




Cobalt Fairy
PUBLISHING

The Broken Duke


WHEN A DUKE VOWS
SERIES

SCARLETT
OSBORNE

THE BROKEN DUKE

A STEAMY REGENCY ROMANCE



SCARLETT OSBORNE



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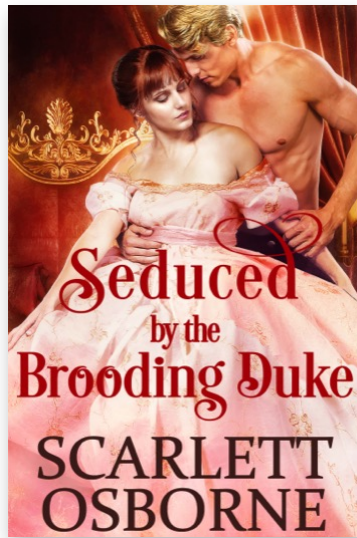


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With love and appreciation,

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ABOUT THE BOOK

“Everything I love gets destroyed. I will never let that happen to you.”

Secluded by choice, Duke Richard denounces love. Until a kiss in the dark with a mysterious woman awakens in him a fire he had long thought dead. And now, he cannot get her out of his mind...

The only thing Teresa dislikes about being a spinster is the lack of ... pleasure. When her plan to experience it goes awry though, her lips end up burning with the Duke's touch. And she knows she is in trouble!

For when an insistent suitor tries to claim Teresa, her tryst with the Duke turns into a fake courtship. But as desire threatens to turn into more, Richard must face the ugly truth: Love is not an option for him. Not if he wants to keep Teresa safe...

PROLOGUE



If Richard Longman, cursed heir to the blasted Duke of Beaumont, knew one thing, it was this: he did not deserve his friends. He did not deserve them at their worst—which typically meant “exam time,” when Joseph would be overset with nerves, Seth would be annoyingly full of confidence that was, even more annoyingly, always rewarded, and Percy would just be testy. And he even more certainly did not deserve them at their best.

As he watched a *very* drunk Seth argue with a somehow even drunker Joseph, Richard had to admit that maybe this wasn’t their *best*, per se, but it *was* highly entertaining.

“S’not *safe*,” claimed Joseph, the future Duke of Cullton, as he looked up at the new ride at this year’s iteration of the St. Giles Fair, an Oxford tradition.

The machine was called an “up and down,” and did, more or less, just what the name advertised. It was a large pole, from which several carriages, each big enough to hold two or three people, extended. The carriages dangled, rather than being fixed in place, so when the team of burly men who had been employed to turn the crank that got the machine going applied their force, the carriages remained upright even as they twisted around and around the large pole.

It was rather like a large wheel, and Richard, who had also had more than his fair share of ale this evening, felt a bit queasy looking at it.

“Of course, it is,” scoffed Seth, the future Duke of Dowton.

No matter how much Seth drank, his words never seemed to slur. It was one of those things that made Seth *Seth*. He seemed to have a charmed way of walking through the world, but you couldn't help but love him for it, anyway.

Nearby, their final friend, Percy, future Duke of Haddington, was staring intently at the machine, as if it bore some secrets he could divine if only he glared hard enough. He, too, needless to say, was quite deep in his cups.

“People are not birds,” Percy muttered darkly.

Seth ignored him. “Look,” he said to Joseph, gesturing broadly with an arm. “There are ladies aboard the thing. Are you saying you haven't the bravery of a lady?”

Joseph squeezed one eye closed to look at the ride and then back at Seth. “I don't think those are ladies,” he said.

That was... probably true. While St. Giles Fair was not entirely proper in the daytime, it was pronouncedly improper after dark, and the sun was likely nearer to rising than setting at that point. Over the past several years, it had moved gradually away from the well-to-do event that, it was told,

Queen Elizabeth had once attended, and into something decidedly less genteel.

No well-bred lady who would have been raised since birth to safeguard her reputation like the most precious jewel would be found within a mile of the raucous debauchery taking place tonight.

The crowd was loud and well-liquored, and Richard had never seen lower-cut gowns in all his days. The vibrant energy of the fair, as well as the cover of darkness, had emboldened many of the country misses in attendance tonight, and the four friends had enjoyed continual flirtations with a number of pretty girls. Well, Joseph had likely endured more than enjoyed the flirtations. But it had still been a great deal of fun for all.

Richard had never been able to identify what the precise balance brought about the feeling he sometimes got, that he was observing his group of friends from the outside, the way the master of natural sciences had kept that awful baby mouse preserved in a jar in the lecture Richard had had the misfortune of attending.

When the feeling came upon him, he wasn't sure if he was the mouse, frozen and staring out at those living around him, or the scientist, peering in and trying, but always failing, to understand. If he'd known what brought it about, he would have done whatever it took to avoid letting the feeling overtake him, because with the feeling came the knowledge that he had learned at his father's knee.

The Longman line was rotten to its core, and Richard was rotten right along with it.

Most of the time, he got by without reckoning with that truth in his daily life. He got up, went to his lectures—well, sometimes—dined and talked and caroused with his friends, kept up a regular correspondence with his mother to ensure she was well, and generally got on with things. Most of the time, he could pleasantly pretend he didn't have a father, didn't have wretchedness lurking in his blood.

But sometimes, it snuck up on him, that ghoul with his father's voice, who whispered, "You can never be like them, Richard."

"*Women*," Seth was allowing with the air of someone granting a great favor. "There are, you have to admit, *women* on the up and down."

"There are..." Joseph said doubtfully. "But it still seems very dangerous..."

When the feeling came over Richard, he found himself longing to gather his friends to him even as he was certain he would never be able to hold on to them tightly enough. The agonizing tension between those two situations—between what he wanted but couldn't have—made him angry, if he allowed himself to steep in it.

And no matter what happened, Richard could not permit himself to grow angry.

"You can't say you are less brave than a woman!" Seth's voice was getting that tone that suggested he was arguing less to win and more to needle Joseph. Percy was still glowering at the contraption like it had personally wronged him.

“Country girls are very strong of fortitude,” Joseph protested. “And perhaps less protective of their lives, given that they’re on that thing.”

Shrieks of delight echoed from the up and down, and Seth pointed at them emphatically.

“See?” he said. “Fun.”

From his position behind the bubbled glass of his poor mood, Richard didn’t note what argument, in the end, convinced Joseph. And he wouldn’t remember, later, what ultimately prevented them from ever boarding the up and down. Was it a jammed gear? One of the riders losing their supper? The men who turned the thing growing too tired?

Richard wasn’t sure he’d ever know.

All he would recall—the next morning, the next week, over the years to come when he and his friends would look back on their university days—was the effort it had taken to keep a smile plastered on his face.

Because his friends could never, ever know about the demons that haunted him. Not if Richard wanted to keep them in his life.

CHAPTER 1



“*W*hy are we here?” whined Seth Baxton, the Duke of Dowton, for the umpteenth time.

Richard Longman, the Duke of Beaumont, rolled his eyes and didn’t even bother to look at his friend. Instead, he gazed placidly at the whirling skirts on the dance floor in front of him as the assembled members of the ton made their way through a waltz.

“Will you shut up?” he asked without heat. “People are watching.”

People were *always* watching when Richard and Seth, the last two unmarried members of the group known as the Four Dukes, attended a Society event. The group had always attracted attention, enough to gain them that stupid, unimaginative moniker. Four young, attractive dukes who happened to all be friends with one another? It was the sort of thing that matronly gossips lived for.

Then, Percy Dunn, the Duke of Haddington, had gone off and had gotten married. This was a disaster, though through no fault of Percy’s Duchess, Marina, whom Richard quite liked. Marina was witty, charming, and spent half her time positively

bedeviling Percy, which was, to Richard's mind, exactly what his stubborn friend deserved.

But watching one of the Four Dukes—who had previously shown no inclination toward matrimony—marry, and worse, *marry for love*, had sent the ton talking.

The conditions then had been almost tolerable. One out of four was a fluke, after all. The wagging tongues made a meal over the lovelorn looks Percy wore every time he gazed at his new wife and then resigned themselves to disappointment over the other three.

But then, Joseph had to go bollocks the whole thing up by *not only* marrying for love but by making *a dramatic bloody proclamation* of that love in front of half of the aristocracy as he broke up the would-be wedding of his beloved. Even worse than that, the original groom had revealed himself, in dramatic fashion, to be Joseph's illegitimate half-brother, which had led to a brawl in the church.

And *even worse* than *all of that*, if such a thing could be countenanced, was that Seth and Richard hadn't even been there to see it.

Percy and Marina had, though, and they had never shut up about it. Not even the recent birth of their twins had stopped the pair from crowing about, in their words, “the best show of the year.”

Joseph and his new Duchess, Louisa, would be back from their honeymoon any day now, and when they returned, Richard was going to have words with his friend.

Because one of the Four Dukes getting married was a fluke, but two was a pattern. And now the matchmaking mamas watched Richard and Seth like hawks, eager to see which one of them would fall next.

It was *not* going to be Richard.

Not that Seth seemed in any danger of falling himself, either. Richard prayed his friend would remain stalwart, as he could not fathom that being the final unmarried Fourth Duke would be any more comfortable than being one of two remaining, which was already bad enough.

And Richard could not marry. Richard could not ever marry.

But that kind of bad thinking was a path Richard no longer allowed himself to go down. His past was his past, and that was a closed door. A locked door. Nailed shut and barricaded with heavy, immovable objects.

Seth, to Richard's left, did not heed Richard's warning against eager ears, instead keeping up his complaint. "Surely you realize this place is not *for* us, Beaumont," he said, following—in public, at least—the aristocratic habit by which a gentleman referred to his familiars via their titles. "This kind of place is only for gentlemen looking to appease their wives—or acquire a wife they will later have to appease. In other words, *not us*."

Seth raised his voice slightly on this last part, though not enough to be obvious. Maybe his friend was mindful of their

audience, Richard considered mildly. That would be just like him. Seth was wily.

“We are here,” Richard said, answering Seth’s original question, “because this is Rylant’s wife’s first ball, and he wants it to be a success for her, and we’ve known him since we were at Eton. Thus, we are being good friends.”

The Four Dukes had never been particularly close to Lord Rylant, a jovial man who made friends everywhere he went, hence the crush at his new wife’s first event as hostess, but attending a ball was not a very big favor, either.

“Being a good friend is *boring*,” grumbled Seth. “I already have you three. What do I need more friends for?”

Richard declined to answer this. “Shut up,” he said instead.

Seth, being Seth, did not shut up. “You’re at dire risk of becoming boring, too. Did you know that, Beaumont? And you don’t even have the excuse of a missus. Hell, Percy and Marina are more exciting than you, and they’ve got the wee ones.”

Privately, Richard thought that Percy and Marina only did exciting things out in the ton because of their wee ones, who, though not even yet a year old, were absolute hellions who drove their parents to distraction.

Percy and Marina were very attentive parents, particularly for members of the aristocracy, and their nights out, when they gratefully left the children home with their nursemaids and got

to discuss something other than naptimes and feeding schedules, were sacred to them.

Seth continued. “Do you know what you need?”

“I am sure,” said Richard dryly, “that you are going to tell me.”

“Your problem,” Seth went on, “is abstinence.”

Richard had spent this conversation looking placidly out at the ballroom—it was never good to encourage Seth’s antics by paying them attention. But at this comment, he turned sharply to look at his friend.

This reaction was mild compared to that of an elderly matron, who whipped around so quickly that her silver curls bobbed around her face. “My word!” she exclaimed, aghast, as she fluttered her fan furiously in front of her face.

“My apologies, My Lady,” said Seth, sounding not the slightest bit contrite.

The woman stomped off toward the lemonade table in a huff, and Seth went on as if the interruption had never occurred.

“Your problem,” Seth repeated as Richard stared at him, wondering, not for the first time and likely not for the last either, how on earth he had ended up with this lunatic as one of his best friends, “is that you have this mad idea that you

need to... restrict yourself somehow. I don't understand it. You do know you're a duke, right?"

"Seth," Richard gritted out. "Shut up."

He now regretted all the times he had told Seth to shut up when he didn't really mean it, as it diluted the meaning now, when he absolutely, positively meant it.

Seth didn't even blink at the admonishment. "I'm not saying that you need to engage a mistress. I can understand your hesitation in that regard, certainly. The whole financial aspect does make the thing seem rather more sordid, doesn't it? One can hardly fault the ladies, of course—the world is not kind to a woman alone." His tone had taken on a musing quality as if it were a perfectly normal thing to consider the place of the female sex in society in the same conversation as encouraging Richard to indulge in a liaison.

He shook his head. "No, not their fault at all. And I daresay that a tightly-wound thing like yourself, who hasn't known the touch of a woman in—good Lord, Richard, how long *has* it been?—is not ready to plunge fully into the experience of having a mistress. No, that's not it at all."

"Would. You. Stop. Talking?" Richard growled.

Now, another matron, this one with snow-white hair and an astonishingly ugly adornment pinned to her hair that Richard supposed was meant to resemble a bird, was looking at them with disgust.

“But that’s what widows are for!” Seth crowed happily. “It’s marvelous, really. All you have to do is find yourself a young—or even not that young, as a more mature lady does know her business, which is a fine experience for all—widow who has her own money and isn’t looking to attach herself to a man for longer than a bit of pleasure takes. As long as you ensure that it’s good for her, as well, it’s practically a good deed. Women have needs, too, you know, Richard—and the world does not offer them many ways to satisfy them, either while their husbands are alive or after they’re gone. Egad, would you listen to me? Next thing you know, I’ll be agitating for the rights of women. Mary Wollstonecraft would quite approve. Though I do believe she died...”

Out of sheer self-preservation, Richard had no choice but to tune his friend out. He wondered if anything short of outright murdering Seth would get him to cease his inane prattle.

Likely not.

Still, Richard was enjoying the mental image of jamming a very large sock into Seth’s mouth—where he got a sock in a ballroom or why the sock was so large did not feature in the fantasy—when he was jostled sharply. Someone knocked into Seth, Seth knocked into Richard, and Richard knocked into a potted tree that, for whatever reason, was featured in this ballroom.

And, blessedly, Seth stopped talking.

“What on earth was that?” Richard asked after he had righted both himself and the indoor foliage.

Seth had his hand in his pocket, and Richard watched with passive interest as his friend removed both his hand and a small square of paper.

“What’s that?” Richard repeated as his friend unfolded the paper, ran his eyes across its contents, smirked, and put it back in his pocket.

“Nothing,” Seth said, the hint of a smile still playing about his lips.

Richard rolled his eyes but didn’t press the matter. There was no point. Seth might delight in needling his friends, and he might be a bit of a rake, but he wasn’t the kind of man to get into anything sordid or dangerous. The note was probably just part of some flirtatious game the man was playing with some lady or another—he was *always* in the midst of some flirtatious game.

Richard figured that if he just waited, he would find out anything he needed to know—which, hopefully, would not be very much. He didn’t need to hear any of the details about Seth’s romantic exploits.

Sure enough, Richard only had to wait a few moments more before Seth spoke up again.

“Say now,” he said in that too-innocent tone that suggested that he was absolutely up to something. “You say you want to stay at this ball, correct?”

Wanting to stay was likely overstating things, but Richard knew better than to get into a semantic argument with Seth. “I do,” he confirmed.

“And you cannot be convinced to go to a very pleasant club where we might encounter one of the very accommodating widows I mentioned earlier?” Seth prompted.

“I cannot,” Richard confirmed.

“In that case,” continued Seth, sounding annoyingly pleased, “would you consider perhaps going to a different *room* of this ball? The library, perhaps? The atmosphere in here is *so* stuffy, after all, and I am positively *parched*. Care for a drink?”

Richard narrowed his eyes. The thing with Seth wasn’t so much avoiding the traps—that was impossible; the more you resisted, the wilier he became—as it was letting yourself get sucked into the traps that you didn’t mind getting sucked into. This one, for example, sounded relatively harmless. And Richard *could* do with a drink.

“Very well,” he sighed.

Seth grinned. “Splendid. You go ahead, and I’ll meet you there shortly.” He made a gentle shooing gesture. “Go on, now.”

Richard went, feeling pleased with himself for identifying a straightforward trick.

If Seth was trying to get Richard out of the ballroom, it was likely so that he could sneak off to meet whoever had slipped him that note. Richard could say plenty about his friend's rakishness—namely, that he wished Seth would curb those tendencies, as Richard felt sure they would one day return to bite Seth in the arse—but he could not fault the man for the care he took to safeguard the identities of the ladies with whom he dallied.

Richard would never speak out to sully a lady's reputation, and Seth knew as much, and yet, his friend still took care with his privacy.

But it wasn't Seth's protectiveness over his paramours that made Richard feel so happy as he headed off toward the library. No, his primary source of pleasure was the knowledge that if Seth was attending to his own romantic liaisons, he wouldn't be trying to ensnare Richard in any affair of the kind. And a romance was the very last thing Richard needed.

* * *

Miss Teresa Norman, daughter to the late Viscount of Dorshire and sister to the present Viscount of Dorshire, paced around the darkened library in uncharacteristic agitation.

Well, of course, she would be experiencing uncharacteristic feelings, she chided herself, hands balled into fists. She was behaving with uncharacteristic ludicrousness!

At twenty-five years of age, Teresa was no longer considered so much a *young lady* as simply a *lady*... to her face, at least. Behind closed doors—or behind cupped hands, if the speaker was less polite—she was a spinster, and that was that. But

spinsterhood didn't have to be unenjoyable, and Teresa had a plan to make it as fun as possible.

It was a sound plan if Teresa did say so herself. This was good, because a sound plan was important for a lady in the comfortable, albeit societally incomprehensible, status of spinsterhood. It was, after all, a plan that had gotten her so firmly on the shelf in the first place, after all. For Teresa knew what marriage could do to a woman...

But there was no sense dwelling on such things, Teresa told herself as she paced nervously in the library. She didn't need to worry about the perils of marriage when she had no intention of getting married. Just because she intended to remain unmarried, however, didn't mean that she intended to self-impose a lifelong ban on the pleasures of marriage.

No, indeed. For, in the Season of her twenty-fifth year, while the ton was distracted by its own plumage and the jockeying for power that came either on the marriage mart or in the hallowed halls of Parliament, Teresa Norman intended to have a *love affair*.

Or, well, no. She intended to have an *affair*. Love would *not* come into it.

Teresa did not abide by the kind of romantic notions that proliferated in dramatic stories that were best read while tucked up in bed on a moody, stormy night. She enjoyed reading about mad capers and passionate declarations as much as the next person, but fortunately, she was sensible enough to know that these things were the purview of books, not real life. In the real world, love was rare, and marriage was for the combination of assets and social connections, not for anything so fragile as sentiment.

She also did not abide by the moralistic notions held up by the old biddies of the ton, who were more likely to turn their nose up at you as they were to look you in the eye like an equal. Physical liaisons did not have to be restricted to the confines of holy matrimony. And a woman was no less valuable for having experienced extramarital sex.

Which was very good for Teresa, indeed, as she had recently begun to experience... longings. Longings and curiosity.

So, she had hatched a plan.

She had watched, and she had listened. Teresa was very good at watching and listening, because—and honestly, this was one of the great blessings of Teresa's life—nobody ever noticed a spinster. If she held a teacup in her hand and looked at it intently, she might as well be a statue or a bit of wallpaper, which meant that the matrons of the ton would let loose gossip they were not meant to reveal to unmarried young ladies. Or even unmarried young-ish ladies.

After many, many cups of watery and often lukewarm tea, Teresa had discovered that, when it came to unrepentant rakish behavior, one name was bandied around and around: Seth Baxton, the Duke of Dowton.

What the Duke of Dowton lacked as a suitable partner—one of the legendary Four Dukes was hardly ideal for an illicit liaison that one hoped to *keep* illicit, especially when he was as frequent a topic of gossip as was the Duke of Dowton—he more than compensated for in other ways.

“His Grace is quite... gifted,” Lady Bandford had whispered to her friends at a garden party, several weeks past, while Teresa had feigned interest in a perfectly ordinary bush.

One of her conversational partners had gasped in shocked delight. “Oh, Delia,” she exclaimed. “You never!”

“I did,” Lady Bandford replied, her voice smug. “And do let me tell you. The rumors are *all* true. It was the perfect way to celebrate the end of mourning for my dear, departed husband.”

“May he rest in peace,” murmured one of the ladies.

“Indeed,” countered Lady Bandford. “But I am still alive, and I daresay that I have never felt *more* alive than when in the Duke of Dowton’s arms!”

The group had drifted away, then, leaving Teresa behind. But it was no matter, she thought, crushing the fragrant leaves between her fingers. They’d given her the information she needed.

And then, at other parties, other ladies had echoed this information.

The Duke of Dowton, everyone said, was absolutely *terrible* (this bit was always said in whispers that were accompanied by twittering feminine laughter). He never kept up with one woman for more than a few weeks. He’d left a trail of broken hearts behind him, the rumors said.

Teresa was not worried about that part; she did not intend to engage her heart in any part of her plot. She was, however, far more interested in the next bit of the conversation, during which voices grew even more hushed and furtive glances were cast over shoulders.

Seth Baxton, the Duke of Dowton, was reportedly *marvelous* at bedsport.

To Teresa's chagrin, nobody ever offered further details about what it meant to be marvelous at bedsport, or what it was about the Duke of Dowton that made him so accomplished. A little suspense wasn't terrible, she rationalized. She would have *preferred* more information, to be certain, but she could work with what she had.

With her target secured, Teresa had waited for the perfect opportunity to present itself—which it finally had.

A *frisson* of excitement had traveled through her when she'd realized that the Duke of Dowton was in attendance at Lady Rylant's ball. Though she'd nearly balked three times, she'd gathered her courage, bribed a footman to provide her with a pen and paper, and then bribed the servant again to slip the note summoning the aristocrat to the dark library into the Duke's pocket.

Good thing Kenneth is generous with my pin money.

She continued to pace. She hadn't factored in how much bribery would be needed for her scheme.

No matter how much planning she had done, however, she was a bit astonished with herself for going through with it. Her brazenness was alarming, but also a bit delicious. She shivered in anticipation as her long minutes of waiting stretched on.

In her mind, she rehearsed the next steps: when he entered, she would greet him with a kiss so that the Duke of Dowton would know she was serious, and not some missish shrinking violet. Then, she would make her proposition. Three experiences with passion, that's what she desired.

This number was the result of a very careful consideration. One time, she considered, was not enough, because she would no doubt be nervous. Besides, she had heard maids talk and knew that one's first experience was not always overwhelmingly pleasant. Two times would also be insufficient because she might be so overcome by sensation now that the experience *was* overwhelmingly pleasant that she wouldn't have time to pay attention to the details. She felt certain, however, that she would have regained her wits by the third time.

Four was obviously too many, as that suggested a *relationship*.

She felt confident this plan would appeal to the Duke. He, too, did not seek a lasting attachment, and though he was reputed to have many qualities, an excess of choosiness was not one of them.

"It's a good plan," Teresa whispered to herself. She pivoted on her heel for what had to have been the thousandth time and paced back across the room.

Just then, she heard the creak of the library door as it opened, and a faint glimmer of light entered, revealing a tall form in the doorway.

Teresa's eyes had adjusted to the dim of the library, which was illuminated by a fire that had been banked so well that it was barely more than embers, so she blinked into the sudden increase in light, dim though it was. She turned to face the entering Duke.

"Hello?" he called into the dark room as the whisper of her skirts against the floor met his ears. Teresa took one last steadying breath.

Hmm, he's broader than I realized.

"Is anyone there?"

She didn't answer his question. Instead, before she could do something idiotic like talk herself out of her plan, she strode forward, threw her arms around the Duke's neck, and kissed him square on the mouth.

The Duke let out a muffled sound of shock as Teresa kissed his mouth, trying to enact the things she had only read about in books. She didn't want to keep her mouth too tightly puckered; this was meant to be an audition showcasing her skills as a potential lover, not an embrace from one's least favorite great aunt. As she hastened to amend her technique, however, she had the distinct sense that she was doing it wrong.

Was she meant to be getting so much of his cheek?

Her doubts intensified when the Duke pulled away. Lord, why had she thought this was a good idea? She braced herself for the humiliation that was certain to come.

Instead, though, the Duke let out a low chuckle that somehow thrilled her even more than the kiss had. “Well, hello there,” he said, voice raspy. Ooh, that was thrilling, too. “That’s quite the greeting, sweetheart, but do allow me to show you how it’s really done.”

Then, he wrapped his arms around her, one clutching her about the waist and the other threading through her hair, and planted his mouth solidly on hers.

Instantly, Teresa knew she *had* been doing it wrong because whatever she had been doing, it paled in comparison to this. She couldn’t say how, precisely, it differed because that was the last coherent thought in her mind. Because how was she supposed to think about anything when she could *feel* everything?

The Duke’s mouth against hers was soft, warm and welcoming, the sensation of his lips a contrast to the hard planes of his body as he tugged her against him. His arm, likewise, was strong and supportive about her waist, clutching her in a way that made her feel safe to melt against him.

And melt she did. As his mouth moved, deepening their kiss, Teresa felt as though her body was inhabited by some strange force, a force that did not wish for her legs to support themselves. When his tongue darted from his mouth to caress

her lower lip, her legs gave up entirely, and it was only his hold that kept her upright.

It was *marvelous*.

Teresa understood, now, what those ladies had been talking about.

She had never felt so much, had never been so aware of every part of her own body. She had never considered, for example, that there was a texture to a man's cheek even if he'd had a recent shave. Pressing her hand to the Duke's cheek, however, she felt a sense not that there *was* any stubble there, but the clear feeling that there *had been* stubble there and *would be* again. She didn't understand how that could be, but felt certain of it, nonetheless. She also didn't know how such a sensation could be enjoyable. Yet, it was.

She also didn't fully understand how kissing, an activity that she had always presumed would primarily occupy one's mouth, perhaps with a bit of assistance from hands, in the case of grabbing faces and whatnot, could consume her entire body. But as she stood there, kissing the Duke, she found that the heat that spread from his kiss soon consumed all of her, with a tight feeling low in the pit of her stomach as a particular nexus of sensation.

The sensation wasn't bad. On the contrary, it was alarmingly good. But—and this was, Teresa felt, the crucial distinction—it was not part of the *plan*. She was not meant to *feel things* until their second romantic encounter. She had mapped out the whole thing!

Teresa found herself torn between the addictive marvel of the Duke's mouth on hers and the growing realization, which poked its head out from behind the overwhelm of her pleasure-addled senses, that perhaps she was in over her head. The thought nudged her, then nudged her again.

Wait. Wait! What was she *doing*?

With a gasp, Teresa wrenched herself backwards. The Duke released his hold on her instantly, though a significant part of her wished he hadn't. It was a balmy spring night, but even so, Teresa felt a sudden chill in all the places where the Duke had been touching her.

"Oh," she sputtered. "I—ah—"

Teresa Norman was not often at a loss for words. She prepared and she planned and she plotted to avoid that very fate. Life was challenging enough for women as it was, she frequently reasoned. Preparation was half the battle.

And yet, somehow, she had entirely failed to plan for the fact that the Duke of Dowton would be so good at kissing that he would make her lose her head. She'd been so busy worrying that he would say no to her proposition that she hadn't accounted for how easy he would make it for her to say yes to him and his embraces.

Well, that would show her, she reprimanded herself, the thought tinged with just a note of hysteria.

"Are you—" the Duke began.

All right. Teresa knew how that sentence ended. *Are you all right?*

The problem was that Teresa wasn't all right. She was... discomposed. And she was not about to let a man, let alone a handsome *discombobulator* of women from Surrey to Southampton, know that he'd had this effect on her.

Or, well, given that that horse was likely already out the gate, she was at least going to try to not show how *badly* he'd had this effect on her.

"Yes, yes," she said quickly, brushing him off.

She had to extricate herself—and quickly. She could still smell him, warm and smoky and masculine. That would simply not do. Better to make a hasty retreat and then reassess the plan later. Except her mind was still too jumbled, half her attention spent stopping her hand from creeping up to caress her recently well-used lips.

So, what came from her mouth were words that would lead her to spend the rest of her night lying awake in bed, castigating herself for sounding like a silly, dramatic heroine out of a novel.

"No one must know," she commanded in a whisper.

And then, just like those silly, dramatic heroines, she fled into the night.

CHAPTER 2



*R*ichard stared at the open library door as though it might impart some answers.

“What,” he said out loud, “on *earth* was that?”

The library door, being a piece of timber with a nicely carved brass handle, of course, did not answer.

Ultimately, though, Richard wasn’t even sure who he was asking. The mystery lady, to be sure—who did such things? Who just—just *accosted* men who were innocently wandering into libraries?

Although, he had to admit grudgingly, he could not think of a nicer way to be accosted. He hadn’t seen much of the mystery lady, not in the darkness of the library. But somehow, the reduced visibility had heightened his other senses. He had taken in the scent of her, like lilacs in the sunshine. He had taken in the murmuring sound of her husky voice, which had instantly caused a thrill of arousal to shoot through his body, even though he had no business feeling such things about a strange woman. He had felt the smooth satin of her skin against him, had felt the warm press of her curves inside the silk of her gown. He had felt the softness of her hair and the

lushness of her form and had been consumed with a mad urge to feel more, more, more of her.

And he had tasted her. Lord, how he had tasted her.

She had tasted like champagne and lemonade, like courage, like a thousand emotions that Richard craved even as he feared to name them.

Which brought him to the second iteration of his question: what on earth was *he* thinking? Because the lady had not been the only one to engage in questionable behavior here tonight. Richard should have stopped the embrace as soon as he had realized what had been happening. He certainly should have let her pull back when she had first attempted to do so. Instead, though, he had—clearly possessed by some sort of demon of bad decisions—grasped the woman and kissed her more.

It was ridiculous! It was insane. It was not the kind of man he was, nor the kind he wished to be.

Richard was not the kind of man who impulsively kissed strangers. Richard was not the kind of man who impulsively kissed anyone—or even did so with much consideration. Hadn't Seth just been lamenting Richard's self-imposed celibacy?

That thought brought Richard up short. *Seth.*

Seth, the bastard, obviously had something to do with this. *Let's meet in the library for a drink*—oh ho, no doubt Seth

thought he was so clever. It couldn't be a coincidence. The timing was just too suspect.

For a second, Richard was horrified at the possibility that he had just embraced one of Seth's paramours, but then shook his head, disregarding the notion. For all Seth was a rake, he didn't disrespect the women with whom he dallied. If he ever left a broken heart behind, it wasn't because he had misled the woman so much as that she hoped, despite Seth's assurances that he did not intend to settle down, that she would be the one to reform the rake. So, no, Seth would not be so unkind to any lady of his acquaintance.

If a lady had hinted at interest in Richard, however, that would be a different story. He did not think Seth would have any compunctions about tricking *him*. Richard had a dozen stories from university—and a dozen further stories that he couldn't tell, given that the friends had been too inebriated to remember the details of various misadventures—to reinforce the notion.

Alas, here was the answer to Richard's question. What on earth had just happened?

Seth had happened.

It was reassuring to feel that he had someone else to blame for the evening's chaos and good to have a plan that didn't involve dwelling on the feel of the mystery lady's lips on his.

Richard stormed out of the library with intent, determined to find his friend and deliver him a strongly worded piece of his mind.

* * *

Richard didn't find Seth, of course.

Seth, slippery as a fish, had no doubt left the ball the instant he had sent Richard up to meet the lady. Richard's ire had mounted as he'd searched the various crowded corners of Rylant House, seeking out that damned difficult Duke of Dowton.

He'd only become more irritable when he'd realized that Seth was gone and had taken himself back home in a proper snit. He spent the night tossing and turning, alternately fuming at his friend and thinking of the crush of the mystery lady's breasts against his chest as he'd clasped her in his arms while they kissed—thoughts that filled him with an altogether different sort of heat.

It was not a restful night.

Altogether this left Richard, by midmorning the next day, in a rather foul mood. His head was muddled, torn between the mire of irritation and the heat of feeling—after a long, long period without experiencing such a thing—the warm press of a woman's lips. These were not the things that Richard needed to think of. He needed to think of the quarterly business reports from his printing press.

It was unusual, to say the least, for a duke to be as immersed in commerce as Richard was. Most of the gentry considered *commercial labor* to be the gauche purview of the lower classes, something to oversee and observe from a distance but never, ever actually *do*. The irony was acute; only due to his

lofty position as a wealthy duke did the ton tolerate Richard's odd preference (as they all saw it) for having a *job*.

If only they knew the whole story, Richard would often think wryly. Because he hadn't started his now-thriving publishing business because he had been an indolent young nobleman in need of a way to pass the time when he hadn't been drinking, gambling, or flirting. No, Richard had gotten into the printing business much for the same reasons as did any other young man: because he'd needed the money.

But that was then, and this was now, he reminded himself as he forced his eyes to return to the columns and rows of numbers, which were written in the cramped, spidery hand of the printing press' foreman. One of their main ink suppliers had recently increased their prices dramatically.

The foreman, a man named Kemp who could stretch a farthing father than any other person Richard had ever known, was of the opinion that Richard ought to find a new supplier. Richard, however, wanted to look at the numbers before making any decisions. Prices went up as times changed, as was the regular order of things. He wanted to make sure that the increase in price really was impacting their profits as drastically as Kemp had implied before he broke ties with a business associate with whom he had worked without problem for many years.

To ensure that, however, Richard had to figure out how to make his dashed eyes focus on the account books which, at present, he could not seem to manage.

He was adding this to his considerable list of grievances when, without warning, the doors to his study burst open and Seth entered, grinning from ear to ear.

“You,” intoned Richard threateningly, standing from his chair and slamming the accounts book shut as he pointed angrily at his friend. “You had better be here to explain yourself.”

“My dear man,” said Seth grandly, dropping into an armchair across from Richard’s desk.

The little nuisance never had feared Richard’s moods, Richard thought sullenly. Seth Baxton was as irrepressible as a swift wind and three times as annoying.

“I am here to allow *you* the chance to explain *yourself*. Namely, why did I not find you at my door first thing in the morning, falling all over yourself to thank me?”

Richard’s jaw dropped. Thank Seth? Of all the audacious things...

“You have a bloody high opinion of yourself,” he accused.

“Thank you,” said Seth with infuriating pleasure. “But that doesn’t really answer my question.”

Richard closed his eyes briefly and breathed slowly in and out through his nose. Really, Seth was fortunate that Richard had had ample reason, in his life, to learn to practice keeping his temper.

Instead of attempting to argue that Seth had done nothing to be thanked for—trying to combat Seth’s logic, Richard had

learned by the age of fourteen, was guaranteed to end only in a headache—he went for the more indisputable facts of the matter.

“I searched for you at the ball,” he pointed out. “But you’d left.”

“Well, of course,” Seth replied as if this were obvious. “What was I supposed to do, hang around unaccompanied to be harangued by any number of matchmaking mothers looking to snare one of the ‘Four Dukes’ for their daughters? Not bloody likely.”

“You’re saying you need a chaperone out in public. My apologies, *Mademoiselle*.”

Seth ignored the jab. “You’re blasted right I do. As the most handsome of the four of us—”

“Lord help us,” muttered Richard.

“—I cannot be left unprotected. I would be besieged by women. Positively besieged. Besides,” Seth added as an afterthought, “I didn’t want you to wallop me.”

Richard had to take another slow, steadying breath. He did love his friend. But he was also familiar with what it felt like when Seth was playing him like an instrument. Seth usually had good intentions, but still, the sensation was not comfortable.

“I still might wallop you,” Richard said. “And yet, you decided to waltz into my home uninvited.”

Seth did not look worried. “I had assumed that by now you had gotten over your little fit of pique and had realized that I have done you a vast favor.”

“A vast—” Richard sputtered in astonishment. “In what world am I meant to consider being sent to a dark room to be leaped upon by some anonymous woman *a vast favor*.”

“One—” Seth held up a finger to illustrate his point. “—every world, man. That’s a favor in every world. Two—” Another finger was added. “—she went through with it, then? Good for her.”

Richard suppressed a growl. “Yes, on that matter,” he gritted out. “How did you manage to get a young lady to waylay me in the library at a very public ball?”

Seth rolled his eyes. “Waylay—God, are you not dramatic? And I didn’t get her to do it—it was all her idea. Didn’t she tell you?”

And there it was: the Seth Baxton trap snapping shut. Because it was at that moment that Richard found himself forced to confess, his teeth clenched around the admission, “We did not do much in the way of talking.”

Seth looked as though his every dream was coming true.

“Why, Your Grace,” he drawled, and, really, Richard *was* going to wallop him if he kept this up. “Do you mean to tell me that you debauched the young lady and then *did not even get her name?*”

“They are going to find your body in a shallow grave,” Richard threatened.

Seth, consumed by delight, did not even seem to register the threat. “Oh, this is too good,” he crowed. “I say, Richard, I shall never again accept even the mildest of disapproving glances when you hear a tale of *my* exploits, let me assure you of that right now. This is incredible—maybe even enough to shut Percy up about the whole debacle with Joseph ruining that wedding.”

“Are you quite through?” Richard asked dryly.

“Not by a nautical mile,” Seth said happily, almost breathlessly. “An anonymous liaison. My word.”

Despite everything, Richard felt a strange compulsion to defend his mystery lady’s honor. “It was not a *liaison*,” he corrected irritably. “It was just a kiss, that was all.”

The words tasted like a lie, not that he would be saying as much to Seth. Not only had it been, at the very least, several kisses, but describing his encounter with the mystery lady as *just* anything felt... wrong.

After all, was something *just* a kiss when it had lit a fire in Richard? Was it just a kiss when he couldn’t stop thinking

about the mystery lady, when he was forced to admit that though her brazen action had led him to act woefully out of character, he had liked it? It wasn't *just* a kiss. It was a kiss *and*. The problem was that Richard didn't know what that *and* was—or if he even wanted to find out.

When Richard surfaced from his thoughts, Seth was grinning at him, a wicked gleam in his eyes.

“What now?” Richard groused.

“Well,” said Seth, drawing out the word in a singsong. “If I didn't know any better, I'd say that you wanted to know the lady's identity.” He let out a heaving sigh. And Seth had the audacity to call Richard dramatic. “If only you knew someone—a wonderful, handsome, rich and witty friend, for example—who could reveal to you the name of this mysterious mademoiselle.”

And then, from his pocket, Seth produced a familiar piece of paper. Richard recalled the crash at the ball and then seeing the same slip of parchment disappear into his friend's pocket. Seth held it tauntingly between two fingers, waving the folded square lightly in Richard's direction.

Everything in Richard's body urged him to lunge for that paper. Fortunately, there was a desk between him and Seth.

“No, thank you,” he forced himself to say politely, instead.

Seth frowned, and Richard, even though he was still quite certain that he was on the losing side of this interaction, felt a

twist of pleasure at surprising his friend.

Richard didn't have any brothers, but he had the suspicion that this was how it felt to finally get one over on the elder brother who had been pranking you all your life. It was a mix of love, exasperation, and an unrelenting desire to pound your opponent into the dust, metaphorically speaking.

“You don't want to know?” Seth asked, his voice dipping to seriousness. “You met with the woman, kissed her—and don't give me that ‘just a kiss’ malarkey, you obviously went beyond a friendly peck—and now don't even wish to know her name? Don't you think that's treating her a bit shabbily?”

Richard felt his temper rise before he could squelch it with deep breaths or any other of the techniques he had developed over the years to avoid letting his emotions get out of hand.

“*I'm* treating her shabbily?” he bit out. “That's a bit rich, don't you think, coming from you? You're the one who set me up to encounter her in the first place.”

Seth's eyes narrowed. “Well,” he said icily, “I had rather imagined that you would conduct yourself with honor. Apparently, I was mistaken.”

Richard ground the knuckles of his right hand into the edge of his desk, the feel of the unyielding wood against his hand helping him stem the rising tide of anger. He wanted to shout at Seth, wanted to rail at him. He resented the implication that he lacked honor—he pressed his knuckles in harder, forcing himself to pause—but he knew that Seth would have similarly resented the implication that he was cruel to women. Richard

had been baiting him. And, yes, Seth had baited him right back. But Richard had to be the bigger man because he was the one who could not risk emotional excesses.

So, instead of letting himself off the leash and saying something he couldn't take back, Richard let the tense silence hang in the room for a moment, until he mastered the atmosphere instead of it mastering him.

“Apologies, Seth,” he said gruffly. “I shouldn't have said that.”

Seth, easily mollified, leaned back in his chair. “Nor should I have done. You have my apologies as well. But,” he added, a serious gleam in his eyes, “I do think you should at least let the woman know who she met in the dark last night.”

Richard sighed, rubbed his temples, and settled back into his hard-backed wooden chair. He felt divided. Part of him desperately wanted to know the identity of the mystery lady. But another part of him worried that, if he knew her real identity, that would make the whole thing, which currently had the aura of a lovely dream, become real.

Still, Seth was right. Richard was a duke. He had an ethical responsibility to do right by those with less authority than him. Annoyingly, for a duke, that meant virtually everyone except the King himself. But if he wished to be better than those who had come before him—and he did wish that, most sincerely—then Richard had to hold himself to that moral standard, even when it was uncomfortable.

“Very well,” he said, holding out his hand. “Let me see it.”

But Seth, being Seth, did not hand over the note. Instead, he unfolded it with a flourish and commenced to read the contents out loud.

“Your Grace,” he read. Then, he looked away from the paper and toward Richard. “I believe she means me,” he clarified.

“Just read the damn thing,” Richard requested wearily.

For once, Seth complied. “Your Grace,” he repeated. “My name is Miss Teresa Norman, daughter of the late Viscount of Dorshire. We do not know one another, but we are similar in one significant account: neither of us wishes to marry. I do not hold, however, that this means that I should be entirely without male companionship throughout the whole of my life. As such, I have a proposition for you. To discuss this proposition in greater detail, please meet me in the library posthaste. Yours, Teresa Norman.”

Seth glanced up. “A postscript follows. ‘I am seeking a gentleman with your reputation for protecting the reputations of his friends, so I trust you will exercise discretion in this matter. Though I consider ladies’ reputations to be a construct primarily designed to limit our activities, I would nevertheless not wish to embarrass my brother, the present Viscount. Thank you in advance for being circumspect. TN.’ That would be for Teresa Norman again, I suspect,” he added pointlessly.

Richard didn’t answer, as he was too busy clutching his head in his hands, trying to think of any single way out of this situation that didn’t make him a complete and utter arse. He could feel the weight of Seth’s eyes on him and struggled to find his voice.

“An *unmarried young lady*,” he croaked eventually. “You sent me up to engage with *an unmarried young lady*?”

Oh goodness, oh Lord, he was a *debaucher*. He was a *ruiner of innocents*. He was a *cad*. He should have gone to the club of dubious morality with Seth; at least there the ladies would have been widows, not gently bred virgins untried in the way of physical affection.

If Richard found out she was a debutante, he was going to throw himself out a window, truly.

“I thought you said you didn’t ‘engage’ with her,” Seth said with a frown, putting suggestive emphasis on the word.

“I didn’t—I mean, not like *that*,” Richard clarified. “But I don’t think it matters when it comes to unmarried young ladies.”

Seth bobbed his head, considering this for a moment. “No, I think it does matter quite a lot, actually.”

“Not if we were caught!” Richard protested. “Her reputation would be in shatters!”

“You weren’t caught,” countered Seth pragmatically. “And she doesn’t care about her reputation—she says so right here.” He waved the note with emphasis as if presenting a piece of key evidence in court.

None of this made Richard feel better. He looked down at the polished leather of his boots, somehow surprised to find them still planted firmly on the ground.

“She thought I was *you*,” he muttered, the idea pricking his pride as much as the notion of ruining a young lady’s chances at marriage—whether she wanted those chances or not—pricked at his sense of duty. “She wanted it to be *you*.”

Seth scoffed at this. “How did you manage to pass your literature courses at university? Your comprehension is dreadful. Listen again.” He opened the note to read it once more. “She writes that we ‘do not know one another,’ and that she seeks ‘male companionship’ and a gentleman who values discretion.” He gave Richard a pointed look. “You are male and hardly likely to go about town nattering to everyone you meet about what happened. Therefore, I daresay you meet her requirements.”

This also did not make Richard feel any better. He let his head *thunk* against the hard wooden back of his chair with a bit more force than he’d intended. Good. He deserved any headache he got. He gazed up at his ceiling, thinking the matter through.

This well and truly was not good.

When he was done thinking, he sat up straight and pointed at Seth. “I am absolutely going to kill you,” he said. “But fortunately for you, you get a head start to start running.”

Seth, entirely unperturbed, gave a crooked smile. “Why’s that, again?”

“Because,” said Richard, feeling the ominous weight of *doing the right thing* once again drape over his shoulders like the world’s ugliest mantle, “I cannot afford to be arrested for murder, not yet. First, I have to go apologize to a very daring, very brazen young woman.”

* * *

The morning after the... unexpected incident in the library, Teresa was feeling neither brazen nor daring. On the contrary, she found herself staring out the window of the breakfast room in her family home, a cup of tea clutched in her hands, wondering how it was possible that this morning looked like every other morning, when it felt so very different.

This was likely how people felt after they’d been struck by lightning.

After all, the effect that the Duke’s kisses had on her had been as unexpected and as powerful as a lightning strike. She felt a bit as though she were wandering around in befuddlement and could not fathom how nobody else seemed to notice.

Well, not Kenneth—she understood that. Kenneth never did seem to notice much beyond whatever mad passion gripped him at any one time or another. Recently, it had been the taxonomy of snails, of all things. The topic was just about the most boring thing that Teresa could imagine, and she hoped that Kenneth would move on to a new interest sooner rather than later.

His preoccupations never lasted long, thank goodness. She hoped the next one would be something more engaging to the

public, like the time he'd read everything he could get his hands on about medicinal herbs. That had been quite fascinating, and the spirited conversations that he had gotten into with Cook on the topic had led to a dramatic improvement in the woman's poultices and tinctures. The whole household had benefitted from that one.

So, no, Teresa was not surprised when Kenneth greeted her with an abstract wave, his nose already buried in a book. That was simply her brother—which was why he needed her around to help keep the estate running. Kenneth's distraction was, for Teresa, a blessing in disguise.

But Teresa's mother, Charity Norman, the Dowager Viscountess of Dorshire, had also not seemed to notice anything amiss with her only daughter. She had merely asked Teresa how she had liked the ball the night prior, and then nodded politely and asked interested questions as Teresa had stumbled through an explanation that did not include the words "library," "rendezvous," or "queer feeling in the pit of my stomach that I've never encountered before but suspect that I would be deeply interested in encountering again."

Instead, the Dowager Viscountess had smiled at her daughter, eaten her breakfast, and then headed off to start her day.

Around Teresa, the maids kept up their sweeping, the footmen waited solemnly to be summoned to duties, and life simply went on as if nothing monumental had happened.

It was, all told, ridiculous.

Except, Teresa told herself as she set down her teacup with a sigh, it wasn't everyone else that was being ridiculous—it was her. She was letting herself get too flustered, too engrossed, and over what? A few kisses from a man that—given his reputation—could have kissed half a dozen other women by now? Pshaw. No more.

With that resolute thought, Teresa set down her (still mostly full) teacup with an unladylike clink against the saucer. She needed to pull herself together.

Her skirts swished purposefully around her feet as she strode off to the office, where she planned to look over the books of the estate and keep up with crucial correspondence, as was her habit after breakfast. It was rather unconventional, but the office had become Teresa's domain, instead of that of the lord of the house. Kenneth, by contrast, could almost always be found in the library.

She entered the office, feeling an odd huff of irritation to find everything perfectly in order, just as she had left it yesterday—just as she left it every day. The recent accounts were stacked neatly in one corner, a pile of incoming mail arranged tidily in its tray. Teresa wanted her desk to be neat, of course—except couldn't *just one thing* be considerate enough to reflect the disarray of her mind?

But that was silliness talking again.

Willfully blocking out any thoughts of mouths, hands, and dark rooms, Teresa turned to a small stack of papers at the center of her desk, atop which sat a note from her brother who—mad though Teresa found the practice—preferred to handle his business matters in the evening. Privately, she suspected

Kenneth did so to avoid going to social engagements, much to their mother's chagrin.

T, the note read. I am inclined to look favorably on the enclosed investment opportunity, but wanted to consult you prior to any decision, in case you see anything amiss. You know how I rely on your good sense. K.

The note filled Teresa with a warm glow—one that, thankfully, had nothing to do with dukes of any ilk. *Rely*. Her brother *relied* on her. And wasn't that what she wanted? Wasn't that the thing that would mean she wasn't just some burdensome, hang-along spinster who uselessly drained household resources?

Certainly, she wanted to experience some of the, ahem, *things* that she might not normally otherwise experience as a spinster. Last night's incident hadn't dissuaded her from that. On the contrary, it had reasserted her commitment to finding a way to engage in some kind of physical pleasure before retreating into her life of unmarried solitude. She would recalibrate her plan and try again—though, she thought, she may set her sights on a less appealing target next time. The Duke of Downton was evidently far too good at games of seduction for her peace of mind.

Happy with the reminder of her purpose and goals, Teresa lost herself in the investment proposal—which, per her brother's instinct, was a sound opportunity to invest in a transportation company that brought necessary goods to remote locales—allowing her mind to become consumed with numbers, profits, and risks.

She became so consumed, in fact, that when a maid gently knocked on the study door sometime later, Teresa jumped so

violently that she nearly upset the bottle of ink she'd been using all over her lap.

“Oh!” she exclaimed. “Come in!”

The maid poked her head around the door. If the servants at Dorshire Manor felt that it was odd that the daughter of the house liked to spend her time nose-deep in expense reports, they kept such thoughts to themselves.

“Begging your pardon, Miss,” said the servant, a girl somewhat younger than Teresa with a shy, London-accented voice. “But there’s a visitor in the drawing room, and Her Ladyship is asking for you.”

“I see,” said Teresa, glancing in dismay at her ink-stained fingertips. “Did she say who it was?”

“I’m afraid not, Miss,” said the maid with a timid dip of her chin.

“No matter,” said Teresa, half to reassure the maid and half because it likely *wasn't* a matter of any concern.

Visitors to the house didn't come for *her*, so if her mother was summoning her, it was likely someone Teresa had known for ages—one of her father's old friends, for example, or one of her aunts, who occasionally came to London. Either way, whoever it was likely already knew about Teresa's odd habits.

Still, she scrubbed at her fingers—albeit with little effect—as she headed back toward the drawing room.

When she arrived, Teresa stopped in surprise. Both her mother and her brother were in the drawing room, but the face of the guest seated therein wasn't a familiar one. But neither was the reedy, fair-haired gentleman entirely unknown to her. She couldn't bring his name to mind, but something about those icy blue eyes tickled her memory.

“Ah, Teresa,” said her mother, rising with the grace of a lady born and bred. Her mother had always been the consummate hostess—the late Viscount had demanded she be so. Charity hadn't lost the habit just because her husband was no longer among the living. “There you are. Do come in. The Earl of Archinton is here to see you.”

Oh, there it was, Teresa thought. Hearing the Earl's name cemented the memory she'd been searching for—and offered another sign of her distraction, as she'd only met the man the night prior. She'd been at the Rylant ball, standing among a group of acquaintances prior to the arrival of the Duke of Dowton that had set her plan in motion.

One of the few effects of spinsterhood that Teresa disliked was that her unmarried status had caused most of her friends amongst the ton to drift away as they married and became consumed with their husbands and children. Teresa didn't take this personally; it wasn't as though she had suffered any great betrayal by any one particular friend. During the early years after her debut, however, she had enjoyed the camaraderie of fellow debutantes and then, in subsequent years, the veterans of the marriage mart with whom she was of an age.

One by one, though, those women had gone off to marry, a few for love, most for other reasons—duty, money, familial obligation. They had, understandably, turned their focus to their new lives while Teresa had remained firmly entrenched in her old one.

She liked it that way, of course, but it was still a disappointment to attend social gatherings without companionship, especially when the younger unmarried ladies saw her as something like an ill omen, as if spinsterhood was catching.

Thus, Teresa had found herself, at the previous evening's ball, hovering at the edges of a group of young ladies, not really included, but not excluded, either. It wasn't unpleasant. She got to hear all the best gossip when nobody paid her any mind.

Except someone *had* paid her mind. The Earl of Archinton had looked at her with that intense look. He'd even asked for an introduction, which one of the ladies present had provided.

Nicholas Hounton, the Earl of Archinton. He was from a well-regarded family with an old title, yet, for whatever reason, wanted to meet *her*. That had piqued Teresa's curiosity briefly, but the Duke of Dowton had arrived shortly thereafter, drawing her attention away from the intense Earl. She'd thought no more of the man.

But here he was. He'd come to her home.

How... odd.

Teresa bobbed a polite curtsy as the Earl stood to greet her with a bow. “Hello, My Lord. It is very good to see you again.”

The Earl smiled, and it lit up his entire face. It wasn't a bad face, Teresa decided. The man was handsome enough when he put his mind to it.

“Miss Norman,” he said kindly. “I'm so pleased that you remember me.”

“Of course, My Lord,” she lied. “How could I forget?”

The Earl's smile widened at the compliment. “How very kind of you, Miss Norman.”

“Teresa,” said her mother, waving an arm to indicate that Teresa should take a seat. “The Earl has come to call on *you*.”

There was a titter of excitement in Charity's voice, which made Teresa suppress an inward wince. No matter how unhappy her own parents' marriage had been, Charity had not ever seemed to understand Teresa's desire to remain unmarried, instead evidently believing her daughter's attitude to be a mask that concealed the disappointment of never having received a proposal. The more Teresa had tried to convince her mother otherwise, the more fretful Charity had become, so Teresa had given up the endeavor.

Teresa looked between the Earl's happy smile, her mother's expression of hope, and Kenneth's—well, Kenneth merely

looked polite and was probably thinking about snails—expression and strove for a suitable reply.

“How nice,” she said. It was the best she could do.

It was also, evidently, sufficient for her mother. “He is here to *court* you, Teresa,” she emphasized.

Teresa blinked in surprise. Wasn’t that... rather fast? She was, it was true, no expert in the matter, but she did tend to think that a gentleman was supposed to follow a certain way of doing things. First, he would call on a lady, get to know her a bit. It was only after a few meetings, after they decided if they suited or not, that he was meant to formally announce his intent to court her.

It wasn’t as though the formal announcement was when the courtship technically began—everyone knew why a gentleman called on an unmarried lady—but being less forthright about the matter gave everyone a respectable reason to save face in the event that the couple did not, in fact, suit. There was nothing the ton liked so much as polite fiction.

That the Earl was charging ahead so rapidly made Teresa instinctively suspicious.

But the Earl merely chuckled, the sound lightly self-deprecating. It was clearly designed to put Teresa at ease—and did, even if she recognized the intent behind the gesture.

“You’ll have to forgive my eagerness, Miss Norman,” said the Earl, a note of apology in his tone. “You must think me getting

dreadfully ahead of myself. Although, I confess”—he dropped his voice a bit lower, as if their conversation were private, even though Kenneth and Teresa’s mother could still hear him quite clearly—“I did find myself quite taken with you when we were introduced yesterday evening. So, I do hope you will regard my irregularity as a compliment.”

Teresa offered him a smile, hoping her tension didn’t show in her expression. It was complimentary, she supposed. Unfortunately, it was a compliment she had no interest in. While she was seeking masculine companionship, and possibly in the form of someone with less charisma than last night’s Duke—and the Earl did certainly fit the bill in that regard, though he was handsome enough—she did not wish to become entangled with someone who had matrimony in mind.

This was why, Teresa thought, as she scrabbled for something to say, surprises were so dreadful. She couldn’t understand why people acted as though the unexpected was delightful. Yes, yes, she supposed there were some good surprises, like when someone brought you a present you hadn’t thought to receive, but, in Teresa’s opinion, that was *also* better served as an anticipated event. That way, one got to enjoy waiting for the present as well as its receipt.

And if there were no surprises in life, then Teresa wouldn’t find herself in a moment like this, where she had to come up with a polite demurrer while the Earl of Archinton gave her a charming, eager smile, and her mother looked at her with an expression that said *it’s finally happening for you, darling!*

And it was because Teresa, a woman who liked to plan, found herself in this moment, this unpleasant surprise dangling its net of thorns over her head, that she further found herself saying something very, very foolish.

She plastered a smile on her face, looked the Earl straight in the eye, and said, “I am so sorry, My Lord, but unfortunately I have already agreed to a courtship with another gentleman.”

And then, before anyone could ask her a single other question, she found herself fleeing a room for the second time in less than a day.

CHAPTER 3



At the door of the Dorshire estate early that afternoon, Richard wondered if he was about to be punched. Miss Norman—it was nice, despite everything, to have a name for his mystery lady, he thought—had mentioned a brother in the note.

And while he highly doubted that the lady in question had disclosed her, er, activities to her brother, he also knew that these kinds of things had a way of coming out—just ask anyone who had ended up leg shackled after being discovered in a compromising embrace. And if Richard had learned that one of his sisters had been manhandled by a cad who hadn't even known her name at the time? Well, he certainly would have punched that man. Probably more than once, if he were telling the truth.

A part of Richard almost looked forward to getting slugged. He likely deserved it. His sense of honor would thank him, even if his face would not.

With a grave sigh, Richard raised his hand and rapped the ornate brass knocker against the door.

A stiff-postured butler answered instantly. “Good morning,” he said in a sepulchral voice. “How may I help you, My Lord?”

Richard reached into his breast pocket to produce his card as the butler opened the door with a sense of understated gravitas, admitting him into the house’s vestibule.

“The Duke of Beaumont to see Miss Teresa Norman,” he said, handing the card to the servant.

Given that he had risen to the role of butler, the man had clearly spent his life in service and thus was too well-mannered to show anything more than a flicker of surprise at Richard’s title. This, in turn, surprised Richard.

Miss Norman was a viscount’s daughter. It wasn’t the highest rank of the nobility by any means, but it wasn’t as though she was at the fringes of Society. It was still an aristocratic title, for goodness’ sake.

Richard’s stomach sank even lower as he wondered what he had gotten himself into.

“Very good, Your Grace,” said the butler, offering Richard a quick bow. “If you would like to follow me to the drawing room, I shall fetch Miss Norman for you.”

Richard was about to agree when a husky voice that sent a jolt of arousal coursing through him—which was *really* not the optimal time for such a thing—rang out through the entryway.

“No need, Lafferty. I am here.”

Both butler and Duke turned in the direction of the voice.

Ballocks, thought Richard when he saw her.

Because Miss Teresa Norman, who was the kind of daring creature who would slip a note into a strange man’s pocket simply because she wished to know what pleasures her body could give her, who was the kind of thoughtful person who wasn’t worried about her own reputation but who didn’t wish to upset her brother, who kissed like a dream and tasted of sin and longing, was also very pretty.

Of bloody course she was.

“Miss Norman,” said the butler, a hint of fondness in his otherwise formal and upright tone. “The Duke of Beaumont is here to see you.”

For the briefest instant, Miss Norman’s eyes widened. They were green, vibrant enough that Richard could make out the color from where he stood. The color suited her, he was annoyed to decide. It complimented her golden hair, which wavered prettily just this side of being brown, and her pert nose, and the wickedness that Richard knew she harbored beneath the innocent exterior.

He forced himself to stop thinking. Christ. He was here to apologize for his bad behavior, not to engage in further bad behavior by panting over the woman he had already wronged.

Miss Norman turned to look at him, a slight frown tilting down the corners of her pretty rosebud mouth, which he *was not noticing*. “The Duke of... Beaumont,” she said, pausing slightly before his house’s name.

This was helpful, as the reminder that Miss Norman had been expecting Seth, not him—if she was expecting anyone, that was—served as an icy dousing wave to any ardor Richard was feeling. It was unhelpful, too, though, as it pricked his pride quite irritatingly.

“Indeed, Miss Norman,” he said in his most ducal voice. “I was hoping to speak with you briefly, if I may.”

Her mouth quirked down again before she plastered a polite expression back in its place. “I do apologize, Your Grace, but I am dreadfully busy today. Might we meet another time?”

Richard’s spine stiffened. The little minx was dismissing him! As much as part of him wanted to laugh at this audacity—most young ladies of the ton would rather chew off their own hand than set a duke on his year without so much as a by your leave—he was too irked to allow any humor to sink in.

“I’m afraid not, Miss Norman,” he said, giving her a meaningful look and trying not to remember how soft her curls had felt beneath his fingers. “We have something important to discuss.” And then, when she looked as though she planned to reject him again, he added, “About the library.”

Miss Norman froze. She paused and then, very carefully, she asked, “The library?”

Lafferty, the butler, occupied himself with pretending he did not exist.

Richard held her gaze and gave her one solemn nod. “The Rylant library, Miss Norman.”

Her face went white as a sheet. Richard wished he could enjoy this instead of immediately fantasizing about what, precisely, it would take for him to bring color back to those cheeks.

It occurred to him that maybe Seth was right—perhaps Richard *had* gone too long without knowing a woman’s loving touch. His getting himself twisted up over the potential of making a lady blush was a sure sign he had done so. It wasn’t natural.

“I see,” Miss Norman murmured in that same voice she’d used to mutter her exhortation of secrecy into his ear the night before. When she spoke again, however, her tone was stronger and more confident, an attitude that was matched in the stiff set of her shoulders. “Very well, Your Grace. Shall we take a turn about the garden to discuss the matter with the—” She paused. “—books?”

He offered her a courteous bow. “I would be much obliged, Miss.”

Miss Norman, somewhat less courteously, turned on her heel and walked out of the entryway, leaving Richard to trail behind her. Like a puppy, he thought, annoyed to find himself doing her unspoken bidding.

She moved through the house quickly until they came to a set of French doors that opened out to an elegant and fragrant garden. Glancing around, Richard didn't immediately recognize any of the plants, which tended more toward modest greenery than the elaborate shrubbery and floral arrangements that most aristocrats maintained so they could demonstrate their wealth via their impractical foliage.

Richard did not know much about the Dorshire viscountcy, but what he had seen of the neat, well-maintained house did not suggest financial hardship. And, indeed, despite the modesty of the plants, the garden did not imply a lack of access to care. Rather, there was something practical and elegant about the plants' layout, as if they had found a way to be both beautiful and useful.

Richard shook himself out of this line of thought. For one thing, he was not the kind of man who went on flights of fancy about the poetic layouts of gardens. For another, Miss Norman was getting away.

While Richard had metaphorically stopped to smell the roses (or, rather, whatever herby greenery was sprouting around him), Miss Norman had sallied ahead, her gait more of a stomp than the effortless glide that the young ladies of Society were encouraged to cultivate. Again, Richard felt the prickling tension between amusement and annoyance.

"Miss Norman!" he called after her. She did not stop.

Richard was *not* about to run after this woman—at least not more than he had already done so.

He called again, “Miss Norman!”

She whirled. The frown she’d been attempting to conceal while she had been inside had emerged in full force now. Richard bit back a smile.

“I cannot believe he told you!” she accused, her tone scolding. “All that research I did was for nothing, apparently, if the man couldn’t keep his mouth shut for one measly day. That will show me for listening to gossip, I suppose, but I think you, Your Grace, should be ashamed of yourself for showing up here like this to harangue me.”

This was, Richard felt, quite a lot of confusing information spat at him very quickly and with a great deal of anger. And so, he felt it was reasonable that the only response he could come up with was a baffled, “What?”

As she had done inside, Miss Norman froze. This time, however, instead of feigning innocence, her eyes narrowed.

“Wait a minute,” she said. “What are *you* talking about?”

She was pretty, out in the spring sunshine, the gold of her hair and the blue of her dress against the verdancy of the garden putting him in mind of a watercolor painting—and *good Lord above, what was wrong with him?* Forget engaging in bedsport with a lady, perhaps Richard needed to see a physician. There was something wrong with his head.

He refocused on the present. “As I said in the house,” he said. “I’m here to talk about the library.”

“What about the library?” she shot back, as though he were attempting to get her to confess to a crime of which he could not yet prove her guilty.

Richard, due to his recent mental malady, had the impulse to say, crassly, “The part where I put my tongue in your mouth,” but since he was, despite any latent insanity coming to the fore, still a gentleman, he instead said, “The, ah, interlude.”

He gave her a meaningful look and gestured vaguely in the direction of his face. He didn’t know how he expected Miss Norman to derive any meaning from this, given that it was absolute lunacy, but evidently, his message got across because she took a few staggering steps toward him and asked, *sotto voce*, “How do you know about that?”

“Um,” said Richard.

But apparently, this caused something to settle in Miss Norman’s mind, because her mouth dropped into a surprised *O* that Richard found himself aching to kiss. She pressed one hand to her cheek. Her fingertips were stained with ink, he noticed. Bizarrely, he found that charming.

“It was *you?*” she asked, her tone aghast.

Well, that was insulting.

Then, she looked his body up and down, her cheeks growing pink.

That part was less insulting.

“It was you,” she said, answering her own question. “But—I—just—*how?*”

Richard decided then that death was too good for Seth. Instead, Richard was going to use his wealth and power as a duke to hire someone—or several someones, if necessary—to follow Seth around and hide snakes in places that would be very distressing to find snakes. His bed? Snakes. Carriages? Snakes. The necessary? Loads and loads of snakes.

Spending the rest of his life being absolutely bloody *hounded* by snakes was precisely the punishment Seth deserved for making Richard say, out loud, to this horrified young woman, “Well, it seems we were tricked.”

“Tricked?” she echoed, the word coming out in a bit of a shriek. She took a deep, shaky breath. Her eyes were wild, and her curls were attempting to wriggle free of their hairpins as if her mane wanted to echo her mood. When she spoke again, her voice was strained, but her volume was reasonable. “Explain yourself,” she demanded.

Richard had lived through many moments in his life where he wished the earth would swallow him whole. Very few of them compared to this moment, where he had to explain how Seth had received her note, read it, and asked Richard to meet him in the library, and how Richard, who had assumed Seth had been attempting to distract him so that *he* could go meet up with a lady, had blithely headed to the library for the aforementioned drink.

As he spoke, Miss Norman's expression grew increasingly horrified.

"What you mean to tell me," she said, with an air of patience that seemed very fragile indeed, "is that when you went up to the library, you did *not* expect someone to be there?"

"I did not," Richard confirmed miserably.

"And so I am guessing," she continued, "that you did not expect to be, ah, waylaid."

Richard cleared his throat. "Um. No."

"And then," she went on, seeming to be speaking to herself more than Richard at this point, "I just *attacked you*. My God."

Richard was fairly certain he had never heard a lady publicly blaspheme before. Miss Norman, unheeding of the novelty of this experience for him, repeated her invective.

"Oh my God," she said again. Then, she turned her back to Richard and said to the garden behind her, "Oh my God."

Richard had to force himself to avoid looking at her *derriere*. For the thousandth time that day, he asked himself what was wrong with him. The woman was in clear distress and still, he couldn't stop ogling her.

She turned to face him again, which ought to have saved him from his torment, except she looked lovely from this direction, too.

“I am *so sorry*,” she said.

“Well,” he said, overtaken by a strange urge to reassure her, “it wasn’t unpleasant—” He broke off as Miss Norman held up a quelling hand.

“Don’t,” she said. Her other hand came up to pinch the bridge of her nose. “I beg of you. If you reassure me about this whole wretched... misadventure, I shall be forced to scream.”

As Richard very much did not want that—one of the few things that he could think of to make this whole debacle more awkward was if the lady’s scream brought people at a run—he waited patiently while Miss Norman composed herself.

“Let’s sit,” she said after a few breaths, during which she closed her eyes, rubbed her temples, and generally looked the way Richard felt. “There’s a bench just around the corner.” She waved a little ways behind her, to an area where the path bent out of sight.

Richard, feeling foolish, cast a nervous glance back at the house.

Where they stood, they were out of earshot of anyone inside the manor, but easily visible through any number of windows. It was entirely proper. If they moved to Miss Norman’s

proposed location, however, they would be invisible to those inside. He didn't need to give himself another reason to apologize later.

“Well,” he said uncomfortably. Why couldn't this young lady act like any of the other dozens and dozens of young ladies he had met in his lifetime? Why did she keep making him say these things out loud? “Oughtn't you fetch a chaperone?”

She scoffed, giving him an incredulous look. “I don't need a chaperone in my own garden,” she huffed. “Not at my age. I'm ancient.”

She didn't *look* ancient, but now that the topic was broached, he found himself, once again, asking an uncomfortable question. “I do apologize, but—how old are you?”

“Five and twenty,” Miss Norman replied with a defiant tilt of her chin, as if she were proud of having achieved this lofty age.

Five and twenty certainly was *not* ancient, despite Miss Norman's assertion. But, Richard had to admit, it was on the older side for an unmarried young lady. He thought back to the note that Seth had read aloud in his study, and how, in it, she had professed no desire to wed.

Whether or not that inclination was authentic or merely a defense of her circumstances, Richard allowed that it was likely that she would not marry if she had not already done so. The habits of the ton were deeply unkind to ladies in that regard. While a widow at five and twenty was still considered young (and therefore ripe for a second marriage), a woman

who had never married by five and twenty was called a spinster and eyed with suspicion.

The rules applied so differently to men. Richard would be nine and twenty two months hence, and he still had several more years before anyone started muttering that he really ought to have married already. And yet, no matter how long he put off the long walk to the altar, the “best” choice of potential wives would be considered the debutantes and other young women who were new to the marriage mart.

It was, in Richard’s opinion, somewhat appalling.

But the look in Miss Norman’s eyes suggested that she would not thank him for saying so, so he merely nodded and said, “Very well.”

And then, because he was all out of politeness for the day, he muttered, just as Miss Norman was starting to turn her back to him, “But if someone shouts at me for my bad behavior, *I* shall be the one to scream.”

He thought he caught just the slightest glimpse of a smile on Miss Norman’s face before she turned fully to move down the path. The idea that he had made her laugh warmed him more than it should.

True to Miss Norman’s word, the bench was only a few feet beyond the curve in the path that hid them from the house. Richard sat on one end, trying to put as much space as possible between him and Miss Norman without trying to *look* as though he were trying to put as much space as possible between him and Miss Norman.

There was a limit to the amount of humiliation he could bear, but there was a limit to the amount of temptation he could bear, too, and if he just stayed on his side of the bench, then he would remain enveloped in the fresh scent of growing plants and far away from whatever evil magic she possessed that befuddled his senses so.

“Very well,” she said, clapping her hands to her knees to emphasize the words. “We might as well get to the point. What is the price of your silence?”

* * *

The Duke of Beaumont gaped at her. Teresa, who had been having an enormously trying morning, struggled not to roll her eyes.

“What are you talking about?” he asked, sounding genuinely shocked.

Oh, he was good. Except his dumbstruck, blinking expression of innocence had to be feigned, obviously, as there had to be a reason for his coming here. Why else would he bother tracking her down, making little hints to get her to agree to talk to him, and having this *unbearably* uncomfortable conversation when he could, far more easily, do none of those things? So, he had to be after something, though she couldn’t imagine what a nearly invisible spinster with a penchant for matters of business could offer a wealthy and—yes, she could admit it—handsome duke.

“Can we skip this part where you pretend you don’t know what I’m talking about?” she asked tiredly. “You clearly

hunted me down for a reason. Why don't you just tell me what that reason is?"

"I didn't hunt you down," the Duke protested in a sputter.

His dark hair waved fashionably over his forehead, staying in place through some force of gravity that Teresa's own curls would never permit. The one front lock seemed perpetually in danger of falling into those hazel eyes that still looked at her with an expression of incredulity, but never actually made the final plunge out of place.

"Seth—that is, the Duke of Dowton—brought me your note and insisted I set the record straight."

Something about that *insisted* set Teresa's teeth on edge. "Do you always do what your friends tell you to, then?" she asked, crossing her arms defiantly.

The Duke's expression was baffled and on any other day, Teresa likely would have enjoyed that. Today, she did not.

"No, I don't always do what my friends tell me to," he returned, sounding as though he hadn't yet decided if he was offended. "Just when it's the right thing to do."

Teresa made a disgruntled sound at the back of her throat. "So, you're telling me that the 'right thing to do,' was to come here and embarrass me? Some gentleman you are."

She was being absurd in her combativeness, she knew, and yet, she couldn't seem to stop herself.

“I didn't come here to embarrass you!” the Duke protested. “I would have been more reassuring but—but you told me not to be!”

She had done that, admittedly. Yet, Teresa did not feel inclined to fairness.

“Why did you come here, then?” she challenged.

“To apologize!” he said exasperatedly. “For manhandling you. You are an unmarried young lady, and it was not appropriate of me.”

Teresa saw red.

“Oh, I am sorry,” she said with biting sarcasm. “Here I was, getting embarrassed over how you were made an unwitting pawn in my scheme. But la! That was just a foolish fantasy invented by my foolish brain because I am but a foolish lady! Thank you for coming to enlighten me and letting me know that it was actually *your* fault, after all.”

“That's not what I meant,” muttered the Duke, but Teresa, on a proper tear, kept going.

“How right you are,” she proclaimed grandly. “In fact, I daresay it should be *you* asking *me* the price for my silence. After all, what if my feeble little woman's mind leads me to

proclaim our dalliance to the world! I might forget that women's reputations are prized to an absurd degree and disregard mine entirely! I am very likely not clever enough to remember that it would embarrass my family and make me a topic of gossip for absolutely no reason! Silly me!"

"All right, all right," the Duke protested loudly, both hands held out in front of him in apparent supplication. "You're right." That mollified Teresa a bit. "I shouldn't have said it that way. You were a mastermind of your own plan, entirely in control of things, until Seth came along and mucked it up for you—he does that a lot," he added in a gentler tone. "I apologize—not for any manhandling, of which there was none—but for my poor phrasing in suggesting that any kissing that may or may not have happened was anything other than an enjoyable interlude between two equally responsible persons."

That little speech mollified Teresa a *lot*. And she felt even more pleased—veering in on delighted, even—when she spotted the exact moment that the Duke realized that he had called their kissing enjoyable.

He slumped in his seat, muttered something Teresa didn't quite catch about a sanatorium, and then asked, sounding weary, "Can we please start over?"

Teresa, feeling magnanimous after learning that she was better at kissing than she had suspected (and let *that* be a lesson about doubting herself, she thought triumphantly), agreed. "Very well."

The Duke sighed in relief and then straightened so he could sketch a bow from his seated position. "I am Richard Longman, the Duke of Beaumont. It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance."

Teresa, too, pantomimed a curtsy without leaving her seat. “Miss Teresa Norman, spinster. The pleasure is all mine.”

The Duke looked aghast. “Don’t call yourself that,” he said.

Teresa raised an eyebrow. “A spinster? Why not? I am one. I am an unmarried lady of an age when one expects marriage to have already taken place. It’s hardly an insult.”

Teresa didn’t mind being a spinster, generally speaking. Her brother was supportive and happy to allow her a permanent place in his household. She repaid this generosity by making herself as helpful as possible. Since her brother, Kenneth, was not yet married, she focused her attention on the running of the household and the estate, but as she did not wish to step on the toes of Kenneth’s future wife, she also educated herself on matters of business, so she had something to occupy her whenever a new Viscountess of Dorshire entered the picture.

And she failed to see any limitations in the role, frankly. That was, after all, where her plan had come in. Being a spinster, she reasoned, was no reason to consign herself to a life of never knowing what pleasures her body could experience. Information, after all, was power.

“I’m pretty sure it’s supposed to be,” the Duke pointed out.

“Well.” She gave her hair a haughty toss. “I am taking it back, then. Reclaiming it. In defense of women and all that.”

“Lord,” muttered the Duke. “It’s a good thing you *didn’t* meet Seth. There’s no imagining the trouble the two of you could get into.”

She wasn’t sure she liked the connection to the Duke of Dowton, who was now resolutely on her bad list, but she enjoyed the vision of herself as a troublemaker, no matter how false it was, so she let the comment pass without comment.

In any case, the Duke seemed to have distracted himself. “Speaking of,” he said, “how was it that you came to, ah, invite Dowton to the library, anyway? You mentioned something about... research?”

Teresa felt herself blush. “Oh, that.” She cleared her throat. “Well, as I said in my note—have you seen the note?”

The Duke of Beaumont nodded in confirmation.

She went on. “As I said in the note, I am not looking to marry. However, I am aware that there are certain, shall we say, *experiences* that ladies are only invited to experience within the confines of matrimony.” She shrugged. “I wished to forsake the confines, not the experiences. So, I listened to the gossip among the married ladies and the widows and kept hearing the name of a rakish duke with a talent for discretion—which ended up being entirely unearned,” she hastened to add. “The Duke of Dowton should be entirely ashamed of himself.”

“He’s not,” said the Duke of Beaumont drearily.

Hmph.

Teresa ended her tale. “When I saw him at the ball last night, I seized my chance and invited him up to the library, hoping he would be open to my proposition to engage in a bit of a liaison. But you came in instead.”

“You didn’t proposition me,” the Duke pointed out reasonably. “You threw yourself at me.”

This time, Teresa did roll her eyes. “I thought we agreed that was actually your fault somehow. And, anyway, that was my prelude. I wanted to demonstrate that I was serious.” She hesitated, considering. “And I supposed it meant that I got something out of the experience even if he declined my larger offer.”

The Duke’s eyebrows rose. Behind him, a robust growth of St. John’s Wort rustled merrily in the breeze, a relic of Kenneth’s plant era. If her brother decided to import a bunch of snails out here, Teresa was going to throw a fit.

“Get something out of the experience?” the Duke echoed.

Now that she had oh so generously agreed to a fresh start, Teresa decided to placate him. “You did wonderfully as well,” she reassured. “It didn’t even matter that you weren’t the right duke.”

Despite her good intentions, the words felt a bit too blasé the moment they left her lips. Instead of growing angry or hurt, though, she thought she saw a wicked gleam in the Duke’s

eyes that, for some reason she didn't fully understand, caused her breath to catch.

"Oh, I see," he murmured.

So far this morning, she had seen this Duke flustered, annoyed, and sarcastic. She'd seen him apologetic and confused. But this was the first time she'd seen the confident, capable man from the night before, the one who had told her he would show her how to kiss properly, had called her sweetheart, and then crushed her to him.

The reappearance of this man rendered *her* flustered, and put her on the back foot. And, to her astonishment, Teresa found she didn't mind that.

"So, you're saying that any duke would do, then?" he asked in that same voice. "Quite the view for a woman who eschews marriage and argues for the autonomy of women." His voice was teasing, low.

Seductive.

"That's—that's not what I meant," Teresa stammered. She felt a flush creeping up her neck. "I just—the Duke of Dowton has such a reputation, you know."

"Hmm," hummed the Duke. He moved forward slightly in his seat. It wasn't a large movement by any means, but then again, it wasn't a large bench either. "I do know. I, however, do not. So, maybe I need to show you that I can be the *right* duke, after all."

This was, Teresa knew, about pride. She knew it wasn't about her, or her dubious charms. It was about the Duke of Beaumont's sense of superiority, which certainly every duke possessed, and the fact that she'd wanted his friend over him. He wished to prove himself to himself—and was merely using her as the conduit.

She didn't mind, though. Because, after all, wasn't she using him, too? She didn't hold a deep and abiding love for the Duke—for either of the dukes she had ensnared into this plot. She wanted someone who could show her what pleasures her body was capable of and then would trot off obligingly without too much fuss.

This strange, handsome, quarrelsome man could be good for that, couldn't he? After all, maybe his not having a reputation for rakishness was a sign in his favor. She didn't believe for a single moment that a man who looked like *that* was wanting for feminine companionship. Which meant that he must be exceedingly discreet if she hadn't heard a single murmur while she'd been conducting her reconnaissance into potential paramours.

And it wouldn't hurt anyone if she gave into the taunt in those honeyed hazel eyes, wouldn't do any harm if she leaned forward and launched herself into his arms like she'd done the night before, only this time with the full knowledge of who, exactly, she was allowing to embrace her so. The knowledge of him only made the prospect more appealing.

Teresa had nearly made up her mind to do it, had all but begun to lean forward toward that wicked, smirking mouth, when she realized it *would* hurt someone.

The events of earlier that morning came back to her in a sudden, disappointing rush, and she slumped back in her seat despondently.

“I can’t,” she said, her voice dull even to her own ears.

The Duke, to his credit, didn’t push the issue. The wicked gleam left his eyes, and the frown crept back on his face, likely in response to her tone.

“Why not?” he asked.

“I’m afraid I have—” Her nose wrinkled in dismay. “—an offer of courtship.”

For a long moment, the Duke stared at her. And then, he threw back his head and laughed, long and hard and loud.

“It’s not funny,” Teresa muttered peevishly.

This, of course, only made the Duke laugh harder.

She crossed her arms and waited him out, which took longer than it should have.

“Are you quite finished?” she demanded.

“Yes, yes, I’m sorry,” said the Duke. “It’s just—you sounded so put out about the whole thing, when most young ladies would consider a courtship a positive thing.”

“I *am* put out about it,” she insisted. “I *don’t want to get married*. Why does nobody ever believe me when I say that?”

The Duke was still grinning. How annoying.

“Is your family pressuring you, then? To accept the offer.”

“No,” said Teresa. “It’s not like that.”

“What, then?”

She narrowed her gaze upon him then. Because a very good or possibly very bad idea had begun to form. Maybe impulsiveness beget impulsiveness. That could very well be her problem. Because the more the very good or possibly very bad idea grew, the more her mental scales tipped toward good, good, very good.

“Do you remember,” she said cautiously, “how you came here to apologize?”

The non sequitur instantly made the Duke suspicious.

“Yes,” he said, equally cautious, drawing out the word.

“Do you wish to make it up to me?”

Though it would have been better for Teresa’s plotting and scheming if the Duke was sufficiently guilt-ridden that he agreed immediately, she rather found that she liked the suspicious look that crossed his face. It put her in mind of the way she had felt—though not be able to show, of course, not in the way this privileged, powerful duke was free to do—when she’d gotten the Earl of Archinton’s proposition this morning.

“I want you to know,” the Duke said cautiously, “that it is only years of gentlemanly rigor being pressed into my very being that compels me to say yes.”

“Your reticence is duly noted,” Teresa said dryly before remembering that she probably ought to butter up the man before she asked him for a favor. It was just, it turned out, too easy to banter with him.

Just as easy, a traitorous thought whispered, as it had been to fall into his embrace.

But maybe that was for the best, as her very good (definitely *not* very bad, she had concluded) plan depended on them appearing to actually like one another. And, even if the very good (though possibly unlikely to succeed) plan did not bear fruit, at least she would have a good time in the process.

Teresa liked contingencies. It was, she concluded, a dearth of contingencies that had brought her to this moment. Alas, she would not be caught making that mistake again.

“I propose,” said Teresa as the Duke regarded her as one might regard a snake poised to strike, “that we become affianced.”

CHAPTER 4



“*W*hat?” The incredulous response burst from Richard’s lips before Miss Norman’s bizarre proposition had even fully registered in his mind.

She wanted to—what?

A part of Richard’s mind knew that there were ladies who would scheme to make themselves a duchess—though these ladies were far fewer and further between than novels might have suggested, sort of like how quicksand very rarely appeared in one’s life in England, despite adventure stories’ preoccupation with the stuff. But he hadn’t taken Miss Norman for that kind of character, and despite his choice to remain friends with Seth, Richard was generally a good judge of character.

Perhaps catching the incredulous expression on his face, Miss Norman waved a hand airily. “Oh, well, not affianced. That seems to go a bit far.”

Richard wanted to agree, except he didn’t know what goal they were far *from*, and so he didn’t dare encourage her.

“But a courtship,” Miss Norman went on. “Now that would be just the thing. That would solve all my problems, indeed.”

It was barely past noon, but already Richard had had a very long day on very little sleep. And he had been quite relentlessly spun around by this woman. All these *emotions*. Regret, humor, irritation, lust—was that last an emotion? Richard cared not. The point was, it was not natural for a man to feel so many things in such a short period of time.

“I thought,” he said carefully, as though this were a university examination for which he had inadequately studied, “you didn’t want to get married.”

“I don’t,” confirmed Miss Norman.

Madness! Today, Richard had woken to a world full of madness. “But you do realize,” he said in that same cautious tone, “that a courtship is entered into with the intent of ending up at marriage.”

Miss Norman looked at him as though he were unforgivably dense, which, to be fair, matched how Richard felt. “Well, it wouldn’t be *real*,” she said derisively.

Like Miss Norman had done earlier, Richard pinched the bridge of his nose. “Could you perhaps explain yourself like I am a very small child? Because, alas, I am beginning to feel I am the babe in the woods.”

He caught sight of her smirk, which she swiftly stifled, and was grateful when she complied.

“I am,” she clarified, “faced with an offer of courtship from the Earl of Archinton.” Richard searched his memory and came up with a tall, thin man with pale hair, but couldn’t picture anything further from the name. “I don’t know *why* he is interested in courting me, and I don’t much care to find out.”

Richard felt certain that he understood why Archinton was interested in Miss Norman. If one disregarded that she was the most maddening woman Richard had ever had the dubious pleasure of meeting, she was pretty, amusing, and well-positioned in Society. Any man—or rather any man who was seeking a bride—would be interested.

While he mused on this, however, Miss Norman continued talking. “In an effort to dissuade this gentleman from his course without embarrassing my family, I did something that, well—” She winced. “—might be considered just the tiniest bit impulsive.”

“You?” drawled Richard. “I cannot imagine.”

Miss Norman shot him a poisonous look. “I may have told him that I have already agreed to court someone else.”

And there it was.

“And you would like,” Richard went on dryly, “that ‘someone else’ to be me.”

“Yes, please,” said Miss Norman.

Richard was getting a grinding, brutal headache.

“Have you ever considered,” he offered, “thinking things through before you do them?”

Miss Norman’s frown was swift. “I am typically excellent at making plans, I’ll have you know. I have just faced quite a number of unforeseen hurdles of late.”

“Unforeseen hurdles,” he pointed out, “is what plans are designed to avoid.”

“Oh, hush,” Miss Norman scolded, and Richard wondered when the last time someone had told him to hush had been. Well before he had inherited the dukedom, to be sure.

Even mere heirs to dukedoms did not get told to hush very frequently, particularly when they were as well-built as Richard was.

He wanted to hate it.

He did not hate it.

“Are you going to help me or not?”

He was, as it happened, but the temptation to needle her a bit more was too great. Was impulsiveness contagious?

“If I do,” he asked with a teasing smile, “what’s in it for me?”

Impulsiveness evidently *was* contagious, because the instant he said the words, he wished he could snatch them back. Not because they were rude or unkind or because Miss Norman reacted poorly. No, the mischievous question was a mistake because Miss Norman reacted so *well*.

Her cheeks turned a pretty shade of pink, flattering her fair complexion, and her gaze darted quickly down to his mouth. And then—she must not have realized she’d done it, certainly—her tongue darted out to lick her bottom lip. Richard wanted to lick that lip. He wanted to nibble there and see if it would make Miss Norman moan.

These were very bad thoughts, and Richard could not seem to keep them at bay. He turned his attention to pretending that no part of his body existed below the waist. Those parts of him could not react to Miss Norman’s blush—or the insidious thought that the same blush would look oh so pretty elsewhere on her body—if they did not exist.

When Miss Norman realized how she had reacted, the blushing, desirous look faded from her expression, and she set her shoulders defiantly and narrowed her eyes.

“Name your price,” she challenged.

That caused so many unconscionably inappropriate thoughts to cross Richard’s mind that he couldn’t even pick one clearly out of the mix.

He had to end this. He would help her, yes, but this matter of suggestive teasing had to end.

He cleared his throat. “I will help you,” he said, watching in some satisfaction as defiance gave way to surprise on her face. He quickly reminded himself that he had avowed mere seconds ago to cease the teasing. “I will pose as your suitor until Archinton gets the message and leaves you alone.”

“Thank you,” she said, relief evident in the slump of her shoulders.

He knew he’d judged her correctly—this really was a woman who wished to avoid matrimony. He didn’t understand *why*, but then again, he didn’t need to, not to help her.

“One more thing,” Richard said, holding up a hand. “The other part of your proposition—the original one. There will be no more of that.”

He needed to set those terms, for her protection and his own. Still, he couldn’t help but be a bit offended when she scoffed and tossed her head.

“Of course not.”

“Good,” he said, forcing the word out.

“Good,” she shot back.

They stared at each other for a drawn-out moment, and Richard wasn't sure if the air between them sparked with tension or heat. He couldn't afford to wait around to find out. He needed to—well, he didn't know what he needed to do, exactly, but something that got him away from Miss Norman's hypnotic gaze and mystical, fragrant garden.

Perhaps a bout of fencing to get his blood pumping, or something mindlessly dull, like expense accounts. Or heavy drinking. That was always good in a pinch.

He stood gracelessly. "Very well," he said, backing away even as he gave her a quick bow. "I shall call on you in two days' time for a promenade, so we can show our courtship to the world. Have a good day, Miss Norman."

"Oh, ah, good day to you, too," she said in surprise. He was already retreating. "And thank you!" she called after him.

Rude though it was, Richard didn't stop. He was already beginning to feel that he had made a terrible, terrible mistake.

But he wasn't sure if that mistake was leaving or if it was agreeing to come back into Miss Norman's spell.

* * *

Two days after she had struck her deal with the Duke of Beaumont in the garden, Teresa was still trying to decide if she had made a terrible, terrible mistake. She paced about her bedroom, dressed for a promenade in the park, alternately

hoping that the Duke would appear as promised and hoping that he wouldn't.

The problem was that there were just too many unknowns in the whole business. Or were there? After all, the proposed scheme was very simple: be seen around London with the Duke of Beaumont, wait for gossip to circulate (as it always did when one of the Four Dukes was concerned), let that gossip dissuade the Earl of Archinton, and resume her peaceful life of useful spinsterhood. The only variable was whether she'd be able to achieve the technically optional but highly desired step of stomping on the Duke of Downton's foot, as retribution.

The plan was not only simple, but it was also necessary. Teresa had spent so much time over the previous two days worrying about what the Duke of Beaumont would or wouldn't do that she had completely neglected the estate's business accounts. She was fortunate that all the accounts were current and that each of the viscountcy's properties was well-equipped for self-sufficiency. Otherwise, her inattention could have spelled disaster.

Kenneth couldn't be trusted to handle things himself, not when he was in the grip of a fervent discovery about the decline of the *myxas glutinosa* in Britain, a pond snail that was important for some reason that Teresa had tuned out.

Kenneth's distraction was a blessing. When he had learned that the Duke of Beaumont had come to call on his sister, he had merely said, "Oh, that's nice, Teresa. So many visitors!" and returned to his book.

Their mother had been less sanguine about the whole thing.

“A duke!” she had cried, bursting into the room where Teresa had been embroidering on the afternoon of the Duke’s visit, startling her daughter so soundly that Teresa jabbed herself very hard in the thumb with her needle. “You received a visit from a duke?”

“I did,” had mumbled Teresa around where she’d stuck the bleeding thumb in her mouth. She had removed the offending digit and stared at it in disgust. *Ouch*. “The Duke of Beaumont was here. We walked in the garden.”

This had felt like a traitorously simple way to describe all that had happened in the garden, from the bickering, to the teasing, to the heated glances, but they technically *had* done some walking, so it wasn’t a lie.

“He is courting you? That is who you meant when you said you had agreed to court another? Him? The Duke of Beaumont?”

Teresa had felt that the sheer quantity of these questions was the tiniest bit offensive, but since she was not *actually* being courted by the Duke of Beaumont, she had decided not to say anything.

“Yes,” she had answered simply, instead.

Charity had let out an excited squeak, which had forced Teresa to suppress a sigh.

Of all the people in the world, the Dowager Viscountess ought to have understood why Teresa didn't wish to be married. It was, after all, on her mother's account that Teresa had come to understand the perils that marriage held for women.

Teresa's father hadn't been cruel or neglectful. He hadn't been a philanderer or a gambler who had frittered away the family's fortune. He had been a very ordinary man who had loved his children in an ordinary way for a nobleman, meaning that he had seen them for brief periods daily when they had been children and politely asked after their interests at dinnertime once they had gotten older.

Teresa had always known that her father had cared for her, even if she had never felt particularly close to the man. Even so, she'd mourned him when he had died seven years prior after a particularly violent bout of influenza.

Teresa's father had not, by contrast, cared for her mother.

Teresa pushed thoughts of her parents' difficult marriage aside. That wasn't the issue at the moment. The issue, rather, was her mother's insistence that she *also* enter the dreaded institution. For, despite her history, Charity Norman fretted over her daughter's continual unmarried state. She worried that Teresa didn't have suitors, and would never make a match.

That was one of the most insidious things about marriage, in Teresa's opinion. Even a woman who knew with cruel certainty how terrible it could be still felt that it was the *duty* of women to engage in the institution.

One indisputably good thing that came from her mother's eagerness to see her wed, however, Teresa had to admit, was that she had gotten, with staggering speed, all the gossip there was to have about Teresa's false suitor.

"Did you know," Charity had asked as she entered the drawing room the day after the Duke's first visit while Teresa had been attempting to enjoy a somewhat salacious novel. "The Duke of Beaumont has increased his estate's wealth twofold in the five years since he took up the mantle of the title?"

"I did not know that," Teresa had answered mildly, which she had known was not the response her mother had been hoping for.

A young lady with an affluent suitor ought to be excited about her prospective husband's wealth, though she was also meant to feign polite indifference, as finances were *not* something appropriate to discuss. This false ambivalence was evidently markedly different from Teresa's actual ambivalence.

Her mother had huffed off.

"Did you know," Charity had said the next morning over the breakfast table as Teresa had been attempting to enjoy her toast and eggs. "The Duke of Beaumont's estate in Lancashire is said to have one of the loveliest botanical gardens in the country."

"Plants are nice," Teresa had offered.

Charity's expression had flickered, then deepened into a frown when her son had looked up from his newspaper. "What kind of botanicals? Are we merely speaking of flowers, or does he have medicinal plants as well? Only those native to England, or foreign specimens, too? Are there greenhouses or outdoor plants exclusively?"

Teresa had used the distraction to slip unobtrusively from the room while her mother had explained, flustered, that she didn't know the answer to any of Kenneth's questions and generally fumbled through her confusion that it was the wrong child who had demonstrated such keen interest.

Later that afternoon, Charity had struck again.

"Did you know," she had asked as Teresa had been attempting to enjoy merely standing about without being accosted by facts about a particular aristocrat. "The Duke of Beaumont owns a highly successful printing press?"

That had grabbed Teresa's attention.

"He does?" she had asked.

Charity had worn the grin of the cat that ate the canary. "Indeed, he does. Isn't that interesting?"

It *was* interesting. Rich, titled gentlemen didn't engage in anything as sordid as *industry*.

“You mean currently,” Teresa had clarified. “Not prior to his inheritance?”

That could, at least theoretically, make a bit of sense. Sometimes young noblemen used supposed occupations to while away their time before their fathers died, using the business experience to derive practice at management before inheriting an estate. It wasn't common, but it did happen, and Teresa approved of the practicality of the thing.

“Currently,” Charity had said triumphantly, clearly thrilled to have finally snagged the interest of the correct child. “Evidently, he published a new scientific tome about astronomy that was quite the success earlier in the year.”

Teresa vaguely remembered the volume in question. She wasn't much of a reader of scientific discoveries, but Kenneth certainly was, and he'd been equal parts delighted and dismayed that the ton at large had taken up with astronomy, as it offered him plenty of conversational partners on the subject... but few who had what Kenneth considered sufficient scientific knowledge.

“That,” Teresa had said absently, “is fascinating.”

Not that she needed reasons to be fascinated by the Duke of Beaumont, she had reminded herself as she had prepared for bed that evening, winding her long blonde hair into the plait she wore for sleep. Theirs was a practical relationship that would not be muddied by anything so silly as intrigue.

Still, she had reasoned as she had tucked herself into bed, it would be nice to have something to discuss with him the

following day on their promenade.

She tried to remember these facts—she had a conversation at hand and, what was more, it didn't *matter* if their conversation was good, as this was all for show—as she waited for the Duke, feeling oddly twitchy and nervous.

“I’m just not used to being the center of attention,” she told her reflection in the vanity mirror. “That’s all.”

The Duke of Beaumont arrived precisely at the start of the social hour, and Teresa hurried down to meet him before either of her beloved but occasionally difficult relations could say something that would mortify her for years to come.

To their credit, she found her mother and Kenneth doing their best impressions of normal people as they greeted the Duke in the parlor. To... less of their credit, their best impressions weren't that good. Charity was clearly vibrating with excitement that her spinster daughter was being courted by a young, handsome duke, and Kenneth was hiding something behind his back. Teresa could only hope it was a book about snails and not an actual, living snail.

“Look, Teresa,” her mother said, her voice coming out octaves higher than its normal register. “The Duke of Beaumont has come to call!”

“Just as he said he would,” Teresa said soothingly, hoping to mentally transmit some calm in her mother's direction. One bonus to the whole ordeal, she thought to herself, was that her mother's excitement had led Teresa's nerves to seem paltry in comparison. “How do you do, Your Grace?”

“Miss Norman,” the Duke said, bowing politely over her extended hand. His tone was measured, but Teresa thought she saw a flicker of amusement in his gaze. “I am well, thank you. And you?”

“Quite well,” she returned.

Her mother watched this tepid exchange with the air of someone watching a riveting sporting event.

The Duke’s mouth was *definitely* quivering.

Do not laugh, Teresa told him with her eyes. *If you laugh, the whole plan will be ruined before it has even begun.*

“Would you care to join me for a promenade, Miss Norman?” he asked, his voice betraying nothing of the humor she saw sparking in his gaze. “It’s a lovely day, and I have brought my curricule. I thought perhaps we could enjoy a short ride to St. Regent’s Park and then a walk to enjoy the weather.”

A curricule!

She could have kissed him—or, er, no, that phrase didn’t work when she actually *had* kissed him, she thought, fighting back a blush. She didn’t think she succeeded but hoped that her mother and brother merely took any flushing of her cheeks as a sign of her pleasure at having such a thoughtful suitor. She couldn’t even fathom what the Duke might think of any flushing on her part.

Given their history, she could only assume he would—correctly—assume that her thoughts had turned salacious.

In any case, Teresa thought, forcing her mind back to the present and away from any libraries at any balls in which any kissing might have occurred, a curricle was perfect. Because the vehicle only seated two passengers and was open to the air, it was considered perfectly respectable for a courting couple to ride in one without a chaperone, especially when the lady in question had reached the lofty age of five and twenty. It was also the perfect way to see and be seen, which was essential to their plan.

This time of day, St. Regent's Park would be teeming with members of Society. They'd be the talk of the town by the end of the day; they could probably put an end to their plan within a few weeks.

Why did that thought sit poorly with Teresa?

She shook off the sudden clench in her stomach. "That sounds wonderful, Your Grace," she said politely.

"Marvelous." His smile was gracious and charming, framed by soft, full lips, and—

Teresa looked away from his mouth.

"Allow me to fetch my spencer," she said, hurrying out of the room before her mother could point out that retrieving clothing items and similar chores was precisely the reason why the

family had servants. She needed the quick trip up to her bedchamber to get her head on straight.

She was being silly. Why was she being so silly? Teresa Norman was many things, but silly was not one of them.

She lectured herself on the merits of seriousness as she traveled up and back down the stairs, buttoning the light jacket as she went. Even so, she didn't feel the tension fully leave her until she and the Duke had boarded the curricle and were pulling out of the house's front drive. Teresa refused to look back, certain she'd see her mother peering out a curtain.

"Your family is very nice," the Duke commented as they turned out onto the main road, his matched pair of horses trotting along in perfect unison.

"Do shut up," she said before she could think better of it.

Fortunately, the Duke only laughed.

"Trust me," he reassured her. "It's not as bad as you think. There's some sort of affliction that every mother of a young lady seems to catch when in the proximity of an unmarried, titled gentleman. I assure you that your mother was among the least egregious."

That did make Teresa feel a bit better, though not entirely. "I don't understand why she's quite so excited," she confessed. "I mean—" She waved a hand. "—I do, in part. She thought I would never marry, and now I'm apparently being courted by

you, who is quite the catch, according to the absurd standards Society sets around such things.”

“No, no,” the Duke said dryly as he neatly turned the horses. “Don’t flatter me anymore. It shall go to my head.”

“If you want someone to fawn all over you, you should try engaging in a real courtship,” she retorted.

“Your point is taken. Do go on.”

Teresa gazed out at the bustling city around them as they drove. She adored London, even at its dreariest, and in the bright spring sunshine, it was simply too lovely for words. Still, though, her mood over her family’s behavior spoiled her enjoyment somewhat.

“I guess what I don’t understand is why, precisely, she is so eager for me to be married,” she admitted.

She could not bring herself to voice the second part. *Am I not good enough for her as I am?*

But maybe the Duke heard the unspoken question in her tone because his voice was kind as he responded, “Maybe she just wants you to be happy.”

“Maybe,” Teresa responded doubtfully. “But—” She paused, uncertain if she should share what came next.

It wasn't as though it was an uncommon situation, after all. But, despite everything, it felt quite personal, even though the crux of the problem hadn't involved her, at all.

"My parents' marriage was not a happy one," she said after a long pause.

She was facing forward, but out of the corner of her eye, she saw the Duke's head whip toward her before he just as quickly turned back to watch the road ahead of them.

His voice was careful when he asked, "Your father was... unkind?"

"No." The answer leaped to Teresa's lips. She twisted her mouth, thinking about how to explain.

The relationship between the late Viscount of Dorshire and his Viscountess had not been a fractious one. She had never seen her parents argue. But Teresa had never seen them laugh together, either.

Instead, they had merely... existed. Day in and day out, they had sat across from each other at the dinner table, each speaking to their children but rarely to each other. When Teresa's father had had business, her mother had gone with him, not out of any apparent reluctance to be parted, but because that was the way things were done. For years and years, they had gone on like that, existing in the same space but rarely so much as glancing at one another.

She couldn't say all that to the Duke of Beaumont, though, not when their courtship wasn't real. So instead, she asked, "Have you ever stood in a muddy spot, thinking you're on solid ground, except you're sinking very slowly? And you don't realize until it's too late that your boots are terribly stuck and you don't know how to get out?"

He might not have been looking at her, but Teresa instinctively knew that the Duke was listening very carefully. "And your parents were stuck in the mud?" he asked.

"My mother was," Teresa corrected. Because in a marriage like her parents', it was always the woman who got stuck.

The passive unhappiness between her parents had been such a deeply engrained status quo in Teresa's childhood that it wasn't until after her father had passed, shortly before she had been set to make her debut, that she had realized just how lackluster her parents' marriage had been, and how heavily that unrelenting weight of duty had weighed upon her mother. For after a suitable period of shocked mourning and grief—for though her husband may have been all but a stranger to her, Charity had seen him nearly every day for the previous two and a half decades, which no doubt left his sudden absence a shock—her mother had flourished.

Where she would have once been stuck at home, playing hostess to her husband's allies in Parliament, Charity was now free to attend dinner parties with her friends. The late Viscount hadn't liked the theater, so Charity had scarcely gone for the full duration of her marriage, even though she adored opera. The Dowager Viscountess had even taken up archery, which had become a popular fad among aristocratic women. Her husband, while alive, had considered sports to be an uncouth occupation for ladies.

And somehow, nobody but Teresa had seemed to realize that this turn toward her own interests wasn't merely a happy adventure for Charity in her later years. It was something she could have been pursuing *her whole life* if it hadn't been for her husband's quelling influence.

Teresa missed her father. But a part of her felt grateful for the timing of his passing, for if he had lived even a few years longer, she may not have learned her lesson about the perils of marriage until it was too late, until after she'd found herself tied for life to some man who would crush her spirits and turn her into a shadow of her former self, as had evidently happened to her mother.

It had horrified her to realize that it didn't even take a cruel or abusive husband to achieve this—and Lord only knew those existed. But disinterest, as benign though it seemed, could prove equally as brutal in wearing away at a woman's sense of self when endured over years and years.

“And you're afraid of getting stuck in the mud, too?” The Duke's question was oh so gentle.

She wanted to balk at the term *afraid*. But the quiet way he asked, entirely free of judgment, soothed her impulse to snap back.

“I do not intend to get stuck,” she said decisively. And that was really what mattered, wasn't it? Her feelings on the matter were not nearly as important as her actions. “I know where the patch of mud is. So, I plan to avoid it.”

The Duke frowned thoughtfully over this for a moment. They were approaching St. Regent's Park. He pulled the carriage to the side of the road, halting the horses, and looked at her before they disembarked.

“And that's why you won't marry,” he said.

“That's why I won't marry,” she confirmed.

He nodded once, then again. “You know, Miss Norman,” he said, not looking quite at her but not looking quite away, either. “Some may find your position on the matter to be bleak. But I am reasonably certain that you are absolutely right.”

CHAPTER 5



As far as fake courtships went, Richard felt he could have done far worse than Miss Teresa Norman. She was, of course, positively confounding. He knew from their exchange in the garden that she was capable of wielding her cleverness like a weapon. Hadn't she, after all, roped him into this scheme of hers with apparently little effort?

The more time he spent with her, though, the more the twists and turns of her wily mind felt like depth rather than craftiness. She was clever and thoughtful and had blushed adorably to the roots of her hair when faced with her mother's excitement over their courtship.

And her confession about why she wished to never marry was intelligent—though, Richard thought, it was equally damning.

Because he was the mud.

Not him specifically, necessarily, though he was certain he had muddy qualities all of his own. He worked too much, which would no doubt frustrate any wife of his class, who would expect a gentleman of leisure in a ducal husband. And his temper often got the worst of him—an inherited quality, and the deepest quagmire in his personality.

But he suspected that she was correct more broadly, too, in her assessment that marriage to an aristocratic gentleman—who were not, as a group, taught to pay special care to their wives' interests and personalities—was more likely to provide danger to a lady than security.

He hated the bleak look in her eyes as she'd made her confession, though. He hated that she seemed resigned, even if that resignation seemed to concern the fate of women broadly as opposed to herself specifically. It was such a contrast to the snappy, witty woman he already knew her to be.

He resolved, then, that he was going to make this courtship *fun*.

Yes, yes, perhaps it was fake, and perhaps it was practical. But nothing in their arrangement suggested they couldn't also have a good time while they scared off her other suitor. It would be good for Miss Norman, he suspected—hadn't her original scheme shown that she had a taste for fun in her?

And, he thought, it would likely be good for him, too. Though he hadn't agreed with Seth's diagnosis that he needed a liaison in order to shake himself out of his recent rigidity, he thought that perhaps the underlying principle had been correct. He needed some enjoyment in his life. And if he could find that enjoyment while helping Miss Norman, while spending time with a woman who offered no risk of expecting a serious attachment from him? Well, that was all the better.

Thus, though he knew her admission was serious, he put a smile on his face and offered her his arm with exaggerated gallantry. "Well, Miss Norman," he said. "Allow me to be your

rope ladder. I shall drag you out of the muck and into the sunlight. Tally ho.”

“This metaphor has really gotten away from us,” Miss Norman muttered. But she couldn’t hide the smile tugging at the corners of her mouth, and she accepted his hand, allowing him to help her down from the curricule.

He flipped a coin to one of the lads who loitered around the park, waiting to be paid to watch the ton’s horses and carriages.

The boy, who looked to be perhaps thirteen, tipped his worn hat. “Thanks ever so, M’Lord!” he called cheerfully.

Given the fine weather, the park was absolutely teeming with the who’s who of the ton, with gaggles of gossiping matrons clustered here and there, and blushing young couples promenading along the paths. At least half a dozen eyes immediately alit upon Richard and Miss Norman. A blush began to rise in her cheeks once more.

“Pay them no mind,” Richard murmured to her as he tucked her arm firmly in his. “Remember, you are wildly smitten with me. And why wouldn’t you be? I am handsome, titled, and in possession of all my teeth. Not to mention dashedly clever.”

He was laying it on thick for her amusement and felt a spark of pleasure when it worked.

“And *so* modest,” she shot back, looking as though it was taking her physical effort to avoid rolling her eyes. “However

did I get so lucky?”

“You assaulted my person,” he retorted and felt an even brighter spark of pleasure when a flush quickly crossed her cheeks. Because it would help sell their charade, he told himself. That’s why he liked her blushing.

“I thought,” she said lowly, “that we agreed not to discuss that.”

Richard pretended to think. “No, I’m fairly sure we agreed not to *repeat* that.” He immediately regretted his words, as it brought to mind what kind of delightful trouble they could get up to if they *did* repeat the incident in the library. It was moot, however, as they were coconspirators and possibly friends and nothing further. “I made no such promises about discussing.”

“I really think you did,” she stressed.

“Hmm,” he hummed, causing his tone to become even lighter as hers intensified. “I suppose we shall have to agree to disagree.”

She let out a sound like a growl. Delightful. “You are maddening.”

“Tsk, tsk,” he chided. “With talk like that, nobody will believe that you are truly obsessed with me.”

“Obsessed,” she scoffed. “Obsessed!”

But she was smiling, which was all Richard had really wanted.

“Fine,” she said a moment later as they strolled through the dappled sunlight that filtered through the trees. “Let us do proper courtship talk, then. My mother told me that you own a printing press. Is that true?”

Richard supposed that he ought to stop being surprised by Miss Norman. She never did ask what he expected her to ask.

“I do,” he said. “Though I can’t fathom why you—or your mother—would be interested in such a thing.”

She cast him a look that questioned his intelligence. “Why, because I am a woman? Or because I come from an aristocratic family? Therefore, I cannot possibly be interested in matters of business?”

He knew it was the wrong answer, but... “Well, yes. You have to admit it’s hardly the usual sort of thing for a young lady to be fascinated by?”

“It’s hardly the usual sort of thing for a duke to do,” she shot back, which really was fair enough. “Besides, I like to be useful.”

He found himself soaking up this little tidbit about Miss Norman. She liked to be useful—yes, that made sense. Another piece of her puzzle slotted into place in Richard’s mind.

“I don’t know that I would characterize the press as *useful*,” he allowed. “Engaging, yes. Profitable, certainly. Maddening, often. But I suppose the question of its utility would depend on how useful you consider scientific and mathematical treatises, often translated from different languages.”

“If you ask my brother, Kenneth, those are absolutely essential things in life,” Miss Norman said with a laugh. “He’s always deep in the grip of some new fascination or another, usually in the realm of the natural sciences.”

“Really?” Richard asked. “I shall have to send him over some copies from the press, then, if he will enjoy them.” He said it without thinking, then paused. Was that too much to offer for a fake courtship?

But Miss Norman shot him a happy smile. “Oh my goodness, he will love that. I mean, we shall have to make sure the library is well-stocked with provisions before the books are delivered, as once they arrive, I daresay we won’t see him for a week. But it will be a very happy week for him, indeed.”

Richard grinned down at her. “Marvelous. I love another aficionado. That was what sent me in the direction that the press is currently going,” he said. “I am no great mind on the topics, but I have always found the natural sciences to be fascinating. So, when I had the opportunity to decide how the press ought to specialize, I followed my own interests.”

He shrugged. There had been business considerations, too, of course, but his heart had played a role in the choice, though Richard rarely admitted it. It was easy to tell Miss Norman, though.

“Oh, I had wondered why you got into the bookmaking business,” she said. “But a passion for the sciences—that makes sense.”

Richard paused, wondering if he should correct her assumption. On the one hand, she *was* easy to talk to and he *did* wish to be honest. On the other hand, though, he had just sworn to himself that he was going to make this false courtship enjoyable for her, and the real reason he had gotten involved with the printing press was considerably darker and more sordid than the kind of lighthearted entertainment he wished to provide Miss Norman.

“Well,” he hedged, “it was really more of a business opportunity...”

She was already beginning to shoot him a quizzical glance, perhaps noticing some of the tension he knew had colored his tone when he trailed off as a group of young matrons approached. Before Miss Norman could open her mouth to ask a question, he nodded his chin gently toward the approaching coterie, drawing her attention away.

Never before had he felt so grateful for an interruption, especially not one by a group who wore the kind of carefully polite and yet still somehow snide expression that foretold an unpleasant brand of Society gossip.

And, sure enough, when she saw who was approaching, Miss Norman’s posture stiffened.

“Oh my dears, look! It *is* Miss Norman!” called out a very pretty blonde who was wearing a frock that was obviously the

cutting edge of fashion, even to Richard's untrained eye. It was less the dress itself that communicated that message than the way the woman wore it, as if it conferred a certain status upon her.

"Oh, hello there, Mrs. Aglionby," Miss Norman greeted, a brittle edge to her smile. "Lady Arlow. How good to see you."

She did not, Richard noted, sound as though it was good to see them in the least.

The first woman—Mrs. Aglionby, Richard gathered—let out an airy laugh as if Miss Norman had said something very witty.

"Oh, my dear Miss Norman, it *has* been an age!" she exclaimed. "And may I introduce my younger sister-in-law, Mrs. Ipford?"

Miss Norman twitched with tension again. "How do you do?" she said pleasantly to the third woman, a somewhat plain lady whose curls were struggling to stay in their pins.

"Charmed," the lady said, her voice scarcely above a whisper.

"Aggie," continued the blonde, who was obviously the leader of the group, "that is, Mrs. Ipford now, just married the most *charming* gentleman. Didn't you, Aggie dearest? Very well-to-do and refined, for all that he is a younger son."

Miss Norman gave a tight smile but said nothing. Richard watched carefully, evaluating before he reacted. There was evidently some tension here that he didn't quite understand. An odd question of rank, too, given that Mrs. Aglionby—who, judging by her name, had either married a younger son of a lesser nobleman or a man with no title in the family at all—had made a point to mention Mr. Ipford's status.

“How lovely,” Miss Norman murmured. “Felicitations.”

Mrs. Ipford let out a wordless mumble of apparent gratitude.

Miss Norman continued. “Allow me to introduce my companion,” she said, looking as though she wished to be anywhere else in the world. “His Grace, the Duke of Beaumont.”

The three ladies froze, their eyes going wide—even those of the nervous Mrs. Ipford, who had been staring at the ground.

“The... Duke of Beaumont?” echoed Lady Arlow, speaking for the first time. Her voice was extraordinarily high and girlish.

Richard assumed this was his cue. “Indeed. What a pleasure to meet you, ladies.” He bowed over each of their hands in turn. “Are you special friends of Miss Norman, then?”

Something about Miss Norman's expression made him certain that she felt a keen desire to stomp on his foot.

Mrs. Aglionby resumed the reins of the conversation. “Oh, well, we *did* make our debuts together—though that was ages ago, wasn’t it, Miss Norman?”

Ah, Richard thought as the penny dropped. That was the thing he hadn’t understood. These ladies had been gloating because they were married and Miss Norman was not—only now Miss Norman had shown up with a duke who hadn’t been introduced until *after* Mrs. Aglionby had shown that she held great value in rank. Now the woman was attempting to regain control of the situation by pointing out Miss Norman’s age.

It was devious, he had to grant the woman that. Her ultimate goal was unclear, but she was clearly in rugged pursuit of it.

“It was some time ago, yes,” Miss Norman replied mildly. “And now look at you. Wed and with a passel of children. How many is it now? Four? Five?”

Mrs. Aglionby’s smile grew sharp. Evidently, the lady wished to be viewed as an unencumbered young noblewoman, not a mother with a truly remarkable quantity of offspring.

“Yes, we have been blessed,” she said tightly, which, Richard noted, did not answer the question. “But do tell us, dear, how you have come to be in the park, accompanied by such an impressive gentleman?”

She all but fluttered her lashes at Richard. He felt a pang of sympathy for her husband, the father of her four or five children, who likely had no notion that his wife was making eyes at another gentleman.

He used his grip on Miss Norman's arm to tug her closer until his hold was just this side of scandalous.

"I asked, of course," he said with a joking tone that did not reveal his true annoyance. He suddenly felt as though he had a keener understanding as to why Miss Norman had felt compelled to employ subterfuge in order to escape marriage, given that absolutely everyone around her acted as though it was the only objective for women—and that to not achieve such an objective was a gross failure.

"I was lucky enough to make Miss Norman's acquaintance at a ball recently, and I found that, after I left, I simply could not put her out of my mind."

That much was true, at least, but Richard felt it best he not mention why, exactly, he'd been so fascinated by Miss Norman after that ball.

"I called on her at once, and after we enjoyed a lovely garden stroll, we agreed that—" He directed his most charming grin down at Miss Norman. "—well, would you say it's too soon to call it a courtship, Miss Norman? Or dare I be bold?"

One of the ladies—Lady Arlow, he thought—gasped. Mrs. Aglionby looked furious, though she quickly hid it behind her Society mask.

"You are quite bold," Miss Norman murmured, though the teasing hint to her tone suggested not that she was rejecting his claim of their courtship, but that she was flirting with him.

Well done, Richard thought proudly. Not only would that put these rude ladies in their place, but it would cause rumors of an affection between them to spread like wildfire.

“Well, that is just wonderful,” said Mrs. Aglionby, sounding as though she found this entire scenario to be anything but. “I am simply so happy that you have found someone with whom you suit after so long.”

It was a final jab, but it didn't land. They all knew that Miss Norman had won this round.

“That's terribly kind of you, Mrs. Aglionby,” Miss Norman said with dripping sweetness. “And it was *so* lovely to see you again. Do give Mr. Aglionby and the children my best. Goodbye!”

And then, she half dragged Richard away.

They swept past the gaggle of ladies, who looked at them with a series of expressions that suggested that they would be gaping openly at the allegedly courting pair were they just the tiniest bit less well-bred.

Richard let Miss Norman pull him along, strolling with her as if entirely unconcerned with anything except for the woman beside him, but he could not resist one last parting shot.

As they walked away, he turned back to shoot a jaunty wave over his shoulder at the ladies, who still had not moved an inch.

* * *

Teresa only just made it around a bend in the path before she burst out laughing so hard that she had to unlace her arm from the Duke's and brace a hand against her stomach, lest she fall over from the force of her mirth.

She glanced up at the Duke, who was eyeing her with an expression of amused shock. Gradually, he began chuckling as well, then full-on laughing, though he still didn't seem to entirely grasp what they were laughing about, precisely.

"You," Teresa managed to gasp out, "are the most wonderful fake suitor in the *world*."

The Duke beamed down at her. She liked the spark of amusement in his eyes more than she did his serious persona, she decided, though he also wore gravitas well.

"I do aim to provide a full service," he said with a sweeping, grandiose bow that sent Teresa—and, as a result, himself—into fresh peals of laughter.

When they managed to catch their breaths, Teresa daintily wiping under her eyes with the knuckle of her glove, as her eyes had begun to water, the Duke asked, "I am curious, though—what was all that even about?"

Teresa opened her mouth to answer, but he held up his hand. "To clarify," he continued, "I did get the gist of it. They wanted to mock you for being unmarried. But what I don't understand is *why*."

“Well,” said Teresa, looping her arm back through his so they could continue their promenade. “I daresay the reason you don’t fully understand it is that it is absolutely absurd.”

She thought back to her debut.

“Everina Courtenay—that is, now Everina Aglionby—Julia Piedmont, now Lady Arlow, and I all debuted together. The two of them are distant cousins. We weren’t particular friends. Everina was considered the jewel of the Season, and I was...” She grimaced. Settling into one’s spinsterhood was one thing, but remembering the denigration of others was another thing entirely. “Not.”

The Duke gave a disbelieving *harrumph*, which Teresa found to be a tactful show of loyalty from her false suitor.

“However, Everina’s courtships all fizzled out before any proposal could materialize. Meanwhile, she, still convinced that she was *the one* out of all of us destined to marry above her untitled father’s station, shunned younger brothers and those without titles.”

“Which I suppose did not end well, given that she is now *Mrs.* Aglionby,” the Duke supplied.

“It did not,” Teresa confirmed. “At least not according to how Everina saw things. It took her three Seasons to receive a proposal, and by that time, her cousin was already married *and* titled.”

“But why,” asked the Duke, sounding genuinely baffled, “does that have anything to do with you? You aren’t married. It wasn’t as though you snatched up some fellow she had her eye on.”

Teresa sighed, considering how to explain this. The problem, she thought, was that while young men often dreaded the marriage mart, given the eager young ladies and grasping mamas that lay in wait in the dressed-up dance halls of Society ballrooms, they didn’t really understand *why* those ladies, both young and old, were acting thusly.

“At the risk of belaboring our metaphor further,” she said finally, “do you remember that mud I referenced earlier?”

“Of course.”

“Well, imagine that it isn’t a single patch of mud at all. It’s an entire bog. And, for the entirety of your life, you’ve been told that you ought to go stand in the bog, usually by people who are already sunk in up to their necks. But there are so many of them, and they’re *all* saying how wonderful it is in the bog, how the bog is the only place to be, how anyone who isn’t in the bog is simply dreadful. They unearth those poor, preserved bodies and say, ‘La! What a wonderful time she had in the bog!’”

The Duke nodded slowly. “And since you are not in the bog, so to speak, they resent you.”

“Yes,” agreed Teresa. “And worse—I become a symbol of someone who may *never* get to enjoy the bog. Like a ghoul or a devil or something. So, the only way to show that they are

not like me—were never like me, not even when they were waiting for that coveted proposal—is to exhibit the kind of behavior you just saw.” She waved a hand vaguely over her shoulder.

“That’s preposterous,” said the Duke. “*But*,” he added before Teresa could protest, “I can also see how it could become... tempting.”

“Fitting in is so often easier than standing out,” Teresa affirmed.

The Duke thought about that for a long moment as they strolled through the park, the fresh scent of dew evaporating off greenery entirely blocking out the more complex—and often less pleasant—scents of the city. Teresa had spent summers in the country as a child—her father had liked the sport, the shooting and hiking that could only be done in wilder areas than this—and the smell of St. Regent’s Park always brought her back to that idyllic time.

She didn’t mind the quiet of the Duke’s contemplative mood and simply enjoyed the atmosphere as they strolled along, though she did have to force herself to ignore the curious looks of various passersby.

“Alas,” said the Duke eventually. “Once again, I am forced to confront an eternal reality. If there is a situation I find uncomfortable, it is no doubt thrice so for ladies.”

“You don’t say,” Teresa commented dryly, prompting a wry chuckle from him.

“But,” he went on with emphasis, “I think we should make it part of our plot to work *with* such assumptions rather than against them.”

Teresa’s mouth quirked into a quick frown. “Explain, please.”

“Well,” he said. “If you are a marital curse, let’s make you an utter marital curse—eventually,” he added. “But first, I am going to become absolutely, utterly, positively besotted with you.”

He said these last words as he looked down at her, his honeyed hazel eyes intense. Teresa had to swallow hard.

“Explain, please,” she said again, aiming for a tone lighter than the one she had achieved.

The Duke grinned, and the force of the moment was gone. Teresa could breathe again.

“I am going to become so deeply enamored with you that it positively shocks the ton,” he elaborated. He affected a high, nasal voice that Teresa supposed was meant to imitate an elderly gossip. ““Oh, dearie me, how that Duke of Beaumont does *dote* on Miss Norman,”” he said. ““The dear girl has *positively* struck gold.””

“You have the most remarkable opinion of yourself.”

He grinned again, and his voice returned to normal. “I was projecting, Miss Norman. You may have noticed, but Society

is positively mad for dukes.”

“I have heard such thing once or twice,” she quipped.

“In any case, I shall gaze at you adoringly, refuse to be torn from your side, et cetera, et cetera. And then, when everyone is simply on the edge of their seats, waiting for a proposal—and your other suitor has amenably vanished into the woods —”

“The *woods*?” she interjected. The Duke waved her off.

“—amenably vanished into some place more likely to be found within London’s city limits, we shall just, very mysteriously—” He paused dramatically. “—stop courting.”

Teresa was skeptical. “How does this make me the ghost of spinsterhood, again?”

“If you couldn’t manage to land a man who was rich, titled, and obsessed with you, what other man is likely to have a chance?”

Teresa was not entirely convinced by his logic. This skepticism must have shown on her face because he kept explaining.

“When everyone is just gasping for gossip on the situation, I will drop hints that I came on too strong or something like that, and shall quietly, and in apparent misery, bury myself in my work. Nobody will expect me to marry for years after my

supposed heartbreak, which will give me a nice reprieve, and you will be a legend of unmarriageable ladies everywhere.”

The plan had some sound points, especially the one where he benefitted. Teresa was beginning to feel faintly guilty that he was willing to do all this work almost exclusively for her. Except...

“I don’t want to be a legend. I just want to quietly live my life without people bothering me about matrimony.”

“You will be a temporary legend,” he amended swiftly. “You know perfectly well how fickle Society gossip can be.”

That was... true.

“And,” he added, the word dangling like a carrot in front of a horse reluctant to pull its cart, “it will *really* annoy those ladies back there, and all others like them.”

Teresa raised an eyebrow at him. “You were saving that one, weren’t you?”

“Perhaps.” His smile broke free. “Very well, yes. Perhaps it is petty of me, but I found it quite irritating how rude they were to you, when you’ve done absolutely nothing to deserve it.”

Teresa knew she shouldn’t warm to that protective comment, but she did anyway. It was so nice to have an ally.

She was already prepared to agree to this development in their little scheme, but a glance down the lane in the direction where they were walking cemented her resolve.

“All right,” she said hastily. “I agree with your idea. But we have to start right now.”

“I—what?” the Duke asked, just as Teresa called out gaily, “Oh, my Lord Archinton! How nice to see you!”

The Duke, to his credit, scarcely so much as twitched as the Earl of Archinton approached them, a surprised expression quickly giving way to a charming smile as he took in Teresa, arm-in-arm with the Duke.

“Miss Norman,” the Earl said warmly. “How nice to see you, as well. Are you enjoying the fine weather this morning?”

“I am,” she agreed. Goodness, this kind of polite chitchat was so *boring* and so *useless*. She could only imagine how much the members of the ton could collectively accomplish in a day if they dispensed with such foolish niceties. “We have found the day to be particularly lovely. Speaking of, allow me to present to you His Grace, the Duke of Beaumont.”

If the Duke had been giving her flirtatious glances when they'd been in conversation with Mrs. Aglionby and her group, the way he was regarding her now was downright heated. Teresa did a double take when she saw him regarding her as though he were having delicious, wicked thoughts. Though she knew the expression to be nothing more than an act for the Earl of Archinton's benefit, she still felt a shiver run down her spine and a blush cross her cheeks.

Lord, too bad the man is a duke. He would have broken hearts on the stage.

When the Duke looked up at the Earl, he somehow managed to make the expression dismissive, even as he reached out and shook the Earl's proffered hand. "Pleasure, Archinton. How do you know the lovely Miss Norman here?"

Already his gaze was back on Teresa, his eyes crinkling as he gave her a fond smile. Her breath hitched.

"Well," said the Earl, causing both the Duke and Teresa to snap their gazes back toward him. She'd half-forgotten he was there as she looked at the brown and gold flecks in the Duke's eyes. "I had the pleasure of paying Miss Norman a social call earlier in the week."

The Duke arched a single eyebrow. Truly, was there some acting blood in the Beaumont line? No, certainly not. Teresa's mother no doubt would have informed her of a scandal of that magnitude before letting her know about the man's expansive botanical gardens.

"Oh?" he said after just a beat too long spent merely regarding the Earl.

Lord Archinton was either oblivious or far braver than Teresa had given him credit for. "Indeed," he said jovially. "She's a wonderful girl, so I had hoped to take her for a promenade myself one of these days—still do," he added, looking at Teresa.

Teresa might have objected to being called a “girl.” She was five and twenty, for goodness’ sake! Except, her objection to the terminology was quickly lost, because, at that moment, the Earl of Archinton reached out and *grabbed* her arm.

She stared down at where his hand clasped her. She’d scarcely have been more shocked if the man had started doing a jig right there in the middle of the path.

It wasn’t as though the touch itself was particularly intimate—the Earl was wearing gloves, and she had the sleeve of her light spencer covering her. The location of the touch was likewise socially acceptable—men and women walked arm-in-arm every day.

But he hadn’t offered his arm and waited for her to take it, as was customary and polite. No, he had just reached out and *grabbed* her.

She didn’t like it.

The Duke of Beaumont, evidently, *really* did not like it.

“I say,” he said, the crisp iciness in his tone a sharp contrast to his friendly words. “Do remove your hand from Miss Norman, Archinton. Posthaste. Or else I shall remove it for you.”

Teresa changed her assessment of Lord Archinton from *brave or oblivious* to *brave or stupid* because the man did not remove his hand from her arm. Should she jerk it away? She was tempted to jerk it away. But that didn’t seem like the kind

of attention she and the Duke wanted, and the park was crowded with people who would spread the incident far and wide.

The Earl, however, in a failure to gauge the temperature of the interaction so acute that it boggled the mind, *laughed*.

“A bit possessive there, eh, my friend?” He chortled. “Rather quick for such a thing, don’t you think?”

The Duke did not laugh. “No,” he said shortly, the word blunt enough to break glass.

Teresa swallowed nervously as the Duke stared, nearly unblinking, at the Earl until Lord Archinton slowly, as he might do when confronted with a wild animal, withdrew his hand. Before she could stop herself, she angled herself away from another potential grab. The Duke, noting the movement, tucked her in closer to his side.

Lord Archinton laughed again, but this time, the sound was more nervous.

“I suppose you win the day, there, eh, Beaumont? But never fear.” He shook a mock-stern finger in Teresa’s direction. She barely held back her grimace. “I’m not giving up yet, Miss Norman. Do be prepared for that.”

He tipped his hat and jauntily walked away, leaving Teresa feeling like his parting words had been more of a warning than perhaps he had intended.

CHAPTER 6



*R*ichard did all he could to bite back a smile when Miss Norman arrived at their next outing with a chaperone that was, at Richard's best guess, seven thousand years old. The woman, who wore the neat cap and simple dress of a servant, blinked impassively as the hustle and bustle of the menagerie, which was crowded with children and their exhausted parents, swarmed around her. He watched Miss Norman look around and enjoyed the spark of recognition in her eyes when she caught sight of him leaning against a lamppost. Her smile was bright as she headed toward him.

He was beginning, he was forced to admit to himself after that infuriating encounter with the Earl of Archinton, to feel a bit protective of Miss Norman. In a friendly way, no doubt, he hastened to remind himself every time he thought of how he'd wanted to break the man's fingers for daring to touch her when she clearly hadn't been receptive to such a thing.

He'd simply... never been friends with a woman before. Gently bred young ladies were not encouraged to enter into friendships with young gentlemen, and young gentlemen were generally advised to avoid young ladies whom they did not intend to marry like the plague, lest the noose of matrimony slip around one's neck sooner than one might wish.

Women were not entirely foreign to him, of course. He had sisters. Not, he thought with a mental shudder, that he thought of Miss Norman as a sister. That was a notion too horrifying to even contemplate.

However, he rationalized, certainly Miss Norman's status as a member of the fairer sex accounted for his protective feelings around her when he did not, for example, feel the same impulse when it came to Percy, Joseph, or—God forbid—Seth, whom he still owed a wallop.

Everything could no doubt be explained by the novelty of the situation. He felt a measure of protectiveness toward the women in his life, and Miss Norman was a woman in his life, ergo it was *eminently reasonable* that he wished to look out for her. As a friend. Which accounted, he told himself as she approached, pleased with his logic, for the pulse of happiness he felt whenever they encountered one another.

“Good day, Your Grace,” she said, bobbing a quick curtsy as she drew near.

He bowed in return. Somehow, even that simple act felt more fun with Miss Norman than it did with other young ladies. “Good day, Miss Norman. Are you ready to explore the wilds of the animal kingdom?”

“Quite,” she agreed, her mouth twisting into a smile at his grandiose tone. He liked that twisty little smile.

The Tower of London menagerie was an odd place with a long history, though its grounds had only become open to the public in recent years. As a result, the place was a popular

destination, particularly for the middle class, who enjoyed the cache of visiting a place that had, for so long, been restricted to royal access only.

Even with its teeming crowds, though, Richard liked it as a place to show off his continuing relationship with Miss Norman. It was public enough that they'd likely encounter someone who recognized them, thus perpetuating their farce, but not so frequented by members of the ton that it would be obvious that they were *trying* to be seen. It struck, in his opinion, a perfect balance.

Additionally, he liked the anonymity brought on by the crowd. He and Miss Norman could discuss whatever they liked without fear of being overheard, given the roaring of the large cats over by the tower of the lions, the gleeful squealing and shouting of children, and the merchants calling out prices for food and other wares.

"You brought a chaperone today," he noted as she took his arm and they began winding through the menagerie, the ancient woman doddering along behind them at a respectable distance. "I thought ladies of your advanced years were beyond such things."

Even from the side, he could detect her eye roll. He'd realized that Miss Norman was sensitive about her age, though not in the direction that people might expect, and not in the direction that those awful ladies in the park had obviously deemed correct. No, Miss Norman wasn't embarrassed by her supposedly advanced years. She was proud of them.

After hearing her describe the way marriage sucked ladies in, leaving them few other choices for how to organize their lives, he felt he could understand her self-satisfaction at having spent

so many years avoiding the lure of the altar. Indeed, he knew many gentlemen who felt the same.

“Alas,” she drawled, “my mother insisted. Apparently, she thinks I’m liable to fall into the lion pit. Though what she expects poor Tillie to do about such an event, I couldn’t say. The woman is a dear, but she is just a touch past her prime and refuses to take a pension. She’s worked for our family for years.”

Centuries, more like.

Aloud, though, Richard said, “And your mother doesn’t trust me to protect you from the beasts? I’m wounded.”

“Don’t make that joke in front of her,” Miss Norman chided, laughing quietly. “She’ll expire on the spot.”

He laughed in return, then quickly tugged her out of the way of a small child, who threatened to careen into Miss Norman’s legs and spatter his cup of shaved ice all over her.

“My hero,” Miss Norman said as they watched the little boy’s harried mother chase after him, another baby on her hip.

Richard felt that stab of pleasure again.

Friends like to rescue friends, he reminded himself, even though he had never once attempted to rescue one of his male friends from anything, and had instead usually laughed his

head off while they fumbled their own way out of any minor misfortune.

Whirling her away from the child's potential mess had brought her closer to him, her arm pressed tightly between his own arm and his side. He didn't loosen his grip. She didn't tug away.

That was their plan, he remembered. He was to seem deeply, passionately in love, and she was to allow it. A smarter man, he thought, would have come up with a reason for her to flirt with him in return—who didn't enjoy the flattering attentions of a pretty woman... even if she was just a friend? But his amendment to their original agreement had been born of pique more than good sense, and he hadn't been able to think of a reason for their supposed courtship to end if they were *both* besotted with one another.

Even so, he allowed himself to enjoy the warm press of her body against his as they walked together, touching somewhat more than was *strictly* appropriate, though all but the stodgiest members of Society would consider the crowd at the menagerie a suitable excuse for such an oversight. She smelled lovely, too, he noted. Soft and clean and with a hint of citrus. Certainly, the aroma was far more pleasant than that of the wild animals' leavings, which permeated the air no matter how diligently the keepers cleaned up after them.

They passed the lions and tigers who were, disappointingly, sleeping in their enclosure, before heading over to see the giant, wrinkly elephant. When the enormous beast trumpeted out its song, Miss Norman jumped with a tiny squeak that brought her fully into the embrace of his arms. Then, she laughed at her own alarm.

“My goodness!” she exclaimed, looking up at him, mirth shining in her emerald eyes. “I don’t know why I’m so surprised—I mean, look at the size of him—but that was far louder than I anticipated.”

“Have you never been to the menagerie before?” he asked.

They were still standing scandalously close. If she breathed heavily, her breasts would brush against the fitted wool of his jacket. He found himself absently hoping that the elephant would blow its long nose again and make Miss Norman gasp.

She shook her head, her curls bobbing merrily. “I haven’t, actually. I suppose it’s one of those things—when you’re nearby and feel you can go at any time, you end up never going at all.”

He nodded. “That makes sense. I think I had been in possession of the title for, oh, I want to say three or four years before I ever journeyed to Vauxhall Gardens, and I was living in London nearly full-time for all those years.”

Her eyes flashed. “Truly? My dear Duke, you cannot go about admitting such things. Your reputation shall never survive it.”

He chuckled.

Vauxhall Gardens was well-known for its scandalous encounters, as the risqué performances and the many dark corners in the pleasure gardens created an abundant landscape for less-than-proper behavior. Richard had to admit that the place was fun, though it was more the kind of thing that

appealed to Seth than him. He'd visited a few times since that first trip—which had been, in fact, at Seth's behest—but had never felt compelled to become a more frequent visitor. His traitorous mind, however, flashed to the thought of Miss Norman's face, lit by the hundreds of candles that illuminated the nighttime gardens, as she gasped and blushed at the sights and delights the gardens had to offer.

Flirting aggressively to show his affection for her was one thing, though, and taking her to Vauxhall was another thing entirely. Though she did not wish to have a reputation as a marriageable lady, he did not think she wished for her reputation to be entirely ruined, which was certainly the fate of an unmarried lady seen parading around Vauxhall with a gentleman. Best to put such things from his mind.

He ducked his head toward Miss Norman. "Can I trust you to keep my secret?"

To his disappointment, she stepped back in order to press a hand to her chest. Perhaps it was for the best, however, as his body (which had not received the message that Miss Norman was to be his *friend only*) had begun to respond to her nearness.

"I shall take it to my grave," she vowed solemnly.

He took her arm in his once more and then moved away from the giant, clomping beasts to see what other intrigue the menagerie had to offer. As they moved toward some of the smaller animals, Richard wondered if Miss Norman wasn't perhaps holding *him* a bit closer, as well. His suspicion was confirmed when they reached the enclosure where the monkeys were kept. Even as she stared at them in wide-eyed fascination, she stood close enough in front of him that the

back of her skirts grazed the toes of his boots—even though there was plenty of room for her to step closer to the enclosure and get a nearer look at the animals that had so captured her attention.

“They are remarkable,” she breathed as she regarded two of the little creatures wrestling and playing with one another. “Look at their faces! And their hands! They are uncannily similar to people and yet entirely different.”

“Some natural scientists believe that humans and apes actually share a common ancestor if one goes back thousands and thousands of years,” he said. “My press published a treatise on it a few years back. There was a fantastic uproar over it, as it rather contradicts what the Bible tells us to believe about the origin of mankind.”

“Yes, I can see that,” Miss Norman murmured distractedly, though he didn’t know if she meant the theory itself or the reaction to it.

She was standing so close that one of her curls fluttered slightly every time he breathed. The fine-spun gold of her hair was lovely, especially so close, but its nearness was similarly a form of torture when he could not, under any circumstances, reach out and touch the golden ringlet.

Friends can have pretty hair, he told himself with gritted teeth.

As it happened, however, he didn’t even know the meaning of torture until Miss Norman bent over to get a closer look at one of the monkeys, who had approached the fence with a stick in

its hand, which it was brandishing in a manner remarkably like a person holding a sword.

Richard did not notice the little creature in the slightest, though, as the shift in posture brought the soft, round curve of Miss Norman's backside within inches of the front of the placket of his trousers.

Instantly, all the blood left his brain to travel elsewhere in his body, leaving him scrambling to think of how he ought to react to this change in their circumstances.

While he suspected she had been flirting back with him earlier, likely due to a miscommunication in the plan as to whom, precisely, was meant to be smitten with whom, he *knew* with certainty that she did not realize how compromising their current position was.

He should move. The gentlemanly thing to do would be to take a step back, put some distance between them. Except, what if he did so and it drew the attention of others nearby? There was a middle-aged couple standing only a few paces away who seemed as though they were likely to be members of Society, based on the fine cut and fabric of their clothes. Richard didn't recognize them, but that didn't mean they wouldn't recognize him—or Miss Norman.

Perhaps stepping away wasn't the best course of action, he thought, even as a clearly misinformed voice in the back of his mind chimed in that *of course* stepping away wasn't the best course of action, as such a thing would put distance between himself and Miss Norman's appealing form.

Besides, if he did, would she realize and be embarrassed? What if he *didn't* step away, though, and then she realized and was embarrassed *and* angry that he had been so forward? Except he hadn't really done anything, had he? Or was not doing something just as bad, in cases like this?

First, he decided, he needed to get himself under control so that he could think. That would help. He tried to think of unappealing things. Reading bills on proposed changes in tax rates. Getting a head cold. That time he'd stepped on a snail as a boy and it had been crushed beneath his heel, the shell shards piercing his foot and the body of the poor, unfortunate creature squelching unpleasantly into the cuts.

“In fact,” he said, his voice too loud or too soft or too something as Miss Norman cooed at the tiny animal, who was basking under her attention, waving its little stick to and fro. What had they been discussing? Oh, yes, the uproar over the natural scientist's theory. That was suitably un-amorous. “We feared briefly that someone would attempt to burn down the press in retribution.”

This got Miss Norman's attention. She gasped and stood, whirling around. Her hands ended up pressed against his chest as she peered up at him in alarm. Whatever success his unpleasant memories had worked in controlling his body evaporated. He tensed every muscle.

“They didn't, though, did they?” she asked, patting her hands absently against him as if she were checking him for harm.

He chuckled—the sound came out like a choking cough. “No, no, they didn't,” he reassured her. And then, when he could take it no longer, the war between his idiot mind and his traitorous body getting the best of him, he grasped her hands

in his and took a step back. “No harm was done, neither to person nor property.”

“Thank goodness,” Miss Norman said, squeezing her fingers against his.

Friends worried about friends, he reminded himself. She wasn't flirting or making advances or knowingly pressing closer to him or—

She licked her bottom lip, then gently bit it.

Oh, very well, then. He was doomed.

“I hate to think about you getting hurt,” she continued. Was her voice lower? It sounded lower.

“Ah, thank you,” he said.

They'd stood this close in the library. He'd resisted then, too, before giving in. Except no, no, he *had* to continue resisting, because this wasn't an anonymous encounter in the dark any longer. This was his *friend*, Miss Norman, with whom he had a plan that very clearly forbade any of the things that his body was currently putting forth as very, very good ideas.

“Shall we continue?” he asked.

It was only when that twisty little smile made its appearance on Miss Norman's face and her gaze—for only the barest of

seconds—flashed down toward his mouth that he realized that his words could very easily be construed as having a double meaning.

“Let’s,” she said, her voice breathy.

With a feeling faintly like desperation, he glanced back at poor old Tillie, who was dozing on a nearby bench.

“Should we, ah, alert your chaperone?” he asked, a halfhearted attempt to pull himself away from the course his body was charting.

Miss Norman didn’t even glance in the elderly servant’s direction.

“I think she’s earned a rest, don’t you?”

This was bad. Richard knew it was bad. He shouldn’t be doing it, he should be staying strong, he should be resisting.

But, Lord above, he didn’t want to.

“She certainly has,” he heard himself agree. “We’ll return for her later.”

“Splendid,” murmured Miss Norman as they continued along the path.

They wove through the increasingly bare areas of the menagerie, where the less interesting animals were kept, until they reached an area where there were no animals at all, merely trees and ancient buildings, looming ominously in all their terrible historical splendor. If Richard needed another reason that this was *not at all* what he should be doing, the setting would have provided it. The Tower of London was far from the kind of picturesque romantic setting that one would imagine for a dalliance.

He didn't care. He was quite certain that Miss Norman didn't care, either.

The noise of the crowds faded behind them, and they came to a place where the path veered in two directions, one looping back the way they'd come, the other heading into a small copse of trees. Miss Norman paused before the tree-lined path.

"If we go that way," he warned, honor demanding it even as his heart racing in his chest scolded him for it, "we'll be quite out of the eyeline of the people at the menagerie." He tried to make it sound cautionary. It did not emerge as such.

Miss Norman smiled. "I know," she said.

And then, she stepped into the trees.

* * *

Teresa had *no bleeding idea* what she was doing.

Or, rather, she did know exactly what she was doing. She was, very deliberately, luring the Duke of Beaumont to an

abandoned area so that she could, hopefully, kiss him with vigor.

She just didn't know *why* she was doing it.

Except that was a lie too. She was doing it because she wanted to, very badly. So, perhaps the real question was: *had she lost her mind?*

Only—and she was driving herself even more mad with this absurd back and forth—she knew the answer to that, too. She had indeed lost her mind.

And she couldn't bring herself to care.

Oh, she *had* tried to put the library debacle out of her mind.

Except she hadn't tried particularly *hard*, as their time at the menagerie had shown all too well. When they'd gotten close, she'd let him pull her closer—or maybe she'd pulled him closer—had let herself be swept into his arms when she'd been startled by the elephant and had lingered there too long. She'd flirted and felt a thrill when he'd flirted back.

She had been *temporarily* distracted by the monkeys, with their sweet faces and their clever little fingers, but when the Duke had reported that he'd been in peril—even only hypothetical peril, and one that was long in the past, in any case—she'd felt a disproportionate sense of alarm.

She'd whirled, animal friends forgotten, and pressed her hands to the Duke's firm, strong chest. And then left them there.

It had been entirely inappropriate, and she didn't regret it a bit.

So, when she had hinted—and he had hinted—and she had gone along—and he had gone along in step...

It had been a terrible decision. A terrible, wonderful, delightful, exciting decision.

She turned to face him as she backed slowly away, a smile on her face as she moved further into the little cluster of trees that made the raucous sounds of the menagerie fade away like they were in another world.

"Miss Norman," the Duke said, his voice low with warning. But he was matching her, step for step, moving forward as she moved back.

"Your Grace," she shot back.

For the first time, Teresa was learning that flirting was *fun*. She'd long viewed it as a dangerous sport, one that could easily end up in matrimony if one didn't take the utmost care. But this? This was delightful, because it *felt* dangerous, particularly as the Duke prowled toward her like one of the enormous cats they'd seen earlier in the day, a wicked, seductive smile on his face. At the same time, though, she felt perfectly safe.

She trusted this man, she realized with a sensation like a rock dropping into deep water. The trust was there, deep at the core of her, which meant they could play with fire as much as they wanted, without risking getting burnt.

“You seem to have lured me to your lair, Miss Norman,” the Duke murmured and *ooh*, she liked that, too, liked the implication that she was the dangerous one. She was the hunter.

“Have I?” she asked airily, making a show of glancing around her. “Oh, dear, it seems I have.”

She stepped back. He stepped forward.

“Has anyone ever told you, Miss Norman, that you are trouble?”

“Me?” She pressed an innocent hand of protestation to her chest.

The Duke’s gaze followed the movement, and heat flared in his eyes. Teresa felt a blush spread across her cheeks at the heightened realization that he found her person very tempting, indeed.

“I am but a plain old spinster, knitting over in the corner, bothering nothing and nobody.”

A step back. A step forward.

“Ha,” said the Duke, the syllable dripping with dark humor. “My dear Miss Norman, I have never heard a sentence so dense with falsehoods.”

Forward. Back. Forward. Then forward again. She could see the different colored flecks in his eyes now.

“Much as you may flaunt your advanced years, we both know there is nothing elderly about you. As for plain? I am afraid you shall have to seek a blind man if you wish to put forth that claim. A man would have to have no eyes at all to miss your loveliness.”

Teresa knew this was part of the game they were playing, but even so, she felt a flush of pleasure at the compliment.

The Duke continued speaking. “If you’ve ever spent a day knitting, I’ll eat my hat, and as for bothering nothing and nobody?”

She took a final step back. Her spine pressed against the rough bark of a tree. A triumphant grin lit the Duke’s face as he approached, one, two strides, until he was scant inches from her, his hand pressed against the trunk above her head.

“I think you know you have torn through my life like a tempest. I am, as it happens, decidedly bothered.”

And then, the wicked smile staying on his face until the very last second, he pressed his lips to hers.

Kissing him in the library had been pleasant and thrilling after the initial awkwardness. Now, however, Teresa lit up like a flame, the heat of his mouth against hers igniting in an instant. She gasped, and his mouth was still there, open now, his head slanting slightly to press even more firmly against hers. Teresa's hands clutched at his shoulders, drawing him even closer to her, and his free hand cupped her jaw.

She didn't know if she was driven by memory or instinct as she tentatively let her tongue trace against the bottom seam of his lip, relishing the shudder that coursed through him as she did so. He leaned into her more heavily, crushing her pleasantly between the hard planes of his body and the coarse tree bark.

The day had been warm enough that she'd worn a dress with short sleeves, and the natural texture jabbed at the space between her cuffs and her gloves. The sharp bite, rather than distract from her pleasure, seemed to augment it; when the tree snapped back at her, her body instinctually leaned further into the Duke's warm embrace, the soft wool of his coat, the fine lawn of his shirt.

The heady heat of his skin.

"God, woman, but you are maddening," he murmured as he moved his mouth away from hers, to kiss across to her jaw, then to nip at a sensitive point on her throat just below her ear, before repeating the journey back again.

The words did not feel even remotely like an insult.

“I’m harmless,” she said again, chuckling, loving their little game.

“Harmless, my right arse,” he grumbled, and the obscenity made her laugh hard, right into his mouth, like she was a boy hearing his first swear and delighting at the adulthood of it.

Except she didn’t feel even remotely childlike or masculine at this moment. No, she was a woman, her softness just right for the Duke’s hardness, the places where they were touching—which, Teresa realized with a flutter in her chest, was nearly everywhere, despite the many layers of clothing separating them—molding perfectly to one another.

She wanted to offer a saucy reply, but his tongue tangled with hers, and her response was lost in the low groan of her moan as it ripped free from her throat. She just felt... so good. The touching, the taste, and smell of him, crisp like autumn air and comforting like a roaring fire. The closeness that she felt at this moment. It was simply all so marvelous.

This was the best idea Teresa had ever had.

The Duke’s hand dropped from where it rested against the tree, causing his forehead to press more firmly against hers as he readjusted his weight. He moved both hands to clasp her waist, and Teresa could feel the heat of his touch through her clothes. She had the mad, wild, reckless wonder about how his touch would feel directly against her skin.

Even just the thought caused the flames in her body, which she hadn’t thought could soar any higher without actually burning her, to flare up, to crackle beneath her skin. Almost without

her permission, her fingers crept closer to his neck, itching to untie his cravat, to reveal more of him to her—

“Oi, watcha think’s down this way?” came the sharp cry of a Cockney-accented youth—from far too close by.

Teresa and the Duke ripped away from each other as if they’d been hit by lightning, and then froze with bated breath, not making a sound.

“Ain’t nothing over there,” a gruff man’s voice returned at a slightly farther distance. “Jus’ some trees.”

“C’mon, Tommy,” a woman’s voice added. “Let’s go see the animals.”

“Maybe there is something,” Tommy wheedled, his voice growing momentarily closer.

Teresa felt her eyes widen in alarm. It would not precisely be a *disaster* to be discovered by some unknown child and his parents, but it would certainly be *uncomfortable*.

“I been workin’ here for years, ain’t I?” returned the man. “So, I knows as well as anybody that over there’s a tree and over here’s a lion. Which one you want to see, eh?”

“A’right, fine,” Tommy said, his voice growing fainter even as he spoke. Teresa let out a breath. “Let’s go see them giant cats, I s’pose...”

As the danger passed, Teresa felt a nervous giggle bubble up in her, but she suppressed it when she saw the Duke's aghast expression.

"Miss Norman," he said, none of the desire that he'd previously possessed remaining in his tone. "I'm so sorry—this was—"

"Stop," she demanded.

Embarrassment flooded her. Did he regret their actions? He'd seemed to enjoy them enough while they had been in the midst of passion, but perhaps this was just another case where she had thrown herself at him. How mortifying to contemplate.

"No," he said, "Miss Norman, it isn't—"

"Stop," she said again. She couldn't bear to listen to his explanations. She simply could not bear it. "You're right. We agreed we wouldn't do anything like this. I apologize. Now, let's go retrieve my chaperone."

And she stalked out of the trees, her head held high—alone, the way she was always meant to be.

CHAPTER 7



No flirting.

Richard repeated the order to himself as he waited in his rarely used box at the opera. If he did one thing tonight, it was to make it through the performance without flirting, casting desirous eyes at or touching Miss Teresa Norman, who had come to plague his every thought.

For Christ's sake, he couldn't believe she'd even agreed to come on this outing with him tonight, not after his deplorable behavior at the menagerie. Of all the reckless, stupid, idiotic things he'd done, that one was remarkably high on the list.

Certainly, he'd known Miss Norman was interested in a bit of kissing when they'd drifted off to that enclosed cluster of trees. He'd been happy to accommodate, despite their bargain to not engage in any such behavior—made when calmer heads were making the decisions, evidently. What she had not agreed to was getting mauled against a tree—a *bloody tree*. Even if she did not seek to find her romantic encounters in the comfort of a marriage bed, she deserved better than a goddamned *tree*.

She deserved better than *him*.

He should have known that he, a man whose blood heated too easily, who had a temper in his veins, would not have been able to resist the siren's call of her soft embrace. He should have known he would take things too far. He was the more experienced one, and it should have been up to him to remember to set limits, to hold back.

Instead, he'd groped her until they'd nearly been interrupted by some lad named Tommy who had an unhealthy curiosity about foliage.

She hadn't even let him apologize—not that he blamed her. What good would an apology have done her? All it would have done was make him feel better, which he didn't deserve, not after he'd displayed such despicable behavior.

He'd had to discreetly pluck two leaves from her hair before they had made it back to the main crowd of the menagerie, for goodness' sake. It was not the kind of treatment that a gently bred lady deserved.

When he had written to invite her to the theater this evening, he'd only barely squelched the instinct to attempt another apology. She'd made herself perfectly clear on *that* front, so he could at least accept her wishes.

Even so, he'd felt a frisson of relief when she'd accepted his invitation... until he remembered that she needed his assistance, which made him feel even more wretched about pressing his attentions upon her.

He was, he thought again despondently, the mud. Or, where had they left their metaphor? A bog?

In either case, he certainly *felt* like dirt.

He straightened his cuffs and sat up straight in his seat as he awaited the arrival of Miss Norman and her family at the theater. The past was the past. He would make his poor behavior up to her by acting the perfect gentleman tonight.

And by ceasing thoughts of the throaty little moan she had let out when he'd nipped at that soft spot on her neck, the way she'd arched up into him, seemingly without realizing it—

No. No. That was exactly what he was *not* thinking about.

Just as he struggled to get his thoughts in check, a theater attendant swept open the curtain to Richard's box, admitting Miss Norman, the Dowager Viscountess of Dorshire, and the Viscount of Dorshire, all dressed in their evening best. Richard shot to his feet and greeted them with a bow, starting with the Dowager Viscountess.

"Lady Dorshire." He turned to the brother. "Lord Dorshire." He faced Miss Norman, who was looking unbearably lovely in an evening frock of bottle green.

He knew she'd be pleased by the color, which was too saturated to be acceptable for a younger unmarried lady. Debutantes and ladies in their first few Seasons tended to wear pastels and white exclusively. Looking at her now, Richard realized he'd never seen Miss Norman wear such a faint shade.

He couldn't imagine that they would flatter her any more than the rich hues she preferred, which made her golden hair look more luminous, and her unblemished complexion look creamier, and her green eyes shine brighter—

Which were all things he had vowed to *stop noticing*.

Even so, he could not resist a quick compliment. “Miss Norman,” he said, bowing over her hand. “You look beautiful, as always.”

Her cheeks flushed. She flushed so easily, a trait that Richard never would have thought he'd find charming. And yet, he did. Every time, it made him wonder where else she might blush, how far that rosy flush would spread down her—

Christ, he was incorrigible.

He forced himself away from Miss Norman. “You, too, are looking very well, Lady Dorshire,” he added. See? He could compliment a lady without getting all flustered.

“Oh, thank you, Your Grace,” the older woman said, a hand fluttering to her updo.

Like her daughter, the Dowager Viscountess had golden hair, though her coiffure was shot through with a few lines of silver. She only cast Richard a spare glance before returning to gaze back at the stage in evident excitement. “And thank you so much for inviting us tonight. I do so love the theater—Teresa may have mentioned.”

“I am very pleased to have you,” he said. “Have you seen *Le Mariage de Figaro* already, or is this your first time?”

“Oh,” said the Dowager Viscountess, laughing. “I’ve already seen it twice this Season. But it is one of those remarkable operas that becomes even more engaging every time you see it, so I’m quite looking forward to tonight’s performance. I have heard there is a new soprano playing Susanna who is supposed to be simply marvelous.”

Richard grinned, charmed by her excitement. Though he knew Miss Norman and her mother had some conflicting viewpoints regarding marriage, he also knew that Miss Norman loved her mother very much—it was evident in her very being when she spoke about the older woman. He’d seen the same kind of fond exasperation between his sisters and his mother when they’d been in conflict over this thing or that. It was the kind of safe conflict that had so long been absent from other parts of his family.

But he didn’t want *those* kinds of thoughts to interrupt his evening, either.

“Then you must sit in the front,” he said, gesturing to where the box’s seats were arranged in two rows. “You are clearly the aficionado, so I shouldn’t want you to miss a moment.”

“Oh, you are too kind, Your Grace,” the Dowager Viscountess said.

He didn’t miss the approving look that the woman shot her daughter, which made him suppress a wince. He knew that a crucial part of his and Miss Norman’s plan was getting up the

hopes of those around them, but he felt a twinge of guilt over making this sweet, eager woman expect that he was planning to propose to her daughter.

“You take the other front seat, Tessa,” Lord Dorshire said to his sister. “We gentlemen will hold down the back.”

Miss Norman shot a glance at Richard, but it was too fleeting for him to gather what she meant by it. She turned back to her brother and gave him a nod. “Very well,” she said.

Richard knew he *should* be pleased that he’d found a way to not sit next to Miss Norman without having to even try. He *should* be grateful to Lord Dorshire for arranging things so that he would be freed from the hours-long temptation of sitting only inches away from her soft beauty without ever being able to touch her. He *should* be looking forward to listening to the opera, which was reportedly quite good.

He was not thinking any of those things. Instead, he was wondering how annoyed Miss Norman would be if he gave her brother just the *teensiest* wallop.

The foursome took their seats as the quick tempo of the overture rang out over the theater, the murmuring of the guests lowering but not stopping entirely. Most of the members of the ton came to the opera to see and be seen, not to pay attention to the performance. The Dowager Viscountess was an obvious exception to this rule. As the curtain rose and *la folle journée* began its madness on stage, the woman leaned forward eagerly. Richard saw her reach out to clasp her daughter’s hand in excitement.

Miss Norman shot her mother a loving smile and then glanced over her shoulder to meet Richard's gaze.

Thank you, she mouthed, the words clear even in the dim light of the theater. She turned back to face front.

It was then that Richard realized the wonderful (or possibly terrible) thing about their arrangement. Sitting behind the two women meant that he could look at Miss Norman at his leisure without being obvious about it. She was little more than a silhouette, given the bright lights of the stage in front of her, but even so, he let his eyes trace over the gentle slope of her neck and the soft curve of her shoulder. Her evening gown revealed a considerable expanse of that soft skin, before its hemline dipped down to reveal her (thankfully obscured to Richard's eyes, as he did not fancy watching the entirety of his performance at full arousal) décolletage.

He watched the way her head dropped to one side as she listened intently to the music, the way her curls bobbed when she laughed at the comedic performance before her. When she turned to respond to some comment her mother had whispered into her ear, he saw the quirk of her smile and the way she wrinkled her nose when she was entertained, and—

“Not a big fan of opera either, eh?”

Richard jolted. Good Lord, he'd entirely forgotten about the Viscount of Dorshire.

“Sorry?” he asked.

The man, who appeared to be about Richard's age or a little younger, smiled kindly. "I get lost in my thoughts too, sometimes," he confided. "But yours did not seem to be entirely fixed on the opera."

A stab of panic shot through Richard. Was he caught? It might be good for their plot if he was spotted mooning over Miss Norman, but bollocks, would it be embarrassing. It was one thing to have, ah, intimate thoughts about a lady, and it was another thing entirely to be found doing so by the lady's brother.

"I confess my mind wandered," he said carefully, casting a glance at the stage where—was that a man leaping out a window?

He truly did not have any idea what was happening in this performance. He quickly turned the conversation back on the Viscount of Dorshire before the man could ask him something about the production which Richard would clearly be unable to answer.

"Are you not a fan of opera, then, Dorshire?"

Richard's companion shook his head. The Viscount was taller and reedier than Miss Norman, his face thinner and his eyes obscured by spectacles, but when his mouth twitched quickly into a rueful smile, Richard could see the resemblance to his sister.

"I'm afraid not, but Mother loves it, so I try to accompany her when I can. Sadly, the light in here is too poor to bring a book

with me, but I can always think about my interests, even while the company rattles on about marriage laws.”

He waved a hand at the stage. Point one for the Viscount, Richard thought. Clearly, he had been paying attention better than Richard had been, no matter his assertions that he was lost in his own mind.

“Ah, yes,” Richard responded, keeping his voice low so they didn’t disturb the ladies sitting in front of them. “Your sister said that you were interested in the natural sciences.”

The Viscount perked up visibly, an almost childlike light appearing briefly in his features. “I am, indeed! Are you, as well?”

“Somewhat, though from what I hear, you are far more an expert than I am. I run a printing press that specializes in mathematics and the natural sciences, but I focus more on the business side of things than the science itself.”

The Viscount beamed. “Oh, yes! Longman and Carey, isn’t it?”

Richard blinked.

While it was well-known throughout the ton that he ran a business, such behavior was considered an oddity for a duke, so few people took the time to learn about the actual details of the business. It helped that though the press carried his family name, Longman, most people knew him by his title, instead. Carey was the name of the man who had owned the press

before him, who had sold Richard the enterprise when Richard had made sufficient coin to invest, rather than just squirreling his money away for his mothers and sisters, in case the day arrived when they needed rapid funds.

“It is,” he affirmed.

“You do good work,” the Viscount complimented, and Richard felt oddly pleased that he had the man’s approval. “I positively tore through your editions of *Flora Nautralis of Brittania* when I was learning about native plants. A remarkable collection.”

“You read them... cover to cover?” Richard asked, astounded.

Flora Naturalis was a five-book series that was densely crowded with tiny text and had been published for use as a reference manual for students of botany, not to be read in its entirety by a viscount.

“Of course!” the Viscount exclaimed. “They were fascinating. I couldn’t have left a single word unexamined. Not to mention that they were invaluable when I was planning our garden after I inherited the title. While I find gardens to be fascinating places, I lament that they are so often merely for appearances, rather than for function *and* form. I intended the grounds at Dorshire House to both delight the senses and serve a purpose.” He chuckled. “It’s probably the one of my interests that Teresa approved of the most, all told. She is keen on practicality, that one.”

As the Viscount cast his sister a fond glance, Richard considered that it sounded like Lord Dorshire was keen on

practicality, too. It made him feel an unlikely kinship with the man. Most of the time, other members of his class viewed Richard's penchant for engaging in a business that actually produced something as, at best, tolerable. It had been a long time since he'd met someone who felt similarly to him about it.

"I've seen your gardens," he murmured, thinking back to the way the abundant, fragrant greenery had framed Miss Norman's expressive face. "They're wonderful."

The Viscount beamed with pride. "Oh, Your Grace, you cannot imagine what that means, coming from you. I have heard that your estate in Lancashire is populated with plants of every type. I would so love to hear more about it if you ever have the time."

Richard liked Lord Dorshire, he decided. It was a damn pity the man would no doubt despise the very ground Richard walked on, once he and Miss Norman reached the conclusion of their plan and parted ways. Nevertheless, he decided to enjoy what he could of this new potential friendship while he had the chance.

"Call me Beaumont," Richard encouraged. "And while I cannot take full credit for the gardens, as they are my mother's purview—" *Mother's escape*, a bitter voice muttered in the back of his head before he shoved it down. "—I would be more than pleased to have you, and your mother and Miss Norman, of course, come visit for a few days. You could explore the grounds at your leisure, and I'm sure my mother would be happy to discuss her projects. She's likely to give you some clippings if you'd like them."

The Viscount could not have appeared more excited if Richard had offered him the very throne of England. “Oh, Your Grace—Beaumont, I mean—I would love such a thing. But are you sure it’s no great imposition?”

“Certainly not,” said Richard firmly. “You are Miss Norman’s brother and a fellow natural scientist. I would be happy to have you.”

He felt a twinge at invoking Miss Norman’s name thusly because he knew that the Viscount would take it to mean that Richard intended him to be a brother by marriage sooner rather than later. Inviting a woman you were courting to your country home, even with her family in tow, sent a definitive message.

But he *did* like them, he thought stubbornly. So, why shouldn’t he have these people—people who were becoming friends, even if that friendship was fated to be temporary—visit his estate? God only knew the place could benefit from some happy memories.

“Well then,” said the Viscount, still looking poleaxed with the force of his delight. “We would be pleased to accept. Do set a date.”

Just then, the theater lights rose as the second act ended, and intermission began. The crowd below in the main portion of the theater began to buzz more enthusiastically. This was when the real social aspect of a night at the theater began.

In the row in front of Richard and the Viscount, Miss Norman and her mother got to their feet, then turned to face the men,

who were standing as well.

“Are you enjoying the show?” Miss Norman asked.

“I’m afraid we haven’t been paying the *closest* attention,” Richard admitted, prompting that sideways smile from Miss Norman.

The Dowager Viscountess, who spotted a friend in a nearby box, slipped quickly away, waving a hand and whispering that she would be back soon. The Viscount nodded to his mother, then faced Richard and Miss Norman again.

“Guess what, Tessa?” the Viscount asked, invoking what was clearly an affectionate nickname for his sister. “Beaumont has invited us to visit the gardens at his estate—and has graciously allowed me to address him by his title.”

“That’s very nice of you, Your Grace,” Miss Norman said, and despite how well he’d been doing, Richard immediately found himself wondering what it would feel like to have her address him more informally, as well. By his first name, obviously, and preferably in that low moan she made when she was lost in pleasure.

He really was a lost cause.

Miss Norman turned to her brother. “But do tell me you haven’t been badgering the Duke about snails all evening, Kenneth.” She sighed.

The Viscount looked affronted. “I haven’t mentioned snails *once*,” he insisted. He turned to Richard. “Have I?”

“Indeed, he has not,” Richard confirmed. Then, his gaze darted between the two siblings. “Although—snails?”

Miss Norman groaned—and not in the delightful way Richard had been fantasizing about. “Now you’ve done it,” she commented.

The Viscount, on the other hand, looked smug. “I should answer his question, shouldn’t I, Teresa? It would be rude not to answer, wouldn’t it, Teresa?”

Richard had clearly stepped into something between the siblings and was preparing to backtrack—he and his sisters *still* didn’t speak of the incident with Adelaide’s dolly, even though she’d been all of five when it had happened and was now a married woman with children of her own—but Miss Norman merely rolled her eyes.

“Yes, very well,” she said. “You may speak on the topic of snails. *Briefly*,” she added in a cautionary tone.

“Of course, I shall be brief,” said the Viscount dismissively in a manner that even Richard recognized as disingenuous. “There are only two species of snail native to Lancashire, anyway. It really is a very disappointing landscape for such things.” He shot Richard a reassuring glance. “It has many wonderful plants, though.”

“That... is a relief,” Richard said.

“In any case, I am doing a study of England’s snails. Especially the rare ones, like the glutinous snail. I am thinking of publishing a book on the subject.”

Now *that* was something Richard knew how to discuss. “Well, when you’ve finished your study, I do hope you will consider Longman and Carey as your publisher.”

“I certainly shall,” agreed the Viscount. “And not just because I now know the owner. You are the best publisher to handle the material, naturally.” Then, he turned to his sister, and Richard was certain that on the barest veneer of gentlemanly behavior stood between the man and his impulse to stick his tongue out at Miss Norman. “See, Teresa? I am perfectly capable of being brief.”

The look she shot her brother was dry as sand. “Yes, Kenneth, you are a marvel,” she said. “Now, shall we mingle a bit and stretch our legs before we return to our seats for the remainder of the performance?”

She shot Richard a meaningful glance, and he knew she was thinking of their plan. They needed to be seen in order for rumors to circulate.

“That sounds wonderful,” Richard said, extending his arm.

They emerged from the box and were instantly thrust into the throng of theatergoers, all dressed in their finery. Despite his better judgment, Richard used the opportunity to pull Miss Norman closer to his body, feeling a flicker of relief like a long, slow exhale at being able to touch her at long last.

We're in broad view of everyone. Nothing untoward can happen with this many eyes upon us.

Because Miss Norman had clearly been put on this earth to torment him, however, she immediately tugged him away from the crush of aristocrats (and the wealthier members of the middle class, who wished to rub elbows with aristocrats), moving down a quieter hallway. He halted before they could get too far. No need to tempt fate.

She turned to look at him, a brief expression of surprise crossing her face before a frown took its place, creasing her brow.

“I just wanted to have a bit of space to speak with you,” she said, a defensive note in her tone. She gestured a bit further down the hallway, where a worn but still elegant, plush settee waited. “I promise I’m not going to throw myself at you again,” she added with a note of bitterness when Richard hesitated. “I got that message clearly.”

Lord, how he wished she *would* throw herself at hi—wait, what?

It was his turn to frown. “What are you talking about? What message?”

She flushed, and though it was as pretty as ever, he found he didn’t like it, as this particular flush appeared to arise from genuine embarrassment.

“You were very clear,” she said, snappishness failing to cover up what sounded like authentic hurt. “You... regretted our actions.” She paused. “At the menagerie.”

Oh, he had known what actions she'd been referencing, he'd just been trying to figure out how she'd gotten the matter so incredibly wrong.

“Miss—” He broke off, looking at the distance between the settee and the crowd of people.

Oh, bollocks, fine. It was too far to be *entirely* safe from temptation, but clearly, he needed to set the record straight—without the threat of being overheard. He would just have to control himself. He could control himself. He could definitely do that.

“Come here, Miss Norman,” he said, grasping at her hand to tug her after him.

Why did holding her hand feel so much more pleasant than holding her arm, he wondered? But he had little time to contemplate it. He turned her by her waist, then gently prodded her until she sat compliantly on the velvet-covered seat.

She let out a long, slow, and clearly annoyed breath. Richard already liked that better than the pinched look of shame she'd worn moments ago.

“Miss Norman,” he said sternly, not joining her on the chaise. “You are absolutely wrong.”

“Oh, wonderful,” she groused. “I did hope you were going to reprimand me. How lovely.”

He ignored this. “You seem to believe that I regret our—” They were not so far from prying ears that they could speak entirely frankly. “—outing the other day.”

She crossed her arms in front of her, which did marvelous things to her bosom that he refused to examine, and let a mulish expression cross her face. “You tried to *apologize*,” she pointed out. “Twice.”

In hindsight, that might have been poorly done of him.

“Not because I didn’t *like* it,” he explained, unable to keep the exasperation from his tone. Goodness, this woman. She was going to drive him to an early grave, and he couldn’t help but think that he’d like the journey. “But because I should have had some more self-control. We agreed that we wouldn’t engage in any further... outings, and as I am the one more experienced at, ah, going on outings, I should have been the one to, let’s say, direct us to home earlier.”

Well, that had sounded foolish. But at least the wounded look was leaving her face, the defensiveness leeching from her posture. Her shoulders dropped from her ears, but her arms remained crossed.

“Oh,” she said as if she had just realized something very obvious. “You’re an idiot.”

“I—what?”

“And simply terrible with metaphors. You should leave those to me, clearly.” Her mouth twitched. Oh, good—at least one of them was enjoying herself.

“I am not an idiot,” he sputtered. “And it was a fine metaphor,” he added with a mumble.

“You are, and it wasn’t,” she said, not unkindly.

She uncrossed her arms to gesture to the seat behind her. Begrudgingly, he sat. What had she said, moments ago? *I did hope you were going to reprimand me?* It appeared it was his turn to be reprimanded.

“Your Grace,” she said pertly. “Do I strike you as a woman who does not know her own mind?”

Oh, Lord, that was a trap. Richard had sisters, he knew a trap when he saw one. And yet, he didn’t know how to get himself out of the trap, so he merely said, a tiny sulk in his voice, “No.”

“No,” she agreed. “And did you trick, trap, coerce, or otherwise ensnare me to that section of trees?”

“No,” he said. “But—”

She cut him off. “Do you believe that I suffered from a temporary madness that led me to head into that section of trees without knowing where I was going?”

“No,” he said again. He saw where the trap was headed now, but he still didn’t like it. “But—”

Again, she cut him off. Richard was not one for throwing around his title, but he wouldn’t mind the tiniest bit of ducal respect if it meant not getting bloody interrupted so much.

“And do you have reason to believe that I was unable to use my voice or hands to speak out or otherwise attempt to repel you while we were in the aforementioned section of trees?”

“No.” He didn’t even bother trying to say anything else.

“Therefore,” she concluded, like the most unbearable of university professors used to do, “you must agree that I was amenable to both the location and the activities conducted therein, and your misdirected desire to apologize for that location or actions is ultimately highly insulting, as it suggests that I do not know my own mind.”

He waited for more, but she appeared to be finished.

“Can I respond now?” he grouched.

“Are you going to say something idiotic?”

Probably. “No.”

She waved a hand. “Very well.”

The words tasted like acid, but they had to be said. “I am sorry—for apologizing the first time,” he added hastily when her eyes flashed. “You are right. I should have realized that it was rude to assume all responsibility was mine.”

She smiled at him, and despite how very annoying everything about this conversation had been, Richard couldn’t help but feel pleased that she approved of his apology.

“I accept your apology,” she said grandly. “And even though I should torment you more, I shan’t.”

“How generous,” he said dryly, and she laughed.

“Truly, though,” she added a moment later. “I understand that gentlemen are taught to view ladies as pretty ornaments or fragile flowers that need to be protected from everything, including ourselves. Often, even the best of you have this misguided impulse to guard us away from the world. It’s part of why I am uninterested in marriage.”

“It’s a patch of the bog,” Richard added.

“Precisely.” She nodded sharply. “But we are—or at least, I hope we are becoming—friends. And if we are to be friends, you cannot treat me like a glass figurine. I am a person just as much as you are. I might not have enjoyed the same

opportunities to experience—” She rolled her eyes as she echoed his supposedly awful metaphor. “—*outings*, but that does not mean I cannot make my own decisions. Understood?”

Richard nodded. “Understood.”

He felt a strange mix of shame—for she was quite correct, he hadn’t given her enough credit—and relief. He hadn’t wronged her, not in the way he’d feared, anyway. And she’d said they were *friends*.

On that note, actually...

“But one thing,” he added. He stuck out his hand for a handshake, which was not a common means of interacting with a lady, but then again, what was usual between him and Miss Norman? Not a blessed thing, at least not so far. “My friends call me Richard.”

She looked down at his hand and arched an eyebrow, but then she smiled and shook his hand. Her grip was strong and firm, though he would have expected no less from the firecracker that was Miss Teresa Norman.

“Very well, Richard.” He felt a spark of pleasure at hearing her say his name which was not friendly in the least. “Then you must call me Teresa.”

“Teresa,” he said. Her name tasted like spring and sunshine.

“Well, this is cozy,” came a drawling voice.

Teresa and Richard both snapped their heads in the direction of the Earl of Archinton, who wore a clear look of snide displeasure, no matter how much he was evidently working to cover the expression with a polite façade.

“Lord Archinton,” said Teresa, also doing a poor job of hiding her disappointment. Richard had to agree, not only due to the man’s appearance but because Teresa dropped his hand as soon as she realized they had an audience. “What a pleasure to see you.”

It was astonishing, because though there was nothing objectionable in Teresa’s attitude, Richard could practically see how badly she wanted to roll her eyes.

“And you, Miss Norman,” the Earl said, not even glancing at Richard. “Though I am surprised to find you in such a tucked-away place.”

Teresa *did* raise her eyebrows at that. Was that a threat?

But the Earl continued blithely on as though he found nothing amiss. “I do believe the production is due to begin again soon. Would you allow me the honor of escorting you to your seat?”

Teresa glanced over at Richard, the Earl did not.

“I am being accompanied by the Duke of Beaumont this evening,” she said, a note of finality in her tone.

The Earl still kept his eyes fixed on Teresa. Richard wasn't *entirely* sure if the man was phenomenally rude or phenomenally stupid, but he was putting his money on rude.

"Of course," Lord Archinton said.

Though his words agreed with Teresa's dismissal, his posture did not. He did not go quite so far as to extend his arm to Teresa, but his way of standing there was somehow anticipatory, as if he believed she would, in only a moment, take his arm, despite her protestations otherwise.

That was enough of that, Richard decided. He might find himself having to apologize for it later, given that he had just promised to trust Teresa to know her own mind, and to treat her as an equal, but the problem here wasn't her knowing her mind. It was this bloody rat of an earl failing to listen to her that was the issue.

"Time to go, Archinton," Richard said lowly.

The louse had the audacity to act as though he were surprised to see Richard there. "I daresay that's between me and the lady, Your Grace," he said. The lightness in his tone rang false.

"The lady," Richard retorted tightly, "has made herself perfectly clear. So, I suggest that you take your leave before I take it upon myself to reinforce her position—and *not* with my words."

Lord Archinton held Richard's hostile gaze for a long moment, an act of trivial yet overt defiance. Then, he swept into a too-

formal bow before Teresa.

“I see that you are occupied this evening, Miss Norman,” he said, sounding all the world as though he had come up with the idea himself. “I shall resign myself to being patient and shall enjoy your marvelous company another time. Good evening.” And with another bow—to Teresa only, Richard noted—the Earl left.

The moment the Earl disappeared around the corner, Teresa let out a gusty sigh.

“Goodness,” she said, slumping back slightly against the worn tuft of the settee. “What in the world is wrong with that man?”

Richard had many, many words for what was wrong with the Earl of Archinton, but none of them were fit for a lady’s ears, even a lady as competent and unconventional as Teresa Norman.

“Why is he so fixated on *me* specifically?”

Richard had an answer for that, as well—just not one that he thought Teresa would appreciate. He’d noticed before that she truly didn’t recognize her own beauty, didn’t know that men’s eyes lingered on her as she entered rooms, no matter her age. Confessing such thoughts was not, however, the act of a friend, so he kept mum on the subject.

“I don’t care for him,” was all he said, instead. “I don’t care for the way he... runs roughshod over your objections.” He

didn't care for the blatant disrespect the Earl showed for him, either, but this wasn't about that—it was about Teresa.

“I don't care for it either,” she agreed. She shook her head in confusion, leading one curl to slip its pins and dangle against her neck. “I also don't understand it. He cannot mean to think that it improves his suit. Why would I be tempted to marry a man who *already* doesn't listen to me?”

She sounded so disappointed, so weary that Richard felt his temper rise in him. It heated his blood like a dark passion, making him want to follow after the Earl, make good on his threat to show the man the dangers of not listening to Teresa, of treating her, of all people, like she didn't matter. The anger roared in his ears, threatening to drown out the hum of the crowd in the distance—

Teresa placed a hand on his knee, startling him back to the present moment, perched on a chaise in the theater. With her. He placed his hand atop hers, feeling the warmth of her palm radiate out in both directions, into his fingers above and his knee below. The connection grounded him.

“Thank you for your help with him,” she said softly.

Richard took in a shuddering breath, the air filling the places that had been consumed with ire, pushing back the tide. He focused not on the lesson he could deliver to the Earl but on her soft smile, the one that didn't entirely banish the worry from her eyes. He couldn't huff off in anger, not when she needed him here.

Not ever, he amended. He knew what became of giving in to his temper and knew there was no coming back from it.

“I’m sorry if I should have let you handle it yourself,” he said, his voice sounding hoarse, as if he’d been shouting. “I know you are capable. I know you know your own mind—”

She shook her head again, cutting him off. Her smile was a little rueful now, but that edge of humor worked to banish the lingering dismay. “I should be cross with you, I know,” she said wryly. “Not shouting at you now will no doubt only encourage your ridiculous tendency to be *protective*.” She said it like it was a filthy word, and, despite himself, Richard smiled, too. “But I daresay it was nice to have an ally in all this. So, I thank you.”

She flipped her hand over and squeezed his fingers—just once, but it was enough.

Richard’s next breath came easier. He still wanted to pound the Earl of Archinton until he begged for Teresa’s forgiveness, but the demon in his blood, the one who craved rage and violence, was quiet for now.

For this moment, just sitting there with her was reward enough.

CHAPTER 8



“*N*ot one word,” Teresa warned under her breath as she approached Richard where he waited near a lovely picnic spread in the garden of his London townhouse. “Do not say a single word.”

He reached out to greet her, pressing a kiss to the back of her gloved knuckles. Even with the fabric between them, Teresa could feel the warmth of his mouth. The touch flared through her.

Stop that.

Though she felt overall considerably more comfortable with Richard after their frank discussion at the opera regarding how he had to treat her like a thinking person rather than a porcelain doll, and though she now understood that he hadn't regretted their encounter in the trees and was merely suffering from some misguided, idiotic, masculine sense of *honor*, they still had not discussed where they stood on... all the other things.

The kissing things.

Teresa, personally, had decided she was in favor of pursuing the kissing portion of their relationship. She had sat up, tossing and turning and generally fretting over the issue for several nights in a row. What if any further amorous encounters between them compromised their friendship? Would it make this newfound ease between them disappear? Would it cost her her sole ally in the fight against the snare of matrimony?

Then, she remembered that if all went to plan, she and Richard wouldn't be able to remain friends after the conclusion of their scheme anyway. They couldn't be, not if he intended to avoid his own trip down the aisle by feigning heartbrokenness over her.

The thought was more unpleasant than she would have expected. Thinking of giving up Richard's friendship hit her like a punch in the gut, the blow feeling a lot like regret. It didn't matter that she already knew she'd miss his friendship when he was gone, would miss his little crooked smiles and the way his eyes crinkled when he was planning mischief. It didn't matter a bit because their course was set.

They had already made their courtship public, and courtships only ended in one of two ways: in parting or in agreeing to remain together until death did them part. Their world, alas, was not built for friendships between men and women.

Teresa lamented the loss, grieving it prematurely, but she did consider there to be a single silver lining to the snarling storm cloud they had fashioned for themselves.

If their friendship was already destined to end, then it didn't make a difference if certain romantic desires endangered that friendship. And if she possessed those desires (which she absolutely did) and he possessed those desires (which he

certainly seemed to), then there appeared no reason they should not... indulge themselves.

Which was why, when she received an invitation to enjoy a picnic in Richard's garden, she'd readily agreed, even though such a private encounter could have no benefit to their plan.

And it was why she had scheduled said picnic for a time when her mother—and more importantly, Kenneth, who absolutely *would not shut up* about Richard's gardens ever since their night at the opera—was unavailable.

Now, all she needed was for Richard to stop making such obvious glances at poor, sweet Tillie, who had been dragged along as Teresa's chaperone this afternoon.

"I haven't said a word," Richard protested, mirth glimmering in his eyes.

He knew. He knew what she was up to. He knew she was going to proposition him. She was certain of it. Except that wicked gleam in his eyes, as much as it did still make her want to proposition him, also made her want to kick him in the shins, which would no doubt put a stop to her more pleasurable plans.

Besides, Tillie, dear that she was, was oblivious but not *that* oblivious. No doubt she would notice any violence that Teresa committed and duly report it back to Teresa's mother, who would suffer apoplexy at the thought of her daughter assaulting a duke—especially a duke who was, against all odds, apparently interested in Teresa.

“You’re thinking very loudly,” she shot back.

He was trying not to laugh, she could tell—she could identify nearly all his expressions by now—as he led her to the comfortable pile of cushions that had been laid out under a majestic English oak tree.

“I’m not allowed to *think* now?” he protested, hints of that laugh breaking through.

“No,” she said sourly. Even so, a smile threatened to escape *her*, as well.

He was annoyingly charming sometimes, she thought. Truly, the man was a menace. And if he kept up with the charm, the one that reminded her that he was the much-desired Duke of Beaumont instead of simply her friend Richard, she was going to lose her nerve.

“My goodness,” he murmured, settling himself languidly on the cushions, appearing every inch the idle nobleman at his leisure.

What rot.

Teresa hadn’t seen him for the past four days because he had been so wrapped up in tending to his business, which evidently had suffered some sort of crisis involving a broken letter *w* and the man who replaced the letter stamps traveling to Bath to meet his grandchild.

“You are quite the taskmaster, Miss Norman, did you know that?” Richard drawled as he reached for the large basket that some enterprising servants had placed nearby. “Telling me how to think and everything.”

“You need to be placed under a firm hand,” she retorted. “You’re an absolute menace on your own. You ought to be in shackles.”

She’d intended it merely as a quip, the kind of repartee that they often volleyed back and forth. So, she was surprised to see the unexpected quirk of heat in Richard’s eyes at her words.

“Don’t make promises you don’t intend to keep, Teresa,” he said quietly enough that Tillie, who had settled under an adjacent tree with some embroidery clutched in her ancient fingers, couldn’t hear.

Teresa didn’t know why she was blushing. Maybe there had been something to his insistence that he had greater authority in romantic matters, after all. Because though she didn’t know what she’d said that had led him to cast her that desirous look, there was absolutely no doubt in her mind that it *was* amorous.

A sudden flash of nerves shot across her skin, and she reached hastily for the basket to hide her flaming face.

She could not, however, bear to let Richard get in the last word. “Menace,” she mumbled as she uncovered a plate full of tiny, perfect strawberry pies. She bit into one viciously.

When she glanced up again, he was still grinning at her. The beast. She furiously ate another pie.

After Teresa's temper cooled somewhat—*not* that Richard made it easy, as he kept stealing glances over at Tillie, then looking back at Teresa and chuckling—she found that the picnic was very pleasant.

“If I ever make my fortune,” she commented as she devoured a forkful of the most wonderfully shaved asparagus salad, “I shall spend it all tempting your cook away from you.”

Richard, twirling the stem of a champagne flute between his fingers, regarded her. “I know you have never seen fit to be even remotely concerned with my title—”

“Lord above, can you imagine? Your ego couldn't handle it,” she retorted.

“—but *some people*,” he continued, speaking over her, “actually consider there to be some cache to a dukedom.”

She shrugged, unconcerned. “I shall just have to make a *remarkable* fortune.”

He feigned shock. “And leave me to starve?”

“You do know suffering, don't you?” she returned, voice dry as a bone. “You do realize there is a sea of difference between having the cook you want and literally starving? Please tell me you realize that.”

“You are *so mean* to me,” Richard said, sounding delighted.

“Like I said. You need more suffering in your life.”

“Your brand of it, certainly.”

She threw a piece of asparagus at him, which he dodged nimbly.

The food was unilaterally wonderful, but as Teresa recalled her plan and kept one eye on Tillie, she found that nerves prevented her from eating too much of the repast that lay before her. Instead, she sipped at her wine, the cool bubbles in it tickling her nose. The day was sleepy and warm, the perfect soporific spring afternoon, and as a bumblebee buzzed lazily from flower to flower nearby, Teresa spotted Tillie’s head begin to droop lower and lower before settling on her chest.

Exactly as Teresa had known would happen.

She looked at Richard, who was reclining languidly on a cushion, his eyes closed and one knee propped up. He was the very image of the redolent Duke at rest, and Teresa might have suspected him to be asleep, if not for the relaxed smile playing on his lips.

“Richard,” she ventured softly.

“Hmm?” he returned.

His tone was absent, and maybe a kinder woman would have permitted him to relax—she got the distinct sense that he didn't relax nearly frequently enough, unlike every other man of his class that she had ever encountered—but she worried that if she did so now, she'd never get up her nerve again. And there was something so... appealing about the way he lay there, strong and soft all at once. So, she really, really did not want to lose her nerve.

"I've been thinking," she said, just as soft, both in deference to her trepidation and to prevent Tillie from waking up on the far side of her nearby tree.

"Oh, well, that's never good," Richard teased, his voice just as relaxed.

Well, now she wanted to kiss him *and* chuck something at him.

"We should make love," she blurted out.

Well, *that* got his attention.

"What?" he cried, sitting bolt upright and staring at her like he half suspected he would find her replaced with someone else.

"Shhh," she scolded hurriedly. "Be quiet, or you'll wake up Tillie."

"I—" he said, then words seemed to fail him. "*What?*"

“I’ve been thinking,” Teresa repeated. “And, as you know, my original scheme was to find a gentleman with whom I could enjoy, ah, physical pleasures before I quietly returned to my life of spinsterhood.”

“Yes, and you went after *Seth*,” he shot back, sounding delightfully disgruntled at the notion.

Still, she didn’t have time for whatever kind of petty rivalries went on between gentlemen.

She waved him off. “Yes, and I got *you*, and I’m quite pleased with the results. Do stay focused. As you’ll recall, that was my initial plan. Then, everything got sidetracked by that datted Earl of Archinton. But recently, it occurred to me that there was no real reason that we ought not to pursue the original plan as well as the one we’ve concocted to free me from his snare of courtship.”

Richard made a sound that she could only characterize as *ugh*. She decided that she no longer found his staring to be flattering.

“Well, not if you don’t want to,” she said, putting on affected crossness to hide her wounded pride—her wounded feelings. “I’m not going to force you. Lord, you could just say so—”

He lunged forward, cutting off her speech. She jerked backward in surprise, the movement carrying them until she was leaning back on her elbows, her legs extended before her, and Richard hovered over her. His hands were placed on either

side of her elbows, not touching her by only the slimmest of margins, and his face was very, very close to hers.

“Teresa,” he said, and her name came out like a purr. It sent a shiver down her spine, and her breath caught. “Don’t swipe at me. You’ve just surprised me, is all.”

She sniffed. He was trying to surprise *her* now, she knew, with all his *handsomeness* and his *closeness*. She would not be falling for *that*, thank you very much.

“Well,” she returned archly. “You were very slow to respond.”

His grin was still so sly. “You wound me,” he said, and she had the distinct impression that she did *not* wound him in the slightest.

“Bah,” she retorted.

It wasn’t just his face that was close to hers, it was all of him. His knee was planted to the left of her hip, the line of his arm paralleled hers. Where her torso leaned back, his leaned forward. If she just pushed up a little bit, or he leaned down into her, they would be touching. Everywhere.

“Your shields won’t work,” he chided gently. “Let them back down. And let’s discuss your proposition—and my reaction to it.”

There were about five things she wanted to object to in those comments—the nonsense about shields, for one, and...

something else, too, certainly—but her brain wasn't quite working correctly. It was almost as though the air between them wasn't mere air. It couldn't be, not when she felt every inch of herself in that sliver of space between them. So, it had to be that the air was made of sparks or magic or something because she could *feel* him.

“Your reaction?” she said, her voice coming from somewhere very far off. “You just said ‘what?’” There. That had been a grammatical sentence, at least. Points to her.

“I did,” Richard agreed.

Whatever spell she'd cast over him with her shocking proposition had faded with remarkable alacrity, as he now seemed entirely self-possessed. She'd preferred it when he was the discombobulated one and now regretted being so snippy about it. It was hard to think when your mind had gone on holiday.

“And I think you disliked that reaction,” he continued, the ghost of his breath caressing her cheek, “in large part because you underestimate how appealing of a proposition it is.”

“It is?”

Was she asking for a clarification, or was she merely echoing him? Hard to say when she was fairly certain that, if she took a deep breath, her breasts would brush against the lawn of his shirt.

“It is,” he confirmed. “You are very lovely, Teresa.”

Oh.

He was being kind, she was sure. They were friends, and one was kind to one's friends. But it was still very nice to hear him say that.

She closed her eyes, which helped her think a tiny bit. "I just want to know what it's like," she said, hoping he couldn't hear the needy note in her voice. "I won't have a chance, after. So, I just—I just want to know."

Richard sat back on his heels, and she could breathe again, though she found she wasn't as fond of the sensation as she might have expected. When she opened her eyes, she found him looking at her with a quizzical expression on his face.

"What?" she asked, a little more snappishly than she perhaps should have done. It was very annoying when he knew things she didn't, and, in this realm of knowledge, he knew so many things that she didn't.

"You do know," he said cautiously, "that you can... feel such things even without being married, don't you?"

She gave him a pointed look. "Well, yes, Richard, that's really what I was getting at. I didn't think that if we—" She couldn't bring herself to say *make love* a second time. "—did that, that we would magically find ourselves face to face with a parson, rings in hand."

He looked like he wanted to laugh at that, but he gathered himself once more, returning to the topic at hand before she managed to distract him.

“That’s not what I meant,” he said, shaking his head. “I meant, did you know that you can enjoy physical pleasures entirely by yourself?”

She narrowed her eyes at him. Was he teasing her? They teased one another constantly, to be certain, but certainly, he would recognize that mocking her about this particular lack of knowledge would be hurtful instead of playful?

No, she didn’t think he would do that. Which meant...

That meant he was serious.

“Explain yourself,” she demanded.

For an instant, an expression like pain crossed Richard’s face, and she started concocting plans for swift retribution, for if he introduced such an intriguing topic and then left her without recourse to learn more. But it was only a moment before he spoke, a slight strain in his voice.

“I take this to mean,” he said, and the low note in his voice made that shivery feeling come back to Teresa’s limbs, “that you have not ever explored your body.”

“Explored my...” She hesitated as comprehension came over her. “Oh, you mean my sex?”

Tillie was fast asleep, but even so, Teresa lowered her voice.

“Jesus Christ, Teresa!” he burst out. “Don’t say—”

“Sex?” she completed with an innocent bat of her eyelashes. Ha. Good. He could be the one off-kilter again.

“Yes,” he gritted out. “That.”

“Oh, would you rather I called it my—”

“Do *not* finish that sentence,” he ordered. “And don’t think that you can distract me with filthy language.”

Drat. That had been precisely what she’d planned on doing. Which was something of a muddled plan, if she was honest, as she *did* want the information he was offering. She just possibly wanted to rile him up just as much.

Yet, Richard didn’t appear put off by her language. No, rather he looked a bit flushed.

How intriguing.

“As I was saying,” Richard went on, his eyes bright with heat. There was an anticipatory energy to his frozen posture as if he was holding himself back from her. That, too, was wonderfully intriguing.

For the first time since he'd gawped at her like a fish, Teresa began to think that perhaps Richard's claim about her proposition was true. Perhaps he did find her appealing. Attractive. *Arousing*.

The notion was heady, like a full glass of wine on an empty stomach.

"You don't need a partner in order to enjoy bodily pleasures," he explained as she watched him, oddly rapt.

The tangible quality of the air had returned, and though there was more space between them now, she felt as though she could sense every one of his breaths as firmly as if he was pressed physically against her.

"Men certainly don't. When we are experiencing, ah, urges, and we don't have a woman in our beds we, *ahem*, take ourselves in hand."

She couldn't help it, her eyes darted to his lap. She didn't know much about human male anatomy, not beyond what one saw in paintings, and even then, those were almost always placed so high on gallery walls that you couldn't really get a good notion of what was happening. But she knew the general shape of matters, and the phrase *take ourselves in hand* was somehow incredibly evocative, despite its simplicity.

She felt suddenly certain that she would like to see that very much, indeed.

Richard noticed the direction of her highly improper gaze and shifted where he sat on his heels. She assumed it was only his pride that kept him from adjusting in such a way that he would be covering himself.

Nevertheless, he valiantly continued. “Women can do the same,” he said. His voice was even lower now. “You can... explore, learn what you like best. So, next time you’re in the bath, or in bed, or—”

“Here,” she interjected, the word leaving her like a shot.

“What?” He gaped at her.

It was an insane idea, very likely, but once it had gripped her, she couldn’t seem to let it go. “Here,” she repeated. “Now. Show me.”

This time, when he hesitated, it didn’t cause her to feel any lack of confidence. How could she, when the expression on his face was one of pure hunger?

“Teresa,” he said, the word a warning.

Except she didn’t feel frightened off. On the contrary, she felt that this was a splendid, stunning, wonderful idea. Because this was Richard. Who could she trust better than him? Who else, when hearing that she wanted to learn the ways of physical pleasure, would respond not with an act that took pleasure for himself, as well, but by teaching her how to please herself? The wave of affection in her crested and broke, and she smiled at him because everything was just so *right*.

“Please,” she said.

It broke him, she saw it. And she heard it and tasted it, too, because, at her word, he groaned and leaned in toward her, crowding her until she lay back against the blankets and cushions and his body was hovering over her, and then touching her, and then his mouth was pressed firmly to hers, the touch like a promise.

She moaned into his mouth, relishing the delicious weight of him against her, pressing her into the softness beneath her. The contrast between the soft cushions and his hard chest set her nerves alight with sensation, and she speared her fingers through his hair, clutching him tighter to her. She’d taken off her gloves to eat, and his locks were slippery and silken against her fingers.

She touched and petted him, and the first time she pulled his hair was accidental, but when he reacted with a groan and a slight increase in the pressure of his hips against her core, a pressure that made her groan right back, she pulled at his hair again, the tiniest bit harder.

He pulled back at that, to her intense disappointment.

“Fuck, Teresa,” he said, and now she understood his heated reaction to her improper language before. Because hearing him say that word lit her up.

She reached for him, her eager hands clasping his shoulders to pull him back down toward her, atop her, but he gently eased them down to her thighs.

“Christ, woman,” he said, his voice thick. “You’re going to be the death of me.”

“Kiss me,” she insisted. She scarcely recognized her own voice. This version of her sounded delightfully wanton.

This time, his groan sounded tortured instead of pleased. “Trust me,” he assured her. “I would like nothing more. But you wanted me to—” He paused, swallowed hard, and the bob of his throat made Teresa whimper. “—show you how to touch yourself.”

Oh, right. Yes, that did sound good, too. Especially if doing so would help her quench this raging inferno that was churning within her.

“Yes,” she said, the word scarcely more than a breath. “Richard, please.”

He stole another swift kiss that left her senses reeling, then moved to recline beside her, so that she was lying on her back, propped gently by cushions, and he was on his side, his head propped on his hand so he could watch her closely. Then, he claimed one of the hands he’d laid on her thigh in his larger fingers, guiding her to reach down as far as she could toward her knees.

“First,” he said, and his voice was that of a mesmerist, entwining her senses and capturing her neatly in his snare. She found she had no desire to escape. “You must raise your skirts enough so that you can reach underneath.”

She clenched her hands in the muslin of her day dress, ready to yank it toward her, heedless of any wrinkles that might ensue, but Richard used his hand to press her fingers flat once more.

“Slowly,” he commanded. “There’s no rush. This part is just the first flirtation.”

His *voice* was a flirtation, she thought wildly. No, it was a seduction. And was it ever working on her.

He released the pressure on her hand just enough so that she could inch the fabric up with her fingers, sliding it up until she could feel the hem move past her ankle, then her shin, then above the top of her stocking, revealing the first inch of bare skin to the balmy spring air. She didn’t have the proper angle to look at herself, to see the progress of her clothing as it covered less and less of her, but she didn’t want to see herself. No, she wanted to see exactly what she was in the perfect position to see: Richard’s entranced expression as the shape of her legs was revealed.

When he looked at her like that, it was impossible to feel that any of what she was doing was improper or the kind of thing that would result in instant ruination in the eyes of Society. No, instead she felt powerful. Desirable. Beautiful.

When her skirts were raised high enough that the bulk of the material was bunched around her waist and she could grasp the hem with the tips of her fingers, Richard took a shaky breath and moved both their hands together to delve under the raised hem.

“Now,” he said, leaning the tiniest bit closer to her so she could feel the heat of his body all along her side. “You feel for the place that feels best.”

Even as he spoke, he guided her hand along the silky soft pillow of her inner thigh toward her center. He did not touch any part of her except the back of her hand; she was the only one touching her own body. And yet, she felt as though it was his touch, somehow, felt as though he was the one stoking this desire that coiled, fierce and determined in her low belly.

“Start gently,” he advised as her fingers skirted along the outside of her mound, a place she had never paid any attention to aside from the mechanical act of bathing. “Some ladies may find that they most enjoy the sensation of being touched inside —” He guided her hand gently lower before reversing its direction, pushing her fingertips up in the direction of her belly. “—but most find there is a place, just at the top—”

Even as he spoke, she found it, and she gasped.

“Yes,” he said, hoarse but smiling, gazing directly into her surprised eyes. “Just there. You’ve found it.”

“Oh... my,” she managed as she sketched a cautious fingertip over the place that caused lightning to radiate through her.

“Quite,” he agreed, and the expression in his eyes was so fond that it looked almost like—

He exerted the tiniest bit of pressure against the back of her fingers, causing her hand to press against herself a bit more

firmly. She gasped again as a somewhat more intense sensation traveled through her.

“From there,” he explained, guiding her to move her hand from side to side and in small circles, “all you need to do is discover what feels best, whether that is fast, slow, gentle, or firm. Your body will tell you where to go, and all you have to do is trust that. You don’t need my help with it at all.”

As he said that, though, he did not remove his hand, and Teresa was glad. She experimented as he advised until she landed on a back-and-forth motion that made the lightning grow until it wasn’t mere bolts, it was shining like the sun, a sun that was getting bigger and bigger. She felt as though she was chasing something, though she didn’t know what, and the feeling grew and grew until she was sure she couldn’t contain it. Her breaths grew faster and more ragged, and through it all, Richard kept his eyes on hers until she felt sure she would die like that, staring into the beautiful, wonderful depths of him.

Far, far away and yet threateningly nearby, she heard the unmistakable snort of an elderly chaperone jolting awake, which meant she had to stop, except she couldn’t stop, not now, not when she was so close to that thing she needed to find.

Richard’s head jerked up at the sound, too, and he removed his hand from her skirts, only to lay a single finger over her lips in a shushing expression, the gesture doing nothing to muffle the sounds that wanted to break free from her and yet providing the perfect reminder that she needed to remain silent.

And then, in a flash of pleasure she’d earned by her own hand, Teresa fell over a cliff and into an abyss from which she did not ever desire to emerge.

* * *

When he watched Teresa reach her climax, Richard nearly spent in his trousers like an untried youth. He wished he could have heard her cries, longed for it like a physical thing, and mentally cursed the servant with the worst timing of any man, woman, or child in London.

Even without getting to hear those cries, however, he couldn't help but admit that the experience had been one of the most intensely arousing of his life, even considering that he'd only touched the back of her hand. He scarcely even cared that he hadn't gotten to chase his own pleasure, or that his prick felt like it would burst through the placket of his trousers at any moment.

It was simply that none of that felt very relevant, not when he was gazing down into her bright eyes, shining with the aftermath of her crisis, her cheeks flushed and her bosom heaving as she fought to catch her breath.

Beautiful. She was simply so beautiful, his Teresa.

Except she wasn't his. She couldn't be, wouldn't be. Not only because it went against her plans, but because a man like him would take her beauty, her glorious spirit, and he would crush it into dust. He would destroy her.

All of which meant that he should have found a way to say no to this old-but-new proposition of hers without hurting her feelings. He should have said that he would teach her to find her own pleasure but go no further.

Except he hadn't, and he wouldn't. No, after seeing her like this, pleasure-drunk and giggling with their near-discovery, he knew he would snatch every moment that he could with her before their agreement was over. He would let himself grow greedy for her, delight in her.

For now. And then, he would, as promised, leave her with everything she wanted.

It was the only way to guarantee she didn't get hurt.

"Oh my goodness." Teresa giggled as he guided her to sit upright, tugging her skirts down—pity, that—to cover her legs as he went.

Dear old Tillie might be an inattentive chaperone, but even she might protest seeing her charge rolling around on the ground with him in obvious dishevelment.

"Try to look as though you are enjoying yourself *slightly* less," he reminded her, though he could not keep the laughter from his voice, either. She was so beautiful, she almost hurt to look at when she grinned like this, buoyant with enjoyment.

"Hmm, no," she replied. "I shan't. But I *shall* permit you to take me for a walk so that I may look as though I am enjoying myself precisely as much as I am without bothersome prying eyes."

"You have a deal," he said, all but hauling her to her feet.

If Tillie noticed anything amiss, she might report back to Teresa's mother, who then might not allow her daughter to see him anymore. And he couldn't repress the feeling that he absolutely despised that idea. He would give her up when it was time, but not a second earlier.

Her skirts were in utter disarray as he tugged her toward the garden path, and her legs was a little wobbly. He tried not to feel pleased with himself when he saw that. Technically, *he* hadn't done anything. And yet, he could not suppress the bolt of masculine pride that went through him at seeing his woman well-pleasured.

Not his, he reminded himself. He was letting himself confuse bedsport—or blanket sport, as it happened—with possessiveness and... other feelings. Which, he hurried to mentally add, was ridiculous. He was a grown man and a duke, not a blushing virgin in a sentimental novel.

Besides—the thought that came on the heels of the previous one was much more sour—Teresa wasn't acting all moony-eyed. No, she was giggling at a flower like she'd had three drinks too many.

“You do realize that you are about to give yourself away,” he said, not really meaning it. He just had the petty urge to draw her attention back to him. “Come here. Let's walk.”

“Oh, *fine*,” she said with an affected, theatrical sigh. “Let us walk around the garden like a proper lady and gentleman.”

Her tone suggested that she did not think much of this plan, but she came over and took his proffered arm, anyway. He tugged her close.

Holding her was nice, he decided after a few steps, but it wasn't enough. He wanted to know her. He needed to know her.

“What do you like?” he asked abruptly, causing her to startle away from where she was admiring a fat bumblebee that droned along cheerfully.

“What do I—what?” she asked. Her perplexed look was annoyingly adorable. Now would be a fine time for her to go back to being irritating, he decided.

“What do you like?” he repeated. “To do, to read, to use to fill your days. What activities please you?”

“I like to be useful,” she said. “I'm sure I've mentioned it.”

He shook his head. He wanted to be able to picture her actually doing something. He wanted an image he could hold onto once she was gone—even if the impulse behind that thought was one he did not wish to investigate.

“That's the consequence of an activity, not the activity itself. What actual things do you like to do?”

She paused to think. “Well,” she said. “I like doing the household accounts.”

He stopped dead in his tracks. She nearly yanked their arms apart with the sudden cease in momentum.

“You do not,” he accused.

Even he, the peculiar Duke with his penchant for running a business that produced something, did not enjoy the literal act of keeping the books.

“I do!” she insisted. Even his poking and prodding could not disrupt her good mood, apparently, as she laughed at his look of disgust.

“You do not,” he insisted. “Nobody likes it. The columns in those ledgers are tiny, and the handwriting is always terrible, and if you make one mistake, it cascades on forever until you go half-mad trying to track it back down.”

“I do like it! I’ll grant you that the columns are tiny, but the handwriting is my own, so I can read it perfectly well, and I dare suggest that it isn’t as terrible as all that. And I do try to rarely make mistakes, but tracking one down is just so *satisfying*.”

If they hadn’t been arm-in-arm, he had the sense that she would have been rubbing her hands together with glee. She was simply so entertainingly *peculiar*.

“Do you want a job?” He was joking, but she gave him a wry grin.

“Oh, how I wish,” she said. “I mean, obviously, it would kill my mother outright, so I couldn’t possibly, but it would be stupendous if something was allowed for ladies. A profession would give us a way to make our own names in the world, without depending on men for things. I don’t want to disregard my own privilege—I know having money is far preferable to the alternative and that I’ve been enormously fortunate in my life—but that is one way in which I envy lower-class women. They can work and earn their own funds, and nobody bats an eye.”

Richard felt a thrum of satisfaction. Yes—this was the kind of knowledge he’d wished to obtain. This was the kind of thinking that made Teresa the difficult, interesting, wonderful woman he knew. His friend, despite everything.

“If you could have any profession, what would it be?” he inquired.

They continued their walk as she thought about it. “Well—and trust me when I say it pains me to admit this—but I do find your work very fascinating.”

Richard had been flattered before. Of course, he had—he was a duke. He had, in fact, ceased attending various Society soirees because he could no longer stomach the empty platitudes that were thrown his way.

It felt different, coming from Teresa.

Part of this, he knew, was because Teresa wasn’t sending him empty flattery. If she said his work was fascinating, it was for

the simple reason that she felt it to be so. She wouldn't invent the opinion to puff him up. Hell, she was more likely to lie in the opposite direction.

So, that bit was nice. But he knew there was a deeper reason, too. The compliment didn't strike him because it was coming from someone who meant it. It struck him because it was coming from *Teresa*.

He already knew he would mourn their friendship when it was over.

To prevent himself from getting maudlin, he said, "Please tell me what intrigues you is the books. Please, Teresa. Say it's the books."

She was looking ahead, not facing him directly, but even so, he saw the narrowing of her eyes. "I do like books," she said, her tone suggesting that, no, it wasn't the books that drew her to the work of a printing press.

"Go ahead." He sighed. "What is it, really?"

"Well," she said, drawing out the word.

Richard had never been full of the kind of idiotic bravado that led young men into duels—he knew the repercussions of violence too well to ever have been lured in by that particular bit of nonsense—but if pistols at dawn gave anything near the thrill of the verbal sparring he did with Teresa, he could understand how so many dandies got themselves shot.

“If you make fun of me, I am going to kick you, but... Your records must be very interesting, mustn't they? After all, once you print something, you have to have it bound and make sure that it is filed correctly, and all the pages have to go in order, and all the tintype is certainly fascinating—”

He choked back a laugh because she *would* make good on her threat to kick him. The impulse was there, though, because she had just listed, nearly in order, all the worst things about running a printing press, in his opinion.

“Yes,” he said solemnly once he'd gotten himself under control. “Laying tintype *is* fascinating.”

It was not. It was dreadfully dull. He was not going to be the one to break the news to her.

Her triumphant grin made the lie more than worth it. “See?” she gloated, and he found he didn't mind her smugness a bit. “You should stick with me, Richard. You might learn something.”

And, to his intense dismay, he found that he liked the idea of sticking with her far more than he ought.

CHAPTER 9



“*Y*ou would think after however many decades of drinking this awful, tragic excuse for lemonade, someone would have the decency to serve something better at balls,” Teresa observed as she stared mournfully into her cup.

“A tonic of astragalus root is meant to help forestall illness,” Kenneth supplied helpfully from her side.

“Yes, I can’t imagine why that didn’t catch on,” she retorted, sipping the drink again. It tasted less like lemonade and more like water that had once been in the same room as lemon and sugar for no longer than three minutes, but it was wet, and this ball was crowded and therefore hot.

Ballgowns, as it happened, were not designed for comfort in crowded spaces.

Additionally, clutching a cup in one’s hand was a useful talisman against people asking one to dance. Previously, Teresa would not have suspected she needed protection in this regard, as she’d scarcely been asked to dance once in the entirety of the Season. But apparently, being publicly affiliated with the Duke of Beaumont gained one a certain sort of popularity, even if that popularity was only by proxy.

She'd had *three* invitations to dance thus far that evening and had only been able to wriggle her way out of two of them. The third had been a dreadfully dull man who looked to be in his early forties (although she knew his family and knew him to actually be only three and twenty, just cursed with a very unfortunate hairline) and had mainly wanted to talk about Richard.

Teresa had avoided revealing anything by doing her best impression of being an absolute dolt.

Shocking, really, how easily men would believe that of a lady.

The lemonade, furthermore, allowed her to glance over at Richard (who was presently embroiled in a conversation with an older gentleman whose name Teresa had forgotten but whom she knew to be a heavyweight in Parliament) while appearing merely *interested* at a level appropriate to their courtship instead of *besotted* like a lady who had been taught the art of self-pleasure in a garden.

At that thought, Teresa had to use her lemonade prop once more, lest the sly smile that crossed her face every time she thought of her interlude with Richard. It had been... revelatory. And while she had put her newfound skills to the test once or twice in the more private locales he'd referenced—once in the bath, which had simply left her worrying that she'd splash all over the floor and then have to explain herself to the staff, and once in bed, which had been very pleasant—those experiences paled in comparison to the one in which Richard had been present. It made her feel hungry for more.

In the end, it was this ruminating about the different, unknown ways she could sate that hunger that got her in trouble, though not in the usual way that such things got young ladies in trouble. No, it was simply that while Teresa was lost in her musings about how she might entice Richard to show her those unknown ways, Lord Archinton approached entirely without her notice.

“Miss Norman!”

She nearly dropped her lemonade at his voice, too loud and too near. She glanced over in surprise and found the man smiling at her broadly. What was it, she wondered, about that smile that was just so unsettling?

Lord Archinton continued speaking, his dramatic tone garnering the attention of Society members standing nearby. “What a delight to see you unaccompanied!”

“Ahem,” said Kenneth.

Lord Archinton ignored this. “Alas!” he said, which truly was so overblown that it was almost physically painful. “Do you not have a partner for the coming dance, Miss Norman? You must allow me to oblige.”

Teresa darted a glance to the center of the ballroom, where couples were beginning to trickle onto the dance floor for the coming waltz. Drat. She really didn’t want to dance with Lord Archinton, particularly not a dance that required as much *touching* as did the waltz, but he’d backed her neatly into a corner, as she did not, of course, have a partner.

She might have risked the polite refusal if not for how blasted *loudly* Lord Archinton had asked. If she denied him for no good reason (or at least not a reason considered good by Society standards, the list of which did not include “I don’t like him”), there would be talk. She dreaded *talk*, not for her own sake, but for her mother’s, for Kenneth’s. For Richard’s.

Thus, without a better option, she gave her best approximation at a genteel smile, handed her cup of lemonade to her brother, and took Lord Archinton’s proffered hand.

As they took their positions, Lord Archinton holding her just a touch closer than was probably necessary or appropriate, he kept up a steady prattle of conversation.

The conversation was so unrelenting and so dreadfully boring that it took Teresa a moment to realize, as they spun about the room in time with the music, that Lord Archinton’s voice had grown hard and serious.

“You know, Miss Norman,” he said. “I don’t think you take me seriously.”

Teresa, who was a passable dancer but not an exceptional one, was startled from where she was counting steps in her head.

“I beg your pardon, My Lord?”

The contrast between Lord Archinton’s tone and the insistent smile on his face was chilling. “I said,” he repeated, “I don’t think you take me seriously, Miss Norman. And I daresay the

evidence that you were not listening just now proves my theory.”

Teresa scrambled for an excuse. In reality, she *didn't* take the Earl seriously. He was a nuisance she wished to be rid of. But it wasn't *de rigueur* to mention such things out loud. One was meant to get privately annoyed and then, oh, she didn't know, *not pursue that person for marriage*.

His air was anticipatory, however, so she knew she needed to respond. “I am, ah, sorry to have given that impression, My Lord,” she said, which she felt was as diplomatic as she was capable of being.

Lord Archinton's ingratiating smile took on a razor's edge. “Nicholas,” he said firmly. “You shall call me Nicholas.”

It was not an invitation. It was an order. Nevertheless, Teresa made an attempt at demurral.

“Oh, I'm not sure—”

“You will,” he insisted. “And I will call you Teresa. It will be a sign that we are courting and that we are going to be married.”

She truly didn't know how to react in the face of such brazen self-assurance. His arms around her suddenly felt like a cage, the waltz a prison.

“I'm courting the Duke of Beaumont,” she managed.

She wanted to add on a *My Lord*, but a glint in Lord Archinton's eyes warned her off that plan. If she had disliked the overly jovial buffoon that he'd played earlier in the evening—earlier in their entire association, in fact—she found she disliked this version of him far more intensely.

“For now,” Lord Archinton allowed. “But everyone knows that he and that idiotic cadre of friends of his eschew marriage unless it is a *love match*.” He spat the words as if the very idea was ridiculous. “He is toying with you, and he will soon tire of it. I, on the other hand, am not going anywhere.”

This, Teresa felt, was insulting on a number of levels. For one, she felt it was highly unfair to Richard, as Lord Archinton's comments cast him as a careless rake who hurt others without regard. Even the Duke of Dowton, who had by far the most rakish reputation of the Four Dukes, was not reputed for the kind of cruelty that Lord Archinton alluded to.

For another, she resented the implication that Richard would *tire* of her, that she was merely a pawn in some larger game in which men were the players and women the pieces. Why was Lord Archinton even interested in marrying her if he found her to be so uninteresting?

But the part that stung the most, somehow, was the implication that she and Richard could never have a love match.

They *weren't* a love match, she reminded herself, pushing back the silly pang of hurt that came with Lord Archinton's words.

He isn't wrong on that account.

She could not say any of this, however, so she merely said, “I don’t have a reason to believe that’s the case.”

For the barest moment, Lord Archinton’s smile twisted into a sneer. Then, quick as a snake, his friendly mask slipped back into place. “It doesn’t matter what you believe, does it, Teresa? The facts are these. I am not a man who loses. I have decided to wed you, and so wed you I shall. You are mine. Do not think that this flirtation with Beaumont will go anywhere, and do not imagine that it does anything more than make you look like a fool. When he casts you aside and there is nobody else to turn to, you will be grateful that I am here. You will be grateful that you are mine—my wife, in my bed, bearing my children.”

She had no response to this. It was too crass, too insulting. So, all Teresa could manage was to gape at him as the waltz’s final notes echoed out over the ballroom, as dozens of swishing skirts came to a halt around her. She merely stared, knowing her eyes were wide, as Lord Archinton released her with an elaborate bow.

“I’ll be waiting, Teresa,” he said loudly enough that the couples nearby could hear.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw one of them start to twitter at his use of her Christian name. His tone was gallant enough to seem romantic, but Teresa saw it for what it was: a threat.

Her limbs felt wooden as he escorted her to the edge of the dance floor and departed with a formal bow and a victorious gleam in his eyes. It was only when he was out of her orbit, when she had room to think and air to breathe, that she began to feel very, very alarmed.

The whole thing was so absurd that it scarcely seemed true. She had been menaced in the middle of a Mayfair ballroom by an aristocrat who purported to be courting her. He had spoken of her—to her—like she was already his, like he *owned* her. Her hands started to tremble.

Around her, the sounds of the ballroom were suddenly too loud, too close. The air was too hot, the scents of expensive perfume too cloying. She needed to get out of here, she realized, before she broke down. But she couldn't go alone—what if Lord Archinton was watching? What if he came after her and decided to pursue her even more forcefully—even violently?

Richard. His name leaped immediately to mind. She needed Richard.

She found him almost instantly, his tall and grand form easy to pick out from the milling masses of the ballroom. He was engaged in casual conversation with some young lord or other, but with a sense almost like magic, almost as if they were connected somehow by more than mere bargains or friendship, he seemed to sense her gaze the instant she sent it his way.

He glanced up, the smile on his face dropping immediately into a concerned frown when he spotted whatever her face revealed.

He understood, she realized with relief. Of course, he did. He always understood.

With a murmured word to the man next to him, he began making his way toward her, but he was too far away. Teresa knew she wouldn't last until he wove his way through the throngs of well-to-do people, and she couldn't bear it if someone tried to talk to her while she waited. So, she tipped her head in the direction of a nearby exit, gratified when he gave her a quick nod of comprehension.

Feeling like she could finally manage a full exhale, Teresa ducked into a quiet hallway, letting the sounds and sights of the ballroom fade away behind her as she pressed her back against a wall. This was what she needed. Privacy.

Privacy—and Richard.

Moments later, the door to the ballroom cracked open once more, letting in a quick burst of light and noise, and then Richard slipped through. The door wasn't even fully closed behind him before he had grasped her elbows, tugging her toward him.

“Teresa,” he said, worry thick in his tone. “What happened? What’s wrong? I saw you dance with Archinton—what did he say to you?”

Even hearing Lord Archinton’s name sent a shiver through her, which she knew Richard noticed, as his hands tightened briefly on her arms. The conflicting emotions—her alarm and her gratitude for the man before her—warred inside her, clogging her throat.

She shook her head. “I just—I need to get away,” she said.

A second's hesitation was the only sign that Richard wanted to press her for more immediately, before he nodded, a grim expression on his face. "Let's find somewhere we can talk," he said.

He gripped her hand in his, the point of contact grounding as they traveled down the dimly lit hallway in search of a quiet space to sit. Although she knew slipping off with a man in the middle of a Society event was the kind of thing that courted ruin, Teresa relaxed more and more with each step they took further and further away from the ballroom and the smiling menace it contained.

They passed the slight echoing sounds of the gaming room, where gentlemen smoked and played cards, and the ladies' retiring room, where hems were mended and hairpins readjusted.

They finally came upon a quiet area, and Richard pushed open a door—a library, Teresa realized. That would have been quite a nice bit of symmetry, she thought with a note of hysteria, except as soon as Richard poked his head in the room, he was met with a cry of feminine alarm and a man's voice shouting, "Get the hell out, man!"

He slammed the door.

"My goodness," Teresa said. "What was that?"

"I have just seen," Richard commented, "far more of Lord and Lady Hewitt than I ever hoped to."

Teresa felt her eyebrows raise at the notion that their hosts had slipped away from their own ball for a romantic interlude in the library.

“How nice for them,” she said mildly.

Lord and Lady Hewitt were in their fifties and had been married for at least two decades. Their eldest two daughters were already married themselves. Teresa found it oddly charming to think that the couple might be swept away by passion after all this time.

“For *them*,” Richard said with emphasis. “Less for me. Between those two and you, I shall never be able to look the same way at a library again.”

That pulled a chuckle from her. Even after the most dreadful episodes, Richard could always cheer her up.

Even so, however, she wanted to find a place to talk.

They were at the end of the hallway, now, and so the two headed up a small back staircase, which was blessedly empty. They found *another* quiet room, and whether it was luck or Richard’s muttered prayer—“*Please* do not let me find anyone else fornicating in here”—the room, too, was devoid of occupants.

It was evidently a guest bedchamber, neat and clean but devoid of any of the personal touches that would suggest the room was occupied. No fire burned in the hearth, but moonlight shone through the windows, providing enough

illumination for Richard to tug her over to the single armchair that sat in front of the barren fireplace.

She wondered over the mathematics of having two people but only one chair until Richard sat himself down on the plush seat and then immediately tugged her into his lap.

Oh. Well. Yes, that solved it.

His arms went around her like he'd barely been holding them back from doing so, and she found herself sinking instantly into his warm embrace. How was he so comforting? She didn't have the answer, but she didn't care to worry about it at the moment, not when he *was* comforting her and she desperately needed that comfort.

"All right," he said, the word murmured against the side of her head where he bent down until his face was pressed into her hair. "We're alone. Now, tell me—what happened? You looked as though you'd seen a ghost back in the ballroom."

Now that she was here, in this better place with this better man, she didn't want to let the specter of Lord Archinton's threat into the room with them, but she knew Richard wouldn't be able to rest without knowing, and she knew she would feel better for sharing the burden.

"Lord Archinton was...a bit forceful this evening," she said, trying to figure out how best to phrase it.

A part of her worried that if she framed it incorrectly, Lord Archinton's insistence would seem like a romantic declaration,

but a larger part of her rebelled against that worry. This was Richard. He would understand.

And, indeed, as soon as she said the words, he stiffened beneath her.

“What has he done now?” Richard demanded. “I knew I should have taught him a firmer lesson after that night at the opera house.”

Ignoring the little thrill she got at the idea of Richard defending her honor against Lord Archinton, she said, “He didn’t hurt me or anything like that. But his words were... well, they were less than complimentary, shall we say. And somewhat aggressive.”

“Explain yourself,” urged Richard. “Before I decide that it’s a good idea to show him what aggressive really means.”

Another shiver ran down her spine. She shouldn’t like that. She shouldn’t. But she did.

“He said—” The words tasted ashen in her mouth. “He said that you would tire of me and that he would wait until then. He said he had decided to marry me and that he was going to do so. He said...” She swallowed. “He said I was *his*.”

As she had spoken, Richard had gotten more and more rigid beneath her until his body was like stone. His arms tightened around her, not painfully, but tight enough that she knew she would struggle to break his grip on her own if she wanted to.

She didn't want to. And she knew, as well, that if she asked, he would let her go.

She didn't want that, either.

No, what she wanted was to stay right here, just like this, feeling him beneath her, hard where she was soft, hearing him rasp her name into her hair.

"Teresa." His voice was rough. "Teresa."

A warm hand came to the back of her neck, turning her to face him. Richard's eyes were burning, anger etched in the lines of his face, but his anger didn't frighten her. Because she knew he wasn't angry *at* her, he was angry *for* her. And so the force of that anger wasn't a weapon, but rather a reassurance that she was not alone.

"Listen to me," he said, his gaze boring into hers. "Listen." His words shook with barely suppressed emotion. "He will not harm you, do you understand me? I will not let him. I will not let him bully or force or coerce you. I swear it to you, not while there is breath left in my body."

He let out a shuddering breath. Teresa, too, felt like she couldn't breathe. She felt entranced by him, enthralled by his... magnificence.

And so her breath came with a gasp when he finished speaking. "Because you aren't his, Teresa. You are *mine*."

She should have hated those words. Wasn't that her fear—being owned by a man? But if her mind wanted to rebel against the sentiment, her body overrode that command, because she didn't protest.

Instead, she threw her arms around Richard's neck and drew his mouth to hers in a heated, passionate kiss.

He met her with equal fire, his mouth opening beneath hers and his hands clutching at her greedily. Their breaths mingled, and still, she pressed closer to him, wanting more, *needing* more. His tongue traced her lower lip and then plundered her mouth. The gesture was encompassing, captivating.

Possessing.

She loved it.

She shifted, the movement a bit clumsy until Richard helped her, so that she was straddling his lap instead of sitting astride it, some deep-seated impulse telling her that this position would bring them together more satisfyingly. And she was right. Sitting like this, her core pressed against the hardness she could feel growing in his trousers, applied pressure against that secret place he'd taught her about in a way that made her moan with sensation.

“Do you like that, my sweet?” Richard asked in between the kisses that he pressed along her jaw and down her neck. “Do you like me laying claim to you?”

“Oh, God,” she murmured, the heat of his mouth as he licked over her pulse sending her heart skittering.

“Say it,” he urged. “Tell me you like it.” He paused, his tone growing wicked. “Unless you want me to stop, of course.”

She did *not* want that. “I like it,” she panted, wriggling against him, seeking more pressure, more sensation, more Richard. “I like your claim.”

“Hmm,” he hummed against her as he kissed his way back toward her neck. “Such a good girl. So sweet. So lovely.”

She knew she should not like that as much as she did. But only a little whimper of desire emerged.

“Let me show you pleasure, Teresa,” he said, and she could hear the note of desperation in his tone. It made her feel powerful, even as his arms were like a vice around her. “Let me show you what I can give you if you are mine.”

“Yes,” she said.

If he needed words, she would give him words. Anything to hurry him along, because she was nothing so much as a cavern of need, and she knew he was the only person who could satisfy it. She needed the pleasure he was promising. Needed it. She would die without it, she was certain.

“Yes, Richard, please, yes.”

And then, she was weightless, not because he'd tumbled her into that place of pleasure—not *yet*, that was—but because he'd stood with her in his arms, lifting her as easily as if she weighed nothing at all. She hadn't realized that a show of physical strength would delight her so well, but something low in the pit of her stomach throbbed pleasantly with the knowledge that he could move her about so easily.

That throbbing only intensified when he laid her down and she recognized the surface beneath her as a bed.

God bless Lord and Lady Hewitt.

Libraries didn't have beds. And maybe it was the softness beneath her, or the way she could stretch out her arms before Richard like she was an offering on his altar, or maybe it was just the salacious, risky knowledge that she was well and truly *in bed* with him, but she felt suddenly certain that no other piece of furniture would do half so well.

The grin that Richard shot her was feral, with no gentlemanly politesse to it at all, and Teresa felt that if she never stopped seeing that smile, she could die a happy woman.

He leaned over her, pressing his warm weight against her. She bucked against him, but she couldn't go much of anywhere—he was too heavy. The feeling tore a whimper from her throat.

“Richard. Please.”

She didn't even know exactly what she was begging for. But he'd promised something, and she wanted it. She wanted it

immediately.

Because he was an awful, dreadful, contrary, wonderful man, however, he merely pressed another long, hot kiss to the underside of her jaw. She squirmed harder, and he chuckled—a dark, thrilling sound.

“Do you remember,” he asked, his lips whispering across her skin, lighting fires in their wake, “your clever little quip about shackling me?”

Teresa tried to think, but he was not making that easy. “Um, yes?” she said. “Maybe. Who cares? Please, touch me.”

He liked the neediness, she could tell, but not enough to dissuade him from whatever course he had set. “Oh, I will, my little minx,” he reassured her, his lips grazing the shell of her ear, the touch more arousing than it should have been. “But if I am going to lay my claim to you—if I am going to claim your delicious body for my own—then *you* are not going to touch yourself.”

“What?” She didn’t understand, couldn’t think, but she liked the dark promise his tone held. “What are you—”

And then, swift as could be, he clasped both her hands in one of his, using his long fingers and strong grip to press her wrists over her head. The movement pushed him up and off her, his weight now held aloft by his other hand, which leaned heavily into the mattress next to her head. He was, for the barest moment, only touching her in that one place, in that one-handed grasp that pressed her down in a way that was inescapable.

It was only one touch. And yet, she was aflame.

“Oh my—”

The blasphemy was torn from her lips as Richard settled down atop her again, his mouth coming against hers in a bruising kiss. The force of it—not painful, but harsh and all-encompassing—brought the previous sensations even more acutely to life.

She squirmed her hands against his grasp, and he pulled back briefly to look at her, a reassuringly solemn look on his face. “If you really want me to let go,” he promised, “I will.”

She knew it to be true even before he said it, but even so, she found the attention to her comfort to be an added element of the pleasure she found with him. She was free to feel this way because she was safe, truly safe, in Richard’s arms.

“Don’t you dare,” she returned.

And then, she hiked up one of her legs, freeing it from her skirts enough to wrap around the back of his strong thigh, pulling him closer to her. If she didn’t have use of her hands, she would make do.

This time, it was Richard’s turn to gasp and press himself firmly against her, which Teresa found to be enormously gratifying, both due to the physical sensations it inspired and from the sense that she had managed to gain the upper hand. He recovered quickly, though, lifting himself back up and

reaching down to draw up her skirts in a demonstration of balance that was frankly impressive.

“Now, now,” he chided, that wicked grin fixed firmly back in place. “Do play by the rules, darling. After all, I promised that I was going to show you the kind of pleasure I can offer.”

His kiss stole the retort right off her lips. And then, his fingers, which danced up her calf over the silk of her stocking, kept her from regaining the power of speech.

How could she talk, after all, when she was so busy *feeling*?

He touched her ever so lightly as his fingers trailed higher and higher, his touch rasping against the fabric, then teasing the ends of satin ribbons, then teasing along the sensitive skin of her inner thigh. All the while, he talked, a delicious litany of temptation.

“What color are these ribbons, I wonder?” he mused.

He didn’t seem to require an answer, which was good, as Teresa wasn’t sure she could remember the name of any color that wasn’t the gold-green hazel of his eyes, let alone recall what ribbons sat beneath her clothes.

“One day, I shall undress you in the bright of day, and then I shall be able to see everything.”

A distant part of Teresa recognized that as a fantasy—their moments together would always be stolen, and then their time

together would be over—but the flicker of sadness that inspired was quickly swept away by the capture of the present, as Richard suddenly went from grazing his fingertips against her to palming the whole expanse of her thigh, squeezing her flesh firmly.

“I might even steal one of those ribbons for myself,” he added. “And then you shall know that I have a talisman at the ready whenever I wish to think of what you look like beneath your skirts. The secret part of you that nobody else gets to see. My Teresa.”

Her skirt was nearly at her waist now, and he was glancing down in that direction, which she supposed ought to have embarrassed her but thrilled her instead. Briefly, his attention flashed back to her face.

“I’m going to release your hands now,” he informed her. “But I want you to keep them where they are. If you move them, I shall stop.”

Oh goodness, why was that thought so arousing? Why did it cause a sensation to prickle along her skin, even on the places he *wasn't* touching, to know that he had devised a way to keep this claiming hold on her even after he had released her?

“Richard,” she pleaded. “Don’t stop.”

“Then leave your hands where they are,” he said, his voice teasing.

How could he talk? One day, she vowed, she would reduce *him* to a wordless pile of want and need.

She nodded her agreement. She would have agreed to *stand* on her hands if that was what it took to get him to touch her just then. All she had to do was not move her hands. That would be easy.

It was not easy.

She realized how not easy it would be mere seconds after he let go when he stood, lifting himself off her, robbing her of every single bit of his touch. Her instinct to grab for him was so strong that she nearly lunged at him before she forgot their game, leaving her hands in place only at the last second.

Richard seemed to recognize this. He arched an eyebrow at her in an unspoken challenge as he looked down at her, laid out for his perusal. Her skirts were rucked up, her hair a mess, her hands pinned overhead not by any physical force but by the strength of his command. She could only imagine what she looked like.

“Beautiful,” he said as if he could hear her thoughts. “You look so beautiful, it kills me.”

She was going to kill him if he didn’t touch her soon because the tight spring of energy in her couldn’t wind any tighter, or she would explode. It was, therefore, very good for both of them that he placed both hands on her knees, spreading them wide before his admiring gaze.

And then, he dropped to his knees, all but dropping out of sight.

She wanted to look. Oh, how she wanted to look. But she had a feeling he would consider it a very fun game to stop if she moved her hands, would find it wickedly amusing to tease her at length before allowing her to find her release. That was the only thing that kept her in place.

She was rewarded for her obedience when he leaned forward, a puff of breath caressing her thighs mere inches from their apex. And then, a second later, he pressed an openmouthed kiss to that spot. She hadn't realized the skin on the inside of her legs could be so sensitive, but when he laid a caress there, lips and tongue and then a sharp nip of teeth, she felt certain she could have levitated off the bed.

"Richard," she panted. It was the only word left in her vocabulary.

"So soft," he murmured appreciatively. "So soft and sweet."

Nobody thought Teresa was sweet, but she wasn't about to argue with the man now, of all times.

"Please," she said.

Apparently, she had a second word. She didn't like her odds of coming up with a third, however, so it was extremely fortunate that Richard then took pity on her.

He pressed his mouth to her core.

Teresa let out a little squeak of surprise, one that was likely too loud for their present need for secrecy, but she couldn't have held the sound in if she'd tried, nor could she have repressed the moan that followed quickly on its heels. It was just that his touch—*there*, like *that*—felt so unbearably marvelous that the rest of the world simply melted away.

She was no longer worried about Lord Archinton, didn't fear the perils of marriage. She didn't worry about the ball or the dozens of members of Society who were far too close nearby for this to be considered anything less than reckless. She was not a lady, or a spinster, or anything, except Teresa.

She was Teresa, and he was Richard, and they were there together, joined by this experience of feeling and arousal and power, and she nearly sobbed with the unbelievably, incandescent joy of it.

And then, he slipped one finger inside her, pressing at some place that felt like a secret miracle, and she detonated, no longer in her body but instead exploding into a blaze of light.

The sensation went on and on, and when it finally receded, Teresa's body went limp like she was a rag doll instead of a woman of muscle and bone. Her hands were still above her head, no longer held there but simply lying there. She couldn't have moved them, not for a king's ransom. The only part of her that moved—the only part of her capable of movement—was the heaving of her chest as she struggled to regain her breath.

Richard rose to his feet, smug, masculine pride shining in his expression. As his eyes ran fondly over her disheveled form and the glow of Teresa's climax began to fade, she felt the inklings of worry creep in, then grow stronger and stronger.

What, she wondered, as her heart raced in her chest at the sight of this man she could only temporarily call friend, had she gotten herself into?

CHAPTER 10



“*F*or goodness’ sake, Teresa, would you stop that? It’s terribly unladylike.”

Teresa looked up at her mother’s exasperated tone, and then down at her hand. Oh, drat. She’d been worrying her thumbnail again.

“Sorry, Mama,” she said, tucking her hand beneath her thigh.

It *was* a dreadful habit, one she thought she had left behind in childhood. But over the last few days, she had been... uncommonly conflicted.

Charity sat down in a chair across from where Teresa sat in a window seat, assembling her needles, silks, and hoop for embroidery. As a further element of her pursuit of enjoyment after becoming widowed, Charity no longer embroidered the delicate florals and Biblical passages that were considered appropriate fare for well-bred ladies. Instead, her mother had borrowed one of Kenneth’s books on poisonous plants and now spent her time embroidering toadstools and aconite, the bright flora innocent at first glance, but unsettling in its toxic brightness.

As such, her mother pulled a strand of blood red from her collection of threads before feeding it through the eye of her needle.

“Is everything all right, Tessa?” she asked, keeping her eyes on her work.

Teresa wasn't fooled. Her mother was using her embroidery as a distraction, just as Teresa had used her cup of lemonade the other night at the ball she was absolutely refusing to think about. She had learned that trick from her mother, after all, who had shown her early in life that men thought that a woman with an object in her hands could not simultaneously have a thought in her head.

Everything *wasn't* all right, but Teresa could hardly confess to her mother that she had derived pleasure from listening to a man whom she had no intention of marrying describe all the ways he wished to *claim* her. She couldn't say that she'd felt nothing but horror when Lord Archinton had announced that she would be *his*, and yet had felt thrilled and nearly drunk with desire when Richard had uttered the same words.

She couldn't admit these things, not only because they would cause her mother to drop dead of shock and Teresa to drop dead of embarrassment, which would lead to an extremely dreadful interlude whereupon some innocent member of the staff came across two unexpected corpses, sent into early demise by the force of their own unfortunate emotions.

She also couldn't explain any of it because she didn't understand it herself. She didn't understand how she could like Richard's possessive words when she'd so long cherished her independence, when she'd structured the entirety of her life around protecting that independence. Wasn't that why she'd

done everything she could to remain a spinster? Wasn't that why they'd hatched this whole mad plan?

And she couldn't understand why declarations of ownership from one man felt like a noose tightening around her neck, yet from another...

From another, it felt like freedom. Freedom to be who she really was, without apology. Without reservation.

And she certainly didn't understand how she was meant to go on after her friendship (and could she even still call it a friendship, after everything they'd done together?) with Richard was over.

Since she couldn't say any of that, she asked instead, "Mama, did you love Papa?"

"Ouch!" her mother cried as she stabbed herself in the finger with her needle—hard, too, from the looks of it. Charity gave her daughter a shocked look as she pressed the injured finger to her mouth for a moment.

"Teresa, of course, I did," her mother answered when she'd pulled the affected digit free and pressed a scrap of cloth against the pinprick. "Why would you even ask me that?"

Teresa supposed she should be pleased that her mother had felt love in her life, in her marriage. It should have been the answer she wanted. But as her mother reassured her that she'd loved her father, a father Teresa had loved as well, she felt nothing but disappointment.

“I’m sorry, Mama,” she said, since she was certainly to blame for the needle to the hand. “I just... I suppose I’ve been thinking about what makes a happy marriage recently.”

Charity’s expression softened. “My love,” she said gently. “I’m sure you’ll be happy with the Duke of Beaumont—” She broke off as Teresa shook her head sharply. “Unless you prefer the Earl of Archinton?” she prodded gently.

Oh, Lord, no. Just the thought of it was enough to make Teresa feel queasy.

“It’s not even really about them, specifically,” Teresa hedged. And it wasn’t technically a lie, she supposed, since she was asking about marriage, and she had no intention of actually marrying either of the men her mother had referenced. “It’s more about... things changing after marriage. For a woman, I mean.”

Well, that had been idiotically vague, she thought with an inward roll of her eyes.

But her mother didn’t seem to think she was being foolish. Instead, Charity looked considering.

“Things *do* change after marriage,” she said consideringly. “But that is the nature of the thing, my love. Courtship is... Everyone is on their best behavior during a courtship. It’s lovely, and it’s flattering, but it isn’t entirely *real*. No person is at their best in every moment of their lives—and that’s what marriage is, a whole life together. So, while marrying for love is all well and good, to think that any version of love you have

before marriage will remain entirely static throughout your life? Well, I'm simply not sure that's a reasonable expectation. Love means compromise."

Teresa paused as she took in this explanation. The words themselves made sense, but...

But she knew what it looked like. She knew exactly what this form of compromise had looked like for her mother. It meant that her mother had compromised everything, while her father had compromised nothing. She didn't think her father had done anything particularly salacious—Teresa didn't believe he'd kept a mistress or anything of that kind of betrayal—but when he had wanted to go somewhere, they had gone. When he'd wanted to do something, they'd done it.

And her mother had compromised and compromised and compromised until she had been erased.

"How do you know when you've compromised too much?" Teresa asked.

Her mother's smile was meant to be reassuring, Teresa knew.

"Darling, you won't compromise too much. You're a wonderful girl—a woman, I really ought to say now—and I'm sure you will please your husband just the way you are."

That was... not an answer.

Or rather, it was, but it was the kind of answer that one got from a woman who had compromised until she had scarcely existed as her own self anymore, instead becoming merely “the Viscount of Dorshire’s wife” for the long, interminable years of her marriage. It was the kind of answer one got from a woman who had gone through all that and then had emerged from the other side without learning any kind of lesson from the experience.

And that was what Teresa feared more than anything else. Yes, she felt safe and protected with Richard now, but what if that protectiveness turned into a prison? And, worse, what if she started to like that prison? What if her identity was worn away, smoothed like river rocks until it was unrecognizable, until the Teresa that she was now ceased to exist?

Wasn’t the very fact that she was thinking about this already a sign that it could happen? Shouldn’t the realization that she was even wondering about marriage instead of doing everything in her power to avoid its trap frighten her? She supposed she ought to find comfort from the fact that she was still dead set against Lord Archinton and that when questions of what marriage might look like floated through her mind, they were with the one man that she knew would never, ever marry her.

Because he had said as much, outright and direct, to her face.

Why didn’t that make her happy, then? Why did it make her feel nervous and off-kilter instead of relieved?

What was *happening* to her?

Teresa took a deep, steadying breath and forced her mind back to the present, pulling her thoughts away from swirling *what ifs* and *never woulds*. Her mother was eyeing her, a flicker of concern on her face, so Teresa forced a smile. She would never get the answer she wanted from Charity, that much was evident. And she didn't want to force her mother to look back on the long years of her marriage with sadness or regret. That time was gone, and there was no use in pressing her mother to relive those years, not when she was finally getting a chance to engage in her own pursuits.

"Thanks, Mama," she said, hoping the lie wasn't evident. "That helps a lot."

Charity dumped her bundle of silk threads and fabric off her lap and came over to embrace her daughter, pressing a kiss to each cheek. Teresa sank into the hug, using it to share the love she felt for her mother despite the disappointment that she worried they would never truly understand one another.

"I love you, my darling girl," her mother said. "I just want you to be happy."

"I know, Mama," Teresa responded, hugging her tighter.

That was the problem, ultimately. Charity loved her daughter, and Teresa loved her mother. That's what made the knowledge that she would disappoint her mother so painful.

But she couldn't marry Lord Archinton, not even for the sake of her mother's happiness. She couldn't sacrifice her own happiness to such a man. She just couldn't.

And the man who didn't make her cringe away in dread and despair? Well, he wasn't a real option, after all. He was a lie they were telling for mutual gain.

She retreated to work for a few hours, hoping to find solace in the orderly numbers, facts, and figures of a set of well-kept account books. But—darn her strong work ethic—the books were all in perfect order, and the slower period that always arrived along with the end of spring meant that there was no new business to attend to. Even double and triple-checking things took her less time than she might have hoped.

Limbs suffused with jittery energy, Teresa was headed off to find something for luncheon when she was waylaid by a footman.

“Excuse me, Miss,” the man said politely, bobbing a respectful bow. “But I've been sent to inform you that the Earl of Archinton is here.”

Only a lifetime of being conditioned in ladylike behavior stopped Teresa from swearing loudly and at length. She'd wanted a distraction, but not *this* distraction. She allowed herself one moment in which she considered refusing to entertain the man, but given Lord Archinton's behavior at the ball the other night—in front of dozens of witnesses—who could even guess how outrageously he'd react if she outright ignored him?

She thanked the footman and headed toward the front parlor.

I've been dancing around him for too long. If he wants to be forthright, I can be forthright, too.

Even so, she felt tense with nerves as she entered the parlor.

“Good day, Lord Archinton,” she said, squaring her shoulders as she faced the man.

He wore his usual smile—which seemed, to Teresa, now slimy and laced with viciousness—but it evaporated at the sound of his title.

“I thought I told you to call me Nicholas, Teresa,” he said. “Go on, say it. There’s a good girl.”

The words were an awful echo of some of the things Richard had said to her when they’d been together during the Hewitt ball. Hearing them from Lord Archinton made her feel sick, then hot with anger. How dare he try to take that lovely moment from her? He already threatened her future—now he wanted to cast shadows on her past, too?

“Lord Archinton,” she said forcefully. A dangerous glint lit his eyes, but she continued. “I understand your preference in this matter, but I do not believe the level of familiarity between us warrants the use of given names. I will call you by your title, and I ask that you revert to calling me ‘Miss Norman.’”

Lord Archinton took a step forward—not far enough to be menacing, but far enough to raise Teresa’s hackles against the *potential* of his being menacing. She refused to retreat.

“Come now, Teresa,” he said, the show of disrespect blatant. “I don’t understand why you’re being like this. We are going to

be married.”

“We are not.” There. She’d said it. He even looked a bit surprised at it. “We are not going to be married, My Lord. I understand that you may not find this answer to be as you hoped. I understand that you have come to believe that there is a courtship between us. But the fact of the matter is that you and I do not know one another, and what I do know, I cannot say I have found impressive. In our few encounters, you have shown yourself relentlessly uninterested in my opinion on matters that concern my own life and future and unwilling to respect my thoughts when I do express them.”

She clenched her hands at her sides to stop them from trembling. She’d never been this bold, but it felt good, felt right. “I do not appreciate being threatened. I do not appreciate being pushed or bullied. When you do find a woman whom you plan to marry—and I assure you, that woman will not be me—I suggest that you attempt to court her by showing that you consider her a person in her own right, rather than an object you wish to add to your collection.”

As she’d spoken, Lord Archinton’s gaze had gotten narrower and narrower, his expression more and more twisted until it was a snarl. When he spoke, his voice was low, and Teresa found that far more alarming than if he had shouted at her.

“I hope you are pleased with your clever little speech, *Miss Norman*.” Her name was an insult, not an acquiescence to her desires, that much was clear. “But know this. It changes nothing. I told you at the ball. I do not lose. I *will* not lose. You are mine, and nothing will change that.” He took another step forward, and it took everything in Teresa’s body not to retreat at the furious air that rolled off him in waves.

“I had heard that these little fits of temper were becoming fashionable with ladies these days. It’s a pity, really. Apparently, we have failed in the education of a generation, if none of you are being taught that you need a strong man to teach you what’s good for you.” Teresa gasped in affront, but Lord Archinton continued his tirade. “I will be that man, Teresa—you mark my words. You may not know yet how to behave, may not know what you must endure for your own good, but I will show you. Trust that.”

“Get out.” The words came out like a gasp. “Get out. Take your threats and get out of my house.”

The *audacity* of him. She felt blazingly hot with fury and, yes, fear. Because the look in Lord Archinton’s eyes told her he believed it—he really, truly believed that women needed to be controlled by men. That they must *endure* this control whether they liked it or not.

All this made her realize that marriage was far more dangerous than she’d ever realized before. Because if she hadn’t resisted him, if she hadn’t been opposed to marriage on the whole, she never would have seen this side of him, not until it was too late. If Lord Archinton had gone after the kind of spinster who lamented her unmarried state, who was glad for a proposal no matter its origin, she would have been embroiled in matrimony, under his legal control, before she discovered that he wouldn’t erase her personality due to accident or carelessness.

No, a man like Lord Archinton would do it *intentionally*.

After all, as he stared at her in her own parlor, he looked sly and cruel, like he was happy to have rattled her. He liked seeing her unsettled, liked her fear.

“I’ll go,” he said, the easy tone back. And wasn’t that the most frightening bit of all, the realization that he could fake normalcy so easily? “For now, I will go. But I will be back, Teresa. And that’s not a threat—it’s a promise.”

And he swept past her and out the door, seeming to take all the air with him, leaving Teresa gasping and shaking in his wake.

She sank down onto a settee, her legs no longer feeling strong enough to support her. She took slow, steady breaths, attempting to calm her racing heart. What was she going to do about Lord Archinton? How was she going to get herself free from him without shaming her family?

Richard would know, her traitorous mind whispered.

The thought made Teresa shoot to her feet in anger. She had to stop relying on Richard for comfort, for advice, for anything. Soon enough—although perhaps not as soon as they’d first anticipated, given Lord Archinton’s tenacity—their scheme would end, and their friendship would be over. She needed to get out of the habit of turning to him.

Besides, she reminded herself as she stomped out of the room, not even knowing where she was going but needed to burn off energy, hadn’t she just been reminded of the one thing she’d been in danger of forgetting?

No woman could ever, ever trust a man.

CHAPTER 11



“*W*hy are we all here, again?” moaned Percy Dunn, the Duke of Haddington.

“Good God, Percy,” complained his wife and Duchess, Marina, from where she lounged on a very ugly settee that Richard should have disposed of ages ago. “You act like you’re being dragged to the guillotine, rather than to a party at the home of one of your very oldest and dearest friends.”

Percy put a wounded—or possibly self-important, it was hard to tell with him—hand to his chest. “I am a father, Marina. I have offspring. Children. And I have abandoned them to be here.”

Marina rolled her eyes. “Yes, they shall suffer immensely spending three days with your mother, your sister, both of whom spoil them absurdly, not to mention their nannies and a full staff.”

“You will note,” Percy countered, “that nobody on that list is their beloved father.”

“Shut up, Percy,” his wife retorted without heat. “I, for one, am looking forward to three days when nobody spits, drools, or casts up their accounts on me. Or bites me,” she added.

“So, the twins are good, then?” chimed in Seth from across the room, a look of faint horror on his face.

Marina’s expression grew instantly dreamy. “Oh, they’re marvelous, of course. You should see their toddling little walks. It’s the most charming thing you’ve seen in your entire life.”

“I’ll... take your word for it,” Seth said.

“Like hell you will,” countered Percy. “You’ll come visit, and you will give as many rides on your back as is demanded of you. And you will like it.”

Seth turned to the fourth member of their group, Joseph Pike, the Duke of Cullton, who had only recently returned from his honeymoon. His Duchess, Louisa, sat beside him, one of Joseph’s arms slung around her shoulders fondly.

This expression of casual affection had surprised Richard—Joseph had always been the most reserved of the four of them, but marriage to Louisa, who was a delightful hellion, in Richard’s opinion, had loosened him up a bit. It was, Richard felt, a positive development for his formerly overly starched friend.

“Never have children,” Seth begged Joseph. “Please. Look what it does to a man.”

A small smile played on Joseph's lips. "Well," he said, sounding quite pleased with himself, indeed. "I'm afraid I cannot oblige you, my friend."

Marina gasped as she caught his meaning, and Richard felt his face break into a smile that paled in comparison to the beaming grins on the faces of the parents-to-be.

"Oh my goodness!" Marina exclaimed, leaping to her feet to give Louisa an exuberant hug. "I'm so happy for you—for both of you!"

"Be careful!" Joseph exclaimed in alarm, causing both women to roll their eyes at him.

"He thinks I'm made of glass now," Louisa complained as if the man she discussed wasn't sitting right beside her.

"I do not," muttered Joseph.

"Oh, Percy was a *menace*." Marina's tone was heavy with commiseration.

"Really quite rude," groused Percy.

"Wait until you're properly showing," Marina went on. "It awakens some sort of insanity in them. They *hover*. Start thinking of excuses now to get him to leave you alone for an hour. You'll be round and hot and irritable, and you'll be desperate for a moment to yourself."

“That’s a good idea,” Louisa said.

“They do realize we can hear them, don’t they?” Joseph asked Percy. “Doesn’t knowing their plan in advance reduce its efficacy?”

“No,” Percy returned glumly. “I caught on pretty quickly, but I still went off on whatever harebrained errand she sent me on.”

“*As interesting as this is,*” Seth interjected loudly, causing the four friends to look over at him—which was a shame, really. Richard had been enjoying himself. His friends were better than the theater. He didn’t deserve them. “I don’t believe that Longman ever did tell us why he summoned us all here.”

Richard recanted. He probably *did* deserve Seth, the bloody nuisance.

He scowled at his friend, who knew perfectly well what he was doing. “A man can’t have a party?” he asked peevishly.

“A man can,” Seth returned loftily. “*You* cannot. Especially at your country seat. You hate it here.”

Richard did, in fact, hate it here. The place was heavy with memories that he preferred to leave in his past. But his mother had been over the moon to have him, and his younger sister, Adelaide, had even traveled from her home to be here, dragging her husband, the Viscount of Crouton, along with her.

“My mother lives here,” he protested.

Joseph’s eyes narrowed. “No, that’s not it,” he said. “You call your mother to London when you want to see her.”

“Maybe I decided it was rude to make her do all the traveling,” Richard retorted.

Wait—blast. *Was* it rude to ask his mother to do all the traveling? Now that he thought about it, he suspected it was.

Percy, who had been lounging against a wall, stood up straight. “Wait a minute,” he said. “This is all starting to seem very familiar...”

“Shut up, Percy,” Richard said.

“Would everyone *stop* telling me to shut up?” Percy complained.

Seth opened his mouth, and Percy shot him a poisonous glance before he could say anything.

“As I was saying,” Percy went on pointedly. “Is that this sounds awfully familiar. And if I remember, you all bedeviled me to hell and back when it was *me* who was mooning over a girl.”

“Aww,” said Marina, looking doe-eyed at her husband.

“There’s a lady?” Louisa looked delighted. Even damned *Joseph* looked delighted.

Richard gave up. Every good thought he’d ever had about these bunch of arseholes was retracted.

Especially Seth, who said, “Yes, Richard. Please tell us about the young lady in question. And please, please, *please* tell us how you met her.”

“Don’t talk about her like that,” Richard snapped. Which was a mistake. A huge mistake. Because, as one, his friends gasped—even the men.

“Oh,” said Joseph quietly. “You love her.”

“I do not—don’t be ridiculous,” Richard returned. “I—it’s not—she’s a friend.”

“We’re your friends,” Marina pointed out with a deeply irritatingly reasonable tone. “I don’t think you’ve ever thrown one of us a party.”

Was it too late to cancel? Probably. In any case, if he canceled, he wouldn’t get to see Teresa, which he *did* want to do. Because she was his *friend* and a very charming and lovely bed partner. That was it, despite what all these idiots kept saying. That was all it could ever be.

Still, though, it was a pity his dukedom hadn't been around since the dark ages—then his house might have had a dungeon. These pests would all benefit from a few days spent locked in a dungeon. Maybe not Louisa—she was with child—but he could still lock her in a very nice bedroom where she couldn't look at him the way she was now, like she wanted to clap her hands in delight, couldn't he?

“I'm not throwing her a party,” he protested. “Her brother is a naturalist, and he wanted to see the botanical gardens. Since it would be a bit unfair of me to ask my mother to host a man she's never met, I thought it best that the whole family came. And if her family was going to come, then I might as well make it a party—a decision,” he added, “I am now regretting, as it led me to invite you lot.”

He expected them to poke back at him, but instead, Percy looked at him thoughtfully. It was bad news when *Percy* looked thoughtful.

“So, let me get this straight,” he said. “You're throwing a party, not for the lady, but because the lady's *brother* wanted to look at some flowers?”

“Well, not flowers,” Richard grumbled. “He likes botanicals.”

“The brother likes botanicals,” Percy went on slowly. “Which you know because you have spent time with the brother. And you have accommodated this desire of his to make the sister happy. So, we are all here to make happy a man we don't know, because his happiness will mean her happiness, and her happiness will mean your happiness?”

“Crikey,” said Seth. “You *do* love her.”

The protest sprung to Richard’s lips, but he couldn’t seem to make himself utter it. He couldn’t deny it a third time. So, instead, he merely said, “There’s no future in it.”

Marina, who was clever, kind, and as fiercely loyal as her husband, looked at him carefully. “Why not?” she asked.

He couldn’t get into that—he wouldn’t. He felt even less inclined to do so when he saw the three men of the group—the friends who had known him since his boyhood, the only people in the world apart from his immediate family who knew even the bare bones of his history—exchange glances.

“There just isn’t,” he snapped, hating that speculative look between them.

He saw Percy bristle with the harsh tone he had used on Marina, but the Duchess of Haddington held her husband back with a hand gesture. Richard felt a pang of guilt at lashing out, but he couldn’t bring himself to apologize, either, not when it might mean opening that line of conversation again.

“Just forget it,” he said, his tone softer, gently pleading.

Marina held his gaze for just a moment longer before she nodded. “All right,” she said.

He knew that there was an unspoken addition to that comment—*for now*—but he let it rest.

There was a frisson of tension in the air after that, which Richard assumed was his fault. His temper so easily held the power to ruin everything, if he let it, and he'd been careless just then, letting anger dictate his words. He was, therefore, grateful when the butler knocked gently on the door and then entered to let him know that the first guests were arriving.

“Stay here,” Richard told his friends, assuming they would be grateful for the opportunity to speak without his brooding presence mucking things up. “I’ll get everyone introduced and settled before we meet again as a group.”

He headed out into the main foyer of his ancestral home before anyone could do anything besides murmur their acceptance.

The gravel drive of the ostentatious house that served as the country seat of the Beaumont Dukedom was long, so Richard had time to gather his thoughts as he watched two carriages and then a third crunch up the long path toward the house. His mother, who had been in charge of the local invitations, had only extended a welcome to a few members of the local gentry for the party, so he felt confident that one of those carriages contained the Norman family, though they were still too far away to make out a crest on the side of the vehicle.

As he was standing there, trying not to let anticipation get the best of him, his mother came up beside him, an excited expression on her face.

Nancy Longman was not an old woman—she had been a young bride and had only been twenty when her son had been born. But a life of hardship had worn her out, and more gray showed in her hair than its former deep brunette shade. Still,

she looked happy now, Richard thought with pleasure. Seeing his mother happy still felt like a novelty to him.

“Guests,” she said cheerfully as she looped her hands around Richard’s elbow. “We’re going to have guests. Oh, this will be such fun—I’m glad you had this idea, Richard!”

“I’m happy you’re happy, Mother,” he said, meaning it, though he did feel an underlying twinge of guilt that he wasn’t able to make his mother happy like this more frequently. Didn’t she deserve that?

But she likely didn’t deserve to be pulled into his orbit any more frequently than she already was, not when Richard bore too strong a resemblance to his father, a man none of them had mourned. Better to leave her in the company of his sisters, who shared her blue eyes and petite stature.

Like, for example, his sister Addie, who came up on his other side.

Richard had been surprised that his sister, who lived only an hour or so away, had agreed to come to the house party, despite her proximity. She, too, was with child, though a bit further along than Louisa, who did not show at all, yet.

Addie, by contrast, had a modest bump which only showed when she stood as she did now, with her hand pressed against her abdomen.

“How’s my niece or nephew?” he asked his sister to distract himself.

She looked down at her belly with a fond smile. “Allowing me to eat again, so that’s a good thing. But also forcing me up a thousand times at night to seek a chamber pot, so that is less ideal.”

Richard tried not to cringe. “That’s, ah, challenging,” he said.

His mother and sister both laughed.

“Men are always so *persnickety* about anything to do with pregnancy and childbirth,” his mother observed.

“It’s bloody terrifying, is why,” he muttered, thinking back to the conversation in the parlor—before he’d gotten everything all awkward and unpleasant, that was.

He was on Joseph and Percy’s side of things. How was one meant to protect one’s pregnant wife if you didn’t provide constant care?

He wondered, in a flash that he was too slow to suppress, if Teresa wanted children. But that was immaterial, since she never planned to marry. She wouldn’t end up with them, no matter how she felt about the little tykes.

“The baby’s mother,” Addie chimed in, sliding herself neatly under Richard’s arm, as she’d been doing since they had been children and she’d turned to him for protection against all evils, “is very excited to be here. The baby’s mother,” she continued, “would very much like to meet the *new friends* you’ve invited up from London.”

“Oh,” he said, feigning ignorance. “Do you mean Joseph’s new wife? She’s lovely, but she’s inside, I’m afraid.”

Adelaide stepped on his foot. “No, I met Louisa. I meant *Miss Norman*.”

He caught the women on either side of him exchanging a glance. Christ, not them, too.

“Miss Norman,” he said, knowing he sounded pompous and stiff, “is accompanying her brother, the Viscount of Dorshire, who wants to look at Mother’s garden. He’s a naturalist.”

“Yes, Adelaide,” Nancy said, her tone suspiciously light and tinged with laughter. “Your brother works with many naturalists at his printing press. You know how often he invites them to come see the gardens.”

“I *do* know how often he invites them to come see the gardens,” Addie echoed with that same brightness. “Never. It has never happened before now. Not even once.”

If Richard sold that ugly settee indoors—it had to be worth *something*, otherwise, they couldn’t possibly have held on to something so hideous—maybe he could set sail and start over in America, where nobody would bother him.

“I wish Fanny had come,” he said melodramatically, referencing his other sister, Fanny Penfield, the Countess of Maningshire. She was also reasonably local—her home was

approximately half a day away—but she had stayed at home, as she was recovering from recent childbirth.

Good gracious.

Absolutely bloody everyone he knew was having children.

“Do you think Fanny would have been on your side?” Addie asked innocently. She leaned around him. “Mama, he thinks Fanny would have been on his side.”

“Fanny would have riled him worse than the rest of us,” said Nancy with undisguised fondness.

This, alas, was true.

“Are the two of you enjoying yourselves?” he asked tartly, though he didn’t really mind, not deep down. It pleased something essential in him to see the women in his family happy.

“I am, thank you for asking,” said Addie while their mother chuckled at her children’s antics.

The carriages had reached the front of the drive by that point—and not a moment too soon, Richard thought sardonically—so his mother and sister were mercifully forced to stop terrorizing him.

The first carriage emitted Mr. Browning and Lady Camellia Browning, who had retained a courtesy title as an earl's daughter even after marrying a younger son. Camellia was a few years older than Richard, but he knew her passably well, as they'd both grown up in the area. The couple approached the waiting Longman family members with cordial smiles, expressing how pleased they were to have been included and how lovely it was to see everyone.

The second carriage opened to reveal the Normans.

Teresa was handed down first. She gave a gracious nod to the footman who aided her, and then Richard watched as her smile grew broader and more genuine when she spotted him. A breath escaped him, and something in his chest eased. He hadn't seen her since they'd stolen that hour together at the Hewitt ball, and though he had revisited the incident in his mind as he had lain in bed every night, struggling to drift off to sleep, he hadn't realized how much he longed to see her in person. It had been a week, which was, he felt, a week too long.

These were foolish thoughts. Dangerous thoughts, even. But as she approached him and his family, here, in his own home, he couldn't keep them at bay. He was glad to see her, and he was going to feel that gladness.

"Good afternoon, Miss Norman," he said, bowing.

It was wrong of him, certainly, to address her before her brother and mother, who were on her heels, but he couldn't help that, either. His mother noticed, and he knew he'd be teased about it later. But it charmed Teresa, and that mattered more.

“Good afternoon, Your Grace,” Teresa said with a curtsy. Then, she turned to his mother. “Your Grace, thank you so much for inviting us into your home.”

Nancy was all smiles. “Oh, don’t think a minute on it, my dear. I love meeting my dear Richard’s friends.” She lowered her voice conspiratorially. “They do provide me such delightful fodder to torment him with.”

Teresa’s laugh was bright, infectious. Richard couldn’t help but smile as he saw her fall in love with his mother.

“Oh, I assure you,” Teresa gushed. “I shall do everything in my power to oblige. Tormenting him is my truest joy in life.”

She doesn’t know the half of it.

“Teresa!” her mother exclaimed, shocked.

But Nancy laughed as brightly as Teresa had, and he saw that his mother loved her, too. Who wouldn’t?

“Marvelous,” Nancy said, clasping the younger woman’s hand between hers. “We shall compare notes later. In the meantime, may I introduce my younger daughter, Adelaide Vaunt, the Viscountess of Crouton?”

As the Normans murmured their hellos (once Kenneth had been dragged away from gazing at the plants in delight, at least), the occupants of the third carriage disembarked, but

Richard scarcely noticed them. He felt ravenous for Teresa's attention.

Which was why, as the group headed inside, servants scurrying to and fro to get this guest's luggage to that bedroom without mixing anything up, Richard took advantage of the chaos to drag Teresa into the morning room, which was guaranteed to be empty, as it was no longer morning.

He surprised her, all but leaping out at her from a shadowy doorway to snag her by the arm, but he found he couldn't regret it, as she let out a charming little squeak and then a burst of laughter as she recognized him.

"Goodness, you startled me!" she exclaimed, leaning against his chest.

He put his arms around her, feeling that ease of tension continue. Yes. Good. This was where she belonged.

"I didn't mean to frighten you," he said, drawing in a lungful of her scent—soap and citrus and... *Teresa-ness*. "I just needed to have you alone for a moment before the vultures descended."

"Be nice," she chided, but she snuggled deeper into his embrace, so she couldn't be that put out with his bad attitude. "I'm looking forward to meeting your friends."

"Don't trust a single thing they say," he warned her. He nuzzled her hair, even though he should be more cautious of her coiffure. "They're all liars and fiends, the lot of them."

Also, don't trust my sister. Or anyone who has anything to say about me, really."

"Oh, no? What if they say nice things about you?"

"Those you can trust," he confirmed with a chuckle. "Liars and fiends are right sometimes. Purely by accident, of course."

"Of course," she echoed, her voice going throaty and low as he pulled her mouth to his.

She tasted sweet and wonderful, like home—or what home was supposed to feel like. He also suspected she'd been eating something with honey in it, as her lips held a touch of the sugary sunshine flavor of the substance.

"I missed you," he said, offering the words like a confession.

Something about being here, in this place of memory and misery, was breaking down his barriers, was making all the emotion that he normally kept in check bubble to the surface. He should resist harder, he knew, since the emotion that came out would include the bad as well as the good, but it was just so much. It was so hard. He'd been keeping it at bay for so long.

And when he held Teresa in his arms, when he could taste and smell and feel her, it was hard to remember why he needed those walls.

She melted into him for a moment, heavy and boneless against him, and pride surged through him at the show of trust. She should trust him—she could trust him. He would prove it.

All too soon, however, she pulled back. It was for the best, he knew, as sooner or later, someone would come looking for one or the other of them. House parties had reputations for encouraging salacious behavior, and no doubt nobody would be surprised to find a courting couple stealing a kiss or two. Still, though, the party had only just begun, and he knew Teresa didn't care to make her family the subject of gossip.

Even so, he was not entirely in favor of her self-control.

“I missed you, too,” she said, smiling at him gently, and he *supposed* it was all right to stop kissing temporarily if she was going to say things like that.

And look at him like that, he mentally added as he trailed his fingers down the side of her neck and her eyes went all soft and warm as she regarded him. It was a look that said she needed something that only he could provide.

“Richard,” she said. He liked hearing her say his name. Her idea of having them be on first-name terms had been a very good one. She had good ideas, his Teresa. “I need to talk to you about something.”

The seriousness in her tone gave him pause. Oh, goodness, was she going to break off their arrangement? No, she wouldn't be looking at him like that if she was thinking like that, would she? It had to be something else.

“What’s happened?” he demanded.

“Well—”

“Hello there, Miss Norman!” sang out Seth, a future dead man.

Teresa blinked rapidly and jumped so high that she practically flew. She stumbled a few steps away from Richard—damn—as she turned to look at Seth, who was lounging in the doorway like a bloody caricature of a lothario.

“Oh, um, hello, Your Grace,” she said, her cheeks pinkening.

Seth grinned. “You *do* know me!” he exclaimed in delight. “Wonderful. I mean, I know we’ve *corresponded*—” Richard was going to *murder* him. Teresa’s blush deepened. “—but since this is the first time we’ve formally met, I wasn’t sure.”

But Teresa, his wonderful, bold Teresa, took all of Seth’s nonsense and put an unimpressed look on her face. She turned to Richard. “A lot makes sense now,” she said.

Richard grinned. He wasn’t sure where she was going with this, but he already felt sure he would enjoy the ride. “It does?”

“Yes, it does?” Seth echoed.

“Indeed,” Teresa said, looking at Richard only. “I mean, I wondered what sort of lunatic would take a note and pass it off

to a friend to launch him into a bizarre trap with an unknown lady, nary a word of warning to either of them, but now that I've seen all this—" She waved in Seth's direction, still without so much as glancing at him, Richard noticed in delight. "—it makes sense. He really is an actual lunatic."

"I *like* you," said Seth. "I like her, Richard."

"I like her too," said Richard, his eyes fixed on Teresa's face.

Her blush returned, only this time, instead of feeling as though the flush made him want to wring Seth's neck, it made him want to drag Teresa off to somewhere more private so he could see how far he could make that blush extend. Despite all they'd done together, he still hadn't seen her breasts, something that suddenly felt like a grievous injustice.

"Makes a man think he shouldn't go off passing on impertinent notes," Seth mused aloud.

Richard's eyes darted to his friend. "No," he said sternly.

Seth held up his hands in surrender. "All right, all right, I see that's not something we find funny." He turned to Teresa. "All joking aside, Miss Norman, I am quite impressed with how much you've managed to twist our friend here up in knots. You are clearly an utter menace, and I must say, there is not a quality I admire more in a person."

Teresa let out a small sigh. Richard agreed wholeheartedly. That was the kind of effect Seth had on most sane people.

“Thank you,” she said. “I think.” She looked back at Richard. “Far be it from me to thank him for this interruption, but I probably should go get ready for dinner. I’m sure it will be soon, and I’m completely bedraggled from the road.”

Simultaneously, Richard thought that she didn’t *look* bedraggled, she looked lovely, and that he would like to see her looking far *more* bedraggled, preferably by his own hands, though her hands were a suitable alternative. In lieu of saying any of that, though, he merely nodded.

“I’ll see you soon,” he said.

She gave him a quick smile and then headed out the door, though not before giving Seth a glare and a muttered, “*You.*”

Seth stared after her, awe in his gaze. “If you’re not going to marry her, maybe I will,” he said.

Richard shoved him by the shoulder, hard enough that Seth nearly hit the floor.

“Ow,” said his friend pointedly when he’d recovered himself. “Blimey, you are so *testy*. I’m jesting, of course. I’ll be a bachelor forever.”

“Forever will end very soon if you keep interrupting people during their private moments,” Richard warned.

Seth rolled his eyes. “Please. You know it is against my personal code of ethics to interrupt a tryst without a good

reason. But elderly Lord So and So was coming down the hallway. At a glacial pace, I'll grant you, as he is about two thousand years old, but I still felt you would prefer that you and your lady not get interrupted by a stranger. I fell on my sword in your honor."

"Wow," said Richard sardonically. "Thank you."

"You're welcome," replied Seth, all earnestness. "You can thank me by sharing your finest liquor and by joining up with Percy and Joseph so that we can make fun of you some more. Come along, now."

And, despite himself, Richard went.

* * *

"Miss Norman?"

Teresa glanced up to see a petite brunette with smiling brown eyes standing next to her.

"Yes?"

The woman's smile broadened. "Hello. I'm Marina Dunn, the Duchess of Haddington. My husband, Percy, is one of Richard's oldest friends."

Oh, yes! Teresa knew she'd recognized the woman. The Duchess of Haddington had become legendary after being the first to secure the hand of one of the Four Dukes. Members of the ton were either fascinated by her or, in the case of those

who had wished to snag the duke for themselves, furious with her. Yet, the Duke and Duchess of Haddington were reportedly madly in love.

Teresa hoped that meant that marriage was more comfortable for this cheerful-faced woman than it was for most women who found themselves embroiled in its clutches.

“Oh, Your Grace!” she exclaimed. “It’s so nice to meet you. Would you like to sit?” she inquired, gesturing to the space next to her on the settee.

“I would,” said the woman, taking the indicated space. “But please, call me Marina. I’ve been married two years now, but I confess that I still am not accustomed to getting *Your Grace*’d everywhere I go.”

Teresa felt a pang of guilt over the scheme she’d concocted with Richard. Deceiving the ton was one thing—she didn’t care that she would fail to fall into the neat little box that Society had decided all women must squeeze themselves into. But the Duchess was clearly making an overture because she believed Teresa was being courted by Richard—and that the courtship was serious, given her presence at this party.

Going along with that felt a whole lot like lying.

Still, she didn’t know any way out but through. “Teresa,” she said in return.

“Wait, wait, wait!” A taller woman with darker hair hurried over. “Don’t start without me!” She took the seat on the other

side of Teresa.

Ah. This is an inquisition.

Well, she deserved that, she supposed. Still, the new arrival also looked friendly, so Teresa was determined to be nice in turn. It was a little easier, actually. It made her feel less deceitful if they were to be probing her to make sure she was good enough for their friend.

Not that she could be sure who *could* be good enough for Richard. He was the ideal catch, both by traditional Society standards and by her own less traditional ones. He was handsome, rich, and titled, of course. Also, he was young and in possession of all of his teeth, which was always preferable. But atop that, he was kind, funny, and cared about what she thought and felt. Not to mention that he was a phenomenal lover.

No, when Richard married, it would be to someone far better than an aging spinster with a bee in her bonnet about marriage.

She squelched the wince that wanted to rise to her face at the thought.

Fortunately, the new arrival was still talking, which distracted her from any reaction Teresa might have revealed. "I'm Louisa Pike, the Duchess of Cullton," she said. Then, she sighed dreamily. "Mad, isn't it?"

"She's a newlywed," the Duchess of Haddington confided. "It's made her very gushy."

“Oh, hush,” said the Duchess of Cullton. “Tell me about your children, again?”

“Ha!” shot back Marina. Teresa watched this exchange with interest. Perhaps these two had married into the Four Dukes’ group of friends, but it was clear that they were friends themselves, as well. “Try telling me that in seven or so months, and we’ll see how you are.”

“Oh, congratulations, Your Grace,” Teresa said, quickly doing the math on that comment.

The Duchess of Cullton waved her hand. “Oh, goodness, no. Forget the ceremony. I’m Louisa.”

Again, Teresa was struck by the contrast between how certain words could feel when coming from different people. When Lord Archinton had insisted she use his first name, it had felt like coercion. With these two women, it felt like kindness, even friendship.

“Teresa,” she said again. “It’s lovely to meet you both.”

“Oh, who cares about *us*?” Louisa asked. “We’re boring old married ladies.” Marina nodded, apparently finding no issue with this claim. “We want to know about you. Richard has been frustratingly mum on the topic—you know how he is—and we would like to know more, please.”

Teresa frowned. “How he is? I don’t find His Grace particularly taciturn.”

In fact, the man never shut up half the time—including in-between moments when his mouth was *otherwise occupied*.

Except if Teresa thought about that, she would blush, and that would definitely make these Duchesses suspect that something was afoot.

Although she'd apparently cued them onto something anyway, even without a telltale flush to give her away.

"He isn't?" Marina asked, her eyebrows nearly meeting her hairline. "How... interesting."

"I *knew* he would be next," Louisa gloated under her breath.

Teresa turned to look at the woman in alarm. Yes, she and Richard had planned that he would appear to be besotted with her, but that was for Society's eyes, not those of his closest friends—or their wives, at least. Yet, from the starry-eyed way that Marina and Louisa talked about their husbands and children, Teresa had no doubt that anything she said here would be swiftly transmitted to at least two of the Four Dukes.

"Oh, it's, ah, not like that," she said, her mind racing.

What was she meant to say here? Was she meant to deny any affection between them whatsoever? Was she meant to merely downplay it? How had she neglected to compare notes with Richard over what his friends did and did not know?

She glanced around hurriedly, but he was nowhere to be seen. On a second look around the room, it occurred to her who *else* she was not seeing. I Dukes of Haddington and Cullton were nowhere to be found. The Duke of Dowton, on the other hand, gave her a jaunty wave from near the door.

Damn, it really *was* an ambush.

Well, she couldn't fault them for their flawless planning. They'd struck with military precision.

When she glanced back at the ladies, they were looking at her as if they knew she knew what they were up to.

"I am an open book," she told them with a laugh.

They chatted pleasantly for a while, flitting from topic to topic. For all that she'd feared the two women might have been searching out flaws, Teresa found the conversation to be quite lighthearted. They discussed literature, fashion, and a turtle soup that Richard's cook prepared that was apparently to die for.

"Do whatever it takes to taste that soup," Louisa said earnestly, one hand placed on Teresa's arm to emphasize her point while Marina laughed so hard she nearly lost her seat. "Whatever it takes."

Despite the looming threat of possibly revealing a secret that Richard wished to keep, Teresa found herself having a lovely time—lovely enough that, despite her empty stomach, she

found herself sorry when the dinner bell rang, summoning them to the dining room.

As the group stood to line up in order of rank, as the rules of decorum dictated prior to entering the dining room—a move that would put her, the daughter of a viscount, far away from two duchesses—Marina paused, laying a hand on Teresa's arm.

Teresa looked at the woman, a question in her eyes.

“I know you said it's not—not *like that*, between you and Richard,” she said, her voice soft and careful. “I just... I just wonder if you're certain about that.”

And then, she slipped away to take her smiling husband's arm where he waited at their place in line, leaving Teresa totally and completely poleaxed behind her.

CHAPTER 12



Marina's words rang in Teresa's ears throughout the marvelously delicious dinner. During a moment of clear thought, Teresa wondered if Richard had brought up his much-lauded London cook for the occasion, or if the man just had a talent for sniffing out brilliant chefs. Yet, she could scarcely enjoy the fragrant, herbed cuts of braised meat or the delicately poached pears.

Because she had no bloody idea what Marina might have meant.

She tried to clear the thought from her mind as she muddled through a particularly lively round of charades in the parlor after dinner. The Duke of Dowton played with an energy that was distinctly more ribald than was usually observed, which left Louisa giggling at her husband where they sat next to Teresa.

Despite these antics, Teresa could not focus. Because not only did she have the Duchess of Haddington's curious implication to puzzle over, but she had a far greater problem, too—Lord Archinton and his threats.

She needed to talk to Richard about it, she decided as ladies started to politely smother yawns and noises were made about heading upstairs. Not the bit Marina had said, as some instinct made her think that was for ladies' ears only. But Richard was a gentleman, which meant he might have some insight into the way men wielded their power, power from which ladies were barred.

And he would be angry on her behalf. She knew that, just like she knew that seeing that anger would make her feel much less alone.

The party was breaking up for the evening, though, and she couldn't manage to catch his eye, not after her mother gave her arm a happy squeeze.

This was the first house party Charity had attended in years, and she was clearly beside herself enjoying it. So, Teresa went upstairs to her lovely, beautiful guest chamber, with its peaceful décor that was perfectly suited to a comfortable night's rest.

But her mind was decidedly *un-peaceful*, and any kind of rest, comfortable or otherwise, felt entirely out of reach.

Which was how she found herself making the absolutely blasted insane decision to seek Richard out.

This is so stupid.

She crept down the hallway, one hand cupped around the single candle she'd taken to light her way. Even that act, she

felt, was the height of foolishness. What was she going to do, smash the flame with her palm if someone came along?

And you say you're worried about gossip. Don't you think there will be gossip if you're caught roaming the hallways like a bloody ghost of the bleeding moors?

It was ridiculous. She could talk to Richard in the morning! They had three days of the house party, a place where—and this was crucial—the Earl of Archinton was not present. The man's veiled threats were the absolute opposite of urgent.

She found Richard's door and knocked.

His brow was furrowed when he opened his door a few moments later, but more like he'd been deep in thought than deeply asleep. His expression eased as he saw Teresa, then tightened again as she, without any real forethought, threw herself into his arms.

“God, Teresa, sweetheart, what is it?” he asked quietly, even as he whisked her into the room and shut the door behind them—and took the candle from her hand, which was wise, as she'd all but forgotten it in the deluge of relief she'd felt as soon as she'd seen him.

“Hello,” she mumbled into his chest as his arms came around her, secure and safe.

He chuckled so quietly that she only felt the vibration through her, instead of being able to make out the sound.

“Hello,” he said back.

He guided them over to a settee, Teresa not letting to as they walked. It made the movement a bit awkward, but she couldn't regret it. Not when he was so *warm* and *solid* and *there*.

Yet, when they were seated, he put gentle hands on her shoulders and guided her back so she could look at him. She felt this was uncalled for, personally, but allowed that at least he was still sitting so that they were touching.

“Not that I'm not happy to see you,” he said, running a soothing thumb down the side of her face. Hmm, that was nice, too. “But you seemed upset. What's going on?”

When had Richard gotten to know her so well, she wondered.

She sighed and leaned forward, pressing her forehead against his shoulder. “It's Lord Archinton,” she said, hating how even the mention of him brought him into the space with them, when she wanted this time and place to be hers and Richard's alone.

Indeed, the Duke stiffened at the mention of her over-determined suitor.

“What has he done?” Richard demanded, his voice low and urgent.

“He... Well, I think he threatened me, actually.”

“*What?*” The word burst out of Richard, too loud, a gust of air and righteous indignation. His tone was lower when he spoke again, but tension vibrated in his voice. “What do you mean?”

She explained what had happened in the drawing room, Richard’s posture going more and more rigid as she spoke. She couldn’t resist the shiver that coursed through her when she recalled Lord Archinton’s parting words: *You are mine, and nothing will change that.*

She didn’t quote the threat itself. Richard was practically vibrating with frustration and rage, and while that support felt good, she didn’t want to see him actually shatter.

“I think,” she said, trying to articulate what exactly had alarmed her so acutely about Lord Archinton’s claims during their most recent meeting as opposed to the prior ones. “I worry I may have gone too far,” she said finally.

Richard’s frown was thunderous. “You did *nothing* wrong,” he insisted. His hands were back on her now, and his touch made Teresa feel brave.

“I know,” she said. “And you know. But Lord Archinton doesn’t. And I’m afraid that now that I’ve actually stood up to him, instead of playing this game where I try to politely retreat...” She looked up at Richard, determined, loyal Richard, who had somehow become the most important ally in her life. “He was so angry.” The words came out in a whisper. “It frightened me.”

On her arms, Richard’s fingers twitched, like he wished to drag her toward him, but he resisted.

“Teresa,” he said, his voice a rasp that caused heat to curl low in her stomach. This was not the time for *that*, she told herself, but she couldn’t resist leaning into the feeling. Desire for Richard was so marvelously preferable to her anxiety about Lord Archinton.

“He won’t harm you.” Richard’s words held the weight of a vow. “I will not allow it. I swear it.”

“What if you can’t stop him?” Her words, by contrast, came out like a whimper. It wasn’t that she doubted Richard, of course. But Lord Archinton’s rage had seemed to have a life of its own.

“I can,” he said, his tone brooking no argument. “I will. I will protect you. I will do whatever it takes.”

Looking into his eyes, bright with determination and fury on her behalf, Teresa felt a rush of emotion overcome her. God, Richard. *Richard*. He filled her. She felt and felt and felt and dared not name the emotion, because if she did that, she would have to face that, no matter what promises they made, their time together was coming to an end.

And if she faced that, she feared she would break.

Therefore, instead of giving those feelings even an inch more purchase, she pushed them aside and instead focused on what she could manage to feel without risking her heart and herself: desire.

She reached for his face like a woman dying of thirst, faced with her first drop of water in days. She pulled him to her, safe in the knowledge that he always came when she asked. And he did, letting her drag him down until she could fuse their mouths together, pouring all the feelings she dared not feel into their kiss.

“Teresa,” he murmured against her mouth, even as his hand trailed up to caress a lock of her hair that had come loose from the long plait she wore to sleep.

And because it was Richard, because somehow she always understood Richard, she knew what he was asking.

They were alone, in a bedchamber. *His* bedchamber. Nobody would be looking for them, not before morning. They had time. They had privacy.

“Yes,” she said in response to the unspoken question. “Richard, please. I want you so very much.”

The admission felt dangerously close to that feeling she was only just barely keeping at bay, but it made Richard groan, the sound cut off as he pressed his mouth even more firmly against hers.

“Hell, Teresa,” he said, his fingers tight in her hair and rubbing deliciously against her scalp. “You have no idea what it does to me when you say things like that.”

She smiled, knowing he could feel it. By every metric she could imagine, Richard overpowered her. He was taller and

physically stronger. He was richer and had more powerful social connections. He was a duke, for goodness' sake!

But somehow, despite all that, he made her feel like the most powerful woman in the world.

And that power made her feel just a bit wicked, too.

“Show me, then,” she taunted, taking his hand from her hair and sliding it to her waist under her dressing gown until only the thin, wash-worn cotton of her nightgown separated their skins.

The thin barrier might as well not have existed, for all his touch set fire to Teresa.

Richard, for his part, rose to her challenge immediately. He intensified their kiss, pressing her back into the settee. Teresa barely had time to think that, while gratifying, this was a woeful misuse of the available furniture in the room, before Richard, as if he'd read her mind, looped one arm under her shoulders and the other under her knees, lifting her effortlessly and crossing swiftly to the bed.

He placed her against the pillows with all the gentle care in the world. The fire burned low in the hearth, leaving the room cozy but sufficiently illuminated for her to see the softness in his eyes, the fondness in the smile that played on his lips.

Her heart thumped in response. She couldn't. She couldn't face that tender expression.

She reached for him again, and he came to her, like always.

He hadn't been entirely undressed for bed when she'd arrived at his door, but neither had he been fully dressed for the day. He was in shirtsleeves, the collar of his shirt unbuttoned to reveal the first inches of his muscular chest, and when she allowed her hands to roam down to his waist, a gesture which prompted Richard to let out a very satisfying growl, she was pleased to find the placket of his trousers already partially unbuttoned.

She wasn't sure why she liked this so much, the idea that she'd encountered him on his way to bed. It made her feel as though she was part of his everyday life, no matter how untrue that was. It made her feel at home, instead of a guest.

She pushed those thoughts away, too, and focused on the physical sensations before her. He kissed her softly as she continued her perusal, letting her take charge—though Teresa suspected this state of things was temporary. His breathing grew ragged as she dipped her hand under his shirt, trailing her fingertips across the ridges of his abdomen, and he pulled his mouth from hers, dropping his head to the crook of her shoulder when she reached into his trousers to grasp the length of his manhood.

“God, Teresa,” he panted as she explored the curious contrast between soft skin and hard man. “You shall see me to embarrassing myself.”

Oh, well, she liked that. She decided to push him a little further.

“You used your mouth,” she observed, trying to keep her own neediness out of her voice. “Could I do the same?”

His hips bucked forward, against her hand, against her body.

“No,” he gasped, the word hot against her skin. “Not if you want to—”

He broke off. *Make love*. That was what he hadn’t said. She was grateful he’d stopped himself, just as much as she was sorry that he’d done so.

“I do want to,” she said, pushing past the miasma of emotion at those unspoken words.

“Then no,” he repeated, his tone steadier, but only slightly. “It is... It is *possible*, but I should enjoy it too much, and then would not be ready.”

She absently cataloged this—as she felt it contained several interesting details that she wished to further discuss—for later. Now, she was not prepared to wait, not for anything, not when she felt as though she needed to have him, or else she would explode.

“Are you ready now?” she asked, the words breaking off in a gasp as his body pressed more heavily against hers.

Even without knowing exactly what was to come, she knew she was ready, was eager.

She felt that readiness in the shivering that radiated up and down her limbs, in the way she wanted to squirm under the force of Richard's gaze. She felt it in the way every glancing touch traveled to her core, which pulsed with an insistent, growing heat. She felt it in the racing of her heart, which spoke of feelings she was not yet ready to face.

"Yes," said Richard, and she nearly sobbed with relief, with joy, with the knowledge that for this brief moment, at least, he was hers.

For a long while after that, their breaths grew rough and ragged, their hands doing the speaking for them. Yet, there were moments where speech joined in among the sounds of their panting breaths, the soft moans that Teresa could not suppress, the groans of appreciation that tore free from Richard's throat.

"Beautiful," he murmured when he sat her up and guided her nightgown over her head, leaving him bare before him. "I knew you would be." And then, he pressed a kiss in the space between her breasts, a kiss that traveled straight through to her heart.

"Strong," she whispered against his skin when the removal of his shirt revealed a patch of rough scars on his shoulder. He stiffened slightly when her fingers brushed against the textured skin, so she moved around and pressed a kiss there until he relaxed again. She would ask about these, but not now. "Brave. Wonderful."

"Teresa," he breathed. He did that over and over again at different intervals, letting loose her name on a puff of air, like she was as important to him as oxygen itself.

They teased and touched and murmured and caressed until they could take it no more, until the throbbing feeling between Teresa's legs took on an urgent quality and her hands became covetous, dragging him toward her, eager to make them one.

He held himself out of reach only long enough to slip one finger inside her, then two, gently pumping and caressing until she had to clasp a hand over her mouth to stifle the sounds that came from her with every movement.

"Richard," she begged behind the muffle of her palm. "Please."

Because, no matter how incredible his hand felt as it worked upon her, some deep-seated instinct told her there was more to have, and she wanted that more. She wanted everything he had to offer, everything he was willing to give.

And if she secretly wanted *more* than he was willing to give, that thought was washed away by the sensation of him pressing inside her, stretching and stretching. The motion was uncomfortable at first, the intrusion foreign and oh so right at the same time. Somehow, though, she found she didn't mind the discomfort, which never quite crossed into pain. It felt... transformative. It offered her the satisfying feeling that, no matter what happened next, she would always have this moment with Richard ingrained in her memory and on her body.

Then, the discomfort faded, and he began to move, and, God help her, that was so much better.

“I’m sorry,” he gasped as he bucked against her, the movement slightly erratic. “I couldn’t hold still any longer.”

“Don’t you dare apologize,” she replied, just as breathless. She could feel him everywhere, in every part of her. He was in her very blood. In her soul.

She began to move, too, figuring out the rhythm of this new use for her body, thrilled at the way it made Richard growl curses into her hair.

Their tempo was steady, languorous, and unhurried, and then suddenly it was *very* hurried as they both chased the crisis that loomed closer and closer. Richard gritted his teeth as he moved inside her, guiding her through her climax, and the sight of him, the knowledge that he was affected just as deeply as she was, only made the waves of rolling pleasure intensify.

Teresa moaned her pleasure as her body went limp, only managing the slightest whimper of protest as he pulled himself away to shudder his own release into a spare bit of sheet.

His own breaths already slowing, Richard rolled back toward her, wrapping her in his warm embrace. Her previous unrest felt very far away from the safety of his arms.

Her Richard, she thought dreamily as the exertions of the night carried her into sleep. He was always looking out for her.

It was, came the final thought before oblivion claimed her, why she loved him so.

* * *

When she woke with a start in the wee hours of the morning, the thought was still at the forefront of her consciousness.

Love. She loved Richard.

Oh, no. That was bad. That was very bad.

She glanced at the man beside her, his face soft with sleep. She'd never seen him looking this unguarded. It made him look young. It made her want to protect him.

Except that wasn't her role, was it? She felt the discrepancy in their positions like a weight, one she'd never before explored. As much as she knew he'd enjoyed their time together—that part, at least, she did not doubt—almost everything they'd done together had been for *her* benefit. Oh, indeed, he'd said that their sham of a courtship would help him avoid an unwanted marriage himself, but now that she thought more critically, she felt that even *that* had been for her benefit—an excuse to make her feel as though she was not so entirely in his debt.

He was a powerful duke. Certainly, that meant that plenty of people might *badger* him to marry, but nobody could actually *force* him.

Which meant he had just said that to make her feel better, just as he'd comforted her whenever she'd needed it. Just as he'd joined in her scheme to help her get free. Just as he'd agreed to her proposal, had introduced physical intimacy slowly so she

could find pleasure without feeling overwhelmed. Hell, he hadn't even taken his own pleasure until the night prior, now that she thought about it.

He was so *kind*, so generous that it made her want to weep.

She watched him breathe, a wavy lock of hair flopped over one brow. She brushed it back gently, feeling like she was pressing a bruise to test if it still hurt.

Yes, she loved him. Love, love, love. It echoed in time with her heartbeat.

As it continued, insistent, the thought turned hysterical. It wasn't even dawn yet, but she had to get out of this room, out of this space that felt clogged with her own foolish emotions.

Careful not to disturb Richard, she slipped from the bed and gathered her nightdress and dressing gown, hurriedly donning the garments before leaving the room quickly and quietly. She hurried back to her chamber, scarcely thinking to listen for any servants who may be getting ready to start their day, only avoiding discovery by pure luck.

In her room, she looked at her reflection like it was that of a stranger. The same golden blonde hair and green eyes looked back at her, unchanged and yet different. It wasn't the lovemaking that had altered her, she knew. It was the love itself—or the admission of it. Because, truly, if she was honest with herself, she had to confess that she'd loved Richard for a while and had only been too scared to admit it.

“Pull yourself together,” she told the reflected image. Her mirror self did not comply.

So, Teresa did the next best thing. She brushed the snarls out of her hair, pinned it into a simple bun, and dressed in her simplest dress so she could take a walk to clear her head. She might not be an enthusiast like her brother, and she might be a city girl born and bred, but she knew that some time spent in the tranquility of nature would help her feel less like a horse that wanted to bolt.

A little bit of time and space was all she needed. Surely, with those things, she could figure this out.

Surely.

On the way outside, she did encounter one servant, a maid who looked to be about seventeen, which felt impossibly young to Teresa at that moment.

“Can I help you, Miss?” the girl asked, startling enough to cause the bucket of coal she held to rattle.

Teresa tried to offer a reassuring smile. Given her mental state, it probably looked more menacing than soothing, but she did what she could.

“Not at all,” she reassured the maid. “I’m simply going to take a turn about the gardens. I quite enjoy an early morning walk.”

“Would you like me to go with you?”

The offer was sweet—and wholly unnecessary.

“No, thank you,” Teresa replied. “I know you’ll have plenty to do, with the house full of guests. I’ll be quite all right on my own.”

“Very good, Miss,” said the girl, though her tone was doubtful. She headed down the hall with her bucket, casting one last glance over her shoulder at Teresa.

When she reached the outside, Teresa felt as though she could finally take a full breath of air. She marched toward the lauded botanical gardens, moving briskly to keep the chill of the early morning at bay. When she’d made it far enough into the greenery that the house was only visible in glimpses through the shrubs and trees, she paused.

“All right,” she said out loud, testing it out. “I love Richard.”

Damn. That had felt good. Bad, of course, because she had no idea what came next, but good.

She kept walking, letting her fingertips brush against leaves and needles, considering. So, she loved him. What was she going to do about it?

There was the obvious first option, which was to do nothing. Instantly, she *hated* that idea. She’d already disliked the prospect of letting her friendship with Richard go, and now that she’d admitted that it was more than friendship, she felt

even more reluctant to do so. Not only did that way lie guaranteed pain, but it felt like the coward's way out.

"Fine," she said, speaking aloud again, since it had been clarifying the first time around. "So, what's the brave way, then?"

Blast. She didn't like *that* either. Because the brave way was obviously to tell him she loved him. And either he wouldn't return her feelings, in which case she faced pain *and* embarrassment, or he did and...

Well, that result was frightening, too. Because if he loved her in return, they would, what? Marry? The very thing she'd feared from the start?

Except she didn't fear Richard. She just didn't. How could she, when he was so giving? When his smile made her feel like fireworks inside? When he'd acted with nothing but honor and goodness from the start? Hell, even coming to apologize to her after that first night in the library had been marvelously *good* of him. After all, she'd thought she'd been embracing the Duke of Dowton. Richard hadn't had a single reason to tell her the truth aside from his own sense of what was right.

But he'd come anyway. And he'd helped her anyway. And he'd defended her, and laughed with her, and thrown this whole blasted party just so her brother could get a look at these stupid gardens!

She kicked a pebble irritably. Richard wasn't the problem. Which meant that *she* was the problem.

If Richard was a good man who would never try to reduce her to a smaller version of herself—something she knew, without question, to be the case—then the only reason she had for not telling him how she felt was pure cowardice. She thought back to her conversation with her mother. *Love is a risk*. That was what her mother had been telling her. And yes, Charity seemed to think it was a risk that was always worth taking, and Teresa couldn't agree with that.

But in this case, with this man, with this love?

“It's worth it,” she whispered.

Once the words were out, once the decision was made, she felt her anguish begin to lift, like a stage curtain before the beginning of a play, revealing more and more of what was beneath. Hope. Possibility. Love. So much love.

She would tell Richard how she felt. He might not feel the same, given that he'd expressed his own disinterest in marrying. But oddly, that possibility didn't scare her as much as maybe it ought to. Because she knew Richard and knew he wouldn't be cruel or use her feelings to manipulate her.

But she couldn't dismiss the feeling that there was something special between them, that the tenderness in their embraces, the ease of their conversation, the silliness of their bantering all suggested *more*.

So, while he might rebuff her, he might not.

And that possibility made her feel positively giddy with anticipation.

Suddenly, every step between them seemed a step too far. Why on earth had she thought it smart to leave his bed, when he'd been tucked in warm and soft and unclothed with her? That had been extremely foolish, and while she couldn't very well go and slip back into his bedchamber, not with the sun coming up over the horizon, she could ensure that they were near one another, where they belonged.

Feeling as hopeful as she ever had, she was just about to turn back toward the house when a sound, too loud to be caused by a small animal, startled her.

“Well, ain't this convenient,” said a voice.

And then, before she could so much as whirl around, something came over her head, and her world went dark.

CHAPTER 13



*R*ichard reached out a sleepy arm for Teresa in the instant before two things struck him as one.

First, the sun was shining.

Two, Teresa's side of the bed was unoccupied, the sheets cool.

He felt a pang of disappointment overcome him, even as he recognized that fact number one meant that fact number two was for the best. It absolutely would not do for Teresa to be discovered in his bed. And yet, he couldn't help but wish she *were* here, couldn't help but want to wake with her in his arms, her limbs sleepy and sated after a night of vigorous lovemaking and a long rest afterward.

He clenched his hand into a fist where it sat in the space where Teresa should have been sleeping. She belonged here with him. Always.

He rolled over with a groan, scrubbing his hands over his face. Because she didn't actually belong here with him. She couldn't. Not when he had nothing to offer her.

The previous night had proven as much, no matter how wonderfully it had ended. He'd been sitting awake, thinking the thoughts of a besotted idiot and unable to sleep. He'd liked seeing Teresa with his friends more than he'd thought. He'd liked seeing her chat with Marina and laugh with Louisa and Joseph. He'd liked that, when Seth got particularly outrageous, she would look instantly to him so they could share a knowing look.

He had felt like she belonged with the people he loved. And that, in turn, had made him feel more as though he belonged than he had in the years since he'd recognized his father's temper in himself, the years since he'd started keeping himself at the fringes of the group, just in case.

She belonged with the people he loved because he loved her, too. God, how he loved her.

Except his love wasn't safe. He'd been reminded of that when she'd come to his door, interrupting his daydreaming about the life they could never have together, looking wan and alarmed. He'd been reminded of the danger that lived inside him when she'd relayed how that bastard Archinton had spoken to her.

When he'd heard how the man had frightened Teresa, he had wanted to pummel him until he couldn't stand. When he'd seen the haunted look in her eyes as she'd asked if he really could protect her from Lord Archinton, he'd wanted to kill the man to make sure it was done.

It nauseated him, how satisfying he found the mental image of Lord Archinton's shock when he realized that he would never touch, look at, or speak to Teresa again. He loathed himself for enjoying the picture even more if Lord Archinton had a broken nose in it.

Richard forced himself out of bed, shrugging into his dressing gown and splashing water on his face from the ewer, which had already gone cold. No matter. He deserved cold water. He deserved worse. He was an animal, a monster. He was a dangerous creature that needed to always be kept on the leash.

He was—the truth felt painful every time he was forced to face it—his father's son.

But that didn't mean he would become his father. No, he would protect Teresa from Lord Archinton, but he would protect her from himself, too, if it was the last bloody thing he did on this earth. He would do it, no matter the anguish he had to suffer in return.

He had to break things off with her.

The thought of losing her—not just the physical intimacy they had shared, but her friendship, too—hit him so hard that it almost felt like a stomach cramp. He wanted to press his hand to his gut, to bend over, to give into the discomfort. But he couldn't. He had to be strong—that was all he had to give her.

He would find her, tell her they had to end their fake courtship early. He would ensure she was safe from Lord Archinton, though he didn't know how, given that actually murdering the man was probably a bad idea, no matter how tempting the thought at times. But he would make sure not only that Teresa was safe but that she felt safe, too.

And then, he would get some distance. He would let her settle into the life she'd wanted all along before he'd come into the

picture. Maybe he would stay here, in the country, for a while. He hated it here, certainly, but that was likely a fitting punishment for him. Besides, he could spearhead a project to rid the place of all its ugliest furniture.

Feeling sick with dread but resolute, he rang for his valet to help him dress for the day, since a houseful of guests required he be neat and presentable. If he noticed that he was taking a bit of extra care to dress well to put off the dreaded conversation for a few moments more, well, that was easily brushed aside.

When every button was buttoned, cravat perfectly tied and hair all brushed into place, he still wasn't ready to face her, but he took a deep breath and went to do it anyway...

Only to discover that he could not find Teresa *anywhere*.

At first, he tried to be circumspect about it. He poked his head into the breakfast room, the parlor, the library. He found servants clearing away the morning meal, his mother and the Dowager Viscountess of Dorshire gossiping happily, and Seth attempting to convince Percy that he would look *simply dashing* in a daffodil-yellow waistcoat.

When that turned up no trace of her, he started asking if anyone had seen her, no matter that this made his intentions a bit more obvious and opened Teresa up later to uncomfortable inquiries over *why* he had been searching for her.

"No, I haven't seen her this morning," Marina said with a frown in response to his question, while Louisa shook her head

to signal the same. "I'll let her know you're looking for her if I run into her, though."

"I do think her brother was intending to get a look at the gardens," Louisa offered. "Perhaps she went with him?"

The idea had merit, though Richard figured that Teresa had good enough sense to know that a trip with Kenneth to botanical gardens was likely to be an all-day affair. Even so, Richard gamely tramped out to the gardens, feeling fortunate that he found Kenneth within half an hour.

Unfortunately, however, Teresa was not with him.

"Haven't seen her, I'm afraid," Kenneth said, inspecting some marigolds with astonishing focus, considering they were just regular, run-of-the-mill marigolds.

"Is it possible she's still abed?" Richard asked, feeling doubtful even as he said it.

Kenneth squinted briefly at the sky, light reflecting off his spectacles. "I doubt it," he said. "It must be, what, past noon now?" Richard confirmed this with a glance at his pocket watch. "She's not usually a late riser, but perhaps with the excitement of a party..."

The Viscount trailed off, his attention already drifting back to the plants that surrounded him. Richard tried to take heart in the man's apparent unconcern as he headed back toward the house, though prickles of unease were starting to needle him.

He was fairly sure that this wasn't mere dread at the conversation to come, but genuine fear.

But maybe he was wrong. Maybe everything was fine. He had, after all, kept Teresa awake late into the night. That, combined with their physical exertions, might have made her unusually tired. Or perhaps she hadn't slept well beside him. He'd slept like a babe, comforted by her presence, but maybe she didn't care to sleep with another.

He clung to these thoughts as he walked faster until he was practically running toward the house.

It was highly improper to disturb a lady in her bedchamber, no matter the hour, but the sickening worry that was growing in his gut wouldn't let him wait.

He hailed one of the maids. "Can you go check to see if Miss Norman is still abed?" he asked her. "You needn't disturb her if she is. I just want to make sure she is well."

If the maid found this request unusual, she was too well-trained to show it. She bobbed a curtsy. "Of course, Your Grace. Right away."

The girl turned to head upstairs, but before she could, a tiny voice with a local accent interrupted timidly. "She's not still abed."

Both he and the first maid he'd addressed turned to see another servant looking horrified at having addressed the master of the

house. “That is,” she hurried to add, “begging your pardon for interrupting, Your Grace.”

“That’s quite all right,” he reassured her. “Have you seen Miss Norman?”

“Not recently, Your Grace,” she clarified, blushing straight up to her hairline. “But I did see her real early this morning before the sun was even up. She was dressed—was dressed for the day,” she amended, her servant-at-the-big-house propriety faltering under the gaze of her employer and the nervousness it inspired.

Richard knew that later he would be horrified to think that he terrified young girls with his mere presence, but was presently too concerned for Teresa to worry about anything else.

“She said she was going for a walk outside,” the girl concluded, squaring her shoulders like she had to summon all her bravery to do so. “I offered to accompany her, but she said she preferred to go alone.”

Distantly, Richard heard himself thank the girl, who fled like a mouse from a cat. There was a roaring sound in his ears.

Teresa had gone out walking around dawn. It was now—he glanced at his watch again frantically—nearly two in the afternoon. That meant nobody had seen her for five hours? Six?

He couldn’t think. He was starting to panic.

What if she'd fallen? There weren't any cliffs nearby, thank the saints, but there were hills. There was even a system of caves about an hour's walk away. Would she have gone that far? What if she'd encountered a wild animal? He'd spent so many years gone from this place that he hardly remembered what kind of wildlife posed a threat to a woman walking alone. But there were snakes, he remembered that. What if she'd been bitten by a snake and even now was dying, poison stiffening her limbs, sweat breaking out on her brow while she waited for him to come find her, save her, only he was still bloody standing here in this stupid fucking house—

“Richard.” He blinked and saw Joseph's serious face. His friend was grasping him by the shoulders. How long had he been standing there? “What's happening?”

“Teresa.” The word came from Richard like a gasp, a brutally different type than the one he'd used to say her name the night prior. Still, speaking helped clear his head the slightest bit. “I can't find her—nobody can. A maid said she went out for a walk before dawn, and nobody's seen her since.”

His friend's solemn expression grew even more serious. “All right,” he said, his voice determinedly calm. “Where have you looked for her?”

Richard wanted to shout that there was no time for this, not when Teresa was lost somewhere, likely hurt, probably dying, and it was all his fault, but some very small part of him recognized that this was not rational. He took a deep breath and recounted everywhere he'd searched thus far.

Joseph's grave expression was not reassuring.

“All right,” he said again, nodding. “We’ll—Percy!” he called out to their friend, who had entered the foyer while munching cheerfully on a biscuit.

Percy pointed at himself as if to say, “*Who, me?*” but rearranged his expression into something more serious when he took in the mood of the room.

“What’s wrong?” he asked instantly, crossing to their sides.

“Nobody can find Miss Norman,” Joseph explained. He still had one hand on Richard’s shoulder, and Richard felt certain it was the only thing preventing him from shaking into pieces. “We need to assemble everyone so we can search for her.”

Percy offered a single nod and then was off like a shot. Within minutes, the whole of the house party had assembled in the front parlor. Marina hurried upstairs to check Teresa’s room, only to return quickly with a troubled frown and a shake of her head.

Richard felt as though he couldn’t breathe. He was dying. He was dying, but he had to stay alive because he had to save Teresa. He had to *find her*.

“We’ll split up.” Percy took charge of the situation as Louisa came over to take Richard’s arm in a grasp that was half worry, half reassurance. “Seth, you go with Richard, take the west side of the grounds. Joseph, you and I will stay on the east side. We’ll reconvene in an hour.”

“An hour’s not long enough,” Richard said. His voice felt gravelly, like he hadn’t used it in a year. “We’ll search until we find her.”

Percy’s gaze was sympathetic. “Of course we will,” he said softly. “But we have to check in regularly, to ensure the other group hasn’t found her.”

“I’ll set the staff to looking as well, Your Grace,” said the butler from where he hovered at the door. Richard gave a distracted but thankful nod.

“We’ll search the house,” Marina said, indicating between her and Louisa. “And I will make sure Louisa doesn’t overexert herself,” she added before Joseph could open his mouth.

“And Lady Dorshire and I will stay here and wait in case she returns,” said Richard’s mother in a soothing tone. She’d wrapped her arm around Charity’s shaking shoulders. She gave Richard a level look and a slow nod, as placid and calm in the face of disaster as she’d ever been. He hated that he was now grateful for his mother’s experience of keeping a cool head in a crisis.

But he could hate himself later. Now, finding Teresa was his top priority—his only priority.

The groups set out to look as designated, and a footman was sent to the gardens to find Kenneth and alert him to the problem. In the stables, every horse was being saddled, as the grooms prepared to ride out themselves and aid with the search.

Richard and Seth headed to the west side of the house, beginning close to the property and then extending their search in a grid. In the distance, Richard could hear other searchers calling Teresa's name. Each time the wind carried the sound to him felt like another blow to the sternum. That meant they hadn't found her.

When the designated hour was up and they turned back to the house, Richard felt as though he was giving up, though he wasn't sure why. He would search as long as it took. He would search forever if he needed to. He would make sure she got home safe because there wasn't any other goddamned option that wouldn't kill him.

"We'll find her," Seth said. He was as serious as Richard had ever seen him. This was good, as Richard would have murdered anyone who tried to make a joke just then, but it also drove home how dire things were. "We're going to find her, man."

Richard couldn't do more than nod.

They arrived back at the house at the same time as Percy and Joseph, whose solemn looks told their failure without the need for a single word. Lady Dorshire was weeping quietly.

Richard took one look at the worried faces around him and turned on his heel, preparing to head back out to search. Forget this short limit. He would keep looking and looking and looking until he found Teresa or dropped dead.

The arrival of his butler, concern on his face, caused him to pause. "Your Grace," the man said, faintly breathless. "I'm

sorry to interrupt at a time like this, but something came for you, and I feel it may be important.”

He handed Richard a letter, which was addressed simply to *Beaumont* without any further title or direction, which meant it hadn't come through the regular post.

Richard frowned down at the parchment. What in the hell?

He opened the letter and scanned its contents, then swore far too long and emphatically for the ears of the ladies in the room—another thing he'd regret later. Even Joseph did not scold him as his three oldest friends flocked to his side.

“What is it?” asked Seth, grabbing the paper from Richard's hand.

Richard let him. For all that he'd only read the words once, he knew they'd forever be emblazoned in his mind.

Beaumont, it read. *Your courtship with Teresa Norman is over. She is set to marry another. Announce it yourself and save yourself some embarrassment. I've won.*

It wasn't quite a ransom, and it wasn't quite a threat. Even so, Seth—with Percy and Joseph reading over his shoulders—knew what it meant as quickly as Richard had.

“Shit,” Seth breathed. “Someone's taken her.”

Someone had. And Richard knew exactly who.

CHAPTER 14



Teresa woke, feeling dizzy, to the unpleasant sensation of being jostled in some sort of unpadded and poorly sprung vehicle. What the hell was going on?

She groaned before she fully regained consciousness.

“Shuddup,” growled a nearby voice. The accent was of someone London-born, but not from the well-to-do side of town.

The morning’s events came back to her in flashes dense with mental fog. Waking up in Richard’s room. Going for a walk in the garden. And then—she blinked, knowing she should be alarmed, but the emotion felt distant. Someone had grabbed her. Drugged her. And, apparently, shoved her in a cart.

“Where am I?” Her words sounded slurred. “Where are we going?”

“I said, shut up,” gritted out the voice again. A boot stomped, too close to her side for comfort.

She shut up.

The bouncing of the carriage—or cart or whatever kidnappers used to transport their victims—was unpleasant, causing Teresa’s right hip to bang continually against the floor. The dark fabric still covered her head, and when she tried to reach up to remove it, she realized her hands and feet were bound. This ought to have frightened her, and it did. It was just that her fear felt buried beneath the throbbing in her head, the heaviness in her limbs, and the distracting but also somehow hypnotizing *thump, thump, thump* of the carriage over the ground.

She tried to access her wits, but the combination of the motion, her aching head, and whatever drug was still coursing through her system kept them at bay. It was, she thought absently, as consciousness ebbed, probably a small mercy that she wasn’t awake for all of this.

When she woke again, she was no longer moving, and someone was yanking the sack off her head not too gently.

“Have a care,” snapped an upper-crust accent. “That’s my future wife you’re manhandling.”

“Blimey. This passes for romance among toffs?” This was the voice from the carriage, the tone less hostile now for all the words remained disrespectful.

“Watch yourself around your betters,” the first voice snapped.

While the kidnapper grumbled in reluctant agreement, Teresa forced her heavy lids open. The light was dim in the room, but even the scant illumination pierced through her headache.

“Ah, hello, Teresa. You’re awake.”

And the smug, smiling face of the Earl of Archinton came into view.

Unlike in the carriage, Teresa’s return to full alertness was sharp as a knife. She took the span of only one more blink before she was back to herself and looking around the space. Her head still ached something fierce, and she was still bound hand and foot. She had been... sort of propped against a wall, which was unpleasantly cold.

Was she in some kind of cellar?

All in all, she realized with depressing swiftness, she was in a very bad situation, indeed.

She looked back at Lord Archinton. “My L—” She caught herself at the last second. This was *not* the time to irritate the man. “Nicholas.”

His aura of smarmy self-satisfaction intensified, and, despite her circumstance, Teresa had to fight the impulse to roll her eyes.

With some struggle, she kept her tone polite. “May I ask what is going on here?”

Lord Archinton dropped down on his haunches so he could look at her more closely. She supposed that was better than looming, which was what he'd been doing before, but not by much.

“Well, my dear,” he replied, now condescending *and* smug. “I have decided to accelerate our courtship somewhat.”

At the word *courtship*, the kidnapper made a disgruntled sound that he quickly covered with a cough when both Teresa and Lord Archinton turned to look at him—Lord Archinton with a glare, Teresa with all the dryness she dared not project at the Earl.

It was very bad, Teresa thought, trying not to become upset with the reality of what was happening here, when one's closest thing to an ally was the man who had snatched you, drugged you, and carted you off to parts unknown.

“Nicholas,” she said, very carefully. “I know you would like us to be married—”

“We *are* going to be married,” Lord Archinton snapped, every trace of the smile gone. “It's time for you to accept that, Teresa!”

She was *not* prepared to accept anything of the sort.

“You can't just kidnap me!” she exclaimed, feeling her own patience fly out the window.

“I can, and I have,” he pointed out, which was unfortunately fair.

“You can’t kidnap me and expect it to *work*,” she amended. “People will be looking for me. And you can’t think I’ll agree to marry you after all this.”

Lord Archinton looked distressingly unconcerned. “Of course, it will work,” he retorted. “People will be looking for you, certainly, but you were at a house party. And, as Travers here reports—”

He jerked his head toward the kidnapper, who was looking as though he were having second thoughts about having gotten involved in all this. So nice for one’s kidnapper to have a crisis of conscience after the fact, Teresa thought bitterly.

“—you were strolling all by your lonesome out in the garden. Once we are wed, I will be putting a stop to such nonsense, of course—you shall have an escort wherever you go, since you’ve proven yourself untrustworthy—but it was handy for my purposes, as it means anyone looking for you will assume you’ve turned your ankle or gotten lost or some such.”

Teresa wished she could say this was nonsense, top to bottom—the bit about *her* proving untrustworthy certainly was—but he had a point, unfortunately. Wherever she was, and from the faint sounds that came through the walls she thought she might be back in London, it would be a long, long time before anyone came *here* to find her. If they ever did.

“I’m sure right now your loved ones are traipsing through valleys and glens, looking for your crumpled form,” he said, sounding horrifyingly cheery at the prospect. “But they won’t find you, naturally. Tomorrow, your erstwhile suitor will receive a letter saying that you’ve run off with someone else.”

“Tomorrow?” This was Travers, sounding startled.

Lord Archinton shot him another sharp glance. “You did arrange to have the letter delivered tomorrow, did you not?”

“Oh, ah, yessir,” Travers said, completely unconvincingly. “But the local boy—mayhap he won’t deliver it until the day after?”

Lord Archinton looked appeased. “Oh, that’s fine.” A curious expression passed Travers’ face, too quick for Teresa to really understand it, and then Lord Archinton was speaking again. “In any case, rumors will circulate that you’ve been off for days, unchaperoned, with a lover. You’ll be completely ruined. You’ll have no choice but to marry me.”

For a moment, Teresa could only stare at him. This was an insane person’s logic, but she supposed there was some logic to it. If she squinted. Still, Lord Archinton had neglected to account for one thing: that Teresa would far prefer being ruined in the eyes of Society than spend a lifetime as his wife.

“You’re a lunatic,” she said finally.

For an instant, the snarl that crossed his face was so violent that she feared he would strike her. But just as she began to

tense, he gave a forced chuckle, then stood and stepped back a few paces.

“You say that now, my darling,” he said. “Let’s see how you feel when your mother is weeping because the ton is calling her daughter a harlot. Let’s see if you’re more appreciative of the protection of my name then. In the meantime, let’s see if some time down here teaches you manners. I won’t stand for a rude wife, you know. Come along, Travers.”

He headed toward the door. Travers hesitated, and Teresa cast him a desperate glance. But then, Travers turned and followed Lord Archinton to the plain but very heavy wooden door.

“Wait,” Teresa called in the moment before Lord Archinton slammed the door shut. “Aren’t you going to untie me?”

He paused as if he was thinking about it, then shot her a vicious smile. “You know what?” he said. “I don’t think I will. Maybe it will motivate you to better behavior. Goodbye, for now, Teresa.”

And then, before she could say a single word more, he slammed the door shut, leaving her alone in the dark.

CHAPTER 15



Richard rode for London like he was being chased by the Devil himself, praying all the while that Lord Archinton hadn't hicked off to some country seat or rented cabin. In the rushed minutes they'd taken to plan and saddle their horses, the group had decided that, given the man's character, his London home was his most likely destination.

"Archinton?" Percy had echoed incredulously when Richard had revealed the name of the villain who had dared to take his Teresa—from his very home, no less. "She's being pursued by Archinton?"

"She is," Richard confirmed. "And he's being none too respectful about it, either."

"That's because he's a right bastard," Seth had said. "Sorry for the language, ladies."

"And he's poor as a church mouse," Percy had added. "Lost everything in some bad investments over the past few years, has been desperate to hide it. Has Miss Norman a substantial dowry?" He had directed this question to Lady Dorshire, who had been pale and covering her mouth with shaking hands.

“I—yes,” the woman had stammered. “Her father had a few lucky investments when she was young and put it all aside for her. But I never thought...” She had trailed off, looking horrified.

Richard had felt the same. How had he not known that Lord Archinton was capable of this kind of duplicity? How had he neglected to look into the man, once he’d realized that he’d been dismissive of Teresa’s wants and needs? He should have done better.

Joseph had looked thoughtful. “This is good, though,” he had said, then continued despite the squeak of surprise from his wife and the growl of warning from Richard. He had waved the paper. “If he’s sent you this, it’s because he is trying to work the appearances angle. He’s trying to make it look as though she has run to him, presumably to get away from you.”

“Which means he’ll have taken her to London,” Richard had said, comprehension dawning. “Because it will make him look like the hero in this drama.”

“Exactly,” Joseph had confirmed. “It means we know where to find her.”

That *we* had sent a jolt of warmth through Richard’s iced-over heart—the sensation painful through the chill, as much as it had been needed. Of course, his friends would help him. Hadn’t they always, even when he hadn’t deserved it?

“Let’s go then,” he had said. The hopelessness that had weighed him down had been quickly becoming replaced by rage, which had propelled him into motion.

And go they had. The ladies, who could not ride as quickly, had waited for a carriage, with Joseph agreeing to stay with them so they had an escort to town. Richard knew this was also to watch over Louisa (and so did Louisa, who rolled her eyes), but he couldn't blame his friend, not when he would give his own right arm to have the opportunity to watch over Teresa at that moment.

Never mind that Louisa was Joseph's wife, while Teresa would never truly be Richard's. That was a problem for another day—after Teresa was safe.

Richard, Seth, Percy, and Kenneth (who had proven a surprisingly adept rider, for all his air of gangly awkwardness) had taken to horseback, racing to town with all the speed their horses—and fresh rented mounts, when the time came—could manage.

The ride was grueling at such a speed and took hours. It was full dark by the time they reached the outskirts of London, and then the city proper. Riding this fast in these conditions was dangerous, Richard knew. But he couldn't slow, and none of his companions so much as mentioned it, either.

He wouldn't leave Teresa in the clutches of Lord Archinton for so much as a second longer than necessary. He didn't care what it took, didn't care what he risked.

The only other thoughts in his head besides the pounding need to see Teresa safe was the mounting rage that boiled his blood hotter and more vicious with every hour that passed. Lord Archinton was a dead man. Richard didn't care what his bloodthirstiness said about him, not just then. Because Lord

Archinton had dared to lay a hand on Teresa. And for that, he would suffer.

The four men rode up to Archinton House in a clatter, not hiding the urgency of their approach. The instant they neared the front door, Kenneth, Seth, and Richard dismounted, tossing their reins to the young groom who had come running, even as he rubbed sleep from his eyes. Percy stayed astride.

“I’ll find a constable,” he reported, then hurried off.

Richard barely listened. He didn’t need a constable to mete out the justice Lord Archinton would face. He stormed up to the door and banged the knocker with all the force he could muster, continuing the assault until a bewildered-looking footman yanked the door open.

“Ah, good evening, My Lords,” he began. Then, Richard shoved past him, Kenneth and Seth hot on his heels. “I beg your pardon!” the footman gasped.

“Where is Archinton?” Richard demanded without preamble.

“I’m not sure His Lordship—” the servant began to hedge. Too slow. Richard grabbed the man by the front of his uniform.

“Richard,” Seth said, his voice a low warning. Richard ignored him.

“Where,” Richard said, his voice low and dangerous, “is Archinton?”

Either the footman was too surprised to guard his employer's secrets, or he saw the murderous intent in Richard's eyes and decided that his position at Archinton House wasn't worth his life.

"His study," he stammered.

Good. He was here. The relief faintly penetrated the haze of Richard's fury.

Richard released the man immediately, storming deeper into the house. Most of these Mayfair houses had similar layouts. He'd find the study soon enough. And then, either Lord Archinton would tell him where to find Teresa, or Richard would lay waste to the place until he discovered where she was.

If Lord Archinton had stashed her elsewhere, Richard would lay waste to the entire *country* until he found her.

The first door Richard slammed open was an unused parlor, the furniture draped in sheets to keep the dust at bay. The second was a closet. He never made it to the third, as two doors further down, an irritated-looking Lord Archinton stuck his head out.

"What the hell is all this racket?"

The man's expression scarcely had time to change from annoyance to shock before Richard's fist plowed into his face.

Lord Archinton sagged against the door frame, not quite saving himself before he started to sink to the floor, but Richard stopped him with a fist around his cravat, which caused Lord Archinton to make an unpleasant gurgling sound.

“What the hell?” Lord Archinton cried as Richard shoved him backwards, back into the study, then threw him into a chair.

“Where is she?” Richard roared.

Finally, the monster inside him purred. *Make him pay.*

Lord Archinton scrambled back to his feet. The place on his cheek where Richard had hit him was already a brutal red. He’d have a dreadful black eye by morning. He’d have far more bruises to accompany it if Richard had anything to say about it.

“Beaumont,” Lord Archinton said placatingly, still trying to weasel his way out, apparently. That was a mistake. “What are you—”

Richard hit him again, this time square in the nose.

“Fuck!” Lord Archinton cried, the word thick and wet with the blood that began to pour from his nose.

“Where is she?” Richard shouted again.

Lord Archinton still didn't answer, instead coming at Richard with his own fists swinging. Richard batted one hand aside, then sidestepped Lord Archinton's return swing so that it only caught his cheek in a glancing blow. The pain was fleeting, it didn't deter him. He slammed a shoulder into Lord Archinton's gut, sending them both crashing to the floor.

Lord Archinton tried to scramble free, tried to shout for help, but Richard was bigger, stronger, and angrier. And maybe Lord Archinton didn't pay his servants enough, or maybe Seth and Kenneth were keeping them at bay—Richard didn't know, and he didn't care—because nobody came to the Earl's aid.

They grappled on the floor, Lord Archinton attempting to knee Richard in the bollocks (which was dirty play, but what did Richard expect from this criminal swine?), but Richard turned just enough that the blow caught him on the upper thigh. The limb went briefly numb from the impact, nearly letting Lord Archinton get the upper hand, but Richard got hold of the back of his shirt (two could play dirty) and used it to wrench the man over until he was pinned beneath Richard's weight.

"I'll ask you once more," Richard said, panting slightly from the effort of their fight. "Where is she?"

Lord Archinton, who was either very stupid, very brave, very confident, or some dangerous combination thereof, sneered. Blood from his nose stained his teeth.

"Go to hell," he spat.

Richard hit him. Then again. And again. Christ, it felt *good* to hit him, felt good to work out some of this anger on someone

who deserved it. He pulled his fist back for another blow when the sight of Lord Archinton's face, bruised and bloody, cut through his rage.

He paused, his fist still held aloft.

What was he doing? This wasn't getting him answers, wasn't getting him any closer to Teresa. This was just violence for the sake of violence.

"Just tell me where she is," he told Lord Archinton, his words coming out more like a plea.

Though it was likely more due to a disinclination toward being walloped in the face than due to Richard's shift in tone, Lord Archinton answered then.

"The cellar," he croaked. "She's in the cellar."

Richard let his fist drop.

"Richard!" Seth barreled into the room. "God, man, stop."

Richard had stopped, but his friend's words still shamed him, because it meant that Seth knew what Richard knew—he was not the kind of man who could be trusted to stop. He felt a numbness spread over him as he let Seth pull him off the Earl.

"She's in the cellar," Richard said, his voice feeling very far away. He glanced at Seth like the man was a stranger. He

blinked. His job was not done, he told himself. “She’s in the cellar.”

They hurried through the house, heading toward the kitchens in the direction wordlessly indicated by an elderly housekeeper, who looked wide-eyed in her nightgown when they barked their inquiry at her. The door was locked, but the lock was flimsy, and Richard, a dangerous man, a deadly man, smashed through the lock with a single blow from his booted foot.

His body almost went limp with relief when the light from the kitchen hearth, as it streamed through the now-open door, illuminated Teresa’s huddled form. The stiffness of fury suffused him again when he saw that her cheeks were stained with tears and that the bastard had *tied her up*.

“Bloody hell,” swore Seth, behind him.

Richard heard his friend rummaging around, but he didn’t turn to check and see what he was doing. He had eyes only for Teresa.

“Richard,” she said, her voice a bit scratchy, as he entered the cellar.

It was cold enough down here that Richard almost wanted to turn back and pummel Lord Archinton a bit more. Except his body rejected that thought as soon as he had it. His feet continued to carry him toward Teresa.

“Teresa, sweetheart,” he said, brushing a gentle thumb across her cheek, before reaching down to take her cold fingers in his. God, she was so cold. “Are you hurt? Tell me where you’re hurt.”

“I’m all right,” she said, and another wave of relief hit him.

She couldn’t *truly* be all right, but he had her now, had her safe, and if she was uninjured, he could make sure the rest was fixed for her.

Behind him, Seth approached and handed him a knife. Richard accepted it with an absent nod of thanks, then used the blade to carefully cut through her bindings. He only got through the ropes at her hands because, as soon as they fell from her wrists, she pushed the knife away and threw her arms around his neck.

Richard let the knife clatter to the ground to hold her against him. He pressed her close, feeling the rapid fluttering of her heart echoing his.

“You came,” she whispered, and something in Richard broke beyond repair. Had she doubted it?

“Of course I did,” he said.

He was the kind of man who deserved that doubt. He was untrustworthy, unreliable. Unsafe. But, God, he would cross the country for her. He would cross the world to come for her. Whatever she needed.

“Of course you did,” she said with a sigh, burying her cold nose in the crook of his neck.

He held on to her, trying to remain in this moment, here, with her, when his mind wanted to send him back to the study with Lord Archinton, wanted to send him back to the first time he’d stood up to his father, wanted to send him back to before he had been big enough or strong enough to do that, when he had had no recourse but to hide under the covers and hoped that the anger hadn’t turned his way.

He ran a hand over Teresa’s hair, which was snarled and hanging limply from a mostly unpinned coiffure.

“Come along, darling,” he soothed, pulling back. “Let me get the rest of the ropes so we can get out to the kitchen, where it’s warm.”

Teresa blinked, then nodded. She let him slide the knife under the rope around her ankles, then rub some feeling into her legs before helping her to her feet. She leaned heavily against him, limping slightly as they moved toward the welcoming glow of the kitchen fire, though her gait grew steadier even in the short walk across the room and out of the cellar.

A maid was standing there, and she mutely handed Richard a blanket to wrap around Teresa’s shoulders before turning to the kettle to brew a pot of tea and give a good impression of pretending she didn’t exist. Absently, and beneath the thousand other emotions that weighed Richard down so heavily that he worried he’d drown beneath them, he assumed this evening had to be very uncomfortable for Lord Archinton’s staff.

But that consideration was buried so deeply that he couldn't do much besides recognize its existence and dismiss it for the time being. He wrapped Teresa in the blanket and sat her on a chair in front of the fire, resisting the urge to pull her into his lap. Instead, he arranged himself a few feet away, where he could keep an eye on her without being tempted to touch her.

How could he touch her when he literally had blood on his hands?

In the light of the kitchen, he must have looked amiss, because Teresa glanced up at him, her eyes wide with concern. "Richard, are you all right?" she asked. She reached one hand out from the little cocoon of her blanket, extending it toward him.

He couldn't help himself. He grabbed her hand, savoring the brief feeling of her skin against his, then tucked it back inside the blanket. She needed to get warm.

"I'm fine," he assured her. But reaching out for her had shown the scuffs and bruising on his hands.

"No, you're not," she gasped. "You're bleeding!"

"I'm fine," he said again, tucking his hand behind him.

He couldn't bear to listen to her sympathy, he simply couldn't. How could he bear her kindness, when he was a man who might have killed another if his friend hadn't intervened? How could he listen to her worry over him, when she'd been abducted, bound, and left to rot in a cellar?

“Richard—” she said again but cut herself off when Kenneth entered the room, Seth behind him.

“Tessa!” her brother cried, falling to his knees in front of her chair. “Are you all right? Are you injured?”

“I’m not hurt,” she assured her brother, who looked like he was about to cry.

Richard backed up a step to let the siblings have a moment together. Teresa deserved someone good to look after her, someone who didn’t have such monstrosity lurking inside.

“I’m a bit shaken, I confess,” she went on, and her bravery made Richard love her all the more just as it made him deserve her all the less. “But I’ll be just fine.”

Kenneth continued to fuss over her as the maid slipped Teresa a mug of tea, before leaving the kitchen—and its hoard of aristocratic interlopers to their business. Teresa sipped at the brew, a reassuring pink returning to her cheeks. Richard stood in the corner, forcing himself to breathe, unable to tear his eyes away from her.

“Richard,” Seth murmured at his side, but Richard shook his head, cutting his friend off. He couldn’t bear it if Seth tried to comfort him. He simply could not bear it.

He didn’t know how long he would have the ability to withstand Teresa’s curious glances, which were becoming

more frequent and more focused, and so felt a rush of gratitude when Percy arrived, two Bow Street Runners in tow.

One of the men headed upstairs with Seth to secure Lord Archinton, while the other pulled up a rickety chair and asked, his voice surprisingly gentle considering the man was at least as tall and broad as Richard, for Teresa's story.

"In your own time, Miss," he said with a soft, fatherly smile.

Richard wanted to flee as he listened to Teresa halting at first, then her voice gaining confidence, recounting her ordeal. The Runner listened patiently, taking down a note when Teresa identified her actual abductor as a lowborn man named Travers—Richard should have known Lord Archinton was not the kind of man to get his hands dirty with his foul misdeeds—and asking the occasional question to prompt more detail about this or that part of the story.

Richard wanted to run when she reported being snatched from the garden, being *drugged* and thrown into a carriage like she was no more than a sack of flour. He couldn't stand listening to her suffering, couldn't abide the anger it roused in him once more.

But if she could survive the ordeal, he could very well bear witness to it, no matter the pain he felt in the hearing.

No matter the pain he felt when she glanced over at him curiously from time to time, as if wondering why it was Kenneth, instead of Richard, who stood at her side and held her hand while she talked.

Staying away from her was agonizing but necessary, even if Richard felt as though he might die when a howl of rage came from upstairs as Lord Archinton was arrested and Teresa, almost imperceptibly, winced.

Yet, somehow, he managed it. Managed to keep his feet planted through the long telling of the story, managed to stay still as Teresa recounted Lord Archinton's malicious plot to ruin her and force her into matrimony. He forced himself to remain still as the Runner glanced over his notes, nodded, and declared that was quite sufficient for the evening and he would call on Miss Norman the following day, should any further information be required.

Richard stayed where he was for all that. But when Lady Dorshire arrived, half hysterical with fear and relief, his own mother trailing behind her, he found he could take it no more.

And so, as Teresa was wrapped up in her mother's loving embrace, Charity whispering apologies and words of adoration into her daughter's hair, Richard turned and, without saying so much as a word to anyone, walked out of the house.

CHAPTER 16



“*A*re you feeling all right, my pet?” asked Charity for the fourth—no, fifth—time that morning.

Teresa gave her mother a smile from where she was poking her head into her bedchamber, a sheepish expression on her face as if she knew she was being a touch overbearing but couldn’t seem to help herself.

“Yes, Mama,” Teresa assured.

She didn’t mind the attention at all, as it happened. As harrowing as the kidnapping had been, one good thing had come out of it. She and her mother had talked late into the night about Teresa’s true feelings about marriage, and her mother, shaken by the realization that one of Teresa’s suitors had been a devious fortune-hunting criminal, had been very open to her daughter’s perspective.

“So, you shan’t marry anyone, no matter what?” her mother had asked, the two of them cuddled together in Teresa’s bed in a way they hadn’t done since Teresa had been a little girl.

“I don’t know that I would say that,” Teresa had hedged, picking at the plate of sandwiches and scones that she’d been presented with mere minutes after arriving home.

The Duke of Haddington, who was evidently more of a thoughtful sort than he let on, had sent word ahead to the Dorshire Manor staff that the family would be arriving home unexpectedly early and in quite a state. Teresa had found the staff’s concern honestly quite flattering.

“It would definitely have to be the right person, though,” she had concluded. “I won’t marry just for the sake of being married.”

“The right person?” Charity had asked, a sly note coming into her voice.

Teresa had blushed but hadn’t argued. The playful tone had been a welcome indicator that her mother had been feeling slightly less hysterical after the day’s events.

“Might I assume that person is a tall, dark-haired duke who was *very* worried about you today?”

“You might,” Teresa had allowed, aiming for loftiness but missing the mark.

Shortly after, Teresa’s yawns had become too dramatic to deny any longer, and her mother had left her, tucking her in as tightly as if she were still a child. The act had been surprisingly comforting, and between the long day, the full

belly, and the cozy position, Teresa had fallen into a deep, dreamless sleep that had carried her long into the morning.

When she'd finally awoken, she'd been fussed over in a manner that was at once very sweet and the *tiniest* bit exasperating, not only by her mother, but by her maid, her brother (who had hovered with palpable discomfort at the door to her bedchamber, evidently terrified of whatever feminine nonsense lay within), and even the housekeeper, who had brought up a tray for breakfast, despite this being a duty far below her normal responsibilities.

“Good,” said Charity now, bustling into the room. In her hand, she held a novel, in case the six novels she'd been plied with previously did not satisfy, Teresa supposed, and a letter. “Even so, you are to rest *all day*, do you hear me, Teresa Norman?”

“Yes, Mama,” said Teresa, just as she had all the previous times she'd been met with this order.

It was easy enough to comply and made her mother feel better. Besides, Teresa's hip was dreadfully bruised from that bouncing carriage ride, and her wrists and ankles were chafed from the rough rope, and so the prospect of putting on a proper frock—and, Lord help her, a *corset*—did not appeal to her.

“You may, however,” said Charity with the air of someone bestowing a great favor, “have this letter from a certain duke.”

For all her soreness, Teresa practically lunged for the piece of parchment. She was feeling better and more settled, the ordeal slipping further and further away with every passing moment spent in the comfort of her own home, but she *was* worried

about Richard, who had seemed very out of sorts the prior evening.

Not, she reminded herself, that he wasn't entitled to be a bit upset over the whole circumstance. He'd raced halfway across the country to rescue her after, as her mother had reported, spending the first part of the day searching furiously for her. The entire drama was enough to set even the most stalwart character on his ear. Even so, she was worried about him, even as his actions gave her hope that perhaps her affection was returned.

She tore through the seal with hasty fingers, nearly slicing herself against the edge of the paper.

Miss Norman, the letter began, setting her to frowning immediately. Why the formality? Maybe he'd worried the letter would be read before it reached her hands.

I regret to inform you that I must put an end to our courtship. I understand that the timing of this is less than ideal, and I hope that you are recovering well from your unfortunate experience. Please understand that the fault is mine entirely and that I wish you nothing but the greatest happiness.

Yours,

Richard Longman, the Duke of Beaumont.

“What?” Teresa said, scanning the brief missive again. This... It didn't make any sense! She read it a third time, like this would somehow provide some clarity. It did not.

“What is it?” Charity asked, peering at her daughter with concern. Wordlessly, Teresa held out the note, and then heard her mother gasp as she read its contents.

Why would he send her this? Their courtship had been arranged, had been part of a scheme, so it wasn’t as though he needed to *actually* cry off. And even if he had felt it was time to move to the next step of their original plan and end their public relationship, why had he framed it like this, so stiff and formal?

If he’d intended her to have some kind of proof of his fault at the end of their association—and why would she ever need that, when gossip would do all the work?—he might have mentioned it beforehand, and he wouldn’t have referenced her “unfortunate experience,” which was obviously best kept as secret as possible, for the sake of her reputation.

It didn’t make any sense. Not a single word of it.

“I... don’t understand,” Charity said finally. “He seemed so...” she trailed off.

Teresa shrugged helplessly, not meeting her mother’s eyes. She was going to cry. She could feel it coming.

Because even if the note didn’t make a lick of sense, its meaning was still clear enough. Richard did not feel anything for her in return. He didn’t want her, not the way she wanted him. He didn’t love her.

She should have expected it. But that did nothing to diminish the hurt.

“I think I’m going to have a rest,” she said, her voice teary.

If she was going to weep over a man who had never claimed to love her, who had told her from the start that it was all a ploy, she wished to do so in privacy.

Charity hesitated but gave in. “All right, sweetheart,” she said, to Teresa’s enormous relief. “Ring if you need anything, all right?”

Teresa gave her mother a miserable nod, her eyes welling. She balled her fists in her lap to hold her collapse at bay. But the moment she heard the handle of her door click, signifying her mother’s departure, she threw herself onto her pillows and let her tears take her away.

* * *

Richard looked around his study, the familiar room feeling foreign. His desk, which was normally neat and orderly, was strewn with papers he’d been neglecting, for all that he’d shut himself in here, allegedly to work. He hadn’t even tried to read them.

The sharp knock on his study door felt like a cannonball to the skull. He didn’t call out for entry. He didn’t want to see anyone. He didn’t want to speak to anyone.

Well. That wasn’t entirely true. He wanted to see Teresa. He wanted to speak to her, hold her, make love to her. He wanted

to apologize for that awful, awful note he'd sent her. He wanted to swear that he would never leave her side again.

He couldn't do any of that.

He couldn't even wallow in self-pity and self-loathing properly, either, apparently, because, moments later, despite his failure to respond, the door burst open.

"Jesus Christ," Seth spat. "You look terrible."

"That is not," groaned Joseph, coming in behind him, "how we agreed to handle this."

"He's not wrong, though," added Percy, who was also here, because of course, they were all here.

"Go away," Richard said succinctly.

They ignored him, though Joseph at least offered a sympathetic cringe. Instead, they each took a chair and, as if they'd rehearsed this—and based on Joseph's words, they actually might have done so—and looked at him expectantly.

"What?" Richard sighed.

Seth was the first to give in, his expression dropping from feigned patience to exasperation in a moment. "'What?' he asks," he complained to their friends. "'What?' Like he isn't sitting here, moldering and bleak for no good reason."

“*Seth*,” hissed Joseph, his tone a warning. “Could you try to be just a *touch* gentler?”

“No,” said Seth shortly. “I thought I could, but then I saw him. He looks like someone died. He looks like *he* died.”

Percy winced as if to say, “*Harsh, but still not wrong.*”

“I’m fine,” Richard said, which was a lie, and every soul in the room knew it. “I’m alive. You can go now.”

“Good try, but no,” said Percy. “We’re not going until you talk to us and, ideally, get your head out of your arse.”

Richard’s headache was more like a pickaxe than a cannonball now. When was the last he’d eaten? Probably too long ago.

“My head,” he said, “is fine. I don’t know why you all seem to think I need help.”

This absurdity broke even Joseph’s patience. “Because,” he said, his voice low, “you ended your courtship with Miss Norman.”

And there it was.

Richard knew it was over between him and Teresa. Hell, he’d been the one to end it. But hearing it out loud like that still felt like a blow. He barely managed to stop himself from gasping.

He had practiced that by now, after all. He didn't feel as though he'd managed to take a full breath since before he'd realized she was missing.

"That's none of your business," he snapped.

He should be kinder to his friends, he knew. But then again, he was just that sort of man, wasn't he? The kind that was cruel to those who loved him even when he didn't deserve it.

"Like hell it isn't," said Seth.

"That's never really stopped any of us before," added Percy.

But it was Joseph's question that brought him up short. "Why did you do it, Richard?"

Richard didn't know how to even begin to approach the truth. How could he tell his friends, these wonderful, loyal, good men, that he'd been hiding his depravity from them for all this time? How could he face them if they knew the truth? He'd just given up Teresa. He couldn't bear to lose his friends, as well.

"I'm not right for her," was all he said in the end.

Joseph frowned, and Percy nodded in sympathy. But it was Seth who said, "I'm sorry, but that's the biggest crock of shite I've ever heard in my life."

All three men turned to stare at him.

“Oh, don’t even give me that,” Seth went on. “I know I’m not all romance and flowers like the happy husbands over here.” He jerked a thumb toward Joseph and Percy. “But I’m also not blind. You love her. She loves you. Figure it out.”

“It’s not that simple—” Richard began. *She loves you*. It couldn’t be true, but hearing it still caused his heart to leap foolishly in his chest.

“Like hell it’s not,” Seth returned. “So, you broke things off with her. Yes, well, Marina said she’s sad about it, so that’s better than her hating you. Buy the woman a posy and apologize and ask her to marry you and move it along.”

There were so many objectionable things in that sentence, but...

“She’s sad?” Richard despised the thought of Teresa being sad. In fact, he had explicitly said in his letter that he wanted her to be happy.

Seth let out the longest sigh in the world. “I’m going to kill him,” he told their friends. “Can I kill him?”

“No,” said Joseph. “But,” he added pointedly, swinging his head to look at Richard. “You are being just the tiniest bit daft about this. And I do understand, truly I do. I almost let Louisa marry someone else.”

“I almost let Marina slip away, too,” Percy added, his tone marveling at his own stupidity. “It would have been the biggest mistake of my life.”

“Mine, too,” Joseph agreed.

“It’s not the same,” Richard insisted.

They didn’t understand. They couldn’t understand. He’d made sure they didn’t because he never wanted them to know.

Except Seth, with that keen eyes and clever way of his that was so often hidden beneath his silliness and antics, did understand, apparently.

“Richard,” he said in a gentle tone he so rarely used. “You’re not your father—you do know that, right?”

It was like a bucket of ice water being poured over his head.

Richard wanted to bluster, he wanted to prevaricate. He wanted to hide, deny, run, anything to get him away from this conversation. But he couldn’t manage any of this.

“You never knew my father,” he said.

“No,” said Percy, also gentle. Richard might have hated their tone, felt it as pity, if not for the fact that it felt so much like grace. “But we know why we never knew him.”

“You do?”

Joseph spoke next. “Of course we do. You think we never saw how you avoided going home? How you worked yourself to the bone at a trade even while you finished your university degree? Do you think we didn’t know why you sent money to your mother and sisters even though they lived in a ducal house?” He looked Richard squarely in the eye. “Your father was a bastard. All our fathers were, but yours was a special case. I’m glad he’s dead.”

“And,” added Seth, his voice firm. “He *is* dead. You are not him.”

A spark of anger flared up in Richard—a sign that they were all wrong about him. “How can you say that?” he demanded of Seth. “You saw me. I almost killed Archinton.”

“Archinton is *fine*,” Percy said like this was a trivial matter. “He has a broken nose and some bruises. Those aren’t his biggest problem by a mile—as it turns out Dorshire’s solicitor is a bit of a shark, and the Viscount is throwing everything after the man who harmed his sister. Aristocrat or no, Archinton is going to end up in jail over this.”

Good, that was good. It wasn’t the point, but it was good.

“I could have killed him,” Richard insisted. He remembered it too well, that white-hot rage that consumed him as he’d pinned Lord Archinton to the floor beneath him, that urge to destroy the man, beat him until he was no more than a stain on the carpet.

“But you didn’t,” Joseph insisted.

“Seth stopped me.”

Richard hated this. He hated arguing his own culpability when he wished—oh, how he wished—he could believe his friends’ reassurances. But they didn’t know the monster inside him.

“No,” said Seth slowly, with the air of someone carefully combing his memory. “I didn’t. You had already stopped when I arrived.”

Why were they doing this? Why didn’t they understand? *None of this mattered.*

“I didn’t *want* to stop!” Richard exclaimed, the ugly truth breaking out of him. “I wanted to kill him. I wanted to make it hurt.”

“But, don’t you see, Richard?” This was Percy. “That’s why it matters all the more that you did.”

Richard slumped back in his chair. He felt defeated. Not because they’d won the argument, but because this was clear evidence that his friends could not ever truly see him for who he was—what he was. That was a mixed blessing and a curse when the reality was so hideous.

“It doesn’t matter,” he countered. “Not in this. I cannot—I will not expose Teresa to this kind of danger. Don’t argue it again. I will not do it.”

For a long moment, he thought they wouldn't drop the matter. He thought they would make him tell them, again and again, about the worst parts of him. But Joseph was the first to sigh, clap his hands against his thighs, and stand.

"Very well," he said, his tone resigned. "It's your decision."

"We can't make you do anything you don't want to do," Percy added.

When Seth shot to his feet, however, it was with none of the resignation of the other two. He shot Richard a look full of poison.

"You're going to regret this," he said. And then he swept out of the room.

As the door closed behind his friends, Richard gave a mirthless laugh. Little did Seth know that Richard already did.

EPILOGUE



The day after she'd received that miserable note, Teresa was certain that Richard would arrive and explain himself. Two days later, she was less certain. On the fourth day, she had a visit from Marina Dunn and Louisa Pike, during which the three of them all took great pains not to mention Richard and Teresa struggled enormously to appear cheerful.

By the time she reached a full week after the receipt of the cursed letter, Teresa had moved past her denial, beyond her sadness, and into a full head of righteous fury.

Whatever idiocy Richard was up to, she was refusing to get involved in it. She would not sit around like some sad woman scorned. She was not going to sulk and wallow and fret and whine.

"I want to go to the Kerringer ball," she announced to her mother and brother, storming into the drawing room.

"Oh, goodness!" exclaimed Kenneth, dropping his book. "I don't. Let's not. Good talk."

Charity ignored her son. “Are you sure, darling?” she asked Teresa. “You are more than welcome to go, of course, and I’ll accompany you if you wish, but you were not precisely keen on balls at the best of times...”

The way she trailed off made clear Charity’s opinion that this was *not* the best of times.

And it really wasn’t, all things considered, but Teresa was determined to shed that mindset, and if getting dressed up and out of the house was what it took to accomplish that, she was prepared to make the sacrifice.

“I am absolutely sure,” Teresa confirmed. “And you needn’t accompany me if you weren’t already planning on going. I think...”

She was a woman on her own—she had been before, and she would be forever, now that everything had gone the way it had. An established spinster. That was her lot. She had to reacclimate herself to doing things independently.

“I think it will be good for me to go myself,” she concluded, pleased with how firmly the words came out.

Charity looked faintly doubtful, but Teresa knew she had a card game with friends scheduled for that evening because she had insisted her mother go back to scheduling things after the fourth day of hovering.

“Well, all right,” her mother said, frowning at her needlework, which was a particularly bloody rendition of the Battle of

Towton, as enacted in Shakespeare. “But if you change your mind, tell your brother, and he’ll go with you.”

Kenneth shot her a look that said, “*Do not change your mind, do not tell your brother, he will not go with you, he is reading a book.*”

“Of course,” Teresa said to her mother while trying to promise her brother with her eyes that he would not be pulled away from his tome on—she stole a glance—mushrooms.

And indeed she did not pull him away. Instead, she put on her favorite gown, donned her favorite earbobs, assembled her hair in a most flattering style, and set off for the Kerringer ball all by herself.

She felt quite proud about it, truth be told.

She continued to feel good about the decision as she entered the throng of attendees, her head held high, bypassed the table where one secured a dance card entirely, and headed for the little knot of spinsters and wallflowers where they huddled in an unobtrusive corner. These were her people, she thought to herself. She would not act as though she regretted it.

She was, in fact, feeling very nearly optimistic about her ability to survive her heartbreak when, from her elbow, someone said, “Excuse me.”

And she turned to see the Duke of Dowton.

“Drat,” she said.

“It’s Seth, actually,” he quipped.

She scowled. “I am not in the mood for your antics,” she informed him.

The Duke held up his hands in an expression of innocence. “I am not executing so much as a single antic,” he said, which was an exercise in contradiction.

Nevertheless, she tried cutting this off before it began. “Wonderful,” she said. “Good evening.”

He did not budge, which was extremely predictable.

“By the by,” he offered after a few moments in which she pointedly ignored him. “Did you know that Richard is utterly miserable?”

She knew it would be juvenile to stamp her foot, but she longed to do it, anyway. Couldn’t he see that she was bravely trying to make a fresh start? No, instead he had to go on dredging up the terms of her heartbreak.

“I’m sorry to hear that,” she said primly.

“Are you?” The Duke’s tone was light, but Teresa had the impression he saw more than he let on. This was, she decided, annoying, so she elected to ignore him.

Not that this deterred him in the slightest.

“You know what I think, Teresa—and you know what, I’m going to call you Teresa because you’re one of us now.”

This broke her. “One of who?”

He cast her a long-suffering glance. “Don’t make me say it.”

She merely raised an eyebrow.

He sighed dramatically. “The *Four Dukes*,” he said, sounding as though the words tasted foul. “And the accompanying coterie of ladies we seem to be gathering around us.”

“Oh,” she said. Then, she added, “No, I’m not.”

“Good God, you and Longman are perfect for each other, do you know that?”

Teresa wondered, on the scale of inadvisable to unfathomably salacious, how bad it would be to tell a duke to *shut up* in front of a hundred witnesses.

The Duke continued. “You are, but that’s not the point. The point is, I am going to speak plain.”

“This is you *not* speaking plainly?”

He ignored that. “My point is, he is miserable, and his reason for being miserable is stupid. Which means that your reason for being miserable—and please don’t even try to deny that you are—” he interjected when Teresa opened her mouth to do just that. “—is also stupid. Which means that you should go to his house, tell him you love him—I swear to God, Teresa, if you try to deny that, either, I shall scream, I really will—so that you can both stop being miserable and dragging the rest of us down with you.”

For a minute, all she could do was stare at him. Around them, the other spinsters were edging away, as if fearing that scandal was catching.

Even after the full minute passed, all she could conjure was, “Honestly, I don’t even know what to say to that.” Except that broke something of a dam in her. “No, you know what?” she went on because if *he* said anything more, *she* was the one who was going to scream. “I want you to listen to that. You want me, an unmarried woman, who has been cast aside—which was painful and embarrassing—to go to the home of the person who cast me aside—improper and embarrassing—and *tell him I love him.*”

The English language did not possess words for how painful, improper, and embarrassing *that* would be, so she didn’t even try to clarify.

“Yes,” said the lunatic who had somehow been given a dukedom.

“Why would I do such a thing?”

The Duke of Dowton looked at her like *she* was the lunatic. “Because he loves you, too, of course.”

Her mouth dropped open.

“Good God, Teresa, you’re a smart woman. That *cannot* be news to you. Do I have to do *everything*?” He muttered this last bit in an aside to himself. “Fine. I take it back. You’re both completely dense, so I will lay it out, though why I bother, I cannot say. You love Richard. He loves you. He called off your courtship because of some wrongheaded ideas that he doesn’t deserve you. I came to you because I thought you were the less stubborn or at least the more intelligent of the two of you—though I am beginning to doubt that just the tiniest bit, now—so that you will *go fix things*.”

Teresa processed this. She had never been so happy to be so grievously insulted in her life.

“Why would he think he doesn’t deserve me?” she asked. “If anything, I don’t deserve him.”

The Duke pinched the bridge of his nose. “Please,” he said flatly. “Just go talk to him. I am begging you. Truly.”

She processed this a bit further, thinking back to her walk in Richard’s garden—before she’d been coshed over the head, of course. She’d been prepared to risk her pride then, hadn’t she? Why was now any different? Because that was the worst that could happen, wasn’t it? She could go, as the Duke said, to

speak with Richard and confess her feelings. And he might rebuff her. But she'd already been rebuffed.

But if Seth was right...

"All right," she told him. "Let's go."

It was almost comical, how quickly Seth's expression went from annoyed to baffled to alarmed. "What, now?"

She gestured toward the exit to the ballroom. "After you. You do have a carriage with you, don't you?"

"But, wait," he sputtered. "I don't want to go with you."

"Oh, I'm sorry, did you not want to get involved?" He had no answer for that one. "I'm hardly going to traipse about Mayfair myself at this time of night."

Seth narrowed his eyes at her, then huffed a breath. "Damn, I like you. Fine, I will take you. But only because you're clearly going to drive Longman insane for the rest of his life and I, for one, will enjoy seeing that."

And maybe that wasn't the highest of compliments. Perhaps it was even something like an insult. But as Teresa followed Seth out of the ballroom, she couldn't help but think that she, too, enjoyed the idea of annoying Richard until death did them part.

* * *

If he thought about it logically, Richard should be starting to feel better by now. After all, he'd only known Teresa Norman for a bit more than a month. If he went back to the start of the Season, he had not yet had that fateful encounter in the library, nor any of the encounters that would stem from it afterward. And a Season was just a part of the year, and Richard had lived for eight and twenty years. All of which meant that his acquaintance with Teresa was a mere blip in his life. A week and a day without her was a substantial fraction of the time they'd known one another. He should be feeling better.

He was not feeling better. She was not a blip.

He felt worse.

He could drink, he supposed, casting an eye over at his mostly untouched shelf of liquor, which he kept here for guests more than for himself. He wasn't a big drinker, though, preferring to indulge only in social settings. Drinking by himself felt sad, and Lord only knew he didn't need to feel any sadder.

On the other hand, though, if he drank, maybe he would sleep. He had scarcely slept all week. Instead, he'd spent his nights tossing and turning, unable to banish the picture of Teresa's tear-stained face in the dark. And when he did sleep, he dreamed of that long, dark ride to London, only in the dream he knew he would arrive too late, or he would arrive just in time, and she would look at him and say, "*Monster.*"

And then, when he woke, he would have the barest instant where he still expected her to be beside him. And then, he'd

wake the rest of the way and remember everything that had happened, and losing her would hit him with a fresh wave of agony.

He supposed even if he drank himself into a stupor, he would still have to wake eventually. Besides, the liquor was all the way across the room, which felt, at present, very far.

All in all, this meant that he was feeling very sorry for himself, indeed, when his study door smashed open—really, didn't he employ servants to prevent this exact sort of thing? And yet, it kept happening—to admit Teresa looking very beautiful and very furious.

For a second, he thought he had drifted off, and now was dreaming (she was often furious in his dreams), but then he saw Seth lurking behind her. Seth did not typically appear in his dreams.

“I'm going to go wait somewhere far away where I can't hear anything,” said Seth, before disappearing out of sight. An instant later, his arm reappeared to close the door behind him.

Which left Richard alone with Teresa in her guise of an avenging angel.

“Are you an idiot?” she demanded, her hands on her hips.

This further confirmed that he was not dreaming. Dream Teresa was always too horrified at him to cast this sort of barb. Real Teresa, however, would say exactly that. Had said it. Was saying it right now.

“Almost definitely,” he said.

He didn't know what she was doing here, but he felt the way he imagined a man might feel if he received a last-minute stay of execution. He was still perched on the gallows block, but the noose was not yet around his neck.

“Oh, *good*,” she said, not sounding at all like she thought this was good. “Then we agree. Which means you will be happy to explain why, exactly, you wrote me that asinine note and then never came to inquire after me *after I had been kidnapped*.”

It was a bit ridiculous, really, that he hadn't seen this coming. Teresa was no shrinking violet who would let an insult like the one he'd delivered stand without comment. Even Seth's interference wasn't that surprising if he really thought about it.

“I'm sorry,” he offered, which was inadequate but also true.

“No,” said Teresa. “Do not apologize. Explain.”

He winced. She looked so lovely that it hurt, in a pale blue ballgown with her hair cascading in curls about her face. By contrast, he hadn't shaved in days, was barely dressed in suitable clothes, and was still sitting, because he didn't even deserve to stand to defend himself.

“I can't,” he said, the words a lament. “You wouldn't understand.”

She looked like she wanted to light him on fire. “Forgive me for saying so,” she said, her tone dry as sand. “But that is the stupidest goddamned thing I’ve ever heard in my entire life.”

Despite himself, he wanted to crack a smile. Christ, he adored her. She was so stubborn, so forceful. Hell, she’d been *abducted*, and she’d taken it all on the chin. And now, here she was after he’d been unfathomably rude, truly unconscionably awful, here to give him hell for it.

“Teresa,” he said. Mistake.

Her eyes narrowed. “Don’t you *Teresa* me,” she countered. “I don’t understand? Well, lucky for you, I have a working brain. So, why don’t you explain it to me so that I can tell you why you’re being an idiot in context.”

He wanted to, even as much as it terrified him.

“I can’t,” he said.

And then, to his absolute horror, the stubborn expression fell from her face, and her eyes filled with tears. Even so, her voice was steady as she said, “I’m not going to give up, Richard. Do you know why? Because I love you. Don’t you love me, too?”

He didn’t know which shocked him more, her matter-of-fact assertion—*I love you*—or her question.

“Don’t I love you?” He choked out the words. “God, Teresa, *yes*. Yes. That’s why I have to stay away from you, because I love you so much I can barely breathe, and I am terrified of hurting you.”

She shook her head, baffled. “Hurting me? The only thing that’s hurting me is staying away—”

“No.” He cut her off and then, despite his better sense, he was telling her everything, maybe because he knew nothing less than the truth would convince her to go, maybe because he wanted her to see all of him, even the terrible parts.

“You have to understand—my father was a monster. Violent. Cruel.” Her eyes grew very wide in her face, but she didn’t interrupt, for which he was grateful. “He’d lose his temper over anything, and it turned him into a madman. He’d lash out at everyone, at his friends, at servants, at my mother...”

“At you?” she prodded gently when he trailed off.

Grimly, Richard nodded. “Until I got big enough to defend myself, yes. He rarely turned toward my sisters, which I suppose is some small mercy, but he was relentless. And—” He swallowed hard. “—when his anger had faded, he would be all apologies, all regret. He loved us, you see.” The words were the bitterest ones Richard had ever spoken. “So, if we could only manage to *behave*, he wouldn’t *have to* grow so angry.”

High color was rising in Teresa’s cheeks. “That’s nonsense—cruel and vile lies from a man who wanted to excuse his violence.”

Richard nodded. He did know. “Yes, but knowing that didn’t change anything. The dangers of marriage you spoke about? I saw all too well how they trapped my mother. My father was the Duke. His word was law. He controlled everything and everyone around him.

“That’s why I got into printing, at the start,” he confessed. Each word felt like a weight lifted as it left his lips, and he couldn’t help but think he didn’t deserve to lessen his burden. “I was saving money for my mother and sisters to escape him. I wanted them to be able to get away—I’d found a little cottage for them that I could just about afford.” He shrugged. “And then, he died. Suddenly. A fever. Too merciful for what he deserved.”

Richard thought back to the letter that had broken the news that his father was dead. He’d sat down and wept—tears of relief.

“He’s gone,” Teresa said. There was one single tear on her cheek. He hated that she was crying over him.

Richard shook his head. “He’s not, though. Because his blood lives on in me. No matter how hard I try otherwise, I cannot deny it. I am like him in more ways than I ever wish to be.”

“You’re not—”

“*I am*. You saw what I did to Archinton. He was down. He was *down*. And I kept hitting him anyway.”

Teresa blinked, another fat tear rolling down her cheek, and Richard thought this might finally be it, the moment where she looked at him and saw the monster. But then, a look of utter belligerence crossed her face.

“That,” she said, “is the stupidest thing I’ve ever heard.”

Wasn’t she *listening*? “It’s not. It was horrible—”

“No,” she said.

“I shouldn’t—”

“No.”

“I—”

“No.”

“God, Teresa, would you please let me talk?” It wasn’t a shout, but it was near enough to one that he felt an instant bolt of shame.

Instead of growing angry or cross, however, Teresa merely tilted her head at him. “You’re angry,” she observed.

That shamed Richard even further. “I’m sorry, I got frustrated
—”

She cut him off again. “Do you wish to strike me?”

He recoiled in his seat as if *she* had struck him. “God, no. Teresa, I would *never*.”

“I know,” she said simply. “And now, it’s my turn to talk.”

He didn’t know whether to laugh or cry when she approached him, silk skirts rustling, and perched herself on his knee. Her touch was a blessing. It terrified him.

“Here’s what I know, Richard. I know that your father is lucky he is already dead, or I would kill him myself. I know that he was a monster and that maybe the cruelest thing he did in a long list of cruel things was make you think that you were to blame for any of his actions.” She took his hand in hers.

“I know that I was terrified of loving anyone, terrified of marriage or getting trapped. But you made me feel safe. At every turn, you looked out for *my* interests, made sure *I* was happy. Even this—” She waved her free hand. “—misguided desire to push me away. You did all this for *me*.”

Richard was starting to feel something that might have been hope. “From the start, I knew I could tell you the truth. Do you know how valuable that is? Do you know that you are the only person who has made me feel that way? I love my family, I do, but you know I was hiding bits of myself from them. I never had to do that with you. I could be me, all of me, and *you loved me anyway*.”

“Yes,” he whispered because he could not deny her.

“I know,” she said, putting emphasis on the words, “that you will not hurt me. And for all that you wish to compare your actions against Lord Archinton with those of your father, you must consider this. Your father hurt those he purported to love, those he was meant to protect. You only hurt the person who hurt me. You protected me. You found me. You saved me. And those two things are completely different. They are the opposite. You are a *good man*, and you cannot stop me from loving you for it.”

Each of her words fell into him, like a rock into a pool of water. Only instead of disrupting him, he felt as though she were building something in him, something he wanted, so very badly, to see completed.

But his fear would not be silent. “What if,” he whispered, burying his face into the crook of her neck. It was the safest place he knew. “What if I become like him?”

She put a hand to his cheek and guided his head back so he was looking at her once more. “You protected me on the worst day of my life. Now—and forevermore—I will protect you. Do you understand me? I will be there for you. I will not let you fall. I love you, Richard Longman, and I will aid and guide you for all my days. Do you hear me?”

He did hear her. He heard, in particular, one thing that made his frozen heart set to beating anew.

“Forever?” he echoed, scarcely daring to hope.

She smiled, and it was sunlight on a spring morning, fresh snow on Christmas morning. Joy, joy, pure joy.

“Forever,” she confirmed. “Because I have decided I am changing the terms of our deal.”

“You are?” He was starting to smile, too, which astonished him, as he’d been so certain he would never smile again.

“I am. Henceforth, I shall love you with all my heart. I shall wake up with you each morning and go to bed with you each night. I shall kiss you when you’re sad, and when you’re happy, too. I shall soothe your tempers and reassure you when you fret, and I shall make you smile and laugh.”

“That’s quite a lot of things,” Richard said. He was feeling playful now, too. Huh? Who would have thought it? “And what shall I offer you in return?”

She grinned at him, and there was an air of mischief to it because his Teresa was all these things. Love, safety, home, but also silliness, teasing, and the capacity to drive him to absolute madness.

“Why, you’ll give me the same, of course. That’s why it’s such a fair deal.” She paused, looking thoughtful. “And I think we should marry, naturally.”

He tried to feign disapproval, but he was too happy. “Aren’t I meant to ask you?”

She shook her head. “No. If we’ve learned anything, it’s that you are dreadful at making plans. I should be the one to manage such things in our family. I’m clearly far superior at it.”

It was an obvious goad. She meant for him to argue. But he was too busy kissing her because he couldn’t do anything else, not when she had said *our family*.

When they finally pulled back from one another, laughing and breathless, and Teresa’s coiffure looking far less elegant and pristine than it had when she’d arrived, he couldn’t help but prod her a little. This was them, after all, and he had promised to show her how to have fun with things.

“There is one problem, though,” he said, his sigh overdramatic.

She narrowed her eyes, though the way her cheeks were pink with pleasure did diminish the effect somewhat.

“You are an avowed spinster. If we marry, it shall simply ruin all your lovely plans.”

She grasped his chin and placed a long, slow kiss on his mouth that made him practically forget what he’d been teasing her about in the first place. When she pulled back, she looked decidedly pleased with herself, as if she knew just how deeply she affected him.

Very well. He didn’t care at all if she knew.

“Well, Richard Longman,” she whispered against his lips.
“You have proven the ruin of all my lovely plans, but I cannot say I regret it in the least.”

The End?

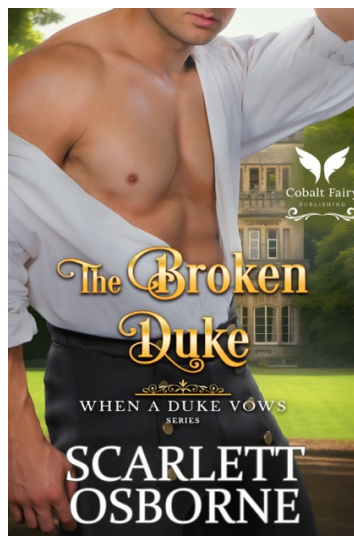
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PREVIEW: A VIRGIN FOR
THE BROKEN DUKE



CHAPTER 1



“*Y*ou should take responsibility!” Jonathan Parson, red in the face and almost steaming from his ears, bellowed.

For a second, Evan Parson, the Duke of Windham, was relieved they stood outside, far away from the opulent building where loud, serenading music and laughter came from.

Like this, no one would hear my stupid brother rant.

Evan shot Jonathan a glare.

He stood straight—as straight as his darned walking cane would allow anyway—and made sure the anger and incredulity were evident on his face before he scoffed in a low, dangerous voice, “Take responsibility? Take responsibility, you say, Brother?” He nodded sarcastically. “I can surely do that, but I will ask you some questions before we go on. What happened to the bag of gold I gave you just two moons ago?” he asked, and his drunk, angry brother had the nerve to look away in shame.

It only lasted for a second, though, because in the next, Jonathan was staring up quite defiantly at his brother. “I used it for business,” he snapped.

“Oh... right. You mean the investment that scoundrel Richard Moss spreads around town? Where you are asked to give a bag of gold and get three in return after two weeks? That one?” Evan did not bother to hide the annoyance in his voice.

Is my brother really that stupid? I told him over and over not to trust a man like Richard Moss! Claiming to be from France

and bringing all the goodies in the world with him. I have never heard of such well-spun lies.

“It was going well till his vessel got stuck at sea!” Jonathan stomped his foot on the ground like the impudent kid he was.

Evan was not fazed. He might have allowed his brother to become so silly and spoiled. It was his fault.

He nodded again. “Well, this is not the best moment, Jonathan. We are at the ball hosted by the Duke of Lincoln. Do you truly believe that such an occasion is fitting to recount the tales of your misfortune and ask for additional funds?”

Jonathan’s eyes widened in fear for a second, his eyes flitting about as he swallowed. “I would not be here if I didn’t need those funds immediately, Brother. I need them to help Richard save his ship, which has been lost at sea!”

“Damn! You’re such a fool! You still believe such Banbury tales?! Coming from someone who has scammed you over and over again?” Evan bellowed, unable to hold back his anger for one more second. His hand tightened on the hilt of his cane as he leaned on his good leg, rage and pain washing over his sharp features.

Jonathan gulped again, his countenance quite altered from sobriety. His once pristine attire, adorned with an intricate cravat and waistcoat, now clung uncomfortably to his frame.

Evan wondered just what mess Jonathan had gotten himself into before attending the ball and acting like such a disgrace.

The fool looked away, his hand going up to rub his neck. Evan’s eyes zeroed in on his cravat, which constricted his neck like an over-tautened noose. His movements were unsteady, as though his feet treaded upon uneven terrain, while his eyes betrayed a tempest of emotions—nervousness, anger, and a hint of disarray.

Evan huffed. That his brother knew to ask him for more gold in his current state was surprising.

Naturally, Jonathan became even more of a fool once he got drunk. The fervent flush on his cheeks did naught to conceal

the palpable tension that coursed through his form, inebriated and vexed at the same time.

Not a good combination.

“You won’t be giving me what I have asked for, then? Why? Do you plan to give them all to the unfortunate woman who has planned an arranged marriage with you? Knowing that you’re a cripple and she would forever detest the sight of you? Do you plan to woo her with your wealth?” Jonathan growled.

Evan’s eyes darkened. His hand shook with anger, but no matter how vexed he became, he knew he could not lift his hand to strike his brother—not because he was scared, but because he knew he would surely fall on his face without the help of his stick.

Sweat from pure, undiluted anger streamed down his face, and the only thing he could snarl at that moment was, “Leave. Now.”

Jonathan’s skin turned pale as he stared at his brother. Even though he knew just how to push Evan’s buttons, he also knew when he had gone too far and when to stop and retreat.

Now was the time for the latter.

Wetting his lips with his tongue, without another word, Jonathan turned on his heel, and like the drunken fool he was, he stumbled away, his overly-long dark brown hair blowing in the wind.

Hopefully not into the ballroom, where you would continue to disgrace my name.

Evan thought of everything and how easily his brother had been duped by a stranger. The bag of gold was supposed to help him kickstart a business, something to help him stand strong on his feet.

He shook his head in frustration.

He stalked toward the water fountain they had passed earlier when Jonathan had asked to speak with him privately. He stared at it, in an attempt to distract himself from his boiling

thoughts. It was almost like the one he had in his manor. But then, he huffed with annoyance.

He sat by the sides, wincing in pain.

What was I even thinking, placing my trust in Jonathan repeatedly? This is not the first time he has squandered my diligently acquired funds, and yet, he returns empty-handed, time and again!

Evan shook his head and decided that thinking of his brother was a waste of time. He looked up, taking in the beauty of the Lincoln estate as he tried to think of something else.

Something else, like his marriage.

He was to meet her today, his future wife.

When he had mentioned the fact that he had sought a wife some weeks ago, he had not expected Nicholas Garvey, the Earl of Stilton, to hastily propose his daughter for a wife.

Evan had thought the older man had been jesting, but he had been surprised when Nicholas had contacted him again some days ago and asked him to get ready to meet with his daughter at the ball.

A rare beauty, the Earl had boasted.

Evan would not lie and say he had not thought about it all night. He wondered what a rare beauty would look like. He had seen a lot of beauties in his life, but he wondered what could be classified as a rare beauty. One that would be his.

Would she have big, bright eyes? Would her skin be as pale as the moon, and would her cheeks be kissed with the lightest and most natural rouge? Would her lips be something he would lust after? Would she smile for him and make his heart thunder in his chest?

He wondered about all those things in his private chambers, even though he tried not to.

Evan sighed and looked down at his legs, then the cane resting lifelessly beside him. Would a rare beauty want someone like him? A good-for-nothing cripple? He highly doubted it.

Even I would not want a man like myself.

All his thoughts were sad and stressed. Maybe he would clear his head if he walked around a bit. It would also give his bad leg something to do.

He got up with a low groan, and still ignoring the low lights that came from the ballroom, the laughter, and soft, cheerful music, he started to walk around aimlessly.

He didn't want to be in the ballroom, anyway. Not when it was possible that he would be rejected tonight. Again.

The night breeze blew past his face and ruffled his dark hair. He closed his eyes to take in more of the peacefulness and—

“Ach—”

In a swift motion, his left hand darted forward and grabbed a hold of the woman who had bumped into him and was now falling backward. His large hands closed in around her small, soft arms, and he yanked her back toward him. Her hands splayed across his chest as she fell against him, and his nostrils were suddenly filled with her scent.

Soft, warm, and sweet. Like vanilla and sunshine.

She smelled so good, Evan thought as his hand went to hold her waist to keep her from stumbling.

Her waves of dark blonde hair bobbed as she looked up at him, and he was met with the deepest green eyes he had ever seen.

She gasped, and her eyes went wide, blinking rapidly as she stared up at him, her parted lips so pink, so beautiful that the first thing that came to his mind was what it would feel like if he pressed his own lips to hers.

They both stood there for what seemed like a lifetime before their senses returned, and she stepped away from his arms, leaving a cold gust of wind in her wake.

“Apologies, sir. I'm quite known for being clumsy,” she muttered, and Evan found that even her voice was pleasing to hear.

Soft and lilting.

He cleared his throat and rubbed the back of his neck. “Ahh, fret not, My Lady, being clumsy is not too bad of a thing in this regard,” he said.

Her eyebrows rose, a devastatingly beautiful smile stretching her lips as she beheld him. “It isn’t?” she asked, her green eyes running over every inch of him with such intensity that he froze.

From his hair, down to his face and body, to his leg—Evan didn’t think he was breathing anymore—and back up to his face. Those green eyes of hers that held no judgment, just pure appreciation and desire, darkened.

Damned already by the look in her eyes, Evan’s body hardened in response.

“When it brings a woman like you falling into my arms, then no, it is not,” Evan heard a dark, low purring voice say, and he was shocked to realize that it belonged to him.

The lady also gasped, her chest heaving as she watched him with glazed eyes.

Evan watched her pale, slender throat as she gulped, his hands itching to touch her, her lips, her neck, her skin. Everything.

A rare beauty, that was what she was.

With her golden hair, green eyes, and creamy skin that called to be touched, her simple but very elegant-looking frock, even though billowing, did nothing to lessen the curves he knew she had underneath.

A goddess.

If this woman looked like this, what did the rare beauty who was to be his wife look like?

Would she be better looking than her? Could anyone be better looking than her?

Evan was so shocked at his reaction to this woman, to the pleasure and desire that hummed lowly in his veins as if asking him to act on his desires.

It had been so long since he had felt this way with a woman. And now, this lady with her green, expressive eyes stood before him and evoked so much emotion in him?

She had stared at his legs earlier. He had seen the curious question in her eyes, but nothing more. Did she not find him lacking? Disgusting?

She took a step toward him, her eyes narrowing, and Evan could only stand still as she came up so close to his face, her soft scent flirting with his nose.

“You have such a straight and serious face, sir, but you talk like the devil himself with such sinful tongue,” she said.

Evan’s lips curled. His fingers curled too, but he kept them by his side and on his cane. Goodness, he had never been so conscious of his situation before. But now that she stood before him, the moon casting a warm glow over her face, he felt like a man again.

The look in her eyes made him feel like a man again. It excited him.

He leaned forward as well, enjoying her startled gasp as his lips almost touched hers. “Is that a good thing or a bad thing, My Lady? My sinful tongue?”

She shook her head, her eyes never leaving his. “It feels like a good thing.”

Damn.

He was damned to hell and back. He wanted her. With a vengeance, he wanted every inch of her.

He took a step forward, but then she took one back. As if she finally realized the incriminating position they stood in. Evan also leaned backward.

The silence between them stretched, and in that silence, a lot of unsaid words hung in the air.

“We can’t be in this position,” she finally whispered.

Evan nodded. He understood what she meant. “It would be bad for us if anyone catches us like this.”

Their society was a harsh one when it came to relations between the opposite genders.

She also nodded and turned to look at the ballroom, which was still filled with laughter and the clinking of glasses. “I should go.”

“Yes... I should go too.”

Then, more silence. None of them moved an inch.

Evan rubbed the back of his neck with his left hand, and she bit her plump lower lip.

It looked like none of them wanted to leave just yet.

Finally, Evan spoke, “The ball appears to be quite lively. Why are you out here, when you should be relishing the merriment within?”

The desire in her eyes shuttered a little, and she sighed. “I’m trying to escape the horrible man I am to marry,” she muttered.

Evan threw his head back, laughing. He had not expected that answer at all. She was trying to escape the man she was to marry, and he was standing there trying to avoid the woman who would surely reject him.

She scrunched up her nose adorably at him. “Why do you laugh so hard over my misfortune?”

“Because I’m also here to avoid a sure rejection.”

“A rejection? From whom?” she asked, and he shrugged, unwilling to give her an answer.

If she did not think he lacked physically, telling her of his fears would surely help her in seeing the cripple in him.

Even though she did not know the reason for the rejection, she said anyway, “Only a fool would reject a man who possesses a most handsome countenance.” She shook her head.

Desire shot through Evan’s veins again, and this time, the air became so filled with the lust they felt for each other that it became hard to breathe.

He took her hand and gently pulled her behind a tree in the garden, where no one would easily see them. Her intense eyes followed all his movements even as she pressed herself against the tree when he leaned forward again.

“You think I look good?” he whispered, and she shivered, a small sound coming from her lips as she stared up at him.

She only nodded.

Unable to help himself, his fingers slowly inched upward to touch the soft sides of her neck, his eyes never leaving hers. The beautiful lady shivered softly and squirmed against him. Slowly, feather-light, his fingers trailed down her neck to the creamy, open expanse of her chest. Her breaths began to come in quick bursts, and Evan groaned in desire.

He stopped right at the swell of her chest and allowed his eyes to do the rest. She moaned softly, as if his eyes were touching her in such intimate places, and arched her neck toward him in a plea for more.

He lifted his eyes to hers again and shook his head. “I don’t know if I had too much wine, but I can’t seem to stop myself...”

She ran her tongue over her lips, and Evan’s body tightened with pleasure. He wanted to be the one to do that to her.

“I’ve not had anything to drink tonight,” she whispered, shaking her head. Her voice had become low and sultry.

“Neither have I,” he muttered, and her hands went to touch the flannel of his coat.

“Sir, I—”

“I’m going to kiss you, then,” Evan whispered, and in the next second, his lips were on hers.

Their kiss was a confusing one. It started off slow, soft, and learning, his hand wrapping around her waist, pulling the softness of her body toward himself while he managed to balance on his cane. His tongue slowly licked her lower lip, asking for permission, and when she moaned, opening up to him, he pushed in.

The sweetness of her came as a shock to him. A pure, warm, and silken sweetness that threatened to drive him mad with want. Then, in the next second, as if too desperate for each other, their kiss turned wild, their hands roaming and their teeth clashing as they tried to get closer and closer to each other.

The music stopped, and with it, their senses returned. With a gasp, she pulled away, her eyes wide and breaths heavy as she stared up at him. And then, without a word, she turned on her heel and fled. Back into the ballroom.

Evan stood there, panting and leaning heavily on his cane for a while as he tried to steady his breathing. For a while, he just stood there, thinking of how his lips had felt against hers, of how her body had been so soft and so willing against his.

He thought of the way his body had roared in hunger for her. The lady whose name he didn't know.

Had it been a dream? Like a wish granted by the heavens to have a taste of what it felt like to be desired before he tied himself up in a marriage of convenience?

Evan sighed, stood upright, and then started to walk back to the ballroom.

Time to meet his bride and snap back to reality.

CHAPTER 2



What have I done? I am to be married to another!

Alice hurried through the moonlit garden, clutching her garments tightly against her, the soft rustling of her dress and the distant melodies from the ballroom the only sounds that accompanied her rapid footsteps. The night air was cool against her flushed cheeks, a stark contrast to the warmth that still lingered on her lips from the kiss she had just had with the stranger.

I can't believe I did that.

Her heart pounded in her chest as she recalled the sensation of his lips against hers. The stranger's touch had been electric, igniting a fire within her that she hadn't known was possible. The memory played over and over in her mind, the way his fingers had grazed her skin, the intensity of his gaze as he had pulled her closer.

As Alice walked, she couldn't shake the guilt that surged through her. She knew that the kiss had been reckless, impulsive, and completely inappropriate, and it could get her in big trouble. But at that fleeting moment, it had felt like the world had faded away, leaving only the two of them in the darkness of the garden.

Oh, Alice. You don't even know who he was. What if we were spotted together? My already stringent and boring life would be irreparably compromised.

Her thoughts swirled as she continued to put distance between herself and the place of their encounter. A shiver ran down her

spine, and she wrapped her arms around herself, both to ward off the chill and to hold on to the memory a little longer.

Alice's steps quickened as the ballroom doors came into view, the warm light spilling out onto the garden path. She hesitated between the desire to escape and going back into the ballroom.

Maybe I should just return to him.

The man's face, with his striking hazel eyes and confident smile, flashed in her mind's eye. She did not doubt that he was a man who could effortlessly navigate a room, capturing everyone's attention.

But as captivating as he was, Alice reminded herself of the reason she had ventured into the garden in the first place—to escape the clutches of a marriage she dreaded. She took a deep breath, willing herself to gather her courage and walk back into the ballroom, where the weight of her responsibilities as a young lady awaited her.

“What are you doing here?” Lady Jacquelyn frowned confusedly upon seeing Alice looking back frantically into the garden as she hurried over to the ballroom doorway.

Alice yelped as she turned around to see Lady Jacquelyn of the Evrett household, her soul almost jumping out of her body.

Did she see us? Am I now involved in a scandal? Oh, no. I'm already a big nuisance to my family, and now I'm going to be the worst daughter they have ever given birth to.

Alice did her best to calm herself down and politely curtsy to the lady.

“My Lady.” She bent her knees slightly.

Lady Jacquelyn's gaze remained piercing as she looked Alice up and down, suspicion and disapproval clearly written on her face. “What are you doing out here alone, Lady Alice? And where is your chaperone?”

Alice cleared her throat, her voice coming out softer than she had intended. “I just needed a breath of fresh air, My Lady. I was about to head back inside to rejoin my chaperone.”

Lady Jacquelyn huffed audibly, irritated. “You ought to know better than to wander alone at a ball, Lady Alice. Your behavior is unbecoming of a young lady. Your sisters have all managed to secure fine matches, and here you are, causing unnecessary worry.”

Alice would normally feel sad and shameful at the remark, but she had grown immune to it, especially after growing up with her kind of parents.

Alice had never felt the need to stand up for herself, so she just bowed her head slightly.

She’s right. I should have been more careful. It would have been a disaster if we were seen by Lady Jacquelyn. No one will know anything about what happened if I keep my mouth shut.

She dared a glance at Lady Jacquelyn, the hostess of the night’s ball, who was known for her overbearing nature and her two daughters’ successful marriages to wealthy marquesses.

Lady Jacquelyn, her point made, turned with a dismissive swirl of her gown and walked away, muttering something about Alice’s behavior.

As the older woman’s footsteps faded, Alice let out a sigh of relief. She pushed aside any feelings that had come with Lady Jacquelyn’s words. She had endured more, she told herself.

Just one step at a time. I will get through this.

With one last glance back at the moonlit garden, Alice turned and stepped through the ballroom doors.

The world inside was a whirl of laughter, music, and shimmering gowns. She squared her shoulders, put a sweet smile that her mother had commanded her to always have on her face, and walked straight toward her mother, who was standing with a group of matrons chaperoning their daughters.

Alice approached the group, her heart pounding in her chest. Her mother, the Countess of Stilton, was at the center of it all, her presence impossible to ignore.

Lady Stilton was known for her pretentious airs and a propensity for controlling the lives of her daughters, orchestrating their marriages as if they were pawns in a grand game. She had never held back her opinions on Alice's appearance, a fact that had caused a dent in Alice's already fragile self-esteem.

With her medium height, dark blonde hair, and dark green eyes, Alice had never quite fit the conventional beauty standards that her sisters seemed to embody effortlessly. And her front teeth, with the adorable gap, were a constant reminder of her uniqueness.

The group consisted of other chaperones as well, including the stern Lady Agnes, whose daughter had been wed off to a duke just last Season, and the gossipy Lady Beatrice, whose obsession with societal events often led to rumors and secrets being spread like wildfire.

As Alice drew closer, she forced her lips into a genteel smile, hoping to please her mother and the rest of the watchful matrons.

Remember, Alice, be the obedient daughter they expect you to be. Smile and nod "yes" always.

"Mother," she greeted, curtsying gracefully. Her voice was barely above a whisper, her unease evident despite her best efforts.

As much as Alice yearned for attention from her parents, after all the years of not getting any, she had grown to love being alone.

Coming to social balls and sometimes being around her overbearing mother and her never-available father was not what she desired. She just wished she could lock herself in her room and read as many books as she could, unaware and unbothered about what was happening in the outside world.

Lady Stilton's gaze raked over her daughter, her scrutiny almost painful. "Alice," she said, her tone tinged with disapproval, as it always was, "you've managed to find your way back to the ballroom, at last."

Yes, Mother. Back to where I belong, under your watchful eye.

Alice kept her head bowed slightly, her eyes downcast.

“Your friends have all managed to attract the attention of esteemed gentlemen tonight,” Lady Stilton continued, her tone biting. “You, on the other hand, seem to find solace in the garden.”

Solace, or perhaps an escape.

Alice’s gaze briefly darted toward the garden entrance before she quickly looked back down at her feet.

“Have you met the gentleman you are to be wedded to yet?”

Alice looked up at her mother and shook her head slightly.

“What is your father doing that he hasn’t introduced you yet?” Lady Stilton’s gaze roamed over the crowd in the ballroom, trying to find her husband, the Earl of Stilton.

Alice, on the other hand, bit her lips, rubbing her hands together anxiously. She knew there was no escape from this impending marriage her parents had set up for her, but she still couldn’t help but wish she had a say in the matter.

I never have a say in anything. I hate that I have to do this against my will, but there is nothing I can do about that. I find being a duchess more befitting than being a burden on my family.

The other matrons exchanged knowing glances, and Lady Beatrice’s sly smile indicated that she was undoubtedly gathering material for her next round of gossip.

Lady Stilton leaned in slightly, her voice dripping with condescension. “There is your father, and thankfully, he is with the Duke. Perhaps it’s time you learned to behave more like your sisters. Marriages of consequence don’t simply happen, my dear.”

As if I haven’t been trying.

Alice’s fingers tightened around the fabric of her dress. She felt like an outsider in her own family, always failing to live up to their expectations.

She looked in the direction of her father and saw him engaged in a conversation with a man standing in front of him, his back to her.

Is that the Duke? The man I am to marry? What am I to do when I meet him?

Lady Stilton beckoned her forward, and Alice forced her feet to carry her toward her father and the mysterious gentleman he was speaking to. Every step felt like a weighted burden, every heartbeat a reminder of her lack of control over her own fate.

As they approached, Alice's anxiety only grew. Her father turned to face her, his expression unreadable as always. The gentleman in front of him turned to face her.

And then, her eyes locked with his, and shock coursed through her veins. It was him. The stranger from the garden, the man whose lips had burned against hers in a moment of passion.

This cannot be. Fate cannot be so cruel as to place him before me now!

Alice's cheeks flushed with embarrassment.

When her father cleared his throat awkwardly, indicating her blatant rudeness for not acknowledging the Duke, Alice did her best to mask her surprise. She curtsied, her movements practiced, and offered a polite smile, even as her heart threatened to give away her secret.

The Duke stood tall before her, with a composed demeanor. His stare held a glint of something familiar, a recognition that sent a shiver down her spine.

"Your Grace," Lord Stilton began, his voice filled with enthusiasm and not with his usual detachment, "may I present to you my daughter, Alice Garvey. And, Alice, meet Evan Parson, the Duke of Windham."

Alice dipped into another curtsy, her cheeks flushing under the Duke's gaze. "Your Grace," she murmured, her voice barely audible.

Evan inclined his head, his gaze lingering on her for a moment longer than was strictly necessary. "Lady Alice," he replied

with a faint, enigmatic smile.

Does he remember? Of course, he does. It just happened some minutes ago. But he won't mention it. He can't. Right?

A tense silence settled between them. Alice's heart raced as she willed herself to remain composed, even as her mind replayed the memory of their kiss in the moonlit garden.

"I trust you are enjoying the festivities, Lady Alice?" Evan's voice broke the silence, his tone polite but distant.

Alice nodded, forcing herself to meet his gaze without betraying her inner turmoil. "Indeed, Your Grace. The ballroom is quite splendid."

Stay calm. He won't bring it up.

Her fingers discreetly fidgeted with the fabric of her gown.

Evan's gaze remained on her for a moment longer, and almost as if he was waiting for the moment, he stretched out his hand as soon as the song ended.

"Can I have the pleasure of a dance, Lady Alice?"

Alice looked around anxiously, scared that anyone was seeing them, but she had forgotten for a moment that she was to marry him. Her mother and father had stepped away to give them space.

It seemed she didn't have any choice but to accept. She sighed, looking down at the floor, and her eyes caught a glimpse of the Duke's cane.

She frowned in confusion.

Can he dance with his cane? Would it seem rude and mannerless of me to ask if he could?

She quickly pushed the thought to the back of her head and accepted the Duke's offer, placing her delicate, soft hand in his as the minuet started.

Alice watched as the Duke walked her toward a small part of the dance floor and leaned his cane against the wall before walking carefully back to her and wrapping his arms around her waist.

The dance was a minuet, its graceful and delicate steps perfectly executed by the assembled couples. Despite his leg, Evan danced with surprising ease, his movements confident and controlled. Alice found herself swept into the rhythm of the dance, her eyes meeting his for brief moments as they moved together.

As they danced, his touch was firm yet gentle, his gaze lingering on her in a way that ignited a strange mixture of emotions within her.

“You are quite the dancer, Your Grace,” Alice ventured, her voice soft as they moved through the steps of the dance.

“Thank you, Lady Alice,” Evan replied, a hint of amusement in his eyes. “One learns to adapt when circumstances require it.”

Adapt. Is that how he views his life? As a series of adaptations to his circumstances?

The dance continued, and as they glided across the floor, Alice’s curiosity got the best of her. She couldn’t resist the urge to ask the question that had been lingering in her mind since their encounter in the garden.

“Your Grace,” she began, her voice hesitant, “about earlier, in the garden...”

Evan’s eyebrows lifted in a silent question, his gaze fixed on her. And then, with a playful glint in his eyes, he leaned in slightly, his voice a low murmur that only she could hear.

“That kind of thing will have to stop once we are married, you know.”

Alice’s cheeks flushed with a mixture of embarrassment and indignation.

Excuse me? What is he saying?

She bit back the retort that threatened to escape her lips, her fingers tightening on his shoulder.

He’s just teasing. He can’t possibly mean it seriously.

Despite those thoughts, it still didn't stop her from speaking up. Which shocked her too.

“What do you mean by that, Your Grace?”

“Going around kissing other men outside ballrooms.”

What? Is he joking with me right now?

“You were out kissing a woman outside the ballroom too, Your Grace. What is this talk all about?” Alice frowned at the Duke, getting offended by his words.

What does he mean by kissing other men? Didn't he know, too, that he was about to meet his future wife at the ball, and still kissed a stranger?

“So, you're telling me that you are allowed to kiss other women on the day we are supposed to meet, and I am not?”

Alice didn't know why, but she found that she couldn't hold her tongue, the way she had always controlled herself.

Evan stared down at the beautiful, green-eyed woman in front of him. He knew he had made a mistake by talking like that, but it still didn't stop him from making another mistake.

“I must admit, Lady Alice, your penchant for propriety is rather... impressive,” he remarked.

Alice's patience was wearing thin, her irritation obvious as she met his gaze head-on. “And your disregard for decorum is equally astonishing, Your Grace.”

He chuckled, a mirthless sound that grated on her nerves. “Ah, but perhaps I find the boundaries of society to be confining. A little rebellion can be invigorating.”

Alice's eyes narrowed, her retort sharp and laden with sarcasm. “How admirable. It's not every day one encounters a duke who fancies himself a renegade.”

Evan's gaze hardened, a spark of annoyance flickering in his hazel eyes. “Lady Alice, I assure you, I have no desire to live up to the expectations of the ton.”

Stubborn man. Why must he be so insufferably contrary? Why did I ever kiss him?

Alice's frustration was mounting with every word he said.

"Are you vexed, Lady Alice? I thought you liked my devil tongue," Evan asked, annoyed.

Alice didn't spare him a glance, she was eager to get the dance over with and be rid of him.

The dance continued after their tense exchange of words that left them both on edge. Despite her frustration, Alice couldn't help but feel a spark of satisfaction whenever she managed to throw the Duke off balance. And yet, beneath the annoyance, there was an undercurrent of something else—an undeniable attraction that only seemed to intensify with every heated exchange.

And so, as the dance came to an end, Alice turned away from the Duke, her steps quick and purposeful as she retreated from the dance floor. She was determined to put distance between them, to quell the fire of irritation that still burned within her.

The dance had revealed more than they had intended—layers of pride and stubbornness that clashed like opposing forces. As the night continued, Alice found herself fighting her conflicting feelings, her heart torn between the undeniable attraction that had sparked between them and the lingering annoyance that threatened to eclipse it.

Later in the evening, as the ballroom festivities started to wind down, Evan found himself escorting Alice to her carriage. The moonlight cast a soft glow over them, the atmosphere more serene than it had been earlier.

As they walked side by side, Alice couldn't shake the whirlwind of emotions that had taken over her. If only she had a say in anything, she wouldn't even be here.

Finally, as they reached her carriage, Evan turned to face her. The air was heavy with unspoken words, the tension palpable.

"I must apologize for my behavior," he began, his voice sincere, "and for the way I spoke to you earlier. It was uncalled for."

Alice met his gaze, her eyes searching for any sign of insincerity. She was surprised by his change in demeanor, her

guard momentarily dropping.

She nodded slightly, her voice soft. “Apology accepted, Your Grace.”

Is he suggesting that we try to get along? After all the bickering?

She swallowed, her thoughts racing.

Evan’s expression seemed to soften, his eyes holding a hint of something she couldn’t quite decipher. “Lady Alice,” he said, his words carefully chosen, “despite our rocky start and our... differences, I find myself curious. Are you still willing to proceed with this arrangement? To marry me?”

The question hung in the air, the weight of it settling between them. Alice felt her heart race.

Do I want this? Do I want to try and make this work with a man who infuriates me? What am I even saying? I don’t have a say in it. It doesn’t matter if I want it or not.

The silence stretched.

She met his gaze, her voice steady despite the whirlwind of emotions within her. “Your Grace, I am willing to consider your proposal,” she replied.

Evan’s eyes held a mixture of surprise and something else—perhaps a glimmer of hope. As the moonlight bathed them in its glow, he nodded, his expression unreadable. “Thank you, Lady Alice. I can’t promise that it will be easy, but I believe that we have a chance to make this marriage work if we both try.”

“Of course, Your Grace.” Alice curtsied.

With that, Evan offered a polite bow and turned away, leaving Alice to stand by her carriage, her heart racing, and her thoughts a tangle of uncertainty.

Would this marriage between us really work? Am I really just going to accept this? Well, I guess I’d rather have something else to focus on rather than the constant reminder that I need to get married like my sisters. It just sucks that this feels like a

forced decision because I know deep down that I would have accepted to marry him even if it wasn't planned by my parents.

Alice sighed and stared up at the sky, imagining how the next few days would go.

She knew she was in for another series of trouble in her home, but at least she was off the hook for this one.

CHAPTER 3



Sounds of clapping and cheering burst in Evans's ears as the ceremony within the hallowed chapel concluded.

That was it, final. They were married now.

He turned to Alice and tried not to think of how beautiful she looked in her wedding dress. A masterpiece of elegance and grace. Made from pure silk in a soft sky-blue shade—because she loved the color and he wanted her to have everything she wanted.

He looked down at the delicate lace at the neckline with ivy and blossom patterns. The tailored bodice highlighted her waist, while the sheer sleeves billowed like angelic wings. The skirt flowed with layers of fabric.

His eyes settled on her face again, and she smiled tentatively.

Evan sighed. She was so beautiful. Her ensemble included a gossamer veil with a pearl and blossom crown, like an angel.

He held out his hand silently, and her smile widened as she took it. They both turned and walked out of the chapel. The cheers of the gathered congregation did not stop even as they emerged outside, greeted by a cascade of sunlight filtering through the arched door. The sound of bells ringing joyfully in the distance heralded their union.

Soon, their wedding guests approached to congratulate them, and for a second, Evan thought he felt Alice's hand tightening on his arm before she let go, smiling and greeting guests.

Evan nodded in acknowledgment, and soon, the couple had to leave for their new home.

Windham Mansion.

* * *

The huge and beautifully decorated carriage hurtled down the chapel road, its wheels spinning gently over the uneven terrain.

Everything was still like a dream.

Ewan refused to look at the beautiful woman sitting in front of him in the carriage. His wife. Alice Parson, now Duchess of Windham.

A rare beauty. One that had become his.

He could not bear to look at her and remember everything that had happened between them, that kiss they had shared at the ball, the way she had looked at him, touched him.

He could not bear to think of it now that they were married. It was apparent she hadn't wanted to get married, not to him or anyone. She had said so that night.

She had tried to escape the horrible man she was to wed. It was just bad luck that he happened to be the horrendous man who would ruin her life with his marriage proposal.

Then, he thought of the other part of that night, the part that had been filled with heavy breaths, desire lingering in the air, and lips pressed against each other.

It had been the best kiss of his life. He had thought he would probably never see her again after that ball. But now... she would be with him for a long time. She was his wife.

He glanced at her, and she stared down at her lap, wringing her hands. She didn't look happy. She didn't look happy at all.

What had happened between them that night was probably an aphrodisiac in the air that had affected them. Now, they were married, and Evan was scared. What happened that night

might have been a mistake for her, but not for him, and that was the scariest part of it.

This woman could easily break his heart if he gave her a chance. That meant she was dangerous, and he had to stay away.

He sighed and looked out the window.

Outside, the landscape blurred into a mesmerizing tableau of fleeting images. Tall trees, their branches swaying in the wind, cast dappled shadows over the path—fields of emerald-green grass swayed gently, their undulating motion resembling waves on a tranquil sea.

It was such a beautiful view, and Evan wished he would be able to watch this view with her. He wished she was happy enough to want to watch the view with him.

The vibrant wildflowers that lined the road created a kaleidoscope of colors, their petals swishing as the carriage passed by.

The silence stretched on for so long that Evan could not take it anymore.

He turned to her. “You’re quiet.”

Her green eyes snapped up to his, and his heart almost seized.

“I’m always quiet,” she countered, and he nodded.

He couldn’t find it in himself to muster up a smile.

“Even on your wedding day?” he asked.

She sighed. “I have had a lot on my mind.”

Evan looked away again. Of course, she had a lot on her mind. She probably didn’t mind kissing a cripple, but marrying him?

“I tried conversing with your mother after the ceremony,” she started, and he turned to look at her again.

She probably should not have done that. Evan knew his mother.

“How did it go?”

“She was rather distant and curt.” Alice shrugged and looked down at her lap again.

Evan wondered what to tell her. After thinking for a while, he said, “She is just that type of person. Don’t take it to heart.”

Alice bit her lip and nodded. Evan tried not to look at that lip.

She looked back up at him, her eyes wide with uncertainty. “Will they be staying with us?”

Evan’s eyebrow rose. “Staying with us?”

“Will we all live together?” she clarified, her eyes looking worried, and Evan realized that since she had not had a great time with his mother and childish brother, she would be a bit uncomfortable with them.

That must have worried her. Married to a crippled man and his complicated family.

He grimaced. “No, but they will be visiting. They visit a lot,” he tried to explain. When that did not seem to ease her worries, he blurted, “They won’t be there for a long time, at least during our honeymoon,” he added.

“Oh... all right, thank goodness for that,” she muttered under her breath, but he heard her anyway. She smiled at him. “Today is a beautiful day. The sun shines so brightly, and the air is fresh and warm.”

Even nodded half-heartedly. “Yes, it is.”

He saw right through her. He knew what she was trying to do. She was trying to make the most of what she had. She was trying not to think of her misfortune.

He was her misfortune. He knew that. He was just surprised at how bitter he was at the thought of it.

But who was he kidding? He had known from the beginning that any woman who would marry him would feel like she was in a trap. She would react in one of two ways: she would either become so closed off and go into a sort of seclusion, or she would try her hardest to make the most of her misfortune while secretly wishing him death.

It seemed Alice was the latter.

Evan had prepared himself for this. He just hadn't prepared himself knowing it would be Alice.

"You look dashing today," she whispered.

He looked up at her and gave a nod. "Thank you, and so do you, Lady Alice."

She frowned. "You're quiet." She repeated the words he had said a few minutes earlier.

"Am I?"

"I always knew you had a serious face, but you seem even more serious today—brooding even. Did you not want to get married?" she asked, and he stared at her in shock for a while.

"Of course, I wanted to get married."

"So, how come you call your wife by her old title instead of endearments?"

Your wife, she had said.

My wife.

"What term of endearment would you prefer?" he asked, and she laughed.

"Surely, you jest. Why would I tell you what term of endearment to call me?"

"Why not?"

"It would not be an endearment if I had to force you to call me by the name, would it?" Alice snapped, a bit annoyed, and Evan sighed.

"I'll look for something," was all he said, and then he turned back to the window.

"Looks like we are never going to get to know each other," she muttered, but he heard her.

Without turning, he answered, "We don't have to get to know each other."

"We don't?"

“We don’t.”

She scoffed, “What sort of married couples don’t get to know each other? We would be strangers in our own marriage! What sort of marriage would that be, then?”

Evan thought that was the longest sentence he had heard her speak at a time, and he turned to her. “A marriage of convenience.”

“Pardon?” she sputtered, her intense eyes on him. As if she was daring him to say the words again.

He sat straighter and looked into her eyes. “It would be a marriage of convenience.”

“This isn’t a marriage of—”

“Isn’t it? Did you have feelings for me when you accepted the proposal? *Do you have feelings for me? Are you happy right now?*” he asked, and she just stared at him.

Her throat bobbed. He watched all through. He wanted to hear her answer.

He shouldn’t. It would break his heart. He knew it, but all the more reason to hear it. It would help him see reality.

Her mouth opened and closed as if she wanted to say something.

Heart thundering in his chest, he watched her, saw the emotions flicker in her eyes.

Do you, Alice? Do you have feelings for me?

That would change everything. If she miraculously did have feelings for him, it would change everything.

The light in Alice’s eyes slowly dimmed the more she looked at him. Then, she turned away.

That was it. That was her answer. She did not have feelings for him.

Evan looked away.

Of course, she didn’t. I knew that a long time ago. Why did I even think about it? Allowed myself to hope?

“Now, you understand me? We don’t need to get to know each other,” he said.

Alice turned back to him again, her gaze cutting. “So, what are we supposed to do in this marriage? I’m just a decorative wife?” she asked, and he sighed.

“I wanted to get a wife because I need to sire an heir, that is all.”

Alice was so quiet for a while that Evan thought she had gone to sleep. When he turned away from the window to look at her, she looked devastated.

“What’s wrong?” he couldn’t help but ask.

“I-I’m to be the bearer of your children, and that’s it? Someone who produces heirs for you?” Her voice was barely above a whisper, and Evan almost hated himself for making her feel the way she felt.

But he knew it was the truth, and so he sighed. “Yes. In fact, once you birth me a son, you have the liberty to do whatever you want, in the company of whomever you want.”

With whomever you desire, was what he did not add because it was too hard for him to say it.

He should not have kissed her. He should not have met her that night and felt such an attraction toward her. Then this marriage would have been easy on them both.

They both looked away from each other.

The carriage was quiet again. Then, it started to run up a steep hill. Evan saw the way Alice tried her best to stay in her seat and not fall out.

“You could sit here,” he offered, but she ignored him, holding onto the window.

He sighed.

Stubborn, stubborn woman.

“Alice—”

The carriage bumped against a stone, and with a small yelp, Alice came crashing into his arms. Green expressive eyes met with warm hazel ones, and they both held their breath.

Evan's arms held her up as she stayed sprawled on his lap. He wanted to kiss her badly. His whole being ached for her. But as soon as the carriage righted, she pushed away from him harshly.

"No need to concern yourself with a mere child bearer," she bit out.

Evan heaved a sigh. He just knew this was not the marriage he had signed up for.

Want to know how the story ends? Tap on the link below to read the rest of the story.

[A Virgin for the Broken Duke](#)

Thank you very much!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Born in the Sunshine State of Florida, but of both British and Nordic descent, **Scarlett Osborne** grew up reading historical romances from the land of her ancestors. Fascinated with the British society of the 1800s and armed with a wild imagination, she obtained a degree in Creative Writing and immediately started her career as a Regency romance author.

A daydreamer extraordinaire, Scarlett likes to jump in the shoes of her heroines, immersing herself in her own stories, living the adventures that she wished she had experienced as a child. An avid reader and fan of the outdoors, Scarlett spends her free time either reading or going on long horseback rides along with her two sons.

Get lost in a land of enchantment, where adventure and love await around every corner...Scarlett hopes that through her heroes, you too will get to live a whirlwind romance in the Regency era, when fairytales were real and all dreams possible!

Scarlett is part of **Cobalt Fairy's** team of authors! Visit cobaltfairy.com for new, bargain and free deals for every dedicated bookworm there is out there!

