



Cobalt Fairy
PUBLISHING



THREE PROMISES TO THE DUKE

THE MATCHMAKING GAMES SERIES

DAPHNE BYRNE

THREE PROMISES TO THE
DUKE

A STEAMY HISTORICAL REGENCY ROMANCE
NOVEL

THE MATCHMAKING GAMES

BOOK THREE



DAPHNE BYRNE



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BEFORE YOU START READING...

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ABOUT THE BOOK

“It’s about time that I took control of you,” Anthony growled against her lips.

Lady Sophia is a hellion that needs to be tamed. And the only person who can find a suitable person for her is none other than the matchmaker.

But Duke Anthony is the last person she wanted to marry. For the rule-abiding Duke needs to have control in every place in his life...even his heart.

Will she drive him crazy, or will she submit to the wicked Duke?

PROLOGUE



“*Y*our line shall never walk the face of the earth after me.”

Anthony Atwood glowered down at his father as he stood beside his bed. Calmly balling his fists at his sides, he waited for the rasping to cease. His tall stature towered over the man who had caused him grief throughout his life.

“I don’t understand...” the old man did his best to speak as beads of sweat dotted his pale brow.

“Don’t you, Father?”

Anthony tilted his head to the side before reaching for a chair and pulling it closer. He looked at his father with a pitying gaze in his dark brown eyes. Once a big, burly man of the *ton*, his father was now a mere shell of his former self, nothing more than a ghost of a duke confined to his bed.

“I am only the man I am today because you left me with no other choice.” Anthony’s eyes filled with hatred because of the memories that plagued him night after night. “You beat me into the person you needed me to become.”

Seeing the man’s eyes suddenly filling with dread, Anthony stood.

The final kiss of death filled the air as Anthony shut his eyes, sealing the vow within his chest.

CHAPTER 1



“*L*ord, that was insufferable! I thought it was never going to end,” Sophia Braxton whispered under her breath as she smoothed the skirt of her pale pink skirt over her curvy hips.

“I take it that the gentleman was not the one?” Theodore Braxton smirked as he spotted the man glancing at his sister with a thunderous look in his eyes.

“Don’t jest, Theodore,” Nicholas Braxton, the eldest of Sophia’s two brothers, reprimanded his younger brother, barely concealing his mirth. “What, may I ask, was it that you said to the poor man?”

The Braxton brothers could have been twins with their brown hair and dark eyes, had it not been for the five years that separated them. The only defining feature was their difference in height. Theodore stood eye to eye with his sister, while Nicholas towered above them both like a pillar.

Rolling her light blue eyes that always seemed more grey than anything else, Sophia took a deep breath. “I merely said that I did not agree with the rules placed upon Society by men who don’t even know what it is like to bring life into the world.” She began the tirade that inevitably got her into trouble every time she opened her mouth.

“You would do well to hold your tongue, Sister.” Nicholas swatted his brother’s arm once again when Theodore laughed, drawing the attention of nearby guests.

Ladies glanced at Sophia with disapproving looks and whispered behind their fans. She’d become accustomed to being the talk of the *ton* with her wayward thinking.

“I get enough of this from Mama, Nicholas. I don’t need yours or Theodore’s lectures.” She shifted her eyes from one to the other.

“Speaking of which,” Theodore spoke up and pursed his lips, placing his hands behind his back, “you might want to make yourself scarce if you don’t wish to listen to another lecture.” He glanced over her shoulder and made a face.

Sophia turned to see their mother walking toward her with a determined scowl on her face. Her blue eyes were thunderous despite the polite smile on her lips.

“Oh, no.” Sophia felt the chill coming from their mother’s disapproving gaze. “She’s going to skin me alive.”

Helena Braxton, the Dowager Countess of Harsworth, made her way through the throng of guests, gently sidestepping anyone who got in her way. Her dark blue dress swayed angrily along with her movements, depicting the storm that was about to erupt.

“I’d hide if I were you,” Theodore whispered urgently in Sophia’s ear. “That vein on her forehead is bigger than I’ve ever seen it before.”

All three siblings gulped as they turned their heads to look for the vein that had painted the background of their childhood discipline. Everyone knew that Helena meant business when the tiny muscle beneath the hairline of her grey-streaked mahogany hair doubled in size. Even their father had religiously gone riding when the vein made an appearance.

“Run,” Nicholas whispered under his breath, faking a sneeze to cover his words.

Panicking, Sophia looked for an escape, frantically searching the crowd for a gap. Her chance came when one of the couples decided to steal the show, taking the lead in the center of the dance floor with a grandiose waltz. The onlookers erupted with applause, affording Sophia the chance to duck under her brothers’ arms and disappear.

“Where did she go? The two of you always do this.” Helena’s complaints carried across the susurrations of admiring onlookers. “You’d let her get away with murder.”

Sophia overheard her mother interrogating her brothers just as she broke through the sea of bodies, making her way toward the many halls of the mansion where the ball was being held. Seeing a chance to catch her breath, she quickly made her way into one of the deserted halls, escaping into the shadows.

Looking back, she saw her mother craning her neck in an attempt to see around the room. Picking up the pace, she lifted her skirts and hurried further into the shadows.

Unfortunately, Sophia was many things, but graceful wasn’t one of them. She suddenly ran into a brick wall that sent her reeling backward. Catching her breath, Sophia shut her eyes in anticipation of the inevitable impact. A few moments passed before she realized that her body was suspended in mid-air, mere inches away from the floor.

“Watch where you are going,” an angry voice growled at her just as a strong hand caught her around her waist. “Didn’t anybody teach you manners?” the deep voice growled again before she felt herself being righted on her feet.

Her breath caught in her throat as she raised her head, catching a glimpse of the singularly most handsome man she had ever

seen in her life. Light filtered through the shadows from the ballroom chandelier, granting her the opportunity to take him in.

The man was taller than Nicholas, with broad shoulders, dark brown eyes, and black hair. His handsome features were set with a strong jawline and neatly shaven face. He stared at her a bit, moving his gaze all over her body before his eyes caught the stain of whiskey on his coat. His eyes slid to her in annoyance while he dabbed his coat with a handkerchief.

Realizing that she had been staring, Sophia quickly shut her mouth and tilted her head to the side in defiance. The man she had bumped into was one of the most sought-after and notoriously stuck-up men in London. She didn't remember his name, but she did know he was a duke, and she had seen the various mamas whispering behind their fans whenever he passed them by.

“I beg your pardon, Your Grace,” she said coolly, suddenly feeling self-conscious for an unknown reason. She never felt self-conscious, so what was this? She shook her head. “I did not mean to cause any inconvenience.”

“Yet, you did,” he thundered as he examined the spreading stain on his navy coat. “Did your mother not teach you not to run in halls?” He glared at her.

Feeling her anger and irritation rise at the utter arrogance and snobbery the man was showing, Sophia took a deep breath. She could handle the fact that he was annoyed with the stain on his coat, but his arrogance in assuming he knew what proper behavior for a lady had pushed her over the edge.

“Perhaps you should not have been drinking whisky in a dark hallway, then, Your Grace.” She uttered his title with as much sarcasm as she could possibly muster, glancing at the empty glass in his hand.

Allowing the hand that was holding the handkerchief to fall to his side, the man glowered at her with a cool stare that made her stomach flutter with a strange sensation. She couldn’t help but find him attractive despite the air of mystery and danger that seemed to permeate the air around him.

“It is none of your business what I do in hallways. Were you trying to give your chaperone the slip?”

Who does this pompous fool think he is?

The dangerous accusation in his voice made her want to back away, yet her feet felt rooted to the spot as she pondered how much trouble she would get into if she mouthed off at a duke. Yet she could not resist the temptation to continue talking to him. There was something about him that intrigued her more than the other men who had asked her to dance. Perhaps because it would be much sweeter when she won their little

verbal sparring. He made for an excellent opponent, whereas the other gentlemen usually lost their cool or fumbled with their words.

“That is none of your business. Also, I asked you first,” she shot back defiantly and narrowed her eyes.

“Do you think this is a game?” The corner of his mouth tilted into a wolfish grin. He walked slowly closer to her, and she took a step back, her back colliding with the wall behind her. The Duke put his arm above her head, effectively caging her in. “Because I love bending the rules, if it means that I win. So, be careful what you wish for, My Lady.” He pronounced her title almost like a pet name.

Sophia felt flustered for the first time in her life. Feeling like she was rapidly losing the battle, she gave him a shove, feeling a surprisingly hard stomach underneath her hands.

“That was not very gentlemanly of you,” she returned icily and smoothed her skirt.

She needed to leave, as soon as possible, fearing she would do something stupid, like touch his stomach again. Facing her mother at present was preferable to being in the presence of that man.

“I never claimed to be a gentleman!” the man breathed as she twirled around and stormed away. His words followed her all through the darkened hallways, flooding her cheeks with a deep red.

Reaching the ballroom once again, Sophia took a deep breath and braced herself for the battle that lay ahead with her mother. Glancing back, she tried to catch a glimpse of the man who had made her angry, but he was nowhere to be seen.

She felt her heart beating faster as the thought of his handsome features and the way he had made her stomach flutter. The attraction she had felt toward him was equal to the amount of annoyance she had experienced. He was the only man in the *ton* who had ever made her feel that way.

And she hadn't even gotten his name.

CHAPTER 2



“*F*or pity’s sake, stop fussing with your dress,” Lady Harsworth reprimanded her daughter as the carriage bumped over the busy cobbled streets of London. “We are here now. Please try to behave, Sophia.”

Realizing that her current fate was inevitable, Sophia took a deep breath and stepped down from the carriage. The bright red door of the matchmaker’s office stood out like a sore thumb. People hurried past as if being seen in the mere vicinity of the door would tarnish their names.

Fully resigning herself to her fate, Sophia reluctantly climbed the stairs, glancing at the gold plaque on the door.

Marie Webster, Matchmaker Extraordinaire.

A small bell tinkled above the door, announcing their entrance to all who could hear.

“My Lady.” A tall blonde woman with greenish-blue eyes stood behind her desk and bowed with a polite smile. “I wasn’t expecting you yet.”

“I’m terribly sorry,” Helena apologized after greeting the woman. “I thought it best if everyone arrived early before they could change their minds.” She pursed her lips and glanced down at her daughter with an accusing look.

“It’s no trouble.” Marie smiled with a knowing glint in her eyes and clasped her hands in front of her chest. “We were just finishing here.”

Noticing that one of the chairs in front of the desk was occupied by a disgruntled man who looked to be in his late twenties, Sophia and her mother politely nodded a greeting. Taking a good look at him, Sophia tried to remember his name. The man did not appear often in the *ton*, but Sophia knew his face because her mother had tried to set up a date with him.

“Yes, I think we are done here.” The Duke of Wiltshire glared at Marie as he stood, tugging on the sleeves of his jacket in an attempt to straighten the cuffs.

The gesture reminded Sophia of the duke she had bumped into at the ball. He too was pompous and arrogant with the same air of mystery and danger.

Dominic Harding was another well-known gentleman of the *ton*. Famous for his rake-like beliefs. He seemed slightly less arrogant than Anthony Atwood, but only by a fraction. If what you were looking for was money and a slightly less than pleasant disposition with looks, then this man was a winner.

“I hope we will be able to discuss this matter further,” Marie said kindly, smiling at the man with a stern look in her eyes that seemed to intimidate him. “Matters are far from settled, Your Grace.”

The look in the man’s eyes suggested there was a grave danger to anyone who dared cross his path as he stormed out of the shop. Clearly, Marie had irritated him to great lengths. Sophia pitied anyone who would even glance at the Duke today.

“I’m sorry, ladies.” Marie lifted her light-blue dress and came toward Sophia and Helena. “I often have disgruntled men in here.” She smiled at them both. “But they all yield in the end. Now, you must be Lady Sophia Braxton.” She beamed at Sophia with a light luminescence that instantly put her at ease.

There was something about the tall, beautiful woman that made Sophia take a liking to her despite her reservations. Her curly blonde hair was pinned behind her head in a fashionable bun, and her clothes were neat and tidy. She had an air of sophistication that seemed to ease any doubts that Sophia harbored. Sophia found herself staring in awe at the woman who seemed to handle everything cast in her direction with ease.

“I’m afraid you will have to excuse His Grace,” Marie began after pouring them each a cup of tea. “We are currently negotiating a match for him, and things aren’t going very well.” She handed them each a cup before lowering herself in her chair. “He will come around, they always do. Now, shall we talk about your match, Lady Sophia?”

“As a matter of fact, I would like that very much,” Sophia said, seizing her chance to tell the woman that her mother was forcing her into a marriage against her will and better judgment.

“We are very excited to see whom you have chosen,” Helena cut her daughter short before she could say anything else. “We just know that the same kind of diligence and foresight that was used for Miss Bennett and Miss Crawford will be used for our Sophia.” She narrowed her eyes at her daughter. “Don’t we, dear?”

Her thinly veiled threat did not go unnoticed by Sophia.

“Of course.” Sophia held her gaze with a glare.

“I understand that this can be daunting,” Marie interjected politely. “Many young ladies have come through my doors kicking and screaming, and almost all of them have left with a smile when their matches were settled.”

“And the ones that haven’t left with a smile?” Sophia challenged the woman with a triumphant tilt of her head.

“They are still busy with their dates,” Marie retorted with an equally triumphant smile. “If they aren’t busy sitting at my desk,” she added with a wink.

Feeling as if the woman had somehow gained the upper hand, Sophia averted her gaze in annoyance and sipped her tea. It wasn’t often that anyone called her out on her sarcasm. The feeling was anything but comfortable for her.

“You can rest assured, Lady Sophia, that I only consider people to be a match if I am sure that they will inevitably bring the best out in one another. Speaking of whom—” Marie turned her attention to the front door just as the tinkling of the small bell announced the arrival of another client.

“Oh, no,” Sophia gasped under her breath as she caught sight of the man.

“Do you know him?” Lady Harsworth asked hopefully as she, too, turned toward the door.

“We met once, briefly, at the ball,” Sophia admitted as the man came striding into the room with a thunderous look on his face.

“I am sorry I am late,” he said gruffly. “There was an incident with a jacket at a ball I attended, and the seamstress who is attempting to remove the stain is demanding payment for the extra hours she has to put in.”

Shifting in her seat, Sophia bit her lower lip, waiting to see if he would remember their incident at the ball.

“You...” he said darkly as glowered at her.



The hallway stumbler was the last person that Anthony had thought he would be seeing. The nerve of the woman to be glaring at him in such an insolent manner was enough to set his teeth on edge.

The feisty, albeit beautiful young woman with piercing grey-blue eyes continued to glare at him, narrowing her eyes as she turned in her seat.

Does she blame me for the incident in the hallway?

“Your Grace.” Marie stood with a confident smile, ignoring the tense atmosphere that filled the room. “You’re just in time. Please, come and have a seat.” She gestured to the wicker table and chairs. “I’ll send for more tea.”

“Thank you.” Anthony straightened the cuffs of his neat black coat. “I shall wait for you to finish with your meeting. I presume my match will be here soon?” He raised an eyebrow in question, pretending as if he didn’t notice the daggers the young woman was shooting at him with her eyes.

“Your Grace?” Marie looked at the other women in confusion. “The young lady in question is already here,” she said gently.

“No,” he instantly responded with an air of finality, looking the young woman in the eye.

“No? Your Grace?” It was the older woman, who stood and gave him a questioning look.

Anthony was taken aback at first, not wanting to be rude, but the fact remained that he didn’t want to marry a woman who skulked in hallways.

“No,” he said more respectfully. “I will wait for the next young lady on your list, Miss Webster. I’m afraid that this match will not be possible. Good day.” He turned to leave.

“Thank goodness.”

Anthony stopped in his tracks as the young woman sighed in relief.

“I thank you for not wasting our time, Your Grace.” The sweetness of her voice barely hid the sarcasm beneath.

Turning slowly, he glared at her. “I beg your pardon?”

“I just meant that I do not wish to marry you either,” she said defiantly with her chin tilted to the side. “It would be a complete waste of time for both of us to go ahead with the meeting.”

She doesn't wish to marry me?

“I think this is a good time to make our introductions,” Marie interjected before the argument could get out of hand. “Your Grace, may I present to you Helena Braxton, the Dowager Countess of Harsworth, and her daughter, Lady Sophia Braxton.”

Clenching his jaw, Anthony bowed politely. He wanted to say that there was no pleasure in meeting anyone as outspoken and cheeky as Lady Sophia. Yet, the years of propriety that his father had instilled in him kept him from saying what was on his mind.

“Ladies.” Marie turned to the women. “May I present His Grace, Anthony Atwood, the Duke of Beaumont.”

“It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Your Grace.” Helena curtsied with a warm smile that was not mirrored by her daughter.

“Now that we have all made our introductions, I think we should have a seat and talk.” Marie walked over to the table in the corner of the room and stood behind a wicker chair.

Sophia seemed horrified at the fact that the meeting was going ahead despite the fervently matched protests from both sides.

“I do not mean to be rude, Miss Webster, but I must insist on my sentiments from earlier. I think it best if we move on to the next match on the list,” Anthony said with an air of finality that he hoped would get his point across.

“I wholeheartedly concur,” Sophia agreed with a nod.

“May I remind you, Your Grace”—Marie placed her hands on the back of a chair—“that your situation is time sensitive. Any delays in finding you a match may result in a grave loss for you.” She held his gaze as she pulled the chair out.

Her words hit deep as Anthony considered his predicament. It was true that time was of the essence. He needed to make a

match, and preferably soon. Even if it was to someone like Sophia Braxton.

What does it matter anyway?

He reasoned with himself. Their marriage would be one of convenience in any case. It wasn't as if he needed or even wanted to make a match that was based on love.

“Finding another match would mean waiting for quite some time.” Marie stepped aside and sat in the chair beside the one she had pulled out. “The choice is entirely yours, Your Grace.”

“Very well.” Sophia took a deep breath and approached the table, taking a seat opposite Anthony. “I will humor this little meeting, but only because I know that this will not lead anywhere.” She shot Anthony a confident grin.

Looking from one to the other, Lady Harsworth chewed on the inside of her cheek. “Shall we talk about the date for the wedding, then?”

CHAPTER 3



Sophia's jaw dropped as she gawked at her mother. "Wedding? We've only just met."

"I knew you would put up a fuss with any man we chose for you," Helena explained. "So, I took the liberty of giving all of your preferences to Miss Webster beforehand. His Grace has been hand-picked according to the list of criteria I provided."

"How would you possibly know what I am looking for in a husband?" Sophia rounded on her mother, ignoring the smirk that spread over the Duke's face.

"It's simple, you want a marriage of convenience to a man that will allow you to read your books and ride your horses. His Grace has both a large collection of books and stables," Helena finished triumphantly as if she had solved the problem.

"That alone does not ensure a good match," Sophia protested, only slightly intrigued by the fact that the man owned stables. Any man could possess a collection of books he never read,

but it took a man of character to care for horses, in her opinion.

“I can assure both of you,” Marie spoke up, placing her hands in front of her on the table. “All due diligence has been performed to confirm your compatibility. I have considered more than just the lists from both sides. It is my opinion that the two of you will make a great match.”

Sophia was about to open her mouth and protest that she didn’t need a great match—or any match, for that matter. She was fairly certain that she would be able to make a comfortable life for herself without the help of an arrogant and pompous man.

“We do not need a great match,” the Duke cut her short before she could open her mouth. “I simply require marriage in name alone. And by the looks of it, Lady Sophia requires someone to take her off her mother’s hands. By that account alone, the match will work. We can go ahead and set the wedding date. We’ll get married one week from today.”

Feeling as if she had been punched in the stomach, Sophia sat seething with her mouth agape.

This man is insufferable!

“Wonderful, we can go ahead with the planning, then,” Helena agreed enthusiastically.

“Mama!” Sophia reached the end of her rope. “I must object.”

“You may object all you like, Lady Sophia. The truth of the matter is that you and I shall be wed within a week. I hope you will be done objecting by that time.” Anthony stood and bowed. “I thank you for your time, ladies.” He turned to leave before Sophia could say anything else.

Feeling as if the carpet had been ripped from beneath her feet, Sophia sat silently with a stunned expression on her face.

Am I to be married within a week?

Marie looked at her with sympathy in her eyes. “The Duke may come across as a beast of a man, but his kindness knows no bounds. I’m certain you will see that for yourself in time if you give him a chance.”

Time?

Sophia’s mind suddenly snapped into focus. “I don’t have any time to lose.”

“That’s the spirit...” Helena suddenly trailed off as Sophia jumped from her seat. “Where are you going?!” she yelled after her daughter.

“To stop this wedding before it’s too late!” Sophia yelled over her shoulder.



Making his way across the pavement, Anthony let out a breath. The matter of his wedding was at least settled, so he could rest assured that the promise he had made to one parent would be kept while still honoring the vow he had made to the other.

“Your Grace!” Sophia’s voice carried through the air and reached his ears just as he reached the other side of the street. “Your Grace, I must speak with you at once,” she protested relentlessly.

“What is it now?” Anthony snapped and turned to face her, his voice carrying over the bustling carriages. He hated making a spectacle in public, but it seemed as if the woman was hell-bent on doing just that.

Heads turned to look at them as the scene continued to unfold.

His future bride was attempting to cross the street while carriages passed, causing giant wheels to turn at an alarming rate while horses galloped past.

“The woman is going to get herself killed before we’re even married,” he muttered under his breath just as a cloud of dust began to settle.

Seeing a gap in the carriages, Sophia bolted across the street with her dress lifted slightly, exposing her black leather boots. She reached the other end just as a man yelled at her to get out of the way.

“Are you mad?” Anthony yelled, snatching her out of the way of the oncoming carriage. “You will get yourself killed running across a busy street like that,” he grumbled.

She seemed startled at first as he held her upper arms, but she quickly regained her composure. “That would just be my luck,” she complained, fixing her skirts. A light blush had spread over her porcelain skin after her near-death experience.

“What is it that you want?” Anthony demanded, annoyed by her sarcasm.

The woman had only been in his life for a short space of time, and she had already caused him a great deal of hassle. He wasn’t surprised that she hadn’t made a match with anyone before he had come along. The engagement agreement should have come with a warning clause, in his opinion.

“What I want”—she lifted her chin and tilted her head to the side—“is for you to go back in there and demand to be rematched with somebody else—anybody, as long as it isn’t me.”

“And then what?” He decided to humor her. “You marry the next man you happen to bump into at a ball? Hopefully one won’t run afoul of your clumsiness.”

“No,” she retorted sarcastically. “You go in there and declare your absolute reluctance in marrying me. Marie Webster will find you a match suitable for your sour disposition. And I get to go on and live my life in utter bliss, not having married anyone at all.”

“So, your grand scheme in life is to become a spinster?” Anthony found himself becoming increasingly perplexed with the strange woman and her outlandish thinking. “Isn’t that something that women generally try to avoid?”

“All of you men are alike.” She rolled her eyes. “It should not concern you whether I wish to become a spinster or not. Nor should you concern yourself with the reasoning behind my decision. The fact of the matter is that you get to go and marry a doe-eyed young thing that will more than likely suit your stereotype of a dutiful young duchess.”

Anthony considered her words for a moment, searching her face for any hint or even a trace of irony. “No,” he said once

he'd made up his mind.

"No?" Sophia seemed just as perplexed as he had been with her behavior.

"No." Anthony nodded and turned to leave, walking away from her in the opposite direction of the matchmaker's bright red door.

"Do you just like saying that word, or do you find pleasure in torturing me?" She hurried to keep up with him. "You were fervently against the match when you entered the shop. Why are you so reluctant to stop the marriage now?" she demanded, red in the face from trying to match his pace.

"As a matter of fact, I find that the word 'no' can often be used as a positive reinforcement. Especially when petulant young women do not know their place," he growled under his breath, growing tired of her antics and insistence on ending a match that had already been decided.

"Petulant!" Sophia repeated the word loudly just as another carriage rattled down the busy street, causing her words to fade into the noise.

"Go back inside!" Anthony commanded, rounding a corner and turning into an alley beside a bookstore, in the hopes that it would discourage her from going any further.

“I thought you wanted to take me off her hands. Who is changing their mind now?” Sophia shot back and followed him without so much as a moment’s hesitation. Her courage and determination were evident in the unfazed way she kept in step with him.

Feeling the final chords of his resolve snap, Anthony whipped around and faced her, prancing toward her until she stepped back. He continued his prancing until her back pressed against the wall, and he placed his hands above her head, effectively caging her in. It reminded him of that fateful night in that damned ball. Their little outburst and her wanton eyes and hands had plagued him in the following nights. He had dreamed of her touch ever since, and now he found himself in the same position.

He just knew that Sophia Braxton would not be leaving his mind soon.

“Why can’t you just leave me well enough alone?” he hissed through his teeth, drawing closer to her face.

Sophia stared back at him with a fierce determination that caught him off guard. There wasn’t a single hint of fear in her eyes. Surprise and shock perhaps, but not fear.

“I am trying to leave you well enough alone,” she said under her breath. “I was doing just fine on my own before all of this

marriage nonsense was thrust into my life.”

“I wouldn’t talk about situations being thrust into anyone’s lives, Lady Sophia, not when I have you pinned against a wall.” Anthony’s breathing grew deeper as he realized that they were completely hidden from view.

The *ton* buzzed beyond the walls of the quiet alley, completely oblivious to the precarious situation that was unfolding in the shadows.

Realizing the predicament she was in, Sophia suddenly looked around, her eyes filling with panic as she spotted the rows of barrels and empty crates. Even the Duke realized that her reputation would be compromised beyond compare if anyone were to spot them there.

“It may not have occurred to you, Lady Sophia, but you and I could be the solutions to one another’s problems.” He placed a finger under her chin and lifted it, forcing her to look him in the eye. “I need a wife that doesn’t expect anything more than niceties such as libraries and horses. You, on the other hand, need someone who will marry you while still allowing you the freedom you seek. In all of your bluestocking ways,” he added bitterly.

Her chest began to rise and fall, causing her ample breasts to strain against the fabric of her dress. The curvaceous form of

her body didn't go unnoticed by him as he leaned in closer, breathing in the sweet scent of her perfume.

“If you'd stop talking for long enough, you will realize the merits of the arrangement for both of us.” His eyes darkened with passion as he glanced down at her cherubic lips.

The plump redness of her small mouth was appetizing in a way he almost couldn't handle. Allowing his hand to slip from her chin, he cupped the curve of her hip, holding her steady as she gazed at him with a heated look in her eyes.

God, she is beautiful.

His arousal grew more evident as the warmth of her skin seeped through her dress and onto his thigh and fingertips. He quickly shook off the thought and focused back on her eyes. Her beautiful, grey-blue eyes that were far fiercer and alluring than any he'd ever seen before.

“All I need from you is to toe the line and behave like a duchess in public. You may read your books and ride horses the rest of the time.”

Her firm breasts pressed against his chest as he drew even closer, feeling as if she'd cast a captivating spell over him with her looks.

“I don’t like being threatened,” Sophia said in a breathy voice that made him want her even more.

The contours of her body were pressing into his hip and chest as he held her steady, making it hard for him not to press his lips against hers. He wanted nothing more than to run the tips of his fingers over her smooth neck and down the beaded bodice of her dress...

“Then I wouldn’t protest so much if I were you,” Anthony said menacingly, glancing back down at her mouth and licking his lips.

Sophia’s lips parted slightly as her breathing deepened. She brought her leg up at his side, adding to the heat between them as she shifted beneath his grip. A soft gasp escaped her lips as she felt his arousal pressing against her thigh.

“You will behave from here on out,” he threatened in a low voice. “You will be the very definition of a perfect duchess,” he growled, his lips inches away from hers. “Or there will be consequences.”

Realizing that he was about to lose control, Anthony let go of her wrists and stepped back. He gave her a cool stare. “Go back to your mother now.”

He turned on his heel, leaving Sophia with her back pressed against the alley wall.

Walking in haste, he picked his way through the alley and out onto the busy street. He needed to get his mind off her body and the sensual way she had responded to his touch. Was that desire he had seen on her face, and the way she had shifted her body against his?

Did she feel the heat just as I did?

He found himself wondering about the wild look in her eyes despite his better judgment.

Marrying Sophia Braxton was going to be harder than he had anticipated. He'd have to watch himself with her whenever they were alone. If that was the kind of heat they felt in an alley, what would happen once they were married and alone?

CHAPTER 4



“Lady Sophia, are you all right?” Marie asked when Sophia returned to the shop.

Sophia had hoped that her mother would have bumped into her, but it seemed as if they had missed each other on the street. Her face was flushed with color, and her hair was slightly loosened from her tight bun.

“I...” she stammered, trying to catch her breath. “I was just looking for my mother.”

“I’m afraid Lady Harsworth has gone looking for you as well. Would you like to take a seat before she returns? You seem a little worn out.” Marie gestured toward one of the chairs in front of her desk.

“I think I should rest a while.” Sophia bit her lower lip before making her way toward the desk. Her eyes were filled with passion despite the tiredness in her steps. The poor girl must have run all the way back to the shop.

It seemed to Marie almost as if the young woman were in a daze. Her eyes were far away, and her mind was just as distracted. She wondered if something had happened between her and the Duke. She had hoped that the underlying passion in their personalities would burn bright for one another, but she hadn't thought it would happen so fast.

“Could I possibly trouble you for another cup of tea?” Sophia asked distractedly with a polite smile, licking her lips. “I’m afraid my little stunt had left me rather parched.”

“Of course.” Marie rushed forward and rang her little bell once again before perching on the edge of the desk. “May I ask if something has happened, Lady Sophia? It’s just that you seem a little distracted...” She sought the right word. “Did you and the Duke have an argument?”

“One argument, two? Who is to say how many we had?” Sophia answered with a sigh. “The man is as insufferable as they come, and why is he so handsome?” She seemed irritated at the fact. “One person shouldn’t be allowed to be that good-looking.”

Marie bit back the amusement she felt.

So, the attraction has already begun.

She knew from their backgrounds that both Sophia and the Duke were deeply passionate people. All they needed was the right spark to ignite their respective fires. She had banked on the fact that Sophia's passion for her own beliefs would conquer the disciplinarian in the Duke. Whether they would fall in love or not was another story, but at least their attraction was already evident.

"I can't marry a man like that." Sophia's irritated voice brought her back to the present.

"Would you prefer a more demure man?" Marie teased, knowing full well that Sophia did not want to marry at all if she could help it.

"I'd prefer not to get married," Sophia grumbled, confirming Marie's thoughts. The girl was as stubborn as she was beautiful. "You have a good life." She gestured around the shop. "Why can't I make my own way like you?"

Marie took a deep breath and bit her lower lip. "I had no other choice but to make a life for myself," she said with a heavy heart. "Both of my parents died. Some women don't have the luxury of choosing the life they wish."

Sophia's eyes widened as she stared at her, her mouth slightly agape. "I'm so sorry, Miss Webster. I didn't mean to sound ungrateful. Of course, there are women out there who have been thrust into situations they didn't choose."

“No matter,” Marie said a bit more cheerfully as Janey came into the room, carrying another tea tray.

Sophia waited awkwardly for Marie to take a seat with a cup of tea in her hands before opening up. “I lost my father as well. He was there one day, and suddenly he wasn’t. The doctors said his heart failed.”

Marie watched the sadness in the young girl’s eyes. It was clear to her that she’d loved her father just as much as Marie had loved her own parents. There was a commonality in that.

“May I ask you if you ever wanted to get married?” Sophia changed the subject. “I mean, before you started your career as a matchmaker.”

“I’m not sure,” Marie answered uncomfortably as she shifted in her seat. “I think I may have had aspirations along those lines at one point, but I’ve given myself over to the shop and helping others find their dreams.”

It seemed as if Sophia had more to say, but she lowered her gaze and sipped her tea.

“But enough about me, I’m the one who makes the matches. Do you think you could give the Duke a chance?” Marie steered the conversation in a different direction. “The Duke

isn't just a handsome man. I hear he's quite nice once you get past all of his rules."

"Did his mother tell you that?" Sophia narrowed her eyes.

"Well..." Marie bit back the laughter that threatened to spill over.

"I'm sure my mother would tell any prospective matches that I'm a delightful young woman with a fresh and open mind." Sophia mimicked her mother's voice and thrust her nose in the air.

"Actually, your mother used the words *strong character*." Marie laughed, delighted by the girl's witty banter. She felt strongly that she had, indeed, made the right choice for the Duke. Sophia would be able to keep up with his sharp intellect and political views. Perhaps she would even make him smile in time.

"I can't fault her for that." Sophia placed her empty cup back on the tray. "I can't promise you that I am going to try, Miss Webster. My mind has been made up for a very long time that I shall not marry. I mean no disrespect to anyone who has been thrust into a life that was not of their choosing, but I do not think that it makes my choices any less valid."

“I can respect your view,” Marie said with a twinkle in her eyes.

Sophia was definitely a strong-willed young woman. The only thing that would possibly tame her spirit was the love of a man who craved to be free, even if he wouldn't admit to the fact.



“Tell me again how it is that you find yourself betrothed despite your reluctance to enter into the institution of marriage?” Anthony's oldest friend leaned back in his chair and swirled his glass of whisky in one hand. The light filtered through the large window, lighting up his blonde hair and accentuating the gold highlights. A thin scar ran down the length of his neck, barely concealed by the collar of his shirt, evidence of the war he had survived. The only other notable marks were visible beneath his ear, a small map of wounds where a bullet had grazed his skin.

Jason Meyer was Anthony's oldest friend and the only person other than his mother that Anthony felt comfortable enough to confide in. Their friendship had withstood the test of time and even the ravages of war, as Jason had offered his life up for service and paid the price. He'd spent the past few years as a recluse, self-conscious about his scars and what people would say when they saw the very visible wounds.

“I find myself in a precarious situation.” Anthony clenched his jaw before taking a sip from his own glass of whisky. He

hadn't wanted to discuss the matter with anyone at all, but circumstances had changed, and he felt as if he owed his friend an explanation.

"That must have been one hell of a circumstance to convince you to go against your vow." Jason stretched his long legs out in front of him and crossed his boots at the ankles. He was dressed in a white shirt and cream breeches, a stark contrast to Anthony's neat suit with a tailored coat.

"My mother is ill," Anthony admitted, averting his gaze and looking around the lavishly decorated drawing room.

The topic of his mother wasn't one that he relished. As difficult as his life with his father had been, he'd loved and cherished his mother for the security she had provided for him.

The décor in Jason's manor could only be described as manly. He chose to decorate his walls with the many heads of animals that had given their lives in the name of hunting.

"I'm sorry to hear that. Is there nothing the doctors can do for her?" Jason placed his glass on the table beside his chair.

"I have gotten the opinions of several doctors. It doesn't seem as if there is anything that can be done other than making her comfortable." Anthony downed the final drops of his whisky

and placed the glass on the table. Sitting back in his chair, he massaged his temples with his forefinger and thumb.

“That is dreadful.” Jason sighed. “I wish there was something I could do for you.” He seemed thoughtful for a moment as he licked his bottom lip. “Does this mean that you will be siring an heir despite the promise you made to your father?”

“No,” Anthony said determinedly. “My mother’s wish is to see me happily married. The arrangement I made will ensure her last wish is fulfilled without having to break my vow.”

Letting out a sharp whistle through his teeth, Jason sympathized with his friend. “That’s a heavy situation, and I should know. I’ve been away at war for years.”

“I highly doubt your battle expertise will come in handy now,” Anthony joked, lightening the mood.

Jason allowed a lazy smile to spread over his lips. His boyish features relaxed a little as he reached for the whisky decanter and poured them each another glass.

“Will you be looking for a wife now that you have returned?” Anthony asked him, accepting the second glass.

“That depends,” Jason said thoughtfully with a frown.

“On what exactly?” Anthony humored his friend—a welcome distraction from his own situation.

“On whether or not your match is successful. I just might use Miss Webster’s services for myself if all else fails.” Jason laughed.

Anthony could see the concern in his friend’s eyes despite the mirth he displayed.

Jason had once been a sought-after bachelor before he had gone to war, but the emotional wounds inflicted on him through battle had left him aloof and lonely.

“Surely you aren’t that desperate?” Anthony asked in an amused tone.

“The last social gathering I attended ended with me calling a lovely young lady ‘*Sir*’ after spilling a glass of wine on her gown,” Jason confessed with a disappointed frown. “Perhaps I am a better match for your Lady Sophia,” he teased.

Anthony was suddenly filled with an intense and inexplicable protectiveness toward Sophia. The unwelcome thought of another man pinning her against a wall in an alley, as he had done, flooded his brain. Feeling the urge to storm out of the

room, he raised his glass to his lips in an attempt to calm his anger.

“I was only joking,” Jason said with a strange look in his eyes, a frown creasing his brow.

“I know.” Anthony quickly pulled himself together and shook off the sudden and unexpected feelings. “I highly doubt you would have wanted to make her your wife, the woman has the infuriating habit of challenging every word that comes out of my lips. I could say the sky is blue, and she would protest.”

Throwing his head back, Jason laughed from the pit of his stomach. “I’m sorry, Anthony,” he began when his laughter finally subsided. “I do not mean to laugh at you, I was merely amused by the irony. What are the chances that you of all people would be matched with a woman like that? Please tell me she is a bluestocking as well. I don’t mean to add to your pain, but it will add a great deal of amusement for me.”

“I’ve heard that she is,” Anthony admitted reluctantly. “Apparently, she’s very passionate and vocal about all of her beliefs.” He shook his head in disbelief at the situation he currently found himself in. For all of his manners and strict rules, he was about to marry a woman who believed in the fall of the aristocracy at large.

“Surely that isn’t such a bad thing?” Jason asked with a knowing smirk.

“It’s definitely a bad thing if she is going to use her beliefs to make my life a living hell,” Anthony grumbled. “There is nothing wrong with being passionate, as long as you aren’t beating people over the head to make your point.”

“That’s brilliant,” Jason admitted with his eyes shut. “Absolutely brilliant.”

Anthony shook his head in utter disbelief. If it hadn’t been for his mother who had suddenly taken ill, he’d still be living the life of a bachelor. Content if not happy with his lot in life.

There was much to be said of forging one’s own path. He just hadn’t foreseen the fact that his path would be colliding with that of Lady Sophia Braxton. The untamed and wild young woman who set his body on fire with lust.

CHAPTER 5



Sophia was still furious at the wedding announcement, and even more furious about only having a week to prepare for it—or rather only a week to put a stop to it, which is what she would have preferred. She was currently perched behind a pillar at the top of the stairs with a book in her hands, pretending to read as maids hurried about.

Helena, on the other hand, was overjoyed at the prospect of having a duke for a son-in-law. She fussed about and made arrangements, driving her daughter crazy with questions like what flowers were best and what food should be served. Sophia, however, had made up her mind to make things as difficult as she possibly could.

“Sophia Braxton!” Helena yelled up the stairs. “Would you please tell me if you would prefer red or white roses? I can plan this wedding on my own, but I still need your input!” Her voice was heavy with frustration.

“I told you, Mama,” Sophia replied irritably. “I don’t care what color roses you choose. Use dried leaves and twigs for all

I care—or better yet, call off the blasted wedding altogether.”

“I think twigs and dried leaves are a great aesthetic, Mama. It matches her enthusiasm,” Theodore chimed in from his position at the foot of the stairs.

“Don’t you dare encourage her.” Helena swiped at his shoulder with the piece of parchment she was holding. “Don’t you have somewhere else to be, young man? Like with your wife and children?”

“Jane suggested I come and help with the plans,” Theodore explained with a smile. “She said that it would take the help of the entire family to get Sophia down the aisle. I think she was right.” He snickered.

Shaking her head, Helena shut her eyes and massaged her temples. “I think she may have wanted you out of the way so she could deal with the children,” she grumbled under her breath.

Sophia drew a great deal of amusement and pleasure from the situation that was unfolding downstairs. Having her brothers there to draw some of the focus off her and annoy their mother was working to her advantage.

“I will choose the flowers on my own,” Helena called up the stairs once again. “But don’t think you will be getting out of

coming with me to see the Vicar this afternoon, young lady! That is one of the most important duties of the bride, and I will not allow you to shirk that responsibility!”

“Sophia?” Nicholas spoke up softly.

Looking up, Sophia noticed her eldest brother leaning against a pillar, his eyes fixed on her with a serious look. “Not you as well.” She rolled her eyes and shut her book.

“I am only trying to do what is best for you,” he spoke softly so that their mother would not hear. “You know as well as I do that you will need to marry sooner or later. Think of what the Duke is willing to offer you. Worse matches have been made in the history of London.”

“Fine,” Sophia sighed. “I will go with you to the church, Mama,” she agreed reluctantly.

Nicholas always reminded her of their father and his gentle ways of restoring control to situations. Even his own household with his wife and three children was hardly ever seen in disarray.

“I think that will be best.” He gave her an approving smile and helped her to her feet. “Try not to make Mama too irritable. You know how she gets when her nerves are on end.”

“I said I would help.” Sophia narrowed her eyes at him. “Let’s not push the matter now.”

Nicholas laughed as he gently nudged her down the stairs toward their mother and brother.

“Why did you have to come and restore order?” Theodore complained. “I was having so much fun.”

“Somebody had to.” Nicholas shot him a stern look. “We are here to help, not to allow the situation to descend into anarchy.”

“Thank you, Nicholas.” Helena breathed a sigh of relief. “I know I can always count on you.” She kissed his cheek and squeezed his arm.

“Just a minute,” Theodore complained. “I thought I was your favorite.”

“I don’t have favorites.” Helena thrust her nose in the air. “I love all my children equally. I simply choose to distribute my affections when it’s deserved.”

Theodore chuckled to himself as Sophia rolled her eyes.

“Now, please go and change so that we may go and see the Vicar. He’s put time aside for us this afternoon at the Duke’s request.” Helena’s eyes filled with admiration as she sighed in a dream-like manner. “Such an influential man, and handsome to boot.”

It was annoying to Sophia that her mother held a man she didn’t even know in such high esteem based on his looks and title alone. The situation made her feel like a prized cattle that was being sold to the highest bidder.

“You should marry him, then, Mama,” Sophia said grumpily, rolling her eyes.

The way her mother carried on about the Duke was even worse than the fact that she had to marry the man.

“I think you should just go and get changed,” Nicholas added quickly and ushered her up the stairs as the vein in their mother’s temple began to throb once again.

“Very well,” Sophia said coolly. She’d go and meet the Vicar, but she wasn’t going to make things easy, not if she could help it...



Sophia entered the doors of the old cathedral, looking around as her mother made her way straight to the altar, where a man

in black robes was busy paging through his Bible. The woody scent of incense and candles filled her lungs, offering her a moment's respite from her irritated demeanor.

The wooden pews were all empty, as no one felt the need to attend mass during the week.

“Good day, ladies,” the old man said with a warm smile that was welcoming despite the annoyance that Sophia felt.

His full head of white hair was combed to the side with enough brill cream to fix a broken wall. Yet, his pale green eyes were kind beneath the half-moon spectacles that sat atop his beak-like nose.

“How may I assist you this afternoon?” He came down the steps with a spring in his step despite the many years that were evident on his face. “Should we have some tea in the office?”

“No, thank you. I don't like tea,” Sophia said defiantly before her mother could elbow her in the ribs.

The gesture did not go unnoticed by the Vicar as he glanced at both women over his spectacles. “Very well, how may I be of assistance, then?”

“We are here to discuss my daughter's wedding.” Helena beamed with pride. “She is marrying the Duke of Beaumont.”

“Ah, yes,” the Vicar replied. “I was looking forward to meeting the future Duchess of Beaumont. I believe that His Grace would like the ceremony to be held here. He has long been a faithful member of this parish.”

Sophia noticed the fatherly affection that filled the man’s eyes. It was more than annoying for her that everyone acted as if the Duke walked on water, when he was nothing more than a grumpy git, in her opinion.

A handsome, grumpy git.

The familiar unwanted thought came to her mind once again.

“That is correct,” her mother responded on her behalf when she just stood there, stubbornly sticking to her decision to not have any part in the arrangements.

“Wonderful.” The old man seemed to ignore Sophia’s stubbornness as he clapped his hands together. “It seems as if we are all in agreement, then. Is there anything that the future Mrs. Atwood would like to ask before we proceed?” His gaze fell on her face as if he were expecting her to protest.

“No questions,” Sophia said, then cleared her throat. “But I would like to bring something to your attention that could have a severe impact on the impending nuptials.” She took a

deep breath and lifted her head. If there was going to be a time when she enacted her plan, it was now.

“What are you talking about, dear?” Helena laughed nervously and shifted on her feet.

“Oh?” the Vicar replied with one eyebrow raised.

“I am almost certain that the Duke is actually married to another woman,” Sophia lied with all the confidence she could muster.

“What!?” Helena gasped in shock. “How would you know this?”

“This is a very serious accusation, indeed.” The Vicar bowed his head with a frown. “Things cannot proceed if the Duke is, indeed, married.”

“I have heard whispered rumors that he and his mother are concealing a marriage to a woman he met abroad. Apparently, the Duke has tried to conceal his marriage from the *ton* in an attempt to hide the fact that his wife is not English.” Sophia added as much fuel to the fire as she could. “Having an English wife here in London would provide him with a cover-up should the facts ever arise.”

“It’s not good to jest like this, dear.” Helena gave a shaky laugh as she frowned at her daughter. “Obviously, the Duke would not be married to another woman.” Her voice was filled with uncertainty as she spoke.

“I have known the Atwoods since His Grace was a baby,” the Vicar said. “I baptized him. I am certain I would have known if he had married another woman. Rest assured that I will be addressing the matter with His Grace himself.”

Sophia felt a small sense of triumph at the discord she was sowing in the situation. She doubted the fact that any rumors of the Duke being married already would come to fruition, but it was nice to know she was causing a stir. Perhaps she would even annoy him enough to call off the wedding.

“We will have to postpone the wedding until the matter can be resolved,” the Vicar announced with an air of authority.

“There will be no need to postpone the wedding,” the Duke’s voice suddenly called out over the pews as the group turned in unison. Pushing himself up, he stood and made his way to the pulpit. “You will have to forgive my bride,” he said with a warning glance at Sophia before addressing the Vicar. “She has quite the sense of humor.”

Feeling her breath catch in her throat, Sophia stood her ground and looked him in the eye, fighting the strange fluttering sensation in the pit of her stomach.

“She still needs to learn that certain jokes can be harmful.” He narrowed his eyes at her.

“Was this really a joke, young lady?” The Vicar turned to her with a serious expression.

“Yes,” Sophia said after a moment’s hesitation. “His Grace and I have a running joke.” She plastered a fake smile on her lips.

It took the old man a moment to process the information before he laughed.

“While I cannot say that I agree with such jokes, I will admit that I was fooled.” Relief flooded his face as he shook his head. “I am relieved to hear that nobody is already married. Shall we continue with the discussion, then?” He stepped aside and gestured for them to follow.

Sophia was about to follow suit when she suddenly felt herself being held back by an iron grip.

“Don’t think any of your little tricks will work,” the Duke growled in her ear, sending a wave of shivers down her spine. “I’m on to your little game, and I can assure you that I am one step ahead.” His breath was hot in her ear as she took in his

words. “Now, why don’t you behave, if only until we get married?” He let go of her arm and followed the group.

It took her a few moments to catch her breath.

What is the power this man holds over me?

She felt the heat he elicited in her core spreading to the rest of her body.

Anthony Atwood was dangerous and unpredictable, yet her body responded to him in a strange way that caught her off guard. The sensations he created in her were entirely unexpected.

CHAPTER 6



Sophia woke up with her stomach in knots. She had a slight headache from yet another sleepless night. Things seemed far cloudier in her mind than they had the day before. It was her wedding day, and she felt anything but joy and excitement. Instead, she was afraid and wondered how much her life was going to change after the wedding.

A gentle knock made her head turn toward the door.

“Sophia, are you awake yet?” Nicholas’s soothing voice carried through the wood in muffled tones.

She had hoped in her heart that everyone would leave her alone until it was time, but her dreams were not to be realized at present.

“I am ready as I will ever be,” she grumbled before tossing the sheet aside and making her way to the dresser, where her silk robe was hanging. “You may come in now,” she said once her robe was secured in place.

Her bedroom door swung open, revealing Nicholas and his wife, followed by a gaggle of maids who were ready to do her hair.

Patricia Braxton matched her husband in height and posture. She was tall, slim, and petite, with light brown hair and doe-like eyes. Sophia had always appreciated her calm demeanor and gentle mannerisms. She never said much, yet she was always there when needed.

“How are you feeling?” Nicholas asked in his usual serious tone after walking over to his sister.

“Honestly,” Sophia said, looking up at him after one of the maids began to brush her hair, “I’m terrified.”

Nicholas placed his hand on her shoulder and gave her an encouraging squeeze. “You’re going to be fine. The Duke is a good man, and the Atwoods are a very distinguished family. I wouldn’t be allowing the wedding to take place if I hadn’t thoroughly researched his background. If you need to marry, Anthony Atwood is the way to go,” he added with an encouraging smile.

Their conversation was interrupted by Theodore, who came into the room and leaned his shoulder against the doorjamb.

“How’s the bride feeling?” Helena asked as she suddenly appeared beside him.

“She has cold feet, and it’s got nothing to do with the weather,” Theodore answered with a cheeky smile, having looked his sister over and assessed the situation within seconds.

As cheeky as he was, Theodore was always the one who was able to assess a situation with ease.

“Don’t pay any attention to him.” Nicholas did his best to reassure their mother. “You know he’s always fancied himself the gestor of the Braxton family. He forgets that he’s the son of a nobleman and not a jester.”

“I think I may have someone here that will cheer you up.” Helena winked as she stepped aside, interrupting her sons’ banter before things could get out of hand.

“Margaret.” Sophia breathed a sigh of relief as her friend stepped into the room. Her light green dress accentuated her strawberry-blonde hair and bright green eyes. Her marriage to one of the most eligible viscounts in all of London seemed to be doing her a world of good.

“Darling, it’s very normal to be afraid.” Margaret came over to the dressing table and kissed her cheek. “I am certain that the

two of you are a great match. Marie knows what she is doing, trust me.” She gave her an encouraging smile. “If she could find a match for me, there is nothing she can’t do.”

Sophia held her friend’s gaze in the mirror as a single string of pearls was placed around her delicate neck. Her friend’s teasing did little to ease her nerves. The guillotine blade swung above her head despite the jovial atmosphere in the room.

“I think we should give the bride and Margaret a moment alone.” Helena ushered everyone out of the room in the hopes that Margaret would be able to placate her daughter’s fears.

“I don’t want to marry him, Margaret,” Sophia blurted out the second the door was shut. “I don’t want to marry anyone. I don’t see why my situation has to change.”

“Darling.” Margaret gave her a sympathetic smile. “This is the way life works. You are of marriageable age.”

“I don’t see what that has to do with anything.” Sophia heaved a sigh and closed her eyes.

“It has everything to do with getting married. You wouldn’t want to end up a burden to your mother or either of your brothers,” Margaret said gently. “And while I know none of them would think twice about taking you in, you have to admit

that living the rest of your life as a spinster is not as desirable as having your own house.”

Sophia bit her lips as she considered her friend’s words. She didn’t want to live her life as a burden to anyone, let alone her mother and brothers. Things would just have to proceed as she knuckled under and married the Duke.

I could run...

The words echoed in her heart and soul.



Anthony fidgeted with his sleeves as he waited for his bride at the altar. Time was ticking by, and Sophia was yet to make an appearance. His jet-black hair was neatly slicked to the side, and his suit had been neatly pressed.

“What’s the matter?” Jason whispered in his ear, leaning toward him. “You look like you’re about to faint.”

“I’m just worried Sophia won’t show up,” Anthony said irritably. “I told you how difficult she has been these past few days. Her antics have nearly driven me over the edge.”

“Calm down,” Jason replied, patting him on the shoulder. “I’ve been told women use their wedding day to set the

standard for the rest of the marriage. You are going to wait for her each and every day for the rest of your life. Enjoy it.”

Anthony wondered where Jason could possibly have heard it. Spending years in the military, until his father died and he had to assume the title and lands, he didn't know exactly how the *ton* worked. Or women.

“Am I doing the right thing?” Anthony asked, having a moment of doubt as his overwhelming emotions got the better of him. His mind jumped to the promise he had made to his mother and the vow he had made in his father's presence.

“Anthony.” Jason leaned toward him again. “This is the worst possible time to ask that question, but I will say this. Look into her eyes and think how your life would be if you never have to look into them again, and therein will lie the answer to your question. Do you honestly think it will be better with anyone else?”

Taking a deep breath, Anthony felt his attention being drawn to the chapel doors as the sound of hooves carried through the air. There was no denying the fact that he was attracted to his bride, but would he be able to tolerate her antics in the future?

The organist suddenly began to play as Sophia and her eldest brother appeared at the end of the aisle. Anthony's breath caught in his throat as he glimpsed the ethereal appearance of his future wife.

Sophia glowed with the sun at her back. She wore a light gown of pure champagne and pearls. Her hair had been pinned in an elaborate style that boasted jewels. The veil hid her face as they made their way toward the pulpit, one hesitant step at a time. The few guests that had been invited turned to look with many gasps of awe.

She definitely cut a fetching picture as a bride.

“Dearly beloved,” the Vicar began as Sophia reached her place at Anthony’s side. Her eyes were filled with uncertainty and angst as she peered at him through her veil.

How would I feel if I never looked into her eyes again?

Anthony repeated his friend’s question in his mind. The question suddenly roused an inexplicable feeling of jealousy in his chest. He would never be able to rest if they didn’t go through with the wedding. The thought of another man kissing her lips or making her his bride filled him with anger.

Why am I feeling like this? I hardly even know the woman...

He struggled with his thoughts as the Vicar droned on.

“Now,” the Vicar’s voice broke into his thoughts, “before I join this man and this woman in holy matrimony, if there is anyone here who objects to this union—” He looked around at the faces of everyone who had gathered in the chapel. “-May they speak now or forever hold their peace.”

Anthony flinched as he saw the way Sophia lifted her head, parting her lips slightly as if she were about to object. He let out a breath when she squeezed her eyes shut and bit her lower lip.

The Vicar seemed satisfied with the lack of response and proceeded. “Do you, Anthony Atwood, take this woman, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death do you part?”

“I do,” Anthony responded without hesitation as he held Sophia’s gaze. Better a woman he felt attracted to than anyone else.

“And do you, Sophia Beatrice Braxton, take this man, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death do you part?”

The chapel filled with an eerie silence as Anthony awaited her answer.

Is she going to say no?

His palms began to sweat as his jaw clenched in anticipation.

“I do,” she finally breathed and looked him in the eye with a strange expression he couldn’t place.

“Having made your vows in front of all of your family and friends, I now pronounce you husband and wife. You may kiss your bride.” The Vicar stepped aside, allowing Anthony and Sophia the space they needed to share their first kiss.

Time seemed to stop as Anthony stepped forward, raising her veil to reveal her beautifully serene face. Her eyes were filled with questions as she gazed at him. Lifting his hand, he gently cupped her chin and lifted her face to his.

Sophia’s eyes fluttered shut as her lips parted slightly in anticipation. Leaning in, Anthony gently pressed his lips to hers, lingering for a moment as the fullness of her lips softened against his. He could feel her body trembling as she responded in kind.

Her breath filled his lungs in an entirely unexpected manner as he breathed her in. It seemed to Anthony as if the moment lasted a lifetime. The sweetness of her body and lips intoxicated his senses until he nearly lost control, lifting his hands slightly before their kiss was interrupted.

A light round of applause erupted, drawing them both away from the moment and back into the real world.

The Duke was pleasantly surprised to see that the kiss had affected her in the same way it had caught him off guard. Her cheeks were lightly flushed with color, and her lips were still parted. Yet, it was her eyes that spoke to him the most. The plethora of questions that had been there before were now replaced by a strange look of wonder.

Did she enjoy it?

CHAPTER 7



The guests had arrived, and Anthony was welcoming them to Beaumont Manor with his usual courteous, respectful demeanor. Most of the guests were members of the *ton* and were all curious to meet the new Duchess. After all, Anthony had been a notorious bachelor who had vowed never to marry.

The maids and footmen were bustling about with trays of drinks, trying to ensure that each and every guest was comfortable as they waited for the dinner to commence. Everyone had arrived early from the chapel—everyone beside his bride, who had insisted on taking a moment to freshen up.

“Where is Sophia?” Anthony whispered to his mother, who was standing beside him, waving at all the familiar faces as they shuffled past them to the dining hall. Sophia’s brothers and their families along with her mother were all accounted for.

“I’m not sure, dear,” the Dowager Duchess muttered without breaking her smile. “She is your bride, how could you have lost her so soon already?” she spoke through her teeth so as

not to alert their guests to any potential problems. “I would have hoped you’d be able to keep things together for one day at least,” she half-teased, half-admonished him.

Emily Atwood was a tall lady with a frail figure and papery skin. Her bright blonde hair was streaked with wisps of long grey strands. Her amber eyes were tired, dark with the pain she tried to hide despite the tiredness he could see on her face. Anthony worried the wedding would tire her out, yet she had insisted on being in attendance no matter what.

“If I were you, I would check the stables,” Margaret whispered to him, as she happened to be passing by and heard his question. “There are only two places she would be hiding, and I highly doubt she would have chosen the library, at present,” she explained and then curtsied just as another gentleman passed with his wife.

“What?” Anthony couldn’t believe what she had said to him.

The audacity of the woman to slip away to the stables and shirk her duties as hostess was grating on his nerves.

“Horses are her comfort,” Margaret added. “I’m sure she’s feeling overwhelmed and has gone in search of peace.”

Emily seemed to be enjoying the situation as she bit her lower lip in an attempt to hide her amusement, averting her gaze

away from her son.

“Thank you,” Anthony grumbled to the woman he hardly knew and made his way out of the hall, greeting guests with a stern expression on his face.

Their marriage had only just begun, and his wife was already defying his request that she take her duties as a duchess seriously. There would be consequences to pay if she behaved like this in the future. He’d give her the benefit of the doubt at present, but there was no telling what would happen if she disobeyed him again.



Sophia felt the tension leaving her body as the chestnut mare nuzzled the palm of her hand. The stables had always presented a safe space for her. Even as a child, she had relished the time she was allowed to spend with the horses. She’d had to leave her horses behind in the country when her father had died. Nicholas had gone against her wishes and moved the family to the city, forcing her to leave her beloved pets behind.

The horse neighed impatiently, bumping her hand to the side in search of some kind of food.

“I know,” Sophia said with a heavy heart. “I yearn for freedom and something better as much as you do, girl.” She laid her forehead on the mare’s head as the musky scent of horses and

hay filled her senses. The train of her dress was smudged with dirt, but she couldn't care less.

“What are you doing in here?” Anthony's voice boomed across the stables, making the horses uneasy.

Sophia's eyes shot open as she waited for the argument she knew was coming. “I'm in much better company in here than where you are,” she snapped, glancing over at him.

There had been a moment after their kiss in the chapel where she had felt a strange sensation. A fluttering in her chest that felt as if her heart had awoken. The sensation alone had caused her a great deal of confusion.

“Oh, really,” he snapped back irritably with a dark look in his eyes. “Has the horse vowed to look after you for the rest of your life? It was I who stood beside you in the chapel this morning, the last time I checked. And it is I whom you promised to obey, whether you enjoy my company or not.”

Rolling her eyes, Sophia turned her attention back to the horse. “I would have made a vow with the horse if the opportunity presented itself,” she said sarcastically and continued to pay attention to the mare. “It was just rotten luck that you were the one who trotted into the matchmaker's office.”

“You better come with me right now,” Anthony growled, having had enough of her cheek. “It’s bad manners to keep your guests waiting when you are the hostess.”

“And what will happen if I don’t?” Sophia shot back angrily, taking her eyes off the horse for a moment and looking at Anthony defiantly. She wasn’t about to start her marriage by being told what to do when she needed a moment alone.

“You might regret it, Duchess...” Anthony trailed off in a menacing manner as his eyes darkened even further. The menacing look he was giving her was more than enough to send any man running.

Sophia recalled the moment in the alley when she’d thought he was going to kiss her. What was the man capable of when his anger was brought to the surface? He didn’t seem like a violent man, at least.

“Oh, really?” She sniggered mockingly, feeling slightly less confident.

“Oh, really.” Anthony lunged forward, grabbed her by the arm, and hoisted her into his arms, one hand firmly secured around her waist, and the other under her knees in one smooth movement.

“Put me down, you brute!” Her fists pounded on his back, with little to no effect. The man was stronger than an ox when matched against her slight stature.

“I think you best keep still, Your Grace,” he said in a dark, mocking voice. “I would hate to drop you and your pretty dress in the mud. Our guests will think that something untoward had happened out here.”

“I demand you put me down this instant!” Sophia tried again, squirming to get away as her heart began to pound in her chest.

Is he flirting with me?

Her efforts, however, were futile against the sheer strength of Anthony’s grip. He carried her with such ease that it almost seemed as if he were carrying a feather.

He grumbled as he shifted her on his arms when she had squirmed one too many times and trudged out of the stables. “I don’t take kindly to having my requests disobeyed.”

Accepting defeat, she took a deep breath and stopped her fussing. What could she do in any case? Run from him? They were married now, and her husband had every right to demand her presence at their wedding feast. She wasn’t even sure she

wanted to run away from him. From the rest of the guests, maybe.

Anthony carried her all the way back to the manor, taking a detour and stopping in a hidden alcove just as they reached the front entrance.

“If you don’t put me down, I am going to scream!” Sophia hissed at him through her teeth.

The distant sound of people laughing had made her anxious. Being carried by a burly man, in her opinion, would irreparably damage her image as a bluestocking. She was already in danger of being seen as a pushover by her peers since her wedding.

“Just be quiet.” Anthony put her back on her feet and smiled wolfishly at her. It almost seemed as if he had enjoyed carrying her over his shoulder as he stood there smirking.

“I can’t believe you just did that!” She looked at him in shock, wondering what was happening behind his dark brown eyes. Never in her life had she ever envisioned a man carrying her like a sack of grain, let alone the fact that she had secretly enjoyed it.

He leaned in closer. “Will you be a good girl now?” he growled in her ear, catching her even further off guard with the

deep tone of his voice and hot breath.

She regained her composure and glared at him. “Do you think I’m one of your horses that you can just move around to get them to do whatever you want?”

“No,” Anthony said honestly as he came even closer, bringing his face inches away from hers. “I am, however, your husband, and as such, I have the right to bring my wife with me wherever I want.”

“Well, a husband who expects honor from his wife needs to be an honorable man.” She smiled at him, wanting to gain the upper hand once again. “You forget, Your Grace, that I advocate for the freedom of women and their place in society. If you are to win my affection as your wife, you will need to develop an entirely different approach,” she said confidently.

“Your blush says otherwise.” Anthony winked at her with a wolfish grin. “You might want to examine your feelings before taking me on again in the future.”

Sophia was about to shuffle past him when he grabbed her arm and pulled her toward him again, shoving her gently into the darkest part of the alcove. He looked her in the eye, leaned in closer, and took in the scent of her soft skin. He ran the palm of his hand along her arm and up her neck, tangling his fingers in the loose strands of her hair.

“I can be much more honorable than a horse,” he whispered in her ear, his voice low and sensual. “If you come to dinner with me, I promise I will show you just how honorable I can be. And I promise to never carry you like that again, unless you ask for it.”

A shiver of unexpected pleasure ran down her spine as she stifled a gasp, catching her breath right before it escaped. What was this power that this man held over her like a carrot dangling in front of a starved horse? He awoke things within her that she hadn't even known existed.

The Duke drew back slightly and tucked a single strand of hair behind her ear. “I trust that you will come to the dinner without any more fuss.” His voice was still dark as he looked into her eyes. “My threats are not hollow, Your Grace.”

Sophia held her breath as he turned on his heel, leaving her hot and flustered with her own thoughts.

What would happen if she ran away now? Leaving him alone to explain to his guests why his bride was not present.

Glancing at the open door to her side, Sophia thought of their kiss in the chapel and the way her core had fluttered with his nearness.

Why can't I leave?

She kept asking herself that question as her heart pounded in her chest.

Lifting the hem of her soiled dress, she averted her gaze and made her way into the dining hall, greeting her guests as the newly-crowned Duchess of Beaumont.

CHAPTER 8



Sophia's hands were still shaking with irritation. How dare he hoist her over his shoulder and carry her to the manor? She didn't like that he expected her to be like a trophy, to be carried around as a reflection of his greatness. She hated it and was determined to stand her ground and show everyone that Sophia Atwood, the Duchess of Beaumont, was not just a push-over bride.

She pulled herself together despite the pounding of her heart and waltzed into the room where all of the guests were waiting to be seated.

"You shouldn't have waited for me." She clucked her tongue in a very unladylike manner. "This is a party, after all. Everyone should be celebrating."

Guests turned their heads to look at her, whispering behind their hands as she grinned from ear to ear with a radiant smirk.

"Don't be silly, dear." Helena laughed nervously, glancing around the room at the stunned faces. She turned to the

Dowager Duchess. “My daughter has a wonderful sense of humor, don’t you think, Your Grace?”

Emily simply smiled as she came toward them amidst the curious susurrations. “We have not yet had the pleasure.” She smiled warmly at Sophia. “But I have heard that she has a wit to be reckoned with.”

Sophia felt sheepish as she curtsied. In all of her spiteful attempts to get back at her new husband, she had forgotten that she still hadn’t met his mother. Far be it from her to leave a bad impression on a lady she heard was frail.

“I beg your pardon, Your Grace, I only meant that I hoped everyone was having a good time,” she apologized as a light blush spread over her cheeks.

“That’s quite all right, dear.” Emily smiled politely at her. “My daughter-in-law is right. I think we should all take our seats, the food is waiting.” She gestured gracefully for all the guests to take their seats.

“I don’t know what you think you are doing,” Anthony hissed quietly in Sophia’s ear as he came up from behind, guiding her by the elbow to her chair. “But let’s not have any more of that this evening.”

Sophia clenched her jaw in irritation as she took her seat by his side with her mother-in-law to her left. Good impression or not, she was going to make him rue the day he had met her.

Waiting for the soup to arrive, Sophia formed a plan in her mind as the guests chattered away, happily commenting on the beauty of the room and how elegant the wedding ceremony was.

“Oops!” Sophia said loudly as she dropped her spoon to the floor, nearly knocking the tray off the footman’s hand.

Anthony glared at her along with her mother, who shook her head in disappointment.

“I’m afraid I’m terribly clumsy,” Sophia said to the table at large.

People giggled nervously at her strange behavior and turned back to their conversations, giving her the chance to enact the second phase of her plan. Waiting until the footman had ladled the hot soup into her bowl, she gingerly scooped some up and allowed it to fall straight onto her dress.

“Would you stop behaving like a child!?” Helena kicked her gently under the table and smiled at the other guests to try and conceal her atrocious table etiquette.

“Mother!” Sophia hissed a little louder than she had intended and rubbed her shin to ease the throbbing. Physical pain had not been part of the plan.

People from all around the table were commenting to each other and giving her dirty looks. Sophia noticed out of the corner of her eye that Anthony had a smug look on his face. It was almost as if he were enjoying her mother’s reprimanding scowls.

Sophia just knew she couldn’t leave things as they were. She had to do something to show them that she would not be tethered by anyone, much less this wretched but handsome man who expected her to be at his beck and call at every turn.

Sophia turned to glance at her mother, then once more at Anthony, before carelessly grabbing the spoon again and launching it into her bowl of soup with such force that it sent the bowl flipping backward onto her dress. She gasped with slight pain as the hot soup singed the delicate skin of her bosom. Yet, she forced herself to smile with satisfaction at the absolutely horrified look on Anthony’s face.

Her mother was beside herself with embarrassment, trying her best to hide herself from judgmental eyes.

Emily merely smiled and sipped her wine as she watched the scene with what seemed to Sophia to be a look of amusement.

“We need to clean that off before it stains,” Helena said sweetly as she stood. “Come, dear.” Her voice held a note of finality before she turned to the rest of the guests. “It’s just nerves. You know how it can be with a young bride on the brink of marital bliss.”

The guests laughed awkwardly as they averted their gazes, turning back to their conversations and soup.

“Oh, I’m so sorry everyone,” Sophia said loudly as she stood. “The spoon just slipped from my hand.”

Anthony gave her a cold stare, prompting her to grin widely and stick her tongue out at him in secret before leaving the table with vegetable soup cooling on her skin and staining her gown.

“Come,” Helena hissed in her ear angrily and yanked her toward the door.

People were turning their attention to Anthony and his mother. Sophia heard them asking him questions about how and when he had met her, and if he was sure she was the type of person he really wanted by his side. The direction of the conversations gave her a slightly uneasy feeling as her mother dragged her out of the dining hall.

For some reason, she didn't want other people feeding Anthony doubts. She decided not to dwell on that further. She wanted this marriage annulled, and she would get it no matter what.

“Sophia Braxton!” Helena raised her voice angrily, walking beside her as they made their way to the retiring room down the hall. “What has gotten into you? This is not how I raised you! What if the Duke regrets his decision and decides to have the marriage annulled?”

“I think you mean Atwood now, Mama. And it would be the happiest day of my life if the Duke considers having the marriage annulled. I do not wish to be placed on display for the benefit of the *ton!*” Sophia spat angrily.

She hadn't realized how loud her voice had been.

Her mother hurriedly bundled her into the nearest room out of fear that people would hear.

“You stop your nonsense at once,” Helena threatened with a finger thrust to her nose. “I have worked far too hard on this match to have you throw everything away now.” Her face was red with anger at her daughter's antics.

“I hope I am not interrupting,” a sweet voice spoke as both Sophia and her mother turned to see who had entered the

room.

“Your Grace,” Helena said quickly as the blood drained from her face. “I apologize for my harsh words. I did not know you were there.”

“There is no need to apologize.” Emily held up her hand to halt Helena’s words. “I was hoping to have a moment alone with the bride. That is if you do not mind, Lady Harsworth?”

“Of course not, Your Grace.” Helena curtsied politely and hurried out of the room, but not before she shot her daughter a threatening glare.

“I’m so sorry for causing a fuss at the table.” Sophia felt flustered as she began to apologize. “It was such a silly accident.”

“Not to worry, my dear.” Emily smiled, to Sophia’s great surprise. “We all know what it’s like to be a young bride, thrust into a new family and life.” She walked across the room and sat in a chair in front of a dressing table.

Sophia noticed for the very first time just how frail the old woman was. Her skin was papery thin, and the circles under her eyes seemed to suck the very life from her eyes. The short walk from the dining hall left her out of breath.

“I only came to see if you were all right. That soup you poured on your dress was rather hot,” Emily said in a kind voice once she had gotten her breathing under control.

The tired look on the old woman’s face made Sophia feel bad about her behavior. The last thing she wanted was to cause a sickly woman embarrassment in her own home.

“I rather enjoyed that spectacle. It’s been a long time since we’ve had any entertainment around here.” Emily chuckled. “The conversation was getting rather boring anyway. I always seem to be seated beside some fortune-seeking old booby who smells of cheap cigars and whisky.”

Sophia took a liking to the woman. She seemed to be the polar opposite of her uptight son.

“Don’t mind Anthony.” Emily’s eyes twinkled as she looked at her. “His bark is worse than his bite.”

“Has he always been this stuck-up?” Sophia took her chance to enquire about her new husband. “I beg your pardon,” she quickly corrected herself. “I meant to stay stern.”

Laughing again, Emily shook her head. “No, dear, you meant to say stuck-up. Anthony does come across as a very pompous and right-winged man.” Her eyes filled with love despite the things she was saying. “I will ask you to please be patient with

him. There is a lot more to his character than just the stubborn ways that were drilled into him by his father.” She pursed her lips in sadness.

Sophia wanted to ask more questions but didn’t know if she would be overstepping a boundary.

“I am happy that you have joined our family,” Emily said more tiredly now as she attempted to stand.

Seeing that the lady was struggling, Sophia hurried forward and gripped her arm.

“Bless you, dear,” Emily said with a heavy sigh. “I’m afraid that this old body no longer wants to function as it used to.”

“Would you like me to help you back to the dining hall, Your Grace?” Sophia asked gently, noticing the unsteady rise and fall of the older woman’s chest.

“No, I think I would like to retire to my room now.” Emily patted Sophia’s hand. “You need to change and rejoin the party.”

“I think I’d better,” Sophia relented.

“And, dear.” Emily turned to her before they reached the door. “I know how tempting it is to push Anthony to his limit, but try not to overdo it tonight.” Her eyes twinkled mischievously. “You have the rest of your lives to try and drive him crazy.”

She knew what I was trying to do.

Sophia felt slightly sheepish at having been caught out by her mother-in-law on the very first night she entered her home. Yet, all was not lost, as it seemed as if the lady would support her with her crazy antics. That at least gave her something to look forward to. The two of them would undoubtedly share many mischievous moments together.

The only hurdle in her marriage was her husband. Her handsome, rule-loving husband who didn't seem to possess a sense of humor. Her mind drifted to his looks and what he would look like without a shirt. His muscles had certainly felt toned as she'd pounded on his back.

Shaking her head, she focused back on the task at hand—escorting her mother-in-law to her room before returning to the dining hall. There would be plenty of time to get on Anthony's nerves in the future, but for now, she would hold off on all of her antics.

CHAPTER 9



*A*nthony entered the dining hall and glanced around the room in search of his wife. The main table was neatly set, with each place exactly where it needed to be. He'd even gone as far as asking the butler to have fresh fruit brought in from the market in case his new bride didn't fancy the eggs and toast. Yet, Sophia was nowhere to be seen.

They hadn't spoken again after the stunts she had pulled at their wedding dinner. To say that he was less than amused with her antics was the understatement of the century. Wondering what his mother would think if they didn't spend an adequate amount of time with one another, he decided to go in search of the newly crowned Duchess of Beaumont.

"Where is my wife?" he asked one of the footmen coming into the hall with a bowl of fruit.

"I'm not sure, Your Grace," the young man with bright blonde hair replied nervously, steadying the bowl of fruit in his hands. "I did see her leave the manor. Perhaps Her Grace is taking a stroll in the gardens," he added helpfully.

“Thank you, you may carry on with your duties,” Anthony said and clenched his fists before leaving the room.

What is she up to now?

His jaw clenched in irritation. The last thing he thought he would be doing on the morning after his wedding was looking for his wife.

Servants bowed and curtsied, scurrying out of his way as he stomped down the halls toward the gardens. His mother often said he was like a bear with a sore foot when things didn't go his way. If that was the case, Sophia was about to see just how stern and grumpy he could be.

The crispness of the early morning air did little to cool his temper as he stomped down the steps and onto the gravel of the deserted drive.

She has to be here somewhere.

His eyes scanned the sprawling gardens of his manor before coming to rest on a small figure in the distance who was hunkered down in the dirt.

“Right,” he huffed angrily and stomped down the path that led to his mother’s rose garden just beyond the drive.

The sprawling lands were green and luscious as they stretched as far as the eye could see. Sophia hummed peacefully to herself as she dipped her hands into the dark earth and scooped out the soil, making a hole large enough to accommodate the sapling that stood at her side. Her hair was pulled into a tight bun at the top of her head, and her dark blue dress was tucked under her knees as she hunched down on the grass.

Anthony cringed inwardly at the dirt that was doubtlessly already staining the fabric of her dress. He made a mental note to make an appointment for her at his tailor’s shop.

“You are the epitome of sophistication right now,” he growled sarcastically, folding his arms over his chest as he glowered down at her. “It’s unbecoming of a duchess to do such things.”

“Oh, come off it, Your Grace.” Sophia rolled her eyes, pausing for a moment before reaching for a small rose bush with orange buds and placing it in the hole. She seemed entirely unbothered by any of his concerns. “Your mother mentioned to me this morning that she hadn’t been able to plant any new roses. Just because I am a duchess does not mean that I am lame.”

“Clearly your impediments aren’t of a physical nature,” Anthony replied. “Who plants orange roses anyway?”

Traditionally, roses are either white or red. Look around you, for heaven's sake. Did you not notice that all of the other bushes are either red or white?" He found himself becoming irrationally angry over the color of the flowers.

What was the matter with him? He never got angry with people over something so simple.

Except Sophia.

Oh, Sophia managed to tick off every last nerve in his body. What was it that made her have such power over him?

Pushing herself off the grass, Sophia stood and rubbed her hands together in an effort to shake off some of the dirt. "Are you implying that I am stupid, Your Grace?" she asked angrily as her nostrils flared. "Your mother said that I may plant anything I liked. I happen to like orange roses."

Closing his eyes against the anger that grew in his chest, Anthony decided to pick his battles and leave well enough alone. He knew the problem wasn't the roses, or even that she was gardening. The problem was that he had not slept at all last night, thinking of her. The way her bosom rose and fell with each breath. The way she had fit in his hands when he carried her over, her shapely legs right next to his face.

She will be the death of me.

“I am simply saying that gardening is not a fitting pastime for a duchess. Look at your hands, for pity’s sake. What if you dirty the house on your way in?” He gestured to her entire appearance with a wave of his hand.

“Does my appearance embarrass you, Your Grace?” Sophia cocked her head to the side and shot him a challenging glance.

“Just the dirt on your hands and knees,” he said uncertainly, noticing the mischievous glint in her eyes.

There was something about the way she was looking at him that let him know he was in for trouble.

“Do you mean like this?!” Sophia lunged forward with her dirty hands and ran her fingers and palms down his neat, white button-down shirt before he could stop her.

“What the devil are you doing!?” Anthony gasped in shock as he looked at the dark brown stain that ran down his chest and over his abdomen.

Sophia’s cheeks filled with color as she giggled with the back of her very dirty hand covering her mouth.

“I suppose you think this is hilarious?” he barked disapprovingly.

“A little,” she admitted with a sheepish grin that thawed his heart slightly despite the anger he felt toward her.

“I am going to count to three, and you had better start running,” Anthony said darkly, glaring at her. “One...”

Her eyes darted around the garden. “You aren’t being serious, are you?” she asked in a panicked voice.

“Do you want to stick around and find out what happens when I’m really angry?” he growled. “Two...”

Sophia set off at a run just before he reached the final count.

“Three!” Anthony yelled as he began to give chase.

She was surprisingly fast despite her short and petite stature. She bolted toward the apple orchards, presumably in the hopes of hiding between the trees to escape his wrath.

Anthony, however, was slightly faster than her, as he caught up to her and spun her around, pinning her back against the trunk of one of the larger trees.

A faint yelp of surprise and giggles escaped her lips as she looked into his eyes, her cheeks flushed with color from the running as her chest rose and fell with every breath. A few tendrils of her mahogany hair had escaped the bun at the top of her head and were framing her face.

“That wasn’t a very wise thing to do,” Anthony said gruffly. He could see the defiance in her eyes as she stared back at him, unfazed by the anger he was showing. “What am I going to do with you now that I have caught you, you little vixen?” His voice dripped with the cool anger he was feeling.

Silence filled the grove of trees as Anthony looked into her eyes. Even the birds ceased their chirping as he listened to the rhythmic beating of her heart. They were completely alone and hidden.

Is she scared of me?

He tried to gauge the look in her eyes as she searched his face. Her beauty once again caught him off guard as the ribbon that had been holding her hair in place gave way to the gentle breeze, allowing the mahogany waterfall to flow down her shoulders. The breathtaking sight of her face framed by her hair muddled his thoughts and aroused his passion.

“What are you going to do with me?” she whispered. Her voice had once again dropped to a breathy tone, holding a hint of defiance and longing.

“I don’t know,” Anthony replied, holding her arm a little tighter with one hand as he ran his fingers through her hair with the other. “I’ve got a few ideas, but I’m still trying to figure out what will be best.” His breathing suddenly matched hers as desire began to take hold.

How can a woman be so attractive and stubborn?

Her hair felt like strands of silk between his fingers as the light scent of lavender drifted up to his nose, intoxicating his senses.

He lowered his voice to a menacing tone that sent a visible shiver down her spine as she moved her shoulders. “You need to be taught a lesson.” Feeling as if they were trapped in a world of their own, he leaned in closer and whispered in her ear, “Close your eyes, Your Grace.”

Her eyelids fluttered shut as her breathing deepened, causing her breasts to rise and fall in anticipation of what came next. The tips of her thick, dark lashes brushed against her cheeks as Anthony raised his fingers to her face. He wanted to examine every curve and indentation of her delicate features, running the tips of his fingers over her cheeks, jawline, and nose.

A soft whimper of surprise escaped her lips as she tilted her head back, leaning against the bark of the tree for support.

Leaning in closer, Anthony lightly brushed his lips against hers, waiting for her response before parting her lips with his own. Sophia responded to him in kind as she brought her soiled hands up his back and drew his body closer to hers. She sighed softly as she sunk into his kiss, yielding to his every whim with quiet moans of pleasure.

It wasn't long before the passion he had been harboring for her took over. His hands were suddenly on her waist, working their way up her body as he deepened the kiss, searching the warm depths of her mouth with his tongue.

A passionate growl took him by surprise as she bit on his lip, begging him for more with her body pressed against his.

Taking his cue, he used his leg to part her thighs and propped her back up against the tree, freeing his hands as she placed her arms around his neck for support. His mouth sought the gentle curve of her neck as his tongue drew a path over the delicate flesh.

“Anthony,” Sophia gasped in pleasure and cupped the back of his neck with one hand, drawing his head closer to her flesh.

The palms of his hands made their way to her breasts, gently squeezing the supple flesh through her dress. His arousal grew when her dress slid up, displaying the smooth skin of her upper thighs. His hands were about to make their way down

her body when a sudden yell drew his attention back to the present.

“What was that?” she whispered in his ear, breathing deeply as she waited for his response.

“It’s one of the footmen. I think we are expected back at breakfast,” Anthony whispered reluctantly, gently lowering her back to the ground.

Sophia swallowed hard before fixing her dress and reaching for the ribbon that lay on the ground. “I think we best get going, then.” She breathed heavily and avoided his gaze. “They might send a search party out soon if we don’t go in.”

Anthony couldn’t help but look at her breasts as the mounds peeked out from the hem of her bodice.

Noticing where his gaze was headed, Sophia quickly fixed her dress and turned her back. “I’m sorry about your shirt,” she whispered awkwardly. “I’m sure one of your many seamstresses will be able to fix it for you. If not, I’m sure you will be able to buy a new one.”

He watched as she walked away from him, refusing to meet his gaze after the steamy moment they had shared. He couldn’t quite understand the way she was acting.

Was she embarrassed?

One thing was certain: she had reacted to him with the same amount of passion that he had felt.

CHAPTER 10



*O*h, Lord, there he is.

Sophia panicked as she came down the stairs and saw Anthony talking to the butler. They had been avoiding each other since their kiss the previous day. It wasn't that she hadn't enjoyed the kiss, she just wasn't sure how to act around him now that it had happened. She had even reasoned with herself that it should not have been a big deal, given the fact that they had kissed in the chapel.

Yet, there was something different about the kiss beneath the apple tree. Her lips still tingled from the feel of his caresses. The passion he had displayed flowed through her veins like the heat of summer.

No.

There was no way she could face him right now, not when her feelings were as confused as they were. Turning, she quietly crept back up the stairs.

“Sophia,” Anthony called up to her just as she was about to escape.

So close...

She sighed just as her hand touched the top rail of the banister. Plastering a smile on her lips, she turned and greeted him with as much enthusiasm as she could muster. “Your Grace, I didn’t see you there,” she lied in an attempt to gloss over the awkwardness of her attempted escape.

Anthony raised an eyebrow as he looked at her. “You didn’t see me standing at the foot of the stairs as you made your way down?”

He’s really not going to make this easy, is he?

“No, I’m afraid I did not,” she replied confidently as she came down the stairs, taking her time with each step. If it was a game that he wanted to play, then she would make sure that she won. “My thoughts were far away from here.” She reached the bottom of the steps with a triumphant smile.

Let’s see him counter that.

“Where were they?” He latched onto the subject like a dog with a bone.

The look of insinuation on his face made Sophia bristle with irritation. She wasn't about to be toyed with, especially not by the pompous man she had married.

“Politics,” she answered quickly as her mind wandered to the pressure of his lips against hers and the feel of his hands on her hips. The path that his fingers had traced still tingled through the fabric of her dress.

“Politics?” A teasing smirk spread over his lips. “You were thinking of politics.”

“Does that seem like an impossibility, Your Grace? Could a woman not possibly be thinking of anything other than flowers and dances?” She cocked her head to the side in a challenge and propped her hip up against the wall at the bottom of the stairs.

“I didn't assume that you were thinking of flowers or politics,” Anthony said teasingly with a dark look in his eyes that made her gulp and avert her gaze.

The fact that she found him breathtakingly alluring in his riding breeches and crisp white shirt did little to help her mind stay focused on her side of the battle. She needed to prove to

him that she wasn't about to become soft just because he had pinned her against a tree and kissed her lips.

Sophia recalled the last topic she had read in one of the leaflets that were handed out on street corners by forward-thinking men and women. "I happen to be thinking of the change in prime ministers that we experience on a regular basis."

Her mother had often tried to stop her from reading the material that was spread around the *ton*, but she had always found a way to get it.

"And, pray tell, what do you think should be done about the constant change of prime ministers?" Anthony caught her off guard by delving into the topic instead of calling her out.

"Well..." Sophia frowned at the unexpected turn of events.

It wasn't every day that men indulged her political views or forward-thinking ways. Being what Society referred to as a "bluestocking" held a certain amount of notoriety that was hard to escape when it came to making intelligent conversations.

"I don't agree with the Monarchy having the biggest vote in who should stay or go. I believe that the people who are being governed should have the right to decide who makes decisions on their behalf."

“I agree.” Anthony nodded without a trace of irony in his voice. “The people should have a say in the running of the country that they ultimately inhabit more than the King or Queen does.”

“Well...” Sophia suddenly felt flustered at having been heard on one of her political views. It was almost as if her vocabulary only extended to the word *well* in his presence. “I also agree.”

She fought for another bone of contention she could bring up with him but failed to find any at all. She found it infuriating when he disagreed with her, but even more so when he did agree with her.

“I am glad to hear that we can agree on something, at least.” His eyes sparkled mischievously as he gave her a wolfish grin that made her core flutter with new sensations.

“If that is all you have to say on the matter—” She tried her best to keep the upper hand she knew she had lost. “—I think I might return to my room now. There’s a book I want to read.”

Sophia turned to leave, seething from the fact that he had been teasing her after indulging her views.

“Look out!” Anthony called out just as she came face to face with a maid carrying a stack of clean linen.

Bodies collided with a sudden burst of fabric as sheets and pillowcases drifted to the bottom of the steps. Time seemed to move in slow motion as Sophia’s body went rigid, falling back without the hope of anything to grab and steady her fall.

Strong hands suddenly gripped her legs and shoulders, cradling her body against hard muscles of iron.

“Your Grace!” a sweet voice screeched, making Sophia open her eyes. A blonde girl came running down the stairs in haste, her black uniform flapping about her. “I didn’t mean to... I couldn’t see where I was going beyond the pile of linen,” she hurried to explain, her round face flushed deep red.

“It’s all right. I don’t think I am hurt,” Sophia stuttered, trying to make sense of what had happened to her. Lifting her gaze, she realized that Anthony was staring down at her with an intense look in his eyes.

“Does it hurt anywhere?” He ignored the maid’s plea for forgiveness and stroked a single strand of her hair behind her ear. The look of concern in his dark eyes made her body melt against him, rendering her hopeless against any of the animosity she may have felt before. One look from Anthony Atwood and she was putty in his hands.

“I don’t think so.”

Sophia glanced at the maid, who was hurrying to gather all of the linen that was now strewn across the hall. She moved to help her, but the Duke’s hands kept her in place. She felt her chin being cupped in a strong hand before her face was gently moved toward his own once again.

“Are you sure?” His eyes searched her face before drifting down to the rest of her body. “Sometimes, you aren’t aware of the pain straight away,” he whispered in a deep, strong voice, running the back of his finger over her cheek.

Sophia suddenly became aware of the heat of his strong body that seeped into her own. She hadn’t realized that the shock had made her cold. The heat of his skin seeped through his shirt, warming her own like a blanket of safety.

“I...” She found her breath catching in her throat as she got lost in his gaze. Glancing down at the lips that had ravaged hers the previous day, she felt a rush of desire flood her body.

The maid hurried away with the pile of linen in her arms, muttering something about the housekeeper locking her in a dungeon if she made any more mistakes.

“I don’t think I was hurt,” Sophia breathed as her chest rose and fell with the heat of the moment that was building between

them.

“That’s good.” Anthony’s voice was barely above a whisper as he kept his gaze locked on hers.

Is he going to kiss me again?

Her mind was filled with panic that mingled with desire in a confusing dance. The Duke was the single most handsome man she had ever seen in her life. The strong curve of his jaw and thick black locks drew her in and kept her captive. She resisted the urge to lift her hand and run her fingers through the strands of ebony that hung over his forehead.

Anthony stood with her in his arms, carefully placing her back on her feet in front of him, while keeping one hand on the small of her back for support.

“Thank you for breaking my fall,” she managed to speak after swallowing hard. The unexpected moment of intimacy made her legs weak.

Why does he affect me like this?

“It’s my pleasure.” Anthony lifted a hand once again and tucked a stray lock behind her ear. “I wasn’t about to let you fall.” His voice was still steeped in passion as he looked into her eyes, gently stroking his fingers over the small of her back.

Sophia's abdomen began to flutter as her heart raced in her chest, panic filling her body in an unsuspected manner. "Was there something you wanted to tell me earlier?" she babbled quickly when it looked as if he were leaning in closer.

"Earlier?" He frowned as he tilted his head back.

"When you called me down the stairs." She felt her face flush with embarrassment as he looked at her.

Why was she panicking about a kiss when he had already kissed her twice? Even if the first was obligatory in their marriage, there had still been something there that she had felt all the way down to her core.

"Yes." He dropped his hand and cleared his throat as if the sudden break had been uncomfortable for him.

Sophia straightened as the spot where his hand had been resting suddenly felt cold. She straightened her dress and waited for him to continue as he fixed his shirt and smoothed his hair back.

"I just wanted to let you know that I will be away for a few days," he said more coolly.

“Away?”

A sudden rush of disappointment and confusion filled her mind. Was he leaving because he was rejecting her? Did he feel the need to be away from her? She searched his face to try and decipher what he was feeling but found nothing but the flushed look she had seen in the apple orchard.

“I have some business to attend to on one of the estates. I didn’t think you would want to come, so I let the housekeeper and butler know that you would be staying behind,” he explained and averted his gaze after glancing at her chest.

Looking down, Sophia suddenly noticed that her dress had been pulled down in the fall, exposing the mounds of her creamy breasts to the world.

“That is quite fine.” She hurriedly fixed her dress, pulling on the fabric until her chest was no longer exposed. “I wanted to pay my friend a visit anyway.”

“Your friend?” Anthony suddenly took a greater interest in the conversation once again as he looked into her eyes, raising a single eyebrow in question.

“Is that a problem?” Sophia bristled again, feeling confused by his sudden change in behavior. The last thing she wanted was to feel as if she were a caged bird.

“Who is this friend?” His eyes darkened as he looked at her, making her core flame with heat once again.

Is he jealous?

“Her name is Margaret. You met her at the wedding,” she said defiantly, lifting her head in a challenge. “And what if it was a man?”

She knew full well that it would have been improper for her to have any friends who were men, but her defiant nature got the better of her. Why could men and women not be friends if all the boundaries were set in place?

“Then I would have had to accompany you,” Anthony said in a deep voice as he took a step toward her, backing her against the wall. “I would have to go along and protect you.” His voice dripped with danger as he placed an arm above her head on the wall and looked into her eyes. “I always protect what is mine.”

Sophia felt her heart race as his presence oozed with a danger that thrilled and intrigued her at the same time. Her voice caught in her throat as she struggled to regain her composure, melting under his gaze once again.

“Never forget that.” He tilted her chin up until her face was angled toward his.

Her lips parted slightly as if they possessed a will of their own. His body covered hers like a shield against the rest of the world as she lifted her hands and placed them on his chest.

He leaned in closer. “Don’t make me remind you when I get back,” he whispered against her lips before drawing back.

Feelings stunned, Sophia continued to lean against the wall as her chest rose and fell in an uneven rhythm from the heat of the moment.

Why does my body feel rooted to the spot?

Her legs almost gave in as Anthony gave her a wolfish grin before turning to leave.

Resting her head against the wall, she tried to calm her body, focusing on her breaths as he strolled away from her with lengthy strides.

Why does this man affect me like this?

CHAPTER 11



Sophia still bristled with irritation as she sipped her cup of tea and placed it back on the saucer, causing the delicate floral China to clink a little louder than she had intended. A small drop of amber liquid sloshed over the rim, causing a wet droplet to appear on her dark blue dress.

“Is anything the matter, dear?” Margaret lowered her cup and saucer to the table with a bemused look in her eyes.

Margaret had long been a confidante and mentor of Sophia’s who had matured considerably since her successful marriage to the Viscount of Northfork. Her fortunate match had granted her somewhat of a reprieve in the eyes of the *ton*. Her circumstances before her marriage to the Viscount had been less than favorable, to most.

They were currently seated in Margaret’s private drawing room. The elegant French décor did little to assuage the annoyance that Sophia felt as she glanced at the pink trimmings of a lamp. As the newly crowned Duchess of Beaumont, she knew that she, too, would be expected to

decorate their house with her own personal touch. Yet, the fancy paintings and elegant vases held little sway with things she found important.

“I can’t stand how infuriating he is,” Sophia complained, deciding to vent some of her frustrations to her friend as she shook her head.

Margaret simply smiled and placed her hands in her lap, stroking her fluffy white cat as it lazily flicked its tail from side to side.

“One minute he’s hot, and the next he is cold. I can’t seem to find a base reading for his behavior,” Sophia grumbled in a very unladylike manner and pouted, crossing her arms over her chest once she had placed her cup and saucer back on the table.

“A base reading?” Margaret tilted her head to the side slightly. “Have you been reading those strange books again that focus on people’s emotions rather than the physical body?”

She referred to the many books by doctors and scholars who sought to study the mind rather than the body. Sophia had the reputation of consuming these “questionable” books at an alarming rate.

“Never mind that.” Sophia unfolded her arms and waved the idea away. Explaining to Margaret what she meant felt as if it would raise more questions than she was able to answer in a single sitting. She wanted to focus on her marital problems at present. “I just meant that it’s hard for me to understand his true character when he burns hotter than an ember one minute, and then chills you with a single look in the next.”

“When exactly does he burn hotter than an ember?” Margaret bit her lower lip with a knowing look in her eyes, smiling as she waited for Sophia to respond. The mischievous glint in her eyes spoke of a secret that Sophia was supposedly in on or should be after her wedding.

“He...” Sophia’s face suddenly felt hot as color spread across her cheeks. There was no denying that Margaret had cornered her.

Should I tell her about the kiss beneath the tree?

Her mind wandered to the moment at the foot of the stairs when he’d pinned her against the wall.

“He’s just difficult to understand. He isn’t very open all of the time.” She decided to keep their intimate moments to herself for the time being, at least until she was able to understand the fluttering of her heart whenever he drew near.

“I’m glad to hear that you are at least making an attempt to get to know him. I thought you would be trying to overthrow the Monarchy in an attempt to annul the marriage by now,” Margaret teased, reaching for her cup of tea once again.

Sighing, Sophia bit the inside of her cheek. It was true that she hadn’t been too vocal about the match. In truth, she could have protested harder and even tried to barricade herself in her bedroom, demanding that the arrangement end before their wedding day. Yet, she had allowed things to go ahead with only a slight amount of protesting from her side. A strange thought niggled at the back of her mind, making her question the strange feelings she had experienced during their kiss.

“Who says I am not still planning to overthrow the Monarchy?” Sophia added defiantly after shaking off the unwanted thoughts. “I might just be biding my time before I strike,” she half-heartedly tried to convince herself as well as her friend.

She felt it best not to examine her own feelings at present, lest they lead her to some kind of epiphany that would turn her beliefs upside down.

Margaret smiled warmly as she stroked the purring cat on her lap. “I think you should give your marriage a bit more time before you go overthrowing any monarchy or establishment.” Her voice seemed dreamy as she looked at her cat. “The strange things you are feeling aren’t unlike those that I felt for Evan,” she referred to the Viscount with a contented smile. “I,

too, fought them at first, but he won me over in the end. It's hard to maintain a marriage of pure convenience and nothing else when there are sparks."

Rolling her eyes, Sophia sighed. "Please, don't tell me you think I'm falling in love. That idea alone is simply preposterous. Love is for simpletons that have their heads in the clouds."

Margaret gave her a sharp look that spoke volumes. "Are you calling me a simpleton, Your Grace?" she questioned, the more casual but pointed form of address giving her more warning she was on shaky footing.

"No." Sophia realized that she had unintentionally insulted her friend. "I'm happy that you have found someone to share your life with. I simply meant that a connection like yours is rare. People who try and pursue it are simpletons. It should fall into your lap effortlessly if it's meant to be. Some of us just aren't meant for that life."

"Nice save." Margaret's lips curled into a smile.

"I didn't mean to offend you." Sophia softened her approach and tried again. "I just don't think that I am capable of romantic love. It's not something that I have ever aspired to."

“Everyone is capable of love, Sophia. It’s part of our nature, we weren’t created to be alone for the rest of our lives,” Margaret said gently in a tone that implied she was speaking to a child who didn’t quite understand the way the world worked.

“I am capable of loving my friends and family,” Sophia argued. “I just don’t think it’s necessary to love another person as if they were more important than anyone else. Don’t you think true love would have fallen into my lap by now if I was destined for it?”

Truthfully, the thought of love had always scared Sophia. Not only did it make women soft and distract them from the things that mattered the most, but it had also devastated her mother after her father’s death.

She recalled the night the doctor had delivered the news of her father’s death. Lady Harsworth had gone as pale as a sheet and shut down for weeks on end after that. It was a fate that Sophia hoped to avoid if she could help it. Relying on another person for happiness was scary enough without the thought of losing them.

“You sound just like my husband.” Margaret shook her head with a smile. “He swore blind that love fell from the sky and wasn’t something that needed to be worked toward or built upon.”

“I think I am inclined to agree with that notion.” Sophia sipped her tea and sat back. “Love should not be something that needs to be fought for or something easily aggravating.”

She thought of the way she and Anthony bickered over the smallest of matters.

Margaret seemed as if she were about to say something more but shook her head instead. “What is it that aggravates you so much?” she asked. “You said earlier that he infuriates you. Does he stop you from reading the books you like?”

Lowering her cup, Sophia chewed on her lip. “No, he doesn’t prohibit any of my reading material. Not that he has seen it, but he hasn’t placed any restrictions on the books I take from the library. He said I may read whatever I liked.”

Margaret frowned. “Does he try and stop you from airing your views?” she tried again.

“No.”

Sophia felt annoyed by the fact that she couldn’t put into words exactly what it was about her husband that irritated her so. He never limited her actions, unless it was a social setting like their wedding, and he never told her what to do with her free time.

“Actually, he agreed with me during the only political conversation we’ve ever had,” she conceded begrudgingly.

“That cad, how dare he agree with you on such matters. You may as well have him tarred and feathered before he commits any more atrocities,” Margaret teased, causing Sophia to roll her eyes once again.

“It’s not what he does. It’s *how* he does it,” Sophia clarified, realizing that she wasn’t making a very convincing case. “He has this smug attitude that makes me want to smack him with the nearest object.”

“That’s a bit violent,” Margaret drawled and replaced her cup of tea on the table. “It seems to me that you have a lot of repressed feelings that you’re trying to deal with. I have an idea. Why don’t you try and spend more time with him? Even if you don’t believe in falling in love, it will make your life a little easier if you get to know one another a little better.”

“I guess it wouldn’t hurt to be friendly when the occasion calls for it,” Sophia acquiesced with a heavy sigh.

“And who knows—” Margaret began but quickly quieted when Sophia shot her a warning look.

“Don’t you dare say we might fall in love,” Sophia warned her friend through narrowed eyes. “I’m tired of that insipid word

being used with my name.”

“I wouldn’t dare say anything of the sort. You know your own mind.” Margaret arched her eyebrows and shut her mouth. “Far be it from me to suggest how you are feeling.”

Sophia shook her head in frustration. Why was the world so obsessed with love? It seemed at times as if all women ever thought about was meeting the man of their dreams and starting a family. What was great about being in love in any case? By all accounts, it made people silly and only resulted in them losing their focus on important matters.

Margaret had once been a fiercely independent woman that Sophia had looked up to with all of the admiration and respect in the world. Now, she spoke of her husband in a favorable manner even when he wasn’t around. The thought of acting like Margaret did at present was utterly baffling to Sophia. She wouldn’t be caught cooing over her husband as if he had moved the earth.

“May I ask you a personal question?” Margaret interrupted her thoughts.

“I think you have known me long enough to venture as far as that.” Sophia sat up straight, placing her hands on the armrests of her chair.

Clearing her throat, Margaret shifted uncomfortably in her seat, making Sophia wonder if she hadn't made a mistake in agreeing to the request.

“Has anything... physical occurred between you and Anthony since your marriage?” Margaret's face flushed with color as she averted her gaze.

“Physical?” Sophia's mind wandered to the apple orchard and their heated moment on the stairs that had left her breathless.

“You know...” Margaret seemed to be searching for the right words to broach the subject. “Did your mother not talk to you about what happens between a man and a woman on their wedding night?”

Sophia suddenly realized that her friend was alluding to the act that occurred between a man and a woman once they were joined. All her mother had told her was that she would fully become a woman once she had said her vows. The only other knowledge she held about the act was gathered from the romance novels she had attempted to read in moments of boredom. She wasn't sure what it entailed exactly, but she was glad that her arrangement with Anthony did not seem to include that specific act.

“Our marriage is one of convenience, there is no need for anything to be consummated,” Sophia clarified once and for

all before Margaret's mind wandered to places that it shouldn't.

"I see," Margaret answered kindly with a warm look of understanding in her eyes. "You shouldn't be nervous if anything does happen. It's perfectly natural for a married couple to enjoy each other in that way." She held up a hand when Sophia opened her mouth to protest. "Hear me out for a minute. I'm not trying to force anything on you, but you might be pleasantly surprised by how you feel if it does happen. The act itself brings a couple together in the most unexpected manner."

The heat Sophia had experienced in her core from their very first kiss crept back into her mind. How exactly would it feel if Anthony were to finish what he had started? If his hands had slid over her body and caressed the skin under her dress, making their way up her thighs and only stopping when they reached their destination.

The pit of her stomach fluttered as she envisioned Anthony without his shirt. How sculpted were those muscles she had felt through the fabric? Was the rest of his body just as tanned as his neck and shoulders?

"Would you like another cup of tea?" Margaret's voice broke through her thoughts like an unwelcome sneeze.

Sophia snapped out of her daze and shook her head as a light blush spread over her cheeks. “Thank you, that would be lovely,” she replied sheepishly, returning her hands to her lap.

She hadn’t even noticed the way she had been rubbing her hands over the armrests of her chair as if they were her thighs. Not to mention the fact that her breathing had deepened as heat crept up the back of her neck.

The rest of her body was pleasantly warm and tingly as she straightened her dress.

Do I want him to do those things to me?

Taking a deep breath, she looked out the window of Margaret’s drawing room, seeing nothing as her mind wandered back to her husband. For the very first time, she began to wonder how she really felt about Anthony Atwood.

CHAPTER 12



Sophia lay on her back, staring up at the man she had married. Her shapely body was clad in nothing more than a silky garment that exposed her breasts, abdomen, and thighs. The sheer fabric left little to the imagination as she reached up and stroked his cheek, feeling the prickle of his stubble beneath her fingertips. The cool evening air kissed her skin with a crispness that made her shiver.

“Sophia,” Anthony whispered gently as he lowered himself to her body and gently kissed her cheek before working his way down to her neck.

The strong muscles of his thighs pressed into hers with an intoxicating heat that brought a sheen of dampness to her undergarments. The hot sensation of his lips against her flesh made her moan with pleasure and wrap her arms around his neck. She buried her fingers in the thick black curls at the nape of his neck. The woody scent of soap and pure masculinity wafted to her nose on the breeze that filtered through the open window.

Anthony suddenly moved faster than lightning as he scooped her up and onto his lap, holding her close to his chest with her thighs on either side of his body as she gasped in surprise. The gentle feel of the silk garment against her flesh sent a wave of goosebumps over her skin.

“Anthony, I’ve never done this before...” Her voice was breathy and quiet as she looked down at their bodies touching in all the places that made her shiver.

“I know, my love,” Anthony breathed against her hair before placing a finger under her chin and tilting her face to his. “I’ll show you what to do.” He took a deep breath before kissing her with all the passion and longing she felt fluttering in her core. “But first, I’m going to show you just how good it can feel if you allow me to take control...”

Her breath caught in her throat as he moved his hand over her chest, drawing a path down her breasts and abdomen before reaching the parts of her that ached for his touch with a burning and fierce desire.

“That’s it, Sophia...” He whispered her name in the most scintillating manner that made her body quiver.

“Oh, Anthony...” Sophia breathed in rhythm with his movements.

“Sophia!” he cried even louder as she arched her neck in pleasure. “Sophia!” His voice became even more demanding and angry.

Sophia awoke with a start as her body hit the bedroom floor with a loud thud.

“Sophia! Why are you not answering me?” Anthony growled angrily through the wood and banged on the door once again. “We are going to be late!”

“For what?” Sophia managed to croak sleepily as she rubbed the elbow that had connected with the floor. Looking around, she noticed the tangled sheets that were flung across the room in disarray.

I must have been having a dream...

“Mother has invited us to tea this afternoon. Since you were still sleeping, I went and accepted for both of us.” Anthony’s voice was steeped in irritation.

Shaking her head, Sophia stood, trying to ease her breathing as she thought of the dream that had left her skin more than just a little damp.

“Aren’t you still supposed to be away on business?” she asked as the fog began to lift from her brain.

Her conversation with Margaret had only taken place the day before. It was more than likely the reason behind her vivid dream of Anthony.

“I’m sorry to inconvenience your plans,” he answered angrily with a slight note of hurt in his voice. “I had to return early, and it’s just as well that I did. The invitation from my mother has been lying on the hall table since early this morning. What exactly were you doing last night that you didn’t get adequate sleep?”

The frustration from before suddenly returned as Sophia balled her fists at her sides. The conversations with Margaret had taken a few unexpected turns, causing their tea to carry on well past supper.

“I will be ready in a few minutes,” she yelled at the door.

Why couldn’t the real-life Anthony be as quiet and alluring as the one in her dreams?

“I’ll be waiting in the carriage,” he growled gruffly. “Be sure to look presentable, I would like to avoid the wedding fiasco as much as possible.”

Losing her temper, Sophia reached for a pillow and flung it at the door as hard as she could as Anthony stomped down the

hall.

“I always look presentable!” she yelled at him as his footsteps faded down the hallway.

The absolute nerve of the man!



Anthony glanced at Sophia as she sat across from him in her wine-colored gown. Her beauty was simply breathtaking to him, with her thick hair plaited down her back. His eyes couldn't help but wander down her slender neck and her voluptuous breasts that swelled above the beaded gown.

He'd been furious with her when he'd arrived back home to find his mother's note unanswered. All manner of scenarios had flashed through his mind. The worst of which had been that she had either been hurt or left him for good.

Anthony clenched his fists over his knees at the thought of Sophia running away. She'd become such an important fixture in his life that he found himself wondering what she was doing even when she wasn't around.

The carriage rattled on, making him avert his gaze and shift in his seat. The rate at which he was becoming attracted to her was alarming even to him, and the dress she had chosen did little to keep his mind off her body.

“I am assuming that this little social visit is your mother’s way of checking if I am, indeed, acting the part of a dutiful duchess and wife?” Sophia spoke up with an annoyed edge to her voice. The irritation of being woken up was still clearly evident.

“Please remember the following when we reach my mother’s estate.” Anthony ignored her annoyance, clasping his hands together as he looked her in the eye. “There shall be none of your little attempts to go against my wishes. Food is to be eaten properly without messing on your gown, and wine is to be consumed without spilling.”

“I know how to eat and drink.” Her eyes darkened as she glared at him. “Believe it or not, I can act like a lady.”

“Your behavior at our wedding says otherwise,” he bit back and returned her scornful look. “All I ask is that you behave in a manner befitting a duchess this afternoon. Curtsy politely and speak sparingly when spoken to.”

“Should I kiss her feet and follow her to the powder room if she needs help?” Sophia stared at him with a look of exasperation.

“Which reminds me,” Anthony replied, ignoring the bait she was dangling in front of him. It was clear that she wanted an argument, and he wasn’t about to oblige. “No sarcasm.”

He held her gaze and clenched his jaw in an attempt to convey the seriousness of the matter.

“Well, aren’t you just a ray of sunshine and fun this afternoon,” she replied flatly. “I can’t wait for this exciting event you have so clearly thought through for us.”

“I have.” Anthony smiled darkly. “So, I wouldn’t come up with any clever little schemes if I were you.” He sat back in his seat with his hands clasped over his knees.

“And what will happen if I don’t behave?” Sophia asked after rolling her eyes at the stern look he was giving her. “What do I get out of this proposed arrangement?”

Anthony looked at her with a heated gaze, his eyes swooping over her chest before locking on hers once again. “You will get the satisfaction of knowing that you have done your duty as my wife,” he said coolly before clenching his jaw. “That was our original agreement.”

“So much for our original agreement.” Sophia sighed and looked out the window at the passing scenery.

Her behavior still puzzled him. Had he not given her the life of a duchess with all its finery and perks? He had ceded the library and study to her with the promise of all the books she

could read. Pausing in his thoughts, Anthony realized that there had been one aspect of her past that he hadn't yet addressed.

“It just so happens that my mother is very fond of her horses.” He kept his eyes on her face, noticing the way her eyes instantly lit up as she turned her full attention back to him. “If you agree to behave, I will ensure that we go for a ride after tea this afternoon.”

The look of defiance mingled with surprise made Anthony want to smile. She was more stubborn than a wild horse that hadn't been saddled.

He thought of the gossip he had heard from the *ton*. Sophia had loved her horses dearly before they had left their country home after her father's death.

“And I will allow you to choose your own horse that can be kept in the family's private stables in London. You will be able to ride whenever you like.”

Taking a deep breath, Sophia held his gaze, fighting against her will to argue. “Fine,” she relented after a brief pause. “I will play the model Duchess if you keep your word.” Her eyes looked wild with excitement despite the iciness in her voice.

So, that's what makes her tick.

Anthony felt a strange sensation of warmth in his chest as she looked out the window again, trying her best to hide the smile that crept over her lips. There was something utterly serene about her features whenever she smiled.



Sophia's heart raced with anticipation as she stared out the carriage window.

Would he really buy me a horse?

She thought of her horses back at her family's country mansion and how much she had pined for them. One in particular had been her favorite, a stunning white mare named Flake. Her father had laughed at her choice of name but had relented in the end.

“While I don't agree that a horse should be named after something as dandy as a snowflake. I will allow you to choose the name just this once,” her father had once told her, then winked at her with his bright blue eyes after tousling her hair.

The two of them had been inseparable as a father and daughter duo.

Her heart ached at the memory, causing her to sigh heavily. She missed her father and the life they used to live with a

fierceness that had never left.

“Do you miss your horses back home that much?” Anthony’s voice seemed far softer than it had been before.

Glancing at him out of curiosity, she noticed the concern behind his eyes. “I do.” She opened up a little. “My horses, and my father.”

“How did he pass?” Anthony asked the dreaded question she hated answering.

The feelings of helplessness on the matter always made her feel inadequate as a daughter. She had prayed and prayed for time to go back. If there was even the slightest sign, she could recognize that her father had been ill, she could have done something more to save his life. Perhaps he could have still been in her life, alive and well while she rode her horses on the family estate.

“We don’t really know how or why he passed. He collapsed one day in his study. There was nothing anyone could have done by the time the doctor arrived. At least, that is what the doctor told us.” A sad smile spread over her lips. “My life changed drastically after his death.”



Anthony looked away from her face. What must it have felt like to have loved her father so much that she still mourned him years after his death?

“How did your father pass?”

Anthony was jolted back to the present.

“He was gravely ill. We knew it for a long time,” he said matter-of-factly without a trace of emotion in his voice.

Sophia seemed stunned as she looked at him, confused by his abrupt response. “Did you at least get to say goodbye?”

“I did.”

Anthony recalled the lack of emotions he had felt standing beside his father’s deathbed, staring down at the shell of the man he had once been. Memories of all the beatings and abuse that had been inflicted on him filled his mind, leaving a bitter taste in his mouth as he swallowed.

“For what it’s worth.” Sophia reached out and placed a gloved hand over his. “From one grieving soul to another, I am sorry for your loss.”

The sincere look of compassion in her beautiful eyes halted his words, leaving him unable to protest the anger he felt toward his late father. Tightening her hand over his fingers, she continued to gaze into his eyes, her breathing coming in shorter bursts.

“Sophia...” Her name escaped his lips before he could stop himself. The irresistible urge to draw her into his arms and kiss her mouth overtook his senses like a sudden burst of water from a broken dam.

The carriage suddenly jolted, causing Sophia to fall forward, arms sprawling into his lap.

“I’m so sorry,” she stammered from shock, lifting her eyes to his as she tried to steady her body with her hands on either side of his hips. The subtle parting of her lips drove him wild as he reached for her arms and pulled her up until her face was level with his.

“It was just the carriage. The wheel must have hit a stone,” he whispered after swallowing hard.

The sweet scent of her rose perfume drifted up to his nose like a wave of heat that couldn’t be stopped. There was something elegant and graceful about the softness of her skin that made him want to press his lips to her tender flesh.

Acting without thinking, he allowed his hand to slide down her wrist, pulling her white glove off her arm. The tips of his fingers caressed her skin in a gentle manner that made her gasp. Lifting her naked wrist to his mouth, he gently kissed the delicate flesh, using his tongue to softly lick a path up to her palm and fingers.

His breathing deepened to match hers as she allowed him to pull her up and onto his lap, with her knees on either side of his thighs. Working his palms up her thighs, he felt the firm muscles of her legs, groaning softly as the carriage jostled her body against his.

The warmth of her skin seeped through the fabric of her dress, drawing him in closer as he angled his lips toward hers.

“Whoa!” The coachman eased the horses to a stop.

“I think we are here,” Anthony whispered almost breathlessly as he let go of her hips.

Sophia’s eyes filled with panic as she scurried back onto her seat, fixing her hair and dress. Her chest rose and fell with labored breaths as she struggled to regain control of the situation at hand.

The carriage door had barely opened when she shot out the door like an arrow that had been loosed from a bow.

What came over me?

Anthony closed his eyes and grasped his knees once more. Keeping his hands off his wife was proving to be harder than he had imagined. He'd just have to keep her at arm's length to prevent anything unfortunate from happening.

CHAPTER 13



Sophia noticed again just how frail Anthony's mother appeared as she stood waiting for them just inside the manor doors. Her pale skin seemed papery thin, and the dark circles under her eyes made it seem as if she hadn't slept in weeks. Yet, Sophia couldn't help but marvel at the elegant way the woman carried herself in her pure white dress.

Her back was straight despite the tiredness in her eyes, and her thick blonde hair was neatly slicked back into a tight bun.

"I thought you weren't coming." Emily Atwood smiled brightly despite her sickly countenance as the couple made their way up the stairs, welcoming them both with open arms.

The grandeur of the manor didn't go unnoticed by Sophia as she glanced at the high marble pillars and fine masonry of the manor's exterior. It felt more like a palace to her than a manor, given the sheer size of the building alone. There had to be more rooms than could be filled in the space of one ball or lavish dinner party.

“We would have been here a little sooner, but we were unavoidably detained,” Anthony grumbled after kissing his mother on the cheek and stepping aside, making sure to glare at his wife in accusation.

Emily laughed lightly as Sophia rolled her eyes and curtsied with all of the decorum befitting a lady of her station. “There is no need to apologize. I presumed the two of you were far too preoccupied with marital bliss to answer straight away.”

“Thank you for the invitation, Your Grace,” Sophia responded politely, ignoring the daggers that her husband was shooting at her for lagging behind.

“Please, dear.” Emily came forward and took her daughter-in-law’s hands in hers, pulling her up straight. “You are part of the family now, please call me Emily. That is if you wouldn’t mind me calling you Sophia?” she asked hesitantly.

Sophia’s body relaxed instantly in the presence of the older woman. She instantly felt at home in her company. “It would be an honor, Your Grace.”

“We will work on the name.” Emily winked at her with a warm smile. “Now, shall we go in for tea? I can see that Anthony is eager to go inside.” Her voice carried a teasing note as she glanced at her son.

“I think that would be best. Enough of the afternoon has been wasted as it is,” Anthony grumbled and turned away from her as the butler bowed politely and led them to the drawing room.

The man reminded Sophia of a scarecrow in the middle of a field. His body was certainly thin and frail enough to give the impression of a stick. Anthony begrudgingly trudged along behind the man.

Sophia couldn't understand how it was that she and Anthony had shared such an intimate moment in the carriage, and here he was, treating her as if she carried the plague. Was it because she had bolted from the carriage?

“Never mind him,” Emily whispered as she looped her arm through Sophia's. “He's always been a bit of a bear with a sore foot at the best of times. I'll give you tips on how to handle him.”

Stifling a giggle, Sophia averted her gaze when Anthony turned to glare at them both. Emily acted as if she hadn't said anything at all and pushed past her son through the open doors of the lavishly decorated drawing room.

Sophia's breath caught in her throat as she looked in wonder at the high ceiling that boasted a wondrous painting of cherubs and angels frolicking happily on white fluffy clouds. The room itself was covered from wall to wall with more ferns and potted plants than she had ever seen in one room.

“I’m afraid I am a bit of a plant enthusiast,” Emily said proudly as she ran her fingers over the leaves of a dark fern. “It’s always been a passion of mine. Plants, and horses.”

A sudden wave of warmth spread over Sophia’s chest as she realized the common interest she had with her mother-in-law.

“But let me not blather on,” Emily continued with a sad smile. “I think we better have our tea before Anthony reprimands us both.”

Sophia noticed for the first time that Anthony rolled his eyes at his mother’s teasing, smiling lightly despite the displeasure he tried to show.

So, there is a softer side of him when it comes to his mother.

She was almost relieved to know that he wasn’t as grumpy and strict as he’d have everyone believe he was.

“Now, dear.” The Dowager Duchess took a seat as the butler stepped forward to pour their tea, making herself comfortable on one of the floral couches. “Tell me a bit more about yourself. What are your hobbies?”

Waiting for the butler to hand her a cup of tea, Sophia noticed the way the old man's frail hands shook as he tried his best to hold the cup and saucer steady. His frail frame seemed as if it hadn't held a spec of fat in at least a century. The liver spots on his balding head and slender fingers spoke of the years he'd served the Atwoods.

"I'm pleased to say that I share one of your passions," Sophia said happily as she cautiously accepted the cup of tea. A few drops of amber liquid sloshed over the side as the porcelain rattled.

Emily smiled sympathetically at the old man as he left the room with a shaky gait. "I'm afraid that Simons has been with us for far too long. I haven't the heart to let him go."

"It's about time he retired," Anthony grumbled, dabbing a spot of tea on his coat.

"Hush and drink your tea, dear." His mother waved a dismissive hand and turned back to Sophia. "You were saying, dear?"

Smiling at the interaction, Sophia sipped her tea. "I was saying that I have a love for horses. I had a few on my family's country estate. Riding has always been one of the greater joys in life for me."

“That’s marvelous. We must certainly go and see the horses once our tea is done.” Emily beamed enthusiastically.

The friendly chatter flowed easily between the women as Anthony sat by silently, scrutinizing his wife’s every move. Sophia felt acutely aware of the way he was watching her, yet she kept her cool and played the part of a dutiful duchess, just as she had promised.

“You have a lovely home, Your Grace—I mean, Emily,” she corrected herself when Emily lifted an eyebrow.

“It’s quite all right, my dear. I know it will take some time before you warm up to me entirely. In fact, I think it’s about time we went and paid the stables a visit.” Emily placed her cup and saucer back on the tray that lay on the center table. “I’m sure that will set us all at ease.”

“It won’t set me at ease,” Anthony grumbled under his breath.

“Then I suggest you stay here, dear. Sophia and I will be more than happy to leave you behind.”

Emily winked at Sophia and took her arm once again, then they made their way out of the drawing room, leaving Anthony behind.



Anthony trailed behind as his mother and wife chattered away, walking ahead to the stables. Being back at his childhood home did little to set him at ease as he kept his eyes on the stables, trying his best to ignore the memories of his father that plagued his mind. It was at least a relief to him that his mother seemed to like Sophia and all of her quirky ways.

Their marriage, after all, had been arranged to fulfill his mother's wish of seeing him happily married before she died. At least, that was how it had started. Anthony wasn't entirely sure why he hadn't insisted on someone else—someone who wouldn't get under his skin every time she disobeyed one of his orders. There was something about Sophia that had drawn him in the instant he had seen her at the ball.

“Don't dawdle, Anthony. I may wither away if you take any longer!” his mother called over her shoulder as she and Sophia entered the stables.

Sophia gasped in delight as she caught sight of all the horses lounging contentedly in their stalls. “How many are there?” She turned to Emily with bright eyes.

“Thirteen,” Emily replied proudly. “I know some people may say it's a tad too many, but I would honestly have more if it wasn't for the limitation of space.”

Anthony looked around the stables at all the heads that turned to look at them. The earthy scent of hay filled the air with a

freshness that made him pause and take a deep breath.

The horses' big black eyes stared at the small group. Their dark eyes glinted as they flicked their tails back and forth.

"You are more than welcome to ride anyone you choose, Sophia," Emily said encouragingly.

Sophia's demeanor seemed to change altogether as she walked down the long aisle between the stalls, glancing from one horse to the other. She seemed like a child who had been told they were allowed to eat as much sweet cream as they liked before supper. Again, it warmed Anthony's heart in an unexpected manner.

"I like that one as well." Emily laughed and leaned against a wooden beam as Sophia approached a light brown stallion with a white patch over his nose.

"Mother, are you well?" Anthony suddenly frowned as he watched Emily sway slightly from side to side, the color leaving her face.

"I'm just a little tired, dear," she answered and smiled as both he and Sophia came forward to help her. "I think the excitement has just worn me out a bit. There's no need to fret."

“I think we should get you back inside,” Sophia said sweetly as she placed her hand on the old woman’s waist.

“No, dear, I would hate to cut your visit with the horses short. I’ll go inside, and the two of you can stay out here for a while —” Emily’s body seemed to crumble slightly as she bent at the knees.

“Let Sophia stay out here. I will take you back to your room for a rest,” Anthony interrupted her and placed her thin arm over his shoulder before addressing Sophia. “Do you mind waiting for me here?”

“Not at all. I’ll get more acquainted with the horses while I wait.” Sophia stepped aside to allow them to pass.

Emily waited for them to exit the barn before she leaned on her son for support. “I like her, Anthony. Don’t you go bungling things up with her.”

Anthony held his tongue as he walked his mother back to the manor. She seemed to be getting worse as time ticked by.



Leaning against the doors of the stables with one shoulder, Anthony watched as Sophia flitted from one horse to the next, paying special attention to any of the horses that caught her fancy. He tried his best to push his mother’s health to the side

as his mind wandered back to the moment in the carriage, and why it was that he couldn't seem to keep his hands off his new wife.

"Anthony," Sophia said almost breathlessly as she spotted him in the doorway. "I hope your mother is well?" Her cheeks were flushed with color as she petted the same brown stallion with a streak of white over its nose.

"She's resting," he said distractedly as he pushed off the doors and came forward. "She said to apologize for not being able to stay with you any longer, but that she did enjoy your company and hoped that you would accept Niel over here as an apology." He placed one hand on the horse's snout and smiled down at her. He thought it best not to mention the fact that he had asked his mother permission to give the horse to Sophia. The way her eyes had lit up upon seeing the horses made him want to do more as her husband.

"I beg your pardon." Sophia seemed shocked as she stared at him. "I don't think I quite heard you correctly."

Anthony leaned in. "The horse is yours," he whispered with a smile.

The sheer look of ecstasy in Sophia's eyes distracted him from the fact that his mother was gravely ill.

“Anthony!” Sophia took him by surprise as she flung her arms around his neck and hugged him tightly. “Thank you so much!”

Hesitating at first, Anthony wondered if he should push her away, lest something else happen again. The moment seemed too good to break as she hugged him even tighter. Giving in, he let out a sigh and hugged her back, feeling the warmth of her body seeping into his.

“I’ve been thinking.” She suddenly drew back and looked at him with a slight blush. “What if I stayed here with your mother while you went back to London?”

Anthony suddenly felt as if someone had punched him in the gut.

She wants to stay here without me.

The thought washed over him like a bucket of ice.

“I just mean that your mother seems to need help, and I would love to stay out here in the country. We bicker most of the time, anyway. I thought it could be a nice way to give us both some space.”

“I’ll tell you what.” Anthony pulled himself together as he glanced at the horses over her shoulder. “I’ll race you. If you

win, you can stay here in the country with my mother. If you lose, you have to come back to London with me.”

Sophia seemed a bit confused as she looked at him with her head tilted to the side.

“I understand if you think that you can’t win.” He added an insult he knew she wouldn’t be able to resist.

“I’m not dressed to go riding,” Sophia complained and gestured down to her full-length red dress.

“I see. I thought you were an expert rider, but I guess being a lady comes with its limitations.”

He knew he had her when her jaw tilted defiantly to the side.

“You have a deal, Your Grace.” Sophia narrowed her eyes at him before sauntering toward the horse he had convinced his mother to give her.

Anthony wasn’t sure why the thought of Sophia living away from him bothered him so much. All he knew was that he needed to win the race no matter what.

CHAPTER 14



“*W*here to?” Sophia asked after saddling her horse and trotting toward Anthony, who was waiting for her at the entrance to the stables, poised, confident, and ready to go.

He had chosen a pure black stallion named Ebony for the race. Sophia had to admit to herself that he cut quite the handsome picture atop the glistening beast. His muscular figure seemed even more toned as he held the reins with his back straight.

“Over there.”

Sophia looked to where he was pointing over the horizon and spotted what looked like a body of water glistening in the late evening sun.

“Fair enough,” she agreed, adjusting her dress over her legs. Riding side-saddle wasn’t the best option for a race, but it was all she had to work with at present.

“Are you sure about this?” Anthony asked, glancing down at her legs as she once again readjusted her position in the saddle.

“I’m sure that I could beat you if my legs were tied together,” she teased with a confident smile. “Now, are we going to do this or not?” She took a breath and steadied herself, lifting the reins in front of her.

“As you wish.” Anthony nodded. “Whoever touches the bench beside the lake first wins. Now, on the count of three—”

“Wait.” Sophia’s head snapped up. “I don’t know where the bench is...”

Anthony shot her a wolfish grin. “One.”

“Hey, you can’t just add another condition like that, it’s not fair!” Sophia complained as he fixed the reins in his hands.

“Two,” he continued, ignoring her protests.

“I demand you stop at once!”

She began to panic as he leaned forward in his saddle, causing her to tighten her grip on her horse’s reins and lean forward.

Her blood roared in her veins as the excitement began to kick in.

“Three!” Anthony yelled as he dug the heels of his boots into his horse’s flanks, urging the beast forward as it darted from the stables.

“That’s not fair!” Sophia protested again, following suit as she flicked the reins, making Niel dart after the pure black stallion. The wind whipped through her hair as the horses picked up speed, kicking up grass and dirt in their wake as their hooves hit the earth.

Sophia couldn’t remember the last time she had felt as free as she did on the back of her very own horse. The cool air against her skin reminded her that she was more than just someone’s wife. She was a free spirit that could conquer any mountain she chose to climb.

“How are you doing back there?” Anthony turned his head back to look at her with a wide grin.

Sophia could tell that he was more than just an adequate rider. He was one of the best. He moved in the saddle with ease and guided his horse with expert authority. She couldn’t help but feel impressed by his technique as he leaned forward and urged the beast on. Her heart made a strange fluttering motion at the gallant way he smiled.

“Anthony, look out!” Sophia yelled as he looked back at her. They were passing a weeping willow tree with low-hanging branches.

He ducked just in time before one of the branches smacked him clean across the face. A wave of relief washed over Sophia as he turned back and laughed at her. The rich tone of his laughter affected her in an unexpected manner as her heart clenched. He was devilishly handsome even when he was grumpy, but more so when he smiled with ease and laughed.

The horses’ hooves continued to beat the ground as they approached the water, with Sophia lagging behind. Seeing her chance as Anthony slowed in an attempt to avoid another branch, she leaned down, and her horse bolted past his.

“Don’t think you’ve gotten the better of me!” Anthony laughed as she took the lead.

Laughing from the pit of her stomach, Sophia sat up straight and allowed her horse to gallop at his own pace. Looking back, she realized that Anthony was nowhere to be seen. The grass behind them was deserted as a gentle breeze blew over the blades.

She began to worry that something had happened to him as she passed a small hill overlooking the lake. She was nearly at their destination, and she couldn’t even hear his horse. A sudden sound like thunder startled her as she pulled on the

reins, just in time to see Anthony come from behind some trees, clearly taking a shortcut she didn't know about. Sophia was far too stunned to realize that he had tricked her and once again taken the lead.

Her mind only snapped back into action when she noted the wooden bench beside the lake as he angled his horse to the left.

"I'll get you for this!" Sophia laughed and steered her horse in the same direction, catching up to Anthony just as he reached the final stretch of grass where the bank of the lake was too soft for the horse to gallop.

Swinging himself from the saddle, Anthony threw his horse's reins aside and bolted toward the bench before Sophia could even dismount. She laughed freely at the sight of him bolting across the soft soil, sinking and stumbling slightly as he went.

Lifting her skirts, she gave chase in a futile attempt to catch up with him. Her slight stature was no match for his muscular build and well-defined calves, as he kept the lead by a long shot.

Sophia watched as he flopped down on the grass in front of the bench, laughing from the pit of his stomach as he rolled over onto his back. She finally caught up and collapsed beside him on the soft grass that was only slightly damp.

“I think it’s safe to say that I have won this one.” He chuckled with one hand on his chest as it rose and fell with heavy breaths.

Recalling the finer points of their bet, Sophia raised her head and looked at the bench. “I don’t think you should count your chickens just yet, Your Grace.”

“What do you mean?” Anthony glanced at her in confusion, his brow creasing into a frown.

“They haven’t all hatched.” She smirked at him as he followed her gaze.

“Don’t you dare!” He suddenly lunged for her arms just as she reached out to touch the wood.

Sophia giggled gleefully as they tumbled together on the grass, both trying their hardest to touch the bench. It was Anthony who used the tip of his boot to graze the seat, declaring his absolute victory once and for all.

“It’s settled!” he declared triumphantly and let go of her arms.

“Wait just a minute now!” she managed to yell breathlessly. “You said touch the bench. That implies that it must be with your hand or at least a finger,” she argued as he sat back on his haunches, shaking his head.

“I did not specify which body part should be used to touch the bench. Therefore, my victory stands. As per the document brought forth by Bartholomew and Co., a verbal contract not specified by details is open to interpretation.”

“Bartholomew? You mean the Welsh pirate?” Sophia looked down at her lap in confusion, trying to make sense of what he had said.

“Indeed.” Anthony nodded, barely containing his mirth as he bit his lower lip.

“What does the pirate code have anything to do with our bet?” She recalled one of the novels she had read.

“Everything if it lets me win.” He shrugged honestly. “As long as it lets me win.”

Shaking her head, Sophia laughed. “Let’s take a break. I still think we should see who can touch the bench first, but I’m quite out of breath at present.”

“Very well, but I am keeping my eyes on you.” Anthony glanced back at the bench with a smirk.

A light breeze picked up as Sophia sat back on the grass, enjoying the view of the sun beginning to set over the lake. The surface sparkled like diamonds as tiny ripples sloshed back and forth. Even the leaves of the weeping willow brought her comfort as they swayed in the wind.

“You must have had an amazing childhood on this estate.” She closed her eyes and leaned her head back, allowing her now loose braid to fall on the grass.

“You would think that, but it wasn’t all sunshine and roses.” Anthony’s voice seemed harsh as he spoke.

Opening her eyes, Sophia noticed the hard lines around his mouth as he spoke of his childhood. There was a sadness there that seemed to stretch far beyond his years.

“My father was a very harsh man.” He averted his gaze and looked out over the water.

Sophia waited for Anthony to relax without pressing the issue any further. She wanted him to open up to her, but only on his terms. The conversation needed to come from his side without any coercion or coaxing.

“He wanted a model son and would often beat me if I acted any way that was less than exemplary.” Anthony took a deep

breath and exhaled as if the words were causing him an uncomfortable amount of pain.

“Did you at least make peace on his deathbed?”

She recalled the conversation they had had in the carriage about their fathers. She couldn't understand what it must have been like to grow up with a father that valued his reputation above all else. Yet, she could sympathize with having a parent that valued the opinions of the *ton*. Her own mother wanted nothing more than to be seen as someone worthy of their praise.

Anthony's jaw clenched as his body went stiff. “The conversation was brief, but I did make a vow to him...” he trailed off as he seemed to grow even more uncomfortable.

Reaching out, Sophia placed her hand over his on the grass. “You don't have to tell me what that vow was. It can remain between you and your father,” she said soothingly, trying to put him at ease.

“Perhaps it is better that way,” Anthony said stiffly and pushed himself up. Her words of encouragement did little to bring back his carefree mood from earlier. “It's getting late, we better get back before the darkness really sets in.”

Glancing out over the lake, Sophia noticed the quickly fading light before reaching for his proffered hand. The wind picked up once again, whipping the branches of the weeping willow about in a furious dance.

“Oh.” Sophia suddenly blinked furiously and lifted a hand to her eyes.

“What’s the matter?” Anthony’s voice was filled with concern as he took a step toward her and lifted his hand to hers.

“I think the wind blew something in my eyes.” She felt the grittiness beneath her eyelids as her eyes began to water.

“Let me have a look,” he whispered gently and placed his hand over hers, lowering it to her side.

Sophia’s heart began to race as her chest rose and fell with deep, even breaths. The wind was blowing her red dress about her legs, bringing with it the woody scent of Anthony’s masculine frame.

“It was a piece of a leaf,” he whispered, his lips mere inches away from her cheek as he used the tip of his finger to remove the offending debris.

“Thank you,” she said breathlessly and blinked a few times, trying to step away.

Anthony held her hand firmly in his and rested it against his chest. “Thank you for how you treat my mother. I think you have realized by now that she isn’t well.”

“I didn’t want to say anything until you were ready, but what is wrong with her?” Her heart clenched with anguish and empathy at the look of sadness in his eyes.

“The doctors aren’t entirely certain. They think it may be her lungs. She seems unable to catch her breath even after walking short distances.”

“Anthony, I’m so sorry.” Her fingers gripped his a little tighter in a gesture of comfort as she looked into his eyes.

“That’s the first time you used my name like that instead of calling me *Your Grace*.” His voice was deep and heavy as he held her gaze with an intense look in his eyes.

The moment seemed to last forever as the wind drew them closer in the fading light. It was almost as if the world at large ceased to exist in the wake of their passion.

“I can still address you by your title if you like,” Sophia asked hesitantly, feeling the heat of his thighs against hers.

“No.” Anthony placed a finger beneath her chin and angled her lips toward his. “I like hearing you say my name.” His voice was gruff and thick with emotions as his lips came crashing down on hers with a kiss that left her limp in his arms.

Backing her up a little, Anthony guided her over to the bench, where she reached her hand out to steady her body beneath his. Her fingertips brushed the rough wood as his hands sought her hips, feeling her curves through the fabric of her dress.

“Say my name again,” he growled in her ear before kissing her neck in a hungry onslaught of passion and desire.

“Anthony,” she gasped as he squeezed her thigh, kneading her flesh with the tips of his fingers.

A sharp whistle in the distance made them stop.

Anthony growled in disappointment, reluctantly removing his lips from her neck. “That will be the stablehands looking for the horses. We better get back,” he explained and then pressed a single kiss to her neck once again, leaning his hand beside hers on the bench. “To be continued,” he whispered in her ear before drawing back completely.

Sophia took a moment to catch her breath before opening her eyes and looking at him. Her emotions felt as if they had been

captured by a tornado, tumbling in her chest through a confusing whirlwind.

“Oh.” Anthony seemed to sober up as he noticed their hands on the bench. “Who do you think touched it first?”

Images of Anthony backing her up against the wood and her hand reaching out flashed across her mind.

I touched it first.

The thought crossed her mind as she looked into his dark eyes. She could stay with his mother now if she wanted to.

“So?” He shot her a cheeky smile. “Who touched it first?”

Taking a deep breath, Sophia smiled back at him. “I think you will have to put up with me for quite some time, Your Grace.” She teased him with his title in a seductive voice. “I believe it was you who touched the bench first.”

CHAPTER 15



Two weeks had passed since their kiss at the lake on the country estate. The couple were beginning to settle into their lives together despite their many nuances and differences. Their bickering could often be heard in the hallways if anyone cared to listen. A fact that only seemed to draw them closer together, as they spent their days in each other's company.

Anthony had grown begrudgingly accustomed to the smell of burnt firewood. Sophia was constantly lighting fires to keep warm, while he ran hotter than the fires themselves. She kept on bickering about the cold and didn't like it when he insisted on opening the windows. Yet, he hated the constant stench of smoke in the house and needed the fresh air.

Living with her was challenging enough, but in the quiet moments, Anthony couldn't help but feel grateful for her presence. She brought his home to life, even though it was sometimes at the expense of his sanity. The silent evenings he would spend thinking of his father and their failed bond was something of the past.

“I really wish you wouldn’t open so many windows,” Sophia complained, rubbing her arms with her hands as a layer of goosebumps spread over her skin.

“And I really wish that our home wouldn’t smell like a woodcutter’s cabin every day,” Anthony grumbled under his breath. “But we can’t always get what we want, sadly.”

“But it’s so cold—of course, you don’t feel it because you don’t have a heart, to begin with,” Sophia snapped. Her mood always seemed to worsen when they bickered over the cold.

“I can prove you wrong, you know?” Anthony narrowed his eyes at her with a determined look.

“How?” Sophia rolled her eyes in exasperation and reached for the shawl that hung over the back of her chair. “Are you planning on rescuing an orphan to prove your chivalry?”

Closing his eyes, Anthony bit back the smile that threatened to show. Her sarcasm and wit were something he enjoyed as the days passed by.

“Don’t you trust me?”

“To do what?” Sophia continued to snap at him. “Freeze me to death? Yes, I think you are more than capable of doing that.”

“You really are quite pessimistic, aren’t you?” he muttered under his breath.

He had gone to great lengths to secure a surprise for her as a way of saying thank you for her behavior in front of his mother. Yet, it didn’t seem as if she was going to make things easier for him.

“Do you blame me after the stunts you pulled with the race?” She yanked her shawl over her shoulder, displaying her annoyance with him.

“All is fair in love and war.” He smirked at her, noticing the question in her eyes at his words.

Although they had begun to grow closer as time went on, they hadn’t had a real discussion about how they felt.

Trying his best to avoid the hurdle between them, Anthony changed the topic. “It just so happens that I have a surprise for you. Now, if you are willing to trust me enough to show you is entirely up to you.”

Sophia hesitated at first but then quickly warmed up to the idea of a surprise. “Very well then. What is it?”

“I am going to blindfold you just to make things a little more interesting.” He removed a clean handkerchief from his pocket as he stood.

“You are daft if you think that I am going to allow you to blindfold me,” she snapped with a horrified expression on her face. “I may end up dead and buried beneath the stables.”

“That would save me the bickering I have to put up with. Yet alas, I have planned something entirely different.”

“Was that an attempt at humor?” She glared at him and yanked on her shawl again.

Anthony let out a breath as he shook his head. The woman wasn't easily pleased or even amused. She would be the death of him if their marriage continued like this.

“Would you like to see the surprise I arranged for you or not?” he barked at her.

“I guess I will have to, since there is nothing else to do at present.”

Sophia stood begrudgingly and allowed her husband to turn her around. Carefully placing the handkerchief over her eyes, Anthony proceeded to secure the knot before dropping his hands to her arms. Her skin felt cold to the touch even through

the fabric of her shawl. A pang of guilt sprung through his gut. He really did need to stop opening all the windows if she was getting cold to the point of having a chilled skin.

“Now, are you ready?” he asked her as he ran his fingers up and down her arms in an attempt to warm her up.

“That depends. Are you going to hack me to death and throw me at the bottom of a lake?” Her voice seemed softer as she teased him rather than barked her displeasure.

He leaned closer. “Much worse,” he whispered in her ear with a deep chuckle.

“Very well, lead me into the unknown.” Her body seemed to relax beneath his touch despite the chill on her skin.

Anthony led her out of the manor and onto the grounds, where a light layer of snow covered the earth.

“Now, I really believe you are trying to freeze me to death,” she grumbled and wrapped her arms a little tighter around her body.

“You will warm up once we are there.” He rolled his eyes and shook his head. Trying to keep her happy really was a monstrous undertaking.

They walked a short distance before he stopped her in her tracks and held her steady. “Now, I know this isn’t ideal. The building hasn’t been used in quite some time, but it’s only temporary. We can have her moved soon so that she’s comfortable,” he said confidently and squeezed her shoulders.

“Who on earth are you talking about?” Sophia seemed exasperated as she spoke, her breath turning into a cloud of steam in front of her face.

“See for yourself.” He removed her blindfold and took a step back, waiting for her to take in the sight.

“Oh, Lord, you really are going to murder me,” Sophia said without hesitation as she took in the nearly dilapidated building that stood on the estate grounds behind the manor.

The building in question had paint peeling from all sides and a few broken windows in front that were patched up with pieces of wood.

Rolling his eyes, Anthony came to her side. “It’s not the building, it’s what’s inside the building that you will like,” he tried his best to explain without giving the surprise away.

“Is this an old barn?” Sophia frowned as she took in the building that was nestled between a few overgrown trees.

“A stable, actually. It hasn’t been used in years, since my father didn’t like horses and Mother preferred to keep hers at the country estate.” Anthony rubbed the back of his neck. “I had completely forgotten about it until you came along. I guess we could have it repaired if you like.”

“I still don’t know what to say,” Sophia confessed.

“Let’s go inside then and see what you think of your surprise,” he said awkwardly as if he wasn’t sure how to deal with the situation now that he was there.

Why am I nervous?

He’d spent two weeks arranging the surprise for her, talking to her brothers and even her mother. Yet, there was a small part of him deep inside that was scared she wouldn’t like what he had done for her.

Leading the way, he pushed open the doors, allowing warm air to rush over their bodies.

Sophia hurriedly stepped inside, enjoying the heat that seemed to emanate from within. “At least it is warm in here,” she said with a tremor in her voice as Anthony shut the doors.

The inside of the barn was warm and bright, lit by lamps hanging from the stalls. The old smell of dust mingled with fresh hay as Sophia took in what she was seeing.

“I have tasked one of the hall boys to keep the furnace lit, at least until we have decided where you would like to keep her,” Anthony explained after clearing his throat.

“I’m still not sure who she...” Sophia trailed off as her eyes fell on the only occupied stall at the end of the barn. A flood of tears suddenly spilled from her eyes. “How did you know?” Her voice was choked with raw emotion.

“I had to ask your brothers and mother and do a great deal of compromising, but they finally agreed to let you have her,” he finished on a triumphant note. “She’s yours to keep where you like. I did promise you a horse, after all.”

Turning around, Sophia suddenly flung her arms around his neck, sobbing gratefully into his chest. “I didn’t think I would be seeing her again anytime soon. Nicholas made it very clear that it wasn’t an option to bring her to London.”

The white mare snorted contentedly in her stall, dipping her head into her bucket of oats before chewing again.

“I know,” Anthony said gently as he held her against his chest and stroked her hair. “I know.”



The warmth of his body seeped into hers as she cuddled in closer to his chest. She hadn't dreamed that she would ride her favorite horse ever again, let alone call it her own.

"And here you thought I didn't have a heart," he teased gently, pushing her away just enough to see her face.

"I'm sorry I can be difficult sometimes." She wiped her tears with the back of her hands. "I guess we are both still trying to figure out exactly how this marriage thing works."

Sophia couldn't help but lean into his body, feeling the strength and warmth of his muscles through the fabric of her dress. The air seemed to grow hotter as he ran his hands up her back, gently massaging her with the tips of his fingers.

"Things can't be easy for you either." His voice was low and deep once again as he gazed into her eyes, drawing her closer to his chest. "I know our arrangement is one of convenience, but I am trying my best to make you happy, even if it doesn't seem that way all of the time."

Her voice seemed to catch in her throat as her eyes fell on his lips. It was her passion that overtook this time. Gliding her hands up his abdomen and chest, she pressed her lips to his, unable to resist the power he held over her with his presence.

Anthony groaned in surprise, gripping her waist tightly as she nibbled on his lower lip. Sophia was suddenly taken by surprise when he guided her legs around his hips, lifting her with ease, his hands firmly gripping her bottom with a strong squeeze.

A gasp escaped her lips when he turned them both, pressing her back against the wall of a nearby stall. Their bodies seemed to move together as pleasant sensations rushed through her loins. He was ravishing her mouth with his tongue, searching her warm depths and stealing her breath.

It wasn't long before his hands were pushing her dress up her thighs, exposing her bare skin as he pulled her stockings down.

Is this really happening?

Her mind and heart felt full beneath his tender touch. Sophia had dreamed of how it would feel if he took charge and made her a woman. Yet, nothing could have prepared her for the explosions of pleasure that took over her mind, forcing her to focus on nothing but his presence.

His fingers suddenly snaked its way beneath her shift, taking her by surprise as he explored the heated folds of her core.

“Anthony...” she gasped in surprise, placing one hand behind his neck and drawing him closer to her as they moved against the stall.

“I’ve wanted to touch you like this for so long,” Anthony breathed against the base of her throat before kissing his way down her chest, licking her milky skin as he went.

The tension in her body began to build as she moved against his fingers, feeling the pleasure he elicited in her core all the way down to her toes.

It wasn’t long until she was panting for breath, whimpering in his ear as a light sheen of perspiration covered her thighs. The rhythm alone was enough to send her over the edge as she leaned her head back against the stall and rode the waves of pleasure that coursed through her body.

Using one knee to prop her up, Anthony continued his onslaught, freeing his hands to cup and squeeze her breasts, urging her on with a steady rhythm.

Sophia felt her arms moving independently as her fingers intertwined behind his neck, allowing her the freedom to lean against the wall. A loud gasp escaped her throat as the tension finally reached its peak, causing her body to spasm with wave after wave of pleasure.

Anthony carefully lowered his knee, holding her steady with his hands on her waist before lowering her back to the ground.

Sophia quickly leaned on him again as her legs threatened to give way, refusing to cooperate with her. “My legs seem a little unsteady right now,” she panted against his chest.

“That’s a good sign.” He chuckled deeply before kissing the top of her head and holding her close. “It means you enjoyed what I did.”

“Oh, I did very much.” She felt herself blush despite the intimacy they had shared. “Anthony?” she mumbled.

“Yes?” He pulled back slightly and looked into her eyes.

“What we just did, is that what is supposed to happen between a man and a woman once they are married?” She felt sheepish asking him the question, but her mother hadn’t been clear on exactly what it was.

“Did no one tell you what occurs between a man and a woman?” he asked her with a strange look in his eyes.

“Not in so many words,” she admitted, biting her lower lip.

Anthony placed his finger beneath her chin and tilted her face up. “There is no need to be ashamed of not knowing. It shows how pure you are.” His heated gaze made her blush even more. “This is very much like the intimacy that occurs between a husband and a wife. It’s a way of enjoying each other’s bodies.”

Feeling the heat creeping up her neck once again, Sophia buried her face in his chest, breathing in the woody scent of his skin. She finally felt as if she understood what it meant to be a woman.

CHAPTER 16



S ophia looked out the window to see a blanket of snow covering the earth. Winter had come in full swing, announcing its presence like a roaring lion. She'd had enough of arguing with Anthony about the heat and had decided to snuggle up under a blanket in the drawing room and learn how to knit, for lack of anything better to do.

Her current efforts had resulted in a length of scarf that strongly resembled a slice of Swiss cheese. The peaceful crackling of the fire in the grate provided a warmth to the room that she knew would drive Anthony up the walls. What exactly was wrong with him, she didn't know. The man carried on as if he would melt at the slightest suggestion of heat.

"I was wondering where you were." Anthony came into the room and shut the door before sitting across from her on one of the couches, rubbing his hands together in an attempt to ward off the cold.

At least he does get cold at times.

She found reassurance in the fact that he wasn't entirely oblivious to the cold that had set in.

"I thought I might make this my little hovel, since you are so set against having any heat above a blanket in any of the rooms." Sophia glared at him before focusing back on her knitting.

The steady clicking of the needles made her feel accomplished, even if she hadn't quite gotten the hang of the pattern.

"There's no need to get all bent out of shape. I realize that winter is here in full swing. I wasn't going to say anything about the roaring fire, closed windows, hot tea, or layers of blankets that you currently have draped over your shoulders. God alone knows how you are able to endure that amount of warmth." He rolled his eyes and shook his head.

"Good, because I have claimed this room for the purposes of keeping warm. You may go outside and play in the snow if you do not wish to contend with the temperature," she warned sternly, pulling the blankets a little tighter around her shoulders.

The three quilts Sophia had managed to procure from one of the maids were just enough heat for her to rest comfortably in her chair without the added necessity of a coat.

“This is more like a furnace than a drawing room, but to each his own,” Anthony mumbled under his breath while making himself comfortable on the couch.

It was evident from his thick cotton shirt and breeches that while he was feeling the cold, he wasn't feeling it to the extent that Sophia was.

Ignoring her husband's grumbling, Sophia continued to click her knitting needles together, flicking her tongue over her lips as she tried to concentrate on the stitches. The atmosphere in the room was peaceful and homely despite Anthony's moaning and grumbling. The housekeeper had been helpful enough to show her a book with patterns that now lay open on the coffee table in front of her seat beside the tea tray.

“Since when do you know how to knit anyway?” Anthony crossed his legs at the ankles and looked at her handiwork on her lap. The lazy way his muscular body relaxed against the back of the couch drew her attention for a moment before she averted her gaze.

“I don't know how to knit, I'm trying to learn. It's how one betters oneself, or so I am told.” Sophia lifted the row of stitches to her eyes in an attempt to see where she had gone wrong.

The lime green scarf had more holes in it than the rows of stitches. She had lost count for the hundredth time that

morning, causing a large amount of frustration that she was currently beginning to direct toward Anthony.

“Is the first lesson in knitting is how to knit a slice of Swiss cheese?” Anthony lifted an eyebrow as he scrutinized her handiwork, smirking mockingly.

Feeling overcome by exasperation, Sophia lowered her needles onto her lap, allowing the final remnants of stitches to slip from the needle. “No, the first lesson is how to adequately knit a rope that one could use to hang their husband.” She glared at him through narrowed eyes, feeling as if she should throw the needles and scarf at his head.

“Oh, that makes perfect sense, then. Is the biggest hole where my head is supposed to go through?” Anthony chuckled, obviously pleased with having vexed her to the point of quitting.

Losing the battle against her will to ignore his taunts, Sophia threw the blankets off her shoulders and stood, stalking over to the couch, where Anthony suddenly sat up straight.

“Just what do you think you’re about to do?” He glanced at the scarf and needles in her hands with an overly concerned look on his face.

“I want to see if I got the measurements of your head right!” Sophia lunged forward with the lime green scarf, trying her best to force the biggest hole over Anthony’s head.

The ball of yarn fell from the chair, rolling across the floor and stopping at the door.

Struggling at first, Anthony quickly gripped her wrists, gaining the upper hand and pulling her down onto the couch beside him. “Are you mad, woman?” he growled at her, wrestling the scarf from her hands.

“Not as mad as your wanting the house to be cold in the middle of a snowstorm!”

Sophia slipped out from beneath his grip and came to her feet in front of the couch. Her hair was a tangled mess of strands that had escaped her braid, and her navy-blue dress was wrinkled from hours of huddling beneath the quilts.

“I think the insanity comes in when you want the house to feel like the pits of hell. No sane human can live with that amount of heat!” Anthony’s eyes swept down her chest, taking in the mounds of her breasts that were straining against her corset.

Feeling his gaze ravage her body, Sophia quickly averted her gaze and fixed her dress, wanting a distraction from the heat she felt building in her core.

“I can help you cool down if that’s what you really want.” She spotted the snow on the windowsill and stalked over to the other side of the room.

“Just what are you up to now?” Anthony asked in an exasperated tone.

“Helping you cool down, Your Grace.”

Sophia placed her hands on the bottom of the window frame and used all of her might to pull it up, groaning as she grimaced. The weight of the snow made it difficult to gain any kind of leverage.

The window finally slid up, allowing a few blobs of snow to fall into the room along with the icy wind. Reaching out, Sophia dug her fingers into the frozen mass and produced a ball which she proceeded to mold into a tight sphere.

“If you are doing what I think you are doing, you better not.” Anthony stood and positioned himself in front of the couch with one finger extended to her in a warning.

“Or what, Your Grace?” She used his title sarcastically as she cocked her head to the side in a challenge, bringing the ball up to shoulder’s height.

“You don’t want to find out what will happen if you fling that thing at me.” Anthony’s eyes drifted to the ball in her hand and back to her face.

Sophia finally felt as if she had gained the upper hand. Having him at her mercy was oddly empowering to her.

“Maybe I do.” She cocked her hand back, with her ammo poised to fire.

“Sophia, don’t you dare—” Anthony had barely gotten his sentence out when Sophia let loose.

The ball flew through the air with shocking speed and agility, hitting Anthony square in the face before he had a chance to react. Snow slid down his face as the bulk of the missile hit the carpet at his feet, splattering into a watery mess. Lifting her hands to her mouth, Sophia stifled the giggle that threatened to escape. The utter look of anger and shock on his face made her want to burst out laughing.

“Did you not think I was going to follow through?” she asked him after lowering her hands. The open window behind her back blew the loose strands of her hair about her face.

“You are going to regret that.” Anthony glowered at her before lunging forward and giving chase.

Yelping like a pup, Sophia darted away from him, trying to escape, but it was far too late.

Anthony gripped her wrists with both hands and spun her around, pushing her back against the wall and pinning her hands on either side of her head.

The force of the snow and wind pushed the window down, causing the frame to bang shut.

“I see that I’m going to have to teach you a lesson,” Anthony growled in her ear, lifting her hands above her head and pinning them in place with one of his.

Sophia’s heart began to race as she looked into his eyes. The passion and fire she saw burning within the brown depths set her soul aflame despite the chill that had filled the room. The crackling fire was quickly beginning to ward off the cold as Anthony traced a path over her lips, circling her chin before dropping to her neck and chest.

“I think there is only one way you will learn not to mess with me.” His voice was deep and husky as he kneaded the mounds of her breasts with his fingertips.

“And what exactly is that way?” Her chest rose and fell with anticipation as she waited for his response.

The atmosphere grew thick with tension as she slipped one hand from his grip and entwined her fingers with his, allowing her other hand to slip to her side. The gesture signaled her willingness to obey.

Anthony brought his lips closer to hers, breathing heavily as his free hands sought her waist. "This."

He tenderly pressed his lips to hers before deepening the kiss, parting her mouth with his tongue, and searching the warmth within.

Feeling his body melting into hers, Sophia gave in to the desires she'd been fighting, lifting a leg and wrapping it around his side with a small moan as his hand moved from her waist to her thigh.

"It's about time that I took control of you," Anthony growled against her lips, dropping his head to her neck and savoring the delicate flesh.

A passionate gasp escaped her lungs as she felt the warmth of his tongue at the base of her throat. His tongue quickly drew a path down to her chest, nibbling at the firm mounds of her cleavage.

Sophia's fingers snaked through the tendrils of his thick black hair, curling into the strands as she pushed his head even

closer to her chest.

Taking his cue, Anthony trailed his hands up her waist, feeling the contours of her body, before moving to her back and loosening the ribbons of her dress and corset. The fabric of her dress gave way, revealing the milky flesh of her soft breasts.

Breathing heavily, Anthony took his time to look into her eyes as he massaged her breasts with the palms of his hands, rolling her nipples with his fingers.

“Do you like that?” His voice was husky as he watched the pleasure on her face. The rosy buds were hard from the cold that had entered through the window.

“Yes...”

Sophia leaned her head back against the wall, reveling in the attention that Anthony was giving her breasts. A burst of pleasure suddenly crept over her chest as Anthony licked and suckled her nipples.

Her breathing grew heavier when he used his knee to separate her thighs, with his lips still on her breasts.

Sophia could feel the pleasurable sensations of his fingers making their way up her thighs, massaging a path to her moist center. It wasn't long until Anthony's fingers found their

target, pushing her undergarments aside before rubbing the bundle of nerves that caused her body to squirm with pleasure.

Bringing his lips up to her ear, Anthony nipped the tender flesh before whispering, “I can make you whimper with pleasure.”

The heat of his words caused a wave of goosebumps to form on her neck.

The sudden increase in speed caused Sophia to pant and move her hips in rhythm with his fingers.

“And I can also make you beg for more.” Anthony’s lips curled into a wolfish grin against the skin just below her earlobe as he slowed his pace and moved his fingers slightly south of where she needed them to be.

“Anthony... don’t stop,” Sophia whimpered and writhed, wanting his fingers back where they had been. Her nipples stood like stiff peaks, wordlessly begging his lips for more attention.

“Ask me nicely.” Anthony flicked his fingers up unexpectedly before moving them back down. The gentle kisses he was pressing to her neck did little to slake the thirst he had awoken in her body.

“Please...” Her voice was barely audible above her whimpers as he moved his fingers back up, moving at glacial speed over her folds.

“Please what?” he growled more urgently before gently biting her neck.

“Please touch me,” Sophia almost shouted as she arched her back, grinding her hips against his hand.

“As you wish, Your Grace.”

Anthony cheekily nipped her neck before lowering his head to her chest and licking her nipples with the same amount of urgency as his fingers moved between her thighs.

Sophia’s urgent gasps grew louder as the tension between her thighs grew, coursing through her body like an unstoppable force. Feeling her climax building, she placed her hands on his shoulders for support, moaning loudly as he pushed her over the edge.

Her muscles quivered and tightened as she let out a loud gasp of pleasure, collapsing into his arms and chest with her dress hanging from her waist and wrists.

“Do you see what will happen if you disobey me?” Anthony’s voice was softer now as he nuzzled her neck, gently kissing

her flesh.

“Yes,” she breathed, struggling to regain control of her body. Her legs would have given out if it hadn’t been for his strong body keeping her upright.

Breathing heavily, Sophia rode the final waves of her pleasure, waiting for the sensations to subside.

“I can make you feel great, pleasurable things. Never forget that I am your husband,” Anthony growled before taking her mouth with his once again and kissing her with a heated passion that fueled her pleasure.

CHAPTER 17



*A*nthony paced back and forth in front of the window as he waited for Sophia to return from her afternoon tea with Margaret. The snow was getting thicker, and she had yet to make an appearance. He admonished himself for allowing her the freedom to leave when he knew that the storm was drawing closer.

Why had he not insisted that she wait until the weather was better before allowing her to call on Margaret to talk about keeping the blasted horse?

“Where are you?” he muttered to himself, running his fingers through his disheveled hair.

Taking deep breaths, he paced more intensely around the room, waiting for any sign at all that she was unharmed. Images of their moment together in the barn flashed in front of his eyes. He hadn’t meant to lie to her, but he couldn’t see any way out if he was to keep his vow of not siring an heir. They could enjoy intimacy together as a couple if she believed the act was complete as it was.

The sound of the front door opening made him stop in his tracks. He held his breath as he waited to hear who it was. The door slammed shut, followed by light footsteps that bounded up the stairs at an alarming rate.

Heaving a sigh of relief, Anthony made his way into the hall, spotting Sophia at the head of the stairs.

“Just where have you been all this time?” he growled angrily, secretly relieved at the sight of her.

Sophia turned to look down at him, shivering beneath her sodden dress and drenched hair. He instantly took pity on her, climbing the stairs two at a time until he reached her side.

“The tea ran a little late.” Her teeth chattered as she spoke. “I tried to get to the carriage without getting caught in the snow, but it was too late. I thought of sending a note to say that I would be staying with Margaret, but there wasn’t any time for that.” Her body shook as she shivered uncontrollably, her lips turning blue.

“Where is your coat?” he asked gently, placing his hands on her shoulders and feeling the coldness of her skin.

“I left it in the carriage. It got so wet that it was weighing me down. I shrugged it off and dashed for the door, but the

snowfall was so heavy that I fell.”

“You are absolutely chilled to the bone.” He rubbed her arms more vigorously. “You will catch your death of cold if you don’t change soon. You should have come back earlier,” he admonished her softly.

“I know!” she snapped through chattering teeth. “Don’t you think I know how badly I messed up? I’m the one standing here shivering my skin off, for goodness’ sake!”

“If you paid more attention to your surroundings instead of having your nose constantly stuck in a book, you may have had the forethought and sense to leave at a reasonable hour!” His anger rose as they stood at the top of the stairs, bickering.

“Anthony, please.” Sophia squeezed her eyes shut, fighting back the tears of frustration that threatened to spill over. “I am really cold, I can barely speak, and I really don’t know what else I can do or say to show you that I know I messed up. Can we have this conversation tomorrow, once I’ve had a good rest and have warmed up, please? I’ll be more than happy to admonish myself, but just not right now.”

Realizing just how desperate she was for heat, Anthony placed his arm around her frozen shoulders and guided her to her bedchambers. “The fires have already been lit. I’ll have one of the maids draw you a hot bath. That should bring the color

back to your cheeks. We can continue this discussion in the morning.”

He looked up to see the same blonde maid who had bumped into Sophia on the stairs staring at them with a wide-eyed expression.

“Run a bath for Her Grace in her chambers and let us know at once when it is ready,” he ordered quickly, passing the girl on the way to the room. “And tell the cook to prepare a hot broth of chicken and vegetables. I think we will need that later.”

“Yes, Your Grace!” The maid scurried away from them down the hall.

“Here,” Anthony said as he quickly pushed open the door to Sophia’s bedchamber and led her inside, placing her as close to the hearth as he could before rushing over to her bed and retrieving a quilt.

“You do believe me when I say that I didn’t do it on purpose?” Sophia asked him through the damp strands of hair that hung over her face, gladly accepting the quilt he draped over her shoulders.

“I do,” Anthony said heavily and sat beside her on the rug, feeling the warmth of the crackling fire wash over their bodies. “I just wish you weren’t as stubborn as you are. Life would be

a lot easier. But no, you always know best despite my warnings.” He winked at her, gripping her shoulders and rubbing them up and down over the quilt.

“Now is not the time for sarcasm,” she huffed, the quivering of her lips subsiding ever so slightly as color returned to her cheeks.

“It’s never stopped you before,” Anthony replied, chuckling. “Next time you go out in winter, take me. I think I will do a much better job of keeping you warm than Margaret did.”

“It’s not her fault,” Sophia said defensively. “Margaret did suggest I stay the night, but I didn’t like the idea of you wondering where I am. I thought it best to come home than have you worrying about my safety like a mother hen.”

The mere fact that she had taken his feelings and concern into consideration warmed his heart. They had come a long way in the few short weeks of their marriage. Sophia was beginning to take her position in his life more seriously, and he was beginning to believe that a close friendship with her wasn’t entirely a bad idea.

“I detest that comparison,” Anthony said gruffly with a cheeky glint in his eyes. “I’m much more handsome than any run-of-the-mill hen.”

“Shut up.” She laughed, playfully attempting to swat his arm but missing. “I’d show you a thing or two if I wasn’t this cold.”

She shivered again, attempting to pull the quilt even tighter around her body.

“You aren’t getting warm enough.” His eyes swept over the room in an attempt to spot another quilt or even a blanket. “We need to raise your temperature before you catch a cold.” He finally spotted a blanket at the foot of her bed and quickly stood to retrieve it. “Take off that dress, it’s not doing you any favors at present,” he instructed after returning to her side.

“I beg your pardon?” She looked at him in shock.

“We are married, Sophia, it’s not like I’m not allowed to see you in your undergarments.” He rolled his eyes and shook his head. “I heard a doctor saying once that the best way to bring up your core temperature is to have skin-to-skin contact.”

Sophia hesitated at first but hesitantly lowered the quilt from her shoulders. “I did read that in a book once. It has to do with the heat transferring from your skin to mine.”

“So, you believe a book over me?” he asked sarcastically.

“Books don’t tend to take shortcuts during races,” she bit back and stood, pulling her sodden dress off her body and stepping aside.

Picking his battles, Anthony hurriedly removed his shirt and placed the dry quilt over his shoulders, holding his arms open to her. “Do you want to get warm or not?” he asked her with a pointed glare.

She was being awfully demanding for someone who was drenched and in need of bodily heat.



Sophia hesitated for a second before stepping forward and allowing Anthony to wrap his arms around her chilled body. The warmth instantly seeped into her skin as she laid her head on his chest, feeling his heartbeat beneath her cheek.

“Is that better?” he asked in a low voice, with his cheek pressed to the crown of her head. He rubbed her back with the palms of his hands.

“Much better.” She breathed a sigh of relief, the numbness beginning to leave her body.

“Let’s move a little closer to the fire, it will help warm you up.”

He gently maneuvered them both back down to the rug, then pulled her onto his lap, with her chest pressed against his.

“Thank you,” Sophia whispered, with her face pressed against his collarbone. The comforting warmth of the fire accompanied by his skin was making her drowsy as she soaked in the warmth. “I’m sorry if I made you worry. I didn’t mean to cause any trouble.”

“Shh,” Anthony whispered in her hair and held her tight. “There is no use in beating a dead horse. You’re home safely now.”

“Please, don’t say that.” She shivered from more than just the cold in her bones. “It’s very disturbing.”

“I’m sorry.” A deep chuckle escaped his throat, reverberating through his chest beneath her ear. “I just meant that there is no need for you to keep on apologizing. You made a mistake, it’s human. God knows that I have made my fair share of mistakes in life.”

Sophia felt a strange sensation in the pit of her stomach as she listened to Anthony speak. His arms around her were more than just comforting. She felt as if she’d never know a day’s sorrow ever again if he were there to catch her whenever she fell. Yet, there was something else nagging at the back of her mind.

Why do I feel so close to him?

She chalked her strange emotions up to the fact that his body was once again pressed against hers. A situation they seemed to find themselves in with increasing frequency the more time they spent with each other.

“I’m just glad nothing worse happened to you. I would never have forgiven myself if you had gotten hurt in the storm.” His voice took on a huskier quality once again as his hot breath warmed her ear.

“You told me to get back at a reasonable hour.” She lowered her voice to a husky purr that matched the deep timbre of his own. “I’ve always had a bit of a stubborn streak in me.”

Her body suddenly felt hotter as his movements slowed to a more rhythmic and deeper pace. His hands caressed her thighs and calves, trailing over her skin in purposeful motions.

“I know,” Anthony whispered in her ear. “You’re the single most stubborn woman to ever have walked the face of the earth. But it’s my job to keep you safe.”

Her head tilted back slightly as she looked into his eyes. The passion and concern that she saw there tugged at her heart. There was definitely something more between them than what she had thought there would be. A deep longing filled her

body as she ached for him to touch her again. She had lain awake all night, thinking of his caresses and the moment they had shared.

“I promised to keep you safe the day I made you my wife. It’s a promise I intend to keep...” He looked down at her lips as his hands moved up her thighs and hips, warming the sides of her body and breasts.

The fire crackled in the hearth, adding to the charged atmosphere that had suddenly emerged between them once again. Tilting her head to the side, Sophia angled her head for a kiss, parting her lips in anticipation of what was to come. Her body responded to him in a way that left her wanting more of him.

A sudden knock sounded at the door just as Anthony’s lips brushed against hers.

“What is it?” he growled almost angrily, holding her body against his.

“I beg your pardon, Your Grace, but the bath is ready and waiting in the dressing room,” the maid’s nervous voice called through the wood.

“Thank you,” Sophia answered, her eyes locked on her husband’s.

The hurried footsteps disappeared down the hallway, leaving Anthony and Sophia alone once again.

“I think we better get you into that bath,” Anthony said almost breathlessly, his chest rising and falling against her almost naked breasts.

She nodded. “I think we had better.”

Sophia allowed herself to be lifted as Anthony stood, scooping her scantily clad body into his masculine arms.

He carried her across the room, using his hip to push open the door that led to her dressing room.

CHAPTER 18



S ophia allowed herself to be carried into her dressing room as the doors swung shut behind their scantily clad figures. Her heart pounded in her chest as she looked into the face of the man who had used his own body to draw the cold from her skin. She had never imagined that a marriage of convenience would ever result in anything like what she was experiencing at present.

Placing her in front of the steaming tub, Anthony took a step back and allowed her a moment to adjust to the situation at hand. She was glad for the moment to breathe and just take in what was happening.

“Would you like me to help you with your corset?” Anthony asked her in a husky tone that made her shiver.

“Thank you,” was all she could say as she turned her back to him.

She realized that the size of the tub was big enough for two adults to bathe comfortably side by side.

Is he going to join me in the tub?

The hot water sent columns of steam to the ceiling, heating the room to a comfortable temperature.

“Is that better?” he asked softly, releasing the final string of her corset, allowing the fabric to fall away.

Sophia felt an instant wave of relief as the warm air caressed the chilled skin that had been confined beneath her undergarments.

“It’s quite a relief,” she answered shyly, becoming increasingly aware of the fact that her ample breasts were now bare. “I think I should get in the water before I catch a cold,” she hurriedly explained and scurried toward the tub before the final remnants of her undergarments could hit the floor.

The hot water instantly soothed her body as she placed one foot in the tub, followed by the other, then sank into the water until her breasts were once again hidden. Her muscles relaxed beneath the comforting heat.

Turning around, she began to panic when she saw that Anthony had begun to unbuckle his belt.

“What are you doing?” she asked in a hurry and sank even further into the tub. The situation she found herself in was new and just a little daunting, despite the kisses and intimacy they had shared.

Would he be expecting them to be intimate all the time now that they had breached one of the barriers between them? Not that she hadn't enjoyed the pleasurable experiences that he had introduced her to. She just wasn't sure if she was ready to make their intimate moments a regular occurrence, despite the heat she felt toward him.

“Your dress made me just as wet as you are,” he grumbled and stepped out of his breeches, kicking them aside. “It's not just you that will be in danger of falling ill if I don't do something about this soon.”

“Oh.” Sophia suddenly turned her back to him, causing a bit of water to slosh over the side of the tub. Heat that had nothing to do with the steam on her face flushed her cheeks. She had nearly seen him naked.

“Relax,” he said as he stepped into the tub. “I won't bite unless you ask me to.” The teasing note in his voice was evident to her even with her back turned to him.

“I know you won't bite,” Sophia snapped, feeling more than just a little embarrassed. She was a married woman, for

goodness' sake. She couldn't be blushing at the sight of a naked man.

No matter how handsome and toned his body is.

Anthony chuckled as the water in the tub rose, signaling the fact that he was submerged.

Feeling slightly more confident, Sophia turned to see the way he was smirking at her, his arms leisurely flung over the edges on either side of his body.

“You could have asked one of the hall boys to draw you a bath of your own,” she said sheepishly, trying her best to not look at the parts of his body that were visible beneath the surface of the water.

Leaning his head back, Anthony sighed. “Thank you, Anthony, for availing your body to me and ensuring I don't die of frostbite.” He mimicked her voice in a very unflattering manner.

“Of course, I am grateful for your help.” She rolled her eyes and turned away from him, deciding to continue with her bath despite his presence.

Her hair was still cold, and her long strands clung to her back. Taking a deep breath, she turned her back to him and dunked

her head beneath the water, taking extra care not to open her eyes beneath the water.

Sophia resurfaced with her eyes shut, allowing the hot water to run down her hair and back. The last remnants of cold finally left her body. She opened her eyes to see that Anthony was staring at her with a heated expression in his eyes.

Realizing that her breasts were completely exposed, Sophia quickly sank back down, mortified and slightly aroused that he had openly been admiring her body. She would have been lying to herself if she said that she hadn't wanted him to touch her again. Yet, she couldn't bring herself to be the one who made the first move.

"You have a stick in your hair," Anthony said in a low voice. "Let me get that for you."

"Oh, it must have been from when I fell," she murmured nervously and then turned her back to him, allowing him to retrieve the offending object.

Anthony's body created a wave in the tub as he moved to the side and tossed the twig to the floor. "Would you like me to check if there is any more?"

Sophia hesitated at first, growing increasingly more comfortable with his presence and the situation they were in.

“If you don’t mind.”

Taking his time, Anthony slowly began to part her hair, exposing the steamy flesh of her back and shoulders in search of more debris. Sophia could feel her heart pounding in her chest as he gently brushed her bare shoulders with the tips of her fingers. She wasn’t sure if it was her imagination or not, but she could have sworn that his body was moving closer to hers.

“Do you like that?” he asked in a quiet voice, gently trailing his fingers over her shoulders in a circular motion.

“I... I do.” She felt uncertain at first but then leaned back as he continued to massage her shoulders.

“It will help the warmth flow through your body.” His husky voice seemed to be moving closer to her ear as his hands moved over her shoulders in rhythmic motions.

Closing her eyes, Sophia gave herself over to his hands and simply enjoyed the feel of his hands on her skin. “You’re pretty good at that.”

She let out a breath and allowed her body to drift in the tub, exposing her breasts once more to the air.

“Thank you.” His breath was closer now, tickling the shell of her ear. “How about this?” His hands made their way down her chest, cupping her firm breasts in the palms of his hands.

An audible gasp escaped her lips as her nipples hardened in his hands, making her gasp in pleasure as her body pressed even further against his.

“I think it’s safe to say that that was a yes,” Anthony growled in her ear and continued to massage the ample flesh, using his fingers and thumbs to pinch the delicate nubs. Moving his hands down her body, he gripped her hips firmly.

Sophia thought he was about to repeat the moment they had shared in the barn when he suddenly turned her around, making her face him. His lips were on hers, searching for more before she could even comprehend what had happened. Their tongues danced together in a tender embrace, dueling as hands explored flesh.

“Not just yet,” Anthony whispered against her lips as she tried to push his hand down to her thighs. “I want to explore your body a little more.”

The cheeky grin on his lips made her stomach flutter with nerves. She wasn’t sure what it was that he had in store for her, but she knew that she wanted to experience it in all its glory.

Helping her to her feet, Anthony made her stand in the tub, allowing the water to drip down her body as he looked her over. “You’re absolutely stunning,” he whispered to her before getting down to his knees and placing a single kiss on her navel. “Allow me to show you just how stunning I find you to be.”

He brought his mouth to her breast without waiting for her response.

Sophia gasped as his moist lips suckled on her rosy nipple, making her breast tingle with a sensual sensation. His other hand came up to her free breast and began to massage the flesh in circles, mimicking the motions he was drawing on her breasts with his tongue.

“Anthony,” she moaned in pleasure as he switched from one breast to the other, taking turns to kiss each nipple.

It wasn’t long until his head dipped down, licking a path down her navel and thighs. Sophia felt a pang of nerves as he caressed her, softly nibbling on the part where her hips meet her thighs.

What is he going to do?

Her mind suddenly went blank as he flicked his tongue over the most delicate parts between her thighs. The white-hot

pleasure was more intense than anything she could have imagined. His tongue flicked back and forth as he used one hand to guide her leg out of the water, placing it over his shoulder. The new position of her leg made her center more accessible to him.

Using her hands on his shoulders, she steadied herself and allowed him to explore the intimate parts between her thighs, licking and kissing until she felt as if she would burst. Her eyes rolled to the back of her head as the pleasurable sensations grew to a point where she could hardly hold on.

Sensing that she was close to the end, Antony brought his hands up to her hips and held her steady, doubling down on his efforts as his tongue caressed the bud that brought her an immense amount of pleasure with increasing speed.

“Oh...” Sophia let out a long moan of ecstasy, holding the back of his head and grinding her core against his face. “Anthony!” she gasped, her body shaking with uncontrollable waves of pleasure that made her throw her head back in a silent scream.

Holding her steady, Anthony took his time to gently kiss and lick her thighs, bringing her down from the high that had taken her body, mind, and spirit away. He waited for her trembling to subside before lowering her back down into the water and pulling her into his arms.

Sophia sighed contentedly and pressed her cheek to his chest, listening to his soothing heartbeat. “Anthony?” she spoke after a few moments of lying on his chest.

“Mhm?” he murmured almost dreamily while stroking her arms.

“I was wondering if I could ask you something?” She felt foolish but knew that she needed to address the matter that was weighing on her mind.

“Anything.” His voice was thick and contented as he lay back in the tub with his eyes shut.

“Before, in the barn, you said that it was an act that both husband and wife participate in when they are married.” She cleared her throat, hoping that he would understand what she was trying to ask.

“It is,” he said almost uncertainly.

“Then shouldn’t I be doing the same kind of things that you do for me?” She felt her heart race at having been bold enough to address the topic.

Anthony seemed quiet for a moment before he continued stroking her arms. “If the woman is willing, then it can be an

act that is enjoyed by both parties,” he spoke hesitantly. “Is it something that’s on your mind?”

Pushing herself away from his chest, Sophia looked into his eyes before blushing. “I guess what I am trying to ask is if you would show me how to give you pleasure as well.”

A wolfish grin spread over his lips as he pulled her slightly closer and kissed her lips. “I think that can be arranged,” he whispered before taking her hand and guiding it down his chiseled pectoral muscles.

She gasped slightly and held her breath when her fingers ventured between his thighs.

“Like that,” Anthony said almost excitedly as he guided her fingers with his hand. His eyes rolled to the back of his head as she began to mimic the motions he had shown her. His face looked almost serene in the light of the dimly lit room.

Sophia took her time to watch his face, relishing the strange sensation of arousal she felt in her core as she gave him the same kind of attention that she had received.

Anthony suddenly gripped her upper arms as he pulled her closer to his body, hungrily whispering in her ear before kissing her neck. “Faster,” he panted through labored breaths.

Doing as she was told, Sophia increased the pace, causing the water inside the tub to slosh, creating ripples across the surface.

His face suddenly contorted as he grunted in pleasure, every muscle in his body going rigid. His eyes had barely fluttered shut as his panting stopped. He quickly stood and lifted her out of the water, holding her there as he breathed heavily.

“Did I do something wrong?” Sophia felt unsure if she had done what was needed.

“Quite the opposite.” He smiled at her and pulled her against his chest. “That was amazing.”

Sophia melted into his body, pushing aside the feeling that something hadn't quite ended as it should have. What did she know, after all? She had never had a man touch her body. The territory was all new to her.

Taking her hand, Anthony guided her out of the tub. He reached for a towel that was draped over a chair, then dried her body before drying his own.

“Wait.” She held her hand out to him when it seemed as if he were about to leave with the towel wrapped around the lower half of his body. “Do you have to leave?” She blushed again and swallowed hard. “I mean, you could stay the night with

me, and we could talk.” She tried her best to put into words the longing she felt toward him.

“Of course,” Anthony relented as his face relaxed. Walking back over to where she was standing, he reached for her night dress and slipped it over her head. “Let’s go to bed then, you must be exhausted after the day you had.”

“I’d like that very much.” She felt her chest flutter again as he kissed the top of her head.

Sophia wasn’t certain what was happening between them as she followed him into her bedroom and onto the bed, but all she knew was that her soul harbored a deep longing for him to hold her in his arms.

Climbing onto the bed, Anthony pulled her closer and cradled her head on his chest, gently stroking her hair.

“I think I like doing that with you,” she said sleepily, stifling a yawn with the back of her hand. “I think I can understand a little why women are so eager to get married if that’s the kind of thing that husbands and wives do.”

Her eyes fluttered shut as she drifted away on a cloud of fog.

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CHAPTER 19



S ophia tapped her foot and sipped her tea, running her teeth over her bottom lip as she thought of what had happened between her and Anthony in the tub. Her skin still tingled from his caresses, and her core yearned for his touch once again. He had been gone when she'd awoken, but he had been there in the middle of the night. The smell of his skin still lingered on her pillow long after he had left.

Her lips curled into a faint smile as she thought of how peaceful he had looked by her side, his chest rising and falling in an even rhythm. She'd used the tips of her fingers to trace a path over his chiseled abs, even venturing as far as drawing a line just below the towel that hid his pelvic bone from view.

Anthony's body was a perfect example of a Greek god, in her opinion. She had only seen the statues once at a ball, but they reminded her of his toned physique.

"Penny for your thoughts?"

Sophia started, spilling a few drops of her tea over the rim of her cup. A few minutes of conversation had gone by without her saying anything at all.

“Sorry, my mind was far away. Did you say something, Margaret?”

Sophia quickly tried to hide the fact that she had been thinking of Anthony and their steamy moment in the tub. She would be mortified if Margaret knew what she had been thinking about.

“I can see that. I was talking about the party tomorrow, but I would rather know what you were thinking about.” Margaret smiled knowingly, running her fingers through the thick fur of the ginger cat on her lap. The animal purred peacefully, yawning now and then when Margaret would trail her fingers down its spine.

Sophia wasn't even sure how many pets Margaret owned. Every time she saw her, there was a new cat or dog sitting on her lap or walking at her side. How Evan put up with all the fur, she wasn't sure. She'd lose her mind if every piece of garment she owned got covered in fur all the time. There were definitely more animals in the manor than Sophia could tolerate. Horses, on the other hand, were a different matter entirely.

“How many cats do you own?” She tried to cleverly redirect the conversation away from her steamy thoughts and into safer

waters.

“Never mind how many cats I own or what sandwiches will be served at the party tomorrow. I have known you for many years, Sophia Atwood. What were you thinking about?” Margaret raised an eyebrow expectantly and waited for Sophia to come out with the story.

Taking a deep breath, Sophia giggled lightly, biting her lower lip and dragging her fingers through her curls as she stretched and settled back down. If there was anyone in the world she could trust with a secret like that, it was Margaret.

“Well, something did happen between Anthony and me yesterday when I returned from our tea.” Heat filled her cheeks despite her best efforts to handle the situation like a sophisticated married woman.

“It did not! Tell me more—only if you wish to, of course. How did it make you feel?” Margaret hurriedly pushed the cat from her lap and sat up straight, folding her hands in her lap as if she were about to learn the Crown’s secrets.

“It felt...” Sophia hesitated as images of Antony kissing down her wet skin flashed through her mind. “It felt like an explosion I couldn’t control. The way he touched my body left me feeling as if there was something important I was missing all along.”

The news seemed to make Margaret even giddier. She placed her hands over her mouth and smiled. "I'm so happy for you, Sophia. You may not realize it now, but this is how your connection with your husband will begin to grow. You'll find yourself in these little situations more often than not, and before you know it, you've both fallen in love."

Her words shocked Sophia into silence as she allowed Margaret to prattle on in the background of her muddled thoughts.

Love?

Was that what it felt like when a woman truly loved a man? Did she yearn for his touch on her skin and the feel of his tongue on her thighs? Surely it had to be so much more than that. Love by very definition was a deep ache in your heart that never found its peace until the one you desired held you in his arms. At least that was what the limited number of romance novels she had read had portrayed to her.

And what of the greater good? Would her mind suddenly be filled with nothing but lust if she was truly in love with her husband?

Turning her head to the side, Sophia looked out the frosted window of Margaret's drawing room. The snow came down in droves, covering the world in a thick white blanket.

A chill ran down her spine despite the roaring fire in the hearth. Wondering if she had fallen in love was a terrifying aspect. Fundamental parts of her very being were beginning to change. Yet, she couldn't help but yearn for his touch. Yet, she needed more to know if she was in love or not.

Did he want her purely for her body, or did his feelings reach far beyond lust?



Men lounged around the smoke-filled room at White's, puffing on cigars or drinking their whisky. Some played poker or chess as others merely lounged about, chatting to friends or discussing business with potential partners.

Anthony often found solace within the white stone walls. The manly décor of hunting trophies and lack of flowers gave the gentlemen of the *ton* a place to exist without the more feminine demands. Even the portraits on the walls boasted nothing but strength, depicting the many men who had triumphed in sports, such as hunting or archery, over the years.

“I must say that I am impressed, Anthony. I really thought that you would have blown your marriage by now,” Jason teased, pulling on the thick cigar in his hand. He wore dark green tails over crisp white breeches and polished black boots.

“I may not be blowing up my marriage, but I may very well begin to jeopardize the vow I made to my father,” Anthony

grumbled and shook his head.

He'd come so dangerously close to losing control with Sophia the previous day. It had taken all of his strength not to pull those shapely thighs of hers around his waist and go all the way.

The way the beads of water had traveled down her perfect skin in rivulets had driven him to the edge of sanity, where all sense and reasoning ceased to exist. Many a man had fallen prey to the wiles of women and their finer qualities. Anthony had just never envisioned that he would be one of those men.

“That’s how it all starts,” Evan Sutherland chimed in, swirling the amber liquid in his glass.

The Viscount of Northfork had only recently become a friend of Anthony’s. Sophia had insisted they meet, since she and his wife Margaret were best friends. Apparently, that kind of arrangement happened all the time when people were married—her friends’ friends became your friends. Not that there was anything wrong with Evan.

Anthony felt as if he could open up to the Viscount, who had equally found his match through Marie Webster. He hadn’t known the man for very long, but he seemed like someone who was very well put together with neat blonde hair, tailored suits, and a straight build that spoke of discipline.

“I never wanted it to start, in the first place. I only took a wife because of my mother’s desire to see me married before her illness progresses any further.”

Anthony clenched his jaw in anger at the precarious situation he found himself in. None of his feelings seemed to make sense anymore since Sophia had come along. He thought about her every waking hour and even dreamed of her when he slept.

“Like it or not, you are married now. And even if you do not wish to admit it to yourself, your wife is beginning to change who you are. Sophia is getting under your skin in a very big way,” Evan explained with a mischievous glint in his eyes.

He seemed to watch the exchange with great interest as Jason and Anthony argued about the finer points of character and love.

“Name one thing that has changed since I got married, other than the fact that the vow I made is being put in jeopardy?” Anthony demanded angrily. He wasn’t about to have his character besmirched just because he said, “I do.” There was still a great deal of who he was that he intended to hang onto.

“Where were you last Thursday evening?” Jason finished his cigar and snuffed out the tip in an ashtray beside his chair. White’s always made ample accommodations for its patrons and their many varying habits.

“I was at home with Sophia, answering letters from my mother,” Anthony responded with a frown as he tried to pinpoint what his friend was getting at. Surely there was nothing wrong with a man answering his correspondence.

“And the Thursday before that?” Jason seemed as if he wanted to laugh at the look of confusion on Anthony’s face.

“Obviously, I was at home, ensuring that Sophia settled into the manor. Just because I have a marriage of convenience does not mean that I can shirk my responsibilities toward my wife.”

Anthony’s frustration was beginning to grow with the look of amusement on his friend’s face.

“And there was nothing else you needed to be doing on that evening?” Jason smirked as if he had already won the argument.

Realization suddenly dawned on Anthony. It had long been a tradition for them to meet at White’s on a Thursday night and play poker. A tradition that he hadn’t upheld since he’d gotten married. The truth was that he hadn’t thought of doing anything other than being with Sophia.

Has she already begun to change me that much?

“Check and mate. You have not attended a single poker evening in weeks,” Jason said triumphantly, sitting back in his chair and folding his hands over his chest.

“That’s how it starts, you know. You think you won’t ever change your ways, then this woman comes into your home, and you find yourself thinking of nothing other than her presence. She consumes your very being until you morph into an unrecognizable form of yourself,” Evan added, smiling as if he had just let Anthony in on a secret piece of vital information. The dark look in his eyes spoke of someone who had been worn down after many battles of will.

“Why don’t I find that comforting at all?” Anthony frowned and sighed.

He’d already smudged the lines of the vow he had made to his father. What else would change as time went on? Would he eventually succumb to his desires and sire an heir with Sophia? The sudden thought startled him.

“You won’t, at first.” Evan laughed, puffing on his cigar and blowing a cloud of smoke into the already murky room.

“I think you should listen to the married man,” Jason teased and laughed, thoroughly enjoying the discomfort his friend was feeling.

Leaning forward, Evan smirked, allowing the cigar to hang from his lips. “First you find yourself being unable to think of anything else, then the attraction begins to grow...”

Images of Sophia’s curvy figure in the red dress, and the way her hair gently caressed the back of her neck, filled Anthony’s mind. He had become intoxicated with her without even realizing it.

“Then comes the really dangerous part that hooks you in for life. You won’t be able to keep your hands off her. It’s almost as if her very existence becomes the drug that sustains your life. No matter how hard you try to resist the feelings, you always go back for more...” Evan’s voice dripped with a dark longing.

Jason broke the silence that had filled the room. “Well, damn, I’m not sure if I’m terrified or if I suddenly want a wife.”

Evan snapped back into his cheerful demeanor and smiled. “Oh, you should definitely get a wife.”

“You just made it sound absolutely terrifying,” Jason said incredulously.

“It is, but it’s also one of the most rewarding and intoxicating experiences a man can have. I highly recommend getting married. The fear is all part of the grand mystery of marriage.”

Evan laughed and shook his head, placing his finished cigar in the ashtray beside his chair.

Anthony suddenly began to question the sanity of the Viscount. The man seemed utterly enamored with his wife while still being deathly afraid all at the same time. It didn't bode well for him that he had already progressed to the part where Sophia's body had become like a gold mine to him. The desperate need to explore her body overtook his thoughts and better judgment.

There were ways to be intimate with her that wouldn't lead to him siring an heir.

But what if she finds out that there's more?

He hoped and prayed that she'd understand his plight if by some miracle she realized that he wasn't doing everything required of a husband.

Anger suddenly made him clench his jaw as he thought of the way his father used to treat him. He'd never risk making a child that unhappy, even if it meant that he'd never feel the complete joy he yearned for with Sophia.

CHAPTER 20



S ophia's eyes drifted across the room to Anthony, who was deep in conversation with a few of his friends. The party had been in full swing for a few hours, and he'd spent most of his time talking to the other men. Even the carriage ride to Margaret's house had been filled with polite conversation that had never ventured beyond the weather or who would be in attendance that evening.

She was beginning to wonder if he was avoiding her after the moment they had shared in the tub.

Was I not avoiding him yesterday afternoon?

Her conscience prickled at her as she recalled the way she had bolted up the stairs and into her room upon returning home. The confusion that the conversation with Margaret had caused her prevented her from wanting to talk to him until she was certain. Yet, seeing him laughing with his friends made her yearn for his company once more.

She was about to lift her skirts and bridge the distance between them when Margaret, accompanied by one of her friends, stopped her in her tracks.

“Sophia, we have been looking all over for you. You must remember the Duchess of St. Clair?” Margaret smiled. Her arm was looped through that of Emma Galloway, née Crawford.

“Of course, I do.” Sophia smiled politely and curtsied, greeting the woman she had met on one of her many promenades in the park with Margaret.

The Duchess of St. Clair was a short lady with a pleasantly plump face, golden hair, and light brown eyes. Her cherubic lips and rosy cheeks made her a very pleasant person to talk to. The town had buzzed with gossip of the Duchess when her many dates with the Duke of St. Clair had led to marriage.

“Of course, she would, Margaret. We had many insightful discussions on our walks. I know you haven’t met my husband yet, he must be around here somewhere.” Emma lifted her gold spectacles to her nose and squinted around the room. Her bad vision had been one of the aspects that the *ton* had frowned upon, as if a woman with poor eyesight was akin to having the plague.

Sophia recalled the way her mother had scoffed at the idea of one of the *ton’s* most eligible bachelors marrying a woman

who used spectacles like an old spinster. Her mother's persistent infatuation with the *ton* and their opinions had been a constant source of frustration to her over the years.

"I think we will need to get you a new pair of spectacles soon. I have been walking behind you for the past few minutes." A deep voice that dripped with annoyance made the ladies look to the left in surprise.

The Duke of St. Clair was a tall man with black hair and green eyes. His stony countenance made Sophia wonder how it was that Emma had fallen head over heels in love with him. Then again, everyone knew that Marie Webster was famous for making matches no one would ever have thought would work. Their opposing interests and personalities made the Duke and Duchess of St. Clair the crowning jewels of the woman's career, putting her in good standing with a few if not all of London's desperate and hopeful youngsters.

"Don't be such a tease, Nicholas. You haven't introduced yourself to dearest Sophia." Emma smiled warmly at her husband and nudged him playfully in the side with her elbow.

"Of course, Duchess. I had the pleasure of making your husband's acquaintance earlier. I trust that you are enjoying married life?" The Duke spoke briskly as if he were getting the social formalities out of the way rather than enjoying the conversation. His briskness spoke of a restrained manner that stood in contrast to the way he treated his wife.

“Of course, she is enjoying married life. Why would she not be? You can be such a silly goose at times.” It was Emma who answered for him. She laughed, shrugging her shoulders before winking at Sophia.

The corners of the Duke’s mouth curled into a smile, making him slightly more approachable than he had been moments prior.

Sophia couldn’t help but smile at the interaction between the couple. It was obvious to anyone who saw them together that Nicholas simply doted on his wife, despite his reserved nature. His eyes searched her face whenever she spoke, wrinkling at the sides with tiny lines.

“Let’s not keep Sophia and Margaret to ourselves. I think they’ve placed fresh scones with clotted cream on the table,” Emma said happily and tugged on her husband’s arm.

“Then we should ascend upon the table at once. We wouldn’t want everyone else to get there before we do.” Nicholas winked at his wife and guided her away from Margaret and Sophia, but not before Emma could be overheard whispering to her husband.

“I knew there was a reason I married you.” Her light voice faded into a giggle that matched her youthful face.

Sophia watched the playful exchange between the couple with fervent curiosity. They seemed to love being with one another, despite the room full of people. Her eyes wandered back to her husband, who was deep in conversation with Margaret's husband. It seemed as if they had entered a heated debate that required the use of many hand gestures and glares.

Does he even think of me when we aren't together?

The thought crossed her mind with a dull ache in her chest that she hadn't been expecting. He hadn't once looked in her direction since the party had started. Did that mean that Margaret had been wrong in saying that the intimate moment they had shared would only bring them closer? Perhaps Anthony only viewed her as part of their marriage of convenience, and not someone that could be his partner.

"You know, Emma wasn't always as talkative and outgoing as she is now." Margaret brought Sophia's attention back to the party and looped her arm through hers, pulling her away from her thoughts and mixed feelings of confusion.

"She was quite talkative on our promenades."

Sophia recalled the time that Emma had stood up to a few ladies in the park who looked down on women who used the services of a matchmaker. Sophia could hardly believe that she had found herself in a similar situation despite her fervent beliefs at the time. She had sworn blind that women like Marie

Webster represented everything that was wrong with society in a very big way.

“Believe it or not, Emma had aspirations of becoming a spinster just as you and I had once upon a time. The reason I’m telling you this is because I noticed how you withdrew during our little chat yesterday.” Margaret smiled warmly at her.

Sophia hadn’t realized that Margaret had noticed how caught up she had been in her own thoughts. She was more than certain that the conversation had carried on despite her lack of participation.

“My point is that change while in a marriage is inevitable. You will lose some of your interests while gaining others. It’s nothing to be afraid of, and perhaps you may even find a few interests that you and your husband have in common,” Margaret finished with an encouraging nod and stopped a few steps away from Anthony, who was completely engrossed in his conversation with the Viscount.

Sophia’s mind wandered back to their talk on the stairs and the way that he had agreed with her about the prime ministers and who should have a say.

Could we possibly be able to have a friendship as well as a functioning and intimate marriage?

“You will never know if you don’t give things a chance,” Margaret whispered in her ear and gave her arm a gentle squeeze before nodding in Anthony’s direction. Ever the peacemaker, she was doing her utmost to nudge Sophia in the right direction.

What is the worst that could happen?

Sophia stood by thoughtfully as she watched the way Anthony engaged in conversation with Evan. Perhaps it wouldn’t be the end of the world if she tried to engage him intellectually to see if there was anything else they had in common.

Taking a deep breath, she decided to open herself up to the possibility of more than just a marriage of convenience. She was about to join his side when his attention was suddenly captured by another woman who wanted his attention.

The red-headed lady with freckles touched his arm and began to speak in an animated fashion. Her skin was alabaster smooth, and she had emerald green eyes. Feeling as if she were once again out of place, Sophia pursed her lips in disappointment and turned to leave, making her way up the stairs to Margaret and Evan’s study. There was no use in trying to gain his attention when his mind was clearly distracted.

Making her way up the stairs, she glanced back to see if he was still speaking with the woman.

Anthony laughed at something she had said and touched the hand that she had placed on his arm.

Feeling as if she could kick someone in frustration, Sophia clenched her jaw, lifted her skirts, and hurried into the gallery.



Sophia stood with her back against the wall of the study, thinking of Anthony as she watched the snow falling outside. What was it that she had felt when she had seen the way he had spoken when the woman had touched his arm? Who was she anyway?

She fought the urge to yell in frustration, shaking her head and pulling her light blue shawl a little tighter around her shoulders. The air was chilly and cool despite the fire that roared in the hearth.

The guests downstairs laughed and talked, adding to the growing feeling of claustrophobia that was beginning to make her ill. Would Anthony even notice that she was missing? He hadn't so much as looked in her direction. The constant feelings of uncertainty were making her head spin in confusion, giving her a headache.

Sophia decided to rejoin the party before her intrusive thoughts got the better of her. There would be time enough for reflection in the morning.

The door creaked open just as Sophia was about to leave, revealing the concerned look on Anthony's face.

“Here you are. Are you well? I didn't notice you leaving the room downstairs.” He stepped into the study and shut the door behind him.

I didn't even notice you leaving...

His words echoed in her mind and heart, creating a stinging sensation in her chest.

“You seemed a bit preoccupied, and I didn't want to bother you,” Sophia snapped a little harder than she had intended.

What had gotten into her all of a sudden? She was acting as if he had betrayed her.

“Are you well?” He came closer, closing the gap between them with lengthy strides.

Sophia's heart began to race, making her hug her arms around her middle in a defensive manner. She could kick herself for allowing his presence to have such a profound effect on her.

“You seem a little pale.” Anthony cupped her chin and lifted her face to his, his free hand gently resting on her upper arm as he spoke.

“I was just feeling a little cold, is all. I wanted to come and fetch my shawl.”

She melted slightly as he gazed into her eyes. There was something magnetic about the way he looked at her. Concern mingled with the desire that never failed to awaken her senses.

“We can always go home if you’re feeling a little peaky. You don’t think perhaps that you’re ill from staying out the other night? These things do have the tendency to linger if you don’t get enough rest.” His voice was filled with warmth and concern, taking her completely by surprise.

Here he was, asking about her well-being, while she had been wondering if his feelings for her were purely derived from lust. There was a much gentler side to Anthony Atwood than what she had seen before.

“No, I am all right. I think I just needed to warm up a little. I know you were enjoying your conversation.”

Sophia felt lost and a little confused under his gaze. What did it mean that he had come looking for her almost as soon as she

had left? She had only been gone for a few minutes when he'd come looking.

His lips curved into a charming smile that caught her off guard once again. "I saw how you were enjoying your conversation with Margaret and the Duchess of St. Clair. I wanted to come over and join you, but I was stopped by Evan and his political opinions." He ran his hands up and down her arms over the shawl as if he were trying to keep her warm.

He was watching me...

Her breath caught in her throat as she realized that Anthony had been paying attention to her despite the fact that he had seemed to be absorbed in his own conversations.

"I also wanted to introduce you to my cousin, but when I turned around, you had already left," Anthony continued.

That took her aback.

"Your cousin?" she asked with a frown, feeling her stomach sink because of her own jealousy and stupidity.

"Yes, Haley Grace. We've been friends since we were little. Her mother was my mother's sister. I wanted to introduce you to her and possibly Jason. He's a bit lonely after the war. I thought they could keep each other company if nothing else."

He smiled as if he had come up with a brilliant plan that only he knew about.

“The red-headed woman is your cousin.” Sophia shut her eyes and shook her head, feeling a mixture of disbelief and stupidity at how she had jumped to conclusions.

“So, you did see her, then? Did you think she was somebody else?” Anthony frowned with a strange look in his eyes as he searched her face.

“I didn’t think anything of it at all. I simply noticed her striking hair and eyes. We should go back downstairs before they miss us,” she lied in an attempt to change the conversation and divert his attention away from her embarrassment.

“If you are sure you’re feeling well enough.” Anthony stepped aside and placed his hand on the small of her back, allowing her to take the lead as they left the room.

Taking a deep breath, Sophia stepped out of the study and waited for him to join her. She was certainly more confused than she had been before she had come up to the study.

Exactly how did Anthony feel about her?

CHAPTER 21



Sophia's eyes drifted down the page of the book she was holding. Her eyes saw the words, yet her mind drifted to the tender way that Anthony had treated her at the ball. He'd been far more attentive with her for the rest of the evening, staying by her side and making sure that she had been included in all of his conversations.

The fire crackled in the hearth, filling the room with a comfortable warmth as she thought of Anthony and her ever-changing feelings toward him. Perhaps Margaret had been right in suggesting she put in a bigger effort where he was concerned. Sophia was beginning to feel hopeful that their marriage could turn into something more than just convenience.

She pulled her shawl a little tighter around her shoulders, leaning against the desk that sat in the corner of their smaller drawing room. She far preferred the coziness of the smaller room, especially in winter, when she struggled to keep herself warm.

“I thought I might find you in here,” Anthony said gruffly as he came into the room, shutting the door behind him in an attempt to keep the heat inside.

Sophia quickly shut her book and placed it behind her back, straightening her spine in an almost guilty manner. She had taken the book of poetry off the shelf on a whim, discarding her usually frowned-upon literature for something that could perhaps explain her feelings.

“What is it that you have behind your back? You’re like a cat that knows it shouldn’t have gotten the cream, but did so anyway.” Anthony raised an eyebrow at the suspicious way she was shifting from foot to foot and biting her lower lip.

“I... I do not know what you are talking about,” Sophia stammered at first, but she quickly regained her composure and held her head up defiantly. Her fingers curled over the leatherbound spine of the book she was concealing.

Frowning, Anthony glanced around the room, spotting the tray of scones, sandwiches, clotted cream, and jam that stood beside the pot of tea that had yet to be touched.

“Well, it doesn’t look like you are hiding anyone.” He smirked and walked over to the table in the center of the room.

“Why on earth would I be hiding anyone?”

Sophia suddenly felt annoyed at his unfounded accusations. She had asked for tea and sandwiches to be sent, but she had become lost in one of the pages and had completely forgotten about her tea.

Leaning down, Anthony placed his hand on the floral porcelain of the pot and measured the temperature. “I don’t know, there has to be a reason you’re acting so strangely. The pot of tea seems to have been standing here for quite some time.” He turned his head to look at her with a cheeky grin and narrowed his eyes.

“I sent for some tea while reading and forgot all about it. It’s not a Crown secret,” she snapped quickly before realizing that she had brought up the subject she had been hoping to avoid.

“And what is it that you were reading?” Anthony straightened with a mischievous glint in his eyes, taking a step toward her.

“Nothing.” Sophia tightened her grip on the book and took a step back, realizing that the desk was blocking her path.

Anthony’s smile only seemed to broaden at her behavior as he came closer. “Nothing? And why is it that you seem hell-bent on hiding this ‘nothing’ behind your back?” His voice held a teasing note that made her heart jolt with excitement. There was something almost intoxicating in the atmosphere between them.

She quickly thought of a lie that she hoped he would believe. “If you must know, I overheard one of your conversations last night and decided to look up one of the books you had mentioned. It’s a complete composition of the Crown rules and laws.”

She had in all honesty intended to look for one of the books he had mentioned, but her conversations with Margaret had gotten the better of her, causing her mind to wonder.

“I see, and you were hoping to surprise me with all of your political knowledge. That is why you are adamant about hiding the book from view.” Anthony nodded despite the smirk on his lips and came closer, stopping right in front of her.

“Exactly, I was hoping to enrich our conversations with more political facts,” Sophia said triumphantly, believing that she had succeeded in diverting his attention away from the book.

The smile on Anthony’s face seemed to broaden as he pursed his lips, biting back his laughter. “I see. I don’t suppose you will mind if I see the book, then?” He lunged forward and reached behind her back before she could react.

“Anthony! What are you doing?” Sophia panicked and jumped to the side, keeping the book hidden from view. Her heart was racing from shock as she glared at him.

“Trying to enhance our conversations!” He laughed out loud and lunged at her again, attempting to snatch the book from her hands.

Sophia panicked and bolted to the sofa as Anthony began to give chase, sidestepping all of her attempts to run from him, blocking her path with his body like a human shield.

“What is all of this fuss about? Just let me see the book.” He chuckled deeply, narrowing his eyes at her in a teasing gesture.

The sudden playful side of his nature warmed Sophia’s heart. Seeing the mischievous sparkle in his eyes made her realize that she had been entirely wrong in thinking that he would marry a woman purely for lust alone. There was something gentle and caring in his nature once he opened up.

“Because I am still entitled to have my secrets!” She laughed through her ragged breaths. Her brief stint around the coffee table had left her breathless and flushed in the cheeks. Her hair had loosened itself from the clip and now hung down her back in a waterfall of waves.

“No, no, no. You and I are married. What’s yours is mine, and what’s mine is yours. I ceded my library to you, and therefore have a right to see what you are reading.” Anthony raised a finger and shook it back and forth in front of her face.

“I don’t think that’s exactly what that saying means.” Sophia laughed at the child-like manner he was making his case.

Lunging forward, Anthony grasped her shoulders and pulled her to the sofa amidst a plethora of squeals and giggles. Sophia tried her best to escape his grasp but only succeeded in entangling their arms and legs even further. Realizing that there was no hope, she tossed the book behind the sofa in a last-ditch effort to maintain her dignity.

“Oh, that was very mature of you.” Anthony looked at her with his eyebrows raised.

“Coming from the man who chased me around a drawing room for a book!” Sophia could barely contain her laughter at the shocked expression on his face.

“That was self-preservation! You could have been concealing a weapon. You’re the one who isn’t acting mature here!” Anthony laughed and let go of her wrists, helping her sit up.

Glancing at the tray of clotted cream and jam, Sophia ran her teeth over her bottom lip. “We’ll see who is more mature.”

She dipped her finger in the pot of apple jam and smeared it all over his cheek before he could stop her. Laughing hysterically, she fell back on the couch.

“So, that makes you mature, doesn’t it?” Anthony couldn’t help but laugh with his eyes closed, shaking his head.

“It does in my books,” she managed to breathe through her fits of laughter.

“I guess I should follow your example, then.”

The teasing note in his voice made her pause and look up.

“What do you mean...” Her eyes widened when she spotted the full pot of clotted cream in his hands.

“This!” Anthony tipped the pot over her face and held her down with his arm over her chest.

“Anthony, don’t you dare!”

Sophia tried to fight him off but stopped moving when the blob of clotted cream hit the corner of her mouth.

Anthony let her go and chuckled deeply before replacing the pot on the tray. “That will teach you to use your little tricks on me. Now we are both mature.” His eyes drifted down her face and to her lips.

Shaking her head, Sophia sat up and used the tip of her finger to remove the blob of cream, licking it off before running her tongue over her lips. “Very well, you have won, Your Grace. I concede that you are the more mature between the two of us.” She giggled and attempted to fix her hair.

The heated passionate look in Anthony’s eyes made her breathing deepen. She’d seen that look in his eyes before when he’d wanted to kiss her.

Clearing her throat, she sat up straight and reached for a handkerchief to wipe his face. “Here, you might want to take care of that before you attract any ants.”

“That’s very kind of you. Do you mind showing me what you were reading now?” His voice was lower as he averted his gaze from her lips and wiped his cheek.

Sophia took a deep breath, conceding to the fact that there was no way out of the situation at present. “Only if you promise not to laugh at me.”

“I will make no such promise until I’ve seen what it is that you were concealing.” He tossed the handkerchief back onto the table and waited expectantly.

Shaking her head and smiling at the playfully gruff manner in which he spoke to her, Sophia stood and walked around the Sofa. She retrieved the book before returning to her seat and handing it over. “Now you know my shame,” she said and placed her hands in her lap, waiting for his response.

A strange kind of smile spread over his lips as he examined the cover. “So, this is what all of the fuss was about? You were enjoying the works of Lord Byron?” He ran his finger over the cover and opened the book at a random page.

“I know it’s not my usual reading, but the book caught my eye, and it made me curious,” Sophia tried to lie again, not wanting to admit to the fact that she had willingly gone looking for the book.

“Which poem were you reading?” Anthony ignored her awkwardness and flipped through the pages.

“So, we will go no more a roving,” Sophia admitted sheepishly.

“Did you like it?” Anthony looked into her eyes with no trace of irony or mockery.

Biting the inside of her cheek, she searched his face thoughtfully before deciding to trust him. “It wasn’t really what I thought it would be. I was given to understand that

Lord Byron was a romantic poet. I couldn't quite grasp what was supposed to be romantic about that one in particular."

A veiled look fell over Anthony's face as he flipped through the pages. The silence that filled the room began to make Sophia nervous as she waited for him to respond.

"You might want to try this one if it's romance you are looking for," Anthony eventually spoke and showed her the page he was holding open.

Sophia glanced at his face before reading the title on the page. "She walks in beauty?"

Her heart pounded in her chest. How was it that he knew of the poem?

"It's a poem about the way a man admires the woman he loves." Anthony swallowed hard with the same veiled expression on his face before turning the book back to himself.

A dull longing filled her chest as she watched his face. There was something utterly sincere about his features while he read.

*"She walks in beauty, like the night.
Of cloudless climes and starry skies;
And all that's best of dark and bright*

*Meet in her aspect and her eyes;
Thus mellowed to that tender light
Which heaven to gaudy day denies...*”

”Anthony’s voice trailed off as he read the last line. He brought his eyes up to her face, a passionate look in his gaze. The richness in his voice had added to the poem, making her breath catch in her throat. Sophia couldn’t help but admire the depths of his character.

Anthony Atwood was far more than met the eye.

“It’s always been a favorite of mine.” His voice was low and deep as he looked into her eyes, closing the book in his hand.

“I can see why. It inspires quite a bit of desire in the reader,” Sophia spoke in a breathy tone that conveyed the depth of the awe she felt.

“And what is it that you desire more than anything else at present?” Anthony leaned in closer and wiped the final remnants of clotted cream from the corner of her mouth.

A silent gasp escaped her throat as her breathing deepened. Her heart wanted to yell that she wanted nothing more than to feel his hands on her skin, have his kisses caress her thighs and make her feel the sweet ache of desire she had felt before. Yet, something was stopping her from telling him what she truly wanted.

“I want to ride horses with you again,” she managed to murmur as his lips came closer to hers.

“Your wish is my command,” Anthony breathed into her mouth before his lips came crashing down on hers in a passionate embrace.

Responding to his kiss with her arms around his neck, Sophia got lost in the feel of his tongue probing the warmth of her own. Their bodies melted together with his hands caressing her thighs through the fabric of her dress. She couldn't help but moan and gasp as Anthony dipped his head, kissing her neck with gentle flicks of his tongue.

His hand had barely grazed the skin of her leg beneath her dress when he drew back, pulling his body away from hers.

Confusion filled her mind as she looked up at him.

“We will have to be up early in the morning if we are to visit the horses on such short notice.” Anthony swallowed hard before running his fingers through his hair. It was almost as if he had been struggling with the situation as much as she had been.

“I'll be sure to be up early, then.” Sophia tried to gain control of her breathing as she watched him turn on his heel and leave

the room.

Why did it seem as if he wanted to devour her, but kept himself back?

Sophia's chest rose and fell with excitement as she watched the door close in his wake. Her body ached for his touch, yearning for the fulfillment his kisses had brought her.

CHAPTER 22



*A*nthony cleared his throat and shifted in his seat as he sat across from Sophia in the carriage. The air was cold and thick, highlighting their breaths as they both sat quietly. The snow on the ground was thick enough to allow for a smooth ride while shallow enough not to have the wheels sink into the ground.

He wondered why he had agreed to take her to see the horses again when the conditions were clearly not conducive to riding. Something that Evan had said to him at the ball came floating back to his mind.

Love can make a man do stupid things...

Glancing up at Sophia, Anthony wondered if what he felt toward her was love, or something else entirely different.

What is love anyway?

His heart skipped a beat when she suddenly looked up, smiling at him in an uncertain manner. Their close brush with intimacy

the day before had left an awkward silence between them that was hard to breach. He hoped that things would get better once his mother was there to act as a sort of buffer between them. It wasn't possible for Anthony to be alone in a house with Sophia, not when he found her as irresistible as he did.

All he had thought about when they had been playfully wrestling on the sofa was how it would feel to have his head between her thighs once again. His mind wandered to things he could teach her and the supple curves of her perfect breasts.

Sophia broke the silence with an awkward hesitation in her voice. "I hope your mother doesn't mind us dropping in on such short notice."

"I don't think she will. She's always complaining about how lonely it is to live in the country manor. She will be delighted to see us." Anthony shifted in his seat once again in an attempt to hide the effect that his thoughts had had on his body.

Sophia's thick grey coat and scarf didn't help much, as the shape clung to her body, making her hourglass figure even more prominent than it already was.

"It can't be easy living out here all alone. Surely things would be better for her if she had some company." She turned her head to look out the window at the miles of snow that blanketed the land as far as the eye could see.

Anthony's heart stopped for a second. Was she going to suggest living with his mother again? Did she abhor his presence to the point where she couldn't stand to see him every day? His anger suddenly grew to an irrational level as he thought of her leaving.

Sophia turned back to him with a serious expression. "Could not find a companion for her? I could place the ad myself and interview the young ladies."

The clenching anger in his chest suddenly eased as he allowed his fists to uncurl over his knees.

Why did the prospect of her living with my mother make me so angry?

He searched her face for a sign that she wanted to be away from him for any length of time but found nothing but deep concern for the well-being of his mother.

"I think she wouldn't mind that, but we would have to ask her first. It's quite an undertaking to bring someone into your home. You'd have to be able to trust them with your secrets as well as your belongings," he replied, feeling a little more relaxed.

"I never thought of it that way." Sophia turned back to the carriage window and placed her chin on her hand, staring at

nothing with a contented look in her eyes.

The way she reacted made Anthony wonder if she was content with his company, after all.

“We’re here,” he said as he caught a glimpse of the country manor in the distance. A fine blanket of snow had begun to fall over the earth, obscuring the view.

“I didn’t think of the snowfall when I asked if we could visit,” Sophia admitted sheepishly, huddling down in her seat with a shiver.

“I’m afraid that riding may be out of the question, unless you do want to brave the elements. But we can always visit the stables tomorrow.”

“I’d like that.” Sophia seemed to perk up, smiling gently at him as the carriage slowed to a stop in front of the manor.

Looking into her eyes, Anthony returned her smile. The soft glow of her skin in the evening light made him want to reach out and touch her cheek, gently stroking the rosy flesh. He was about to reach out when the carriage door suddenly opened, revealing a pink-nosed footman in a dark blue uniform.

“We were not expecting you this evening, Your Grace,” the man greeted humbly, trying his best not to shiver.

“I’m afraid we didn’t let Her Grace know that we would be coming,” Anthony explained, helping Sophia down from the carriage.

“That is quite all right, Your Grace. I’m just afraid that the stay might be a little lonely,” the footman said with a bow and shut the carriage door.

“Loney?” Sophia reached for Anthony’s arm as she sank into the snow, trying her best to steady herself.

The footman shivered slightly, brushing the falling snow off his coat. “I’m afraid that Her Grace went to London to visit a friend. The house is currently running with a skeleton staff.”

Anthony raised his eyebrows and exchanged a look with Sophia. They had driven all the way to the country to stay with his mother, and she had headed in their direction without so much as a note.

“It’s too late to return home now.” Sophia held onto his arm and searched his eyes. Her use of the word *home* in reference to their house in London made his heart skip a beat.

“I guess we could stay a night or two until the weather improves.” Anthony turned back to the footman, whose lips were beginning to turn blue. A small heap of snow was

beginning to form on top of the man's head. "How much of the staff has stayed on?"

"The cook, two maids, me, a hall boy, and, of course, the stablehands," the footman spoke through chattering teeth.

Taking pity on the man, Anthony decided to move things along. "Have one of the maids prepare the adjoining guest bedrooms. We will be staying a few nights." He dismissed the footman before he turned into a living icicle.

Turning back to Sophia, he waited to see what she would think of staying in the house alone with him for a few nights.

"I guess we will be staying a few nights, then." She pursed her lips into an awkward smile and shrugged.

Placing an arm behind her back, Anthony helped her up the walkway and onto the snow-covered stairs. The house seemed dark and abandoned upon closer inspection, with just a few candles burning in the downstairs windows.

It suddenly occurred to Anthony that he and Sophia had placed themselves in an even more precarious situation than they had been in London. The large country manor was all but abandoned, save for a few servants who would see to their needs. At least, in London, they had the distraction of staff in a smaller manner.

Things could get dangerously heated if Anthony didn't watch himself.



“I guess we will have to entertain ourselves for now.” Sophia shut the book she was holding and pulled her shawl around her shoulders.

The fire crackled in the hearth, sending sparks up the chimney as Anthony stretched his legs out in front of him. The manor was silent enough that they could have heard a pin drop on the other side of the house. Dinner had been a simple meal of soup and bread, followed by a glass of sherry to stave off the cold.

“I guess we will.” Anthony gave her a lazy smile, placing his hands behind his head with his eyes closed.

Sophia couldn't help but admire the firmness of his muscles that bulged beneath his shirt. Anthony was a fine specimen of a man. The large contours of his muscular calves stood out against the black breeches above his boots. Realizing that her breathing had deepened, Sophia averted her gaze, looking around the room for any kind of distraction to her heated thoughts.

The main sitting room of the large country manor was decorated in the delicate French style with floral prints and

gold candle holders. The elegance spoke of the graceful woman that Emily Atwood was. A few vases of holly and berries had been placed around the room, giving one the homely feel of Christmas.

Her eyes fell on the chess table nestled in the corner at the far end of the room. She didn't know why Anthony had stopped their kiss the night before, but she was fairly certain that something similar would happen again if they didn't quickly find a way to distract their thoughts. She had wanted him to touch her as he had done before, but not if it meant that the situation would make the atmosphere between them tense.

“Have you ever played chess before?” Sophia blurted out in a very unladylike manner.

“I beg your pardon?” Anthony opened one eye to look at her and frowned. The relaxed look in his eye suggested that he had been drifting off right before she had interrupted him.

“I was just wondering if you perhaps know how to play chess,” she said more quietly with an apologetic note in her voice and gestured to the chess table at the other end of the room.

Sitting up, Anthony followed her gaze and shook his head. “I'm afraid that I never took an interest in chess. Too many rules to remember.” He stifled a yawn with the back of his hand and turned back to her.

Sophia frowned and shook her head, confused by his peculiar statement. “Aren’t you interested in politics?”

Anthony seemed just as confused as she was and frowned. “I am.”

“Then how can you say that there are too many rules to memorize in a game of chess? The very nature of politics has to do with rules and strategies. It should actually be a mental exercise for someone like you. Quite frankly, I am shocked that you would not know how to play.” She called him out without thinking her statement through.

“Do you know how to play chess?” Anthony narrowed his eyes and glared at her.

“I do not, and I am not ashamed to say it. Chess isn’t something that is usually included in a young lady’s education.” Sophia stuck her nose in the air and held her head high.

There was no use in knowing how to play chess, in her opinion. The only reason she had suggested the game was to pass the time.

“Excuse me while I watch the pot call the kettle black.” Anthony’s voice dripped with sarcasm as he mimicked her

voice mockingly.

“I beg your pardon?” It was Sophia’s turn to sound confused as she lowered her chin and looked at him with a furrowed brow.

“Aren’t you the one that’s constantly spouting volumes of politics, equality, and other bluestocking principles?” He gave her a triumphant look with a smirk that said he knew he had gotten the upper hand and enjoyed it.

“That’s... that’s neither here nor there.” Sophia shrunk back slightly, unable to think of a reply that would best his.

“Exactly what I thought.” Anthony folded his arms over his chest and lay back on the sofa with a grin that angered her more than it should have.

“I don’t have to sit here and take this abuse,” she huffed and then stood, slamming her book down on the table beside the sofa.

Opening one eye, Anthony smiled at her again. “You’re just mad because I got the better of you.” He laughed and shook his head.

Balling her fists at her sides, Sophia glared at him, readying herself to storm out of the room. The infuriating way he was

teasing her made her want to fetch a glass of water just so she had the pleasure of throwing it in his face. She couldn't stand the fact that he had called her out on a matter of wits.

Turning to leave, she fumed with anger, clenching her jaw before setting off in the direction of the door. Just then, her foot hooked on the corner of the rug, sending her sprawling forward with her arms outstretched.

Moving quickly, Anthony caught her around the waist, holding her upright before her hands could even touch the ground.

Sophia opened her eyes to find herself suspended in mid-air, her arms outstretched in an attempt to break her fall. Her heart was beating at an uncontrollable pace, causing her chest to heave from the shock.

"This brings back memories," Anthony growled above her head before placing her back on her feet.

"Thank you," Sophia said quietly with one hand on her chest in an attempt to calm her racing heart.

The sudden stumble had happened so quickly that she hadn't had the time to process what had happened.

Turning her gently, Anthony tilted her face toward his. "You didn't get hurt, did you?" His eyes swam with concern, devoid

of the sarcasm and triumph that had been there before.

“No, I don’t think I did.” Sophia felt lost in his gaze as he traced a path over her chin with his thumb.

The heavy scent of cigars and soap filled her senses, drawing her in. It occurred to her that she’d never liked the smell of cigars before meeting Anthony, but now the scent seemed like home to her whenever she caught a whiff.

Leaning in, he brought his lips closer to hers and closed his eyes.

A knock sounded at the door, startling both Anthony and Sophia. “Your Grace.”

“What is it?” Anthony snapped at the closed door, annoyed.

The footman’s muffled voice hesitantly came through the door. “I only want to know if you need anything before the maids retire for the rest of the evening.”

“That will be all, thank you,” Anthony called back, keeping his eyes on Sophia’s.

Another knock sounded at the door.

“What is it now?” His voice was sharper than he had intended.

“I beg your pardon, Your Grace, I just wanted to add that the bath that Her Grace requested is ready and waiting.” The poor footman’s voice seemed to tremble with fear.

“Thank you, Jimmy. I will be up soon,” Sophia answered more gently, pushing past Anthony.

Anthony dropped his hand from her face. “You better take your bath before the water gets cold.

“Thank you,” was all she whispered before turning to leave.

There was definitely something keeping him from wanting to be closer to her. What that was, Sophia didn’t know.

CHAPTER 23



S ophia ran her fingers over the neatly stacked spines of the books in Emily's study. The leatherbound covers gave her a sense of purpose and determination as she thoughtfully read the titles. There had to be something on the shelves that would help her and Anthony overcome the awkwardness that had suddenly sprung up between them.

She yearned for the intimacy they had shared that evening in the tub. Her dreams since then had been filled with Anthony touching her flesh in ways that made her skin tingle. Sophia didn't know why Anthony was withdrawing the way he was, but she was determined to figure it out if it meant that things would progress as they should.

Progress as they should...

Pausing on the ladder, she wondered when she had started thinking that relations between a married couple were normal. She had come so far from the girl she had been before Anthony Atwood. She still believed in equality for men and women, yet her mind had somehow opened up to the idea that

there was more to marriage than just the norms of society. Having seen the way her friends had blossomed in their marriages, she hoped for something similar with Anthony.

“There it is,” she said triumphantly and reached for a red book with gold lettering.

“There what is?” Anthony suddenly spoke up from behind her.

Having been startled, Sophia gripped the edges of the bookshelf and steadied herself, causing the step ladder to shake beneath her feet. How long had he been standing there, watching her? She felt insecure about the way she had been admiring the books and talking to herself while she had thought she had been alone.

“Please, don’t fall again. Why are you so accident-prone all the time?” Anthony grumbled, letting out the breath he had been holding and shaking his head.

Feeling as if she were steady again, Sophia climbed down the step ladder she had been using and fixed the skirts of her dress with the book in hand.

“This time, it was not my fault. You were the one skulking in the doorway. Just how long have you been standing there?” she complained, her annoyance growing.

“You should be aware of your surroundings. What book do you have this time? Or will I have to wrestle it out of your arms to get the answer again?” Anthony smirked at her, uncrossing his arms and pushing himself off the doorframe.

Sophia shook her head. The man was insufferable with his quick wit, yet she couldn't help but be drawn to his presence. It was almost as if she yearned to know more about him and the feelings he conjured within her. “I was looking for a book that might help us learn the rules of chess.” She lifted the book in her hand and handed it to him as he approached.

“You are quite adamant that we will be playing chess on this trip, aren't you?” Anthony shook his head and accepted the book, opening the cover and flipping through the pages.

“And what, may I ask, is wrong with that? Are you afraid you will lose to a 'bluestocking,' to use your turn of phrase?” She cocked her head to the side defiantly and placed her hands on her hips.

“No, I'm just afraid that you might cause bodily harm to me or yourself if you're allowed around pointy little objects for any length of time,” he shot back with a smirk.

“I will cause bodily harm to you with that book if you aren't careful.” Sophia narrowed her eyes and glared at him, hiding the fact that she was amused by his statement.

Although she would never admit it to Anthony, she rather enjoyed their witty banter. She had longed for that kind of company ever since Margaret had gotten married and left her to her own devices.

“I’m absolutely terrified, I might need to ask the doctor for a nerve tonic in order to sleep tonight. Now, where do we start with this?” His eyes scanned the pages from top to bottom.

Rolling her eyes, Sophia shook her head. “I presume we should start at the beginning, don’t you think?”

It was Anthony’s turn to roll his eyes and shake his head. “Obviously, I wasn’t about to suggest we start at the end.” The level of sarcasm he used matched hers. “I never know with you. Anyway, I was looking for you to say that the cook and all the servants have gone to town with the carriage. Apparently, it’s their half day. So, you and I are to fend for ourselves for the rest of the day.” He closed the book with one hand and looked up.

Sophia’s heart skipped a beat as she looked into his eyes.

Alone all day in an empty manor.

“I’m sure we won’t fall to pieces in the space of a few hours. Now, let’s figure this out before you trip over air.” Anthony placed the book beneath his arm and headed toward the door.

Taking a deep breath, Sophia tried to compose herself without her mind wandering to things it shouldn't.



“I don't think you are allowed to move your rook in that manner,” Anthony said thoughtfully, stroking his chin as he stared at the board.

They had been attempting to play for at least an hour, with little to no success at all. Sophia kept her nose stuck in the book after every turn, and Anthony tried to learn while playing.

“No, it clearly says here that a rook can move in any direction,” she grumbled irritably with her finger on the open page, holding it up for Anthony to see.

“I'm pretty sure that you aren't allowed to move diagonally,” Anthony countered, moving her piece back to the position it had been in when they had started.

“Please, do not touch my pieces, and I'm sure that a rook can move diagonally along with the bishop and queen.” She moved her piece back to the square it had vacated and glared at him.

She had been concentrating so hard on the game that pieces of her hair had come loose from her bun, hanging down her face and back.

“No... You need to read a few pages back. The rook cannot and must never move diagonally.” Anthony moved her piece back to the starting point and held his hand up.

The atmosphere grew tense as Sophia clenched her jaw and gripped the edges of the book. The look on her face suggested that she was about to bludgeon him with the book if he wasn't careful. A fact that both amused and irritated him in equal measure.

“We can leave the rook there, but only if you intend to cheat or be wrong.” Anthony held his hands up in mock surrender.

“I am not wrong, and I'll prove it to you.” Sophia violently leafed through the pages in an attempt to prove her point.

Rolling his eyes, Anthony shook his head and leaned back on his chair with one arm flung over the back. “You can look up the queen, king, pawns, and whatever clergy-related pieces you like. It won't make you any less wrong.” He lazily leaned over the board and shoved her piece back.

“Stop touching my pieces!” Sophia lost her temper, snapping the book shut with one hand and snatching her rook from the

board.

“Hey now, you can’t remove the pieces from the board!” Anthony sat up straight and glared at her.

“I’ll remove any piece I like if you don’t stop touching them,” she said defiantly and held the piece away from him.

Clenching his jaw, Anthony narrowed his eyes at her and leaned forward. “Place the piece back where it belongs, at the start.” His voice dripped with irritation.

He’d never met a woman as stubborn and blatantly defiant as his wife. He’d take her over his knee and spank her bottom if she tested his patience any further.

“Or what?” Sophia cocked her head to the side and glared back at him, making sure that her rook remained out of his reach.

“I will take it from you and place it back myself.” He placed his hands on the arms of his chair to convey his seriousness.

“You wouldn’t,” she said more hesitantly, uncertainty swimming in her eyes.

Anthony had barely tried to stand when Sophia yelped like a pup and bolted from her chair, knocking the board with all of the pieces onto the ground.

“Look what you’ve done!” Anthony yelled and jumped to his feet, giving chase as she ran to the other side of the room, with her rook tightly clasped to her chest.

“I don’t care! Just leave my rook alone!” Sophia shouted breathlessly, taking shelter behind the sofa as he caught up to her.

“We can’t continue playing the game, you’ve knocked over the board!”

Anthony held back the mirth that was building in his chest. The childish way she clung to the rook along with the wild look of her hair hanging from her bun made him want to laugh at the ridiculousness of the situation.

“At least I have my piece and you can’t touch it. That’s all that matters.” She glared at him, watching his every move like a mouse attempting to escape a hawk.

He wasn’t sure why, but he couldn’t stay mad at her for any length of time. She always found a way to creep back into his good books with a simple glance or smile. Her chest rose and fell beneath her beaded blue gown from the effort of trying to

outrun him, yet she still managed to look breathtaking to him even in her disheveled state.

“How is that all that matters?” A deep chuckle escaped his chest as he lost the battle of holding onto his anger. Her logic made absolutely no sense to him at all, but it seemed to matter quite deeply to her.

“Don’t laugh at me.” She took a step back, clutching her book even tighter to her chest.

“I’m not laughing at you. I’m laughing *with* you.” He placed his hands on his hips and shook his head while laughing.

He couldn’t believe there was no one there to witness the madness she was displaying. He knew deep down that his mother would have enjoyed the way Sophia was keeping him on his toes.

“I’m not laughing. Therefore, you are laughing at me!” Sophia stomped her foot angrily against the wooden floor.

“We will just have to do something about you not laughing, then, won’t we?” Anthony gave her a wolfish grin before darting around the sofa and catching up to her just as she made it to the front.

Yelping in shock, Sophia fell on the cushions, with Anthony tickling her sides. Her attempts at escaping only brought her closer to his chest as he flipped her over onto her back and pinned her down with his knees on either side of her hips.

“Stop tickling me!” She lost her breath as she laughed, trying to hold onto her rook.

“Let go of the piece, and I’ll stop.”

Anthony redoubled his efforts of tickling her before gripping her wrists and pinning them on either side of her head. Her laughter filled his ears like a sweet melody that he’d longed to hear for many years.

Her laughter subsided as she looked into his eyes. Her hair had completely come loose, framing her beautiful features. Anthony couldn’t help but lean in closer, wanting more of the beautiful vision he saw before his eyes.

The rook fell to the floor and clattered loudly as Sophia loosened her fingers, placing her hands behind his neck and drawing him closer.

Not able to resist any longer, Anthony gave in to the desires of his flesh. His tongue hungrily parted her lips in search of the heat concealed within her sweet mouth, eliciting a soft moan from her chest. Lowering his body onto hers, Anthony could

feel her perfect breasts pressing against his chest. The sensation of her nipples pressing through the fabric of her dress drove him wild with desire.

His fingers caressed the delicate flesh of her wrists before making their way up her hands and tangling with her fingers as she kissed him back with equal amounts of passion and desire.

A soft moan of hunger made him place his hands on her sides, guiding her up and onto his lap as he sat back.

“Anthony...” Her hot breath caressed his ear as she leaned into his passionate embrace, her bare thighs touching the sides of his legs.

His hands caressed the small of her back as he kissed a path over her chin and down her neck, stopping at the gentle curve of her neck to savor the sweet fragrance of her skin. The smell of her rose-scented perfume erased any kind of reservations that had lingered in his mind. He needed to feel the length of her naked body against his flesh and sample the forbidden fruits of his desire.

“I want to take you to bed,” he growled against her throat, nipping her neck in a playful manner.

“You may take me wherever you like,” Sophia breathed, throwing her head back with a loud moan of pleasure.

Standing with her in his arms, Anthony held her steady as she wrapped her legs around his waist, pressing her body against his already heated loins.

“You drive me wild with all of your antics,” he growled before covering her lips with his and allowing his hands to wander down to the firm shape of her buttocks.

He would have had her on the sofa if he allowed himself to give in to his lust, but he wanted to savor every moment with her, taking his time to explore her body with the tips of his fingers.

He carried her out of the room, then made his way up the stairs with her in his arms, kissing her neck and shoulders, with one hand on the rails to guide his way.

CHAPTER 24



Sophia wrapped her legs around Anthony's waist, her breath caught in her chest as she felt his powerful hands grab onto her thighs. They moved through the house, stopping at regular intervals on the stairs to run their hands over each other's bodies and sample the fruits of their kisses. Their insatiable moans echoed through the empty corridors, creating an animalistic atmosphere of heat that drove her wild.

There was something utterly sensual about the deep growls that escaped Anthony's chest. She wanted to hear him speak in his deep voice as he caressed her body, making her want him even more.

"I think we are still alone." Anthony's voice sounded muffled against her neck as they reached the top of the stairs. He was carrying her in his arms with ease.

"I certainly hope we are," Sophia gasped, tangling her fingers in his thick hair as he traced a path down her neck with his tongue, gently nibbling and kissing.

Her skin tingled with desire as Anthony paused in the hallway, pressing her back against the wall as he propped her up with his knee. His hands quickly made their way down her waist, feeling the curves of her hips before making their way back up her body and cupping her breasts with a gentle squeeze.

The sensation alone was enough to make her scream as she placed her hands on his upper arms, squeezing the taut muscles through his shirt.

“Do you want me to stop?” His voice was low and deep in her ear, causing a wave of goosebumps to spread across her skin. The strong way he commanded her body fueled her desire, setting her heart aflame.

“Absolutely not,” she whispered through moans of pleasure, leaning the back of her head against the wall as he massaged her breasts. The reactions he was eliciting from her body swept her away on a cloud of desire that engulfed them both.

“Good, I don’t intend to stop.” His voice was urgent as he gripped her waist tighter and pulled her body against his, making his way to the other side of the hall before kicking the door open and carrying her in.

His sudden surge of urgency sent her spiraling out of control. Placing her hands on either side of his face, she hungrily sought his lips, allowing him to press her back against the hardwood of the bed’s posts. Her fingers made their way down

his chest, tugging at the fabric of his shirt that hid the flesh she needed to touch.

Anthony's fingers ran up her thigh, making their way under her dress before caressing her intimate flesh over her undergarments. Whimpering, Sophia begged him for more, wanting the sweet relief he had given her in the stables with his fingers.

"Not yet," he breathed against her neck as she moved in time with his fingers.

"Don't make me wait," she moaned hungrily against his lips, holding his face with the palms of her hands.

Placing her on the edge of the bed, Anthony swiftly removed his shirt, exposing the chiseled muscles of his chest and abdomen. The hardness of his arousal that had been pressing against her core with a fiery need came into full view as he lowered his breeches to the ground. Stepping aside, he kicked his clothes out of the way and walked over to the bed.

Sophia could tell by the wild look in his eyes that there was no stopping him now that they'd found themselves alone in the house. If things had been good between them before, they were about to get a whole lot better.

“Do you trust me?” he whispered, leaning down and looking into her eyes with his hands resting on either side of her thighs on the bed.

“Yes.” Sophia’s eyes made their way down his body and rested between his thighs, causing her chest to rise and fall in a deep, even rhythm. Anticipation building in her core, she wanted to touch him in the same ways that he had touched her.

Pushing her back, Anthony climbed onto the bed and lay at her side, using his fingers to trace a path from her chin down to her chest before gently cupping her breasts and leaning in for a kiss.

Sophia hungrily returned his affection, placing the tips of her fingers against his chest and feeling the heat of his skin.

“This dress is in my way,” he growled hungrily and squeezed her breasts a bit harder in both hands.

Pushing herself onto her elbow, Sophia reached around her back and tugged at the strings holding her dress in place. The fabric around her bosom gave way, revealing the milky flesh of her breasts above her corset.

Without wasting time, Anthony dipped his head between her breasts, flicking his tongue over the soft skin while holding the

sides of her chest. With one swift motion, he reached behind her back and ripped the back of her corset, freeing her chest.

Cool air kissed her rosy nipples as he stared down at her, devouring her naked form in the flickering light of the fire. Moving the tips of his fingers over her chest, he took his time admiring her body before lowering his face to her ear.

The pit of her stomach fluttered with a strange sensation that extended all the way to her chest. There was something intoxicating about the hungry look in his eyes. It made her feel whole as a woman to be wanted by a man as strong and handsome as Anthony.

“You’re mine tonight,” he whispered, kissing his way down her neck while using his tongue for added effect before reaching her breasts.

Sophia whimpered at the feeling of his tongue gently flicking her nipples in slow motions. The tingling sensation that erupted in her core made her hips writhe, matching his pace and urging him on. She wanted him to touch her again, bringing the sweet relief that would stop the ache in her loins.

Wanting the feel of his skin against hers, she gently put her hands on his chest and pushed him back, kissing his chest down to his abdomen as he shut his eyes. Placing his hands on the back of her head, Anthony tangled his fingers in her hair, encouraging her on.

Coming to his knees, Anthony guided her head lower, gently nudging her body in the right direction when she hesitated at his hips. It wasn't long until she got the hint, kissing a path over his muscular thighs while gently flicking her tongue back and forth. Her mouth sought his arousal, instinctively knowing what she needed to do.

A loud moan escaped his throat as his thighs trembled with pleasure, causing Sophia to double her efforts as he throbbed. Placing his hands on either side of her head, Anthony guided her movements, stopping her when he began to throb harder.

“Just wait, there are many things I would like to do to you first. I didn't know you were such a little minx,” Anthony growled, lifting her by her upper arms and bringing her lips to his for a passionate kiss and playfully biting them.

Sophia relented to his commands and allowed herself to be guided back down, watching her husband toss her dress and corset aside before positioning himself above her on the bed. The heated look he gave her made her yearn for the sweet release. She could have died in that moment and never complained, as long as he followed through.

He drew a path down her chest with the tips of his fingers, circling over her breasts and nipples before dipping down to her abdomen and caressing the gentle curve of her thighs. Soft sighs of pleasure escaped her lips, the tingling sensation in her thighs only growing stronger as he teased her skin.

Her breathing deepened as Anthony caressed a path over her most intimate flesh, dipping his fingers into the parts of her body that ached the most for his touch.

“Do you like that?” He lowered himself onto her abdomen as he touched her, making her back arch with pleasure as she gripped the pillow beneath her head and closed her eyes.

“Yes,” she moaned.

“In that case, I think you’ll like this a whole lot more.” He kissed the tip of her nose before removing his hand and repositioning himself between her thighs.

A wave of disappointment swept over her body in the absence of his fingers. The sensations had been mind-blowingly good. After days and days of yearning for his touch, she couldn’t wait any longer.

“Don’t worry, I’m not done with you yet. I was just checking if you were ready.” Anthony chuckled in a deep voice, kissing her neck and spreading her thighs with his knees.

Relenting to his guidance, Sophia allowed him to take control, lifting her hips as he positioned himself at her aching core. The strong feel of his muscular thighs between hers was a new sensation that nearly sent her over the edge. She wanted to

scream for him to hurry but knew that he was teasing her on purpose. The struggle for dominance between them was evident even in the bedroom. The only difference was that this fight was one that Sophia was willing to lose.

Anthony could have her mind, body, and soul if he wanted. The gentle caress of his touch was enough to make her body yield to his will.

“This will only hurt for a second,” Anthony whispered softly in her ear before coming up and looking down at her with a tender smile. His thighs pressed into hers as he used his hands to guide his manhood into her core.

A sharp pain shot through her abdomen as Anthony entered her body with a grunt, carefully moving his hips while holding her face with his other hand. The pain was quickly replaced by pleasure when his body sank into hers, lending its warmth to her skin and easing the fire burning within her.

Feeling the warm sensation of fulfilling pleasure, Sophia began to move in sync with his thrusts, lifting her hips to meet his at every thrust.

“Anthony...” Sophia breathed heavily, leaning her head back on the pillow as he made love to her.

Every fiber of her being vibrated with excitement, melting into his body like ice on a hot summer day. Her fingers gripped the sheets, searching for something to hold onto as she rode the waves of pleasure.

Deep moans escaped Anthony's throat as he picked up the pace, adding to her pleasure with growing friction, his thighs rubbing against hers. Straightening himself a little, he reached down and gripped her hips, guiding her body with every thrust and stroke. Lowering himself back down, Anthony picked up the pace, looking into her eyes as they moved.

The ecstasy began to build in her core, reminding her of the tub with his tongue caressing her flesh. Gasping loudly, she gripped his back, holding on tightly as her muscles stiffened and contorted, giving her the release she had been longing for. Her legs wrapped around his waist, pulling him closer.

Anthony's face suddenly contorted as a fine sheen of perspiration broke out on his skin. Rolling off her, he grunted loudly, lying on his abdomen with his face buried in the pillow. His shoulder blades rose and fell with effort as he came down from the immense high they had both experienced.

Sophia panted loudly for a few moments before she was able to turn onto her side and look at his body. The muscles of his back stood taut like rows of ropes being strained in a tug of war before his body finally relaxed.

Using the tips of her fingers, she drew a path over his back and admired the strength of his body.

Turning his head to look at her, Anthony grinned before turning his body to hers and placing his arms around her waist. “I hope that didn’t hurt too much,” he spoke softly, running his fingers over her bare arm.

“It did at first, but it got better really quickly.” Sophia bit her lower lip and caressed his chest, feeling an overwhelmingly strong urge to be closer to him. She’d never thought she’d feel as if another person was part of her soul, but lying there with Anthony after having made love invoked a strong feeling of unity within.

“That’s how it’s supposed to be.” Anthony smiled at her and drew her closer to his chest.

Breathing in the scent of his skin, Sophia allowed herself to feel the wholeness and contentment that came with the warmth of being held.

Anthony held her tightly against his chest, whispering sweet nothings into her hair as she drifted off to sleep, feeling as if nothing in the world could ever go wrong.



Anthony awoke in the dead of night to see Sophia sleeping peacefully beside him on the bed. The blankets had slipped down her back, exposing her shoulder blades and lower back to the dying light of the fire.

The serene expression on her face as she breathed made him reach out and tuck a few strands of her hair behind her ear. The motion made her stir, turning her face away from him and pulling the blankets over her shoulder.

How could he tell a woman as perfect and beautiful as her that he'd never be able to give her children? And what if she found out that he had intentionally married her knowing that he'd never be able to sire an heir?

Dread suddenly filled him as he watched her sleeping figure. He'd barely been able to contain himself earlier. It had been lucky that he'd pulled out at the last second, finishing on the sheets rather than in her womb. Looking to the side, he spotted the sheet he'd crumpled into a ball and tossed aside. What if the next time they were intimate, he took too long and accidentally spilled his seed in her womb?

Realizing that he'd gotten himself in too deep, he quietly stood and walked over to the fire, leaning against the mantle with his forearm.

I must do what is best for us both.

He thought of the amount of pain that he'd cause if he left her to live with his mother or even the pain he would feel if she wasn't in his life on a daily basis. None of that, however, compared to the pain he knew she would feel if he sat her down and explained that he'd never give her a child.

Making up his mind, Anthony walked back over to the bed and placed a kiss on her forehead. He hoped against hope that, in time, she would come to forgive him for the decision he had made.

CHAPTER 25



*R*olling over in the bed, Sophia reached out an arm but quickly realized that Anthony was not there. Her mind was still foggy from sleep as she lifted her head, squinting around the dimly lit room in an attempt to see. The fire had long since burned out, leaving nothing but smoldering embers in the hearth.

Her eyes searched the room, finding Anthony at the dresser, buttoning his shirt and pulling on his boots with his back to the bed. By the looks of his neatly combed hair, he had already been up for a few hours.

“It’s a little early to be up, isn’t it? What time is it anyway?” Her voice was thick and groggy from sleep as she turned on her back and stretched.

It felt as if an hour or two had passed, but then again, she could have been mistaken. Their intimate dalliance had left her sleeping peacefully, blissfully unaware of the rest of the world.

Turning slowly, Anthony looked at her with a veiled expression. "It's still early, go back to sleep." His voice was cool and distant, devoid of any emotions as if he were addressing a stranger and not the woman he had married and bedded.

Realizing that something was wrong, Sophia sat up in bed and looked him over. He was wearing a fresh pair of breeches and a clean shirt with polished boots. He had to be going somewhere, she just wasn't sure where to. She racked her mind but couldn't recall him mentioning anything about a business trip or plans.

"Is something the matter?" Panic began to set in as she thought of his mother and her illness.

"Nothing is the matter," he answered a little more sharply and turned his back to her once again.

"Then why are you dressed?"

She wondered why he was snapping at her when everything had been fine before they'd fallen asleep. At least they had been fine for her. She had thought that Anthony had enjoyed their time together as much as she had.

"I will be leaving. You must stay here and wait for Mother to return. It shouldn't be more than a few days." He kept his back

to her as he spoke and reached for the tails that were draped over the back of a chair. Pulling sharply on his shirt, he tucked the ends into his breeches and fastened his belt.

“Stay here? Where are you going? Shouldn’t I go with you?” Sophia frowned at his back, feeling an uncomfortable sensation creeping into her chest.

His sudden change in behavior seemed cruel and unwarranted, for she hadn’t done anything wrong. Something must have happened during the time she had fallen asleep in his arms.

“Like I said, you will be staying here while I leave.” His voice was gruff as he glanced at the bed, straightening his cuffs before averting his eyes.

The dismissive way he was treating her made her think that perhaps she had done something wrong during their love-making session.

“Did I do something wrong?” Sophia asked, reaching for the sheet and pulling it over her chest.

She suddenly felt naked and exposed in his presence despite the intimacy they had shared. The way he was treating her left a feeling of dread in her stomach.

The room was cold, given the fact that the fire had gone out at some point during the night. The lack of servants also meant that none of the fireplaces would be lit until the morning. Yet, the iciness in his voice was worse than the bite in the air, cutting her deeply with serrated edges.

“You didn’t do anything wrong. I’m merely asking you as my wife to obey my commands and stay here in bed. I’ll contact my mother in the morning and let her know that you will be here, awaiting her return.” He made sure that his gloves were secure on his hands before walking toward the door.

A wave of panic washed over Sophia as her eyes frantically darted around the room. Everything was just as it had been before they’d gone to bed, yet the atmosphere had suddenly changed in the space of just a few hours.

“Please, tell me what the matter is!?” she begged.

Ignoring her plea, Anthony made his way to the door, shutting it firmly behind him with a loud bang. A few pieces of parchment that had been on the dresser fluttered to the floor.

“Wait!” Sophia yelled in confusion, clutching at the sheets. Waiting for a moment, she listened to his retreating footsteps before flying out of the bed with the sheet wrapped around her body. Yanking open the door, she raced down the hallway, with the sheet as her only form of protection against the cold.

“Go back to bed, Sophia, it’s cold outside. You will catch a cold if you come out undressed,” Anthony called over his shoulder without so much as looking back at her.

His lengthy strides gave him an advantage as he disappeared around a corner, leaving her feeling as if her world had come crashing down.

Shivering from the cold, Sophia bolted back into the room and pulled on her dress, coat, and fur-lined boots. There would be enough time for undergarments once she’d gotten an explanation for his strange behavior. Tears of frustration and panic streamed down her cheeks as she tried to think of all the ways she could have done something wrong.

Everything had seemed to be falling into place as she had lain in his arms, but now he was leaving her without an explanation.

She ran out of the room, then made her way down the hall, taking the stairs two at a time before catching up to Anthony as he shut the door in her face.

“Wait!” Sophia cried out, yanking on the large wooden doors that proved to be heavier than they looked. It took all her strength and pulling with her full weight to leverage the doors open enough to walk through.

A cold blast of air hit her full in the face as she finally opened the door, spotting Anthony on his way to the stables. His boots left deep impressions in the snow as he trudged on ahead, seemingly desperate to leave her behind.

“You can’t just leave me like this without an explanation!” she yelled at his back, slipping on a snowdrift on her way down the stairs.

The snowfall had doubled since their arrival, making it difficult for Sophia to maneuver in her indoor boots.

Whipping around, Anthony rushed forward and gripped her upper arms, pulling her to her feet with shocking agility despite the mountains of snow. “This is what you wanted!” he snapped, anger marring his handsome features.

Sophia recoiled slightly, leaning away from him as he gripped her tightly. She had never seen him in such a state before, and she never wanted to see him like that ever again. The frightful look in his eyes brought even more tears of confusion to her eyes.

“You wanted to stay here with my mother all along, why are you being so persistent now that I’m giving you just that?” Anthony shook her lightly and lowered his voice to a low hiss. His dark eyes seemed even darker with anger as he waited for her reply.

“Anthony, please, you’re frightening me. I don’t understand what I did wrong.” Sophia whimpered slightly, frightened by what may happen to their marriage if he left her alone in an abandoned manor. She was sure that he’d never harm her physically, yet she feared their marriage would not survive if he left her there.

Anthony’s face suddenly fell as he let go of her arms and balled his fists at his side. “Wrong? You ask me what you did wrong? You came into my life and turned everything upside down. I was perfectly happy by myself before you came along. I didn’t ask for any of this.” He slapped his chest angrily.

Sophia swore she could see a few tears in his eyes, but she quickly regained her composure and stood her ground. “Me? I never wanted to get married either. The only reason I was in that blasted matchmaker’s office was to appease my mother! You were the one who came along and refused to call off the wedding when I begged you to in that alley!”

The flow of hot tears increased as her breath billowed out in front of her in a giant cloud. Her chest rose and fell with each ragged breath.

“Then I guess we both entered this marriage against our free will.” The tone of Anthony’s voice suddenly changed as his eyes filled with tears. It was almost as if her words had hurt him just as much as his words had torn through her.

“What do you mean?” Sophia’s voice was barely audible as the wind blew a few strands of her hair into her face.

His sudden admission of reluctance hit her in the gut like a fist, causing a shiver to run down her spine as she hugged her waist.

“I never wanted to get married. I wanted to stay a bachelor for the rest of my life and keep the vow that I made to my father on his deathbed. My mother wanted to see me happily married before she died!” he spat venomously, thrusting his hand toward the mansion to gesture that he’d done everything for his mother and no one else.

Sophia’s blood turned to ice as his words sank in, leaving an irreversible mark on her heart.

He never wanted to marry me. He’s done all of this for his mother.

The expression on Anthony’s face suddenly softened as he realized the hurt he had caused her. He was about to open his mouth and apologize when Sophia spoke up softly.

“What vow did you make to your father?” Her face was pale, her tears drying up after freezing on her cheeks.

The frightful weather suddenly matched the way she felt in her heart. Cold, dark, and barren. She was more than certain that nothing else in the world could have hurt her more than his sudden, inexplicable change in behavior.

“Sophia, I never meant to...” Anthony trailed off when she suddenly snapped out of her daze, lashing out at him through gritted teeth.

“What vow did you make to your father?! Answer me, Anthony!” Sophia knelt on the ground and scooped up a fistful of snow, then hurled it at his head with all of her might.

Ducking quickly, Anthony managed to side-step the attack before looking at her in shock. The anger on her face spoke of a deeper hurt that he’d awoken.

“Tell me now, you coward!” She began to cry once again, shivering from more than just the cold that beat against her body, rendering her coat useless against the icy elements.

“I vowed that none of his offspring would ever walk the face of the earth ever again! I vowed never to sire an heir. I cannot have a child with you, Sophia. It would go against everything that I believe to be right and true in this world.” Angry tears ran down his cheeks as he raged at her in front of the house where they had made love a few hours prior.

Sophia felt stumped as she stared at him. Their entire marriage over the past few weeks boiled down to the fact that he had promised his mother to marry while honoring a childish vow he had made to his father. Every moment they had shared, every passionate kiss, warm embrace, and intimate moment had been based on a lie.

Everything that is right and true in the world.

His words made her realize that she was not included in everything that Anthony Atwood believed to be right and true in the world.

“Leave, then!” Sophia finally yelled at him after processing what he had said.

“Sophia, I am sorry. I didn’t mean to... There are things that you wouldn’t...” he trailed off as she came stumbling forward.

“Just leave, then! I’ll stay here with your mother, and don’t you worry about me! I’ll be just fine here with the horses and your mother. The *ton* need not know about your little vow or the fact that you have a wife in name alone!” she spat angrily, stumbling in the snow just before she reached him.

Anthony looked like a deer staring down the barrel of a hunter’s rifle, waiting to see if he would lose his life or not.

“Go and only come back when you wish to see your mother! I’ll tell her that you and I are very happily married, indeed, but we need to spend some time apart to keep the romance alive! I’m sure she’ll buy it. I, after all, bought your vows hook, line, and sinker!” Her rage spilled over along with the rest of her emotions.

“Allow me to help you inside first.” Anthony came forward with his arms outstretched.

“Don’t you dare touch me, Your Grace. I am perfectly capable of looking after myself. I did it before you came along, and I can do it again.” Sophia gritted her teeth and stood, glaring at him with tear-stained cheeks.

Backing away, he lowered his hand and looked at her as if she had broken his heart.

How dare he act as if he is the one who got hurt?

“Go now, Your Grace. I will see myself back inside and go to bed as you instructed me in your chambers.” Her voice was stiff, devoid of any emotions.

Anthony stared at her for a moment. “You may let me know if there is anything you require, but I am sure that my mother will be able to see to all of your needs,” he spoke in a business-like manner before turning on his heel and leaving,

making his way toward the stables just as the sun began to peek over the hills on the horizon.

Watching him go, Sophia sank to her knees in the snow, sobbing with her arms wrapped around her waist. Nothing in the world made sense to her anymore, except for the fact that she now understood how her mother had felt on the night her father had died.

Cold and all alone in the world without a hope of ever being happy ever again. The only difference was that her father had died, and Anthony had betrayed her trust, casting her heart aside and into the abyss of loneliness.

She wished he had taken a knife and stabbed her in the chest with it because, then, she could have died rather than lived with the fact that she loved a man named Anthony Atwood.

The very man who had plunged her world into darkness.

CHAPTER 26



*A*nthony stared at the empty bottles on his desk, twirling a piece of ribbon in his hand that he'd found in Sophia's chambers. The lilac fabric still smelled of her hair and perfume. It had been a few days since he'd left her alone in the snow. His mother had written a letter to say that she didn't understand what had happened, but that she hoped he'd join them again soon.

Images of Sophia frolicking in the snow, happily riding her horses without him, made him reach for a full bottle that had been hidden beneath his desk. The choice he had made had been for both their sakes, yet he couldn't help but feel as if his world had come crashing down in the course of that conversation.

"I'm glad to see that you are still alive." Jason strode into the room with someone at his heels that Anthony couldn't identify. Or perhaps it was only Jason. He wasn't sure at present if his mind could be trusted in its inebriated state.

“Of course, I’m still alive,” Anthony groaned before bringing the bottle back up to his lips and taking a huge swig. The amber liquid burned his throat on the way down but helped him stave off the longing he felt in his chest.

“Well, I didn’t think it was a given, considering the fact that you haven’t answered anyone’s letters or received any visitors in three days. I’ve received frantic letters from your mother, and the only way your butler let me in was with a signed threat from your mother to have him dismissed if he didn’t comply.” Jason’s voice grated in his ears.

“I told the butler that I was ill and needed some time to recuperate. Must you speak so loudly?” Anthony complained, clutching his head.

“Yes, I must, and I must also do this.” Jason yanked the curtains open, allowing the late afternoon sun to flood the room.

Searing pain shot through Anthony’s head, stabbing the back of his eyes as he struggled to adjust to the harsh light. The drapes had been kept shut at his behest since his arrival back in London. He wanted nothing to do with the world at large even if it meant becoming a recluse.

His vision suddenly swam into focus as he realized that the extra someone behind his friend had turned out to be two extra people and not just figments of his imagination.

The first he recognized as Evan and the second as the Duke of St. Clair, whom he had met at the ball.

“I see you’ve brought reinforcements,” Anthony grumbled, shaking his head before taking another swig from his bottle.

“I did, just in case we needed to remove your corpse. But I can see the situation is much direr than that.” Jason lifted his eyebrows, silently counting the number of empty bottles on the table.

“If this is your way of cheering me up, you’re doing an awful job at it,” Anthony huffed, leaving the bottle on the table as he sat back in his chair. The bright sunlight was causing him a splitting headache that didn’t do much to improve his already sour countenance.

“Do you need cheering up? I thought you wanted things to be this way.” Jason’s tone of voice was nonchalant as he walked forward and removed the newly opened bottle of whisky, gesturing for the others to take a seat in front of the desk.

“Don’t act as if my mother hasn’t filled you in on what happened, and you’d better leave that bottle of whisky if you know what’s good for you.” Anthony narrowed his eyes and glared at the other men in turn.

The last thing he needed at present was the company of men who believed in love and marriage. He'd turned his back on the institution in the hopes that his troubles would lessen.

"I'm afraid that I do not know what happened, and neither does your mother. All we know is that a very distraught Sophia has refused to leave her room for days. And here I find you in a similar reclusive state, albeit a bit more disheveled and dirtier. She at least has bathed, I hear." Jason walked back over to the window with the bottle of whisky in his hand, wrinkling his nose at the stale smell that permeated the room.

Sophia is refusing to leave her room.

The realization that she, too, was struggling with their situation brought Anthony a small amount of solace, making him wish that he hadn't made such a rash decision. Perhaps he should have continued on with the ruse, being intimate with her while still keeping the vow he had made to his father without her ever knowing. Then at least he would have been able to see her instead of inhaling the smell of her hair from an abandoned ribbon.

"What are you doing?" Anthony's head snapped up as Jason threw open the study window, letting in the cool winter air, and unscrewed the cap of the almost full whisky bottle.

Snow drifted in on a breeze, bringing with it the unwelcome memory of Sophia's tears running down her frozen cheeks.

“I am helping you, as it seems that you cannot help yourself at present.” Jason held the bottle out the window and tipped it over before Anthony had time to react. His legs were far too wobbly to allow for any kind of protest, forcing him to sit and watch as his friend got rid of the only form of comfort he possessed at present.

Jason kept his eyes locked on Anthony as the amber liquid flowed from the bottle in a bright, golden stream, emptying quickly, with the force of gravity pulling it down.

“Bless you, My Lord!” a crotchety old voice called up from the street below, causing all four men to frown.

“Oh, dear, it seems that I unwittingly poured the whisky on an old beggar,” Jason admitted sheepishly after glancing out the window with a stunned look and bringing the bottle back inside.

“He didn’t seem to mind very much. It actually sounded as if it had been a pleasant and welcome surprise.” Evan chuckled despite the seriousness of the current situation.

“He’s going to have a merry Christmas.” Nicholas Galloway smirked, glancing at Anthony with a bemused look in his eyes.

“A very expensive Christmas,” Anthony shot back, unamused at having his prized whisky poured on the street.

There were few times in life when he wished he could toss his friend from a window. Pouring his whisky on the street just so happened to invoke that feeling in him.

The comic relief did little to put Anthony in a better mood as he thought of the whisky he'd been saving for a special occasion. The bottles had come from his father's private stash. Leaving Sophia seemed just as good a reason as any other to finally crack them open. He'd gone years without so much as thinking of the stuff, but now he felt the need to drown his sorrows.

“I'll buy you a new bottle just as soon as you've come to your senses again. While that didn't quite have the effect I intended, the whisky is better poured over a beggar than down your gullet at present.” Jason closed the window before walking across the room and taking a seat between the other men, who were still smirking at the incident.

“And what exactly do you think you will accomplish with this little stunt of yours?” Anthony asked, sitting back in his chair and glaring at the man who had wasted the last bottle of his prized collection. It took all his will not to banish them all.

“I brought Evan and Nicholas with me because they will be able to help you more than I can. I asked Nicholas to share a

bit with you about the struggles he faced with his own marriage,” Jason explained, placing the calf of his left leg over his right knee while clutching his thigh.

Anthony sized the man up with his jet-black hair and green eyes. He seemed to be judging him and the way he was handling things at present.

“Let me guess, you didn’t have very high expectations of love until you gave Marie Webster a chance, and now you’re deeply in love with your wife. I suspect you have a similar story to that of Evan’s?” Anthony smirked sarcastically at the other Duke, leaning back in his chair with his legs stretched out in front of him.

Nicholas tilted his head back with a knowing smile. “Actually, I made a vow to my father on his deathbed, promising him never to sire an heir,” he said triumphantly with a knowing look in his eyes.

Anthony’s blood began to boil as he glared at Jason. It wasn’t enough that he’d had to break the heart of the woman he’d married along with his own, but his best friend had gone and betrayed him. He’d never given Jason permission to tell anyone of the vow he’d made to his father.

Lifting his hands in surrender, Jason feigned innocence. “I swear that I did not breathe a word of your secret to another soul, Anthony. It just so happens that Nicholas really did find

himself in a similar situation to your own. I brought him here after hearing his story because I thought it might help you see your situation on the other side of this mess you have created.”

“I can confirm that Jason never so much as mentioned your situation to me. I put two and two together after he asked me to accompany him here to your lodgings. I figured it had to be something similar to my experience if I was needed.” Nicholas made himself comfortable and waited for Anthony to respond.

“So what, you made a vow to your father and married a woman despite that? Is that it? How does that help my current plight?” Anthony felt his irritation growing as he tapped his foot impatiently on the floor.

“Well, the hope is that you will sober up enough to realize that the world revolves around more than just your feelings,” Nicholas said coolly, glaring at him with a look of distaste.

The man’s reproach only made Anthony dislike him even further. Who was he to come into his house and point fingers? Even if his marriage was one of the most successful unions of the *ton*.

“You see, it took me a long time to realize that the vow I made to my father had been born out of my own selfish need to hide the scars he had left upon me as a child,” Nicholas continued when Anthony failed to respond.

Something in his words rang true, making Anthony contemplate his behavior and the past he'd tried to outrun for most of his life.

“Who does it really benefit if you refuse to sire an heir? Will it show your father what a horrible human being he was? I don't know about you, Anthony, but the last time I checked, my father was dead, unable to feel the sting of my self-serving vow.”

A tense silence filled the room as Jason and Evan watched Anthony's face, gauging his reaction to Nicholas's words.

“And how arrogant are you to assume that just because your reasons for making a vow were selfish, mine are, too?” Anthony clenched his jaw as he glowered at the man who dared talk down to him in his own house.

“Arrogant enough to have realized that trying to hurt my father only served to hurt not only myself but the woman who means more to me than anyone else in the world. I do assume that you love your wife. Otherwise, you wouldn't be trying to find a solution at the bottom of a whisky bottle.” Nicholas ran his tongue over his bottom lip, allowing Anthony the space to process his words.

“He's right, you know. There is little to no sense in taking revenge on a ghost,” Evan added.

Running his hands over his tired face, Anthony wished that his so-called friends would leave him be. Here he was, licking his wounds after losing the woman he cared for deeply, and his friends were lecturing him on the selfishness of his actions. He wanted nothing more than to toss them out but knew that he'd lose with three against one.

"I don't think you are in the right mind to process just how much is at stake here, so I hope you'll remember this conversation in the morning. There is nothing more that I can add other than this. Trying to enact revenge on a ghost for the rest of your life will leave you in the company of that very ghost and no one else," Nicholas said and stood, then made for the door.

Following his lead, Evan pursed his lips, having said all he could at present.

"You've been an amazing friend to me all of these years, Anthony. I can only hope that you see this little intervention in the light and spirit it was intended. Oh, and by the way, if you find the cellars locked or even empty, just know that your mother sent word to the butler." Jason shrugged before leaving the room, shutting the door behind him.

Am I really trying to enact revenge on a ghost?

Anthony raked his fingers through his hair as he thought of their words. He'd never thought of his situation from that

perspective before now. What good did hurting his father do when he wasn't around to feel the repercussions?

He'd kick himself if it turned out that he'd hurt Sophia simply to spite the ghost of his father.

Sophia.

The look on her face as she had stood before him in the snow flashed before his eyes. There had been something more there than just the hurt he had caused, but what that was, he wouldn't know unless he sobered up enough to ask her.

Was there any point in him even trying to regain her trust? What kind of father would he be when he couldn't even be trusted to take care of his wife?

Looking around the empty room, he realized for the first time in his life that he had successfully pushed away all the people who had ever cared about him.

Placing his forehead on the cool desk, Anthony shut his eyes and commiserated with his thoughts, feeling the weight of his empty house like a ton of bricks on his shoulders. The lilac ribbon rested on his lap, where he had placed it earlier, reminding him of the pain and suffering he had caused on his one-man crusade to get back at his father.

CHAPTER 27



The snow fell down in fine sheets, frosting the windows with beautiful patterns. The beauty, however, did little to draw Sophia out of the stupor she found herself in. The sun had risen over the mountaintops, bringing with it light without warmth, reflecting the desolate state of her heart.

The crackling of the fire reminded her that warmth did still exist in the world, even if it seemed hard to find at present. Pulling her shawl a little tighter around her shoulders, she rested her chin on her knees and stared out the window.

It had been two days since Anthony had left her alone in his mother's house. The servants had returned to find her crumpled up on her bedroom floor.

She cared not if anyone thought she was weak or pathetic. Her humiliation had reached its peak at Anthony's feet. Feeling the tears flowing down her cheeks, she thought of her father and the night he had died. That night was the last night she had allowed herself to feel, yet here she was, crying over a man who had rejected her in every sense of the word.

“Sophia?” A gentle voice pulled her attention away from the fog that surrounded her soul.

Looking up, Sophia saw Emily’s worried face. The Dowager Duchess wore a green shawl wrapped around her thick grey dress.

Emily gently shut the door behind her and came into the room. “The servants said you were still in your room. Are you ready to talk about what happened?” She waited for Sophia to respond with patience that only a mother could spare.

“There’s nothing to talk about.” Sophia used the back of her hand to wipe the tears from her cheeks, swallowing the emotions that still threatened to spill over.

Sighing heavily, Emily shook her head and walked toward the edge of the bed, making herself comfortable beside her. “It has been two days of you telling me that there is nothing to talk about, and two days of my son not responding to any of my letters. I think whatever happened between the two of you is the very opposite of nothing,” she spoke kindly with a warmth in her voice that made Sophia want to cry all over again.

When last did Sophia confide in anyone other than Margaret? Her mother would certainly have told her to buck up and navigate her marriage like the woman she had raised her to be.

Laughing ironically, Sophia buried her face in her knees. The world was turning out to be a far crueler place than she had imagined.

“Is something I said amusing, dear?” Emily’s voice remained patient as she waited for Sophia to take a deep breath and compose herself once again.

Bringing her head up, Sophia stared out the window at the pure white lands, wishing her life was as simple as ice falling from the sky. “Nothing is amusing. I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to laugh. I’m just finding it difficult to understand how it was that I landed in this situation, when I spent most of my life building a wall around my heart.”

Emily remained silent for a moment before placing a hand beneath Sophia’s chin and tilting her face up. “I can answer that question for you with little to no doubt that it is the right answer.” Her amber eyes swam with emotions.

The pure honesty and vulnerability that Sophia found in the elderly woman’s gaze tugged at her heart, making her feel as if she wanted to throw herself into Emily’s arms and find the motherly comfort she desired at present.

“Love has this incredibly strange way of breaking down the walls that even the most skilled of crafters has built. Neither of you will want to admit it at present, but the reason you are

hurting right now is because your love is true, born of the feelings that grew from a true connection.” Emily’s words stabbed her in the chest with a searing pain that made her ache.

“I don’t think Anthony loves me,” was all Sophia could say as hot tears stung her eyes, leaving a trail of pain down her cheeks.

“I, on the other hand, think that he loves you very much. He wouldn’t be in the reclusive state that he is right now if he doesn’t,” Emily returned in a cautious voice.

Her sudden admission shocked Sophia. Was Anthony just as sad as she was? She had pictured him laughing and drinking with his friends, having a good time now that he had gotten the freedom he desired.

Sitting up straight, Sophia looked at Emily, hugging her knees a little tighter to her chest. “I don’t think he loves me, Your Grace. He told me that the only reason he married me was because he wished to appease you while still keeping the vow to his father that he would never sire an heir. The only reason he married me was you.”

Emily frowned at Sophia’s sudden admission, looking at her hands as deep lines appeared on her brow. “I’m not sure of any vow he made to his father, but I can account for the promise he made to me.” She looked up with tears in her eyes.

Sophia regretted having spouted the truth in the manner that she had. It hadn't occurred to her that Anthony hadn't told his mother about the vow he had made to his father. Given their close relationship, she had been certain that he had told her.

Emily swallowed hard before speaking again. "It is true that I asked Anthony to find a wife before I die. That may seem like a very selfish request for an old woman to make, but I wanted to know that he was loved and taken care of when I was no longer here." Hot tears streamed down her cheeks in torrents, landing on her hands in her lap.

Feeling a great deal of sympathy toward the woman who seemed to love her son more than anything else, Sophia reached out and held her hand.

"Believe it or not, that request was more for Anthony than anyone else. Like you, he built walls around his heart that only served to keep him away from life, despite what he may have thought. It never served him well. I was concerned at first that I had made a mistake in forcing him to choose a bride, but when I met you, I realized that you would be the best thing for him. Your antics at the wedding dinner and everything thereafter gave me hope that you would keep him on his toes."

Sophia giggled despite her broken heart, recalling her antics with the soup and all of her plans to spoil her wedding.

“That’s better. I missed your beautiful smile. I knew from the start that it wasn’t a mistake, and upon closer inspection, I realized why Anthony chose you.” The mischievous glint returned to Emily’s eyes.

“I thought he chose me because I was the first person he was presented with.” Sophia’s voice held a note of bitterness.

“Yes and no. You see, I presented Anthony with many eligible young ladies of the *ton*. He turned them all down like a badly set-up game of dominoes. I was just as shocked as anyone when he came home from his first visit to Marie Webster and said that he had found a match.” Emily’s eyes widened as if she could still not believe what had happened.

Did he choose me?

Sophia’s mind suddenly felt muddled at the prospect of Anthony having chosen her out of many other options. If it was true that he had seen something else in her, their meeting in the alley suddenly held an entirely different meaning to her. She had begged him to call off the wedding, yet his response was to pin her against the wall in the alley. Her heart raced with the memory of his lips so close to hers.

“There must have been something he saw in you that made him say you are the one he would marry. Personally, I think it was that spark of defiance he saw in your personality, and of

course, you are stunningly beautiful. He is a man, after all.” Emily winked at her with a warm smile.

Sophia couldn't help but laugh at the old woman's attempts to cheer her up. “Thank you, Emily, you brought a ray of sunshine into the dark pit I currently find myself in.” She used the sleeve of her dress to wipe away the tears that had dried on her cheeks.

Emily seemed relieved that Sophia had stopped crying. “That's better, and you are finally calling me Emily. Now, dry your tears and get out of this room, dear. Visit the horses and read a book. I know my son is a stubborn ox at times, but I'm more than certain that he will see the error of his ways and come around.”

A warmth spread through Sophia's chest, giving her hope. She still wasn't entirely convinced that Anthony loved her, but Emily had brought a ray of hope into her life.

“I still can't say that I know what vow he made to his father, but please be patient with him. Anthony and I suffered many a hardship because of the man I married,” Emily uttered, the expression on her hardening.

The fact that Emily didn't refer to the late Duke as her husband did not go unnoticed by Sophia as she examined the woman's expression. She had taken for granted that not everyone in life was blessed with a father who loved and cared

for his family. What cruelties did they have to endure under the reign of a man they'd rather never speak of?

“I blame myself for not stepping in and intervening when he would discipline Anthony. The poor child only ever tried to please his father, but it was never enough. He'd suffer beating after beating for the smallest of infractions.” Emily's eyes once again swam with tears, revealing the pain she harbored for what had happened to her son.

What must it have been like to live with a father like that?

Sophia's heart broke for the child in Anthony who had learned from an early age that his best was never good enough, not even for the man who had helped bring him into the world. Did he fear what kind of father he would be if he sired an heir, or were his motives purely to spite his father?

A wave of uncertainty ran down her spine as she tried to make sense of the man that Anthony had become.

Hugging her knees to her chest, Sophia placed her chin back on her knees and stared out the window, with Emily at her side.

“I know it may seem like a lot to ask, but Anthony truly is a good man at heart. Despite his gruffness, he harbors a heart of pure gold. When he does come back—and I say *when* because

I know he will—try and find it in your heart to forgive him,” Emily pleaded, her voice holding a note of desperation that Sophia had only heard once before with her mother on the night her father had died.

Keeping quiet, she fought against the confusion she felt within her heart. Anthony had lived a life of hardships despite his elevated position in life, yet he had professed his reasons for marrying her in the snow. The hurt that his words had inflicted upon her soul could not easily be put to rest in the space of one conversation with his mother.

“Think about it, and while you do, I hope that you will venture beyond the walls of this bedroom. The snow hasn’t stopped entirely, but there is a whole world out there just waiting for you.” Emily winked at her, running the back of her thin knuckles over her cheek in a tender gesture before leaving the room with a heavy sigh.

Can I forgive him?

Sophia pondered that question as the door clicked shut. Perhaps there were other reasons for the way he had acted, but that didn’t detract from the fact that made her chest ache.

Anthony doesn’t love me.

CHAPTER 28



Staring at the empty bottles on his desk, Anthony thought about everything his friends had said. A few hours had passed since their visit, and he was nowhere near capable of processing everything they had said.

Am I really trying to spite a ghost?

The thoughts of futility plagued his mind, making him reflect on aspects of his character he hadn't revisited in years. He'd wanted to believe with all of his might that not siring an heir was punishing his father, rather than fueling a selfish vendetta that no longer mattered.

A sudden commotion downstairs drew his attention to the present as a frown creased his brow. The butler's fervent protests carried up the stairs amidst the discernible yelling.

"I don't care if he's asked not to be disturbed. I demand to see him, at once!" a female voice that was only slightly familiar echoed through the silent house.

“Margaret, I beg of you to listen to me for once in your life! Anthony is vulnerable right now and needs time to think things over for himself!” Evan’s voice accompanied Margaret’s shrill demands with growing angst as footsteps thundered up the staircase.

Anthony briefly wondered if he shouldn’t try to hide or jump out of the window, but it was far too late when the sound of footsteps outside the door greeted his ears. It was far too cold for his mother to venture all the way from their country manor, and the woman yelling seemed far too healthy as she bounded toward the study.

The voices drew closer, bringing with them a growing sense of anger and indignation within Anthony.

“Poppycock if you ask me! The man has had long enough to wallow in self-pity. It’s about time someone kicks some sense into him!”

The door to the study suddenly burst open, revealing an irate Margaret, who glared at Anthony through narrowed eyes. Her strawberry blonde hair was hidden beneath a dark grey, fur-lined hat that matched the bulky coat hiding her figure.

“You listen to me, Anthony Atwood!” Her anger carried across the room, nearly slapping him in the face as she thundered with rage.

“Darling, please.” Evan came to her side, pleading with her to see reason and exercise some restraint.

“What is this?” Anthony asked in a low voice, taken aback by the sudden intrusion into in home.

Margaret opened her mouth to speak but was suddenly silenced as two very large and hairy balls of fat came barreling into the room. Stepping aside, Margaret and Evan watched as the two bulldogs launched themselves onto Anthony’s lap, licking his face with exuberant abundance.

“Get these blasted creatures off me!” Anthony growled, trying to keep the animals at bay while trying not to hurt them.

All of London knew that the animals in the Sutherland household were like family and were to be treated as such, lest Margaret turned into a protective mother bear.

“Ham, Taffy, down!” Evan came forward and pulled the dogs off of his friend with great effort.

The two white bulldogs with brown spots over their coats rolled on the carpet beside the desk, happily leaving thousands of hairs on the very expensive rug.

“Did you have to bring them along? Or even better yet, kindly inform me as to why you are, once again, intruding?” Anthony grumbled before reaching into his coat pocket and producing a clean handkerchief to wipe his face.

“We are here again because I can’t stand by while my best friend’s heart gets broken over some nonsense!” Margaret seethed with rage as she stomped into the room, scrunching her nose in disgust at the sight of all the bottles on the desk.

Evan tried his best to keep the smaller of the two bulldogs from jumping back onto Anthony’s lap as Margaret stopped in front of the desk, placing her hands on her hips and shooting Anthony a stern look.

Tossing the handkerchief aside, Anthony fell back in his chair and glared at her, running his hand over the stubble that had begun to form on his cheeks.

“Sophia has not answered a single letter from me in days. Your mother let me know that she hasn’t come out of her room since she got home. The servants apparently found her freezing to death on her bedroom floor the night that you left.” Margaret let her anger slip for a moment, revealing the hurt and fear behind her dark green eyes.

Anthony’s chest suddenly constricted with the news of Sophia’s state. He’d thought for sure that she would be carrying on with her life in the wake of his absence.

Perhaps she loves me?

He quickly shook off the thought, reminding himself of the vow he had made to his father. Even if he was chasing a ghost, he couldn't allow that to go against years of abuse from the man who had raised him.

“How can you just sit here, knowing how much pain she is in? The woman you love is struggling to deal with the situation right now.” Margaret looked at him with a shocked expression.

Anthony's tongue flicked over his cracked lips, feeling the grooves caused by a night of heavy drinking and dehydration. “Sophia is better off without me—everyone is.” He averted his eyes from Margaret's scrutinizing gaze and spoke from the heart. The last thing he needed was to blame his drunken state on Sophia.

“So, this is what it's all about? You're feeling sorry for yourself because of a crappy childhood?” Margaret's mouth opened slightly as she looked at him with a deep frown.

“Margaret...” Evan stopped paying attention to the dogs and came toward his wife, trying to stop her from speaking her mind.

Anthony sat up in shock, glaring at Margaret, who dared speak to him as if she knew him.

Holding her hand up, Margaret halted her husband in his tracks. “No, Evan, let me speak. Anthony needs to hear the truth. You and your merry little band of men had your chance to speak, now I will have mine.” She glared at Anthony, with her hands on her hips as if she were an old schoolmarm giving a lecture.

Stepping aside, Evan pursed his lips, raising his hands in surrender as if he were handing the situation over to his wife.

“Sophia married you against her will, but I know my friend, she’s changed over the past few weeks. And I think the main reason for that is she sees something in you that the rest of us don’t. Sure, you’re quite handsome when you’ve shaved and your breath doesn’t smell like the wrong end of a distiller’s donkey.” She wrinkled her nose slightly and glanced at all of the bottles on the desk.

“Hey, now...” Evan looked at his wife with a hurt expression.

“Of course, he isn’t as handsome as you, dear, but I’m trying to make a point here.” Margaret motioned for her husband to let her continue with a look of exasperation.

“What’s the point you’re trying to make?” Anthony growled, growing increasingly tired of the antics he’d had to put up with in the walls of his own home.

“My point is that I’m certain that Sophia had fallen in love with you, and in your world, that should make you the luckiest man on the face of the earth, Anthony Atwood,” Margaret spoke more earnestly.

Looking into her eyes, Anthony realized the depths of the pain he had inflicted despite his inebriated state.

“In that case, I think that Sophia is far better off without me. She shouldn’t have to have a husband that causes her that amount of pain.” He lowered his head and looked at the desk, unable to face the truth of the situation at hand.

No matter how hard he tried to avoid becoming his father, he had inadvertently turned into a monster that discarded others’ feelings.

Rolling her eyes, Margaret stomped her foot on the carpet. “Give me a break, Anthony Atwood! So, you had a terrible childhood with a father that never appreciated you. My father was a drunk who gambled away the family fortune after my mother died! Evan had to be raised by his grandmother because both of his parents died in tragic circumstances,” she retorted in an uninhibited manner that made him pause and look at her.

“It’s true,” Evan mouthed sheepishly, giving Anthony a look as if to say that he was sorry about his wife’s outburst, but that it was the truth, nonetheless.

“Don’t even get me started on what Emma and Nicholas had to endure throughout their lives and courtship. We all have demons, Anthony. You can’t allow them to stand in the way of true love. I will say again, even if she never confessed it, I’m sure that Sophia does love you. And that’s saying something, given the fact that she wanted to burn London to the ground a few weeks ago.” Margaret shook her head sympathetically.

Stepping forward, Evan placed his hands on his wife’s arm, gently guiding her toward the door. “I think you’ve said all that there is to say, Margaret. Let’s give Anthony some time to think things over,” he spoke gently as if he were trying to keep the situation from escalating any further.

“Yes, please, do leave so that I may drink in peace,” Anthony grumbled under his breath, feeling the sting of truth in Margaret’s words, but not wanting to admit how wrong he had been in leaving Sophia.

“Drink?! Is that all that matters to you at present, Anthony Atwood?!” Margaret yanked her arm away from her husband’s grip and stormed back toward the desk.

“Oh, dear.” Evan rushed forward and tried to regain control of the situation, but he lost the battle when Margaret snatched up an almost empty bottle and stomped to the window.

Flinging open the window, she tossed the bottle to the street below, her nostrils flaring with anger. “This is the lowest I have ever seen you! Even if I’ve only known you for a short time.” Her cheeks flushed with color as she glared at Anthony.

“Thank you, My Lady! Thank you so much. This is turning out to be a blessed holiday, indeed!” an old man’s voice called up from the street and carried into the room.

Shaking her head, Margaret shut the window and stormed out of the room without so much as looking in Anthony’s direction again.

The two bulldogs happily followed their mistress, their floppy tongues hanging out the sides of their mouths as they bounced.

Evan shook his head, looking at the empty doorway before turning his attention to Anthony. “I’m sorry about Margaret, she gets quite passionate about things that mean a lot to her.” He rubbed the back of his neck before coming forward and rearranging some of the bottles on the desk in an awkward fashion.

Anthony could see that he was trying to buy time. He wished that everyone would just let him be and stop pestering him with things that he couldn't change. His father was gone, and Sophia would more than likely recover from her heartache without him having to get involved.

“I think what Margaret was trying to say in her fit of rage is that you may end up regretting it for the rest of your life if you allow Sophia to slip through your fingers. You don't want a marriage in name alone, no matter how much you may have convinced yourself that you do.” Evan breathed a heavy sigh as he looked around the room.

The days of heavy drinking had left a heavy stench of stale liquor in the air, making it hard for anyone to breathe.

“I know you haven't known us for very long, but everyone can see that you and Sophia have changed each other in ways that are good. That must mean something.” He gave Anthony a sympathetic smile.

“What if I change her life into something that is far worse than what she had before I came along? What if we have children, and I end up being a monster to my family?” Anthony opened up in the aftermath of Margaret's outburst.

“That is only something that *you* will be able to figure out and decide. I suggest you face your demons before you make

amends with your wife.” Evan pursed his lips, his eyes swimming with emotion.

“I don’t know how to do that when the reason I have demons is six feet under the ground.” Anthony felt his chest constricting at the fact that his father was no longer around to atone for his sins.

The reality of death seemed unfair to him for the first time since his father had died. He’d never grieved the man who had raised him. How could he, when there had never been a bond of love between them?

“What worked for me was returning to the last place I saw my father. Things just seemed to fall into place from there. Now, speaking of wives, I have a very irate and angry wife waiting for me down in the carriage. I hope that little stunt of yours doesn’t lead to me having to foster another animal that will inevitably become part of the family.” Evan chuckled lightly with a warm smile that spoke of his affection for his wife despite her outburst.

“I appreciate the fact that Margaret cares deeply for her friend. Sophia is an amazing woman who deserves a friend like her.” Anthony felt his mind sober up for the first time in days. Margaret’s little outburst along with Evan’s honesty was doing him a world of good.

“I hope you find a way to make peace with the past so that you may accept the gift that is right in front of your face.” Evan nodded once before turning on his heel and making his way out of the room.

Alone in his study, Anthony thought of the last time he had seen his father. The darkness had consumed him on that day. He could still recall the intense feelings of anger that had plagued him. He had come back to the house and downed more bottles than he should have.

The darkness began to loom again as Anthony reached for the final bottle of whisky beneath his desk. A sudden whisper in his ear made him stop, leaving his hand hovering over the neck of the bottle.

Anthony...

Sophia’s gentle voice called to him once again.

Whipping around, Anthony searched the study. No one was there besides the shelves of books and the stale stench of alcohol.

“I have to figure this out,” he whispered to himself in the empty study as he ran his fingers through his hair. His mind was beginning to play tricks on him.

CHAPTER 29



The wind blew through the deserted graveyard, shifting a few of the branches in the barren trees. Leaning forward, Anthony brushed a few handfuls of snow off his father's tombstone, revealing the name of the man who still haunted his dreams despite the time that had passed.

His throat still burned from the alcohol he'd consumed, even though he'd woken up early, shaved, and had a bath before breakfast. The taste of tea lingered on his tongue, a poor substitute for the liquid that made him forget the reason for his current mood.

Evan and Margaret's visit had had such a profound impact on him that he had decided to visit his father's grave in the hopes that the experience alone would bring him closure.

"Fancy running into you here." A gentle voice drew his attention away from the white marble stone. It didn't seem as if anyone had visited the grave in quite some time, as none of the snow had been cleared like the others around it.

Anthony looked up to see Marie Webster standing at his side with a large tub of poinsettias in her hands. The bright red Christmas flowers stood out against her pure white coat like a drop of blood on crisp linen. She seemed to be struggling beneath the weight of her burden.

“I don’t come here that often.” Anthony set his jaw in annoyance and straightened. He’d banked on the fact that nobody else would be in the graveyard, with the weather as bad as it was.

“I know. I’ve been coming here frequently for three years, and I’ve never bumped into you before. Either I have missed you on every occasion, or you are exceptionally good at hiding. Given the fact that your black coat doesn’t exactly blend in with the snow, I think neither of those options is true,” Marie teased and shifted the overly large tub of flowers onto her hip.

“Do you need a hand with that?” Anthony asked gruffly, deciding to ignore the sarcasm that reminded him of Sophia.

It seemed to him at times as if all the women who had crossed his path had made a pact to drive him insane with their quick wit and sarcasm.

“That would be a godsend.” Marie gracefully accepted his help, handing him the tub of flowers without hesitation.

Anthony stumbled slightly beneath the unexpected weight of the flowers. “How much soil do you have in here?” he groaned after regaining his balance, barely stopping himself from slipping into the wet snow. A fine sheet of snow fell from the sky, causing a chill to run through his body.

“Enough to try and keep the flowers alive for a while.” Marie laughed and trudged on ahead through the snow, only looking back to see if he was following her.

Taking a deep breath, Anthony reminded himself that he was a gentleman and could not, in fact, leave her with the heavy load in the middle of the graveyard, even if nobody was there to see.

Finally reaching the statue of a very large angel after stumbling a few times, Anthony let the tub slip to the ground, causing a loud thud as the wood sunk deep into the snow.

“You know these flowers won’t survive the night?” he complained as he struggled for breath, holding his knees before coming straightening up. The cool air stung his lungs as he struggled to catch his breath, the fatigue from the past few days still wearing on him.

Marie’s gentle laughter carried over the barren yard, causing her breath to form a visible cloud in front of her face. “I know,” she finally confessed.

“Then why the effort?” Anthony felt annoyed at having made an effort with something as futile as flowers that would die during the night.

“Well, tomorrow is Christmas, and my parents loved these flowers. They always had them at our feast every year. The centerpieces on our table were always glorious vases of poinsettias. I know they never make it through the night, but it’s the thought that counts. It’s just my way of spending the holidays with them.” Marie bent over and removed the snow covering the names with her gloved hands.

The marble shone in the late morning sun despite the chill in the air. It was obvious to Anthony that Marie took a great deal of pride in looking after her parents’ graves.

Realizing that both of her parents were buried beneath the angel, Anthony cleared his throat and took a step back. He wouldn’t have grumbled the way he had if he had known the flowers were for her parents. The past few days had left him feeling like a sheepish fool more often than not.

Feeling as if she had done a good enough job, Marie regained her feet, standing in silence for a few moments as she stared at the engraved names.

“What happened to your parents?” Anthony asked after a while.

Marie sighed heavily with a sad smile on her lips. “Now that’s a story for another time. We all have our sad little tales of woe. How about you tell me why you’re out here in the cold instead of spending Christmas Eve with your wife?” She turned to him after using her foot to nudge the tub a little closer to the stone. A laborious feat that she soon gave up on.

Anthony frowned as he tried to piece together the time that he’d spent back at home. He hadn’t even realized that it was the day before Christmas until Marie had pointed it out. It must have been three days since he’d left Sophia at the country manor. He silently hoped that she hadn’t given up on him just yet.

“You can’t be having trouble this soon into your marriage? Where is the new Duchess of Beaumont, or did you have a spat about what gift to give her?” Marie playfully bumped his arm with her elbow.

Deciding that there was little to no hope of escaping the situation with Marie, Anthony shook his head and decided to placate her curiosity. “I decided to pay my respects to my father before seeing her again. She’s been in the country with my mother.” He swallowed hard and glanced at his father’s grave, which was a few stones down.

“Oh, dear, that bad?” Marie sighed again, picking up on the note of hesitation in his voice.

“I never actually attended my father’s funeral. I went straight from seeing him lying in his coffin to drinking my sorrows away at home. The graveside service was something that I skipped.” Anthony felt his jaw clench again as the wind blew the snow back over his father’s name.

The other headstones in the graveyard seemed to have been cared for, with small attempts having been made to clear the snow, but his father’s headstone had been neglected. A fact that didn’t come as a surprise to him at all. He had been tolerated by some and hated by most in his years on earth.

Will that be me if I don’t fix things with Sophia?

Anthony swallowed hard as the troubling thought plagued his mind. He wouldn’t blame Sophia for never wanting to visit his grave if anything were to happen to him at present. He’d left her crying in the snow after having caused her a great deal of pain. The tears running down her cheeks still made him feel as if he was worse than his father.

“I see.” Marie’s voice held a note of understanding as she kept her eyes on his face. There was something wise and mysterious about her demeanor that made him uncomfortable.

“How exactly do you think you *see*?” Anthony snapped, dragging his eyes away from the tombstone.

Marie's lips curled into a strange smile as if she knew something that Anthony didn't. The look she gave him made him want to apologize for snapping, and he shifted from foot to foot. There was something very intimidating about Marie Webster whenever anyone did anything that displeased her.

“This may come as a shock to you, Your Grace, but I do know quite a bit about people, especially those who seek out my services. Many have called me a gossip and a spy, yet I have never used the information I have learned to harm anyone.” She seemed sad for a moment.

Anthony wondered for the first time since meeting Marie if she had ever longed for a love of her own. She spent most of her time making matches for those who sought happiness but never seemed to show a longing for love.

“I know that you, like the Duke of St. Clair, struggled with your upbringing and the harsh way you were treated by your fathers. He, too, thought that he would never be able to bring life into this world without throwing the yolks of generational burdens off of his shoulders.” She turned back to her parents' graves.

“He seems to be pretty happy with his life.” Anthony frowned and looked at the angel who towered above them in the graveyard.

He knew from his previous discussion with Nicholas that he, too, had made a vow to his father, but he didn't seem to carry any of the burdens that Anthony did, or at least he no longer carried them.

“The Duchess had a lot to do with that. He finally realized that choosing the woman he loved was a much better choice than trying to get back at the ghost of a man he would never see again.” Marie fixed him with a knowing look as if she were trying to tell him the solution to all of his problems.

“I feel like the ghosts of Christmas keep paying me a visit with that line,” Anthony grumbled, shivering slightly as he pulled the collar of his coat over his neck against the wind that had picked up.

“What line?” Marie laughed at his turn of phrase.

“That whole speech about chasing a ghost and so on.” Anthony rolled his eyes in exasperation.

“Well, I can't say that I rehearsed that line with anyone, but I do know that if things keep repeating themselves, there's probably a reason. One should pay careful attention to messages from ghosts.” Marie gave him a mysterious smile before squeezing his arm in passing.

“Thank you, that was very helpful.” Anthony’s voice dripped with sarcasm as he watched her retreating figure.

“You’re welcome. And just one more thing, Your Grace. Try not to spend too much time talking to the dead. I think you might find the conversation to be a little one-sided!” Marie called over her shoulder, her voice barely audible above the howling wind that was now sweeping the graveyard in a mini blizzard.

Walking back to his father’s grave, Anthony wondered just what kind of resolution he had been hoping to gain from his tombstone. All he saw now was an old stone covered in snow, just as silent as his father was beneath the ground. He’d awoken with the hopes that, like Evan, he would revisit the site of his father’s resting place and gain some kind of closure.

The chapel bells struck noon, bringing his attention to the fact that half the day had already passed. Looking back at the grave, he realized just how barren life could be when one spoke to the dead more than the living.

The graveyard was deserted, devoid of loved ones who sought the comfort of the dead.

“What am I doing here?” he asked himself before turning around and running as fast as he could through the snow toward the chapel gates.



“It’s good to see you out of your room,” Emily called to Sophia from the bottom of the stairs.

Looking down to see her mother-in-law in a thick coat, Sophia forced a smile and descended the stairs, pulling her padded riding gloves on her hands.

“I realized that moping in my bedroom all day long would not change anything, so I’ll be keeping to my traditions of riding on Christmas Eve.”

She reached the bottom of the stairs and stood in front of Emily, feigning the bravery she failed to feel inside.

“That’s the spirit.” Emily placed her hand on Sophia’s arm in a comforting gesture.

“Besides, I don’t think we will be doing much else tonight.” Sophia tried to perk up and turned toward the door.

“Oh, I don’t know. Just because it’s the two of us, doesn’t mean that we have to sit around like a bunch of sappy souls. I asked my maid to purchase some gifts for all of us, and the cook has prepared some mince pies and sandwiches for midnight. It’s all set up in the living room. We can have ourselves a real midnight feast and usher Christmas in

together.” Emily winked at her before letting go of her arm and walking up the stairs.

Smiling at the kindness Emily showed no matter the situation at hand, Sophia continued toward the entrance hall.

“Oh, and, Sophia, dear, it is quite cold outside. If you feel as if you need a rest along the way, the hunter’s cabin serves as a halfway point down the trail. I know the men always keep the logs and supplies in there in case of an emergency.” Emily nodded before carrying on with her arduous journey up the stairs.

It seemed to Sophia as if the older woman’s health was declining despite the cheerful smile she had plastered on her face. Sophia was certain the smile was for her benefit alone.

Allowing her curiosity to get the better of her, Sophia took a detour and poked her head around the corner of the drawing room. The fire crackled peacefully in the hearth beside the giant fir tree that had been set up in the corner of the room. A myriad of colorful ornaments were hanging on the branches.

Just how much had Emily done while I was up in my room?

She gingerly walked into the room as if the merriment of the ornaments and baubles would jump up and bite her at any minute. She wasn’t exactly in a festive mood as she spotted

the trays of nuts and chocolate that Emily undoubtedly hoped they would share later in the evening.

The smell of pine filled her lungs as she hunkered down beside the boxes of neatly wrapped presents. Three of the presents had Anthony's name neatly scribbled on the tag.

She believes he will come this evening...

The thought made her unreasonably sad, and she straightened with a sigh. Nothing in his current behavior made her believe that he would come back in time for Christmas.

Walking toward the door, she spotted the mistletoe hanging in the doorway, making her even sadder as she shook her head and left the manor.

CHAPTER 30



*R*acing up the steps of his mother's home, Anthony nearly lost his footing, gripping the stone railing just in time. Grunting from the cold stinging his lungs, Anthony pulled himself up and hurried up the stairs with a bit more caution. Bursting through the front doors, he skidded into the entrance hall, leaving a wet trail of snow in his wake.

"Anthony, what on earth are you doing?!" Emily clutched at her chest, leaning against the wall with a large gift in her hands.

"I'm sorry, Mama, but there is no time to waste. Where is Sophia? I must see her at once." His eyes darted around the empty hall, searching for his wife.

Taking a deep breath and composing herself, Emily pushed herself off the wall and straightened her spine before placing the gift carefully on the floor. "I can see that you are in a hurry, but I need you to take a moment and explain yourself before I have a heart attack," she scolded him sternly, her chest heaving from the shock her frail body had received.

Seeing that he had unsettled his mother, Anthony took a deep breath and apologized before explaining his sudden appearance. “I know that you haven’t heard from me in a few days, Mama.”

“Three, to be precise.” Emily lifted her head and looked down her nose at him as she used to when he had been a young boy.

“Very well, you have not heard from me in three days. I can’t explain the exact reason at present, but I will apologize to you in due time, once I have spoken to Sophia.” Anthony attempted to step past his mother on his way up the stairs.

“Just a minute there, young man.” Emily reached out a hand and held him back.

“Mama—” Anthony began to complain but stopped when he saw the look of impatience in his mother’s eyes.

“Patience has never been your strong suit, Anthony, but allow your poor old mama to at least speak before you go around, kicking down every door in my house.” Emily gave him a pitying look.

“Very well. Please do explain,” Anthony relented and removed his boot from the bottom step.

Emily waited for him to stop looking around the hall before speaking with her hands calmly clasped in front of her. “Sophia is not here at the moment.

The breath left his lungs as he listened to her words.

I was too late.

His blood suddenly ran cold. Sophia had gotten fed up while waiting for him and left. God alone knew where she could have gone by now. If she had left more than a day ago, she could be nearing the border of another country. Anthony could have kicked himself for not coming to his senses soon. Just when he had important information to share with her, she leaves.

“You look like you’ve seen a ghost, dear. I only meant to tell you that Sophia has gone riding, since the weather has eased up a little.” Emily bit her lower lip, searching his face while attempting to suppress a smile.

“You did that on purpose, Mama,” Anthony grumbled angrily, clenching his jaw at his mother’s antics. It was just like her to make light of the situation when he was in a hurry.

“Well, at least now I know what your true feelings are toward the girl. You can’t blame me for wanting to know after the

strange stunt you pulled these past few days.” Emily came forward and straightened the lime green scarf around his neck.

“Are you done having your fun? May I please go and find my wife now?” Anthony rolled his eyes and shook his head, secretly feeling relieved that his wife had not left him, after all. He didn’t know what he would have done if she had really skipped the country in the hopes of leaving him behind.

“She didn’t leave too long ago. You still have plenty of time to catch up to her. Where on earth did you get this ghastly scarf? It’s full of holes. Swiss cheese comes to mind upon closer examination.” Emily clucked her tongue and pursed her lips.

Gently pushing his mother’s hands away, Anthony tried to back away from her, eager to get a horse and catch up to his wife. “Sophia made it for me, Mama—or at least attempted to. I know it isn’t much to look at, but she tried, and…” he trailed off.

“And you were just trying to prove yourself to her by going out in public with Swiss cheese around your neck,” Emily finished for him, her eyes sparkling mischievously. She beamed from ear to ear as she once again stepped forward and straightened the scarf around his neck.

“Exactly.” Anthony appreciated the sentiment that his mother was trying to convey in understating his plight. He would

never under normal circumstances be caught dead or alive in public wearing something as atrocious as Sophia's scarf.

"Of course, Sophia made it. It's simply brimming with character just like she does." Emily shifted her focus from the scarf and patted her son lovingly on the cheek.

"I'm glad you understand, Mama. Sophia means the world to me." Anthony felt his eyes tearing up as he placed his hand over his mother's and gave her fragile fingers a gentle squeeze. He realized then that her health had deteriorated quite a bit in the weeks since his wedding. Her fingers were thin and frail with little to no fat on her bones.

Emily's cheeks had become sunken with dark circles beneath her eyes that spoke of the sleepless night she had endured.

"I'm sorry if my actions caused you any pain, Mama. I never meant to hurt anyone. And in sticking to my own beliefs, I hurt those that mattered the most to me while trying to spite a ghost." A lump formed in Anthony's throat as he saw the gratitude and understanding in his mother's eyes.

"Nobody will understand as much as a mother. You will learn this in time when Sophia bears you many little children. And I do trust that will be happening now?" She pursed her lips and gave him a knowing look.

“But how did you... Of course, there will be many children for you to love.” Anthony was about to ask how his mother knew that he never wanted to sire an heir but changed his mind in light of the epiphany he’d had in the graveyard.

“We will see. Now, stop wasting time here with me and go get my daughter-in-law back!” Emily laughed and gently pushed him back.

Stepping forward, Anthony drew his mother into his arms and held her tight. “I love you, Mama. I know those are strong words for an Englishman, but I do.”

“Away with you now.” Emily beamed at her son, pushing him toward the door that was still standing open, allowing a fine sheet of snow to cover the floor.

Smiling at his mother, Anthony turned toward the door, skidding over the wet patches of snow he had trudged in earlier.

“Don’t be out too long, dear! I have an entire evening planned for the three of us. I knew that you would be back this evening!” Emily called out to him just as he reached the top of the stairs.

It was just like his mother to have planned a small party in the hopes that he would come around. With renewed hope in his

heart, Anthony set off at a run, hoping against hope that Sophia would be as understanding as his mother was.



Sophia's breath billowed out in front of her in clouds as she brought her horse to a stop in front of a frozen lake. She recognized the lake as the one that she and Anthony had raced toward during her first stay at the manor. She should have convinced him then to allow her to stay with his mother.

At least then she would have saved herself all of the heartache that she'd had to endure over the past few days. Why was it that he had asked her to return to his home instead of staying? His reasoning baffled her as she reined her mare in a little tighter, stopping the beast from walking in the direction of the ice.

Shaking her head, she pushed back the thoughts and spotted the hunter's cabin in the distance. Snow was beginning to fall once again, urging her on as a chill ran down her back. She hoped that the groundskeepers had placed a kettle in the cabin. Even hot water without tea would serve to warm her up.

The sound of hooves thudding in deep snow drew her attention back to the path she had come from. Sophia spotted Anthony racing toward her through the barren trees with their low-hanging branches.

Is he wearing my failed scarf?

“Sophia!” he called to her, the lime green scarf billowing behind his head in the wind. The chestnut stallion he had chosen made quick work of the path as the snow flew to the sides in drives, useless against the iron hooves.

“What on earth?” Sophia frowned at the odd spectacle before her.

Anthony kept his body low, dodging branches as he sped toward her, jumping off his horse even before the beast had come to a stop. “Sophia!” he called to her, doubling over with his hands on his knees.

“Anthony, what on earth are you doing here?” she asked, a frown creasing her brow.

Spooked by the sudden arrival, her horse took a few steps back and neighed, causing her to pull on the reins and soothe the animal with her hand on its neck.

“I know I’m probably the last person you wish to see right now, but I need you to listen to what I have to say,” Anthony panted, red in the face as he came up straight.

“You’re three days too late for an apology. But why on earth are you wearing my failed scarf.” Sophia shook her head in confusion, utterly flustered by his strange behavior.

“I wanted to wear the scarf that you knitted for me as a symbol of how sorry I am for what I did to you.” Anthony lifted one end of the scarf in his hands and held it out to her as if his sacrifice could mend the wounds he had inflicted.

Losing her temper, Sophia dismounted her horse and trudged through the snow toward him, stumbling a few times in the depths. “You arrogant, pompous, soiled man!”

Anthony took a few steps back, his face in utter shock at her outburst.

“How dare you come slinking back here with your tail between your legs, thinking that you can make things right with me simply by smiling and acting all charming!” Her cheeks flushed with rage as she snapped at him, unleashing all of the negative emotions she had been stewing in since the last time they had spoken.

“If you would give me a chance to explain, then perhaps you will understand where I am coming from.” Anthony stood his ground.

“And what exactly is it that you would like to explain to me? Why it is that I spent three days heartbroken in a country home while your ill mother had to look after me?” Sophia thrust her thumb toward the manor before pointing it to her chest.

“I know my behavior seems unacceptable, but I would like to explain...” Anthony took a step toward her.

“You can’t explain any of it! Because in doing so, you would have to justify the fact that I allowed myself to be taken in by a complete and utter idiot. I gave my heart to a man who thinks that leaving his wife in the snow is the best way to handle his problems!” Sophia shouted at him, her voice growing hoarse.

“You gave me your heart?” Anthony stopped in his tracks and lowered his arms to his sides, obviously taken aback by her sudden admission.

It startled her in turn that he didn’t seem to know that she loved him. How could he not, when she had given herself to him mind, body, and soul?

“Is that truly what you just took from what I said? That I gave my heart to you? Did you not hear what a pompous and arrogant arse you are!” Sophia lost her temper again and leaned down, picking up a fistful of snow and hurling it at his head.

Ducking in time, Anthony managed to side-step her attack just as the snowball zoomed past his face. “Do you forget what happened last time you threw snow in my face?” he growled at her.

“Don’t you dare try and flirt with me, Anthony Atwood. And by the way, that scarf was never intended for you! I knitted it for myself!” Sophia raged with her back to him while stomping a patch back to her horse.

The utter nerve of the man. Showing up out of the blue as if a simple explanation could make everything right again drove her insane. She needed to put as much space between them as she possibly could lest she lost her temper and threw more than just snow at his head.

“Sophia, wait!” Anthony growled angrily at her, coming forward just as she reached her horse and hoisted herself back into the saddle.

Not realizing that the green scarf was hooked on a branch, Anthony stumbled forward into the snow, disappearing from view for a few seconds before coming up straight once again.

Sophia waited for him to clean his face before lifting the reins in her hands. “I don’t need to wait, Anthony. I did that already. Three long days of waiting for you to realize that my love for you should outweigh the hatred you harbor toward your father.” Her voice held a note of finality as she shook her head, coming to a final decision about their marriage.

Her life would be far better off spent living with his mother, who cared for her more than he did. At least then she would be

able to make peace with the fact that their marriage had not been entirely in vain.

The blood drained from Anthony's face as Sophia gave him one last look and turned her horse, galloping away from him as more snow began to fall from the sky, creating little white heaps on his shoulders.

CHAPTER 31



Anthony watched his wife ride away from him, her mahogany hair flying out behind her as the strands escaped her signature bun.

She gave her heart to me.

Sophia's words echoed in his mind. He had noticed a change in her behavior since their wedding, but he had simply assumed that it was the way of the world for women to settle down once they got married, whether they were happy or not.

Everyone's words from the past few days came flooding back to him in torrents.

She's changed. She's happier now. You've both changed each other for the better.

Snapping out of his daze, Anthony sprung to action, clambering to his feet and sprinting toward his horse with a renewed sense of hope and purpose. It took him one attempt to

pull himself into his saddle and urge his horse in the direction that Sophia had gone.

Her figure loomed in the distance as he dug his heels into the horse's flanks. He'd already proven that he was faster than her on a horse, and he wasn't about to be chivalrous in light of the fact that he was losing her.

"Sophia!" Anthony yelled just as his horse caught up to hers.

"Stop following me and go back to the house, Anthony! Even better, go back to London and allow me to live in peace here with your mother," Sophia yelled back at him as his horse drew beside hers.

The wind was picking up quickly, howling past their heads and whipping the branches of the trees about in a furious manner. Both Anthony and Sophia had to squint a few times as large, wet drops of snow hit them in the face. They would be trapped in the blizzard soon if they didn't hurry back to the house.

"Stop riding so fast, you can't even see where you are going!" he cautioned as she leaned forward and pushed her horse to the limit, causing the scenery to blur past them as she sped up.

"This isn't the time to suddenly start caring about me!" she shouted at him and galloped ahead.

Feeling the sting of a branch across his cheek, Anthony slowed his horse to a stop before using the edge of the nearly frozen scarf to clear whatever debris had flown into his eyes. The sound of Sophia yelling made him look up.

“Stop!” She pulled on her horse’s reins a little too hard in the distance, causing the mare to rear up.

“Sophia!” Anthony yelled as she fell over backward, losing grip of the mare and falling into the snow beside the hunter’s cabin. Springing back into action, he gritted his teeth and galloped toward the cabin, jumping from his saddle just as his horse came to a stop.

Sophia’s body lay motionless, unnoticeable in the deep pile of snow. His heart raced with fear as he hurried to her side, hunkering down beside her. Reaching for her face, he gently cradled her head in his hands.

“Are you hurt?” His voice was steeped in concern.

Sophia lay still with her eyes staring up at the sky, unblinking and cold. He feared for a second that she had snapped her neck in the fall, but the position of her body gave him hope. There was no blood in the snow that would indicate a serious injury of any kind.

“I don’t think I got hurt. The snow was deep enough to break my fall,” Sophia finally spoke up and blinked a few times before sitting up and rubbing the back of her head.

“Oh, thank God.” Anthony gave in to the wave of relief that washed over him and wrapped his arms around her shoulders, pulling her into his chest.

Sophia’s reluctance to accept his embrace became evident when she pushed him away with both hands and stood. “We better go after the horses before they get too far away,” she spoke in a tone that was devoid of any emotions.

Anthony stood as well. “Sophia, just wait for a second. The horses know their way back to the stables. Allow me to explain my absence first,” he tried to reason with her.

Sophia rounded on him, with her fists balled at her sides. Angry tears began to spill down her cheeks. “Your absence! I don’t need to know about your absence. I felt the sting of it these past three days.”

“I know! Don’t you think I know how much pain I caused you? I wouldn’t be out here in a looming blizzard if I didn’t know how much I hurt you.” Anthony gripped her shoulders, shaking her gently as if the act alone would convince her to see reason.

Sophia's eyes widened as she looked at him, clearly shocked at his sudden burst of anger.

She thinks I'm a monster.

Anthony loosened his grip on her shoulders while still holding onto her from fear of her running away again. "I know how much I have hurt you, Sophia. I'm here because I want to try and make it right. I don't think that a simple apology will be enough for you to forgive me, but I'm hoping that it will be enough to make you see that I want a chance to try and make it up to you. If you would allow me to." His voice softened as he let go of her shoulders, tucking a few strands of her hair behind her ear.

"Anthony, I don't know if I can ever trust you again." Sophia cried silently, her glistening eyes screaming with the hurt he had caused.

Taking a deep breath, Anthony prepared himself to deliver the speech he had planned in his mind on the carriage ride over. "I didn't realize how much I love you until I was standing alone in the graveyard surrounded by nothing but ghosts."

Her lips parted slightly as her body froze. It almost seemed to Anthony as if the wind had been knocked out of her sails.

“What were you doing in a graveyard?” she eventually asked after a few moments of hesitation.

Anthony threw his head back and laughed, letting out the mirth caused by the ridiculousness of the way that he and Sophia kept missing each other’s main point.

“Is that what you took from what I just said?” He shook his head.

“I heard the rest, I was just wondering why it was that you needed to visit a graveyard before you realized it.” Sophia sounded sheepish, avoiding the phrase he had used.

Shaking his head with a chuckle, Anthony searched her beautiful face. The frost was beginning to turn the tip of her nose pink, and her cheeks were flushed, yet he still thought of her as the single most beautiful woman on earth.

“I realize that it seems strange, but I needed to face my demons before I could realize that chasing a ghost for the rest of my life wasn’t worth what was already in front of me. There are people in this life whose graves go untended for many years because they never cherished the people who were already around them in life. I don’t want to be that person, Sophia. I don’t want to spend the rest of my life taking for granted the fact that you are here in front of me with a pink nose.”

Raising her hand, Sophia rubbed the tip of her nose, suddenly conscious of the fact that the storm was drawing nearer.

“I want you and all your silly window-closing habits for the rest of my life. I want you to knit horrible scarves with holes in them for me and our children.” He laughed and lifted the edge of his scarf where the branch had made one of the holes even bigger.

“The scarf still wasn’t for you.” She lifted her chin defiantly.

“I don’t care, Sophia! I love you and all of your stubbornness!” Anthony came forward, placing his hands on either side of her face and kissing her lips with all the passion and longing that had built up over the days they had been apart.

Melting into his arms, Sophia returned his kiss, hesitantly at first, before thrusting her tongue into his mouth and gripping his arms.

The wind blew harder as large clouds began to block out the only remnants of light that was still in the sky.

“I love you, Sophia. That is what you should be taking from what I am saying.” Anthony drew back slightly, cradling her face in his hands before kissing the tip of her pink nose and cheeks.

“I love you, too, Anthony. I realized just how much I love you when you left me in the snow. I saw my whole world walking away from me, and I was afraid that I would never feel happy again. I’m not sure when I fell in love, but I suspect it started that day you pushed me against the wall in the alley.” Her voice shook slightly as snow hit their bodies, forcing them both to take a step to the side.

“You don’t understand how happy you have made me. I don’t deserve the kindness you are showing me right now.” His emotions began to overwhelm him as tears filled his eyes.

Looking up, Sophia huddled a little closer to his body. “You don’t deserve them, but I think I did hear you saying something about wanting to make it up to me for the rest of your life?” A faint smile tugged at her lips as she looked into his eyes.

“I will gladly spend the rest of my life trying to make it up to you.” He leaned in closer and pressed his lips to hers, feeling the warmth of her touch on his chest.

Their tongues danced together in a glorious waltz of passion before Sophia broke the kiss.

“I think we should get back and have this discussion indoors before the two of us freeze to death,” Sophia whispered just as the wind pushed her against his chest.

“I think you might be right. Your lips are already starting to turn blue.” Anthony looked around but couldn’t see the horses through the thick clouds that were surrounding them on all sides.

“The horses would have surely gone back to the stables by now. Do you think we will make it back to the house before freezing to death?” Sophia asked, the shivers in her body growing stronger.

“No, but I do have an idea. Come with me.”

Anthony took her hand and led her over to the cabin, which was quickly becoming obscured by the snow that was being blown in every direction. Reaching the door, he struggled with the handle, fighting against the mound of snow that was already piling up fast.

“Let me help you!” Sophia yelled over the noise of the storm and began to scoop the snow away from the door in armfuls, pushing it aside in an attempt to make room for the door to move.

It took them a few moments of working together, but they eventually pushed the door open and stumbled inside, shutting the sodden wood behind their backs before too much of the snow could drift in. The loud bang caused the cabin to shake slightly.

“That was a close call,” Anthony breathed before straightening and looking around the neat little room with piles of wood, boxes, and supplies for emergencies such as this.

A single bed sat in the corner of the room with one pillow and a few grey blankets that had been neatly folded at the foot. The wooden floor had been neatly swept, and it was clear by the lack of cobwebs that the cabin had been cleaned in preparation for the lengthy winter months.

“I didn’t think we were going to make it there for a minute, but I’m glad we did. The storm is getting frightful out there.” Sophia straightened and began to remove her gloves, which were covered in snow.

“Hold on just a second before you start undressing. We should light a fire to ward off the cold. The wind will die down in an hour or two. We can make the long walk back home once we have warmed up.”

Anthony strode across the room, retrieving a few thick logs before throwing them into the hearth and retrieving the tinder box on the mantle.

“So, a blizzard is your limit.” Sophia smirked and walked over to the windowsill, hanging her gloves to dry out.

“Is starting an argument really the best idea when we’ve just made up?” Anthony laughed, shaking his head, and hunkered down to light the fire.

Flames began to crackle after a minute or two, igniting the pile of wood with a glorious warmth that drew Sophia to his side.

Holding her hands out to the flames, she reveled in the heat that emanated from the fire. “You mentioned something earlier about not wanting to spite your father’s ghost for the rest of your life. Does that mean you want children with me now?” She kept her eyes on the flames as she spoke to him. The hesitation was clear in her voice as she fidgeted slightly with the sleeves of her drenched coat.

Standing, Anthony gently turned her to face him and looked into her eyes. “I think this will answer your question,” he whispered tenderly before pressing his lips to hers.



“Shall we send out a party to search for them, Your Grace?” The concerned butler stood behind Emily as she peered out the window with the binoculars she used for the Opera.

Grey smoke could be seen in the distance, mingling with the snow. It was evident by the tiny prickle of light in the window that a fire had been lit inside the cabin.

“No, I believe that Anthony and Sophia will be just fine. Put on a pot of tea for me. I doubt we will be seeing them again until morning. There are enough supplies to last them the night.” Emily turned from the window and smiled at the old man with his bristly mustache and frail frame.

“As you wish, Your Grace.” The butler bowed politely with a respectful nod.

“You and I have been at this game quite a while now, haven’t we?” Emily looked at him with warmth, reliving the many years shared with the family.

“Quite enough for both of us to recall, Your Grace.” His voice held a hint of sadness.

“I think it’s about time that these old bones found their rest. It’s the next generation’s turn to carry on.”

Emily slipped past her butler, making her way up the stairs with sore bones and a contented heart.

CHAPTER 32



S ophia's hands worked their way up Anthony's chest, resting on the sculpted muscles beneath his coat. Her heart was full to the point of bursting as she returned his kiss, only breaking their moment when the snow from her clothes began to drip on the cabin floor.

The fire had reached a roaring blaze, filling the small room with warmth and light that warded off the chill of the storm raging beyond the walls. The icicles from outside that had formed on their clothes slowly began to turn to slush, making their garments soddy.

"I think we should get out of these clothes before we catch our death of cold," she whispered passionately against his lips, fighting the urge to throw herself into his arms and have her way.

She needed to savor every moment of their union now that things had been settled between them.

“Don’t mind if I do.” Anthony flashed her a wolfish grin that made the pit of her stomach flutter with nerves.

Turning her back to him, Sophia allowed him to pull her coat off her shoulders, revealing the dark green dress beneath the fur. The snow had been deep enough to penetrate all the layers of fabric. Even her undergarments were damp.

“I think green is my favorite color on you. It brings out your eyes,” Anthony whispered in her ear while his hands unlaced the ribbons of her dress, freeing the fabric before pressing gentle kisses to her neck and back.

Swallowing hard, Sophia closed her eyes, relishing the feel of his hands and lips on her body. She had lain awake at night, dreaming of her husband making love to her with the full extent of his passion, wondering what it would feel like if there was nothing hindering his thoughts. She knew from their argument that he had been holding back out of fear of having children.

Her heart raced with the idea that this could be the moment when they finally came together as one, unhindered by anything beyond the four walls of the cabin.

Working the loops of her corset, Anthony allowed the garment to fall to the floor, exposing her bare skin to the warmth of the fire.

“Is the fire warm enough for you?” His voice was husky as he kicked the dress aside, turning her body around to face him.

Sophia felt uncertain at first as she stood before him in nothing at all, but she quickly realized that he had seen her naked on other occasions when they had made love. Reaching out, she pushed his coat off his shoulders and began to remove the frozen green scarf, casting the garments aside with the rest.

“I think it could be a little warmer, but I’m sure that you can help me with that.”

She untucked his shirt and started unbuckling his belt while looking into his eyes. Her fingers gracefully brushed against the toned muscles of his abdomen, creating an even deeper ache in her core that yearned for the sweet release of his touch.

“Did you know that you are the single most hauntingly beautiful soul on the face of this earth?” Anthony’s eyes dropped to her chest as he drew a line from the base of her throat to the center of her firm breasts.

Gasping slightly, Sophia parted her lips, pushing his breeches to the floor before running her fingers up the length of his thighs. Taking her time, she kissed a path over the muscles that drove her wild, stopping as she reached his chest before moving over to his neck.

“Sophia... you don’t know what you’re doing to me,” Anthony growled hungrily, placing his hands on her tight waist and drawing her body closer to his.

“Maybe I do,” she whispered, holding his gaze and exposing her neck as she flicked the strands of her damp hair over her shoulder. The light sting of the icy tendrils sent chills down her back, yet the sensation was nothing compared to the heat she felt for her husband.

“What man could resist that?” Anthony lost control, taking her lips in a slow lingering kiss that sent waves of pleasure through her body. The tender embrace burned on her mouth like embers of fire, fueling her desire along with his own.

Her legs felt as if they would melt as she leaned into his body, wrapping her legs around his waist when he cupped her buttocks in his hands and lifted her. The position alone was enough to make her feel just how much he had missed her presence in his arms. His body communicated the longing even if he couldn’t.

“I’m not sure if the bed is big enough for both of us,” Sophia breathed above his head, throwing her head back as he ravaged her neck with passionate kisses.

“We don’t need the bed,” Anthony groaned against her neck before pushing her back up against the stacked crates with her buttocks on the edge.

Sophia braced herself as he positioned his body between her legs, taking his time to stroke her thighs and the flat curve of her stomach. She moaned slightly when he leaned in closer, taking her into his arms for extra support.

His sudden thrust caught her off guard, and she gasped in pleasure, feeling the full length of his arousal stretching her walls. She hadn't been expecting things to heat up as quickly as they did, yet she was glad of the release as she gave in to the steady rhythm of his lovemaking, resting her elbows on the crates as she leaned her head back. Her breasts bounced in the bright light of the fire.

“Look at me,” Anthony commanded as he slowed his pace, keeping one hand on her hip as the other squeezed her breasts in turn.

The urgency and strength in his voice made her look up as gentle moans emanated from deep within her throat. The pleasure was unprecedented as she obeyed his command, yielding to his will.

“I want you to look at me and see just how much I love you,” Anthony spoke through grunts as his hand moved up her chest, firmly gripping the back of her neck and holding her closer with his gaze locked on hers.

Sophia's breathing deepened as her chest rose and fell with every thrust. Her legs wrapped around his waist while his hand guided her hips with slow, even movements. She didn't think the feeling could get any better until Anthony leaned in closer, bringing the full weight of his body onto hers before taking her hard nipple into his mouth.

The gentle flicking of his tongue on her breast was almost more than she could bear as she rode the waves of pleasure. The muscular feel of his arms beneath her fingertips kept her grounded as her body lost control, yielding to every whim and caress. Her fingers traced the outline of his biceps before making their way to his back, where they dug into his flesh.

Her breaths suddenly quickened as a fine sheen of perspiration broke out on Anthony's skin. His eyes rolled to the back of his head as he cried her name a final time, grunting in pleasure, his muscles contorting in sweet release.

Sophia could feel her legs stiffen, trembling from the pleasure that coursed through her body before she finally cried out, shuddering uncontrollably as she clung to him.

"Anthony!" Her screams filled the cabin with deafening passion.

Anthony held her close, running his fingertips over her spine until her shivers finally subsided, signaling the end of her climax.

“I hope that answered your question.” Anthony kissed a path over her chest, keeping her close before placing his forehead against hers. The intimate moment they had shared had left them both gasping for air, basking in the glow of their passion.

“What question?”

Sophia’s mind struggled to focus on the aftermath of their lovemaking. She couldn’t have pointed out the difference between the Queen and a bear if anyone had asked her just then. Her thoughts still clung to the ecstasy that coursed through her body.

A deep chuckle escaped Anthony’s throat as he pressed a kiss to her forehead, tightening his arms around her waist. “I didn’t realize that doing that to you would render you speechless. I need to keep that in mind for the future. It may come in handy whenever you’re mad at me.”

“Don’t be so smug, I’m coming to my senses again.” Sophia’s laughter was light as she rested her head on his shoulder. She couldn’t believe that things could get any better than they were at present.

“Is that so?” Anthony pulled back slightly and shot her a cheeky grin. The love in his eyes tugged at her heart, flooding her with an overwhelming surge of happiness.

“What are you doing?” she suddenly asked when he drew his body away from hers. The expression on his face had changed as if an idea had suddenly occurred to him.

Anthony stepped away from her, kicking their sodden clothes aside before reaching for a tanned deer hide and shaking it out onto the floor in front of the fire.

“You will see.” He winked at her and strode back over to the crates, lifting her in his arms and kissing her lips.

Their kiss lasted until Sophia felt as if she needed to catch her breath. The intoxicating scent of his skin filled her senses, pushing away any doubts she may have had.

“What are you up to, Mr. Atwood?” She giggled lightly, feeling as if the weight of the world had been lifted off her shoulders.

“Patience, my darling wife...” Anthony grinned and lowered her to the ground, laying her back on the soft animal hide before positioning himself above her with his hands on either side of her head.

“Do you plan on ravaging me in front of the fire?” she asked him with a cheeky grin, her heart pounding with anticipation.

The hungry look in his eyes made her nervous in a good way that knotted her stomach with pleasure.

“I don’t know, that depends on whether or not you want me to ravage you in front of the fire.” He leaned in closer and kissed her cheeks.

“I think we should definitely come back here so that you may do just that.” She closed her eyes contentedly and basked in the heat that radiated from the flames.

“Oh, we will be coming back here, don’t you worry about that. But we don’t have to wait for next time.” A deep chuckle escaped his throat as he kissed her chest.

“What exactly are you up to?” Sophia became curious as his hands slid down her body.

“I’m... going to... start making it up to you,” Anthony murmured between kisses, kissing a path from her jaw to her neck, and down to her breasts.

Shutting her eyes and tangling her fingers in his hair, Sophia relaxed beneath his kisses. She didn’t think that they would be able to make love so soon after what they had just done, but she was pleasantly surprised to find that her body reacted to his advances despite the exertion.

Having spent a good few moments on her breasts, Anthony worked his way down her body, kissing her hips and thighs while his hands held her waist.

Her legs parted for him as he nuzzled her core, moving his head from side to side before gently flicking his tongue over the bud that brought her a great deal of pleasure. The soft warmth of his strokes soon made her body tremble, eliciting soft moans in response.

Bringing his hands up to her chest, Anthony cupped her breasts, holding her body steady with her nipples pressing against his palms.

“Anthony,” Sophia gasped repeatedly until it felt as if the world would fade to black with every caress and stroke of his tongue.

The world at large faded against the backdrop of the crackling fire, heating her skin with a scintillating warmth.

Anthony’s moans of pleasure quickly sent her over the edge, causing her muscles to tighten with sweet release as she cried out for a second time that night.

“I thought I was about to lose you there.” Anthony chuckled before kissing her thighs and working his way up her body.

Pulling her close, he rolled onto his back with her head on his chest, his arms securely wrapped around her waist.

“I did think I would swoon there for a second.” Sophia laughed, lazily dragging her fingers across his chest. The heat from the fire created a comfortable atmosphere as they lay in front of the hearth.

“That’s how it’s supposed to be when it’s good.” He kissed the top of her head before laying his head back with a contented smile on his lips.

“I didn’t think it was possible to do that so many times. Just how many times can we do that a night?” Sophia asked curiously, rolling onto her back, his arm beneath her neck.

Laughing loudly, Anthony propped himself up on his elbow and stared down at her, taking in the wonder of her curves in the light of the fire. “I can do that as many times as you like, but I need a few moments to recuperate. Men and women are just different that way.” He drew a pattern over her hips and abdomen with his fingers.

The gentle feel of his skin against hers made her smile. She hadn’t imagined that he could have ever gotten any better-looking, yet there was something utterly serene about the happiness she saw in his eyes, as if the burdens that had been weighing them down before were gone.

“Perhaps it’s God’s way of making it up to us because of all the nonsense you men put us through,” she teased with a smirk.

“Perhaps, or perhaps it’s because men only need one round of lovemaking to placate them. It takes a lot of effort to remove the crazy from ladies.” Anthony rolled his eyes before smiling down at her again.

“Anthony Atwood! It’s you, men, that make us crazy, to begin with.” Sophia laughed and playfully swatted his chest.

“I have no doubt about that, my love.” Anthony suddenly tickled her sides, before kissing her deeply.

“I love you, Anthony Atwood,” Sophia confessed when her laughter had finally died down.

“I love you, too, Mrs. Sophia Atwood, and I hope to spend the rest of my life showing you just how much that is.”

Anthony drew her closer to his chest, allowing her to listen to the steady beat of his heart as she peacefully drifted off to sleep.

CHAPTER 33



Sophia held on tightly to Anthony's arm as the butler held the front door open, welcoming them both inside with a solemn "Merry Christmas."

"Is Her Grace awfully mad that we didn't make it back in time last night?" Anthony peered around the hall in an attempt to see if his mother was waiting for them.

"I'm afraid that your mother had taken quite ill during the night, Your Grace. The doctor is with her now." The butler's eyes were red and blotchy as if he had been crying all night.

I knew that something was wrong.

Sophia felt her stomach clench in the same manner as the night her father had died. The house had been far too quiet upon their arrival late that morning.

"What happened?" All the blood drained from Anthony's face as he looked the butler in the eye.

Sophia had never seen such a concerned expression on anyone's face, and it made her wonder if that was what her face had looked like when her father had died.

"Her Grace went up to bed last night and failed to awaken this morning. Her maid left for a while, but it soon became evident that Her Grace was ill." The butler cleared his throat as if the news caused him a great deal of pain.

"Oh, Lord, it's because we didn't come home last night. She worried herself sick." Sophia began to panic as she raised her hands to her mouth, hyperventilating from the shock and guilt. She would never forgive herself if she was the reason that Anthony's mother was no longer able to carry on.

"Don't be silly." Anthony attempted to soothe her nerves, placing his hands on her upper arms and rubbing them vigorously.

The butler stepped forward once again and coughed into his fist. "Actually, Your Grace, if I may interject. Her Grace was not at all concerned last night when she went up to bed. She seemed rather chipper after having spotted the smoke coming from the old cabin chimney." He turned to Anthony. "Her Grace found peace in the fact that there was once again harmony in your marriage, Your Grace." A sad smile spread over his lips as he recalled the conversation with his mistress.

Looking up, Sophia searched her husband's face. They all knew that his mother's dying wish was to see him happily married. Perhaps her time had come now that her wish had been fulfilled.

Anthony swallowed hard as he looked up the stairs at the silent gallery. "May we go and see her?" he finally asked after blinking a few times.

"The doctor is with her now and has asked not to be disturbed, Your Grace. I can have some tea and perhaps some hot chocolate sent to the dining room while we—I mean, you wait, Your Grace." The butler looked away with tears in his eyes as he waited for Anthony to reply.

Stepping forward, Anthony placed his hand on the butler's shoulder. "No, you were right, it is *we*. You have served my mother for many years. You have just as much right as any of us to wait for the news." He gave his shoulder a gentle squeeze before stepping past him and walking toward the drawing room.

Sophia marveled at the strength and compassion displayed by her husband. A lesser man would have chewed the butler out for insubordination, but Anthony was able to look beyond the bounds of propriety and see the suffering of his servant despite his elevated rank in life. The touching display of empathy warmed Sophia's heart with pride for the man she had married.

“You may have a tray of hot chocolate sent up, and perhaps the servants would enjoy a cup as well while we all wait,” Sophia spoke kindly before following her husband into the adjacent room.

“Thank you, Your Grace. I can see why Her Grace was content with His Grace’s choice.” The butler’s bright blue eyes filled with tears as he, too, turned away and left.

“Anthony,” Sophia whispered behind her husband as she entered the drawing room, placing a hand on his shoulder.

The fire crackled in the hearth, filling the cheerfully decorated room with a welcoming warmth. Trays of nuts and pines lay waiting on the tables with many festively wrapped gifts beneath the tree.

“She set up Christmas just as we always celebrated it.” Anthony’s voice was choked with emotion. Reaching up, he placed a hand over Sophia’s, gripping her fingers.

“I know this seems like a hard pill to swallow, but there is a light in all of this.” Sophia came around the stool and hunkered down in front of her husband.

“Forgive me if I fail to see it at present.” Tears fell down his cheeks, and he sniffled.

“Everything is forgivable right now, my darling. I can’t tell you all of the mischief my mother had to put up with after my father’s passing. I was quite the hellion before you came along and tamed me. I look back now and wish I had handled things a little better, but all is forgivable when we lose someone so dear to our hearts.” Sophia attempted a smile for her sake as well as his.

“I suppose that having you admit that I tamed you can be seen as the light at the end of the tunnel.” Anthony used his sleeve to wipe the tears from his cheeks.

Sophia got to her feet and then sat beside him in front of the fire. “That isn’t exactly what I meant, but I will give you a free pass, considering the circumstances. I just meant that even though the situation seems grave, your mother’s wish came true. She wanted nothing more than to see her only son happily married, and she went to bed last night with that thought in mind.”

“I just wish that I had come to my senses a long time ago. We could have all been a happy family if I hadn’t been so stubborn. What if she never gets to meet her grandchildren?” Anthony hung his head and sobbed into his hands.

Placing her arm around his shoulders, Sophia tried her best to comfort him, tears streaming down her cheeks for the woman she had met and come to love as her mother-in-law.

The butler came into the room with a tray of drinks in his hands. “I beg your pardon, Your Grace, but the doctor is on his way down. I saw him at the top of the gallery.”

Anthony hurriedly dried his tears, awaiting the news of his mother. Sophia looped her arm through his, bracing herself for whatever was to come. All she knew in her heart was that no matter the outcome, she and Anthony would be there for each other.

A tall man with grey hair and a wispy mustache entered the room, carrying a brown leather bag. The liver spots on his thin hands spoke of his age despite the spring in his step. “I apologize for my appearance.”

Sophia couldn't tell from his demeanor if the news he was bringing was good or bad. The professional mask he kept over his face at all times hid his feelings, as was no doubt his intent.

“My name is Dr. Andrews. I was barely out of bed this morning when a very irate footman came pounding on my door, so do forgive my disheveled appearance.” The man's dark eyes held a note of warmth that instantly put her at ease.

“I thank you for your due diligence, Doctor. Is my mother well, or has she—” Anthony's voice caught in his throat before he could even finish his sentence.

Sophia took over when it became evident to her that Anthony would not be able to speak. “What my husband means to ask is if there is any news.” Her heart pounded in her chest as she waited for the doctor to respond.

“Your mother is very ill, Your Grace. It is to be expected that she will not last that much longer, but today is not the day. Your mother has come down with a cold and will recover if she adheres to the bedrest and keeps up her strength,” the doctor finished with a relieved sigh as if he had been trying to remain professional while sharing the good news.

Anthony let out a breath, his face as white as a sheet. “May we go up and see her now?”

“You may, but try not to tire her out.” The doctor smiled at Sophia as Anthony rushed out of the room.

Sophia stepped forward and played the dutiful hostess. “May we offer you a cup of hot chocolate before you leave, Doctor?”

Looking over his shoulder and out the window, the doctor seemed to consider her offer. “I suppose I don’t have anything better to do, unless someone comes looking for me.” He gratefully accepted a steaming cup of hot, thick chocolate before taking a seat.

“I hope you won’t mind me slipping upstairs for a moment. I’ll be back in two shakes of a lamb’s tail.” Sophia used a phrase of her mother’s that she never in a million years would have thought of using.

“Please, don’t let me interrupt the happy family reunion. From what I heard, you might be needing my services in nine months.” The doctor widened his eyes knowingly before looking at the fire and sipping his hot chocolate.

Sophia felt the heat flooding her cheeks, wishing for a giant hole to open up and swallow her whole. Even the butler coughed uncomfortably and shifted on his feet, avoiding making eye contact with her.

Just what had Emily told him?

“You may rest assured that I am only teasing you, Your Grace. Anything that was discussed in the bedchambers is private. Even the marriage proposal that was made to me by your mother-in-law.” The doctor seemed to smile at some kind of inside joke.

Even the butler seemed to enjoy the cheeky humor of his mistress.

Shaking her head, Sophia lifted her skirts with a smile and made her way out of the room and up the stairs. She needed to

see how Anthony was faring with his mother. Crossing the gallery, she gently knocked on the door and waited for Emily's faint voice to call her in.

"I'm glad to see you looking better, dear," Emily called from her bed, the covers pulled over her lap as she sat up straight with pillows at her back.

Anthony sat crouched beside her bed with his face buried in the sheets, tightly grasping her hand in his.

"I think I should be the one saying that. We had quite a fright upon our arrival this morning." Sophia shut the door behind her.

Waving the idea away as if it were a fly buzzing around her head, Emily made a face. "People tend to overreact when you're old and frail, dear. Your time will come as well, many years from now when I'm nothing but a memory for you all."

"Please don't say that, Mama, not when I thought I had lost you." Anthony raised his tear-stained face from the sheets, looking at his mother with a sorrow-filled look.

"I'm sorry I scared you, dear. It was only a cold," Emily spoke more gently and beckoned Sophia to the bed with a wave of her hand.

Accepting the invitation, Sophia came to the nearest side of the bed and took the hand that Emily was holding out to her.

“All I want to know now is if we can finally put all of this nonsense about vows and broken hearts behind us.” Emily looked from one to the other with an expectant look.

Sophia looked up and smiled at her husband. “I think it’s safe to say that we can.”

“The only vow that I wish the two of you to keep is the one you made in the chapel.” Emily turned her attention back to her son, patiently waiting for his response.

Anthony seemed to straighten, returning to his old self as he came up and sat beside his mother’s other side. “I can assure you that everything that needed to be said between us had been said. You will no longer hear anything of Father or the selfish vow that I made to him.”

“That was all I wanted to hear.” Emily sighed contentedly and brought their hands together on her lap.

Anthony’s eyes bored into Sophia’s with such a loving look that Sophia felt her heart skipping a beat. Even after everything they had been through as a married couple, he still managed to give her butterflies as if they had only just met.

“Now that we have all of that sorted and out of the way, has Dr. Andrews left yet? I asked him to marry me. You have to admit, Sophia, that he must have been quite a looker in his younger days. That salt and pepper hair really does it for me.” Emily winked at Sophia while holding onto both their hands.

Anthony seemed appalled. He pulled his hand away from his mother’s. “Mama, since when do you speak in such a manner?”

“I nearly died this morning, Anthony. Don’t begrudge your old mother a little fun. I did, however, ask the handsome doctor to stick around and see if Sophia is with child. I’m not getting any younger, you know, and I had one near-death experience this morning already.” Emily laughed at the horrified look on her son’s face.

Getting off the bed, Anthony straightened his sleeves, scowling at his mother. “You only have a cold, Mama, you are not dying yet. But I will die if I sit here and listen to you speak in this manner. I will go and ask the servants to draw a bath. Sophia and I feel very cold,” he said determinedly and then stalked out of the room in the same manner he had on the day he and Sophia had met.

Shaking her head, Sophia closed her eyes. Things had certainly come full circle from that day in Marie Webster’s shop. She was now happily married to a pompous man who meant the world to her.

Emily leaned in closer and whispered to Sophia, “I was only half-joking, you know. That Dr. Andrews really is a good-looking man.”

Feeling the mirth building up in her chest, Sophia let go, laughing harder than she had in years. All was well in her life, the only thing that would make it better was the addition of children.

CHAPTER 34



The fire crackled in the hearth as Sophia removed her semi-dry clothes from the day before. She'd had good enough sense to hang them out before she and Anthony had built a makeshift bed in front of the fire. Yet, she was grateful to have them off her skin, as the fabric was beginning to make her itch.

“Are you happy to be home and in our own private chambers, Mrs. Atwood?” Anthony came up from behind and placed his arms around her shoulders, hugging her tight and kissing her ear.

“I can't say it's a small cabin in the wilderness, but it sure does help to have all the comforts around.” Sophia smiled and placed her hands on his forearm, feeling the bare skin of his chest pressing into her back.

“I'll make a wilderness explorer out of you, then,” Anthony growled seductively in her ear, lowering his hand and spanking her naked bottom.

“Careful, Mr. Atwood, or your mother will hear and have the doctor come in here to examine me.” Sophia laughed and turned in her husband’s arms, her naked breasts pressing against his chest.

Shaking his head as if he were in pain, Anthony closed his eyes. “Please don’t ruin the mood by bringing up my mother.”

“You know she wants to marry the doctor because of his striking looks and salt and pepper hair.” Sophia leaned into his body, pressing her pelvis against his.

“I had an entire plan in mind for how this evening should go, and I can assure you that discussing my mother didn’t even feature,” Anthony grumbled, turning away from her.

“No, I’m sorry. Please, don’t go, I was only teasing you. Tell me a little more about these plans you had in mind.” Sophia pulled him into her arms and playfully nipped his chin.

Perking up, Anthony lifted her in his arms and nuzzled her neck. “Well, I thought that I might revisit our wedding night and show you just what should have happened,” he spoke softly in her ear, sending a wave of goosebumps over her skin.

“But you have already made love to me, what else can there possibly be for you to show me?” she cooed seductively in his ear, feeling the desire tightening her belly.

Anthony was certainly the man she intended to spend the rest of her days with. She couldn't picture her life without his grumbling and strict rules.

Carrying her across the room, Anthony used his hip to push open the door, carrying her into the adjacent room, where a hot bath had been drawn for them.

“I may not be able to make love to you for the first time again, but I can certainly show you how it should have been if I had gotten my act together sooner.”

He stepped into the tub with Sophia still in her arms, lowering them both into the steaming warmth as a small amount of water sloshed over the sides.

“Now that is something I'm looking forward to,” Sophia purred against his lips before slipping her tongue into his mouth and savoring his warm depths.

“Not just yet.” Anthony gently pushed her away with a wolfish grin as he reached for a sponge beside the bath and gestured for her to turn around.

Doing as he asked, Sophia turned her back to him and allowed him to gently pull her into his arms.

“What I should have done on our wedding day was bring you up to our room and remove your dress before carrying you into a hot bath like the one we are currently in.” Anthony kissed her neck, gently dragging the sponge over her shoulders and back.

Closing her eyes, Sophia allowed herself to be taken away, her body relaxing in the heat of the hot water and the feel of the soapy sponge on her skin.

“And then?” she asked in a breathy tone, leaning into his arms and chest.

“Then I should have used this sponge to gently explore each and every curve of your body.” He lowered his voice to a deeper husky growl, bringing the sponge over her arms and her chest before massaging one breast with his free hand and soaping the other with the sponge.

“Hmm, I think I would have liked that,” Sophia moaned, her body like putty in his hands as he worked magic with his hand and the sponge.

“And then I would have waited for you to be as relaxed as you are now before making my way down your abdomen and ensuring your complete comfort.” Anthony moved the sponge down her body, rubbing her legs and inner thighs.

Parting her lips with new pleasurable sensations, Sophia allowed her mind to drift away from all the worries of the world. Her skin felt hot from more than just the water, making her gasp for more.

“Once I had seen that you were fully under my control, I would have put the sponge aside and allowed my hand to wander even lower...”

Sophia opened her eyes to see the giant sponge floating on the water, drifting to the other side of the tub on tiny waves. She didn't have to watch the sponge for too long, as Anthony instantly set to work on pleasuring her, eliciting a loud gasp from her throat.

“Once you reacted like that, I would have held your body closer to mine, tilting your head back ever so slightly until I could see the pleasure on your face.”

Anthony made good on his word, placing a hand on her throat and gently moving her head back on his shoulder.

The strong feel of his hands guiding her body, and the heated sensation of his breath in her ear, drove Sophia insane as her hips began to move with the rhythm of his fingers.

A sudden wave of disappointment washed over her as Anthony withdrew his hand, pushing her gently away. Turning

in the water, she gave him a puzzled look, uncertain of how to react to his withdrawal.

A teasing grin spread over his lips. “And just when I saw that your pleasure was reaching its apex, I would have stopped, turned you around, and drew you in for a kiss like this.” Anthony reached for her arms, pulling her closer and guiding her knees on either side of his thighs.

Their lips locked together in a hungry battle, each searching for dominance with their tongues until Sophia finally yielded to her husband’s demands, allowing him to take the lead.

“And once you were under my spell with a kiss just like that, I would have guided your hands to my lap, showing you just how happy I was that you are my wife.” Anthony closed his eyes as he guided Sophia’s hands down his chest, stopping when they finally reached their destination.

“And then, once you guided my hands to your very, very erect manhood, I would have taken over, allowing my natural instincts to take the lead.” Sophia gained the upper hand and watched his face contort in pleasure, loving the way she could turn the tables on him and give him as much pleasure as she had received.

“Don’t get ahead of yourself.” Anthony placed his hands on her wrists and drew them out of the water, kissing her lips.

“What will happen once you have ruined my fun?” She drew his bottom lip into her mouth, playfully running her teeth over the puckered flesh.

Antony’s eyes darkened with passion as he placed his hands on her hips, guiding her closer to his body with expert precision. “I would proceed to show you just how good it can feel when your husband takes control of your body.”

Flesh met flesh, and Sophia gasped with pleasure deeper than she had ever felt before. Placing her hands on his shoulders, she began to move at the behest of his hands, feeling the fullness of his manhood inside her with every breath and stroke.

Water splashed against the sides of the tub, creating a large puddle on the stone floor. The earth moved with sensual pleasure, allowing Sophia to experience new sensations of love.

The gossip mill of the *ton* had often described the act of lovemaking as a deep and sensual experience of becoming one in every sense of the word. It wasn’t until that very moment, looking into his deep brown eyes, that she felt as if she could grasp the concept in all of its glorious fullness.

Souls connected as bodies collided, resulting in the ethereal experience of passion.

“Sophia.” Anthony’s lips parted with a loud gasp, sending her over the edge as she began to pant.

Feeling as if she were about to explode, Sophia leaned forward, cupping his face in her hands as their pleasure reached an apex. Muscles writhed and tensed, leaving them both gasping for air in the aftermath of their climax.

Collapsing against his chest, Sophia allowed herself to breathe, inhaling the scent of his soapy skin as he held her close.

“I think it’s safe to say that that would have made for a perfect wedding night, indeed,” Anthony breathed huskily in her ear with a deep chuckle.

Having regained her breath, Sophia sat up on his lap, gazing lovingly into his eyes. “I don’t mind that we didn’t have the perfect wedding night, or that you took a while to come to your senses. As long as every road we decide to take leads us back here, to each other.” She felt her breathing even out as her world came together in his eyes.

Anthony’s eyes locked onto hers in a heated moment. “I will never understand what it is that I did to deserve someone as amazing as you, Sophia Atwood. I hope and pray to God that our union results in many children, and may they have your personality and character down to a T. Even your stubborn streak of sarcasm.”

Sophia knew then that she would never in her lifetime doubt the fact that her husband loved her more than life itself.

“I think that this is a case of the pot calling the kettle black.” Her laughter carried through the room as she allowed herself to be lifted up in his arms.

Carrying her out of the tub, Anthony placed her on her feet, reaching for the nearest towel and drying her body.

“And what is it that you would have done at this juncture if this was, indeed, our wedding night?” Sophia teased, flashing a cheeky grin.

“If this was our wedding night, I would have ravaged you in the tub until the sun rose over the hills. Considering the fact that you and I are both tired from our many adventures together, I think we should call it a night.”

Acting swiftly, Anthony swept her off her feet and carried her to their room.

“What are you doing?” Sophia’s laughter echoed through the room as he playfully tossed her naked body onto the bed.

“Putting you to bed. You may want to take a few pointers for when we have children.” Anthony yanked the covers back and rolled her up into a bundle on her side.

Sophia giggled from within her cotton prison, fighting to free her arms. “I highly doubt that this is the way that babies should be handled.”

“Of course, I would wait a few years before I tossed them onto the bed like that, but I think the whole rolling concept applies from birth.” Anthony laughed before leaning in and kissing her head.

Finally freeing her arms, Sophia pulled him in closer and kissed him deeply, wrapping her arms around his neck. “If we are blessed with many children, I hope that at least one of them is a copy of you. Because then I would have two of the finest men in England to call my own.”

“I love you,” Anthony breathed against her lips.

“I love you more than you will ever know, Anthony Atwood.”

EPILOGUE



Six Months later...

*A*nthony watched his wife from across the room. Sophia looked lovely in her white gown with simple beading. The bouquet of white roses she held in her arms reminded him of the purity of her character.

“Do you take this man, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death do you part?” the Vicar asked the bride in front of the whole congregation that consisted of family and friends that Anthony hadn’t heard from or even seen in years.

“I do,” the bride replied as Sophia locked eyes with her husband, smiling from ear to ear with a delighted glint in her eyes.

A low susurrantion of oohs and aaahs swept over the room, adding to the already jovial atmosphere of the day.

“And do you take this woman, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death do you part?”

The question echoed over the congregation, filling every corner of the simple stone chapel with anticipation.

“I most certainly do, and I can attest to the fact that I am doing so of sound mind and body. With every ounce of my free will.” Dr. Andrews beamed from ear to ear as he placed the ring on Emily’s finger.

The guests erupted with laughter at the doctor’s heartfelt response.

Seeing his wife stand as his mother’s maid of honor brought a grateful tear to Anthony’s eyes. Despite his mother’s worsening condition, Sophia had encouraged her to seek the love she had never found with the late Duke. Anthony couldn’t have asked for a better partner or even daughter for his mother.

“Well then, I guess there is nothing left to do besides pronounce you husband and wife. You know what to do, Doctor.” The Vicar stepped back with a pleased smirk on his face, allowing the couple room to seal their union with a kiss.

Averting his eyes, Anthony shook his head at the passion with which his mother kissed her groom. Sophia's laughter was loudest of all as she shot him a triumphant grin.

"Now that I have publicly embarrassed my son, I think we can all enjoy a marvelous feast back at the house." Emily laughed and winked at Anthony when he dared to glance in her direction.

"You know you will be the death of me," Anthony whispered to her as she came down the aisle, leaning on her new husband for support.

"Don't worry, dear, we have a doctor in the family now. Jasper will cure anything that ails you." Emily turned her attention to Sophia as she made her way through the throng of guests, stopping to loop her arm through Anthony's.

Jasper leaned in closer and whispered to Anthony, "I'm afraid that I'm not such a good doctor that I will be able to cure death, but I have heard that a few glasses of whisky do wonders for parental embarrassment."

Rolling her eyes with a bright smile, Emily addressed her daughter-in-law. "Thank you for holding onto my flowers for me, dear. My old arms are too tired to lug them around."

“You are most welcome, Emily.” Sophia attempted to hand them back to her.

Placing her hand over Sophia’s, Emily gently pushed them away. “You keep them, dear. They go beautifully with your dress. And there is something in one of the roses that I want you to have.” She winked at her, laying her head on Jasper’s shoulder as they made their way down the aisle.

“I wonder what she was talking about...” Sophia twirled the bunch of flowers in her hands, searching for what her mother-in-law had been talking about.

The light filtering through the stained-glass windows suddenly caught something shiny. Reaching into the center of the flowers, Anthony retrieved a stunning emerald ring with a gold band.

“It’s beautiful,” Sophia gasped, bringing her hand up to her throat.

“It belonged to my grandmother.” Anthony’s voice was low and soft as he turned the ring over in his fingers.

“Emily’s mother?” Sophia asked, her voice dripping with disbelief.

Shaking his head, Anthony let out a sigh. “No, it belonged to my father’s mother. She was very fond of my mother and often said that she was the daughter she never had.”

“I can’t accept this, Anthony, it’s too much. This is a priceless family heirloom.” Sophia closed her fingers over Anthony’s hand and pushed it away.

“You can’t decline an offer like this. Doing so would be telling my mother that you do not wish to be the daughter she never had.” Anthony grasped her right hand, sliding the ring onto her ring finger.

“I don’t know what to say.” Tears filled her eyes as she examined her hand.

“You say that you are the luckiest woman alive to have fallen into a family such as this.” Anthony winked at her before leading her down the aisle.

“Of course, I am happy, even with someone as stubborn as you.” Sophia laughed and kissed his cheek.

Stepping into the sunlight, Anthony and Sophia approached the throngs of people that were congratulating Emily and Jasper in droves.

Suddenly, Jason stepped out from behind a bush. “God, this is depressing.”

Laughing, Anthony turned to see the sour expression on his best friend’s face. “I beg your pardon?”

“Your mother has gotten married before me, Anthony. You can’t tell me that that isn’t a solid reason to drink.” Jason gestured toward the happy couple, who were absorbed in a world of their own as they exchanged smiles.

“I think I should go and see what Emma and Margaret are up to. See you in the carriage?” Sophia laughed before kissing her husband on the cheek and leaving the men to their devices.

“Are you really that glum just because my mother has tied the knot?” Anthony looked his best friend over.

Jason’s face seemed tired as he kept looking at the happy couple. “Even you have to admit that it’s depressing, Anthony. Here I am, without a date, and your mother has tied the knot for the second time. My life is a pathetic joke,” he complained and shook his head.

Grinning from ear to ear, Anthony clapped his friend on the shoulder and turned him around until they were both facing the crowd. “Do you see that lady over there in the light blue

dress and hat?” He pointed discreetly to the far end of the chapel yard.

“The stunning blonde with the curly hair and sea-green eyes? Don’t you think she’s a bit out of my league?” Jason watched the lady laugh as she greeted some of the guests.

Anthony placed both of his hands on his friend’s shoulders and lowered his voice so that others couldn’t hear. “Oh, she is definitely out of your league, but she’s the only chance of you ever finding a good match.”

“How is she my only hope if she’s out of my league? I think I should be setting my sights on a homely girl,” Jason responded earnestly with only a hint of self-pity in his voice.

“She isn’t your match, you oaf. She’s the matchmaker. That is Marie Webster, and trust me on this, if she can find a match for me, she can find a match for you. The woman knows what she is talking about.” Anthony checked to see that she wasn’t walking in their direction. “Please, never tell her that I said that she can be frightful when she’s stern.”

Realization finally dawned on Jason as he turned back to Anthony. “Ah, don’t you think that using a matchmaker is kind of desperate? I know it worked for you, but you had the constraints of time working against you.”

Rolling his eyes, Anthony shook his head. “I feel like I’m talking to myself at the start of my marriage. Perhaps I should just knock some sense into you now and save us all loads of time and effort.”

Jason conceded out of fear that Anthony might just make good on his promise and knock some sense into him. “There’s no need to bring violence into the equation. I’ll go and see her.”

Anthony’s eyes drifted over the crowd, finding Sophia as she laughed with her friends. “Good, and when she finds you a match, be sure to never mention to your wife that you thought she was attractive. I never made a blunder like that of my own, but I’m sure that it’s ill-advised to start a marriage like that.”

“I’ll be sure to keep that in mind.” Jason swallowed hard as he scanned the crowd, seemingly searching for his future wife.

The End?

EXTENDED EPILOGUE



Eager to learn how **Sophia and Anthony**'s relationship evolved? Then enjoy this complimentary short story featuring the beloved couple.

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Turn on to the next page to read the first chapters of *Four Rules for the Viscount*, one of my best stories so far, and the second standalone in the series!



PREVIEW: FOUR RULES FOR
THE VISCOUNT



CHAPTER 1



*W*hat am I going to do?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Margaret quietly walked down the hall and gently pushed on the wood door. It silently swung open to reveal her father slumped over his desk with the blinds to the study still shut.

His hand was clutching an empty bottle of whisky as a deep snore filled the air, adding to the eerie darkness.

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

There.

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

What am I going to do with you?



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

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

Marie Webster, Matchmaker.

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

matchmaker who could handle the hardest of situations with ease.

The last thing she wanted was to marry a man for anything other than love, yet the light basket swinging at her side reminded her of the fact that she needed to think of her sisters as well as herself. Their father was definitely not going to change any time soon.

Did I not promise them they would make good matches?

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

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

A small bell tinkled above the door.

CHAPTER 2



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

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

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

“I am afraid that I am at fault here; I did not have an appointment; my name is Margaret Bennett,” Margaret hurriedly offered an explanation as she shifted her basket from one arm to the other. “I came in here on a whim more than anything else really.”

“I see.” The woman’s face seemed to soften as she looked Margaret over with a glint in her eyes. “Why don’t we start

with the reason you felt prompted to come in here,” Marie suggested kindly before taking her seat.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Margaret searched the woman’s face for any signs of sarcasm or trickery but found nothing but understanding and kindness. She took a breath and smoothed out her dress. Beggars

couldn't be choosers, but she had a few demands to make for her future husband.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

A mischievous grin spread over her lips as Marie returned her quill to the pot of ink. "Well, Miss Benett, you have given me a lot to work with. I think it is safe to say that it will not take me long at all to find you a suitable match. I will let you know

as soon as I have one, and your first meeting should be here in the shop under my supervision.” She gestured to the table and chairs in the corner of the room.

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“No, I am not.” Evan was beginning to think that something more than just a match of convenience with a poor Baron’s daughter was afoot. “But I must warn you, I am no lover of pets. I do not want any in my home.”

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER 3



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

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

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

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

Margaret's heart suddenly stopped beating as time stood still. The man sitting opposite the matchmaker was far more handsome than she had envisioned him to be since receiving the note. Not that his looks had anything to do with the match; she needed a husband, not a carving of a Greek God that could

be shown off to the ton. She was simply taken aback by how strikingly good-looking she found him to be.

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

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

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

"Not at all." She shook her head and came forward. "I'm sorry I'm late; there were a few unforeseen circumstances that needed to be taken care of," she explained cheerfully while trying her best not to gawk at the man who seemed grumpier than her favorite cat and less approachable.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Now that we are better acquainted, I suggest we have some tea while we discuss the finer points of the arrangement,”

Marie suggested before walking over to her desk and retrieving a gold bell that she rang once before replacing it in the drawer. “If you would both care to have a seat?”

“Very well then.” The Viscount cleared his throat and shifted in his seat as if he were slightly uncomfortable with the situation at hand. “I will begin. As the Viscountess of Northfork, you will be expected to act like a lady at all times. You will be punctual, elegant, and well-mannered. Your main duties will be to ensure that the family is properly represented in the eyes of the ton. Appearance is everything.”

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“I'm not done.” Margaret surprised him as she set her cup back down on the table. “My sisters need a tutor, a decent one

that will teach them French, the pianoforte, painting, and everything that a young woman would require to make a suitable match.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Very well, no gambling, and no drinking. I can agree to those terms if you promise to uphold your end of the deal and act as a model of perfection — in the eyes of the ton at least; you may do as you please behind closed doors in the mansion.” He

bit back the smile that threatened his lips as he narrowed his eyes at her, placing his fist against his lips with his elbow on the table as he waited for her response.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Want to know how the story ends? Tap on the link below to read the rest of the story.

My Book

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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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