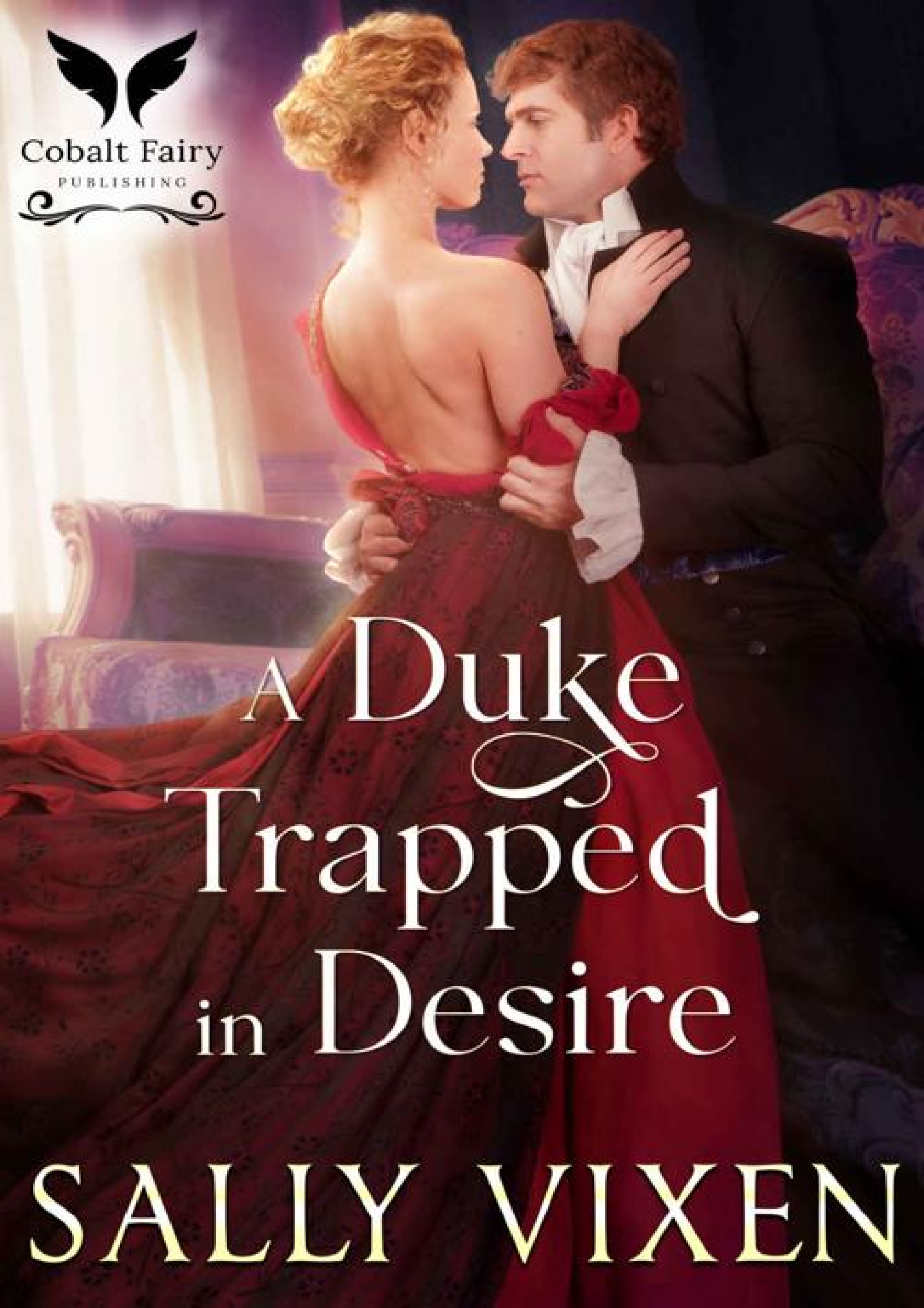




Cobalt Fairy  
PUBLISHING



A Duke  
&  
Trapped  
in Desire

SALLY VIXEN

# A DUKE TRAPPED IN DESIRE

A STEAMY HISTORICAL REGENCY ROMANCE  
NOVEL



SALLY VIXEN



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# BEFORE YOU START READING...

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## ABOUT THE BOOK

***“Rule number two, I shall not bed you.”***

To escape a marriage to a horrendous man, Marina does the unthinkable: she tries to compromise herself on purpose with a kind Earl. However, to her horror, the one that walks into the Earl's bedroom is not the Earl, but his rakish brother...

Proud owner of a gaming establishment, Duke James crawled his way out of debt into an immense amount of wealth, and he has been living by his own set of rules since. He never drinks, nor gambles. And more importantly, he never falls in love. He was fully prepared to let his brother continue the family line, when he is found in a bedroom with a seductive vixen..

If there is anything James hates in this world, it's losing control. And that's exactly what happens when the two are forced into a marriage of convenience. But the war of wills between them has just started, and neither of them will go down without a fight..

# PROLOGUE



*London, England*

“*I*’m late. I’m never late.” James sighed as he descended the stairs, moving from his lodgings to the gambling hall he owned. This late, the candles were glistening brightly. He knew if he passed through one vast door, he’d walk straight into the gambling rooms.

On one side, he’d see the hungry men, greedy for money as they leaned over the tables. Like dogs at their feeding bowls, ravenous, the men tried to grab the money, offering feeble cards and bets to try to win from him.

James smiled slightly as he looked at that door, adjusting his tailcoat before he turned his back on it.

*Not tonight. Tonight, I have somewhere else to be.*

He was choosing to be late. An invitation from his younger brother to a ball was so rare that, ordinarily, he never would have chosen to be late, but tonight, it was necessary. One of his gambling customers had not just asked to see him, but it had become imperative.

Making his way across the hall, he turned to another door, this one much smaller than the last and placed between two marble busts, bearing the faces of eighteenth-century philosophers. James opened the door, stepping into the room. The candles were lit here too, with some placed in sconces on the walls, creating the appearance of stars following him down the corridor as he walked.

Eventually, he heard voices. They came from an open doorway at the far end of the corridor through which he could see a friend of his pacing. Michael Hawkins, known by many as the Viscount Thorne, was clearly losing his patience. With a hand rubbing his temple and his pacing relentless, their guest had to be pushing the Viscount's limits.

James held himself back for a minute, hovering in the doorway and watching the meeting that was taking place.

As Michael paced, their guest, Mr. Jeremy Waters, was sitting in a chair, visibly shaking. His fingers trembled so much, it was as if he'd suffered some sort of shock.

"You cannot expect me to pay, My Lord," Mr. Waters was saying repeatedly to Michael, his voice squeaky with desperation. "I have given everything I have to this establishment."

"Ha! You make it sound as if you were a benefactor rather than a gambler." Michael's words made James smile as he hovered by the open door. "You are in great debt to this gambling hall, and neither I nor the proprietor can continue to maintain your debt. You know the rules, Mr. Waters; you must pay your debt."



Mr. Waters shook his head and bent forward as if he had been punched in the gut by those words.

“Oh, oh, I do not feel well,” he wailed then placed a hand to his chest. “I believe I am having heart trouble, palpitations. Oh no!”

“A fine actor you are, sir, but I need to point out that your heart is placed in your left-hand side of your chest not your right.” Michael calmly stopped walking and pointed at Mr. Waters’ chest, showing he was clutching at the wrong part of his torso. Mr. Waters moved his hand to the correct side, but it was too late. His attempt to garner sympathy and possibly an escape from this meeting had failed.

*No control, that was the man’s problem.*

James kept the thought to himself as he watched through the open door, seeing the orange light from the candles flicker so much that the light and shadows danced across Mr. Waters’ face. He’d seen such weaknesses many times since he’d opened the gambling hall. No man had good control of himself, at least none as good as him.

*My rules are simple and should be any man’s rules. No liquor, no gambling, and nothing that can threaten my discipline.*

He’d adopted these rules long ago, and they had served him well. After his father had passed, and the dukedom faced ruin, James had opened the gambling hall with Michael coming in to work for him. Through his discipline and hard graft, James had seen the business grow to the resounding success it was today.

The dukedom was profitable once again, and he'd never need to fear losing money, or dread a debtor's prison, but it had come at a price. Many suspected what good there could be in a man who owned a gambling hall. His reputation had been torn into tatters by the scandal sheets, and his younger brother barely spoke to him, fearing what association could do between them.

Despite the damage, James would not change things. He was content, happy as he was, and that was all down to one thing.

*I keep to my rules.*

"I beg of you, sir, I must see a doctor," Mr. Waters pleaded with Michael again.

"You're no sicker than I am. Your only sickness is of your wallet, not your body." Michael gestured to the man, watching as Mr. Waters' hands lowered from his chest.

James had had enough and pushed the ajar door wide open, revealing his presence. At once, silence fell in the room. Michael turned to face him with a small smile, revealing grey eyes that looked tired and a mop of dark blond hair that was tangled, for he had pulled at it in stress many times.

Mr. Waters said nothing, yet he audibly gulped as he looked toward James. Slowly, James stepped into the room, aware of the power that had shifted toward him at that moment. It always seemed to be the same. Either men feared him or his influence, for they frequently fell quiet in his presence, and they became obedient like young, newly weaned pups.

“Mr. Waters,” James’ voice was deep as he approached and stood in front of the gambling man. “I’ve had enough of listening to your quarrels with my manager, and I’ve equally tired of the credit we have given you in this establishment.”

“I will pay, Your Grace, I will!” the man said desperately, leaning out of his chair. He looked ready to stand and paw at James’ tailcoat with his hands outstretched. One hard glare from James’ dark blue eyes was enough to keep the man in place.

“What money do you have to your name now? Hmm?” James asked. His voice was quiet, but the depth was enough to make the man’s trembling worse. It was a rare thing indeed for James to need to shout.

“A little.” The man gulped again. “I regret to say... I cannot pay at this time.”

“How much does he owe?” James turned his focus on Michael. His friend reached for a table nearby and opened up some papers, revealing a total sum that he passed to James. “God’s wounds,” he muttered. “I pray you do not have a family, sirrah. I’d hate to hear of a family dependent on your poor fortunes now.”

“I do have a family, Your Grace,” the man said meekly. “Two young-uns and one that’s old enough to be taken from school.”

James cursed under his breath. He could see Michael was equally aggrieved at this news, shaking his head and muttering under his breath.

It would not be the first time James had demanded money from his customers. Frequently, some of them needed a helpful reminder that his business wasn't a charity. It was their own doing if they got themselves into such trouble that they couldn't pay him back. Merely the year before, James had seen one customer go to debtors' prison, not only incapable of paying James but his other creditors too. That man was alone though, unmarried, and without a family depending on him.

James thought back to the moments when he was at university, learning as much as he could. He'd been absorbed in his studies the day a letter had arrived from his father, telling him of the dire circumstances the dukedom was in. That was many years ago, but he hadn't forgotten that night. The world had come crashing down around him in that moment, and life had been different ever since.

*I'd hate for that to happen to this man's children.*

"I cannot let any customer of mine not pay, sir." James lowered the papers to the table and slowly turned back. "Equally, I have no wish to bankrupt a man and his family. So, I will propose a deal for you. A payment plan. You will pay the gambling hall back your debt but in instalments. I hope you have a fair job, sirrah, for you will need it. In the interim, you are banned from the gambling hall."

"Banned? But I could win my money back. One good hand, that's all I need, Your Grace!" Mr. Waters' desperation made James' lip curl in disgust as he exchanged an uneasy glance with Michael.

“Gamblers always think the same. The luck of the next hand will save them, they think. Take my advice, we make our own luck in this world; we don’t win it.” The latter words were harsh enough to urge Mr. Waters to flinch in his seat. “Come, to your feet. I’ll show you to our clerk where your payment plan can be drawn up.”

James and Michael led him to an adjoining room where they left him with the clerk preparing the paperwork. Once done, James and Michael left with them both hurrying to the carriage that awaited them in the streets of Covent Garden. Darkness had fallen, and the only light spilled out of the gambling hall windows and from the one lantern the driver of the carriage carried.

“Do you think he’ll pay?” Michael asked as they climbed into the carriage, and James hastily lit the lantern that swung from the roof of the carriage.

“He will, given time; he must. Or in the end, we’ll have to report him.”

“Ruthless, James.”

“It’s necessary.” His voice was calm as he sat back and looked at his friend’s face. “If we’re too charitable to one customer, what’s to stop us being too lenient with them all? I won’t let us fall into bad ways.”

“So disciplined,” Michael laughed. “You remind me of one of my old school masters. We were never allowed a word out of turn. It’s a wonder I like you.”

“Ha! I am not so bad.” Though James knew the truth... his discipline sometimes came across as callousness. Michael was his closest friend, and for all the teasing, they would never abandon one another. They both knew what it was like to suffer at the hands of a father with financial trouble. “I have my rules, that is all. No liquor, no gambling, nothing that could risk me.”

“You have one weakness though,” Michael said as the carriage moved away, jerking with rickety wheels over the cobbles in the road. “Women.”

“Women? Hardly.” James laughed deeply at the idea, knowing exactly what Michael was referring to. His reputation as a rake seemed to be growing, not out of intention, but it was a natural thing. The ladies he’d been with had always known his offer – a night of passion, nothing more. “They are not my weakness. I am as disciplined in that regard as I am in any other.”

“Truly?” Michael chuckled at the idea. “You do not allow yourself a glass of port, but you allow yourself women? You must admit, your discipline faulty in that regard.”

“Indeed, it does not.” James shook his head. “Allow me to explain, my friend. I do not have a rule of no women, no. My rules are different. No love, that is simple. No affection, no courtship, no marriage, nothing of that kind. *That* is my discipline, and it has served me well.”

“No love, eh?” Michael seemed intrigued by the idea, his smile growing. “I wonder if it really is possible to discipline one’s heart the way one can control a drinking or gambling habit.”

“It’s possible. Believe me.”

## CHAPTER 1



“Do you know what I’m thinking?”

“Quite frankly, Lord Rutherford, I shudder to think.” Marina’s words didn’t appear to affect Baron Rutherford at all. She might as well not have spoken for all the good it did. He leaned toward her, quite ignoring the fact they were at Lord Frampton’s ball with many witnesses to watch them together, and he whispered in her ear.

“I am thinking of what our first night will be like together when we are married, Marina.” The suggestion made her blood boil.

Turning her back on the Baron, she reached for the nearest drinks table, clutching to the edge of the table to keep herself standing. It was stacked high with crystal glasses and champagne bottles that never quite seemed to be full, for people were so eager to drink. Marina barely noticed the fine decorations. She ignored the napkins that had been shaped into swans and the myriad of candles thrust into ornate crystal holders. She reached for a tall glass of champagne and drank it quickly.



*If I am to go through with my plan tonight, I will need all the courage I can summon.*

Yet Baron Rutherford followed her, stepping so close that his arm brushed her waist, and she jumped away from him.

“Pray, Lord Rutherford, do not come so close,” she begged of him in a whisper.

“Why should I stay away? We are betrothed, are we not?” he said luridly with his eyes drifting down her person. She felt sick at the mere thought and nearly gagged on a swallow of champagne.

It was her greatest disappointment that her father had agreed to the match. She'd had no say in the matter. No matter how many times she had pointed out that Baron Rutherford was a cruel man with little kindness in him, it did nothing to dissuade her father. Her mother had looked on with sympathetic eyes throughout her protests, but being of a meeker nature, her mother hadn't argued the case.

*What I would do to be away from this man!*

Marina turned her eyes on the Baron, looking at the greasy black hair he now brushed back across his temple, apparently thinking it fine and well kept. He was short and may have even been shorter than her had the heels of his boots not given him a little lift. His dandy ways meant his clothes were more effusive than her own with a waistcoat so embroidered with flowers and perfume to match that her nose wrinkled at the strong scent of lily and bergamot.

He leaned toward her once more, his lace cuffs tickling her wrist as he tried to take her hand.

“I know ladies can sometimes be nervous about their first night,” he tried to whisper in her ear again, but she leaned away from him. The grasp he had on her hand meant she couldn’t get far. “Allow me to assure you, the night will be quite something.”

“You forget I have not agreed to that night,” Marina whispered in fear though once more, her words didn’t matter.

“That is a lady’s natural reluctance, demureness.”

“Demure? Believe me, My Lord, if you think me demure, then you do not know me at all.” She’d been called bold before, forthright, and spirited, but never demure. “I have not agreed —”

“All you’ll need is a little persuasion.” His hand caught her wrist harder, pressing so firmly that her skin stung.

“Ow.”

“I assure you, I’m strong enough to... *persuade you.*” His words made her want to wretch, for he was suggesting not to persuade her but *force* her.

“If you would excuse me.” She adopted a false smile and stood on his foot. She didn’t care if it was a petulant act, for it

worked well to achieve her aim. He released her, exclaiming a little in pain, giving her the chance that she needed to escape.

Abandoning the champagne glass on the table, she hurried across the room, searching for one face in particular. To make sure Lord Rutherford could not follow her too easily, she slipped between the crowds in the ballroom, twisting her path so he could not find her. She hid for a few minutes behind a group of tall ladies with feathers all thrust in their hair then she stood behind a group from the London militia, their red regimentals drawing eyes, so no one saw her.

When she caught sight of Lord Rutherford searching the wrong end of the room, she took her opportunity. Her friend, Miss Caroline Davis, was standing in the corner of the room, sipping slowly from a punch glass. She seemed happy to stay in the corner, observing the room at a cool distance.

“Caroline!” Marina jumped toward her.

“My goodness, you gave me such a fright.” Caroline clutched her glass and her chest, her brown eyes lighting up with laughter in the next second. “I thought I had escaped here to this corner, and yet you find me.”

“You know I’ll always find you,” Marina said to which Caroline laughed.

“I am glad for it, but tell me, Marina, what is wrong?” Caroline reached toward her. “You’re pale, and your hands... you’re trembling.”

“Lord Rutherford.” It was the only answer she had to give.

“Ah.” Caroline nodded. “Has he said more inappropriate things?”

“Just a little.”

“That man.” Caroline cursed under her breath. “Were I a man and twice as strong as I am, I would have thumped him for his words by now.”

“As would I.” Marina sighed deeply and leaned on the wall beside her good friend. “I’m desperate, Caro,” she used the familiar nickname. “I cannot marry him.” A lump formed in her throat at the mere idea.

“We talked of this before. You’d escape if you could, run if you could, but how? You know what your father is like,” Caroline whispered with a kind of horror attached to her tone. “He’d merely find you and drag you back to the church.”

“I fear you’re right.” Marina’s smile began to grow as she became even more determined of her idea. “That is why I have a plan to escape. Rather than simply run, I will make Lord Rutherford give up his suit altogether.” Her courage was building. Either from the fear and desperation to escape the Baron, or the champagne may have helped a little.

“Pray, tell,” Caroline encouraged her on. Marina looked around, checking that no one was nearby before she lowered her voice to a whisper and revealed her plan.

“I must destroy my reputation, Caro. I’ll make myself a fallen woman. The Baron then would surely not wish to marry me then.”

“Marina! Can you hear yourself?”

“Yes, of course.” She shrugged, not bothered by what the result could be. “Listen, I must speak quickly before the Baron finds me again. Lord Frampton is hosting this ball, yes?”

“Yes.” Caroline nodded. “He is so busy with his guests; I do not think we have spoken to him tonight.”

“Barely,” Marina agreed. She glanced across the room, trying to see the Earl. She caught sight of him at a distance, dancing with a young lady. Tall and handsome with a face so pleasant that many ladies stared, it was hardly surprising he had such attention. “He seems a kind man.”

“What are you thinking, Marina?” Caroline asked, warily.

“His bedchamber is upstairs,” Marina whispered. “What if I was to go into his room, undress a little, and wait for him there.”

“Marina!”

“Hear me out, I pray you.” She clutched Caroline’s hand, trying to stop another outburst. “I know it’s mad, wild even, but I’m desperate. If you and others were to ‘accidentally’ come upon us, my reputation would be ruined.”

“You know what would happen then, do you not?” Caroline grimaced. “Lord Frampton would have to wed you to rescue your reputation.”

“Maybe or maybe not.” Marina shook her head, revealing the full extent of her desperation now. “If he were to offer marriage, then I do not doubt he would make a fine husband, but that is not what I intend to gain. I will assure him I do not expect an offer of marriage. My reputation will be destroyed by the gossip that will spread, and the Baron will retract his proposal. Gentlemen’s reputations always recover quicker than a lady’s, so Lord Frampton will not be affected for long.”

“Oh, goodness, Marina.” Caroline offered a sympathetic look. “You are so fearful that it has come to this?”

“I am afraid I am. Please, Caro, say that you will help me?”

Caroline did not agree straight away. She finished her wine, turned on the spot, and offered alternative ideas before agreeing that none made sense. Eventually, she nodded, for they could both see Lord Rutherford across the room, searching for Marina.

“If you would prefer to be a fallen woman than marry that man, I could not abandon you now,” Caroline said with fervor. “Let it be done then, just as you plan. Find his bedchamber, stay there a while, and after I see he has left the room, I will encourage others to go on a tour of the house with me. We shall ‘stumble’ upon the bedchamber by chance.”

“Thank you, Caro, thank you!” Marina quickly embraced her friend before Caroline pushed her away.

“The Baron is coming this way. Go, go now.”

Marina saw her friend was right. Lord Rutherford was heading in her direction, and the redness of his cheeks suggested anger at letting her escape for so long. Fearful of what that anger could mean for her, she hastened from the room, once more carving a confused path past the dancers and those that laughed and tittered, trying to avoid the Baron catching up with her.

One time, when Lord Rutherford had come to call on her, he'd been drunk indeed. The chaperone had blushed bright red at all the things he'd said to Marina, and even though she had begged him not to say such things, he'd gripped her hand hard, saying he would not have a disobedient wife.

*I fear he will be violent...*

Nothing could dissuade her from her goal. She knew it was risky, and this thought kept coming back to her as she escaped the ballroom and found a set of stairs, hurrying up them two at a time. Hitching the skirt of her ballgown high, she ran with vigor.

*I will escape him, no matter what the cost!*

Her parents would be furious at her descent. Her father, in particular, would never forgive her for her name appearing in the scandal sheets, but it was a sacrifice she was willing to

make, compared to a lifetime of misery married to Baron Rutherford.

To her surprise, it was not difficult to find Lord Frampton's bedchamber. It was behind the most elaborate door on the landing, the plaster around the doorframe molded into vine leaves and rose buds. Opening the door, all was dark. She hastened to light a candle, filling the room with soft light, before she sat down on the edge of the bed.

For a minute, her breathing stuttered, and her hands shook. She was prepared to partly undress for her deception to work, but it was not an easy thing to do.

“Remember what I am doing this for. Any sacrifice,” she muttered to herself then she reached for the laces of her gown. Slowly, she untied them and stood, stepping out of the gown and laying it on the bed before she turned to the door.

With her palms sweaty and her heart thudding hard in her chest, now she just had to wait for Lord Frampton to arrive. Even if he never had cause to go to his bedchamber, her discovery here unclothed by Caroline and others would be enough for supposition to grow and her name to be ruined.

The longer the time went on, the more she wondered what would happen if the Lord did find her there first... Would he be glad of her appearance there?



“Your Grace, you cannot have forgotten that night so easily.”



“I didn’t say I had forgotten, merely that night came to an end.” James was curt with the words, but the lady continued on. She was standing a little too close for comfort here in the ballroom, her hand occasionally reaching out and brushing his own.

With worry, James looked around the ballroom. It was full of people tonight, and clearly his brother had spared no expense in wanting a grand affair.

*He cares what the ton thinks, does he not? He’s always out to impress.*

James’ eyes found his brother across the room. Neil Follet, known by others as Lord Frampton, was quite the center of attention. Gentlemanly, well dressed, and of an affable manner, he had always been the family’s favorite. James hadn’t minded his brother being the favorite. The only thing that disappointed him was that over the years, he had lost Neil’s good opinion.

He could still remember the last conversation he and Neil had had on this subject.

*‘You’re a gambling hall owner, James. You know what people think of you, do you not? I am tainted by association!’*

James supposed the invitation sent to him to come tonight was Neil’s way of not wishing the ton to see there was a divide in their family. It gutted James to the core, but he was happy to play along if it would earn him some respect from Neil.

“Your Grace?” The lady beside him longed for his attention again, and he turned back to face her. The Countess of Warrington was persistent. A beauty with curling black hair and startlingly dark eyes, the night they’d spent in passion had been an enjoyable thing, yet he had thought she’d known that was all it was. At the time, she’d accepted it, but now, it seemed she wanted something else.

“My Lady, we have talked about this.” He lowered his voice, talking to her in confidence. “You have your suitors, plenty of them, but I am not one of them. You were happy with our arrangement the last time we talked.”

“Is it so wrong to hope one night could become something more?” she asked, attempting a sweet tone. He could have laughed at the attempt, for it was so ridiculous.

“Do not place hope on me, My Lady. I am not the man for you.” He turned away from her and tried to escape across the room, but to his dismay, she followed. He reached for a drinks table where citrus fruits had been laid out for a non-alcoholic punch. He was about to pour himself one when the Countess turned up at his side again.

“One dance, Your Grace, that is all I ask. Perhaps my company could change your mind?” Her pleading was desperate. He could not stay to listen.

“Pray, excuse me.” He abandoned the attempt to find a drink and left the room. Hastening to the door, he stepped out into the hallway, only to hear the Countess was still calling after him.

“Your Grace?”

“Good Lord, she will not rest.” Turning on the spot, he looked for an escape. The staircase nearby offered such an escape route. He reached for it and hurried up the steps as quickly as he could.

Reaching the landing, he turned on the spot, only to hear more footsteps on the staircase behind him.

*She follows... I have never known a lady so persistent!*

With frantic hands, he reached for the nearest door and tried to open it, but the door handle did not move. He supposed it must have led to a garderobe or privy, for it had been locked tight.

“Damn,” he muttered, moving down the corridor and looking for another door.

“Your Grace?” The Countess’ voice was growing closer now.

Ordinarily, James would have been stern with her. He could frighten people without trying and was certain he could scare the Countess off, but tonight he had been invited to his brother’s house, and he didn’t want to cause trouble. If Neil was already wary of James’ reputation, then he wasn’t going to cause a stir at the ball. What if the Countess cried and ran to the ballroom, telling everyone he’d used her ill? He couldn’t risk it.

Without looking where he was going, glancing over his shoulder, he reached for a second door. This one he was relieved to find was open. Flinging the door wide, he stepped inside.

He was so determined to escape that he didn't notice at first there was light in the room from a candle. He merely closed the door behind him and pressed his face to the gap. With one eye, he saw the Countess hurry down the corridor, still looking for him.

“Oh.” Someone's shocked gasp had him turning around.

At last, James realized exactly what situation he'd walked into. He was in his brother's bedchamber, yet it was not empty.

A young lady stood before him, wearing nothing but her chemise and her corset. She was striking in her beauty with cinnamon-colored hair wound perfectly into an updo, and green eyes so bold and large in her face that as they widened at his entry, they seemed to take up most of her face. Her full lips parted in wonder.

James' mind worked fast, understanding exactly what was happening. Neil had a lady waiting for him in his room for such night-time lusts and passions, yet Neil was not the one to find her, James was.

“God's wounds,” James muttered, staring straight at her. It didn't help that she was beautiful nor that the lack of clothes and well-placed corset revealed a curvy figure that ordinarily would have had James' blood raging.

“You are not supposed to be here,” she muttered, the surprise making her voice weak.

## CHAPTER 2



*M*arina turned and grabbed the gown off the bed, holding it over her body to hide herself.

*This was not the way it was supposed to go!*

She recognized the face of the man who had walked into the bedchamber, and he was not the man she had been waiting for. This was Lord Frampton's brother, the Duke of Curton.

A known rogue with a dreadful reputation for owning a gambling hall in Covent Garden, she had only seen him at a distance at balls. She'd always been discouraged from speaking to him, and it was plain in the way he looked at her, he had no idea as to who she was.

"God's wounds," he said again, turning on the spot and covering his face. "I did not see that..."

"Didn't see what?" she spluttered. "Your eyes definitely looked downward."

“Well, what do you expect when I find a lady undressed in here?” he snapped. His voice was deeper than she had expected it to be. He turned back to face her, showing just how tall his figure really was. He was broad shouldered too and lithe in body. The moment his eyes fell on her, he turned away again, covering his face. “God’s blood. Does my brother know you’re here?”

“No.” Her one word was enough to make him turn back to face her, his eyes wide.

“What did you say?”

“You should go. Now.” She waved a hand at the door. There was still a chance everything could work out as she wished it to if he left now.

“Happily!” He reached for the door, yet before he could take hold of the handle it moved. “Oh...”

“Oh no,” Marina muttered. She stepped back, trying to put herself behind the bedpost though little good it would do to hide herself.

The Duke practically leapt across the room as if he was looking for a hiding place, but he was out of time. The door was flung open.

At the front of the group was Caroline with an innocent expression.

“I wonder what is in here?” she asked. Clearly, she’d enlisted many other guests to join her self-led tour, for a group of people followed her with two ladies and three gentlemen. “Oh my!” Caroline’s voice was overdramatic when she saw Marina then her eyes fell on the Duke, and this time, genuine shock bled into her voice. “Oh dear...”

“Well, well,” one of the gentlemen said as he looked between the two of them, “we seem to have come upon quite the tryst.”

Marina looked down, seeing the way she held her gown over her body barely covered up anything. Her corset was on show, the tops of her breasts too, not leaving much to the imagination.

One of the ladies sniggered behind Caroline as silence stretched out.

The next thing Marina knew, a sheet was bundled over her. She looked up to see the Duke of Curton had crossed the room toward her. He had grabbed the bed sheet and tossed it in her direction.

“Cover yourself up,” he ordered then turned to face the others. “I think you’ll agree that this is a private moment.”

“Private? Ha! Not anymore,” one of the gentlemen laughed. The Duke merely took a step forward. He must have had a threatening expression, though Marina could not see it from her position, for the group all flinched and stepped back.



“Let us leave, now,” Caroline said to the others in a rush. She exchanged one panicked glance with Marina, and in that look, Marina knew exactly what her friend was thinking.

*I know. It is the wrong brother.*

“Go!” the Duke ordered again when one of the ladies did not hurry but angled her head, trying to get another glimpse of Marina. The moment they were out of the door, he grabbed it and thrust it shut hard, making the door wobble in the frame.

Marina slowly sat down on the edge of the bed, feeling her body quite crippled.

*What have I done?*

Her eyes flicked up to the Duke. He was leaning against the door, his hand thrust into his dark brown hair, pulling at the tendrils in stress. He was shaking his head repeatedly.

“Pray, wake, and tell me this is a dream,” he said to himself.

“It is no dream.” Her words plainly angered him, and his eyes shot open, revealing an intense dark blue color.

“Whoever you are...” he paused, stepping away from the door, “you will dress yourself and meet me in the hallway. This needs to be discussed.”

“Must it?” she asked, but he didn’t say anything in answer. He flung the door open, stepped out, and slammed it behind him again. “Oh God,” she muttered as she dropped the bed sheet and began to dress.

*The plan has gone horribly wrong indeed!*

The whole idea about being seen with the Lord Frampton was so her reputation would not only be destroyed, but if he wished to do the honorable thing, he could make a fine husband. The gentleman she had been caught with in comparison she knew little about beyond the rumors.

They said he was a rogue, a gambler, a ruthless businessman, and frightening. None of that made a good husband.

*Pray, do not do the right thing, Your Grace.*

When she’d finished tying the laces of her gown, with some difficulty, she left the room, stepping out into the hallway. The Duke was there, pacing up and down, though he froze when he saw her.

Once more, those dark blue eyes looked down at her body. A heat overtook her, one she had barely been aware of, but that was now all too present. She couldn’t deny the Duke was a handsome man, and something in her body seemed to respond to that look, wondering what it meant when he stared at her so openly. Did he like what he saw? Could he be attracted to her?

Before her mind could wander on much longer, his eyes flicked back to meet hers.

“Who are you?” he asked, his voice quiet but seething.

“Lady Marina Hodge, daughter of the Earl of Miller,” she explained, watching as he shook his head and turned away. He stepped in a frantic circle before reaching over to her. “Oh!”

She didn’t have time to step out of the way. His fingers brushed her shoulder and flicked her sleeve in place. It must have been askew from when she’d pulled her gown on again. The way he fixed it had been clean and quick, but the brush of his fingers against her skin had made that heat deeper.

*What am I thinking of? Desist thinking of such a touch!*

“You probably should not touch me,” she murmured. He glared at her in answer, stepping back from her.

“You probably should not undress and walk into other people’s bedchambers.” He pointed accusingly at his brother’s bedchamber.

“You were not supposed to be there,” she said in a whispered rush. “That was not the plan.”

“And what was the plan, exactly?” he asked, his hands splayed out wide. “Be prepared for impertinence, though based on what I know of you so far, propriety is hardly something that concerns you.” He gestured to her clothes. She cleared her throat and stood tall, folding her arms over her body.

She rather hoped if she could stop his blue eyes looking at her so much that this heat would disappear. It didn't though. It simmered in her gut, wondering what it would be like if he touched her again.

*I've seen him before, but being this close, it is apparent how handsome he is.*

“My brother puts a lot of stock in his reputation and being honorable,” the Duke said in a rush. “*This...*” he gestured between her and his chamber, “I find hard to believe was something of his own doing.”

“It wasn't.” She shook her head. She knew at this moment she had not covered herself in glory, yet she could not allow the Earl's brother to think so little of him. “He knew nothing of it.”

“Then what was this?” the Duke asked wildly. He was strong in manner, and she supposed many would have found him intimidating. She was too angry to consider being cowed by such words. Come what may, the Duke had spoiled her plan tonight. She rather wanted to blame him for it. “Were you planning to entrap my brother in marriage?”

“No, the plan was something different altogether.” Her harsh response and lifted chin seemed to shock him. She realized that he had expected her to hang her head in shame. She had no wish to.

“God's blood, whatever your plan was... we are both ruined now.” He turned with his hands on his hips.

“Oh, do not flatter yourself, Your Grace.” Her words shocked him, for his eyebrows rose.

“You know who I am?”

“The Duke of Curton. Your reputation precedes you,” she gestured toward him. “There is no need for you to look ashamed of your involvement, is there?” She pointed out. “You are a known rogue, and this will hardly tarnish your reputation. It will dull it for a few days like silver in need of a polish, but no further harm will come to your name. You are safe from me.” She turned on her heel and walked across the landing, determined to escape.

She hesitated at the top of the landing, looking down the stairs. The ballroom was not far away, and she feared what she would find when she returned. Would the gossip have spread already about her being found with the Duke of Curton? Would her parents have heard it on whispering tongues?

Her pause was enough to allow the Duke to catch up with her. He cut her off, placing a hand on the banister in front of her, so they were standing closer together.

*Oh...*

The scent of pinewood and musk filled her. The Duke was wearing a heady cologne, one that made her head swim though she tried not to show it.

“Just as you shouldn’t touch me, you should probably not stand so near, Your Grace,” she warned him though in spite of

her words, she didn't step away from him. His lips flickered into the smallest of mischievous smiles.

“You could have backed up by now.” His words prompted her hands ball into fists at her side, angered to have been caught out at her weakness. “I am stopping you from leaving at this moment. Do you have any idea what situation we are now in? Sure, deny it if you like, pretend we are not both affected –”

“You are not as affected as I.” She lifted her chin higher, matching his firm tone. He was so shocked that his brows lifted across his forehead.

“You have a strong voice,” he observed, his tone quiet.

“Did you expect a lady not to have a voice at all, Your Grace? For all I have heard of your reputation, I did not believe you to think ladies were quiet mice.” Her words made that mischievous smile return on his lips. She rather liked that smile. It had a habit of making her heart thud harder. “Accept the truth, Your Grace. My reputation is the one that is destroyed, not so much your own.”

Abruptly, his head cocked to the side as he observed her. In the dim candlelight in the hallway, she could see his features were rather more statuesque than she had first thought. His cheek bones were high and could have been carved by marble. On his chin, however, there was a bristling of whiskers. He was not quite as clean shaven as other men of the ton.

“You astound me,” he whispered. “Most ladies would be shocked, terrified of what they had done to their reputation. You talk of it as if you have merely dropped a cup. Believe

me, My Lady, such shattered porcelain cannot be put back together again.”

“I know.” Her adamant refusal to look cowed or embarrassed clearly made him shake his head in disbelief.

“Was this your aim?” he asked in amazement. “To destroy your own reputation?”

She didn’t answer but stepped around him, trying to get down the stairs. She barely made it two steps before her hand was caught in his.

“What are you doing?” she cried as she was dragged back up the stairs and returned to the banister on the landing.

“You cannot go yet,” he pleaded, releasing her quickly. Once more, he stood close in front of her so near that they both froze, staring at one another. “You could back up,” he reminded her.

“As could you.” Her words were a challenge, but he didn’t give in. They stood so close that had she wanted to, she could have stood on the balls of her feet and kissed the gentleman.

Never in her life had she thought of kissing the Duke of Curton before. Each time she’d seen him at a distance across ballrooms, her parents had reminded her of who he was. She had merely turned away, thinking they had no cause to move in the same circles.

This moment was very different. Standing here alone in the dim light with such intensity and fraught tones in their argument, the temptation to kiss the man was suddenly strong. She wondered if he was as passionate about kissing as he was about arguing. The idea rather tempted her.

*Have I lost control of all of my reason?*

“You should let me go, Your Grace.” She attempted to keep her voice level as he slowly shook his head.

“I wish to know why a lady would choose to destroy her own reputation.”

“That is my business.”

“And mine too now, in case you hadn’t noticed,” he pointed out with a sardonic smile. “Care to comment?”

“No.” She lifted her chin once again, and he matched the action, both of them lifting their heads high.

“If you are attempting to intimidate me, My Lady, may I point out you have chosen the wrong gentleman for such a task.”

“Not intimidate but warn.” She held his gaze. “Maybe you are a gentleman who is used to having his word obeyed, but you will not find me falling at your feet like a limp pup, ready to do as you command. My motivations are my secret alone. I do not have to talk of them to you.”



“This is absurd,” he muttered. “You have cast us both into the scandal sheets for this.”

“My apologies, but your name was not supposed to be the one to join me there.”

“Your intention is by the by now!” he snapped and stepped back a little. She was glad of the space, for his heady scent was making her feel faint, so she reached for the banister beside her.

*How mad am I this evening that one meeting with this man can make me so attracted to him?*

“You cannot go down to the ball and walk in as if nothing has happened,” he gestured down the stairs.

“There is no other way out of this ball.”

“You will be walking into a room that whispers of you. Can you stand their condemnation? Their accusations?” he asked, staring at her wide eyed. “Trust me, My Lady, I have done many such walks into rooms where you are hated for what people say of you. You have to have skin as hard as marble for such a task.”

She looked at him, feeling as if he had betrayed a small secret to her. Never had she considered what it must be like for a man such as him to walk into a room that gossiped about him.

“I suppose I thought you did not care what the ton thought,” she mused quietly. “I certainly do not care.” She stepped forward, yet this time, he did not move to stop her.

“Leave quickly, if you can,” he pleaded with her. “Enough damage has been done tonight, and if you stay for too long, people will talk of you all the more. Leave quickly for your own sake.”

“I will.” She nodded. Her foot took the next step when he spoke again, bringing her to a halt.

“I will call on you and your father tomorrow.” His words tightened her chest, and her stomach knotted. Slowly, she turned back to face him, her lips parted wide.

“You do not have to do that,” she pleaded. “Forget tonight, Your Grace. This does not have to be spoken of by you again.”

“You think I will stand back and watch you be talked of in scandal sheets?” he asked, his brow furrowing.

“Yes, and you must!” She took the next step down. “I ask nothing of you, Your Grace. Nothing, and I expect even less. You do not have to visit me tomorrow; you have no need to talk to my father.”

She knew what he was insinuating. There was one way he could attempt to save her reputation. That was by offering to marry her, but she couldn't have that. She'd rather be a fallen woman, declared a spinster and unmarriageable forevermore, than marry a man such as he.

*He's a rogue and owns a gambling hall. He'd spend every night with his ladies, and when he came home, he'd probably bring trouble from the gambling hall. That is not the future I want.*

“Whether I come or not is my decision,” the Duke said slowly. A voice was heard along the corridor, suggesting someone else was upstairs. He looked around, paling a little, probably scared of being caught with her again. “Now go, and do as I ask, I pray you. Leave quickly before the whispers can become much worse.”

She nodded though she said no more. As she hurried down the stairs, she considered what he'd said.

*Please, do not come tomorrow, you fool. You do not have to offer to marry me because of my mistake.*

## CHAPTER 3



“*I* need to speak to you,” James said in his brother’s ear as he found him in the ballroom.

“You think I haven’t already heard of what you have to tell me?” Neil’s face hardened as he turned around. The affable countenance had drained in an instant and had been replaced with severe features. “Follow me.” He jerked his head, urging James to trail behind him.

They walked through the ballroom, heading to a door at the far end. James grew aware of Michael hurrying to keep pace with him, trying to catch up. Everyone in the room was whispering, and gazes kept lingering in James’ direction. Ladies with feathers in their hair tittered, those feathers fluttering like they truly had birds nesting in their hair. The gentlemen turned their backs on James, a not-so-subtle sign of their disapproval.

As they reached the door at the far end, Neil beckoned James through. Before the door could be closed, James took Michael’s arm and dragged him through too.

“You really want another here for this conversation?” Neil asked as he closed the door. They were in a small sitting room,

one that had but two candles lit inside, clearly as a reprieve from the main ball.

“I have no secrets from Michael.” James gestured for his friend to stay. At this moment, he needed a friendly face to look at. “Besides, judging by his expression, he has heard too.”

The grey eyes offered an apologetic look.

“I may have,” Michael replied, and he walked to the nearest chair, sitting calmly. “I think this is the point where you explain the gossip, James.”

“Very well.” James turned to his brother. Neil was now a hardened man, reminding James that there were at least a few similarities between him and Neil, no matter how much his brother tried to deny the connection. “Lady Marina Hodge was in your chamber, Neil.”

His brows furrowed instantly.

“Why?”

“I wonder...” James stepped away, trying to find a calm demeanor. He had been teetering on the edge of losing his temper ever since he had seen Lady Marina in that chamber, but he was distracted now, too. The conversation he’d shared with her had startled him.

She was no meek and mild wallflower who would drop her head demurely. She had intrigued him, certainly, and there was a mystery there too, for she had refused to say why she sought to destroy her reputation.

“Perhaps she hoped to ensnare you in marriage.” James motioned to his brother. The mere idea made him resent Lady Marina in an instant. He tried to forget about those big green eyes that had stared up at him and those full lips. They were a distraction, that was all.

“Well, that failed, thank God!” Neil said, turning in a circle. “Though I wonder why on earth I should be thankful at all. James, you have managed to cause yet another scandal, and what is worse, you have done it here in my house.”

“Me? Neil, what do you not understand about the fact it was not my doing? I simply went into your chamber for some peace; I hardly expected to find her there.”

“Somehow, I doubt you.” Neil folded his arms in front of his chest. “Your ways are known. Ladies at balls such as this not only whisper about you, but your name is dragged through the mud of scandal sheets frequently. For all I know, you planned your assignation with Lady Marina here.”

“I do not know the lady!” James’ temper snapped at last. His voice boomed with the words. Just like any other person had ever known, Neil cowered at that voice. He put distance between them, even going so far as to move around a chair, putting an obstacle in the way. James looked at Michael pleadingly, but even he fidgeted uncomfortably. “It was not of my doing,” James repeated, calmly now.

“I wish I could believe you,” Neil muttered. “God knows I wish to.” He gripped the back of the chair he stood behind. “Yet I know fears of this very thing are what make me keep my distance from you.”

James stiffened, glaring at his brother across the room.

“You seek to blame me again for any misfortune that may befall?” he asked, his voice much quieter now but just as seething with rage.

“No, I wish to blame you for your own reputation.” Neil waved a hand dismissively in James’ direction. “You are the one talked of in scandal sheets, not I. They talk of ladies and, oh yes, your gambling hall... What fresh criminality has it been involved with this week?”

“If you had ever been, then you’d know I do not deal with criminals.” James stared at his brother without blinking. The constant need Neil had to separate the two of them because of the gambling hall burned in James’ gut though he pretended it did not. “May I remind you that if I had not opened the gambling hall, the dukedom’s estates would be ruined. You would not have the annuity you gain from it.”

“Fortunately, I have no further need of it, do I?” Neil asked, his arms wide. A couple of years before, Neil had invested the annuity James had given him and reinvested it. These days, Neil had his own estates to run and his own wealth, but before that, he had been dependent on the annuity James could provide for him though he frequently liked to deny it.

*He's too busy with the ton and his foppish ways to see the sacrifices I had to make.*

“When you are on the verge of debtor’s prison, remind me to be as disparaging of your attempts to escape it as you are of mine.” James’ words prompted Neil to curse and walk away.

“Imbecile.”

“What a compliment.”

“Enough sarcasm!” Neil snapped, turning once again. Michael fidgeted in his seat, drawing attention to himself.

“If I may interrupt the argument for one second.” Michael held up a hand. “The arguments over the gambling hall have been had before and are not going to go away –”

“Of course, *you* would say such a thing,” Neil muttered, cutting Michael off.

“As benevolent as ever, Neil.” James’ increased sarcasm wasn’t helping matters. Rather than giving his brother a chance to go on, he nodded at Michael, urging him to speak. Michael sat on the edge of his seat, looking at James with an earnest stare.

“What are you going to do about tonight?” he asked, his voice gentle. “Lady Marina, whether you know her or not, from what is said of her in there tonight, her reputation will not recover. It is quite in tatters.”



“That is what I feared.” James moved to a seat opposite Michael and sat down heavily so far that the wood creaked beneath him, and the sleeves of his tailcoat caught on the arms. His mind worked fast, thinking through all the possibilities.

What that spirited lady had said as she left was right in one regard. James could survive the scandal reasonably well. His name was hardly the pillar of virtue as it was, but she was another matter altogether.

*She could never marry as she is now. She would be cast out of all good society.*

“What will happen to her?” Michael asked.

“Do you need to utter such a foolish question?” Neil raged, marching past Michael.

“He’s a calm man, isn’t he?” Michael addressed James alone, prompting him to smile a little. It was the light relief he needed in that moment.

“I often praise him for his control of his temper.” James continued the jest, watching as Neil froze and glared at them both.

“I thought you were done with the sarcasm.” Neil pointed straight at James, such hatred in his face that a knot tightened in James’ gut.

*We were never going to be the closest of brothers, not after I opened the gambling hall, but this... it could drive us apart forever.*

“If I do nothing, the Lady will be abandoned by the ton. She won’t marry but will be left a spinster, and she’ll be dependent on anyone in her family.” His thoughts were in a whirl, thinking of the worst situation possible, for he had once stood at the door of financial turmoil himself.

After Lady Marina’s father passed, she’d be reliant on the kindness of the male relative that inherited the earldom. If that man decided to cast her out, she could be destitute and end up in a poor house.

*Such things are not to be born.*

“What are you going to do?” Michael asked again, earning his attention. James slowly looked up, a realization coming to himself.

“There is only one thing I can do.”



“Let us leave, Mother, please.” Marina managed to pull her mother free from the door of the ballroom. Her mother was reeling, her face pale, for she had clearly heard the news, but behind her, Joshua was yet to hear.

“What on earth is going on?” Joshua asked, following Marina out of the room. When her mother swooned, tottering on her

feet, he grabbed his wife's arms and walked her forward, heading for the exit. "Careful, Ruth. I have you."

Marina led the path out of the building, not once looking back. At the door, she collected her pelisse from the staff and grabbed her father's frock coat and top hat too, not wanting to waste time with letting him take his time as he gathered the items.

"Marina?" Joshua called impatiently, following her down the front steps, out into the night air. The driveway was full of carriages, and Marina fervently sought out their carriage, hidden among others. "What has happened? Are you ill? Is that why we had to leave in such a rush?"

"Y-yes," Marina stammered, uncertain what to say when they were out in the open. Ruth whimpered, the only sound she made to show she knew the truth of the matter.

Marina gulped as she found their carriage and opened the door.

"Inside then I shall tell you all."

Joshua helped Ruth in to sit beside him, and Marina flung herself back on the opposite bench. She issued quick orders to the driver, closed the door, then lit the lantern above them with a tinder box. The light jumped to life just as the carriage took off, rocking them from side to side.

As that light flickered and danced, Marina looked at her parents, fearing their reactions.

Ruth's pallor was paler than normal. Her brown hair that was so like Marina's own was perfectly tidy apart from one loose tendril that she pulled at now, curling it around her finger in a sign of stress. Joshua's rather haggard and aging face was set in such worry that his jowls shook, and his greying eyebrows furrowed together in one line that could have been mistaken for a rat's tail.

"Is it true?" Ruth whispered as the carriage escaped the driveway.

"Not everything you heard, I am sure." Marina gulped hard, her thoughts working quickly. There was one thing only she could say to her parents, and she would have to hope they believed her story, rather than what others would say. "I felt ill tonight. I suffered from a headache, but I could see you were enjoying yourselves, and I did not want to drag you away from the event."

Joshua must have sensed the wariness in her tone, for he released his wife and sat back. His spine went rigid, and his body tensed.

"What did you do?" His whisper shook.

"I went to lie down," Marina said as hurriedly as she could. "I found a bedchamber and thought I could rest there for a while to let the pain pass –"

"Foolish, foolish girl," her father cursed before she could even finish the story.

“I was found. The Duke of Curton walked in, and before any words could pass between us, others arrived.” Marina avoided looking at her parents. She stared down at the dance card on her wrist instead where Baron Rutherford had listed his name beside three dances.

*May one good thing still come out of this. I pray he will retract his proposal now.*

“They saw the Duke and I in the chamber and jumped to the wrong conclusion. Father, I fear they whisper that we were —”

“Do not say the words! Any possible words for it are too hard to hear at this moment.” Joshua raised a hand and covered his face as their bodies rocked from side to side with the carriage movement. “I cannot believe it. Caught with the Duke of Curton in a chamber? What will they think of you? They’ll think you are a *harlot*.”

“Father!” Marina protested at the harsh word.

“Joshua, that is a cruel word,” Ruth began slowly. One harsh look from Joshua made her fall silent. Marina wished her mother would not be cowed by such looks, but she had judged long ago that Ruth did not have such fire in her. She seemed to do what she thought would give her the easiest life. She sat back, dabbing her cheeks with a handkerchief as tears escaped, hearing of Marina’s fall from grace.

“It is true,” Joshua spat the words. “They’ll call her a harlot and the Duke’s whore. His reputation is already a bad one; what do you think it will do to Marina now?” He shook his

head vigorously. “This is awful, too awful. Ruth, you heard this?”

Ruth hesitated. That hesitation made Marina lift her eyes to her mother, seeing there was wariness in Ruth’s gaze. Those green eyes were narrowed a little as if trying to judge something. A breath caught in her throat, and she dabbed another tear away from her cheek before she nodded, ever so slightly.

“I heard our daughter’s name whispered by others. As Marina says, they are running wild with what has happened. They will no doubt tell lies and make the matter into something truly awful.” Ruth’s words made Marina sigh a little with relief. It seemed her mother was reluctant to repeat the exact words she had overheard.

“What is to happen now? What is to become of us all?” Joshua held out his hands, sitting so far forward on the carriage bench that he was in danger of falling off the edge.

“We must see, Father.” Out of nowhere, Marina felt a calm overtake her. Earlier she had been panicked and flustered, fearing that her plan had gone wrong indeed, but the more she considered what had occurred, the more she realized things may have worked in her favor.

*The Duke of Curton is a rogue. He will not wed himself to anyone. I will have avoided marriage to Baron Rutherford, and I can remain a spinster.*

She tried to keep her lips pressed flatly together, not giving into the temptation to smile. She simply had to hope that the

Duke listened to her parting words and didn't come to see her tomorrow.

Ruth fell silent, her only sounds coming from her occasional sobs. Marina didn't say much either. She simply listened as her father lectured her on all that she had done wrong.

“You should have asked to leave. How could you be so dimwitted as to go and lay down in another's bedchamber...?” He went on in a similar vein for their entire journey. Only when the carriage pulled up outside of their house did his words pause long enough for there to be a minute of peace.

Marina jumped down from the carriage, not waiting for the footman to open the door for her. Her father followed then Ruth. They climbed the steps of the house and hurried inside where standing candelabras had been lit, ready for their return home. Marina made a beeline for the stairs, wishing to escape to her chamber, but her father caught up with her and snatched her hand.

“Marina... you cannot go to bed yet.” His voice was dark. “Do you not see what you have done to yourself tonight?”

“It was not intentional,” she lied, her eyes glancing at her mother who crept into the hall, still sniffing and trying to stop her tears. Marina rather wondered if Ruth suspected the truth; that it had been completely intentional. “Let the dice fall where they may, Father. I'm prepared to see my name in the scandal sheets tomorrow, and I'm prepared to read the lies. Now, I shall retire for the night.”

She pulled her hand out of his grasp and walked up the stairs, but she only managed two steps before he spoke, calling her to stop.

“You think it is that easy to see one’s name in the scandal sheet?”

She glanced back, seeing his jowls shake with the words.

“You will be ruined for this. Lord Rutherford... He is a man of pride and standing. He chose you not just for your dowry nor this family’s position but for your impeccable reputation. Do you not think he will have something to say on this matter?” He gestured toward her, his nose curling a little.

Never had Marina felt so small in her father’s eyes than at that condescending look. He had been the least loving of her parents as she had grown, there was no denying that, but he was ultimately a practical man, and that practicality ruled everything else. He had bound her hand to Lord Rutherford’s as if she were a prize cow to be sold off. Now, he merely worried about reputation and nothing else.

“I do not care what Lord Rutherford thinks.” Her voice was strong as she glared back at her father. “I am retiring. Goodnight to you both.” With these final words, she turned and hurried up the stairs. As she reached for her chamber, one question lurked in her head.

*I pray he ends our betrothal now.*



## CHAPTER 4



“*I* have apologized, many times,” Marina reminded her father, trying to adopt a gentle voice as she poked at her breakfast, finding she could summon little appetite. At the head of the table, her father glared at her, before turning his eyes down to his plate.

Ruth said nothing. She kept her focus purely on her teacup and had barely glanced at Marina as she had entered the room and taken her place between them.

“Mother.” Marina slowly faced her mother. “Please, talk to me? I am truly sorry –”

“Your mother is despairing as am I.” Joshua’s words had Marina freezing with her hand tightening around her fork.

“Can she not speak for herself?” Marina asked, keeping her eyes on her mother. Ruth glanced up briefly before returning to blowing on her hot tea again. Clearly, she did not wish to risk Joshua’s temper by speaking at this moment. “Father, will you not accept my apology?” Marina asked, turning to face him.

“I accept your reasoning,” he said with a heavy voice, scratching his temple. “Yet the outcome is disastrous. The choice you made last night was a fool’s decision. You should have never gone exploring Lord Frampton’s house on your own.”

Marina gulped and turned to the plate, prodding at the fish and making it flake. The scent of smoked fish and lemon filled the air, yet she could not bring herself to eat. She had not realized how much her parents’ disappointment in her would cut into her heart.

Before anymore could be said between them, there was a knock at the dining room door.

“Enter!” Joshua called. His tone of voice even with the staff was brasher and curter than it usually was.

The butler appeared around the door with a silver card tray in his hand. He avoided looking his master in the eye but hurried over, proffering the silver tray forward.

“The scandal sheet you asked for, My Lord, and... a letter. It was delivered by a man from Baron Rutherford’s estate.” The butler’s words had them all exchanging glances around the table. At last, Ruth had lost interest in her fascination with the teacup, and Marina managed to fork a mouthful of fish into her mouth, just to stop herself from asking what was in the letter.

Joshua snatched both items out of the card tray and issued a hurried thanks to the butler, sending him on his way with a

sharp wave. As the door closed behind the butler, Joshua tore open the letter first, breaking the Baron's red wax seal.

Marina paused chewing, leaning forward with her elbows on the table as she watched Joshua's reaction. In her mind's eye, she was thinking of the last time Baron Rutherford had come to call on her. He'd been so forward, so intent on talking to her about their first night together, it made her skin crawl. At one point, she had tried a normal conversation to see if they'd had anything in common, yet the Baron had made it clear he did not appreciate the style of her conversation.

When she spoke of art and how she admired it, he belittled her, saying the creative world was utter nonsense. She had tried to see if the theatre pleased him any better, yet he had laughed at her, calling her a fool for enjoying such mindless entertainment. He preferred his books and never read fiction.

*We would be miserable together.*

Marina watched her father with bated breath as his pudgy cheeks turned bright red. His nostrils seemed to flare, and she could have sworn the heavy bags beneath his eyes that showed his tiredness seemed to grow deeper.

He moved slowly at first, dropping the letter down on the table. In a surprisingly calm voice, he revealed what was in the letter.

“He has called off your betrothal.”

Marina could have danced for joy. Had she been free to do as she liked, she would have jumped up, sang God's praises, and danced quite alone in celebration, but she was not free. She stuffed her mouth with a bigger forkful of fish, trying to hide any temptation to smile.

Joshua suddenly struck the table, the side of his fist thumping where the letter rested on the table. Ruth jumped so much that she spilt tea on herself.

"This is maddening!" Joshua moved to his feet. "The one chance we had at saving your reputation was to see you married and fast, and now, look at what has become of that? You should hear the way Lord Rutherford speaks of you."

"I am not interested to hear it." Marina had also stood, but she moved toward her mother and offered a napkin, helping her to clean up.

"Thank you, dear," Ruth said with softness. They shared a small smile, and Marina half wondered if there was a part of her mother that was also relieved Baron Rutherford would not be in their lives anymore.

"He calls you..." Joshua snatched up the letter, ignoring Marina's words and reading out from the page regardless. "*A deceiver. The lady charmed me yet clearly has many other men's eyes. I will not be cuckolded by a disloyal wife.*" He tossed the letter in the air. The paper seemed to mock him, for it did not fall flat. It drifted in the air, waving from side to side like a falling feather before ending on his plate where he snatched it away for a second time.

“What’s that?” Ruth asked, pointing to the folded paper beside the letter. Marina poured out a second cup of tea for her mother and passed it to her. “Thank you, dear. I see you’re taking care of me again.”

“I always will.” Marina smiled and patted her mother’s shoulder. She loved Ruth dearly and was devoted to her. In the whole of this affair, the worst thing for Marina was to think she had disappointed her mother. Ruth reached for her other hand under the cover of the table and squeezed it reassuringly.

*Maybe she is not as mad as my father, at least.*

“This?” Joshua answered Ruth by reaching for the paper. “It’s a scandal sheet. God knows, I do not wish to read this, but what choice do I have?” He flapped open the pages, his eyes casting down at the words. “Well, they do not pull their punches.”

“I do not wish to hear it, Father,” Marina pleaded.

“You will hear it,” he snapped, glaring at her before he began to read from the scandal sheet. “*‘What news we have to share with our readers today, for we speak of the downfall of a well-respected lady of the town. Lady Marina Hodge, daughter to Earl of Miller, was last night caught in a chamber alone with the Duke of Curton. Many will have read before of the Duke’s wayward and wandering eye, but to hear that Lady Marina had succumbed to his temptation was a shock indeed for the ton. Some even say she was seen in her underwear with him.’*”

“Oh, this is not to be born!” Joshua broke off and cursed at what he read. “They are lying now. As we suspected they

would, they are making the situation much worse indeed.”

Marina gulped and retracted her hand from her mother’s, hiding her face a little by bending down and offering a jug of milk to Ruth. She had been in her underwear, after all. She prayed her father would not read the truth on her face.

“What are we to do?” Ruth asked, accepting the milk from Marina.

“I would see her married, but who would have her now?” Joshua laughed though there was no real humor in his tone. “Perhaps we should send her away to the country, somewhere far away from here, away from the whispers.”

Ruth reached for Marina’s hand again and clutched it hard. Ruth didn’t protest, but Marina knew what that touch meant. Her mother was reluctant to see her leave the house.

“Must we?” Ruth asked in a whisper.

“It is the way of things.” Joshua huffed and sat down in his chair, moving so fast that he managed to clatter his cutlery and send it flying. He didn’t bother to retrieve it off the floor.

A second knock came to the dining room door.

“What is it now!?” Joshua snapped with his voice much louder than before.

The butler peered his head around the door, clearly so nervous to enter that his feet stayed beyond the threshold.

“Forgive the intrusion, My Lord, but you have a visitor.”

“A visitor? Pah! I scarcely believe that.” Joshua shook his head. “I’ve had two notes already this morning to rescind invitations to balls and assemblies. Is it another messenger boy to tell us of our woes and retract more friendships?”

“No, My Lord.” The butler shook his head, appearing more than a little confused. “It is the Duke of Curton.”

Ruth dropped her teacup again, and Marina tried to catch it, but she missed. She was too busy staring at the butler, her lips parted in wonder.

*No... the Duke of Curton has come.*



James waited restlessly in the Earl of Miller’s parlor. His top hat was resting on his knee, and it wobbled each time James’ knee bobbed up and down. He could not sit still, despite being confident of the decision he had made regarding Lady Marina.

The door soon opened, and the man he presumed to be the Earl of Miller appeared, followed by his wife. Behind them, Lady Marina stepped into the room.

James stood to greet them, and his eyes slid to Lady Marina involuntarily. He’d half wondered if the attraction he had felt

for the lady the night before had something to do with the position he'd found her in. Perhaps now, when he'd had time to process, he would not find her so beautiful? Yet he was wrong. Her features were not classically pretty or demure, but she was striking.

Had they met in different circumstances, he would have happily pursued her as a passionate companion for one night. Yet the way they had met showed nothing of the sort could happen now.

"Lord Miller." James bowed to the Earl who stood uncertainly before him. "I know this is a strange introduction and a peculiar situation for us to meet."

"A little."

"A lot," James continued as the Earl bowed too.

"This is my wife, Lady Miller." He didn't bother introducing Lady Marina but just waved a hand toward her. "You will have seen the scandal sheets that mention you and my daughter this morning?"

"Yes, I have." James waited, but they did not move further into the room. He was used to taking command of situations and found himself gesturing for the family to walk further into their own parlor.

Lord and Lady Miller hurried forward, taking seats on a rococo settee. Lady Marina followed and rolled her eyes a little, unseen by her parents. James had a feeling she would



happily comment on the strange way in which he had the power in this room.

“Allow me to explain a little of what happened last night.” He kept his eyes away from Lady Marina, addressing her parents alone. “What happened... it was a misunderstanding. I had no knowledge your daughter was in that chamber before I went in.”

“Yes, thank you, we know,” Lord Miller spoke hurriedly. “Marina has explained as much to us.”

Now, James glanced her way, wondering what excuse she had given them. To his surprise, she didn't join them in sitting but stayed standing on the other side of the room. She continued to stare openly at him, those rather bold green eyes not looking away or blinking.

“Whatever drew you both to enter that chamber though hardly matters at this moment,” the Earl began to speak in a rush. “As you will have seen in the scandal sheet and no doubt heard whispered between many, people believe you were there together for some sort of *assignation*.” At the word, Lady Marina bristled across the room. She pinched her brow and looked away from her father.

James bit the inside of his mouth to stop himself from smiling. There was something to be said about being embarrassed by a parent in a matter as awkward as this. He could imagine his own father shuddering at such an idea had he still been alive.

“Her reputation is quite ruined,” the Earl continued on. “As her name is dragged down, so will our own position go with

her. Today I have had two invitations for balls retracted.”

“Anyone who would retract an invitation over such a matter as this is no true friend, My Lord.” James’ words clearly startled everyone in the room. The Earl looked at him, wide-eyed, as did his wife. Lady Marina smiled a little across the room and nodded her head though her parents didn’t see the movement. “I speak out of turn; I only wish to be honest in this matter. Any true friend would not cast you aside so.”

“Perhaps you’re right.” The Earl fidgeted in his seat. “No matter the truth of this situation, I cannot stop what will happen to my daughter. She will be rejected by all. Even her true friends may leave her behind, fearing being tarnished by association.”

At the words, James stood taller, feeling as if a blow had been delivered to his gut. It was the same word that Neil had used many times before.

*Tarnished... like we are some poisonous materials to our families.*

He stole another look at Lady Marina who had walked to the window and stood far behind her parents. She leaned against the windowsill and huffed quietly. The distance between the Lady and her parents was noticeable, reminiscent of the number of times he’d separated himself from Neil in a grand room where the ton filled the spaces.

*Perhaps we are a little alike.*

“Lies are already spreading,” Lady Miller spoke for the first time, urging her husband on.

“Yes, you are right.” Lord Miller stood to his feet and reached into his pocket, pulling out what James recognized as a scandal sheet. “Have you read this, Your Grace?” He thrust a finger at the paper so hard, he nearly punched a hole through it. James carefully took the paper from him, his calm movements a contrast to the Earl’s own frantic manner.

“Let me read,” James said slowly, casting his eyes downward. Once more, the power of the room shifted toward him. The Earl hurried to sit and didn’t say a word for a moment. He read the line that had clearly caused Lady Marina’s parents much consternation.

*‘... in her underwear...’*

He glanced at Lady Marina, knowing it was the truth and seeing her cheeks had blushed red.

“Scandal sheets will say anything if they think it will get a rise out of people.” He returned the paper to the Earl. “We must consider where we go from here.”

“There is not much we can do.” The Earl shook his head. “Her betrothed has this morning written to us and rescinded his offer of marriage. That too will be in the scandal sheets tomorrow. Oh! The turmoil this family is to be put through.” He grunted and flung back with his wife patting his arm consolingly.

## *Betrothed...*

James found Lady Marina's eyes, noting her blush had grown worse. At once, he realized why she had been in that room at all last night. She had intended to escape one betrothal and possibly aim for another.

"Who was your betrothed?" he asked Lady Marina directly.

"Baron Rutherford," she answered. "Have you met him?"

"I have." His voice deepened a little.

"Your tone suggests you know him quite well."

"Let us say, I know him as much as I wish to. No further acquaintance is required." To his surprise, his declaration brought a smile to her features. He'd met Baron Rutherford often enough and decided long ago he was an odious figure. He had a habit of making ladies uncomfortable and demanding to be the center of attention. "That betrothal is gone then?"

"It is," Lord Miller declared with fervor. "I do not know what is to become of her now, yet you have come here today..." He paused, leadingly. "May I presume you have come to ask us something, rather than just talk of this situation?"

"I have." His words prompted a sudden reaction. Lady Marina stood off the windowsill and rounded the rococo settee where her parents were sitting, moving toward him.

“No, no, Your Grace, you do not have to ask anything of us,” she pleaded.

“Marina, you have been forward enough and embarrassed yourself as it is,” Lord Miller snapped at her. “Pray, do not make it worse.”

“Speaking my mind is not an embarrassing thing, Father,” she argued with him, making him bristle even more, though she never once looked away from James.

This time, he couldn't hide his smile. There was something to admire in the way Lady Marina refused to be silenced by her father, even in a matter so delicate as this.

“You are under no obligation to ask us anything,” she said solemnly, standing beside him.

“No obligation, you say?” He sighed deeply, for he felt that obligation. He felt it as keenly as the same need he'd had to recover his dukedom's fortune. “I feel a responsibility, even as you dissuade me from it.” Her lips parted, evidently realizing she could not stop him from asking his question. “My Lord, I have come to ask for your blessing to marry your daughter.”

## CHAPTER 5



“Oh...” Marina gasped. She had not thought it would come to this, but here the Duke of Curton was, defying her expectations.

*I cannot marry him.*

Her eyes danced over him. There was an attraction there, certainly. His tall and lithe figure had her imagining things, and she'd be lying to herself if she hadn't wondered at least at one point in the night what could have happened in that chamber where they were alone together, had they not been discovered. Yet attraction was not a good cause for marriage alone, and neither was saving a reputation.

“No.” The word escaped her lips so suddenly that the Duke snapped his head toward her, cricking his neck and lifting a hand to rub the sore spot.

“Ignore her; she is overcome with shock.” Joshua was on his feet and grabbed Marina's arm, pulling her away. Turning his back on the Duke, he offered one warning glare, urging her to be quiet. “You also have no say in this matter, Marina.”

“Strange, I thought we were talking about my hand as the one that is being given away here?” she pointed out. Her father gritted his teeth then planted a false smile in place and turned to face the Duke again.

“Of course, I accept, Your Grace. A marriage will not only rescue her reputation but may help lessen the slander against your name as well.” Joshua’s words barely seemed to affect the Duke. He nodded though he made no comment on the matter of his own ill-used reputation.

*This cannot be happening.*

Marina looked to her mother in desperation, hoping she would say something to object, but just as Ruth had not protested against Lord Rutherford for a suitor, she said nothing against the Duke of Curton either. She simply shrugged in Marina’s direction.

*Oh, Mother!*

“Can we not talk about this more?” Marina pleaded, striding past her father to come face to face with the Duke.

“We have done all the talking we need to,” he said in summary. The top hat that had rested in his hand up until this moment he now lifted and returned to his head. “I will take my leave of you.”

“Already?” Joshua said in surprise. “Do you not wish to hear what her dowry is?”

“I will begin the paperwork from my end. I will also apply for a special license, My Lord. We must marry soon, within the week, if we are to stem the flow of scandalous whispers.” He turned and moved to the door. Marina followed, knowing she could not let this conversation end like this. She stumbled as she walked, amazed the rogue she had heard so much about was now preparing to marry *her*. “As for the size of her dowry, I do not care what the value is.”

“Not at all?” Marina asked in surprise, reaching the door at the same time as him.

“I have enough money these days, My Lady. Your dowry you can keep for yourself if you wish to.” His words filled her with a sort of warmth, one that took her so much by surprise that her lips opened and closed for a second as she struggled to find words. Lord Rutherford had made it clear that he intended to use her dowry to improve his house to the latest fashions set by the continent in Paris and Venice. She was not to see a shilling of it.

The Duke was already proving himself to be a very different suitor.

“I will take my leave of you all now.” The Duke looked back to her parents. “Spread the word of the betrothal, by all means, for it may help to soften the rumors. I will send word as soon as I have the license. Good day to you all.” He bowed swiftly, opened the door, and was gone, his tall figure striding out of the room.

At first, Marina didn’t move. She gawked in his wake, amazed at the control he had in the room. Despite the fact it was her parents’ house, they had deferred to him like children in a schoolroom and let him lead the conversation.



“Good day!” Joshua called, bowing far too late. “I cannot believe what has just happened,” he whispered to Ruth.

“Nor can I,” she agreed. “Does this mean Marina’s name is safe?”

“It is a little safer though it will never be perfect again. He is making a sacrifice,” Joshua pointed out practically. “He could have survived the scandal and not called on us, but that is not what he chose to do. He has surprised me today.”

“You are not the only one.” The words escaped Marina as she stepped out of the door.

“Marina? Where are you going?” Joshua called after her.

“To talk to him.”

“Is that wise?”

“It’s hardly improper now you have betrothed me to him, is it?” Her challenging tone made her father fall still and not pursue her as she exited down the corridor, having to run to the front door to catch up with the Duke.

She drew level at the front door as he opened it. His eyes swiveled in her direction with his brows raised. Those dark blue orbs drifted down her, just as they had done the night before. She dropped her skirt that she had grabbed as she ran, hiding her legs from his view.

“You have a habit of revealing what’s beneath your gown, My Lady.” It was a playful tone before he opened the door wider and stepped out.

She ignored the sizzle in her gut that his words made and followed him out.

“Your Grace, you cannot leave now after such a discussion.”

“Why not? Do you wish me to make further comments on the state of your dress?” he asked, walking away from her toward the horse that awaited him on the drive.

“No! I meant the discussion of our betrothal.” She reached for his arm and caught him, just as he stood level with the horse. He looked down at the hold she had, and she instantly dropped that hand, rather wary of the unfathomable look in his expression. Was that wariness? Anger? Or something else altogether? “We must talk about this more. Your Grace, I did not expect you to make a proposal. I did not ask one of you.”

“You said as much in that parlor.” He nodded toward the house. “You may have no care for your good name, but I would not forgive myself if I stood back and watched you fall. I had to do something.”

“But...” She struggled for words, wondering what further objection she could put up.

“Accept it, Lady Marina. You and I will have to get used to seeing each other much more.” He turned and picked up his

horse's reins, preparing to mount him.

Marina turned on the spot, a little frantic, with her hands on her hips. Her thoughts were in a whirl with one idea running into the next. If she could not end this proposal as she had ended the last, then she would have to make something of it.

The gentleman before her had a foul reputation. He owned a gambling hall, and if whispers were true, he was involved in criminal activity, yet his decision not to see her good name ruined showed there was a heart there.

*He cannot be an evil man.*

Before he stepped up into the stirrups, she moved beside him, blocking his path.

“You are developing a habit of standing close,” he whispered to her, his blue eyes resting on her.

“It's a way to grab your attention, I see.”

“Very much,” he agreed. “Yet you would do wise not to tempt me, Lady Marina.” She wondered what he meant by those words. An image filled her head of what temptation could be like, maybe kissing the Duke, or undressing for him again.

*Do not think about it!*

The coil of excitement that wormed in her stomach and then shot somewhere much lower made her squirm, moving her weight between her feet.

“I wish to talk,” she pleaded.

“Talk?” He laughed. “After what I saw of you last night, I would have thought you had something else in mind other than talking.”

“You are bold!”

“Not as bold as you.” His wit had her groaning in frustration. Once more, he made a move to climb into the saddle, but she placed her hand on the saddle, stopping him. “That is not boldness but control, My Lady.”

“Perhaps a little.” She didn’t move her hand though, determined to have his attention. “If you and I are to be wed, Your Grace, should we not at least know one another better? An hour or so in conversation would be something. I’d like to know the gentleman I am to meet at the altar.”

“You would?” A smile curled his lip, revealing something mischievous. “I rather suspect you were not fond of the last man you expected to meet at the altar.”

“Baron Rutherford.” Marina uttered his name with contempt that made the syllables harsh. “He is hardly a good man.”

“With as much good in him as a bee has in his sting.” His wit brought the smallest of smiles from Marina.

“What do you know of him then? You intimated before you had no great admiration for him.”

“Put it like this.” The Duke tipped his head back as if deep in thought. “When I heard he was your betrothed, I suddenly knew why a woman would be willing to cast her name into the ditches just to escape marrying him.” He nodded slowly in her direction. “I don’t accept what you did last night. In a way, I cannot forgive you for it.” The insult made her hand tense on the leather saddle. “Yet I understand what you did now, if nothing else.”

“Stay a little while. You know something of me now, is it not right I know something of you?” she asked, but her hand did not remain on the saddle. To her surprise, the man before her lost his temper. He took her wrist, gently, but with a firmness that brooked no refusal. He didn’t hurt her as the Baron had hurt her, but he moved her hand away, giving himself space.

“You were out to trap someone in marriage last night. You think I wish to stand and talk merrily with a woman who would be so manipulative?” he asked, shaking his head.

“You presume me capable of evil more so than I am.”

“No, I do not. I was there. I know what you did.” He scoffed at her, revealing such derision that Marina backed up. Any hope she might have had that the Duke of Curton would make a better husband than Lord Rutherford was beginning to slip away. The one thing the Duke had in his favor at the moment

was that she was attracted to him, but there was nothing more than that.

“You will not entertain the notion that my motivation was to destroy me alone, not to ensnare another?”

“No.” He didn’t look at her as he set the reins straight. “A weaker man might have let you fall. God knows, I do not even think my own brother would have wedded you had he found you there.”

“Goodness,” she murmured, watching the Duke carefully. It sounded like an insult, but there was no great venom in his words as he spoke of his brother.

“Many men would save themselves rather than a lady. I have too much discipline to allow such a thing to happen.” He paused with the reins and turned back toward her, his heavy breaths revealing just how angry he really was. “You wish me to speak to know me better? Very well, then know this. I am proposing a marriage of convenience, nothing more.”

“You speak like a lover,” she said sarcastically.

“Oh, the most ardent one.” He continued the sarcasm and shook his head. “I will continue my life as I see fit, and if lovers are a part of that, so be it. You can have your own lovers, for all I care, as long as you do not parade them around the ton so much that the scandal sheets learn of them.”

With these words, he stepped up into the stirrups and pulled himself into the saddle. Marina stepped forward, so she could

still look him in the eye. He was already a tall man, but on the horse, he seemed higher still, out of reach.

“I was proposing we could be friends, Your Grace. A marriage of convenience does not require us to be enemies.” She said the words with her chin tilted high.

“You have defiance in you.” It could have almost been a compliment if his eyes hadn’t narrowed on her. “I wonder if you will be a difficult wife.”

“We could be more than acquaintances. Is it so wrong to at least wish to like my future husband? To be his friend?” she asked, trying to provoke a reaction from him.

“Do not mistake this arrangement.” He shook his head. “My opinion of you was set last night when I caught you trying to trap my brother in marriage –”

“That was not exactly my intention –”

“Argue it all you wish, but I know the truth.” He waved a hand, clearly pleading with her to stop talking. “As I said to your father, I will apply for the special license. My advice to you is, for the next couple of days, keep your head down and stay home. Do not visit friends or family, but stay quiet. It might keep you safe from some of the whispers.”

“You confuse me.” Marina stepped in front of the horse and patted the animal’s muzzle. At once, the steed responded to her, snorting and pushing his nose further into her hand, wanting attention.

“Gabriel doesn’t usually like other people,” the Duke said suddenly, eying his horse.

“Perhaps he’s a good judge of character,” she mused, continuing to stroke him. “You have confused me greatly, Your Grace. How can you in one breath deny any wish to be my friend then in the next breath, issue an instruction you hope will protect me?” Her question deadened the air between them.

Suddenly, the Duke was silent. He didn’t argue, he just stared at her, his breathing fast and heavy.

“Can you answer me that?” she provoked him. Still, there was no answer. In the end, he jerked the reins of the horse, pulling him back from her stroking. When they were far enough away, he turned the horse’s back toward her.

“Good day, Lady Marina. Wait for my letter when I have the special license. With a little luck, we’ll be married by Friday.” He clicked his tongue, and the horse galloped away with such sudden speed that Marina scurried back out of the way of the gravel that picked up behind them.

“Friday,” she muttered to herself. “That is just four days away.”



## CHAPTER 6



“Do you know, I cannot believe you are doing this,” Michael said in his place as the best man.

“Talk a little louder, won’t you? I do not think the organist heard you.” James’ harsh sarcasm made Michael shift his weight between his feet and turn his gaze forward to the altar. “Speak quieter.”

“I can’t believe you’re doing this,” Michael whispered this time. “I thought one of your rules was ‘no marriage.’”

“Well, that rule is being bent now,” James accepted, a muscle ticking in his jaw at the frustration of it all. “It was necessary.”

“Was it?” Michael clearly didn’t believe him, elbowing him to get his attention. “You always keep to your rules. One-time last year, you said that bending the rules was just another way for someone to deny they were breaking them.”

James glared at his friend, not appreciating the reminder.

“Very well, you wish me to accept what is happening here?” James asked.

“Please do.”

“I am breaking my rule. It was not out of choice.” James glanced behind him at the church, aware that people were filtering in now, just the few that he could bear to invite to this hurried and tiny affair. “What was I supposed to do, Michael, hmm? Watch the Lady fall?”

“You have been linked with many ladies in scandal sheets before,” Michael pointed out, a little too loudly until James elbowed him in the rib. “Ow.” Michael rubbed the sore spot. “I’ll speak as loudly as I breathe now.”

“All of those articles were different.” James sighed deeply, knowing it to be true. “Whenever I was mentioned in scandal sheets before, it was all supposition and guesswork. No one ever truly knew if I had been with a lady or not. Lady Marina is a different case. Everyone believed we had lain together, even though we hadn’t.”

His eyes flicked to the altar again. Resting on the surface were two tall tallow candles on either side of a vast ornate cross. The scent of candle wax hovered under his nose, reminding him of the gravity of the situation he was about to undertake.

“If I didn’t marry her, she would have been ruined, and...” He glanced over his shoulder, looking at his side of the pews. One of the few people he had invited had turned up to his surprise. Neil was there though his brother was doing his best to avoid his gaze. “Neil would never have forgiven me for it if I did

nothing. He probably would have cut off ties between us all together.”

“Hmm, I wish I could say it was not the case.”

The two of them fell quiet, both restless and struggling to stand still. Behind them, only two pews had guests. Alongside Neil was a cousin of James’, who sat rather quietly, whispering to Neil and apparently trying to find out as much gossip as he could.

On Lady Marina’s side of the pews, her mother was there, sitting quite alone at the front. Behind her were two young ladies and an elder, whom James presumed to be cousins and an aunt. Beside them were a pair of faces that he recognized in passing from events of the ton. Miss Caroline Davis and her father, Mr. Peter Davis, had come to attend. Judging by the worry in Miss Davis’ face, and the way she repeatedly chewed her lip, she was nervous for her friend and the commitment she was about to make.

Miss Davis was the only one who looked down at her own shoes. Everyone else stared around them, either gazing straight at James or looking to the church door, waiting for Lady Marina to arrive.

“They watch too eagerly,” James muttered, putting his back to them. He rather felt that their families had come to watch a slaughter take place, to feed on the gossip and scandal that was unfolding before them.

“At least your brother is here,” Michael pointed out.

“Hmm.” James wasn’t sure how good a thing it was at that moment. No matter what happened between them, he and Neil never saw eye to eye. Just as James couldn’t understand Neil’s constant need to please the ton and appear a perfect man, Neil couldn’t see why James had opened the gambling hall in the first place.

*He’s in denial if he ever thought I could have rescued the dukedom’s finances without it.*

“So, you’ve broken your rule,” Michael said, clearing his throat and opting for a more conversational tone now. “Does this mean you’ll be trying port yet? Maybe claret?”

“No. I still like to stay in control at all times. One bent rule does not mean the abandonment of another.” James’ words were harsh, but Michael seemed unaffected by that tone. He simply nodded. “It’s a marriage of convenience. Lady Marina will have her life, and I will have mine.”

“Convenience? What an odd word that is,” Michael said with a small laugh. “Forgive my impertinence –”

“You’re apologizing for such a thing now?” A smile grew on James’ face. “That would be changing the habit of a lifetime.”

“Perhaps,” Michael smiled too. “The point I wish to make is that I have seen your bride-to-be. Lady Marina is a beautiful woman. Are you telling me that once you are wed, you will have nothing to do with her? Ha!”

“I can stay away from her.” James had already made up his mind on that score. Marina was attractive, and she had such spirit that he couldn’t help imagining what it would be like to lie with her. It could be passionate indeed, and the thought of the way Marina would moan in his ear and tip her head back as he pleased her made his body stir, wanting to rise to the occasion.

*That’s a new rule I will put in place. I will not lie with my wife.*

He feared doing so could lead to feelings, and that would truly break one of the first rules he ever put in place.

*No love.*

“Marriages of convenience are marriages seen by the church only. We can live under the same roof and barely see one another,” James explained in a rush.

“Yes, but I am as good at staying away from a glass of port as you are at staying away from an attractive woman.” Michael’s words urged James to glare his way.

“You are not helping.”

“I was simply trying to have an open conversation.”

“Shh, not now,” James said quietly. “It is to begin.” On cue, the vicar stepped forward, nodding to James in greeting, then the organ music began in the distant regions of the church. It

was quiet music as if the organist didn't want to give the piece its usual full gusto.

The doors to the back of the church opened, and James turned to watch his bride approach. Seeing Lady Marina, he did a double take.

She hadn't had many days to prepare for the wedding, yet she had prepared well indeed. The gown she wore was cream in color with the skirt cinched high on the waist and so much lace across the bust and shoulders that it repeatedly drew the eyeline toward the neck of her gown and her ample curves.

James growled under his breath quietly, a sound he thought hadn't been heard until he heard Michael clear his throat behind him.

"Yes, I see what you mean. Such a woman is easy to stay away from," Michael whispered.

"Shh."

There was a golden chiffon overlay to the skirt of her gown that just reached the floor. The material moved from side to side as she walked, emphasizing the curve of her hips. With her cinnamon-colored hair gathered into an updo of curls, her face was completely revealed. She'd applied a dark rouge to those full lips, and it had altered the focus of her face.

*Well, maybe I do not always have to stay away from my wife. It's something I can decide as time progresses.*

He tried to block out the thought of Marina in that chamber, wearing just her corset and her chemise.

As she reached his side, her father passed her hand over to James. A jolt passed through him as they touched, and judging by the way Marina's eyes snapped to his own, she felt it too. Looping her hand through his arm, James led her up to the altar, ready for the ceremony to begin.

With the organ music still playing, he felt at liberty to whisper something to her without fear of being overheard.

“After the wedding has passed, we will return to my lodgings. We cannot have a wedding breakfast.” He hoped by being matter of fact and practical, it would make the moment easier.

“Yes, I know.” She sighed with the words and looked away, blinking a little too quickly.

In that moment, James thought he saw tears in her eyes. He couldn't be certain of it, for the glistening effect was there one second then gone in the next.

*Oh, God's wounds.*

Something happened to him at that moment. It was as if he was standing outside of his own body, perhaps perched on the altar and staring at himself with Marina. She was on the verge of tears, staring forward prepared to be wed, meanwhile he had taken her hand and spoken of how they could not celebrate the wedding nor see their family. She was to be taken back to his lodgings, more like a prisoner than a bride.

*When did I become so cold?*

“Dearly beloved, we are gathered here in the sight of God to join together this man and this woman...” the vicar began as the organ music ended, and James became quite wooden. Part of him was acutely aware of Lady Marina’s hand on his arm, the incredibly light pressure there but nothing more.

“Now, Your Grace, would you repeat after me please?” The vicar took Lady Marina’s hand from his arm and held it aloft. “I, James Follet, the Duke of Curton, take thee, Marina Hodge, to be my lawfully wedded wife...”

James listened to the vow in full before he took Marina’s hand then he said the words. The moment he uttered her name, he looked up from the joining of their hands and into her eyes.

“...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...” He hesitated. Without meaning to, his tongue had tripped on the words. James realized that he could talk of ‘marriages of convenience’ all he liked, but he was the only one vowing to protect the woman who stood before him. No other would make this promise now.

Her brows furrowed a little at his hesitation, and he went on. “Until death do us part. According to God’s holy ordinance, and thereto, I plight thee me troth.”

As the vicar urged Marina to say the same vow, James felt his hand grip hers a little harder. She didn’t appear to notice though he was all too aware of it.



*Maybe I cannot be a good husband, but I vow this to her and to God – I will protect her.*

As the ceremony came to a close, the vicar seemed to rush it. There were no hymns, no sound of celebration nor words of congratulations. The vicar merely called them husband and wife, and they were urged to turn around as the organ music began.

Slowly, James threaded Marina's hand back onto his arm.

*Marina now. Not Lady Marina anymore. Now, she is my duchess.*

They took the few steps down from the altar as their congregation stood. Lord and Lady Miller were the first ones to approach, their words a little muffled by the organ music, so James had to strain to hear them. Lady Miller kissed her daughter on the cheek, but Lord Miller offered no warm words or congratulations. He didn't even touch his daughter.

"Well, it is done then." He nodded with the words. "Your things will be taken to your new home, Marina."

"Thank you," she said quietly. James could have sworn the fingers of her hand clutched his arm a little tighter, but he couldn't be sure it wasn't in his imagination. He was rather distracted, glaring at her father and wondering why the man would not show at least a little more warmth toward her.

“You are welcome to come and see our new home soon,” James addressed her parents. At once, Lady Miller nodded, but that nod weakened when her husband puffed his chest out a little.

“We shall see.”

James didn't wait around for his new wife to suffer any more small slights. He walked forward, drawing Marina with him. As he passed the pews, Neil moved to the end of the row. Marina avoided looking at him, yet as far as James could see, Neil had no interest in looking at her at all.

“I am glad to see you did the right thing, James,” Neil said quietly, forcing a smile.

“So subtle.” James' sarcasm made that smile falter. He couldn't help feeling his brother was something of a hypocrite. For all of Neil's wants to be seen as an honorable man, praised by the ton, James wasn't convinced Neil would have done the same thing had their roles been reversed. It would have meant marrying a fallen woman, and Neil probably couldn't have persuaded himself to do such a thing. “Thank you for coming, Neil.”

His brother nodded as they parted, heading for the church door. James didn't tarry but led Marina through as quickly as he could.

Outside, rain was beginning to fall. The light could have been angels' tears for the drops were so small. James held his arm not just over his own head but Marina's too, shielding her

from the shower until they reached the carriage that awaited them.

The carriage was not dressed in white ribbon nor adorned with flowers to celebrate. It was plain and black with the curtains pulled tight. He helped Marina inside, glancing back at the church door where family members should have thrown flower petals to wish them good luck. There were no such good luck signs today.

He sighed at the emptiness of that door and followed Marina inside. In his anger at the way their families had treated them both, he slammed the carriage door too hard. It reverberated around them, making the carriage shake, and Marina flinched.

The sight of her flinching as she sat down opposite shook him to his core.

“Marina, I do not wish you to be frightened of me.”

## CHAPTER 7



“*F*rightened?” Marina repeated the word, staring at the Duke as the carriage began to move away, taking her to her new life. “You think I am scared of you?”

“You flinched.”

“Because the door closed.” She shook her head. “I am not scared of you. Wary, perhaps, but not scared.” She chose not to tell him that her nerves were on edge because of the wedding. It was not the wedding she had pictured for herself someday, and neither did her family react as she had hoped they would do. The whole experience had left her heart feeling tender, and her hands repeatedly fidgeting with the extremely small bouquet in her hands.

The flowers had been gathered that morning by her lady’s maid as a well-wishing, for Marina’s parents hadn’t bothered to buy her any ahead of the wedding.

“Well, I am glad at least someone in this world isn’t scared of me.” He leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. “I’m well aware I can be something of an intimidating figure.”

“Truly?” She affected a look of shock, rather amused when he smiled at her. There was something different in the Duke’s countenance today, something that made him seem like quite a different gentleman to the one who had called on her earlier that week and insisted they marry.

“I owe you an apology,” he said slowly, that smile dropping from his face. “I was harsh with you earlier this week. Unjustly so. It is just...” He sighed deeply before he went on, “I do not appreciate feeling trapped into anything, and this week, I certainly did.”

Marina felt a little warmth toward the man before her, wondering if the idea she had of him was the true him or not.

“I know something of what that feels like,” she whispered, fiddling with her bouquet. “I do not like that feeling either. My actions may have been wrong, reprehensible even, but I pray you will appreciate someday that I did it out of desperation – not the intent to trap you or any other.”

Her words made a quiet fall on the carriage. They remained in silence for a minute or so until she saw a hand join hers with the flowers. He gently took the bouquet from her grasp, examining the flowers.

“I understand why you did it,” he whispered carefully. “Now, you have given me a window into your heart, so I will give you a window into mine.” He pulled out one of the flowers, holding out a white chrysanthemum. “My mother once told me these flowers symbolize truth.”

“They do?” Marina asked, leaning forward a little. He passed the flower back to her, brushing her fingers as he did so. Marina tried not to jump at his touch. It was something that she had felt in the church – like a spark travelling through her body.

“Everything I will tell you now is the truth,” he promised. “I never wish you to fear me, Marina. I would never hurt you or any woman.” His words were solemn and deep.

She frowned a little, considering he had not said the words hurt ‘anyone’ – only women were forbidden from his ire.

“Whatever you read of me in scandal sheets... it is not all true.”

“It’s not?” she asked in surprise. “So, you do not own a gambling hall?”

“Oh, I do.” He nodded. “Yet there are no criminals there, no hustlers, and I never gamble myself.”

She sat straight in amazement, scarcely able to understand it.

“You could resist such temptation when it is literally within your own doors?”

“I believe in discipline,” he whispered. “It is why I never touch liquor either.”

“Oh...” She gasped in amazement. This was not quite the picture of the rakish Duke she had read of. “You have had affairs though, have you not?”

“Passionate nights, certainly, but I have never promised anything more than that.” The way he’d said the word ‘passionate’ had her breathing quicken a little.

*Is it so wrong to wonder what a night with my new husband could be like?*

As she fiddled with the white chrysanthemum, her eyes went wandering. They danced over the midnight blue tailcoat he wore and the silver waistcoat. They fitted him well, flattering his athletic figure.

“On that subject.” He picked out another flower and used the blooming head to lift her chin so that her eyes found his own. “I think a few ground rules need to be set if you are to continue looking at me like that.”

“Like what?” She purported an innocent tone.

“I may not be the devil many believe me to be, but I’m an experienced man.” His words made her mind go wandering again, and her heart rate fluttered. “I know what she is thinking when a woman looks at me like that.”

“You could be wrong. It could simply just be arrogant thoughts,” she challenged. When he laughed, deeply, she realized she’d not heard him laugh before, only seen him give small smiles. The laugh transformed his countenance from

something authoritative and distant to something altogether much warmer.

“Here is the key rule.” He held up the flower stem as if it was number one. “It is a marriage for convenience, so I will not restrict you in what you do or where you go too much. The idea is that we can both be happy with our lives.”

“That sounds reasonable and fair,” she acknowledged as he lifted a second flower, representing the second rule.

“Number two, I shall not bed you.”

“I beg your pardon?” Her eyes widened, and her lips fell apart.

“I have no desire for an heir, Marina,” he explained slowly. “We may each satisfy our lusts elsewhere, but an heir is not needed therefore relations between us are not a necessity either.”

“Oh, I see.” Marina supposed she should have been relieved, but she wasn’t. Deep in her gut, she was disappointed as if she had been winded by some stone. Her curiosity about what it could be like to be with her husband now dwindled, disappearing like smoke in the air. “Any other rules I should be aware of?”

He reached for a third flower.

“A couple,” he said, holding up the third flower and proffering it forward. “I want my wife to call me by my name. James.”



Marina blinked, rather startled at the offer of intimacy when he had just shut the door on the thought of them ever being physically close.

“Not ‘Your Grace?’” she asked.

“No.” He pushed the third flower toward her. “I am hardly enamored with hearing the title, and I am addressed as such repeatedly by my staff as it is. My name is James, and I wish you to use it. Just as, if you have no objection, I shall call you Marina.” He smiled at her with the words, and Marina could have sworn something in her felt weak. She nodded, happy with the deal, and wondering why she had suddenly lost the power of her tongue.

*Is it the proffer of some intimacy without all that could be offered? Nothing physical at all...*

The thought cut deep. Even as her eyes threatened to wander away from the flowers she was amassing toward her new husband, she fought the temptation, fearing her eyes would go wandering over his figure, thinking of indulgent things that she was clearly not allowed to think of.

“Next, I desire you to learn about my business.” His words made her sit tall on the coach bench, her back abruptly rigid.

“Gambling? Oh, no,” she whispered, shaking her head. “Whatever association you wish to have with your gambling hall is your decision, I would not seek to stop that, but surely you cannot seek to make me a part of the sordid business?” Something in her words darkened his expression. Suddenly, all traces of those smiles he had shown before were gone. In their

place, there was a deep frown, and his thin lips were pressed together.

*Would he smile again if I kissed those lips? Oh! Behave! You cannot have such thoughts...*

“As I said, I do not gamble myself. You wish to call it a sordid thing? Well, I could think of many other names for the occupation. A waste of time, a temptation that leads men to debts and misery. Yes... perhaps gambling is akin to the apple God placed in the garden of Eden.” His frown set deeper than before. “At least I could understand why Eve took that fruit as she needed to eat. No man needs to gamble.”

“You have strong opinions,” Marina remarked.

“As I said, I believe in discipline. Just as I want there to be rules for the two of us, I have rules for myself.” He gestured to what remained of the bouquet in his hands and inched it toward his own chest. “No gambling is near the top of that list.”

“Why?”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Why?” she asked again, her brow creasing. “I suppose a man as disciplined as you could gamble a little and not have the habit ruin his life, yet you refuse temptation anyway. Why is that?” she wondered aloud, watching him closely as she tilted her head to the side.

“You watch me as an owl watches its prey.” He smirked a little as he stared back at her.

“Perhaps I’m curious about you.”

“Hmm.” His voice had deepened, and the sound that escaped him reached deep into Marina as if it made her stomach vibrate. She liked the depth of that sound. “Do not be curious about me, Marina. Your interest is a distraction only. Another temptation I will not allow myself.” He used what remained of the flowers to press them under her chin and lift it, so she sat squarely looking at him rather than at a tilt.

“So, you are tempted?” She couldn’t help being thrilled by the idea. If he was going to set this infernal rule for them not to share a bed together, then at least she would get some pleasure from knowing he was as dissatisfied with the rule as she was.

“I’m tempted by many things in this world.” Once more, his voice had deepened. “Yet I do not intend to come too close to you, just as I will not get too close to gambling.”

“Strange that you should have us both under your roof then,” she jested, smiling widely. He chuckled too and nodded with an approving laugh.

“You have wit about you. It was not something I noticed very much before.” The carriage seemed to be slowing. As it did, he passed the bouquet back to her. The way his fingers brushed her own had a heat blooming in her stomach. It spread wide, deep, and low to a part of her body she had not known it was possible to feel heated in.

Gathering the flowers together, she looked down at the petal heads, not wishing her husband to see how she blushed at his touch.

“We are here,” he announced as the carriage came to a stop.

James, as she was now to think of him, stepped down from the carriage first. He did not wait for a footman, as many men would do, but strode out happily himself then turned back and offered his hand to Marina.

She took it carefully, still thinking of that heat as she stepped down, following him. Momentarily, she was distracted from his touch, looking at the house ahead of them.

*Oh, it is grander than I thought.*

When she'd heard James owned a gambling hall, she half expected his home to be a narrow town house, perhaps on the wrong edge of town, but that was not the case.

They were situated not far from Hyde Park with a vast house sitting back from the main road with a small drive leading away from the black gates and up to the front porch that was built of white marble struts. The red brick contrasted the white pillars and the window frames. The whole effect was one that was pearlescent and beautiful.

The frost around the garden was beginning to melt, revealing tulip shoots and daffodils that were poking their heads skyward, making dapples of color like flourishes on an artist's palette. To one side of the garden, there was the stable, alive

with activity as the horses were being attended to by the stable master. On the other side of the garden, there was a trail leading toward trees and a fountain, all being attended to by gardeners.

“Are you surprised I could have a respectable home?” James asked at her side before he scoffed, “Well, you would not be the first to presume I lived in a den of sin.”

“That is not what I thought,” she insisted as she followed him down the driveway, heading toward the house. When he raised one eyebrow, she smirked a little. “Perhaps it is a little of what I thought. *This...* it is a grand home indeed.”

“I work hard to keep it that way.” He paused, stepping in front of her. “That is why I need you to grow accustomed to the business and be familiar with it.” At his words, she was ready to argue, wanting nothing to do with it, but he went on before she had a chance, “You do not have to like it. I do not like it. Yet business is business. You are my wife now, and you represent the business as I do. I need you to understand how it works.”

“I see.” She nodded slowly, realizing she could make little objection to the idea. If he was trapped into marrying her, then the least she could do is make the effort to understand his business.

“Thank you.” He stepped away, about to ascend the white stone steps toward the porch before he clearly realized she wasn’t following him. Her eyes were darting between the gardens, the stable master, and the fine house. For a minute, it was easy to trick herself into thinking this could be an ordinary marriage of the ton. She could have a husband and a friend,

but then his heavy stare reminded her of the rules he had placed upon them.

*He will never be intimate with me.*

“Do you not wish to see your new home?” he asked, gesturing to the house.

“If you are permitted to make rules, then I should like to make some too.” She stepped toward him, taking one of the white chrysanthemums out of the bouquet in much the same way he had done earlier. She offered the flower to him.

“Truth?” He reminded her of the symbol of the flower. “You are about to make an honest request of me now then, I take it?”

“That is correct.” She stopped shortly in front of him. “I understand you wish for little to do with me. Considering the manner of our marriage, I can hardly blame you for it, despite the fact you claim to be tempted...”

“It is more than a claim,” he said, his voice so deep she felt that warmth spread through herself again. She warded it off with some irritation.

*How can this man I know so little of have such power over me?*

“Yet I do not wish us to be strangers under the same roof. Maybe you can be happy with a wife sitting like some peg doll

in one of your rooms, but I will not be.” She shook her head.

“I wouldn’t wish for that. As I said, you can pursue any interests you like,” he said slowly, his brows furrowing with some confusion.

“I thank you for it,” she continued on, not wanting to let up now she had begun. “What I wish to ask for though is not pursuits to fill my time but company.” Her words had his chin lifting high and a muscle ticking in his jaw. She wondered if it was nerves that caused that reaction in him. “I wish us to dine together each evening. I would like us to at least try to be friends.”

“Ah, I see.” His expression softened. “Yes, I can give you that.”

“Thank you.” She sighed with relief and moved toward the open door that had been pulled back by the butler. “We shall also attend events of the ton together.”

“Rule number two?” he said as he followed her.

“My rule number two. Together, we have amassed many more.” She stepped into the house, smiling at the butler and pausing as she stared at the grand entrance hall.

Built of mosaic tiling, the floor was almost roman in style. A myriad of colors shone up from the surface, contrasting the white pillars and walls, along with the plinths on which old busts and statues had been placed. Either side of the front door there were vast windows, filling the room with light.

“Well, I must praise your designer,” she whispered as James moved to stand beside her.

“I designed it myself.” James’ words had her head jerking toward him sharply in surprise. “Was that shock? Ah, yes, I see, amazement! Did you think I was devoid of culture and art? A poor gambling house owner who sits in his counting house counting out his money?”

“Something tells me you rather like the impression people have of you. You do not seek in a public sphere to dispel the idea.”

“Perhaps not,” he confessed and shook off his frock coat that he offered to the butler beside him. The small smile he revealed told Marina a secret, that she was right – James sought to keep his life private from the eyes of the ton. “This is Mr. Pitt-Rivers. A fine butler indeed.”

“It is a pleasure to welcome you, Your Grace.”

“Oh... Th-thank you,” Marina stammered as the butler bowed deeply, realizing with shock that she was now a duchess as the butler had addressed her so formally. She had scarcely thought of how it would feel when people began to address her so. It felt too formal and stuffy. She rather wished to shed the title.

“Shall I arrange for the housekeeper to give the Duchess a tour, Your Grace?” Mr Pitt-Rivers asked James, his tall forehead and large eyes pitching back a little to accommodate for James’ great height.



“No, thank you. I shall give her the tour myself.”

*Wait... he will?*

## CHAPTER 8



“*M*usic room, parlor, and withdrawing room are this side.” James opened three doors and hurriedly pointed inside. Marina moved toward one of them, but he closed it again before she could go in. “Through this door is the servants’ quarters and a long spiral staircase leading down to the kitchen. If you are in need of the housekeeper, Mrs. Viner, at any point, then you can ring the bell here.” He tapped a brass bell that sat on a thin mahogany hall table.

“I see, I –” Marina looked ready to ask questions, but James wasn’t in a mood to dawdle. He’d spent a long time in Marina’s company that morning, and he had now also committed to spend dinner with her later that day. The sooner he put some distance between them the better.

“This way to the staircase.” He gestured back to the hallway, leading the path toward the tall white stairs that led into the building’s rafters. “Your chamber will be the second door on your left as you ascend. Now, I think that is all –”

“Pah! That is all?” Marina laughed suddenly. The sound was so abrupt, and rather free, that it caught James’ interest. He looked round at her, seeing her clutching her stomach as she giggled. “I do believe a dog could have afforded a better tour. At least a pup would hover in one or two rooms for a few

minutes and allow me to see them.” She gestured back in the direction they had come from. “I must determine that you are eager to escape my company.”

“Confirm it, and you’ll think ill of me for it.” He matched her stance, folding his arms and moving to stand in front of her. “And if I deny it...”

“It would be a lie.” She raised a finger and pointed it straight at his chest. “You are wanting to be out of my company as soon as possible.”

“As I said, I will dine with you, but I do not have to spend every minute of every day with my wife,” he insisted.

“I would not have it so. Yet today is our wedding day.”

“And this is not a normal marriage.” His darkened tone he regretted a minute later as the smile slipped from her face.

“I see you are intent to frustrate my attempts to be your friend at any point. Very well, you have your wish.” She gestured behind him, indicating he should walk away from her, then she turned on her heel and walked back in the direction of the other rooms he had skipped over.

There was something in the speed with which she walked away that he couldn’t let the matter lie. He knew he should walk away, just as he had been intending to do for some time.

*This is one of my rules. I should never spend too long in a lady's company.*

His rules were already bending as they were by marrying a lady. If he was going to stay disciplined, then he couldn't spend too long with her.

*No nights will be spent with her, and there will certainly be no affection.*

When he heard the music room door open, he couldn't help following. Cursing under his breath, wondering why he felt the need to trail in her wake, James followed her all the way into the music room. By the time he caught up with her, he found her standing by the wall, not looking at the instruments but at the paintings.

"I thought you desired to be out of my company," she remarked, without turning to face him. There was something in how the painting earned her gaze more than he did that irked him. He crossed toward Marina, standing beside her.

"Perhaps I can hold off that desire for a few more minutes. What sort of tour did you expect? To be led around the house like an infant?" he asked, smarting with the anger that she still would not look at him.

"Ha!" She laughed deeply, despite his irked words. "I see your manners now. When someone is in a disagreement with you, do you always retort to pettiness?"

"I am not petty," he insisted.

“Your intimidating manner makes any words you say have gravitas, but the words certainly were.” She at last looked away from the painting. “I wished for a tour not a description or list. You very much gave me the latter.” Her eyes swiveled toward the painting once more. “I do not believe it... Is this a Hogarth?”

“It is.” James stood taller, the tick in the muscle in his jaw slackening a little as he stared in wonder at her. She had recognized the artist even though there was no plaque on the wall, and the signature was indistinct.

“Marriage-A-la-Mode, is it not?”

“Yes. The Toilette, the fourth in the series, I believe,” he said slowly, watching as she inched closer to the painting. “You know art?”

“You sound as surprised to discover I know art as I am to discover you own such a collection.” She offered an amused smile. “Strangely enough, I have filled my head with more than just empty space.” She stared in such wonder at the painting that James felt a little admiration for her.

It was the first time he had seen an expression of peace on her face, rather than challenge, fear, or anger. At this moment, staring at the painting, she was a different person altogether.

“You are this fond of art? To the point it affects your whole being?” he asked, gesturing toward her with a wayward hand.

“I do not know how a person could not be affected by it.” She shrugged, looking a little self-conscious. “When the picture and the artist deserve admiration, who could not be affected?”

“Then... allow me to show you something.” He couldn’t resist the temptation to impress her more. Perhaps it had something to do with the large green eyes on her face, the ones the color of a stormy ocean that had widened at the painting. He longed to see that expression some more and motioned for her to follow him.

They left the music room, moving through a small doorway in the far end of the chamber, stepping out into what the previous occupant had deemed a garden room. Though it once had been full of flowers and potted palms, James had transformed it. The floor to ceiling windows, arched at the very top, flooded the area with sunlight that basked on the walls of paintings.

“What is this place?” Marina asked as she stepped inside. “You have your own art gallery?”

“In a manner of speaking.” He closed the door behind them. He didn’t allow many people in this room, other than the maids that kept it clean. He often felt that people didn’t understand why he admired the paintings so much.

“Oh, my goodness, another Hogarth.” She hurried to one painting before stepping back, her heels moving so audibly and quickly on the marble floor beneath them that the sound could have been a fire crackling. “A Rembrandt too. God’s wounds, I do not believe it.” She paused at the far end of the hall, staring open mouthed at one of the oldest paintings he owned. “A Caravaggio.”

“I have never heard anyone recognize him before.” James stumbled forward, reaching her side. “You know this painter?”

“The darkness in his work.” She raised her hand as if she would touch the canvas, but she didn’t let her fingers drop. “It is stunning, almost intoxicating in its power.” The way she moved her fingers through the air, almost mimicking the paintbrush movements, had him distracted.

*Intoxicating indeed.*

He didn’t think of the painting but of her fingers and their sensual movements. They made his body stir to such an extent that he had to back up from her.

*I will not bed her. I can’t. I have put in this rule to protect myself.*

He didn’t believe in losing control of himself. That meant no gambling, no liquor, no smoking or other intoxicants, and he certainly couldn’t indulge too far with a lady. Any lady he did indulge with had to be gone by the next morning. That was the problem with Marina. She would not be gone by the next morning.

“I will ask Mrs. Viner to show you your room.” He backed up and headed for the door.

“James?” Marina turned, her brow creasing. “But... we were talking of your art collection...”

“Another time. I have business matters to attend to.” He exited the door and closed it behind him, hurrying to lean on the wood for a second. Closing his eyes, he attempted to clear his mind of the thoughts of her hand, those fingers tracing the air, and the sexual image it conjured, but he failed. In his mind’s eye, all he could see was that hand and picture it as it trailed down his chest, reaching somewhere much lower.



“I know he’s not coming,” Marina muttered the words to herself as she sat on the end of her bed, looking around her bedchamber.

It was a beautiful room, much finer than any she would ever think she’d have. Split into two levels, the lower was scattered with chairs, a chaise lounge, an old coffer, and a fine wardrobe. There was also a table and a writing bureau, pressed into the corner of the chamber. On the upper level was her four-posted bed where she sat now, almost hidden between the loose curtains embroidered in duck-egg blue and white thread.

The sun had long since disappeared from the windows, and the only light in the room with her came from the two candles she had placed on the tables beside her bed. She kept looking at those candles, deep in thought. Despite James’ declaration not to bed her, she couldn’t help hoping that as the marriage night drew on that he would come.

Yet he never did. The door remained firmly closed.

Huffing a little in frustration, Marina stood to her feet and untied her dressing gown, revealing her night gown. She crawled under the bed covers, longing for warmth, and delved



under the blankets, thinking of the strange dinner they had shared together that evening.

He had come to dinner, just as he had promised, but he had not been there long. Explaining he had business to attend to at the club, he had left a short while later. Marina had longed to ask him more about his art collection. At first, he had joined in with the discussion with vigor before he seemed to grow abruptly aware of the time. Hurrying to put his pocket watch away in his waistcoat, he'd moved to his feet, with his plate of capon and saffron leeks unfinished, then left.

He'd wished her well for the evening though he'd barely looked back with the words.

*Tempted? Clearly, he isn't tempted, or he would at least bear a whole dinner with me.*

Sadness bloomed in her chest as she leaned out of the covers. She blew each of the candles out in turn, watching as their smoke trails disappeared into the air and all became dark. Moving deep down into the covers, she pulled them over her head, trying to be as warm as possible.

As much as she tried to think of any other subject, only one thing kept coming back to her mind: James. At first, she dwelled on the day's events, the rules he'd put in place for them, the curiosity she had about his art collection that suggested there was so much more to the man she had met, and the way he had looked at her in the carriage, declaring he was tempted by her.

The real world began to blur with her imagination, and soon enough, she was in an imagined world completely.

*Marina was back in Lord Frampton's bedchamber. She didn't know how long she had been there, half undressed, in nothing but her chemise and corset, but she was waiting for someone to arrive, someone particular. Every few seconds she looked at the door in expectation, and he did not disappoint.*

*James entered the bedchamber, wearing the same midnight blue suit he had worn for their wedding.*

*"I thought I'd find you here." He locked the door behind him and moved toward her. This time, there was no chance of them being disturbed, no chance of their discovery. They were completely alone, locked away from public view, to do with each other as they liked.*

*"You found me," she whispered and met him in the middle of the room. When she reached up toward him, he didn't hesitate. He bent his tall frame down to her own and kissed her. It was hardly a chaste kiss, a mere press of lips, but a passionate thing.*

*Marina had seen such a stolen kiss once between a maid and a footman in her father's household. They'd had no idea she had seen them when they had stolen a moment together on the servant's staircase.*

*She saw herself kissing James now in such a fashion. He angled her head to the side, exploring her mouth further, until the point she was leaning back, bent over his arm.*

*“We won’t be disturbed,” she whispered as they both stood straight, parting from one another.*

*“Good. Then we can indulge.” He peppered her neck with kisses until he found a sweet spot beneath her ear and labored on it for a second. She whimpered at the feeling, longing for more. “On the bed, Marina.”*

*She didn’t even think of disobeying him, for why should she? She longed to know what they could do together, and in particular, what he could show her. She backed up to the bed, crawling onto the mattress.*

*“No, on your back.” He flicked a finger in her direction, and she did as he asked. He began to crawl over her. She thought he would come for another kiss, but he didn’t get that far. He took hold of one of her legs and lifted it high, flicking the skirt of her gown up around her hips. There was a brush of cold hair on her exposed region before she felt his fingers delving low, deep into her folds.*

*There was a rush of wetness there, something she was unprepared for, before his fingers reached inside of her.*

*Marina gasped at the touch, amazed at the feeling of it.*

*“Lift your other leg,” he whispered in a soft order once again. These breathless orders were commanding, almost dominating, yet she adored it and wanted more of it. She obeyed his command, lifting her other leg so that she was completely exposed to him, so he could see everything. He pleased her, his fingers moving fast until she could scarcely*

*breathe cleanly. All she could think of was wanting more of this pleasure, wanting more of James.*

*When he stopped abruptly, she whimpered.*

*“In time,” he promised with a quick kiss to her lips. He teased her with a brush of tongue but no more. “Take off your clothes.” Once more, she did as he asked, fumbling to get the corset undone behind her. As she undressed, he did too. She could picture what his torso would be like, muscular and lean, due to his height.*

*When she was naked, his eyes glanced between her and the mattress. She didn’t need to hear the order to know he wanted her to lay down again. She did so then he moved between her legs.*

*“Hold onto me.” His order was a stern one. Maybe she should have been annoyed, but she wasn’t. She clung to his arms, preparing as he raised her legs around his hips. “Be ready, Marina.”*

*Then he entered her.*

Marina woke up. She pulled the covers off her face in a flustered scramble, feeling a heat ricocheting through her body as she realized what exactly had happened in her dream. Everything was a blur for a few seconds. She saw herself on the bed, being pleased in Lord Frampton’s room. She saw skin upon skin, her hands clutching a gentleman’s biceps.

*No, it cannot be...*

Then the dream came completely into focus. She had been about to make love to her husband, to James, the very man who had vowed not to touch her at all.

“Oh, this is ridiculous!” She turned over and punched the pillow in anger. It seemed that though James had forbidden touching her in the real world, it couldn’t stop her imagination running wild wanting it. Somehow the attraction she had felt to James since the first night they had met had grown. It didn’t seem to matter that he was arrogant, commanding, and she was sure he was also too business minded. She desired him anyway.

It was such a strong feeling that as she laid on the bed, she longed to satisfy the sensations and urges in her body. Her fingers reached down beneath her nightgown, and she pictured everything that had happened in her dream. Only this time, there was no stopping point. She didn’t wake up, and as James entered her in her imagination, it kept on going, never ending until she knew exactly what pleasure felt like.

Then frustration bled through her. He’d told her she could satisfy her desires with other men as he would satisfy his lusts with other women. That meant her dream would have to remain just that – only ever a dream.

*How do I stop this desire?*

## CHAPTER 9



“*A*nd this is the gambling hall itself. Do me a favor and stay close whilst we are in here.” James’ words were uttered near to her ear as he led her into the dark room. Marina suddenly felt no wish to be far from him as she looked around the room.

That day, she had struggled to meet his gaze, blushing every time he looked at her and frequently glancing away. She supposed part of her feared that he would be able to read what she had been dreaming of just by looking at her face. When he’d insisted on showing her the gambling hall, she hadn’t objected and was simply pleased he didn’t intend to run off from her as he had done the night before.

“It’s so dark,” she whispered to James as he beckoned her to follow him around the room. “Yet... it’s plush too.” She noted the fine armchairs and even a rococo settee at one end of the gambling hall where three men lounged in their cups with glasses of scotch and brandy hanging from their bottom lips.

“A man at ease and in comfort is more likely to spend his money here than at another gambling hall.” Once more, he beckoned her to follow. “Here are the tables.” He swept aside a red velour curtain, revealing a room that seemed almost scandalous as it had to be so hidden.

At the sight before her, Marina's jaw hung open. At first glance, it could have been a look of awe, for the tables were full of cards, dice, roulette wheels and other gambling games. Men laughed and drank, adding more and more betting chips to the tables until their chinks could be heard audibly over the laughter.

The more Marina looked though, the more she saw the room for what it truly was. Men around the poker tables sat there hungrily like feral dogs, tongues hanging beyond lips and teeth gnashing.

"This is how you make your money?" Marina asked, aware that James took her arm and drew her back into the corner of the room. "The men... they seem all so... *hungry* for the gamble."

"They are."

"Why did you do that?" She gestured at how he had pulled her into the shadows.

"I do not trust all of my clientele," he said slowly, a small smile upon his lips. "As much as I wish you to learn the business, I do not want any gentleman to look at you and suddenly think I am offering fine courtesans."

"I beg your pardon!?" she stuttered, panicked at the idea.

"Trust me. No man will touch you like that." He took her arm and threaded it through his own. "Yet drunken men see what

they want to see, and I don't want them getting any ideas." He led her around the tables.

"I feel rather like we are at the Tower of London menagerie, watching the animals as they try to attack one another." She nodded her head at the dice table where two men began to argue over the dice.

"It is how I've often thought of it too," he confessed with a smirk. Marina had no wish to let go of James' arm and held on a little tighter, not because she was worried about where she was but because she was enjoying being so close to him. He didn't seem to mind, for he didn't respond to her tighter hold. "I might need to step in." He nodded his head at the men arguing over the dice, but before he could, another man appeared.

This one was familiar to Marina, and it only took her a few seconds to recognize the face of James' best man from the wedding. He said some quick words to the arguing men that made them fall still before he turned and found James, approaching him with a quick bow to Marina.

"Ah, I see you have brought your new Duchess tonight?" He clasped his hands as if preparing for mischief. "What delight! Will she get to gamble?"

"Behave, Michael." James sighed at his friend's antics though he revealed a small smile that showed he was actually amused. "Marina, this is my friend, Michael Hawkins, known to others as Viscount Thorne. He manages the establishment for me."



“How do you do, Your Grace?” He took Marina’s hand with a little charm and kissed the back.

“Such a gentleman,” she said in admiration, watching as he stood tall.

“Now, that is the first time I have ever been called that.” He chuckled along with James. “What other words have I been called, James?”

“Rogue springs more to mind though I think I prefer fool,” James said, laughing deeply.

“Ha! You would be right. You are fond of calling me the latter.”

Marina stared at James in wonder as he jested with his friend. It was almost as if he had undergone a transformation. Here with his friend, he was able to relax in a way she hadn’t seen him do before.

*I wonder if I could make him laugh in that way too.*

Yet the idea seemed rather impossible.

“What do you make of our little gambling hall then, Your Grace?” Michael asked, moving to stand on her other side, so she had a view of the room.

“It’s...” She struggled to know how to describe it. It perhaps wasn’t as sordid as she had expected, but there was a depravity she had not been prepared for. “It’s an eye opener,” she said in the end. “They seem ravenous as if they eat and survive on money.”

“They practically do,” James whispered as some of the clientele walked past, so only they could hear him. “Come, I’ll show you the books too, so you can see exactly how we make our money.”

“Some honeymoon,” Michael said with a chuckle before they could walk away.

“What was that?” Marina asked.

“Don’t encourage him.” But James’ words came too late.

“A newlywed couple?” Michael raised his eyebrows at the two of them. “Forgive me for being impertinent, Your Grace,” he addressed Marina with the words though James interrupted before he could finish.

“You always are, so go on.”

“I do not imagine many new husbands when married to you, Your Grace, would take you to a gambling hall. There is a very particular room I imagine they’d much rather occupy.” At Michael’s mischievous words, Marina blushed, but she couldn’t help giggling. He spoke of things that really shouldn’t be spoken of at all, and he continued to smile, even as James glared at him.

“I rather like your friend,” she said to James between her laughter.

“I did too, up until now.” He mockingly glared at his friend. “I’ll cause as much mischief when you wed, Michael.”

“May she be fine as your own wife.” He lifted Marina’s hand and kissed it again, but she felt her hand being quickly snatched away.

“No more kisses, Michael.” James threaded that hand back through his arm and led Marina away. Marina glanced back to see his friend laughing raucously, clearly pleased to have caused such mischief.

One look at James showed that muscle was twitching in his jaw once more. Something about the interaction with Michael had upset him.

“Do you not like your friend?” she asked as they left the room and stepped out into the back rooms.

“Of course, I do. He’s my dearest friend.”

“Tell that to your glare,” she teased him, earning another scowl from him though this one was a touch more playful. He released her arm, leaving her feeling a little cold without his touch, and reached for a candle. He took the wax stick out of the sconce on a wall and placed it in a brass holder before using the light to guide their way. They entered an office, the door set between two busts on white plinths.

“He’s my friend, but perhaps I don’t like the idea of him getting too close to you,” James said offhandedly, closing the door behind them.

“Why not?” Marina asked with intrigue, following his beckoning hand as he led her to his desk where he had laid out some account books. She sat down, so curious that her head bent over the books. “As I understand it, you told me I could take a lover, could I not?” The book she had been looking at was abruptly closed.

“Not Michael.” James’ face was so near to Marina that she could smell his scent. The muskiness was rather intoxicating, and she didn’t move away.

*Wait... is he going to kiss me?*

His lips were close; it felt like a real possibility.

“Why not?” she whispered the words.

“I just don’t like the idea.” Yet he didn’t elaborate. He increased the distance between them, and any hope Marina may have had that he was going to kiss her evaporated. “Let us look at the books.” He took a chair beside her and opened up the book once again.

She chewed her lip and bent her face forward, hoping to hide both her disappointment and her blush.



James cut up the meat on his plate with a little more vigor than usual, finding his anger was getting to him. Marina made no comment on it to the point that he wondered if she even noticed. Sitting across the table from him, she had a book beside her dinner plate and was reading about Hogarth's paintings.

He longed to ask what she made of the book, for he had read it twice himself, but his thoughts were caught up elsewhere. For the last two nights, he had taken Marina to the gambling hall, so she could become acquainted with how it worked. He had also shown her the books, so she could understand business practices and where their money came from. She had shown a natural aptitude for accounts and had impressed him with her skills. Despite her skill, he could not settle.

Two things that had passed in the gambling hall lingered with him as if there was an itch under his skin that he could not quite scratch. The first was how some of the men at the hall had turned their eyes on Marina, watching her. Their gazes he purported to be lecherous, even if their expressions were not obvious.

The thought of any one of those men touching her sickened him.

The second thing that had irked him so much was Michael. He knew Michael had only been causing mischief, but the thought of Michael and Marina possibly becoming intimate started a fury deep within his gut.

Staring at Marina across the table now, James longed to bring it up with her. Yet he didn't feel he could give her another rule, saying that Michael was out of bounds as a lover for her – he had already given her many rules to follow.

“The gambling hall was interesting,” Marina said, out of the blue, closing up the book.

“Truly? You actually enjoyed seeing it?”

“I did.” Marina smiled a little, her green gaze finding his own. He happily lost interest in his food and looked at her across the table. Her beauty had become an increasing distraction in the last few days. “There was much more to it than I had expected there to be.”

“I am glad. Though you are as trapped in this marriage as I am, I hoped you would find something interesting here.” His voice had darkened with the words. As he took a sip of his lemonade, he noticed her smile slip from her face.

*Ah, I did not mean to upset her.*

“I am sorry.” Marina's words were sudden and silenced the air. Neither one of them moved, ate, or sipped from their glasses. “About what happened,” she went on, turning her gaze down to her plate. “It was not my intention to trap you or anyone in marriage that night.”

“You must understand I find that hard to believe –”

“I was intending to ruin my reputation only.” Her words were soft. Contrary to her usual challenging tone, there was a gentleness there that intrigued him. He lifted his napkin from his lap and tossed it to the side, showing he was done with dinner.

Abandoning his place at the table, he stood, his boots echoing loudly across the wooden floor as he walked toward her. He took the chair closest to her at the table and sat down, waiting for her to continue on.

“I couldn’t marry Baron Rutherford,” she said slowly, shaking her head. “He threatened to...” She broke off and gasped, looking down at the glass she held between her two hands.

“To what?” James asked.

“To force me to share his bed. He made the matter quite plain.” Her whispered words put a fury in James. He sat forward, his palm on the table for fear he would strike it with his fists. The thought of anyone forcing Marina sickened him. She should be adored, made love to so that when she shared someone’s bed, she writhed with pleasure, not squirmed in fear.

“Well, I know what I’ll be doing the next time I see Baron Rutherford.” He cracked his knuckles in emphasis, and she smiled a little though it didn’t last long.

“I chose your brother that night because I was running out of time, and it seemed the best opportunity I had. I prayed that I could destroy my own reputation, and his would survive any

scandal of me being there,” she explained in a rush. James slowly nodded, considering her idea.

“I bet too that you considered if my brother decided to offer to marry you, you thought he would make a better husband than the Baron.”

“I did.” The words were barely audible at all now. “I am sorry. It was fear, not cruelty or intention to trap you, that made me do what I did that night.”

James leaned on the table once more, bringing himself closer to her.

“I can’t blame you for that.” Strangely, he felt as if he hadn’t blamed Marina for some time – since finding out that she had been betrothed to Baron Rutherford, the thought had simmered at the back of his mind. He couldn’t blame any woman wanting to escape him. “I know what it is like to feel trapped, Marina. I acted out as you did; I broke free from the chains.”

He thought of his father’s debt left to him though he didn’t elaborate.

“I never want you to feel trapped here,” he assured her, his voice deep. “If you ever do, then act out. Be free as you like.”

“I feel trapped a little now.” She tapped the glass as she spoke, her eyes meeting his.



“Trapped? In what way?” He stiffened at the words, uncertain what he had done to give her such a feeling.

“Because I am not allowed to do something I wish very badly to do,” she confessed, a smile creeping onto her lips.

“Then please, do it!” he said aloud with sudden vigor. “I will not have you feeling as trapped as you did when you were betrothed to that beast of a man.”

“You are certain?” she asked.

“Yes, do whatever you wish to do!” He was unprepared for what she did next. She put down her glass on the table and reached for him, her hands latching onto his waistcoat and tugging him forward as her lips met his own in a kiss.

## CHAPTER 10



*M*arina couldn't help being bold as she pulled James into that kiss. She wanted to know too badly what it was like, and he had encouraged her to do as she wished.

At first, he didn't seem to respond to the kiss. Feeling wilted and depleted by his lack of action, she was about to retreat from him when she suddenly felt him return the kiss. It was anything but gentle.

A hand upon her waist pulled her out of the chair she had been in and tugged her into James' lap.

"Hmm!" she murmured into the kiss in surprise, just as he bit her bottom lip. There was a harshness to the kiss, one that was demanding, yet she loved it. That nip had heat spreading so much through her body, she could feel a redness increasing not only across her cheeks, but her chest too. As she parted her lips, he took control completely.

Lifting one hand to her head, he tangled his fingers with her hair, pulling on her updo until the tendrils were loose and angling her head so he had more access to her. She willingly gave it to him, stunned when his tongue came out to meet her own. Each tempting brush he delivered felt like fire. It was as

if she was being scorched by his kiss, but it was a pleasant scorch. If ordinary fire felt like this, she would happily sit too close to the flames.

She shifted in his lap, wanting to be closer to him. As one of her knees slipped down beside his hip, she felt his hand come up and take the top of her knee. He directed it further alongside his hip, drawing the two of them even closer together.

Marina could feel his hard body against her own. It sent her imagination wild to the point she imagined they were doing this same thing, but his chest was bare. The cravat, waistcoat and shirt had been tossed away, lying somewhere on the floor as they kissed, trying to get closer to one another.

She pulled on his waistcoat, this yearning to be nearer to him taking over. James responded to her pull, and he tilted her back until she ended up on the table. He moved abruptly, standing and bending over her, his body sliding into place between her legs so suddenly that she felt that pool between her legs.

It was just like in her dream, that warmth and wetness developing fast, longing for him. Then she felt something beneath his trousers, a hardness that brushed against her center.

“Hmm!” she murmured in surprise.

James abruptly ended the kiss. He lifted himself up, looking down at her, panting as he caught his breath with his hands braced on the table on either side of her head. She was just as breathless, her hands still on his waistcoat above her.

“Trapped, eh?” he teased with a small smile. “You felt trapped because I said I would not bed you.”

“A little.” She returned his playfulness, delighted when he laughed deeply. She rather liked that sound and being able to draw it from him.

“Feel freer now?” he asked, bending down toward her.

“Much more.” She attempted to lean up to find his lips with her own again, but he moved away at the last minute and struck the table beside her. She turned her head toward his hand, wondering what that meant. “Strange... I could have sworn you liked that kiss.”

“I did.” James’ voice had deepened further to something that was practically a growl, almost animalistic. It made her think of her dream once more. Her legs drew up either side of his hips, and he emitted a thrilling growl, one of his hands going to her thigh through her gown to hold her still. “I’m bending my rules for you. I don’t usually bend my rules, Marina.”

“So, break them.” She offered an innocent smile, drawing her leg higher, despite his hand trying to restrain her. He clearly didn’t try too hard to hold her back, for he let that thigh brush his hip then his hand lifted higher, his fingers tracing her leg through the gown and up to her hip.

“If we’re going to break this rule, then it won’t be like this. Not here on this table.” He closed his eyes as if warding the image of her away. Marina couldn’t help being disappointed as her leg fell still. She wanted him to throw out all the rules, to

make love to her there on that table, but once more, he was refusing.

“Why not?” she asked quietly.

“It won’t be like this,” he said again, opening his eyes. “I’ll make it something different, something you’ll remember, rather than a fast rut on this dining table.” Something in his words made the heat increase. She supposed he meant it to sound like something distasteful to her, yet she smiled. “Don’t look excited by those words,” he said, chuckling. She merely offered an innocent smile.

He stepped back from her and offered his hand. She took it, and he helped her off the table, so they were both standing still. Raising his hands, he went to fix her updo that she found had completely fallen down in their attentions to one another.

“What will it be like then?” she asked, intrigued to know what he had in mind for the two of them.

“I have a plan.” He spoke quietly, lowering his hands from her hair. “You’ll have to wait and see what I have in mind though.” He winked at her and stepped away.

Marina leaned on the dining table, finding she needed it for support just to keep standing. Despite James’ words, she wouldn’t have minded at all if he had taken her there on the table.



A happy tune was escaping James' lips in a pleasant hum as he descended the stairs. His dreams all night had been filled with that kiss he had shared with Marina.

*Perhaps it would not be the worst thing in the world to bend the rules a little. A few nights with my wife would be an enjoyable thing. Clearly, she longs for it too.*

He was busy with the thought when he caught sight of Marina. Standing in the sitting room, she was holding up swatches of materials toward the curtains with Mrs. Viner at her side.

“What do you think, Mrs. Viner? Perhaps this material is too fussy?” Her question clearly startled the housekeeper who pressed her hands to her chest.

“You wish for my opinion, Your Grace?” the elderly housekeeper asked, brushing her wispy white hair out of her eyes as she moved to the curtains.

“Of course, I'd be glad of it.” Marina declared, offering two different swatches to the housekeeper.

James leaned on the doorframe and stood silently, not wishing to disturb their conversation. The other day Marina had asked him if she could make some changes to their home, and he had encouraged her to do so.

*This should be her home as much as it is mine.*

He was pleasantly surprised to see the materials she had requested from the draper were both cheerful fabrics, patterned and full of light. They would bring a little more joy to the sitting room they were standing in.

“Oh, but a duchess does not need a housekeeper’s opinion, surely,” Mrs. Viner said sweetly, taking the fabrics with a tentative hand.

“Nonsense, I would be glad of your opinion,” Marina declared again. “Now, which do you think?”

There was a humbleness in Marina’s manner which caught James’ attention. Many a lady might order their housekeeper around, demanding changes, but not Marina. She had kindness in her.

*Perhaps she will make a good mistress of this house.*

The two of them decided on a material for the curtains before James cleared his throat, announcing his presence.

“Do you like the choice?” Marina asked, holding up their selection.

“I do.” He tried to keep the surprise out of his voice. “I’m off to the gambling hall for some business; I will return later.”

“Oh, erm...” Marina hurried to put down the material and stepped forward. “I was wondering if I could join you again today?”

James hovered in the doorway. The way she looked at him reminded him all too much of their kiss. Locked away in his office at the gambling hall, he rather feared he would not be able to keep his hands off her.

*Well, maybe I don't have to.*

“If you like.”

Marina smiled at his words.

A few minutes later, they were sitting in the carriage, making their way to the gambling hall. Once more, James told her of how the business worked. When he described how sometimes people did not pay back the sums they owed, and he had to be firm, she looked a little panicked.

As they reached the gambling hall, they walked in together, standing so close that they kept bumping their arms as they talked of the situation.

“How awful people should not pay what they owe.” She shook her head at the idea. “A man should not bet what he does not own!”

“I quite agree.” He held open the door for her, ushering her inside. “Yet not every man is as wise as you and I.”

“Ah! Was that a compliment?” Marina stopped in the hallway of the backrooms of the gambling hall, turning to face him



with a smirk on her lips. “I thought I’d never hear one pass your lips.”

“You think me such a demon, do you?” he whispered playfully, finding he couldn’t resist. Not anymore.

“Not a demon, no; restrained, certainly.” Marina slowly reached for him, and he felt no desire to back away. She adjusted his cravat, tightening it a little. “I sometimes wonder if the rules you have placed on yourself are a little like this cravat. Restraining you from being completely free...”

James leaned toward her. At her words, the idea of abandoning some of his rules sounded alluring. He could shed them as easily as he could this cravat, take her to his office, and show her what being free really meant – then a noise urged him to move back from her.

“Ah, you’re here!” Michael’s words declared. James couldn’t fathom the expression on Marina’s face as he stepped back from her, but he rather hoped it was disappointment. “James, I’m glad you’re here. We have three more gentlemen who are not paying their debts.”

Michael appeared through a doorway and held out an accounts book for James to see. Under his breath, James cursed to see the names. He couldn’t put faces to all of the names, but he was familiar enough with them to be certain they were all long standing members of the club. There was Lord Fortheringhay, a rather gluttonous and large man, who might as well have eaten his cash, then there was Mr. Arthur Baker, a man who came most nights, and lastly, the Marquess of Stanton.

Michael struggled to put a face to the latter name, but he remembered well enough the Marquess had a vast estate and much money. If he was refusing to pay up, then something had to be wrong.

“I will write to them directly.” James led the way into his office with Michael and Marina following behind them. “I will threaten to report them to the debtors’ office too if they do not pay in the next month.” He was laying out his parchment and ink to begin his letters when his attention was torn away by Marina and Michael.

Michael had taken her hand once more in greeting and kissed the back.

“You have returned to our gambling hall again already?” Michael asked, lowering her hand though not quite releasing it quickly enough for James’ liking. “Shall I hope it is the company here that has drawn you back, rather than the pastime of work?” He offered Marina a dazzling smile then smirked in James’ direction.

*I know what you’re doing, Michael. You’re trying to make me jealous.*

What irked James more, and made his blood boil beneath his skin, was the fact it was working. All he wanted to do was tear Marina away from Michael’s grasp.

“You flatter yourself,” Marina said, putting Michael in his place. “Yet I can’t deny, the company is enjoyable.”

Her words had James tossing down his quill. He couldn't stand this burgeoning friendship between Marina and Michael, not when he and Marina had come so close the night before to becoming something much more intimate. He nearly knocked over his inkwell as he strode around the desk.

“Perhaps your wife could join us for a drink this evening, James – oh!”

James grabbed Michael's shoulder and began to steer him to the door. Michael's sound of shock was soon drowned out by laughter.

“Upsetting you, was I?” Michael asked. “I was simply being kind to your wife.”

“Attentive. That is what you were being, rather too much.” James opened the door and pushed Michael back out of it. Despite the vigor of the action, and a little aggression, Michael was still laughing, clearly pleased he'd achieved his aim.

“Am I banned from her presence then?” he continued to tease as James closed the door on him and locked the door. James spun on his heel, marching back into the room when he came face to face with Marina's angry stare.

She stood tall, something that amused him a little for one so petite in stature compared to him. Yet there was fire in her eyes and resistance.

“Are you now banning men from my presence?” she asked. “That is rather possessive...”

“Not possessive.”

“What is it then?” She waved a hand at the closed door. “Your friend was simply being kind.”

“And you like his kindness a little too much.”

“What should it matter if I like his kindness?” she asked wildly. He had no answer to give her, nothing that explained with words his feelings.

*I cannot tell her I am jealous. I cannot do it!*

“How can you just push him out of the room so – hmm!”

He cut her off. Marching toward her, he silenced her with his lips on hers.

## CHAPTER 11



“James,” Marina tried to murmur his name between kisses, but she barely got chance. James seemed determined now, intent on kissing her, and she had no reason to stop him.

When his hands took her waist, his fingers splayed across her gown, she was only too happy to move her body toward his, allowing him to continue that kiss. She was soon backing up though she didn't pay attention to where they were going. She only thought of that kiss and how his hands seemed intent on gripping her, holding her to him.

As her back collided with the wall, she gasped at the sudden thud, excited by their heated and fast movements. He parted from her lips, setting kisses on her neck that started travelling south, across the neckline of her gown. When he pulled back the top hem, revealing a glimpse of the crest of her breast, he kissed the pale skin there, urging her to moan at the intimate touch.

“You'll have to stay quiet, Marina. We don't want the whole gambling hall to hear us.” His words had that excitement only growing, wondering what he had in mind for them to share.

His kisses travelled even further south until he placed them on her clothed hips then he dropped to his knees.

“What are you doing?” she whispered, laying her hands on his shoulders.

“I’m a little tired of Michael’s attentiveness to you,” he said, holding her gaze with his own as he looked up at her. Despite that firm look, his hands were busy elsewhere. He scooped up the hem of her gown, lifting it high, then his hands went to cup the backs of her thighs.

“Wait... are you jealous?” she asked. “Just because I like your friend.”

He didn’t answer with words, but she felt he didn’t need to, not when one of his hands was sliding her thigh to the side, creating a space between her legs.

“James...” She gasped at the touch, wanting more of it.

“Maybe I just wish to remind you of who you are married to.” His words made her laugh. He may have almost been commanding with that statement, but she felt it was playful.

He lifted her leg suddenly, so she was standing on only one foot, then he placed her knee over his shoulder.

“Stay quiet now.” At his order, she nodded, rather feeling like she was playing out one of her dreams, only too happy to do as he asked of her.

He leaned forward, kissing the insides of her thighs. Each brush of his lips was a tease, a promise of what more could come, then he playfully nipped the inside of her thigh. She was so busy gasping at that feeling, surprised he had done it, that she was unprepared for his lips moving to her core.

James found her center. The kisses were immediately pleasurable. It felt different to whenever Marina had explored herself. This was somehow much more intimate, and the shot of thrills was stronger as if she was intoxicated by some sort of liquor that made her head swim. She clutched to the wood paneling behind her with one hand, and James' shoulder with the other, tipping her head back as she moaned at the feeling.

He became bolder. Soon, they were no longer just kisses that remained outside of her. He delved deeper, reaching up with his fingers so that he was pleasuring her not just with his tongue but his fingers too.

The thrill became wild within Marina. She could barely contain it or stay still, for her body longed to thrash with pleasure, to cling onto him and not let go. She didn't know how long they stayed against the wall. Seconds bled into minutes, and she became limp. Soon enough, her body wouldn't stay standing. As she grew weak against the paneling, she felt James' arm come up around her.

“Oh!” With swift ease, he spun her around to the floor and somehow ended up above her. Her knees were high, the skirt of her gown around her hips as he bent over her, his lips returning to her center. He worked faster now, harder, and seeing his dark hair moving down by her core did something to her.

The pleasure shot her over the edge. Being with him was much more intense than she had imagined. Her body reached a euphoric state, and she bucked toward him, riding out her pleasure as she came down from her high.

Even as she laid there, quivering in the aftermath of the quakes that shuddered her body, his fingers continued to dance on her core but gently now as if exploring her sensitivity. Slowly, he raised himself up, resting himself on an elbow with a satisfied smirk on his face.

“Well?” he asked, clearly hoping for some praise.

“Well, if it helps, I definitely remember who I am married to.”

“Good.” He moved down toward her, about to kiss her again, when there was a knock at the door.

Marina’s eyes shot toward the office door in a panic, thinking of how loud her moans had been despite James’ instructions to stay quiet.

“My apologies, James, but you’re needed in the gambling hall,” Michael called. “Believe me, I would not be dragging you away if it wasn’t necessary. With the sounds coming from that room, I don’t need to imagine in what way you are busy.”

“Michael!” James snapped in the direction of the door. Marina lifted a hand trying to cover up her laughter as James bent down toward her and kissed her forehead, just once.



The touch astounded her. It was a soft kiss, one more of affection than heat.

“Regrettably, we must end this here for now.”



James stood outside his bedchamber door, looking down the corridor toward Marina’s door. It would be so easy for him to go to her tonight.

He was too exhausted to consider making love to her that night. It was also not how he wanted their first night together to be. A woman like Marina deserved so much more than a hurried release in the darkness. She deserved to be adored and pleased, and he had every intention of building up to that moment.

*Not tonight.*

Yet he found himself leaving his bedchamber door and walking toward her own anyway. He leaned on the wall beside the door, looking at the closed wood.

Earlier that day when he’d been called away by Michael to attend business, one thing had led to another. He’d had to deal with gamblers refusing to pay, one near brawl that got out of hand, and also a former customer who had been banned and insisted on trying to come in. When he had refused to leave, James had stepped out onto the front step in front of the men he had hired for security and told the man to scarper,

reminding him of what debtors' prison had been like the last time he was there.

After such a long day and night, James needed his sleep and rest. His hand reached for Marina's door handle, wondering if it could be had in her room. Perhaps he could share her bed purely for sleep, lying beside her.

*I've never done that before.*

It was yet another one of his rules. The nights of pleasure he'd had with women had always ended after the pleasure was done. If the women came here, he ensured they were escorted home, and if he had attended a woman's house, then he took pains to leave in a rush.

He'd never known this sensation before of purely wanting to enter a lady's chamber to sleep beside her. He supposed there was something in what had passed between them that day. The confession of jealousy was an open window, and he hoped she would offer some amount of comfort in the darkness as he tried to sleep.

He was about to enter when he caught sight of the end of the corridor. There was an empty space where a painting used to hang. Once, there was a portrait of his father there, but he'd taken it down long ago, not wanting to be reminded of the man.

*I will not be like him. I cannot give into urges, or I might end up like him someday.*

He'd made the vow long ago never to become his father.

Slowly, James stepped back from Marina's doorway, his hand falling limp and loose, away from her door handle. Turning his back on her bedchamber door, he retreated to his own bedchamber and hastened inside. He was so caught up in thoughts of her and the anger he felt at his own rules, he fell back on the bed fully clothed and fell asleep without even taking off his shoes.



“Our first evening out as husband and wife. Now, that is something, I'd say.” Marina hurried down the staircase, her manner excited. James smiled a little to see her so excited. There was a blush on her cheeks and a smile she couldn't restrain. “I have not seen Caroline for well over a week now, or has it been two?”

As she reached the floor, she looked around at him, looking for his confirmation.

“So lost in my company you can't remember how long we have been married?” he teased her. She moved toward him as if she would kiss him. He burned, wanting that touch, then Mr. Pitt-Rivers stepped into the hall, and they moved apart from each other. “It's been ten days.”

“That it has.” She smiled as she moved to the mirror, checking her appearance. She fussed with the cinnamon-colored curls that hung down beside her cheeks though he didn't know why. He was rather fond of their wild look.

When she attempted to repeatedly curl one of the strands around her finger, trying to get it to behave, James stepped forward. He checked the butler was out of the front door, ensuring the carriage was ready, before he took the strand out of her hand and let it lay flat. Marina stared at him, wide-eyed.

“There’s something to be said about the wild locks,” he said slowly.

“Was that another compliment?” she teased. They laughed together though neither of them said anything more.

As the butler announced the carriage was ready, Marina stepped toward the door, clad in her silver gown and gold pelisse. He didn’t follow though, and at his hesitation, she paused in the doorway, looking back at him.

“Is something wrong?” she asked slowly. James felt a longing to tell her why he could not summon the same excitement that she had for such an event. To his surprise, the butler clearly sensed a need for them to be alone, for Mr. Pitt-Rivers made himself scarce. “What is it?” Marina asked, moving back to James’ side.

“I cannot help being apprehensive of events like this,” he said, his voice deep and low. Feeling strangely vulnerable, he looked away from her into the hall mirror where he fussed with his jacket, making sure it lay flat. “My brother... he...”

“What about your brother?” Her tone was soft, gentle.

“I am not sure he’ll be glad to see me there.” The moment the words were beyond his lips, he felt a release of tension, and his shoulders slumped a little. Marina somehow sidled between him and the mirror, capturing his attention. She reached up and took the lapels of his tailcoat out of his hands, smoothing them flat for him. Her hands on his chest made a spiral of pleasure leap within his gut, remembering what they had already shared together and longing for more.

“You are his brother; why would he not be pleased to see you?” she asked, her voice still soft.

“Because of my choices. The gambling hall...” James sighed deeply before the whole tale escaped him in a rush as he looked down at how she flattened his lapels. “My father left the dukedom in considerable debt. He was a gambling man, and he wrote to me a year or so before he died explaining the situation. Despite his confession, he made no effort to curb his ways. None!”

His voice was venomous in its anger. “By the time he died, I was on the brink of being put in debtors’ prison for his actions.” To Marina’s credit, she didn’t gasp or respond, she just continued with that touch to his chest. It made him take a very small step closer to her. “I vowed that day to get our family out of trouble.”

“That is why you opened the gambling hall?”

“Yes.” He nodded. “Michael needed money too, so he came on board a short while later. My brother, though... he could never understand why I had done it.” James shook his head, laughing though it was without humor. “He’s a man who likes to stick his head in the sand and pretend a problem is not real, much

like our father before him. He was convinced that I could have recovered the fortune another way.”

He paused, meeting Marina’s gaze at last. Her lips were parted as she listened in a little wonder. “He cared more about our position in society and what the rumors would say of a duke who owned a gambling hall. He has never truly understood how close to ruin we became.” He sighed, unable to stop the sound escaping him. “Now, after my latest scandal...” he paused, watching as she bit her lip, “I fear he will hate me even more.”

“He’s your brother; can he really hate you?” she asked.

“I fear he can.” James could still remember the look of fury in his brother’s eyes the night he had been caught in that chamber with Marina.

“Then you should not think of him when you go to these events.”

“I beg your pardon?” James snapped his head upward, startled by Marina’s words and the sudden smile on her lips.

“If your brother would be selfish enough not to see why you have done everything you have, then why should you keep endeavoring to earn his good opinion at the expense of your own sadness? No, that is no way to live.” She stood tall, impressing him.

For the first time, James thought how like a duchess Marina looked. It was not because of the fine gown or the jewelry she

wore but because of that look, that confidence.

“You should attend the assembly tonight for your own enjoyment,” she insisted, her voice buoyant. “Either in time your brother will come to see the good in you and realize he was not understanding, or he will keep his distance. Either way, you enjoy yourself then. You will not be made sad by his distance.”

James shifted his weight between his feet, eyeing his wife closely.

“What is it?” she asked, her hands slipping away from his chest.

“I was just thinking you have wisdom in you, Marina. A wisdom that you perhaps do not always reveal.” He couldn’t help smiling at her, thrilled when she returned that look.

“Another compliment?” She laughed. “Well, this must be a record for one evening.”

James’ own smile faltered when there was a knock at the door. He went to answer it before Mr Pitt-Rivers could return and opened it to find a messenger boy, holding out a letter.

“Correspondence for the Duke of Curton.” The boy passed the letter over, and James gave him a coin or two for his troubles.

Looking down at the letter, James frowned, not recognizing the handwriting on the envelope. The seal was blank on the

back too, the red wax plain, bearing no family emblem.

“A matter of business, is it?” Marina called to him, crossing to the door, preparing to go.

“I do not know.” James tore open the envelope, allowing his eyes to dance quickly across the page.

*‘Dear Duke of Curton,*

*Your business matters have extended far and invaded too many lives. You throw men’s livelihoods into jeopardy and their families’ lives too.*

*The time has come to show you what that jeopardy is like, to reveal to you the fear and terror of knowing one of your own is in such danger.*

*I hear your new wife is making herself quite at home in your house. I’d hate to see anything happen to her.*

*Curtail your business, or you will discover what jeopardy I speak of.’*

There was no name at the bottom of the letter. James felt abruptly sick, and his stomach tightened into a knot as he looked at Marina. She was smiling sweetly, hurrying toward him, none the wiser as to the threat that rested in that letter, directed at her.



*Someone wishes to hurt her. No... I vowed in church no one would ever hurt her. Ever!*

“James? What is it?” she asked, her smile faltering as she recognized his expression. Unable to speak, he handed her the letter, knowing she had to know. She read it as quickly as he had done before she looked up, her face pale. “What does this mean?”

“It means we are being threatened,” he said, his voice low. “Someone resents my business.”

“They intend to hurt...” She broke off, swallowing hard.

“Nothing will happen to you, Marina.” He stepped toward her with intent, needing her to hear the words. “You will be kept safe; I promise you that.”

“How can you promise such a thing?” She held out the letter. “We don’t even know who sent this.”

“You are not to leave the house without me or one of my best men with you. They’ll keep you safe.”

“I beg your pardon?” She looked at him, flummoxed, before her voice rose in volume. “James, I am not made of glass.”

“It is my order, Marina – until we find out who sent this letter.”

## CHAPTER 12



“Goodness, and the letter is genuine? It is not some awful prank?” Caroline clutched to her glass of wine, her hand trembling a little as Marina told her the story of the letter that had been sent that evening. She and Caroline were huddled in a corner of the assembly room where they had spent the last hour at least.

They had discussed much of what had passed this last week though Marina kept secret the passion and the excitement that had passed between her and James. She said only enough to let Caroline know that she was not disappointed by her husband.

When their conversation turned to the matter of the letter, though, things had grown somber.

“James seems to think it is.” Marina looked down at the wine glass in her hand, finding she didn’t wish to drink much of it. If there was a threat against her, she wanted to keep her wits about her. “You should have heard him on the carriage ride here. He would not stop speaking of it. He insists I cannot leave the house alone or with just a maid. He must come with me or another man must assist. Is that not madness?”

“Madness? Why?” Caroline asked, frowning.

“Because it is making me a prisoner.” Marina shook her head. “Yes, I am not so great a fool as to not see the sense in what he says. I am more likely to be protected, but what if he never discovers who this letter writer is?” She could see her point connected with Caroline who nodded slowly and knocked back what remained in her wine glass.

“Then you could be escorted like a prisoner for the rest of your life,” Caroline summarized for her.

“Exactly.” Marina nodded. “I do not think I could bear that. James should not ask that of me.”

“We shall have to see what he does ask.” Caroline shuffled closer to Marina in their chairs, whispering to her. The action urged Marina to look around the assembly rooms, scanning who was in attendance that night.

It struck her that her parents had not come though she supposed they were avoiding such busy events of the ton at present. Most ladies who had gathered were dressed in the latest fashion with turbans in their hair, the silks shining brightly in the candlelight. It was with some chagrin Marina noticed a lot of these turban-clad heads were turned in her direction, staring at her.

The realization made her look down and fidget with her silver gown, trying to rid herself of any of the creases.

“I see you have noticed what I was about to whisper to you,” Caroline murmured softly. “This threat aside, it is hardly your only problem. Despite your hurried marriage to save your

reputation, people are still gossiping. I fear they will not stop for some time.”

“I daresay you’re right.” Marina accepted the truth as her eyes flicked up to the ladies who were staring their way. She felt small under their gaze. The mere idea had her sitting taller, not wanting to be cowed by them. “Caroline, I fear the answer to my next question, but please, do tell me nevertheless.”

Caroline nodded, waiting for her to go on.

“What was the reaction when James and I walked in tonight? Were there many whispers?”

Caroline seemed to swallow and fuss with her empty glass before she answered.

“There were some who talked a lot about it. There were some who were pleased to see the Duke had done the right thing and married you, yet others were more suspicious of the arrangement. Rumors run wild at these sorts of events; you know that.”

“I do.” Marina looked back at the ladies who stared her way. Gradually, they lost interest and looked elsewhere for their gossip though some snapped their gazes away as if Marina’s challenging stare had burned them.

“Do not think of that now.” Caroline laid a hand over Marina’s. “In time, people will find someone new to gossip about; they always do.”

“Yes, you are right.” Marina tried to force a smile though it didn’t last long. All she could think of was how her parents had not deigned to come this evening. She had even written to her mother, asking if she would attend in advance, but the reply had come back rather late that afternoon, saying that Marina’s father had decided against it.

In her mother’s words, they wished to *‘hide from the condemnation of the ton until a new scandal should arise.’* Marina felt quite abandoned by her parents at that moment. They could have stood with her and bore the whispers together. They could have shown strength by being there tonight as she was, refusing to be browbeaten by the gossip. Instead, her father was hiding at home like a frightened child.

“This letter worries me, Marina.” Caroline’s words shifted Marina’s focus back to her friend. Caroline could barely sit still in her seat, for she fidgeted so much and pulled at the sleeves of her pastel pink gown. “To think someone would hurt you.”

“It could be just an empty threat.” Marina had been thinking a lot about it on her carriage ride. “Despite James’ fear, we must look at it with a reasoned mind. What person who intends to hurt another forewarns them in advance? They do not! It’s common sense not to warn your victim you’re coming, isn’t it?” Her words prompted Caroline to smile a little.

“Yes, I suppose it is.”

“My conclusion is that the letter was sent to scare James. It was addressed to him after all, it spoke of hurting him as the letter writer had been hurt, and it bid him to curtail his business.” Marina nodded, certain of her thoughts. “The letter

must have come from someone associated with the gambling hall; that is the only thing that makes sense.”

“What? A rival business, perhaps? Trying to put him out of business?”

“Maybe.” Marina shrugged, uncertain what more to think on this matter. “All I can say is that I am certain the intention was to make James afraid, to urge him to keep me at home. Well, not many things frighten me, and even when they do, I’m not willing to cow down to them.”

She was reminded of Baron Rutherford and to what lengths she’d gone to in order to escape that fear. “Whoever wrote that letter will be sorely disappointed to find me not a fearful lady, determined to hide at home.”

“I pray you are right about the writer of that letter.” Caroline held tightly to her hand. “Where has your husband gone, by the way?”

“Oh, he’s...” Marina looked across the room, searching for James, startled by the warmth that had spread through her when Caroline had called him ‘her husband.’ She had known since they were married that she was attracted to James, but the warmth was a new feeling. It seemed to be growing each day that she learned something more about him, perhaps a secret, such as the one he had revealed to her that evening about his relationship with his brother.

“He’s there.” Caroline found him before Marina could. “It seems he is with his brother.”

Marina swallowed nervously, worried for James as she saw Lord Frampton approach.



James was glad of Michael's distracting conversation and his jests. It made it easier to ignore the stares of the rest of the ton in this part of the assembly rooms. That happiness began to slip when Michael pointed behind him.

"Incoming..." he whispered.

"What?" James turned round to see his brother approaching.

"I shall make myself scarce," Michael murmured and clapped him on the shoulder. "Come find me again if you need someone to make you smile. Or you could ask your wife to do that task for you. I warrant she does a better job of it me these days."

"Michael..." James offered a warning tone, but Michael simply smiled as he began to retreat, disappearing into the crowded ton.

"What?" Michael called back to him. "You smile just when you say her name!"

*I do?*

James was so caught up with the thought, he was scarcely prepared for his brother's arrival. Neil approached quickly with the usual smile he offered everyone else in that room

surreptitiously absent. He had a large glass of wine in his hands, and judging by the way he nearly slipped as he walked to James, he'd had a little too much.

“Careful, Neil.” James took his brother’s arm, keeping him standing, until Neil glared down at that touch. James quickly retrieved his hand. “How much have you had?”

“That isn’t really your business, is it?” Neil downed some of what was in his glass. James tried to keep the look of horror off his face. For a horrid second, it was as if he was staring at his father and not his brother at all.

*No... don't become him, Neil.*

“If you intend to be so abrasive in your manner tonight, tell me, why did you come to talk to me?” James asked, longing to seek out Marina in the room. Something she had said earlier to him had made a difference. The way she had talked of him trying to enjoy himself whether he earned Neil’s good opinion or not made sense to him.

*Well, for how long have I tried to earn his good opinion and made no progress? It is unlikely I will ever have it now.*

“Because I had to talk about –” Neil broke off sharply and smiled pleasantly at a couple who passed rather too closely to them. Once they were gone, he took James’ arm in a vice-like grip and dragged him to the corner of the room. They were half hidden behind a candelabra and a drinks table where Neil reached to top up his wine glass. “I had to talk about what you have done to this family.”



“I thought you had lectured me on that many times before. Tell me, which of my failings do you wish to condemn this evening?” James asked, purposefully making his tone a light one. “Is it my occupation? My manner in general? Or perhaps my choice in bride?”

“Pa! Choice. At least, you did marry her. The situation could have been worse if you did not.” Neil took rather a large gulp of his wine. “All of it.” He took a firm turn toward James. “I spoke to the Prince Regent this week.”

“You are going up in the world – royal connections now! How long until you call him a firm friend?” James had seen repeatedly how Neil ingratiated himself with people who weren’t that likeable, just to advance his position in society. James didn’t doubt his brother intended to do the same with the Prince.

“He spoke about you. Imagine that.” Neil scoffed, shaking his head. “I’m there trying to make a friend of the most influential gentleman in the land, and he could not stop talking about you and the scandals you have caused.” Neil was almost breathless as he took another gulp from his wine.

“I really think you need to slow down with that.” James made his voice serious and pointed to the wine, but Neil didn’t appear to hear him.

“I just wanted you to know the lasting damage you have done to me, James.”

“I hardly need yet another reminder of it.”

“Your smile suggests you do.” Neil glared at him. “You walked in here tonight, smiling as if you hadn’t a care in the world.” He was clearly incredulous and a little angry at the idea.

James didn’t answer right away, for he wondered why he had been smiling at all. The whole journey to Almack’s Assembly Rooms, he had been angry. The letter that had arrived shortly before he’d left put the fear of God into him. He’d not smiled at all because of the fear that something could happen to Marina.

Then he remembered walking into the assembly rooms with her. She’d jested that people were turning to face them, staring at them as if they were the wondrous attraction at the Tower of London menagerie now.

*“Perhaps I should have worn one of those ridiculous feathers in my hair. At least then, I would look more like one of those marvelous birds of paradise, and they’d have an excuse to stare.”*

Her jest had brought laughter from him when he’d least expected it. It was a delight to discover she could change his mood so easily.

“You wish misery upon me then, brother?” James asked slowly. Neil didn’t answer; he simply raised his glass toward his lips, preparing for another gulp. “I’d never wish such a thing on you.”

“I find that rather hard –”

“James?” Marina’s voice had him turning toward her. At her presence at his side, relief washed over him. She reached for his arm without hesitation, and he gladly gave it to her.

“Marina, you remember my brother, Neil.” He gestured toward Neil, who looked at her a little coldly before lifting his nose, silently sneering. Marina curtsied. “Neil... tell me, you will bow to my wife.” James’ voice had darkened into fury.

For the first time, he saw a look of fear on his brother’s face at that tone. Neil bowed though he didn’t bow very deeply, not enough for what a duchess deserved.

“Neil...” James stepped toward him, his anger getting the better of him. Neil could hate him all he liked for what he’d done in the past, but he couldn’t bear the thought of Neil detesting Marina.

“James,” Marina tugged on his arm before he could say anymore to his brother, “would you dance with me? Please?”

“Dance?” He glanced toward her, startled by the invitation.

“Please.” She didn’t give him a chance to refuse but pulled his arm, drawing him away. “Good evening to you, Lord Frampton.” She addressed Neil who still deigned not to reply to her. The fury swelled in James again, but Marina pulled so hard on his arm he couldn’t have gotten back to his brother without making a scene.

*That would probably just make Neil resent me more.*

Before he left, he did just one thing. Grasping hold of the wine bottle that Neil was reaching for on the drinks table, he took it out of Neil's reach, watching as his brother reached for it like a child wanting sweetmeats.

"Do not turn into our father, Neil." James' words seemed to connect with his brother more than he had thought they would. Neil's hand went limp, and as James returned the bottle to the other end of the table, Neil didn't reach for it again.

Marina towed James through the assembly rooms toward the main ballroom where people were gathered.

"Why did you come?" James asked, finding her hand was sliding down from his arm to take his palm. He let it happen, rather amazed at the warmth that spread through his palm as their fingers entwined together.

"I rather thought you were in need of a rescue," she said quietly.

"I was. Well perceived." He nodded in approval, and they shared a sad smile. "Are you truly asking me to dance though?" He stopped short of the dance floor, realizing it wasn't an excuse for an exit after all, and she did intend to dance.

"Of course." Her smile grew. "I am not the world's greatest dancer, but I am not so bad that I will trip us both up, I assure you." Her jest lightened the air a little. "Dance with me?"

"I don't dance."

“Another restraining rule of yours?”

“Perhaps.”

“So, bend it.” Her words were so confident that he didn’t argue with her. He didn’t even consider if he was ‘bending,’ ‘breaking,’ or throwing out the rule altogether. As the music changed and she moved toward the floor, leading him by the hand, he followed, only too glad to.

They bowed and curtsied with the start of the music and began a waltz. Slowly, he drew her into his arms, feeling the slenderness of her waist beneath his palm and how firmly her fingers held his shoulder. As they began to dance, moving in the three-time step, neither one of them looked away from one another. They just continued to stare.

“There now, I knew a dance would cheer your spirits a little,” she whispered as they circled another couple. “I must admit, I am rather enjoying the chance to be closer to you again too.” He chuckled at her audacity, loving how confident she was with him now. It reminded him of their first kiss when she had leaned across the dining table and quite demanded a kiss from him.

He rather longed to be free of this assembly room, to see what else she could demand tonight.

“You do provide a rather pleasant distraction from my woes,” he admitted, moving with her. When a couple moved near to them, James shifted her closer in his arms, avoiding a

collision. They were so near to one another that Marina had to tilt her head up toward him.

He could smell her scent of bergamot and rose. It made him long to draw nearer to her.

“You look as tempted as I feel,” she whispered, her eyes flicking between his gaze and his lips.

“That’s because I am,” he confessed. “You and I cannot dance again this evening if we continue to stare at one another like this. I’ll be hurrying you to the carriage all too quickly.” She laughed at the words, lowering her head a little.

As he turned the two of them, his eyes were caught at the side of the dance floor. Neil was standing there, watching him closely.

“Thank you,” James said, returning his focus to Marina.

“What for?”

“For distracting me from my brother. You came to cheer me up, didn’t you?”

“Ah, it seems I am not half so crafty as I think I am. You have discovered my intent.” She smiled and shifted toward him so that their hips were nearly brushing together. He was glad there were so many couples on the floor that they could not easily be seen together. “You are most welcome, James.”

He smiled at her, aware that a feeling bloomed inside of him. It wasn't something he'd felt before, but it rather changed the way he looked at Marina, and his hand held hers tightly.

*God's wounds... what is this feeling?*

## CHAPTER 13



“**S**he has taken well to this world, hasn’t she?” Michael said as he stood behind James, gesturing at Marina. James had barely taken his eyes off Marina since they had returned to the gambling hall. It was partly because of what was in the letter that made him nervous and also because he couldn’t stop thinking of her and how their relationship was changing.

Three days had passed since the ball, and in that time, he had bent more rules. He spent more than just his dinners with Marina now. He’d even helped her as she planned new redecorating ideas for the dining room, saying it was a little cold. They had decided on some new artwork together, a Constable painting, that was to hang over the dining table.

They’d gone for a ride together that morning too, and he had discovered she was not only skilled but as fine a rider as he. Maybe, if he admitted the truth to himself, she was even better. They had raced, and she had won though he professed more than once that it was down to her horse having the lighter load.

“James?” Michael waved a hand in front of his eyes, trying to get his attention.



“Yes?”

“I was saying, she has taken to the gambling hall well.”

“Yes, she has.” James nodded in agreement. Marina, once more, had accompanied him to the gambling hall. She’d looked over some of the accounts earlier and had even advised him on where he could make some savings before wandering the hall with him.

It was busy tonight with some tables packed too much with gambling men. Their hungry eyes pored over their betting chips, and their jittery fingers reached for fresh cards with eagerness.

Marina walked between them all as if she was watching some performance on stage. James found himself following her at a distance, wanting to make sure she was all right, and Michael trailed behind him.

“You have taken to her quite well too.”

“Enough mischief, Michael.” James levelled a glare at him.

“Come now, no mischief for a second.”

“Are you capable of that?” James asked with a dubious stare. Michael laid a hand on his heart, the picture of honesty.

“Allow me to ask after your happiness, my friend. I know you were worried about this arrangement.” He walked around James and clapped his shoulder. “Yet, if I am not mistaken, what I have seen in your relationship with your wife has been a very promising start. For one thing you are not keeping your distance from her.”

“She’s hard to keep distance from,” James insisted. He looked away from Michael, seeking Marina out again, but he couldn’t see her.

*Where did she go?*

A little fear crept in, reminding James of what was in that mysterious letter he had received.

“James? You all right?”

“Michael, she’s gone.” James gripped his friend’s shoulder and spun him around, so he could see the empty space where Marina had been standing, seconds ago.

“Do not panic. It’s your gambling hall! She’s probably in the next room. You search there, and I’ll look in here.” Michael’s buoyant tone helped a little, but it didn’t dissuade the fear completely.

James pushed aside the red velour curtain and stepped into the main entrance hall, plush with chairs and alcohol being served in fine crystal glasses atop silver trays. His eyes darted between the drunkards and the gamblers, searching for any hint of a gown.

That's when he caught it. A flicker of the Pomona green gown she had been wearing in the corner of the room and her cinnamon hair. She was barely visible, for a man stood in front of her.

James advanced quickly toward them, trying to get closer to Marina. The nearer he got, the more he heard something of their conversation.

"Step aside, sir," she delivered the order with fervor and gusto, her face coming into view. She'd paled.

"I didn't know the Duke had hired courtesans," the man leered, moving toward her. James couldn't see the man's face, but the hair was greasy, full of wax.

"He has not. Leave me be." Marina tried to step past the man, but he grabbed her wrist. The moment the hand was put upon Marina, something snapped in James.

He launched himself forward and snatched the man's tailcoat, grabbing it so hard that he was forced to release Marina. She stumbled away as James spun the man around and took hold of the lapels of the jacket, holding them so high in the air that he practically lifted the man off the floor. The toes of the man's boots scraped repeatedly on the floor. James could hear them as their kerfuffle made the room fall quiet, the drunkards turning their heads toward the commotion.

"How dare you touch her?" James seethed, so full of fury that he felt a capacity for violence he had not known before. He'd

brawled in the past, but this need to deliver justice? To hurt a man in vengeance? It was new.

“Your courtesan?” the man asked, bleary-eyed, struggling to get down out of James’ hold.

“My wife!” James snapped loudly. The man’s eyes widened. He tried harder to get free. “Here’s what happens to any man that dares to touch her.” James pulled back his arm and delivered one harsh blow. It smacked the man on the nose so firmly that the sound of bone crunching was audible in the air.

Some of the drunkards laughed, and others tutted.

“Michael!” James called, his voice booming. Michael must have already been on his way from the next room, having heard the commotion because he was there in seconds. “Escort the gentleman out. Offer him a handkerchief for his bleeding nose too. He won’t be welcome back here again. I will not have this place be unsafe for my wife.”

“Gladly.” Michael grabbed the man’s arm and hurled him to stand straight. The man bemoaned his broken nose, pressing his hand to it, but he didn’t fight to stay, nor did he offer an apology.

James turned, seeing the attention of the room upon him.

“Go back to your drinks.” At his order, all the men beckoned for more drinks, only too glad to laugh and point fingers at the man who was now being hauled out. As their focus shifted away, James sought out Marina.

She was standing close by, leaning against the wall, her breathing panting.

“James,” she whispered.

He couldn't talk. Not here. He took her hand and drew her away from the room, reaching for the door that connected to the backrooms behind the hall. She hurried behind him, enabling him to close the door with a bang before he made his way to a flight of stairs.

“Where are we going?” she asked, struggling to keep up with him on the steps.

“Away from there,” he seethed, angered that she had come so close to being hurt.

There was one bedchamber in this entire building. James had ensured it was there in the early days of the gambling hall in case he ever wished to stay overnight. It had been some time since he had spent a night here, but the bed was always clean, just in case.

He hastened into this chamber now, finding it dark. He closed the door behind him, and Marina then reached for the mantelpiece where he hurried to light two candles from a tinder box. Flames jumped to life, revealing Marina's face that was still pale.

“James,” she said again, her voice firmer this time. “It's all right. All is well. I am not hurt.”

“You came too close tonight.” He placed the candles around the room before moving back toward her. He took her face in his hands, tilting her chin upward, checking for bruises.

“James, he didn’t even touch me – well, apart from the grasp to my wrist.” Her words calmed him a little but not enough. “He was drunk.”

“That does not make what he wanted to do all right.” He spoke quickly, loosening his hands from her and stepping back. “God’s wounds. I vow to keep you safe, and what happens? Under the roof of a building I own, you come into danger. This is mad, quite mad.”

“James, please.” She hurried around him, trying to find his gaze with her own. “I’m fine. I’m well. I am not harmed.” He nodded, trying to find comfort in this. All he found was anger and frustration that she had come so close to being hurt.

“I will not see you harmed.” His voice was deep as he stared at her, unblinking. He was so caught up in his fury, he didn’t think anything would calm him.

“I see you need a distraction.”

“No distraction would be enough.” He stepped away from her, flinging his arms down. “Maybe you can’t come here anymore.”

“What? No. You wished me to be familiar with the business.”

“Yet you are not safe here!” He waved a mad hand toward the door. “You’re not safe, and I will not see you harmed.” She hurried toward him. He was too busy in his tirade, so he did not register how close she came. “I’d sooner hurt all the men here than see you hurt yourself – Marina!”

She launched herself toward him. Stepping up onto a cushioned footstool between them, she practically jumped against him, her lips finding his own. He stumbled to catch her, not even waiting a beat before he returned that kiss.

There was sudden lust between them and great heat. All the anxiousness for her he put into that kiss so that his lips did not stop moving against hers, not for a single second.

With her legs around his hips, he moved the two of them together, down toward the bed, not wanting this to end. Maybe she was right... maybe this was the distraction he needed, to be with her. Here, at least, she was completely safe with him.

“Don’t stop,” she begged between kisses as he reached down and lifted the skirt of her gown, desiring to be closer to her. The burn was all encompassing tonight. To the extent he couldn’t control it. It made his hands jerky, reaching for her, frantic.

When he flipped her skirt over her hips, revealing her to him, her hands clutched at his arms, clinging to him. That tightening of her grasp nearly sent him wild.

*God, how I want her.*

He could have gladly removed his trousers and made love to her, to claim her as his own so that the two of them were completely united. Yet there was something about sharing this moment with her above the gambling hall he could not abide. He would pleasure her, yes, maybe even take some pleasure for himself, but he wouldn't take her completely – not here, not in this way. He had a better idea for that night.

He bent over her on the bed and kissed her, moving his lips to hers with such fervor that one of her arms raised around his neck. The way she held onto him plastered their bodies together. He barely had the room to lift his hand between them and search for that tender spot between her legs.

He found it swiftly, discovering she was already wet, ready for him. She moaned into the kiss as he began to touch her. He knew he should have been gentle at first, soft, preparing her, yet his desire for her made his fingers fast, and she seemed to love that speed. Her hips moved with his hand until her body was moving completely to the rhythm that he made.

She laid a hand to his. Stunned, his movements froze, and he inched back from that kiss, fearing he had done something wrong. The smile on her lips showed that all was well.

“Show me,” she whispered, her hands moving toward his trousers. He lifted himself up, uncertain what she meant at first. She shifted to his tailcoat and sat up, pushing the jacket off his shoulders then his waistcoat and his cravat. Lastly, she reached for his shirt, trying to pull it over his head. “Please, James.” Her plea was enough to make him help her. He tossed the shirt away, throwing it somewhere across the room though he didn't care to look where it had landed.



The moment he was exposed, he froze, feeling her hands beginning to explore him. Those sensual fingers travelled down his chest, exploring the carving of his muscles there. He was suddenly glad he practiced his fencing so much with Michael and made a point of riding. It kept him physically fit, something that seemed to enamor Marina, for as she explored him, her lips parted in a small ‘o,’ and her fingers became firmer on him.

When she reached down to the fastening of his trousers, he held a hand over hers, wanting her to be sure.

“Please,” she whispered once more. “Show me what to do. I want you to feel what you make me feel.” Her words snapped any resistance he might have felt.

He helped her to undo the fastening then his trousers were pushed down his hips, revealing his length to her. At first, her eyes went wide, and he smiled a little, clearly seeing how stunned she was to discover his length. She wet her lips for a second, not once looking away from him.

“Lay down,” he said playfully, intending to take command of her again. She did as he asked, her Pomona green gown gathered around her hips, revealing her legs and the curve of her hips that had him so enamored. He reached for her center, but she held a palm to his chest, stopping him.

“I’d like to be in control this evening.” Her words had him practically growling as he pressed his lips to her neck, pressing kisses and playful nips there. A coil of pleasure had begun in his stomach, shooting very low indeed. He didn’t think it was possible for his body to stir more or for his length to stand

more to attention. “Show me what to do, James.” She placed her hand in one of his.

Lifting himself off her a little, he took her hand and directed her to his length, showing her exactly what to do.

## CHAPTER 14



Marina was enamored as she watched James' face. She did as he showed her, until soon, he let his own hand fall away, so it was only her pleasuring him. He braced himself over her, one hand to the mattress as his face began to redden and small growling moans escaped his lips.

Never once did he look away from her. His eyes on hers made the moment so intense that Marina couldn't fathom why they had not done this before. How come they hadn't shared in this excitement the first night they were married? Better yet, why didn't they lock the door of that first bedchamber they had found themselves in and explore this feeling then?

He moved one of his hands off the mattress, inching toward her center. That first touch had her mewling, wanting more of his touch. She became quite distracted as she tried to please him, for her own pleasure was taking over.

James was just as bold as before, moving his hands without relent or hesitation. The confidence with which he thrilled her had her panting, closing her eyes until her eyelids fluttered. Her end was coming much quicker this evening though she supposed it had something to do with the fact they were sharing pleasure tonight, rather than it being her alone. The

intensity was overwhelming, and when she reached her end, it took over her body.

Closing her eyes firmly, all went black with stars as his name passed her lips. She panted, trying to recover, as she felt him release. He moved himself away from her all of a sudden, just far enough that his length was buried in the bedsheets beside them, masking what had happened for a minute.

She was still struggling to catch her breath as she reached out toward him, her hand going for his arm. He moved before her fingers could touch the bare skin there. He rolled over on the bed and flipped her with him so that she was laid on her back on the mattress, her head on the pillow.

“James,” she barely managed to say his name before his lips found her own. It was a slower kiss than before, just as heated but not so fast and demanding now. The slowness of it was sensual, urging her hands to raise and tangle in his dark hair, pulling him down toward her.

When they parted, she was very aware of how bare they both were. His trousers were around his hips, his torso exposed, and her gown was still ruffled around her waist. As they looked at one another, Marina smiled, unable to contain it.

“I think I quite like the way you try to distract me these days,” he said, his voice so deep and quiet she had to strain to hear it.

“Me too. But I...” She trailed off. She wanted to know him completely, to experience what it was like to be made love to by James, yet he shook his head.

“Not here, Marina,” he whispered, trailing kisses down her cheek that soon reached her neck. “In our home, then yes... someday soon.” He melded their bodies together, and she embraced him tightly, lifting her leg past his hip to cling to him.

Had she known such intense intimacy was possible with James, she would have gladly walked up to him the first night she had ever seen him at a ball. Yet there was no way to turn back the hands of the clock. She was just glad she knew him as she knew him now.

Abruptly, there were sounds from downstairs in the gambling hall. James lifted himself up, a frown betraying his anger at those noises.

“Did you forget where we were momentarily? I certainly did,” she teased him, her hand reaching out to his bare chest.

“Very much,” he agreed, nodding. “In the midst of that... ah, I could only think about what we were doing.” He kissed her again with one slow kiss that was so gentle her hands curled around his biceps, holding onto him. “We can’t stay here.” The words were sudden, leaving her bereft as he climbed off her.

“Oh.” She sighed deeply, reaching for the skirt of her gown. She had loved every minute of what they had shared, yet now, a sadness crept in. With how easy he was leaving her, climbing off the bed, she was reminded of something.

*How often have I heard his name whispered amongst those who talk of rakes? How many times have I read his name in scandal sheets where the writers have taken a guess at what*

*lady has caught his eye this week? What if I am just one of many now?*

How easily he left her body had her pulling at the skirt as she stood, hiding her body completely. It was just possible that whatever the moment had meant to her, it had meant very little to him.

He was pulling on his shirt, tucking it into his trousers, when he rounded the bed.

“Let’s go home,” he said, caressing her arm with the softest of touches. She felt a pleasant shiver up her spine at that touch.

“What of the hall? I thought you had to be here?”

“Not anymore tonight. Michael can take care of it for the rest of the night.” He pulled his waistcoat on next. “I will just go talk to him and let him know we are going. I’ll meet you by the back door. Don’t go out without me.”

“James...” She levelled a glare at him. “I am perfectly safe.”

“After what happened this evening, forgive me if I doubt it a little.” He kissed her on the forehead and left the room all too abruptly for her liking. She would have been glad of one last embrace or any single brief touch.

Gathering herself, she left the chamber, trying to flatten out the bed a little as she blew out the candles. Descending the stairs,

she made her way to the back door where James joined her shortly later, offering her pelisse.

The whole ride home in the carriage, they barely said a word to one another. Marina found she was scared to speak, worried that when her lips parted, words she was afraid to ask would come out.

*Do you still have lovers? Do you intend to keep them?*

The one thing she took comfort in was his hand on her own. He kept playing with it, toying their fingers together in the darkness of the coach, only stopping when they pulled up on their drive.

James stepped down first and helped her next. They approached the house and stepped inside where Mr. Pitt-Rivers wished them a good night before he retired for the night.

Marina moved to the stairs when her feet grew still on the bottom step.

“Is something wrong?” James called to her from the entrance where he was hanging up his frock coat.

“I was wondering...” She swallowed, rather nervously, though she held her head high in the hope that he would not notice those nerves. “Perhaps you could join me in my chamber tonight – to sleep.”

“Ah.” He looked away from her, his manner suddenly frantic, before he fidgeted with his cravat.

“Let me guess,” she sighed, “it is one of your rules, never to sleep beside a lady?”

He turned to face her; his franticness abruptly ended.

“Damn the rules,” he muttered, walking toward her. “Let us go to your chamber.” He placed a hand to the small of her back and followed her up the stairs with that gentle touch.

She didn’t ask him what had changed his mind, for she was simply glad he had. In her chamber, neither of them called for the lady’s maid or the valet. They both undressed until Marina was only wearing her chemise, and James was just in his trousers then they moved into the bed, beneath the covers.

Marina blew out the candle beside her before shifting toward James, resting her head on his shoulder and nestling into the crook of his body. At first, he seemed rather stiff then his body relaxed. His arm came up around her waist, and his head moved toward her, brushing her forehead with the smallest of kisses.

*I like this.*

She almost said the words aloud but managed to keep them to herself, worried that talking of it might make James scarper. After all, he’d seemed nervous and reluctant when she had first asked him to come to bed.



As her eyes closed, and she heard his breathing deepen, showing he was drifting into sleep, Marina understood why she had wanted him to come to bed with her. It had nothing to do with wanting to feel safe after the threat of the man in the gambling hall, nor was it because of the threat in the letter. She had simply been loathed to part from James' company. It stretched deep within her, the affection she had for him growing until it was all encompassing.

*Oh, so this is what it feels like to fall in love.*



“Stay safe today.”

“James? How many times have you told me that?” Marina laughed as she stood in the sitting room, watching as James prepared to leave. Standing in the doorway, the butler had already offered him his frock coat and hat. He shrugged them on, his eyes never leaving her own. “You send men to follow me everywhere I go, regardless.”

“I know.” James sighed with the words.

“It is a little like being a prisoner.” Marina could see at once the words didn't help matters. James' handsome features darkened a little. He checked over his shoulder that the butler was not paying attention then walked toward her, gently cupping her face with his hands. Marina couldn't keep the smile off her face at this action. It was a surprisingly gentle touch.

“For now, stay here, please,” he whispered before moving his lips to hers. Marina was ready to argue. She had planned on

doing so and on pointing out that over the last three days she had done little but loiter around the house, bored out of her mind. The best parts of her day were the night, for James had developed a habit these last three nights of coming to sleep beside her in bed.

*This is what a marriage should be like with this intimacy.*

Yet any argument she wished to make with James faded as his lips pressed to hers in a kiss. At once, it was heated. Marina forgot the thoughts that troubled her so much, thinking only of James' kiss before he backed up.

“Michael is investigating the letter. Soon enough, we'll know who this man is, and you can go where you like again. For now, stay here.” James kissed her lips one last time, silencing her before she could argue, then he was gone, slipping away from the room and out the front door to the horse that awaited him.

Marina moved to the open door, leaning on the frame and watching him part. As much as she was excited by their growing intimacy, she knew it could not be the summary of her life. She needed other relationships too.

Walking to the side of the hall as the butler closed the door, she reached for the silver tray deposited there, searching through what letters she had. There was one from her mother, one she hoped would issue an invitation to visit, but no such invitation existed.

*It seems my father is determined to keep his distance for now.*

Biting the inside of her mouth to stop herself from sighing or bemoaning his coldness, she turned to the second letter on the tray. This one was from Caroline, who longed to hear Marina's news since the ball. She wished to hear of the threat over Marina's head too, and if they had discovered any more about the letter.

Slowly placing the letter down on the silver tray, Marina looked at the door. Caroline's house was only a short distance away, perhaps a ten-minute coach ride but no more. Caroline was such a dear friend too, with a house full of people Marina could trust; she doubted James could object to such a small visit.

"Mr. Pitt-Rivers? Could you order the preparation for the carriage for me please?" Marina asked, calling to the butler who was busy tidying the hall. "I'd like to go out for a short while."

At first, the older gentleman looked ready to object, clearly knowing about his master's orders.

"It will be a very short trip," Marina assured him.

"Of course, Your Grace." He bowed with a smile and hurried to prepare the carriage.

A few minutes later, Marina was ready for her outing with a spencer jacket on her shoulders and a bonnet on her head. Pulling on thin white gloves, she stepped up into the carriage, aware that the driver moving toward the coach did not appear the normal man. He was far younger, taller, and broader in figure too.

*He seems more like a boxer than a driver!*

He seemed to have a hurried conversation with the butler before he stepped up, asking Marina where she wished to go, then he moved to the front of the carriage to steer the horses to their destination. Parting from the house, Marina pressed her face to the window, looking back toward it.

*Surely James will not mind such a short visit... will he?*

A minute later, she realized how absurd such an objection was. She was not going to live her life according to James' orders, no matter how much she now respected him and the decisions he had made with his life. She couldn't be a prisoner and had to find a way to live that she was comfortable with.

A doubt had seeded itself in the back of her mind, a doubt that they would never find the man who sent that letter. If it was intended merely to scare, then the gentleman who sent it never wished to carry out his threats. Marina was quite safe, even if she dared to escape the house walls.

The carriage had turned a couple of roads when she abruptly felt the driver urge the horses faster. At the sudden increase in pace, Marina was tossed into the back of the carriage bench. She rubbed a sore spot in the small part of her back before sitting forward, ready to call out to the driver to ask what was wrong.

Peering her head through the window, she saw why the driver had acted so suddenly. At the sight, her lips parted.

*No... it cannot be.*

There was a horse rider following them closely as they rode down the quiet road alongside Hyde Park. He wore a mask over his face, and in his hand, he was lifting a pistol and pointing it directly at the carriage.

## CHAPTER 15



Marina threw herself back in the carriage as a shot rang out. The bullet splintered the side of the wood, fracturing the carriage wall high over her head. Breathless, Marina scrambled to the other side of the coach, feeling it rock from side to side dangerously as the driver picked up speed.

A second shot rang out, and this one brought them to a hasty halt. Judging by the cry of the horse, the frightened neigh that sounded more like a scream, the assailant had struck the horse with one of his shots. The carriage skidded on the cobbled road, the halt an ungainly one. The horses continued to neigh as Marina was tossed from the carriage bench by the sudden halt.

Pressing herself on her hands and knees, she looked to the carriage door, watching as it was flung open. The sight that greeted her froze her to the spot. The masked man had acted quickly to reach her so fast. He was tall, though not as tall as James, his belly rather protruding through the tightly fitted black frock coat he wore. In his hand, he held the pistol, but it was not pointed at her.

Abruptly, he reached forward for her, the black mask he wore covering his entire face and shifting around a pair of cold blue eyes.

“No!” Marina leapt back, scrambling toward the other side of the carriage, but there was no door here through which to escape, only a window, and it would take too long to squeeze through such a gap.

The man grabbed her throat, his fingers so strong on her neck that breath was stolen from her body. She tried to gasp for air, but she couldn't accomplish it. Her hands strained, pulling at his fingers around her neck, only to find he released her a second later.

He tore the necklace she had been wearing from her throat and stuffed it in his pocket, breaking the chain as he did so. Gasping, Marina dropped to her knees once more, pressing herself to the wall of the carriage.

When the assailant moved forward again, she lashed out, lifting her skirt and kicking hard with her feet.

“Argh!” the man cried out in pain with his voice very deep. She struck him hard in the leg and then in the hand that held the pistol. It made the weapon fly out of his grasp and fall into the carriage, landing at Marina's feet.

“You bastard –” the carriage driver's voice was suddenly near. Marina looked up as the masked man was tackled from the doorway, driven to the ground. The driver punched hard into the masked man's face and attempted to grasp the mask, to lift it clear of his features, yet the masked man was too fast. He drove his knee up between the driver's legs, wounding him and dislodging him from their wrestling match.

The driver struggled to gather himself on the cobbled road on his knees, gasping for breath as the masked man reached for the carriage again.

*No. I will not let him come near me again!*

Marina grabbed the pistol that had been dropped in the carriage and pointed it out of the door, aware that her hands were shaking, trembling so much that the barrel would not stay still, but it would have to do. She clutched it with both hands, two fingers on the trigger as the masked man halted in the doorway, his head jerking toward her.

“You will not hurt me,” Marina muttered in anger. “Go, now, or I shoot.”

The man didn’t move despite her words, nor did he say anything. He merely looked between her and the driver who was recovering, moving to his knees.

Any further threat Marina wished to make was drowned out by the sounds of more horses. Another carriage was passing down the road, and at the sight before them, the horses must have been spooked.

“Woah! What’s going on here?” the driver of this other carriage called.

“Call for the constable!” Her own driver bellowed the words before launching himself at the masked man again. Yet, he was too slow. The masked man left quickly, darting away, but not



before shooting one last look at Marina. He seemed to limp a little as he ran.

The blue eyes were burned onto Marina's memory as she saw coldness in that look. She wasn't sure what he had hoped to do. Maybe he had hoped to take her as he had taken her jewels or rob her some more. Then the memory of his hand upon her throat revisited her, and she realized what he hoped to do could have been much worse.

The man ran off, his footsteps loud on the cobbled road as her driver chased him, trying to catch up with him.

Marina slumped down on her knees and lowered the pistol to the floor of the carriage, lifting her free hand to her neck where she found herself wincing at the quickly forming bruises. Swallowing past the pain in her throat, she cursed at what she had done.

She hadn't taken the threat in the letter seriously, no, and now, it seemed she had every reason to think it was real. Whoever had written that letter was coming after her in order to get to James.

"Who would do this?" Marina muttered to herself as her head dropped forward, and she lowered the pistol to the carriage floor. It thudded loudly in the air. "Why?"

A figure returned to the open door of the coach, his face red and his hair mussed. It was the driver, placing his hands to his knees, trying to catch his breath.

“Are you all right, Your Grace?” he asked in a panicked voice. She nodded, struggling to find her own voice for a minute.

“Did you...?”

“He got away.” The driver cursed with the words. “He cut across the park. He has evaded us, Your Grace.”



“These are the latest papers on the debtors,” Michael said conversationally, handing over the paperwork. James sat rigidly in his seat behind the desk, looking over the papers as quickly as he could before his eyes darted toward the clock on the mantelpiece in his office. “Or are you planning to return home quickly today?” Michael teased him.

James shot his friend a warning look though it did little good.

“You have spent most of the last three days with your new wife,” Michael observed. “It’s a wonder you’re here at the gambling hall at all.”

“She’s interesting company,” James said, keeping his eyes down on the papers and avoiding looking at his friend. It wasn’t something he could explain very easily though his mind attempted to do so more than once, to justify his attachment to Marina.

The best he could compare it to was an addiction. He had seen men walk these gambling halls for years, addicted to gambling, and he’d seen some men complaining they couldn’t live without other such addictions, opium and laudanum. It

wasn't that James couldn't be away from his new wife, of course he could, but his mind had a habit of circling back to thinking of her.

The day before, after he had slept beside her once more in her chamber, they had spent much of the day together. Frustrated at having to stay in the house, she'd ask if they could go to an art gallery, but he'd perceived it to be too dangerous. At Somerset Gallery, that letter writer could easily find them. Instead, they'd spent a lot of the day in his own gallery where they discussed the art he had purchased.

*She has an eye for art and understands the skills of an artist in ways I have heard few others talk about.*

“James?” Michael waved a hand in front of his face.

“Yes?” He placed down the papers in front of him.

“Ha! You are in a state. Did you hear anything I said?”

“Of course, I did.” James lied but pretended to show little interest as he stood to his feet. “How many customers did we have last night?”

“Many, too many. We'll have to expand if it continues like this.” Michael followed him as James walked out of the office and toward the corridor that led to the gambling hall. Stepping through the door, he leaned on a nearby archway, his eyes dancing over the early customers.

It was still just the afternoon, but many men had arrived, impatient to begin their addiction for the day.

“I swear I do not understand it,” he observed, shaking his head. “Would these men not rather be somewhere else than here, giving us their money?”

“Don’t complain about it,” Michael said with a chuckle. “It’s what pays our bills and keeps us in good stead.”

“I know, it just...” James’ eyes danced around the room. “It baffles me.” His gaze darted from one man who was begging a serving boy to bring him another whisky, even though there were three empty glasses beside him already, to another young man who leaned so far forward on the card table, he was practically not sitting down at all.

“Well, sometimes people develop a liking for things they didn’t expect to, wouldn’t you say?” There was a teasing tone in Michael’s voice that had James glancing his way. “I could point out your attachment to your wife again –”

“I already understood the hint.” James smiled and shook his head at his teasing friend. “Yes, I take your point. Maybe sometimes our likings do surprise us.”

He had a plan to make Marina smile. It had to be difficult staying in the house all the time. He was hoping to take her out during the weekend, perhaps to Somerset Gallery after all, but only if he could hire the place privately for a few hours. He would have to pull in a few favors from some contacts to obtain such a feat, but fortunately, one of the curators of the collection was a regular at the gambling hall.

“Ho, what’s this?” Michael asked, drawing James’ attention away from his thoughts and into the gambling hall. Across the room and in the open doorway, a boy ran in. In scruffy clothes, he did not look right in the gambling hall.

He was frantic, his face flushed red as if he had been running, and he turned his head back and forth, seeking someone out.

“Pickpocket boys coming in now?” Michael said, stepping away. “I’ll send him on his way.”

“Wait, don’t.” James reached out and took Michael’s shoulder, stopping him from going any further. The closer the boy got, the more James recognized him. “It’s my stable boy.”

“Your Grace, Your Grace!” The boy stumbled over one of the chair legs nearby and nearly went flying in his effort to reach James. To save the boy, James leapt forward, managing to catch him under the arms and set him on his feet again.

“Careful lad; you’ll do yourself an injury.” James looked up and had to hold in his smile when he saw the chair leg the boy had tripped over belonged to the man who had been consuming himself with drinking whisky. His latest whisky was now dripping down his cheeks, thanks to the collision.

“I was asked to give you this. It’s an emergency, Your Grace.” The boy delved a hand into a pocket, looking panicked when he couldn’t find what he was looking for, then he reached for a second pocket and pulled out a sealed envelope that he passed over.

James took the envelope and broke it open, his eyes shooting down to see the name of Mr. Pitt-Rivers at the bottom of the letter.

*'Your Grace, you must come home at once. The Duchess attempted a journey in the carriage this morning to see a friend and was attacked on the road. She is well, but her jewels have been taken, and I have called for a doctor to see her. The assailant, I'm afraid, has escaped.*

*I beg you, return as soon as you can.'*

“Michael, you’re in charge of the gambling hall.” James ran so quickly out of the hall that the boy could not keep up, and Michael’s shouting to ask what was wrong could not slow him down.



James burst through the door of the house, making it ricochet off the wall. Mr. Pitt-Rivers, who was standing in the sitting room doorway, jumped at the loud sound and nearly dropped the silver tray in his hand. James muttered a hurried apology before the butler nodded his head into the sitting room.

“Your wife is in there, Your Grace. I am just taking the tea away. The doctor says she will be quite fine.”

“Thank you.” James was glad to step past Mr. Pitt-Rivers into the room and close the door behind him. The door shut with a heavy thud as he turned his eyes on Marina.

She was sitting up on a chaise longue, a hand playing near her throat. At the loud sound, she jerked her head toward him, her eyes wide.

James froze. This look of panic wasn't something he had known before. He felt it as if it crippled him, like a wound in his chest, as he stared at the bruises on Marina's throat.

*That bastard... he grabbed her by the throat.*

This kind of fear he had not felt for anyone else before. It made him mad, a feeling that was so sudden and overpowering that he couldn't control it. Part of him was angry that Marina somehow had this control over him when he always wished to be in complete control of himself. The other part was furious that she had disobeyed his orders – for she had risked her own life.

“James –” she began slowly, her voice quiet, but he cut her off.

“I asked you not to go out,” his voice boomed around the room. She rolled her eyes and looked away, down at her lap.

“I am not a prisoner.”

“You aren't! That's right.” He marched across the room. “You ever heard the saying an Englishman's home is his castle? It could not be truer here. In this house, it's your castle, and you are safe here. It's our fortress. No one can get in these walls, not when I have so many members of staff watching us. What do you do? You march beyond the safety of these walls.”

“Caroline’s house is just a few roads away. I thought I could travel there fine.” She didn’t meet his gaze though she spoke with strength. “I am not a dog to be ordered around either.” This time, she lifted her gaze to meet his own.

Frustrated, he turned away, feeling a growl escaping his lips.

“I am not ordering you around like a dog, Marina. I am trying to protect you. Can’t you see that!” He knew it was mad to be angry at her. He should have really been angry at the assailant, but what could he do in this moment? The assailant had escaped. Marina was the closest one to him, and it became all too easy to be angry at her too.

“Yes, and no.” She stood to her feet, lowering her hand from her neck. There was strength in how she slowly took command of the room, despite her small height compared to his own, jerking her chin higher. “The wish to keep me safe? Yes, that is admirable. Saying this house is a castle to keep me within it?” She turned, gesturing outwardly with her arms to the room. “That is not.”

“If you can be attacked so easily, what message does that send to my enemies? Anyone angry at the gambling hall will know they can threaten us by getting to you. It shows my protection of you is flawed.”

“Is that all that matters? The gambling hall?” she scoffed.

“Marina, please!” He marched toward her, determined to continue this argument, but when he got so close to her, the bruises on her neck choked him. They grew in focus, not just



blue but purple. He could practically see the outline of the man's fingers upon her neck.

"What?" she asked, looking as irritated as he had felt moments ago. He lifted a hand to her neck and reached out, his fingers gentle upon her skin. Her eyes fluttered closed, and she leaned into that touch as if taking comfort in it.

"That man did this to you?" James whispered, moving closer to her. "I'll kill him for this, I swear it."

"Don't, James."

"No man should touch you like this. No man should hurt you." He moved toward her, pressing his lips to her temple, kissing her with keenness then pressing his lips down her cheeks, reaching toward her lips.

"James..." she whispered, but he silenced her, pressing his lips to hers, needing to be that close to her. Her reaction was sudden, for her hands reached for his shoulders and she clung to him, almost desperately, with her fingers curling into the frock coat he hadn't yet taken off in all of his haste.

When they parted it was rapid, and he lifted her head higher, the better to see the bruises on her throat.

"Look what he has done to you," James seethed, his whisper escaping him in a hiss.

“The doctor says I’ll be fine. The bruises will disappear in a few days.” Her words were a comfort but not enough. He couldn’t stop running his fingers over her skin, wishing he could get rid of those bruises.

“Does it hurt?”

“A little.”

“That man... that devil...”

“James?” she tried to catch his attention.

“What?” he barked, distracted. She moved suddenly, raising herself on her toes and finding his lips with a kiss. He pressed himself back toward her, only too glad to continue that heat, when she abruptly parted, leaning back from him.

“Don’t leave me tonight,” she whispered.

“I won’t.”

“No, James. I mean more than that.” She held his gaze, not blinking for one second. “I mean I do not want you to just sleep beside me tonight.”

## CHAPTER 16



Marina held her breath as she waited for James' answer, uncertain what it would be. After all, he was angry with her, wasn't he? He had marched into this room, practically barking in his fury, yet he had kissed her so willingly with passion that was unequalled.

"Ah, Marina." He pressed his lips to her forehead. There was something tender in that kiss, breaking through the anger that had been between them. Marina held onto the moment, gripping his shoulders as she closed her eyes.

*This feeling... this warmth from him. It is like no other.*

She felt the bloom of love growing in her once again. James had no idea the power he had over her when it came to such kisses, yet here they were, and she was so happy to let him have that control.

*Please, do not say no.*

Before she could even utter the words aloud, he acted. He parted from her with his lips, and as she thought he was going to refuse, he dropped down.

“What are you – ah!” She was cut off as he placed his shoulder into her knees and tossed her over his back. “James! This is not what I had in mind!”

“It’s very much what I had in my mind.” There was mischief and firmness in James’ tone as he turned, carrying her out of the sitting room. He did so with ease, one arm wrapped around her legs, so she couldn’t wriggle. She pulled on the back of his frock coat, trying to get his attention as she hung down over his shoulder, the loose strands of her hair falling in front of her face and masking her view of the marble hall.

“James!” she called again.

“Do you want to make Mr. Pitt Rivers come running and see us like this?” he asked as he hastened for the stairs.

“James...” she said, much quieter this time.

“That’s better.” James chuckled, that sound vibrating deep within his chest. “I have no intention of parting from your side at all tonight, not once, I promise you that. Yet first, tell me what happened, everything.”

Marina felt she had no wish to. She wished to be distracted from the memory of the masked man not to relive it.

“Marina.” James reached her bedchamber and paused by the door. “Tell all or...”

“Or what? You’ll stay here in the corridor until one of the staff comes and sees us?”

“It might make them whisper about us,” James pointed out.

“The entire ton whispers about us anyway!” She pulled on his coat once more, desperate to be let down. “I have no control in this position; put me down.”

“You want control? I’ll be happy to give you some tonight, but first, tell me everything that happened.”

Marina froze as she heard footsteps further down the corridor. Worried Mrs. Viner or a ladies’ maid would be upon them any minute, she gave into James’ request.

“Yes, yes! I’ll tell you all; just go in the bedchamber.”

“Gladly.” James opened the door and stepped inside, closing it and locking it behind him. Marina heard the click of the lock audibly in the air before he marched across the room. Far from putting her down gently, he tossed her over his shoulder so that she fell back on the bed, staring up at him.

That speed and agility only had the heat in her rising.

“Tell me,” he pleaded.

Marina sighed and gave him what he wanted. She explained exactly what had happened in the carriage, right down to her

grabbing the gun and the driver chasing the masked man away. It wasn't long before James confessed that he had changed her driver to a man who was trained in fighting.

“After this, I'll give your driver a pistol of his own,” James said, still standing as she laid back on the bed, staring up at him. The lack of touch between them was infuriating to her. There was this heat, burning beneath her skin, a heat that had started the moment he had kissed her downstairs, and she didn't want it to stop.

“James.” She sat up, reaching for him. She started with his frock coat and pulled it down his shoulders. He barely seemed to notice though he let her do it. He was too busy rambling.

“The constables will be involved now. Michael's investigation into who sent that letter will have to be ramped up. This cannot happen again. Ever!” With the final word, he turned his attention toward her, his hand shooting down to the bruises on her neck.

It was the gentlest touch he had ever given her, tilting her head back a little as he examined the bruising. In the last light of the day through the window, that orange light bathed James' face. She could see an intensity in that expression, one she did not remember seeing before.

“No more talk,” she pleaded, her hands finding the lapels of his tailcoat and pulling him down toward her. He went to her easily so that she could pull him into her, initiating a kiss. This one was instantly passionate. She felt no nip at her lips begging his entrance, for she gave it openly. Their tongues danced together as James pressed her on the bed, molding his body over hers. The strength and height of his body pushed

against her own made that heat grow until she was almost wild with it.

Her movements became frantic with one of her legs lifting beside his hip, just needing to be closer to him. When she brushed her core against his own through their clothes, he growled into that kiss, making her practically vibrate with the sound.

Restlessly, her hands reached for his clothes, and he went to help her. The tailcoat was soon gone along with the waistcoat where they had both fumbled while undoing the buttons. Forced to part their kiss to lift his shirt, he knelt on the bed between her legs, tossing it over his head so it landed somewhere on the toilette table nearby, knocking over some bottles.

His exposed chest distracted Marina. She began to run her fingers over the carving of muscle there, aware he was bending down toward her, bracing his hands either side of her on the bed.

“No one will come near you again,” he whispered with firmness. “No one.” He pressed his lips to hers, swallowing anything she might have wanted to say in retort.

His hands were the next to go wandering. They started with her legs, lifting the skirt of her gown. That simple touch to her thighs had her trembling with excitement, thinking of the strength in those hands, then he untied the gown and pulled it over her head, breaking her kiss.

She was ready to reach up to him when he flipped her over on the bed. She yelped a little in surprise then understood why as his hands went for her corset. He fumbled with the laces but managed to get it undone before he took her hips and urged her to kneel on the bed with her hands on the mattress. It gave him the room he needed to lift the corset from her.

“James...” She felt a wetness pooling between her legs, longing for his touch. He must have understood her quiet plea, for her chemise was lifted beyond her hips, so it fell about her waist. With her facing away from him, she wasn’t prepared for what he was going to do next though she loved it.

His hands found her center. Unlike the times before when he had pleased her where he’d given her nips or touches to her thighs to show he was coming, this time, he moved straight to the point. His fingers slid to her core, finding the wetness there before he began to pleasure her. He played with a pleasurable nub outside of her first, and when Marina was panting, finding herself rocking her hips gently back toward him, his fingers entered her.

The depth of his fingers in this position had her breathless, increasing that rocking action, just wanting to be nearer to him.

“God, Marina,” he muttered, and the sounds of his boots and trousers falling to the floor followed. “Impossible to resist.”

The words baffled her, but she didn’t have chance to ask what he meant. His fingers left her core, and he took her hips, rolling her over so that she was flat on the bed once more. Lifting the chemise from her, he exposed her body completely.



Any nervousness she might have felt being exposed to him was soon lost, for he placed kisses down her body. He started with her bruised neck, those kisses gentle and sweet, then they passed down the center valley between her breasts, growing firmer. When his lips found one breast, that kiss grew so passionate, taking her areole into his mouth, that she arched off the bed toward him.

The heat she had imagined consuming her body before had erupted now. She rather imagined it like the fire in the grate in the side of the room, roaring, impossible to put out.

“James, please,” she begged, not wanting to hold back anymore. She longed to know what it was like to give herself completely to him.

He understood and lifted himself off her. One of his hands took her knee and lifted it high, exposing her core to him, then he lined up his length with her entrance. That nudging feeling made her pause, her breath halting in her chest with sudden nerves.

“Trust me?” he whispered, turning his lips down toward her. When she nodded, his lips flickered into a small smile, and he bent to kiss her, his body entering her own.

At the feeling of being breached, there was sudden pain. She froze, her hands clinging to his biceps.

“It will pass,” James whispered between his kisses. “I promise, the pain will pass.” He stayed still for a minute to the point it frustrated Marina. The longing was impossible to deny, even when she felt pain. One of her hands slid from his bicep to the

lower part of his back, and she pressed into him, wanting him to move.

He moaned with pleasure then lifted himself off her lips, bracing his hands suddenly down on the bed either side of her as he began to rock their hips together. The intensity of the pleasure had Marina's legs lifting high around his hips, shocked by how deep that thrill rocked her body. With each thrust James made, it grew to the point where she was panting.

Her hands could never lay flat. She found herself exploring him constantly. As he pressed into her, she sometimes reached for his bicep, other times his back, urging his movements on, then she'd reach for the covers beneath her head and grip them hard, giving her the purchase that she needed on the bed to rock her hips back into his own.

"Ah, Marina," he managed between moans. His kisses went back down to her breasts. That dual sense of pleasure had her body almost beyond control. Unable to stay in one place, her head thrashed from side to side as the moans fell from her lips.

Reaching down with his hand, he felt that nub outside of her, just above their connection, and he began to rub it softly. It was a strong contrast to the fervor with which he was entering her with his own body. The strong thrust and that soft touch were the things that sent her over the edge.

This time, the pleasure that shook her body came so fast, she wasn't even sure what she did in the build up to it. Did she cling to his shoulders? Maybe the bed?

All she knew was that his name fell from her lips as her hips bucked one last time. Her body clamped down around his own, eliciting a much deeper moan from James than had escaped him before. As she panted, coming down from that high, he continued to thrust. Above her, his head had flushed red, and there was sweat beading on his chest. She drew her hands up to his chest, her fingers exploring him. He looked down at that touch then his face contorted as he thrust into her one last time.

A warmth spread between them as he finished with her. Marina shot her eyes down, knowing exactly what it meant for a man to finish inside her. It meant they risked her ending up with child. The thought had her smile growing before James dropped down over her, his tall frame bending over hers as he tried to catch his breath.

“That was...” James apparently struggled for words as he chuckled, distracting himself with kissing her.

“More than I could have imagined it to be,” Marina confessed, wrapping her arms around his neck. She wanted to ask him about the passion with which he had made love to her. Was it because of fear for her that had made him so intense? Yet the words didn’t come easily to her lips.

“Nothing can happen to you, nothing.” James’ words answered her question regardless. He didn’t leave her body but stayed within her. It urged one of her legs to come up and wrap itself around his hip, clinging to him. “Please, Marina, I know it is mad to ask you to stay inside, but for now, will you do it?”

He rested his forehead against hers. Marina could have denied him, but she did not wish to. The fear on his face was making

his brow crease, and she wanted him to be as happy as she was at that moment. Lifting her hands from his body, she placed them on his cheeks.

“I will stay here,” she assured him, her voice soft.

“Thank God.” He bent down and kissed her lips. It began gently, but Marina couldn’t control herself. Her other leg lifted higher, wrapping around his hips, wanting to know more of the excitement they had just shared. He growled into her, his body pressing hers so that their connection made her sensitive spots sing with pleasure.

“James,” she murmured eventually.

“Yes?”

“You and I both know that I cannot stay indoors forever.” She spoke slowly, not wanting to upset him. “We will need another plan than to have me stay here forever more.”

“I know. You are right.” He smiled a little. “We need to find the man that threatened you, and I have an idea as to how to do just that.”

## CHAPTER 17



*K* *keep your mind on the job.*

Despite his attempt at discipline, James was finding it hard. The one thing he and Marina had agreed on was that she could accompany him to the gambling hall. He had so many men here, they knew it must be safe, and Marina stayed constantly at his side on his arm. She was there now as they walked around the gambling hall.

James usually used these moments of circling the hall to check for cheaters and to keep an eye on debtors who weren't paying up. Not tonight though. No matter how many times his usual discipline tried to step in and urged him to focus on the job at hand, his eyes would slip back to Marina at his side.

He thought of those large green eyes that were darting around the gambling hall in wonder. The night before as he had made love to her, those green eyes had stared up at him, mixed with a pure look of pleasure. God, how he wanted to experience such a look again. He longed for all of it, to make love to Marina, to have her moaning his name, and to spend an entire night with such pleasures.

*What has become of me?*

He snatched his gaze away from her. In the past, one night alone with a woman had been enough to satisfy his lusts, but not Marina. He thought of so many other things he wanted to try with her, different positions, ways to give her more pleasure. After they had made love the night before, they had stayed up for hours, talking, never leaving the bedchamber. They'd even had their dinner served to the chamber though Mr. Pitt-Rivers was good enough not to comment on it.

“James, you seem distracted,” Marina said at his side as they circled the gambling room.

“I am a little. Perhaps I should show you why.” He led her to the nearest door, taking her into the corridor that led to the back rooms. The moment they were out of view of anyone else, he pressed her to the wall. She smiled as his lips came to meet her own, and they kissed, indulging in one another when there were so many people just on the other side of that door.

“We should be working,” she whispered teasingly between kisses.

“The hell with work.” James never used to say such things. Work always came first, above everything else, but not now.

He stepped back from her, taking her hand, and moved toward the stairs. He intended to make use of that bedchamber once more above the stairs, to show her more ways to feel pleasure, when something caught his attention.

“What’s that?” Marina pulled on his hand, seeming to sense it at the same time. He turned toward her, his nose wrinkling.

“It’s smoke,” he murmured before his body acted on instinct. Still clutching Marina’s hand, he ran to this office, following the scent of smoke. From under the door, he saw a thin trail of smoke in the candlelight from the sconces of the room. The smoke wound a path in the air then dissipated.

“Careful!” Marina called as he pushed her back away from the door and flung it open.

The shock of bright light had him stumbling away, covering his face with his arm. The office was on fire with such vast flames taking up the room it would be impossible to put out with a bucket of water. His desk was gone, the papers adding to the tinder of the room.

Across the office, he could see one of his fine paintings, a Constable, hanging on the wall, the paint beginning to peel in the heat and bubble before the painting was lost forever.

“It’s spreading!” Marina called, grabbing his arm and pulling him back.

James hurried to close the door and grabbed her arm, hurrying her through the corridor and back to the gambling hall.

“We have to get everyone out, now!” he called and burst through the door. “Everyone! Out!” His voice boomed across the room.

Drunken men lifted their heads, others took no notice, too busy staring at their cards to even hear him.

“Do you hear me?” James released Marina’s hand and jumped up to stand on a table. “The building is on fire. Take your money, your drinks, for all I care, and get out!”

This time, his words caused a reaction, and people sprinted for the door, but not everyone did. One or two were still so drunk at the tables that they continued to sit there. James caught sight of one man with his lips still hanging on the rim of his glass, and another adding a chip to the table to continue his game of loo.

“Marina, this way.” James jumped down from the table and took her arm. It was now so packed by the double door entrance to the hall that they couldn’t get out easily that way.

He reached for a window instead and lifted it high, determined to get her out. Taking her waist, he lifted her, so she could get out first. She scrambled through before reaching for him, helping him through too. He had to bend his tall frame awkwardly to fit through the gap before he landed on the cobbled road the other side and took Marina’s hand.

The two of them ran to the front of the gambling hall, just as a massive crack sounded from within the building.

“Get back!” James took hold of Marina and thrust her behind him, looking at the building as one of the windows overhead burst open, the glass shattering into the street. Flames jumped into the air through the window.

With his jaw hanging open, James stared, unsure how the fire could have spread from the office to the upstairs room so



quickly.

*Perhaps it was no knocked over candle that caused this...  
What if it was done on purpose?*

“James, people are still inside.” Marina was pulling on his shoulder in panic. “Look.”

Some men were outside now, most having made it through the doors, but others had opted for the windows like James and Marina, making scrambling escapes and dropping to their knees in their drunkenness. James stepped forward, searching through the faces around him, before he realized one face in particular was missing.

*Where’s Michael?*

“Michael,” he said aloud, turning to face Marina. Her eyes were wide, and her cheeks pale.

“He’s not here,” she said, seeing exactly what he feared. James stepped away, back toward the building. “James, no!” She pulled on his arm with sudden desperation. “You cannot go back in there, please.”

“I cannot leave him in there. I cannot do it.”

“But...” She hurried in front of him, her eyes wet with unshed tears. “I won’t see you hurt.”

“Marina.” His voice softened as he hurriedly raised a hand to her cheek. “I’ll be fine.”

“You don’t know that.”

His heart thrummed in his chest to hear that she cared so much for him. When they were first wed, their connection was such a slim one he never thought it would come to this, but now? Everything was different. She seemed as caught up in the idea of his safety as he was in hers.

“I still can’t leave him. Marina, I’ll be back, I promise. Just stay with the others,” he pleaded. She didn’t release him right away, but he kissed her quickly. The shock of that kiss made her release him, so he had a chance to run back to the window.

Clambering inside, James looked around the hall. To his horror, he could see the flames spreading on one side of the gambling hall. There was a gambler still at a table, so in his cups he had no idea what was happening around them. He was merely looking through the cards in his hands.

“Old fool.” James sprinted toward him and grabbed him under the arms, hauling him to his feet.

“What are you doing? I have a right to be here, I’ll have you know. I’ve paid my way!”

“Do you want to die in a fire?” James barked at the man, steering him toward the doors. At last, the man’s eyes turned to the flames. They widened in pure terror, the whites of his

eyes almost yellow with the reflection of those flames. “Get out!”

The man hurried away from James, stumbling down the front steps that led up to the building and into the hands of some of the staff. James looked at those faces, but he still couldn't see Michael.

Unable to get closer to the flames, James covered his face with the sleeve of his tailcoat, trying his best not to breathe in the stench of the smoke. The fire was like a wall of heat, ever moving forward. James backed up, opting for the door he and Marina had used earlier to get to the corridor.

He almost tripped over the figure of Michael prostrate on the floor.

“Michael!” James called to him, bending down and reaching for his friend. There was a little blood at the base of Michael's head. James reached for Michael's pulse; it was strong, and Michael began to move. “Michael! Wake up.”

Overhead, James could hear the fire raging. Looking to the stairs, he saw the flames were on the landing, coming down each step as if each lick of the flame was the foot of a demon, hurrying to its destination.

“Sorry about this, Michael.” As his friend was unable to stir fast, James grabbed his arm and hauled him to his feet. Michael was bleary eyed, blinking madly, dizzy from the wound to his head. James looped Michael's arm around his shoulder, and rather than come back the way he had come in,

he made it for the nearest door, the one at the back of the building.

They burst out of it with James kicking the door open. They fell into the alley as Michael roused more, coughing and spluttering on the smoke he had inhaled.

“Arson.”

“What?” James asked as he wrapped Michael’s arm tighter across his shoulders and hauled his friend around the building.

“I caught a man upstairs, James,” Michael hurried to say, his voice croaky from the smoke he’d breathed in. “Masked man. He was setting the place on fire. I chased him, followed him, lost him on the stairs, then... all went black.”

“He hit you.” James explained, watching as Michael lifted his other hand to touch the wound on the back of his head. “We need to get you to a doctor.”

They appeared out the front of the building. James’ eyes shot to the crowd where all of his customers were pointing at the building, gushing and bemoaning the loss of their favorite haunt. Some pointed at the flames bursting out of the windows, others called for the fire service to come, demanding to know why they weren’t here yet with their hooks to drag down roof tiles and stop the fire spreading to nearby buildings.

James didn’t care about any of it at that moment. The gambling hall was bricks and mortar. He only thought of Michael as he lowered him down to the curb on the other side

of the street. Michael couldn't focus properly, his eyes moving away from James' face and to the building, scarcely landing on one thing at a time.

"Where's your wife, James?" Michael managed.

"She's here." James stood, looking at the very spot where he had left Marina, only, she wasn't there.

He stumbled back onto the road, hardly caring that he was nearly run down by the fire service cart and their horses as the men jumped down with their hooks attached to ropes, ready to do their work.

"Marina!" James bellowed, scrambling through the crowd. He pushed men out of the way as he searched for her, but there was no gown amongst the suits, no pair of large green eyes looking up at him.

*She's not here.*

"Marina!"



Marina felt a heaviness in her head. It was as if her head had become some leaden weight, making her neck ache to lift it high. Eventually, she managed it with her eyelids flickering open.

*What happened?*

She struggled to recall the last things she had said and done. She remembered pleading with James not to go back into the building, but he did then there was that crack on the back of her head. Something had struck her. Had she fallen to the ground? She could certainly remember the feeling of her cheek on the wet cobbled road.

“Er...” She made a noise as she lifted her head high, trying to make sense of her surroundings, but all was black. When her eyes saw nothing but darkness, she began to panic. Her body twitched, and she tried to move, only to find she was fastened down.

She had been forced into a chair, her wrists were bound to the arms of the seat, her ankles to the chair legs, and her waist was wrapped with rope for good measure to the back. Jerking her neck left and right, she tried to see something of her seated position, but it was all too dark.

“No. No!” She began to panic, pulling at the ropes.

*How could this have happened?*

She wriggled, desperate to be free, but the ropes at her wrists began to cut into her skin, and she could practically feel blood dripping down her wrists.

“You’re tied too tightly for that.” The sudden voice had her freezing in the room. Her eyes sought out the source of the voice.

Footsteps followed, and she barely made out a set of stairs ahead of her. The steps came from high above, suggesting she was in some sort of dark basement or cellar. It made sense as to why she was so cold with a feeling of dampness in the air, possibly coming off stone walls.

A candle was lit on the stairs, and a figure was revealed. With such a small candle, the orange glow was feeble, but it was enough to show it was the masked man who had attacked her in the carriage. The sight of him had her fingers curling around the arms of the chair and her stomach tightening into a knot.

He walked down the last of the steps, revealing he had a limp, for he put most of his weight on one leg.

“Who are you? Why are you doing this?” Marina demanded, leaning forward as much as her rope would allow her.

“Fear not.” His voice was insufferably calm. “You won’t be hurt if your husband does as I ask him to.”

“What is it you ask of him?” Marina swallowed uncomfortably, feeling a large knot in her throat.

“To write off my debt. That’s the problem with gambling hall owners, you see. They’re too impatient. They don’t wait for a man’s luck to turn. So, I’ll make my own luck turn.” The masked man stepped toward her, raising the candle higher. Marina backed away in the chair, away from the hot wax she feared would fall on her skin. “The threat only lasts until he agrees to give in to me.”

“And what will happen if he doesn’t?” Marina asked.

The man didn’t answer, and his expression was hidden behind the black linen cloth he wore over his face.



## CHAPTER 18



“Search for her. Find her!” James ordered his staff. The two serving men he’d grabbed for the task nodded hastily and hurried off. They divided themselves between the groups gathered outside of the gambling hall, gawking and watching as it burned. Yet no one returned to James to say they had seen Marina.

Reaching for the other side of the road, near to where Michael was sitting on the pavement with his head curled forward as he held onto his wound, James leapt onto a low-lying wall. He used the extra height to search for Marina, watching as the firemen began to tear down the tiles connecting his gambling hall to the buildings either side of it.

*She’s not here!*

“Marina!” James bellowed her name, cupping her hands around his mouth to call for her. Still, there was no answer.

“James.” Michael’s voice was quiet, but James heard it above the hubbub for they were so close. Ignoring the cracks and heavy thuds of the building falling apart, he jumped off the wall and crouched down beside his friend. “She’d come

running if she was here. Anyone would when you shout like that.”

James grimaced as he looked at his friend.

“You need a doctor. Lean on me.” He pulled Michael to his feet once more, urging Michael to put his weight fully upon him. “I’m not giving up, Michael, not for anything.” He dragged his friend toward his carriage out the back of the building where the driver was standing, staring at the burning building, the flames practically dancing in his eyes. “Take Michael to the nearest physician or doctor you can find.”

“Yes, Your Grace.” The driver jumped to the task. Before Michael closed the carriage door, he latched a hand onto James’ wrist, gripping it tight. “What is it?”

“I saw a masked man in there,” Michael said, his voice deathly quiet. “He was the one setting fire to the place. That seems to match the description of the man who attacked Marina before, doesn’t it?”

“It does.” James nodded, knowing exactly what Michael was trying to warn him about. “He could have taken her. Go to the doctor. I will find her.”

He closed the door and watched the carriage drive away before he circled the building, watching as it became just ruins on the earth, the top floor plunging into the bottom. He shielded himself from the spitting ash and smoke, hurrying back with the crowd.

Staring at those ruins, he thought of the last time he had been in that upstairs bedchamber with Marina. The way they had explored one another, discovering such pleasure, had been a great thrill. It was the growing of their intimacy. That moment somehow seemed in tatters now, to see the room destroyed so.

*No, Marina is not gone. I shall find her again.*

When the constables appeared, asking what had happened, James grabbed the nearest one. He introduced himself, talked of what Michael had seen of the arsonist, then revealed the worst.

“My wife is missing,” he said to the constable, a man not dissimilar in age to himself, who had introduced himself as Constable Jones.

“You are certain, Your Grace?” the man asked, his face setting in severe lines.

“Yes. I can’t find her anywhere. I left her here.” He pointed to a place on the pavement beside them. “She was attacked in her carriage just yesterday, and now, this? Her attacker then was a masked man.”

The constable nodded, understanding the danger and clearly not questioning James again.

“Listen, Your Grace, here is what we are going to do.”

James was surprised to find there was a protocol for someone who had gone missing. Some constables were sent to the nearest coaching inns, stable houses, and doctors, all to see if any of them had seen any sign of Marina. It was just possible that if she had been kidnapped, her attacker might take a horse and flee London.

“We will continue the search all night and tomorrow. I’ll have constables patrolling –” Jones had to break off as the last of the building collapsed. James stepped back, out of the way of the debris and danger. The constable held out an arm as if wishing to protect James from the fire. “I am sorry, Your Grace. To see your business gone... so quickly.”

James stared uncertainly at the fallen building, the flames slowly dying out as the fire service began to throw water onto the remains. For the business, he felt a strange numb feeling in his chest.

“It’s just a building, only a business.” It didn’t matter to him, not at all. Such things could be rebuilt, and even if he couldn’t rebuild it, he could find another way to make money. He’d done it before, he could do it again, and he had enough money now in investments to keep him going for a long time without it.

*None of that matters. None of it!*

“I don’t care about the building,” he said in realization, turning to face the constable. “Not one bit. All I care about is finding my wife.”

“I give you my word, Your Grace,” Constable James said, his London accent thick as he bowed, “we will help you find her.” He backed up, calling to his constables to begin the search.

James reached for the nearest wall and held himself up with the palm of his hand, staring at the empty space on the pavement where Marina should have been.

*Where are you, Marina?*



“Well?” Michael called from the large settee in James’ study as he burst back into the room.

James hovered in the doorway for a minute, feeling the sunlight streaming through his window was too bright for comfort. He shielded his eyes against the brightness as he stepped into the room, leaning upon his desk for support.

“You’re exhausted,” Michael observed, lifting his head a little off the arm of the settee.

“You should look in a mirror,” James retorted quickly, his eyes darting over his friend. When nothing could be found of Marina the night before, James had sought the nearest doctor to search for his friend. Michael had a concussion, but he would be fine. Not wanting to leave him alone, James had brought Michael back to his house. Michael had risen early from his bed and laid on this settee, wishing to be more useful than he could be.

“What did the constable say?” Michael asked.

“Oh, he had good news. That is why I look so happy,” James said with thick irony, watching as Michael winced. “I’m sorry,” he apologized quickly and sat on his desk. “This is awful.”

He couldn’t describe the feeling in his chest. This heavy darkness had been lodged there all night. He rather imagined it was as if something had a tight hold of his chest and was compressing it down, like some ugly creature clawing at him.

That feeling had made it impossible to sleep, and in the early hours of the morning, even before the sun had risen, he’d left the house. Taking his horse, he’d gone back to the remains of the gambling hall, searching for any sign of Marina, but there was none. From there, he’d gone on to see the constable.

“They didn’t find any trace of her,” James muttered angrily. “No one in the street even remembers seeing her or this masked man. They were all too busy staring at the burning building.”

“It’s clever,” Michael said, clearly reticently. “Everyone would be staring elsewhere. It would make it almost easy to take her.”

“Don’t say that,” James muttered darkly, rounding his desk and dropping into his chair. “I have to find her, Michael.”

“I know. We will.” Michael sat forward in the chair until James urged him to sit back with a wave of his hand. “I’m not an invalid.”

“That is debatable at the moment, especially with how wan your face is.”

“You look awful too,” Michael replied quickly.

James leaned forward, resting his elbows on the desk, when his eyes landed on some papers before him.

“What’s this?”

“It’s the papers of who is in debt to the gambling hall. I thought some of them may be of use, so I had my butler bring them over.”

“I thought these were destroyed in the fire?” James grasped them up with eagerness, gripping them so hard he almost gave himself a paper cut.

“I took them home to work on them the other day. It’s a good thing I did.” Michael sighed as he leaned back on the settee.

James tore open the papers and began to search the names, looking for any clue that might relate as to who would take Marina. There were too many names for comfort. There were three that owed the largest of sums, and therefore were the most likely, but there were plenty of other men who owed smaller sums, and James had seen enough of a gambling hall to know a man desperate for money could be drawn to awful violence if it meant even protecting the smallest of sums.

His eyes darted over the papers, trying to focus, for his mind was distracted every few seconds as he thought of Marina.

*I'll find her. I have to!*

The memory of her moving beneath him on the bed as he made love to her was a thrill but also one that now terrified him. He had vowed to protect her, and look at what that had come to?

“I can’t let anything happen to her,” James said aloud, surprising himself as well as Michael with the words.

“Do you love her?” Michael asked. The words were such a bolt from the blue that James nearly dropped the paperwork in his hands. He struggled for an answer, staring at Michael’s pale face, when there were hurried footsteps through the house.

“Your Grace! Your Grace?” Mr. Pitt-Rivers was calling.

“Yes?” James jumped to his feet as the door burst open. Mr. Pitt-Rivers appeared and behind him was Mrs. Viner, looking flustered with her face red. They all knew of Marina’s disappearance, and judging from the bags under their eyes, they had suffered equally sleepless nights as he did.

“A letter. Mrs. Viner just found it now.” Mr. Pitt-Rivers thrust forward the envelope.



“Someone left it on the gate. I saw him running away, I did,” Mrs. Viner said with a bawled-up handkerchief in her hand as if she had been crying. “He was all dressed in black.”

James exchanged a worried look with Michael before he took the letter and broke the plain red wax seal, offering no clues to its sender.

*‘You will know by now she is gone. You didn’t listen to my first letter, so I was forced to carry out my threat. Tonight, at midnight, you will come to the address I list below. You will come alone, no gun, no weapon of any kind, and you will bring with you cash.*

*‘I want five thousand pounds. You will bring it without any constables, without any man by your side. Once I have the money, you will have your wife back.’*

The letter wasn’t signed.

“James?” Michael said, sitting forward in his seat. “What is it?”

“It’s from her abductor.” James’s voice was seething, the words coming in sharp syllables. “He wants five thousand pounds.” It was worth a year of James’ income. “Only then will he release Marina.”



James pulled on the reins of his horse, urging the animal to stop in the thick darkness. It was a lonely part of London town, this far out on the perimeter. Here, there were

warehouses and old buildings, long disused. He'd passed an old brewery and two meat houses, neither of which had life within them.

He was certain of the address as he stepped down from the horse and wrapped the reins around a fence post nearby. It might have been a lonely place, but that was certainly the way Marina's abductor would want it to be.

Taking the bag of money off the saddle, he looked at his surroundings. He'd followed the requests exactly in the letter, not wanting to risk Marina's life by disobeying. He'd not told the constables, and when Michael had offered to come and watch from a distance, James had refused. For one thing, Michael wasn't well enough yet. Mostly though, James did not want to take the risk. He didn't know what the abductor would do if he saw Michael.

Turning his back on the horse, James held tightly to the leather bag in his hand and crossed the open yard toward the warehouse the abductor had specified in his letter. A candlelight bobbed by an open door, showing James was in the right place. By the door, two men stood, apparently unaffected by the chill in the air, for they had stoic faces though their hair was ruffled by the cold wind.

What was strange to James was that they were content to show their faces. Clearly, they didn't fear being recognized.

*Perhaps the masked man has hired them for this task alone. That would mean it will be hard to identify him through them.*

James cursed inwardly as he approached. He was a few steps away when one of the men raised his hand.

“Stop.”

“I’m here to see –”

“We know,” the first man said again and stepped forward.

“Then step aside.” James’ darkened voice seemed to unsettle the man a little, for he fidgeted where he stood.

“Drop the bag. I have to search you for a weapon.”

James did as he was told and held out his arms, forcing the frock coat to hang wide on his frame. The man stepped forward and searched him, checking all his pockets but finding nothing, he nodded his head forward.

“Go in.”

James didn’t need to be told twice. He grabbed the bag from the earth and hurried through the door of the warehouse.

At first, he saw nothing but the darkness that could have been never-ending. His feet walked through damp puddles on the stone floor, the only thing he could use to direct himself in the darkness. As he walked, a light appeared on his left, and he made his way toward it. In a chamber of the main warehouse, there was a candle lit and placed on a table.

James stumbled on the sight revealed by that candle. The masked man, completely dressed head to toe in black, was standing very still, his hand gripping a pistol he held down by his side. To his left, Marina was in a chair, fastened tight with so many ropes they pulled against her gown.

“Marina,” James whispered, and her green eyes shot up to meet his own through the dim light.

## CHAPTER 19



Marina's nerves grew as James stepped out of the shadows. Any relief she might have felt at seeing him was hampered by the way the masked man beside her gripped to the pistol.

“No further forward,” the man warned, his voice deeper than before. It struck Marina he was using a fake voice to avoid being recognized. James abruptly stopped, his boots splashing in the puddles in the warehouse beneath him. His hand gripped to a bag so tightly, his knuckles were white, and his eyes darted between the masked man and Marina constantly, never resting on either of them for long.

“Drop the money.” The masked man gestured with the pistol at the ground between them.

“Are you not going to tell me why you are doing this?” James asked, slowly placing the bag on the ground.

“You know well enough. The money...” The masked man's face turned toward it.

“You should earn it like a decent man, rather than kidnap my wife to get it.” The way James had called Marina his wife had her stiffening in her seat. She couldn’t remember hearing him say it before, and if he had done so, then it was certainly not with so much possessiveness.

She longed to be with him alone, far away from here, somewhere safe.

“We do what we have to,” the masked man muttered harshly. “Kick the bag over to me.”

James kicked it with fervor. It landed at the masked man’s feet where he dropped down to look inside. When James took a step toward Marina, the man lifted the pistol, aiming it straight at James.

“Don’t move,” he warned. James held himself still, his eyes on Marina.

There was so much she wanted to say to him, but she couldn’t, not here. Her breath escaped her lips in jittered gasps instead, and she wondered how much money he had stumped up just to get her out of here.

“Five thousand, good,” the man said, standing to his feet.

*Five thousand pounds?*

Marina reeled, her jaw hanging open. James had paid so much to have her back? It was even more than her dowry!

“You can take her, but be careful what you do.” The masked man backed up with the bag. “One move toward me, and I will shoot.”

Marina recognized the hatred and anger in James’ eyes. The glower was heavy, and a muscle ticked in his jaw as he looked at the masked man then he hastened forward, practically running to Marina’s side.

In silence, he untied the ropes at her wrists and her ankles. The one at her waist was the most difficult to undo, and she went to help him before stumbling to her feet. Turning around, she looked into the darkness, but the masked man had vanished.

“He’s gone,” James whispered. “Come, quickly.”

He took her hand and led her out of the warehouse. Marina was weakened from a lack of food. She hadn’t been given anything to eat all day and just a few sips of water. As she ran, she ended up stumbling in that weakness, and James’ arm came up around her waist to help her.

“James, I’m so sorry, I did stay where you told me to,” she explained in a rush. He never let up with his pace and directed her back to his horse at the edge of the compound. “He struck me.” She lifted a hand to the back of her head and winced. James panicked, turning her around to examine the wound in the moonlight.

“That bastard. He will face revenge for this, I swear.” He took hold of Marina’s waist and lifted her into the saddle even before she could attempt to step up herself.

“How? He’s gone,” Marina pointed out. She didn’t so much care for revenge. “I’m just glad to be away from there.” As James stepped up behind her, he wrapped an arm around her waist. She gave into her longings and embraced him tightly. He seemed to abandon his haste to be away from this place so quickly and held her back, his lips going urgently to her temple to kiss her there. “Thank you so much,” she whispered, “for getting me out of there.”

“I would never have left you there,” he whispered against her temple. “I am only sorry I could not get to you sooner.”

“What of your gambling hall?” she asked, lifting her head as James shifted them both in the saddle, wrapping one arm around her waist to keep her in place as his other hand took the reins and prompted the horse on. “Is it gone? Destroyed?”

“Completely.”

“Oh, James.”

“Do not be sorry for that.” His voice was strong. “I could not care less about it.”

“What do you mean?” She angled her head to look over her shoulder at him, noting the severeness in his expression in the moonlight with his dark blue eyes staring forward at the path ahead of them.

“I would have paid any sum to have you back and seen any building of mine burnt down to have you. Marina, when you



were gone... the thought of you being hurt..." He broke off, swallowing hard, so that his Adam's apple bobbed in his neck.

*Wait... does he...?*

Marina wondered for a minute if James looked at her as she did him. Was it possible he felt some love for her?

Rather than uttering any more words, he moved his lips and kissed her head again before concentrating on the road ahead.

"Thank the Lord you're with me again, and damn the business, for all I care."



"How is she?" Michael asked from the doorway of the study, looking out across the corridor and toward the sitting room. James couldn't blame him for standing there for so long; he had done much the same that morning.

Marina was in the sitting room now with her friend, Caroline, at her side. The two had embraced for a long time, relieved to see Marina was back again.

"She'll recover," James said with confidence, "she assures me of it. She's strong." He smiled a little, thinking of the way she had curled into his arms when they had returned to the house the night before. With confidence, she had said all would be well now. He admired her for it. "Yet the threat is still there. Now this man knows he can get money out of me, so what's to stop him doing it again?"

“I take your point.” Michael nodded slowly. “What are we going to do then?”

“Hmm.” James shifted his weight between his feet, looking through the two doors to catch a glimpse of Marina as she sat beside her friend, the two hand in hand. The bruises were still traceable on Marina’s neck, and the sight of them made him sick. Fortunately, the knock to the back of her head had only given her a mild concussion, according to the doctor, but James feared how great that strike could have been. Too much weight, and the masked man might have killed her.

“I have an idea,” he confessed as he walked away from the door and moved toward his desk. It was an idea he’d had a few days ago, but with the fire, he’d been unable to put it into action. “We still have debts owed to us. For the next two days, I will visit the men who owe us money.”

“You?” Michael said in surprise, for it was usually handled by Michael or one of their staff.

“I will.” James spoke carefully. “Marina told me what she judged of this man. His height, width,” he patted his stomach, “the fact he walks with a limp. I heard this man’s voice too. He might have tried to disguise it, but few can hide their own tone completely. If he is in this list...” he paused and patted the list of debtors’ names in front of him, “I will make sure I find him.”

“I pray you do.” Michael lifted a hand uneasily to the wound at the back of his own hand. It was healing though the anger still remained in Michael. “May the man burn for what he did that night to us all.”

James nodded in agreement. He was not a particularly violent man, but there was aggression there and certainly anger. To see so many he cared about hurt, to see Marina's life in jeopardy, and his livelihood burned down – he wanted vengeance.

*I will have it.*



James sat very still in his office; the only movement came from his hand that repeatedly tapped the top of his ink well as he stared at the clock on the mantelpiece.

*He's late.*

Distractedly, James turned his eyes out of the window. Beyond the glass, he could see Marina walking in the garden. Her mother had come to see her at last and her father too. The sight of the three of them walking together made James smile a little, praying that the tension in the family's relationship was over.

When James had written to the Earl to tell him what had happened to his daughter, a reply had quickly been sent. He rather suspected Marina's father had been shaken by the news and had realized what truly mattered in this world – his daughter, not his position.

James longed to be alone with Marina, but that would have to wait for now. He had business to attend to. Turning back, he faced the clock again, but it was nearly half past eleven, and

the gentleman he was waiting on should have been there at eleven on the dot. Curious, James looked over the list of names before him.

All the men in debt had appointments to see him that morning, and all had come as requested, offering up their installments to repay their debts. Not one had matched the masked man in figure nor in voice, and now, this last man was suspicious in his absence.

James' eyes landed on the man's name.

*The Marquess of Stanton.*

James frowned as he read the name. He'd heard of the man though he had not met him. As far as he understood, the Marquess had great estates and a healthy inheritance. Yet the man was refusing to pay his bills to the gambling hall, and now, he hadn't turned up to see James at all.

Standing, James took the Marquess' address from his files and left the room, making his way to the door. He requested Mr. Pitt-Rivers leave a message for Marina that James would return soon then he was about to turn out the door to collect his horse when Mr. Pitt-Rivers held up a letter.

“Your Grace, I see you have missed your correspondence this morning. This arrived for you earlier.” He handed James the letter that he took quickly, noting the Marquess of Stanton's emblem was in the red wax seal.

*'Your Grace, the Duke of Curton,*

*It is with regret that I cannot make the meeting you have requested today. I shall endeavor to meet with you another time.*

*Yours etcetera,*

*The Marquess of Stanton.'*

James folded up the letter and stuffed it in his pocket, feeling the rudeness of the letter make his anger simmer. It was plain the Marquess was avoiding him, but to not offer a reason as to why he was avoiding the meeting was even stranger. He could have come up with any plain excuse, but he had not, suggesting the letter was written in a hurry and something of a panic.

*Is it possible he is this masked man?*

James thanked his butler and left the house, taking his horse quickly from his stable and leaving the grounds. He caught Marina's eye in the garden as he left, watching as she lifted her hand to wave goodbye to him. Had her parents not been there, he would have gone to her side and embraced her. He seemed to find every opportunity to do so at the moment, terrified of losing her again, but he would not do so with her parents there. It was an intimacy he and Marina would share alone.

Leaving the house far behind, he crossed the town, heading for the Marquess of Stanton's address. He found it eventually, the house set back from the road. Coming upon it, James sat forward in his saddle, noting with interest that the garden was overgrown as if no gardener was being paid to tend to it. The

front of the house appeared a little untidy too as if no maid had cleaned the front steps.

Leaving the horse by the railings, for no stable boy appeared in order to take the horse from James, he stepped up to the house and knocked. The first knock wasn't answered, so he knocked again, firmer this time.

At last, the door was answered. A staff member revealed himself at last, a short and portly fellow with white hair and sagging skin around his cheeks.

“Goodness, that is a loud knock!” he said in reprimand.

“It would not have been had my first knock been answered,” James said tartly. “The Duke of Curton to see the Marquess of Stanton.” The announcement of James' title seemed to have an effect on the butler. The man scurried back a step, his eyes widening.

“I'm afraid my master is indisposed at present. He cannot take visitors.”

“Indisposed? Is he not here?”

“Yes, no, I mean...” The man dabbed his sweating brow, clearly uncertain of what lie he was supposed to say. A sound echoed from within the house of a door closing. James latched onto that sound and stepped forward, pushing past the butler. “No! What do you think you are doing? Your Grace! Even you cannot demand entry to another man's house without invitation.”

“I would happily stand here and debate with you what men should and should not do, but another time. I must see your master.” James felt hatred curl in his chest and an excitement building as he wondered if he was about to come face to face with the masked man.

He pushed open a door, finding himself in a small parlor which was not empty.

A man, who appeared to be James’ age, was sitting at the far end of the room by the fire. His icy blue eyes turned to James in surprise, his fair hair was plastered back on his forehead, and his body was somewhat hidden by the fact he was crumpled in his chair, slumped down.

“Allow me to introduce myself.” James stepped forward and bowed though he did it with contempt and barely bowed at all. “I am the Duke of Curton, and you must be the Marquess of Stanton.”

## CHAPTER 20



“Stand, My Lord,” James demanded of the man before him. The Marquess of Stanton didn’t move. If he moved at all, he simply slumped forward in his armchair. He waved a dismissive hand at his butler a second later, urging him from the room.

“As you are rude enough to demand entry into my house, I will not stand. One discourtesy deserves another,” the Marquess said calmly.

*That voice.*

It held the same pitch as the masked man though perhaps it was not as gruff as the man’s voice had been the other night. It made sense, for he would have been disguising it then.

*It could be him. The color of his eyes is right.*

“Stand,” James ordered, stepping forward. “To hell with courtesy.”



“Courtesy?” The man laughed though he looked a little uncertain as he did so, his lips not quite spreading wide enough. It suggested he was forcing the laugh, trying to be calm when he wasn’t. “How about plain decency?”

“Decency is repaying your bills,” James warned, his glare heavy. “You owe my establishment over three thousand pounds.”

The keen gaze of the Marquess faltered on this occasion.

“I’m curious because someone demanded of me a great sum this week. It would have paid for your debt and much more,” James continued.

“Who was that?” The Marquess looked to his fireplace and sighed as if he wasn’t really interested.

“Stand, and I shall tell you, or I shall make you stand.” James’ words had little effect though.

The Marquess refused to move and continued to stare into the fire.

“You have a fascination for this fireplace. Come, I will stoke it for you.” Seeing an opportunity, James strode to the stone hearth and grasped the poker from the fireplace. He stoked the wood in the grate, making the flames leap to life before he turned around, facing the man. “Stand, My Lord.”

“No,” the man still refused.

James took action. He knew how to hurt a man, but that was not his intention in this moment. Marina had told him exactly how the man limped, leading James to conclude where the masked man was injured. Testing his theory, he struck out with the poker and tapped the man on the upper part of his right thigh.

“Ow!” the man leapt forward in sudden pain. “Are you mad?”

“Most men would not have cringed so much in pain.” James tossed the poker into the fireplace as the Marquess of Stanton stumbled to his feet, apparently trying to get away from James. His figure was revealed, the tallness, the rounded belly, and the limp as he backed up a few steps. “I know exactly who you are.”

James launched himself at the man and grabbed the collar of his shirt, holding him in the air.

“Let me go!” the Marquess demanded, his voice high pitched now, full of panic.

“As you wish.” James released him, but only by tossing him to the side. The Marquess fell over the footstool behind him, stumbling into the nearest wall. James followed, thinking of the bruises on Marina’s neck and the wound to the back of her head. “So, you would hurt a woman, would you? You’d treat her as if she was nothing, no more important to you than an ant you can squash beneath your boot.”

He took hold of the Marquess’ shirt again and held him up against the wall, baring down on him with superior height.

“You have this all wrong. I do not know your wife!” the Marquess insisted.

“I know what you did. This is for the bruises on her neck.” James pulled back his arm and delivered a heavy punch to the man’s nose. The Marquess slumped against the wall as his nose broke, the bone crunching audibly. “Do you want something for the strike to her head too?”

“No, no!” The Marquess dove under James’ arm, escaping across the room. “Please, no more. No more!”

“I see you are not denying it anymore.” James was in no doubt at all, watching the man before him, who, at his words, fell quiet. It was the only confession James needed. “You have my money.”

“You want it back?” the Marquess asked, his hands shaking as he gripped the back of an armchair and put it between himself and James.

“Take it for all I care. Use it to leave and never come back to London. Come back, and you die.” James watched as the Marquess cowered behind the chair. “I pray you believe me, for I will carry out my threat.”

The Marquess hesitated for a minute, clearly not knowing what to do.

“Do you deny my conviction?” James launched himself across the room, only thinking of this man when he had hold of

Marina's throat. "Then let me show you."

"No!" The Marquess dove down, trying to hide behind the chair as James chased him. The door opened a second later, and the old butler stumbled in.

"Oh my, shall I call the constable?" he asked, his voice shaking.

"No! Get out!" the Marquess barked, running around another chair to try and escape. James followed him, catching up with him. He grabbed hold of the Marquess' throat, just as the man had done to Marina, and held him against a table, so the man could not escape.

"This is what you did to her, isn't it? You held her like this in the carriage?" He didn't squeeze, he merely pressed the man's throat, wanting him to know the fear he'd caused in Marina. "Before you ever lay your hands on a woman in this manner again, remember this feeling. Remember the fear of what would happen if I squeezed."

He saw the man's pale blue eyes widen in fear then James released him, stepping back. The Marquess took the opportunity to escape, running back behind the armchair.

"I'll go. I vow it. I'll go this afternoon." The Marquess spoke in a rush, so desperate to speak that one word followed the next, the syllables barely distinct from one another. "I'll leave London. For good!" He waved a hand in emphasis. When James stepped forward, he mirrored the action, stepping back.

“Do, or I shall return here.” James left hurriedly, not waiting around to see the Marquess’ reaction any further. He had a plan, despite his words to the Marquess, and he had to put it in place at once if it was all going to go right.



“What is going on?” Marina asked. She’d only just waved off her parents as James came speeding down the driveway atop his horse, the steed so frenzied that it whinnied into the air as James pulled him to a hasty halt.

“We’ve found him,” James called to her.

“What?” Marina hastened toward him, running with the skirt of her gown in her hands.

“We’ve found him!” James declared happily, jumping down from the saddle.

Something about the words made Marina abruptly weak at the knees. The memory of the masked man was not something that was easy to ignore. She thought of him all too easily, for he had haunted her dreams the last two nights since she had returned home.

“Marina,” James’ voice softened as he moved toward her. His hands found her waist, and she gripped his waistcoat, finding she needed that support with her knees so weak. “There will be no more nightmares, not when he’s gone, I promise you that.”

She gulped, remembering what had happened the night before. James had slept beside her, neither of them having any wish to sleep apart these days. She'd gone to sleep with her hand in his own then woken trembling, for her nightmare had taken her back to that damp cellar where the masked man had held her. This time in the dream, that man had just kept pressing on her throat.

*"It's just a dream, Marina, just a dream."* James had woken at her sudden yelp as she sat upright in bed, and he threw his arms around her. She'd clutched to his shoulder, not wanting to be weak, yet she had given into fear and cried. Never had she felt so safe as she had in James' arms.

"You've found him?" she repeated, scarcely able to believe it. "Truly?"

"Yes." James nodded. "He was one of the debtors who hadn't paid. He as good as admitted it, and he said he'd leave London for good."

"Oh." Marina frowned. "And you believe him?"

"No, that's why..." He broke off as the sound of horses' hooves on the drive, and he looked toward their gate. Marina looked too, recognizing the face of the man on the horse at the front. It was Michael, and behind him on six other horses were constables, their uniforms fixed in place with their silver buttons shining brightly.

"What is going on?" Marina asked, her eyes darting over all of the men before her.

“I sent a message to Michael,” James explained in a rush, releasing Marina and going for his horse, “to meet me here with the constables. The Marquess of Stanton will be arrested for this.”

“Arrested?” Marina felt a sudden leap in her chest. She followed James and lowered her voice, so no one but him could hear her as she whispered, “A trial would make the papers. I wouldn’t blame you for having had enough of your names being in the scandal sheets, James. I truly wouldn’t.”

“That’s never bothered me.” He shook his head, firmly. “Let the scandal sheets talk of this. All I care about is making sure that man can’t come after you again. From today, he won’t.” His words were spoken with such conviction that her lips flickered into a smile.

*Never could I have imagined when we first met that he would be this kind, this devoted to keeping me safe.*

“I will be back soon.” Bending down behind the horse so that their action was hidden from the others, he quickly kissed her on the lips.

“That kiss wasn’t long enough,” she teased him, watching as he smiled.

“Then I’ll make up for it later, I promise.” He winked with the words then pulled himself into the saddle, hurrying toward Michael and the others.

“You have found him, Your Grace?” the constable at the front of the group asked.

“I have. He is the Marquess of Stanton. Follow me, I shall show you where he lives.” At James’ words, he turned away.

Marina hurried back to the front stoop outside of the house and scurried up it, the better to keep her eyes on James for longer. She watched as he disappeared down the drive with Michael and the constables following him.

### *The Marquess of Stanton.*

The name felt dark and almost unnatural. With the man who had attacked her only ever wearing a mask in her presence, it had been easy to think he was some sort of monster, a demon walking this earth. To hear he had a title and was a member of the ton rather lowered the threat.

“He is a man like any other,” she whispered aloud, watching the last of the horses leave the driveway, kicking up gravel behind them. “He can be beaten.”



James turned the steed into the pebbled drive of the Marquess of Stanton’s house, the horse growing tired enough after such mad riding to lower his nose as they came to a stop. Behind James, the constables climbed down from their saddles, along with Michael, then James made his way toward the door of the house.



As before, the first knock wasn't answered. He knocked again as Constable Jones and Michael moved to stand behind him.

"He confessed to the crime?" Constable Jones asked in amazement.

"He offered to give me my money back," James hurried to explain. "I thought it would buy me some time to get a message to you if I pretended that I only wanted him gone from London."

"Cleverly done, Your Grace," Constable Jones said in approval, nodding.

James banged on the door, harder this time, until the butler appeared. He was heavily flushed, breathing heavily.

"Oh, it's you again!" he exclaimed. "My master has a broken nose because of you."

"He deserves worse," Michael said from behind James.

"I quite agree. Now, move aside." James waited for the butler to move, but when the old man didn't, James looked to the constable who nodded, urging him on. James took the butler's shoulder and purposefully steered him away, giving the space for James and the others to step into the house.

"You cannot barge your way in here," the butler spluttered, just as Constable Jones stepped in his way.

“Allow me to introduce myself. Constable Jones.” His words made the butler fall silent. “And your master is under arrest. Where is he?” The butler paled and said nothing. His eyes only shot upward to the ceiling.

James looked to the stairs as he realized there were sounds overhead of footsteps running and something heavy being toppled over.

“This way,” Constable Jones called to his men and led a path up the stairs. “Two of you, stay by the door!” Two men were left to keep guard as James and Michael followed the other constables up the stairs.

It wasn’t difficult to find the Marquess of Stanton’s bedchamber, for the door was flung open and sounds were coming from inside it.

“I need my carriage as soon as possible,” the Marquess was calling out of the door, evidently thinking the footsteps belonged to his butler rather than a constable. “I’ll take a ship from Southampton. This evening, before the Duke can report me to...”

The Marquess trailed off as James pushed open the bedchamber door, wider. The Marquess stalled from where he was tossing clothes into a large case, his hair wild and his face bright red from the exertion. His body stilled, his lips pressed flatly together, and those cold blue eyes danced about those in front of him.

“Constable Jones,” James said, capturing the attention of the Marquess. “This is the Marquess of Stanton. He attacked my

wife once in her carriage, burned down my gambling hall, assaulted the Viscount Thorne here,” he looked to Michael with the words, “then he assaulted my wife and kidnapped her, extracting money from me in order to get her back.”

“That’s quite a lot of crimes you’ve been totting up there, My Lord,” the constable said with satisfaction as he stepped forward. “You’re under arrest.”

“No. No!” The Marquess backed up, colliding with another of his bags that he had packed, knocking it off a table so that the contents spilled out over the floor. “You were going to let me go!” he complained as Constable Jones took hold of his wrists and forced the man to his knees, shackling his hands together.

James smiled a little, glad to see the man was to go to prison for what he had done.

“I’m a principled man, and I believe in discipline. A man commits a crime, he will pay for what he has done.” There was darkness in his tone, one that made the Marquess of Stanton hang his head.

## CHAPTER 21



Marina waited by the window for what felt like hours. Mrs. Viner came to keep her company for a while, and Mr. Pitt-Rivers brought her more than one pot of tea. She thanked them both for their kindness, but soon, she returned to staring out of the window, waiting for James to return.

When he eventually did, night had fallen. His grey steed was only just noticeable in the darkness as he rode at a canter up the driveway. Marina leapt from her chair, hurrying out of the room, and raced to the door. Mr. Pitt-Rivers had emerged to answer the door, but seeing her beat him, he smiled and retreated.

Marina flung the door open, leaning on the frame as she watched James jump down from his horse. He looked tired, his body not quite standing straight as he passed the steed's reins into the stable boy's waiting hands then approached the house.

"Marina." His voice was deep as he walked. "It is done."

"He has been arrested?" she asked, jittery as she waited for his answer.

“He has.” James nodded and reached for her, kissing her lips quickly. She returned that kiss, her hands easily finding the tops of his arms and clinging to him. “He will not be bothering us again.” When he parted to say the words, there was a quiet somberness to his voice. “I kept my vow to you that I would find him, and I did. I’m only sorry I could not keep you safe from him before now.”

“James, you were not to know what would happen.” She pulled on his arms, drawing him into the house. “You look tired. Come, I’ll fetch you a drink.” Taking his hand, she drew him into the sitting room and urged him to sit.

He removed his frock coat and tailcoat, sitting beside the fire and running his hands through his hair as Marina crossed to the drinks cabinet. She found a glass of cordial, something she knew James was fond of as he had no taste for liquor, and brought it to him. Unable to put herself far away from him, she took the footstool in front of him, instead, wanting to be close to him.

His eyes looked over the rim of the glass, clearly noting how close she was.

“Thank you,” she murmured to him, unable to stop her smile. “You look so tired.”

“I am, but I will not sleep yet.” He downed what was in the glass, clearly thirsty. Marina took the glass from him, ready to stand and pour him another when his hand found hers on the glass. He took the glass back from her and placed it on the table beside them. “Not yet, Marina,” he whispered and moved to the edge of the chair, coming closer to her. “There’s something I need to tell you.”

“Tell me? Tell me what?” she asked, leaning toward him. Their hands ended up toying together. There was something playful in the action until she drew her hand down his forearms, resting at the crook of his elbows. He clung back to her, just as tightly, his eyes casting downward.

“You cannot look me in the eye,” she observed in surprise.

“Because I am about to say something I never thought I would say.” At last, his eyes lifted to meet hers. “It’s taken me by surprise, and it seems I have broken one of my many rules.”

“Why do you set yourself so many rules?” she asked, feeling a little frustration at his discipline. “No liquor, not even a drop, no gambling. You clearly used to have the rule of not sleeping beside a lady either, one I’m glad you broke for me. You had a rule not to marry, too.”

“The rule was never to grow close to a woman,” he confessed. “My father, Marina, he was always a slave to his urges. He drank, he gambled, and he slept with many women, making my mother miserable.” James was serious, his expression stern. Hearing the words spoken so plainly had Marina’s breath hiccupping in surprise. “I never wanted to be like him. I decided long ago I would always be in control of myself. That is why I chose not to grow close to any one woman.”

He paused and loosened one of his hands from her arm, raising it gently to her chin. He lifted it, just a little, as if his eyes were surveying the bruising on her neck that was beginning to heal before they darted back to meet her own gaze.

“I made that decision, not knowing I was going to marry you someday.” At his words, she blinked, wondering if he was going to say the very words she longed to hear. “You have control over me.” He was clearly surprised by it, laughing a little and breaking his somber tone. “So, it seems all my attempts to control my own being have failed, for you have a power over me I didn’t expect.”

“You are not the only one who feels a little powerless.” She raised one of her hands from his arm and placed it on his chest, fumbling with the top button of his waistcoat. She knew what she wanted, what she had been longing for these last few days. “James...” she whispered, ready to say the words, “I’m in love with you.”

He sighed deeply and closed his eyes. That response had her pausing with his waistcoat, terrified of what his reaction might be.

“Thank God, for I love you too.” His words startled her, and she pulled on his waistcoat, tugging him toward her.

When their lips met in a kiss, it was a clash, a fight for dominance, though within seconds Marina was only too glad to let him have that control. He pulled her off the footstool so that her body was leaning against his own, curving into him with his arms around the band of her waist. Her hands travelled up his arms, clinging to his shoulders, not wanting to be released from him.

He overpowered her in that kiss, having complete control of the dance of their tongues. Deciding she wished to tease him in that power, knowing now that he was as devoted to her as she was him, her hand lowered to that waistcoat, and she

began to undo his buttons. He parted from their kiss, just enough to look her in the eye with a querying gaze.

“Clothes off, James,” she playfully ordered. He smiled and helped her, the waistcoat practically ripped from his shoulders as the shirt quickly followed. Before she could reach for his trousers, he was on his feet, moving to the windows to close the curtains, blocking out the moonlight, so the only light left in the room came from the fire behind Marina. He locked the door too before returning to her.

“You too, love,” he said with equal dominance, urging her to stand with a wave. She stood to her feet and unlaced her gown, letting it drop to the rug beneath her. Once she was out, she gestured to him.

“Boots,” she ordered. He kicked them off, and they landed nearby in a chair, making her giggle.

“Corset,” he said, moving to stand behind her and hurrying to untie it. It soon fell away. “Chemise,” he whispered the word in her ear so close to her skin that she could feel his lips against her. She shivered in delight, loving the feeling as he passed his lips down her neck and found a sweet spot at the top of her shoulder, nipping her there before she reached down and pulled the chemise over her head.

“Trousers,” she declared, turning back to face him; now, she was completely bare. He smiled, showing how much he liked her taking control too, then reached for the laces of his trousers before lowering them down his hips.



Marina was rather distracted, admiring his tall and muscled figure in the candlelight before her eyes discerned how ready he was to make love to her, standing to attention. Her attention was soon torn away as he reached for her, taking her bare waist and pulling her into him as he kissed her.

“Tonight, we shall both know control,” he said between kisses then urged her down to the ground.

She was panting as she laid back on the rug before the fireplace, feeling him move above her as he spread her legs. This evening, he didn't prepare her as he had done before. Not once did he explore her with his fingers; he just moved himself toward her. The wetness between her legs showed how ready she was as he pressed himself into her, his hips meeting her own.

The sudden thrill of pleasure had her arching off the rug, reaching up to plant one of her hands in the center of his chest. There was no pain this time, only excitement. He rocked their bodies together, his hands planted on the rug either side of her as he thrust.

Sweat began to build on his chest as he moved, and Marina leaned back, bathing in the heat not just from the fire but from James. She lifted her legs high, wanting to know as much of him as possible.

Growing distracted, she soon leaned up and kissed him, drawing his lips down to meet hers. He pressed his body to her, moving his hips alone to continue their dance together. Each movement of his body had the pleasure stirring madly within her until it consumed her completely. Every fiber of her being seemed to sing with pleasure, longing for more, even as it basked in that thrill.

“Now, it’s your turn,” he murmured.

“Hmm?” She barely managed the sound between moans before she felt him wrap an arm around her waist. Anchoring the two of them together, he rolled them on the rug. It was a fumble until Marina ended up on top of him. She found James flat against the rug beneath her with her above him, straddling his hips, their bodies still connected.

They both fell still for a minute, smiling at one another.

“Now, you have control.” He lifted his hands away from her and laid them flat on the rug beside him, showing she could do as she liked. That power did something to her. Rocking her hips experimentally, she watched as his eyes became half lidded, enjoying their pleasure.

She moved back and forward a little then raised herself higher on her knees and drove back onto him. That sudden movement had him gripping to the rug harder. Feeling the pleasure begin to spiral in her core, her movements became faster.

Needing something to hold onto, she reached out, grasping for something. James offered up his hand, driving his elbow to the floor. She took that hand, using his support to move herself.

With each meeting of their hips, the pleasure grew more, and the sweat began to bloom across his chest. She couldn’t stop though; she had no wish to as her body was hurtling toward its climax. When it hit her, it was sudden, and her body bucked toward his. A hand flew to her hip – it was his other hand, gripping her as he angled her just enough for him to rock his

hips up into hers one more time. It was evidently the thing he needed, for she felt him release as he moaned her name, the effect sudden as he tipped his head back on the rug.

Panting, Marina came down from her high with her hand still wrapped in James' own. She smiled as she leaned over him, feeling her breasts pressing against his chest as her lips found his. They kissed for many minutes, both basking in the afterglow as their lips moved slowly together.

Marina raised herself a little, just enough to look James in the eye.

“Will every time be like this?” she asked.

“I don't doubt it.” He laughed and wrapped his arms around her, pulling her naked body closer to his own. The movement had their connection rubbing together, making her tingle with delight.

“Thank God,” she whispered, moving down to place a kiss to his chest.

“Thank God for what?” he asked, distracted as one of his hands moved up into her hair, tangling with the locks that had fallen out of her updo as they had made love.

“I was just thanking Him for your resolve breaking so easily to not bed me.” She looked up with mischief, watching as James frowned. “That night I first kissed you, everything changed.”

“Thank God indeed.” The glower changed to a look of mischief, and he took hold of her waist before rolling her over, moving to be the one top. She laughed, wrapping her arms around his neck and pulling him in for another kiss.

This time, he was the one to go wandering, and his lips soon created a path down her body and across her breasts though he arched his body as he did so, his core never leaving hers.

“James,” she whispered, a harsh reality coming to her suddenly.

“Hmm?” he murmured between his kisses.

“I know the Marquess is gone, but... what of the gambling hall?” Her question prompted James to pause, and he looked up at her, his brow furrowed. “It’s gone, isn’t it?”

“It is, but we can rebuild it easily enough.” He smiled broadly. “I have plenty of money to see us through, and we have recovered the money the Marquess took. We’ll start a new hall, and this time, I want your thoughts on it, too.”

“You do?” Marina said, fond of the idea. “I rather like it when you put me in control of things.”

“As do I.” He clearly understood her double meaning, for he began to lean toward her again. “I fancy being the one to take control this time though.”

“This time? For what?” she asked.

“Let me show you.” He moved their bodies. It was sudden, rocking his hips into hers. Marina gripped the rug beneath her as James made love to her for a second time that night, somehow, his body ready again.

She found she did everything he asked of her. When he urged her to raise her legs high, she did so, and when he told her to move to her knees and face away, allowing him to enter her from behind, she did so. She was only too happy to follow his commands when it came to experiencing such pleasure. He was rather good at showing her what they could share.

When she reached her climax for a second time, her face falling forward on the rug and her hands gripping the strands as he thrust into her from behind, she had a feeling that with the danger now passed, she and James could have a very happy marriage indeed.

## EPILOGUE



“*W*hat do you think of it?” James asked as Marina walked through the gambling hall.

It was vaster than the last with the cavernous ceiling above them filled with candlelight. On one side of the room, there were the card players and gamblers with each man poring over his table, desperate to win something. On the other side of the room was a different sort of clientele, hidden mostly by a curtain though Marina could glimpse them through the gap.

She smiled to see this chamber room full of women, come to gamble too.

“I think it quite brilliant,” she said, unable to stop her smile as she took James’ arm. “This way, wives can gamble as well as their husbands. Though I’d wager for most, they will not lose as much as their husbands.”

“Ha! You looking to make a bet with me, love?” James asked as he laughed, drawing her around the room. Marina had seen with impressiveness how James had built this new gambling hall. Buying a property in Covent Garden, there had been extensive building work done, but the club was better and much more alluring than the last had been. She didn’t doubt

many a man would come here to gamble their money away. “I told you before, I don’t gamble,” James whispered in her ear.

“Oh, that is just one rule though.” She pointed out, lifting her chin high as they circled the room. “As I recall, you have broken many of your rules since you have met me.”

He playfully narrowed his eyes toward her, prompting her to giggle.

“A few of them, perhaps.”

“A fair few!” she said pretending to gasp in shock. “Who would have thought you would have married for one thing?”

“Or fallen in love with my wife,” he whispered into her ear, making sure only she could hear him. She shivered with delight at him coming so close and found her hand curling tightly around his bicep. It was moments like this she regretted their decision to come to the gambling hall at all, wishing they could have stayed home alone. “Don’t look at me like that, Marina.”

“Why not?” She snapped her eyes up from his chest to his eyes.

“Because I’ll be tempted to make use of that new bedchamber upstairs.”

She laughed as she moved her hand down his arm, finding his palm with her own. They walked around the gambling hall

together, hand in hand. Marina's walk suddenly came to a stop when she saw someone in the hall she had not expected to see.

Sitting at one of the card tables was Neil, James' brother. He was looking intently at his cards, but as one of the servers approached to offer him a glass of whisky, he shook his head and returned his attention to his cards.

"James," she murmured, pointing toward him.

"I know, I can scarcely believe it either." He pulled her into him, so they bumped into each other. "He came to see me this afternoon. Apparently reading of our trial against the Marquess of Stanton has shaken him. He apologized to me."

"Apologized?" Marina said in surprise.

"Yes. He said he realized reading the paper how precarious life is. Reading of the fire, he imagined a world I wasn't in. He didn't want that life." James smiled rather sadly. "We are hardly the best of friends, yet, but maybe this is the start of something new." He looked with hope toward his brother at the card table, and Marina smiled to see it.

*Thank goodness. Perhaps the two of them can be friends at last.*

"I'm glad to see he's lost his keenness for a drink, anyway." James nodded his head at the way Neil refused a second offer from a server for a glass of whisky. "At least, I am comforted now that he will not be following the path our father chose." He drew her away from the card table, circling the others.



“Speaking of friends, I have not seen Michael for this last hour.”

“Have you not?” Marina laughed, for she knew exactly where Michael was. “Here, let me show you.” She drew James away from the main room and toward the vast curtain that partitioned the spaces before stepping beyond.

On the other side, there were more candles, and the space was much brighter. Some ladies gathered here used the room as a saloon, for they sat and talked together, rather than played games, whilst others sat staring at their cards intently.

Amongst the tables there was one where Caroline sat, and Marina pointed toward it. Beside Caroline was a rather attentive Michael, whose gaze he seemed to struggle to tear away from Caroline, even as she urged him to do so, suggesting he paid closer attention to the game of cards they were playing together.

“I see.” James stopped at her side. “It seems my friend is quite enamored.”

“Perhaps he is,” Marina said with a smile as she watched her friend’s face closely. The two had been introduced before at the wedding but only in passing. After Marina had been rescued from the Marquess of Stanton by James, it became almost a daily habit for Caroline and Michael to check up on her. In those visits, the two saw each other more and more. It hadn’t escaped Marina’s notice that Caroline blushed every occasion Michael looked at her.

“I’ll have to give him a warning,” James said.

“A warning? What for?” Marina spluttered, turning to face him.

“Well, if Miss Davis is anything like her friend,” James paused, his eyes landing on Marina, “he’ll find himself quite in her power within days.”

“Speaking of which, where is that new bedchamber you told me about in this building?” Marina said, pressing her body closer to his.

“Allow me to show you.”

*The End?*

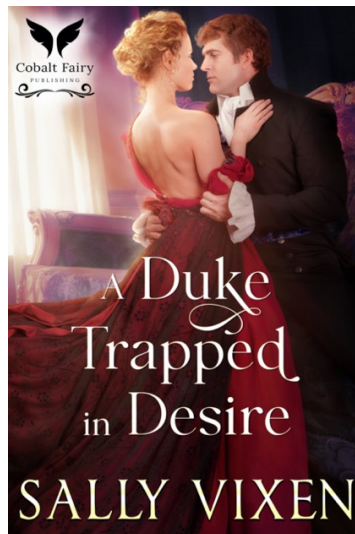
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PREVIEW: THE DUKE OF  
VENGEANCE



## CHAPTER 1



“*I* did not think that any of them would turn out like this,” Lydia Lambert, the eldest daughter of the Earl of Russton, heard someone say nearby. She recognized the voice. It belonged to an old friend of her late mother’s, and most certainly, the woman was talking about Lydia herself and her sisters.

“Like what?” another voice asked. Lydia wondered that herself as she eavesdropped on a conversation that was about her yet not meant for her.

“Well, so... appropriately,” the woman replied with incredulity in her voice.

Lydia looked proudly around the ballroom, congratulating herself on a job well done. Her rosy, freckled cheeks were glowing with delight as she watched her younger sister, Selina, dance with the Viscount of Lipton and their youngest sister Anna converse joyfully with the other ladies. Things were finally all in their place as they should be. There would be weddings afoot, and she was the one responsible for the joyful union.

“... late mother... absent father... older sister took good care of them...” That was all Lydia heard as she distanced herself from the ladies and this conversation. She had heard enough.

She exhaled with relief, thinking that she deserved a break. All this stress of being a constant help to her sisters had started to take a toll on her. Truth be told, it was simply how life had

turned out for them. The untimely and tragic death of their mother left the Lambert family in a state of utter disarray.

The Earl, although a kind and loving man who would do anything for his daughters, was completely oblivious to the needs of three young girls. He always expected his wife to be there, to lead them onto the right path and eventually into the arms of a loving husband. Without the matronly presence, the Earl felt lost, like a ship in the open seas having entered a tempest without any sight of salvation in the form of land.

Quickly, it became obvious to Lydia that she would need to be the motherly presence in her sisters' lives. As for her... well, her own happiness would not be a priority. First, she needed to lead her sisters onto the right path and only then, focus on herself.

Suddenly, she felt someone's reassuring hand on her shoulder. She turned around and was met with her father's loving gaze. She smiled back.

"Are you enjoying yourself, my dear?" he asked.

"Yes," she said, mostly so he would not worry. She would rather have a moment of peace with her own thoughts.

"Why aren't you with your sisters or with your friends?" he wondered. "I hate to see you all alone."

She almost told him that she'd had so few precious moments alone lately that she relished every single one of them. But he would not understand, just like he did not understand many things that were happening lately.

"I shall join them in a moment, rest assured," she said, propping herself up on her toes to give him a peck on the cheek. "I think I need a breath of fresh air first."

"Would you like me to accompany you?" he suggested.

"No," she shook her head, and at that moment, someone by her father's side, an old friend, pulled him back into the conversation which obviously needed his presence to continue.

Throwing one last glance to assure herself that everything was truly in order with her sisters, she headed out into the garden

for some fresh air. The garden was illuminated enough for her to venture a little further away from the house, seeking a moment of peace and solitude. Surrounded by tall blossoming flower beds, tall trees, and thick shrubbery, she closed her eyes, enjoying the peace and quiet.

Then, suddenly, she heard angry voices coming from the other side of the thick, bushy fence. She tried to peer through it, but the thick leaves and the darkness did not allow her to see clearly or to see at all, for that matter. If she wished to see the two men, she would need to walk around the fence towards the opening.

Everything inside of her told her she should head back. This was none of her business whatever it was these two men were discussing. But Lydia Lambert was a lover of a good mystery, and what was more mysterious than two men arguing while concealed in the garden?

Led by curiosity, Lydia walked closer. Ever since she was a little child, she loved solving puzzles and mysteries. She would have one of the servants hide an object then leave clues as to its whereabouts. Lydia had come a long way in her search for good mysteries since those days, but this one promised to be the biggest one yet. There was no chance that Lydia would allow this chance to slip past her. She had to see what all this was about, even if that knowledge came at a price. After all, didn't the solution to all good mysteries come at a certain price? The only question was whether someone was willing to pay it or not.

With those thoughts in mind, Lydia tiptoed closer. The voices were becoming clearer. She could hear what they were saying, instead of only snippets. Revealing only a part of her face, she caught a glance of the two men. One seemed familiar. The other, who had his back turned to her, did not. Her eyes adjusted to the darkness easily although there was enough light coming from the torches around.

“Tell me, damn you!” the one facing her demanded of the other, his voice laden with fury. “When was the last time you saw her?”

“I do not owe you any explanations!” the other one spat back even more angrily.

Light from a nearby torch illuminated the first man’s face. He was tall, much taller than what was considered to be average male height. His shoulders were equally broad to match his height, and his arms were long, ending in fingers that were now curled up into fists. His brown hair was tousled, wild, and curly, but his eyes were what captured her attention. They were a striking blue, the color of pure rainfall. She could see that even from this distance as his eyes shone bright in the darkness, fueled with despair and rage.

The other man still had his back turned to her. He was shorter. His voice was deeper, and it resembled a growl more than human speech. His entire body was positioned forward as if he were about to attack the other man. He was merely biding his time, waiting for the right moment.

“Answer me!” the other man demanded, sounding enraged. He obviously needed this information as much as he needed the air to breathe. Lydia wondered who the woman in question was. Perhaps a paramour? A sister? Someone obviously very important if that man was willing to make such a scene during a ball.

“If you keep pestering gentlemen such as myself on these issues, I shall make sure that you are cast away from the *ton* in no time,” the man with his back to Lydia threatened.

She wondered if such a threat had any weight. If the other man valued his position in society, he would not be here, verbally attacking this man and demanding answers so publicly. He probably did not care one bit what the *ton* would think of his total lack of manners. He was obviously trying to find out something important, and he refused to allow anyone to stand in his way.

“I shall keep pestering whoever I damn well please,” the man with the questions growled his insistence, “until I have the answers I am searching for!”

Once again, there was the issue of the mysterious lady. Lydia could not help but wonder about her identity and what she



meant to the man. He must have loved her dearly. The thought panged her. She doubted that such deep, passionate love was destined for her. For her younger sisters, certainly. She had made sure to teach them all about what they needed to look for in a man who would prove to be a good husband. As for herself and her own husband, she had no time to ponder on that topic. It was not a priority.

Even now, she believed that she had been deemed by all eligible men in town as someone who was focused on her sisters and not her own life. No man wanted a wife who valued the happiness of her siblings more than her own happiness. Yet, that was something that came naturally to Lydia. No one forced her to become a second mother to Anna and Selina. It was a role she stepped into, almost like second nature. Then that second nature became first, and she slowly realized that she was living for her sisters with her own life blending into the backdrop.

“I won’t ask you again,” the man snarled.

At this point, Lydia believed that the two men would fight each other. That was the only way she could see this ending.

“You were the one who accosted me in the garden of this ball!” the other man replied. “I should call the constables to have you removed!”

“Call them. I shall gladly share with them what I know regarding your involvement in all this!”

“My involvement!” the man screeched. “How dare you accuse me of anything! Why someone might overhear you and – ”

At that moment, a dry branch snapped underneath Lydia’s foot. She didn’t immediately realize that she had made that sound. Only after the two men turned in her direction, staring at her in shock and disbelief, did she realize that she had made her presence known.

The first man, the one with the questions, had his eyes blue and wide like the oceans. It took her only a single moment to realize that she knew that man. She knew who he was which made this situation even more awkward. She wanted to run

away without saying a word, but something forced her to remain there, to stay put and endure their shocked gazes of incredulity.

Her eyes traversed the distance from the first man to the second, the one who refused to reveal what he knew regarding the mysterious lady. She had no idea who he was. Besides, she only managed to take a single look at him, not long enough for any of his features to awaken the memory of someone she knew. Realizing that someone was eavesdropping on their conversation, the other man instantly ran away, disappearing in the garden. His footsteps reverberated for a few seconds then everything was enshrouded in silence once more.

The only thing Lydia could hear was the frantic beating of her own heart, palpitating in her throat, making it increasingly more difficult to breathe. She still had to endure the scornful gaze of the man who refused to take his eyes off of her. When he spoke, it was cold and without any affection.

“I had him right where I wanted him,” he told her, his nostrils flaring with anger that things obviously did not end the way he had hoped they would. “Are you pleased now?”

## CHAPTER 2



“*I* ... I... I’m sorry, I...” the lady who ruined the one chance he had of finding his sister kept stuttering her apology which, at this point, served very little purpose if any.

Edwin Carter, the Duke of Combston, did not know this woman. In fact, he believed that he had never seen her in his life prior to this moment. She was a stunning vision of strawberry blonde hair and green eyes, standing in her curve-hugging gown. Her rosy cheeks were flushed into a poppy red, most probably the result of having been caught eavesdropping on a conversation that had nothing to do with her.

He tried not to allow her beauty to distract him from his purpose which was more important to his own existence. He could not believe that he was so close to finding out what he needed to know. He had that man right where he wanted him. It was a chance that would only occur once in a lifetime, and this was it. He would be getting no second chances. He sighed heavily at the thought, blinking hard as if his own eyelids threatened to close on him.

“I...” she said again, her lower lip quivering, then she turned to go without being able to finish her thought.

“You know, the least you can do right now is introduce yourself,” he shouted after her.

His words stopped her mid-step. Her gown fluttered around her feet in the night breeze. Despite all his conscious effort not to pay attention to that, he still could not stop seeing her as a stunning vision in lilac, a light emanating from somewhere

deep inside of her. The light of curiosity? It seemed he would need to remind her that curiosity killed the cat.

She hesitated for a moment. He thought she would not dare turn to face him. She would run back inside, hoping he would not follow her. To be quite honest, he had no intention of following her. He had other people he needed to follow, other people he needed to speak urgently to. This lady, beautiful though she may be, was a distraction.

Then, she turned around. Her eyes were fierce, unyielding, although everything about her body assured him that she was one step away from running back inside. That was her first instinct. Yet, he seemed to intrigue her as much as she intrigued him, no matter how reluctant he was to admit this.

“I am Lady Lydia Lambert,” she announced, her voice trembling, but she managed to push on. “I am the daughter of the Earl of Russton.”

Edwin knew the Earl only superficially. He had been introduced to him on one occasion and exchanged a few pleasantries with him, but other than that, the man was a stranger. His daughter was even more so.

“I am—”

“I know who you are,” she interrupted him. For some inexplicable reason, it pleased him that she knew him. “You are Edwin Carter, the Duke of Combston.”

He expected her to curtsy in front of him, but she did no such thing. That amused him even more. He reached into his pocket, well aware of the fact that she was not taking her eyes off of him for even a second. He took out a cigar then proceeded to light it.

“Well, if that is all—” she started, but this time, he decided to interrupt her back.

“No,” he cut her off, inhaling deeply, enjoying the smoke filling his being. He knew it was a horrible habit. He was supposed to have quit it a long time ago. In fact, he managed to quit then this whole madness happened, and it was now the only thing that provided some solace in this tempest of

troubles. “The least you can do now is keep me company for a little while,” he added nonchalantly.

He had spent so much time chasing ghosts for the past two years that he had already forgotten what it was like to be in the company of a lovely young lady. Perhaps he could be a normal gentleman just for a few precious minutes and just enjoy her company.

He thought she would refuse his request. After all, they were outside in the garden, alone. Unchaperoned. Her reputation might be at risk if someone came outside and saw them. Then he remembered what she had already done. She had already risked her reputation by coming out alone then eavesdropping on a conversation that was none of her business. She was obviously unlike any other young lady he had met before. That too intrigued him immensely.

“I apologize for my lack of manners,” she said, regaining some of her composure, although that blush on her cheeks was still as prominent now as it was several minutes ago. It suited her perfectly. He didn’t like that pale, porcelain complexion ladies preferred these days. He enjoyed some blush on a young lady’s face.

Her voice soothed him in a way he found surprising. While he was still angry regarding how this situation ended, he realized that he was eager for some company. *Her* company.

“I was simply worried because I heard two people arguing,” she added.

He grinned. “You thought you could talk some sense into us?”

“I...” she started, but once again, could not bring herself to finish. Her confusion was so endearing.

“You were curious,” he pointed out, taking another puff of his cigar.

She pressed her plump lips together so tightly that they turned into one single slit on her moonlit face. He was right. She simply did not wish to tell him that he was.

“I can’t blame you for being curious,” he finally said, wishing to take some strain off of her. Besides, it was true. If he heard

someone arguing, he would probably have done the same thing. Claiming otherwise would be unfair. “Although, curiosity can be a dangerous thing, especially for a young lady.”

As soon as he said those words, he could not help but think of his sister. It had been two years since her disappearance. Two long years, with each passing day more difficult than the one that preceded it. Rachel had always been a wallflower. There was childlike curiosity in her, and that was how she perceived the world. She was gullible and trusting. She believed all men and women were good, decent people. She never even dreamed that someone might have any desire to harm her in any way.

Rachel was his younger sister, his only sister. As her older brother, he was supposed to be her protector. They were supposed to be each other’s harbor. They were supposed to keep each other safe from harm. He failed her. That was why he could not rest until she was found and brought back home.

“I think curiosity is what makes life truly worth living.” She surprised him with her reply, bringing him from his troubled thoughts back to the present moment. “If you aren’t inquisitive, if you don’t ask questions, if you don’t notice the mysterious things around you, why are you living then?”

For a moment, he was stunned into silence. He had to admit that he wasn’t expecting such a profound response, especially not in the situation they had found themselves in.

“You like mysteries?” he wondered, already sensing what her answer would be.

“Ever since I was a child,” she confirmed. “I think life is one big mystery. We all have this capability of trying to solve it, but not everyone wants to do it. Some are content living mediocre lives without questioning any of the whys or the hows.”

Suddenly, he realized that her curiosity might be a problem. She might start asking questions, and that was the last thing he needed right now.

“Did you recognize the man I was speaking to?” he asked her, sounding grave. She noticed the change in tone. He could see it in her expression.

“No,” she shook her head. “Who was he?”

“That doesn’t matter,” he replied with silent relief. This didn’t mean that she would not be asking any questions on her own, but at least she did not know who the man was. “Believe me, it’s better for you that you do not know him.”

“Why were you arguing with him?” she asked boldly, and once again, he was stunned by her determination to find out more about what just happened.

He smiled. “I’m afraid that would be a tale too long to tell in the few minutes I plan on spending here with you. Furthermore, it is a tale that still has no end, so I would not know exactly what to tell you. Bottom line, it is best that you do not tell anyone of what you’ve witnessed here.”

“I might do that,” she told him, “but my curiosity needs to be satiated.”

She said it with such sweet determination that he could not help but chuckle out loud. He took one last puff of his cigar then threw it on the ground carelessly, stepping on it with his shoe. Yet another thing that was not exactly according to the rules of the *ton*, but he stopped caring about those a long time ago — somewhere around the time when his sister disappeared, and he realized that he had no one to rely on for help, no one but himself.

“You are a tough negotiator,” he had to give her that. She seemed to like that unusual compliment. “All I can tell you is that I spoke to this man demanding information regarding the disappearance of my sister.”

Upon hearing that, her facial expression changed immediately. There was no more defiance, no more confidence, just pure human sympathy. He had not seen such an expression of true compassion in a long time. It surprised him to see it from a complete stranger.

“I am truly sorry to hear that,” she said softly.

Against his better judgment, he continued talking about Rachel. "Everyone thinks she is dead," he admitted, and the potential truth of those words weighed heavily upon his heart, like the stab of a thousand daggers all piercing through him at the same time in one swift puncture. "Or that she ran away of her own accord," he added the other, softer version of events, the one which he still wholeheartedly believed in. "I am certain that she is still out there, waiting for me to find her, and that is what I intend to do, no matter what."

She smiled. It was a smile unlike any other he had ever seen. In it, he could see the glow of innocent cherubs, and he could hear the music of an angelic chorus, all voices singing in unison as one.

"I would have done the same for my sisters," she admitted. In that admission, he felt he just gained an ally.

There were so many other questions inside his mind. He suddenly wanted to know all there was to know about her. He wanted to hear her thoughts, her wishes, her dreams. But the silence was overpowering. A comfortable silence. The sort of silence that enshrouded one in a cozy embrace, promising only good things to come.

He had no idea how long they were standing like that, occasionally catching each other's gaze only to look away again. He could not have imagined that this woman would understand him more than those who knew him for ages. She took one look at him and understood why he refused to give up searching for his sister. It was simply how older siblings were. At some point, they become parents, protectors, guides. It was a role one would never outgrow. It lasted forever.

Then, the spell seemed to be broken. It made Edwin sad, but he knew that this moment could not last forever. It came suddenly, and it caught him by surprise. He welcomed its appearance nonetheless, despite the knowledge that it was all too fleeting.

"Well, I'd best head back inside," she said, still with that flicker of a smile on her face.



“Of course,” he nodded. He regretted putting her in this risky situation of being unchaperoned with a gentleman, but at the same time, he relished the precious time they had together. He was certain that she was a lady unlike any other he had met. A part of him wished to see her again, but he was caught up in the momentum of things occupying his life right now. He had no time for courting. It would be unfair to her.

“Good night,” she told him, her lips widening into a proper smile this time. Her eyes sparkled even more now as if filled with some inner light she had revealed only to him right now.

“Good night,” he smiled back.

She turned to go then stopped. When their eyes locked, she made him a promise. “Your secret is safe with me, Edwin.”

With those words, she tiptoed back into the house, disappearing from sight. The sound of his name on her lips inflamed him. It awakened passions he thought were long buried and forgotten under the burden of finding his sister. But they were there. They had awakened. And he feared it would be a difficult task to put them back to sleep again.

## CHAPTER 3



“Susannah?” Lydia called out to her lady’s maid that evening as Susannah was combing her hair, preparing her mistress for bed. She gave her one of *those* looks. Lydia knew that Susannah would recognize exactly what was expected of her. No words of explanation were necessary. The plan for that evening was more than obvious.

“You can braid my hair in the back,” Lydia instructed. “I want to be as simple as possible. Nothing convoluted. Also, if you would be so kind as to bring me your blue dress from last time, the one with the roses. I really liked that one. It is so comfortable for dancing!”

Susannah smiled. Lydia smiled in return, taking her friend’s hand into her own. “You have no idea how much I appreciate your willingness to cooperate with me in my shenanigans,” she chuckled. That was what Susannah and she always called their adventures.

“You know, in all the years of me working as a servant girl, which I’m counting now more than ten, I never had such a strange request,” Susannah expressed her surprise as many times before. “Not that I mind, My Lady. It is, in fact, nice to see someone wanting to be an ordinary woman instead of it being the other way around.”

“This is all sometimes suffocating,” Lydia admitted, looking around at nothing in particular, “but I am grateful for it all, nonetheless. I simply like to live outside the confines of this house.”

The rest of the house was sound asleep. Lydia had started sleeping in her own chamber years ago, leaving Anna and Selina in another to keep each other company while she herself got some respite from everyday obligations. That privacy was also rather beneficial when it came to Lydia's nightly wanderings as she liked to refer to them.

"You know," Lydia remembered, "I will never forget the first time I explained what was required of you." They both chuckled. "You could not understand why I wanted to dress as a commoner, make my hair in that same manner, and go out to a tavern where I would be treated as any other commoner."

"I honestly could not, My Lady," Susannah admitted, amused by this reminiscence.

"You see, for someone like me, it made perfect sense. Every single hour of every single day requires of me to be prim and proper. My own behavior always needed to be a guide for the behavior of my sisters. That means if I were to make any mistakes in behavior and decorum, my sisters would follow suit, and I could not have that." She paused to sigh heavily then she continued, "It is very difficult to appear constantly proper, to perpetually speak and act in the right manner."

"And when you are a commoner, you do not need to be any of these things," Susannah added.

"I could be someone else," Lydia agreed. "During these outings, Lady Lydia Lambert does not exist any longer. She is asleep in her chamber. The Lydia that is out there is someone else entirely, someone who does not need to think about manners and decorum, someone who could watch people live completely differently from her, simply and without the restraints of polite society that I feel are strangling me like a noose."

"You know I will always be there for you, whatever it is you wish to do, My Lady," Susannah smiled, and Lydia felt overwhelmed to have someone by her side in her adventures. After all, going through them alone would not be even half the fun, and it might even be dangerous as well.

That night, like all those nights before, Lydia and Susannah snuck out of the house, making sure that no one noticed their departure. They could never use their own carriage for these purposes. Lydia could not trust one of their footmen with this secret. She was already forced to place her trust in Susannah. That was one person, but more than one would mean that a secret was not as safe. Lydia would worry that one of them might mention something unintentionally to her father, who would probably have a heart attack to learn what his eldest daughter had been up to behind his back! Lydia generously wanted to save him from the burden of that knowledge.

At first, Susannah felt uneasy about all this, but slowly, she learned to enjoy it as well. Lydia felt unrestrained. She could converse with people. She could laugh with them. She could dance to her heart's content, and no one would be any the wiser.

Upon entering the tavern, Lydia was washed over with the rowdy sounds of song and merry laughter. Everywhere she looked, she could not recognize a single face. It made her even more comfortable. She ordered two drinks for them and immediately started to dance. A few men were giving her interested glances, but she was never afraid when she was in a tavern. Lydia had learned not to return those gazes, and it quickly proved to the men that she was not interested in them but rather in dancing and having fun.

However, sometimes it happened that there was someone who did not understand such subtle hints, and Lydia had to be more vocal about it. When a man approached her while she was dancing, she smiled back politely but tried not to engage in either dancing or conversing with him. However, he was resolute to exchange a few words with her. He leaned closer to her, and she could smell beer on him.

“Oy, luv,” she heard him say, drawling out the words. “Fancy a dance wif me?”

“Thank you,” she smiled, trying not to get too close to him as he had already tried to put his arms around her. “I’m here with my friend, and I wouldn’t want to lose sight of her.” That was the first thing that popped to mind. She could not very well

refuse him outright. It would be rude. It might also be dangerous. She did not know what sort of a man he was. It was best to always deny people's wishes in the gentlest manner possible.

"I can 'andle two of yah," he told her with a lewd look in his eyes, after which he laughed loudly.

Just when she was about to tell him that she was not interested, another woman came up and pulled the man by the arm.

"Come nah, Tim, leave the girls alone, will ya?" The lady gave Lydia an understanding look, and Lydia smiled.

"I was just..." the man started, but the woman, who was obviously his sister or perhaps a good friend but not his wife, kept pulling him away good-humoredly, telling him it was not nice to accost young ladies in such a manner.

Lydia sighed with relief, already thinking that such a situation could have escalated into something she would be unable to control. Such a possibility was always present, and she was well aware of that. After all, she and Susannah were two young ladies out on their own without any gentlemen to keep them safe.

At the same time, this was what she wanted, to be away from anyone who might be enshrouding her with protection. She could handle herself, and she could protect herself well enough. Truth be told, she still hadn't found herself in such a situation, but something told her that she would be able to handle herself just fine.

She continued dancing, minding her drink and just having fun with Susannah. She was a nobody here. She was just another nameless face in a crowd, acting exactly how she wanted to act. There was no right or wrong. There were no demands that chained her to act in a certain way. She could be who she truly was. She could express her curiosity about the world around her and about the people in it and everything that ever interested her.

No one in her family understood this need of hers. She knew if they ever found out, they would be shocked. Even worse, they

would be disappointed in her. Flabbergasted, even, that she would want to experience something like that. Lydia knew that no matter how hard she tried to explain it, she would never be able to make them see things the way she saw them. So, it was best to keep this side of herself a secret. As for Susannah, Lydia was certain that the sweet girl would not tell a soul about their occasional nightly wanderings. In addition to that, she was well compensated for them which was another incentive to keep quiet about them.

Lydia had no idea how long they were there as one hour blended into the next. Suddenly, Susannah pulled her by the hand and leaned to whisper something in her ear.

“Isn’t that Philip?” Susannah pointed at a man in the corner of the tavern who was too busy chatting with his friends to notice them.

Lydia looked in that direction. It took her eyes a little while to focus her gaze then she truly did recognize one of the footmen employed in her home. He had distinctively wide lips which revealed almost all of his teeth not only when he smiled but also when he spoke, so recognizing him was no difficult feat.

Lydia knew that it was imperative they were not seen. Although she was dressed differently, and her hair was done unlike she usually did it, she was not disguised in the sense that her face was any different. He would surely recognize her if he came up to her closely. She could not allow that to happen. She needed this secret. She needed this one thing that was solely hers, that brought her so much relief and comfort.

“We need to leave, now,” she told Susannah as fear gripped her. The longer they stayed there, the more likely it was that Philip would look in their direction and see them. If not her, he would recognize Susannah and surely approach her to greet her.

The two women held hands, searching for another way out which they found after asking for it. They stumbled out into the dark night, and for a moment, Lydia could not tell whether they were supposed to go left or right to get back to the main road. She pulled Susannah left and, mistakenly, ended up in an

even darker alley. The moment they stepped into it, Lydia saw a group of four men, huddling in a corner, talking in a hushed manner.

She swallowed heavily, gripping Susannah's hand. A lady alone in an alley at night was not safe, especially if there was a group of men involved. Their best option was to slowly back up the way they came from, but instantly, one of the men turned to face them. The moment he saw them, his face lit up. Then, the eyes of others fell upon them, and the two girls froze in place. Lydia could not remember the last time she was this frightened. Susannah squeezed her hand tightly.

If they ran back, they might make it. Those were the first thoughts that rushed through Lydia's mind. It would take them only a few seconds. The men would not catch up with them that quickly.

But something forced her to remain where she was. That man. She had seen him somewhere before. But... where?

"Wait..." that same man spoke to her, pointing his index finger at her. "I know you!"

Lydia's heart sank all the way down to her heels. It seemed that the feeling was more than mutual.

**Want to know how the story ends? Tap on the link below to read the rest of the story.**

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**Thank you very much!**

## ALSO BY SALLY VIXEN

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Born and raised in Pennsylvania by a mother of British ancestry, it is no wonder Sally developed a love for British culture. An avid reader since she was a child, it wasn't long until she stumbled onto the Regency classics, and the rest is history.

A couple of years and a Creative Writing degree later, Sally has truly found her calling. She is rarely found without a book in her hand, but when she isn't reading or writing, she likes taking walks in nature, traveling and spending quality time with her very own happily-ever-after, her wonderful family of four.

So, allow Sally to take you on a majestic trip, full of passion, boundless romance and glamorous balls, and let your heart be stolen by the dashing Lords and seductive Ladies of an era where fairytales came to life...

