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SAVING
HER
MARRIAGE
TO THE DUKE

AVA MACADAMS

SAVING HER MARRIAGE TO THE DUKE

A Steamy Historical Regency Romance Novel



AVA MACADAMS



Contents

[A Special Gift For You...](#)

[Before You Start Reading...](#)

[Love to Read?](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Extended Epilogue](#)

[Preview: Romancing his Fair Duchess](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Also by Ava MacAdams](#)

[Loved the Book?](#)

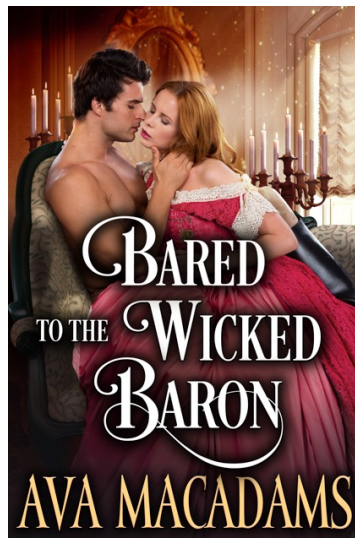
[About the Author](#)

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About the Book

“Watch yourself, wife, or I will become the monster you are making me out to be.”

The Duchess of Lancaster is so depraved that she would let just anyone in her bed. At least this is what the gossip columns declare about Arabella. If only they knew these rumors were no more than a ploy to ruse her elusive husband back to her...

Having lost everything he loved once already, Evan doesn't intend to go down the same path ever again or let himself love. And he is willing to stay away from his alluring wife for another five years if that is what it takes.

When news of Arabella's infidelity reaches Evan, he has no choice but to return to London and teach his wife some discipline and decorum. Only... what he finds instead is disobedience. And the most delicious lips he was ever hoping to kiss.

Chapter One



Gloria Garter, the Dowager Duchess of Lancaster, whacked her grandson's valet soundly in the leg with her cane, startling him awake.

"Get up, you fool, and open this door immediately!" she demanded, looking at the servant with hate-filled eyes.

"Apologies, Your Grace," Simon replied, scrambling from his seated position to open the double doors to her grandson's study.

"Worthless," she muttered impatiently, banging her cane against the floor loudly.

In the study that was once his grandfather's, Evan Garter, the Duke of Lancaster, was startled by her brash entrance. She barged through the double oak doors into the dark-blue painted room, casting light into the naturally dark corners, over the arrangement of heavy furniture and hunt-related paintings. He hadn't changed anything since he'd taken over the family affairs though every day he wondered if he should. Traces of his grandfather were everywhere, reminding him of the past.

Evan looked once more at the small, brown, leather buckle shoes and quickly hid them in a drawer of his desk. His blue eyes barely got a chance to focus before his grandmother's shrill, condescending voice filled the air. Immediately, an ache bloomed beneath his left temple. He rubbed it and squinted in annoyance.

"Blessed evening, Grandmother," he replied dryly as she slapped a newspaper in front of him.

"Blessed evening my foot, grandson!" she spat back, pointing a thin, gnarled finger at the print.

"Look at this! Your wife is making a fool of our family name and legacy with her hedonistic ways again. I will not stand for it, Evan! You must gain control of her at once!"

Evan sighed heavily as he reached for his decanter of whiskey and poured himself a refill. This was *not* what he wanted to be bothered with at the moment. He wanted to be left alone with his pain. With his misery. With the ghosts of his departed family. Of course, it did not matter what he wanted. Not when duty called.

"What is it exactly that I am supposed to be looking at, grandmother?" he asked, looking into her steely eyes as he took a healthy swallow of liquor. A fresh wave of burning numbness washed over him, and he felt the modicum of care he had started to feel slip away. *Ah. That was better.*

"Your *wife*, Evan," she bit out, leaning down once more to poke at the newspaper. "She is taking lovers outside of your

marriage, and she is throwing all caution to the wind by not caring who it is that sees her commit such dalliance!”

When Evan rolled his eyes in indifference, she scooped up the paper and began to read through the story.

“Arabella Garter, Duchess of Lancaster, has kept busy this summer season despite her husband’s absence. It has been said that more than once, she has been seen dancing and taking tea with the ever-renowned bachelor, Lord Leonard Garter, the close cousin to the Duke of Lancaster himself. More than that, spectators have seen the Duchess with quite the list of—”

“Enough,” Evan barked, rubbing his temple. “Surely, you are not convinced these rumors are true. After all, you chose Arabella for her... whatever rational reason you might have had in having grandfather align this marriage for me.”

He did not care. Not really. Even if it were true. As long as he got to keep his solitude.

Evan’s grandmother threw the paper back down onto the desk in disgust. “It goes on to say that she has been seen disappearing up the stairs of *your* estate with lovers of all kinds, Evan. At times, even more than one!”

Evan let out a dry laugh.

“Good for her,” he replied drolly, “at least someone is making use of our marriage bed.”

The Dowager Duchess looked at her grandson with pure horror, her lips curling to bare her teeth.

“This is no joke, Evan, nor will I allow you to treat it as one. That woman is ruining our name. Our reputation. She is ruining *you*, Evan, and yet you act as if you do not even care.”

I do not care, Evan thought, meeting his grandmother’s gaze. *It is because of your blasted husband that I am already ruined.*

“Arabella is a lady, grandmother, and a good woman. You should know. You are the one who arranged our marriage. I highly doubt any of these pathetic rumors are true,” he replied instead.

“I do not care what you *think*, Evan,” she shot back. “I care about what you do. And what you *will* do is travel to London and get this gossip—and your wife—in hand. Immediately. It is not just the papers that have me worried. My friends in London are also keeping me well informed, and they have confirmed what the papers have written.”

Evan shifted uncomfortably in his seat, concern rising in him for the first time.

“They say they have seen her do these things with their own eyes?” he asked, looking at his grandmother gravely. She stared back at him with equal brevity and nodded.

“You *must* take care of this, Evan, and immediately before it gets worse.”

She began to walk around to his side of the desk, and anxiety spiked through him as she began asking where the ledger of their London estate was. Before he could brush her off or think of a reason to ask her to stop, she pulled open the drawer in which he had hidden the tiny shoe and froze. The anger in her eyes melted as she turned to look at him, and for a moment, Evan caught a glimpse of the kind woman he once thought she was.

“Oh, my darling boy,” she sighed, picking up the children’s shoes, “Is this what is making you so impossible?”

Evan averted his gaze and picked up his whiskey glass again, saying nothing. He had been only three-and-twenty when he discovered that he was about to be a father and four-and-twenty when he had to bury his child and its mother. It had been six years since his loss, but it was a loss that shrouded him in heartache every day.

So much so that when his grandmother arranged for him to marry Lady Arabella five years ago, he had left her alone and untouched the very night after they were wed. Instead of fulfilling his duty as a husband, he had retreated to the solace and solitude of their family estate in Lancaster, refusing his wife’s request for visitation in the process.

“You cannot keep living in the past, Evan,” Gloria urged, tears welling in her once-sharp eyes. “It will eat away at your soul until there is nothing left. I am *so*, so sorry for the loss you feel, but you cannot let it consume you. Please, darling grandson, be with me in the present. Let us travel to London and rectify this...this *situation* with your wife. Perhaps, after spending a little time together, the two of you could have a child, and you would not feel so lost.”

For a moment, anger and resentment toward his family's responsibilities swirled inside of him, threatening to bubble up and take over. He did not want another family, not even if the union he was committed to demanded it. *But* it had been five years since he had attended to any affairs regarding his marriage, and perhaps, despite her arrogance, his grandmother was right. There was no place for him in the past.

"Very well," he said at last, speaking in a kinder tone. "I shall have Simon prepare my things. We will leave at first light." He paused, looking at her woefully.

"I am sorry, grandmother. For failing you and our family. And...her."

"Oh, my darling boy," Gloria sobbed, enfolding him in her arms. "You have not failed anyone. I would never allow it."

Evan felt his body tense up as the elderly woman embraced him, but he tampered down his disdain and allowed her to hold him. Although he did not like it, what she said was indeed true. She would never allow him to fail. With renewed patience, he listened to her talk about her plans for London and what she expected of him. When she was finally satisfied that she was getting her way, she left him once more to his privacy.

The moment the doors closed again, he picked up his whiskey glass and hurled it into the crackling fireplace. His brilliant blue eyes scanned the room, full of all of his late grandfather's things, and he felt more disgust rise up in him. Duty had driven that man to do horrible, *horrible* things.

And now, it was duty that was driving Evan to do the same.

Chapter Two



Henrietta Winston gathered the peach satin folds of her gown in her hands as she marched with purpose into her sister-in-law's bedroom quarters. Arabella gasped at the sudden intrusion and groaned as her brother's wife came storming in. She did not have a care in the world for what Henrietta wanted at that moment— or anyone for that matter. After what she had just learned from the most recent gossip sheet, she just wanted to be left alone with her comfortable bed and her misery.

“Time to get up, you lazy lie about,” Henrietta sang loudly, her overly cheery disposition grinding against Arabella's much-depleted state of comfort. She walked right past Arabella's bed toward the windows and flung open the heavy curtains. Sunlight poured into the dark room, hurting Arabella's cornflower-blue eyes. With a hiss, she brought up a hand to block out the sun's rays, and let her long, brown locks shield her face from them.

“What in the world are you doing here so early?” Arabella demanded, throwing the heavy covers over her head. “I thought my darling brother was not going to bring you here until this evening. There was talk of supper plans, I believe, not breakfast. And where is my lady's maid?”

Henrietta rolled her dark brown eyes as she shook her head and proceeded to drag the covers off of Arabella. “You truly think *I* would not be by your side as you went through all of *this?*”

Arabella rubbed her clear, unblemished, face with her hands, trying to summon the social etiquette that was required of her. She was happy her brother, Antony, had met a well-matched wife, but Henrietta could sometimes be a bit too much.

Remember, she loves your brother dearly, and for that, you must love her too.

It was not that Arabella despised her sister-in-law. In fact, on most occasions she found her to be a dear friend and a very supportive influence. But ever since the gossip sheets had printed their lies, she wished for nothing but solitude. However, it was obvious that such a request was not going to be granted, so Arabella pushed herself up to sit among the pillows.

“I am fine, Henrietta,” Arabella sighed tiredly, pushing her messy, chocolate-brown waves away from her face, so she could look up at her sister-in-law. She forced a smile, but she could tell by Henrietta’s discomfited expression that she was not convinced.

“You most certainly are *not*,” Henrietta replied, taking a seat on the bed close to Arabella. She reached out and picked up her hand as she leaned forward and pressed the back of her other hand to Arabella’s forehead.

“Are you ill?” she asked, her big brown eyes full of concern. “Shall I have Antony send out for the physician?”

Realizing her self-pity was getting out of hand, Arabella quickly shook her head *no* and assured Henrietta that she was well and in no need of a doctor.

“Well, if it is not the gossip sheet’s talk of you and it is not an illness, what is it then, darling? Your servants tell me that you have been shut in here ever since Antony and I took you with us to the soiree at the Queen’s Solarium.” She looked at Arabella with pleading eyes, clearly concerned. “*Please*. Talk to me dearest.”

Arabella felt guilt rise up in her as she looked at her sister-in-law’s worried expression and regretted being so short with her. It was clear that Henrietta was just trying to help, and all Arabella was doing was punishing her for her efforts. But the problem was, the truth was something she had never shared. Not with her brother, not even with her closest friend and ally, Leonard Garter, her husband’s close cousin. Perhaps though, the time to come forward was now. With a heavy sigh and depression lacing her voice, Arabella began to tell her the truth.

“I understood that when the Duke of Lancaster and I were married, it was a union of duty and not love. But I did think that, perhaps after a time of living together and learning about each other, we could very well feel *something* amicable between us.”

“You know, the first year he was gone, I could easily believe the excuses for his absence. I understand well the duties required of a nobleman after watching Antony be groomed to fill his position at court, so when the second year and third

year came and went with him not living here, I assumed it was out of duty.”

Arabella looked over to Henrietta with tear-filled eyes, and her friend silently urged her to continue.

“But last year, the loneliness became so much that I felt it was time to implore him to come back to London— to *me*.” She shook her head, the tears flowing fleeing now, leaving tracks down her cherubic cheeks.

“There has been no response for over a year. Not a love letter or even a scribble of acknowledgment. And I— I cannot go out now. Not with these rumors swirling about. And I feel like I cannot stay here because I feel like I am always expecting him to just walk through the door. I could not handle it— any of it— so I hide in this home where I am supposed to be loved the most.

Arabella laughed bitterly as she wiped her tears away with her bed sheets while Henrietta began rubbing soothing circles over her back.

“I am nothing but a title. I *have* nothing of my own. Just this empty feeling that has now grown so large that I am convinced it will never go away.”

Arabella felt Henrietta pull her into her arms, and she went into them willingly, letting her tears flow. For the next few minutes, neither said anything as Arabella’s tears soaked the bodice of her sister-in-law’s gown. After a while, Arabella felt her heartbeat and her tears start to slow, and when she leaned away from the embrace, Henrietta let her.

“Oh, look at me,” Arabella laughed bitterly, drying her face, “I must sound like a lovesick fool.”

Henrietta quickly shook her head, her perfectly arched brows furrowing in disagreement.

“It is the Duke that is being the fool here, not you,” she replied in a steely tone. “He has no idea how lucky he was in gaining you as a wife, and he is a downright dolt for not even taking the opportunity to try to get to know you.” She shook her head in disgust, wanting to wring the neck of the man that had hurt Arabella.

“Five years is long enough for anyone to dutifully wait for their husband,” she continued. “If he does not want to accept the blessing that was handed to him, then I see no reason why you shouldn’t give it to someone else.”

Arabella looked at her, startled.

“You cannot mean what I think you mean,” she replied, shaking her head. Henrietta shrugged a single shoulder and began to examine her well-manicured nails.

“What if I do?” Henrietta asked nonchalantly. “Do you have any idea just how many gentlemen would love to take you to their bed? That is why all of these rumors about you started! Your beauty, your grace— it makes lesser women jealous. Especially when they catch their husband’s gaze constantly gravitating toward you...” Henrietta rolled her eyes in annoyance as she shook her head. “Clucking hens, the lot of them. Pay them and the gossip sheets no mind and focus on

something fun and new. Something all for yourself.” A sly smile spread across her face, and she wagged her eyebrows suggestively.

“Like our darling Leonard Garter. He is smitten with you, you know. Everyone but you can see it, and if I recall correctly, he is rather the experienced rake. He could show you *everything* your husband has failed to show you himself.”

“Henrietta!” Arabella exclaimed, her cheeks turning a dark, rosy red. “You *cannot* be serious! As a married woman yourself you know as well as I that adultery is the worst sin a wife could commit against her husband.” She shook her head, taken aback by her sister-in-law’s vulgarity. “Leonard is a dear friend and a cousin to the Duke, that is all. But perhaps you are right. A new distraction could do well in raising my spirits. Perhaps I could dedicate some time to *Our Lady’s Home of Wayward Children*. They are always in need of helping hands and kind hearts.”

When Henrietta laughed at her suggestion, Arabella demanded to know what was so funny.

“You, my darling girl,” she sighed, touching Arabella’s chin with the tips of her fingers. “For someone so covered in scandal, you really are so adorably innocent.”

She dropped her hand away and stood up.

“Go to the orphanage if you wish, I will not stop you. But I am also going to organize a *different* type of distraction. A masquerade ball, I believe.” Henrietta held her arms out and twirled dramatically. “Right here.”

Arabella's eyes grew wide as she scrambled out of bed, shaking her head. "Here? No, that is impossible. I could not. I am not in the mood for guests and I still feel guilty about it not being my house."

"You always say that, but it *is* your house, darling," Henrietta said, cutting her off, "and has been ever since the Duke put that ring on your finger. Do not worry about the details. I will see to them all. You just focus on getting yourself ready for a fabulous time."



"Darling that dress is *perfect* on you!" Henrietta gushed as she walked into Arabella's quarters. Arabella looked in the mirror, not exactly of the same opinion. When Henrietta had promised to take care of everything, she had certainly meant it. When Henrietta left an hour later, the modiste, Madame Jessette, arrived to dress Arabella.

After taking a look through Arabella's dressing room, Madame Jessette pulled out her favorite gown— a pearlescent crushed silk ensemble with small, capped sleeves and a modest bust line. It was this gown that was deemed worthy of recreation to Arabella's slight chagrin. The seamstress, more than adequate with her thread and needle, somehow made the small, capped sleeves even smaller, tightened the waist, and lowered the bust line so much that Arabella's ample bosom was nearly bursting out of the fabric.

"It is a harlot's dress," Arabella replied dryly, her eyes still on the reflection of her breasts.

Perhaps If I keep my fan up no one will notice, she pondered.

“Nonsense,” Henrietta replied dismissively, waving her hand. “A harlot could never afford such fabric, no matter how decent her bed sport skill was.”

“Would you *please* stop with your vulgarity, sister,” Arabella groaned. With her hair and cosmetics now finished, she stood up and took a final look at herself in the full-length mirror. As she did so, a knock came on her chamber door, and her brother strolled in.

“Antony, thank *God* you are here,” Arabella exclaimed, sighing in relief as she turned to him. “Do tell your wife that this dress is ridiculous.”

Antony smiled handsomely at his little sister as he looked her up and down.

“On the contrary, dear sister, I believe it is quite fitting for tonight’s events. Besides, if you are feeling meek, your mask will help hide who you are.” Arabella gave him an exasperated look, and he laughed heartily. “All right, it will not. But you look amazing, Arabella, and I shall not let anyone— including you— say otherwise.”

He bowed at the waist before her and took her gloved hand, so he could kiss it. “And I am *proud* to escort you and my beautiful wife downstairs.”

He looked toward Henrietta then, and she smiled widely as she went into her husband’s arms.

“You, my love, are an absolute vision,” he said in admiration, twirling Henrietta around so he could get a full look at her. “I do love it when you wear red.”

Arabella watched her brother as he brought Henrietta back into his arms to kiss her soundly, and she smiled despite the discomfort with her new gown. Antony had grown from a chubby, adolescent boy who would put toads in her bed to a handsome man who absolutely loved and protected his wife. She was happy for him, even if it stung a little.

It was the type of relationship she had hoped and prayed for when she discovered she was to be married to the Duke. Unable to watch the flagrant display of love, she turned her face back to the mirror so her handmaid could finish getting her ready. As she did so, Arabella blinked rapidly to stop the tears threatening to escape.



“I *told* you the dress would be exquisite,” Henrietta whispered into Arabella’s ear, her voice full of excitement.

Arabella felt her cheeks grow warm as she recalled the many sets of eyes that were drawn to her when she was announced to the ball. While she was sure Henrietta had noticed only the gazes of the bachelors, Arabella had only been watching the women. Their beautiful painted lips had all curled back in a predatory snarl as if she was a creature whose sole purpose was to take their husbands. It was *not* the attention she had been hoping for, but she knew Henrietta’s intentions were pure, and Arabella had decided to be as grateful as possible. After all, her sister-in-law was the only one that had been able to get her out of bed.

“It seems you were right,” Arabella agreed, hoping her white and gold feathered mask helped her smile look more genuine. Before Henrietta could say anything more, Antony appeared by their sides holding glasses of champagne.

“Drink it quickly, darling,” Antony urged Henrietta, “I have a surprise for you.”

Before she could ask what he was up to, the quartet’s latest song died down, and a new, familiar tune took its place. It was less lively but more soulful, and Arabella recognized it immediately. She looked up at her brother and sister-in-law’s faces and watched as Henrietta slowly realized what Arabella’s brother had done.

“Our wedding song, my love?” she asked, a slow smile spreading wide across her face.

“I am afraid I am a nostalgic creature, dearest,” Antony replied, smiling at her lovingly as he offered her his hand. “And when you look this radiant, I cannot do much else but revel in how lucky I am to have you.”

Emotion welled up in Arabella as Henrietta handed her half-empty champagne flute to her, and she watched her brother escort his wife lovingly to the dance floor. She averted her eyes from the romantic scene, unable to take the loneliness, and found a small table to set their drinks on. As she peered around the room, the only thing she saw was more hateful eyes glaring back at her through their decorated masks, and she sighed heavily as she felt once more forced to look at the pure love that was flowing between Henrietta and Antony.

“Now tell me, why is it the loveliest lady in the room appears to be having the most dismal of a time at this festive soiree?”

Arabella smiled as she heard her dear friend Leonard Garter’s voice, and she looked up to her left just in time to see his handsome face smiling down at her.

“You came,” she said, relief washing through her. Leonard’s brows went up in amusement.

“You had doubt?” he asked with a dry chuckle.

“I fear you will grow a sudden aversion to me like your cousin appears to have.” Her words came out more honest and less humorous than she intended, and when she saw Leonard’s fill with pity, she wished she had kept her mouth shut.

“My cousin is a fool if he thinks it is prudent to ignore you, and I, my dear friend, am no fool.” He reached out to offer her his hand, and Arabella felt the first burst of happiness she had experienced in a long time. Smiling gratefully up at him, she accepted his hand.

“I think it is time to show off that *gorgeous* gown of yours a little bit more, don’t you think?” Leonard asked, twirling her dramatically, making the skirt of her ensemble flare out beautifully. With a flourish, he led her to the dance floor as the soulful melody transitioned into a livelier tune. As always when they danced, their steps aligned perfectly, and before Arabella knew it, her sadness began to melt away like snowflakes in the sun.

Since they had met a few weeks before her and Evan's nuptials, Leonard had been an incredible friend and ally. He was always present to offer sage, if not sometimes catty, advice and to make her laugh. It was no different when they danced. Her laughter radiated from her like a pure, crystal bell as Leonard whispered his less-than-savory opinions on the other dowdily dressed ladies.

She was so consumed in her enjoyment, that when the Dowager Duchess and Duke of Lancaster were announced, she almost missed it. Thinking surely there was some mistake, she paused, fumbling her next step in the dance, and suddenly found herself moving quickly toward the floor. In an instant, Leonard's strong arms wrapped around her, preventing the painful and embarrassing fall. Leonard smiled down at her curiously, and, just as he held her the tightest, she saw Evan's handsome, pained face appear beside her.

"What is the meaning of this?" her husband demanded.

Chapter Three



Evan's greeting was no more than a furious glare as he grabbed her arm and wrenched her out of Leonard's embrace. The eyes of the *Ton* fell on them greedily as he pulled her out of the ballroom. Arabella felt a shameful blush color her cheeks as she caught sight of the Dowager Duchess's scrunched-up face peering down at them from the landing. *Oh heavens, this cannot be happening.*

"Your Grace, I can explain," she stammered as he pulled her into the empty library.

"You bloody well will," he replied, his tone quiet but harsh as he turned to look at her, eyes blazing. "When my grandmother told me the rumors of your infidelity, I told her it could not possibly be true. That you were a respectable lady and would never tarnish her name with such foolery. But I see that I have been played for a dolt. How could you do this to us?"

Arabella felt her embarrassment and shock slip away as anger clouded over her, and she balled her fists and put them on her hips as she planted her feet.

"*Us?* What *us*, Your Grace?" she shot back defiantly.

For a moment Evan's anger transformed into shock, and he looked at her as if she had lost her mind.

"Please," she continued, "do explain how there could possibly be an *us* when you have clearly established that there is simply just *you*, who apparently belongs in Lancaster? Whereas *I*, you decided, belong here in London?"

"I did what duty required," Evan shot back, regaining some of his passion.

"Your duty required you to bear children with your wife, Your Grace, and yet you chose to ignore that. Tell me, *husband*, how am I to provide you with an heir and fulfill my purpose if you have not even ventured to consummate our marriage?"

Evan tried to interrupt her, but she raised her voice and continued. The loneliness and anger of his abandonment finally had a place to go, and she was not going to miss the opportunity.

"Did you know that the longest reply you have ever written to my *pages* of letters was comprised of only two sentences? *I am afraid joining you is not possible. Please use our home to find the happiness you wish to seek from my company.*"

She said the words, having memorized them by heart, and for a moment, she thought Evan had flinched in discomfort.

"So I obeyed your request, Your Grace," she continued, "as a good wife does, and I found happiness without your presence.

If that is not what you wanted, then perhaps you should have spared a moment to come here and get to know your wife.”

“And your happiness is drawn from infidelity?” Evan asked, his tone as sharp as a knife.

The words cut Arabella deeply. She wanted to protest the rumors more than anything, to make him believe that they were not true. But instead, she heard Henrietta’s words come out of her mouth.

“Why should I not?” she asked haughtily.

Evan’s bright blue eyes grew wide in horror before they narrowed in contempt.

“So it is true, then?” he asked, his deep voice barely above a whisper.

No, you idiot, Arabella wanted to scream as she felt tears form in her eyes. But if I say it is not, you will leave me again.

“What does it matter?” she said instead. “It is obvious you have already decided what is true and what is false about me.”

Evan closed the distance between them, his steps sharp and precise, and grasped her chin so that he could hold her face close to his. The moment he did, Arabella caught the masculine scent of his natural musk and felt the warmth radiating from his body. Despite her anger, she felt a tendril of

desire spring from his touch, and she felt her breath hitch in her throat as he leaned his lips close to hers.

“Are you making a fool of me, Arabella?” he asked, his deep voice laced with anger as his eyes stared down into hers.

Arabella felt the tendril of desire grow, winding down her spine as his tone caressed her ears, and she smiled up at him mischievously. She should be intimidated, she was sure, but instead, it felt wickedly intimate and delightful to hear him say her first name.

“Not at all, Your Grace,” she replied lightly. “You have made a fool of yourself.”

“Watch yourself, wife,” Evan warned, his eyes never leaving hers, “or I will become the monster you are making me out to be.”

“I am not afraid of you, Your Grace,” she whispered back, her one eyebrow arching defiantly. “What are you going to do? Leave me again? No punishment you give me for my exaggerated crimes could hurt me now.”

“Tell me the *truth*, Arabella,” Evan seethed, his lips looming so close to hers she could feel his hot breath on her own.

Again, he used her first name. What sort of trick was this? To not speak for five years, then suddenly appear using such intimacies. But she couldn't deny she liked it. In fact, the more he said her name, the warmer her body grew.

For a moment, their eyes stayed locked on each other. There was fury in his gaze for certain, but there was something more. Something primal... and erotic. As she studied him, Evan's other hand tightened around her waist, and she was pulled closer. She could feel the static tension between them, and almost unwittingly, she felt her mouth gravitate closer to his.

Do it, Arabella silently begged, feeling her desire rise within her, Kiss me, and you will know the truth.

As if he could read her thoughts, Evan's gaze softened. The look he gave her lost some of its anger and was replaced with arousal. Slowly, Evan began to draw his lips down to hers as if he too was caught up in the onslaught of new feelings. Unable to help herself, a sigh of relief left Arabella just as they were about to touch. Then, suddenly as the doors to the library were suddenly flung open, and Arabella found herself standing alone, feeling more bereft than ever before as Evan put several quick paces between them.

Chapter Four



“**H**ow *dare* you put your hands on my sister like that?” Antony spat, his dark eyes full of rage as he marched aggressively over to Evan. “In front of the entire *Ton*? Are you mad?” He gripped at Evan’s lapels which Evan brushed off aggressively.

“Cousin, what is the meaning of this *awful* behavior?” Leonard demanded, strolling into the library a second later, looking absolutely livid. He turned to Arabella, his face full of concern, and gently laid a hand on her arm. “Are you all right, darling?”

“I...I am fine,” Arabella rasped, resisting the sudden urge to cry. She wasn’t sure if it was because she had been embarrassed by Evan’s earlier display of jealousy. Or perhaps it was because her husband was so close to finally kissing her before the moment was ripped away from her. Either way, she felt her emotions boiling over.

“Do not touch my *wife*,” Evan seethed, attempting to get around Antony. “You may be her brother, but it is *my* family name that is being ruined.”

The three men began to shout at each other as Arabella felt Henrietta take her hand and pull her away. Like a child, she could not take her eyes off of the scene as she was being led from the room, and it was not until Henrietta shut the door that Arabella blinked rapidly and looked around surprised. On the other side of the house, she could hear the loud murmurings of people in the halls, and she asked Henrietta what was going on.

“The Dowager Duchess halted the party immediately after Evan pulled you away,” Henrietta explained, looking at her with sympathetic eyes. “Everyone is going home— no doubt with lots of gossip to chew on for the rest of the night.”

Henrietta looked around them, making sure they were alone.

“What happened, darling? Why is he here?” Henrietta asked, her voice a low whisper.

“He saw the papers,” Arabella murmured, feeling oddly numb. She took a look around the grand hallway of the Lancaster Estate, and her vision blurred as if she were underwater. Her eyes ached from the unshed tears that wanted to be released, and it was as if they were flooding her entire head in order to be contained.

Henrietta had the grace to look ashamed as she looked down to the floor, and her ordinarily pale cheeks turned as crimson as her dress.

“Forget what I said earlier,” she urged, taking Arabella’s hands. “Tell him the truth. He has to know you have been

loyal. Oh, goodness, this is not at all how I had pictured it would go.”

She shook her head worriedly as she looked at Arabella, who was entering a somewhat dazed state. “Why are you shaking your head like that?” Henrietta demanded to know.

“Because,” Arabella’s voice rasped, her tears close to the surface, “he has already made up his mind that it is true. He is not here for me but for his family’s reputation. The only need he has of me is that I stop shaming his family’s name with my alleged adultery.”

“But the rumors are not true,” Henrietta snapped, looking both worried and annoyed. “None of it! I know that earlier I suggested you pretend otherwise, but I never thought he would come in here so angry and—”

The doors to the library flew open, startling them both, and Antony, Evan, and Leonard all came walking out. All of them looked a little tussled— a tuft of hair going sideways here, an uneven jacket there— and Arabella wondered how physical their altercation had gotten.

She walked up to Evan, eyes pleading as she began to speak.

“Your Grace, could I please—”

“I have had enough conversation for one evening,” Evan snapped, cutting her off as he glared at her, “and enough humiliation to last a lifetime. The Dowager and I will be

staying this evening but will return to Lancaster first thing in the morning.”

His tone was as sharp as a knife’s edge, cutting her to the quick. Without saying another word to either of them, he walked away, disappearing up the stairs.

“The man is insane,” Leonard preached as soon as he was gone.

“Agreed,” Antony added, glaring after his brother-in-law with deep spite. “He will not listen to a single shred of reason.” He turned his eyes away from Evan’s fading backside, going from hateful to sympathetic in an instant as he looked at his shaken sister.

“Do not worry,” he soothed, embracing her tightly. “He will not put his hands on you again. I swear it.”

“I know he will not,” Arabella agreed, her voice cracking as her tears finally released. She accepted their cajoling, letting them coddle her, but not for the reasons they all thought. The truth was, she had been close, *so* close, to having a real, intimate moment with her husband— and it had all just been ripped away.



In his quarters, Evan paced aggressively, his body so full of intense energy he did not know what to do with it. It had been a shock to come to London and find half of the *Ton* there in his home. The moment they arrived, his grandmother had been quick to point out all of the signs of Arabella’s infidelity. He had brushed her accusing comments off at first— until he

spotted his wife on the dance floor, wearing an incredibly form-fitting dress...with his cousin.

She had looked beautiful in the white ensemble, of that there was no denying. It oddly reminded him of their wedding day, sans the ample cleavage that Arabella had on display this evening. Despite his fury at seeing the rumors were true, his body reacted strongly to seeing her again.

Though he was not sure how he had managed to forget certain details of her person that were now cemented into his imagination: her full, pouty lips, her heavy, dark, silken curls, the intense blue of her eyes, the sweep of her lashes, and the graceful curve of her neckline— had she always been so beautiful?

If that was not enough, the dress she had worn surely was. Fitting like a glove, it hugged and presented her breasts like they were a trophy meant for the highest winner in life. Even before he had been announced, he could see all eyes were on his wife, and he knew exactly why. Now, as he thought back, he almost felt a swell of pride as all of the envious eyes in the room feasted on her— almost. If only she had been in his arms instead of his cousin's.

You have no one to blame for that but yourself, old boy, he thought to himself wearily. He sighed, rubbed his face with his hands aggressively, and sat on the edge of his bed. His grandmother had been right; this was a fine mess indeed. As much as he wanted to place all of the blame on Arabella, a part of Evan knew that it was his cruelty that had brought them to this point.

Unable to take the confines of his room any longer— or even the confines of the grand house— Evan shot himself up from

his bed and all but ran outside. The stress of the evening was bearing down on him with an unbreathable weight, and he needed to be free of *something*. Going through the back patio double doors, Evan sprinted over the flagstones, sweat beading down his temples as he leaped like a gazelle down the set of stone steps that led to the privacy of the lush gardens. The moment his fine leather shoes touched the soft earth of the flower beds, he stopped and drew in a ragged, feral breath as he shakily began to remove his cravat, vest, and shirt, stripping them away from his heaving muscles that glistened with sweat.

Throwing his head back, he ran a shaky hand through his sweat-drenched hair and drew in another deep, ragged breath, letting his frustration out in a wolfish groan. Forcing himself to keep his eyes on the stars, he felt all of the agony of his truth come pouring back.

He wanted his baby. His offspring that never breathed his first breath. He wanted his wife. He had not loved Anna, but he had cared for her deeply. He had taken full responsibility for her pregnancy, and although he had been saddened by the fact that he had never experienced that passion he had hoped for as a young man, he felt a sense of worth and accomplishment in knowing that he could allow Anna to have a life of leisure as his wife, his Duchess, and her only worry would be to care for their child.

Their deaths had haunted him like a demon haunts a pure soul. Always lurking, waiting for a moment to pounce. Never far behind. After their funerals, he knew that he had to remarry because of his birthright. But he had barely been given time to mourn when the marriage to Arabella was thrust upon him.

And then, when he had seen her... *Sweet God*. He had never seen such eyes. His eyes were blue, yes, but they could barely

be called that compared to hers. Deep, blue cyanic pools that begged a man to dive into them. Large and innocent like a doe's with thick, dark lashes that grazed her cheeks when she closed her eyes. Unlike the other ladies of the *Ton*, her complexion had a natural golden glow that shone through clear skin and beautifully carved cheeks.

On their wedding day, she had worn a touch of gossamer on her pouty lips, making them look warm, soft, and deliciously wet. He had ached to feel those lips. Confusion, fear, guilt, and most harmful of all, hope, had surged through him, and he could not get away fast enough. He could not do that again. He could not hope for a future just to have it ripped away. So he kept his distance. Committed himself to the Lancaster name and did his diligence in his hamlet. And he had done well. Better than his father. Far better than his grandfather. His people were happy, healthy, and their trade and agriculture had never been better.

There must be a way out of this. Arabella had made a mess, but it was his duty to clean it up. That was what a good husband did. He may not be able to fulfill the other duties of being a spouse— but this he was sure he could do.

He stayed outside for another good hour, mentally comprising a list of things to do the next morning as he let his body roam through the thick privacy of the trees, free from any peering eyes. When he was finally satisfied with what he had come up with and was no longer feeling the burden of the world suppressing his shoulders, he made his way back to the house.

As he drew his shirt back on, he looked up at the many rows of windows that graced the back side of the mansion. Out of the dozens that faced him, only three were illuminated and thrown open to the stone balcony before them. The fifth-floor matron suite. Arabella's quarters.

Evan stilled as he realized that the small figure he saw curled on the balcony was she. Silently, he willed everything around him to be still, and he strained his ear toward the faint sound floating down to him. As his eyes adjusted and got a clearer view, he now saw she was draped in a giant robe, and she was sitting very ungracefully on the floor of the balcony with her knees drawn into her chest and her head tucked between them.

She was sobbing. Soft, breathy sounds that at first could have been misheard as sounds of pleasure. But as he listened longer, he caught the melody of her agony, the raggedness of her uneven breath, and he felt a crevice open in his heart as he absorbed her pain.

Unable to take it, he tore his eyes away from the sight and walked quickly and silently back into the house. He downed a drink when he entered his room, completely shed his clothing, and went to his washstand to splash his musky sweat off him. When he finished, he skipped drying off, and let the cool sheets of his bed wrap around him.

Chapter Five



Simon Smithers stared judgmentally down his Roman nose at the little minx that was Lady Arabella's handmaid. He had just walked into the kitchen to prepare the Duke's tray of coffee when he had heard her shrill voice speaking disdainfully of His Grace to the cook.

"I do not care if he is a duke or not; it is not right what he did her, I tell ye, it is just not right," the handmaid condemned, shaking her white-bonneted head in distaste.

"Do be careful with your tongue, handmaid," Simon said sagely, announcing his presence to the two women. Both of them jumped and looked at him startled.

"And who are ye?" the handmaid asked, her hands going to her hips as she rose her heckles.

Simon sneered and lifted his chin proudly.

"I am the Duke of Lancaster's manservant and will be overseeing his establishment until we make our journey back home," he crowed, his chest swelling in pride, "and I will not have you slandering His Grace's name."

The handmaid paled and lowered her eyes as a bright red blush colored her cheeks.

“Apologies, sir,” she mumbled. The cook immediately walked away from the girl, leaving her on her own to prepare the Duke’s tray. Simon took a step closer to her and tilted her chin up with his finger so that she would meet his eyes.

“You are young and inexperienced in this world, so I will heed you this warning once. It is not our place to be in our master’s business because it is not safe. Those that may seem to enjoy your gossip could very well turn their back and tell your masters of your treachery if it meant saving their own hide.” His dark eyes softened. “Do not make yourself into a pawn for your superior maid staff to play with. Understand?”

The young girl’s shoulders dropped as she breathed a sigh of relief, nodding her head.

“Yes, sir.”

Simon nodded. “Good girl. Now for another. You do not know the full story of anything when it comes to our masters’ lives, and you cannot make assumptions out of your own personal self-righteous anger. You may know your mistress’s side, but I know my master’s, and whatever is going on between them is for them to understand. Our only duty is to serve and protect them. And that includes not inadvertently providing rumors for the gossip mill.”

The handmaid nodded again, straightening her shoulders, so she rose up a little taller. The scared look in her eyes was gone,

and they now glittered with a new sense of determination.

“Very good,” Simon praised, removing his finger from her chin. “Now, what is your name?”

“Eliza, sir.”

“A pleasure to be working with you, Miss Eliza, however brief that may be,” he replied. He made a small bow toward her, and she curtsied back almost immediately, a different kind of blush now coloring her cheeks.

The cook came back with the Duke’s tray then, and without another word, Simon left to fulfill his duty. Although he was a decade older than Evan, he had grown fiercely protective of him as he was forced to watch the boy’s grandfather try continuously to tear him apart. He was his Lord first and foremost, but secretly, in his heart, Simon looked at Evan as his little brother.

Simon was confused when he did not find Evan in his quarters, and with his unfamiliarity with the London house, it took him a while to find Evan in the library on the third floor. His Grace looked awful with bags under his eyes and thick wavy hair in disarray. But his focus was dagger sharp on whatever he was looking at, and he did not even realize Simon had entered the room until he was right beside him.

“Heavens, Simon, where did you come from?” Evan asked as he jolted in his chair.

“How long have you been awake, Your Grace?” Simon asked, ignoring the rhetorical question as he sat the tray down in front of his Lord.

Evan grumbled as he poured an ample amount of cream and sugar into his coffee, and nearly downed the cup before answering.

“Since three. I was out good for about two hours, but then—” he shrugged, looking exasperated as he let the sentence die off.

“This is not good, Your Grace,” Simon replied, a tinge of worry in his deep voice. “I shall pack your valise immediately. We must get you home so you can rest.”

Evan peered up at Simon with a smug smile, shaking his head slowly.

“Your worry is appreciated, Simon, always. But no. I am needed here. Might as well settle in, old friend. We may be in London for quite a while. Speaking of, has my wife arisen yet?”

Simon’s dark brows flew up in surprise.

“Why yes, Your Grace, I ran into her handmaid in the kitchens this morning, and she was preparing her tea tray.”

Evan nodded approvingly and finished his coffee with a second gulp.

“Very good. Go find the handmaid, would you, and tell her that I request her Mistress’ presence in the dining hall for breakfast in a quarter hour.”



Arabella’s heart raced as she made her way to the dining hall. After the savage interaction she had had with Evan the night before, she was sure that she would be banished from his presence forever. Then when Eliza had come to tell her of his invitation, she had felt a rush of glee and hope she was not accustomed to.

Pausing for a moment in the hallway, she took a steadying breath, drew her shoulders back, and walked confidently into the dining hall. Evan was already seated at the head of the table. The first thing she noticed about him was that his handsome features were etched over with stress lines, and she felt a pang of guilt rip through her.

“Good morning, Your Grace,” she greeted, curtsying to him as he rose from his chair.

“Good morning,” he replied diplomatically, bowing with a stiff, almost forced etiquette. Arabella felt her heart sink for a moment but then quickly felt it harden as she realized this would not be a pleasant conversation. Still, she was surprised when she approached the table, and Evan waved away the footman, pulling her chair out himself.

Confused, she looked up at him, and their eyes locked. His body stilled, and his hands on the back of her chair tightened their grip. The sweet, electrifying current she had felt the night before when they had looked at each other returned, and she felt a warmth spread through her body. It was only when Evan

cleared his throat and broke away from the look that she remembered to breathe, and as he went to take his seat once more, she drew in a deep inhale that caused her chest to heave upward, and she blinked rapidly as she tried to gather her wits.

“Coffee?” Evan asked, his deep voice cracking slightly. Arabella cleared her throat softly.

“Tea, Your Grace. If you please.”

Evan motioned toward the footman holding the silver teapot, and he came forth silently to fill her cup.

“I have been looking over the accounts of our London home this morning,” he announced, moving straight forward into his business as he motioned for the other servants to come forth with the trays of food. “It seems that this nasty habit of adultery you have picked up has been quite an expense. Caterers, opera singers, acrobatics, theater groups— you seem to be quite skilled at throwing some rather hedonistic functions, *darling*.”

Though his tone was amused, his words sliced through Arabella like a knife, and she knew the term of endearment was meant as anything but that. Silently, she began to curse Henrietta for allowing her to talk her into such themed parties. Even when she had said no, Henrietta had always found a way to turn it into a yes. And she had to admit, the distractions were helpful. With everyone complimenting her on the parties and the entertainment being on the more peculiar side, she had won the attention of many. At least, when they were present at her parties. Once they left, however, it was quite clear that they would not be caught dead with her at any other function. Still, it was better than no company at all. At least that’s what Henrietta preached.

“Perhaps if my husband were more attentive to the needs of his wife, I would not have to rely on such extravagancies for amusement,” she replied, matching his amused tone and sharp words.

Arabella looked over at him as she slowly raised her cup up to her lips and took a small sip. His blue eyes were glittering with a combination of humor and rage, a combination that she had to admit sent a tendril of excitement shooting through her lower belly.

“Yes, well, it was foolish of me to expect my wife to be dutiful and patient until I was able to return.”

Arabella looked away from him as she put her cup down and stabbed at a piece of sausage with her fork violently, making Evan’s one eyebrow cock up as he watched. Anger vibrated through her as she sawed her knife through the link. *Patient? You had no intention of returning.* There was no doubt about that. It was only Henrietta’s push toward bad behavior that had brought him there. Nothing more.

“As Duchess and Lady of this house, I will do whatever it is I see fit in order to fill my days with the loneliness you have left me with. No husband to dote over. No children to care for.” Her voice broke slightly as she said the last part. “So I will amuse myself in whatever manner I please.” She bit out the words before she took an aggressive, unladylike bite of her sausage, chomping at the meat as she glared at him.

“As for these rumors you are so obsessed with— I have no idea how they started. I have escorted guests to many rooms as a hostess, and yes, at times, I have shown some men where the

smoking room may be, but I was never alone. I cannot control what stories the *Ton* creates to soothe their noble boredom, nor can I be bothered to care.”

All humor gone, Evan’s gaze sizzled with fury as he looked at her, his mood visibly creating a dark shadow around him. Instead of being intimidated, however, Arabella felt her own self-righteous anger arise, and she glared back at him with equal aggression. Moments passed, minutes even, before either blinked. Around them, the footmen stared at one another tensely, not at all sure of what was going to happen next.

It was Evan who broke the silence, and as the dialect of duty had returned, he spoke in a calm and matter-of-fact voice.

“Seeing as you have made a mess of our finances— for whatever reason you claim— I shall have to give you your wish after all. I will be staying until I can get this scandal and our accounts settled, Arabella. You will see in the days to come that it is far better for you that I stay away, and when I leave again, you will feel most relieved.”

Arabella’s mind began to churn with despondent thoughts as she tried to absorb the heaviness of Evan’s words. The moment he said he was going to stay, she felt a rush of pleasure that was quickly shrouded by a sense of foreboding as he continued talking.

Could it be true? Could the husband she had hoped for in Evan not exist in him at all?

Chapter Six



What he had thought was going to be a smug and triumphant conversation with Arabella had actually turned into a magnificent loss. Evan realized this after she had stormed away from the breakfast table. He had expected her to at least defend herself or apologize when he had pointed out her adultery, but she had glazed over it altogether! Just kept on defending her damned parties.

If her sharp wit and quick turn of phrase were not enough to set him off keel, her choice of gown this morning absolutely was. He had noticed the evening before that this season's apparent trend was lower bust lines, but no one held a candle to how well Arabella's curves beautifully filled out that fashion.

The soft lilac taffeta had been corseted tightly around her slim waist, causing her already ample bosom to thrust forth for his full view. For a moment, he got lost in the fantasy of freeing it from the strict confines of the fabric, letting it burst out into his greedy hands and mouth. His arousal was so great at one point, he could not hear anything but the blood pulsing into his turgid member.

The new style of corset also did wonders for the curve of her hips, making his hands itch to slide beneath the layers of silk

to see if she felt as soft as she looked. He pictured kissing her thighs, hearing her soft moans as her liquid heat parted her petals, readying herself for him.

Then she said a word that pulled him out of his fantasy so abruptly that for a moment he saw red. *Children*. She wanted them. Expected them. Did she not know how terrifying of a request that was? How hard it was to survive such things? If she wanted a death sentence, fine, but he was not going to be the one to deliver it. *Not like Anna. Never again*.

He would have to show her, prove to her, that he was no good for her. And he was infuriated at her that she had brought him to that point. After taking a few moments to gather himself, he compartmentalized that semi-successful but mostly abysmal breakfast conversation and set himself back to looking over the accounts for the next several hours. From what he could see, the woman really did have a hand at throwing the most peculiar of parties.

To his amusement, he discovered that his wife had accrued for them a small menagerie of exotic animals— something he failed to notice during his late-night outburst. An emu, llama, alpaca, peacocks...*three monkeys?* Not to mention the number of new horses for their stables here and their land in Bath, four dogs, a trio of Bengal cats, and a few dozen fish that now presumably lived in the many fountains on the property.

So far in his meanderings of the house, he had not seen a stitch of evidence of where such animals could be hiding and concluded that there were more and more reasons to step away from the books for a brief break and wander outside. Back on the patio in the full summer sun, he quickly identified several of the animals that were on the list meandering through the gardens. Despite his previously sour mood, he felt himself smile and chuckle at the sight.

To his left, he heard a rustle of feathers and a hiss and jumped when he saw the peacock lunge at him with its beak. The massive plumage of the brilliant bird shook defensively, towering over Evan in a warning.

“Easy there, big fellow,” Evan soothed, quickly calming down. “It is all right.”

He pulled a biscuit out of his pocket that he grabbed from the breakfast table and crumbled it onto the flagstones. The peacock immediately dropped its defensive feathers and began to feast happily on the crumbs. With the creature distracted, Evan carefully stepped away and began to walk toward the stables.

The moment he saw the four new Arabian mares, Evan made a mental note to compliment his wife for her equestrian taste. The identical yearling quadruplets all shared a gorgeous, shimmering silvery gray coats and matching manes and tails. Their big, gorgeous eyes were a deep, soulful brown, framed with long, golden lashes.

“My sister has excellent taste, does she not?”

Evan did not bother to look toward Antony’s voice as he entered the stables, interrupting the brief bout of euphoria he had been feeling. Arabella’s older brother came up to his side and clapped him solidly on the back. Annoyance laced through him as Antony looked over at him in a condescending manner, and he rolled his eyes before answering.

“She does indeed. I would only wish that she had the same taste in men. From what I have heard, she has made some less than stellar choices when it comes to that selection.”

Evan braced for Antony’s aggressive remark— either verbal or physical, but none came. He studied Antony’s face, and the only marker of irritation was the tick of his jaw.

“Things are not always what they seem.” He peered over at Evan almost pityingly then sighed.

“Shall we put last night’s discord aside?” Antony asked. “We were friends once, you and I. You forget that when you left, you did not just leave my sister behind.”

Evan felt a slash of guilt, not saying a word as Antony continued. “I have taken your place, watching out for her the best that I could. Luckily, my wife loves my sister as much as I do and does not mind how much time we spend here with her. But we are not you, Evan. We cannot replace what you took from her. Only you can.”

Evan shook his head.

“You do not understand, she has done awful things in reaction to being left alone. The damage she has done to my family’s reputation alone—”

“You keep talking of all of the damage she has supposedly incurred on your family,” Antony said, cutting him off in the same calm tone as before, “but have you given any thought to the damage you have incurred upon her?”

That brought Evan up short, and though he opened his mouth to reply, nothing came out.

“Have you spoken to your wife about anything other than these rumors? Hm? How she has been? What she has become passionate about? No. Of course not. In fact, you have not treated her like an actual person since the moment you two were betrothed.”

“I see your point,” Evan said gruffly, unable to take anymore. He was used to the loud, angry voices of his grandparents when arguments ensued, and Antony’s calm manner was putting him more on edge than any other confrontation he had encountered. He took a step back from the horses and began to walk away. Before he reached the door, however, he paused and turned back to Antony.

“Thank you, Antony,” he said, sounding the words out awkwardly, “for being here for my wife.”

Antony did not turn his head from the horses, but let his knowing gaze wander over to Evan.

“You are welcome, old boy. And for what it is worth, I truly *do* hope that you get your house in order. Not just for my sister’s benefit, but yours too. She could make you happy, Evan, if you let her.”



“Lady Thimble, come down darling,” Arabella’s lady’s maid cooed, holding up a slice of apple toward the tree tops of the

large greenhouse. It had been a small room on the estate when her mistress had moved in, but now, it sprawled over a massive section of the backyard. It had been one of her first passion projects and was still one of Eliza's favorites.

The small capuchin monkey saw the treat and came swinging down happily from one of the large trees that grew within the greenhouse. Lady Thimble landed gracefully on Eliza's shoulder and delicately plucked the apple slice from her hand.

"Did you get her down, Eliza?"

Eliza turned to her mistress and the Countess, smiling triumphantly.

"I did, Your Grace," she replied, walking over to the wrought-iron table where Arabella and Henrietta were seated with their tea. On Henrietta's lap sat Lady Thimble's brother, Sir Squeaken, and Arabella was stroking the head of Midas, the small Bengal cat that looked very much like a miniature tiger.

"Come here, little darling," Arabella cooed, stretching out her arms to the small monkey. Lady Thimble let out a hoot of approval as she climbed out of Eliza's arms and onto her mistress's shoulder, nibbling on her apple happily.

"Thank you, Eliza," Arabella said, smiling at her softly as she nodded her head, motioning her to give them some privacy. Eliza bowed her head and made furtive steps backward until she was no longer seen even though the greenhouse was so peaceful she could still hear.

“So, he is going to stay?” Henrietta asked Arabella as soon as Eliza was out of sight. “That sounds like progress.”

“It sounded more like a threat,” Arabella replied, “like he is only staying to prove that we would hate each other.”

Eliza noted the anxiety in her voice, and she bit down on her lip as she continued to listen.

“He does not even know you,” Henrietta countered, her voice soothing. “Perhaps if you let him, he will see that you do not, in fact, have to hate each other.”

Eliza heard her mistress let out a dry, humorless laugh.

“You did not hear his voice, Henrietta, or see his face. I assure you, he is not even going to give me a chance.”

Eliza’s focus was pulled away from the conversation when she heard the soft creak of the greenhouse doors open, and she instinctively took a step further into the brush as she looked toward them. From her viewpoint, she saw the Duke of Lancaster step furtively in and take a long, gaping look around. She studied his face closely and watched as fascination took over him as he stepped further into the greenhouse.

Furtively, she looked back toward the table where her mistress was, and she wondered if she should say anything. Before she had a chance to decide, she watched as the Duke registered Arabella and Henrietta’s voices and began to listen as well.

Stealthily, he moved forward toward them, his ear straining toward the sound of their voices.

“He’s *so* handsome, Arabella,” Henrietta stated, unaware of their visitor, “more so now than on your wedding day if I say so myself.”

“Handsome he is, yes,” Arabella replied with an exhausted sigh, “but sound of mind? That I cannot say.”

Eliza let out a gasp as her mistress stated such strong words, and she quickly cupped her hand to her mouth to stifle the sound.

“What was that?” Arabella asked, sounding alarmed as Eliza heard the feet of her chair scrape against the stones. Before she could react, the Duke moved from his cover, stepping into her mistress’s view. As their voices rose to concern, Eliza took her chance and quickly made her way out of the greenhouse to stand guard by the door.

Chapter Seven



Despite her initial burst of fear, Arabella felt a tingle of excitement as she saw that it was Evan whom she had heard. From the unamused expression he wore, she knew he had heard her last words, and despite knowing she should be intimidated, she smirked at him as he strode toward them.

“Your Grace,” she greeted sweetly, bowing her head to him in her most casual fashion, “what a pleasant surprise. How do you like my little oasis?”

The damaged pride in Evan’s eyes seemed to melt a little as she asked the question, but his mouth was still set in a bemused frown.

“It is quite beautiful, Your Grace,” he replied dryly, his eyes not leaving hers, “though I do not know how a person *sound of mind* could perform such work on a property without a husband’s approval. Tell me, who did you hire to build such an escape? Did the queen herself give you permission to build this?”

Henrietta paled as her eyes moved from Arabella to Evan then back to Arabella. It was obvious Evan had heard her last

comment, and she gave her sister-in-law a look as if asking if she should go. Arabella gave a furtive shake of her head toward Henrietta, but her eyes never wavered from Evan's. Slowly, she reached up to Lady Thimble, handing her another piece of fruit.

“The Queen did, in fact,” Arabella replied with a proud tone and glittering gaze. She liked how Evan suddenly looked taken aback for a moment then oddly pleased. As if, perhaps, he was proud of her for getting such *positive* attention.

“As for your other question,” she continued in the same tone, “the builders were a smart group who needed very little convincing that a woman could make decisions for herself. Isn't that what you wanted, Your Grace? For me to make my own decisions, so you were not bothered?”

Evan had the decency to look uncomfortable then to her surprise, he nodded his head.

“Yes, I suppose I did,” he agreed, his eyes leaving hers to sweep over the large greenhouse. His eyes shifted suddenly as if recalling something then he cleared his throat and loosened his cravat slightly.

“I must say,” he said, his voice taking a much kinder tone, “despite my...surprise over this structure— of all of the expenses I went over today, this, and your animals, are the only two things I completely agree with. I saw the yearlings in the stables, and they are magnificent.”

Arabella threw a furtive glance over to Henrietta, who was looking at her with growing excitement. Was her husband

softening? Was he actually trying to compliment her? She felt her heart swell as her once cocky smile softened into a sincere look of gratitude.

“Why— why thank you, Your Grace,” she replied, unable to keep the surprise out of her voice. “They are my two biggest passions and how I spend most of my time.”

“I can certainly see why,” Evan replied amicably. He reached out to touch one of the large, dark-green, fanned leaves that nearly reached his shoulder, running his fingers delicately over the healthy plant.

“It is quite beautiful,” he murmured softly. “Magical, even.”

“I couldn’t agree with you more,” Arabella replied emphatically. “Would you care to join us for tea, Your Grace?”

“Oh yes, please do,” Henrietta added quickly, sitting up straighter as she nodded her head. “We would love to introduce you to the wonderful other little creatures Arabella has collected.”

For the first time since his arrival, Evan let out a laugh, a real, jovial laugh that seemed completely absent of irony, and he took a couple of steps toward their table. Arabella felt hope swell in her heart as she realized he was about to say yes, and she felt her own smile start to spread across her face.

“Well, actually I would rather like—”

Evan's words were cut off as the sound of a large bang erupted from the door, followed by the echo of small thumps on the stones. Arabella watched Evan's happy expression fade dimly back into a mask of hardness as the Dowager Duchess of Lancaster rounded the corner, escorted by Eliza.

Unlike Evan, the Dowager did not look amused or fascinated by the large greenhouse, and once she saw Lady Thimble and Lord Squeaken, she let out a sound of disgust and shrunk her thin body close to her grandson.

"What in the devil are you doing with those wretched things?" she hissed, pointing her cane at the two monkeys.

"They are perfectly harmless, Your Grace," Arabella replied defensively, her hand instinctively pulling Lady Thimble protectively toward her.

"Harmless, my foot! They carry diseases," the Dowager spat out in disgust. She looked up at Evan, her withered face quickly distorting from disgust to helplessness.

"Evan, make her get rid of these ghastly things before they make us sick. It is bad enough she built this glass monstrosity. Did she have to fill it with rodents as well?"

Arabella watched conflict etch over Evan's face as he looked back and forth between her and his grandmother, and for the first time, she realized that Evan's life, much like hers, was not entirely his own.

“Your Grace,” Arabella said, her tone soft as she rose to bow toward her grandmother-in-law, “I do apologize for the rumors that brought you here, but I implore you, do not make my pets suffer for it. I assure you that my monkeys, like the rest of my menagerie, are most docile and clean. Also, they never leave the greenhouse, so they are well contained.”

As the Dowager started to mutter and stumble over a comeback, Evan nodded his head and wrapped an arm around his grandmother’s elbow.

“Arabella is right, grandmother,” he agreed, looking between her and his wife. “On the grand scale, this certain proclivity is harmless. But I agree that perhaps for your health, you should not be around them. Come, grandmother, let’s go take tea in the house. I assure you the parlor is empty of any such creatures.”

The Dowager grumbled a response that was out of Arabella’s earshot but ultimately let Evan lead her away from the greenhouse. Before he did so, he met Arabella’s gaze once more, and she saw a mixture of emotions. Remorse and annoyance, yes, but also kindness, and understanding. Such depth for a man who seemed to not care about much of anything.

Who was this man she was married to?



“Such nasty little creatures,” the Dowager spewed as Evan helped her into her chair in the parlor. “I remember when your Great Aunt Dahlia had a few. Awful things they were— would throw their mess right at you. You should get them off the property at once.”

Despite his annoyance at having his grandmother show up and ruin the almost fond moment he could have shared with Arabella, Evan felt the corners of his mouth twitch. He cleared his throat to fight back a smile and took a seat opposite of his grandmother while the closest maid came forth to pour their tea.

“Perhaps they were a different breed of monkey,” Evan offered as reservedly as he could. “Arabella seems to have these ones quite tame and well taken care of.”

The Dowager snorted as she rolled her eyes and picked up her cup of tea. “Do not forget why you are here, Evan,” she chastised, eyeing him over her cup. “You need to get that girl and this house in order.” She sat her cup down with a loud clatter and leaned over the table, her wrinkled face set in a hard frown.

“Speaking of, have you confronted her yet?” Her frown slowly transformed into a churlish grin as she rubbed her hands together. Her mirth at the potential conflict made Evan take a mental step back from her, and for a moment, he simply studied her. It was his grandfather that always had a hardened heart, but lately, it seemed that his grandmother was following in her late husband’s footsteps.

“We had a few discussions about her behavior,” he agreed, still studying her expression.

“And?” she asked, almost too gleefully. “She denied it, didn’t she?” She snorted as if she already knew the answer and rolled her eyes.

“No, actually, she did not,” Evan replied calmly, his left eyebrow arching as he looked at her. His grandmother guffawed.

“The audacity. I thought surely, she would deny it.”

“She only alluded that she was not responsible for the rumors or how the *Ton* chooses to entertain itself,” he further explained with a frustrated sigh, “which in itself is rather annoying. How can we move on from such things if she will not even discuss them?”

His grandmother’s hard features softened then, looking more like the kind elder he knew and loved.

“Shame is an awful thing, darling,” she sighed, shaking her head pityingly. “Some people just do not know how to face it. Perhaps if you will talk to her more, you will find the truth of the matter.”

Perhaps I would know already if you had not interrupted us with your fit about the monkeys, Evan thought.

“Yes, of course,” he replied instead, keeping his thoughts to himself. “I have some matters to attend to tomorrow that will require me to leave, but after then, perhaps she and I could have a better discussion.”

Chapter Eight



Arabella stroked her fingers over Midas's soft, spotted, and striped fur, making him purr contentedly in her lap. She smiled down at him lovingly as he stretched out his paws and snuggled further into her gown, but the small burst of happiness was quickly swallowed again by her intrusive thoughts.

Three days ago, after Evan had announced his stay, they had a small moment pass between them. It had given her hope that he would speak to her again, but Sunday and Monday came and went. Now, it was Tuesday evening and there had been no sight of him.

The only reason she knew that he had not left altogether was that she had seen her handmaid chatting with Evan's manservant that very morning which she had found rather sweet. By the way the girl's cheeks flushed when the manservant spoke, Arabella could tell Eliza was smitten. She smiled as she watched them talking, clamping down on the slither of jealousy she felt toward them.

"Arabella, precious?"

Arabella heard Leonard's voice through the thick brush of trees in the greenhouse and looked up just as he, Henrietta, and Antony rounded the corner. They all looked relieved when they saw her, and she felt a sliver of guilt for making them worry.

"Whatever are you doing out here alone, darling?" Henrietta asked, making a beeline for her side. Arabella forced a smile as she looked at them, thankful for their concern but also a little annoyed that her moment of self-pity was over.

"The Dowager was quite displeased with my selection of animals when she came in here," she explained, motioning to her surroundings. "I wanted to make sure she had not had them removed since then."

Henrietta, remembering the churlish words the Dowager had said about Arabella's pets, rolled her eyes as she took a seat by her sister-in-law.

"I would not worry about her," she said, her tone laced with annoyance. "She probably does not even remember the conversation at her age."

"Henrietta!" Arabella half-exclaimed, half-laughed. "What a truly awful thing to say!"

"No, no," Leonard interjected, smirking, "Henrietta's quite right. I swear that woman has reached pre-historic age. I am quite certain she will never die."

Despite the rudeness, Arabella felt herself stifle a laugh. “Surely, she is not that bad?”

Leonard shrugged.

“Perhaps not at one time. But now?” He shook his head almost pityingly. “Perhaps it is the Garter curse. With old age comes a twisting of the soul. I swear, in the small handful of times I have visited her in the last few years, she has seemed more and more like my grandfather every day. Old. Mean. Stubborn. Downright hateful at times.”

Arabella thought back to the few brief interactions she had had with Evan’s grandmother. The woman was always a picture of grace. Cold, yes, but unbreakably poised and refined. Very much like a china doll that stood thin and proud atop a child’s mantle. Her words were always polite and unemotional, and through the process of accepting the marriage, she always spoke of it as if it were more of a business deal than two souls coming together as one. But hateful? Never.

“As you say, Leonard,” she replied to him lightly, wanting desperately to move on to any subject that was neither Evan nor his grandmother. “What are the three of you doing today?” Arabella asked, dropping her hand as Midas, seemingly irritated with the sudden intrusion, stretched and jumped from her lap. She watched with a dissatisfied smile as he loped off into the underbrush, no doubt on the hunt for a small mouse or two.

“We have come to cheer you up, sister,” Antony announced proudly, reaching his hand down to her. “The trainer is working with the quadruplets at the moment, and they look glorious. Let’s go watch their progress.”

“Yes, then afterward some games in the drawing room?” Henrietta added excitedly, taking Leonard’s offered hand so she too could rise.

“With plenty of yummy vittles and devilishly stiff drinks, of course,” Leonard finished, wagging his eyebrows at Arabella. She burst into laughter as she slapped playfully at his arm, her spirits immediately lifting.

“I love it all,” she beamed brightly, her blue eyes glowing so bright they nearly matched her shimmering summer gown. “Come, let’s go see the horses. Perhaps it is time we picked out names for them.”

Under the bright warmth of the sun and the openness of the horse paddock, Arabella felt a gushing wave of rejuvenation as she watched the silver quadruplet yearlings run through the course in the field. Their strong, young muscles rippled under their shimmering coats as the trainer worked to call them in and instruct them out, all the while not using a harness or lead of any sort. It was magic to watch.

Afterward, as promised, they retired to the drawing room for a late lunch. Leonard was not joking about the devilishly stiff drinks. One sip of the deliciously spiked lemon, lavender, and melon concoction had her head spinning in the most wonderful fashion. As per usual, he had instructed the cook to prepare her most favorite things: sweet, spongy lemon cakes doused in a sweet, translucent glaze, miniature, thinly sliced cucumber and cheese sandwiches topped with salmon and capers, boiled and pan-fried quail eggs marinated in a sweet, tangy fig sauce, and a myriad of exotic fruits that came from the greenhouse.

Aside from the visual splendor of the addition she had made to the London estate, it also allowed the property some otherwise rarer fruits year-round. Sliced pineapple, giant, sweet melons of all sizes and colors, coconuts, and papayas. It was one of the many reasons so many yearned to attend her parties. Although, she banned get-togethers inside of it after the first time when someone tried to steal her other capuchin, Reginald. Still, she knew people snuck outside of the main house to peek inside the greenhouse any chance they had.

Arabella happily filled up her plate with a little bit of all of the delicacies and brought it over to the table already set up with cards. Leonard, bless his soul, had already brought her cup of spiked juice and a large, glass pitcher of it to the table. Once everyone was seated, Leonard announced that he hoped everyone was all right to play hearts and began to deal.

As Arabella collected her cards, she popped a piece of papaya into her mouth and chewed happily. *God knows what would have become of me without these precious friends.*



“May I carry that in for you, Your Grace?” Simon offered, extending his hands out toward the small tray the Dowager had balanced in her one hand. She looked at him crossly as she whacked his leg with her cane.

“I will do it myself,” she scowled as he winced at the pain in his calf. “Just open the door.”

She rolled her eyes in annoyance as Simon quickly moved to open the door to the room Evan had recently made his study.

“Now, get out,” she murmured coldly. As he closed the doors, Gloria’s face turned upwards into a sweet smile, and her cold eyes grew warm.

“Darling boy, come, you must eat a little something if you insist on not leaving this room.” The Dowager’s now sweet voice drifted across the room to Evan, and he looked up from his ledger and smiled at her fondly.

“I will,” he promised, getting up from his chair. His legs shook as he did so, and he realized that his grandmother was right. He was bent over that desk far too long today, and his entire body was protesting it. With stiff movements, he came around his desk and took the offered tray, kissing Gloria on the cheek softly as he did so.

“Thank you for this,” he said appreciatively, taking a huge bite out of the cold roast beef sandwich and nearly inhaling it. “I was hungrier than I realized.”

“This is not good for you, darling,” Gloria chastised softly, shaking her head with worry. “I do not like how this plan of yours is unfolding. You still have not gotten Arabella to confess her adultery, and you have not even stopped the parties.”

Evan swallowed the last bite of his sandwich almost painfully as he looked up at his grandmother in shock.

“What parties?” he asked, his brow arching. Gloria’s concerned look softened slightly, and she waved her hand.

“Well, perhaps not a party, but there is a little gathering in the drawing room right now. Your cousin Leonard has his hands all over your wife, Evan! If you are going to continue to allow these interactions, you have to at the very least keep an eye on her.” She tisked her tongue as she shook her head, looking suddenly very distraught. “That girl is wilder than I ever could imagine her to be.” Her voice dripped with pity, but even still, Evan could hear the subtle note of disdain.

“A title her family may have, but good etiquette? Hardly! You should see how Antony is all over his wife. It is downright lewd!”

Evan indeed knew what his grandmother was talking about when it came to Henrietta and Antony. The way they constantly touched and praised one another made his jealous streak soar higher than ever before, and on some level, he hated them for the love they had found in one another.

“Thank you for the sandwich and the information, grandmother,” Evan said tersely, rising from his seat. Gloria stood with him, happy to see that her grandson had been kicked into motion. She patted him on the back proudly as he passed by her, striding out of the room. Over his shoulder, she heard him say, “I shall go downstairs and see what it is that is going on in *my* house.”



Taking a deep breath, Evan tampered down the jealousy and anger that had swelled through him when he pictured Leonard’s hands on Arabella and forced a cold, unfeeling shield to come down over his emotions. When he reached the drawing room, he drew up close to the slightly opened double doors and peered in. His grandmother had been right. With only four people, it definitely was not a party. From his

viewpoint, Evan saw that Antony was blindfolded in an apparent game of blind man's bluff and that Arabella, Henrietta, and Leonard were all hiding from his fumbling footsteps and roaming hands.

With his eyes trained on Arabella, who was hiding behind one of the couches that faced the windows, the rest of the room fell away, and he saw only her. She had a beautiful, wide smile on her face as she failed gloriously to stifle her adorable giggles. Her laughter sounded like bursts of pure mirth: delicate and full of wonder.

Her eyes, even in the dimming light, were glowing brightly, so much so that they perfectly matched the vivid blue dress and hair feathers she wore. In her awkward position, half-crouched down on one knee and slightly bent over, he could see the ample flesh of her perfect bosom, vibrating slightly with every suppressed giggle.

He had never seen her so happy, and a slash of guilt pulsed through him as he realized that. *How could anyone not want to see this woman happy?* As if his cousin were reading his thoughts, he watched as Leonard quietly began to slink from his hiding space over to Arabella's while her back was turned.

Jealousy shot through him next as his cousin's hands then reached out, and tickled Arabella at her sides. Her stifled giggles erupted into full-blown laughter, and as she shot up, Antony went to the sudden burst of sound and tagged her on the shoulder.

"No fair!" Arabella laughed, swatting away the blindfold Antony was trying to hand her. "Leonard cheated!"

“I did no such thing,” Leonard replied matter-of-factly, rising up to his feet with a satisfied smile. “It is not my fault you are so ticklish. I was merely trying to get your attention.”

The room erupted into playful laughter, and they chose that moment to take a break. As Leonard moved about to fill everyone’s cups, his eyes landed on Evan. With the way his smile twisted into a smirk, Evan knew he had been caught. With a quick breath, he straightened himself and opened the door with gusto.

“Cousin!” Leonard greeted loudly, his arms going wide as he held a full cup in one hand and the near-empty pitcher in the other. His smile was wide and cocky, instantly making Evan irritated. “So happy you have decided to join us after all this time,” Leonard said jovially. He forced the cup into Evan’s hands, but it sloshed out sloppily. Evan caught the delicious scent of fruit and liquor.

“Oops,” Leonard murmured, putting the tip of the pitcher to the cup, “looks like you need a refill.”

From behind Leonard, Arabella appeared, her cheeks rosy with laughter, and if he was seeing it right, she looked as if she was very happy to see him. She had her own cup as well in one hand and a cloth napkin in the other. “Pay Leonard no mind; he gets a little careless when he is this drunk,” she urged, patting Evan’s hand dry for him. Evan felt the warmth of her touch through the fabric, and he gave her a small smile.

“How drunk is everyone?” he asked, amused. Her cheeks blushed again as she looked at him and drank from her cup.

“Quite a bit,” she admitted, tipping her cup a little this way and that. “Leonard knows the secret to making the strongest drinks in London. I swear, he missed his calling as a distiller.”

“In that case, I should not imbibe,” Evan said, attempting to hand her his cup.

With a sly smile, Arabella gently pushed his hand away, bringing his cup to his lips. “No darling, in that case, you absolutely *should*.”

Evan wanted to be mad. About watching Leonard put his hands on her. For her not getting mad at him when he had. For their drinking. For the fun. But instead, he felt Arabella’s happiness seep into him, and before he knew it, he brought the cup to his lips, tilted the cup back, and downed the entire drink in one swallow.

From behind him, Leonard, Antony, and Henrietta all cheered as he raised the empty cup, his eyes immediately going back to his wife. Arabella looked back at him warmly, her eyes bright with joy.

“You are right,” he agreed, his tone playful. “This is the strongest drink I have ever had.”

“And so you must have more,” Leonard said, coming up behind him to refill his cup. “Come cousin, take a break from your gloom and brooding, and have some fun with us. Get to know your wilder side a little better!”

The delightful effects of Leonard's concoction were already making Evan's mood lighter, and with Arabella looking at him the way she was, he found no reason not to indulge in a bit of fun. After they all finished their drinks, it was Arabella's turn to wear the blindfold. He had to admit, as he watched her being spun around by Henrietta before being set to find them, that her idea of fun was much better than his.

Although he knew he was supposed to be hiding from his wife's explorative hands, he decided to forego hiding behind any furniture and stand perfectly still next to the wall. He had thought himself incredibly clever since he had not seen Antony go anywhere near them. But the moment Arabella came within his space, she stilled as if sensing his presence, and she lunged carelessly in his direction.

Evan laughed deeply as he caught her, saving her from going sailing into the curtains. The rest of the room erupted into hoots and laughter as Evan saved her from calamity, and as he pulled her blindfold up, he could see that her eyes were full of laughter as well. They glittered back at him brightly as he gently pulled the fabric away, and he felt her relax comfortably in his arms.

"Well done, husband," she giggled up at him, her much smaller frame settling perfectly into his bigger one.

"I am not so sure about that," he jested as he continued to hold her gaze. "If I had done well, would I have *not* been found?"

"Perhaps," she giggled back, shifting slightly in his arms, so she was more comfortable, "but if you had not caught me, who knows what might have happened to me? You all could be walking me to my room with a bloody nose."

Evan chuckled as he shook his head. “Well, we most certainly would not want that.”

Soon the cheers for him to take his turn became adamant, and although he did not want to, he released Arabella and went to the center of the room to put the blindfold on himself. Once it was fitted on him, he felt Arabella’s soft touch on his biceps and heard her soft voice whisper, “Do not worry, I will not spin you too hard.”

Evan smirked as she began to turn him in circles, his mind completely devoid of why he was there in the first place, and he took his turn being the blind man. Despite Arabella’s promise, he still felt himself being spun around several times to the point of dizziness before he heard a collective, “Go!” come from everyone in the room. Suddenly Arabella’s hands were off of him, and he felt a surge of gravity as the room stopped spinning.

It took a moment for Evan to get his bearings, but soon he was furtively gravitating toward the sound of laughter coming from all parts of the room. Remembering what he saw from his viewpoint at the door, he first made his way around the furniture, feeling for any contorted figure that may be hiding there. The only problem was, he was so ill-adept at playing the game that every time he thought he was close to glory, he would hear a giggle and rustle of clothes, and they would dash from his grasp.

His turn went on for several minutes, the merriment in the room continually rising as he narrowly avoided his victory again and again. Then suddenly, as he was standing still and listening for more giggles, he heard the soft rustle of fabric close by, and he jumped towards it. His one hand landed on

something warm and soft, and his other arm wound around a feminine waist as he grinned widely.

“Aha, I have got you!” Evan yelled triumphantly as he felt the blindfold being pushed away from his eyes. Arabella stared back at him as she removed it, looking both shocked and pleased.

“Indeed, you do, Your Grace,” she giggled back, her eyes moving from his gaze to her chest, “in the most exhilarating fashion.” As Evan lowered his gaze to follow hers, the raucous laughter transformed into silly giggles from the others, and he quickly realized why.

Although one arm was wrapped tightly around Arabella’s waist, the other had a soft but firm grasp on her breast. As if he needed to see it to feel it, his fingertips suddenly grew warm and tingly as he felt the soft contour of her breast beneath his hand, and his manhood immediately began to stir in his breeches.

“It is all right, Your Grace,” Arabella whispered, seeing his alarm. She reached up to cup his cheek, no longer merry but languid, sultry...and seductive. “We are married after all. This claim is freely yours.”

More arousal coursed through Evan as her fingertips began to caress his clean-shaven jaw, and for a moment, he almost gave in to the urge to close his eyes and dissolve into the pleasure of their mutual touch. His mouth ached to taste hers, to capture her tongue and lips and finally taste them. The way she was looking at him made him feel as if that was what she wanted too which made it even more difficult to let go.

“Perhaps the games are over,” Leonard mused drunkenly, walking up to them. “Should we make ourselves scarce so that you may *finally* take fun in your marital bed?”

Evan’s jaw ticked in irritation as Leonard said the blunt words, and in his arms, he felt Arabella tense up and steady herself on her own two feet. From behind Leonard, Henrietta reached out and slapped him across the back of the head for his poorly worded jibe.

“Hush now, Leonard, you will ruin the fun,” Antony hissed, stepping in front of him to block Evan’s view. He turned to his brother-in-law and gave him a lopsided grin.

“Pay him no mind, old boy; he is too far in his cups,” Antony urged. “Come, let’s play another round, shall we? Or perhaps a game of charades?”

Evan shook his head stiffly as he stepped away from Arabella. She immediately turned to look at him with apparent hurt, and it tore at him so much he could not meet her gaze. Propriety and why he was there suddenly all came back to him, masking his pleasure and arousal, and he took another step toward the door.

“Apologies,” he murmured to Arabella as he bowed to her stiffly. “There seems to be too much merriment in the room for me. Thank you for allowing me to play, but I believe I should be getting back to my work now.”

Arabella shook her head as she took a step forward, but when his eyes hardened, she stopped.

“Do not be that way, Your Grace,” she quietly urged, her voice laced with desperation. “You have done nothing wrong. Please, stay. Or come with me to my quarters so we could talk?” Hope laced her voice as she made the last offer, and Evan felt turmoil roll through him as his mind said yes, but his words said no. Without another word, he laid a chaste kiss on the back of her hand and departed from the room.

Chapter Nine



Shortly after Evan took his leave, Henrietta and Antony were quick to berate Leonard for his ill-timed comments as Arabella stared numbly toward the door. They had been *so* close to connecting again. Evan had been having fun with her, growing warmer with her. And then suddenly, it was all gone.

“Damn you, Leonard!” she hissed when Henrietta laid a hand on her shoulder and asked if everything was all right. Arabella turned on her heels to look at her best friend, who only had the wherewithal to grin sheepishly and shrug his shoulders.

“T’was a mere jest, darling,” he said in drunken defense. “It was not my fault he took it so harshly. Come, let’s not let his foul mood ruin our fun. I will take his place. Where did the blindfold go?”

“I think not,” Antony replied, sounding suddenly sober, “I believe it is time to call it a night.” He laid a gentle hand on Arabella’s shoulder, and she looked up at him with a pained expression. “You should go try to talk to him,” he urged softly, so only she could hear. “Do not worry about these two; I will see they make it to bed.” Though his eyes were sad, he gave her a soft, reassuring smile. “Have heart, little sister. He feels

something for you. We all saw it. Go. Find out just how much that is.”

Arabella nodded, then rose up on her toes to kiss Antony’s cheek.

“Thank you, brother,” she whispered softly. As she heard Antony’s voice begin to give Leonard orders, Arabella left the room and made her way to the third floor where she knew Evan had chosen to take up quarters. Eliza had been her eyes and ears over the last few days, and it was only through her that she discovered where in the grand house the Duke was staying.

When she knocked on his door, she half-expected him not to answer. So when he did, a shot of exhilarating hope catapulted through her and sobered her up almost instantly. Since leaving the parlor, he had removed his cravat and coat, unbuttoned his vest, and had his shirt undone by a few buttons. A tendril of arousal and curiosity shot through her as she saw him in such an unkempt state. Also, was it just her vivid imagination, or did he actually look happy to see her behind the initial surprise of finding her at his door?

“Might I come in, Your Grace?” she asked timidly, her hopeful eyes trained on his. Conflict seemed to pass over Evan’s face momentarily, but then he gave her a small smile and opened his door wider, so she could step through.



“I owe you an apology,” Evan said as soon as he closed the door behind them. “That was most inappropriate of me.”

Arabella quickly shook her head as she stepped close to him. “No, it was not, Your Grace,” she insisted. “We were playing a game. And even if we were not, I am not too timid to admit that I have dreamt of your hands on me for the longest time.”

Her confession came out rushed and heavy, but she was so worried she would not get a chance to actually get it out that she had all but pushed the words directly out of her heart. She felt her cheeks warm as Evan’s gaze suddenly grew heated, his eyes quickly raking down the front of her dress where his hand had been.

Immediately, she remembered his touch. Hot and firm through the corset of her dress— and incredibly addicting. She wondered then what his hands would feel like against her naked flesh, and without realizing it, she let out a gasp as she pictured it.

“Why is it you do not want to consummate our marriage, Evan?” It was a blunt question, she knew, and though he had called her by her first name a few times in the last few days, this was the first that she had called him by his. The word felt foreign in her mouth, but as she said it, heat pulled into her chest and throat. She liked saying his name. *Evan*. She wanted to moan it into his ear.

He did not react when she called him by his first name, and she took that as a sign that he was not offended by her using it. *Well, at least that is something*, she thought as she studied his thoughtful, quiet expression. If anything, she thought she saw him take a settling breath as she said it, letting his shoulders drop away from his ears.

“As I told you before,” he said calmly, pulling away from her gaze, so he could walk to the lit fire in the hearth, “I had other

responsibilities that were far more pertinent to get in hand.”

“I know that is not all.” Arabella’s words were soft, like a caress against the back of his neck that sent a shiver down his spine. They were not accusatory or defensive. They were simply true.

“Perhaps not,” he admitted softly, feeling his gut wrench at the small confession, “but those are matters I will not discuss.”

Unable to keep his eyes from her any longer, he turned from the flames and found her glittering eyes staring at him sympathetically.

“Lay down your burden,” she said in a pleading whisper. “Let me in.”

Her voice was full of ache and need, both physical and emotional— a deep well he no doubt created himself. And he yearned to fill it in some way, to give her something since he could not give her his secrets. Evan had been glad when she had come to his quarters. He had wanted to see her for days, but the mixed fear of his own desire and thoughts of his wife with all of those other men had stopped him every time he ventured out of his quarters.

How could she have done that? But then again, how could any man not take the opportunity? His eyes traveled from hers to her lips, and his breath caught as he thought of tasting them. Surely, they were so sweet. If the rumors were true, that she had caught many admirers, one little taste could not harm, surely...

“Evan,” Arabella whispered, closing the distance between them, “are you all right?” Her hand came up, almost naturally, to rest on his cheek in a nurturing fashion. He immediately felt the soft warmth of her touch and without realizing it, leaned into her palm. His lips grazed across the soft flesh, and he inhaled the sweet scent of lilacs from her soap.

Brazenly, his tongue flicked out over the plump curve of her palm, and he heard her breath hitch. Arousal laced through him as he watched Arabella’s entire body melt under his soft touch, and he kissed the palm of her hand softly before delivering a gentle bite. This warranted him a soft cry of alarm and pleasure from his wife, and hunger swept through him.

“I do not want to talk right now,” he rasped, his deep voice strained as he met her eyes, “if that is all right with you.”

Arabella’s eyes grew wide as she breathed the word *yes*, and in an instant, Evan had her in his arms, crushing her breasts to his chest with one arm around her waist and one hand wrapped firmly but delicately behind her neck. Finally, giving in to his fantasies, his chiseled lips came down hard on her plump petaled ones. He moaned as he felt Arabella’s body melt into him, giving him all of her weight as their lips passed heady volts of electrical vibrations between them.

In all of his daydreaming and erotic thought-filled, sleepless nights, none of his best imaginations had prepared him for how soft and delicious her kiss was. It was timid, almost, which surprised him, and delightfully needy. Her arms had wrapped tightly around his neck, and she was pressing as tightly into him as he was to her, her kisses urgent and innocent.

When he swept his tongue over her lips, he was rewarded with a breathy, gasping moan, and she willingly kept her lips parted, so he could taste her. The sweet, highly alcoholic lemonade they had been drinking had lingered, and he moaned when he enveloped her tongue with his and pulled her into his mouth. When he let her go, breathless, she timidly darted her tongue over his, swiping softly as though she had never before committed to such an exploration.

Gently, he ended the kiss, pulling away softly several times only to come back for one more long, sensual parting peck. It took everything he had to stop, but his burgeoning curiosity made him realize that he was on the verge of either being terribly disappointed or incredibly, irreversibly aroused.

Holding her tightly, he waited patiently for Arabella to open her eyes and steady her breath. He himself took the opportunity to do the same and felt a primal thrill when he felt Arabella tremble in his arms. When she did open her eyes, they were glittering with lust, excitement, and... if he was not mistaken, *innocence*.

“Why did you stop?” she breathed, her brow drawing up into an incredibly seductive pout.

“I have to ask you something,” he told her, trying to keep his eyes off her breasts which swelled with each breath she took. Her eyes clouded over in confusion.

“What is it?” she asked, her hands moving from his neck to his rigid biceps. He felt her fingers impulsively clench around his muscles, and he saw the fire crackle to life in her eyes again. *God*, she was making it hard to stop.

“Your lips,” he rasped, his gaze settling on them, “they are... You kissed me as if— as if you have never been kissed before.”

Hurt rose in Arabella’s eyes, and Evan silently scolded himself when she pushed at his chest to get out of his embrace. Reluctantly he obliged, but the moment he let her go, his palms itched to make contact again.

“That surprises you, Your Grace?” she asked, her tone still soft but now laced with a defensive edge. Evan winced. He had been Evan for the first time only moments ago, but now he was back to Your Grace. Still, he realized he needed to speak his truth. What he was about to say was going to be harsh but honest, and he did his best to use a calm, matter-of-fact tone as he explained.

“Forgive me,” he implored, “but when I asked you if the gossip was true, if you had indeed taken lovers, you refused to answer. Then again, when I accused you of adultery, you completely glazed over my comment. And do not think I do not notice how intimately you let Leonard touch you. Always when he is around you, he has a hand on your arm. Or your side. Or your back. He kisses your hand and cheek constantly, and you do nothing to dissuade him. You have not given me any proof that you are innocent of these charges. Until right now. That kiss... that kiss was from a woman who has never been kissed before. Soft. Innocent. Perfect...”

His voice trailed off at the last word, and despite her anger, he saw a flattering blush rise in her cheeks and chest.

“If these rumors are not true, Arabella, why not tell me?” he implored gently. “Or is it that they are true, but it is just between you and my cousin?”

Arabella stepped away from him as if slapped, her eyes blazing with anger and pain.

“Leonard has been one of my dearest friends since you left me,” she replied, her pain-filled voice so apparent it made his heart ache. “You have no idea how dreadfully painful it is to want someone’s affection all day, every minute of every second, and have it worsen in the loneliness of the night.”

The hell I do not, Evan thought, his jaw locking as his eyes glittered at her harshly. He was not going to say a word. Not yet.

“Has our relationship gone beyond what our society thinks is appropriate?” She nodded her head, continuing. “Perhaps. But, in every private moment, in which there were admittedly many, he has never tried to kiss me. Never tried to touch me beyond more than what you plainly see for yourself. He tells me of his ventures with other women sometimes, yes, but he never tried to impose such a tryst on me. He is my friend. My closest friend. And if it were not for him and Henrietta, I— I don’t know how I would not have gone mad. Truly.”

Relief and sorrow flooded through Evan as he heard the truth in Arabella’s voice. When he reached for her again, elation poured through him as she let him pull her into his embrace. She looked up at him, so hurt, so raw, her beautiful, glassy eyes brimming with tears.

“I have only ever wanted you, *Evan*,” she whispered, staring pleadingly up at him. “To be with me, to talk with me...to touch me.”

Evan groaned softly as he brought his lips down on hers again and felt his member pulse even harder when she let out a small, emotional cry of joy and pleasure.

Chapter Ten



Arabella felt her body melt once more into Evan's as his ravenous lips devoured hers. She had feared their sudden conversation was going to lead to either one of them walking away, but in a delicious twist of fate, they were once more enveloped in one another's arms. All other thoughts dissolved as Evan's hands began roaming freely over the bodice of her gown, and she gasped in pleasure when his fingers cupped her breasts and pushed her nipples out of the confines of her corset. His thumbs caressed the sensitive nubs repeatedly, drawing them to a turgid peak as his mouth moved from her lips to her throat.

It was with the barest acknowledgment that she realized Evan had moved them to his bed, and she was straddling his lap against the edge. With both of her tiny fists wrapped in his dark, silken hair, she pushed her body further into him. Evan eagerly replied by gripping her hips and grinding into her as his soft lips suddenly flashed white teeth and began to nip at her neck. His canines grazed erotically at the pulsing vein in her throat as he moved her hips slowly with his, and after a sweet, wet kiss, he bit down on the sensitive flesh, just enough to make Arabella moan deeply and sink heavily into him.

As his lips continued their journey south, Arabella realized that the only thing that kept her from falling off the bed was Evan's strong grip around her hips. She should have been

frightened, she realized, but instead, she felt safe and aroused by the fact that he held her steadily. When his lips reached her nipples, she tested that theory by nearly jumping at the erotic sensation. It was unlike anything she had ever experienced, and when his tongue switched from rapid flicking to slow, lapping movements, she felt a wet warmth spread over her inner thighs.

It was not until Evan began to pull down the front of her gown that Arabella realized that while his mouth had been busy, so had his hands. With a deft quietness, he had unlaced the maze of laces that kept her dress in place. Evan lifted her up briefly to remove the rest of it, leaving her only in her chemise, stockings, and undergarments. When she moved to take her place on his lap again, Evan stopped her and took a moment to slowly rake his eyes up and down her body multiple times. It was only when she started to tremble from fighting her desire that he suddenly picked her up by the waist and placed her gently down on the bed, being tenderly mindful to lay her head comfortably among the pillows.

With seemingly frustrated hands, he ripped the open vest away from himself and in one, languid movement of muscles, removed his shirt from his incredibly defined physique. Arabella's eyes moved over every curve and bulge of his muscled torso greedily, wanting so badly to run her tongue over every one of them.

His breeches came next, revealing muscular legs, and her breath hitched when his hands landed on the lip of his briefs. Her mouth began to water when he dragged them down, revealing his hard, girthy member. When she was straddled in his lap, she could feel him between her legs, even through the layers of her gown. Now she understood why. She had seen the miniature erotic paintings Henrietta collected and knew what an aroused man looked like. But Evan, he was far larger and harder than any painting she had ever seen.

Arabella trembled when his delicious weight came down upon her as he nestled his hips between her parted legs. Immediately his lips were on hers again, drowning her in kisses as his hands made quick work with the rest of their clothes. Wantonly, when the last of her garments were gone, she bucked her hips against his girth, making herself and Evan moan in hunger. Wanting more, she did it again, and she pouted as Evan suddenly captured her hips and chuckled at her exasperated expression.

“Not yet darling,” he rasped, his voice like dark honey as he bent his head to lick up her throat. Unable to help it, Arabella squirmed against him, needing to feel him, and freed her arms to dig her nails into his back. Evan’s muscled flesh was already hot to the touch, and his sweat-sheered skin trembled uncontrollably when her fingernails sank into him. With a quick movement, he suddenly had her hands above her, trapped together in his one larger hand while the other cupped her throat as his mouth once more continued down to her breasts.

“Stay there,” his deep voice commanded as he let her hands go. Biting her lip and lacing her fingers together, Arabella obeyed his command and felt the coil in her belly continue to tighten as he lavished attention on her breasts. When she was sure she was about to explode, Evan pulled away from her chest and continued moving his kisses down her abdomen. His arms looped around each of her legs, lifting her bottom half off the mattress so that her backside rested in his hands.

Arabella looked down at him, both horrified and mesmerized.
Surely he is not— OH!!!

Arabella's thought was abruptly cut off when Evan's tongue dipped between her soft petals and drew her sensitive bud of nerves into his mouth. Arousal shot through like fireworks, making her entire body tremble as his tongue began to do wonderful things to her. She bit her lip hard to contain the strangled cry that begged to be let loose from her throat as he made the coil in her lower belly grow tighter and tighter.

Unsure of what was happening to her, Arabella suddenly loosened her hands from one another and began pushing at Evan's shoulders. He only chuckled sensually as he captured her wrists and pinned them to her sides, his tongue continuing wickedly until she felt the coil inside of her suddenly break from the tension and felt a gushing warmth flood through her lower body.

"That's it, sweetheart," Evan moaned, lapping at her sex hungrily as she continued to orgasm, "give it all to me."



Evan could not remember a time when he wanted or needed a woman so badly, but despite his primal urges, he forced himself to take his time. The moment he felt her relax in his arms again, he had wanted nothing more than to rip off her clothes and finally claim her as his own. Instead, he had tortured them both by going slow, letting himself taste and savor every bit of her before he made her his.

As her orgasm gushed into his mouth, he thought that all control had been ripped away. But when he looked at her and saw how breathless, aroused, and sweet she looked, he drew on his strength and painstakingly forced himself to go slow.

“Are you certain?” Evan asked, his tone low and shaky as he settled his hips between hers.

Arabella looked at him, her eyes shining with arousal, and nodded.

“Yes,” she moaned desperately, her fingers digging into his shoulders, “please...please do not stop.”

Her moaned cry of virginal pain brought a sudden ball of emotion to his throat as he eased inside of her, and he breathed through the urgency to take her faster. Inside, her sweet walls were gripping him almost painfully as if they refused to let him go. He could feel the trembling in her core as she struggled to adjust to his size, and he whispered soft praises into her ear as he moved softly inside of her.

It was only when her beautifully shaped legs hitched up on his hips and her hands began to rake down his back that he picked up the pace. Even then, he waited until the cloudy look of pain had disappeared completely from Arabella’s eyes before moving faster. Soon, her sound of discomfort was dissolving into a moan of arousal, and only then did Evan begin to give in to his own needs.



Arabella’s body reacted perfectly to his touch, her sensitive responses only driving him even wilder as they began to set a pace with one another. With his every thrust into her hips, she rose up to meet him, wanting them to be joined just as desperately as he did. Her movements, matched with the mounting pleasure and arousal he felt from her willingness, were soon too much for him to handle, and when he came, his

arms caged around her tightly, locking her beneath him as his seed shot strongly into her.

Evan felt all of the stress and pain from his past flood out of him as he came, and he collapsed on top of Arabella as her hands struggled to loosen from their pinned places. When they did, one hand came to stroke his back while the other began to massage his head. He groaned softly at all of the pleasure and sank further down into her softness as he kissed her. For several moments, their bodies stayed locked together as their lips moved languidly on one another, drawing out sweet, breathy moans of postcoital ecstasy.

It was hard to remove himself from her, and when he finally did, his entire body cried out in protest; every part of him wanted to be back inside of her sweet warmth. Still, he rolled to his side, wrapped the blankets around them, and pulled Arabella into his side. He smiled at her softly as she moved to him willingly, her beautiful blue eyes now incredibly soft, looking wonderfully drowsy with pleasure. It was easy to see she was straining to stay awake, and he found it incredibly adorable.

“Sleep, sweetheart,” he murmured softly, pressing his lips to her forehead. She moaned softly in response as she nuzzled deeper into his chest, and in seconds, he felt her breath deepen, and he knew she was asleep.

Drowsiness was taking over him as well, so he shifted into a more comfortable position and began to absentmindedly caress the loosened locks of Arabella’s silky hair as his mind played back what had just happened. Her body had been delightfully sensitive to his every touch, and her gasps and moans of pleasure had been sweet music to his ears. Already his body itched to stroke her awake, to make her come alive once more, so he could hear more of her beautiful melody.

Instead, he held her closer and moved his hand down her naked back to start making slow circles. In her sleep, Arabella moaned softly, and his once flaccid member stirred to life on his thigh again. He stifled a chuckle and told himself to calm down. Closing his eyes, he soon found himself slipping into a sweet, deep sleep that was blanketed in darkness.

Then, in his dreams, the sweetness faded, and suddenly, Anna appeared.



It was a heart-wrenching sound that woke Arabella up from her deep, dreamless sleep. It was the deep sound of haunting pain, and it was coming from right beside her. Prying her sleep-filled eyes open, Arabella pulled herself up and looked down at Evan. His eyes were shut, obviously still asleep, but he was jerking sporadically, and his handsome face was scrunched up painfully as he let out deep breaths.

“Anna,” he sobbed. “No, no, no, Anna.”

Fully awake now, Arabella cupped her hand up to her mouth as she looked at him with tears in her eyes. *Anna? Who was she? Obviously, someone important.* He sounded so tortured, so broken. Evan twisted suddenly, as if reaching for something, and then pulled the imaginary thing back to him.

“Please no.” he whispered, “I can fix it. Just tell me how to fix it.”

Cracks formed in Arabella's heart as she quietly crawled out of Evan's bed and made quick work of her dress. In the hallway, she saw that it was still very dark, and with no servant in sight, she figured it was one of the few hours of the day when everyone in the house was in bed. For that, she was thankful, for if she had seen a single face as she scurried to her room, she would not have been able to stay her tears any longer.

The feeble attempt to do so only lasted until she was shut behind her bedroom door. Once she was inside, the thin dam keeping them back crumbled, and thick, hot tears tracked continuously down her face. How could she have been so foolish? That was why he never came to her. He had another woman. One he obviously already loved much more than he could ever love her.

A sudden knock on Arabella's door made her jump, but she sobbed in relief as Eliza stepped through, asking in a whispered voice if she was all right. Eliza's eyes grew wide as Arabella flung herself into her handmaid's arms, and she was alarmed when she saw a flash of red through the gown's open layers.

"Your Grace, what has happened?" Eliza pleaded, holding her back as she looked at Arabella with fear-filled eyes. "Have you been attacked? Should we call the constables?"

"No, no," Arabella sobbed softly, shaking her head. "No, Eliza it is not that. I was not attacked. I was just played for a fool. A silly, *stupid* fool."

Realization dawned in Eliza's eyes, and she drew her mistress back into her arms.

“There now, Your Grace,” she soothed, taking the tea towel from her apron to dry Arabella’s face, “you are certainly not the fool in whatever this situation is. Come, sit. I will fetch you some warm water for a bath and some tea. You will feel better once you are fresh and clean, you will.”

Arabella sat down numbly as Eliza left to fulfill her duties. When she returned, she walked Arabella toward the steaming tub she had just filled and helped her in gently. Despite her heartache, Arabella sighed in relief as she sank down into the soothing water, and she did indeed feel better as she felt the soreness between her legs lessen.

“Do you have a husband, Eliza?” Arabella asked softly but suddenly. Eliza looked up from straining some tea, surprised.

“Why, no, Your Grace,” she replied. She pondered for a moment, as if thinking of a particular young man, then added, “but one day, I would very much like to have one.”

Arabella looked over at Eliza with jaded distaste. “No, you would not. It is awful. A downright dirty trick. Everyone says it is some sort of blessing, but it is a curse. Even when you think something good is finally going to happen, it still turns into a disaster.”

Arabella watched a sympathetic expression move over Eliza’s face. Perhaps it was ill of her to lop all men into one category. For all she knew, Eliza could have a very different experience with her future husband. She did not know Simon that well—in fact barely at all, aside from his position as Evan’s loyal manservant. Through her heartache, Arabella felt a sliver of

guilt pull through, and she apologized to Eliza for her brazen words.

“Oh, please, Your Grace. There is no need to apologize. I am sure you have every right to say such things about men, Your Grace,” Eliza responded softly, handing her the saucer and teacup full of honey and lemon balm tea to soothe her pain. Arabella took it gratefully and rose up enough in the tub so that she could take a small sip.

“Do you know anything, Eliza?” Arabella asked suddenly, turning to the handmaid. “About His Grace, I mean. Have the other servants been sharing any whispers?”

Eliza felt her cheeks burn as her eyes lowered to the carpet.

“Only that the Duke is a kind master, Your Grace, and that though he is patient, he often appears in a brooding or sulking way.”

Arabella’s brow furrowed as if unsatisfied with the answer.

“No talk of another woman?” she asked quizzically.

Eliza’s eyebrows went up in confusion and surprise.

“No, Your Grace!” she replied fervently, leaning closer to her. “I promise you, nothing like that.”

Though it should have been a relief to hear, Arabella only felt more puzzled by the lack of gossip. After taking another sip of tea, she really took in Eliza for the first time and realized how small she looked. Her pretty face was drawn with fatigue, and the blush on her cheeks made it obvious the conversation had made her uncomfortable. She suddenly felt very thankful for Eliza's dedication and felt guilty for somehow waking her from her rare few hours of sleep to come dote on her.

“Thank you for the bath, Eliza, and the tea. Most importantly, the conversation. I do appreciate our talks and that you keep them private. Please, go back to bed. The tub can wait until morning,” Arabella said kindly, placing her teacup and saucer on the small stand next to the tub. Eliza gave her a grateful look and bowed into a curtsy before she took her leave.

“My pleasure, Your Grace. Sleep well; I will see you in the morning,” Eliza replied before slipping out the door.

Arabella stayed in the tub until the water cooled, thankful that the tea and warm water had soothed her. After drying off, she drew her white nightgown over her body and crawled into her bed. The tea had also made her sleepy, and though her mind wanted to race, it was doing a loping dash at best. Curling into her pillows, Arabella reached for the memory of being in Evan's arms. Though her heart ached at the absence of them, it was enough to lure her back to sleep where, for a brief time, she forgot about her husband yelling another woman's name.

Chapter Eleven



As Evan awoke, he immediately noticed the lack of soft, supple curves in his bed, and his eyes popped open in alarm. He looked around, confused, as he felt for Arabella and found nothing. Why was she gone? Throwing the covers back, Evan shot out from the bed and went for his breeches as Simon knocked and came in with his morning tray of coffee.

“Good morning, Your— Good Heavens, are you all right, Your Grace?” Simon asked, his voice full of alarm as his eyes narrowed in on Evan’s pelvis.

Evan looked down, and for the first time, he realized that Arabella’s virginal proof was evident on him. He looked back at the sheets quickly and saw a few more crimson spots of confirmation. Arabella had been honest with him after all. The rumors were not true. It would have been impossible.

“I am fine, Simon,” Evan huffed, kicking back out of his breeches. “Have a few servants bring in some hot water, will you? I need to bathe then you must go to Her Grace’s handmaid and request that I see her for breakfast.”

“Of course, Your Grace,” Simon quickly agreed, “but I must inform you, Her Grace is not here. She left with her friends for the promenade at near first light.”

Evan’s jaw hardened and ticked in irritation. He managed to grit out a thank you as Simon took his leave to get the bath water. What had happened in the last few brief hours of sleep that would make Arabella want to run from him? After he wrapped a sheet around his waist, he thought back through last night’s events to try to find any shred of wrongdoing as the servants brought in bucket after bucket of steaming hot water.

As he washed, he concluded that he could not remember a single reason why she would leave him in such a fashion. After all of her yearning to connect and talk, why would she just disappear like that? There were, however, things he knew for sure now.

For starters, Arabella was not the harlot the papers were making her out to be, and he wished that fact had made him feel better. Another thing was that if it was not Arabella’s actions that started the rumors, it meant that someone’s slanderous tongue had. Which led to one conclusion: his family had an enemy.

Who would want to see the Garter name in ruin? There were plenty of other nobles that his grandfather had scammed back when he held the Duke title, but that had been decades ago. Surely those old grudges would be long and buried by now.

He thought of the swell of noble ladies who had felt scorned by his aversion to their advances when he was keeping his secret about Anna years ago. Would one of them be jealous enough to go after his wife’s reputation? But if so, what would they gain?

Getting a headache from the constant changing of thoughts, Evan shook his head and got out of the tub. Why did everything have to be so complicated? If one problem was finally solved, why did another have to pop up? Frustrated, he toweled himself off and began to get dressed.



Arabella had roused Antony, Henrietta, and Leonard at first light and insisted they go to promenade. Her out-of-character jubilation had them baiting her with questions all morning, but she had somehow been able to sidestep them time and time again until her friends were so taken with the fun in the green that they eventually stopped asking. Once they were back at the house, she insisted on taking lunch as a picnic outside, and their suspicions began to arise.

“First an early morning and now an outdoor lunch? Tell me, dear, are you trying to keep us from the house?” Leonard asked, grinning at her wickedly. Arabella felt heat rise in her cheeks at the rebirth of rapid questioning but snapped her fan open sassily to cover it.

“What an outrageous question, Lord Garter,” Arabella replied with false propriety, “I am merely taking advantage of a beautiful summer day. Surely you cannot disagree that it is a prestigious one.”

Leonard rolled his eyes, seeing straight through her charade. Before he could say more, he felt a pinch at his side, and he looked up to see Arabella’s brother looking at him in a chastising fashion.

“You have no right to be teasing Arabella, old boy,” Antony chastised, “especially after the conundrum you landed her in last night.”

Arabella noticed the shot of warmth that went through Leonard as he looked up at Henrietta’s husband, wondering if he was ashamed of his previous offenses. He turned quickly away from Antony and gave Arabella his most charming smile as he extended his hand toward her.

“My dear Lady. Do tell me you have forgiven me for last night’s transgressions? After all, you cannot hold anything against a man who is in his cups, can you?”

Arabella tried to keep up her pinched face of disapproval, but it quickly dissolved as Leonard’s charismatic behavior soon had her rolling her eyes and smiling. *Of course*, she was going to forgive him. How could she not?

“Very well,” she said at last with an exasperated sigh, taking his hand. “But only if you promise to never do it again. I fear the damage you did last night was almost irreparable.”

For the first time, a genuine look of guilt registered on Leonard’s face, and he squeezed her hand once more before he let her pull it away.

“I really am sorry, Arabella,” he whispered sincerely. “And I do promise, never again. I certainly hope I did not ruin any progress you have made with my cousin.”

Henrietta and Antony's conversation died away at the moment — as if they were all wondering if Leonard's bad behavior had caused another rift in Arabella and Evan's relationship. On one hand, Arabella desperately wanted to tell them everything; to have help figuring out what was going on. On the other, she was so ashamed. One, for the fact that her husband had said another woman's name. Two, for, despite her anger, she already wanted to be with him again. To feel his lips on hers. To feel the sweet pressure of his muscular frame come down on her. The thoughts had teased at her since she had woken up.

“How *did* that go, sister?” Antony asked, referencing her visit to Evan's quarters after Leonard's poor display.

He took a seat beside Leonard at the table. Arabella noticed as Leonard's eyes suddenly left hers, and once more roamed over Antony. As she saw it, a streak of curiosity went through her. She supposed she should be happy that her best friend and brother got along so well, and she had bigger problems to deal with anyways— like how to answer Antony's question.

“I— I would not say it ruined anything,” Arabella ventured timidly, her eyes averting to the peacock that was slowly meandering toward them.

They all sat forward attentively.

“What would you say then?” Henrietta implored.

Arabella was fighting for her words when her peacock to their left suddenly darted from its original course and turned quickly back toward the house. She looked to see where it was going and felt a mixture of excitement and dread fill her as she

saw Evan step onto the patio. The moment he saw the peacock, she watched him pull out a biscuit and crumble it on the ground, smiling.

Despite her confusion toward him, Arabella's affection for him grew as she watched the small display of kindness her husband showed the precocious bird. She watched, distractedly, as Evan knelt down to deliver a ginger pat to the peacock's head, and she felt herself beginning to smile.

Suddenly, as if sensing her stare, Evan's eyes shot up and connected immediately with hers, locking her in place. Her heart began to pound rapidly as he rose up and strode toward her, looking determined, slightly relieved, and highly irritated. She *hated* how devilishly handsome her husband looked when he was angry. It made it difficult to argue, especially now that she knew that his touch had definitely been worth craving for the last five years.

Swallowing her racing heartbeat and jumping nerves, Arabella put on her most charming smile as the others noticed Evan's arrival and turned toward him. She curtsied with full ceremony, making him pause for a moment in his approach.

"Good day, Your Grace," she greeted him as coolly as possible.

"Your Grace," Evan replied curtly, his eyes dashing briefly to Henrietta, Antony, and finally Leonard to nod hello. When his eyes met Leonard's, Arabella immediately noticed that neither of them moved, and the two cousins became locked in a tense, soundless stare. Arabella looked to Antony, hoping he would know what to do. Her heart sank when he only gave her a subtle shake of his head as if asking her not to get in the middle of it.

“After our...*conversation* last night, I assumed that we would break our fast together and perhaps have another one.”

As he spoke to Arabella, Evan’s voice was laced with dry amusement and irritation as his bright eyes stared into Leonard’s dark ones. The outrage in them was so apparent that even Antony rose from his chair and came over to stand protectively at Arabella’s and Henrietta’s side.

“Our *conversation* reminded me of my responsibilities, Your Grace,” Arabella replied calmly as she kept her eyes on the silent confrontation, “and while I appreciate the time you gave me, I cannot just thrust them to the side the moment you appear. If you wanted time with me this morning, you should have said so.”

She paused then added, “*Or*, perhaps you shouldn’t have trained me to act so independently by leaving me with nothing but your absence.”

Evan’s blazing eyes turned from Leonard to her, and she immediately felt regret for her words. She had not given him the opportunity to even do that, she knew. Not with the way she had left things. It had been a few sweet hours of pure perfection, but now they were back to their heart-wrenching game of cat and mouse.

“My Lady,” Evan said. His tone was calm, but she could hear the strain in his voice as he fought for control. “I would most appreciate it if you would join me in my quarters at your earliest convenience.” His eyes darted angrily back to Leonard, who only stared back at him with indifference. “Whenever you are finished entertaining your...*friends*.”

Arabella felt the sting of his words as forcefully as a hand coming down hard across her face. She had been so truthful with him last night. So real. She had told him of her friendship with Leonard and how important and pure it was. And now he was acting like this? Like he had just seen proof of her infidelity? Hadn't last night proven anything?

“In one of the few times you have deemed to talk with me about your life, Your Grace, you shared that there were matters that were much more important than me to attend to. Matters that existed *before* me.” She waved an arm at the people around her. “These such matters existed for me as well, and I cannot just put them on hold now that you have chosen to come to check on me for whatever reason.”

Her words were cold, calculated, and very much as unfeeling as the Dowager's were when she had once talked of their wedding. It reminded Evan of the stark emptiness he had felt for the last five years, and Arabella watched as a range of emotions passed through his eyes. Without another word, Evan turned from them and went back into the house.

The moment he was gone, Antony turned to her, looking furious.

“Arabella, what on *earth* are you doing? You have done nothing but beg for that man's attention for five years, and now that he is finally willing to give it to you, you are shooing him away? On account of *us*?”

“Antony is right,” Leonard interjected, looking uncomfortable with drama for the first time ever. “Surely, he knows that

despite my reputation, I would *never* go so far as to try to pursue you, doesn't he?"

It has nothing to do with you! Arabella wanted to scream. But she was not ready to talk to them about what had occurred the night before. She needed to find out more about Anna, and if the servants did not know any of the gossip, then her friends surely would not. Or...would they? She did not know, and until she could find out more from Evan, she was not ready to ask. If the woman was not in the picture anymore, which was possible, then she would be risking the spread of more false rumors about their already tumultuous situation.

"I am no longer hungry," Arabella announced, getting up from the table. "Please excuse me, I believe I need to take a rest after our robust morning."

From behind her, she felt Antony's hand on her shoulder.

"Arabella, please," he urged as Henrietta came up to her side to grasp her hand.

"Tell us what is going on," Henrietta urged gently. "You have never shut us out before, and now, you are keeping everything inside." She gave Arabella a pleading look. "We could help if you would let us in," Henrietta pleaded softly.

Arabella sighed, the jumbled wave of emotions she had been resisting all day long finally washing over her. Unnerved, she shook off Antony and Henrietta's hands and took a few steps back.

“I am fine,” she replied defensively, continuing to walk backward away from them. As she headed toward the house and ignored her friends’ pleas to turn around, Arabella understood that she was not in fact fine, and although she had been so close to getting her husband back, it now felt like she was losing him all over again.

Chapter Twelve



Arabella realized, as Eliza helped her into a clean gown, that she had accidentally chosen every wrong move she possibly could have made that day. She had hoped, at one point, to feel comfortable enough to ask Leonard and the others about Evan's past. Unfortunately, Evan's confrontation had occurred well before she had been ready to do so. By not talking about it, she had ruined the day for everyone—including herself.

An hour or so after she had stormed off, she tried to make up with Henrietta. She found her in the library, sulking in Antony's arms. The moment Arabella saw her friend so upset, she went to her and begged for forgiveness. Henrietta had been sweet but still urged her to stop keeping secrets. When Arabella could not honor her sister-in-law's request, Henrietta became upset again, and Antony quietly but firmly asked that Arabella leave them be for a while.

She had then gone to find Leonard, but after searching the property, she deemed him impossible to find. He was doing more of that lately: disappearing for hours on end without alerting anyone to where he was going or when he was coming back. It worried her a little, but she chalked it up to him finding interest in another lady. It would be good for him, after all, to take a wife. He had been living his life as a rake for too

long, and it was souring his view toward women. Of that, she was sure.

Perhaps Evan was a little right about the two of them spending so much time together. Since he had been there for her, Leonard had put off his duty in finding a wife and continued with his debauched lifestyle which, of course, did not help the rumors that were revolving around her. She hoped that for both him and whomever he had disappeared to see, it was becoming serious.

“Thank you, Eliza,” Arabella said as Eliza stepped away from her finished hair. She took another look in her vanity, appreciating the way the pale pink gown made her dark hair and bright eyes pop.

“Would you take this menu down to the cook, please, and then have it brought to the Duke’s quarters? We shall be dining together tonight.”

At least, Arabella thought, as Eliza complied and scurried away, she hoped they would. Her fears were put to ease when she knocked on Evan’s door later that evening. He had first looked at her in great annoyance and anger, but after she apologized for avoiding him that day, his hard look softened, and he let her in.

“I do so most appreciate the opportunity, Your Grace,” Arabella said graciously as Evan shut them into his room.

“As do I,” he replied pointedly, guiding her to a seat at his tea table. “Perhaps you could tell me what it was that had you

bolting from my bed so early this morning? Was my lovemaking so poor?"

A dark red blush seeped upwards from her breasts all the way to the tips of her ears. Inside, she felt her lower belly twitch in interest, and her nipples hardened beneath her corset. She squirmed a little as she took her seat and bit her bottom lip to stifle a small moan.

His lovemaking? *Poor*? Not hardly. She had dreamt and fantasized about what it would feel like to be touched and lavished by her husband for years, and his skillful ministrations the night before had delivered something better and more intense than anything her mind could come up with.

"I am a bit of a novice when it comes to the subject, Your Grace," she said softly, feeling her pulse throbbing, "but from what you have shown me so far, you are an expert on it."

Despite his hurt feelings, Evan gave her a devilish smile, and he felt his shoulders loosen.

No, it was not his lovemaking skills that had pushed her away from him; it was because of what he had said. Who he called out for.

All Arabella knew she had to do was say the words. Ask the question. Who was she? Her lips parted as she made the decision, but as she started to speak, she heard something else come out.

“I left because you still do not know anything about me, and you have not tried,” she said instead. “And you will not let me get to know you. I am happy with our new physical relationship, Your Grace— *very* happy. But I also want more. So yes, in some way, I suppose, I did feel jilted.”

Evan’s eyebrows went up in surprise, and a strange silence passed between them until Simon knocked on the door and brought in the rolling tray cart.

“Shall I set up your table for you, Your Grace?” Simon asked.

Evan’s eyes moved from Arabella to Simon, and a small smile suddenly tugged at his lips.

“Please do, Simon. Also, if you would, could you also help me remember a few things I have done in Lancaster over the last few years?”

Arabella’s eyebrow perked up inquisitively as she looked from her husband to his manservant.

“Oh, certainly, Your Grace,” Simon answered enthusiastically as he prepared the table. “Let’s see. The scholarship program you created at the schoolhouse for the young boys wishing to go to law or medical school was quite a good one. In fact, the very first boy you sent off to Cambridge has recently come back to Lancaster to open his own law office which will of course expand our land’s business acumen.”

Arabella’s eyebrows flew up in surprise as she looked from Simon to Evan. “Really?”

“Most certainly, Your Grace,” Simon answered enthusiastically as Evan silently nodded, his eyes glittering with pride. “The Duke has also expanded our farmland which has allowed our people to be more self-sufficient with our agriculture. With more farmland also comes more work, and poverty has nary been an issue in over four years.”

“I had no idea,” Arabella murmured, amazed. It sounded like a lot of work. Real work, that would require all of his focus. Simon continued for a few more minutes, naming one success of the Duke’s after another until Evan politely told him that was enough.

“Of course, Your Grace,” Simon agreed, bowing. “Enjoy your meal, Your Graces; I shall leave you to it.”

“Are you surprised?” Evan asked, smiling coyly at her as soon as they were alone.

“Incredibly so,” Arabella laughed as she picked up her fork. “Why didn’t you tell me any of this?”

Evan’s smile fell a little as he picked up his own fork and stabbed into his piece of fish.

“I do not really like talking about myself,” he explained, looking at her, “but I wanted to actually try today.” Arabella winced in guilt but said nothing as he continued. “I realized that I needed to do that as I watched you fall asleep last night. Then when I woke up, you were gone.”

Arabella looked down to study her plate.

“I do have a reason, *husband*,” she replied, her tone falling heavy on the last word.

“Pray tell,” Evan replied, looking at her with intrigue.

Arabella pulled her gaze up from her plate to look at Evan, trying to combat the feelings that were nagging at her insides.

“Who is Anna, *Your Grace*?” she asked, her tone barely above a whisper.

Evan’s entire body stilled, his grip tight on his utensils as he gazed back at her with a wild look.

“Where did you hear that name?” he asked, his voice tinged with discomfort.

“From you,” she replied softly, her eyes not leaving his. “You called for her last night in your sleep. Is she the reason why you haven’t visited me once in the last five years?”

She was trying to make herself sound as composed as possible, but as she said the last few words, a trill entered her voice.

Evan’s eyes went wide as his breath quickened. How was he to answer? On one hand, no, not at all. He had not touched another woman. But on the other...a resounding *yes*, for his mind was constantly consumed by Anna and William’s death.

He didn't want to go into the details now, but she did deserve something.

"Anna was someone who was very dear to me when I was younger," Evan said lightly, picking up his wine glass. "Unfortunately, she died before you and I ever met."

He tilted the glass to his lips and drained the rest of his wine, clearing his throat as he swallowed the last bit.

"I do apologize for the confusion I've caused you," he replied sincerely, unable to look at her as he refilled his glass.

Arabella began to chastise herself as Evan's words sank in. They were acquainted long before. Perhaps she had been a childhood friend or another cousin. She'd yet to lose a friend to the mortal coil, and she couldn't imagine the pain Evan must feel to have gone through such a thing so young.

"I am sorry, Your Grace," she said sincerely, looking up at him with apologetic eyes. Evan finally looked back at her, his eyes bright with emotion. He gave her a small smile and raised his glass to her.

"I suppose I cannot blame you for this morning then," he continued. "I cannot say I wouldn't have reacted the same way if it were you who had spoken another man's name in your sleep after what we had...accomplished." He gave her a soft smile, and she felt herself giving him one in return before he continued.

“If it is well with you, I’d very much like to move on from such matters. You have learned a little about me, let me learn a little about you. Tell me something, anything.”



Evan’s laugh vibrated through his chest, making Arabella tremble in his lap slightly every time. Their conversation had flowed in a delightfully natural fashion. Evan had been very amused by her antics in both building her greenhouse and collecting her menagerie and had many questions about them that she was happy to answer.

Not too long after they had finished eating, Arabella had poured them some port, and when she had returned to the table with it, Evan had grasped at her hips and pulled her into his lap. She liked the way it felt to be so close to him, how warm his chest was when she brushed an occasional hand there, and how his masculine scent kept her mind slightly distracted.

“I cannot believe you were actually entertaining buying an *elephant*,” Evan chuckled, his hand beginning to rub slow circles over her back.

“Oh, but I wanted her so bad,” Arabella replied, half-laughing, half-pouting as she thought of Tum-Tum, the beautiful and gentle pachyderm that the circus had tried to sell before leaving London two years ago. “But you know, it is awfully complicated to house an elephant. Even in the country! They need constant fires in the winter, I am told. Great big ones or they get sad. And they need plenty of space to roam. Also, if they get angry or adventurous, there is really no way to stop them.”

Arabella sighed, her tone full of ennui. “It just was not meant to be.”

“Or perhaps you just let go too easily,” Evan jested, “after all, she spent her entire life in the circus. She would not know what she was missing.”

Arabella’s smile saddened a little as she shook her head.

“No. If she would have come home with me, I would have wanted her to be free. Life is so empty when you are forced to live it confined to a cage. That is why I visit with my monkeys often. I do not want them to feel alone.”

Understanding shone in Evan’s eyes, and he nodded slightly as he brought his hand up to stroke the delicately curved line of her jaw. Arabella trembled at his touch and leaned into his warmth.

“It does make life hard sometimes, doesn’t it?” he asked softly. Their eyes locked, and Arabella nodded. Her earlier anger had been trampled down by the wonderful conversation they had shared, and she felt surer now that Evan was not going to just go away.

“It does,” she agreed, her voice barely above a whisper, her eyes searching his pleadingly.

“I have missed you, husband,” Arabella breathed, feeling vulnerable as the truth left her lips. Her breath hitched as Evan’s arms snaked around her tightly and held her closer, bringing her lips only a few scant centimeters away from his.

“Well, now you have me,” he rasped, his eyes a molten, brilliant blue.

Arabella moaned as she felt his hand slide across the back of her neck and pull her in for a kiss. She met his lips hungrily, her teeth tugging at his lower lip playfully before she sucked it into her mouth, not realizing just how hungry she was for him. Forgetting every damning thought, Arabella let her desire consume her, and she gave herself over to Evan completely.

Feeling the exchange of power surge through him as Arabella went limp in his arms, he groaned headily. With ease he was on his feet, shifting Arabella around in his arms while never breaking their kiss. He carried her over to the nearest wall, placed her on her feet, and then broke their kiss off abruptly before spinning her arm.

Arabella gasped as Evan gripped her wrists and brought them up to meet the wall, moving her body so that her feet were farther away, forcing her lean in with her back arched.

“Stay there,” Evan growled in her ear before sucking her lobe into his mouth and biting it gently. Of its own volition, Arabella immediately felt her entire body arch into his touch at the sound of his command, his voice sending pleasurable shivers down her body. With every kiss down her neck, with every heavy breath Edward took against her sensitive flesh, those shivers landed hard in her loins, heating them to a sizzle until a steamy mist of desire sprayed her inner thighs.

When Evan was sure she was not going to move her hands, he slid his own away from them, his large hands splaying so wide against her much smaller back that his fingertips grazed her

breasts as they made their way down. He loved the way she shivered and gasped his name when they landed on her hips and moved them suddenly backward, right up against his aching hard member.

He had been mad at her earlier, yes— but that was long gone now. He had given in to the desires he had had all day and let her feel how much passion she had ignited within him. Forcing his hands up, he began to unlace her dress, which complimented her skin tone beautifully and had drawn his gaze continuously to her breasts. He had discovered last evening that Arabella needed very little help from her corset, and he loved the way her breasts rode high and proud.

With quick work, he had her stripped down, being tender to her gown despite the arousal continuously shuddering through him. For a moment, as he moved the clothes away, he stopped to marvel at the beautiful sight that was his wife. She had a goddess-like figure, formed in the perfect hourglass that accentuated her small waist and blessed wide hips that held the most gorgeous backside he had ever laid eyes on.

And she was his. Rightfully in every way. Where had he been? What had he missed? A deep ache overtook him as he began to massage his hands over her, addicted to the way his touch drew out her soft moans. He moved his fingers sensually over the back of her neck, up over her graceful shoulders; her hands, still resting obediently on the wall, formed perfectly into a triangle as her head hung forward. Her hips surged upwards and backward obediently with even the gentlest touch, her bare cheeks stroking his member through his breeches with every enticing wiggle.

When his fingertips stroked over the flesh of her backside, Arabella suddenly let out a startled, pleased cry and trembled violently against him. Grinning devilishly, he did it

again, this time digging his fingertips deeper into her plump flesh, moving her grinding hips exactly where he wanted them. He held her tight with one hand and with the other, delivered a soft slap to her left cheek. Arabella immediately began to tremble even more as she let out another shocked moan, and she threw her head back to look at him. Her blue eyes were wide and heavy with arousal, giving him an almost pleading look.

“Are you punishing me, Your Grace?” she asked, her sweet voice sending another shiver of desire down his spine.

His eyebrow quirked as he looked back at her, his free hand gently massaging the area he had just slapped.

“And what if I am?” he asked challengingly. “You did bring me great frustration today.”

His soothing hand suddenly drew back, and he delivered another quick slap, this one sharper than the last. Evan felt a deep surge of pleasure rise in him when he saw her eyes glaze over as if she had almost entered a trance. A shaky moan poured from her plump, parted lips as he began to soothe the slightly stinging flesh with another gentle massage.

“Then, I would say this is the most enjoyable punishment I have ever received,” she replied wickedly, releasing her hands from the wall and wriggling out of his grasp. Evan chuckled in amusement as she gripped his shoulders, and he allowed her to move his back against the wall. “Although, what *has* been punishment is that you are clothed, and I am not,” Arabella explained, her hands going to his cravat to tear it away.

“Is it now?” Evan asked in a sultry tone, letting his body relax, so he could let Arabella undo the buttons of his shirt.

“Most assuredly,” Arabella moaned, rising on her toes to kiss and lap her tongue at the bare flesh of his now-exposed lower neck. Evan felt his pulse jump as her eager mouth kissed, nipped, and lapped down his torso as Arabella’s trembling hands undid each button and pulled the shirt further and further until she could drag it completely off of his arms. Evan looked down at her and saw that she had rested on her knees, her head level with his hips.

When her fingertips hitched into the waistband of his breeches, he could not stifle the ragged groan that came out of his throat. He wanted to be free of them forever ago, but he was enjoying Arabella’s ministrations far too much. When his member was finally able to spring free from the confines of his clothes, he bucked his narrow hips almost instinctively. Arabella gasped when he did this, and to his surprise, she brought both hands up to his hips to steady them. She looked up at him with a sultry gaze and timidly darted her tongue across the mushroomed head of his member.

Evan let out a growl as his hands caught fistfuls of her silken curls. Gently, he pulled her back, one hand sliding down so that it rested around her throat. Anger and lust burned through him brightly and equally as he gritted out a very important question.

“Where on *earth* did you learn *that*?” he asked her pointedly, his grip on her throat flexing gently, making her gasp and flush as she looked up at him. A wicked smile spread across her face as her eyebrow perked up tauntingly.

“From you, dear husband,” she purred, gently pulling against his grip in a rebellious fashion. “Last night, when you tasted me and flooded me...it made me curious as to what would happen if I used my tongue on you the way you used your tongue on me?”

As if to prove her point, Arabella strained further against his grip, and stroked her tongue over the bobbing head of his painfully hard member once. Something ancient and dominant arose in Evan as Arabella continued this little display of rebellion, and a pleasure he had never known was possible flooded through him. As he loosened his grip on her and allowed her to come closer to him, every muscle in his body tightened and reacted to Arabella’s curious ministrations.

She continued with just her tongue for a while at first, growing bolder with each stroke. As he looked down at the erotic display, he felt a deep sense of satisfaction; one so unlike anything he felt before, it nearly shook him on an emotional level. His grip tightened in her hair once more when her wet, plump lips enveloped the head of his member completely. The explosion of pleasure was so great, he had to will himself not to thrust entirely into her beautiful mouth right then and there.

As if she could read his thoughts, Arabella opened her mouth wider, and Evan watched in pure ecstasy as his member slowly disappeared down her delicate, tight, warm throat. Evan cursed as Arabella kept her pleasure-glazed eyes on him as she pulled his member slowly out of her mouth, only to thrust him slowly back inside of it.

“You are going to be the death of me, woman,” he growled, drawing her up to her feet. She grinned mischievously at him as he pulled her to her feet and pressed her back against the wall, his much-bigger body once more caging her there.

“Well, I certainly do not want that, husband.” Arabella’s witty words were strangled halfway when Evan’s hands gripped her hips and lifted her onto his waist, her upper back pressed tightly against the wall.

“Is that so?” Evan mused, his voice thick with desire as he began to rub the tip of his member over her center, making her lips twitch and part further with each little nudge.

The playfulness in Arabella’s eyes faded as an erotically needy look rose through her dilated pupils. She thrust her hips up toward him provocatively and in pleasure, watched as Evan bit back a groan.

“Never, my husband,” she whispered emphatically. “I always want you with me.”

The raw emotion in Arabella’s voice was almost too much for Evan to bear, and his need to be a part of her grew until he could not take it anymore. As his lips captured hers in a kiss, he swiftly thrust his member between her folds. Both of them moaned into one another as Arabella’s petal-soft walls gripped Evan tightly, immediately beginning to suckle and spasm around his thick expanse hungrily.

Unlike the night before, Evan did not keep his thrusts gentle. With as deliciously wet as Arabella was for him, there was no need, and he lost himself inside of her. Arabella wrapped her arms around his back tightly; her gorgeously tight body gripped around him, trusting him completely to not let her down.

Chapter Thirteen



Evan's first orgasm came quicker than either of them expected, but he was ready to rise again almost immediately. In the few minutes it took him to recharge, he carried Arabella to the bed, put her on the edge, splayed her legs, and feasted on her until she screamed his name.

Arabella was trembling with pleasure and fatigue by her second orgasm, her beautiful body languid with released pleasure as it lay splayed on the bed. With his member as hard as it ever was, Evan kissed her languorously as he wrapped her in his arm and rolled on the bed until he was on his back and she was laying on his chest. Immediately, her legs came down on either side of his hips, and she tilted her hips so that her dripping sex rubbed against the head of Evan's turgid member.

Evan gripped her hips and brought Arabella's sex slowly down on his member until she had completely swallowed him from tip to base. Arabella's eyes widened and her mouth formed a perfect *O* as she felt Evan from the new angle.

"Do you like to ride horses as much as you like to collect them?" Evan asked, slowly forcing her to sit up straight. Arabella let out a gasping *yes* as she sat up on her own, her hips already twitching, gripping, adjusting to the new sensations of being on top.

“Very good,” Evan breathed, beginning to move his hips beneath her, “that is just what this is like. Use your hips to buck in with every gallop.” To prove his point, he gripped her hips and forced her to move forward as he brought his own hips up abruptly. Arabella moaned once more as she felt her sheath begin a fresh flood of juices, and she nodded obediently.

Instinct had taken over her body, and Arabella began to move in a hypnotic rhythm with Evan. With his guiding hands on her hips, and hers balanced on his muscled chest, Arabella began to feel a whole new spectrum of pleasure open up to her as she ground herself on Evan. Though she had liked the other positions Evan had shown her so far, this one made her feel more powerful somehow, more wild and free. The faster and deeper she moved her hips, the more she made Evan growl and moan, and that made her feel a type of pleasure and liberation she never knew could exist.

She had certainly thrown some wild parties before and was no stranger to the sounds of human lovemaking, but when she had heard them before, she thought them silly and fake somehow. As if surely a person could not sound so...*animalistic* just from a few drops of passion.

Yet, when Evan made those primal sounds, it squeezed something tight in her lower abdomen, causing a fresh flood of wetness every time one left his throat. She wanted to hear those sounds all day, every day, for the rest of her life.

As Arabella began to get more comfortable in the new position and was able to thrust her hips down harder, Evan’s hands gradually left her hips and began to roam leisurely over her body. A shot of pleasure unlike ever before went through her

when Evan's fingertips splayed over her nipples softly then suddenly followed by a tightened roll of them. Unable to take the pleasure, Arabella felt her third orgasm begin to build inside of her.

Immediately noticing her body's sensitive change, Evan groaned and sat up halfway so that he could wrap one hand around her waist and grip one of her breasts with the other. Somehow, Evan's hips began to rock them together, taking over control of the tempo as he dipped his head to her captured breast. Arabella cried out his name when his lips captured her nipple, and his tongue began to flick wickedly back and forth against it. Evan abruptly stopped, and a tone of despair slipped into Arabella's voice as his grip forced their bodies to still completely.

"Yes, sweetheart?" he asked, his voice like black silk against Arabella's naked skin. She shivered as she looked down at him, his blue eyes sparkling with arousal, hunger, and something more...*feral*.

She bucked her hips against him needily, but he stilled her as a growl rose from his chest.

"Tell me what you want, Arabella," his deep voice commanded, his eyes not leaving hers. "If you want to continue."

"You," Arabella rasped, feeling her arousal rise to a torturous level, "You, Evan, please— do— do not stop moving."

Evan groaned at the sound of her needy tone and sunk her hips down once more.

“That’s it, sweetheart,” he praised, pulling her nipple back into his mouth. Arabella moaned as her body melted around Evan’s much stronger frame, letting him take on her full weight as her orgasm ripped powerfully through her body, depleting her of what little strength she had left. As if he had been waiting for her all along, Evan’s grip tightened on her hips as his thrusts increased into a pounding after Arabella came, and within moments, he was joining her in the ecstasy of release.

“Your— Your Grace...” Arabella panted. Evan cut her off with a kiss, his tongue delving deep into her mouth in a display of ownership.

“Evan,” he growled, wrenching her head back so he could kiss her neck. “Call me by *name*, Arabella,” he groaned, his member still throbbing deep inside of her.

“Evan,” Arabella breathed, her voice barely audible as she shivered under his lips.

A guttural sound of approval rose from Evan’s chest as he slowly eased himself out of her and settled her exhausted figure deeper into his chest. Her beautiful curves fit against his muscled torso perfectly, making his skin continue to feel alive and bursting with sensitivity.

“Stay with me tonight,” he urged, “the *entire* night, this time.” Though it seemed like a command, his voice held the small lilt of a question as if giving her permission to say no.

Arabella smiled up at him, her eyes full of sated pleasure. The look of happiness on her face sank deep into Evan’s heart,

healing a broken part of him that he swore would never be fixed. She nuzzled into him further then nipped at his nipple playfully, making him jump and chuckle.

“I believe I shall, darling,” she replied, her voice soft with delicious exhaustion, “but if you call out another’s name again, I shall have to thump you. And you’ll have to live out the rest of your days knowing that you’ve been bested by a naked woman.”

Evan chuckled as her body slid slowly off his only to nuzzle tightly at his side. He turned, pulled her into his arms, and kissed her passionately once more.

“That is a punishment I’d bravely bear,” he promised her, moving his kisses to her nose, cheeks, then forehead.



“Surely you cannot be ready again,” Evan chuckled, a wolfish grin on his face as he snatched a towel-clothed Arabella by the waist.

“Why can’t I be?” she replied haughtily, throwing him a sultry look over her shoulder as she wiggled her backside into him.

It was the next morning, and Simon had had the wherewithal to discreetly leave them a breakfast tray in the hall. After they had awoken, still wrapped in one another’s arms, they had found it impossible to keep their hands off one another as they began to break their fast. Their feeble attempt to eat at the table resulted in a spilled tray and them once more entangled in bed, feeding each other bits of scone and fruit as they made love again.

After their spirited breakfast, they had attempted to prepare themselves to leave by ordering the tub filled. But, as soon as the servants were finished filling it with clean, hot water, Evan had Arabella bent over the edge of the inside of it in another bout of ecstasy. They had, however, been able to contain themselves long enough to give one another a good scrub afterward and even a dry-off.

But as Arabella was toweling off her breasts, she noticed Evan's eyes fixated on them. Another burst of erotic energy hit her as she watched Evan's gaze rake slowly and hotly over every part of her flesh that was stroked with the towel. When his gaze suddenly shot up to hers, his blue eyes were hot with desire, and they rushed to one another yet again.

"If you do not stop teasing me so much," Evan panted as he tore the towel away from her and lifted her onto his hips, "we are never going to be able to leave this room." He groaned in pleasure as he pushed her back up against the wall and sank his rigid member into her once again, reveling in the tight, wet grip of her perfect sex.

"Oh darling," Arabella moaned, her hands fisted tightly in his hair as she arched her back into the wall, "we both know that it is you who is teasing me."

Desire shot through Evan as his grip on her backside tightened, and he thrust himself faster and harder in a primally possessive manner. He was becoming addicted to the way she talked when they were alone like this. To how playful and sinfully seductive she could become in their banter. And he loved that it was just for him. Even with her friends, Evan knew she elicited a certain amount of public propriety with them. And this free, wild version of his wife— it was all his.

A deep emotion unlike anything he had felt before began to well in him as they moved together as one against the wall, their pleasure and desperation tightening with each stroke. It was familiar yet somehow completely unknown and even a tad frightening. Evan felt a thickness start to rise in his throat as his grip on Arabella tightened, his need for her suddenly growing bigger.

Feeling his intensity, Arabella pulled his head back by a fistful of hair and met his gaze. Lust and desire poured from them as she met Evan's eyes, and inside them, they both felt a deep, almost feral connection start to take hold. It was something beyond lovemaking, beyond even the body.

"Arabella, I— I," Evan moaned, his hips slowing to a deeper tempo, "I—"

"Yes?" she breathed, her eyes looking deeply into his.

The words were on his tongue, dancing over his tastebuds as they waited for him to open his mouth and say them. But, as he tried to let them loose, a sense of fear came over him: the fear of loss. One that he was already too well acquainted with.

"I cannot seem to get enough of you," he moaned, tossing the other more intimate words to the wind, never to be spoken. Unaware of Evan's intended words, Arabella smiled wickedly at him as her grip on his neck tightened, and she brought his lips to hers.

Evan let Arabella's kiss swallow the unsaid words, and his mind once more moved back to the pleasure at hand. He began

to move his hips faster, deeper, until Arabella's moans were constant and desperate. Her sweet, tight walls gripped him tighter and tighter as their lovemaking once more came to the pinnacle of frenzy.

"I am not complaining about our activities," Evan panted afterward, "but my dear, I believe I might need a bit of a reprieve."

Beside him, Arabella giggled innocently and burrowed into his side. After his intense orgasm, he'd dragged her down to the floor with him, and they'd yet to make it back up again. Playfully, she scraped her teeth against Evan's nipple, and giggled more as he jumped and chuckled. Evan smiled at her as he shook his head and pulled her close for another kiss.

"I believe you may be right," Arabella agreed, once he let her slide down to his side again. "Perhaps we should give your room a break— at least long enough to let the maids in for a good clean."

Her happiness seemed to slip away a little as she said this, and as she leaned up on her elbow, Evan could see a touch of anxiety there.

"What is it?" he asked, reaching up to tuck her hair behind her ear. She smiled at him softly and shook her head.

"It's nothing, really, but I must confess you've spoiled me a little over the last two days. It will not be easy to spend time away from you."

Evan sat up and pulled her up with him.

“What if you didn’t have to?” he asked calmly. Arabella looked confused as her smile started to come back.

“I am not a fool, Your Grace; I know your responsibilities as Duke of Lancaster can keep you most busy. Especially now that I have a better understanding of all that you do— thanks to last night’s conversation,” she replied simply.

Evan grinned and pulled her into his arms so that she was straddled across his lap.

“Well, while I appreciate your new understanding of my responsibilities, I am currently away from Lancaster, and the responsibilities I have here have been limited. I would very much like to spend the day with you,” he paused, then added with a mischievous grin, “That is if you can fit me into *your* busy schedule with your friends.”

Picking up on his reference to her attitude yesterday afternoon, Arabella smiled, pressing her lips together as she blushed softly.

“I believe I can fit you in, Your Grace,” she teased, emphasizing his title for extra fun.

“Oh, good,” Evan chuckled, wrapping his hand around the back of her neck so he could bring her to his lips again, “I must admit I was a tad worried you’d be too busy.”

Giggling together, the two of them fell back to the floor, letting their desires take over them one more time.

Chapter Fourteen



“I can’t believe they come to you when you call them like that,” Evan said, his voice full of wonder.

Arabella smiled as she gently stroked the brightly colored plumage of the parrot that was comfortably resting on her fingers.

“It just takes patience and time,” she answered softly, gently bumping her nose against the parrot’s beak. “I believe animals *want* to live among us; we just have to know how to treat them properly.”

It had been two weeks since the first night Evan and Arabella had shared a bed, and it had been two weeks of bliss. Arabella had happily taken him around to all the animals, introducing them and giving him small pieces of information about them as she did so. Because of this, Evan had begun to gain a better understanding of who his wife was.

Arabella was a nurturer. He saw it in the way she cared for all of her beasts, both great and small, and in the way she spoke to people as well. Unlike many other women of the *Ton*, she spoke to all of their servants softly and kindly and praised them for the work they did to help care for her animals.

Just as he had been able to finally learn more about Arabella, she had indeed learned much about him. He was not a boastful, overly emphatic man that required a constant lauding of recognition. Evan was a true leader, both patient and cautious but also seemingly ready at all times to jump into any situation and handle it. He was also quiet when other people spoke and incredibly perceptive, both in normal conversation and in games.

“Your Grace,” Henrietta spoke up, grinning widely as she stroked Sir Squeaken’s fur, “have you worked up the courage to hold this little man yet?”

Evan chuckled as he turned away from looking at his wife up and down and toward Henrietta, Antony, and Leonard. They were all seated at the table in the greenhouse, each of them holding their own creature. Like Henrietta, Antony was holding one of the other monkeys, and Leonard was stroking the belly of a very content Bengal cat that was stretched on its back in the crook of his arm.

“I’m not sure,” he admitted cautiously, looking at Lady Thimble up and down.

“Come now, cousin,” Leonard jested, “a great man like you cannot be felled by one small, mere monkey.”

“It is true, husband,” Arabella said warmly, coddling the parrot in her hands, “Lady Thimble and Lord Squeaken are quite harmless and well-trained. I assure you, it is safe.”

“I’m not worried about it being safe,” Evan replied. He was quickly greeted with a round of cajoling laughter, and he rolled his eyes.

“At least not too much. All right, fine. Hand over the little beast. Let’s see what all the fuss is about.”

In his time spent with Arabella, Evan had not only grown more comfortable around the animals but also with her friends. Gradually, his suspicions of Leonard’s rakish behavior had started to fade, and he was now seeing why his wife enjoyed his company. Even if, at times, he could be wildly immature, and even childish.

Evan sat down, held his arms out, and let Antony carefully place the monkey on his chest. The adorable fluff quickly wrapped her tiny, fur-covered arms around him, and clung to his chest tightly. He couldn’t help but smile when the little thing looked up at him with her tiny black eyes, and smiled to reveal small, but very sharp, fangs.

“Well, this isn’t so bad at all,” he murmured, gently stroking the fur atop the monkey’s head.

Arabella, Antony, Henrietta, and Leonard had started to chatter in agreement when they all heard a sudden scrape against the stones, followed by a woman’s voice booming, “Evan Joseph Garter, you put that vile thing down!”

On Evan’s chest, Lady Thimble burrowed closer to him at the sudden explosion of sound. Looking up, he and everyone else saw Gloria Garter before them, looking at them all as if they were daft.

“Grandmother, not again,” Evan pleaded, tamping down his sudden agitation. “I assure you, these animals are perfectly clean and healthy.”

“I don’t care if they have been washed in the river of Lithe; a Duke and his Duchess should not be handling such creatures. It’s downright improper,” Gloria replied in a condescending tone.

“What may I help you with, Your Grace?” Arabella asked, curtsying toward Gloria before taking a step toward her.

Gloria straightened her posture as she wrapped both of her hands around her cane and looked the young people up and down.

“I require an audience with my grandsons and granddaughter-in-law,” she said matter-of-factly, looking down her nose toward Antony and Henrietta.

“We have been here weeks now, and it is abominable that we haven’t gathered yet as a family. Lord and Lady Winston, while I admire your dedication to your sister, I would appreciate it if you returned to your own home for the time.”

She gave them a look that had Antony and Henrietta both apologizing. In return, they gave a knowing glance at Arabella and took their leave.

“Now come,” Gloria insisted, already turning around, “let’s get out of this *awful* place and have tea as polite society does.”



“Well, that was...terrifying,” Arabella said as Evan pulled her into his quarters. The moment he got her inside, Evan pushed her against the door and kissed her soundly.

They had just finished having tea with Gloria, and to say it was a spirited conversation was an understatement. Although she was doting and respectful toward Evan and civil with Arabella, the Dowager had a much less kind inclination toward Leonard. So much so that not far into the tea, he confessed he had a private engagement and made a quick exit.

“She is all bark and no bite,” Evan assured quickly, his passion overtaking him. In his grasp, Arabella laughed lightly.

“Tell that to Leonard,” she quipped back. “I thought she was going to flay him alive then and there.”

Evan groaned as he lifted her, ready to put the afternoon tea behind them.

“Pay no mind to it,” he assured her, walking toward his bed. “Leonard and grandmother have been always been on... *strenuous* terms. Now, let us put that at the back of our minds and focus on more delightful distractions.”

Arabella laughed as Evan’s words dissolved into a sultry tone, and she wrapped her arms around his neck; loving the way their passion for lovemaking had consumed him just as much as it had consumed her. Just as their lips touched, the door suddenly burst open. The ruckus was quickly followed by a

cacophony of voices, one of which Evan immediately recognized as Simon. His dedicated manservant was desperately trying to contain the chaos that was spilling into his master's rooms.

“Good Heavens!” Henrietta exclaimed, clutching at Antony’s waist as Arabella’s brother froze in his steps, staring at them wide-eyed.

“Good job, old boy!” Leonard crowed enthusiastically, throwing his fist up in the air. He leaned to the side and winked at Arabella. “Well done, dear; it seems you have *certainly* gotten what you have wanted.”

“Leonard, *please*,” Evan groaned, lowering Arabella gently but quickly to her feet.

“*Must* you always play the fool?” she hissed at her friend in irritation.

Leonard rolled his eyes uncaringly. “Oh, *posh*, both of you stop acting so dreary.”

“What is the meaning of this?” Evan urged, annoyed by the interruption. “I thought you had other business to take care of?”

He took a seat on one of the couches, pulling Arabella down by his side; a smug smile on her face as he did so.

“I did,” Leonard agreed, nodding his head toward Henrietta and Antony. It was only then that Arabella noticed that the three of them were dressed in evening attire as if ready to go out.

“I’m a bit confused,” Evan confessed, looking toward Arabella for clarification. She gave him a quick shrug, just as lost.

“Look what all this husband-and-wife business has done to them,” Leonard said in pitying jest. “Very well, since it seems you have drained each other of your wits, I shall inform you. Tonight is the Bassetts’ ball. The Queen herself is going to be in attendance, according to the gossip, and there is even talk of fireworks.”

Beside Evan, Arabella groaned. He looked down at her as she pushed her wild, dark curls out of her face.

“That is tonight? I could have sworn that it was another month away!” she said as if disappointed.

Leonard shrugged as he looked over at her with a side-eye. “Time flies when you are having a honeymoon with your estranged husband,” he muttered sarcastically. “Even if it is five years late...”

Arabella smacked him on his arm hard as Evan reached out to thump his forehead, and Antony reached forward to whack at the back of his head.

“Easy!” Leonard scolded, flinching at the onslaught of punishments.

“Watch your language, *cousin*,” Evan warned, his tone laced with amusement. “I have still not decided on whether or not I am going to throttle you. And if you keep acting like this, I am certain Antony will be glad to assist.”

“With passion,” Antony replied pointedly, his eyes still on Leonard. “What has gotten into you lately? You’ve been more outlandish than usual.”

Leonard rolled his eyes and got up from the couch, striding away from the group.

“You have all been a tremendous bore lately,” he said in an unhandled tone, looking away from them, “and I am in need of fresh entertainment. Which is why we burst in here. You are coming with us— the both of you.”

Evan lifted a sardonic brow and shook his head subtly. There were many other more intimate things he’d rather do with his time, and none of them involved an audience. Especially one that dragged his family’s name through the mud.

“I think not,” he replied coolly, staring firmly at Leonard before turning to Arabella. When his eyes met hers, his cool stare became warm, and a slow smile made its way across his face.

“Besides, I believe my wife and I have more important festivities to engage in.”

Arabella felt a warmth spread up through her chest, and she leaned up to kiss him just as Leonard made a sound of disgust.

“Come *on*, cousin,” Leonard drawled, leaning his head back dramatically. “Have a little fun while you are away from your responsibilities! Besides, now that you...” He waved his hand toward them with an extra flick of his wrist. “...are assured of your wife’s chastity, you can now put those nasty rumors to bed. Surely Arabella being on your arm in solidarity shall provide sufficient proof that all is well in your marriage, and you do not believe these awful lies.”

Leonard moved his gaze to Arabella as he leaned his elbows forward on his knees and clasped his hands.

“And you, you deserve to be seen with your husband. Happily and proudly. To shut these brainless clucking hens up once and for all.” He said his words pointedly and matter-of-factly, leaving little room for either of them to argue.

Evan turned to Arabella the moment he felt her eyes on him, and she stared up at him imploringly.

“Well, what do you think?” she asked him, squeezing his arm.

Evan sighed and rubbed the back of his neck.

“I suppose he does have a point,” he muttered.

“Several, actually,” Leonard corrected, throwing Evan a wink. Knowing he won, he clapped his hands together loudly and

jumped up from his seat.

“Well, come on then; we do not have time to lose,” he crowed cheerily, making his way to the door. “The festivities start in only a couple of hours. Get yourselves ready. I will have my manservant tell the stables to have our carriage prepared by five— Oh, and the theme tonight is chess. Black and white attire only.”

Chapter Fifteen



“Simon,” Eliza whispered, smiling widely as she opened the door to her mistress’ quarters. They had all just left for the Bassett Ball, and Eliza had stayed behind to prepare Arabella’s quarters for when she returned. She had been very pleased with herself with what she had accomplished with Her Grace’s hair, rouge, and accessories to her dress, and she was organizing the vanity when she heard the knock.

“Hello, Eliza,” Simon said warmly, stepping in through the narrowly open door. The moment he shut it behind him, he wrapped his arms around Eliza’s thin waist and pulled her to his chest.

“I have been wanting to do that all day,” he groaned, after pulling away from their deep kiss.

“I understand that feeling very well,” Eliza replied breathlessly, her eyes glittering with desire. She had found Simon attractive the moment she had laid her eyes on him, but it had surprised her to find that he had felt the same about her only the night before.

When her mistress had failed to come to her quarters to get ready for bed, Eliza had begun to worry and set about looking for her. When she saw Simon standing dutifully outside the Duke's bedroom quarters, he had looked both startled and pleased to see her. As Eliza drew closer, she began to hear what Simon was listening to and felt her pulse quicken.

The sounds of the Duke and Duchess' pleasure were echoing through the closed chamber doors, and it immediately had a deeply arousing effect on her body. Then, as Simon raked his eyes over her, she felt another layer coat over, almost putting her in a sort of trance.

"They sound quite..." she had started to say, her voice fading as Simon reached for her.

"They do, indeed," Simon had murmured before pulling her into his arms. She had melted at his masculine warmth, and they too got wrapped up in their Masters' intimacies. They had kissed in the small enclave of the Duke's room nearly all night, their hands roaming but never traversing under one another's clothes.

At times, they tried to stop, to try to talk, but then their Master and Mistress' sounds of passion would start again, and they could not keep their lips off each other.



"I was not sure you wanted to come," Eliza said presently, running her hands over his vest, feeling his muscles flex beneath as their lips parted and came together.

Simon groaned, pushing her further into the Duchess' room. "You have no idea how hard it was to focus on anything today," he said between kisses, his voice deliciously thick. Suddenly he stopped, his entire body freezing, and he placed his finger over his lips as Eliza opened her lips to ask what was wrong.

In the stillness, Eliza heard the faint, rhythmic tapping growing steadily closer. Simon's grip changed on her arm, wrapping tightly around her bicep, and he began to drag her into the Mistress' dressing quarters. Just as he closed the small doors behind them, they heard the door to the Duchess' room open, and someone stepped inside.

"Who is that?" Eliza whispered. Simon pressed her back further into his chest as he drew her silently further into the small room full of dresses.

"The Dowager," Simon replied in a grave whisper, moving his eye to the keyhole. "What in the bloody hell is she doing here?"



Although she very much liked to wear white, Arabella could tell by the look on Evan's face that she had chosen correctly with black. When she came out of her room, his blue eyes grew wide with adoration, and a wolfish smile took over his face as he looked her up and down. She had chosen her black silk empire waist gown and accompanied it with a pair of gloves dyed a deep violet hue. In her dark mass of curls, Eliza had strategically placed an equally bright, thick-plumed feather. Tightly wrapped around her neck was a deep amethyst velvet ribbon that balanced a three-carat tea-drop diamond perfectly in the well of her throat.

Evan too had chosen black, and it suited him very well indeed. It drew out hints of the savage side of him that lurked just beneath the surface of his gentlemanly facade. His wide shoulders, dark brows, and thoroughly brushed hair was wrapped handsomely in the well-fitted black brocade coat. His vest, shirt, and the rest of his ensemble was dashing.

“You are a *vision*,” Evan enthused, pulling her into his arms eagerly. With her so close, he caught the scent of lilac and orchids, and he breathed her in deeply.

“You are quite handsome yourself, dear husband,” Arabella replied softly, trailing the tip of her nose under his chin. He shivered when she placed a kiss on his freshly shaven jawline, and they almost did not make it down the stairs.

“Oh, darling, you look absolutely *ravishing*,” Henrietta gushed when they finally did make it to the foyer. Unlike Evan and Arabella, Henrietta, Antony, and Leonard had opted for white.

“As do you, dearest,” Arabella replied sweetly as they went in to kiss one another’s cheek.

Henrietta thanked her then smiled one of her mischievous smiles as she leaned in close to Arabella’s ear.

“You and the Duke look *perfect*. Just wait until the *Ton* sees you two together. You will be an immediate sensation!”

Arabella was not sure if she wanted to be another sensation, but she was more than thrilled that Evan was not only coming with them but that the bliss of their reunion had stretched into weeks now. It seemed that he was no longer investigating her honor, and there had been no talk of his departing. Tonight, after the ball, she had decided, she was going to ask him what his future plans were.

After everything Evan and Simon had told her about Lancaster and how it had flourished, she was most curious about the land and the people that lived there. She wanted to see it for herself by Evan's side. Arabella suddenly wondered if that was something Evan wanted, and the joy she'd been feeling over the last couple of weeks started to become tainted with anxiety.

"Arabella, are you all right?" Antony asked, leaning across Henrietta's lap to touch her knee. The rest of their party immediately looked over to her, and she realized, embarrassingly, that a brooding look had taken over her face. Evan's eyes stared back at her inquisitively, his gaze so intense, she felt as if he was reaching in and pulling out her secrets.

Arabella pulled her eyes away from him, straightened her shoulders, and forced her face to relax into a serene smile.

"Of course, brother," she replied cheerfully, "I am just a tad tired I suppose."

Evan's brow quirked in curious amusement as a small blush rose in her cheeks, and his eyes melted into a deep blue that swirled with carnal mischief. Arabella felt her body react to his gaze and cut the tether of dark thought that had encroached upon her. His hand gently picked hers up, and he brought it to

his lips. For a moment, he held her hand just a hair away from his lips, letting his breath seep in and moisten the fabric of her glove.

“Mmm, yes, and I am the incorrigible one,” Leonard drawled, rolling his eyes. “Keep it proper you two; we are here.”

“Look who is being the prude now,” Arabella teased in a sweet tone. A moment later, the carriage stopped, and Leonard all but bolted out of the carriage. Not waiting for them, he called to a gentleman he knew and walked briskly to join them.

“Whatever has gotten him so out of sorts lately?” Henrietta asked in an exasperated tone as she shook her head. “I swear his emotions have been more unpredictable than a summer storm.”

Antony gave her a comforting look as he tucked her gloved hand into his arm and began leading them inside. Behind them, Evan did the same for Arabella, his fingers stroking the bare skin of her underarm in a teasing manner.

“Who knows, darling?” Antony replied.

“You never know,” Evan mused, “He has always been the one to rake over women. Perhaps there has been a woman who raked over him?”

Arabella let out a sudden laugh. “Could you imagine?”

“It surely would explain his mood,” Antony mused, their conversation dying down as the sound of music and conversation began to swallow them.

Chapter Sixteen



“Leonard was indeed correct about the two of you showing your faces tonight,” Henrietta said enthusiastically, furtively looking around the crowded dance hall at all of the attending members of the *Ton*. While some of them were trying to hide their stares, most were being downright obvious.

As Leonard had predicted, many of the guests had been shocked to see him in attendance after five long years of absence. Several other gentlemen had rushed to his side to greet him, wanting badly to speak of his hand in the uptick of trade and commerce that was coming in and out of Lancaster.

Arabella felt a sense of pride and affection as she watched her husband go from shocked to excited as he quickly became engaged in conversation. Though she understood he did not like social engagements much, the topic of Lancaster seemed to be a point of security with him, and he spoke of it with pride and ease.

She had tried, at one time, to pull away from his side so he could speak more freely to the other gentleman, but glee shot through her when he gave her a sly side smile and tightened his grip on her. He actually *wanted* her there, she had realized, and since, she had been in a daze of love-struck euphoria as

she stood by his side. It was not until she felt him pull her toward a table already accompanied by Henrietta and Antony that she realized an hour had already passed since they had arrived.

She swept her eyes around the room, looking to see what Henrietta was seeing, and Arabella indeed found it to be true. *Everyone* was staring.

“They are taking in the beauty of you in your *exquisite* gown, dear wife,” Evan stated proudly, relaxing back into his chair as his eyes traveled up and down her figure.

“Thank you, *husband*,” Arabella replied playfully, tapping his shoulder with her fan, “but I am sure that is not why they are staring.”

“Well, it certainly is why *I* am staring, my darling,” Evan replied, his deep voice holding an edge of possession to it.

“Darling, I believe that is our cue to give the Duke and Duchess their space,” Antony announced suddenly, looking slightly flustered as he rose to his feet. He held his hand down to Henrietta and helped her stand, “Come, my dear heart, let’s have a dance.”

Henrietta blushed as her husband pulled her to her feet and followed him willingly to the dance floor. The moment they were alone at the table, Evan reached for Arabella’s chair and dragged it closer to him. Arabella gasped and steadied herself as Evan’s sudden show of rather taboo strength made her rock, and she felt her arousal deepen even as Evan put their closeness on apparent display.

This man was more than what she could have ever dreamed. The way he touched her, the way he wanted her, it was all deeply satisfying. She had ached for him for so long, and now that they were finally together as husband and wife, it was so perfect that it did not seem real.

“What are you thinking?” Evan asked as he stood up with her and led her to the dance floor. They both saw everyone turn their heads, and they both silently agreed to ignore the stares.

“I am afraid to say,” Arabella confessed, moving into the steps that went with the music.

Evan’s wicked look of playful desire dissolved into one of concern.

“Tell me, Arabella,” he implored gently, bringing her close to twirl her.

She looked up at him over her shoulder and saw the yearning to fix whatever was broken shining in his eyes.

“I am thinking about when you leave...” she confessed, her voice so soft, Evan nearly missed it.

He twirled her back into him, pulling her closer than necessary, and rested his lips against her ear.

“And what if I do not leave?” he asked, his deep voice rumbling in his chest, sending delicious vibrations onto

Arabella's back. He pulled her away from him in the next step of the dance, just in time to see the look of confused joy on her face. "Would it bother you so to have me around a while longer?" he asked, amusement now lacing his voice as he twirled her back into his arms.

"Not at all, dear husband," Arabella said warmly, her happiness building so high that it made her voice thick and soft. "In fact, I think I would assuredly find great satisfaction in your extended stay."

Evan smiled at her wolfishly, and as he caught her one last time, he curled his fingers under her jaw and brought his lips to hers in a consuming kiss. Members of the *Ton* gasped around them; others chuckled jovially as they shook their heads. Some looked at them crossly and began to talk in hushed whispers.

Evan was done with the rumors, he had decided. Gossip be damned, he was no longer going to give it a second thought. He kissed Arabella wholly, making a public claim on her with his lips, happy that so many people were staring at his claim of ownership. Arabella was *his*. And his alone.

"I do believe I have had enough company for the time being," Evan told her, after breaking off their kiss as the music ended. "Perhaps you would like to take a small respite with me in one of the more private rooms?"

"Most certainly, Your Grace," Arabella replied playfully in her sweetest, most respectful tone, curtsying to him innocently as she thought of the devilish things they were about to do. Behind them, they both heard a gentleman call Evan's name, and they both sighed in irritation as their plan was quickly foiled. Before Evan turned toward the man, he leaned into

Arabella's ear and provocatively whispered, "See the hallway to the left off of the second-floor balcony? Walk down to the fourth door on the left and wait inside for me there. I swear I will be there in a few minutes."

Excitement rushed through her, and before Arabella could ask any questions, Evan was gone from her side, already talking animatedly with a group of gentlemen that swallowed his attention. Flicking her fan out with a quick snap of her wrist, she did her best to melt into the rest of the black-and-white-clad crowd and make her way up the stairs.



Arabella knew the moment she had stepped into the darkened room that it was already occupied by the hushed sounds of carnal pleasure that radiated throughout the room. She tried to escape quietly, but somehow when the door clicked shut, it locked her in with the two moaning creatures writhing in the darkness. Sweat pricked at Arabella's temple as she twisted at the door knob as quickly and quietly as she could, silently begging for the thing to turn correctly and set her free.

"Oh god," a manly voice breathed, breaking away from the chorus of moans in the darkness, "someone is in here."

"I am so sorry," Arabella begged, leaning all her weight into the stuck door. "I have seen nothing, I am just— Oh damn it all, it will not budge!"

"Arabella?" Another male voice asked, this one much more familiar.

“Leonard?” Arabella cried with relief. “Oh, thank God it is you! Listen, this is a mistake. The door is jammed—”

“Arabella you have to go. *Now*,” Leonard demanded, his voice commanding and eerie as it came through the darkness. Arabella felt fear begin to rise in her as she desperately tried to open the door. Her best friend did not sound like himself at all. He sounded angry. Frightening even.

“I am trying!”

In the darkness, Arabella heard his footsteps coming toward her, and she let out a strangled noise of fear. Leonard’s hand was soon gripping her arm tight— *too* tight, and she felt his strength push her body aggressively against the door. As he did so, the door suddenly was pushed open from the other side, and Arabella was sent sprawling back into Leonard’s arms. With a motion that made her immediately sick to her stomach, Arabella felt Leonard’s mouth clamp down hard on hers.

His touch, unlike Evan’s, was not gentle at all. It was harsh, unforgiving. The taste in his mouth was awful and made her want to retch. Even as she struggled against him, he clamped his hand around the back of her head and ground his mouth into hers harder, using so much force that suddenly blood gushed forth behind her lips as she cried.

A growl erupted from the hallway as Arabella wrenched her head out of Leonard’s vice-like grip and pushed at his chest as forcefully as she could. Her skin crawled at his touch; her fury and shame were unlike anything she had ever felt before. Then, as the light flooded into the room, she paled and took several steps back. To make matters even worse, the man was naked.

“Arabella, what in the *hell* is going on?” Evan demanded.

Panic filled Arabella’s chest as she heard Evan’s aggressive tone and turned to see his blazing eyes glittering with rage. In the dim light, Arabella looked quickly around the room, looking for the other person or people that she had heard in the room with Leonard moments ago. Confusion flooded her when she found no one there but her and a shamefully naked Leonard, who was doing nothing to try and cover up.

“Evan,” Arabella’s voice immediately began to quiver as she already began to feel her heartbreak. “Evan please,” she begged, “this is not what it looks like. I did not know he was in here. The door— it was stuck.” She let out a sob as she realized Evan would not look at her and had turned a hateful stare toward Leonard.

“Why did you do that?” she sobbed, looking at Leonard with pure betrayal. She was trying to keep her voice down so no one downstairs would hear the crumbling of her world, but inside she was screaming as loud as she could.

“Sorry, cousin,” Leonard panted, slowly drawing on his breeches as he kept his stare on Evan, “but I was more desperate than you were.”

Arabella had no idea what he could mean by saying that, but it soon did not matter. As she lunged to slap Leonard across the face, Evan beat her to it. His fist came down hard against her best friend’s face as his other hand grappled for his throat, and soon, the two men were engaged in an all-out brawl.

“Stop,” Arabella pleaded, her hands pressed together in a desperate prayer, “please, both of you, stop!”

“Oh, good heavens!” Henrietta gasped as she and Antony came running into the room. At first, she put her hand to her mouth in shock, but then quickly went to Arabella, pulling her away from the two grown men while Antony inserted his body between the two of them.

“Are you *insane*?” Antony hissed as he finally got them apart. Evan only glared at him as he pulled Antony’s hand away from his lapel, and Leonard merely rolled his eyes as he sat down, still half-nude, on the bed. Behind them, Arabella was starting to cry uncontrollably, and he could hear his wife trying to comfort her. He looked at the two men he had just separated, shaking with anger.

“We are leaving,” he commanded, his deep voice threatening and absolute. “Leonard, get dressed this instant, or we are leaving without you. I have no idea what just happened, but you damn sure better believe you are going to tell me about it.”

“Actually, no,” Leonard panted, leaning back on the bed as if unbothered by the events that just unfolded, “I do not think I am. I have had quite enough fun with this particular little group. You all go. And I recommend soon if you do not want to draw a scene.” He said the words matter-of-factly, crossing one leg over another as if to prove his point.

“Antony, we *must* go,” Henrietta urged, still holding Arabella tightly. “Someone will be coming. The commotion was far too great to ignore.”

Antony turned to his wife. “Go ahead and take Arabella outside. We will meet you at the carriage.”

Without another word Henrietta whisked Arabella away, leaving the three men alone. Giving up on talking sense into Leonard, Antony turned toward Evan, who looked as if he was still grappling to control his rage.

“Come, Evan,” he pleaded urgently, holding out his hand. “I know you want answers, but now is not the time to get them. We must leave this fool now before we get wrapped up in his nonsense.”

Evan stood up to stand in front of Leonard, his hands on his knees so he could look his cousin directly in the eye.

“Come near my wife again, and I *will* kill you,” he promised, his tone deadly as his eyes blazed with rage. “You and I are no longer family. Do you understand? We are *done*.”

Leonard let out a dry laugh as Evan and Antony left the room.

“Rightfully so, cousin,” he replied lounging back on the bed, his voice edged with strife, despite his *laissez-faire* body language, “rightly so.”

Chapter Seventeen



Arabella panicked as she looked out of the window of the carriage and only saw Antony walking toward them.

She asked him where Evan was as soon as he opened the door. Her heart nearly stuttered to a stop when he first ignored her and told the driver to make haste back to the Garter Estate.

“Antony, answer me,” she demanded, her tone strained and laced with anger. Her lips burned painfully from Leonard’s assault as did her arm where he grabbed her, but she pushed through. “Where is my husband?”

The look of disgust Antony shot his sister sent a sick feeling straight into Arabella’s stomach. So much so that for a moment, she could not breathe. What had just happened?

“He needs some time to think, Arabella,” he replied coldly, “and rightfully so. He told me what he walked in on. How could you? After everything you have done to try to prove your innocence, you do this?”

“But I did not!” Arabella sobbed, leaning hard into Henrietta’s arms as the carriage lurched them forward. She had thought she had ached before from Evan’s rejection for the first five

years of their marriage, but this pain was *so* much worse. It felt like she could not think, could not breathe. Everything she had ever wanted— all suddenly gone.

“Well, what in the bloody hell happened then?” Antony demanded, smacking his hand against his knee in frustration.

“Do you have any idea what would have happened if it had been *anyone* else but Evan that walked in on you? Or if we had not gotten you out of there before the rest of the *Ton* began to investigate? Christ, Arabella, it would not have been just yourself that you would have ruined this time. It would have been all of us!”

Antony’s anger was clear in his loud voice, and Henrietta implored him to calm down. Arabella gently pushed herself out of her sister-in-law’s arms, wiped her tears, and glared at her brother as she caught her breath. With effort, she began to explain what had happened— including her and Evan’s plans for the room before the incident with Leonard. She told them about the door, the other voice or voices— now she was not sure— and how Leonard had suddenly and aggressively grabbed her and kissed her as Evan opened the door.

“Look at what he did to me, Antony,” Arabella pleaded, holding up the crimson-stained kerchief she had been pressing to her lips. “Do you truly think I would want this?”

For a moment, Antony’s hardened gaze softened as he stared at the bright red proof of Leonard’s confusing aggression. Then, as if it were just a passing thought, his face hardened again, setting into a disapproving, stone-like stillness.

“You speak in riddles, sister, and it is not amusing,” Antony said in distaste. “Nothing you said makes sense.”

“That is what I am trying to tell you!” Arabella shot back, trembling from the stress of the whole ordeal. “It doesn’t make sense. Any of it. Leonard has *never* kissed me before despite the rumors in the papers. Why would he suddenly do so now?”

Somehow, Antony’s body grew more rigid, and he looked at her warily.

“I have always defended you, sister,” he said, the exasperation clear in his voice. “I have never listened to the rumors because of what I saw with my own eyes between you and that man. You are close, yes, but I always believed you when you insisted there was no impropriety. But if this gets out, I will have no way to help you.”

Arabella felt her heart break even more as she realized that Antony was not hearing what she was saying at all. She was not only losing her husband. She was losing her brother, too. When the carriage stopped, she burst out of it, not waiting for him or Henrietta, and ran as fast as she could up to Evan’s room. Hopelessness surged through her when she found it empty, and she fell onto his bed in a mess of tears.

What had happened? It was going so well! Evan was finally starting to *see* her, to want to be with her as a husband should want to be with his wife. Her mind went back through the last forty-eight hours, reliving each ecstasy-filled moment. It had been too good to be true, and now, she undoubtedly understood that it was. After all, if her relationship with Evan could be undone so quickly, was it ever really real to begin with?

Wiping the fresh tears away from her eyes, Arabella began to pace around Evan's room, unsure what to do with the tense energy that had gathered inside of her. An hour passed then two, and her tear-washed eyes began to ache from being open for so long. She wanted to stay up and wait for Evan, to be able to talk to him as soon as he came home— but her body had been shaking and in fear for so long that fatigue was starting to take over.

Slowly, she began to let the pins out of her hair until her mess of curls had fallen to her shoulders. Then, she started the tedious process of undressing herself, removing everything until she was completely bare. When she was finished, she pulled one of Evan's shirts from his closet and pulled it on. As she situated herself under the covers of his bed, she felt his scent wrap around her. Fresh tears tracked down her cheeks and an ache swelled in her throat as she burrowed into the covers. Silently, as her tears began to soak her pillow, she prayed that Evan would return soon.



Evan could not breathe anymore, but he forced his legs to keep running as he felt the pain of his breaking heart explode in his chest. He had to leave the party, of course, but he had nowhere to go but the Garter estate. So, when he returned, only a few moments after Arabella's carriage had, he walked through the first grand house and strode right out to the gardens.

His practice of letting off steam was uncommon, at best, but running with his bare flesh against the wind was the only thing that could calm him down and allow him to think straight. It had been over an hour of him running, panting, and jogging so far, and the anger inside was still so great that it blurred his vision and made him see red. After all of the witty responses

and prideful denials about her alleged adultery. After seeing the proof of her alleged virginity— it was all a lie. And he had fallen for it.

His stomach rolled with disgust and fatigue, and he suddenly stopped running to wrench. The bitter taste of bile tainted his tongue as he tried to physically expel the pain inside of him. Of its own volition, Evan's mind began reeling back to the day of Anna's death. How he'd wept, how he'd run himself sick, just like he had now, and he collapsed onto the grass. His body, covered in sweat, trembled as he tried to catch his bearings and his breath.

As he willed his body to calm down, he forced his mind back to the evening's events. They'd had such a fun evening at the Bassetts' ball. They'd laughed, danced, and teased one another. They even seemed to put a stop to Arabella's ghastly rumors. Then *he'd* had the idea to go upstairs before being pulled away by some old acquaintances. Even still, he'd only sent Arabella upstairs for a brief moment before he joined her. He couldn't have made her wait for more than five minutes. Surely, that wasn't enough time for anything nefarious.

None of it made sense. Arabella had urged that someone else had been in the room, and maybe he should have checked. But between Leonard's nudity and his refusal to get dressed, and Evan's own consuming rage to beat his cousin to a pulp, he ran from the room without the smallest of searches.

Evan stayed outside for hours, eventually pulling his clothes back on when the sky began to move from a dark blue to a light gray. It was only when the birds started to wake and sing in the treetops that he finally found the strength to walk back into the house. As he took the stairs, his body attempted to will him toward Arabella's room. Even though he was livid, he still felt the urge to go check on her. Giving in to the urge, he

walked up the additional flight of stairs to her floor. He opened her door carefully, trying not to wake her, and felt his heart stop when he did not find her there.

He did, however, find Antony standing by her fireplace, a glass of whiskey in his hand. Evan looked toward the marble table across from his brother-in-law, and there sat a near-empty bottle. He wondered if he too had not been able to sleep. When Antony raised his eyes to Evan's, it was confirmed. His rakishly young face had deep, purple circles sinking beneath his eyes, and Evan could have sworn he saw a shock of gray hair by his temple that had not been there the day before.

“She is not here,” Antony announced, slurring slightly as he looked down at his drink.

“That is apparent,” Evan replied curtly, walking toward the table. In his mind, Evan saw a flash of Arabella wrapped tightly in Leonard's arms, his mouth clamped down hard on hers. Anger flashed through him so hot that for a moment he saw red. Had Arabella gone to Leonard last night? Is that why she was not here?

Needing a drink of his own, Evan turned over the upside-down, clean glass, and filled it with what was left of the whiskey. It was down in two swallows, and he brought the glass upside onto the table with a hard knock. Morning be damned. The liquor burned hot for an instant then a delightfully, tingling numbness came over him.

“Wherever do you think she may be?” He tried to ask the question as nonchalantly as possible, but even he could detect the hostility in his voice. Evan looked to Antony, who had

looked completely unaware, and watched him give a simple shrug as he struggled to balance.

“Who knows? I am afraid I was a little too rough on her during the carriage ride home,” Antony confessed, guilt aging his face a good ten years. He shook his head wearily.

“It just does not make sense, Evan!” Antony groaned, leaning forward to rest his head on his forearm, which was leaning on the giant marble hearth. His inebriated state made his steps falter, and he nearly fell into the flames of the fire below. With cat-like reflexes, Evan was out of his seat, arms out, and pulled his drunken brother-in-law back to safety. Antony stumbled into his arms for a brief second then righted himself.

“Thank you for that,” Antony mumbled, running a hand through his mussed hair once he was standing on his own again. “That was quite a close call.”

“Indeed, it was,” Evan murmured, taking his brother-in-law by the arm. “Come, sit down with me. I will have Simon bring us some coffee, and you can tell me what Arabella said to you while we wait for her.”

As Antony murmured a jumble of words that Evan assumed was an agreement, he walked to the door to get Simon. As he opened it, Evan came chest to chest with Arabella, who was walking with ample speed into her room as he was walking out of it. Immediately, she lost her balance as she walked into his taller frame, and his arms shot out to catch her before she was off her feet.

Arabella's startled eyes looked up at him as he pressed her into his chest to steady her, and he saw that they were red from crying. Evan felt a lump form in his throat as his eyes trailed down, and he saw that she was wearing a man's shirt. *His shirt*. Relief flooded through him, followed by a hot flash of desire as he realized she had slept in his room. In his bed. For a moment, he just stood there, appreciating the fact that she had not been with Leonard, and let himself look at her.

She looked dreadfully tired, her blue eyes soft and watery from tears, surrounded by dark bags that made her usual rosy cheeks look pale and sunken in. Her lips, usually so plump and dewy, were drawn thin, and a purplish-red bruise showed between them every time she spoke. Another picture from last night streaked through his mind, and he slowly let her go. It was only then that Evan saw that her handmaid was right behind her, holding Arabella's dress and silently trying to blend into the wall.

Disappointment flashed through Arabella's eyes as he released her, but instead of speaking, she slowly pulled her bottom lip into her mouth, nibbled on it, and then drew her top lip in as well to worry them both together. She looked up at him as if she wanted to say something but would not. At that moment, he craved for the Arabella that had bested him at wordplay when he first arrived. He wanted her to speak up and put him in his place. To tell him that he had nothing to worry about. Though he had not been able to hear her last night, he certainly was now.

"Arabella? Is that you?" From inside her room, they both heard Antony implore for her presence, and the moment between them passed. Arabella looked as if she was being torn apart but then sighed and walked past Evan into the room.

“Yes, brother,” she replied softly. She stopped just inside and turned back to Evan. “Were you waiting for me?” she asked, her voice hopeful. Unable to fight the urge to put her at ease, Evan nodded. Her eyes got wide, and she looked almost scared again.

“Do not go,” she whispered. “Please, come back in.”

Evan nodded curtly, reigning his emotions in, and turned away to speak to Simon.

“There you are,” he said when he spotted Simon chatting quietly with Arabella’s handmaid. Simon quit speaking to her immediately and hurried over to Evan with a look of concern on his face.

“Your Grace, I must tell you something,” he implored, his voice urgent, “about your grandmother.”

“Unless it is that she is on her deathbed it can wait,” Evan snapped, cutting Simon off. “For now, get the three of us a tray of coffee and cakes, would you?”

Simon looked as if he was about to insist on something further, but when Evan glared at him, he immediately snapped his mouth shut, bowed respectfully, and left to do as he was told.

Chapter Eighteen



In Arabella's quarters, Evan and Antony waited patiently and quietly as she went to her changing room to don a proper dressing gown. In the meantime, Simon delivered their small breakfast. The moment she stepped back into her general quarters, however, Evan could hold his tongue no longer.

"What happened last night, Arabella?" he asked. Unable to take sitting any longer, he stood and strode over to the fireplace, his fist connecting harshly with the marble.

Arabella gathered her strength as she felt the pointed stares of her brother and husband and once more recalled the details of last night's horrific events. When she finished, she also repeated that Leonard had never once acted so brazenly or forcefully with her before.

"Why do you defend him?" Evan demanded, looking at her in irritation.

"*Him?*" Arabella scoffed, sounding more like herself. "I am defending myself. I am telling you, he has never made me afraid to be alone with him before. This is a great offense to me, and that trust is now destroyed!"

Evan spared a glance over to Antony, who was slowly sobering up, and Evan saw he was giving him a “she’s got a point” look. Grinding his jaw, Evan took a deep breath and willed himself to be calm.

“Apologies,” he said in an even-tempered tone.

Evan’s eyes wandered over to her lip, where he once more saw the bruise. Anger burned through the thin wall of calm he had just built, and he clenched his fists repeatedly. “Leonard did that to you?” he asked, his voice more grating.

Arabella looked once more as if she were about to weep and nodded. He watched her fingers twitch at her side as if she thought of covering the bruise and then chose against it. What suspicions he had towards her faded completely then, and he felt a strange calm take over him.

“Stop,” Antony said, standing up suddenly. He wobbled on his feet as he stood, and both Arabella and Evan moved to be ready to catch him.

“I am fine,” he assured them, after regaining his bearings, “but I must implore a break. I am happy to see you safe, and to hear the two of you discussing it properly, but I must get some sleep before the papers hit in a few hours. Please, let us discuss how to deal with Leonard later.”

Evan glanced from Antony to Arabella, who looked at him as if she were waiting for him to answer first.

“I am amenable to that,” he agreed resignedly, feeling the extent of his exhaustion.

Antony nodded and began to walk toward the door. Just before he was about to reach for the knob, he turned around, walked back to Arabella, and pulled her into a tight embrace.

“I am sorry, Arabella,” he said emphatically, holding her close, “for everything that has happened and for everything that may be about to happen.”

Arabella felt more tears well in her eyes as she hugged her older brother back, already having forgiven him.

“Thank you, brother. I love you so much.”

Antony kissed her on the cheek tenderly, brushing a tear from her cheek with his thumb before he backed away.

“And I love you, darling. Get some rest. We will figure out how to deal with this when we get up.”

Antony nodded once more toward Evan then took his leave. Once alone, Evan looked over at Arabella. Her tears were still glistening in her eyes, making the protective nature in him want to rise up and comfort her.

“I suppose I should go,” Evan suggested, taking a step toward the door. “Your brother is right. We can figure out our next move after the papers come out.”

“Don’t,” Arabella implored quickly, walking closer to him. “I need to know, Evan. Where does this leave us? You believe me when I tell you I am innocent in this...don’t you?”

Evan swallowed a lump of confusion as he looked down at Arabella. He wanted so badly to wrap his arms around her that his fingertips ached. Stubbornly, he shoved them into his pockets and averted his eyes.

“It’s not that I do not believe you,” he replied, saying his words slowly as if not sure how to put them in the right order. “It is just such a mire to navigate at the moment. There are things that need to be put in order, and I do not have the means to do so.”

As he said it, he knew it was true. His mind was drawing blanks, going crisscross even, and all he wanted to do was sink down into Arabella’s bed with her and go to sleep.

“If what you say is true, then stay, and sleep next to me,” Arabella replied quickly as if reading his thoughts. Despite his unsure feelings about her, Evan could not deny how strongly his body reacted when she said such words so urgently. Every muscle tightened, every particle of him came alive.

“Where is my shirt?” he asked, taking on a commanding tone. Arabella’s breath hitched as she looked back at him with hopeful eyes.

“Just in my dressing room,” she replied quickly.

“Go get it,” he commanded before she could finish her sentence. Without a word, Arabella visibly swallowed and went to obey his command. She came back only a moment later, presenting him with the garment.

He stepped away from her, going to her bed, so he could sit and look at her.

“Now, put it on.” His tone had taken on a feral edge as if daring her to disobey.

Keeping her eyes on him, Arabella slowly lowered the shoulders of her dressing gown and began to let it fall to the floor. Evan’s cock stirred when he saw her in her natural beauty with no strip of clothing touching her at all. Then, a primal satisfaction took over him as she reached up over her head and pulled his shirt down over her. Since she was so short, it fell adorably to her knees, and the parted neck came all the way down to her navel so that the fabric revealed the enticing swell of her breasts.

His body was beyond tired, but even still, he felt his desire stir deeper, begging him to give in to the beauty that stood before him. Silently, he held out his hand as he dragged his eyes back to hers. Her eyes shone back at him with questions, but she took his hand and let him pull her onto the bed with him.

Arabella moaned softly as she felt Evan’s arms encompass her as they lay down. His bigger, more muscular frame wrapped tightly around her back as they nuzzled into the pillows and blankets. In her throat, she felt the itch to keep talking, to try and discover how Evan felt about this all. She was in love with him, of that much she was certain. Even if behind that love was a growing wall of fear that she was about to lose him all over again.

Pleasure and relaxation wound their tendrils around Arabella's body as she felt Evan press her closer to him. Beneath his shirt, her nipples hardened as she felt his lips press hotly against the back of her neck, and when his teeth scraped gently against her shoulder, she felt herself shiver.

Turning in his arms, Arabella moved to face him. His handsome face looked utterly exhausted as he tiredly stared back at her. There was so much feeling in his eyes. Pain, fear, exhaustion, and despite all of that— *desire*. A sense of strange urgency came over Arabella as she looked into his eyes, and a small, strangled cry suddenly poured from her lips. Immediately, Evan's grip tightened on her as if he too felt the same type of urgency.

No words were spoken as Evan brought his lips down on hers, and they began to silently and desperately rip at Evan's clothes. Both of them dragged the fabric borders away from his body with an equally understood need, and when it was Arabella's turn, Evan had the shirt flung off her in seconds. He rolled Arabella onto her back, pinning her against the mattress with his hips, and sunk his rigid cock into her warm, wet folds.

"Evan," Arabella moaned, his name coming out in a strangled cry of desperate pleasure as her arms snapped tightly around his back. He groaned heavily in her ear as they began to make love, but Evan said nothing. Instead, his focus poured into the connection of their bodies.

In the last few days, their lovemaking had been spirited, to say the least. But this was not at all like that. A cloak of impending sadness hung around them as they slowly began to move with one another, their moans taking on a soft, pleading tone with each stroke.

Arabella felt tears prick at her eyes as she felt herself near her orgasm and had to bite her bottom lip when she felt the ecstasy roll throughout her entire body. Evan's grip on her tightened as she came, and he moaned her name as his lips came down on hers in a possessive kiss. His hips began to pick up the tempo, his cock plunging deeper into her with every movement until he, too, reached his orgasm.

Evan's grip had been tight on her before, but when he felt his release, Arabella was suddenly pinned against his chest with a fierceness that almost robbed her of her breath. Above her, Evan groaned into her ear as his entire body trembled from his intense release. She felt every little shiver move from his body into hers, and she clamped her legs tightly around his so that he couldn't move.

Exhausted, and— in at least one way— satisfied after a hellish evening, the two of them eventually loosened their grip on one another just enough so that they could shift into a more comfortable sleeping position. As before, Evan curled his frame tightly around Arabella's back, his arm caging her tightly to his waist in a direct display of possession. In return, Arabella's free arm was clamped tightly around his, their fingers laced tightly together at her chest.

Despite her exhaustion, Arabella fought to stay awake as she listened to Evan's breathing slow to a more even tempo. She wanted to be able to feel him— take him in for just a little bit longer. If she was going to lose him when they woke up, she would at least make sure that she had one final good memory of them. Eventually, however, her body could no longer fight sleep, and Arabella sank into a slumber as deeply as she sank into Evan's arms.



For a brief moment as Evan woke up, he did not recall the events of the night before. Instead, he only took on the feel of Arabella's warm, supple body pressed tightly against his and the rhythm of her soft, deep breaths as she slumbered in his arms. Her dark curls had been swept up into the pillows, revealing the delicate curve of her neck that tapered perfectly into her delicate shoulder and collarbone.

He could feel her soft, warm skin beneath his much rougher hands, and they ached to stroke her until she was awake. Until a hot blush rose from her breasts and stained her cheeks; until her thick, dark lashes suddenly flew up in shocked arousal. She would moan his name. It would be the first word she would speak today.

But then, as the memories of Leonard's naked body pressed tightly to his wife's flooded his mind, his body grew cold, and he drew his hands away from her as he silently left the bed. Pain laced through his heart as Arabella let out a soft moan of protest and burrowed deeper into the covers to make up for his absence. He did not want to hurt her. But he could not do this again.

It was crashing down. All of it. Every single horrible moment of his life was suddenly flashing before him— especially the sordid events of last night. Evan dressed with incredible speed and snuck quietly out of Arabella's room. As he had hoped, he found Simon standing dutifully by.

“What time is it?” Evan demanded in a hushed whisper as he approached. Simon held up a silver tray with a cup of coffee, a plate of fatty bacon, and the morning papers.

“Just after nine, Your Grace,” Simon replied. “The papers *just* arrived.” Evan downed the coffee thirstily and tore off a piece of the bacon with his teeth as he picked up the paper. Anxiously, he scanned down the news columns, his eyes looking for any resemblance to their names. His heart skipped a beat when he saw Leonard’s name suddenly jump up at him, and he began to read slower.

Lord Leonard Garter was seen by many parading into the Bassetts’ ballroom with nary on but his breeches and an opened shirt last evening. It only took a mere glance and sniff in the Lord’s direction to identify that the man was well into his cups and had no etiquette left to offer. He was removed, respectfully, by the Bassetts’ guards only moments before Her Majesty, the Queen’s, arrival.

Evan read further down, looking to see if any other details were shared. He had completely forgotten that the Queen had arranged an appearance, thanks to the drama that had unfolded. Evan breathed in a heavy sigh of relief as the story soon ended with no mention of their names. On the next page, however, there was a small excerpt that stated *the Duke of Lancaster was seen for the first time in London for several years at the Bassett Ball, surrounded by fellow gentlemen eager to learn his secrets of commerce. More so exciting was seeing his wife, the Duchess of Lancaster, looking so happy to be close to his side. Such radiance from both of them makes this author doubt if any such rumors of the Duchess’ alleged unfaithful past were ever true.*

“You look relieved, Your Grace,” Simon noted as Evan reread the last paragraph over again, this time more slowly.

“Indeed. It seems there are only praises to be written about us. Thankfully, Leonard’s name and ours were in two separate stories.”

A look of relief spread over Simon’s face, and he nodded in a satisfactory fashion.

“Very good, Your Grace,” Simon replied happily. His eyes shone brightly for a moment, then his gaze took on a more somber expression. “Now that is settled, I was hoping I could have a moment to speak with you. Regarding the Dowager.”

“Ah, yes,” Evan replied, motioning for Evan to follow him as he headed toward his quarters, “I remember you said something about that earlier. What is it?”

“Well, Your Grace, last night I—”

Simon’s words froze in the air as Evan opened his bedroom door, and they both saw the Dowager sitting in the small gathering area.

“Grandmother,” Evan stated, looking at her, startled, “what are you doing here?”

The Dowager shot a deadly look toward Simon, and he quickly left the room without saying another word. When the door was shut behind him, her sharp eyes turned soft, and she looked at her grandson as if wounded.

“It has been nearly two days since we’ve even talked or seen each other. Please tell me that this absence of yours has led to you gaining control over your wife?” she asked, her tone sending shards of guilt flying into him.

“Apologies, grandmother,” Evan replied sincerely, resting his fingertips against one another in prayer for patience. “It has been an intense few days and most assuredly, an even more intense evening.”

“I should say so,” Gloria agreed, nodding her head curtly. “I have already heard the rumors of Leonard’s *disgusting* performance last night. Thank heaven he chose to act a fool *before* the Queen’s arrival and not during. Now, we have a whole new mess to clean up on top of Arabella’s.”

The Dowager gave him a look of disapproval. “Do not think I did not hear about how you both had your hands so brazenly all over each other. And that *kiss*. I swear Leonard’s lewdness is rubbing off on you.”

“I should say *not*,” Evan snapped, struggling to control his tone. “If I want to kiss my wife, I will kiss my wife. Whether it be in the privacy of our quarters or in front of the King and Queen themselves.”

“Evan!” Gloria gasped, offended by his sudden brusqueness.

“And as for Leonard,” he continued, his anger running unchecked, “do not *dare* lump me in with the same lot as him. I would never do the things he has done. *Ever*. We are not helping him with anything. Do you understand? If you are

questioned about him from henceforth, simply reply with the utmost sympathy that the poor fool is beyond help.”

“Evan,” Gloria repeated, this time her voice laced with concern, “what has happened? Have rumors been deemed true? Have Arabella and Leonard been having an affair?”

What little patience Evan had left suddenly vanished. He’d found no traces of truth to the rumors at all, and from what he could fathom, they were spread by someone who liked to see others ruined. Like Leonard could have last night.

“I cannot take this London life anymore,” Evan said in way of answer, his voice taking on a commanding tone.

“We are leaving by the end of the month. I made some very promising appointments over the next few days, and I must see them out. After that, we are going back to Lancaster and not coming back unless the circumstances are *dire*.”

“And what of Arabella?” the Duchess asked, not exactly arguing his demands. “Shall she travel with us or remain here?”

Gloria watched as something dark passed over her grandson, making his fists tighten and his whole body tremble. Then, in a deep, unfeeling voice, he said, “It will be as it has always been. I know you want heirs, grandmother, and I understand that is the real reason you brought me here. But I will not have them.”

Gloria's mouth dropped open as she rose to her feet, leaning on her cane.

"You cannot be serious, Evan," she said gravely. "The Lancaster name must carry on!"

"I will not discuss this with you further," Evan warned, going toward the door to open it. "I have spoken my piece, and you will honor it. I will not stop you from making your own choice on whether you stay or go, but I *will* be returning to Lancaster, one way or another."

Gloria held her head high as she made her way across Evan's room and toward the door.

"After everything your grandfather and I have done to present you with this opportunity," she said icily, approaching him. "After the trouble your past mistakes have caused. This is how you talk to me?"

Evan lowered his eyes as he felt an oppressive blackness press down upon him. He knew his grandparents had blamed him for Anna's death. After all, if he had not gotten her pregnant, she would have never died in early childbirth. They had gone to great lengths to cover up his mistake, then loss, and procure him a wife. Having children was supposed to be repayment for these sacrifices they made for him— but now, he could not deliver.

"I am sorry, grandmother," he apologized, his tone resigned as he looked back up into her eyes. "But my decisions are my own, and I will not change them."

Chapter Nineteen



Arabella knew Evan was gone the moment she stirred awake, and a deep ache immediately began to bloom in her lower belly. Heartache pierced through her chest as she sat up and looked around wildly, soon confirming her fear.

Shards of light were coming in through the edge of the thick curtains, and she suddenly remembered the papers. Pulling her dressing gown around her tightly, Arabella hurried to her door to have Eliza fetch the papers.

“Arabella!” the Dowager greeted warmly, startling Arabella as she opened the door. Arabella blanched in embarrassment as her hands went to her dressing gown, and she took in Evan’s grandmother’s fine attire.

“Your Grace!” Arabella exclaimed in shocked apology, immediately curtseying to her. “I beg your forgiveness; I was not expecting you.” She tried to say the words calmly, but they came out jumbled and nervous. The Dowager gave her a condescending look before she pushed past Arabella and strode into her room.

Eliza came up behind the Dowager quickly, and relief flooded through Arabella as she saw she was not alone.

“What is going on?” Arabella whispered to her urgently. Eliza gave her a helpless, frightened look and shook her head.

“I do not know, Your Grace,” Eliza whispered back.

“Girl,” the Dowager called out, interrupting their hushed conversation. They both stilled and turned to the Matron.

“Yes, Your Grace?” Eliza replied politely, curtsying.

“Have one of the other servants prepare your Mistress some tea and vittles, would you? It is bad enough that she has slept this late; she must not make her day worse by skipping breakfast too.”

“Yes, Your Grace,” Eliza quickly agreed, moving to action.

“Wait,” the Dowager said sharply, making her and Arabella both freeze. “Do hurry. Your Mistress is in a *disrespectful* state of undress and needs to be properly attired with post-haste.”

Arabella felt the belittling power of the Dowager’s words as Eliza once more agreed and quickly fled the room. She wished desperately she could go with her, but Arabella knew she was stuck.

“I am deeply sorry for my state, Your Grace,” Arabella said emphatically, curtsying once more to Gloria. “It has been—well, a most complicated time.”

The Dowager let out a dry laugh as she rolled her wrinkle-set eyes.

“Yes, indeed it has,” the Dowager replied matter-of-factly, her eyes full of aristocratic judgment as she looked Arabella up and down.

Eliza returned a moment later, assuring them that a kitchen maid would be up shortly with their vittles.

“Very good,” the Dowager replied shortly. “Now, please, go get your Mistress dressed so that she may receive me like a proper Duchess should.”

“As you wish, Your Grace,” Eliza and Arabella replied in unison. The moment they were in Arabella’s dressing room, they moved erratically to get her into a suitable gown.

“Your Grace, if I may say something,” Eliza whispered as she laced up Arabella’s corset with swift movements of her fingers.

“Not now,” Arabella whispered curtly, balancing precariously on one foot while she lifted the other and began to pull up a stocking.

“Apologies, Your Grace, but it is about the Dowager,” Eliza insisted. She knotted the corset quickly and reached for the white and peach-swirled gown Arabella had quickly chosen.

“Then most *certainly* not now,” Arabella whispered in a threatening tone. “Could you imagine if she heard us? Now help me with my hair. Quick!”

Eliza obeyed, pressing her lips together tightly as she finished with the dress and moved on to Arabella’s hair. Within a few moments, they had it somewhat presentable, and after Arabella slipped into her satin shoes, they quickly exited the much smaller quarters.

“Ah! Much better,” Dowager Gloria Garter remarked, giving Arabella a look of approval. “Come, child, sit. A kitchen maid has just delivered breakfast, and I am sure you are famished.”

Her warm eyes turned cold as she turned to look at Eliza.

“You may go now. I wish to speak to Her Grace privately.” The Dowager’s voice was belittling, so much so that it shocked Arabella as she looked over at her handmaid. Suddenly, she wondered if she should have taken a moment to hear what Eliza had wanted to say.

“As you wish, Your Grace,” Eliza replied quickly as she curtsied low, once more leaving them alone.

“Well?” the Dowager asked, looking at Arabella calmly. “Are you going to take a seat or not?”

With stiff movements, Arabella walked to the table laden with food and tea and took a seat. She wanted desperately to be reading the papers or finding Evan, and it took all she could to pretend to be poised.

“Do you find me lacking in intelligence, child?” the Dowager asked, her tone sweet as she picked up her teacup.

Arabella looked over at her, stunned for a moment before she began to vehemently shake her head.

“No, Your Grace!” she exclaimed. “I could never.”

“Wonderful,” Gloria replied quickly, cutting off the chance for Arabella to say more. “And do you know why, of all of the eligible ladies of the *Ton*, it was you and your family that my late husband and I chose for His Grace in marriage?”

“I confess I do not,” Arabella said, after taking a moment to contemplate how to answer. Her heart was racing rapidly as she tried to figure out what the Dowager had heard or perhaps *read* about her. She once more sorely wished she could have had a chance to at least glance at the new papers before the Dowager paid her such a visit.

“But I do know that it was quite good favor for me indeed to be your choice, Your Grace,” she added quickly.

“Ah,” the Dowager said pleasantly, waving to Arabella to enjoy her tea. Instinctively, Arabella picked up her teacup.

“Honest and realistic. I like that,” Gloria mused. “It will serve you well. The reason we picked you, darling girl, was because of your family’s consistent devotion to propriety. Unlike most members of the *Ton*, your family did all they could to not be embroiled in scandal.”

Shame and heat spread up through Arabella. It was certain, she was sure. The Dowager had read the papers which no doubt held the awful story of what had occurred the night before. Her hands tightened around her cup anxiously, and she almost let out a cry when the delicate ceramic suddenly snapped. With her cheeks flaming red, she kept a tight grip on the broken piece, hoping to hide it.

“I agree, Your Grace, that my family has been devout when it comes to staying out of gossip... until me,” Arabella ventured, noting the tremble in her own voice, “but, I assure you, I am innocent of all charges, and it was never my intention to bring dishonor to your family or myself.”

“I’m sure you are, dear,” the Dowager replied, her voice so dry Arabella was sure that she did not mean it. She took another sip of her tea then sat it down gently.

“But after everything that has happened with my family, I cannot afford any more scandal.”

Arabella’s eyebrows flew up in surprise. Aside from the slurs about her in the gossip sheets, there had been no gossip or slurs regarding the Garter name— other than Evan’s grandfather was an incredibly harsh man when he had still held the title. Had there been others?

“I am not at all aware of what you are referring to, Your Grace,” Arabella urged.

The Dowager’s brow furrowed as she suddenly studied Arabella, her cold stare shooting straight into the younger

woman. Arabella felt as if her grandmother-in-law's stare was looking directly into her soul, searching it for a shred of falsehood.

"Very good then," Gloria replied finally, her tone much more pleasant now.

"Let us leave the past where it is," she continued before picking up a small triangle of jammed toast. "For now, I want to focus on the present and the future. Your husband has informed me this morning that we shall be leaving for Lancaster by the end of the month, and that you are not to be traveling with us."

Arabella's curiosity over the Dowager's last statement vanished as soon as the new information was presented. The end of the month was only two weeks away. That was almost no time at all. Suddenly, she felt a heavy pressure in her chest and found it difficult to breathe.

"When did His Grace make this announcement?" Arabella asked, struggling to put the words together.

The Dowager's haughty expression moved into one of annoyed vexation.

"Just this morning," she replied dryly. Arabella could hear the dissatisfaction in Gloria's voice, and it gave her a small slither of hope. Perhaps, like once before, the woman would be on the side of union not separation.

“Do you want to remain here?” Gloria added, gesturing around the room. “Alone in London with your hobbies and independence? I must confess I wouldn’t blame you. Even though I loved my husband, it wasn’t until he was gone that I truly began to experience what real happiness was. So, tell me. Is that what you want?”

Once more Arabella found herself stunned by the ever-changing topics that their conversation was undergoing. The Dowager’s confession regarding her husband had startled her, and she immediately felt an adverse reaction to being a widow. It was hard enough living so far apart from Evan, but to know that she would never see him again...it nearly made her cry. Instead of letting the tears track down her cheeks, however, she drew in a composing breath.

“My wish has always been to be by His Grace’s side, Your Grace,” Arabella answered with calm assurance. “And it will continue to be so for as long as I live. However, I understand I cannot demand my husband’s company, nor can I coerce him into bringing me with him.”

Gloria let out a loud, terse laugh that startled Arabella.

“What if you could?” she asked coyly, her old eyes glittering with mischief.

“I do not understand, Your Grace,” Arabella said slowly, feeling a sudden wave of discomfort wash over her.

“A child is a most unique bargaining tool, my dear granddaughter-in-law,” the Dowager went on in a calm, matter-of-fact tone. “It is amazing what the presence of one

can force on a parent upon their arrival. In fact, even in the most unusual of circumstances, the birth of a baby sets the parents' world on its side. What was always yes can suddenly become no, what was always no can suddenly become yes. Do you understand what I'm saying, darling girl?"

"I believe I do," Arabella said quietly, feeling at a loss, "but your grandson has spoken to me regarding the subject and he will not be moved in his opinion. He says children will not be a part of his life or mine."

The Dowager made a *tsking* sound as she shook her head, a strange smile on her face.

"That is an ultimatum my grandson is not allowed to make. Even as a Duke, he cannot run from the particular responsibility of passing on the Garter name. He wants to pass the duty down to his cousin, but I will not allow it. Especially after the awful things he did last night."

The Dowager paused for a moment, and Arabella felt the woman's gaze shift from mischievous to accusatory.

"I am not convinced that these rumors that have been printed about you are false, child, but I know of a certain way to make them stop. I heard about the *odious* display of affection you shared with your husband on the Bassetts' dance floor last evening. You've succeeded in showing the *Ton* that you're amorous toward one another. So, if there was soon an announcement of pregnancy, no one would question who it belongs to. It would cease your gossip immediately, give you the leverage you need to make Evan take you with him, and provide me a new generation of Garters."

Gloria smiled suddenly, so widely Arabella found it almost off-putting, and waved her arms over the table.

“Don’t you see how providing an heir can be an answer to all of your problems, my dear?” she asked cheerfully.

Arabella’s discomfort continued to grow as the Dowager continued to speak with enthusiasm about how much joy a baby would bring to all of them. It was practical and normal, yes, but also somehow *wrong*. In the back of her mind, Arabella began to see the manipulative and calculating behavior Leonard had once warned her about.

Chapter Twenty



Arabella had no time to recover from her conversation with the Dowager before Henrietta came bursting into her quarters. Although what Her Grace had said would be practical advice from all sorts of sensitive parties, Arabella felt very unsettled by it all. She wanted a child, yearned for one even, but there was something that whispered between the Dowager's words. Something much more sinister than the birth of a baby.

"Sister, have you seen the good news?" Henrietta crowed, holding up the morning's papers. Arabella's uneasiness faded as her need for answers overcame her, and she took the papers quickly.

"I have them circled for you," Henrietta noted, tapping on the paper. "I think you'll be quite happy."

Arabella scanned down the first article, her heart coming to an abrupt stop at reading Leonard's name. Thankfully, it restarted as soon as she finished and saw that no other names were attached to his scandal. Her eyes then shot up to the second, much smaller article, and she read the praise written for her and Evan.

“Thank God in Heaven,” Arabella breathed. A surge of relief came over her with so much force, she let her body drop and fall impolitely into a chair. She smiled widely as she read the articles again slower, thankful that last night’s *true* disaster had not reached society’s ears.

“Isn’t it wonderful?” Henrietta urged, gripping at her arm. “Now that we don’t have to worry about that, all we need to do is give Evan a few days to cool his temper, and all will be right again!”

At this, Arabella’s brief smile dropped, and she looked down at her body as she slowly straightened her posture.

“Actually, I’m afraid that’s not true,” she replied, feeling her heartache re-emerge. “You just missed the Dowager. She informed me that my husband will be leaving London without me in two weeks.”

“*Please*, darling, that’s plenty of time,” Henrietta countered, her voice dropping to a sultry tone. “Do the right things in bed, and any man will change his mind about being so cross.” She leaned forward, smiling wickedly as she winked. “Trust me, I know.”

Arabella chuckled in exasperation as she leaned her head back and rubbed her forehead.

“Please, Henrietta, I do not know what it is you do to make my brother so madly in love with you. Besides, I know my expertise in the act of lovemaking is quite novice compared to yours, but the Duke and I already do the right things to each other in bed. That part is...” she sighed, feeling a mixture of

yearning and arousal as she thought to earlier that morning, “...*divine*.”

Taking in her sister-in-law’s tense emotions, Henrietta reached out and turned Arabella’s cheek so that they were meeting one another’s eyes.

“My apologies if my earlier tone made you feel I am taking this lightly,” Henrietta said sincerely, “but what I’m saying is no jest. Truly, when a man feels his every desire can be fulfilled by his wife, she is all he wants. You don’t have to lose him, Arabella. At least not without trying.”

Arabella’s posture relaxed slowly as she accepted Henrietta’s apology. Then, just to be sure, she looked behind them toward the door to make sure it was closed.

“The Dowager is insisting I make Evan stay by having a child,” she said, her tone still low despite their privacy.

Henrietta gave her an inquisitive look and shrugged her shoulders. “So? It is true, quite practical, and it is also something you want. Seduce him before he leaves and see that he gives you one.”

“I know,” Arabella sighed, feeling exasperated, “but what if we succeed, and he gets so upset that I’ve had one that he alienates me again? What if instead of sending me back to London, he sends us to his home in the country? It’s so much more isolated out there when it’s not the summer season. I would be all alone.”

Henrietta shook her head and wrapped Arabella in a hug.

“No, you wouldn’t,” she assured Arabella, squeezing her tightly. “Antony and I would follow you wherever you would go. And we are to have children soon, so your child would have their cousin to play with.”

She pulled away, lifted Arabella’s chin up, and gave her a sincere smile. “But that will not happen, darling. Do you know why? Because we can fix this. You just need to listen to me. Trust me, if you take my advice for the boudoir, you will have the Duke *begging* you to follow him wherever he may need to go.”

Arabella groaned. “I love you, darling, but sometimes you are absolutely vulgar.”

“I’m revolutionary, not vulgar,” Henrietta replied matter-of-factly, before moving back to the matter at hand, “but honestly, Arabella. You really shouldn’t worry. Antony, myself, and practically the entire *Ton* saw how the two of you looked at each other last night. The way Evan looks at you? He is becoming infatuated. You are all that he wants. And everything he is afraid of losing. I know because that is the way your brother looks at me.”

Arabella felt a mixture of emotions at Henrietta’s abrupt but also compassionate words. Relief. Hope. *Love*. And acceptance. She got up from her chair, pulled Henrietta out of hers, and hugged her tightly.

“Antony certainly does look at you like that, my love,” Arabella agreed, pulling away gently, “and thank you, greatly,

for your perspective and your advice. Perhaps you are right. I maybe could use some education in the art of passion.”

Henrietta squealed in delight as she clapped her hands then looped her arm around Arabella’s.

“Wonderful! But let us stroll through the gardens as we chat. Antony and Evan are off doing something with the horses anyway, and you need a break from this stuffy room.”



“You look like hell,” Evan chuckled, shaking his head as he looked over at Antony.

“I feel even worse,” Antony murmured, rubbing the back of his head as they exited the stables.

“I shall have Simon make you his hangover cure,” Evan offered, a small smile spreading across his face as Antony groaned when the sunlight hit his eyes.

“Make haste if you please,” Antony encouraged as they walked under the shade of the nearby willow tree. The servants had set up two chairs and a table under the cool shadows, and Antony dropped himself heavily into one of them.

“You must feel quite relieved, though,” Antony continued after Evan gave Simon his orders. “The papers read nothing but your praises.”

“No doubt,” Evan agreed begrudgingly, “since I rose this morning, I’ve received three more correspondences from other gentlemen. They’re all inquiring about meetings of business and finance. My next two weeks will be tight, but hopefully, I can get them all in before I take my leave.”

Antony groaned and rolled his eyes.

“We are back to this again?” he asked in a droll tone. “All is well now!”

“Yes,” Evan agreed, his voice low, “*for now.*” Not wanting to discuss it any further, he moved on to a different topic. “Have you heard anything from Leonard?”

Antony made a noise of disgust and gave his brother-in-law a look of displeasure.

“No. And if I’m honest, I’m quite relieved about that. I want to wring his neck with my bare hands. He’s indeed been acting more oddly and boldly as of late, but last night was entirely out of bounds. I fear he may have lost his mind, but at the moment, I’m too angry to be truly concerned.”

“Agreed,” Evan replied dryly.

“So if you agree that his actions were incorrigible, and Arabella was innocent, why are you leaving?” Antony asked.

Evan cursed under his breath and gave Antony an annoyed look.

“Me leaving is not a punishment for her,” he replied, his tone matching the look on his face. “It is just a matter of fact. I have business to attend to. Business that I’m accustomed to handling alone.”

Chapter Twenty-One



Relief flooded through Arabella when she and Henrietta walked into the greenhouse. To her surprise, Evan was already there, studying one of the brightly colored parrots that had landed on his finger. As if sensing her, he turned his attention away from the bird and smiled at her.

“Good evening,” she greeted him warmly, both she and Henrietta curtsying politely.

“Good evening, ladies,” he greeted in return, bowing slightly. His eyes shifted from Arabella’s over to Henrietta’s. “I believe, dear lady, that your husband is seeking your attention,” he informed her in a jovial but sincere voice. Henrietta smiled warmly and sighed.

“Of course, he is,” she replied, giggling. “Whatever would he do without me?” Henrietta curtsyed to Evan once more.

Henrietta reached out to lay a supportive hand on Arabella’s shoulder. “Remember what we discussed, darling,” she whispered, giving her a wink.

Arabella felt a small blush as Henrietta walked away quickly, leaving the two of them alone. The moment they heard the door close, they stepped closer to one another.

“I apologize for leaving this morning,” Evan replied sincerely, “but I could not rest long. We are in luck though. The papers have not said a word.”

“So I have heard,” Arabella replied, feeling a wave of comfort fall over her as she heard Evan’s kind tone. She was not sure what type of mood she would find Evan in and was relieved by their gentle conversation thus far. “It truly is good fortune,” she agreed, looking at him eagerly.

A small, apologetic smile broke across his face, and he lifted his hand so the parrot would take flight. Once it did, he held his free hand out to her. Arabella took it willingly, and he brought her closer so he could kiss her knuckles softly.

“I apologize for last night. For making you go upstairs alone. For letting my anger and surprise overcome me. For making you feel as if any part was your fault. I know it was not. It was all just so...jarring.” He shook his head, a look of frustration passing over his handsome face only a moment before his kind smile returned.

Arabella felt a surge of relief as Evan said this, and she felt herself relax. Perhaps all would be well after all. She gave him an understanding smile and let go of his hand to wave him toward the table.

“I accept your apology, Your Grace,” she replied warmly, taking a seat, “and I agree. But I am a Duchess and a grown

woman, and I understand some things should not be obsessed over. Our relationship is more important than someone's improper acts."

Arabella thought back to the conversation she'd just had with Henrietta. She'd not only explained some fascinating new techniques to try in the bedroom but also advised wisdom in choosing which battles to give up on. And if Evan was willing to let this particular one go then so was she.

Evan seemed pleasantly surprised to hear her mature response and took a seat beside her.

"I am happy to hear it," he replied, wondering if she'd heard about his decision to leave. If she had, she had yet to bring it up. Surely, she would have if she knew.

"I thought you would be," Arabella replied happily, "and in the fashion of moving on, I was hoping that you would have dinner with me again tonight. Your manservant has told me of your favorite dishes, and the cook is already preparing them."

"That is most kind of you," Evan replied, finding himself smiling. Arabella smiled back but in a way that sent a shock of arousal through him.

"Then perhaps, dear husband, afterward, we could spend some time discussing some more— *intimate* conversations."

Heat spread through Evan as he rose from his chair and swept Arabella into his arms. He was thankful she hadn't brought up any news of his departure. It wasn't that he didn't want to tell

her— just not yet. After such a terrible evening the day before, they both needed a moment of peace.



Once Evan took his leave, Arabella took a moment to gather her thoughts. Evan genuinely seemed to believe her about last night. And she also noticed that he hadn't mentioned any plans of leaving. Perhaps all was turning around, and with Henrietta's advice, she could succeed in staying by her husband's side.

"Your Grace?" Eliza asked, her voice coming through the foliage. Arabella startled then chuckled dryly as she saw her handmaid appear.

"Goodness, Eliza, you gave me a fright," Arabella chuckled, fanning herself.

Eliza curtsied. "My apologies, Your Grace, I had no such intent. But seeing as you rarely have a moment alone these days, I was hoping to speak with you."

Remembering Eliza had been trying to tell her something earlier in her dressing quarters, Arabella nodded.

"Of course," she agreed. "Something to do with the Dowager of Lancaster, you had said?"

Eliza nodded and came forward a few more steps.

“Yes, Your Grace,” she agreed. Timidly, Eliza began to tell Arabella about the Dowager’s secret visit to her chambers, and how, under the presumption of not being seen, she had begun to shuffle through Arabella’s things. As Eliza told the tale, Arabella felt a chill creep up her spine. According to her handmaid, Evan’s grandmother had not only let herself into Arabella’s private rooms but searched rather thoroughly, pulling out drawers, lifting up the bedding, and even going under the bed and pulling out Arabella’s keepsake boxes.

“I don’t understand,” Arabella replied, shaking her head. “Why would she do that?” Eliza looked at her helplessly. “It’s all right, Eliza, you can tell me,” Arabella promised, leaning forward. “I need to know.”

“I am not sure, Your Grace, but she was mumbling a few things. About your...reputation. Your inability to be a proper Duchess. About you not being worthy.”

Embarrassment colored Arabella’s cheeks as she heard this, and she thought back earlier to her conversation with the Dowager— particularly, about how uncomfortable it made her feel. Now, she was beginning to wonder if there was something more to it.

“You haven’t shared this with anyone else have you?” Arabella asked Eliza, looking her directly in the eyes. Eliza immediately shook her head no but then her youthful cheeks took on a red tinge of their own.

“I swear on my life and my mother’s, Your Grace, I have not spoken of this to anyone, but...” Eliza’s face grew even redder, and she looked genuinely afraid.

“Tell me, Eliza,” Arabella insisted, her anxiety growing.

“Your Grace, I was with a man!” Eliza’s confession came out in a rush, and fat tears started to roll down her face.

Arabella looked at her flabbergasted.

“In my quarters?” she asked, appalled. “Who was it? Eliza, how could you?”

“I know, Your Grace, I am so sorry,” she sobbed, “I did not intend to. He is a good man, and we were not going to terry long. But then the Dowager came in, and we panicked, so we hid in your dressing quarters. I swear to you, Simon and I would never—”

“*Simon?*” Arabella asked, cutting her off. Eliza lowered her head and nodded.

“Yes, Your Grace,” she confessed. “He was only coming to wish me goodnight before I cleaned your chambers and retired for the evening. I swear it.”

For a moment, Arabella was at a loss for words. She was beyond shocked that her handmaid, a woman she had grown to trust, had let a man inside her quarters. However, if it were any man, she was at least thankful it was Simon. After spending the last couple of weeks around him, she found the manservant to be wise, deeply respectful, and incredibly loyal to Evan. She knew he would never speak to anyone about what he might have seen or heard, especially when it came to his master.

Taking a steadying breath, Arabella began to put her thoughts in order.

“Eliza, this was incredibly brave of you to come forward and tell me all of this,” she said kindly. Slowly, the handmaid raised her watery eyes to her mistress. “I must admit I am not thrilled that Simon came to visit you in *my* quarters, but, if it had to be anyone— well, at least it was someone loyal to the Duke. I thank you for letting me know about the Dowager’s secret visit, and I will take it all into consideration.”

With a shaky breath of relief, Eliza curtsied again. “Thank you, Your Grace,” she replied emphatically. “I assure you that it will *never* happen again.”

“I’m sure that it won’t,” Arabella agreed. “So, you and Simon fancy one another?”

Eliza’s cheeks turned red once more, but this time for a completely different reason. A small smile tugged at her lips, and Arabella knew the girl was smitten. As she watched her reaction, she felt a small burst of happiness for her handmaid.

“He is most handsome, Your Grace, and one of the most well-mannered and elegant men of my station that I have ever met,” Eliza confessed. She paused for a moment as if not sure if she should say what was on her mind next. “I hope, Your Grace, for your heart and mine, that the Duke will stay in London.”

Arabella smiled sadly at her handmaiden as her mind churned with all of the new information.

“Me too, Eliza,” she replied softly, “me too.”

Chapter Twenty-Two



As promised, Arabella had gone to the trouble of having the cook prepare all of his favorite dishes: roasted fowl with a savory brown sauce, watercress and grilled leeks, fish stew, roasted potatoes with butter and parsley, and seasoned mushrooms. Sprinkled between the main dishes were also plates of cheeses, olives, and other small nibbles. It looked like a delightfully decadent meal placed attractively on his table and was offset with candles and three decanters of assorted wine.

Evan's mouth watered as he saw it all and realized that it had been well over a day since he'd eaten anything of substance. His eyes swept appreciatively from the table to Arabella. Though she had looked lovely earlier, she was absolutely radiant now. She'd pinned her long curls away from her face but had let the rest of her hair fall down the back of her dark red dress in a cascade of chocolate.

"You have outdone yourself," he praised as she came to take his hands. Arabella smiled at him in an alluring manner and led him to his seat.

"I have had some fascinating conversations today, dear husband," she explained. "They provided some most illuminating information that I was eager to put to the test.

Arabella sat him down in his chair, pushing at his chest lightly as he went down. Once settled, she shifted her skirts and sat in his lap, careful to balance herself on his thighs.

She picked up his wine glass, having dismissed the servants for privacy, and filled it before bringing it to his lips. Evan's eyes blazed with intrigue as he parted his mouth and allowed her to let the wine trickle through. It tasted sweet and rich as it hit his tongue, and he wondered what she was up to.

“While I am not by any means against this particular dining method, my dear, I am new to this manner of eating,” he confessed as Arabella gently pulled the cup away.

Arabella shrugged, smiling coyly as she readied his first bite on his fork.

“As am I, dear husband, but I must admit, I've been most interested in trying it since learning about it,” she replied.

“Well, I wouldn't dare impede on your passion for such education,” Evan murmured before accepting his first bite. Once he swallowed, Arabella brought her lips to his softly, sweetly caressing over his before preparing him another bite.

And thus, the scintillating pattern continued with Arabella giving him sweet kisses between every bite and every sip of wine until he was full. When he declared he was finished, Arabella sat the fork down and began to loosen his cravat. Evan's hands moved to her waist as she worked the small piece of attire away from his neck. When she finished, she

brought her lips to him again for a longer, deeper kiss, before moving down to his naked throat.

Desire streaked through him as Arabella's kisses slowly made their way down his torso, her swift fingers loosening the buttons of his shirt as her teeth and tongue wreaked havoc on his sizzling, sensitive flesh. His breath hitched ruggedly when she finished with his shirt, and she moved to her knees in front of him so that she could begin to untie his breeches. Unable to move his eyes away from her, he watched, fascinated as she freed his already rigid, aching member free.

A deep groan of pleasure left his throat when she locked her eyes with his eyes and flicked her tongue against the head of his member. Her blue eyes were glittering with pleasure at his reaction, and she slowly lowered her mouth down one agonizing inch at a time until he was entirely in her mouth. From this angle, he had the perfect view of her breasts, and he deeply enjoyed the way they swelled high when she took a deep breath through her nose.

Instead of moving him in and out like she had a few days ago, she suckled on him. Sensually, she began to glide her tongue over the back of his member while her lips were wrapped securely around his girth. Unable to hold back the pleasure of her technique, Evan's eyes rolled back as he leaned his head back against the high back of his chair.

Needing to touch her, Evan's hands released their grip from the arms of the chair and moved into her silky curls. He did his best to let her control the rhythm of her suckling, but soon, he found himself guiding her; using his hold on her hair. His pleasure was only amplified when Arabella went along with this willingly and allowed him to take control.

When he thought for sure he would burst from the pleasure, he slowly pulled her up, using the gentlest of force, so he could drag her once more into his lap. The moment she was in his arms, Evan's lips captured hers, making Arabella moan deeply. As they kissed, his hands roamed from her waist and down over her skirts. When he finally got to their hems, he lifted them up greedily. A growl of surprise and satisfaction ripped from his throat when his fingertips came in contact with her bare flesh.

Beneath her gorgeous gown, she wasn't wearing a stitch of anything. Not a stocking nor chemise nor the usual undergarments of any kind. She'd also rubbed a sweet oil into her skin which made her feel like butter in his hands. Eager to feel her, his hands traveled up her thighs where he gripped her possessively.

Suddenly, he broke the kiss, pulling her away just enough so that he could see her dazed eyes. She looked back at him achingly; her beautiful cheeks were stained with a soft pink, revealing her excitement for the moment. The ache inside him grew deeper as he took in her raw beauty and fought the urge to strip her bare right then and there.

"You are a rather fascinating woman, Arabella Garter," he rasped, his eyes possessively looking into hers. Her smile came slowly and seductively, making his feverish need tick up a few notches.

"And I am all yours, Evan Garter," she replied back. He groaned once more as he stood up and carried her over to his bed before his mouth enveloped hers again. With needy hands, they began to pull at each other's clothes; Arabella dragged away each annoying piece from his body and freed him from their confines.

He grinned wickedly when it was his turn to remove her dress, loving how simple it was to have her naked before him. For a moment, he pictured coming into his room every night and finding her like this. By all appearances, she was a lady dressed in finery, but only he would know that her sweet treasures were only one flick of his fingers away. Once back on the bed, Arabella lowered her head to his member again, her lips sweetly wrapping around him in a way that had him gripping the sheets and breathing through his teeth.

Wanting to touch her just as much as she was touching him, he suddenly brought her up and guided her to turn around on top of him so that her moistened folds were temptingly suspended above his lips. She moaned deeply when he reached up to lap at her sweet juices, and Arabella soon understood what she was meant to do. Once more, her mouth came down on him, and together they feasted on one another.

When Arabella orgasmed, she tried desperately to move away from his mouth, her body deliciously oversensitive to the new type of foreplay. Instead of letting her go though, he pressed his palms tightly into her voluptuous backside, making it impossible. Evan moaned greedily as he tasted her orgasm, and it was only when he had his fill that he suddenly had her on her back and was poised above her.

Needing more, Arabella immediately wrapped her legs around Evan's waist and urged his hips closer to hers. She moaned desperately when he teasingly brushed the tip of his member over the moist folds of her sex, and in a strained voice, she begged him for more.

Chapter Twenty-Three



Arabella woke up slowly, her body deliciously sore from the intense and frequent lovemaking she and Evan had engaged in. She stretched languorously, and when her arm felt nothing but empty space beside her, her eyes flew open in despair. Sitting up suddenly, she scanned the dimly lit room, looking for Evan. She breathed a sigh of relief when she saw him standing by the far window, bathed in the light of the moon.

Wrapping the sheet around her, she quietly slid out of bed and tiptoed toward him. As she got closer, Arabella saw that he was holding something small in both hands. His handsome face, not long ago etched with pleasure, now looked tired and forlorn. Whatever he was holding, it was obviously causing him pain.

Gently, she touched her hand to his naked shoulder. When she did so, Evan looked over at her affectionately, as if not at all surprised by her presence, and balanced the object in one hand, so he could pull her under his arm. Tucked warmly into his side, Arabella looked down at the small thing in his hands and was shocked to discover that it was a tiny pair of shoes.

“What ails you, my love? What are these for?” she whispered, her voice full of concern as she rubbed the tip of her nose

along his pectoral muscle. It was the first time she'd ever called him by such an intimate pet name, but as it left her lips, she knew it was genuine. There was no mistake now— she was absolutely in love with her husband.

Evan looked slowly away from the small shoes and down at her. There was such pain in his eyes that it instantly made her gut ache. It tortured her at first when he only kissed the top of her head and held her closer to him. But, after evoking all of her patience, he finally began to speak.

“I must confess something to you,” he started wearily, his thumb grazing across the toes of the tiny shoes. “Do you remember when you asked me about Anna? And I told you that she was gone before you came into my life?” Arabella nodded, an uneasiness taking over her. “She was my first wife. And she was carrying my son when she died. We were to name him William, but of course, he perished with his mother.”

“Oh, Evan,” Arabella breathed, her heart breaking for him. “I had no idea. I’m so— so very sorry.”

“My grandparents were furious when they found out that she was with child,” Evan went on. “To be quite honest, I had been shocked myself. Anna and I enjoyed each other’s company, but I was not in love.” He stopped, his eyes turning to hers with a look of torment. “Not like I am with you. I love you, Arabella. I’ve never felt this way about any woman before, nor do I believe I will ever feel that way about another. You are funny, quick of wit, and incredibly beautiful. You capture my attention even when you are not physically beside me; the thought of you is always with me.”

Evan's words brought such joy rushing through Arabella that her grip on Evan's waist tightened, and she moved slightly so that she was standing more directly in front of him.

"Evan, I love you too," she replied in a whispered rush, her eyes brimming with tears of happiness. She reached up to kiss him on the lips, but when she did so, Evan did not move to kiss her back. Fear started to creep into her veins as she took a step back, looking at him confused.

"I did not love Anna, but I still mourn her loss every day," Evan continued, moving away to sit the shoes on the window's ledge. "And that baby— Lord in Heaven, I had already loved that baby so much even though he hadn't come yet." He touched the shoes once more tenderly before he turned his gaze back to her. "Their memory haunts me almost every day — except when I am with you."

"Then *be* with me," Arabella urged desperately, going to him again. "Let me be what keeps those awful memories away."

"I can't," Evan rasped, his voice gripped with emotion. She tried to meet his eyes, but he refused to look at her, and he glanced upward toward the moon. As he did so, she saw the glimmer of tears in his eyes. Realization dawned on her, and a heartache like never before began to rip through her chest.

"Evan..."

"I *cannot* lose you as I lost them," he said abruptly, cutting her off. "I would not survive it. That's why I stayed away in the first place. Even though I had been drawn to you from the

moment we met, I couldn't bear to let myself get close to that type of happiness again."

He finally turned his eyes back to her, his blue pools full of deep, unending pain. Arabella felt her throat close up as her own tears began to spill down her cheeks as she saw his helplessness. There was no bedroom trick that would make him stay, no advice from Henrietta that could convince him to think otherwise. This was much, *much* deeper than mere erotic satisfaction.

"I wanted to keep you away," Evan continued. "In a way, I thought it would keep you safe. And it was working. It wasn't ideal, of course, but I kept you in comfort, and I kept myself safe from such emotions. Then, those damned rumors came out and brought me to you. And you turned out to be this *amazing*, beautiful creature that was everything I was ever looking for."

"Nothing will happen to me, Evan," Arabella said suddenly, her tone taking on a steely edge. She desperately wanted to turn the conversation around, to find a way to steer him away from this decision.

"You don't know that," he answered quickly, shaking his head, "and neither do I." He took a shaky breath and ran a trembling hand through his hair. "I'm sorry, Arabella. I am so, *so* sorry. But I have made my decision. By the month's end, my grandmother and I will be returning to Lancaster."

"Evan, no," Arabella sobbed, a wave of pain hitting her hard.

“I promise you that there will no longer be a coldness between us,” he continued on. “I will respond to your letters unlike before and as often as I can. I want you to tell me what you need immediately, and I swear to you, I will provide it. Dresses. Travels. More animals. If you ever tire of London, please let me know. I can make whatever adjustments you desire to the country property.”

He paused, a small but painful smile touching his lips. “Perhaps Tum-Tum could come to live in the country with you after all. And whatever other animal you desire. It is yours. I just want you to be happy.”

Arabella tried to scream, to tell him that *he* was what made her the happiest. There still was so much they didn’t know about each other. She yearned more than anything to know the deep depths inside of this man’s soul. To discover even more things about him to love. But it was clear, despite his confessed feelings, he was not going to let her.

“What does this mean for the rest of your stay here?” she asked, trying to control the tremor in her voice.

Evan reached out his hand to her and patiently waited for her to take it. When she did, he brought it up to his lips and delivered a soft kiss.

“I have many appointments that will take up most of my days,” he explained, a tinge of guilt lacing in his voice. “But if you would be willing, I would like to dedicate my nights to you.”

The relief Arabella felt when she heard his offer was quickly swept away by the overwhelming sadness she knew she would feel upon his departure. But if this was the only way she got to spend time with Evan, she was going to take it— even if it utterly destroyed her heart when he left. Slowly, she nodded her head. Evan breathed a sigh of relief as she did so, and he pulled her tightly into his arms.

Although every kiss they had shared between them had been incredible, this one was different. It was far more intense. The passion that exuded between them was unlike ever before, and desperation took over them as Evan lifted her up and carried her once more to the bed. As they made love, they held onto one another tightly, their lips fused to one another's in desperation not to part. They swallowed each moan as if it were a lifeline and didn't stop making love until they both passed out from exhaustion.

Chapter Twenty-Four



Three weeks had passed since Evan had made his announcement, and the only thing that changed was that he had extended his stay by one week. Still, despite the extension, Evan was still set on leaving London. Aside from a growing uneasiness in her stomach, a strange numbness had fallen over Arabella. She had felt the strange pull in her stomach occasionally the first few days after she and Evan had first made love, but now, it was constant.

Since the night Evan revealed his plans, the Dowager had morning tea with her nearly every other day on the patio. Each time, she insisted Arabella give her an update on Evan's plans, and she seemed to grow less kind when Arabella would report that nothing had changed. Whenever they talked, Arabella often thought of what Eliza had told her about her secret visit, and she wondered what the woman was up to.

Had she been looking for proof of infidelity? And if so, why was she now so forcefully pushing her to try and trap Evan? It was a confusing matter that she couldn't seem to get a grasp on.

Henrietta, too, had visited Arabella frequently, and she was also growing uneasy with her company as well. In her willingness to help, Henrietta had tried valiantly to tell her that

not all was lost after Arabella had confirmed the news of Evan's departure. But the optimism fell on deaf ears, and eventually, Henrietta stopped pestering her about Evan when she realized it only made Arabella grow more distant. Now though, she insisted on giving her a distraction from the heartache.

"A ball to celebrate the return of your freedom then," Henrietta insisted, stroking Lady Thimble's sleek fur with a fine bristled ivory brush.

As usual, after she left Evan's bed in the morning, Arabella had made quick work to dress for the day, had tea with the Dowager, and then would spend most of her time in the greenhouse during the daylight. Only when the sun went down, and Evan's meetings were finished, would she go back inside and go straight to Evan's chambers. It seemed silly, she knew, but it had become a tiny coping method that eased her heartache.

"I neither feel free nor social," Arabella replied numbly as she stroked Sir Squeaken's fur, "Besides, while Evan is still here, I plan to dedicate every moment I can to him. I must savor what I have left."

Henrietta gave Arabella a pained look and stopped brushing the pet monkey.

"My darling, I hate seeing you like this," she said in exasperation. "Please, allow yourself some distraction. If you want to wait until His Grace leaves, I'm amenable to that, but you must find *something* to fill this void."

“That’s why I’m in here with my darlings,” Arabella replied matter-of-factly, motioning toward both of the monkeys.

Henrietta shook her head, becoming more concerned. “Monkeys are a lovely source of brief entertainment, sister, but it does not compare to human interaction. You need to be among your own kind. You need to know what it’s like to laugh again. Even if only for a brief moment.”

Arabella winced, stung by the truth of Henrietta’s words. It was true that she hadn’t so much as managed a smile in the last two weeks. Not at a single thing. Suddenly, she felt a pang of longing for Leonard, her dearest friend who had always made her laugh. None of them had heard from him since the night at the Bassett Ball, and even Antony was now starting to get worried. They’d kept their eyes on the gossip sheets and saw no further mention of his name.

“It is far too hot to be in here today,” Henrietta said, suddenly agitated. “It is not healthy for us to perspire to this degree. Come, I must insist we break your little rule and head back inside. We can go to the lower library. It’s always cooler down there, and I can try to mix up one of Leonard’s old concoctions.”

Arabella was about to argue then she felt a fresh trickle of sweat glide down her temple. She dabbed at it delicately with her kerchief then sighed. Henrietta was right. Normally she could withstand the balmy air, but today, it was worse than ever, and it was barely even one in the afternoon yet.

She looked down at her monkeys. Unlike her, they loved the humid air- but even they seemed to be struggling with the heat a little today. At least by going inside, she could alert the

servants to bring some fresh water into the greenhouse for the small, hand-dug pond the monkeys used to cool off.

“Very well,” she grumbled, gently lifting Sir Squeaken off of her lap.

As she got up, Henrietta wrapped her arm around Arabella’s, and together, they left the greenhouse and walked back into the Garter Estate. Behind them, their handmaids trailed dutifully. Once on the patio, Henrietta requested from one of the servants bring them something cold and spirited to drink and then had them open the patio doors of the library. Upon stepping into the darkened room, Arabella felt the cooler air land on her skin, and she took a small breath of relief.

“See? Isn’t this better already?” Henrietta asked, smiling at her softly as she pulled her inside. “It’s much too dreadful out to be outside today.”

“Indeed, it is,” a male voice said, startling them both. Arabella, Henrietta, and their handmaids all turned to the turned-away chair where the voice came from, and Leonard rose from his seat.

“*You!*” Henrietta seethed, pointing an accusatory finger toward Leonard. “How dare you show your face around here again! After everything you’ve done!”

She turned to the handmaids and immediately told the two young women to go fetch her husband. Immediately, they left, hurrying to do as they were bid as fast as possible.

“Henrietta, please,” Leonard implored, holding his hands up in surrender, “I’m here to apologize.” He looked away from her and toward Arabella, who had been standing in shock over his sudden reappearance.

“Arabella, I’m begging you to give me a moment,” he pled, his eyes full of regret. “I can explain. Everything if you want, but I mostly need you to know how sorry I am.”

For a moment, Arabella stood completely still as her emotions ran amok inside of her. There was rage at seeing Leonard again, a deep hurt that hung wide open and unhealed. But... there was also relief. After all, he had been a dear friend for five years, and although she hadn’t missed his more recent odd behavior, she had desperately yearned to talk to him about Evan. To seek his comfort and advice as she had so many times before.

“Get out this instant,” Henrietta demanded coldly.

“It’s all right, Henrietta,” Arabella announced calmly, her eyes going from Leonard’s to hers. Her sister-in-law looked at her in shock.

“After what he did to you?” Henrietta asked, looking at Arabella as if she had lost her mind.

“We just need a moment,” Arabella implored calmly. She gave Henrietta a pleading look, but she only crossed her arms in determination.

“No, I’m not leaving you alone with him.”

“You don’t have to,” Leonard said, speaking up. “After how I’ve behaved, I don’t blame you. Please, feel free to open the doors into the house, so you can hear us, but I do request, respectfully, that you wait out there.”

Henrietta now looked at them both as if they’d gone insane and let out a sound of irritation.

“Fine, but I will *absolutely* be listening to every word, Leonard, and if I hear anything untoward, I will not wait for my husband. I will thump you myself. Do you understand?”

Leonard’s charming smile, the one Arabella had missed seeing so much, spread softly across his face, and he bowed his head toward Henrietta respectfully.

“I would expect no less from you,” he replied, a tinge of pride in his voice.

Arabella and Leonard watched as Henrietta opened the door to the hallway and stood so that they could still see her skirts. Despite the situation, Arabella felt herself smile softly at her sister-in-law’s protective nature. Once she turned back to Leonard, however, it faded back into the grim line she now wore on her face every day.

“You have an incredible amount of explaining to do,” Arabella announced, breaking the small stretch of silence. “I suggest you do so quickly before Antony comes and thumps you into oblivion.”

Leonard sighed as a pained look stretched across his face, and he took a seat next to where Arabella was standing.

“Arabella, I do not have the words worthy enough to express how regretful I am of my behavior that night at the Bassett Ball. You *never* deserved such treatment from me.”

“I certainly did not,” Arabella agreed haughtily. “With all of the rumors of my impropriety finally dying down, you chose that night to act a fool?”

“I panicked,” Leonard replied hurriedly, looking anxious. “The...young lady I was with required the utmost discretion. The ruin they would have felt—that *I* would have felt had we been caught, it was something that we couldn’t recover from.”

“So you chose to ruin *me* instead?” Arabella asked, her anger rising. “Me, one of your closest friends. You decided that it was better that I was ruined than you and this mystery woman.”

“But you weren’t ruined,” Leonard pressed. “I saw the papers; no one suspected you at all. It was I that got all of the attention, and I took that on happily.”

“So you walked into the ballroom half naked and fully drunk to save my reputation and this mysterious lady’s?” Arabella asked skeptically. Leonard nodded.

“After you left, Evan and I had quite a tussle,” he explained. “It was starting to draw attention, and at the moment, I felt it was the only way to save everyone. I’m already considered a

disgraceful rake anyway; I didn't really do much damage to my reputation by fully sinking into the part."

"Who is this woman that you were willing to gamble all of us for?" Arabella demanded.

Leonard's eyes filled with guilt, and he shook his head solemnly. "I cannot say, Arabella. God in Heaven, how I wish I could tell you— you have no idea how much I want to. How much I want to tell *someone* about this. But I cannot. It is...it is life or death, Arabella. What is at stake goes way beyond a disgraced reputation."

Arabella balked as he said this, not sure at all what he meant. Slowly, she took a seat beside him, her eyes begging him for more information. In response, Leonard's eyes suddenly took on a glassy sheen, and he stared at the floor as he shook his head.

"I cannot tell you more about the situation than that," he ventured, "but that doesn't mean that I don't regret what I did. You have been nothing but a wonderful friend to me since the day we met, Arabella, and I am so unbelievably sorry for everything. I can only say that your sacrifice helped me protect someone close to me, and I will *never* commit such crimes against you again. I swear it, Arabella."

Arabella continued to stare at Leonard, her mind churning over the vague information he gave her. She wanted desperately to find out more, but it was clear that Leonard would not explain further. Sighing, she let her body sink further into the chair in an unladylike fashion.

“Even if I forgive you,” she began, “that does not guarantee that Antony will.”

Leonard gave her a look of relief. “I understand that I must make amends with them as well. That’s why I didn’t implore you to stop the handmaids from fetching him. If he needs to throttle me, so be it. I am happy to pay for my sins in whatever way allows my absolution.”

He looked toward the door expectantly then back at her.

“I’m assuming Evan will be coming as well,” he said dryly.

At the mention of Evan’s name, Arabella’s thin mask of composure broke, and she began to let out the sobs that had been clawing at her throat for weeks.

“Oh, darling,” Leonard cajoled emphatically, going to the floor on his knees, so he could scoop her hand from her lap. “What is it? Please don’t tell me I’ve ruined anything.”

“It wasn’t you,” she said through shaking breaths, “but it is ruined all of the same.”

Chapter Twenty-Five



Leonard looked at Arabella with complete shock as she poured out the details of all he had missed. He'd known about Anna and the child. It was a family secret that they had all buried deep. But he hadn't known that Evan had been affected by their deaths so badly. It pained him to know that the past could destroy the future in such a way, and he began to dread his own. Would his past come to haunt him as well?

He tried desperately to give Arabella hope, to tell her that he would speak to Evan if needed, but nothing he said changed her mind. It was all torturously sad, and his heart ached for his dear friend.

"There's more," Arabella rasped, drying her eyes with her kerchief, "but I haven't told anyone this yet."

"Unburden yourself, darling," Leonard urged, wanting to help.

Arabella took a steadying breath, and her hand gravitated toward her stomach.

"I cannot be sure yet, but I believe it's already too late to respect Evan's wishes regarding a child," she confessed,

shaking her head as fresh tears wet her cheeks.

“It’s only been a couple of weeks, but my monthly woe was supposed to start last Tuesday, and I feel a fluttering in my stomach. As if something isn’t quite right. I suppose I’ll need a few more weeks before I can be sure, but...”

As her sentence trailed off, Leonard suddenly arose and pulled Arabella into his arms to comfort her.

“There now,” he soothed, holding her as she cried, “we will figure this out, I promise you.”

“We won’t,” she sobbed. “Evan doesn’t want children after... If anything, he’ll hate me!”

From the hallway, the opened door was suddenly struck by an open palm, and Antony stormed in.

“Get your hands off of her this instant,” Antony seethed, roughly pulling Arabella from Leonard’s arms.

“Antony, wait!” Arabella gasped as Antony’s free hand came around in a closed fist and connected with Leonard’s jaw.

“After what he did to you, I will wait for nothing,” he growled, rearing back to punch Leonard again. Arabella shook herself free from his grip and stepped between them.

“Arabella, move,” Leonard exclaimed, his eyes going to her stomach protectively as he moved her. “Whatever Antony needs to say or do is his right. I deserve it.”

Leonard’s rationality was enough to give Antony pause, and he let his arm drop as he looked at the man he once called a friend, confused over what to do next. The two men locked eyes, and Leonard gave Antony a pleading look.

“Arabella, leave us,” Antony commanded, not looking away from Leonard.

“Not until you calm down,” Arabella replied quickly.

“No,” Leonard interjected, shaking his head, “he’s right. This conversation should not happen before a lady.” His gaze left Antony’s, and he gave Arabella a subtle nod. “It will be all right,” he promised, his voice calm, “but you should indeed go.”

“Come,” Henrietta implored, walking in to take Arabella’s hand, “we must leave men to discuss manly things.”

“What if Antony goes too far?” Arabella asked, looking back at her brother and friend worriedly as Henrietta dragged her from her room.

“Then so be it,” Henrietta replied matter-of-factly, “but we do not need to be present when it happens.”



“His Grace is in a very important meeting at the moment,” Simon implored as Gloria Garter demanded that he open the door to Evan’s study.

“Nothing is more important than what I have to tell him,” Gloria shot back, whacking him with her cane smartly in the shin. “I am getting tired of your interference, boy, and if you continue, I will see to it that you won’t be able to serve *any* house for the rest of your miserable days.”

Knowing she was more than capable of making good on her threat, Simon quickly opened the doors and let her in. Upon doing so, he heard the Duke’s voice suddenly draw to a stop, and he looked up to see him glaring at him angrily.

“Simon, what did I say about interruptions?” Evan asked, clearly irritated by the sudden violation of privacy.

“Apologies, Your Grace,” Simon murmured, bowing low, “but I had no choice.”

“He certainly did not,” the Dowager agreed, coming around from behind him. She looked over to the gentleman Evan had been convening with and gave him a small curtsy.

“Do forgive us, My Lord, but you will need to reschedule the rest of your meeting for another time,” she informed the visitor with cold practicality. “We have private matters that have risen to an urgent degree, and I need to speak to the Duke at once.”

“Of course,” the gentleman replied quickly, standing to take his leave. He turned briefly toward Evan and nodded. “Do call

on me when you're able, Your Grace," he added politely before quickly leaving the room.

The moment they were alone, Evan turned to his grandmother with a look of intense irritation, and he ground his teeth together to keep the most impolite words he was thinking from leaving his lips.

"Grandmother, what is the meaning of this?" he asked, trying to say the words as calmly as possible.

"I was right!" she hissed, pointing a finger at him as she walked closer.

"About what?" Evan snapped, shaking his head. "Really, grandmother, I have been patient with your constant interruptions of late, but this is getting out of hand."

"You will thank me for this, Evan," she replied bitingly. "I just saw, with my own eyes, that Arabella and Leonard have in fact been having an affair."

Evan's blood ran cold as his grandmother said the words. There was no way. Not after everything they had shared. Arabella was his...even if he was leaving, he knew now, she had always been his.

"I don't believe you," he replied, his tone distant as he studied his grandmother's determined expression.

“I thought not,” Gloria replied quickly, taking a step toward the door. “Which is why I interrupted your meeting. They are together this very instant. I saw them being amorous in the library just moments ago. Evan, you *must* come with me now.”

Evan felt his legs moving before his thoughts were even formed. Anger, jealousy, and hurt raged heavily inside him as he strode down the steps, not waiting for his grandmother despite her protests. His emotions only grew more intense when he saw the closed library door, and with more force than necessary, he threw it open.

What he saw next was a sight he’d never seen before, and it stopped all tracks of thought as he stared at the scene, completely dumbfounded. There, standing in the middle room was not Leonard and Arabella nearly engaged in a kiss— but Leonard and...*Antony?*

Chapter Twenty-Six



The next few moments swirled together in a tornado of chaos and confusion as Gloria, Henrietta, and Arabella were all suddenly beside him, staring at exactly what he was staring at. They all watched in shock as Antony, suddenly redeeming his senses, growled and pushed Leonard away from him forcefully.

“What the hell are you thinking?” Antony roared, wiping at his mouth roughly as he glared at Leonard.

“Get your hands off of my husband!” Henrietta shouted indignantly, storming into the room with her hand raised toward Leonard. He did nothing to stop her from slapping his face, and the sound of her palm hitting his cheek rang loud within the room.

“What sin is happening in this house?” Gloria whispered in disgust, shrinking away from the scene as her face moved into a snarl. “Leonard, Arabella, what sort of debauchery have you brought here?”

“This has *nothing* to do with me!” Arabella exclaimed, just as startled as everyone else. As she did so, Antony lunged toward Leonard again, ready to beat him to a pulp.

“Oh, *please*,” Gloria hissed, “this is just a grand coverup for your affair!”

In the middle of the chaos, Evan suddenly saw things clear as day. He walked up to the two wrestling men, grappled Antony away from his cousin, and landed a solid punch to Leonard’s mouth. Around him everything stilled, and they all looked at him wildly.

“Lord in Heaven, Evan!” Leonard yelled, pedaling backward until he hit a row of books. He touched his bleeding lips tenderly then looked at Evan as if he’d lost his mind.

“You gave my wife a bloody lip; now, I’ve given you one,” Evan said flatly, combing his hand through his hair. He adjusted his coat and vest and shook out his sore muscles. No one spoke as he walked over to the drink cart, poured himself a glass of whiskey, and plunged his injured fist into the ice bucket.

“Now, I believe there is some confusion here that needs to be tidied up,” Evan announced matter-of-factly. He pulled his hand from the ice bucket, shook it, and put it in his vest pocket before walking a slow circle around Antony and Leonard.

“I should say so,” Henrietta agreed, her eyes narrowing on Antony. “Is this why we haven’t been able to conceive a child yet, husband? All of the attention and love you show me—was it all just for show?” she asked, her tone full of betrayal.

“Of course not,” Antony responded in a rush, quickly going to her. “Henrietta, *no*. Never. I agreed to sit down and hear him

out, yes, but I did not realize he was confessing feelings until he started to lean into me. Even then, I thought perhaps he was playing another one of his strange tricks.”

“How can I believe you?” Henrietta screeched, pulling her hand away from him. “Leonard fooled us all with his reputation of being a rake, and that is obviously not true.”

“Henrietta, please,” Evan implored, his deep voice the sound of reason amongst all of the hurt feelings, “I believe your husband to be telling the truth.”

“And how would you know?” she demanded, tears brimming in her eyes as she turned to him.

“One, because if Leonard’s... ‘paramour’ was Antony, surely, he wouldn’t be at your side as often as he is,” Evan began. “Two, because I now understand why Leonard did what he did at the Bassetts’ ball. It would have been far easier on him to be involved in a scandal with Arabella than it would have been with a man. Isn’t that right, Leonard?”

As he asked the question, Evan and the rest of them turned back to Leonard, waiting for his response. In return, Leonard only met Arabella’s eyes, his gaze full of regret.

“Yes,” he said, at last, his tone curt and strained. “It’s true. All of it. Antony has never shown interest in me as more than a friend.” He turned toward Henrietta and Antony, shame and resignation written on his face. “I know you are not like me, Antony. I’ve known it for quite some time. And Henrietta, I’m so sorry I made you think your husband was being unfaithful. I assure you that he loves only you. In fact, he can’t seem to

stop talking about you whenever he's away from you. It's one of the reasons I knew he wasn't interested in me."

"Then why the bloody hell did you try to kiss me?" Antony asked, still alarmed at nearly being kissed by another man.

Leonard shrugged tiredly. "It was not my intention, I swear. But it has been so long since I've seen you, and with you right in front of me, willing to listen and be so kind after everything I've done, I lost myself. I know you are not attracted to me Antony, but I am very attracted to you. I've tried to stop it, I swear. But nothing makes it go away. No matter who else I chase."

Everyone but Evan looked on at Leonard with stunned silence as if they were absorbing everything they had just heard. Even as Leonard made his admission, parts of them were sure that it couldn't be true, and that it was somehow a strange ruse. They waited for him to yell in jest, but it never came. Instead, Leonard dropped himself into a chair, pulled a kerchief from his pocket, and nursed his bloody lip.

"Henrietta, I believe you and Antony need some privacy to discuss what just happened," Evan suggested, breaking the silence. "Now that you know your husband is innocent of these charges, I suspect you'll have an apology for him."

Henrietta looked up at Antony expectantly, and he gazed back at her lovingly as he offered her his hand.

"There is no need for apologies, dearest," Antony replied kindly, "but I would most appreciate a private moment with you."

“Of course,” Henrietta agreed quickly, taking his hand.

After they left, Evan turned to Arabella and the Dowager.

“Grandmother, I believe my wife has been through enough. Would you please take her to have some tea? A brew to calm her nerves, perhaps.”

Gloria Garter took a deep breath and rose to her full height as she leaned on her cane. For a moment she gave Evan a look of defiance— as if she were going to refuse him. Then, a thin smile spread across her face, and she nodded.

“I have just the thing,” she assured him, nodding her head. Her eyes narrowed as she looked over at Leonard.

“Don’t you go anywhere,” Gloria commanded. “As matron of this family, I must insist I be a part of the discussion on what to do with you.” Neither man said anything as she turned toward the door, and beckoned Arabella to come with her. “Come, child, let’s get you a soothing drink. I’ve brought something from home that will settle all of this nicely for you.”

Arabella looked longingly at Evan, not wanting to leave him. He met her eyes with a silent understanding and nodded at her comfortingly.

“I’ll come find you as soon as we take care of this,” he promised.

“Of course,” she agreed, looking between the two of them worriedly. Arabella had no idea what was about to unfold, but she could only hope that Evan’s calm demeanor would extend through the rest of the conversation.

“Come, dear,” the Dowager insisted, tapping her cane against Arabella’s skirts, “let’s go get you that cup of tea.”



“Tell me now,” Evan commanded, once he and Leonard were left alone. “Was it you that started these false rumors about Arabella’s infidelity? To create a cover for your...*lifestyle?*”

A pained look came over Leonard’s face, but he slowly nodded. “Yes,” he bit out, “I thought if others assumed she and I were embroiled in a romance, I would avoid other, more dangerous rumors that could be spread about me.”

He looked back up at Evan, tears brimming in his eyes. “I truly do care about her, cousin,” Leonard rasped. “She really is a wonderful woman and better than what most men dream of. And I’m sorry that she was the one that paid the price here.”

“Rest assured you will even the balance of this unfair trade,” Evan promised, his tone absolute.

“Oh, God,” Leonard croaked, burying his head in his hands. “You’re going to tell everyone, aren’t you? Of course, you are. How else would you clear Arabella’s name?”

Evan looked at his cousin in disgust. Not so much for liking other men, but the lengths he had been willing to go to keep up with his lie.

“Unlike you, I understand that the past cannot be changed. I can, however, stop it from being repeated,” Evan replied. He walked over to the podium where a book of maps was displayed, picked it up, and deposited it heavily into Leonard’s lap. Leonard yelped as the heavy book came down on his groin, and Evan couldn’t help but smile in satisfaction. To him, it was a small drop in the bucket for his cousin’s repentance.

“What are you doing with this?” Leonard asked, looking up at him in confusion.

“I’m going to let you choose,” Evan replied simply, nodding toward the book.

Leonard shook his head, still not understanding. “Choose what?”

Evan’s eyes lifted in amusement, unable to believe his cousin hadn’t caught on yet.

“Why, your place of exile, dear cousin,” he replied in a rather upbeat tone. Leonard’s eyes went wide, and Evan’s smile grew bigger.

“I cannot tell the truth about you. You are a Garter, so if I purposely choose to ruin your name, I will also ruin mine. Nor can I allow you to stay in England. After everything you’ve

done to my wife— your supposed friend— there is no possibility that I could allow you around her again.”

As Leonard sputtered to defend himself, the door reopened, and Gloria walked back in.

“Ah, Grandmother, perfect timing,” Evan greeted her, bowing his head to her respectfully, “Leonard was just about to tell us where he will be living out the rest of his days.”

“Well wherever it may be, it’s not far enough away,” she replied bitterly, glaring at Leonard. “After everything he and that woman did to ruin our family’s reputation, they both deserve to be sent off.”

Leonard suddenly rose from his chair, the atlas tumbling from his lap with the speed of his movements.

“Arabella is innocent of those rumors, and you know it,” he bit out, pointing a finger at her. “All you’ve done since coming here is try to tear them apart.”

The Dowager barked out a laugh as Evan looked at Leonard quizzically.

“You are mistaken, cousin,” Evan said, looking between the two of them. “Grandmother has been supportive of Arabella and our marriage from the beginning.”

Leonard shook his head, not believing him.

“I know that’s what she wants you to think, but it’s not true. Is it? You *want* these rumors about Arabella and myself to be true. That’s why you kept insisting that Evan badger her into a confession.” Leonard turned away from Gloria to look at Evan, his eyes pleading for him to believe him. “Arabella has been nothing but a faithful wife to you, Evan. She is in love with you and doesn’t deserve to be left behind. She’s with child for God’s sake!”

The silence that filled the room after Leonard’s confession was followed quickly by a strangled sound of fear that slipped from Gloria’s lips.

“Oh, heavens!” she whispered, her face paling as a look of realization crossed over her face. Suddenly she turned, moving at a surprising speed toward the drawing room. “Arabella!” she yelled. “Arabella, stop!”

Behind her, Leonard and Evan looked at each other in startled confusion and then quickly began to follow her.

Chapter Twenty-Seven



“**L**ord in heaven, what are we to do about all of this?” Arabella murmured to herself, staring down at her stomach, stroking the flat surface with her thumb.

She was not in the mood for tea as the Dowager had so insisted. So, for the first few minutes, as she sat in the drawing room, she nibbled absently at a cake as her mind went over the events that had just occurred. Leonard liked men. Leonard used her as a scapegoat so that the *Ton* would not discover that he liked men.

And if that was not enough, he had just tried to take advantage of Antony. Antony! Her dear brother, who had adopted Leonard as a friend the moment he met him, no questions asked. She tried to picture what Henrietta and her brother had to say about it all and came up empty. She'd heard of men who'd liked other men but never in her life thought she would meet one.

Then, on top of that, there was a new life growing in her stomach. The moment she'd confided her suspicions to Leonard, she had realized it was true. She was with child, Evan's child. And he would be leaving them forever.

As her thoughts churned, Arabella absentmindedly reached for the tea the Dowager had left her. It was a foreign brew, one that smelled sickly sweet in a way that made her stomach churn. But the cake had made her mouth terribly dry, and she was willing to take a sip. Her nose wrinkled as she brought it to her lips, and just as she was about to hold her breath to take a drink, she heard shouting erupt from the hallway.

As if being chased by the devil herself, Gloria Garter ran with surprising speed into the drawing room and dashed over to Arabella. With great force she knocked the teacup out of Arabella's hand, sending it shattering into the wall. Startled, Arabella stared at the woman she had always seen so poised and wondered if she had gone mad.

"Grandmother, what is going on?" Evan huffed, he and Leonard following closely behind.

"You're with child?" Gloria asked demandingly, ignoring Evan's question as she stared down at Arabella.

Suddenly, feeling as if she was in danger, Arabella shrunk back further in her seat. There was a look in the Dowager's eyes that didn't seem safe. It was sending a chill up her spine, and she looked toward Evan desperately.

"Answer me!" Gloria demanded, taking a step closer. "Why wouldn't you tell me?"

"I— I don't know," Arabella stammered. "I only realized a few moments ago."

Gloria sneered at her and drew her hand back. “Why, you *stupid*—”

“That is enough,” Evan commanded, moving between them. He pulled Arabella protectively into his arms and stepped several steps away from his grandmother.

“What was in that cup?” he demanded, glaring at Gloria. As if just now realizing what she possibly looked like, Gloria’s eyes widened for a moment, then her face moved into an expression of pitying concern.

“If you are with child, dear, you shouldn’t drink so much tea,” she replied sweetly.

“Bullocks,” Evan replied tersely, moving Arabella behind him. “What. Was in. That cup.”

Gloria was able to maintain her mask for a moment longer. But only a moment. Shortly after, her self-righteous nature dissolved it. The look of innocence left her face as her brows furrowed, and she pointed an accusing finger at Arabella.

“She was proving herself unworthy of the Garter name,” Gloria accused. “Whether they were true or not, the rumors hurt our family, and on top of that, I had thought she had failed to deliver another generation of Garters. I warned her about how important it was to me that she was to bear children.”

Evan, Arabella, and Leonard looked on at the Dowager in pure shock.

“You were going to poison her?” Evan rasped, his voice strangled with shock and pain. His eyes narrowed, and he looked Gloria up and down suspiciously. She shook her head desperately but didn’t say a word. “Is that what happened to Anna?” he demanded.

The pause in Gloria’s head shaking was all he needed, and feeling as if the wind was knocked out of him, Evan backed up until he was against the wall.

“What have you done?” he croaked. At his side, Leonard suddenly appeared. They shared a silent look, and Leonard gave him a subtle nod.

“Arabella, come with me, darling,” he said calmly, holding his hand out to her. “Let’s get you away from this.”

Arabella allowed Leonard to lead her to the doorway but refused to budge after that. She wasn’t leaving Evan alone with that crazed woman. Not on her life.

“She was a *peasant*, Evan!” Gloria wailed, finally breaking her silence. “Her child would have never been legitimate. And as for Arabella, if I would have known she was with child, I wouldn’t have tried to poison her. We *need* a legitimate heir, Evan. And she very well couldn’t provide one if you were going to leave her alone all over again.”

She rolled her eyes as if she thought the entire conversation was trite. “I would have found you a new and better wife. One that could behave more obediently.”

Evan's eyes grew wide with rage, and he felt his body tremble as he struggled to keep his fists to himself. Anna's death had made no sense from the very beginning, and now it was all clear. He'd lost his wife, his son, and almost the love of his life to this woman.

"Leonard," Evan called, his voice strained with rage, "do fetch the constable, would you? I believe our grandmother here has an appointment with a prison cell."



"Please don't let me go," Arabella implored, nuzzling her head into Evan's chest. She felt his arms tighten around her, and his lips placed soft kisses in her hair.

"Not for a long time," Evan promised.

It had been a hectic few hours, to say the least. Gloria, in her panic, had tried to flee the estate, and it had resulted in Evan having to lock her in the drawing room. Once the constable came, she tried vehemently to deny the entire thing, but the investigator's tactics soon had her trapped in a corner, and she eventually confessed to attempting to poison Arabella and succeeding in poisoning Anna.

Once Gloria was taken away, Evan brought Arabella to his room and asked her himself if she was with child. She'd been timid to admit it at first, worried that it would make him upset. But then his body relaxed, a huge smile had taken over his face, and he had pulled her into his arms. Since then, they hadn't let go of each other.

“Arabella, I am so sorry. For distancing myself from you, for making you think I didn’t want you, and for so many other things. I see now I was only making you and myself more miserable by keeping us apart, and I don’t want to do that anymore. I want you in Lancaster, by my side, with our child.” As Evan said the last part, his hand gravitated toward her stomach, and he pressed his palm to it lightly.

“I will never let anything happen to either of you,” he vowed solemnly before capturing her mouth in a sweet kiss.

Arabella moaned softly as Evan’s kiss made the events of the day begin to slide away, and a new type of happiness began to take seed. Although it had been terrifying to think that she could have died a few short hours ago, she was now somewhat thankful for all of the drama. For, in her opinion, if it hadn’t happened, she would be saying goodbye forever to the man she loved in just a few short days.

Now that everything was out in the open, though, there was nothing more to fear or run from. And they could just finally *be*. With all of the new revelations, Evan extended his stay in London through the rest of the summer season. Once the fall came, they agreed that they would be traveling together back to Lancaster.

“Can you imagine our child?” Arabella asked, laughing softly as she placed her hand over Evan’s which was still resting on her stomach.

“I hope they have your eyes,” Evan replied sincerely, a smile spreading across his face, “and your wit and your heart and your compassion for nature and animals.”

“Well, I hope our child has your strength and sense of good business,” Arabella replied fondly, enjoying the game of picturing their future child.

Evan chuckled softly as his hands moved to the ties of her dress; his fingers slowly starting to untether them.

“I cannot wait to see what you do with the gardens in Lancaster,” he continued, working her dress loose. “They are much grander than the ones we have here, and I imagine you will create a real Eden for us.”

“We will have lots of pets to keep our child happy, that is for certain,” Arabella agreed, her voice dropping to a more seductive tone. Her hands moved up to Evan’s neck, and she began to loosen his cravat. Once she had done so, she placed her lips softly over his pulse and felt him growl softly. As she did so again, she felt herself smile against his neck.

“Heaven help the *Ton* if the child develops both of our talents in arguing,” Evan jested, pulling her gown down over her shoulders, revealing the tantalizing swell of her breasts. He let out a low groan as he saw them and dipped his head to graze soft kisses over her cleavage.

“Well, they will certainly never be played a fool if they do,” Arabella breathed. Evan freed one of her nipples, and she gasped and pressed into him as he drew the sensitive flesh into his mouth.

Their conversation faded as their clothes continued to drop to the floor until they were completely bare. Once Evan had her last stocking stripped off, he cupped her backside in his palms

and lifted her. Arabella quickly wrapped her legs tightly around his waist, and they kissed as Evan walked them to the bed.

Epilogue



Eight Weeks Later

“**L**ovely,” the doctor murmured, nodding his head as he finished his examination, “truly lovely.” He stood up straight, cracked his back, and gave Evan and Arabella a satisfied smile.

“Well, Your Graces, I am happy to announce that your little one is coming along quite nicely,” the doctor announced, washing his hands in a basin. “I see no issues for you in the foreseeable future. By all accounts, this seems to be an incredibly healthy child.”

Arabella and Evan gave each other a look of relief and then shared a sweet kiss before they placed their hands on the small, growing bump on Arabella’s stomach. Although most men did not prefer to be in the room when the doctor came, Evan had insisted. He was still very overprotective about Arabella and the baby and now refused to go more than an hour or two without being around them.

“Thank you, doctor,” Evan replied gratefully, moving to shake his hand. “Do you know when she is due yet?”

The old doctor nodded his head happily. “Indeed, it will be a spring child for sure. Most likely April.”

He bowed his head respectfully to the couple. “Congratulations again, Your Graces. Now, if Her Grace wants to get dressed, I shall wait outside, and then we can discuss your travel arrangements. I hear you are returning to Lancaster in a few days’ time?”

Evan agreed that they were, and the doctor nodded his head matter-of-factly as he left the room. A few moments later Evan opened the door again, and the doctor re-entered. In his hand was a scribbled note which he insisted Evan give to the doctor that would be taking care of Arabella in Lancaster. He also produced a list of foods and activities that Arabella was to stay away from and insisted that they travel with multiple pillows in the carriage.

“It is of the greatest importance that your ride to Lancaster is as comfortable as possible. So I would not recommend a fast pace for your horses. Your baby is strong, but you don’t want to risk that with an upturned carriage, God forbid,” he warned.

Evan quickly promised that it would be a most leisurely journey for the both of them. After a few more minutes of discussion, and some lightly given warnings on how to protect the health of the baby, the doctor took his leave, saying he was pressed for time with another appointment.

“I believe we are all set to go, darling,” Evan announced happily, once they were alone again. Arabella smiled warmly and reached up on her toes to kiss him.

“It is all so exciting,” she replied enthusiastically, “I can’t believe that we are leaving in only a few days!”

They had wanted to be sure all was well with the baby before they departed, but in hopes that it was, they had begun making arrangements weeks ago. Evan already had builders in Lancaster working on the new greenhouse Arabella had drawn out, and already several of the animals were on their way to Lancaster. The only loose end that needed tying up was Arabella’s monkeys which she was going to discuss with Henrietta that very afternoon. She was very well-versed in their care, and Arabella was sure that she could take care of them perfectly.

“What time are Henrietta and Antony planning to arrive?” Evan asked.

“Within the next two hours,” Arabella replied, a slight frown on her face. Henrietta had been feeling unwell the last couple of weeks, and she knew that a doctor’s visit was the only thing that kept her brother and sister-in-law away from them through the entire day.

“I do hope she’s feeling better,” she added, slightly worried for her friend.

“I have no doubt that whatever is ailing her, Antony will ensure a full recovery,” Evan replied comfortingly, laying a kiss on her lips once more.

At that moment, a knock came on their door. After Evan bade them to come in, Simon appeared with a letter. Arabella had

told him of the news of his manservant and her handmaid, and like her, Evan was happy for them.

“A correspondence for Her Grace,” he announced pleasantly, holding the small silver tray out to her. Arabella thanked him as she took the envelope, and a smile spread wide on her face as she read the corresponding name.

“Oh, it’s from Leonard!” she replied happily, ripping the top open. Eagerly she read through the letter, her smile growing larger.

“How is the old dog?” Evan asked jovially.

“Quite well,” Arabella announced, her eyes still on the letter. “He has made it to Italy! Oh, and he has settled into an estate in a small coastal hamlet called Viareggio. He says he is beyond well and is positively consumed by the art and culture.”

She read further down, her smile slipping only a tad.

“Oh, but he does miss us terribly,” she added, looking up from the letter.

“I must admit I miss him a little as well,” Evan replied with a sigh. After everything had unfolded, they had all been mad at Leonard for quite some time. But as the weeks passed and he readied himself for departure, they had all been able to fathom some forgiveness, and they had sent him off with love and prayers.

“As do I. Shall I write him and tell him of our latest news?” Arabella asked, already walking to the writing desk. Evan agreed that she should, and while she wrote her missive, he spoke with Simon and Eliza about the details of their departure. Simon assured him that all was ready to go on his end, and Eliza confirmed that aside from the carriage of dresses and furniture that were to leave the next morning, all was taken care of for Arabella.

Although they had hidden it well at first, it was now quite clear to Arabella and himself that the two servants were and had been in love. Both of them had blessed the union happily, and Simon and Eliza were to be wed once they all arrived in Lancaster. Now that Evan saw them together, he wondered how he didn't notice their relationship before. The way they looked at each other reminded him of how he looked at Arabella, and he truly wished great happiness for both of them.

The evening passed quickly as they all found small odds and ends to tidy up before their departure. Soon, Simon returned to announce that Henrietta and Antony had arrived for dinner, and Arabella and Evan left for the dining room together. The moment they walked in, Arabella knew something was afoot.

Unlike the last few days, Henrietta looked better than ever. In fact, her face was practically radiating as she smiled and opened her arms to Arabella. Even Antony, Arabella noticed, had a glow about him.

“I'm so happy you are feeling better!” Arabella greeted as she warmly accepted Henrietta's hug. “Has your ailment finally left you?”

Henrietta beamed at her, giggling, and turned to share a mischievous look with her husband.

“I am much improved, sister,” she agreed, “but I’m afraid my ailment will not be cured for quite some time.”

Arabella’s brow furrowed with worry as she pulled back from Henrietta.

“Oh no, how dreadful! Do you need assistance? I’m sure we could delay our trip a few weeks if you need my help.”

Henrietta let out a bubbly laugh and shook her head emphatically.

“No darling, all will be well once it’s run its course. And, according to the doctor, I have nine months left before I am fully recovered.”

Understanding dawned on Arabella and Evan at the same time, and a round of laughter erupted from all of them. Arabella squealed and pulled Henrietta back into her arms, and Evan clapped Antony on the back and shook his hand. Congratulations were shared with everyone, and as they sat down to eat, they all talked animatedly about their future.

Henrietta and Antony had decided to stay in London until after their baby was born but promised to visit as soon as mother and baby were healthy enough to travel. Arabella promised that she would write to both of them daily to keep them informed, and Henrietta willingly agreed to do the same. To Evan and Arabella’s surprise, they discovered that Henrietta

and Antony's baby was only a couple of weeks younger than theirs, and that they would be born with less than a month between them.

As Antony and Evan discussed their futures as fathers, Arabella and Henrietta chatted excitedly about future birthday parties, family gatherings, and what they hoped for their children. By the time the dinner was over and their guests were ready to depart, everyone was overflowing with happiness.

"I cannot believe our little one will have a cousin to play with!" Arabella crowed once she and Evan were alone again. Evan chuckled, loving how happy Arabella was with their life.

"We will certainly have to host them in Lancaster often," he agreed, moving toward his wife.

"They can be raised as siblings," Arabella added, looking down at her much bigger stomach. Evan walked to where she was seated, tilted her chin up with his finger, and kissed her sweetly.

"If that is what you want and Antony and Henrietta are all right with it, then that is what you shall have," he assured her, his voice dipping into a more seductive tone.

"As for real siblings, I would very much like to give our little one many more." His grin widened handsomely. "Or at the very least commit to the practice of it."

Arabella giggled as she felt Evan lift her from the chair, and he pressed her body tightly to his as they kissed more deeply. As usual, Arabella felt the delicious tingles of desire scatter through her person at Evan's touch. She sighed as his fingers slipped into her hair, massaging her scalp as he worked her pins loose and eased the tension in her neck.

"Practice you say?" Arabella asked suggestively, pushing lightly at Evan's chest. He chuckled as he allowed her to push him back toward their bed.

"Indeed," he agreed, gently pulling her down into the mattress with him.

"Well, I am a firm believer that practice does achieve perfection," she replied playfully, sinking into his kiss.

The End?

Extended Epilogue



Would you like to know how **Arabella and Evan's** relationship evolved? Then enjoy this free complimentary short story featuring the beloved couple!

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PREVIEW:
ROMANCING HIS FAIR
DUCHESS



Chapter One



“That was his one fault, the poor old chap. He was never able to give up the drink,” Emma’s father, Baron Dames, lamented sadly.

“Yes,” Emma murmured, “I do recall how Cousin Richard liked to... *carouse*... more than was perhaps strictly necessary.” Her mind’s eye conjured up an image of her cousin Richard during the last Twelfth Night Masquerade. He was dressed as a preening peacock and held aloft a snifter of brandy, toasting the revelers and slurring his words.

“It is a God-awful shame,” the Baron retorted, allowing his emotions to consume him. “Richard was like a brother to me, and I should have known... I should have warned him that one day... one day... he would...” He succumbed to his tears. He extracted a stark white silk handkerchief from his pocket and blew his nose noisily.

Lord Dames had always been close with his cousin, the Duke of Worthington. They had affectionate mothers who had played together in their youth, and so when they gave birth to sons at approximately the same time, they flung their children together. As that had been the case, it meant when Emma and her brother had been born, they had come to think of their cousin Richard and his progeny fondly as well, and the news of his death stung all the members of their family acutely.

“Papa,” Emma said in a comforting voice as she reached for his free hand, “how could you have known that the Duke would one day drink too much and meet his d—” She cringed to finish the statement.

Her brother Nicholas had been staying with their cousins for several weeks when he had sent word that day. While all the men had gone out stalking, the Duke had taken a tumble. The specific details of what had happened and how the usually very capable hunter had been injured were murky, but Nicholas had reported that the Duke, their cousin Richard, had died an instantaneous death and that the fact that he had been drinking sherry, rather than tea, just before the outing was to blame.

“I know I could not have stopped him.” Lord Dames wept bitterly. “But I could have tried.”

The tip of the Baron’s nose was now bright red from the way he had consistently been wiping at it. The carriage bounced over a divot in the road, and Emma took a long moment to stare out the window.

We are not far from Harrow Estate now. At least, that is something.

She had always loved the home the Duke of Worthington had in the country. When she was a child, she and her family members spent many summers here. She and Nicholas used to chase her cousins Benjamin and Mary through the woods that surrounded the estate, and now, she longed to smell the fresh, earthy aroma that reminded her of those carefree summer days.

She took her hand away from her father’s and replaced it in her own lap. “I understand from Mary’s latest letter that Her Grace did try to talk some sense into His Grace. She did tell Cousin Richard that it was imprudent to drink so much before heading out with the other men and—”

“Ah, but she is the *Dowager* Duchess now, is she not?” the Baron interrupted, his voice thick with remorse. “And a fat lot of good it did her to lecture poor Richard as she did.”

“Papa,” Emma scolded him lightly, “you must not think so harshly of Her Grace. She only did what you yourself just wished you would have done.”

“I know.” Her father sniffled.

He sighed dejectedly, and they lapsed into silence for a moment. He hastily dug around in the pocket of his jacket and pulled out a wooden trinket that she did not recognize. He was always toying with some object, keeping his idle fingers busy, and she paid this fidgety gesture very little mind now, as it was a part of her father's quirks. She was accustomed to seeing him with something in his nimble fingers.

Emma had always been told she and her father looked a great deal alike, and such a comparison was inevitable, for they did have nearly identical features. Lord Dames was a small fellow with a slender frame and rounded shoulders. He had brown hair that was the color of a sparrow's wings, and the locks were just as light and wispy as the bird's feathers. For the Baron, his tresses sat atop his head, fluttering constantly, and were only capable of being tamed into a coif by applying a liberal amount of hair oil.

For Emma, her locks were the same shade and texture, but they lent themselves grandly to nearly any hairstyle and always guaranteed that several pretty tendrils would escape the braid, coils or twists so that they might frame her face. Emma and her father both had rosy cheeks, but when people looked at them, what they found most intriguing were their matching hazel eyes. They were dark with a brown ring, but inside their irises, there were spokes of green and gold. As Emma stared at her father, feeling his melancholy at the loss of his dear friend and cousin mingle with her own, she watched his hazel eyes, which were slowly becoming red-rimmed as he exhausted his tears but kept wiping at them.

"I do hope..." Emma began.

"Perhaps we should discuss the situation with Her Grace," Lord Dames started. Since they had spoken at the same time, Emma quieted her tongue dutifully and nodded at her father, letting him know he should proceed. "Yes..." he said as he cleared his throat. "Since you mentioned Her Grace and we are nearly at Harrow Estate, I think it only fitting that we prepare ourselves."

"Prepare?" Emma questioned. "I do not understand. Has the Dowager Duchess asked you... or rather us to take part in the

burial service?”

Her father shook his head impatiently and tucked his handkerchief back into his pocket. “It is nothing like that, Emma. It is just that...” He hesitated, and she could see that he was once again struggling with his emotions.

“Papa,” she urged, “what is it? Is there something I need to know before we arrive?”

“It is just that the Season is nearly upon us, Emma, and...” She could not stifle her groan, and the noise brought her father up short. “Do not take that tone with me,” he chastised her.

“Papa,” Emma argued, “I did not breathe a word. I merely displayed my distaste for the subject.” She sat back on the padded seat and ran one gloved finger listlessly along the window frame. “Forgive my reluctance, but I cannot find it within me to have the same conversation, again, with you.”

“But our circumstances have changed now, my dear,” her father reminded her. “A few days ago, you were a young lady of two and twenty who had yet to secure herself a husband. At that time, my cousin vowed to step in and give you the proper London Season we could never afford.”

Emma nodded. She knew all too well her own situation. Even though she was the daughter of a baron, Lord Dames never had a surplus of income. He could not afford to send her to London to make her debut in Society when she turned eighteen, and there had not been enough funds to dream of pursuing such gaieties during the later years as well. Both the Baron and Nicholas had tried to set her up with eligible gentlemen who lived near their own home, Dames House, but all the dinners and strolls had yielded very little. Emma did not feel a spark or connection with any of her gentlemen callers and therefore had not felt compelled to marry any of them.

But with her cousin Mary set to make her own debut in a few weeks, her father had convinced his cousin Richard to sponsor both girls. Had things not gone awry and Richard not faced his untimely downfall, Emma and her father might be traveling to Harrow Estate with entirely different purposes. She would be going to stay with the family so she and Mary could begin

taking dance lessons or perhaps having ball gowns made to their requirements. As Emma stared down at her drab black mourning dress, she hated to admit that her heart was broken. As much as she admired the Duke of Worthington and was grieved by his passing, she was also bemoaning the fact that with his demise, she also lost all hope of making a match this season.

“Yes,” Emma agreed simply, “I do not know what shall become of me now that I do not have Cousin Richard’s support.”

Her father leaned forwards in his seat, and for the first time all day, he did not look so tired or ragged. He tucked the wooden object back in his pocket, and his eyes bored into hers as they flared with excitement.

“We must make the most of the time we are to spend at Harrow Estate. You must beseech the Dowager Duchess. Ask her to sponsor you for the upcoming season.” His eyes widened hopefully. “It is nothing more than Richard promised. She may well feel obliged to act on his wishes.”

“Oh,” Emma demurred, “I am not sure that I can speak of such things at an event like this. Is it not in poor form or perhaps considered a little macabre to talk about balls and soirees while one is meant to be mourning?”

“We have little choice in the matter, my darling,” her father replied with a touch of urgency. “Had Cousin Richard died at any other time of year, we could have been more respectful in the matter and given his family the space they needed. But with the Season just a few short weeks away...” he trailed off, and Emma felt a pang in her chest.

She knew quite well that her father spoke sensibly, but it did not make the disquietude abate. She pictured the Dowager Duchess, proud and haughty as she was, and prayed that the woman would take pity on her.

“I suppose I should speak to Her Grace almost at once,” Emma said quietly. “I will want to give her ample time to think over the matter.”

“Very good,” her father praised her, then as he scooted backwards in his seat, he snickered. This seemed so out of place with his previous demeanor that Emma stared at him, wondering if he was on the verge of forfeiting his sanity to his grief altogether.

“Papa?” she ventured. “What are you thinking?”

“I was just marveling at the Dowager Duchess,” he replied as a small smile played on his lips. “She has wed three dukes in her day, and I understand when she was a young lady, she had suitors falling at her feet, offering her the world if only she would accept their hands.”

“Yes,” Emma said slowly, “I do believe Mary once told me as much.”

“But do you not see that aligning yourself with the Dowager Duchess will be fortuitous?” her father questioned as his eyes gleamed a little. “With her as your sponsor, she will ensure that you not only find a suitable husband, but she will also guarantee he is wealthy and titled.”

“Oh, Father,” Emma moaned, but the sound turned into a yelp as the carriage jerked underneath them and she nearly bounced right off her seat. “What was that?” she cried.

“Blast!” Lord Dames exclaimed. “I knew better than to trust young Morrison to drive us all the way to Harrow.” He straightened his jacket and reached for the door handle. “I will just bet he was driving too closely to those potholes, and now, we have busted a wheel.” He blew out an exasperated sigh. “I must see to it.”

“But, Papa,” she said as she put out her hand to stop him, “it is Morrison’s job to take care of the carriage. Do stay inside and...”

But her words were useless.

Her father ignored her protests completely and stepped down from the carriage. Baron Dames was known for being a bit of a tinkerer. He fancied himself an inventor and most always, even when they traveled, he carried about trinkets and gizmos, telling anyone who would listen that some day he was going to

craft something useful and change the world. She winced when she imagined her father rummaging through his trunk now, pulling out wrenches and hammers, bits and screws that might not even have proper names, all in an effort to help Morrison fix something that he was certainly capable of dealing with on his own.

After several minutes had elapsed, Emma felt exasperated, and she alighted the carriage. The sun was making its descent down the horizon, and the world was awash with purple and royal blue as the last rays of sunshine mingled with the gray clouds overhead.

“We ought to give it up for the night,” Morrison, the driver, said.

The driver wore the livery of House Dames, but he had undone the top button of his jacket, likely because he was frustrated by the situation and felt like he needed to breathe more freely. Emma looked at him and could see that he was just as annoyed as she was. His brown eyes were narrowed, and his hands were covered in mud. While he stood there glaring at the carriage wheel, her father crouched in front of the chaos, muttering to himself.

“How bad is it?” Emma asked, directing her question at Morrison.

“I am sorry, Miss Hilrow,” Morrison answered, “but this carriage won’t be going anywhere tonight.”

“Then, what are we to do?” she inquired as she pulled her shawl more tightly around her shoulders, hoping to shield herself from the crisp breeze that had picked up now that night was falling.

“There was an inn, just a quarter mile back there,” the driver replied as he cocked his head over his shoulder. “If you and Lord Dames consent to make the walk, I will accompany you. We can bed down for the night and get assistance in the morning.”

“Very well,” Emma consented to this plan. She ducked back inside the carriage quickly and plucked her reticule off the

seat. "Lead on, Morrison. It is getting awfully cold, and I do not wish to catch a chill."

He smiled politely at her. "Nor do I, Miss Hilrow."

The pair were just about to wander down the lonely road and head towards the inn Morrison had suggested when the Baron made a tutting sound.

"Just where do you think you are going?" he asked haughtily. "We can spend the night at the inn, but we must not abandon my trunk. Come, Morrison, help me to carry it."

Morrison shot Emma a look of surprise, and she felt very sorry for him. Her father could be a tad eccentric, at least as far as his inventions were concerned, and she did not envy Morrison for having to help heft the heavy trunk all the way back to the inn. She shared a sympathetic smile with him but said nothing, as there was little she could do. When her father made up his mind about something, he was very difficult to dissuade.

The trio then set forth, bracing themselves against the wind that turned almost frosty once the sun disappeared completely. The Baron and Morrison staggered along, carrying the trunk between them, and she walked next to her father, every so often holding out a hand to help steady him when he tripped over his own feet or an imaginary pebble. They reached the inn, a place called The Tinkling Bell, just as tiny stars appeared and illuminated the sky. She knew they could have made it there much earlier if her father had consented to leave his trunk, but that hardly mattered now.

"Sir... Miss..." the innkeeper, a stout little man with a balding head, greeted them as they entered the shabby wooden structure. "What can I do for you all this evening?"

The Baron dropped his end of the trunk and rummaged in his pockets.

"My daughter and I would like a room, please."

Emma made a small sound in the back of her throat, indicating to her father that she would prefer not to share a room with him but have one of her own, but he ignored her altogether.

“Just the one then?” the innkeeper asked as he ran a hand over his smooth scalp. He eyed both Emma and Morrison.

Lord Dames placed the precise number of coins on the counter that were required to secure one room and nodded. “We won’t be here long, and my man can bunk down with the other servants for the night. My daughter and I will be awake before first light, and we will not require any luxuries.”

Emma fought to keep control of her countenance.

How am I to make a good impression on the Dowager Duchess if I arrive at the estate tomorrow with the hem of my dress covered in dirt and dust?

She silently lifted her skirts and surveyed the damage. They were not so very unclean, but she knew it would not do to look shabby when she encountered the Dowager Duchess either.

“One room then,” the innkeeper said as he smacked his lips and slapped a bronze key on the countertop. “Take the steps up to the second floor. It’s the third door on the right.”

“Thank you,” the Baron grumbled, and it was then that Emma noticed his own embarrassment. The color had heightened in his cheeks, and as he picked up his trunk and turned away, he murmured, “Insufferable. If Cousin Richard had only sent me the money I needed or if one of my inventions were sold last week...”

Emma did not hear the rest of her father’s grumblings, but she knew they were much the same as they always were. He spent all their money on his projects, and that meant minor instances like this one could not be accommodated because he had not a single farthing to spare. She clutched her reticule to her stomach, thinking of the coins jingling around inside.

I have meager savings. It might be worth it to secure my own room for the night.

She had just eschewed the idea, remembering that if she was to participate in this season, it would be prudent to have a spare bit of pocket money available, when she turned to find that Morrison had already disappeared. He’d evidently taken

his leave for the evening, and her father was standing there staring at her.

“Well,” he prompted, “do be a sport and pick up the other end of this trunk, Emma. Yes... that’s a good girl.”

I have had enough of these inventions.

Inwardly, she fumed, but outwardly, she did as her father requested.

She took hold of the trunk with her free hand and gripped the handle tightly, not wanting to drop the heavy case on her toes. They tottered up the stairs, moving slowly and holding up the progress of others, who also wanted to adjourn to their rooms for the evening. By the time they made it to their room, Emma was thoroughly exhausted. But as she helped place the trunk carefully near the fireplace, she realized that her father was too enthused to rest.

“Let’s get this thing open,” he prattled. “I do believe I have just the thing that we can use to fix the carriage tomorrow morning. Yes, yes,” he continued, “if Morrison and I can repair the carriage on our own, we will not need to waste money employing the services of a...”

But Emma could listen no more. While her father continued babbling to himself, she walked directly out the open door, returned to the front desk and asked the innkeeper for the key to another room. She was forced to hand over nearly half of her precious savings, but she considered it a worthwhile investment, as having a room to herself would surely give her some reprieve... if only for the night.

She stumbled into bed, still fully clothed, and laid her head on the pillow. Emma prayed that tomorrow, even though it was likely to be a sad day full of tears and sorrow, would be slightly better than today. She settled herself comfortably and jerked the quilt upward, tucking it around her shoulders and chin. Her eyes drooped groggily, and she yawned, welcoming sleep. But just as she was about to drift away, she heard someone fumbling with the lock on the door.

There was a creaking sound, and all the fatigue of mind and body that had plagued her a moment before was replaced by terror.

Who can that be?

She quaked underneath the blankets, pulling them tighter, then willing herself to lie still as she heard the latch give way and the heavy thunk of boot heels as they fell on the uneven wooden floors.

Chapter Two



Do your best to get here as soon as possible, dear Liam. We need you. I am afraid your brothers and sister are incapable of dealing with their sorrows, and as for me, I am also beside myself with grief.

Liam read his mother's letter for what seemed like the hundredth time. He had received it a few days ago at his home in London, Kerwood Place. When he saw his mother's seal on the missive, he had been tempted to ignore it, but something deep inside his soul had prompted him to open the letter and read her words.

He took a sip of the ale he had been nursing for the last hour and gritted his teeth.

I am not even sure what I am doing here.

The letter announced the death of what he supposed was his stepfather, but he had never thought of the Duke of Worthington in such a way. After the death of his own father, his mother had married the Duke of Summerhand. He had perished... oh... it must have been almost twenty years ago, and his mother had promptly remarried once more, this time finding her true happiness with the Duke of Worthington. She had behaved just as his aunt had foreseen she would and found herself not just one husband, but another after that, too. She had given birth to three children, one who was the reigning Duke of Summerhand, and two others who were the heir and daughter of the Duke of Worthington. Liam knew the Duke of Summerhand as Noah, a young man who was relatively quiet

and always had a pensive look on his face, but he did not even know the names of his other half-siblings.

I can hardly keep up with my mother and her beaux. And now, here we are, with her outliving another husband and looking to me for support.

Liam lifted the mug of ale once more and drained it before slamming it back down on the bar. It was not that he was bitter or even that he begrudged his mother for the life she had made for herself. It was more that he saw the same story unspooling itself repeatedly. Each time, his mother had fallen violently in love with a man, had borne his children, then years later, had suffered tremendously when he had died. As she had done when it was Liam's father, she had looked to him to provide succor, but he had nothing left to give. Liam was only answering her summons to come to Harrow Estate now because... well... the answer to that question was indefinable.

"What ails ya?" the man next to him asked as he knocked back his own drink and lifted a finger to signal the barkeep to bring him another round.

Liam studiously ignored the man. His drinking companion wore battered clothing that had patches on the elbows and was frayed around the collar. His face was mottled red as if he had been outdoors fighting against the blustery winds all day. The man's eyes were glazed, and even as he looked at Liam, it was obvious he was having trouble focusing. Liam shifted in his seat, trying to put as much distance between himself and the man as possible. Even though he was feeling remorseful this evening, he had only had one mug of beer, and he was not planning to prolong his time at the bar by getting into a conversation with this patron, who was already so deep in his cups.

"Eh, come on," the man coaxed. "I can tell something's rattling away inside your mind. Why don't you tell old Coates all about it?"

Liam shook his head, trying to politely let the man know he was not interested in sharing his thoughts, abundant and perturbed as they were, but the man, presumably named

Coates, insisted. He sloshed his second mug of ale as he lifted it and took a long drink. When he lowered it back to the bar, he said, “There’s nothing you can say that I haven’t heard a dozen times, My Lord.”

Liam smarted. This man should, of course, refer to him as “Your Grace,” but since he had not bothered to share his name with the bloke yet, he could hardly fault him for making the mistake. Instead, he sat more rigidly in his seat, staring at the bottom of the glass that was still in front of him.

What will I say to my mother when I see her tomorrow?

It was that thought that had vexed him throughout his trip. As he left London far behind and made his way to the countryside, he wondered what he was meant to do. How ought he to behave? He had not known the Duke, and he was not acquainted with the man’s children, his half-siblings. But his mother’s letter had been so urgent, so desperate, that he had been compelled to step momentarily away from his own business so he could tend to her.

“We’ve all got our own troubles,” Coates continued. “Take me, for example. My wife left me three months ago, and I had to send me son off to an institution.” He raised his glass and gulped down the remainder of his ale, which was quite a feat, as the mug had been nearly full, having just been replaced by the barkeep. He wiped a hand across his mouth and belched quietly. “There’s nothing left for me now but to wander the world and spend a night every once in a blue moon drinking at one of these inns.” He tapped the bar in front of himself, indicating he was already eager for another refill. “I was hoping I might have found a kindred soul in you, My Lord.” He let loose a loud hiccup. “You seemed nearly as down in the dumps as me.”

Liam swiveled in his chair, so he was no longer facing away from Coates. He fished a few coins out of his pocket, and when the barkeep approached this time, Liam paid for his own drink as well as the ones Coates had already consumed. Coates picked up what was, to Liam’s knowledge, at least his third stein of ale, and he took a sip.

“I thank you for the kindness, My Lord. Can’t say I’ve met many who would do old Coates such a favor.”

Liam nodded. He felt sorry for the man, not just because he was spending his nights tossing back the ale and telling his story to strangers, but because this man had indeed lost everything. “I am traveling to a funeral,” he said at last.

Coates bobbed his head as if he understood the situation perfectly. “The deceased a friend of yours?”

“Not exactly,” Liam replied.

He felt the letter from his mother scorching a hole in his pocket. He did not really want to talk about his mother or the situation with his family, in general, so he thought it best to keep his answers vague.

The beer mug made a clunking sound as Coates placed it once more in front of himself. “If you can’t call the man a friend, what business have you got going to his funeral?”

Liam shrugged.

If only I could explain that to myself.

He decided to change the subject altogether and ask Coates more about his problems. “You said you dropped your son off at an institution? Is it near here?”

Coates nodded, and his eyes lit with a little fervor. “The mistress is a holy woman, Lady Patricia.” He made the sign of the cross and looked up at the rafters. “She has been sent to earth to provide for those in need, and she shelters all God’s children, just like St. Nicholas of Myra himself... er... I guess herself... as it were.” He rolled his head from side to side, clearly trying to defog his brain and gather his thoughts.

Revulsion gathered inside Liam. It was so tremendous and overwhelming that he had to gulp down the ale that was determined to be regurgitated. “Did you say Lady Patricia?” he asked, certain he had misheard Coates.

“Indeed, My Lord,” Coates replied solemnly. “She swore to take care of me boy until I can do it meself. Then, once I am back on me feet, I can go fetch him from her.”

“Best not to wait too long.” The words slipped from Liam’s mouth unbidden, but his skin crawled just hearing the mention of his aunt’s name.

Liam instinctively touched the scars on his arms, which were currently hidden by his clothes. From the time he came to live with her until he was able to leave her house and institution behind, he had served as little more than a whipping post. Lady Patricia had lashed him so many times that he had become numb to the stinging pain, but the marks, the thin white marks were still there as a haunting reminder of all the love and compassion his aunt lacked.

“Excuse me,” he muttered hastily as the compulsion to flee came upon him.

“Much obliged for the drinks, My Lord,” said Coates as he swayed in his seat, picking up his mug of ale one more time and toasting Liam.

Coates did not seem to notice the sudden tension that had risen between them. But as Liam pushed away from the bar and made his way up the stairs, he was filled with dread. During his everyday life, he was able to tuck away all thoughts of his aunt Patricia. He had never spared her a thought and had always kept his arms covered so that he did not have to look at the scars that were constant reminders of the time he had spent in her care.

But now, after his quick conversation with Coates, he thought of all the other young lads who were currently under Lady Patricia’s care. Some of them were orphans, but others must be just like Coates’s son, children who were dropped there with the hopes that someday, their mother or father would return and rescue them. For Liam, that day had never come.

Chapter Three



Emma lay there and listened to the stranger. She could not tell if it were a man or a woman.

It must be a man. Listen to the sound of his footsteps.

The only sound in the room was the quiet thumping of the boots. Emma inhaled sharply, and her nostrils were stung by a smell that was also particularly masculine. This person smelled faintly of ale, but there was also a woodsy tang. It reminded her of someone who might have gone walking in the forest near her house or had perhaps ridden on horseback through the deep woods that ran through one entire stretch of Harrow Estate.

“Blast,” the man whispered as he crossed the room, “I thought I left a candle lit.”

A candle...

Emma glanced over at the night table to the place where there was a candlestick holder, and suddenly an idea came to her. As she heard the man make a few more incomprehensible sounds, she slid close to the edge of the mattress. She stretched, reaching for the candleholder, and luckily, because she had such slim and petite fingers, she was able to loop her forefingers through the hooked handle.

All at once, she leapt from the bed and swung to face the man. She held the candle in one hand and the holder in the other. “You just stay where you are, Sir!” she threatened. Her voice did not tremble or quake. She meant to defend herself, and in

this moment of action, she was unafraid. “I have a weapon, and I warn you that if you take one step more, I will use it.”

The man made a strangled noise, but then said, “Well, if you aim to shoot me, it would be best for the both of us if you go on and do it.”

She was shocked by such a reply. “Sir? You want me to shoot you?” she questioned as her self-preservation instincts were replaced by sheer curiosity.

“Well, I cannot see any way around it,” he muttered darkly. “You have, quite literally, caught me with my pants down.”

Since Emma had been in the darkened room for so long, she did not need the light from a candle or even the gleam from the moon to allow her to see clearly. She figured that the man, having just made his way inside the small space, did not have the same luxury. But when she took advantage of her eyesight, she was awestruck. The man who had come into her room, presumably so he could steal from her, was standing there with his pants around his ankles. Quite clearly, she could see the curve of his buttocks, which were high and tight, and muscular. Without thinking about it, her eyes flitted to his front, and she saw his whole manhood on display.

She sucked in a deep breath as she just stared at him. “Sir... you—you are without your clothing.”

“Yes,” he said drolly, “one tends to disrobe when they are getting ready for bed.”

“But... but...” she faltered now.

All her bravado had evaporated as she stood there, ogling this man. She had never glimpsed the naked male form before. Had it been the light of day, or perhaps if she had been thinking more clearly and not had her reasoning muddled by everything that already unfolded today, she might have snapped out of it and looked away. But she did not.

“What are you doing in my room?” the man asked.

Somehow, he was able to ask questions and even make full statements, and that embarrassed Emma. She shook her head

to rid herself of the lusty thoughts that were racing through her brain unbidden and tried to participate in this discussion.

“This is not your room, Sir.”

“I am fairly certain it is, Miss. And I did not ask the innkeeper to send me a bedfellow for the evening. So, I am afraid that I am going to have to ask you to leave at once.”

“A—A bedfellow?” Emma cringed at the accusation. “I am no lady of the night,” she said as a fit of fury stole over her. “I am a proper lady of the *ton*.”

The man laughed then. “If you are a lady, I am a king.”

“What? What is that supposed to mean?” she questioned. She was utterly astonished by this man and his ways, and all her sensibilities smarted at the lewd implications he was thrusting at her. “You have no cause to speak to me thusly.” She sniffed and held her head up high. “I am fully clothed and, lest you forget, *I* am defending myself.”

“Yes,” the man agreed quietly. “I am to believe you are a fine lady, of good breeding, and yet you have allowed me to stand here for a great deal of time with my pants around my ankles.” He was still wearing his shirt, but when he lifted his hands and put them on his waist, her eyes did not linger on the white fabric of the shirt but rather went to his manhood once more.

“Well... well... what do you expect me to do?” she asked, plainly flummoxed by the situation. “You broke into my room late at night, and I had to defend myself.”

He snorted. “You are only carrying a candleholder.” There was a small pause, and Emma used it to swallow down the nerves that were beginning to bundle in her throat. “Why not use that candle for its proper purpose?”

“Hmm,” she murmured. She was still staring at this man, wondering at the shape of his strong thighs and feeling her insides begin to tingle with something akin to desire. She had not realized that her mouth had fallen open until she was only able to make this gentle humming sound. “H—How did you know I was carrying a candle?”

He chuckled drily. “My eyes have finally, blessed, adjusted, and I can see that your only weapon... your defense against my advances... is nothing more than a pewter candle holder.” He nodded towards her. “Do replace the candlestick in the holder and light it. At the very least, we must decide what to do about this room for the evening, and it might be best if we had a little light between us.”

His suggestion seemed sensible enough, so as she put the holder back on the nightstand, she sought the matches that would be necessary to accomplish the task. She could hear him as he made a quick, grunting noise, and as she successfully fulfilled her obligation and brought light into the room, she turned to find that he was once more fully clothed. Well... perhaps not properly clothed. He was without a vest or jacket, and his boots were still lying on the other side of the room next to the door. But he had taken the quick moment to cover himself and pull up his pants.

“There,” she said, “that is much better, is it not?”

He shrugged casually. “I was already at my ease.”

Emma highly doubted that. For the first time in her life, she understood that the clothing men and women wore was rather flimsy. Her fine skirts and petticoats seemed abundant when she was donning them, but all she had to do now was lift her skirts, and *she* would have been the one fully exposing herself to this stranger. Likewise, now that she knew what lay underneath his tight-fitting tawny colored breeches, she could not help but think about it.

“I... I...” Emma fought to regain any semblance of her composure. “I thought you said we ought to figure out what to do about this room. Perhaps we should focus on that.”

“Indeed,” he agreed.

He plopped down on the edge of the bed and gave the mattress a quick pat, indicating she should join him. She hesitated, and when she approached, she caught a glimmer of impishness in his blue eyes. She stood there, firmly rooted to the spot for a moment, and looked him over carefully.

When he was standing, he had seemed very tall, and she knew from her previous inspection that he was well built. He did not seem nearly as imposing now that he was sitting, but she could see by the way his shirt stretched across his chest that his shoulders and arms were nicely toned and muscular. His hair was very thick and a bit mussed, as though he had just run his hand through it. The strands were a dark black hue, and whether it was a trick of the darkness or the way things simply were, there almost seemed to be a blue undertone streaking throughout the long strands. But it was his eyes that drew her in and made her knees buckle. They were icy blue, almost unusually so, as the rest of his features were so dark. She stared, transfixed by those eyes until the silence between them became uncomfortable.

“Fine,” she grumbled, “I shall consent to sit with you, but do not think of doing anything untoward.”

“I would never dream of offending you,” he assured, and Emma could not tell if he was jesting with her or speaking in earnest.



Liam eyed the young woman closely as she slumped onto the bed next to him. She was so dainty that the mattress did not even sink when she finally consented to join him.

“Now,” he whispered, “tell me how you came to be sleeping in my bed.”

“This is not your bed,” she retorted, and he watched her blue eyes flare in the softly glowing candlelight. “As I already told you, I paid for this room. And it is you who have interrupted my sleep.”

“You must be mistaken,” he countered. He removed the brass key the innkeeper had given him hours ago from his pocket and held it out to her. “You see?” he said as he offered it to her so she could inspect it. “This is my room because I have the key.”

“No,” she said just as vehemently. She shuffled a little as she patted both sides of her dress, but then, she regained her confidence as she produced an identical key. “This is *my* room because *I* have the key.”

He took her key and held it up to his own. “It seems that they match.”

She snorted lightly. “That explains how you were able to use yours to unlock my door.”

He shook his head. “While this might explain how we were able to get into the same room, I still do not understand why you are here.”

She shot him a stern look. “This is room number twelve. Were you also assigned—”

“Twelve?” he interrupted. “It is not room fourteen?”

“No,” she replied brusquely.

“Ah... yes,” he muttered, “now we have come to the crux of the trouble. It seems I am to blame for all this, as I meant to go into room number fourteen, but here I am, disturbing you... barging in on a room that you say you have paid for and...” He had been watching her intently, but now, he took in just how lovely she was, and that muddled his thoughts. “You said you were a proper lady of the *ton*?”

“Yes,” she answered stiffly, “I did say as much.”

“Well, tell me this,” he continued, “if you are just as you say, why are you in this room alone? Are you traveling alone with no chaperone?”

“Of course not,” she replied as she shook her head. “We both know that would be improper.”

“Well put,” he agreed. “But...” He paused as he searched for the right way to phrase his next question. “I can see that you are not a green girl, but you have not quite reached spinsterhood either. Are you married?”

“No,” she replied. She had been holding her hands together in her lap, but he saw the way her fingers flexed uncomfortably as she answered that question.

He persisted. "But if you are unmarried, why have we not met before? I live in town throughout the year and have been known to attend many soirees and parties that are held during the Season. If you are exactly who you say you are, our paths would have surely crossed before."

The young woman bit her full lower lip and dropped her gaze. But then, she rallied, lifted her chin and returned his question with one of her own. "How can you be so very sure we have not already met?"

He snickered. "Dear lady, if I had met someone like you, I would have remembered it."

"Someone like me?" she echoed, clearly not taking his words for the compliment he meant them to be.

"Well... yes," he replied. "You are beautiful, and you seem to be well-spoken. Had we been introduced, or if I knew your family, I would have recalled your name at once. Moreover," he proceeded, "you would have recognized me and not allowed me to stand with my pants dangling about my ankles."

He could not be entirely sure, as the singular candle did not illuminate everything, but he thought he saw her cheeks color with embarrassment. "You surprised me," she explained at length. "That was all."

"Are you sure?" he asked as he placed a hand on her knee.

It was a challenge of sorts. He knew now that she was not, as he first thought, a painted lady, but she did not seem exactly coquettish, either. He was fascinated by this young woman whom he did not know, but also who had not shied away from glancing at him when he stood there stark naked in front of her.

She gasped and swatted his hand away. His sleeves, which he had undone earlier, hung loosely, and as he moved, the fabric flapped, revealing the thin scars on his arms. He hastened to cover them once more, but even as he did, he noticed that her eyes were locked on those marks.

"What happened to you?" she asked.

"Nothing," he responded too quickly.

“But those scars...” she whispered. “Do... do your arms hurt?”

“No.” That was mostly the truth. The physical pain had long since abated. It was the mental anguish that came from reliving the horror of what his aunt had done to him that still plagued him. “I am fine.”

“But—” she insisted, and now it was she who was reaching for him. She laid her soft hand on his forearm, and her fingers moved deftly towards the cuffs of his shirtsleeves.

“Miss,” he said quietly, “I thought you were a proper lady of the *ton*, not one who would make such a claim in one breath and would aim to undress a man in the next.”

Her fingers stilled, and she turned her head so that she could look at him squarely. Their eyes locked. “I was not going to undress you,” she uttered stiffly. “I simply wanted to get a better look at—”

“But you should have already had your fill this evening,” he interrupted in an attempt to shift the course of the conversation once more.

He did not want to dwell on his past any longer this evening, nor did he wish to speak of what had come before with this stranger. Instead, he wanted to seize this opportunity. A lovely young woman was already in his room. She had glimpsed his naked body, and while she had allowed him the chance to clothe himself once more, she had not slipped away yet. She sat very still right next to him maintaining eye contact.

Her hand on his arm was suddenly filled with warmth. “I should not have looked at you as I did, Sir. Please forgive me.”

“There is no need to apologize, Miss,” he said simply. “It is not often one finds a woman who is so intrigued by the male form.” He paused before adding teasingly, “Perhaps we should satisfy your curiosity and make the very best of this situation.” He cocked his head to the side, indicating the bed they were sitting on, and quickly, she removed her hand from his arm.

“I cannot... I will not even entertain such a notion,” she said as she looked away from him.

“But you want to?” he countered. Pressing his luck perhaps a little, he scooted nearer to her, making it so their thighs touched. “I saw the way you looked at me, Miss. Either you know precisely how to seduce a man, or you are a maiden. Which one is it?”

Her mouth dropped open, and he had to stifle the laugh that bubbled in his throat. “I... You... You should not speak to me like this.” She leapt from the bed, but he moved just as quickly. He wrapped his arms around her. She had been about to take a step away from him, but with his arms encircling her, she was unable to move forwards. Instead, she fidgeted and turned, then they stood there just staring at one another. “Let me go, Sir.”

“I could,” he jested, “but where would you go? We have already established that this is your room.”

“It *is* my room,” she said defiantly, “and I demand that you release me.”

He slackened his grip on her, giving her the opportunity to step easily away from him, but she did not move an inch. “Miss,” he whispered as he lifted a hand to brush away an errant lock of her feathery brown hair. “I have done as you requested.”

She licked her lips, and as she did, he interpreted this movement to mean she wanted him to kiss her. He leaned forwards and got so close to her that he closed his eyes when she pushed him away.

“I am confused,” she breathed.

“That makes two of us,” he grumbled. Since the shove she had given him had been very weak, he still stood there with his hands loosely holding her, and she began to relax in his arms. “Miss... might I ask, would it be so very terrible if we shared a kiss?”

“We cannot,” she answered immediately.

He lifted his hand and used the pad of his thumb to trace the smooth curve of her cheek. She inhaled deeply as he brushed his fingers down the slope of her neck and allowed just the tips

to dance along the neckline of her dress. “What about now?” he asked roguishly.

She sighed and murmured, “I am intrigued... and perhaps... very willing.”

“Yes,” he agreed, “we both are.”

This time, when he leaned towards her, she did not shy away or push back against him. Instead, she melted in his arms, and as he pressed his lips against hers, he was gratified to feel the way she responded to his touch. Her arms went around his waist, and as he used the tip of his tongue to open her mouth further, she moaned loudly.

“Emma!” the sound of a man, out in the hallway, shouting startled Liam. “Emma! Are you out here?”

“My father!” the young woman squeaked as she ended the kiss abruptly. Her lips were still right up against the man’s, and the warmth of her breath flitted across his face.

“*You* are Emma?” Liam asked, and he was immediately annoyed with himself for posing this question, which had such an obvious answer. But to be fair to himself, the kiss with the fair Emma had been intoxicating, and after all he had been through tonight, he was allowed to take a moment in which to recover his wits.

Emma nodded. “Papa said we would need to leave early in the morning, but—” Her words halted as she tipped her head towards the window. “Look... I can see the first signs of day peeking through the curtains.”

Liam released his hold on her then and turned to look at that which she had just indicated. The heavy drapes that were blocking the windows were split in the middle, allowing just a crack of daylight to filter into the room. As he watched, a miraculous thing happened. The space, which had been dark and almost alluring the night before, brightened. When he swiveled back to her, he saw an alarmed look on her face.

“Emma!” her father yelled.

“I must go,” she said hastily.

Liam dropped his arms from around her waist.

“Not yet,” he begged. “Please just stay a moment longer.”

“Emma!” the Baron’s voice reverberated, and Liam wondered if he was right outside their door.

But that did not make sense. If the Baron knew where his daughter was staying, he would have simply knocked on the door and said her name one time. He would not be making all this commotion, likely waking all the other guests as he searched for her.

“I cannot,” Emma said quietly.

“But... will I ever see you again, *Emma*?” Liam asked, saying her name aloud, relishing the way the word rolled off his tongue.

“I don’t know,” she answered. Just as Liam was about to reveal his own name and beg her to seek him out the next time she was in London, Emma’s father shouted her name again. “I must go, but... when I open this door, do me the courtesy of hiding. I do not wish for my father to know I have spent the night in here... with you and...”

“Of course,” Liam said, trying to infuse his words with politeness.

He had been toying with her a little, lightly jesting with her about her behavior and the way she had stared at him when she saw his manhood. But now, he felt tremendously sorry for her. He knew the restrictions that governed young ladies such as her. While he might be allowed to enjoy a tumble with any lady of his choosing, she, who had only taken a quick look at him and shared a hasty kiss, would have her entire reputation ruined if anyone were to see him inside her bedchambers.

Want to know how the story ends? Tap on the link below to read the rest of the story.

[Romancing his Fair Duchess](#)

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About the Author

Born and raised in rural Louisiana, Ava's rebellious nature would always find her riding her horse through vast farmlands or lying under a tree, getting lost in one of her favourite historical romances. Always itching for adventure, she was only nineteen when she decided to embark on her biggest adventure and travel through Europe.

She studied art and theater in London, where she met several people that filled her with valuable experiences. Taking part in a writing competition upon her professor's encouragement, she realised that this was what she always wanted to do. Married to that same professor a few years later, she decided to return to her roots to settle down and write about her favourite era.

Let yourselves be lured into an intense experience of desire and passion, alongside irresistible Lords and seductive Ladies of the Regency Era. Ava's skilled writing hand will throw you back in time, when tales were told and songs were sung...

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