

A DUKE'S  
WICKED  
SECRET

MEGHAN SLOAN

# **A Duke's Wicked Secret**

A REGENCY ROMANCE NOVEL

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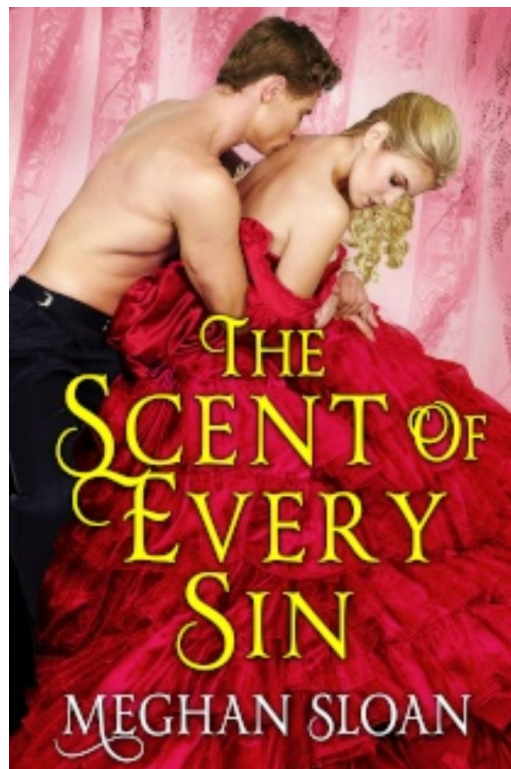
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A Duke's Wicked Secret

## Introduction

As soon as Penelope Ainsworth arrives in London, she sets tongues wagging. During a solitary ride, a near collision with a melancholic stranger known as the “mad Duke” leaves her breathless with intrigue. Despite her friend’s warnings, Penelope is drawn to the Duke’s enigmatic past and imposing presence. As she navigates the dangerous waters of London’s elite, their eyes meet again at a ball, and she feels powerless to resist his devilish charms...

Will Penelope choose to risk everything for her wicked Duke?

His facial scar and troubled past have earned Theodore Winterbourne the title of the mad Duke, a reputation that sometimes works to his advantage by keeping the nosy ton at bay. Yet, beneath his brooding exterior lies a man tormented by family trauma and a fierce determination to avoid his father’s tragic fate. Swearing never to marry, he is totally unprepared for the fiery Lady who ignites a flame within him.

As their mutual love for riding blossoms into a friendship, Theo finds himself on the brink of breaking his own rules to pursue his passion for her.

Yet, will he ever denounce the wounds of his past that continue to haunt him?

In the scorching London summer, Penelope is swept away by the alluring Duke. As their scandalous romance blossoms amidst the glittering world of high society, a simple horseback ride turns into a thrilling and dangerous escapade, igniting a passion that threatens to consume them both. With secrets and betrayal lurking at every turn, will their sinful love survive the storm, or will it be crushed under the weight of scandal and prejudice?



# Chapter 1

Exhilaration filled Penelope's entire being as she and her horse, Phoenix, a beautiful sorrel mare, galloped across the countryside surrounding London. The morning was bright and clear, which was unusual for that time of year.

Usually, in early March, it would be damp and misty out, but today the sun was out in all its glory, and Penelope was drinking it in hungrily. Her chestnut brown curls bounced gracefully as they rode over the green hills, and all the while Penelope's eyes flashed with the brilliance of their bright blue hue.

There was nothing in the world that Penelope loved so much as her early morning rides. Her mother and father had long since given up convincing her that it was improper for a young debutant to "gallivant around" as they put it.

For no matter how much they fussed, she still found time to sneak out and ride. In consideration of their unhappiness about this, she made sure to rise early before the rest of the household and come back before it was time to break their

fast. It was a kind of unspoken agreement she and her parents had.

If she went without them explicitly knowing and returned before her absence was taken note of, they would all pretend that it had never happened.

Penelope and her family had just settled in her father's new estate because his father had lived to a very old age, and with his passing, the estate had finally gone to her father. Usually, she would go for a more peaceful ride, but since the move, she had been unable to sneak away for those precious hours with Phoenix, and instead of proceeding with caution so that they could avoid anyone else riding, they continued at full gallop.

As they passed a small meadow, Penelope noted the sounds of the presence of another rider, and due to the speed she was currently riding at, she barely managed to manoeuvre so that she and this rider did not collide.

Penelope struggled to stay seated in her saddle, so she called for Phoenix to slow down to a gentle trot, and in doing so, she saw that the other rider was a tall gentleman with dark wavy brown hair. He looked to be no more than four and thirty, but

Penelope did not dare to take in more not to appear completely uncouth.

The moment she averted her gaze from this man, she found herself curious to look at him again. He was so intriguing, not to mention exceedingly handsome, and as of yet, Penelope had not been introduced to him or even seen him at any of the events this season.

It was obvious that he was a man of great wealth and being that she had never seen him made her all the more curious. She was sure she had been dragged in front of all the eligible bachelors of the ton. With his brooding demeanour and the deep scar on his chin, she thought he could only be one man, the one known as the Mad Duke.

The thought of meeting this man here in such a precarious manner sent a chill through her body. Much of the ton spoke of him, how his father, the late Duke, had been stark raving mad, and now he was also following in his father's footsteps.

Though his case was not as severe, it was only a matter of time before he was just as utterly insane. Insane or not, this man

had thighs so evidently toned underneath his britches, and he was incredibly alluring to Penelope.

Both she and the gentleman pulled their horses to a stop, and upon realizing that he was not going to speak first, as he should, being a man and her senior by ten years, Penelope gave a polite smile and spoke.

“I am so sorry, sir. I truly did not see or hear you until the last moment. I do hope you and your horse are both alright!”

Again, there was an awkward pause, and he looked as though he might not respond to her, but finally, he curtly told Penelope, “Madam, do you realise how unwise it is for you to be riding out here by yourself with no chaperone? The safest course of action would be for you to turn back for your home and refrain from such reckless actions in the future.”

He said this firmly, but under the seriousness of his voice, Penelope detected a note of genuine concern for her well-being.

“Oh, of course, sir. I would never stray far from home, and I can assure you I am perfectly safe,” Penelope answered him gaily to ease the tension in the air. However, the man said nothing to this, which only increased Penelope’s nerves towards him, so she bid him adieu, stating the hour was growing late and it was time for her to return home.

All the way home, the tall stranger danced across her thoughts. His piercing deep blue eyes and how he looked directly at her caused her to feel chills of delight course through her as she rode. Penelope had never met a man that made her feel this way, and she could not even sort how she felt in her mind, only that it was definitely excitement.

As she arrived home and began to dismount, she whispered into Phoenix’s ear and ran her hands through her mane saying, “Wasn’t that a strange adventure girl! And goodness what a man ... Oh, he never even told me his name, so how am I to be sure if he was indeed the one known as the mad Duke?”

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Theo rode swiftly home, annoyed at that young lady for being so reckless as to almost cause a collision with their two horses, but truthfully, he was much more frustrated with his harsh demeanour towards her. He was so surprised to come upon anyone else riding at such an early hour.

One of the main reasons that Theo chose to ride at sunrise was because most of the ton preferred to sleep in, and he could enjoy the solitude of his ride without the interruption of gawkers.

Thinking on his interaction with her, he silently scolded himself for admonishing her, even though she was alone. The gentile thing to do would have been to ensure that she was all right and possibly even escort her safely to her estate or, at the very least, introduce himself to her. But, of course, he did none of that.

*“Well, she probably thinks I am mad as everyone else in the ton does, so what is the difference?”* thought Theo, trying to convince himself that he did not care and should forget about this nagging feeling eating away at him. As was the memory of her lovely curls streaming through the wind and her dazzling blue eyes, not to mention her lovely bosom that he could not help noticing was rising and falling rapidly even once they stopped.

Furthermore, a single droplet of sweat was making its way down the centre of her chest of creamy white skin. God, she was a vixen! Even if she was reckless, something about that also caught his attention. She was of a different cut from the other debutants of the ton.

Just the mere fact that it was clear that she was not afraid of him though slightly shy also set her apart. As for her shyness, it made sense that she would be such; for one, he was not amicable towards her, and she did not know him, but he could not help wondering if she “knew of him.”

The whole ton saw him as mad and the only reason he still had a place in high society was his title of duke. Even so, this did not keep the ton from gossiping about him behind his back and making up lude and obscene stories about him. In truth, he was not mad at all, though he was reserved, straight forward (usually, he found the fewest number of words possible to get his point across), and rarely went to social outings if he could avoid it.

Although he could not be sure if this was his born nature or if he had adopted this persona to fit into the ton’s perception of him. Although he was not mad, it was one of his greatest fears

that he would succumb to madness someday. This was because his dear father had truly gone insane in the last few years of his life.

The slow demise of his father had begun after Theo's beloved mother had died of consumption. Watching her slowly suffocate had simply been too much for his father and his only relief was found at the bottom of a whiskey bottle. After she finally succumbed to her illness, his father lost all reason for living and eventually all his wits.

Theo hated thinking about these things and all the terrible memories he usually kept locked deep in the recesses of his mind. Being around the ton only served to have those memories flooding back to the surface because of how everyone acted around him.

On the other hand, Theo almost encouraged the rumours by doing nothing to contradict them but rather allowed the ton to think what they liked of him, only letting his closest friends know the real man he was.

Arriving home, Theo was now thoroughly famished, and the smell of breakfast wafting in from the breakfast parlour caused



him to quicken his stride. On reaching the breakfast table, Theo found Alexander already finishing his first helping of ham and reaching for another slice of buttered toast.

Normally this would have been considered rude to start before the master of the house sat down, but Theo and Alexander were like brothers to each other in heart, if not blood, and the rules of decorum did not apply between them.

“So, are you prepared for tonight?” asked Alexander between mouthfuls.

“What about tonight?” responded Theo.

“Don’t play that with me, Theo. You are perfectly aware that tonight is the ball being thrown in honour of the arrival of Viscount Ainsworth and his wife and daughter.

Theo let out a deep groan. His eventful ride had completely pushed the ball out of his mind.

“Oh no! You are going to this ball; besides, it is March, and you have not attended a single ball this entire season and promised to attend at least one this year! The season is halfway over now, and you are not about to slide your way out of it. Also, I have to find a wife this season so that I can get my mamma off my back, and I want your help choosing one.”

“Alright, all right. I said I am going, and I am, but don’t expect me to dance or anything of the sort. I will do my duty and introduce myself to Viscount Ainsworth and his family, but that is all,” said Theo emphatically.

“Fine, but in between your sulking, could you help me look for the woman to be my wife?” asked Alexander.

“How am I supposed to do that? You are acquainted with every eligible lady of the ton and always have them wrapped around your finger. Just pick one!” retorted Theo.

“I don’t want just any pretty girl that can smile and dance. I want a woman that is a good match for me and whom I can love the way I saw your parents. Their love for the other was so genuine, and they fit each other like a hand and glove. I refuse to have a marriage like my parents have. They hate each other and only married because it was a profitable match to further their social and economic status.”

“Alexander, the mere fact that you see this will ensure that you will not end up in a marriage like the one your parents share. I do not think you should worry about this too much,” said Theo.

“Thank you, Theo, but more to the point, I know you want the same thing someday, and don’t deny it. I’m sure you could find the right future duchess if you just try and not shun every woman that looks your way,” said Alexander.

“Sure, who would want to marry the made duke? The only woman signing up for that would be mad or just in it for the wealth and power that comes with the title. No thank you.” remarked Theo, barely concealing the pain in his voice.

At this, Alexander changed his tone from one of annoyance to compassion. “Theo, you know there is a woman out there who will see you for the man you really are if you only give someone the chance.”

“Speaking of meeting a woman, I did meet someone just this morning,” said Theo with a smirk.

At this piece of information, Alexander looked up from his plate in utter surprise. “What? Whom did you meet, and how did you do this early in the day?”

“Well, I met or, more accurately, almost got knocked off my stallion, General, by this young woman I have never seen before. She was riding at a fast gallop as we came out of the Evergreen Meadow and just barely managed to stay in her saddle herself.”

“OK, enough about the horses; who was she?” Alexander said.

“Oh, well to be honest, I do not exactly know. In truth, I did not introduce myself or allow her to tell me who she was before barking at her to go home,” Theo said sheepishly, suddenly very interested in perfecting the amount of marmalade on his toast.

“Theodore Winterbourne, how could you be so rude?” Alexander said, taking on his favourite persona of behaving as though he were his older brother, even though Alexander was but two years Theo’s elder.

“Well, yes, I mean, what was she doing out in the countryside unaccompanied by a proper chaperone and barely after dawn?”

“And you are sure you have never seen her before? Was she part of the ton or the working class?” Alexander asked.

“I am certain, and she definitely appeared to be a woman of fine breeding judging by the fineness of her mare and the quality of her riding frock. Not to mention the way she spoke.”

At this, Alexander had Theo start from the beginning and tell him everything about his encounter with the lady, and by the conclusion of the tale, Alexander stated that it very well could be Penelope Ainsworth, the viscount's daughter.

The whole ton had been talking about her and how she was considered the catch of the season due to her great beauty and status.

Although Theo was not about to admit this to Alexander, he was hopeful that he might see the beauty from this morning at the ball. Finally, there might be someone of note at one of these dreadful things; for now, it was time for business.

## Chapter 2

The two girls had always secretly whispered when they were alone that the last name Brown suited her well because she was as dull as dry, hard, brown dirt and dressed the same.

Still, she was a kind woman, a lenient chaperone, and not as overbearing as other girls of the ton had the ill luck of having. As was the norm, the chaise had lulled Ms Brown to sleep, and she sat there with her chin resting on her chest and gently snored away.

Penelope's mother and father were in the chaise behind them, giving the girls a moment to speak freely but in hushed tones to not rouse Ms Brown. Georgina was not related to Penelope, but they were as close as sisters and shared everything with each other.

"I am so excited for this night. Just think of it, Pen! Our first ball, I mean, yes, we have been to countless other balls, but that was back in our small town and must be ever so different from here.

I have always heard that the balls held in London are the most decadent and luxurious events one can ever hope to experience. I certainly never thought I would actually be able to go to one. Oh, thank you so much for taking me with you and your family this season.”

This was how Georgina always spoke. Like a spring chicken that had just hatched and was eager to tell her friends everything she had been thinking while cramped inside her tiny eggshell. That is not to say that Georgie, as Penelope liked to call her, was dim. On the contrary, she was very smart and always got better marks than even Penelope, who worked very hard at her studies at the finishing school they had attended together.

Georgina was also quite pretty but felt a bit like a delicate bunch of baby’s breath next to a crimson rose when she was around Penelope. Her hair was a straight sandy blonde, and her eyes a nice hazel colour, but her figure could not compare with Penelope’s luscious shape. Penelope never seemed to notice, though, and often complimented Georgina on how lovely she looked or how she wished her studies came as easily to her as they did Georgina.



“I know, I am excited about this ball, but truthfully, I am exceedingly nervous more than I am excited. I just feel like I will be out of place at such a grand affair, and everyone will have their eyes on me,” Penelope said.

“Oh, it is going to be wonderful, Pen. You know it will! The ball is in your honour. Well, your father’s honour, but you know the one that everyone will be craning to get an eye full of is you! Each time my handmaiden has returned from the market, she tells me about all the questions she gets about you. And do not fret; the entire ton will love you, and why would they not? This is you we are speaking of, and with that gown you are wearing tonight! How could they not?”

“It is quite stunning. I feel as though I am walking around in a gown made of delicate lily petals covered in diamonds from how it shimmers. And I adore yours! That soft purple really highlights your gorgeous eyes!” Penelope remarked. Speaking of eyes got Penelope thinking back on the rider from this morning and how she went hot and cold under his gaze when he looked at her.

“I do like it a lot. Thanks, Pen. I wonder if many gentlemen will ask us to dance. I so want to meet them all and see what they are like. They must be so fascinating!”

“Goodness, I hope I do not have to do too many dances. My feet already hurt in these new slippers Mamma purchased for me. I really should have heeded Ms Brown’s advice and broken them in yesterday. However, I am hopeful I will encounter that gentleman from this morning,” Penelope whispered, but not before checking to ensure Ms Brown was still snoring.

“Lord, I cannot fathom why you would wish such a thing! I already told you that he most likely is the mad duke. Who else could it have been? Every other eligible bachelor has already come to call on you at the house and make the proper introductions, aside from Theodore Winterbourne.

I sincerely think that you should do your best to stay far away from him. You should hear the things my handmaiden says she has been told of him. He is absolutely insane, and if he is there tonight, I would suggest you make an excuse to end the interaction as quickly as decorum allows,” Georgina stated emphatically.

Although it was not in her nature to be judgmental, she was worried about her dear friend from the stories she had heard of this duke.

At that moment, the chaise hit a bump in the street, waking Ms Brown from her nap. This came as a relief to Penelope because like herself, Georgina was very stubborn, and once she had made her mind up about something, there was little a person could do to change her view on the matter.

Aside from not wanting to argue with her friend, Penelope did not really have any proof to counter against what was said of the duke. Only that in her encounter with him, brief though it was, he appeared perfectly sane to her, and underneath his serious countenance, he also struck her as kind.

There was a gentle sweetness in his eyes and the overall feeling she got in his presence that did not bode of a man who had lost control of his wits. Penelope knew what a person suffering from such things was like because, in her old age, her grandmamma had got to where she did not know who she was, where she was at, or even her own son, Penelope's father, at the end. The family had kept it hushed up so as not to tarnish the family's image.

At long last, the chaise came to a halt, and the party climbed the steps to the ballroom entrance. The servants relieved them

of their coats, and the girls picked up a dance card and slipped it on their satin-gloved wrists. Soon after being greeted warmly by their hosts, Penelope was surrounded by young men bowing and craning for an opportunity to save a slot on her card.

Penelope stood on her tiptoes in hopes of catching her father's eye so that he might rescue her, but he merely smiled and continued his conversation with a lord. So, Penelope put her best foot forward and attempted to see the rest of what looked to be a long night of dancing with all the grace her family name required.

It was not that Penelope disliked dancing; in fact, she quite enjoyed it when her shoes were not striving to torture her toes. It was just that these men all so evidently looked at her as a prize to be won. While on the dance floor with them, they would mostly fill up the moments in her presence by trying to impress her with their masculine prowess.

None seemed to genuinely be interested in getting to know her or seeing if a love connection could be built between them. No, it was all a game to them, and she hated it. Penelope longed in her heart to find someone who would love her for her, even if she was just a poor milkmaid.

Someone she could build a life and a loving family with, and sadly this longing seemed ever more unlikely. It was clear to her that she was expected to accept an offer of marriage this season, and if she did not, her father would see to arranging a suitable match for her.

Georgina had stayed close to Penelope's side as much as she could, and when she finished the latest dance and saw the drained and concerned look hidden behind the sweet smile on her dearest friend's face, she said, "Penelope, I am parched. Can we please go avail ourselves of a glass of that delicious-looking punch on the table there?"

Penelope smiled gratefully and agreed. As they stood near the table, a man approached them, and Penelope took one more sip of her punch, hoping it would steady her for yet another suiter, and was ever so relieved to see an old childhood friend, Henry Carlton. Henry bowed, and Penelope extended her hand for him.

"Henry, I am so pleased beyond words to see you again. You do, of course, remember my good friend Miss Georgina Stuart. Her father is my father's business partner and lifelong friend.

She came with me on many of my trips here in London when we were young and visiting my grandfather's estate."

"Yes, miss, I do remember you, and it is an honour to see you again and looking in such good health." Henry bowed towards Georgina.

"Penelope, I was greatly grieved to hear of your grandfather's passing, though I am pleased it has finally brought you and your family here to London permanently. The ton life simply is not the same without you present! Would you do me the great honour of dancing with me this evening?" Henry stated, his voice dripping with flattery.

"I would be delighted. I have but one dance left on my card. The second to the last dance of the evening."

"I will count down the moments until then." And with that, Henry bowed and took his leave of the ladies, though not before kissing Penelope's hand and gazing into her eyes as he did so.

This concerned Penelope greatly. She and Henry had been close friends as children, and she cared for him as such but nothing more. And the way he had just spoken and looked at her made Penelope worried that he had intentions other than mere friendship between them.

Penelope was not in the slightest interested in Henry romantically, and on top of that, she was not attracted to him. He was barely taller than her, his hair was mostly gone from his head even though he was not one and thirty, and he liked to flirt with every woman he saw. Simply put, Henry was not the man she wished to marry.

While surveying the room, Penelope noted that almost everyone was staring at her, and in this perusal of the room, Penelope locked eyes with the tall, handsome man from her morning ride. Penelope instantly felt her heart jump and her cheeks flush.

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Theo stood on the opposite side of the room, giving himself as much distance from everyone else as he possibly could, and hardly anyone approached him unless they wished to speak with Alexander, who stood beside him.

The pair had arrived early to the ball and now all that was left of his obligations for the evening was to introduce himself to his new neighbours, the viscount, and his family. Then he could end this tortuous affair. He did his best to avoid making small talk, as it only seemed to further the rumours about him when he left. So why should he try to converse with any of them?

Having seen Ms Ainsworth arrive, it was clear who she was and that she was indeed the woman from this morning. He had secretly been taking note of her all evening. She looked like the perfect model of what a good debutant should be, graceful, polite, elegant, and charming, often making those around her laugh while conversing with her.

She also smiled very sweetly and seemed to put those around her at ease. Though what he found most curious about her was that when she was finally given a moment of quiet with her female companion, he saw relief wash across her face. Every other unmarried lady of the ton would have traded their best jewels to have the unrivalled attention that this girl had held



the entire evening, but it was clear to him that she was not basking in it.

When she noticed him, Theo could not bring himself to look away. He saw her smile again, though this smile appeared a bit less practiced compared to the one she had been flaunting the entire evening with all her suitors, and he also saw, even from the distance that he was, that she was blushing. This only served to make her look all the more enrapturing.

Alexander noted that Penelope and her friend were free, and he nudged Theo in that direction so that he could leave, as Theo had been waiting to do all evening. When the men were finally in front of the two ladies, Alexander as usual made the introductions.

“Ladies, might I have the honour of introducing myself to you? I am Mr Alexander Davenport, and this is my good friend, Theodore Winterbourne, Duke of Winchester.”

As Theo bowed, he saw Penelope’s eyes grow larger upon realizing who he was, but she hid this almost instantly, made a polite curtsy, and kindly responded.

“It is my pleasure to meet you, sir, and Your Grace. This is my friend Miss Georgina Stuart.” As she said this, Theo saw that with closer examination, she was even more attractive than he had before realised, but he pushed it from his mind, telling himself that it made no difference to him how attractive she was. He was not interested in anyone.

Another awkward lull passed as Alexander pulled Georgina into a conversation, and Theo realised that Penelope was waiting for him to say something. For the life of him, though, he could not think of a thing to say to this woman smiling at him, so once again, she kindly filled in the spaces he had left empty.

“Your Grace, if I may say so, you have a very beautiful estate. We passed it on the way into London, and its incredible architecture took me away.”

“Thank you, my great-grandfather had it built,” Theo answered. Usually, he would have found a reason to exit the conversation by now, but the way that this girl seemed so kind and yet not overly so that it was overwhelming, Theo was not in a rush to take his leave of her.

“So, have you always loved horses and riding, Your Grace?” Penelope asked with a twinkle in her eyes. This greatly surprised Theo. He would have never anticipated a lady of her status to mention the unseemly manner in which they met this morning. Simply put, it was downright scandalous and could put her reputation at risk if the wrong people had seen her with the mad duke.

But before he could even respond, she added, “I met your stable hand while out with my father as we were in want of the best place to find items for my horse, and he said that you were an avid horseman.”

At this comment, Alexander stepped in for Theo because clearly, he thought that Theo would not do himself justice.

“His Grace is an excellent horseman. He always bests me in our hunts and races. The way he is with the beasts is truly incredible. We should all go for a ride someday if you ladies would oblige?”

Theo gave Alexander a side look of irritation for volunteering him for an outing with these ladies when Alexander knew perfectly well how much he disliked being around people he was not already close to. On the other hand, the prospect of seeing Miss Penelope atop a horse with the wind pulling her petticoat tight against her body was exceedingly enticing.

“Oh, that would be lovely! Though I am not nearly as skilled on a horse as Penelope, I enjoy a good springtime ride,” Georgina exclaimed.

Before Penelope could say anything in agreement about the idea, the young man from earlier in the evening approached Penelope and reminded her of the dance she promised him, and she politely went with him, nodding to the others as she took leave of the group and headed for the dance floor.

As Penelope left, Theo relished the last look she gave him. Once again, this girl filled him with strange and unfamiliar sensations. In some regards, he was relieved to see her walk away because her interest in him was not something he was accustomed to, especially when it so clearly came from a place of kindness as opposed to judgement.

On the other hand, Theo found himself irritated that this man interrupted their conversation and seeing her on his arm gave him a twinge of jealousy that was entirely unexpected. More importantly, it was high time he made his introduction to the viscount and viscountess so that he could end his time at this ball and return to the comfort of his home.

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Penelope and Henry danced across the floor to a pleasant melody and reminisced on old times together as children.

“Do you recall when your shoe got stuck in the mud when we were playing tag, and we had to fish it out with a stick, and then when I had finally almost retrieved it, you pushed me into the mud?” Henry asked.

“I do remember that time, and I certainly did not push you into the mud; you lost your balance and fell!” Penelope exclaimed merrily.

“Well, that is not how I remember it or ever tell the story.”

Henry laughed.

“But I suppose there probably will not be any more games of tag now that we are both all grown. Also, Penelope please take me at my word that you really should not put yourself in the path of the Duke of Winchester. Do you not know that he is mad and can be quite dangerous to a chased and kind girl such as yourself! It is fortunate that our dance came at the time that it did, and I was able to rescue you from his clutches.”

“Henry, I can assure you I was perfectly safe, and although I appreciate your concern for me, my friend, the duke was merely being a respectful neighbour and introducing himself,” Penelope answered, hopeful Henry would drop the matter from there.

“Oh, sweet naive Penny girl, you are too kind-hearted as you have always been. The whole ton knows that the duke is crazy. Why I once heard that he locked a group of his servants in the

stables for two whole days, and when asked why he would do such a thing, he simply laughed and said that was where they wanted to stay for holiday!” Henry said.

“Oh, that is terrible, but Henry, you know how tales can get so twisted as they go through the ton that they end up so far from the truth of the matter,” Penelope stated.

“Well, I also once saw him at my favourite club, and he was gambling, and then he proceeded to eat some of his coins at the table and remarked how delicious they were. And that is just a couple; I could tell you countless more. All of which are true!” Henry stated with disgust.

And with this, he proceeded to tell Penelope about the duke’s father and that he had also been mad and passed the sickness to His Grace.

With that, the dance was finally at an end, and Penelope went to the powder room for a few moments of peace before the final dance of the ball. Shortly thereafter, they would finally be returning home. It had been a wearisome night, and Penelope now had blisters on her feet, and she just wanted to have

Bessie, her handmaiden, soak them in hot water and put a soothing salve on them.

She thought of her large feather bed with her silk sheets and warm cotton quilts and ached to fall into it and dream sweet dreams. Penelope thought back on her dance with Henry and how he had pulled her in closer to him than she preferred, and at a few points, she felt his fingers quickly brushing against the bare skin slightly above the hem of her dress on her back. It frustrated Penelope greatly that Henry would take such liberties.

For now, though, it was time to go and dance the final dance. As she left the powder room, the duke crossed her mind again, and she wondered if he were still at the ball and if perhaps they would get to speak once more before the night was done.

After that dance, Penelope went to find somewhere she could sit quietly and not be disturbed by anyone else until it was time to head back home. Penelope decided that the balcony overlooking the gardens would be the best place for her to find the sanctuary she sought, and she made her way out there after donning her shawl since it was slightly chilly that night.



That night, a cool breeze fluttered about and sent a lovely aroma from the flower beds, and the clear moonlight gave everything a peaceful ambiance.

Penelope sat on a bench surrounded by flowering vines that provided enough cover to lean back, look up into the stars, and breathe easily for the first time that night.

Moments later, Penelope realised she was not the only one who had thought to seek solitude outside and saw that Theo stood at the edge of the balcony. Penelope began to get up, but at that moment, he turned and saw her sitting there.

“My apologies, Your Grace. I did not mean to disturb you. I will not impose on your privacy further.”

The moonlight framed his chiselled jawline so perfectly that Penelope hated to have him exit her view.

“No need, Ms Ainsworth, please stay. You are not disturbing me, and I was just about to leave the balcony. I just needed some fresh air,” the duke answered. With this, Penelope relaxed again and expected him to leave, but the duke seemed to have little interest in returning to the ball. Instead, he made his way closer to where Penelope was seated.

“It is much nicer out here than in there, is it not? I can only imagine it must be overwhelming for you to be here,” Penelope stated, hopeful that this would break the silence. The duke gave her a quick look, and she soon added what she meant by that not to be misunderstood and offend him. “Being a duke, everyone must want your attention, which can get tiresome quickly.”

At this statement, the duke gave her a small smile, and Penelope was surprised that she had managed to say something that pleased him. That smile gave Penelope an unexpected thrill down to the base of her womb.

“In truth, I have never been much for balls, but I wanted to respect your family’s arrival and welcome you as my new neighbours,” the duke said gently.

“That is very gracious of you. It has been a pleasure to make your acquaintance *officially*,” Penelope answered, reminding him covertly of their morning.

After Penelope made this statement, there was a shift between them, and Penelope felt her stomach flutter with excitement as he appeared to be considering sitting on the bench beside her.

Although it was clear Theo was a man of few words, he was not as intimidating as she had thought at first. At that point, he appeared something of a mystery to her and one that she wanted to discover in more depth.

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But instead, he bowed to Penelope and wished her a good night. After Theo retrieved his coat, top hat, and gloves, he made his way to exit the ball, and once he was halfway down the steps, Theo came face to face with Rupert Lancaster.

Rupert had been his father's business partner and managed his many properties and tenants in his absence. They had been very close, and Theo's father had trusted Rupert implicitly. Because of this, in the last few years of his father's life, he had relied almost solely on Rupert to handle his business affairs.

Theo girded himself for an unpleasant encounter and donned his most stern facial expression. Theo had not seen him since his father had died, and Theo had ended his business dealing with Rupert, and he had left for France in an attempt to grow his wealth there.

Rupert was not pleased about losing the business with the Winterbournes, even though Theo had given him pieces of land and investments and took some losses in doing so. However, Theo did this so that Rupert could never come back claiming he had been unfairly treated by him. Still, Rupert made it clear to Theo that he was unsatisfied with his decision to cut ties.

“Well, this truly is a surprise to see you here, Your Grace!” Rupert stated.

“As you can see, I am leaving. The greater surprise is that you are back in London. I did not think you to ever return from France. Especially since you were so at home with the French by all reports,” Theo retorted.

“Oh, I just missed home and needed a piece of the wonderful ton but not to worry, I will be paying you my proper respects come morning and we can catch up more thoroughly.” With that, Rupert walked into the ball without even the curtesy of bidding the duke good night.

This concerned Theo greatly, for he had no desire to *catch up* with Rupert, but if the scoundrel were there, it was best to see what he was scheming and be done with it rather than be caught unawares. As Theo headed home, he decided he would talk this matter over with Alexander when he returned from the ball. If he was still awake at that hour of the morning, that was.

## Chapter 3

When the lark began his morning tune, he alerted Penelope that it was time to get up. She knew that even though she would have enjoyed sleeping in, Phoenix would not forgive her for missing their ride after she had been unable to for so long, aside from yesterday morning. It was colder this morning and looked as though the sky had plans to rain on and off for the entirety of this day.

However, in some ways, Penelope liked those days just as much as the sunny ones because they seemed to hold an air of mystery and adventure about them. As she donned her riding boots, her poor feet objected intensely, but she knew that once the wind was in her face and filling her lungs, she would forget about the pain in her feet.

After Penelope had groomed and tacked Phoenix, they set off in the opposite direction from the previous day, attempting not to encounter the duke once more and face his disapproval for not heeding him. Penelope had no intention of stopping her morning rides as they were her only time in which she was truly free and could be herself, out there on the dewy moors, as though anything was possible for her, and she treasured it all!

Not long into her ride, though, she found this plan faulty because, once again, she and the duke crossed paths on each of their horses. Penelope did her best to keep calm and not allow her nerves to take over and appear intimidated by Theo. In all actuality, when he looked at her with his serious and straightforward gaze, he set her entire body on fire and gave her tingles all over.

“I had thought you would have listened to me yesterday when I warned you about riding alone. The proper and safe place for you would be to be at home with your loved ones rather than placing yourself in a situation where you would have to explain why you are riding alone at such an early hour,” the duke admonished.

Usually, a comment like this would have annoyed Penelope, but once again, she saw that he was attempting to look out for her best interest.

“I was going to, but the morning was calling to me, and sweet Phoenix here insisted we go out again today,” Penelope replied as she patted her mare’s neck.

“And to be completely truthful with you, I had thought that taking this direction, I would not run into you so as not to ruin your morning, but obviously, that was folly,” Penelope said with a small laugh.

Theo did not laugh at this, but he softened his expression towards her and answered, “Ms Ainsworth, you have not ruined my morning at all; on the contrary, seeing your lovely face is a pleasure. I just worry that it is not safe out here alone for you.”

“While I appreciate this, Your Grace, it is just that I love riding and have been going out early in the morning since I learned to get on horseback and sincerely cannot see myself stopping,” Penelope replied meekly.

“Please call me Theo. I feel no need for such formality in such a setting as this. And your father is not opposed to this kind of behaviour?”

“Well, he and my mother tried for years to keep me from going out on my own but have long since given up changing



my mind. It simply proved fruitless for all their efforts. It may be best for you to do so as well. If we are to be friends, you will soon learn that one of my greatest faults is my stubbornness. Mamma often jests I should have been born a redhead,” Penelope remarked lightly.

After this comment, Penelope and the duke stared one another down as if testing the will of the other, but eventually, what started out as a stare of wilfulness between the pair shifted.

At the same moment, Penelope noticed how Theo gripped his stallion rein so tightly and wondered what it would be like to have his strong manly hands caress her. Only when he looked away did she snap back to reality and flush bright red at her bold and unladylike thoughts.

“Well madam do try to stay safe!” And with that, Theo tipped his hat to her, dug his heels into General, took off down the way, and Penelope went the opposite direction.

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Theo whistled one of his favourite tunes as he walked into the music room. He was surprised to realise what a merry mood he been in throughout the entire day after his morning ride. He had decided not to tell Alexander about his meeting with Penelope, but when Alexander mentioned seeking the viscount's permission to take Ms Penelope and Ms Georgina out riding, with a chaperone of course, Theo agreed to the idea.

As Theo thought back on his encounter with Ms Penelope this morning, he recalled how the sight of her had made him feel.

(Theo had felt his heart pounding within his chest and found himself looking at her supple lips, and when she subconsciously bit her lower lip, it caused him to have to look away so that he could maintain his composure and not pull her off her saddle and explore those lips for himself.)

The day took an unpleasant turn when James, the butler, announced the arrival of Mr Lancaster. Both Theo and

Alexander gave each other a knowing look before standing up to greet Rupert as he walked into the sitting room.

“Good afternoon, Your Grace, Mr Davenport. I hope your day has been a pleasant one so far. I tell you I may have overindulged last night, for I have been dealing with a splitting headache all day. I just am not the young lad I once was,” said Rupert.

“Mr Rupert, what did you want my assistance with today?”

“Ahh, Your Grace, straight to the heart of the matter. I have always liked that about you just like your father. God rest his soul.”

Theo stiffened at the mention of his father, knowing Rupert was inferring that he would descend into madness like his father had.

“Well, I will tell you the truth. I want to talk to you about coming to an agreement on returning back into business together as I did for your father for so many years,” Rupert answered.

“I told you all those years ago when we severed ties that we would never enter into any such arrangement again, and I meant it heartily. If that is all you come for, you may take your leave now, for I will not discuss the matter further,” Theo remarked sternly.

Not only had he meant it, but on top of that, he never trusted Rupert, for he had the persona of a viper.

“Well, since you are such a man of honour, I am sure you would not deny me the promises made by your father before he died.”

“What promises?” Theo asked suspiciously.

“The last large business deal I saw through for your father due to his poor health, bless him, he promised me a sizeable portion of the profits, and I have yet to receive it to this day.”

“That is ridiculous! You had no such deal. Now please leave, sir, before I have you thrown out,” Theo spat.

“Oh, is that so? Well then, I suppose it is good that I held onto the papers for this,” Rupert responded slyly as he pulled rolled-up papers from his satchel.

Theo unrolled the papers on his desk and saw that the snake appeared correct. Still, Theo did not believe it. He had gone over all the ledgers after he took over the estate and had never seen mention of this deal. Still Theo’s pride and honour demanded he look into it.

“Mr Rupert, I will investigate this matter further, and if this is true, you will receive all that is justly owed to you. For now, I will ask you to leave my home immediately and not return unless summoned. Good day sir!” Theo stated with authority and turned his back to Rupert.

Rupert bowed and took his leave. After he had left the room and his footsteps had faded from the corridor's marble floor, Theo finally turned around. He sank into his chair, and Alexander walked over to look at the papers with him.

“Damn, I detest that man! I do not understand why you are even entertaining what this scoundrel is claiming. You know it is just another one of his plots to rob you, Theo,” Alexander said.

“I know, but I would never dishonour my father by not at least doing my due diligence and examining it to see if a deal was made between them,” Theo answered sombrely.

“But even if he did, your father was in no position to make deals considering the state of his health by the end of his life, and Rupert knew that, and to do so was just pure thievery!” Alexander exclaimed.

At this, Theo gave Alexander a look that he knew meant to drop it, so in respect of his friend, Alexander did so.

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At teatime, Penelope and Georgina discussed the ball and all the events of the night before as they sipped their tea and enjoyed cook's freshly made biscuits.

The girls were surrounded by many fresh bouquets of flowers from Penelope's countless admirers; some had even delivered them in person. Some of the smaller bouquets were from Georgina's, though not nearly as many or costly.

"I wonder if Mr Davenport and the duke will follow through on their promise to ask us to accompany them for a ride one day this week. That would be so lovely! Even if the duke is mad, we will have Mr Davenport there to protect us and ..."

exclaimed Georgina.

"Georgina, stop this!" interrupted Penelope.

“Stop what? You do not wish to go out riding with them? I thought you would, considering your passion for the beasts.”

“No, that is not what I mean. I wish you to stop speaking of the duke as a madman and someone we would need protection from,” Penelope stated firmly.

“Oh, well, if you prefer that, Pen, of course, I will, though I must admit I do not understand your defensiveness towards him. But I will never want you offended, my sweet dear friend. You are just too kind, always believing the best in everyone,” Georgina answered.

“Thank you, Georgina. And to answer your quandary, I would not set your hopes on the ride happening, for the duke did not appear keen on the idea.”

“Oh, I see. Well, I am sure many others will ask us to promenade with them or go for picnics or strawberry picking when their season finally comes in!” said Georgina dreamily.



“Yes, I am looking forward to all the exciting outings there are to be had this season, Georgie,” Penelope agreed.

“And in all of these outings, one of them surely will set that stage for a marriage proposal for you and maybe if I am ever so lucky me as well,” Georgina stated, full of longing and a tinge of sadness. Penelope caught this in her best friend’s tone and gently probed for her meaning.

“Why do you say, ‘if you are very lucky,’ Georgina? I am sure you will receive proposals as well.”

“Pen, you know why I say this; please do not toy with me,” Georgina said, suddenly fascinated with the rim of her teacup.

“No, I do not, and I would never toy with you about such things, Georgina. Please educate me as to your meaning,” Penelope pleaded.

“I am no great beauty like you are, Pen. And on top of all, I do not come from a family of vast wealth as you do, so that greatly lowers my chances of getting marriage proposals when you put those two factors together,” Georgina answered, tears brimming over her hazel eyes.

“Georgie, no! That is not true at all; you will find the man you are meant to spend your life with and have a beautiful family,” Penelope assured, taking her friend into her embrace and stroking her hair in a comforting manner. It pained Penelope greatly to see her friend hurting so much and to have such a negative perception of herself. She wished that Georgina could see how wonderful she really was.

“This is not your fault by any means, so I beg of you not to take this to be my meaning, but at times, it is hard to be by your side when in the market for a husband because with you beside me, I rarely get a second look from the available suitors,” Georgina sobbed.

“I know you do not mean that unkindly Georgina, but I do not feel it has anything to do with you or your family’s wealth but rather that you can be so shy at times. If you would just come

out of your shell more, you would have ever so many suitors,” Penelope advised.

“It is just so challenging for me, and I do not even know that if I did, it would matter; for example, last night at the ball when I was talking with Mr Davenport, he dropped out of our conversation in the midst of it to gain your attention.”

“You know that is the second time in the space of half an hour that you have mentioned Mr Davenport. Georgina, are you interested in the man?” prodded Penelope. As soon as Penelope said this, Georgina’s entire face flushed a deep shade of red, and she looked down at her hands to hide her smile.

“Well, if I am being completely truthful, Pen, I do not believe I have ever met another man I find more handsome and impressive than Mr Davenport. I would dearly love to get better acquainted with him.”

Penelope knew better than to question her friend further because she was such a meek girl, but Penelope could tell she would likely fall in love with the man. Penelope only needed to find out if the interest was mutual between Georgina and Mr

Davenport. With that, Penelope began plans to make the match a reality for her best friend.

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Theo had tired of making excuses about why they should not ask for permission to ask Ms Ainsworth and Ms Stuart to ride and found himself riding alongside Alexander headed towards the viscount's estate. Once they arrived there and had been announced, the viscount received them both in his study. He looked surprised at their unexpected arrival but was polite, nonetheless.

“My Lord, thank you for allowing us a few minutes of your time. I am sure you have many important matters to attend, so we will not take up much of your time,” Alexander began.

“Thank you for your consideration. How may I be of assistance to you, gentlemen?” Mr Ainsworth responded.

“The duke and I wished to know if Ms Penelope and Ms Georgina were not otherwise engaged tomorrow at two hours past noon, would they be allowed to go for a ride with us. Under the supervision of a chaperone, of course,” Alexander stated.

“I know that Georgina is available for a ride tomorrow, but unfortunately, my daughter will not be as she has other obligations she must fulfil tomorrow.”

Both Theo and Alexander took their leave of the viscount and thanked him for his time. As they rode down the road, they spoke of their encounter with Viscount Ainsworth.

“Honestly, Theo, I find it a bit odd that the viscount behaved so abruptly.”

“I do not see why that should surprise you, Alexander. He was treating me with the same regard as all the ton does. I am the mad duke, after all,” Theo stated.

“I suppose I expected better of the man considering the way in which the two ladies under his charge behave with such grace and kindness. Would make you think he would reflect the same character.”

“Do not think about it; rather focus on your ride ahead tomorrow with Ms Georgina.”

“I am truly looking forward to it and the opportunity to get to know her better. She struck me as an intriguing lady,” Alexander answered.

## Chapter 4

“Penelope, I have so much to tell you about my ride with Alexander ... I mean, Mr Davenport! He is so utterly wonderful. I have never met a man that makes me feel as he does! But first, I have to tell you what I found out today!” Georgina exclaimed as she sat on the side of her bed and tried to take off her riding boots. She had little success with this task, which Penelope blamed on her excitement until her handmaiden came to Georgina’s aid.

“What did you find out?” Penelope asked.

“Well, as we were riding, and we had a bit of privacy from Ms Brown because she was struggling to get Fairfax to move at a pace to stay in step with our horses, Mr Alexander mentioned that he was told to extend the duke’s apologies for not riding with you today as well. But he hoped you would be available next time the opportunity arose.”

“I do not understand. What did His Grace mean by that?”

“That is precisely what I said to Mr Davenport. I said that you were a bit disappointed that the duke did not ask you to ride, especially since of the two of us, you are much more of the horse lover than I!” stated Georgina with much gusto.

“Well, what did he say?”

“He told me that both of them had come over yesterday and asked your father for permission for us to go ride today, and he had told them that I was available but that you were already otherwise engaged and could not. I have no idea why he would tell them this, but I am so sorry. I hope I have not said anything to him that I should not have!” begged Georgina.

“No, Georgie it is quite alright. I will simply have to discuss this with my father at length and see why this took place. For now, though, let us just work on our music together and then share some peace and quiet.”

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Over the course of the next few days, Penelope did not encounter the duke on her morning rides, and this concerned her, for she greatly longed to apologise for her father's deceit. She had spoken with him about it on the evening she had found out about it, and he bluntly told her that he would not have a daughter of his seen with a madman, duke or not.

Although she had done her best to convince him that Theo was not mad, he said he had seen nothing of him to make him distrust all the tales he had heard of the duke from every one of the ton.

The discussion had ended on a very heated note, but Penelope had seen it was clear that her father would not change his mind about Theo until he was given irrefutable proof that he was sane and a good man.

This, however, was not a major concern of Penelope's at the moment. She was more interested in ensuring that Georgina and Alexander had another opportunity to get to know each other better. And as if fate were also willing this to happen, the perfect solution revealed itself when Penelope's mother announced that they would be hosting a musicale that week.

Although Penelope did not enjoy the fact that she would be forced to play at this event, her mother also mentioned that the duke would be invited to the affair, and with that piece of information, Penelope offered to extend his invitation personally.

Her mother had given her a puzzled look but apparently chose not to question the matter, since normally Penelope would have strongly objected to performing. Besides, Ms Brown would accompany her to make sure Penelope was safe.

Penelope wasted no time accomplishing this task, so her father would not have time to learn of it and forbid her from delivering the invitation. So just a short time later that same day, she and Ms Brown arrived at the duke's estate. Upon closer inspection, the home was even more impressive than she had previously realised, and the interior was so stately it took a person's breath away.

The butler led them to the drawing room and told them the duke would be with them shortly thereafter. True to his word, it was only about fifteen minutes before he arrived to greet them, and even so, Ms Brown was already asleep in the chair.

“Good morning, Ms Ainsworth. I must say it is quite a surprise to see you here. Is there something I may assist you with madam?” asked the duke quietly. The deepness of his voice made Penelope ache, and she wished he would speak to her for hours in such hushed tones as he looked into her eyes. Perhaps his hands would wander across her body to more intimate areas than her gloved hand.

“As a matter of fact, you may. The reason for my visit is threefold. Firstly, my mother is hosting a musicale at our estate come this Thursday morning, and she wished me to extend you a personal invitation. I know such things are not exactly to your taste, but ...”

“I would be honoured to attend the musicale, Ms. Ainsworth,” stated the duke. This took Penelope by great surprise, and she struggled to hide this.

“Oh, well ... I am pleased to hear it. I also wanted to apologise for the way my father treated you the other day. I beg you to forgive him and not hold it against him. Unfortunately, when it comes to me, he is overly protective. On a different subject,

please ensure that Mr Davenport will be attending the musicale with you,” stated Penelope.

“Think nothing of it. In truth, I would be just the same if I were a father,” said Theo. Penelope got the sense that he was annoyed somewhat by her mention of his friend, almost as though the duke thought that Penelope was interested in Mr Davenport.

“Well thank you, Your Grace, and thank you for your time.” At this, she stepped over and tapped Ms Brown gently to alert her to their departure. They both said their goodbyes and left.

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The day of the musicale arrived, and the viscount’s estate was flooded with numerous people eager to take in Penelope’s musical talent. Penelope had fanned intense nerves about the upcoming musicale and had asked Georgina to practice with her so that by the time of the musicale, Georgina was just as proficient at the pieces as Penelope.

One of the first gentlemen to arrive was Henry, and Penelope greeted him warmly and promised they would find time to chat before the end of the day after all the guests had been properly greeted. Soon after, the Duke of Winchester and Mr Davenport came into the estate, and Penelope's jumped at the sight of the duke.

He made her feel as though she were being set ablaze, but Penelope did her best to push those feelings to the side and focus on her true mission of securing the match for Georgina with Alexander.

“Gentlemen, I am so pleased you decided to attend today!” greeted Penelope warmly with all her charm. It was a challenge to ignore how the other guests remarked that it was entirely strange to see the duke there. Others stated how he was rarely seen twice in one season.

Mr Davenport bowed to both ladies and said, “Thank you for the invite. I am so eager to take it all in!”

“Mr Davenport, Georgina told me about how you were so kind as to pluck every flower you saw while on your ride together the other day and then made a gift of them for her at the end,” Penelope remarked.

“It was nothing. Ms Georgina said she loved flowers, so I retrieved those we came across. The true kind one was Ms Georgina, for she was the one that was thoughtful enough to bring along a small bottle of wine and then shared it with me when I mentioned how parched I was that day.”

Mr Davenport, looking sweetly at Georgina, who by this point in the conversation was beaming and blushing hopelessly. Through all of this, the duke said nothing, and as much as Penelope tried to keep her eyes off the man, she constantly found herself peeking back at him.

Not once did he smile then, but she wondered what his full smile would look like or even a full hearty laugh from him. Or what it would be like to have him do those due to something she had said, like how Mr Davenport smiled and laughed with ease now.

Penelope's mother announced that it was time for everyone to find a seat and that the entertainment would begin shortly. As everyone migrated towards the other room, Penelope tripped on the hem of her gown and fell, causing her to land on her wrists. She had tried to catch herself.

Although Penelope had entirely planned this accident from the very beginning, she had not actually intended to injure herself, but unfortunately once she hit the marble floor, the pain in her left wrist told her that the injury was real. Penelope's face flushed with embarrassment, but very few guests saw her fall.

Those who witnessed the accident came to help her, but the duke was the first to her aid.

He knelt to the ground and said, "Ms Ainsworth, are you alright?" The worry in his voice was clear, and the way he was so close to her and hovered over her caused Penelope to wish that no one else was around so that he would pick her up and carry her away. How he looked at her again sent chills up and down her spine and pleasure throughout her body.

At that moment, Penelope's mother came over and helped her up. And before she could say anything, Penelope informed her

mother that she was too injured to perform but that she should have Georgina play in her stead.

“Georgina has been practicing with me all this time, and she will do marvellously, Mamma. I simply cannot play with the pain in my wrist right now,” Penelope explained. Penelope’s mother gave her a look of complete frustration.

“Alright, I suppose that will have to do. Georgina, prepare your pieces, and I will turn your pages for you. Penelope, be sure that you do not further strain your wrist. I will have the doctor attend to it first thing tomorrow if it is still ailing you.”

And with that, the viscountess strode up to the front of the room and began to explain to the rest of the guests that Ms Georgina would be the first to preform today.

While Penelope’s mother did this, Georgina gave her a look of sheer terror.



“Pen, you know how nervous I get playing in front of people. Why would you ever suggest such a thing?” asked Georgina.

“You play in front of me all the time and have practiced so diligently with me for this musicale. You will be amazing, Georgina. Now go up there; they are all waiting.”

“OK, I will do this ... but if it goes poorly, I shall never be able to face your mother again. You know how she takes pride in hosting flawless events.”

“Hush, you are incredible, and they will be basking in your talents, my dearest friend,” Penelope encouraged.

A few of the other guests asked Penelope as she passed them by if she was alright, and she assured them all that she was perfectly well. Just then, Penelope noticed that Mr Davenport was about to take a seat in the middle back, and she beckoned him over to her and said, “Mr Davenport, please come and sit here in the front. Georgina truly is a magnificent pianist; you will surely want the best seat to take it all in.”

Not only from this seat could he get a better position to listen to Georgina play, but more importantly, he would be able to relish in the sight of her sweet figure and watch her lovely small lips as she sang her sonnets and her fingers danced across the keys of the grand piano.

Shortly after the music had begun, Penelope made her way inconspicuously from the room in search of a way to ease the pain in her wrist. It felt as though it had started to swell already. After Penelope left the room, she noticed the duke soon followed her.

“That does not look good, Ms Ainsworth. Will you please allow me to take a closer look at it so that I can be sure it is not broken?” Theo asked. Penelope considered declining his offer but honestly enjoyed being at the centre of his attention, so she agreed.

Theo took Penelope’s small hand into both of his, and with his right hand, he pulled her silk glove off to see the state of her injury. He looked at her hand and gently moved it into various positions to test for any problems. This was the first time Theo had ever touched Penelope’s bare skin, and she struggled not to get caught up in the feel of his skin on hers or thoughts of what it would be like to feel those fingertips brushing over her body.

At that same moment, Penelope felt a surge of pleasure that caused her to lose track of the pain in her wrist. His hands made hers appear so small in comparison, and their toughness made her feel excited and secure. Then he moved her wrist a certain angle, and Penelope inhaled quickly, and her face winced in pain. Theo seemed to see this and let go of her hand instantly.

“I am not a doctor obviously, but I would wager that it is not broken, or your pain level would be much higher. I would just think it is slightly twisted and will be a bit sore and tender for the next few days,” Theo assessed.

All this took place with Penelope and Theo completely oblivious to the fact that they had been watched by such a furious peeper who had just stormed out of the house.

“Thank you so much for your help and consideration. I sincerely am very pleased you decided to come today. Although you are now missing the entire event due to my clumsiness,” Penelope said.

“I am perfectly happy. If I am permitted to be just as frank, you are the only reason I chose to make an appearance today. It had not a thing to do with the music, although I am sure you are a great talent, but I am sure you must be disappointed not to be able to show this to Mr Davenport,” responded Theo.

At this declaration, Penelope’s heart soured to the highest heights, but with the second part of his statement, she was entirely confused.

“Mr Davenport ... No, honestly my intention was for him to hear my friend, Ms Georgina play, definitely not myself. He seems very nice, but I do not wish to have his attention by any means,” answered Penelope with clarity.

“Oh ... Then why did you make a point of him being here today and coming to my estate to deliver the invitation personally?”

“Well, I cannot share secrets that are not mine to tell, but I will say that it was for someone dear to me that I did all this for,”

Penelope stated coyly and looked pointedly at Georgina and then Alexander, who at this moment seemed as though he were lost in a trance by her playing.

¶Theo followed Penelope's gaze and understood completely, as is typical of a man finally becoming enlightened to what a woman would have seen as obvious from the start. The realization that Penelope was not interested in his best friend for herself but for Ms Georgina washed over him like a soothing wave, and he relished it.

“I must say I have been disappointed to have not run into you out on my morning rides in the past few days. You missed so many opportunities to admonish my rash choices,” Penelope mentioned with a smirk.

“Well, I would have liked to, but unfortunately, business has forced me to stay up long into the young hours of the morning, and I have not retired until almost daybreak. Hence, I have had to forgo the pleasure of my morning rides,” answered Theo.

“I hope your business concludes soon so you may resume your rides. I know how trapped I feel on the days I don't ride Phoenix.”

“Yes, it will soon. Another reason I lectured you so when we first met about your riding alone is that I have had first-hand experience of the things that can go awry when riding,” Theo said.

“Oh, is that so? What happened to you, Your Grace?”

“This scar you see here on my chin is from a bad fall I had off my pony when I was but a lad. It is but one of many. I was terribly reckless as a child. I about killed my mother in the process.”

“I am quite shocked to hear that is how you got that scar!” declared Penelope.

“Humph, you thought I got it in a lapse of my sanity, correct?” Theo laughed.

“No, I did not ever think that, though I had been told something of the sort. What I meant, Your Grace, was that I would never have seen you as someone that would have been reckless even as a child,” Penelope answered with passion. This was a pleasant change for Theo and served to soften him all the more towards her.

“Will you please do me the great honour of calling me Theo? Please, Ms Ainsworth. I thought you had said we were to be friends, did you not?”

“Yes, I can do that. And Theo, let me start this friendship off on the correct path by stating once and for all I know you are not mad. So please do not hold that same defensiveness around me,” Penelope stated.

“Your words mean a lot to me to hear you say, Ms Ainsworth, but what makes you so certain of this?”

“Suffice it to say I have seen what madness is truly like, and you most certainly are not mad. It seems very clear to me that

all this talk of you being mad is just the cruel and untrue gossip the ton thrives on,” answered Penelope.

“Well, aside from Mr Davenport and my household servants, you may be the only other person in the ton who sees me as sane. Your kindness is very touching,” said Theo.

“You, *Theo*, are the kind one ...” answered Penelope softly.

With this answer, Theo leaned towards her, and as he moved his hand to her cheek, he brushed a stray curl from her face. Penelope’s breath quickened, and her lips ached for his, but just before he made contact with her mouth, he backed away.

Penelope had been so lost in the excitement of her growing passions and the warm heat stirring between her thighs that she had not noticed the sounds of the others moving from their seats, signifying the end of the musicale. Before anyone reached the area where she sat, Theo had disappeared from there, leaving Penelope to wish he were there still.



## Chapter 5

Henry stopped at his favourite gentleman's club after he had suddenly left the musicale. He raged as he thought back on what he had seen from the edge of the doorway, unbeknownst to either Penelope or Theo. He stood in the shadow of the doorway and covertly watched the pair as he seethed with jealousy. It was inappropriate for the duke to take such liberties with Penelope, hurt or not.

*Who was he to think he could take off her glove and run his hands all over her bare skin?* thought Henry. What angered him more about this scene was the clear attitude Penelope was behaving with. From her demeanour, anyone could see that she was infatuated with the duke.

*How could she allow herself to develop feelings for the idiot? She knows he is crazy. Besides, she is supposed to be mine. That was always the plan.* Finally, he could not bear it any longer and stormed out of the room, heading towards the exit where he yelled at the footmen to fetch him his horse.

Henry hated that he had not dared to face the duke and call him out for his improper behaviour, but for now, a glass of brandy would have to soothe his outrage. As he drank it down and started to pour a second glass, he noticed Mr Lancaster making his way over to him.

“Mr Carlton, tell me what is bothering you so? inquired Rupert.

“It is nothing; I am fine. I just needed a drink in peace if you do not mind,” answered Henry impatiently.

“Oh, I thought we were closer compatriots than that. Unburden yourself now, my good lad, and perhaps I can help,” Rupert urged.

After Henry had downed a third glass of brandy, he gave in and told Mr Lancaster all he had seen while at the musicale. Rupert was highly intrigued by the tale and told Henry not to share this information with anyone else, and to let him know if Henry saw anything else between the duke and Ms Ainsworth.

“I will go over there now and ensure everything is alright with Ms Ainsworth. I received an invitation to the musicale and was not going to attend, but now my conscious demands I see all is well with the poor child,” Mr Lancaster stated with an air of importance.

“Here, wait, I will accompany you ...” slurred Henry as he struggled to stand on his feet.

“No, my friend, you need to take a chaise home and clear your head. Not to worry. I will see to everything!” instructed Rupert.

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Penelope quietly excused herself after Theo was gone and went to the sitting room where she could have the privacy she needed. Initially, Penelope had simply intended to have a moment to calm down and regain her composure.

However, when she walked to the desk, Penelope noticed that the key for the sitting room was there and decided to lock the door behind her. After doing so, Penelope sat in the dim corner of the room in the biggest chair and pulled the soft cotton throw over her lap. Then she leaned back and closed her eyes.

Penelope found Theo there in her mind's eye, smiling down at her. And with her hand, she traced the apple of her cheek where he had brushed his fingertips. Then she began venturing down the course of her body, and with a feather light touch, she surveyed her neck, down her chest exploring each of her breasts.

She toyed with each of her nipples over the material of her dress, then reached within the top so she could caress them directly. Penelope's body began to awaken further to the purpose of her desires, and before long, her right hand was planted between her open thighs and playing in the wetness dripping down from her hot, peachy mound.

As Penelope stroked her most sensitive spot with her middle finger, her entire body climbed to higher heights. Upon the arrival of her peak, Penelope moaned out loud, and froze in utter ecstasy. Once Penelope landed back to the reality of the sitting room around her, she thought how she longed it to be Theo's hands and body causing her such complete pleasure.

Although she had never experienced anything with a man, she imagined it would be incredible in real life rather than what her inexperienced mind could come up with.

Penelope knew that her presence would be missed if she was gone much longer, so she folded the throw back in its original place, unlocked the door, and left it looking as though no one had ever disturbed its quiet solitude.

Penelope returned to where the rest of the party was located enjoying the small sweets laid out as well as the lemonade the cook had squeezed just before the musicale. No one seemed aware of Penelope's absence. Once Penelope made her way to where Mr Davenport and Georgina were standing, she was delighted to see how impressed he was with her talent. He was continually complimenting her skill, not just on the piano but also her lovely alto voice.

Georgina appeared completely elated, blushing the brightest shade of red at Mr Davenport's praise.

“Ms Ainsworth, have you seen His Grace anywhere?” asked Alexander.

“I did see that he left right before the end of the musicale. Possibly he did not wish to converse with everyone?” answered Penelope, trying to sound as natural as possible.

“That honestly does not surprise me, and I would say you are most certainly correct,” said Alexander.

“Exactly, he probably wanted to leave before he ran into me since he has obviously been avoiding me as of late!” barked a man Penelope did not recognise as he presumptuously inserted himself into their conversation.

“I do not believe that is the case at all, Mr Lancaster, but I will be sure to pass along your concerns with the duke, and he will certainly address you in due time,” said Alexander respectfully but also making it clear that he stood behind his friend.

“Ah, please forgive me. I do not believe we have officially been introduced, Ms Ainsworth. Alexander, do the honours,” stated the man, as though he were the master of the house.

“This is Ms Penelope Ainsworth and her good friend Ms Georgina Stuart. Ladies, this is Mr Rupert Lancaster, who has just recently returned from years in France,” stated Alexander.

“Ms Ainsworth, it is my absolute pleasure to make your acquaintance, but honestly, I am shocked to find that you would allow an insane man into your honoured estate.”

“He is not insane!” said Penelope and Alexander in unison. At this, Alexander gave Penelope a pleasantly surprised look that she would defend Theo after such a short time of knowing him.

“Well, Mr Davenport, I will just have to agree to disagree with you ... but, Ms Ainsworth, as for you, a young lady such as yourself cannot be expected to know such things. You are still so young and naïve,” remarked Mr Lancaster.

“Or perhaps I am blessed with the gift to see people for how they truly are. The duke is very kind and always polite. He is completely sane,” retorted Penelope. She said this with the expected decorum and subtly made her point clear.

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“Alexander, this evening is quite warm. Why don’t we go to the pond to see if we can catch some fish? We have not had a free evening to do so where the weather has been corporative,” suggested Theo, who had been in an extremely pleasant mood all day since the musicale.

“I think that sounds like a superb idea! I think we have not been able to fish since last October.” They both were eager to get to their favourite fishing spot on the pond. It was the same spot they had been sneaking off to since they were small boys, and Theo was hiding from their tutor’s dull lessons. After they had settled in and set their lines, Alexander began to tell Theo what he had missed after he left the musicale.



“I wish you had not rushed off so soon at the musicale today,” stated Alexander.

“I apologise. I just needed to leave when I did. What makes you say this, though? When last I saw you, it appeared that you were completely content watching Ms Georgina.”

At this, Alexander’s face reddened. “She truly is the most captivating creature I have ever beheld, Theo. I just wish she would make her feelings more clear. I cannot tell if she is just being polite towards my attention, or if she returns my affections for her,” said an anguished Alexander.

“I understand, Alexander. I think it would be best for you to pursue her boldly, and you will know for sure if she feels as you do. But if you want my opinion on the matter, I will say that she most assuredly favours you.” Alexander snapped his head up at this last piece of information, seemingly taken aback to learn that Theo thought this.

“Why do you say that, Theo? Do you know something? If so, you must enlighten me. I beg of you!”

“I do not know anything for sure. I simply say this because of the evidence my very own eyes provided. She lights up like a lantern every time you are around her. Furthermore, Ms Ainsworth is determined to set up the two of you,” answered Theo.

“How so?”

“She came here personally to ensure you and I attended the musicale, and she made statements today that led me to believe this.”

“You have no idea how much this delights me to learn that Ms Georgina could possibly care for me as well! Oh, speaking of Ms Ainsworth, I almost forgot to tell you what happened today.”

This led the two men to speak at length about the encounter with Mr Lancaster, how Penelope had defended Theo, and that Theo had not found any truth to Rupert’s claims of his being left out of business he had rights to per an agreement with

Theo's father. Then they both fell quiet, as each of the men was lost in his own thoughts about the events of the day.

As the night drew to a close, Theo retired to his chambers and finally laid his head to rest on his goose feather pillow, and he found his mind once again focused on Penelope.

All day long, she had been in the back of his mind, and he had to force himself to push her out of his head so that he could accomplish the tasks at hand. Now that he was finally free to let his mind wander wherever it wished, Penelope was at the forefront of his thoughts.

“God, how I wish I could have tasted her lips today!” Theo said out loud. Would she have returned his kiss, or would she have pulled away from him? Her eyes had told him that she wanted to feel his warm kiss as dearly as he did, but still ... Could it really be possible, or was it all just imagined in his head?

What would it feel like to pull her small waist into his broad body so that his manhood could have her pressed against him?

“Alright, enough of this! Where is that wash basin? I need to cool down and sleep,” said Theo to himself. With that, he washed his face and neck and forced himself to clear his mind and sleep.

There, Theo had thought to find himself free of tempestuous feelings, but instead, Penelope was at the centre of his dreams. In the morning, he awoke to his heart pumping ... and a sticky mess covering the spot in his sheets where he had been lying face down.

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The birds sang and alerted Penelope to the coming of dawn. Once she had washed her face and slipped on her riding clothes, she wondered if she would run into the duke that morning. Secretly Penelope hoped that she would see him and finally have time with him when no one else was around.

Perhaps he would even finish what he started yesterday and kiss her. Penelope had never been kissed by a man, aside from

on her forehead by her father and grandfather before he passed away, and she longed to know what it was like.

“Alright girl let’s see what this morning brings for us, hm?” said Penelope to Phoenix, who nuzzled her face against Penelope as if in agreement. They took off leisurely since Penelope’s wrist was still slightly tender, and she did not feel up to an all-out gallop this morning. After just a short twenty-minute ride, there he was at the bottom of the hill.

Theo was riding towards her. As soon as Penelope laid eyes on his handsome face, her heart flew up into the clouds, and she struggled to hide the huge smile he caused to spread across her face. How could he look so good on top of his steed that Penelope had to force herself not to stare at his sculptured form?

“Good morning, Ms. Ainsworth. I did not think you would have been out riding with your hurt wrist this morning,” greeted Theo.

“Ah, I was dying to get out into the fresh air and ride with Phoenix, but I am taking it easy today since it is still a bit sore. I am happy to see you out this morning. Did you finally

conclude all your business keeping you so late from your slumber?" asked Penelope with a sweet smile.

"Yes, I decided to leave it to rest and deal with that problem later since I have concluded the source of the matter. I am glad to hear your wrist is not troubling you too much. Do take care not to injure it further, though please."

"I will do that." Penelope laughed. "I think I am done playing matchmaker for the time being."

In an attempt to change the subject, Penelope remarked about the countryside, how lovely this area was, and that she had not been able to explore in this direction until this morning.

"I favour this bit of land; in fact, a particularly beautiful spot near here is a bit of a hidden secret. If you like, I can show you it?" suggested Theo.

“I would love to; that is so kind of you to offer to share your secret place with me!”

“Well, you are sworn to a solemn pledge that you will never reveal the magic of this spot if I take you there, of course!” answered Theo with a glimmer of mischief.

“Alright, but it had better be worth it!” answered Penelope. Theo smiled back at her, and they took off towards this secret place. As they rode side by side, each took turns sneaking a look at the other’s profile, and if they happened to look at the same time, one of them would bashfully smile and look away.

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Ten minutes later they came to a place where a few old trees stood guard near a babbling creek entirely surrounded by wildflowers, which blanketed the ground. Clusters of snowdrops sprang up and danced in the gentle breeze, along with happy cowslips, bright euphorbias, and countless other blooms in every direction.

The sight seemed to take Penelope's breath away, and she quickly dismounted from Phoenix. Theo watched her explore this beautiful glen further, and he did the same. After taking it all in, she turned around to face him.

“Oh, I have never seen such a marvellous place in my life. How did you know I would love wildflowers? Theo, thank you so much for sharing this place with me. It truly is as magical as you said!”

Theo simply smiled and nodded his head in acknowledgement of her praise. In truth, he was struggling to contain his wild beating heart because there, surrounded by all of nature's lustre, Penelope looked like a Greek nymph, and he longed to take her into his arms.

After enough time had passed for him to calm down, Theo tried to engage her in a topic of conversation. “I am sorry for the encounter you had yesterday with Rupert Lancaster. If I had known he was going to show up there, I would have stayed so that you did not have to engage with the man.”



“It is not your fault. I am not afraid of him. He reminds me of the old bulldog one of my grandfather’s servants had long ago. Full of bark with no power, but still he saunters about as though he owns the world and everyone is there to serve him,” commented Penelope. At this analogy, Theo laughed outright, and Penelope joined in with him.

“I have always described him as a snake the way he slithers about. He hates me and anyone that has anything to do with me because I broke business ties with him after my father passed. He has never forgiven me for taking away his golden goose, but I never trusted him.”

“I would have done the same thing in your position. I hardly know the man, and it is clear that he is not trustworthy and not worth believing a word he had to say.”

“Do you mind if I ask you to explain further about how you were so certain from the start that I am not mad, Ms. Penelope?” asked Theo.

“Not at all, so I do not usually share this with anyone, but my grandmamma lost her mind in her old age. It was terrible, and

I saw for myself what an insane person was like, and that just simply is not you.”

“I am so sorry to hear that. That must have been very painful for your family to go through. My father also lost his mind in his final years, which is why the ton assumes I am also mad.”

“On a different note, I will also say how refreshing it was to meet you, Your Grace. Although I am well-liked by the ton, I am not liked for who I truly am but for who they think I am, which is not the real me.”

“How so?” asked Theo.

“I am merely a prize for suitors to claim the victory of because I am the daughter of a viscount. You, however, were not treating me like the queen to capture in a game of chess but were interested in me as a person genuinely!”

“You continue to surprise me, Ms Ainsworth. In earnest, I have never met anyone quite like you!” said Theo as he leaned down, picked a flower, and offered it to Penelope.

As she slid the purple bloom in her hair, she responded and said, “As have you, Theo.”

Penelope’s voice was quiet and breathy. Finally, she looked up into Theo’s eyes, and when she did, he moved closer and leaned into her. Penelope blushed but held his gaze as the moment’s intensity grew between them. Theo tipped her chin back with his hand and leaned in to kiss her sweet lips.

She tasted so succulent, and he quickly followed that first kiss by many more. Penelope opened her mouth more, giving Theo access to explore further. By this point, his arms were firmly around her small frame, and her hands were woven into his lush wavy brown hair.

When Theo began to move his hands down to the curve of her back, venturing near her bottom, Penelope stepped back and inhaled deeply. Theo followed her lead and let go of his hold on her even though everything in his body burned to continue

further. Her cheeks were so red, and her lips were wet from his passionate kisses.

*“God, she looks so ravishing!”* thought Theo. No woman had ever aroused him the way this woman did, but it was more than the lust he had known in his youth for other women. His heart longed to be close to her, body and soul. He did not want just to have her body, he wanted to make love to her and be one with her, which was a desire he had never had before.

“I’m sorry I do not know what has got into me. The hour of the morning has grown late, and I really should go. Good day, Theo!” said Penelope in an embarrassed rush as she jumped onto Phoenix and took off before Theo could say anything in response.

## Chapter 6

“Penelope, did you hear what Henry asked you just now?” inquired Georgina. Around teatime that afternoon, Henry had come to the house and stayed to visit with them. Penelope had struggled to keep her mind on the conversation at hand because she had constantly found herself thinking about her time with Theo that morning.

Every time she did, her womb would flutter with excitement over the memories of his kisses and touch. In many regards, Penelope was mortified at her improper actions, but secretly she ached and yearned to kiss him again and be able to inhale his masculine scent again. Georgina’s question snapped Penelope back into reality, and she saw Georgina, Ms. Brown, and Henry staring at her.

“Please forgive me. I must have missed what you said, Mr. Carlton. Will you please repeat your question?” said Penelope.

“No need to beg forgiveness. I will always do anything you request! I simply asked if you and Ms Georgina will attend the ball Lord Collins is holding Saturday next,” stated Henry.

Penelope hated the way Henry now treated her with this overly sweet demeanour. He had never acted so obnoxiously when they were playmates in their youth, but now that she was on the marriage market, he was so fake towards her.

“Ah yes, I believe we have received an invitation for that, but I will have to ask Mamma if our schedule has us available that evening, and if so, I am sure we will be attending,” responded Penelope.

“If I may be so bold, may I request having the pleasure of your first dance that night if you can be there, Penelope?”

Before Penelope could think of a polite way to decline his request, she was rescued from having to give an answer by the interruption of the butler’s announcement of the arrival of the Duke of Winchester.

Theo strode into the parlour with confidence, and Penelope instantly felt her chest tighten as her heart pounded wildly. They all stood and greeted the duke formally.

“I apologise for my intrusion on your afternoon. I just wanted to ensure that Ms Ainsworth was alright and recovering quickly from her fall yesterday,” stated Theo.

“That is very thoughtful of you, Your Grace. I am doing much better today and expect my wrist to recover fully in a few days. Will you please sit down and join us for tea?” asked Penelope.

“No, I am afraid I have a prior obligation to attend but thank you for the kind offer. Mr Carlton, ladies, good day.” With that, Theo bowed and exited the room as quickly as he had entered it.

“Well, that was odd. If that does not confirm how insane the duke is, I do not know what will,” snarled Henry as he looked in the direction the duke had gone.

“Mr. Carlton, please stop! I do not feel right gossiping about someone like this. Let us turn to a different topic ... for example, was not Georgina amazing yesterday at the musicale. In fact, would you please grace the three of us with one more piece Georgina?” begged Penelope.

Georgina looked as though she had wanted to refuse but saw the anguished look on her best friend’s face and said, “Of course, I would love to play something! Mr. Carlton, will you be so kind as to turn my pages?”

“It would be my pleasure, Ms. Georgina, as it is the wish of my lady Ms. Ainsworth to hear you play. I could never think to decline your request,” obliged Henry, eyeing Penelope hungrily.

As Georgina played and Penelope was finally given time to think without interruption, her mind returned to the duke again. Henry’s words about Theo had angered her greatly, and hiding this from her face was challenging. As the melody from the piano continued, Penelope realised that in her heart, she felt the pangs of missing Theo and ached to be alone with him again.



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Once Theo had mounted General, he found himself lost in thought on his short visit to Ms Penelope's home. Theo had not expected to see Henry there as well.

*“Of course, that weasel would be there creeping into places he is not needed or wanted.”*

When Theo had seen Henry sitting next to Penelope on the lounging sofa, his jealousy had risen within him, and he had direly wanted to pull him away from Penelope's side. At the same time, he admonished himself for thinking that he would have been fortunate enough to have a moment alone with Penelope this afternoon.

He had intended to apologise to her for his actions this morning, but as this was impossible, Theo had needed to scramble for an alternate reason for his unexpected visit. All this left Theo entirely frustrated, and he decided to go for a long walk once he returned home before going in to finish the ledgers for the day.

That evening, Rupert once again came to Theo's estate, and this time the duke was at home, so he, of course, received Mr. Lancaster.

"Well, finally you are "home," and we can take care of this matter that is long overdue!" snapped Rupert without even taking a moment to greet Theo properly.

"If you are implying that I have been avoiding you with that remark Mr. Lancaster, then I will just once tell you this and not discuss it further that I most certainly have not been doing this. You could have done the proper thing and waited for me to invite you here to discuss this matter, but you chose not to, and as such, have missed me," replied Theo with calm authority.

"Well, I will agree to drop that, but what of my money? You owe me quite a large sum, and it is high time you handed it over to me, my young sir," demanded Rupert.

“Sir, you will address me properly going forward, or this meeting will be at an end. Now as for this matter of a final deal with my father, I have thoroughly investigated it and find no proof whatsoever of any such deal taking place,” stated Theo.

“That is outrageous and absolutely nothing less than highway robbery! How can you claim such a thing? I gave you the evidence of this deal. What else do you need?” roared Rupert.

Theo refused to lower himself to the snake’s level by raising his voice, so he pointedly kept his voice low but increased the sternness of his tone as he spoke. “My solicitors and I have gone over your documents at length, and it has been made clear that they are not legitimate. That is *not* my father’s signature.”

“How can you claim such a thing? It also has his seal on it.”

“That is true, but you were the one entrusted with my father’s seal in his final days, so that proves nothing. If you continue to prolong this matter, I will take it to the authorities and have you charged with fraud. Test me at my word and see sir,” said Theo.

At this statement, Rupert seemed to back down and attempted to recover his emotions. After several deep and laboured breaths, he managed to continue, “In that case, the least you can do is to afford me my old position managing your estates again as I did for your father.”

Theo was shocked at the gall of this man.

“Mr Lancaster, I will only say this once: I will never have any further business dealings with you for as long as I live. You are the most vile and untrustworthy man I know. I am aware of the kind of dealings you took part of in France and will not shame my family name by association with you,” stated Theo.

“Well, I never ...” remarked Rupert, but before he continued, Theo interrupted him.

“Good day, sir. James will see you out.” And with that, James, the butler, escorted him out of the house. Theo sighed with

solemn relief that his conversation with Rupert was done, but he could not escape this nagging feeling that his troubles with the man were not over yet.

He poured himself a glass of brandy to calm his heated nerves and drank it down. As he sat the glass back on the tray, there was a knock on his study door. After Theo called for them to come in, the maid entered carrying a small note. After she delivered the note to Theo, she curtseyed and left him to read it in peace.

Theo was very curious to see what the contents of the note were. It was not marked on the outside and had no seal but just a black ribbon tied and secured with wax to ensure only the intended recipient opened it. After opening it, he saw just a short sentence penned stating:

*Thank you. How did you know I love seven wildflowers?*

For a moment, Theo was confused as to what this meant. He knew that it must have been penned by Penelope, but what was she trying to communicate to him through this? Then it suddenly dawned on him that this was the first thing Penelope had said to him when they were at the glen this morning, and

she must be covertly trying to tell him to meet her there at seven that evening! That was in just twenty minutes, and it would take him ten to reach the glen.

“James!” called Theo.

“Yes, Your Grace?” answered James.

“Have General saddled at once.”

“Of course, sir,” responded James as he bowed.

Theo rushed to change into clothes suitable for riding and soon was outside and had mounted General with Penelope’s note in his pocket. On the way there, his mind was filled with thoughts of that morning at the glen, and he told himself he would show restraint this evening and not cross any boundaries as he had before with Penelope, no matter how much he dearly wanted to do so.

Finally, Theo arrived at the glen, but no one was in sight. He pulled his pocket watch by the chain out of his vest to verify that it was indeed just two minutes past seven in the evening. *“Have I misunderstood the message? What else could it have meant?”* thought Theo, his mind and heart racing. Just then, Penelope stepped into view from the shadow of the large sessile oak she had been standing by.

“Theo, thank you so much for coming and meeting me here so quickly! I have been so nervous all day since we were here this morning, and I rushed off so quickly this morning we did not have a chance to talk,” stated Penelope as she paced back and forth, twisting an oak leaf in her hands.

“Of course, I would never dream of not coming. Is anything wrong? Are you alright?”

“Yes, I am well. I just felt I needed to talk to you about this morning. I am so sorry. I do not know what got into me. I have never done anything like that ever before. I do not want you to have the wrong impression of what kind of woman I am!” pleaded Penelope.

“Penelope, no, you have nothing to apologise for. I am the one that was in the wrong. I came to your home this afternoon to ask your forgiveness for taking such liberties with you this morning!”

“Well, perhaps we should just agree that we were both at fault.” Penelope smiled.

“I suppose that is fair, though I would prefer to shoulder all the blame, but as I know you to be a strong-willed woman, I know that will be a useless road to venture down.” Theo chuckled. After this, both of them relaxed and took a deep breath.

“Well, since we are here, we really should enjoy the sight of the evening as the sun starts its final journey for the day,” suggested Theo as he sat down in the lush grass. After he sat himself, he removed his jacket and laid it next to him so that Penelope could sit without soiling her riding habit.

Penelope happily sat next to Theo, and he found himself at peace for the first time that day, and as he listened to the



calming sounds of nature around them, he realised how happy he was to simply be there with Penelope.

“I truly do love this place. It is so pleasant and joyful here,” remarked Penelope.

“I feel the same way. I have spent countless hours in this very spot, especially in my father’s final days; this is where I would escape to.”

“I know that must have been a very trying time for you. I am so sorry you went through such sorrows, Theo,” said Penelope.

“It was very challenging, but the worst part was how the ton treated my family and me. My father had always been highly respected, and then just like that, they all turned on him and judged him. They have done the same for me because I refuse to fit into their box,” stated Theo with pain and anger in his voice.

After a pause in which he took a few deep breaths, he told her the entire sad tale of how his mother had died, his father's drinking, and eventually, his madness and death.

"I have never understood how people can be so cruel! Oh, Theo, this must have pained you so terribly to go through all of that," stated Penelope.

"I have never told anyone this, but my greatest fear is that I will one day lose my wits just as my beloved father did."

"I do not believe you need worry about that. I am not an expert by any means, but from what you have told me, it does not sound like the kind of thing that would be passed down from one generation to the next."

Penelope put her hand on his back and rubbed it to comfort Theo. When she did this, he looked at her and said, "Thank you for all your kindness to me, Penelope. You truly are a saint." Penelope blushed at his statement, and before she could refute it, he leaned over to her and kissed her forehead. She

seemed hesitant at first, but she lifted her head to him so that her lips could meet his.

She pulled him closer into her and with her hands explored his chest, back, and muscular arms. They kissed this time much less shyly than this morning, and when they started to pull back so they each could take a breath, Penelope gently bit Theo's lower lip and then lightly licked his cheek with her tongue, making her way to his right ear.

Then she took his soft earlobe into her mouth and sucked on it while breathing her hot breath into his ear.

As she did this, Theo groaned in ecstasy. She lit a fire in him that could not be doused no matter how many kisses he planted on her smooth sweet skin. He knew the only way to tame these flames was to explore her wondrous body entirely, but Theo would not allow himself to go that far with her. Not here, not today!

This time it was Theo who pulled away, but it was more gently and less abrupt than this morning.

“Although I have nothing to compare it to, the way you kiss is like that of a Greek god ... or at least how I imagined they would kiss from the books I have read when I am alone late at night,” stated Penelope as she attempted to catch her breath and ease the heated passions inside her body. This made Theo throw his head back and laugh heartily, and she meekly laughed as well.

“Well, that is definitely something I have never been told before. You know, the first time I saw you, I thought you looked like a Greek nymph, so I suppose we are two peas in a pod!” answered Theo.

Penelope sighed with disappointment and stated, “Hm, it is the last thing I wish to do at the moment, but it is beginning to get dark, and if I am gone much longer, it will cause concern, so sadly I must go now. Thank you for meeting me here and confiding in me with your past, Theo.”

“I wish you could stay for hours more, but you are right. It is growing late. I will accompany you for a way down the road to ensure your safe return, though.”

“Thank you so much,” said Penelope.

## Chapter 7

“Penelope, wake up! Come on; you will never guess what I have! Come on, please open your door, Pen,” Georgina pleaded, who stood outside Penelope’s chambers.

It was just barely dawn, and even though Penelope usually would already be up and preparing to ride by now after the events of yesterday evening, she had found sleep an elusive thing last night once she got into her bed. Her mind had been filled with the events of the day, and it was not until she had taken matters into her own hands did she finally achieve relief and, shortly after, the slumber she needed.

“I am up, Georgie; just give me a moment. I will open the door.” Penelope yawned as she stood with a stretch, slipped into her robe, and walked to the door where Georgina waited impatiently. It was hardly open a fraction of a moment before Georgina had burst into the room holding a letter that she waved joyfully in Penelope’s face.

“Read it, read it! Oh, you will never guess what it says! It is so perfectly perfect, Pen. I could just fly into that lovely sky.”

Georgina danced around the room, having bestowed Penelope with the letter. Penelope looked out the window and saw heavy rain clouds and inwardly smiled, knowing her sweet friend was obviously not looking at the same sky that was currently present but rather the bright rainbows in her mind. Penelope had never seen Georgina so elated, so she was quite interested to see what this letter held. Inside the letter, it read:

*“Dear Ms. Georgina,*

*I t would be my great pleasure to accompany you this afternoon for your daily promenade if you are not otherwise engaged today. My mother and aunt will serve as chaperones and perhaps we might go for a hot beverage afterwards as the day appears to be a chilly one ahead. I look forward to your gracious company!*

*kindest Regards,*

*Mr Alexander Davenport*

After she had read the letter, Penelope looked up at Georgina and smiled at her.

“Isn’t it just the sweetest, most lovely letter you have ever read? And I just *adore* his penmanship. I have always felt that you can tell a lot by a person’s penmanship. Do you not agree, Penelope?”

“It is a wonderful letter. Have you answered him yet?” asked Penelope.

“Oh, of course. I did that within two minutes of reading the letter, and I said you would come with me!”

“What? Why did you say that, Georgina?” said Penelope incredulously.



“Oh, you must, you simply must, Pen. I could never be brave enough to go alone. What if I cannot think of anything to say? You know how shy and stupid I can get. Please come, Penelope!” Georgina implored, as though on the brink of tears.

“Of course, I will go with you if you wish, Georgina. I just thought you would want to speak with him alone and get to know him better.”

“I do, but I need your help. Thank you so much; now hurry up and do not take too long on your morning ride. I need your help selecting the perfect attire for today, from my slippers to my jewels. You have such flawless taste!”

“That is very sweet of you to say, Georgina, and yes, I will not be too long on my ride.”

Penelope was disappointed that she did not see Theo during her ride but thought it was probably for the best since Georgina was impatiently waiting for her to return at home.

The event of finding Georgina a suitable outfit was an affair that took nearly all morning and some of the afternoon. At one point, Penelope thought dressing the queen would probably be simpler, but finally, Georgina was satisfied and ready for her outing with Alexander.

“I am so pleased you could come today, Ms Georgina. And Ms Penelope, it is wonderful to see again,” Alexander said as they met for their promenade. His mother and aunt walked far enough ahead of the couple so as to give them privacy to talk, and Penelope tried to do the same, but Georgina would not let go of the vice-like grip she had on Penelope’s arm.

“It is a pleasure to see you as well, Mr Davenport.” Penelope paused to allow Georgina the opportunity to lead the conversation, but after an awkward lull, she decided to do her best to get Georgina to open up and show her authentic wonderful self to Alexander.

“Georgina, tell Mr Davenport about when we went to Scotland and saw the highlands. We had such marvellous adventures there!” Penelope prompted, and with that, Georgina began

regaling him of their many stories of their time in the highlands.

Georgina was an avid storyteller, and the fact that she had the habit of stretching the truth just a hair only served to further enrich the story. Soon Georgina was so invested in the tale that she did not even note that Penelope had fallen about twenty paces behind her and Alexander after stopping to don her gloves.

Walking slowly behind them gave Penelope a chance to observe the couple together. She could not help thinking how adorable they were and what a beautiful match they would make for each other. If only Georgina would let go of her shyness so that Alexander could truly see what an incredible woman she was. The two made Penelope think of Theo and how she wished she had seen him on her ride this morning. What would it be like to go on walks with him and talk about anything they wished?

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The night of the Collins ball had finally arrived, and both Penelope and Georgina were eager to spend an enchanting

evening. Alexander had called on Georgina almost daily, and they were now officially courting.

Since that first promenade in the park, Georgina could be with him without the safety of Penelope there with the two of them, and they appeared to be very much on the brink of falling in love with each other. Penelope had never seen Georgina so happy.

She constantly had this sweet glow about her and walked around each day as though she were floating on pink and lavender coloured clouds. It made Penelope very pleased to see Georgina so elated.

She, on the other hand, had to endure countless hours of the attention of every bachelor of the ton—every single one but the one she longed to have call on her. She knew he did not call on her because her father had made it painfully clear that Theo would not be allowed to pursue her, but still, she yearned to be with him.

Since he also had an invite to this ball, she and Theo could interact, and nothing would appear untoward. At long last, the chaise halted in front of the Collins' estate, and the footman

assisted Penelope in stepping down. She wore a stunning light blue gown with hanging jewels that gently made the slightest tinkling sounds as she moved.

Penelope's handmaiden had really outdone herself with Penelope's hairstyle for this evening as it was gracefully tied into a bun that looked like a beautiful flower in full bloom, and the jewels in her hair also hung and swayed with each step.

The entire time Penelope was getting ready, she thought about how she had heard Alexander mention, in passing conversation with Georgina, that light blue was Theo's favourite colour. Hence why she had intentionally selected this dress for tonight.

Would Theo notice her tonight, and would he possibly even ask her to dance? Penelope doubted this since it was obvious that he did not like dancing, but still, she held the slightest pearl of hope that she might have the opportunity to dance in his arms tonight.

“My lovely lady, I am so beyond pleased that you are in attendance tonight! And if I may be permitted to be so bold, to say how utterly enchanting you look this evening,” Henry

exclaimed, not wasting a moment to steal Penelope's attention. Penelope forced a polite smile for Henry.

“It is good to see you tonight as well, Henry, and thank you for your kind words; you are too sweet to me, my *friend*,” Penelope stated, doing her best to emphasize they were friends and nothing more!

“Never, it is impossible to be too kind to you, my fairest! Since you have come tonight, may I have the pleasure of your first two dances?” Henry asked.

Unfortunately, as Penelope did not have anyone on her dance card, she had no option but to allow Henry the dances he desired. As Penelope allowed him to write his name on her card, she looked up and saw over on the other side of the room the man she wished to fill every space on her card, the duke. Theo was not looking at her, for he was conversing with Alexander, but she hoped to catch his gaze before long.

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Shortly after Penelope had looked away, Theo's eyes had found their way over to her lovely small form.

*“Hm, how is it that every time I see her, she seems even more beautiful than the last; she tortures me like none other!”* Theo also saw how the weasel, Henry, had been sure to secure his time with Penelope. It vexed him how Henry seemed so familiar with Penelope, as though she belonged to him.

Although many other young men commonly swarmed her like a bunch of bees around a garden rose, none were as presumptuous as Henry. At times, Theo had wondered if Penelope was also interested in Henry, and the thought of her with that vermin of a man sent him fuming.

When Penelope and Henry began dancing and continued on the second one, Theo was drowning in jealousy. Theo felt his jaw muscles flexing and his fists tightening in an attempt to deal with his emotions. Seeing Henry's hands on Penelope was just too much for him to stand by and watch for another entire dance, so Theo made his way to the punch table and took his sweet time choosing a glass.

Finally, the dance was done, and Theo covertly listened to their conversation from about seven feet away, where they both sat on a large, cushioned bench. As he listened, he heard ...

“Dear Penelope, I have never enjoyed any two dances more than I did those ones. I just had the immense pleasure of dancing with you! You are such a graceful dance partner,” Henry stated.

Penelope looked so uncomfortable with the way Henry constantly tried to flatter her. Why could he not just act as he did when they were young and be a good jolly friend?

“Thank you, Henry. You are a proficient dancer as well. What did you think of the opera that you attended last ...” asked Penelope hoping to change the subject, but Henry interrupted her before she could finish her question.

“Ohh, Penelope, forgive my rudeness for interrupting you, but I cannot bear to speak of the opera at this moment. Not when my heart is bursting with passion and excitement,” Henry exclaimed.



“Whatever is it, Henry?” asked Penelope, who was a bit startled.

“My sweet, wonderful, perfect Penelope, can you truly not know? Surely you must! I am madly in love with you, and I would dare say I have always been. Will you not acquiesce to marry me? If your father will agree, of course,” declared Henry with extreme intensity as though his life depended on Penelope’s answer.

At this outburst, Penelope was utterly shocked; although she had been aware that Henry might consider someday asking something like this, she had always thought that she had made it clear enough that to do so would be useless.

“Henry, although I am very flattered and honoured that you think of me so highly and would consider me to be your wife, my feelings for you do not go beyond friendship,” Penelope stated as gently as she could.

“Penelope, that cannot be the truth. I have seen the way you look and smile at me. Perhaps you need some time to think this over and know your true feelings on the matter. I am certain we are perfect for each other!” implored Henry.

“Henry, I do not need any time to reflect on this. I am positive on this; my heart and mind agree that we are only ever going to be friends and nothing more,” answered Penelope with a slight tone of frustration.

“But my dearest Penelope, surely you will reconsider I—”

Now it was Penelope’s turn to interrupt. “Henry, please stop calling me by such terms of endearment. It is not appropriate or wanted. I will not reconsider, so please let us drop this subject.” At this moment, Theo chose to make his presence known and walked the distance that separated him from Penelope and did something he had not done in years.

“Ms Ainsworth, might I have this dance?” asked Theo as he bowed as if completely unaware of the proposal he had just intruded in on.

“I would love to, Your Grace, thank you.” And with that, Penelope stood up, handed Henry her glass of punch, and took Theo’s hand as he led her to the dance floor. The music began shortly after all the couples had arrived at their places. A lovely waltz began, Theo expertly guided Penelope through the dance, and she felt like she was gliding across a still shimmering lake on a sunny summer day.

“Are you quite all right, Penelope?” enquired Theo in a quiet tone so that the other dancers would not hear him address her so informally.

Before answering, Penelope gave Theo a grateful smile, secretly squeezed his hand that held hers a bit tighter, and replied just as quietly, “Yes, Theo, I am all right, although a bit unnerved. I know you do not prefer to dance, so if you would rather stop, we could now.”

“I would rather be dragged away by wild horses than let you leave my arms, Ms Penelope,” Theo stated as he pulled her into him slightly. Penelope looked up into his deep blue eyes and saw that he was not toying with her in the slightest, and her cheeks flushed in pleasure and surprise.

“I have missed our time together in the past few days. We shall have to come up with a better method of meeting than leaving it to chance,” said Penelope.

“Shhh, not here, we will do so, but there are too many listening ears and watchful eyes to discuss such things now. After this dance, I will leave you and then in fifteen minutes tell your father that you have a terrible headache and ask if you may leave the party early. Go home and make yourself ready for bed, and wait for my signal,” whispered Theo so quietly that Penelope struggled to hear everything he said, or was that from her pounding heart?

After the dance ended, Penelope did exactly as Theo had instructed, and when her father asked if she wanted him to accompany her home, she assured him that it was nothing that a good night’s sleep could not cure and kissed his cheek good night. The entire ride home seemed to last an eternity even though in reality it was less than ten minutes.

Once Penelope arrived home, she found it quiet as a pub on Sunday morning because all the servants were given the rest of the night off since the entire household was expected to be

gone until late into the night. Therefore, the servants would not return for their duties until the next morning.

Shortly after Penelope was ready for bed, and just moments after laying her head onto her feather pillow, she heard a tapping on her window. Penelope looked up and found Theo in the old tree outside her room. She jumped out of bed, wrapped her shawl around her, and quickly went to open the window.

“Theo, oh my goodness. I would have never guessed that you would climb up this tree. Come in before you fall to your death!” remarked Penelope with a huge grin as she helped Theo climb into her window.

Theo stood there for a moment, just taking the sight of her in. Penelope looked so enchanting with her hair cascading down around her in such magnificent locks of brown almost reaching her waist.

In the moonlight from the windows, her skin looked a milky white, and her shawl barely served to conceal her perky breasts. After the moment passed, it seemed as though time sped to twice its normal pace as the hungry couple rushed into

each other's embrace and drank ardently from each other's kiss.

Penelope wove her arms through his and clung to his strong back tightly as Theo ran his hands along the course of her body down to her round bottom and grabbed each cheek in each of his hands. Then he moved his right hand up to her head and filled it with her ample chestnut curls.

Finally, he gently pulled her head back and looked down into Penelope's pools of blue eyes, softly kissed each of her plump red cheeks, and then one more on the centre of her forehead.

"Oh, Penelope, you cannot know how you make me feel. I have never felt as alive and content as when you are in my arms. I know I should not behave this way, but my heart aches when I am away from you," sighed Theo.

"I feel the same way, Theo. You set me aflame. I dream of you constantly. You are on my mind day and night," replied Penelope as she buried her head in his chest.

“I want you to hear me say this out loud, Penelope, so there is no doubt in your mind. What I feel for you is not just the lust of the night that burns hot and in the morning is nothing more than ash to be swept away and thrown out. My feelings for you run deep, sweet, beautiful, Penelope Ainsworth,” declared Theo as he looked her square in the eyes.

“I feel the same for you, Theo, and if I am being completely honest, I have been falling for you from the first time I met you. You are the man I have always dreamed about; though I did not yet know you, my heart did.”

“I would love nothing more than to court you properly, but I know that your father views me as unstable and mad as the rest of the ton does, so until we can change his perception of me, will you permit me to court you secretly, until I can do so openly?” requested Theo.

“I completely understand, and in the core of my soul, I earnestly believe that my father will see the error of his ways and allow us to be together, but until then, yes, it will be a secret courtship,” agreed Penelope and with this, she stood on her tiptoes so that she could kiss his lips once again. Theo eagerly obliged and leaned down to meet her kiss with his own.

Theo felt his manhood stirring in his trousers and growing larger against her body, and before he lost all control of his actions, he stepped back and breathed deeply, trying to clear his head. “We should slow down, Penelope.”

“Hm, yes, we should. I will quietly go to the kitchen and get some cold milk. Everyone in the house is already asleep, so I am not too worried about being seen,” suggested Penelope.

“I think that sounds like a wonderful idea. But I wish I could help you down those stairs.”

And with that statement, Theo swooped Penelope up in his arms, and she laughed as he twirled her around after he sat her back on the ground. When Penelope regained her balance, she clandestinely went down to the kitchen. Once she arrived at the kitchen and retrieved the desired beverage, she again crept up the stairs to her chambers where Theo awaited her return.



“What took you so long? It felt as though a year you were away from me, my lady. God, how I missed you!” Penelope handed the jar to Theo, but he refused to take the first sip. He gave it right back to Penelope so that she could take her fill of the creamy drink before she handed it to him, and he did the same.

“Mmm, that was delicious! Thank you, my good sir!” said Penelope.

“My pleasure. I would do so any time you had such a craving! But, now, you young lady, it is high time I returned you to where I found you,” said Theo with a silly smile as he picked her up again and carried Penelope back to her chambers.

“Ohh, Theo, how I wish you could stay. I am very tired, though, in truth.” Penelope yawned as he laid her gently back on her bed.

“I would like nothing more than to lay down in this bed with you, but you are tired, and if I were to enter into this bed with you, I am afraid you would get very little sleep tonight.” Theo tucked Penelope into her covers, brushed her hair from her

sweet face, and kissed her once more before heading to the window.

As Theo sat straddling the windowsill, he looked back at his perfect lady and said, “Sleep well, my beauty. Meet me tomorrow morning at dawn in the glen, where we rode. And know that my heart and thoughts will be with you tonight.”

Penelope blew him one last kiss before he ducked out the window and climbed down the tree, disappearing into the quiet night.

*“Hmm, and to think that I was not even sure if Theo would dance with me tonight! I cannot believe that is really true, that he loves me. It is more than a dream come true. Oh, my heart is bursting!”* Penelope thought.

Again, Penelope yawned, and then she thought about how she wished he were still there with her, but that at the same time, she was afraid of him staying longer. If someone found out about them, she would be ruined. Her father and mother would never forgive her for such scandalous actions.

*“Would even my dear Georgina judge me? Still, I cannot bear to be away from him. I want to know so much more. What are his hopes and dreams? How many children does he wish to have ...?”*

These thoughts and questions floated in the air around her as Penelope drifted into her dream world. She smiled to herself and could not wait to see what the morning would bring with her handsome duke.

## Chapter 8

Theo awoke the next morning full of excitement and anticipation. He could not wait to see Penelope again! Theo could not remember ever feeling so happy or intrigued about the day ahead of him. As he donned his riding clothes, he felt his heart skipping with anticipation.

It was a beautiful day outside, much like the morning on which he had first seen Penelope, and Theo was eager to bask in it with Penelope. He dressed as quickly as he could and went to mount General, heading for the glen.

Once he arrived at the glen, Theo saw that Penelope was not there, and for a few moments, his heart dropped at the thought that maybe she might not come. However, just a few minutes after that, Theo felt relief and joy wash over him when he saw her gorgeous figure climbing up the hill on her mare. She was wearing a blue riding habit, and her hair was braided in one long loose braid down her back, with a few stray curls whipping in the wind.

When Penelope neared the glen, she slowed down and smiled at Theo. Theo helped Penelope down from Phoenix and gave her a long slow good morning kiss.

“It feels so good to have you hold me again. It felt like such a long night. How are you this perfectly spectacular morning?” asked Penelope.

“I am perfectly happy now that you are here, my lady; you look stunning! I love the way you look in that riding habit. Did you know that blue is my favourite colour?”

“Yes, I did,” said Penelope bashfully. “I heard Mr Davenport mention in passing that you particularly favoured the colour.”

“Well, the colour has never looked as lovely as it does now on you,” stated Theo.

“Thank you, Theo! I must tell you about the note I read this morning that Georgina slipped under my door last night. You

have met my sweet friend and know how lengthy of speech she tends to be, so I will just summarize the contents of the letter for you.”

“Of course, please tell me.”

“She said that on the way home from the ball, my parents bombarded her with enquiries about you and me. My mother had seen you and me dancing and did not think much of it until she was with my father towards the end of the night, and they were approached by Henry.”

“Of course, the weasel would go to them. What did he say?” asked Theo.

“He warned them that he was only trying to do his duty as an old friend but that he had heard the duke saying crazy and wild things to me while we danced and that I should not be allowed near you again.”

“God, blast that man. He is the absolute worst!”

“I know; he is much changed since we were young. My parents asked Georgina if you were courting me and that they did not want me left alone with you at any public events and charged her with keeping an eye on me,” stated Penelope as she finished her synopsis of the note.

“Well, as frustrating as this is, in all actuality, it changes very little, other than I shall have to work all the harder to achieve your father’s trust and approval.”

“Yes, and that worries me. He is the one I inherited my stubborn streak from,” answered Penelope reflectively.

“Penelope, are you sure you are OK with this? You can refuse my courtship, and I will completely understand. Besides, you have countless suitors, who have the freedom to pursue you openly,” said Theo.

At this question, Penelope was snapped out of her thoughts. “Theo, please do not ever ask me such ridiculous questions again. I meant what I said last night. That I long for you! You are the only man I desire!”

This statement touched Theo’s heart to the core, and he took her head in his hands and smothered her in kisses until she giggled in pleasure.

“Come on, my lovely lady, let’s go for a ride. I think it is high time we see who is better on horseback of the two of us!” suggested Theo.

“Oh, I already know who the answer to that quandary is! Race you to the river and back here!” declared Penelope as she jumped onto Phoenix and dug her heels, urging her mare to take off.

“So much for playing fair, hmm?” called Theo after her as he rushed to mount General and catch up with her. Penelope won the first race, and Theo demanded a second match since she had helped herself to a head start. Although Penelope disputed the need for a rematch, she obliged, and after the third race, they decided to call it a tie to keep from an argument.



After their races, they were both out of breath and hot, so they went down to the creek and drank from the cool water. Penelope offered to help cool Theo down.

“What do you mean by that?” puzzled Theo.

“Like this!” answered Penelope and proceeded to splash Theo. He yelled in response.

“Well then, here, allow me to return the favour, madam!” and he started to splash her back. Penelope squealed and tried to run away.

“Oh, no, you don’t. Get back here!” roared Theo and chased Penelope along the creek’s edge. They both laughed when he caught her in his arms with a huge bear hug and lifted her up in the air, swinging her around. They lost balance and rolled down the small hill, landing among the wildflowers, with her on top of him.

They both sighed, and Penelope looked down at him and smiled before planting a kiss on Theo. After a few moments, she made her way down his neck and kissed his chest and waist before rolling over to lay her head on his shoulder as they both looked into the bright blue sky.

“Theo, can you tell what it was that caused you to fall for me?” Penelope asked.

“There are so many ways I could answer this question, Penelope. Your grace, your strong will, your courage, your beauty, but most of all, I believe it is your kind and gentle heart,” answered Theo.

“Oh, Theo!” blushed Penelope.

“Can I ask you the same question, Penelope? What is it about me that made you want someone like me?”

“Of course, I will tell that, Theo, but will you first tell me why you say, ‘someone like me’ when you ask me that?” enquired Penelope.

“I suppose I say that because I am so used to people judging me by the reputation the ton has for me, and even though I know you do not share that harsh judgement of me, it makes me wonder why you would be willing to tie yourself to me.”

“I honestly care very little for what the ton thinks. So long as in my heart, I know that what I am doing is right, I will continue to do so, regardless of people’s opinions. Now to answer your question. Above everything else, I love your genuine honesty. You always tell the truth, even if it is unpopular, and I never have to wonder if I can trust what you are telling me,” said Penelope.

“Well, the morning is starting to get late; we should probably go so as not to cause any trouble. I am going to be at the opera tomorrow night. Perhaps we can find a moment together there?” asked Theo.

“You are right; it is time to go. I wish we could stay together all day long, though. And yes, I hope so!”

“Ride home safely, Penelope. I will miss your sweet smile!”

As soon as Penelope got home and rushed to change so that no one would see her damp clothes, she headed down to the breakfast table. On her way down, Georgina caught her in the corridor and pulled her into an empty sitting room.

“Georgina, what are you doing?”

“That is my question! Pen, I know something is going on with you. Please talk to me and tell me! Why are you being so distant now; we have never had any secrets; please do not start now,” pleaded Georgina.

“I am sorry, Georgie; I did not mean to make you feel this way. You know that I trust you implicitly. It is just that I have

not been sure of how to share this with you.” Penelope paused before continuing and checked the adjoining rooms to ensure no one was within earshot of their conversation.

“Whatever can it be that you must be so secretive about it?” asked Georgina impatiently.

“Hush! Lower your voice, Georgie, and come over here so we can speak without being overheard,” stated Penelope as she sat on a sofa in the centre of the room. Georgina sat beside her, and Penelope quietly told her all about her secret affair with the duke.

Georgina was very quiet for a long time after Penelope had finished telling her everything, and Penelope grew more anxious by the minute. Finally, she could no longer take it and broke the painful silence between them.

“Georgina, please speak and tell me what you are thinking; I beg of you, do not leave me in suspense any longer! Tell me if you think I am the most wicked and uncouth woman you know if you must, but just tell me.”

“Penelope, I am not silent because I judge you but rather because I am in such a state of shock. You have always been so reserved and uninterested in suitors that, in truth, at times, I have wondered if you wished to marry a man. You simply seemed so picky. I thought you may not ever find one to suit your fancy,” Georgina revealed.

At the realization of Georgina’s meaning, Penelope threw her head back and laughed heartily.

“Oh, Georgina, how I love you, my dear friend. To think that you have thought this of me and yet continued to be my closest friend with no regard to how it would reflect on your reputation to have an old maid as your best friend.”

“Well, it would not have mattered to me. I honestly feel that what one likes to do in their bed chambers is their business and no one else’s, but I am glad to know you are not, for I have always wanted us to be mothers together someday!”

“So do I, Georgina; it is something I look forward to eagerly.”

“Now, back to you and the duke. This is absolutely marvellous! I am so happy that you have found yourself a love match. Mr Alexander has long since made it evident that he is perfectly sane and good, so I have no worries about that. I mean, how could he be anything other than perfect, seeing as he is the best and oldest friend of my Alex, I mean, Mr Davenport.”

Georgina blushed.

Penelope smiled and ensured Georgina that she was correct in this regard; Theo was perfect.

“Now, we simply have to find a way to make your father see that the duke is worthy of you and not umm ... well, mad, you know. For now, though, let us go down to the breakfast table. I am terribly famished!”

With that, both girls giggled and walked down to breakfast arm in arm as they had done so many times before. At the breakfast table, Penelope's mother reminded them to be on their best behaviour at the dinner party they were hosting at home tonight and that she expected both of them to be prepared to each play at least two sonnets for their guests before the night was through.

Penelope and Georgina ate their breakfast and then dutifully went up to the music room in the east wing to practice their music pieces for the night ahead.

"I do not see why I have to play again," protested Georgina when they were alone in the music room.

"Well, I would not want to do it with anyone but you, Georgie," remarked Penelope as she smirked.

"That is quite true. We do make quite the entertaining pair, do we not?" As Georgina said this, she danced around the room, inviting Penelope to join her.



The hours of the day passed slowly, and Penelope often thought of Theo and wondered what he was doing or if he was also thinking of her at that exact moment. How she wished that he were going to be in attendance at this droll dinner party! Then it would suddenly be something to look forward to rather than dread.

Georgina's mention of motherhood had her wondering what Theo would be like as a father. Amid her daydream about him holding their first-born son, she was startled by Bessie entering the parlour to inform her that her bath was prepared and ready.

This was a small dinner party of just five and twenty; most were older and spoke of nothing of interest. Only when Penelope heard mention of Mr Rupert Lancaster and his return from France did Penelope's interest peak.

"Ahh, yes, that is right. I also heard that he was involved in multiple business ventures there, and not one ended profitably for him. Now he has returned to see what grift he can sell here," Lady Willcox gossiped.

“I despise that man and pity the poor woman that had the ill luck of being his wife. I would wager she died just to finally escape the wretched old bastard!” stated another lord in the party.

“Well, what can be expected of a man that worked for the Mad Duke for years?” Lady Willcox responded. “He now tries to convince everyone that he did so under duress and only because he could not leave until the old duke’s death. Once he had passed, Mr Lancaster told the young duke he refused to continue working for an insane family.”

“I do not blame him for that choice. Who would do so? Why it is downright dangerous! The other day, I heard him and the young Carlton lad talking about seeing the duke being given what he rightfully deserves. Whatever that means,” added the lord.

Penelope had heard enough and went to her mother.

“Mamma, I am feeling quite exhausted. Would it be all right if I go ahead and retire for the evening?”

“Of course, my dear. The hour is growing quite late. Sleep well, darling.” Penelope leaned down, kissed her mother on her cheek, and went up to her chambers.

“I am all right, Bessie. I will get myself ready for bed tonight; thank you, though,” Penelope said when her handmaiden walked in to assist her. Bessie nodded and replied, “Good night, mistress.” With that, Bessie curtsied and left the room.

But getting ready for bed was the last thing on Penelope’s mind. She locked her chamber door so no one could come in for the rest of the night. All the lords’ and ladies’ talk about the duke had angered her greatly, and she was determined to tell Theo what she had heard about Mr Lancaster and Henry.

Penelope changed from her evening gown into clothes for riding, carefully climbed out of her window onto the tree, and down to the ground. Then she made her way down to the stables and found Phoenix in her stall.

“Hello, girl; are you awake still?” Phoenix turned around in her stall to face Penelope and neighed quietly at her as if to say:

‘What are you doing here so late?’

“I know it’s not our usual riding time, but I need you tonight. Come on, let’s go,” whispered Penelope as she opened the stall door. Penelope left all the tack in the stables and mounted Phoenix bareback without a bridle to avoid being in the stables any longer than necessary.

Once they were a far enough distance from her family’s estate not to be heard, Penelope coaxed Phoenix to a gallop and took off towards the duke’s estate.

It was a clear moonlight night out, and when Penelope arrived at his estate, she realised she had not considered how she would find Theo without being seen by anyone else. She dared not knock at his front door and risk being seen by the servants.

For a moment, Penelope was at a loss as to what she should do next, but then she spotted Theo walking out on the balcony overlooking his gardens. Thrilled to see him, Penelope quietly approached the gardens, tied Phoenix to a nearby tree, and ventured into the gardens. As she neared where Theo was standing, she called out to him.

## Chapter 9

Theo heard her calling and looked to see where she was as Penelope stepped into the moonlight like a garden fairy.

“Penelope, what on earth are you doing here? It worries me to think of you riding out in the dark like this! You could get hurt,” exclaimed Theo, though from the huge smile and look of delight, it was evident that he was extremely pleased to see her.

“I know, but I could not bear being away from you another moment. My heart has been aching for you all day since we parted this morning. My parents were holding a dinner party, and the entire evening I kept thinking about how I just wanted to be with you, Theo.”

“I know I should be vexed that you would do something so reckless and risky, but I cannot even pretend I am not completely thrilled to see you right now. You have held my thoughts captive all day long. Come in and get yourself warm by the hearth before you catch a chill,” said Theo as he led her inside with his arm wrapped around her back.

“Theo, I want to tell you about what I heard some of the lords and ladies saying tonight about Mr Lancaster and Mr Carlton.”

“Tell me, my love, but take a glass of sherry here. I am sure you must be parched from your ride in the cool night air.”

“Thank you, my throat is a bit dry ...” said Penelope as she gratefully accepted the small crystal glass and took a sip of the amber coloured liquid before continuing, “I was terribly bored at the party and was paying little attention to what was being said until someone mentioned Mr Lancaster.”

“What were they saying?”

“Well, most of it was filled with the typical gossip, but then a lord mentioned how he had seen the two men discussing you and looking for a way to see that you get what they feel is coming to you ...”

At this statement, Penelope's voice faltered, and Theo saw a tear escape her beautiful sapphire eye. "Oh, Theo, I am worried. Henry is not the boy I was friends with as a child. I do not know what he is capable of."

"Sshh, Penelope, sshh, it will be all right, I am sure of it. Thank you for telling me this, though," Theo answered in an attempt to calm her fears as he wiped away the tear from her rosy cheek.

"I just could not bear it if they did anything to you because of me. He was so convinced that I would accept his proposal, and now that he has been rejected, I am afraid of his retaliation."

"I know, I will be fine, and I will see what can be done about this issue. For now, though, you just need to calm down, sweet Penelope," Theo stated with a comforting authority. Penelope sat down her glass, walked over to where Theo sat, and made herself comfortable in his lap with his arms around her.



Mere moments later, they were lost in each other's eyes and began kissing passionately. His touch ignited Penelope's entire body, and she longed to know what it was like to be with this man she had fallen for so deeply. *I know I should not be here, much less considering giving myself to Theo, but I know in my heart he is the right man for me to venture down this scary but amazing road with!*

"We should stop while I still can, Penelope," said Theo as he fought to pull his lips from hers.

"I do not want to stop, Theo. I want you to show me what it is like to be loved fully as I give myself to you completely."

"Penelope, are you sure about this?" asked Theo.

"I am. I want you to be the man to take my maidenhood. I want you, Theo; I have thought long and hard about this, and I am absolutely certain," Penelope replied with conviction and longing in her eyes.

“Then, as you wish, my lady!” declared Theo as he stood up and led her by hand to his chambers. But before he opened the door, Theo stopped.

“Wait here; I will be just a few moments,” said Theo smiling. Penelope waited patiently for what felt like an eternity, but in reality, it was but a few minutes before Theo opened the door and led Penelope into his chambers.

“Ahhh! It is beautiful, Theo.” Penelope gasped as she took in the room. Theo had lit tons of candles, the fire in the hearth was letting off a comforting warmth, and from the flowers in a vase in the room, Theo tore the blooms from their stems and scattered them around the room and on the bed.

“It is so much less than everything I would love to do for you, but at the last minute, this was all I could do for now.”

Theo walked over to Penelope and gently kissed her. Then Penelope turned around to give him better access to the laces on the back of her dress. He untied her petticoat, and it slipped onto the mahogany floor. Theo quickly undressed as Penelope

assisted with his shirt. Finally, both were fully naked and stood there, taking the other in.

Penelope had never seen anything so alluring. Theo's body was the absolute picture of perfection and masculine prowess. Every muscle in his body was strong, and his manhood was already fully aroused and ready to please Penelope. Having never seen a man naked before, Penelope now felt a bit nervous and extremely excited, and everything in her body was fully awakened to the slightest stimulation.

Penelope laid back on the bed, and Theo moved down so his face aligned with her chest. He kissed her neck and then each of her tender, full breasts. As he licked her erect nipples, they hardened like acorns in the fall, and Penelope moaned in pleasure.

Then Theo caressed Penelope's stomach and trailed his fingers, closely followed by his tongue down between her thighs. At first, he gently stroked her, and then when she was beginning to drip from her ecstasy, Theo tasted her soaking wet flower.

Finally, Penelope could not take it any longer and begged Theo, "Please, Theo, I need you inside me!" Theo ignored her pleas until her eyes rolled back in her head, and Penelope gripped the covers in her hands. For a moment, she was silent, and when she could utter a sound again, Penelope cried out, totally lost in the bliss of her orgasm.

Seeing Penelope in such bliss caused Theo's member to drip with anticipation, and Theo lifted his body to hover over her.

"This will be a bit painful at first, my goddess, but I will be gentle and get you accustomed to the feeling, and it will no longer hurt at all," warned Theo. Penelope shook her head in acknowledgement, and her entire body trembled with excitement and nerves as she was on the brink of losing her virginity to this man she loved.

She was so hungry to feel him enter her and be one with him, but a part of her feared that he would see her differently after she gave herself to him and was no longer chased and untouched. Although in her heart, she believed that Theo truly loved her and would never think of her like that, it was challenging to erase years of what she had been taught her entire life.

Theo gently entered Penelope very slowly, and although she was exceedingly wet, she was also extremely tight. Before he pushed into her fully, he told Penelope to take a deep breath, and as she released it, he thrust into her depths.

Penelope cried out in shock and pleasure, pulling Theo into her tightly. Slowly Theo increased the tempo of his strokes, and Penelope started to relax as her body became comfortable with this other person inside her most inner chasm. Soon Penelope felt her hips moving in rhythm with Theo and asked Theo if she could move on top of him.

Once she was straddled on Theo, she took his large and slick cock in her hands and directed him back inside her. It took Penelope a few minutes to learn how to ride him properly, but soon she had it down and was moving back and forth rapidly.

Before long, Penelope's heart was racing, and her legs trembled with exhaustion. Theo put his arms around her back, cradled her back onto the bed, slid her legs onto his shoulders, and pushed into her, hitting an area so deep inside her that she felt an even more pleasurable sensation than she had yet felt.

“Mmm ... yes, right there, please, that feels amazing!” begged Penelope, and Theo expertly hit this exact spot with each stroke. Penelope began to feel her body climbing to her pinnacle once more, and as she did so, Theo spilt his hot seed deep inside her as he throbbed against her tight contracting walls.

Afterwards, they both fell onto the bed and lay there unable to move from the sheer pleasure of it all.

“I cannot believe this is what making love is ... Why do married women act as though it is a chore? I find it the most amazing thing in the world and would want to do it constantly if I could!” exclaimed Penelope.

Theo laughed at this and kissed the top of her damp forehead as he pulled her into his chest. “I know, but some men are sadly very selfish when it comes to love making, and in those cases, it can be quite unenjoyable for the woman.”

“Oh, I suppose I had not thought of that. Well, you, Theo, are the most incredible lover!” stated Penelope.

Theo blushed and thanked her. They both were starting to drift off to sleep when Theo told Penelope that they must not fall asleep, and she agreed and said that she just wanted to lay there a bit longer and then she would get dressed. However, mere moments later, they were both fast asleep in each other's arms.

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Something inside of Theo's mind startled him awake from his slumber, and he saw his sweet Penelope asleep curled up next to him.

She looked so inviting as she lay there peacefully next to him, dreaming sweet dreams, but Theo could not enjoy watching her, for when he saw the time on his mantle clock and noticed that it was almost half past five in the morning, alarm set in that they had slept through the night. He had to get Penelope back home before anyone noticed she was gone.

“Penelope, wake up, sweet lover. Wake up, Penelope,” said Theo, shaking her so that she would rouse.

“Mmm, what is it? What is the matter ...” mumbled Penelope still half asleep and talking with her eyes closed.

“Penelope, we slept through the night. It is half past five in the morning already. We have to get dressed and get you home, my love!”

At this statement, Penelope jumped up and started searching for her scattered clothes. Theo could not help noticing that this morning Penelope was much more bashful about her naked body and walked around with the sheet cloaking her body and that she did her best to stay covered as she dressed. Theo did his best to give her privacy by turning and looking out the window after he was fully dressed.

“All right I am ready,” Penelope said as she finished putting on her shoes.



“OK, let’s go then. I will ride with you down as close as I can to your home, and then I will watch from a distance to ensure you arrive home safely,” Theo stated.

“That is so kind of you, but it really is unnecessary. I am sure I can make it home all right on my own.”

“I will not hear of it. I insist, Penelope; allow me to escort you as far as I am able,” Theo said firmly.

“If you insist, I will happily accept your company for my ride home. Do not stress too much, though, handsome man. My household is used to me being gone first thing in the morning for my ride, so all I need to do is rumple up my sheets and blankets so that it looks as though I slept there.”

“Ahhh, I had not thought of that. Well, in that case, let us take the long way back to your estate and enjoy the morning for a bit,” suggested Theo.

“I would love that!”

As they rode through the countryside, Theo noticed that Penelope was rather quiet.

“Penelope, is everything all right? You seem so quiet; is something troubling you?”

“No, not really ...” Penelope replied.

“That cannot be true. You are never this quiet. What is it; please tell me.”

“I suppose I just wonder how you see me now.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“I mean, now that we have been intimate.”

“Oh, Penelope, you mean you are concerned that I might look at you differently now that you are no longer a virgin?”

“Well, yes ... I mean ... I just ...” Penelope stumbled on her words, clearly unable to express what she was thinking.

“It is OK; I understand why you are worried about this, and to calm your fears, Penelope, no, I do not see you any differently or feel any different than before we were intimate together. Well, other than the fact that I feel more bonded to you now, of course.”

“I also feel very close to you now. Is that always the case when two people are intimate together, Theo?” Penelope asked.

“I believe that is how it is intended to be, but that is not always so. Also, Penelope, know that protecting your reputation, with your family and the ton is of utmost importance to me, and I will never risk hurting you in any way.”

“Thank you, Theo, that means so much to me! I love how protective you are and that you care so much about taking care of me, but that it does not turn into possession.”

“Thank you for allowing me to be protective of you! I know that you are a very independent woman, and that you trust me enough to act protectively towards you is very honouring for me.”

“Well, this is as far I should probably accompany you home to ensure we are not seen together. I will ride up to that hill in the distance and in the shade of that birch tree where I cannot be seen, I will watch and make sure you arrive safely.”

“I hate saying goodbye to you Theo ... as soon as we say ‘hello,’ I begin dreading ‘farewell.’ I hope to see you and

spend a few precious moments alone with you tonight at the opera.”

“Nothing will keep me from being there tonight if I can see your beautiful face there!” Theo replied, and with that, Penelope set off down the way to her home with a huge smile.

Penelope arrived home, and everything appeared as it always did when she returned from her morning rides. Just a few of the servants were starting their work for the day and paid Penelope little attention.

When Penelope got to her chamber door, she looked around and made sure no one saw her slip her key into the keyhole and unlock her door. She quickly rumbled the bed up so it would appear slept in and then set about changing into her dress for breakfast.

Even after dressing, there was still about half an hour until breakfast was served, so she decided to get her journal and sat in the reading nook. Before she started her entry, Penelope leaned against the window, looked out towards the Birch tree that Theo had said he would watch her from, and blew a kiss

in that direction even though she knew that he was most assuredly already long gone from the spot.

*April Twenty-fifth, 1811*

*Dear Journal,*

*Oh, how can I ever begin to express how I feel this morning? I feel as though I am not the same girl that left this room last night. No, she is gone and never to return. In her stead is a woman that looks much akin to her but in truth, she has completely left childhood behind her forever. I feel so different.*

*I can still feel him inside of me as though he has claimed me as his forevermore. The sheer level of pleasure that I felt as he made love to me was like nothing I have ever experienced before. I just hate that I have no one to share this with.*

*I know Georgina would wish me to tell her about this but for some reason, I am not ready to open up about this with anyone*

*just yet. I just feel like it was such a perfect night that I could not bear it if she had anything negative to say about it.*

*It is crazy, I was with him less than twenty minutes ago and I already ache for him and his touch again.*

*Oh, if only I were his bride now, and we were on our honeymoon and could make love as often as we pleased and spend days on end together, that would be nothing short of heaven!*

*Honestly, marital relations are nothing like what Mamma told me to expect. I mean, of course, we are not married, but the act itself is so much more than Mamma led me to believe it would be.*

*She made it seem as though it would be something that I would have to endure so that I might have a child and produce an heir for my future husband and to ensure that he was pleased and not given a reason to look outside our marriage to have his needs met. That those relations would be a duty for me to fulfil much like I would be expected to keep order in the household. Not something that I would find great pleasure and passion in doing with my lover.*

*I wonder, does she see it this way because perhaps Papa is a 'selfish lover' as Theo put it? I feel so bad for her to have maybe never known what it is truly like to make love.*

*I know I should feel ashamed of myself for my actions, but I simply do not. There is nothing about my time with Theo that feels wrong or wicked in any regard and if I am being completely honest, I cannot wait to be in his bed again!*

*I think that is the bell ringing for breakfast and I am quite famished from last night's activities so I must go for now.*

Penelope closed her journal and hid it back in the bottom of her desk—where she always kept it under a bunch of the old needlework she had done when she was first learning how to as a little girl—and headed down for breakfast.



## Chapter 10

Theo waited to see that Penelope was safely back home before leaving his spot on the hill, but instead of returning as he had planned, Theo decided to go to his favourite spot for an early breakfast. And then when it had opened, he stopped by the best florist in town and picked out a bouquet that he had delivered to the Ainsworth estate.

Theo did not write a note but specified that they were for Lady Ainsworth, and if anyone asked who the flowers were from, they were to say only that they were from a secret admirer of the lady.

After taking care of that and a couple of other small tasks requiring his attention, Theo made his way home. As he rode down the road, Theo's mind was filled with the tempting images of Penelope last night. How good she looked this morning as she lay there on his bed sleeping peacefully ...

He would have loved nothing more than to wake her up to the feeling of him inside her once more. Or even to get up while she slept and have tea and fruits prepared for her and then after

they had enjoyed that in bed together to dive back under the covers again and stay there all day, making love to her and exploring every part of your beautiful body.

Theo eagerly looked forward to seeing Penelope at the opera tonight; even though he knew they would most likely only have a few moments alone together, his heart longed to be near her again.

Theo knew that he had to find a way to change Penelope's father's opinion of him, but he was unsure how to do so. Though Theo was certain whom to go to for that solution: Alexander. Alexander was always so much better at convincing people of his point of view and charming them without difficulty.

Theo found Alexander in the parlour reading the day's paper.

“Alexander, do you mind if I intrude on your reading?”

“Of course, I do not mind at all, but I will tell you that I am leaving to call on Ms Georgina and take her berry picking in a few minutes,” answered Alexander.

“Oh, well, in that case, it can wait until later.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, it is nothing of great importance. Go, have a wonderful time, and send Ms Stuart my regards.” Before Alexander could ask him again what he wanted to discuss, Theo left the parlour.

Theo knew it was not his friend Alexander’s fault by any means, but his heart was pained to see how Alexander could call on Ms Stuart so freely. Why, if he wanted to, Alexander could propose to her today and marry her before the end of the season.

These were all things that Theo would love to have with Penelope, and he feared that it possibly could never happen,

and if that were the case, he would be forced to let her go so that someone else could make her his bride and a mother. The mere thought of that sickened him and tortured his heart, but he would never stand in the way of Penelope taking her rightful place in society. He simply loved her more than that.

But Theo was not ready to consider that by any means. He would talk to Alexander soon, and he felt hopeful that the pair would be able to develop a plan to show the viscount that he was a worthy suitor for Penelope. Since Theo could not do anything else about this matter for the time being, he decided to try and focus on the work he needed to address in his study.

That afternoon, Alexander returned looking as though someone had just offered him all the jewels in the royal treasury. He walked around with that silly bashful grin, so evidently, a man lost in his love for the woman he was courting.

“Well, I take it from the spring in your step that you got all the berries you could ever desire today,” said Theo teasingly.

“Ahh, yes it was the best day! I mean it, Theo. I am mad about that woman. She is just truly perfect in every way.”

“I am very happy for you, Alexander. I think you have made a great choice in pursuing her,” Theo said.

“So tell me, what was it you wanted to discuss with me this morning before I left?”

“God, you have the memory of an elephant! I cannot believe you remember that after such a full day with your fair lady.”

“Well, the fact that you would not tell me then when you first mentioned it this morning made me quite curious about what you wanted to discuss. So, come on, tell me,” Alex stated.

“Ahhh, yes, well, you see, I have actually developed affections for a young lady myself—”

“Ms Ainsworth, yes,” remarked Alexander. Theo gave his best friend a look of complete flabbergast at this statement, and his mouth even dropped open. Alexander saw his friend’s shock, laughed loudly, and slapped Theo on the back.

“Oh, Theo, I am sorry. I am not laughing at you, my good friend. It is just the way you look right now is too humorous!”

“However did you know? Are my feelings for her so apparent to everyone?” Theo asked with a note of concern in his voice.

“No, not at all. In fact, I did not even know, and I feel that I know you better than anyone else in the ton. I only found out when my poor sweet Ms Georgina accidentally let it slip.”

“Well, I suppose I should have expected this considering the two of them are like two spring twins, always attached to the other.”

“Well, at least she trusted her best friend to tell her about her romance with you. I must say I am a bit hurt you have not confided in me until now.”

“I am sorry, Alexander; you know that I trust you as though you were my own brother. I have wanted to share this with you; believe me, it is just that I know that the best way to keep a secret is to tell no one,” Theo said apologetically.

“That is true, but I think in this case, both of the other parties in this circle of secrecy understand the gravity of the situation and love you dearly enough never to tell anyone else, so you are safe.”

“It is truly a relief to finally be able to talk to you about this matter. Firstly, though, I need your assistance in devising a way to gain Ms Penelope’s father’s permission to court his daughter.”

“Well, I think it is safe to say that coming right out and asking his permission will be pointless, so I think we must gradually work up to it with the viscount.”

“True, but how?” Theo asked.

“I think we should have the girls suggest the idea of inviting me to dinner, and I will bring you as my guest.”

“Are you sure they would permit that?”

“Of course, they will. It would be terribly rude if I answered the invitation and asked that you accompany me, for them to refuse. Of course, it is also rude of me to invite someone else, but that is beside the point,” Alexander plotted.

“I suppose that will work, or at least be a place to start ...”

“Exactly, but Theo, for this to be successful, you have got to force yourself not to behave as you usually do in public!”



“I know; I will try my best to be more like you are and treat everyone as though they are my long-lost bother!” Theo remarked, taking the opportunity to take a dig at his friend.

“Well, I understand why you are the way you are with the ton, but you also only perpetuate the rumours by being reserved and unapproachable all the time.”

“What you say is true. I just struggle to trust anyone of the ton so that they know who I actually am.”

“It will come easier with time. And as you have seen with Ms Ainsworth and Georgina, there are good people of the ton that can see past the lies and gossip; there are many more too. You simply have to give them a chance, Theo.”

“I will put my best foot forward. If this is successful and I can pursue Ms Penelope, I would not want her to be isolated from the ton by association with me,” Theo stated with determination.

“Perfect, I will inform Georgina of the plan tonight at the opera.”

“I will be accompanying you to the opera as well tonight.”  
Now it was Alexander’s turn to look wholly befuddled.

“You? At the opera? But you never go! They will have to beat the cushions and give the spiders notice of their eviction from your box. It has been years since you went to the opera!”

“Well, I do enjoy it. I just have tried to stay away from public outings, but as I just stated, I am going to be actively working to rectify that, and I meant it. Also, Ms Penelope will be in attendance tonight,” Theo replied.

“Now, that makes sense. I cannot believe how much this woman is changing you. Did she request that you go to the opera tonight?”

“Actually no, it was my idea.”

“Well, I am completely impressed! I would give the woman a standing ovation if I could at her triumph,” Alexander said, jabbing back at Theo for his earlier comment about him treating the entire ton as his family.

“Oh, hush!” Theo smiled. “Quit your jesting and help me concoct a plan to spend a few moments with Ms Penelope tonight.”

After about twenty minutes of debating the best course of action, the two men finally agreed and had everything decided.

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“Pen, you look gorgeous tonight!” Georgina exclaimed. “Do you know if the duke will be at the opera tonight?” This question Georgina asked in the softest tone possible.

Penelope was looking in the mirror, checking her appearance one last time before it was time for them to leave for the opera.

“Yes, that is correct,” Penelope replied in an equally quiet tone.

“I hope you can have some time with him tonight. Let me know if I can aid you in any way tonight, and I can cover for you if need be.”

“That is very sweet of you, Georgie. I really appreciate your willingness to help.” Penelope pulled on her gloves, wrapped her shawl around her slender shoulders, and offered her arm so that Georgina could link arms with her as they headed down to the chaise.

On the ride to the opera, the girls said very little to each other because Ms Brown was strangely awake so they did not have any privacy. It was a short ride, though, and when they arrived, Penelope, Georgina, and Penelope's parents spoke with a few friends before going to their own boxes.

The opera was always something Penelope loved going to and taking it all in, but tonight Penelope's mind was on anything other than the performance on the stage. Penelope had seen Theo and Mr Davenport enter the opera house but could not catch his gaze. Mr Davenport had come over to their party so that he could speak with Georgina.

After a few minutes into the performance, Georgina took her fan out, and as she fanned herself, she leaned closer to Penelope and slipped a small piece of paper into her hands.

Penelope quietly opened the paper and read its contents.

*“My beautiful Penelope,*

*The day today has felt more akin to five days as compared to the one that it has actually been. I will be up in the rafters of the left side stage, where I hope to see you there after the intermission.*

*Alexander spoke with Georgina and told her about the plan so that when your family asks where you are, she will say that you are still in the powder room and need a bit more time before returning to your box. I know it will not be a lot of time, but I am longing to see you again and have you in my embrace even if it is just for a few moments.*

*All My Love,*

*Your Theo”*

Penelope’s heart fluttered, and it was such a challenge not to smile after reading Theo’s note. The rest of the opera’s first act seemed to last two lifetimes, but finally, the curtain was closed for the intermission, and everyone went to talk and stretch their legs. As everyone began to return to their boxes,

Penelope discretely drifted away from her family and went up to where Theo had written for her to meet him.

Penelope could not wait to see Theo. She was dying to run up to meet him but forced herself to walk slowly, not to draw anyone's attention. The alley was tucked away in a corner leading to a dead end and was almost never travelled by anyone, so it was quite secure from unwanted onlookers.

Finally, she saw him, and when their eyes locked, they instantly flew into each other's arms. Theo kissed his lovely lady and pulled her into his arms fervently.

How I wish I could take you away from here and stay with you all night. How are you, my love?"

"I would love to be with you all evening more than anything in the world, and I am very well. I thought of you constantly today, Theo. I feel as though I am starving to be alone with you again."

“Can you meet me in the meadow where we first met tomorrow morning, Penelope. Do you remember where I am speaking of, my love?”

“Yes, of course I do. I will never forget it. And yes, of course I will meet you there tomorrow morning.”

“Thank you so much, sweet Penelope. Also, I want you to know that I am working on a plan so we do not always have to sneak around to see each other. I will explain it all to you tomorrow morning. For now, though, we must part before your long absence raises concern,” Theo stated as he kissed Penelope’s cheeks and lips in between words.

“I know, you are right. I am so glad I had a few moments with you tonight. Good night my handsome duke!”

After one final long kiss goodbye, Penelope turned and returned to her box with her family. Her mother leaned over and asked if she was feeling alright. To which Penelope responded that her corset was just a bit too tight and was



causing her stomach to bother her slightly but that she was just fine now.

The rest of the opera was uneventful, and Penelope had time to think about Theo. As much as sneaking around and seeing him clandestinely like this was exhilarating, it also made her feel guilty and like the kind of woman that Penelope simply did not want to be. But what other choice did she have?

Until her father could be made to see the truth about her wonderful Theo, this may be what had to happen for a time. But what if her father never chose to see the light and allow her to be with Theo? Would he then force her to marry another suitor, and how would she get herself out of that? All these questions made her head spin, and she felt a bit of panic in her soul but forced herself to calm down and not worry about this now.

Once the opera was concluded and the party got back in their chaises, Georgina asked if she could talk to Penelope in her chambers after they were ready for bed. Penelope agreed happily.

As Penelope was brushing her hair and finished preparing for bed, she heard a gentle knock on her chamber door. Knowing that it must be Georgina, Penelope called out for her to enter. Penelope was completely surprised to see that it was not Georgina at all but rather her mother.

“Mamma, I was not expecting you. I thought it was Georgina. If I had realised it was you, I would have got up to open the door for you. I am so sorry!”

“Not to worry, my darling. I know it is not usual for me to come to see you this late in the night, but I am worried about you, my dear.”

“What, why are you worried about me, Mamma?” Penelope asked.

“I do not rightly know. I cannot put my finger on it. Call it a mother’s intuition, I suppose, I just feel as though you seem different here recently.”

“Oh, well, I am perfectly all right, Mamma. You need not worry about me.”

“Dearest, you can confide in me; you know that, right? You used to tell me everything when you were a young girl. Are you sure nothing is the matter with you?” Penelope’s mother prodded.

“I am really quite well. I promise, Mamma. Thank you for asking me, though. You are the most wonderful Mamma anyone could ask for,” Penelope said as she kissed her on the cheek. Penelope’s mother did not look entirely convinced but thanked Penelope and bid her good night and sweet dreams, and Penelope told her the same.

Shortly after her mother had left, Penelope heard another tap on her chamber door, and this time she went to the door to see who it was for herself and found Georgina in her nightgown, a shawl wrapped around her petite body.

Penelope stepped to the side so Georgina could enter her chambers, and as soon as the door was closed behind her, she

began plying Penelope with a laundry list of questions.

“Oh, Pen, is not this so exciting? I feel as though I am part of a secret mission in the military, except instead of trying to seek out the destruction of an enemy country, we are set on getting two sweet lovers together. Tell me everything! How did it go tonight with your dashing duke?”

At this statement and hearing her friend refer to the duke as ‘hers,’ Penelope blushed. “It was wonderful; thank you for your assistance in the effort, Georgie. It could not have taken place without you, my sweet friend.”

“Oh, hush, Pen, of course. I would never dream of doing anything otherwise! Now get to the story. Tell me what happened, please!” Georgina urged impatiently.

“Well, we could not spend long together because we did not want to raise anyone’s suspicions at my extended absence, but we had a few moments alone together, which was wonderful.”

“Oh, this is all so romantic. I just love it!” Georgina exclaimed, interrupting Penelope in the process.

“Yes, and by the end of our encounter, we decided to meet tomorrow morning on our daily ride, and he promised to tell me of the plan that he and Mr Davenport have come up with to gain my father’s favour so that the duke may court me.”

“Ahh, I am so excited. I simply cannot wait to hear all about it when you return tomorrow. I shall have ever so much trouble finding sleep tonight. Well, good night, my sweet friend. I will not keep you from bed since you have such an early and full morning ahead tomorrow.”

“You are so sweet, Georgie. Sleep well, and I will see you come morning,” Penelope said.

“Good night,” Georgina replied, and before she closed Penelope’s chamber door, she blew her a kiss, softly shut the door, and tiptoed down the hall back to her own chambers.

Shortly thereafter, Penelope had blown out her candle, burrowed under her warm covers, and fell fast asleep, eager for what the next morning would bring.

## Chapter 11

Theo awoke the next morning and felt a sense of excitement at the thought that he would be holding Penelope in his strong arms just a short while from now. Instead of the plain black suit he usually wore, Theo wore a vibrant burgundy jacket with black trim. With his dark brown hair, the outfit made him look quite catching indeed, or at least, Theo hoped that Penelope would think so.

The clouds hung low in the sky this morning and threatened to sprinkle at some point, and Theo hated that. Unfortunately, this might cut his ride with Penelope short. It did not take him long after having dressed to mount General and head off towards the Evergreen Meadow.

Once he got to the Meadow, he pulled out the quilt he had put in his saddlebags and laid it on the soft forest floor that was still somewhat dry from the thick tree covering. Theo heard the welcome sound of a horse and looked up to see Penelope on Phoenix.

Penelope looked stunning as always, and the misty air had made her curls look like she had just emerged from a steaming bath and the thought and sight of her like this caused Theo's entire body to ache for her and his manhood to stiffen with excitement.

“Good morning, my lovely lady. Did you sleep well?”

Penelope smiled and blushed lightly. “Yes, I slept wonderfully. How was your rest? Peaceful, I hope?”

“It was, thank you. Though, to be completely honest, I would have fallen asleep easier if I had you nestled into my arms.”

“Hmmm, that would have been wonderful,” Penelope stated, and as she did so, she reached up to wrap her arms around Theo's neck and kiss him hello. Penelope's kiss tasted better than any cool glass of lemonade on a hot summer's day. At times it still amazed him how much this little woman had changed his world so drastically and in just a short amount of time.



It was as though someone had taken a candle into a dark, cold dungeon and used it to light a blazing fire spreading from cell to cell until the entire fortress was ablaze and this lovely king had emerged from the ashes.

“So, Theo, please tell me what the plan is you and Mr Davenport have decided upon. I have been so eager to hear it since you mentioned it last night at the opera,” enquired Penelope.

“Oh, right. I apologise. Your delicious kisses caused my mind to set adrift anything that was not you and your love,” Theo stated and was happy to see Penelope roll her eyes but at the same time blush with pleasure at his compliments of her.

“Well, the plan is quite simple really. We had thought that if Ms Stuart asked Alexander to dinner, he could accept the invitation and state in his acceptance correspondence that I would be accompanying him.”

“That is brilliant, Theo, really it is! My parents would never be brazen enough to deny you the dinner invitation outright, so

they will be forced to spend time with you and see for themselves that you are a wonderful and charming man.”

“Exactly. That is the thought, at least. Hopefully, it will work. I am a bit nervous about how I can show your father that I am not mad.”

“Oh, do not be, Theo. I know he will not take long to see the truth about you. My concern is if I will be able to hide my affections for you until you can win him over completely,” replied Penelope.

“I have thought about that. I think the best way to avoid this is to do our absolute best to keep from each other’s presence, especially one-on-one, as much as possible at dinner, not to alert anyone to our feeling until the time is right.”

“I suppose that is the wisest course of action, but it will be so difficult to be with you but not be with you at the same time. I truly cannot wait until we can be as Georgina and Mr Davenport are and court openly.”

“Yes, I feel the same way. Soon though, my darling, we will be able to share our love for all the world to see, but for now, we must practice patience if this is to be successful.”

“Yes, just do your best to engage my father in conversation as much as possible. Though it would be wise to stay away from politics that concern America. He has had a bad bit of business in the new world and is still a bit sore about it,” Penelope advised.

“Noted, thank you for the tip, and I will pass this along to Alexander so that he does not accidentally take the conversation negatively.”

“Well, I think that is enough plotting for one morning. How about we fold up this lovely blanket you so kindly brought and go ride through this meadow before the weather turns against us?”

“I think that is a wonderful idea. Come on; I can show you one of my favourite old trees in here that I used to climb as a

young boy with Alexander ... where we almost broke our necks a time or two, according to my mother.”

Penelope laughed and said that she was quite glad that he did not break his neck or Mr Davenport’s because then both she and her dearest friend would be left without the two men they ardently loved now.

After riding for no more than ten minutes, Penelope and Theo halted in front of an old oak tree covered in moss, whose branches hung wide and low to the ground so that it was easy and welcoming to climb.

“How do you fancy one more chance at breaking your neck in this lovely old tree with me?” Penelope questioned with a mischievous smile.

“I do not think that wise. I know I would be perfectly fine, but I am not sure a lady such as yourself should take such a risk.”

“Oh, please, I am an expert climber! I dare say I have climbed just as many trees, if not more than you in my childhood,” Penelope retorted as she began taking her riding boots off. Theo saw that she was having trouble with this and came to assist her.

“Here, allow me,” said Theo with a seductive tone in his voice as he pulled the boot from its hold on her delicate little foot. Theo slid his hand up her leg and felt the warmth of her thighs, wishing he could take her right then and there, but he knew that this was not the time or place for such things. So instead, Theo slowly retracted his hand and kissed her sweet ankle after removing her boot. Then he followed the same procedure with the left foot.

Once Penelope was free of her boots and barefoot, she thanked Theo and gave him a look that clearly said she yearned for him to have continued his exploits under her dress. But since he seemed to have decided to stop, she started up the old tree. Theo stepped back to ensure she had a successful start to her climb, but suddenly, he pulled Penelope down from the first branch she clung to.

“Damn it all! I cannot keep myself from you; come here!” With that declaration, Theo carried Penelope over to General and sat her in his saddle. He pulled the blanket out and quickly

whipped it onto the ground under the tree, and then he returned to pick her up in his arms again.

This time facing him, she wrapped her slender pale legs around his waist and kissed him as she strode towards the blanket. Once they were at the blanket, Theo laid her gently down, pulled up her skirts, dove between her open thighs, and kissed and licked until Penelope moaned with euphoric sighs.

He lapped all of her lovely juices as though he was a man starved and continued even as she reached her climax and would not stop until she begged him to say it was too much!

As Theo finally began relenting, he noticed that the weather had turned from misty to raindrops that tinkled like small bells around them.

“Well, I suppose I will have to see your climbing skills at another time. I think this rain is only going to get more intense, so I should see you home, my love,” Theo said as he helped Penelope up from the quilt after she had put her shoes back on.

“The time always seems to fly when I am with you, my perfect man. I find myself always wishing we had more time together.”

“I know; I feel the same way Penelope,” responded Theo.

The pair rode silently for the first few minutes of the journey home until Theo broke the silence with an unexpected question for Penelope.

“Can I ask you something, Penelope?”

“Of course, you can ask me anything, Theo; you never have to ask that,” Penelope replied.

“Well, you and I are both only children, and it made me wonder if when you have children, you also only want one or

if you would prefer to have more than that?”

“Oh, that is an easy question. I most assuredly want more than one; God willing, I want to have at least four or five.”

“What makes you say so many, Penelope?”

“I have hated being an only child. Thankfully, I have had my close friend Georgina, who has been like a sister to me, but still, there were so many times I spent alone with no one to play with and share all the small little beautiful moments of life with, and had I but had a sibling, that would not have been the case.”

“I am so glad to hear that, Penelope. I felt the same growing up. I always wondered what it would have been like to have a sister. My parents wanted more but sadly were never blessed with another child after they had me.”



“I am sorry, Theo, my parents had a son before I was born, and then when they had me, they never had another. So may I ask you a question now?”

“Ask away, beautiful!” Theo replied.

“Do you prefer to spend most of your time alone? My parents will go the course of almost an entire day apart and hardly speak until returning to the dinner table, and I just wondered if this is normal for couples ...”

“Well, I am not sure what is ‘normal’ for couples. I can tell you it was not so with my parents; they spent most of their days together, and it was evident that they hated being apart and were always eager to be by the other’s side again when separated. I would also want my relationship with my wife to be like this.”

“So, would I. I want my husband and me to be best friends and look at everything as a team. Of course, we would have different roles and such, but we would do things from a place of being on the same side.”

“I love that. But we are coming to the place where we must part ways. I will watch you from the hill as I did before. Goodbye, my sweet Penelope,” Theo said.

“Once again, the time has gone by far too quickly. Goodbye, Theo. I will miss you!” Penelope said this and shared one final kiss with her handsome man before taking off down the hill towards her father’s estate.

As Theo watched her from the cover of the tree, he thought about how he hoped that one day returning her safely home would be to his estate that they would share.

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Penelope stepped inside just before it began pouring, but she was already thoroughly wet and not just from the rain. Penelope loved how spontaneous Theo was and how he made her feel so wanted and desired.

Penelope went to her chambers, slipped out of her wet riding clothes, took a towel to dry her wet curls and body, and found something appropriate to wear down to the breakfast table. Breakfast was a quiet affair, with no one having much to say. Papa was busy reading his paper, and Mamma, not much of a morning person, said little other than to pass the milk.

On the way from the table, Georgina said that she wanted to hear about Penelope's ride, and Penelope agreed to tell her. She did so but left out a few of the more risqué moments she did not feel her friend needed to know in explicit detail.

Georgina agreed that the plan to have Mr Davenport for dinner was an excellent idea, and she would go down now to the sitting room in the east wing to find Penelope's mother and ask if he could be invited tomorrow night.

"I am going to stay here and take a small nap. I feel much tired from this morning's ride. Just tell Mamma I have a headache if she asks where I am; will you please, Georgina," stated Penelope.

Georgina smiled when Penelope said she was tired, and she said nothing other than a nod of understanding and quietly exited the room so Penelope could sleep. After Georgina was gone, Penelope took her journal out of her hiding place and opened it to a blank sheet.

*April Twenty-sixth, 1811*

*Dear Journal,*

*Theo told me of his plan to start winning Papa's approval so that he may court me, and I truly hope that it works. Today he asked me how many children I wish to have, and although he did not say it directly that he was thinking of the two of us and having children together, I feel certain that was his reason for asking me a question such as that.*

*Hmm, the thought of having children with Theo is a dream too wonderful to ask for. I think he would make such a wonderful papa. How I would love to see him holding our first child in his arms and smiling down on me with our tiny new-born babe asleep in his strong embrace.*

*If he is able to gain my father's approval, I wonder if Theo would ask for my hand in marriage this season or if he would desire a long courtship?*

*Oh, I truly hope not! I want to be married to him already, and the thought of waiting until possibly next season would be too much to bear. Surely Theo would not wish this either. I wish I had the courage to ask him this outright, but I cannot bring myself to be the first of the two of us to speak of marriage.*

*I wonder what my parents will be like as grandparents. I hope that they enjoy it and are involved in my children's lives for as long as they are living. It is strange to think that one day they will not be here, Lord, please let that day be many, many years from now!*

*I would love it if ...*

Before Penelope was able to finish this thought, she had drifted off to sleep with her quill still in hand. A little while later, she realised she had fallen asleep and stood from her desk, laid on her bed, and took a long nap.

Penelope slept away the rest of the morning and struggled to rouse herself when it came time for the midday meal. In truth, she was not very hungry but knew that it would worry her mother if she did not eat, so Penelope took a small portion for her plate and ate quietly.

“Is your headache gone, my dear?”

“What? Oh, yes, I am much better now; thank you, Mamma,” Penelope replied, having forgotten what she had told Georgina to say to her mother to explain her absence that morning.

“I am very glad to hear it. Georgina, did you receive a response yet from your suitor if he can attend dinner tomorrow night? If so, I need to speak with Cook to go over the meal and see that it is suitable for company.”

“Yes, I did!” replied Georgina merrily. “He stated here in his reply that he would be delighted to come to dinner and bring the duke with him as well.”

As Georgina made this last statement, both of Penelope’s parents looked up from their plates in surprise but said nothing.

After a moment’s pause, Penelope’s mother said, “Well, then, I suppose I will inform Cook to be sure to prepare for a party of seven as we go over the menu for tomorrow’s dinner.”

The annoyance in her mother’s voice was apparent, but she said nothing more about the rudeness of another guest coming to dinner without a specific invitation.

Georgina gave Penelope a quick smile and a look of satisfaction; nothing more was said until the meal’s conclusion. After the meal, the girls said they would take a turn in the greenhouse and tend to some of the plants there that needed trimming.

As they walked, Georgina chattered about her excitement for tomorrow night's plan.

“Oh, I really hope this will all work out according to plan! I am so glad your parents did not object to the duke coming to dinner. But, of course, they could not. He is still a duke, after all. Have you decided what you will wear tomorrow night yet, Pen?”

“No, I have not even begun to think of it, to be honest, Georgina,” Penelope replied.

“What? I have had it decided since you first made mention of the plan to me. Come on; we must go to your chambers and find something for you to wear tomorrow night!”

After this statement, Georgina dragged Penelope up to her chambers and spent hours requiring her to try on different dresses until finally, Penelope said that the light pink one with the gold beading (which happened to be the very first she had



tried on) would do just fine, and Georgina agreed that it was also her favourite, looking quite pleased with herself.

## Chapter 12

Alexander and Theo dressed in fine suits for their dinner at the viscount's estate. Instead of riding horseback, they chose to journey there via a chaise since they had suffered rainstorms all day.

“How are you feeling about the night ahead of us, Theo?” Alexander asked.

“I am concerned that no matter what I do or say, the viscount might not see that I am worthy of his daughter.”

“I understand. I would not expect the man to have a complete change of heart tonight, but rather I am hopeful that this will plant a seed for him to see you for the incredible man you are and later have a completely different perspective of you, my friend.”

“Well, do you have any ideas on how to continue watering this ‘seed’ as you so eloquently put it, Alexander?”

“As a matter of fact, I do! If this dinner is going well, I will invite the viscount to go hunting with us this coming Saturday morning.”

“You think he will come?” asked Theo.

“Well, I have it on a very good authority that the man is an avid hunter and always eager for an opportunity to do so. So yes, I feel certain he will join us.”

“All right, I suppose that is a good next step. So long as I do not make any massive blunders tonight in front of him.”

“That is bollocks, Theo, and you know it! Now pull yourself together, man; we are arriving at their estate now.”

*He is right. I know who I am. I am the Duke of Winchester and will show this man I am worthy of his daughter no matter what the ton thinks of me!* The two gentlemen stepped from the chaise and were given a warm welcome by the entire household.

Theo would only allow himself a brief moment to gaze upon Penelope as he bowed in greeting towards her, but he saw in her eyes that she was full of the same hope and nerves that he had felt twisting inside his soul that night.

Due to the raging storm that day, they had been unable to see each other that morning as they usually did on their daily ride at dawn. And it felt as though he would die if he did not have the privilege of seeing her tomorrow morning. The thought of climbing up the giant tree outside her window later tonight after everyone had gone to bed was extremely alluring.

But he knew they needed to stay as formal and unfamiliar with each other that night as possible, which would make it exceedingly bothersome for him to tell her of his desire to spend the night with her tonight, so Theo pushed the desire from his mind.

Theo bowed low for the viscount and the viscountess and thanked them sincerely for their invitation to dinner, saying how honoured he was to be welcomed into their home to share a meal with them. To which they both replied that the honour was all theirs. They both looked surprised, having never heard the duke say anything more than a simple greeting of three words or less before tonight.

“Can I offer you a glass of wine, gentlemen? Dinner should be served here shortly,” offered the viscountess.

“I would love a glass!” Alexander replied.

“Thank you, a glass of wine would be wonderful,” said Theo as he accepted the glass offered to him.

Everyone made small talk for a few minutes until the butler came in and announced that dinner was served. Everyone got up and sat down at the dinner table. The table was lavishly prepared, with the best silver and China laid out, and the candlesticks all lit and gorgeous flowers arranged elegantly.

The first course of white soup was followed by many courses of meats, jellies, and pickles, and the dessert was an excellent custard. By the end of the meal, everyone was quite full and all very happy to relax on the sofas and lounge chairs in the drawing room.

“My dears, will you not play us all a lovely sonnet to listen to now that dinner is done?” asked Penelope’s mother, looking at Penelope and Georgina as she said this.

“Oh, yes, please do play something, Ms Stuart. I so love hearing you play. And Ms Ainsworth, I have yet to hear you, though I have been told you are a great talent. Your Grace, I am sure you would agree with me?” Alexander implored.

“I have been told the same and would enjoy listening to both ladies’ artistic talents,” Theo agreed.

Both Penelope and Georgina stood up and headed to the pianoforte. Georgina played, and Penelope sang. Penelope had an enchanting soprano voice, and as she sang, Theo lost all sense of where he was and found himself in a world where only he and Penelope existed.

There in that world, he listened to her sing for hours, and even as he made love to her once again, her singing could still be heard. Theo loved how talented and accomplished Penelope was.

He loved how free-spirited she was and that she had a mind of her own and stayed true to her beliefs no matter what. Penelope was not the kind of woman someone would meet every day on the ton; she was unique and had completely captured his heart, body, and soul.

After Penelope and Georgina finished playing, Alexander mentioned how he had been admiring the billiards table as they passed it earlier.

“Ahhh, yes, it is a beauty, is it not? Would the two of you gentlemen care to play a game?” the viscount asked with pride.

“I would love to play a game,” Theo stated, and Alexander almost in unison. The decision made, the three men stood up and headed towards the room with the billiards table.

“Can I offer either of you a glass of brandy and a cigar?” the viscount offered.

“I would enjoy one of each, please,” Alexander replied.

“Just brandy for me, thank you,” Theo said.

As the game began, Theo could tell that the viscount was paying close attention to him and thought that, like most men, the viscount thought that someone could learn a lot about a person by the way they played billiards. With this knowledge, Theo chose a conservative strategy similar to the one the viscount played.



In the course of the game, the men spoke of many things. When the viscount brought up his last hunt and how much bad luck he had on it, Theo took the golden opportunity to ask him to hunt together, as they had planned beforehand.

“I would greatly enjoy the opportunity to go for a hunt on your land, Your Grace. I have been told you have some of the most fertile hunting grounds in the region. Thank you for the offer.”

“The pleasure is all mine. Alexander and I will enjoy having someone to go with us this Saturday,” Theo said sincerely, and Alexander agreed.

After they had played two games of billiards in which the viscount won the first and Theo won the second (though it was neck and neck between him and the viscount) the men returned to the drawing room where the women were talking amongst themselves.

“Ahh, perfect timing. The ladies and I were just discussing a game of cards. Will you gentleman play?” Penelope’s mother asked as she dealt the cards before they even answered.

“That sounds wonderful, though, I must admit I am a sore loser at cards,” said Alexander in jest.

“Thank you, I would enjoy a game,” Theo said as he sat at the card table.

The rest of the evening passed quite pleasantly, and Theo was surprised at how he found himself there. By the end of the night, as they all said their goodbyes, the viscount shook his hand and said that he was greatly looking forward to their Saturday hunt and that they would have to come over again very soon.

Theo said that it would be his honour to host them all at his estate next time, and if the hunt were successful, they could enjoy some of the fruits of their efforts.

On the ride home, Alexander gave Theo a warm smile.

“See, Theo; I told you that you had nothing to worry about. I believe tonight to be a great success. Do you not agree?”

“I also feel like the evening went well and a good seed about me was securely planted in the viscount’s mind. Alexander, can you tell me honestly, were my feelings for Ms Ainsworth noticeable tonight?”

“If I had not known because you told me, then I could truthfully say, no, I would not have any idea that you and Ms Ainsworth are involved whatsoever.”

“Well, that is a relief to hear. I felt like every glance I shared with her would be a complete giveaway as to our intentions for tonight.”

“No, you both were fine; you have nothing to worry about in that regard. I would wage that it is just a matter of time before the viscount changes his mind about you entirely!” Alexander stated emphatically.

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Penelope awoke the next morning to the sounds of yet another thunderstorm outside and felt incredibly frustrated that for the second day in a row, the weather was working against her. She would again be unable to go ride and hopefully meet with Theo this morning. It was wonderful seeing him last night at the dinner party, but it had been close to pure torture to be in the same room as him and have to pretend that he meant nothing to her.

*Well, since I cannot go out and ride this morning, I might as well try and fall back to sleep for a couple more hours,* thought Penelope to herself as she flopped back down on her huge feather bed. Laying on her bed, Penelope studied the artistry of the ceiling décor as she had done hundreds of times before in an effort to fall asleep.

Instead of drifting off to slumber, her mind entered into thoughts of Theo, and doing so got her body tingling with excitement. So Penelope closed her eyes, pulled up her nightgown, and slowly began massaging herself between her open legs.

Soon she was growing extremely wet as she thought of Theo and what it would be like to have him enjoying himself as he ate from her succulent dripping fruit, and when he would look up at her with those dark blue eyes was just too much for Penelope, and she had an orgasm so intense that as she reached the highest heights Penelope's back arched while her hand was down inside of her and her other hand gripped her full round breast and played with her hardened nipple.

After the waves of relief and pleasure slowed, and her heart stopped pounding in her head, Penelope pushed her nightgown back down, curled up under her quilts, and soon dreamed happily. She did not stir until her handmaiden entered the room and opened the curtains saying that breakfast would be served shortly.

“Good morning, Bessie, thank you. I will be down soon.” Penelope yawned as she stretched in her bed.

“I am sorry you were not able to ride again this morning, mistress. I know how much you look forward to them each day, especially lately.”

“Why do you say that, Bessie?” asked Penelope doing her best to hide her alarm at this statement.

“I just know you have had a lot weighing on your mind this season with so many suitors. I am sorry if I spoke out of turn, mistress. I did not mean to offend.”

“No, you did not, Bessie. You have nothing to apologise for. It has been a busy season, and my morning rides have been one of the only places I have found refuge. So, you are correct.” Penelope smiled and got out of bed so Bessie could strip the bedclothes to be washed today.

After breakfast concluded, the rainstorm finally let up, and the sun came out. Georgina said that she fancied a stroll in the gardens, and Penelope agreed that it would be nice after two days cooped up inside.

As they walked arm in arm along the extensive gardens’ pebble pathways, Penelope deeply breathed in the sweet fresh smell of spring after a good long wash. She loved how

everything looked as though it was covered in diamonds from the rain droplets and how they glistened in the sunlight after it rained.

When they were sufficiently far enough away from the house and sure that no one was around, Georgina brought up last night's dinner.

“I am so pleased with how everything went according to plan last night. And Mr Alexander told me when we had a moment together that your father has agreed to go hunting with the two of them this Saturday!”

“That is so wonderful to hear. I also am very hopeful that things will change for the duke and me very soon. Do you think that my mother and father were shown a better image of who he truly is last night? I mean, do you think he began to get through to them that he is not mad?” Penelope asked.

“Well, it is hard to say for sure, especially concerning your father. He is so hard to read, but I would say yes, it was a very good beginning, and I feel like they would be hard-pressed to hold onto the lie that the duke is unstable after spending more time with him.”

“I truly hope so ...” Penelope said as she drifted back into her inner thoughts and worries.

“Pen, stop fretting. It is all going to be perfect, you will see. You will marry the duke and I will marry my Alexander, and we shall have lots of beautiful babies and grow old together just as we have always planned!”

“Oh, Georgie, you are such a dreamer, but I would love that to be the future for us more than anything else in this world. But keep in mind both of these gentlemen have yet to ask us for our hand in marriage,” Penelope remarked in an attempt not to fall too far into the world of fancy Georgina was currently in.

“Posh, that is merely a formality. It will most certainly happen. Just you wait and see. Why I would even be willing to predict that you and I have a double wedding? Mark my words,” said Georgina in her sweet, carefree way that Penelope admired so much about her friend.



“Come on, let us head back indoors. I am feeling a bit parched and would like a glass of something cool to drink,” Penelope suggested. With that, the two girls turned about and walked back in the direction they had just come from.

After Penelope and Georgina had practised their music, they were free to do whatever they wished, and Penelope asked her mother for permission to go to the market.

“What do you need there, Penelope? Why can you not just have your handmaiden go for you instead?” Penelope’s mother questioned.

“I know that she could, but, Mamma, we have free time, and Georgina and I have not been able to go anywhere. Could we not take the chaise with Ms Brown and go shopping for some new silk ribbons and such things?”

“I suppose there is no harm if you promise to be careful,” Penelope’s mother agreed.

“Oh, thank you, Mamma. We shan’t be too long!”

The girls headed up to their chambers to change into clothes appropriate for shopping.

“Oh, thank the Lord, I am so happy you got your mother’s permission to go out today. I was beginning to feel stir crazed if I did not get out soon,” Georgina exclaimed.

“I know, and it is getting quite warm out today; perhaps after we are done shopping, we can go and enjoy some frozen cream.”

“Yes, that would be wonderful!” Georgina replied.

Penelope and Georgina changed quickly and went out for an enjoyable day, free from the boredom of home.



## Chapter 13

As Theo rode back home from his appointment at the tailors, he thought about his chance encounter with Penelope. He looked out the window as the tailor was just finishing up his sketches for Theo's new suit. The tailor looked very excited to finally be creating the duke something more interesting than the typical dull brown suits he had always ordered in the past.

Outside the window, Theo spotted Penelope and Ms Stuart walking down the street headed towards the sweet shop, and once he had thanked the tailor, he headed out of the store. As he stepped out of the shop, though, he ran into Mr Henry Carlton, tipped his hat to him, wished him a good day, and went toward the front of the shop. Georgina and Ms Brown were walking ahead of her when Penelope and Theo locked eyes, and he gestured to the back alley.

Once he got to the back-alley, Penelope soon joined him out there. Theo quickly checked that no one was in sight, pulled Penelope into his embrace, and kissed her long and hard.

“Oh, my beautiful, Penelope, these past two mornings have been so hard not to be able to see you. I swear if it storms again tomorrow, I shall lose it!” said Theo as he held her close to him, and Penelope noticed that it was indeed ‘hard,’ so to speak.

“I know it has been terrible not getting to see you. Seeing you last night at dinner only made it harder for me. To be so near you and not be able to touch you and afraid to look at you for too long in case someone noticed ... It was utter torment.”

“I am so glad you picked up on my reference from last night that I would be at the tailor today at this time. I was hopeful that if the weather did work against us meeting again this morning, we would be able to steal a few moments together here.”

“At first, I did not think much of it, to be honest, but then I was trying to think of a way to see you again, and I remembered you saying that you would be here, so I concocted this plan in hopes of meeting you.”

“That is because you are the smartest and quickest woman there ever was or will be, my love!” Theo stated as he kissed

Penelope once more.

Penelope giggled and rolled her eyes at his exaggerated compliments of her intellect. “Oh, Theo, do stop; that is so outrageous!” Penelope laughed and playfully hit his chest.

“What? I am in complete earnest! OK, maybe in this scenario it is a bit overstated, but Penelope, I do find you so very smart and quick on your feet, and I love that about you,” Theo said in a more serious tone.

“Thank you, lover. I find you equally intelligent and clever ... for a man, that is,” Penelope said as the corners of her mouth twitched in an attempt to hide her smile.

“Oh, that is unfair. My sex is not entirely unintelligent and unclever, surely?”

“Well, I suppose it depends on where one was to set the bar to measure that,” replied Penelope. Moments after Penelope had

said this, they both froze at the sound of a twig snapping on the ground nearby. Both Penelope and Theo looked towards the sound but breathed a sigh of relief when they saw that no one was there.

“Hmmm, well, I think we may have to continue this debate at another time. I would not want your chaperone to come looking for you and find us here together. I will not be able to meet you tomorrow morning since I will be hunting with Alexander and your father.”

“I heard about that, and I think it will be a great next step. Do be careful out there, though. His sight is not as good as it once was, though he will never admit it.”

“I will do my best to keep a watchful eye on him while not letting him know I am doing so. Have a wonderful rest of your day, and I look forward to seeing you soon,” Theo said.

“You, too, Theo ...” As Penelope said this, she stood up on her tiptoes and kissed him goodbye one final time before returning to the shop.

Theo watched Penelope walk away and was tempted to swoop her up and carry her off to his home so that he could spend the rest of the day with her all to himself without the worry of any other onlookers. But he told himself to be patient and follow the plan, and hopefully, soon she would be his, and he could be with her, onlookers or not.

Henry had seen Penelope with her friend and chaperone walking the streets that day and had been following them at enough of a distance so as not to be seen or noticed by the group of ladies in the crowds out doing their shopping. He had hoped to find a moment alone with Penelope and ask her to reconsider his offer of marriage, and when she stepped out of the sweet shop, he had thought this was the perfect opportunity to approach her.

But when he got close to the alley, he heard a man's voice. He peeked slowly around the corner to see who it was first. There he spied Penelope alone once more with the duke, but this time he had his arms around her and was kissing her passionately!

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Henry burned with bitterness at the sight of the woman that should have been his wife by rights (in his mind, if nothing else) flagrantly in love with that madman! He wanted to charge at them both and challenge the duke to a duel right then and there, but Henry had heard what an excellent shot the duke was and did not care to take a chance at killing him, no matter the injustice of it all.

No, a better course of action would be for him to creep up closer to where the couple stood and try to hear what they were saying. As Henry did so, he accidentally stepped on a twig in the dirt, and shortly thereafter, the couple separated. Thankfully, neither of them could spot him from where he hid behind some tossed out crates in the alley. After Henry was sure they were gone, he stood up from where he was crouching and dusted his clothes off.

*I must go and find Mr Lancaster and tell him about this. He must know what has happened. He will know the best way to exact revenge upon that bastard.*

## Chapter 14

Theo awoke the Saturday morning much earlier than usual; daybreak was still about an hour away, but he could stay put no longer. Theo and Alexander had spoken at length discussing today's hunt and after much argument, it had been decided that Theo was to inform the viscount when they met this morning that Alexander had come down with a cold and would not be able to join them on their hunt.

Although Theo had reservations about this, Alexander felt certain that this would give the two gentlemen a chance to really get to know each other without anyone to come between them. So finally, Theo had agreed to the plan, but he still felt nervous about it because so much hung on this hunt.

He had to gain the viscount's favour so that he could court his dearest Penelope. Theo had had his fill of sneaking around as though she were his mistress as opposed to the woman he longed to make his future duchess. If this did not work, he was not sure what he could do to show the viscount that he was not an insane person.

Theo tried to keep his mind busy with business in his study for the rest of the hour until it was time to get himself ready for the hunt. He had made sure to have his gun cleaned last night and General freshly shod so that everything was as it should be for when the viscount arrived this morning.

Finally, the hour had passed albeit at a glacial pace, and Theo closed his ledgers and headed out to the stables. Soon after arriving there, he saw the viscount riding his way in the distance. Theo waved in greeting, and when the viscount was close enough for conversation, he bid him good morning.

“It is the perfect day for a hunt, is it not?” Theo declared as he double checked all his gear and General’s tack.

“That it most certainly is! Where is young Mr Davenport? He is not still in his bed, is he?”

“Unfortunately, he is, and that is where he will most likely stay. He came down with a cold last night and sadly will be unable to join us today,” answered Theo.

“Ahh, well that is bad luck. But we shall make a great hunt of the day regardless won’t we, Your Grace?”

“I would say so! I am so glad the weather worked with us this morning; I am done with those rainy days!”

“I know what you mean. A rainy day once in a while is refreshing, but when they drag on day after day, it becomes quite wearisome,” Viscount Ainsworth agreed.

“Well, I am all prepared and ready to set out if you are.” Theo said this and at that exact moment, the viscount’s horse reared up.

“Whoa, girl, whoa, settle down now!” called the viscount as he did his best to settle the mare down. It appeared that when the black stable cat sprinted into the stall nearby, it spooked the horse.

“Are you all, right?” asked Theo.

“Ahh, blast this mare. I hate riding her! My usual stallion threw a shoe at the last minute, and I did not want to be late so I just decided to take this mare ... but we should have named her, Nellie instead of Ruby, for she truly is a nervous Nellie, at times,” complained the viscount as he tightened Ruby’s reigns.

“I have had my fair share of experiences with horses like that. Would you prefer to have one of my horses to ride today? I can have one groomed and saddled in just a matter of minutes.”

“No, no need, Your Grace. I will be just fine. I am sure Ruby and I will manage today. Besides the day is passing us by with the best hunting hours in the morning with it. Let us set off!”

“As you wish, then,” Theo said as he swung his leg over General’s side and mounted him easily. The two gentlemen set off down the path and headed toward the forest in search of their prey.

For a long time, they did not encounter anything other than a few small hares and other such creatures not worth shooting at and potentially scaring off the larger kill they hoped to secure. They began talking in low tones as the hours passed by, and Theo was surprised at how much he liked the viscount.

In fact, the man reminded him a lot of his dear father and the many days they had spent doing this very thing together before his mother died and everything changed. They spoke of the hunts they had been on in the past and the great kills they had won, which morphed into the topic of the adventures they had each been on as boys with their friends and laughed at the trouble they had got into on some of those times.

“With all due respect, Your Grace, you really were an adventurous lad in your youth, weren’t you? You must have worried your father something fierce that you would not make it to hold the title of the next Duke of Winchester with all the chances you took as a lad!” the Viscount stated as he continued chuckling at Theo’s last tale. Theo agreed, but his mood turned solemn at the mention of his father.

Before anything else could be said, both Theo and Lord Ainsworth froze where they were at the sight of a huge buck not forty paces away from them. The viscount cocked his

musket slowly so that he would not startle the animal that was grazing peacefully.

He took aim and fired, but as he did so, his mare, Ruby, reared up again and caused him to miss his shot. The buck ran off, and so did the viscount's mare. The viscount fell to the ground and his musket hit his forehead, causing him to bleed quite profusely. Theo jumped down from General and rushed over to where the viscount was laying on the ground.

“My God, are you all, right?”

“Ahhh, yes just a bit dazed. Damn that horse. I should have been less in a hurry to hunt today and taken the time to have my stallion reshod!”

“Here, take my handkerchief and hold it to your head to stop the bleeding.”

“Thank you, Your Grace; that is very kind of you. But there really is no need to fuss. I am sure I will be perfectly fine. Especially after I have a glass of Scotch to warm my blood again.”

“Please have some from my flask. It sadly is not Scotch, but it will warm you a bit!” Theo offered.

“Thank you, kindly,” said the viscount as he helped himself to a long swig of the liquor.

“Please do not mention it! Here, put your arm around my shoulder, and I will help you onto my horse.”

Theo helped the viscount up and onto General’s back, then took the reins and led them back towards his estate. It would be a long walk back, not only because they had ventured so far into the forest for their hunt, but also because they had to go slowly to ensure the viscount did not fall off his mount.



They spoke of different topics to make the time pass more quickly. After a long pause, the viscount broke it with a question.

“Your Grace, may I ask you a more personal question? Or rather, more of an observation? I noticed before we saw the buck that you looked pained at the mention of your father. I am sorry if I brought up painful memories. That was not my intention.”

“Not at all. To be entirely truthful, yes, I was pained, but not because it was a painful memory, but rather a happy one. And recalling that time hurts.”

“I have lost both of my parents, and I know how much that can cause pain when you remember life when they were there with you.”

“It is just that my parents were so happy and loved each other so deeply. When my father lost my mother, it was more than he could bear.” Theo reflected on the memory.

“I am so sorry for your pain and the experiences revolving around that time.”

Again, both men were silent for the rest of the slow walk home. Theo thought how the day had not gone at all as he and Alexander had planned, but that he still felt like he and the viscount had become closer. He also wondered if the viscount still considered him to be mad. Finally, they arrived back at The duke’s estate. The servants saw them from the distance and hurried to see what had gone awry.

“I am fine, truly I am. It was not more than a scratch.”

“I am very glad that you were not injured more seriously. I will have a chaise readied to take you home. May I offer you anything else for your injuries?” Theo asked.

“No, I will be all right. What actually was wounded the most was my pride, but I am sure I will recover and perhaps you and I can keep this between us. If my wife finds out that the mare threw me, she will want the poor beast sold, and she does not deserve such ill treatment.”

“I would never dream of it, though I imagine your mare has long since beat you home, so you may need to tell your stable boy to be mum about it,” Theo suggested. The viscount threw his head back laughing.

“Damn, if you are not right! I had not thought of that, yet I will be sure to do so. Well, Your Grace, thank you for an eventful morning, and perhaps we can try this again sometime and have better luck then!”

“Agreed. That will be a hunt I look forward to!”

“Well, how about you come over tomorrow morning, and we can hunt on my land, and if Mr Davenport is feeling recovered, he can join us?”

“I am sure he would love that, and I will,” Theo said. “I will be there bright and early ready to hunt, most assuredly!” Theo waved goodbye to the viscount and watched as the chaise

pulled away. He felt good about the fact that even with the mishap of this hunt, the viscount still wished to go hunting with him once again. Hopefully, this next hunt would not have any mishaps!

## Chapter 15

Penelope spent the entire course of her morning ride thinking of Theo's hunt with her father, worried about how it was going. She hated that she could not just rush up to her father when he returned and badger him with an onslaught of enquiries about it so that she could know if it had been successful.

How would she get the answers she sought without letting on to the true intention of her interest in his hunt? Penelope was so lost in thought that she hardly noticed that she was now back at her and Theo's magical glen.

Penelope slid off Phoenix's saddle and sat for a while by the creek, but this only made her think of the times she had spent there with Theo, and this just made her miss him and worry all the more about how things were going with him and her father. *If he cannot gain my father's favour, how will we ever be together? I could not bear it to lose him. My heart is set on him!*

Later in the hour, she finally turned back towards home, and when she arrived there, Penelope saw that Theo's chaise had just left and her father was about to walk into the stables.

Penelope rode over to the stables, dismounted, and handed Phoenix's reins to George, the stable hand.

“Good morning, Papa! I am surprised to see you back so soon from your hunt. Why was The duke's chaise here?” Penelope enquired.

Usually, her father would have lectured her for riding alone in the morning (and more importantly letting him see her return), but this morning, he seemed to forget the family rules on the matter and just said, “Ahh, I took Ruby this morning, and the silly girl decided to end her hunt earlier than planned. Mention nothing of this to your mother, and I will do the same about you.”

“All right, Papa,” Penelope agreed, smiling as she kissed him on the cheek. “Well, other than that, how was your time this morning?”

“It honestly was quite enjoyable. We are going to hunt here tomorrow morning, and if luck is with us, we will have a kill by the end of it.”

“Oh, that is nice. I am sure you all will have good fortune tomorrow. Well, I must go and change before breakfast. I will see you in a bit, Papa,” Penelope said.

“I am about to do the same, my girl, see you then.”

Penelope turned and forced herself to keep a completely calm composure until she reached the safety of her chambers where she broke out in a huge smile of joy and twirled around as she giggled and landed on her bed, laying on her back with her arms spread out. After a few moments of taking it all in, she got up and pulled her journal out so that she could share all that had transpired.

*April Thirtieth, 1811*

*Dear Journal,*

*I missed Theo so much this morning on my ride and he will not be able to join me tomorrow either. Although my heart aches to be alone with him again, I am so glad that the reason he will not be with me tomorrow is because he will be hunting again with my father.*

*I did not dare ask too much of my father about how the hunt was, but he did say that it was enjoyable, and the mere fact that they are going again tomorrow morning is extremely promising! Oh, I am so excited to see what these efforts with Papa will bring! I know that he simply must see that my handsome, talented, and steady Theo is not mad and that he is the best man to pursue me.*

*If my father would give his approval for Theo to court me, then all would be right with the world, and I shall be one of the happiest girls in all of England! I know that we would make the most dashing couple, not to mention the most beautiful children together. Please, God, please, may the hunt tomorrow go well without any issues and my father finally change his opinion completely on my lover!*



Penelope knew that it was high time she changed into something appropriate for breakfast. She would never forget the time that she got lost in the moment, enjoying herself in her bed after an excited ride with Theo, and chose to finish her pleasure to completion behind the locked door of her chambers.

She had to go down to the breakfast table still in her riding habit. Her mother looked as though she might as well have arrived utterly naked. Her mother lost it, and Penelope did not hear the end of it for weeks to come. She was never going to make such a mistake again!

The rest of the day passed by without anything happening out of the norm. The girls practised their music pieces together, went for a couple of walks in the gardens and continued on their needlework after teatime. Penelope was glad to see the sun setting so she could return to her chambers and ready herself for bed.

As she brushed through her long luscious chestnut curls, Penelope looked out the window at the old tree outside and thought of Theo when he had been in that tree. Penelope wished he were outside her window at this moment, but sadly

as he was not, so she resolved to blow out the candle and try to find him in her dreams that night.

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Theo and Alexander rode their horses home after having bid the viscount good day the next morning. They were riding at a bit slower pace because Theo's horse, General, was laden down with a sizeable doe he had killed. The viscount had also had a great time hunting: he had killed a buck, not as big as the one he and Theo had come across the day before but still a great size.

Alexander sadly had not killed anything, but that was probably because he had a bad habit of humming or whistling when he was bored and thus scared off much of the nearby game. However, getting an excellent kill on this hunt was not truly the purpose of it for Theo and Alexander. The true purpose was of course ensuring that the viscount approved of Theo.

Theo and Alexander had spent much of the morning regaling Viscount Ainsworth of their many adventures together, most of which showed Theo as the hero of the day, being the wise one, and keeping his cool composure in challenging times.

Alexander was an incredibly talented storyteller, and it was not in the slightest bit obvious why he told these tales aside from passing the time and pure entertainment.

All three of the men laughed a lot during their hunt and enjoyed themselves greatly. Theo often commented and added poignant details to Alexander's stories. By the end of it, they were in very jolly moods and said that they looked forward to their next hunt or perhaps a trip to some of Theo and Alexander's secret fishing holes they were more than happy to share with the viscount.

"Well, I think it is safe to say that it will not be long before you have the viscount's complete and hearty approval to court Ms Ainsworth!" Alexander stated happily on their ride home.

"I also think that things look hopeful for her and me as well!" Theo said in a happy tone, but with a bit more reservation in his voice than Alexander.

As they reached Theo's estate, Alexander and Theo both agreed that they were starving and could not wait to see what Cook had prepared for breakfast this morning, and they were not disappointed. It was a feast to be sure, and when they had both had more than their fill, Theo said that he was going to take a long hot bath and then try and go back to sleep, as he had not slept well the past two nights.

Theo had been nervous about the past two hunts, so much rested upon the outcome of them. But now they were past, and both had been quite successful as far as bonding with the viscount was concerned.

The bath felt incredible, and afterwards he was so relaxed that Theo was soon fast asleep. His rest was not as peaceful as he had hoped it would be, though, for his dreams were consumed by images of his sweet Penelope.

But in all of them something was happening to her where she needed his help, and he was always unable to get to her and rescue her from harm. Therefore, when Theo awoke finally, he was filled with this sense of impending doom that he simply could not shake, and he felt certain that the feeling would not cease until he had Penelope safely in his arms once more.

The rest of the day passed slowly, and Theo could not wait to see Penelope tomorrow morning for their ride, which in such a short time had become what felt like the correct routine for his mornings. The past mornings of not riding with her had felt like a lifetime apart but also had thrown him off for the entire rest of the day. He longed to see her graceful form as she skilfully rode her mare.

He loved how talented she was in so many aspects, one of which being her horsemanship. He knew in his heart that if his efforts to win over her father were successful, they would spend countless mornings going for rides throughout the year. As the day drew to a close, Theo's butler entered the parlour where he and Alexander sat enjoying a nightcap and handed Theo a letter.

For a moment, Theo's heart raced with excitement thinking it to be a letter from Penelope, but quickly he realised that the handwriting on the front was not that of his lovely lady. The letter was simple and to the point, it stated:

*Your Grace,*

*It would be my honour and great delight to have you and Mr Davenport for dinner at our estate this coming Monday eve, if you are not otherwise engaged.*

*Kind Regards,*

*Viscount Charles Ainsworth*

Theo handed Alexander the letter after reading it himself, and once Alexander had looked over the letter, he jumped up to slap Theo on the back in excitement.

“See? Did I not tell you, man, that your efforts were not in vain? The viscount has written you personally and asked us to dinner tomorrow night!”

“I am very pleased to see this. I think that if that dinner goes well I will ask him for permission to court his daughter,” Theo agreed, unable to hide his jubilation.

“I agree. I cannot think of any reason why you should not ask his permission then. Surely, he will agree to your request. I mean what better match could a father ask for than a duke? And not just any duke. You are an honourable and good man!”

“Thank you, Alexander for your kind words and all of your aid in this endeavour. I shall not forget it. You truly are the most loyal and caring of friends a man could hope to have!”

“Well, I can easily say the same about you, my friend, think nothing of it. It has been my pleasure and great joy to see you find a woman that you have fallen so deeply for and makes you so happy,” Alexander said.

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Penelope could not remember the last time the morning felt as welcomed. At last, this morning she would see her wonderful Theodore Winterbourne! It had only been a few days, but her heart yearned for him as though it had been years since last she had seen his charming smile and tantalizing blue eyes.

Also, she took the fact that it had been her father's idea to invite the duke and Mr Davenport to dinner tomorrow night as a very good sign that he was changing his mind about her Theo, but she wanted to hear from him in detail how their times together had gone and how he felt about them.

Penelope dressed quickly and made her way to where Phoenix was awaiting her arrival for their daily ride.

“Guess what, sweet girl?” Penelope whispered in the mare's soft ear as she fed her a handful of oats. “This morning we will get to see our dear friends, Theo and General, on our ride. Won't that be wonderful?” Phoenix whinnied softly in response to her, and Penelope took that as her approval of the idea of company on their ride this morning, and so she moved to mount her mare and set off.

Penelope and Phoenix trotted along on the bright late spring morning and Penelope felt as though she could sing as merrily as any of the birds out in full force that day. She knew the place she would find Theo would be near the Evergreen Meadow, where she first ran into him, and she soon found out



that her women's intuition was not wrong, for there he was already waiting for her just outside the meadow.

Penelope could not help thinking to herself, *God I had forgotten in the past few days how incredibly handsome he is! Or has he grown even more handsome since last I saw him? He makes me feel as though I could fly!*

“Good morning, my lady; you look perfect as always,” Theo said, smiling at her as she neared him.

“Good morning, I was just going to say the same measure of words to you. How have you been the last few days, and please tell me everything about your time with Papa. I have been dying to know every detail of how it all went!” Penelope said, unable to keep to small talk any longer.

Theo chuckled slightly at her eagerness and nerves, and it made him feel better to know he was not the only one that had been living on pins and needles the last few days. “Well, to tell you everything would take more time than I feel that we have, but I will give you the important highlights.”

With that, Theo filled Penelope in on the most pertinent moments of his encounters with the viscount and some of the points where he really felt like the two of them had connected. He ended all this when he said, “I have not asked your father specifically for his approval to court you, but in my heart I feel that when I do, he will not refuse my request.”

“Ahhh, Theo, I must tell you how happy I am! I feel as though a huge weight has been lifted from my shoulders now, and I whole-heartedly agree with you that my father will allow you to court me!”

“I honestly still would not say so out loud until I received his invitation to dinner tomorrow night.”

“I know, this gave me so much hope that he had seen the truth about what an amazing man you are. Thank you so much for being willing to go through all this for me,” Penelope agreed enthusiastically.

“There is no need to thank me. I only did what my heart required me to do, although it was greatly grieved over the time spent apart from you those mornings.”

“I have missed you fiercely since last I saw you and have yearned to be near you!”

“Oh, you did, did you? And just why is that, might I ask?” Theo said in a mischievous tone and with a teasing smile as he pulled his stallion closer to Penelope’s mare so that they were now inches away from each other.

“Oh, I do not know that I can quite put it into words to be truthful with you, my good sir,” Penelope said with equal playfulness in her voice as she cocked her head up to look into his eyes more deeply.

“Well, then, let me see if I can put my finger on it,” Theo replied in a low seductive tone as he placed his thumb under her pointed chin and leaned down to draw her lips to his. Theo kissed her long and hard and showed Penelope that he had missed her just as ardently as she had him.

Penelope moaned gently as he kissed her and felt her heart pound rapidly within her chest. “Did that aid you at all in clearing up the matter, my sweet lady?” Theo asked as he pulled back from her ruby red lips.

Penelope bit her lower lip and swallowed hard in an attempt to clear her mind. “Umm, yes, I believe that was quite clarifying. Though I may need more *aid* in a while from now if you are so inclined.”

“I will always be willing to do so, Penelope.”

The way that Theo said ‘Penelope’ sent chills down her spine and a heat of pleasure surging through her innermost places. Penelope smiled bashfully and realised that if she was going to be able to keep from pulling him off his steed right there on the outskirts of this meadow, she had to find a way to get her mind off of how badly she ached for this man!

“Theo, how about we have that rematch race you requested? What do you say, down to the end of the stone wall and back

here twice? Whoever returns here for a second time will forever be named the better rider,” Penelope challenged.

“Done, though I must warn you I have no plans of taking it easy on you to save your pride, my sweet lady.”

“You need not worry yourself about that. It is I that will not be giving you an easy go of the title.” Penelope smiled in retort. The pair lined their horses up and readied for the start of their impromptu race.

“On your count,” Theo offered.

“All right: one, two, three!” Penelope yelled, and they both dug their heels hard into their steeds’ sides urging them forward. They took off with a flash, and as they reached the second stretch of the race, they were still neck and neck full of competitive exhilaration.

Penelope's heart raced wildly as they neared the last turn of their race, and she gave Phoenix her head and let her gallop at full speed. The wind whipped in her face as she leaned closer to her mare's mane so as to create less resistance, and Penelope felt a thrill of victory as she took the lead by more than two lengths.

In a flash, though, she realised that something was amiss, her saddle was slipping from under her, and before she had time to comprehend what was happening, Penelope had hit the ground hard and was rolling down the slope.

At long last, the world stopped moving, and she laid there for a few moments in shock. By the time Theo had reached where she lay, the reality that she had fallen from her horse entered her mind.

"Penelope, are you all right?" Theo exclaimed as he jumped off of General, and in a mere second was at her side with his hand cradling her in his strong arms.

"Ahh, I think so. To be honest, other than sore and very dazed, I do not feel anything hurting at the moment," Penelope said as she began slowly sitting up. When she did so, she tried to

move her right foot and felt a searing pain shoot up her leg! Penelope cried out in agony and reflexively grabbed her foot.

“Careful. Here, let me test it for you. Try to hold still, my dear,” Theo directed her.

Penelope listened to his direction and sat there doing her best not to move as he gently touched her foot. When he reached her ankle, Penelope once again cried out. Theo then touched another area around her ankle, which was tender but did not cause nearly as much pain.

“We will have to get you home and call for the doctor immediately to confirm, but I do not think it is broken from my experience. Call Phoenix over to us.” When Penelope beckoned her mare, she eagerly approached them.

Theo looped Phoenix’s reins through his arm and then knelt next to Penelope.

“Now, here, lean against me and wrap your arms around my neck.”

Penelope did so, and Theo stood up and walked quickly over to General. He carefully sat Penelope on his back and then got on behind her. Again, Penelope rested her head on Theo’s chest. It was a very long ride back because Theo would not allow his horse to go much faster than that of a tortoise, across the flattest route home.

By the time they reached Penelope’s home, she was mostly unaware of what was going on around her and everything seemed hazy. Though the pain in her ankle was only increasing, she felt very safe with Theo’s arms around her, and the steady rhythm of his heartbeat kept her calm.



## Chapter 16

Theo knew it would not look good for him to arrive at the viscount's estate with Penelope half passed out, injured, and in his arms like this, but at that moment, his last concern was of appearances. Penelope had drifted in and out of consciousness the entire ride back.

Theo was longing to take off at top speed so that he could ensure her safety as swiftly as General would carry them, but he did not want her to feel any more pain than she was already enduring. Even the smallest jolt, and her sweet, beautiful face contorted in torment.

It was utter torture for him to see her like this, but finally, they arrived, and he called for the stable hand to come out and take care of the horses while he jumped down and carried her into the house, not bothering to wait to knock or be announced.

“Hello, I need help at once!” Theo exclaimed. The butler came around the corner soon after that and looked very surprised to see him there with his young mistress in Theo's arms.

“You! Go get your master, the viscount, and send someone else immediately for the doctor.”

The butler looked as though he did not care for his tone but bowed and did as he was instructed without argument. Mere moments later, several servants were gathered around him asking a flurry of questions, but Theo answered none of them until the viscount rushed into the foyer with the viscountess only a few steps behind him.

“Oh goodness gracious, what has happened?” the viscountess cried as she ran over.

“She was out riding, and I saw her take a fall from her mare,” Theo said, doing his best not to lie but also not to make it completely obvious that he was with her when she fell. “I believe her ankle sustained the worst injury, though. She tumbled down quite far, and I am worried about her head as well.”

“Peter, go for the doctor!” the viscount ordered.

“I have already sent one of your men when I arrived,” Theo informed him.

The viscount called for the servant, Robert to come over.

“Robert, kindly take my daughter and lay her gently down in her chambers. Bessie, please go with him and do not leave there unless she awakens before the doctor arrives, and if she does, I want to be informed immediately.”

“Of course, Your Grace. At once,” Robert replied as he lifted Penelope into his arms and carried her up the stairs as Penelope’s mother trailed him crying loudly about her poor, dear, child.

“Thank you for everything you have done Your Grace. I am very grateful that you *happened* to be in the area when my daughter took her fall,” the viscount said sincerely, but Theo

could not help noting the emphasis he had put in his words and knew that her father probably suspected the truth of the matter.

Theo hated that this could soil all his plans to seek the viscount's permission to court Penelope, but there was nothing else he could do about that now what had happened was done.

*Oh, if only she had not fallen!* Theo thought, not for the first time, and this caused the question to arise in his mind: what had been the reason for her fall? In all the times Theo had ridden with Penelope, including from the very first moment they had met, Penelope had always been more than capable of keeping her seat on her mare.

Something must have been amiss, so Theo set out to go back to where she had fallen and retrieve her saddle where it still lay in the dirt. Theo had been so completely preoccupied that he had not given her saddle the slightest thought. Theo rode General at a full gallop the entire way back and jumped off when they pulled to a halt outside the meadow.

At first, he did not see her saddle anywhere, but finally he spotted it amongst some heather. Theo strode over to it and

picked it up. The saddle looked completely normal until he flipped it over and saw that the girth was torn in two.

Theo examined the girth more closely and saw that its first section had been cut. There was no question about it. The difference between the severance was clear, for it started straight and precisely and continued in a random ripping pattern. Some vile person had cut her girth so that she would fall from Phoenix that morning.

Theo took the saddle, returned to the viscount's estate, and requested that he have an audience with him, if he could be spared for a moment. The viscount came down, and Theo informed him of his finding.

“I just cannot believe that anyone would attempt such a horrific thing.”

“I cannot either, but the evidence is undeniable,” Theo said, “and I am determined to learn how this happened.”

The viscount looked as though he was going to say something else, but just then the doctor came down the stairs.

“Good sir ... What have you found? Is my Penelope all right?” the viscount asked.

“Yes, yes, she will be OK. Just a sprained ankle and a bump on the back of her head. Nothing she will not recover from. She is incredibly fortunate, though, that could have been the death of her if she had hit her head on a rock.”

“Thank you so much for coming so quickly and for all your help, Doctor!”

“Please do not mention it, My Lord. Keep her calm and resting for the next few weeks and make sure she takes the medication I have given her for the pain if it gets to be more than she can handle. Call for me if anything changes.”

“Yes, of course. Thank you again. I will have a carriage take you home. Good night, Doctor.”

Theo felt as though he could breathe after being in a deep dark pool, having finally reached its icy cold surface again. He would not let himself acknowledge it, but his heart dreaded that Penelope’s injury would be much more serious and long-lasting. He would never have been able to forgive himself if that had been the case. Theo bid the viscount goodbye and headed home.

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Theo had been home for only a few hours, and during that time he had told Alexander about Penelope’s fall and that it had been a planned attack on her. They spent much time discussing this and who the culprit might be when it was announced that Mr Lancaster was there and requesting a moment with His Grace. Theo let him enter so that he could see what the snake had to say.

Rupert bowed low and greeted both Theo and Alexander with all the respect they were entirely unaccustomed to when dealing with Mr Lancaster.

“Your Grace, I was in town this afternoon, heard of Ms Ainsworth’s terrible fall, and came to find you straight away. I did not want anything to be twisted if I let any time pass.”

“What is it that you have to tell me?” Theo asked curtly.

“I wanted to inform you that I know how Ms Ainsworth came to have her fall from her horse this morning. It was Mr Carlton’s doing, Your Grace. He came to me recently and told me of his plan to see that you were caught for your affair with the lady and wanted to make it look as though you were responsible for her fall.”

Theo jumped up, walked over to Rupert, and took a swing at the villain, but Alexander stopped him.

“You bastard! How could you let him do such an evil thing?” Theo yelled. Rupert cowered down and sat on the sofa further away from Theo before he answered.



“I told him not to. That it was wrong and could hurt the woman he claimed to want to marry, and it took hours of convincing, and I thought that I had at last done so, for Mr Carlton had promised me that he would not do it. But when I heard about it, I knew he had lied to me.”

“Why would you not inform the authorities of his desires? Or her family?” Theo asked indignantly.

Mr Lancaster hung his head in shame and said, “I was in cahoots with him to find a way to bring you to ruin. I was outraged at you for not choosing to work with me once more, but I would never have been all right with anyone actually being physically hurt, especially that poor innocent girl.”

“Well, you did, and now you are going to make it right! You go and find this worm of a man and tell him that come tomorrow morning at dawn, outside the old mill, I am challenging him to a duel. You will stand as his second and ensure that he is there, or I will see you prosecuted for your part in all this!” Theo declared.

Mr Lancaster bowed and said that he would bring him to the place and quickly left before Theo lost his control again. Theo raked his hands through his dark brown hair and pounded his fists on the table in front of him.

“I will be your second, of course,” Alexander said with certainty.

“I should not allow you to do so. It is illegal, but I cannot think of anyone I trust more to stand second for me. Thank you.” They both talked about this for hours and finally they agreed the best thing to do would be to go back to the viscount and inform him of what they had learned.

They swiftly rode over, and when they were in front of Viscount Ainsworth, they told him of all that Mr Lancaster had revealed to them. The viscount bellowed that he would find that wretch and have him pay for what he had done, but Theo told him that it had already been taken care of, and that he was going to deal with the pair tomorrow morning.

Theo would not say outright that he was going to duel Henry, but he knew that it was obvious what his meaning was to the viscount.

“Why would you take such a risk for my daughter when by rights it should be me doing this?”

Theo paused before he answered him, but his heart told him that he had to tell the man the truth. “Because Your Grace, I care for your daughter more than any woman in the world, and it is my fault that Mr Carlton was jealous of my relationship with her.”

“I do not understand your meaning ...”

“I wish to court your daughter, and he proposed to Ms Ainsworth, but she denied him in favour of me. Your Grace, it is my deepest desire to court your daughter if you will allow it,” Theo explained.

As he did this, he knew that the man might slay him where he stood for pursuing his daughter without his knowledge or approval, but Theo felt completely at peace with the risk he was taking. Penelope was worth it.

The viscount's hands balled into fists, but he said nothing for a long while until, "You may court my daughter. I realise that some of this is my doing for not allowing you to in the beginning. I was wrong about you. You are a worthy suitor for my daughter, Your Grace. I realise that now."

Theo felt a wave of joy and disbelief wash over him like a wave, and he broke out in a huge smile. He thanked the viscount over and over.

"Enough, it is I that should still be thanking you for saving my daughter and finding out who attempted to end her life. She awoke about an hour ago. Would you like to see her?"

"Yes, My Lord. I would be delighted!"

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Penelope heard a knock on her chamber door, and when she told her handmaiden to open the door for them, she was stunned to see Theo. Her maid gave them as much privacy as she could, busying herself at the opposite end of the room while they spoke.

“Your Grace, I am so shocked to see you here,” Penelope said, mindful that she had to appear as though she was not close to Theo.

“Your father said I could come and see you. Oh, Penelope, I am so happy to see you and know that you are all right.”

“Yes, I am fine ...” Penelope said before her brain caught up with the fact that he had openly called her by her first name in front of someone else, and she knew she must have missed something. “What has happened?”

“I have learned who tried to hurt you, and I told your father as well about my intentions to pursue you, and he has given his approval,” Theo answered, smiling.

Penelope’s heart jumped, and she almost leapt out of her bed, but Theo stopped her. “No, my darling, do not move.”

“But who has done this? What do you mean?”

Theo lowered down closer to Penelope and explained everything to her, and that he was going to duel with Mr Carlton tomorrow. Penelope again tried to get up, but Theo would not let her up more than to lean against her headboard.

“Theo, no. I beg of you do not do this. If you are caught, you will be arrested.”

“I cannot let what he did to you stand. He almost got you killed, Penelope!”

“But why would you put yourself at such a risk for me, and how do you know that they will honour the rules and not try and kill you?” Penelope asked.

Theo smiled softly and brushed the stray curls from her damp face.

“Oh, sweet Penelope, do you truly not know the answer to that by now? I do not wish to court you just for the sake of courting you. I love you and wish to marry you ... if you will have me? As for them honouring the rules of the duel, Old Man Philips will oversee the duel and see that everything is upheld as it should be.”

Tears formed in the corners of Penelope’s eyes, and she blinked them back, but one escaped and made its way glistening down her lovely cheek.

“Theo, of course, I will marry you! I love you more than life itself and have dreamed of nothing else but you as my husband for the rest of my days!” Penelope declared overjoyed.

Theo leaned down and kissed her sweetly. “Now, rest my dear.”

“Theo, please promise me, if you must do this ... do *not* kill him. I do not want his blood on your hands, no matter what he has done.”

Theo did not answer her for a long time and appeared to be struggling to decide how to answer her pleadings. “I promise, my love.” And with that, he kissed her hand and left her chambers.

Penelope felt as though she could dance around her room for hours, sprained ankle or not, but she knew that her handmaiden would have a fit if she but moved one toe out of her bed.



“Bessie, will you ask Ms Stuart to come to my room, please?”

“But mistress, you need your rest. You really should wait to see her till tomorrow. You have had more than enough excitement for one day.”

“Bessie, please. I promise after I see her, I will take that awful medication you wish me to take and sleep the rest of the day. Please!” Penelope begged.

“As you wish, mistress.” Bessie bowed and left to go and find Georgina.

Just a few minutes later, Georgina came bursting into Penelope’s chambers.

“Oh, Penelope, I am ever so relieved that you called for me! I have been begging to come and see you ever since I heard of

your accident, but they said that you were still not yet awake and would need your rest when you did!”

“I only woke up a little while ago, but I appreciate your concern, sweet Georgie.”

“How are you feeling? Is there anything I can do for you or get for you? I hate seeing you in bed like this. Is the pain just terrible for you?” Georgina prattled on.

“I am all right. My ankle hurts a good bit, but I promised Bessie I would take the medicine for that if she let me see you. Now please hush for a moment, so I can tell you what my news is!” Penelope said, biting back a smile.

“Oh of course! I shall be as silent as the grave. What is it, my dearest friend?”

“The duke has told me that he loves me, that he received Papa’s permission to court me ... and best of all, he has asked

for my hand in marriage, which I, of course, accepted eagerly!” Penelope explained full of delight.

Georgina’s mouth dropped open, and for the first time in her life, she was utterly speechless—for a few moments at least—and when she finally was able to form words she stumbled all over herself, “Oh my goodness! That is incredible ... but how? And your father ... It is perfect! I am so confused. Please start at the beginning of all I have missed.”

Penelope did as Georgina requested, starting from her ride this morning with Theo and how he had filled her in on how his hunts with her father had been very successful, and that he was invited to dinner tomorrow night.

That they had started racing, and when she finally reached top speed, her saddle had come off, and she fell. How Theo had learned of Henry’s plot to harm her and make it look as though Theo had done this, and that tomorrow dawn, Theo was going to duel him but would not kill him.

“Oh, my, this is all too much! I am so happy, scared, and excited, all at once. I do not know how I shall ever sleep tonight! But Penelope, I am so very pleased that you and the

duke will be able to court and get married soon. It will be so much fun planning your wedding!”

“Well, he still has to ask my father’s blessing officially, but I am sure that is more of a mere formality at this point. I know Papa would never have agreed to him courting me if he would not then allow him and me to marry,” Penelope added.

“Oh, I wish Mr Davenport would hurry up and ask me to marry him, I want ...” Georgina complained, but before she could continue, Bessie entered and interrupted her.

“I am sorry, mistress, but I must insist now that you rest. If anyone finds out that I allowed you so much excitement tonight, it will be my job on the line!” Bessie said.

“She is right. I should let you get your sleep! There will plenty of time to talk about this very soon. Oh, I can barely wait! Goodnight, Pen.” Georgina agreed and kissed her friend’s cheek goodnight.

“Thank you, Georgie. I will see you in the morning. Sleep well.”

Georgina quietly left Penelope’s chambers, and as soon as the door was shut, Bessie had a large spoonful of an amber coloured liquid ready and waiting for Penelope to fulfil her end of their bargain. The medicine tasted terrible and made her want to throw up, but very soon after, Penelope found herself extremely drowsy and drifted off to sleep, not to wake until very late the next morning.

## Chapter 17

Theo and Alexander were on their steeds long before the sun even began to rise, so that they would be at the old mill by the time dawn arrived. Mist hung thick in the air and gave everything a cold and dangerous feeling about them.

Neither of them had much to say, as Theo was filled with his own inner thoughts and concerns for the outcome of this duel. Theo did not like the idea of aiming wide and allowing the rat to live after what he had tried to do to Penelope, but he also was not about to break his word to Penelope.

As they reached the old mill, they saw that Old Man Philips was already there waiting for them. Theo had asked Alexander if he would secretly get word to him about the duel at dawn this morning. Although duelling had been outlawed, they were still very common as a way of dealing with issues among the ton.

All someone had to do was make the arrangements with Old Man Philips with the money that would be required for his fee,

and that to keep the authorities from intervening, and it would all be fine.

Once Theo and Alexander dismounted their horses, Mr Carlton and Mr Lancaster also arrived. All the men nodded tersely at one another, and Old Man Philips explained the rules of the duel.

“There will be a coin toss to decide who shoots their pistol first. Mr Carlton, since you were the challenged party, you may have the privilege to call heads or tails while the coin is in the air.”

Old Man Philips tossed the coin high in the air, and as it fell, Henry squeaked out, “Heads!” He looked terrible, and the smell of the pub was all over him. It was common knowledge that the duke was a highly skilled marksman and never missed, so it seemed clear to everyone present that he was terrified and would have rather been anywhere but there that morning, if he had not been forced within an inch of his life if he did not arrive.

The coin dropped, and Old Man Philips caught it on his hand with his other hand covering the coin. He removed his hand,

and everyone leaned in closer to see which side the coin had landed on: it was heads. A look of relief spread across Henry's face that he would be the first to shoot.

“All right, gentlemen, stand back-to-back, and I will count out the ten paces. One. Two. Three ...” Old Man Philips called out sternly.

As he called out the rest of the paces, Theo thought of Penelope, how usually in a little while he would be meeting her for their secret morning rides together. Not this morning, though. And when he pictured her in her big bed with a hurt ankle and this *vermin* being the one responsible for her pain, his fury rose, and he wished once more that Penelope had not made him promise not to kill him. *The criminal does not deserve to continue breathing!*

“Ten! Turn and face each other now. Ready, aim, fire!”

Old Man Philips had told them that when the other was shooting they may stand side-facing, but Theo would not show any fear.



Henry fired, and after the smoke cleared, it was clear that he had not even come close to hitting Theo.

“Your Grace, it is now your turn. Ready, aim, fire!” Old Man Philips called out, and as he did so, Henry turned, visibly shaking.

Theo fired his pistol and specifically aimed for his arm. Theo hit his target exactly where he had intended and just barely grazed his arm with the bullet. Henry cried out and wailed like a woman giving birth to her first child. It took a lot of coaxing from Mr Lancaster to allow him to see it.

Once Henry finally showed him his wound, Mr Lancaster slapped him on the back, saying to hush up, for it was hardly more than a scratch, and he would be fine. Mr Lancaster then came to him and bowed low to Theo.

When he arose, Theo looked him dead in the eye and said, “You will take that scoundrel with you and return to France and never set foot back in England. If I ever hear of either of

you setting one step on British soil, I will finish what I started here today, and that day I will not show either of you any mercy!”

Mr Rupert bowed once more, pulled up Henry, and they quickly rode off as Henry whimpered the entire time.

Theo and Alexander watched the two of them leave, and Theo felt a sense of relief that he would never see either of them again.

Once they were out of sight, Theo thanked Old Man Philips and shook his hand, concealing an extra tip in his palm. Old Man Philips tipped his hat to Theo and then nodded his head to make Theo look behind him. Theo turned and saw the viscount riding down from the hill.

“Your Grace, I did not expect you to be here. If things took a turn for the worse, I did not want you to be implicated in this.”

“I learned of your plans from Penelope’s handmaiden, who overheard your conversation with her last night, where you not only asked for my daughter’s hand in marriage but also told her about your plans for this morning.”

“Yes My Lord, I apologise. I know I should have asked your permission first before asking her—” Theo said but was cut off by the viscount when he raised his hand, signalling him to stop.

“You need not apologise. I came here this morning because I wanted to see what you would do. I must say I am extremely impressed with your fortitude and restraint not to finish that git off when you had the chance. I am not sure I would have been able to do so if I were in your position.”

“I promised your daughter that I would not kill him,” Theo explained.

“Yes, I know that as well, and to be truthful with you, not only do I know that you could have easily killed him from that distance, but you also could have shot him in a place where he would later die from his wounds. But you only grazed him, and the fact that you would place such a high value on

honouring your word to my daughter ... Well, I will gladly give you permission to marry her!”

Theo blinked in shock and joy. “Oh, thank you! I can never express to you how happy you have made me! She is the most wonderful woman I have ever met, and I am ardently in love with her! I promise you I will always take care of her.”

“I know that you will. You have proved that in many ways in the past two days.”

With that, the viscount mounted his stallion again and left. Now it was just Theo and Alexander left at the old mill. When the viscount was out of sight, Alexander whooped out loud and slapped Theo on the back.

“Well, man, I knew it would all work out in the end, and I am overjoyed that you have got what you deserve my friend!” Alexander congratulated him.

Theo felt his face turn a bright shade of red, could not hide his big smile, and laughed with Alexander in jubilation.

“Now you just need to go ahead and ask Ms Stuart to marry you!”

“Oh, do not worry, I intend to! You know the other morning when you and this viscount went hunting alone, and I was gone most of the day?”

“Yes, of course, I do. Why?” Theo responded.

“Well, I took the opportunity to travel to Ms Stuart’s village and seek her father’s blessing for her hand in marriage. He gave it to me, so now I am free to ask her tonight at dinner. Will you help me at the jeweller’s today in selecting a token of my affection? I was thinking a ring for her.”

“Oh, blast! With everything that has been going on, I had completely forgotten about a ring. I need to go and get my

mother's engagement ring sized down for Ms Ainsworth!"

"Let us go back to your estate, have breakfast, and make ourselves ready for going to the jewellers today then," Alexander suggested.

"Yes, let us do that. My stomach has been complaining loudly for some time now!"

Alexander laughed and said that he had as well. So the pair of them mounted their horses and rode off towards Theo's estate. This ride was filled with excited conversations about what their futures would be like with each of their new brides and joking about looking forward to the honeymoon and wedding night most of all.

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When Penelope finally awoke, she was still drowsy and sluggish, feeling the effects of the medicine she took last night

before bed. However, her mind flashed when she looked at the time and realised that the duel had long since taken place.

Penelope rang the bell, and Bessie came in just a few minutes later carrying a tray of food for her mistress. After setting the tray on her lap, Bessie opened the heavy curtains and the windows to let the warm sunlight and gentle breeze in.

“I am so happy to see you looking so much better this morning! How are you feeling my mistress? How is your head?”

“My head feels much recovered, and I cannot say I feel any pain in my ankle now, so long as I do not move it. But Bessie, please tell me has there been any word this morning from the duke,” Penelope said.

“Well, in fact, yes, there has,” Bessie answered as she pulled a sealed letter from her petticoat pocket, “but I would really prefer you read it after you eat some, mistress ...”

“I will eat, but I could not begin to swallow a single bite before I have read that letter!”

“Hmm, I feared you would say that. Here, you are mistress.”  
Bessie relented and handed over the letter.

Penelope tore it open and impatiently read its contents:

*My Darling Penelope,*

*First, I want you to know that I am perfectly well and I did as I promised you. I did no serious harm to Mr Carlton, but we will never have to concern ourselves with him or Mr Lancaster again, as they will be going to France and shall not return here forever more.*

*I hope that you slept well and are recovering rapidly. I have thought of you constantly since I left your sweet presence, and my heart has ached for the moment when I can hold you in my*



*embrace once more! So that you know, my love, even injured laying there in bed, you looked so stunningly beautiful!*

*Your father came to the place of the duel after it was done. He watched from a distance, and once it was over, he came down and spoke with me. He gave his blessing for you and me to marry! I cannot tell you how blissfully happy I am. Although I detest the way it came about and that you were injured in the process, I am so very grateful you will be all right soon, and we will be able to be man and wife soon!*

*Take the day easy and do not exert yourself. Try to rest as much as possible so that you may make as speedy a recovery as possible.*

*I am so looking forward to seeing you tonight at dinner, if you are feeling up to it.*

*All my love,*

*Yours ardently Theo*

Penelope read the letter with tears of joy streaming down her cheeks. She was so relieved that her perfect man was not harmed, and that Henry and Mr Lancaster would not be in the ton any longer to spread rumours about her and Theo.

She could not wait for the evening to come so that she could see Theo again, and she did not want anything to ruin her chance to see him tonight, so she asked Bessie to request that the doctor come and check on her. Bessie said of course she would do this and left to have the doctor sent for. After she left the room, Penelope sat in her bed and ate as much of her meal as she could, but not all of it, because it was enough for three women to eat.

After Penelope had finished eating, she sat there wishing she could write an entry in her journal, but she could not get up from her bed to retrieve it. So, there was nothing for her to do but lay there and dream of her wedding day. Just as she began to drift off into a happy dream, Bessie returned to her chambers, and she had the doctor with her.

“Hello, Ms Ainsworth, you are looking much improved this morning. I am glad to see you resting, so I will not be long. How is the pain in your ankle today?”

“I do not feel any pain at all unless I put pressure on it. I would like to attend dinner tonight with my family and be allowed to leave my chambers if you will approve of this, Doctor,” Penelope said.

“Ahh, I would prefer you stay in bed for at least a few more days, but I suppose if you have someone to help move you downstairs, there is no harm in having dinner outside your chambers.”

“Thank you so much, Doctor!” Penelope said.

“I do not want to find out that you have been overexerting yourself, however.”

“Yes, of course. I will not do anything of the sort, I promise.”

“Good, now let me check you over.”

The doctor checked that she did not have a fever, and her pulse, and then gently examined her ankle. He saw that it looked slightly better, and he even told her that it may not be sprained but rather an extreme twist. In which case, her healing process would be much faster. He then bid her a good day, and shortly after, Penelope did drift off for a couple more hours.

When she woke up, Bessie gave her a midday meal and then asked if she would like to be taken out to the balcony and enjoy the outdoors. Penelope said she would love to and took her books with her to read and try to pass the time.

Finally, the time to prepare for dinner arrived, and Bessie gave her a bath and then helped her dress in a lovely gown with simple jewels. She put her hair up in a loose bun with many small locks of curls hanging delicately down around her head.

Once Penelope was finally ready for dinner, Bessie had Frank, who worked in the kitchen and was very strong, carry Penelope down to the drawing room to await the guests' arrival. As she sat on the lounge sofa with her foot elevated on a pillow, Penelope watched Georgina come down to the drawing room.

She was wearing a lovely green dress that complemented her complexion and eyes. Amethyst jewels dangled gracefully from her neck and ears and gave her a very distinguished look.

“Georgina, you look marvellous tonight!” Penelope exclaimed.

When she did so, Georgina giggled and twirled a couple of times, giving Penelope a look at all angles.

“Thank you, I do feel quite pretty tonight. And you look gorgeous too, but you always look stunning.”

“You are very sweet to say so. How has your day been? I have missed you so much. It has been a dull day of reading and naps for me,” Penelope stated.

“Honestly, mine was not much more exciting. It felt as though the day would never draw to a close so that Mr Davenport and the duke would finally arrive. You must tell me about what happened this morning with the men. I have been nervous about it all day!”

“Everything is fine ...” Penelope said and proceeded to share all that had transpired that day.

“Oh, it just gets better and better! I so hope my Mr Davenport will not wait long to propose to me so that we may all marry sooner than later. The waiting is torturous!”

“I am sure he will ask you soon. Do not fret about it, Georgie.” Penelope advised, though she knew Georgina would do so regardless of what she said—and to be truthful, so would she, if she were Georgina.

Penelope's mother walked in, and the three began speaking of plans for Penelope's wedding when she was healed. They hoped that her recovery would not take too long, so that they could begin preparing for her wedding: her dress, her trousseaus, to the flowers and the cake and so much more.

They could have continued talking about all this for much longer, but they were required to pause at the announcement of the duke and Mr Davenport's arrival. They all stood up, aside from Penelope, of course, to welcome their guests. Theo and Alexander bowed, and each of them handed their lady the huge arrangements of flowers they had brought for them.

"Oh, thank you so much, they are simply lovely!" Georgina cried.

"Thank you as well; I love them," Penelope said much more quietly, as Theo handed her the flowers and bowed, kissing her hand as he did so.

"How are you feeling, Ms Ainsworth?" Theo asked, sitting on a chair close to Penelope.

“I feel much better and think I will be back on my feet in about a week. The doctor came back today and said that he thinks it is not severely twisted and not a sprain after all.”

“I am so relieved! I am also so happy that you are not still confined to your chambers but will be with us for dinner tonight.”

Penelope’s father walked in and greeted both Theo and Alexander warmly, and a few moments later, it was announced that dinner was served. Again Frank came to assist Penelope to the dinner table, but Theo would not allow it. He insisted (if her father would allow it) that he be given the honour of assisting her to the table, and when her father gave a smiling nod, he leaned down and picked her up.

It felt so good to feel Theo’s warm body and strong arms around her again, even for a few moments, and when he sat her at the table, she found herself already looking forward to the end of the meal when he would carry her once more.



The evening was a pleasant one with much laughter from everyone, but nothing much of note happened until they all retired to the drawing room. Mr Davenport surprised everyone, getting down on one knee and proposing to Georgina along with the ring he had found to display his affection for her.

Georgina's hands flew up to her mouth, and she then joyously nodded in answer to his request to be his wife. Unable to speak, Georgina extended her small hand and slipped the ring on her little finger. Then she finally found her voice again and said that he had made her the happiest woman ever!

The rest of the night, she fluttered around the room showing off her ring. And she told Penelope that now that she was officially engaged, they must have a shared wedding day as they had always talked about when they were little girls.

In a moment of quiet, Theo leaned over to Penelope and told her that he had a ring for her as well, but that it needed to be resized, and that he hoped she would like it because it had been her mother's ring and had been in the family for generations.

“I am sure I will love it, and I am deeply honoured that you would wish to give me your dear mother’s ring!”

The night was still quite young when Penelope’s mother announced that she felt like there had been quite enough excitement for Penelope for one night and that she should go ahead and retire to her chambers to rest.

This frustrated Penelope because she was not ready to say goodnight to Theo so soon, but if she were being completely honest with herself, she was getting tired. The men stood up and said they should take their leaves, but that they would call on the ladies tomorrow afternoon if it was all right. This was happily agreed upon by everyone present, and they all said they looked forward to it.

Theo once more insisted on carrying Penelope, and when it was only Bessie there, and her back was turned, he kissed her forehead and whispered, “Good night, my lovely bride to be. Sweet dreams, my love!”

“Good night, Theo ... *my* Theo,” Penelope whispered in an equally quiet tone.

After Theo had gently shut her door, Bessie helped her ready for bed and required that she once again take the medicine the doctor had prescribed. Penelope did not want to as it made her so drowsy all that day, but it had helped her to sleep without any pain waking her in the middle of the night, so she asked only to take a small dose tonight.

Bessie agreed and gave her about half the amount she had poured for her last night, and once Penelope had swallowed it down and drank a glass of water to wash away the horrid taste, she laid her head on her soft feather pillow and fell fast asleep.

## Chapter 18

The next few weeks went by quickly, with Theo and Alexander visiting often. Theo often came and sat for long hours reading some of his favourite novels to Penelope as well as anything that she needed. He babied her continuously, and although she often protested that he did not need to, it was clear to him that Penelope actually loved how attentive he was with her.

By the third week, Penelope was well enough to go out riding again, but she kept it to nothing more than a slow walk. Still being able to go out on her morning rides once more and seeing Theo alone without anyone looking over their shoulder at them was so wonderful.

When Theo finally tasted her sweet lips again at their spot in the glen, he felt as though he would lose himself in her, and if he were not careful, he would take her again. But Theo was determined to wait to be intimate with her again until their wedding night. Penelope deserved that from him, and he was going to give her all she deserved as well as the moon and stars if he but could.

“Can you believe our wedding is just a mere seven weeks away? I am so happy you convinced my father to let us marry at the end of this season so we could have a double wedding with Georgina and Mr Davenport.”

“Of course, my love. In all honesty, there is no way I could have waited any longer than what we are waiting. I would marry you today if I could!” Theo declared.

“I feel the same way. Will it not be wonderful when we are man and wife and can be together always?”

“I agree wholeheartedly. On a different topic, though Penelope, there has been something I have been wanting to tell you.”

“What is it, Theo?” Penelope asked.

“I wanted to tell you that I have been thinking back on everything surrounding the duel, and how now that I have had

time to calm down about it and look back on it all, I am very glad that you had the wisdom not to let me end Mr Carlton's life."

"It makes me glad to hear you say this, but why do you say that?"

"I simply now see the wisdom in your decision. I would not have felt right having his blood on my hands, even with the terrible thing he tried to do to you. I want us as a married couple to swear to always come to the other with major choices and only go forward with them if we are both in agreeance over them."

"I love that and think that is a wonderful plan to have, and it means so much to me that you value my insight and opinion. Not many men would care to take advice from a woman."

"I think that is ridiculous and short-sighted. I need you. You make me whole and complete. Without you, I am only half the person I was created to be," Theo stated.

“I love that you think of it as two halves of one whole. It is such a beautiful way of thinking about it!”

“There is something else that I needed to ask you if you do not mind,” Theo said.

“Not at all,” said Penelope looking out at the water. When she turned her gaze back at Theo, though, she was shocked to see him down on one knee with a ring box in his hand.

“Theo, whatever are you doing?”

“I did not get to do this properly the first time I asked you, so I wanted to rectify that now that I have the opportunity. Ms Penelope Ainsworth, will you do me the honour of being my wife and partner for the rest of my life? Nothing on Earth would make me a happier man than to call you my own and to have you by my side forevermore!”

“Oh, Theo, yes! You will always have my heart! I love you more than life itself and long to spend the rest of our lives together! Yes, I will marry you and be your wife!” Penelope replied.

Theo took the ring out of its box and slipped it smoothly onto Penelope’s tiny ring finger. It was a perfect fit. The ring was dazzling, the metal was made of the finest gold, and the centre stone was an extremely large deep blue sapphire with countless tiny diamonds that wrapped around it and all over the band. It truly took one’s breath away to see it. Penelope stared at the ring in awe for a long time.

“What do you think of the ring, my love? Do you like it?”

“I absolutely adore it. I do not believe I have ever seen a ring that is quite its equal! I feel so honoured that you would give such a precious treasure to me, Theo! Thank you so much; it is truly beautiful!” Penelope was so thrilled that she pulled Theo in, kissed him passionately, and had to force herself to stop before things became too intense and they both lost control of their senses and made love right there.



“It was made for a duchess, and that is exactly what you shall be. Many other beautiful pieces of jewellery have been passed down in my family, and they will be yours once we are married. I hope they will also be to your liking.”

“You are so wonderful, Theo. I am sure I will love them all as well.”

“I am sorry it took so long to get this ring to you. I needed to have it resized as I said, but once it was finished, I wanted to wait for a moment when the time felt right, and this is the first time that I felt certain that I should not wait for a better one to come along,” Theo stated.

“Sweet lover, please do not apologise! It was a perfect moment, and it means so much to me that you think about things so particularly and so in depth. I love how much you care even for the smallest of details.”

“Well, I think I tend to over think matters at times, but I am ever grateful that you are such a patient woman and see the value in my considerations. I do strive to do all things to the very best of my ability.”

“You do many a thing with great skill and expertise,” Penelope said with a sensual smile.

Theo saw this look and was surprised at this comment and felt his manhood harden in his trousers as his heart beat faster. How he longed to pull that beautiful blue riding habit off her, or even just pull up her skirts there in the grass and make love to her till the morning was long past! But he knew they neither had the time, and he again told himself he would wait until they were married, as much as it seemed impossible at that particular moment!

So instead, Theo stood up because it was getting late, and he needed to return Penelope back home. Penelope started to stand up as well, but before she could, Theo swooped her up in his arms and carried her over to Phoenix, planting a few seductive kisses on his betrothed’s neck and ears along the way.

“Theo, I can walk for myself. Are you going to carry me around for the rest of our lives?” Penelope giggled.

“And just what is wrong with that idea?” Theo retorted playfully.

“Well, for one, it may not always be as easy for you as it is now when we are in our old age.”

“You will always be beautiful enough to get my blood pumping so hard that I have the vigour to carry you and more,” Theo said, making Penelope blush.

Theo climbed onto his stallion and set off slowly back to Penelope’s home.

“Poor Phoenix ... She looks so bored on these rides. I know she is longing to go for a real ride, and so am I. I simply cannot wait for my ankle to be fully healed and ride like there is no tomorrow again!”

“That does not surprise me in the slightest. I think by next week you should be back to your old self and not have to worry about your ankle any longer!”

“I certainly hope so!” Penelope declared.

Theo and Penelope set off at a leisurely pace, enjoying their last few minutes together for the morning.

“Would you like to go for some frozen cream this afternoon in town?” Theo queried.

“Oh, that sounds lovely! I have been craving that delicious treat for quite some time now, but I am not sure if I can go before the shop closes because my mother has made an appointment for myself and Georgina at the modiste this afternoon. I feel it will not be a short appointment, sadly.”

“I understand. I have an appointment with the cobbler today for my shoes for the wedding day, though I am sure it will be

less involved than your appointment today.”

“Well, usually I would dread such an appointment, but since it is a fitting for my wedding gown, I am actually really looking forward to seeing it. So far, all I have seen is the material and the sketches for it,” Penelope confessed.

“I am looking forward to seeing you in it that happy day as well, though truthfully, I am more hungrily anticipating taking it off of you that night.”

Once again, Penelope blushed crimson red at this. “I also must say I have thought much about that night and what our honeymoon shall be like!”

“Speaking of our honeymoon, I had thought it would be nice to travel abroad for a few months, get away from England’s summer heat, and return in time for the next season.”

“Oh, I would love that. There are so many places I have always yearned to see, and to do so with you on our honeymoon would be spectacular. Yes, please let us do that, Theo!” Penelope said enthusiastically.

“It is decided then. If it is all right with you my love, I will make all the arrangements and not tell you of them so that I may have some surprises for you during our travels. I cannot wait to show you the world as my duchess!”

“It still sounds so strange to think of myself being introduced as the ‘Duchess of Winchester.’ I think it will take me a while to get accustomed to that.”

“Well, get used to it, Your Grace,” Theo said playfully, “for it is going to be your title for the rest of your days.”

“I adore it.”

“Once again, the time has flown by, and here is where I must leave you, my lovely lady. I am sure I will see you tomorrow morning if not before, though,” Theo stated as he pulled General to a halt.

Penelope blew him a kiss as she continued down the hill towards home, “Farewell, my handsome man.”

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As the wedding day approached, Penelope grew increasingly busier with the countless wedding details. Her mother insisted that everything be perfect for the affair, and that it would be the wedding spoken of in awe for years to come.

The week of the wedding finally arrived, and many of her and Georgina’s family relations started pouring into the London. The house was full to the brim with guests, and all of them wanted the brides’ attention so that neither Penelope nor Georgina had a spare moment to themselves until they retired to their chambers for the night.

As much as Penelope had tried not to feel stressed about all this, when the night before the wedding arrived, she was so full of anxiety that she could not wait for the night to end so that she could enjoy the peace and solace of her chambers.

There was much toasting that night with her relations congratulating her, and when it was only women present, asking if she was ready to leave maidenhood and her father's home behind and go into the stage of life of being a woman, the mistress of a grand household, and before long, the mother of little ones.

Penelope answered them all with a smile and laughter and stated that her mother had prepared well for all of it, but the knot in her stomach grew larger and tighter with each jest and question.

At last, the night was done, and Penelope left the party early due to needing to get her 'beauty sleep for her big day.' Bessie, for the entire month leading up to her wedding, had been putting Penelope through a strict regimen of daily beauty routines and diet so that her fair completion would be at its very best.



Tonight, Bessie had made her mask for her face and neck that she was instructed to keep on for at least half an hour, and as it absorbed into her skin, Bessie painstakingly took Penelope's freshly washed hair and tied it up in tiny rolls so that she would have a bounty of curls in the morning.

Finally, her face was washed, her hair tied and wrapped in a silk wrap so that it would stay in place, and her entire body was oiled down when Bessie looked satisfied that her work was complete, and she bid her mistress goodnight. Penelope was exhausted but wide awake with nerves, so she pulled out her journal (which had long been neglected of late), and she was excited to at long last have the time to write.

*July Twenty-ninth, 1811*

*Dearest Journal,*

*I cannot express how good it feels to be able to write tonight. So much has happened in the last weeks, but I am far too tired tonight to try and lay out everything tonight. Hopefully, on our*

*honeymoon, I will have plenty of time to think back on all of this and commemorate it here.*

*I cannot believe this is my last night as Penelope Ainsworth. I am so looking forward to being Theo's wife and he my husband, but I am also very nervous about it. Will I make a good wife? Will we remain as happy and in love as we are now, or will we grow apart eventually?*

*I cannot imagine the two of us ending up like that, but I would assume that no newlywed couple would think that either. I want to talk to Theo about this concern and how we should plan to avoid it in our future together. I know there will be challenges in this life, and I want us to face them together and grow stronger and closer once we overcome those challenges.*

*I am excited to be the lady of my own household. I am looking forward to having the freedom to make my own schedule, decorate my home to my liking, and everything that comes with being a married woman.*

*I hope that Theo loves my wedding gown. I adore it and think that it is truly the most beautiful dress I have ever worn!*

*I truly cannot wait for tomorrow night, my wedding night! Yes, we have been intimate once before, but this time I know will be different because it will be as man and wife. I look forward to sleeping in his arms and waking up slowly and maybe even having breakfast in bed together and then making love to him once more.*

*We are going to be traveling abroad for our honeymoon. Theo has not told me where we are going, but I hope that we will be going to Spain, Greece, and most of all, I hope we will go to Italy. There are so many places I have always wanted to go and see and experience and have yet to get to go to!*

Penelope started to feel as though she could not continue to put legible words to paper much longer when a gentle knock came on her door.

Penelope got up and opened her door and found her mother in her nightgown with a large shawl wrapped around her shoulders.

“Hello, darling. I hope I did not wake you.”

“No, Mamma, I was still up. Please come in,” Penelope said as she stepped aside so her mother could enter.

“I will not keep you long because I know you must be very tired. I just felt that it was well past time for me to have a more detailed conversation about ... erm ... marital relations.”

Penelope struggled to keep herself from smiling at how bashful her mother was mentioning marital relations to her.

“What would you like to say about it, Mamma?”

“Well, I suppose I wanted to know if you had any questions for me before tomorrow night.”

“Ahh, yes ... I was wondering, should I wait for him to suggest we go to bed, or would he be waiting for me to suggest that?” Penelope asked. Penelope felt a knot form in the pit of her stomach about not being completely honest with her mother as she did not know that she was no longer a virgin, but it was true that she was not sure if she should initiate them making love or if he should.

“Oh, well, I would say that he will take the lead in that, and I would follow his guidance throughout the event. Also, it may be a bit painful, but if you relax, it will ease before long.”

“Thank you, Mamma.”

“Of course, was there anything else?”

“Not that I can think of at the moment.”

“Well, I think that will be sufficient. Just trust your husband and make sure he is pleased, darling. I love you and am very happy for you. You have made a wonderful choice in a husband.”

“I love him so deeply, Mamma.”

“I know, and I can tell from the way he looks and speaks to you that he adores you as well, and there is nothing more I could ask for as a mother. Sleep well my darling, and I will see you tomorrow morning!”

Penelope’s mother kissed her goodnight and quietly walked out of Penelope’s chambers. Once she had left, Penelope pulled her journal out from under the covers where she had hidden it and put it back in her permanent hiding place for it. She then laid down and fell asleep, thinking of what this next chapter of her life was going to bring with it.

It felt as though she had only been asleep for five minutes when she awoke with a start at the sound of her chamber door bursting open. Although it felt like it had only been five minutes, Penelope knew that it had obviously been more than

that because the light was shining in from under the bottom of her floor to ceiling windows.

Georgina danced in and laughed when she saw Penelope. “How can you ever still be in bed now? I woke up before the dawn had barely broken, and you always wake before me, so I thought you would surely be up, today of all days!”

“Oh, I just had trouble getting to sleep last night and was in quite a deep sleep.”

“I did not. I was so tired by the end of last night and could not wait to blow out my candle! Can you believe it. Pen? Today is our wedding day!”

“I know. I am so thrilled! It has been so long in coming and finally today is the day!”

“Well, come on, it will soon be time for breakfast, though I am so excited that I will be shocked if I can eat a single boiled

egg!” Georgina said.

“I am starving! I doubt I will be able to eat much for the rest of the day with all the preparations. I know I need to eat a decent amount to hold me over.”

“Well, do not eat too much. You do not want to feel sluggish later.”

“I am frustrated that I slept so late and will not have a chance to go riding this morning now.”

“Oh, Pen. There will be plenty of time for that. I cannot believe you are thinking of riding your horse on your wedding day!” Georgina said with exasperation.

The girls went down for breakfast and ate a lovely meal, and even though Georgina had claimed only to want an egg, it was all so perfectly prepared that she had just as full a breakfast as what Penelope finished.



As soon as they had finished, they were each pulled away from the breakfast table by their handmaidens and other servants to ready them for the wedding.

Hours later, they were finally ready. Penelope's dress was made of intricate and delicate lace with small pearls embroidered throughout the floral pattern. The dress flowed like rippling water in a brook whenever Penelope moved and made her look like a forest fairy queen. Her curls laid on her head in a perfect arrangement of braids, intertwined with tiny pearls and diamonds.

Georgina wore a fine satin dress that gave her a regal appearance. Her ruby necklace and earrings were in such a dramatic contrast that when she turned towards someone's direction, it would take their breath away. Both of their veils where long and so sheer they almost floated as the brides walked. The flowers for their bouquets matched in size, but Georgina had opted for red roses, and Penelope had selected white roses.

They walked down the stairs to the two chaises that awaited them along with each of their fathers. When Penelope saw her

father dressed in his finest suite and the smile he had as he gazed upon her, she felt as though she could fly.

“My beautiful, angel. You look ... Well, honestly, words fall short. You look as beautiful as your mother did on our wedding day!”

“Thank you, Papa,” Penelope said.

“Take my arm my dear, as everyone is waiting for us at the church already.”

As Penelope took her father’s extended arm, and they stepped over the threshold of their grand estate, Penelope looked back once more and looked at the home she was leaving forever. Tonight, she would have a new place to call home, and this would be a place to visit but would never again be home.

It filled her with a bitter-sweet emotion. She was so overjoyed that this day had finally come, and she was marrying the man

of her dreams, but she also felt the heaviness that change often brought with it when one faced it, no matter how happily.

“Penelope, I must say how proud I am of you. You have taken your time and found a husband that is not only a good man but loves you endlessly. I know as a father and a viscount to boot it was my duty to see you married sooner than now. But to be completely truthful with you, I was happy that none had suited you before now.”

“Why do you say that, Papa?”

“Well, you are my only little girl, and I do not think I could have given you up to anyone that I was not certain you loved with your whole heart and that he cherished you above all others.”

As he said this, a single tear ran down his cheek, and Penelope thought this was the only time she had ever seen her father cry, and it touched her heart deeply that he would be so vulnerable with her.

“Oh, Papa. Thank you so much for telling me that. You are the most perfect father a girl could dream to have. I love you so much!”

“Well, you are the best daughter, and I love you, sweetheart.”

Penelope’s father kissed her cheek and looked away, which Penelope figured was to hide any further tears that might escape his eyes.

They drove the rest of the way to the church fairly quietly, and when they arrived, the footman helped her down from the chaise, ready to step into her new life.

## Chapter 19

Theo felt his heart leap as the double doors of the church opened up. Theo stood on one side of the alter steps as he awaited his bride. The sun flooded into the church as the doors opened, and it took a few moments for his and everyone else's eyes to adjust to the bright light. When Theo's eyes did adjust, he thought he might be permanently blinded by the sight of this lovely woman walking towards him down the aisle.

She was absolutely breathtaking, and when Theo saw the smile on her face as she reached him, he felt as though his heart might burst from the sheer joy of it all.

The priest droned on for some time, and frankly, Theo heard very little of what he was saying until it came time for the vows, exchanging of the rings, and finally, when the priest said they could kiss the brides (which he had been aching to do the moment he saw her), Theo pulled back her veil and saw clearly the tears in her eyes, and he felt his own eyes threaten to water. Theo quickly pulled his bride into his arms and kissed her.

Then they walked from the church, and once outside of it, everyone began pelting them with rice and cheering. The chaise was there waiting to carry each of the happy couples to the viscount's estate where the reception would be held out in the extensive gardens.

It was a lavish affair with endless courses and beverages for the wedding parties and numerous guests to enjoy. Many toasts were raised, and when everything was finally finished, Theo realised that he had hardly had a minute alone with Penelope the entire time.

He hoped that now they were leaving the wedding reception, his servants would be wise enough to leave the introductions to the shortest length possible for the evening, so he could finally have his lovely duchess all to himself without anyone or anything to intrude on his love and the making of it with her for hours and years to come.

They rode in the chaise towards his estate where they would spend their wedding night before leaving for their honeymoon. Theo had thought that it would be too late for them to try and set out after the wedding reception that evening, and he was right, for it had run very long, and they were both ready to be alone once it had come to a close.

“How are you feeling, my love?” Theo asked.

“I am well. A bit tired after the excitement of everything today. How are you, Theo?”

“I am wonderful and extremely at peace now that I at long last have time alone with you, Penelope. I hope you are not too tired, though,” Theo said with a seductive side smile.

“Oh, most assuredly I am not! I would never dream of missing out on the adventures ahead of us tonight within the privacy of your chambers.”

“Hmmm, I am so glad we see eye to eye on this matter,” Theo whispered in her ear and kissed the nape of her neck, which caused Penelope to inhale sharply. Her chest rose rapidly up and down with excitement.

“Hmmm, well I suppose I should not get you in too much of a blatant fluster as we will be arriving home very shortly,” Theo teased.

“Yes, please I want to make a good first impression with the household staff.”

“Oh, you need not worry about that. I cannot remember the last time my servants were so excited, and they all have told me how eager they are to have a lady of the house again. It has needed a woman’s touch and care for a long time now.”

“Yes, but I just would not want to step on anyone’s toes when I make changes.”

“They will love and respect you, and I have told them to anticipate a large amount of remodelling and changes to the way things are done once we return at the end of October from our travels.”



“Are you sure you are all right with that, Theo? There is not anything you would like me to leave as it is?”

“No, my darling. In fact, if you wished to take it all the way back to the bare stone structure, that would be fine by me. All the happy memories in that house have been marred by bad ones in the more recent years of my life, so a complete change is completely welcome by me!”

“Well, I do not foresee me taking the remodel quite so far, but I am excited to breathe new life into it and make it ours and new for us and our family to come.”

“Hopefully sooner than later. In fact, I had hoped to start working on that tonight,” Theo said, and again he started kissing her face and down her chest.

Penelope laughed with glee and said, “Theo, please! We are arriving, and the staff will see.”

Theo pulled back and adjusted himself within his trousers as the footman opened the chaise door and held out his hand to help the new duchess out. Theo stepped out after her. The entire household was lined up on both sides of the entryway steps.

“We will have one-on-one introductions with all of you when we return from our honeymoon. The duchess and I are tired and ready to retire for tonight, so for now, I will simply say, everyone this is your new Lady of the house, Penelope Winterbourne, Duchess of Winchester.”

Everyone nodded and as they passed by them; they each bowed or curtsied and said a welcome. Penelope smiled sweetly at them all and thanked each one for coming out to meet her, or how she was eager to get to know them all individually. The last two servants they met were the butler, James, and the head housekeeper, Mrs Hunter.

“When we return in October, I will give you the grand tour of the estate, but for now, let me carry you in my arms so you do not lose your way to the most important part of the house.”

Theo whisked her up in his arms, and Penelope laughed as he carried her off and up the right side of the double staircase. When they were out of sight of all the staff, she whispered in response, “And just where is this *most important part* of the estate, if I may be so bold as to ask you?”

“Why, that would be our chambers, of course. I know officially you have your own room, but I see very little need for you to keep your things in there since we shall always be staying in this room.”

As Theo said this, he opened the door to his chamber, which was decorated for their special day. Candles covered every surface of all different heights and sizes, rose petals two inches deep carpeted the wood floors, and the bed’s usual dark, heavy curtains that hung from the canopy were replaced with delicate sheer ones that blew gently in the breeze from the open windows.

There was a bottle of wine with two glasses and fruits, cheeses, chocolates, and nuts on a platter so that the couple could keep up their strength.

“Oh, my goodness, this hardly looks like the same room from when I was in here those months back! I love it; you are such a romantic, Theo!” Penelope declared as she took the entire ambience of the room in.

“I am so glad you are pleased. I wanted it to be bright, happy, and quixotic for you on our wedding night. You are my bride, and I want to give the world.”

“You are so sweet and thoughtful!”

Theo noticed that Penelope’s hands were shaking slightly, and so he went over to the table and poured them each a glass of wine.

“Here, have some of this. Have I ever told you of the time I tried, as a child, swinging from the canopy curtains onto the balcony, and then onto another curtain I had tied to the old oak that hangs over there?”

“What? No you have not! I am sure I would recall such a tale if you had! Whatever made you think to try such a ridiculous feat?”

“Well, I had just been learning about the gorillas in Africa, and I thought I was strong enough to do the same thing they did with my curtains as they do with vines.”

“Oh, my goodness! What happened?”

“Well, as it turns out, I may have been strong enough, but the material of the curtains was not. When I tried to make my way onto my second *vine*, it ripped, and I went plummeting to the ground.”

“You must have scared the life out of your parents,” Penelope said.

“My mother cried for an hour, even though I only ended up with a broken arm, and it healed just fine, she still was much

more particular about the things I studied so as to not repeat that type of event happening again.”

They both laughed at this and traded stories of their childhood escapades. After an hour or so, Theo could tell that Penelope was much more at ease and even seemed to be giving him hungry looks. So, he sat down his glass of wine and walked over to where she sat on the bed.

Penelope offered him her glass, and he placed it out of the way, and then he slowly kissed her, building the intensity of his kisses with each one. As he did so, his hands expertly worked their way through the lacing of her frock until she was free of it.

Once the top of her body was bare, Theo began revealing her lower body. He pulled her stockings down, and finally, she was naked. Theo looked at his wife's naked body and marvelled at her exquisite beauty. He longed to ravish her there, but he was determined to make this a night they would never forget.

Theo took her left leg in his hand and gently kissed the top of her dainty foot, alternating between kisses, licks, and soft

nibbles as he moved up the inside of each of her legs until he was just below where her legs came together. There he paused and removed all his clothes, exposing his fully aroused manhood.

He dove down into the glorious pool between her thighs and enjoyed her sweet juices that had already begun to flow freely. Penelope moaned loudly and called out his name many times as she cradled her breast in one hand, playing with her pink erect nipple, with her other hand grasping the curls at the top of Theo's head.

Penelope reached her climax quickly, and she called out in utter pleasure. She tried to get Theo to come up to where she was so that he could finally enter her, but Theo was not done. Not by a long shot. He stayed in the sweetness of her womanhood until she had climaxed three times again, each time building in length and intensity.

By the end of the last one, she looked as though she were in another universe, completely overcome with ecstasy that she struggled to *move*, much less form a full sentence. Instead, she merely beckoned him with her eyes and hands, and Theo could no longer resist her. His cock was aching with his desire so long averted and the intense amount of pleasure it gave him to see her enjoying his ministrations so thoroughly.

Theo moved up and allowed Penelope to taste the delicacy that was her own sex and kissed her passionately as he pressed his large member into her tight entrance. Although she was already more than completely aroused, Theo felt that her body was still unaccustomed to the large size of him, so he continued slowly and would not penetrate her fully until she had opened herself to him and received him with ease and joy.

Theo began to feel his need to release his seed and knew that he would not be able to refrain much longer. Just then, Penelope wrapped her legs around his waist and began moving her hips in sync with his movements. This was more than he could stand, and Theo spilt all of his creamy seed deep within Penelope.

The waves of sheer pleasure continued throughout his body, and Theo felt as though he had never experienced anything like this before. He finally gathered the strength to lay down beside her, and Penelope turned on her side, and he embraced her as they both drifted off to sleep.

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Penelope awoke early the next morning and felt completely blissful at the realization that she was there in bed with Theo, her husband. As she lay there, she thought how even though at the time she would not have believed it possible, last night had been even more wonderful than their first time making love. There was just something so beautiful and pure about making love to her husband for the first time.

It was absolutely wonderful, and she felt as though she could bask in it all day. He looked so peaceful that she hated to rouse him, but he also was so extremely appealing, laying there totally bare. His entire body was so strong that it exuded masculine virility.

Penelope carefully moved down under the covers and found her way to his manhood. She gently stroked him in her hand, and once he began to stand erect, she wrapped her small mouth around his member and moved up and down along the length of his large cock.

As Penelope moved to achieve a better angle, the covers slipped down around her. When she looked up, she saw that Theo had woken up and was smiling down at her. She smiled back at him and blew him a kiss before she continued her work. Theo grunted as he enjoyed the endeavours of her labours.

Penelope straddled his strong thighs, directed Theo into her wet depths, and rode him vigorously until he sat up and wrapped his arms around her back. Penelope encircled her small legs around his waist, and Theo pushed his way into her, hitting her in her most pleasurable places. Penelope felt her orgasm building within her, and she called out that she was going to climax, and at the exact moment Theo did as well. It was a height of pleasure like none other.

“Oh, my amazing Penelope, I love you so deeply!”

“I love you, Theo!”

“Well, thought we would not have time this morning for a ride, but apparently, we should have time for two since someone woke up so early.”

Penelope giggled at this. “Ahh, that would be lovely. Can we go out riding now?”

“I think so, though we will have to make it a short one so that we are not late leaving for our travels. Come on; let us get dressed.”

They both dressed quickly, aside from the delays of Theo’s constant attack of kisses all over Penelope.

As they rode down the road and enjoyed the delightful summer morning, Penelope thought how much her life had changed in such a short amount of time.

“So, Theo, will you tell me where we are traveling to first?”

“Humm, I suppose. Well, let me see if you can guess the place.”

“Oh, goodness, I have no idea ... Erm ... Paris?” Penelope guessed.

“No. First, we are going to Spain, or more specifically, the northern coast of Spain. I have been there before, and it is some of the loveliest country I have seen thus far.”

“That sounds wonderful. I cannot wait!”

“I know, I really think you will love it there. Each place I have chosen for us is a very special area and ones that I want to explore with my beautiful duchess.”

“And there is no one I would rather see the world with than you, my charming duke.”

They rode at a quick pace and then got down at their glen, letting the horses drink from the water there as they stretched their legs with a short walk before the long ride ahead of them.

Then it was time to return home for an early breakfast and then finish packing for their trip. When they finally got into their carriage and headed for their honeymoon travels, Penelope thought of her sweet friend Georgina and longed to hug her. There had been such a large amount of people craning for an audience with her that she had not had an opportunity to bid her farewell before they left last night.

Although Penelope was very much looking forward to their honeymoon, she felt sad to be away from her best friend for so long. The chaise made an unexpected turn.

Penelope looked at Theo with a questioning look in her eyes, “Why have we turned this way? Should we not have taken a right just there?”

“Oh, I have one place I need to spot before we truly start our journey,” Theo said, as though this was nothing of interest.

Penelope could see that he was not going to tell her where they were going, so she sat back and leaned her head on his strong

shoulder.

Theo looked down at her and said, “Have I told you this morning my duchess, how beautiful you are, and that I am wildly in love with you. In fact, it may be idolatry how much I adore you. I worship your every movement.”

“Oh, Theo you are too sweet. You simply spoil me with all your flattery!”

“It is my job to spoil you. And speaking of spoiling ... that reminds me of a present I have for you.” Theo said this and pulled a velvety box from a bag next to him.

Penelope opened it and saw a gorgeous set of emerald drop earrings, necklace, and bracelet. The entire set was beautiful craftsmanship, with exquisite designs in the construction of the silver chains.

“Oh, my goodness. I love it so much. Thank you so very much, perfect husband!”

“I am happy you like it. It is just a start of the honeymoon gift I wanted you to have. Here, let me put it on you,” Theo said as he helped her with the necklace and bracelet.

“Well, what do you think of it?” Penelope said as she modelled her jewels for her adoring husband.

“They honestly look more stunning now that they are upon you, my love!”

“Thank you, Theo. Do you truly like the wedding gift I gave you yesterday?” Penelope asked.

Theo pulled out his new gold pocket watch that she had got engraved for him. The inscription said:

*To my Husband Theo*

*I will love you for all of Time*

*~Penelope~*

“I love it and will cherish it always. I love the inscription on it. It was so thoughtful of you. I love that it looks so akin to your very own penmanship, as though you had etched it into the metal yourself.”

“I actually brought them a sample of my writing with that written on the note so that they could match it as closely as possible. I am so happy they were able to match it so well!”

“Ahh, speaking of time, perfect timing, we are here!” Theo announced as the chaise stopped.



Penelope had been so preoccupied with the gifts she had forgotten all about where they were headed. When she stepped out, she instantly knew where they were.

This was the Davenport estate. It was one of the closest estates to Theo's, and as they stepped out, Georgina came out in jubilation.

“Oh, Pen! I am so happy to see you. Alexander did not tell me till just now that the two of you were coming. He allowed me to lament all morning about how I was so disappointed that I would not get to see you once more before your travels!”

Penelope shared a sweet embrace with her dearest friend and answered saying, “Neither did Theo! I am so happy they thought out this plan for us to see one another.”

“Well, we both knew that you ladies would need one more farewell before being apart for so long.” Alexander laughed as

he walked out to join them all.

Georgina wrapped her arms around him before slapping him fun lovingly on his shoulder. “Still, it was very wicked of you to let me suffer for so long this morning and not to say a word the entire time!”

“Would you both like to come in? We were just sitting down to breakfast? Prey, come and join us!” Alexander offered.

“We have already eaten and sadly really must be on our way. We have a long journey ahead of us before we stop for the day. But thank you for the kind offer, my friend!” Theo said as he shook Alexander’s hand heartily.

“Oh, how will I ever manage for so long without you, Penelope? I do not think we have ever been separated for so long since we first met as tiny girls!”

“I do not think we have, but the two of you will have a wonderful time in Bath, I am sure. And I will write very often, I promise,” Penelope stated.

“All right, well, you both take care and know you shall be gravely missed until ...” Georgina choked on her words, unable to finish her sentence.

“Oh, Georgie, do not cry!” Penelope said with tears forming in her own eyes as she hugged her friend once more. “We will be back before you know it!”

Georgina pulled herself together and cleared her throat before saying, “Yes of course. It is going to be wonderful. I cannot wait to see all the things you bring back from all the wonderful places you will go and see. Take it all in and enjoy every moment of it, you two!”

After one last hug, Penelope and Theo climbed up in their chaise and waved out the window to their two very best friends as they headed down the road towards their first trip together as The Duke and Duchess of Winchester.

# ***THE END***

*Can't get enough of Priscilla and Lionel? Then make sure to check out the [Extended Epilogue](#) to find out...*

*What will cause Penelope's sudden bleeding, and what implications will it have for her and the baby?*

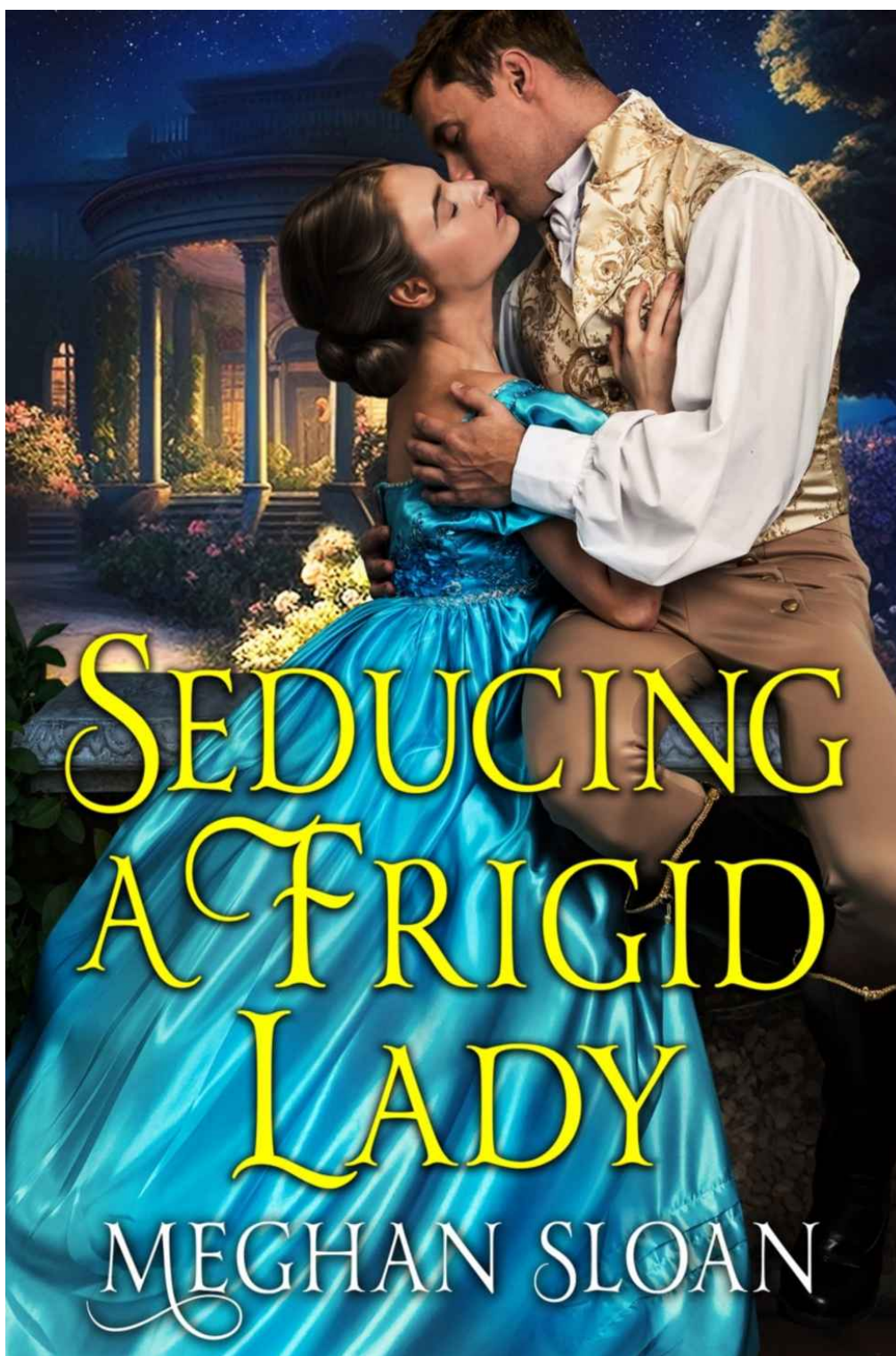
*How will Theo's troubled past and relationship with his father affect his parenting style?*

*After everything that happened, what will the Ton's perception of the "Mad Duke" be?*

Click the link or enter it into your browser

<http://meghansloan.com/priscilla>

*(After reading the Extended Epilogue, turn the page to read  
the first chapters from “**Seducing a Frigid Lady**”, my Amazon  
Best-Selling novel!)*



# Seducing a Frigid Lady

## Introduction

When her father promised her she will never have to marry if that is her wish, Priscilla Lloyd immediately chose the life of spinster. Since then, she proudly wears the title of the ice queen knowing it will protect her from the resentful suitors of the ton. While rebuffing every marriage proposal with an icy demeanour, she will be surprised when a wicked Lord intrigues her, threatening to melt her chilly façade and set fire to her deepest desires...

Will she fight it back or will passion conquer her for the first time?

Lord Lionel Sinclair is the Earl's only son and his title comes with great responsibility. His parents force him to marry, and so, he resides in London. Lionel has one rule; he will not court any woman of the ton until he is absolutely certain he wishes to marry. Little did he know that upon meeting the tempting Priscilla he would break all his rules. Being more and more



intrigued with lust for this alluring Lady, fate will soon challenge his feelings, honour and loyalty.

Will he be able to make the ultimate sacrifice for the sake of his flaming love?

Thrown together by chance at one of the few dinners Priscilla has been forced to attend, they realise that they may be each other's saving grace or each other's downfall. As passion and sinful kisses in the dark spark their sizzling romance, jealous suitors, schemes and secrets threaten their courtship. Can their scandalous affair thaw the ice queen's heart and find its way amongst the madness or will the firestorm vanish the two lover's passion like ephemeral snowflakes?

# Chapter 1

If Miss Priscilla Lloyd had known how many people would be at the dinner her best friend's parents were hosting, she likely would not have encouraged her father to go. Nor would she have gone herself. Miss Sophie Lyttleton, the daughter of a Viscount, just as Priscilla was, had assured her that there would only be a few guests at dinner. The words, if Priscilla remembered correctly, had been "just a few friends and relatives."

Yet from the moment she set foot inside the Lyttleton townhouse, she was well aware that her friend had lied to her. Sophie would no doubt assure her she had done nothing but embellish the truth, as many members of the *ton* were family or friends in some way, whether they liked it or not.

The intertwining connections built over years and years were the very thing that Priscilla liked to avoid because everybody was always talking about everybody else, always in everyone else's business, and discussing the latest gossip.

More often than not, she found her father at the very centre of said gossip, not physically but in the gossip itself, due to his constant need to be in the strangest business. Even more often than not, it worked out for him in the wealthiest of ways and brought brand new connections, but for weeks or even months before plans came to fruition, the *ton* would be talking about whatever hair-brained, nutty scheme the Viscount Lloyd was up to now.

The more guests at an event, the more likely the talk was to turn towards her father, especially when he was in attendance and whetting the appetites of said members with glorious tales of what he intended to do next.

Priscilla was pretty certain that was exactly what would be happening the moment that a group of the men in the party called out to her father upon their arrival, waving him over with smiles and cheers as though the life of the party had arrived.

She was forced to grit her teeth and bare it, recognising only a few friends amongst the crowd and knowing that they would do their best to shield her father from all the others. There was little she could do herself.

“There is no need to look so worried, Prissy,” Lady Diane Bishop said. The Countess Bishop and Priscilla’s aunt laid a gloved hand upon her forearm and gave a comforting squeeze. The two of them watched her father walk into the drawing room, where they were all to await the dinner gong. “Your father is a grown man, and he can take care of himself.”

Priscilla pursed her lips, not only because she knew that for the most part her aunt was right, but also because she hated it when anyone called her Prissy.

“I can’t help but worry,” Priscilla admitted with a shrug of her shoulders.

“You are the child, and he is the parent,” Lady Diane pointed out, caressing her niece’s face for only a second. “Whether you are a young lady now or not, he is supposed to take care of you, and that is exactly what he has always done.”

Priscilla couldn’t argue with that. Her father had always done right by her. More than that, he had always listened to her, and

she knew that if she had really asked him to, he would not have attended that night, nor would he have made her attend.

“Now, where are our hosts? We must make our greetings.” The lady slipped her hand into the crook of Priscilla’s arm and held her with a vice-like grip as she began to encourage her around the room towards Lord and Lady Marsham, Sophie’s parents.

“Ahh! Lady Bishop! Miss Priscilla! It is so good of you to join us!”

Lady Marsham greeted them both immediately upon seeing them cross the room towards her and her husband, who were already entertaining a small group of their guests in the centre of the room.

Lady Marsham, who was a few years younger than Lady Bishop, was beginning to get the first few streaks of grey in her brown hair. And there were a few wrinkles about her eyes, but other than that, she was a picture of health and beauty, dressed in a fine shade of lavender silk with diamonds on her tiara and around her neck.

She greeted the countess and Priscilla with a kiss upon each cheek before holding the younger at arm's length as if she wished to look at her. "You look more and more like your mother each day."

Priscilla had to grit her teeth at that. She had heard it so many times and even managed to see it for herself when she looked at her reflection, yet it never got any easier to hear.

All she had to test the theory by were the paintings of her mother that hung in every one of her father's residences and the very few memories she had of her mother who had died in childbirth when she was just four years old. She had little to go on save for the memory of a lullaby she could hear in a sweet voice when she went to sleep, and the softness of a caress upon her cheek.

"I am certain she was always much more handsome than I, Lady Marsham," Priscilla responded, bowing her head because she could not curtsy with the lady's hands still upon her shoulders. Feeling awkward and slightly embarrassed, she hoped she was wearing enough powder on her face to stop it from being obvious.

“I would have to disagree,” Lady Marsham protested with a shake of her head. “Though she was a most handsome woman indeed.”

Priscilla bit back a sharp retort, having no desire to talk about her mother; it was just too painful. Before she could do so, the Viscountess released her and began to gesture to another member of the party. “Lady Sophie, look who has arrived!”

Relief washed over Priscilla as the woman called over her daughter. With a quick curtsy to their hosts, Priscilla turned and hurried to meet her friend a little way off from them.

“Thank goodness you’re here!” She hissed under her breath, glancing back over her shoulder to be sure that none of the elder members of the group had followed her.

“I would have been down sooner,” Sophie responded, looking more than a little flustered. “But I was having a bit of a problem with my dress.”

To look at her, nobody would have ever guessed. Looking like a much younger version of her mother with glossy brown hair and glistening green eyes, Sophie was quite the beauty, and she pulled off her pale mint green gown beautifully. Priscilla wasn't quite so certain that she was matching up in the peach gown that her aunt had insisted she wear.

Linking her arm with her friends for emotional support, she squeezed her forearm affectionately and stated, "Nobody could ever tell."

For a few moments, the two women simply smiled at each other. Priscilla had to admit that she had missed her friend.

"I am so glad that you and your father finally decided to show your faces in polite society again," Sophie said affectionately and Priscilla struggled to stop herself from openly cringing at her words. She was beginning to sound an awful lot like her mother and even Lady Bishop.



“Yes, well, you know how this time of year affects me,” Priscilla said, struggling to meet her friend’s gaze. It was no secret to her or her friends that she hated the London Season and all the pomp and arrogance of it all.

Though she tried her hardest to hide her true feelings from the wider public, the more occasions she attended, the harder it was to do so. Better to stay out of the public eye as much as possible, especially as her father had so often promised her a simple and slightly more unconventional life.

“Yes, but I also know that the deal you have with your papa is to keep up appearances, and so I do believe you ought to at least try and make a small effort on what remains of the Season,” Sophie said pointedly, and from the expression that she gave, Priscilla started to wonder whether tongues had begun to wag about her. *Great, just what I need.*

In an attempt to glean a little more information, she asked, “If I am to do that, then you must catch me up. What have I missed?”

Though she offered her friend her full attention, she could still feel the watchful eye of her aunt upon her every so often. Lady

Bishop remained close by, speaking with Sophie's parents, though Priscilla knew well that her aunt was an excellent multitasker.

"Well, there is news that a new and very admirable viscount and future earl arriving shortly," Sophie explained, clearly not having gotten the hint as to what Priscilla was truly asking. Feeling the eyes and ears of several other guests upon them, she decided it was best not to try to correct herself and simply go with the flow.

"Do we have a name?"

"Viscount Lionel Sinclair, one day to be the Earl of Oxforth," Sophie explained, brushing back a strand of hair from her face and gazing out around the room almost as though she expected the very man to appear out of the crowd. She sounded excited, as though a simple name could merit such a thing.

"I am afraid I do not believe I have heard of him," Priscilla admitted, trying her hardest to recall a man with that name. Yet she had met so many viscounts, all waiting to inherit their father's titles, and one seemed to melt into another like rain

droplets into a stream. Just like all other members of the *ton*, they were all the same in essence.

“Surely, you must have,” Sophie said, looking at Priscilla almost as if she believed she had lost her senses. “He is a cousin of our most dear friend, Mr. Parr.”

Priscilla bit back the urge to scoff at her friend’s overly enthusiastic words. She was certain that it was more for the overbearing ears in close proximity, namely her parents, who were adamant to see their daughter married off by the end of the Season.

Though she was no stranger to Mr. Maximillian Parr, a gentleman of the *ton* who was quite bearable compared to most. In fact, he was a neighbor to them in Covent Garden and though she did not see him all that often, whenever she did, their encounters were always amiable.

“One can only hope that this new nobleman is as pleasant as his cousin,” Priscilla responded carefully to her friend, knowing that if she said the wrong thing now, her aunt would likely scold her later. To discard any thought of a new gentleman in town before he had even arrived was one thing

that Lady Bishop would expressly frown upon, whether she and her father had an agreement for her not to be forced into marriage or not.

“Well, the general talk about town is that he is a most agreeable man in appearance and very respectable on the surface but...”

Sophie trailed off for a second, glancing about them both as though she wanted to be sure that nobody was watching or listening in. For the most part, other guests were much too taken by their own conversations to pay any attention to them. Though Priscilla still suspected that there would be at least one set of ears listening in.

“They say he is witty and loved by all and that he is especially fond of the ladies.”

Priscilla felt as though she had heard it all before. There were far too many noblemen around her capable of doing whatever they wished when it came to extra-marital affairs. Yet if a lady were to so much as sniff in the direction of the wrong man, she would be scandalised for all eternity.

“Is that not the case for all men?” she commented openly, shrugging her shoulders. “Lord Sinclair need be no different.”

“You would believe so, wouldn’t you?” Sophie said, and the way her eyes glistened suggested that she had yet more to say.

“But the talk is that he is exceptionally scandalous. Flirtatious and downright depraved, and yet everybody loves him so greatly that he seems to just flutter on overall mention of scandal in the eyes of the most respectable noblemen around.”

Priscilla did scoff at that. Of course he did. A man, so long as he had the backing of other men like himself, could get away with just about anything that he wanted. It was no secret, and yet Sophie appeared absolutely fascinated with the fact.

“He is so well-respected. In fact, my papa has invited both him and Maximillian to join us for dinner tonight,” Sophie explained, her excitement seeming to grow. And with it, the

mood in the room seemed to grow, too. Suddenly, the fact that there were so many people in attendance made far more sense.

If this was to be the Viscount's first night in London, and if he was as eligible as Sophie was making him out to be, then every man and his daughter would be looking to secure some kind of connection with him.

Glancing about the room, Priscilla could suddenly see it in an entirely new light. Though there were many elder men about the place, there were a few younger gentlemen and a great number of young ladies, all of which were fluttering about like birds with their brightest and most glorious feathers on.

This was one of those odd mating dinners if ever Priscilla saw one. *And here I am, caught right in the middle of it!* She thought, gulping past the sudden lump in her throat.

As though she sensed exactly what Priscilla was thinking, Sophie scowled and huffed, "Can you believe all of these young ladies have been dragged here by their fathers to be paraded about before him?"

The look on Sophie's face made Priscilla bite back the urge to laugh. Of course, she could believe it. She had seen it a hundred, if not a thousand times before. She opened her mouth to say as much but bit that back too as Sophie beat her to it.

“And can you believe that my own papa is one of them?”

It was no surprise to Priscilla that her friend was angry at the fact. Having known Sophie for practically all of her life, she was no stranger to the fact that she hated being told what to do. And yet, she had never quite been able to say no where her parents were concerned.

“I so wish that my parents could be more like your dear papa.” Sophie continued to ramble on and her words made Priscilla search through the crowd, trying to catch a glimpse of the very man she was talking about.

Lord Lloyd was talking animatedly with a group of elder gentlemen across the room and though he looked quite foolish doing so, whatever he was saying had clearly captivated his

audience. Priscilla couldn't help but smile with amusement at him, for she was lucky indeed to have such an eccentric and unconventional father.

“If you had to put up with all of my papa's hair-brained schemes, you might be more willing to get yourself married off,” Priscilla joked, though deep down she was more than a little relieved to have such a father, especially one so respected even though many did believe he was one step from falling out of the cuckoo's nest.

Priscilla was so distracted by watching her father's antics that she nearly missed Sophie's warning, “Don't look now, but Mr. Kenyon is making his way over.”

*Oh no, why did anyone have to invite him?* Priscilla gritted her teeth. Without so much as a glance in the same direction as Sophie, she started to pull her friend away, making a swift path towards the nearest group of young ladies.

“Good evening, ladies,” she said with an overly friendly tone, forcing a smile. It was immediately clear that not one, but all of the ladies were quite surprised by her presence.



She couldn't say that she blamed them, as she so often made a point of avoiding talking to air-headed, arrogant, self-obsessed women. Yet for the moment, they were a good protection from a gentleman she had no interest in speaking to.

"I do hope you are all having a good evening."

"Quite," one of the women, Miss Selina Kendal, said rather sharply, offering Priscilla an almost disgusted glance up and down before she turned pointedly to continue her conversation with the other ladies.

The woman with the glossiest blonde hair, slender neck and upturned nose had never had any great love for Priscilla, and there was no fixing that in an instant. Priscilla knew her luck was out as the other ladies started to turn away from her.

"Is he still coming?" Priscilla hissed under her breath to Sophie. Even before her friend had responded, she continued

to drag her around the room, skirting quickly around the pack of ladies, looking for a pillar or a curtain or even a statue that she might be able to hide behind.

It was only when they came to the drawing-room door that she was able to find any hope of escaping.

“Cilla, I don’t think this is going to work,” Sophie protested. “Stop flitting about like a fairy and just speak to him.”

“Are you insane?” Priscilla blurted back scoldingly. Turning to her friend, she looked at her with desperation in her eyes, pleading for her to help her find a way out of the situation. And though Sophie looked apologetic, there was little that she could do.

Turning swiftly, Priscilla released her friend’s arm and made for the door, only to stop dead in her tracks the moment that the blonde-haired, green-eyed gentleman stepped out in front of her.

“Lady Priscilla, it is so good to see you.”

Priscilla’s heart sank the moment that she saw him. He was all too close, and she made a quick step backwards, drawing her gloved hands down the front of her dress, and clearing her throat. Placing an unreadable mask upon her face, just as she so often did whenever she was speaking to a mere acquaintance, she responded, “And you, Mr. Kenyon.”

“Please, how many times must I tell you? Call me Harold,” the gentleman responded, smiling warmly.

Priscilla found herself reaching behind her, searching for her best friend’s hand, searching for anything she could use to keep herself anchored and stop herself from running.

“Mr. Kenyon, I would prefer it if we were to keep things respectable between us,” Priscilla announced rather coldly. She was only slightly relieved when Sophie stepped up beside her, taking a little of Harold’s attention away.

“As you wish,” Harold said, a flash of what might have been hurt crossing his gaze before he bowed his head to Sophie and greeted her, “Miss Lyttleton. I hope you are having a pleasant evening.”

“I am, thank you, Mr. Kenyon.”

Priscilla gritted her teeth against the urge to scream at them both. Why did Mr. Kenyon have to try to be so friendly towards her when he was so formal towards everyone else? Deep down, she knew exactly why. She remembered all too well the day he had come to stand before her in her father’s drawing room, the day when he had announced that he had just come from her father’s study after having asked for her hand in marriage.

At the time, she had been sick to her stomach with worry, terrified of what her father might have said in response until he had explained to her that Lord Lloyd had explained that Priscilla had her own mind and he would not presume to know what it was that she wanted for her own future.

That had been her very first hint that her father would allow her to have whatever it was she wanted in life, and since then they had shared many a conversation about it, much to her aunt's disgust.

She still remembered Mr. Kenyon's face when she had rejected his proposal, how frustrated and almost angry he had appeared. Though she admired him for how he had tempered those emotions and how quickly he had retired from the room, she did not admire his determination to continue to approach her as though he had not yet given up hope that one day she might change her mind.

She could see it in his eyes, not because she was big-headed and because she believed that she was worth waiting for, but because she had always known him to be stubborn and pig-headed, much like any other gentleman of the *ton* who was so used to getting whatever it was that he wanted.

Having rejected him only last Season, she had hoped that this one would see him steering clear of her, and yet here he was. Nervous about what that might mean, Priscilla was careful to show as little emotion as possible, only keeping half her attention on him. The last thing she wanted was for him to get the wrong impression and try to begin courting her again. If he were to do so, she knew that she would be forced to at least

give him a little of her time as part of her promise to her father to maintain appearances.

*I do not want this*; she thought despairingly. She didn't want any of it. It was not just Mr. Kenyon, but all of the young and eligible men who liked to flit about her looking for a bride. Of course, she was in exactly the same boat as all the other ladies of the *ton*, at least where all of the bachelors were concerned. They had no idea of the deal she had with her father, that if she did not want to, she would not ever have to marry.

A part of her wished so desperately that she could scream about it from the rooftops so that she would never have to entertain a gentleman who wished to marry her again. She had absolutely no intention of giving a single one of them the opportunity to actually do so.

Even as she faced Mr. Kenyon, she could feel the eyes of the few other young men in the room upon her. Bile rose in her throat at the knowledge. It appeared to her that their attentions had become some sort of unspoken game between the gentlemen of the *ton*, almost as if her cold reputation had made all of them determined to be the one to *break* her. But there was one thing none of them knew; she would never allow herself to be broken by a man.

Just thinking about it, feeling all of their eyes upon her, made Priscilla exceptionally angry. And though she was loathed to do so, she had to force her focus onto Mr. Kenyon. At least then she might be able to temper her anger.

“I merely wanted to come and wish you both a good Season.”

Mr. Kenyon smiled at her, looking a little sheepish. The way his cheeks blushed slightly reminded Priscilla of the short time after his proposal in which he had become quite rude towards her with snide comments and disgruntled looks. And the way that Sophie stepped a little closer to her suggested that she had not forgotten either.

“I do hope we shall have good weather.”

“Thank you, Mr. Kenyon.” Sophie’s voice was almost as cold as Priscilla’s would have been had she beaten her to the punch. It was a formal and firm ending to their conversation, one which Priscilla silently thanked her friend for, knowing that Sophie had not forgotten or forgiven either.

“Good evening to you both,” Mr. Kenyon said rather awkwardly, bowing respectfully. “Perhaps I shall see you both at the dinner table.”

“Perhaps,” Priscilla responded curtly. Though she hoped not. After all, there were so many people in attendance that evening that she wasn’t even certain they would all fit upon one table. What were the chances of being put close enough that they would be able to see each other?

A swift glance around the room told her that there were still at least two more guests to arrive. There was still no sign of Maximillian or his cousin. At least, she didn’t think there was anyone unfamiliar in the room.

*Perhaps they won’t attend,* Priscilla thought as the dinner gong was finally rung. Clearly, Lord and Lady Marsham had grown tired of awaiting their final guests. She couldn’t say that she blamed them.



One glance at the grandfather clock across the room suggested that they had been waiting forty-five minutes as it was and the sudden rumbling in her stomach reminded her of how little she had eaten that day in preparation for what she knew was certain to be a wonderful feast. Lady Marsham was always one for going overboard when instructing her cooks on what to prepare for her dinners.

“Well, it looks as if we shall be escorting each other into dinner,” Sophie laughed, glancing around at the uneven number of men to women in the room. Priscilla followed her gaze, more than a little relieved at the fact she saw Mr. Kenyon offering his elbow to Miss Kendall.

Barely daring to hope, Priscilla thought, *Perhaps tonight won't be as bad as I thought?*

It was a relief to sit beside her best friend at the dining table. Even more wonderful was the fact that nobody really appeared eager to sit beside her on her other side, leaving two spaces free before the next lady sat. It was of little consequence to Priscilla when her own father came to sit beside her, offering a smile before he began to make conversation with the gentleman opposite.

Save for the gentle hum of small-talk, the room was quiet enough to hear the clinking of pots and platters being brought out by the servants. And yet it all seemed to become utterly silent the moment that the doors opened again at the far end of the dining room.

“Please, forgive us our lateness!” came a familiar voice and Priscilla looked around to see Maximillian entering with a far less familiar man in tow.

The instant that they slipped into the room behind the butler, every single person at the table turned to look at them. The quiet hum turned to an excited one as all the women in the room began to wriggle in their seats, looking around desperately for any way that they could bring themselves to be the one to sit beside the newcomers or namely Viscount Sinclair.

*Poor Maximillian*, Priscilla thought, actually feeling a little sympathetic towards the gentleman who was practically invisible to all the other women in the room thanks to his cousin.

Just looking at him, Priscilla couldn't quite see the reasoning for why everyone was quite so excited about his arrival. Of course, just like any other nobleman, he was finely dressed. And if she were entirely honest with herself, he was quite handsome, with dark hair and even darker eyes. Even from this distance, she could see how they glistened in the candlelight.

Yet there was something else about his appearance, something which did not bother her but that she thought would be looked upon differently by many of the other young ladies in the room.

His complexion was quite coppery, as though he spent a lot of time out in the sun. No doubt he liked to hunt or play pall mall or even go riding out in the sun just as many gentlemen did, though it was clear he had a low opinion for hats and other such things.

Yet it appeared that every woman in the room was entirely blind to this fact, no doubt blinded so by the knowledge of his wealth and also his future title. It was clear just from looking at him that he was very entitled and rich. Priscilla could practically smell it coming off him.

She was startled out of her gazing at him by a gentle hand upon her shoulder. Almost jumping out of her seat, she turned her attention to her father and smiled in an attempt to hide the fact.

“Papa? Is everything alright?” she asked as she alarmingly realised that he was rising from his seat.

“I think it would be a kind gesture for me to offer my seat to the newest member of the party,” her father announced loudly enough for all around them to hear. Priscilla bit back the strong urge to protest. Her stomach clenched when her father leaned over to whisper, “I do believe he shall be much safer sitting beside you.”

The way he glanced around the table at all the other young ladies told her exactly what he meant. For just a second, she allowed herself to feel pity towards the newest meat on the marriage mart. The way that the women were looking at him, anyone would think that Viscount Sinclair was a prized pig about to be sold at auction for an alarmingly good price.

Priscilla forced a smile for Maximillian and his cousin as they made their way around the table towards the two seats that were now available beside her.

Only a glance told her that at least her father had managed to find a seat at the table a little way down, opposite Mr. Kenyon. She could only hope that Harold would not think to try to get too friendly with her father in the hopes of getting to her again.

It was only when Lord Sinclair came to sit at her side that Priscilla realised Maximillian had failed to follow him.

“Oh, no, Cilla,” Sophie exclaimed under her breath, reaching for Priscilla’s hand beneath the table. It was in that moment that she glanced past her friend to see that Maximillian had settled on the other side of her friend.

The way Sophie glanced down at the head of the table told Priscilla everything she needed to know. Seeing the way that Lady Marsham smiled at them both, raising her glass in their direction as if in a toast, she knew that somehow Sophie’s mother had orchestrated the entire thing.

“Miss Lyttleton, Miss Lloyd, it is a pleasure to see you both again,” Maximilian greeted them both with a smile and Priscilla couldn’t help but chuckle slightly at her friend’s deer in lantern-lights expression. She could think of far worse men to be stuck sitting next to all evening. “Please, allow me to introduce you to my cousin, Lord Lionel Sinclair.”

At his gesturing, Priscilla was forced to turn slightly in her chair to look at the man beside her. Immediately, she was caught off guard by the sight of him so close up. Though tanned, his complexion was flawless, an afternoon shadow of facial hair making him look rugged, yet handsome. The way the corner of his lips twitched upwards in a smile made him look almost boyishly charming and yet there was a masculine energy to him that set her heart racing.

*He is just like all the others;* she told herself firmly. It had to be true because she had yet to meet a single gentleman of the *ton* who was not self-centred, arrogant and quite annoying in some way or other.

“It is a pleasure to meet you, Lord Sinclair,” she said, keeping her voice level and firm. Bowing her head discreetly before she turned her gaze away to focus on something else going on

around them, hoping to ingratiate herself into another conversation.

It took only a few seconds to realise that would be next to impossible. Not a single person was looking at her, not even a gaze slanted in her direction that she might be able to grab a hold of to stop herself from merely looking ignorant.

Worst of all was the tugging in her gut that had her turning her face back towards the viscount. The double-take she took of his appearance and the way his adamant gaze upon her made her shiver was enough to make her more than a little frustrated. No gentleman had ever looked at her in such a way and made her feel anything but the determination to get away from him.

*Cilla, get a hold of yourself*, she insisted, pinching her own leg with great difficulty through the skirts of her gown. *He really isn't that attractive.*





## Chapter 2

Viscount Lionel Sinclair was rather used to the way new acquaintances, especially the ladies, liked to fawn over him. It was not merely a big-headed thing but a fact, one that he welcomed in light of his good humour and wit, always willing to make people laugh and always happiest when everyone was having a good time.

But at the Marshams' table that night, there was one woman who did not act as all the others did. She had not begun to whisper to her friends the moment that he walked in or shown any hint of excitement in a broad smile, trying to meet his gaze, fidgeting in her chair as though she hoped he might sit beside her. In fact, she seemed to react in quite the opposite manner, not meeting his gaze for more than a second as he rounded the dining table with his friend and cousin, Maximilian.

Though she greeted him kindly enough upon sitting, she did not gaze at him adamantly or even blush, as though the mere closeness of him made her feel the slightest bit uncomfortable. She kept her distance, talking mainly to her friend, a woman whom Lionel soon came to realise was their host's daughter.

Where Miss Lyttleton was a brunette with gentle green eyes, Miss Lloyd was quite the opposite. Her raven-black hair was coiled at the nape of her neck before cascading in glossy waves down over her right shoulder, the shoulder closest to him. And her eyes were so icy blue that he feared if she looked at him too long, they might actually turn him to ice too. Her cool demeanour did not help matters, though it did intrigue him greatly.

As dinner commenced, Lionel found himself wishing to get to know the woman better. Compared to all the other young ladies at the table who were eyeing him, fluttering with laughter whenever he looked in their direction, Miss Lloyd was practically made of stone.

“Have you been in London for the Season for very long, Miss Lloyd?” he asked in an attempt to make conversation, unused to having to be the one to do so.

He made an effort to begin eating the entrée that had been placed before him, though suddenly, he found that he was far less hungry than one might have imagined after spending most of the day travelling.

“On and off, Lord Sinclair,” she responded, barely looking up from her plate to look at him. Though on the surface it was a simple answer, Lionel thought that there had to be more to it. One did not usually flock to and fro when the Season was on, at least not the women. They liked to congregate wherever the gossip was going on and during the Season, that was London. Yet Lionel did not get the sense that Miss Lloyd was a socialite.

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