



Cobalt Fairy  
PUBLISHING



THE  
DUKE'S  
UNWANTED  
TEMPTATION

DAPHNE BYRNE

# THE DUKE'S UNWANTED TEMPTATION

A STEAMY HISTORICAL REGENCY ROMANCE NOVEL

THE UNWANTED WIVES

BOOK ONE



# DAPHNE BYRNE



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## BEFORE YOU START READING...

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## ABOUT THE BOOK

***“How did you find me?”***

***“There is nothing I can’t find if I want it badly enough.”***

The Duchess of Sutherford has not seen her husband ever since their wedding day, two years ago. Now, she decides, it's finally time to live on her own, and forget about him altogether.

It's been two years since Devlin, the Duke of Sutherford, was forced to get married. Convinced that his wife was better off alone than with a monster like him, he has been living as a recluse away from London ever since. Until he learns that Theresa left their home, forever...

Now, certain that this his only chance at saving his marriage, Devlin must do something he never does: beg for forgiveness. But as much as Theresa enjoys the sight of a Duke on his knees for her, trusting him again will take much, much more than that. Even if the mere sight of him sets her insides on fire...

## PROLOGUE



*T*heresa's trembling hand lifted the quill pen off the paper. The letter was finished. She felt like the words were torn from the very flesh of her heart, and the ink was made of blood coursing through her veins.

Her flowery script revealed a message that had been bearing upon her soul for quite some time now. Finally, it was all out, and she would be able to live her life again.

*Live again.* The thought made her smile. The words in the letter were her liberation. They promised her everything she ever wanted. She took it in her hands again and read it silently, almost unable to believe that this was truly happening.

*To the Duke of Sutherland,* — she purposefully refused to call him *dear* for the simple reason that he was not.



*The past two years have provided ample chances for things to change. Seeing that no such thing happened, I do believe that this has gone on long enough. You have abandoned me by your own choice, proving that our marriage is but a scribble on a piece of paper. As that must remain so, I have decided that we shall continue to live separately, but this time, truly live, not merely exist and hope for something that will never be. I shall be moving to my own quarters with the dowry that my father has left me. I have no need of anything from you any longer.*

*Respectfully,*

*The Duchess of Sutherland*

Perhaps she could have said it in fewer words. In fact, she was certain of it. But she wanted him to know that this wasn't a sudden decision but rather a well thought-through one. She knew what she wanted, and she was tired of waiting for it.

She exhaled deeply with much relief. That smile still lingered on her face as her mind presented her with images of what her life could be, liberated from the shackles of being an invisible yet obedient wife. She could live, truly live, and enjoy life for all it had to offer.

They forced her into all this. She had no say then, but she had a say now. She would regain control of her life and be who she always wanted to be, despite

all of them.

If someone tried to stop her? Well, then they would see the force they reckoned with.

## CHAPTER 1



“Well, this is my new home!” Theresa said exuberantly as she swirled around the main hallway with her hands outstretched the moment she closed the grand front door behind herself and her younger sister, Helen, who looked about in awe. It seemed that Theresa’s exuberance was contagious, and the two sisters relished the sensation of joy that reigned within this charming little place.

“You were always the one for elegance and sophistication,” Helen commented, glancing at the decorative columns around the door that seemed to beckon one to enter and never leave.

“Oh, this is quite subdued, I would say,” Theresa laughed joyfully, feeling that sensation of control finally being back in her hands once more. It was intoxicating to feel this way again after such a long time, and this home embodied exactly that. This was *hers*. No one would be taking this away from her.

Her new home was situated in London, and although Devlin's family owned a house here, that was the last place she wanted to stay. She wanted a place solely her own, and for that, she needed to cut her ties with her husband as much as she could under the circumstances.

The interior of her home was arranged around a central stairwell with reception rooms on both sides that were decorated luxuriously with their high ceilings and ornate plasterwork. In both of them, large Axminsters lay in the very middle with a chaise lounge, a small tea table, and several other pieces of furniture that were placed strategically to make the place as welcoming as possible, a goal which was met with utter success.

"I absolutely adore it!" Helen exclaimed as her sister led her from one chamber to another, finally ending the tour in the drawing room where the two sisters waited for tea to be served.

"It is rather lovely, isn't it?" Theresa smiled, feeling a strange concoction of emotions suddenly take hold of her.

If she were to be completely honest, this was not how she imagined her life to be. Her imagination led her to a very different life path altogether, but as usually happened in life, things rarely unfolded the way someone wanted them to. And Theresa had learned, over the course of these two long joyless years, that she would not be getting her happily ever after. What was even more surprising was that eventually she had managed to come to terms with it. And now, she was here, both happy and sad about the way things turned

out.

“Theresa?” Her sister’s tender voice brought her back to the present moment.  
“Are you listening to me?”

Theresa suddenly turned to her sister, and she immediately realized that Helen had probably been telling her something all along, but she wasn’t listening. The words simply did not reach her because for a moment, she was back where she had come from, a place she had finally escaped. It was supposed to be her new home with her husband, but all it ended up being was a prison with invisible bars and shackles which she had finally gotten rid of by coming here. Still, she did not feel completely free as she was still a married woman and needed to act as one. But at the same time, the burden of hoping that her husband would eventually come to inquire about her had been lifted. She wasn’t expecting anything from him anymore. All hope was gone, and in its place was calmness.

“Oh, sorry,” Theresa smiled softly. “I got lost for a moment there. What were you saying, dear?”

“Just that Father sends his regards,” Helen said, and immediately upon hearing that, Theresa frowned with displeasure.

“I didn’t expect him to come,” she pointed out gravely. “But telling me that he sends his regards when he very well does not doesn’t fool me into thinking

he's changed, Helen."

The question of their father was a very difficult one for both sisters. In a way, it was exactly because he was as he was that Theresa was not willing to take her sister's words at face value. Their father was an old-fashioned man who thought that it was a man's job to determine a woman's fate, and that was why the two sisters united against him a long time ago when they realized what sort of man their father truly was. They had to show him that there were women who refused to bow down to a man, whether or not it was to their father. Needless to say, he did not like it one bit.

"I suppose that he is setting up *your* marriage as well as we speak," Theresa noted something both sisters were well aware of.

"Of course," Helen replied then chuckled without much concern, "but he'll see that it isn't such an easy task."

Theresa's eyes widened in shock then she burst into a very welcome chuckle herself. "Good," she finally replied, once the onslaught of laughter died down a little. "I'm glad that you've decided to stand up for yourself as well. I do suppose that he will be rather upset upon hearing that I am here on my own, instead of trying to make up with my husband."

"But... that's impossible," Helen pointed out with a disapproving knitting of her honey-colored brows. "How can you make up with someone you haven't

seen in two whole years?”

*Two whole years.* Sometimes, Theresa forgot that it had truly been that long, but she would quickly be reminded of it because she could barely even remember what her own husband looked like. It was ridiculous, and it had gone on for long enough. Even too long.

“Right?” Theresa shrugged. “Oh well. I’m way beyond that now. Whatever Father chooses to think is his own right. As for me, I plan on enjoying myself, living my life to the fullest, and not allowing any man, be it my father or my husband, to tell me what I can or cannot do any longer.”

Helen’s eyes sparkled as she listened to her sister. Being the older one, Theresa had always borne the brunt of their father’s utter disappointment at having two daughters instead of two sons. She was supposed to be a boy who would grow up into a man to carry on their family name. But that did not happen.

The only way Theresa could appease her father was to prove to him her worth through a convenient marriage. For a while, their father was appeased. A good connection with a respected and well-known duke was created, and he could rest assured that the same would happen with Helen as well.

Only, he seemed to forget that Theresa would not allow her sister to suffer the same fate as she did. They both lost their mother at an early age, but

Theresa vowed to herself that she would always look out for Helen, no matter what. If her own life could not be what she wanted of it, then Helen's would. She would see to it that her sister was a happy woman living her life by the side of the man who truly loved her.

“And while I'm living my life to the fullest, you are welcome to come here and stay with me for as long as you'd like,” Theresa added, much to her sister's delight.

“I would very much like that,” Helen nodded, already imagining all the balls they would attend and all the strolls they would have through Hyde Park.

“In that case, all you need to do is return home, pack your belongings, and come stay with me,” Theresa smiled, taking her sister's hands into her own.

While she was certain that she could not prevent their father from searching for a suitable husband for Helen, she could still keep her sister as sheltered as possible and even help her find a man she would love. After all, London was full of eligible bachelors. Most of them were looking for only a convenient marriage, but hopefully, there were a few who were also looking for someone they would enjoy growing old with.

Theresa hoped that they could find a man for Helen who would not only love her but also be a good match in their father's eyes as well. A difficult feat but not altogether impossible.



At that moment, the tea arrived. The two sisters watched as a servant girl carried a silver tray in trembling hands. As she placed it down, continuing to pour the tea, she spilled a little.

“Oh, I’m dreadfully sorry!” she exclaimed apologetically with a look of terror in her eyes.

“It is quite all right, Georgina,” Theresa assured her in a soft voice. “You may pour my sister a cup and then come back with a dishrag to wipe it up. Think nothing of it.”

Georgina seemed a little confused then that confusion spilled over into a look of relief. “You are most kind, Duchess.”

Theresa frowned. “I don’t think I’ll ever get used to it.”

Georgina thought that was meant for her, but in fact, Theresa said it to her sister. The servant girl nodded then quickly disappeared from the chamber.

“I was told that the poor thing was beaten several times in the previous household she worked at just because she broke a glass,” Theresa said softly, feeling sympathy for Georgina.

“Oh, so that’s why she looked as if she half-expected someone to punish her for spilling the tea,” Helen pointed out.

“Yes,” Theresa nodded with a sigh. “She is a very sweet girl. As soon as she was introduced to me, I knew she was the one I wanted with me here.”

A knock on the door interrupted her, and a moment later, Georgina was called to come in. She hastily, with an even more trembling hand, wiped the spilled tea.

“Is there anything else, Your Grace?” she asked, looking down at her feet.

“You don’t have to look away, Georgina,” Theresa smiled. “You haven’t done anything wrong.”

“Thank you,” Georgina smiled as she looked up at Theresa.

“You are very welcome,” Theresa replied. “Now go see if Mary needs any help in the kitchen with dinner. I am meeting a very good friend of mine for an afternoon stroll, and I would like dinner to be served earlier this evening.”

“Of course, Your Grace,” Georgina nodded just once then Theresa gestured at her that she was dismissed, after which she quickly closed the door behind

her.

“Are you meeting Mary-Jane?” Helen inquired curiously.

“I am,” Theresa confirmed. “We haven’t seen each other since I arrived. Her little girl is keeping her quite busy.”

“Doesn’t she have a governess?” Helen sounded surprised.

“No,” Theresa shook her head. “You know that Mary-Jane likes to do things her own way, especially when it comes to Rosemary. She is a mother who likes to be involved in everything her child does, and while that sounds rather time-consuming, I cannot imagine anything more rewarding in life than watching your child grow up into a good person.”

Suddenly, Theresa noticed that her sister had that melancholy look in her eyes which she always had when she was thinking about their mother.

“If Mother were here, do you think she would be proud of us?” Helen wondered softly, her voice down to a whisper.

Theresa smiled, her eyes beaming. “No one could convince me otherwise, my dear.”

They spent the rest of the morning casually chatting about everything they could think of, even taking a trip down memory lane which somehow did not make them sad but rather happy about where they were now: still together, determined to create a better life for both of them.

“Thank you for coming to see me,” Theresa said, embracing her sister strongly as they stood in front of Helen’s carriage that was to take her back home. “Don’t forget, I am waiting for you to come again and stay with me longer next time.”

“I promise,” Helen smiled when the two sisters pulled apart.

Minutes later, Theresa was waving her sister goodbye, watching the carriage become a small dot in the distance until it was completely gone. Theresa was alone again. The thought was frightening for some reason although at the same time, it was strangely thrilling.

After all, this was what she wanted, what she fought for. She did not receive a reply to her letter which surprised her a little. She expected at least a word or two on part of her husband, and all she received was silence. Not that it mattered. His words would have changed nothing. She was now exactly where she wanted to be, away from the toxic influence of any man in her life.

She smiled as she went back inside. It was time to get ready to meet with

Mary-Jane.

## CHAPTER 2



“*T*hat is, my dear, because there are no marriages without problems. In fact, the problem is marriage itself!” Mary-Jane exclaimed in a way that was all hers as the two ladies strolled languidly though Hyde Park, completely oblivious to the looks they were getting.

While the two were not the only ladies in attendance, they were certainly two of the most beautiful ones as they stood in stark contrast to each other. While Mary-Jane had honey-toned hair with striking green eyes, Theresa’s curly chocolate tresses refused to be controlled by her coiffure, and her piercing blue eyes were always aware of what was happening around her. Theresa had not learned the technique yet, but Mary-Jane strolled as if she were the Queen herself, gracing all those around her with her presence.

It was, after all, one of the things Theresa loved so much about her friend. Her confidence, her aura of attraction, and her unwillingness to bow down to anyone’s rules but her own. Theresa wondered if she would ever become this confident. Perhaps in time?

She couldn't resist chuckling aloud at her friend's comment. "Perhaps you are right."

"I am most certainly right," Mary-Jane replied, patting her friend's hand which rested on her own arm.

It was the time of day when Hyde Park was bustling with life. Theresa did not particularly enjoy that, but she knew that was something she needed to get used to. Solitude was her only friend in her previous home. Now, she needed to open herself up to life, and that meant new people, new places, and new things. Once again, that fear mixed with thrill overpowered her. But her friend immediately sensed it.

"Just look where being married has gotten us," she scoffed although Theresa was certain that her friend had good reasons to both appreciate having been married as well as not.

"Alone?" Theresa wondered aloud before she could even think about what she had said.

But Mary-Jane had caught it, and there was no taking it back. "Do you miss him?"

Theresa almost laughed at the absurdity of the idea. "How can you miss

someone you've seen only once in your life? Someone who hasn't inquired even once about not just whether you are all right, but not even whether you were alive or dead."

"Well, now, aren't you being a little overdramatic, my dear?" Mary-Jane teased.

"Maybe," Theresa couldn't help but grin, "but half of it is true."

"It is," her friend nodded.

"You know, I wrote him a letter before coming here," Theresa revealed.

Her friend's eyes widened in eagerness to hear what would follow next. "And?" she asked, the end of her question wrought with inquisitiveness.

"Nothing," Theresa shrugged anticlimactically.

Mary-Jane frowned. "What do you mean nothing?"

"Exactly that," Theresa clarified. "Nothing. No response whatsoever. Not to tell me it's all right nor to tell me I'm mad. Nothing."



Mary-Jane seemed to ponder it for a few moments as they continued to walk through the maze of rose bushes in full bloom. Theresa loved this place.

“That is rather odd,” Mary-Jane pointed out.

“Why?” Theresa answered with yet another question. “I suppose it shouldn’t come as a surprise. We haven’t spoken since we met on that fateful day which was also our wedding day. I don’t know why I expected him to have anything to say to my letter which actually changes nothing. Why would he care whether I live there or here when I’m living alone in either case?”

Mary-Jane didn’t say anything to that. Her own fate had been more or less the same or perhaps even worse.

“And how is Rosemary?” Theresa asked in an effort to change the subject.

She felt that from the moment she set out on this journey to solidify herself as her own woman, her husband was constantly on her mind. She had seen him only once, but the memory of his handsome face was still etched in her mind, refusing to let go. How ironic it was that as she was trying to get away from him, she brought him with her wherever she went?

“She is doing well, thank you for inquiring,” Mary-Jane smiled. “You know,

she plays the piano so beautifully. I've been meaning to enroll her in Mrs. Putnam's piano classes."

Theresa knew that Mrs. Putnam was one of the most famous piano players, a master in her own right, and if she would take on Rosemary as her student, that meant that Rosemary was truly a diamond in the rough, for Mrs. Putnam was known to refuse many who wanted to be taught by her.

"I wish you the best," Theresa replied.

"Thank you, we'll need it," her friend sighed. "She is... shy. I don't know where she gets it from, certainly not me."

Theresa didn't want to remind her friend that her husband was the one who shunned society in general. He was an old man with even older values, but he still believed that a fifty-year-old man had the right to marry a twenty-year-old woman, just because he had money and her father agreed to this arrangement. Then he continued to mistreat her until the very day that he died which was not a day too soon. Mary-Jane said many times that it was all worth it because now she had Rosemary.

Theresa wondered if she would feel differently about her husband if they had a child. But the thought was preposterous. They did not even get to have a proper wedding night. How on earth could there be a child?

Deep down, she always imagined herself with a little girl and a boy. Maybe two girls. She would be as involved in their lives as Mary-Jane was in Rosemary's. They would be her reason for living. They would make everything worth the pain. But she was alone.

At that moment, a familiar face flashed in the crowd for one brief moment. The eyes burned bright with anger. All it took was one second. No more.

“Goodness!” Theresa exclaimed, stopping immediately, gripping at her friend's hand, clutching at it desperately as if her life depended on it.

“Theresa?” Mary-Jane turned to her with a worried look on her face. “Theresa, are you all right?”

Theresa squinted heavily against the sun which prevented her from seeing properly. But she knew what she had seen. Now, there was not a trace of him. The crowd dispersed, and they were mostly couples, walking hand in hand, speaking to each other as if the rest of the world did not exist.

“Theresa?” Mary-Jane asked again, and this time, Theresa turned to her.

“It's nothing,” she said, not wanting to reveal that she had been so obsessed with not receiving a reply from her husband that she was now even seeing him here in Hyde Park which was beyond ridiculous and downright

impossible. “I think I spent a little too much time in the sun.”

She adjusted her bonnet a little to strengthen this reasoning. She expected Mary-Jane to demand more of an explanation, but her friend knew better than to push.

“Would you like us to head back?” Mary-Jane asked, still a bit concerned.

“Yes, please,” Theresa nodded, pressing her hand to her chest where she could feel the violent beating of her heart.

*Tell her*, that little voice inside of her urged. Mary-Jane always knew how to make her feel better, but this time, Theresa doubted that was possible. Still, she treasured her friend’s company, and she was glad that they were together. As for the mirage, that was all it was. Her husband was miles away. This was just her mind playing tricks on her.

“I am very happy to have you here in London. I didn’t like having you in that little village. You were too far away from me,” Mary-Jane added quickly as they turned left to follow a less frequented path that led them away from the crowd and into a maze of hedges that were trimmed to perfection. “We shall have so much fun!” she added with much delight.

Theresa laughed again, amused by her friend’s good mood. Already, she was

feeling more at ease about what happened. She just needed to spend more time with Mary-Jane and hopefully, meet more people who would be like her — fun and optimistic — who would help Theresa get out of her shell and finally live life the way she always thought she deserved.

“We should go to the British Museum next time,” Theresa suggested. “I hear there is an exhibition of —”

“Museum?” Mary-Jane frowned with disapproval. “We could take Rosemary there, certainly. But the two of us, no. We shall do something far more interesting.” With that said, there was a slightly mischievous gleam in her eyes.

“What are you thinking *now*?” Theresa chuckled again, knowing well that her friend was concocting a plan, one that probably involved something Theresa would never do under usual circumstances.

“All in good time, my dear,” Mary-Jane teased. “For now, we shall arrange that museum visit if you are so keen on it.”

“I am,” Theresa nodded. “It is also a good excuse to see Rosemary.”

“She will be so happy to see you as well,” Mary-Jane assured her.

The two ladies continued chatting casually as they approached Theresa's carriage which took them both home. They continued to chat about their upcoming plans; however, even though Theresa was trying to be focused on the conversation, she could not forget what happened at Hyde Park.

Who was the man she saw? Was it truly *him*? Of course not. All logic assured her it couldn't be. It was probably someone very much like him. Besides, she probably forgot what he truly looked like. After all, she had only seen him once.

She could still remember those jitters that followed her throughout that entire day when she knew that she would bind herself to someone, that thrill upon meeting him, upon realizing that he wasn't an old man but a young man and a rather handsome one at that. Finally, she remembered the disappointment of finding out that he wanted nothing to do with her.

She didn't forget him, but she was determined to do so. In fact, she promised herself that she would and kept repeating that promise in her mind on the way to her new home in hopes that this would solidify it.

## CHAPTER 3



“*I* don’t want you to think about that awful man a moment longer, understood?” Mary-Jane ordered in a tone of voice that did not allow for any backtalk.

Theresa knew that there was no ill-will behind this order. In fact, there was nothing but profound care and affection for Theresa herself. It was simply how Mary-Jane expressed her concern.

“I promise,” Theresa smiled as the two ladies embraced, ready to say goodbye for the day.

“I have to go and see what Rosemary is up to.” Mary-Jane glanced at the house behind her. “I have given her several assignments which she needed to finish by the time I come back.”

“Aren’t you a bit strict with her?” Theresa asked. “She is after all just a child

yet.”

“A female child,” Mary-Jane pointed out. “And we live in a man’s world. I want her to be able to do anything she wants. I would simply die if one day, she told me that the whole purpose of her existence was to get married to a lord and be taken care of. Ugh, God forbid!” Mary-Jane shuddered at the thought which immediately made Theresa chuckle.

“I doubt such a thing would happen with you as her mother,” Theresa reminded her friend.

“Thank you, dear,” Mary-Jane smiled. “I had already forgotten how good you are to my self-esteem.”

“And you to mine,” Theresa assured her.

The two ladies burst into an amused chuckle yet again when Theresa gave her friend a peck on the cheek and climbed back up into the carriage.

“I shall send word when we are to visit the museum,” Mary-Jane exclaimed as she waved the carriage goodbye.

Theresa merely nodded then sat back into the carriage, allowing the soft



rocking to lull her into a state between wakefulness and sleep. So many things had happened, and she was still a bit weary as to what the future would bring. Even more so, she wondered if she would be able to handle everything.

She remembered that she still hadn't seen her father, who would no doubt be rather disgruntled with what she had done. But she didn't care. She was no longer under his control. In fact, she was under no man's control. The thought made her smile. She was free to do whatever she wished. The world was her oyster.

Only now, she had had enough of the world. She wanted to hide away in her own little piece of heaven where she would not be bothered by anyone. Somehow, she managed to pacify herself with the thoughts of upcoming visits to places she'd always wanted to visit, spending time with her best friend and her daughter, and perhaps even meeting someone new.

Not that she had any plans of meeting anyone new. She just wanted to be alone with herself and to find her place in the world, not by the side of some man but rather as a liberated woman who knew her worth instead of having it established through the eyes of men around her.

"Worthington?" Theresa called out the moment she entered her home.

Strangely enough, there was no response. She looked around the main hallway. She wanted to call out to Georgina, but she decided against it. She

didn't want to seem like the panicky woman who needed reassurance the moment she found herself alone and unattended. They were all here... somewhere. They had to be.

Besides, it was not like she needed her butler right now anyway. Dinner would be served shortly, as per her request, and everything would be all right. Those were the words she kept repeating to herself, but something would not let her be. She felt as if someone was tapping her on the shoulder, a cold finger of fright that refused to allow her to be lulled into a state of reassurance.

Suddenly, this house seemed frightening. It was too big. It was too silent. She wanted someone here... now.

“Worthington?” she called out again, trying to sound composed as if she simply needed something, anything other than reassurance that all this nonsense was just in her mind, and she was merely projecting it into her reality. Apprehension churned in her stomach.

*Housework*, she finally came up with a plausible answer to her question regarding the whereabouts of her butler. He must be somewhere in the house doing housework. Or maybe even out in the garden. That must be why he could not hear her call out to him.

She smiled at this reassuring thought as she walked towards the drawing

room to the left of the entrance hall. It was her second favorite room in the entire house with its warm, earthy colors and details scattered about it. However, her favorite room was the library. That was where she would head next, just after she took one look through the drawing room window which overlooked the garden.

She walked over to it and pushed the curtain slightly more aside. The setting sun welcomed her, oozing warmth onto her cheeks. She closed her eyes, enjoying the warm caress, but the moment she opened the curtains, she was only convinced that Worthington was not in the garden. That could only mean one thing. He was in the house.

She did not need him *per se*. She needed to see someone, to hear someone. She had no reason to go down to the kitchen or the servants' quarters. However, she could come up with any reason to speak to her butler. That was why it was crucial that she found him, so she could end this day in a calm manner that assured her everything would be all right. Because right now, she could not be further away from that conviction.

She moved away from the window and listened. The house sounded empty, devoid of anyone's presence. It was somehow eerie. She instantly remembered how she thought she saw her husband in Hyde Park.

"Don't be silly," she said aloud this time because saying it silently, inside her mind did nothing anymore. She needed to hear it, and since she was the only person here, her own voice was better than bleak silence.

Her voice exploded in the drawing room, like a knife cutting through thick clouds, but it served very little purpose. She could barely convince herself of anything right now.

“What I need is a good night’s rest,” she said, sighing and shaking her head. She had never behaved in this manner. She had no idea what had gotten into her. She had always been a calm, reasonable creature, not prone to fancies and flights of imagination which was exactly what this was.

Her mind was creating frightening scenarios, and she believed them. All she needed to do was banish them from her mind, and it would be all right. She was alone here. She was away from both her father and her husband, the two men who had control over her life — at least, who *thought* they had control. Her being here proved otherwise. Again, she smiled at the thought.

*There, she thought to herself. Much better.*

Slowly, without any rush, she headed towards the library. As soon as she reached the library, the fragrance of an unfamiliar cologne permeated her nostrils. She knew that Worthington was not in the habit of wearing cologne. Also, there was no other man in the house.

Her heart started to beat wildly at the insinuation. A million questions started to swarm through her mind like furious bees, threatening to sting her with

every answer. She approached the door to the library and noticed it was left ajar. That was never the case. Theresa herself closed all the doors to the house, and everyone else followed that unspoken rule. Was it possible that someone had simply forgotten?

She swallowed heavily, reaching for the doorknob. Her fingers trembled. She could feel her heartbeat in her throat, making it increasingly more difficult to breathe. Everything inside of her told her to calm down, that it was all in her mind. But curiosity won over.

She pushed the door open. The curtains were pulled, hiding most of the window, so a large part of the library was now in shadows. At first, she didn't even see him — that figure huddled in the corner as if he dropped something, and he just casually bent to pick it up. When he straightened, she could see his entire body, everything but his face which was concealed in the shadows.

A scream died inside of her throat, silent and inaudible. Her mind went blank. Her ears exploded. Before, there was no sound, and now, she could not hear anything because of the buzzing noise her own mind was making. She could see the muscular body and the hands, which she noted only now, were holding a glass of whiskey.

Could it be? No, no, no. Everything about this was wrong.

Was it a dream? Yes. It was a dream. It had to be a dream. Because this man

couldn't be who she thought he was. It was impossible. He couldn't be here for the simple reason that he had no idea where she was. She made sure not to write her new address in the letter she had sent him. She merely informed him of what was going to happen, nothing else.

She still could not see his face, but she knew that he was staring her dead in the eyes. Slowly, without her even noticing, fear gave way to something else, something far more worrisome, because as he stepped into the light, and she could see that he was as handsome as she remembered him. That one time she had seen him, that one time their hands touched, was enough for her never to forget him.

It was then that he spoke, and her heart fell all the way down to her heels.

“You are very hard to find, wife.”

## CHAPTER 4



“Devlin!?” Theresa asked, aghast, paralyzed on the spot.

“That is still my name,” he grinned in a way she knew she would never forget, even if she were never to see him again. “Although I’m wondering if you forgot it, taking into account we haven’t seen each other in almost two years.”

“And whose fault is that?” she frowned then quickly shook her head as if she didn’t want to have this conversation at all. The truth was, she didn’t. Talking about this was dangerous. She might reveal how much she was actually thinking about him in all this time of his absence, and she would rather die than have him know this.

What she did want to know herself, however, was his reason behind being here. “What are you doing here?” she demanded, still taken aback by his presence. “And how on earth did you find me? I didn’t leave any address in the letter.” Her entire body trembled as if she had gotten soaked in the rain

and was still in wet garments this very moment.

The knot on his forehead signaled confusion. “Letter?” he echoed, eyeing her strangely. “What letter?”

Now it was her turn to be confused. “The letter I sent you, telling you all about... this,” she said, gesturing around her.

Was it possible that the letter didn’t reach him? She doubted that. She addressed it correctly. Or maybe, he was just pretending that he didn’t know anything about it, so he could make this as awkward as possible? The thought inflamed her even more than the realization that somehow, he had gotten even more handsome than she remembered him. She was furious with herself for noticing how tall and muscular he was, how prominent his dimples were when he smiled, and how rakish his dark curls that fell over his forehead were. Everything about him was so devilishly handsome that it almost made her mind stop functioning.

“I didn’t receive any letter from you,” he said finally.

“Then how did you know about me leaving for London?”

*Ah, I caught you there!* she thought to herself victoriously, hoping that she had managed to regain control of this situation, but his next words dashed



that conviction against the rocky shores of reality.

“My grandmother,” he said simply with a half-shrug. “She was the one who, upon visiting me, told me all about your shenanigans.”

“Shenanigans!?” she repeated, filled with shock at how he refused to take her and her actions seriously. She immediately remembered why she left in the first place. “These are no shenanigans. This is my life we’re talking about.”

“Yours *and* mine,” he reminded her. “Do not forget that whatever you do reflects on me as well, for we are still married, *wife*.”

She didn’t like how he was looking at her, mostly because she enjoyed it too much. She could feel herself blushing, and that meant that he had an effect on her. Quite an effect, to be exact, and she hated it. She had imagined this moment so many times over the course of the past two years, and every time in those imaginings, she was the composed one, the one in complete control.

Now, reality could not be further from that. She found herself on slippery ground, unable to keep her balance because she was still as infatuated with her husband as the first and last time she laid eyes on him. As if to taunt her, those dark eyes kept staring at her, drinking in the sight of her, and she could not look away even if she tried.

The worst part of all this was the simple fact that he was not here because he loved her or even found her attractive. It was simply the fact that her actions did not reflect well on him. That was all, yet she herself could barely think straight with him looking at her like that. She scolded herself silently for wanting this man so desperately when he could not care less about her.

“How did you find me?” she asked again, curious whether it was again his grandmother who provided the knowledge of her whereabouts or did he go through the lengths to discover it. How she hoped it was the latter.

“I am a duke,” he said in a rakish manner, tilting his head to the side as if to take a closer look at her. Her heart dropped. Her body was washed over in flickering flames of his gaze. “There is nothing I can’t find if I want it badly enough.”

She rolled her eyes, not sure whether to take it as a compliment or not. Something inside of her urged her to do the former, but she banished the thought. It was dangerous to think that he was here because of her, because of their marriage. He could have come to her much earlier had he any desire for it. He did not. That revealed everything she needed to know.

He was here probably because all of this was an inconvenience to him, just like it was for her father — only her father was still not here, knocking on her door to give her a piece of his mind. She did not doubt, however, that it would happen soon enough. For the time being, she only had her husband to deal with.

“All right, then,” she said, trying to regain control of the situation, but the moment she started to speak, he got up and strolled over to her slowly, his every step evoking the aura of danger.

She swallowed heavily as he stood right in front of her. She had forgotten how tall and strong he was, how handsome, how utterly charming without needing to say a single word. If he were to wrap her in his arms, she would get lost in them.

*Focus, Theresa, she scolded herself silently. It is not good to think about him embracing you.*

“Now that you *did* find me, you are welcome to state your business,” she said as gravely as she could, as if they were here to address a business matter. In a way, they were. For there were emotions only on one side.

“My business?” he chuckled.

*Goodness, even his laughter is as thrilling as his appearance.*

She had totally forgotten all about him. Over these past two years, he had become but a ghost of the person he truly was. She managed to mold him into something that had little effect on her. Now, the real man was here, and she

knew that she would fall under his charm very soon if they spent much more time together. She needed to get him as far away from herself as possible which she planned on doing right after he stated his business for being here.

But her heart was beating in her throat. Her entire body was aflame. Her mind could barely make heads or tails of anything that wasn't him. She needed to focus all her conscious effort to remind herself that this man, this handsome charmer, was the one who left his wife on their wedding day. She couldn't believe how much it still hurt her.

"Yes, your business," she replied, liking the confident tone of voice she was using. "You must be here for something other than to see if I am all right, isn't that so?"

He was still smiling, those dimples provoking her into madness.

"Why yes," he finally confessed. "I *am* here for something other than to merely check up on you. Although I can see you've settled in quite well." He looked around himself, whistling in awe. "The place has been remodeled as I can see. And no penny was saved."

"I have not taken a single penny from you or your family," she snapped, wanting to assure him that she did not need him and that whatever she did decide to change here and remodel was done out of the pocket of her own father, certainly not him. "This was all paid for from my dowry."

“All right,” he nodded, much to her surprise, for she expected him to argue with her, “but you’ll need to hold onto that.”

Her brows knotted with a lack of understanding. “What do you mean?”

He took another step closer to her, a dangerous step, but she refused to budge. He wanted to intimidate her, to show her that he was in control. Well... he was not.

At least, not until the moment he cupped her chin and forced her to look up at him. “I mean, you need to come home, Theresa. Immediately.”



“Home?” she repeated, and her voice, like an echo, reverberated throughout the chamber.

Once again, Devlin was stunned into near silence at the sound of it so melodious and angelic-like. He had forgotten it completely which was the result of concentrated effort. He wanted to forget all about her, so he tried his best to do so. Only, the heart refused to make this task easy on him. He also thought that he had forgotten her face, but he could not lie to himself about that either. Everything about her was painfully familiar, and his every sense was awakened by the very sight of her. She was breathtakingly gorgeous, and she didn’t even know the effect she had on him. He didn’t know whether to

laugh or cry about that.

“Back where I lived before?” she asked, sounding incredulous. “Alone?”

“No,” he shook his head. “Home... with me. I will send footmen to gather your belongings the following day, so you needn’t worry about that.”

Her reaction surprised him. Her eyes widened, and instead of saying something back, she burst into an amused chuckle. It took her quite a while to calm down again, and he couldn’t help but wonder if she was doing this on purpose, to prove to him that she didn’t need him.

Something urged him to grab her by the shoulders and kiss her into obedience. That was what he’d been yearning to do since the moment their eyes locked. She looked ethereally beautiful... just as he remembered her. His heart clenched in his chest, paralyzing him.

But he knew that kissing her senseless would never work, even though the idea did not sound half as bad. He had been tempted once to do it, during their wedding ceremony, and he could swear that she wanted him to as well. But his own fears and doubts prevented him from acting upon that desire.

In fact, it was exactly that desire which left him fearing that his heart belonged to her forever. No woman ever had such an effect on him, such

complete surrender to her smile. It was beyond anything humanly possible. How could he not fear such strength of emotion?

Staying away from her was for the best. Now, once again, that same yearning came to the surface, and same as before, doubts creeped upon him, keeping him at bay. He had to talk some sense into her and make her see his point of view. She needed to come back home with him. There were so many reasons for this, the strongest one being that he simply wanted her to. He needed her by his side. He could not fight this yearning any longer, especially now that there was a great risk of losing her to someone else, someone who might appear suddenly in her life... in *their* life.

“I have no intention of returning,” she said simply, without much deliberation, dispersing his fog of thoughts. Then, she added for more clarification, “Seeing we cannot get separated in the eyes of God, we shall continue our lives as we have lived them so far. Separately. Only now, this will be on my terms, not yours.”

He had to admit that he wasn't expecting such fire from her. At first glance, she seemed a timid creature, especially taking into account how she agreed to this arranged marriage without much rebellion. This woman here was someone else, someone with courage and daring, someone who was unafraid to speak her mind. She managed to capture his interest far more than he was willing to admit.

“I cannot have my wife live in London on her own,” he stated, knowing fully

well it was a weak argument. He had a better one, but he refused to share it with her. Of course, she immediately grabbed at it.

“And living in a different home in a different town from you was all right?” she asked, now sounding as amused as he was. “How does this differ? Simply because it is London?”

*Yes, you can easily be stolen from me here because you are a stunning woman, and any man would be mad not to notice you.*

The words were almost at the tip of his tongue, but he managed to swallow them before they left the confines of his mind and created even more trouble. His heart felt that she belonged to him, not simply because they were married but because his every thought was filled with the image of her face which he so unsuccessfully tried to forget. He was moments away from telling her this. But he knew better. Now was not the moment to tell her the truth. She was not in the right state of mind to understand where he was coming from. He needed her to be calm and rational.

“No, no,” she shook her head, not allowing him to say anything to her previous words, and instead, her monologue flowed, “You come back to my life after two long years, unannounced and uninvited. You have no right to demand anything of me, for the same reason that during this time, I have not demanded anything of you.”



He had to admit that she was right. She had not contacted him once, not to tell him that she needed anything, not to ask for any clarification regarding their marital status. There was silence on her end, and he was fine with it. At least, that was what he tried to convince himself of. Now, he knew better.

Her cheeks flared up as she spoke, and she looked even more ravishing as her chest rose in that tight gown which suited her complexion so perfectly. In fact, everything about her was pure perfection. He wasn't expecting that. He thought that it was merely in his mind that she had attained that ethereal beauty, but it was reality. That was why this was so difficult.

“I know that,” he confessed. “And I —”

“If you know that, then respect me as a woman if not as your wife,” she said, hitting him where it hurt. “Respect my wish to lead my life alone, away from you.”

Her words felt like a punch to the stomach. The pain dispersed then a strange warmth filled his insides. He was burning, but it wasn't because of anger. It was much worse than that. He was burning for her, to be with her, to be by her side, but instead of pulling her closer him to herself, she was running away.

Finally, he realized that he would achieve nothing today. She refused to listen to reason, and all he could do was respect her wishes although it pained him

to do so.

“Fine,” he said reluctantly, unable to take his eyes off of her, dreadfully afraid that this would be the last time he would see her. But he also knew that prolonging this initial meeting longer than she wanted it to last would only work against him.

“I will leave now,” he whispered, and the words caused him actual physical pain.

He headed towards the door, but before he exited the chamber, he lingered in the doorway, turning to her one more time. She was breathtaking. Everything about her — the way she spoke, the way her eyes sparkled, the way her cheeks flared up, the way her lips said no, but her body urged him not to leave — assured him that she was as attracted to him as he was to her. But she was hurt, and he could understand why. It was all his fault. Every bit of this mess. He had to prove to her that he wasn't this man who she thought he was.

“This isn't over,” he said in a determined voice.

Then, he turned on his heels and marched out of the house, vowing that he would convince her that it would be best for everyone if she returned home with him.

## CHAPTER 5



“*Y*our husband is here in London?” Mary-Jane exclaimed so loudly that her entire drawing room echoed with the news, and in addition to this, she almost dropped the dainty, flower adorned teacup she was holding in her right hand.

Half-amused and half-annoyed, Theresa pressed her index finger to her lips. “Shhh! I don’t want the whole London to know.”

Mary-Jane nodded. “Sorry, dear. I’m just... stunned.”

“I know,” Theresa sighed, trying to adjust herself in the usually very comfortable chaise lounge, but this time, she felt as if she were sitting on jagged rocks. “Can you imagine what it felt like to see him there in the library? My heart nearly jumped out of my chest!”

Mary-Jane eyed her friend slightly suspiciously. “Is it because there are

feelings between you two?”

“Feelings?” Theresa felt as if her tongue got all twisted and tied up at the mere mention of feelings for him. “Don’t be silly. How could there be feelings for someone you’ve seen only once?”

“Love at first sight?” Mary-Jane urged, now smiling as if she were a part of some deep, dark conspiracy which amused her greatly.

“Seriously now,” Theresa pouted, desperate to have her friend stop insinuating something which was obviously true. “He is a handsome man, I’ll give him that. Very handsome, indeed. But anything more than that is out of the question.”

Mary-Jane didn’t say anything to that, but it was obvious that she wasn’t all that convinced. “So, you told him you’re not going back with him?”

“I most certainly did,” Theresa confirmed, reaching for her own teacup with trembling fingers. She needed to steady them on something, and the polished porcelain of the cup would prove to be just the thing.

“How did he take it?” Mary-Jane asked.

Theresa paused, trying to come up with the right words. “Not very well.”

“It’s his behavior from the past two years that hasn’t been very well,” Mary-Jane frowned, and Theresa knew that her friend was right.

“He said it would be best for everyone if I came home,” Theresa revealed. “I’m wondering if he’s spoken to Father.”

“Whether or not he has, it doesn’t really matter,” Mary-Jane was adamant as she took another sip of tea which only seemed to fuel her rage even more. “The thing is that returning *home* with him isn’t best for everyone. It’s best for *him*.”

“I thought that as well,” Theresa nodded. “The idea of me being alone here in London doesn’t agree with him.”

Mary-Jane laughed heartily at her friend’s words. “Who cares what agrees with him or not? His opinion stopped being important the moment he left *you*, his wife, on your wedding day, to live alone and forget you existed at all. Now that you want to change things, he’s remembered, ‘Oh, silly me, I have a wife!’”

She deepened her voice as she said that which made the words sound hilarious. Theresa couldn’t resist laughing, and both ladies felt enormous

relief at diminishing the importance of something that was obviously troubling Theresa.

When the onslaught of laughter finally subsided, Mary-Jane continued. “All joking aside, dear, you should not listen to anything he tells you. It’s all lies, most probably.”

“Well, he hasn’t really said anything yet,” Theresa pointed out. “I mean, he hasn’t lied about anything. We merely established the fact that we haven’t seen each other in two years. That was all.”

“And that is where your conversation ended?”

“Well... not really,” Theresa admitted, pushing back a stray curl behind her left ear a little nervously. “He left, but he said that it wasn’t over.”

“Typical man,” Mary-Jane scoffed. “All they want to do is control you. See? While you were living there where he left you, everything was fine. You didn’t bother him. He was free to live his life, but you weren’t. Now that the tables are reversed, he suddenly thinks he has the right to come here and tell you what to do. Ugh, I hate such men!”

With those words, she got up and started pacing about the room apprehensively. Theresa knew where all this pent-up rage was coming from.

Mary-Jane did not trust men in the slightest. Her own father, the man who was supposed to assure his daughter's happiness, had arranged for her to be married to a man twice her age.

Theresa could not even imagine how dreadful that must have been to need to fulfil all marital duties with a man who was older than her own father. Despite everything, the marriage produced a daughter. Mary-Jane's husband had hoped for a son as any man of his ilk would, and he did not hide his disappointment with Rosemary at every step. This only further solidified Mary-Jane's utter disgust with men in general and her belief that most of them were selfish monsters with no concern for anyone else.

When her husband died, she played the role of the grieving widow to perfection. She even managed to cry at the funeral, something Theresa was shocked by because she believed that one could only cry if one had true feelings. But all that rage and disappointment were enough emotions to make Mary-Jane cry real tears.

Then, in the privacy of their own chambers, her friend admitted that she was glad she was finally free. She had her treasure with her, Rosemary, and she was free to live her life. Fortunately, her late husband's uncle, who was to inherit the title, had taken his inheritance and left them to their own devices. This turned out to be a blessing in disguise as Mary-Jane was left enough money to live comfortably with her daughter for the rest of their lives. In her case, death was not only the end of one life but also the beginning of a new one.

Theresa could see the look of sheer joy in her friend's eyes, and the following few months, Mary-Jane had become a different woman. She blossomed into someone else, someone new, someone she always wanted to be but couldn't because the oppressive boot of patriarchal influence had always been upon her.

Theresa wondered if she could do the same for herself. Little by little, she managed to convince herself that she deserved happiness as well, instead of waiting for something that would never be and someone who would never come. Now, she was here, and that someone had arrived, but it was too late.

"But you know..." Theresa suddenly remembered the look on Devlin's face which confused her because she could see more in it than a mere male desire for control. There was something else, something that she hadn't seen before. "I felt something strange when he was there. He refused to accept no for an answer."

"Well, of course," Mary-Jane scoffed again for good measure.

"No, no," Theresa shook her head. "I felt like there was real panic in his voice."

"Panic?" Mary-Jane asked, surprised.



“Yes, panic,” Theresa nodded. “Maybe panic that he would lose not just control over me but... me?”

The two ladies exchanged a meaningful glance. Theresa had no idea what that could mean, that tone of voice he used and the way he still left it for her to decide. After all, he was a duke. He could simply issue an order, and it would have to be fulfilled.

“He could just force me to return with him,” Theresa pointed out. “But he didn’t.”

“Hmm, that *is* odd,” Mary-Jane agreed.

“See? That’s why I’m so confused,” Theresa admitted, getting up and starting to pace the room herself while Mary-Jane had taken her seat yet again. “I really don’t know what he wants. Does he want to control me? If that’s all he wants, then why didn’t he exert control over me immediately and tell me to pack my belongings right then and there? I mean, he could have done it.”

“Yes, he could have,” Mary-Jane agreed yet again, not having anything else to say to that.

“Only, he didn’t,” Theresa continued. “He asked me to come back. You know, like someone he cares whether that other person would come back of

their own volition.”

“Well, the man does have his flaws, but I suppose we could say that it was kind of him not to force you into anything,” Mary-Jane stated, still sounding as confused as Theresa herself was. “Still, with that said, this one instance of kindness does not make him a good man. It does not clear him of what he has done over the past two years.”

“I know,” Theresa sighed, taking her seat again and crossing her hands in her lap.

“Just don’t let him convince you of anything,” Mary-Jane reminded her. “Stay true to yourself.”

“I’m really trying to,” Theresa nodded with a smile, remembering why she was here.

Devlin could come and speak to her. Of course, that was his right as her husband. But that was all he could do. He could not convince her of anything, not as long as she did not allow herself to be convinced. She constantly kept reminding herself that he didn’t care about her at all for the past two years. He shouldn’t start caring now, even if that was the case. They would continue to live their lives as they had so far.

“Well, then that’s settled,” Mary-Jane clapped her hands. “If he comes again, you remain adamant. You tell him you belong here, and that’s that.”

Theresa smiled, nodding again. Only, she feared that was easier said than done. However, she wisely kept that to herself as her friend continued to talk about the upcoming ball.

“Oh, I don’t know if I’m ready for balls yet,” Theresa admitted. “I don’t have a new gown, all the ones I have look worn out, and I just —”

“Splendid!” Mary-Jane exclaimed, having completely forgotten about their previous topic of conversation, unlike Theresa. “Then, we need to go shopping for a new gown! I could use one myself, you know. Maybe a new bonnet, too?”

“You really like shopping, don’t you?” Theresa chuckled, welcoming the change of subject to something far less strenuous.

Mary-Jane shrugged mischievously. “I like to think of it as reward for all the years I spent with that horrible man. Now, I have his money to dispose of as I wish. Karma, right?”

Once again, both ladies burst into a chuckle. Theresa remembered why she loved Mary-Jane so much. She was just so filled with buoyancy and life that

it was contagious. It spread all around her, like the warmth of the sunshine herself.

Theresa was the opposite in character. She preferred solitude, a good book, the silence of her garden, and the chirping of the birds. Events like balls made her anxious, especially here, being all alone. However, at the same time, there was a part of her that wanted to experience all of that. She wanted to live. She wanted to be happy. And rare was a person who could be happy constantly on their own. That was why she knew that she needed to open up to the world, and in turn, the world would open up to her as well.

“How about we go tomorrow?” Mary-Jane suggested, and at that moment, the door to the drawing burst open with Rosemary barging in.

“Going where?” she asked, curious, with her green eyes and fiery red hair floating in a long braid behind her. Her freckled cheeks only added to the mischievous look that seemed to accompany her everywhere she went.

“To purchase new gowns,” Mary-Jane explained, welcoming her daughter into an embrace as the little girl jumped into her mother’s lap.

Theresa’s heart immediately melted upon seeing them like that. Once, there was a time when she believed that she too would be holding a little child in her lap, whispering sweet words of undying love to him or her. But now, such a thing seemed as possible as the chance of a blossom in a hailstorm.

“May I come along?” Rosemary inquired politely.

“Would you like to?” her mother asked. “But we shan’t be finished very quickly. Auntie Theresa wants to purchase something, and I do as well, so it might take a while. If we agree to take you, I don’t want to hear you’re bored.”

“No,” the girl shook her head importantly. “I also wish to purchase a gown.” She said it with such an air of importance that all three girls burst into a boisterous chuckle. That meant the vote was unanimous.

Rosemary stayed with them for the rest of the time while Theresa was there, and at one point, they all bid one another goodbye as Theresa decided it was time to go home.

*Home*, she thought to herself as the carriage swayed gently though the cobbled streets of the city. She wondered if this place would ever feel like home. That old adage said that home was where one’s heart was, and Theresa was afraid to admit that maybe, just maybe, her heart was where her husband was.

What a terribly frightening thought to have...

## CHAPTER 6



*Y*ou really shouldn't be here, Devlin thought to himself.

Of course, he shouldn't. He was asking too much. It had been too long for him to demand anything of Theresa. Yet, here he was, sitting in his carriage in front of her house. He refused to call it a home, even in his mind, because she did not belong there. She belonged with him. Only, he could not quite appear on her doorstep and order her to come back. No. She had to do it of her own volition. That was the only way.

He inhaled deeply and exited the carriage. He proceeded to adjust his collar, wanting to look his best. He raked his fingers through his hair, pulling it backward, but a few stray curls refused to stay put. *Oh well.*

He knocked on the door and was welcomed by the same butler from the previous day.

“Your Grace,” the butler remembered him.

The butler had that old value system where even if he obviously disapproved of something or someone, he would obediently keep it to himself. But his eyes revealed everything. The man remembered how Devlin dismissed him and simply stated that he would wait for his mistress to return home in her library. As her husband, it was his right. The poor man, although protectively inclined, was powerless to do anything.

“Is Theresa home?” Devlin inquired politely, not wishing to antagonize the man because of the simple fact that he liked him. The question was a mere formality, for her carriage was parked in front of her house.

“She is,” the butler nodded with a slight bow of the head, closing his eyes for a second longer than usual as he did so. Everything about him was slow and measured as if he was in no rush to get anywhere and rather wished to get there safely instead. That made Devlin like the man even more. “But I’m afraid that Her Grace has a visitor.”

“A visitor?” Devlin exclaimed.

Was it possible that she already had a gentleman caller? Preposterous! She was a married woman. If she had a visitor, whoever that was, he was privy to that visit as well, being her husband.

“Yes, Your Grace,” the butler nodded once more. “So, if you’ll be so kind as to wait here, I shall let Her Grace know that you are here, and she will —”

“No such thing, old boy,” Devlin refused the offer, curiosity eating him up alive regarding this mysterious visitor.

*Who was it? And why was he here?* For some reason, it was immediately a man in Devlin’s mind. After all, his wife was a stunning woman. It shouldn’t come as a surprise that someone had already noticed her and deemed her worthy of their attention.

The thought boiled inside of him. Was he jealous? Damn right, he was! She was his wife, and he had half a mind to barge into that drawing room and give that scoundrel a piece of his mind, to explain to him the actual state of affairs.

However, Devlin tried to remain calm. Theresa didn’t know him that well yet. The last thing he wanted to do was make her think that he was some sort of animal who only knew how to sort out problems with his fists. Although the idea of planting a facer to a possible suitor brought him much joy. He actually grinned for a moment then turned his attention back to the butler.

“I shall see myself in,” he said then added a little white lie. “Theresa is expecting me.”



In a way, she was. He told her that their conversation wasn't over yet, and he meant it. The only nuance was that he didn't actually specify when he would be coming to see her again. *Ah, details. They are irrelevant.*

He passed by the butler before the poor man could say anything else and headed straight for the drawing room to his left from which he could already hear Theresa's chuckle. His jaw clenched. She was amused. Someone was entertaining her to such an extent that she was actually chuckling aloud.

He was planning on knocking — a small courtesy to give the man some time to prepare for the interruption that was bound to ensue. But now, hearing that pleased chuckle, he decided against it. Jealousy raged inside of him like a thunderstorm. He tried to calm himself down, but it was impossible. His heart drew images inside his mind of Theresa's hand in another man's, and her eyes gazing at that same man with devotion. Devlin's teeth gritted roughly at the thought.

He wanted her all to himself, no matter how hard he tried to convince himself that he didn't deserve her after what he had done. His heart, his body... they refused to listen to reason. Theresa was all he could think about as he grabbed the doorknob, turned it, and opened the door. The sight that awaited him was beyond shocking.

"Grandmother!?" he gasped as the two ladies looked at him with stunned expressions on both their faces.

“Ah, Devlin,” Veronica McClaire, the Dowager Duchess of Sutherland, replied cordially in her usual grand manner. “We weren’t expecting you.”

That was an understatement of the century. The trio remained in this stunned silence for a few moments longer, all eyes darting in all directions incredulously, until Theresa finally spoke.

“What are *you* doing here?” she demanded. She sounded annoyed, but truth be told, he didn’t really go about this in the right manner.

Still, he could not deny the feeling of relief on finding out that the visitor was no man but rather his own grandmother. Jealousy relinquished that grip it had on his heart and allowed him to breathe properly once more... if only for a short while.

He closed the door behind him and walked languidly over to the unoccupied sofa. That was where he took his seat, leaning back in a rather comfortable fashion, crossing his left foot over his right knee as if he had just returned home.

“I came to see my wife for tea,” he said as if that was the most expected thing in the world, and he was the one being shocked to have her ask him such a silly question. “A husband can do that, no?”

“You forget one thing,” she said, her cheeks flaring up instantly which he loved — even more so because he knew he was the cause of it. “We are not husband and wife anymore.”

“We shall see about that,” he replied confidently, glancing at the table which only housed two teacups. “Would you be so kind as to call for more tea, please? I am parched.”

He stared at her dead in the eyes. He knew that, if they were alone, she would probably tell him exactly where he could go and never come back. But his grandmother was here, and Theresa was a very polite person. She would never have an argument in front of someone.

Devlin was aware that he knew very little about his wife, but there were certain things one could conclude within seconds of meeting someone. For instance, whether someone was prone to dramatic outbursts or not or if one was cautious regarding what they said in public and in front of others, even if those others were technically considered family. Still, what they had to say to each other was for their ears alone. He was certain of that, and he was more than happy to seize the chance of controlling the situation as he saw fit.

“Fine,” Theresa said through clenched teeth, going over to the bell which hung right by the door and pulling it twice to signal for one of the servants to come. “You may join us for tea.”

He grinned. He liked that *may* part. It only proved his point that he was in utter control here even though she was squirming on the hook, trying to show herself as the one allowing and forbidding things. That was fine by him. He was actually having more fun than he thought he would.

“Thank you kindly,” he said with a content smirk. Then, he gestured at his grandmother. “But I interrupted you ladies for which I am very sorry. By all means, continue your conversation.”

Once again, Theresa shot him an icy glare that held a million words in it, words she would never say in front of his grandmother. Instead, she turned to the old lady and inhaled deeply as if the weight of the world was upon her shoulders.

“As I was saying before we were so *rudely* interrupted,” she continued, accentuating that one word which was aimed at him, “I found out about this house from a recommendation from a friend, and I have to say that I am rather pleased with it. In fact, I can see myself here for a very long time.”

She stole another glance in his direction — yet another not so secret message which was meant to be proof that she would not be returning with him. He smiled. She thought that would deter him from his plan while in fact, it had the exact opposite effect. He only became more adamant to convince her that she didn't belong here, alone. But obviously, he would need to put some effort into it, something he was no stranger to.

After all, this was entirely his fault. He could not deny that even if he wanted to. The moment his eyes befell her, he knew that he would come to love this woman very soon if he continued to be around her. That was dangerous. After the tragic death of his parents and both his sisters in a fire that burned down his home, Devlin vowed he would never love again. How could he when his heart was already broken? And this marriage was merely a promise he had made to his dying grandfather. That was why staying away from Theresa for the sake of his own sanity was imperative.

But no matter how far away he was from her, he always carried her in his mind, so it was as if they were never apart. Moreover, playing this game was proving to be rather amusing. He had no idea this initially timid seeming creature had such fire in her. He wondered what else she was hiding beneath that prim and proper wallflower persona. He was hellishly curious about her and promised himself he would find out, no matter what.



“... alone... balls... spent time... careful...” Theresa was barely listening to this sweet old lady offering advice on what it was like to be a woman living alone in London. Theresa appreciated it, but she could barely focus on anything other than Devlin’s gaze which was burning a hole in her cheek.

*Why is he here, just sitting and listening to our conversation? What is he hoping to find out?* she wondered, but she could not find the answers to any of those questions.

Even worse, she realized something. She was not only annoyed and angry, but there was something else, something that had been slumbering for the past two years, and now, it was awakening again. The effect he had on her was not something she expected. She wanted him gone. She wanted him to leave her alone to live her life. But at the same time, the fact that he was here, asking her to come back, titillated her in ways she refused to admit even to herself.

The truth was, he didn't deserve her attention, and yet, he had it. He had all of it which unnerved her. Worst of all, he knew it. That smug grin on his face proved it. He knew what he was doing to her, and he liked it. *Ugh!*

"... I do believe that. Wouldn't you agree, dearie?" the Dowager asked, and much to her embarrassment, Theresa realized that she had absolutely no idea what this sweet old lady was saying.

"Oh..." she mumbled, grabbing the teacup as means of protection. "Absolutely. Most certainly. Yes."

She was sure that the old woman knew exactly what was going on, and she chose not to say anything. Instead, she just smiled, placed down her own teacup, and announced that she would be leaving.

"I feel a headache coming on, and I would like to head home and lie down a little," the Dowager explained as she stood up and headed towards Theresa.

Theresa jumped up from her seat, taking the old lady's hand respectfully. "It was so lovely of you to come and check on me," Theresa said gratefully.

"I was in the neighborhood, dearie," the Dowager hinted. "I could not very well pass you by. It has been such a long time since I've seen you last."

"It *has* been, hasn't it?" Theresa smiled then glanced at Devlin inquisitively.

Her gaze urged, *Why are you still here?*

His casual grin assured her that he knew exactly what she was silently asking him. His response was a resolved, *I'm here to drink my tea, silly.*

Then, he brought the teacup to his lips and took a long, satisfied sip, refusing to look away from her, even for a moment.

"I'll walk you out, Your Grace," Theresa suggested and immediately started to take the old lady towards the door, but she was prevented in that endeavor.

"Oh, no, no," the Dowager shook her head, patting Theresa's hand tenderly. "I shall find my own way out. It was so lovely to see you, Theresa my dear." Then, she turned her attention to her grandson. "And I shall see you later,

Devlin.”

He nodded with a loving smile. That was something that had absolutely no pretense in it, and Theresa could immediately tell that they had a very close relationship. Still, that did not allow him to do whatever he pleased, whether or not he was in the presence of this sweet old lady or not.

They both waited until the moment the doors closed behind the Dowager then Theresa boldly stared at him.

“Well?” she asked, expecting him to leave.

“Well, what?” he replied, obviously with the intention to tease her.

*Ugh!* Her mind exclaimed silently, but on the surface, she wanted to remain as calm as she could be. She watched as he took another sip of his tea, clicking his tongue against his upper teeth with apparent satisfaction. It was evident that he had no intention of leaving. That left her with only one choice.

“If you want to stay here, I cannot force you out,” she said, hoping that she finally found a way to outdo him and show him that she had won. “But I don’t have to be in the same room as you either.”



With those words, she turned around on her heels and headed out of the drawing room, going straight to the library. She couldn't hide her confident smirk. He would get the hint, and he would be gone.

Only... she wasn't certain she truly wanted that.

## CHAPTER 7



*H*e watched her leave, and he couldn't believe it. She left him alone in the drawing room, thinking that he wouldn't follow her.

He almost chuckled aloud at the thought. It was like a game they were both playing, and little by little, it was becoming clear to them both that now, they were playing it not to win but rather just to play it — because he could have easily ordered her to come back with him, or even simpler yet, he could have just returned without her, continuing to live as they had been so far. But that was out of the question.

He waited until he could no longer hear her footsteps then he stood up and followed. He would try a different strategy now. He would no longer ask her anything. He would merely be here. Just that and nothing else.

When he exited the drawing room, he heard her footsteps to the right of the room. There, he noticed a large stairwell. He listened intently when he heard something heavy drop to the floor above him. He grinned. He knew where

she was, for he had been in that room already.

He climbed up the stairs without any rush and followed her into the library. The door was open, and he couldn't help but wonder whether it was a silent invitation for him to follow her. It would not be the first time that a woman was sending mixed signals. But to be quite honest, he could have been accused of the same crime, so they were the same in this respect. Not that he would ever admit to it aloud.

She was with her back to him, bending over a trunk that seemed to be filled with books. He walked over to her and stood by her side. He watched her place a book on the shelf then another one. She pretended not to notice him.

“Are you putting them in some particular order?” he asked, bending down himself and extracting the first book that he could.

She turned to him, a puzzled look on her face. He knew what she was thinking. She was expecting him to talk about the same thing all over again, to ask her to come back. But he had no such plans. Instead, he grinned amusedly.

“If you can't beat them, join them, right?” he asked, and the moment he did so, she burst into an amused chuckle, shaking her head and playfully swatting him with a book.

“Ouch!” He made a bigger deal out of it, wanting to keep her smiling which he managed to do successfully.

In fact, they spent the following minute or so chuckling at what just happened as he handed her books which she then proceeded to place gently on the shelves. He watched her fingers gently grip at the leather-bound tomes, and he suddenly remembered that this was one of her favorite pastimes: reading.

Suddenly, seeing her like that, happy and unburdened, he wanted to know everything there was to know about this charming woman. He wanted to know what made her smile so brightly that her eyes sparkled and also, what made her sad.

“You’ve got quite a collection,” he pointed out.

“They were mostly my mother’s,” she said without looking at him, but from the way she was talking, he was certain that she was still smiling. That thought made him glad. “I thought that my father would want to keep them. You know, something to remember Mother by, but he was more than happy to let me have them. I don’t know if that makes me happy or sad.”

“Why sad?” he asked, truly curious about her thinking.

She shrugged, turning to him. “Doesn’t he want as many things to remember

Mother by?”

“Why?” he asked again, hoping that he could provide her with the answer she obviously needed. “I can tell you like books, but they are just items that you give value and meaning to. Without it, they are merely objects, and objects as they are carry no memories. Therefore, it is you who decides what makes you remember someone, and it seems to me that your father doesn’t need books or anything else to remember the woman he loved.”

She thought about it for a moment then she smiled. It was as if the sun itself managed to squeeze into the room through the windows, and it was shining with all its might now, straight at him with its rays caressing his cheeks and filling his soul with warmth. It was one of those rare, precious moments that he had so little of in his life.

“Thank you,” she said softly, that smile still lingering on her beautiful face, “for those words.”

He smiled back. “Sometimes, it is difficult to see the other person’s point of view when we are clouded by our own judgment.”

“You’re right,” she nodded, taking another book and proceeding with the task at hand, occasionally stopping to look whether she liked the order she had created. “I just miss her so much sometimes.”

“If she is still in your heart, that means she is never truly gone,” he pointed out, incredulous that he was saying all these clichés, but the truth was, he wanted to make her feel better. And clichés were not such a bad thing after all. They made sense. They warmed the soul. They were true. Otherwise, they would not be clichés at all.

She seemed surprised at these last words. “You know, I never thought you were like this.”

“Like what?” he asked inquisitively.

“This... thoughtful,” she admitted, slightly blushing upon those words.

“Usually I’m not,” he laughed, wanting to create some much-needed distance between them because things were becoming a little too intimate. He wasn’t planning on that. He was losing control, and it was all because of her smile. “Usually, I’m a villain.”

“Yes, that is what I’ve heard,” she teased.

“In every rumor, there is a bit of truth,” he admitted. “But only a bit. That is why they say truth is stranger than fiction.”

He handed her a book, and as she reached for it, she accidentally brushed her fingers against his. The touch was so unexpected and thrilling that he almost dropped the book. She felt so soft to the touch, so delicate. He suddenly wanted to protect her from the whole world.

“So, you are more wicked than they say?” she asked, gazing at him with the book safely in her hands now.

“Or less,” he shrugged. “It depends on one’s point of view.”

When he bent down for the next book, he recognized it immediately. “Well, what do we have here?” he asked, and the moment she noticed what he was holding, she blushed a poppy red.

She was caught, red-handed.



She knew that book. He also knew it. How could he not? After all, she stole it from *his* library, and she didn’t even know why she did it.

Maybe it was to spite him? Or maybe, it was to have something of his when she left his home, something to remember him by?

To be quite honest, she had all but forgotten about it until he found it in the trunk with the others. Now, they both knew.

“This book seems familiar,” he said, turning it around in his hand, inspecting it closely. She wondered if he would accuse her of taking it.

“Perhaps because you’ve read it before?” she shrugged indifferently, adamant not to let him trick her into a confession.

He chuckled. “I most certainly have. In fact, I liked it so much that I bought a copy of it for myself. The same edition, actually.”

“It’s a nice edition,” she added without the slightest tone of apology in her voice. “That’s why I purchased it myself.”

A lie. A blatant lie, but it was better than admitting the truth that she took it from him. If she would burn in hell for stealing a book, so be it. She was willing to take that risk.

“Really?” he asked, opening the book and looking at the first page.

*Good Lord!* she thought to herself. *Was there an inscription?*



He leafed through the first several pages then he closed it again. Her heart was beating like mad, and she had no idea whether that was because of the book and her being exposed as a book thief or simply his presence and nearness. Whatever it was, she could not pacify herself, even if her life depended on it.

“A good edition indeed,” he nodded, handing her the book with a self-explanatory nod.

She grabbed it from his hands and slid it with the others, hoping that would be the end of it.

“Would that be the only book you took from my library?” he inquired, handing her another one.

How could he even ask her such a thing? There was only that one. And she didn't even know why she took it. What a silly, silly thing to do!

“This is not *your* book, I told you,” she said through clenched teeth.

She felt heat rise in her cheeks. She was no good at lying. She was never any good for the simple fact that she never needed to lie to anyone. Now, it was imperative. She almost felt as if her life depended on it.

“It most certainly is,” he said calmly, even amusedly, “and it’s fine. I just want to know why. If you had asked me to give it to you, I would have done so, gladly. Was it the thrill of stealing?” he teased.

“I have never stolen anything in my life!” she gasped.

*Just this book, that little voice reminded her. Vile, wretched voice, curse it for always speaking the truth.*

“I told you, it’s fine,” he chuckled, and they both realized that the magic of the moment was somehow lost.

It was obvious that he didn’t mind her having taken the book, but he just accused her of stealing. Whether or not that was the truth, it was still rather ungentlemanly of him.

“And I told you it’s not *your* book,” she repeated, almost hoping that if she said it enough times, it would somehow, magically become the truth. It would be her book while his would still be resting on his bookshelf, waiting for him to prove her right.

He was standing so close to her now that she could almost feel his breath spill over her lips. Her entire body was titillated by his presence. Yes, she wanted him gone, but she wanted him here more than anything else. And that desire

was dangerous. It was risky. She had to fight it, to completely banish it from her mind.

“Sometimes, we say things we don’t mean,” he reminded her of something she knew well.

“And sometimes we say *mean* things,” she snarled back, not really that angry but rather frightened that if he remained here any longer, she would succumb to her desires and kiss him. It was a desire that would slowly creep up on her and take her by complete surprise. It was a fear that if he continued to gaze into her eyes, he would see exactly how she felt about him, and he would know everything. The thought strangely thrilled her and petrified her at the same time.

He was right about everything, but she couldn’t let him know that. She had to fight him because the alternative was something that would lead to a path where she would end up hurt.

Unexpectedly, he reached for her face. She didn’t flinch. She didn’t even move as he pushed a stray curl behind her ear. Her heart was beating so wildly that it threatened to jump out of her chest. She had to remind herself to breathe steadily as their gazes locked with neither of them willing to look away first.

“I think you’re done with your tea now,” she reminded him that the only

reason he was here was to have tea with his wife. Teatime was finished.

She could see something in his eyes, something she could not quite decipher. She wondered what it was. But he didn't say anything to that. Instead, he respectfully took a step back, pulling his hand away from her as if touching just her hair scorched him.

His charcoal black hair stood in stark contrast to his sky-blue eyes which wanted to pierce through her very soul and gaze into the darkest, most concealed corners of her mind and heart. She could not but pay attention to how everything about him was perfect. His waistcoat was made of silk, and there was an intricate pattern in yellow and green. His cravat, a pale yellow, to match the waistcoat, had an embroidered golden lion's head, a symbol of elegance and style.

“As you wish,” he said, bowing, and a moment later, he was gone. Just like that.

Theresa was breathing heavily, her hand pressed to her chest. It took her a while to regain composure, knowing that she did not handle that situation well. In fact, she had no idea at all how to act around him. He made her angry and delighted at the same time, and the confusion regarding which sensation to give into was too much to handle.

She glanced at the trunk with books. She would not be ordering the rest of

them today. She could not. She needed to rest not only her body but her mind and racing heart as well. Perhaps some creamed ice would soothe the unusual yearning inside her soul. After all, that was what she and her sister would indulge in at times when they didn't know what to do or how to act.

That little rush of flavor didn't help them solve any of their problems, but at least they were lost in the bliss of taste for a little while. That would be enough for now.

## CHAPTER 8



“*I*t’s very simple, old boy,” Harrison Ritchie, the Earl of Lindburgh said while the two men were seated comfortably at their usual table at White’s. “You shouldn’t have left your wife alone.”

Devlin frowned. “That isn’t the advice I expected of you.”

Harrison laughed with the animation of a lad who had just won in his favorite game. A perpetual bachelor who vowed never to marry, he was now advising his best friend to turn to his wife and find a way to bring her back. Devlin thought that everyone had gotten mad.

“You mean, I’m not telling you what you want to hear,” Harrison corrected himself. “That’s different.”

Devlin was still frowning as he watched his friend take a sip from his glass then place it down onto the table that separated them. This had always been

their comfortable space, every time he was in town. Devlin did not care much for the elegant and expensive furnishings, but he did like the fact that White's members boasted some of the most influential and powerful men of their day and age. That meant that numerous business connections could easily be made within these four walls, a rather important benefit for someone in both Devlin and Harrison's shoes. However, today, the two friends were here solely for the purpose of speaking to each other.

"You know I cannot get emotionally attached to my wife," Devlin reminded him. "That is why we separated in the first place."

"But you didn't explain it to her," Harrison pointed out, leaning in his leather chair and holding a cigar in his left hand. Devlin was not keen on smoking, but Harrison was.

"Of course not," Devlin scoffed. "It would have made everything unnecessarily complicated. Why would I want that?"

"Because a mind runs wild when it doesn't have all the information it needs to make sense of something," his friend reminded him. "We all do that."

"Even you?" Devlin teased.

"Not me, old chap," Harrison shook his head, taking a puff of his cigar then

exhaling slowly with much pleasure. “I don’t tend to overthink things for the simple reason that I don’t get attached to a woman. I am very open regarding what I am willing or not willing to offer them. It is a simple matter, so take it or leave it,” he shrugged.

Devlin couldn’t help but chuckle. “You make it sound so easy.”

“It is,” Harrison nodded. “Marriage only complicates lives. But since you’ve already complicated yours, maybe you should come up with a way to simplify it... for the sake of both of you.”

“I thought that would be best for both of us, not just me,” Devlin said with a heavy sigh. “Every wife in the ton wanted her husband to leave her alone, right?”

“Don’t be a dunce.” Harrison’s brows knitted in displeasure. “Don’t generalize women like that.”

Devlin was surprised that as someone who tended to see women as nothing more than tools for instant gratification, Harrison respected them enough not to generalize them.

“Your wife is obviously not like the other women in the ton,” Harrison pointed out more calmly now, “so you shouldn’t treat her as one. Besides,



you left her alone for two whole years. I mean... seriously?"

Devlin didn't say anything to that. He had no explanation, nothing he could say on his own behalf, because he felt that same cold talon of fear gripping at his throat. It was the same as before, that same feeling of being overwhelmed by desire for this woman when he promised himself that he would never become close to anyone again.

"Then, you come to her, asking her to come back, and you're surprised she doesn't want to speak to you, let alone come back with you. Devlin... old boy... just put yourself in her shoes."

Devlin had to admit that Harrison was right. In fact, he always seemed to be right. It was an astonishing feat. He always knew what to say and how to make someone see another person's point of view therefore easily ending an argument in the best manner possible.

Knowing that his friend was right did not make things easier for Devlin. On the contrary, he seemed to be at his wit's end. He needed her to come back with him to their home. Only, he didn't really say it in those exact words. He didn't say *need*. He said *should* or whatever other word he used that didn't really convey the truth.

Besides, what *was* the truth? He had no idea himself. He didn't really know what he wanted. He both wanted her away from him, and he wanted her by

his side. The scales would occasionally tip to one side, and he would be convinced that staying apart from each other was the right path for them both. Then, the scales would tip to the opposite side, and he would feel that desperate need to have her with him and to spend his life with her as a real husband and wife ought to.

“I messed up,” Devlin finally admitted, raking his fingers through his hair. “I messed up badly.”

Harrison nodded, with a satisfied grin. “You did. Glad to hear you admit it. Now, we can move onto actually solving this predicament.”

“But she doesn’t want to come back with me,” Devlin frowned. “She’s told me so already. What else can I do? I cannot force her to come with me.”

“No, no, no,” Harrison was quick to shake his head. “That is the exact opposite of what you need to do, old boy.” He paused for a moment, staring right at Devlin, then he continued, “You need to woo your wife.”

“Woo her?” Devlin exclaimed so loudly that the three men at the adjacent table turned to look at them in surprise. Devlin waved at them awkwardly to which they nodded and continued with their own conversation, leaving Devin to focus on his own.

“Don’t tell me you forgot the meaning of that word,” Harrison teased. “You know: do romantic gestures, bring her flowers, take her for a stroll, write a poem. That sort of thing.”

“Write a poem?” Devlin’s forehead wrinkled up in displeasure. “I don’t think I can do that.”

“That was just a thought,” Harrison smiled. “You know the lady. You know what she would like. So, you go and do *that*.”

“But that’s exactly it,” Devlin sighed heavily. “I don’t know her that well. I’ve lost these two years I could have used to get to know her.”

“Now, you start from the beginning then,” Harrison explained simply. “What does she like to do?”

“She likes to read,” Devlin remembered. “She even stole a book from my library and brought it here with her.”

“I see,” Harrison pointed out knowingly. “That’s a good sign. Maybe she wanted something of yours with her. That means you’ve got very good chances of wooing her.”

“I don’t think I reacted well with the book,” Devlin admitted, remembering how she asked him to leave when he was one moment away from kissing her.

Her lips were parted as if words always dwelled on them, but more often than not, she was unwilling to reveal her thoughts to the world. He never used to pay much attention to what women around him wore, but with Theresa, every detail was memorable, even the way the hems of her gown swirled around her ankles like the tail of a mermaid. For that was who she was, an immortal creature who had graced him with her presence, and he was a fool not to see her for who she really was sooner.

“Don’t dwell on the past, old boy,” Harrison advised in a sage-like manner. After all, if anyone knew anything about courting women, it was Harrison. “Look to the future, and act in the present.”

“So, should I get her a book then?” Devlin asked.

“It would seem she already has one from you,” Harrison teased. “No. Maybe flowers? Do you know her favorite?”

Devlin thought about it for a moment. “No, but I could ask Grandmother. She spoke to Theresa more than I have. Maybe she mentioned something to her.”

“Ask,” Harrison instructed. “That will be your first step in earning your

wife's trust again because, let's face it, she's lost it. And there is no love without trust... and respect."

Devlin tilted his head a little to the side, surprised at his friend's deep insight on the matters of the heart. "For a sworn bachelor, you know a lot about love."

"I know a lot about it, so I can avoid it," Harrison laughed which immediately made Devlin chuckle as well. He loved how his friend never took anything at face value. There were always two sides to every story, and Harrison was not quick to jump to any conclusions. That made him a good friend, one Devlin could always rely on, especially in situations such as this one.

"Now, what you need to do is earn her trust again and show her that you are worthy of her love," Harrison continued. "Then, once you've made this promise, you must vow never to break her heart again. Because from what you've told me, she isn't like other women, Devlin. There is something special about her, and you know it. Otherwise, you wouldn't be here."

Devlin had to admit that his friend was once again right. These past two years were a haunting loneliness of thinking about her but keeping to himself because he knew what her presence in his life would mean. He wasn't ready for love. Yet... here he was, unable to stop thinking about her.

“I know that she’s never been mine to begin with, but I... I want her back,” he finally admitted.

“Why?” Harrison asked a very simple but effective question.

Devlin had to think about it for a moment. Was it his own ego? Was it that he cared about *the ton* talking about his wife being in London alone? Or was it something else, something he was unable to admit to himself, let alone to someone else?

“I wronged her,” Devlin said although he knew that wasn’t the whole truth.

Harrison lifted an eyebrow. “I didn’t ask you that. We both know that you wronged this woman. But why do you want her back?”

“Because she is my wife.”

“She’s been your wife for the past two years, and living apart was not an issue for you,” Harrison reminded him.

*Damn him and his introspective ways,* Devlin thought to himself amusedly. He was never able to hide anything from this man. He knew him too well.

“Maybe because I feel... things for her.”

“Things?” Harrison tilted his head, urging him to continue.

“Yes, things,” Devlin snorted, resisting the urge to chuckle. It was a difficult conversation, but he wouldn’t have it with anyone else.

“Things like?” Harrison continued, and this time, the corner of his lips danced in a half-smile.

“You know very well what I mean when I say things,” Devlin pouted like a little boy, and he didn’t care one bit.

“Do *you* know what you mean?” Harrison asked mysteriously, enjoying every minute of this, “Sometimes, it is easier to say loudly what we want. It clarifies a lot of the fog in our minds.”

Devlin actually thought that could be right, so he tried it.

“I think I fell in love with her that day when we married,” Devlin finally admitted. “Up until now, there was no fear of losing her. But in London, she could meet someone else, and... I don’t want that.”

“Good,” Harrison finally nodded, satisfied with the conclusion they’d reached together. “Are you willing to do whatever is necessary?” Harrison continued with his probing questions. “Are you willing to commit yourself to her fully? Because she doesn’t deserve another heartbreak.”

Devlin thought about it for a moment. His mind was washed over by the memory of her sweet face, how beautiful and adorable she looked when she was angry, how flushed her cheeks were, and how full and luscious her lips were that he wanted to kiss so badly. He realized a simple truth: he would do anything to have her return home. It was as straightforward as that.

“So, I need to be prince charming?” Devlin joked, trying to ease the storm inside his own mind and heart. Sometimes, hiding behind a joke was the safest thing a man could do, but Harrison could see right through him.

“The most charming of all princes,” Harrison nodded. “But at the same time, you need to be yourself. A woman like that will know if you’re pretending to be someone you’re not.”

Devlin nodded. Of course, she would notice. With her, he never knew where he stood. At one point, he was in control; at another, it was her holding the reins. But at the same time, he could not deny having so much fun with her. In fact, he relished her company to such an extent that he did not wish to leave every time he was in her presence.



But he felt that they shared one common trait. They were both afraid of opening up to each other. He could see that emotion, that fear mirroring in her own eyes as he gazed at her. He knew that look. He knew what it meant. All he needed to do now was prove to her that he wasn't the horrible husband she thought him to be. He needed to show her there was more to him than this cold man who pushed her away at a moment when she needed him the most, being alone in a new home and new city without her father and sister.

He inhaled deeply, deciding that he had spoken about her enough. He wanted a distraction, so he asked Harrison about his latest business deal, news which Harrison was more than happy to discuss. The two men spent the next two hours pleasantly as always after which Devlin returned to his London residence, determined to find out what Theresa's favorite flowers were.

It was a silly start, but a start nonetheless, one that would hopefully lead him to the accomplishment of his goal.

## CHAPTER 9



*All right, old boy. There's nothing to it. You just give her the flowers. That's it.*

Devlin kept repeating these words in his mind over and over again until he couldn't listen to the sound of his own inner voice any longer. He felt so silly, almost downright ridiculous, as he stood in the parlor, holding a bouquet of Canterbury Bells which his Grandmother had told him were Theresa's favorite flowers.

He was actually a bit annoyed with himself, for he could have figured this out on his own without his grandmother's help because these flowers were used in their wedding as decoration. Theresa had specifically asked for them. But Devlin himself was too focused on sulking to think about anyone else but himself.

He inhaled deeply as he turned around the parlor, waiting for the butler to inform Theresa that he was here. It was a bit silly to have to announce oneself

to one's own wife, but he quickly remembered why it was so. Before he could scold himself silently again, the door opened.

“Devlin?” Theresa called out to him, looking ravishing in a gown the color of sunlight. In fact, upon her arrival, Devlin truly felt that the sun itself had graced him with its presence, and now, the entire chamber had become illuminated by a soft, effervescent glow that glistened all around them.

“Uhm, these are for you,” he said without a proper greeting, offering her the flowers.

Her eyes widened upon seeing them. Much to her surprise, she smiled upon accepting them. “Canterbury Bells,” she gushed, burying her nose in the bouquet and inhaling with evident pleasure. “You remembered they were my favorite.”

Devlin wanted to bite his own tongue. All he needed to do was nod, and she would have been none the wiser. But something inside urged him to be truthful with her. If they were to have a real marriage somewhere down the line, they needed to be honest with each other, even if it was about something as small as this.

“I have to admit that wasn't the case,” he said, this confession feeling like a stab in the heart. “Grandmother told me.”

*Well, you just ruined it. You didn't even start properly, and it's all over now.*

That little voice inside his head assured him that she would be upset over this. She might not show it, but she would hold it against him that he didn't remember it himself when he was supposed to.

However, her reaction surprised him. She smiled at his words.

"I always appreciate an honest answer," she told him, gripping at the flowers with her dainty fingers. "They're beautiful. Thank you."

*Maybe, all's not ruined,* he thought to himself with much joy.

He smiled back at her. "You are very welcome."

"I shall just go and have one of the servants put them in a nice vase," she informed him, and before he could say anything, she disappeared from the parlor, leaving him alone.

He raked his fingers through his hair, feeling nervous. This action felt dismissive. She liked the flowers, she thanked him for them, and now, when she returned, she would be bidding him goodbye. That's what it sounded like. He had to think of something to ask her, something to talk to her about. But

what?

The truth was, he had so many questions for her — so many *personal* questions which she would probably not be willing to answer. He could not blame her for it, but he was here now, and there was nowhere else he'd rather be. He had to have faith that the right words would come to him at the right time.

A few moments later, Theresa returned with the flowers in an elongated vase, adorned with blue streaks and curls that enveloped the entire outer side of the vase with the edges colored in a much more striking blue than the rest of it.

“I found this vase here when I moved in,” she explained, placing it on a small table by the window, pulling away, taking a closer look, then centering it more, so that the vase was now even closer to the window. Then, she rested her hands on her hips and seemed satisfied with the location. She turned to him for the following words. “I suppose the owners won't mind I borrowed it.”

“I'll buy you a new vase,” he blurted out. “A nicer one.”

It was such a silly thing to say. It made no sense. But he was cursed with only nonsensical thoughts swarming inside his mind right now. And it seemed the more reasonable he wanted to sound, the more his own thoughts sabotaged him in this endeavor.

“I don’t have any more flowers,” she said with an amused smile.

“I’ll buy you more flowers as well.” Once again, his tongue was faster than his mind, racing to talk to her about anything. “I’ll buy you any flowers you want. We’ll fill the whole room with them!”

This time, she burst into a melodious chuckle. He felt like a little boy, trying to impress his governess, so she would stay and never leave. Only, he wanted the opposite here. He wanted Theresa to come with him and never leave. But if he told her that, it would only frighten her away even more.

“That is very kind of you, but wouldn’t that be a little excessive?” she asked, and it was obvious that she wasn’t taking him seriously. Well, he would take whatever he could get and slowly build from there. “To be honest, I like flowers best when they are in a garden.”

“I have a wonderful garden,” he reminded her, quick on his feet. “Back home.” He wanted to say at *our* home, but he didn’t want to cross any lines that might push her away from him. He needed to take things slowly.

“I remember,” she nodded, somehow wistfully which made him sad. Could it be that she wanted to stay there before with him, and now, he was too late asking that of her?

*No!* he ordered himself not to think in such a defeatist manner. He knew why he had come here, and he would not rest until that goal was met.

“The garden here is very small,” she continued, walking over to the window and glancing outside equally sadly as if she yearned for more of it to fill her days.

He couldn’t see the garden. He didn’t want to look at any flowers or shrubbery. All he wanted to do was look at her, all day and all night long. “I feel bad plucking flowers from it and selfishly keeping them in a vase inside, only for them to wither.”

Unexpectedly, the clock on the wall chimed. They both turned to it, somehow desperate for the intrusion in their conversation which didn’t seem to make much sense, but it was exactly that triviality which allowed them to be at ease together, alone. He knew it was far too soon to talk about anything of importance. Conversations about gardens and chambers filled with flowers were the safest for the time being.

“Oh, it is almost dinner time,” she mused, more to herself, but he could still hear her.

He wondered if that was his sign to leave and if she wanted him to leave of his own accord. It probably was. But he didn’t want to. With his hat still in his hands, wringing it nervously, he could suddenly hear her ask.

“Well... why don’t you stay for dinner then?” Her voice was gentle but determined, not as if she had just decided upon this now but rather as if it was the result of long and ponderous thinking. Then, she quickly added, just to assure his understanding of the exact reason why he was being offered this. “I could tell you all about the town gossip that you’ve missed hearing about.”

He nodded with a satisfied chuckle. He couldn’t care less about any of the gossip, but if that was the price of having dinner with Theresa, so be it.



“I’m grateful to have my best friend here, so close,” Theresa informed him as they watched the servants place all of the food on the table before them.

She wasn’t particularly hungry, and to be quite honest, she would have been perfectly content skipping dinner altogether, but she felt that it would have been rude to Devlin to do so. After all, he had come to her, bringing flowers. She knew she shouldn’t succumb to any sudden onslaught of tenderness for him, but it was impossible not to do so.

Just seeing him made her heart flutter, and she knew what the reason for that was. She wasn’t indifferent towards him. Even worse, she was infatuated with him. The effect he had on her was evident in every aspect of her being. Her breathing would hasten. Her cheeks would flush barely noticeably. Her blood would start coursing through her veins hurriedly as if in a rush to actually get somewhere. The thought almost made her chuckle aloud.



“One shouldn’t be alone,” he agreed, bringing her back to the present moment once the servants had set up the entire table, and now, they retreated from the dining chamber, leaving them alone.

The thought of being all alone with him in the darkness brought a sudden color to her cheekbones yet again. Thoughts, which were subdued with his absence, were now a thousand times more fervent than before, simply because he was here, seated opposite her at the table. What was even worse, she knew why he was here. He wanted to bring her back with him. But... why? She still couldn’t understand that. What was the point?

“Why not?” she shrugged, taking a sip from her cup. “There is a difference between loneliness and being alone.”

He didn’t immediately respond to that. He looked at her, and with each passing moment, she felt that her emotions fell deeper and deeper into this whirlwind which she had been fighting so hard to avoid.

“Do you like being alone?” he asked, curious, as if there was no hidden meaning to his question.

“As a matter of fact, I do,” she nodded. “One gets used to it after a while.” She didn’t mean to say it aloud. She bit her lip, but it was too late. The words were already out, poisoning the air between them.

“I understand,” he nodded, the weight of her words falling right onto him. “That is on me.”

He hadn't touched the food yet, and neither had she. Somehow, she suspected that he suffered from the same lack of appetite as she did, but then again, why was he still here? Was it really because he wanted her back so much? The thought made her heart feel like a butterfly in a blossoming garden, unable to stand still. But it was dangerous to entertain this emotion.

“No, I don't think it's a bad thing at all,” she corrected him. “I think it is necessary for us to learn to be alone with ourselves and our own thoughts. That is how we learn to accept and love ourselves. And that is crucial, because if we don't love ourselves, how can we love someone else?”

He smiled at those words. She wondered why. It wasn't funny or amusing. It was actually quite serious, but at the same time, she welcomed his smile. It soothed her in ways she didn't even know she could be soothed.

“See, my best friend, she only learned how to truly love herself then she became a widow and was left to take care of her own daughter,” Theresa added.

Theresa didn't want to go into too much detail although Mary-Jane's fate was more or less known in all of London. The *ton* loved other people's misery,

and they would always retell it to everyone they knew. That was, after all, how gossip was constantly kept alive because people would keep adding to it, and by the time the last person heard it, it was never the same story as when it started.

“Your friend is fortunate to have you,” he pointed out.

Theresa wasn't expecting such a turn, so she smiled. “We are both fortunate to have each other. Her presence in my life has been a safe harbor in times of hardship. Not only that, but she is a rather amusing woman,” Theresa added, wanting to change the melancholy direction in which this conversation was going.

“I do not believe I've had the pleasure of speaking to her, other than being introduced to her during our... wedding.”

“Yes,” she smiled, but she was equally titillated by the word. “Well, she herself has decided that she would not be marrying again — that marriage is nothing but a pain in the neck.”

He laughed at those words. “Is it now?” he pondered amusedly.

She shrugged. “I am merely saying what she herself has told me.”

“Do *you* think marriage is a pain in the neck?” he asked, tilting his head a little. She tried not to think how handsome he was, especially now, with his eyes focused so intently on hers.

“Hmm,” she pretended to think. “I can’t say I truly know what it is to be married. I’ve only had a little taste.”

It was exactly then that she realized what she said. The word sounded utterly ambiguous, and he could infer from it something that wasn’t there. Or was, but not so much. Or maybe yes, a lot. *Oh goodness!* Her mind was a mess. It knew exactly why it used that word. She had a little taste, and now, she wanted more.

Quickly, she grabbed her fork and dipped into the fowl that rested on a big silver platter, waiting. She placed it onto her plate and started to cut quickly, taking a bite. Chewing seemed to be more difficult than usual, especially under his watchful gaze, but it gave her a plausible reason to be quiet.

“So, how is it?” he asked, not taking his eyes off of her.

“Well, we’ve only spent a few hours together on our wedding day, and I honestly cannot say how —”

“The meat, Theresa,” he cut her off, grinning at her mischievously. He, too,

knew exactly what he was doing. He knew it very well.

“Oh, the meat... yes,” Theresa nodded, swallowing as quickly as she could. “It is very delicious. You should have some.”

He nodded with a wicked gleam in his eyes. “Don’t mind if I do.”

Theresa had no idea how their conversation took such a sudden turn and so unexpectedly, but she welcomed it. She didn’t want them to remember the past two years. Against all better judgment, she was enjoying herself with him. She didn’t want him to go home.

But then... what was left for him to do?

## CHAPTER 10



“*T*hat isn’t true!” Theresa said in between chuckles.

“It most certainly is,” he replied, nodding as they found themselves engaged in a spirited argument over a historical event that seemed to spark both their interests.

To be quite honest, he had no idea how they came to it. One thing seemed to lead to another, and with every subsequent topic, they felt more and more at ease with each other. Now, their differing interpretations led to a friendly disagreement which they both obviously enjoyed immensely.

“Shakespeare was born in London,” he said, absolutely convinced that he was right. After all, he had an unbeatable argument. “That was where he wrote most of his plays. That was also where his plays were first performed, and he lived his entire life there, only traveling around England here and there for the purposes of work, especially to Stratford Upon Avon. But I repeat... he wasn’t born there.”

Theresa had mentioned that Shakespeare was one of her favorite writers, and that was how it all started. Devlin considered Theresa's literary knowledge to be on a rather high level, unlike his own, but this was something he was absolutely certain of. That is, he'd never read any biography regarding Shakespeare, but he had to have been born in London. After all, it made perfect sense, no?

"He was not," Theresa shook her head. "You are way in over your head, mister."

He had to laugh at the *mister* comment. To be honest, he realized that he had been laughing for the past two hours or so. They barely touched their dinner, and it had been two hours. All the warm food had gotten cold, but they didn't seem to mind. They had eyes only for each other, and his body was ravenous for her, not for the food that lay in front of him.

"Am I now?" he asked.

"Yes, you are," she replied with a confident nod. "History books are my favorite, especially writers and their biographies. I've read several books about Shakespeare's life."

"Maybe you forgot this one minor detail," he teased her, loving how her cheeks would grow a darker hue of red every time he found the right spot to

press. “After all, reading all those books... information tends to become all muddled up, you know.”

“It does not!” she burst again, her eyes gleaming with desire to prove to him how utterly wrong he was. “I know what I am saying.”

“Prove it.” That was all he needed to say for her to lock her gaze with his.

This was when he knew. She shared the same intellectual curiosity that he had. He recognized that grace in a woman who was determined to make sense of the world around her, to pursue the truth and live by it. Admiration filled his mind. Not only that, but she seemed to instantly draw him even more towards herself without even knowing what it was she was doing to him.

“With pleasure,” she replied as she gracefully rose from her seat, her pale pink gown making a swishing noise as she moved.

She didn't beckon him to follow, but that was the only thing that he wanted to do. She walked across the large dining hall towards the door, which led into a corridor. She headed left, and he followed closely behind. A few moments later, they both found themselves in a grand library, something he wasn't expecting to see in a house such as this one. Usually, these sorts of houses possessed smaller libraries while this one was adorned with rows and rows of richly bound books placed tenderly along all the shelves. However, it



could be that the owner of the house left his own library here, for the perusal of his tenants. It would not be unheard of. Some of the books he recognized as Theresa's, while others seemed to belong to someone else. He inhaled deeply, enjoying the familiar fragrance of aged leather and paper.

He looked at her with both curiosity and amusement, but there was also something else. His body yearned for her as she reached for the highest shelves, her dainty fingers trailing the book spines, searching for the right one. There seemed to be millions of volumes as the warm glow from the sunlit window danced upon her face.

Then, she dropped to her knees to check the row which was all the way down. Her skirt spilled around her as her delicate, swan-like neck moved slowly, her eyes darting from one title to another. She could not possibly know what the sight of her on her knees did to him. He swallowed heavily, gazing at her, desperate to rake his fingers through her hair and pull her close to him, to inhale her fragrance and taste her lips.

“There it is!” she suddenly exclaimed, triumphantly pulling out a specific book from the row of others. It seemed old and worn out with its burgundy leather cover, but even despite the assumed years of beloved possession, it still revealed signs of elegance.

She turned to him, and she wore the look of an assured smile. “We shall find our answer here.”

She walked over to the *chaise lounge* and took a seat slightly to the left, leaving enough space for him to join her. He didn't hesitate even for a single moment. He sat by her side, completely forgetting all about Shakespeare and whatever city or town he was born in. It didn't matter. What mattered was that he was here by Theresa's side because of Shakespeare. That was more than enough.

Theresa was leafing through the book hastily, licking her lips eagerly, a sight which drove him mad. Was it possible that she didn't know what it did to him? His body was engulfed in flames, and her rosy fragrance didn't help. It actually made his yearning a million times more potent.

"Here," she said, allowing the book to rest in her lap as she trailed a line with her delicate finger. She continued to read. "William Shakespeare was born in Stratford Upon Avon, England in April 1564. The exact date of his birth is not recorded, but it is most often thought to be the 23<sup>rd</sup> of April."

He was barely listening to the words she was saying. All he could hear was the choir of angels themselves in the sound of her voice. She could have been telling him the time over and over again, and it would still sound equally mesmerizing.

"See?" she pointed out triumphantly, her cheeks flaring up as she spoke. "This book proves I'm right, and you're wrong."

There was no right and wrong in Devlin's mind any longer. His heart had completely taken over control of his body. Without thinking, he turned to her, one hand on her waist, the other cupping her chin with trembling fingers. Their lips crashed against each other like the sea crashed against the shore, ravenous and yearning, knowing that they could never be together but still desirous of each other's presence.

Devlin's mind was a blank as he kissed her deeply, not wanting to waste a single second of this magical moment.



She kissed him back, their tongues intertwined. She wasn't thinking. She had lost all the ability to think, to question whether this was the right thing to do. As if hearing her doubt, he groaned against her lips, deepening their kiss.

She could feel his hand on her waist, anchoring her trembling body, keeping her close to him as if she might disappear like a mirage. Instinctively, she hung her arms around his neck. Without ending the kiss, she neared him. This sudden rush of emotions was new but not utterly unexpected. Her heart was afraid of being shattered, but at the same time, she knew she was in his command. All he had to do was look at her, and she would obey.

He tasted like sin, like everything forbidden. Heat pooled between her thighs, inner pressure unlike anything she had felt before. She was at his mercy with the way he kissed her, demanding possession. She grabbed a fistful of his hair, feeling his hand traverse up her back, sending a million little

goosebumps up and down her body in response to his touch. She had to clamp her thighs together to try and satiate this need, to stave off this overwhelming thunderbolt of yearning.

He kept kissing her tenderly while his hands caressed her arms and her back, and much to her embarrassment, she wanted his touch on all those other, forbidden places. His hot breath fanned over her lips when he pulled away, only to bite her lower lip and tug at it gently then he returned for another plunging kiss.

She moaned loudly when she felt his hand at the back of her neck, doing exactly what she was doing to him. He grabbed her hair, keeping her in place. She could feel his hot breath. Delicious pleasure spread all throughout her body, and she knew she had to end this. This was becoming dangerous.

It took all of her conscious effort to place her hands on his chest and push herself away from him. They were both breathing heavily, and his eyes gleamed at her with wild passion. Her entire body had stopped listening to her mind. It became nothing but a writhing heap of pure sensations, burning one very edge of her nerve. She was so close to giving herself up to this man, to surrender to the moment, but she knew that would be a dangerous slope. She had to regain control of everything, of herself, of the situation.

“You should go home,” she told him, barely able to catch her breath.

He didn't say anything to that at first. She waited with much anticipation until finally, he leaned towards her only to whisper. "I wish you would come home with me..."

A gasp died inside her throat. But before she could say anything to that, he got up and left the library with a hastened stride. She listened to the sound of his dying steps then finally, the front door slammed closed, and she was alone with her beating heart and the storm inside her body.

## CHAPTER 11



White's was not Devlin's usual place of daily residence. At least, not since the tragedy. That was when all joy in life died for him, and visiting old friends he used to drink with at the prestigious club was not a pleasure anymore but rather a burden.

However, when Harrison invited him to join him the following morning, Devlin couldn't refuse. They were sitting in a secluded corner with their glasses of fine whiskey resting on the table that separated them. While Harrison had partaken several times of his, Devlin's was left untouched. The usually composed and calm man was restless, his usually sharp features etched with concern.

Of course, this didn't escape his friend's attention. "What's troubling you, old boy?" Harrison asked, leaning back in his leather armchair, not taking his eyes off of his friend.

Devlin sighed heavily, running his fingers through his impeccably styled hair.

He inhaled before he spoke as if that might bring some comfort. It didn't.

"I've done something I wasn't supposed to," Devlin admitted. Harrison didn't ask anything. He waited for Devlin to continue on his own, as always. "I kissed Theresa."

Harrison's features relaxed immediately, and he raised his eyebrow in mock astonishment. "Don't tell me! You kissed your own wife! That *is* the worst thing a man could do!"

Devlin frowned although it was difficult to stay angry with this man, who was only trying to make a difficult situation lighter.

"I don't need you to make fun of me, you know," Devlin rolled his eyes, deciding that it was high time for him to taste that whiskey. He grabbed the glass and took a long, thirsty gulp, clicking his lips in a satisfied manner. For one brief moment, he was thinking about something other than Theresa.

"I'm your best friend," Harrison teased. "It's in my job description to make fun of you. But seriously now, you kissed Theresa because you want her back. Correct me if I'm wrong, but isn't that a good thing?"

Devlin shrugged. "I'm supposed to give her time. I'm supposed to woo her slowly, not steal kisses every time we meet, but Harrison... she is

intoxicating. Every time I see her, my resolve weakens, and I become horribly impatient to have her back. I succumbed to this desire, and I just had to do it.”

Harrison thought about it for a moment. “Did she kiss you back?”

Devlin nodded which made Harrison chuckle. “Why are you worried then? She obviously wanted you to kiss her if she kissed you back. You are making it more complicated than it is, old boy. Women want to be wooed, and wooing includes stealing kisses. Especially from your wife.”

Devlin inhaled deeply. “But I don’t want her to think I’m pushing her into anything.”

“You aren’t,” Harrison assured him. “Otherwise, she would be cold to you until you got the message that she wasn’t interested in what you have to offer. She is entertaining your company still which should make you hopeful. Very hopeful indeed.”

“Very hopeful?” Devlin’s eyes widened.

“Indeed,” Harrison nodded. “And also—” he continued but was interrupted before he could say what he wanted to say. Their moment of revelation was interrupted by the approach of a stranger whom Devlin did not think he had



ever seen in his life.

Although it was early in the afternoon, far too early for anyone to be this inebriated, the man swaggered over to the table with a malicious gleam in his eyes.

“Ah, Devlin,” the man spoke familiarly, and Devlin suddenly realized that he knew the man, but he couldn’t remember where from. Not that it mattered because the man continued to speak, not even waiting for Devlin to reply. “Was that your wife I saw with the Dowager Countess of Forrester? You know that they’re talking about her in town. Is your wife then of the same kind?”

Devlin’s expression immediately hardened. His jaw clenched in anger. Even Harrison couldn’t stay immune to this, but he urged his friend with a silent look to keep his composure. After all, if there was a fight here at White’s, it could result in the expulsion of all three of them. Devlin didn’t really care that much about that, but he was certain that Harrison did.

Devlin tried to get up, but Harrison managed to reach out to him, grabbing his arm, and keeping it bound to the chair he was seated on.

“Sir, you have interrupted our pleasant conversation with your rude remarks. Needless to say, they are uncalled for. Please, leave.”

Devlin was on the verge of telling this vile man where he could take his comments, but he was still trying to keep his composure. That also meant that he needed to be quiet. So, in an effort to do so, he rubbed his chin, focusing on anything else other than the man, hoping that he would just leave them alone.

The stranger chuckled which made things even worse. “I don’t remember asking you,” he told Harrison then shifted his focus back to Devlin. “What? Cat got your tongue? I’m merely stating the obvious. A man of your stature could surely do better than someone like your wife.”

Devlin’s hands tightened into fists, his knuckles turning white. A flash of anger took over him completely, and he couldn’t control himself any longer. Without thinking, he lunged at the man, grabbing him by the lapel, and pushing him against the nearest wall. His grip was tight and unyielding. He neared the man’s face, staring him dead in the eyes.

“Watch your mouth!” Devlin’s growled through clenched teeth. “Show some respect!”

Harrison knew that he needed to act quickly because he knew that Devlin could lose control easily when he felt that someone he loved was being disrespected. Harrison hurriedly stepped in, placing a hand on Devlin’s shoulder.

“Devlin, that’s enough,” he tried to calm down his friend, but that was impossible. Devlin could still feel that rush of rage.

“He insulted Theresa,” Devlin spat out at the man.

The man was immediately caught off guard by Devlin’s aggression, and he tried to struggle himself free from Devlin’s grip, but that was impossible.

“Unhand me!” the man demanded, but Devlin had no such intentions.

The chatter around them had stopped already, and everyone was paying attention to what was happening. Both Devlin and Harrison knew that the guards would come shortly if this wasn’t resolved as soon as possible. But Devlin couldn’t let this man get away with such words aimed at Theresa. *His wife.*

“Apologize,” Devlin spoke with what was now controlled fury.

He locked his gaze with the man. His intentions were clear to everyone. He was ready to beat him up regardless of what the consequences could be. That much was obvious to everyone.

Harrison got involved again, urging the man. “Just apologize, so we all don’t

get in trouble because of you.”

Devlin was still staring at the man, gripping at his lapel as if his life depended on it. In a way, it did. In his mind, he was now proving himself to Theresa. He could not let someone disrespect her like this.

The man somehow sensed this. The intensity of Devlin’s gaze was overpowering. He begrudgingly muttered an apology.

“I apologize,” he said with a defeated tone of voice.

Devlin considered it for a few moments longer then he released the grip he had on the man. He stepped back to regain composure and to remove himself from the man’s vicinity because he could easily revert back to that behavior if the man said something else. Only this time, it would not end there, and no apology would stop him from showing this man what he deserved.

The man hastily retreated from their table, hitting the corner and almost falling, but that didn’t stop him. The weight of the situation was apparent as he cast one last resentful glance before he disappeared out the door.

Both Devlin and Harrison watched the man until he was out of sight. A moment later, the chatter around them resumed as if nothing happened. Harrison seemed relieved but not Devlin.

“You can’t react like that,” Harrison advised him. “You let your temper get the best of you.”

“He insulted Theresa,” Devlin reminded him. “And her friend.”

“But her friend *is* a bluestocking,” Harrison frowned. “And I’ve heard that she is insufferable, that she doesn’t know where her place is in society, and she is odd.”

“That’s not what a gentleman should say about any lady,” Devlin replied.

Harrison shrugged. “I say things as they are, you know this. And the Dowager seems the kind of a woman who speaks the truth as well. I guess that’s also what makes her so unlikeable.” Harrison pondered about it for a moment then continued. “We could have gotten in trouble here. Theresa deserves better than a public altercation caused by her husband.”

Devlin had to admit his friend was right. No one around them heard what the man said, but they would have seen and remembered that it was Devlin who attacked him first. Theresa truly deserved a man who was able to control himself under pressure.

“You’re right,” Devlin nodded apologetically, taking a seat. Harrison

followed suit. "I'll work on controlling my reactions."

*And emotions*, he wanted to add, but he bit his tongue in time.

"That's all right, old boy," Harrison smiled. "It happens to the best of us."

They continued talking about business matters although Devlin could barely focus on any of that. Still, he enjoyed the time he spent with his friend, as always. When he returned home later, he felt slightly relieved. Perhaps that kiss did not mean that he crossed the line, but he had to be careful. He wanted to draw Theresa close to him, not push her away by seeing impatient and needy. He had to control his urges although that was proving to be increasingly more difficult to do with each passing day.

## CHAPTER 12



“*W*hy do you look so utterly miserable, my dear?” Mary-Jane asked as the two ladies strolled through the back garden of Mary-Jane’s home. It was in full bloom, but Theresa could barely pay any attention to the blossoming flowers and the cheerful chirping of the birds that was heard all around them. “Why, if I didn’t know any better, I’d think that your carriage just ran over a kitten.”

“You know, I’ve come here for you to make me feel better, not worse,” Theresa replied, trying to banish the image that her friend had just created in her mind.

“I am your best friend, my dear.” Mary-Jane patted Theresa’s arm which was linked with her own as they strolled. “It is my duty to tell you the truth, and right now, you seem absolutely miserable. Has that wretch of a husband done something to make you feel this way? Because if he has, I have half a mind to —”

“No, no, of course not,” Theresa corrected her friend as she shook her head fervently in Devlin’s defense. “Well... not exactly... I guess.”

Mary-Jane was now even more confused than before, and her eyes showed it. “What has he done!?”

“Nothing, nothing,” Theresa smiled, trying to calm down her friend. “And please do not refer to him as a wretch. He is a good man.”

“A good man would not leave his wife alone for two whole years,” Mary-Jane reminded her although Theresa did not need to be reminded of that. She knew it well. Her heart was doing the reminding every single day, and now, she was certain that it would be even more often, after that kiss they shared. “But do tell me what has you so distressed and if I can help in any way.”

“You are so sweet,” Theresa smiled. “Thinking of me when you have worries of your own.”

Mary-Jane waved dismissively with a mischievous sparkle in those deep set, dark eyes of hers. “I told you that without a man, there *are* no troubles.”

“Oh, yes, I forgot,” Theresa chuckled. “But mark my words, one day, a man will come who will sweep you off your feet, and then you will eat your own words, darling.”



“Never!” Mary-Jane shook her head fervently then pressed her free hand to her head in a theatrical manner which made both women chuckle boisterously. “I have had one marriage too many. But enough about me. Tell me what is happening because now, you’ve got me all worried, and I hate being worried.”

Theresa inhaled deeply. She knew what her friend would say to what happened, so she wanted to present it in the best light possible, the same light that shone in her own heart. “Why don’t we call for a tray of cakes and biscuits and sit down at the gazebo? That is my favorite place in the entire house.”

“Of course,” Mary-Jane nodded then took her friend in the direction which she specified.

The gazebo in question exuded elegance and grace, adorned with delicate lattice work and vines of blooming jasmine and ivy that surrounded it on all sides. Now, with the entire garden in full bloom, it appeared that the entire structure was enveloped in a floral embrace. Inside, there were enough seating arrangements for several people, benches upholstered in velvet, inviting them both to take a respite from their walk.

By the time the table was set, there were much more than just cakes and biscuits. There were bite-sized lemon tarts, Theresa’s favorite, along with meringue crowns and fruit tarts. The bottom tier of the tray held thin, crispy

almond macarons and buttery shortbread biscuits. Theresa couldn't resist taking one even before the tea was served, enjoying the sensation of it melting in her mouth, allowing for that crumbly texture to come to the forefront.

"Thank you, Julia," Mary-Jane nodded at the servant girl when the tea was served. Theresa looked at the delicate porcelain cups and saucers with delight as she had always paid close attention to such details. She watched the steam disperse into the air just above the cup, inhaling the fragrance of lavender which was obviously an addition to the tea itself.

"Well, now," Mary-Jane exclaimed, "will you finally tell me what all this is about?"

"We kissed," Theresa finally admitted, "and I think I have feelings for him."

Mary-Jane's eyes widened then she shook her head nervously, like a mother bear who failed to teach her cub an important lesson about the danger of the woods. "I was afraid of that."

Theresa considered if it was that obvious to Mary-Jane then she was certain Devlin expected it to happen as well. Her stomach churned at the thought of her deepest emotions being something so obvious to those who knew her.

“How did it happen?” Mary-Jane asked. “I mean, the kiss.”

“It was all because of Shakespeare,” Theresa sighed.

“Shakespeare?” Mary-Jane burst into a chuckle. “So, even from beyond the grave, he keeps creating drama where there is none.”

Theresa quickly recounted what happened as Mary-Jane listened intently. “It seems to me that there is more to this story than just Shakespeare,” she teased Theresa good-naturedly as always. “And you can deny these emotions all you wish, but I know better.”

Theresa sighed. She should have known that she would not be able to hide anything from her best friend. After all, she had not been able to do that even once. Mary-Jane was simply too skilled at reading other people, a skill Theresa would have loved to possess.

“Well, I fear that I am alone in my emotions,” she admitted. “I fear that he is doing all of this just to have me back under his control as his wife.”

“What we need to do here is be practical.” As always, Mary-Jane was the voice of reason, and Theresa appreciated that at least one of them was thinking with her brain and not her heart. “You need to ground yourself and maybe, look at it from a different perspective.”

“What do you mean?” Theresa asked, now completely having lost her interest for the tarts and the tea. She was immersed in the conversation at hand.

“Do you trust him?” Mary-Jane asked simply, pausing for a brief moment. “I mean, do you trust him enough not to do it again?”

Theresa couldn't answer that question yet, so she had to be honest. “I really don't know.”

“That's good,” Mary-Jane nodded with a smile.

Theresa laughed. “How on earth is that good?”

Mary-Jane leaned closer to her, grabbed a tart, then took a satisfied bite. Theresa waited for her to swallow, and it seemed to take an entire eternity. But that was Mary-Jane, always preferring that dramatic build-up to simply saying everything she had in one flow of thought. It made her quite the interesting spokesperson for whatever topic she was interested in at that moment.

“Admitting that you don't know,” she explained matter-of-factly. “In other words, that means you don't trust him *enough*.”

“Come to think of it, you’re right,” Theresa couldn’t help but agree. “I don’t trust him. I don’t know whether or not he will do the same thing again, and it frightens me beyond description. Last time, what he did didn’t break my heart, but this time, I might not be so lucky. I’m so terribly frightened of having my heart broken and then being left alone to pick up the pieces.”

Mary-Jane nodded tenderly. “That is the worst thing that can happen to a heart that loves. That is also why you need to be cautious with what you do with him from now on.”

Theresa sighed heavily. “I know in my heart that I want him. I want to be with him. I feel so utterly attracted to him that it drives me mad sometimes. But... he’s hurt me far too much.”

“It is difficult to trust someone who’s hurt you before,” her friend acknowledged this fear.

Theresa had to admit that, for someone who didn’t believe in love, Mary-Jane was making an awful lot of sense. That came as a pleasant surprise.

“But you obviously care about him,” Mary-Jane added thoughtfully. “That further complicates things.”

Theresa frowned. “I thought that by coming here, I would clear up

everything, and I would finally know where I stand with him. You have always been that voice of reason for me, Mary-Jane. As it turns out, I'm even more confused now than I was before!"

Of course, she didn't expect her friend to sort her every predicament for her, but it helped to know that someone could offer a differing perspective, perhaps even shedding some new light on the matter at hand.

"That may be so, but remember one thing, and that is that your husband didn't force you to come back." Mary-Jane was once again making much sense. "If all he wanted to do was have you back home under his control, you would already be there under duress."

"That's right," Theresa agreed, not having considered that point. "I mean, he's never hinted at any emotions on his part. And I know that he has a bit of a reputation because before his family died in that tragic fire, he was a bit of a rake. He lived a carefree life, and only after that tragedy happened, did he... well, change, I suppose."

"People don't tend to change unless something very good or very bad happens to them," Mary-Jane pointed out. "In this case, something bad happened to him. It is plausible that he truly isn't the man he was before. And maybe, he's continued to change. Maybe he needed some time to process everything, and now, some things are clearer in his mind."

“But I also needed to process everything,” Theresa reminded her friend, “and I had to do it on my own while I really needed someone by my side to make it easier on me.”

“I know,” her friend continued. “But such a tragedy leaves a mark on someone. I’m not saying he’s become a saint, but... maybe, just maybe, you should see how he behaves. But remain at a distance until you are absolutely certain of both your and his emotions.”

Theresa knew the story of Devlin’s life even before she married him. She could not imagine what it must have felt like to lose everyone in one night. Just like that, one snap of someone’s fingers, and it was all gone. *They* were all gone. He was alone. She couldn’t imagine what that did to someone’s state of mind, to someone’s psyche. Devlin obviously had his own demons which he was battling, and Theresa could hardly blame him for feeling as if he was alone against the whole world. It was difficult to be thrown into a whirlwind of tragedy where everything was beyond his control.

“Has he mentioned that he will go back without you?” Mary-Jane asked.

“No, on the contrary,” Theresa shook her head, “I feel like he is doing everything in his power to get me to return with him.”

“That shows effort,” her friend murmured pensively. “That’s good. But not good enough.”

“Of course not,” Theresa could agree with that. “I don’t know much, but I know that I don’t trust him yet.”

“And you shouldn’t,” her friend echoed. “Let him prove to you that he’s changed. Allow him to do everything and anything. And then, make your decision.”

Theresa smiled. “It sounds so easy when you say it like that.”

Her friend shrugged amusedly. “It is always easy to be a bystander and comment on someone else’s life. Then, we know best. But for ourselves, it’s always a different story.”

Just as Theresa was about to comment on that, Rosemary came running from the house, carrying two pieces of paper. Even from a distance, Theresa could see that they were two drawings, probably one for each of them.

“Auntie Theresa, this one is for you,” Rosemary gushed, handing her one of the drawings with colorful flowers and a semblance of Theresa herself amongst them. “And this one is for you, Mama.”

“Why, thank you, my precious.” Mary-Jane took the drawing and kissed her daughter on the forehead.



“They are lovely, Rose, thank you,” Theresa added, unable to stop smiling. “Your mother tells me you’re getting very good at piano.”

“Oh, I most certainly am!” Rosemary stood proudly, exclaiming. “May I play something for you before you leave?”

“I would love that,” Theresa replied.

“We are almost done with our tea here, darling, and we’ll come in shortly to hear you play,” Mary-Jane added.

“I shall go prepare!” Rosemary said, and within seconds, she was back at the house.

Theresa turned to Mary-Jane. “She is such a delightful little thing.”

“Honestly, I don’t know what I’d do without her,” Mary-Jane admitted, her gaze lost somewhere in the direction of the house, and Theresa knew that it lingered on Rosemary. Even when she was out of sight, she was never out of mind for her mother.

“Maybe when you meet a man you like, you could give Rosemary a little

brother or a sister,” Theresa said, half teasing, half seriously.

“A man I like?” Mary-Jane exclaimed as if that was the most preposterous thing in the world. “Such a man has not been born yet!”

Both women laughed cheerfully at this comment, mostly because they both considered it to be true. Mary-Jane only wanted to focus herself solely on her daughter and their life together. As such, they had no need for a man. Besides, the older she got, the less she was willing to make concessions about people’s characteristics that she didn’t particularly fancy. Mary-Jane had always been rather vocal about those. Theresa could understand that.

As for herself, she didn’t know what she wanted. Once, she believed she wanted to be with her husband, to make this marriage real and not just on paper. Now, everything had become even more confusing. Her heart was telling her one thing, and her mind another, and it was impossible to find middle ground.

## CHAPTER 13



“*I* hope you have a good plan, Devlin, my dear.”

Those were the first words Devlin heard that morning upon walking into the dining hall of the family’s London abode which had was their home when they spent time in town and which he had moved into now while he sorted out his situation with, not to mention feelings for, his wife. It was all a confusing mess that he could not find heads or tails of, and he welcomed the idea of having his grandmother by his side. A woman’s perspective, especially from a wise, older woman, could never hurt.

“A plan?” Devlin asked, watching his grandmother butter up the toast with a knife that had been shined to perfection.

She looked as if she were about to go out for a ball in the middle of the morning in her silk gown and made coiffure. Then again, his grandmother always liked to look her best, even now in her seventies. She always claimed that there was no reason for someone to look disheveled. If one felt bad, then

it was all the more important to look good, to convince the world and oneself otherwise.

“A plan to win Theresa back, of course,” she replied, stunned that he didn’t know.

Although, truth be told, he knew very well what she was referring to. Only, Theresa was proving to be increasingly more difficult to win over — not that he held it against her.

“I’m working on it,” he told her, taking a seat opposite her at the table. He didn’t feel particularly hungry, but the day seemed hopeful, and he needed strength and energy for what he was about to do.

“Did she like the flowers?” his grandmother inquired curiously.

“Very much so, yes,” he nodded with a smile. Instantly, his mind was washed over by memories of the kiss they shared.

It proved to him that she felt something for him. There was no way for her to deny it. The passion with which she kissed him, embraced him, and called out his name revealed emotion. It made him hopeful that not all was lost. Although, he was still a long way away from reaching his goal which was to bring Theresa back home with him, so they could start a life together. The

thought made him smile. It made him even more hopeful.

“Your smile assures me of your answer,” his grandmother eyed him knowingly.

“Grandmother?” he suddenly wondered about something.

“What is it, darling?” She lifted her gaze from her plate. Her steel blue eyes questioned him with anticipation.

“When did you know you loved Grandfather?” he asked. It was a simple question, but for some reason, he wanted to know. There was no one else left to ask. It was just the two of them now.

She smiled at him in that graceful manner of her twilight years. He could see immediately that her mind was awash in memories that surfaced as a result of his inquiry. She didn't speak immediately. He allowed her that moment to relish those memories then to choose which one she wanted to share with him. As her eyes sparkled with nostalgia, she finally started to speak, and the words flowed like a softly babbling brook.

“I'll never forget that day,” she recounted. “It was the middle of summer, and it was hotter than Hell itself.”

“Grandmother!” Devlin laughed, much to her amusement.

“Well, it was,” she said, teasing. “A grand ball was held in Lord Livingstone’s estate. It was the event of the entire season. Everyone was talking about it, counting the days until it finally arrived. I still remember that evening as if it happened yesterday. My gown was new, purchased specially for the occasion. It made me feel like a mermaid, that aquamarine shimmering silk which flowed down my body like a fishtail. That was when I saw him for the first time, your grandfather. His tailored attire suited him perfectly. Everyone wore earth colors, but his tie was a fiery red. It caught everyone’s eye, and I seemed to have caught his.”

“How could you not?” Devlin smiled proudly at his grandmother. “You were probably the loveliest lady in attendance.”

“That is what your grandfather, God rest his soul, always used to say,” she said softly with a gentle lilt. “The host introduced us, and your grandfather immediately asked to dance with me. I remember having promised my first dance to another man, and your grandfather approached him, whispered something into his ear, and the man, oh I forgot his name, he immediately turned around and left.”

Devlin’s eyes widened with curiosity. “What did Grandfather tell him?”

“You know, my dear, he never told me,” his grandmother chuckled

amusedly. “I supposed it doesn’t matter. Your grandfather was a man of few words, you know that. But there was deep sentiment in every word he spoke. He knew how to choose them wisely. Everything else, he said with his eyes.”

“So, that was the night?” Devlin asked.

“We danced together,” she continued to reminisce. “He told me that everyone was looking at me, but all I cared about was whether he was looking at me. And... he was throughout the entire night as we glided across the ballroom floor. That was when it started. Something happened inside of me, a shift. His presence was so overpowering, so enchanting, I couldn’t resist getting lost in those eyes. We had an instant spark that lit up my entire heart.”

“So, it was the dance then?” Devlin continued, enjoying this conversation immensely. With everything that had happened, he had closed himself off from such experiences completely, forgetting how wonderful they could be. But at the same time, they were dangerous because when one loved someone, that meant they could get hurt very easily.

“No,” she shook her head. “We snuck away from the ball that night.”

“Grandmother!” Devlin exclaimed again. He had never heard this story before. He knew that grandmother and grandfather met at a ball and fell in love with each other, but he didn’t know any of the details. Now, he was curious to know everything, hoping that it might help him with his own love

predicament.

“Oh, shoosh,” she teased, chuckling. “As if you’ve never done such a thing. I know you have. Now, to continue with my story, we shared a moonlit stroll through Lord Livingstone’s rose garden. There was a little maze, and we hid inside. We sat on a marble bench. It was cold, and I remember he took off his coat for me to sit on it. Then, he recited poetry to me beneath the canopy of fragrant roses. That was when I knew that I was completely, utterly, and madly in love with him, and there would never be any other man for me.”

Devlin was still smiling. A part of him wished that he and Theresa had gotten a chance to have such a magical first meeting where they would both be swept off their feet by the other’s beauty and character. Whereas he had truly been swept off his feet by her, instead of pulling her close to him, he decided to push her away.

“Grandfather was a fortunate man,” Devlin pointed out.

“Anyone who finds their kindred spirit and recognizes them in time to keep them is a fortunate person,” she corrected him knowingly.

“Sometimes I’m afraid that I might be too late,” he admitted with a heavy heart. After all, she and Harrison were the only two people he could talk to about this, with whom he could truly be himself and express his wishes as well as his doubts.



“It is never too late, always remember that,” she shook her head, reaching for her tea and taking a satisfied sip which resulted in a soft click of her tongue against the upper teeth.

“What if she doesn’t... want me?” he asked.

He was afraid to say the word *love*. He didn’t deserve to even consider whether she had such feelings for him or not. But something told him to be hopeful, to work towards this goal he had set for himself, and that was to get her back at any cost.

“Has she been cold to you?” his grandmother suddenly asked.

“Cold?” he echoed, lifting a brow.

“Has she been pushing you away?” she clarified.

“Initially, yes,” he nodded. “But last time... it was different. I don’t know how to explain it.”

He didn’t want to admit that they kissed. Actually, he didn’t want to admit that he was the one who could barely resist the temptation to kiss her. It

seemed to him that she had managed to tear down all of his walls with just one glance of those beautiful eyes. It both thrilled him and petrified him because he knew that he was slowly losing control over the situation.

Not only that, but it took all of his conscious effort to end that kiss and not prolong it into something lustful, something animalistic that he didn't even know dwelled in him all this time. Without even being aware of it, she managed to raise him from the dead, his soul had awakened after an eternal winter, and now, he wanted to feel the warmth of sunshine again in the guise of her eyes.

“Sometimes, you don't need to explain anything,” she smiled wisely. “At least, not in words.”

He knew what she was referring to. Her words comforted him. But at the same time, he was afraid of the magnitude of his own emotions which threatened to drown out everything else.

“But I don't know if she can forgive me for leaving her like that, without a word for so long,” he confessed.

“There is always hope, darling,” she reminded him. “As long as we wake up in the morning, every new day brings forth new possibilities, new opportunities. It depends on us whether we shall seize them or not.”

He had to admit that she was right. “I have two years of missed opportunities.” The thought saddened him, but he didn’t want to feel sorry for himself. It was his fault. He wanted to accept responsibility and act on it. However, the knowledge that he could be denied what he desired more than anything else still bore heavily on his soul.

“Then, you mustn’t miss any more,” she told him with a mischievous smile. “You have to do everything in your power to prove to Theresa that you could be the man she always thought you were.”

“Always thought I was?” His voice reverberated throughout the chamber in an echo of confusion. “What do you mean?”

She smiled in a way that only made things even more confusing, so he had to listen intently.

“I noticed the way she was looking at you both during your wedding, and the last time I was there,” she explained, those eyes glistening with knowledge only a woman could have about the world.

His heart leaped with hope at these words. They found their place inside his mind and soul and nestled gently, refusing to leave. They fed his optimism, his desire that Theresa might still feel the same way about him as he did about her but was, just like him, afraid of being heartbroken. He knew that feeling well. It made taking a risk all the more frightening, but something told

him that someone like her was worth that risk. Even more.

“A woman only looks at a man in such a manner if she finds him attractive, and even more than that,” she continued, “she was mesmerized by you, and honestly, I think you were as enchanted by her as well.”

Devlin bit his tongue before he could exclaim that it was true. Of course, it was. That was the whole reason why they were in this mess. He recognized her as someone he could grow to love very quickly, someone who would become as indispensable to him as air itself, and he ran away from her. He couldn't risk falling in love and getting hurt like he was before.

“You don't have to say anything,” she smiled at him. “Sometimes, silence speaks more than words ever could.”

He smiled back at her. “You know so much, Grandmother.”

“Oh, well, this old age comes with a few benefits, I suppose,” she chuckled, taking another sip of her tea. “I do talk too much sometimes, but I hope I managed to help you.”

“You did, Grandmother,” he nodded. “You most certainly did.”

“So, what is your next step, darling?” she asked, curious to find out.

“I want to ask her and her friend to join Harrison and me for a stroll,” he explained, thinking that with some company, they might feel more at ease with each other.

“Just make sure that you don’t play a matchmaker with her friend and your friend,” she commented with an entertained chuckle.

“Harrison?” Devlin asked incredulously. “There is a better chance of snow in the midst of August than Harrison finding a woman he wants to marry.”

The thought was truly ridiculous. And he had no concerns about Harrison and Mary-Jane. They were there solely for the purpose of aiding their friends. That was what they would both focus on — to help bring him closer to Theresa.

“Well, as long as he is happy, that is all that matters,” his grandmother shrugged. “Happiness is different for different people. I just always believed that we need companionship.”

Devlin wanted to tell her that Harrison had more than enough of that whenever he pleased, but he managed to bite his tongue before he said it aloud. He had known his friend for ages, and that meant both he and his

grandmother knew him well. Harrison had become like a brother to him, and after the tragic accident that left him almost alone, Devlin learned to keep those precious few people he cared about close by. The only mistake he had made was with Theresa, but now, he was adamant to rectify it no matter the cost.

His grandmother suddenly got up and walked over to him, cupping his chin with her fingers to make him look up at her. “You are at an age when you are no longer a young man, darling. You need someone by your side to make you happy. I truly believe Theresa could be that woman for you.”

He believed it as well, but he dared not say it aloud yet.

“I will try my best,” Devlin nodded, with a smile.

“There is no trying,” she shook her head. “You either do something, or you don’t. Trying is the middle ground, and we don’t go for middle ground in this family.”

“Yes, grandmother,” he smiled, getting up and taking her hand into his, only to place a soft kiss on it. “I shall go immediately.”

He headed out the door when he heard her call out to him. “What about breakfast?”

“No time!” he turned around to say before disappearing behind closed doors.

He had more urgent matters to attend to than food.

## CHAPTER 14



*T*heresa adjusted her gown for the fifth time as she stood in front of the looking glass. She had already started towards the door three times but returned to the looking glass each time to check again whether she looked good.

“Ugh!” she exclaimed to herself, shaking her head at her own reflection.

Before these five adjustments, which was approximately five minutes ago, she was informed by her butler that Devlin was waiting for her in the drawing room. She wondered if he had come bringing more flowers or perhaps there was something else behind this visit.

*No more adjustments*, she thought to herself as she finally grabbed the doorknob and left her chamber. She walked down the corridor with her heart at her heels. She wanted to run, to fly, and it took all of her conscious effort to walk slowly and with dignity as if she was in no rush at all.



When she opened the door to the drawing room, she found him standing in the middle of the room, his back turned to her. Even when she didn't see his face, she was affected by his mere presence, his masculine scent, and his energy that spilled about the chamber and washed over everything it touched.

“Good morning,” she greeted him a little nervously, wondering if she managed to straighten that invisible wrinkle on her gown or not.

He turned to her, handsomeness personified. “Good morning,” he returned her greeting. “I hope I did not interrupt you in your morning duties.”

“I have no duties here, only pleasurable activities,” she smiled vaguely, hoping that he would not get a hint at the truth of her condition which was that she had been wondering and waiting for his next visit with exalted trepidation.

“I am very happy to hear that,” he replied. “And to be quite honest, pleasurable activities are exactly the reason why I find myself here today.”

“They are?” she asked, almost bursting into a loud chuckle. First, she thought that his sentence was meant as light teasing, but upon second glance, she couldn't tell whether or not he was aware of the double entendre he had created.

Another gaze in his direction, and his eyes assured her that he knew exactly what he was saying as well as what he was doing. He was standing in front of her, the embodiment of confidence, with his hands crossed in front of his body at the level of his chest. She doubted that she had ever seen him look more handsome. With her heart aflutter, she waited to hear the reason behind this visit.

“I have come to ask for the pleasure of your company on a hopefully delightful walk through Hyde Park tomorrow afternoon,” he announced, his voice carrying a note of eager anticipation. “From what I could gather, the day promises sunshine, and I uhm... I greatly believe that the park’s beauty would only be enhanced by your presence.”

Flattered by what he had just said, Theresa blushed although she tried hard not to. “Did you call me beautiful just now?” she asked, a light tone of teasing in her voice.

“Why yes,” he smiled, revealing a charming row of pearly whites. “I do believe so.”

“I just wanted to make that clear,” she chuckled. “Well... a stroll through Hyde Park... just the two of us?”

“No, no,” he shook his head which only surprised her even more. She was actually hoping for some time alone with him, and Hyde Park had many

deviations from the main path where they could hide away from curious glances and exchange some private words.

*Not only words*, her naughty mind reminded her, causing an ever more fervent blushing of her cheeks.

“I was thinking, just for your peace of mind, that I will behave like the finest gentleman. We could invite my good friend, Harrison Ritchie, the Earl of Lindburg, and your friend the Dowager Countess of Forrester. They could be our chaperones, so we do everything by the rules.”

“But we’re married,” she giggled cheerfully this time. “We don’t really need chaperones.”

“I know,” he nodded. “But I thought maybe you would like to have your friend close by for that previously mentioned peace of mind.”

She had to admit that she liked that idea, despite all reason. She also liked the first thought of going for a stroll just the two of them and maybe allowing another kiss to happen, but having Mary-Jane there would be even better. Mary-Jane would help steer her in the right direction. She would also keep her out of trouble. Theresa was certain of that.

But at the same time, she felt like this was all happening too quickly. She was

letting him close before she was even certain whether he had truly changed, whether he was a man worthy of her trust. What a ridiculous thing to do — fall for a man so strongly after one small kiss and throw all caution to the wind!

She had to remind herself to regain composure of herself. She didn't want him to think that she was too eager. She should be slightly distant and aloof. However, that was easier said than done.

“That actually sounds like a splendid idea,” Theresa replied, trying not to sound too enthusiastic which she truly was.

“We shall be quite the quartet,” Devlin chuckled.

“Quite,” she joined in, not really certain why it was that she was laughing, but it felt good. “I just have to see if Mary-Jane is free to join us.”

“I have already taken the liberty of speaking to Harrison, and he is always eager to partake in lively conversation during a stroll, maybe even a friendly debate.”

“Oh, Mary-Jane is always up for a debate,” she said amusedly. “I get the feeling the two might get along well.”



Theresa could not have been more wrong. It was as obvious to her as it was to Devlin himself. Harrison and Mary-Jane seemed embroiled in a spirited argument as the two of them strolled just a few steps behind Devlin and Theresa, so it was impossible not to overhear their endless battle of wits.

“So, how is your grandmother?” Theresa asked, the moment the conversation behind them toned down a bit.

“Oh, you know, she is —”

“I have never met someone so insufferable as you!” Mary-Jane exclaimed loudly behind them, interrupting Devlin’s sentence which only made Devlin and Theresa exchange a meaningful glance and suppress a bout of laughter.

“... good,” Devlin continued his sentence. “She sends her —”

“Just because I am right?” This time, it was Harrison who interrupted Devlin. “It is you who is the insufferable one.”

“I beg to differ!” Mary-Jane wasn’t shouting, and neither was Harrison, but they were loud enough for Devlin and Theresa to hear them as well as if they were actually partaking in the conversation itself.

Their friends' opposing views on whatever subject they chose to discuss clashed like thunder and lightning. The tension in the air was electric, and it seemed that their exchange was only becoming more and more heated.

“So...” Devlin turned his attention to Theresa again as they were both on the brink of laughter, but they were still controlling this overwhelming desire. Still, neither of them had even the slightest intention of turning to their friends and getting in the middle of this. It was simply too much fun to try to stop it.

“So...” Theresa repeated, grinning widely.

“Has your sister come to visit you here?” he asked, opting for safe conversation that would show her that he cared about her well-being, whether or not she chose to come back with him. That was, of course, true. It was also true that he wanted her back with him but not at all costs and only under the condition that she herself wanted that as well.

“Yes, she has,” Theresa nodded as they turned left towards a narrower path frequented by less passersby. “She could only stay for two days this time, but she has promised me that she would come to visit me again and stay longer.”

“You know, she could come visit you back home as well,” he couldn't resist telling her this.

Instantly, he feared that maybe he had crossed the line with this remark and that she might think he brought her here to convince her to come back with him. It was part of his agenda indeed, but he wanted to ease her into that decision and show her that he wasn't the man he presented himself to be before.

“Back home?” she echoed, but upon second glance, it was obvious that she was teasing him. She knew very well what home he was referring to.

“Yes, that same home that was supposed to be yours, but...” he started, but he didn't really know how to finish this sentence without making it feel as if he was pushing his decisions onto her. So, he chose to talk about something else although he would rather just grab her by the hand, pull her back towards his carriage, and drive away into the sunset with her.

He leaned closer to her, whispering. “I think at one point, we'll have to separate those two because they will be either kissing or trying to kill each other.”

Theresa burst into a chuckle which was interrupted by Mary-Jane's exclamation of shock.

“But everyone knows that isn't true!” Mary-Jane's voice reverberated all around, but fortunately, there was no one to hear her besides the four of them.

Theresa pressed her hand to her mouth, nodding.

“You are such a bluestocking!” Harrison was heard replying, and all Devlin could do was roll his eyes to which Theresa once again burst into a silent chuckle.

At that point, Devlin noticed a small group of women walking in their direction. He wouldn't have noticed them otherwise, but he was certain for some reason that they were talking about them. One would lean closer to the other, whisper something in her ear, then they would look in their direction, nod, and chuckle.

Devlin had always hated such people — whether they were men or women was irrelevant.

“... blunder... I cannot!” Harrison was heard again behind them, but this time, Devlin wasn't listening.

He turned to Theresa, their arms linked, urging her to quickly turn right and go off the beaten path — which surprised her, so she wasn't able to do it in time — when suddenly, one of the ladies approaching them shouted his name.



“Your Grace! Oh, Your Grace!”

Initially with his profile to them, he wondered whether he should just pretend that he hadn't heard the call. After all, she could be “Your Gracing” any of the dukes around — except he was the only one in a radius that they covered, so one could not mistake that she was calling to him. That as well as the fact that she kept staring at him.

Theresa obviously noticed this too because her wandering eyes were already darting in that direction. If he chose to escape now, she might think that he had something to hide when that couldn't be further from the truth. All he wanted was to spend time with Theresa without any other people, even without Harrison and Mary-Jane who were proving to be a bigger distraction than he expected them to be. Yet, it seemed that his desire would not be satiated.

He turned to the ladies. They were grinning from ear to ear. When they came closer, he realized that one of them was his late sister's friend. The others he did not know, nor did he wish to make their acquaintance. However, Lady Angelina was someone he had spent some time with — in the presence of his younger sister, of course. Never alone. It would be rude to pretend that he did not know her.

So, he bit his tongue and stopped with Theresa as the ladies were in their way and refused to move.

“Why, if it isn’t Devlin McClaire!” Lady Angelina exclaimed a little melodramatically, separating herself from the group, and as if she didn’t even notice that he had his arm linked with Theresa, she stood by his side and patted him compassionately on the shoulder. “How have you been? I feel like I haven’t seen you in ages!”

He tried a polite smile, the kind he had learned when he didn’t feel like smiling at all, but the situation required it.

“Lady Angelina,” he bowed politely, first and foremost. “A pleasure.”

As *always* was something he would usually add, out of nothing more than mere courtesy, but he didn’t want to. This was already an awkward situation, and the last thing he wanted was to make Theresa think that in her absence from their married life, he had something with this woman or any other woman for that matter.

Before he could introduce Theresa and the rest of his company, Lady Angelina continued. “Oh, I’ve been meaning to visit your dear old grandmother. How is she doing?”

Once again, she touched his shoulder, but this time, he barely noticeably pulled back. The touch of any other woman felt foreign, almost like the touch of something prickly and unwelcome.

“She is well, thank you for asking,” he replied politely but without any emotion.

At that moment, he noticed that one of the ladies behind her leaned closer to another one and whispered something. A bout of chuckling followed, and once again, he was certain that they were saying something about him, Theresa, Harrison, or Mary-Jane.

To be quite honest, all four of them had a past that could be considered blemished up to a certain extent. But that didn't mean that he would allow such behavior. He could feel his jaw tightening as his teeth gritted.

*Just say goodbye and go*, he kept telling himself.

## CHAPTER 15



Theresa had never been the subject of someone's obvious amusement. She could not tell what exactly it was she did or said. Truth be told, she didn't do or say anything. She was merely standing by Devlin's side, their arms linked, signaling that they were no mere acquaintances, but she wondered if any of them knew that she was Devlin's wife. The lady who had evidently been desirous of that position, touching him so inappropriately, certainly didn't seem to know.

"If you will permit me to be so bold, but in the time that I haven't seen you, you have grown even more handsome if such a thing was even possible," Lady Angelina commented, turning towards her friends, who all nodded, clucking like chickens in a coop.

Theresa resisted the urge to frown then glanced at Mary-Jane, who was standing silently by Harrison's side. They forgot what they were arguing about and merely watched the scene that was unfolding itself right before their eyes. Theresa tried to unhook her arm from Devlin at that moment. If he wanted to stop and speak to these ladies, he was welcome to do so.

That was reason talking. However, her heart had already been bitten by the green-eyed monster, and it wanted to pull Devlin away from them all where they could be alone and gaze into each other's eyes for the rest of their lives. But she couldn't very well do that. Instead, she would give him the freedom he so desperately wanted all this time.

But before she could pull away from him, he gripped at her arm with his free hand and kept her in place by his side. His next words shocked them all.

"And have you met my lovely wife?" Devlin spoke confidently with much joy in his voice.

"Your... wife?" Lady Angelina seemed not to like this idea all that much, but she did her best to curtsy before Theresa, who just smiled and nodded quickly.

"It is a... pleasure, I'm sure," Lady Angelina said, sizing up Theresa from head to toe.

Theresa felt her blood boil. She could turn a blind eye to mocking gazes directed her way, but this time, it was different. This time, she was fueled by jealousy, and she could barely control herself. She could see a lady from the group whisper something again, and she could not remain silent any longer. However, she didn't get the chance to say anything because Devlin spoke for

her.

“You know, it is considered very rude to whisper when in company,” Devlin said as calmly as he could but with much determination. It was evident that something compelled him to take action, much to her surprise. His very presence commanded attention. The moment he said these words, the chuckling subsided.

Lady Angelina turned to her friends then back to Devlin. “Oh, but we didn’t mean to—”

“I don’t know what you meant or not,” Devlin cut her off, addressing them all with a tone that conveyed both authority and respect. “But I cannot help but notice the amusement with which you regard my wife and us with her.”

“You? Oh, no, by no means,” the lady who was doing most of the whispering was quick to reassure him.

“So, just my wife?” Devlin asked, tilting his head a little.

The ladies were all taken aback by Devlin’s words. They could think of no response as they exchanged glances of surprise and realization that they had been caught doing something they were not supposed to be doing. Theresa wondered how many times they relived this scenario with no one saying

anything, just letting them behave in this rather unladylike manner. She almost smiled, realizing that Devlin had just stood up for her, defending her honor.

Still holding Theresa's arm linked with his, refusing to let go even for a single moment, he took a step closer to Lady Angelina. As he did so, he made Theresa approach her as well. But Theresa didn't feel like she was in the middle of something. On the contrary, she was the most important player in this drama, and this realization filled her with an unexpected sense of newfound awe at her husband.

"I will say this only once," Devlin spoke calmly, every word said with a measured breath. "If you ever disrespect my wife like that again, I will make sure that all your families are ruined for generations to come."

"But we didn't—" the lady in question started, but Lady Angelina interrupted her, addressing Devlin.

"We apologize for any misunderstanding that has happened here," Lady Angelina spoke hurriedly as if she suddenly remembered that she had to be somewhere rather urgently. "I'm sure that my friend, Lady Penelope, did not mean anything by her whispering although she does have a tendency to do that often, and I admit, it is not the nicest thing one should do. So... we apologize." This last sentence was aimed at Theresa, and it took her a moment to realize this.

She shrugged as indifferently as she could. “It’s all right.”

What she wanted to say was that she didn’t care one bit because her arm was the one linked to the arm of this man standing by her side. But those words weren’t even necessary. Devlin had said everything already.

“Yes, well, thank you,” Lady Angelina replied hastily then turned to her friends. “If you will excuse us, we should get going.”

“Good day,” Theresa smiled after them, a feeling of victory filling every pore of her being.

All four of them watched the small group of ladies scuttle away from them like wet penguins, wobbling left and right, until they were finally out of sight. Theresa’s heart was beating wildly as if she were a winning horse at Ascot’s. She dared not turn to Devlin because she knew that she would be expected to say something. The truth was, she didn’t know exactly what to say. Her first impulse was to wrap her arms around his neck and shower him with kisses for what he had just done. It was difficult to resist the sheer temptation to do so.

Then, Mary-Jane’s bubbly voice burst through this veil of silence.

“That was absolutely amazing!” she exclaimed.



Both Devlin and Theresa turned to face them. Harrison seemed taken aback by the comment as well, but instead of finding something to argue about, he merely nodded, exploding into a fit of amused laughter. A moment later, all Devlin and Theresa could do was join in the laughter, allowing it to take complete control over them. Once the onslaught of laughter had subsided, they continued their stroll as if nothing had happened.

Although, it was far from it.

“Look!” Mary-Jane pointed out suddenly. “They are playing pall-mall over there! They seem to be having ever so much fun! Can we join in?”

Theresa looked in that direction. Mary-Jane was right. The small group of people were enjoying themselves immensely. That childhood desire to join in emerged inside of her instantly. Once again, she thought there would be opposition from either both of the gentlemen or at least Harrison because he seemed to be taking particular joy in refusing everything Mary-Jane suggested. But to their surprise, he agreed again.

“Come, let me show you how this game is *really* played!” he told Mary-Jane then rushed past her. Mary-Jane rolled her eyes then ran after him.

“We’ll see about that!” she shouted, refusing not to have her word be the last one said.

Once again, Theresa burst into an amused chuckle. All they could do was follow and see where the day would lead them.



Excitement permeated the air as the quartet prepared to engage in a friendly competition. Devlin could not take his eyes off of Theresa even for a single moment. Her infectious enthusiasm was more than enough for him to reach a decision: he would let her win. Every time if need be. He couldn't resist the opportunity to witness the joy that would light up her beautiful face upon claiming victory and those eyes that shone like the brightest emeralds which he wanted to claim solely for his own.

As she took up her mallet, Theresa seemed to be able to read his mind. "Now, don't you be letting me win, Devlin."

His eyes narrowed then he laughed boisterously. *How on earth did she know?*

"I had no such inclinations," he said, resorting to a little white lie. Sometimes, they were exactly what the situation called for. Basking in the sheer delight that the victory would bring to her eyes was something he didn't want to miss, even at the expense of something as harmless as that.

"Prepare yourself," Harrison suddenly spoke up somewhere behind them.

Theresa and Devlin turned to him at the same time, realizing that he wasn't talking to either of them. He was addressing Mary-Jane, who stood facing him, refusing to look away even for a single moment.

“Oh, I am more than well prepared, mister,” Mary-Jane fumed back with eyes that sparkled. “You wouldn't be the first one who's underestimated my skill in pall-mall.”

Harrison grinned. It was obvious that he was having more fun than ever. “I meant, prepare to witness a display of mastery, my dear.”

“Mastery? Hardly,” she scoffed. “And do not call me my dear.”

Harrison chuckled, and the game began. Devlin subtly adjusted his swings, allowing Theresa to take the lead and revel in her success. It seemed that she was unaware of his tactics and grew more and more confident with each subsequent shot. Every time she was successful, she would jump and clap her hands together, her eyes sparkling with delight like a little child.

Mary-Jane and Harrison took their competition to a whole new level. Their swings became wilder and wilder as gasps from the onlookers followed the fortunate avoidance of mishaps that otherwise could have ended in calamity. The spectators held their breath every time when a near-collision happened, and they marveled at the wild maneuvers of the daring duo.

However, despite all of this, or perhaps exactly because of it, playful banter and laughter echoed throughout Hyde Park. Devlin couldn't remember the last time he had so much fun with someone. The contrasting dynamics within the groups, that is the couples, only continued to entertain both the other players as well as the onlookers, who were now gathering in larger numbers.

Mary-Jane missed, and much to her chagrin, Harrison always had something to say. "Your swings are more akin to a whirlwind than a controlled stroke of a master of the game!"

"Just wait and see," she would pout at him, annoyed that she wasn't winning.

The game continued for a little while longer when Theresa, who was obviously winning, hit the ball to a far end of the nearby maze. With all players exhausted from the game, they welcomed a short break. Even the intense rivalry between Harrison and Mary-Jane had taken a respite.

"I shall go fetch the ball!" Theresa informed everyone, running away before Devlin could say anything.

For a moment, he pondered what he should do. One option was to stay behind and just wait for her like everyone else was doing. The other was to follow her and make sure she was all right. It was an excuse, of course. Hyde Park was well lit even in the darkness, and it was still broad daylight. She was perfectly safe from any harm, and yet, he grabbed at the first excuse that

allowed him the privilege of running after her.

He glanced at Harrison, for one of those silent confirmations, but Harrison had already become invested in yet another argument with Mary-Jane and was barely paying any attention to anyone else. Devlin had to decide on his own. It was, of course, a clear choice. He knew exactly what he wanted to do.

He dropped his mallet and rushed after Theresa, having absolutely no idea what he would tell her when he reached her — what sort of an explanation he would offer her. But he would cross that bridge when he got to it. For the time being, his feet followed his heart, not his mind, as he ran to catch up with her inside the maze.

## CHAPTER 16



*T*heresa wandered through the woods, her eyes surveying the surroundings in search for her missing ball. In the distance, she could hear the laughter and cheerful chatter of the other players, who seemed to be having fun even without playing the game.

She reached a small clearing, but there was still no sign of the ball. She continued her search without the slightest bit of frustration when suddenly, she heard a branch snap behind her. She turned around, ready to shriek, only to see Devlin behind her.

“You almost gave me a heart attack!” she scolded him, pressing her hand to her chest to soothe her beating heart which was pounding with anticipation.

He didn’t say anything to that. Instead of offering any sort of explanation as to why he had followed her, he closed the distance between them and gently cupped her face. She wanted to say his name, to ask him what he was doing, to regain her composure, but she couldn’t muster the words for any of it

because she feared that then he would let go of her, and that was the last thing she wanted him to do. His touch was both tender and thrilling, especially knowing that someone might stumble on them at any moment. The risk made it all the more appealing.

Caught off guard, her eyes widened in surprise. Her lips parted in a soft gasp, and that was the moment when his lips pressed against hers. He pulled her close to him, diving his tongue into the warmth of her mouth. She kissed him back instantly, not caring one bit that someone might stumble onto them. They were married after all.

Her entire body reacted to his knowing touch. He knew exactly how to awaken that slumbering desire inside of her, and she wondered how much more he could awaken. The thought made her blush instantly as she wrapped her arms around his neck keeping him close to herself. She felt as if the kiss lasted an entire lifetime when suddenly, they heard someone call out his name.

“Devlin!” The voice belonged to Harrison.

Before either of them could think, their stolen moment was interrupted. They could hear the sound of approaching steps which led them to immediately break their kiss and pull away from each other. Their eyes still lingered on the other, a silent testament to what just happened between them.

Harrison was slowly making his way towards them. There was a knowing smile on his face. Theresa tried to hide her disappointment, but she doubted it was possible, especially after Harrison's words.

"Well, well," he chuckled. "It seems that I have interrupted something."

Theresa immediately blushed, unable to control her reaction. Her gaze instantly shifted downward to her feet, avoiding the gaze of either of the two men. Devlin on the other hand, managed to feign composure.

"By no means," Devlin sounded nonchalant, much to Theresa's amusement. "I just came to help her find the ball."

"And did you find it?" Harrison wondered, looking at their empty hands.

"Well, no... not really," Devlin replied with less nonchalance this time which made his friend chuckle.

"That's fine," Harrison said patting his friend on that back. "No need to explain. But we do have to find that ball. Everyone is waiting."

"Oh, of course," Theresa rushed to agree, and the three of them found it almost immediately, hiding in some bushes.



“It’s a good thing I came along,” Harrison grinned as they were returning.

“Yes,” Devlin replied, sounding annoyed. “Your timing is, as always, impeccable my friend.”

For some reason, all three of them found that comment funny, so they burst into an inexplicable chuckle. Much to Theresa’s surprise, she was finding herself more and more at ease with Devlin, something she wasn’t expecting would happen. She yearned to feel his lips on hers once again. She longed for the touch of his hands on her body. The very thought sent shivers down her spine. When he spoke, she couldn’t take her eyes off of him even for a single second. She was mesmerized by him, and it was quite a difficult task keeping this a secret from everyone.

However, at the same time, her heart kept reminding her of the previous two years and everything that happened during them. Or, better yet, everything that didn’t happen and should have. They should have been together like real husband and wife, getting to know each other, yet they might as well have been on the opposite ends of the world.

While it was easy to get lost in the sound of his voice and her own wishful thinking, Theresa was a reasonable young woman. She was not prone to flights of fancy, no matter how fanciful those ideas might have been. That was why she still managed to keep herself at a distance while still enjoying the company and the stories that were shared.

While they were still at a safe distance, Harrison leaned closer to them and whispered. “Don’t worry, you two. Your secret is safe with me.”

Before either Devlin or Theresa could say anything to that, he rushed off into the crowd, immediately finding his place next to Mary-Jane, who scolded him for handing her the ball in the wrong way if such a thing was even possible. Theresa laughed at their constant bickering, unable to figure out why on earth they would find each other so insufferable.

Theresa turned to Devlin, a mix of relief and anticipation in her eyes. Devlin’s gaze met hers, the unspoken connection between them burning brighter than ever. They shared a knowing smile, a silent agreement to cherish their stolen moment.

The day continued in the same manner with everyone enjoying themselves, despite the bickering. When it was time to go, they all bid each other goodbye, and Theresa found herself in Devlin’s carriage on the way home. She couldn’t think of anything to ask him, anything to fill the silence in the carriage as it rocked them gently. But at least it wasn’t a heavy silence. It was rather pleasant, and every time they exchanged a glance, they would smile at each other, turning to the window and focusing on some invisible spot known only to them.

The carriage ride was short. She wished it could have been longer when he offered her his hand to help her out. She lingered in the doorway as he bid her

goodbye. Her heart did not want to let go of him although her mind kept telling her it was for the best.

“I had a lovely time,” she couldn’t resist sharing with him.

From the way he smiled at her, it was obvious that her words made him joyous. He was still holding her hand in his, almost as if he himself was unable to let go. The thought made her both happy and sad at the same time.

Why couldn’t it have been like this from the start? Everything would have been so much easier, and who knows where they would be right now?



There was something about the way she was smiling, the way her eyes sparkled when she was looking at him. He doubted that she had ever gazed upon him in such a manner before — as if she were truly happy to have him there. The day had come to an end, but he was desperate to prolong it at least for a few precious moments which he would spend with her.

It was slowly getting dark, and the soft glow of the streetlights illuminated her face as they exchanged a bittersweet smile. There was a growing connection between them. Neither of them could deny it. He was still holding her hand while she used her other hand to straighten an invisible wrinkle on her gown. She seemed slightly nervous, apprehensive even.

He knew why that was so, and it pained him because it was his fault. Had he not been an oaf from the onset, he would have a loving wife by his side right now, one who would gaze at him adoringly, just like... Theresa was now.

He smiled at her. There was nothing in this world he wanted as much as he wanted her.

“I also had the loveliest time,” he agreed, realizing that he had taken a little too much time in replying.

He had made progress with her, breaking through the walls she had cautiously built around her heart. He knew because he had built the same kind of walls around his own heart. He couldn't fathom why he was so drawn to her, so consumed by the need to protect her and make her fall in love with him. She was just a woman after all. That was, at least, what he was trying to convince himself of, albeit without any success. Theresa was special. There was no one out there like her, and no amount of stating otherwise would erase this knowledge from his mind or even worse, from his heart.

He also knew that, deep down, he couldn't let her live in this house alone any longer. She didn't belong here. She belonged with him in *their* home. But she couldn't grasp that notion yet. He had to be patient.

“Maybe next time Harrison and Mary-Jane won't be arguing so much,” she added amusedly, reminding them both of their chaperones, who resembled an

aged couple who had spent a little too much time together and now, couldn't stand to look at each other any longer.

He couldn't help but chuckle, shaking his head. "I thought they would never stop."

"And they didn't," she pointed out, laughing. "The only reason why their bickering stopped was because they both went to their own separate homes. Had we all gone to the same place for the night, I fear we would have been listening to their bickering until the early hours of the morn."

"You are absolutely right," he nodded, smiling. He seemed to ponder for a moment then his eyebrows raised inquisitively. "You know, I have an idea."

"What is it?" she wondered curiously.

"Maybe next time, we could... have a more silent stroll?" he suggested. The idea was, of course, going alone instead of going with chaperones.

She hesitated for a moment as if she were pondering this idea. He felt a slight pang of disappointment. He was hoping that she would instantly agree.

"Would you like that?" she replied to his question with another question.

“Very much so, yes,” he confirmed, finally managing to bite his tongue, once all these words were said.

He couldn't help it. He reached out, gently brushing his fingertips against her cheeks. They felt hotter than fire itself. He pulled away instantly, that gesture sending shivers down his spine. He didn't know why this woman had such an effect on him. In her presence, he was not thinking straight. All he cared about was having her like him. Nothing else seemed to matter.

“Then, we'll have to make it happen,” he declared. He was looking forward to a stroll with just her without Harrison's interference and Mary-Jane's constant comments — although their friends' hearts were in the right place.

He finally bowed down and brought her hand to his lips. He kissed it gently then released her from his grip unwillingly. He found solace in the fact that he would be seeing her soon.

“Good night,” he smiled, turning around.

“Oh... Devlin?” he heard her call out to him. He immediately faced her again, watching her with a look of curiosity. “Lady Chillingworth's ball is the day after tomorrow. Will you... be attending?” Her eyes searched his, a mixture of hope and uncertainty swirling within them.

He smiled. He wasn't planning to, but now, he wouldn't miss it for the world. "Of course," he nodded. "Will I be seeing you there?"

"Yes," she told him with unwavering determination.

He felt this was the moment to say something else. "I know you've said you need time, and I want to remind you that I'm not going anywhere. Not without you at least. I'll be patient. I'll be understanding. I'll be anything you need to prove to you that taking a risk and coming back with me will be worth it."

Her gaze softened. She wasn't expecting him to say anything like this. His heart yearned for the connection he had so long denied himself. He wondered if she felt the same way. He could tell that she was scared, frightened that he would do the same thing he had already done. It was difficult to trust someone who had wronged you once before. He knew that. He was also afraid, but he was more afraid of not being with her.

But he felt this would be too much to share with her right now. "I can be the anchor that holds us both," he told her softly, hoping that he said exactly what was in his heart and that she would understand him in the right way.

She smiled at those words. "I look forward to seeing you tomorrow," she told him then turned around and walked into the house, closing the door behind her.

A sense of triumph washed over Devlin. There was a renewed determination that fueled his every step as he returned to the carriage, ready to go home — at least, to the place he was willing to call home for the time being. He felt that they had given a silent promise to each other, that they were slowly starting to embrace this uncertainty together, and he rejoiced in the thought.

When he returned home, he popped by his study, only to see that there were several letters which had arrived over the course of the day in his absence. He opened every single one of them, and it seemed that each subsequent letter brought more and more bad news.

Papers and letters were strewn across the writing table before him, a testament to his responsibilities and obligations that needed to be tended to as soon as the following day. His brows furrowed, the words bringing nothing but bad news. His jaw clenched in frustration. It seemed as though every missive brought tales of unrest, challenges, and the constant threat of danger. Devlin's mind raced, considering the implications of each message, and the toll it would take on him.

The weight of the world settled upon his shoulders, and his heart was heavy with the burden of leadership. The cracks in his resolve threatened to deepen as he grappled with the sheer magnitude of his responsibilities. But within the storm of despair, a flicker of determination ignited within him.

Devlin took a deep breath, his eyes scanning the room as if searching for



inspiration amidst the shadows. He refused to succumb to defeat. Each challenge presented an opportunity for him to rise, to protect, and to lead with unwavering strength.

Those were the thoughts he fell asleep with, dreaming of Theresa and their happy future together.

## CHAPTER 17



Theresa sighed heavily as she stood in front of the looking glass in her chamber. The soft glow of the vanity lights illuminated her gown, flickering along the delicate lace and intricate beading. It was the most elegant gown she owned, and she wanted to be absolutely breathless this evening. This was of the utmost importance.

The memory of what happened two days prior still lingered heavily in her mind. She wondered if he even knew that he had unknowingly captured her heart. She sighed heavily as a deep longing for his presence bore upon her very soul. There was an undeniable comfort and joy that seemed to envelop her every time he was near, without mistake.

As she adjusted the bodice of her gown, Theresa's gaze met her reflection, and her eyes filled with a glimmer of hope. Tonight was a new chance, a fresh beginning. The ball held the promise of encounters and stolen moments, a possibility that she might catch a glimpse of Devlin amidst the sea of elegantly dressed guests.

Her hand reached for the delicate necklace that lay upon the vanity, its pendant a treasured gift from her grandmother. She clasped it tenderly around her neck, the cool metal resting against her porcelain pale skin, a talisman of strength and perseverance. With a final glance in the looking glass, Theresa took a deep breath, summoning the resolve to cast aside her melancholy and embrace the enchantment of the evening. The ballroom awaited, a haven of music and laughter where dreams had the potential to be realized.

She, too, had a dream, one she had yearned for almost as much as she had been afraid of it. It was difficult to want something one was so afraid of at the same time, but that didn't prevent her heart from longing for Devlin's presence, his touch, his and voice. Tonight, she wanted to take his breath away and show him what he had been missing for these past two years.

Within the hour, she was at the ball, having greeted the hostess politely and commenting how lovely everything was decorated. After this, she decided to get lost in the sea of unfamiliar faces. It was not a place where she felt at her best, especially without Mary-Jane by her side, but her friend had informed her that she would not be attending the ball as Rosemary had taken ill.

Of course, Theresa understood that, and her initial reaction was not to attend as well, but she couldn't miss the opportunity to see Devlin. He said he would be here, and the temptation was too great to resist. She glanced at every man present, and yet, none of them was Devlin. Disappointment started to creep up on her as minutes turned into hours. The evening stretched before her like a canvas she had been so eager to paint with the colors of Devlin's smile, but her heart took a plunge every time a man's eyes locked with hers,

and it wasn't him.

“Excuse me, Your Grace,” she heard someone call out to her, a sound that made her turn around. She smiled a little awkwardly at the man who was bowing in front of her politely. He bowed so low that she could see the top of his head which almost made her chuckle. “Would you do me the honor of saving a dance for me?” he asked once their eyes met again.

She recognized the man from Mary-Jane's stories as her friend had taken it upon herself to tell her of all the gentlemen Theresa was supposed to steer clear off. Apparently, Lord Turlington was one of them. Theresa could see the reason for all this commotion. Lord Turlington was far past his youthful years, but he seemed to age with grace and very few wrinkles. To be quite honest, Theresa wondered why he was asking her to dance when any other woman would be dying for a chance to do so. She could immediately notice how he had been the object of many a hushed whisper. However, the man was standing in front of her, waiting for her response, and not paying attention to anyone else.

“Well, my dance card is almost filled,” she said as politely as she could, slightly blushing at the fact that she wasn't honest with him. The truth was that she had kept two dances available in case Devlin showed up although it had already been three hours into the ball, and there was no sign of him. Despite all common sense, she wanted to keep those slots open for him.

“I can assure you that dancing with me is worth that last slot,” he said a little

rakishly which she didn't like, but he seemed to be the sort of man who was used to always getting his way. It was probably better to simply dance with him once and then send him on his merry way to some other woman who would be his next object of attention, for she was absolutely certain that he wouldn't find fertile ground for his compliments in her mind.

"All right then," she smiled graciously, hoping that the dance would not last too long.

"I shall be back for my dance then," he said still politely, but there was a strange eagerness in his voice.

She danced a few uninteresting dances with other gentlemen, simply because she had promised them she would, but her mind wasn't there. She was constantly looking about, trying to see whether Devlin had arrived, but she couldn't see him anywhere. That was what made those dances all the more dreary for the simple fact that none of them was the man she had come here for. That light inside of her, which shone so brightly upon her arrival here, had slowly started to extinguish, and there was nothing she could do about it.

But when Lord Turlington took her to the center of the ballroom, she realized that he was a better dancer than all the previous gentlemen put together. It pleasantly surprised her.

"You are quite a good dancer," she told him as she swayed gracefully,

realizing that, for the first moment she had arrived here, she was actually focused on the conversation she was having.

“I told you so,” he grinned, revealing a row of pearly whites which many ladies had already fallen victim to. Mary-Jane had told her that much.

But Theresa had no intentions of falling for this man for the simple reason that she had already fallen for someone else: her husband, who was nowhere to be seen, and it was driving her insane. She needed to stop thinking about him, at least for a few precious moments. Perhaps that would allow her to gather her composure and be herself again.

“You seem distracted,” she suddenly heard him say, and that comment brought her back to the present moment, forcing her to focus on him.

Maybe it would be all right to exchange a few pleasant words with this man, she thought to herself. They might ease the ache of Devlin’s absence.

“I am a bit, yes,” she admitted, not seeing a reason why she would lie.

“May I ask why?” he wondered courteously as he made sure to keep a polite distance from her while still leading her through the dance.

“Oh, it’s... my husband,” she confessed, unable to hold it in.

“I didn’t see him here,” he pointed out at that moment, pulling her slightly closer, something she didn’t even notice as they twirled around.

“That is just it,” she said with a sigh, closing her eyes for a moment. “He isn’t.”

“Well, he is a fool then,” Lord Turlington commented.

Suddenly, she wasn’t able to control her amusement. “I was actually thinking the same thing myself,” she said, chuckling amusedly.

“That is good for me, though,” he smiled at her mischievously. “Otherwise, I doubt I would have the chance to dance with a lady as beautiful as yourself.”

“Thank you,” Theresa replied as courteously as she could although she knew well that the ways of this man were murky. She wasn’t planning on falling for anything he had to tell her.

Honestly, even if she wasn’t utterly enamored by Devlin, she doubted this man would capture her attention, for he seemed to have the good looks and charm, but she could see into his soul immediately, and she didn’t like what

she was seeing. Besides, Mary-Jane had told her all she needed to know about men of his ilk, and that was enough for Theresa to be very weary of them. At the same time, she had enough common sense to steer clear of them on her own, too. So, she continued to dance with him, waiting for the music to stop.

Perhaps this was also an indication that she needed to go home now and stop hoping that Devlin would arrive. He obviously wasn't going to appear, and no matter how hard she tried to convince herself that her night wasn't ruined, she felt exactly like that.



Devlin could see Theresa smiling at this man as she swirled in his arms. Rage washed over him unlike anything he had ever felt before. Without thinking, he elbowed his way through the crowd, not taking his eyes off of the man for a single moment. He knew who he was — Lord Turlington, a well-known rake who did not care whether a woman was married or whether she was someone's mother or daughter. Every woman was just a plaything to him. Well, Theresa would not be. Devlin would rather live for the rest of his life with blood on his hands than allow such a thing to happen.

He was certain that it wasn't Theresa's fault. In fact, it was his. He was late. He was supposed to be here hours ago, but work kept him occupied. There had been unexpected issues and troubles with his estate, something he could not foresee, and if it wasn't for his cousin Robert who let him know in the nick of time, Devlin figured he would have lost a lot of money. Even now, the situation wasn't great, but at least, things were looking up.



Robert had always been there for him, pinpointing details that Devlin sometimes omitted when it came to the estate and all the dealings regarding it. He considered Robert his right-hand man, someone he could always rely on, and this evening was no exception. Robert's attention to detail had saved them from financial loss, for which he was very grateful.

Here, however, all hell was about to break loose. When he reached the dancing couple, he tapped the man's shoulder, interrupting their dance.

Startled, the man turned to face the unexpected intruder, ready to dismiss the interruption. But the words died on his lips as he came face to face with a livid Devlin, his eyes blazing with a mixture of anger and possessiveness.

"That is my wife you are dancing with," Devlin growled, his voice dripping with restrained fury.

Harrison advised him to keep his emotions under control, but in this situation, when he wanted to plant this man an instant facer, that was more difficult than Devlin could have ever imagined. The man, surprisingly, did not understand the urgency of the situation, and instead, attempted to brush him off with a dismissive wave of the hand.

"So, you've showed up?" he said, grinning with those teeth that Devlin was so desperate to knock out for this insubordination. "Well, now you'll have to

wait your turn. Can't you see that we're having a good time?"

Devlin gripped at the man's upper hand, his fingers digging into the man's flesh through the fabric of his clothes. He could rip his arm away from his body. That was the strength of his sheer rage. But he managed to keep his cool for a few moments longer, giving the lordling another chance to realize that he had just made a grave mistake.

"I will say this only once," Devlin's voice cut through the air, low and dangerous, leaving no room for argument. "Step away from my wife."

Lord Turlington only then realized the gravity of the situation. His face immediately took on a pale hue as he realized that Devlin was serious about every single word he had just said. He barely managed to stammer out an apology, his voice filled with regret.

"I... I didn't mean any disrespect," Lord Turlington stammered. "She said you weren't here, and I just —"

"Leave," Devlin ordered with a wolfish voice. "Do not ever try to encroach upon what is mine." His gaze remained steel cold, his tense jaw barely restrained with fury.

With a quick nod, the man hastily retreated from the dance floor, a sense of

unease evident in his hurried footsteps. The room seemed to exhale a collective breath as the tension dissipated, onlookers averting their gazes, giving Devlin and Theresa a wide berth.

He didn't know what to do with himself. He still felt that pent up rage at having seen another man with his arms around his wife's waist. She belonged to him. He wanted to shout it from the rooftops. He wanted to let the world know that she was his and his alone. But he was too angry to think straight.

At that moment, Theresa took him by the hand, and they continued to dance.

## CHAPTER 18



*A*s they glided across the dance floor, Theresa couldn't help but notice the lingering tension in Devlin's frame. The incident with the man who had danced with her weighed heavily on her mind, and she knew she had to address it, even if it risked dampening the enchantment of the evening. She was so happy to see him at first, but what just happened could be a rift she wanted to bridge together immediately.

"That man has done nothing to you," Theresa told him, trying not to sound as if she were scolding him.

She couldn't understand his behavior. For the past two years, he behaved as if she didn't even exist, and now, suddenly, she was not allowed to converse or dance with another man. It boggled the mind. She couldn't figure out what he wanted, and it was driving her insane.

"No one touches my wife," he murmured back as they were dancing, but she could hear the fury in his tone, subdued only by the sheer knowledge that

they weren't alone.

He was staring right at her, and initially, she could see the rage of his anger like a fire burning inside of him, threatening to consume them both. But upon a second glance, she noticed something else. Possessiveness was a sign that someone cared. Deeply cared. But she did not appreciate being treated like a material possession or told how she should act.

"I'm not a thing that you possess," she snapped back, trying to keep her voice under control. Fortunately, the dance allowed them to spend much time facing each other closely, so she could tell him everything that was on her mind. "I'm your wife. I'm a living being, someone who needed you during those two years when you had no idea whether someone was touching me or not. You just didn't care enough to reach out, and now, you pretend that you do?"

She had no idea that all of this would flow out of her like an avalanche of emotions. But now that the dam had broken, she couldn't stop it. She wanted to tell him everything that lay upon her heart like the heaviest of burdens. She wanted him to know how many nights she had spent in her bed crying, wondering if he would ever come. He never came. Not until she had finally come to terms with the fact that their marriage was not a real marriage at all.

"Not a single letter, Devlin," she complained to him, her voice under control, but inside of her, she was brimming with passion, with rage, and with emotion. There was the strangest amalgamation of sensations inside of her,

and they were governing her now. Her mind had stopped functioning for a moment, allowing these sensations to lead the way. “You didn’t inquire whether I was alive or dead, let alone what I was doing. And now, you dare come to me, announcing to the world that I am yours?”

The thought filled her with passion unlike anything she had ever felt before. Theresa’s eyes welled up with tears out of fear and frustration as she stared into Devlin’s anguished face. She refused to look away even if her tears did start to stream down her face. She refused to be ashamed of her own emotions, those very same emotions that he was the cause of.

They stood in the midst of a heated argument, their emotions swirling like a tempestuous storm. Devlin’s anger burned bright, his possessiveness casting a shadow over what she thought would be a peaceful coming together. But now she knew better than that.

“I cannot bear the thought of anyone touching you but me,” he said, grinding his teeth as his features contorted with a volatile mix of rage and hurt. She figured he would be shouting these words if they were alone to make his point. But he forgot one thing, and that was that shouting did not make something more truthful.

“Controlling someone isn’t love,” she urged as her heart ached at those words. She knew that he was confused by his own emotions. She knew it well because she felt the same way. They were walking on slippery ground here with neither of them knowing exactly what to do.

The music brought them together. His entire body was stiff. She knew he was angry, and she didn't know how to calm him down. That was the worst thing. When the music stopped, all she wanted to do was have a conversation with him somewhere away from all the hustle and bustle of the main hall, and Devlin seemed to have read her mind.

“Meet me in the sunroom in five minutes,” he told her, leaning over to her ear so that no one else would hear him.

Before she could reply with anything to that, he had turned away from her and headed immediately for the refreshments table where he grabbed a glass of liquor and downed it in one thirsty gulp. She thought he would turn around to wait for her to go there with her, but he stormed towards the door, elbowing his way through the crowd of people as he did so, and a moment later, he was gone.

Theresa's mind was beside itself. This outburst didn't seem to make any sense. Now was the time he chose to be jealous and possessive? She wanted to scoff loudly, but she bit her tongue in time and remained quiet, inhaling deeply several times to pacify her racing mind and a heart that threatened to jump right out of her very chest.



“All right then,” Theresa said the moment she had entered the sunroom as she closed the door behind her. “Do you mind telling me what all this is —”

Only, she wasn't allowed to continue. Devlin had grabbed her into his arms, his grip firm but gentle as he pulled her closer to himself and crashed his lips against hers. Nothing could have prepared her for this onslaught of desire and yearning that came with his lips upon hers. It all happened in an instant, but that was enough for her body to react immediately. She didn't even know when she did it, but her arms flew around his neck in that same possessive manner which she had been trying to subdue so desperately. The truth was she hated the idea of him spending a single second in another woman's company, just like he hated her dancing with another man.

As if he were able to read her mind, he pulled away only for a single second. She thought he would use it to take a breath, but instead, he spoke.

"I will show you now why no man can touch you ever again," he murmured when another kiss stole her breath away.

He lifted her up into his arms. His irritation with her had disappeared completely, just like hers did. There was nothing she cared about more than being in his arms right now. He took her to the sofa and sat her there. Then, he knelt before her as she watched what on earth he was about to do. His hands were on her thighs now, gently spreading them apart.

"Devlin?" she gasped, assuming what his plan was.



But it was too crazy, too risky. Someone might stumble onto them and see them in this act. Yet that actually added to the sense of urgency and longing. She didn't want him to stop. Not now, not ever.

“You don't mean to —”

“Shh!” he hushed her into silence, interrupting her once again.

Only, she didn't mind one bit. His fingers slid her knickers down her legs, and immediately, his mouth found the hidden bundle of nerves that had been trembling for longer than she even knew. He lifted his gaze only to stare at her right in the eyes, and all she could do was be at the mercy of this man.

“You are mine,” he said, and at the very moment, she felt his tongue stroking over her most sensitive flesh.

She immediately gasped, her entire body tightening at this, but instead of pulling away, she spread her legs even more, offering herself up to him. His tongue knew exactly what it needed to do to make her body writhe with pleasure. He was flicking her swollen bud tenderly. She could feel the warmth of his breath spill all over her naked flesh. Then, he took her into his mouth and sucked slowly at first, tantalizingly so.

She gasped more loudly this time, pressing her hand to her mouth. She didn't

want to make noise because someone might hear them. But the thought dissipated inside her mind. It was irrelevant. Sensation exploded inside of her. Warmth spilled throughout her body. Pleasure unfurled, spreading through her, radiating outward. And with all of this, she still wanted more. She couldn't get enough of his tongue, his lips.

He slid his tongue inside of her ever so slightly, the wicked man, knowing well what that would do to her. She grabbed a handful of his hair and tugged at it, but all she wanted to do was make sure that he didn't leave, not before she was brought to the conclusion of this thrilling act.

Her desire was beyond description. An intense longing filled her being, making her oblivious to anything else. She bit her lower lip in an effort to suffocate a moan as his tongue flicked over her in quick, rhythmical pulses. She lost all control. There was nothing she could do about it but surrender to this overwhelming emotion.

Something inside of her gripped at her stomach and clenched. Heat unfurled, molten hot lava, as she brought his head closer to the apex of her thighs. He was right where she wanted him, and she showed him that. She looked down, only able to see his hair and forehead. His eyes were closed. The sight was so utterly carnal that it heightened the sensation that blossomed inside of her.

It hit her like a tidal wave, washing away all doubts and uncertainties, at least for the time being. But he didn't stop.

*What was all this?* she wondered to herself. How was it possible that every time he showed her more, he brought her more pleasure. Each sensation assured her that there was more he could show her, more he could give her, and she was eager to have it all.

She finally released his locks from her grip, inhaling deeply. But instead of getting up, he sat on the sofa next to her, wordlessly, and took her into his arms. She had no idea what to think of this. But to be quite honest, it didn't matter. Some moments were meant to be stolen and taken as they were without any overthinking. This was one of them.

Theresa closed her eyes and inhaled the masculine scene that oozed off of him. It soothed her although she still trembled in his arms. The thoughts about the true meaning of this act were lost upon her right this very moment. She would think of it later. Right now, she would rather get lost in his embrace.

## CHAPTER 19



Theresa nestled comfortably against Devlin on the sofa in the sunroom, their bodies entwined as they relished the warmth of their embrace. There was darkness all around them, but instead of evoking fear, it enveloped them in a serene ambiance, promising to keep their secret.

Devlin couldn't have imagined that this was where they would end up. This time, he was unable to control his rage upon seeing that man drool over his wife, and he was one inch away from planting the man a facer. Fortunately for him, Theresa was more understanding than he thought she would be. She wanted to find out the cause of this behavior as if she couldn't recognize it immediately.

He looked down at her. She had her eyes closed as if she were lost in some kind of reverie. The last thing he wanted to do was stir her from it, but he had to. With a sigh, he reluctantly broke the tranquility of the moment.

"We should be leaving soon," he told her, murmuring, and the moment she

heard his voice, her eyes opened.

“Must we?” she asked, shifting slightly as her fingers traced delicate patterns on his chest. That was where he wanted her hand to remain forever, close to his heart.

He liked her reply. A smile tugged at the corner of his lips as he brushed a stray lock of her hair behind her ear. “I’m afraid it wouldn’t do us any good to be caught *in flagrante* like this.”

This time, she chuckled. “Oh, very well,” she said, pouting playfully. “I suppose all good things must come to an end.”

“Well... not necessarily,” he told her, his eyes sparkling as he gazed upon her while she got up from his embrace and sat upward next to him. Already, he felt a longing emptiness in his arms where she was a moment ago.

She raised an eyebrow, her curiosity peaking. “What do you mean?”

A mischievous glint danced in his eyes as he leaned closer to her in an effort to inhale more of her tantalizing smell. “I propose that we can continue if you join me for dinner at our old home tomorrow night at 8 o’clock.” His voice was a low, seductive murmur.

She feigned surprise, her hand pressed to her chest slightly theatrically, but that was the whole point. “An invitation, Your Grace? Or is it perhaps an order?” she teased, a playful smile on her lips.

He locked his gaze with hers. To be quite honest, he could put her on his back and take her back there without a single word of protest on her part. She belonged back with him. He had made a mistake not acknowledging the importance she would have in his life, but now, he was eager to rectify that mistake in any way he could.

“Consider it both,” he teased her back. “An order that I hope you’ll willingly accept.”

She laughed at his play of words, a melodious sound he found he could not get enough of. “How could I refuse such a proposition, Your Grace?” she asked.

He smirked at the way she was addressing him. He liked it more than he was willing to admit for more reasons than one. As they reluctantly untangled themselves from their embrace, Theresa stood and straightened her dress. Devlin rose as well, his eyes never leaving her as he reached out to take her hand.

Devlin and Theresa stepped back into the bustling ballroom, their presence immediately noticed by the curious gazes of the guests. The elegant music

continued to fill the air, mingling with the murmur of conversations and the gentle rustle of gowns.

As they made their way through the crowd, heads turned, whispers fluttering like delicate feathers. Devlin held his head high, his arm possessively wrapped around Theresa's waist, exuding an air of confidence that drew the attention of onlookers.

He noticed that she clung to his arm, grateful for his support. Pride swelled up inside of him as he guided her at a steady pace, not a single trace of that rage inside of him. Their steps were graceful, synchronized as if they were engaged in an intricate dance within the grand ballroom.

He didn't see that blasted lordling who thought he could steal Theresa away from him. It was for the better. He didn't want to revert to that fury again, not now that Theresa was so content by his side. The atmosphere crackled with anticipation, the air thick with unspoken questions and judgments. But in that moment, Devlin and Theresa found solace in each other's eyes, their silent promises echoing through the crowded ballroom.



Theresa stood in the doorway of her new home. *Home*. She wasn't sure if she should call it that. The truth was, she didn't know if she had a home any longer. But now, she was supposed to go back where a flood of bad memories would wash over her, threatening to drown her.

Maybe it won't be so bad, she thought to herself. Then, she quickly frowned and shook her head. How could it not be bad? The memories that resided within those walls were painful and etched deep within her soul. Every step she took there felt like a battle against the haunting echoes of past betrayals and shattered trust. Now, she was supposed to awaken the ghosts of the past, those same ghosts she felt she had laid to rest with her arrival to London. And most importantly, she still wasn't certain whether Devlin had earned her trust completely. It was a long and arduous road they were treading on, and there were still so many unknowns, so many things that could go wrong. It frightened her immensely.

With a heart that fluttered at the very mention of Devlin's name, but at the same time fearful that this love might prove to be yet another heartbreak, she entered the carriage. The journey was quick, but she felt as if it lasted an entire eternity when the carriage finally came to a halt.

She was still seated inside before the imposing iron gates that guarded the entrance to the old estate. The moon cast a soft glow on the surrounding grounds, creating an ethereal atmosphere. Her heart fluttered with a mix of nervousness and anticipation as she finally managed to find her way out of the comfort of the carriage and head for the main gate, hesitating slightly before pushing it open.

As she stepped onto the cobblestone path, memories flooded her mind. This place, once destined to be her home, now stood as a relic of what could have been. The grandeur of the estate, the lush gardens, and the elegant architecture whispered of a life that had slipped through her fingers.



A pang of sadness tugged at Theresa's heart as she approached the front door. She couldn't help but wonder what her life would have been like if Devlin had remained here with her. Would they be a happy family already? Would they have children? If they did, would they have a little girl who would look like her and a little boy who would be his father's mirror image?

Before she could even knock, the door swung open, and there stood Devlin. His eyes were alight with warmth that seemed to melt away all her worries, at least for the time being. He looked dashing in his royal brown jacket and pants with a pristine white shirt, the collar of which stood sharply around his neck. At that moment, she was glad that she chose her finest gown, a sparkling sky blue with daintily embroidered hems. Around her neck, there was a pearl necklace, a small addition which did not take away from the elegance of the gown, but rather added to it.

"Theresa... welcome," he said instead of a greeting, his voice filled with genuine affection. "I hope that you will see that there is still some magic left in this old place."

She didn't know what to say to that. She smiled, her breath getting stuck in her throat as she stepped inside, taking his offered hand for support. The grand foyer, which she remembered lacking in any refineries, had now been meticulously restored. The flickering glow of a million little candles illuminated the entire space, casting a soft, warm glow on the ornate chandeliers and the polished marble floors.

“What is all this?” she gasped unexpectedly, her hand pressed to her chest in a state of surprise. “This is not the house I remember.”

A smile played on his lips as he pulled her hand in an effort to follow him. She obeyed without a word, relishing what she was seeing. He was guiding her deeper and deeper into the house. Memory flooded her in an instant. She remembered this place well.

“I have a confession to make,” he suddenly said, his voice laden with sincerity.

“What is it?” she asked, still leaning on his arm. She had no intention of letting go. Not yet, at least.

“I invited you for dinner tonight to give you a glimpse of what could have been,” he confessed. “This house as it is now, reborn and full of life once again, could have been ours. I know it is my fault things didn’t turn out that way.”

Theresa was overwhelmed by emotions. She had no idea he would go to such lengths to make a point he had been trying to make all along. Now, he had managed to create a crucial moment which encompassed so much significance. Little by little, it was becoming obvious to her that he wasn’t indifferent towards her.

But still, she could not just throw away the last two years and pretend like they never happened. That was impossible, mostly because those two years left scars on her heart and soul, and now, she was afraid to open up the doors which she had finally decided to close. She was starting to learn to live alone when Devlin barged back into her life demanding things. She didn't like that, but at the same time, there was this other side to him, the side that filled the entire house with candles and created a rose petal path to the dining room.

“You don't have to say anything,” he added quickly. She wondered if that was because it seemed like she didn't know what to say. Whatever the reason behind his words, she was grateful that she didn't have to respond.

Together, they continued to explore the grand halls and elegant rooms on their way to the dining hall, following a dainty path of red rose petals.

“This is so beautiful, Devlin,” she couldn't resist telling him how she truly felt about all of this.

“I was hoping you would like it,” he smiled as they were both feeling a growing sense of contentment.

She couldn't help but imagine the life they could have had. She quickly banished the thought because it was dangerous to ponder such things. They could lead to heartbreak. Then, he led her to the dining hall where dinner was already served.

As they stepped inside, Theresa's breath caught in her throat. The room was beautifully set with flickering candlelight casting a warm glow over the polished silverware and delicate china. A bouquet of fresh flowers adorned the center of the table, their vibrant colors adding a touch of life to the grandeur.

"Please, have a seat," Devlin said, pulling out a chair for Theresa in a most graceful gesture. She settled into the plush upholstery, her eyes wandering about the room in utter awe.

Once she was seated, Devlin took his place across from her, his gaze fixated on her with an intensity that sent shivers down her spine. There was a determination about him, the likes of which she hadn't seen before.

"My goal tonight was to create a special evening," he confessed. "I hope I will be successful in that."

She smiled, her heart tugging in all directions, breaking apart at the seams. She knew she would not be able to resist this man for much longer — not if he kept this up, charming her in these unexpected ways.

*Stay focused, Theresa, she thought to herself. He needs to earn your trust first and then your heart.*

That seemed easy enough in theory. But she was not living her life in theoretical terms but rather in a world where one defied expectations, where boundaries were surpassed, where promises were broken only to be whispered again. Whatever happened this evening, she knew that the memory of tonight would be forever etched in her mind.

## CHAPTER 20



“*T*his is all for me?” Theresa gasped, watching the soft flickering glow of the candlelight reflecting off the exquisite crystal chandeliers.

“All for you,” he nodded as they were both seated at the long mahogany dining table which stood as the centerpiece of the chamber, adorned with a pristine white tablecloth that cascaded gracefully all the way to the floor.

He had made sure that not a single detail was left to chance. There was sparkling silver cutlery polished to perfection. There was fine bone china. There was crystal glassware, each piece meticulously placed on the table to be in perfect alignment with the rest. He even added delicate porcelain floral centerpieces which exuded a fragrant aroma, something his grandmother had advised him to do.

He turned to the servant next to him. “Stella, you may serve the first course.”

Stella, dressed impeccably in traditional livery, moved silently and swiftly, joined by another young woman who had the same job. They were presented with a delicately prepared consommé garnished with freshly picked herbs.

“This looks absolutely delicious,” Theresa pointed out, unable to take her eyes off of the meal as they were being served.

The soup was followed by a wide array of delicious dishes including a succulent roast, platters of tender poached salmon decorated with lemon slices and dill, side dishes of buttered asparagus, and crisp, golden potatoes.

“My goodness!” Theresa exclaimed. “I don’t think I will be able to eat all of this!”

He chuckled. “What sort of a host would I be if I left my guest hungry?”

“Not a very good one, indeed,” she smiled back.

“And even more importantly, you aren’t my guest,” he added, not resisting to opportunity engage Theresa in a conversation that might reveal more about the way she felt although he was hoping that he managed to prove a certain point in the sunroom the previous evening.

“I’m not?” she asked, pretending that she didn’t understand the meaning behind this.

“Of course not,” he confirmed. “This was supposed to be your home. How can you be a guest in your own home?”

She smiled at his words, but there was melancholy in there as well. “I don’t think I feel quite at home anywhere anymore to be quite honest.”

He tilted his head. It wasn’t where he hoped this evening’s conversation would lead, but he preferred a heart-to-heart conversation to small talk, especially with Theresa.

“Why is that?” he inquired curiously, his voice warm and inviting.

She inhaled deeply, looking at her plate which was half full. They had both taken a break from eating, but the food was truly delectable. However, now, he wanted to focus on his company rather than the food.

“Well, I am no longer my father’s daughter,” she said with a shrug as if she were indifferent to the idea, but it was obvious that she wasn’t. “And I am apparently not my husband’s wife either.”



“I am here to rectify that,” he reminded her tenderly.

She smiled more of that melancholic smile, and now, more so than ever, he wanted to jump from his seat, rush over to her, and wrap her in his arms in an effort to hide her away from all the hardships of the world. He could not allow her to feel this way although he knew well that he was the cause of it. This made her sorrow even more painful to him.

“Words can’t repair the past,” she told him.

“Only actions can,” he agreed. “I have been trying, Theresa. Really.”

“You were trying really hard not to hit that man last night, I could tell,” she suddenly switched up the conversation and started to tease him, something he wasn’t expecting.

In fact, it came as such a surprise that his eyes widened in shock at her words then he burst into a chuckle. “I really was,” he admitted. “He doesn’t even know how close he came to wearing the imprint of my fist right on his nose.”

“And yet the man has done nothing,” she reminded him.

“He knows what he’s done,” he smirked. “And say whatever you want, but

you are *my* wife, and I am *your* husband.”

“My husband?” she echoed, still teasing him. “Strange. I don’t remember having one of those.”

“All right, all right,” he laughed. “I deserved that one. But just that one.”

“And you are modest as well — I didn’t know that,” she replied playfully, picking up her fork and taking a bite of the asparagus.

“There are lots of things that you don’t know about me,” he countered. “Things I would love to show you, like that one in the sunroom.”

He loved how she immediately blushed at the memory of what took place there. *Good, that’s what I want you to feel*, he thought to himself. He wanted her to think about him and his kisses and caresses all day long. The only way he could get her to do this was to actually show her what it was she had been missing all this time. It was all his fault. He wasn’t trying to escape from that notion but rather to show her that it wasn’t the man he was.

He was also captivated by her shy demeanor, how she was able to overcome it at times, teasing him and being playful. “You are most beautiful when you blush like that. You truly rival even a blossoming rose.”

Her eyes widened at that unexpected compliment. She lowered her gaze, a coy smile on her lips which she couldn't hide even if she wanted to. "You flatter me with your kind words."

He didn't like it that sometimes, she would revert back to being slightly official and distanced when she spoke to him, but he tried to keep in mind that she was merely endeavoring to be cautious around him. He could understand that need to keep herself protected from a heartbreak.

At the same time, he realized that he knew so frightfully little about her and what made her happy. Genuinely interested in getting to know the woman who was seated opposite him, who was still so eager to keep her heart locked away from him, he continued their conversation in a slightly different direction.

"You know very well that I have come to admire your elegance and grace, but I know so very little about your interests and passions. I know that you like to read, we've established that already with the Shakespeare issue. But... what else brings you joy, Theresa?"

Not expecting this question as he took on this wild ride of questions that seemed to come from all directions, he noticed that her eyes lit up with enthusiasm at this particular question. "You want to know about my interests?" she sounded incredulous.

“Yes,” he nodded with a smile. “Please, share them with me.”



Theresa wondered if his question was truly genuine. One look into his eyes assured her it was. “I’ve always found solace and inspiration in the world of literature. Reading novels and poetry and engaging in thought-provoking discussions about a variety of literary works brings me immense pleasure.”

“I’ve noticed that,” he smiled with a nod. “Especially when you prove a point.”

She chuckled. “You questioned me on Shakespeare. That was a travesty!” she exclaimed, her eyes wide in mock shock which made both of them chuckle out loud.

“I probably should have known better than to do that,” he admitted, once they stopped laughing, but they were still unable to stop smiling. That was impossible.

“Indeed,” she affirmed.

“Shakespeare is untouchable then,” he grinned. “But what else do you enjoy?”

She thought about it for a moment then she continued. “I have always enjoyed nature and flowers. I also have a fondness for sketching and painting, especially landscapes and botanical illustrations.”

He was captivated by the tone of her voice and how she spoke of the things she liked. He wondered if she would ever talk about him with such sparkle in her eyes. “A lover of literature and the arts. That is a perfect combination in a woman.”

“It is?” she asked, now putting the fork down because food was the last thing on her mind right now.

“Most certainly,” he confirmed. “In fact, there is something I would like to show you.”

He got up and walked over to her, taking her by the hand. “Will you accompany me, please?”

“Where?” she asked, taking his hand but not getting up yet.

“Somewhere,” he teased.

She pouted a little playfully then she acquiesced. Curiosity won over.

Silently, he led her out of the dining hall, passing through a long, darkened corridor, then entering the library she remembered well. The scent of aged books permeated the air. She felt in awe of all these books around her. He continued to guide her through a labyrinth of stacked shelves until he finally stopped.

She watched him release her hand from his grip then retrieve a beautifully bound book, its pages yellowed with the passage of time. He turned to her with a gleam of anticipation, revealing what he was holding in his hands. She gasped when she saw the title.

“Don Quixote?” she asked with a trembling voice although no confirmation of this was necessary. He just nodded as she took the book into her hands. She touched the cover with deep reverence. “This is something I’ve never even dreamed of holding in my hands. The first edition of Miguel de Cervantes’ masterpiece.”

She could feel his eyes on her, not leaving her even for a single moment. “I thought you might appreciate this.”

She caressed the book with the tips of her fingers. “It is utterly astonishing how a book can hold so much history within the confines of its pages.” She looked up at him. “May I open it?”

“Of course,” he nodded.

She opened the book, reading the first couple of sentences, her voice a symphony of admiration for Cervantes' humor and the enduring romance contained in the pages that took place entirely in the mind of the protagonist, whilst he fought his imaginary windmills. When she stopped, she realized that Devlin had been listening to her breathlessly. He smiled at her, his eyes filled with warmth. He had never heard her speak like that. The echo of Cervantes' timeless tale awakened something in her, and he wanted to see more of it.

“Do you like it?” he asked although the answer was more than obvious.

“I have no words for it,” she replied, reluctantly closing the book. “This should be in a museum somewhere. It is too valuable.”

He shrugged. “What good is a book in a museum? A book should be read, not looked at.”

“You're right,” she smiled as she walked back to the shelf and placed it back tenderly as if placing a little bird with a broken wing back into its nest.

At that moment, she reached for another book which seemed to be too high up for her to reach.

“Should I help you?” he asked.

“No, no, I’m fine,” she shook her head as her entire body stretched to reach the book she had set her mind on.

But that is where something unexpected happened. Devlin had no idea that the bookshelf had pried itself loose from the attachments to the wall. As she gripped at a shelf underneath the one she was trying to fetch, he noticed it shake slightly.

“Theresa, watch out for...” he tried to warn her, rushing to her, but it was too late, and all he could see was the shelf separating itself from the wall and the books falling down in rows around her as she lifted her hands in an effort to shelter herself from the onslaught.



## CHAPTER 21



*I*t all happened in a matter of seconds. Theresa's instincts immediately took over, and she swiftly moved away from the falling shelf, managing to avoid a catastrophe. However, as fate would have it, one of the heavy tomes grazed her foot before crashing onto the floor.

"Ah!" she exclaimed as sharp pain shot through her.

Devlin immediately rushed to her side, concern etched in every single line of his face as he leaned over her on the floor. "Good heavens, Theresa!" she heard him say. He was as incredulous as she was about what just happened. "Are you all right?"

Theresa winced, reaching for her injured foot. It felt hot to the touch although that sharp pain had subsided, and in its place, there was now a dull ache which pulsed stronger and stronger every time it washed over her. She was certain that within the hour, her foot would be swollen, and the pain would be unbearable.

“I managed to move away,” she explained, looking at the volumes and volumes of books which now lay scattered across the floor. “But the books hit my foot.”

“Does it hurt?” he asked, sounding concerned.

“Yes,” she nodded, pressing her cold palm against the hot, pulsating ache.

Gently, he supported Theresa, guiding her to a nearby chaise lounge. He knelt down to inspect her foot, noting the immediate swelling. “I am so sorry, Theresa. Let me fetch a cloth and some cold water to help alleviate the pain and reduce the swelling.”

Theresa didn't say anything to that as another onslaught of pain washed over her, and she hissed through it. That made him rush immediately. She watched him rush to his study and return with a damp cloth and a basin of cold water.

He then knelt before Theresa again, tenderly placing the cloth on her injured foot. “Please forgive me for this mishap, Theresa. I never imagined that a simple visit to the library would result in such an unfortunate accident.”

Theresa offered him a reassuring smile, despite the discomfort she was experiencing. “Do not blame yourself, Devlin. It was purely an accident.

Besides, reading the first edition of anything written by Miguel de Cervantes is worth any pain.”

This made him smile. “I’m glad to hear you say that, but still, reading should be a pleasurable safe activity, not an activity where one is in danger of losing one’s foot.”

She chuckled at his words. “It is hardly that bad.”

“Oh, but is the book damaged?” she exclaimed, taking it tenderly into her hands and inspecting it.

“That hardly matters,” he assured her.

“How could it not matter?” she gasped. “It is the first edition!”

He smiled. “It is merely an item someone has ascribed high value to. But like I said, what is its value if it is kept concealed from eyes hungry to read it and kept high on a bookshelf?”

Then, Devlin’s brow furrowed with worry, looking at her foot, determined to do whatever he could to assist Theresa. “I will send for the physician immediately, just to ensure that there are no serious injuries. In the meantime,

please allow me to bring you some tea or perhaps a pain-relieving salve.”

“I hardly think there is a need for a physician,” she shook her head. “The last thing I want to be is a burden. I shall just —” she said as she started to get up, but he wouldn’t allow her, instead grabbing her by the waist and pulling her back down.

“Where do you think you’re going, miss?” he asked playfully, but she could hear the determination in his voice as well.

“Home?” she smiled.

“No,” he shook his head, and one look into those eyes assured her, he meant it. “I can’t in all good conscience let you go back like this. What if becomes worse during the night? What if your ankle is sprained or even worse, broken? No, no, absolutely no chance of you returning back to your current abode.”

It didn’t escape her attention that he didn’t use the word *home*. He referred to her new home as *her current abode*. She had no idea why she liked it so much, but she decided not to dwell on it too much. Her foot was hurting her more now. He was right. It might be more serious than she thought.

“Are you sure?” she wondered. “I really don’t want to be a bother.”

“Nonsense,” he waved his hand dismissively. “You could never be a bother. Now, I’ll go send for the physician; he lives nearby, so he should be here soon. Also, I’ll have the servants send some tea.”

Theresa nodded gratefully. “Tea would be lovely, thank you. And perhaps a cushion to elevate my foot.”

Devlin nodded and hurried off to attend to Theresa’s requests. Soon, he returned with a soft cushion to support her injured foot. He adjusted it on the *chaise lounge* carefully, holding her foot almost reverently in his hands. Sitting beside her, Devlin offered a comforting presence as they waited for the arrival of the physician. She couldn’t believe that this had happened. It was such a stroke of bad luck.

“I’m so sorry,” he apologized again.

She wanted to reassure him. “It’s really not your fault, Devlin. You couldn’t have known that the shelf was loose and that the books were probably too heavy for it. It actually could have been much worse than just an ankle.”

“That’s right,” he nodded pensively.

“It’s just one of those unfortunate accidents,” she added, and at that moment,

the tea arrived.

They both watched in silence as the servant girl placed the tray on a small coffee table in front of them, proceeding to pour the steaming hot tea into two dainty cups. Once it was all done, she excused herself barely audibly and left them alone again. He took the cup and brought it to her. She smiled.

“I’m not paralyzed, thank God,” she teased. “I can reach and fetch my own tea.”

“You really aren’t used to someone doing things for you,” he pointed out, urging her to just take the cup from his hand which she eventually did.

“I suppose not,” she admitted, enjoying the lavender aroma that was added to the tea blend. It soothed her, especially after such an unpleasant event.

“Well, maybe you—” he started, but he wasn’t allowed to finish, as the knock on the door interrupted him.

Their eyes darted to the door.

“Yes?” he called out, and a moment later, the butler peered in.

“Your Grace, the physician is here,” he announced.

“Send him in,” Devlin nodded, turning to Theresa with that same look of apprehension and concern etched on his handsome face.



“Thank you for coming so quickly, Doctor Anderson,” Devlin shook hands with the physician, whose one hand had a firm grasp on Devlin’s while the other clutched at a black, leather bag.

Theresa had never been ill in her life. At least, not so that she would need a physician. As little girls, her mother would take very good care of both her and her sister, and as they grew older, they learned to take care of themselves. Luck would have it that they never needed professional medical care. That was why Theresa was both curious as well as apprehensive regarding that black leather bag and what it might contain.

“I suppose this is the patient,” Doctor Anderson glanced at a lying Theresa, who tried to prop herself up, but the man shook his head at her.

“Please remain as you are most comfortable, Your Grace,” he urged.

Theresa wondered if this man knew she was Devlin’s wife. He must have. Whoever went to fetch him must have mentioned that it was the Duke’s wife

who needed medical help. He sat down by her side and gently took her foot into his hands. Devlin had already taken her shoe off, and although the man was a physician, Theresa felt a little odd about another man looking at her foot. The ridiculousness of the thought almost made her chuckle out loud.

He then gripped at where she found it very painful, and she gasped silently. He lifted his gaze to meet hers.

“Does it hurt?” he asked.

“Yes,” she nodded. “More now than an hour ago.”

“Well,” he said, gently putting her foot back on the pillow then proceeding to adjust his glasses, “it is just a minor sprain although I’m certain it seems much more serious to you because you are the one feeling the pain. What I would advise is to avoid putting any weight on your foot and lots of bed rest for a few days to help the healing process.”

“What about the pain?” This time, Devlin interrupted although that was also the question Theresa herself wanted to ask because she doubted she would be able to fall asleep tonight.

“I shall write you a prescription for a herbal infusion with willow bark tea and also for a topical ointment with arnica that should provide localized



relief. What you are doing now, rest and elevation, is exactly what you need to continue with for the next couple of days as this will reduce swelling and promote healing. Finally,” he turned to Devlin for this part of his instructions, “you could gently massage the area with oils or liniments which will improve blood circulation and also alleviate the pain.”

Theresa couldn't imagine Devlin massaging her foot, yet he immediately nodded. At that moment, Doctor Anderson got up, scribbled something onto a piece of paper and handed it to Devlin.

“Thank you, Doctor Anderson,” he smiled, shaking the man's hand yet again.

“You shall feel better in no time.” The doctor turned to Theresa, nodding at her. “I shall find my way out. Good night.”

They both waited until he closed the door, and they were alone again. Devlin turned to her and spoke immediately. “You shall stay here with me, so I can look after you. This is the most comfortable environment for your recovery.”

Theresa wasn't expecting this. She hesitated for a moment, touched by his concern, but at the same time, she was reluctant to impose. “I know you are doing this because you feel guilty, but I assure you, there is no need for that. I'm not holding you accountable for this odd accident, so you don't have to go through so much trouble. I can manage just fine on my own at my home.”

His eyes softened at her. “I would be lying if I said I don’t feel guilty. I do. So, please allow me to ease my conscience. It would bring me great peace of mind knowing you are well cared for under my roof. Besides, you would be all alone there, with just the servants, and you will have me here in this home which is equipped with all the necessary comforts to aid you in your recovery.”

She watched him, earnestness oozing out of his every breath. She wanted to stay here. She could not deny it to herself any longer. She wanted to be by his side, to be in the same house with him. But was it smart? Would it lead to another heartache?

After a brief pause, she finally relented. “Very well. I shall accept your most generous offer, but only on the condition that I do not inconvenience you in any way.”

He smiled. It was obvious that he was grateful for her decision. “You could never be an inconvenience, Theresa. I assure you of that.”

She smiled. “Then perhaps you could help me to the guest room?”

“Of course,” he nodded, rushing to her side and taking her into his arms as if she were as light as a feather. “But I shall take you to your own chamber.”

She felt his strong arms underneath her body. He gripped her hard, keeping her close to him. She wrapped her arm around his neck. They were so close, she could see the stubble of his beard. She had a sudden urge to caress it with her fingers, but she resisted the temptation.

And so, Devlin carefully assisted Theresa to her feet, supporting her as they made their way out of the library and towards the bedrooms. Theresa couldn't help but feel a mix of gratitude and a growing sense of closeness to Devlin, appreciating his genuine care and willingness to make her recovery as comfortable as possible.

## CHAPTER 22



*“A* bookshelf almost fell on you??” Devlin’s grandmother gasped the following morning as she was having her morning tea in the bedroom which was now occupied by Theresa.

Confined to the comfort of Devlin’s home, Theresa was telling his grandmother the details of her odd injury. Maybe confined was not the right word she would use. To be quite honest, he offered for her to stay here, and she accepted with much pleasure. She nodded in response to the grandmother’s echoing words as the morning light behind her filtered through the lace curtains.

“But I assure you, it is not as dire as it would seem,” Theresa was quick to reassure this regal woman she had always liked, who was now adorned in a gown of rich brocade, her graying hair elegantly styled beneath a lace trimmed cap. There was genuine concern etched on her face as she was seated by Theresa’s bedside.

Devlin's grandmother shook her head with a hand pressed delicately over her heart in shock. "I cannot imagine that shock," she said, "but I am so happy that it ended with only a minor sprain."

"Yes," Theresa was quick to agree. "It could have ended much worse."

Both ladies exchanged a meaningful glance as relief flooded both their features.

"Thank heavens it is not a more grievous affliction. I was so dreadfully worried when Devlin told me that Doctor Anderson was sent for yesterday evening and for you of all people."

"We were fortunate that Doctor Anderson came so quickly," Theresa said with a nod as she adjusted herself on the pillow.

"He is a good physician," Devlin's grandmother, Veronica, assured her. "You couldn't be in more skilled hands."

"I am happy to hear that," Theresa smiled. "But like I already said, there is no cause for alarm. I could have returned home last night, but Devlin insisted that —"

“Of course, he ought to insist!” the old lady interrupted her knowingly. “How could he not have checked that bookshelf? For goodness’ sake!”

“Oh, no, no,” Theresa shook her head. “You cannot blame him for such an accident. It was entirely my fault. I was reaching up beyond my means, and I think I even pulled the shelf onto me somewhat, making it more my fault than his really.”

The old lady tilted her head a little as if there was something that Theresa was not telling her that she couldn’t hide well.

“If you are in any pain, we should send for Doctor Anderson to come and see you again,” Veronica urged.

“There will be no need,” Theresa smiled reassuringly. “I have already brought commotion into the serenity of your lives with my presence here. I promise I shall not be a nuisance for long.”

“Nonsense!” the old lady waved her bejeweled hand dismissively. “You are absolutely no nuisance to any of us, and I shall not have you speak that way. In fact, I think Devlin enjoys having you here almost as much as I do,” she chuckled this time.

Theresa returned the smile. “You are most kind to say so.”

Devlin's grandmother observed Theresa with a mixture of relief and admiration then she spoke again. "You know, my grandson is a truly remarkable young man, but like any man, he can be a bit... lost. I hope you know what I mean."

"I'm not certain I follow," Theresa smiled. She spoke the truth although she could venture an educated guess as to where the lady was aiming.

Because Theresa always felt a certain connection with this woman, who seemed very eager for her grandson to finally marry and have children which she would proudly call her great-grandchildren. During the wedding, Veronica even approached Theresa, embraced her, and welcomed her into the family, wishing them many happy years together, filled with children's laughter, something Theresa found heartwarming. Even now, as the old lady sat opposite her, Theresa could feel that same connection burn with the same intensity as before. Veronica liked her, and she wanted Theresa to be a real wife for Devlin in every manner of the word. A part of Theresa wanted that as well. But another part was still afraid.

The woman leaned over to her and took her by the hand, patting it sympathetically. "Oh, you shouldn't take the ramblings of an old lady all that seriously," she said playfully, but something assured Theresa that it was because the Dowager wanted to keep the meaning of her own words a secret for a little while longer. "Just remember that you are a cherished member of our family, my dear. We worry about your well-being, especially now with what has happened, and I consider both myself and Devlin personally

responsible for not having taken better care of our library.”

“I don’t think it is your fault at all,” Theresa argued again.

“You just focus on rest for the time being.” The Dowager did not comment on the previous issue again. “You need to recuperate, and we shall do our best to make you feel at home and welcome here. And should you require anything at all, do not hesitate to summon us.”

Theresa felt overwhelmed by the gesture, her eyes shimmering with gratitude. “Your kindness touches my heart, Your Grace. I shall certainly reach out if the need arises. For now, I shall surrender to the embrace of rest. I cannot image being bedridden for days on end, to be honest, but if that is what I need to do, so it shall be.”

The Dowager nodded. “Excellent, my dear. Take utmost care and know that we are here for whatever you need.”

With a final nod of reassurance, Devlin’s grandmother departed, leaving behind a sense of tranquility in the room. Theresa settled deeper into the embrace of the soft blankets, her sprained ankle elevated on a pile of plump cushions. She could feel the throbbing subsiding, replaced by a gentle, dull ache.



As she gazed out of the window, her eyes were drawn to the vibrant tapestry of colors in the garden below. The scent of freshly blooming roses wafted through the air, carried on a gentle breeze. It was a vivid reminder of the beauty that lay just beyond her reach.

Her thoughts drifted to Devlin, the kind soul who had been by her side throughout this ordeal. She felt a surge of gratitude for his unwavering support and his ability to make her feel safe and cherished. She imagined his gentle smile and the reassuring touch of his hand, offering comfort in times of distress.

As Theresa sank into a restful slumber, a gentle knock on the bedroom door stirred her from her dreams. With a soft groan, she opened her eyes and shifted slightly in bed, trying to find a comfortable position.



Devlin was standing in front of the door with a bouquet of freshly picked flowers, feeling awkward and exhilarated at the same time, unable to tell which of the two sensations were winning over.

“Yes, come in,” he heard Theresa call from the other side.

Only then did he open the door which creaked under the pressure of his desire to enter the chamber. She was lying in the bed as he expected she would be, her eyes fluttering open to meet his gaze. He offered her a warm

smile, trying to gauge if he had interrupted her much-needed rest.

“Good morning, Theresa,” he greeted her. “Did I wake you up?”

“No, no,” she assured him. “Your grandmother was just here a few moments ago. She wanted to know what happened.”

“I actually told her everything already,” he frowned.

He could understand why his grandmother would do that. She liked Theresa, and she wanted to see how long Theresa would stay here. If it was up to his grandmother, Theresa would stay here forever. To be honest, he would make the same decision if it was up to him as well.

“Are those for me?” she asked, interrupting his flow of thought, glancing at the flowers in his hands.

“Oh, yes,” he smiled, nodding. “They are. I brought these to bring you a touch of nature’s beauty into your sanctuary here.”

Her eyes widened at the gesture as she accepted the flowers into her hands. She buried her nose into the fragrant bouquet and closed her eyes as she inhaled deeply, relishing every single petal of every single flower. When she

opened her eyes, her voice that flowed was filled with gratitude.

“That is most kind of you,” she said. “Thank you. Could I ask you to put them in some water and place them here by my bedside? I want them close.”

He felt pride swell inside of his chest to such an extent that it threatened to tear the seams of his being. Warmth flowed through his entire body as he took the flowers into his hands which he hoped would bring a sense of solace and rejuvenation to her day.

He turned around and found an empty vase which seemed to serve the purpose of mere decoration. He placed the vibrantly colored flowers into it, taking a small pitcher of water that also rested by her bedside and pouring it into the vase.

“They are so beautiful, Devlin,” she said, gushing. “The scent alone brightens the room and lifts my spirit.”

His gaze was filled with tenderness as he looked at her, unable to take his eyes off of her. “I thought they might provide you with a glimpse of the garden’s splendor, even if you can’t be there yourself. I know how much you enjoy nature.”

“I cannot believe you remembered that,” she exclaimed, sounding

incredulous. “Honestly, I don’t even think I said it in those exact words.”

“Not always, but sometimes, I do have a tendency to read between the lines,” he chuckled. “Also, I’ve noticed the way you look at flowers, the way you tended to your own in your... new home here in London.”

He didn’t like the sound of those words, *her new home here in London*, but he had to comply with that, at least for the time being. Maybe eventually, she would be able to see that he was willing to do anything for her.

“I had no idea you were so attentive,” she teased him.

Devlin’s heart swelled with warmth at Theresa’s words. He longed to see her freely wandering through the garden again, her laughter mingling with the rustle of leaves and the fragrance of flowers. He made a silent vow to support her healing process and ensure her eventual return to the beauty of the outdoors.

“Only with people who matter to me,” he clarified.

“I matter?” she inquired.

“Very much so, yes,” he nodded, not wanting to play any games. “I think I

have made that pretty clear. And I want to show you the entire garden as we're strolling through it hand in hand. But for now, your well-being is what matters the most. I want you to know that I haven't kept you here to try and convince you of anything. I am truly worried about you and will allow you to leave only when I have been assured that you are well again. That is one thing I shall not accept any back talk on."

He wondered if he had perhaps crossed a line with this little monologue. He didn't mean it to sound as if it were an order he was issuing but rather his desire to see this until the end with her and make sure that her ankle was fully healed before she would return to *that place* she called home.

But much to his surprise, she chuckled at his words. This assured him that she understood where he was coming from.

"When you put it like that, what else can I do but agree?" she replied playfully as her eyes shimmered with appreciation, reflecting her trust and faith in him. He welcomed these sensations, hoping that love was soon to follow.

"Good," he smiled. "Because I plan on doing everything in my power to make you feel better." He paused for a moment then gave her a meaningful gaze. "Everything."

Her eyes widened while her cheeks blushed. He loved seeing her like that.

“Thank you,” she managed to muster through that onslaught of poppy red cheeks.

He smiled then stepped back, allowing Theresa to settle back into the soft cocoon of rest. As he quietly left the bedroom, Devlin felt a profound sense of gratitude. Gratitude for being able to bring a moment of beauty into Theresa’s day, for the strength of their connection, and for the unwavering support of their loved ones.

With renewed determination, he resolved to do everything in his power to help Theresa recover, eagerly awaiting the day when they could once again explore the wonders of the garden together.

## CHAPTER 23



When Theresa heard a knock on the door, she expected it to be one of the maids bringing her breakfast. So, when the door opened, revealing Devlin's face first thing in the morning, she was pleasantly surprised. There was something about his face, a boyish exuberance as if he was unable to contain his excitement.

"Good morning," he greeted her cordially. "Did you sleep well?"

"Very nicely, thank you for asking," she smiled back. "You also seem to be in a very good mood today."

"I am?" he pretended to wonder then he shrugged, still with that mysterious smile on his face. "I suppose you could say I am. You see, we're having guests today."

"Oh," she nodded politely. "Some relatives of yours and your mother's?"

“No,” he shook his head. He couldn’t tell yet if her curiosity piqued, but at the same time, he didn’t want to reveal too much, too soon. He wanted it to be a surprise until the very end. “I meant, you and I are having guests.”

“You and I?” Her response reverberated incredulously. His eyes met Theresa’s, sparkling with anticipation as he walked over to her bed.

“Indeed,” he nodded.

“Well, who is it?” she asked, the embodiment of curiosity and excitement.

“Tsk, ts, ts,” he shook his head at her. “You women are always so very eager to know everything. I was hoping we could keep this a surprise until the very end. After all, a little teasing never hurt anyone, right?”

She chuckled amusedly. “You certainly know how to keep me intrigued, Devlin. I wonder who it could be?”

From his point of view, the guess was a pretty obvious one, but he decided he would not reveal the identity of their mystery guests until the very moment they arrived to knock on these same doors themselves. He wanted to do something special for her. He had already brought her flowers which she loved. He had spent several hours the previous afternoon reading to her from



that Don Quixote book that was the cause of this entire mishap. When he offered it to her as a gift, she refused it, saying it was far too valuable to be given as a gift. He decided not to fight her on this one as she had always been a stubborn little thing, but he vowed that the book would somehow be in her possession one day. He couldn't imagine anyone more worthy of it than her.

“Ah, that is the question, isn't it?” he replied, chuckling softly. “But fear not, Theresa. The answer shall be revealed soon enough. Just a little longer, and your patience will be rewarded.”

He savored the playful banter between them, reveling in their deep connection. Devlin enjoyed these lighthearted moments, knowing that they brought a sense of joy and laughter to their days together. He knew that, depending on her final choice, these could be the happiest days they would spend together, or they could be just the overture into something even more beautiful. He hoped with all his heart that it was the latter.

“But I don't think I'll be able to handle this much suspense,” she pretended to pout, amusing them both.

He grinned mischievously before replying. “Oh, but the suspense is part of the fun. Still, you won't have to wait too long. Just a few more hours, I'd say.”

“Hours!?” she exclaimed, playfully dramatizing her answer.

“Yes, hours,” he nodded. “It could be days, you know. But I’ve decided to keep you in suspense just a few hours which shall pass soon enough.”

He took a step closer to Theresa’s bedside, his eyes filled with tenderness for this woman whom he cared about more than anyone else. He knew that now, and he wasn’t afraid to admit it either to the world or to himself. But she was still too fragile for such a proclamation of love. He needed to slowly build his path towards her. He didn’t mind. He would wait until the end of time to have her in his arms and to make her his wife in the way she deserved to be. If only she would give him the chance to prove it to her.

Her lips curled into a playful smile as she nodded, accepting the challenge of waiting for the surprise. “All right,” she acquiesced without any disgruntlement as he had hoped she would. “I shall trust your judgment and eagerly await the identity revelation of our mysterious guests. But don’t keep me waiting too long, or else I might have to start guessing.”

He laughed softly. “Ah, the guessing game. It is always so much fun, isn’t it? But in this case, it might be dangerous as well.”

“Dangerous?” She lifted a brow.

“In the sense that you might actually make the right guess and ruin your surprise,” he told her with a final playful wink as he stepped back.

“Oh, very well, you wicked, wicked man,” she laughed more melodiously than the choir of the angels themselves.

“I shall have the maids send breakfast up right away,” he informed her. “And grandmother might join you here for tea while you’re eating. I think she has been more worried than both of us put together.”

“Oh, that sweet, dear lady,” Theresa said. “I’ve tried reassuring her that I’m fine. I mean, I can barely feel any pain. Occasionally, it comes as a wave then it goes away, but most of the time, it is just numb from all the lying.”

“And that is how it should be,” he reminded her. “Do not be tricked into thinking you are all right too soon. Listen to the good doctor. He knows what he’s saying. And we love having you here.”

“Thank you,” she smiled. “Really.”

“It is a pleasure,” he replied, grinning. “Really.”

They both burst into a chuckle then he closed the door behind him, unable to resist feeling a surge of happiness, knowing that he had brought a touch of excitement and intrigue to Theresa’s day.



Theresa had no idea who the surprise visitor could be. Was it her sister? She hadn't seen her in a while, but she figured that Helen wouldn't be able to keep it a secret. Theresa spent her breakfast time pondering. Was it perhaps Mary-Jane? But Devlin and she were mere acquaintances. That meant that he would need to write to her officially, explain what happened, and ask her to come here. That included effort and careful planning. It was easier to just call for Helen. After all, she was Theresa's sister, she was family, and as such, she was the more obvious choice.

However, Theresa felt that right now, she needed the companionship of her best friend. Mary-Jane would advise her on what to do in this dire time of need. Yes, she needed her, but she doubted that Devlin would go through all that trouble to bring Mary-Jane here.

Sometime after breakfast, Theresa could not tell exactly how much time had passed when she heard a knock on the door. She called out eagerly, knowing that the time for revelation had come. She adjusted herself on the pillow, propping herself up.

The door opened, and there was Devlin, grinning from ear to ear. Only, he wasn't alone. Behind him stood Mary-Jane, her dearest friend, and by her side, Mary-Jane's daughter Rosemary. The sight of their familiar faces filled Theresa's heart with pure joy.

She gasped in delight before she could say anything. “Mary-Jane! Rosemary! What a wonderful surprise! Please, come in,” she beckoned, gesturing at the chamber with her hands.

Mary-Jane rushed over to her friend, wrapping her arms around Theresa. She had to bend down, and her flamboyant gown spilled all over the bed sheets, but neither of the two ladies seemed to mind. The embrace lasted for what seemed to be an eternity before they released each other from their grip. Next, it was Rosemary’s turn. She hugged Theresa as well, and all three ladies felt like they were reconnecting after what felt like an entire eternity.

“What on earth are you doing here?” Theresa exclaimed, still taken aback by seeing them here and almost fearing that they were just a mirage which might disappear at any moment if she stopped believing in it.

Mary-Jane turned to Devlin. “The Duke was kind enough to let us know what happened since you yourself failed to do so after I went to your home yesterday only to be told that you had not been seen there in two days.”

“Oh, yes,” Theresa chuckled. “I should have written to you. But as you can see, I was advised bedrest, and everyone else is taking it more seriously than I am.”

“That is good,” Mary-Jane nodded. “I’ve missed you, and I’ve been ever so worried about you. Thank goodness that Devlin thought of us, your friends,

since you obviously did not.”

It was obvious that Mary-Jane was only teasing. It made everyone smile as Rosemary’s youthful energy seemed to infect everyone.

“This was really such a wonderful surprise, Devlin,” Theresa turned to him, not wanting to sound ungrateful or forgetful with her friends being here.

She couldn’t believe what he had done for her. She had hopes of Mary-Jane being the mystery guest, but it required too much effort on Devlin’s part. Now, it seemed that he did it all gladly, just to make her happy. Theresa’s heart was filled with joy and delight at seeing the people she loved cared so much about her.

“I told you that I would make your stay here as pleasant as possible,” he reminded her. “I meant every word of it.”

“I can see that,” Theresa nodded. Just as she was about to ask him something else, Rosemary interjected.

“Mr. Devlin?” she asked. “Who got these flowers?”

“It’s not Mr. Devlin, darling,” her mother corrected her. “It is Your Grace.”

“It’s fine,” Devlin waved his hand dismissively. “Children are allowed to call me whatever they want, especially lovely young ladies such as this one.”

Rosemary blushed at being called a lovely young lady, but that didn’t shift focus from the politeness she had been taught by her mother.

“You are most kind to say so, Your Grace,” Rosemary thanked him for the compliment.

“As for the flowers,” Devlin continued, “I got them for Theresa.”

“You did?” Rosemary gushed. “Could we go and pick some more?”

“Rosemary,” her mother interrupted again in an effort to save Devlin from being pestered by her daughter, “I doubt the Duke has time for —”

“No, no,” Devlin smiled, walking over to the vase where Rosemary herself was standing. “Why don’t I take Rosemary out to the garden, so we can pick some more flowers for her to take home while you two ladies have a private little chit chat as I know all ladies are wont to do?”

Theresa and Mary-Jane laughed boisterously. It was obvious that they both

liked that idea.

“Are you sure that is all right with you?” Theresa asked, incredulously, surprised that he of all people would suggest something like that. It seemed that there was so much she still didn’t know about him, so much that she was growing to like more and more.

“I wouldn’t have offered otherwise,” Devlin assured her. Then, he turned to Rosemary and offered her his arm as a real gentleman did. “Now, My Lady, shall we stroll to the garden?”

Rosemary chuckled delightedly, resting her arm on his. They were the most adorable couple, and Theresa couldn’t help but be overwhelmed at the sight. She couldn’t help but imagine what a wonderful father he would make to a little girl whom he would treat like a true lady or a little boy who would learn all the gentlemanly manners in the best way possible.

Theresa watched as Devlin and Rosemary closed the door behind them, and the little girl’s laughter disappeared somewhere in the distance of the corridors. Then, she turned to Mary-Jane, whose eyes were still wide with shock and disbelief as she spoke the following words.

“So... are you going to tell me what *really* happened?”



## CHAPTER 24



Devlin stood in the garden, his gaze shifting from one flower to another, a mixture of determination and uncertainty on his face. He had no green thumb to speak of, but his eagerness to accompany Rosemary and create a memorable experience for her outweighed any doubts he had about his gardening skills.

Not only that, he knew that Theresa and Mary-Jane wanted some time alone to themselves which they usually couldn't have if Rosemary was around. Besides, he couldn't remember the last time he was in the company of a child as sweet as Rosemary. How hard could it be to keep her entertained in the beautifully blossoming garden of his estate?

Rosemary, with her bright eyes and infectious enthusiasm, skipped alongside him, her small hands reaching out to pluck the petals of the blossoms she found most captivating.

"Mr. Devlin, look!" she exclaimed then turned to him apologetically. "Oh...

I'm sorry... Your Grace."

He chuckled. "No need to apologize, Rosemary," he assured her. "I already told your mother, you can call me Mr. Devlin if you wish. In all honesty, you could call me John if you wanted to, and I wouldn't mind," he laughed.

She tilted her head a little. "But your name isn't John. It's Devlin."

"Right," he nodded, amused that she took him literally. He had forgotten that children had a tendency to do that. If you told them that it was the moon shining in broad daylight, they would actually take it as true first, and only afterwards, their curiosity would question whether such a thing was actually possible or not.

"The point was... never mind," he smiled, pointing at another flower. "How about that one?"

"Oh! That is the prettiest shade of pink. Can we pick it for Aunt Theresa?"

He was touched that she came out here to pick a bouquet for herself and was still thinking about Theresa. It was obvious that she cared a great deal about her, and he was also certain that it was the other way around as well. Devlin chuckled warmly, grateful for Rosemary's youthful exuberance.

“Of course, we can,” he confirmed. “How about we pick it together?”

With a gentle touch, Devlin guided Rosemary’s hand to cradle the delicate bloom as they plucked it from the stem. A sense of satisfaction washed over him as he witnessed the joy on Rosemary’s face, her eyes sparkling with delight.

“Aunt Theresa will love it!” Rosemary gushed at the flower which now rested in her hand. “And look, Mr. Devlin! I see more flowers we can pick!”

Devlin’s smile widened as he followed Rosemary’s gaze, realizing that their impromptu garden adventure was becoming a cherished bonding experience. As they continued to stroll among the blossoms, Rosemary’s infectious chatter filled the air, sharing stories and observations about each flower they encountered. As Rosemary skipped through the garden, her eyes lit up with excitement as she spotted each new flower, her little fingers delicately plucking them one by one.

“These are daisies,” she was explaining. “They have such pretty white petals with yellow centers; they remind me of sunshine!”

Devlin nodded, listening intently, his attention fully captivated by her botanical knowledge which he suspected came from Theresa herself.

“Oh, and roses!” She pointed at a rose bush next to them. “See how it has layers of soft, velvety petals? They come in many colors, you know. Each one has its one special meaning, but if you want to tell someone you love them, then you give them a red rose.”

“Red?” he smiled. “I’ll keep that in mind, thank you.”

Devlin observed the rose that Rosemary pointed out, captivated by its intricate beauty. He found himself listening intently, eager to learn more. As they ventured deeper into the garden, Rosemary continued her delightful botanical commentary, pointing out lilies with their graceful petals and elegant form, vibrant tulips that stood tall like colorful soldiers, and cheerful sunflowers that seemed to reach for the heavens.

“I can see even striped tulips!” she exclaimed joyously. “And they stand up so straight like they’re showing off!”

They continued their flower-picking adventure with Rosemary introducing Devlin to daffodils, irises, and delicate forget-me-nots. Devlin found himself truly appreciating the intricacies of each bloom, thanks to Rosemary’s enchanting explanations.

He had no idea how long they had been gathering all those flowers when they reached the end of the garden. “Thank you for being my guide through the wonderful world of flowers, Rosemary,” he smiled at her.

Hearing his gratitude made her beam with pride. “You are very welcome, Mr. Devlin. I love flowers. I am even named after one. And I think Aunt Theresa will be so happy with all the beautiful blooms we’ve gathered for her because they come from our hearts.”

“I am absolutely convinced of that,” he assured her.

Devlin’s heart swelled with affection for the wise words spoken by such a young soul. He marveled at the depth of Rosemary’s understanding and the way she effortlessly reminded him of the simple yet profound truths in life.

Together, they slowly found their way back to the mansion, both of them content, forever marked by this wonderful experience they had just shared.



In the comfort of Theresa’s room, Mary-Jane sat beside her dear friend, their voices hushed with a shared intimacy. They spoke softly, their words carried by a mixture of warmth and concern.

“So, that is why you decided to stay here?” Mary-Jane asked, once Theresa had told her the story of the fallen bookshelf and the sprained ankle although Devlin had obviously already shared it with her. Still, Mary-Jane needed to hear it from Theresa as well.

“I didn’t decide,” Theresa corrected her. “The doctor said I should rest for a few days, and Devlin was kind enough to offer to let me to stay here, so I just accepted.”

Mary-Jane laughed melodiously. “You are trying to avoid answering. You pretend that this was a choice imposed upon you, but the truth is, you are happy to be here. You can’t deny that. I can see the glow of a happy woman. You beam, my dear.”

“I do?” Theresa asked with a sigh. “I don’t want to make it that obvious.”

“I’m afraid you can’t help it,” Mary-Jane shook her head, leaning over and taking her friend’s hand into her own, patting it sympathetically. “It is evident how deeply you care about Devlin. Your heart has found solace in his presence. But I can sense a lingering fear within you. Does the past still weigh on your mind?”

Theresa sighed, her gaze falling to her clasped hands.

“I cannot deny that I care about him. Ever since he appeared in front of my door, he has been nothing but kind, attentive, and loving towards me. Yet, a part of me remains guarded, afraid that if I fully surrender my heart, it may be shattered once again.”

Mary-Jane nodded. Theresa knew that she understood her sometimes better than anyone else in the whole world.

“I know that the wounds of the past run deep,” Mary-Jane confirmed. “I know that you’ve endured the pain of being rejected right at the time when you thought a new life would be commencing for you. But you forget that love is a risk we all must take. Well, all... not me, but you.”

This made both girls chuckle amusedly.

“I know you’ve sworn off of men,” Theresa nodded.

“I truly have,” Mary-Jane agreed. “I think I’ve had enough of men for three lifetimes. But that is besides the point. The point is that there are still good men left out there, and maybe, just maybe, Devlin might be one of them. You should be able to judge that yourself. If his actions, not only his words, prove his love to you day by day, you will find the reassurance to make the decision you need to make.”

Theresa’s eyes brimmed with a mixture of vulnerability and longing. “You are right. It is just hard to let go of the past.”

“That is truly the hardest thing of all,” Mary-Jane spoke wisely of something they both knew a lot about.

“You’re right, Mary-Jane. Devlin has shown me so much love and tenderness, going out of his way to bring joy into my life. Yet, I fear that if I let myself fully believe in this love, I’ll expose myself to the possibility of heartbreak once more.”

Mary-Jane’s gaze softened, reflecting years of friendship and shared experiences. She knew Theresa better than her own sister did. They were closer in age, and nothing Helen could share with Theresa could be compared with the wisdom of Mary-Jane’s life experience. Still, that didn’t mean that Theresa didn’t value the advice of both ladies. They both had important lessons to share although their point of view about life differed drastically.

“My dear Theresa, trust your heart and the love that has blossomed between you and Devlin. Sometimes, the fear of heartbreak can hold us back from experiencing the extraordinary. Give yourself permission to be vulnerable, for it is in vulnerability that we discover the true depth of love,” Mary-Jane spoke profoundly.

Theresa’s eyes searched Mary-Jane’s face, seeking solace and guidance. “I yearn for that depth of love, Mary-Jane. To let go of the fear that has held me captive for far too long. Devlin has been patient, understanding, and consistent in his love for me. Perhaps it’s time I embrace the possibility of happiness with him.”

Mary-Jane nodded, a tender smile gracing her lips. “Take your time, my dear.



Follow your heart's rhythm. Devlin has proven himself time and again, and if love is meant to flourish between you, it will. Trust in the strength of your bond and allow yourself to be open to the possibilities that lie ahead. Don't rule anything out."

Theresa's gaze turned inward, contemplating the path she would take. She wanted to take this plunge. With each passing day, she was more and more convinced that Devlin had truly changed and that he deserved another chance, a chance that would make them both happy which was what they truly deserved.

"Thank you for always being there for me, Mary-Jane," Theresa gushed. "I know that life is too short to deny oneself the chance at true happiness."

"It is," Mary-Jane smiled back. "You're stronger than you realize, Theresa. And with love as your guide, I have no doubt that you will find the happiness your heart craves. Trust in yourself and in the love Devlin has shown you. I mean, just look at what he has done for you. He has taken a little girl out to the garden to pick flowers with him! What gentleman in his right mind would do that!?"

"True," Theresa laughed, remembering that it was true.

Just at that moment, the doors burst open, and Rosemary barged in. She was carrying a bouquet of fragrant flowers, and she rushed straight towards

Theresa.

“Auntie Theresa, these are for you!” she showed Theresa a small bouquet she was holding in her other hand.

“For me? Why, they are lovely,” Theresa gushed. “Thank you, sweetheart.”

“And I taught Mr. Devlin about all the flowers in his garden!” Rosemary beamed proudly.

“You did?” Theresa glanced at him then back at Rosemary, whose eyes were sparkling. It was obvious that the short time she had spent with him was magical. To be quite honest, Theresa didn’t doubt it would be so.

“I did!” Rosemary confirmed.

“Yes, I really learned a lot,” Devlin added, chuckling, much to everyone’s delight. “How about now we call for some tea, ladies?”

“A splendid idea,” Rosemary was the first one to reply as she went to the vase and added her flowers to the bouquet Devlin had picked before. “There! Now, it’s perfect.”

“It is,” Theresa smiled, unable to resist feeling as if her heart would burst at the seams with all the happiness she was feeling.

## CHAPTER 25



The following day welcomed Theresa with many conflicting emotions although one thing was clear: she was ready to give Devlin another chance. Those were the thoughts swarming inside her mind when yet another gentle knock interrupted the tranquility of her chamber. She smiled before answering. It seemed that knocks on her door here brought many beautiful things with them. She hoped this would be yet another in a row of many.

“Come in,” she chirped joyfully, thinking it was Devlin.

But the moment the doors opened, she realized it was a man, but it wasn't Devlin. She knew the man she was seeing with his wide smile and small, almost beady eyes but a bright looking, cheerful face. She met him during her wedding. It was... Devlin's cousin!

“Oh... Robert, right?” she smiled at him, surprised to see him.

She couldn't imagine why this man would be knocking on the door to her guestroom and not on the door to Devlin's study, but she decided to control her curiosity and be polite first and curious second.

"Yes," he nodded, smiling even more broadly this time as he entered the room only now, his demeanor polite and composed if a little awkward as he held the flowers.

His eyes beheld the vase, and he added. "I see I wasn't the first to come and wish you a quick recovery."

"You weren't, but such wishes are always welcome," she replied courteously. "You are most kind, thank you. Please, take a seat anywhere."

"Oh, I won't bother you for long," he said apologetically. "I was on my way upstairs to see Devlin in his study. He is waiting for me as we have some urgent business matters to attend to. But when he told me that you were here with a sprained ankle, I had to come and offer my wishes."

"Like I said, that was most kind of you, Robert," she repeated.

"I do believe I haven't seen you since the wedding," Robert pointed out.

“Yes, well...” Theresa tried to explain because no one knew that Devlin hadn’t seen her in two years of their marriage, and she wanted to keep it that way. “Devlin and I arranged it to have separate abodes, at least for the time being. It was just easier that way, you see.”

It made no sense. She didn’t offer any explanation other than a vague reason and the avoidance of eye contact. Still, she hoped that she wouldn’t need to delve more deeply into this conversation.

“Of course,” he nodded agreeably, something she appreciated. “But now that you are here, I suppose you will be staying here indefinitely? It is only to be expected.”

He was smiling reassuringly as his gaze watched her intently. She still didn’t have the answer to that question, but she wanted to be honest. Also, she wanted to say it out loud, to see what it would sound like.

“I find myself truly touched by the hospitality and warmth of this place. Devlin has been so attentive, and his grandmother’s presence has been a source of comfort. I must admit, the thought of staying here has crossed my mind.”

The moment those words crossed her lips, she knew that nothing had ever felt more right than this. He looked at her with an air of enthusiasm.

“It warms my heart to hear that, Theresa. Devlin has always spoken highly of you, and I can see why he would want you by his side. This home is filled with love and security, and you both deserve nothing less,” he assured her.

“Thank you for those kind words, Robert.” Her smile grew, a mixture of hope and uncertainty glimmering in her eyes. “There has always been something special about this place, about the connection it creates between the people in it. But I’m still deliberating whether to go back to the way things were or to stay here.”

“Thank you for sharing those private thoughts with me,” Robert said politely. “I apologize if I have crossed a line by asking it. I am merely thinking about the happiness of my cousin, who has always been like a brother to me. When I heard he was getting married, I was beside myself, thinking how he will have children soon and how I will be the best uncle ever.”

Theresa chuckled. “That does sound lovely.”

“Right?” Robert nodded with joy then he seemed to remember something. “Well, I don’t want to pester you any longer. And also, I mustn’t keep Devlin waiting any longer. He hates when people are late.”

“Of course,” Theresa nodded. “You can just leave the flowers here on the table, and I shall call for the maid to put it in a nice vase by the other flowers.”

“Wonderful,” he replied. “I’m glad we had this chance to talk. Whatever decision you make, know that I am here for you as well, just as I am here for him as a friend and confidant. I want you both to be happy.”

Theresa expressed her gratitude, watching as Robert left the room with an air of measured composure. Once alone, she couldn’t help but ponder the conversation. The warmth of Devlin’s affection and the genuine connections she had forged within this household tugged at her heartstrings. As Theresa lay in her bed, a sense of possibility mingled with her thoughts, and a soft smile graced her face. In that moment, it became evident that staying in this place, surrounded by love and the promise of a future with Devlin, was an option she was increasingly considering. There was less and less fear and more and more hope.



It was a week after the incident with the fallen bookshelf when Devlin guided Theresa gently through the garden under the warm embrace of the sun’s golden rays. Together, they took leisurely steps, making sure not to overburden her leg.

Theresa’s sprained ankle had healed considerably, allowing her to walk with Devlin’s assistance, relishing the joy of finally being outside. He could see this joy in the way she smiled and in the way her eyes sparkled every time she looked in his direction.



As they strolled along the garden path, Devlin's strong arm offered stability while Theresa leaned into his touch, reveling in the closeness they shared. The fragrant scent of blooming flowers enveloped them, adding a touch of enchantment to the moment.

"I was so eager to finally go outside," she admitted, looking around, absorbing every single color as if she was seeing it for the first time in her life. Right now, her exuberance reminded him of Rosemary's. That was just one of the reasons why he loved her so much. Theresa had a way of seeing the world as a child did, in awe of everything around her, and that sensation was spreading to those she touched by her presence.

"I knew you would like seeing it in full bloom," he nodded.

"This garden is truly a sanctuary." She was astonished at all the blossoming flowers around them. "I can feel the vibrant energy of life all around us. Thank you for bringing me out here."

"It is my pleasure," he assured her as his voice carried a hint of playfulness, his eyes sparkling with affection.

He had to tell her how happy he was with her here, and if she decided to leave, it would be as if she had taken away the sun with her.

“Now that Doctor Anderson had given you his permission to try walking a bit, I couldn’t resist the opportunity to steal you away from the confines of the house, even if it is just for a little while. The sun seems to shine brighter when you are by my side.”

Theresa obviously wasn’t expecting such a compliment, so she blushed. She looked down at her dainty little feet as they made small movements along the paved pathway of the garden.

“You flatter me too much,” she said with a still blushing smile.

“I don’t think I’m flattering you much at all,” he argued with her with a mischievous smirk. “But I plan on doing that now.”

“You know that flattery won’t get you anywhere,” she teased.

“It doesn’t have to,” he shrugged. “As long as it keeps me by your side, I am a happy man.”

His gaze intensified, and hers seemed to envelop his entire heart, refusing to let go. He felt as if he was falling in love with this woman again, not having seen her for a long time and again discovering what a true gem she was. He knew that this time, he would not be letting her go, no matter what the price of that endeavor might be.

“Well, if you must really know,” she suddenly said, biting her lower lip slightly nervously, “the sun does seem to shine brighter when I’m with you, too. It’s as if the world holds an additional layer of beauty when we’re together.”

“I couldn’t have said it better myself,” he told her. “I treasure every moment we spend together, and I want you to know that even if you decide not to come back to live with me, I will remember our time together with much fondness.”

As they walked further into the garden, the playful banter continued, their conversation filled with gentle teasing, laughter, and stolen glances. Their connection deepened, effortlessly blending the tenderness of their growing affection with the lightness of their shared joy.

“I must admit, Theresa, you have a way of making even the simplest moments feel extraordinary. I never imagined that a garden walk could be so delightful.”

Theresa’s eyes met Devlin’s, their gazes locking in a silent understanding of the depth of their feelings. In that shared connection, they discovered a world of possibilities and a future filled with love.

As they continued their leisurely stroll through the garden, Theresa’s hand

found its way to Devlin's, their fingers intertwining, a symbol of their unity. With each step, their hearts grew closer, their love blossoming like the flowers surrounding them.

In that moment, amidst the sunshine and gentle breeze, time seemed to stand still. Theresa and Devlin embraced the simple pleasure of being together, their laughter and tender exchanges echoing through the garden, creating the music of their growing love.

They remained outside until the last rays of the sun became orange and golden, and darkness slowly started to descend. He walked her back inside, and without thinking, he lifted her into his arms as they stopped in front of the stairwell.

“What are you doing?” she chuckled.

“What does it look like?” he pretended not to understand. “I’m taking you back to your chamber.”

“I can climb stairs now,” she pointed out.

“You can barely walk,” he frowned. “You can’t climb stairs. Don’t be silly.”

She burst into a chuckle at this comment, much to his delight. She was still laughing when he put her to sit on the bed gently. She inhaled deeply, obviously overwhelmed by the laughter.

“I shall tell the servants to set the dinner table, and I shall then come fetch you,” he told her.

“Will you be taking me down the stairs again?” she teased.

He took his answer most seriously. “You can bet on that.”

He winked at her and closed the door, his heart palpitating wildly, and he knew that it would not be pacified by anything other than her presence in his arms again.

## CHAPTER 26



The dinner passed by sweetly. Devlin did exactly what he promised he would do. He carried her down in his arms, had dinner with her, and then, carried her back up the stairs, putting her gently in bed. With a soft kiss on the forehead, he bid her goodnight.

Her heart was still beating like a galloping horse at Ascot's long after the echoes of the door creaking died in the silence that reigned in the chamber. She knew she would not be able to fall asleep any time soon. Too many things had happened. Her heart was too overcome by it all. She needed to sort out her emotions, and what better way to do so than to write to her sister and tell her everything?

Truth be told, Mary-Jane's words helped her a great deal. Her advice and support had always been invaluable for her, and this time was no exception. Still, she wanted to share all the developments with Helen as well, so she sat down at a small writing desk, a delicate quill poised in her hand, ready to etch her deepest sentiments onto the parchment before her. The flickering candlelight cast a soft glow across the room, adding an air of intimacy to the

moment. Her thoughts swirled like a tempest within her, threatening to overflow if not given voice.

With a steadying breath, she dipped the quill into the inkwell and began to write, each stroke of the pen a testament to the whirlwind of emotions that had taken hold of her heart.

*My dearest Helen,*

*As I write these words, I am filled with a mixture of elation and apprehension. I can no longer deny the truth that resides within my soul. Love, dear sister, has captured me in its tender embrace, leaving me both enchanted and vulnerable.*

Theresa's hand trembled slightly, betraying the intensity of her emotions. She paused, allowing herself a moment to gather her thoughts before continuing.

*I know I came here to start my life anew, but it seems that fate had other plans for me. Devlin's eyes, deep and mesmerizing, have followed me here, and they hold the secrets of a thousand lifetimes. In his presence, time seems to lose its meaning, and the world around me fades into insignificance.*

She traced the letters on the page as if hoping to convey the depth of her feelings through the ink itself. A sigh escaped Theresa's lips, carrying with it

both longing and uncertainty. She knew the road ahead would not be without obstacles, but she could not deny the pull of her heart.

*I confess, dear sister, that fear clings to me like a shadow in the moonlight. The scars of past heartbreaks still linger, haunting my every step. But there is something about Devlin that inspires hope within me, a belief that perhaps this time, love is different, that it could withstand the tests of time.*

A solitary tear slipped from Theresa's eye, marking the parchment with its crystalline trail. She wiped it away with a delicate swipe of her finger and continued, her words flowing like a heartfelt confession.

*Sister, I share this with you not only to unburden my soul but also to seek your counsel. I trust your wisdom and guidance, for you have always been the beacon of reason in my life. Do I dare to give my heart completely to Devlin? Can I muster the courage to take this leap of faith once more?*

She closed her eyes, allowing her sister's presence to surround her, even from afar. In her mind's eye, she could envision the comforting smile that always graced her sister's face, a smile that offered both reassurance and encouragement. As the quill touched the paper once more, Theresa's hand regained its steady rhythm, fueled by a newfound determination.

*Know, dear sister, that regardless of the path I choose, I will face it with an open heart and an unwavering spirit. Love, they say, is a risk worth taking,*



*and I am willing to brave the unknown in the pursuit of true happiness.*

Theresa folded the letter carefully, sealing her words within the embrace of the parchment. She would entrust it to the hands of a trusted messenger, letting her sister share in the intricacies of her heart. With a sense of both vulnerability and anticipation, she placed the letter on her desk, ready to embark on this journey of love, knowing that her sister's unwavering support would guide her through the twists and turns that lay ahead.

Finally, sleep took over her, without her even realizing. She didn't even know how exhausted she was, fighting all these emotions which were tugging at her from all sides.



The moon cast a soft, ethereal glow upon Devlin as he stood outside Theresa's door, his heart pounding with a mixture of longing and hesitation. Unable to resist the magnetic pull drawing him to her, he gently pushed open the door, so he could come in, closing it immediately behind him.

A surge of tenderness washed over Devlin as he approached her, his eyes tracing the delicate curve of her face and the rise and fall of her chest with each peaceful breath. Unable to deny the depth of his emotions any longer, he resolved to take her into his arms and carry her to a place where their connection could blossom freely.

With utmost care, Devlin slipped his arms beneath Theresa's supple form, cradling her as if she were the most precious treasure in the world. Her body stirred slightly, sensing his presence, and her eyes fluttered open, revealing a mixture of surprise and delight.

"Devlin?" she called out his name again, her voice brimming with delicate vulnerability which made her all the more irresistible to him. She resembled an angel in the night, come to light the way for him.

"Shhh," he smiled at her, an unspoken promise in his eyes. "Allow me to feel you close to me."

Theresa's gaze locked with his, a silent understanding passing between them. With a gentle nod, she wrapped her arms around his neck, surrendering herself to his embrace. Devlin moved with a fluid grace, his steps purposeful yet gentle as he carried Theresa across the room, their bodies pressed intimately close. The softness of her breath against his neck sent a shiver of anticipation coursing through his veins, deepening his resolve.

As they reached the edge of the bed, Devlin carefully laid Theresa down, his hands lingering upon her form, reluctant to relinquish their touch. Their eyes remained locked, their unspoken desires dancing in the air between them as Devlin leaned in, his lips brushing against her forehead.

He kissed her softly, not wanting to harm her in any way, even if it was with

his unrestrained desire. He wanted her so much that it made every fiber in his being ache for her, throb with need for her, and it was becoming damn near impossible to control it during the day. At night, when darkness enveloped everything, he let go. That was why he was here now.

But where he wanted to take it slow, she opened for his tongue, tasting him, needing him as much as he needed her. That desire almost brought him to the edge right then and there. His hands cupped her breast immediately as they continued to kiss. He could feel her pebbled nipple through the thin, satin fabric of her nightgown. That small barrier of chastity drove him mad. He wanted to tear it off of her, but he reminded himself that she was in control of everything here. He wanted her to know that.

She cupped his face with her hands, bringing him closer.

“Oh...” she moaned against his lips as his other hand slid underneath her nightgown and prodded her already wet folds. He felt her body tremble at the touch. He groaned with desire, pressing his manhood against her thigh, rubbing it achingly.

If there was anything else she wanted to say, she wasn't allowed to because his lips crashed against hers once again, drowning out any words she might have shared with him in the silent darkness. Then, out of nowhere, he felt her fingers on his throbbing needy tip, curiously caressing it.

“Theresa...” he murmured her name on the brink of telling her how much he loved her, but he bit his tongue in time to keep it to himself. This was not the time or the place for such confessions.

Instead, he continued to kiss her ferociously, demanding everything of her. He couldn't control himself. His fingers rubbed her swollen bud, causing friction that made her entire body tremble and shake and that made her breath quick and her eyes watery.

She continued to explore his manhood with her fingers, squeezing gently, careful not to hurt him. He almost chuckled at the softness of her touch. He wanted to tell her that she could touch him much harder than that, but there was something so wonderfully endearing in the way she touched it so reverently.

As if able to read his mind, she did exactly what he wanted her to. She squeezed harder, gripping his manhood while he caressed her soft, wet folds. They both relished each other's touch, getting lost in the sensation that washed over them both.

“God, Theresa...” he said as his forehead dipped to hers, wanting to look at her while she was being pleased by him.

Everything about her was so delicate, and yet she kissed him with the ferocity of a lioness.

“Don’t stop,” he heard her say.

He heightened the pressure, and in turn, she did the same. They both relied on their bodies to guide them through this as their minds were completely blank. Suddenly, her entire body tightened as her fingers dug into his shoulders. She moaned barely audibly, not letting go of him. Her eyes were closed, and the silvery rays of the moon fell on her beautiful face. That was the moment when he finished as well, spending right between her fingers onto the bed sheets.

Both of them breathing heavily, he lay down next to her, refusing to move away. He turned to her, kissing her forehead. She nestled in his arms, her eyes closed. Her breathing was soft, rhythmical. Neither of them wanted to move. After all, there was no need for that.

As he watched her peaceful form, Devlin knew that he had embarked upon a journey that would forever alter the course of their lives. With each passing moment, his love for Theresa grew deeper, more profound, and he vowed to cherish and protect her with every fiber of his being.

In the hushed stillness of the room, their hearts beat in harmony, silently whispering promises of a love that defied all odds. And as Devlin leaned down to press a gentle kiss upon Theresa’s forehead, he knew that he had found his home in her arms.

## CHAPTER 27



Devlin stirred from his slumber, his mind clouded with sleep as the sound of a persistent knock echoed through the grand halls of his ancestral home. He blinked his eyes open, momentarily disoriented before realizing that it was the butler at the guestroom door where he had fallen asleep with Theresa in his arms.

Still rubbing his eyes, he addressed the butler, hiding his nakedness behind the door. “What is it, Stephens?”

“Your Grace,” Stephens started apologetically, lowering his gaze to his feet as a good butler ought to do in front of their master’s naked form, even in the darkness. “I apologize for the disturbance, but there is a guest who insists upon seeing you immediately.”

Devlin frowned. “At this time of night?”

“He says it is a matter of the utmost urgency,” Stephens explained softly as both men attempted to speak in their lowest possible voices so as not to stir Theresa from slumber.

“All right,” Devlin nodded quickly. “Take him to my study. I shall be there in a moment.”

He quickly closed the door then grabbed his nightshirt and put it on. He would need to pass by his bedchamber to fetch his robe as well. Whoever this guest was, he couldn’t very well welcome him in his nightclothes, even if it *was* the middle of the night, and no guest in their right mind would be visiting at this time.

He walked over to Theresa, who was still sleeping soundly. He placed the covers gently over her naked body which was bathed in the soft glow of the moonlight. He was overwhelmed by love for this woman. He knew that now. There would never be anyone else for him ever again. He made the mistake of letting her go once. Never again. He would do whatever it took to prove to her that he was worthy of her love and that he would spend the rest of his life making it up to her. He would gladly do so.

He smiled at the thought of spending every morning with her, of having breakfast with her, of carriage rides without any particular destination, of just surprising her with flowers like that one time and seeing that smile of utter gratitude. He wanted it all. And he would tell her exactly how he felt the next day.

No more waiting. No more fear. He had been patient enough. He had been afraid for long enough. Actually, far too long. Now, the time had come for him to be bold and courageous, to tell her how he felt about her although he suspected she already knew. He could only hope that she felt the same way.

He leaned over her and placed a soft, tender kiss on her forehead. She stirred a little. He waited to see if she would wake up, so he could explain where he was going and tell her that he would be back, but she just turned around and went back to deep slumber. He smiled.

Then, he remembered the commotion. It made him frown again. He did his best to open and close the door as noiselessly as possible then he headed to his bedchamber. As he was still pushing aside the weight of sleep and the displeasure of being torn away from Theresa's arms, he hastily slipped into a robe before heading to his study. A mix of concern and confusion coursed through his veins. Who could possibly be calling at such an ungodly hour?

As he descended the staircase, Devlin's mind raced with possibilities. Who could require his presence in the middle of the night? His thoughts flickered to potential emergencies or dire news that required his attention. Each step fueled his curiosity and apprehension, the questions growing louder in his mind.

Finally, he reached his study, where a figure stood shrouded in shadows. He squinted, trying to discern the identity of the unexpected visitor. As he drew



closer, his breath hitched in surprise and disbelief.

“Robert?” he called out his cousin’s name. “What on earth are you doing his at this mad hour?”

Robert turned to face him, his countenance wrought with a mixture of anxiety and urgency. His usually composed demeanor seemed strained, lines etched upon his face.

“I know this must seem utterly insane on my part to be here at this time,” Robert said. “And I do apologize for the intrusion and waking you up, but I have received distressing news on my way back home, news which demands your immediate attention. It concerns your family legacy.”

Devlin’s heart skipped a beat. Robert had always been his right-hand man when it came to affairs such as this one. He was always good at sorting out whatever he could on his own, only letting Devlin know about bigger issues. This one was obviously one of those, otherwise Robert wouldn’t be here, looking as pale as if he had seen a ghost.

“What news, Robert?” Devlin demanded. “You’ve unsettled me to quite an extent with all of this. Speak, man!”

Their gazes locked, and Devlin could see it was something very urgent and

very serious. Robert's tone of voice was down to a barely audible whisper.

"It is about your estate, Devlin," he informed him, still vague about the details which only seemed to annoy Devlin even more. "There are rumors of impending financial ruin. You need to head immediately to your estate home. All the papers are there. I've instructed the butler to keep it all neatly arranged for your arrival, so you don't have to waste any more time than is required of you. I had to come as soon as possible to make sure that your heritage, that your family legacy, that your name and your reputation remain intact."

A wave of shock washed over Devlin, his mind struggling to process everything he had just heard. The weight of responsibility settled upon his shoulders as he realized the enormity of what was at stake.

"I... I had no idea things were in such a grave situation," Devlin commented, pacing about his study as he raked his fingers through his hair. "How could this have happened?"

Robert shrugged. "It is of the utmost importance that you take a look at the figures and see what doesn't align. If a mistake had been made anywhere, you might be able to spot it. But... I doubt there was a mistake."

"There rarely is a mistake," Devlin agreed. "We must take immediate action then."

“I knew you would say that,” Robert was quick to add. “That is why I came as soon as I found out.”

Devlin's mind raced with a whirlwind of thoughts and emotions. He knew the path ahead would be challenging, fraught with uncertainty. Yet, he also understood the significance of preserving his family's legacy, not only for himself but for generations yet to come. Now, he was certain that there would be children to carry on his family name. And Theresa would be their mother. The thought made him smile.

“I shall ready the carriage immediately,” Devlin informed Robert. “I just have to let Theresa know before I go.”

“Is she sleeping?” Robert asked although the answer to that was obvious.

“Yes,” Devlin nodded. “Why?”

“I suggest not waking her up,” Robert said cautiously.

Devlin thought about it for a moment. “I'll just take a second.”

“It might be just a second to you, but you know how fretful women can be,”

Robert advised him, his voice slow and reasonable. “She might become nervous about everything, and in turn, this will make you nervous.”

“Theresa isn’t the kind of woman to get agitated easily,” Devlin explained. “And besides, I really don’t want to just disappear in the middle of the night like that without a word.”

“No one said you would be doing that,” Robert shook his head. “What I am suggesting is for you to get ready while I go and tell the footman to ready the carriage, so you can start immediately. As for Theresa, you can rest assured that I will be here in the morning to tell her where you are and to assure her that you will be back as soon as possible.”

“Can I count on you for that?” Devlin asked.

“Of course,” Robert nodded. “I know how much Theresa means to you. And now, it seems you are back to living together.”

“Well, not yet,” Devlin said with a hopeful smile. “But I believe we are well on the way there. And afterwards, we can become a real family.”

“I cannot imagine anything that would make us, your family, happier than that,” Robert smiled back, patting Devlin on the shoulder cordially. “Now, you need to hurry. Remember, the sooner you get there and sort everything

out, the sooner you will be back here with Theresa.”

“Yes, of course,” Devlin nodded quickly. “Tell her everything. Explain it to her that I had to go, all right?”

“You can count on me,” Robert assured him. “I can take one of the guest rooms, right?”

“By all means,” Devlin agreed. “After all, it wouldn’t be the first time you stayed over. Grandmother will be happy to see you in the morning.”

“And I shall be happy to see both her and Theresa and explain everything to them,” Robert said again, accentuating that Devlin had nothing to worry about.

“Thank you,” Devlin said, his voice dripping with gratitude. “I am so fortunate to have a cousin like you, who so unselfishly thinks about my wellbeing first and then his own.”

Robert grinned. “Hasn’t it always been that way?”

“Always,” Devlin confirmed. “You prepare a carriage then. I shall leave immediately to confront this threat head on.”

With newfound purpose and determination etched upon his features, Devlin set forth into the night, ready to face the challenges that awaited him. The echoes of his footsteps in the empty corridor served as a reminder of the legacy he was bound to protect, and the sacrifices he was willing to make for the sake of his family's cherished home.

Now, there was so much more to consider, not only himself. There was Theresa, too. He needed to provide everything for her. She deserved a good husband, a kind husband, a loyal husband, a respected husband who would provide her with the life she deserved. And not only she but also their children.

It was actually the thought of their future children which lingered on for the longest time in his mind as his carriage cut through the darkness of the night, taking him to his country estate where the very essence of the problem was situated.

He would sort it out as quickly as he could, and then he would return to Theresa. The thought soothed him into slumber as the carriage rocked him softly along the unpaved roads that led to the countryside.

## CHAPTER 28



Theresa's eyes fluttered open, her gaze searching the room for any sign of Devlin. As the remnants of sleep faded away, a sense of unease settled in the pit of her stomach. Her heart quickened its pace as she realized he was not by her side.

Sitting up, Theresa glanced around the room, hoping to find some clue that would explain Devlin's absence. The warmth of his presence and the comfort of his touch was sorely missed. Questions flooded her mind, casting a shadow of worry over her features.

"Where could he be?" she whispered to herself, her voice tinged with a note of sadness and confusion. Her thoughts darted in every direction, almost as if he had been hiding somewhere in the chamber and all she needed to do was find him. But it was far more difficult than that, and her mind was not her friend as it conjured up a myriad of possibilities, both reasonable as well as utterly irrational.

Had something happened? Had he been called away unexpectedly? The weight of uncertainty bore down upon her, amplifying her concern. Theresa's fingers trembled as she reached for the robe draped across the nearby chair, hastily slipping it on as she resolved to search for him. Her steps were hurried but cautious as she navigated the corridors of Devlin's grand estate. Each passing moment without him intensified her longing, her worry growing with each echoing footfall.

Theresa's heart skipped a beat when she caught sight of the study door ajar. A flicker of hope surged within her as she approached the room, her hand trembling as she pushed it open. But to her disappointment, the room stood empty, its air heavy with the scent of leather-bound books and lingering uncertainty.

"Are you all right, dear?" she suddenly heard the Dowager's voice from somewhere behind her.

Theresa turned around, trying to regain composure. She didn't want to seem like a frantic mad woman in search of a man she hadn't seen in just a few minutes when he might very well be just around the corner.

"Oh, yes, quite, thank you," Theresa smiled. "I was just uhm... looking for Devlin. Have you seen him this morning?"

"To tell you the truth, I haven't," the woman responded curiously. "Is he



perhaps in his bedchamber still?”

“I haven’t checked there,” Theresa almost chuckled aloud, scolding herself silently for jumping to all sorts of ridiculous conclusions before she had any reason to do so.

She was being silly. Of course, he would be back in his bedchamber. Why was she making such a big deal out of nothing? Truth be told, she expected him to stay with her in bed, but perhaps he was uncomfortable and went to sleep in his own bed? It was possible. In fact, it seemed highly plausible.

“I shall go there and see,” Theresa said, smiling. “Thank you.”

“I shall go down to the dining hall and wait for you two there then,” the Dowager spoke gracefully as always, turning around and walking away, leaving Theresa with her own troubled mind that wouldn’t let her be.

She fought her desperate urge to run all the way to Devlin’s bedchamber, and when she finally reached it, she stopped for a few moments to gather herself. She inhaled deeply, adjusting her hair a little. After all, she didn’t want to look disheveled, just... curious. Nothing else.

She knocked gently several times then she waited for a response. Strangely, there was nothing. She frowned, trying again. The exact same result

followed. She wondered if it would be all right to open the door herself without being called in. Maybe he was sleeping and didn't want to be disturbed? Well, if that was the case, she would apologize and feel a little embarrassed, but at least she would know that he was here.

Taking a deep breath of encouragement, she grabbed the doorknob and pushed the door open. What awaited her was the sight of an empty chamber with a bed that obviously hadn't been slept in the night before.

"Devlin?" she called out his name, more for her own sake than for anything else because it was obvious that there was no one there. She was greeted by the sound of her own heavy breathing.

Thoughts swirled in her mind, each one punctuated with a question mark. Was he intentionally keeping his distance? Had he grown tired of their connection? Doubts clawed at her, threatening to unravel the delicate tapestry of their love.

Her eyes welled with unshed tears as she contemplated the possibilities. The silence weighed upon her, a deafening reminder of his absence. Theresa clutched at the fabric of her robe, seeking solace in its familiar touch.

Then, she figured she would ask the staff. Maybe they had seen him go somewhere very early in the morning, and they might be able to shed some light on this mystery. She went downstairs to the dining hall where she found

the Dowager seated at the dining table, waiting patiently for everyone to come down.

“He isn’t there,” Theresa said instead of any explanation.

“He isn’t?” the Dowager lifted an eyebrow in surprise. “I don’t remember him having any urgent business this morning. At least, nothing that would force him to leave without any word. He knows better than that.”

Theresa wanted to ask the staff, but she didn’t want to seem desperate as if she needed to know his whereabouts at any given moment. Fortunately, the Dowager took that assignment upon herself.

“Juliet?” the Dowager called for the nearest servant girl, who immediately rushed over.

“Yes, Your Grace?” Juliet replied in the obedient tone of a country girl who aimed to please her employers.

“Have you seen the Duke this morning?” the Dowager inquired.

“No, I’m afraid I haven’t,” Juliet shook her head apologetically.

“Can you fetch Stephens?” the Dowager urged, but one look in Juliet’s eyes revealed that for some reason, that wouldn’t be possible.

“I apologize Your Grace, but Stephens has asked for these two days off because his sister has taken ill and he left before any of us had woken up,” Juliet reminded her. “He wanted to rush to his sister’s aid as soon as possible.”

Theresa had no idea about this, but obviously, the Dowager knew of it.

“Oh, yes,” the Dowager nodded, a flicker of remembrance in her eyes. “That’s right. Now I remember. In that case, go back to the kitchen and see if any of the other servants have seen the Duke or know where he has gone off to.”

“Yes, Your Grace,” Juliet curtsied hastily then rushed out of the dining hall, leaving the Dowager and Theresa alone.

Theresa’s mind was still racing, and the wise old woman could immediately sense what was happening. She got up and walked over to Theresa. As she gazed into Theresa’s eyes, her elegant coiffure framed a face adorned with gentle lines that spoke of a life filled with wisdom and grace.

Her voice, soothing and filled with genuine concern, gently pierced the

silence that enveloped the room.

“I can sense your unease, my dear,” the Dowager spoke to her. “Please know that you are not alone in your worry. I, too, am perplexed by Devlin’s sudden and unexpected absence. But I implore you not to let despair cloud your judgment as well as your heart. Devlin is a man of honor. There must be a reason behind his departure, and we shall soon find out what it is.”

Theresa was already on the verge of tears. She was trying not to allow worry and fear to consume her, but that was becoming more and more difficult.



On his way to his country estate, Devlin couldn’t stop thinking about the nature of this emergency, for it dawned on him that Robert hadn’t really told him anything in detail, but the tone of urgency was evident. After all, that was why he had set off immediately upon finding out, not even letting Theresa know.

He wondered if Robert had explained everything to her. He regretted not having done it himself, but perhaps Robert was right. Waking her up in the middle of the night to tell her that he was leaving would only unsettle her. It was better to let her sleep through the night, and then have Robert explain everything in detail once she was up.

The journey lasted several long hours, during which he couldn’t stop thinking

about her. He knew now what he had been denying for so long. He couldn't live without her. He was adamant to tell her that upon his return, hoping that this emergency, of whatever nature it was, would not take up too much of his time, and that soon, he would be back where he belonged with Theresa by his side.

Upon his arrival, Devlin was greeted by his steward, a man who had always been loyal and trustworthy.

“Your Grace,” Huntley greeted him cordially with a respectful bow. “I was informed of your arrival, and everything has been prepared for your stay here.”

“Thank you, Huntley,” Devlin nodded in passing as he entered the house which had truly been kept in a wonderful state. He had been coming here less and less, something he regretted, but there was simply so little time left for things that were not a priority right now. “I was actually hoping that I would not need to stay here too long as I have urgent matters to tend to back in London.”

The thought of Theresa being that urgent matter made him smile. He looked in Huntley's direction, and suddenly felt that something was amiss.

“I fear, Your Grace, that your presence here is a requirement,” Huntley pointed out apologetically.

“Well, of course it is,” Devlin nodded reluctantly, for this was the last place where he wanted to be right now, torn away from a warm bed where he was sleeping next to Theresa. “But I’m hoping that the emergency Robert had told me about would be easily rectified.”

“From what I understand, he left all of his suggestions in a note on your escritoire,” Huntley revealed.

“I’m sure it isn’t anything time-consuming,” Devlin said as he headed up the stairs.

“Also…” Huntley said quickly before he lost sight of Devlin, who upon hearing Huntley speak stopped on the first step.

“Also?” Devlin echoed.

“Now that Your Grace is here, there have been a few things around the house that need to be looked into,” Huntley added apologetically. “I didn’t wish to disturb Your Grace while you were away, but seeing you are here now, perhaps it would be a good idea to take a look at those as well?”

“Well, what do they entail?” Devlin wondered, not all that eager to handle more than what he had come for.

Huntley proceeded to voice a list of menial tasks and mundane responsibilities. Devlin didn't think they were that urgent, so he headed up to his study without breakfast in an effort to start sorting out things as soon as possible. As soon as he opened the door to his study, he could see a mountain of papers and documents awaiting him.

He frowned, inhaling deeply, as he approached his *escritoire*. He started to leaf through the papers one at a time, but no matter how many words he ended up reading, he didn't feel like he knew the exact nature of the emergency he had been sent here for. After what seemed endless hours of eye strain, he realized that some of their investments had backfired, mostly those that Robert had urged for. Devlin didn't think it was such a big problem although the money that was lost wasn't a small sum by any account. Still, it wasn't as bad as Robert had made it out to be.

Exhausted by the end of the day, he had a quick dinner and retired to bed where he fell asleep with the thoughts of Theresa in his mind. He was quite content that the emergency Robert had prepared him for was not as bad as either of them had believed. This made him hopeful that he would be able to return in a day, maybe two, and have that heart-to-heart conversation with Theresa, where he would tell her everything.

Two days passed quickly without Devlin even realizing it. Huntley kept adding to the list of duties, almost as if in an effort to keep Devlin occupied, so he would not leave before those two days had expired. Devlin was eager to return, but a part of him knew that these were things which also needed his



attention, so he tried to get as much done as possible while he was still there.

In the quiet hours of the evening, when the estate was cloaked in a hushed stillness, Devlin would often find himself retreating to a secluded spot, seeking solace and clarity. It was during these moments of introspection that his longing for Theresa became almost unbearable. He would envision her radiant smile, the way her eyes sparkled with warmth and understanding. Memories of their shared conversations and stolen glances flooded his mind, igniting a deep longing within him to express the truth that had been weighing on his heart.

## CHAPTER 29



“*H*e did what?” Mary-Jane exclaimed with a gasp she couldn’t suffocate even as she placed her hand on her lips. A look of incredulity was etched on her face.

Theresa inhaled deeply, nodding. The lush pathways of Hyde Park led them away from the crowd through the vibrant colors of blooming flowers while the gentle rustling of the leaves underneath their feet provided a serene backdrop to their heartfelt conversation. But nothing could ease Theresa’s mind. She had been wracking her mind, trying to come up with any number of possible explanations, but none seemed to make enough sense. All it took was one word, whether written or said. That would have sufficed. How could he have disappeared just like that?

“Disappeared, just like that,” Theresa said the same thing aloud, feeling weakened by each passing moment that she lived in this limbo.

“Come,” Mary-Jane grabbed her by the hand, pulling her towards a secluded

bench beneath the shade of an old weeping willow tree. “We won’t be interrupted here.”

The two ladies settled themselves on the bench, turning to each other in a conspiratorial manner as Mary-Jane waited for her friend to open up about her profound love for the Duke and the enigmatic circumstances regarding his abrupt disappearance. It took Theresa only a single minute to share all the important details with her friend, hoping that someone else’s perspective might shed new light on this mystery.

“I don’t know what to think, Mary-Jane,” Theresa said once her story had come to an end, her heart heavy with the weight of her unspoken feelings for Devlin. “It has been two days already, and not a word from him.”

Mary-Jane pondered for a few moments. “That doesn’t sound like the man you told me about. It really seemed to me that he had been true to his word, that he had changed. Perhaps he wrote, but the letter didn’t reach you?”

“I don’t know,” Theresa admitted. “I’m afraid that perhaps I’ve trusted him too soon.”

“I see that his absence weighs heavily on your heart, does it not?” Mary-Jane pointed out as any good friend ought to.

Theresa's eyes met her friend's. There was a glimmer of longing as deep as the ocean's depths. She couldn't explain it in words, but she tried. "I... I feel as if a part of me is missing. His sudden disappearance in the middle of the night has left me adrift, searching for answers that seem to elude me constantly."

"Have you spoken to his mother?" she wondered.

"I have," Theresa confirmed with a nod. "She also finds it incredible that he would do such a thing and assures me that there is more to this than meets the eye."

"A mother knows," Mary-Jane affirmed, taking Theresa's trembling hand into her own, offering solace in their shared moment of vulnerability. "If she tells you this, believe her. And believe in him. From what you've told me, he's proven to you that he is a changed man."

"But what about this?" Theresa asked again, unable to come to terms with the fact that it had already been two days.

"Fear not, my dear," Mary-Jane stated. "Perhaps this is fate's way of putting you two to the test. Love has a way of defying logic, of transcending barriers. I'm sure that he has been called away on urgent matters, and that he will return shortly with a complete explanation."

Theresa nodded, her gaze drifting towards the tranquil landscape that surrounded them. Most of the people preferred the busy avenues, while the two of them enjoyed a solitary corner where they could speak uninhibited.

“I want to believe that, Mary-Jane, I truly do.”

“Then believe, you silly girl,” Mary-Jane chuckled. “You do love him, don’t you?”

Theresa was caught off guard. She hadn’t said it aloud yet. It was still only something deep inside of her, something she had barely admitted to herself. But it was the truth, nonetheless. She could no longer hide it either from herself or from her best friend.

“I do,” Theresa finally admitted it.

“Then, there is only one thing you should do,” Mary-Jane added, sounding joyful over what she just heard.

“I will wait for him,” Theresa said. “I’m still afraid, but my love for him far outweighs that fear.”

In that moment, amid the grandeur of nature’s embrace, Theresa resolved to

trust in the power of love. She would wait with unwavering devotion, knowing that their paths would intertwine once more, and that the chapters of their love story were far from over. Everything that had happened between them happened for a reason, and that reason was love. It couldn't be anything else.

"I'm glad to hear that," Mary-Jane said, gazing somewhere in the distance. "Because I think that after what you've told me, you two are simply meant for each other. I mean, why else would your paths cross again in this manner when you could have continued as you lived for the past two years?"

"I wanted to live my life differently, and now, it seems that I am back where I've started," Theresa remarked, but there was no regret in her voice. On the contrary, she felt that she was exactly where she needed to be. There was only one thing left and that was Devlin's clarification. After that, Theresa felt that they would be starting their lives together, as real husband and wife ought to.

"Fate knows where to bring us," Mary-Jane stated.

"Exactly," Theresa agreed. Just as she was about to say something else, she noticed a man approaching them.

She stared in his direction although he was still too far away for her to recognize him. For one brief moment, her heart fluttered in hopes that it was

Devlin, but this man didn't have his confident stride, his broadness of shoulders, or his stature. It couldn't have been him. Yet, the man was approaching them steadily, staring in their direction.

"Who is that" Mary-Jane asked, gazing at the same man.

"I can't tell yet," Theresa admitted.

Then, several seconds later, she knew who it was. "Robert?" she called out to him once he was within earshot.

He was grinning from ear to ear. "Theresa!" he returned the greeting in only a name. "Fancy meeting you here."

"Quite," Theresa replied, returning the smile although hers was less eager. "Oh, this is my friend, Mary-Jane Higgins, the —"

"Dowager Countess of Forrester," Robert continued her sentence, bowing in front of Mary-Jane, who eyed him with distrust. "How could I forget meeting such a beautiful lady?"

Mary-Jane had no intention of offering him her hand to kiss which seemed to confuse him for some reason, but he quickly regained composure.

“So, Robert, what brings you to London?” Theresa inquired. Her hopes flared up that perhaps, he had come back with Devlin, or at least, he knew where Devlin was.

“Well, to be quite honest, I found myself here in Hyde Park by pure accident, and it seems that fate itself has brought us together.”

Theresa frowned. “What do you mean?”

He looked around, almost as if in fear that someone might overhear them, but there was no one around, so he stepped closer to the two ladies, who were now standing in front of him, listening intently to find out the reason behind him being here.

“I was weighing whether to inform you of an... interesting encounter I had at the country estates,” he admitted, sounding awkward. “But now that I have stumbled onto you, I think I have to share my knowledge with you.”

“Knowledge about what?” Theresa was becoming impatient, a trait that didn’t usually belong to her. However, this situation was draining her. She hadn’t seen Devlin in two days. In fact, she hadn’t even heard from him. And now, his cousin had stumbled onto her, by accident or not, to tell her something.



Theresa's breath caught in her throat as a foreboding sense of apprehension settled over her. She exchanged a quick glance with Mary-Jane, who offered her a supportive nod, silently encouraging her to stay strong.

Robert leaned in to such an extent that Theresa fought with all her might not to pull away from him. His voice was lowered to a barely audible whisper as if relishing the power of his revelation. "I happened upon Devlin at the estates yesterday. He was..." he paused, not taking his eyes off of her, then he continued, "in the arms of another woman. Their intimacy was apparent for all to see. I... I assumed that he had come here to make the parting of your ways final."

Theresa's heart sank, her mind racing to make sense of the words that had just pierced her soul. Devlin, the love of her life, entangled with another woman? It felt like a cruel blow, a betrayal that threatened to shatter her fragile hopes.

"Could... you have been mistaken?" Theresa asked, but she knew how ridiculous this question was. How could he have been mistaken? He knew his cousin well.

Robert did not even dignify that with an answer. All he did was shake his head. That was more than enough.

She tried to muster her composure as Mary-Jane squeezed her elbow, just to

remind her that she wasn't alone with this man. Disbelief and defiance swirled inside Theresa's mind. She didn't want to believe this, and yet, it made perfect sense.

"Devlin would never betray her like that," Mary-Jane decided to interfere this time, seeing that her friend was too weakened by this revelation. "Do you have any proof of what you claim?"

"Proof?" Robert reverberated, an amused smile dancing on his lips. "How could one have proof of something like that? You don't have to believe me, but the truth has a way of revealing itself, whether we want it to or not."

Theresa knew that he was right. She tried to find a plausible explanation regarding Devlin's disappearance, but the truth was evident. He disappeared in the night probably because he had changed his mind about everything, and he was not man enough to tell it to her face.

"I'm sorry, Theresa," Robert said apologetically, his thin lips pressed against each other. "But if something like that happened to me, I would want someone to tell me."

"I know," Theresa nodded. "I appreciate your honesty."

Robert turned to Mary-Jane and bowed before them both. "If you need

anything..." he said, not finishing. He didn't need to. Theresa knew that she would never ask him for anything. It was mere courtesy which she paid very little heed to.

Both she and Mary-Jane watched him turn on his heel and disappear into the bustling crowds of Hyde Park, leaving both ladies stunned in his wake. The once idyllic park seemed transformed, its beauty tainted by the seed of doubt that had been planted within Theresa's heart. As the world continued to whirl around her, Theresa sought solace in Mary-Jane's unwavering support.

"I don't trust that man," Mary-Jane frowned, still looking in the direction where Robert had just disappeared off to.

"Why would he lie?" Theresa wondered. "What does he have to gain from that?"

"I don't know," Mary-Jane admitted, "but my gut has yet to steer me wrong."

Theresa didn't want to talk about it any longer. She felt weakened by this entire conversation, and all she wanted to do now was go home and lock the door from the inside, leaving the world and all its troubles outside. If only it were that simple.

## CHAPTER 30



Three whole days had passed, forcing Devlin to remain trapped in the country estate, burdened by numerous menial tasks which, according to him, were of no urgency. However, Huntley kept adding to the list, up until the moment where each second felt like an entire eternity.

Devlin's longing to be reunited with Theresa grew more fervent with every beat of his heart, but Huntley, oblivious to the torrent of emotion taking place inside Devlin's heart, kept effectively prolonging his departure. On the evening of the third day, Devlin had made up his mind. Still shifting through papers in his study, he called for Huntley, who appeared moments later.

"Your Grace, you called?" Huntley said respectfully, bowing before him. Devlin felt as if the two of them had spent every waking moment together for the past three days, and it was more than enough.

"Yes," Devlin nodded. "I have decided to leave whatever outstanding business there is left for another time, and I shall be leaving first thing in the

morning.”

Frustration gnawed at Devlin’s spirit, but he held on, driven by the burning desire to see Theresa, to explain the circumstances that had led to his abrupt disappearance. The weight of his unspoken emotions weighed heavily upon him, urging him to seize control of his destiny and seek solace in the arms of the woman he loved.

“Your Grace, of course, knows best,” Huntley said with much respect in his voice, but as Devlin sensed, there was a but following. “And I do understand your concern that you have already stayed here longer than you had anticipated. But there are matters here that require Your Grace’s attention. Robert has assured me that you need to stay here until every single thing has been looked into, and as Your Grace can see for himself, there have been quite a few issues that need your urgent attention.”

“Robert said that?” Devlin repeated.

“Why yes,” Huntley nodded. “He only has your best interest in mind, yours and your family’s, of course.”

Huntley was right. Robert had always given him advice which benefitted the family. It was only logical that he would want any loose end tied up and sorted out. It was, after all, what Devlin wanted as well, but his mind was elsewhere. It was increasingly more difficult to focus on the tasks at hand

when all he wanted to do was run back to Theresa and tell her how much he loved her, how much he needed her in his life.

“I have fulfilled my duties here,” Devlin declared firmly, his voice carrying an air of determination. “And I shall see to it that I discuss things with Robert regarding anything that is left outstanding here. He could also come and spend some time here, looking into things that have been left unresolved.”

It wouldn't be the first time such a thing had happened, after all. However, this time, it seemed that both Robert and the steward were doing everything in their power to sort out absolutely everything. He couldn't understand the need for such urgency. He had taken care of the most urgent affair which was the issue of the lost money. Fortunately, it would not be a big blow to his family's finances as long as they kept such future monetary losses to a minimum which was what Devlin had planned on doing.

The steward's face contorted as he watched Devlin stand up from his escritoire, signaling that his work was done. There was an odd air of victory about him as if he had finally come to terms with himself. In a way, he had.

“In fact, I have just decided not to wait until the morning,” Devlin announced. “Have my carriage ready. I shall leave immediately.”

“But... it is night, Your Grace,” the steward mumbled. “You know that there are robbers in the Sherwood Forest just waiting for lonesome carriages to

pass by.”

“I shall be vigilant of such risks.” Devlin did not allow himself to be dissuaded from his new plan. He had waited long enough, even longer than that. “But I really must return. I have someone who has been waiting for me.”

He had decided to finally pursue the very essence of his existence, the love that resided in his very heart. He had been sworn to duty all this time, but he finally realized that duty without love was a hollow existence. He needed to go back to Theresa and tell her all of this. He was certain that she felt the same way about him. All he needed to do now was pour his heart out to her and assure her that she belonged with him. There would be no more games, no more hiding of truth.

“Your Grace has always been a responsible duke,” Huntley nodded. “You’ve always put your family and your duty first.”

“My duty now is to my wife,” he said, meaning every word of it. “Now, go and have my carriage ready.”

Huntley seemed as if he had something else to say, but he changed his mind at the last minute. Instead, he bowed and hastily left Devlin’s study. Within the hour, Devlin was in the carriage, being rocked back on the road to London.

As Devlin rode through the picturesque countryside, the wind tousling his hair and the rhythmic sound of hoofbeats filling the air, his mind was consumed by thoughts of Theresa. The memory of her smile, her laughter, and the warmth of her touch lingered in his heart, fueling his determination to reach London as swiftly as possible.

The journey seemed to stretch on forever, each moment between them an eternity. He replayed their stolen glances and whispered conversations in his mind, his heartache intensifying with each passing thought of her. Devlin knew he had to find the words to explain his sudden departure, to lay bare his soul and reveal the depth of his love for Theresa. He hoped that Robert had done what he had promised which was to tell Theresa the reason behind this sudden departure and have her wait for him.

As the spires of London came into view, Devlin's heart quickened with anticipation. He knew that Theresa was waiting for him, her own heart yearning for answers and reassurance. The bustling city streets, teeming with carriages and pedestrians, melted away as his thoughts became consumed by the woman who held his heart captive.

As he finally arrived at her doorstep, dismounting with a sense of urgency, he took a deep breath to steady his racing heart. His fingers trembled slightly as he raised his hand to knock on the door, his resolve unwavering. In that moment, Devlin knew that his love for Theresa was the anchor that would guide him through any storm.



The doors opened, and Theresa's butler welcomed him.

"Your Grace," he bowed respectfully, ushering him into the entrance corridor.

"Is Theresa here?" Devlin asked, breathless as if he was the one who was galloping on his own two feet and not the horses. Devlin had never felt this nervous in his entire life.

The butler's expression was stern, and his voice carried a note of finality as he spoke. "I beg your pardon, Your Grace, but Miss. Theresa has informed me that she refuses to see you," the butler relayed, his tone firm and unwavering.

"Refuses to see me?" Devlin echoed the words which refused to make any sense in his mind. "Why on earth would she refuse to see me?"

He knew that it was a silly question. The butler wouldn't know the answer to that question. The butler was merely here to follow directions given to him by Theresa. But why would she refuse to see him? Devlin couldn't understand. He knew that he had disappeared without a word, but Robert had assured him he would let her know exactly what had happened. Was it possible that Robert was prevented from doing so?

Devlin instinctively shook his head. Robert had always had their family's best interests in mind. He was a man of his word. If he said he would clarify everything with Theresa, then Devlin considered it as good as done. But now, the reality of his situation hit him hard. He struggled to find the right words to speak to the butler.

“Can you tell her that I know my departure was sudden and unexpected, and that I will explain everything if she only gives me a chance to do so?” Devlin pleaded.

The butler's expression softened momentarily as he observed Devlin's earnest plea. He seemed to consider the request for a moment before sighing softly.

“I can certainly give her your message, Your Grace,” he responded, his voice sympathetic and understanding. “But I cannot make any promises. Her Grace has been rather adamant in expressing her desires not to grant you an audience with her.”

Devlin nodded, appreciating the butler's understanding and knowing that his fate now lay in Theresa's hands.

“I shall go tell her now,” the butler informed him. “I would have shown you to the drawing room, but...” He didn't finish but instead only shrugged helplessly, strengthening the impression that it was not his decision to make.

“I understand,” Devlin nodded. “And I am grateful for your help.”

The butler bowed then disappeared up the stairs. There was the sound of knocking on doors then those same doors opened, only to close quickly yet again. Devlin felt as if his heart was beating inside his throat, making it more and more difficult to breathe. His anticipation grew as he waited for the butler to return, each second feeling like an entire year. He fought the urge to pace back and forth and instead remained standing in one place which required all of his conscious effort.

Finally, the door creaked open again, and the sound of footsteps descending the stairs could be heard, becoming louder and louder. When the butler appeared before him again, his expression was grave. Devlin’s heart skipped a beat as he searched the butler’s face for any glimmer of hope, even the faintest one, but it was clear as daylight that the news wasn’t favorable.

“I’m sorry, Your Grace,” the butler spoke, delivering Theresa’s final decision. “Her Grace still refuses to see you. And... she insists you leave the premises immediately.”

Devlin felt a mix of sadness and frustration welling up within him. He had hoped that his sincerity and remorse would touch Theresa’s heart, but it seemed that she had made up her mind. He took a deep breath, struggling to keep his composure.

“I understand,” Devlin said, raking his fingers nervously through his hair. He thought of shouting up the stairwell. He was certain that she would be able to hear him, but that wouldn’t serve any purpose. He wanted to speak to her, but she refused to see him. He still couldn’t understand why. Was she so upset with him for leaving to take care of his business? She never struck him as a woman who couldn’t understand that such urgent affairs sometimes happened. And yet, it seemed that she was upset exactly because of that.

“Please let her know that I respect her decision,” he said solemnly. “I will not bother her anymore.”

“I will relay your message, Your Grace,” the butler assured him. “Is there anything else I can assist you with?”

Devlin shook his head, appreciating the butler’s offer but knowing that there was nothing more to be done at this point. “No, thank you,” he replied, his voice tinged with resignation. “I’ll respect her wishes. Please convey my gratitude for her past kindness.”

With a final nod, Devlin walked outside, listening to the sound of the door closing behind him. He took a moment to collect himself, wondering if this meant what he thought it meant. Was this fate’s way of telling him that he would now have to find a way to move forward without Theresa?

*No!*

Everything inside of him refused to accept that. He couldn't bring himself to accept that she didn't want to see him, let alone that she might not love him anymore. The butler's words echoed in his ears, but he refused to let them settle in his heart. With a heavy sigh, he stepped back from the door and began to make his way down the hallway, knowing that he had done all he could for now. He would patiently wait, hoping that someday Theresa would find it in her heart to give him another chance.

## CHAPTER 31



“*I*s he gone?” Theresa asked with a trembling voice.

Mary-Jane had her ear pressed to the door. A moment later, she turned to Theresa with a nod. “I think so.”

Theresa didn’t want to admit that she was moments away from barging through those very same doors and running after him. She wanted to hear him say everything he had to say, but the pain was too much. He promised her he would not hurt her ever again, and here he was breaking that very same promise.

Unable to hold the weight of her own body any longer, Theresa slumped down onto a chaise lounge. Mary-Jane sat beside her in the comforting embrace of the sofa. The knowledge that Devlin was there mere moments ago weighed heavily on Theresa’s heart. Her eyes were filled with tears although she was trying her best not to allow them to escape the confines of her eyes.

“He promised,” Theresa whispered, her voice barely audible.

Mary-Jane gently squeezed Theresa’s hand, offering a small measure of solace. “We both believed him.”

“I never wanted it to come to this,” Theresa added. “Why does it have to hurt so much?”

“I know, Theresa,” Mary-Jane said softly. “It is heartbreaking when we decide to risk our hearts and trust someone, especially someone who has wronged us before, and they let us down. It happens more often than you think that love takes such a difficult turn. But sometimes, we just have to keep our chins up and prioritize our own happiness.”

A stray tear rolled down Theresa’s cheek. She didn’t even try to wipe it away. Her voice choked with emotion as she continued to speak, feeling that it was better to let it all out, instead of burying it inside.

“I really thought that he was telling me the truth,” Theresa said softly, her voice on the verge of breaking. “I thought that he changed, that he truly loved me like I love him. Now, he has shattered that trust, and I feel like I’m drowning in this uncertainty.”

Mary-Jane leaned closer, her voice filled with compassion. “Theresa, you are

strong, and you deserve to be with someone who respects and cherishes you which obviously isn't the Duke. It's okay to feel heartbroken and mourn the loss of what could have been. Take the time you need to heal."

Theresa took a deep breath, trying to steady herself amidst the overwhelming emotions. "You're right, Mary-Jane. I need to find my own happiness to rebuild myself. But it doesn't make it hurt any less right now."

Mary-Jane's comforting presence remained unwavering as she spoke softly. "I'll be here for you, Theresa, every step of the way. Lean on your friends and loved ones during this time. Allow yourself to grieve but also remember your strength and resilience."

As Theresa leaned into Mary-Jane's embrace, she found solace in the support of her dear friend. The road ahead seemed uncertain, but she knew that with time and the support of those who cared for her, she would find the strength to heal and rediscover happiness.

"Yes, I just need some time alone," Theresa nodded with a heavy sigh.

"Absolutely not!" Mary-Jane surprised her with her loud, determined exclamation. She wiped away that same stray tear from Theresa's cheek. "That is the last thing you need to do right now, my dear. No, no, no. What you will do is this: you and I will go back to my home. Rosemary is there, and she will be delighted to see you. Spending time with loved ones and



engaging in joyful activities is exactly what you need right now to bring some solace to your heart.”

Theresa looked up at Mary-Jane, her eyes reflecting a glimmer of hope amidst the sadness. She nodded, realizing that being in the presence of a dear friend and the innocence of a child might provide a temporary respite from the pain.

“That does sound comforting,” Theresa had to admit. “Rosemary always knows how to bring a smile to my face.”

“Then, why don’t we head there immediately?” Mary-Jane suggested.

To be quite honest, Theresa was hoping that Devlin would return. At the same time, she didn’t want him to because she knew that she might break down and allow him to see her. If she did that, all was lost. Her heart would win over her mind, and any excuse he had would be accepted.

“I think that is a good idea,” Theresa finally agreed.

Mary-Jane gently helped Theresa to her feet, supporting her through the difficult moment. Together, they walked out of Theresa’s home and made their way to Mary-Jane’s residence where laughter and the playful energy of a child awaited them.

The moment Mary-Jane opened the front door, there was the loud pitter-patter of a child's feet, rushing to greet them.

“Carefully down the stairs, darling,” Mary-Jan urged her daughter, who didn't even hear that. Her face lit up with excitement as she ran towards Theresa. “Auntie Theresa!” she exclaimed, wrapping her arms around Theresa's legs, so she was unable to move. Theresa's arms flew around the little girl's body, keeping her close. “I missed you!”

“I missed you, too, sweet girl,” Theresa said softly, immediately feeling this tidal wave of love banish all the hurt and pain she had been feeling up until that point. She knew that it would be far more difficult to get over it all, but with the help of loved ones, she knew she would be able to do it.

Theresa's heart swelled with affection as she bent down to embrace Rosemary. The innocent love of a child brought a sense of warmth and renewed hope. She knew that moments like these were precious and could help mend the wounds in her heart if only for a little while.

Mary-Jane smiled, observing the tender interaction between Theresa and Rosemary. “Let's spend the day playing games, telling stories, and enjoying each other's company,” she suggested, hoping to create a positive distraction for Theresa.

Theresa nodded, her voice filled with gratitude. “Thank you, Mary-Jane. Your kindness means the world to me.”

“You are like a sister to me, Theresa, you know that,” Mary-Jane gushed, taking Theresa’s hand into her own and squeezing it gently. “I cannot bear to see you heartbroken over someone who obviously never deserved your heart to begin with.”

Theresa sighed. “I was so blinded by my love for him. I didn’t see that he did exactly what he had done the first time. He disappeared without a word.”

“Don’t think about him now,” Mary-Jane urged. “We need to erase him from your mind as if he never existed. We need to go back to your original plan of living your best life here in London with us.”

“Yes, with us!” Rosemary joined in, and only then did they realize that she had been listening. That meant they needed to be careful with what they said in front of her, for children were like little sponges, absorbing everything they heard.

“Now, what are we going to do first?” Mary-Jane wondered, patting herself on the cheek as if lost in deep thought. Rosemary chuckled at the sight.

Her youthful enthusiasm filled the room, and she clapped her hands with

excitement. “Let’s have a pretend tea party!” she exclaimed, her eyes sparkling with joy.

Theresa couldn’t help but smile at Rosemary’s suggestion. The simplicity and innocence of a tea party game seemed like the perfect escape from the heaviness in her heart. “That sounds lovely, Rosemary,” Theresa replied, her voice lightening with anticipation.

Together, the three of them gathered around a small table with a colorful tea set, pretending to pour and sip tea from delicate cups. They laughed and chatted, immersing themselves in the imaginative world of the tea party. As the game progressed, Theresa found herself fully absorbed in the moment. The cares and heartbreak that burdened her seemed to fade away, replaced by laughter and the pure joy of being present with loved ones.

Rosemary pretended to serve an imaginary cake, and Theresa played along, taking a bite with exaggerated delight. Mary-Jane joined in, sharing stories and jokes that brought genuine smiles to their faces. The afternoon was filled with a beautiful sense of togetherness and lightness, even if only temporarily. In the midst of the tea party, Theresa realized that she hadn’t thought about her heartbreak for a while. The game and the loving atmosphere created by Mary-Jane and Rosemary had granted her a reprieve from the pain, offering a glimpse of healing and hope.

Time seemed to fly by, and the entire afternoon was spent in laughter and joy. Theresa couldn’t have imagined anything better. As she was saying

goodbye to them both, she embraced Rosemary tightly, cherishing the innocence and the cheer the young girl had brought to her life at a moment when she needed it the most.

“Thank you both,” she said, her voice swelling with love and tenderness. “Today has been a wonderful reminder that love and happiness can still exist, even in the face of heartache. I am so grateful for having you both in my life.”

Mary-Jane and Rosemary smiled. “You will always have a shoulder to lean on in us,” Mary-Jane assured her. “You will never be alone. Always remember that. Together, we are stronger. Together, we can bear any storm.”

“You are right,” Theresa smiled. “I’m sorry that I seemed to have forgotten that for a while.”

“Don’t worry,” Mary-Jane winked at her. “I will always be here to remind you of that.”

With a renewed sense of hope and a heart filled with gratitude, Theresa bid farewell to Mary-Jane and Rosemary, carrying with her the precious memory of a carefree afternoon. Though her heartbreak would still require time to heal, she now knew that moments of joy and love could help mend the wounds and pave the way for a brighter tomorrow.

That night in bed, Theresa lay engulfed by a sea of sadness that seemed to wash over her. Thoughts of Devlin, their shared memories, and the pain of their recent separation consumed her mind. It was in these solitary moments, in the quiet solitude of her bedroom, that her emotions came crashing down, leaving her feeling vulnerable and alone.

With a heavy sigh, Theresa longed for answers that seemed elusive. She questioned herself, wondering if she had made the right decision and if there was anything more she could have done. The ache in her heart grew, and the longing for what was lost intensified.

In moments like these, the pain seemed unbearable, and Theresa felt an overwhelming sense of loneliness. She yearned for comfort, for someone who could understand the depths of her sorrow. But in the darkness of her room, she was left with her own thoughts and the bittersweet memories that haunted her.

All she had ever known of love was a lie. She didn't want to listen to any more of those. She was better off alone, a path she had already chosen to walk once before. Now, all she needed to do was take a step back and remind herself of her own strength. It would be difficult but not impossible.

Those were the thoughts she fell asleep with, hoping that with the new day, she would emerge out of this well of sorrow.

## CHAPTER 32



“*Y*ou must have done *something*, old boy,” Harrison shook his head, sitting opposite Devlin in the study of his lavishly decorated town home.

Devlin had always liked this room the best out of all the others as there was the sense of intellectual curiosity which permeated the place. There were rows and rows of bookshelves, filled from floor to ceiling with a vast collection of books spanning various genres and subjects. He couldn’t help but think how Theresa would be instantly captivated by its refined elegance and the inviting atmosphere where all these books would beckon to her like old friends.

“But that is just the thing,” Devlin said, raking his fingers through his hair as he always did when he was anxious. “I left and —”

“You left her,” Harrison pointed out, interrupting him. “In the middle of the night, from what I understood, after you had shared a... well, passionate evening, let’s call it. How can you not see that you shouldn’t have done

that?”

Now, Devlin was more anxious than ever with the weight of Theresa’s rejection still fresh in his mind. He needed the presence of his best friend and the opportunity to share both his thoughts and his feelings, something he had not been used to doing.

“I left immediately at Robert’s beckoning,” Devlin tried to explain himself. “He assured me that he would clarify everything in the morning when Theresa woke up.”

Harrison tilted his head a little as if to take a closer look at Devlin. “Does it seem like he has done that?”

“Well... not really,” Devlin had to admit.

“There is something strange going on here,” Harrison mused, getting up and pacing about the chamber where the thick Axminster absorbed the sound of his feet.

“Strange how?” Devlin asked although he had to admit that some pieces of the puzzle simply didn’t add up. At least, not in the way they were supposed to. First, it was Robert arriving in the middle of the night, demanding that Devlin go immediately, then Huntley being more thorough than ever with all



the little things that needed to be taken care of, and finally, Theresa acting as if she knew nothing of the reason why he had left so abruptly.

“I don’t know,” Harrison admitted. “I think the only way to clarify everything is to speak with Theresa.”

“But how am I supposed to do that when she refuses to see me?” Devlin sighed heavily.

Harrison went to a small cupboard and reached for a bottle of aged whiskey, its rich amber hue catching the soft light in the room. The aroma of oak and vanilla permeated the air as he poured a generous measure into each of the two glasses, the liquid gliding downward smoothly, its golden streams reflecting the glow of the sun rays oozing through the window.

He carefully added a splash of water to temper the intensity of the whiskey, releasing its complex flavors. He gently stirred the mixture, allowing the ingredients to harmonize, creating a balanced and inviting cocktail. Devlin watched him do this in silence, allowing his own mind to focus, for a few precious moments, on something other than Theresa.

With drinks in both hands, Harrison approached him and offered him a glass. Devlin took it without hesitation. “Thank you.”

The clinking of glasses mingled with the quiet anticipation that hung in the air. Devlin knew that he could count on his friend for brutal honesty. That was what he needed right now because he felt as if he weren't seeing the bigger picture. He believed he had done nothing wrong, yet the reality of the situation was far from it. Theresa was upset with him, but she refused to tell him why.

“The butler told me that she wanted me to leave,” Devlin continued, enjoying the scratch of the liquor which now clawed its way down his throat. “I can't help but feel lost and confused most of all. I... I thought we had something, something worth fighting for.”

Harrison listened attentively, nodding when it seemed required of him. He inhaled deeply before he spoke. “I know it might be difficult to accept, old boy, but women aren't like us. They don't think the way we do. My opinion is that she expected something of you, something you had promised, and you haven't kept that promise, and now, she feels betrayed.”

“So, she is angry with me?” Devlin's brows furrowed with even more concern.

“No,” Harrison shook his head.

“No?” Devlin felt suddenly hopeful. “Then, I still have a chance.”

“I don’t know,” Harrison tried to clarify, but it wasn’t that easy. “When a woman is angry, she will shout, she will yell, she will scream. She will let you know how angry she is with you because she wants you to make her feel better.”

Devlin thought about it for a moment. “But she hasn’t done any of that.”

“Exactly,” Harrison nodded, taking another sip of his drink before continuing. “Which means she isn’t angry. Or at least, there are more emotions involved here. I would say she is disappointed for some reason. Maybe even heartbroken. Because a woman whose heart is broken will hide away like a wounded animal. She will refuse to speak because she doesn’t believe that there is anything that can be done to rectify the situation.”

The reality of Harrison’s words struck him like lightning. “That means I’ve hurt her so much that she no longer believes in us. Harrison, I can’t bear the thought of losing her. Not again.”

Harrison placed a reassuring hand on Devlin’s shoulder. “We all make mistakes, Devlin. It’s how we learn and grow. But right now, what you can do is respect Theresa’s wishes. Give her the space she needs and use this time to reflect on your own actions and how you can become a better person. Sometimes, the best way to show someone we care is by giving them the freedom to find their own path.”

Devlin nodded slowly, absorbing Harrison's wisdom. The road ahead seemed uncertain, but he understood that self-reflection and personal growth were essential. He took a deep breath, finding a glimmer of hope amidst the pain. All he wanted was to see her, to caress her cheek, to hear her melodious voice telling him that everything would be all right.

"What if she decides never to see me again?" Devlin asked the question which made him paralyzed. It was something he didn't want to even consider as a possibility, but he knew that it could happen whether he liked it or not.

"You are still married," Harrison reminded him. "She can hide away from you all she wants, but eventually, your paths will cross again, one way or another. So, not seeing each other ever again is not a possibility. However, I would advise you to give her some time."

"I want to give her all the time she wants, but after she tells me what it is I've done wrong!" Devlin exclaimed, unable to control himself any longer. "I just want to go there, barge in through the door, push that butler aside, and demand an explanation from her!"

Harrison shook his head. "I know, Devlin. I can only imagine how you must feel, but you know that by doing this, you will only make things worse. Much worse."

Devlin sighed, feeling as if he were walking on a thin line between a weak

semblance of control and an utter lack of it. And the scales were constantly tipping to one side although he was still somewhere in the middle, holding on. He just didn't know how much longer he would be able to do this balancing.

"You might try writing to her first," Harrison suggested knowingly. "There is a high chance of the letter returning to you unread, but at the same time, she might be curious enough to read it and even respond."

"I can't imagine writing everything I feel for her in two sentences," Devlin admitted. "Besides, I don't want to write. I don't want to have others speak for me or for her, like that damned butler. I want us to speak to each other, and I want her to tell me to my face that she doesn't love me."

"Oh, but she does," Harrison laughed amusedly. "If she didn't, she wouldn't be doing all this. And that is exactly the point. When someone we love hurts us, we do confusing things because we don't know what to do or how to act."

Devlin shook his head. None of this was making any sense.

"You have to be patient, old boy," Harrison echoed. "That is what it all boils down to."

Devlin didn't like it, but he had to admit Harrison was right. Barging in there

demanding explanations would get him nowhere. He had to be patient.

“You’re right, Harrison. I need to give Theresa the space she desires, even if it’s the hardest thing for me to do. I want to learn from my mistakes and become someone worthy of her love whether or not we find our way back to each other.”

Harrison smiled, proud of his friend’s determination. “That’s the spirit, Devlin. Remember, life is full of twists and turns, and sometimes the most unexpected paths lead to the greatest growth. Though the road may be challenging and uncertain, if your connection with Theresa is strong and genuine, I have faith that you will find your way back to each other.”

Devlin hoped so as well. Although he still couldn’t understand what made Theresa so angry with him that she refused to see him without a word. He had to take Harrison’s word for it. Women saw things differently. Perhaps he was right in thinking that she saw Devlin’s disappearance in the night as yet another instance of him abandoning her, just like the first time, and it made her retreat and push him away.

“Thank you, Harrison,” Devlin smiled at his friend with appreciation. “I truly value your input, and honestly, it seems you know more about women than any other man I know, even those who have been married for years.”

Harrison chuckled at these words. “I told you, Devlin. I know a lot about

women, so I can predict their every move and not fall into any traps they set for me.”

“Have traps been laid out?” Devlin inquired curiously, enjoying this sudden change of topic. He wanted to think about something else, something other than Theresa, although that was quite difficult.

“You wouldn’t believe how many,” Harrison shook his head in disbelief. “But you know me. I plan to live out the rest of my days a content bachelor.”

“You say that now,” Devlin teased, “but fate has a way of ruining even the best of plans.”

“Hardly,” Harrison was adamant. “There is a better chance of a hailstorm in the middle of July than a woman wrapping her talons around me.”

Devlin couldn’t help but chuckle. It was simply who his best friend was, and he loved him as such, nonetheless. As for his manner of thinking, it was truly different. While everyone else yearned for stability and family life, Harrison enjoyed being a bachelor and all it brought with it.

The two friends spent the next two hours conversing about less important affairs which Devlin again welcomed. His mind got a respite from the heartache that had befallen him, and only during his carriage ride home did

he think of Theresa again. Only this time, the memory of her came back more haunting than ever. It urged him to do the unthinkable.

He knocked on the roof of the carriage, giving the footman different instructions. The carriage came to an abrupt halt then changed directions. He was not going home any longer. He couldn't go home. Not yet. Not when there was so much to be said, to be clarified. He knew that he had to get it off his chest. If Theresa would choose to hold it against him, so be it.



## CHAPTER 33



Every rational fiber of his being urged him not to do this. At least, not to do this now, late in the evening when the whole house was getting ready for bed. But he couldn't stop himself even if he tried to.

Devlin's fingers curled into a fist which he then used to knock on the door several times. He waited impatiently, feeling rage and confusion rise inside of him like a tidal wave. He knew that nothing but seeing Theresa would pacify him now, and he would not leave until he was granted an audience with her.

Just as he was about to raise his hand to bang on the door again, it opened. Theresa's butler stood there, looking incredulously at Devlin. Despite Devlin's rude appearance, the butler tried to handle the situation politely.

"Good evening, Your Grace," he greeted him cordially.

"Theresa," Devlin said breathlessly as if he had been running a race.

The butler shook his head. “I’m certain you yourself can see that this is a rather inappropriate time for a visit. Her Grace has retired for the evening. And not only that, but also —”

“I know what she had you tell me last time I was here,” Devlin interrupted him. The man was actually making this situation even worse by being so dreadfully polite. To be quite honest, Devlin would have preferred him to be disrespectful and rude in which case Devlin would have been more than happy to plant him a facer, push past him, and find Theresa.

However, the man’s utterly polite behavior prevented Devlin from acting in such a crude manner. He wanted to remain civilized, no matter how ridiculous it all sounded.

“Then, Your Grace knows how she feels about you being here,” the butler said apologetically, looking down at his feet.

“I know,” Devlin nodded again. “I know everything. But I also know that I won’t leave until she has agreed to see me, even for a few moments. I will stay here for days on end if necessary, and during that time, she will have to pass through these very same doors. She will have to see me eventually.”

The butler sighed in an almost fatherly manner. “I cannot disturb Her Grace this late.”

“You have to!” Devlin exclaimed. “It is urgent. Nothing has ever been this urgent, believe me! This cannot wait! I cannot wait!”

The butler gave him another look and immediately recognized the persistence in Devlin’s voice. He inhaled deeply, realizing that Devlin meant every word of it.

“Very well, Your Grace,” the butler finally acquiesced. “Please wait here a moment, while I speak with Her Grace. I will see if there is any possibility for her to meet with you briefly.”

The butler excused himself and went to find Theresa. The doors closed, so Devlin could not overhear anything that was happening inside. He waited anxiously in front of the door, his mind filled with the urgency of the matter he wished to discuss. Time seemed to stretch indefinitely as he waited for the butler’s return. After what felt like an eternity, the door opened, and the butler reappeared.

“Your Grace,” he said calmly while Devlin’s heart was beating so wildly it threatened to jump right out of his chest. “Her Grace has agreed to meet with you, but please bear in mind that it is to be only a brief visit. It is already rather late.”

“I just need a few minutes with her,” Devlin said anxiously, gripping at any

hope he still had left.

“Please follow me,” the butler nodded then turned around.

Relieved to hear that Theresa had agreed to meet with him after all, Devlin followed the butler inside, and they made their way to the designated area where Theresa was to meet with him. The butler ushered him into one of the two drawing rooms, leaving him there.

“Her Grace shall be with you shortly,” the butler announced then left him alone.

Devlin doubted that he had ever felt more anxious about anything in his entire life. He knew that customs dictated for him to take a seat and wait for her to arrive, but he couldn't sit still. Instead, he paced about the room like a caged animal, trying to come up with the right words to say to her. In fact, he only had one question for her. He needed her answers and explanations. He wanted to hear her talk, not himself.

He glanced at the old grandfather clock on the wall. The seconds were ticking away painfully slowly, like fine grains of sand slipping through his fingers. A cold talon of fear patted him on the shoulder.

*Maybe she just told you to wait here but has no intention of showing up? a*

treacherous little voice inside of him suggested.

He instinctively shook his head. That wasn't true. Theresa would never lie. If she didn't want to see him now, she would have told him so. He knew her that much.

He glanced at the door, and at that moment, she finally appeared.



Theresa stood in the doorway, unable to go through it. Her eyes were fixed on Devlin, her heart racing with a mixture of all emotions known to man. At first, she didn't want to agree to this. Why would she? She didn't owe him anything. In fact, he owed *her* an explanation, only she had little desire to hear it. She was too hurt and too embarrassed that she trusted him even after he had proven to her that he wasn't worth her trust.

Yet, here she was, standing in front of him, her heart bare and her thoughts out in the open. She was almost certain that he was able to read her mind right now. Uncertain about what to say or how to react, she took a deep breath, trying to regain composure.

Devlin, noticing her presence in the doorway, stopped mid-step. He looked up and met her gaze. There was a brief moment of silence as they locked eyes, each one seemingly lost in their own thoughts. Theresa's heart beat wildly, making her acutely aware of his every breath as if she were close

enough to him to feel it on her lips. Time seemed to slow down as they stood there, their connection almost tangible in the air. It was as if the outside world had faded away, leaving only the two of them in that moment.

She fought the urge to run towards him and wrap her arms around his neck. It was difficult to resist that temptation, to remind herself of what Robert had told her. There was another woman, and Devlin dared to come here to demand explanations of her.

“I’m surprised to see you here,” she told him, unwilling to take her eyes off of him. She wanted him to see that she was in control of not only the situation but also of her own emotions. “Won’t your mistress ask you where you’ve been so late in the evening?”

“Mistress?” Devlin asked, looking stunned by her comment. “What mistress?”

*Do not believe him!* her heart urged her. He had already broken her once. What was to prevent him from doing it again and again?

“Do not pretend for my sake,” she scoffed, trying to sound as aloof and cold as she could which required all of her conscious effort. “I know everything.” Her voice trembled. It was on the verge of breaking with all the pain and anger she was succumbing to. But instead of calming down, this amalgamation of conflicting emotions was only fueling her pain even further.

His brows furrowed in confusion. If he was pretending, he was doing a damn good job of it, she had to give him that. But she had to remain adamant. She couldn't fall for his explanations or his sweet talking.

“There is no mistress, Theresa. What makes you think that?” he asked, still flabbergasted but calm and composed which made her feel even angrier.

“Don't you dare deny it,” she snarled, pointing her finger at him. “Robert told me everything!”

“Robert!?” he gasped at his cousin's name in a way she wasn't expecting him to. He turned away from her, shaking his head with his hands resting on his hips. She couldn't tell what he was doing. Was he trying to come up with more explanations?

“Yes,” she nodded, continuing this flood of pain that threatened to destroy everything in its path. Now that she had started it, she needed to end it. “Unlike you, he had the decency to tell me to my face what he saw. But you just disappeared in the night without a single word!”

She wanted to add that he probably went to see *her*, that other woman, but she bit her tongue in time. There was no point in mentioning this. After all, this other woman was irrelevant. If Devlin felt anything about her, even the slightest bit of respect, he would have told her everything. It would have been

painful, but not nearly as much as all this.

“That is preposterous, Theresa.” Devlin kept shaking his head incredulously. He took a step closer to her, but she refused this closeness and instead, pulled away from him. That was a signal for him to stop. “This is all Robert, can’t you see? He is spreading lies about me! I cannot believe that after everything, you would entertain such baseless accusations!”

Theresa’s anger intensified, her frustration mounting with each passing second. “Don’t you dare turn this on me! Robert told me all about it — how he saw you two together! How am I supposed to ignore that?”

Devlin’s defensive facade wavered for a moment as he tried to find the right words to defend himself. He didn’t want to shout, and honestly, neither did she. It was making everything even worse.

“Theresa...” he spoke softly, tenderly, like before. She had no other option but to listen to him. “I swear to you that there is no truth to Robert’s claims. I have been loyal to you from the moment we got married, even during that time we were apart. And after everything I promised you, I would never betray your trust in such a way. You have to believe me!”

She hesitated, but she couldn’t shake off the doubt that had already settled in her mind. “How can I believe you when you vanished in the middle of the night without a word?”



“Without a word?” he echoed in disbelief. “It was Robert who urged me to go at once because the matter was of the utmost urgency, and he assured me that he would let you know exactly what had happened, without delay.”

Her lips parted, but she didn't know what to say to that. She wasn't expecting this answer. The room filled with tension as the weight of their words hung heavily in the air. Both Theresa and Devlin stood locked in a battle of emotions, neither willing to back down. She wanted to believe him, but the frayed edges of trust were not to be mended so easily. He could see that in her eyes.

“I know what I will do,” he suddenly said, nearing her.

This time, she did not pull away. She allowed her trembling hands to be enveloped by his. The warmth of his touch reminded her how much he meant to her, how much she loved him.

“I have dedicated myself to you and only you, Theresa,” he assured her. “I don't know why Robert would do this, but I'm going to find out!”

Without waiting for her to say or do anything, he brought her hands to his lips and placed a tender kiss on them. Then, a moment later, he stormed out of the drawing room, slamming the front door behind him. Theresa was left alone with her tumultuous thoughts and a heart that refused to believe

Robert's words were true.

She stared at the door longingly, hoping that they were merely puppets in another man's game. She had no idea why Robert would tell such a horrendous lie, but if it truly was a lie, she welcomed it with all her heart. She walked up the stairs to her bed chamber as the truth still remained obscured behind these conflicting testimonies, and the fate of her love hung in the balance.

## CHAPTER 34



*I*t was late at night, and all around him, there was darkness as Devlin's carriage found its way through the now quiet, cobbled streets of London. But in his mind, everything was as clear as daylight. Robert had created all this commotion, but for what purpose? That was what Devlin still couldn't fathom.

Determined to clear his name and uncover the truth, he made up his mind to confront Robert immediately without a moment to waste. Inside the carriage, Devlin sat with an air of determination, his mind focused on reaching Robert as quickly as possible. The wind howled outside, carrying a sense of foreboding that only heightened his unease.

As the carriage turned a corner, the dimly lit houses and shops flickered by, their facades momentarily illuminated by the carriage's lanterns. The familiar streets of London became a maze of shadows, shrouded in mystery and uncertainty. The clatter of hooves echoed through the deserted streets as the carriage pressed on, the sounds reverberating like a symphony of determination. Devlin's heart pounded in rhythm with the horses' galloping

strides, mirroring his unwavering resolve to set things right.

He felt as if the carriage ride took forever then finally, it came to a sudden halt. Devlin jumped out of the carriage, consumed by a mixture of anger and determination. He stormed to Robert's house, unable to bear the weight of these horrible accusations. With every step, he could feel his resolve harden, fueling his desire for the truth.

When he stopped in front of the door, he pounded on it with a force that echoed through the silent street. His impatience and frustration were palpable as he awaited a response from the inside. Again, moments felt like hours as he waited until finally, the door creaked open, revealing a startled butler. Devlin had had enough dealings with butlers for one evening.

“Good evening, how may I—” the butler commenced with the usual greeting, but he wasn't allowed to finish.

“Move!” Devlin ordered with a dismissive wave of his hand, and all the stunned butler could do was follow that strict order.

Devlin barged in through the door, looking about. He had visited Robert in his home a handful of times, so he knew where most of the rooms were situated. Robert's bed chamber itself was up the stairs which Devlin aimed for immediately.

“Your Grace!” the butler called out after him, but Devlin paid no heed. He was done explaining himself for mistakes and lies other people had made about him. Now, he would find out the truth no matter what it was. “You cannot barge in like this, please!”

Devlin kept climbing up the stairs, turning to the left and heading down a darkened corridor. At that moment, a door opened, revealing a startled Robert, his eyes wide with surprise and apprehension.

“Devlin?” he gasped, not expecting to see his cousin there. “What on earth...”

Without allowing Robert to finish his thought, Devlin rushed at him, his voice filled with anger and mistrust.

“You know exactly why I’m here! Do not play the fool with me!” Devlin shouted. He didn’t care that he would awaken the entire house. He had come here for one thing, and that was the truth. He was going to obtain it one way or another.

Robert seemed stunned by Devlin’s unexpected and forceful entrance, and he did his best to regain composure and at least a semblance of control over the situation.

“Devlin, just calm down,” Robert tried to diffuse the situation, but Devlin wouldn’t allow it. “Let’s just talk about —”

“Talk?” Devlin exclaimed, barely controlling himself from grabbing Robert by the collar and shaking the truth out of him. “It seems to me that you have done all the talking you could have! You’ve tarnished my name and spread falsehoods! You, my cousin, of all people! I trusted you, and you go and tell Theresa that I have a mistress!”

His voice reverberated through the house, filling the air with tension. Devlin’s eyes bore into Robert’s, demanding an explanation. It was at that moment that Robert’s face contorted with defiance and resentment, something Devlin had never noticed before. When he gazed into his cousin’s eyes, one thing was certain. This resentment had been there for a long time, growing and festering.

“You think you deserve happiness?” Robert spat back venomously. “You think you and your precious Theresa were meant to be together? I couldn’t let that happen. I couldn’t let you continue your lineage and have an heir that would inherit everything that was eventually supposed to be mine.”

Devlin’s eyes widened in disbelief. He couldn’t recognize this man who was now standing in front of him. It wasn’t the Robert he had known all this time. Or perhaps, it was the same man, only he was very good at pretending to be someone he was obviously not.

“How could you do something so despicable?” Devlin gasped, his fingers curling into a fist he was barely able to control. Anger was taking over. “That is unforgiveable!”

Robert shrugged his shoulders as if the fact that he had almost ruined Devlin’s life meant nothing to him. “Unforgiveable?” he asked as if he were enquiring about the damned weather. “That might be true. But it was necessary. While you and Theresa were separated, there was no danger of you ever producing an heir. Then, she had to get that stupid idea of moving to London, and you decided to run after her, begging her to come back to you. This was when I realized that if you had a son, he would inherit everything — everything that belonged to me! I had to protect my interests, Devlin. It is as simple as that. Nothing personal. Just means to an end.”

This was when Devlin completely lost control. He allowed his rage to guide him as his fist flew right towards Robert’s jaw, feeling a slight crack underneath the pressure of his fingers. Robert stumbled back onto the floor, his hand on his jaw.

“You selfish, manipulative bastard!” Devlin shouted as loudly as he could. He didn’t care one bit who would hear them as their voices echoed throughout the house. “You had no right to meddle in our lives, to sabotage our happiness for your selfish goals!”

Devlin had completely lost trust in his cousin, and where care for this man once was, now lay an overwhelming sense of betrayal.

“Get up!” Devlin growled at Robert, grabbing him by the upper arm and forcing him to stand up on his feet.

“Where... where are we going?” Robert asked, the little courage that he had left having dissipated completely by this point.

“You are coming back to Theresa’s home with me,” Devlin said, dragging him down the stairs in his night clothes. “You are going to explain everything to her because it is your fault that she thinks I am a liar and cheat!”

The thought echoed inside his mind, urging him to beat Robert into a bloody pulp, but that wouldn’t solve anything. He kept dragging him out of the house and towards his carriage where he threw him back in, urging the footman to start.

“What else did you do that I do not know of?” Devlin asked, his voice a muffled growl of a wild animal about to attack. It was at that moment that it dawned on him. “You made Huntley give me that list of things to do while I was at the country estates, didn’t you?”

Robert nodded, swallowing heavily. That was all he needed to do.

Devlin shook his head. “I can’t believe you. And Huntley... I trusted him.”



“He isn’t to blame,” Robert explained. “I told him I would spread lies about his sister if he didn’t help me.”

Devlin was relieved to hear this. At least his trusty steward didn’t betray him like his cousin. That didn’t make this betrayal any less painful, but at the same time, he was hopeful that this would clear everything with Theresa. Robert would tell her it was all his fault, and Theresa would know that Devlin wasn’t to blame for any of this. That was the most important thing right now.

“And the letter...” Robert added in a whisper.

“What letter?” Devlin echoed then he remembered. “The one Theresa wrote months ago, informing me of her move to London?”

“That’s the one,” Robert nodded. “I knew you would go after her. I couldn’t let that happen.”

Devlin shook his head. “You should have known better than to stand in the way of fate. Theresa and I were meant to be together.”

Robert didn’t say anything to that. He merely lifted his hand and pressed it to his jaw where Devlin had punched him half an hour ago. Before, Devlin was itching to do it again, but now, most of that rage had left him. He didn’t want

to waste any more energy on someone who didn't deserve a single ounce of it. If it weren't for Theresa and proving everything to her, Devlin would have sent Robert away, threatening that if he saw him again, he would not refrain from exacting a far worse revenge than a mere punch in the face.

The rest of the journey was silent which Devlin didn't mind at all. When the carriage came to a halt, Devlin dragged Robert outside and all the way to Theresa's door. Much to his surprise, he didn't need to knock this time. The door opened on its own to welcome them with Theresa standing right before them.

Devlin was breathing heavily, eager to prove himself to her. Without needing a word to be said, she stepped to the side, allowing them both in. Once they were in the nearest drawing room, Devlin spoke first.

"He orchestrated the whole thing in an effort to keep us apart," he spat in Robert's direction. "This man, my own cousin, whom I've helped more than anyone else in the world, and this is how he chooses to repay me!"

Devlin could feel that rage take over him again, but then, Theresa's gentle hand rested on his shoulder. That was more than enough to calm down the whirlwind of emotion which he had no idea how to control. Now, she was here. She was by his side, and he knew that somehow, some way, everything would be all right.

## CHAPTER 35



“*S*peak the truth!” Devlin exclaimed loudly.

With her quivering hand still on his shoulder, she could feel his entire body tremble under her touch. She couldn't even imagine what it must have taken him to bring this man here in this god forsaken hour of the night and force him to speak the truth. She dared not say anything. All she could do was listen as the truth unraveled before her.

Robert glanced awkwardly in her direction. She noticed he was still in his sleep clothes. Devlin probably stirred him from slumber, not allowing him to get dressed. Then, she assumed that one thing led to another, ending up with all of them here, together.

She was eager to find out what the actual truth was. In this tense and charged atmosphere, she and Devlin waited for Robert to muster the courage and allow the truth to finally come to light. She could see that he was trembling with remorse, but she could not sympathize with him. After all, he didn't

sympathize with her when he told her that he saw, with his own eyes, Devlin with another woman. She almost broke down in tears in front of him at that moment. He must have seen it, and it didn't make him change his mind about creating all this trouble for them. He had no sympathy for her, and in turn, she could not have any sympathy for him either.

“Theresa, I...” Robert started, trying to find the words. She noticed that the right side of his jaw was slightly swollen. He would rub it occasionally, and she could only assume that he felt the wrath of Devlin's fist. She had never been one for physical altercations, but she believed that if Devlin had hit him, there was good reason for it.

“This is all my fault. The accusations, the lies, everything. I intercepted your letter to Devlin, so he wouldn't find out you were moving to London. I also sent him away to the country estate where the steward kept him there for three entire days unnecessarily. I promised him I would tell you where he was, and I didn't. Instead... I concocted a story about him and his mistress, all so I could prevent your reunion and the possibility of an heir.”

Robert's admission hung in the air, filling the room with a mixture of disbelief and anger. Theresa had lost the ability to speak. She had no idea that someone would go to such lengths to ruin someone else's happiness. She just couldn't understand it. They had done nothing to him, nothing to deserve this much hatred.

She noticed that Devlin's gaze hardened, his fists clenched instinctively, so

she gently squeezed his shoulder in an effort to remind him that he wasn't alone. They were together now, standing before the truth. Still feeling that mixture of shock and betrayal, Theresa's mind was washed over by hope. They could still get back on the path they had started on... together. If they found it in their hearts to forgive each other, perhaps their love was strong enough to weather this storm.

"But... why?" Theresa couldn't resist asking Robert. "Devlin is your cousin, for goodness' sake! Hasn't he always treated you with kindness and respect?"

Robert looked down, his eyes filled with regret. He was cracking the knuckles of his hand with the fingers of the other. The sounds exploded in the silent, tense chamber around them. They all knew there was no excuse for his misguided motives, but he still seemed to struggle with finding the right words which might offer some sort of an explanation. Although in Theresa's mind, there was no explanation. There was no excuse.

"I was consumed by my own selfish desires," Robert admitted in the end. "I feared the loss of my own standing, my own legacy. I allowed jealousy and greed to cloud my judgment. That is why I did all those things which I regret now and know that I can never justify."

Theresa, her voice trembling with a mix of hurt and disappointment, couldn't hold back her emotions any longer. She wanted to shout and scream, but instead, her voice was down to a whisper on the verge of breaking, and she asked, "How could you, Robert? You've caused so much pain to us both."

Robert tried to approach Theresa, but Devlin stood between them, determined to protect her in any way.

“Don’t,” Devlin warned, his voice a low, menacing growl. Theresa knew that she was in no danger, but she still appreciated Devlin’s protection. She felt as if as long as she was by his side, no harm would ever come to her again. The thought washed over her with a sense of calm and reassurance.

As for Robert, he knew better than to question such an order. He nodded, taking a step back, keeping a safe distance from them both. He obviously didn’t want to risk another altercation with Devlin’s fist.

“I am truly sorry. I can’t undo what has been done, but I hope that my admission of guilt can pave the way for healing. I understand if you can never forgive me,” Robert told them both although at this point, Theresa felt that those words had lost all meaning.

After all, it was so easy to say one was sorry when the damage had already been done. If it weren’t for Devlin’s insistence, she feared that the damage would have been irreversible, for she would have believed the wrong man, and that would have ruined both her and Devlin’s lives. She shuddered at the thought.

“It is far too early to talk about forgiveness,” Devlin told him, bringing her

back to the present moment. “You have betrayed our trust in the worst manner possible. I highly doubt that rebuilding that trust is even possible.”

Robert didn't say anything to that. He looked at Devlin then at Theresa. The silence that reigned in the room was interrupted only by the sound of heavy sighs and the echo of shattered relations. Seeing that they didn't need him for anything else, Robert headed for the door. Theresa wondered if Devlin would stop him for whatever reason, but he did not. Instead, they both watched as Robert left, standing at a crossroads, grappling with their emotions, and trying to find a way forward. The path to healing would require much of them, open roads of communication, introspection, and a willingness to confront this pain that had been caused by someone else.

Devlin turned to her, his eyes filled with love and devotion. She realized now that she should have trusted him all along. He was true to his word, and she, afraid of being heartbroken again, chose to believe someone else instead of him. Overwhelmed by this sudden guilt and remorse for doubting him, she found the courage to speak up.

“Devlin... I am so sorry for not trusting you,” she said with a trembling voice as she pulled her hand away from his shoulder, but before she could continue with her words, his hand found hers, and he refused to let go. “I allowed doubt to affect my judgment of you when I should have known better. I allowed Robert's words to taint my perception of you when I knew you all along. Can you ever find it in your heart to forgive me for such a mistake?”

He looked deeply into her eyes. She could only hope that he would see the sincerity of her apology and the genuine remorse she was feeling.

“Theresa, my darling, there is nothing for you to apologize for. We were both victims of Robert’s manipulation, and it’s only natural that doubts would arise in such circumstances. I understand the confusion and fear that gripped your heart. You have my forgiveness, completely and without reservation.”

A sense of relief washed over Theresa as she listened to his words. “Thank you. Your forgiveness means the world to me.”

He smiled back at her, his voice brimming with reassurance. “It is you who has to forgive me as well.”



This was the moment when they both needed to tell each other exactly how they felt. Feeling overwhelmed by vulnerability and sincerity, Devlin mustered the courage to express everything to Theresa. With a gentle touch, he looked deeply into her eyes and spoke from the depths of his heart.

“If you mean those two years, maybe we are both to blame for that,” she told him.

“No, no,” he shook his head. “That is entirely my fault. I will not allow you



to take the blame for that. It was all me. I was the one who became afraid of my own emotions, of what you might become to me if I allowed you into my life. And just as I suspected, you have become the most important person to me.”

“I have?” she asked, her eyes sparkling.

“Absolutely,” he smiled, his hand gently caressing her cheek. She tilted her head a little to the side so that his entire palm was pressed against her silky skin. “And throughout all these ordeals, my feelings for you haven’t remained the same. On the contrary, they only intensified. The fear of losing you forever has made me realize that you were all I ever wanted, all I ever needed to be truly happy.”

She gasped, pressing her hand to her lips. “You don’t know how long I’ve been waiting to hear these words.”

“You are the most important person in my life, Theresa,” he continued. “I cannot imagine a future without you.”

He watched her, unable to take his eyes off of her. Emotions swirled inside them both as they struggled to keep on talking. Then again, words were superfluous. There was that overwhelming sense of love in the air around them, and that was more than enough.

“I love you, too, Devlin,” she replied, finally saying those words he longed to hear. “I was so afraid that you will break my heart again, and I just —”

“I know, my love,” he interrupted her gently. “What I did was unforgivable, but I did it because I, too, was afraid of the magnitude of my own emotions. When I saw you for the first time, I knew you were special, and I was right. I know now that I shouldn’t have run away from love. And I promise that I will spend the rest of my life proving to you how much I love you and what you mean to me.”

“That is all I could ever want, Devlin,” she gushed as he took her into his arms.

As the weight of their shared emotions enveloped them, Devlin and Theresa surrendered to the powerful pull of their love. Their embrace tightened, drawing them closer together, and their lips met in a tender and passionate kiss. In that moment, the world around them faded away, leaving only the warmth of their connection and the affirmation of their love. Time seemed to stand still as they poured their hearts into the kiss, expressing their deepest desires and sealing their commitment to one another.

The kiss spoke volumes, conveying a multitude of unspoken promises and a shared vision of a future filled with happiness and unity. It was a moment of pure bliss, a testament to the strength of their bond and the resilience of their love. As they finally pulled away, their foreheads rested gently against each other’s, their breaths mingling in a harmonious rhythm. In that intimate closeness, they exchanged a silent understanding that their love was a force

that could conquer any obstacle, a beacon of light guiding them through the darkness.

“Well, now we have only one thing left to do,” he suddenly told her amusedly.

Her eyes widened in surprise. “We do?” she echoed, expecting that everything had finally been brought to a satisfactory end. But it wasn’t.

“Of course,” he nodded. “We have to have a wedding celebration. A real one this time.”

“Oh,” she chuckled melodiously while his arms were still around her, absorbing the sound of her voice, eager for it to become the first thing he heard in the morning for the rest of their lives. “But we’re married already. We don’t have to do that again.”

“We do,” he assured her. “I want this start to be different. I want to show to everyone that we have found each other through this fog of confusion and other people’s meddling, and we have vowed to love and cherish one another.”

“You don’t have to do that just because of me,” she smiled, her eyes brighter than two stars in the night sky, the lights that would guide him forever.

“I want to do things right,” he explained tenderly.

“Then, let’s have that wedding again,” she laughed, and he couldn’t resist lifting her up into the air, swirling her about. There was nothing else in life he needed, nothing else that could ever bring him this much happiness. He was a man who had finally found that missing piece of himself, something not everyone was fortunate enough to uncover.

“Come home with me,” he whispered lovingly when her feet touched the ground again.

“There is nowhere else I would rather be,” she smiled back, taking him by the hand, and he knew that she would never let go of him again.

## CHAPTER 36



*T*heresa couldn't believe that she found herself here in the same place, yet again. It felt as if she had made an entire circle, only to return to the place where she started from, where she had gotten married to the man who was now her husband in every sense of the word. But not everything was the same as before. On the contrary, everything was different. Better.

She was standing in front of a grand, oval looking glass, staring at her reflection. She remembered standing here before, three years ago. She remembered the fluttering sensations that filled her stomach, like jarred butterflies aching to get out. She also remembered wondering what her life would be like with this man she didn't know, a man she was yet to find out everything about. Now, she knew him.

She smiled at herself, and at that moment, there was a knock on the door.

"Yes?" she called out, not knowing who to expect. The celebration was to commence within the following hour, so everyone was busy with their own

personal preparations.

The door opened, and Helen entered the room, a soft smile gracing her face. Her eyes traversed the distance through the door, locking them with Theresa's in her reflection.

"Theresa..." Helen spoke, stunned into near silence. "You look absolutely radiant."

Theresa turned around, her eyes shimmering with delight. Like that previous time, there was not even a hint of nervousness.

"Thank you, my dear sister," Theresa gushed. "I am so glad that you could be here... again." They both chuckled at the last word.

"You know that I wouldn't miss it for the world," Helen assured her. "And neither would Father."

Theresa didn't want to think about him right now. Whether he was here or not was up to him. But she wouldn't allow him to have any effect on her happiness. She had learned her lesson never again to allow anyone to dictate what she should or should not believe or how she should lead her life.

“How do you feel?” Helen inquired although it was obvious from just one look at her. Theresa was glowing.

“This all feels like a dream,” Theresa replied. “But it’s even better because it’s real. I never thought I would be so fortunate as to find someone like Devlin, someone who would understand me, someone who would love me the way he does.”

“You know, I saw the way you two looked at each other during your wedding,” Helen revealed. “And I was so surprised to find out that you two were pushing each other away intentionally, afraid of your own emotions.”

“Yes, that is exactly what happened,” Theresa acknowledged. “But now, he has shown me a love that goes beyond my wildest dreams. He sees me for who I truly am, and I don’t have to be anyone other than myself when I’m with him. It is so liberating. And over the course of what happened, I’ve discovered a strength I never knew I had, a strength that forces me to fight for what I want no matter what others think.”

Helen’s eyes sparkled with admiration and sisterly love.

“You deserve all the happiness in the world,” Helen smiled. “I am so glad you found it with Devlin.”

“Thank you, Helen. I don’t know what I would do without the support of my loved ones. You and Mary-Jane have been with me every step of the way in this ordeal, and today, as I celebrate my union with Devlin, a real one this time, I know that I am embarking on a whole new journey filled with love and shared dreams. I am grateful for everything that has happened, which has led me to this moment.”

Helen took her sister’s hand and squeezed it lovingly.

“Cherish every step of this journey. Life is unpredictable. Anything can happen as you yourself have witnessed. But when you find that special someone, you can face anything together. I am so happy to see you and Devlin finally found your way back to each other,” Helen gushed.

As they exchanged a heartfelt embrace, Theresa felt a sense of peace settle over her. In Helen’s words, she found reassurance, encouragement, and the reminder that true love was worth every risk and every leap of faith.

With a renewed sense of joy and anticipation, Theresa took a final glance in the mirror, her heart brimming with love for the man who had become her rock, her confidant, and her truest companion. She was ready to step into her future, hand in hand with Devlin, knowing that together they would face whatever came their way, bound by a love that would forever illuminate their path.



“Now, there is only one thing missing,” Theresa suddenly said, looking pensive.

“What is that?” Helen wondered, surprised.

“We have to find someone special for you!” Theresa exclaimed, and the two sisters chuckled aloud boisterously.

“One thing at a time,” Helen teased. “Let’s just enjoy the festivities of your own rather overdue wedding celebrations, and then, we can think of such things.”

“All right,” Theresa smiled, inhaling deeply.

“Are you ready?” Helen asked, interlocking her fingers with Theresa’s.

“More than I’ve ever been before,” Theresa beamed as the two sisters turned towards the door and walked out into the Grand Hall where everyone would be waiting for them.



“No, no, and no!” Theresa heard Mary-Jane arguing with Harrison as she and Devlin passed them by.

The festivities had been ongoing for well over two hours now, and everyone seemed to be enjoying themselves. The orchestra was playing music wonderfully, and people weren't able to stand still, unless they were eating or were busy conversing as Mary-Jane and Harrison were obviously.

“What are you two arguing about now?” Theresa asked amusedly as they stopped by their table.

Harrison turned to them first. “I am trying to explain to this insufferable woman the rules of cribbage, and she thinks she knows them better than I do!”

“Well, I do!” Mary-Jane exclaimed exasperatedly, shaking her head in disbelief.

“I keep telling her that the objective is to play so that the value of one's cards reaches exactly fifteen or thirty.”

“See?” Mary-Jane pointed out victoriously, her eyes gleaming with delight at him having made the same mistake again. “It isn't thirty, it is actually one and thirty.”

“Preposterous!” Harrison scoffed, absolutely certain of himself.

Theresa turned to Devlin. “Do you want to tell him or should I?”

“Tell me what?” Harrison frowned, much to Mary-Jane’s glee.

Devlin inhaled deeply before he continued. “I’m sorry, old boy, but the rules state one and thirty.”

“What!?” Harrison gasped, his eyes wide with disbelief. “You cannot possibly mean that!”

“Ha!” Mary-Jane exclaimed loudly. “I was right!”

“I’m afraid so, old boy,” Devlin chuckled. “She is right.”

Harrison slapped himself on the forehead, raking his fingers through his hair. His jaw clenched in frustration, much to everyone’s amusement, most of all Mary-Jane’s.

“I need another drink,” he said, turning around and storming over to the refreshments table, leaving the three alone in the crowd.

“Thank you,” Mary-Jane smiled. “I don’t know why he always thinks I’m wrong.”

“Maybe because you like proving him wrong a little too much?” Theresa teased with a light chuckle.

“I like proving pompous gentlemen wrong, if that is what you meant,” Mary-Jane replied playfully.

“Of course,” Theresa chuckled again, leaning over to her and kissing her on the cheek. “Are you having fun, my dear?”

“Now, even more so than before,” Mary-Jane laughed. “But that pompous gentleman was wrong. I could also use another drink.”

With those words, she disappeared in the same direction. Just as Theresa was about to say something else, she felt someone’s gentle pat on the shoulder. She turned around and saw her father, a distinguished figure now exuding both pride and a touch of melancholy. He extended his hand to her.

“May I have this dance?”

When he and Helen arrived, they exchanged a cold, but polite greeting as

always. She expected that during the festivities, he would get lost in the crowd, choosing to retire as soon as the opportunity for it presented itself. She couldn't have dreamed that he would be standing in front of her with his hand extended in an invitation to dance.

She didn't know what to say at first. Devlin, immediately realizing what was happening, took her hand gently into his and connected the estranged father and daughter. Theresa, moved by this gesture, accepted silently with just a gentle nod. She allowed him to lead her towards the center of the ballroom, their steps guided by a lifetime of unspoken understanding.

The music was already in full bloom, so they adjusted themselves then dived right into the rhythm. Immediately, Theresa was surprised how skilled her father had been at dancing as she had never seen him dance. She tried not to look directly at him. For some reason, it made her feel awkward, but she couldn't very well keep throwing disinterested glances about the room.

“You look lovely,” she heard him say — yet another surprising thing on his part. He was not very generous with his compliments either. “You remind me so much of your mother.”

Something inside of Theresa clenched at the mention of a mother she had adored. Her eyes filled with a mixture of gratitude and curiosity. Why was he acting this way now?

“Thank you, Father, I... I think of her often,” she admitted, allowing sorrow to take over her, for just one moment. This was not the right time for sorrowful memories to come to the surface, but sometimes, one could simply not control such things.

“I do as well,” he shared something deep and intimate with her, something that had never happened before. She could hear a hint of remorse, as his voice softened.

He twirled her around then when they came face to face again, he continued.

“Theresa, there are moments in life when one realizes the mistakes they’ve made, the choices they wish they could undo. I have my own regrets, things I can’t take back. But seeing you here, finding happiness with Devlin, fills my heart with solace.”

Theresa couldn’t imagine that she would ever hear her father say such things. Yet, here they were. Her heart, full of love and understanding, spoke with sincerity because she knew that if her father was truly to change, that would make both hers and her sister’s life more joyful.

“We all make mistakes,” she assured him of something she was painfully aware herself. “I try not to hold any judgment, for I have made my own missteps as well, and I tried to rectify them as best as I could. But we tend to forget that the past should stay in the past. What truly matters is the love and

support we can offer each other in the present.”

Her father nodded, his lips widening into a smile. “You have grown into such an extraordinary woman. And I know that it is not because of me. I have not been the father you needed, the father your sister needed, but I am grateful for the wonderful women that you both have become.”

Theresa’s grip in her father’s hand tightened, a silent reassurance that his words were falling on fertile ground. She was listening, and she wanted to welcome him back into her life.

“Mother taught us so much in the little time she was allowed to spend with us,” Theresa said, her heart clenching again, but she wanted this pain, this memory, this undying love for the woman who gave Theresa and Helen her everything. “It is because of her that we are as we are.”

Her father continued. “I see you flourishing in love, something your mother considered the most important thing in life. I... I never saw it like that. She was my gift, a gift I never deserved, and in turn, she gave me you and your sister, two other gifts I never deserved. I want you to know that your happiness means the world to me, Theresa. Yours and Helen’s. And I will try to be here for you if I you allow me.”

Theresa smiled, nodding. They continued to dance, their steps synchronizing with the rhythm of their hearts. In that moment, Theresa felt an unspoken

bond of understanding and forgiveness between them, paving the way for a future filled with love, growth, and the shared desire to cherish every precious moment life had to offer.

When the music stopped, her father kissed her hand then brought her back to Devlin.

“Remember to take good care of her,” he urged.

“I will,” Devlin nodded, taking Theresa’s hand into his own, and she knew that he meant it.

They looked around, enjoying the sight of all those smiling faces. Then, she suddenly remembered someone who wasn’t there, someone who used to be an important part of Devlin’s life.

“Have you spoken to Robert after what happened?” she inquired.

He turned to her with a frown. “Why would I?”

“He said he was sorry, maybe—”



“No, Theresa,” he interrupted her. “He tried to keep me away from you, from living my life happily, because he felt he deserved what is rightfully mine, yours, and what will belong to our children. How could I ever forgive him for something like that?”

He was determined enough for her to know not to question him any further. She leaned her head on his shoulders, and he kissed her forehead. She closed her eyes, listening to the sounds of merriment, for it was also the sound of her own life. That was what true happiness was like.

## CHAPTER 37



*I*t was late in the night when the last of the guests had retired to their respective guest chambers. The music had died down, and nothing but the hurried commotion of busy servants clearing everything could be heard.

Suddenly, there was a tap on the window. Then, another one and another one.

“Is it raining?” Theresa walked over to the window with Devlin holding her by the hand.

“I think so,” he nodded, immediately turning to the door and starting to run, pulling her along.

“What on earth are you doing?” she exclaimed, chuckling through the words.

“I want to dance in the rain with you,” he told her, grinning as they flew out

the door of the Grand Hall.

“But I’ll drench my beautiful gown,” she complained, but she followed wholeheartedly.

He stopped right at the end of the corridor that led to the entrance door. He tilted his head as if to take a better look at her.

“Don’t tell me you’re scared of a little water?” he teased.

“Me? Never!” she answered theatrically.

To show him that she wouldn’t back down, she was pulling him now towards the entrance door, and together, they stepped out into the rain. The first droplets fell on his face. They were refreshingly chilly. Little by little, the rain intensified as a new torrent of droplets fell upon them, catching them off guard.

She squealed in delight as he turned to her and wrapped her in his arms, whirling her around, following the sound of the music only the two of them could hear. They were soaked to the bone almost instantly, but neither of them seemed to mind.

The fabric of her gown pressed to the outlines of her body, beckoning him to touch her, to taste her. Nothing would have pleased him more than that, but he knew that they couldn't do that in the middle of the garden. Instead, he pressed her to himself closely, and her body awakened his desire instantly. He knew that she could feel him rubbing against her. When their eyes locked, she blushed. He wondered in what other ways he could get that reaction from her.

She lifted her hand to his face and gently grazed his lips with her fingers. Something inside of him snapped. He lost all control. The sensual promise of them becoming one had become too much to bear. He didn't even know how badly he had wanted her until this moment, until he gazed into her eyes and saw the reflection of his own longing, of his own desire.

Now, she was finally within reach. Beautiful and soaking wet. Stray strands of her hair slid down the sides of her lovely face. He couldn't count all the times he had imagined them standing like this, trembling in front of the other, waiting. But now, she wasn't imaginary any longer. She was real. He couldn't wait a moment longer.

He lifted her into his arms, feeling her dainty little body weighed down by her wet clothing. He headed back to the house, his heart beating like mad.

“Does this mean I won?” she teased.

“No,” he grinned back. “This means that we shall continue our dance somewhere else.”

She chuckled, blushing again. How he loved to hear the sound of her laughter. When she stopped, she looked at him, breathless. He wanted to make her even more breathless, and he knew just the right way to do it. He wanted to run back inside, but he couldn't. They were dripping onto the floor, and he didn't want to slip and make them both fall down, especially on the stairs.

“You can put me down, you know,” she said playfully, hearing him stifle a groan.

“Absolutely not,” he shook his head. “Do you know how long I've waited to have you in my arms?”

“You have?” she asked, equally breathless.

“I've counted not only the days but also the hours and the minutes,” he said, knowing that she was finally where she belonged in his arms, and soon, she would be in his bed as well.

“I've waited for this moment as well, Devlin,” she said, and upon those words, he hastened his pace.

He reached his bed chamber quickly enough, kicking it open with his foot.

“What on earth will the staff think we’re doing?” Theresa chuckled, burying her face into his shoulder. “Destroying the house?”

“They can think whatever they want,” he laughed. “I know what I’ve been thinking about all evening.”

“And what pray —” she started, but she wasn’t allowed to finish, for his lips were upon hers in an instant.

He kicked the door closed in the same manner, and he felt her chuckle again against his lips. He cupped her face in his hands, bringing her closer. He drank in the taste of her, for the first time properly, knowing that they had the entire night to themselves. No one could steal this moment from them.

He kissed her slowly, reverently, inhaling the essence that was all hers, those familiar, floral notes which always reminded him of her when she was away. She wrapped her arms around his neck, clinging needily to him. He groaned at this, kissing her even harder. He was relishing every taste, every bite, every lick of her lips and tongue.

Her ferociousness surprised him as their mouths and tongues united. He

wanted to take his sweet time with her because he had been waiting for this moment for so long. But when he pulled away, he was dismayed. He couldn't remember the last time a kiss left him feeling so desperate, so utterly yearning for a woman's touch. *Her* touch.

"You are soaking wet," he murmured to her.

Their eyes locked. He swallowed heavily, unable to breathe. A rush of lust left him disoriented.

"Maybe you could... help me disrobe..." she suggested, her voice low and sultry. He could not have imagined anyone looking more seductive than she did at that moment.

Instead of waiting for him to reply, she turned around, revealing what seemed to be an endless row of buttons. With trembling fingers, he started to undo them, one at a time. He drank in the sight of her, elegant, sophisticated, ravishing. And all his.

There was something sacred about this moment they had both been waiting for. It was so much more than mere lust. He loved her. He worshipped her. He needed her. The enormous strength of his emotions left him trembling before her as he leaned closer, inhaling the scent of her wet locks. One by one, the buttons were coming undone, and he along with them.



She tried to hold still while Devlin was undoing her gown. Inside, she was all aflame, waiting to turn around and kiss him again. Just when she closed her eyes, enjoying the sensation of his fingers on her back, she felt his tongue on her neck.

“Oh...” she moaned loudly as his tongue traveled up her neck to her earlobe, flicking over it gently.

Moments later, her gown slid down her wet body, weighed down by the dampness. She opened her eyes to find his hands around her waist, pulling her closer. It was as if they were lost in a dream, and she feared she might wake up at any moment.

When he nibbled on her earlobe gently, this brought her back to the present moment. This would not end. Why would it? This was their life from now on. They would be here for each other, to cherish and to hold, to love and honor, for better and worse. Heat exploded somewhere inside of her, traveling down her body to the hidden spot between her thighs. There was an aching pulsation, the likes of which she had never felt before.

He led her to the bed where he turned her around to face him. She felt him wanting to push her gently on the bed, but she refused.



“Your clothes,” she smiled, trailing a line over his muscular chest with the tips of her fingers.

“Do you want to disrobe me?” he asked.

“I would love nothing more.”

“Then do so,” he murmured seductively.

She blushed instantly. She didn’t even know that she said those words out loud. She thought she locked them up safely within the confines of her mind, but they managed to escape. Perhaps it was for the better.

She pushed his waistcoat down, unsticking it from his shirt. Next, her fingers found his trousers. He moaned softly, biting his lip when she unbuttoned his belt first. The metallic sound echoed in the chamber around them. Everything about this was so different from what she expected it to be, and yet, it was pure perfection.

He stepped out of his trousers, and a few moments later, they stood naked in front of each other.

“You are breathtaking,” he told her, cupping her chin with his fingers.

Before she could tell him how handsome he was, he lifted her into his arms and tenderly placed her in the middle of the bed. She relished the sensation of the cool linens underneath her naked, still slightly wet body. She was afraid that she might feel self-conscious in front of him, but there was none of that. She wanted to belong to him as she was, not hiding anything about herself.

He positioned himself between her legs, his stare pinned upon hers, unwilling to look away even for a single moment. He slid his hand between her legs. She felt his finger parting her gently, prodding her entrance. When he brought back that same finger to his lips, he licked it sinfully without breaking their eye contact. Words failed her. Everything about this was delicious and carnal. She couldn't wait to feel him, taste him again.

“You are mine, Theresa,” he murmured to her, lowering himself. “All mine.”

“All yours,” she nodded, her voice but a whisper.

Her fingers lunged at his back, gripping at him, and at that same moment, his mouth crashed against hers. The tip of his manhood pressed against her wet, swollen bead. She purred softly, kittenishly, waiting for him, enjoying how his body worshipped hers.

Little by little, he steadied the pressure as her mind exploded into nothingness but this moment. It was a merciless grip of pleasure intertwined with just a

little bit of pain. The perfect amount of both. Desire completely took over her as her fingers dug into his skin, keeping him in place.

He entered her more and more, sliding into her effortlessly. Those little remnants of discomfort he soothed with his lips.

“Take me,” she urged, desperate to feel more of him inside of her.

She locked her legs around his waist, refusing to let go. His tongue, bolder than ever, dived into her mouth, kissing her with determined passion.

When he sank all the way inside of her, her mind turned into a blank. There was nothing left. Reason was gone, extinguished. Only instinct remained, and it urged them both to continue. She gripped at him fervently, feverishly, using all that pent-up desire and longing she could not get rid of no matter how hard she tried. She was ready to give all of herself to him, demanding the same of him.

He kept pumping harder, hastening the rhythm. Nothing could have prepared her for this sensation as she felt like she was walking along the brink, and one push would send her falling into the abyss of ecstasy. He kissed her deeper, longer, grabbing her hair, tilting his head, so they were as close to each other as possible. He was now gliding in and out of her with a steady pace, her wetness engulfing them both.

At that moment, she clutched at him hard, rubbing herself against him. Pleasure completely took over. He kept thrusting into her through her pleasure, her body convulsing, palpitating, her insides clenching around him, which in turn, sent him into the same state of bliss. His body became rigid, and with a muffled groan, he slammed into her harder and deeper than ever. He repeated this motion several times, breathing heavily, then rolled to the side and wrapped his arm around her, pulling her close to him.

With their hearts thundering in unison, they stared at the ceiling, allowing the remnants of this tidal wave of desire to subside. Theresa had no idea when she fell asleep. All she knew was that when she woke up in the middle of the night, he was still there by her side, breathing softly.

She smiled, kissed him tenderly on the forehead, then went back to sleep because when he was with her, all was right with the world.

## EPILOGUE



*I*t was two months later that Devlin and Theresa found themselves in their serene garden, enjoying the blossoms as well as their afternoon tea. This time, Devlin's grandmother joined them, only she preferred to hide away from the sun underneath the confines of her wide-brimmed hat and simply listen to the sound of the chirping birds. It was a blissful afternoon for everyone involved.

Both Devlin and Theresa had a book in their hands, occasionally lifting their gazes to acknowledge each other lovingly, but this time, when Devlin looked up at her, Theresa seemed pale and unwell with her hand pressed to her belly. He immediately jumped up from his chair to come to her to offer his aid with whatever it was she could possibly need.

“Theresa, my love what is the matter?” he inquired in a concerned manner, observing her closely as if his eyes would be able to pinpoint exactly what was wrong with her. “Are you feeling unwell? Shall I send for the doctor?”

Before Theresa could say anything, the color drained from her face, and she clenched her jaw tightly, pressing her hand to her lips. Without a moment's hesitation, she got up and hurriedly made her way back into the house without excusing herself, leaving Devlin bewildered.

A million questions started to swarm inside his mind. Had she taken ill? Would she be all right? He tried to banish the darkest of thoughts from his mind, but fear gripped him tightly in its clutches, and now, he needed reassurance more than ever. He had to go and make sure that she was all right, that there was nothing to it.

He turned to run after her, his brow furrowed with concern, but then he heard his mother's voice which bade him to stop. "Leave her be, Devlin."

Out of his mind with worry, his mind raced to understand what was happening, and even more, why his own grandmother was so calm and reassuring when Theresa was obviously feeling unwell. The two women had always gotten along wonderfully, even more so after Theresa had moved back in with them. He loved seeing the two of them out in the garden together or just taking a stroll. Having Theresa here seemed to have rejuvenated his grandmother in more ways than anyone could have expected it. Now, she showed absolutely no concern regarding Theresa's condition, and he couldn't understand why that was so.

"I have to go see what is the matter with Theresa, Grandmother," he tried to tell her, but she shook her head at him with the look of someone who had

complete control over the entire situation.

“There is no need,” she smiled benevolently, her voice serene and reassuring.  
“Theresa is fine. Just give her a moment.”

He frowned. His grandmother’s words made no sense. He had seen Theresa almost vomit before rushing back to the house. That could not be a good thing under any circumstances.

“I beg to differ, Grandmother. She obviously isn’t fine, and I need to go see if she needs anything, if there is any way I can help her.”

“Oh, you men,” his grandmother waved her hand dismissively, chuckling to herself. “You cannot recognize what is happening even when something is staring you dead in the face.”

Devlin didn’t understand his grandmother’s words, and it made him even more frustrated than he already was.

“But something is clearly wrong. I fear she may be unwell,” he said, feeling something heavy bear down upon his soul. He refused to accept that anything was wrong with Theresa.

His grandmother, a wise and perceptive woman, smiled gently, her voice laced with understanding. “My dear, there is absolutely no cause for alarm. This hasn’t happened for the first time, you see. I’ve noticed Theresa become suddenly unwell several times already.”

“Several times?” he exclaimed, shocked. “How come I am the last one to find out about this?”

She smiled at him again as if there was not a single thing to worry about. “Well... think about it. She feels unwell but is not ill otherwise. It comes and goes suddenly and unexpectedly.”

Devlin’s eyes widened with a mix of surprise and delight, his concern shifting to sheer amazement. *Was it really so?*

“Grandmother... are you trying to tell me that Theresa is... with child?” he gasped, feeling all sorts of emotions swirling inside of him.

His grandmother nodded, her gaze filled with warmth and support. “I do believe so, yes. Her symptoms, the ones I’ve seen for the past month or so, are indicative of the early stages of pregnancy. It seems that you and Theresa are about to embark on the beautiful journey of parenthood. And me... I am about to become a great-grandmother!” she exclaimed, clapping her hands with delight. He had never seen his grandmother so joyful over anything before.



A mixture of joy, excitement, and apprehension welled up within Devlin's heart as he absorbed the revelation. He couldn't help but smile, his voice filled with awe and tenderness. He got up, unable to stand in one place, and started to pace through the small paths that led around the garden.

“To think that Theresa might be carrying our child... It is beyond incredible, Grandmother. It is a gift that fills me with immeasurable joy.”

His grandmother got up and placed a reassuring hand on his arm. “Devlin, my dear, this is a precious moment in your lives. Embrace it with all your heart. Support and cherish Theresa as you navigate this journey together. Parenthood is a wondrous experience that will test and strengthen your love in ways you can't yet imagine.”

Devlin nodded, his eyes shining with determination and devotion.

“Grandmother, I will do everything in my power to ensure Theresa's well-being and the happiness of our growing family. Together, we will face this new chapter with unwavering love and support.”

“I know you will,” she nodded. “And now, knowing what you know, you can go after her and see how she is doing. But let her tell you the news. To be quite honest, maybe she doesn't even know herself. Sometimes, our bodies are trying to tell us something, but we are too busy with other things to truly

listen.”

“I’m going,” he nodded, giving his grandmother a quick peck on the cheek and rushing back inside, eager to find Theresa.



Theresa sat on the edge of her bed in her chamber, her body still feeling the lingering exhaustion from the sudden bout of nausea. The door gently opened, and Devlin entered, his face etched with concern.

“May I come in?” he asked.

“Of course,” she greeted him with a weak smile.

He walked in and sat by her side. He took her hand in his, bringing it to his lips. “Are you all right?” he inquired tenderly. “Is there anything I can do for you, my love?”

Theresa looked up at him, a mixture of weariness and elation reflected in her deep eyes.

“I uhm... have something to tell you,” she suddenly said, looking down at her feet.

She didn't know how to say this. Everything happened so quickly, they had very little time to discuss the idea of children and when they wanted to have them. She knew her answer to that. She wanted them immediately, and the thought of being with child with the man she loved filled her with immense joy. But she didn't know if he would feel the same way, or perhaps, he wanted to remain child-free for a little while longer as they enjoyed their marriage together, just the two of them.

That was why she was so reserved about starting this topic because she didn't know how he would feel about it. But now it seemed that it was the perfect moment for it. Well, as perfect as any other.

“What is it, my love?” he asked, staring lovingly into her eyes. “You know you can tell me anything.”

“I think... Actually, I know that I... I'm with child, Devlin.”

She waited for his reaction, and she didn't have to wait long. His eyes widened, his breath catching in his throat. He smiled widely, his eyes sparkling with newfound elation.

“With child?” he echoed. “You and I are going to have a little girl, who will look just like you?”

She smiled, sensing that tears were brimming in her eyes. She tried hard not to let them roll down her face. This was not a moment for crying.

“Or a little boy who would look just like you,” she added to his comment.

He smiled even more joyfully now. “That is the most incredible news, Theresa. We are going to have a child!”

A radiant smile spread across Theresa’s face, her exhaustion momentarily forgotten, giving way to sheer unadulterated joy. Devlin knelt before her, his hands gently cradling hers. His voice trembled with overwhelming emotion.

“I cannot express the depth of my joy,” he spoke in a voice that conveyed not only love, but the deepest devotion. “You have given me a second chance not only at our love but at life as well, and now, you have given me the gift I’ve always wanted. To know that our love has created a life, a child that will forever be a testament of our undying love... I almost cannot believe that this is happening.”

Theresa couldn’t stifle her tears any longer. They welled up in her eyes, as she leaned forward and embraced this man that she loved more than life itself. Their hearts were overflowing with the weight of their shared happiness. Devlin held Theresa tightly, their hearts beating in unison, their souls intertwined with the promise of a future filled with love, devotion, and the joy of raising their child together.

He released her from his embrace but only to press both of his hands on her belly hidden inside the confines of her gown.

“Silly, you can’t feel anything yet,” she chuckled amusedly.

“How do you know that?” he asked, all serious. “I want this baby to know my voice. I want to keep telling it how much it is loved and how we shall provide a home filled with love, warmth, and unwavering support for it to come into. Whether it is a boy or a girl, it will be the most beloved child in the world, for it is our child.”

“Oh, Devlin...” Theresa gushed as they sat there, basking in the profound joy of this newfound revelation. “I love you so much.”

“I love you, too,” he gazed back at her, both of them ready to embark on this journey together.

For both of them, time seemed to stand still. Life was truly wonderful, and there was nothing that could ever stand in their way again.

*The End?*

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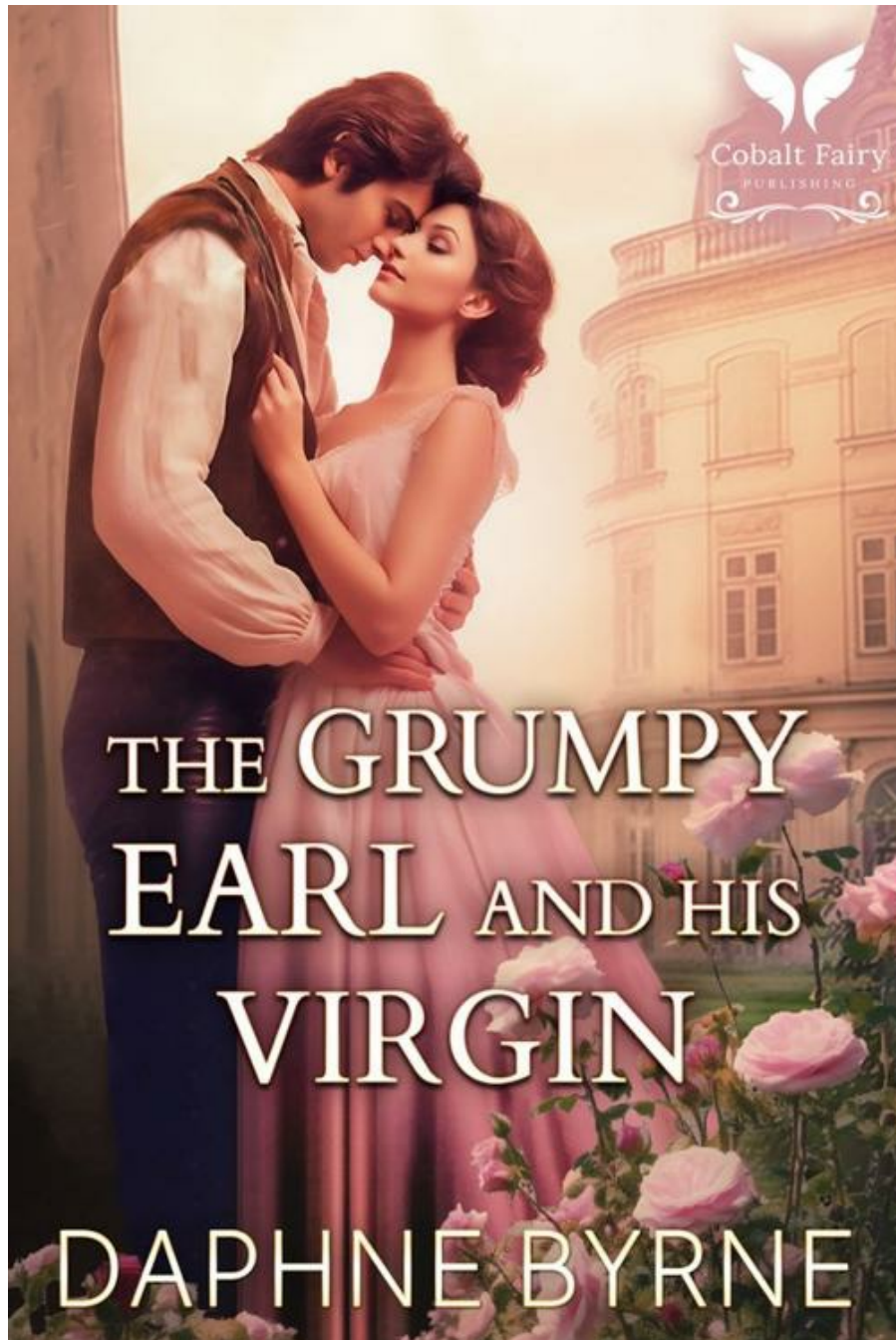
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PREVIEW: THE GRUMPY EARL  
AND HIS VIRGIN





LONDON, MAYFAIR,



## THE DOWAGER DUCHESS OF HEREFORD'S HOME

“*N*etherfield Hall is let at last it seems,” Daphne, the Dowager Duchess of Hereford, said to her daughter, Susan, as she stood by the lace-covered window in the sitting room.

Susan was reading a book, closer to the fire to keep out the spring chill. It was an exciting novel, the latest of Rosaline Caney's, her new sister-in-law of sorts, published under the name of Robert Casey. The book was a sequel, and Susan did not wish to be disturbed from its contents. And yet her mother's use of the line from *Pride and Prejudice* did give her pause.

“And what has you quoting novels, Mother?” she asked, looking up to see her mother's back to her, lifting a corner of the lace curtain to peek out. She chuckled. “If only the illustrious ton could see my mother now. A dowager duchess, very well-favored and well-bred, peeping out at her neighbors like a common woman.”

“Susan!” her mother scolded with a shriek, turning around to face her with wide eyes. Her black walking stick was in her hand, and she hit it once against the ground. “I swear it, Marina's marriage to Lord Woodworth has made you quite the bold one. Perhaps I ought not to let you go over there any longer. Sometimes, I think my sharp-tongued and scandalous Marina is still here in this house, and not my sweet-tempered, quiet child who always knew

what the rules of decorum were.”

Susan smiled as her mother arched a brow and turned back to what she was looking at. Yes, she was rather the more docile one of her family. If she was a book character, Susan thought she sounded rather dull.

“I am looking for our new neighbor. You remember that we are to receive a new neighbor today. It is such a delicious mystery, for no one seems to know who is to take the house next door. But it must be a man, for the furniture going inside has the very sharp edges and distinct lack of warmth of masculinity. So, he is single, perhaps.”

Susan sighed and shut her book, noting the light bit of amusement and hope mixed into her mother’s tone. She walked up to the window and lifted the curtain to peer out as well as three footmen carried in various bits of furniture.

“I do hope the man is older than forty, Mother,” she suggested idly, covering a hand over her mouth as she yawned.

“Whyever would you say such an odd thing, Susan? And it is not proper to yawn like that. You must take better care to make it much demurer and unseen.”

Susan said nothing to that ridiculous idea, but instead she replied, “Because then you will not be as likely to attempt to matchmake me with him. I can see the idea already forming in your mind without you saying a word.”

“Well, I never,” her mother huffed, but she did not turn away from the window, and Susan smiled to herself.

“It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife,” Susan said with a sigh, watching as a footman struggled with a very large and heavy-looking ottoman.

“Now look who is quoting novels, my dear.”

Susan chuckled, and then she leaned in to kiss her mother on the cheek. Despite her mother’s attempts over the years to make all her children as proper as she, Susan still loved her dearly, and having just the two of them now, with her older brother and older sister married, Susan felt a deeper kinship between them.

“I am off to Marina’s — to be further scandalized, of course,” she teased, backing away from the window, and her mother tsked.

“At least I can depend on you not saying such ridiculous things in public. Your shyness helps in that way at least, Susan. Do give Marina and Leonard my best, and do remind them not to scandalize you any further with all their bluestocking talk. And my goodness, the way they make eyes at each other at the dinner table. It is enough to make a pastor blush!”

Susan burst out laughing. “Of course, I will tell them, Mother. Fear not!” she cried with a half-raised fist, and then she left the room.

Closing the door softly, she hurried to the entryway, calling for the butler.

“Mr. Smith!” she called, and the old butler appeared from a side hallway.

“Yes, Lady Susan?”

“I am off. Might I have my gloves and spencer?”

“Of course.” He went to gather them from the closet and returned, assisting her into them. “Your bonnet as well, my lady.”

She turned to face the old man, smiling at him. “One of these days, I believe you will call me Susan, and then all my efforts to charm you will have succeeded. Besides, you have only me to contend with now, without Colin and Marina to take the spotlight.”

His serious façade cracked a little, and she thought she spied a smirk on his wizened face as she tied the bow to her bonnet under her chin.

“Perhaps, my lady. Only time will tell.” He went to open the door, and with her thanks, she swept out into the afternoon, her reticule hanging from her wrist.

She descended the steps into the street and turned right, knowing that her mother was likely still watching the neighbor’s house being filled with all his sharp-edged masculine furniture and thus would see her heading in the ‘right direction’. She skipped past another footman carrying a vase of sorts and lifted her chin high and confidently.

But in fact, she was not going to her sister’s house at all but some place even more scandalous than her mother could ever have predicted. Once she left the street, she raised her hand for a hired hack. Whispering the street name to the driver, whose wide-eyed expression told her what he thought of that, she hopped inside and breathed out with relief once the carriage was on its way.



When Susan arrived at her destination, she removed a little extra money from her reticule and pressed it into the driver's hand.

“Return for me here at 6 o’clock, please.” The young man’s eyes widened as he stared at the coin in his hand, and he nodded.

“Yes, my lady.”

Giving him a quick smile, Susan turned away and waited until the sound of his carriage wheels had faded a bit. She rushed down a side alleyway, passing by a bakery, the smell of bread filling her nose. She could feel people’s eyes on her, but she knew that they’d seen her there before a few times, and she

also knew that no one recognized her, for no one in this place mingled with the ton. So, she felt safe in that regard. Besides, it was the only place which was safe for what she was doing.

At the end of the alley, before the next turn, there was a wooden door painted red. She quickly wrapped a rhythmic knock on the door, and it swung open.

“Oh, welcome, Lady Susan,” a pink cheeked older woman said, curtsying to her. “You are the last to arrive.”

“Good afternoon, Amelia.” Susan rushed in, and they both shut the door together. “Sorry for my delay. How many are here today?”

“Oh, nearly twenty, I reckon,” Amelia said, her voice unable to hide her excitement.

Susan, too, felt the same excitement tingling all the way down to her toes. Never in all her years had she hoped that twenty women would share the same dreams or would feel the same things about life. With a nod at Amelia, she passed ahead of her in the small hallway and up into the bigger room where she could hear the excited mumbles of the women as they waited.

When she entered the grand room, it was as if they were not in a dangerous part of London at all. Susan always lost her breath a bit whenever she walked into it. A few months ago, she had been one of the first to join this secret society of women. She had heard about it through her friend, Evelyn Sweeney, a fellow bluestocking, and she looked around the crowd to see if Evelyn was there that evening. Unable to see her, she took a seat, and Amelia slid in next to her.

“Welcome everyone,” their founder, Mrs. Sarah Forthright, spoke from the head of the room. “We are so glad that so many have joined us.”

Sarah was only a bit older than Susan, but her much older and very wealthy

husband had died a couple of years earlier, leaving Sarah with quite a fortune. She had been able to secure this lovely room for whatever purpose she pleased. Rich tapestries and paintings hung on the walls, and through the doors out the back, there was a secret, beautiful garden. Susan was not able to get away as much as she wished, especially with the Season upon them, but there were many discussions and meetings throughout the week.

“Now I think the concern on everyone’s minds is what the young Earl of Blackwood has been saying in Parliament of late. A few lords have been able to discuss the idea of furthering women’s rights, especially when it comes to voting. However, the Earl of Blackwood, even though he only assumed his title a few months ago, seems set against us. And in spite of the fact that he is young, since he has taken on a very old and respectable title, the old fools are listening to his arguments. We must find a way to spread the word about our own cause and see if we cannot disparage the Earl of Blackwood in some way. He must lose credibility if we are to defeat him.”

Amelia nudged against Susan and whispered, “How could we ever hope to disparage an earl? Men seem to be able to get away with everything, especially the toffs.”

Susan nodded at her friend with a grimace. It was very true. That was one of many reasons why marriage did not appeal to Susan at all. But she could never tell her mother that. She was now her mother’s sole focus after Marina was married, and it made her desire to rush off to society meetings even greater of late.

“Does anyone have any ideas or plans?” Mrs. Forthright asked, and people began to put up their hands.

The discussion lasted for a long time, and they eventually broke into small groups to discuss. When Susan noticed the light beginning to fade outside, she looked at her watch she carried whenever she went to meetings and

gasped.

“I must go,” she said to her small group of friends. “Mother will worry terribly about me.”

Amelia chuckled. “Oh yes, the infamous Dowager Duchess. Don’t worry. I would be terrified of her as well. I’ve seen her out and about!” Amelia winked, and Susan smiled.

“Yes, well, I also do not like having to come up with all sorts of ridiculous reasons why I am late or have been running about in the near dark. Usually, she is having tea in her room and does not know what time I return home. That is what I am hoping for today! Goodbye Victoria, Tabitha,” she said, touching hands with the other two young ladies in the group, and then she left.

She hurried out down the passageway and out the door, rushing through the now darkened alleyway to the street where she looked left and right for the hired hack. At least now out of the alleyway, she could tell that the day was not so dark yet.

The hack came around the corner, and Susan breathed out a sigh of relief before she jumped into it. She was grateful to be away from the pairs of eyes who were now looking at her more curiously than ever. It was very interesting and unseemly for a woman her age to be out on her own, especially a woman of the peerage. She did not wish to attract any more attention than was necessary. If not for her own safety and reputation, then to keep all knowledge of her goings-on away from her mother.

Before they turned onto her street, she knocked on the top of the carriage, and it slowed. She jumped down and paid the man again, and then she quickly hurried down the street towards her house. She pulled out her watch chain as she hurried, and looking down at it, she didn’t notice that anyone else was



about.

That is, until she ran into a hard chest and made a very unfeminine ‘oof’ sound.

## CHAPTER 2



Alexander Hanover, the famed, or perhaps infamous, Earl of Blackwood, was pacing in his sitting room. He never thought he'd be the type to worry about where things would be placed in a room, but now that he was finally taking over the earldom, he wanted to do things right in his new home.

"Over there, in the far corner," he said, pointing at the footman who was carrying a large, Egyptian vase he'd bought at an auction a few years ago.

"Yes, m' lord."

Alex rubbed his hands together and breathed out. Everything had to be perfect. As the footmen assembled the items in the room, he pushed a hand through his dark curls, and then he turned towards the door. Standing here was making him itch. He nodded at the tall, thin, beaky-nosed butler who was standing in the doorway.

"Smythe, I'll be in my study. Come and let me know when the moving is done."

"Yes, my lord."

Alex left, hurrying off to the study, glad to hear the softening of the sounds of men dragging in furniture. He slumped into the chair behind the large, dark

wood desk in the study, daylight streaming in through the windows at his back. With his elbows on the desk, he steepled his fingers together and leaned forward, pressing his fingers to his lips.

Blasted Oliver.

It was Oliver's fault that Alex's ascension to the earldom was not the blessed day anyone else would look upon it as. Being given a title, after his uncle died without issue, was like the hand reaching down in the pit, pulling him out of what could have been a very dangerous life. He'd done well for himself over the years, and yet it had always been hard work, and he'd not had to care about society in any way.

Now, he had just moved himself into Mayfair, and brought his things from his old offices. He was now to be a gentleman in every sense of the word. Not only that, but it would be his very first London Season as an earl.

"My lord?" Smythe called from the other side of the door.

"Come in," Alex said, leaning back in his chair.

"They are finished, my lord. Would you like to survey their work? Then lunch will be served in the dining room."

"Thank you." Alex saw Smythe start a little at the kind words, and Alex tried not to smirk.

*I suppose noble gentlemen do not say thank you.*

He wandered into the sitting room on his own. It was the last of the rooms for the items to be moved into, for everything else had been done the few days before. It had to be scattered for rain had set in, and Alex thought it ridiculous that people should have to get soaked simply to carry furniture inside when he was perfectly capable of waiting a few days. That seemed to be a bit strange to the footmen and butler as well.

Everything was positioned well enough. But he would make small adjustments himself. Not all his books had yet been placed on the shelves, but he wanted to go through them himself before he allowed anyone else to touch them. When he turned away with a nod, he saw Smythe waiting for him. Alex jolted, surprised to have someone constantly around. He had had an assistant at his office, but it was nothing like this, nothing like a butler trained to attend to his every need.

“Ah, Smythe,” he said, trying to hide his surprise at finding the old man waiting for him. “All is looking well. You can tell the footmen that they did a good job, and I thank them for their help. I will let you know when the books are ready for the shelves. There are a few I would like to give away and a few new purchases I would like to make.”

“Very well, my lord, if I might suggest, I know that there are plenty of charitable institutions, as well as London schools, always looking for books.”

Alex grinned. “My uncle never mentioned just how good of a butler you are. That is a perfect idea. I will leave the handling of those details in your very capable hands, Smythe.”

He saw something like pleasure pass across the man’s face and he bowed.

“Now for lunch,” Alex said. “I will be there presently.”

He had eaten alone before many times in his life, but in the past few years, he had often eaten inside the small confines of his office. Never had he eaten alone in such a large and imposing dining room. But he supposed he would have to get used to it. This was what earls did, he supposed.

He ate and read, trying not to think too much about his brother or the next session of Parliament. He hoped, rather, to think about how he could make sure his debut into society was a success. Even though his mother had been the sister of an earl, and he had grown up comfortably enough, his own father

was not titled, and he had never been privy to the elegance of the ton's activities.

But even so, his mother had always hoped for her children to one day be able to walk amongst the fancier set. And she had taught them all the manners she knew. So, he did not feel entirely without hope that he could smoothly enter society as the new Earl of Blackwood as well as making an impression in the House of Lords. He had to, after all. Certain things were riding on it. Under his breath, he cursed his foolish younger brother again.

After lunch, he returned to his study, poured himself a tumblerful of whiskey, and continued to work. He had passed the management of his other businesses, factories and such to his assistant, Harold Davies. He could not very well tie his name to much of his businesses now that he had come into his title, but he had no desire to let go of them altogether. They were quite lucrative, in fact, and it was always wise to have that kind of money. There were many in the ton he knew, as his mother had often told him, who hid behind their title but actually had not a penny to spare. That would certainly never be him.

The hours seemed to pass away quickly, and when he next looked up, the light was beginning to fade. He stood and stretched, reaching for his pack of tobacco and pipe. His uncle had never indulged in the habit, and when he'd first lit up in the sitting room, Smythe had looked at him in horror. And so, Alex had taken to smoking out of doors which was not a very great trial. It gave him a chance to look at all the goings-on on the streets of Mayfair.

Just like any other day, he picked up his pipe and cloth bag of tobacco and walked out of his study and out the front door.



Alexander had only taken a few puffs of his pipe before he was suddenly reaching out to steady someone who had run right into him. After only a second, he realized that the person who had run into him was a young woman.

“Oh, forgive me,” she apologized, pulling back, and looking up at him.

When he saw her, Alexander could feel a slow smile creeping across his face.

“Forgiven,” he said.

His hands were still on the girl’s elbows, and normally he might have removed them quickly, but he was rather captivated by her dark eyes. There was a whole world in those eyes: intelligence and innocence but at the same time, maturity. He looked down from her eyes to her mouth which was lovely; pink lips slightly pursed as if she was about to say something else. Under the hood of her cloak, he could see that she had dark blonde hair, and in her hurry, it seemed some of the strands had come undone from her pins.

“I must go,” she said, and then he realized the breathless tone in which she said it.

Her eyes were wide too as if she was terrified of something.

She pulled away from him, but he reached out to grasp her elbow again. “Do you know how dangerous it is to be outside at this hour without a chaperone? Let me hire a carriage for you.”

Whatever fear and innocent expression he had seen on her face disappeared in a moment, and she stood tall, putting her hands on her hips.

Pinning him with a defiant glare, she said, “I do not see what business it is of yours, sir. It is not as if you have any authority to tell me what to do. Please unhand me and leave me be.”

Now, Alex was even more intrigued. He let go of her instantly, and one corner of his mouth lifted up in a smirk.

“Feisty woman,” he observed, more to himself than anyone else, for the woman had turned around and run up the steps to his neighbor’s home.

He smiled after her for a moment.

*Ah, the daughter of the Dowager Duchess, I see. A titled noblewoman out on her own just before dinner. How very odd.*

Their encounter had been like being surprised by a passing spark as it cut across the darkness. It exploded in his vision and then was gone. He leaned against the stone balustrade by the steps of his own home and smoked his pipe. The smoke rose up in the air as he thought. Thoughts of Oliver now fled his mind, and he was fully focused on the young woman, who was interesting and mysterious and very, very beautiful.

And she was living just next door.

*I will certainly pay a call on them tomorrow. To be neighborly, of course.*



The next day as soon as Smythe told him that visiting hours had begun, Alex collected the bouquets of flowers he’d asked a footman to go and buy. He walked down his steps, turned left, and walked up the steps to the Dowager Duchess of Hereford’s home. Before he had moved to the neighborhood, he had done his research. He wanted to know who his neighbors were so that he could greet them and make his introductions.

Putting both bouquets onto one arm, he knocked on the door. Straightening, he hoped he looked every inch the Earl of Blackwood. The door opened, and a wizened butler stood on the other side.

“I am Lord Blackwood. I am the new neighbor, and I was hoping to pay my respects to the Dowager Duchess and family.”

“I see, my lord,” the butler said, lowering his head respectfully. “I will go and inquire as to if they are ready for visitors. Please do come in and wait here.”

Alex walked inside and waited in the entryway, the smell of flowers filling his nose. He thought about what he might say to the fiery woman from the night before. She would likely not be happy to see him, but he wondered if she would look different in the light of day when she was not returning from some mysterious errand, for that was certainly what she had been doing.

Alex straightened a bit more as he heard the shuffle of the old butler’s feet across the carpeted hall, and when the butler appeared, the man motioned to his side.

“Please follow me, my lord. The Dowager Duchess will see you in the sitting room.”

“Thank you.”

Alex tried to hide his disappointment at not being able to see the younger lady with a smile. He followed the butler until they reached an ivory-colored door, and the butler opened it, speaking in a quiet tone to the Dowager.

“Do send him in, Mr. Smith,” an older woman said, and Mr. Smith appeared once more in the doorway.

“Please do go in, Lord Blackwood.”

Alex strode into the room, and the Dowager Duchess rose to her feet. He smiled as she turned to him and curtsied. He inclined his head.

“My lord, what a pleasure to receive your visit.”

“Thank you for your kind reception, Your Grace. I thought it a very good



idea to come and pay a call to my new neighbors.” He held out one of the bouquets of flowers, fresh lilies, and she took it, breathing in the scent gracefully.

“How lovely and kind of you.” She grinned up at him, and he realized that if his mother was alive, she would be near the same age.

The Dowager was not an old woman, despite what her title implied. Her dark hair had only the slightest bit of gray, and her green eyes were still bright and intelligent.

*I know where she gets it from then.*

“Please do come and sit.” Her hand motioned to a seat while her eyes dragged to the other bouquet.

“Ah, these are for the young lady. I was told a daughter resided with you still?”

“Oh yes,” the Dowager Duchess of Hereford cried with delight.

He smiled in return. He’d forgotten about how his mother had mentioned to both him and Oliver that young, titled, and marriageable young ladies were always seeking to marry titled and wealthy gentleman. The Season was created for the very purpose of finding that person.

The Dowager left for the doorway, calling to Mr. Smith again. “Please do send for Susan,” she instructed, and Alex smiled to himself.

*So, Susan is the name of the fiery young woman. I wonder if her mother knows of her nightly escapades.*

Alex sat and made pleasant conversation with the Dowager Duchess of Hereford for a few moments until he heard a rustling at the doorway. Instinctively, he rose, and his breath caught in his chest when he saw Lady

Susan at the door, just as beautiful, if a little more refined, as the night before.

Her eyes passed over him, and yet again, they widened in what he thought was terror. “You,” she said.

He couldn’t help but grin as he replied, “Me.”

## CHAPTER 3



“Susan, is this how you greet guests?” the Dowager Duchess of Hereford sighed, the sigh of a long-suffering mother frustrated with her uncouth daughter.

Alexander looked down at his shoes and brushed a finger over his lips, trying to hide his smile.

“You will have to forgive her, my lord. She is rather...spirited at times you see.”

“It is no trouble at all, Your Grace. I have a younger brother myself. I know just what kind of spirit you mean.” His eyes returned to Lady Susan, and he lifted one brow, wondering if she’d react to that.

At his glance, she stiffened a bit, and he could tell that her chin lifted again. He wondered what she would say next.

*Perhaps she will once again bluster on about how she was not to be told what to do?*

He stepped forward and bowed while her mother made the introductions.

“Susan, this is Lord Alexander Blackwood, our new neighbor.”

Alex turned back to the low table where he had placed the bouquet of flowers, picked them up, and placed them in front of Susan. “What a pleasure to meet you, Lady Susan. And this is for you. A neighborly call if you will.”

With obvious reluctance, she reached out, grasping the bouquet stems. And he could see her cheeks had colored to a dark red. In the light of the sitting room, he could see that her dark eyes were actually a very chocolate brown. And in that moment, they looked even fiercer than last evening. He wasn’t sure that he’d ever seen such an angry look on a proper young woman. And once again, it was utterly mesmerizing.

*I believe it is official. I’ve never seen a more beautiful woman in my whole life.*

There was something keeping her from a beauty that men noticed right away. Something a little fiercer or sharper than the traditional soft beauty that the ton seemed to adore. But the longer he looked at her, the more Alex realized he had never found those simpering soft ladies beautiful at all. This was true beauty right before him. Fresh, independent, strong. A beauty not easily forgotten.

“My lord,” she said curtsying, her eyes finally leaving his. “Thank you for the gift.”

“You are most welcome.”

“That’s much better, Susan,” the Dowager said. “Please sit, Lord Blackwood. I will call for some tea if you will give me but a moment.”

The Dowager Duchess of Hereford left the room, leaving the door wide open. On the other side, Alex could see a few servants pass. He was surprised to find that the Dowager had just left the two of them on their own without a chaperone. It was most unusual, but in fact, he did not mind at all. When he turned his gaze to Lady Susan again, she had put down the bouquet and was

now crossing her arms over her light pink day gown.

“Shall we not sit, Lady Susan?”

“What are you doing here?” she asked, instead, choosing to ignore his question. He’d just been in the act of sitting when he straightened again.

He noticed that she did not address him as the titled gentleman he was. It made him feel like his old self for a few moments, despite the fact that she was looking at him as if he was a snake who’d suddenly found his way into her house. He found he rather liked her more for her boldness, but he decided that he would not let her know that just yet.

“You are not welcome,” she added without letting him answer.

“Now, Lady Susan,” he said, frowning and raising a hand to his chest. “It is proper etiquette for neighbor to call upon neighbor, especially since I am new in the neighborhood, and I wish to make a good impression on all those who surround me.” She scoffed, and his eyes lit up with amusement. “Is your new neighbor not welcome into your home, even when they have brought flowers?” He punctuated his sentence with his usual charming smile.

The one that ladies *usually* seemed to be charmed by, that is. It had always worked before, no matter the station of the lady who was the recipient of it, but this time, it had the opposite effect. It was rather confounding.

She rolled her eyes at him, and her arms seemed to tighten across her chest. “What good are flowers when there is a snake hiding in them?” she hissed.

Now, Alex was even more surprised at her angry behavior. She acted as though she knew him, and yesterday, he had done nothing wrong besides trying to assist a young woman who was out on her own in the dark.

He let out a surprised laugh, walking around the low table between them to stand before her. Her eyes followed his movements, even rising to continue

to look into his. She was not easily cowed, it seemed. He found he liked that even more, even though all this vitriol was directed at him, and he wasn't exactly sure why.

“Good God, woman. What have I done to offend you? Yesterday I was only attempting to assist you. It was not as if I had ravished you in some way.” His eyes looked her up and down.

At her soft gasp, Alex realized perhaps he had spoken too harshly. And it would not do him any favors, nor to his reputation, if he was heard speaking about anyone getting ravished with a young unmarried woman. Or if he was seen looking at her as he was as if he was indeed ready to ravish her — which he was on the brink of doing.

She colored, and she stepped closer to him. He blinked when he caught the scent of her perfume. She had the smell of soap about her, of course, but on top of that there was something like honeysuckle. It was sweet, and it reminded him of when he was younger, wandering country paths with his parents before things had become different and more difficult. The scent was the complete opposite of the woman who was nearly vibrating with anger before him. Honeysuckle was so gentle and pure while this woman was strength and fire.

“I know just who you are, Lord Blackwood. I have heard all about the kinds of things you've been saying in Parliament. How against women's rights you are, how you wish to trap women forever, keeping them under their husband's thumbs, never allowing them any hope of owning something for themselves.” She lifted her chin as she stepped back from him again, and he found he missed her scent. “You are simply a cruel man. And you only care about laws for your own benefit. For why else would you say such ridiculous things in the House of Lords?”

For a moment, Alex simply stared at her. Anger vibrated off her every inch.

Even the loose strands of her air seemed to be angry at him. Her color was high, and her arms tightened again as if protecting herself. He wasn't sure that he had ever been so disliked in his life. And the fact that it was *this woman* who disliked him, the woman who had intrigued him from their very first meeting, bothered him more than it should.

At her accusations, he had, at first, the greatest urge to laugh. She had no idea that he was not, in fact, entirely guilty of all the accusations she'd made. Certainly, it was true about what he'd spoken about in Parliament, but the rest of her feelings about his beliefs could not be further from the truth — a truth he certainly could not tell her, no matter that he wished to. Very much so.

And so, he decided, as usual, to speak around the topic at hand. He had never been very good at speaking the truth of what he really felt. One didn't get ahead that way.

"I do not think your mother would appreciate, Lady Susan, that you are not exactly being a very welcoming hostess. And it is not exactly proper, so I've been told, for people to discuss politics over tea — especially when they are first introduced."

"You certainly do not know me very well at all, Lord Blackwood, for I do not care a fig for manners and politeness. I have never been very good at them, and so, you will often find me along the wall at Season events. I care little if I have offended you. You are *not* welcome."

"Ah, I see. Very good then," Alex said with a smile, trying not to let his secret disappointment show on his face.

He had dealt with dangerous men many times before as well as people who did not like him. It was part of his business to do things that were not exactly legal. He had dealt with angry men, money-hungry men, violent men. And yet none of those who had raged against him or threatened him had ever

made him feel this sense of great loss or even guilt.

“I shall leave you then to enjoy your afternoon. Do give my regards to your mother, Susan,” he said, purposely leaving out her honorific in order to tease her just a bit.

It was what she deserved, after all. Susan’s arms fell to her sides, and her mouth opened again, drawing his eyes there. He swallowed, noting her surprise as well as just how lovely and plump her lips looked. Lips made for kissing.

And for vitriolic speeches as well.

He glanced up at her eyes again. He could see one thousand emotions inside them, and he wondered which one she was going to choose. It made him tired just thinking about how much fire existed inside of one tiny woman.

“Of course,” she said, a little bit softer. “I will do that.”

He stepped forward to walk out of the room, and he passed by her side, he leaned close to her ear, softly and slowly, wanting to savor the moment of their closeness. He could smell her honeysuckle scent again, and he could even feel the light brush of her golden hair on his cheek. Never had a woman so intrigued him and drawn him in in the span of seconds. Even if she never looked at him or thought of him well again, he had the great urge to tell her the truth. Or at least a part of it. He didn’t want to leave until she knew that she was not exactly correct in her estimation.

“I am not the man you think me to be, Susan.”

His whisper was as gentle a tone as he could muster, but he couldn’t keep the dangerous glint out of his voice. He thought he saw a shiver pass through her body, and he straightened again, walking straight out the door without looking back.



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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

A California girl born and raised, Daphne Byrne's ancestry holds from the gloomy English countryside, but she loves the sunny weather that California offers. She can often be found exploring the picturesque hills of nature with her hyperactive puppy dog named Freddie, daydreaming of ghosts of the past.

Hopped on a plane to London to study Creative Writing, Daphne put her imagination to the test. Countless efforts, friends, heartbreaks, tears and laughs, she returned back to California armed with a writing degree and an English husband, to live the rest of her life putting the stories in her head on paper.

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