

The Scarred  
Duke's  
Gamble

PATRICIA HAVERTON

# THE SCARRED DUKE'S GAMBLE

A HISTORICAL REGENCY ROMANCE NOVEL



PATRICIA HAVERTON



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## ABOUT THE BOOK

*“You are my only hope for salvation...”*

Theresa, a self-proclaimed expert in all matters of fashion and decorum, would do anything to restore her family’s name after her mother’s scandal shook London and ruined any chance she had of a normal life.

Marquess Jeremy, notorious for his rebellious ways, must prove he is a changed man in order to get back into his father’s good graces and gain back access to his funds.

When they accidentally cross paths, they form a plan: Teresa will help him become the perfect gentleman, and he will help her shed her family’s scandal. Until their growing affection makes them reckless and the ton takes notice. Bring about the biggest scandal London has ever seen...



## BEFORE YOU START READING...

Grace and Thomas' courtship turned a lot of head in the ton. After all, it is not everyday you see the fearsome Scarred Duke with a socialite on his arm!

But if you want to know about **real scandalous courtships of Regency era, click below!**

Here is a **Historical Fact Sheet about Courtships that shook the Regency Era London** which will help you understand and visualize the story inside my book better.

Many of my readers requested it and that's why I am giving it away for free! I believe you will LOVE IT!

It's not mandatory to read it, but it will be really helpful if it's your first time with this book.

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## CHAPTER 1



“*I* have despaired of change and better amusement from London Society,” Lady Grace Jennings lamented, her delicate fan snapping shut.

Though the ballroom was awash with the gleam of candlelight and the shimmer of rich fabrics, it felt painfully repetitive to Grace. Every event had the predictable ebb and flow of the last. She glanced around, noting familiar faces in all too familiar scenes. Guests engaged in idle chatter, the same dance routines, and the expected polite laughter filled the air.

“The Season has only reached its midpoint, yet it feels like an endless repetitive parade,” she murmured, her eyes capturing the fleeting glances of the bustling ballroom from where she stood.

Lady Caroline Shampton, a longtime confidante with a knack for sharp observation, sidled up beside her. She smirked, her gaze falling to the intricate lace details on Grace’s dress. “Your dresses, however, tell a different tale,” she observed cheekily. “They certainly see more change than Society’s events. Is this the latest from Paris?”

Smiling, Grace twirled a bit, letting the lace flounces flutter. “It is my addition. I find that if Society would not evolve, my wardrobe certainly should.”

While most ladies were content with whatever was handed down from Parisian modistes, Grace endeavored to be different. She took those designs and made them uniquely hers.

Caroline laughed. “I’ll wager a pretty penny—no, better yet, my mother’s favorite tiara—that by the next ball, half the ladies would parade about in their versions of those lace flounces.”

Grace grinned. “Well, imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, isn’t it?”

The whispered rumors and hushed conversations about Grace’s fashion choices echoed through ballrooms, sitting rooms, and even private chambers. Whenever Lady Grace introduced something new to her attire, the ladies of the ton eagerly anticipated the next fashion shift. The overzealous attempts to imitate Grace often led to comical consequences, and the memory of those tumbling trains still brought a smirk to Grace’s lips.

“Your mother’s tiara?” Grace repeated with an incredulous chuckle. “Why not wager your own belongings, Caroline?”

Caroline adjusted her pearl necklace, feigning a look of innocence. “Why should I part with mine when my mother’s is so much grander?”

Grace arched an eyebrow. “Ah, hiding behind your mother’s jewels, are we?”

“Oh, absolutely! I know better than to gamble with what’s rightfully mine,” Caroline replied, her laughter like tinkling bells.

As their laughter melded with the music of the ballroom, Grace’s attention drifted. A stranger, an enigma in the sea of familiar faces, instantly captivated her. His steady gaze, unflinching and intense, held hers from across the room. She found herself entranced, ensnared by those mysterious eyes.

Caroline noticed the shift in her friend’s demeanor and playfully elbowed her. “It seems our mystery man has also noted your distinguished tastes,” she teased.

Grace blinked, breaking the trance. “Who is that?” she asked, her tone a mix of curiosity and genuine interest.

Caroline leaned closer, her voice a whisper filled with intrigue. “That, my dear Grace, is a tale for another dance. But suffice it to say, he has been away for quite some time and has only now returned.”

Grace felt the anticipation of a new story, a fresh face in their repetitive Society, and she was all ears.

“That is the Duke of Dawshire. Rumor has it he has been away, but it seems he has chosen to grace us with his presence again,” Caroline said, lowering her voice to ensure their conversation remained private.

Grace, trying to steal another glance at the mysterious Duke, found his spot empty. He had seemingly melted into the crowd, or perhaps left the ballroom entirely. “How peculiar,” she murmured.

Caroline chuckled. “He does have an air of mystery about him, doesn’t he?”

Grace nodded in agreement. “His gaze felt... intense. Almost as if he could see right through me.”

Before Caroline could respond, they were interrupted by the enthusiastic call of, “Lady Grace!”

Both women turned to find Tabitha Langley, always a beacon of excitement, making her way toward them, a slightly bewildered-looking lady trailing behind her.

“Tabitha,” Grace greeted with a warm smile. “And who is this you’ve brought with you?”

“This—” Tabitha beamed, drawing the lady forward. “—is my cousin from America, Miss Rachel Wood. Her family’s made quite the fortune across the pond, and now she is here in England, searching for a match that equals their newfound status.”

Rachel, seemingly accustomed to her cousin’s forwardness, curtsied gracefully. “It is a pleasure, Lady Grace.” She smiled. “Tabitha speaks very highly of you,” she added, her

gaze darting around the opulent ballroom. “She claims you’re the best guide one could hope for in London Society.”

Grace laughed lightly. “Well, Tabitha has always had a way with words.”

Tabitha winked. “And Lady Grace has always had a way with people. Knowledgeable, gracious, and always impeccably dressed.”

Rachel nodded in agreement. “Indeed, I have heard much about your sense of style.”

Grace flushed with modesty. “Thank you, Rachel. Coming from across the ocean, I am sure you bring a unique perspective. Perhaps we can learn from each other.”

Rachel smiled warmly at that, but it was Tabitha who cut in with characteristic eagerness. “Speaking of unique perspectives, did you see the Duke of Dawshire earlier? Rachel and I were hoping to gather some insights about him.”

Caroline’s interest was piqued. “I heard he is a war hero.”

Tabitha nodded vigorously. “And not just any hero. Word is, he has returned with numerous scars, evidence of his valor on the battlefield. But rather than hide them, he wears them proudly, unafraid of Society’s prying eyes.”

The women shared a moment of contemplation, the tales of the Duke’s courage adding yet another layer to the evening’s

intrigue.

And the admiration in both Tabitha's and Rachel's eyes could not be more palpable.

Grace raised an eyebrow, noting their shared glances filled with giggles and whispers. The ladies apparently knew more about the Duke than she did, a fact that both amused and intrigued her.

“How about I discover more about him before I divulge any more information to you all?” she suggested, tapping a finger against her chin. “We would not want to start passing around falsities, now, would we?” she added with a sweet, innocent smile.

Tabitha's eyes sparkled with mischief. “Oh, this is why I never trust a different source. Thank you, Grace.” She practically bounced on her feet as she pulled Rachel away, leaving Grace slightly bewildered but amused.

Caroline, her best friend since childhood, stepped closer, her gaze sharp but filled with mirth. “Well, if things did not suddenly become more interesting,” she commented with a sly smile. “I sniff the entertainment you seek, Grace.”

Grace chuckled. “Always on the prowl for a good story, aren't we?”

Their shared laughter was light and free, but this pleasure was fleeting, as a familiar and often overbearing presence suddenly loomed over the scene.

Emily Jennings, the Countess of Folletton, approached with a swift stride and a commanding air. On her fourth Season, Grace could sense her mother's desperation to find her a suitable match.

Expecting to be whisked away for another dance with a boring gentleman, Grace steeled herself. To her surprise, however, the conversation took a turn.

"Lady Henshaw cannot stop talking about your dress tonight, Grace. Come quickly, she would like a proper look at it," Emily remarked.

Grace took a moment to gaze down at her dress. The intricate lace and fine stitching were indeed remarkable. Yet, she knew her mother had always been a woman of vanity and expected the praise to be directed at her.

"Where else would she have gotten such excellent tastes from if I did not raise her with keen senses?" Emily boasted, presenting Grace like a prize to a group of eager matrons.

Grace inwardly sighed. As much as she drew attention and admiration, she loathed being treated as a mere showpiece. Desperately scanning the room for an escape, fortune favored her when she spotted a familiar face.

"At this rate, we'll never see to that dance, Henry," Grace called out, beckoning her cousin, Henry Griffiths, the Marquess of Marfield, over.



Henry, being her mother's older sister's first and only son among six children, was often Grace's savior. His arrival was timely, and Grace silently thanked the heavens for sending her the perfect excuse to slip away from her mother's claws.

He was a gentleman many in her family regarded with favor. With each passing Season, the unspoken but unanimous decision among her family was clear: should she want to marry and fail to make a satisfactory match, she would find herself engaged to Henry.

Grace's frustration was not with Henry. Rather, it was the underlying sentiment that she, after three years and now a fourth on the marriage mart, did not want to marry. No one seemed to understand it. She'd trusted a man once with her heart, and she still bore the scars of his betrayal.

She'd been burnt, and she was not keen on experiencing the pain a second time. Every suitor now seemed to wear the same mask of deceit. The mere idea of marriage became a looming specter she was eager to evade.

To their credit, her parents had granted her the time and liberty to search for a partner. They'd occasionally nudge her in certain directions, yes, but they never suffocated her with demands. Yet, their subtle inferences and the quiet encouragement for Henry to court her were not lost on Grace.

Henry was family, a brother in all but blood. Their shared history and bond meant so much to her, and the thought of tainting that with an obligation-marriage filled her with dread. Henry, for his part, showed a mild interest. She could see in his eyes that she would make a sensible wife for him. But he was not in love, not truly. And that's what pained her the most.

“Dance?” Henry’s brows lifted slightly, a touch of surprise in his voice.

Grace shot him a covert glance, silently imploring. Quickly understanding, he responded, “Oh, yes, yes. Our dance.”

Relief washed over her. She was not ready to return to the lion’s den of matrons just yet.

“How about we promenade about the room for a bit before the next waltz begins?” Henry suggested, sensing her need for an escape.

Grace gratefully placed her hand on his arm, allowing him to steer her around the ballroom. Her mother watched them from a distance, her approving eyes making it clear that she had no qualms about this particular pairing.

While Henry’s presence was a comforting one, a stark contrast from the other presumptuous gentlemen, Grace yearned for something more. Something different.

“I see he has made a reappearance at last,” Henry remarked, nodding toward a huddled group of ladies whose excited whispers centered on the Duke of Dawshire.

“It appears so,” Grace said, trying to feign indifference. “I have heard his service to the Crown had kept him away all these years.”

Henry scoffed, a shadow crossing his face. “Service to the Crown? I am sure that’s what he’d like Society, especially the young ladies, to believe.”

Grace tilted her head, taken aback by the sharpness in Henry’s tone. “What do you mean?” she pressed, genuinely intrigued.

Henry paused, taking a moment to carefully choose his words. “Some pages are best left unturned and most definitely unread, Grace, dear.”

She looked at him, her eyes sharp with determination. Although she may have playfully promised Tabitha and Rachel that she would search deeper into the Duke’s history, her own insatiable curiosity drove her more than she cared to admit. She could not resist the allure of the enigmatic Duke of Dawshire.

She desperately wanted to know. What was Henry withholding about the Duke?

However, before she could press him further, her eyes darted to the ballroom’s far end. There, exiting through the grand doors, was the Duke. His tailored attire and the unique aura he exuded in a room full of distinguished guests were unmistakable.

Realizing an opportunity, she turned to Henry. “I believe I need to visit the retiring room.”

His laughter was light, but there was a hint of something deeper in his voice. “I knew you weren’t interested in a

dance,” he teased, though a shadow of disappointment clouded his features.

“Next time,” she assured him, already eyeing the doors the Duke had just passed through.

“That’s what I heard the last time,” Henry replied, shaking his head in feigned exasperation.

“This time, I promise,” Grace replied, her smile genuine.

Henry’s grin was contagious, and it spread across his face. “Next time, then, Grace.”

And with that, she pivoted gracefully, her sights set on the path the Duke had taken. She could not let him slip away again, not when answers might be within her grasp.

With every quiet step she took, Grace was more aware of the thrilling chase, and after what felt like an eternity, she spotted the Duke entering what looked to be the grand library. With her heart racing, she decided to give it a few moments before venturing inside herself.

She slowly pushed the door, peering into the dimly lit room. The soft glow from the fireplace cast a flickering light on the rows of books. Before she could assess the situation, a stern voice challenged, “Who is there?”

Taken aback, Grace inadvertently released the door handle, causing the door to swing shut behind her, casting the room

into deeper darkness.

Panic surged within her, the beats of her heart resonating loudly in her ears. Her playful, and perhaps reckless, endeavor now seemed far from innocent. What had she just walked into?

With every echoing step of his that came her way, she realized she was cornered.

## CHAPTER 2



Thomas Robins, the fifth Duke of Dawshire, leaned against the library's liquor cabinet. The dark burnished wood held an array of beverages, and he reached for a decanter of brandy, pouring himself a drink. The amber liquid swirled in the glass the same way that memories of his past did in his mind.

Tonight marked his return to London's high society after years away in service and dealing with the grief of losing both his father and older brother, Neil and Simon Robins. Their sudden demise in a carriage crash had not only been a tragic accident, but an event tainted with suspicion.

Since the evening had begun, his gaze had been fixed upon the vivacious Lady Caroline. Her bright eyes and animated conversations were hard to miss. But as he had observed her, another figure had caught his eye. A young woman standing beside Lady Caroline, her gaze audacious yet intriguing. It was the sort of gaze that made one forget the purpose of one's attendance.

The brightness of her eyes, even from a distance, had been undeniable. There had been a fervor, a fire in them that spoke of spirit and passion. And for someone whose intent had been

to watch and draw close to Lady Caroline, he had found his attention inexplicably tethered to the woman beside her.

How could a man on a mission, such as his, be so easily swayed?

Shaking his head, he berated himself. Every moment he lingered, lost in distractions and seeking solace in dimly lit libraries, was a moment wasted. But before he could further admonish himself, he caught wind of a faint rustling.

An unexpected guest.

His voice carried across the vastness of the room, sharper than he had intended. "Who is there?"

An audible gasp was the reply he received, followed by the unmistakable sound of the door creaking shut. A woman. The moonlight gently cascading through the nearby French windows painted a faint silhouette on the floor. It was elegant, refined, and familiar.

Advancing toward the intruder, his stride firm yet cautious, he stopped short at the realization that he was face-to-face with Lady Caroline's captivating companion. The one who had so effectively stolen his attention earlier.

"Did you follow me?" he inquired, surprise evident in his voice.

Her face, even in the dimness, betrayed an array of emotions. Surprise, undoubtedly, but also a hint of defiance.

“Follow you? Good heavens, why ever would you think so highly of yourself? I do not even know who you are,” she replied, her tone touched with feigned insouciance.

“Yet, here you are,” Thomas retorted, a playful smirk forming on his lips, thoroughly enjoying the dynamic of their unexpected rendezvous.

“I most certainly did *not* follow you,” she declared. But to his ear, there was a subtle waver in her voice. Uncertainty, perhaps?

“I believe you might have, Miss,” he countered, amusement lacing his voice.

“It is *Lady* Grace Jennings,” she announced, punctuating her title with a bit of flair. Her eyes seemed to challenge him, as if waiting for recognition, and suggesting that he should have known all along.

“I am quite certain you did, Lady Grace Jennings,” Thomas responded, his voice a mixture of bemusement and mock severity. He was somewhat enjoying this unexpected game.

Her eyes sparkled, a blend of annoyance and begrudging respect. It seemed she took a small pleasure in hearing her title uttered correctly, despite the rather dubious circumstances of their encounter.



His lips quirked up in a knowing, mischievous smile.

“So, what prompted you to shadow me, Lady Grace?” His tone was light, but his gaze was sharp, searching.

For a split second, she looked a touch vulnerable, a deer caught in the glow of lanterns. But before she could muster her thoughts and articulate a reply, he chimed in with a playful quip. “Surely you did not conceive a plot to ensnare me in some outrageous scandal?”

“I beg your pardon, Sir?” Her voice rose with affront, her brow furrowing.

“Dawshire. The Duke of Dawshire,” he replied, mimicking her earlier tone of gentle admonishment when she’d clarified her title.

Taking a deep breath, she replied in an exasperated tone, “Very well, I beg your pardon, Your Grace. But must a lady be questioned so thoroughly for merely seeking a momentary escape from the festivities? Especially when confronted with such baseless accusations from a gentleman she has just met?”

He could not contain his chuckle. This evening had taken a wholly unexpected but thoroughly delightful turn. “In actuality, Lady Grace, it was you who intruded on my brief respite,” he countered, leaning slightly forward.

“And how was I to know the library was already occupied?” she retorted, a hint of defensiveness in her voice.

Thomas cocked an eyebrow, considering her words. There was something about the fleeting vulnerability in her gaze that gave him pause. Could she truly have trailed him? Their earlier exchange of glances might suggest so, but then again, he was not sure if she had been as affected by their fleeting connection as he had.

He shook the thought away and smirked. "Indeed, how would you have known? Unless, of course, you had seen me make my exit from the ballroom and deliberately followed me," he teased, drawing her further into their playful verbal dance.

Lady Grace looked as if she'd been struck by a sudden realization, her eyes widening in astonishment. As she tried to muster the words, he jestingly interjected, "To trap me into a scandal."

She appeared to want to speak, her lips parting in preparation, but the words did not come. It was as though his banter had disarmed her usual defenses. In fact, she then exhibited a lightness he hadn't seen since their encounter had begun.

"Well," she began with a coy smile, her earlier tension dissipating, "what eligible lady would not desire to secure a duke for herself?" The jest was evident, and the playful glint in her eyes was infectious.

Thomas, though briefly caught by the mischievous allure of her grin, replied, "Ah, but you see, not every duke might be honorable enough to offer marriage in such a situation."

She laughed lightly, crossing her arms in mock indignation, inadvertently drawing his attention momentarily to her

décolletage.

Realizing where his gaze had wandered, Thomas cleared his throat, slightly embarrassed. She, however, seemed blissfully unaware of his momentary lapse.

With a teasing smirk, he said, “Well, Lady Grace, there’s only one way to discover the answer.”

But just as the air grew palpably electric between them, the library door creaked open, causing an immediate spike in Thomas’s anxiety. The very thought of being found alone in a dimly lit room with a lady was enough to set the tongues of the ton wagging.

His earlier jest seemed about to become a terrifying reality. Swiftly, he reached for her wrist, his intention solely to shield her from being discovered. But in the urgency of the moment, he pushed her into a nearby shadowy corner with less grace than he had intended.

A soft gasp, half-startled and half-pained, escaped her lips. A pang of guilt twisted inside him. Had he been too rough?

“Dawshire, there you are,” came the voice of their host.

Thomas, with great reluctance, stepped forward. The last thing he wanted was for their host to venture further into the library and stumble upon Lady Grace’s concealed presence.

With a brief nod, he followed the man out, but his thoughts remained tethered to the library, hoping against hope that the intriguing Lady Grace was unharmed. He would return to check on her as soon as he got a chance.

The urgent matter turned out to be resolving a petty wager between some lords.

Upon dealing with the trivial wager, Thomas was keen to return to the library. He felt a nagging concern for Lady Grace, despite their recent playful banter. But upon his return, the room was empty. Relief washed over him. If she had managed to leave of her own accord, she must be all right. He reassured himself that she did not require his aid.

As he roamed the hallways, attempting to redirect his attention to the night's original mission, he heard a voice that was unmistakably Gilbert's. It was muffled, but the distinct drawl was recognizable.

He retraced his steps and peered into a softly lit salon. There, comfortably lounging in an upholstered chair, was Gilbert Tulk, a close friend from his school days. As the second son of an earl, Gilbert had always had a less burdened view of life, preferring the company of a few close friends and a good book to the grandeur of balls and parties.

Thomas smiled at the sight of Gilbert holding a glass of what appeared to be his favorite brandy. Gilbert, spotting him, raised an inviting hand.

“Shying away from the festivities as usual, are we, Gilbert?” Thomas jested, recalling the many times they'd shared similar

sentiments in their youth.

Gilbert chuckled. “Word in the realm is that you took refuge in the library earlier. Pot calling the kettle black, eh?” His smirk made it clear he was having a bit too much fun at Thomas’s expense.

Taking the proffered drink from Gilbert, Thomas leaned against a table, feeling a weight being lifted off his shoulders in his friend’s company. “I’d forgotten how stifling these events can be.”

Gilbert took a sip of his drink, his gaze steady. “You’d best become reacquainted with them, given your recent... elevation.”

Thomas grumbled, “You’re well aware of the only reason for my attendance tonight.”

Nodding, Gilbert leaned in. “Did you manage to find any evidence on Lord Willson?”

Thomas hesitated before admitting, “Only Lady Caroline was in attendance tonight.”

Gilbert clicked his tongue, a light frown on his face. “That’s unfortunate. She is unlikely to be of much help.”

As they continued their conversation, a plan began to form in Thomas’s mind. It was odd, perhaps even a little underhanded, but if he truly wanted to get close to the Earl, he’d need to

employ tactics he'd never considered before. Lady Caroline, or perhaps her friend, Lady Grace, might be the key to unraveling the mystery surrounding his family's tragedy.

Thomas's mind raced with the possibilities, but they were fraught with challenges. While he knew he could not directly approach Lady Caroline without inciting gossip, a different route presented itself. Lady Grace Jennings, with her fiery spirit and connection to Lady Caroline, might just be the key to navigating the delicate waters of Society and investigating the Shampton family further.

But using Lady Grace felt duplicitous, even if it was for a noble cause. Yet, if he managed it right, his proposal might prove advantageous for her as well.

The seeds of an alliance began to form in his mind.

As he contemplated this new plan, Gilbert's voice snapped him out of his reverie.

"Oh, dear," Gilbert remarked with an arched eyebrow. His sharp eyes had always had the knack for reading Thomas like an open book. "What are you scheming in that head of yours?" he asked, a teasing note in his voice.

"Scheming?" Thomas feigned innocence, though he knew Gilbert would not be so easily misled.

"You have that particular glint in your eyes, Thomas. Something's brewing." Gilbert's voice held a mix of

amusement and curiosity. “Come now, old friend, do not keep me in suspense.”

Thomas considered for a moment, weighing the consequences of sharing his plan. “Time shall tell,” he finally said, cryptically.

Gilbert laughed, a genuine, hearty laugh, and raised his glass. “Well, I hope time doesn’t keep me waiting too long. To intriguing plans and curious glints!”

They clinked glasses, the sound echoing Thomas’s inner turmoil.

Yet, as the night wore on, an undeniable eagerness took hold of him. He needed to seek out Lady Grace once more, not only for his mission but also to decipher the unexpected pull he felt toward her.

*Odd.*

## CHAPTER 3



Taking a deep breath, Grace tried to push the confusing jumble of emotions she felt to the back of her mind. She splashed some cool water on her face from the porcelain basin, hoping to calm her flushed cheeks. The moment with the Duke had been so unexpected, so out of the ordinary, that it had left her somewhat rattled.

When had she become the sort of lady to steal away to quiet libraries with dashing dukes? She chuckled softly to herself at the thought. Never, of course. It had been pure happenstance. Or had it?

Meeting him tonight had been a surprise. All the whispered rumors about him had painted him in a very different light, but in person, he was nothing like the tales she'd heard. Sure, he exuded strength, a presence that drew the eye and commanded attention, but there had been a glint of mischief in his gaze, a playfulness that contradicted the stories.

She stared at her reflection in the ornate mirror, her fingers tracing the lace collar of her dress. "Oh, Grace," she whispered to herself, "what have you gotten yourself into?"



Shaking her head at her own folly, she thought back to his shove. It had been abrupt, yes, and she could still feel the grip of his fingers on her wrist. But she had to admit, in that instant, it had been necessary. And she could not ignore the fact that his swift action had saved them both from potential ruin.

And as she pondered the night's events, she realized she was curious about the man. About who he really was beneath the title and the whispers. Perhaps there was more to the Duke of Dawshire than met the eye.

Taking one last deep breath, she smoothed her dress and made her way back to the ballroom, wondering if fate would have them cross paths once again.

Would he indeed have stepped forward, standing by her side in defense of her honor? She hadn't the slightest idea, and the uncertainty piqued her curiosity further. Marriage was not on her list of aspirations, certainly not under duress. But the alternative... oh, the mere thought of whispers and pointing fingers sent a shiver down her spine.

Yet, gratitude bubbled within her. For his quick thinking, for his saving of her reputation, she felt she must convey her thanks. But where was he? She mused, searching the faces of the crowded ballroom. The risk of another private meeting, however, was not one she was willing to take. Not now, not ever.

Lost in thought, she failed to observe her steps and stumbled right into a towering figure near the ballroom entrance. She took a brief moment to regain her composure, and as she tilted her head upward, her eyes met his. The very same pair she'd been seeking.

“Your Grace.” Her voice was slightly breathless, a mix of surprise and embarrassment. She hastened to add, “I apologize for my carelessness.”

The ballroom’s golden glow now illuminated him entirely, allowing her to fully take in his visage. Those scars, telling tales of valor and courage, only heightened the allure of his features. A rush of warmth flooded her cheeks at this realization.

Yet, the Duke’s expression was one she was beginning to understand. That inscrutable facade barely masked an underlying amusement—it was so very... Dawshire.

His lips curled slightly at the edges as he leaned down, his voice hushed, intended for her ears only. “You and I both know how clumsy you are, Lady Grace.” The playful rebuke in his tone was unmistakable. Drawing back, his voice assumed the proper, decorous tone befitting their public setting. “Worry not, Lady Grace. It is a bustling evening, after all. Easily forgiven.”

As memories of their hushed rendezvous in the library came flooding back, a deep blush painted Grace’s cheeks. Before she could even think of steadying her rapidly beating heart, he caught her by surprise, extending his hand with a silent, inviting gesture toward the dance floor.

With a barely audible exhale, she acknowledged, “I believe I owe His Grace a thank you,” as they seamlessly merged into the sea of twirling couples.

The waltz's gentle rhythm filled the room, and her heartbeat resonated with its beat.

She could not ignore the warmth of his hand on her back, both reassuring and unsettling.

He cast her a playful look, his lips curling into a smirk. "A thank you for stopping your stumble, ungraceful fall, and potential mortification before the entire ton? You're welcome."

She met his gaze directly, feigning a huff. "You did not stop anything. You were simply in my way."

His eyebrows arched in surprise, the glint of mischief undying in his eyes. "It would not hurt to simply admit defeat for once, Lady Grace."

"*Defeat?*" She let out a light, incredulous chuckle, momentarily getting lost in their dance. "I see those years in service have left quite the impression on your vocabulary."

His reaction was almost immediate. The lightness in his gaze vanished, replaced by a steely reserve. Grace inwardly cursed herself for her thoughtlessness. She hadn't meant to tread on such personal territory.

The change was palpable. The man who moments ago had been teasing her was now distant, guarded. Grace, determined to mend the situation, cleared her throat, searching for words.

“I do appreciate your thought and gesture earlier,” she finally murmured, hoping to bridge the chasm that had inadvertently opened between them.

His sudden shift in demeanor was intriguing, and the wrinkle of concern that appeared on his brow had her heart fluttering in a way she hadn't expected.

“Are you all right?” he asked. His voice held a note of concern that she hadn't detected before.

She could not resist the urge to tease him, to lighten the mood. “Haven't broken anything, so you're spared, for now, Your Grace.”

He chuckled softly. “What a relief.”

His eyes met hers, and the vibrant green sparkled in a way she hadn't noticed earlier. The life in them gave her a glimpse of the man behind the title and stories. And that intrigued her all the more.

The scar that ran down the left side of his face, from his temple to his jaw, had her wondering what manner of injury he had survived. Grace also did not see it as others did. There was no ugliness here. She wanted to know what had happened...

With a deep breath, she dismissed the thought and said, “I should like to show my gratitude.”

In her mind, the prospect of a casual tea seemed the most appropriate way to do so. It would be an opportunity to understand the Duke better, outside the formalities of these social gatherings.

But before she could continue, he spoke, interrupting her line of thought, “I require no show of gratitude.”

She tilted her chin up in determination. “Oh, but I *do* want to.”

He hesitated, his eyes searching hers, clearly having an inward battle. Finally, he took a deep breath and said, “If you really wish to show me your gratitude, Lady Grace, then perhaps you would accept my offer to court you?”

The ballroom, with its music and chatters, faded into the background. Grace was taken aback, and she would have lost her footing had he not held her steady.

“I told you, you are clumsy,” he remarked with a slight shake of his head and a hint of amusement in his voice.

“Courtship?” The word barely escaped her lips, whispered in an incredulous tone, her mind spinning. She hadn’t seen that coming. Not in the slightest.

His gaze was distant, as if wrestling with inner turmoil when he began to speak. “I understand it is too sudden for that. Especially since we have no such interest in each other,” he said. His voice held an almost pragmatic tone to it. “But no cause for alarm, as I seek a mere arrangement and nothing

more,” he added quickly, perhaps trying to reassure her or possibly himself.

Grace’s eyebrows furrowed, the wheels in her mind turning, trying to piece together his words. “What do you mean by a mere arrangement?” she inquired.

He paused for a moment, seemingly gauging how to proceed. “Everything between us would be a facade,” he admitted. “Something convincing before Society, for reasons I’ll divulge at an appropriate time. We pretend to court, and once the purpose is served, we dissolve our courtship.”

Grace’s lips parted slightly as surprise had her shoulders tensing slightly. “And why, may I ask, do you wish to put up such a show of pretense, Your Grace?” The curiosity in her voice was audible.

He hesitated, looking momentarily at a loss. And it was in that pause that Grace became acutely aware of the many eyes in the ballroom turned toward them. The silent weight of their collective scrutiny pressed down on her. She realized then that perhaps this was not the best setting for him to disclose his motives.

Realizing she had inadvertently put him in a precarious position, she quickly said, “I’ll consider your proposal and respond to you as soon as I am able.”

“Very well,” he replied, nodding gently as they gracefully finished their waltz.

Later, the excitement and flurry of the evening weighed heavily on Grace. As she made her way to her chambers, a familiar, rhythmic clunk broke through her musings. Her heart warmed instantly. She'd recognize that sound anywhere.

Benedict Jennings, her loving, albeit sometimes overly protective, older brother, made his entrance, his ever-present walking stick leading the way.

Benedict had many peculiarities, but two of them stood out distinctly. First, the painstaking care with which he dressed, ensuring that every aspect of his appearance was impeccable. And second, his near-obsession with his collection of ornate walking canes. The very canes that, with their distinctive clunks, heralded his presence long before one would see him.

“You brought that stick into my room at this time of the night, Benedict?” Grace questioned with a hint of exasperation, one eyebrow quirked in that familiar way she had when he tested her patience.

He straightened, his chin raised just a touch too high, in that way that told her he was being insufferably proud. “I am just returning from the ball,” he replied with a slight flourish.

Grace let her gaze wander deliberately over his attire, making a show of assessing his sartorial choices for the evening. The rich green waistcoat adorned with meticulous gold embroidery did not escape her scrutiny.

With a sly smile, she met his gaze again. “I can see that.”

While Grace and their father had made an early exit from the ball, her mother and Benedict had stayed on, ensuring they relished every last dance and sip of champagne the evening had to offer. Truly, when it came to enjoying the London Season, those two were relentless.

“I see somebody caught the Duke of Dawshire’s attention,” Benedict remarked, a hint of mischief in his eyes. And as if to punctuate his statement, he gave a playful swing of his walking stick.

Grace’s eyes widened in mock horror. “Do stop swinging that stick before you break my mirror!” she exclaimed.

“Stick?” Benedict feigned offense, clutching the cane closer. “Have some respect for the cane, Grace!” His voice held a mixture of mock reprimand and genuine pride. “These are not just any canes. They are works of art, and they cost a fortune.”

She had to concede on that front. She had seen the prices and would not be surprised if one of those canes was worth more than her considerable dowry. And she knew well the lengths her brother had gone to to acquire them. From the markets of the East to the most exclusive London shops, Benedict had left no stone unturned in his quest for the perfect cane. The dragon-headed one, in particular, was a rare oriental masterpiece, and he never wasted an opportunity to flaunt it. She only wished he would be a little more subtle about it.

Grace’s warning came out with more force than she had intended. “I will snap it if it breaks my mirror, Benedict.”



Benedict, who was often jovial and rarely took matters seriously, was quick to understand her agitation. He immediately pulled back his prized possession, his eyes showing a hint of the boyish mischief he had never truly outgrown.

“So, Dawshire fancies my sister,” he mused, a teasing edge to his voice.

Grace sighed and rubbed her temples. She’d hoped to escape the topic, but evidently, the chatter hadn’t died down at the ball.

“Mother could not stop talking about it during the ride back,” Benedict continued, shaking his head. “She is already hearing wedding bells in the distance.”

“Goodness gracious, Benedict, it was just one dance!” Grace protested.

But Benedict’s eyes twinkled with mischief. “Try convincing Mother of that,” he replied with a chuckle. Before she could protest further, he continued, “And if you do not fancy Dawshire, you always have another option.”

She knew to whom he was referring even before he mentioned it. The topic of Henry’s eligibility was a favorite topic in family discussions.

“After all, this other person is family,” Benedict emphasized with a raised eyebrow.

Grace looked away, her cheeks flushed. “It is getting quite late, Benedict. I should like to sleep now,” she said, tactfully changing the subject and hoping to end their discussion.

Benedict seemed to get the hint, nodding. “Very well,” he responded, making his way to the door. But just as he was about to step out, he paused, his playful demeanor replaced with an unexpected seriousness. “Grace,” he said slowly, “do not dismiss all possibilities. A courtship, even one that doesn’t lead anywhere, might do wonders for your reputation.”

Grace was taken aback. She was aware that Benedict knew of her past and her reluctance toward marriage. He had always respected her decisions, never pushing or prodding her into anything. This sudden display of seriousness and concern was uncharacteristic of him.

After he left, Grace sat on her bed, lost in thought. His casual reference to Henry and his advice about courtship lingered in her mind. Would accepting the Duke of Dawshire’s offer of a false courtship be the answer she was looking for? A temporary solution, a diversion that would give her the respite she so desperately needed?

Resolving to find answers and get clarity from the Duke himself, she made a mental note to pen down her thoughts and write to him first thing in the morning.

## CHAPTER 4



The weight of his decision pressed heavily on his shoulders. Every moment Thomas pondered it, the more he realized the gravity of dragging Grace into his intricate web. It was not just about the charade they'd play for Society. It was about the burdens and the dangers of being associated with the Shampton name.

Thoughts ran with great force through his mind as he paced the room. Should he retract his proposal? Did he have any right to impose upon her in the first place? The more he considered it, the clearer it became that involving her was a mistake. She was innocent in all this. She deserved better than to be a pawn in his game.

Lost in his thoughts, the subtle clearing of a throat drew his attention. Hithers, his ever-faithful butler, held out a delicately sealed envelope. Recognizing the seal, a jolt of apprehension ran down Thomas's spine. It was from Lady Grace.

*Your Grace,*

*Perhaps a "chance" encounter at Hyde Park would work in our favor. After all, it is an opportunity for me to practice my*

*acting, should I find myself thrown into a theater to save my life.*

*I also have some stipulations I should like to present, if Your Grace does not mind. We would not want one party to have all of the advantage, now, would we?*

*Sincerely,*

*L. G.*

“She wishes to meet in the park,” he murmured after reading her neat script. Her ironic yet humorous style of correspondence had him chuckling. It was just like her to give stipulations, and he admired her all the more for it.

Yet, as the time drew near, his anxiousness deepened. Perhaps he should come clean, reveal his motives, and retract his offer. On the other hand, he could not deny the allure of having her by his side. It was true, she was not a fresh-faced debutante anymore, and the favor of the Duke of Dawshire could boost her prospects.

But was he being selfless or just a fool driven by his own desire?

Deep within, he recognized an uncomfortable truth: he enjoyed her company. And this baffled him and left him wrestling with his feelings.

Overwhelmed, Thomas found himself shaking his head as if the physical action could organize his jumbled thoughts. Decisions awaited him, but whatever he chose, he must focus on what he had set out to do, which was to uncover the truth about his father and brother's death.

The weight of his familial duty pressed on his consciousness, a constant reminder of the legacy he now carried. His thoughts drifted to Lady Caroline Shampton and her father's questionable dealings.

He emerged from his study, his mind set with determination, only to be greeted by a heart-wrenching sight. His mother, the once vibrant Laura Robins, the Dowager Duchess of Dawshire, stood before him. The formidable woman who had once influenced Society with grace and charm was now but a shadow of her former self.

She was lost in a world of memories, one where the tragic events that had taken her husband and eldest son had never happened. The pain of her transformation was evident in every step she took, and it was an agony for Thomas to watch. Especially on the rare occasions, like now, when she dared venture out of her secluded bedchamber.

His immediate instinct was to look for her nurse companion. Yet, the usually ever-present woman was oddly absent, heightening his concern.

A glimmer of recognition sparked in his mother's eyes, but not for him. "Neil, darling? Is that you?"

She saw not her youngest son but the ghost of her beloved husband. Such moments, when her mind was muddled with either Neil or Simon, tore at Thomas's soul. Every time she looked through him, his heart splintered anew.

With a soft sigh, he played along, offering his mother a semblance of comfort. "Yes, dear. It is Neil."

Her touch, once full of warmth, felt fragile as her fingers brushed against his cheek. "We must begin preparations for Simon's birthday. It is almost time," she murmured, lost in a time when her world was still whole.

His heart ached for her. Laura had dedicated her life to her family, loving her husband with a passion that had been envied by many. Seeing her like this, so utterly broken by the treachery that had befallen her, filled Thomas with an overpowering mix of love, pity, and fury.

"And Thomas," she continued with a chuckle, "that boy is always hiding. Have you seen him, Neil? He should not miss Simon's birthday."

The irony of her words was not lost on him. Thomas was right there, standing before her, but to his mother, he was invisible. Always absent. Always hidden. It was a painful reminder of how far she had drifted from reality.

As he guided her gently back to her chamber, Thomas's resolve hardened. He would uncover the truth about Lady Caroline's father and restore his family's honor. And perhaps, in doing so, he could find a way to heal his mother's shattered heart.

His mother's unseeing eyes twisted his heart. It was a wretched reminder that, to her, he was always in the shadows of his late father and brother. He could be standing right in front of her, yet remain invisible. It was a heart-wrenching realization that, perhaps, in her boundless grief, she had mentally discarded her remaining son.

Gently, with a tenderness that belied his strong exterior, Thomas rested his hands on her fragile shoulders. "Let me take you to your chamber, Mother," he whispered.

Even as he uttered the words, he knew she might not fully comprehend them. But it was the routine, the familiar cadence of their conversation, that he hoped would ground her.

Hearing her faint agreement, a spark of hope kindled within him. "Yes, Mother. We'll discuss Simon's ball preparations."

Just then, Miss Everton, his mother's companion, hurried into view. A clear sigh of relief, followed by a flushed expression, signaled her concern. "Your Grace, there you are. I have been searching everywhere!" she exclaimed.

Thomas took in her appearance. The tell-tale signs of exertion and the slight ruffling of her cap indicated that she had indeed been on an extensive search for the Dowager Duchess.

Handing his mother's care over to the capable hands of Miss Everton, Thomas took a moment to collect himself. His emotional encounter with his mother had drained him, and the upcoming meeting with Lady Grace loomed in his mind. An

unexpected distraction, yes, but one he realized he was increasingly eager for.

With newfound determination, he set off for his appointment, hoping that the meeting would offer a brief respite from the heavy responsibilities and emotional turmoil that had become a constant in his life.

*Heaven knows I could use the distraction.*

Upon seeing her, Thomas's heart experienced a brief but undeniable flutter.

"Lady Grace," he greeted with a smile that he was certain reached his eyes. Bending slightly, he gently pressed his lips to the back of her gloved hand, the gesture both formal and intimate.

Behind Lady Grace, her lady's maid tactfully kept her distance, ensuring that while the two had some semblance of privacy, propriety was still very much maintained.

The park was abuzz with activity, unlike his home. Families, couples, and children created a vivid scene of society in leisure. The infectious laughter of children playing their games, the soft murmur of conversations, and the occasional neigh of a horse made him yearn for something he doubted he could ever have. Peace.

With a playful smile, Grace replied, "Indeed, such fine weather in England is a rare occurrence. It would be almost criminal not to make the most of it." Her voice, while not



overtly loud, carried just enough to ensure they were not an unnoticed pair.

As Thomas extended his arm, which she gratefully accepted, they began their leisurely stroll. As they ambled, he could not help but notice the nods of acknowledgment, the curtsies, and the waves directed toward them. More specifically, toward her. There was an undeniable charm about Lady Grace that drew people to her. She was, undeniably, the belle of the park on this particular afternoon.

Witnessing the affection with which she was regarded, a thought crystallized in Thomas's mind. Perhaps, in aligning himself with Grace, he had made a choice that went beyond their initial agreement. Maybe this association would not only serve his immediate goals but also introduce a delightful and unexpected turn in his otherwise calculated life.

"Certainly, Lady Grace," he began, his voice carrying an appreciative tone as he took in the sights around them. "London does have its moments of brilliance, and it seems today is one such day."

She looked up at him, her clear eyes meeting his, teasingly adding, "And it seems the ton finds it particularly brilliant when one is in the company of the Duke of Dawshire."

He chuckled softly. "Perhaps, but I'd like to think it is your presence that has brightened the day for many."

As they strolled, Thomas could not help but marvel at the natural confidence with which Grace handled the attention. She acknowledged acquaintances with the slightest nod or a

delicate wave, responding to compliments with poise. With each step, it became clearer that the young woman by his side was no ordinary lady, but rather one who commanded respect and adoration from the society around her.

Not only could she get him through to the Shamptons, but the public association with her would work wonders on mending his reputation in Society.

The niggling voice of guilt did try to remind him of the potential selfishness of his actions. However, he swatted it away with the newfound determination that coursed through him. His decision was made. He would not rescind the offer he'd made her.

As they meandered through the park, the delicate crunch of gravel underfoot accompanying their conversation, Grace broached the subject. "I have considered your offer," she began with a careful tone. "I am willing to entertain the notion, but only if you're completely forthright about the motives behind this arrangement."

Her insistence on transparency was only reasonable, and Thomas could not find fault in her request. "That is only fair, I believe," he murmured in agreement. "I should like to make the acquaintance of a dear friend of yours," he hinted.

"Caroline?" She voiced the name with a hint of surprise that intrigued him.

"Lady Caroline Shampton, yes," he affirmed, noting the flicker of something he could not quite decipher in her eyes.

Her lips parted in an O, but there was more to it than just a simple realization. “I did not fathom that you’d developed an interest in her,” she remarked, and there was a subtle undertone of disappointment in her voice, something he chose not to acknowledge, letting her continue with her misunderstanding.

She looked at him, perplexed. “But, Your Grace, I fail to see how my involvement is required in your... interests.”

His gaze swept the surroundings before settling back on her. “I have been absent from the social scene for a good stretch,” he explained, “and in that void, whispers and gossip have, unfortunately, sullied my reputation. You, Lady Grace, are the epitome of respectability and grace. With your influence by my side, I hope to repair my image.”

She regarded him skeptically. “But being seen frequently in each other’s company would surely fan the flames of gossip. What then?”

He nodded in agreement. “Precisely my point. If we’re to spend more time together, the wagging tongues will inevitably craft tales about us. So, I propose, why not present them with a relationship that is evident? A courtship. It is the perfect ruse to keep the gossipmongers at bay. We simply give them the obvious.”

Grace took a moment, her eyes focusing intently on him as she tried to piece together the unfolding situation. “So, let me understand this. You seek to court me, essentially to polish your tarnished reputation. And during this charade, I am to serve as a conduit through which you acquaint yourself with Lady Caroline?” she asked, a tinge of incredulity in her voice.

Thomas nodded, attempting to infuse a touch of earnestness into his gaze. “True, but this arrangement also offers you benefits,” he hastened to add, hoping to balance the scales in her mind. “With my visible interest in you, you’re likely to become the center of attention, a desired presence amongst the other gentlemen. That can only enhance your marital prospects,” he reasoned.

Grace’s eyebrows shot up, and her lips pursed in a rather charming manner. “I have little interest in marriage,” she declared, her voice carrying a hint of defiance that was both surprising and captivating.

Thomas’s eyebrows rose in response. It was not a usual sentiment for a lady of the ton. But the sudden shift in her demeanor, the coolness in her gaze, signaled that she was not in the mood to discuss the topic further. He wisely chose to steer clear.

She sighed, seemingly reaching an inner compromise. “Very well. Even if I am not in search of a husband, at least this false courtship will afford me a respite from my family’s relentless matchmaking efforts,” she admitted.

Their conversation then took a turn toward the practical. How would they present their newfound relationship? They discussed the need for public appearances and the delicate balancing act they had to perform. They had to be affectionate enough to be convincing but not so much that it would be impossible to sever their ties without causing a scandal.

Grace suddenly halted, her eyes narrowing slightly as she considered her next words. “I have an additional condition,”

she said, her tone deliberate.

Thomas could not help but raise an eyebrow in intrigue. “Why does that sound slightly foreboding?”

She laughed, a genuine, light sound that seemed to dance in the breeze. “Do I sense a hint of apprehension from the Duke of Dawshire?”

He chuckled at her playful jab but waited with bated breath for her condition.

“We shall proceed with this courtship. But, the moment I decide it is over, it ends. I retain the right to draw the concluding line.”

Thomas contemplated her words, then nodded. It seemed a fair condition. “Agreed,” he conceded.

The rest of their afternoon together in the park passed with surprising ease. They shared in pleasant conversation, a few moments of genuine laughter, and mutual understanding. Departing, Thomas felt an unexpected lightness in his step. Instead of heading straight home, he chose to divert his path, paying a visit to his friend’s nearby bachelor lodgings.

Upon entering the dimly lit, book-laden study, the figure behind the massive wooden desk looked up and feigned a look of surprise. “Surely, there must be some mistake. Can I not relish in my self-imposed exile without a certain someone intruding and disturbing my cherished solitude?” Gilbert drawled, a playful glint in his eyes.

Thomas smirked, giving a dramatic sigh of exasperation. “Ah, but, my dear friend, it is my solemn duty to rescue you from your hermit-like tendencies,” he jested, easing himself into one of the plush armchairs, and accepting the crystal glass with some liquor.

Gilbert raised an eyebrow in mock consternation. “For someone who rarely pays social visits, this is quite unexpected. You might even say you’re more of a recluse than I am,” he noted, a teasing note to his voice.

Thomas swirled the liquid in his glass before taking a sip, the warmth spreading down his throat. “In fact, I come directly from a leisurely afternoon stroll in the park,” he revealed, his voice dripping with mock pride.

Gilbert’s eyes widened in feigned shock. “The park? My word! Whatever could have possessed my brooding friend to wander out in broad daylight?” His tone carried both mirth and genuine curiosity.

With a chuckle, Thomas decided it was time to reveal the truth. He relayed his recent encounter with Lady Grace and the subsequent offer he’d made her, all in the hopes of getting closer to Caroline Shampton.

Gilbert leaned back in his chair, tapping a finger against his chin thoughtfully. “A double advantage, then? Lady Grace paves your way to Lady Caroline while inadvertently aiding in mending your fractured image among the ton. A cunning strategy, indeed,” he remarked.

However, Gilbert's mirth soon shifted to a more somber note. "Yet, I must remind you, even the most innocent of deceptions, such as a faux courtship, can weave a web of unintended complications," he cautioned, his voice serious.

Thomas leaned forward, resting his glass on the table. "I did harbor a pang of guilt, believe me," he confessed. "The moment the words left my mouth, I questioned the fairness of it all. But retracting my offer seemed impossible." He looked into the depths of his drink. "I have hit an impasse with my investigation. This might be the breakthrough I need," he resolved.

There was a weight in his words signifying the importance of his mission. It was more than just social intrigue—he needed answers, and he'd do whatever it took to get them.

## CHAPTER 5



Grace's gaze drifted, the clinking of cutlery and the low murmur of dinner conversations seeming to fade away from her attention. The events of the park, especially her conversation with the Duke of Dawshire, replayed unbidden in her mind. She'd unexpectedly become a key player in a ruse most peculiar. What's more, he aimed to court her close friend Caroline through her. This realization brought forth an inexplicable tug of emotion in her chest.

The sudden familiar voice of her father snapped her back to reality.

"Grace? My dear, where have you wandered off to?" Mark Jennings, the ever-observant Earl of Folletton, remarked, his brows knitted in gentle concern.

Grace blinked, focusing on her father's warm eyes. "Oh, Father," she began, trying to mask the turmoil in her mind.

He leaned slightly across the table, his voice playful yet laced with paternal concern. "You've been absentmindedly nudging that carrot around as if willing it to dance. It is unlike you to neglect your meal. Is something amiss?"



Before Grace could even attempt a response, her mother, with her typical flair for the dramatic, interjected, “Mark! You make it sound so cryptic. The answer is simple, is it not?” Emily Jennings, ever the romantic, cast a knowing look at her daughter. “A duke, and not just any duke, has shown interest in our Grace. Which young lady would not be aflutter with nerves and excitement?”

Grace’s cheeks flushed a shade pinker. She hastened to set the record straight. “Mama, I must correct you. No one is pursuing me. Please, let us not fan flames of gossip before there is even a spark.”

Her mother gave a sly, teasing smile. “Oh, but where there’s smoke...” She left the sentence dangling, inciting curiosity and laughter around the dinner table.

Grace could only shake her head and smile, realizing that the days ahead promised to be quite eventful, indeed. Her mother’s bubbling enthusiasm had a way of taking over any room, she thought.

Emily’s eyes sparkled as she imagined lavish preparations, and with each passing second, it seemed as if her dreams were fast becoming reality—at least in her mind.

“I’d think a London wedding would be so delightful, do you not agree, Mark? The ballroom adorned with roses, the best musicians from France. Oh, it would be the talk of the Season!” Emily’s gaze had that faraway look, dreaming up a grand spectacle.

Grace sighed audibly. “Mama, you’re getting far ahead of yourself. There hasn’t even been a proposal!”

Emily tilted her head, pursing her lips. “Well, it is merely a matter of time, isn’t it? He is quite taken with you.”

Mark gently chided, “Emily, remember, we mustn’t pressure Grace. It is her life and her choices.”

Grace wished Benedict were there. He had a talent for teasing their mother just the right amount, pulling her away from her extravagant musings, grounding her with playful banter.

As the meal went on, Emily’s musings never ceased—a grand wedding march, a list of potential guests, even a debate on which tiara Grace should wear. By the end, Grace felt as if she had aged several years.

Retreating to the sanctuary of her room, she had barely begun to unpin her hair when a soft knock interrupted her. Her father’s silhouette filled her doorway, the familiar and comforting presence she needed.

Mark entered with a soft smile, concern evident in his eyes. Grace watched as he sat on her bed, the gentle fabric rustling as he did. The soft candlelight from the room’s corner glinted in his eyes, and she could see the many years of wisdom etched in the lines of his face.

She quirked an eyebrow. “Am I now known as the most loquacious of the family?” Her tone was playful, even if her heart was aflutter from the day’s events.

Her father leaned back, resting his weight on his elbow. “Well, someone has to fill your mother’s shoes when she is not around.” His smile was infectious, and Grace could not resist a giggle.

Taking a deep breath, Grace sought to assuage her father’s concerns. “It was just a simple walk, Papa. A chance meeting, really.”

The crease in Mark’s forehead deepened ever so slightly. “Yes, but the Duke of Dawshire isn’t just any man to have ‘chance meetings’ with. There’s talk, Grace. Whispers of his recent seclusion and his reasons for rejoining Society.”

Grace tilted her head, her curiosity piqued. “You sound as though you have reservations about him.”

Mark hesitated, choosing his words carefully. “Every father worries about the man who shows interest in his daughter. More so when that man is as enigmatic as the Duke.”

She reached out, placing a comforting hand on his. “I’ll be cautious, Papa. I promise. But for now, there’s nothing to be truly concerned about. It is all quite innocent.”

With a heavy sigh, Mark nodded. “Perhaps I am just being overly protective. But remember, always trust your instincts, and do not be afraid to share any doubts or concerns.”

“I will be, Father.” She took hold of his hand and gave it a reassuring squeeze, trying to staunch her guilt over the whole

false arrangement. “Trust Mama to turn a simple courtship into the event of the Season,” she quipped, looking into his eyes with fondness.

Mark let out a hearty chuckle, shaking his head. “Oh, your mother and her dreams. Bless her heart, she is just eager to see you well-settled.”

Grace could not help but join in the laughter, thinking about how her mother could make mountains out of molehills. “She is planning many steps ahead, isn’t she?”

“Always.” Mark grinned. “I would swear she has got the entire Season planned in that little book of hers.”

Their shared humor was a lovely interlude, and they reveled in it before the weight of reality settled in once more.

Mark rose from his seat, ruffling Grace’s hair affectionately. “Remember, you always have our support, no matter what the gossips say.”

Grace nodded, her smile rueful. “Goodnight, Papa.”

“Goodnight, my dear,” he replied, disappearing into the hallway.

The noise on Bond Street the following day was the opposite of the tranquility of last night. Grace walked arm-in-arm with Caroline, weaving their way through throngs of shoppers and stopping occasionally to peek into shop windows.

Caroline, with her ever-vigilant eye on the societal pulse, was the first to bring up the elephant in the room. “You know,” she began with a casual tone, flipping through a catalog of the latest fashions, “I have overheard more than a few whispers about you and the Duke of Dawshire.”

Grace rolled her eyes playfully. “Oh, you and your eavesdropping!”

Caroline gave a mock gasp of indignation. “It is not eavesdropping if they’re practically shouting it from the rooftops, dear.”

Grace sighed, taking a deep breath. “Caroline, what do you truly think of the Duke?”

Caroline paused, her fingers resting on a particularly intricate sketch of a dress. She looked up, mischief sparkling in her eyes. “If you’re asking whether he’d look dashing waiting for you at the altar, then yes.”

Grace gave her a light shove, laughing. “That’s not what I meant!”

But Caroline, ever the tease, continued with a sly grin, “And if he is as taken with you as the rumors suggest, I do not think it’ll be long before he proposes.”

Nothing was public yet, but everyone seemed to have formed an opinion that the Duke was courting Grace after one dance

and a promenade and that he would most certainly marry her. They had already decided her fate. Typical.

Grace cleared her throat. “It was just one dance,” she emphasized, the delicate lace of her glove crinkling as she clutched a dress.

Caroline wore a sly grin. “And a walk in the park,” she chimed in.

“Caroline!” Grace exclaimed. With a best friend like Caroline, who needed town criers?

Her friend’s bright, sparkling eyes twinkled with mischief.

“Oh, very well,” Caroline said, her hands raised in playful surrender. Her voice then took on a tone of seriousness. “The Duke, from what little I have seen and heard, seems respectable. Perhaps a little intimidating like those wild tales suggest, but mostly respectable.”

Grace’s mind wandered to the Duke’s scars. His face still had a charm to it despite those scars, and her cheeks warmed at the thought. Why, of all times, did she have to blush now?

Caroline, ever the observant one, caught the change in her demeanor instantly. “Why do I feel as though you’re hiding something?” she teased. Her eyes, sharp and discerning, bored into Grace’s.

Feigning surprise, Grace responded, “More?”

Caroline leaned in closer, the scent of roses emanating from her. “That flush on your cheeks tells me everything,” she murmured with a sly grin.

Shocked and slightly flustered, Grace exclaimed, “Goodness gracious, Caroline!” causing a few heads to turn in their direction.

Caroline gave a mock gasp of horror. “You are too loud,” she chided playfully.

“You’d have everyone knowing in no time,” Grace jested, looking at Caroline, her eyes filled with that familiar glint of playful interrogation. Trying to put her off the scent, she added, “There’s nothing of the sort you’re hinting at, believe me.” However, she could not help the slight tremor in her voice.

But Caroline tilted her head slightly, her brows arched with lingering doubt. “Are you quite sure?”

Grace, feeling cornered, changed her approach. She found herself thinking of how Caroline was the object of the Duke’s affections. The very idea made her stomach turn uncomfortably, but why? She certainly did not want to see him with a wounded heart. But then, the Duke always carried himself with such confidence. He hardly seemed the type to be ensnared by love’s often cruel games.

Yet, as Grace well knew, love had its own whimsical logic. And so, in an attempt to gauge her friend’s sentiments, she

inquired, “What do you truly think of the Duke, Caroline? As a man, not just a peer of the realm.”

Caroline’s gaze drifted for a moment, searching for the right words. “I barely know him, Grace. But from what I have seen, he’d be a good match for you.”

Grace sighed inwardly. This was not quite the insight she’d hoped for, and she was not entirely sure if it allayed or fueled her concerns. She had expected—hoped?—for Caroline to express a smidgen of fondness for the Duke of Dawshire. However, her response felt neutral, detached.

This realization sparked a strange sense of relief within Grace. Why did she feel this way? It was all so very perplexing.

She blinked, lost momentarily in the maze of her emotions. “Odd,” she murmured, her voice barely above a whisper.



## CHAPTER 6



“*L*ord Folletton,” Thomas greeted with a cordial nod while the Earl bowed. He was at the Folletton residence to declare his *intention* to court Grace.

“Please, do be seated, Your Grace.” Lord Folletton motioned to a chair. “To what do we owe this call?”

“I have come to formally express my interest in courting Lady Grace,” Thomas responded after sitting, getting straight to the point.

The Earl took a moment to study Thomas closely before speaking. “Well, that is certainly unexpected,” he remarked, his eyebrow raised slightly in evident surprise.

Thomas had been mentally preparing for a variety of reactions, but Lord Folletton’s response was far from what he had anticipated. This was Grace’s first suitor in a very long time, after all, and a duke at that. Surely, the man should be all over himself with excitement. Yet, the lines on Lord Folletton’s face betrayed a clear sense of unease.

Despite the myriad rumors and whispers that circulated about him, Thomas maintained a steady gaze. He was well aware of Society's judgment. A tragic event years ago had stained his reputation, and whispers of his involvement had never quite faded.

Clearing his throat, Thomas said, "Why, with a daughter as enchanting as Lady Grace, I should think this utterly expected, Lord Folletton." His voice was firm, but there was hope and sincerity in it.

Lord Folletton took a deep breath, momentarily softening as he thought of his daughter. "Oh, definitely. My Grace is most enchanting, indeed." His tone bore the undeniable warmth of paternal pride. But soon, the initial caution returned. "What I meant to say is that you are just returning into Society. I did not think courtship would be your... priority, at the moment."

The final words carried concern, the father's protective instinct, perhaps, shining through.

"You are right. It was not," Thomas said, his voice steady and confident.

Lord Folletton, a man of experience and discernment, clearly hadn't anticipated such a direct admission.

But then, Thomas continued, softening slightly, "Until I made your daughter's acquaintance."

Lord Folletton let out a wry smile. "She does leave an impression wherever she goes, that child." His words were

spoken fondly, a hint of amusement hiding behind the proud glint in his eyes.

Taking the opportunity to express himself, Thomas ventured, “She certainly has with me. And we would like your blessing in our courtship.” He raised the crystal glass he’d been handed earlier to his lips, letting the brandy calm his nerves, all while seeming at ease in the study.

The Earl, however, was not as composed. The burden of the decision before him was clear in the furrow of his brow. His fingers drummed lightly on the armrest of his chair, betraying his inner unrest.

After what seemed like an eternity, he finally voiced his thoughts. “Well, if this is what my daughter wants, then I shall grant it.” The statement, though layered with hesitation, carried the finality of a decision made.

Thomas’s keen eyes observed the man before him. He’d navigated the treacherous waters of the *beau monde* long enough to recognize the subtle signs—the slight tightening of the Earl’s jaw, the wary glint in his eyes.

It was evident Lord Folletton had reservations about him, fueled by the circulating rumors. Yet, the status Thomas held as a duke, coupled with the lack of undeniable evidence against him, limited the man’s options. A direct refusal could risk the Earl being branded as a baseless gossipmonger in Society’s unforgiving circles.

\* \* \*

After his meeting with Lord Folletton, Thomas was in the front hall, preparing to leave, when the light rustle of silk drew his attention. Grace, resplendent in a frock of soft blue, entered, a clear look of surprise momentarily flitting across her face upon seeing him.

“Your father’s given us his blessing,” Thomas shared, his voice filled with a touch of pride as they walked side by side into the more private setting of the drawing room.

Grace took a moment, her fingers lightly brushing the back of a nearby chaise. “That is one bridge crossed,” she murmured.

Thomas tilted his head slightly, examining her. “If I did not know better, I’d say you sound nervous, Lady Grace,” he said with a playful lilt in his voice, relishing the opportunity to tease her just a little. For in the world they inhabited, courting, especially their kind, was a dance of words, looks, and gestures.

Grace’s eyes met his squarely, a spark of defiance clear. “And why would I be?”

Thomas chuckled lightly. “I have many talents, but I am afraid mind reading isn’t one of them.”

She stepped closer, an eyebrow raised elegantly. “Pray tell, what are those talents you speak of, Your Grace?” Her voice held a hint of playful challenge. “I should think mind reading is among them, since you’ve already concluded I am nervous.”

He smiled, feeling the corners of his eyes crinkling ever so slightly. “I merely made an observation, not a conclusion.”

She nodded. “That doesn’t answer my question.”

He could not contain the smile that tugged at the corners of his lips. Conversations with her were always delightful.

“With your father’s blessing now, we shall begin soon,” he added, his tone casual.

She blinked at him, momentarily caught off guard. “Begin?” Her words were filled with genuine surprise, her eyes widening slightly.

His own gaze was steady as he explained, “Begin our arrangement and make our first public appearance together at the next ball.”

Relief was evident in her posture, but Thomas detected a flicker of something else—perhaps disappointment?

“What else would we begin, Lady Grace?” he queried, feigning innocence, delighting in their playful exchange.

Grace gathered her composure quickly, her voice smooth. “What else would we?” A playful yet mysterious smile played on her lips, further captivating him.

Ah, that enchanting smile, he mused. It was truly something to behold.

Thomas strode into his drawing room, pleasantly surprised to find Gilbert lounging in one of the chairs. Considering their meeting at Gilbert's residence the previous day, this was quite the twist.

"Is this your way of returning the favor for interrupting your solitude yesterday?" Thomas inquired, raising an eyebrow in mock accusation as he poured two drinks.

Gilbert accepted the glass with a chuckle. "It is only fair now, isn't it?" His light tone mirrored the easy camaraderie the two shared.

Thomas swirled his drink, a small smile playing on his lips. "As a matter of fact, I just made another social call," he announced, making himself comfortable opposite his friend.

One of Gilbert's brows quirked up in intrigue. "Do tell."

Taking a sip of his drink, Thomas replied, "I declared my intentions to court Lady Grace to Lord Folletton." He paused, recalling the Earl's reaction. It had been quite clear how the man felt about the whole matter, especially considering the rumors about Thomas. "I could tell he was not pleased, even if he hid it well."

Gilbert nodded thoughtfully. "I have heard the whispers about you. But you know how Society can be—always looking for a new scandal to talk about."

Thomas sighed, placing his glass down. “But that is the least of my troubles.”

His friend leaned forward, a spark of mischief in his eyes. “Play your cards right, and it shan’t be long before his daughter rectifies that, after all,” Gilbert put in with a grin.

“I appreciate your optimism, but I need more than just my name cleared,” Thomas said, that familiar frustration nudging his insides. “I simply want progress in my investigation.”

His determination was clear. The past still haunted him, and Thomas was resolute in seeking out the truth, especially about Lord Willson.

## CHAPTER 7



“It is no wonder you did not want to divulge any information about him. You were secretly courting even then!” Tabitha exclaimed, her eyes twinkling with excitement.

They were sitting in the exquisitely decorated parlor of her house, sipping on fragrant tea.

Grace glanced around the room, noting the familiar faces of Caroline, and a handful of their mutual friends. They had this delightful ritual where they would alternate hosting their little gatherings. Today, surrounded by Tabitha’s pale pink draperies and fine china, was her dear friend’s turn.

As she nibbled on a buttery scone, Grace acknowledged the truth in their tradition: their so-called needlework sessions or tea gatherings were primarily gossip meetings.

However, today was different. She was the topic of discussion, and it made her slightly uncomfortable. She would typically be the one revealing intriguing tales or providing sage advice. Still, her recent courtship with the Duke of Dawshire had set tongues wagging, and she was now the center of the chatter.



“Oh, do tell us about his war stories, Lady Grace. As your suitor, I am certain he must have shared some,” chimed in Rachel Wood, Tabitha’s vibrant cousin. She leaned forward, a glint of genuine curiosity in her eyes.

Across the room, a lady in a lavender bonnet murmured, “I must confess, the courtship was rather quick and took us all by surprise.”

A few nods of agreement followed.

Grace took a deep breath, trying to appear indifferent, even as she felt a tinge of unease. Their arrangement, a courtship purely in name, was a secret she desperately wished to keep hidden. She sipped her tea, searching for the right words, hoping to navigate the curious stares and prying questions.

“Why, he was simply too besotted to waste any time declaring his interest and making her publicly his,” Lady Whittington replied, her voice dripping with romantic sentiment, as she fluttered her fan in mock distress. She then turned to Grace, her face glowing with genuine warmth. “My felicitations, dear.”

Caroline, always with an eye for the heart of the matter, leaned close, her bonnet barely grazing Grace’s ear. “I *knew* where his interest in you was leading from the start,” she whispered, her voice holding a hint of mischief.

Tabitha’s melodious laughter rang out, pulling Grace from her musings. “As much as we are all happy for you, Grace, it is quite a blow that our favorite war hero is off the market as quickly as he’d rejoined it,” she quipped, causing the room to

erupt into cheerful laughter. “Quite impressive the speed with which you snagged him, too,” she added, her playful smile infectious.

Grace joined in, her laughter light and carefree, though just beneath the surface, her emotions told a different story.

The truth was, as the laughter continued around her, she felt a pang deep within her. Nothing about this situation was genuine. And for reasons she could not fully comprehend, this realization brought a twinge of sadness.

She caught Caroline’s sympathetic gaze across the room. Grace remembered all too well that the Duke of Dawshire’s true interest lay with Caroline. She was merely a bridge connecting him to her friend.

This thought brought a bitter taste to her mouth. She was meant to be working toward a good match, ensuring a secure future, and rejoicing for Caroline’s newfound attention from the Duke. Yet, instead, she was overwhelmed with feelings she could not, and perhaps should not, entertain.

“Dawshire Secret is all but a rumor, then, Lady Grace?” Miss Montgomery suddenly asked, her eyes gleaming with an unmistakable hint of mischief.

Grace felt her heart race a bit faster. Dawshire Secret? This was news to her, and she was rarely ever unaware of the happenings in Society.

Before she could respond, Tabitha, ever the protective hostess, swiftly intervened. “Oh, we all do not believe that. And we know it is not true, do we not, Barbara?” She sent a pointed look toward Miss Montgomery, her tone half-playful, half-warning.

Miss Montgomery, caught in the spotlight, replied with a somewhat flustered, “Oh, yes, yes. Never mind me, Lady Grace.” She took a moment to sip her tea. “We know it isn’t true at all. It could not possibly be,” she mumbled, her voice lower.

Grace, her curiosity piqued more than ever, tried to discreetly scan the room. Dawshire Secret? The room, lively a moment ago, was now filled with hushed whispers and quick glances exchanged among the gathered ladies. Her mind instantly wandered back to that ballroom exchange she’d had with Henry. His words, cryptic at that time, seemed to hold more meaning now.

Thomas had shared about his reputation being tarnished due to his absence, but now, Grace was not entirely convinced. She felt a prickling sensation at the back of her neck. There seemed to be something the Duke was not sharing with her.

It irked Grace to think she had never come across this piece of on-dit, especially when she was always at the center of any new tale. How, then, had this eluded her?

Nevertheless, she schooled her expression, expertly hiding the confusion swirling within her. Giving the ladies a placating smile, she played the part of a woman who was privy to Society’s every secret, even if, at the moment, she felt quite the opposite.

“Such tales, always spinning,” she remarked airily. Then, she added with a chuckle, “But truly, one hears so many things these days, right?”

Grace hoped her nonchalance would throw the ladies off the scent of her genuine bewilderment.

Just as the topic was about to shift, a subtle disturbance arose from the entrance. The stately butler, Jenkins, stepped into the room with a straight posture, indicating the presence of someone significant.

“The Duke of Dawshire here for Lady Grace, Miss Langley,” Jenkins intoned, addressing Tabitha.

A wave of excited murmurs and anticipating glances fluttered through the room. The regal Duke of Dawshire here? And for Grace? The very topic of their recent discussions now stood at the threshold, turning the afternoon tea into an unexpected spectacle.

Once the initial excitement had subsided, and the ladies regained some semblance of composure, the Duke was led into the drawing room. With an apologetic smile, he explained, “I was at your house, Lady Grace, but they told me you were here.”

Grace raised an eyebrow, genuinely surprised. “And you followed?”

He inclined his head, a half-smile playing on his lips. “I had hoped to take you out riding today.”

One by one, Grace presented the ladies to the Duke, watching with a mix of amusement as they preened and curtsied, trying their best to impress. But her gaze always returned to Caroline, who was sitting with quiet elegance. Grace saved her introduction for last, not only because of their strategy but because she knew Caroline’s charm would be a stark contrast to the other introductions.

When the Duke’s eyes finally met Caroline’s, Grace noted his lingering gaze, the way he took a moment longer to move on. However, what truly struck her was Caroline’s reaction. Instead of the expected flutter or the shy demureness, Caroline responded with an aloof nod, seemingly impervious to the Duke’s evident admiration.

Maybe because, right now, she perceived him as nothing but her friend’s suitor. That lens through which she saw him was certainly not romantic, but rather dutiful. Over time, her perceptions would shift, and she would see him for the nobleman he truly was.

Grace attempted to squash the budding feelings that threatened to rise in her chest. The sting of guilt was not far behind.

She took a steadying breath, reminding herself of the role she had committed to play. She was facilitating a match, ensuring the happiness of her dear friend. With that goal in mind, she offered her friends a bright smile, one that did not quite reach her eyes, as she bid them farewell. The room seemed to echo their laughter and chatter long after they’d departed.

“I see you cannot keep away for long,” she jested, her voice light as the Duke handed her into his phaeton. She was endeavoring to keep the atmosphere between them light.

His eyes sparkled with mischief. “Oh, but where will you find occupation and entertainment if I stay away?” he retorted, his tone teasing.

Grace laughed, her spirits momentarily lifted. “I believe we just left my occupation and entertainment back there.”

“Those ladies could never compare to me, Lady Grace, and you are quite aware of it,” he remarked.

She glanced at him, her heart skipping a beat as she met his stare. There was something dark, something enigmatic in his eyes, those deep pools of green that seemed to see right through her. A shiver of anticipation raced down her spine, and she was momentarily lost, ensnared by the intensity of his gaze.

Their quiet bubble was soon disrupted when they entered the park, and Grace’s attention was drawn to a familiar face. With a burst of genuine pleasure, she recognized her cousin Henry. Walking toward him, she warmly greeted him. “Henry! What a pleasant surprise!”

She introduced her cousin to the Duke, but as they exchanged pleasantries, Grace keenly noticed the underlying current. Even though Henry attempted to maintain a facade of politeness, his eyes lacked the usual warmth when meeting someone introduced by Grace. The lines in his face were taut,

and his jaw was set in a way that spoke volumes to anyone who knew him well.

Desperate to ease the palpable tension, the Duke initiated light banter, commenting on the weather and the beauty of the park, but Henry responded with only monosyllabic answers.

The stiffness in the air was undeniable, yet the Duke seemed completely unperturbed by it.

Grace bit her lip, feeling caught in the middle of this unspoken tension. While she understood the root of her cousin's cold demeanor toward the Duke, she made a conscious choice to focus on the present moment.

"I shall bid you both a pleasant rest of the afternoon, then," Henry said, his tone polite but with a hint of distance, before giving a curt nod and making his exit.

The Duke squinted, following Henry's retreat with an amused smirk. "Such sense of humor," he mused, his voice dripping with light sarcasm.

Grace quickly came to her cousin's defense. "Oh, Henry's usually quite the charmer," she interjected, though her voice betrayed a hint of uncertainty. Perhaps she was trying to convince herself as much as she was trying to lighten the mood.

"You have quite the definition of charming, Lady Grace," the Duke drawled, the corners of his lips upturned in a teasing smirk.

Her response was an involuntary laugh. “I believe you may address me as Grace now.”

He smiled. “Only if you will return the courtesy, My Lady.”

“Certainly,” she murmured.

The rest of their promenade was filled with playful retorts and shared laughter. Grace found immense entertainment and comfort in it despite the small voice in the recesses of her mind telling her that this was all for Caroline. So engrossed was she in their exchange that the murmurs and stolen glances of onlookers faded into the background, inconsequential.

Yet, as the day’s sun began to sink, casting long shadows, it still had one more surprise in store for Grace.

Now back in her parents’ house, as she descended the grand staircase, the gentle hum of conversation reached her ears. Walking into the dining room, her eyes widened in surprise to find Henry seated at the table, looking as if he belonged there all along.

There was displeasure etched into every plane of his face as he regarded her.

*What now?*



## CHAPTER 8



“*W*hat a lovely surprise,” Grace said, endeavoring to smile as Henry stood to escort her to her chair. “And you did not mention you’ll be here, earlier at the park,” she chided playfully.

“Ah, but I would have ruined the surprise, then,” he replied, his jovial manner returning. She much preferred it to the stoic demeanor she had witnessed earlier.

As the meal progressed, the conversation flowed naturally. Henry, with his animated tales and witty remarks, was the undeniable center of attention. However, Grace, not one to be outdone, ensured she contributed her fair share of engaging anecdotes, eliciting chuckles and nods of agreement from around the table. The evening was turning out to be far more delightful than she’d anticipated.

Once the main course had been cleared and the port decanted, Grace found herself drawn to the large French doors that led to the balcony. The moon, in all its silver splendor, hung low in the sky, casting a serene glow over the estate. She stepped out, momentarily escaping the hum of reality, to lose herself in the celestial beauty.

The soft sound of footsteps behind her signaled Henry's approach. There was a brief pause before he began, "I believe I should apologize for my manners earlier at the park, Grace." He sighed softly, looking somewhat abashed. "I'd had a lot on my mind," he admitted, glancing sidelong at her.

Grace decided to put him at ease. "What manners?" she teased, pretending as if she hadn't noticed anything amiss.

The corners of Henry's mouth quirked upward in gratitude for her tact.

"Is everything all right, though?" Despite her playful facade, concern colored her voice. After all, Henry was a part of her family, and she could not stand to see him troubled.

"Oh, quite all right. Sometimes, it just gets a little too much for one man," Henry admitted, rubbing the back of his neck with an air of vulnerability that was seldom seen.

"Then perhaps it is time for that man to share his burden with a wife," Grace teased, a playful lilt in her voice.

She was instantly taken aback by her own forwardness, feeling a slight blush creep onto her cheeks. She'd certainly not intended to venture into such territory with her remark.

Henry paused, regarding her intently. His eyes, usually so readable, were now masked with a quiet contemplation. "You think?" he finally inquired, his voice carrying a hint of genuine curiosity.

“Why, of course,” Grace replied hastily, her laughter a touch too spirited as she sought to steer their conversation back into safer waters.

While she anticipated some further probing into her involvement with the Duke of Dawshire or perhaps a jest regarding their rapidly developing courtship, Henry surprised her by staying notably silent on the matter.

Soon, the drawing room began to empty. Henry and Benedict discussed plans for the evening before deciding on a quick jaunt to their gentlemen’s club. Their laughter echoed down the hallway.

Emily, in her typical dramatic fashion, yawned exaggeratedly. “I absolutely must retire. I have a most crucial shopping expedition in the morning!” She approached her husband, Mark, who looked at her with amusement dancing in his eyes. “Goodnight, darling,” she trilled.

His fond eye roll was the only response to her melodramatic departure.

Soon, the room was quiet, save for the soft crackling of the fireplace and the measured ticks of the grand clock.

Lord Folletton turned his gaze toward Grace. “I trust you had an enjoyable ride with the Duke?” he asked, his voice steady but his eyes searching her face for more than just a simple answer.

“Quite an enjoyable one,” Grace replied, her lips curving upward as a flurry of memories from the ride raced through her mind, each one reminding her of the unexpected rapport she’d found with the Duke.

Her father leaned back in his chair, his fingers tented, and regarded her for a moment. “On the subject of rides,” he began in a casual tone, though Grace could tell he had been waiting to broach this topic. “I overheard Henry and your mother discussing plans for an outing on horseback tomorrow morning. I am certain you would enjoy accompanying them,” he suggested, his gaze steady on hers.

“Oh, I did not realize,” Grace responded, slightly taken aback.

She tried to recall if she had missed any such discussion earlier but drew a blank. The prospect of a family ride was always a delight, and the fact that it had been kept from her was surprising.

She cast a puzzled look at her father, her brows furrowing just a touch. This was, indeed, news to her.

“Your cousin is a most pleasant gentleman, I must say,” her father continued, his voice carrying genuine admiration. As he sipped his brandy, the room was filled with a comfortable silence, the crackling fire in the hearth the only sound.

Grace tilted her head thoughtfully, studying her father. His face wore a fond expression, one she’d seen countless times when he spoke of things he genuinely believed in. But as he continued, there was a subtle shift in his tone that did not escape her attention.

“Henry has a way with people, you know. There’s an earnestness about him that’s quite endearing.”

Grace nodded in agreement. She had always been fond of Henry, but as her father went on, it became increasingly clear that his praises weren’t simply observations. It felt more like he was presenting a case, subtly hinting at what he deemed a favorable match for her.

Was he truly trying to steer her attention away from the Duke and toward Henry? It struck her as an odd endeavor. After all, Thomas was a duke, a most eligible bachelor, and she had felt a palpable connection with him.

Her mind flitted back to the whispers she’d overheard earlier. Barbara’s words echoed in her head, and the way Tabitha had hurriedly tried to stifle the topic as if it were something that should not see the light of day. She felt an icy grip of curiosity tightening its hold on her.

What was this Dawshire Secret that seemed to loom ominously in hushed conversations? Could her father be privy to it? Did he know something about the Duke that she did not? Was that why he now seemed intent on redirecting her affections?

As she mulled over these thoughts, another more troubling one emerged, a quiet whisper in the recesses of her mind.

*What is Thomas keeping from you?*

She bit her lip, deep in thought, realizing that she was surrounded by more questions than answers. The intrigue was thickening, and she was determined to unveil the truth. Whatever it might be.

Cold apprehension came over her at these intertwining and quite perplexing thoughts.

Tonight was Grace and Thomas's first appearance together in a formal gathering. As the large, ornate ballroom doors opened, Grace could feel the numerous eyes turning to gaze at them. The soft rustle of fabrics, the subtle shift in conversations, and the not-so-discreet whispers were all attestations of their grand entrance. Thomas, with his usual air of confidence, escorted her inside.

From the corner of her eye, she caught her mother's approving nod and beaming smile. Her heart swelled with pride, but, unexpectedly, a flurry of nerves churned in her belly. It was as though she was making her Society debut all over again. It was not the attention, for she was used to that. It was the man at her side, the Duke of Dawshire, whose presence seemed to have a peculiar effect on her composure.

His nearness and his gentle but firm hold on her arm were setting her nerves aflutter. It was as if she was seeing the world through a fresh set of eyes, where everything was a little more vibrant, a little more exciting. The sensation of being like a schoolgirl, giddy and unsure, coursed through her veins.

Seeking a diversion, and perhaps to ease the rapid beating of her heart, she cast her gaze to the dance floor, where couples were forming for the quadrille.

“Shall we?” she hinted, recalling their earlier waltz.

Thomas chuckled, the sound deep and warm. “After stepping on my feet throughout the waltz, you’re still not satisfied?” he teased, raising an eyebrow.

She raised her chin defiantly. “Oh, I possess more skill than that,” she countered with a playful smirk, challenging him to another round of dance and delight.

Grace was, in fact, an excellent dancer. Ever since she had been a child, the sway of music had spoken to her very soul, and she’d honed her skills under the watchful eyes of many a governess and dance master. Twirling, stepping, and gliding had become as natural to her as breathing.

“Then why do my feet ache?” Thomas teased, raising a brow, the glint in his eyes revealing the jest behind the words.

Grace, never one to back down from banter, replied with feigned innocence, “Have you thought of old age?”

He looked momentarily taken aback, then his face broke into a smile, and something between a snort and a slight chuckle escaped him. The genuine sound of his amusement caused a delightful warmth to blossom in Grace’s chest and a light flutter in her stomach. She found herself drawn in even more.

Tugging her gently by the hand, and with an exaggerated sigh, Thomas led her onto the dance floor. As they settled into position, Grace could not help but notice Henry paired with Rachel Wood. They exchanged brief nods of acknowledgment.

A few paces away, Caroline, radiant in her dress, was engaged in a lively conversation with a gentleman Grace did not immediately recognize, but who seemed quite enthralled by her friend's charm. Both couples, along with them, were readying themselves to be part of the quadrille.

During their dance, as the steps dictated, Grace found herself momentarily paired with Henry, while Caroline paired with Thomas. The dance steps were nothing new to her, but this particular switch felt oddly serendipitous. Quite convenient, she mused to herself.

Henry attempted to regale her with a recent anecdote. His voice was animated, and he was clearly enjoying the retelling of his tale, but Grace found herself struggling to focus on his words. Her attention was pulled, like a magnet, to Thomas and Caroline.

Through the sea of whirling dancers, Grace noticed Thomas leaning in slightly, saying something to Caroline, who in turn offered a demure smile. That smile was the kind Caroline reserved for genuinely charming comments, and Grace could not help but note how the soft candlelight seemed to emphasize the bloom in Caroline's cheeks.

Had it deepened?

A familiar pang of something she did not quite want to label as jealousy pinched Grace. She tried to push the feeling away, but her throat constricted, making it momentarily difficult to breathe.



“Are you all right?” Henry’s concerned voice broke through her thoughts. His brow was furrowed, and his eyes sought hers for an answer.

But just as she tried to form a coherent response, the music directed them back to their original partners. The shift was fluid, and soon enough, Grace found herself encircled in the familiar, comforting embrace of the Duke of Dawshire, while Caroline glided back to Henry’s side.

“You did not tell me what a pleasant friend you had, Grace,” Thomas remarked, an appreciative note in his voice.

Grace’s lips tightened imperceptibly. Of all the things she’d wished to hear, this was not one of them. Why had she ever thought it a good idea to join the quadrille?

“She has always been a dear friend,” she replied with a lightness she did not feel.

He looked at her, a hint of amusement playing on his features, but it did not reach his eyes. Instead, what she saw there was a deeper scrutiny, something probing and concerned. “You look unwell,” he remarked.

Grace’s heart skipped a beat. Did he genuinely care? Could he see past her facade? She met his gaze, trying to find sincerity, and when she did, a tiny part of her felt relieved. She clung to that feeling of relief like a drowning person to a rope.

“I am all right,” she said, offering him a smile that was meant to be reassuring, but even to her, it felt hollow.

Thomas, however, did not look convinced. There was a question in his eyes, a silent offer to share what was troubling her. But she was not ready. If ever.

The evening's festivities continued with laughter, music, and endless rounds of dances. Yet, all of it seemed distant and muted to Grace. She went through the motions, smiled when expected, and responded to the countless admirers and acquaintances who approached her, but her thoughts were elsewhere.

When the evening finally wound down and it was time to depart, a profound sense of relief washed over her. But with that relief came a pressing weight of doubt and questioning.

What was she getting herself into? Would there not be repercussions for deceiving those she held dearest?

## CHAPTER 9



Grace descended the grand staircase only to be greeted by the melodious hum of chattering ladies in the conservatory. The scent of fresh blossoms mingled with the rich aroma of tea, but the atmosphere was thick with more than just the fragrant blend. There was an unmistakable air of anticipation.

Upon entering, all conversation seemed to momentarily hush before her mother exclaimed, “There she is, the lady of the hour!”

Grace tried to smile graciously, but the attention was too much to bear.

The Marchioness of Edenton, an elderly matron with a penchant for mischief, winked at her over her teacup. “Perhaps it is time we begin practicing with *Your Grace*,” she said, her voice dripping with playful suggestion.

Lady Folletton, ever the gracious hostess, laughed, her eyes sparkling with unbridled joy. “Indeed,” she concurred, gently patting Grace’s arm as if she were a prize mare on display.

Grace, usually composed and confident, felt a twinge of discomfort. It felt almost as if she was on display at a market.

Mrs. Hopkins, always one to steer conversations her way, piped up eagerly, “Oh, I must introduce my dear Edith to you, Lady Grace. You’re both around the same age, and I have no doubt you’ll become fast friends.”

Not to be outdone, Lady Whitford and Mrs. Branson, too, hurriedly extolled the virtues of their respective daughters, expressing their eagerness for introductions.

Mrs. Langley, however, had the advantage, and she knew it. “Oh, my Tabitha is already quite close with Grace,” she announced, drawing herself up to her full height, a proud smile curling her lips. “As a matter of fact,” she added, a touch smugly, “Tabitha had her over for tea just a few days ago.”

Grace saw the fleeting expressions of envy and regret on some of the matrons’ faces. Yes, Thomas might have had whispers surrounding him, his scars might make certain ladies of the ton wary, but the weight of his title, that of the Duke of Dawshire, could not be denied. Society, with its fickle heart and discerning eye, often chose to focus solely on that which glittered the brightest. And in this case, it was the allure of the title.

Once the ladies had departed, and the sounds of carriage wheels faded into the distance, the weight of the afternoon’s interactions began to press down on Grace. She felt the frustration bubbling within her, unable to remain silent on the matter any longer.

“Mama,” she began, her voice measured and even, choosing her words with care, “do you not think it is best if we do not give Society anything more to talk about?”

Lady Folletton, who was busy rearranging the tea service, looked up at her. The familiar blue eyes, so much like Grace’s own, met hers with a hint of distraction. “What are you talking about, dear?”

Grace took a deep breath. “The Duke and I are in the early stages of our relationship. Is it wise to be discussing marriage, especially with the matrons?” There was a plea in her eyes, an unspoken hope that her mother might understand.

Lady Folletton paused, her hands stilling on the tea set. She looked at her daughter with an amused tilt of her head. “Why, Grace, Society is like a mill. Whether we provide the grain or not, it will keep grinding. Might as well give them quality wheat to chew on, do you not think?”

“But, Mama, this isn’t a game,” Grace pleaded, her voice strained. “I do not agree with fueling the flames of gossip.”

Lady Folletton sighed dramatically, her hands fluttering to her chest. “Oh, whatever has come over you, child? It used to be very entertaining, but now...” Her gaze turned pointed. “You are on the brink of being engaged to a *duke!* Do you have any idea how many young women would give anything to be in your shoes? You’ve been unattached for quite a while, darling. This is a splendid match.”

A wave of guilt crashed over Grace, making her stomach churn. She knew her mother meant well, but the expectations

felt heavier than ever.

The charade with Thomas was becoming harder to bear, and she did not think she would grow exhausted this early in their agreement. There would most certainly be no marriage as the ton was expecting. Not that Grace wanted it.

“Not every courtship results in marriage, Mother,” she found herself saying, her voice holding a note of finality.

But as she watched her mother’s face shift from confusion to hurt, Grace realized that perhaps a direct approach was best.

Hesitating only for a moment, she forged on, “Consider the gossip, Mother. The wagging tongues. Imagine the scandal if things do not progress as you’ve... boasted.”

Emily’s eyebrows shot up, her pride stung. “Boasting? I am merely acknowledging the truth. Why would the Duke of Dawshire be courting you if not with intent?” There was a measure of certainty in her eyes that Grace found disconcerting, given the truth of the situation.

Grace took a deep breath, attempting to quell her rising frustration. “You’re speaking of certain futures, creating expectations. It could be seen as boasting.”

Her mother’s gaze softened, and her voice quivered with emotion. “Am I now to be faulted for being a proud mother? I have watched, waited, hoped... and now, after four long years, am I not permitted the joy of seeing my daughter happily settled?”

Grace felt a pang in her chest. “Mother, that’s not what I am saying,” she whispered. But it was done, and she watched as her mother retrieved a handkerchief, delicately dabbing at her eyes.

Swirling emotions threatened to consume Grace. The tangled web she’d woven was growing increasingly difficult to navigate. She wished she could simply confess all and end this charade. But then, memories of her moments with Thomas sprang to mind, reminding her why she was enduring this in the first place.

And in her heart, she knew she was not yet ready to give those moments up.

“Well?” Thomas raised his eyebrows as he queried the physician, Dr. Bentley. “How is she?”

“It is an ordinary loss of appetite,” the physician replied, adjusting the spectacles on his nose.

Thomas leaned forward, still ill at ease. Reports of his mother’s failing health had been a constant cause of concern for him.

“She has not been herself,” the nurse had told him earlier.

“A loss of appetite *with* a fever,” Thomas pointed out, his voice betraying the worry he tried to mask.

Dr. Bentley cleared his throat, attempting to maintain an aura of authority. “The fever, Your Grace, is merely indicative of the body’s general weakness. A direct consequence of her not eating,” he reasoned.

Thomas’s eyes narrowed, unconvinced. He remembered the days when his mother would dance until dawn, her laughter echoing through the hallways of Dawshire Manor.

The physician, sensing the skepticism, continued, “Given her present condition, it is not uncommon for patients to have certain... behavioral shifts. It can manifest in ways like refusing food.”

While Dr. Bentley’s words were meant to reassure, they had the opposite effect on Thomas. Memories of his youth flooded back—the radiant smile of his mother as she had waved him goodbye, the trepidation in her eyes. She had had reservations about his decision to enlist, but his father had had other plans.

Neil Robins had been a man of secrets. His insistence on sending Thomas away had not been merely out of a desire for his son to serve. It had been a diversion, a way to keep the prying eyes of Society away from the skeletons hidden deep within the family vault.

The aftermath had been catastrophic. Thomas, returning home wounded and scarred, not just in body but in spirit, had found a family changed forever.

The shadows of past decisions lingered, and their darkness pained his heart.



Laura, once radiant with boundless energy, had been broken. Yet, even in her fragile state, her unwavering love for Thomas had been evident. Through the pain, fever, and delirium, it was her comforting voice and gentle touch that had anchored him to life. He still remembered those endless nights when she'd sat by his bedside, whispering words of hope, praying for his recovery. His life could testify to her determination, for it was her faith that had dragged him away from the cold clutches of death.

Yet, life, with its relentless twists, had tested her further. Losing both the husband she'd doted on and the elder son she'd cherished had pushed Laura to an abyss of grief from which she had never fully emerged.

As he sat, mired in these thoughts, guilt weighed heavy on Thomas's heart. His mother had been his pillar during his lowest moments, and now, he felt utterly powerless to lift her spirits.

Miss Everton seemed to be a beacon of hope in these challenging times. "But thankfully, she hasn't tried to harm herself in a while," she remarked, her voice filled with genuine relief.

Dr. Bentley nodded, his features serious. "We mustn't get complacent, though," he cautioned, adjusting the rim of his glasses. The underlying meaning of his words hung heavily in the air, a grim reminder of the tragedies that had previously befallen the household.

"Most definitely," Miss Everton agreed, her tone echoing the grave sentiment. She engaged the physician in a brief discussion, keenly noting down his recommendations for the Dowager Duchess's ongoing care.

With the instructions delivered, she then graciously escorted Dr. Bentley out of the room, leaving Thomas alone with his contemplations in the dim light of his study.

He decided to visit his mother, but he found her asleep. Thomas approached her bedside, feeling a swell of emotion as he gazed down at her.

Even in sleep, the traces of weariness were visible. Yet, there was a hint of the strength and grace that defined the woman she had once been. With utmost tenderness, he leaned in, placing a fleeting kiss on her forehead, as if to transmit every ounce of love and healing he could muster.

As he stepped out into the hallway, his steps heavy, he was met with the echoing silence of the vast manor. The desire to drown out his thoughts with the burn of liquor was potent, but the salon and its assortment of spirits would not suffice tonight. He needed more. More noise, more distraction.

The club, with its buzz of life and occasional debauchery, seemed the perfect choice. The grand entrance greeted him with the familiar clinking of glasses, the hum of conversations, and the faint music drifting from somewhere. Before he could fully settle into a corner, a voice reached his ears.

“Fancy a round, Dawshire?” The Marquess of Marfield’s voice was unmistakable.

Thomas turned around, surprised to find him there, a deck of cards in his hands.

As if on cue, the lively discussions in the room fell into a hush. Curious eyes darted between the two gentlemen, sensing the undercurrents of tension and rivalry. Lord Marfield had undoubtedly known what he was doing. The challenge was deliberate, designed to put Thomas in a position where declining would taint his reputation.

The moment stretched on, and Thomas, still grappling with his own turmoil, found himself momentarily caught off guard. Yet, he was not one to back down, especially not when he was the topic of whispered speculations.

“Very well, Marfield,” Thomas responded with a resigned nod, taking the obvious bait.

An amused chuckle rose through the club members as the two men took their seats opposite each other.

“Ah, it is a family game. The husband and the cousin,” quipped a particularly cheeky gentleman, drawing attention and laughter. “And where do you suppose Lady Grace’s loyalties lie?” he teased, turning the conversation to a topic Thomas had hoped to avoid.

A barrage of opinions followed, and as much as he wanted to shut out the voices, Thomas could not. Instead, he allowed the chatter to flow, giving the room what it wanted—more fodder for their relentless gossip.

Thomas studied Lord Marfield’s actions and demeanor. The man’s evasive glances, his curt replies, and especially the conspicuous lack of mention of Grace’s association with

Thomas, spoke volumes. It was becoming more evident with each passing second that Lord Marfield harbored sentiments that went beyond mere familial concern for Grace.

Thomas's mind was a whirl of thoughts, trying to decipher Lord Marfield's actions, when an unexpected voice sliced through his concentration.

"You are not just a copy of your father's face, but you shuffle your cards in the same manner, too," came the cool observation from the circle of men who had gathered to watch their game.

Raising his gaze, Thomas met the challenging eyes of none other than Lord Willson. The recognition was instant, and a myriad of emotions flared within him. Surprise. Anger. Curiosity. The older man's casual posture belied the palpable tension between them. Lord Willson's insouciant demeanor was irksome.

"It has been a while, Dawshire," Lord Willson remarked, his voice dripping with a feigned amiability that did not escape Thomas.

"A while, indeed," Thomas replied, his voice carefully neutral.

Each word was measured, concealing the storm of feelings Lord Willson's presence evoked in him. The name Dawshire, the allusion to his father, it was all a calculated ploy to get under his skin.

Thomas felt their shared past pressing down on him, every unsolved mystery, every lingering doubt. He knew the answers lay close to Lord Willson.

The need to uncover the truth was now more urgent than ever. He must advance his strategies, especially concerning Grace. Lady Caroline Shampton seemed to be the linchpin to this entire mystery. He would have to approach her sooner rather than later.

A plan formed rapidly in his mind.

## CHAPTER 10



“*P*erhaps you should take the opportunity tonight to dance with Caroline,” Grace said and immediately regretted the words.

Tonight was another ball, and she had just finished dancing with Thomas. They were taking a turn about the ballroom.

The gentleness of his hold had offered her comfort and familiarity she hadn’t expected to find. Yet, when the music ceased, and they separated, she made this suggestion that although was in accordance with their arrangement made her uncomfortable.

“Yes, I should.” Thomas agreed and then found Caroline.

As they glided away toward the dance floor, a peculiar heaviness settled in Grace’s heart. She watched from the perimeter, an involuntary observer of their shared smiles and murmured words.

Caroline’s genuine smile seemed to light up in Thomas’s presence, and the slight upturn of his lips suggested a shared secret or jest between them.

Grace made her way through a door and onto the terrace, seeking refuge in the solitude it offered. The cooler air enveloped her, providing a small measure of comfort as she leaned on the railing, her gaze cascading over the guests who conversed and laughed in the gardens below.

“Hiding away on the terrace, are we not?” a voice, touched with a hint of playful chastising, interjected into her solitude.

Grace turned slightly, recognizing Henry’s frame as he approached.

“Quite unlike Society’s darling,” he commented lightly, taking a position beside her at the railing.

His plate bore a few carefully chosen hors d’oeuvres, and she could not suppress a smile at the sight of him nibbling contentedly. Henry, with his insatiable appetite, always found joy in culinary delights, a trait she had often found endearing during their shared youth.

“Even an infant requires time away from his mother’s bosom now and then, do you not agree?”

“Oh, absolutely,” Henry responded, the humor in his eyes gentle as he extended the plate toward her.

Her fingers grazed the small, carefully crafted item, igniting a cascade of memories of childish escapades and simpler times shared with Henry.

“Remember when we hid underneath the refreshments tables for these whenever our parents hosted?” Grace chuckled.

“I devoured them in tens,” Henry admitted, an impish grin curling the corners of his mouth.

“And is that a source of pride?” She quirked an eyebrow. “I still vividly recall how you moaned in pain after one of your adventurous feasts!”

“Oh, those bittersweet memories.” Henry theatrically scrunched up his face.

Laughter bubbled between them, and it seemed to suspend the passage of time, even if just for a moment.

“I see you never learned your lesson,” Grace teased as she nodded toward the plate.

“It is food, Grace. Excellent food,” he replied with a shrug, his voice earnest. And, somehow, that simple statement encapsulated all the uncomplicated joys of their youth.

For a few moments more, Grace allowed herself to be enveloped by the comforting familiarity of Henry’s presence as they nibbled on treats and went together down memory lane, where life was simpler and love was unscarred by the weariness of adulthood.



Until the appetizers dwindled to mere crumbs, prompting Henry to excuse himself in pursuit of more, leaving Grace alone again with her thoughts.

The faint sound of footsteps drew her attention, and she turned, preparing a playful quip for Henry upon his return. Instead, her gaze met Thomas's steady one, causing her light-hearted demeanor to falter, if ever so slightly.

"That was a quick waltz," she found herself saying, her voice even despite the sudden fluttering in her chest, endeavoring to appear indifferent.

"I thought it a rather long one," Thomas responded as he leisurely closed the distance between them, leaning on the railing beside her. His words, imbued with an unexpected sincerity, lingered in the air between them, heralding a dialogue where spoken words were merely the superficial layer of the emotions and intentions moving underneath.

She recalled the smile she thought she'd seen on his face, and Caroline's as well. It did not look like a long dance to him at all, she thought, her mind involuntarily weaving a thread of stories she dared not confirm.

"I cannot say exactly. As I had my attention elsewhere," Grace said, forcing more indifference into her tone, intending to direct their conversation away from the subject of Caroline and the dance.

"Ah, Marfield, was it not?" Thomas responded, quirking an eyebrow.

A seemingly innocent inquiry, yet beneath his unchanging expression, she sensed a veiled probing, one that bored into her with a subtle intensity. It left her feeling curiously exposed, and a flicker of defensiveness instinctively stirred within her.

Although his demeanor exhibited the customary stoic and unyielding nature she had come to know, something in his tone, ever so slightly accusatory, pricked at her consciousness. A delicate but deliberate nudge toward a topic she'd rather leave untouched.

She held her silence, choosing not to venture into the conversation about Henry any more than she wished to discuss Thomas's dance with Caroline. The tension between them grew.

"The gentleman seems quite taken by you, I must say," Thomas pressed, unmoved by her reticence.

"He is my cousin, yes," she replied, her words meant to act as a finality and a boundary set to enclose the unwelcome conjectures regarding Henry.

A moment passed, and Thomas seemed to retreat into contemplation. Even the sounds of distant laughter and the soft music inside could not get rid of the silence that lingered between them until he broke it, saying, "I am sure that would not stop him from courting you. Marfiel—"

"Not you too, Thomas!" Grace sighed, the exhale a mixture of discomfort and a too-familiar irritation that had begun to

bubble within her each time the topic of Henry and matrimony was broached.

“Oh, so I am not the only one who’s made the observation,” Thomas noted, a slight upward curl of his lips hinting at an inward amusement at her exasperation.

“Can we abandon this subject of marriage?” Grace asked, her voice carrying a sharpness and an uncharacteristic sternness.

“If I did not know better, I’d say you seem quite averse to the notion of matrimony altogether,” Thomas continued.

“I beg your pardon, but I do not recall my opinion about marriage being a part of our agreement,” Grace said.

“Forthrightness and openness are,” he returned smoothly, yet his eyes mirrored a shadow of something unspoken.

“There is a clear difference between transparency and invasion of privacy,” she shot back, irritated.

“Are you implying that I have just crossed that line by a simple observation?”

“I am saying that I do not owe any explanations for my personal decisions.”

“Well, then I suppose I, too, owe no explanation for my simple observation about Marfield—”

“I do not need another lecture on Lord Marfield’s virtues and eligibility. I do not recall it being a part of our agreement, Your Grace,” she interjected, the title she used a clear signal of the distance she wished to place between them if only to shield her heart from further probing.

Every second that elapsed with marriage and Henry becoming the focal points of their conversation served to erode the remnants of her patience.

Grace had not anticipated that Thomas, of all people, would join the multitude in nudging her toward Henry, and this unexpected development was unwelcome, at the very least. As such, she made a firm decision to staunchly shut out any further exploration of that topic.

Turning on her heel, she said, “Please, excuse me.”

She felt his gaze on her as she walked away, but she refused to allow herself to feel any guilt for her actions.

“I could not help but worry after your hasty departure from the ball last night, Grace, dear,” Caroline said with a worried frown. She had called on Grace early the following day.

After her little squabble with Thomas, Grace had made up another excuse to her family and left the ball altogether. The crisp night air had enveloped her like a comforting shawl as she had departed, but now, within the walls of her home, it was a different atmosphere altogether, thick with unspoken expectations and looming decisions.

“Is everything all right?” Caroline, ever the perceptive friend, pressed, her brows knitting together with gentle concern as she peered into Grace’s eyes, searching for anything hiding therein.

“All well, Caroline,” Grace replied, managing a semblance of a smile that teetered precariously between genuine warmth and careful facades. “Just a little suffocation from the festivities which saw me wishing to remove myself early,” she reassured, her words dancing around the veritable emotions within her chest.

Grace had rung for tea, and it had come accompanied by the most delectable biscuits and cakes. Their sweet aroma wafted through the room, light and enticing. She watched, somewhat absently, as Caroline reached for another off the platter.

“These biscuits are so divine,” Caroline gushed, her eyes lighting up with innocent delight. Her voice, light and airy, fluttered about the room just as Emily elegantly walked into the drawing room.

“And I think you ladies have had enough of them,” Emily declared, her voice gently authoritative, as it always was.

Before Grace could muster a response, an assertive gesture from her mother signaled a footman to have the cake platter cleared, the tempting delicacies vanishing before their very eyes.

“But, Mama.” Grace finally found her voice, the protest filled with a weariness born not just from the disappearance of the

biscuits but from the ever-present discourse on her matrimonial future.

“All this flour will only make your cheeks too puffy. Not to mention other places,” Emily said, a hint of maternal wisdom and concern mingling with the traditional perceptions of beauty and propriety. “You need to look good in your wedding portrait,” she added, her words holding an assumption that stung Grace’s already perturbed spirit.

“Not again,” Grace grumbled under her breath, but perhaps louder than she’d intended.

“Not again what?” Her mother’s brow arched upwards, curiosity and a faint shade of annoyance flickering across her refined features.

And that was when Grace realized that her vexed thoughts had, indeed, been audible.

A part of her pondered the virtue of dismissing it, of retreating into the agreeable daughter role she had so often assumed. But that dominant part of her, the part that was now fervently agitated by the ceaseless chatter of marriage, compelled her to speak forthrightly.

“Not again with your wedding plans for an uncertain outcome,” Grace breathed, her words a whisper, yet they held a palpable firmness that seemed to reverberate through the room.

Emily remained contemplatively quiet for a bit, her gaze lingering on Grace with an unreadable expression, and for an instant, a flicker of guilt washed over Grace. A moment stretched between them, taut and fragile, until her mother continued with an unexpected, softer cadence.

“I understand your aversion now, Grace, dear. And if it is the Duke of Dawshire you do not want, it is perfectly all right. Who says you must marry a duke? A marquess would be just as fine.”

*Oh, dear!*

Her mother had ended up misconstruing the entire thing.

Grace’s heart beat a little faster, and she suddenly felt breathless in the drawing room. She’d just opened her mouth, a slew of carefully curated words ready to spill forth to further protest and clarify things to her obstinate mother—who seemed firmly ensconced in a reality quite different from her own—when Caroline interjected gently, “It is all right, My Lady. I think Grace is simply too overwhelmed by all the attention she is getting from their courtship. Especially one with a duke.”

When Caroline’s gaze met Grace’s, her eyes flickered with a secret message, prompting her into silence. Grace swallowed the words that had been on the tip of her tongue, letting them simmer unspoken in her throat.

“Oh, I am so glad my Grace has a friend like you, Caroline, darling,” Emily effused, her eyes softening with maternal affection, albeit misplaced. “Your mother’s doing an excellent

job with you,” she added with a gentle pat on Caroline’s hand before a maid appeared, her words a hushed whisper into Emily’s ear.

“Oh, I must leave you now, ladies. It is a pity I cannot join you for tea,” Emily said with a wistful glance toward the ornate teacups.

“After you’ve had our cakes taken away,” Grace grumbled. A soft nudge from Caroline served as a gentle reprimand, a reminder to tread carefully on the path of maternal frustrations.

Alone, at last, Grace turned to Caroline. “I do not know what has come over them. They never cared much about who courted me, let alone proposed. The Duke has only just begun courting me, and they are already planning a wedding.” She threw her hands up, huffing.

Caroline reassured her with a gentle hand on her arm. “Concentrate on the present, Grace, and try not to think too much about the future, its outcome, or what others say,” she counseled, her voice steady and reassuring. “Believe me, there is so much more before us that we fail to see because we get carried away by what *was*, and what *would*.”

“I have never felt pressured as I do now, Caroline.”

“I know.” Caroline gave her friend a gentle smile. “It is only a problem if you give it attention, Grace.” Then, as if a cloud had lifted, her expression shifted, a sly, wicked grin casting playful shadows on her features. “You have the Duke of



Dawshire to focus on now. He should be more than enough to occupy you,” she teased, a playful lilt to her words.

It was Grace’s turn to nudge her friend, the giggles bubbling up, a momentary respite from societal chains.

*But the Duke of Dawshire was never mine.*

Grace recalled their arrangement with a twinge of bittersweetness weaving through her thoughts.

*He never will be, as I must match him with you, Caroline.*

A somber blanket of resignation gently settled upon her.

She continued to smile and wear a mask of joviality as she entertained her friend for the remainder of the afternoon. Caroline, who deserved nothing but the best, held her attention and affection with unbridled sincerity.

And if the Duke of Dawshire was the best for her, then Grace was truly happy for her friend. She’d just have to work harder to push them together, to erase the inkling of indifference that lingered in Caroline’s eyes whenever the Duke was near.

And within that resolution, a quiet strength blossomed, even as her own heart quietly yearned for what could never be.

## CHAPTER 11



“*I* heard about your game with Marfield,” Gilbert said to Thomas as he rounded the billiard table, his stance leisurely, yet his eyes sparkling with latent curiosity.

Thomas had called on his friend, seeking both the comfort of familiar company and perhaps, subconsciously, a diverting ear to bend.

“Ah, yes,” he said, his voice steady.

He’d won the first round with a sort of undemanding skill that came from years of practice, and Gilbert had redeemed himself right after with an impressive performance. He was a worthy competitor, indeed.

“And I saw Willson, at last,” Thomas added, steering the conversation toward another topic.

“Do you think you would still need his daughter to get to him?” Gilbert asked. He lifted a crystal decanter with casual elegance, pouring a generous amount of liquor into his glass. He looked expectantly at Thomas as he served himself, a silent offer.

“I did not need Lady Caroline to get to him from the start,” Thomas responded. “I need her to make the Earl comfortable enough with me to let his guard down so I can investigate better,” he explained, his gaze fixed intently on Gilbert, assessing his reaction.

“Convenient,” Gilbert uttered, his eyebrow arching slightly. “Well, in that case, Lady Grace best gets to work,” he added with a chuckle.

### *Speaking of Grace.*

Thomas’s thoughts unintentionally drifted, coalescing around the woman who had become a somewhat perplexing fixture in his life, especially recalling their little squabble at the ball last night. Her irritation, the subtle flinch of her eyes when he’d merely mentioned Lord Marfield in their conversation, needled him.

He had incurred her ire for a seemingly innocuous comment, and as he thought about it, reflecting on the contours of her expressions and the tense set of her shoulders, she had seemed to hate any mention of marriage. A peculiar stance for a lady of the ton.

Could she be completely averse to it? And if so, why? He suddenly felt the desire to delve deeper and unearth whatever mystery about her she was keeping locked up from him, hidden behind those eyes that sparkled with untold stories.

But before that, a softer emotion whispered through him, suggesting a course of action unfamiliar yet undeniably

necessary. He felt he owed her an apology, an admission that, even to himself, felt strangely significant in the grander scheme of their intricate interaction.

He did not see any fault in his observation of Lord Marfield's interest in her, but if it displeased her, then he needed to apologize for crossing that boundary, to mend whatever unseen chasm had perhaps formed between them.

"I may have crossed a line with her that I need to apologize for before she does get to work," Thomas confessed, his voice a low murmur that suggested a mixture of regret and self-reproof.

"I *told* you to be careful," Gilbert began, his voice a gentle chastisement, brotherly concern narrowing his eyes slightly. "What did you do to her?"

"It isn't what you think," Thomas defended himself, an attempt at lightness touching his words as he leaned against the finely crafted mahogany of the billiard table, his hands absently brushing against the soft, cool surface. "I am not a beast, man," he added with a light chuckle. "This is a different line I think I crossed. Mentioned things I should not have," he elaborated, his gaze fixing on a distant point in the room.

"You've never been creative with your words, Dawshire. So, this isn't surprising," Gilbert teased gently, a subtle crinkle around his eyes.

"With a friend who avoids Society with every second breath, I never had a good teacher," Thomas returned.

“Not that you’d deign to learn from anyone,” his friend grumbled almost to himself, though a wry grin tugged at the corners of his mouth.

And they had a laugh before Gilbert finally said, his tone dipping into a more earnest register, “I suggest you make your apology hastily before she ends the arrangement and your investigation.”

“It appears I must,” Thomas agreed, steering his thoughts into a pensive rumination.

Later, when he returned home, he was passing by one of the open drawing rooms when he spotted a most curious sight through the French doors. His mother, Laura, was seated alone on one of the benches in the gardens.

She was eating again now and was a lot better, thank God. Yet, there lingered frailty about her that tugged insistently at his heart every time he beheld her.

Wondering where her companion was, he crossed through the drawing room to the gardens, his steps measured. Laura appeared peaceful as she hummed quietly to herself, a gentle melody that drifted through the air, mingling with the soft whispers of the garden. This sound brought back memories that constricted his chest, the melody a gentle ghost from days long past.

She’d always sung him and Simon to sleep, her voice a lilting lullaby that had cocooned them in warmth and safety. And even when they’d pretended to be independent and too old for

the lullabies, they'd secretly craved them, longed for the comfort they had provided.

What he would not give to hear her *truly* sing to him now as she'd done before—happy and very much aware of everything, the spirited woman who had shaped his childhood with her melodies and love.

“What are you doing out here all by yourself, Mother?” Thomas asked, his voice light, though within him was a pang of sorrow, not expecting any proper response, yet somehow hoping for one all the same.

Surprisingly, she answered, “Miss Everton has gone to collect my shawl. The maid she sent got the wrong one. I do not like the blue one, you see. I prefer the green one.”

Miss Everton was her nurse companion, as well as her lady's maid, a dual role which she fulfilled with a stoic patience and unwavering loyalty that had endeared her to the entire household. His mother would not allow anyone else near her clothes and her person in such a manner.

Thomas made sure he compensated the woman well for all the services she carried out. For, in essence, she was doing the work of three people, a burdensome task that she bore without complaint or regret.

A gentle rustling heralded Miss Everton's approach, her steps hurried yet composed as she came back with the desired shawl gently cradled in her arms.

“My apologies, Your Grace. I should not have left her alone. But the maid I sent could not get the proper shawl. I must have kept it too out of reach,” she said to him, sounding a little breathless.

With a mild and reassuring smile, Thomas dismissed this pleasantly before extending a hand to accept the shawl. He took the soft fabric, feeling its delicate weave beneath his fingers, and tenderly wrapped it around his mother.

“I will escort her back inside, Miss Everton,” he said.

“Very well, Your Grace,” Miss Everton responded, her voice respectful and mildly relieved, before bowing slightly and taking her leave.

Thomas then took a seat beside his mother on the bench, the fragrant bouquet of the surrounding flowers gently enveloping them. His mother glanced at him, her eyes holding a shimmer of distant memories as her fingers lightly caressed the shawl wrapped around her.

“Green was Neil’s favorite color, you know,” she suddenly said, a softness in her voice that whispered of long-held remembrances and cherished moments. “It became mine, too,” she added, a faint, almost spectral smile flickering across her lips.

Thomas, absorbing these words, remained silent, allowing the conversation to be pulled by his mother. He’d heard bits of these stories before, usually whispered as she drifted into slumber. His father had never deserved it, Thomas thought to

himself, a familiar wave of indignation rising bitterly in his throat yet held captive behind his lips.

His mother continued, her eyes acquiring a faraway look, “I remember the first time I saw Neil... He had on a green waistcoat with the most delicate silver thread embroidery.” Her gaze seemed to pierce through the veils of time, a look that went farther than the one she always wore. “He seemed like the perfect gentleman, even though I was very skeptical about him at first,” she added, her voice a gentle murmur that seemed to dance with the ghosts of her past.

A melancholic serenity embraced Laura. She was very composed right now. The most composed she'd been in a while. In fact, she seemed almost like her old self, like the mother Thomas had known before the fog of confusion had stolen her from him.

This made Thomas wonder if she recognized him as she continued her story. But he feared prompting her, afraid to jostle the delicate balance of her recollections, lest he was met with the sting of disappointment again.

“When my father announced that he'd found me a match, I was nervous and very scared. I did not think I would like the man,” Laura said, her eyes gazing into an unseen past. “But the moment Neil held my hand, I just knew I had nothing to be afraid of. I knew right then that he had my heart already,” she finished with a soft sigh.

“Do you think you had his?” Thomas asked against his better judgment, the words slipping from his lips before he could rein them in, like errant soldiers abandoning their post.



“Oh, not at first, of course,” Laura replied gently, a soft, melancholic smile curving her lips. “But eventually, I got it,” she added, her gaze still lost somewhere in the memories of days long past.

A quiet dissent lingered in Thomas’s heart, restrained behind his lips. If so, then things should not have turned out the way they had. But he kept his opinion to himself, nestled quietly beside the silent frustrations that had long learned to stay hidden. He studied his mother, watching as the subtle nuances of emotions played across her still-elegant features.

His mother’s gaze suddenly focused on his right then, and with a clarity that startled him, she said to him, “Your father loved me. I am certain of that.”

*A certainty that you seem to wear like a protective cloak.*

She’d never looked surer of anything, and it tugged at his own certainties, unsettling them.

Thomas thought that he ought to feel some relief right now that she at least recognized him as her son. A fleeting acknowledgment that could stitch together some semblance of maternal connection. But the question of which son lingered ominously, giving him much apprehension.

“You loved him, Mother,” Thomas gently interjected. He could not possibly counter what she’d just said about the late Duke. So, he might as well affirm something he was certain of.

His mother had loved his father. She still did. That was the one truth that was undeniable, immutable, no matter what.

“Oh, I do miss Thomas. I hope the battalions are treating your brother well, Simon,” his mother suddenly said, her words toppling the fragile hope he’d built.

And so, Thomas was Simon again.

Laura never saw Thomas. Her eyes and heart always sought out either Neil or Simon. And what was perhaps even more piercing was the fact that she’d traveled back to when he had not been home, to those bitter years of his time away in service.

His mother was living in those tangled memories, tethered between a longing for the past and the fleeting moments of the present.

*“At least she thought of and missed you,”* a soft, reassuring voice whispered in Thomas’s head. But it did little to assuage his pain or fill the cavernous absence his mother’s vacancy had created within his heart.

He nodded as he silently played the role of Simon, offering a gentle, “I am sure he misses you too, Mother,” as he reached for her hand, holding it in his own, trying to anchor her, even if just for a fleeting moment, in a present where they could share the bittersweet memories, lost and found.

## CHAPTER 12



“You know,” Caroline said, the skepticism in her voice all but palpable, like a thinly veiled concern that refused to be silenced, “I cannot help but feel as though you’re keeping something from me, Grace.”

Caroline had called on her again to ensure she was well.

Grace sighed, the burden of concealed truths weighing on her shoulders. “Not again, Caroline. What could I possibly be hiding?” she queried with soft exasperation.

Caroline’s inquiries had been a consistent theme since her arrival.

“I do not know. You’ve just seemed awfully reserved since the last ball. Utterly unlike your usual self,” Caroline observed, peering at her friend with a scrutinizing yet compassionate gaze.

“Goodness, Caroline. One would think me wild.” Grace chuckled, trying to infuse some levity into the conversation. But the somber expression of concern on her friend’s face remained.

“Now that I think about it,” Caroline mused, her voice taking on a tone of gentle probing, “I saw you on the terrace with the Duke of Dawshire before you suddenly left the ballroom, and eventually the ball. Could this be something to do with him?”

Grace sighed again, the exhale speaking for her.

“Oh, dear,” Caroline let out, soft empathy lingering in her utterance.

“We did have a little disagreement, Caroline,” Grace confessed at last, her words releasing a tiny fragment of the hidden depths within her.

“Something that could change your demeanor for days doesn’t seem like a little thing, Grace,” Caroline countered gently, her words both a challenge and an embrace. “What happened? Do tell me, dearest Grace,” she encouraged, her eyes radiating genuine concern and steadfast support.

Grace wished with all her heart that she could unburden herself to her friend. But this was something she could not share, a secret that was bound in apprehension.

Caroline must have noticed her reluctance, because she said, “I understand if it is something you cannot share, dear friend. But I want you to know that I am always here for you if you ever change your mind.”

Gently, she took Grace’s hand in hers and gave a reassuring little squeeze, a tangible reminder of her unwavering support.

“Also, know that every relationship comes with hurdles we must scale. Misunderstandings are natural. Think nothing of them except how to cross over the hurdles. I know you are more than capable of handling whatever it is, Grace,” Caroline added, her words a soothing balm to Grace’s turmoil.

“Thank you, Caroline,” Grace said, smiling, just as the butler appeared.

“The Duke of Dawshire,” he announced.

She did not particularly wish to see him, but she nodded. “Send him in, please.”

Grace was surprised he called, but she endeavored to mask it as he walked in, looking regal in a dark blue afternoon coat. Thomas seemed to bend the very air in the room to his will, and her heart raced. Their eyes met and held. Although she was tempted to look away, she refused to allow herself to.

“Good afternoon, ladies,” he greeted, taking Grace’s hand first and placing a soft kiss on her gloved knuckles, then Caroline’s.

Once more, Grace looked at her friend to measure her reaction toward Thomas but found only the cordial indifference with which Caroline had always regarded him.

Caroline gained her feet as he was about to sit, causing him to remain standing, and then she turned to Grace.

“I shall see you tomorrow, dear Grace.” Accompanying that was a soft smile.

Grace’s consternation rose immediately. She did not want to be left alone with Thomas. Thus, she protested with, “Are you leaving so soon?”

“Oh, Grace, do not tell me that you have already forgotten that I must visit the Modiste with Mama this afternoon,” Caroline replied, her eyes laughing.

They both knew that statement was a lie, and she was leaving Grace with Thomas to sort out their differences.

Caroline curtsied to Thomas, and inclining his head regally, he said, “May I invite both of you for a ride tomorrow afternoon?”

Grace and Caroline exchanged a look, and as much as Grace wanted to reject the invitation, she forced herself to remember her mission.

Smiling with confidence she did not feel, she responded, “Of course. We would be delighted.”

“Yes, we would, Your Grace,” Caroline echoed with a small curtsy, and a nod in Grace’s direction, before taking her leave.

Thomas and Grace sat across from each other, saying nothing. Grace tried, but she found herself unable to contain her anger for much longer. Pretense had never been her thing. She'd always been an open book. Too open, in fact. His gaze fixed upon her did nothing to calm that ire.

“Is my examination perturbing, Grace?” he asked, his gaze shadowing her very breath, unrelenting, managing to gently peel back the composure she so desperately attempted to maintain.

He did not just ask her that, Grace thought to herself, peeved, feeling the unsolicited exploration of her vulnerabilities like an unwelcome chill.

And before she could give any response, before she could construct a wall of witty retort or steely indifference, he added, “I did not lose my way, Grace. As a matter of fact, I came to apologize. I understand that I might have crossed certain boundaries I should not have.”

“Oh.” She heard the breathless surprise escape her, a singular, soft exhalation that punctuated the still air, causing the very fabric of her prepared defenses to subtly quiver.

An apology was the last thing she'd been expecting. Not from a man like Thomas, a duke known for his steadfast composure and unwavering certitude. His actions, so unanticipated, wove an unexpected pause into the melody of their exchange.

She felt somewhat ashamed now for openly displaying her anger earlier when he'd just humbled himself. He'd presented

vulnerability, an unexpected gift wrapped in the honesty of acknowledged missteps.

“Well then, apology accepted.” She cleared her throat in a weak attempt to appear more dignified, her voice barely above a whisper amongst the soft rustlings in the room.

A gentle simmer of something unspoken warmed the space between them, emotions tangled in a delicate dance.

His eyes held hers, and for a moment, the world felt suspended, tethered by the fragile string of shared understanding. It was in that breath, in that beat of silence, that the masks of decorum seemed to slip ever so slightly.

“Think I could still get those directions now?” he suddenly asked, a sly glint in his eyes, disrupting the delicate balance that had momentarily united them.

“I thought you said you weren’t lost?” Grace returned, her own gaze unmoving, intertwining challenge and curiosity into her softly spoken words.

“Ah, but a man lost would never admit it. He’d be giving away his weakness, opening a door to be misled, you see,” Thomas replied, the contours of his face softening, revealing a tenderness that was both surprising and disarming.

His words lingered, a gentle caress against the silence that followed, inviting her into a space where perhaps, for a moment, they could lay down their weapons and simply be Thomas and Grace. In the tender battlefield of their own



insecurities and wants, perhaps they could find a sanctuary, if only fleeting, within one another.

“And you trust me not to mislead you?” She gave a light chuckle now, a gentle mirth lighting her eyes, yet a hidden depth lingered beneath the jesting tone, hinting at the complexity of the path they trod together.

“Wherever I go, you go, Grace,” he responded, an earnestness seeping into his words, seeking refuge in the space between them. “So, I trust you not to mislead yourself,” he added, tipping the scales of their discourse to a strangely intimate cadence.

And when her gaze met his and held it, she could not help the little flutters she felt deep within her, a whisper of something akin to hope, and perhaps a touch of peril. She’d missed their banter. She’d missed *him*, she realized, with a startling clarity that danced dangerously with the boundaries of her reserved demeanor.

And the thought scared her as much as it thrilled her.

A dry cough from a passing maid made them both jump.

Grace turned to hide her blush. She tried to school her thoughts right then, placing them neatly into the guarded alcoves of her mind, but found that it did nothing to change the way she felt.

This scared her even more. A fear, not of his deceit, but of her own treacherous heart and its ability to so easily entwine with

the prospect of a precarious happiness.

*Curious.*

\* \* \*

The following afternoon, Caroline came over as planned, her presence a familiar comfort amidst the tumult of Grace's introspections.

And shortly after, Thomas arrived to take them out, a picture of affable charm and gentlemanly composure, though Grace wondered if, beneath the surface, he too harbored a tempest of unspoken sentiments.

They went to Gunther's for some ice, a rather rejuvenating activity in the warm weather, a delightful interlude to the simmering undercurrents of Society and the quiet storm that brewed within.

Here, they overheard some gentlemen complaining about the year's harvest, and the disadvantages of the Corn Laws.

"These tariffs on imports are limiting!" one of them complained, the exasperation evident in his voice, painting the air with palpable discontent.

"They benefit no one but the Crown!" the other agreed, nodding his head with fervent disapproval.

"Oh, Papa cannot stop complaining about the same," Caroline said somewhat abstractedly, her voice a gentle interjection, yet

her thoughts seemingly distant, perhaps navigating their own private maze.

Grace was surprised when Thomas suddenly hopped on the subject, stepping into the fray of political discourse with a calm assurance. He shared his views about the laws, a calculated commentary yet underscored with a palpable sincerity.

“It is disadvantageous only if one chooses to see it as such. In my opinion, invest in the local farms instead. This, I think, would benefit both the local farmers, the peers, and the Crown at large. England should not let the imports define her,” he finished, his words a deliberate cascade into the stream of debate, unmasking a facet of his intellect hitherto unobserved by Grace.

“Oh, with such views, Father would be thrilled to exchange ideas with you, Your Grace,” Caroline said, her voice carrying a tone of genuine interest yet tinted with an unspoken, nuanced emotion. Her eyes flickered toward Thomas, reflecting a certain amiable curiosity.

“In that case, perhaps you can introduce me to him?” Thomas prompted with a lift of his brow, an undercurrent of intrigue running through his words.

And Caroline agreed, her lips curling into a light, friendly smile, yet one that subtly grazed the edges of something perhaps more ambiguous in nature.

That unpleasant heaviness came over Grace at this, a subtle churning within that pulled at the threads of her well-woven

facade. A facade that guarded not just her heart but the complex emotions that threatened to unravel with every beat.

He must care deeply for Caroline, it seemed. For he was already making plans for the future, and thinking of partnering with his prospective future father-in-law, she thought, an acrid pang of something indescribable twisting subtly within her chest.

Thomas engaged Caroline in further conversation. “Has your father implemented this idea in this estate?”

“Oh, he has, and the tenants are very happy. His neighbor, on the other hand—” She glanced at Grace with a slight smile. “—whose name I would prefer not to mention rejected the thought, and his tenants are discontented.”

This sent ripples through the quiet sea of Grace’s contemplation, and she was surprised at how chatty her friend was with him. She knew who the neighbor was, and she smiled knowingly at Caroline.

“What is your opinion, Grace?” Thomas asked suddenly, and Grace had to quickly think of a response that was not mired in her tangled thoughts.

“It mirrors yours and Caroline’s. Unfortunately, many of my father’s acquaintances disagree. They would rather grow what benefits the populace far less than corn.”

Thomas nodded, seeming satisfied with her response, and then he turned to Caroline, giving her all of his attention—at least,

that was how Grace perceived it, and her mind was not the best of judges at this time.

Although Grace contributed to the conversation herself, her words almost seemed to linger in the periphery, her voice a soft melody overshadowed by the more vibrant duet unfolding before her. She could not help but feel like a stranger in their midst.

Guilt came over her as well, enveloping her like a shroud, whispering bittersweet nothings into the recesses of her conscience. How strange, she mused, to be ensnared by such a tumultuous cascade of emotion amidst what should be a pleasant outing.

She had no right to feel all these emotions, she inwardly admonished, a gentle scolding to her wayward heart. She was nothing but their matchmaker, after all. She ought to know her place by now, keeping a respectful distance from the blossoming connection she herself had orchestrated.

But oh, the human heart is seldom tethered by the chains of rationale, is it not?

As their laughter, gentle and carefree, drifted through the sun-dappled afternoon, Grace navigated the delicate balance between her role as the matchmaker and the subtle, gnawing longing that quietly took root within her. A longing not for something lost, but for something never to be obtained.

Grace's eyes often found Thomas's, and in those fleeting moments, her heart ached more.

## CHAPTER 13



Grace walked into the morning room to the sight of her brother eating alone. “Are Mother and Father not joining us?” she asked.

“Father was summoned to the House of Lords for an emergency meeting,” Benedict replied, without lifting his gaze from his plate, where he meticulously sectioned off a piece of egg. “And Mother is having breakfast with the Duchess of Devonshire. I believe the Duchess invited her and the Countess of Willson to help her make plans for her annual grand masquerade,” he added in between deliberate, savored forkfuls.

After serving herself from the sideboard and joining him at the table, Grace settled into the seat opposite him, her own breakfast modest but delightfully arranged before her, the delicate fragrances wafting temptingly toward her.

Benedict asked, his voice carrying a casualness that belied the intensity of his gaze, “No plans today, dear sister?”

Something in his gaze was curiously unreadable, a flicker of something deeper lingering just beyond the veneer of casual

sibling conversation. It was a gaze that lingered, heavy with unspoken curiosity and perhaps a dash of protective concern.

“No plans today, dear brother,” she replied, her voice light yet carrying an undercurrent of thoughtfulness. “God knows I could do with a little breather and the rest,” she added, her fingers delicately navigating around her utensils, her movements deliberate yet distantly distracted.

“With a demanding suitor like yours, I could not agree more.” Benedict nodded, his voice laced with an amiable jest, yet something in his eyes hinted at a deeper sentiment.

“The Duke of Dawshire, you mean?” she asked, her brow slightly furrowed, surprised by his description of the Duke, and subtle curiosity lacing her words.

“Is there anyone else courting you?” Benedict returned, a half-smile playing on his lips, yet his eyes remained seriously locked on hers, a gentle probe encased in light-hearted banter.

“I should say he is hardly demanding, though,” she intoned, a subtle defiance coloring her words, as she lifted the delicate cup to her lips, taking a sip of her hot chocolate and savoring the rich, comforting beverage as it cascaded warmth through her throat and into her spirit.

“He watches you like a hawk, Sister,” Benedict noted, his joviality giving way to a more somber, somewhat displeased expression, the protective undertones now surfacing more overtly.

“Does he now?” Grace returned, her voice steady, yet within, her thoughts fluttered like captivated birds, brushing against the cages of her restraint.

An image of Thomas’s piercing green eyes flashed in her mind right then, and unwittingly, she could not shield the warmth that traveled, unbidden, to her cheeks, betraying the stirring within.

“There’s a difference between being demanding and simply watching someone,” she added, her words measured and deliberate, while her fingers lightly traced the edge of her porcelain cup, drawing arbitrary patterns along its fine rim.

“Yes. The watching part is quite upsetting and improper,” Benedict retorted, his countenance revealing an unexpected sternness, an uncharacteristic seriousness that lingered in his usually lighthearted eyes. His knife paused midair, suspended above his plate, as he considered his next words.

Her brother did not seem very pleased right now. His brows were knit together in a mild display of discomfort, and his lips were drawn into a thin line of restrained discontent. In fact, it was almost as if he did not like the Duke, which was especially notable in the strained manner he spoke about him. It was curious, considering how he’d been the one teasing her about her dance with the Duke and his apparent interest in her on the night of the first ball.

“You’ve never been one to care for propriety, Brother,” Grace observed, her tone nonchalant, as she took a bite of her sausage, her teeth sinking into the succulent meat with a subtle, satisfying resistance.



“When my sister is concerned, I do,” he said, his tone laced with an undercurrent of protective firmness. His eyes, reflecting a cocktail of brotherly love and concern, remained locked with hers, a silent exchange of familial sentiments passing between them.

Grace appreciated his concern, the warmth of his brotherly love always a comforting balm to her. But she could not help teasing him a bit as well, a playful means to diffuse the slowly mounting tension in the air.

“Why are you being unusually nice, Benedict? What’s the favor?” she asked, a playful arch of her brow accompanying her words.

“I am always nice.” He gave a smug snort, the corners of his mouth twitching upward in a restrained smile, though his eyes continued to hold that rare gravitas that spoke of unspoken fears and latent caution.

And he’d just opened his mouth to say more, perhaps to defend his brotherly demeanor, when Grace interjected with, “You have nothing to worry about, Benedict. The Duke is a good man.”

Benedict paused in obvious thought, his knife now resting on the plate, his eyes momentarily losing focus as they retreated inward, pondering on the reassurances of his sister. He seemed to grapple with his reservations, mingled with a desire to respect her choices.

“But is he good for you?” he asked her, the words slow, deliberate. And the somber air about him, the heaviness

lurking within his gaze, reminded her of the one from the night he'd advised her to be open to courtship, to allow herself to be pursued and cherished.

"I am taking your advice and keeping my options open, Benedict," she reminded him gently, offering a soft, reassuring smile.

He sighed, leaning back into his chair and observing her for a long, silent moment before he responded, "There are plenty of other gentlemen in Society, Grace."

She felt her brow quirk in surprise, a delicate arch, eloquent in its own subtle way, and an indication of her rising intrigue. Her brother really did not like the Duke, it seemed.

"If I did not know better, I'd say you do not seem to favor the Duke of Dawshire," she pointed out, her voice light yet probing, echoing through the genteel surroundings of their intimate dining setting.

Benedict's eyes flickered momentarily, a veiled shadow crossing his typically jovial features. "I must confess I did not think his interest in you would become as serious as courtship," he admitted, his tone containing a mix of regret and subtle warning.

His hands idly adjusted the silverware on the table, a clear reflection of the discomfort brewing within.

"You do not like him," Grace said succinctly, her eyes narrowing ever so slightly in a keen observation of her

brother's mannerisms.

“Oh, I have nothing against the Duke,” Benedict replied, somewhat hastily, his gaze avoiding hers as he spoke. “I do not even know the man to make such judgments about him. I just think he is not the right one for you...” he trailed off, a reluctant admission hanging between them.

“Why?” she pressed, her single-word inquiry piercing the tranquil air with unbridled curiosity.

Benedict did not respond, his silence hanging heavily between them, a palpable entity of unsaid words and unshared thoughts.

“Why did not you say this on the night of the first ball?” she prompted again, her voice steady yet gently encouraging, coaxing him to reveal the thoughts that were clearly burdening his mind.

He sighed deeply, his shoulders heaving in a resigned manner. “Like I said, I did not think he was serious at all,” he replied, his words deliberate, though a faint hint of evasion lingered still.

“But it was your advice to entertain courtship even if it fails,” she reminded him yet again, her voice laced with mild frustration, trying to wrap her head around his perplexing behavior.

His contradictions were utterly unlike him.

Benedict leaned back, rubbing his temples in an uncharacteristic display of vexation. “I did not recommend Dawshire, now, did I?” he returned, his gaze finally meeting hers, a flicker of pleading desperation subtly clouding his eyes.

Grace, feeling the defensive surge of a protective advocate, swiftly countered, “Now this is you being utterly judgmental of the Duke, Brother.”

He shook his head, leaning forward with earnestness etched across his countenance. “What I am saying is that you do not *know* Dawshire, Grace,” he insisted, his voice tense and imbued with a fear genuine and potent.

The concern she saw in him right now was so intense that it radiated fervent energy, its depths housing something oddly akin to fear. This silent, trepidatious emotion mirrored strangely in his eyes made her heart clench unexpectedly.

Memories flickered in her mind. She recalled a similar fear she’d seen flickering in Barbara’s eyes when she’d mentioned the Dawshire Secret at Tabitha’s during tea, a dark, enigmatic aura that seemed to shroud the Duke in mystery. Henry’s cryptic words about the Duke also resurfaced, adding layers to the enigma that was Thomas, festering doubts and unresolved curiosities.

“What do I not know?” Grace asked her brother, at last, a weightiness in her voice that spoke of inner turmoil and perplexity. “Is this to do with the Dawshire Secret?” she added, her eyes searching his, looking for answers in the familiar pools of hazel that had always been transparent to her.

Benedict's expression shifted, the surprise crossing his face fleeting but distinctly palpable. His eyes darted away for a moment, as though attempting to gather thoughts that had been unexpectedly scattered.

"All you should know is that Dawshire is not to be trusted, Grace," he began, his voice lowering to a serious, hushed tone that immediately pulled her into a tense focus. "And I would not want a man like that around my sister. But at the same time, it isn't my place to interfere in your relationship. Not yet, anyway," he continued, his eyes flickering with a mix of protective vigor and reluctant restraint.

The lingering notion of the Duke being enshrouded in some impenetrable mystery ensnared her thoughts, turning them into a tumultuous sea of questions and trepidation.

Grace could feel her heart pounding in her ears as she pressed, "Whatever it is, do you not think I have a right to know?" Her voice echoed with a blend of despair and subtle defiance, crying out for clarity amidst the bewildering fog that had encased the Duke in her mind.

Benedict's mouth opened, teetering on the brink of utterance, his gaze reflecting an inner struggle as he seemingly wrestled with some internal dilemma. But words were stolen from him as the butler entered with impeccable, practiced discretion, yet his presence sliced through the mounting tension like a dagger through silk.

Grace's gaze lingered on her brother, a silent plea etched across her face as the butler delivered a message to him. A mixture of frustration and unresolved fear lingered heavily within her as she watched her brother excuse himself, his

departure leaving her enshrouded in a sea of unanswered questions and unsettling thoughts.

Benedict, pausing momentarily at the sideboard to pluck an extra piece of toast and a handful of fresh berries, offered her a parting glance, one laden with unspoken words and a palpable tension that seemed to hang in the air even after his departure.

Grace sat, the remains of her breakfast now forgotten, her appetite stolen by the disconcerting exchange. Her thoughts spiraled, twining around every cryptic message and every concealed truth that seemed to weave an enigmatic tapestry around Thomas.

The silverware gleamed back at her, its polished surface reflecting a version of herself, furrowed brow and contemplative eyes lost in a maelstrom of bewilderment.

Who was the Duke of Dawshire?

## CHAPTER 14



Grace was on her way to her bedchamber when she came across her father in the hallway, his sturdy yet slightly aged frame casting a comforting silhouette in the dimly lit passage. She greeted him with a small, amiable smile, the day's weariness reflecting in her soft eyes.

Just as she opened her mouth to bid him a warm goodnight, he queried, with a genteel, paternal quality to his voice, "Mind a little late-night chat, dear? Or are you too tired for that?"

A familiar tenderness cascaded through his words, invoking in her an immediate willingness to accede.

"Not at all, Father," she said, her voice imbued with a gentle, fatigued warmth.

Grace shifted her course to follow him into his study, the familiar scent of rich mahogany and aged paper wafting comfortingly around her.

In the soft light of the study, the concern knitting her father's brow became markedly visible.

“Is something the matter, Papa?” she ventured, her tone laced with cautious curiosity, as she perched herself delicately on the velvet armchair opposite him.

“Your mother feels like you’re pushing her away, Grace,” he declared with a soft but unvarnished sincerity, taking her somewhat by surprise.

Her brows gently knitted in a fusion of confusion and curiosity as she queried, “Did she tell you that?”

Her mother had seemed perfectly content during dinner, her demeanor revealing no trace of the discontent her father now voiced.

“Oh, no,” Mark responded with a chuckle that carried a melodic resonance through the tranquility of the study. “Emily merely dropped it casually in conversation. You know your mother. She is always in her own little world. Hardly ever complains, too, so long as she gets her shopping allowances.” His eyes twinkled momentarily with fond reminiscence. “But she did lament and seemed quite concerned that there might be something she has done to offend you?” His voice, while light, held an undercurrent of genuine concern.

Grace, while attempting to maintain a composed exterior, felt a gentle twinge of guilt. “Nothing at all,” she assured, her voice a gentle caress aimed to mollify his worry.

Mark, however, quirked a brow, a signature paternal skepticism dancing in his eyes.



Grace sighed lightly, her shoulders sinking into a slight slouch of resignation as she confessed, “First, I am not pushing her away,” and paused before adding, “And with regards to her feelings, I think she is talking about the conversation I had with her after her tea with the matrons.”

With a delicate and articulate flow, Grace unfolded the tale of her mother’s exuberant—and rather premature—introductions of her as the future Duchess of Dawshire in Society, where such a future was far from certain.

Upon hearing her words, Mark released a beleaguered sigh, its depth carrying the weight of paternal understanding and sympathy. “Understand that your mother means well, Grace, dear,” he encouraged, his words gently enveloping her in a paternal warmth. “She is terrible at containing her excitement and showing some restraint, but it all comes from a good place,” he said with reassuring gravity.

Grace nodded slowly. “I know, Papa. But for her own sake, too, Mother needs to learn some restraint and how to keep her affairs private in Society.”

“I know, child,” he agreed, leaning forward slightly, his eyes reflecting a world of paternal understanding. “And you need to learn some patience, too. Especially where your mother is concerned.” A light, hearty chuckle escaped him as he added, “Oh, what do I do with the squabbling women in my life?” His eyes sparkled with a gentle mischief, causing Grace to be swept into his merry mirth.

Their laughter mingled in the air, a harmonious echo that held the timeless bond between father and daughter. With a lightness that seemed to gently ease the earlier tension, Grace agreed to exercise patience, though playfully stipulated that

her mother should cultivate restraint and privacy in equal measure.

“She is your wife. You need to teach her,” she teased, her eyes dancing with playful defiance.

“And she is your mother,” Mark retorted in kind, his laughter rich and warm as it filled the room.

Thomas was at the club one afternoon when a gentleman joined him in his corner. The resonant clinking of glassware and murmurings of other gentlemen in the club softly enveloped the space, an ambient backdrop to what was about to become a most intriguing encounter. His attention was momentarily drawn by the unobtrusive approach of the newcomer.

He looked up to a rather fashionable young man dressed in a cascade of impressive—not to mention garishly splendid—colors, which despite their audacity were strangely fitting. The man’s hand elegantly cradled a walking stick, an accessory that seemed to serve more as a statement than a necessity.

“Good day to you,” the gentleman greeted with a voice smooth and cultured, extending a pleasant, albeit somewhat enigmatic, smile in Thomas’s direction.

The familiarity of that smile, something in its curvature, struck a chord within Thomas, kindling a faint ember of recognition. The gentleman, interpreting the puzzling scrutiny in Thomas’s gaze, introduced himself with measured confidence.

“I am Benedict Jennings, the Viscount of Hale.”

The puzzle pieces snapped into place. Ah, Grace’s elusive older brother, Thomas mused, mentally aligning the visage before him with tales and descriptions he’d heard from Grace.

Beneath the veneer of expectation lighting the Viscount of Hale’s eyes lay a discernible similitude to his sister, an intrinsic assurance that seemed to emanate from the Jennings line. The reminiscent air of certainty and inquisitive spark mirrored those moments with Grace in the library, coaxing an involuntary, albeit subtle, smile to grace Thomas’s lips.

“A pleasure, Hale,” Thomas acknowledged with a courteous dip of his head, his voice gentle but firm.

“Likewise,” Lord Hale returned, his demeanor equally amiable, a congeniality that veiled the palpable scrutiny within his gaze.

Upon Thomas’s invitation, a drink was procured for the Viscount, which he accepted with a cordial nod. The amber liquid swirled gently within the crystal glass as he took a measured sip, then, with calculated casualness, ventured, “I see you are courting my sister.”

“I have the honor, yes,” Thomas affirmed, maintaining a level, sincere gaze upon the other man.

Lord Hale’s eyes, sharp and probing, never wavered from Thomas as he segued into the anticipated inquiry. “What are

your intentions for Grace?” His voice, though soft, bore an unmistakable gravity.

“The best, rest assured,” Thomas replied evenly, a determined, protective fire subtly igniting within his depths.

Lord Hale’s expression subtly shifted, a mix of contemplation and unspoken concern crossing his visage before posing his next, decidedly pointed question. “Do you wish to marry my sister?”

Despite the somewhat jarring directness of the inquiry, Thomas had to acknowledge a certain respect for Lord Hale’s unadorned approach.

“Right now, I am getting to know what a lovely person your sister is,” Thomas responded with composed sincerity. He added, “The decision of a life together, however, is not up to me entirely. It is a mutual decision Lady Grace and I have to make. One we shan’t rush into for its importance.”

This appeared to mollify Lord Hale to a degree. “There is no rush in matrimony, I agree,” he conceded, his tone threading a semblance of understanding through his words. “But know that I will stop at nothing to protect my sister’s best interests.”

The anticipated warning was gently but firmly laid forth, an unwavering resolution gleaming in Lord Hale’s eyes.

Thomas, despite the protective tightening in his chest, respected this. Lord Hale’s steadfast protectiveness of his sister’s well-being struck a chord within him. Nonetheless,

Grace held the reins here, her autonomy in their relationship a cherished and non-negotiable aspect. She had the complete liberty to shape their path forward.

*To make or break your heart*, a subtle voice murmured within him, intertwining perplexity and a whisper of fear into his thoughts.

The veiled warning issued, Lord Hale's demeanor lightened marginally, steering their dialogue into more congenial territories.

"Quite the cane you have, Hale," Thomas complimented.

The Viscount grinned. "It is Celtic," he said proudly, handing him the cane.

Thomas examined the intricate carvings on the handle.

"I collected it on my last trip to Ireland," Lord Hale continued. "The gypsy I purchased it from was loath to part with it."

"However did you manage to succeed?"

"I had to make him an offer he could not refuse. Besides the sum I paid, I allowed him to claim friendship with me to whomever he wills."

"That is quite a price." Thomas chuckled. The conversation was more pleasant than he thought, and they navigated

through topics of politics, estate management, and the Season's social events with a mutual, if cautious, amiability.

\* \* \*

Returning home that afternoon, Thomas was met with a commotion that caused an instinctual unease to coil in his stomach, the echo of their conversation lingering like an unresolved chord as he moved to discern the source of the disturbance.

He made his way to his mother's bedroom, the soft echo of his hurried footsteps intermingling with the crescendo of agitated voices emanating from within. Bursting through the ornate doorway, his gaze fell on a tableau of tense desperation—his mother, clutching what unmistakably was a table knife, while the nurse, housekeeper, butler, and a visibly shaken maid hovered anxiously, attempting to manage the precarious situation.

“Another step, and I will have all your guts spilling on this fine carpet,” Laura threatened, her eyes alight with a wild, unbridled fervor that pierced through the chamber's heavy air.

Thomas's gaze swung toward the housekeeper, whose eyes flickered with a blend of fear and concern, as she gently offered, “Oh, my apologies, Your Grace. But the new maid did not know that Her Grace isn't allowed any cutlery.”

A subtle, apologetic bow of the maid's head, her eyes flickering with a mixture of guilt and apprehension, followed, “It is an oversight on my part, Your Grace.” She took a cautious step forward, an action which only served to elicit another shrill, desperate cry from his mother, the knife brandished once more as a weapon of sheer defiance.

Thomas, his heart thrumming a frantic rhythm in his chest, interjected, a quiet, firm steadiness to his words, “You do not want to hurt anyone. You’re not going to hurt anyone.”

Steadfast, he navigated through the cluster of servants toward his mother.

While this tempest of emotions from Laura was not an unfamiliar scene, it had been a lengthy passage of time since she had spiraled into such a chaotic state. A tangible pain knotted within him, sharply juxtaposed against the brief respite of hope he’d felt for her in recent times.

Thomas witnessed a softening, a subtle yielding in her gaze as she fixed her eyes upon him. “Neil? Neil, is that you?”

“It is me,” responded Thomas, his voice barely above a whisper, allowing a tender smile to grace his lips, despite the aching twinge in his heart.

At this moment, his identity was malleable, crafted into whoever she needed him to be in order to find solace and tranquility once more.

“I missed you, Neil. I have been waiting for you all this while.” Laura’s voice quivered, the knife finally slipping from her grasp, clattering with a muted thud against the plush carpet beneath.

He met her halfway, feeling the coolness of the knife being discretely removed from their vicinity by the swift butler, as

Laura cradled his face with her delicate, trembling hands, a cascade of tears streaming down her cheeks.

“I am sorry I made you wait,” Thomas managed to articulate, his throat constricting with the surge of emotion threatening to overwhelm him.

“You must be tired. Let us get you into bed,” he coaxed gently, his hands reassuringly placed on her shoulders, guiding her toward the inviting softness of her bed, while behind them, the servants busied themselves with tidying the remnants of the disrupted meal.

The nurse, with cautious nimbleness, handed Thomas a cup, her voice a confidential whisper. “Her sleeping draught.”

Eying the cup, Laura inquired with a tone of innocent curiosity, “Is that water, Neil? I am quite parched,” even as he was delicately pulling the covers snugly around her.

Nodding with a soothing smile, Thomas handed her the draught, which she accepted without a hint of reluctance.

“That is some awful-tasting water,” she commented, her sleeve serving as an impromptu napkin to dab away the residual liquid from her lips. Her eyes, still shimmering with the remnants of tears, warmed as she offered, “You should have some too, Neil, darling.”

“You drank it all,” Thomas replied, a gentle hand softly caressing her silvery strands.



“I am sorry.” She yawned, her eyelids beginning to flutter in drowsy surrender.

A wan smile lingered on Thomas’s lips as he watched over her. His mother did not deserve this life, and he was all but helpless.

He was still yet to unravel the simple truth behind his father and brother’s death, an enigma that weighed heavily on his soul like a pervasive fog, unwilling to be dispersed by the light of understanding.

“*Will I ever?*” his mind queried, a solemn whisper amidst the turbulent tempest of his thoughts. However, it was an answer that, despite his perpetual searching, obstinately eluded him.

“I love you, Neil.” Laura’s voice, fragile yet somehow grounding, infiltrated his introspection, her words accompanied by another languid yawn as she turned gently beneath her softly enveloping sheets.

“I love you too, Mother.” Thomas’s response was tender, though the final word lingered, a whispered admission meant only for his own ears and the shadowy confines of the dimly lit chamber.

Ensuring that his mother was truly enveloped in the comforting arms of slumber and that the nurse and housekeeper were competently managing the aftermath of the prior chaos, Thomas reluctantly detached himself from the serene yet somehow melancholic atmosphere of the bedroom. The desire to submerge himself within the distracting currents

of his work beckoned him, though his mental faculties seemed to rebel against the notion.

With resolve giving way to emotional exhaustion, he instructed a servant to retrieve his coat and hat, intending to seek respite beneath the vast, impartial skies above.

In the front hall, a sudden remembrance halted his steps, causing him to pivot toward the patient butler.

“Tell Mrs. Mops that the maid is not to be fired. She should be given the instructions and rules around the household, but she keeps her job,” he stated with a firmness that belied his inner turmoil.

“Very well, Your Grace,” the butler responded, offering a nod of understanding and a flash of quiet empathy.

Seeking the comforting familiarity of camaraderie, Thomas called on his steadfast friend, Gilbert, who upon opening the door immediately discerned the weariness that enveloped Thomas like a shroud.

“You are looking worse than the skies in winter,” Gilbert observed, his voice laced with a genuine concern that only deepened the lines marking Thomas’s furrowed brow.

“I am afraid Mother isn’t doing as good as I thought she was,” Thomas admitted with a heavy sigh, allowing the facades of strength and stoicism to momentarily crumble within the safe confines of their friendship.

Gilbert, always the pillar amidst Thomas's storms, expressed his heartfelt regrets and provided assurance. "You are ever here for her. You are doing enough, man."

However, the bitterness that had taken root within Thomas's soul whispered discordantly, "Not enough."

A frown etched itself upon Gilbert's countenance. "You are being too hard on yourself now."

Thomas, ever the resilient spirit, declared with a fervency that emanated from the very core of his being, "If being hard on myself, whatever that is, is what will get my family their justice, then so be it."

Gilbert's observation came with a blend of understanding and gentle admonishment. "This is like you saying you will sacrifice yourself for justice." Without pausing, allowing Thomas no chance to retort, he continued softly, "If only unearthing the truth will bring back the late Duke and your brother..."

Thomas, grounded by the reality of his friend's words, conceded, "Sadly, it would not." A pause, before adding, "But it might give Mother the peace of mind grief has robbed her of."

Certainty of her peace was an elusive phantom, yet for Laura Robins, Thomas would navigate through the storms of doubt and uncertainty. He'd traverse uncharted territories of despair and determination, in search of that evasive closure, that peace.

His heart, bound by love and duty, declared silently that he must try, he must persist, for her sake, until tranquility graced her soul once more.

## CHAPTER 15



Grace and Thomas were attending a garden party that afternoon, the lush surroundings blanketed by a clear azure sky, offering a picturesque backdrop to the social dalliances of the gentry. It was a pleasant affair, indeed, with the weather proving to be quite cooperative, offering a gentle breeze that softly caressed the attendees and whispered through the verdant foliage.

“Grace, Your Grace.” A familiar voice, brimming with exuberant cordiality, halted their leisurely stroll toward the refreshments table, where an array of vibrant delicacies awaited.

“That is Mrs. Langley approaching. Quite the influential matron,” Grace whispered to Thomas, noting the subtle furrow of his brow, a silent query as to the identity of the approaching woman.

With a sort of determined hustle, Mrs. Langley made her way toward them on rather short, sturdy legs, her dress fluttering mildly with her hurried pace.

“Oh, I thought I’d never catch up,” she declared with a punctuated exhale, once she’d reached them, energetically

wielding her fan to cool herself, yet still somehow maintaining an air of refined composure.

Despite her evident fatigue, Mrs. Langley's countenance was adorned with a smile of such expansiveness that it seemingly threatened to engulf her entire visage.

Her eyes darted between Grace and Thomas, anticipation alight within them. Recognizing the expectation in Mrs. Langley's gaze, Grace gracefully executed the formal introductions.

"Oh, I am sure Grace must have told you, Your Grace. But my Tabitha is dear friends with her," Mrs. Langley gushed, her words tumbling forth with a warmth that was both genuine and somewhat overpowering.

"Grace never mentioned it," responded Thomas, his voice steady and polite, yet beneath it lay a hint of unmistakable forthrightness that characterized his interactions.

"Oh," emanated from Mrs. Langley, a single syllable carrying a momentary flicker of surprise. But her ebullient spirit proved unassailable, her smile unyielding amidst the unexpected revelation.

"Now you know." She chuckled, undeterred, and continued, "Since Grace is friends with Tabitha, I think it would be a great idea to introduce Your Grace to my older son, Matthew. I am sure you two could forge an equally strong relationship."

Grace, feeling the firmness in Thomas's arm subtly tense around hers, offered a gentle, reassuring squeeze, silently commending his patience. After all, Mrs. Langley's ebullient enthusiasm toward him could indeed be construed as a positive sign, especially considering his ongoing endeavors to refine his image.

"Oh, I am sure he is around here somewhere," Mrs. Langley continued, her gaze scanning the vibrant congregation of guests.

Grace, familiar with the visage of Matthew Langley, also scanned their surroundings, but he remained elusive amidst the mingling crowd.

Just at that moment, Caroline, graceful and poised, approached with her father, the Earl of Willson, in tow.

Thomas, ever the gentleman yet perhaps somewhat relieved, welcomed the timely interruption, gracefully pivoting from Mrs. Langley's effusive conversation to greet the newcomers.

With genuine warmth, Caroline facilitated the introduction of her father to Thomas.

"Oh, Caroline, dear, the Duke and I are no strangers, but it is always a pleasure, Dawshire," Lord Willson spoke, his voice imbued with a congeniality that mirrored his kindly demeanor.

Thomas, his cordiality unblemished, engaged amicably with Lord Willson, attentively absorbing the Earl's words as he mentioned that Caroline had shared details of their previous

discussions. The subtle nuances of their conversation, the gentle ebb and flow of social exchange, continued amidst the blooming flora of the splendid garden, where secrets and alliances often intertwined beneath the delicate dance of polite conversation.

Underneath Thomas's cordiality, however, was an odd air Grace could not pin down. Something in the way his eyes flickered with an unamiable emotion, something that sent apprehension down her spine.

"... you should have a look at my lands, then. The ones I speak of are not too far away from London, as a matter of fact," the Earl was saying to Thomas, his voice maintaining a steady, pleasant cadence that only briefly distracted her from the Duke's enigmatic demeanor.

When the Earl turned to her, his eyes gentle with affable curiosity, he asked about her parents, and Grace managed to pull her thoughts together sufficiently to inform him that they could not make it to today's event.

"Ah, life goes beyond the English aristocracy's parties. We often get carried away and forget that," Lord Willson responded with a chuckle, a genuine warmth lighting his features, and momentarily, Grace found solace in the easy congeniality of the exchange.

Yet, when the Earl returned his attention to his daughter and Thomas, that familiar, elusive weight seemed to anchor itself once more in Grace's chest. A place, dimly lit by unacknowledged emotions and unfamiliar feelings, she still could not decipher.



Suddenly finding the conversation and company stifling, she crafted a gentle excuse to remove herself from the scene, feeling an urgent need to seek refuge away from the conviviality that now seemed oppressive.

Grace found sanctuary in the first empty room back inside the sprawling manor, her pulse easing slightly as she stepped into the solitude, attempting to wrestle with the tumult of emotions cascading through her.

What was wrong with her?

No sooner had she found this temporary haven than the door creaked open, and her solitude was gently invaded.

“I knew you weren’t going to the retiring room.” Thomas’s voice, soft yet carrying a thread of concern, enveloped her as he shut the door behind him and purposefully made his way toward her.

“Why did you leave Caroline and her father?” Grace managed to ask, her voice barely above a whisper, trying to mask the vulnerability that seemed to cling to every syllable.

“You seemed unwell,” he replied, and for a moment, Grace felt something tender unfurl within her at his perceptible concern. But it was snuffed just as quickly when he added, “And Lady Caroline’s mother sought her attention right after you left, anyway.”

A pang of something bitter—disappointment, perhaps—twisted within her. He’d only followed her because Caroline

was not there to occupy his attention. She was nothing more than a second choice, a fill-in, she lamented silently, a wave of misery clouding her thoughts.

With effort, she swallowed the unpleasantness, attempting to shield her emotions, striving not to meet his gaze lest her eyes betrayed the turmoil swirling within her.

But Thomas, ever perceptive, gently but firmly placed his hand on her chin, tilting her face so she was compelled to meet his gaze.

“Are you all right, Grace?” His voice, soft and laden with genuine concern, seemed to caress her name.

The authenticity in his eyes beckoned her to believe that his concern, his attention, was genuine. That she meant something to him.

She was about to respond, her words perched tentatively on her lips, when her gaze landed on a twisted scar beneath his left eye. The mark of a pain once sharp and immediate. Whatever weapon had slashed him there had narrowly missed his eye.

And, imagining the agony that must have coursed through him then, she felt a sympathetic pain twist within her.

“That looks to have been quite excruciating,” she found herself murmuring instead, her voice barely above a whisper, yet laden with a wealth of unspoken emotion, as their eyes

remained locked, lingering on a precipice of unspoken words and concealed feelings.

“What?” Thomas’s voice, a gentle baritone, interjected into her thoughts, anchoring her back to the present moment.

Grace, blinking against the sudden intrusion of reality, snapped out of her reverie and focused on his gaze, wherein she discerned a flicker of confusion, closely trailed by a hint of self-consciousness as she steadfastly continued to stare.

“That scar,” she ventured softly, recognizing there was now little point in retracting her curiosity—it had already effortlessly spilled into the space between them.

A vulnerable silence spanned briefly, before, propelled more by a tender impulse than conscious thought, she felt her hands moving, drawn toward the imperfection marring his otherwise handsome features. Her palm lightly caressed his cheek, her fingers whispering over the roughened line of his scar.

Thomas tensed, almost imperceptibly, when her touch grazed his skin, but he did not move away. Rather, his own hand rose to gently cradle hers, his warmth seeping into her, spreading a gentle heat that seemed to resonate within her very heart.

“Life is never without its pains, Grace,” he replied quietly, his voice a gentle caress that brushed over her senses. “Some of them just leave us with bigger, more visible scars,” he added, a melancholic lilt to his words.

“I am sorry,” she murmured, her finger delicately tracing the path of the scar, a silent acknowledgment of the pain it symbolized.

He closed his eyes, leaning slightly into her touch, an unspoken acceptance hanging delicately in the air between them.

“It isn’t your fault, Grace,” he whispered, his voice almost imperceptibly unsteady.

“I wish you’d never had to suffer,” she whispered back, her voice a barely audible admission.

Briefly opening his eyes, he met her gaze before volunteering, “I got it from a bayonet.” He paused as if contemplating how much more to reveal. “My face practically chronicles my time in service now,” he added with a bitter chuckle, an undercurrent of pain threading through his subsequent words as he continued to share some of the horrors he’d faced.

“My father and brother died just after my return. It is fortunate I’d regained consciousness in time to have last conversations with them, at least,” he finished.

But beneath the veil of his grief lay an additional layer of bitterness, a complexity that suggested to her that his narrative was far from complete.

“My condolences,” she offered softly, her words a mere whisper against the weighted silence.

“I am sorry to burden you with such a thing, Grace. I should have kept my woes to myself,” he suddenly apologized, emerging from the depths of his memories with an abruptness that slightly startled her.

“Do not be,” she gently implored. “I liked that you did. I want to know, Thomas,” she continued, her words a quiet plea.

I want to know *you*, she silently admitted to herself, her heart subtly echoing her unspoken sentiment.

A glimmer of something—perhaps hope, perhaps gratitude—flickered in his eyes at her encouragement.

Her finger, still exploring the contours of his face, moved to another scar, and she watched as he swallowed, his gaze darkening with an intensity that sent a shiver of anticipation through her. She reciprocated the swallow, her throat suddenly parched, her heartbeat a hushed yet frantic rhythm in her chest.

His gaze dropped to her lips. His face inched closer. A breath, a heartbeat, and they lingered there, at the precipice of a kiss, ensnared in a delicate tension that threatened to consume them both.

Their lips, now barely an inch apart, hovered there, when suddenly, the distant laughter and light-hearted banter from the hallway punctured their bubble, startling them back to the here and now, where their emotions lay, unspoken yet palpably lingering, between them.

“I should go,” Grace gasped, a sudden influx of rationality dousing the heat of the moment like a pail of cold water.

He opened his mouth, the look in his eyes a mix of earnest emotion and subtle pleading, but she did not afford him the opportunity to utter whatever reassurances or pleas he might have offered. Whirling around, she hastily vacated the room, her cheeks flushed with a blend of exhilaration and embarrassment, her heart embattled between desire and a perplexing kind of guilt.

In the hallway, through eyes still blurred by her hastily quelled emotions, she glimpsed Caroline at the far end, emerging from a room, her actions oddly furtive.

Grace’s brows furrowed slightly as she observed her friend hastily adjust the buttons on her bodice, pat down her disheveled hair, and subsequently scurry in the opposite direction, evidently oblivious to Grace’s presence. Curiosity, albeit momentarily, redirected her thoughts.

Concealing herself behind the heavy drapery of an alcove, Grace covertly watched Caroline’s retreating form, questions whirling within her mind regarding her friend’s peculiar behavior. But as she eased from her hiding place and rounded a nearby corner, she was abruptly stalled by an unexpected encounter.

“Oh, Lady Grace. Just the woman I was looking for,” Barbara greeted her with a peculiar intensity, her eyes flickering around almost nervously.

Without awaiting a response, she seized Grace's wrist and dragged her into a proximate room, where, beneath a hushed urgency, she unleashed warnings that left Grace both profoundly perplexed and subtly rattled.

"He isn't who he appears to be, Lady Grace," Barbara uttered, her eyes reflecting a sincerity laced with fear, and Grace felt a chill run down her spine as she added, "The Duke of Dawshire is a murderer. He killed before. And I am worried about you, Lady Grace."

Grace, striving to maintain a semblance of rationality amidst the bewildering claim, retorted, "Why, Barbara, all men who've been at war have killed. That doesn't make them murderers. It is service to their country. A call they could not avoid."

Yet, internally, her stomach knotted, a tumult of emotions and thoughts vying for dominance within her.

Barbara, with a dismissive wave of her hand and a sympathetic look, countered, "Not the war. These are innocent lives he took. You appeared unaware during tea at Tabitha's. And I would have told you right then had Tabitha not stopped me."

Grace's heart rattled within its cage as she prodded, "Where did you hear all this, Barbara?"

Barbara's reply sent an additional shiver through Grace's being. "Why... it is all over Society. The Dawshire Secret is no secret at all. Honestly, I found it surprising that you of all people did not know that the Duke killed—"

A sudden, sharp bang from the hallway outside interrupted the haunting revelation, and both women started, their eyes wide, their breaths held.

“Oh, dear. I should not be running my mouth like this!” Barbara exclaimed, an amalgam of fear and regret in her eyes. And before Grace could wrestle further information from her, she hastily departed, leaving behind a suffocating silence, punctuated only by Grace’s staggered breaths.

Her mind awhirl with the haunting implication of Barbara’s words and the surreal memory of a near kiss, Grace, later that night, passed by her mother’s bedroom. The door, ajar, suggested a welcome, or perhaps a careless forgetfulness. And with a sigh, she decided to check in before surrendering herself to what promised to be a restless night.

Her mother was perched on her vanity chair, her fingers delicately fingering something that Grace could not quite discern from the doorway. The older woman, clad in her white night rail, swiveled at her entrance, her eyes soft yet holding a hint of fatigue.

“You’re not sleeping, dear?” Emily inquired, her voice a gentle lilt in the dimly lit room.

Grace, hesitating at the threshold, replied, “I was just on my way,” before adding, with a small, forced smile, “And I saw the door open.”

“Oh, I am just returning from your father’s study. I must not have pushed it properly shut,” Emily said with a dismissive



wave of her hand, the tranquility in her voice belying the turbulent thoughts Grace was currently wrestling with.

Emily gently prodded her daughter about her attendance at the garden party, her eyes shimmering with a motherly blend of curiosity and concern.

Grace, standing there amidst the gentle fragrance of her mother's perfume and the muted ambiance of the softly lit room, navigated through the memory of the recent intimate moment with Thomas and the disturbing exchange with Barbara.

A smile, tinged with a bittersweet complexity, danced momentarily on her lips as she confessed, "Quite eventful, I must say," accompanying the words with a sheepish chuckle that felt both genuine and strained in its lightness.

"Was the Duke there?" Emily's voice carried a subtle note of anticipation that did not go unnoticed, but quickly, she seemed to scold herself. "Oh, never mind that I asked. Your father said I need to curb my nosiness."

Her words were a playful echo, but Grace could perceive the underlying sincerity within them. Emily did indeed harbor a genuine fondness for the Duke, one that had often bordered on matchmaking. And Grace, in her peculiar emotional state, found her mother's quip amusing yet piercing, a jolt of reality amidst the dreamlike quality of the evening's occurrences.

"Are you laughing at me now?" Emily's faux pout tugged at a heartstring within Grace, and her words, somewhat self-deprecating yet affectionate, brought a gentle, comforting

warmth to the atmosphere. “Your father thinks I ask too many questions. I think he is right,” she continued, her fingers absentmindedly tracing the outline of a delicate piece of jewelry resting on the vanity.

It was then that Grace noticed the piece—a stunning necklace, glistening with diamonds and sapphires, nestled amidst the velvet cushion of an ornate box.

Her mother’s voice, imbued with nostalgic reverence, spoke, “It was my mother’s,” and upon noticing Grace’s lingering gaze added, “And her mother’s before.” She gently lifted the necklace, allowing it to cascade down, catching the ambient light in a cascade of sparkles. “Your grandmother gave this to me upon my engagement. I’d brought it out, hoping to pass it on and carry the tradition, but I do not want to overwhelm you. As you’re not even engaged yet,” she finished, her voice a blend of reminiscence, hope, and a subtle, concealed worry.

Grace, her soul momentarily soothed by the familial connection and the unwavering love emanating from her mother, moved closer, seating herself on a nearby ottoman. Taking her mother’s free hand into her own, she offered reassurance with a tender smile. “You make judgments and come to conclusions a little too quickly, Mama. But you are hardly nosy.”

Silence lingered between them, charged with unspoken words and understood feelings, as she continued, “But we are all only human, and have our different strengths and weaknesses. Do not get me wrong, but I do appreciate your care. I really do, Mama.” Her words hung in the space between them, a gentle acknowledgment and acceptance of the other’s imperfections and fervent love. “And I will be honored to accept and carry on our family tradition. So, you can keep it and give it to me when the opportunity presents itself,” she concluded, the

encouragement in her voice mingling with a quiet, internal resignation.

Emily's eyes, a reflection of Grace's own, lit up with an unspoken understanding and a glowing hope that softened the harsh edges of Grace's tumultuous emotions. And amidst the ensuing silence, within the sacred safety of maternal affection, Grace discovered a surprising openness within herself to the prospect of marriage.

However, the shadow of a certain Duke loomed subtly, yet undeniably, within her consciousness, intertwining with the recognition of their societal obligations and impending separation.

While an insidious sadness seeped into her, contradicting the false hope she'd just instilled within her mother, guilt, cold and unforgiving, entwined itself around her heart, threatening to suffocate the fragile peace she'd momentarily found within this maternal moment.

## CHAPTER 16



Grace and Caroline were supposed to go shopping the following day. But when a hastily penned note, its ink barely dry, was delivered into Grace's hands, requesting a postponement due to a malaise afflicting her dear friend, concern bloomed in her chest, overshadowing their jovial plans.

Worried, she hastily prepared herself, and with a few succinct words to her maid, she was soon making her way toward Caroline's residence, her thoughts swirling with a mixture of concern and curiosity.

Upon arrival, she was shown into Caroline's softly illuminated bedroom, where her friend, paler than her usual vibrant self, reclined amidst the plush pillows.

"It isn't as serious as you think, Grace," Caroline whispered, her voice a gentle assurance caressed by an underlying fragility. "Just a little headache," she added, her eyes attempting a playful roll, though they betrayed a weariness that seemed more profound than she let on.

Grace, taking a seat on the edge of the comforting softness of the bed, her eyes keenly observing her friend, retorted, "It is

serious enough if it is keeping you in bed.”

“I am just resting,” Caroline gently protested, then gave a faint smile to quell Grace’s apprehension. “The physician said the Season must be taking its toll on me.”

Her words, intended to be dismissive, failed to mask the peculiar tension that Grace sensed coiled within her.

In that intimately quiet room, where the distant sounds of household activities whispered through the walls, Grace’s concern metamorphosed into a probing curiosity.

She leaned slightly forward, her voice soft yet insistent. “Are you sure you’re all right, Caroline?” She hesitated, before adding, “Was it perhaps something you ate at the garden party yesterday?”

Her words hung in the air, a quiet inquiry amidst the subtle rustling of the bed linens.

Caroline’s response was not verbal, but a sudden, dramatic blush that seeped into her cheeks, coloring her visage a shade so strikingly deep, it elicited a quiet gasp from Grace. Her friend’s eyes darted away, an unspoken turmoil flickering within them.

“Caroline?” Grace’s voice, now colored with a deeper concern and a growing suspicion, softly pressed.

But her friend remained silent, her gaze affixed to some distant point as if attempting to locate an elusive answer.

As the silence stretched, thickening the air between them, Grace found her thoughts darting back to the previous day, to a moment in a secluded hallway and an image of Caroline fumbling with her bodice, oblivious and... secretive?

“Is there something you’re hiding?” The question, gentle yet insistent, flowed from Grace’s lips as she recalled that peculiar scene. “Where did you disappear to yesterday anyway?”

Her words, carrying the weight of her suspicions, prodded gently at the fortress Caroline seemed to have erected around herself.

The reaction was immediate. Caroline’s eyes snapped back to meet Grace’s, an unspoken confession flickering within them, as her blush deepened, becoming nearly impenetrable in its intensity.

Grace, her mind piecing together the fragments of observation and intuition, allowed a knowing, albeit gentle, accusation to form on her lips. “You have a suitor, Caroline Shampton,” she whispered, her eyes narrowing slightly, only to widen in empathetic astonishment as her friend, normally so ready with a playful rebuttal, simply averted her gaze. “You *do!*” she exclaimed, excited for her friend.

Her excitement faltered, however, when she recalled her deal with Thomas, and his genuine, if not somewhat reserved, expectations and feelings for Caroline. A knot formed in her

stomach, twisting and turning with the ramifications of this newfound yet still undisclosed revelation.

If her friend had indeed found comfort in another's arms, it did not only complicate matters, it threw their carefully plotted arrangement into disarray. The arrangement with Thomas which had once been seen as a benign, mutually beneficial understanding now seemed to totter on the precarious ledge of emotional entanglement. It would be quite unfortunate if he, with his understated but discernible affection for Caroline, had his expectations dashed, and heaven forbid, his heart injured in the fracas.

Yet, at this moment of revelation and mystery, Grace clung to the wisdom of restraint. It was pivotal not to leap toward unfounded conclusions.

With an exhale, steadying her thoughts, she softly asked her friend, "Who is the lucky gentleman, then?"

Caroline's face, now a mosaic of conflict and hesitation, was difficult to behold. She appeared almost tortured, grappling with an internal debate that left her lips slightly parted but devoid of words.

"Oh, take your time, dear. You do not have to tell me immediately," Grace offered gently, her voice a tender cocoon attempting to envelop her friend in understanding and patience. The last thing she wanted was to birth pressure amidst the fragile tendrils of trust and friendship between them.

Caroline seemed to inhale this understanding, her shoulders ever so slightly relaxing from their taut stance. An acknowledgment glimmered in her eyes, thankful yet still tempestuous with undisclosed thoughts.

Recognizing the emotional quagmire her friend seemed to be navigating, Grace, with thoughtful precision, shifted the tide of their conversation. She unfurled the tale of Barbara's startling revelation from the garden party, her words carefully measured yet laced with the undeniable tremor of her own unsettled feelings.

“Do you know the Dawshire Secret, Caroline?” Grace inquired, her eyes searching her friend's for any flicker of recognition or insight.

A shake of the head was Caroline's response, her voice echoing the perplexity that now seemed to linger between them like an unwelcome guest. “Perhaps you can ask your brother?”

Caroline's expression melded into one of confessed ignorance and growing curiosity. “I must confess I am just as confused and curious,” she added, her words fluttering into the space between them.

A sigh escaped Grace's lips. “I tried. Even before Barbara's warning. But Benedict was not very cooperative, I am afraid,” she relayed, the memory of her brother's evasive demeanor and cryptic words playing afresh in her mind, intertwining with Henry's equally obstructive stance.



Why was everyone around them being so conspicuously tight-lipped about the Duke?

Their speculation ventured down various paths, hypotheses forming and dissolving amidst shared looks of bewilderment and conspiratorial whispers. The puzzle of the Duke of Dawshire was yet to be solved, the pieces scattered amidst mystery and reticence.

As Grace prepared to depart, a subtle, unspoken agreement seemed to hang in the air between them—a pact of friendship and shared secrets yet to be fully revealed.

Caroline, ever the gracious hostess even amidst her own emotional tumult, made to accompany Grace to her departure. But Grace, ever mindful of her friend's current state, gently declined.

“Rest, dear Caroline. We shall navigate these mysteries together soon enough.”

At the door, however, her friend stopped her. The touch was gentle, yet laced with an anxiety that was almost palpable. And when Grace turned around, there was much worry in Caroline's eyes when she said, “Be careful, Grace. I should hate to think Barbara is right, but whatever the case, do be cautious, dear friend.”

Grace nodded, the sincere concern in Caroline's eyes seared into her memory as she made her way home, the lingering sunlight casting long shadows that seemed to echo the elongating doubts in her mind.

After dinner that night, a meal through which she mechanically moved, her thoughts were embroiled in the worries and secrets of the day. She sought her brother, finding him in the quiet solitude of his study, his face illuminated by the soft glow of the desk lamp.

Without preamble, she questioned him about the Dawshire Secret once again. “Benedict, you must tell me, what is this mystery that shrouds the Duke?”

Benedict sighed, a weighty, reluctant exhale, his eyes flickering with a mixture of concern and hesitation before he replied, “Society has it that Thomas killed his father and older brother to get the dukedom for himself.”

Grace’s heart stumbled at his words, her voice barely above a whisper, uttering, “What?” She could feel her disbelief like a tangible entity in the room, clawing at the very possibility of the accusation. “That is preposterous. What grounds have they to make such conclusions?” she spluttered, the defiance rising, wrapping around her like a protective cloak.

Benedict leaned back, his fingers steepled as he elaborated with a cautionary tone, “Do you think it a mere coincidence that shortly after his return from service, mangled and incapacitated, his father and older brother, the heir, both died in the same carriage crash?”

“There’s still no argument here, Brother. No proof at all. I cannot believe you’re even entertaining such unfounded accusations and rumors about him,” Grace countered, the surge of defensive emotion surprising even herself as she stood her ground, her shoulders set and her eyes aflame.

Benedict, ever stoic yet with a glimmer of sympathy, continued, “It is said that there’d been a heated argument between Thomas and his father the night before the accident, Grace. That is ground enough for belief. And these suspicions are precisely why I do not want him for you. But as I said, I will only interfere if *and* when the need arises. I am watching him, for now.”

*Suspicions.* The word whirled around her, a bitter taste in her mouth.

“Suspicions. That is just what they are, Benedict. Not facts, not proof,” she insisted, her words a steely resolve against the dark implications cast upon Thomas.

Her brother’s gaze penetrated her own, searching, probing. “Never say you have grown sentiments for the Duke, Grace?” Benedict asked, his voice a tender murmur amidst the storm of allegations.

A defiant lift of her chin, she affirmed, “So, what if I have?” Grace stood her ground, unyielding in the tide of skepticism before her.

Benedict rose, approaching her, his voice gentle yet fervent as he laid a gentle hand on her shoulder. “Then do not let those feelings blind you to caution and reality, dear sister.”

Her eyes met his, a fortress of resolve as she returned, “And do not let those baseless rumors blind you to fair judgment of character and true nature, dear brother.”

With a final, lingering glance, Benedict departed, leaving Grace amidst the echoing silence of the room. As his footsteps receded, she found the room spinning around her as she struggled to comprehend everything.

Thomas, the Duke she had come to know, was not a monster. He would never commit such a heinous act as murder. Much less against his own family. She refused to get swayed. She refused to believe it. The Duke she knew was a good man who would not hurt an ant.

That alone sufficed.

*“Does it now?”* an irksome voice in her head slipped in, sowing the seed of doubt amidst the once fertile certainty of her belief.

And there, in the silent recesses of the study, it began to take root.

## CHAPTER 17



Grace was all Thomas could think of, a constant, gentle echo in the chambers of his thoughts. Her laughter was a lingering melody, and her eyes, oh those eyes, they held a cosmos that seemed so achingly beautiful in its mystery. He wanted to dwell on what could have happened between them at the garden party had that door not been banged in the hallway, to linger in the potential sweetness of unspoken words and barely restrained emotions.

Alas, duty, as ever, loomed its daunting head, and he had other engagements that afternoon. Engagements he hoped could bring him a step closer to the truth he sought, a truth that danced tantalizingly out of reach, shrouded in shadow and enigma.

Lord Willson had invited him to view the lands he'd spoken of not far from London, a wide expanse of fertile fields and potential that stretched toward the horizon. Indeed, getting Caroline to properly introduce him to her father saw the man willing to trust him more—a trust that Thomas was keen to utilize, albeit with an internal grimace of reluctance.

The land stretched before them, a tapestry of greens and earth, under the benevolent gaze of a gentle sun.

“Such fields should not be allowed to go to waste,” Thomas observed as he squinted far, taking in the vastness of their surroundings, his mind already ticking over with potential, with possibility.

“I think you of all people have the key to use the new Corn Laws to your advantage, Lord Willson,” he added, injecting into his voice a sincerity that barely veiled his true intentions.

Lord Willson turned to him, a smile pulling at his features, his eyes twinkling with something Thomas could not quite decipher. “Ah, you think just like your father. Never a wasted opportunity.” He chuckled, the sound light, yet beneath it, a thread of something else lingered.

And at that moment, Thomas felt that bitterness in his throat once again, the sharp, acrid taste of memories and wounds yet to heal. The nerve of him to bring up his father so casually, like uttering the name of a distant acquaintance rather than a dead man shrouded in mystery and pain.

Lord Willson was not a fool, he must have known his words would cut. Thomas may have no proof of the Earl’s crimes right now, but Lord Willson had never hidden his animosity toward the late Duke of Dawshire. That was public knowledge, whispered in hushed conversations in dimly lit rooms.

Thomas shifted slightly, his eyes narrowing ever so slightly as he trod on the path of subtle inquiry. “You sound in agreement with his views?” he prodded, a gentle nudge toward the unspoken, toward the darkness that lingered unsaid between them.

The Earl took a moment, his gaze sweeping over the lands before them as he mused, “Not all his views, of course. But I later realized that I might have been wrong about him in more ways than one.”

His voice held a nuance of something not quite regret, not quite reconciliation, a middle ground where enmities faded into the pragmatic realities of land and title.

Thomas’s eyes lingered on the man, a subtle probe beneath the affable exterior as he said, “Or perhaps it was late Dawshire who’d been wrong about you.” His voice was level, non-confrontational, yet the words held a quiet challenge.

A pause stretched between them, the silent interplay of unspoken words and hidden truths hanging heavy. Lord Willson paused in ostensible thought for a bit before he responded, a thoughtful expression furrowing his brow, “Your father and I disagreed a lot. In most cases, he was mature enough to conceal his feelings, while I was not. But in the end, was there really a point to it all?”

“Perhaps there was,” Thomas replied, his voice holding the merest whisper of defiance, of challenge, as his gaze locked with the Earl’s.

Their moment of locked wills was interrupted just as Lord Willson’s steward appeared, a silent shadow that whispered something into his master’s ear, an urgent secret that drew a thin line of tension across the older man’s brow.

“Ah, I am afraid we might have to cut our little adventure here short,” the Earl said, a tight smile not quite reaching his eyes.

“Something that needs my attention has come up, apparently.”

Thomas nodded. “Of course.” His expression was undeterred and measured, a practiced veil of stoicism despite the flutter of contemplation beneath.

“Oh, and I have something back in town that could interest you,” the Earl added, his words hanging in the air with an allure of intrigue, before promising to show him next time.

Thomas’s interest was piqued, yet he maintained his composed demeanor. “I shall look forward to it,” he responded with a polite nod, keeping his curiosity tightly locked away behind a courteous smile.

“Feel free to examine more of the fields if you wish,” the Earl encouraged, his voice holding a subtle warmth before leaving.

Left amidst the untouched beauty of nature, Thomas took a slow, measured breath, feeling the crisp air fill his lungs as his eyes traveled over the sprawling fields that stretched before him. On his way back, his path led him to discover a hidden gem—a beautiful body of water surrounded almost completely by the lush vegetation around it. The water, so clear and tranquil, reflected the gentle dance of the overhanging leaves, whispering secrets of secluded moments and quiet solitude.

The area was so cool and serene that it beckoned to his every sense of fancy, whispering promises of secluded tranquillity amidst the chaotic tapestry of nobility and obligation. As he took in the greenery, Thomas found himself overwhelmed by the desire to share the beauty in this place with a soul just as



beautiful, a soul that mirrored the gentle grace and quiet strength found in nature's hidden retreats.

He made a mental note to prepare accordingly, a plan gently forming in the recesses of his mind, a soft image of shared smiles and unspoken words amidst nature's sanctuary.

Upon returning home, his serenity was gently frayed by the sight of the family physician, a tangible reminder of the darker threads woven into his daily life. He'd almost forgotten that he'd summoned the physician after his mother's last incident, an oversight that added a subtle weight to his shoulders.

He wanted to see if there was any way she could be helped more. A futile effort, perhaps, with each previous endeavor seemingly only adding to the tapestry of pain and helplessness that lingered ever-present in his thoughts. But he did not believe in not trying at all. He would never give up on his mother. No matter what.

Offering a tight-lipped smile of greeting, he apologized to the man, whose understanding eyes met his with a gentle reassurance. And Dr. Bentley dismissed it pleasantly, an unspoken solidarity passing between them.

"I apologize for the recent events with regard to the Dowager Duchess," the physician said to him, his voice carrying a gentle weight of unspoken understanding.

Thomas exhaled, a weary resignation seeping through as he responded, "It is not your fault. You're trying your best. And we all know how unpredictable my mother gets."

Silence hung briefly between them before Dr. Bentley hesitantly began, “Speaking of predictability...” His voice betrayed a subtle thread of caution. “I have been meaning to ask. Has Her Grace ever had self-harm tendencies in the past?”

Thomas felt his brows crease in confusion, his heart seizing ever-so-slightly in his chest. “What do you mean?” he asked, his voice low and restrained.

“I mean, has she ever tried to harm herself even before she slipped into her current state?” the physician clarified, his gaze steady yet brimming with gentle concern.

“Not that I am aware of,” Thomas replied, his voice barely above a whisper, the words tumbling clumsily from his lips as the implication of the physician’s words hung heavily in the air. “Why?” he pressed further, his apprehension growing, clinging to the silence that stretched between them.

The physician hesitated, his eyes reflecting a mirrored sorrow before responding, “It is just that I have treated her to some cuts on her palms and fingers before that looked almost self-inflicted for their numbers and sizes,” he said, the words a gentle blow that threatened to crack Thomas’s carefully maintained composure.

“And when was this?” Thomas asked, his voice edged with a restrained quiver, a mixture of concern and an underlying pulse of perturbation coloring his tone.

The silence that followed felt almost tangible, a barrier that seemed to echo with unspoken stories and stifled cries of the past.

He'd always known that his mother had dealt with her personal pain in silence. Especially if it had had anything to do with her husband. But harming herself to cope with the pain was news. It was a revelation that rocked the foundation upon which he'd built his understanding of his mother's strength and stoicism. And something he did not think she'd have done.

The human mind, however, was an intricate web, a labyrinthine tapestry of thoughts and emotions, which afforded little comprehension. Especially the wounded mind, where pain and despair wove dark patterns amidst the fragile strands of sanity.

“It was during your recovery period, Your Grace,” Dr. Bentley replied, a subtle tremor of hesitance permeating his voice. His eyes flickered with an amalgam of compassion and regret as he continued, “If I remember correctly, I'd come to check on you, and the housekeeper told me that Her Grace needed some tending to herself.”

His eyes, grey and weary, further wrinkled in thought, shadows of memories flickering behind them. “Now that I think about it... I think it was right before your father and brother's tragic passing,” he finished, the words hanging heavily in the air, laden with implications unexplored.

A shiver of unease slithered down Thomas's spine, the news startling him, introducing a haunting echo in the silent chambers of his thoughts. And after the physician's departure, his mind churned with tumultuous waves of unsettling revelations and concealed truths.

He found the housekeeper, Mrs. Mops, and questioned her, a firm yet quietly desperate edge to his voice, about how his mother had sustained those cuts.

“Oh, Her Grace never mentioned, Your Grace,” Mrs. Mops responded, her eyes reflecting his own distress laced with a matronly concern that was almost palpable. “In fact, she’d appeared quite desperate to conceal them. Even from her lady’s maid, who eventually saw them and brought them to my attention,” she added, the words a gentle yet piercing exposition of concealed agony.

Thomas’s gaze lingered on the housekeeper, a multitude of questions swirling in the depth of his eyes. “And have similar wounds been seen anywhere on her body before those cuts?” His voice was barely above a whisper, his words cautiously drawn from a well of trepidation.

“No. None that I was told of, at least,” Mrs. Mops said, her words a quiet, comforting balm to the cacophony of unsettling thoughts clamoring in his mind.

And Thomas spent the remainder of his day mulling over this perplexing discovery, the hallways of his mind becoming a labyrinth of bewilderment and agony, where every turn presented more questions than answers.

Had she really hurt herself? What level of mental anguish had pushed her to such dark, despairing lengths?

If only he could ask her directly. He recalled what his father had done... His arguments with the man... Those fateful nights...

Now that he thought about it, it was utterly plausible that she might have been pushed to such lengths.

Fresh anger simmered within him.

## CHAPTER 18



Grace received a note from Thomas asking for her company for an entire day. A flutter of curiosity tickled her chest as her fingers traced the elegant script of his writing. He did not mention what he had planned, but the mystery, the soft allure of the unknown, called to her, and she found herself responding in the affirmative nonetheless, her own script meticulously measured yet carrying a hint of her emerging excitement.

“I must confess, I was surprised you sent a note and did not just show up at the house,” she remarked, a teasing lilt in her voice as they rode out, the steady clip-clop of the horses’ hooves blending harmoniously with the soft rustling of the leaves in the gentle breeze.

He turned toward her, the barest hint of mischief dancing in his eyes. “One would think I have no manners, Grace.” He quirked an amused eyebrow, the lines of his face softening in the mellow sunlight, casting a gentle glow on his profile.

“The Duke doesn’t ask. He only takes,” she replied, her chuckle a melodic tune fluttering in the open air, mingling with the delicate symphony of nature around them.

Thomas leaned back slightly, a casual ease in his posture, and the corners of his mouth tilted upwards in a wry smile. “Why ask when I already know what answer I would get? Would not that just be a waste of my words?” he returned, the playful banter between them a familiar and comforting dance.

Her laughter, light and spirited, cascaded around them. “You are too confident,” she retorted with a gleam of mirth in her eyes.

He shrugged, an image of unbothered assurance. “I take my pleasures wherever I happen to find the opportunity.”

She nodded, for she could not agree more, finding a strange comfort in his forthright demeanor.

Grace tilted her head slightly, her eyes reflecting the azure of the sky above. “Why do I feel like I have just signed off my life?” she asked, her voice a playful sing-song, when he staunchly refused to unveil the mystery of their destination.

He turned toward her, his gaze steady and reassuring. “Then consider it in the safest hands,” he responded, a sincerity in his voice that melted into the surrounding tranquility of their journey.

“Ominous,” she declared, making a show of shuddering dramatically in feigned fear.

His laughter, hearty and rich, reverberated through the serene landscape, and she felt a warmth blossom within her. She’d

never heard him laugh so loud before. No sound, she thought, had ever felt warmer or more genuine.

After a bit, her observant eyes noted the change in scenery as they approached the highways leading out of town. A soft sigh escaped her, a playful smirk dancing on her lips.

“Is my life still in the safest hands?” she teased, her eyes alight with amusement and a spark of adventure.

“That depends,” he responded, the sly glint in his exquisite green gaze imparting a sense of purposeful vagueness that only heightened her anticipation.

Finally, the carriage rolled to a gentle stop in what appeared to be an expansive field. Her eyes, wide and curious, took in the lush vegetation that seemed to go on for miles, an emerald sea under the touch of the gentle wind. Her lady’s maid rode in the second carriage they’d brought, while she rode in Thomas’s barouche with the top open.

Grace had wondered why he’d brought a second carriage with a servant with him, the creaking wheels and gentle clop of hooves a continuous background melody to her ponderings. Every turn in their journey carried a question, and each mile a growing curiosity that gently pricked at her senses. But whatever questions she’d posed, he’d refused to give her answers for, always with that tantalizing glint of mystery twinkling in his eyes, coaxing her further into his planned enigma.

Well, the mystery was about to end, she mused, the soft rustle of leaves and the gentle caress of the wind whispering secrets



in her ears, now that they'd finally arrived. Her eyes, wide and expectant, scanned their lush surroundings, attempting to peel back the layers of his surprise.

But she was wrong, and a soft gasp escaped her lips as he led her, with an air of understated pride, to the most magical body of water, nestled protectively in the loving embrace of a copse of trees. It was as if they had stepped into a secluded world, untouched by societal norms and expectations, where nature whispered sweet nothings to those who dared to listen.

The very air in the place hung with such mystery that enticed the senses, tickling one's desire for exploration and adventure with gentle fingers of intrigue and wonder. Leaves rustled softly above them, a symphony of nature that wrapped around them in a delicate cocoon of serenity. The cool temperature in this hidden cove contrasted delightfully with the warm weather, offering a refreshing embrace that invited them to linger and lose themselves in the present.

It was perfection in every green leaf that fluttered softly overhead and each drop of water that kissed the edge of the peaceful pond, a silent witness to their secluded rendezvous.

"Oh, Thomas, this is..." Grace breathed, awe infusing her voice, her eyes dancing with reflected sparkles from the gently rippling water, but she found that words eluded her, no term or phrase able to encapsulate the sheer beauty that unfurled before her.

It seemed the birds were of similar mind, for they perched on the branches, serenading the secluded spot with melodies that spoke of hidden gems and whispered love. Their song, a harmonious tune that mirrored her heartbeat, a gentle rhythm that spoke of joy and contentment.

“I see I have rendered Society’s sweetheart speechless, at last,” Thomas said, his voice laced with smug satisfaction, yet his eyes gleamed with gentle mirth and something deeper, something tender that lurked just beneath the surface.

Grace turned toward him, a playful petulance shaping her features into a delicate pout. “One would think my mouth ever running,” she rebuffed, the spark of her spirited nature dancing in her eyes, unwilling to be entirely tamed by their tranquil surroundings.

His laughter, a low, enchanting sound, mingled with the ongoing symphony of the birds, and he stepped closer, his voice a soft caress as he returned, “Is it not?”

“Thomas,” she admonished, a light chiding tone mingling with the suppressed amusement that danced in her eyes.

“Tell me I am wrong, and that your mouth doesn’t only rest when you’re asleep,” he challenged, a playful glint residing comfortably within the depths of his eyes, ever inviting her into this jovial verbal spar.

“Well, someone has to provide the entertainment,” she conceded, her own eyes sparkling with mirth, becoming complicit in the friendly jesting at her own expense.

She’d just opened her mouth, perhaps to render a playful counter, when suddenly her words were stolen, her lips parting but closing again in astonished silence at the surprising sight that was unveiled before her. A picturesque scene of a picnic, so thoughtfully laid out, awaited in a somewhat secluded part

of the verdant sanctuary, nestled gently by the protective embrace of some shrubberies.

“Oh my,” she exhaled, the words a breathy whisper that barely dared disrupt the tranquility that enveloped them.

“No words again?” Thomas teased, his voice a gentle nudge of merriment as he extended his hand toward her, an offering and invitation entwined within the gesture.

With a glint of delighted surprise still lingering in her eyes, she placed her hand in his and allowed him to guide her toward the picnic blanket, where a decadent spread of various foods whispered temptations to her senses.

“When did you have this prepared?” she queried, her eyes reflecting the delicate dance of the sunlight through the leaves above as they lingered on the feast before them. Understanding dawned as she considered the extra servant and carriage—no doubt employed to facilitate this splendid repast and ensure a swift pack-up when they decided to depart.

Thomas, ever the planner, began to unfold the tale of how he had discovered this enchanting spot on his way back from Lord Willson’s farm, and, captivated by its quiet allure, had known he wanted to share it—and its serenity—with her. So, in preparation for this shared secret moment, he had arranged the picnic, every detail meticulously planned to offer them this peaceful respite.

The mention of Caroline’s father acted as a gentle reminder of his interest in her dear friend, a flicker of thoughts and potential matchings fluttering at the edges of her mind. But,

with a determined grace, Grace shoved the notion aside, refusing to allow any specter to haunt this present, beautiful moment that had been so generously crafted for her.

It was enough, more than enough, that he had chosen to share this beauty, this tranquil haven, with her. And of course, the indulgent offerings of the feast before them.

“So, what’s the occasion?” Grace queried, her voice soft and genuinely curious as they settled down to their lavish meal amidst the charming tranquility of the secluded spot.

“Do I need an occasion to wish to spend time with you, Grace?” Thomas returned, his eyes alight with an earnest warmth that sent a flutter through her stomach, a gentle disturbance at the sincerity she perceived—and desperately hoped was genuine—in his gaze.

“You do not like pickles?” His sudden inquiry drew her attention, her brows lifting slightly in surprise when he noted her careful removal of a pickle from between the slices of bread that composed her sandwich.

“Nasty things,” she declared with a slight wrinkling of her nose, expressing her distaste with a playful grimace.

Pickles had never found favor with Grace. Even as a child, not even the most inventive bribery from her father could entice her to consume the briny cucumbers that had often found their way onto her plate. With a soft chuckle, she shared this little tidbit from her childhood with Thomas, to which he responded with a hearty laugh, the sound a rich melody in the tranquil embrace of their surroundings.

“Simon hated pickles, too,” Thomas suddenly shared, his voice a gentle lilt, softened perhaps by memories.

“Simon?” she probed gently, her brows furrowing slightly in innocent inquiry.

“My late brother,” he elucidated, a subtle shift in his expression hinting at the tender emotions that lingered beneath the surface of his usually stoic demeanor. “He always traded his pickles with me. I am quite fond of them, you see,” he added, a hint of nostalgia tinting his gaze.

Grace recalled the rumors Benedict had shared with her. She could not believe Thomas was capable of what Society was accusing him of. No. He would never do it. If anything, there was love in his eyes now as he spoke about the meals he’d shared with his brother, and how they’d exchanged with each other foods one did not like but the other did...

“Is that why you had pickles in most of our sandwiches today?” She chuckled, finding the bittersweet memory charming in its own way.

“Oh, I gave no specific instructions with regards to what should be prepared. But Cook knows I like pickles,” he responded, a soft smile briefly lighting his features, flickering with the memory of the brother he’d lost.

An unspoken curiosity nestled in the back of her mind, nudging gently at her consciousness. It had been there since the mention of Simon, a delicate inquiry, sensitive in its pursuit of understanding the man before her better.

“What happened?” she could not help but ask, treading gently on the path where sorrow may lie. “To Simon, I mean,” she added, her voice tender, caressing the words with the softness of genuine concern.

“A carriage crash took his life,” he replied solemnly, his gaze momentarily distant as if peering into the past, reliving the agony of the memory. “Along with the late Duke’s,” he added.

His voice held a different note when he spoke of his father—a notable absence of the lingering tenderness that had embraced the memory of Simon.

“I am sorry,” Grace uttered, her hand instinctively reaching across the blanket to envelop his, a quiet squeeze conveying her sympathies.

Thomas enveloped her hand with his, warmth emanating from the touch, a gentle cocoon that mirrored the comforting hold he’d offered at the salon during the garden party. Yet, beneath the warmth, she sensed a tension, a tethered tempest of emotions held at bay.

“The person who tampered with that carriage should be the one who’s sorry,” he said, an edge of bitterness seeping into his words.

“It was not an accident?” she asked, recalling Benedict’s words, her heart seizing at the implication of malicious intent toward the Duke’s family.

She wanted the truth about those rumors. And only Thomas could give her that truth. “*Not unless he is the culprit,*” an irksome voice in her head said. But she dismissed it just as quickly, not wanting to lend it any credence in the face of the man who’d shared such a tender part of his past.

“I am afraid not,” he replied, his voice edged with a restrained sorrow, a glimpse into the depth of anguish he harbored. “As a matter of fact, Society thinks me the culprit who murdered my own father and brother to assume the title for myself,” he added with just as much bitterness, his gaze fixed on the distant horizon, perhaps to a place where accusations did not taint memories of those he’d lost.

Grace felt a lurch in her stomach at his words, the harshness of the suspicions against him a stark contrast to their gentle surroundings. “Why in the world would they think such absurdity?” she scoffed, not masking her indignation.

“I do not know.” He sighed, his shoulders slumping ever so slightly, the stoic mask wavering to unveil a man burdened by loss and unfounded accusations.

And for the first time, there was a certain vulnerability about him, a delicate exposure that tugged at her heartstrings, rendering them into a melodic sympathy.

This broke her heart. Grace, a spectator to his pain, wished she could do more than offer kind words and a listening ear. She longed to somehow alleviate the heavy burden he bore within.

“I wish I could bring them back. Or at the very least have my mother back,” he continued, his words trailing off into a soft

murmur, like a gentle plea sent forth into the wind, hoping for some semblance of solace.

“I thought the Dowager Duchess was alive?” Grace asked, her brows furrowing in confusion yet maintaining a gentle inquisitiveness.

“Oh, she is,” he responded, his eyes reflecting a different shade of pain, one that hinted at a living loss, perhaps even more tormenting.

Before going on to share what a changed person she was now, his voice wrapped around each word with a softness that spoke of a longing for things once familiar, now replaced by an aching void.

“Grief has stolen her,” he lamented.

He really was all alone now, Grace thought, wishing she could take away his pain. Her heart ached for him, for the wounds he bore, both visible and those etched deep in his soul.

“Mother did not deserve what Father did to her,” he carried on. And that bitterness about him returned. In fact, he seemed quite indignant right now. His eyes were aflame with the anger of injustice, and his body tensed as if ready to fight battles long since past.

And Grace was surprised when he opened up to her at last, laying bare the wounds of his past with a raw honesty that made her respect him all the more. “Mother lived her life for him. I never saw a woman love a man so,” he said. “But he



returned her love by keeping a string of mistresses. I caught him once. Confronted him after, and to quieten me, he forced me to enlist to remove me from the scene altogether. He was a selfish man willing to risk his own son's life to keep his sins hidden. Then again, I was not the heir. I was of no use to him," he scoffed, the scorn in his voice palpable.

"I am sorry to hear that, Thomas. I truly am." Grace brought her other hand over his, which still cradled hers, trying to convey through her touch the sympathy and support she felt for him.

"And to think that even Simon saw nothing wrong in Father's actions," he continued, the frustration evident in his tone. "My brother was of the opinion that Father did not love Mother any less because he sought outside company. But I felt—I still feel—she deserves better. More," he said vehemently, his words fueled by a fierce sense of protectiveness and justice.

"It is fortunate Mother never knew of his affairs," he carried on, his voice softening a fraction. "The only time I ever saw her disagree with Father was when he forced me to enlist. She thought I'd never come back from the war. I almost never did. Well, I came back less than half the man I'd left. Changed for the worse forever," he added, his gaze dropping to their joined hands, as if ashamed.

"That is not true," Grace disagreed with him now, lifting his chin so he had to meet her gaze. "I believe you are more than the man you'd left. Even though I did not know you back then, I believe there's growth in you from those wounds. Both the physical and emotional ones. *Especially* the emotional ones," she added earnestly, her eyes searching his, willing him to believe her words.

And he gave her a wan smile in response, a glimmer of gratitude in his eyes before he carried on, “I was naive to think that I’d return to find Father a changed man. *If* I ever returned. But when I recovered enough from my injuries to move about, I found that not only was he still stuck in his old ways, but he now entertained the women secretly in his very house, right underneath his loving wife’s nose.

“I did not give up. Barely able to stand on my feet, I confronted him once again. It was the night before the accident, I remember. And this resulted in an argument worse than the first one we had. The following afternoon, his carriage crashed. And he bid the world farewell,” he finished, his voice barely above a whisper.

So, this was the root of the argument Benedict had mentioned, Grace thought to herself. He’d only been trying to protect his mother’s heart and dignity. And now, Society suspected and accused him of a crime she was certain he was incapable of.

Her heart ached anew, not just for his past pains, but for the present injustice.

## CHAPTER 19



As she held his pained gaze now, she saw the regret she'd picked up in his final words. He may still hold a grudge against his father, but he did not hate the man. Perhaps he thought he did, but deep in his eyes, she saw that he did not. At that moment, she realized that the complex tapestry of his emotions was woven with threads of love, loss, anger, and regret. And she felt honored, and a bit awed, that he'd chosen to unveil such intimate parts of himself to her.

"I feel as though I lost my mother with Father and Simon in that carriage as well, Grace," Thomas continued, his voice heavy with the pain of his loss. "She was never the same since receiving the news," he added, a note of profound sadness lacing his words.

"She is in there somewhere, Thomas," Grace reassured, her heart aching for him.

Reaching up, she gently caressed his cheek, hoping to offer some solace. She could feel the stubble against her fingertips, a testament to the rough days he must have been having.

His hand, cradling her free one, brought it to his lips, placing a tender kiss on her knuckles. The gesture was so gentle, so full

of emotion, that it made her heart swell. Then, as if drawn by an invisible force, his face inched closer to hers, before his lips finally found hers. The kiss was soft, tentative at first as if he was unsure of his welcome. But it quickly deepened, becoming something more, something profound.

Right now was a moment and a connection Grace had hoped to find with Thomas for what had felt like forever. Even though she had never admitted this desire to herself until the very moment his lips touched hers, at last. It was as if all the pieces had fallen into place, and everything made sense.

Nevertheless, she could not help the guilt that came over her. With great effort, she put some space between them, breaking the kiss. “We should return,” she said, her voice barely above a whisper. She made a show of examining the skies, trying to hide her burning cheeks and the disappointment from him.

He was a man she was supposed to matchmake with her friend, not one she should be kissing. And this shared intimacy with him right now just brought into light feelings she’d been in denial of all this while.

She cared about Thomas. More than she was supposed to. She’d given him the most vital part of her, and there was no getting it back. But she knew that she would never get that part of him she wanted in turn the most. Heck, she did not even know what this kiss meant to him. *If* it had meant anything at all. And this broke her.

The remainder of their journey back was spent in silence. Silence which only further suffocated her.

“Are you sure you’re all right?” he asked her again outside of her house.

He’d been asking her the same question since. In fact, save the sounds of the horses’ hooves, it was the only thing that had broken the silence.

Grace nodded, for she could not find her words before going into the house and hurrying up to her bedroom. She needed to be alone, to sort through the tumultuous emotions swirling within her.

“Oh, you’re back,” her mother said when she almost walked into her in the hallway, seemingly surprised by her hasty return. “Are you all right?” she added, presumably at her rush.

Grace nodded once again, her jaw clenching at the familiar question. She did not trust herself to speak, afraid that her voice would betray her emotions.

And when she closed the door to her bedroom and slumped against it, all she could hear still was Thomas’s voice asking her if she was all right. His voice, filled with concern, echoed in her mind, making her heart ache even more.

“No, I am not,” she said out loud in her empty room, her voice breaking. And only when she let her face fall into her palms did she become aware of the tears streaming down her cheeks. The dam had broken, and all her pent-up emotions were pouring out.

She loved Thomas. She'd fought it, denied it, but she'd fallen in love with him. Once more, she found herself in love with a man she believed would never love her in return. And the realization was devastating.

"Oh, I have news, dearest Grace!" Caroline exclaimed, her voice filled with an eagerness that was almost contagious as she swept into the drawing room.

Grace, who had finished breakfast a mere half hour ago, was settling down with a book, attempting to find some semblance of normalcy in her tumultuous emotions.

There was a curious urgency about her friend that had her sitting straighter in her seat, despite her initial reluctance. She was not in the mood for conversation or gossip, yet she braved it, curious despite herself.

Caroline confirmed this urgency when she said, "Oh, I simply could not wait to tell you. But when you asked me about the Dawshire Secret, I was too curious, so I called on Tabitha and asked her." Her eyes were sparkling with the thrill of the chase, the excitement of having unearthed something potentially scandalous.

Caroline went on to tell her the same rumors Benedict had shared. Society's suspicions, and accusations of Thomas. It was all laid out before Grace, the sordid tales and whispers that had been circulating in hushed tones.

But it was all redundant now, for Grace had already gotten the details from the man himself. And now more than ever, she

wanted to believe that he was innocent. She needed to believe it, for her own heart's sake.

Although he'd mentioned that it had been no accident, he'd said nothing about the true culprit, a voice in her head pointed out, nagging at her. But she shook it away, not wanting to dwell on it any longer.

"Oh, you already know." Caroline deflated, her shoulders slumping slightly as she realized she was not bringing any new information to the table.

"The Duke shared the deaths with me, Caroline," Grace admitted softly, her voice laced with a hint of sadness. "He is not a monster. He would never do such a thing," she found herself defending him, the words coming out more fervently than she had intended.

"Of course," Caroline agreed, though there was a slight hesitation in her voice, a subtle lift of her brow that showed she might not be entirely convinced.

But while Grace wanted to believe Thomas was innocent, Caroline had a slight air of skepticism about her.

"You love him," Caroline suddenly observed, her voice soft, almost a whisper. It was a statement, not a question.

"I beg your pardon?" Grace was taken aback, her heart skipping a beat. Was she that obvious? Could her feelings really be read so easily?

“Not just in your defense and belief in him, but the whole air about you, Grace. I think you’re in love with the Duke,” Caroline further observed, her gaze keen and all but scrutinizing her. “Did you cry? Your eyes are all puffy. Is something wrong, Grace?” she pressed, relentless in her pursuit of the truth. “Is it Dawshire?” she added, her concern evident in her voice.

Grace had indeed cried herself to sleep last night. And she’d barely gotten much sleep too. This morning, she had tried to hide her puffy eyes and distraught state from her family.

“Nothing is wrong, Caroline,” Grace said, her tone a little more curt than she’d intended, her walls immediately coming up.

And Caroline must have gathered this, for she did not press her for further answers, though her eyes still held a hint of worry.

“I am sorry, Caroline,” Grace quickly apologized, her voice softer now. “I am just a little crotchety this morning. I barely got decent sleep last night,” she confessed with a sheepish chuckle now, attempting to lighten the mood.

Caroline, ever the understanding friend, nodded sympathetically. “I should get going now. I shan’t want to disturb you further,” she said, standing up to leave. Before she exited, she turned back to Grace, her eyes filled with genuine concern. “Do try to eat something, and perhaps get some rest, will you?”



But Grace, left alone in the drawing room, could do neither even after her friend's departure. Her thoughts were in turmoil, her heart in chaos. She was guilty and scared. She should have had a better rein on her heart.

Grace had a choice to make. And tonight, she chose her sanity by avoiding Thomas at the ball. She felt the weight of the room, the whispers and the glances, all while trying to keep her composure and appear unaffected.

She purposefully sought her cousin out. But unfortunately, Henry seemed awfully distracted, as his gaze kept drifting back to the entrance during their abstract conversation. His attention was elsewhere, and Grace could not help but feel a twinge of annoyance.

“Are you looking for someone, Henry?” She voiced her somewhat frustrated thoughts, trying to bring him back to the present moment.

If she could not have and keep his attention, it would not be long before Thomas sought her out. She could feel his presence in the room, a constant awareness at the back of her mind that she could not shake off.

And as Caroline was yet to arrive, she had no other alternative. She wondered for the umpteenth time what was keeping her friend. Caroline was never the tardy sort. And neither did she honor the notion of being fashionably late. Yet, here Grace was, waiting for her friend as Henry searched for Heaven knows who.

“What?” Henry turned to her, his expression distant. It was as if he had been miles away and had just been brought back to reality.

Grace was just about to repeat her question when he suddenly realized it and responded, “Oh, no. Just a friend who’s yet to arrive, from the looks of it.”

His words were dismissive, but his gaze was still fixed on the entrance as if willing the person to appear.

“I cannot find Caroline either. I think she is yet to arrive as well.” Grace sighed, her gaze scanning the ballroom now. She was feeling increasingly uncomfortable and out of place.

“Caroline?” Henry half coughed, suddenly looking flushed. His reaction was odd, to say the least.

“Yes. My friend Caroline,” she replied, perplexed by his odd behavior. “You know, the one I am always with?” she added, her brows furrowing in confusion.

Whoever knew her knew of Caroline and their close friendship. This should not be news to Henry, of all people. Yet, here he was, acting as though it was.

“Are you all right, Henry?” she pressed, concern lacing her voice now. He was acting strange by the minute, and she could not help but worry.

“I am afraid I do not feel quite like myself this evening,” he replied, his voice strained. And before she could say anything further, something came over his face—a look of determination—and he quickly excused himself. “Please excuse me, Grace.”

Perplexed and somewhat concerned, Grace watched him make for the entrance as though in pursuit of somebody. *Curious*. She was left standing alone, her mind whirring with questions and concern for her cousin.

Grace spotted Thomas just then, and almost instinctively, she felt herself shrink away before his searching gaze could find her. She did not think she could face him again with what she’d discovered about her feelings for him. She knew she needed to keep her distance.

Tonight was about self-preservation.

## CHAPTER 20



She quickly took to the nearest terrace, seeking refuge and a moment to gather her thoughts. Her heart was pounding in her chest, a mix of fear and determination driving her forward.

And in her flight, she bumped into Barbara. “Oh!” she exclaimed, startled. For a moment, she was disoriented, but then she realized that this encounter could be to her advantage.

Excellent, she thought to herself. This was her chance to clear the air and perhaps gain an ally in this seemingly endless battle to clear Thomas’s name.

“Just the lady I was looking for,” Grace lied, her voice steady despite her inner turmoil.

“Is something the matter?” Barbara, always one for alarm, quickly asked. Her eyes were wide, filled with concern and a hint of excitement at the prospect of being involved in some scandalous affair.

And before Grace could reply, Barbara dropped her voice to a whisper and asked, “Never say the Duke did something...”

Her eyes darted around as if expecting someone to jump out and accuse them of gossiping.

“Oh, no,” Grace quickly reassured, waving her hand dismissively. “It is nothing like that.”

“But as a matter of fact, it has to do with our last conversation. We weren’t finished before we got interrupted,” she added, deciding then to clear the air with Barbara. She had to tread carefully, though. One wrong word could send Barbara running in the opposite direction.

No matter what, she still believed Thomas was innocent, and she wanted desperately to convince someone in Society. Even a single person believing the same as she did would make a world of difference, she felt. Thomas was a good man. And he would never do what he was being accused of.

“I am not sure that is a safe conversation for us, Lady Grace,” Barbara said tentatively, her eyes flickering with uncertainty. “Especially for you,” she added.

Grace tried not to grimace at her implication. She knew what Society thought of Thomas, but she also knew they were wrong. “Walk with me, Barbara?” she suggested instead, offering her arm. She needed to get Barbara away from prying ears and eyes.

After a cautious look around them, Barbara accepted her arm, and they began through a deserted portion of the gardens. The cool night air was a welcome relief, helping to calm Grace’s frayed nerves.

“You did not seem to think of the dangers when you approached me with the topic at the garden party,” Grace observed, her tone gentle but firm. She needed Barbara to see reason.

“My concern for you comes above all, Lady Grace,” Barbara replied, her voice soft. She truly did seem to care, and for that, Grace was grateful.

Grace expressed her appreciation with a small smile before she said, “But I do believe you have nothing to worry about, Barbara. The Duke is innocent. In fact, I sought you out to clear this. To make you understand, hopefully.”

“Do you have any proof of his innocence?” Barbara challenged, her gaze steady. She was all but skeptical. And very much wary.

“I have no certain proof, Barbara, save for what I feel in my heart and gut,” Grace responded truthfully, her eyes pleading with Barbara to understand. “I have come to know the man the Duke is, and he is no murderer,” she added, her voice filled with conviction.

“Did the Duke swear his innocence to you?” Barbara asked, her voice lower now, as if afraid of being overheard.

“He has shared his past with me. And I concluded, *and* believe, it is the truth. He is just as clueless to who murdered his father and brother as the rest of Society,” Grace answered, her words rushed.

“Oh, but Society is hardly clueless. We know he did it,” Barbara obstinately insisted, her face set in a determined frown. “Keep an open mind, Lady Grace. Only then can you see the dangers before you,” she added, her tone almost pleading.

And as much as Grace appreciated her concern, she found herself getting frustrated. She was tired of the whispers and the accusations. She wanted to shout from the rooftops that Thomas was innocent.

Who knew that rumors could do such damage? She had never truly understood the power of gossip until now. No wonder Thomas had seemed desperate to clear his name with her influence. She was his lifeline in a sea of rumors and accusations.

“Do you not think you are closing your own mind to the possibility of his innocence right now, Barbara?” Grace pointed out, her voice steady. “I will also advise that you keep an open mind and not judge and declare him guilty without certain proof,” she added, hoping her words would make a difference.

Making the effort to convince Barbara right now was a part of her arrangement with Thomas, she felt. She was doing her job. After all, she’d allowed herself to get carried away in the whirlwind of her emotions and failed to concentrate on the true task she had, which was to clear his image in Society. And get him the bride he had his eyes on, a voice in her head reminded her. She was naught but his matchmaker. And that kiss should not have happened. It had meant nothing to him, too, she was certain.

Still, these thoughts did nothing in the way of changing how and what she felt for Thomas. She could not deny the turmoil inside her, the way her heart fluttered uncontrollably at the mere thought of him.

Suddenly feeling suffocated by the weight of her emotions, Grace bid Barbara a good rest of her evening, her words hurried and her smile tight. She needed to escape, to breathe and sort through the jumbled thoughts in her mind.

She darted out of their secluded corner and made her way to the conservatory, her steps quick and purposeful. The coolness of the night air did little to calm the storm inside her. She decided to seek some solitude rather than return to the ballroom and festivities. The laughter and music in the distance seemed to mock her, a stark contrast to the confusion and heartache she felt.

No sooner had she stepped inside the conservatory, lost in her own world, than she felt a strong hand around her wrist, pulling her in a certain direction. Her heart leaped in her throat, a mix of fear and anticipation coursing through her veins.

“Thomas,” she gasped when he shut the door behind them. He led them into an empty alcove, the dim lighting casting shadows on his face, making him appear even more enigmatic.

“Grace,” he returned, his expression, although inscrutable, not very pleased. There was a hardness in his eyes that she hadn’t seen before. “You’re avoiding me now,” he said. And it was not a question. It was a statement, a fact that he had noticed and did not seem to appreciate.



Grace did not deny this. She could not. Her actions spoke louder than any words could.

“Why?” he finally asked, his voice low and filled with frustration that mirrored her own.

She swallowed nervously, her throat dry. Was that even a serious question? Had he forgotten about their last meeting already? The kiss? The boundaries they’d crossed and broken?

*“If it had meant anything to him, he would not be asking you this question right now,”* a voice in her head whispered, stabbing her heart with the thought.

“I think it is time we redefined our relationship, Thomas.” Grace cleared her throat and stood up straighter in what she thought a pathetic attempt at confidence. She might as well get straight to the point. She could not bear the back and forth any longer.

He was quiet for a bit, studying her with those intense eyes before he asked, “Is this about the kiss?”

“It should not have happened,” Grace said, her voice steady despite the turmoil inside her. “I let myself get carried away, and transgressed the boundaries we placed,” she added, watching his jaw clench, unclench, and clench yet again.

She had never seen him so affected, so raw. Something about him shifted right now. And it did not feel very pleasant.

“Do we no longer have trust now?” he asked, the unexpected question catching her off guard.

“I beg your pardon?” she returned, her eyebrows knitting together in confusion.

“If we do, then you should have known that there was nothing like getting carried away with what transpired between us,” he said, his voice low and steady.

And if she did not know better, she could have sworn he sounded... hurt.

“Then what was it, Thomas?” she asked, her voice barely above a whisper, daring to hope for something. Anything of meaning at all. She wanted to know that she was not alone in her sentiments.

“Do not worry, Grace, I am not about to further ‘transgress those boundaries’ by proposing marriage over a simple kiss,” he said, his voice laced with a bitterness that took her by surprise.

She could not help but feel hurt by his words, too. “You throw around the word marriage as though it means so little,” she observed painfully, her heart aching.

She was not averse to the notion of it anymore, she realized. Not since her heart had begun to beat for a certain duke. A certain duke who now stood before her, practically ridiculing what they’d shared.

Tears burned at the back of her eyes. And Grace inwardly vowed to keep them at bay. She would not let him see how deeply his words affected her.

“For a woman who gets indignant at the mere mention of marriage, you certainly seem to care for its gravity now,” he observed in that ridiculing tone again. Not to mention accusing...

“Indignant?” she echoed, her voice soft. “You misunderstand me,” she added, her heart in her throat. She needed him to understand, to see that she was not just some silly girl.

“Perhaps because you never explained yourself to me, Grace,” he said, his voice steady yet carrying a hint of frustration. His eyes bored into hers, seeking answers, clarity.

“Having my trust broken once and deciding to protect myself after is not indignation. At least not unjustified,” she argued. And he looked on expectantly, his posture rigid, as if bracing himself for what she might reveal next.

“I trusted my heart with a man once, Thomas,” she revealed after a moment of thoughtful pause, her voice softer now, tinged with the pain of past memories. “But he revealed to me that my heart meant nothing to him, stepped on it, and moved on, leaving me to collect the broken pieces all alone,” she continued, her words laced with a vulnerability she rarely showed.

Grace opened up herself to him right now, all but vulnerable. She could feel the walls around her heart crumbling as she spoke, revealing scars long hidden. She should have learned

her lesson after the betrayal she'd suffered once, but no. She was trusting again. Opening up again. Loving again...

Jonathan Reeves was the third son of the Baron of Filch. The Baron was a peer with a less than decent fortune, after squandering most of it in hopeless wagers and wrong investments. Jonathan had known that he had to seek his future elsewhere, being a third son, and with the state of their family fortune. As such, he had approached young and naive Grace, whose family shared an estate border with the Montgomerys in Kent.

"He made all manner of professions. I truly believed he loved me," Grace said, her voice breaking slightly. "I loved him," she added painfully, her eyes glistening with unshed tears.

But after stringing her along for the better part of her adolescent years, Jonathan had found another woman right before Grace's debut and abandoned her for his new conquest.

"He'd promised to marry me once I debuted. But left me right before. And when I confronted him, he told me that he needed to secure his own future. And that he'd found a lady with a better dowry, and a stupid father he could take even more advantage of," she said, her voice filled with a bitterness born of betrayal.

"I was broken, but I picked myself up and moved on. I kept an open mind even after my debut," she continued, her tone more resolute now. "That was until certain news reached me. Again, I seemed to be a catch to the gentlemen for my dowry. I was being discussed at the clubs and events in Society, being weighed for what material things I could offer the men. I'd personally walked in on such conversations at parties.

“Once again, I discovered and realized that all men were nothing but fortune hunters. They were all like Jonathan Reeves. As such, I decided that marriage was not worth it. I wanted no part in it if it meant nothing to the other party but business and finances. This was a scar I have carried with me until recently,” she finished ruefully, her heart heavy yet lightened by the confession.

But curiously, she felt an odd relief at finally opening up to Thomas and sharing her past, and how it had shaped her decisions and future.

“Until recently...” he echoed, his voice softer now, filled with something she could not quite decipher. Regret? Understanding? But she did not dare hope. “What changed?” he asked, his eyes searching hers for the truth.

You, Grace almost said. The words were on the tip of her tongue, but she swallowed them back. It was too much, too soon. And she was not ready to lay her heart bare, not when she was unsure of his feelings.

When she did not respond, he said, “Not all men are the same, Grace.” His tone was earnest, pleading almost, as if he needed her to believe him, to see him as different.

And she wanted more than anything to believe him. To believe that he was innocent. To believe that he loved her as she loved him. But while she was certain of the former, she knew she was being delusional with the latter.

She would never have Thomas's heart. For he'd already given it to someone else. To her good friend, as a matter of fact. And for this very reason, she must keep her distance from him. Limit their interactions to the bare minimum. It was the only way to protect her heart, her sanity.

## CHAPTER 21



Thomas was gripped by a peculiar surge of anger as he replayed his recent conversation with Grace. His feelings were a chaotic mix, turbulent and persistent. He found himself repulsed by Jonathan's betrayal and his exploitation of Grace's innocence.

How could anyone be so callous toward someone as sincere as Grace? Yet, he could not ignore the flicker of gratitude. Without Jonathan's deceit, he would never have had the chance to truly know Grace.

She could have been Mrs. Montgomery, blissfully ignorant and living in the countryside. But now, she was still Grace Jennings—unclaimed, resilient, and strong. Thomas abruptly halted his train of thought, shaking his head slightly, trying to dispel the burgeoning hope within him.

Regardless, Jonathan Reeves was a scoundrel, and Grace deserved far better. Could he dare to hope to be that "better" for her? Their recent conversation seemed to reduce their moment at the picnic to nothing. She made him feel as if he had overstepped, recalling her words about transgressed boundaries.

In an attempt to release his frustrations, Thomas threw a dart at the board on his wall, hitting the center. Yet, it brought no relief.

“Goodness gracious, what did that board ever do to you?” Gilbert’s voice cut through his thoughts, concern laced with amusement. “You’ve been quite elusive since the ball,” he noted, his worry evident. “Did you receive my notes?”

“Which one? The first or the second?” Thomas tried to joke, though it sounded forced.

“I sometimes question our friendship,” Gilbert quipped, shaking his head in feigned exasperation.

“The feeling is mutual,” Thomas retorted, and they shared a moment of laughter, temporarily lightening the mood.

“What’s going on, Thomas? You seem off,” Gilbert asked, his tone now serious.

“Can’t a man desire some solitude?” Thomas evaded, not ready to delve into his thoughts.

“That’s your right, of course. Until it leads to isolation and ignoring those who care for you,” Gilbert countered, his gaze unwavering.

Thomas could not deny the truth in his friend’s words—he had been brooding.



“It is about Lady Grace, isn’t it?” Gilbert pressed, reading Thomas’s surprise. “Do not look so shocked. It is obvious,” he assured, dismissing his reaction. “If it were about the Dowager Duchess, you’d carry a different air. Since you do not, it has to be about Lady Grace.”

“I may have mishandled things,” Thomas confessed reluctantly. “I hope I haven’t given her reason to regret assisting me,” he added softly, his voice filled with concern.

“I won’t pry,” Gilbert said after a pause, his expression serious. “But you must take responsibility for your actions. Apologize if needed, and accept the consequences.”

“You’re right,” Thomas conceded, nodding slowly. Gilbert had always been one to provide the necessary perspective.

“Just do not lose her, Thomas. She is a keeper,” Gilbert advised before walking out of the room, leaving Thomas alone with his thoughts—and the realization that Grace was, indeed, someone special. “And respond to my letters next time,” he called back, a reminder of the connections Thomas had neglected.

\* \* \*

Alone with his thoughts once again, Thomas decided to take a walk to clear his mind. The room felt too small, too suffocating, as if the walls were closing in on him. Well, whatever he had left to call a mind, he thought to himself wryly as he walked down the front steps and into the warm late afternoon air and busy streets of London. The city was alive with activity, the hustle and bustle a stark contrast to the solitude of his thoughts.

He wandered aimlessly, lost in thought, until a voice calling out to him brought him back to the present.

“Your Grace,” the voice called, and Thomas looked up to find Lady Caroline approaching him.

“Lady Caroline, what a pleasant surprise,” Thomas greeted, bending slightly to kiss her gloved knuckles. She was as elegant as ever, her dress impeccably tailored, her hat perched just so.

She’d just exited a nearby shop, her bags held in one hand, a smile on her face. “Your Grace,” she greeted, her voice warm. “It is quite the coincidence running into you here.”

“You’re alone?” he asked, noting the absence of a companion or chaperone.

“I am afraid my companion for the afternoon changed her mind at the last minute.” She sighed, her smile fading slightly. “Grace has been doing a lot of that lately. It almost feels like she is avoiding me,” she added, her gaze lifting to meet his, searching.

“Is something the matter? Is she unwell?” Thomas quickly asked, concern lacing his words. He could not help but worry, especially after his last interaction with Grace.

And the look Caroline wore now was all but accusatory, her eyes narrowing slightly as she studied him. “Oh, this is something only she can handle. And I am sure she is more

than capable,” she replied, her tone light but with an undercurrent of something he could not quite place.

Before he could say anything, she added, “My friend is quite resilient, you see.” There was a hint of pride in her voice as if she was glad to speak of Grace’s strength.

“I have no doubts,” he agreed, nodding.

He had seen Grace’s strength, her resilience, and it was one of the things he admired most about her.

“She isn’t appreciated enough if you ask me,” Caroline continued, her gaze never leaving his.

“I believe so.” Thomas went along, unsure of where she was leading this conversation.

“You believe so?” Caroline quirked an eyebrow, her tone incredulous. “Yet, you do nothing about it?” she added, her voice sharp.

“I beg your pardon?” Thomas was getting quite confused now. What was she getting at?

He felt as though he was getting absorbed into that labyrinth that was the female mind, and he was unsure if he’d be able to find his way out. Caroline was being oddly cryptic and vague right now, her words a puzzle he could not quite solve.

“Take a second to actually *look*, Your Grace,” she said almost impatiently as if she was tired of dancing around the subject. “Perhaps then, you will be able to see the real Grace and every truth her heart holds,” she added, her gaze intense, before bidding him a good afternoon and leaving.

Thomas was rooted to the spot, her words echoing in his mind.

“Every truth her heart holds...”

Could Caroline’s choice of words be a mere coincidence? Or was there a deeper meaning to them? He did not want to believe so, lest he got his hopes dashed. Grace saw nothing in him but their arrangement. An arrangement which he’d “transgressed.” The thought was painful indeed, a sharp stab to his heart.

Nevertheless, he decided to call on her right then to check on her. After what her friend had shared, he could not help his concern. He made his way to the Folletton residence, his steps brisk, his mind a whirlwind of thoughts.

Upon arrival, however, he was told that she was resting from a headache. And he encouraged that she was allowed her sleep and not awoken on his behalf.

“Oh, I had no intention of disturbing my daughter’s beauty sleep,” the Countess said to him as she offered him some tea, her tone light, a small smile on her lips. “You see, beauty is one of the sacrifices I would never encourage a woman to make. Not even for a duke,” she added, her gaze meeting his, a glint of mischief in her eyes.

And Thomas thought her quite honest. In fact, he rather liked Emily Jennings, he thought to himself as he took a sip of his tea. She was as charming as she was beautiful and elegant, her presence comforting in a way he hadn't expected.

She reminded him a little of his mother. *When* Laura had been herself, that was. And certainly when she hadn't been going out of her way to humor his father's ridiculous whims. Or hide his obvious and *many* flaws. The Countess had a strength about her, a grace that he admired. And he could not help but think that perhaps, just perhaps, he could find an ally in her.

"I would never dream of asking for such a sacrifice, My Lady," he replied, his tone earnest as he looked into her eyes, trying to convey his sincerity. He hoped she could see that he truly meant every word.

"Should I believe you?" She quirked an eyebrow, her expression playfully challenging, as if she were testing him, pushing him to prove his honesty.

"I would not ask that of you either." Thomas took a sip of his tea, the warm liquid comforting as it slid down his throat. He set the teacup down with a soft clink against the saucer, his gaze never leaving hers. "I believe that should be another prerogative of yours. And I believe you more than capable of deciding whether or not I am believable," he added, his words careful, measured.

A smile broke across the Countess's regal features now, transforming her face into one of genuine amusement. "Now I know the other reason why I liked you, Dawshire." Her voice was lighthearted, filled with a warmth that made Thomas feel at ease.

“There’s more than one reason?” he asked, a hint of a smile playing on his lips.

He found her quite entertaining too, he thought, and he was starting to see the appeal of her company. Now he knew where Grace had gotten her wit from. Although at first glance and assessment, the Countess had appeared quite unassuming in that regard, it was clear now that she possessed a sharp mind and a quick wit.

“Why, I liked you because you’re a duke. Never mind what Society says. I do not care for such rumors.” Emily threw out that blatant honesty once again, her voice strong and confident. “And now that you seem in possession of a decent sense of humor, and not at all the dull duke I’d thought you at first glance, I like you even more. My daughter shan’t perish of insipidity,” she added, her tone playful.

“I shall try,” Thomas said, his voice low, a small smile tugging at the corners of his lips. He was beginning to enjoy this banter, this back-and-forth with the Countess.

“Oh, humility does not become you, I must say. No need to try. You already have it,” she returned, her eyes sparkling with mirth. She seemed to be thoroughly enjoying their conversation, and Thomas found that he was, too.

Where he was already halfway through his tea, she was yet to take a sip of hers, he observed. She had been so caught up in their conversation that her tea was seemingly forgotten.

Just when she finally made to take a sip of her tea at last, her expression suddenly grew somber, a shift so sudden that it took Thomas by surprise. “My Grace deserves the best, Dawshire. And I want to believe she is making the right choice.” Her words were heavy, filled with a gravity that belied her previous playful demeanor.

Her words felt like a warning, a reminder of the responsibility he held. And the gravity about her right now was one he had never thought her capable of.

Alas, he’d underestimated the Countess of Folletton. She was not just a witty, playful woman. She was a mother concerned for her daughter’s happiness. And Thomas knew at that moment that he needed to prove himself worthy of not just Grace, but her mother’s approval as well.

## CHAPTER 22



Grace paced about her bedroom, her footsteps soft against the plush carpet, her mind a whirlwind of conflicting emotions. Thomas was downstairs, she knew, but she'd asked her mother to lie on her behalf. She did not wish to see him. Yet, a tumultuous part of her, deep down, wanted nothing more than to run down those very stairs, meet him in the drawing room, and pour her very heart out to him.

She wrestled with her thoughts, her heart feeling heavy in her chest. She had no regrets about her last conversation with him. But despite the relief her confession had brought her, she'd been left feeling quite drained by everything. The intensity of it all had taken its toll, leaving her feeling vulnerable and exposed.

After a while of pacing, she heard the front door open and close, and she felt her heart skip a beat. Curiosity getting the better of her, she darted to her window, peering out just in time to catch a glimpse of Thomas in his great coat and hat.

He was leaving. She watched, her heart sinking, as he paused briefly before the house, adjusting his gloves with precise movements. And while she watched him, he suddenly turned and looked up in the direction of her window, as though he'd somehow sensed her eyes on him.



A gasp escaped her. And even though she knew she was well out of sight from her angle, she could not help but find herself hiding behind the curtains. Oh, how she wanted to see him, to talk to him, to...

When she looked out the window again, he was gone. She felt a pang of disappointment, and she slumped, bereft, into the chaise lounge by her window. She'd missed her chance.

No sooner had he gone than she heard the front door open once again. This time, it was Caroline who called, her voice carrying up the stairs.

"Since you decided to abandon me at the last minute, I figured to follow you home," Caroline complained petulantly.

Grace could not help but smile, despite the turmoil in her heart. Caroline had a way of lifting her spirits. Grace had been supposed to go out shopping with her friend earlier, but she'd had a last-minute change of heart, and canceled. She felt a twinge of guilt at having let her friend down.

She gave Caroline a sheepish smile and apologized. "I am so sorry, Caro. I just... was not up to it today."

"It was not as interesting without you." Caroline slumped onto the chaise next to her, her tone dramatic but her eyes twinkling with humor.

"So, you did go, after all?" Grace asked, genuinely surprised. Caroline had a tendency to cancel plans herself when not in

the mood.

“I needed the distraction.” Caroline sighed, her expression momentarily flickering to something more serious.

“From what?” Grace asked in concern, her brows knitting together. She’d noticed some fluctuating patterns in her friend’s behavior lately. But whatever it was, Caroline was yet to share with her.

Unsurprisingly, Caroline smiled sheepishly once again and did not give much detail. “Just... life. This Season is quite overwhelming, do you not agree?” she said, suddenly appearing flushed.

“Indeed,” Grace agreed, understanding all too well the pressures of the Season.

“When I finished, I decided to check on you before going home,” Caroline went on, her expression softening with genuine concern.

Grace felt a rush of warmth and gratitude. “Thank you, Caro. I really appreciate it. I promise to make it up to you,” she said earnestly. “I will take you to Madame Small’s sweet shop next time,” she promised, trying to lighten the mood.

“What am I? Your five-year-old?” Caroline grumbled, but there was a twinkle in her eyes.

“Oh, I wish.” Grace sighed, and before she knew it, they both burst out laughing.

The laughter was infectious, and for a moment, Grace felt her worries lift.

“Well, in that case, you best find that husband. This five-year-old isn’t going to exist on her own.” Caroline chuckled, her eyes shining with mirth.

“Not until I see you walk down the aisle first,” Grace returned in equal humor, her laughter still lingering in the air.

A voice in her head seized the opportunity to remind her of her matchmaking task right then, but she shoved it aside. Not right now. She needed this moment of levity with her friend.

“Speaking of...” Caroline suddenly began, her tone taking on a teasing edge.

*Oh, dear. Here it comes.*

“I came across Dawshire on my shopping trip earlier,” Caroline declared, her eyes sparkling with mischief. “He did not look very good, I must say. And he seemed especially concerned when I told him we were supposed to be together, but you canceled,” she added, her tone implying all sorts of things.

So, that was why he had called, Grace realized, her heart skipping a beat.

“As a matter of fact, he called just before your arrival,” Grace shared, her tone neutral.

“He did?” Caroline seemed oddly excited and very much satisfied as if things were going exactly as she’d hoped.

“He did,” Grace replied, her voice slightly quivering as she relived the moment in her mind. The weight of her mother’s gaze upon him, the sound of his voice echoing in the entrance hall—all of it came rushing back to her.

“Well?” her friend prompted, her eyes shining with that anticipation about her once again.

Caroline was relentless when she was onto something, and Grace could not help but find her persistence both endearing and slightly exasperating.

“I am sure my mother entertained him quite all right,” Grace said, trying to dismiss the topic with a wave of her hand.

But Caroline obviously deflated, her shoulders slumping ever so slightly. Grace could not help but notice the change in her demeanor, and she felt a flicker of concern. Her friend was acting rather strange right now.

“You did not see him?” Caroline asked, her voice laced with a disappointment that was hard to miss.

“Why do you sound displeased?” Grace gave a light chuckle, trying to lighten the mood. She could not fathom why Caroline would be so invested in her interactions with Thomas.

“Well, no reason at all. Only that it did not seem like the most polite thing to do.” Caroline suddenly turned sheepish, her gaze dropping to her lap as if she was hiding something.

“Since when did you care about propriety, Caroline?” Grace quirked a dubious eyebrow, her curiosity piqued. This was not the Caroline she knew.

“I have always cared about propriety, Grace,” Caroline responded, her voice a tad too high, further fueling Grace’s suspicions. She avoided meeting Grace’s gaze as well.

*Curious.*

Grace could not let this go. “Who are you, and what have you done with my friend?” she teased, trying to get a rise out of Caroline.

“When are you taking me to Madame Small’s?” Caroline suddenly asked, her tone light, but Grace was certain she was trying to change the subject now.

Nevertheless, she humored her. “I thought you weren’t my five-year-old?” she asked, a playful smile on her lips.

“Well, I am now,” Caroline declared, a mischievous glint in her eyes. And they laughed once again, the tension dissipating

into the air.

Grace found herself feeling quite light after. The laughter, the teasing—it all served to lift her spirits. That was until her mother found her after Caroline’s departure.

“Now, are you going to tell me why you made me lie to Dawshire on your behalf earlier?” Emily asked, her tone gentle but probing.

“It was as I said, Mama. A headache,” Grace lied yet again, her gaze dropping to her lap. She could not meet her mother’s knowing eyes.

“Oh, rubbish.” Emily waved a dismissive, bejeweled hand, clearly not buying the excuse. And when Grace did not reply, she said, “The Duke seemed quite concerned, you know.” Her voice held a note of significance that Grace could not ignore.

Grace recalled Caroline’s similar words.

*Is he all right?*

Their last conversation hadn’t been the most pleasant one. But she doubted that he was as disturbed. Thomas felt nothing for her. So, he should not care, she thought to herself.

She recalled her conversation with Barbara as well. She wanted the truth. She wanted his name cleared despite it all. Could she ask him about the culprit?

Perhaps she should, she decided.

“Grace?” Her mother broke into her thoughts, her voice laced with concern. She heaved a sigh. “Did you two fight?” she pressed, her brows furrowed in concern.

“Perhaps.” Grace shrugged, not quite ready to delve into the details.

Her mother’s brows further wrinkled.

“I knew it,” Emily said, more to herself than to Grace. “But such are relationships, are they not? Never without their moments of petty squabbles. You’ll get over it,” she added, her voice full of optimism.

“What if this is more than a mere petty squabble, Mama?” Grace showed her vulnerability to her mother right then, her voice barely above a whisper.

And for the first time, she feared losing her heart. She feared losing the man she’d given it to yet again.

As if Emily had somehow sensed that fear, she said, “You have nothing to worry about, dear. You may not see it now, but I know what I saw in Dawshire’s eyes earlier. And I feel like he is here to stay.”

*Do not give me hope, Mama,* Grace almost blurted. It was only a matter of time before she fulfilled her end of their arrangement, and they went their separate ways.

Thomas was not here to stay. He had never been from the start. And once again, she knew that she'd lost her heart, for she'd placed it in the wrong place. She was repeating her past mistake.

But why did she wish to carry on this time despite knowing where all was headed?

Why did she want Thomas to keep her heart even if she was making a mistake?



## CHAPTER 23



Thomas could not ignore the feeling that Grace was purposefully avoiding him again. The days had passed in a blur of restlessness and mounting frustration. She'd been asleep the last time he'd called, or so her mother had informed him. And none of his missives had seen any response since their last conversation at the ball.

Was this perhaps her way of redefining their relationship, as she'd mentioned?

His days were incomplete without her presence, and his nights were filled with thoughts of her. He wanted to see her, to talk to her, to understand what was going on in her mind. He felt as though he would lose it if he went another day without a glimpse of her, without the sound of her laughter ringing in his ears.

As such, he made another unannounced call, his impatience getting the better of him. This time, he was fortunate enough to find her in the front hall, giving some instructions to a footman. She appeared shocked at the sight of him.

Good, he thought to himself. Perhaps this would shake her out of whatever reverie she had been in.

She quickly recovered, offering him a polite smile. “Your Grace,” she greeted, her voice steady. She ushered him into the drawing room before ringing for tea.

Thomas stopped her then, his decision made on the spur of the moment. “Would you care to join me for a ride instead?” he offered, surprising himself with the invitation. “I believe the change of scenery would do you good,” he said, trying to sound casual. “You won’t regret it,” he could not help encouraging, his eyes locked on hers, trying to convey his sincerity.

She appeared fleetingly hesitant, her eyes searching his as if looking for something. Finally, she nodded, excusing herself to get ready. Thomas felt a wave of relief wash over him. At least she was willing to spend time with him outside the confines of her home.

\* \* \*

“Will you take responsibility, then?” Grace suddenly asked, her voice low, as they rode out.

Thomas was caught off guard, as she’d been quiet all along, her posture stiff and distant if anything.

“I beg your pardon?” he managed to get out, his mind racing to understand her meaning.

“You said I would not regret it,” she reminded him, her eyes finally meeting his. There was a challenge in her gaze, a

flicker of the old Grace he knew. “That weighs quite heavy, you see,” she added, her body relaxing just a bit as she spoke.

Thomas could sense a change in her, a slight shift in her demeanor. She was opening up if only just a little.

“What is life without a little challenge, eh?” he said, trying to keep the mood light. He wanted her to feel at ease with him, to remember the connection they shared.

He was not sure why, but she colored up slightly at his words. Just a tease of it, he noted, trying to school his thoughts and body. She was not making things easy for him, he realized.

“They say, be careful what you wish for, Your Grace.” She chuckled, her eyes sparkling with mirth.

“*They?*” he echoed, intrigued. “Not *you?*” he asked, his curiosity piqued.

“No. What is life without a little challenge, eh?” she returned slyly, a playful smile on her lips.

And Thomas chuckled, the sound genuine and full of warmth. Their exchange right now was just as natural as it had been from the start. He’d missed this, their banter. He’d missed *her*, he realized.

She opened her mouth to say something right then, her expression shifting, but closed it for some reason, seeming all

but tentative now. Cautious almost. Thomas waited, his heart pounding in his chest, wondering what was on her mind.

And when she finally spoke, he had the oddest feeling it was not what she'd intended to say.

"I was told you called the other day," she said, her voice steady, but he noticed that she was also curiously avoiding his gaze. "I do hope my mother did not bore you," she added, her tone polite.

"On the contrary, she was the most entertaining hostess," he confessed, his words sincere. He had enjoyed talking to her mother, but it was Grace he had wanted to spend his time with.

"And here I thought myself the most entertaining hostess in Society." Grace gave a petulant pout, inadvertently drawing his gaze to her lips.

Thomas swallowed hard, wrestling with his thoughts once again.

"Well, you must have gotten it from somewhere." He shrugged, trying to keep the conversation light.

"And again, here I thought you'd humor me at least." She met his gaze with her petulant one at last, a playful glint in her eyes.

"Encourage your delusions, you mean?" Thomas returned before he heard a hearty laugh escape him this time at the look

on her face. She was adorable when she was trying to be cross with him.

And suddenly, he could not imagine his life without this. His life without Grace in it, and how she made him feel. Heck, he could not imagine what his life had been like *before* her. He did not *want* to. He wanted her, all of her, and he was determined to make her see that.

Another realization so sudden struck him right then, that he found himself momentarily robbed of all breath. His heart thudded loudly in his chest, the beats echoing in his ears as he tried to process this overwhelming revelation. He was in love. He'd fallen deeply, irrevocably in love with Grace Jennings, and the weight of this truth settled in his chest with a strange mixture of elation and terror.

He never wanted to let go of this feeling, of *her*. The mere thought of letting her go was one he could not entertain, not even for a fleeting moment, for how utterly terrifying it was. His heart felt full, ready to burst with the intensity of his emotions, and more than anything, he wanted to tell her. He wanted to pour out all his feelings, lay his heart bare for her to see.

Damned the consequences and the possibility of her not returning his love. He just needed her to know, needed her to understand the depth of his feelings. And how he wanted, more than anything, for her to keep his heart safe. He'd just opened his mouth to speak, to finally reveal his true feelings, when something wet and unexpected dropped on his lip.

“Goodness gracious,” Grace let out just as more splatters of rain came down on them, interrupting the moment and bringing him back to reality.

He could feel his heart sinking as he realized that the opportunity to confess his feelings was slipping away.

That was the English weather for you, Thomas thought in frustration, his brows furrowing as he tried to shield Grace from the rain. It was just about as predictable as the Prince Regent's tantrums, changing in the blink of an eye and ruining perfectly good moments.

"And there goes our ride," Grace added with a small, disappointed sigh when he steered their barouche back in the direction they'd come, in an attempt to return her home before the rain worsened.

Thomas could not help but notice the slight frown on her lips, and he wondered if she was just as disappointed about the interrupted moment as he was.

But he did not dare hope for more. He could not. Not when there was so much at stake, so much to lose. He needed to protect his heart, even as he yearned to give it to her.

By the time Thomas returned home, he was completely drenched, his clothes sticking to his skin uncomfortably. He could not get out of the wet garments fast enough, his mind still reeling from the events of the day, from the realization that had struck him so suddenly.

He headed straight for his bedchamber, eager to change out of his wet clothes and warm up. Only to pause when he passed an ajar door, a door which was supposed to be securely locked.

His mother's familiar humming filtered into the hallway through the slightly open door, and a wave of trepidation washed over him.

What was Laura doing in the room he'd clearly instructed to keep locked? It was the late Duke's chamber, a place filled with memories and belongings of his father. And although it was connected to his mother's rooms, Thomas had had it locked for certain reasons—reasons he thought were understood by all the staff.

“Oh, Neil, darling, there you are.” His mother looked up the moment he entered, her eyes lighting up with recognition and love.

He felt himself visibly relax when he saw that she was safe, that she was surrounded by memories of happier times.

She was seated on the carpet in the middle of some portraits and pictures he'd had moved upon his father's death and locked in the room, as if trying to preserve the past, keep it safe and untouched. Thomas wondered why she was left alone, why there was no one there to watch over her.

“Do you remember when I forced us all to get this family portrait done?” She beckoned him to sit next to her on the carpet, patting the space beside her with a gentle smile. He obliged, sitting down and turning his attention to the portrait in her lap.

It was a moderately sized family portrait, a smaller version of the bigger one on display in the gallery. It was a snapshot of a

time before the war, before the scars and the pain. Thomas was younger, unmarked by battle, and he felt as though he was looking at a stranger as he stared at that scarless face.

Laura had, indeed, been the one to insist on that portrait, he recalled with a small smile. She had always been the sentimental one, the one to cherish memories and moments captured in time.

“You hardly smile in your portraits, Neil. Oh, what do I do to get a smile out of you?” She sighed fondly, her eyes tracing the features of the young man in the portrait as if trying to coax a smile from the painted version of her son.

Thomas felt a pang in his chest as he realized that she still saw him as Neil, still thought of him as her late husband. It was a bittersweet realization, and he was not sure how to feel about it. He was her son, but in her mind, he was also her husband. It was a confusing, tangled mess of emotions, and he was not sure how to navigate it.

Miss Everton appeared just then, her presence a welcome distraction from the tumultuous thoughts swirling in Thomas’s mind. She was his mother’s nurse companion, a steady presence in their lives since Laura’s health had started to decline.

Thomas was about to ask what was going on, why his mother was in the locked room, when Miss Everton explained.

The Dowager Duchess had thrown a tantrum, insisting on having the room opened for her. Miss Everton had made sure there was nothing in the room that could harm Laura before



allowing her entry, following Dr. Bentley's advice to indulge her requests if they seemed to stimulate her memories and bring a smile to her face.

"I gave her some privacy to explore, to reconnect with the past," Miss Everton explained, her voice calm and steady. "I check on her every few minutes to make sure she is all right. My constant presence would have interfered with this moment for her."

Thomas nodded, understanding the delicate balance they had to maintain with his mother's health. He was grateful for Miss Everton's care and dedication, grateful that she was there to look after his mother when he could not be. And as he sat there on the carpet, surrounded by memories of the past, he realized that he had more than just his feelings for Grace to contend with. He had his mother, her health, and the tangled web of memories and emotions that came with it.

And for a moment, just a moment, the weight of it all felt overwhelming.

"Very well." Thomas was even more relaxed now that he knew what was going on.

Dr. Bentley, it seemed, was truly onto something with his treatment of the Dowager Duchess. The idea of grounding his mother in the happier memories of her past, in hopes of soothing the tempests in her mind, was showing promise.

Dr. Bentley was exploring ways to help the Dowager Duchess cope better and have less violent episodes. It was a delicate process, navigating through the maze of her memories, trying

to anchor her to the joyful ones. Thomas was on board with anything that could bring his mother peace.

The doctor was of the opinion that exposing her to what had made her happy in the past could help calm her in general. Thomas thought this a great idea. He had noticed a subtle shift in his mother's demeanor over the past few days. She seemed more centered, less prone to the sudden storms of confusion and rage that used to sweep through her with little warning.

Laura had been more stable, more present. Whatever Dr. Bentley and Miss Everton were working on seemed to be working, and for that, Thomas was profoundly grateful.

Miss Everton excused herself, leaving mother and son to their private reminiscence.

As Thomas listened to his mother reminisce about fond moments from their past, he let his gaze wander about, taking in the lifeless room that seemed to hold so much of his mother's essence.

His eyes landed on an open chest of drawers. Papers were sticking out of it in a haphazard manner. Clearly the result of his mother's rummaging, he thought to himself with a small, affectionate shake of his head.

He gained his feet, moving closer to examine the scene while Laura was distracted by her pictures. His curiosity was piqued. What had his mother been looking for, or perhaps trying to hide?

Thomas found a sheaf of documents which left him in shock. The papers were old, the ink faded, but the signatures at the bottom were unmistakable. They were business plans signed by his father and... Lord Willson.

His heart sank, a cold pit forming in his stomach.

The Earl had been anything but his father's business partner. In fact, the men had been known rivals in every conceivable way. The discovery of these papers, of this hidden alliance, sent Thomas's mind spinning.

What was this now about a joint venture? One he had never found a record of after his assumption of the title and fortune no less. The date on the documents was just a month before his father's untimely death, a detail that did not escape Thomas.

It was a well-known fact that there had been open animosity between the late Duke and Lord Willson. Thomas had every reason to suspect the Earl of his father's murder, especially now with this potential motive laid out before him.

Lord Willson could have easily made the late Duke invest in their joint venture, only to murder him after and claim everything for himself. The documents in Thomas's hands could very well be the missing piece of the puzzle, the key to unraveling the mystery of his father's death.

Thomas also wondered why Lord Willson had never mentioned this business to him during their visit to his farm. He had been elusive, hinting at something of interest, something he had that would be of significance to Thomas.

Although he had mentioned something at the end, Thomas recalled. Something about a thing of interest to Thomas which he had in his possession. Could this be it? Could this be the secret that Lord Willson was holding over him?

Thomas needed to get to the bottom of things once and for all. His mind was made up. He needed answers, and he would not rest until he had them.

With a newfound determination, he collected the documents, tucking them securely under his arm.

He would unravel this mystery, for his father's sake, and for his own peace of mind.

## CHAPTER 24



The Duchess of Devonshire was hosting a dinner party tonight. It was a grand affair, with guests dressed in their finest, laughter and chatter filling the opulent rooms. Grace, amidst the revelry, found her thoughts drifting toward Thomas and the pressing questions that had been plaguing her mind for days.

Grace decided to use the opportunity to speak to Thomas about the one thing that had been gnawing at her for days. She needed answers, and tonight felt like the right time to seek them out. There was a certain urgency in her heart, a need for reassurance that everything was going to be all right.

She needed to know if he was investigating his family's murder, and if he had any leads on a suspect. Her heart ached at the thought of him carrying such a heavy burden alone, and she yearned to be there for him, to support him through whatever lay ahead.

She'd wanted to ask him this during their ride, but the moment had been so pleasant that she'd thought the better of bringing up such a somber topic and ruining it. The laughter, the shared glances, they were moments she treasured, and she hadn't wanted to tarnish them with talk of murder and suspects.

And if she was being honest with herself, she was also apprehensive about what answers he might have for her. The truth, she knew, might be hard to hear, but she needed to know. She needed to understand what was going on in his mind—what demons he was battling.

After a game of chess with Tabitha and Rachel, she announced that she needed the retiring room, and excused herself. The game had been a welcome distraction, but now, as she made her way through the crowded rooms, her mission was clear.

On her way back, however, she found herself thinking of a way to get some privacy with Thomas. The house was bustling with guests, and finding a quiet corner to talk seemed like a daunting task.

Only for a hand to pull her into a nearby room just then. Her heart leaped in her throat, surprised by the sudden movement, but as she turned and saw Thomas, her nerves settled.

The room appeared unused, as there were pieces of furniture covered in Holland cloths. It was a small, intimate space hidden away from the rest of the party. A perfect place for a private conversation.

And the only illumination in it came from the moonlight filtering through the open curtains. The soft glow of the moonlight cast shadows on the room, creating a serene ambiance.

“Do you have a habit of pulling people into closed rooms, Thomas?” She quirked a playful brow, trying to lighten the mood, to ease the tension she felt building inside her.

“For certain people, yes,” he replied, his voice low and filled with a warmth that made her heart flutter.

“*People?*” Grace heard herself echo, her mind suddenly filled with unpleasant images. She did not want to think of Thomas with other women, did not want to entertain the thought of him being anything less than faithful.

“A certain woman,” he corrected, his eyes locking onto hers, a smug smile playing on his lips. “Is that jealousy I hear, Grace?”

“Oh, do not flatter yourself, Thomas.” She snorted, trying to brush off the intensity of his gaze, the way his eyes seemed to see right through her.

“It would not hurt to just admit it,” he returned, his voice teasing, and she could not help but roll her eyes at his confidence.

“And it would not hurt to quit jumping to conclusions to feed your ego,” she threw back, her words sharp, but there was a playful glint in her eyes.

He let out a low chuckle, a sound that sent familiar warmth all through her. And she laughed with him, the tension easing, the weight on her heart lifting just a bit.

A voice in her head reminded her of what she’d wanted to ask him. And once again, she felt that reluctance come over her.

She did not want to ruin this moment, did not want to bring the darkness into their little sanctuary.

But at the same time, she'd stalled long enough. She needed answers, *needed* to know what was going on.

"As a matter of fact, I was hoping to speak to you," she began, her voice tentative, unsure.

"Should I be worried?" He quirked an eyebrow, a playful glint in his eyes. But she could see the concern hidden just beneath the surface.

And after a moment of thought, she responded, "I do not think so."

She hoped not. She hoped that whatever he had to tell her, they could face it together.

"What about?" he prompted, his gaze now steady, serious. He could see that this was important to her, and he was ready to listen.

"I was just wondering if you've begun any investigations on the carriage accident, and if you have a suspect in the picture..." she voiced out, her voice barely above a whisper, her heart pounding in her chest.

He was quiet for what felt like forever, sending apprehension knotting away at her guts. Had she overstepped? Pushed too hard?



When he finally spoke, he sounded almost as tentative as she felt. “Lord Willson,” he said.

“I beg your pardon?” Grace blurted in perplexity.

Lord Willson? Caroline’s father? What business did he have with Thomas’s family? With the carriage accident?

“I think the Earl of Willson might have something to do with it,” he responded, his voice steady now, filled with a conviction that sent shivers down her spine.

He went on to tell her about the Earl’s history with his late father. The shared animosity and open rivalry.

“How long have you harbored such suspicions toward the Earl?” she asked, her voice laced with a mixture of curiosity and concern.

She wondered how long this seed of doubt had been growing in his mind, and how it had affected his feelings, particularly toward Caroline.

Was he in love with Caroline, knowing this? The question nagged at her, eating away at her composure. She knew the heart had its own logic, but this was a complication she hadn’t foreseen.

Then again, there was no controlling what the heart chose. And for all they both knew, the Earl was innocent, and

Thomas had assumed wrongly. She had to keep an open mind, for both their sakes.

“I have suspected from the moment I found out that it was never an accident,” Thomas replied, his words measured as if he was carefully choosing each one.

“But you love Caroline,” Grace said, needing clarification, needing to understand the tangled web that was being woven around them.

“I *what?*” His shock was palpable, and she had never heard him so taken aback before. “Where did you hear such an absurd notion?” he asked, his voice rising slightly in disbelief.

If she’d thought herself confused and shocked earlier, then she had no words to describe what she felt right now. This was a twist she hadn’t anticipated, and it left her reeling.

“Isn’t that why you wanted to use me to get close to her? To make her your bride?” she asked, her voice barely above a whisper as she tried to make sense of the situation.

“Grace, my interest in Lady Caroline has nothing to do with sentiments and everything to do with my investigation. I needed Lady Caroline to get through to her father from the start,” he explained, his tone earnest, as if he was desperate for her to understand.

“I felt that if his daughter was involved, he would be more forthcoming. And my tactic appears to be working, considering he even invited me to his farms. But it is taking

longer than I anticipated, and I need my answers as soon as possible,” he finished.

His words struck her as selfish and inconsiderate, and she could not help but feel a twinge of disappointment.

Grace felt her knees weaken slightly, and her head spun as she tried to process this new information. It was a lot to take in, and she was not sure where to go from here.

She understood that he needed his answers, but whatever had been between the late Duke and Lord Willson, whatever was between Thomas and Lord Willson now, Caroline was innocent and had nothing to do with it. She did not deserve to be dragged into this. And she certainly did not deserve to be turned into an object, a catalyst in an investigation and crime she knew nothing about.

“So, you merely wanted to use Caroline for your answers,” Grace concluded, her voice steady, but the hurt clear in her eyes. “Why didn’t you tell me this from the start, Thomas?” she asked, her voice rising slightly as indignation joined the storm of emotions swirling inside her.

Caroline was nothing but a tool to aid his investigation. And Grace felt like she’d handed her friend over on a silver platter to be used. Stupidly, she’d believed that he’d been transparent with her from the start. But no, he’d withheld the most important piece of their “arrangement” from her.

Whatever that arrangement had been from the start, that is, as she did not know what to believe anymore. Not after this.

“It did not seem necessary.” He had the nerve to excuse his deceit, his voice calm as if he did not realize the magnitude of his omission.

“It did not seem necessary?” she spluttered, her anger bubbling to the surface. “Did I not deserve the truth, Thomas?” she asked, her voice tight with emotion. “You hid things from me, and made me hand my innocent friend over to you to be *used*,” she added, the regret in her voice palpable.

“You make me sound like a monster with your words, Grace.” Thomas grimaced, his discomfort evident.

“You are not a monster,” Grace said, her voice softer now, but firm. “But it doesn’t change the fact that you lied to me, when I thought we were being nothing but honest and sincere with each other,” she added, the disappointment clear in her tone.

“I am not ‘using’ anyone, Grace. This is just an investigation. I need to *know*,” he argued, his voice filled with a desperation she hadn’t heard before.

“Not at the expense of an innocent person. Caroline doesn’t deserve to be dragged into any of this. Whatever happened, she is *not* her father,” Grace insisted.

She felt betrayed right now. He should have told her from the start. Perhaps she’d have helped him find a different way to approach the matter without exposing anyone to hurt.

“I never lied to you, Grace,” he suddenly said, his voice a deadly calm that belied a pained edge. It was a pain she could

feel mirrored in her own heart.

“I trusted you, Thomas,” she whispered, her voice barely audible, laden with the weight of her disappointment.

“I had nothing but suspicions, Grace. I did not want to burden you with unfounded assumptions that constantly plagued my thoughts,” he responded earnestly. “I could not bear to spread potentially baseless rumors without any proof, and that’s why I chose not to share these details from the start. But never, not once, did I withhold anything with the intention of causing you, or anyone else, any hurt,” he added, his sincerity apparent.

Grace wanted to believe him, she truly did. But it did little to ease the sting of her disappointment and hurt.

This revelation only served to highlight a painful truth—that Thomas might not have ever truly trusted her.

“I see we never had trust from the start, Thomas,” she said, her voice breaking as the weight of the realization hit her.

“I would never have approached you if that had been the case,” he responded, his voice steady, but she could hear the undercurrent of desperation.

“We could have found a better way, Thomas,” she said, her voice steadier now, but still tinged with sadness. “I only wanted to help you from the start.”

And that truth remained. She still wanted to help him, to clear his name. But the realization that he might not have trusted her enough to allow her to do so constricted her chest and brought tears to her eyes.

“I must go,” she mumbled, turning away before he could see her tears.

She saw him open his mouth, perhaps to explain, to apologize, she did not know. But she could not stay to find out and left in search of solitude to nurse her wounded heart.

\* \* \*

Upon returning home that night and retiring to her room, Grace was startled by a knock on her bedroom door. Her brother Benedict entered, his cane preceding him, and she sighed.

“What is it now, Benedict?” she asked, tired and in no mood for his usual antics.

“I came to ask you that very question,” he replied, his tone serious, devoid of its usual lightness. “You may have concealed your feelings from our parents on the ride back, but I know something is amiss, Grace,” he said, his gaze piercing.

“I assure you, there’s nothing—” she began, but he interrupted her, his voice firm.

“I saw you leave a room in quite a state at the dinner earlier. Do not think to lie to me, Grace.”

His words left no room for argument, and she knew she could hide nothing from him. Although his words did not sound it, concern was evident in his eyes, and Grace felt a fresh wave of emotion swell in her own.

“Was it Dawshire?” he pressed, anger sharpening his tone. “What did he do to you?”

“I think... I might have been the one to do something, Benedict,” Grace admitted, her voice low.

Memories of her interaction with Thomas flooded back—his attempts to explain, his defense of his actions, and her own unyielding and dismissive response. He was a man acquainted with loss, acquainted with deception, seeking only to uncover his truth and secure peace for himself and his mother.

She should have been more understanding, more compassionate. Instead, she had allowed her own pain and the sting of perceived betrayal to cloud her judgment, to make her selfish, when he had needed her understanding the most. And for that, she was profoundly disappointed in herself.

“You do not need to defend him, Grace,” Benedict interjected, misreading her introspection.

“What?” she asked, momentarily thrown off. “I am not defending him,” she added quickly, though a part of her wondered if perhaps she was.

“I warned you about him from the beginning, dear sister,” Benedict continued, undeterred. “That man is not to be trusted.”

“Is this really what I need to hear from you right now, Benedict?” Grace asked, frustration coloring her tone. She hardly needed her brother to add to her turmoil.

“Do you expect me to defend a man who’s deceived Society? A man who has now entangled my sister in his web of lies?” Benedict shot back.

“Thomas is not a liar. He hasn’t deceived anyone.” Grace found herself defending Thomas instinctively, her clarity on the matter surprising even herself. He had been protecting her, she realized.

“Then provide the name of the person responsible for the carriage accident that claimed the late Duke and his heir. Or, at least, show me proof of Thomas’s innocence,” Benedict challenged, obstinacy lacing his words.

“I won’t stand here and listen to you condemn an innocent man,” Grace said firmly, gesturing toward the door.

“You’re blinded, Grace. Blinded by what you think is love,” Benedict said, pausing at the exit, his words heavy with implication.

“How dare you?” Grace’s frustration boiled over into anger. How dare he dismiss her feelings for Thomas as mere infatuation?



“I have respected your choices and kept my distance from your courtship thus far, Sister,” Benedict said, his tone taking on a warning edge. “But do not think I will stand idly by and watch you make a mistake.”

Grace felt a chill of trepidation wash over her. Before she could demand clarification, Benedict added, “Just remember, Grace, I warned you.”

And with that, he was gone, leaving behind a heavy silence and a looming sense of foreboding that hung over her, casting shadows on her happiness, her future, and her entire life.

## CHAPTER 25



Thomas was not interested in making Caroline his bride, after all. Yet, the revelation brought Grace no solace. Instead, she was swamped by guilt and disappointment for her own failings toward him. She had convinced herself that after her recent behavior, Thomas would surely desire no further association with her.

Seeking refuge in the library that afternoon, she had hoped that the comforting embrace of books might distract her from her tumultuous thoughts. But the words on the pages did little to quell the storm within.

“There you are,” came a voice she knew all too well.

Grace could not help the internal groan that escaped her. Her brother’s voice, accompanied by the familiar tap of his cane, grew nearer.

“I have heard your thoughts from last night, Benedict. I do not wish to discuss it further,” Grace said, a hint of weariness in her voice.

“Not all of it, you haven’t,” Benedict countered, stopping before her.

With a sigh, Grace rose to her feet, determined to escape any further reproach or disparaging words about Thomas. “Very well, then,” she said tersely, attempting to move past her brother.

But Benedict was quicker, his hand catching her wrist in a gentle yet firm hold. “Hear me out, Sister,” he pleaded, his eyes earnest. “Please.”

Grace hesitated, then, with a resigned sigh, returned to her seat. “What is it, Benedict?”

“I want to apologize,” he said softly, taking the seat opposite her.

Grace stared at him, momentarily lost for words.

Benedict continued, “I said things I should not have said last night. I saw your distress, and I let my anger cloud my judgment. My censure should have been directed at the Duke, not at you.”

Grace shook her head. “You do not understand what happened between Thomas and me, Benedict. He was never in the wrong.”

“I realize now that I was rash and did not think things through. I was wrong, and for that, I apologize,” Benedict admitted.

“It isn’t to me you should be apologizing.” Grace sighed, her thoughts turning to Thomas. “The Duke really is no murderer,” she added quietly.

“If you are certain of that, then I trust your judgment.” Benedict nodded. After a moment of silence, he spoke again, “I know you love him, Grace. All I want is your happiness and security. If you find that with Dawshire, then you have my full support.”

Grace felt a lump form in her throat. “But what if I do not know how to secure that happiness?” she asked, her voice barely above a whisper.

Benedict leaned forward, capturing her gaze. “The greatest mistake you could make, Grace, is to let past wounds prevent you from following your heart and finding love again.”

His words lingered in the air long after he had left the room, giving Grace much to ponder. That is, until another voice interrupted her thoughts, and she looked up to find her father standing before her.

“Mind if I join your afternoon musings, dear?” Mark gently inquired, his presence calming yet filled with concern.

“Not at all,” Grace replied, setting aside the book that she hadn’t truly been reading.

“How are you?” he asked, sitting beside her, his eyes filled with fatherly concern.

Grace hesitated, not immediately finding the words to respond.

Sensing her struggle, he softly added, “I know you haven’t been at your best lately.”

She looked up at him, her eyes asking the unspoken question of how he knew.

“What kind of father would I be if I did not notice such things about my own children?” he responded with a gentle smile. “And besides, you and your mother are cut from the same cloth. You both wear your hearts on your sleeves.”

“Too open, apparently.” Grace sighed, feeling the weight of her emotions.

“Oh, do not see it as a weakness,” Mark reassured her, his tone gentle. “Such clarity about a person is a strength. Your mother wears it proudly, and I want you to do the same, Grace.” He reached for her hand, giving it a reassuring squeeze, his touch warming her soul but also bringing a fresh wave of tears to her eyes.

“But what if that clarity and openness cost me my heart, Papa?” Grace whispered, her voice barely audible.

He smiled warmly, his grip on her hand firm and comforting. “Oh, I believe it will bring you your heart, instead. I have seen you with Dawshire,” he said, accurately interpreting her fears. “I may have been hasty in my judgments, swayed by rumors.

The Duke is a genuine man, and I believe he values sincerity. You have nothing to fear, my dear.”

With those words, a flicker of hope ignited within Grace. Maybe she had been too quick to doubt Thomas, too hasty in her judgments. She needed to see him, to apologize, to lay her feelings bare, regardless of the outcome.

Without another word, she rose, determined to find him. But as she reached the front hall, ready to leave, an unexpected visitor appeared.

Caroline, her dear friend, entered in a state of visible distress.

“Caroline, is everything all right?” Grace asked, her heart lurching at the sight of her friend’s turmoil.

Caroline’s response was a mix of a nod and a shake of the head, her emotions clearly overwhelming her.

“Oh, dear,” Grace murmured, immediately wrapping an arm around her friend and leading her to the privacy of the drawing room.

This was not like Caroline at all, and Grace’s mind raced as she tried to recall any signs she might have missed.

She sat Caroline on the sofa, encouraging her to let out her tears, offering a handkerchief and a patient, listening ear.

Once her friend had somewhat collected herself, Grace gently asked, “What is the matter, Caroline? Are you all right?”

“I thought I was,” Caroline managed, her voice shaky. “But I realize now that I have been wrong all along.”

Grace could see there was more her friend wanted to say, though hesitation held her back. “Talk to me,” she encouraged softly.

“Oh, I love him, Grace. I know I should not. I have been fighting my feelings all this while, but I have failed,” Caroline confessed, bursting into tears once more.

Grace felt a mix of surprise, confusion, and concern wash over her. She wondered, her mind racing, just who had captured her friend’s heart so completely.

“I know Lord Marfield is your cousin, and his interest has always been in you over the years,” Caroline began, her voice trembling as she sniffed back tears.

“You speak of Henry?” Grace asked, surprise evident in her voice.

“Yes. I love Henry, Grace. And I am sorry,” Caroline confessed, her weeping unabated.

“Caroline, you do not need to apologize,” Grace assured her gently, her heart swelling with compassion for her friend.

“Oh, but I do. I have let too much happen between Henry and me. I should not have encouraged him, especially knowing he has shown such interest in you over the years,” Caroline countered, her voice laced with guilt.

“Henry’s never explicitly shown his interest like that, Caroline,” Grace reassured, her tone soft and comforting. “And there is nothing between us other than family ties. He is my cousin and a dear friend—nothing more. I assure you, I have no romantic feelings for him,” she explained earnestly.

“You do not?” Caroline sought confirmation, her sniffles persisting.

“I do not,” Grace affirmed. “Now, is he the man you’ve been hiding all this while?” she inquired, her curiosity piqued.

“I should have told you, but I felt so guilty. I feared I was going behind your back,” Caroline admitted, her confession spilling out as she recounted the secret relationship she had been maintaining with Henry.

Grace offered her reassurance and comfort, truly happy for her friend and cousin. “Do you think he feels the same, Caroline?” she finally asked, knowing the importance of mutual affection in any relationship.

“There were moments when he showed me that he does... I want to believe he does,” Caroline replied, hope and vulnerability mingling in her voice.



Grace expressed her heartfelt happiness for them both, genuinely pleased at the match. “And don’t you *ever* apologize for loving someone, Caroline,” she added firmly, wanting to instill confidence in her friend.

Caroline responded with a grateful hug, thanking Grace for her understanding and support.

“Thank *you*,” Grace said sincerely.

“For what?” Caroline asked and let out a sheepish chuckle.

“For giving me the courage I need now more than ever,” Grace shared, inspired by her friend’s bravery to face her feelings.

She silently hoped for Lord Willson’s innocence, not wanting anything to disrupt Caroline’s newfound happiness.

\* \* \*

That evening, as fate would have it, Henry was invited to dinner. Grace noticed his uncharacteristic quietness, a stark contrast to his usual lively demeanor. Even her parents sensed something was amiss and probed gently, but he dismissed their concerns.

After dinner, sensing a need for a private conversation, Grace suggested a walk in the garden. Henry agreed, and as they strolled down the cobbled pathways bathed in moonlight, Grace initiated the conversation.

“I must confess, I did not know you were coming tonight,” she began, choosing her words carefully.

“I could tell. Your face said it all earlier,” Henry replied with a light chuckle, his mood lightening slightly.

Grace could not help but smile self-consciously, recalling her father’s words about her transparent emotions.

“Aunt Emily was quite persistent with her dinner invitations. I had to accept, eventually, lest she decided to flood my entire study next time,” Henry shared, his laughter genuine now.

“Subtlety has never been Mama’s strength, I am afraid,” Grace agreed, her laughter joining his, creating a moment of shared understanding and warmth between them.

“Are you all right, Henry?” Grace inquired, her tone softening as their shared laughter gradually subsided.

He remained silent for a moment, lost in thought.

“It is Caroline, isn’t it?” she prodded gently.

He raised an eyebrow, not in surprise, but in acknowledgment.

“I am aware of your relationship with her,” Grace revealed, her voice steady.

“You would be,” he acknowledged, his tone a mixture of resignation and relief.

“She holds you in great regard, you know,” Grace could not help but add, her words sincere.

He finally met her gaze, and this time, genuine surprise flickered in his eyes.

“Why do you look so astonished?” Grace could not help but ask, her curiosity piqued.

“Perhaps because I genuinely did not know,” he admitted, his voice barely above a whisper.

“She never mentioned it?” Grace pressed gently, needing confirmation.

His silent look was answer enough.

“Oh, dear!” Grace exclaimed softly, her heart going out to both her cousin and her friend. “What have you two been thinking? Your feelings for each other are so blatantly obvious, yet you’ve both chosen to remain in the dark about them. It is as if you’re intentionally pushing each other away,” she observed, her words laced with a mix of disbelief and exasperation.

“I feared she did not reciprocate my feelings,” Henry confessed, his sigh heavy with unspoken emotions.

“Well, now you know,” Grace stated matter-of-factly, before assuring him of her happiness for the both of them. “You must hold onto her, Henry.”

“Your friend is going to have to put up with me for eternity now, I am afraid,” he quipped, his tone lightening.

“That does sound rather ominous,” Grace teased, a playful glint in her eyes. “I suppose Caroline should brace herself for your... robust appetite.”

“You make me sound like a voracious beast, Grace.” Henry chuckled, his demeanor completely transformed.

“Only where food is concerned, dear cousin. Only where food is concerned.” Grace laughed, relieved to see his spirits lifted, even if it was at the expense of a little good-natured ribbing.

And he, too, joined in her laughter, the weight of the world seemingly lifted off his shoulders.

## CHAPTER 26



Thomas had been selfish, and the gravity of his actions weighed heavily on him. In his desperation, he had cast aside his principles, willing to exploit an innocent person for answers. He was profoundly disappointed in himself.

But the weight of letting Grace down was even more crushing. He had trampled on her trust, and he wondered if there was any way to restore what they had once shared.

With these thoughts heavy on his mind, he sought out Gilbert the next morning.

“You look as if you’ve lost your best friend,” Gilbert remarked upon seeing him.

“It feels rather like I have.” Thomas sighed, pouring himself a drink from the decanter on the table.

“Isn’t it a bit early for that?” Gilbert raised an eyebrow, a hint of concern in his voice.

“If you disapprove, then why is it out?” Thomas retorted, his mood dark.

“It was from last night,” Gilbert explained simply.

Thomas shrugged, knowing full well that the liquor would not numb his pain, but he was desperate for any sort of relief.

The harsh truth was that he had no one to blame but himself—his incompetence, his desperation, his selfishness.

“Are you planning to empty my liquor cabinet before explaining yourself?” Gilbert asked, his tone laced with a mix of amusement and concern.

With a heavy sigh, Thomas refilled his glass and began to recount his recent encounter with Grace, explaining her discovery of his true intentions regarding Caroline and her evident displeasure.

“You did not think to explain yourself beforehand?” Gilbert asked, surprise evident in his voice.

“I wanted to have proof first,” Thomas defended.

“Even so, you can’t expect Grace to simply understand, especially when it involves her friend,” Gilbert pointed out with pragmatic wisdom.

“I realize I have been selfish,” Thomas admitted.

“And rather foolish,” Gilbert added. “Your approach was flawed from the start.”

“And you choose now to tell me this?” Thomas felt a mix of frustration and gratitude.

“You needed to learn this lesson on your own. Only then could you truly understand,” Gilbert explained. “Besides, would you have listened if I had advised you against it?”

“No,” Thomas conceded, knowing his friend was right.

“My point exactly,” Gilbert affirmed. “You must rectify whatever harm has been done, Thomas. Moping and drinking shan’t bring Grace Jennings’ good opinion back,” he added, not unkindly.

Thomas, feeling a twinge of vulnerability, confided in Gilbert about the documents he had discovered and his late father’s undisclosed dealings with the Earl of Willson.

“I find myself puzzled as to why the late Duke would leave such crucial documents in his chambers, seemingly untouched,” Gilbert pondered aloud.

“And without a trace of them anywhere else,” Thomas added, a hint of frustration in his voice. “I do not have all the answers yet, but I intend to confront Willson and get them straight from him.”

“You mean to face the Earl directly?” Gilbert’s tone was laced with surprise and a hint of admiration.

“Have you a better suggestion at present?” Thomas challenged, his resolve strengthening.

“On the contrary, I believe it is high time you dealt with the Earl openly. It is long overdue,” Gilbert encouraged, his eyes holding a glimmer of resolve. “And, Thomas, make certain you leave no question unasked.”

Determination surging through him, Thomas stood. “I will. I am going to see him now.”

As he made for the door, Gilbert stopped him, tossing him something. “You never know when you might need this,” he said, his tone casual, as Thomas caught the pistol in his hands. “Just make sure you come back in one piece,” he added, his voice sincere.

Pistol in hand, Thomas left, his steps determined.

His next destination was the Earl of Willson’s residence.

\* \* \*

“Ah, Dawshire. This is quite the surprise,” Lord Willson greeted, his voice smooth as Thomas was shown into his study.

“I suspect you won’t find it a pleasant one,” Thomas responded, taking a seat with an air of determination.



“I beg your pardon?” The Earl looked genuinely confused. “You seem troubled. Is everything all right?”

“I believe it is time you provided some answers, Willson,” Thomas said, cutting to the chase.

The Earl fell silent for a moment, his expression thoughtful. Finally, he spoke, “I think I owe you more than just answers.”

Thomas watched, his confusion mounting, as Lord Willson opened a drawer and retrieved some documents, which he handed over. “If I am not mistaken, this is what you’re here for, isn’t it?” he asked, indicating the papers now in Thomas’s hands.

“I had promised to show these to you the last time we spoke, though I must admit, I did not expect you to confront me so directly,” he added, a touch of surprise in his voice.

But Thomas was barely listening, his attention caught by the documents. They were copies of the same papers he’d found in his father’s chambers, and there were even more that he hadn’t seen before. Everything appeared to be in order, with dates and signatures from both his father and Lord Willson.

“They were partners in business, and the ventures are still ongoing,” he realized aloud. “Why was I not informed of any of this?” he asked, his voice laced with a mix of frustration and confusion.

“Your father had copies of these documents. Did you not find them among his records?” Lord Willson asked, his surprise now mirroring Thomas’s.

Thomas explained that since assuming his title, he had been unaware of any records pertaining to these business ventures. He had only recently stumbled upon the copies in his father’s chambers.

“I am afraid I can’t tell you why your father chose to keep these matters private,” Lord Willson said, his tone earnest. “As for my part, you had distanced yourself from Society and closed off all communication until recently. I *did* attempt to reach out to you.”

Thomas was left to process this new information, the weight of the Earl’s words settling over him.

Thomas had to acknowledge the truth in Lord Willson’s words. He had, indeed, withdrawn from Society and severed all lines of communication. It was a bitter pill to swallow.

“But none of this explains why my father would choose to go into business with a man he considered a rival,” Thomas pointed out, a frown marring his features.

“Former rival,” Lord Willson corrected, prompting Thomas to raise an eyebrow in surprise.

“I must admit, I am rather taken aback that your father did not share these details with you,” Lord Willson continued, opening another drawer and rifling through its contents. Finally, he

pulled out a stack of letters, handing them to Thomas. “Here they are.”

Thomas scanned the correspondence between Lord Willson and his late father. The letters, dating back over a year before the business ventures had begun, detailed his father’s offer of a truce to Lord Willson.

Shock coursed through Thomas as he realized he had been completely unaware of these dealings. His relationship with his father had always been strained, particularly regarding Laura, and eventually, his father had even sent him away to the military.

He could not help but wonder if Simon, his late brother and former heir to the dukedom, had known about all of this.

“Your father extended an olive branch, suggesting we bury the hatchet and end our petty quarrels,” Lord Willson explained, his voice tinged with regret and a hint of nostalgia. “Neil was a commendable business partner and the better man in our dealings.”

Thomas was not sure he could fully agree with that assessment of his father’s character, considering the tangled web he was currently unraveling.

“You seem both shocked and dissatisfied,” Lord Willson observed, watching him closely.

“Perhaps because I am,” Thomas admitted, his voice filled with confusion and contemplation.

He was struggling to make sense of everything when a sudden realization hit him. “My father and brother’s deaths weren’t an accident,” he blurted out.

“I have heard the whispers in Society.” Lord Willson nodded solemnly.

“Rumors concerning me,” Thomas clarified.

“Rumors are just that—rumors,” Lord Willson responded evenly.

“I have had my suspicions about a culprit ever since I learned their carriage had been sabotaged,” Thomas continued, his gaze steady.

“And who might that be?” Lord Willson asked, sitting up straighter, his expression a mix of anticipation and... hope?

Thomas took a moment to carefully assess the man before him. Lord Willson did not seem to be concealing anything, but Thomas needed to be sure.

“I believed it was you. I thought you had sabotaged the carriage, Lord Willson,” Thomas stated plainly.

The shock on Lord Willson’s face was so profound that he seemed momentarily lost for words. “Me?” he finally spluttered. “Why would you think that?”

“You were my father’s most notable adversary. Your disagreements were common knowledge,” Thomas replied calmly.

Lord Willson seemed to ponder his words before gradually regaining his composure.

“As much as your suspicion has angered and shocked me, I wish to keep an open mind and truly understand your perspective, son,” he began.

At that moment, Thomas felt a shift in their dynamic. Lord Willson was speaking not as a peer or business partner of his late father, but with the care and concern of a father.

“I won’t waste our time asserting my innocence, as I am not certain you would believe me. However, I want you to know that I am a man of principles. Taking a life, particularly that of a friend and business partner, is against everything I stand for,” the Earl continued earnestly.

“Yes, I had my disagreements with your father, but we resolved those issues long ago. Now, all I can offer you is my support in your investigation and our joint business ventures. I am committed to uncovering the truth and ensuring justice for your father and brother,” he concluded.

Before Thomas took his leave, Lord Willson handed him additional documents and expressed his willingness to discuss their business affairs at Thomas’s convenience. After all, the businesses still partially belonged to the Dawshire estate, despite Neil’s passing.

Returning home, Thomas felt a whirlwind of confusion. Lord Willson was innocent, his father had reconciled and entered into business with him, and now he had the full documents to prove it. He absentmindedly placed the pistol Gilbert had given him on a table by the door and set the documents on his desk.

As he loosened his cravat, he realized he felt an unexpected sense of relief that Lord Willson was innocent, safeguarding both Caroline's reputation and Grace's peace of mind.

His thoughts were interrupted when the butler arrived with startling news. Lady Grace Jennings had come to visit.

Thomas quickly stood and was soon face-to-face with a visibly distressed Grace.

"Are you all right, Grace?" he asked, meeting her halfway across the room.

"I am not all right, Thomas," she replied, her emotions close to the surface. "Because I have wronged you."

"You've done no such thing—" he started to say, but she interrupted him.

"No, Thomas. I should have listened to you, understood you. I did not, and I turned you away when you needed me most. You were trying to protect me, and I could not see that," she admitted, tears finally rolling down her cheeks.

“I was selfish, too, Grace. I see that now,” he said, pulling her into a comforting embrace.

He gave her time to cry before gently telling her that Lord Willson was innocent, to which she visibly relaxed. But then, her demeanor changed. “But this means you still do not have your answers.”

“Perhaps it is time for me to stop dwelling on the past and accept that some things will remain unknown.” Thomas sighed.

“We need to find the truth, for your mother’s sake. Justice must be served,” she insisted.

“Would finding the truth bring my father and brother back?” he asked softly.

She was silent for a moment before responding, “It could bring the Dowager Duchess some peace. We have to try, Thomas.”

He felt her hand on his cheek and lifted it to his lips for a gentle kiss. “Thank you,” he said, lifting her face to meet his eyes. “I love you, Grace Jennings.”

“You *what?*” came a horrified voice from the doorway.

Thomas’s head snapped up, his eyes widening when he saw who had spoken. “Mother,” he uttered gently.

“Why are you proclaiming your love for her, Neil?” Laura questioned, her demeanor striking him as peculiar. “It is I whom you love, Neil. I am your wife, your *Duchess*,” she insisted.

“Mother, you must rest,” Thomas implored, moving closer in an attempt to soothe her.

“I am not your mother! I am your *wife*, Neil Robins!” Laura’s voice escalated into a piercing scream, her eyes wildly scanning the room until they landed on the pistol Thomas had carelessly left on the end table near the door.

Without hesitation, she lunged toward it.



## CHAPTER 27



“*M*other, no!” Thomas sprang into action, but she was closer and reached the table first.

“You little harlot. You’ve stolen my husband,” Laura accused, pointing the pistol at Grace with trembling hands.

“Mother,” Thomas implored, his voice barely above a whisper as he took cautious steps toward her, feeling as if his heart might burst from his chest.

Caroline stood frozen, her hands covering her mouth in an attempt to stifle her shock.

“Two nights ago... I waited for my husband in our bed. And when he did not return, I went searching.” Laura’s voice wavered, her hand trembling but her aim unwavering on Grace. “I found him in *your* arms.” She laughed, a manic edge to her tone. “In a guest room beneath my own roof, you little harlot,” she spat out, her eyes wild.

Thomas barely recognized the woman before him, the rage in her eyes something he had never seen.

“I am not the woman you think I am, Your Grace. And the man you are speaking to is your son, Thomas,” Grace said bravely, risking Laura’s wrath.

Laura’s laughter halted as she took a threatening step forward. “Another word, and you die,” she hissed.

Thomas moved slightly, positioning himself between the two women. “Mother, please,” he whispered, his voice laced with desperation.

“You too, Neil,” Laura spat out, her anger seemingly boundless. “All this while, the whispers of your dalliances reached my ears, but I refused to believe them. Until I found you with her.” She gestured toward Grace with the pistol, her voice breaking.

“Was it not enough to send our son to war, Neil? While he fights for his life, you whisper sweet nothings to this... woman.” She choked on her tears. “Because you claim to love *me*,” she finished, her voice a whisper of its former strength.

Thomas’s heart broke for his mother. She was living in a tortured past, her mind twisted by grief and betrayal.

“You have scarred me, Neil. And you have scarred our son. I had to make you feel my pain,” she said, her laughter returning, more unhinged than before. “I tampered with your carriage. I wanted you to hurt as I did.”

Thomas’s world tilted, his breath stolen as he realized the gravity of her confession.

“I killed you, Neil. In that carriage crash,” she said, her voice eerily calm.

“You did what, Mother?” Thomas’s voice was a mere whisper, his entire being shaking.

“I did not want to kill you—just to hurt you. To make you feel my pain. And Simon... Oh, my sweet boy, he was never meant to be there.” Laura sobbed, her composure crumbling.

A gasp from Grace broke the heavy silence, her eyes wide with horror.

“*You* should have died, not my husband and son.” Laura’s voice was a venomous whisper as she tightened her grip on the pistol.

Thomas’s heart stopped, a primal scream tearing from his throat just as the study door swung open wider.

It was too late, however. His mother fired the shot. Instinctively, Thomas pushed Grace to the ground, just as the butler tackled a shrieking Laura.

From his peripheral view, Thomas recognized the butler, even as the pain started to flood his senses.

“Oh my God, Thomas, you’re bleeding,” Grace cried out in alarm.

Yet, the physical pain was a mere trifle compared to the turmoil in his mind. He would endure this pain a thousand times over to undo the revelations and the agony they brought.

Laura, in her misguided attempt to make her husband feel her pain, had accidentally killed him and their eldest son.

The butler managed to restrain the Dowager Duchess, just as Miss Everton and the housekeeper rushed in.

“Oh, dear, I left her resting,” Miss Everton gasped, taking in the chaotic scene.

“Do not move. Your arm,” Grace warned, her voice laced with concern as Thomas made to rise.

“This is nothing new to me,” he grunted, managing a weak smile. “Are you all right?”

“Me? Thomas, I am worried about you,” she said, her voice filled with disbelief and her eyes brimming with tears. “Thank God you’re still with us.”

The butler and two footmen secured Laura just in time for the doctor’s arrival, summoned by the quick-thinking housekeeper. Grace, ever practical, bound Thomas’s wound with her handkerchief.

Dr. Bentley sedated the Dowager Duchess before turning his attention to Thomas, who had been shot in the arm. Grace

remained by his side, unwavering, as he was tended to.

The wound, though painful, was not deep, and soon enough, his arm was stitched and secured in a sling.

“Is this really necessary?” Thomas complained, eyeing the sling.

“To ensure a swift recovery, we must limit the movement,” Dr. Bentley explained patiently.

The sling brought back memories of Thomas’s time in service, dark days he’d rather forget. His current injury paled in comparison, but he could see the gravity of the situation weighing heavily on Dr. Bentley.

“I fear I have made a grave error. I thought reconnecting her with happier times might stabilize her, but I was wrong,” the doctor admitted, his voice filled with regret.

“Mother has always been a bit unpredictable,” Thomas responded, trying to ease the doctor’s guilt.

Dr. Bentley then suggested a change in Laura’s care, advocating for complete removal from any potentially triggering environments. “This includes you, Your Grace. I believe it would be best if she doesn’t see you for some time.”

Thomas felt a lump form in his throat. He had wanted to keep his mother close, to protect and support her. But now, it seemed his presence did more harm than good.

“Perhaps she could be moved to the country?” Dr. Bentley suggested, advising a place with as few memories of the past as possible.

A property came to mind, one seldom used by his late father and in need of repair. A project Thomas decided to start immediately.

“You need to rest,” Grace chided gently as he rose after the doctor left.

“I need to see her,” Thomas insisted, his voice firm. Grace simply nodded, understanding.

He went to check on his mother then and found her in a deep slumber, just as Dr. Bentley had predicted. He could not help but notice the letters scattered around her on the bed.

“She always insists on keeping these close,” Miss Everton explained as he picked one up.

They were correspondences between his parents, filled with words of love and gratitude but conspicuously lacking in reciprocation of that love.

“She won’t be needing these any longer, Miss Everton,” Thomas stated, his voice firm as he began to collect the letters with his uninjured hand.

Miss Everton moved quickly to assist him, gathering the remaining letters from the night table and handing them to him.

Back in his study, he found Grace waiting patiently. Setting aside the letters, he pulled her into a heartfelt embrace, his actions speaking louder than any apology.

With her reassurance, they began to sift through the letters together, uncovering the depth of his mother's love for his father.

Despite his gratitude, Neil had never seemed to return that love in kind.

*I am unworthy of your pure heart, Laura. And yet, you give it freely. For that, I am eternally grateful,* one of the letters from Neil read.

“It was during his business trip to Belgium, shortly after my birth,” Thomas explained, his voice laced with bitterness. “And yet, he repaid her love by pushing her to her limits,” he muttered.

“I am so sorry, Thomas,” Grace said softly, taking his free hand in hers.

“You have nothing to be sorry for,” he reassured her, giving her hand a gentle squeeze. “It is all too much, Grace. But now we know the truth,” he added, his voice tinged with a mix of relief and sadness.

Neil Robins had broken the woman who had loved him unconditionally, leading her to the brink of destruction. Their family had been shattered, lives lost prematurely.

“And now, the truth has left its mark,” Thomas murmured, his voice barely audible.

Grace, sensing his turmoil, offered her comfort. “She never meant for any of this to happen, Thomas,” she whispered.

“I know,” he responded, his voice heavy with grief. “That’s what makes it all the more painful. It was all a tragic mistake.”

Realization dawned on him. He had lost his mother long ago, lost in her own guilt and grief. Memories of her past attempts at taking her own life resurfaced, and with them, tears.

He only realized he was crying when he felt Grace’s gentle touch, wiping his tears away.

“I love you, Thomas Robins,” she whispered, her own voice choked with emotion.

“And I love you, Grace Jennings,” he replied, drawing her face to his.

As their lips met, he felt her tears mingle with his, a shared moment of grief and love.



## EPILOGUE



Grace had called on Thomas every day since his accident, offering her companionship and voice to read him stories. Two weeks had passed. His arm was free of its sling, and he was on the mend, a fact for which she was profoundly grateful.

Yet, despite her best efforts to buoy his spirits during the daylight hours, she knew from his butler that the nights were a different story. Sleep eluded him, and everything that lurked in the shadows of his mind would come forth. It was to be expected, but that did not mean she had to like it.

Grace held onto hope and prayer as her companions, wishing for the day when Thomas would find his equilibrium. In the meantime, she did everything within her power to coax a smile, perhaps even a chuckle, from him.

She would bring him his favorite sandwiches, always generously laden with pickles, just as he liked them. Today was no exception, and she had gone to the kitchen herself to ensure everything was prepared to perfection. It was there that the butler found her, bearing unexpected news.

Thomas had called on her, flipping their usual routine on its head. Her heart danced in her chest as she hurried to the drawing room, a mix of excitement and slight trepidation in her step.

Upon arrival, she found Thomas, his presence as commanding as ever.

“Thomas,” she breathed, relieved to see him looking not just well, but radiant.

He was, without a doubt, the picture of health and happiness, and his smile was infectious. His eyes held a spark of admiration as they met hers, causing a warm blush to spread across her cheeks.

“You’re looking well,” she noted, a bit breathless.

“I am,” he agreed, his smile never faltering. “Thanks to you.”

She brushed off the compliment with a sheepish smile. “Oh, I rather doubt I did anything.”

But Thomas was having none of it. He closed the distance between them, taking her hands in his. “You underestimate your impact, Grace,” he told her earnestly. “You came into my life.”

The gravity of his words hung in the air, underscored by the sincerity in his gaze.

“And for that, I cannot thank you enough,” he added, his voice soft.

She felt her eyes welling up, touched by his words. “Oh, Thomas,” she whispered, lost in the moment.

Then, he got down to one knee, his next words changing everything. “Marry me, Grace. Become my wife, my Duchess. Let’s journey through life together.”

She was speechless, overcome with emotion. Thomas, the ever-confident gentleman, appeared vulnerable, his eyes filled with hope.

“I have found the truth, and I am free. And I wish to spend that freedom with you,” he added.

“Yes,” she finally managed to say, her heart swelling. “Yes, I will marry you, Thomas.”

The tears flowed freely as she spoke, and the room seemed to echo with the joy of her acceptance.

After Thomas left, her family erupted in celebration, the entire household swept up in the joyous occasion.

“And here I thought you’d live the glorious life of a spinster,” Benedict teased Grace, watching as she nervously twisted her handkerchief between her fingers.

The long-anticipated day of Grace's wedding had finally arrived, filling the air with a mix of nervous energy and joy. Caroline and Henry had tied the knot just a week prior, having secured their license in a timely fashion. However, Grace's nuptials had been postponed, with her mother insisting on additional time to ensure every detail was perfect.

"Rather than tormenting your younger sister on her most special day, perhaps it is time you consider finding a bride of your own, Benedict," Grace responded, a playful glint in her eyes.

"Oh, how the tables have turned." He chuckled, shaking his head in amusement. "To think, Grace Jennings, once an advocate for spinsterhood, now a proponent of matrimony."

Grace simply rolled her eyes, her nerves momentarily forgotten in the banter with her brother. However, they returned full force when her father appeared, ready to escort her to the drawing room, where the ceremony awaited.

"It is time," he announced, a gentle smile on his face.

Taking a deep breath, Grace allowed herself to be swept up in the moment, excitement mingling with her nerves. As she stepped into the drawing room, her eyes immediately found Thomas. He stood there, a mirror of her anxious anticipation, and the depth of emotion in his gaze was enough to bring tears to her eyes.

Her mother and Caroline were already dabbing at their eyes, clearly moved by the occasion. Henry and Gilbert were there as well, their presence adding to the gravity of the moment.

“Are you ready?” Thomas whispered, his hand warm as it enveloped hers.

Grace could only nod, words failing her as the vicar began to speak.

The ceremony unfolded, vows were exchanged, and soon, they found themselves at the heart of a bustling wedding breakfast.

Emily had outdone herself, transforming the event into a grand affair that felt as if the whole of London had been invited. Yet, for Grace, it was perfect.

As the night unfolded, Thomas led her back to the lake, where once again a picnic awaited them. This time, however, the scene was bathed in the soft glow of the moonlight. Lamps and lights adorned the space, casting a magical glow that highlighted the dragonflies dancing across the water’s surface.

“This is like something from a storybook, Thomas,” Grace breathed, awestruck by the beauty of it all.

“I aimed to meet your standards, Your Grace,” Thomas quipped, drawing her close.

“Oh, you’ll need to try a bit harder to truly impress me,” she teased, her eyes sparkling.

“As you wish, my wife,” he whispered before his lips claimed hers in a sweet kiss. “I love you, Grace Robins. Thank you.”

“And I love you, Thomas Robins,” she whispered back, leaning into his embrace.

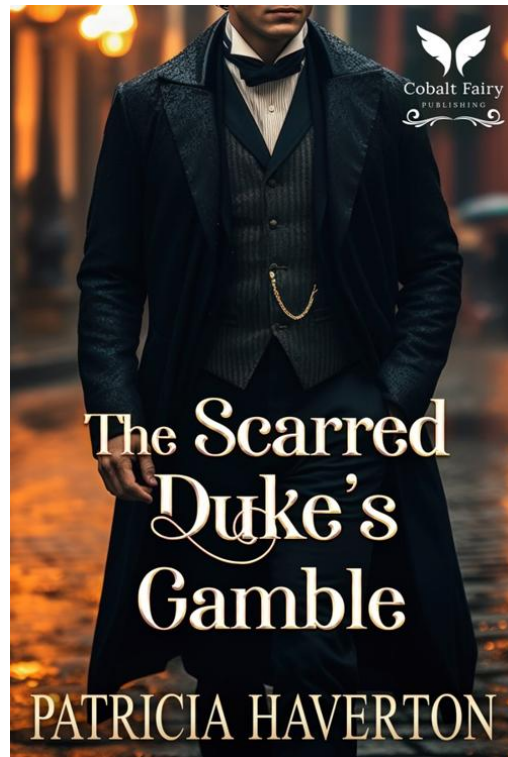
## EXTENDED EPILOGUE



But *Grace & Thomas*' story doesn't end here! Click below for a look into our favorite couple's future!

Simply **TAP HERE to read it now for FREE!** or use this link: **<https://go.patriciahaverton.com/pM4QyyZx>** directly in your browser.

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But before you go, turn the page for an extra sweet treat from me...

PREVIEW: A WILD  
MARQUESS FOR THE  
WALLFLOWER





## CHAPTER 1



The light shone deep into the powder blue colored upper chamber of the mansion that stood tall in the Finch Estate.

“The weather is rather dewy today!” Laura exclaimed as she examined the wardrobe full of colors. She had a plethora of dresses that could clothe the entire *ton*, and they each bore a unique design. Her comment seemed to have fallen on deaf ears, but the eager young lady did not seem to care. Her hands continued to rummage through a pile of fabrics.

“Do you think this dress would suffice, Sister?” Laura asked as she placed a pale green, square cut dress on her body and gazed upon herself in the mirror. A response never came, and she swiftly turned around. “Theresa!” she said loudly.

The beautiful, auburn-haired woman on the bed immediately snapped out of thought and cast her almond shaped blue eyes on her sister’s dress. She smiled as she imagined how delightful her sister would look in it then quickly sank back into the bed.

“It will do. Are you sure the *ton* would like to be graced by our presence?” Theresa asked with an undertone of hopelessness in her voice as she stood up and walked back to the wooden cupboard of evening gowns that stood in the corner of the room. “I am averse to any form of further embarrassment, and I cannot help but wonder.”

“I am almost certain it will go well! It’s the first ball of the season! What could go wrong?” Laura asked rhetorically

while spreading the dress she was considering over the bed in preparation to wear it.

Theresa flashed a rather faux smile at her happy sister as she wondered without pause about the plethora of consequences that could emerge as a result of the ball.

Her mind wallowed in abject misery while it explored the likely sneer and jeer that would probably be the order of the day as the night progressed. The *ton* had never shown any victim of scandal mercy, and Theresa doubted that they would be the first.

In the past few months, the trail of shame that they left behind them when they merely walked in the streets was glaring to the blind, loud to the deaf, and flashier than anything even the Queen owned.

The indecision that surrounded their attendance to this particular ball was weighing Theresa down, but she was trying her hardest to fight it. It would simply amplify and put their mother's actions in the spotlight and on the tongues of the members of the *ton* once again. Theresa had already resigned herself to wallowing in misery forever, but Laura was the complete opposite — adamant and childishly hopeful.

She paced all over the room trying on different accessories and items which could ensure she looked perfect. Sprawling her gold jewelry all over the table, she looked through necklaces then eventually went on to pick out gloves.

Some of the hope that was beaming out of Laura was mildly projected on Theresa, and she was finally brave enough to stand up and try to pick out an evening gown.

She walked up to the mirror like a farmer who was just returning from a long day and stared at the distinctly obvious bags under her eyes.

“Maybe the *ton* will forget,” she muttered under her breath, stretching out her skin as though she could press the look of tiredness out of her face. She could see her woes which had somehow managed to write themselves all over her face.

“Did you say something, Sister?” Laura asked peeking out from behind the cupboard to look at her.

“Oh, it’s nothing. Let us get dressed and wear positivity more comfortably than the widest of smiles that the *ton* has ever seen.” Theresa smiled and proceeded to the same oak wood cupboard to pick out a dress. “What do you think of this one?” she asked Laura as she spun around holding a beautiful pink dress.

“It’s fine, but I think we can explore our options!”

The minutes ran as the two women burdened themselves with the task of looking perfect. In the moments when they were together, deep-rooted fear boiled within Theresa’s stomach. She felt everything but certainty towards the ball. Nevertheless, Laura was her driving force. She was about one year younger than Theresa but still plagued with the same degree of shame that had been forcefully cast on them overnight. Nevertheless, she still stood with hope glistening from her eyes and pouring out of her posture.

Her faith was something to write home about, and Theresa greatly admired how simply brave she was.

As the women looked at their fully dressed up reflections, it was easy to tell that they were pleased. As the admiration continued, they were alerted by the neighing of horses that their vehicle had arrived.

Laura looked out of the window, and she saw a white horse drawn carriage parked in front of the tall, black gates of the estate. In a mix of excitement and fear, they made their way down the marble staircase of the house and further down the stone steps that were sculpted outside.

Laura fit in her dress like a princess with her hair neatly packed into an updo. She accessorized with their mother’s pearls which matched her slightly freckled skin. Theresa, on the other hand, had let her hair fall on her vibrant pink dress. The captivating piece featured tassels on the hands which matched the skillfully crafted embroidery that flowed freely on the hems.

They settled into the red cushion interior, and as the carriage drew away, Theresa could read the nervousness on her sister's face and clasped her visibly shaking hands in hers for comfort.

"It will work itself out," she assured in a motivational tone as she gave yet another fake smile. "Trust me."

Laura leaned comfortably into her sister and kept her eyes closed for the entirety of the ride while Theresa softly prayed that the assurance she had given her sister would not be in vain. As they approached the Brinkley Estate, Laura's nervous jitters quickly vanished and morphed into some sort of childlike excitement.

"It seems as though we are almost there," Theresa observed. Once she began stating the obvious, it became increasingly clear that danger was inching closer and closer.

"I hope I get to dance with the finest of gentlemen today." A curious Laura peered outside the carriage window, and her eyes fell on a beautiful mansion before she fell back into the carriage seat to take one last, deep breath. She could hear all the chatter.

"I am glad to see the positivity beaming from your eyes." Theresa's eyes dug deeper than the nervousness her sister was currently facing and saw the excitement that lay within.

As the carriage finally came to a halt, they could see members of the *ton* littered outside. Amongst them stood the people they knew and interacted with before the scandal, and the ones they were yet to encounter. Both posed a possible threat of disdain.

"Do you think the Duke of Wilshire would appreciate our greetings?" Laura asked as they waited for the footman to come get the door. Theresa looked at her worried because her sister seemed to be skipping eggs and going straight to tough meat.

"It would be in our best interest to only mind who minds us!" Theresa responded as she pushed a strand of hair into place.

The footman helped them down, and their eyes widened as they stared upon the luxurious building that stood before them. The house itself had gold plated exterior on the pillars, and the

grey paint looked fresh. There was a large lion statue that they both estimated would have cost a fortune.

They gracefully held their dresses and strutted into the ballroom, but as they did, the whispers from around them grew tremendously, and members of the *ton* pointed at them with their lips and heads on the rare occasion when they didn't use their fingers.

Theresa braced herself while Laura's face dimmed slightly at the hostile welcome. Nevertheless, they made their way up the black, wide staircase with hands intertwined to comfort each other and walked into the gold doors of the house. The young women of the *ton* brushed past them and refused to hide the fact that they were talking about them.

"Would you like to go mingle?" Theresa asked, and Laura nodded frantically. Theresa smiled despite the dread pooling in her stomach.

The ballroom was filled to the brim. As Laura inched closer to the guests, Theresa followed slightly behind her to ensure she was all right. A group of young ladies just in front of them were giggling and pointing about a group of army gentlemen who were speaking to Lord Brinkley, their host for the evening.

"Aren't those fine gentlemen a sight to behold?" Laura asked softly, hoping to stealth her way into the conversation unnoticed. The girls glanced at her with their noses slightly raised as though she stunk, much to Theresa's dismay. She hoped Laura would receive some acceptance, but the mockery that followed broke her heart even more.

"My mama warned me that there might be trouble at this ball, and I can see what she meant. The scorned of the *ton* had to rear their heads," a blonde haired, overly powdered girl from the group said while examining Laura from head to toe. She was Viscount Smith's daughter, who had been a long-term friend of the Dowding family.

"I'm not trouble. You know me!" Laura argued as she pushed back the tears that welled up in her eyes.

“We knew you, Miss Laura. We have not a clue in our minds who you are now,” another girl said as the group of four walked away, whispering and sneering at Laura who was now tearing up. Nevertheless, Theresa saw, she managed to paint a smile across her face and maintain her poise.

“Do not pay any mind to those girls, my love!” Theresa assured as she approached her sister, hugged her, and held her hand. Laura nodded, and as she stood there, she glanced around at the gentlemen, hoping in her misery that one would at least want to hold her in a dance. But the seconds turned to minutes. As they were about to lose hope, a tall and handsome man in the neatest of jet-black suits came towards Laura.

“You must be the most beautiful woman here,” he said as he stretched his hand out from a distance. Laura was about to take his hand when he hesitated. “Are you not Laura Dowding?” he asked, and she nodded shyly, hoping he wouldn’t know about the scandal.

“Oh. My apologies. Maybe we can dance at another ball.” The disappointment that came over her was very clear to see. Theresa stood shocked and downcast when the group of girls from before who stood to the side began chuckling and whispering while the gentleman approached them. He took one girl’s hand, and they danced. Laura began to walk away.

“Where to, Laura?” Theresa asked while grabbing her arm.

“The mere idea of falling to my knees in tears scares me. I would rather remove myself from the ballroom before a breakdown ensues. I am not going to feed the plot of this scandal,” Laura responded as she shook free from her disappointment.

As Laura hurried outside, Theresa, who could read the disdain on her sister’s face, quickly put the glass in her hand down and followed after her.

“Are you going to be so easily dismayed, my dear?” she said loudly from behind Laura, who turned around with her already reddened eyes.

“Shall we speak in the gardens?” Laura asked, and the two of them took a quiet and awkward stroll to the gardens. Theresa took Laura’s hand in hers to comfort her. Even while they were outside and refraining from conversation, they still managed to attract weird looks and unsolicited whispers. They proceeded into the gardens.

Once out of sight, the women sat on the benches in a cherry-colored part of the garden, and the tears freely flowed from Laura’s eyes.

“I gather you are having a bad time,” Theresa said lightly while stroking her sister’s hair.

“As you can see, it’s going horribly! I tried to dance, made jolly conversation, and nothing seemed to work. I highly doubt that the *ton* will ever open their arms to us in this lifetime or the next,” Laura replied sadly.

“I understand how you feel. Before I came up to you, Sophia had the audacity to shun me.”

“We should most likely change our names to Theresa and Laura ‘Social Pariah’ Dowding,” Laura said as she wiped her tears. “What kind of mother would do this?” she asked angrily.

“Please calm down Laura,” Theresa said.

“I will not calm down! What kind of mother leaves her children to suffer like this?”

“I am certain she did not know what was going to happen to us in her absence!” Theresa suggested reassuringly. Theresa wore an air of understanding for their absent mother, and she often tried to reflect that to Laura but to no avail.

“How wouldn’t she know?! She ran away with a married Earl! The *ton* is cruel, and she knows that! She was the cruelest of them all. She would most certainly be aware of the shame that would bring upon us. If she didn’t want to, she would have stayed here!” Laura argued. She wasn’t lying, nevertheless; their mother was indeed one of the biggest gossips the *ton* had ever seen, and that was one of the contributing factors as to why they had preyed on her so much.

“It is of utmost importance that you understand that Mother never thinks of the consequences of her actions. You know how impulsive she can be! Remember that one time she fired all the staff, and Papa had to recall them?” Theresa smiled bitterly as she had tried her hardest to not allow her feelings of disdain towards her mother show to her sister.

“For a long time, you have made excuses for her and tried to convince me that she is anything but what she really is — selfish!” As Laura said this, she wiped her eyes. “I denounce mama. She only has one daughter, and that is if you’d have her. She has ruined me.”

“Do not speak of such atrocity, Laura!” Theresa said in dismay. “We used to have more prospects than any of these women here, and no one even spoke to me today! If I genuinely felt like this was any of Mother’s intent, I would not be trying to convince you. I understand our mother. Please try to.” The complexity of Theresa’s emotions shook her to her very core, but in this moment, she had to cater for Laura.

“Dear Sister, I will never understand you. She ruined us, Theresa. She made a choice only for herself and didn’t think twice about her own children. A woman like that, a selfish, cruel woman is not one I want for a mother. I rather not have one at all. I will wait for you in the carriage.” She said the last part in resignation as she got up and left into the night.

Theresa buried her face in her palms and softly massaged her temple with the tip of her fingers.

She knew their mother was selfish. She understood where Laura was coming from. And when, after their mother’s scandal, her own suitor disappeared, when the ladies she considered friends shunned her, when her own sister was in despair, she had known their mother was to blame.

But she never had the opportunity for anger. She had had to shove it all aside and take up the mantle of the lady of the house, Laura’s mother. Responsibility is a great distraction, but now, faced with a situation out of her control once more, the injustice of Laura’s anger stung even more.

“I don’t deserve this,” she muttered loudly.



“Why not, my lady?” a deep male voice called from the bushes and Theresa’s blood run cold.

## CHAPTER 2



Theresa jerked her head to the right to find the bearer of the voice. She cast her eyes on a tall, bright-eyed man dressed in a well pressed navy-blue suit. His blue eyes interlocked with hers, and she struggled to process the dumbfounding audacity of this man to peer his nose into her matters.

“What is that supposed to mean?” she asked him harshly.

“My apologies, Miss Dowding. I didn’t mean to hurt your feelings,” he said as he corked closed the half full bottle of whiskey in his hand.

“How long have you been standing there? Who are you?” she asked.

“Well, if you must know, I’ve been here long enough to know who you are. Needless to say, you are a good sister.” The man chuckled, and Theresa’s anxiety skyrocketed.

“Why were you eavesdropping on my conversation?”

“Eavesdropping is a strong word. You just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time if you ask me. This is my cousin’s ball, so I have more right to be here,” he said lightly and sarcastically.

“Oh well, you have seen the dark corners of the Finch household. I hope you’re happy.”

“What do you expect in response, Miss Dowding?”

“I don’t expect a response. The *ton* treats me like I’m trash, so you can go back and tell them what you saw. It is quite the

tale. The plot can only thicken, can't it?" she answered and rolled her eyes.

"I am many things — a Marquess, a deplorable man, the heir to an estate, a lousy son even, the list is rather lengthy — but I, Miss Dowding, am not a gossip. I fail to swing that way."

"At this point, I think it wise to not trust any member of the *ton*. My eyes have seen the things that my lips would not dare to utter," she proclaimed as she stood up to leave.

"Well, I have been the subject on the lips of every mama quite a few times. God forbid that I ever enable them to do that even when I am not the victim."

Theresa laughed at the disgust written all over his face, and how swiftly she related to that situation made her feel rather safe in his company.

"What's your given name?" he asked rather inappropriately as he sat down on the bench which she had gotten up from.

"Theresa," she replied, giving in, as she too collapsed on the bench. "What's yours?" Her eyes turned to him with a glint of mischief, and for the first time since his voice startled her, she noticed his deep blue eyes and his jet black hair.

"I'm the Marquess of Grayton. Where are my manners?" he said as he stood up and took a bow while introducing himself. "Jeremy Godwin, at your service."

Theresa smiled and stood up as well.

"Theresa Dowding." She curtseyed. "Upon hearing your name, I am convinced that you always have tongues wagging in your direction. You are quite a hot topic amongst the *ton*."

"Indeed. I am always the topic for mothers who want to shove their daughters down my throat or some other scandal that my careless tom foolery has gotten me into," he lamented. "I am a nice gentleman, regardless," he concluded assuring as they both sat down on the bench.

"Oh, I never trust a man who proclaims his own trustworthiness. So, you are now rather privy to my secrets,

Lord Grayton. I long to know something about you!” she prodded, smiling unconsciously.

“Well, let’s just say I’m suffering the effects of a long overdue realization,” he started. “I have been a selfish man for much too long. It is time I become a much better person. I certainly hope it is worth it.”

“How so?” Theresa inquired, and the genuine concern in her gaze made him smile a bit, and without hesitation, he continued to give her insight.

“Well, I have always been something of a problem child basically. My father and I are not the best of friends. As a matter of fact, we have been at loggerheads since I turned two digits. I’m not one to conform to archaic constructs. My happiness is my priority.”

“Why is that a problem?” Theresa asked. “I cannot imagine being with my parent and having such long-suffering issues.”

“My old man and I just never seem to agree on anything as a matter of fact. It’s problem after problem, and I have to admit, I am not the easiest chip off the old block. He would cast me out if he had the heart to do so. I’m almost certain.”

“In simple terms, you are a very stubborn son?” She giggled at his attempts to hide it.

“Simply put, yes, but I’m changing.”

“Do you mind if I ask why the sudden change of heart?” Theresa looked impressed. “Did he knock some sense into you with a bat?”

“Very funny, but no. He had a scare. He fell rather ill, and I hate to admit the fact, but that shook me to my very core. I cannot succeed my father and preserve his legacy unless I change my ways. I refuse to go down in history as the duke who ran the estate into the ground due to his reckless abandon. Nevertheless, it has been hard as I have had my own rules for years, and dancing to the beat of a different drum is rather stressful for me. It seems simply undoable.”

“How are you coping then?” Theresa asked. “I can only imagine having to change my entire personality.”

“I am taking my time and just seeing how it goes for me. If I rush myself, then I might just crash. I hate unnecessary pressure.”

“The mamas certainly missed the part where you are an incredibly wise man — unlike the men of the *ton*.” Theresa was impressed. The men of her generation were unrepentantly stuck in their ways. A man had to possess a great depth of intellect to sacrifice his philandering ways for responsibility.

Jeremy chuckled at the compliment. “The *ton* is most certainly annoying you at this point, isn’t it, Miss Dowding? It cannot be only the men.”

Theresa shook her head. “I fail to understand why the *ton* has turned their backs on us when we did nothing wrong. I love high society, and I love them. It wasn’t my fault my mother left. The ballrooms, the adoration, the stellar dresses. That was my solace, and now, it’s gone, and I did nothing to cause that.”

“I cannot possibly comprehend what you must be going through right now. Nevertheless, I do know one thing — the *ton* is as forgetful as they are cruel,” he explained.

“What do you mean?” she asked softly, hoping that there was some sort of solution in his analysis.

“The people in this place have nothing against you; they just have an itch for scandal and gossip. It is a shame that you are the subject at this moment, but by the time the next scandal emerges, Edith Dowding’s elopement will be forgotten news. They will be concerned with the next big thing.”

“I will never wish anyone bad, but at this point, I am at my wits ends. Whoever the next victim is, so it shall be. As long as the eyes are turned away from me, I certainly do not mind.”

“You will see that I told you. I’m like a seer.”

“Also, does that mean they will accept me back like it never happened?” she asked hopefully.

“Only if you start doing far more interesting things and get them talking about you positively. Then, everyone will want to associate with you. It’s like an overshadowing. Once you do better things, you will find redemption,” he assured.

“Interesting. What other things can I do? What activities are interesting enough to count?” she added.

“Well for starters...” Jeremy started before he was interrupted by an alarmed Theresa.

“Do you hear that?” she asked, and Jeremy listened into the night. From a few meters away, he heard creaks of branches and leaves under the footsteps of an unknown person.

“We will have to leave. They can’t find us alone together.” Theresa stood up and quickly made her way to the garden gates.

“I will see you soon Miss Dowding. It’s been a pleasure.” Jeremy said rather quickly.

“Good night, Lord Grayton! Likewise!”

\* \* \*

It was such a bother to Jeremy that the *ton* required chaperones in order to spend time together. He had never believed in that, and the ideas of high society just seemed too uncomfortable for him.

As the footsteps came closer, he saw it was only his brother.

“What manner of lonely soliloquy are you up to at a ball?” the young man inquired as he stared at his brother.

“Colin, you are not privy to the degree of beautiful conversation you just interrupted,” Jeremy replied.

“I see you have met another one of the silly women that fall prey to your charms,” Colin observed.

“No. This is someone very smart and intellectual,” Jeremy argued with indignation.

“Well, come on now, you will see her at another time,” Colin said as he gestured towards his brother to follow him. “Father would like to see you.”

\* \* \*

As Theresa made her way back towards her carriage, she noticed Laura laughing in the corner with a girl.

“I see you made a friend,” she said as she inched towards them and stretched her hand out over Laura’s shoulder.

“Indeed. She saw me storm into the carriage and followed right behind me and cheered me up! This is Miss Penelope!” Laura excitedly ran an introduction. “And this is my sister, Theresa, or Miss Dowding. She is the best of the best.”

“I’m glad you are finally having some fun. You deserve it,” Theresa replied smiling. “Thank you,” she said to the chubby, brunette new friend that seemed to snap her sister out of the contagiously sour mood she was wallowing in.

“You’re welcome,” her high-pitched voice said cheerfully.

“I will be inside waiting for whenever you are ready to leave.”

She took her dress up in her hands and made her way once again up the beautiful, wide staircase. She stood by the juice bowl, and the gossiping continued. The mamas of the *ton*, who once auctioned the achievements of their sons before her, now avoided her, but she tried to enjoy the music on her own.

The task of drowning out the mamas was tremendous, yet she succeeded when Laura and her friend walked up to her.

“Miss Penelope had a fabulous idea for us to enjoy the rest of the ball.”

“Share it, then!” Theresa said happily.

“We could spend the rest of the night in each other’s company!” Laura suggested smiling.

“Does this mean you forgive Mama?” Theresa asked with excitement in her eyes.

“Do not ruin this night, Theresa. I do not have a mother.”

Disappointment painted itself all over Theresa’s face, but she managed to refrain from admonishing her sister. A night that

started out in a horrifying manner seemed to be coming to a good end, and she refrained from saying anything that would upset her sister further.

They did not dance, and the staring never did go away. But the three ladies managed to have fun, nonetheless. It was a rather happy surprise for Theresa, how, with the right distraction, she could almost pay no mind to the sneering looks around her. And it was not just once that the Marquess' blue eyes flashed in her mind. *Once you do better things, you will find redemption.*

As the night drew to a close, Theresa hugged Laura as they stood by the punch bowl. "Are you ready to go my darling?" she asked, and Laura nodded frantically.

"I am on the tired side of things, so yes, we can call it a night," Laura agreed before she turned to Miss Penelope. "You are God sent. Thank you."

"It was my pleasure." Her high-pitched voice sounded like the chirping of a bird. The two women hugged and said their goodbyes.

As they turned around to leave, Theresa's eyes fell on the Marquess, who seemed to be staring directly at them. He subtly raised the champagne glass that was in his hand as though he was toasting to her unconditional happiness. He looked like the night had taken its toll on him, and she wondered if she would ever see him again. That was not her priority anyway. Her main goal was ensuring that Laura was taken care of.

Theresa smiled and waved at him. The wave was rather unnoticeable for those who were around them. For the first time in a full ten months, she felt safe and happy in the comfort of someone other than Laura. She didn't feel judged or looked down upon by a member of the *ton*.

"Who is that?" Laura asked as she noticed their light gestures towards each other.

"The Marquess of Grayton. I met him briefly while you were away." The last thing that she needed to do was encourage her



sister to be found unchaperoned with a man, so she was not going to set that precedence.

“He is so handsome. Did you strike up a friendship?” Laura asked.

“Nothing of the sort, sweet sister. He is merely an acquaintance,” Theresa replied from the depths of the valley of self-awareness.

As they approached the carriage, Laura thought harder about her sister’s friends.

“The same Lord Grayton that had tongues wagging over his wild parties in the estate?” Laura asked.

Theresa looked rather shocked as she had not heard that piece of gossip.

“I reckon he is always amidst one scandal or the other.”

“He is. He is also the most sought-after bachelor in the whole *ton*. A friendship with him will definitely give your suffering reputation a boost,” Laura explained.

“I do not think we will be friends,” Theresa said authoritatively in a bit to kill the idea. “I’m not sure he would want to associate with me in public, and that would definitely be a deal breaker for me,” she explained.

“Oh! Can we just see how it goes? You can never tell what the future holds.” Laura smiled at a skeptical Theresa. “Please? He seems like he’s enamored by you, at the very least.”

Theresa looked at the unquantifiable excitement in Laura’s eyes, and even without the intervention from her, she knew she would like to see the man again. Nevertheless, fear clouded her mind, and she was skeptical.

“Let us see how it goes then. He would make a great asset.”

And she knew it to be true. But as she lay on her bed that night with the memory of his striking eyes, she hoped it was the last time she would meet him. Such eyes, such a man, was a dangerous friend indeed.

## CHAPTER 3



“Who is it?” Jeremy asked blearily as the knock on his door insisted. It was mere minutes after he had opened his eyes and the loud noise was nothing short of unwelcome.

“My lord, your father asked that I come inform you that he is seated at the table,” a strong male voice said from behind the door. “It is worthy of note that he has been there for a good thirty minutes.”

Silence filled the room, and Jeremy’s sleepiness melted off. Getting out of bed he quickly washed and started dressing.

“Are you there, my lord?” the voice asked again but much more subtly this time — as though he was scared.

“Yes, I am here. Be gone. I will join him in a few minutes,” Jeremy instructed while he pulled away from the window and towards the mirror which was positioned opposite the bed. He quickly adjusted his sleeves, arranged his already perfect hair, and proceeded down the stairs.

As Jeremy approached the wide tile staircase, he took a deep breath. While he didn’t feel nervous, he always felt a slight need to impress around his father as a compensation for his erring years. He paced down the stairs and into the dining area.

“My apologies, Father. I completely lost track of time,” Jeremy said as he approached the breakfast filled dining table where his father sat.

“I was almost worried that you would not make an appearance.” His father’s tired voice made him smile.

Duncan was a pale, older man, who from his obvious, drowning eye bags looked like his experiences surpassed his years. His hair was grey, and the equally grey and black mustache sat on top his lip.

Jeremy sat and adjusted himself into the chair. “How dare I stand a duke up? I had a rather eventful night at the ball. As a matter of fact, Colin is still very much asleep. I suspect he is still ill from a night of sheer indulgence.”

“I can only imagine. You young lads have nothing to worry about nowadays. Nevertheless, there is such a thing as a recklessness overdose,” his father said mockingly. “Did you by chance come across a wife?”

“Father, you know very well that I did not,” Jeremy responded as he pulled his plate close to himself. “As a matter of fact, I spent my time engaging in intelligent discourse,” he added with a fork making its way into his mouth.

“Intelligent discourse is never a bad thing, but then again, you need to settle down. Intelligence does not bear heirs,” his father pointed out.

“I understand what you are saying, and I will bring a woman home. I just don’t think the heartache is worth it.”

“What heartache?” Duncan asked.

“The one you and I felt when we lost Mama,” Jeremy responded before swallowing the lump in his throat.

“Grief and pain are the price we pay for love Jeremy. It’s a worthy price as well,” Duncan assured, and Jeremy looked at him oddly as though he didn’t believe him.

“Care to tell me how your night went? My quest for a wife can wait,” Jeremy said in a desperate attempt to change the topic.

“Well, I went to my chamber, and I read a fine book. Being a duke often means being too busy for myself,” his father explained. “Now that I’m old and frail, I do need time to myself don’t you think?”

“I can only imagine.” Jeremy agreed. “Yes. Time spent with oneself is never a waste.”

“You will not have to imagine it for too long. Someday soon, I won’t be here, and you will be the Duke,” Duncan said, and Jeremy looked up at him.

“Father, please stop proclaiming untimely death upon yourself,” Jeremy urged with an irritated look on his face.

“I have made peace with it, and at least, we are healing our relationship. It is safe to say that whenever my time comes, I will bow out as a happy man who knows that he lived his life to the fullest, void of regrets. I will go and sit with the angels and look on you with pride.” The sincerity in his father’s voice shook him.

“Indeed, Father. That is how it should be.” The words that Jeremy spoke were rather different from the feelings of fear that he deeply harbored in his heart. “I may not have met a wife, but I struck a rather interesting acquaintance last night!” Jeremy said in a desperate attempt to shift the trajectory of the conversation to an emotional one.

“And who might this acquaintance be?” Duncan asked as he cleaned the sauce residue from his lips with a napkin.

“Do you know the Viscount Finch?” Jeremy asked.

“A little too well, if I do say so myself.” Duncan flashed a hearty smile through his immaculate white teeth. “Did you make the acquaintance of my dear old friend? Did he inquire about me?” A childish excitement could be found in the way his eyes lit up and in the way he articulated his words.

“I hate to disappoint, but quite the contrary. I met his eldest. How do you know the family?”

“The Viscount and I were friends when we were around your age. Good friends at that. He was a rather fun lad back in our days. A good one as well, undeserving of the turmoil that has befallen him.”

“You don’t say.” Jeremy said. “Yes. It is rather unfortunate what has happened to them. She seemed deserted and cut off from the *ton*.”

“That saddens me. The Viscount is one of the best people in this *ton*. He is selfless to a fault, but his wife played him the

worst card on the deck. I don't know if he'll ever live it down." Duncan had a worried look in between his furrowed brows and a distant look in his eyes.

"I hope they eventually find their way out. Miss Dowding seemed very distressed but somehow managed to maintain an exceptional amount of poise in her behavior," Jeremy explained. "She seems to be handling it with strength. At the very least, that's a good thing. You should never succumb to the *ton* — that I know."

"Of course, you know. You are a frequent player in the realms of *ton* gossip."

"I *was* a frequent player. Past tense. I will maintain the good reputation I am building," Jeremy assured smiling slightly at his father.

"I will believe it as I continue to see it," Duncan said. "You know, you could pick up a thing or two from his eldest. It just came to me that the Viscount often commends her good behavior. Even in times like this. He used to call her an ambassador for high society."

"You would like me to take heed from someone who is neck deep in a scandal? That sounds counter intuitive, don't you think, father?" Jeremy commented as he turned to stare at his father.

"The glaring difference between you and the innocent young lady is she is not the writer and orchestrator of the scandal in which she is wallowing in. You, on the other hand, are skilled in the fine art of getting the need of any assistance. My apologies. You *were*," the duke said with a sly smile.

"Do not mock me, Father," Jeremy feigned indignation even as a smile played on his lips.

"I do not dispute the green nature of the new leaf you have turned, but all I'm saying is that she might be a good influence on you. If you want to stay on the right path, you might as well surround yourself with other people who want to live on the right path as well." Duncan said, and Jeremy nodded in agreement.

“I will try to make her less of an acquaintance and more of a friend if that would sit better with you.”

“It really would. I will be more at peace knowing that you have one more push in the right direction,” Duncan agreed.

“You seem to have a lot of faith in a person you have never met before,” Jeremy observed.

“If her character is anything like her father’s or anything like they said before the scandal, then I don’t think I will strongly regret it. It’s a risk I’m willing to take.”

Jeremy tried to soak up his father’s words. His father practically built the family back up to its past glory, and all he used was the brain in which this advice was born. It would only make sense to open up to his suggestions rather than cast them away.

“I hope to see her at the next ball, and we can build a blooming friendship from there.”

“That warms my heart. When is the next ball?” Duncan asked.

“In three days, the Clarksons are holding their first ball of the season. Let us hold hope that she will be offered an invite,” Jeremy responded.

“Hopefully so,” Duncan said before the conversation fell quiet.

\* \* \*

Three days had passed, and the ball that was slated to be held was upon the *ton*. The Clarksons were known to go all out for their parties, and their first ball of this season was no exception to the unspoken rule.

In the middle of the monochrome checkered floors stood one of the largest orchestra groups in the whole of England, who played the softest and most melodious of music of a genre that could be likened to Mozart but with a more upbeat mood. With not one note off, the men who knew how grand this ball was

going to be stood in their most beautiful suits playing their well-polished instruments.

The entire ballroom was heavily decorated with purple linens, and hors d'oeuvres could be found at every turn with cocktails following closely behind.

As a black carriage pulled up to the door, a neatly dressed Jeremy walked out and fed his eyes with the scene that stood before him. He adjusted his suit, and as he walked up the staircase and further into the ballroom, more of the women who were in attendance tried to get his attention.

“Lord Grayton, have you met my daughter?” one of the grey-haired mamas asked him as she lightly shoved her daughter in his direction.

“I do not believe I have, but I hope I will in my own time. Hopefully before the end of the ball,” he said as he politely smiled and kept moving to the dismay of the absolute mother-daughter duo.

“Lord Grayton, it has been a while. Why don't you pay us a visit?” an old family friend, the Duchess of Richmond asked, but after almost being caught in a compromising position with her rather loose daughter, he realized that it would be in his best interest to stay away from the entire household if he didn't want a forced betrothal.

“Your Grace, I have been swamped with learning the duties of a duke from my father. Maybe sometime during the next season,” he responded politely.

“The next season?!” she exclaimed.

“You will not understand how deeply rooted the job I possess is! There is absolutely no rest for me! I will see you later. I have to get to Colin. He sent word that there was an emergency,” he explained as he bowed and quickly checked out of the conversation. Colin was perfectly fine, but attending these balls were more like a reminder of all the scandals he had somehow gotten himself caught up in over the years, and Jeremy was over that life.

As he reached the end of the hall, he gave a sigh of relief, and his brother, who was nearby, could see the look on his face.

“You look like you just escaped an angry mob, brother,” Colin observed as he handed Jeremy the drink he was about to sip. “You need it more than I do.”

“Something very close to a mob if I am being honest with you,” Jeremy laughed as he sipped the drink Colin had just given him. “I would not be out of line if I say that I am the most sought-after bachelor this season.”

“Only expected. The *ton* talks dirty, and after father’s scare, it came to their attention that you might inherit the manor and the title much sooner than they had expected. Every mama would love for her daughter to get betrothed and married off to a duke,” Colin explained.

“Well, are you suggesting that it has absolutely no connection to my incomparable good looks?” Jeremy joked.

“Your high horse is restless, and you might just fall off,” Colin said laughing.

The two men laughed into silence, and Jeremy ran his eyes through the dense crowd in a search for Theresa, but she was nowhere to be found.

“Where is she?” he muttered.

“Where is who Jeremy?” Colin asked as he noticed his brother’s wandering eyes and slightly outstretched neck.

“Miss Dowding, the eldest to be precise,” Jeremy explained.

“Alarm bells are unavoidably going off in my head. If I am not mistaken, the Dowding family has a ton of problems on their plate. Are you looking to drag their eldest down into a messier scandal?” Colin asked.

“I reckon that you are still judging me by old standards, and I hate to disappoint you Colin, but this leopard has changed his spots.” Jeremy responded.

“Only time will tell, and if you have, why then are you looking for her?” Colin asked.



“When you found me in the garden at the Earl’s estate, I brought it to your notice that you had interrupted a rather interesting conversation. Do you remember?” Colin furrowed brows and cast his mind back to that night.

“Oh yes! The acquaintance that disappeared into thin air before I got the chance to see who it was?”

“Yes. That acquaintance was Miss Dowding.”

“Is this suggesting that you want to court her?” Colin asked with a raised eyebrow.

“Not at all. You know I rarely ever court women. I just want my father to see me around people he approves of. Plus, she was a stellar conversationalist.” The twinkle in Jeremy’s eye was glaring, and he even caught himself with a smile that was far too wide for the mild intensity of the situation.

“If you say so. Imagine you ever decided to court her. The *ton* would turn on its head in no time,” Colin joked.

“Love is not on my agenda brother. You know me. I fail to swing in that direction. Nevertheless, I assume she is not coming. If she was, I would have seen her by now,” Jeremy said sternly before turning to Colin. “I might as well make a new...” he paused and tilted his head and gaze away from Colin and cast it behind him.

“Well, what do you know. There she is,” Jeremy whispered. Theresa, with a smiling Laura by her side, looked stunning and for a moment the Marquess forgot where he was. He lilac dress complimented her complexion and her auburn hair fell in small ringlets around her pretty face.

“Approach her then, so I can get my own show on the road,” Colin suggested as he tapped Jeremy’s shoulder, snapping him out of his stupor. “You might not find a lady, but I will.”

Jeremy smiled and adjusted his suit then walked towards the ladies.

“Good evening to you. You both look dashing.” Theresa and Laura turned to see the smiling Lord Grayton looking directly at them.

“And to you too, Lord Grayton,” Theresa said. “This is my younger sister, Miss Laura.”

“I remember. A strong-willed woman,” he said as Laura’s smile morphed into confusion since they had never met before.

“He was in the garden during our conversation at the last ball,” Theresa explained in low tones, and Laura’s face grew red with shame.

“I admire your strong will just as much as Theresa’s resilience and poise.”

Laura smiled and thanked him.

“Would you like to dance, Theresa?” Jeremy asked, and Laura’s eyes lit up as though it was she who was asked to engage in a dance. Theresa, on the other hand looked terrified for a brief second, before composing herself.

“Of course, my lord,” Theresa said, and Jeremy took her trembling hand as they both approached the dance floor to the dismay of almost all the guests present. The murmuring and chattering knew no bounds, and as they got on the dance floor, he carefully put her hand on his shoulder while he held her waist, and the dance began.

“Good gracious!” someone yelled from the crowd, and this visibly shook Theresa’s mood.

“I don’t think I can do this,” she murmured and it was at the last minute Jeremy held her from running away.

“Stay with me, right here. Look me in the eyes, and drown them out,” her eyes were starting to glaze from tears and he would not have it.

“It is just you and me. No one else.”

**Want to know how the story ends? Tap on the link below to read the rest of the story.**

***[A Wild Marquess for the Wallflower](#)***

**Thank you very much!**

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# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Born the oldest of three children, **Patricia Haverton** grew up believing that she'd follow in her father's footsteps and pursue a career in science. However, her worldview changed when she decided to explore her British mother's roots. The trip to her ancestral lands solidified her conviction that she had found her true calling in the romanticism of the Era of Kings and Queens.

A hopeless romantic and a firm believer in the idea of soulmates, Patricia changed the course of her life and decided to get her degree in Creative Writing and Psychology. As she jokingly says ever so often, "she lives in the past now, where love shows the way and Dukes save the day!"

When she's not weaving tales of love that prevails, Patricia enjoys spending time with her husband, roaming the British countryside, where they have been living in for the past decade.

Now would be the time to let yourself go and experience the true magic of the Regency Era! Let your imagination run wild, live amazing adventures through the eyes of brave heroes! Like the legendary wise wizard, Patricia will be your guide!

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*Let's connect*

[patriciahaverton.com](http://patriciahaverton.com)

[patricia@patriciahaverton.com](mailto:patricia@patriciahaverton.com)

