feel more of her.

She pulled back sharply, the loss of her lips so sudden that he was leaning toward her already.

“We shouldn’t,” she murmured hurriedly.

“Then why come?”

“I don’t know.”

“Then kiss me again,” he pleaded, pulling her into him. She didn’t resist him and moved her arms to wrap around his neck. It became such an intimate kiss that when he backed her up, they nearly ended up entangled in the coats.

The sound of one of the coats falling off its peg distracted Jacob. It was only later he realized that the sound must have covered up someone’s footsteps, muffling those that were approaching.

“Unhand her.” The words were spoken with such anger that Jacob pulled back immediately. He raised his hands, palms outward as a sign of innocence, creating space between himself and Emily.

Her cheeks were flushed, and her lips slightly swollen from all their kissing. She staggered forward, her body turning swiftly around to see who had approached them.

Jacob already knew, without having to turn, for he recognized the voice, but he turned around anyway, ready to face the condemnation that would surely come his way.

*I have wronged this family so much because of my own weakness for Emily. They must despise me for everything.*

Through the darkness, he saw two tall shadowy figures standing in the corridor. In time with one another, they both stepped forward. The first one Jacob looked at was the Duke of Elbridge, his face so tightened, and his eyes so narrowed they were but flecks of black in the darkness.

There was so much hatred in that face as he stared at Jacob, not even moving his gaze away to look at Emily.

Jacob's eyes slowly slid to Emily's sister, the Duchess of Elbridge. She strode in front of her husband, a look of such pain and horror on her face, it was a wonder she did not faint or swoon from the shock of what she had seen.

"The scandal cannot be escaped now," she muttered, the quiet words settling over them all.

## CHAPTER 12



Emily pushed against the coats behind her, stepping off the wall as she understood exactly what she now faced. Yes, she had been weak, powerless to Jacob's suggestion to meet him outside of that room, but she had gone willingly. She knew they'd end up in some sort of passionate embrace again, for she had to face the truth, she could not resist him!

Rachel looked at her with such anger, Emily prayed the coats would swallow her up and hide her from the world.

"I cannot believe it," Rachel muttered and turned her back on Emily.

It was as if she was turning against Emily for good, discarding her, making her an outcast. Emily stepped forward and Rachel sought refuge with her husband, holding onto his arm. Daniel at last looked at her, his warning gaze urging her not to take another step forward.

"This cannot be ignored," he declared, his voice deep and resonating across the cloakroom. "Your Grace..." He paused, looking at Jacob.

Emily turned to face him too, seeing how much he had transformed. He'd gone from being the charming man whose arms she'd willingly fallen into, to a man who was hanging his head forward, his hands on his hips, breathing heavily, as if he could not bear what was happening to him.

*It's almost as though a weight is crushing his shoulders.*

"I'd urge you to say something in your defense, but clearly, there is nothing to be said," Daniel said dismissively. "You have dishonored my sister-in-law, and from your disappearance the other night at the ball, I am going to hazard a guess that this is not the first time."

Neither Jacob nor Emily said anything, but the fact that Jacob looked up sharply seemed to confirm it. Daniel's frown only grew as Rachel slid her hand down his arm and took his hand, still refusing to look Emily in the eye again.

"You will make reparations for this. Now," Daniel demanded.

Emily flinched, recognizing something in what Daniel had said. Yes, when he and Rachel had met, their meeting had been misinterpreted as scandal, but Daniel was such a gentleman of propriety and expectation, even duty, he'd proposed to Rachel the next day and they had married swiftly after that. Rachel had often talked of how he had rescued her. He could have ignored the scandal, for it had amounted to nothing, but he hadn't.

*He would not let Rachel's name be ruined. Now, he is expecting Jacob to do the same for me.*

Emily turned her eyes to Jacob, that same expectation lingering in the air.

“You will marry her,” Daniel said firmly, stepping forward and releasing Rachel’s hand.

“What?” Jacob spluttered, taking a step back.

“You heard me. Do not pretend to be dumb as well as a cad,” Daniel waved a hand at Jacob, derogatively. “You have compromised her. I cannot let this go on and pretend nothing has happened. You will do what is right by Emily, and you will marry her.”

“I will not.” Jacob’s answer was so plain that Emily staggered back. She reached for the coats behind her, clinging to them to keep her up, but she ended up knocking more off their pegs.

“You...” Words failed her.

Jacob wouldn’t even look at her, though his head turned in her direction. His eyes landed on the discarded coats and pelisses instead.

“You refuse?” Rachel spluttered, finding her voice and stepping forward to reach her husband’s side. “You would dishonor a woman then refuse to do what is right and marry her?”

“I cannot marry her. There are other reasons for this, but believe me, it is for the best reason.”

“If this situation wasn’t so appalling, I’d laugh at your pathetic attempt to escape it,” Daniel muttered darkly.

Emily didn’t hear any more for a second. She understood Daniel was insulting Jacob. She felt briefly proud to call Daniel her brother-in-law. As protective as Rachel, he was fighting her corner, but she didn’t listen to the words for a fresh horror was entering her mind.

Jacob had been willing to marry Bridget beforehand. He’d been perfectly accepting of the fact that he would marry a complete stranger, for convenience, to have those children he had mentioned the night they shared secrets. Yet he could not bring himself to marry Emily? It didn’t make sense!

Were they not a good pairing? They made one another laugh, and they were drawn together. There was this heat, this passion, that could make their nights together unfathomably wonderful, but he didn’t want it.

Emily felt instantly disgusting. She looked down at her body and curled herself inward, her shoulders hunched as she raised a hand over her lips. She was just like any other woman that Jacob had seduced. She was another woman who had succumbed to his rakish ways, but she didn’t amount to anything more.

*Maybe it was all an act after all. Maybe he wasn’t as powerless around me as he pretended to be.*

“You refuse then?” Daniel said, his sharp tone bringing Emily’s focus back to the moment. She watched Jacob and Daniel glaring at each other, neither one of them backing down.

“I must,” Jacob said, with startling calmness.

“Then you leave me no choice.” Daniel went rigid.

Rachel must have sensed what he was going to say next, long before Emily did, for she took his arm and pulled him back, as if she could stop him from saying his next words.

“No—” she begged but was cut off.

“You have dishonored my family, and I must repair that honor somehow. I demand a duel of you,” Daniel said sharply.

“A duel!?” Emily discovered her voice again and stepped away from the coats, hurrying across the room. Rachel got in the way and held Emily back, clearly reluctant to let her anywhere near Jacob again.

“Daniel, do not be a fool,” Rachel said over her shoulder to her husband.  
“You cannot duel him.”

“It must be done,” Daniel did not back down. “Honor must be preserved.”

“You wish to duel?” Jacob repeated, his skin turning a pale milky pallor, all too obvious in the moonlight that shone through the nearest window. “Your Grace, the reason I deny marrying her—”

“Should not matter,” Daniel’s voice was so firm, Emily could have sworn it echoed off the walls. “You should be putting duty, reputation, and the lady first. Not your own selfishness.” He looked down at Jacob then.

Even the way Jacob hung his head gave no confidence in his character. Emily stared at him, not wanting to believe that the man she had been so drawn to, had such a shoddy character. He was still the man who had protected her from Lord Gilchrist, was he not? Still, the one who could talk freely with her and share secrets. Could he really be just this cold and callous rake after all?

“We shall duel, and nothing shall change my mind on that matter.” Daniel turned his back on Jacob. “Keep an eye on your messengers for a time and a place. It shall be soon.”

Daniel moved toward Rachel and Emily. “We are leaving. Now.”

“But—” Emily was desperate to stop this. If they dueled, at least one of them would be hurt, and could even end up dead.

“Not now,” Rachel shushed Emily and took her arm, dragging her out of the room.

“You cannot do this, Daniel.” Emily pleaded with him, reaching for him, yet peering past his shoulder constantly, trying to get one last glimpse of Jacob.

He looked at her then. His eyes found hers through the darkness. There seemed to be pain in that expression, unlike anything she had ever seen before. It was a far cry from the passion that had been in those eyes shortly before they had kissed.

*Oh, how I wish I could turn back to that moment and hold onto it! May these awful moments have never happened.*

“Daniel!” she hissed.

Yet Daniel and Rachel didn’t take her back to the guildhall room. They turned her toward the staircase and hurried her down it instead.

“I’m sorry it has come to this,” Rachel muttered repeatedly, staring forward. “I’m so sorry. I should have protected you better.”

“What? What in God’s name do you mean?” Emily asked wildly, yet her sister didn’t appear to hear her words. She just looked at the stairs ahead of her instead.

“We’ll get her to the carriage, and you wait there with her,” Daniel spoke quickly, as if Emily wasn’t a part of this conversation at all. “I shall return to

the guildhall for your father and Bridget.”

“Yes, that is best,” Rachel agreed.

“Are you two mad? You cannot duel, Daniel!” Emily pleaded with him desperately as they escaped the door of the guildhall and came to a stumbling stop in front of their carriage on the road.

“What else am I supposed to do?” Daniel said to her as they came face to face. “I will not have any man treat you in this way, Emily. None.” Then he turned on his heel and fled back into the building, as Rachel held Emily back and refused to let her enter again.



“What does it say?” Bridget took Emily’s shoulder and peered over at the note that was crumpled in her hand.

Emily raised the note a little higher so her sister could read it for herself. She was at the breakfast table, though she had barely been able to concentrate on her breakfast. That morning their father had been called away early on business and Emily thanked her fortune that it was so. She was not sure she could brave the disapproving look of her father when he discovered what had happened.

Rachel and Daniel had kept it a secret from him the night before, for he was in his cups and Rachel had feared his response. For now, it was their secret and Bridget’s, but it would not remain that way for long.

“Oh my,” Bridget gasped as she read the letter, urging Emily to focus on what was written on the paper.

*‘Dearest Emily,*

*It seems this morning Daniel is still determined to have a duel. He is blinded by his fury on your behalf, something I can hardly blame him for. Each time I think of you and the Duke of Thorne, and what I saw with my own eyes last night, I am possessed of equal fury and fear.*

*You should have been protected from men such as him.*

*I shall continue to talk to Daniel, to plead with him not to go ahead with this duel. I know he insists it is a manner of reclaiming honor, but I am not willing to risk his injury, or something greater, and from what you said last night, I know you think the same.*

*Be patient, sister. Allow me to speak to Daniel further today and dissuade him from this foolish decision.*

*Your sister,*

*Rachel.’*

Emily shakily lowered the letter to the table as Bridget sat heavily down in the high-backed chair beside her.

“Oh Lord,” Bridget muttered and reached for a cup of tea, downing it readily. “I cannot believe it has come to this.”

“No. Nor I,” Emily whispered, her shaking fingers resting on the letter.

“To think that the Duke of Thorne...” Bridget broke off, shaking her head.

“There were two people there, Bridget.” Emily raised her gaze from the letter and looked at her sister. “Something Rachel and Daniel seem to be ignoring is the fact that I went to the Duke of Thorne last night. I could have resisted; I could have refused...” She shrugged.

“You did not.”

“Precisely.” To Emily’s shock, she saw Bridget smile a little.

“There is something different between you,” she whispered softly. “Something you could not escape, is there not?”

“Do not make it into something romantic, when plainly, it is nothing of the kind.” Emily rested her elbows on the table and planted her face into her hands. “He has refused to marry me. If he looked at me as I did him, then surely, he would not have done that.”

“You would marry him then? If he asked?” Bridget asked, leaning forward.

There was something strange about admitting such a thing to Bridget. After all, she was the sister who was supposed to have married the Duke of Thorne. As Emily lifted her face out of her hands, Bridget smiled sadly.

“I am not hurt by this mess,” she said with vigor, clearly reading Emily’s thoughts. “The injured party here is you.” She grasped at Emily’s hand. “Now, tell me the truth. You would marry him if he asked?”

“I would,” Emily muttered, startled at the lack of hesitation in her own voice. She was fascinated by the Duke of Thorne. That passion and attraction were strong indeed, drawing her to him, yet everything she knew about his character was equally alluring. The intimacy of the evening they had shared secrets, sat together in the orangery, was not something she would ever forget.

“Then we must hope he comes to his senses and proposes before such a duel can take place,” Bridget said with a heavy sigh and reached for her breakfast. Fortunately, she was able to eat, whereas Emily could not.

Her eyes fixed on Rachel’s letter before her, trying to make sense of it.

“A few days ago, Rachel washed her hands of me,” Emily whispered.

“I beg your pardon?” Bridget stiffened in the chair beside her, not quite raising the buttered bun to her lips.

“We argued in the garden,” Emily explained in a rush. “She accused me of keeping secrets, saying she was certain that I was sneaking off with the Duke of Thorne. She said she wished to protect me, and I... I told her she was not my mother.” Emily still recalled the hurt expression. “Mama Rachel.” Her voice softened at one of the nicknames she’d given their older sister over the years.

“You said that?” Bridget’s lips pursed together. “Well, she is not, but I imagine the curtness of the words shocked Rachel to the core.”

“They did,” Emily nodded, shifting in her chair to face Bridget. “She as good as washed her hands of me, and yet this letter,” she snatched it up, “shows that she is protecting me again.”

“She always protects us.” Bridget dropped the bun to her plate, wiped her fingers together, and took the letter from Emily’s hands. “Despite what Rachel says when she’s irked, it is not how she feels. *This* is how she truly feels. She would protect you fiercely like a mama wolf guarding her cubs.”

“And what have I done in return?” Emily sat forward, planting her forehead against the dining room table with such a thud that Bridget flinched at her side. “I have put her husband in a position where he is willing to risk his life for my honor.”

“Then change it.” Bridget pushed the letter toward her on the table. “Did that hurt by the way?”

“It did.” Emily raised herself and rubbed her temple.

“Emily, listen. Whatever is happening between you and the Duke of Thorne is your business. I do not imagine Daniel challenging the Duke of Thorne to a duel will change much. If he’s willing to brave a duel, then his objections to the marriage must be something complicated. Only you can persuade him otherwise.” Bridget gestured toward her. “Go to him. Speak to him.”

“Speak to him? Imagine what Rachel would say then!”

“You would be speaking to him in her interest as much as your own,” Bridget declared with vigor. “And she need not know of it.” She tapped her nose. “It will be our secret, for now.”

Emily’s eyes widened as she stared at her sister.

“When did you become so mischievous, Bridget?”

“Me? Mischievous?” Bridget laughed with a rather innocent smile in place. “Never. I’m the sister that behaves.”

Emily laughed with her, though it was brief and did not last long.

“You are right. I must try to speak to him. If I can talk some sense into him then maybe this duel could be avoided.”

“Exactly. Go to him.” Bridget waved her to her feet. “Our father is on business so will not notice your absence, and with a little luck, Rachel does not plan to visit today. If she does, I shall think of some excuse for you.”

“That means you’d have to lie,” Emily reminded her sister, placing her hands on the back of Bridget’s chair.

“Ooh, lying! Well, I could give it a go,” she said playfully, and they smiled at one another again.

“The best of sisters,” Emily whispered and took her sister’s shoulder.

“Do not compliment me too much,” Bridget waved her off once more. “Now go, quickly. The sooner you see the Duke of Thorne, perhaps this can indeed all be avoided.”

Emily hastened from the room. In the hallway, she requested the butler for a horse to be prepared then she pulled on her riding pelisse and a bonnet, for the air outside had turned cold and the wind was strong today.

Striding out into the courtyard, she pulled herself into the saddle atop a tall gray mare and turned the horse to ride down the drive. She hesitated just once, glancing back at the window that led to the dining room.

Bridget stood there, offering an encouraging wave.

Emily would not have blamed Bridget for being hurt by all of this, yet she showed no pain at all, only concern for Emily.

*What would I do without my sisters?*

Flicking the reins of the horse, she urged the mare down the driveway and rode away. It was time to try and protect them from what scandal would befall their family, if the Duke of Thorne refused to marry her.

*I just have to persuade him to marry me now.*

## CHAPTER 13



Jacob walked through his garden, though he'd left his tailcoat inside at the breakfast table, for he'd strode out of the house fast that morning, with no thought of the cold weather. There was a light mist in the air, but it still didn't persuade him to return inside.

Once, the butler came to see him, urging him to return, but Jacob politely turned him down and continued to pace the formal terraces of his garden. Usually, the borders were so beautiful they distracted him from his woes, but not today. He found all the flowers were dull in color and there were scarcely any birds in the garden to keep him company at all.

Merely one gray and black jackdaw hovered nearby, watching him from a low garden wall. He felt judged by that strange gaze and turned away, walking back the other way through the garden.

There was a commotion somewhere around the house. The groomsman must have been startled by something, for Jacob heard his familiar shout and a horse's whinny, but Jacob thought nothing more of it. If his steward had called early to discuss business, then it would have to wait.

*I cannot talk to anyone at this moment.*

He glanced up at the windows of his house, relieved for one thing. His mother was sleeping well this morning and had not yet come down from her bedchamber. Perhaps the tonics the healing woman had given were helping her after all.

“They told me I’d find you here.”

*That voice!*

Jacob froze, his boots scattering the stones beneath him on the gravel path. It seemed to be impossible that Emily would be here, but he could not mistake that voice. His imagination certainly hadn’t conjured her.

Slowly, he turned around to face her. She stood a short distance away, her blonde hair wild beneath her bonnet, the tendrils tangling in the wind. Her riding pelisse fluttered too, unable to stay still. She didn’t seem to notice the light rain that was dampening her but stared straight at him.

Those green eyes pinned him to the spot.

“Emily,” he murmured, “what are you doing here?”

“What do you think?” She walked around a border that separated them, but he walked the other way, determined to keep a distance between them. “Oh,

now you dance away from me, do you? You have not done that for a while.”

“I think it best, do you not?” he said artfully, gesturing between them. He hopped one border then put himself behind a rose bush, the thorny shrub between them as some sort of shield. “If I cannot behave when I am around you, then clearly I cannot be *trusted* to be around you.”

She flinched at the words, as if he’d said something shocking indeed, and halted on the other side of the rose bush.

“Why are you here, Emily?” He motioned toward her, fearing they had no chaperone. If his mother saw them now from her bedchamber window, she too may insist on a marriage.

*That would delight her.*

Yet it made his stomach tighten into a knot once again. It felt wrong to condemn Emily to a short marriage indeed.

“Why do you think?” she scoffed, shaking her head. “I know I complained about my sister, but Rachel is protective, and her husband is so principled a man that he has declared to a duel in order to protect me.”

Jacob raised his hands, steepling them in front of his face. He didn’t need to be reminded of what the Duke of Elbridge had said. He’d been thinking about it all morning.

“I cannot let him be hurt, and through him, my sister, all because of what I have done,” Emily said hurriedly.

“Your care of them does you credit,” Jacob said in a small voice.

“I am not seeking compliments, or even your good opinion in this moment.” She tried to walk around the rose bush, but he went the other way. “Why are you dancing away from me?”

“Because I will not be drawn in again.” He glanced down at her, knowing it would be all too easy to go to her.

How simple would it be to take her hand, to kiss her, to promise to marry her? Then, on the wedding day, make love to her. It felt natural, even desirable, but his heart was betraying him, for he knew what, in reality, such a day would lead to.

“You speak as if I am a danger to you.”

“You are!” he said with sudden passion. She stepped back as if he had wounded her, with her lips parting. “Trust me, Emily, this is for the best.”

“What? To stay away from one another?”

“Yes!” The vigor overtook him as he stepped toward her. Suddenly, they had changed places in their little cat-and-mouse game. He wasn’t even sure how

it had happened, but now Emily was the one walking away from him around the rose bush, and he was pursuing her. “I have to stay away from you.”

“Would it be so awful, Jacob?” she murmured. The way she used his Christian name had him weak. He halted on the spot, as did she. “Is the idea of marrying me so awful?”

The pain in her voice made him look to the sky. His eyes danced across the clouds as he breathed deeply, feeling that breath shudder as he exhaled.

*It would be far from awful for me but could lead to heartbreak for you.*

He kept the words to himself. He couldn't utter them aloud, what would she think then?

“You were willing to marry a stranger.” Her voice was bold, urging him to look at her once more. “Yet the idea of marrying me is so unbearable to you.”

“It is not that.”

“What is it then?” she asked wildly, stepping forward and grasping the bush haphazardly. She caught a thorn in her hand and snatched it away, shaking her palm.

Jacob closed the distance between them and grasped her wrist, turning her hand outward so he could examine the wound. The thorn was still stuck in

her palm. Hurriedly, he took hold of it, and pulled it free.

*Pain. It is what I wish to avoid for her.*

“The reason is that I do not deserve you, Emily.” He kept his gaze on her hand in his grasp, refusing to look her in the eye now. “That is the simple truth.” He took a handkerchief from the pocket of his waistcoat and wiped the spot of blood in the palm of her hand. It was a soft touch, one of the gentlest that had ever been shared between them. “It is why I cannot marry you.”

Her hand abruptly left his. She staggered away, nearly walking into another of the rose bushes nearby.

“Emily?” he called to her, but it did little good.

Her breath hitched and she spun away. Grasping the skirt of her gown, she picked it up a little and ran through the garden, hurrying around borders and even jumping a small border of dahlias in her wish to escape him.

“Emily!” He heard her tears and could not bear it. Without thinking, he ran after her, determined to catch her and stop these tears.

When she reached the end of the terrace, she scampered up the steps fast, and his boots slipped on the stones so badly that he nearly fell over. He scarcely managed to stay standing by gripping a nearby wall, but she was far ahead of him by now.

She had reached the driveway and ran up a flight of yellow-stone steps on the terrace and darted out of view.

“Emily!” he called again, following her up the steps and taking them two at a time. He caught a glimpse of her halfway across the drive as she glanced back. Her eyes were red, her cheeks tear-stained, and the sight of those tears broke him.

*I am causing her pain right now. This is what I wanted to avoid!*

He chased her across the driveway, praying that all of his staff had returned inside and that no one would see him pursuing her through his grounds.

She reached the courtyard on the other side of the house fast and darted into the stable, clearly hurrying to her horse in her effort to escape him. He couldn't leave it like this. Perhaps if he apologized, and explained himself a little more, then she would understand.

She darted into the stable and hurried between the cubicles, rushing to find her horse, as he finally caught up with her.

“Emily?” He took her arm, but she snatched it back.

“I thought you wanted not to be drawn in, Your Grace.” She'd returned to the formality of his address, and it cut deep. “If that is what you wish, then pray, do not touch me again.” She saw her horse and ran toward it, the tears still rushing down her cheeks.

The sight of her chest rising and falling with the pain caused by him, broke him.

He pursued her once more, but before she could take the reins of her horse, he gently took her arms and backed her up from the animal.

“No,” she muttered, planting her hands on his chest and trying to force him away from her. They ended up entangled against the wall, with him standing in front of her, their boots brushing together.

The sudden heat was there once again, as it always was around Emily, but Jacob fought it. He looked up to the wooden rafters of the stable, fighting his urge for her. He had already dishonored her, more than once. He would not be doing so again, least of all here in his stable.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered.

“I don’t know what you are apologizing for,” she muttered between her tears, her hands still pushing against his stomach to try and be rid of him, yet he was stronger and easily held his ground. “Is it for refusing to marry me? Or the lie of telling me you do not deserve me?”

“It is the truth.” He snapped his gaze toward hers. He raised his hands to her cheeks.

“What are you doing?”

“Please, Emily, do not cry.” He dried her tears with his thumbs, but as fast as he dried them, more tears followed.

“I cannot believe this.” She hung her head, forcing him to drop his hands. He moved them to her waist instead, finding as always, it was impossible not to touch her. “You must hate me so much if you were willing to marry my sister, but not me.”

“Hate you? An impossible thing.” He moved toward her, pressing his lips near her ear so he could whisper to her. “I could never hate you.” She shuddered, but he had no idea if it was their proximity to one another that caused it, or the cold weather and her damp gown.

“Y-you must do,” she stammered through her tears. “Nothing else makes sense.”

“Something else does.” He closed his eyes, tempted to tell her all at that moment. Maybe if he revealed the truth to her, she would run from him as she should do. She’d run for the hills and stay far away from him, to protect her own heart, but he couldn’t be certain of it. There was every chance she’d insist she was willing to take the risk of being with him, but it was a risk he knew he couldn’t take.

“No.” She shook her head, raising it a little. The sight of those green eyes so wet with tears broke him. He moved closer toward her, so their bodies were settled together against the wall. “Your objections must amount to hatred for

you to deny this and be willing to risk injury, or worse, death, just to avoid marrying me.”

“Surely you can tell after everything that has passed, I do not hate you.” He was losing the battle by being so close to her. Desperate to stop those tears, to persuade her that she was wrong in her thoughts, he moved his lips to hers.

He was certain she’d push him back from that kiss and refuse it, yet she did not. Her lips molded to his and her hands went from pushing against his stomach to clinging onto the buttons of his waistcoat. The fervor of that grip had his fingers splaying outward across her waist, then sinking down to her hips.

What started as a chaste kiss grew fast, and heated, and soon enough, they were both gasping into that kiss as he pressed her against the wall, his tongue tangling with hers as he dominated it.

A sound reached his ears. It was the groomsman’s voice calling to one of the stable boys in the yard. It would not be long before they entered the stable and the two of them were discovered.

Jacob pulled back from the kiss, seeing the same fear of discovery in Emily’s wet eyes. Her breath hitched and she didn’t release him, just as his hands couldn’t leave her.

“How can you kiss me like that,” she whispered so quietly, she practically mouthed the words, “and yet refuse to marry me still?”

“Because it is complicated,” he insisted. He shifted his grasp to take one of her hands from his chest and drew her toward her horse. He helped her up onto the animal, so she sat in the saddle, looking down at him, with her quivering hands reaching for the reins. “Believe me, Emily.” He laid a hand on her knee, and she looked down at that touch, as if it did something to her. “This is not just about reputations now. For me, it’s about something infinitely more important.”

*Your happiness. Your life. And the happiness you deserve in that life.*

“You make no sense to me,” Emily’s voice hitched again, and she flicked the reins. Before Jacob could try to persuade her anymore that this was for the best, she shot out of the cubicle on the tall gray mare and was gone, hurrying from the stable.

He stared after her, stumbling to regain his balance. He caught sight of her darting down the driveway with two of the stable boys jumping out of the way. She rode with skill, so much so that Jacob admired her for a few minutes, marveling at her speed, then he shook himself, coming back to the moment.

“She will hate me for this. She cannot see the truth of this.” He covered his face with his hands, wondering how he’d come to this point of breaking Emily’s heart.



Emily left the horse in the stable then staggered out. She prayed that all her tears had mixed with the rain so much that no one would notice her distress when she entered the house. Disorientated, numb, she reached for the front door and pushed it open, walking slowly into the hallway.

She dragged her wet skirts behind her, leaving streaks and puddles of water on the floor. With her head hung low, she found it impossible to raise her eyes from that floor, thinking of everything that had passed between herself and Jacob.

How could he kiss her like that, as if he cared for her, and then refuse to marry her? Could he not see that her heart was cracking in two because of him? And what was this objection he spoke of that mattered so much more to him than reputation?

“Oh, my goodness!” Bridget’s gasping voice urged Emily to look up. Her sister flung herself across the room and shrugged off a shawl she had wrapped around her own shoulders. She took off Emily’s pelisse, unbuttoning it fast, then wrapped the shawl in its place. “We need to get you warm, Emily. You’ll catch your death like this.”

“I’m fine,” Emily murmured, feeling the lie made her mouth dry.

“What happened?” Bridget whispered, glancing over her shoulder. The cautious way she feared them being overheard told Emily everything she needed to know.

*Rachel is here.*

Emily answered by shaking her head. It was the only answer she needed to give. Bridget nodded in understanding and wrapped her arms around Emily,

holding onto her as she fought more tears, her breath hitching. Emily buried herself in her sister's shoulder, holding onto her for dear life.

"Where have you been?" Rachel's panicked voice came from across the hallway.

Emily didn't release Bridget but angled her head around so she could look at Rachel as she approached.

"Riding," Emily murmured. "Trying to think of something else."

"We need to get her warm," Bridget said hurriedly.

"Yes, we do. This way, we have lit a fire in here."

Each sister took one of Emily's arms and she was hurried into the parlor where they ushered her down to kneel in front of the fire. Rachel at once took over, protecting as she always did. The maids were hurried to prepare a warm bath upstairs, and hot sweet tea was presented in seconds under Emily's nose, pushed toward her lips.

Bridget knelt beside her, clutching her hand. It was warm against Emily's cold palm.

"What happened, Rachel?" Emily found her voice at last as Rachel sat down on a footstool nearby, her cheeks flushed after all her activity. "With Daniel."

Rachel sighed heavily, shaking her head as she stared into the flames, with the red-tinged light shining on her features.

“Daniel cannot be moved,” she whispered, her voice resolute yet disappointed. “He is adamant that if the Duke of Thorne does not back down, he will protect your reputation, and that of this family.”

“There will be a duel then?” Bridget whispered.

“Yes, there will.” Rachel buried her face in her hands.

The news broke Emily’s heart even more and fresh tears spilled down her cheeks. Both Rachel and Bridget flung themselves at her, embracing her tightly, as she cried.

## CHAPTER 14



“*D*octor Rainer, you didn’t need to come again,” Jacob murmured as he rolled down his shirt sleeves.

“Your mother insisted upon it,” Doctor Rainer said in a low tone. “Seeing you come in all drenched yesterday, she feared you’d have a fever.”

“I am well,” Jacob assured him, then hesitated, glancing at the Doctor beside him. “I am, am I not?”

“I can find nothing wrong,” Doctor Rainer smiled and shook his head.

“Yes, that’s what they said about my father for many years.” Jacob sighed and sat back in his chair in the parlor as Doctor Rainer stood and packed away his apparatus in his leather bag.

“If I may say something, Your Grace, about your father’s condition as we are alone.” He glanced over his shoulder, clearly making sure that Catarina wasn’t about to abruptly enter the room.

“Go on,” Jacob urged. “My mother has gone into the village to see the healer woman she relies on so much.”

“Good.” The doctor sat down again briefly, adopting a serious tone. “Your father’s condition was a sudden heart problem. Such things happen, and whilst there are things a doctor can recognize when it comes to the heart, other times...” He sighed heavily, shaking his head. “It is sudden. There is not much a doctor can do.”

“I remember.” Jacob tried to force away the memory of peering through the door of the great hall as he watched his father clutching at his chest and his left arm. He’d dropped to his knees as Catarina screamed beside him, calling for help.

Jacob had been so young, the memory was distant, almost blurry. He half wondered if part of the memory was invented and not even true. Had he truly walked toward his father and been hurried away by the maid?

“When such things happen, I see no reason why a man should put off living his life,” the doctor said casually as he stood once more and picked up his leather case. “Live now, Your Grace. Do not live in fear of tomorrow.” He bowed his head, and with these words was gone, hurrying out of the room.

Jacob stared after the doctor, so stunned by the words that he didn’t know what to think or feel. Slowly, he stood and walked toward the window, expecting to see the doctor take to his horse and cart and ride away again down the drive. Beside the cart though there was another horse that had just arrived.

When Jacob saw it was a tall gray, his mind first went to Emily. He thought of their frustrated kiss in the stable, her tears, her heartbreak, then he saw it wasn't Emily at all.

"Seth?" he murmured in surprise.

Seth practically leapt down from his horse and tossed the reins to the nearest stable boy who had run out to assist him. He took the stairs of the front stoop two at a time then disappeared from Jacob's view at the window.

He turned around in the parlor, waiting for his friend to enter. Less than a minute later, Seth burst into the room, dropping his gloves on a table nearby and shrugging off the wet frock coat that he hadn't waited for the butler to take for him.

"Is it true?" he asked wildly, striding across the room, his hair dampened on his forehead.

"Is what true?" Jacob asked, with his arms folded across his chest.

"That you are to fight a duel with the Duke of Elbridge."

"Ah," Jacob froze, staring at his friend. "The whisper has got out at last then. I wondered how long it would take."

“How can you say that so calmly?” Seth gestured frantically toward him with his hands and stepped closer still. “Jacob, have you lost your senses? Many a man is injured irreparably in a duel, and some even die. For a man so conscious of death, I would have thought you would want to avoid it.”

“Thank you for that reminder.” Jacob scratched the back of his neck and walked away from his friend a short distance, finding he needed the room to think.

“What happened, Jacob?”

“Do people not know?”

“No,” Seth followed him around the room. “There is a piece in the scandal sheets this morning which says there is a rumor the Duke of Thorne and the Duke of Elbridge are to duel, though the reason is not given.”

“The staff of his house must have overheard part of the discussion and sold it to the scandal sheet writers,” Jacob muttered more to himself. “I have not spoken of it at all, so it cannot have come from here.”

“Jacob!”

“Yes, yes, all right.” Jacob held up his hands to calm Seth and then told him everything. He revealed how he and Emily had been caught in the cloakroom together at the concert and how the Duke of Elbridge had happened upon them with his wife.

“Was he watching the pair of you?” Seth asked.

“Clearly. I fear they have suspected us for some time,” Jacob said with a sigh and returned to his armchair, dropping heavily into it. “Emily came to see me.”

“She did? What did she say?” Seth took another chair in the room, though he could plainly not rest or sit still within it. He constantly fidgeted, crossing and uncrossing his legs, then leaning forward with his elbows on his knees.

“She couldn’t understand why I wouldn’t marry her when I was prepared to marry her sister for the sake of convenience.” Jacob’s words were soft and quiet, a sharp contrast to Seth’s panic-stricken voice.

“Well? Why won’t you marry her?” Seth flicked his fingers at Jacob.

“Seth—”

“Come off it,” Seth shook his head. “You and I both know you care for this young woman more than you have any other. What would it matter if you did marry her? Eh? Tell me that!”

“And what would happen to Emily if in five years’ time I keel over? Hmm?” At last, Jacob found a sharp voice too. His words took Seth so much by surprise that he sat back in the chair, falling still. “My father was not ill. He

died suddenly one day—his heart just...” He splayed the fingers of one hand outward, signifying how it gave out without having to say the words. “What if that were to happen to me?”

“I know it is your mother’s fear, but surely it is not your fear too.” Seth shook his head and slowly leaned forward. “You are not your father.”

“I practically am.” Jacob gestured to his own body. In many ways he looked remarkably like his father, so much so that people commented on how alike they were. “From a young age, my mother compared the two of us. It is why we had this absurd promise for me to marry at thirty. She wants grandchildren, for there to be an heir to the line—”

“Then do it. Marry Emily, if that is what you fear.”

“When it was a marriage of convenience, that was fine.” Jacob leaned forward, adopting the same stance as Seth. “My wife, who cared naught for me, could move on and marry for love next time, affection, and be truly happy. You expect me to marry a woman who would be heartbroken the day I died? I would be condemning her to grief, Seth. I’d trap her in mourning. What kind of man am I if I did that to her?”

Seth blinked, with no words left.

Slowly, Jacob sat back and placed a hand over his face, wishing he could block out the world and all that he had done. He should not have been weak around Emily in the first place, then they wouldn’t be in this mess, but he hadn’t been able to help it.

It had been all too easy to kiss Emily.

“This mad fear of yours is something so well lodged that I see I cannot get rid of it so easily,” Seth muttered, shaking his head once more. “So let me tackle a different matter entirely here.”

“What is that?” Jacob asked, lowering his hand from his face.

“The whisper about this duel is out,” Seth said seriously, not even blinking. “If either you or the Duke of Elbridge are hurt, or God forbid, killed, then both families suffer regardless. Heartbreak for more than one party is inevitable. Instead of fearing the heartbreak you could cause in the future, take a look at the pain you are causing right now, you fool.”

Jacob slowly sat forward, listening closely.

“Someone is going to end up hurt, Jacob,” Seth muttered slowly. “Whether it’s you or the Duke of Elbridge at this point, Lady Emily would be in pain. Unless you avoided the duel altogether...”

There was much Seth said that was right, but all the same, something kicked against the idea in Jacob’s chest.

*I need to think about this more.*



Emily marched up and down the garden. The summer season seemed to have left them and she was certain the leaves were turning gold and orange, marking the turn of autumn. She busied herself with staring at these leaves, trying her best to avoid thinking of what was bothering her so much as she marched through the garden.

Her effort to distract herself didn't last long as a carriage arrived on the driveway, snatching her attention away. It was Rachel's and Daniel's carriage.

Grasping her skirt, Emily ran through the garden, hurrying to the driveway. Desperate to appeal to Daniel not to go ahead with the duel, she stopped by the side of the carriage, breathless, and waited for him to step down.

He jumped down first, as Rachel stepped down behind him, holding onto Joey in her arms.

"Daniel, please," Emily reached for him. "Please say you have changed your mind."

"I have not." Daniel's voice was firm.

Her stomach tightened into a knot, but before they could discuss it anymore, the front door to the house opened behind them and the sounds of someone's hurrying footsteps followed. It was Bridget, hurrying toward the pair of them. She went straight to Rachel, the two of them nodding together silently as if in

understanding.

Bridget took Joey in her arms and smiled, rather sadly.

“I’ll take care of him for as long as you need,” she said softly.

“Thank you.” Rachel turned back to face Daniel and Emily together.

“What is going on?” Emily asked, glancing between Rachel and Bridget as she recognized something was afoot.

“Bridget and I have made arrangements. Emily, please get in the carriage.” Rachel pointed to the coach.

Any thought Emily might have had of refusing her sister’s order paled when she saw Rachel’s face. She was on the warpath and full of fear, the lines of her face more noticeable than ever before. Behind Rachel, Bridget nodded eagerly, urging Emily to move toward the carriage.

“Very well,” Emily muttered and reached for the coach. “Where is it we are going?”

“You shall see.” Rachel pointed to her husband next. “Daniel?”

“What are you planning?” Daniel folded his arms and refused to move toward the carriage.

He had more strength in refusing Rachel than Emily did. She sat on the upholstered bench of the coach, peering her head out of the window at the couple.

“Something that will hopefully change our futures and avoid any bloodshed.” Rachel took her husband’s arm. That soft touch plainly changed things. He laid a palm over her hand and the look the two of them shared was so intimate that Emily felt wrong to be watching it.

There was true love in that look.

*I wonder what it is like to feel a man look at you like that?*

Emily’s mind filled with the picture of Jacob as they had stood together in his stable. All of those looks were full of fear, not one of them filled with love.

*Love... that was what was happening on my part at least, was it not?*

The fact that she had been risking it, perhaps running headlong into it made her inhale deeply. She sat back on the coach bench, no longer watching the intimate conversation between Rachel and Daniel but waiting for them to follow. She even moved to the far side of the carriage, so their low voices were muffled, so she could not hear what was said between them.

Whatever Rachel said in the end must have been enough, for she and Daniel entered the carriage and the door was closed. Rachel gave no instructions but tapped the door, indicating to the driver that they were ready to move on. As the coach took off, Emily peered out of the window, back to Bridget.

She stood on the top step by the front door, holding Joey in one arm. She lifted her other hand and waved as they parted. Emily struggled to wave back, her fears growing so much that she sank back into the seat.

A few minutes of silence passed between them.

Rachel and Daniel sat on the opposite bench to Emily, hand in hand, both looking down at that touch. Emily tried her best to push away the envy that crawled inside of her at the sight of that touch. Sometimes, she wondered if Rachel knew just how fortunate she was, to have ended up in a rushed marriage to a man that loved her so much, and she loved in return.

*They are devoted to one another. That is a rare thing indeed.*

Emily realized with horror it was what was missing from her own frustrated attraction to Jacob. Whatever it was he did feel for her, attraction, liking, perhaps even a hint of love, it was not enough. His refusal to marry her showed he did not want a relationship with her—he was not devoted.

She hung her head forward, lost in thought, when the conversation eventually began again.

“I pray you know what you are doing, love,” Daniel said softly to Rachel. “I fear what is afoot.”

“Trust me,” Rachel’s voice was firm. “Sometimes things are not as lost as they appear to be. It just requires a little more thought.”

“You seem awfully confident.” Emily looked up, her eyes finding her sister’s. “You sending me to the country to avoid scandal? A nunnery perhaps?”

“You? In a nunnery?” Rachel laughed and shook her head. “You’d be smuggling claret into your chamber or sneaking out of the abbey at every available opportunity. No, Emily. A nun’s life is certainly not for you.”

“Then, where are we going?”

“You shall see.”

Emily didn’t have to wait long to find out. Soon enough, the gates that appeared before them were recognizable to her. She pressed her head against the window of the carriage, looking out at the familiar driveway.

It was the same drive she had ridden down so madly two days before as she had come to Jacob and pleaded with him.

“Why are we here?” Daniel said tartly, his hand leaving Rachel’s as he

clearly recognized exactly where they were.

“Oh, I wonder why,” Rachel muttered with full wryness and rolled her eyes at her husband. “Trust me. This is for the best.”

When the coach came to a stop on the driveway, Rachel jumped down first. Daniel followed and Emily went last, fearful of being in this place again.

Her eyes darted over the house, taking in something she had refused to look at before. The tall red and yellow stone building was impressive indeed, with so many chimney stacks that there had to be a fireplace in practically every room. The most impressive thing about this house was the estate.

The formal gardens stretched wide, across the terraces that were pitched into the side of the hill and out to a low-lying lawn that stretched into a vast parkland, bordered by trees. Jacob’s estate, being relatively outside the center of the city, had afforded him a home with many luxuries and a lot of land.

“This is not a wise idea,” Emily muttered, her eyes lingering on the garden as she abruptly noticed a figure striding through it.

*Oh my.*

“Well, maybe it is the only idea I have,” Rachel whispered in her ear, “so we shall have to run with it. Now, we must simply find the Duke of Thorne.”

“I have found him.” Emily pointed through the gardens as Daniel moved to her other side, following her gesture with his eyes.

Emily’s mouth turned dry as she saw Jacob approach. He didn’t seem to have noticed them. His head hung down as he walked hurriedly, his shirt wet and loose about his figure. In fact, his whole body was wet.

His jacket and waistcoat hung loosely over his arm and his brown hair was tangled and sodden.

*Has he been swimming? Is there some lake here to swim in?*

She was completely distracted as he climbed the last of the terrace steps onto the driveway. With his shirt so wet, it was molded to his body, revealing his muscled torso.

He looked up, his eyes going first to Emily’s, then he skidded to a stop, his eyes darting across the three of them.

The sight of him in such disarray reminded her of the night the two of them had explored in that orangery. The way she had planted her hands on his chest as he had pleased her, the tingling feeling so encapsulating. The memory abruptly left her as Rachel spoke.

“Good morrow to you, Your Grace.” Rachel managed to display her manners where the rest of them could not. She stepped forward and curtsied. “I have come to insist that you and my husband have a meeting and talk.”

“Rachel,” Daniel hissed, stepping toward her, but she held up a hand to defy him.

“To talk?” Jacob repeated, striding forward. Emily was struggling to take her eyes away from him.

“Yes.” Rachel looked between the two of them, repeatedly. “The days of illegal duels should be a thing of the past. It reminds me of two children fighting and throwing their toys out of their prams. I will not see you hurt, Daniel, and Your Grace, I imagine your mother has no wish to see you hurt either. Therefore, you two will talk out this mess, at once. Do you agree?”

Daniel looked ready to argue again, but Jacob nodded.

“I shall agree to talk only.”

*What does he mean by this?*

Emily tried to earn his gaze, but he avoided it constantly. His refusal to look at her made the pain in her heart worse.

## CHAPTER 15



“Let’s talk in here.” Jacob beckoned the Duke of Elbridge to follow him into his study. He’d attempted to persuade Emily and her sister to sit in the parlor, but Emily had flatly refused. The pair were wandering in his terraced garden instead. As Jacob moved to his window, he saw the pair of them meandering hand in hand.

Jacob took the towel his butler had left for him in his desk chair and tried to dry himself. He’d been for a swim in the lake that morning, hoping it would somehow clear his head, but it hadn’t. If anything, the murky water with all its reeds had simply made things foggier than before.

The door closing heavily on the other side of the room snapped Jacob’s gaze away from Emily through the window. He looked to the Duke of Elbridge who strode into the room, his gaze so dark that Jacob felt strangely chastised, like a child in the company of another duke.

“You can rant and rave, yell at me, anything.” Jacob waved a hand toward the Duke, encouragingly. “Believe me, I know I deserve it.”

He thrust the towel across his head and ruffled his hair as he sat in a wooden chair, stretching out his legs. When he removed the towel, he saw the shock on the Duke of Elbridge's face.

"You perplex me," The Duke shook his head. "You know you've dishonored her, yet you refuse to marry her."

"I do not refuse out of a wish to harm her, or her reputation. That being said, I wish for no harm to anyone in your family," Jacob grimaced when he saw the disbelieving look on the Duke's face. "Though after how I have behaved, I do not blame you for thinking differently."

"Explain yourself then. If you wish me to understand any of this, I need an explanation."

Before anymore could be said, there was a tap on the door.

"Enter," Jacob called. The butler walked in carrying a tray. He offered an encouraging smile to Jacob who thanked him for bringing the coffee. As the butler retreated, Jacob moved to the desk where the tray had been placed and poured out two cups of coffee, one that he passed to the Duke of Elbridge. "First, let us drink. Maybe this will help clear my head."

"No drink does that. Not even liquor." Yet the Duke of Elbridge eagerly took the cup regardless, then turned his back on Jacob and moved to a seat. He sat down, with one ankle crossed loosely over his knee, then gestured for Jacob to begin. "I am waiting for an explanation."

Slowly, Jacob perched on the edge of his desk with the towel slung around his shoulders.

“I was willing to marry for convenience, Your Grace,” Jacob said slowly, “which was why I agreed to marry Lady Bridget in the first place. I never pictured marrying for anything like... this.”

“What? Dishonor?”

“I was going to say affection.” Jacob’s words made the Duke’s brows knit together.

“Hard to picture you being affectionate toward Emily at all after how you have refused to marry her.”

“There is a reason for that,” Jacob said quietly.

“Ah, we run the risk of going around in circles here.” The Duke of Elbridge took a gulp from his cup then leveled his gaze at Jacob. “Believe me when I say I know what it is like to have made a resolution about marriage then be forced to break it.”

“What do you mean?” Jacob asked with interest, fixing his focus on the Duke so much he nearly forgot about the coffee in his hands.

“Marriage wasn’t something I factored in as being a part of my life once,” the

Duke said uneasily, shifting in his seat. “That changed with Rachel.”

“You mean you fell in love then married?”

“Clearly you have forgotten our own scandal.”

“Oh.” Jacob stiffened then stood off the desk, remembering he had indeed once read about the Duke of Elbridge and his wife in the scandal sheets.

“Yes, now you remember.” The Duke nodded toward him and sat forward, shifting his legs so he could rest his elbows on his knees. “I came upon Rachel in a garden at a ball where her gown had been caught on a branch. I went to assist her, and we were seen together in what was perceived as a compromising position.”

“Yet that was just an accident.”

“That it was,” the Duke agreed and took a sip from his coffee, biding his time before he said anymore. “Yet that is not the way the *ton* saw it. If I hadn’t married her, Rachel and her sisters would have been dishonored by association with her.”

“So, you did marry her,” Jacob whispered, stunned at the insight. “Yet you two seem so...” he trailed off, gesturing to the Duke.

“That is because I fell in love with my wife.” The Duke actually smiled, the

movement transforming his features. “We have our boy together, and I could not be happier with my life. It wasn’t always easy though.” Darkness took over his expression. “For a while, it was hard, and I do not pretend that the decision to marry her was easy, for it was not.”

“I feel as if I am seeing you clearly for the first time, Your Grace,” Jacob said with a little admiration and raised the coffee pot, urging the Duke to have some more.

The Duke managed another small smile as he stood and moved back toward Jacob, allowing him to refill his cup.

“In return, let me see who you really are.” The Duke of Elbridge nodded toward Jacob. “Tell me what is truly going on here.”

“Very well.” Jacob knew he couldn’t reveal everything. Seth had already looked at him as if he was mad when he told the truth. He would have to explain part of the truth whilst still being evasive about other parts. “I care for Emily.” The words escaped him in a rush, making the Duke of Elbridge halt at his side, not quite pouring the milk into his own coffee cup yet. “I am not worthy of her, that I know for certain.”

“And that is what holds you back from marrying her?” the Duke scoffed a little. “Well, based on how you have treated her, I’m tempted to agree you are not worthy of her, but I cannot hold onto such a resolution and stand by, just to watch her reputation plummet. Bridget would be affected too, once the scandal spread.”

“It is already starting to spread,” Jacob whispered. “I fear one of your staff may have sold the story of our expected duel to the scandal sheets, Your Grace.”

“Ah.” The Duke sighed heavily and leaned against the desk. “Then we need to act fast.”

“Yes,” Jacob murmured. He turned to face the Duke of Elbridge fully. “I fear what would become of the future, Your Grace. If I do marry Emily...”

“If!?” the Duke spluttered, looking ready to spit his coffee back out again.

“Please, hear me out.” Jacob stepped toward him. “If I marry her, may I extract a promise from you?”

“It depends on the nature of the promise.” Still, the Duke encouraged him on, waving the sugar tongs at him to continue.

“If anything were to happen to me, you would take care of her, would you not?” Jacob’s question left the Duke dumbstruck. He cocked his head to the side, as if examining every part of Jacob. “It’s imperative to me that she not end up hurt, and if someday something were to happen... She would need her family around her. That I do know.”

“You speak in riddles.”

“Yet I will not say anymore.” Jacob put distance between them, rounding his desk and moving to his own seat. “I need your agreement on this matter.” He refused to say more for he feared the same scoffing look that he’d received from Seth.

“You need not hear me promise this especially, for it is already a vow I have taken.” The Duke of Elbridge stood tall. “I have vowed to protect my wife no matter what happens, and through her, her family. It is something I intend to keep until my dying day.”

“That is good.” Jacob nodded, feeling his admiration for the Duke growing by the second. He was not only a principled man, but he had great feeling, and a large heart. He must have been a devoted husband to his wife.

“So, Your Grace,” the Duke of Elbridge outstretched his hand toward Jacob. “Do we have an agreement?”

Jacob looked down at that hand.



“They are returning,” Rachel whispered in Emily’s ear. She turned on her sister’s arm to look across the terraced garden.

She’d been indulging in wild imaginings as she stared at this beautiful garden. What if she and Jacob had been the partnership arranged by her father to be married? What if they had wed and then this attraction between them had begun? She could be mistress to this home and this stunning garden, wandering through these flower borders with a smile on her face,

perhaps with a child by her side who clung to her hand and played with Joey when he came to stay.

*It is a foolish imagining. Such a world is impossible now.*

“I am not sure I am prepared for this,” Emily murmured to her sister.

“I’m here,” Rachel said reassuringly, squeezing Emily’s hand. Emily looked at her sister in surprise.

“What happened to our argument where you washed your hands of me?”

“You didn’t think I meant it, did you?” Rachel asked with a small laugh. “I will always be here for you, Em.”

“I do not know what I’d do without you,” Emily confessed. For all the anger she had thrown at her sister over these last few years, these words tumbling from her lips were the greatest truth she’d ever told. Rachel smiled sadly and clung to her hand tighter.

“Here they are,” Rachel nodded through the garden.

Emily turned to see that Jacob and Daniel were turning. Daniel led the way and walking a little behind him was Jacob. He’d still not properly dressed and though his clothes were beginning to dry, the shirt hung loosely off his torso. It still clung to his shoulders though, in such a way that made Emily’s eyes

trace his figure.

*What is wrong with me? How can I marvel at him and be so attracted when I feel as if my heart has been crushed in two by him? That feeling should be impossible!*

Daniel dropped down into the terraced garden with Jacob following behind. The pair stopped a short distance in front of them.

“Well, the two of you are not shooting daggers at one another with your glares anymore,” Rachel said hurriedly, “so may I presume the situation has improved a little?”

“The Duke of Thorne and I have discussed the matter. At length,” Daniel added, glancing at Jacob beside him.

At last, Jacob looked at Emily. She flinched at that look, feeling how intense it was. He said nothing as he continued to stare at her.

*He will refuse to marry me. I know it.*

“Yes, we have talked,” Jacob said, now shifting his gaze between all of them. “Despite my concerns, I must acknowledge that the Duke of Thorne is right. I have dishonored your family, Your Grace.” He addressed Rachel with these words. “For that, you have my sincerest apologies, and I must make reparations for this.”

*Dishonored? Is what passed between us being reduced to this?*

Emily was stunned, her jaw hanging loose as she stared at him. There were many other words she could have used to describe all of the shared moments between them, but dishonoring was not a word she would have chosen.

“Well?” Rachel said with her brows raised. “I am waiting for what more you will say.”

Jacob cleared his throat and nodded, looking between Daniel and Rachel.

“I am content to marry Emily.”

Emily backed up, her hand loosening from Rachel’s. She moved slowly, but with such purposeful steps that her boots scattered the stones beneath her on the gravel path. He looked at her then, a look of pain on that handsome face.

“Then everything is settled,” Daniel spoke with such a heavy sigh that his shoulders practically dropped two inches. “We shall prepare for the wedding.”

“A wedding? What? No!” Emily spoke with such sudden venom that Rachel’s head snapped toward her. Emily couldn’t bring herself to look at Jacob, so satisfied herself with returning her sister’s look. “Rachel, he has no real wish to marry me. You believe I wish to be bound forever to a man who does not want me? A man who would rather marry any other woman in this world than me?”

“That is not quite how I would put it—” Jacob didn’t get a chance to finish his words, for Emily cut him off.

“Do not dare to say anymore.”

He at least had the decency to fall silent, his lips closing.

“Emily, this is not a matter up for discussion,” Daniel’s voice was firm as he stepped toward her. “If you had the liberty of choice, I would agree with you, but after what has passed between you and the Duke of Thorne, the choice is not something you have anymore.”

“But—”

“The rumor is already out,” Daniel said hurriedly. “The scandal sheets know we were to duel, and how long do you reckon it would be before they discovered the reason why? Days? Maybe even hours?”

Emily stared at Jacob, uncertain of what to think or feel. Was there relief inside her? Yes, of a kind. At least now her name wouldn’t be scandalized, and Bridget was protected by association, but there was horror here too. Jacob didn’t want to marry her, and her own pleading had done nothing. Somehow, Daniel had persuaded him into it.

“I cannot believe the man I am to marry had to be forced into it.” At her dark

words, Jacob grimaced and looked away.

The way in which he refused to return her gaze simply made her feel worse.

“I have no choice?” she whispered, appealing to Daniel, who shook his head.

“I wish there was another way, but there is not,” he said simply. “This matter is at an end.”

This sentence brought such finality, Emily couldn't stand to be here any longer. She spun on her heel and marched away as quickly as she could, not far off a run. Rachel scampered to her side, hurrying to keep up. Emily didn't glance back, though she could hear Jacob and Daniel talking together in low tones, their deep voices carrying around the garden.

“Emily, please.” Rachel snatched up her hand and they walked together, side by side as they reached the stone steps and climbed up toward the drive.

“Please, what?” Emily repeated, baffled.

“Do not despise Daniel and I for this. We are trying to protect you.”

“I know that.” Emily waved her other hand in dismissal, for their interference was not what bothered her. She knew they were faced with little choice. “What bothers me is *him*,” her voice filled with anger. “I am to marry a man who hates me, Rachel.”

“He does not hate you.”

“Does he not?” Emily halted on the driveway, turning to face her sister. “He refused to look at me for most of that conversation and has spent the last few days blankly refusing to marry me. That is hardly a man with affection in his soul, is it? It is hatred! He must despise me.”

She flung herself away and reached for the carriage, not bothering to wait for the footman to open the door but clambering inside herself. Rachel scrambled to follow her.

As they fell onto the coach’s bench together, the tears started once more. Emily was shocked. After all the tears she had cried recently, she didn’t understand how her body could cry anymore, but it happened anyway. Rachel thrust a handkerchief in front of her and Emily gladly took it, drying her tears.

By the time Daniel returned to the carriage, Emily rested her head on Rachel’s shoulder. Her sister’s arm was around her, cradling her into her side.

A memory broke through of Emily leaning on Rachel in a similar way when they were children. Emily had gone climbing the trees in their garden. Rachel had pleaded with her not to climb too high, but Emily had gone anyway. When she fell from the branch and landed on her arm, twisting her wrist, Rachel had been the one to pick her up again and take her back inside.

As they waited for the physician, Emily leaned on Rachel as she did now, relying on her. Rachel was always there, even when she hadn't wanted her to be, but now, Emily wouldn't have had it any other way.

"Thank you," Emily whispered to Rachel as the carriage set off.

"I do not know what you are thanking me for when you are crying such tears," Rachel murmured, patting her shoulder and drawing her in tighter still. "Yet I am here, Emily. I'll always be here."

Emily clung to her tighter, fearing how much she would be able to see Rachel once she was married to a man that did not want her.

## CHAPTER 16



“Oh, this is wonderful news!” Catarina clasped her hands together and practically danced around the room, but Jacob could not share in her joy.

He sat unmoving in a chair in their parlor, staring at the fire that had been lit.

“You shall be wed, and then there shall be children. Oh, this is such good news I cannot stand still.”

“Yes, I can see that,” he whispered in a deadpan tone, though his mother plainly didn’t notice as she continued to dance around the room.

Jacob stared into the fire, thinking much of what his mother was celebrating.

*Children.*

Jacob had always wanted children. As much as he feared abandoning them, he knew it would make his mother happy too, and he prayed any child would keep his widow company after he was gone. Yet now, the idea of children felt wrong.

He'd agreed to marry Emily, for the Duke of Elbridge and Seth had been right. It was the correct thing to do and avoided the most hurt now, but if he was to do this, he couldn't run the risk of hurting Emily even more.

*If I give her children, what then? Would she grieve me even more?*

He was not sure he could do that to her. He'd have to refrain, despite the temptation of taking Emily to bed. He could not leave her pregnant and alone in this world. The unimaginable pain and agony were too much to bear.

Hadn't such pain practically sent his own mother mad? Even now as she danced, she broke off to rearrange the ornaments on the mantelpiece again.

There was a time when Jacob would have jumped up and halted his mother's hands, but he did not have the energy for it now. He simply watched his mother's frantic actions.

"We shall have to make the arrangements, of course," Catarina said as she moved her attention to the rug in front of the fireplace. She kicked out a corner that had been flicked up, rearranging it. Apparently dissatisfied, she crouched to adjust it with her hands. "Then everything will be sorted out."

“Yes, Mother. It will be.”

Before they could discuss anymore, there was a tap at the door. The butler entered carrying a silver card tray on which there was a note, addressed to Jacob.

“Thank you.” Jacob smiled at the kindly butler and then waited until his mother was distracted organizing a shelf of books before he broke open the seal.

*‘Your Grace, the Duke of Thorne,*

*I must beg your presence at the Earl of Pratt’s house this afternoon at three o’clock. The Earl has returned from his business, and though I have endeavored to do my best to explain your betrothal to Emily, he is perplexed and wishes to speak to you himself.*

*If you think Rachel and I are protective of Emily, then be warned. Her father is naturally worse, but I cannot change his mind on this matter. He wishes to speak to you this afternoon, and I judge it to be best, so you can obtain formally obtain his blessing.*

*Emily will be there, so the three of you can discuss the matter together.*

*Yours etcetera,*

*Daniel Warren, the Duke of Elbridge.'*

Jacob slowly closed up the letter, knowing he should have been prepared for such an eventuality. The Earl of Pratt had to return sometime, and he would need an explanation for all that had passed.

*He will despise me for all of this.*

Jacob slipped the letter into his pocket and intended to keep the appointment. There was one line that had burned in his mind from the letter more than any other: *Emily will be there.*

He had not been able to shake the thought of how she had glared at him and first shouted 'No!' when he had declared he would marry her two days ago. She had to despise him, for which he could not blame her. He'd already refused to marry her to her face, crushing her heart, as Seth had pointed out to him. Now what did she think of him?

"Jacob? Is all well?" Catarina reached for his shoulder. "Are you feeling well?"

"Yes, Mother, everything is fine." He caught her wrist before she could place a hand on his temple with concern. "Everything is well, and I feel perfectly normal."

She nodded and forced a rather shaky smile. After a few seconds, it changed to something genuine.

“Good, that is good. Well, I should assist in the preparations for the wedding. Perhaps we should have the ceremony in our church on the estate?”

Jacob paused. It was traditional to have the wedding in the bride’s parish, but for the sake of convenience and time, it would be easier to obtain a date in his own church that sat at the very edge of the estate. If they married by special license, it would make things much simpler indeed.

“Yes, that is probably wise, Mother.”

“Wonderful.” She clasped her hands together again and hurried to the door. “I shall write to the priest at once to make the arrangements...” Her voice faded away as she continued to talk, though Jacob realized she now talked to herself rather than to him at all.

He waited until he heard a door close in the distant recesses of the house. After that, he stood and hastened out of the room. There was something he had to do before he left to go to the Earl of Pratt’s estate. Uncertain why he felt the need to do it so much, he tried not to overthink it.

He climbed two flights of stairs and headed to the long gallery at the top of his house. The room was vast with light pouring in from all directions. On the walls were many paintings, the myriad of faces staring down at Jacob as he walked past them all. Some smiled, some glared, and others wore a distinctly impassive look.

Jacob reached the far end of the room where he located a painting he

sometimes avoided, not because he had no liking for the painting, but because he saw too much of himself in it. In the center of the tall canvas, almost lifelike in size, was his father.

He bore the same dark brown hair and similar eyes. Even the bone structure of his face was remarkably similar and his stance. It was as though Jacob stared into a slightly warped mirror.

Staring at his father's reflection, he sighed deeply, knowing that this painting had been completed just two years before his father passed away.

“What would you think of this mess, I wonder?”

Yet the painting didn't answer. His father's face stared impassively back at him.



Emily quivered in her seat. She held onto Joey, hoping he would offer some distraction. His cooing sounds and the way he periodically wrapped his tiny fingers around her thumb helped, but it was not enough to distract her from her father's shouts that echoed through the hallway.

Beside her, Bridget clasped her shoulder, showing no sign of moving at all. The only movement she offered was occasionally adjusting Joey's blanket on Emily's lap.

“Will he shout all day, do you think?” Emily whispered, glancing at the door.

“Hmm, my answer to such a question shall displease you, I am sure,” Bridget murmured.

They looked at one another, then down at Joey again whose eyes were closing now as he drifted off to sleep.

Rachel and Daniel had been with Edward since the early hours of the morning. He always sought their advice, so being in conference with them for so long was hardly unusual, but his anger and all this shouting were very out of character.

“I hear a horse,” Bridget murmured and stood.

Emily stared down at Joey, not wanting to know who had called on them. She wished to stay hidden in the corners of this house, caring for Joey, and ignoring the reality of what lay beyond the walls of this house. So far, no scandal sheet had arrived that morning, but they were all on edge, fearing what it would say when it did eventually arrive.

A high-pitched sound escaped Bridget’s lips so suddenly that Emily looked around at her.

“What is it?”

Bridget tapped the glass of the window.

“It is the Duke of Thorne. He is here.”

Emily rushed to her feet, taking Joey with her. She bundled the baby into Bridget’s arms who eagerly took him. Roused from his sleep, he complained a little, murmuring soft noises, before closing his eyes again.

Emily put her face to the glass, peering out to see if it was indeed Jacob. He leapt down from his horse and a stable boy ran forward and took the reins of the animal, allowing Jacob to advance toward the house.

He evidently did not notice Emily watching him from the window, for he did not once glance toward her.

Emily hastened from the room, ignoring the cries of Bridget that called her back. She could not be still, not now, and longed to know what was afoot. She barely escaped the room when she bumped straight into Rachel.

“Oh, God’s wounds!” Rachel cried and leaped back, a hand on her heart. “Well, at least you are running to him already.”

“That is not what I am doing—” Emily denied it but was cut off as Rachel took her hand.

“You are requested to talk with our father and your betrothed.”

“I see,” Emily muttered, fearing what her father intended to say to them both.

They passed through the entrance hall, where the front door was opened by the butler, revealing the Duke of Thorne striding inside. He shrugged off his frock coat and hat that were taken by the butler, and his gaze found Emily’s. She froze at that look, staring back at him, though neither of them managed to say a single word to one another.

“This should be interesting,” Rachel murmured, shaking them both out of their staring match. “Your Grace, please follow me to my father’s study.”

He bowed in acknowledgment and fell into step behind the pair of them, walking down the corridor. Emily longed to look back at him, and felt his gaze upon her, as if it burned the back of her neck.

When they reached the study, Rachel didn’t even have a chance to knock on the door for it was opened by Daniel who beckoned them all inside. Rachel deposited Emily in a chair by the fire and offered a warning look. Emily could read what was in that look, knowing her sister’s face so well, without having to ask any questions.

*Do not be wild now.*

Daniel ushered Jacob into the middle of the room as Edward paced up and down behind his desk, refusing to look at either of them. Daniel and Rachel left hurriedly then, though Rachel hesitated in the doorway and had to be dragged out by her husband.

For a few seconds, there were no sounds in the room beyond Edward's feet marching up and down on the rug. Emily looked at Jacob who glanced at her, though she found his expression unreadable. She merely hated the way staring at him made her heart flutter in her chest. For all her anger, she liked him still.

"I..." Edward tried to begin. He halted by the desk and leaned upon it with one hand, shaking his head. "There is much I wish to say on this matter, though I hardly know where to begin."

He jerked his chin upward and his gaze found Emily's first, his eyes narrowing.

"Do you have an explanation, Emily?"

"Not a good one, Father," she said with full honesty. He must have sensed the genuineness of her answer, for he nodded, ever so slightly.

"And you?" He addressed Jacob, who hung his head a little.

"I know I have dishonored your family in many ways, my Lord, but I am attempting to repair things now."

"Repair it?" Edward scoffed, standing back from the desk a little. "I am a man who always told himself that I put my daughters' state of happiness ahead of their reputations, yet what Daniel and Rachel have just told me is right. Happiness is tied up with reputation in this strange world we live in."

He walked around his desk and approached Jacob directly. “Did your pursuit of my youngest daughter begin before or after the termination of your betrothal with Bridget?” His question was so sudden and direct that Emily’s jaw dropped, just as Jacob stepped back.

“It was not a conscious decision on my part,” Jacob said, holding her father’s gaze.

“What does that mean?”

“It means that when I first met Lady Emily, I did not know she was your daughter,” Jacob said hurriedly. “Yes, I was captivated by her, and yet I had agreed to marry Lady Bridget. When I realized the confusion of what was happening, I was happy for the betrothal with Lady Bridget to come to an end. I certainly would not have made her happy, my Lord.”

“Well at least in one matter I agree with you.” Edward turned his back on Jacob and moved toward Emily. He sat down in the armchair opposite her, leaning forward in his seat. He placed his hands over his mouth and for a minute he said nothing but stared at the floor.

Emily shifted in her seat, waiting for him to say something, anything! She longed to be wild and explain with rushed words much of what had happened, but Rachel’s warning glare stuck with her. Edward did not need to know all of it, and he would simply have disapproved even more if he did.

*Thank God no one knows of that night in the orangery.*

The mere thought of it had such heat rising to her skin that she wondered why she was sitting so close to the fire.

“Father?” she whispered, urging him to say something.

He lowered his hands from his mouth and raised his head.

“I cannot pretend to be elated with this turn of events,” he spoke solemnly. “Emily, I am in full agreement with Rachel and Daniel. If there was another way to secure your standing now, I would do it, but there is none. I have no choice but to give my blessing to this match. I hope you understand that?”

“I do.” She fidgeted with the skirt of her gown, crumpling it between her fingers until it was creased.

*I am doomed to marry a man who cannot love me, who may have merely seduced me in the first place for his own distraction. Maybe that's what he fears in marrying me? That he will be forced to make his rakish ways even more secretive than before?*

She longed to ask him such a question, but he wouldn't look at her now. He stared past her into the fire, ignoring her, making it seem as if all the closeness that had once been between them had dissipated, as if that evening in the orangery had never happened.

“I cannot pretend to be happy with you, Your Grace,” Edward said fleetingly, lifting his head a little.

“I understand.” Jacob nodded; his hands latched behind his back. “I’m equally disappointed in myself, though I know that offers little comfort now.”

“Yes, you are right on that front.” Edward stood from his seat and moved back toward Jacob, standing before him. “You are committed to the marriage then.”

“I have given my word.”

“Very well. We shall make the arrangements.” Edward stepped away and moved to Emily’s side. He took her shoulder in a protective way, so much so that she glanced up at him in surprise. “It will have to be a special license, Emily. The wedding will be fast indeed.”

“Oh,” she murmured, startled by the words. Rachel’s own wedding had been rushed.

She couldn’t help fearing what her father thought of the pair of them now. Was he disappointed to have two daughters rushed into marriage by an apparent scandal? He probably feared what would happen to Bridget next.

“I can make the preparations for the wedding license,” Jacob said matter-of-factly, his tone so business-like that it was alien to her. His frown seemed heavier than she had ever seen it before, the brow more prominent. “I suggest

we use the church on my own estate for the ceremony, as that will make the arrangements much simpler.”

“Yes, yes, of course,” Edward agreed, waving a hand at him. “Is there anything else you wish to say to me, Your Grace?”

“One thing more.” Jacob stepped forward; his eyes set on Edward. “I apologize for everything that has happened between us, my Lord, but I will keep my word. I will marry your daughter. I will do right by her.” At last, his eyes flickered down to Emily, and she gasped.

In that second, it would have been easy to persuade herself that he did feel something for her. He was marrying her after all, was he not? Then that look was gone, and she was left feeling bereft and empty.

“Thank you,” Edward nodded. “In some odd way, it is a small comfort now. If you would leave us, I will write to you about the matter of my daughter’s dowry and the other preparations.”

“Of course.” Jacob bowed to the two of them in turn and turned to leave.

“Wait.” Emily found her voice. She was tired of being stifled and stuck in this corner, reluctant to say anything. She stood beside her father, her voice calling Jacob to a stop in the doorway. “When you say you are to obtain a special license, how soon will the wedding be?”

“Soon indeed. Within two weeks.” Jacob parted, leaving Emily reeling as she

watched him go.

*Two weeks!?*

## CHAPTER 17



“Well, it’s a beautiful gown.” Bridget put on a buoyant tone though Emily could see right through it.

She pushed back the modiste’s curtain she had just stepped out of and strode toward a stall standing platform in front of three standing mirrors.

“Do you not think?” Bridget said with a broad smile as she stepped up behind Emily, her smile appearing over her shoulder in the mirror. “It suits you so well.”

Emily could barely concentrate on the gown. The gold silk was molded to her body, with a cream lace overlay that hung under her bust before falling past the curve of her hips to the floor. Short, capped lace sleeves hovered at her shoulders, revealing a lot of her collarbone and neckline. Small gemstones studded across the neck glittered in the morning light through the windows.

“Do you not like it?” Bridget asked, bustling around her and adjusting the skirt of the gown.

“It is very beautiful,” Emily muttered woodenly. She toyed with the skirt, creasing the material.

Rachel appeared in front of her and took her hands, loosening her fingers from the material so it laid flat again.

“The modiste will not be happy with you,” Rachel said in jest and winked. “There, stand still whilst she puts in the final pins.”

The modiste appeared from behind a curtain with a pin cushion studded with many pins. She dropped to her knees in front of Emily and adjusted the hem of the gown, taking it up an inch or so.

Already one week had passed since she had last seen Jacob, and in that time, her family had rallied around the idea of the wedding. The gown was being quickly prepared, as were flowers and invitations for a small group of family and friends. Rachel and Bridget seemed to have taken care of the guest list single-handedly, and when they had appealed to Emily for whom she had wanted there, she had shown little enthusiasm for taking part.

“Have you heard from him at all?” Emily asked, shifting her gaze in the reflection so she could catch Rachel’s gaze as she stood behind Emily.

“No,” Rachel murmured, clearly not needing to ask who she spoke of.

*Jacob will still not write.*

From what Emily understood, two days ago Jacob sent her father a note with the details of the date and time for the ceremony. He had not written to Emily, nor to Rachel and Daniel. Everything had been business-like and plain.

*How can I miss him when I have started to wonder if I know him at all?*

She started to crumple the skirt again, her nervous habit, but one dark look from the modiste made her drop the gown.

“He will write,” Bridget said as she walked around the small dressing space. She reached into an open cabinet of tiaras and gems for the hair and took them out one at a time, admiring them. She reached for a veil last and ran the thin material through her fingers, her eyes widening in awe. “He will, eventually.”

“It is eventually that is the problem,” Rachel said without much restraint in her voice. It was plain she thought ill of Jacob indeed at this moment.

Emily chewed the inside of her mouth, holding back her own thoughts and feelings. Part of her still wanted to hate Jacob, not only for initially refusing to marry her, but now his staunch denial to talk to her at all.

*What kind of marriage will this be?*

Yet hating him was a hard task.

“Well, we must turn to matters at hand,” Rachel said, moving to Bridget’s side and they stretched out the veil between them. It was a long one indeed, that would stretch down over Emily’s train. “We must have something old, something new, something borrowed and something blue.”

“Oh yes, so important,” Emily muttered wryly though her sisters didn’t appear to hear her.

“I have some gems I wore in my hair for my wedding,” Rachel said, gesturing to her hair. “I could bring them for the ceremony.”

“That is the borrowed sorted then,” Bridget nodded. “The gown is the something new.”

“Yes, of course. Then the blue?”

They both frowned in thought.

“My heart,” Emily whispered to herself. Still neither of them heard her, though she suspected the modiste did for she glanced up toward her. Hurriedly, the modiste broke off from what she was doing. She hurried to the side of the room and retrieved a handkerchief from a dresser that she pressed into Emily’s hands.

Emily didn’t even notice that a tear had slipped down her cheek until the handkerchief was presented to her.

“Th-thank you,” she managed to stutter. When the gasping began, her sisters turned toward her. Rachel dropped one end of the veil and Bridget hurried to grasp it before it could fall to the floor.

“Could you leave us, please?” she asked the modiste.

“Of course.” The modiste offered a comforting smile and slipped away beyond a curtain, into the body of the shop.

Emily dried her cheeks, but more tears came.

“What is all this?” Rachel asked as she threaded her arm around Emily’s shoulders. “Emily, we have sorted out everything now.”

“Sorted them out?” Emily said in disbelief.

“Yes, your reputation is intact. You are to marry the Duke. By the time the scandal sheets realized why the Duke of Thorne and Daniel were to duel in the first place, the news of your marriage had been announced. You two are safe,” Rachel said with feeling, “you need not worry.”

“That is not what worries her,” Bridget exclaimed hurriedly. She pushed the veil back into the cabinet and crossed toward them. “This is not just about reputations, is it?”

Emily didn’t answer her sister but stared at Bridget, knowing that every step

of the way Bridget had seen something that she had not.

“That evening when he first came for dinner,” Bridget whispered, taking Emily’s hand, “you two looked at each other in such a way it was plain something was there between you.”

“How could you see it so plainly?” Emily muttered between her tears.

“Sisters, we see everything,” Bridget declared with a laugh. It momentarily made Emily smile too.

“So, this is not just about attraction, or stolen moments of indulgence. Nor even rebellion on your part, is it?” Rachel asked, raising her eyebrows.

“No,” Emily muttered, pressing the handkerchief to her eyes. “Why does he not write? He could even call on us. He could do anything, yet he has stayed as silent as a dark night.”

“Men,” Rachel said as she rolled her eyes. “They are not half so pleasing as we would wish them to be.”

“This from the woman who is madly in love with her husband,” Emily pointed out as she raised her face from the handkerchief.

“That does not mean Daniel is perfect. Far from it! Especially in the early days of our marriage. He was a conflicted man indeed, so conflicted that I

never knew where his heart was.”

“No?” Emily whispered. “But you two are so...” She couldn’t find the words so just locked her hands together.

“We are now, but it was not always the way.” Rachel shook her head and stepped toward her. “May I judge from this outburst of tears that there is more to what you feel for the Duke of Thorne than just affection and attraction?”

“Are you in love with him, Em?” Bridget asked, closing in on Emily’s other side. Feeling so boxed in by their intent gazes, she stepped back, nearly falling off the platform she stood on.

“No!” she said hurriedly, but they took her arms and pulled her back, so she was not in danger of falling. “No, no, of course I do not love him.”

“There’s a ‘but’ here somewhere,” Rachel said to Bridget.

“Oh, there must be. Can you not see the venom of her refusal?”

“What’s that old saying about a lady protesting?”

“She protests too much, methinks!”

“I am here, you know,” Emily said, glancing between her two sisters who now each had hold of an elbow.

“Then stop protesting and tell us the truth, Em,” Rachel urged her. “What is it you feel for the Duke after all?”

“I...” Emily hung her head. It was hard to deny that she had missed him so much this last week. “I would not say I was in love with him, but I was certainly at risk of it. I like him. Very much indeed.”

“Goodness,” Bridget murmured, releasing Emily’s arm and clasping her hands over her mouth.

“And I didn’t think this wedding could get much worse,” Rachel said wryly.

“Yes, thank you for summing up my pain, sister.”

“You know what I mean.” Rachel waved her hand dismissively at Emily. “I am trying to make you smile. Just because you have not heard from him does not mean the Duke does not feel anything for you in return.”

“No? Do you think not? Then let us examine the evidence.” This time, Emily wrenched her arm free of Rachel’s grasp and managed to totter back off the platform. She hitched up the skirt of her gown, for it was still too long to walk with easily and hurried back toward the cover of the curtains. “Here is a man who first pursued me when he did not know who I was. When he discovered it, he didn’t do much about it.”

She broke off, momentarily, not wanting to reveal to Bridget that she was the one who had pleaded with him not to marry Bridget in the first place, out of fear of her sister being hurt by everything. “He pursued me in secret still, and when discovered, he blankly refused to marry me. For days! Even risking a duel just to avoid being married to me.”

“Yet he changed his mind on that front,” Bridget called after her. “He cannot be all bad to have agreed to marry you now.”

“God knows how Daniel achieved that,” Emily muttered as she took hold of the curtains. “Perhaps he merely threatened to hurt Jacob there and then.”

Both Rachel and Bridget looked sharply at her, their eyes wide.

“You think so too?” she said, about to step back out from the curtains when they shook their heads in unison.

“She did not notice what she did,” Bridget murmured to Rachel.

“No, she did not.”

“Oh, why do you keep talking as if I am not here?” Emily asked wildly.

“It is something the three of us have often done,” Rachel explained in

dismissal. “As you have not noticed what you have just done, allow us to point it out to you, Em.”

“What?” she demanded, her impatience growing by the second.

“You called him Jacob. You used his Christian name,” Bridget whispered, as if it was a great crime indeed.

Emily’s jaw fell slack. She had done it naturally, and the name had fallen from her lips without restraint. After all, he’d asked her to call him Jacob once. She’d moaned his name that night in the orangery that had changed everything between them.

Now, it was seen as something wrong indeed.

Backing up, she returned to the safety of the curtains.

“Emily, where are you going?” Rachel called to her. “The modiste isn’t finished with the gown yet.”

“I need a few minutes.” She closed the curtains tightly around her, refusing to let Rachel and Bridget come to her. She needed this second alone, to think of what she had done, and why Jacob would not write to her or talk to her at all.

Sitting down on a stool, she buckled forward, burying her face in the handkerchief the modiste had given her.

Despite her confession to her sisters, she knew the situation was graver than she revealed. She wasn't just at risk of someday being in love with Jacob, but she had very much been on the path already to that feeling. Nothing else could explain why his absence hurt her so much.



“Well, it’s one hell of an invitation to get at short notice, I’ll say that.” Seth jumped down off the horse with the wedding invitation in his hand, swinging it back and forth between his fingers.

Jacob stared at his friend and sighed heavily. He’d been prepared for this moment and knew it had to come sooner or later.

“Let’s talk outside,” Jacob urged. “I do not want my mother to hear this conversation.”

“Very well.” Seth left the reins of his horse in the hands of a groomsman nearby and followed Jacob around the house. They passed into the formal gardens, and the whole time Seth turned the invitation around in his palm as if he could not stop reading it. “I knew this was coming,” Seth broke the silence between them as they entered the walled garden. “Didn’t know it would come quite like this though.”

“What? That I would have to marry Emily?”

“Have to? Pah!” Seth laughed, to Jacob’s surprise. He stopped walking and

turned to face his friend. “A couple of days ago, you were prepared to face death in a duel just to avoid this eventuality, now look at you? Sending out fancy invitations like these?” He purposefully held up the card once again. “This is a particularly fine invitation for one happening under a special license.”

“It was necessary,” Jacob said. “My mother insisted that it is still a fine wedding, despite its rushed nature, and we have no choice but to make it a special license after the news of the duel came out. What else would you have me do?”

“Nothing. On the contrary, I think you are making the right decision.” Seth folded up the card and put it back in his pocket.

“I beg your pardon?” Jacob stumbled on the path, nearly falling into the rosemary bushes beside him, with their scents wafting up to meet him. “You think this is right?”

“I do, but I had to come and see you for another reason.” Seth stepped forward, lowering his voice. “Tell me this, what happens when you are married?”

“I thought you knew that, Seth,” Jacob said, reaching for a jest. Seth barely smiled before shaking his head.

“I am asking you about Lady Emily. If you are to marry her, then I take it you have let go of all these strange fears of yours, yes?”

Jacob didn't answer. He walked around the rosemary bushes and further down the walled garden path. Seth's quick footsteps on the gravel behind him showed he was being pursued.

Jacob got as far from the house as he could before turning on the spot to face his friend again, nestled in a nook in the far corner between clematis bushes.

"I am marrying her because I have to, Seth. That is the line here."

"No? Not because you want to then?" Seth challenged, folding his arms. "Listen to me, my friend." He stepped forward. "I've seen the way you look at her. You have the chance to be happy, truly happy. Do not tell me now you intend to retreat from your wife once you wed her."

"It is a promise I cannot make." Jacob slowly shook his head. He might as well have struck his friend, for Seth stepped back as if he had been winded, turning on the spot and rubbing his stomach.

"I do not believe this," Seth muttered, eventually turning back to face Jacob. "You're going to divide yourself from her? When you have every chance of being—"

"I am protecting her!" Jacob snapped, breaking off his friend's words. Seth halted, staring at him. "That is the kindest thing I can do for her, is it not? Protect her?"

Seth couldn't argue against it, clearly. Instead, he chose not to say anything

for a minute and just stared back at Jacob.

“It has to be done, Seth. Surely you see that?” Keen to have at least one person in his life who understood his decisions, Jacob stepped forward, lowering his voice further. “You lost someone once.”

The reminder made Seth stand tall, a muscle twitching around his eyes.

“You know what that feeling is like. Better than anyone, you understand what is going on up here.” Jacob tapped his own temple. “You can understand wanting to avoid future pain, can you not?”

Jacob stared at his friend, waiting for an answer. Seth looked away, deeper into the walled garden and the herbs that lined the paths.

They both knew they had different reasons for why they had ended up in their rakish ways and perhaps one of the reasons they had been such good friends over the years was not so much their similar habits as their ability to understand one another’s pain.

When Seth was young, he’d lost the woman he was betrothed to. Since then, Seth had numbed that pain by never settling his heart on one woman. That lady was not lost to this world, but lost to him, for she had eloped with another, and it was a pain that Seth had never moved past.

“You once declared to me that you would do anything to avoid such pain again,” Jacob whispered. “Can’t you see that is what I think too? I do not

want Emily to go through what my mother went through.”

Slowly, Seth nodded, though there was no trace of a smile or comforting gesture on his face.

“Just take care, my friend,” he whispered. “I fear the path you’re treading will cause pain anyway.”

## CHAPTER 18



“*Y*ou ready for this?” Seth whispered in Jacob’s ear.

Jacob chose not to answer as the organ music began and he turned to face the church. He’d dressed for the occasion and there was a carnation in his buttonhole, as per his mother’s request. In the front row, she sat, looking strangely at peace and not fidgeting anywhere near as much as she normally did. He tried to take comfort in her stillness. Perhaps at least, some good would come out of this wedding.

His eyes turned to Emily’s side of the pews where he looked for her family. There were distant relatives and in the front pew sat the Duke of Elbridge. He was staring straight back at Jacob, showing he was keeping an eye on matters.

“If I ran from the church now, do you think the Duke of Elbridge would shoot me for it?” Jacob whispered to Seth beside him.

“Undoubtedly, and as much as the best man is supposed to do anything for

the groom, I have no intention of taking that bullet for you.” Seth laughed and elbowed Jacob. “Here she comes.”

Jacob turned his focus to the doors of the chapel. A large number filled the room, surprising for such a rushed event, but many of his friends and family had been eager to come once his mother had revealed the news. Jacob peered over their heads, through fine headdresses and bonnets, and waxed gentlemen’s hair, toward the church doors as they opened.

In the doorway, the Earl of Pratt appeared. On his arm was Emily. She looked down at first, her face barely recognizable through the thick veil she wore, but Jacob would know her anywhere.

His eyes drifted over the beautiful gown, distracted by the golden material that clung to her figure and the lace that overlaid it. On her hands were thin white lace gloves and clasped in one palm she had a small delicate bunch of flowers, filled mostly with yellow roses and blue forget-me-nots.

She would not look at him. On the contrary, Emily stared either at the ground, her flowers, or past him toward the altar.

Jacob’s eyes flitted elsewhere to her bridesmaids behind her, the Duchess of Elbridge and Lady Bridget. Jacob wondered briefly what Lady Bridget would think of him after all of this, considering how they had first met.

*I would scarcely blame her for hating me.*

As the organ music quietened, the Earl of Pratt stopped in front of Jacob with his daughter. Emily turned to face her father and he lifted the veil over her head, revealing her completely.

Jacob's eyes were drawn to Emily's face in such a way that he found it difficult to look elsewhere. Her eyes were bold, perhaps even a little red, and he feared the possibility that she had been crying. Her lips were rouged, just a little, in that tempting way that reminded him of the night they had met and how they had kissed in the darkness. He'd been so drawn to her; he had been unable to resist her completely.

Now, he felt that same pull, that same recoil as he moved toward her, ready to take her from her father's arm.

The Earl of Pratt passed Emily's hand into Jacob's, though he did not look at Jacob nor did he offer words of encouragement or luck. He looked away quickly, making plain what he thought of this situation as a whole.

*The entire family must hate me now.*

Slowly, Jacob drew Emily's hand through the crook of his arm and stepped forward, urging her to join him at the altar. She looked at him, at last, those bold eyes unyielding as she stared at him. She attempted the smallest of smiles, yet the skin around her lips twitched with the movement, and it didn't last.

Jacob couldn't even return that smile as they halted in front of the vicar and the final music of the organ faded away.

“Dearly beloved,” the priest said as he stepped forward. “We are gathered here today in the sight of God, to join together this man and this woman.”

Jacob grew distracted and looked down at Emily’s hand on his arm as the priest began the opening prayer. What followed for the next few minutes passed quickly for Jacob. He rather thought he didn’t pay attention to most of the words. It felt strange to have reached this moment, to have brought Emily to marry him, after all that had passed between them.

“Jacob Browning, Your Grace, the Duke of Thorne. Wilt thou have this woman to be thy wedded wife? To live together after God’s ordinance in the holy estate of matrimony? Wilt thou love her, comfort her, honor, and keep her in sickness and in health; and, forsaking all other, keep thee only unto her, so long as ye both shall live?”

Jacob hesitated, not because of the vow he had to make, but because of the wording.

*For as long as I shall live.*

He swallowed, fearing just how long it could be that this vow lasted between them. If he was as much like his father as his mother feared, then yes, it might not be that long at all.

Emily pulled on his arm, a subtle gesture that he was taking too long to answer.

“I will,” Jacob said solemnly, letting his deep voice echo across the church. To his surprise, he felt Emily breathe out beside him. It struck him that she perhaps feared at this moment he would reject her and refuse to make the vows after all.

*I have every intention of keeping these vows.*

He would be faithful to her, and he would not pursue any other whilst they were married. He would provide for her too, in every respect of his life. There was one vow that stuck in his throat, however, a word that was difficult to say.

*To love her...*

He glanced her way as she completed her vows.

“I will,” she said with confidence, staring forward at the vicar and staunchly refusing to look at Jacob once again.

He wondered not for the first time what it was he did feel for Emily, but he did not know. All he knew was that this pull toward her was almost inescapable, and if he was going to protect her, as he had vowed to Seth to do, then he would have to escape it in any way that he could.

“Now, we shall sign the register.” The priest gestured to a small table that had been set up at the side of the church, ready for them to sign the certificate and the register.

Jacob led the way, offering his hand to Emily as he did so. She placed her fingers in his rather woodenly, barely gripping the very end, as if she did not want to touch him at all. At the table, he let her sit first and sign her name, then Jacob took her seat and signed his own name.

Something about seeing their names side by side, in their own hands, solidified exactly what they had done in their own minds. There was no going back now, after all. They were married in the sight of God and the law.

The Duke of Elbridge stepped forward to be one of the witnesses, just as Seth did too. They both signed the witness' lines on the paper and hovered close to Jacob and Emily's sides as the congregation sang a hymn from the prayer book.

The whole time, Jacob felt watched by the Duke of Elbridge, fearing that if he put a foot wrong, he would be hurt.

*I'm not backing out of this now. I couldn't!*

He intended to uphold that marriage certificate, for as long as it was applicable, for as long as he should live.



Emily's breath shuddered as they returned to the altar and stood before the priest. More prayers were said, and another hymn was sung as well, though Emily could not force her lips to mouth the words, let alone sing them aloud.

Her hand on Jacob's arm became more urgent, pressure he must have been able to feel. For so long she had avoided looking at him in the ceremony, yet now, she wanted something from him. Perhaps a small smile of reassurance, a glimmer of mischief, anything to remind her of the gentleman that she had kissed in a corridor and been so scandalous with in that summer hour outside of the ball.

Yet Jacob didn't once smile, and that man Emily had mistakenly thought she knew quite well didn't appear to be here anymore. He was missing.

"Glory be to the Father, the Son and to the Holy Ghost," the priest said, making the sign of the cross in the air between the two of them. "Amen." As he bowed his head, the word was repeated around the congregation. The moment it was done, the priest lifted his head again. "May you all welcome me in presenting to you Jacob and Emily Browning, the Duke and Duchess of Thorne."

Emily flinched, hearing herself being called a duchess. Somewhere in the madness of this turn of events, she had not considered at any point that she was now to be a duchess.

Applause began from the congregation, welcoming them as Jacob slowly turned the pair around so they could face the pews together. The applause grew louder, and Emily turned to her family, hoping to draw solace from her sisters beside her.

Both Rachel and Bridget smiled, rather forcefully, and clapped around the bouquets they carried. Emily couldn't even manage that forced smile herself,

not anymore.

“Kiss! Kiss!” a call went up from the congregation.

Emily’s hand stiffened on Jacob’s arm, fearing this eventuality. She would have rather she and Jacob had been alone for such a thing. Perhaps then they could see what kisses could mean between them again.

Jacob didn’t move toward her, yet the call only grew louder.

“Yes, kiss!”

“Let’s see the happy couple in their union. Where’s the kiss?”

Emily faced Jacob, lowering her voice to a whisper.

“You do not have to.”

“Well, we have done it before, have we not?” He reminded her, turning to face her.

“Do not kiss me like that in public,” she said hastily. For the first time, she saw the trace of a smile on his lips, a humored moment, but it didn’t last long.

Amongst the call for kisses, he leaned toward her, pressing his lips to hers for that kiss. It was chaste, but hardly momentary or fleeting. As Emily's eyes fluttered closed, she indulged in that kiss, feeling how much he held onto it too.

As the applause grew louder in the church, Emily felt transported back to that moment where they had first kissed in that dark corridor. There was a similar feeling in those kisses, despite the fact that the kisses themselves were entirely different.

When Jacob pulled back, he blinked at her but said nothing. He offered his arm to her once more and escorted her down the aisle. Woodenly, she followed him, glancing back at her sisters to ensure they were trailing behind her.

They hastened down the aisle where people threw flower petals to wish them luck. Outside of the church door, more people from Jacob's estate, including his staff and tenants, had gathered. They shouted their congratulations to him, including a small group of children that threw so many flowers into the air that they were soon strewn across the ground.

Calmly, Jacob drew her through the crowds. He thanked his staff that had come but made no effort at any point to introduce Emily to those he spoke to. She felt as ornamental as the bouquet in her hands, and less noticed by him than the flowers that were beneath their feet.

As they reached the bottom of the churchyard, the gate was held open for them, and they stepped out toward the open-top phaeton carriage that awaited them. Jacob took her hand and helped her up into the back of the carriage, but he didn't quite follow her. He turned to have one last word with his staff who

had gathered.

“Em? Emily?” Rachel called.

Turning on the coach bench, Emily looked out to the other side of the carriage. Rachel followed her and ran around the coach to speak to her. Reaching up, she placed her hands on the side of the carriage.

“Are you well, Em?” she asked with some amount of desperation in her voice. “You did not smile. Not once.”

“I wonder why,” Emily murmured wryly. “How did you feel on your wedding day?”

Rachel paused and looked down at her hands on the coach. She knew what a rushed marriage was like. She knew better than anyone what Emily had to be feeling.

“The wedding day is not a summary of marriage. Maybe the wedding itself is not joyous, but the marriage can be.” She held open her hand and Emily took it, clinging tightly. “Please, believe me in that. Something good can come from this, I assure you.”

“I know you think that.” Emily glanced away, looking to where Daniel stood on the church path with Bridget beside him. The two were talking in low tones, clearly discussing the event that they had just witnessed.

In particular, Emily's eyes traced Daniel and she found a new admiration building for him that she had not felt before. He'd done the right thing in marrying Rachel when he did, but there was more to the matter. He'd opened himself up to the idea of marriage completely, so that now he and Rachel were truly happy.

Emily couldn't quite imagine Jacob making that decision.

"We shall follow you down to the wedding breakfast," Rachel assured her and released her hand.

"Thank you." Emily sat back as she felt the carriage jolt, Jacob sitting beside her. He didn't look at her but stared straight forward. Stiffly, she performed the same action.

As the carriage set off, she forced herself to smile and wave at the children who had gathered, not wanting them to be confused by two very unhappy people who were supposed to have just shared the happiest day of their lives.

As the carriage slipped out of view, Emily's hand lowered beside her, and she stared at Jacob wondering one thing in particular from the church.

*How is it possible he could kiss me like that and yet not mean anything by it?*

## CHAPTER 19



Emily stared at Jacob from a distance, waiting for him to say anything, perhaps even look at her. At least then she would have some comfort, and not feel so isolated in this rushed marriage, yet he never glanced her way once.

As the wedding breakfast came to a close, they stood by the entrance of his house together, saying goodbye to their guests and thanking them all for their good wishes.

Saying goodbye to her family was the hardest part. Her father looked away rather hurriedly, escaping the house as quickly as he could. From the way Daniel clapped him on the shoulder in comfort, she suspected her father was suffering some pain at the turn of events. Emily clung to Rachel for as long as she could, so much so that Rachel was the one who actually pulled back from the embrace.

“Never thought I would see the day you clung to me so tightly,” Rachel whispered.

“Perhaps things change,” Emily observed, her voice quiet.

“Look after yourself. Remember what I said before.”

Emily nodded and released her sister completely, allowing Rachel to leave and hurry after her husband. The last person Emily said goodbye to was Bridget. They clung to one another in a warm embrace with Emily’s arms wrapped around her sister’s shoulders.

“What a strange turn of events has taken place,” Bridget whispered in her ear, rather wistfully. “Write to me any time and I will come to you. You know that.”

“Thank you,” Emily whispered and stepped back.

Bridget merely nodded and curtsied to Jacob in passing, not sharing a single word with him before she passed through the door. With the final guest gone, Jacob turned to the door and closed it. He turned his back against the door, leaning against it with a heavy sigh and his head turned up to the ceiling.

Emily glanced around the empty hallway and turned back to face him.

“Well?” she murmured.

“Well, what?”

“You and I are married now. I should like to think we are able to share a single conversation together, even if you could not deign to manage it throughout our... *celebratory* wedding breakfast.” On the emphasized word, he lowered his gaze, his eyes finding her own.

“You are hardly dancing for joy either,” he pointed out tartly.

“That might have had something to do with my betrothed having to be threatened into marriage. Better yet, perhaps it concerns his plain look of misery throughout the service.”

“I wonder why.” He pushed away from the door and walked toward the stairs.

*I cannot let it end this way. No, this shall not be my lasting memory of this day.*

Grasping the skirt of her gown in her hands, she chased after Jacob. Cutting him off the stairs she stood before him, now at his head for she was on a higher step.

“What is it?” he asked, his eyes darting down to her clothes. She saw that look and recognized it at once—it was the same look they’d shared before, such as the night when they had gone into the garden together, or even in the cloakroom during the concert.

“Well, at least I know there is one thing you can bear about me.”

He snatched his gaze back up again.

“Is that really all you can stand? To just stare at me?”

“We are not having this conversation here,” he hissed as sounds entered the entrance hall. Emily looked around to see staff hurrying in, heading toward the dining table to clear up from the wedding breakfast. Her distracted glance enabled Jacob to escape her. He circled her, walking up the steps, forcing her to chase after him again.

“Jacob!” she called, racing after him. She reached him at the top step and pulled on his arm, urging him to look back at her again. “At least tell me this.”

“What?” he whispered, looking down at the staff, clearly worried that they would be overheard.

“Tonight,” she murmured, swallowing around a nervous lump in her throat. “Tell me you will come to me.”

“What!?” he sputtered, stepping down toward her again. He came so near that she reached out to him on impulse and took his arm.

“Come to me tonight. It is our wedding night, is it not?”

“Are you asking me to...” He trailed off, his hand finding her waist. They both looked down at the staff once more, but they seemed uninterested in their master’s presence, hurrying in and out of the dining room as they gathered the discarded plates and trenchers of food. “You are asking for me to complete my marital duties?” Jacob asked, snatching Emily’s attention back toward him.

“Well, you seemed most eager to pay me attention before. Surely you can come tonight. Please, Jacob. I wish to talk.”

“Talk?” He actually smiled, but it seemed belittling, so much so that Emily released his arm. “I could have sworn you were asking me to do something else entirely.” She brushed his hand off her waist, so irked at his arrogance that she was in danger of falling down the stairs. She gripped the banister, and he went to help her, to steady her, but she brushed him off again.

“I wished to talk, that is all. Come to me tonight, Jacob.”

“I am sorry, Emily, but I cannot.”

“What? Why on earth not?” Her voice pitched high, and he waved a hand at her, urging her to stay calm when the staff could overhear them. “With your reputation, you startle me you care at all what your staff thinks of you. I wonder how many women have traipsed these corridors before me, though none of them claimed the title *wife*.”

He flinched at her words, as if she had struck him with them.

“Why will you not come tonight?” she pleaded.

“Trust me when I say this,” he whispered, his voice turning deeper. “It is for the best.” With these final words, he turned away and hurried across the landing, not glancing back at her once.

Dumbstruck, Emily stood at the top of the stairs, uncertain where to turn and look. Eventually, with her hands trembling, she walked down the stairs, pulling at the skirt of her wedding gown.

Her eyes darted around her new home. The vast house was larger than her father’s, as great as Daniel’s, though differently decorated. Where Daniel’s house was old with outdated furniture in desperate need of updating, which Rachel was slowly changing, Jacob’s house expressed the latest fashion.

The Palladian-style entrance hall was flanked by six pillars on either side of the room, made of white and pink marble. Between these pillars were busts on white plinths, each one bearing the image of some famous man. Paintings attached to the walls were of vast landscapes, each one alive with color and pastoral activity.

Despite the room’s beauty, Emily could not dwell on it for long. Her mind was distracted, absorbed with Jacob’s utter refusal to visit her that night. Slowly, she dropped down and sat on the bottom step, feeling far from the mistress of this house. She felt more like an abandoned woman, discarded, a casual acquittance that Jacob had brought home for a night.

“Goodness, Your Grace, what a place to sit!” a young man hurried forward. The animated voice startled Emily so much that she jerked to sit up straight.

Before her there was a man with manicured features and golden hair brushed back. He was a little older than her with a boyish face and a rounded stomach. With exuberance, he rubbed his hands together and bowed.

“Allow me to introduce myself. I am Mr. Gary Harlow, your husband’s footman.” He gestured to himself, then waved over his shoulder. “Shall I introduce you to the rest of your staff?”

“Oh, my staff.” She smiled with the words. “To be honest, Mr. Harlow, it sounds strange indeed to think of it like that. I am not sure I am used to being mistress of a house just yet.”

“Then being a duchess must be a shock too,” he said good-naturedly with a warm smile.

“It is indeed.” Rather charmed by his boyish ways, she rose to her feet.

“Well, as the Duke has retreated,” he glanced upward, looking uncertain about where Jacob had gone, but clearly intending to brush over the matter, “let me introduce you to the staff.”

“I’d like that. Thank you.” Emily stiffened her spine and stepped off the stairs, intent on trying to make the most of her new home. Perhaps she

couldn't be welcomed here by Jacob, but he was not the only one who lived in this house.

“Your Grace, may I introduce the butler, Payton.”

Payton was an elderly man, austere at first glance and quiet. When he revealed the smallest of smiles as he looked at the footman, Emily supposed that he was actually rather fond of the young man, and only too glad to let him do the talking, even though such introductions should have been more the responsibility of the butler than the footman.

“It is a pleasure to meet you,” Emily said, bowing her head in acknowledgment.

“Welcome,” Payton said, using as few words as possible.

“This is the housekeeper, Mrs. Wright.” Harlow gestured to Mrs. Wright who stood beside Payton. A short and rounded woman who clasped her hands together repeatedly with an ever-present smile.

“Oh, it is lovely to meet you, Your Grace. How glad we are to have a young lady around the house at last. I am sure you will bring some fresh air to this house,” she spoke eagerly, bobbing more than one curtsy.

Emily smiled and recognized an eager talker when she saw one.

“Thank you, you are most kind.” Emily tried to keep her smile in place as she looked around the staff, recognizing that there was another who should have made these introductions.

*Jacob should be here. Does he despise me so much that he cannot even bear my company now?*

“I wonder if I could ask for one of you to show me around the house, please?” Emily asked, looking at each of the three in turn. “It seems my husband... has been taken ill.” She reached for the lie and glanced at the ceiling.

“Unfortunate, is it not?” Harlow agreed with a firm nod, clearly eager to agree with the lie to brush over any awkwardness.

“Most unfortunate indeed,” Mrs. Wright agreed. “His stomach was always sensitive, though. Perhaps he has had too much champagne to celebrate.”

*I am not sure he was celebrating at all.*

Emily kept the thought to herself.

“Come, Mrs. Wright and I can show you around,” Harlow insisted, gesturing to a door nearby.

“Thank you.”

“Yes, we shall.” Mrs. Wright hastened to follow, her feet moving fast beneath her. “I hope you shall settle into your new home well, Your Grace. The Duke has informed me that if there’s anything you wish to change about the house, please do let me know, and we will make arrangements to see it done.”

Emily halted in the doorway to what appeared to be a ballroom. She stared at Mrs. Wright in pure bafflement.

“He is content for me to make changes? He even informed you of this?”

“Oh yes, most certainly.” Mrs. Wright nodded and beckoned her further inside the room.

Emily stumbled into the middle of the ballroom, her jaw slackening in awe at the beauty of the room. There was not a surface that was not ornate or beautifully made, with duck-egg blue panels, white moldings on the ceilings, and golden engravings around the windows. Emily stood in the middle of the floor and turned under a long crystal chandelier. The beeswax candles were thrust into the spindles, ready to be lit for some fine event.

“He was determined, Your Grace, that everything should be the way you wish it,” Mrs. Wright continued.

*Apart from his company, it seems. Jacob was not content to give me that.*



Emily sat numbly at the dinner table, her anger so palpable that she breathed deeply, fearing her nostrils flared.

At her side, Harlow kindly filled her wine glass. When she took an eager sip, he offered to fill it up a little more.

“Thank you,” she murmured, and he offered her a small smile.

“Whatever you need.” He retreated from the room, leaving the carafe at the dining table beside her.

“At least the staff here are welcoming,” Emily mumbled as she stared at the empty space at the head of the table.

As it was their wedding night, Jacob’s mother was away from home. Emily had heard from Mrs. Wright that the Dowager Duchess wished to give them privacy. Emily now wished the lady had not made such a resolution; at least then Emily would have had someone to talk to.

When footsteps sounded, Emily sat forward in her chair, peering through the candles that were set out on the table and toward the doorway, in high expectation. At last, her wishes were answered, and Jacob appeared.

Just like her, he had changed out of his wedding clothes. He wore a much more modest suit and hadn’t even bothered with his jacket. His shirt sleeves

were rolled up to his elbows as he hurried to his chair at the head of the table. He pulled it out and sat down, his eyes glancing at Emily constantly.

“Good evening,” Emily declared with false cheer, finding some amusement at the moment. “Oh yes, lovely afternoon, thank you for asking how it passed.” She saw on his face the trace of a smile, though he did not give into the temptation to laugh. “How about yours? Were you not lonely tucked away in your chamber all afternoon? I had a tour of my new home. A tour that had to be given by your kind staff, as you refused to give it.”

He grimaced as he reached for the carafe on the table and poured out his own wine.

“I trust you like the house?” he said, seeming rather interested in her answer.

“It is beautiful,” she murmured, but with little enthusiasm. “What I wish to know is why my husband refused to be the one to show it to me?”

“I have my reasons.” He put the stopper on top of the carafe and lifted the glass to his lips, tipping it back. The way he slumped in his chair captured Emily’s attention. One of his arms hung loosely over the arm of the seat, the fingers loose, and there was a warm pinkness across his cheeks.

“How much liquor have you had today?” she asked.

“Ah, caring for me like a mother, now.”

“Enough, Jacob.” She shook her head and looked away. Stabbing at the chicken on her plate, she attempted to eat the meal, but it all tasted dry in her throat. It was well made, yet her mind scarcely acknowledged that.

In contrast, Jacob showed little interest in eating at all. He seemed more intent on topping up his glass once again.

Emily could not bear the silence that followed anymore. She placed down her cutlery on either side of her plate, thudding the table loudly and turned toward him. His head angled toward her, those eyes looking strangely out of focus.

“Do you despise me so much that you cannot show me around my new home?”

“Despise you?” he spluttered, putting down his glass and leaning across the table. “Surely all that has passed between us shows such a thing would be impossible for me to feel.”

“No.” She shook her head. “A man who cared for me in the slightest would not have left me so alone or isolated today.” She pushed back the chair, deciding she’d said her piece and that was enough.

“Where are you going?” he asked, standing too and following her around the table. He must have been drunk and had more liquor before he came down for dinner, because he stumbled, nearly tripping on one of the chairs.

“I am giving you what you so desire,” she said snidely and rounded the last corner of the table, heading for the door. “I am leaving you alone.”

“Emily, wait.” He caught her arm and pulled her back toward him. His pull was unintentionally strong, and she fell into his chest, startled, looking up at him with wide eyes.

“You smell of liquor,” she pointed out.

“Well, maybe I am trying to deal with certain things right now.”

“Liquor is no way to deal with anything!”

“Perhaps not.” He nodded in acknowledgment, his eyes closing as if trying his best to steady himself again. “I cannot have you marching from this room thinking I hate you.” He opened his eyes, those blue eyes burrowing into hers. “I do not. You’re just going to have to trust me that I am behaving the way I am for the right reasons.”

“I find that hard to imagine.” She scoffed, shaking her head, abruptly aware that neither one of them had released the other. Her hands were still flat on his chest and his fingers were on her waist, touching her lightly. “We are supposed to be married. Do not married couples share secrets?”

“Not all married couples are so open.”

“Then what is there left for us to do?” she cried, thrusting her hands into his chest angrily. “You are a husband that denies me your company, your patience, and now your secrets too. Do you wish us to live as strangers? To be nothing to one another?”

“Perhaps it is the best way.”

“No, no it is not!” she cried aloud.

“Why not?”

“Because...” She had no answer. With her breath coming and going fast, she scrambled to think of something to say. Unable to summon words, she chose action instead. Pulling down on the edges of his waistcoat, she tugged Jacob toward her, so she could kiss him. Their lips collided suddenly, and she feared for a moment that he would push her off angrily, but no such thing happened.

Abruptly, and with sudden fierceness, he kissed her back.

## CHAPTER 20



Jacob couldn't stop himself. His mind was muddled, the liquor impairing his thoughts, so that when Emily kissed him, all he could think of doing was kissing her back.

He pressed her backward, stumbling with her somewhere, though he did not care to look where they ended up. All he registered was grabbing the edge of the door en route and slamming it shut, to make sure none of his staff would come in to disturb them.

Raising his hands, he buried one in Emily's blonde hair, tilting her head back to get as much access to her as possible. He delved deep, dominating the kiss, but what aroused him even more was the way Emily responded, clawing at him, and matching each stroke of his tongue with her own.

It was intoxicating, not just the taste of her, but every touch she gave. One of her hands trembled on the edge of his waistcoat, and the other raised up and took the side of his face, pulling him down toward her in the most intense way.

They stumbled to the side of the room where they collided with a sideboard, the vase on top shaking and shuddering at their movements. Jacob pressed Emily toward it, brushing his hips against hers. She responded instantly, gasping into his kiss.

*I should stop. I know I should. If I make love to Emily and get her with a child, what then? She and the child would be left to grieve me!*

He couldn't do it. Yet these logical thoughts were downed by the liquor and his desire for Emily.

Grasping her waist, he lifted her onto the sideboard, so that they gazed directly into one another's eyes. Taking her legs, he spread them wide so that they brushed the sides of his hips, opening her to him. He brushed their cores together, distracted as she gasped into their kiss, clearly feeling his length that had hardened for her.

He moved his hands, both reaching for her waist with his fingers splaying across the narrowness there. Tugging her right to the edge of the sideboard, he moved their bodies together. That friction was so great she murmured once more into their kiss.

*Don't stop...*

His thoughts changed, in such a way that he could not control them anymore.

Moving his kisses to her neck, he kissed down her body, toward the open

neckline of her gown. Peppering those kisses across the top curve of her breasts, he nipped her playfully, listening to the gasping moans that escaped Emily's lips as she tipped her head back and indulged in his touch.

“Jacob, please,” she begged. “Do not stop.”

Jacob slowed his kisses. Nestling his lips to the valley between her breasts, he kissed her once more time, feeling her hips grind against his.

How easy it would be to take something of her right now in this room, to show her the pleasure they had glimpsed together once more. It would be so simple, so passionate. If he could manage the walk to his chamber in his drunken state, then he could take her completely.

Images filled his mind of the passionate positions he and Emily would end up in. He pictured first taking her on her back, with her legs raised up around his waist as he buried himself deep within her. Then the image changed. He imagined making her stand off the bed, with her hands on the covers, as he entered her from behind. He'd grip to her waist as he drove the two of them together, watching as she pushed her head into the covers, trying to muffle those moans.

“Jacob,” she pleaded with him again. “Do not stop.”

He broke off. Moving his hands to the sideboard either side of her, he lifted himself off her and looked her in the eye. Her cheeks were a thrilling shade of red, her eyes bright as she panted, doing her best to catch her breath.

Her eyes looked between each of his own, clearly trying to focus on something. He closed his eyes, blocking out the tempting view of her.

“You’re stopping anyway, are you not?”

“Yes.” He released her and stepped back, opening his eyes once more, he looked at her as she slowly clambered down off the sideboard.

“I do not understand you,” she murmured, her voice so husky and low it reminded him of the first night when they had met in that dark corridor.

It was always the same with that deep husky tone. He was tempted to take her to bed once again, or maybe not even get that far and just take her on the table right now.

“You can kiss me in such a way, make it seem as if you wish to be with me completely, then pull back as if you are playing a game of cards that can be so easily ignored?”

“That is not how I would describe you, Emily. Believe me.” He stepped away and reached for the door. “Let us leave it at this between us. The reason I am putting distance between us is good. You have to trust me on that.” He opened the door, intent to step out when her next words made him freeze on the spot.

“Strange, for you have just made me realize something.”

He glanced back, eager to hear what she had to say next. Slowly, she walked toward her seat at the table and sat down, reaching for her own wine glass and taking a large gulp before she continued. The way she sat back in that chair was tempting to him again, with her hair ruffled, her face flushed, and the sleeves of her gown disarrayed. She didn't bother to set them straight.

“What is that?” he asked, urging her on.

“That I do not trust you at all.”

This realization was like a kick in the gut to him. He stepped out of the door, telling himself it was good if she disliked him, yet he did not feel good about it. He only felt worse.



The sunlight filtered through the window, falling on Emily's face and waking her much earlier than she would have liked. She wriggled in the bed, exhausted, yawning as she turned on the covers and rolled over.

As her eyes opened, they fell on the closed door that adjoined her new chamber to her husband's. She supposed the staff thought they were doing the right thing when they put her in this chamber, but that door had remained firmly locked overnight. Judging by the way Emily had pulled on her side of the door, Jacob had bolted it too.

“He didn't come,” Emily whispered as she slowly pushed herself up in the middle of the bed and looked around the room.

Despite Jacob's words the day before, the heated kiss, then him practically running from her, there had been this hope that he would come to her during the night, so they could have their wedding night together. Yet her wishes were not answered. The bed remained cold with only her in it, just as that door remained closed.

Slowly, Emily pulled herself out of bed, looking around the fine chamber and trying to distract herself by admiring its interior. The lustrous golden furniture was upholstered with damask cushions, and the chairs and settees on one side of the chamber appeared comfortable and inviting. The bed where she'd laid her head all night had matching curtains around the four posts, the large bed far too large for her to sleep alone.

Emily reached for the long cord at the side of the room to ring the bell for her lady's maid quarters, deep within the house.

She changed with the maid's help when she arrived, though the conversation was brief and stilted between the two of them. Whenever the maid tried to enquire if Emily was well, Emily would try to push the matter away as quickly as possible. Once Emily was changed, she hovered by the door, preparing to go down for breakfast as the maid reached for the bed.

"I shall change your covers, Your Grace," the maid said with ease.

"Change them? So soon?" Emily murmured in surprise.

"Of course, it is traditional after the wedding night."

“Oh, wait.” Emily stepped forward, but it was too late. The maid swept the top cover to the side and looked around the sheets, then turned round eyes up to Emily. She fidgeted, her hands wringing together. There would be no sign of blood, nothing to suggest that she may have lost her virtue the night before. “It will not be necessary to change the bed, Marianne.”

“Yes, Your Grace.”

“I’d also be grateful if you kept this to yourself.”

Marianne offered a gentle and reassuring smile.

“Of course. I would not betray a secret.”

“You are kind.” Emily forced a smile and left the chamber, hurrying down the stairs of the house toward the breakfast room. By the time she reached the chamber, her hands were shaking, for she thought much of what the maid had said. Whether Marianne whispered to the other staff about what she had seen did not matter, for it did not change what had *not* happened the night before.

*I cannot believe he didn’t come.*

Stepping into the breakfast room, she halted, startled to see it was not empty. At the head of the small table sat Jacob. He had a large cup of coffee in his hands and judging from the shadows under his eyes, he was suffering after drinking too much liquor the night before.

“Good morning,” Emily said, clearing her throat and speaking with false cheer.

“Is it?” Jacob winced and rubbed his temple. “I can scarcely remember last night.”

“You need not fear,” she whispered as she walked past him, hurrying to take her chair beside him. “Nothing happened last night that was worthy of you remembering. We merely argued.”

“I see.” Jacob nodded.

His lack of reaction only made things worse. She reached for the coffee on the table and topped up her cup, then filled her plate high with food, trying to distract herself.

“You did not come,” the whisper fell from her lips eventually. Jacob sighed and sat back in his chair, rubbing his temple once more.

“I remember telling you that I would not come.”

“But Jacob—”

“Emily, there is something I have decided overnight.” His firm voice made her lift her gaze from her coffee cup. She stared at his face, seeing a muscle twitch in his stomach and the way his eyes darted around the room.

“Are you quite well?” she asked.

“Perfectly. It is just the liquor from last night.” He waved away the idea he might be unwell. “I was talking of something I have decided overnight.”

“What is that?” she encouraged him.

“I have a country estate.” He drummed his fingers on the table as he spoke. “It’s a fine house deep within the Wiltshire countryside. Fine rolling hills, a large house, and the gardens, well, they are something to behold.”

“It sounds beautiful.” Emily smiled a little, leaning forward with excitement. Was it possible Jacob was going to suggest they honeymoon at the country estate?

“Yes. I was thinking that one of us should go to the country estate.”

“Wait... one of us?” She nearly dropped her coffee cup and spilled some of the black liquid over her fingers.

“Yes. I think it best.”

She had not the words. She stared numbly back at Jacob, thinking of the way

he had kissed her last night and their conversation beforehand.

*Despite his denial, perhaps it is time to face the truth. He despises me for I am the woman who has ended up pushing him into marriage. How can I face this?*



“Right, sit down Your Grace. Let’s check how things are.” Doctor Rainer gave a little wave, encouraging Jacob to take a seat in the room.

Jacob shrugged off his tailcoat and sat down in the corner of the doctor’s chambers. Usually, Doctor Rainer was brought to the house for such check-ups, but when Jacob learned his mother had set up yet another doctor’s appointment for him, he did not want Emily to hear of it. He’d sent a message to the doctor late the night before, assuring him that Jacob would come to him instead.

“I’m curious,” Rainer said as he rolled up one of Jacob’s sleeves and took his wrist, checking his pulse. “Why have you come to see me today? I would have happily come to see you.”

“You cannot be made to run around all the time, good doctor,” Jacob said with a forced laugh, trying to turn the matter into a jest. “Sometimes the rest of us should work a little harder.”

Doctor Rainer offered a small smile then fell still as he counted out Jacob’s pulse. The smallest of frowns appeared before he turned away to a table beside them and made hurried notes with a pencil on a clean sheet of paper.

Distracted, Jacob's eyes darted around the room. Above the table, there were shelves stacked full of bottles and glass vials. Some had labels with tiny spider-like scrawls across the surface, and others were completely blank, filled with colorless liquid.

"How are you sleeping?"

"Ill," Jacob answered swiftly. "Yet that has more to do with what is going on in my life."

"In my experience, newly married men usually sleep extraordinarily well." Doctor Rainer chuckled as he reached for a small listening device attached to a long tube of rubber.

"Well, not I." Jacob looked away, not wanting to reveal why he was not sleeping, nor why he was not like other married men.

*They share their beds with their wives.*

He was still haunted by the look Emily had given him the day before when he had suggested that one of them should go to the country estate. He'd alighted on the idea with excitement, determined it could be good for them both. They could lead their different lives and whatever was between them would then not have a chance to grow. It seemed wise, surely? The best way to protect her from forming too close a bond with him.

What he couldn't make sense of was why his knee bobbed up and down, and he fidgeted each time he resolved that one of them should leave. Something in his mind objected strongly, and he could not push it away harshly enough.

Doctor Rainer listened to Jacob's heartbeat through the strange device, then he performed other tests, looking into Jacob's eyes and ears, as well as asking other questions which seemed most strange to Jacob. He asked if Jacob felt dizzy, had blurred vision, or felt lightheaded.

"Well, Your Grace." When Doctor Rainer finished, he perched on the edge of the table nearby, his tone strangely somber.

"You're acting differently today, Doctor." Jacob stiffened in the chair, pausing as he rolled down his shirt sleeves. "Have you found something wrong with me after all?"

"No." Doctor Rainer shook his head. "Yet there are things we need to keep abreast of. Your eyes, they are both bloodshot. Have you not noticed?"

Jacob stood from his seat and hurried across the room, moving to the nearest mirror latched to the wall. He pressed his face close to the glass to see if it was true—his eyes were indeed bloodshot and not just by a small amount.

"It could just be because you are not sleeping," Rainer called to him.

"And if it's not." Jacob's spine grew rigid.

“We just need to watch it.”

“If it’s not because of a lack of sleep, Doctor, what else could it be from?” Jacob slowly turned around, finding Doctor Rainer was reluctant to answer. Slowly, the elder doctor shrugged his shoulders.

“Your Grace, there are many possible causes, from small and menial things to greater possibilities.”

Jacob swallowed, finding there was a sudden lump in his throat at this news. He stilled on the spot, not knowing what to do or say.

“My advice is to try and get some more sleep,” Doctor Rainer said with an easy smile. “If you are struggling, there is a laudanum tincture I can give you.”

“No, thank you.” Jacob shook his head, reluctant to take such a thing. He could remember the scent of laudanum all too well. After his father had died and his mother had had one of her nervous fits, it was what the doctors had all relied upon to keep her calm. “I shall be fine without it,” he insisted, trying to force a smile.

“Please, try not to worry,” Doctor Rainer stepped toward him. “For most patients, this is not even something I would even mention. I only mention it because you are usually in such prime health, and I know how you feel about such matters, Your Grace. You would not appreciate it if I kept something hidden from you, would you?”

“You are right.” Jacob nodded and leaned against the wall beside him. “Any other recommendations, Doctor?”

“Sleep. Find a rhythm that suits you and do not stay up too late at night. What time are you falling asleep at the moment?”

Jacob swallowed nervously once more as he finished rolling down his sleeves. The last couple of nights he’d gone to bed well after midnight, for he had been up late thinking of Emily.

“Probably around one or two in the morning.”

“Then you are not even giving your body a chance to sleep. Try, Your Grace. It may help matters and then this will be nothing to worry about. Now, that is all.” Doctor Rainer clapped him on the shoulder and turned away.

Yet Jacob could not settle. He glanced back at the mirror once more, his focus on the whites of his eyes. They were so bloodshot they were a rich shade of deep pink.

*What can it mean?*

## CHAPTER 21



Jacob dropped down out of the horse's saddle and turned to face the house before him. The Duke of Elbridge's manor was a grand one indeed, rather imposing in its age and height as it dominated the landscape of parkland and woodland around it. Facing the house, Jacob adjusted the tight collar and cravat around his throat.

The weather had turned dark and drizzly. The rain fell from the sky persistently, running off Jacob's top hat and down the shoulders of his tailcoat, though he made no effort to run out of the rain and shield himself from that dampness. Puddles grew around him on the gravel driveway and rain ran off the steps that led to the front door, like a waterfall.

"Sir? Sir?" One of the stable boys ran forward. Clearly not knowing who Jacob was, he addressed him formally and offered to take the reins. "Please, sir, hurry inside. I will take care of your horse."

"Thank you." Jacob nodded with appreciation to the boy, but still moved slowly toward the house with no sense of haste in his steps. He climbed the front steps and knocked slowly on the door, waiting in the rain for it to be answered.

The butler soon appeared and opened it wide, his eyes growing wide when he saw Jacob.

“Your Grace?” he exclaimed. “Goodness, come in out of the rain. Is there something I can get for you? Tea, perhaps? Something to warm you through.”

“Thank you. That is kind.” Jacob stepped inside and looked forlornly down at the puddles he had made. “I am sorry for...”

“Think nothing of it, Your Grace. Come, this way.” The butler kindly beckoned him toward the nearest room. “We have a fire going in this room. I shall leave you there whilst I summon the Duke and the Duchess.”

“Thank you.” Jacob followed the butler into a pleasantly decorated parlor. It was warm, with duck-egg blue cushions and white furnishings, mixed with mahogany tables and sideboards around the space.

He chose a wooden chair so he would not damage the cushions and sat close to the fire, shrugging off his tailcoat as he tried to warm up. He didn't have to wait long for the Duke of Elbridge to appear.

He came striding through the door first, his lips parted in fear.

“What's happened? Is there something wrong?” He reached for Jacob. “Is it Emily?”

“What? No.” Jacob shook his head as he stood to bow, realizing how much fear it must have caused his brother-in-law to come riding to the estate in such an estate, willing to face the rain. “Forgive me for appearing like this, but there is something I wished to talk to you and your wife about.”

“She is coming.” The Duke of Elbridge took Jacob’s shoulder and steered him back closer to the fire. “You’re soaked. You’ll make yourself sick riding in weather like this.”

“Oh, I’m well enough.” The words felt wrong on his tongue as Jacob halted by the mantelpiece. Over the fire was a great mirror, and flickering his eyes toward it, he once again saw the bloodshot state of his eyes.

*I look worse than I did this morning.*

He brushed his hair back from his forehead, noting how pale his skin was and the shadows under his eyes.

“What has happened?” a familiar voice called from the doorway.

Jacob turned to see the Duchess of Elbridge had arrived, but she was not alone. In her arms was her son, and beside her was Lady Bridget. Jacob bowed to them each in turn, deciding that it was right both of Emily’s sisters were here for such a conversation. At least then perhaps he could impress upon them all the seriousness of this discussion.

“Nothing.” He shook his head. “Emily is perfectly well, I just needed to speak to you all.”

“Then sit, rest.” The Duke of Elbridge gestured to the chair Jacob had temporarily vacated. “Tea is on its way.”

When the tea arrived, he found a cup pushed into his hands by the Duchess, who insisted that he drank it quickly in order to warm him through. He was restless, leaning forward with his elbows on his knees and turning the cup repeatedly around in its saucer.

The Duchess and Lady Bridget sat nearby on a rococo settee, with the boy now resting in Lady Bridget’s arms, sleeping peacefully. The Duke pulled up another chair to sit beside Jacob instead, with his arms folded and his eyes narrowed.

“What is it then, Your Grace? To come all this way in this weather, you must have something serious to say.”

“I have something to plead, from you all.” He looked around the room before his eyes settled once more on the Duke. “You remember once before I asked you to take care of Emily? You vowed to look out for her if she needed any assistance.”

“That I did. It is a promise I intend to keep.” The Duke of Elbridge slowly nodded and took the teacup that his wife proffered. “I take my wedding vows seriously, as I do my loyalty to the family.”

“Why would she need taking care of?” the Duchess asked, her voice sharp with interest.

Jacob looked briefly toward the Duchess, noting she had a similar curious expression to Emily, with a small line appearing deep within her brow. They shared the same astuteness, that familiar perceptiveness.

“If something were ever to happen to me...” Jacob halted and shifted once more, turning the cup in its saucer with his knee bobbing up and down. “I need to know she would have you all beside her.”

“We would never leave our sister’s side,” the Duchess declared firmly, her voice deepening. Lady Bridget nodded, agreeing with her words.

“Yet what would happen to you?” the Duke asked, his head tilting to the side. “This is strange. You have already asked me to watch out for Emily once, now you come in this state and ask the same thing of me again, yet in a more serious tone. What do you mean by this, Your Grace?”

Jacob was reluctant to answer. He stared down into the fire, knowing he couldn’t say exactly what was on his mind. Such worries had not gone down well and tended to get one of two reactions. He feared a reaction like his mother’s, one with far too much concern and panic, just as he feared a reaction like Seth’s—dismissive.

“It is simply that I fear for what could happen,” Jacob did his best to explain without going into detail. “One never knows what is around the next corner, and I do not like to think that if something were to happen to me that Emily

would be left to deal with it alone.”

“She wouldn’t be alone. Ever.” The Duchess smiled a little at the words.

“Thank you.” Jacob took comfort in the Duchess’s resolution. Inhaling deeply, he found a small weight lifted from his shoulders. He took a deep gulp from the tea and sat back in his chair, looking at the flames of the fire once more. “There are things that should be known, I suppose. If something were to happen.”

“What do you mean?” The Duke of Elbridge seemed to have abandoned his tea and focused completely on Jacob’s words.

“I have two estates, the one in London and one in Wiltshire. I can arrange for their details to be drawn up by my steward. I have many tenants as well. The bloodline is limited, so in terms of things being entailed away, the chance is minimal. I fear a lot of the responsibility would be endowed on Emily.”

“Goodness, what is all this talk?” the Duchess said suddenly, sitting forward. “Your Grace, it sounds as if you are preparing for the very worst possible outcome. As if you knew you were to be hit by a horse and cart later today!” Her impassioned voice drew his attention.

With his eyes on her, he compared her once again to Emily.

He found he missed Emily’s green eyes, the eagerness of her conversation, and the excitement of her company. She was hard to turn away from, and he

hated himself for doing it. He was so torn, so conflicted in wondering if what he was doing was for the best, that staring at the Duchess was an unnerving reminder of the woman he was ignoring at home.

“Your Grace?” she said, leaning forward, clearly trying to rouse an answer from him.

“It is nothing.” He shook his head and downed what was left in his cup. “If you would excuse me, I should leave you now. I have trespassed on your kindness too long this morning.” He stood and placed the teacup down on the silver tray nearby, moving toward the door.

“Goodness. You are leaving so soon?” the Duchess asked, standing to follow him, yet there was another that chased after him much faster. The Duke of Elbridge trailed him through the corridors, heading to the front door.

“Yes, I must,” Jacob said hurriedly.

“At least wait for the worst of the rain to pass,” the Duke of Elbridge pleaded. “You would not want to make yourself ill.”

*There is an irony to such a statement.*

Jacob didn't hesitate to open the front door and stride down the steps, hurrying across the courtyard toward the stable beyond. The Duke of Elbridge followed him, his own being soon sodden by the rain.

“Go back inside, Your Grace. It’s wet out here,” Jacob urged with a wave of his hand.

“I could say precisely the same thing to you, though it seems it would do little good.” The Duke of Elbridge caught his arm just as they entered the stable. Jacob was forced to turn swiftly around, to face the Duke once again. “Tell me the truth now, whilst we are away from my wife and sister-in-law.” His voice dropped to a low hissing whisper, his eyes darting restlessly, betraying his fears. “Your health... are you completely well?”

“That is a question I have never been able to answer clearly,” Jacob muttered and moved to the side of the stable where the stable boy was brushing down his horse. “Thank you.” He gave a coin to the boy for his trouble and pulled himself into the saddle, intent on leaving at once.

“Have you seen a doctor?” the Duke of Elbridge stood in the way, blocking his path so he could not escape. “Do you know what is wrong?”

“It is nothing.” Jacob shook his head, reluctant to elaborate on something that was based purely on his fears rather than any true fact. “Just let it be known that something may be amiss, and if there is, I do not want Emily left alone.”

“She won’t be.” The Duke of Elbridge moved to his side, no longer blocking the way, yet the depth and earnestness of his tone kept Jacob in his place. “Look, Your Grace. Coming in this manner to the house is baffling indeed.” He sighed heavily. “Yet I see what you are so worried about here. If I can put you at ease at all, let it be this. If you were to be struck down by that horse and cart my wife has described tomorrow, I would ensure that Emily was not left alone. Her sisters and I will be there for her, no matter what.”

“Thank you. That is all I wished to have. Your earnest promise.”

“You have it.” The Duke of Elbridge offered his hand. Jacob lifted his hand from the reins and took the Duke’s palm, shaking it firmly, then he left, darting out of the stable and into the rain.

It was cold, with trickles running off his hat and down the back of his neck.



“Mother?”

Catarina sat in the garden room fussing over a set of cards. On the other side of the small table where she sat between palm trees was the healer woman she so relied upon these days. With a surprisingly easy smile, Catarina lifted her head in greeting him.

“Jacob?” She beckoned him further into the room. “Come, come. Tell me how your first few days with your wife have been.” She had returned to the house after staying with friends, mistakenly believing that she had given Jacob some privacy with his wife.

“Well enough,” he said tightly and crossed toward the table. He nodded his head in greeting to the healer woman who hurried to stand and curtsy. She was a rounded woman with a fair face for her age. The patterned gown she wore was cinched at her waist and she covered her shoulders with a thick shawl. A scent of rosemary and thyme wafted off her, hinting at the herbs she used so often in her trade. “Good day, Mistress Mayhew.”

“Good day, Your Grace.” She returned to her seat with Catarina.

“I’d like to ask you something, Mother.” Jacob reached for a chair between the palm trees and dragged it toward their small table of cards. He sat down beside his mother, trying to earn her attention.

She fidgeted constantly with the cards in front of her, then something strange happened. Mistress Mayhew took the cards from her, and to Jacob’s surprise, Catarina didn’t try to take them back again. She quite contently sat back in her chair and didn’t fidget but sat completely still.

Jacob paused, unsure what to say or feel as he observed the transformation. He looked at Mistress Mayhew who offered the smallest of smiles, showing she clearly knew what he had noticed.

*It seems the healer is making a difference after all.*

“I wish to ask you something,” he said to his mother, trying to begin this conversation again. “Now I am married, Mother, if anything were to happen to me—”

“But it shall not happen, shall it?” she said with sudden vigor, reaching for his hand. She clasped it tight, the ridges of her knuckles turning white. “The Doctor has said you are healthy, has he not?”

Jacob decided not to tell his mother about the bloodshot eyes.

“Yes,” he whispered. “Yet as with my father, one never knows what is around the corner.”

“No one does, sadly,” Mistress Mayhew said from the other side of the table. “Yet one can still live as if the sun will always come up tomorrow.” The rather poetic way she described it caught Jacob’s attention and he struggled to shift his focus back to his mother.

“Well, if the worst was to come around the corner,” he said slowly to his mother, “I wish you to take care of Emily, Mother. I have asked the same of her family, but I remember all too well how...” He broke off, thinking of his mother’s difficulties after his father had passed.

“I know.” She softened her hold on his hand. “It was not easy. Rest assured, my boy. If the worst was to happen, I would be there for Emily.” She smiled sadly. “I know what it feels like to lose the man I love. I would not want her to go through what I did.”

Jacob stiffened in his seat, thinking of the words his mother had used.

*A man I love...*

Emily had never told him she loved him, and he had no reason to consider that she did. Yet it bothered him now the words had been said and made him dwell on the memory of the way she had gazed at him in pure shock, her lips parting into a round ‘o’ when he had declared one of them should go to the country estate.

“Do not fear,” Catarina said softly. “Emily will be well looked after; I can promise you that.”

“Thank you.” Jacob slowly released his mother’s hand and sat back in his chair. He felt watched and angled his head around to see that Mistress Mayhew was watching him intently.

“Are you quite well, Your Grace?” she whispered. “There is nothing wrong, I hope?”

“Perfectly well, thank you.” He shrugged and leaned forward, ready to stand, but he noticed that she leaned forward too. She stared at his eyes, rather too intensely, and it made him shift in his seat.

*She will see they are bloodshot.*

“If you would excuse me, I shall leave you to your cards.” He stood from his chair and laid a soft hand on his mother’s shoulder before turning away. In the doorway, he glanced back to notice that Mistress Mayhew still stared at him, with obvious curiosity.

Gladly, Jacob closed the door behind him, shutting out the keenness of that stare. As he walked down the corridor, something that his mother had said still lingered with him, and it was something he could not shift.

*Love...*

He thought of the pain of thinking of Emily, even the agony of seeing her so upset with him for what he had done. There was only one answer for why it hurt him so much. Despite all his denials, and his refusals to be close to Emily, the truth took him by surprise as if he had been struck by it. It was a feeling he could not escape, the pain too strong, and the clarity of the thought as clear as water.

*How is it possible that I have fallen in love with her?*

## CHAPTER 22



“*Y*our Grace?” Harlow followed Emily to the front door, holding out a thick pelisse and a bonnet for her. “If you are to go riding again, at least put these on, I beg of you. It is growing cold outside. What would the Duke say?”

“The Duke? Pah!” She halted on the driveway and turned back to face the kindly footman. These last two weeks he had followed her around, offering help in any way he could. He was a kind soul, but even Emily was getting to the point of wishing he would turn his attention elsewhere. He was an extremely attentive footman indeed. “I do not think the Duke would notice if I fell off my horse when out riding.”

“That is not true, Your Grace. Of course, he would care,” Harlow pleaded, chasing after her as she turned to the stable once more.

Hurrying into the stable, she asked the groomsman to prepare her mare for her, then turned back to Harlow who still held out her pelisse and bonnet for her. He smiled a little.

“If you put them on, then I will leave you in peace for a short while,” he promised.

“Now that temptation is too much.” She jested and decided to take the pelisse and bonnet from him, catching sight of his smile as she did so. She latched the warm pelisse across her body and pulled the bonnet tightly around her head, turning to wait for the horse to be prepared. “Harlow, why is it that you follow me around so much?”

“It is my duty, Your Grace.”

“Yes, I had noticed, but you must have other duties besides running around after me.”

“I promised to ensure you were well cared for and had everything you needed.” Harlow’s words didn’t settle for a minute.

Emily was too caught up in reaching for the horse and pulling herself into the saddle, taking the reins from the groomsman whom she thanked for his work. As she turned the horse, ready to leave the stable, she registered exactly what Harlow had said.

“Wait...” Slowly, she turned in the saddle to face him once more. “I never extracted such a promise from you. Who would you make such a promise to?”

“Ahem.” Harlow cleared his throat, looking abruptly uncomfortable. He

pulled at his cravat, trying to loosen it around his throat.

“Your attempt to hide a truth from me is failing miserably.” She narrowed her eyes at him. “Come on, Harlow. What is it you are not telling me?”

“It is of no great matter,” he shrugged, obviously forcing a smile to his lips. “I simply assured the Duke that I would ensure you had everything you needed and were well taken care of. That is all.”

“The Duke?” She raised an eyebrow in skepticism, finding the idea a baffling one. “I think you must be telling me a small lie.”

“No, no, far from it.” Harlow stepped toward the horse, lowering his voice as he glanced over his shoulder, ensuring the groomsman had retreated enough that they could speak quietly without being overheard. “The Duke made me promise such a thing the night before you arrived at the house.”

“You speak as if the Duke cares what happens to his wife.” She supposed it was too brutal a statement to make, and certainly too honest, for poor Harlow’s boyish face turned into a look of shock. “Do not mistake the Duke’s attention toward me. He merely wishes to ensure his wife comes to no harm, but it is not care.”

With these words, she flicked the reins and darted out of the stable. She raced down the driveway and then turned off into the woodland, heading around the park attached to the estate.

The seasons were changing. Summer was gone, with Autumn fast approaching. The leaves had started to turn, with the green hues now changing to rich oranges and scarlets. Some of the leaves drifted down from the trees, covering the ground with their damp sheen. Emily urged the horse to race faster, so the two of them darted between the trees, scarcely avoiding the branches. They leaped over fallen tree logs, and passed a pond that she skirted around, being careful to make sure the horse didn't muddy its hooves in the water.

When she reached the edge of the parkland, she traipsed up a hill, desperate for a view of the entire estate. She was tired by the time she reached the top, as was the horse, snorting and panting to try and recover its breath. Turning down to look down at the estate, her eyes dwelled on the manor house.

On such a gray day, the house looked cold and no longer as beautiful as it had been on the first day she had arrived. Her eyes darted across the gardens, hoping she would discover some sign of Jacob, but there was nothing.

"He keeps hiding," Emily whispered, shivering as the wind whistled up the hill and buffeted her.

She'd been certain at some point that Jacob would come to her one morning to say that she would be sent to the country estate. After he had suggested such a thing two weeks before, surely, the eventuality was inevitable. Yet to her surprise, no such word came, and Jacob had not even spoken again of his idea that one of them should leave the house.

When they saw each other at mealtimes or in passing in the house, they no longer spoke. Emily's attempts the first week had been stifled at every opportunity, so she no longer tried, for what was the point?

Turning the horse away from the top of the hill, Emily urged the animal down the other side, toward the edge of the estate and the London streets. She passed through a gate and into the busy roads, earning some curious gazes from passing tradesmen and horse riders. Choosing not to return any of their looks, Emily hastened down the road, intent on one destination.

It took an hour to traipse through the busy streets and find her father's home, but when she eventually got there, the long ride was worth it. The butler opened the door and beckoned her inside with a warm smile and she was quickly shown into the parlor where Rachel and Bridget both stood.

“Emily!” Rachel jumped to her feet and moved toward Emily, embracing her warmly. Emily clung to her sister and didn't pull back. She just kept clinging on, reluctant to let go at all. Rachel was the first to pull back, placing her hands on Emily's cheeks as she looked into her eyes. “Are you well?”

“Well enough,” Emily replied tightly.

“Come, sit.” Rachel pleaded with her, dragging her across the room. Emily only released Rachel to embrace Bridget too and was soon placed down into the nearest armchair where Joey was deposited into her arms.

Finding comfort in holding her nephew, Emily sat back, her spine relaxing for what felt like the first time in two weeks. She rocked her nephew from side to side, admiring the features of his small face and his hands that made small grappling gestures. She offered him her hand and he clung onto one of her fingers.

*I hoped I could have such a child someday. From the way Jacob is with me now, it is a wish that will never be granted.*

“How are things?” Bridget asked, leaning toward her.

“Much the same as on our last visit,” Emily answered without looking up. She just focused on her nephew, fussing with him.

“What a sad situation this is.” Bridget sighed loudly and sat back down in an armchair. “This is madness, even!”

“Mad indeed,” Rachel mumbled and creased up the skirt of her gown, fidgeting repeatedly. “I thought the Duke was quite attached to you.”

“Quite?” Bridget repeated with a laugh. “I mistakenly thought he was besotted with Emily.”

“Then we were all mistaken,” Emily mumbled. She closed her eyes, briefly thinking of the night at the concert where she and Jacob stood together at the back of the room, talking intently. It was a remarkable evening, the two of them talking with so much ease, then ending up in that cloakroom together.

*That version of Jacob seems a distant dream now.*

“Clearly, whatever I thought of him was wrong. After marrying him I have discovered he is a distant man indeed, who cannot care for me at all. We have

not said a word to one another for four days at least, perhaps even more.”

In her grasp, Joey wriggled. She adjusted the swaddling around his body, trying to keep him safe and warm in the chilly air.

“What he said still perplexes me,” Rachel murmured, shaking her head.

“Said? When?”

“All this conversation about taking care of you.” Rachel waved her hands in the air. Startled that the words were so like what Harlow had said, Emily looked up from the baby.

“What do you mean?”

“Wait.” Bridget sat forward and placed a hand on Emily’s arm. “Didn’t your husband tell you that he came to see us all two weeks ago?”

“To see you? No. He said nothing of it.” Emily shook her head, looking between the two of them. When Rachel and Bridget exchanged uneasy glances, she huffed. “I am still here, remember? Do not return to that old game now, communicating as if I am not here at all.”

“Of course not, it is just startling. I assumed what he had said to us he would share with you,” Rachel said in a rush.

“Say what? He has barely spoken to me at all!” Emily’s breath caught in her throat. She broke off, having no wish to say anymore in case it made things worse. She shook her head, adjusting her grasp on Joey.

“You tell her,” Bridget urged, addressing Rachel alone.

“Why me? You could tell her.”

“He came to your house and to see your husband too,” Bridget reminded her.

“Must I repeat my request of not talking as if I am not here?” Emily groaned aloud.

“I am sorry,” Rachel murmured and leaned toward her. She helped to adjust the swaddling around the baby before looking up and meeting Emily’s gaze. “He came to see us in a mad rush one day, riding through heavy rain.”

“He was soaked to the bone like a drowned rat,” Bridget added eagerly.

“Yes, my housekeeper was not overawed with the number of puddles he left in our house,” Rachel said with a little levity, but it was brief. “Your husband spoke of you needing to be cared for, protected.”

“From what?” Emily frowned deeply, falling still and stiff.

“He said that if anything were to ever happen to him, we should take care of you. He spoke as if he knew some impending doom was very near,” Rachel explained in a rush. “When I challenged him and said he spoke as if he was about to be run over by a horse and cart, he made no objection to the idea.”

“He didn’t really say anything to that point,” Bridget added slowly. “He just repeated what he’d said before. He wanted us to promise that you would not be left alone.”

“Why ask such a thing? What does it mean?” Emily said, sitting forward.

“We do not know.” Rachel shook her head. “There was only one conclusion we could draw from such a conversation. It sounded as if your husband feared for his health.”

“Did he say those words? Did he openly admit that there was something wrong with him?”

Both Rachel and Bridget shook their heads, adding nothing more.

Emily sat back again, her body going weak as she considered what her sisters had told her. Was it possible that there was something else afoot here? Something that she did not know about, or was Jacob up to more of his games?

“Maybe it has nothing to do with any sickness,” she mumbled, her words surprisingly weak. “He has talked of one of us going to the country estate, so maybe he intends to be the one to leave instead. Perhaps he considers leaving me alone and wants to make sure that I will at least have friends when he retreats from me.”

Emily felt abruptly sick, thinking of what would happen if Jacob left for the country estate. Did he intend to return to his life of being a rake when he was far away from the city and her? Would he bed many women in that country house whilst she was left alone here in London, dwelling on the thought of him, missing him?

“You do not trust him, do you?” Rachel whispered, her voice taking on a sad tone.

“Not for a moment.” The words fell quickly from Emily’s lips. “I suppose he has done nothing to inspire trust at any point, and this strange behavior these last two weeks only suggests that he resents my presence in the house and resents marrying me. That should hardly surprise me though, should it? After all, he never wanted to marry me. Daniel had to practically threaten him to do it.”

The three of them fell quiet, with nothing more left to be said between them.

Emily stayed for the light lunch that was prepared for them, though she picked at it, barely eating anything as she pondered over the news she’d had from her sisters. She set off riding again that afternoon and took a long route home, happy to take hours to return to the house.

It gave her time to think of what she had heard or go over the main possibilities, but she could make no more sense of it than she had been able to the moment she had heard it from Rachel and Bridget.

As she reached the house, she left the mare with the groomsman and walked into the house. To her shock, Harlow was there. He jumped up from the bottom of the stairs and rushed toward her.

“Do not tell me you have been waiting there all day for my return?” she pleaded as she shrugged off her pelisse and removed her bonnet.

“Not all day,” he said with a small smile.

“Hmm.” She wasn’t sure if she believed him or not. She turned, ready to escape across the house when she heard footsteps.

Turning away, she saw Jacob hurrying down the corridor. He had some papers in his hands and was perusing them intently, not looking where he was walking for a second.

“Jacob?” Her voice brought him to a sudden halt, looking up from the papers.

“How was your ride?” he said, the words sounding forced.

“That is what you wish to talk of?”

He didn't answer for a second. He glanced at Harlow instead.

“Harlow, would you arrange for a drink to be brought to the study, please? I have to work.”

“Of course, Your Grace.” Harlow went in one direction as Jacob went in the other.

Emily rushed after Jacob, following him all the way to the study, though they halted together in the doorway.

“What is it? I have work to attend to?” he asked, blocking her path by placing a hand across the doorframe.

“You have a lot of work to do as of late. Every day and all the hours that God sends as far as I can see.” She stepped forward, intent on going with him into the study, but he did not move his arm, showing he had no intention of backing down. “There is something I must ask of you.”

“What is that?” He gestured to their position, clearly silently saying that they could have this discussion out here.

“Why did you ask my sisters and my brother-in-law to take care of me?”

He flinched, his hand adjusting on the doorframe beside him.

“Jacob?” she whispered, her voice softening. “Is there something wrong? With you, I mean? Something that I should know about?”

“No.” His answer was short and sharp. “I cannot talk about this now, Emily. Suffice it to say, it is nothing for you to worry about.”

“Nothing to worry about? Rachel said you turned up at her house drenched to the bone, begging for their assistance—”

“It is nothing.” His voice was sharp. “I am your husband, and I made a vow to protect you. That is all I am doing here, ensuring that the vow is upheld.”

“What about the other vows? You seem happy to ignore them.” At her accusation, he paled, his jaw falling slack. “Jacob—”

“Here you are, Your Grace.” Harlow appeared down the corridor, carrying a silver tray with three different decanters resting on it, so Jacob could clearly have a choice of what to drink.

“Thank you.” Jacob beckoned Harlow inside and went in, showing no sign of continuing the discussion any further with Emily. “If you would excuse me, I have work to do.”

Emily stared at the closed door between them for a minute at least.

Eventually, the door blurred and as she backed up, she realized it was because tears had filled her eyes. She hastened down the corridor, but in her effort to dry the tears from her cheeks with the backs of her hands, she did not look where she was going. Stumbling against the banister at the bottom of the stairs, the tears wrenched through her.

“Emily?” Catarina’s voice called from partway up the stairs. Emily looked up to see her mother-in-law standing there with the healer woman at her side, Mistress Mayhew. “What has happened?”

Emily didn’t have the words. As she parted her lips, attempting to say anything, she capitulated. Her breath grew jittery as she dropped to the bottom step of the stairs and placed her head in her hands, crying fresh tears.

## CHAPTER 23



“Drink this. Nothing better to calm a wild heart that has run away with one.” Mistress Mayhew pressed a steaming cup into Emily’s hands.

“Thank you.” She took the cup and peered down at the liquid. It was a strange golden brown, with a distinct herbal scent wafting up with the steam. “What is it?”

“Mint tea. I have made it with fresh leaves from the garden here.” Mistress Mayhew pointed to the window. “Go on, Your Grace. Drink it. It will help, I promise you.”

“Trust her,” Catarina said with a warm tone as she sat down beside Emily on the rococo settee. “She has done much for me over the years.”

Emily smiled sadly and took a sip from the tea, marveling at the strong mint taste. Her tears had stopped now, but her breathing was still jittery and every now and then her shoulders shook.

Mistress Mayhew added a log to the fire in the sitting room as Catarina wrapped a shawl around her shoulders. Emily looked between them, startled at the mothering attitude of the two ladies. Emily had only met Catarina a few times, and this was the first time she had spoken to Mistress Mayhew properly, but such distance didn't seem to matter to these ladies.

“Now, what is all this about?” Catarina asked, abandoning her fussing with the shawl. She fell still beside Emily, so still that it drew Emily's attention.

More than once since first meeting Catarina she had noticed the lady had a habit of fussing and fidgeting, but that habit did not seem so great today.

“Forgive me,” Emily whispered. “I should not have cried as I did.”

“Nonsense.” Mistress Mayhew waved away the idea. “Tears are natural, Your Grace.” She sat down on a footstool by the fire, a little in front of Emily and Catarina. In her animated manner, she leaned forward, with a warm smile. “Everyone cries at times of hardship, and there is nothing to apologize for in that.”

Catarina nodded eagerly, plainly in agreement.

“What are these tears for?” Catarina said softly, raising her hand to adjust the edge of the shawl around Emily's shoulders just once.

“Jacob and I... we...” Emily struggled to put it into words. She turned her body a little toward Catarina. “It cannot have escaped your notice how distant

we are. He barely talks to me, and scarcely acknowledges my existence.”

“Ah.” Catarina sighed deeply. “I had not realized it had become so bad. Has he told you why he has retreated from you so?”

“No.” Emily shook her head. “Yet he does not need to, for I fear I know the answer.”

“What is that?” Catarina asked.

“I fear that Jacob never had any intention of marrying at all, and now that I am here, in his house, his wife... it makes him realize the life he lost before. I fear he thinks he has lost his freedom. That I have ruined things for him.”

“Nonsense.” Catarina leaned forward and rested her hand over Emily’s in her lap. “Jacob had to marry. He had assured me he intended to.”

“Had to?” Emily murmured, remembering what Jacob had said that night in the garden about intending to marry Bridget out of convenience.

“He always intended to marry,” Catarina assured her. “I cannot believe that the state of marriage would shock him so after he intended it for so long.”

*Then it must be something else that upsets him so. Perhaps it is me as his wife. What if he wishes he had married Bridget after all? What if he regrets it entirely?*

She looked down at the mint tea in her hands and shifted with the cup, thinking of how he had not only refused to visit her on the wedding night, but every night. They hadn't even shared another kiss after that first night when he was in his cups.

“May I offer some words of advice, Your Grace?” Mistress Mayhew said, leaning forward. “It may be nothing, but equally, it might offer some clarity at this moment.”

“Please, go on. I'd be grateful to hear anyone else's thoughts on the matter other than my own mad thoughts,” Emily pleaded, busying herself with the tea once more.

“In my experience, wild hearts are difficult to tame.” Mistress Mayhew's smile turned rather sad. “They wish to run free, and it can be a shock to find them suddenly stilled.”

“Wild hearts,” Emily whispered, realizing that another had once described her as having a wild heart.

*It was how Rachel described me once.*

“My sister always said I had a wild heart,” she murmured, as a stark realization struck her. Ever since she had met Jacob in that dark corridor, she had been struck by him. It didn't seem to matter that at that moment, she had no idea what he looked like. Her head had not been turned by another, and

her former wish for mischief or escape had changed to something else. It was always a wish to be mischievous with *him*. “I guess my heart was tamed by Jacob. Not that he knows it.”

“What a sweet thing to say.” Catarina laid her hand over Emily’s again. “Tell me, my dear, do you love my son?”

Emily felt a quiver through her hands and up her arms. There was something strange about having this conversation with Jacob’s mother. To admit to loving him in front of her, that was audacious! It was hardly helped by the fact she barely knew Catarina. Yet Catarina didn’t seem to notice her awkwardness, she just continued to smile and stare straight into Emily’s eyes.

“I...” Words failed Emily as she stared at her mother-in-law.

“Oh dear, she’s nervous, Your Grace,” Mistress Mayhew said with a pleasant giggle. “Not easy to speak of love, is it?”

“Well, I...” Once more Emily tried, but she struggled just as greatly this time.

“Fear not, Emily.” Catarina smiled as she sat back and reached for another cup off the tray on a small side table. This was also a mint tea, the scent wafting into the air. “I was young once too, and I fell in love.” Her smile grew to something so sweet that Emily was quite captivated by it, unable to look away from the Dowager Duchess.

“I know what it is like to love someone so completely and fear that you may not be loved in return.” Her voice softened. “Shall I take your silence as a yes, my dear? You are in love with my son?”

With her mouth suddenly dry, Emily nodded. She took a gulp from the cup before she eventually found her voice.

“Though it seems I am a fool for falling for him.”

“Do not think such things.” Catarina leaned forward. “I cannot pretend to understand my son’s mind at present. On the contrary, it baffles me greatly indeed, but fear not. I shall endeavor to help you in any way I can. Perhaps together, we can discover what is on his mind.”

“Thank you. I would like that.” Emily smiled, feeling a kernel of hope. Perhaps Jacob could easily ignore her, but he certainly would not be able to ignore his mother. She was too important in his life, too cared for.

“Now, I shall take my leave of you for the day.” Mistress Mayhew stood and curtsied to them both. “I have left more mint leaves with the maids downstairs, so if you need calming at any point, Your Grace, I suggest ordering a cup,” she said kindly to Emily. “I will come if you ever need me.”

“Thank you. You are kind,” Emily spoke softly.

Mistress Mayhew took her leave, and soon enough, Emily was left alone with Catarina in the room. Emily half expected Catarina to return to her fidgeting,

but she stayed remarkably still, clutching her tea in her lap.

“Now, let us talk of something else, my dear,” Catarina declared firmly. “Maybe my son is proving a pain at the moment, but that is no reason for us to be miserable, is it?”

“No?” Emily asked with a small smile. “I confess, I struggle to think of anything else than his misery at present.”

“That is all the more reason for me to offer up some distraction for you. Come, take a walk with me in the garden.” Catarina downed what was in her cup. “Your sister told me at the wedding you are most fond of gardens and nature.”

“I am.”

“Then let us see what you make of the formal borders here. Now the seasons are changing, we shall have to make plans for the coming year. What do you say?” Catarina stood and offered her arm to Emily.

Excited by the prospect of thinking of something else other than Jacob for a while, Emily finished her tea and took Catarina’s arm.

“I would be glad to,” she declared with firmness as they walked into the garden together.



Jacob fidgeted at the head of the table. His leg would not rest in the seat, and he repeatedly reached for his napkin, adjusting it on his lap. When his mother reached under the table and took hold of his hand, urging him to stop fidgeting, he stared at her, wide-eyed with shock.

Was it possible he was taking on one of her own nervous habits in his worried state? He stilled completely, so stunned at the idea that he was determined not to do anything of the sort again.

“Is all well, dearest?” she asked softly, leaning toward him.

“Yes. All is fine,” he lied, trying to force a smile, but it didn’t last.

Others entered the room, and he leaned back from his mother. Harlow and Payton lit the candles on the table now dusk had fallen. The yellow orbs shone brightly on the table. The light glittered off the cloches that had been presented for dinner and the glasses placed by the three chairs that had been prepared.

Jacob’s eyes darted repeatedly to the empty chair on his right, waiting for Emily to arrive.

“Have you seen Emily, Mother?” he asked, his voice deep.

“I saw much of her earlier today,” Catarina said, taking the wine glass that Harlow topped up for her. “We walked in the garden together. She has some wonderful ideas for the place. It is lovely to hear her talk so passionately

about something, to see her excited.”

Jacob swallowed uncomfortably, struggling to think of the last time he had seen Emily excited about anything.

“Did you see anymore of her?”

“Yes. When she returned from her ride, I believe she encountered you. However brief that turned out to be.” There was a coldness in Catarina’s tone that made him pause.

*What does that mean?*

“Mistress Mayhew and I caught her crying at the bottom of the stairs, Jacob.”

Harlow hurried quickly from the room, turning his eyes away, as did Payton. Neither one of them said anything and had the decency to pretend they had not heard. Struggling to summon words, Jacob stared at his mother. She had revealed the news so matter-of-factly, as if it was not something shocking.

“Crying? Why was she crying?”

“Oh, I wonder!” Catarina declared with drama in her tone. “Perhaps it has something to do with the fact that her husband appears to care for her as much as he does for the gravel on his driveway?”

“I never said that.”

“Jacob—” Catarina broke off sharply as the sounds of footsteps in the corridor could distinctly be heard. Slowly, she sat back in her chair and lifted her wine glass, her finger repeatedly tapping the glass. Jacob watched his mother carefully, fearing she would return to that incessantly fidgeting state.

A few seconds later, Emily appeared in the doorway. She circled the table and sat down on Jacob’s other side, not lifting her head to address him.

“Good evening, dear,” Catarina said with ease, though that finger continued to tap the glass.

“Good evening.” Emily offered a smile to Catarina, but not to Jacob.

*Well, I can hardly blame her for that, can I?*

Jacob lifted the cloches off the food and they each served themselves their dinner. There were golden capons and honeyed leeks, with fresh potatoes and sweet wine that had been prepared in carafes. Jacob tried to eat, to focus on his food, but every few seconds his eyes raised to Emily beside him.

What Catarina had said lingered in his gut. He imagined Emily crying and the mere thought made him ache. Losing interest in his food, he sat back in his chair and just stared at her, though she seemed unaware of such an intense gaze.

In contrast, she finished what was on her own plate.

“You must be hungry,” Catarina said, clearly reaching desperately for some conversation to make in the awkward room. “All that riding today and then a walk. You need your strength.”

“Yes, I am quite hungry.” Emily sipped her wine as she placed her cutlery together again. “I did enjoy the walk in the garden, though. It was nice to have the company.”

It was a subtle dig, one that made Jacob’s hands fall loosely over the arms of his chair.

*I like your company, Emily. That is precisely the problem!*

He could imagine all too easily being the one who accompanied her in the garden that day, but what would become of the pair of them then? He feared it would not have remained just a friendly walk but would have become something else.

Something he knew categorically now was that he was weak around Emily. Even as he had declared a wish to part from her, for one of them to go and live at the country estate, he’d made no such preparations for the idea. He found he liked the idea less and less, even though part of his mind knew it was a wise thing to do.

“Well, we could go for another walk tomorrow if the weather holds up,” Catarina said with false cheer. “Jacob, you could accompany us?”

“I am afraid not. I have to see the tenants tomorrow. I will be riding for much of the day.”

“Emily enjoys her riding.” Catarina gestured to Emily across the table. “From what I have seen, she is an excellent rider too. Perhaps you could take her with you and show her where the tenants live?”

Emily looked up. It was the first time he had glimpsed her eyes that evening. There was a tightness to her skin that made him feel withered in his seat.

“I am afraid not.” His simple answer he felt no need to elaborate on. Emily looked quickly away, staring at anything else in the room other than him.

Catarina stood on Jacob’s toe under the table. He gave no sign of a reaction and didn’t even look toward his mother but stared at Emily. She was in pain right now. That was something he could easily read, but he didn’t know what to do about it.

*Surely it is better she suffers this little pain right now to avoid what my mother went through?*

At last, he looked at his mother, thinking of the breakdown she’d had after his father’s death. It had been so complete and all-encompassing that the entire house was in disarray. Jacob could remember clearly one night being

roused from his bed by sounds through the house.

He was young and small, so small that he'd managed to creep partway down the stairs and hide behind the banister. Peering through the railings he had stared at the source of all the commotion.

His mother strode into the house with fresh tears on her face and her riding habit sodden around her body. Payton was still the butler then and had wrapped a warm shawl around her shoulders. Mrs. Wright had hurried forward, taking his mother's hand and pleading with her to explain why she had felt the need to go riding in the middle of the night.

Catarina had not answered. She had simply cried fresh tears.

It was one of the worst memories Jacob had. The pain associated with the image of his mother that night had depleted him.

His mother had risked her life, with no care for her own health, going riding at night and in the rain, and what for? Just to cry.

*I will not put Emily through that.*

“If you would excuse me, I think I'll retire for the night.” Emily stood and placed her napkin on the table.

“So soon?” Catarina asked in surprise. “But it is so early.”

“Yes, indeed it is.” Emily nodded in agreement. “But I am tired after my long day. If you would excuse me.” She dropped two curtsies, one to Catarina, and the other to Jacob.

His chest tightened to see her treating him so formally, but then she was gone, sweeping so fast from the room that he barely had time to inhale before she had disappeared.

*Emily...*

He longed to call out to her, to plead with her to come back, but then that image of his mother returned as he watched her through the stairs.

As Mrs. Wright and Payton had tried to draw Catarina toward the nearest room where they had lit a fire, Catarina had grown faint. She dropped at their feet, and no amount of grappling on their part could save her from that fall.

Jacob had run down the stairs, no longer bothering to hide, as he reached his mother. Mrs. Wright had repeatedly tried to pull him back, to save him from seeing his mother in such a state, but he had refused to be moved. He sat with his mother, his small hand in hers, as he waited for her to come around again.

“What on earth is going on?” Catarina’s sudden clatter of cutlery drew Jacob’s attention away from his reverie. He shifted his focus to his mother who glared at him so openly, he could not remember seeing such anger in her eyes before. “Jacob, it is time you and I spoke openly with one another.”

## CHAPTER 24



“*J*acob, why are you ignoring your wife?” Catarina reached for her wine glass and lifted it to her lips, her fidgeting continuing around the spindle.

“I am not ignoring her.”

“Oh, and is the Pope not Catholic?” she said wryly. “You have disregarded her as much as is feasibly possible for a man to do this last week. She has said that you even intend to consider sending one of you to the country estate.”

“I have not done that.” He couldn’t, despite the temptation. He could not bear to think of one of them being alone in either house.

“Why would you even suggest doing so in the first place? Goodness, Jacob.” Catarina was in full flow now, her words coming fast and with great alacrity. “When your father and I fell in love—”

“Wait, Mother.” He leaned forward. “Emily and I have professed no such thing for one another.”

“And do you wish me to mutter my wry statement about the Pope not being Catholic again?” she asked, frowning deeply. “Let us accept matters for what they are, Jacob. When your father and I fell in love, we spent most of our days together. We were two companions, friends, as well as lovers.”

“Ah, Mother,” he grimaced, not wanting to think of what his mother and father had done together at night.

“My point is that love is not about ignoring one another or causing pain.”

“I am trying to prevent the worst kind of pain,” he said suddenly, veering forward in his seat. “Mother, surely you can understand this better than anyone. You are the one who has told me my whole life about how like my father I am. God’s wounds, you have even set up multiple visits with Doctor Rainer because you fear I am so like him.”

Catarina’s lips fell apart and closed repeatedly. She fidgeted so much with her glass now that she passed it between her hands, in danger of sloshing the liquid beyond the rim.

“What if you are right and in a few years’ time I am to die as he did? Yes? For it is possible.”

“No, no. It cannot be possible.” There were sudden tears in her eyes. “I refuse

to believe it—”

“You refuse to say it, but you clearly believe it, or you would not have insisted on all of the appointments with the doctor,” he reminded her swiftly.

The glass in her grasp nearly turned upside down with all her fussing. Jacob reached forward and took the glass from her, placing it down on the table beside his own.

“What if you are right in that belief?” he asked, his voice deep. “Marrying for convenience was fine, then. I’d provide the heir to the dukedom you so long for, and the wife I had would be able to move on and find happiness, perhaps even marry for love next time.”

Catarina reached for her glass once more, but when he moved it out of her reach, she took her fork instead and turned it over in her palm repeatedly.

“Emily is different.” He swiftly took the fork and tossed that onto the table, far away. “I could not do that to her. I will not do to her what was forced onto you when my father passed.” He breathed heavily, the words out of his lips at last.

Slowly, Catarina turned her chin toward him. Her small eyes filled with tears, appearing larger in the glittering candlelight. The tears overflowed down her cheeks, trickling fast. Her breath came in short, stuttered breaths.

“Ah, Mother,” Jacob reached across the table and took her hand in his,

holding it tight. “Please, do not cry. I do not want to remind you of that pain, just to acknowledge that it is unwise to expect anyone else to go through it.”

“I do not want that pain for Emily either.” She shook her head, trying to calm her breathing and control her breath. When her hand fidgeted in Jacob’s grasp, he placed it between both of his palms, intent on keeping her still. “Yet there is something we are missing in this conversation, something that you appear intent on ignoring.”

“What is that?” Jacob murmured in surprise.

“Plainly this.” Catarina shifted her body completely toward him, making it clear he was her sole focus. “For all the pain I suffered, and for all of my problems, do you think for one moment that I would turn back the clocks and not have married your father?”

Jacob stared speechless at his mother. When she shook her head, making her answer known, he released her hand and reached for his wine glass, taking a rather large gulp for he was suddenly thirsty.

“I would not give up the time we had together.” There was a sudden smile through her tears that transformed her features into one that madly confused Jacob.

His mother was both happy and sad, all at the same time—it was baffling!

“I love your father dearly, to this day, and the memories I have of him are

everything. I treasure them, they keep me company day and night, and I would not be without those memories. I made the right decision when I agreed to marry your father, and nothing will ever change that.”

“You astonish me,” Jacob whispered, marveling at the strength in his mother’s reaction.

“I can see that.” She motioned to his face. “Do not drink too much of that wine, dearest. From what I hear from Payton, you have been relying on it rather too much of late.”

*She is right.*

Slowly, Jacob put down the glass and slid it away from himself across the table.

“Maybe I need some time apart from it.” The wine had become a constant companion in the evening, a way to dull his senses and feelings. He’d have to order tea or coffee instead, anything to avoid the liquor.

“Emily is a good woman,” Catarina said suddenly, her voice so soft that Jacob leaned forward, the better to hear her. “And I know she loves you.”

“How can you know?”

“A mother knows these things. Have you not heard that mothers know best,

dear?” she teased him.

“I’ve heard it.” He smiled a little.

“So, trust me now. She loves you.” Her smile turned sad. “If what you feared was your wife missing you by losing you, then I am afraid you have already given her that pain, for she fears she has lost you already.”

Jacob sat back again, his spine crumpling against the seat in a most uncomfortable way. He didn’t fidget to rearrange himself, however, and just contended with that pain.

“Do not cause her and yourself pain, Jacob,” Catarina pleaded. Slowly, she stood from her chair and leaned over him. She placed a kiss on his temple, and Jacob closed his eyes. His mother had not kissed him on the head since he was a small boy. “You deserve to be happy. Just because my fears for you have led to some aspects of life being... difficult.” She stepped back, grimacing as she struggled for the right word. “That is no way to live.”

He parted his lips, ready to tell her about the doctor’s caution regarding his bloodshot eyes, but he changed his mind, closing his lips again. It would worry her unnecessarily when that red soreness could be from nothing at all.

“Live life to the fullest, my dear. Not in fear of what may come.” She kissed him once more on the forehead and turned to leave the room. In the doorway she hesitated, glancing back toward him. “May I take it that you will talk to your wife?”

“Soon,” Jacob raised his voice so she could hear him on the other side of the room. “First, I must think of what you have said.”

She nodded, then stepped back through the doorway.

“Do not think for too long.” She was gone, turning on her heel and disappearing down the corridor.

In the empty room, Jacob swept his plate to the side and rested his forehead on the table, deep in thought from what his mother had said.

*She thinks Emily loves me. How can she think such a thing?*

The news of Emily’s tears had done much to him to make him ache, just as her hurried exit from the dining room had hurt him too.

*Perhaps my mother is right. Something must be said between us, but what?*

Jacob still had no idea what to say to her. Without being able to make a decision, he retired to his chamber and tried to get that sleep which had evaded him for so many nights.



“Dear God.” Jacob stared up at the canopy over his bed. At last, the morning was on the horizon, for a gray light filtered through his curtains and fell on

that canopy.

The hour was still early, perhaps too early, and he should not yet rise from his bed. Despite the feeling, Jacob moved to the edge of the bed and rubbed his eyes. They were sore and painful, even dry. He hoped it was from the lack of sleep and that nothing else was amiss.

Standing from the bed, he crossed to a basin of water on a sideboard and splashed his face, paying particular attention to his eyes. When they only felt sorer, he rubbed at them, then pushed open the curtains, allowing more of that eerie gray morning light into the room so he could see what he was doing clearly. Standing by the mirror, he gazed at his reflection.

If anything, his eyes were worse than before. As well as the whites being red and the pupils strongly dilated, the skin around his eyes was red too.

“God’s wounds,” he muttered and threw the towel he had been using to dry his face onto the nearest sideboard.

His wish to retire early to try and sleep had failed him. He’d tossed and turned all night, thinking of Emily as she sat forlornly at the dining table the night before, and also of his mother’s words.

Catarina had stunned him. He’d always presumed that after the troubles she’d had, she would regret marrying his father. Surely it would have been better to have married another and had him for longer? Her denial of such a fact shook him to his core.

*This is not what I expected.*

Choosing not to bother his valet so early in the morning, Jacob dressed himself, pulling on his riding clothes and a tight-fitting dark green jacket. Once dressed in his riding boots, he moved to the door that adjoined his chamber to Emily's and leaned against it, curling a finger around the bolt that kept her locked on the other side.

It would be so easy now to draw back this bolt, to go to her, and to at least try to explain some of his thinking, but what then? He hadn't quite decided what he should tell her yet. At the very least, he had to make up his mind about what it was that he was going to say first.

Releasing the bolt, he stepped back into the chamber and moved toward the window, staring out across the gray morning. Clouds had gathered overhead, thick and dreary. There was scarcely any light at all on the ground, though enough that Jacob could see the grass was covered in dew.

A deer entered the lawn from the trees at a distance, nibbling at some grass before retreating again, deeper into the woodland. Blackbirds flitted from one tree to the next, occasionally darting down to the ground to gather worms before they flew on again.

"At least out there, there is a distraction." With this in mind, he left the chamber, hurrying down the stairs.

He saw no one as he left the house as it was so early. Not Payton, Mrs. Wright, or even the attentive Harlow, who had taken to his duty of watching

over Emily with great care for the last couple of weeks.

Jacob strode through the front door, locking it behind him, then made his way to the stable. In the corner of the stable, he found there was at least one of his staff that was up.

His groomsman was brushing down one of the horses, humming a soft tune in his deep tone.

“Ah, Your Grace.” Startled, he turned to face Jacob and bowed. “Goodness, this is early for a ride.”

“Yes, I suppose it is.” Jacob nodded at the horse. “You are up early yourself.”

“I heard the horse stirring.” The groomsman patted Jacob’s stallion beside him. “He’s a restless spirit today, it seems.”

“I know the feeling. Saddle him for me, if you would. I shall take him for a ride. Perhaps it will calm us both.”

“Very good, Your Grace.” The groomsman prepared the horse as Jacob looked back at the house, his eyes darting up to Emily’s window that he could see from his position. The curtains were firmly drawn, suggesting Emily was still fast asleep.

Once the horse was ready, Jacob pulled himself into the saddle and nodded

his thanks at the groomsman.

“If anyone asks after you, Your Grace, where shall I say you have gone?”

“Just for a ride across the estate. I shall be back soon enough. I am even likely to return before the rest of the house wakes.” He nodded his head in parting and urged the horse to trot slowly out of the stable.

They started at this slow speed, heading across the lawn. Halfway down the grass, Jacob pulled on the reins and halted, looking back once more. He could not explain why he kept glancing at Emily’s window, perhaps in some foolish hope that she would wake and peer beyond the curtains, maybe offer a small wave.

*Fool of a man.*

Chastising himself for such errant hopes after how he had pushed her away, he pulled on the reins once more. He and the steed set off at a fast pace across the grass, heading toward the woodland on the estate. They traveled so quickly, that the trees whipped by them, the branches in danger of pulling at Jacob’s hair and clothes.

Beneath him, the horse snorted and panted, his tail flicking and his ears turning back as he clearly enjoyed the morning ride. They jumped a small log and then angled around the next large oak tree, banking along the side of a vast pond, stretching deeper into the woodland still.

Jacob had spent hours in these woodlands as a child, losing himself in the wonders of nature. They were often a pleasant distraction, yet today, he was all too aware of that grayness. The birds that flitted by had no happy songs, but only sad tunes.

The horse snorted in an unusual way beneath him, and Jacob looked down, patting the horse.

“Off your oats, boy?” he mumbled to the horse, who grunted, as if in agreement. “I know how you feel.”

He turned the horse away from the pond and urged him higher up the hill, deciding it was better they both got in some good exercise before they returned to the house. The stallion seemed to struggle part way up the hill, an unusual thing for this skilled horse, so Jacob urged him on further still, before slowing near the top of the hill.

Comfortingly, he tapped the horse’s neck, trying to offer something to make him feel better. The horse’s nose dropped to the ground as they reached the top of the hill, not looking at the view as Jacob did, but focusing on the grass beneath him.

“Maybe we need to get you back to the stable,” Jacob muttered quietly, fearing there could be something greatly wrong with the horse. Stepping down off the saddle, he moved toward the horse’s head and patted his nose. The steed pressed himself further into Jacob’s grasp, as if seeking out further comfort. “Something is wrong.”

As the horse caught his breath, Jacob looked out from the brow of the hill, down to his estate. Cast in this gray light, it was not half so welcoming as it sometimes was. From this distance as well, the house seemed far away indeed, and certainly a long journey. Reluctant to make the horse face his weight again, Jacob flicked the reins over the animal's ear and pulled forward.

“Come, we shall walk. It will be easier for you.”

The horse didn't want to move at first, sticking its hooves into the ground, but eventually obeyed the order and they walked forward together through the trees, dropping down one side of the hill. Repeatedly, Jacob glanced at the horse, wondering what could be wrong with the animal. With a sense of discomfort, it reminded him of his fears for himself—what could be hidden and unknown and unseeable to the naked eye. What could have the power to deplete one's life force?

“I wish I could say it is not a far walk,” he whispered to the animal as they stepped between the trees. To their left, the hill grew steep, and a sheer drop opened up, craggy with rocks. “Yet it is.”

The animal grunted and his hooves slipped beneath him. The horse veered to the side and Jacob thrust against him, trying to stay standing and keep far back from the cliff face. “Careful, boy.”

The horse slipped once more. He neighed, whinnying loudly, but unable to stay standing, he dropped, his weight pushing Jacob over.

“No!” Yet there was nothing Jacob could do to stop himself from falling. His body catapulted into the sheer drop, and he fell through the open air, toward the rocks beneath.

## CHAPTER 25



“Where is he?” Emily traipsed through the house once more. It was strange, for she hadn’t seen anything of Jacob that morning. He may have often intended to avoid her, but she could usually discover something from the staff.

“He is not here, Your Grace,” Harlow said as he hurried behind her, following her through all the rooms.

“Yes, and that is an explanation, is it not?” she said wryly, glancing back at him. “Harlow, your master is missing. Might I suggest you go to Payton and Mrs. Wright? Perhaps one of them knows where he is.”

“I shall ask them, Your Grace.” He bowed and hurried off down the corridor.

Emily chose a different direction and headed to Jacob’s study. It didn’t seem to matter that she had already checked this room once, she was determined to check it again. Pushing the study door wide, she strode into the room and circled it, with her hands on her hips.

Not only was there no sign of Jacob but there was no hint that he had been in this room at all that day. There was no errant jacket slung over the back of a chair, no scraps of paper, or a disused quill left on the desk. It was empty and neat as if the maid was the last one to visit the room.

“What is happening?” Emily murmured and left the study, returning to the first place she had looked for Jacob that morning.

The breakfast room only had one person in it, and that was Catarina. She sat in her usual chair, eating jam and soft bread as her eyes darted around the room.

“Have you found him?”

“No.” Emily moved back to the table, her eyes darting to Jacob’s empty seat. “I have never known him to miss breakfast.”

“He doesn’t. Not usually.” Catarina agreed. It seemed rather difficult for her to take another bite of her bread, but she forced herself to do it. “Have something to eat, dear. You need your strength.”

Reluctantly, Emily sits down. Just as Catarina had done, she spread some jam and butter on soft bread and forced herself to eat it, though the taste was sickly sweet this morning and she kept washing it down with a fresh cup of tea. Every few seconds, her eyes darted between the empty chair beside her and the doorway, in expectation that Harlow would soon return.

“Your Grace? Your Grace!” Harlow’s voice called eventually from the corridor.

Emily dropped her bread onto the plate, hardly caring that it landed jam-side down and stood. Harlow appeared in the doorway, but he was not alone. Mrs. Wright stood at his side, waving a hand in front of her face as she tried to catch her breath.

“We know where the Duke has gone.”

“There is no need to worry,” Mrs. Wright said with a smile as her breathing calmed.

Emily tried to calm her erratic heartbeat, taking comfort in the housekeeper’s smile.

“I have been to see the groomsman,” she explained, pointing to the windows. “It seems the Duke has gone for an early-morning ride. I expect he will be back for breakfast soon enough.”

“Oh, I see.” Emily nodded, the relief making her shoulders relax. Something she was not willing to admit aloud was that for a few awful minutes, she thought he might have left for the country estate after all in the middle of the night, and not told her, just to avoid an awkward goodbye. “Thank you.”

Harlow and Mrs. Wright both left, with the footman offering an arm to the housekeeper as she tried to recover from her run.

Slowly, Emily sat down again, picking up the bread and urging herself to eat it again.

“Does he often go on early rides?” she asked after she struggled with the first swallow of bread.

“He is fond of riding, but this early? No.” Catarina shook her head. “He usually likes to have something in his stomach first. It is strange indeed.” Catarina lifted her mug to her lips and took a sip. “Well, as he may not be joining us for a while, there is something I’d like to show you, if I may.”

“Show me?”

“Yes. Eat up. Then I shall show you something.” Catarina smiled. “Something wonderful to me.”

Intrigued, Emily matched her smile and hurried to finish her breakfast. Once their plates were clean and they had both drained their teacups, Catarina beckoned Emily to follow her from the room.

They hastened up the main set of stairs, and Catarina led her to a smaller set of stairs at the back of the house. This one was much smaller and narrower, so discreetly tucked away that Emily could not remember being shown it by Harlow on her first day at the house. If he had done, then she must have forgotten it, for she was so distracted by Jacob’s resistance to her.

“Up here,” Catarina beckoned as she hurried up the stairs. “This is my favorite room in the house.”

“I am not sure I have been up here before.”

“Sometimes memories are painful, sometimes they are wonderful,” Catarina muttered, more to herself than to Emily. “I fear that my son thinks about the former too much, but I am determined to hold onto the latter. It is what Mistress Mayhew has taught me these last few years, and she is right. Indeed, she is.”

At the top of the stairs, Catarina thrust open a small door and bent through, avoiding hitting her head on the frame. Confused by the Dowager Duchess’s words, Emily intended to ask her what she meant but grew distracted by the sudden bright room.

Despite the early hour and the gray light beyond the windows, this long gallery was so full of windows that stretched from the floor to the ceiling, it was bright regardless.

“Goodness,” Emily murmured, standing in the middle of the gallery and turning back and forth on the spot.

Between the windows were various canvases and paintings, but unlike in other parts of the house where pictures were mostly landscapes, up here there were many portraits.

“Come,” Catarina said with warmth, capturing Emily’s hand and drawing her down the room. “This is my mother. Was she not beautiful?”

Emily smiled as she gazed at the young woman in the portrait. She had Catarina’s small eyes, but even more prominent cheekbones, and her hair was a degree or two brighter. She held a fan in front of her chest and leaned forward as if appealing to talk to the person who walked by.

“She is quite breathtaking,” Emily declared, stepping toward the painting.

“These walls bear the faces of our family and dearest friends. The family portraits are of course what matters most, and that is why I wished to bring you up here. In particular, to see this painting.” Catarina pulled on Emily’s hand once more, urging her to turn around.

On the opposite wall, there was a tall portrait of two people. Sitting down in the chair was Catarina, but a younger version, with her hair tumbling at the back of her head and across her shoulder. Upon her other shoulder was a gentleman’s hand.

Emily’s eyes followed that hand, moving up the arm and to the figure that stood behind Catarina.

“Heavens,” she whispered in surprise. “He is so like Jacob.”

“Oh, he was.” Catarina laughed. “Jacob is quite the spitting image of his father at times.”

Emily stepped forward, her eyes darting over the handsome visage of Jacob's father. There were differences, of course; the green of Jacob's eyes was from his mother, but the face and the strong jawline all belonged to his father. Even his athletic build with broad shoulders was just the same.

"Handsome indeed," Emily whispered. Catarina giggled at her side and patted her hand.

"Yes, he was. They are so very alike." She sighed at the words. "He died soon after this portrait was made. He was just thirty-five."

"Thirty-five?" Emily spluttered, turning to face Catarina in alarm. "That is so young." She jerked her chin back toward the figure in the painting, amazed at how healthy and young he looked.

"It was very sudden." Catarina's voice turned sad. "None of us were prepared for it, and my boy, well, he was only a child. He will not even tell me what he remembers of the day we lost his father, but I fear he remembers much."

Emily released Catarina and stepped closer toward the painting, feeling as if she was staring up at a painting of Jacob rather than his father.

"He will not talk of it?" Emily whispered.

"Not to me."

*Not to me either.*

Emily could remember little that Jacob had ever said of his father at all, but by this account, Jacob had inherited the dukedom when he was just a child.

“Thirty-five, it is so young,” she marveled. “Jacob is just...” Slowly, she turned back to face Catarina.

“Yes. He is thirty.”

“Oh.” Emily felt she had been kicked in the gut. It was a wild possibility, maybe she was far from even guessing correctly what bothered Jacob so much, but there was something here that made sense.

*Does Jacob fear his own death? Does he worry he will follow his father to an early grave?*

If her wild guess was true, then it would make sense why he had pleaded with Rachel and Bridget to ensure she was well taken care of, no matter what happened around the corner.

“Does Jacob... does he fear it...?” Struggling with the words, Emily gestured to the painting.

“It is not my place to say.” Catarina moved forward to her side and took one of Emily’s hands, patting it between two of her own. “Yet let me say this to you now, my dear. I have had troubles in my life, and I fear I have imparted to him my own fears.”

She grimaced, apparently in great pain. “It is not something a mother likes to admit. We mothers like to think we protect our children from every bad thing in the world, especially our own demons, but I need to be strong and admit when that is not the case. I fear my worries are now his own. You should know that. Whatever else is passing between the two of you, may it allow you to understand him better?”

“Thank you, Catarina. Thank you for sharing this with me. I do feel as if I know him a little more.” She looked up at the painting, chewing her lip in thought.

*Even if I cannot quite understand this fear.*

“I wish to speak to him.”

“Well, when he returns from his ride, perhaps you shall see him then.”

“Yes. Perhaps.”



Emily walked into Jacob’s study. The door was open and there was still no sign of him anywhere. No jacket, no papers, nothing.

“Strange,” she murmured and retreated from the room. She went to the breakfast room, but the table had been cleared away already.

Crossing through the hallway, she halted by the clock that hung from the wall, revealing the time was close to eleven o’clock.

*He has to be home by now.*

“Harlow?” Emily called, turning around in a circle in the main hall. “Typical, you’re always at my side until I need...” She trailed off as he appeared from the nearest doorway. “You are amazingly efficient, Harlow.”

“Thank you, Your Grace.” He bowed with a pleased smile. “What can I do for you?”

“Do you know where the Duke is? He must have returned from his ride by now.”

“No, Your Grace. He has not returned.”

“No?” Emily stilled on the spot, her insides tightening so badly that she felt a little sick. “Well, that is strange. Have you ever known him to go riding at such an early hour before and then not return?”

“No.” Harlow grimaced. “I have checked with the groomsmen, but he has confirmed the Duke has not yet returned.”

“Very well, then I shall go to him.” Emily gestured for her pelisse to be gathered from the coat stand as she hurried to the door.

*If Jacob intends to go riding all day on his estate just to avoid me, then I shall chase him down. We cannot continue in this mad way. It is intolerable, and I will not live my life in this manner!*

Once dressed in her pelisse, she hurried out of the house, with Harlow at her heel as she went to the stable. A second horse was quickly prepared as the groomsmen talked of Jacob leaving that morning on the restless stallion.

“They have not been back for hours,” he mumbled, more to Harlow than to Emily. “I wonder what it is that keeps him so far from home.”

Emily glanced back at the groomsmen, seeing Harlow’s face blush bright red as he looked at her. The possibility that the staff were gossiping about how little Jacob liked her made her feel even worse. Without another word, she flicked the reins and left the stable as quickly as she could. Her mare responded to her instructions with ease and shot across the grass, heading toward the tree line where the groomsmen said he had last seen Jacob.

Emily slowed her pace once she reached these. Turning her head back and forth, she repeatedly craned her neck in an effort to see a glimpse of him, anything that could help her. She searched the area around the pond, but finding no sign of him there, she headed toward the hill and the high ground,

hoping at least that from up there, she would be able to catch a glimpse of him.

At the summit of the hill, she halted. The cold wind bristled up the hill, making her body shiver. The mare also snorted and neighed, lifting his head to the sky, clearly disliking the cold weather.

“Not much longer, now, I’m sure,” she murmured to the horse, patting the mare’s neck in comfort. “I just have to find him...”

The sound of a horse’s hooves urged her to turn around. She expected to see Jacob riding out from the trees toward her, but his horse appeared alone. The stallion was injured, hobbling and repeatedly lifting one hoof as it scampered on the other three. He hurried to stand by Emily’s side, whinnying so loudly that Emily’s mare spooked. She had to grip the reins tightly to stop her mare from running off.

With quick eyes darting at the empty saddle, Emily grew worried.

“Where are you, Jacob?”

## CHAPTER 26



“*J*acob? Jacob!”

Jacob could hear his name being shouted as he scrambled to sit up straight. His ankle was hurting at this unnatural angle, but he struggled to find a comfortable position. Sore and bruised, he pushed himself up against a nearby rock, looking around at his strange position.

When he'd fallen from that sheer drop, with his hands lashing out in front of him, he'd scarcely managed to cling briefly onto a branch that had swung him away from the worst of the drop. Landing in an awkward position on his ankle, he found it was now impossible to walk.

*At least I am alive.*

He peered past the nearest rock, looking down to the bottom of the drop.

*It could have been much worse.*

The thought that his death might have happened much sooner than he had ever anticipated had him scrambling away from the drop. He used one of the rocks to lever himself to stand, putting his full weight on his good ankle.

“Jacob!” a voice shouted for him again.

In his effort to turn his head around to find that voice, Jacob lost his footing. He slipped on the wet leaves and tumbled further down the hill again, crying out at the pain of his injured ankle as he fell still against a tree.

“What are you doing?”

“Emily?” Jacob raised his head, pushing away the damp leaves as he registered it was her calling his name. She appeared a few seconds later on a nearby path, looking out at him from her saddle. Her eyes widened and her jaw slackened at the sight of him. “It’s not as bad as it looks—”

“Not bad!?” she spluttered, jumping down from the saddle and leaving the horse behind, hurrying toward him. “What on earth happened to you?”

“The horse was struggling. He tripped and then pushed me toward...” He gestured to the sheer drop nearby as he moved to his knees, eager to try and stand again.

“Goodness.” She took hold of his elbow and helped him to stand. “What is it?”

Your ankle?”

“Yes.” He attempted to put his weight on it, then abandoned the idea, leaning back against the tree, and dragging Emily with him. They ended up slumped together against the tree.

“Oh, you fool.” She slapped him in the middle of the chest.

“Ow, more pain. Yes, just what I need at this moment.”

“Sit.” She pointed to a rock nearby.

“Emily—”

“Sit.”

He didn’t dare argue with her again. He moved to the rock and stretched out his aching leg.

“How did you avoid that drop?” Emily murmured, gazing downwards then dropping to her knees in front of him.

“With difficulty.” He grimaced and sat forward, resting an elbow on his good leg. “I thought I...” he exhaled sharply, the breath leaving him in a rush.

Emily's hand came up and rested on his forearm.

"Death is not so near," she whispered.

"You should have seen it from where I was. It bloody well looked near enough."

"But you survived to tell the tale." She bent down, and Jacob did his best not to think of her position kneeling in front of him. Any other time it would have conjured pleasant imaginings, but at this moment, he had other things to think of.

She reached for his injured ankle and raised it.

"What are you doing?" he asked, her fingers on his ankle surprisingly firm.

"Checking for broken bones." She pushed his boot back and forth, then lowered his foot back down again. "No. Perhaps sprained, but you would have sworn at me or said something ill indeed if it was broken."

"I believe you." He sighed heavily and leaned forward once more. He said nothing for a minute, just gathering himself as he realized how near he had come to drop down that sheer cliff.

“Jacob?” Emily’s voice was soft as she raised herself on her knees, moving closer to him still.

“Yes?” He grew distracted, staring at her because of her proximity. Her golden hair was wild about her ears after her ride.

“You had me worried.” She tapped him on the arm in a reprimanding tone once more.

“Turns out, you had a reason to be worried.”

“Jacob! This is not helping. We need to get you to a doctor.”

“I daresay I shall survive this.” A sudden levity overtook him as he looked down at his ankle and he chuckled. There was something in the relief, the knowledge that only his ankle was injured made everything so much easier to think about.

“Good. Because I need you alive long enough so that I can talk to you about something.”

“What is that?” Jacob lifted his chin, staring at Emily as she moved closer to him still, kneeling between his legs. He should have pushed her away, but he had no wish to. He just wanted her to be near her.

*If I hadn’t grasped that branch, I might never have had the chance to be near*

*her again.*

“Tell me the truth,” she whispered, a surprising firmness in that husky voice of hers. “Why are you avoiding me?”

He lifted his hand and trailed his fingers through the locks that had fallen out of her hair. They were soft to the touch, and he pushed them back from her face, so he could see more of her eyes.

“This isn’t talking so much as touching,” she said after a minute of gazing up at him. He smiled a little, glad that she could reach for that levity too at a time like this.

“Forgive me,” he murmured. “A few minutes ago, I thought I might not have had the chance to touch you again.”

“You didn’t seem to mind such a thing before now.” She frowned deeply. “As if all of this meant nothing to you.” She leaned forward sharply, her lips coming up to meet his.

He was so struck by the touch, that Jacob returned the kiss. His hand buried itself in her hair, angling her to him so he could deepen that kiss. He didn’t care where they were, nor did he care about the pain in his ankle. He just wanted that kiss.

*I’m still alive, I’m still here. Emily is still here.*

He parted from her and rested his forehead against hers, panting to catch his breath.

“I have thought these last couple of weeks you have despised me, but you cannot despise me when you kiss me like that, surely?”

“I could never hate you,” he whispered, moving his hand in her hair so it trailed down her neck. He toyed with the loose locks there, brushing the back of his neck with her fingers. “I’ve been trying to protect you.”

“Protect me? Oh yes, perfectly logical,” she said, her voice thick with sarcasm, leaning back from him so that his hand fell between them. “What kind of man avoids me at every opportunity if he is going to protect me?”

“Emily?”

“Yes, that’s completely logical, is it not? All your curt comments, all your disappearances. That is protecting me, is it?”

“Emily? Can I get a word in edgeways please?” he said with a smile growing on his lips.

“I wish you would! I’ve been waiting for you to speak for weeks now.” She thrust her hands into his chest, begging him to say more.

There was anger in her, and Jacob supposed he should be angry too, so they’d

have another one of their arguments, but he wasn't. He was too overawed. Slowly, he placed his hands on her shoulders, pleading with her to be calm.

“I was trying to save you from future pain.”

“Future pain? What does that mean?”

“I mean... Emily, if I had fallen down that cliff, what would you have thought?” He jerked his head toward it.

Her eyes snapped between him and the drop repeatedly, her lips parting, then closing once more.

“You are a fool.” She abruptly moved toward him, her head burying itself in his chest. On impulse, he raised his hands, wrapping his arms around her and holding her to him. “This has something to do with your father, does it not?”

He stiffened, his hands going still on her back.

“How did you know that?” he whispered.

Lifting her head enough so he could look at her, she tilted her body back, but he didn't release her. Now he had his arms around her again, he didn't want to let go.

“Your mother showed me your father’s portrait in the long gallery this morning. She said he died when he was just thirty-five.”

“Yes, he did.” Jacob looked down between them, feeling a muscle twitching in his jaw.

“What killed him?”

“His heart. They had no idea anything was wrong with him. Then one day, it just... happened.” The image flashed in his mind of his father clutching his chest, but he pushed it away, determined not to be greeted by that memory now. “I am so like him.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“I am him. In every way I am like him,” Jacob declared with sudden feeling, shifting on the rock so he could lean further toward Emily. “My mother made it plain from a young age how alike we were. What if it was to happen all over again? What if like him, I was to...” he trailed off, raising a hand over his face and trying to hide from the madness of it all.

“What if, eh? Well, what if you’re not that like him,” she pointed out. The very plain way she said the words urged him to look up from the cover of his hands. “You cannot know what will happen come next sunrise, can you? No one can predict the future. Are you seriously telling me that you are going to live in fear of the fact that in five years’ time, you could follow your father?”

“It is possible that it will happen.”

“What if it does?” she shrugged. “Would you want to have lived your life in fear of that moment? Unhappy, isolated? Good lord, this is why you have pushed me away, is it not?” She stood between his legs, reaching for his shoulders and shaking him a little.

“Trying to shake some sense into me?”

“Yes!” she said with vigor. “You did not want me close, why? Because you feared what I would think when I lost you?”

“Emily, please listen to me.” He rested his hands on her waist, drawing her closer to him so that her body was practically pressed against his, with her head above his. “I saw the grief my mother went through. She had a breakdown, and to this day suffers strange habits because of it. You think I wanted to put you through that?”

“That is why you talked of marrying for convenience.” She grimaced, not looking at him but somewhere further into the trees.

“Exactly. Better my wife did not care for me at all, than for this to exist between us.” He splayed his fingers across her waist, making it plain exactly what he did feel. When her breath stuttered and she looked back at him, he knew she had felt that same rushing sensation. “I didn’t want you hurt as my mother was hurt, Emily.”

“So, you decided to hurt me now? That seems idiotic!”

“Well, I never pretended to be the cleverest of men, but even you must admit that it is wiser to have the smaller pain now than the greater in five years’ time.”

“I shall have to repeatedly call you a fool for saying such things.” She shook his shoulders once more. “Do you not see the truth of this, Jacob? Trying to stop me from forming too great an attachment to you is ridiculous when I am already in love with you.”

Hearing the words made him gasp aloud. His hands tightened around her waist further still. When he said nothing, but just continued to stare up into her eyes, she looked away, her bottom lip trembling briefly before she bit it to stop it.

“I hardly care if you do not have the capacity to feel the same way. It is how I feel, and I need you to know it.”

“Emily, please, look at me—”

“No, I cannot bear it.” She refused staunchly, staring into the woods. “I do not want to hear you deny me now.”

“Good, because that was not what I was going to say.” He pulled on her waist once more, desperate to capture her gaze. When she turned her face toward him but closed her eyes, he reached up toward her, knowing one thing would

catch her attention more than any other.

Pressing his lips to hers, he indulged in a kiss. This one was slow, a mere press of chaste lips together, but he maintained it for as long as he could, waiting until he felt Emily soften in his arms. Her hands grew gentle on his shoulders, no longer clinging tight.

“I love you too,” he whispered, pulling back from her just an inch. Her eyes shot open wide in surprise.

“You do?” she muttered; her voice so quiet he had to strain to hear it.

“Why else do you think I am trying to protect you so much.”

“Enough of this.” She shook her head. “Do you not understand, Jacob? The pain of not being with you at all would be far greater than losing you someday. I’m willing to take that risk, that gamble, just to be with you now. So would you please, I beg of you, stop being such a fool and running from me all the time?”

He smiled, finding he couldn’t resist her at that moment. He shifted his hold on her so that his arms wrapped tightly around her.

“As you wish,” he murmured, pulling her down toward him.

“You mean it? You’ll stop withdrawing and hiding away all the time?”

“I promise,” he whispered, angling his head toward her as he longed for another one of those kisses. “I love you, Emily. Do me a favor and tell me you love me too. I wish to hear it again.”

“You’re already arrogant enough,” she said, the trace of a smile appearing on her lips.

“Indulge me,” he pleaded.

“Yes, I love you, you arrogant fool—”

He cut her off before she could say anymore and pressed his lips to hers, wrapping his arms so strongly around her that she couldn’t escape him, but neither did she make a move to pull back. Jacob had no idea how long they sat there together on that rock, with Emily practically curling into his lap, but the moment was perfect.

He had never known such happiness, such release from fear.

He wasn’t sure if he felt free because of that near brush with death and the realization that he didn’t want to waste a day, or if it was just to have Emily in his arms again. Either way, he didn’t intend to squander this opportunity to start things again with Emily.

## CHAPTER 27



“*I*t’s just a sprain, Your Grace,” Doctor Rainer said as he stepped back from the bed.

Emily circled the bottom of the bed, looping one of her arms around Jacob’s bedpost and looking toward him.

It hadn’t been easy to get him back from the estate that afternoon. She’d had to help him into the saddle of her horse before they rode back. One of the groomsmen was sent out to recover the missing stallion as Doctor Rainer had been called for.

Now freshly bathed, Jacob sat up in his bed in loose trousers and a nightshirt, with his bandaged ankle raised on a cushion at the bottom of the bed. He looked very comfortable, with his head propped back on the pillows and an easy smile on his face. That smile seemed to appear each time he looked at Emily.

*How much has happened?*

In the forest, Emily wasn't sure what emotion had grown in her more. Was it the frustration that Jacob had pulled back from her in the first place out of fearing his own death? Or the relief that he loved her too? Now, at least, back in his house, she knew what to feel. It was pure happiness.

He offered his hand to her, and she released the bedpost, coming to sit beside him on the edge of the bed to take his hand.

"Is my mother well?" Jacob asked, a rather nervous look in his eyes as he addressed Doctor Rainer.

"I encouraged Harlow not to tell your mother the full extent of how close you came to that cliff drop," the doctor said with a small smile. "She thinks you fell from your horse and sprained your ankle, so she is perfectly fine."

"Good." Jacob nodded and rested his head back on the pillows once more.

Emily stared at him, realizing something more about Jacob's character that she had not understood when they had first met. He was a man constantly trying to protect those around him, whether that was her or his mother. It may have manifested itself in strange ways at times, and had been very perplexing to make sense of, but at least now, she understood him better.

"Good evening, Doctor," Jacob said in parting.

"Good evening." Doctor Rainer bowed to the two of them and left, closing the door behind him.

Emily hurried up from her seat and moved to the door, locking it quickly behind the doctor before rushing back to the bed. Jacob laughed and opened his arms to her, welcoming her onto the bed.

At once, she kissed him, molding her lips to his. He returned her kisses with equal fervency and lifted himself off the pillows, nibbling at her lip in such a way that she opened herself to him, giving him access to her. When his body moved against hers and his ankle left the pillow, she made a sound and pulled back from the kiss.

“Ah, don’t pull back now,” he begged in a small voice, moving his kisses to her neck and kissing down her throat to her collarbone.

“I believe the doctor prescribed rest for you. I do not remember him advising anything more.”

“He also said on his last visit that I needed to sleep more,” he whispered, raising his head and meeting her gaze once more.

“Then how can I help with that?” she said in a mischievous tone.

“I can think of something.” He winked and moved his lips to hers once more.

This time, Emily didn’t hold back in the kiss. She pressed herself toward Jacob, deepening it further and taking control. He fell back onto the pillows,

pulling at her waist and urging her to clamber over him.

Her knees fell on either side of his hips as she nestled herself in his lap. Wrapping her arms around his neck, she tightened her hold, bringing her body flush against his own. So near to him now, when her hips moved against him, she felt his length. It was already hardened, so strongly that she made a sound as she kissed him.

That noise must have done something to him, as his hands moved from her back to her hips and he gripped hard, urging her to rock her body against him. The friction increased, tempting her, making a pool of wetness develop between her legs.

“We never did have that wedding night, did we?” he whispered as he pulled back from their kiss and moved his lips down her neck. He hovered around the open neckline of her gown, nipping at the crests of her breasts.

“Whose fault was that?” she reminded him in a husky tone. He chuckled against her breasts, the sound vibrating through her core.

“Completely my own. Allow me to rectify the matter, wife?”

“Happily.” She sat back, indulging in the feeling of him calling her wife.

He reached around her gown for the ties and hurried to undo them. She hastened to assist him, tossing the gown to the side so that it dropped off his bed. It was quickly followed by her corset and then her chemise, so that soon,

she was completely bare in front of Jacob, straddling him.

Her breathing grew fast, and her hands quivered as she clung to him. A soft ache developed between her legs, one that spoke of what she longed for.

Jacob grasped at her waist and turned the two of them over swiftly so that she was on her back, and he was above her.

“What about your ankle?” she whispered.

“I will be careful.” He hitched one of her legs higher, then bent down, so swiftly that she barely had time to think of his answer.

When his lips found her core and he kissed her there, Emily’s hands fell back against the covers of the bed. Marveling at the sensation of the pleasure he started within her, Emily’s head turned from side to side, just wanting more of this feeling.

He had given her the taste of pleasure once before, but now, she wished to know the full experience.

As his fingers delved into her and his lips strayed just outside, giving her a dual feeling of pleasure, her legs quivered above his shoulders.

“Jacob... please,” she begged of him.

He chuckled into her core, that sound reaching deep inside of her and making her arch off the bed.

Kneeling up before her, he reached for his shirt, pulling it over his head. Sitting up, she went to help him and explored him with her fingers. She marveled at the contours of his body, the firmness of his muscles, and in particular the strong biceps that she gripped a little too hard, watching as he moaned a little at her touch.

She reached for his trousers, and he bent to help her, pulling open the flap to push them down his hips. Slowly, as his length was revealed to her, Emily grew distracted, staring at him. It was larger than she had expected, and her breathing grew faster until he kissed her. That distracted her completely, so she thought only of that kiss and nothing else.

Somehow, the trousers were tossed away, and she heard the cloth falling to the floor beside the bed, then he moved his body over hers, pressing the two of them together on the covers. Her breasts pressed against his chest as he moved their hips together. Her core was ready, that ache still there, but now nudged by him in such a way that had her legs quivering all the more.

Jacob pulled back from the kiss and moved his lips to her temple, giving her a soft kiss, more of a doting touch.

“You said once that you didn’t trust me,” he whispered, moving down to face her again. “I want you to trust me, Emily. Can you do that?”

She nodded hurriedly, so caught up in the moment that she didn't trust her voice to stay level as she gripped onto him.

"It will only hurt the first time; I promise you that." He pressed his lips to hers again, kissing her so deeply that she was marveling at that sensation when he entered her.

It was sudden, and so deep that she felt the pain he had spoken of. One hand gripped his bicep as the other wound itself around his back, holding onto his shoulder blades.

Then he moved. Each movement was slow and languid at first, surprising her, for the pain dissipated pretty much as soon as it began.

He lifted himself off her a little, with his hands planted on the bed on either side of her, allowing the two of them to look down at what their bodies were doing together. Such pleasure ran through her that Emily could not stay quiet. Repeating gasping moans fell from her lips as he drove their bodies together.

When he moved faster, he settled his body over hers again, kissing her so deeply that she trailed her hands in his hair, holding onto him, playfully tugging at him. He seemed to be driven on by such actions, his movements more vigorous as he drove the two of them together.

Her body grew clammy, tight, and in her core, she felt that tightening sensation she'd had once before, yet it was much more intense this time. Her hands flung back on the bed as Jacob raised himself up high, hitching one of her legs around his hip as he drove into her faster and harder.

Her body was catapulted to the edge of pleasure as she gazed up at Jacob, seeing his cheeks blushing red with sweat beading down the center of his chest as he made love to her. She reached her climax abruptly, the tingles spreading throughout her body as she closed her eyes and, in that darkness, she could have sworn she saw stars.

“Jacob,” she moaned his name as he rode out her wave of pleasure. Her body tightening around him seemed to have an effect, for he gripped harder to the bed beneath her and bent over her again, burying his face in her neck as he too reached his end.

It was sudden, his hips thrusting against hers as she felt a warmth spreading through their connection. He moaned into her neck, that sound reverberating through the both of them.

As they stilled, Emily trailed her fingers across Jacob’s back, feeling closer to him both emotionally and physically than she had ever done before.

“Heaven,” Emily whispered as Jacob lifted himself up a little. He gazed down at her, with a smile on his face that she had never seen before. Lifting a hand between them, she trailed it down his chest, still admiring his physique.

“Yes indeed,” he murmured softly. “Ah, Emily. I’m beginning to wonder why we haven’t done that before.”

“Now you say that!” She moved her hand to swipe him across the chest. “It was your decision.”

“Well, you can call me an idiot for the remaining part of our married lives together. I definitely deserve it.” He sank down over her, kissing her swiftly. She briefly indulged in that kiss, then pushed him up just an inch, so she could look him in the eye.

“I love you, you idiot.”

“I love you too,” he said and chuckled, before going back to kissing her.

Emily was not sure how long they stayed there together, their bodies entangled as they kissed, but she had no wish to pull back from him. It was everything she had ever wanted from Jacob, and beyond.

## EPILOGUE



*Two Months Later*

“*J*oey, come to your aunt Emily.” Emily took the boy in her arms and lifted him high into an embrace. Now able to hold his head up of his own accord, the boy made a cooing sound in her ear as she wrapped her arms around him. “Here you are, with your favorite aunt again.”

“Oh. Is that how it is?” Bridget said as she appeared in the doorway behind Rachel who had placed the baby into Emily’s hands. “Now, I see. Rachel, hurry up and have another baby, then I can at least be one child’s favorite.”

“What?” Daniel stumbled in behind the pair of them. “You’re not—”

“No, I’m not,” Rachel said hurriedly, laughing as she waved her hand at her husband. “But thank you for letting me know where you stand. Look at you, ready to turn and run back out of the house.”

“I’m not that bad,” Daniel insisted, coming up behind her and kissing her on

the cheek, lovingly.

Emily smiled as she held Joey nearer, kissing him on the cheek.

“Where is he?” Daniel asked, moving to Emily’s side.

“In there.” She jerked her head in the direction of one of the nearest doors.  
“He has the cards waiting for you.”

“Oh good. I’ll win this time.” Daniel rubbed his hands together as he hurried to the door.

“Certainly, you will,” Rachel called after him. “Just as you have been able to beat Jacob for the last two months.”

“Thank you for the reminder, love,” Daniel said wryly and offered her a wink before disappearing through the door.

The three sisters laughed as they followed him toward the doorway.

“He is determined to win, but I hardly see the pattern of the last two months changing,” Rachel said, patting Joey’s back as he curved himself into Emily’s shoulder, looking very intent on going to sleep.

“Speaking of new patterns.” As Bridget reached the door, she held her hand in front of it, momentarily blocking the three of them from entering. “We have seen much change, but may we be assured that this new version of Jacob is here to stay?”

Emily smiled as she peered through the doorway at her husband. Jacob gestured at the card table, urging Daniel to take his place as he shuffled the cards. With his sleeves rolled up to his elbows and his port brandy glass ready beside him, he was clearly eager to begin the game.

Though he and Daniel may have been frosty with one another the first week that Emily had invited them around for dinner, that had quickly changed. Jacob and Daniel were frequently found to be talking together, and Emily had once heard from her husband that he felt as if Daniel could understand why he had acted the way he had. Maybe Daniel would not have acted in the same way, but once all was explained, Daniel understood it.

Their friendship was not the only relationship that had changed over the last couple of months.

Emily and Jacob’s marriage, the first week after they had reconciled, had been heated indeed. They’d spent every night in one another’s arms, and most mornings too, even sneaking off at every opportunity when Catarina was not around to explore together again.

The mere memory of the excitement had Emily’s cheeks warming now as she held onto Joey, longing to return to the bedchamber with Jacob and be alone with him again.

*At least these days that door between our chamber is never bolted!*

What had started out as heat had soon become companionship. They rode together most days, explored the garden together, and she even joined him in his study when he had to work on business. She would sit and keep him company, occasionally offering some thoughts when he needed advice.

“Emily?” Rachel elbowed her, trying to get a reaction.

“She has been so long in deep reverie, I can only presume she is reliving happy memories,” Bridget said as she danced into the room, with the two of them following behind.

“You could say that,” Emily whispered as they sat down on the plush settees.

Harlow appeared seconds later and passed around glasses, leaving Emily’s port glass beside her on the table so she could give her full attention to Joey.

“Yes, I am happy,” Emily whispered to her sisters after he had retreated from the room. “Jacob has become... oh I do not know how to put it. Not a different man, but more of the man I thought at first he could be.” She gazed at him across the room as he sat down to play cards with Daniel, clearly unaware that he was being spoken of.

“Goodness, look at the wistful smile on her face?” Bridget said, pointing to her with the glass. “I knew how it would turn out.”

“You did not,” Rachel said with a giggle. “I caught you once in tears, fearing that you had forced Emily to marry him.”

“Tears? Why were you crying?” Emily asked, sitting forward so sharply that Joey whined a little in surprise. “Oops, sorry.” She sat back again, allowing the boy to lie still.

“Well, I kept thinking if I hadn’t promised to marry him for convenience, then you might never have been forced into his company at all.” Bridget glanced across the room to Jacob.

*That is not true. I still would have met him in that corridor...*

Emily had to fight a pleasant shudder just at the memory of that evening in the corridor. It had been wondrous that first kiss, and despite all the heartbreak that had followed it, the happiness she felt now was worth it. She would go through it all again to be where she was now.

“Thank goodness I didn’t marry him,” Bridget said suddenly, turning back to face Emily. “Look at the way he smiles at you. To think I could have ruined such happiness!”

Emily laughed softly with her, shaking her head as she looked at her husband. Jacob had looked up from his cards and smiled at Emily. She knew what that smile meant, even if no one else in the room could recognize it. It was an intimate smile, showing that Jacob was distracted, thinking exactly of what had passed between them earlier that day in her bedchamber.

She'd woken to find him slipping into the covers beside her. She barely managed to murmur the words 'good morning', before he kissed her and removed her nightgown. The euphoria he introduced her body to that morning had her smiling deliriously now.

"Such happiness indeed," Rachel commented. "Well, I for one am glad you have settled down, Em." She laid a hand on Emily's shoulder.

"What do you mean?" Emily asked, turning to look at her sister.

"You were so wild." Rachel shuddered. "Was she not?"

"Oh, so wild," Bridget agreed with a giggle.

"You are doing it again," Emily murmured.

"Do you remember when we caught her running through the garden outside of the ball?"

"I was thinking about catching her refusing to tell us what happened at certain events."

"You're speaking as if I am not here!" Emily complained with a laugh. Her sisters giggled too before Rachel squeezed her shoulder.

“I was just pointing out that it’s lovely to see your wild heart at peace at last,” Rachel whispered warmly. “Can you deny you are happy?”

“No, of course, I can’t deny it,” Emily said hurriedly. She lifted Joey onto her shoulder once more, listening to the boy snuffle in his sleep.

*Wild hearts.*

The phrase stuck with her particularly as she gazed at Jacob across the room. They both had wild hearts, and she didn’t think that marrying one another had changed that. It was just that together they now made more sense than apart.

“I am very happy where I am indeed,” Emily whispered to her sisters.

Daniel tossed his cards down on the table and stood hurriedly.

“Ah, it’s ridiculous. He wins every game.” He strode across the room toward his wife as Rachel laughed warmly.

“Knew you’d lose. Pay up.” She held open her hand.

“Wait—you wagered I would beat your husband again?” Jacob asked, moving across the room. He sat down on the arm of the settee beside Emily and laid a hand around her. That soft touch was a simple one, yet it made her heart rate increase.

“I did,” Rachel said. “And I am delighted to have made one.”

“Damn you,” Daniel muttered playfully and pressed his money into his wife’s hands. “Well, at least give me my son back so I have a reason to smile then.”

Reluctantly, Emily passed Joey back into Daniel’s hands. She tried her best not to show her disappointment. As Daniel and Rachel sat together fussing over her son, Emily was glad of Jacob as he moved toward her and whispered in her ear.

“Fear not. The way you and I are going, we’ll have one of our own someday soon.”

Emily thought she had never smiled so much before. She reached up and took Jacob’s hand, holding it tight.

*Maybe he’s right. Maybe, we shall have a child of our own.*

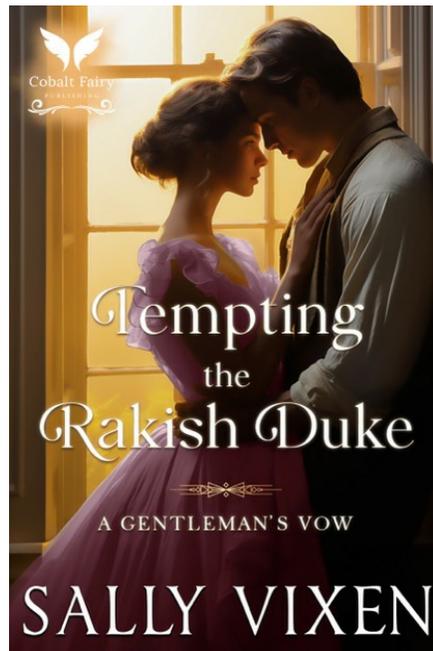
## EXTENDED EPILOGUE



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# PREVIEW: THE CRUEL DUKE



## CHAPTER 1



“*H*e killed them—that is what I heard,” Fanny Swinton, the Marchioness of Tillington, declared in a low, anxious whisper. “A murderer, and your father would bring him into our house and make us dine with the—I cannot even bring myself to finish the sentence, it is too awful!” With shaky hands, she did her best to sip from the cup of tea that had been brought into the Rose Room: a quaint, secondary drawing room that overlooked the beautiful rose gardens of Tillington House.

Joanna Swinton, who stood by the windows, craning her neck to get a half-decent view of the main gates, whipped around in alarm. “A murderer?” She choked on her own breath. “I know Papa’s circle of acquaintances is almost entirely formed of scoundrels and degenerates, but he has a few moral boundaries. He would not make us welcome a killer, much less one who had killed his own family. That cannot be true. Where have you heard such a thing? Have you been reading the scandal sheets again?”

“I wish I had,” her mother replied, the teacup rattling against the saucer as she drew in an unsteady breath, clearly struggling to calm herself. “And you must not say such rude things about your father’s acquaintances. He might hear you.”

Joanna mustered a smile and went to perch upon the armrest of her mother’s chair. “He would only scold me, and I have gained a rather useful sort of deafness when it comes to his chiding of me. The moment his voice rises above a certain volume, I cease to hear a word.” She slipped her arm around her mother’s narrow, hunched shoulders and rested her chin upon her

mother's fragrant, silky-soft gray hair. "But do tell me, where have you heard of this unsettling information? Do you really believe it to be true?"

"The moment rumors spread that this reprehensible duke had been seen speaking with your father in London, I was inundated with letters!" her mother explained in the same, hushed voice she always used, even when there was no secret to be told. "I have never received so many, nor have so many ladies wished to call upon me for tea. Of course, your father thought they were silly letters of no importance; if he had read a single one, he would have intercepted every ensuing message that came to me."

Joanna's heart slowed to a thud of dread. "You were warned about this man?"

"More than warned, darling. I know more of this duke than I ever desired to, not that your father was inclined to listen," her mother replied, taking another nervous sip of her tea. "A daft old coot, he called me. I suppose I should not be surprised after thirty years of marriage."

A muscle twitched in Joanna's jaw as she clenched her teeth, infuriated on her mother's behalf. "You are neither daft, nor old, nor a coot," she soothed, kissing her mother's hair. "You are a swan: elegant and refined and beautiful, maintaining an air of serenity while you—"

"Kick my legs furiously beneath the water," her mother finished the sentence with a cheery smile, for it was a sweet jest that Joanna often used, though that did not make it any less true. To Joanna, her mother *was* a swan, and she would repeat that jest again and again if it could keep bringing a smile to the older woman's face.

"Should I stretch my legs in preparation for some kicking, for when this terrible wretch arrives? I could trip him accidentally or spill something that will stain his shirt or simply kick him in the shins so that he will be so furious with us that he will turn on his heel and leave without ever desiring to return," Joanna offered, meaning every word.

Her mother shook her head. "I can see no means for us to escape this dinner. Your father has made up his mind and sees nothing amiss with the fellow."

"But what, exactly, have you been told of this duke?" Joanna steered the

conversation back to the beginning, her stomach churning as she tried to make her tone as casual as possible. One of them had to have their wits about them this coming evening, if it truly could not be avoided.

Her mother looked at the Rose Room door, her throat bobbing as she swallowed loudly. Joanna's father, the Marquess of Tillington, was tending to some business in his study. As such, the Marchioness needed to be quick if she was going to speak of any revelations before he came back—or, worse, if the duke arrived early.

“There were mysterious circumstances surrounding the death of his father and brother,” Joanna's mother said furtively, picking up a jam tart to nibble on for comfort. “Indeed, it has been said that he was born wrong—a cursed child that took his mother's life when he came into the world.”

Joanna pursed her lips. “I hardly think a baby can be blamed for the death of its mother, Mama. Born without a stitch of clothing, where would it hide a weapon?” She had hoped to bring some levity to the conversation, but her mother ignored the latter part.

“Nor do I, but you do encounter some unnatural individuals in this world, and you do have to wonder if they were born that way,” her mother continued, dropping crumbs onto her skirts, which were creased from a morning's worth of anxious wringing. “The duke's father was, by all accounts, also a somewhat twisted creature. A friend of a friend once had notions of courting him and was so terrified after a single encounter that she begged her father to send her to stay with her aunt for the rest of that season.”

Joanna tilted her head from side to side. “A sins-of-the-father sort of situation?”

“Perhaps,” her mother nodded. “The duke's father died in a riding accident, in which the duke—though he was just the youngest son, then—was the only witness. A year later, the duke's elder brother drowned in the river that runs alongside the Bruxton Estate. Again, the duke was the only witness to the incident, and he has hidden himself away for a decade since.”

Joanna's eyes widened as a shudder ran through her. “You think he murdered his father and brother in order to gain the dukedom?”

“I do not think it, but my acquaintances have informed me that he has a despicable reputation, terrorizing his staff, punishing his tenants in cruel and unusual ways, as well as being beastly to behold. As deformed as his character, or so I have heard. Would a monster like that not—”

“What are you two gossiping about?” a voice asked, as a figure slipped in through the garden doors.

Pretty and fair as a dove, Nancy Swinton was the jewel in the crown of the Swinton family. At 19, she was the younger of the two sisters, with golden blonde hair that fell past her waist when it was allowed free of hair slides and pins, and hazel green eyes that were the color of the sun shining through early autumn leaves. Where she was everything graceful and pure and soft, Joanna was dark and ungainly and sharp: two opposite birds who could not have adored one another more.

“Just lamenting the thought of dinner with one of Father’s strange acquaintances,” Joanna replied casually. Talk of murder and conspiracy and cruelty was not appropriate for Nancy’s innocent ears.

Nancy gasped, clasping a hand to her chest. “You should not speak so rudely of Papa’s friends.”

“I will when they stare at me as if I am a piece of prime beef,” Joanna smiled, keeping her tone light so her sister would not suspect anything. “And when they stare at *you* in the same fashion.”

Nancy shrugged. “That fellow, Lord Albert, was rather pleasant.”

“Not if you picked up the scandal sheets recently,” Joanna remarked, grimacing. “A wretch, like his father.”

Nancy pulled a disapproving face. “The scandal sheets are filled with lies, as you well know. Maybe, I ought to lend you my books, so you might become as wise as me in the art of optimism and pursuit of truth in place of judgment.”

“Goodness, no.” Joanna feigned a dramatic shudder. “If I wish to read of stirring love stories, I shall pore over the great works of Greek mythology and Roman legend. These modern tales inspire nothing within me, other than an urge to roll my eyes and skim to the end.”

For where Nancy had a heart that brimmed with the hope of soaring romance, Joanna had a more sensible approach to love and marriage: namely, that it would not happen for her, so what was the use in dreaming of it? At four-and-twenty, she was well on her way to perpetual spinsterhood, and with each passing year, she found that prospect more and more comforting, throwing herself into other passions: painting, writing, horse-riding, and her determined pursuit of becoming England's finest virtuosa of the pianoforte.

Just then, the Rose Room door swung open and Nicholas Swinton, the Marquess of Tillington, marched in with trudging footfalls. He narrowed his hazel eyes at the three women, puckering his lips in disapproval, for though he could not have heard what they had been speaking about, even Joanna knew that they looked suspicious, all leaning in.

"Should you not be preparing for dinner? I do not consider any one of you suitably attired for dinner with the Duke of Bruxton," Nicholas said, crinkling his nose. "This is no ordinary guest."

"So I hear," Joanna replied, deliberately baiting him. "Please, tell us, how are we supposed to dress to welcome such an infamous gentleman?"

But much like Joanna's ability to ignore her father when he scolded her, he had also developed an immunity to her wit. Usually, he pretended he had not heard it at all. So, it was something of a surprise when he responded, his tone laced with a warning note.

"Gossip is the pastime of ladies who have nothing better to occupy their dull and tedious lives, and I will not accept the ladies of my own family giving credence to any such gossip," he said coolly, adjusting his own cravat. "I shall judge the man when I meet him, not before, and I certainly shall not heed the whisperings of bored women."

Joanna arched a curious eyebrow. "So, you know of the rumors?"

"I know that rumors are rarely grounded in truth," he shot back. "Indeed, my acquaintances at the club have spoken rather highly of him."

*Your acquaintances who are just as awful and infamous, in their own fashion.* Joanna did not say so out loud, choosing to get to her feet as she said, instead, "But you have not met him? I thought you were seen engaging

in conversation with him, in London. Indeed, I was under the impression you were great friends.”

“I spoke with his manservant,” her father replied. “Not that my conversations are any business of yours.” His gaze drifted toward his wife, eyes glinting with accusation, and Joanna’s heart sank as she watched her mother drop her chin to her chest. Chastened, as always.

*And I was the one who got you into trouble...* Not for the first time in her life, Joanna wished she was better able to hold her tongue when it mattered. But she could not worry over that for long, as a sound filtered into the thick silence of the Rose Room: a secondary thud of footsteps, approaching swiftly.

The door swung open, and an unfamiliar gentleman strode inside as if he owned the manor.

“It is my pleasure to introduce His Grace, the Duke of Bruxton,” Joanna’s father fumbled to announce, apparently just as surprised by the fellow’s abrupt entrance.

The gentleman barely bowed, giving the slightest downward dip of his chin as he surveyed the three ladies who stared back at him. Out of the corner of her eye, Joanna saw her sister’s mouth agape, while their mother had blanched, though Joanna could not imagine the expression on her own face. Shock, most likely, for the duke was not as expected.

Indeed, if the duke was a monster, he was cleverly disguised, for he was quite the most handsome man Joanna had ever seen, and he was staring right at her. Or glaring. She could not decide.

## CHAPTER 2



“*Y*our Grace, this is my wife, the Marchioness of Tillington, and these are my daughters, the Lady Joanna Swinton, and the Lady Nancy Swinton,” Joanna’s father continued, for the duke had yet to say anything.

In the ensuing, awkward silence, Joanna took a moment to further appreciate the dashing, surprising beauty of the duke’s appearance. His burgundy tailcoat looked like it ought to be straining at the buttons, it was so tightly fitted to his tall and athletic physique, and yet not a single button budged. His matching waistcoat highlighted his excellent posture, as if it were a corset, holding his upper half so erect that he might have been a statue. Meanwhile, light-colored trousers in the Brummell style drew the eye to places a lady’s gaze should not wander; the thin material inviting Joanna’s eyes to note the detailed outline of powerful thighs, sculpted in such a way that they did not look real. Indeed, there were muscles there, flexing as he stood proud, that she had never seen before.

Diverting her attention to his face, she could not help but marvel. Everything about his noble face sparked visions of her ancient Greek stories, making her think of Perseus or Heracles or even the strapping young hero, Bellerophon, who rode the winged horse, Pegasus.

The duke certainly had the strong jaw and sharp cheekbones of a warrior hero, with a Grecian nose that had the slightest notch in it, as if it had once been broken. His lips were full, with a deep bow, making her consider mythical archers instead of sword-wielding heroes. Yet, his mouth was set in a grim, stern line that seemed wasted on such fine lips. The same was true of

his beautiful, dark blue eyes, which might have sparkled if he had laughed or smiled, but, at present, they were assessing the three Swinton ladies with a cold aloofness that Joanna did not favor one bit. Indeed, there seemed to be no warmth in him whatsoever—even his smooth, unblemished skin possessed a jarring paleness as if all the heat had been drawn out of it. Not even the chestnut brown of his hair could temper his icy demeanor, for that had been cropped into an unfashionably short style, rendering the warm tones of russet and dark blond powerless against the rest of his innate frost.

*Not beastly to behold*, Joanna considered, *but, nevertheless, beastly in nature*. His eyes, when they met hers for a fleeting instant, burned with such intensity that she immediately looked away: a chill prickling down the curve of her spine making her shudder as if she had been scolded by her childhood governess.

“I am grateful for your warm welcome,” the duke said, at last, though he sounded anything but grateful and certainly did not seem charmed by the reception he had received. “Lord Tillington, I trust you have gone to no effort regarding dinner. I am not here to dine with you.”

Joanna frowned. “If you are not here to dine, why would you accept an invitation to dinner?”

To her right, she heard her mother suck in a sharp breath, and watched as angry blotches of red colored her father’s cheeks. Nancy, on the other hand, stared down at her lap and did not seem inclined to raise her gaze.

“Is it not a fair question?” Joanna asked, somewhat appalled by the mollifying behavior of her parents. If her father was half the man he thought he was, why was he not marching the duke out of the house for daring to suggest that he had gone to “no effort” for dinner? Indeed, for wasting their time entirely?

The duke narrowed his flinty eyes at her. “I *shall* dine,” he said, “but I am not here to dine.”

“Then, why *are* you here?” Joanna replied, her heart beating frantically in her chest as she forced herself to hold his gaze. In the span of a few anxious seconds, refusing to look away, she began to believe that every rumor spoken about this man was true. No one could chill her to the bone like that and *not*

be the beast he was alleged to be.

The duke's lip curled as if she had cursed at him, but before she could lower her gaze and admit defeat, his eyes turned toward Nancy, like a ravenous wolf hearing the cries of helpless offspring in a nearby burrow. "I am here to find a wife," he said. "After some investigation, I have concluded that Lady Nancy would be the ideal candidate. That is why I have come."

The girls' mother made a strange noise, half-choke, half-gasp. Nancy's head shot up, her eyes wide and terrified, her mouth opening and closing as if to protest or cry out or say *something*, but no sound emerged. Even the Marquess looked astonished, blinking slowly at the duke. Meanwhile, a numbing nip, like spending too long in a snowfall, pinched through Joanna's veins, leaving her cheeks hot and her body frozen.

She stared at her father, willing him to denounce the man as a scoundrel, willing him to at least laugh at the absurdity of the suggestion. The trouble was, the manner in which the duke had spoken of marrying Nancy had not sounded like a suggestion at all, but a demand. And Joanna feared that he would not leave the manor until he had what he came for.

"Papa..." Nancy whispered, trembling from head to toe upon the settee. And she did not even know the rumors about this duke.

"Darling," the Marchioness echoed, her eyes imploring her husband to do something.

Joanna cleared her throat. "Your Grace, you do not know my sister. You cannot simply—"

"Enough, Joanna," her father snapped, furrowing his brow as if he were actually contemplating the offer. The prospect made Joanna sick to her stomach, her gaze flitting back to Nancy, who had drained of color: all the roses vanishing from her cheeks, her lips bloodless.

Since girlhood, Nancy had dreamed of romance. She had devoured fairytales, despite their father's insistence that they would rot her mind. In the summertime, she had laid out upon the grass, staring up at blue skies, telling Joanna of her hopes for the future—how she longed to, one day, stare up at such beautiful skies with her husband at her side, safe in his arms, knowing

she was loved and loved as much in return. In the winter, Nancy had wrapped herself in blankets and lamented that she did not have a beloved who could keep her warm instead, her eyes shining with excitement as she wondered aloud what traditions and joyful occasions she would share with her husband in their own home, with love brimming in her heart.

As Nancy had grown into womanhood, she had replaced the fairytales with novels and plays and operas and poetry, so enamored with the very idea of love that Joanna had prayed her sister would, one day, find the love she longed for.

*“I will not settle,”* Nancy had always declared. *“I will have the kind of love that poets and playwrights and authors write about, or I shall have none of it.”*

To think that this duke had marched in here to make a demand that would snatch that hope away from Nancy was more than Joanna could bear. There was no possible way that the duke could be a secret knight in shining armor, come to sweep Nancy off her feet with the promise of a love that would last a lifetime and beyond. For love to happen, there had to be warmth, and the duke was an ice sculpture.

“Papa, I—” Nancy began to whisper, but her father cut her off.

“I said ‘enough.’ I must be allowed to think.”

Joanna watched in horror as a tear escaped Nancy’s eye, trickling down toward her trembling lips, but the poor girl was too stunned to even lift her finger to wipe it away. The duke did not seem to care that he had made her cry as he folded his arms across his broad chest, waiting impatiently for the Marquess to finish thinking.

*Father, you cannot be seriously considering this!* Joanna fumed in silence, desperate for him to come to the defense of his youngest daughter. But as the minutes ticked on and the creases in her father’s brow smoothed out, his expression easing as if he had come to his decision, Joanna understood that her father was on the brink of ruining Nancy’s life. He was about to accept; Joanna could see it in the small sigh that nudged her father’s shoulders up and brought them back down. Resigned, but not displeased.

*No, I will not allow it, Joanna decided. Nancy will have her happily ever after, no matter the cost.*

“Why not marry me instead?” she blurted out, just as her father was opening his mouth to speak.

Everyone stared at her; her father’s mouth stuck halfway open. Even the Duke seemed surprised, subtly raising an eyebrow.

“If you are not seeking a love match,” Joanna continued at a breakneck pace, fearful she might change her mind if she did not speak quickly enough, “then you may marry me instead. I am the eldest daughter, I understand the nature of this kind of marriage, and I am better prepared for the demands of being a duchess. Moreover, I would do it willingly. You will hear no protest or weeping or wailing from me.”

The duke glanced at Nancy, wrinkling his nose at the sight of the tears now flowing freely down her face. Perhaps, that was what altered his resolve, or perhaps it was merely the prospect of choosing the path of least resistance that made his decision for him. Either way, he turned to Joanna’s father and stuck out his hand.

“Lady Joanna will suffice,” he said curtly. “I came here for a wife, so I cannot argue if one has been offered.”

Joanna rather felt like a cow at the cattle market, being sold without anyone so much as batting an eyelid. And as her father took the duke’s hand and shook it, the realization of what she had done began to dawn on her, gripping her heart in a vise, suffocating her throat until she could not breathe.

“I will return in due course once I have acquired the special license,” the duke announced, flashing a cold stare at Joanna that spoke of countless horrors to come. “We will be married as soon as possible.”

Joanna’s mother managed to squeak out a quiet, “You will not stay for dinner?”

“No,” the duke replied. “This cannot wait. Adieu.”

With that, he left, and Joanna’s world—small and simple though it was—came tumbling down. She had not been sold; she had sold herself to save her

sister, and she had no real notion of what the true cost might be. After all, if the rumors were to be believed, the duke was violent and cruel, with a taste for murdering anyone who got in his way.

## CHAPTER 3



Edwin Bolt yawned as his black stallion swayed from side to side, trudging along the country lanes toward the town of Beacon Hill. The hour had grown too late for him to hope to retrieve the special license that night, but he preferred the anonymity of the town inn, despite the uncomfortable bed he had slept in the previous night, to spending an evening in the company of the Swintons.

“She is fair enough,” he muttered, dipping into a habit he had tried to shed since childhood: speaking aloud to himself. “The younger one *was* a mite too young. Society would have relished that.”

His lip curled, wondering what the scandal sheets might have said about him if he had chosen the younger daughter, as he had intended. Although, he doubted they would have called him an awful name he had not heard a thousand times before.

“Lady Joanna speaks out of turn, though—that might present a problem,” he continued, closing his eyes so he could picture the lady who would soon be his wife. By the end of the week, if he could make the arrangements swiftly enough.

In truth, Lady Joanna was the one who had caught his attention when he had entered the drawing room of Tillington House, though he had not known that she was Joanna and not Nancy, at that moment. She had the willowy figure that he favored, and a height that was neither too short nor too tall; the perfect height for a society ornament, to be paraded in front of the *ton*. Her figure,

her pale complexion, and her ebony hair would complement most fashions and gowns, too, and if he poured enough of his dwindling fortune into a magnificent dress, he trusted that she would be a welcome distraction, softening society's attitude toward him by celebrating the beauty and grace of his wife.

*As long as she does not speak her mind*, he noted, for he wanted her to be admired and not a cause of further gossip and ill-repute for him. He chewed on the inside of his cheek, wondering if he had been too hasty. Perhaps, he should have insisted on taking the younger daughter as his bride, for she had not said a word throughout their encounter.

“But I cannot abide the weeping ones.” He shuddered, remembering the tears that had reddened Lady Nancy's eyes and puffed her reasonably pretty face, making it blotchy and unappealing. He shrugged away the image, choosing to think of Lady Joanna's face instead.

She had shown a strength he had not expected, particularly in the offer she had made to take her sister's place, and her unusual, green eyes had been defiant; the same color as a cat he had as a boy. He did not know if it was the remembrance of that beloved pet that had made him accept, or the fact that Joanna had offered herself willingly while the other sister wept, but he supposed the exchange could not be altered now. If Joanna proved to be too unruly, then he would just have to educate her in being precisely what he needed her to be, and nothing more.

“She might prove to be charming to other guests at balls and gatherings,” he mused, seeing the opportunity in choosing the more unpredictable sister. “That would certainly benefit me, for if they adore her, they might come to favor me, too.”

He mustered a smile, feeling more hopeful about the coming marriage with every step that his stallion took toward the glowing lights of Beacon Hill that had appeared in the near distance. Like many things in life, perhaps Joanna was the very thing he needed, precisely when he needed it.

“Yes, I think she will suffice very nicely,” he murmured, as his mouth stretched in another, wider yawn.



“Why did you do that?” Nancy whimpered through wrenching sobs, as she clung tightly to her sister in the wake of the duke’s abrupt departure. “You did not need to do that. Indeed, you should *not* have done that.”

Joanna smiled into her sister’s shoulder. “Why, were you desperate to marry him?”

“Heavens, no!” Nancy shook in Joanna’s arms. “I would have died, I am quite certain of it, but... I cannot bear the thought of... I could never have asked you to... Oh, Joanna, what will you do?”

“Become a duchess, I expect,” Joanna replied softly. “And you did not have to ask; there is nothing I would not do for you. I have managed Father’s tempers and foibles for four-and-twenty years—I shall have no trouble managing this duke. If I am fortunate, he shall adopt Papa’s immunity to my voice, and I shall forge a new deafness when it comes to my husband’s. We shall enjoy a marriage of silence and discomfort, avoiding one another wherever possible.”

Nancy pulled back, her teary eyes widening in alarm. “But, you will be forced to leave us. You will have to live in a residence far from here. What if he does not allow you to see us? What if he forbids you from seeing your friends? What if he prohibits you from attending society events? What if...” They were all things that the girls’ own father had prevented their mother from doing, but Joanna was not their mother.

“What if all is well?” Joanna said, sounding more confident than she felt.

In truth, she was terrified. All her life, since she had first become aware of the distance and coldness between her mother and father, she had vowed that she would not shrink into a tiny whisper of who she really was, molding herself to fit what her husband demanded in the futile hope that, if she was quiet enough and soft enough and obedient enough, he might someday love her. Her mother had done all of that, losing more of her sparkle year after year, yet her father had never shown anything more than toleration of his wife. No gentleman would make Joanna meek and submissive, nor would she accept philandering in her marriage—not of the one-sided kind, anyway.

*If both are free to seek love beyond the marriage because it is only a marriage of convenience, that is a different matter,* she mused, her heart breaking for her mother, who had always adored the man she married. Perhaps, if she had been allowed to seek affection elsewhere, Joanna's mother might have been happy, instead of a nervous shell of a woman who always looked around the room before speaking, in case she annoyed her husband accidentally.

“What if he hurts you?” Nancy's voice hitched. “He is handsome, yes, but he is such an alarming gentleman. Why, when he looks at you, it is as if a terrible draft has slithered into the room. I have never encountered someone so cold.”

*You are perceptive, sister, even without knowing what I do.*

Joanna brushed a tear-dampened strand of hair, plastered to Nancy's cheek, behind the younger woman's ear. “I can protect myself, dearest Nancy. I learned a great deal, brawling with the boys from the village when I was a child. I have not forgotten how to throw a punch and mean it,” she assured, her heart lurching. “And I shall ask Papa to give Pegasus to me as a wedding gift, so that, if I find I must escape, I can ride swiftly home and hide away where the duke shall never find me.”

Pegasus was a white stallion that had been purchased several years ago for the Marquess to ride, but the beast was headstrong and half-wild, and would not listen to the instruction of Joanna's father, nor anyone who attempted to control him. Even the stablemaster said that the resplendent creature could never be broken, but when Joanna had gone into the paddock one evening, drawn to the beautiful horse, Pegasus had shocked everyone by lying down beside her.

From that day onward, no one had been able to ride Pegasus except Joanna. The only difficulty was, she had to do so in secret whenever her father went to London, for he had strictly forbidden it. He claimed the creature was too dangerous, but Pegasus had never done anything to make Joanna feel unsafe. Instead, he helped her to feel free, and that was something she suspected she might lack when she journeyed to the duke's residence.

“Oh, Joanna,” Nancy sighed, pulling her sister into another desperate

embrace, for their lives were about to be turned upside down. And if the duke returned with the special license, it would not be long before the women were separated, far sooner than either had anticipated. “Why do you think he wishes to marry so quickly? I cannot fathom that part.”

Joanna had considered the same question since the duke’s departure, but no clear answer would come to her. “I shall have to ask him once I have grown accustomed to his chilling company. I suppose he does not want the fuss of courting and a lengthy engagement and all of the rigmarole that comes with announcements and society’s judgment. Quite sensible, in a way, for the procedures of ordinary marriage can be rather tiresome. I have only observed such rites and rituals from the edge of a ballroom, and I have often felt myself yawning.”

“You always yawn at balls,” Nancy remarked, laughing a little. Just as Joanna had hoped she might.

“Then, perhaps it shall not be such an awful thing if my darling husband decides I am not to be seen in society anymore.” Joanna chuckled but her stomach churned, thinking of all the parts of marriage that polite society did not speak of, yet were rife within her tomes of ancient Greece and Rome.

*The duties no one mentions...* She shivered, already conjuring excuses that might keep the duke away from her bedchamber. But she could not cease thinking of one other reason why he might wish to be married so urgently: the creation of an heir. Perhaps he was unwell and knew his time was running out. If that were the case, there would be no way to keep him away from her.

Just then, the sound of warring voices snapped her out of her worrisome reverie. Her mother and father were out in the entrance hall, and, for the first time in Joanna’s life, it appeared that her mother was refusing to be meek and silent.

“I brought Joanna into this world, and I will not hand her over to a wretched creature who might take her life because he does not like the way that she folds her napkin at dinner or is irritated by the way she sneezes! There is no smoke without fire, Nicholas, and every last one of my friends and acquaintances sought to warn me of this duke! And *that* was simply because they thought they saw you speaking with him! You will not do this, Nicholas.

You will not give my daughter to that beast. I shall not permit it, even if I must lock her in her chambers and stand guard over the door until this absurdity has passed!”

“Hold your tongue!” Joanna’s father shot back. “You will not speak in such an uncouth manner to me in my home, nor will you decide what is right for *our* daughters.”

“I have held my tongue long enough,” her mother replied. “Perhaps, if I had held it less, you would not think that you could do such an awful thing without consequence. I do not care a jot if I have a duchess for a daughter, if *that* is the duke she is paired with. You will not give her to him. He can fetch his special license, but he shall not be marrying my Joanna!”

Joanna and Nancy exchanged a shocked look, for they had never heard their mother speak so defiantly. Indeed, neither of them had ever heard their mother raise her voice at all.

“What are they talking about, Joanna?” Nancy whispered, trembling. “What does Mama mean about being warned?”

Joanna put her finger to her lips to quieten her sister.

“Joanna is four-and-twenty, Fanny!” the Marquess replied sharply. “If she does not wed the Duke of Bruxton, who else will have her? It is your hesitance that has rendered her a spinster. It is because I have heeded your previous requests to wait that she is almost unmarriageable. Do not argue with me any longer, or I shall journey to London within the hour.”

“Very well, go to London!” Joanna’s mother shot back. “See what your mistresses and paramours think of this abhorrent situation. I am certain that they shall agree with me!”

Silence strained out in the entrance hall, so quiet that the sisters could have heard a pin drop. Their mother had stepped too far over the line, and Joanna could not have been prouder. It was certainly time that her father was held accountable for his behavior, but as the silence stretched on, she sensed that her mother’s resolve might be close to buckling.

“You were intending to offer Nancy,” their mother said quietly, most of her bluster gone. “So, do not pretend it is because Joanna is four-and-twenty. Do

not pretend that you would not have given Nancy if Joanna had not intervened. You are a coward, Nicholas. You see something shiny that can be of benefit to only you, and you pursue it. You have always been that way. So, do not insult me by saying this is in anyone's interest but yours."

The soft thud of footsteps retreated, followed by the creak of the staircase; Joanna's mother, walking away from the first argument she had engaged in for decades. And though she had fought rather valiantly, it appeared that the battle was over. Thirty years of shrinking herself had left her wedged in a box she could not spring free from, and when it mattered, she could do nothing to protect the one good thing that had come from her marriage: her children. She had made herself too small and too weak to truly fight back.

"Joanna?" Nancy urged. "What did Mama mean about a warning?"

"Just empty rumors, dearest Nancy. Nothing too concerning," Joanna lied, forcing a smile.

*And nothing that matters now. It is done, Joanna knew. My fate is sealed.*

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**Thank you very much!**

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Born and raised in Pennsylvania by a mother of British ancestry, it is no wonder Sally developed a love for British culture. An avid reader since she was a child, it wasn't long until she stumbled onto the Regency classics, and the rest is history.

A couple of years and a Creative Writing degree later, Sally has truly found her calling. She is rarely found without a book in her hand, but when she isn't reading or writing, she likes taking walks in nature, traveling and spending quality time with her very own happily-ever-after, her wonderful family of four.

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