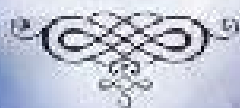




COBALT FAIRY  
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# Sinfully Famed

*by the* Duke

SCARLETT  
OSBORNE

# SINFULLY TAMED BY THE DUKE

A STEAMY REGENCY ROMANCE



# SCARLETT OSBORNE



# CONTENTS

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

[A Thank You Gift](#)

[Love to Read?](#)

[About the Book](#)

[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](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Chapter 33](#)

[Chapter 34](#)

[Chapter 35](#)

[Chapter 36](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Extended Epilogue](#)

[Also by Scarlett Osborne](#)

[Preview: A Duke to Save Her](#)

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[About the Author](#)

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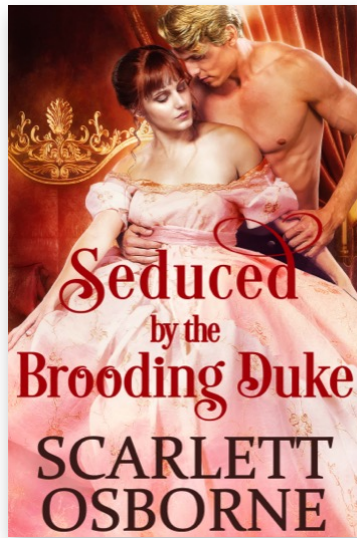


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## ABOUT THE BOOK

*“Despite my better judgment, I cannot seem to get enough of you...”*

Lady Anna takes pride in her inability to fit in. She will never be proper, she will never wed, and she will be herself. That is her vow.

When Duke Derek is approached by a few concerned men of the ton and pressured to talk some sense into the wild, improper, provocative Lady Anna, he thinks little of it.

Until her fiery mouth touches his, and his resolve comes crumbling down. Even with his heart now at stake, he knows one thing: she will be the one to tame him.

# CHAPTER 1



*I*t was a perfect day for walking.

The golden sun shone bright and warm in the cloudless sky; an endless expanse of serene blue for as far as the eye could see. Birds of all colors and types seemed to recognize the rarity of such a day, as they flocked together in droves and flew overhead. Some sang their song while others simply basked in the English summer.

And of course, there were people too, dozens if not hundreds of them, choosing to take advantage of the day's gorgeous weather by heading out from their homes, stretching their legs, and socializing.

Amongst it all was Lady Anna Lewis, relishing how lovely the start of the season was turning out to be. She had worried it might be a wet summer, one of those warm yet dreary seasons that England was known for. But if today was anything to go by, she predicated it was going to be a most wonderful summer indeed...

“What are you smiling about?” Lady Eloise asked Anna. She strolled happily beside her, hands clasped, head turning slightly as she looked about the park.

“Am I smiling?” Anna responded coyly.

“Yes,” Lady Eloise said pointedly.

“And is that a problem?” Anna shot back as her smile turned to a grin. Oh, how she enjoyed teasing Eloise. Even if Eloise didn’t enjoy it as much. “Your best friend smiling? Quick, someone, help!” she pretended to call out. “Lady Anna is enjoying herself!”

“Oh, stop it,” Lady Eloise waved her down. “You know what I meant. It’s not the fact that you’re smiling. It’s the way you’re doing it.”

“With my lips, you mean?”

“With that look in your eyes,” Lady Eloise corrected, narrowing her own eyes as if in warning. “Like a child who’s been left alone in a room full of sweets, and he’s wondering how many he can steal for himself before someone notices.”

“What an odd analogy.”

“You know what I mean!” Lady Eloise exclaimed. Although she was smiling now also, unable to help herself as Anna often had that effect on her. “You’re up to something, Anna. And don’t tell me that I’m imagining things.”

“I would never say that” Anna gasped. But then her eyes flashed and her grin widened. “Although you are imagining

things.”

“I am not —”

“You are,” Anna cut her off smartly. She raised an eyebrow at her best friend, held her smirk for a moment as if daring her to interrupt, and then continued. “I’m just in good mood is all. Surely, you won’t begrudge that of me?”

Lady Eloise narrowed her eyes at Anna. “All right...” she kept her eyes narrowed, flicking them up Anna as if trying to see through the lie. “But I promised to meet you today under the assurance that you would behave yourself. So, don’t even think about —”

“About what?”

Lady Eloise rolled her eyes. “Anything,” she said. “Don’t think about doing anything.”

“That’s going to be rather challenging,” Anna laughed. “You might as well tell me to stop breathing.”

“You know what I mean!” Lady Eloise exclaimed again, her frustration now starting to show. “Oh! I don’t know why I ever listened to you in the first —”

“Eloise, it’s fine,” Anna calmed her friend. “Truly, I’m just happy to be out and about. Not to mention...” she indicated to the scene, how serene and picturesque it was. “... it really is a lovely day too. Can you blame me for smiling so?”

She was right, it was a lovely day to be sure, and Anna wasn't lying about that, at least. Although to be fair, she wasn't lying about her intent either. Truly, her smile was on account of how perfect the day was, how glad she was to be taking advantage of it, and nothing more. She hated being cooped up in her house all by herself, with no one to speak with but the servants. That wasn't living, or anything close to.

But as to Anna's intent? And Eloise's belief that she must be up to no good? Well... that remained to be seen.

For now, however, walking was all that Anna had on her mind. She and Lady Eloise had found themselves in Hyde Park, it was just getting toward midday, and with no further plans for this evening, Anna would have been happy to spend hours doing laps about the busy parkway. It was a simple plan, a wholesome one that shouldn't have had Lady Eloise feeling so worried. Although to be fair to her best friend... where Anna was concerned, often, drama just seemed to find her.

Not that this was ever her fault, mind you. Or at least not entirely.

"I suppose not," Lady Eloise conceded. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be."

"I am," she sighed and shook her head. "I shouldn't judge."

"Especially for something as innocent as smiling."

“Innocent and Lady Anna Lewis,” Lady Eloise said with a sly smile of her own. “Two things that don’t usually go together.”

“Like England and sunny weather,” Anna agreed. “And yet here we are, living it. Truly, anything can happen, Eloise. You need to stop being so closed minded.”

“I am not!” she exclaimed, but then caught the way that Anna was laughing. Her face dropped and then she scrunched it into a ball. “I don’t know why I bother.”

“Oh, because you secretly love it.” Anna took her best friend’s hand and held it close as they walked together. “Don’t say that you do not. Why, if you weren’t here with me right now, you’d likely be... somewhere else.”

“Likely.”

“With your father,” Anna corrected. “Meeting boring old men, pretending to find their boring old stories interesting, while acting as if you want nothing more than to live the same boring old life that they are.”

“That’s a bit of an exaggeration, isn’t it?”

“Not at all,” Anna said, chin pointed high, tone suddenly turned serious. “Who was the last man your father tried to set you up with? Remind me?”

Lady Eloise’s face dropped. “Lord Barneby.”

“That’s the one! And how would you best describe him?” she looked pointedly at her friend as the two walked side by side.

Eloise looked away and muttered under her breath. “Boring.”

“Told you.”

“But they’re not always!” she then defended. “Obviously, there is always going to be one or two suitors who don’t turn out to be what you might hope. But eventually, like fresh cream, one will rise to the top. That’s what courting is all about.”

“Is it now? I thought it was about servitude.”

“Anna...” Eloise sighed.

“What else would you call it?” she defended. “Being forced to marry a man whom you hardly know or care for, all so that your father might be able to advance socially. So that he might be able to brag to his friends as if he’s the one getting married! All the while caring not one whit for how you, his daughter is feeling. If that’s not servitude, then I don’t know what is.”

“Can we not talk about this,” Eloise muttered.

“Why? Is it because I’m making so much sense?”

“No, it’s because you’re depressing me,” Eloise stated rightly. “Why, the moment you began to speak a cloud appeared on the horizon. See —” she indicated toward a sole cloud gently drifting across the sky. “Soon it will blot out the sun, the plants will wither and die, the birds will stop singing and —”

“The world will implode. Yes, I’ve been told many times. Who would have guessed that my refusal to get married could have such a large impact.”

“That just shows you how important it is,” Lady Eloise said with a grin so smug one would think that she just won the argument.

Anna huffed at her friend but said nothing. This was a conversation that the two had engaged in many times, and it always ended the same way. Eloise would fawn over her desire to get married. Anna would argue against it, stating in no uncertain terms that she had no intent whatsoever to be courted. Eloise would debate. Anna would deny. And the two would talk in circles until Eloise eventually forced a topic change.

And it wasn’t that Anna was against the concept of marriage entirely. She wasn’t a fool, and she knew that it served its purpose like anything else. She was even willing to admit that for some women— her best friend for example— it made perfect sense. But where her own future was concerned, her own perceptions about what she needed and wanted in her life to feel fulfilled and happy, marriage was the very last thing on her mind.

“So,” Lady Eloise then began. “I suppose that means you’re not attending the ball tonight?”



“Is that a serious question?”

“No,” Eloise shrugged. “But this is a silly conversation, so I figured it best to play the part.”

“Ha!” Anna laughed and shook her head. “All right, all right, I’ll stop. But only because the day is so lovely. I’d hate to ruin it.”

“Like you ruin everything else, you mean?”

“Exactly.”

The two women continued to walk arm in arm through the park, chatting gaily, enjoying the fact that they were out and about rather than cooped up at home. They wandered along a path made of gravel that skirted about the edges of the large park and was lined on both sides by hedges and trees to block out the bustling cityscape that surrounded the park.

It was a busy day today too, with others taking advantage of the weather in much the same way that Anna and Eloise were. As they walked, Anna took note of a few faces that she recognized. She nodded and smiled at them, and most did the same back. A few though, they averted their eyes as if to look at Anna might curse them.

That was how it had always been with Anna. She was a lady of the *ton*, the daughter of a Marquess, and thus a member of high society that few were privileged to. But that didn’t define her, nor did it influence the way she acted. Forever a free

spirit, she found it difficult to balance the two sides of herself; the fun side that didn't care what others thought, and the aristocratic side that was forced to bend just so that she might not accidentally upset somebody.

They walked for another twenty minutes, and Anna had no doubt that her friend was glad for how effortless the day was turning out to be. But their path was slowly leading them toward a large pond near the park's edges and that was where things became... well, they took a turn that could only ever happen where Anna was involved.

"What's that?" she asked as she spied the pond in the distance.

"What?" Eloise asked, her body stiffening.

"There..." Anna indicated toward the pond where a group of young men were splashing about and calling to one another. "The commotion."

Lady Eloise came to a sudden halt and pulled her arm free from Anna's. "Let's go back."

Anna spun about and cocked an eyebrow at her friend. "Back? Back where?"

"In that direction," Eloise said and pointed back toward the main body of the park. "It's getting warm and I thought we might find a tree to —"

“Nonsense,” Anna waved her down. She glanced back toward the pond, eyeing the men as they dived into the water, screaming, and laughing the whole while. Oh, how fun it looked. “Let’s go take a look, shall we?”

“Anna...” Eloise sucked through her teeth. “We really shouldn’t...”

“Why not?” Anna reached for her friend’s hand. “I just want to get a better look.”

“At what?” Eloise sighed. “Boys playing in the water? It’s exactly what it looks like.”

“Then we should have nothing to worry about.” She kept her eyebrow raised, as well as keeping a firm grip on her friend’s arm.

Eloise grimaced as she looked down the path and toward the pond. She eyed the boys playing as if they were demon spawn, having somehow escaped from the bowels of hell. She clicked her tongue, wagged her head back and forth, looked as if the last thing she wanted to do was go anywhere near them. Anna loved Eloise, but sometimes the woman could be a real prude.

“Oh, come on,” Anna sighed and pulled her friend down the path. “You really need to learn how to loosen up.”

“I really don’t...”

Despite Eloise's protests, she allowed Anna to pull her down the path and toward the pond. She might have acted like they were doing a most dangerous thing, but that was just Eloise getting carried away with her own paranoia. All Anna wanted to do was watch from a closer distance, maybe splash a hand in the water if she was feeling it...

...even Anna didn't believe that. Although she did try and convince herself that was the case, for the sake of Lady Eloise, if nothing else.

Unfortunately, her best friend was right about her. Where Anna tried to do the right thing, tried to be a proper lady of the *ton* that her deceased parents might be proud of, there was a fire within her, and there always had been. It burned hot and pushed her to do and say things that she probably shouldn't. It brought a side out in her that where to most it might seem harmless enough, to other members of the *ton* it was considered positively scandalous.

Not that Anna minded, of course. After all, what was life without a little bit of fun and whimsy?

## CHAPTER 2



There were five boys playing by the edge of the pond. Although they weren't boys so much as they were young men, each in their early twenties, and each appearing far more roguish— and handsome for that matter — the closer that Anna came to them. They had their shoes off, their pants pulled up above their knees, and their white linen shirts unbuttoned and dripping wet.

“Anna...” Eloise hissed as the two women approached. “We really shouldn't be —”

“Oh, stop being such a worrier,” Anna cut her off. She kept a firm grip on Eloise's hand, forcing her to follow. “It'll be fine.”

Two of the five men were already in the pond. They stood knee deep as they ran their hands through the water, splashing playfully and laughing as they did so. The other three stood by the edges, but were already dripping wet, looking as if they'd already been for a dip and were now enjoying the warmth of the sun on their moistened skin.

All five were laughing merrily among themselves, not a care in the world. But then one of them saw Anna and Eloise

approach. He indicated to his friends, pointed down the path, and as one, all five stopped what they were doing, looked up, and grinned for the fun they were about to have.

“Anna...” Eloise protested again.

Anna ignored her friend as they came closer. But she held onto her arm, knowing Eloise well enough to know that she would happily turn and flee the moment she was able.

“Hello there,” Anna called to the men as they came within distance. “This looks like fun.”

Anna could see right away that the five men weren't lords. From the looks of things, they were commoners, most likely the types of men who worked for and under people like Anna. This alone should have been enough to see Anna come to an abrupt stop and turnabout. Really, she should have known better than to even think of approaching and speaking with them, let alone doing so!

“Ello!” one of them spoke. He was the tallest of the five, the broadest in the shoulders and easily the most striking. His hair was dark black and long, his chin was square, and his lips were thick and pouty. “What are you two ladies doin' 'ere?”

“We're just leaving,” Eloise said. She tried to pull Anna away, but Anna refused to be pulled.

“We saw you playing by the water,” Anna explained as she continued toward them. “And we thought we'd see what it was all about.”

“All about?” the leader of the five men frowned. He looked toward his friends and chuckled. “What does that mean?”

“Well... just... it looks like fun,” Anna explained. “And we wanted a better look is all.”

“Fair enough,” the leader shrugged. “Come take a look then.” He indicated for the two ladies to come closer. The two men who were in the water were quick to hurry out and join the other three.

“Anna...” Eloise hissed. “We really shouldn’t...”

Anna ignored her friend as she came closer to the five men. She could see now that each of them was handsome in their own way. Or perhaps a better term was rugged? Unshaven and messy hair, dirty clothes that they probably wore several days in a row, and cocky smiles that spoke of mischief.

“How’s the water?” Anna asked as she reached them. She tried acting brave, even cool as she flicked her eyes across each man. But her heart pounded terribly inside her chest.

“Refreshing,” the leader of the five men said with that same grin. He looked at his friends, pumped his eyebrows, and then was back on Anna. “Although don’t take my word for it, Miss.”

Now, it needs to be said that Anna didn’t make a habit of approaching strange men in parks and speaking with them. In fact, she knew what she was doing to be a most bizarre

practice, something that no lady should ever be seen to do. Especially without a chaperone of some kind! But she was feeling frustrated by her friend Eloise, and it might have sounded silly, but she was doing this as much to prove a point as anything else.

And besides, there was a thrill that came with it. Five men. Each soaking wet. Half-naked too, whilst out in public. Anna spent most of her time speaking with lords and other aristocrats and knew for a fact that not a single one would ever do such a thing.

She had used the word ‘boring’ earlier to describe the lords with whom she was constantly forced to socialize. That description was apt, and she couldn’t help but wonder at the odds of finding a lord who would happily strip down and go for a swim in a public setting like this. Astronomical, she was sure.

“All right then,” Anna shrugged. “I won’t.” She let go of Eloise’s arm and started toward the water’s edge.

“Anna!” Eloise snapped. “What are you —”

“I’m just testing it,” Anna said back to her. She then continued forward, letting the five men part so that she might get closer to the edge of the water. Once there, she crouched down and dipped her hand into the pond. It was cool to the touch, sending a small shiver up her arm. “Oh,” she said. “That is delightful.”

“It’s nice in is what it is,” the leader agreed. He then looked to Eloise. “Are you gonna join your friend, Miss?”



Eloise's eyes flashed anger. "I most certainly am not!"

"Suit yourself," he said with a shrug. "Although it's better in than out."

Eloise rolled her eyes then and crossed her arms over her chest. "I'll have to take your word for it." She was then on Anna. "Lady Anna," she hissed. "We need to be going. Now!"

"Where?" Anna turned back.

"Anywhere!"

Anna scrunched her face. She looked to Eloise, saw the panic in her, but then glanced toward the five men, each of whom were beaming their delight. "No... I don't think so. Not yet."

"Anna!"

"She wants to go in," the leader chuckled.

"Do it!" one of the other men cheered. "Dive in."

"Jump in!" another agreed. "Or we'll push you!"

This sent the men howling. A few cheeky elbows were thrown. More than one curious eye lingered on Anna, no doubt

picturing the Lady diving headfirst into the pond.

And as for Anna? Truly, a part of her actually wanted to take up the challenge.

She stood herself back up straight and patted her dress down. She was wearing a blue gown today, although it was a light fabric on account of the weather. Furthermore, she had recently taken to wearing dresses with lower necklines than what most others of her station wore, and that was simply because she liked the way that they looked on her... and the way that others looked at her when she was in them.

Anna was attractive, and she was more than aware of the fact. She was tall for a woman, with sharp, dark features that had some guessing her to be foreign. Possibly Spanish. And where she was also slim, she was blessed with thick thighs, ample buttocks, and a heaving bosom that she was only too used to being stared at. And this went double when she wore her low-cut dresses.

Lady Eloise bulged her eyes at Anna, doing all she could to indicate that it was time to leave. And while Anna knew that she should... that pesky voice on her shoulder, the one that often got her into trouble, was busy persuading her to do otherwise.

“You’ll push me?” Anna gasped as if offended.

“Maybe?” the leader said. He crossed his thick arms over his burly chest and smirked at Anna as his eyes flicked up and down her body — pausing on her chest for longer than what was appropriate. “If you leave us no other option.”

“Oh, well if that’s the case...” Anna bit into her lip. A quick glance at her terrified friend and she became taken by impulse. “I suppose I’d better dive in.”

The men whooped and howled at this. One of them charged right at Anna, but then ducked around her and dove into the water as if showing her how. A second later and another did the exact same.

“Anna!” Eloise stormed up to Ana and took her by the hand. “Seriously! We have to leave.”

“Why?” Anna pulled her hand away. “It’s just water, Eloise.”

“You know that’s not what I mean! We can’t —” she sucked through her teeth, glanced at the men watching, and then leaned in and whispered. “We can’t be seen to be speaking with these men! Let alone —”

“What? Going for a swim?”

“Yes!”

Anna frowned at her best friend and pretended for a moment to consider. But then she grinned and her eyes flashed. “I suppose you better be off then.”

Eloise’s face dropped. Then she steeled herself as her cheeks flushed red from anger. “You want to go swimming in the middle of Hyde Park? Fine!” she threw her hands in the air.

“But when you get kidnapped and go missing, do not come crying to me.”

“Oh, they’re not going to kidnap me. Are you?” she looked to the five men.

“Not at all,” the leader assured her.

“See, told you,” Anna said.

Eloise looked as if she was about to have a heart attack. She glanced about the park, eyes searching for help — something that might have Anna changing her mind. But then she seemed to realize that this was Lady Anna Lewis with whom she dealt, and once she had her mind set on something, there was little one could do to change it.

“Fine!” Eloise threw her hands in the air. “Have it your way. But I am leaving.”

“All right,” Anna shrugged. “But I’ll pop by tomorrow? You can tell me how the ball went.”

Eloise scrunched her face in a rage. “You’re lucky that tomorrow I’ll really want someone to speak with. Otherwise, I might never want to see you again.”

“Perfect,” Anna beamed. “Speak then.” She waved goodbye to her friend.

Eloise didn't stick around after that. Shaking from anger, she turned on her heel and stormed away from the pond and back toward the park. Not once did she look over her shoulder either, which told Anna that her best friend was truly furious with her. But no matter, she'd get over it soon enough.

Anyway, right now, Anna had other things to concern herself with.

"All right," she started as she bent down and removed her shoes. "How do I do this?"

"What do you mean?" the leader of the five men chuckled.

"Well... do I just dive in?" she asked. "Do I wade in? Is there a method?"

The leader frowned at Anna as if he thought she was joking. When he saw that she wasn't, he shook his head, rolled his eyes and started toward her. Anna seized up when she thought he was going to manhandle her, but then he stepped around her and started into the water. Up to his ankles at first, then he spun about, winked right at Anna, and fell back into the water with a crash.

The other men soon followed, howling as they dove into the pond without care or thought.

Lady Anna Lewis wasn't like other women of the *ton*. Oh sure, she looked like them, she was born into the same world as them, and things were expected of her because of this. But

she didn't care for any of that. She never really had and couldn't see a reason to start now.

Besides, the day was a warm one, her mood was piqued, and sometimes she liked to do things that she shouldn't simply because she enjoyed testing boundaries, pushing limits, and causing a little controversy. And where this might limit her options where suitors were concerned, not to mention muddying her image in the eyes of the *ton*, the simple fact was that Anna did not care.

As such, and without giving it a second thought, Anna stepped toward the water's edge, hiked up her dress, took a moment to ready herself, and then dived headfirst into the water.

## CHAPTER 3



Derek Morton, Duke of Elsbrook, wasn't entirely sure what it was that he was looking at. Oh sure, he could describe what he was seeing well enough. And on the surface, it might have seemed benign, even normal to some. But he knew it to be anything but. Hence, his confusion.

It was the beginning of summer, and Derek had decided to give work a miss today and go for a walk in Hyde Park. He'd been slaving away for the past month in an effort to distract himself and he felt that he had earned it. Nothing too exciting to be fair, but just a chance to get out and stretch his legs a moment and take advantage of the sun.

What was more, and on days like this one especially, Hyde Park was known to be a hotspot for other lords and ladies of the *ton* to gather. Even now, as Derek strolled along the path, he spied several whom he knew well. A few he stopped and spoke with, others he simply nodded his head as he kept at it. There was a ball on tonight, and he knew it to be common practice for many lords and ladies to come here first so they might start laying the groundwork for connections later.

Not that Derek cared for such things. At thirty-three years of age, Derek was more than aware that his time had come and gone as far as romance was concerned. When he was a

younger man, he'd wanted nothing more than to meet a woman with whom he might fall in love, court for some months, and then settle down and marry so he might start the next phase of his life.

But that was years ago. He was twenty-one when he attended his first ball, green as a blade of grass, eyes glazed over with faux images of what romance should be like. But since then, he'd failed to meet even one lady that might catch his attention long enough for him to pursue them. Not a single one! As such, Derek had long since given up on such things. That was for younger men, those who were full of optimism and innocence.

And so Derek walked alone, happy to be distracted by his own thoughts. He was about an hour into his walk when Derek spied something that forced him to come to a sudden halt, stunned by how shocked he was and what he was witnessing.

Again, he knew what it was, technically. But that didn't mean he understood it.

"It's disgraceful, isn't it?" a voice spoke suddenly from just behind Derek.

Derek spun about and spied Rowan Reeves, Marquess of Ashville strolling casually toward him. He was a contemporary of Derek's, albeit a few years older. Tall and imposing, serious of temperament and no-nonsense, he was the type of lord whom Derek should have gotten along with famously, one who was a strict follower of the rules and regulations that dictated the way those of the *ton* were supposed to live their lives.



But he was also a little dry, very serious, and somewhat judgmental. Whenever Derek spoke with Ashville, he felt as if he was being assessed and weighed, as if one wrong thing said might have the lord suddenly turn on him.

“What is?” Derek asked as Lord Ashville came to a stop beside him.

“Oh, you know,” Lord Ashville sighed. He then nodded his head across the way and curled his lip as he indicated to the exact thing that Derek had been staring at. “Positively disgraceful.”

Derek followed his eyeline and nodded his agreement. “It is a little... odd.”

“Odd? That’s one way of putting it,” Lord Ashville sneered. “I prefer the word embarrassing.”

“For whom?”

“All of us,” Lord Ashville emphasized. “I’ve been saying it for some time now. Where it might all look to be in good fun, actions such as this reflect poorly on us all, Your Grace. Surely, you can see that?”

Derek frowned at the lord’s words as he continued to look ahead. “Yes, I suppose it is a tad uncouth.”

“Uncouth is having one too many brandies in a public setting,” Lord Ashville countered. “This is something else.” His thin

lips curled even further and for a moment, Derek wondered if the lord might be ill.

It was one Lady Anna Lewis to whom the two men were referring. And not just them either, but a quick glance about the park and Derek noticed several others watching on in a state of both confusion and disgust. From the looks on their faces, one might assume that Lady Anna had stripped down to her drawers and chosen to parade about for the whole *ton* to see.

Not that what she was doing was much better than that, mind you.

For reasons that Derek could not comprehend, Lady Anna had decided to go for a swim in the pond. Worse than that, she had chosen to go for a swim in the pond whilst wearing her gown. Worse than that, she had chosen to do so with a handful of common men, none of whom were lords — not that this would make it any better — none of whom should have even looked at Lady Anna in public, let alone gone swimming with her.

It was just so bizarre. Derek knew of Lady Anna, of course — there was hardly a person of the *ton* who wasn't aware of her peculiarities. Unmarried at the age of twenty-nine, she was that rare breed of lady who appeared to have zero interest in becoming so. But this wasn't what made her so strange. From what Derek had seen and heard, Lady Anna had a nasty habit of doing things that she shouldn't do, that she should know better than to think of doing. Swimming in ponds in public, for example. But more than that, she didn't seem to care! About marriage, social expectations, or what anyone thought of her.

“And what is she wearing?” Lord Ashville continued.  
“Honestly, the woman is a travesty!”

“Oh, she’s just having some fun,” Derek said in her defense. Not that he knew why he was defending her. Although Lady Anna had the right to do what she pleased, he agreed that her actions today were a tad rambunctious.

“Fun?” Lord Ashville sneered. “Tell me, Your Grace, if you had a daughter, would you let her be seen out in that? Not to mention!” He took a deep breath. “Not to mention making a fool of herself to boot.”

Derek hadn’t even noticed what Lady Anna was wearing. He’d been far too distracted by her actions. But he took a closer look now, curious as to what it was that Lord Ashville was carrying on about. A moment of staring and he saw all too clearly what had the lord’s feathers so ruffled.

The dress was scandalous. Even if it wasn’t dripping wet, it would still be classified as so. The way it swooped down over her chest, so low that her bosom was exposed and heaving, was like nothing that Derek had ever really seen. And it was tight also, far too tight around her waist which had the effect of both pushing her chest upwards toward her chin, while making her buttocks seem larger than they were.

It was sexually provocative, is what it was. And none of this was helped by the way the water made it cling tight to her body as she waded through the pond. Truly, it was all Derek could do to not stare... at least not too obviously, that is.

“No, I suppose I wouldn’t,” Derek agreed. “But unfortunately, Ashville, there is little we can do about it. Neither of us are her father.”

“No,” he agreed. “And thank the Heavens for that.” He then looked at Derek and a sly smile worked its way up the side of his face. “But that doesn’t mean that we’re incapable, Your Grace.”

“What does that mean?” Derek pulled his eyes from Lady Anna and glanced at Lord Ashville, who was appearing positively smug.

“It is my thinking that it will not do to have women like Lady Anna influencing other young women of the *ton* — this isn’t Paris. Oh sure, right now, it’s just she who dresses this way, and acts as if she is a sailor’s wife. But mark my words, soon others will start to do the same. It’s a slippery slope, Your Grace. Far too slippery for my liking.”

“What are you suggesting?”

Lord Ashville glanced about as if worried they might be overheard. “There are... there are a few of us who have been in discussion for some time, concerning Lady Anna and what is to be done.”

“Be done?” Derek blinked.

“Exactly. Simply approaching her and telling her that the way she acts is unseemly will not work- it is likely to spur her toward even more wicked deeds. She is that type, after all.”

Just then, Lady Anna screamed out at the top of her lungs. Derek spun about just in time to see one of the men whom she

was with pick her up and throw her into a deeper part of the pond. They laughed. She joined in. And then another picked her up and threw her again.

“Honestly,” Lord Ashville clicked his tongue.

“What are you saying?” Derek asked.

Lord Ashville’s smile was knowing. “What are you doing right now?”

“Walking.”

“Good. Then perhaps you can walk this way with me.” He indicated in the opposite direction of the pond, toward the center of the park. “There are some men I’d like for you to meet.”

Derek’s first instinct was to say no. Again, he wasn’t a huge fan of Lord Ashville and didn’t much like the idea of being pulled into whatever it was that he was planning. But he was also aware of the lord’s influence, and the big mouth that he had where gossip was concerned. If Derek were to say no, he knew that within days his name would be attached to Lady Anna’s. Likely out of spite as much as anything.

If Derek had plans, or anywhere he needed to be, he would have happily said so and left the lord to his scheming. But his day was free, and Lord Ashville was already in the process of leading him.

“All right,” Derek sighed. “I suppose I can spare a few moments.”

“You won’t regret it, Your Grace,” Lord Ashville assured him. “The sanctity of the *ton* has been left up to us. But I assure you, by the time we are done, those actions of Lady Anna and the effect that she has will be neutered, buried, and then forgotten.”

The whole thing seemed a little hyperbolic for Derek’s taste. He glanced back in the direction of Lady Anna, watched her again for a moment. She really was striking, and again, in that dress, the way the water clung to her body... the way her bosom heaved... if he was anyone else, he might have walked a little closer so he could stare a bit longer.

But alas, he wasn’t anyone else. Derek was a duke and he knew that he could not be seen to be socializing or even entertaining the idea of doing so with someone of Lady Anna’s ilk. Worse than that, it behooved him to do what he could to stop her. So, he allowed himself to be led, all the while wondering what on earth Lord Ashville might have planned.

## CHAPTER 4



Derek followed Lord Ashville through the park, but not away from the pond. Rather, they skirted it, making sure to keep the pond within their sights as if to lose it would be to lose the point that Lord Ashville was trying to make. Whatever that might be.

After a few moments, Derek spied a group of three men standing about in wait. He recognized each of them immediately and groaned inwardly as he came to realize he'd walked himself right into a situation that he very much did not want to be a part of. Again, he wasn't entirely sure what that situation might be, but he knew these men well enough to know that he would not like it.

Barons Tywin and Chester and Viscount Barclay. The three men were known to Derek, simply because they were the type of lords who insisted on being known. They were social climbers, is what they were, those whose life ambition amounted to marrying a lady of a higher peerage than they, which in turn would see their own esteem rise in the eyes of the *ton*.

Derek never had much time for social climbers. And he certainly had little time for barons and viscounts whose entire personalities boiled down to demonstrating that they belonged.

Worse, they weren't even subtle about it. Why, the moment that the three men spied Derek coming for them, they straightened up, puffed their chests out, did what they could to look regal and aristocratic and most of all, powerful.

"Your Grace," Lord Tywin stepped forward and bowed for Derek. He was a slimy individual, with a pointed face and greasy black hair. "What an unexpected, yet wholly pleasant, surprise."

"Indeed," Lord Chester agreed as he too bowed for Derek. Chester was short and stocky, bordering on fat. And he would be soon too, the way he was going about things: little self-control, too much eating and drinking and 'fine living.' "Lord Ashville told us he was collecting another for our mission, but we had no idea it would be you."

"Your Grace," Lord Barclay said and added his own bow. But it was stunted, almost forced, and he eyed Derek with a sense of distaste. This made Derek smile a touch, as he and Barclay had never really gotten along. Mostly because Barclay had a chip on his shoulder and didn't much like being reminded that his station was less than another's.

"Gentlemen," Derek greeted, nodding his head slightly to each of the three men as he reached them.

"Ah good, you're all here," Lord Ashville started as he came in beside Derek.

"Where else would we be?" Lord Barclay sighed. He was a good-looking man, blessed with a strong physique, a



handsome face, and deep blue eyes like the ocean after a storm.

“You, Barclay?” Lord Ashville responded, nose pointed in the air as if the three men he’d joined were omitting a foul stench. “Using that nose of yours to wipe a poor Earl’s backside would be my guess. Anything to curry favor.”

Lord Barclay’s eyes bulged. “How dare you —”

“Oh, good one!” Lord Chester chortled and slapped Barclay on the back. “Well done, Ashville. Good show.”

“That wasn’t funny,” Lord Barclay steamed. “You will remember, I was the one who suggested this meeting.”

“Not true,” Lord Ashville said dryly. “I was the one who thought of it. You simply suggested bringing Tywin and Chester along. I believe you referred to them as your fan club.”

“I said no such thing!” Lord Barclay cried. He then looked to the other two lords, both of whom were glaring at him now. “I never said it. I simply pointed out that the two of you might be interested in helping. That is all.”

“Really?” Lord Tywin steamed, eyebrow raised, lip curled. “Why do I not believe that?”

“Maybe it’s because Barclay here likes to think himself as reputable as the Duke,” Lord Chester added. “When in reality

I've known stable-hands with more class than —”

“You go too far!”

“I don't go far enough!”

Derek chose to say nothing during this exchange. Really, if it wasn't for the stir it would cause, he might have used the distraction to turn about and disappear before being further roped into whatever it was these four men were planning. As a duke, Derek was used to the constant bickering and insult levying that other peers were known to throw at one another. But this was something else.

It was clear that these four men did not like one another. In actuality, they were as much enemies as they were friends. But that was what being a part of the *ton* was all about. No one actually liked one another. Not really. Rather, they used and manipulated their peers and ‘friends’ as a means to further their own ambition. Derek had known men to marry into families that they outright despised, simply because it was good for their name.

This made the situation even more interesting to Derek. For these four men to come together like this, to have planned it! Something of utmost importance must have had them worried.

A shrill cry from across the way reminded Derek of what that was. As the four men bickered, he looked over his shoulder and caught sight of Lady Anna Lewis climbing from the pond, soaked from head to toe, skin shimmering, bosom heaving, body writhing as she shook herself dry and laughed with the

other men. A lady of the *ton* acting in such a way... Derek had never seen anything like it.

“Please! Gentlemen!” Lord Ashville spoke over them. “Now is not the time to level insults.”

“You started it!” Lord Barclay cried.

“And I am ending it,” Lord Ashville snapped. “Unless you have something more to say.” He raised a challenging eyebrow at Lord Barclay, daring him to say something else. Unsurprisingly, Lord Barclay bowed his head and looked away. He was a fool, Barclay, but he wasn’t that much of a fool. “Good,” Lord Ashville then said. “Let us begin.”

“You have a plan, I am assuming?” Lord Barclay asked.

“Of course,” Lord Ashville said. “He’s standing right beside me.” He then indicated Derek. The other three men looked on appreciatively, nodding their heads in agreement, although Derek didn’t know what for. “His Grace here has kindly offered to lend us a hand in our crusade for —”

“Hold on one moment.” Derek held his palms out as if to surrender. “I’m afraid that you have me confused.”

“Confused, Your Grace?” Lord Ashville frowned. “In what manner?”

“Your plans — whatever they may be. I’m not even sure to what you are all referring.”

“Oh, come now, Your Grace,” Lord Ashville sighed and shook his head solemnly. “Just moments ago, we were speaking of Lady Anna Lewis and the ah... the problem she poses.”

“A calamity is what it is,” Lord Barclay sneered.

“Indecent,” Lord Tywin agreed.

“And it reflects poorly on all of us,” Lord Chester finished.

Derek looked to the four men, showing his confusion as he did. “Gentlemen, where I agree that Lady Anna Lewis is a tad... unusual.” Just then, Lady Anna chose to cry out at the fun she was having. Derek ignored it, but the others glanced across and curled their lips as one. “But I fail to see what we can do about it. If anything?”

“Your Grace,” Lord Ashville sighed, shook his head, and rested a hand on Derek’s shoulder. “You are correct. Lady Anna is a travesty to be sure. And it’s not that she refuses to wed. Or that she refuses to partake in regular social outings. Or that she outright refuses to do her part, where being the daughter of a Marquess is concerned. If she was to squirrel herself away and remain hidden, then she wouldn’t be a bother.”

“If only,” Lord Barclay agreed.

“But the simple fact is that she does none of those things. None! Why, to make matters worse, she seems to enjoy

rubbing our faces in her intemperance- it is as if she takes pleasure in watching us squirm!”

Again, Lady Anna chose this moment to cry out. As one, all five men swung about just in time to catch her putting her shoes on and then waving goodbye to the four men with whom she swum. They waved and one even blew her a kiss! It was a sight that might have seemed benign to the common man, but to Derek and the others, it was akin to treason.

“And do not start me on what she wears,” Lord Barclay hissed.

“I don’t know,” Chester giggled. “I kind of like it.”

“Of course, you do!” Barclay exclaimed. “But you’ve never been much more than a country upstart as it is. How your father was able to achieve his title is beyond my —”

“How dare you!”

“Gentlemen, please!” Lord Ashville spoke over the bickering lords. “Put your squabble aside for a moment, will you. We have bigger fish to catch. Then fry. And then devour until there is nothing left. Understood?”

“You still haven’t told us how we’re going to do it,” Lord Barclay pointed out. “Unless His Grace here also comes with a plan.”

Derek eyed the four men with a sense of hesitation and worry over what he had found himself in the middle of. They all

seemed to be of the one mind, but to what that was, he had no idea. At least not entirely.

“Let me get this straight,” Lord Derek begun. “Each of you wishes to... to put a stop to the way that Lady Anna behaves?”

“Correct.”

“Exactly.”

“And why is that?” he then asked carefully, not wanting to appear as if he was on her side. “What does it matter if she behaves in such a way? She isn’t hurting anyone.”

“Isn’t she?” Lord Ashville countered. “Just two days ago, I was in the city when I spied two young women. Two! Wearing dresses that– and I am not exaggerating here– dresses that rose above their ankles as they walked and hung so low on their chest that their nipples were just about showing.”

“Oh really.” Derek rolled his eyes.

“Really! And this is just the start! Lady Anna is a new kind of woman, one who will be running rampant by the time the Season is through, unless we put a stop to it.”

“And that’s where I come in?” Derek asked.

“Correct,” Lord Ashville said.

It was an odd conversation. Oh sure, Derek understood now what the men were worried about, what it was they wanted to achieve. But he still wasn't entirely sure what he was going to do about it. If there was anything he could do!

Derek knew Lady Anna a little. But that was based purely on things he had heard about her. Her parents had died at a young age, and she'd been raised by her aunt, Lady Diana Oakley, who had also passed a few years back. Lady Diana had been a strange one; a free spirit who seemed to come out of her shell when her own husband had died and was known for certain proclivities to which Lady Anna now attested. It was likely that her aunt's ways had rubbed off on Lady Anna.

But these were all things he had heard. Not things he had learnt firsthand. And that was simply because he didn't know the woman. Not really. She didn't attend balls. She rarely went to functions or any events of the *ton*. They were strangers, which again had Derek curious as to why he had been sought out.

"I still fail to see what you want me to do," Derek asked.

"Talk to her," Lord Ashville said. "That is all for now. Just a little chat —"

"What about?" he cut him off. "I'm not her father. Nor am I related in any way."

"But you are a duke!" Lord Ashville insisted, to which the other men nodded their agreement. "Your word stands above all else. It is law, as far as she should be concerned. If you were to seek her out and ask— no — if you were to *tell* her that

the way she is behaving is beneath her, and that she would do well to change her ways before they caught up with her, then she would surely listen.”

As Lord Ashville spoke, Derek watched Lady Anna walk through the park. She was dripping wet but didn't seem to care. The way she walked, it was almost a dance, her body swaying and swishing gaily. She was free, unencumbered, and most of all, happy.

“I'm not so sure about that,” Derek said, unable to hide a grin as he continued to watch.

“But you must try,” Lord Ashville insisted. “The Season has just begun, and it is our thinking that by the time it is through, she will either be a changed woman deserving of her title and place...”

“Or?”

Lord Ashville shrugged. “That is to be decided — assuming that you are to fail in your task.”

Task. What task? It sounded like Lord Ashville wanted Derek to put Lady Anna over his knee and spank her until she agreed to straighten up. But somehow, he didn't think that would work. Nor did he think that speaking with her would do much of anything either.

But the four lords watched him eagerly, each seeming convinced that Derek was the key to their problem. And where he would have liked to have denied them, he also knew that to



do so would sully his own name, and likely attach it to hers. If he said no, or even if he failed, these four men would see it as their duty to let the *ton* know.

“Well... I’ll see what I can do,” was all Derek was willing to offer.

“Bravo,” Lord Ashville cheered. “I knew we could count on you.”

“Well done.”

“Good show.”

The four men slapped Derek on the back and thanked him for his help. He took their thanks and nodded his head; smiled and told them he would try his best. But as he spoke, his eyes drifted over their shoulders so he could watch Lady Anna disappear through the park.

Again, he was taken by how lively she was, how free and unencumbered. It was so unlike any lady he knew or had thought he ever wanted to know. He told the men he wanted to change her, but now he wasn’t so sure. What was more, every instinct he had told him that she didn’t want to be changed, and likely never would. Even if a duke was the one asking it of her.

## CHAPTER 5



It was the next day when Derek decided to pay Lady Anna a visit, and this was simply because he wanted to get it out of the way so that he could put the farce that he had found himself in the middle of well and truly behind him. He still wasn't sure what he could even say to the young lady that might make her change the way she was behaving. Further to that, he really didn't think that she would listen to him. No matter what he said.

But he had to try regardless. He knew Ashville well, not to mention Barclay and the others, and if he simply left it and decided to do nothing, they would begin to gossip about him also. That was the problem with being a duke, as there were always those looking to spread vicious rumors so that they might have a chance at taking you down entirely.

As such, he sent word ahead to Lady Anna that he was going to be stopping by today, and although she didn't see fit to respond to his letter, he assumed that she would be waiting for him nonetheless. She might have been a tad rebellious, but surely even she would not spurn the Duke's invitation to speak.

And so, he made for her manor at a slow pace. It was the middle of the morning, and another glorious day to be sure.

This was shaping up to be a lovely summer, and as the Duke rode, he wondered what he might do with it and how he might take advantage.

It was days like this when he was reminded of how lonely he had become as he aged. At thirty-three years now, it was unusual that he wasn't already settled down with a wife and a couple of kids. Truly, he should have been married for years by now, well into the throes of married life. But that just wasn't his way.

Derek wasn't against marriage, truly. In fact, as a younger lad, he had been excited by the prospect. But he was also an idealist, and always wished to marry someone he cared for—this was likely on account of his parents, who until their tragic demise, had been truly in love with one another. Derek had grown up under their roof, had seen firsthand how wonderful love could be, and had wanted it for himself. But in thirteen years of attending balls and meeting ladies, not once had he met someone who caught his eye and held his interest long enough to consider a betrothal.

Thus, it was a life of loneliness that the Duke had to look forward to. He had his fortune. He had his work. He had a few friends to entertain himself with. It might not have been much, but it was going to have to do.

Lady Anna lived closer to the city than the Duke did, so he had started in her direction at a pleasant pace. On his horse, he was glad for the twenty-minute ride so he might decide on what he was going to say to her when they met. He still had no idea! He still couldn't fathom what he could say. So, he figured it might be best to just get a reading of Lady Anna for now, perhaps lay some groundwork so that later he could press her to behave a little more... well, opposite to how she had been.

Hardly a plan. Less than half-baked, to be sure. But for now, it was going to have to do.

It was when he was five minutes from Lady Anna's home that Derek spied something odd coming at him from the horizon.

At first, he thought it to be a messenger of some sort. A man on horseback certainly but riding with such haste that the horse's tail must have been on fire. The sun shone behind the rider so he was difficult to make out, but Derek moved off the road nonetheless, not wanting to find himself run down.

The rider came closer and closer, seeming to pick up pace as he did so. And soon enough, Derek was struck and then shocked to realize that the rider wasn't a man at all. It was a woman!

She rode low to her mount, body pressed against the horse's back and neck as she spurred it forward. But that wasn't the strange part. What was so strange about the way the woman rode was the fact that she wasn't sitting side-saddle. She had her legs strapped on both sides of the horse, using her ankles to kick it forward and encourage its pace.

Derek stared in bewilderment as the female rider shot along the road at the speed of a bullet. Never mind the speed she was pushing her animal, but the fact that she wasn't sitting side saddle was not only odd, but scandalous. Derek thought to stop her as she came closer, but then the sun dipped slightly and he caught a better sighting of the woman in question.

It was Lady Anna Lewis. For who else could it be? She seemed to be racing from her manor, almost like she was being chased. And what was more, as she came closer, she caught sight of Derek watching her and, rather than slowing up, she beamed at him! Her smile widened, she took her hand off the reins for long enough to give him a wave, and then she continued forward as if it were nothing.

And still, Derek stared, utterly dumbstruck. He wasn't sure what was more shocking, this or seeing her go for a swim yesterday in the pond. It was a close call.

Derek turned his horse on the spot so that it was facing in the direction that Lady Anna had raced. He considered going after her, but then wondered what the point would be. He had told her he was coming, but she seemed to be charging from the house specifically to avoid him. Was it possible that's why she was moving the way she was? Or was this all one big coincidence?

She was halfway down the road now, only to come to a sudden halt. Derek continued to watch with confusion as the horse slowed up just enough for Lady Anna to turn it about and rear it up on its two back feet. His mouth fell open as it kicked its feet in the air. She waved her hand above her head wildly, crying out with utmost joy, before the horse landed on its front legs again.

And then, in another shocking display, the horse turned as if to charge back in the direction of Derek, only for Lady Anna to lose her balance suddenly and tumble from the back of the horse and land in the dirt in a clump.

Her body crashed onto the dirt road and Derek took off in her direction immediately, fear now taking over as he pictured the

damage the poor lady was sure to have done to herself.

“Lady Anna!” he called as he rode his horse for her. “Lady Anna! Are you all right?” he reached her mount just as she was slowly pushing herself to her feet.

“Oh my!” Lady Anna gasped as she steadied herself. She took a hold of her horse for balance as she patted down her dress. “You didn’t see that, did you?”

Still sitting atop his horse, Derek frowned at the question. “I didn’t see... I’m sorry? Do you mean your falling, just now?”

She grimaced. “So, you did see it then? How embarrassing.”

“I... ah...” Derek’s mouth opened and then closed, and then opened again. “Are you all right?” he asked stupidly.

“Physically? I’ll be fine,” she sighed and shook her head. Then she indicated to herself, the dirt on her dress, the mess of her hair, the general state of disarray she was in. “It’s just my ego that is bruised.”

“But you fell!”

“And you noticed.” She pushed her lips together. “Shame on you, Your Grace, watching a young lady embarrass herself like that. I thought you would have more decorum.”

“Excuse me?”

“When you saw me about to fall, you really should have looked away,” she pointed out. “That would have been the honorable thing to do.”

“I... I did not... I was not...” Derek stammered his response. But that was just because he had no idea what to say!

Was she being serious? Lady Anna had just tumbled from the back of a horse, and after riding it like a mad man! And yet she had the gall to act as if Derek was in the wrong somehow. Simply by being there, from what she had said. The exchange was as surprising as it was confusing, and all Derek could do was sit on his horse and gape at Lady Anna, for fear that anything he might say would be turned on him.

She took a moment to herself. This amounted to double checking that her dress wasn't ruined, while also attending to the horse. She ran her hands along its hide, soothing it by clicking her tongue as she gently stroked it. There was an elegance to the way she attended to the animal, a natural grace that told him she had been riding for a while. Although that should have been obvious from what he had just seen.

Really, what she was doing was pretending that Derek wasn't even there at all. Which was fine because he was starting to wish that he wasn't either. Never mind what he had just seen. There were other peculiarities that did well to remind him of his task today.

To begin with, what Lady Anna was wearing was beyond contemptuous. It was a light day dress, green in color, but hiked up her legs and tucked in so that she could use both legs as she rode. This left her calves exposed. It was also low on

the chest line again, and with no sleeves to speak of she might as well have been wearing a nightshift.

This of course made him realize that the two were alone. No coachman or chaperone in sight! If another lord or lady was to come along suddenly and see them, he couldn't even imagine the rumor that it might start.

A part of him thought to say goodbye and leave her. But then he suddenly spied blood seeping out from under her elbow. The woman was bleeding! And before the Duke could stop to think, his chivalrous nature took over and he slid down off his horse.

"Your arm!" he cried as his feet landed on the dirt. "You're bleeding." He swept around his horse and made for Lady Anna.

"Wh — oh?" Lady Anna glanced at her blood-soaked elbow. "Well, would you look at that?"

"Here." He stepped closer to Lady Anna and gingerly took her arm in his hands so he might examine the wound. "Let me..."

"Oh, it's fine," she assured him and attempted to pull her arm away.

"It certainly is not," he said, refusing to let go. As he did, he reached into his pocket and pulled out a handkerchief. And then, he gently dabbed at the wound.



“Ow!” she yelped and tried to pull her arm free. “That hurts!”

“More than falling from the back of a horse?” he dabbed gently at the wound again.

“Yes!”

“Somehow, I doubt that,” he said. The wound wasn’t as bad as it looked and seeing as Lady Anna was making such a large fuss about it, he opted to gently release her arm rather than tend to it further.

“Thank you,” she sighed as he let her go and she pulled her arm into her chest. “Truly, it is almost as if you were enjoying hurting me.”

“What?” Derek blustered. “I never! I mean, I was only making sure that—”

“Your Grace,” Lady Anna interrupted, her smile mischievous and a little wicked. “I am just joking with you.”

“You are?”

Her dark eyes flashed. “Of course! Really, I should be thanking you. Making sure my dress doesn’t get any dirtier from all this blood. So very kind of you, Your Grace.”

“That’s not what I was doing,” he argued. “I wanted to make sure that...” he stopped suddenly when he noticed her body

shaking from withheld laughter. “You’re just joking again, aren’t you?”

“I am!” she exclaimed happily. “Oh, you are too easy. Honestly, never underestimate a man’s desire to prove how chivalrous and dashing he is.” She rolled her eyes and shook her head at him. “But it is appreciated, nonetheless.”

“You’re welcome,” he said coldly, but this just made her smile widen even further.

It didn’t fail to escape Derek’s notice that this was the first time the two had ever actually spoken. And where he had wondered how their introduction might go, he never could have imagined it would proceed quite like this. Never mind the horse. Never mind the blood. But the way she mocked him. How much she seemed to enjoy it! It was bizarre to say the least.

“Well, I suppose I ought to be going,” Lady Anna then began with a sigh. “I’ve embarrassed myself enough for one day.”

“Going? Where?” Derek asked before he could think.

“Home...” she said carefully. “Although that should have been obvious. Why, do you have a better suggestion? Your Grace,” she gasped. “You best mind yourself.”

His eyes widened and his face flushed red. “I didn’t mean—I was not implying—”

“Your Grace,” she then eased with a satisfied smile. “I am just joking. Again.”

His face dropped. “Of course you were.”

She beamed, then took a step back and curtsied. “Thank you for your assistance. But I would ask you to keep what happened here today to yourself.”

“And why is that?”

“Because I take pride in my riding,” she said seriously. “And I would be rather embarrassed if it got out that I fell. What would people say?” she gasped playfully.

The Duke had no idea what to do, what to say, or what to think. He knew of Lady Anna’s oddities. That was why he was here, after all. But he’d had no idea just how strange she was. How different. How unique. It was unlike anything he could have imagined.

A part of him wanted to leave her. Go home, regroup, try again another day. But another part, one he didn’t entirely understand, was enjoying himself too much and didn’t want to let her go. Not just yet. It was easy to lie and say it was because he had a job to do, a task that forced him to speak with her. But the Duke knew that to be a half-truth at best.

“You’re walking home?” he asked.

“Yes, I suppose I should,” she sighed. “I have ridden Bucephalus rather hard already. He could use the break.”

“Bucephalus? Alexander the Great?”

“Of course,” she said eagerly. “If you’re going to name a horse, it might as well be after the most famous one in history. Wouldn’t you say?”

“Most women name their horses after heroines,” Derek said.

“Most women are rather silly though, aren’t they?” she grinned.

Derek laughed. He didn’t mean to. And he knew that he shouldn’t. But there was something about the rogue lady that had him cackling. She said what one shouldn’t, did what one would never expect, and was so open and honest it was hard not to be taken by her presence.

He shook his head to himself as he calmed down, trying his best not to look too enamored. “You’re walking home?” he asked again.

“You already asked me that.”

“Yes, well, if that is the case, then I insist that I walk with you.”

“Oh.” She blinked and then leaned back. “You don’t have to \_\_\_”

“No, no, I insist,” he said to her. “Why, what would people think if they found out that I left you out here on your own?”

“That you were doing a smart thing?” she offered.

He chuckled. “Probably. But still... chivalry and all that. You understand?”

“Men.” She shook her head and exhaled. “Well... I suppose if you insist.”

“I do.”

“Well then, shall we?” She took her horse by the reins and then, without waiting, began to walk it back down the road. And Derek hurried to join her, having to race to collect his horse and then catch her.

Derek still had a task for today, a mission as it was that he had promised to see through. Although, after speaking with Lady Anna, he wasn’t entirely sure that he wanted to anymore. Although why that might be, he refused to consider for fear of what the answer might be.

## CHAPTER 6



Lady Anna hadn't intended for the Duke to see her riding in such a manner. Nor had it been her plan to fall from the back of her horse whilst he was watching her- how very embarrassing. Truly, the whole thing was an accident... but where Anna was concerned, accidents seemed to follow her about like bees to honey.

It was just yesterday afternoon when the Duke had sent word that he was coming to see her today. When she'd received his letter, Anna had assumed at first that it was a mistake. She knew of the Duke, of course, for how could she not? But she did not know him, nor had the two ever spoken. So why he would want to see her now was beyond her comprehension.

Anna spent the night thinking on it. And it was a night that brought no answers. What was more, seeing as her only friend, Lady Eloise, was at a ball, she couldn't even send for her to ask. Instead, she was forced to spend the night in her own head, going over all the possible reasons that a duke might want to see her. And in the end, she came to the only reasonable conclusion that she could muster; he wished to court her.

This realization sent a shock through Anna which had her up half the night in worry. Marriage was the last thing that she

wanted. The last! And to a duke of all people — this duke! She knew a little of the man, enough to know that two more different people did not exist.

The Duke was well liked in the *ton*. And respected. And admired. He was a stern supporter of traditional values, the kind of man who expected women to behave in a certain way and conform to certain requirements. At least that was what she thought. Not someone whom she would even consider marrying... if she was to ever consider such a thing.

It was thus that on this morning she had decided to take a ride and clear her head. The ride took longer than she thought, so long in fact that she worried she might be late to meet him. As such, she kicked her horse into racing, found herself having a little too much fun, accidentally encountered the Duke on her sprint and then... well, yes. She fell off her horse in a most embarrassing manner.

They walked side by side now. A slow stroll down the road as neither spoke nor looked as if they were going to. But she could sense the Duke's eyes on her, watching, judging, no doubt second guessing his desire to court her. In this way, Lady Anna was almost glad for what had happened. At least now he would know better than to waste his time.

"You don't have to walk me all the way home, you know," she said after a few moments more. "I am quite capable."

"I know," he said. "But I insist."

"Oh, I'm aware," she said back with a sly smile. "And my feeling is that you usually get what you want, don't you?"

“Sometimes.”

“And when you don’t?” she pressed. “What happens? The world ends, no doubt.” She didn’t mean to bait him, but sometimes, Anna just couldn’t help herself.

“No,” he said simply, even shrugging. “Although I have been known to have people killed for disobeying me.”

Anna’s eyes widened and she spun about in shock, only to catch the Duke chuckling. Her face fell flat. “Funny,” she said.

“I thought so,” he grinned.

They walked a little further, letting the silence build once more.

She walked on the right side of her horse, and the Duke to the left of his. This put them beside one another, inches apart, although it felt as if the entire road separated them from how tense it was.

Anna could sense the conflict within the Duke, and it made her smile to realize that he had found himself in over his head. So, he thought to come here and impose himself on her, did he? He thought he could court her and try and mold her to become what he needed of a lady? Well, she’d see about that.

“My aunt told me of you, you know.” Anna started casually.



“Lady Oakley?” the Duke asked. “Yes, we met once or twice. But that was some time ago.”

“Yes, well she is dead,” Anna said. “So, it’s a tad difficult to stay in touch.” His face contorted and she smiled at how uncomfortable she was making him. “But she liked you, for what it’s worth.”

“Oh,” the Duke blinked. “That is... that is nice to hear. My mother was a friend to her, before she passed.”

“Oh?” Anna asked before she could stop herself. “I had no idea both your parents had passed.”

She had a weakness where her aunt was concerned. And anything that reminded her of this often had her dropping the walls that she’d worked so hard to construct.

When Anna had been a little girl of around four, her parents had both died within a month of one another. That was the tragedy that had seen her moved in with her aunt Diana. The timing was perfect— if such a horrible event could be called such a thing— as Lady Diana’s husband had also passed away six months earlier. In that respect, the two were able to be there for one another in a way they both desperately needed.

Anna couldn’t remember what her life was like before she had met her aunt. Nor did she know what her aunt was like before she moved in. By all accounts, her aunt was a proper lady once upon a time, an esteemed member of the *ton* who any lady would be honored to know and befriend. But that wasn’t the aunt whom Anna had grown up with.

Lady Diana was as free a spirit as Anna had ever met. Single, done with the *ton* and the responsibilities that came with it, she spent her final years doing whatever she pleased. It was an attitude that she passed onto Anna, and a legacy that Anna was only too happy to continue in cultivating. That was a large reason for why Anna was the way she was. Perhaps the main reason.

“Yes, they both passed away when I was a young lad,” Derek continued. “Fifteen, to be precise. My mother first, and then my father a few months later. A broken heart, is what I was told at the time.”

“And it wasn’t?”

“No,” Derek chuckled. “But it might as well have been. They were very much in love, my parents, and once my mother was gone, my father was always going to be quick to follow. Although that might have been due to how stubborn he was. Couldn’t bear to let her get the last say, you know?”

“Right,” she nodded, not knowing what to say.

“But my mother did know your aunt. And after she passed, I met with Lady Oakley a few times. She was lovely, by the way. I thoroughly enjoyed the few chats we had.”

“Oh, well you mustn’t have known her that well then,” Anna said before she could stop to think. She then caught the way the Duke frowned at her and she hurried to explain. “I just meant — my meaning is, she was an odd duck, is all. Not everyone’s cup of tea.”

The Duke smiled. "I was wondering where you got it from."

"Me?" she touched at her chest as if embarrassed. "I am my own person, thank you very much. Far less likeable than my aunt. That's for sure."

"Oh, I won't argue with that," he grinned.

She pretended to flash her eyes as if angry, but she couldn't hide her smile. It was a small thing, but she could sense the tension easing between the two, their conversation was almost friendly. Far more than she would have ever thought it could be.

"So," the Duke began. She could see the confidence building in him now that they'd started to speak. "Did you enjoy yourself yesterday?"

"Yesterday?" she frowned, eyes flicking at the Duke, noting his smile.

"Yes," he said, holding that smile. "The little dip you took in the pond."

Despite herself, Anna felt her face flush bright red. She looked away, not wanting the Duke to see the effect his question had on her. "Oh... that."

"What else?"

She had known it to be a foolish thing to do. Never mind whom it was that she swam with, but the setting itself, what she was wearing, and who was about. It was always going to cause a stir. At the time, she had done so without really thinking, enjoying the idea of annoying her friend as much as anything. But later, once she was dry and back home, she wondered if perhaps she had gone just a little too far this time.

Anna didn't care what others thought. She didn't. But she wasn't a total social outcast. She knew that she still had to play the game to some degree. But then again, if she had embarrassed herself beyond compare, then why was the Duke here at all? Surely, he wouldn't want to court her after what he witnessed.

“You saw that, did you?”

“I wasn't the only one,” he said with a knowing look.

She winked. “Well then, you should have come for a dip. The water was lovely.”

His face fell flat. “That's not really the point.”

“What is the point then?” she raised an eyebrow at him. “Here to tell me off? Or to ask me to invite you along next time I go for a swim? I would too, but it was a spur of the moment thing. Not exactly planned. You understand?”

That got him. She could see the shock in his expression, the confusion at her answer. No doubt he had expected her to be

embarrassed, maybe even ask for forgiveness. But she had done the complete opposite. And a good thing too. Hopefully, that should be enough to see the Duke on his way, glad to have gotten out of their encounter unscathed.

It was at that moment that Anna's home appeared on the horizon. It rose up from the ground like a small hill, dominating the surroundings. At the sight of the manor in the distance she breathed a sigh of relief, glad that this conversation was coming to an end before anything untoward happened.

“What are you doing later this week?” the Duke asked suddenly and unexpectedly.

“I'm — what was that?” she balked.

“Later this week,” the Duke followed up. “Thursday night, to be more specific.”

Anna blinked. She frowned. She scrunched her brow at the Duke, letting him see her shock. “I'm... not sure.”

“I'll save you the worry,” he said with a charming smile. “I have tickets to the theatre. I was wondering if you might join me?”

“The theatre?” she said.

“Yes.”

“Join you?”

“Is that a problem?” he asked with a raised eyebrow.

It really shouldn't have been. Why, Anna could name ten ladies at the very least who might have killed to have been invited by a duke to the theatre. Her best friend for one! And one thorough examination of this Duke was all that was needed to understand why.

Even Anna had to admit he was dashing. Never mind how tall he was. Never mind his broad shoulders, his sculpted chest, his thick and muscular thighs and torso. Never mind that! It was his face that struck her the most. It was a long face, with high cheekbones and a strong jaw. His eyes were dark, his skin tanned, his lips thick and pouty. He was dreamy, is what he was, devilishly handsome in a way that was distracting and almost unnatural.

If Anna was a different kind of person, she might have jumped at the chance. Truthfully, she still wanted to. She was a woman after all, with needs of her own.

But she was also reserved, and worried at the Duke's intentions. Why, after everything he had seen, did he still wish to see her? There must have been a reason? More than simply wanting to court her? Surely.

“It might be,” she said carefully.

“And why would it?” he asked back, keeping his eyebrow raised whilst grinning to himself over how awkward she had

become.

“Because... ah... well...” she stammered. “I suppose it’s not.” She couldn’t think of a reason to say no. Not one!

“Perfect!” They reached the front gates of Anna’s manor and the Duke came to a sudden stop. “Thursday night it is, then.”

“Yes...” she said slowly, eyes narrowed at him. “Thursday night.”

“I look forward to it.”

“Me too.”

The Duke then took a step back and bowed for her. “Oh, and please try and avoid any more falls like the one you had today,” he then said. “I’d hate for you to break your back and not be able to attend.”

“What a travesty that would be.”

He chuckled and shook his head. Then, keeping his eyes trained on her, showing her the smile behind them for he seemed to be thoroughly enjoying himself, he grabbed hold of his horse’s reins and threw himself up and onto its back.

“Thursday,” he said again. “I shall send a carriage for you.”

“I will look for it,” she told him. He nodded his head and was about to ride off when she stopped him. “Oh, and Your Grace. Thank you for your help today.”

He smiled at that, even seemed to breathe a sigh of relief. “Of course,” he said. And then, he kicked his mount forward and started down the road.

Anna remained where she was as she watched the Duke disappear down the road and over the horizon. When she had first read that he was coming to see her, she’d been worried. And then more so the moment she decided he was going to try and court her. And now that she had been proven to be correct? She didn’t know what to think.

Anna had no intention of ever getting married. There was a myriad of reasons for this, none of which would be solved by spending time with the Duke. And yet, somehow, she was now going to the theater with him on Thursday. It was an outing she would have to attend to for even she wouldn’t consider cancelling on a duke at the last minute.

As to how she was to behave with him? What was to be expected? Truly, Anna had no idea. It was lucky then that she had some days yet to plan. Hopefully by Thursday night she might have a better idea as to what his intentions were, and how she might counteract them.



## CHAPTER 7



“Lady Anna Lewis!” Hugh Parsons, Marquess of Ayers exclaimed. “You are joking! Tell me you are joking?”

“I think you know that I am not,” Derek responded dryly, and a little angrily. He had expected an over-the-top reaction from Lord Ayers but that didn’t mean he had to like it.

“Are you sure?” Hugh chortled, even snorted as he tried to contain himself. “Because I think you just told me you’re taking Lady Anna Lewis to the theatre this week? Unless there is another Lewis who I am not aware of?”

“Are you finished?” Derek asked his best friend.

“Just one moment...” Ayers held a finger up so as to indicate he needed a few more seconds. These were spent in quiet mocking, the chubby lord’s body shaking terribly as he did what he could to not explode from his merriment.

And all the while Derek sat in silence, glaring at his friend, wondering to himself if he’d made the right decision in asking Hugh over to discuss what he had done. Although to be fair,

and after what he had done today, maybe he was right to laugh?

It was later in the same day Derek had asked Lady Anna to the theatre. Later that evening in fact, just after supper, about the time that Derek would usually settle himself down with a drink before bed. And he still intended to do just that, only tonight he wouldn't be drinking alone.

The Marquess of Ayers was Derek's best friend and confidant, and possibly the only man in the entire world with whom he would feel comfortable opening up in the way that he had. They had been chums since boyhood, having attended school, and entered the society of the *ton* together and remained close ever since. Even when their lives veered down remarkably separate paths, they still managed to maintain a friendship that to some seemed rather odd in how different the two men were. But perhaps that was why it worked so well.

Derek hadn't told Hugh why he needed to speak with him, just that he did. The man had arrived less than five minutes ago. He was led into the drawing room where Derek poured him a glass of brandy, sat him down by the fire, and then revealed what he had done.

Ayers continued to chortle as he sipped at his brandy. Every few moments he would stop, catch the look that Derek was throwing his way, and then laugh some more. He really was enjoying himself!

"Now really," Derek sighed. "You're being a tad ridiculous."

“Am I?” Hugh exclaimed. “Because from where I am sitting, my reaction is warranted. Truly, I’m still waiting for the punchline, because surely this is some sort of joke?”

“It most certainly is not.”

“Exactly!” His beady brown eyes widened. “Which means that I’ll likely require another drink because I cannot wait to hear the story behind this folly.” He polished off his brandy in a single gulp and then waved his glass for Derek to refill.

Derek glared at his best friend a moment before standing and filling his glass for him. But he made sure to refill his own glass too. After the way this day had gone, there was going to be a lot more drinking to come.

“All right, all right,” Hugh eventually calmed himself as he took a sip from his fresh glass. “Now that we’ve gotten the mocking out of the way, let’s take a few steps back.”

“Meaning?”

“Why-oh-why, in the name of all things holy, have you decided to ask out Lady Anna Lewis — she is nice enough to look at, I will grant you that.” He smirked to himself for a moment as if in wonder. “But still! Derek! She is so...”

“So what?”

“Unlike you! In every conceivable way. It would be like if the moon decided to court the sun.”

“Not bad,” Derek said.

“Thank you,” Hugh smirked.

Hugh was right. On the face of it, Derek and Lady Anna could not work. But Derek hadn't asked Lady Anna out because he wished to court her. Rather, he had a different plan in mind.

Derek's initial goal had been to speak with Lady Anna about the way she was acting. Just a gentle word of warning, letting her know that others of the *ton* were talking and that she might want to rein herself in just a little bit. That had been the plan, but a few minutes of speaking with her, and Derek had decided on a different stratagem. At least that was what he told himself.

Lady Anna was unlike any lady he had ever met. Or any person that he'd ever met, for that matter. Although she was indeed immature and uncouth and highly irregular, as Lord Asheville had complained, she was also witty and free and most of all, fun. She didn't care what others thought of her and acted without worry for how she might come across. But she was playful, not sinister, and Derek didn't think she'd benefit from a mere 'talking to.'

When Derek had asked Lady Anna out, he had been able to tell himself that it was part of his new plan to help her. Rather than telling her how to act, he thought he might show her instead. Even guide her. A night at the theatre, sitting among equals, demonstrating what was expected, was sure to have an influence upon her.

It was an easy lie for him to swallow. Far easier than admitting that he was fascinated by her, and really just wanted an excuse to see her again. For whatever reason that might be.

“I know she is different,” Derek said to Ayers. They sat across from one another in thickly padded single seater couches. He leaned on the arm, shuffling in closer to Hugh as he spoke. “But that’s sort of the point.”

“How do you mean?” Hugh frowned whilst cocking an eyebrow in curiosity.

Derek took a deep breath, and then quickly explained what had happened; Lord Asheville’s approach, the three lords and their bizarre request, his first impression of Lady Anna, and then his new plan.

On summary, it all sounded rather simple. And for a brief moment, Derek was somewhat chuffed by his own brilliance. But then Hugh voiced his opinion.

“It’s not going to work,” Hugh said immediately. He waved Derek down dismissively as he leaned back on his couch and sipped at his brandy. “Not even a little.”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Oh really?”

“Yes, really.”

Ayers sat up. “Oh, really?” he said again, looking down his nose at Derek.

Derek groaned and rubbed at his eyes. “Will you just tell me what you’re suggesting at and save me the time?”

“She’s a mad woman, Derek!” Ayers cried. “I mean, swimming in a pond at Hyde Park! Who does that?”

“Maybe she was hot?”

Ayers fixed Derek with an unamused expression, before continuing. “The point is, she isn’t going to suddenly change after a single night at the theatre with you — she’s been to the theatre before, you know. That is unless you intend to marry this woman. Otherwise, I really don’t see what your plan is here.”

“Marriage?” Derek scoffed. “That’s a little much, Hugh. Even for you.”

“Oh right, I forget whom I’m talking to,” Hugh held his hands up in defense. “My mistake. I apologize for even suggesting such a thing,” he finished dryly.

Derek glared at his best friend. Hugh was a happily married man and had been for ten years now. And for nine of those years, he’d been trying to push Derek down the same path. That was despite his knowing of Derek’s views toward marriage.

And it wasn't that Derek was against the concept of marriage. Not at all. There were a few years, back when he was younger, where he'd actually tried to court a few ladies. But the process grew stale when he quickly learned that most ladies, nearly all of them really, were exactly the same. They were all polite. All sweet and proper. And kind, nice, well mannered. And most of all, they were all boring.

Everyone knew that Derek felt this way. Ayers especially. But that didn't stop him from pushing... although even he wouldn't go so far as to suggest that Derek and Lady Anna be wed.

"The point is," Hugh continued. "Lady Anna Lewis... I mean, I've met the woman only the once, and truth be told, friend, she wasn't exactly..." he raised a knowing eyebrow.

"Exactly what?" Derek looked pointedly at his friend.

"You know..." Ayers sucked through his teeth, refusing to say it.

"Predictable?" Derek offered.

Hugh's face fell flat. "That's one way of putting it."

"She is different," Derek admitted. Hugh sighed with relief. "But she is not strange. Or odd... or dangerous," he chuckled. Then, despite his best efforts, he smiled. "Just different."

Ayer's eyes flashed. "Oh, I see." He giggled as he fell back in his chair and sipped at his brandy. "Well done."

"What?"

"I'm not going to say anything."

"About?"

"No, no," Ayers giggled. "I don't want to jinx it."

Derek eyed his friend with warning but didn't push. He knew what Hugh was referring to, what he was suggesting... but that was a conversation, or rather an argument, that he didn't want to find himself in the middle of.

The truth was, Derek didn't know how he felt about Lady Anna. Not really. He found her interesting and fancied a chance to speak with her again. But what Hugh had said was also true, in regard to her character. She was a little strange, and definitely not someone who Derek would usually be seen with.

That was why it was easy for Derek to ignore the truth behind his feelings. For now, it was easy enough to convince himself that he was just doing what he had promised Lord Asheville and the others that he would do. Lady Anna was apparently a scourge on society, and it was up to Derek to change her.

For now, that's all that this was, and all it ever could be.



## CHAPTER 8



It was early the next morning when Anna decided to pay her aunt's grave a visit. This was something she tried to do at least once a month, but had lately lapsed a tad, even realizing on the way there that it had been nearly two months since her last visit.

Two months. When Anna learned that it had been that long, she felt stabs of guilt. One through the gut, and another deep into her conscious; a knife twisting, guilt spiraling as she wondered at what had kept her away. Worse that there was no specific reason for it, simply a case of life getting in the way.

She took a carriage to the graveyard that morning — located just on the outskirts of Anna's local parish — but left it by the gate as she strolled alone through the yard and toward her aunt's resting place. It was a small white stone monolith, but despite the way in which Anna's aunt had lived her life, the woman whom Anna had known her to be, the grave didn't sit alone.

Beside it was a similarly sized gravestone, that which belonged to her aunt's late husband. She had requested to be buried beside him.

Growing up, Anna had known her aunt to be single. That was how she was when the two had first begun living with one another, and that was how it was until the day she had died. In that way, Anna was very much like her aunt. Indeed, she had modelled her life closely to hers, even if it wasn't always intentional. She had felt in this way that she was honoring her aunt, living the type of lifestyle that she, her idol really, espoused of her own.

Unfortunately, every time that she visited her aunt's grave, she was reminded of the truth.

Her aunt had been married before Anna had moved in with her. Her aunt had been in love. Her aunt had lived a full and happy life, long before Anna had come into the picture. And yes, she had been perfectly happy for as long as Anna had known her. But was she as happy?

The graveyard was empty this morning. And seeing as it was still early, the sun was yet to break through the morning mists that hung above the gravestones. It was eerie and silent, a little cold and damp, and most of all, ominous. A cold shudder ran up Anna's spine as she reached her aunt's tombstone. It had her pulling her shawl more securely over her shoulders as she sat herself down on the grass and did what she could to relax.

"Hello, Aunt," Anna began. She always addressed her aunt as simply 'Aunt.' No first name. No title. They had always been too close for that. "Yes, I know, it's been a while," she sighed to herself as she got herself comfortable on the damp grass. "You don't have to remind me."

Anna had been just a little girl when she'd first moved in with Lady Diana. Her parents had both recently passed away and her aunt had been kind enough to take her in. She hadn't

known much of her at the time, just that she was a recent widow who was well respected in the *ton*. Anna had thought herself to be moving into a strict household, one where she might be raised in the proper manner of other girls her age.

Oh, how wrong she was.

“But the good news about having to wait so long to see me, is that we have plenty to talk about — I know, I know, I tend to carry on. But I have some... interesting news this time. Although, I could also really use some advice too, so feel free to interject. No need to be a complete bore, Aunt.” She tittered to herself, aware of how silly she was being, but taking great comfort in it nonetheless.

Anna had always been close with her aunt. From the day that she had moved in, she’d felt a kinship with her. Her aunt had realized that Anna was hurting from the deaths of her parents and, despite her own suffering, needed to do all that she could to make things easier on her.

It was a childhood of few rules. Of no expectations. Of freedom and the allowance to be ‘oneself.’ Anna’s aunt had announced that after spending a lifetime doing what was expected of her, she wished to spend the rest of her life doing as she darn well pleased. And she didn’t hold back.

It was for this reason that Anna had turned out the way she did. Not that she had any regrets.

For one, the concept of marriage was laughed at, spoken about as silly and unnecessary and not something Anna needed to worry about. Truly, Anna’s aunt had told her many times that

she needn't worry with getting married, because that just led to a life of constraint and loneliness. Better to be alone and free, than married and in bondage.

These were lessons that Anna took in stride. She'd rather have fun, than worry about being courted and well-behaved and all that nonsense. In fact, whenever anyone mentioned marriage to her, she was only too happy to point to her aunt as an example of how one could be perfectly happy and not be married.

But that was also a lie.

"Now, I have some big news," Anna began to her aunt's gravestone. "And it involves a certain duke — I know, I know. A duke. We all know how you feel about them. But I don't know, Aunt. This one... it feels different. It feels... well, like nothing I have ever felt before."

Anna had suspected that, perhaps, her aunt had lied to her. She didn't hate marriage. She wasn't against the concept, thinking it pointless and contrite. Rather, she had loved marriage. She'd loved it so much that she had become resentful that hers had ended, and this more than anything is what changed her. Not married life, but the lack of it.

Anna had never really wanted to admit this. But sitting here in front of her grave, right next to that of her late husband's, Anna was having a harder time ignoring the truth of this than usual.

None of which was helped by her current predicament: the Duke and his asking her on an outing!

“What should I do?” Anna asked of her aunt. She explained what had happened, from the pond to the horse to the Duke’s asking her to the theatre. It felt good to speak it out loud, but that didn’t solve the issue. It just seemed to pronounce it further. “The Duke is nice enough, yes, but that is not really the point. Why did he ask me to the theatre? Why me? Why now? What does he want?”

She had been up half the night thinking about it. The randomness of his asking to see her. The suddenness of his inviting her anywhere. The fact that he had seen her riding a horse the way she was, the tumble she had taken, how dismissive she had been of him. Even still, he wanted to see her again.

None of it made any sense!

And to confuse the matter even further... Anna was somewhat excited about it too. More than she should have been...

But she tried not to get too ahead of herself either. For now, it was just a night at the theatre. Nothing more. It couldn’t be anything more.

Actually, the more she thought about it, the more Anna realized how bizarre the invitation was. How perplexing. The two were just so different. There was no real chance that the Duke meant to court her, was there? That he was serious about it? And if not that, then what? Did he mean to just use her and then toss her out like a stale handkerchief?

Anna had no idea how to feel. But she did know something. She knew that she wasn't going to let the Duke take advantage of her... not in that sense, anyhow. In fact, if he thought to try and have a little bit of fun with her, what was to stop her having some fun of her own? He knew what kind of woman she was, so why not remind him of it?

A small smile worked its way up Anna's face as she came up with a plan. No... not a plan. That sounded far too devious for what she had in mind. Instead, it was an idea, just something to test the Duke and see what his intentions really were. Nothing improper or scandalous... or too much, anyhow.

She might have been in a graveyard, but in that moment, Anna actually giggled to herself, for how pleased she was. Truly, she was actually looking forward to Thursday night now.

Anna ended up spending all morning with her aunt. She spoke of the past two months. She told her of the incident with the pond, and then promised she would apologize to Eloise the next time they spoke, because it was important to have at least one friend with whom she could confide. And of course, she spoke about the Duke. More than what might be considered appropriate.

## CHAPTER 9



As was right to do, Derek had informed Lady Anna that he'd be sending a carriage to pick her up and transport her to the theatre. So standard was this act, that he hadn't really thought anything of it. In fact, he'd first considered not even telling her and just having one arrive so as to pick her up. The only reason he'd said it to her was because a part of him worried that come Thursday evening she might suddenly change her mind, even act as if she had forgotten.

So, he sent a note the day before so as to give her plenty of time. An hour later the messenger returned with a letter from Lady Anna. Derek opened the letter, expecting it to be a cancellation. Instead, it was... well, something far more bizarre.

*"It is quite all right,"* the letter read. *"I am perfectly capable of making my own way there. But thank you kindly for the offer, Lady Anna Lewis."*

She really was something else. And this wasn't necessarily a bad thing either. Derek read the letter three times, unable to hide his smile for how surprised he was. She wasn't rejecting him, or even denying him. She was simply uninterested in being doted upon.

But no matter. Derek had known Lady Anna to be different. That was why he was escorting her in the first place, to take those differences and mold them into something presentable... at least that was what he told himself. It did make things easier.

As this was an evening event, one that would be spent among his peers, Derek made sure to dress his best. That meant a dark waistcoat, paired with a darker jacket. Trousers that were lighter in color, and boots made to match his jacket and coat. He opted for no hat, instead slicking his brown hair back as was the style. Never one for fashion, a look in the mirror and the Duke decided that he looked more than presentable. Indeed, some might even call him dashing.

He found it a hard line to walk. Derek wanted to look his best, without implying that he was trying to. Although he was technically escorting her, he was still able to convince himself that it was not personal. As such, he didn't want to give Lady Anna the wrong impression. But he still needed to look his best. Casual, was how he needed to come across. Casual, yet still refined.

Of course, once he arrived and took one look at what Lady Anna was wearing, Derek decided that his outfit made little difference, for there wouldn't be a single pair of eyes that night that would bother to glance his way.

"Lady Anna..." Derek gasped as she stepped out of the carriage and onto the street. "You look... that dress..." he continued to gape.

The right thing would have been to tell her how stunning she was. How gorgeous. How a million poets working for a



million years wouldn't come close to describing her beauty. But all Derek could do was gawk.

Her dress was a shimmering, dark blue number. Like water cascading over a fall, it flowed down her body and swept over her legs. But it was tight, from top to bottom, the thin silk clinging to her body and showing off her curves in a way that Derek had never really seen before; like a nightshift that was soaking wet and sticking to her bodice. Further to that, there were no sleeves, and the neckline sat low on her bosom, and even lower underneath her arms. So much skin. So much exposure.

The dress was so scandalous and revealing that it took Derek a moment to look up and marvel at her face, for that was equally as stunning, if not more so. Her dark features worked perfectly with the blue of the dress. Her hair was worn up. Her jewelry was all sapphires and diamonds. Her lips were a light red, pouty, and worn with a smile that suggested she knew how scandalous her dress to be. And what was more, she liked it.

“What do you think?” she asked as she reached Derek. She held her arms out and did a little spin for him. “Too much?” That was the answer she wanted, and she raised an eyebrow at Derek as if hoping he would agree.

“No,” he said seriously. “I think it's perfect.”

Her face dropped. But only for a moment. Anna was quick to straighten up and smile at him. She then allowed for Derek to take her hand and begin leading her toward the entrance.

The theatre was busy this night. As it was the beginning of the Season, there were many who had returned to London for the summer months, so as to engage in the social requirements that their pedigree demanded of them. This meant balls. This meant races. And it certainly meant the theatre.

Carriages lined the street from end to end, and everywhere one looked, there was a lord with his lady slowly making their way toward the theater's entrances. The men were all dressed in a similar style to Derek, whilst the women were dressed regally, and not at all like Anna.

In fact, as Derek and Anna made their way through the catacombs of the theater, through the halls and up the steps so that they might take their seats within the upper balconies, Derek was only too aware of the way that both lords and ladies stared. They weren't even subtle about it. Openly gaping and gawking is what they were doing. And that wasn't to mention the whispers, the fingers pointing, the curled lips and glares. They weren't just curious about what Lady Anna had on. They were angry!

"I'm sorry for all the fuss," Lady Anna sighed as they made their way into their private balcony, perched high in the rafters, overlooking the stage from the left. There were eight seats in the balcony, and Anna and Derek were the first to arrive.

"Fuss?" Derek asked as if he had no idea.

"My dress," Lady Anna sighed as she took her seat. "Honestly, I just wish that people would mind their own business." She clicked her tongue and glared at another lord and lady who entered the balcony and were caught staring.

Derek smiled. “Don’t worry about it,” he assured her. “Let them stare. They’re probably just jealous.”

Lady Anna blinked at the response, almost seeming taken aback by it. Truly, it was as if she had wanted Derek to say something, maybe even agree with them that what she was wearing was inappropriate, but she quickly adjusted herself and smiled for him as she settled.

Derek didn’t mind the dress that she wore. Oh sure, it was revealing and a tad inappropriate. Certainly not something that he would expect a lady to wear. But Anna wasn’t your typical lady, and the more time he spent with her, the more he was coming to realize it. What was more, he was actually starting to enjoy it. Besides, it wasn’t as if Derek was dead from the waist down.

As the two settled into their seats and waited for the show to begin, he found his eyes flicking to her chest and her bosom. He eyed her bare skin, watched the way her breasts rose and fell as she breathed, and felt himself salivate slightly.

“Ah... have you been to the theater before?” he asked stupidly, desperate to start some conversation so that she wouldn’t notice his staring.

She frowned at him. “Yes, of course.”

“Oh, right, of course you have.” He gave his head a nervous shake. “I meant, when was the last time you attended?”

“Oh, I see,” she nodded her understanding. But she wore a knowing grin, suggesting she had seen his eyes wander. “It has been a few years admittedly,” she then said. “I used to come her often with my aunt.”

“Ah yes, Lady Diana. She was a fan of the arts?”

“She was a fan of most things,” Lady Anna chuckled. “She even spoke about taking me to theatres in less reputable parts of town.”

Derek frowned. “Where do you mean?”

“Well, I use the word ‘theatre’ loosely, Your Grace. Really, she always spoke about how we should dress down one night and go to a tavern of some sort. Watch a show they’d be putting on. Maybe a dance or something too. Get a little drunk while we were at it.”

Derek’s face dropped. “Just the two of you?”

“Oh yes,” she nodded her head seriously. “I mean, she always told me that she would. And we spoke about it often, but... well, every time I brought it up, she found a reason to say no.”

“Safety, maybe?” Derek suggested. “A desire not to get mugged?”

“I know,” Lady Anna sighed. “Honestly, she was such a worrier.” She clicked her tongue and shook her head.

Derek didn't hide how shocked he was by the conversation. His lips were pursed. His eyes were wide. His brow was scrunched. Was Lady Anna really suggesting that she might dress as a maid or what have you, and then sneak into the city and go to a bar? Alone? That was... there was no... absolutely bizarre...

What on earth had Derek gotten himself into?

It was at that point when he noticed Lady Anna giggling.

“What?” he asked, expression flattening.

“You are too easy, Your Grace.”

“How do you mean?”

She rolled her eyes. “Truly, is that what you think of me? I feel as if I should be insulted.”

“What do I think of you? I didn't say —”

“You didn't have to say anything,” she pointed out. “Just the fact that you believed me in the first place, is enough.” She clicked her tongue again. “Do you really have such a low opinion of me?”

Derek balked. “I don't! I mean, it was not my intent to insult you... I mean, I didn't really believe...” he stammered his way through an answer, until he noticed the thrill taking over Lady

Anna. His face dropped and he fixed her with an unamused expression. “You’re joking again, aren’t you?”

“I am!” she nodded happily. “Just testing you, is all.”

“And did I pass?”

“Oh yes,” she then nodded her head seriously. “Truly, the moment I stepped out of the carriage you passed.”

“And how is that?”

She grinned. “Most lords I know would have ordered me back into the carriage to change into something more presentable. So, the fact you’re even sitting here with me right now, well, it’s telling.” She raised an eyebrow toward him.

“Yes, well... in my defense, you do look rather good in that dress,” he smirked as his eyes traveled up and down her.

She waved him down. “Careful now, Your Grace. The night is young, and there are ladies about. Keep your hands to yourself.”

“I didn’t touch you!”

“But you were thinking of it- and don’t say that you weren’t. I might be insulted if you weren’t.” She winked at him as they turned back to face the stage.

Derek eyed Lady Anna in a state of wonder. Not to labor the point, but again, he was beyond taken by how different she was. How unique. How little she cared for the opinion of others. In fact, he realized now that she had worn the dress on purpose, a means to see how he might react, if he was even worth going forward with.

Derek was here to try and help Lady Anna change. He was supposed to show her the proper way to act, rein her in a little, mold her so that she might be able to go out in public and not embarrass herself. But the more he spoke with her, the more he realized something: he didn't want to change her. He was enjoying himself, far more than he might have imagined, and knew if he was here with anyone else, he wouldn't be having anywhere near as much fun.

As to what all of this meant? And what Derek was going to do about it? He still wasn't sure. But he didn't let that worry him. For now, he decided that he was just going to enjoy the night as it was and deal with the fallout, and his own pesky aversions, later.

Unfortunately, the night took an odd twist shortly after the show began.

He and Lady Anna were seemingly having a good time. She was so carefree and easy to speak with that she'd even managed to rope Derek into teasing and making fun of a few other lords and ladies about.

“That hat,” Anna sighed and indicated to Lord Barclay who sat on a balcony across from them. “Does he know it makes him look like a pig wearing a bonnet?”

“It does not,” Derek snorted.

“Oh?” she raised an eyebrow at him.

“No,” Derek said rightly. “Because that would be insulting to pigs.”

Yes, it was all a little too much fun. More fun than Derek had had in an age. More fun than he’d known he was capable of having.

He assumed that Lady Anna was of the same mind. But then the show began, the lights dimmed, the theatre became quite and when Derek glanced at his companion, he noticed that tears were falling down her face.

He didn’t know what to say, if anything. He thought to reach out and rest a hand on her arm. Maybe give it a squeeze to let her know that everything was all right- although he had no idea what might have caused the tears in the first place? Was it him? Was it something he said? Had she figured out the true reason behind him inviting her to the theatre? His mind whirred in silence, wondering at what had happened.

And then, even more unexpectedly, Lady Anna suddenly excused herself.

She stood up suddenly, whispered that she needed some air, and then ducked out of the balcony before Derek could do or say much of anything. He turned and watched her go, his mind racing over what had happened. He had no doubt it was his fault but couldn’t imagine why or what he might have done.



The show was in full swing, but Derek wasn't paying it any attention. A part of him thought to wait for her to come back. Another pushed him to go after her. He was of two minds, with no idea what to do. Funny in the way that it reflected his own feelings toward Lady Anna perfectly.

## CHAPTER 10



*A*nna wasn't the kind of lady who felt embarrassment. Ever. She just didn't see the point. Why bother concerning oneself with the opinions of others? Especially if those others were people whom she didn't care for one way or the other. Better to just enjoy oneself, have as much fun as you can, and let those who thought to judge do so on their own. If that's what they thought of as a good time, then so be it.

So, once again, it had to be stated that Anna didn't get embarrassed. Not now, not ever. She needed to confirm this within herself, because as she rushed from the balcony and into the hallway of the theatre complex, tears streaming down her face like a waterfall, body heaving as she tried to hold back even more tears from flowing, she was feeling... well, not embarrassed. That was impossible. But perhaps it was the next closest thing?

It was more a desire to not be seen as weak, that saw Anna flee from the balcony the moment she started crying. Yes, that was more likely. Ordinarily a bastion of personal strength and independence, the last thing that Anna needed were rumors to start that she was just like all the other frail, fragile ladies of the *ton*. One who might burst into tears at a moment's notice, and over something as benign as a play. That would not do.

So, she hurried through the hallway, down the stairs and then onto the street just outside the theatre. Fresh air was what Anna needed right now. A chance to breathe and recollect herself, to steady her pesky emotions so she might be able to rejoin the Duke of Elsbrook without it happening again.

It was a warm night, but there was a cool breeze drifting lazily down the deserted streets that surrounded the theatre. When Lady Anna reached them, she took a deep breath and immediately felt herself begin to calm and steady. She closed her eyes, exhaled slowly, and cleared her mind.

She knew the cause of her tears, she was under no false illusions there. It was her aunt who had done it. Lady Diana, long since passed away, yet still able to affect Anna's moods and temperament so effortlessly. It was as if she had been the one on the balcony, whispering in Anna's ear as the actors performed, making fun of the other attendees for what they were wearing, or how they were acting. It used to be one of Anna's favorite things to do with her aunt. She had forgotten how much she missed it.

That was why the tears had come. It was a reminder which attending tonight's performance had brought, a sort of flashback to happier times in Anna's young life when she hadn't felt totally alone in this world...

Not that she was alone now. Or cared if she was. Certainly not. Anna gave her head a shake and wiped at her nose, almost angry that she'd allowed such pesky thoughts to creep their way into her ordinarily steel-trap mind.

"You're being silly," she chastised herself, sniffing again and wiping away the last of her tears. "Very silly."

And she was, too. Being silly, that is.

She thought to worry what she might tell the Duke when she returned, only to remind herself that she didn't care what he thought- and that was the truth! She still had no idea why the Duke had asked her out exactly, but the more time that they spent together, the clearer it became that he wasn't trying to 'use her' or 'take advantage.'

For all she could see, he was nothing more than a chivalrous, sometimes charming, even amusing when the moment called for it, gentleman. Who, for reasons she could not fathom, had invited her out.

Not that she cared. But that was the whole point. Lady Anna was a strong and independent lady who didn't need anyone to be happy. Just like her aunt... or at least the aunt she had known.

It was just then that Anna heard the door open behind her, followed by the sound of footsteps slapping at the cobbled street in approach. She couldn't help but smile at this, assuming it to be the Duke coming to check on her.

"Really, now, Your Grace," Anna pretended to sigh as she spun about. "There's no need to wor-" It wasn't the Duke. Rather, it was someone much, much worse.

"Good evening, Lady Anna," Lord Ashville greeted as he approached her, his smile overly friendly and unnerving. "Enjoying the show?"

“Oh, Lord Ashville...” Anna’s lip curled as the lord approached her. And she didn’t bother trying to hide it. “Good evening.”

Anna knew of Lord Ashville, although she had little to do with the man, and for good reason. From what she knew of the snooty lord, he was the exact type of gentleman whom she ordinarily tried to avoid, simply because his perceptions of how a lady — or anyone for that matter — should behave were the complete opposite to her own. He was regal. He was proper. He was darn boring, is what he was. A real stick in the mud. Worse too that he seemed to take pride in it.

“I was surprised to see you exit so suddenly,” Lord Ashville mused as he reached Anna. He stopped short of her, leaning on his walking cane as his eyes flicked over her dress in a most judgmental stare. “Were you not enjoying yourself in there?”

“Oh yes, it was perfectly fine,” she said politely enough. As she spoke, she looked past Lord Ashville and toward the entrance, making it as clear as she could that she did not want to be having this conversation. “And you?”

“I’m enjoying it immensely,” he responded coolly. “I do love the theatre. I’ve always found the escapism that it offers a point of extreme interest. A chance to forget where we are... the rules that we live by.” His eyes flicked over her again. “If only for a moment.”

“Yes...” Anna shifted awkwardly as Lord Ashville continued to study her. “Well, that is half the fun.”

Trust Lord Ashville to make a trip to the theatre sound about as exciting as watching grass grow. He really was a shining example of everything that was wrong with the *ton*, and the people who lived it. Even the way that he watched her, the judgement that poured from him, was a frustration unto itself. Anna might not have been embarrassed by what she was wearing, but she was angry that others acted like she should be.

“Anyway,” Anna sighed as the silence stretched. Lord Ashville was literally just staring at her now, thin lip curled, beady eyes narrowed. “I think it’s best if I get back to it.” She went to walk around the lord, only for his hand to suddenly grab her by the arm.

“Before you do...” He pulled her to a halt but continued to hold on tight. “A word, if you don’t mind?”

“Concerning?” she tried to pull her arm free, but he refused to give.

“Lady Anna.” He clicked his tongue at her. “Let us not pretend that you don’t know what it is that you are doing.”

“And what am I doing exactly?”

His face dropped. “Acting a whore.”

Anna’s eyes bulged and she wrenched her arm free. “How dare you!”

“I did not want to say it,” Lord Ashville continued. “Truly, such descriptions are beneath me- as they should be beneath you! But I am afraid that you have left me no choice.”

“Let me make it easy for you then, shall I?” It was taking every ounce of self-control that Anna had to remain calm. And the only reason she even bothered was because Lord Ashville was a Marquess, which meant that he had the power to make her life a living hell. If he so chose.

So, instead of snapping at him, or even slapping him across the face for how rageful she was feeling, Anna did what she considered the mature thing. She straightened herself up, she pulled her arm free of his grip, and she stepped around him and then went back inside —

“Not yet,” Lord Ashville commanded. He quickly stepped in front of her, blocking her path. “Not until you hear what I have to say.”

“And if I don’t want to? Or care to?”

“We rarely get what we want in this world, Lady Anna,” Lord Ashville said. “In much the same way that I do not wish to be subjected to... to this abomination.” He waved his hand over her body, indicating the dress. “And yet, despite my wishes, despite what I *care* for, it is thrust upon me nonetheless. A reminder that in this world, we don’t always get what we want.”

“How unfortunate for you,” Anna said bitterly. “That you must look at me when I pass. I’ll try and keep that in mind the next

time I select an outfit.” Again, Anna tried to walk past the lord, and again he blocked her path.

“This is about more than simple wardrobe choices,” he growled. “It is your behavior that is causing a concern.”

“My behavior?”

“Do not play the fool with me,” Lord Ashville snapped. “You know of what I speak. Just last week, it was you, was it not, who saw fit to go for a dip in the pond at Hyde Park?”

Anna grimaced. “Well, yes, it was hot —”

“And you did so in half dress, with random men of the city, and with no escort or chaperone in sight. I have never, in all my life, seen anything so... so... so...”

“So what?” She raised an eyebrow at him and put her hands on her hips.

“Disgusting,” he seethed. “If I was your father —”

“Which you are not.”

“Thank God for that,” he spat. “But I am a member of this society, I am a servant to it like any other. And for as long as I am that I am afraid that I cannot allow this to continue for any longer.”



“And what is this, exactly?”

“Your behavior,” he said pointedly, as if he was in the middle of committing a good deed and feeling just so very proud of himself for it. “I am not the only one who thinks this way. There are several of us who have come together to discuss what is to be done with you.”

Anna balked. “What is to be done with me?”

“We are willing to give you a warning for now,” he continued in the same self-righteous tone. “But if these proclivities continue, then we will be forced to take more serious actions \_\_\_”

“Oh, will you just stop!” Anna snapped at him. She had tried her best to be polite. She had tried her best to let him say his piece so she might leave him and go back to the performance. But there was only so much abuse that Anna could stomach. “Do not act like you’re some gallant knight, doing the bidding of the people. You’re a prude.”

“Excuse me!”

“A prude,” she said again. “You saw me in this dress, and for reasons that I cannot imagine, you felt a sudden desire to...” her eyes flashed at him and she smirked. “To try and get me alone... Lord Ashville, how dare you.”

His eyes bulged. “Me? How dare you!”

“Oh, please, Lord Ashville.” She waved him down and battered her eye lashes at him. “You don’t have to pretend anymore. No one is here...”

Anna liked to have a good time. She liked to poke fun and play where she could, always looking to get a rise out of someone, rather than taking moments seriously. Like this one right now, for example. She knew she shouldn’t have pushed. She knew how dangerous Lord Ashville was. But in many ways, Anna was her own worst enemy.

Lord Ashville snapped. Where apparently, he was perfectly willing to abuse and deride a poor lady of the *ton*, the moment that his own reputation came into question was the moment that the line was crossed.

“How dare you!” he grabbed her by the arm again, this time squeezing a little too hard.

“Owe!” Anna yelped as she felt his hand press into her flesh. She tried to pull away, but he squeezed her even harder. “My lord...”

“What?” he growled at her and pulled her in to him. So close she could smell his stale breath. “Does this hurt? Do you not like the way it makes you feel?” He continued to squeeze, nostrils flaring, teeth bared. “I tried to be nice. I tried to warn you. But it’s clear to me now, that a simple verbal warning isn’t going to be enough.”

“Please...” she tried to pull her arm free again, but he refused to yield.

“No,” he said with a shake of his head. “Enough is enough. This is the only way you will learn.”

“Owe!” she yelped again as his nails pierced her flesh so that blood began to seep from the wounds. “Please...”

Anna liked to have fun. This was an undeniable truth. But there was always a line, and she was usually pretty good about not crossing it. For her own safety, as much as anything.

Right now, as Lord Ashville bore down on her, looking like he might just brutalize her for how angry he appeared, Anna was forced to admit that she had not only crossed the line, but had left it so far in her wake that she could no longer see it.

For the first time in a long time, Lady Anna Lewis was afraid. Worse than that, she was terrified. Worse than that, she knew that there was nothing that she could do to change it. And knowing her luck, things were only going to get worse.

## CHAPTER 11



Derek found Lady Anna outside the theatre, standing just by the entrance on the side of the road. But she wasn't alone.

At first, Derek wasn't sure exactly what he was looking at. Truth be told, his first thought was that he had walked in on her kissing a random pedestrian. A rather crude image yes, but this was Lady Anna Lewis after all, and the rumors that surrounded her might just justify it.

Of course, it wasn't this, and when Derek saw what was actually happening, he felt awful for even thinking it.

But only for a moment. After that, it was rage.

"What is the meaning of this?" Derek exclaimed as he strode to where Lord Ashville was manhandling Lady Anna. "Ashville!"

Lord Ashville was quick about releasing Lady Anna, and then pushing away. He didn't appear too upset by Derek's sudden appearance, however. If anything, he almost looked pleased by

it. “Ah, Your Grace,” he greeted with a warm smile. “Lady Anna and I were just having a little... chat.”

“It was no such thing!” Lady Anna accused as she caught her footing.

“Please,” Lord Ashville tittered. “You really do need to control your emotions, Lady Anna. You are becoming hysterical.”

“She’s right,” Derek growled at Lord Ashville. He strode forward and put himself right in front of the lord, inches from his face. He was nearly a foot taller than Lord Ashville, and he towered over him like a giant. “That was no chat. You had your hands —”

“A warning,” Lord Ashville eased. “Just a warning, is all that it was. Nothing to worry yourself over.”

“How dare you!” Lady Anna exclaimed. “You had your hands —”

“Nowhere unseemly, I assure you,” Lord Ashville cut her off. “And you would be smart, Lady Anna, to mind your tongue and keep a cooler head than what you are currently displaying. Now is not the time for hysteria.”

“Hysteria!” Lady Anna shrieked as she nursed her bruised arm.

“You had no right to touch her,” Derek snapped. “None.”

“It was the least that I could do,” Lord Ashville said. His face remained mere inches from Derek’s, but he didn’t look the least bit intimidated. “After the scene she caused tonight, no one would begrudge me if I was to remove her by force. Necessary force. Believe me, the people would cheer.”

Derek was still unsure how he felt about Lady Anna. Where she was undoubtedly a fun time, and admittedly very interesting and unique in her own way, he still wasn’t certain if she was the type of woman whom he should be spending time with.

And the fact that he couldn’t stop staring at her — and that dress! — only made matters more complicated.

Regardless of this. Irrelevant really, for Derek was still a gentleman, still a duke for that matter. And there was little chance that he could bear witness to a lady of the *ton* being physically assaulted, and just stand by and do nothing. In fact, there was no chance.

“That’s quite enough,” Derek began, his tone as commanding as his physical stature.

“Exactly,” Lord Ashville agreed with a relieved sigh. “Honestly, I often wonder about the degradation of —”

“Not her, Ashville, but you. What you have done here tonight is not only an embarrassment to your name and title, but worthy of reprimand.”

“Me?”

“To lay hands on a lady in the way you just have...” He glared daggers at the lord, so he might know just how serious he was being. “I should have you stripped and beaten.”

“Oh, please,” Lord Ashville snorted. “For a whore like —”

Without thinking, Derek barged into Lord Ashville, pushing him back with his chest so the tiny lord stumbled, and then nearly fell before finding his balance. “You can count yourself lucky that I have somewhere I need to be,” Derek growled.

Lord Ashville’s confidence drained from him like water through a sieve. He stayed back, half turned as if he meant to flee. “But... but... you promised that you were going to help us.”

“I said I would think on it.”

“And after tonight!” He pointed to Lady Anna. “What she is wearing! How can you stand by so idly?”

Morals were funny things. To Derek, it was strange that a man like Lord Ashville could play the victim so convincingly, acting as if somehow Lady Anna’s actions were causing him intolerable pain. Meanwhile, he was happy to abuse her as if that wasn’t a problem in the least.

Derek might still not have been sure how he felt about Lady Anna. But one thing of which he was sure, was that he preferred her company infinitely to that of Ashville.

“Lady Anna.” Derek turned to where Lady Anna stood watching and held an arm for her to link. She still clutched at her bruised arm, but she wasn’t paying it any attention. Her stare was for Derek- mouth half open, eyes wide, brows narrowed in apparent confusion at his actions. “Shall we be heading back inside?”

Lady Anna snapped back to attention immediately. She dropped her bruised arm and offered Derek a grateful smile as she took his arm and allowed for him to lead her. “Thank you, Your Grace.”

“Not at all.” The two turned about and started toward the theatre’s entrance. But it wasn’t until they were back inside, and making their way through the halls, that Derek spoke again. “I want to apologize for what just happened,” he said.

“Your Grace?”

“Ashville...” Derek clicked his tongue. “He does not speak for the entire *ton*. And I want you to know that.”

“Oh, I know,” Lady Anna sighed. “Just most of it.”

“Not at all!” Derek exclaimed. “The way he was just acting... that is as far from proper decorum as anything I could imagine. Honestly...” Derek was still feeling anger of what he had just seen the Marquess do. “It infuriates me that he would think to accost you like that.”



“Is that so?” Lady Anna asked, the smallest smile working its way over her thick lips.

“It is,” Derek nodded firmly. His eyes flicked to Lady Anna and caught the smile. “What are you smiling at?”

“Oh, nothing,” she said wistfully.

“Where you’re concerned? I don’t believe that for a second.”

Lady Anna came to a sudden stop, releasing Derek’s hand as she did. “Easy there, Your Grace. If anyone was to hear you speak this way, why they might just assume that you’re as bad as I am.”

“What way?” Derek asked, mind racing as he tried to think about what he had said.

“Bawdy talk,” Lady Anna confirmed. “Implying that I am a no-good sort who deserved what she had coming. That is how.”

“I never!” Derek gasped. “I would not dare! I was only joking, Lady Anna, trying to ease the situation by...” It was around that point when he noticed her body shaking. “You’re just teasing me, aren’t you?” he asked flatly.

“Of course!” she exclaimed, and then stepped into him and took his arm once more. “Truly, it is too easy. Far too easy.” Her eyes flashed and her grin widened.

She allowed Derek to continue in leading her back through the halls and toward their balcony. The walk was made in silence, which Derek was grateful for as he had a lot on his mind.

He was still trying to puzzle her out. Although he knew her to be free and unencumbered in a way that he'd never really seen before, he was also beginning to suspect that it was all an act. As crazy as that might sound.

What it looked like to Derek, was a cover, or a sort of protection that she has erected around herself for whatever reason. That wasn't to say that she was pretending to act a certain way, more than what he was seeing, and what she was choosing to reveal, wasn't the whole truth.

What Derek did know however, what he had finally decided upon, was that he didn't want tonight to be the last time that he spoke with Lady Anna.

There was more to her. And there was more to the way he felt about her. A small part of this terrified him, because he could already feel the influence that she had over him and his actions. That desire to behave a certain way just to impress.

But another part, an even smaller part, was excited. There was something special about Lady Anna, something different that Derek felt he needed in his life right now.

Yes, he needed to see her again. He had to.

They reached the curtain which led into their balcony, and Derek and Lady Anna came to a stop. Before they went back

in, Derek intended to ask to see her again. The façade of ‘trying to change her’ was dropped. Now, he simply wanted to see more of her.

However, before he got the chance to speak, she interrupted him.

“What did Lord Ashville mean before?” she asked.

“Excuse me?” Derek blinked, not at all sure of what she was referring.

“When he said that you promised you were going to help him? What did he mean by that?”

Derek frowned as he thought... and then the meaning hit him. This had his eyes bulging as he hurried to dismiss her. “Oh, nothing,” he waved her down. “I am sure he was just... speaking. You know, saying anything that he could.”

“You’re going to have to do better than that.” She crossed her arms and fixed him with a discerning stare.

As to Derek? He bowed his head in shame. He considered for a moment if he should lie to her. But Derek never was one for lying. It felt wrong, even if the intent was pure. In moments like this one, he always felt it best to tell the truth and hope the fallout wasn’t too great.

Sometimes, being honorable was a real pain in the behind.

“Well, about that...” he sucked through his teeth and took a deep breath. “You have probably been wondering the reason that I invited you out tonight...”

Lady Anna took a step back. “I have been.”

“A few days ago, Lord Ashville pulled me aside- I was walking through Hyde Park alone, and he was there with some friends. And so were you if you remember?”

She looked at him flatly and crossed her arms. “The day I went for a swim, you mean?”

“That’s the one,” Derek nodded. “Ashville thought that maybe I could... that I could convince you to change your ways. He wanted me to give you a talking to, to see if you might see reason.” He tried for an awkward chuckle, which fell horribly flat.

And for good reason. The look on Lady’s Anna’s face was one of such disgust, that she might as well have been dealing with Lord Ashville again. Her lip was curled back. Her nostrils were flared and steaming. Her eyes were wide and her stare furious. If she had slapped Derek across the face, he wouldn’t have been surprised.

Nor would he have held it against her.

“But I couldn’t do it,” Derek then hurried to explain. “When I saw you riding that horse, I realized that —”

“Don’t bother,” Lady Anna said.

“Excuse me?”

“Don’t bother trying to explain yourself. I don’t want to hear it.”

“But it’s not what you think!”

“And how could you possibly know what I think?” Lady Anna snapped. “From the sound of it, you already have an opinion of me. One that you and all the other gentlemen have had great fun in constructing.”

“It’s not like that at all!”

“Oh no, I’m sure it’s even worse!” Lady Anna took another step back. And then another. And then, even more tragically, she spun about as if to go.

“Wait!” Derek cried and lunged for her.

She pulled her arm back and held it to her chest. “Don’t,” she warned. “Don’t touch me.” She bulged her eyes at Derek, an act which had him wincing as if from pain. “Good night, Your Grace,” she then said. “I wish I could say it has been a pleasure but... well, we both know that isn’t true.” And then, she left.

Derek stood in a state of paralysis. Unable to move or even think for how shocked he was over what had just happened. Everything had been going so well. And then... it was like a lightning strike to a tree, setting the entire world on fire.

Although once his mind calmed and his pulse slowed, he came to a most tragic realization. After what he had done, Lady Anna had every right to be furious with him.

If it had been just an hour ago that Lady Anna had stormed off, then Derek might have just left it. He might have even felt relieved, counting himself as lucky for avoiding what was surely a dangerous situation. She was bad news and he knew deep down that he'd do well to stay away from her.

But now... well, she was *still* trouble, and likely bad for Derek. But that didn't matter so much anymore. He'd obviously hurt her deeply. That thought alone pained him, knowing that she was upset and distraught all because of something that he had done.

Derek knew that until he set things right, he would not be able to forgive himself. But whether or not the fiery Lady Anna would forgive him... that remained to be seen.

## CHAPTER 12



This was why Anna didn't socialize. This was why she avoided men all together! They were pigs. They were rakes. They were selfish, self-involved bigots who cared for no one but themselves. To think that for the briefest of moments, Anna actually wondered if the Duke might be different, if he was perhaps the only man in all of London that wasn't exactly as she expected.

So much for that!

Anna arrived home from the theatre shortly after she left — lucky she had decided to take her own carriage, otherwise she would have been forced to endure the Duke for even longer. It pulled up outside her front door, the driver jumped out to help her down, and then she walked up the steps and into her manor alone. But that was how it always was.

The manor itself was a large, two-story affair, containing upwards of fifteen bedrooms, eight washing areas, two living rooms, three dining rooms — although one was for the staff — and even a small library. During the day, when the sun shone bright upon the white bricks and grey stone that made it, with the vines and shrubs and colorful flowers that grew up its sides and over its roof, it looked like the most magical of places. Like something out of a fairytale, for how alive it seemed.

Tonight, as was the case with most nights, and even most days truthfully, it was about as lively as a graveyard.

Anna heaved the front doors open with great effort. This led her into the entrance foyer, which itself was as large and open as a grand hallway. But it was dark and musty also, silent, and dead. There were staff about, but the numbers were fewer than when Anna's aunt had been alive, and by now most of them were in bed. The few that were awake were in other parts of the manor, doing duties that Anna didn't know about, keeping so much to themselves they may as well be invisible.

She stalked through the empty manor, mood still despondent. She told herself she was fine with this, and that she was actually happy that the Duke of Elsbrook turned out to be the baboon she had guessed in the first place. She told herself this because she wanted it to be the truth- she was and always would be better off alone!

And yet, the way her shoes echoed off the floorboards of the house, bouncing about the large and empty interior so freely, seeming to announce that she was alone in this world for how loud it was, did much to undercut this belief.

It wasn't always like this.

Once, only a few years ago, when her aunt had been alive, this home had been as lively as church on a Sunday morning. There had always been people about, friends and members of staff, filling the house to the brim and making it seem as if the walls themselves had come alive. During those times, being single had been the simplest of things.



But now, as Anna stalked through her empty home, creeping through the darkness like a rat in the night, listening to the wind howl outside for there was no other sound to distract her from it, she hated to admit... to even think... to wonder what it might be like if someone else was here with her.

This of course sent Anna into a shame spiral, as she had been raised to believe that independence was the most important of things, a badge of honor for the way her aunt used to wear it. What would she say now if she knew that Anna was thinking such things? Would she be as ashamed as Anna felt? Or would she be supportive...

In the end, as she made her way up the winding staircase and toward her room, Anna realized that it didn't matter much one way or the other. Not now. Not after the way she had left.

Likely, she was never going to hear so much as a whisper from the Duke again.

A shame too. Where at first, Anna had been skeptical toward the Duke, certain that he was going to be an outright bore and prude as all men seemed to be, she'd been surprised to find him the complete opposite. Oh sure, he was still proper and some of the things she did and said so clearly grated on his traditional values. But he was open with her, and honest, and willing to at least try and have fun.

Truly, until she discovered what he had done, and the reason he had sought her out in the first place, Anna had actually been wondering if they might see one another again. The first time she'd ever thought that about a man.

There was no point in worrying about that now though. Anna wasn't the type to go chasing. Nor was she the type to apologize. What had been said was said, and there was no taking it back. She swept into her bedroom, her mind hard at work to convince herself that she had done the right thing and this wasn't the end of the world, despite feeling as if it were.

The fire was lit, but burned low, so she moved closer to it so that it might provide her some warmth in an otherwise cold world.

But then she heard something. Coming from outside.

Anna spun about toward the window, the one that looked over the front of the manor. She listened, thinking it likely to be the wind slapping at the side of the —

The noise again! Only this time, she recognized it. It was the sound of a carriage being pulled up the avenue and toward her home. She raced to the window and peered out, not at all surprised to see said carriage quickening toward the front door. And what was more, she knew exactly who the carriage belonged to.

But that was all she knew. She was shocked to see that he had followed her here this night. More shocked that her heart raced inside her chest because of it. How she was going to proceed, how she might wish to proceed... she had no idea. It might have helped if she knew what it was that she wanted.

Another reason Lady Anna avoided all things romantic. It was intolerably complex, confusing, and was often more trouble

than it was worth.

## CHAPTER 13



Derek watched Lady Anna's home through the window of his carriage, wondering to himself all the while what on earth he was doing here.

Well, he knew what he told himself- the reason he had come up with for his visit. He was going to apologize to her for tonight. The way she had left him so suddenly, how upset she had been, had left a sour taste in his mouth that he needed to correct. That was the reason he repeated in his head.

But it wasn't the entire truth and, as the carriage began to slow, as the moment that they should speak arrived closer, Derek struggled to contain his nerves. Nerves that he should not be feeling!

The sight of Lady Anna's manor had caused some confusion in him also. It was completely dark, without so much as a single candle seeming to burn within its body. This was strange, as rarely was a home left so desolate and empty. If not for those that lived there, the staff should have kept it lit through the night. Did this mean that she wasn't home? Or was something else afoot?

It was just as the carriage came to a stop, roughly fifty feet from the entrance, that the front doors to the manor popped open and Lady Anna stepped outside. She was still dressed as she had been when she left him— that dress!— but she didn't look at all surprised by his visit.

In fairness, and seeing as this was Lady Anna, it was near impossible to predict how she might be feeling.

The carriage came to a dead stop, but Derek didn't climb out right away. Rather, he sat hidden behind the curtains, eyeing the mercurial lady, trying his best to discern from her expression how she might be feeling so that he would know how best to proceed.

“You can come out now!” Lady Anna suddenly called. “Unless you plan to spend all night in that carriage watching me?”

Derek felt his face flush red, and he was glad that she couldn't see him. He very nearly rapped his fist against the roof of the carriage and commanded the driver to take off. But he quelled that thought, took a deep breath instead, and figured the best thing to do was get this over with.

So, he did. Derek climbed from inside the carriage, made sure to meet Lady Anna's eyes, and then beamed for her.

“Lady Anna,” Derek greeted as his feet hit dirt and he started toward her. “I'm glad that I managed to catch you. And I want to apologize for the lateness of my —”

“What are you doing here?” Lady Anna snapped from the top step.

Derek balked. His intention had been to go to her, take her hand, kiss the back of it and apologize profusely. But her words had him stopping suddenly, as if there was an invisible wall erected between them.

“Ah...” he offered with bewilderment. “I, ah... I came here to apologize.”

“For?” she asked, eyebrow raised halfway up her head.

“For earlier,” he said stupidly.

“Earlier?” she shot back, that same discerning expression.

“Yes... earlier.” He blinked.

“All right,” she said. “And what of it?”

“Um... what I said to you. I... it is my thinking that it was not right. And that I should apologize.”

“And what did you say, exactly?” Her eyebrow seemed to rise even further toward her hairline.

Derek blinked again. “Well, it wasn’t so much what I said but-what I mean is, what you think that you found out about and

my intentions toward you —”

“Think?” She remained on the top step, looking down at Derek as if she was a dungeon master, the keeper of the keys, and Derek was trying to talk her into releasing him. “So, what I thought happened between you and Lord Ashville, concerning myself and my own actions, was just one big misunderstanding? Is that it?”

“I mean, not exactly, no —”

“What then? Unless you’re here to tell me that you misspoke, and that you weren’t actually working for Lord Ashville tonight when you asked me to the theatre? If that’s the case, then by all means, apologize.” Hands on her hips, she continued to glare down at Derek.

As for Derek, he stared wide-eyed and open-mouthed, caught a little by surprise at the hostility being leveled in his direction.

This wasn’t going at all how Derek had thought.

The fault lay with him though, and he wasn’t about to argue that. The problem, as he saw it, was that he was being too nice. He didn’t want to offend Lady Anna by confirming what she already knew to be true. What he hoped was that he might be able to offer a vague apology and then move on to... he wasn’t even sure.

But he’d forgotten how combative Lady Anna was. She wasn’t like the other women he was used to speaking with, and

because of that, Derek realized that he might need to change tactics.

“You’re right,” he admitted with a shrug. “Lord Ashville and I were scheming against you. That’s the reason that I invited you out tonight.”

“So, you admit it!”

“I already did,” he said with another casual shrug. “Unless you’re angry at me for a different reason?” This time it was he who raised an eyebrow at Lady Anna, and it was she who shrunk back. “I didn’t think so,” Derek chuckled as he started forward again. “And for that, I do want to apologize.”

“Apologize for what, exactly? You still haven’t said why you wish to.”

“Because I hurt you,” Derek explained. He reached the steps, hesitated in case Lady Anna tried to warn him off taking them, and then slowly began his ascent. “When Lord Ashville asked me to speak with you, I admit that I was in slight agreement with him.”

“Excuse me?”

“You’re strange, Lady Anna,” Derek admitted as he climbed the steps. “You are — and don’t try and say differently. Anyone who goes for dips in ponds in public locations while fully clothed, must expect to be called such. And I think you’ll agree with me on that.”



“Maybe...” Shockingly, Lady Anna didn’t appear upset by what Derek had just said. If anything, she was amused!

“So, I agreed to try and speak with you. I thought it was for the best.” He reached the step below where Lady Anna was standing and came to a stop. This put his face right in front of her own... inches away. “But then I did a most unexpected thing.”

“And what was that exactly?” she kept that eyebrow raised at him, like the string on a bow pulled back and ready to let fly.

“Spoke to you,” Derek sighed. “Properly, I mean. Not at you, but with you. And do you know what I discovered?”

“I can’t wait to hear it.”

“That you’re not very strange at all — oh, don’t get me wrong. You are certainly different. You are unique in your own way...” His eyes flicked up and down her body, the dress, how revealing it was. “... something which you also won’t deny, I am sure. But you’re not strange. And you’re certainly not dangerous, as Lord Ashville seems to think you are.”

She snorted at that. “Maybe I am. Maybe I’m more dangerous than you know.”

“Doubtful,” Derek smirked. “Although, if you want to prove me wrong...” he raised a challenging eyebrow at her.

A moment passed between them then. A spark that seemed to zap at them both. It had Derek suddenly realizing how inappropriate this situation was. Here, alone... nobody else around... just he and Lady Anna and darkness to hide their deeds... For the briefest of moments, Derek considered turning about, saying goodnight, and leaving before anything might happen that would threaten his reputation.

But he didn't turn around and leave. The way that Anna was now watching him, curiosity laced with another look that he couldn't quite identify, ensured that he was going to stay right where he was.

She really was bad for him.

"I didn't think so," he chuckled. She opened her mouth to snap at him, but he powered over her. "I was wrong," he admitted. "I was wrong to use you like that. To give you false impressions. And then, to try and lie to you when you learned what I had done. Nothing I say can change what I did. All I can hope for is that in time, you forgive me. Truly, Lady Anna, I am sorry."

Derek hadn't been sure what reaction he'd receive. Anything from a slap across the face to forgiveness would have been pretty much standard, from what he knew of Lady Anna. But when she started to laugh at him, shaking her head and even snorting... well, it was just a little bit surprising.

"What?" Derek demanded. "What's so funny?"

"You are," she continued to chortle. "The way you came riding in here like a knight on horseback —"

“I was in a carriage.”

“Metaphorically, silly,” she rolled her eyes at him. “And the way you stammered and tripped over your apology as if worried I might bite your head off.” She giggled to herself. “Truly, I don’t think I’ve ever been given such an earnest apology before. Never ever.”

“Oh.” Derek blinked. “So... you forgive me?”

Lady Anna narrowed her eyes at Derek as if considering. But then, she exhaled and shrugged as if it was all nothing. “I suppose so,” she said. “It would be rather rude of me to deny you now, wouldn’t it? After you chased me down and everything.”

“I didn’t chase you.”

“Followed me then,” she said with a smirk. “Honestly, Your Grace, following women back to their homes in the middle of the night, unattended. What would Lord Ashville say?”

Despite himself, Derek grinned. “I wouldn’t worry about that. The man is likely terrified of me by now. So, I imagine he’d be hiding in the bushes, too scared to accuse me.”

“Ha,” she laughed and shook her head. “That is good to know. If I ever find him to be harassing me again, I’ll know who to send for.”

“Please,” Derek said, a little too quickly, and much too excitedly. “I insist.”

“Do you now?” she asked, that smirk rising up the right side of her lips.

“Well...” Derek balked. “Only if... only if you would like... I mean... if a time comes when you require — no, that’s not right.” He cursed under his breath.

The apology was out of the way. But that was always going to be the easy part. It had been too, when Derek had been able to convince himself that all he wanted this night was to say sorry and make sure that Lady Anna was well. But that time had come and gone.

If he was being honest with himself, he’d jump back in his carriage and head home, glad that he’d done the right thing and abstained from anything sinister.

But it wasn’t that simple. Not anymore. Derek had decided that he wished to see Lady Anna again. And hopefully under less auspicious circumstances. He still didn’t know what he intended, only that he wouldn’t be happy unless they spent at least one more day together.

“My meaning is...” Derek sucked through his teeth. It was now that he suddenly realized how close the two were standing. Inches apart, noses so close they were almost touching. “I enjoyed myself tonight, Lady Anna. And I think you did too.”

“Is that right?” she scoffed. “Which part exactly?”

“All of it,” he said with more confidence than he was feeling. “From when we met, through to the performance... and right up until this moment, if I might be so bold.”

“Very bold.” Her eyes flashed.

“And I was wondering — hoping, rather, that you might...” He took a deep breath and tried to meet her eyes, but it was too dark to see them properly. “That you might wish to see me again?”

The next few seconds felt like a lifetime. Lady Anna didn’t speak right away. She crossed her arms, raised an eyebrow, and looked Derek over; eyes flicking from his boots to his waist to his face. He could see the wheels turning inside her head as she considered, and he held his breath in waiting.

“Maybe,” she finally said.

“Maybe?” Derek asked.

“Well, it is true, I did enjoy myself tonight. But the truth of it is, Your Grace, that you and I are two very different people. It would be as if a dog and cat started playing together.”

“That’s not true!”

“It is,” she sighed. “The very fact that you thought to change me in the first place —”

“To which I changed my mind right away,” Derek pointed out.

“But still,” she shrugged. “Do you really think that you and I have anything in common? That we might enjoy one another’s company for more than a single night?”

“I do,” he said seriously. He hadn’t been sure before, but now that he was being turned down so savagely, Derek felt a burning desire to prove himself. “In fact, I know that we will.”

“Prove it then,” she said.

“Excuse me?” Derek frowned.

“Prove it,” she said, that same smirk returning. Oh, she was definitely having a good time. A little too much of one. “If you think that you have what it takes to... to tame me.” Her eyes flashed. “Prove it. Right now. Go on.” Arms crossed, eyebrow raised, she looked down her nose in challenge.

Derek frowned at her. He leaned back a little, eyes flicking over her as he wondered what it was that she expected. And whether or not she was even being serious. Knowing Lady Anna, this was all some big joke and she was waiting for him to fail before she revealed the punchline.

Only... it didn’t feel as if it was.

In fact, there was something about the shift in her demeanor which had Derek reassessing the situation. They stood less than an inch apart; she was standing over him just a little. Her eyes continued to roam him. Her tongue licked her lips. Her smile held, and her breathing seemed to increase. There was a fire brewing between the two, one so hot that it almost lit the steps beneath them.

In any other circumstance, Derek would have felt uncomfortable. He knew this to be wrong, and he would have excused himself, turned about and fled. For that was the right thing to do. But this was Lady Anna he was dealing with and he sensed that now, more than ever, he needed to be brave, bold, and a little foolish.

Derek stopped pretending that he didn't know what he wanted. He stopped lying to himself, as if his attraction to her wasn't clear. Yes, she was interesting. And yes, she was different and fun and all of that. But she was also attractive, sexual, so darn alluring that it was all he could do not to stare.

But staring wasn't going to be enough. Despite himself, not even knowing how he was doing it, only that he was, Derek reached out suddenly. First, his fingertips simply grazed Lady Anna's arm. He felt her shudder but did not pull away. Then, he traced them down her forearm until his hand was suddenly wrapped around the small of her back.

Lady Anna's body stiffened, but she didn't push him back. In fact, she leaned into him, pressing her body against his own. And, as she did so, Derek met her eyes once, briefly, before closing his own and then his lips found hers.

They kissed. There on the steps. Hidden by the darkness. Alone, for there was nobody else in sight. Just the two of

them, near strangers for how little they knew one another. Their kiss started to turn passionate and fervent as if the world around them was catching on fire. And Derek loved it.

His grip on her back tightened. He pulled her in closer. His lips pushed her mouth open and his tongue darted inside of her —

“Careful, Your Grace,” Lady Anna warned as she pulled away. “That’s how rumors start.”

“I’m sorry,” he apologized immediately as his senses returned. “I should not have —”

“Don’t you dare apologize,” she said to him. “I was just starting to like you.”

“You were?”

She huffed at him and shook her head. “The night is getting late, Your Grace, and I should be retiring.” She took a step backwards, up the steps and away from him, all the while keeping her lusty gaze fixed on his own. “And you should be getting home.”

“Lady Anna —” he started forward, but then paused. “About my proposal.”

“Write me,” she said to him. “The next time the mood strikes, write and find out. Maybe I’ll be in a good enough mood to say yes.”



“I will,” he assured her, knowing that there was no force on earth powerful enough to stop him.

“Oh, I don’t doubt that.” She took another step back and then curtsied for him. “Good night, Your Grace.” She turned, but then stopped and looked back over her shoulder. “And thank you, also. For the apology. Truly, I am grateful.” And then, she turned back and walked inside.

Derek remained on the steps for some time after that. It might have only been a few seconds, but it felt like hours as he watched where Lady Anna had just been. His heart raced inside his chest, his face flushed red for the way that blood pumped through his body, and his thighs tingled in ways that he knew to be inappropriate but didn’t care at all.

Derek was a traditionalist to say the least. He believed that a woman should be properly courted and doted upon, and even betrothed, before the thought of kissing came to the fore. So, the fact that he had just skipped the process and dove right into it was... well, it was so very unlike him! In every way. But that was what made it feel so good.

He floated down the steps and back into his carriage. And the ride, a solid thirty minutes home, went by in seconds. His mind was firmly fixed back on those stairs, his mouth and tongue ravishing Lady Anna like they were commoners, and her enjoying it just as much.

When his manor came into sight, Derek considered telling the driver to do another lap. There was little chance he’d be sleeping anytime soon.

## CHAPTER 14



The letter from the Duke of Elsbrook came early the following morning.

Lady Anna was in the back garden when the messenger rode through, so she didn't find out about the letter right away. Rather, she was enjoying a pot of tea and sweets with her best friend, Lady Eloise. They hadn't seen one another since the incident in the pond, and considering all that had happened since then, Anna figured it was best to apologize — even though she didn't think she needed to, so that she might be allowed to gossip.

"I do mean it when I say I am sorry," she assured Lady Eloise. "Truly." She took a light sip of her tea, eyeing her best friend over the cup's rim, while doing her best to look remorseful.

"Oh, I doubt it very much," Lady Eloise sighed. But then, she grinned and rolled her eyes at Anna. "Do you really expect me to believe that put in the exact same situation once again, you wouldn't do the same thing?"

"Jump in the pond, you mean?" Lady Anna asked.

Lady Eloise nodded.

“Of course, I would,” Anna exclaimed happily. “But then I would feel immediately bad about it. I promise.”

“I suppose that’s something,” Lady Eloise responded dryly. She took a sip of her tea also, continuing to look unamused. But Anna’s excitable energy soon broke through her defenses, and Lady Eloise began to giggle along with Anna.

It was a gorgeous summer’s morning. A rare one, for there wasn’t so much as a cloud in the sky, but it wasn’t too hot either. Somehow, and even without shade, the temperature was absolutely perfect for sitting and drinking tea.

They sat out in the open, on a thick woolen blanket, by a large water fountain made of stone. It was twenty feet in diameter, circular, and had a statue of a mermaid at its center; water sprung from the base of her tail and curved over the mermaid like a frame. Beyond that were hedges and gravel pathways, occasional statues, flowerbeds, and plenty of benches. It was one of Anna’s favorite places to wander and think.

“Anyway. The gossip,” Anna squealed. She reached forward and grabbed at Lady Eloise’s hands excitedly, holding them and squeezing. “You will not believe it!”

“With you? I truly believe that I will.”

From there, Anna dove headfirst into her tale of the previous few day’s events. She told Lady Eloise everything. Her running into the Duke while she was out riding. How she fell

off her horse. How he had walked her home, and then his invitation to the theatre.

“What?” Lady Eloise exclaimed. “The Duke of Elsbrook? Invited you, Lady Anna Lewis, to the theatre? You’re right, I don’t believe it.” Lady Eloise folded her arms across her chest and fixed Anna with a doubtful stare.

“Oh, it gets better,” Anna smiled wickedly.

From there, she went on to explain the night in question. The dress that she chose to wear, the way she had fled the theatre when she started crying- to which, Lady Eloise, being the friend that she was, stopped the story to make sure that Anna was all right.

“You poor thing,” she murmured.

“It’s fine,” Anna assured her. “Besides. This is where it gets really, really good.”

She told of Lord Ashville and what he said to her, and then what he did. From there, it was all Elsbrook, coming to the rescue like a knight in shining armor. Only, he wasn’t. He had lied to her, having only asked her to accompany him so he could do Lord Ashville’s bidding. It had hurt, and Anna had rightfully fled.

“And so you should,” Lady Eloise agreed. She then exhaled and slumped. “Well, that was quite the story. Although I’m a little disappointed that —”

“It’s not over yet.”

“What do you mean?” Lady Eloise frowned. “You left.”

“I did.”

“And this was last night?”

“It was.”

Lady Eloise could not have looked more perplexed. She had a small, round face already, but it shrank even further as she scrunched it into a ball. “I don’t understand. Did the Duke stop by earlier this morning? Before I arrived?”

Anna’s face dropped. “What? No! He followed me home, Lady Eloise! Right to my front door.”

“You’re joking!”

“I most certainly am not.”

“But... but... but you were alone! And he’s a duke — he should know better than that.” The shock that Lady Eloise was showing, Anna wouldn’t have been surprised if she passed out.

To counteract this measure, she quickly reached for a tray of macaroons and handed them to Lady Eloise. Her best friend

didn't hesitate in taking one, and the bite she took soon after seemed to calm her considerably.

"He should have known, perhaps. And yet..." Anna leaned forward and lowered her voice. "He did it anyway," she said with a suggestive look.

She finished the rest of her story. The apology from the Duke. His asking to see her again. Her demanding that he prove his worth, and then the kiss. Lady Eloise had just taken a final bite of her macaroon when Anna came to this part, and her mouth fell immediately open, and the biscuit tumbled from her mouth and stained her white dress. But she didn't notice.

"He kissed you?"

"Oh yes..." Anna felt her cheeks blush at the memory, and she looked away. "We most defiantly did."

"That is... that is... that is unbelievable."

"Pretty good gossip, yes?"

"I'll say." Lady Eloise exhaled as she leaned backwards, as if the weight of the story was physically pressing on her. And she still hadn't noticed the biscuit stains on her dress.

"Anyway," Anna sighed as she reached for a macaroon. "He said that he would write to me when he wished to see me again. So, for now..." she selected a macaroon and took a bite. "We wait and see."

“And when he does?” Lady Eloise asked.

“If he does.”

“When,” Lady Eloise confirmed. “When he does. What will you say?”

As far as Anna could see it, she really had no choice but to say yes. She had after all asked him to do something that might... impress her. A request that he might not have chosen to take so literally. Only, he had. He'd kissed her, right then and there. A duke, engaging in a most scandalous tryst that would surely ruin his name if anyone were to find out.

Anna hadn't been entirely sure how she felt about the Duke until that kiss. Before it happened, she'd found him engaging and interesting and certainly kind. He wasn't nearly as bad as she had thought he might be and figured there to be a small chance she might want to see him again.

After the kiss however... oh, she was certainly going to see him again. She had little doubt of that.

As to what her intentions were? Well, whatever they may be, there was little chance she'd be sharing them with Lady Eloise. That was for sure.

“I'll say yes,” Lady Anna confirmed with a casual shrug. Meanwhile, her mind was still on that kiss and this had her stomach tingling softly.

“Amazing,” Lady Eloise squealed.

“Yes, but who knows when that will be,” Anna said in an effort to distract... both Lady Eloise, and her tingling loins. “It might be weeks.”

“Or days.”

“Or months.”

“Or seconds.” Lady Eloise perked up, her gaze shifting from Anna to just over her shoulder.

“What are you looking at?” Anna frowned and spun about, immediately spying one of her staff— his name was Jobe — hurrying through the garden toward her. And in his hand, notably, was clutched a letter.

“My Lady,” Jobe greeted as he reached them. He then tucked his ankles together, put his hands to his side, and offered a short bow, before standing tall again. “A rider has come.” He held the letter out.

“The Duke?” Anna asked as she snatched the letter.

“He would not say.”

“Mysterious...” Lady Eloise whispered.



Anna frowned at her as she opened the letter.

“And, my lady,” Jobe continued. “He waits outside still. Refuses to leave until you send back your reply.”

“Gallant...” Lady Eloise whispered.

Anna fixed her friend with an unamused expression before opening and reading the letter.

*My dearest Lady Anna,*

*I hope this letter finds you well. In light of what we spoke on last evening, I was wondering if you'd care to join me this afternoon for a walk? I was thinking sunset, Hyde Park, by the pond.*

“Funny,” Anna muttered to herself, smiling also for there was little chance she wouldn't be joining him. Indeed, she'd been beaming just about from the moment she saw Jobe.

“What?” Lady Eloise gasped. “What is it?” She reached for the letter, quickly scanned it, and then scrunched her face. “The pond?” She thought a moment more, and then her face dropped. “Oh. That is... a little silly.”

It was a little silly. And Anna loved it. If she had thought last night to be a fluke, the Duke was very much confirming it not to be so. The *pond*. She chuckled and shook her head at the cheekiness.

Anna was then quick to inform Jobe to write a response for her, one in which she was to accept the Duke's invitation. She was always going to accept, there was little doubt of that. The only thing she didn't know is what would happen next. But that was half the fun.

## CHAPTER 15



For a short while, Derek worried that Lady Anna would not come. Indeed, as the afternoon sun slowly sunk into the earth, leaving behind streaks of red and orange through the blacks and purples of the evening sky, he became more and more certain that he was being stood-up. Or, worse than that, tricked.

Derek stood on a path that ran by the pond — the same pond that had seen Lady Anna take a swim in it, a little over a week ago now. He looked to his right and then his left, noting how both ways looked much the same at the moment; simple walking tracks that crisscrossed and snaked through the large park. There were handfuls of people about also, most walking in twos and threes as they took in the evening's warm weather and clear skies. It was a perfect afternoon for walking. Or would be if his walking partner deemed it fit to arrive.

Yes, for several minutes, Derek stood alone, waiting, becoming more and more certain that Lady Anna wasn't going to arrive. This didn't surprise him as much as he thought, for that was just who Lady Anna was. Unpredictable, erratic, likely to do the unexpected thing for no other reason than it's what was expected of her. As ironic as that might sound.

But then he saw a single figure waltzing down the path toward him. She appeared from behind a grouping of pine trees, hips swaying back and forth as she gently walked the dirt path; no rush, no hurry, not a care in the world for how casual she was. At one point, she even stopped to smell a rosebush, which Derek was certain to be on purpose, as she must have known he was watching her by that time.

It was, of course, Lady Anna Lewis. She might have been late, but she had come. And this fact alone set Derek's heart soaring.

"Lady Anna," he called when she came near. "I'm so glad you came." He waited for her to come closer, and then he stepped back and offered her a bow.

She wore a smirk on her lips as she reached him, appearing almost amused by his enthusiasm. "You sound surprised?"

"Where you're involved, Lady Anna, I operate under the principle that anything is possible."

Her eyes flashed and her smile widened. "Not a bad idea now that you mention it. It will save you from any future surprises."

"Somehow I doubt that."

Her smile grew. "I'll try not to disappoint."

"I can't imagine you ever could."

She huffed and waved him down. “Now you go too far, Your Grace. All these compliments, they might make my head swell.”

“And you’ll be all the more beautiful for it.”

That had her fixing Derek with a flat, unamused expression. “All right, enough of that. I enjoy a compliment as much as the next woman, but if you use too many this early on, there won’t be any for later. I’d hate for you to run out and have to rely on actual conversation to get you through the rest of the evening.”

“How about a dip in the pond instead?” Derek offered with a mischievous grin.

She raised an eyebrow at him. “Was that supposed to be a joke?”

“It was,” Derek beamed and offered her his arm. “What did you think?”

“Passable. A little predictable though.”

“I’ll try and do better next time.”

“Please do,” she said with the tiniest of smiles that she pretended to try and hide from him, while making sure that he saw it. “You know how eccentric I am, and crazy if gossip is

to be believed. Middling jokes just aren't going to cut it this evening, I'm afraid. I might get bored."

"And we all know what happens then."

She slipped an arm through his. "You said something about going for a dip in the pond?"

Derek chuckled and shook his head at the silliness of the conversation. And that's what it was too, silly things being said by silly people having a silly time. But it was also important. Derek had worried there might be some lingering tension left between them from the previous night, and he hadn't been entirely sure how he was going to handle it.

The truth was, he'd spent the entire day thinking of nothing but their shared kiss. From the moment he left her, to the one where he arrived here, it was all he'd thought of... and he'd done a little more than just thinking about it. But he also knew that he couldn't simply kiss her the moment he saw her, that he'd have to work toward that. If they even did it again!

And so, he'd opted to try and break the tension with some light flirtation and a little bit of humor. This was as much to gauge Lady Anna's responses as anything else. But she was clearly comfortable and relaxed, even jovial for the way she bantered.

If Derek had any worries or misgivings over how tonight might have proceeded, they very quickly vanished like the evening sun.

It was thus that now, with them tentatively linking arms and having dispensed with the pleasantries, that they were able to start their promenade properly and enjoy their walk. And that's exactly what they did.

"I confess, I wasn't entirely sure whether or not you would say yes," Derek began as the two started their journey around the pond. The sun was just now starting to set beyond the horizon, casting the scene in darkness, making the two appear totally alone as they strolled among the trees and hedges.

"Is that so?" Lady Anna asked with a tiny smirk.

"Well, where you're concerned —"

"Yes, I know, anything is possible. You said that already."

"Just making sure that you're aware," Derek responded. "I'd hate for you to think I was underestimating you."

"The same way I underestimated you, you mean?" She looked sideways at him, her smirk rising up the side of her face.

"How do you mean?" Derek frowned.

"Well, Your Grace, I must say, last night when you forced yourself on me—"

"I did not!"

“You did,” she nodded, doing what she could to keep her smile contained. “It was very un-duke-like of you. Why, I just about fell over by how caught by surprise I was.”

“You did not,” he scoffed.

She grinned. “True. But I was still surprised — as said, I underestimated you. It won’t be happening again.”

Derek had no specific plans for their promenade, except for the obvious, that being, walking. Again, this evening was all about testing the waters. Although he knew himself to be attracted to Lady Anna, and interested in her, he still wasn’t entirely certain if these feelings were more than fleeting, or if there was anything to them.

What was more, if Derek did find himself to be interested in Lady Anna, he wasn’t even sure if that would be a good thing. Never mind how different the two were. Never mind the scandal their affair might cause. His views toward courtship and marriage had always been considered odd, and he was yet to decide if Lady Anna was worth changing them.

So, they walked. And they talked. And they laughed and they bantered. It was a relatively simple thing in the end, far more so than what Derek had expected.

“So, tell me about you,” Lady Anna asked as the two strolled.

“What would you like to know?” Derek said.



“Start from the beginning.”

“My birth, you mean? I don’t remember that far back, I’m afraid.”

Lady Anna stuck out her tongue. “Oh, ha, ha. And here I was, thinking I was going to be bored this entire time.”

“Aren’t you?”

“Oh, I am,” she nodded seriously. “But nowhere near as much as I assumed I’d be.”

Derek took her for only half-joking. In fact, now that they were past the initial awkward phase and well into their walk, he was starting to see Lady Anna for what she was: perfectly normal. Oh sure, she was different in her own way, but there was nothing inherently evil or sinister about it. Just a free spirit who enjoyed testing boundaries.

Even her dress this evening was relatively boring and plain. Just a simple day dress. It was a light shift, covered by a dark-blue pelisse dress, which itself was covered by a shawl. She wore no hat this evening, allowing for her brown hair to be tied up in the modern fashion.

She was beautiful. And where Derek might have liked for her to be wearing something as... revealing as the other night, he decided that for tonight, that might not be for the best. Otherwise, his mind would certainly wander.

“My childhood was typical,” Derek sighed. “A little too typical, truth be told.”

“Boring, you mean?”

“No,” he said, meeting her eyes and playfully warning her off the sentiment. “Typical. When you’re the son of a duke, certain things are expected.”

“Something tells me that being single at the age of thirty and three isn’t one of those things?” she chortled.

Derek grimaced. “Yes, well... I did tell you not to underestimate me.”

“Were you close with your parents?” Lady Anna continued.

“As close as any other.”

“Meaning?”

Derek frowned, his eyes flicking to Lady Anna who watched him as they walked. Indeed, she seemed completely preoccupied with him, as if she were truly interested in what he had to say. For some reason, this surprised Derek, as he’d almost assumed she was here seeing him as a joke. Or to prove to herself that she could. The fact that she was actually intrigued by him... it had his heart beating just that little bit harder.

“I was closest with my mother,” Derek began with a sigh. “My father wasn’t a cold man, but he wasn’t exactly warm either.”

“Sounds like a typical duke.”

““You’re not wrong,” Derek chuckled. “Truly, most of my years spent as a youth were in the company of my mother. It wasn’t until I reached my teens that my father became more interested in me. But that was more his way of assuring that I grew up properly. Didn’t want to risk tarnishing the family name, you know.”

“Sounds like he failed miserably.” she joked.

“Easy,” Derek warned with a charming grin.

“Were they happy?” Lady Anna then asked. “Your parents, I mean? Or were they another one of those... what’s that expression? Convenient marriages?”

“No, they were happy,” Derek nodded as he thought of the times he would see his parents together, smiling and laughing and being genuinely in love. A rarity in this town. “Maybe that was their mistake.”

“How do you mean?”

Derek shrugged. This was a topic he didn’t like to think on too much, for the pain it caused him. “My mother was the first to pass. And my father, shortly after that. I always wondered if she had lived, then maybe my father might have been able to

fight off the illness that took him. He didn't die of a broken heart, but he let it weaken him."

"Interesting..." Lady Anna nodded her understanding.

"Is it now?" he chuckled.

"Well, I was just wondering to myself why a handsome duke such as yourself was still single. The obvious guess would be that there is something wrong with you — I almost hoped that was the case. But alas, it's far more complex than that."

Derek came to a sudden stop, forcing Lady Anna to do the same. She turned about and tilted her head at him; in the darkness of night, he could see the smile behind her blue eyes.

"So, you have me figured out, do you?" he challenged.

"Most certainly," Lady Anna nodded. "It's not that you're against marriage, per se. But you're scared of it."

"Am I now?"

"Oh yes," she nodded seriously. "Terrified that you might not find what your parents had — oh, better than that, that you will find it, but this will just lead you to an early grave. Either way, it's a loss, isn't it."

"I suppose I better not get married then."

“You’d be a fool to,” she agreed as she stepped into him and relinked their arms. “Now, come on, I want to show you something.”

“What?”

“Ah, ah, Your Grace. Not until we’re there- it’s a surprise.”

Derek clicked his tongue as if annoyed but allowed himself to be led. Truly, he was enjoying himself, far more than he expected, and the promise of a surprise both excited him... and scared him just a little. This was Lady Anna, so it could literally be anything.

He was also surprised in himself, and the way that he’d opened up about his parents and their marriage. That was a topic he never covered, and for good reason; he simply didn’t like to be reminded of it. Almost like the success of their marriage was a sign of his own personal failings. But what Lady Anna had said was interesting, and not something he’d really given any thought. He had always assumed himself to be picky, and that was why he was single. But was it possible he was just scared?

He gave his head a shake and brought himself back into the moment, and their walk around the pond. The sun had now set completely, the moon was slowly climbing the starlit sky, and he got the sense that his night was only just beginning.

## CHAPTER 16



“Your turn,” Derek said as he and Anna continued in their walk about the pond.

“My turn for what, exactly?” Anna asked.

“To tell me about yourself,” he explained. “That’s how these things usually work. I tell you about me, and then you tell me a little about yourself.”

“Oh, is that how it works?” she giggled as if she’d had no idea. “Well, you know me. I’m a little new at all of this. So, you can forgive me for not knowing the rules.”

“I do forgive you,” he said with a serious nod. “So long as you reciprocate — after what I just told you of my parents, I’m expecting you to return in kind.”

“Is that right?”

“It is,” he nodded again as if he were being so very serious. “So come on then. Who were they? And what did they do to you as a child exactly?”

“What makes you think they did anything?”

He raised a disconcerting eyebrow at her. As if to say ‘Really?’ And then he followed that up by saying, “Really? Unless this was all just an accident.”

“Ha,” she chuckled lightly. “No, this was definitely by design. Although not theirs.”

“Who then?” he pressed, sounding genuinely interested. “Your aunt, Lady Diana?” He watched her as they walked, his dark eyes wide with fascination, his smile eager and curious.

The walk had been going well so far. Much better than Lady Anna could have predicted. Oh sure, she and the Duke had already spoken before this. And they’d already proven themselves to get along. But that didn’t mean tonight was going to be a good time also. In fact, and from Lady Anna’s personal experience, it usually meant that things were going to trend downward.

That’s just how it always was. The few times that Lady Anna had bothered trying to be courted, she had found herself immediately bored, further confirmation that she was better off alone.

That tonight was going as well as it was, that she was actually having more fun than if she had stayed home alone, was telling. But this did not mean that Lady Anna was going to change her tune entirely and admit that all this time she had been a fool for keeping herself hidden. In fact, she felt the unquenchable desire to prove herself correct!

The Duke was boring. He was plain and dull. He was exactly what she had expected, and she was right to scorn him so. All she had to do was prove it.

“Yes, I suppose my aunt is to blame,” Anna sighed wistfully.  
“Or to thank, depending on how you look at it.”

“The two of you were obviously close.”

“She more or less raised me.”

“It must have been hard then, losing her so recently.”

“It was.”

“What was she like?” the Duke continued cheerfully as if Anna hadn’t been giving short responses... almost as if she didn’t want to talk about this. And that was because she didn’t.

Anna was perfectly willing to go out with Elsbrook. She was perfectly happy to speak with him, to flirt and banter, and maybe even share in another kiss...

But what she wasn’t going to do, was open up. She knew why she was this way. She knew why she scorned the idea of marriage and even relationships, why she preferred to be on her own, and why she pushed away anybody who dared to get too close. She knew all of that! So, as far as she was concerned, there was no need to tell the Duke or anyone.



And besides, once he heard of her upbringing, and her championing of singledom as the only way to live one's life, he was sure to turn and run for the hills.

A part of her actually hoped he might, best to get it over and done with now before anything else happened. That was why she was walking him in the direction that she was. That was what this surprise was all about. The Duke thought himself a match for Lady Anna? Let him see how wrong he was.

Lady Anna couldn't help but smile as they approached their destination. The Duke caught sight of her smile, but he must have assumed its cause was simple enjoyment, that Anna was having such a good time she could not help but beam. He was in for a very harsh reality check.

"Oh, don't worry yourself with my aunt," Anna dismissed. "Not when there is so much else to do."

"To do?" the Duke blinked and looked about. "How do you mean?"

"Oh, come now, Your Grace," Anna said with a mischievous grin as she came to a sudden stop. "Surely, you have figured it out by now?"

The Duke frowned at Lady Anna, trying to appear curious, but she could see the worry begin to take hold. He took a step back and glanced up and down the path they were walking. It was just the two of them about tonight, nothing more than trees and shrubs and flowerbeds... and the pond they were skirting.

His eyes landed on the pond. It sat still and silent, tranquil in the way that it reflected the shine of the white moon in its placid surface. He watched the pond a moment more, looked back to Anna, caught the smile she wore, and his face dropped.

“Oh no.”

“Oh yes,” she said with a pumping of her eyebrows.

“You are joking.”

“I almost never joke,” she said seriously. But then, she broke into a grin. “Well, that’s a lie. I always do. But not about this.”

“You can’t be serious.”

“Almost never, but again, this time I am.”

“But... but...”

“Your Grace,” Lady Anna sighed. She then shook her head despondently as she turned and strode to the edges of the pond — the exact same spot he had spied her swimming last week. There, she crouched down and ran her hand through the cool water. “I thought you said that you were through being surprised by me?”

“Yes, well...” he looked from her to the pond, his lip curling.  
“I guess I was wrong, wasn’t I?”

Finally, he got there.

Lady Anna had been in all sorts trying to figure out the Duke, certain that he was exaggerating his willingness to try new things, knowing that he wasn’t nearly as much fun as he pretended to be. She had no doubt that he was doing his best. But it had felt forced and a little predictable. At least now, presented with an actual chance to be a little wild, and he was being his true self again.

Lady Anna felt a slight pang of disappointment in this. For a brief moment, she had wondered if maybe the Duke was all that he pretended to be. But alas, it was not the case. Although that was probably for the best.

“It sounds like we both were.” Anna slapped her knees as she pushed herself to her feet. And then, she removed her shawl and dropped it on the ground.

“What are you doing?” Elsbrook hissed.

“Preparing myself to dive in,” Anna said, as if it were the most obvious of answers. “I suppose I can go in fully clothed, but where is the fun in —”

“You’re not actually going in?”

“Of course I am.”

“But... but...” the Duke looked about them, almost as if he was hoping that someone might come along suddenly.

The park was empty. It hadn't been earlier, but now that the hour was getting late, that the lanterns had gone out and the moon was shining in full splendor, there wasn't another soul for as far as the eye could see. Not that this would have stopped Lady Anna anyway.

“Feel free to leave if you must, Your Grace,” Anna shrugged as she began to unbutton her pelisse. One button at a time, eyes on the Duke who was watching her with an aghast expression.

“Lady Anna...” he gulped.

“Yes?” She undid the final button, shrugged her shoulders and the pelisse fell from about her and landed in the dirt by her feet. “Is something wrong?”

And then a change came over the Duke. As if he'd suddenly been struck by lightning, his body stiffened, his chest puffed itself out, and his chin pointed itself upwards in a showing of confidence. And then, most surprisingly, he began to undo his jacket.

“Your Grace...” Anna gasped playfully as she watched him remove his jacket.

“Don't look so surprised,” he said as he folded his jacket and placed it gently by his feet. “I told you, not to underestimate

me, didn't I?" He crouched down and began to take off his boots.

"I never will again."

"Somehow, I doubt that." He finished with his boots and kicked them off. Then, he stood tall again, hands on hips, eyeing the cool water like it was a monster from the deep that he was about to tackle.

As to Anna, she watched the Duke with curiosity, annoyance, and just a little bit of hunger.

The curiosity came from the shock as much as anything else. She had been sure that her suggestion they go for a swim be enough to scare him away. Well, it hadn't. He was still clearly trying to prove something to her, and it looked like there was little that was going to stop him until he did. That was where the annoyance came from.

This was more or less Anna's last play. After this, she couldn't imagine what she might do to further test the Duke. She knew that this wasn't who he was. She knew he was pretending to be somebody else to impress her. She needed to make him admit it.

And then there was the hunger, although one look at the Duke in his tight trousers and tucked in shirt, and that shouldn't need too much explaining...

He really was a dish. The face itself was typically handsome and alluring. And in the moonlit night, the sharpness of his

cheekbones, the straight angles that made his jaw and chin, seemed pronounced. This paired perfectly with his dark eyes which twinkled in the night, making him appear mysterious... and just a little dangerous. And then there was the body; tall, strong, muscular. Lady Anna licked her lips as she imagined the silk of his shirt clinging to his torso, the water dripping down his hair covered chest...

That was when Anna came up with an idea. A second idea, as it were. One that was sure to finish what the suggestion of this swim had started.

“Well, shall we do this?” Lady Anna sighed. She then reached down and grabbed at her shift, readying to hoist it over her head entirely.

“Lady Anna!” the Duke yelled. He rushed her and grabbed hold of her arm. “What are you doing?” he hissed.

“I thought we’d covered this already,” she frowned at him. “Going for a dip — unless you’ve changed your mind?” She then tried to remove her shift again, only for the Duke to keep a firm hold of her arm.

“Not that,” he said in a whisper, glancing about again in case someone might appear. “Your clothes! You’re... you’re... taking them off!”

“Obviously,” she exhaled as if annoyed. “I don’t want to get them all wet. Now, come on, off with your pants.”

“No!” the Duke took a hurried step back and held onto his pants as if they might suddenly fall off.

“No?” she eyed him a moment, but then shrugged. “If you say so.” She went back to trying to remove her dress.

“Lady Anna!” the Duke was on her again.

“Now, really,” she snapped at him. “I thought you said that you were... I don’t know, not like everyone else.”

“I never said that!”

“You implied it,” she argued.

“Well...” the Duke grimaced, but then straightened up. “There is a line, Lady Anna.”

“I’m assuming that getting naked in Hyde Park before going for a swim crosses that line?”

“Yes!”

“Huh...” she frowned and scrunched her face as if confused. “I would never have guessed. But it’s too late now. We’re here.” She tried to pull her arm free, but the Duke refused to let go. “Your Grace... my arm.”

“Not until you promise to put your clothes back on.”

She grinned. “I never would have imagined you of all people would be asking such a thing of me.”

“What does *that* mean?”

She rolled her eyes at him, but then fixed him with a wicked stare. “After the way you behaved last night, Your Grace, I’m surprised you’re not helping me with my shift.”

The Duke released his hold on her as if she’d suddenly caught fire. He then took a quick step back, eyes wide with embarrassment and shock and surprise and all those other emotions of which he had no control. “That is not... that was not... I did not mean to —”

“To kiss me?” she put her hands on her hips. “I wouldn’t have guessed.”

“Not kiss you,” he stammered. “I meant to do that.”

“Good,” she said. And then, because she was in the mood and enjoying the way that the Duke balked, Anna pushed it a little further. “A shame that it had to stop there.”

The Duke’s mouth fell open. His eyes bulged. “Lady Anna!” he gasped and looked about them again. “I would never!”

“Oh no...” she raised an eyebrow at him. “Even if you were all alone, with nobody about, already practically naked...” her eyebrow went even further up. “Are you telling me you



wouldn't, Your Grace? That you wouldn't even think about it?"

"I..." His eyes moved over, pausing on her chest. That was when she saw the change in him. Subtle, and he was so clearly fighting against it. But it was there. "No... I wouldn't."

"Really?" she smirked as she took a step closer, hands still on her hips so she was pulling her shift tight against the curves of her body. "Not even a little? I might be insulted."

"It's not right," he said as he licked his lips, his eyes now trained on her as if to look away might see her disappear entirely.

"It almost never is..." she took another step closer. And then another. "That's what makes it so fun."

"Who said I wanted to have fun?"

"I just assumed," she shrugged. "Unless you really are just like everybody else."

It had started as a test. That was all this was meant to be. A test to put the Duke in his place and remind him that he was out of his reach and playing with things he really shouldn't have been. Truly, when Anna had begun this dance, she had very much assumed, even wanted him to deny her and run away as was 'right.'

But there had been a shift in the atmosphere. The panic that had taken over the Duke was dissipating. The initial shock of the moment was more or less gone. Now, the two could feel sparks begin to fly between them as the earth seemed to simmer, as the sky seemed to catch fire, as the darkness of night began to act like a blanket cutting them off from the rest of the world.

The Duke might have claimed he didn't want it. But Anna knew different.

And Anna might have thought that this was all for show, that she had no intention of doing anything. But now, she knew different.

Another step closer. And then another. Less than a foot apart, all that could be heard was the twin beatings of their hearts. They thumped against their chests as their breathing increased, as their eyes flicked hungrily over one another, as their minds raced ahead and pictured what they both wanted to do but knew they could not.

"We should be leaving," the Duke said in a whisper. She could feel his warm breath on her lips and it sent a shudder through her body.

"Then go," she told him.

"Not without you." He reached out again and grabbed her by the arm.

“Make me,” she growled at him. Her eyes flicked from his eyes to his lips and then back to his eyes again.

The Duke hesitated. She could see him fighting within himself, desperate to control his urges and walk away. She could see his body shaking. She could feel the want inside of him. And then, most shockingly, she felt him kiss her.

It came from nowhere. One minute he was glaring at her, as if furious with what she was doing. The next, he stepped into her, pressed his body against her own, and brought his lips into hers. They met.

And what was more, Anna knew almost for certain that tonight it wasn't going to stop at a simple kiss. Not if she had anything to do with it.

## CHAPTER 17



Derek couldn't explain it. He couldn't reason with it. He couldn't even have imagined it, until it had happened. The complete lack of control that he had over his own actions, the way that his mind just packed up and left so that his animalistic urges might take control, was unlike anything he'd ever experienced before.

But then he remembered that tonight was a night of firsts, so he tried not to let it worry him too much. Instead, he simply chose to let go, give himself over, and most importantly, enjoy himself.

And that's exactly what he did.

His tongue moved inside of Lady Anna's mouth, parting her perfect lips so that he might wrestle and massage her tongue. As he did this, a hand moved up her back and wrapped itself around her head, holding her face close to his, refusing to let it go for he knew he could never have enough.

Meanwhile, Lady Anna's hands had found their way to his hips. They gripped them tight, her nails digging into his skin in a way that was both painful, and pleasurable — a concept he might never have imagined. He kissed her hard and she dug

her nails in further, which only made him want to keep kissing.

His free hand was cupped under her chin, stroking it with his thumb as he devoured her. But then it began to stray. Slowly, he moved it down the nape of her neck, his fingers stroking her soft skin gently, before moving under her heaving bosom and grabbing it.

“Mmmmm,” Lady Anna moaned as his hand gently fondled her breast.

Without thinking, Derek suddenly let go of both her breast and the back of her head. Lady Anna moved to complain, only for Derek to suddenly squeeze her buttocks instead. Two hands, one on each round cheek, he pulled her into him, pushing his pelvis against hers as he continued to kiss her.

He moved his lips from her lips, down her neck, licking and nibbling and gnawing. He didn't know what he was doing, or how he might do it. He just knew that she tasted perfect. It felt just so right.

Her hands ravished him. First, they grabbed at his hair and held his head still. Then, they were around his back, clawing at him. Then they were back on his hips, his arms, his chest. It was as if she was trying to devour him with her hands. And Derek couldn't get enough.

But it also wasn't going to be enough. The two lovers stood by the edge of the waters, bodies wrapped, mouths tangled, arms grabbing and groping, but it simply wasn't going to get the job done. Not tonight.

Derek had invited Lady Anna out to test himself. He suspected that he had feelings for her, but wasn't sure what they entailed, or if they were even real. Physical attraction was one thing, but to connect with a person on a mental level was something else entirely. It wasn't true love, but admittedly he didn't know much of the concept.

What was happening right now though, what this had devolved into, had nothing to do with love. It was lust, plain and simple. And Derek didn't mind one bit.

He lifted Lady Anna suddenly, and on instinct, she wrapped her legs around his waist. Then, balancing her as the two continued to ravish one another, he slowly lowered himself to crouching, laying Lady Anna on her back in the mud. It was dirty, filthy even. But neither seemed to care.

His lips began to work down her neck again. His hands began to pull up her shift as her legs remained wrapped around his waist. Her hands found his buttons and undid them. This was followed by the button that kept his pants together; quickly undone and then opened. Her shift was well and truly up her thighs now, exposing her for all the world to see.

It was just then that the moon seemed to come out from behind a cloud. It shot down in a beam, perfectly landing on Lady Anna and lighting her face. Her tan skin and features. Her heaving bosom, the way she puffed and panted, struggled in the confines of her shift. And most of all, her smile, the delight, and eagerness in her eyes.

Derek stopped suddenly. He pulled back and looked down at Lady Anna as she basked in the moonlight.

“What is it?” she asked, quickly looking about as if suddenly nervous.

“Nothing,” Derek said with a genuine smile. “Just... just realizing how beautiful you are.”

She blushed a deep red and looked away. Then waved him down, looked as if she was going to speak, but changed her mind. A wicked smile worked its way over her face, as she then reached up and grabbed him by the back of the head and pulled him back toward her.

From that moment on, there was no stopping them.

This was so unlike Derek. In nearly every way.

Oh sure, at the age of thirty and three, he'd been with women before. But it was always in a bedroom, with four walls and a closed door, with a woman who he knew. And never a lady of the *ton*. He wouldn't dream of doing such things.

And yet, Lady Anna was different. Putting aside the amorous desires that she brought out in him, it was the way that she pushed and tested him, which had Derek most fascinated. Even if this had not happened the way it had, they would have still gone for a swim, at night, in a public park. They would have still done the exact same thing that Derek was supposed to be stopping her from doing in the first place!

Derek had grown up in a strict household. He had grown up believing that there was just one way to live one's life, the

correct way, the way of a duke. His father had instilled in him a sense of moral righteousness, reminding him often that there are certain rules which even a duke was expected to follow. He was raised to be proper and elegant and most of all, regal.

When it came to Lady Anna, the expression ‘anything might happen,’ truly did apply. And what was more, Derek loved it.

Derek and Lady Anna made love that night. Out in the open, under the stars, surrounded by water, he took her like he’d never taken another woman before. Backs in the mud. Shift hiked up above her waist, his own pants pulled down to his ankles, he entered her and ravished her the only way he knew how.

It was long, hard, deep thrusts. His head buried in her neck, devouring her skin. Her hands grabbing at his hair, his back, his behind. She moaned for him to never stop. He told her he never would as he continued to thrust. She screamed out, he groaned and roared, the two thrived and writhed and wrestled for the way they rolled about.

They didn’t care that they might be seen. They didn’t care what the consequences might be. All they cared for was that moment, how amazing it felt, and how neither of them ever wanted it to end.

Derek had been worried about his date with Lady Anna. He had been worried for himself really, that meeting her might change him, that he might be forced to do things that he knew he shouldn’t. Well, that had happened. There was no other way to look at it. And now that it had? Derek wouldn’t change a thing.



In fact, the moment that Derek finished and rolled off Lady Anna, body puffing and panting, mind racing, heart beating so hard that it actually hurt, all Derek could think about was when they might do it again.

## CHAPTER 18



They lay by the water's edge, saying nothing, for nothing needed to be said. Instead, they simply enjoyed the shared silence found in one another's company.

At least for a while. Those first few minutes where everything just feels perfect...

Derek was on his back, whilst Lady Anna lay with her head on his chest. As she did so, she gently ran a finger through the hairs on his chest and stomach, twirling them about airily, giggling to herself when she might yank on one and have Derek sucking through his teeth.

"Having fun?" he asked after the third time that she pulled a hair out.

"A little too much," she giggled and then kissed at his chest. "And you thought tonight was going to be boring."

"I most certainly did not," Derek chuckled as he ran a hand through her thick hair. "Although I didn't think it was going to turn into this."

“Disappointed?” She propped herself up on her shoulder and looked down her nose at Derek, almost daring him to say that he was. But she was smiling, so the effect was heavily undercut.

Derek grinned up at her. “Oh yes, very disappointed.” Her eyes bulged at him and he hurried to explain. “That we didn’t do this sooner, is what I meant. Honestly, looking back at the rest of my life, I’m struggling to see what was stopping me.”

“Ha,” she slapped at his chest and lay herself back down. “I believe that would have been me. The thing about love making, Your Grace, is it takes two people.”

“Are you saying that you might have turned me down before tonight?”

“Might? No, certainly not might.” She began to twirl another hair of his through her fingers. “I would have definitely turned you down. Even a promenade would have been unlikely.”

“Is that right?”

“It is.”

“Then what changed your mind?”

She thought on this a moment. “Luck,” she offered eventually. “And boredom. Never underestimate boredom and what it does to a person.”

“I didn’t think you were one to ever get bored?” he joked.

“Rarely,” she agreed as she plucked at another hair — an action which had Derek sucking through his teeth again. “Which is where luck comes into it. Lucky that I was so bored that I decided to see you tonight.”

“Ah, now I see.” He pulled her in closer and began to run his hand down her back. He then leaned in and kissed the top of her head. It was dirty and covered in mud, but he loved the taste anyway “Lucky me then.”

“Clearly.”

The night hadn’t gone at all how Derek might have thought. Never mind the sex — as strange as that might sound. Of course, that had been wonderful, and was likely to sit with Derek for some time to come. What he meant was that tonight, all of it, Lady Anna especially, was unlike anything he might have imagined.

Derek was through wondering how he felt about Lady Anna. That was no longer a question. He liked her. He had feelings for her. And what was more, he wanted to see where these feelings might lead. And it wasn’t just Lady Anna herself, and all that she was. It was how she made him feel, the way she pulled Derek out of his comfort zone and had him doing things he never thought he would do.

Derek was a different person when he was with Lady Anna. He’d spent a lifetime assuming that everyone else was the problem, that he was perfectly adequate and it was all the women he met that were unworthy. And although this might

still be true to some degree, he knew that Lady Anna was the key. She made him different. She made him more interesting. She made him rethink how he had been living his life up to now and had him wanting to do things that he might never have before dreamed.

“What are you thinking about?” he asked.

“Literally nothing,” Lady Anna responded absently.

“Sounds pleasant.”

“The most fun I’ve had all evening,” she joked.

But there was a problem. A small one for now, but it had the potential to escalate. As the two lovers lay in a state of veritable silence, conversation dithering as the evening wore to its inevitable close, Derek struggled to decide what he should do.

Why was he like this? Why couldn’t he just enjoy the moment and worry about such things later? The irony being that if it were Lady Anna, she’d probably do just that.

“What are your plans this week?” Derek asked lamely.

“All week?” Lady Anna asked. “I haven’t thought that far ahead.”

“There’s a ball at the Bradbury Manor in a few nights’ time. Will you be attending?”

“Is that a joke, Your Grace?” Lady Anna slapped playfully at his chest. “I didn’t know you were so funny.”

“It wasn’t a joke.” Derek shuffled up slightly and propped himself on his elbows. “It’s a standard engagement. I thought you might be attending.”

She frowned at him, a look that suggested his question to be beyond ridiculous. “No, Your Grace, I’m not going to Bradbury manor to attend some ball. I might stay home that night instead and watch the staff clean my house. It’ll be far more enjoyable.”

“You really do hate it don’t you?”

“Hate what?”

“Your own class,” he said without thinking. “Or at least the people that make it.”

She rolled her eyes and exhaled. “I don’t hate them, Your Grace. Of course not. But they seem to hate me, so I have long since stopped bothering to try and please them.” She then rested a hand on his chest and forced him back to lying down. “I’ve found it has worked out rather well.”

“Yes but…”

“But what?” she propped herself back up on her elbow and fixed Derek with a discerning stare. “Can you honestly give me one good reason why I should bother with people who never bothered with me? Why I should care what anybody, anywhere, thinks of me? Especially if they only think of me so they might think of how to change me? Should I really give up happiness just so others might be more comfortable around me? Does any of that make sense to you?”

“Well... when you put it like that...”

She smiled for him, almost looking relieved as she lay herself back down, and got back to running her fingers through his chest hair again.

It was always going to be a problem. Despite how well Derek and Lady Anna got along, despite the feelings he was quickly developing for her, the simple fact was that she and he were of two different worlds. Well... technically they weren't. But she was insistent on pretending that she was, so it amounted to the same thing.

Now, Derek was willing to admit that he might be a little tightly wound in certain places. And he was also willing to concede that when he was with Lady Anna, he was a better person than he ever thought he could be. But that didn't mean he was willing to completely ignore and abandon his old life. To forget the requirements that came with being a duke, simply because he was slightly taken by a woman who didn't care one way or the other, just wasn't who he was.

For all that he felt for Lady Anna, he knew that he couldn't simply forget his past. He thought to his father and what he might say if he found out what Derek had done. This image had him shaking.

But he couldn't simply get up and just leave her either. Not now, not after what they had done. What Derek hoped instead was that she might meet him halfway.

"I was thinking..."

"Don't hurt yourself," she joked.

He ignored that. "That maybe, if you were willing, that you might... that you might consider attending the ball with me \_\_\_"

Lady Anna sat herself straight up. "You're joking, aren't you? Tell me you are joking?"

"Ah... no?" Derek sat himself up also.

"What did I just say to you?" she groaned.

"I know, I know," he eased and took her hand. "But it won't be as bad as you think, I swear it. Not if you're with me."

"Oh! Well, if I'm with you, then that makes all the difference \_\_\_"

"It will!"



“It won’t.” She fixed him with a no-nonsense stare, one that let him see the truth in her words. Or the truth as she saw it. “If anything, it will only make things worse — and don’t ask me how,” she then snapped when he went to do exactly that. “You know how. If I was to arrive at a ball on your arm, a duke! The host would likely have a fit.”

“Not if I am there,” he assured her. “Not if I speak with —”

“Especially if you are there,” she sighed. “Your Grace... you simply don’t understand.”

“What then?” he demanded. “This is it? This is where it ends? A single night spent together in the park, only to never speak again? I’m sorry, Lady Anna but... but I don’t think I can do that.”

“Who said this has to end?” she asked.

“You just said —”

“That I didn’t want to attend any balls with you,” she corrected. “But that doesn’t mean I don’t want to see you again.” She blushed and looked away. “Despite myself... well, I do, want to see you again, I mean.”

The confession should have had the Duke’s heart soaring. Liking someone was one thing but hearing that they liked you back was another thing entirely. Only the confession was bittersweet, and left a sour taste in Derek’s mouth. And he knew the exact reason why.

He was starting to like Lady Anna. More than he could have thought possible. And it went beyond a simple physical infatuation. He wanted to get to know her, to learn more about her, to spend more time so that they might... well... fall in love.

Yes, love. It was an alien concept to the Duke, but one that he knew to exist. And what was more, it was expected of him. The main reason he had been alone for so long wasn't an aversion to finding love, but an inability. There was no one, not a single person whom he had ever connected with on a level like this before. No one he'd wanted to spend time with, to get to know, who might actually make him a better person...

Until tonight, he had thought that he might never be happy. That reality hit him as hard as anything.

He wanted to see Lady Anna again. He wanted to spend more time with her. But he didn't want to do so if it couldn't go anywhere. If there was no future, if there was no chance that they might one day be together, then what was the point? It stung to think on, but it was a harsh truth. One that he could not ignore.

"I... I want to see you again, also," Derek confessed.

"Oh, thank God," she sighed, although she smirked to herself as if she had known this to be fact.

"But it's not that simple," he then continued.

“How do you mean?”

Derek hesitated as he met Lady Anna’s clear blue eyes. She was so beautiful. So perfect and serene and stunning in every way. He wanted to hold her, to kiss her, to take her again by the pond and continue at it until the early hours of the morning. But he couldn’t...

“I can’t...” he sucked through his teeth and looked away, for the shame that he felt. “I can’t see you again, knowing that it will lead nowhere. That there is no future between us.”

“You’re not serious?”

“I am.”

“Marriage?” she scoffed. “Is that what you speak of — I thought you were as opposed to it as me?”

“Not just marriage,” Derek clarified. “I am not asking you to marry me. I’m not even saying that one day we might. But I cannot start seeing someone who... who refuses to accept the reality of the situation.”

“And what reality is that exactly?” she asked warningly. “What situation?”

“You’re a lady of the *ton!*” Derek exclaimed a little angrier than he had meant. “And I am a duke. An affair is beneath us —”

“Oh, please.”

“It is! I like you, Lady Anna.” He reached for her hand but she yanked it back. “And I know you feel the same way. You might pretend that you don’t. You might tell yourself you do not care. But I know you do.”

“I don’t.”

“You do,” he insisted. “And the fact that you will do anything to deny it is... is...”

“Is what?” she growled at him.

He set his face to stone. “Is wrong. You’re running from something, Lady Anna. You’re running and I don’t even think you know what from anymore.”

“Is that so?” she laughed at him. Not with him. But at him.

“It is,” he said with a resounding nod.

“Well, let me tell you!” she pushed herself back from him and then climbed to her feet. “I’m about to run again. Only this time, I know exactly what from.”

“Oh, I’m sure you do!” Derek scrambled to his feet.

“It’s not a secret!” she snapped as she began to gather her clothes from the ground. “My only regret is that I didn’t run sooner!”

“Don’t let me stop you!”

“I won’t, don’t worry about that!” She spun about, looking like she might just break into a sprint for how quick she wished to get away. But then she stopped and turned back. Her stare was vicious and angry, so filled with rage that Derek almost winced. “Oh, and Your Grace, I want to thank you, for confirming everything that I knew to be true about you.”

“All terrible things, I am sure.”

“The worst,” she snarled. “Goodnight.” And then, with nothing else to say, she turned about and stalked off into the night.

As to Derek? He watched her go, he didn’t chase her.

A small part of him attempted to roar loud enough so it might be heard. It told him that he had done the right thing, that although it might have hurt, ultimately there was no future there, so pursuing his feelings would have been a waste of time and would only end in hurting him further.

Derek ignored this sage advice.

Instead, he concentrated on the other voice inside his head, the one that told him he was a fool for pushing the way he had.

Tonight might have been the best night of his life and now, in typical fashion, he had gone and ruined it all.

With nothing else for it, Derek went about collecting his clothes and then putting them on. After that, he slowly trudged back toward his carriage, refused to look his driver in the eye when he asked him to take him home, and silently climbed in the back. From there, he made his way home, alone as always, wondering if he'd just done the right thing.

Or, most likely, if he had just made a terrible mistake.

## CHAPTER 19



Mornings were generally the worst time for Anna. It hadn't always been this way, but of late, the last few years especially, she was finding that each morning, the effort it took to excite herself for the day ahead and then rise from her bed to meet it, was becoming more and more difficult. That morning was no different.

It should have been the most wonderful of mornings. She woke to feel the sun warming her face. This was followed by her eyes opening, and quick glance across the room and out the window to spy a pristine blue sky. Why, she could even hear birds tweeting as they perched themselves on her windowsill. Many years ago, such a morning would have seen Anna beaming as she rose from bed, drifted downstairs, and began in whatever activity she had planned for the day.

But those times were long gone. Anna couldn't remember exactly when it was that she had begun to feel this way. It hadn't happened over night. Rather it was a slow, insidious process that bled from one day into the next. She wasn't depressed or anything like that, mind you. Simply apathetic.

All right, so perhaps today she was just a tad upset — not that she was willing to admit it! She was much happier thinking that this was just another one of her early morning moods, and

that by the time she bathed and broke her fast all would be well again. It nearly always was.

This morning, however, something was different. There was a grey cloud hovering over Anna's head all morning, refusing to yield and seeming to grow darker and darker as the morning wore on. From the moment she rose from bed, until well after she broke her fast, this cloud continued to hang about.

Once upon a time, when Anna's aunt had been alive and the manor had been a lively place, these moods were easy enough to break. It was impossible to be upset when so many people were about, when there was fun to be had, and when there was a constant reminder that things weren't as bad as they seemed, so long as friends and family were there to see you through. Unfortunately, Anna didn't have any of this to rely upon. Not anymore. Not even close.

She wandered aimlessly through the house, trying her best to ignore her solemn temperament. The cause of it was as clear as the day outside, but she refused to admit what it was, refused to even consider, for if she did it might very well shatter everything that she thought she knew about herself. And so, it was depression and ignorance that ruled supreme over Anna Lewis all morning and well toward midday.

It was during times like this one that Anna might have liked at least one more friend to speak with, one who wasn't as judgmental as Lady Eloise. After what had occurred last night, she was desperate for an opinion on what to do. Or more just confirmation that she had done the right thing. Which she had, by the way. But it would have been nice if there was someone else to confirm it with.



Last night... that had not gone the way Anna had expected at all.

The more she thought on it — and this was all she did that morning — the more she came to decide that she hadn't really known what to expect from her outing with the Duke of Elsbrook. On the one hand, she had been looking forward to it. But only because she was somewhat taken by the dashing Duke and, after the kiss they had shared, she'd known that she'd need to see him at least one more time so as to confirm that he was exactly who she knew him to be.

And who was he? Or who did she think he was? A standard peer of the *ton*. That was all. He might have pretended to be different. He might have acted like he was cut from a different cloth. But she had known better. She had known he was no different! Although this was also the problem.

When Elsbrook had taken her by the edge of the pond, Anna had hardly been able to believe it. Oh, she'd enjoyed it, that can't be argued. But she'd been shocked by how... roguish the Duke was. Never, ever, might she have guessed he would go through with it. If anyone found out, his reputation would be ruined and all but destroyed beyond repair. But he'd done it anyway, and for a few minutes she had dared to hope....

That hope was dashed the moment Elsbrook asked her to attend the ball—demanded it of her, more like. He might have erred slightly in his gentlemanly ways but, at the end of the day, he was just like all the rest.

But then she wondered what would have happened if he hadn't said anything? Would she have liked to see him again? And then again after that? Anna wasn't about courtship, or anything even resembling commitment. She wasn't! So, it

must only be seen as a good thing that the Duke ruined any chance he might have before it was too late. Surely, this was the best result that Anna could have hoped for?

Only, if that was the case, why, oh why, did she feel so horrendous?

Clearly, Anna was suffering from a serious crisis of conscience. It was with her all morning as she waffled to and fro between feelings of sadness over how her fling had ended so quickly, and sparks of joy when she then reminded herself that this was best as she was better off alone anyway.

Needless to say, it was a rather harrowing morning to say the least.

Things only worsened just before midday, as Anna was working herself into a mood that might see her actually leave the house, when she heard the sound of a carriage coming down the front avenue.

Her heart skipped a beat when she heard it. In her bedroom at the time, she hurried to the window and spied the carriage being drawn toward her front door. It wasn't Lady Eloise; she knew that much. In fact, as far as she was aware, it could only be one person...

Anna's first thought was to pretend she wasn't home. Yes, she told herself as she watched the carriage slowly approach. She couldn't say why Elsbrook had decided to come and see her, but she did not care. He'd made his true intentions known to her and she was not interested in hearing them again.

But then she thought that maybe he was here to apologize.

And then she wondered if maybe he was here to change her mind.

Only then did she consider whether or not she should even care if he did. If he was just here to lie to her again so he might bed her once more, why even bother seeing him?

She watched the carriage come to a slow stop, still feeling at odds with how she felt and what she should do. Her heart so clearly wanted one thing, but her mind, her desperate attempts to cling to a life of independence, she wasn't even sure she liked that much, so clearly wanted another.

The carriage came to a stop, the door opened, and out from the carriage climbed not the Duke of Elsbrook, but a different lord, one whom she had never seen before. He was shorter than the Duke, and far skinnier in body, with legs and arms that looked too long for his tiny stature, a face that was pointed and sharp, and hair that was black, greasy, and a little too long.

Anna watched him approach her front door, wondering who on earth this man might be and what he wanted.

As to how she felt about the fact that this wasn't Elsbrook coming to see her... she told herself she was relieved. But there was little chance of her believing that.

With nothing else for it, Anna swept from her bedroom and made her way downstairs. And it was just as she arrived at the

top of the grand staircase leading into the entrance foyer that the doors swung open and the mysterious lord appeared.

“Lady Anna Lewis,” he called at the sight of her descending the steps. He remained standing in the doorway, bowing low while keeping his eyes trained on her person the whole while. “Allow me to —”

“Who are you?” Anna demanded as she made her way down the stairs. “What are you doing in my home?”

The lord balked at her interruption, but quickly recovered. “My name is Lord Baron Tywin of Surlhaven, and I have come here today to ask that you might accompany me to the ball on Thursday night at Burbery Manor —”

“Excuse me?” Anna stepped into the foyer but didn’t bother crossing it so as to better speak with Lord Tywin. She stayed back, leaving a solid fifteen feet between them.

Lord Tywin cleared his throat. “I have come here today to ask that you might accompany me to —”

“No, I heard you,” she cut him off. “What I meant to say was... and please, my lord do not take this personally, but why on earth would I want to do such a thing as that?”

“Ah well...” Lord Tywin could not have looked more nervous. “Because... I have been made aware that your hand is currently one left unaccounted for —”

“What does that mean exactly?”

“You are not being courted by anyone at the moment,” he gulped as his eyes flicked about the manor like he was looking for an escape. “And seeing as I have nobody to attend the ball with —”

“So I should be so lucky that you asked me?” Anna cut him off again. She put her hands on her hips and fixed him with a shrewd expression. “Is that what you’re saying, Lord Tywin?”

“Not exactly....” he grimaced. “I just thought it might be... a fun time, if you and I were to —”

“Attend the ball together, yes, you said that. But what you have failed to explain is why. Why should I go with you — a man whom I have never met or spoken with? And why did you think it might be a good idea to come to my home, unannounced and ask it of me in a way that would paint me in such a negative light, were I to refuse?”

“I, ah... this is not... it was just my thought...” he stammered and stuttered, unable to come to an actual answer.

What on earth was going on? Who was this lord? Where had he come from? And why was he here? For nearly the entirety of Anna’s life so far, she had managed to avoid instances such as this one — and for good reason. In fact, the more she thought of it, Anna realized that this had only ever happened once before. And that was just a few days ago.

Could it be a coincidence? That two men of the *ton* might ask her out in the space of a week? Or was there something more at play here?

“Don’t tell me,” Anna started, her bewildered expression turning into a glare. “Lord Ashville sent you.”

Shock took over Lord Tywin’s face; eyes wide, mouth dropping open, chin wobbling. But then he hurried to cover it. “No,” he said. “That is not at all —”

“Get out,” Anna said calmly. “Now.”

“But Lady Anna!” he took a step toward her. “I really do insist that you reconsider —”

“I said get out!” she shouted and pointed toward the door. “Now!”

Lord Tywin almost appeared relieved, and very nearly looked like he might leave. But then he straightened, and his nervous demeanor was replaced by a cold, angry one that had Anna shaking as if a chilled gust of wind suddenly blew through the door.

“You’re a fool, you know that?”

“Excuse me?”

“A stupid, utter, fool of a woman,” he hissed. “We tried to be nice. We tried to help! That is all we are trying to do.”

“Help?” Anna scoffed. “Who are you helping exactly? Yourself?”

“Everybody!” he waved his arm in the air as if in indication. “For everybody that comes into contact with you, Lady Anna, is tainted. It’s an insidious poison that seeps through the innocent minds of young women who don’t know any better, that threatens to destroy —”

“Oh, please,” she waved him down. “If you don’t like the way that I do things, there is a very easy remedy.” She cocked an eyebrow at him. He frowned. “Leave,” she said. “Leave, forget that I exist and carry on with your lives as if you have never heard of me. Believe me, Baron, I intend to do the same with you.” And then she spun about and started up the steps.

you

“You’ll regret this!” he called after her. “You will! I swear it!”

Anna didn’t bother with a response, for she knew that there was nothing she could say that might change his mind. Not that she would want to. Lord Tywin, Lord Ashville, and really every lord she had ever met, were all the exact same. They might look different. They might behave differently in some instances. But they were all the same person. They were all products of the *ton*.

There might have been one who didn’t fit this bill... one whom she had been trying to forget all day. But as Anna

hurried into her room and slammed the door closed behind herself, it was all she could do to not think about him.

Anna was alone in this world. She might have liked to pretend that she was perfectly fine with it. She might have liked to act as if it didn't bother her. But then days like this would happen, and she'd be left reminded of the fact. Once, it might not have worried her. But that, it now seemed, that was a thing of the past.



## CHAPTER 20



Derek was never going to see Lady Anna Lewis again. It was a decision that he came to shortly after arriving home from their walk in the park, and it was one that he was determined to stick with. No matter how much it pained him.

She wasn't good for him, Lady Anna Lewis. She wasn't right. The best way that Derek could compare it was to that of a glass of brandy. Oh sure, the first taste might excite. Another might arouse. And by the time the glass is empty, its drinker might very well be in love, knowing that their life has changed forever and they'll never dare to drink another liquid again.

But then the second glass is finished and then the third. Soon, the headaches begin. Soon, the illness that comes from too much of a good thing arrives. For a time, it seemed that sweet liquor was the most perfect beverage in the world... only for it to be discovered as poison.

Lady Anna was much like a glass of brandy. Derek wanted to taste it, to drink from it, to see it each night because he knew his life would improve immeasurably if he did. But he was also aware of the consequence, and how utterly and undeniably bad for him it would be to do this.

Yes, he might have wanted Lady Anna Lewis, but he could never have her. Not again. Not after what happened between them.

He felt vindicated by this decision when he woke that following morning. Content in knowing he was making the right choice, Derek woke with a smile on his face and a kick to his step. He hurried downstairs and broke his fast and then took a morning ride through the country. It was around this point where things began to go awry.

And it wasn't that anything happened, per se. It was simply the fact that he was left to stew in his own machinations, with nothing to distract him but thoughts of Lady Anna, what had occurred between them, and how he might have approached it differently.

First and foremost, the most obvious concern, the lovemaking. As Derek rode out from his home and crossed the vast tracks of open land that made his property, he could not stop thinking about how glorious it had been. He knew he should have felt embarrassed by what he had done. He knew he should have felt ashamed. But instead of that, he was almost proud.

Oh, pride might be the wrong word to use. It suggests an achievement, even a victory of some kind. But that wasn't what last night was. Derek wasn't sure what it was. Just that it had felt good, so good that it had even felt right. It wasn't two random lovers breaking all the rules because their passion and desire for one another was too much to resist. Rather, it was a natural action taken between a man and woman who had cared deeply for one another... if only for a few minutes.

Derek didn't regret what he had done. His only regret was what had happened after...

But then he told himself that this was for the best. In fact, he commanded himself to believe it. He kicked his feet into the side of his horse and sent it at a gallop as if he was trying to escape from something; running from wicked thoughts that plagued him. He might have enjoyed the time spent with Lady Anna, but it was wrong of him to do so, and it could not happen again.

Even if they hadn't made love, the fact that she was so against being courted, even in the most liberal sense of the term, made pursuing her an impossible and thankless task. There was no future with Lady Anna. None. She made sure that Derek knew it too! He might have been angry with himself for speaking up and asking her to the ball, he might have been furious that she had rebuked him. But, in the end, it was the right thing.

These were the thoughts that plagued Derek as he rode that morning. He would move between feelings of sadness in knowing he would never speak with Lady Anna again, to feelings of vindication in realizing he was doing the right thing.

He just wished that with these feelings of vindication came those of acceptance as well. It was one thing to know that you had done the proper, honorable thing. But it was another thing entirely to accept it.

By the time Derek arrived home that evening, his mood had taken a turn for the worse. He did all he could to push through it, again reminding himself that he had made the right decision. But alas, as the sun set and the moon rose, Derek was left hoping that the morrow brought with it better tidings.

It did not. The next day came and Derek's mood was much the same. The day after this one also, and then the next. Each morning he rose, hoping that today might be the day he could finally stop thinking about Lady Anna Lewis. And each morning, when the depression began to set in— getting worse each day by the feeling of things— Derek was forced to content himself with what was sure to be a tragic day, while hoping that the next one was where things started to get better.

Four days. Four long, tiresome, lonely days was how long it took until Derek realized his mistake. But it didn't happen on a whim or by accident. Rather, he was forced to see his error, and then scramble to fix it.

It began when his best friend Hugh paid him an unexpected visit. Derek had just finished breaking his fast, wondering how he might spend the morning, when a messenger appeared on his front doorstep, announcing that Lord Ayers would be with him shortly.

This brought with it a great relief, as Derek figured that not only might Hugh be able to distract, but also offer him some much needed advice. He was thus quick about getting ready— changing out of his casual trousers and overshirt for a more traditional outfit— so that he might meet Lord Ayers outside when his carriage arrived.

Hugh was his typical, buoyant self. All smiles and sparkling eyes and bawdy laughter as he jumped out of the carriage and embraced his best friend. His mood was piqued, and the look he fixed upon Derek suggested that he had come here for a specific reason... one that clearly excited him.

“And what do I owe the pleasure?” Derek asked as the two men parted.

“Is wanting to see my dear friend not reason enough?” Hugh asked, pretending to be hurt by the insinuation. “I wasn’t aware I needed a specific reason.”

“And penguins wish that they might fly,” Derek responded coolly. “They might even tell you that they can. Yet, when they jump off the edge of a cliff, they are sure to tumble like the rest of us.”

“Yes... I am afraid you lost me with that one.”

Derek grinned at his best friend. “You might claim that you are here just because you wish to see me. You might even believe it. But just saying a thing doesn’t hide the truth of the matter.”

“Like a penguin trying to fly off the edge of a cliff, you mean?”

“Exactly! You can fool yourself, Hugh, you can convince me that you have learned how to fly. But words are wind, and you forget how well I know you.”

Hugh looked thoroughly unamused. “You really are a pain in my arse sometimes, you know?”

“Yes, yes,” Derek chuckled as he threw an arm around his friend and began leading him toward the side of the house and in the direction of the back garden. “But that’s what you love about me.”

“Is that what?” Hugh scoffed. “Here I was thinking that I had no choice — I’ve known you for far too long to simply cut you off. What would people think if I did such a thing?”

“That you were making a smart decision?”

Hugh grinned. “Well, yes, I suppose they probably would think that, wouldn’t they.”

They made their way into the garden and started following a gravel path that snaked its way through the grounds.

“So, tell me,” Derek said again. “To what do I owe the pleasure?”

“Oh, no reason specifically,” Hugh said wistfully. “I just thought I’d pop over and see how you’ve been...” He glanced at Derek and caught the side-eye he was watching him with. “What?” Hugh exclaimed. “Is that so unbelievable?”

“Do I need to use my penguin analogy again? Or would you like something a little clearer?”

Hugh groaned. “Fine!” he threw his hands in the air. “You caught me. My reasons for coming here are as nefarious as you likely imagined them to be. What, with me being the terrible friend that I am.”

“I’m glad you’re admitting it.”

Hugh curled his lip, but then broke into a smile. “The ball last night,” he said. “At Burberry Manor. You didn’t make it.”

“And?”

“And I wanted to make sure that you were well- and I know, I know, you likely just didn’t feel like attending. But it’s not like you to miss an event such as that one. And without any warning or word. It’s odd, Derek, hence why I’m here.”

“Worried about me?” Derek chuckled. “I should be flattered.”

“Don’t be,” Hugh grumbled. “My wife is the cause as much as anything. She thought you might have died in your sleep.”

“Thought or hoped?”

“Well...” Hugh sucked through his teeth and pretended to look uncomfortable. Derek rolled his eyes, which had Hugh breaking up and then cackling at his joke.

Ah yes, the Burberry Ball. Derek hadn’t forgotten about it. In fact, he’d very nearly attended, if for no other reason than to distract himself. But this was the ball that he had invited Lady Anna to, the one which had seen them scuffle, fight and then part ways. When he considered going, he remembered who it was that he’d like to be going with, and knew that if he was there alone, his mood would be foul.

So, Derek decided on a night spent indoors. He didn’t think anyone would notice either. But he also didn’t think that Hugh

was being entirely truthful.

“So, that’s it, is it? You came here to make sure I was fine?”

“Yes,” Hugh said rightly. “Is that a problem?”

Derek eyed his friend a moment, looking for the lie. It was there, but he couldn’t quite make out what it was, yet... “I suppose not,” he admitted with a sigh. “It’s nice to know that I’m not completely forgotten.”

“Not yet,” Hugh picked up. “But you’re headed that way—which is why you need to remind people that you still exist. Just last night, Emma and I—

“How is the wife?” Derek asked as a way to cut his friend off.

“What? Yes, she is fine,” Hugh said. “But that is not the point I was making.”

“So, you had a point?”

He glared a moment at Derek before continuing. “As said, we were speaking with a Lady Sally Mewel. She’s a lovely young thing, just turned twenty and one, and when we brought your name up, she hadn’t even heard of you.”

“Is that right?” Derek said dryly.



“It is,” Hugh nodded vigorously. “But that didn’t mean she wasn’t interested. In fact, when I mentioned that you were single, she was nothing but intrigued by you.”

“Is that right?”

“How could she not be?” Hugh continued. “And I know what you’re thinking, but I assure you, Lady Sally is unlike any lady I have met before. Pretty, of course- not that you’d expect anything else. But she is also interesting. And interested! You know one of those people who just becomes enraptured by everything you say? An eagerness of the mind, and a willingness to expand it.”

“Is that right?”

“Oh, you should really meet her some time,” Hugh sighed as if it was he who was doing the courting. “I myself spent a solid thirty minutes speaking with her. And it might have been longer if the wife hadn’t pulled me away. I can only imagine what you and she might speak of, if you were to give it a chance...” he raised an eyebrow at Derek, his meaning clear.

At least Hugh wasn’t bothering with being subtle. He might have claimed he was just here to see Derek, to check on him, but two minutes into their walk and his intent was as clear as the path they walked.

Hugh wanted to know why Derek didn’t attend last night? Well, this conversation right here might be somewhat of an indication. Why was it that those who were married saw it as their right, their duty, to try and set up their bachelor friends? And why did they insist on acting as if this was the most

normal, even honorable thing to do? Did they not see how insulting it was? Did they not see how frustrating it could be?

Even worse that Derek had assumed the two friends were beyond such contrivances. Hugh knew Derek as well as anyone, and he was more than aware of how he felt about courtship. He must have known this conversation to be a folly. So why was he even bothering?

“I suppose this was your idea?” Derek asked.

“Idea?” Hugh frowned. “What idea?”

Derek sighed. “Trying to set me up with Lady Sally —”

“I am not!” Hugh cried. “I was simply telling you of my night.”

“Really?” he responded dryly.

“Yes,” Hugh insisted. “That is all this is. And to be perfectly honest, I don’t see what the big issue is. After the sorts you have been known to be spending time with of late — what?” He spun back, spotting where Derek had come to a sudden stop. “What are you doing?”

“Now I see.” Derek crossed his arms and looked shrewdly at his friend. “It all makes sense.”

“What does?” Hugh looked about himself.

“This isn’t about Lady Sally Mewel — not really. It’s about Lady Anna Lewis.”

Hugh’s eyes bulged, but then he hurriedly got them back under control. “It is not...” he scoffed lamely.

“Hugh,” Derek started flatly. “Don’t lie to me.”

“I’m not!”

“You are,” Derek insisted. He walked to meet his friend, put his arm back around the shoulder and started to lead him again. Only this time, it was back toward the front of the house. “You don’t care about me courting Lady Sally.”

“You have that right.”

“What you care about is who else I might be courting, as if it has anything to do with you. Which it doesn’t, by the way. Not one little bit.”

He could sense the change in his best friend. The way his shoulders slumped and his head bowed. “Oh, fine!” he sighed. “But it wasn’t my idea!”

“Emma’s then?”

“Yes,” he pouted. “After we met Lady Sally last night, she was insistent that I try and set the two of you up. I told her you

wouldn't be interested but..."

"She thought that if I was willing to go out with Lady Anna, then I must be willing to go out with anyone."

He bit into his lip and looked away. "More or less... yes."

It shouldn't have surprised him. Truly, Derek was actually more surprised that it had taken him so long to realize what was going on. He had known that courting Lady Anna might turn some heads, and he had also known that it would do more than that. A lot more.

This wasn't about his being single. It was about the *ton* deciding that he was too good for Lady Anna. They knew he was taken with her and, for reasons that he knew but could not fathom, they believed it was their right to stop it. And it didn't matter with who. Just that it was with someone else.

"I'm disappointed in you, my friend," Derek said.

"Oh, you are not."

"I am. I can take Lord Ashville snubbing me. I can take others whom I don't care for gossiping and imaging all sorts of horrid things. But my best friend? I thought you'd know better."

"I'm a slow learner."

"Apparently."

“But can you blame me?” Hugh came to a sudden stop. He put his hands on his hips and fixed Derek with a determined stare. “Derek! Lady Anna is a nice enough lady. She is pleasant to look at, yes, and she might even be interesting enough, I do not doubt it. But is it really worth everything you’ve spent your life building? Knowing that it shall go up in flames if you persist? Is it really worth ruining your entire reputation over?”

This conversation should have been an easy one to navigate. Derek had already decided that he wasn’t going to pursue Lady Anna, that he was done with her, so he should have been able to tell his friend not to worry, that his fears were for the past and there they could remain. Only, it wasn’t.

Derek went to say all this. His mouth opened, he took a step forward and he moved to speak, but his words became caught in his throat.

Yes, Lady Anna was different. Yes, she was strange and uncouth and the opposite of the type of woman whom Derek should have been interested in. Yes, Derek should have thanked his friend for his concern, and maybe even taken him up on his offer. Yes, to all of that! If only it was that simple.

It was in that moment that Derek realized something, something he had been trying to ignore for the past four days. The entire *ton* might have wanted him to move on from Lady Anna but the fact of the matter was that he simply wasn’t ready. He didn’t know what he wanted from her just yet, only that he wanted more of it.

And in that, Derek came to a decision.

“I have to go,” Derek said suddenly.

Hugh blinked. “What? Where?”

“I just... I just have to go,” Derek said again. He looked about himself, spied the stables tucked away in the back of the garden, and started toward it. “But thank you for visiting,” he called out over his shoulder. “Come back any time.”

“Derek!” Hugh cried after him. “Derek! Where are you going?”

Derek didn't answer. Instead, he hurried to the stables, commanded one of the staff to saddle a horse for him, and then he took off on its back, riding at full pace from his manor as if his life depended on it.

He still didn't know what he was going to do exactly, or what it was that he wanted. But he didn't let any of that worry him. Not now. Maybe not ever. All Derek cared for in the moment was to see Lady Anna one more time. And that's what he was going to do.

## CHAPTER 21



Derek's excitement rose as he approached Lady Anna's manor. For the first time in four days, he truly felt as if he was doing the right thing. There was no more second guessing. Nor more trying to convince himself otherwise. This was the right thing and, for better or worse, he was going to see it through.

When he did finally spy her manor appear, this sense of righteousness swelled within him, had him sitting up straighter on his horse, had him pushing it a little bit harder so he might arrive even sooner. He wasn't even nervous anymore, which again told him that he was doing the right thing.

He wondered too if perhaps he should have sent ahead and let her know he was coming. Lady Anna was a temperamental being, and an unexpected visit might startle her, even put her on the defensive. This might see her snap at and deny Derek, as she had done in the past. But strangely, this thought also excited him. Part of what he liked about Lady Anna was her fiery personality, and he almost relished the chance to see it in action once more.

The estate was surrounded by a high brick wall, with a tall metal gate at its entrance. Derek approached the gate, noting it to be open, a fact he was grateful for as it would make his

journey to seeing her that much easier. But then he came a little closer and saw immediately that someone else was exiting the manor on horseback.

There could be no mistaking who it was. None other than Lady Anna Lewis trotted through the front gate at a leisurely pace. She sat normally on the horse, with her sky-blue dress pulled up so that she could straddle it better. This in itself was not strange, but what happened next certainly was.

Lady Anna reached the roadside. She turned her horse in the opposite direction to Derek, looked about to take off, only to pause. This was followed by her glancing over her shoulder, spotting Derek on horseback, hesitating just a moment, and then smiling.

That smile said it all. Nothing but teeth and gums stretching up the side of her pretty face; she was truly stunning, and actually looked happy to see him. It was as if the sun began to shine even brighter for how warm the smile was that she fixed on him. Derek breathed a sigh of relief and then waved to her.

As for Lady Anna? She watched him a moment more, came to a sudden decision, and then took off down the road, pushing her mount as fast as it could go.

Derek pulled his horse to a sudden stop as he watched her charge away. His heart dropped, as did his stomach, as did his shoulders. She had seen him. There was no doubt about that. She had known it was him also. Heck, she had even waved! So why was she suddenly running?



If it was anyone else, Derek might have seen it as a sign that he was not wanted. But then he remembered this was not anyone else, it was Lady Anna, and everything that she did was strange. Different. Unexpected in the most wonderful of ways. Despite himself, Derek actually laughed.

So, she wants to run? Let's see how she likes being chased.

With nothing else for it, Derek kicked his heels into the side of his mount and took off after her. Body pressed against his horse. Knees dug into its side. Crop snapping at his mount's rear. Derek flew down the road, past Lady Anna's home, and right after the fleeing lady.

The road was made of hard packed dirt, and the hooves of Derek's horse pounded against it as he rode, kicking up a trail of dust behind him. Within minutes he'd managed to catch Lady Anna, but he sensed that was on purpose.

He saw her up ahead, moving at a trot now as she glanced over her shoulder in search of him. Derek sighed when he spotted her, as he assumed that she might now be willing to slow up and let him approach. No doubt her initial charge had just been a little fun. But then she waved to him again. Then he saw that cheeky grin. And before he was able to do much of anything, she turned her horse off the road and steered it onto the surrounding grassy fields.

And then, she took off once more.

"What on earth..." Derek muttered to himself as he watched her sprint across the open pastures and toward the horizon. "Where is she going?"

Again, he considered not chasing. Again, he wondered if she was running from him, or leading him somewhere. And again, he reminded himself that this was Lady Anna and literally anything was possible.

Derek sighed to himself, turned his horse off the road and onto the field also, and then kicked it back to sprinting.

He had her in his sight. She was perhaps five hundred yards ahead, maybe closer, but it was hard to tell as they were both galloping so quickly. The field itself was flat enough, but the grass was thick and overgrown in some places, and there were deep patches of mud in others, not to mention the occasional mound popping up here and there. It made for difficult riding, forcing Derek to speed up and then slow down, to hold on tight as his horse struggled, to steer it about small obstacles, and then push it forward once again.

Ahead, Lady Anna appeared to have no such worries. Her direction was straight, and she kept her horse going as if she had no control over it.

As to their destination? Derek could only guess. He knew there to be a small forest about a mile or so north of where they were, and he could just about see it too, the longer they rode. But he couldn't imagine why she might be — actually, never mind that. He needed to stop applying logic to Lady Anna, he needed to stop formulating reason. She was the opposite of these two things, and he needed to remember that.

So, he committed himself to the chase, slowly gaining ground on her. Derek was a decent enough rider, but more importantly, he was also dressed for it.

Lady Anna was the first to reach the tree line. Derek watched her with a sense of caution, worried that she'd disappear among the trees and he'd be forced to follow her through. Riding full pace in an open field was one thing, but through a forest? That was how accidents happened.

It was with great relief when he saw her begin to slow. The moment that her horse came within distance of the trees, it slowed to a trot, and she hefted her leg over its side, and then dismounted — while the horse was still moving!

By the time Derek reached her, his mood had changed slightly. He was still excited to speak with her. And still eager to apologize for the other night and see if they might be able to... well, he wasn't sure! But he wanted to see her anyway, to test the waters so that they might find a compromise.

Now however, having just ridden at full pace for over a mile, under the blazing sun and its scorching heat, for reasons he could not yet fathom, he was feeling slightly annoyed. His legs ached, his back protested, and his buttocks were as raw as a horse's hide.

It was for this reason that when he climbed from his horse, he might have been just a little angrier — certainly ruder — than what he intended.

“What was that?” he exclaimed as his feet hit grass. He didn't bother with tying his horse up, instead simply throwing the reins over its back and then marching to where Lady Anna stood watching. “Are you insane?”

Lady Anna stood by her horse, gently stroking its mane as she watched Derek approach her. But if his anger upset her, she didn't show it. Instead, the look she fixed him with spoke of nothing but amusement.

"Your Grace," she said, her smile generous, her blue eyes wide and eager. "Fancy seeing you here."

"Oh, don't try that," Derek snapped. He stormed right up to her, putting himself less than five feet away. "I know you saw me!"

"I never said I didn't," she said innocently.

"You just did!"

"No," she said pointedly. "What I said was, fancy seeing you here. My meaning being that I'm surprised you were able to keep up."

Derek's face dropped. "That's not... what I meant was... what are you playing at?"

"Your Grace?" she asked as if confused.

"Riding like that! Do you have any idea how dangerous that is?"

"Well, obviously," she sighed, before flashing him a wicked smile. "But that's half the fun, isn't it. Truly, I never

understood those lords and ladies who enjoy going for little trots through the countryside. I find it intolerably boring. Don't you?"

"I don't think boring is the word I would use."

"Are you sure?" she continued to grin at Derek. "I would have thought that boring suited you perfectly."

There it was. That spark. They'd been speaking for less than a minute, and already Derek could feel it igniting. He had worried she might be mad at him. Maybe she still was? But she clearly wasn't *that* mad. And if she was, she was doing a good job hiding it.

He had nearly forgotten how adorable she was too. It was a sort of cuteness that clashed perfectly with her more vibrant nature. That big, cheeky smile. Those wide, blue eyes that spoke of mischief. That petite frame paired with those wide hips that Derek couldn't keep his eyes from glancing at.

Derek could see what she was doing. She was trying to bait him, almost as if she wanted him to bark at her. Maybe this was a test of some sort, a chance for him to realize that he'd made a terrible choice and leave her be. Well, even if he had wanted to, there was little chance of Derek doing that now.

"You still think I'm boring?" he raised an eyebrow at her. "I don't believe that for a second."

She blew through her lips. "Why? Because you were willing to go for a swim in a pond? How daring of you."

“Well... that and other things...” Derek continued with that same raised eyebrow.

Her eyes flashed. “Careful, Your Grace. Following young ladies into the middle of nowhere, without another person in sight... some might think that your intentions were a tad... rakish.”

“Mine or yours?” Derek shot back.

“Ha!” she laughed. “You do make a good point. I really am a no good troublemaker, aren’t I? You’d do best to stay away from me.”

“Believe me, I’ve tried.”

“And yet here you are. Please tell me that Lord Ashville didn’t send you again? I’ve just about had enough of him of late — he really is a stubborn old mule, isn’t he?”

Derek frowned at the comment. “Of late? That incident at the theatre, you mean?”

Lady Anna looked about to say something. Her lip curled and Derek could see conflict within her. But then she exhaled and waved him off. “Oh, nothing. It’s not important — not nearly as important as what you’re doing all the way out here, Your Grace.”

“Right... about that.” Derek took a calming breath. They’d dispensed with the pleasantries and now he had to, well, he still wasn’t sure. But an apology seemed like the best bet. “I came to see you because —”

“Hopefully not to ask me to another ball.”

“What? No. I wanted to —”

“Double check that I hadn’t changed my mind?” she offered.

“No, not that. I was hoping I might —”

“Ask for some riding lessons?” she cut him off again. “You could certainly use the help.”

He was getting frustrated now. This was hard enough as is, without her interrupting and poking fun. “Lady Anna,” he started in stern tones. “The last time we were together —”

“When was that again? Remind me?”

“Will you just —!” Derek erupted, but then caught his tongue... only a moment too late.

Lady Anna’s eyes widened as if from shock. Then narrowed as if from anger. “Well, if that’s the way you’re going to be...” she said with her nose pointed up as she spun about to climb back on her horse.

“No — I mean, wait.” Derek strode for her. “I didn’t mean to —”

“Snap at me? Are you sure that isn’t why you’re here?” She took hold of the saddle’s pommel and prepared to lift herself up.

“Not at all.” He reached her. “I was hoping to —”

“You’re not very good at this are you,” she sighed as she slotted her foot into the stirrup and readied to lift herself.

“I would be, if you weren’t so — will you just give me a moment?” Without thinking, Derek grabbed Lady Anna by the arm.

Lady Anna froze under Derek’s grip — he could feel her entire body stiffen as his hand wrapped about her and pulled her back down from the horse. Her eyes also bulged at the hand about her arm, the look she gave it suggesting that he had just struck her.

But she didn’t pull away. Nor did she seem upset. If anything and judging by the smirk that worked itself over her soft lips, and the way her eyes danced, Derek might have even thought that she liked it. Which was good because he somewhat liked it too.

“Your Grace,” she gasped. “I would ask that you unhand me.”



“Not until you listen to what I have to say,” Derek growled... and then pulled her in even closer.

“And if I don’t want to?” she asked, voice a whisper as her gaze flicked from his hand to his eyes to his mouth.

“You don’t have much of a choice,” Derek continued, that same growl; voice low, teeth clenched, breathing heavy. “I suggest that for once, you do as you’re told.”

Her eyes flashed again as she turned her body so it was pressed right into his. Her chest against his chest. Her legs between his legs. Her face so close to his that he could almost taste her on his lips.

“And if I don’t...” her eyes were for his lips only, and she watched them like a hawk circling its prey.

This wasn’t what Derek had intended. This hadn’t even crossed his mind! But now that it was happening, it was all he could think. Heart pounding in his chest. Blood pumping through his body. Breathing up, pulse erupting, arousal piquing, Derek knew what was about to happen... he could feel it... and this time, he wasn’t about to question it.

“I think you know,” Derek said as his grip tightened. He stepped in closer, wedging Lady Anna between his own body and that of the horse’s.

“Show me,” she said in a throaty whisper.

They were completely and utterly alone, but also exposed. Forest behind them. Open fields in front. It would take but one person passing by to see them, one curious set of eyes to realize who they were and what they were doing. And yet, Derek, in the moment, didn't care one wit.

Still holding Lady Anna by the arm, still bearing over her like a giant, still pressing his body into her quivering one, Derek moved his other hand to her waist, gripped it tight, and then kissed Lady Anna full on the lips.

She returned the kiss in kind. But one hand wrapped around the back of his head whilst the other shot to the buckle of his pants. She grabbed it and pulled his crotch in close as she devoured his lips and face. A kiss might have been how this started, but neither were under any illusions as to how it was going to end.

Not that Derek cared. He was through pretending that he didn't know what he wanted. As it stood, he knew exactly what he wanted: Lady Anna Lewis. And now, he intended on having her.

## CHAPTER 22



*A*nna's screams echoed over the tops of the trees and were swallowed by the heavens. Her moaning and groaning and panting and puffing rolled over the grassy fields and became lost beyond the horizon. Loud. Animalistic. Intense. She was out in the open, totally exposed and able to be seen by all. But she did not care. She did not even think. Instead, she just screamed louder.

Her back was pressed against the tree. Her hands gripped around Derek's shoulders. And her legs were wrapped about his waist like a crab's pincer grip. It was the most wild and uninhibited thing that Anna had ever done. And oh, how she loved it.

"Oh... urgh... urgh... Anna..." Derek growled in her ear as he ravished her with hard and powerful thrusts, each sending a pulse down her legs and up her body which only set her to screaming louder.

"Do not stop," she commanded, head thrown back as she shouted into the sky. "Don't ever stop..."

This wasn't how it was supposed to go. When Anna had seen the Duke earlier, she had been shocked at first, truly surprised

that he had come to see her. But she had also been touched, and a little chuffed that he hadn't been able to stay away.

Her confrontation with Lord Tywin was still frustrating her, even more so as it only served to remind her of the Duke. She didn't want to be reminded of him. As far as she was concerned, they were finished. He wanted one thing, she could never give it, and that was that. It wasn't the perfect outcome, but it was all she had.

And then she saw him. Then she wondered why he had come. Then she realized that she didn't care. Then she thought to scare him away. Or better, to remind him of who she was and why he'd be best to turn his horse around and head home. And then, she took off.

As to their love making, that wasn't by design. He had grabbed her by the arm, a fire lit itself inside of her, and it was all she could do to not pounce on him then and there. Anna was only human after all, and the Duke was impossibly desirable.

She stayed wedged between the Duke and the tree the entire time. Wrapped around him like a vine as he had his way with her, completely dominated and devoured her like a savage animal. And she wasn't complaining.

The Duke was a different person when he coupled with her. He was passionate and wild. Visceral and carefree. He let go of everything, becoming what Anna assumed to be a closer version of his true self. Not the one he put on so that he might fit better into society. Perhaps that was why Anna enjoyed herself so much.

How long were they there for? Anna had no idea. She didn't care. It might have been minutes, it may have been hours, but time became irrelevant. Alone in that field, just the two of them, able to do whatever they wanted, however they wanted it, Anna could have stayed there forever.

And from the way the Duke was moaning as he continued to thrust inside of her, hands gripped about her backside, head buried in her chest, she got the sense that he was of the exact same mind.

\* \* \*

"Please don't say it," Anna said suddenly.

"What's that now?" the Duke asked, blinking himself into the moment.

"What you're about to say," Anna said as she turned onto her side and propped herself onto her elbow so she might better see the Duke. "Please don't say it."

The Duke did the same, turning onto his side to face her, pushing himself up on his elbow to match her eyeline. "Say what exactly — I honestly have no idea what you're talking about."

Anna gave him a knowing look. Held it for a moment. And then held it a little longer.

"What?" the Duke chuckled. "I really don't know what you're talking about — is this about what I said to do with Hugh? Because I'm already working up the perfect lie —"

“No, not that,” Anna said. Although now she was wondering if maybe she had misread the situation. In fact, based on the Duke’s bewildered expression, she was almost certain that she had. “The ah... the other thing. The thing you were going to say.”

The Duke scrunched his brow and leaned back, so very obviously having not a clue what she was talking about.

So yes, it would seem that she misread the situation just a little.

They were still in the same field. Only this time, they had all their clothes back on. The two lovers lay in the grass, just underneath the tree that had aided in their previous endeavors. There was no awkwardness when they were done, but instead a sort of mutual satisfaction. They collapsed in one another’s arms, both exhausted and covered in sweat, and thus saw no real reason to move.

Even the conversation had been easy. As Anna settled herself on her back and stared at the sky, the Duke chatted happily about this and that. It felt more as if he was simply venting, and glad there was someone there to listen. Oddly enough, Anna was more than happy to be that person. She might have even enjoyed it.

But then a silence fell. Then Anna was allowed inside her own head again. She began to wonder what the Duke must be thinking, and soon found herself at the inevitable answer. He was going to ask her out again.

So, Anna did what Anna generally does. She spoke first, thought second, and got herself into trouble because of it.

“Well...” Anna began awkwardly, now that she was sure she had misread the Duke. “It’s just that, with the silence and everything... I ah, I got the sense that you were...”

“That I was what?” the Duke asked with a cocky smirk.

“Going to ask me out again,” she grimaced. “But feel free to deny it. I won’t mind.”

He frowned at that. “Is that right?”

“Not at all,” Anna doubled down. “In fact, I insist.”

“Insist that I don’t ask you out?”

“Ah... yes?” she offered, while cursing herself at the same time for being so stupid. And stubborn. And just plain foolish.

Anna had been sure that she didn’t want to see the Duke again. She had told herself many times, and just about believed it too. But after what had just happened, she was starting to have second thoughts.

She liked him. She did. She didn’t want to. She didn’t wish it or desire such a thing. But sometimes, one has no control over their own feelings. Sometimes, these things just happen for reasons that are beyond explanation.

Although, and to be perfectly fair to the Duke, there wasn't much that needed explaining. Anna might have been a free spirit, but despite what recent events might suggest, she wasn't one to simply hoist her skirt whenever a half-attractive man came along. This right here, in the field, in the middle of the day, wasn't a common occurrence by any stretch of the imagination.

The Duke had a hold over her. It was raw and sexual. He had her in his grip, and there was little Anna could do to release it. Not that she wanted to.

"And if I do ask you out again?" the Duke asked with a coy smile.

Anna scrunched her face. "I think you can remember the last time. Go ahead, have a think now. See if you can refresh your own memory."

The Duke chuckled at that. "You're in luck then." He lay himself down and got back to staring at the sky. "Because I had no intention of asking you out."

"Fine," Anna scoffed. "If that's what you have to tell yourself."

"It's not what I have to tell myself," the Duke shrugged. "It's just plain fact."

Well, that was unexpected.



“Ah, excuse me,” Anna shuffled in closer. “Do you really expect me to believe that you don’t want to see me again?” she chuckled dryly and then rested a hand on the Duke’s thigh.

“Would that upset you?” the Duke asked without noting the hand.

“Not one bit.”

“Are you sure?” The smallest of smiles. So arrogant.

“Yes, I am very sure,” Anna insisted. Although truth be told, she had no idea why she was.

So, it wasn’t just about the physical. Anna was able to tell herself that it might be. It was easy enough to convince herself of, and then believe it. But truthfully, although she would never ever admit this out loud, she was starting to like the Duke... just a little. Enough that seeing him again wouldn’t be the *worst* time she’d ever had.

But she wasn’t about to change herself in order to do it either. If he wanted to see her again, it would have to be without the fanfare. It would have to be on her terms, and in a way that would not suggest at all that the two were courting one another.

Unfortunately, as this was Lord Duke Elsbrook she was dealing with, that wasn’t an option. A real shame honestly. A real shame.

“That’s a shame,” the Duke sighed. “Because I really wasn’t going to ask you out. My memory isn’t so short, and I think we all know what your answer is going to be.”

“Good,” Anna said meekly. She then gave her head a shake, followed by a firm nod. “I mean, good. I think it’s for the best if we don’t see one another after this.”

Suddenly, the Duke shuffled back onto his elbow. “Hold on a moment,” he said. “Just because I wasn’t going to ask you out, doesn’t mean I don’t want to see you again.”

Anna’s heart skipped a beat. “Wh — what does that mean?”

The Duke smiled warmly. “I know you don’t wish to be courted. You’ve made that more than clear. But...” he reached out and gently took her hand. “... that doesn’t mean we need to stop seeing one another.”

“Seeing one another how?” she asked, narrowing her eyes.

“Whatever you want to call it,” he said. “Just so long as I get to see you again.”

Anna almost asked her to pinch him. Or perhaps to ask if he could in fact read her mind. Really though, she just had to work to make sure that he couldn’t see the excitement that flooded through her entire being. It wouldn’t do for him to know that she was *that* interested.

“All right,” she said simply. “I suppose that might work — so long as you promise not to invite me to balls or dinners or... or...”

“Weddings?” the Duke offered.

Her face dropped. “Do not even joke.”

The Duke kept hold of her hand, giving it a tighter squeeze as he met her eyes so she could see the truth behind them. “Lady Anna Lewis,” he began. “You are strange. You are unique. You are... you are different from any lady I have ever met.”

“Are you trying to insult or compliment me?”

“I’m trying to tell you that I’ve enjoyed these last few times that I have seen you.” A cheeky grin. “A little too much, really. And if I must do things a little differently to see you again, well I suppose that’s half the fun, isn’t it?”

Anna didn’t say anything after that. There was no need. His words were perfect, and so long as he didn’t break them, Anna was perfectly happy to succumb to his wishes. More than happy...

But rather than telling him so, she decided to show him. A quick peck on the lips soon turned into a full-blown kiss, soon turned to Anna climbing on top of the Duke, soon turned to them picking up where they left off.

It was all too perfect. But better than questioning it, or giving it any real thought, Anna did the only thing that made sense. She took full advantage. Right there. Right then. On top of the Duke in the middle of the open field, she showed him just how much she was looking forward to seeing him again.

And the Duke showed her the exact same. Why, from the way he ravished her, there was a very good chance he was even more excited than she.

## CHAPTER 23



It was a romance unlike any that Derek had ever been involved in. Such was the case that the word ‘romance’ sounded almost wrong to use, because what he and Anna were involved in was anything but romantic. Oh sure, it contained several of the typical signs that a courtship might possess. But even these were blurred and strange and on closer inspection, a little ‘wrong.’

The secrecy that surrounded what the two were doing was the most striking difference to any courtship that Derek had known- although, and once again, he had to remind himself that this wasn’t a courtship. Anna made sure to point this out to him nearly every time they spoke and when Derek threatened to do anything even remotely romantic. For example, the first day he went to see her, following their tryst in the field, he brought her a bouquet of flowers.

“What is this?” Anna asked at the sight of the colorful flowers in Derek’s hand. She curled her lip and took a step back, like she thought it might be a snake that was going to bite her.

“Ah, I want to say that they’re flowers,” Derek attempted with a nervous chuckle. “But that seems too obvious a point.”

She rolled her eyes, turned, and walked away. “What did I tell you?”

Derek charged after her. “About bringing you flowers?”

“About trying to court me!”

“This isn’t —”

She spun about suddenly and cut him off. “It is. You know it is. And honestly, flowers? Really? Your Grace, I thought you’d show a little more imagination than that.”

His brow scrunched with confusion. “So, you don’t want the flowers? Or do you want me to be more creative?”

Thankfully, she actually smiled after that, and then blushed slightly. Derek could see the fight happening within her; one side very much wanting to be doted upon and romanced, the other wishing for anything but. This just made her all the more confusing however, as it left Derek not knowing what to do.

“How about the next time I dare to do anything even close to resembling romance, I warn you in advance?” Derek offered with a half-smile. “So you’re not caught completely off-guard.”

She blushed further, tried to roll her eyes and wave him down, but ended up nodding her head slightly. “I suppose that isn’t the worst compromise- but the warning better come with

plenty of time for me to be ready,” she demanded, as if this might give her a small victory.

“Of course,” Derek agreed. “I’d hate to make you uncomfortable.” He then handed her the flowers, and she took them. Although not without a final showing of discomfort at being treated well.

But back to the secrecy, for this was what Derek both disliked and loved most about his seeing Anna, as strange as that might sound.

She made him swear that he wouldn’t tell a soul that they were seeing one another. He was forced to put a hand on his chest and vow it under the eyes of God himself, for only then was she willing to believe that he might hold his tongue.

“There? Happy now?” he asked with a resigned sigh, letting her know how silly she was being.

“Very much,” she said to him. Even giving him a kiss on the lips to follow up. “Trust me, this is for the best. It simply would not do to have the entire *ton* gossiping about us — you know how they are.”

A part of Derek thought to be insulted that she wanted to keep their romance so hidden from the world. But he also understood her worry, and after she told him about Lord Tywin’s proposal, and by extension Lord Ashville’s obsession with her, he figured that maybe it was for the best. He shuddered to wonder how they might react if they were to find out about the two of them. Lord Ashville might have a heart attack.

There was also a level of excitement that came with the secrecy, and it was one that Derek enjoyed a little too much.

He didn't have to worry about what others might think. He didn't have to plan his day around seeing Lady Anna or think of her when he was invited to dinners or lunches or any other social engagement. Sometimes, he might be forced to lie to his friends about what he was doing. But even this only added to the enjoyment.

"Drinks tonight at mine," Hugh commanded of Derek two days after he and Lady Anna began to sleep with one another. They had met for a morning stroll through Hyde Park, and Hugh apparently wanted to continue on into the night.

"Can't tonight, I'm afraid," Derek said with a coy smile that Hugh noticed instantly.

"Why?" he demanded to know. "What are you doing instead?"

"I have plans," Derek shrugged. "That is all you need to know."

"Plans? With whom? Who are you seeing?"

"I'm sorry," Derek continued with a satisfied smile. "Are you and I courting? I wasn't aware that I had to tell you everything that I did. Shall I announce each time I visit the privy also?"

"Oh, ha," Hugh grumbled. "Very clever."



All of this only added to the fire that ignited every time that he and Lady Anna met. That night, for example, he made his way to her home early evening, under the cover of darkness, feeling a thrill that he'd lied to his friend so that he might be here tonight.

This thrill carried over to their evening. It began with a drink. It continued with many more. And then, less than an hour after Derek had walked through the door, he found himself upstairs, on his back, being taken advantage of by a very rowdy Lady Anna. They did not worry themselves with the whole 'getting to know' one another phase. They simply enjoyed themselves the only way they could think... which also happened to be the best way.

And when it was all said and done? When the night came to a close and Lady Anna announced that it was time for bed? She simply kicked Derek out of her home, with nothing more than a kiss on the cheek to comfort him for the ride home.

"Safe travels," she said each time that Derek left her.

"Will you worry about me?" Derek joked as he made his way down the steps and toward the front door. The manor was large and mostly empty, so each step echoed nosily throughout the cavernous home.

"Oh, most definitely," she assured him. "Right up until my head hits the pillow. After that, I'm afraid that I'll hardly remember your name."

"Charming."

“I’ll make it up to you,” she said as they reached the door.

Derek popped the door open and then spun about. “And how are you going to do that?” he asked with a knowing smile.

She rolled her eyes. “Like you don’t know — but if there is any confusion, perhaps I can clear it up... tomorrow night? Same time?”

“I look forward to it,” he said.

And then, it was the kiss on the cheek, followed by the door closing in his face. After that, Derek would ride home, a huge smile on his face, the events of the night being played over and over again in his mind so he could relish in just how good a time he was having.

Yes, for that first week, Derek was nothing but chuffed over how this romance was unfolding — although once again, romance was the wrong word to use. Really, he didn’t know what the correct word was. He’d never done anything like this before! Perhaps a sexual engagement was the best term? Although that felt tacky. Or maybe a hidden romance, for that suggested mystery and danger around their amorous feeling. There was also the more obvious, a ‘casual affair,’ for that was apt and to the point. But Derek didn’t much like the sound of that either.

Was this a casual thing? It was hard to say. And each night that he rode back from her home — four times in that first week — he found himself wondering more and more about the implications of what this meant.

Derek had agreed to Lady Anna's terms of courtship simply because he'd had no choice. He wanted to keep seeing her. He was obsessed with the idea. Never mind their physical connection, and his unapparelled attraction to her. Never mind that! The fact was that Derek enjoyed being around her. He liked her personality. He liked how fun and funny she was. He liked how unserious she acted, how playful she could be, the way she joked with him, and how rare it was for him to 'cross the line' and say something that might upset her. Nothing seemed to upset her!

But it was more than just fun. When Lady Anna wasn't being combative or purposefully antagonistic, she was interesting and intelligent and far more perceptive than she probably realized. More than once, after their love making, as they lay in a sweaty heap, the conversation would turn serious. Likely because she stopped caring about what he thought, if only for a few minutes.

"Do you think I'm strange?" she asked one night as they held one another.

"Almost certainly," Derek laughed.

"Seriously." She shuffled onto her side and looked at him. There was no humor there. No fun in her eyes. "Do you think I'm odd?"

"In what way?"

"Pick one," she said. "I was talking with my best friend, Lady Eloise today, and she insists that I'm going to die alone. I

asked her why that was such a bad thing, and the look she gave me, one would think I asked if we might go dancing naked together through London.”

“Now, that would be a sight.”

“I’m serious,” she pressed. “Do you think I’m strange?”

“You know that I do,” Derek said. As he spoke, he turned onto his side to face her. “But that’s not a bad thing. Think of it like this. What’s stranger to you? Spending your entire life doing what others want of you, even if it makes you desperately unhappy? Or doing what you enjoy, even if others assume it will make you unhappy?”

“I suppose so,” she frowned to herself.

“You are happy, aren’t you?” he asked, sensing that he wasn’t getting the whole story.

She fixed him with a shrewd look. “What? Are you after another compliment — yes, Your Grace. You were more than adequate. So stop your worrying.”

Those rare moments of serious conversation never lasted long. It was as if Anna would suddenly realize she was opening herself a little too much, that she was walking herself into a trap that might see her snared into a relationship with a man whom she clearly liked. So she would hurriedly backtrack and joke and make fun again.

It was obvious to Derek that Lady Anna didn't want their relationship to extend past what it was. A casual relationship, for what else could he possibly call it?

And every night that Derek rode home, he would ponder this relationship as he tried to decide how he felt about it. There were more than enough positives, and he made sure to keep those firm in his mind at all times. This was the most fun he'd had in as long as he could remember, with a woman who he truly believed brought the best out in him. So what if it was fleeting? Why not just enjoy himself while he could?

It should have suited the Duke perfectly, as he'd always said he wasn't particularly fond of marriage. But even that was a lie. The Duke had never been against marriage. He'd just been against marrying someone he didn't care for. If he ever was to meet a woman that he had true feelings for... well, who knows what might happen?

It was a difficult situation to be sure. The week was nothing but splendid, but he also knew it wasn't going to last, and he wondered how much longer this might go on, and what he would do when that time came. He knew what Lady Anna would do, and something told him it was the complete opposite of what he might want.

Although that was a problem for later. For now, it was best to just have a little fun and hope the good times might last forever. Even though there was just no way they could.

## CHAPTER 24



It was the following week when things suddenly came to a head for Derek. It wasn't his intent that it should happen so quickly, and he would have been more than content to have continued in his casual relationship with Lady Anna for at least a few more weeks. But sometimes, one doesn't have a say over these things, and simply must adapt as they come.

The day was still young, and as Derek was coming off a night spent with Lady Anna, his mood was as good as it had ever been. And he knew it was only going to improve, seeing as he'd be spending the day with Hugh as the two attended a boxing match taking place in the city.

Boxing wasn't something that Derek was particularly interested in, per se. He had always found it a little brutish for his own tastes and added to that the drinking and the gambling that went along with it, the whole experience just felt a little off.

Funny that people like Hugh could denounce someone like Lady Anna for acting below her station, only to do it themselves as if it was no big deal. Why, there was every chance that even Lord Ashville would be in attendance today.

But all of that was no matter and, seeing as his mood was a good one, Derek didn't let any of it bother him. In fact, he was looking forward to it. The past week had seen him both alone and at home as he waited for night to fall so that he might go and visit Lady Anna. Or at her house until the late hours of the evening, only to then trot home alone in the middle of the night where there would be no one waiting for him.

He wasn't lonely, but he was missing the company of his friends. A shame that they wouldn't be able to gossip about what Derek had been doing all week. Not that Hugh didn't try.

"Well, this is a surprise," Hugh announced as he strolled from his manor, where Derek stood waiting by the carriage.

"Meaning?" Derek asked, already knowing what his friend was going to say.

"This last week," Hugh continued as he made his way across the cobblestones to the carriage. He was dressed in the proper fashion today; a pair of beige pants, a dark waistcoat, a darker jacket, and a top hat which he likely wore because it made him look taller. "You've been a ghost."

"I saw you four days ago," Derek reminded him as he turned back and opened the carriage door.

"Yes, you did. But if you recall, I invited you to drinks and you turned me down."

"I've been sick," Derek said as he climbed into the carriage. He planted his backside on the seat and then stuck his head out

the door. “A real friend would ask how I’m feeling.”

“No,” Hugh corrected. He then groaned as he pulled himself inside the carriage, the door closing behind him as the coachman shut it tight and then climbed onto his perch. “A real friend would see that you were lying about being sick, and then abuse you until you told him what is really going on.”

Derek had never been any good at lying. He just didn’t see the point, as more often than not lies became tangled, messy things that just ended in worsening the problem you were trying to lie your way around. He preferred to simply tell the truth, hoping that to be enough. Even if the answer might not be what the person wished.

But this was different. He didn’t see it as a lie he was telling, but Lady Anna’s. She had sworn him to secrecy and, if he broke that secret, she was likely to stop seeing him entirely. That simply would not do.

“Believe what you wish,” Derek shrugged as he settled himself into his seat. One leg crossed over the other, he leaned back and exhaled. “But I’ve been unwell for three days now, and this morning is the first where I’ve been able to leave bed without wanting to be sick.”

“Really?” Hugh looked quizzically upon Derek. “You look rather well for a man who was... at death’s door.”

“I never said that” Derek corrected. “But thank you. I do feel a lot better, in case you were worried.”



Hugh narrowed his eyes at Derek, but didn't push. It was clear he didn't believe him and, if Derek knew his best friend, this wouldn't be the last time he broached this topic. Again, Derek was reminded of why he hated lying. When this secret came out, as it was bound to, Lady Anna wasn't the only one whose feelings might get hurt.

Unfortunately for Hugh, Derek was enjoying his time with Lady Anna far too much to risk ruining it. So, for now, lies would have to do.

And Derek thought that would be the end of it. Once the carriage got moving and the two settled into their seats, Hugh began to carry on about his own problems, mostly silly things to do with his wife and married life, and Derek was able to relax again and look forward to enjoying the day. Or at least he thought.

"There is some good news, however," Hugh sighed, and then shuffled himself so he was sitting up in his seat. "As rare an occasion as that is."

"Oh?" Derek asked. He was looking out the window, taking note of where they were exactly. Today's match was in a warehouse in the south of London, which wasn't a spot he frequented often, if at all. This was a poorer area of the city, and he was observing the people and buildings with some interest.

"Well, as you know, next week is my birthday."

Derek pulled his attention back into the carriage. "Let me guess, you have a list of things you wish me to buy you for a

birthday present?”

“Ha!” Hugh laughed. “No, not at all... unless you’d like a list? I can whip one up.”

“How about I just buy you some expensive liquor?” Derek offered dryly.

“That will be a start. And you can bring it over tomorrow night also. Might as well get stuck into it before the actual birthday begins.”

“Tomorrow night?” Derek frowned.

“What’s wrong?” Hugh smirked. “Feeling that illness suddenly begin to creep back up?”

A flat expression. “Your birthday isn’t for six more days. So what tomorrow night has to do with anything —”

“That’s the good news, isn’t it?” Hugh chortled. “Emma is letting me invite some chums over for an early birthday dinner.”

“How magnanimous of her.”

“It wasn’t without its trials — for some reason, she seems to think that I spend my time with ruffians and rakes, men she doesn’t wish to allow inside her home. I can’t imagine who she is thinking of?” His eyes flashed at Derek.

“So, I am allowed over then?” he asked, knowing it was he who Hugh’s wife was referring.

“Most definitely. And...” he raised an eyebrow. “There is a plus one attached, if you would like to take advantage?”

“And who would I bring exactly?”

Hugh shrugged. “So long as you don’t bring a cold. Personally, I suggest a young lady... maybe the one who made you so sick?” His grin was knowing, so much that Derek might have even guessed that Hugh knew all about him and Lady Anna.

He didn’t though. He couldn’t. This was just his friend’s way of prying. Worse, it was his friend’s way of seeing if Derek was in fact still a bachelor, and thus available to be set-up. If Derek refused the plus one, he would almost put money down on the fact that Hugh and his wife might try and set him up. Likely at dinner.

Derek thought quickly. He knew that Lady Anna didn’t wish to be seen in public with him. He knew that she didn’t wish to be invited to events of any kind. But surely, dinner wouldn’t be so bad...?

“Maybe,” Derek said casually.

“Excuse me?” Hugh sat up. “Did you just say —”

“Maybe,” Derek said again. “Leave it with me.”

“You actually have someone to invite?” Hugh gawked. “I was only joking!”

“Half-joking, I’m sure,” Derek said dryly. “And besides, I said maybe. As in, maybe I will have someone to bring along.”

“Who?” Hugh demanded.

“No one,” Derek said.

“Well, that’s not true.”

“It is until they say yes. Or no.”

Hugh narrowed his eyes at Derek. “All right, keep your secrets, Duke. But be warned, if you show up to my birthday without a blushing lady on your arm, my wife will see it as a personal invitation to set you up with one of her silly friends.”

“Does she know you call them that?”

“Of course not,” he snapped. “And don’t you dare say a thing!”

Derek was about to push the joke a little bit further, maybe a little blackmail to ensure that Hugh kept his trap shut. But then

he felt the carriage begin to slow down, which meant they were arriving.

From that point, the fight was what caught the two men's attention, as they began to discuss who they might bet on and for what reason. The dinner tomorrow night was forgotten, as were Derek's lady problems. Or at least they were forgotten by Hugh.

Derek already had plans to see Lady Anna tonight, he was to head there just after supper. It had been a night that he was highly looking forward to, although now it came with some contention. He would ask Lady Anna if she wanted to go to dinner with him, he would press her on it and try and make her see reason — a dinner engagement really wasn't that big of a deal.

As to what would happen after? Where Lady Anna was concerned, that was anyone's guess.

## CHAPTER 25



Derek arrived at Anna's home at the exact moment that she was finishing her supper. She had literally just taken her last bite and was about to call for her plate to be taken away when a member of her staff, Jobe, came rushing in to tell her that the Duke could be seen coming down the avenue.

"Ah, wonderful," she said, meaning it. "Escort him in, won't you Jobe? I'll see him in the drawing room."

Jobe scurried away after that, leaving Anna alone to digest her food for a moment and then quickly make her way to the drawing room so she might be ready for the Duke of Elsbrook — although she called him by his first name now. This meant having a drink poured for him. This meant sitting by the fire so he could join her. This meant reminding him that he was here on her time, and not his own.

She tittered to herself as she thought about this, mostly to do with how accommodating Derek had been across this last week and more. When she had slept with him all those days ago, out on the field, she might never have guessed that things would go so smoothly. Which they were, by the way.

For now, what she loved most was how easy it all was. At least that was what she told herself, for it made how much she was enjoying seeing the Duke that little bit easier to cope with.

Their timetable was based mostly around her own needs and wants. Derek would only come over when she was free, and only after she told him that she might be interested. They only ever spent time at her own manor, and he never, not even once, tried to convince her to do otherwise. He didn't push her to come and see him, and he didn't suggest the possibility of them going outdoors. Why, it was almost as if he wanted the secrecy as much as she did.

But it wasn't the secrecy she was after... although, Anna didn't really know what she was after. Yes, she told herself she wished for a simple romance with no strings attached, and a certain level of secrecy should come with this, but the more that she saw Derek, and the more time she spent with him, the harder this lie became to swallow.

"There you are," Derek announced as he strode into the drawing room a few moments later.

"Expecting me to be somewhere else?" Anna asked without turning around. She sat on a single couch by the fire, staring into the flames. "Perhaps Jobe was luring you in here to take advantage."

"He's not a bad looking individual," Derek chuckled. He strode to the couch, leaned down and planted a kiss on Anna's forehead. She had a second glass of brandy in her hand ready, and she handed it to him. "I could do worse."

“You could do better too,” Anna pointed out.

Derek sat himself down on the armrest of the chair, one hand draped over the couch’s back so his hand could lightly stroke the top of Anna’s head. “Are you referring to yourself?”

“Obviously,” she said. “Although that’s an example of you doing a little too good. Surely, there’s a middle ground?”

“Ha,” Derek chuckled. “Well, I was at a boxing match today. Some of the faces there left a lot to be desired... especially after the match. Maybe one of them?”

“Maybe,” Anna agreed as if she was being serious. “Or perhaps it is me who should branch out. This whole, sleeping with a duke thing is becoming rather stale.”

“Are you trying to hurt me, Lady Anna?”

“Of course,” she said as she looked up at him and grinned wickedly. “What’s the point otherwise?”

Derek chuckled at this, shook his head, and took a sip of his drink. But he watched her as he did so, eyes twinkling with what she could only interpret as amusement at the conversation. But then again, this is how they always were.

Once again, the word ‘easy’ came to mind. That just seemed like the best way to describe them. And not their timetable — at least not this time — but their conversation, and how effortlessly they got on. Anna had met several dukes in her



time, and more barons and viscounts than she dared to think, and never, ever had she met one as easy to talk to as the Duke.

He wasn't supposed to have been like this either. From everything she had heard of the Duke of Elsbrook, he was as uptight and no-nonsense as the rest of the men of whom he was a part. He was supposed to be straight as an arrow, as plain as white bread, and as boring as watching the grass grow after a heavy rainfall. But none of that was even close.

At first, Anna had just assumed he was pretending, that this was all a ploy so that he could get close to her and try and trick her into a marriage. But the more time she spent with him, the more she realized that this was his true self, and he'd simply kept it hidden for fear of what others might say.

Only now, the fact that she actually liked the Duke as a person, and he clearly liked her in return, added more to the headache that was this budding relationship.

"So, the boxing match," Anna then started. "How was it?"

"Violent," Derek shrugged. "Bloody. A little loud."

"Oh no," she gasped playfully. "Not loud."

"But" Derek paused as he eyed her warningly, to which she stuck her tongue out. "I won. Twice, in fact. Even better that Hugh lost every bet he placed."

"Oh." Her eyes flashed. "How much did we win?"

“We?”

“A figure of speech.”

“Ah,” he said as if he believed her. Then, he slid down the arm of the couch while somehow managing to lift Anna up and onto his lap. He was so strong and powerful, and that act alone had her more amorous desires roaring. “Well, you see, I don’t discuss finances with women who I’m sleeping with. Far too personal.”

“Is that right?”

“It is,” he nodded as his right hand stroked gently at her back. “I’d hate for you to think that this was becoming serious. Or worse than that, you realized how rich I am and decide to start using me for my money.”

“Not likely.” She blew through her lips. “I’d prefer to use you for something else.”

“Such as?”

Anna grinned and flashed her eyes. Then she leaned forward and kissed him on his thick, moist lips. As soon as she did, she could feel the change in him. His body stiffened, his hands grabbed her, and his excitement... she could feel it through his pants.

“Shall we...” she indicated out of the room as she pulled away.

This was Anna’s usual mode of operation; a sort of safety net that she could fall into whenever things threatened to become a little too comfortable. Yes, she had wanted something casual with Derek. And yes, that was exactly what she was getting — she should have been thrilled. Only, she was at constant pains to justify the logic of this within herself, and each time that she saw him, she found it harder and harder to do.

She was starting to like Elsbroom. She was. She didn’t want to admit it, but it’s just the way things were. And this had everything to do with the Duke as a person too and how perfect the two were for one another.

In a weird sort of way, she almost wanted him to prove her correct. At least if he was to push her, to try and force her into a relationship that he claimed he didn’t want, then she might be able to better justify the way she was treating him. But as it currently stood, he was darn near perfect, and Anna was liking it a little too much.

Not to mention liking Derek a little too much also.

Again, this should not have been a problem, for he liked her, was willing to do anything she asked of him, and wanted to keep seeing her by the rules she had set. And even still, Anna was doing nearly everything she could to try and ignore the way her heart fluttered when she saw him, the way she kept thinking about him long after he left, and the very real fact that each time he did leave, she could not wait to see him again...

It thus came as a slight surprise when the Duke resisted her advances, and even leaned backwards as if to dissuade her from kissing him again. “Actually... before we do that, there is something I need to ask you.”

“Which is?” she vaguely asked as she began to run her hand through his thick hair.

“Now, I don’t want to you get mad but —”

Anna was up and off Derek’s lap before he finished speaking. She didn’t need to hear what he was going to say. Based on his body language, and the reserved tone of his voice, she could already guess.

“Where are you going?” Derek asked as he half stood to follow her.

“That depends,” she warned him without thinking. “What were you going to say?” she bulged both her eyes at him and put her hands on her hips.

Derek winced. “Something tells me you already know.”

“Derek...” she began was caution. That pesky voice in her mind, the one besotted with the Duke, whispered and begged for her to be reasonable and at least listen to what he had to say. But she was stubborn and ignored it, as she had been doing since they started seeing one another. “Please do not tell me you are about to ask me to —”

“It’s not a big deal.” Derek was on his feet, one hand held out as if he was trying to calm a skittish cat. “It’s not. But I was with Hugh today and he invited me to his home tomorrow night for dinner and drinks.”

“And?”

“And...” he sucked through his teeth. “I thought you might want to come —”

“What did I tell you?” she cut him off. “What was the one thing that I said? Before we agreed to any of this, what was it that I —”

“I know what you said,” Derek assured her. “And I’m not trying to go against your wishes.”

“And yet you are.”

“I’m not!” he exclaimed desperately. “But Hugh asked if I might want to bring someone, and I thought... well, I thought that I might ask you. Crazy, I know.”

“It is crazy. Although that word doesn’t feel anywhere near serious enough.”

“Why?” Derek demanded of her. He put his glass of brandy down and focused all his attention on her. Not angry or upset. But frustrated. “Why is it so crazy?”

“I told you why.”

“No,” Derek countered. “All you have told me is that you do not wish to be courted. You haven’t given me a reason. You haven’t told me anything that might suggest why that is. Just that it’s how you feel.”

“And is that not enough? You know what I wish for, so why are you so desperate to do the opposite?”

“Because I don’t understand!” Derek shouted. This caught Anna by surprise and she took a step back, which had Derek calming himself. “Listen,” he then said. “This last week... I have had a better time than I might have expected. Truly, more than I could have ever imagined...” he looked at her, waiting for a response.

“Me too,” she said softly.

He nodded. “And I am perfectly fine for it to carry on. But I can’t do that if — it should not be that big of a deal if I want to be seen with you sometimes. It should not be the end of the world for the two of us to go outside and —”

“I never said it was the end of the world,” Anna argued. “Just that I don’t want it.”

“Why? Why don’t you want it?”

“That’s...” Anna hesitated, but that was just because she didn’t have a good answer. Once, she might have had one that

made sense to her, but this last week had changed things considerably. “That’s none of your business.”

Derek’s shoulders slumped. “Is that how you really feel?”

“Yes,” she said without believing it.

He pushed his tongue into the side of his mouth. “Well, you should know that if you’re not there, then Hugh’s wife, the Marchioness Emma, is intending on setting me up — I don’t know who with. But he has assured me it is on the agenda... assuming I arrive alone.”

This revelation stabbed at Anna in a way she didn’t expect. She knew that she should not have cared about such things. If anything, Elsbrook’s being distracted by another lady might actually be a good thing. A true indication that this, whatever it was, was just casual. But that’s not how it was at all.

Almost subconsciously, she touched at her stomach like a knife had been driven through it. And she took a step back, looking away for if he saw her eyes, he might see the truth in them.

“That’s... that is fine,” she said. “If anything, I’m happy for you.”

“Really?” Derek said, not sounding at all like he believed it.

“Yes,” she said with more strength. “Why shouldn’t you meet someone else? We both know that this — us. That it has no

future. So why bother acting differently?”

“Is that how you feel?” Derek asked, voice soft, posture shrinking back. “Is that... is that really what you think?”

“It’s not what I think,” Anna said, fighting within herself to not be such a fool. “It’s what I have said, many times. And, if you remember, you said the exact same thing.”

“But that was before!”

“Before? Before what? We slept together? Because that isn’t true.”

“Not that.” Derek swept toward her, took her hands, and held them to his chest. She could feel his heart beating and yearned to hold him. “Before this last week. Yes, earlier when I said I was fine being casual, I meant it — and I still do. I still wish to see you again, and again, and likely again.”

“But...” Anna led him as if she knew the answer.

“But...” he dropped her hands and looked away. “I didn’t think this was going to be... I did not intend for this to become an ultimatum, Anna, you must know that. But now, well... it has.”

“Become an ultimatum?”



“I can’t keep doing this,” Derek sighed, still refusing to look at her. “I might have if I was able to lie to myself, or if I was able to believe that things were... that they were not as they are.” He hesitated, took a deep breath, and then looked up and met her eyes. There were tears in them, building in his eyes and beginning to drip down his cheeks. “You and I, is there no chance, none at all that it might eventually lead somewhere? That one day...” he hesitated again. “That you might even wish to wed?”

Once, not so long ago, that was the case. Anna had wanted nothing to do with marriage, and she believed the choice was the right one. Her aunt was her influence in this, a woman who she had only ever known to be happy, despite being a widow with no intention of marrying again. When the two were together, it was nothing but fun and games and good times, such that marriage wasn’t even thought of.

When her aunt died, Anna had intended to honor her by keeping with the same way of living. She had managed to convince herself that she wanted this too, that it was for the best. And it had been... until she met Derek.

“None,” Anna somehow managed, although it was her turn to look away again. “I’m sorry, Your Grace, but you know how I feel about such things. And nothing you say...” A deep breath as she kept the tears at bay. “Nothing you say will change that.”

She could just about hear the Duke’s heart breaking. She could see it! The way his face contorted as his body writhed. The way he shrunk back, clutched at his chest, and curled his lip like he might be sick. She wanted to go to him, to hold and caress and make everything better.

But instead, she stood strong and tall, chin pointed up, doing all she could to look as if she was resolved in her decision. This was despite the fact that it broke her nearly as much as it clearly did him.

“I understand,” he said in a whisper. “And that is... that is a shame.”

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s fine,” he assured her, although he didn’t sound as if he meant it. “You’re right. You told me from the start and I was the fool who didn’t listen.”

“You’re not a fool.”

“I am,” he said with a scathing chuckle. “But that’s all right.” He exhaled. “It is what it is.”

That phrase might have hurt more than anything. It was so neutral, so distant and opposite to what the two actually were. It suggested a casual agreement, a sort of mutual end to what was a fun but not at all a personal experience. The same way one might feel when their favorite sweet has been eaten before they got a taste. Something that has happened, but it’s that big of a deal.

Nothing much was said after that. Oh, Anna had so much to say. So much she needed to. But she kept her mouth shut firmly as she led the Duke back to the front door. There, he offered her nothing more than a kiss on the back of the hand before leaving.

Anna watched him go from the doorway, very much feeling as if the manor was collapsing around her. A part of her wished it might just bury her now and be done with it. She could have called out. She could have run outside and chased him, told him that she had changed her mind. But she didn't because she was a stubborn coward who refused to listen to logic. Logic that she herself had been trying, and failing, to reckon with.

She had been starting to like Elsbrook, so much so that she'd pushed him away, and for reasons that even she couldn't fully understand. Reasons that made little sense, the more she thought of them.

And once Derek was gone and Anna was alone, she realized just how alone she was. The house was nearly empty, cloaked in darkness from one end to the other, and so silent she could hear the scurry of mice in the kitchen several rooms over. It was an emptiness that she was not only used to but would have to be for the rest of her life.

She shuffled like a ghost through the empty home, up the stairs and to her room. All she needed to do was tell the Duke how she felt, but she couldn't. Part of it was stubbornness. Part of it was guilt on account of her aunt. And part of it was fear. Don't put yourself out there and you'll never be hurt.

Well, Anna was hurting right now. Worse than that, she didn't think it would end anytime soon.

## CHAPTER 26



The following morning, Anna woke, and as expected, she felt no better than she had when she'd gone to sleep. In fact, she felt worse. So much worse.

It was a cloudy morning, and without having to look outside, Anna knew that it was going to rain. She welcomed it though, likening it to her own moody temperament, one in which she felt as if she was drowning. She lay in bed all morning, face buried in her pillows, wondering how she had let herself fall so far, and if she might ever get up again.

She wouldn't. She was sure of that. When she had been alone, before she had met anyone worth talking to, it had been easy to convince herself that the path she had chosen was the right one. Who needed a man when she had everything she would ever need as a strong, independent woman? Truly, she used to laugh at Lady Eloise and her obsession with meeting someone, thinking her weak and desperate for needing someone else in her life.

But was it weak to love? Was it weak to admit that having another in your life might not be such a bad thing? Did grass not need water? Did flowers not need sunshine? Did children not need their parents, did kings not need taxes, and did gods not need people to worship them? It wasn't weak to rely on

someone else to make you feel whole. By all accounts, it was the most natural of things.

A shame then that Anna was so stubborn. When she did finally pull herself from bed, she didn't consider for a moment actually going to Derek's home and telling him how she truly felt. The idea of putting herself out there like that made her feel sick. So, rather than doing the right thing, the obvious thing, she chose to instead do nothing.

Oh, she didn't do *nothing* per se. There was plenty of moping and skulking. She wandered her empty home, going from room to room simply as a means to kill time. Unfortunately, this just had her mind racing.

What if Derek did meet someone tonight? What if the set-up worked, and he fell in love with a different lady? One who was open to marriage, who wasn't hated by half the *ton*, who could give him exactly what he needed... what he knew that Anna never could? What if today was her last chance to actually tell him how she felt?

Again, it was a shame that she was so stubborn.

By the time that lunch arrived, Anna was in no better shape. It might have been raining outside but she knew she could not stay indoors. She might go insane if she was forced to remain here forever – which was how it felt. And not just today, but tomorrow and then day after that. This was her life now and it was looking worse by the minute.

As such, and with nothing else for it, Anna did what she often did when she was upset. She decided to pay her aunt's grave a

visit.

The rain still poured outside, but Anna paid no mind as she climbed atop her horse and rode it in the direction of the graveyard. By the time Anna reached it, she was drenched from head to toe; hair sticking to her face, dress weighing a ton, vision blurred for how much rain there was. But she stomped through the mud-caked site and then plopped herself down by her resting aunt.

“You probably weren’t expecting to see me today,” she started and indicated to the weather. “But it’s important. Gosh, it’s more than that. It is life threatening, is what it is! You know all about the Duke, so I won’t waste your time there. But there has been a new development!”

Her aunt was always someone she could speak with, no matter the topic. There was never any judgement there, never any condescension. She and her aunt had been extraordinarily similar, so much so that the woman could almost read her mind, or so it seemed.

“Derek – the Duke. He asked me to a dinner,” she sighed and wiped at the water dripping down her face. “Just to a dinner, although the way I bit his head off, you’d think he asked me to marry him. Although he almost did too — and no, Aunt, he didn’t say those words exact, but he implied them. He suggested that his ultimate goal was to marry me. And after I’d already told him I was not interested! Honestly, what was he thinking!”

She reached out and touched the tombstone as if it were her aunt. And it might sound strange, but she could sense her aunt’s spirit embodied within. It warmed her and seemed to clear her mind.

“Or what was I thinking?” she chuckled dryly. “Clearly, I wasn’t. A smart response from me might have been that I needed to think about it. Or that I didn’t want to rush anything. But alas, typical Anna, I kicked him out and told him we were through.”

Lightning suddenly flashed in the sky above, followed by a loud crack of thunder which shook the ground beneath her feet. To Anna, it felt as if her aunt was the cause.

“I know, I know,” she sighed. “I’m a fool of the highest order. But... but it’s not that simple! You know it isn’t. Weren’t you the one who always told me that marriage was a sham? Designed by men to trap women? Wasn’t it you who always told me that you didn’t need a man to be happy — who showed me, for all the fun we used to have. How can you say any differently now? How can you even justify a different point of view? You can’t, Aunty Diana, so do not even try.”

A low rumbling of thunder in the distance, one that Anna read as her aunt mumbling beneath her breath as if to disagree.

“I want to know what I must do,” Anna then continued. “I want to see the Duke again. This last week... well, you know how much I have enjoyed myself. Probably more than I have in years, truth be told — although don’t tell Lady Eloise I said such a thing,” she then chuckled. “But if I see him again, then I’ll be forced to submit to his wishes. I have spent so long rejecting marriage, sure that it was the right thing to do. Have I been wrong this whole time? And not just me, but you? Could we really have been so misguided?”

She waited for an answer, looking to the heavens as if expecting more thunder and lightning. But there was nothing.

“Well?” Anna demanded. “I need an answer. I need to know what I must do!”

No answer came. At least not one that Anna was expecting. She looked to the skies again, frowning when she noticed the rain begin to dry up and the sun begin to peak through the clouds. Just a single ray, shooting down right beside where Anna sat, right onto the gravestone built beside where her aunt was buried.

The gravestone belonged to her aunt’s husband, a man who had died shortly before Anna had gone to live with her. It was for this reason that Anna had never known her aunt to be married, as she had been a widow when Anna had moved in and as said, never saw the need to marry again.

Anna eyed the gravestone, the way that the sun lit it like a beacon. She didn’t like to think about her aunt before the two met, but that was simply because her aunt had been a different woman then. She had been married, under her husband’s thumb, a slave to his whims as was the way with marriage. Only, and Anna knew this, although she never admitted it, it wasn’t that way at all.

By all accounts, her aunt had been in a marriage filled with love and happiness. She had met her soul mate, was lucky enough that he thought the same of her and married within a month. They had then lived together for fifteen years before he passed away, a moment in time which was said to have broken her aunt. Of course, Anna hadn’t believed that, as she’d only ever known her aunt to be happy.



“Oh no...” Anna sighed as a realization began to dawn, which coincided with the rays from the sun spreading out to encompass both her aunt’s and her uncle’s tombstones as one. “Oh no...”

Now she understood what her aunt was trying to tell her. A shame it was too little too late.

Her aunt didn’t hate marriage. In fact, her aunt had loved it. She had loved it so much that she never saw the point in doing it again. That was what a real marriage meant, meeting the man whom you loved above all else and then committing to him for the rest of your life. Not because you have to, but because you want to.

Anna had always read her aunt’s bachelorhood as a rebellion of sorts, a desire to show the world that she was free and had no intentions of going back to enslavement. But in reality, it was more of an ode to her dead husband, a promise to never love again because true love comes along but once and should not be taken for granted.

“You could have said something earlier,” Anna sighed. But then, she smiled as she reached out again and touched the gravestone. “But I suppose you know how stubborn I am, don’t you? Why waste your breath,” she chuckled.

Anna still wasn’t sure how she felt about marriage- that wasn’t going to change after just the one small instance. But she did know how she felt about Derek. There could be no doubt about that and, even if she still wasn’t sure what she wanted in the future, she knew what she wanted right now.

She wanted to be happy.

Anna was up and standing after that. Then she was hurrying to her horse. The sun above broke through the clouds and guided her path, seemed to lift her from the ground and onto the horse's back. And then, it lit the way forward, through the graveyard, down the road and back home.

She had a plan. It was bold. It was brave. It was likely to cause a stir... but all the best plans did. And, seeing how disheveled she was, she knew it might take a few hours until she was ready to enact it. Luckily, she had more than enough time.

Unfortunately for Anna, she never got a chance to follow through on this plan. She arrived home thirty minutes later to spot a carriage parked out the front of her house. Her heart skipped a beat when she thought it might be Derek, but then it sunk through her stomach when she realized that it was in fact the same one that bore Lord Tywin two weeks earlier.

Anna clenched her jaw as she pulled her horse up just down from it, jumping off its back and landing in the mud. It splashed up her dress and flicked her face, but she did not care. In fact, she thought it might help in her effort to disparage the pesky lord from asking her out once more.

But then the carriage door popped open and Lord Tywin wasn't the one to climb out. Instead, it was Lord Ashville, and one look at him, the determined, almost vengeful expression he wore on his face, and Anna knew that nothing she did or said was going to dissuade him.

She sensed that her plan to win back the Duke was going to have to wait.

“Oh, hello,” Lord Ashville said, flashing her a sinister smile. “We were beginning to wonder where you had gotten off to.”

“We?” Anna took a step back, eyes flicking to the carriage where she could see at least two more bodies inside.

“Yes,” Lord Ashville said. “We.”

## CHAPTER 27



*Y*our Grace,” Lady Ayers began, “doesn’t Lady Jessica look lovely tonight?”

“She does,” Derek agreed as he focused on the shank of lamb plated before him. He cut a large slice through it, and then several smaller ones. Anything to keep the attention off himself.

“Well,” the Marchioness tittered. “Why don’t you tell her yourself?”

Derek sighed but put his knife and fork down so as to look across the table to where Lady Jessica Farharrow sat awaiting his compliment. “You look lovely tonight, Lady Jessica,” he said earnestly, for she did. And then, he picked up his knife and fork again.

“Thank you, Your Grace,” Lady Jessica said, her voice so soft he could barely hear it.

“Did you notice her earrings?” Lady Ayers pressed. “Don’t they go splendidly with her dress?”

Derek was about to tell her that he agreed, but then stopped himself before looking across the table once more. “Your earrings really are stunning,” Derek said to Lady Jessica. “And the dress too. Our host is correct that the pairing is splendid.” He offered her a sincere smile.

“Thank you, Your Grace,” Lady Jessica said in that same soft manner.

“Have you asked her about —”

“So, Wetherby,” Hugh cut her off as he addressed the man sitting to Derek’s right, Viscount Wetherby. “Tell me about this racehorse you purchased. And why I should waste even a single bet on it when it’s finally ready to hit the track?” He glanced quickly at Derek and winked.

Derek breathed a sigh of relief. He caught the Marchioness glaring at her husband for the interruption, but he was nothing but glad for it. This entire dinner tonight, one which he’d really had no choice but to attend, was very quickly turning into an unmitigated disaster.

He hadn’t wanted to come. After what had happened between him and Lady Anna, the last thing Derek wanted to do was sit among friends and pretend that he wasn’t miserable. Which he very much was, by the way.

How had he let it get to this? How had he turned a simple invite into a fight, then into an actual break-up? Worse that it wasn’t technically a break-up at all, as they weren’t seeing one another. But that was kind of the point.

Derek had gotten carried away. When Lady Anna had rebuked him, it had been with a little more conviction than he'd expected. This had caused him to push, which had her pushing back, which saw Derek cross a point of no return as he well and truly buried their relationship.

For the rest of that night and all of today he had wondered if he'd done the right thing. He still wasn't sure that he had and had been at pains not to race to Lady Anna's home and apologize desperately. The little amount of pride he had left was all that kept him from doing so.

And none of this was helped by the fact that Hugh's wife, a woman who Derek assumed hated him, was doing everything she could to fix him up with her friend, Lady Jessica. She wasn't even being subtle!

"... our trainer is the cornerstone though," Lord Wetherby continued merrily. He was a large man with a larger voice, one that near shook the dining room walls, even when he wasn't shouting. "We brought him over from Spain- he used to work training the bulls, if you believe that!"

"Ah, Lord Wetherby, if you don't mind," the Marchioness cut him off. "I don't think talk of racing is appropriate for the dinner table."

"Oh!" Lord Wetherby's beady eyes widened. "My apologies. Sometimes I get carried away with —"

"That's quite all right," she said quickly. Then, she smiled for the table— a group of eight— her gaze falling on each guest, until finally landing on Derek at the very end of the table.

“Your Grace,” she started eagerly. “You’ve been to Spain, have you not? Why don’t you tell us about it. Lady Jessica has never been, and I am sure she would love to hear all about your travels. We all would.”

“My dear,” Hugh began cautiously. He sat beside her and reached out to take her hand. “I’m sure he doesn’t want to take over the entire table with —”

“Nonsense,” she wrenched her hand free, but kept that smile plastered across her face. “Your Grace,” she then prompted. “Spain? Tell us everything.”

It was all Derek could do to not groan aloud and bury his head in his hands. He didn’t, of course. As this was a dinner party, and all eyes were on him, he did as was asked and told the story of his travels to Spain from when he was five and twenty years old. And the whole while he felt Lady Jessica’s eager stare fixed upon him.

He’d forgotten what it was like to be the only bachelor friend. For a few years there, it had seemed that his friends had simply given up on trying to set him up and resigned themselves to the very real fact that he wasn’t interested. And he had been more than happy with this too. Unfortunately, his recent endeavors with Lady Anna seemed to have renewed their interest.

And the problem wasn’t necessarily that they were trying to set him up. It was just who they tried to set him up with. Lady Jessica seemed pleasant enough. And indeed, she was pretty with that red hair and opaque skin and soft smile. Maybe she was even interesting, although she hadn’t done or said anything to suggest it.

The problem as he saw it, and there really was no way of getting around this, was that she wasn't Lady Anna Lewis. Not even close.

The dinner was a struggle, but Derek persevered. When it finally ended, Hugh suggested that they move to the drawing room for drinks. This, however, was a bridge that Derek simply could not cross.

"I think I'm going to go," Derek grimaced and touched at his stomach as if in pain.

"Oh no," the Marchioness gasped. "Are you sure?"

"It's my stomach," Derek said.

Hugh raised an eyebrow at him. "That illness is back, aye?"

"It feels that way," Derek said, continuing in the charade. "Sorry I can't stay."

"Oh, that's fine," Hugh sighed. "I won't hold it against you forever." He wore a knowing smirk as he spoke, and Derek didn't believe for one moment that his best friend believed his lie.

It was the ride home where everything changed for Derek. He started in the direction of his house, but with each step that his mount took, he felt a real sickness begin to take hold. It was in



his stomach, a churning sensation that made him almost consider walking.

Not that this would make any difference. He knew why his body protested, and he knew what he should do about it. Derek glanced to the sky, noticing how early in the evening it still was. He continued down the road a little further, his entire being now screaming at him to do the right thing.

Was it the right thing though? Did it make sense to ride to Lady Anna's home and see her? She wasn't going to change her mind, so what was the point? Did Derek really want to become involved with someone that saw no future with him?

They were all good questions, but none did anything to sate him. If anything, as those questions rattled around in his head, Derek came to realize something: He simply did not care. For too long he had worried, erred, let himself become besotted with outcomes that weren't nearly as bad as he let himself to believe.

So what if he didn't marry Lady Anna? So what if there was no real future with her? The simple truth was that he was happy when he was with her, and miserable when he was not. If he had to make a few concessions so that he might be with her, so be it. He was more than happy to be alone for the rest of his days, so long as Lady Anna was alone with him.

Like a bolt of lightning striking him where he rode, Derek suddenly reared back his horse, spun the great animal about, and shot it down the road as fast as its legs could go. The moon lit his way forward, but Derek could have ridden with his eyes closed. He could just about sense Lady Anna guiding him.

By the time he reached her home, he felt as good as he ever had. He sat high in his saddle, chest puffed out, heart beat steady and mind settled. There was no more confusion about him. He knew what he wanted and tonight, he was going to get it.

Lady Anna's manor was dark when he first saw it; not so much as a single candle lit within its great body. But he didn't let that dissuade him, as this was usual. He rode down her avenue and jumped from his horse before it had stopped moving. Then it was a few short strides up the steps to her door, which he then hammered on like his life depended on it.

The familiar face of Jobe answered the door, and he almost looked relieved at the sight of Derek. "Your Grace," he sighed. "It's you."

"Jobe," Derek began. "Can you fetch Lady Anna, please? I wish to speak with her."

"I would do, Sir, I would. But she isn't home at the moment."

Derek balked. "She's not?"

"No, Your Grace. She hasn't been home all afternoon and night."

"Huh..." Derek frowned. "Do you, ah, know when she'll be back?"

“No, I’m sorry. Shall I take a message, Your Grace?”

“No...” Derek took a reluctant step back. And then another.  
“That won’t be necessary.”

Well, that didn’t go as planned.

Derek thought to remain and wait for Lady Anna, but he chose not to. His hope was that she was just at Lady Eloise’s home, and that seemed most likely. But a part of him worried that maybe she was off with another... that she might come home with him... might catch the Duke waiting. The thought of this was a knife through his heart and Derek knew he could not spend however many hours waiting and hurting like that.

So, he decided to go home. He would speak with Lady Anna tomorrow. First thing in the morning was his plan. Up with the sun, a quick meal to break his fast, and then he would return. By tomorrow, the Duke knew, he would have his answer.

As for tonight? Truthfully, the Duke foresaw a fitful night’s sleep coming up. Tomorrow could not arrive soon enough.

## CHAPTER 28



“*Y*ou won’t get away with this,” Anna warned Lord Ashville. “You won’t.”

“Get away with it?” Lord Ashville frowned. He sat across from her in the carriage, one leg folded, leaning back, looking positively at ease with himself. “Why, Lady Anna, that would imply that I’m doing something wrong- something sinister that might see me in trouble if caught out. You and I both know that this is far from anything of that nature.”

“I don’t know that” Anna said, doing what she could to keep her temper under wraps. But that was only because she thought it would not be such a smart idea to anger the men who had taken her “What I do know is that you have seen fit to kidnap me. Whatever way you spin in it —”

“I am not trying to spin anything.”

“Whatever way you spin it,” she started again, glaring daggers at Lord Ashville as she spoke. Her hands were bound, and she had a man sitting on either side of her as a sort of guard. But she did what she could to look intimidating. “You have committed a crime, Lord Ashville. And you will be brought to justice.”

“Is that so?” Lord Ashville said with a devilish smile filled with smug satisfaction that had Anna’s stomach turning.

“It is,” she said rightly, although she didn’t feel as if her words had any real impact.

Lord Ashville tittered to himself for a moment. He then looked to Lord Tywin, who was appearing slightly put-off by the situation, raised an eyebrow at him in warning, and the two men chuckled together as if what Anna had said was at all funny. Lord Tywin might have been having some reservations, but clearly, they were nothing compared to his desire to please Ashville.

“Lady Anna,” Lord Ashville then sighed and shook his head. “Tell me, even if I agreed with you, even if I were some ruffian who had kidnapped you for reasons that I truly could not imagine, why anyone would want to take you is beyond me. But even if I were to grant you all of that, please tell me, who on God’s green earth would even care? Who, if anyone, would waste their time coming after you?” He raised a knowing eyebrow at Anna, held it as she shrunk back at the truth behind his words. He then nodded once as if that had settled the matter. “Exactly,” he then finished.

Lord Ashville’s words were as harsh as they were true. Being kidnapped was one thing but having no one to come and rescue her from it, knowing that there was no one... that was a reality that was still settling itself upon Anna’s shoulders. The more it did, and the heavier it became, and the more tragic her situation was realized to be.

It had all happened so quickly. So unexpectedly. So randomly Anna hadn't had a chance to resist or fight back. By the time she realized the danger that she was in, there had been three men on her, grabbing her by the arms and feet and dragging her into the back of the carriage without so much as a word spoken.

From there, it had been a simple enough matter for them to bind her hands together while the carriage took off into the night. She had continued to fight and kick and scream at them to let her go, but the carriage had been in flight by that point and nobody, not a single soul, had seen a thing. She was, for all intents and purposes, alone.

But she wasn't scared. Or not as scared as she should have been. Despite the aggression and general terror of what was happening, Anna reminded herself constantly that she couldn't be in *that* much danger. Surely. For as much as Lord Ashville seemed to despise her, she didn't think he meant her any physical harm. That had to have been beneath him.

At most, this was just scare tactics. Rather extreme scare tactics, but the same nonetheless. Anna just had to stay strong, keep calm, and know that she was going to be perfectly fine...

"Where are you taking me?" she asked Lord Ashville. It might have been the hundredth time she had asked, but it certainly wouldn't be the last.

He wasn't paying her any attention. Rather, he was glancing out the carriage window, brow furrowed at whatever it was ahead that had caught his attention. At the sound of her voice, he pulled himself back inside and looked at her with a raised eyebrow in question.

“Where are you taking me?” she asked again.

He sighed and shook his head. “I told you already, that need not concern you.”

“And who does it concern exactly?” Anna asked. “When it is found out what you have done, I fail to see how you expect to \_\_\_”

“Again, Lady Anna,” Lord Ashville sighed. His eyes flicked to the closed curtain, mind clearly wandering to whatever he had been looking at before, but then he was back on her. “I think you fail to understand what it is that is happening here.”

“Of course I do!” she exclaimed. “You and your goons kidnapped me in the middle of the night!”

“We’re not goons,” Lord Tywin cut in.

“Yes, you are,” Anna said to Lord Tywin on her left. She then looked at Lord Baron Chester on her right and curled her lip. “Goons. What else would you call a man who does such a thing to a lady —”

“And there is the problem,” Lord Ashville interceded. “You are no lady. Oh, you might have the title. You might have the name. But believe me when I say that you are about as far from being a lady is as possible. It’s for that reason that I don’t worry at all about what will happen to me, for no one, anywhere, is going to care what happens to you. Why, when it

is found out, they'll likely throw a parade for the service I've committed."

"You can't possibly think —"

"Enough," he growled at her. "I have not gagged you because even I have my limits. But do not test me." He raised his eyebrows in warning. Anna glared at him but said nothing — she at least had that much sense. Then, satisfied that she was done, Lord Ashville pulled back the curtain and went back to staring out the window.

"What is it?" Lord Tywin asked of Lord Ashville. "Is something wrong?"

"No..." Lord Ashville muttered absently as he continued to look through the carriage window. "No.... it should be fine."

Anna watched him closely, wondering at what he might be staring at. A thin ray of dull light crept through the opening in the curtain, which suggested to her that the sun was only just now beginning to rise. She'd been stuck in the back of this carriage for hours, with no concept of time or where she was headed... and she still had no concept of either, for that matter.

Although the fact that it was now morning was worrying. Not only did it mean they had likely travelled many miles since the previous night, but it also meant that, just as Lord Ashville had said, nobody was coming for her. Worse that nobody even knew she'd been taken.



It was at times like this one where Anna was given no choice but to reflect on her life, and the way she had chosen to live it. When it had just been she living alone, doing as she pleased, she had thought all her decisions and actions to be the right ones. She had convinced herself she was happy on her own and didn't need anyone else in her life to make her feel happy... or safe.

Anna was never one to admit when she was wrong. Far too stubborn for that, she was more likely to accept whatever defeat came her way, convince herself there was nothing that could have been done, and then continue on her way. For the first time ever, maybe, she was starting to wonder if perhaps a change in ideals might be necessary.

There was a certain irony to her being kidnapped right after she and Elsbroom had ended their affair. If the two were still seeing one another, there was a very good chance that the handsome Duke might notice her missing and then track her down, even rescue her from whatever this was. But they weren't seeing one another. Likely, the Duke had barely given her a thought since she kicked him from her home just two nights ago. Likely, he would never think of her again...

A cold shudder ran through Anna as she came to accept this for fact. It was easy telling oneself that they didn't need anyone, especially when their lives involved little danger and nothing that might be called 'living.' Not really. But it was times like this one, when said danger reared its head, that Anna was forced to accept that maybe, just possibly, living a life of isolation and loneliness wasn't the best way to go about things.

Suddenly, the carriage began to slow down. Shouting could then be heard coming from outside, just up the road, and a moment later and the carriage stopped dead.

“What is going on out there?” Lord Tywin asked of Lord Ashville. He shuffled around Anna and stuck his head out the window. “What on earth is that?”

“That’s what I’ve been wondering,” Lord Ashville muttered. “It looks like a roadblock.”

“Caused by what?”

“This far north?” Lord Ashville mused. “Likely a sheep farmer losing control of his flock — this will not do at all. Perhaps there is another road.”

“If there is, I haven’t heard of it,” Lord Baron Chester added. He wasn’t bothering looking out the window, choosing to sit back and relax as if he were on holiday. “Unless we wish to double back?”

“No...” Lord Ashville clicked his tongue. He then looked back inside the carriage at Anna and pressed his lips together. “No, we cannot risk it. The road will clear soon enough.”

“And if it isn’t? We can’t afford to stay anywhere for the night. Not with...” Lord Tywin indicated to Anna.

“We will be fine,” Lord Ashville said, although he didn’t sound it. He sat back in his seat and tried to make himself comfortable. But he quickly began to fidget, which saw him stick his head out the carriage window again, which saw him curse under his breath, which saw him pop his head back inside. “Wait here,” he commanded.

“Where are you going?”

“To see what the holdup is.” He popped the door open, went to step out, but then paused and looked back, narrowing his eyes at Anna. “And keep an eye on this one, won’t you?” And then, he was gone, closing the carriage door behind him.

Anna watched the events unfold, her mind racing as a plan suddenly formed. Truly, she felt like a fool for not considering one earlier, far too worried about what was happening, where they were taking her, and if there was a chance at rescue. Well, Lord Ashville wasn’t going to tell her anything, and he had made it quite clear she wasn’t being rescued... not that Anna had needed this confirmed.

If she was going to escape from whatever this was, she was going to have to do it herself. Lucky then that she suddenly came up with an idea. It wasn’t a very elegant one, nor was it very clever. But it was easy, quick, and hopefully effective.

“Say, Lord Tywin,” Anna began casually. “Do you mind asking Lord Ashville if he might fetch me a drink of water?”

“Huh?” Lord Tywin grunted. “Now?”

“If it’s all right?” she asked with an innocent smile. “Seeing as he’s outside, there might be a place to fetch some? Surely?” She pouted for Lord Tywin and even fluttered her eyelashes.

Lord Tywin groaned and rubbed at his eyes. “Fine,” he relented. “Watch her,” he then said to Lord Chester as he spun

about in the carriage and popped the door open.

And that was when Anna acted.

As said, it wasn't a particularly clever plan, but it caught the two lords in the carriage by surprise. The moment that Lord Tywin turned about and popped the door open was the exact moment that Anna hoisted up her legs and sent her feet flying into the lord's backside.

“Argh!” he yelled as he tumbled forward and out of the carriage, landing face first in the muck.

Anna was out right after him. She didn't wait. She didn't think. She leapt for the open door and threw her body outside and on to freedom —

Her foot caught in the doorway, she tripped and ended up falling right onto Lord Tywin. His chunkier physique helped to break her fall, but she still landed awkwardly on her right arm, twisting, and crushing it beneath her. She then attempted to roll off Lord Tywin, only for him to somehow grab her by the feet.

“Argh!” she exclaimed as she managed to push herself to her feet, only to stumble and land face first in the mud by the side of the road.

“Get her!” Lord Tywin exclaimed.

“Quickly!” Lord Ashville shouted from down the road.

Anna barely had any time to register what was happening. Her hope had been that there might be a person about who she could scream to for help. Maybe even a horse she could steal and ride back to London. But before she even got a chance to look about and see where she was and what was happening, arms were around her.

They wrapped around her stomach and shoulders and pulled her back toward the carriage. She tried to scream but a hand smothered her mouth. She tried to bite it, but then something hard came down on the back of her head...

...and everything went dark.

## CHAPTER 29



Derek felt in remarkably good spirits this morning. If it wasn't the deep, restful sleep he'd had the night before, then it was the hearty meal he'd broken his fast with. If it wasn't the way the sun shone brightly overhead, then it was the way the birds flocked in the trees as they sang their morning song. And if it wasn't for where he was currently headed, it was what was bound to happen once he arrived.

He sat atop his horse, guiding it gently up the avenue and toward Lady Anna's front door. As was the case last night, the manor looked empty, even abandoned, for how little movement could be seen coming from within. But he knew that this was just Lady Anna's way. She lived inside alone, with few members of staff to keep her company, and was in all probability still in bed. Maybe even mourning what had happened just two nights ago...

Derek hadn't expected Lady Anna to come to him. Never, not even in his wildest dreams might he have hoped that she would see the error in her ways, admit fault, and then ask him to forgive her. That thought alone almost had him chuckling as he rode.

Lady Anna was a stubborn creature, one who needed to be guided and then forced to see reason before she might be

willing to admit that she was wrong. Why, she was so darn stubborn that Derek was certain she'd rather die alone than admit to herself that she might be happy with another person in her life, that person being Derek.

But Derek wasn't so stubborn. Nor was he so foolish. What he was, was just a little slow. It had taken dinner at Hugh's home to remind him of why he didn't court anymore, and why he had become so besotted with Lady Anna. Nothing to do with loneliness or a desire to wed. Nothing to do with social requirements or the need to prove himself to others. He had enjoyed himself simply because he liked Lady Anna. He liked how she made him feel. He liked who he was when he was with her. And he liked that she truly seemed happy whenever she was with him. Not that she would ever admit it.

Well, today, that would all change. At least that was the hope.

Derek wasn't entirely sure what he expected from this morning, but he knew what his intent was. He was going to tell Lady Anna how he felt. He was going to explain to her that he didn't care about marriage. He was going to tell her that all he cared about, the only thing that he worried himself with, was her. Being with her. Seeing her. Spending as much time as he could with her. They could call it whatever they darn well pleased! So long as they were together.

Now, as to what Lady Anna was going to say when Derek confessed all of this? He didn't have a clue. As said, Lady Anna was stubborn and bullish, and likely to kick him out before hearing him through or even considering.

What Derek had to do was be strong. He had to make sure that he said his piece and that she had heard him. And then he had

to keep at it, force his point, make sure she knew he was serious. And then... well then, it would be up to her.

But he wasn't afraid, or even nervous. In fact, as his horse reached the front of the manor, Derek felt a pulse begin to surge through his body, so powerful it nearly had him leaping off his horse in midflight. Although Lady Anna had been combative up until this point, for reasons that even Derek could not explain, he felt like today was going to be different.

This resolve only increased when he spied the front door opening upon his arrival. Derek resisted the urge to cry out, instead pulling his horse to a stop and climbing from its back, then landing in the dirt just as Jobe appeared from inside.

Derek's heart sunk just a little when he saw Jobe, as he had truly thought that Lady Anna might have seen him coming and rushed to greet him. The fact that she hadn't didn't dissuade him however, as that would have been too good to hope for.

"Jobe!" Derek called as he strode toward the member of staff. "Is Lady Anna home? I must speak with her."

"Your Grace!" Jobe rushed to Derek, the look on his face taken by panic. But then he reached Derek, came to a halt, and bowed for him. "I am so glad you're here."

"Is that so?" Derek felt himself swell. "Was Lady Anna expecting me?"

"No, Your Grace." It was now that Derek registered the look that Jobe wore; horror stricken was how he would describe it.



“Miss Lewis isn’t home- she has not been home since yesterday afternoon. We have no idea where she is.”

Derek moved to speak, but then paused. “Um... excuse me?” he blinked. “What do you mean that she hasn’t been home since yesterday afternoon?”

“Just that,” Jobe continued, the panic within him becoming clearer. “She left yesterday afternoon for a ride and has not been back since. Nor has she sent word of her whereabouts. We have no idea where she is, Your Grace.”

“Huh...” Derek frowned. He looked over Jobe’s shoulder toward the open door, as if expecting Lady Anna to suddenly appear. Truly, he almost thought this might be another test. “Are you sure?”

Jobe blinked. “Yes, Your Grace. When we saw you arrive, our hope was that she might be with you. It is not like Miss Lewis to go missing.”

“Missing?” Derek frowned. “Surely, you don’t think it is that serious... do you?”

Jobe nodded. “Your Grace, this is a most unusual thing. It is... it is not like her at all. At all,” he emphasized.

It should be said that Derek wasn’t worried for Lady Anna yet. Why would he be? In fact, of all the ladies that he had ever met, she might be the most likely to suddenly go missing. The only real cause for concern that Derek had was in regard to the timing.

Lady Anna was a strong and independent lady. Sometimes, this was almost to a fault. She was so darn concerned with proving said independence, that she often made regrettable decisions, ones that if she thought on them a little longer, she would likely realize might not be the best idea. Going for a swim in the pond in Hyde Park, being a perfect example.

Jobe was clearly worried for Lady Anna, and yet all Derek could wonder if her absence was to do with him and their fight. Was it possible that she had been so incensed by Derek that she had decided to go away for a while on a holiday? Without telling anyone? Was it possible that she had fled the city, just to avoid Derek trying to convince her to see his side of things?

This very real possibility settled itself inside of Derek and just like that, the good mood he'd been feeling all day vanished like the morning mists under the summer sun.

“Did she ah...” Derek stammered as he tried to not look like his world was crashing down around him. “Did she say anything yesterday, before she left? As to her whereabouts, I mean.”

“No, Your Grace.” Jobe shook his head. “We guessed her to be visiting Lady Diana’s grave, as she often does. But it’s been eighteen hours now since we last saw her.”

“And her friends?” Derek pressed. “Have you sent word to any of them?”

Jobe shook his head, eyes wide as he did so. “No, Your Grace. There is Lady Eloise, of course, but she has never spent the night. Nor has she left so early that nobody would see her. We are at a loss, Your Grace. Sick with fear over what might have happened.”

At least Derek wasn't as panicked as Jobe appeared to be. He had no doubt that Lady Anna's disappearance was benign, likely not something to worry about. In regard to her personal safety, at least. What worried Derek was the timing, as again he wondered if he might be the cause.

“Paper,” Derek then said, thinking quickly. “And a quill, thank you, Jobe.”

“Your Grace?” he blinked.

“Fetch me one, won't you?”

“Your Grace?”

Derek sighed. “I intend to leave a letter for Lady Anna's return. And I insist that you hand it to her as soon as she arrives home. Is that understood?”

“You might not, but something tells me this isn't the first time you've been unaware of Lady Anna's whereabouts?”

“Ah... no, Your Grace.” Jobe bowed his head. “She is... impulsive.”

A faint smile came to Derek's lips as he thought on that statement, how real it was. Lady Anna was as unique a creature as he had ever met. He could spend a year guessing where she might have gone and still come up short, such was her way. "When she arrives home, I want my words to be the first that she hears. Or reads, as it is."

Jobe looked about to argue, but Derek cocked a warning eyebrow at him, and Jobe spun about and scurried inside. He then returned a moment later with ink, a quill, and a piece of parchment. Derek took it from him and, using his horse as a table, quickly wrote her a letter.

*My dearest Anna,*

*I was wrong. There is no other way to say it, plus I know how much you're enjoying hearing it. I was wrong about so many things that I do not even know where to start. But I am willing if you would like to help me? That being pointing out all the ways that I have been wrong, and you have been so very right.*

*Please, when you read this, send for me and I shall ride like the wind to meet you. I was wrong, you were right, and I hope that you can see it in yourself to forgive me.*

*Elsbrook*

Derek tittered slightly as he wrote the letter, mostly because he was picturing Lady Anna's reaction when she read it. She loved to point out Derek's faults, and would no doubt take great pleasure in being presented with a chance to do so again. And what was more, he hoped that she might read between the lines and realize his willingness to change to make her happy.

He didn't care about courtship. He didn't care about marriage. He didn't care about anything, except for seeing her again. But he wasn't going to write that in the letter. Those were words that needed to be spoken so he could look into her eyes as he did.

Derek finished the letter and handed it back to Jobe, who took it nervously.

“As soon as she arrives,” he reminded Jobe. “And not a moment after.”

“Ye — yes, Your Grace,” he assured him.

Derek left soon after that. He made sure to tell Jobe that if by chance, Lady Anna refused to read the letter, to send for him anyway. Jobe appeared nervous once again and Derek informed him that he would be back tomorrow and the next day and the one after that, until he spoke with Lady Anna, and that it would do to remain on his good side.

“She will want to see me,” Derek assured him as he climbed back atop his horse. “I promise you that.” Silently, it was more of a hope than a promise, but hope was all Derek had.

And then, he left. Back on his horse, he steered it down the avenue, from the manor, and back onto the main road. But he didn't head home after that. Despite his self-assurances that Lady Anna was perfectly fine, there was something about the way that Jobe was acting, how certain he had been that Lady Anna was in trouble, that stuck with Derek. He still didn't think she was... but he knew he couldn't just sit about and wait and hope.

Rather, he decided that it might behoove him to double check that indeed the woman who he was starting to fall in love with wasn't in mortal peril. Really, it was the least he could do.

His first stop was the graveyard where Lady Diana was buried. He rode there straight from Lady Anna's home, arrived fifteen minutes later, and wasn't at all surprised to find the site empty.

Next, he paid Lady Eloise a quick visit. He didn't tell her why he was searching for Lady Anna, only that he was.

"Oh no, Your Grace," Lady Eloise assured him. She met him outside her manor, appearing positively shocked by his arrival. "I have not seen or heard from her in days."

Derek frowned. "Was she not with you yesterday afternoon? Or last night?"

Lady Eloise shook her head violently. "No, Your Grace. Why? Is everything all right?"

Derek was certain it still was. Surely, everything was fine? If something had happened to Lady Anna, then he would have heard of it by now. A mugging, for example, would have spread through the upper echelons of London society like fire through forest. She had to be fine. She had to be...

There was of course that small worry that she had found someone else since leaving Derek, and that was where she was. But even this didn't make any real sense. Lady Anna wasn't the type of woman to spend days and nights in a row

with a male suitor. She wasn't the type to become swept up and lose track of time. There was just no way.

And still, Derek told himself not to worry or panic. He made his way home after visiting Lady Eloise, walked straight to his drawing room, and poured himself a glass of brandy. He finished it quickly, and then had himself another. And then, another.

The nerves were back now, laced with tinges of worry. Nerves because the longer he went without speaking to her, the more he was able to consider his position, and the more he was forced to reckon with what it might mean, and how he might feel if she were to deny him. And worry because... well, what if something was wrong?

The afternoon was spent in waiting, certain that sooner rather than later a messenger would come for him. It wasn't until the sun began to set that evening that Derek was forced to admit that perhaps, today, he would not be hearing from Lady Anna.

The next morning arrived, and Derek found his mood considerably less than what it was the previous morning. The sun no longer shone. The birds no longer sang. And he didn't even bother sitting to break his fast, choosing to climb his horse and make straight for Lady Anna's home.

This time however, as he rode, as he pushed his mount a little too forcefully for the time of morning that it was, Derek felt angry. He was angry at Jobe for not sending for him. He was angry at Lady Anna for treating him like this. And he was angry at himself for allowing it all to happen in the first place.

This anger quickly dissipated when he arrived at Lady Anna's house, only to find Jobe already standing outside and waiting for him.

There was no need for him to speak. No need for him to confirm that once again, Lady Anna had not come home and nobody knew where she was. There was no need because the look on his face said it all: Something was wrong.



## CHAPTER 30



The anger that flooded through Derek as he rode was such that he felt as if his body had caught fire. Indeed, such was the ferocity in which his blood boiled inside of him that he almost worried for his horse, as if it might suddenly catch alit between his thighs. Not that this would have stopped Derek, mind you. If anything, it might have only spurred him on even harder.

The moment that he had seen Jobe standing there looking as forlorn as any man ever had, and the moment that he had realized that Lady Anna hadn't returned home, Derek had known what had happened. Maybe not the exact details, but he knew who caused her disappearance. And now, it was on him to prove it. And not just prove it but set it right.

Marquess Rowan Ashville. It was he who was behind Lady Anna's disappearance. He was the only one who it could be. No other had been so obsessed with the missing lady of late, no other had pursued and harassed and barraged her the way that he had. And it wasn't just that one time outside the theatre either. No, Lord Ashville's hate for Lady Anna ran much deeper than that.

Derek felt a fool for not seeing it earlier. As he rode, as he pushed his mount as fast as it could go, he thought back to

their first conversation in Hyde Park, the one where Lord Ashville had pulled Derek aside and asked for his help. He had framed the conversation as a mercy, a sort of good deed that he was doing on behalf of the *ton*. He truly thought Lady Anna to be a threat to his very way of life, and that she needed to be set on the right path lest society crumble before his very eyes.

He thought of that night at the theatre, the way that Lord Ashville had attacked her. Worse, he had tried to defend himself, as if her actions were justification for his. The gall of the man, playing a victim because he didn't like the things that Lady Anna did and said.

He then remembered what Lady Anna had told him, about Lord Tywin asking her to a ball. There could be no doubt that Lord Ashville had sent him, had hoped he might finish the job that Derek never really started.

Lord Ashville was obsessed with Lady Anna. But not in the same way that Derek was. Lord Ashville's obsession was insidious and malevolent, evil, and wicked, narcissistic, and self-aggrandizing. Once, his motives might have been true, even honorable for all he wanted was for her to act in the proper way. But they had since transformed into something else. Only, Derek wasn't entirely sure what.

There was no way that Lord Ashville would hurt her. Just no way. And Derek reminded himself of this as he rode. But that didn't set him at ease. Lord Ashville had believed Lady Anna to be an existential threat to his way of living, and although he might not harm the woman physically, Derek knew there was little the lord would not do to get his way.

Ordinarily, it was a forty-minute ride from Lady Anna's manor to Lord Ashville's. Derek managed to make the journey in a

little over fifteen minutes. He flew through the front gate that surrounded the large manor. He rode to the front steps like he was the head of a cavalry charge. Why, if the front door was open, he might have ridden his horse inside.

But he didn't. He pulled it to a stop right by the steps, jumped from its back, strode up to the front door and kicked the door open without bothering to knock.

“Ashville!” Derek roared as he strode into the manor. “Ashville! Show yourself!”

The manor was typically grandiose in size, and ornate in design. It was once a castle, since turned into a homestead that was far too large for any one family to occupy. The foyer itself was the size of a small warehouse, the stairs were grand and winding, the halls long and wide and many in number. It was the kind of home one could get lost in for hours if they didn't know their way.

“Ashville!” Derek roared again as he spun about the large foyer. There were a dozen different entrances, each leading down a hall which went to places that Derek could only guess at. He'd never been here before and was already hoping it to be his last time. “Ash —”

“Your Grace!” a voice spoke up from Derek's right.

Derek spun about, spying a nervous looking butler standing in one of the doorways. He was older than Derek, somewhere in his fifties, dressed smartly, but looking caught between wanting to throw Derek out for the intrusion, and turning tail

and fleeing before getting caught in the middle of whatever it was that was happening.

“You!” Derek pointed right at him, and then strode toward the poor man. “Where is Lord Ashville?”

“He is not here,” the man mumbled, unable to look right at Derek.

“Do not lie to me.” Derek was on him. “Now, I will ask you again. Where is Lord Ashville?”

The butler took a nervous step back. His eyes then flicked over Derek’s shoulder in the direction of one of the hallways. “He’s... he’s not —”

Derek spun about and stormed in the direction that the man had glanced.

“Your Grace!” he called after Derek. “Please! He has asked not to be disturbed!”

Derek ignored him. “Ashville!” he called as he powered down a wide hallway, turning this way and that, having no idea where he was headed. “Ashville! Show yourself!”

It was another minute of storming and shouting before Derek finally found Lord Ashville. Although to be fair, it was the Marquess who found him. Derek was walking in circles, no idea where he was headed, when Lord Ashville suddenly popped out from around a corner.

“Your Grace?” he frowned at the sight of Derek inside his home. “This is rather unexpected.”

It was hard to believe that Derek had ever cared what this man thought. That he had ever bothered to act so that Lord Ashville might accept him. Just the sight of the slimy lord, the smug smile that he wore, the oiliness of his presence, had Derek’s anger piquing to heights that he had never known.

“You!” Derek made for him. “What have you done with her?”

“Why, Your Grace, I have no idea what you’re —” Derek was on him. Without thought. Without care! He grabbed the Marquess by the scruff of the neck and threw his back against the wall.

“Do not lie to me, Ashville!” Derek roared. He held the lord against the wall, putting his face inches away. So close he could see the beads of sweat begin to seep across his forehead. “Do not even think to!”

“I... I am afraid that I have no idea of who you speak...” he stammered. “But if you will just unhand —”

“What did you do with her?” Derek kept a hold of Lord Ashville, so tight that he nearly lifted the man off the ground. “What did you do?”

“If you will just unhand me,” Lord Ashville said with some amount of poise. He was doing his best to not appear terrified, but Derek could see the fear in his eyes. He could also see the

lie. “I will happily help you, Your Grace. For this must be some sort of misunderstanding?”

“You know it isn’t,” Derek seethed. He stepped in closer. “Now tell me. What have you done with Lady Anna?”

“Lady Anna?” Lord Ashville queried. “Again, Your Grace, I’m afraid that —”

Derek didn’t think. If he had, he might have done things differently. But he was through thinking. He was through acting logically or worrying what others might think of him and his actions. He didn’t care. Truly, in that moment, he would have happily been stripped of his lands and title, forced to live in the street like a beggar, if it meant that Lady Anna was all right.

It was for this reason that when Lord Ashville tried to lie to him again, Derek struck him clean across the face.

“Argh!” Lord Ashville yelped as Derek’s fist crunched into his chin.

“Where is she?” Derek shouted at him. One hand about his collar, the other curled into a fist and ready to strike again.

“I do not know what you — argh!” Another fist slamming into his face. This time, Derek released the man, leaving him to fall to the floor in a heap.

“I will ask you one more time.” Derek stood over Lord Ashville, bearing down upon him like a monster from tales of old. “And if you dare lie to me, Lord Ashville, by the time I am done here, you will be begging for the mercy of my fists. I promise you that!”

For one who had been so thoroughly cowed, and for the way he sat crumpled on the floor by Derek’s feet, Lord Ashville still managed to show an amazing amount of fortitude. He curled his lip at Derek, glared up at him like he might suddenly pounce, and then began to chuckle coldly.

“You really are a fool,” Lord Ashville laughed mirthlessly.

“Do not test me.”

“You!” Lord Ashville cried. “I am the one who has been assaulted!”

“And it is nothing when compared to what I am willing to do you. Nothing!”

“For what?” Lord Ashville seethed. “For some common whore like — argh!” he yelped when Derek moved to grab him once more.

“Do not speak of her like that!” Derek growled as he raised a fist above his head.

“She is nothing!” Lord Ashville spat. “A stain on this town. Mud on the bottom of its boot that needs scraping. Waste yet

to be tossed out — but in need of it. For if it is left to fester, then it risks —”

“You do not know her.”

“I do,” Lord Ashville said. “I know her type. She might seem innocent enough. She might appear harmless. But you know better than that. It only takes one! A single loose thread will see an entire dress unravel if not properly attended.”

“And that’s what you have done, is it? Attended her?”

“In a fashion.” He moved as if about to stand, but caught sight of Derek glaring at him, and stayed put on the floor, back against the wall. “She would not listen! I tried to be reasonable. I tried to help her! We all did! And for what? So that she might continue to embarrass us and —”

“Embarrass you, Lord Ashville. Not me. Not anybody else. Just you.”

“It is the same thing! I could not in good conscience simply sit back and... and let it continue. I had to act!”

“Where?” Derek growled. “Where is she?”

Lord Ashville seethed as he glared. Derek could see the hate radiating inside of him. He could see the fight too, the determination to stay strong and not give in. He truly did believe that what he had done, whatever it was, was right.



“It’s too late,” Lord Ashville then said. “She is gone.”

“Where?”

“Why does it matter?” Lord Ashville sighed. “Why do you care- you’re a duke! Do you have any idea how wrong it is that you —”

“Where?”

“Is she worth it?” Lord Ashville then asked. “Is she really worth all of this?” he indicated to the scene, himself huddled against the wall. “When word of this gets out —”

“Where is she?”

“You will be shunned. Stripped. Forced to flee the country for what you have done! I will spend the rest of my life —”

Derek grabbed Lord Ashville by the scruff of the neck and lifted him to his feet. He then brought his face right into the sniveling lord’s, so close that their noses were touching. “Tell me where she is, or I swear you will not live to see the sun rise on the morrow.”

“So, that’s it, is it? You’ve made your choice?”

“It’s not a choice,” Derek said. “It’s what I must do.”

And it wasn't a choice either. Just two days ago, Derek had wondered if he truly had feelings for Lady Anna. Just two days ago, he had been willing to walk out on her, convinced that he was doing the right thing because there could be no future there. Just two days ago, Derek had resigned himself to never seeing Lady Anna again. Oh, what a difference two days might make.

There was no questioning it now. No wondering. No double guessing. Derek had feelings for Lady Anna. In fact, Derek was quite sure that he was in love with her, for what else could this be? He had broken into another lord's home, assaulted him, threatened to kill him, all in the name of Lady Anna, her name, and her safety.

In this moment, Derek truly believed that if he was given the option, he would die to make sure Lady Anna was well. And if that wasn't love, then he didn't know what was.

"I took her north," Lord Ashville caved. "A small parish outside of Cambridge where there lives a priest who specializes in cases such as Lady Anna's. It is my hope that he will be able to... convince her to change the way she has been acting."

"You..." Derek shook his head in disgust. "You really don't see what you have done, do you? How reprehensible you are."

"Me?" Lord Ashville cried. "All I have done- all I have ever done, is what is best for the *ton*! You might not see it now, Your Grace, but one day, you will thank me. One day, you will fall to your knees and beg forgiveness for trying to — argh!"

Derek struck Lord Ashville across the face a final time. This one sent him to his knees, and there he remained. Derek didn't say anything else. He didn't shout or kick or scold the lord for what he had done. There was no point. He knew Lord Ashville's type; he knew that the lord truly believed what he was saying. And he also knew how wrong he was.

From there, Derek left Lord Ashville, turning about and storming from the manor as if it had suddenly caught fire. His horse stood waiting where he left it, and he climbed atop the mount and kicked it forward, out the gate, down the main road, and headed north.

It would take him well over a day to reach Cambridge, hours of riding at full speed with little room for rest or recovery. But this did not phase Derek. That fire still burned hot within him, and he knew he would not rest until Lady Anna was safe in his arms.

His only real fear was that he might be too late...

## CHAPTER 31



The bedroom was smaller than Anna's one at home; perhaps half the size too, and about as far from 'cozy' as anything that she had ever experienced. It was four cement walls, unpainted and covered in mold and grime, a single window the size of a dinner plate, a cot with a mattress so thin that Anna could feel the wooden frame supporting it, and wood-paneled floors that creaked and groaned with every step she took. Which wasn't many, as there was really nowhere for her to go.

There was a door, of course, but it remained shut and locked, which had been the case since Anna was first brought here two days ago. The only times that it opened were for mealtime- the food was brought to her, and when the priest came to see her.

Anna lay on her back on top of her uncomfortable mattress, in her small room, staring at the locked door, silently praying that the priest wasn't coming to see her. Not today. He had the last two however, both around this time, so the odds certainly weren't in her favor.

There was one other item in the room — two, actually, although one was just the bible. The other lay next to the bible on the table, just under the small window. From where Anna

lay, she couldn't see it, but she could sense it. There. On the table. Forever reminding her of what was to come.

Footsteps. She heard them suddenly, echoing from the hallway just outside her door. They grew louder and, knowing what was to come, Anna readied herself. She quickly sat up and swung her legs off the bed. Then pushed herself to her feet and took a deep, calming breath. She needed to remain calm, and she reminded herself of this. And then again.

It was just as she was exhaling that the door unlocked and opened, and the priest stepped inside and closed the door behind him. Then, he turned and smiled at her.

He didn't have a name. Just, the priest. But somehow, this seemed to suit him perfectly. He was just so plain looking. So inconspicuous that you might miss him in a crowd. Middle-aged, mousy brown hair cut short and simple, a round face that was neither handsome nor ugly, and not much taller than Anna. His only distinguishable feature were the priest robes that he wore, and even those were just simple dark cloth.

"Miss Lewis," the priest said with a friendly smile. "How are we feeling today?"

"Very well," Anna said with as much fake enthusiasm as she could muster. She even added an over-the-top smile to go with it. "It's a lovely day to be locked up like a criminal."

The priest frowned slightly. "You know how we feel about sarcasm, Miss Lewis. It is the devil's tongue, and beneath us all. And as to being treated like a criminal..." he shook his

head as if in disbelief. “Nothing could be further from the truth.”

“Right,” Anna sighed. “This is nothing like prison.”

“Sarcasm again,” the priest sighed. He crossed his hands before him and shook his head once more. “But I do suppose that is the least of our problems. For now.” He took a step forward and Anna instinctively stepped back. Took a quick breath. Held it... but then he crossed the room and Anna exhaled with relief. He walked to the table and picked up the bible. Right by it lay a whip made from rope and leather, but the priest ignored it. “I see you haven’t read any of the scripture we’ve assigned you.”

“What makes you say that?”

He turned back, bible in hand, a look of disappoint on his plain face. “The bible hasn’t been touched since I was here yesterday.” Anna frowned and he sighed. “It’s in the exact same spot on the table, Miss Lewis. You might not like me, but please give me some credit.”

“I suppose I’ve been a little preoccupied,” Anna said and gestured to the room. “What with being kidnapped and everything. You’d be surprised by how much time you can kill trying to figure out ways to escape.”

“Miss Lewis,” the priest started as he took a step toward her. Anna took a hurried one back. “As I explained to you the day we brought you, it is your choice being locked up in this room. Not ours.”

“My choice?” Anna exclaimed before she could stop herself.  
“How is it my —”

“If you would just be willing to promise us that you won’t try and escape the moment we let you out, then we’d let you come and go from your room as you please. Just like the other girls.”

“And you’re just going to believe me?” Anna asked.

“Is that a promise?” the priest said.

It would have been so easy to have said yes, made the promise, and then been given a chance to leave the room. To escape. But Anna was nothing if not stubborn, and something told her that making such a promise and then breaking it might just be a consequence she would come to regret.

“No,” she said. “I don’t believe it is.”

The priest sighed and shook his head with disappointment. “I was afraid of that.” The look he then gave Anna was one of complete sympathy, almost as if he truly was sorry for what he was about to say. “You do of course know what that may mean...” he glanced over his shoulder to the table... the whip.

Anna’s face drained white. “I don’t deserve this,” she said. “I... I shouldn’t — shouldn’t be here,” she stammered.

“Three days. That’s tomorrow.” The priest turned and put the bible back on the desk. And then he ran his hand along the whip’s leather handle. “If by then you still refuse to cooperate,

then we will have no choice but to take more extreme measures.” He stood up straight and turned back to Anna, then fixed her with a smile so friendly it was as if he was inviting her to drink tea. “Measures that will ensure your compliance.”

He never raised his voice. He never overtly threatened her or did anything other than speak softly and smile. But the priest terrified Anna, and that whip on the table was the reason why.

It was the first day she was brought here, back when she was even more hostile than now. She had shouted and berated the priest, and he had smiled through all of it. When she had then refused to comply with his demands, he had produced the whip and laid it on the table.

“Three days,” he had told her. “In three days, if you still refuse to do as you have kindly been asked, we will have no choice but to show you God’s mercy.” He had then gestured to the whip like it was a prized canine.

Anna had shut her mouth soon after that.

But she was yet to fold. She still had one more day. One more day to hope for... hope for what? She honestly wasn’t sure. There was no hope of rescue. She knew that now, as hard as it was to come to terms with. Perhaps if she hadn’t been so cold toward Derek. Maybe if she had gone to him sooner...?

There was no point in wishing on what she might have done. She had cast out the only person to have really cared for her since her aunt had died. And the only person she had cared for also. And because of that, here she would remain until the



priest's cruel tortures and brain washing bent and broke her into a different person. Either that or it killed her.

There was an irony to all of this. A cruel joke played on her, as if she should have seen it coming. In the end, it seemed that everyone else was right and being alone really was as bad as it was said to be.

"Tomorrow," the priest continued as he walked past her and toward the door. "I will pay my visit at the same hour. In the meantime, please read the scripture we have assigned. I do truly believe you'll find it enlightening." He reached the door, popped it open, and turned back. "And please, consider your answer for tomorrow. I know that once you come to accept that this is where you belong, you will thrive and learn things about yourself that you never dreamed possible." He took a deep breath and exhaled. "It truly is God's miracle." A final warm smile, and bowing of the head, and he ducked through the door, closed, and then locked it.

The moment he was gone, Anna collapsed back on the bed, breathing a sigh of relief that he was gone, while already feeling a pain in her chest at the worry she held for when he would return.

She could feel herself breaking. It would be so easy to do. All she needed was to promise, keep her head down, fall in line and bide her time. Would it really be that bad?

But that just wasn't Anna, and for now at least, she told herself that this was not where it ended for her. She didn't have much to go on besides hope, but she clung to it like a thick blanket on a winter's night. Somehow, someone would come and rescue her. Obviously, she dared dream that it might be Derek. But she quickly dissuaded herself from that.

Even Anna wasn't so naive to believe such a thing as that might happen.

## CHAPTER 32



*H*eavy rain pelted Derek in the face. It was chilled like ice, and hard like pellets. Each drop that struck him left a mark and some had him gasping in pain. Even still, Derek rode on.

The wind was vengeful and determined, a tempest so powerful that more than once it threatened to lift Derek from the saddle and hurl him to the side of the road. It beat at him. It hammered him. Even still, Derek rode on.

The sky was pitched in black for the storm clouds that gathered blotted out the moon as if it didn't exist. It was so dark that Derek could barely see the end of his nose, and he doubted that his horse could see much further. It would have been smart to pull over and rest, to not take the chance that his horse might give out and throw him from the saddle suddenly. It would have been smart, but in the moment, Derek was ignoring all common sense.

Instead, Derek rode on.

His back was aching worse than he'd ever felt. His thighs were rubbed raw, perhaps even bleeding for how much they pained him. His buttocks were bruised and beaten, his hands sore, his

neck crooked and stiff. But he wasn't going to stop. Not until Lady Anna was safe in his arms. For how Derek was feeling, he was prepared to die if need be.

Love was such a strange thing. Until just today, the word had little application to Derek's own life. Sure, he had liked Lady Anna well enough. That wasn't up for debate. But loved? He hadn't thought so.

As soon as he learned of her peril, that all changed. It wasn't an intentional thing, more a realization. The things that Derek realized he was willing to do for Lady Anna, and the means by which he would do them, there was nobody else that even came close to eliciting this sort of reaction within him.

It had to be love. And the longer Derek rode, the harder he pushed his mount through the harrowing storm, the more he came to accept this. Derek loved Lady Anna and would not rest until she knew it.

And so, he rode. The storm made the going tough, and undoubtedly cost Derek several hours. But it broke eventually, just as the moon was beginning to bed down for the night while the sun poked its head out so as to begin its day's journey across the sky. The sun rose before Derek's eyes, breaking through the clouds and scaring away the winds and rain.

He breathed a sigh of relief when he saw it. And then he breathed another, for on the horizon he caught his first glimpses of Cambridge. It was built in a wide-sweeping valley, stretching endlessly it seemed, from where Derek was riding. It was a sight for sore eyes, as he knew that soon Lady Anna would be safe.

Only then did Derek realize something. It was about the time he reached the main road which led down and into Cambridge. The road forked in several places, some running right into town, others skirting about it and then spreading endlessly through the countryside. Derek pulled his horse to a stop, looked to the many roads, and balked.

Derek had no idea where exactly Lady Anna was being kept.

It was his fault. In his haste and desire to save Lady Anna, he had fled Lord Ashville's manor before confirming which parish she was being detained in. Lord Ashville had said it was located on the outskirts, but that only narrowed things down slightly.

Derek bit into his lip as he looked left and then right. He might have to skirt the entire town, and even stop in and ask a few people whereabouts he needed to go. That would take time. That would take a lot of time.

The sun was now creeping its way up the sky fully. The birds were flocking from their nests and singing their morning song. Farmers were exiting their homes and calling out as if to greet the day itself. And for Derek, time was already running out.

But he didn't let that stop him. Without further thought, he chose to go left, spotting a farmer just down the road who he might ask for help. It was going to take a while, but sooner rather than later, he'd find out where Lady Anna was being kept. He just hoped he wasn't too late.

## CHAPTER 33



“So, you’ve made your choice?” the priest said.

“I have,” Anna nodded.

“Are you sure I can’t change your mind? Really, all you need do is —”

“I know what I must do,” Anna said calmly, chin held high and firm in an effort to steel herself and show some sense of bravery. “And I simply can’t.”

The priest bowed his head with remorse. “I’m sorry then, but I’m afraid that you leave us with no choice.”

“You always have a choice.”

“No,” the priest shook his head solemnly. “Not always.” His hand moved to the table by where he stood, slowly wrapping around the whip, and then gripping it firmly.

Anna eyed the whip with trepidation and took a nervous step back. It would have been so easy to give in and play along. To avoid having to go through with what the priest suggested, Anna thought she might have done anything. But now that the time had come, she knew there was just no way.

Even the thought of rescue had long since faded into obscurity. She didn't refuse the priest because she thought that maybe, somehow, she might be saved from her hellish incarceration. She knew now that her fate here was sealed and hoping wasn't going to change that. Especially seeing as it was her fault that nobody was coming to save her in the first place.

Rather, it was a final act of rebellion that saw Anna decide to accept her punishment. She suspected that very soon she might lose the will for such a thing, so it was best to take full advantage now while she still could. While she was still herself. While there was still a chance before the priest's teachings changed her forever.

"Well," Anna said. "I suppose we might as well get it over with." She moved to slip her shoulders from her dress. It was a grey-woolen shift, thick and itchy like an old blanket.

"No," the priest said and held out a hand. "Not here." Anna frowned at him, and he looked to the door and clicked his fingers. A moment later and two other priests swept into the room. They were dressed as simply as the first, and kept their eyes down as they moved to grab at Anna.

"What's going on?" Anna pulled her arms free. "Who are —"

“Your rebellion must act as a warning, Miss Lewis,” the priest explained. “You are not the only girl who we look after, and where it might surprise you to hear, a few of them are nearly as cantankerous as you are.”

“So what?” Anna snarled as the two priests took her by the arms once more, this time keeping hold of her with a tighter grip. She tried to pull free, but they refused to let go. “I’m to be a martyr?”

“Certainly not,” the priest assured her. He almost sounded insulted. “A warning. To those who are yet to fully comprehend what it is we’re trying to do here- how we are only here to help. Once they realize this —”

“Are forced to realize it,” she snapped.

“Once they realize this,” the priest started again. “Theirs, as well as your own time here will be an infinitely enjoyable experience.”

“This is wrong,” Anna said. “This is so wrong.”

“Through the eyes of a sinner, even the most holy of deeds would look a sacrilegious thing. Once you have been purified, you will see.”

“Never,” Anna growled. She moved to step toward him, but the priests held her back. “I’ll never —”



“Enough of this,” the priest spoke over her. He looked right at her, and for perhaps the first time ever, Anna thought she saw something behind his eyes. A gleeful smile, excitement even. He stroked the whip and continued to look right at her. “It is time.”

The priest gestured at the two others and before Anna could say anything else, they were dragging her from the room.

She was led to a small chapel that sat separately from where her room was located. That, she saw as she was dragged, was a sort of housing area, most likely for the other women who were kept here. But it was curiously empty, as if there were no other occupants and the priest had been lying.

Anna learned moments later that he certainly was not. As she was led across the field and toward the chapel, she spied the other women he had spoken of, and then realized almost immediately what they were all doing. The chapel was their destination also, and they flocked there in solemn silence, heads bowed, eyes averted, likely doing what they could to avoid being noticed by the priest.

A few dared a glance at Anna as she was led past them, and she saw the pity in their eyes. A few even whispered what looked like ‘sorry’ and ‘good luck’ to her. Anna tried to fix them with a brave, determined stare, but it was no good. Despite the courage she had shown, Anna had never been more terrified in her life.

This fear grew as she was led down the aisle and toward the nave. The morning was still early, and the rising sun shot a beam of light through the windows in the roof so they landed right at the center of the nave. It was a spotlight, and she the main attraction.

Behind her, Anna heard the women gather and begin to take their seats. It was all Anna could do to stop herself from crying.

The priests led her to where the light landed on the wooden flooring and positioned her right in its center. They continued to hold her arms as the priest entered the chapel. He held the whip in his hand, and kept his stare fixed on Anna as he approached.

He was clearly trying to look remorseful, but Anna could see differently. There was an eagerness in the way he watched her, an excitement in the way he held the whip. He might have claimed he didn't want to do this, but there could be no doubt about the pleasure it brought him. And as he reached her, Anna saw his eyes dance.

“Last chance, Miss Lewis.” His voice boomed through the small chapel, silencing the few whispers growing from the women. “Promise me, here and now before all who witness, that you will accept this as your new home, that you will be grateful for what we are doing for you and your tainted soul, and that if we allow you freedom, you will not sully it by trying to escape. Make that promise, and no harm shall come to you.”

She had always been stubborn. Sometimes, often, it was to her own detriment, a refusal to comply simply because she didn't like being told what to do. This was not one of those times.

Anna saved her stare for the priest only. She glared hate and anger and vengeance at him, letting him see that she was far from breaking. It would have been so easy to give the priest

what he wanted, but that just wasn't Anna. This was about more than playing along and avoiding torment. This was about being true to herself, as she always had been, even when times were at their hardest.

For reasons that even Anna wasn't sure, she spared a single glance for over the priest's shoulder, toward the open chapel doors as if there might still be hope...

But then, she was back on him. "Do what you must," she said through gritted teeth. "I'm not afraid."

The priest sighed and bowed his head. "Fear is not my goal here, Miss Lewis." His arm dropped, allowing the whip to unfurl by his side. "It's compliance."

Anna swallowed, but did not break her gaze, refusing to show him how scared she was. He smiled at her, and she continued to glare. But inside, she was screaming.

## CHAPTER 34



*H*e didn't know how, but Derek knew the moment he saw the chapel that he was in the right place. Mostly, it was on account of how eerie the place was. The last two he had visited were lively affairs, and the moment he rode in he'd been approached by priests and worshippers asking him of his business. But this place...

There wasn't a soul in sight. Derek's eyes swept the ground quickly, noting the small chapel, what looked to be housing built just down from it, and further down from that another larger building whose purpose he could only guess at. The building looked deserted, and the lodging empty. But the chapel was a different story.

Movement inside. Derek pushed his horse closer, spying through the open doors at what looked to be people congregating. He rode in and quickly dismounted, hurrying to the open doors, and stepping through the doorway, where he came to a sudden halt as the shock of what he saw paralyzed him.

It was nothing but women. At least two dozen of them, dressed in woolen-grey shifts, standing in front of their chairs, facing the nave of the church. Their body language was withdrawn, their heads were bent but not in prayer. Derek stretched his

gaze to see what they were looking at, and that's when he saw her.

It was Lady Anna. There could be no doubt. She knelt with her back to him, and most of her was obscured by a priest who stood in front. But there could be no doubt. Derek nearly cried out with joy but swallowed it when the priest beside Lady Anna suddenly grabbed the back of her dress and tore it open.

That was when he acted.

“What is the meaning of this?” Derek cried out, his voice booming through the small chapel and nearly shaking the walls.

The women gasped and spun about. Their chatter erupted as Derek strode down the aisle and toward his love. But as for the priest? He merely turned around and frowned at the sudden appearance of Derek, seemingly surprised but not at all put out.

“I’m sorry,” the priest began. “But I’m afraid that this is a private service.”

Derek saw the whip in the priest’s hand, and his blood ran hot as bubbling lava, so hot that his head felt like it might explode. “I don’t give a damn how sorry you are!”

Lady Anna spun about, and the look in her eyes when she saw him was all the assurance that Derek would ever need that he made the right choice. He saw happiness. He saw relief. And most of all, he saw love.

“Derek!” Lady Anna cried. “You ca —”

“That is quite enough,” the priest turned back and warned her. He then looked to Derek who was just now reaching him. “As I said, this is a private event and —”

Derek reached the priest and snatched the whip from his grip. He held it so hard that as his hand wrapped the handle, his nails dug into his palms and drew blood. But the fury he was feeling was such that he hardly felt it. “How dare you! How dare — what is the meaning of this?”

The two priests looked about to jump Derek, but the priest held a hand out to stop them. “I’m sorry,” the priest said to him. “Might I ask who you are exactly?”

“I am the Duke of Elsbrook.” Derek’s voice thundered through the chapel. “And I’ll be taking Lady Anna home this —”

“Ah, you Grace,” the priest beamed at him. “It is an honor.”

Derek balked. “I don’t care what you call it —”

“Truly, I have been wondering about you,” the priest continued to speak as if this were the most casual of settings. “Lord Ashville spoke of you, of course, even suggesting that you might be the reason for the way Miss Lewis here has erred.” He clicked his tongue and shook his head. “But I simply refused to believe that. How could I possibly?”

The situation was a confusing one. On the one hand, Lady Anna was so clearly in need of help — and not a moment too soon! If Derek had taken any longer, he shuddered to think what might have happened. He knew what! The priest intended on flagellation as some sort of punishment.

But then there was the priest himself. He was so casual, appearing as if this were a standard affair and Derek was the one who should be sorry for interrupting. Even the way the priests almost attacked him was odd, another sign that this wasn't a regular church. Nothing close to.

Derek glared daggers at the priest, and truly felt the desire to use the whip in his hand on him. But he refrained, as he was still a man of God and such an act would be unseemly.

Instead, he looked past the priest to Lady Anna, and the softest of smiles spread across his face. "Are you all right?" he asked.

"I am" she said with a smile to match. "Now that you're here."

"I should have never left you," Derek said. "I was a fool to even —"

"Excuse me, Your Grace," the priest interrupted. "Although I appreciate why you are here, I am sorry to say it is of little matter. Miss Lewis has been submitted to us under the eyes of God, and it is He and only He who reserves the right to pass judgement." His eyes flicked to the whip in Derek's hand. "And that judgement must be met."

The priest reached for the whip, but Derek held it back. “And who are you to decide His judgement — that Lady Anna, or any of these women even deserve to be judged?”

“Your Grace, please,” the priest smirked slightly. “Do not pretend that these women are not deserving. Do not pretend as if their actions are not filled with sin and in need of cleansing. Each woman here...” he swept his arm over the chapel. “... has sinned more than her fair share of times. And each woman here must repent, change, and then be free to live a blessed life. Just as He commands.”

There was going to be no convincing him. Derek saw that now. Which really only left him with the one option, although it wasn't one he was particularly looking forward to.

If he was going to save Lady Anna, he'd need to do so by force.

And he nearly did too. Through with idle talk, Derek took a step toward where Lady Anna knelt, preparing to push the two priests out of his way if he must. But then a thought came to him.

The priest was right, Lady Anna had indeed sinned. But then again, so had Derek. Even ignoring his time spent with Lady Anna, Derek's life was one filled with what this priest would surely classify as a sin. Sleeping with women. Drinking excessively. Gambling! And yet, because of who he was, there would be no punishment.

Well, if Lady Anna deserved to be punished for her actions, then so did Derek.



“I agree with you,” Derek said to the priest. “Her life is one that has been flooded by sin.”

The priest’s face turned to shock before he quickly composed himself. And Lady Anna too, Derek saw from the corner of her eye, her crestfallen face at the announcement.

“Really?” the priest said. “So, you agree that she must be punished?”

“I do,” Derek nodded. Then he held the whip out for the priest to take, an act which sent gasps of shock through the women. The priest eyed the whip with suspicion, before slowly reaching out and taking it back. “But before you punish Lady Anna,” Derek continued. “First, you must punish me.”

The priest blinked. “I’m sorry, Your Grace? I’m afraid I don’t quite —”

“Lady Anna has indeed sinned,” Derek spoke over the priest as he untucked his shirt. “But so have I. Far more than the good lady has, I assure you. If anyone should be punished, it’s me.” Derek then began to remove his shirt from over his head.

“Now — now really,” the priest stuttered. “That will not be —”

“It is only fair.” Derek lifted his shirt over his shoulders and dropped it to the ground. A few more gasps ran through the crowd. A few wandering eyes also. But Derek stood tall and

proud, chest puffed out in defiance. “How many lashes were you going to administer to Lady Anna?”

The priest hesitated. “That is not... you really don’t —”

“How many?” Derek repeated firmly.

“Six,” the priest said sheepishly. “One for each day, barring the sabbath.”

Derek nodded. “Then I shall take twelve. Six for me.” He looked to Lady Anna, who was still on her knees watching him. Her eyes welled with tears and were it not for the two priests holding her down, she might have leapt for him. “And six for her.”

“Derek,” Lady Anna spoke. “You don’t have to do this. Please.”

“She’s right,” the priest said. “This is not, ah... we ah... we are not in the habit of whipping dukes.”

“I can’t imagine you would be,” Derek said coldly. Then, with nothing else for it, he turned around and straightened his back. “Well, shall we get on with it then?”

“Derek,” Lady Anna tried again. “Please, you don’t have to —”

“It’s fine.” He held her gaze and let her see his smile; how warm it was, how loving. He wanted her to know that it was fine, and that everything was going to be all right. Because it would be. “I love you.”

He could see the shock that his words had on Lady Anna. Like a bucket of water had been thrown in her face, she seemed to buckle and then brace. Eyes wide, mouth tight, she’d never looked so taken by surprise.

But then her face softened, and her body relaxed. Derek could see the realization setting in, taking hold as a smile began to form on her perfect lips. It was matched by the smile behind her eyes as she looked at him, and even before she spoke, Derek knew what she was going to say.

“I love you too.”

“Your Grace,” the priest then interrupted. “I must protest. While I see the point that you are trying to make, surely you must realize the difference?”

“I don’t.”

The priest clicked his tongue with annoyance. “You realize of course that I can’t, under God, administer such a punishment as this to you, Your Grace. It is impossible.”

“But you were willing to do it to her?”

“It is not the same thing!” the priest cried, perhaps for the first time ever. “And you know that.”

The truth of it was that Derek knew the priest wouldn't whip him. At least he had thought that might be the case. Where he would have taken those lashes gladly if it had come to it, the chance that a member of the clergy might strike him like that was absurd.

But he had needed to make a point. A protest to what this man was doing. There was rancid hypocrisy here, and Derek wanted all to see it.

“The way I see it is, you have two options,” Derek said, while keeping his back to the priest. “The first is you do what you came here for. That being, executing God's justice as you see it. But only toward me, for I am as deserving as any.”

“But Your Grace —”

“Or the second option. I leave here now with Lady Anna. We climb atop my horse and leave this horrible place behind us. And you thank God that I chose to show you mercy, rather than administering justice of my own.” Looking over his shoulder, Derek held the priest's stare with his own fiery one. He made sure the priest saw the truth behind his words, and what he'd be willing to do if he was forced to act on them.

A shudder ran through the priest, one he didn't bother trying to suppress. His shoulders slumped and he bowed his head. “You really do not care about what she's done?”

“I don’t.”

“And you are really willing to... to debase yourself in the name of God and all his children, for her?”

“If that’s the way you see it.”

The priest shook his head, but then held out a hand indicating the exit. “Go,” he said in a whisper. “Leave. Take her and live your lives in contempt.”

Even before the words had left his mouth, Lady Anna was up. She pushed the priests back and leapt into Derek’s arms, smothering his face and neck with kisses as she did. This of course had the priest’s lip curling, but that only spurred her on more.

“I knew you would come,” she said. “I knew it.”

Derek pulled back and cocked an eyebrow at her. “Really?”

She grinned. “Well... I hoped. But I should have known. I should have —”

“Will you please leave!” the priest barked. He pointed down the aisle. “And be quick about it, thank you.”

Derek picked up his shirt and took Lady Anna by the hand. He gave it a squeeze and she returned it. And then, together, they walked down the aisle and out of the chapel. From there, it

was onto Derek's horse and back in the direction of London. Only this time, Derek thought he might take it at a slightly slower pace. Now that he had Lady Anna safe and sound, there really was no rush. The way he saw it, they had the rest of their lives.

## CHAPTER 35



They had been riding for twenty minutes now and neither of them had said a single word. Anna could only guess what was going through the Duke's mind right now, likely it was very much the same as was going through her own head.

*What now?* It might have been a strange thought to be stuck on, especially when considering what had just happened. But Anna didn't have much choice in the matter. That was where her mind had strayed to, and that was where it was going to stay.

A shame really, as she would have much rather spent a little more time on the shirtless duke, baring his naked chest and muscular back to be whipped so he might take her suffering onto himself. He was so gallant. He was so brave. He was so darn caring of her needs that once again, it was all Anna could do to not think about what she was to do from here.

The horse slowly trotted down the dirt-packed road, she sat with her arms wrapped around the Duke's waist, holding him tight and close as if to let go might see her back at the chapel. She wanted to speak with him, to say something so that he might know how grateful she was. But she was hesitant, again because she couldn't stop thinking to the future.

Anna didn't know what she wanted exactly. Just that whatever it might be, that it involved the Duke in some way. She had told him earlier that she loved him, and she had meant it. Unfortunately, Anna was about as experienced in the ways of romance as a toddler and had no idea what was supposed to happen next.

But the minutes stretched on and the tension between the two grew. She wondered why he wasn't speaking, and then worried that maybe he was regretting his decision.

She then realized how silly that was, but this only led her to worry over what he might be thinking once again.

And then, finally, Anna came to a decision. It was the same one that she always came to when she didn't know what to do and, barring a few times, it had served her well thus far.

Basically, she did what she wanted, and worried about the consequences later. And right now, all she wanted was to speak with Derek.

"Your — Your Grace," she stuttered.

"Hmm?" Derek said immediately, glancing over his shoulder.

"Your Grace," she said with more confidence. "I wanted to \_\_\_"



“Your Grace?” Derek frowned at her. “I think we’re at a point where you can stop calling me that, don’t you?”

She blushed furiously and was glad he couldn’t see her. “All right, Derek,” she said softly. “I was hoping to — wanting to. I wanted to say — I mean, I think that, ah...” Why was this so hard? Anna sputtered and stammered, her nerves well and truly taking over her usually able tongue.

“Is everything all right?” Derek chuckled.

“Obviously not,” Anna snapped.

“Would you rather I take you back?” Derek joked. “That priest fellow was rather pleasant.”

“No,” Anna sighed, angry at herself now. “What I want is to thank you for what you did. But as is typical, I’m making a mess of it.”

“Oh,” Derek said and blinked to himself a moment. “Well, thank you. That is very kind.”

“You’re welcome?”

Derek frowned to himself, as if not sure how to respond. He pressed his lips together, looked about to turn back further and say something else, but then decided against it. He continued to frown to himself as he looked ahead.

Anna sighed. This shouldn't have been difficult. The two usually got along famously, after all. But now that their feelings for one another were well and truly out there, and they had nothing to hide behind, they both reverted to a state of extreme awkwardness.

It might have been enough to break what was already a very fragile relationship, but then something dawned on Anna which had her chuckling and shaking her head at how foolish she was being. This was the same duke as before. Nothing had changed. Not really. After all, she had always known how he felt about her. And in a way, she had known the same about her feelings toward him...

"This is silly, isn't it?" Anna chuckled.

"What is?" Derek asked quickly, looking back over his shoulder. She could feel relief in him, at her having broken the silence.

"This," she said. "How darn awkward we are being."

"You thought so too?" he winced.

"Even the horse thought so," Anna chuckled. "And as you might remember, he's seen things that should have both of us blushing whenever we ride him."

Derek laughed. "I didn't even think of that. Poor thing." Derek stroked the horse's mane.

“Derek,” Anna then began. She was feeling more confident now, and with it came a desire to... clarify a few things. Both with Derek, and with herself.

“Yes?” he said, glancing back over his shoulder and smiling.

“About earlier — twenty minutes ago, to be more exact. What —”

“You don’t have to say anything,” Derek assured her. “It’s done, and I’d do it a hundred times more if I had to. But hopefully, it won’t come to that, as I really don’t want to get into the habit of taking my shirt off in churches —”

“No, not that,” Anna laughed, and then wrapped her hands tighter around his waist. “What I was going to say was... what I want to say is, what I said to you... about...” she hesitated, feeling the way the Duke held his breath as if he knew what was coming. “About how I... I said that I love you.”

A pregnant pause as Derek considered, still holding his breath, body now rigged. “Wh — what about it?”

“I want you to know that... that...”

“Yes...?”

“That I meant it,” she admitted, her voice dropping to a whisper. “I love you.”

And she did too. In the moment when Derek had first told her how he felt, it might have been easy to go along and say the same, so that he might save her. But that wasn't why she had done it. His sudden appearance in the chapel had shocked her at first, but then comforted her in a way she could have never imagined. The realization that she wasn't as alone as she had thought, that someone else might care for her the way the Duke clearly did. It was... it was love. Plain and simple.

She could feel Derek relax under her words as he took a deep breath and then exhaled his relief. "I love you too," he said.

"I suspected as much," she smirked and pulled herself in tighter to his body. "I'm just sorry it took me so long to admit it out loud."

"Don't be sorry," Derek assured her. "I should have said something sooner."

"Doubtful," Anna laughed. "If you had, I would have kicked you out of my house without a second thought. You couldn't even ask me to dinner without my overreacting."

"You weren't overreacting," Derek chuckled. "You were just being... careful."

"How agreeable of you," she joked. "Maybe this won't be such a bad thing after all."

"Being in love?" he frowned at her.

“No...” Anna hesitated as a new thought struck her. “Not that...”

*Now what?* Again, she couldn't stop herself from thinking it. And where she knew that after what had just happened, she really should have been focused on the present— getting herself home in one piece, for example— she couldn't help but look to the future.

For her entire life, Anna had been determined to avoid marriage. It was such a fierce determination that she had even managed to convince herself that she was better off that way, that somehow every other woman who had ever lived had lost a bet which she alone had won. They might be condemned to a life of servitude and reliance on another, but not her.

Only, it wasn't that simple.

These last few days had taught Anna a resounding lesson: being alone wasn't at all what she had thought it to be. Being alone meant having no one, not a soul to confide in, to worry for, to have there in the bad times as well as the good. It was a life of loneliness, dressed up as one of independence. She had outright refused to even consider meeting someone because of a stubbornness that she thought to be a blessing.

No more. As Anna held tight to Derek's body, keeping him close like he might be her last salvation, she knew that she had been wrong. It was lucky then that she had a chance to rectify it. She just had to hope she didn't ruin it as she was likely to do.

“It’s fine,” Derek spoke suddenly as the silence built. “I want you to know, that there is no pressure for you to do- for us to do anything.”

“Excuse me?”

“What I mean is...” Derek tried to turn around so he could look right at her, but this had the horse suddenly veering off the road. “Oh! “No, that’s not —” Derek spun back and straightened its path. “There we go,” he groaned as the horse steadied.

“Derek,” Anna started. “There’s something I need to —”

“As I was saying,” Derek spoke over her, as if determined to get his point out. “I know how you feel about courtship- I do. You have made it perfectly clear,” he chuckled awkwardly. “Which is why I wanted to say that despite what has just happened, you don’t have to feel any obligation to... to change.”

“Change?” Anna frowned at the wording.

“I mean —” Derek glanced over his shoulder at her quickly. “I mean, I’m aware of your aversion to balls and events and such and, if you wish to keep this- us. If you wish to keep us a casual affair then... then I completely understand.”

“Is that right?” Anna smiled to herself.

Derek hesitated. “It is,” he said with a nod. “In fact, I insist.”

“Oh, do you now?” she beamed to herself, rather enjoying the Duke’s panicked compliance. Even after what had just happened, what he had done, he was still willing to see Anna on her terms. Or what he thought to be her terms.

He really was something else and, if there had been even a shadow of a doubt inside of Anna, in regard to what she was about to suggest, it vanished like a shadow under the sun.

“Derek,” Anna began seriously. “Will you stop the horse a moment?”

“Ah, you want me to —”

“Stop the horse, yes,” she said. “I wish to ask you something and as much as I enjoy staring at the back of your head, I’d much rather it be your face. It’s rather pretty,” she finished jokingly.

“Oh, yes, of course,” Derek hurried. He was then quick to pull the horse over to the side of the road. From there he leapt from its back, and then held his hand out to help Anna down.

“Thank you,” she said as her feet hit the mud. “Much better.”

“I couldn’t agree more,” Derek beamed at her as he took her hands. “I was almost beginning to forget how beautiful you were.”

She tried to avoid his eyes in dismissal, but her cheeks flared red and she was forced to look away. “Oh, you’re not so bad yourself.” She forced herself to look up at him, to meet his dark eyes for the first time since they had left the chapel.

And when she saw them, when their eyes met and her body flooded with warmth, and any aches and pains she might have had melted away, Anna knew with certainty that she had made the right decision. That she was about to make the right decision...

“Thank you,” she said and gave his hands a squeeze. “Really, the fact that you would be willing to do all that...” she smiled for him. “You have no idea what it means.”

“I know how you feel about...” he sucked through his teeth. “That. And again, you should know that I don’t care.”

“Oh, well, I was hoping you might care a little,” she said sheepishly.

“You... you do?”

She grinned for him. “I’ve been doing some thinking lately. The last twenty minutes or so, to be more precise.” She flashed her eyes at him.

“About...?” Derek narrowed his eyes.

“Us,” she said. “And me. What it is that I want, exactly. You see, I’ve spent so long wanting one thing, to find out that I



might suddenly want another is rather startling.”

Derek perked up. “You want... you want something else?”

She smiled at him. “I thought I wanted to remain alone. I thought... I thought that my aunt had wanted this for me, and to do anything else might be a sort of betrayal to her. But I’ve come to realize that I was wrong, that she didn’t wish that upon me at all. Not even in the slightest, truth be told.”

“And what did she want, exactly?” Derek asked with great care.

“She wanted me to be happy,” Anna said simply. “To be myself and live life my own way, whatever way that might be. And now, I realize, that way involves you, Your Grace.”

Derek’s face fell flat. “Your Grace?”

She beamed at him. “Perhaps... husband, might sound better?”

“That’s...” Derek blinked, and Anna could feel his palms begin to sweat. “Really? You... you meant it?”

“I do,” she nodded and squeezed his palms tighter. “Derek, will y— —”

“Wait!” Derek cried. He quickly let go of her hands and took a step back. He was determined in his actions, looking about to make sure the way was clear, fixing her with his eager stare,

holding a hand out so she wouldn't try and speak. He then smiled for her, a warm and loving twinkle that told her immediately what he was about to do. "Lady Anna Lewis." Derek dropped to one knee. "Will you marry me?"

Once, Anna might have thought to spoil the moment with a joke. Perhaps a scolding for him stealing her moment. But as she looked at Derek, as her heart swelled and her eyes began to moisten, she realized that the time for jokes had long since passed.

All Anna wanted from this moment and forever, was to be with Derek.

"Of course, I will," she beamed and stepped into him, just in time for him to rise to his feet and take her in his arms.

The Duke laid a kiss on her lips. She grabbed hold of the back of his head, pressing herself tight into him. Their lips parted, their tongues met and Anna immediately began to worry about her self-control and where her mind was already going...

But then she laughed, for it did not matter. Derek was to be her husband, and she, his wife. They would have the rest of their lives together to commit these sorts of sins, to pretend that they were in the middle of a whirlwind romance without limits. Having said all that, if the beginning of their courtship was any indication, Anna predicted their marriage to be even more adventurous.

## CHAPTER 36



The day of the wedding had finally arrived, and it promised to be a most splendid affair.

Truthfully, this surprised Derek somewhat as he had been bracing himself for a last-minute hurdle to clear, a wall thrown up suddenly that he might have to try and scale or even knock down if he was going to see the day through. But he woke to clear skies, and loving smiles from his bride to be. He learned soon after that preparations for the day were well underway and running smoothly. Even his own nerves were subdued and practically non-existent.

Derek supposed that he must have expected something to go wrong because, when looking back at his courtship of Anna, nearly everything had. But maybe that was the point? They'd gone through so much already that from here on out, things would be simple and easy.

And anyway, even if they weren't, Derek loved Anna and he knew she felt the same way. Even during the hardships, when things were at their most challenging, Derek was sure that would be enough.

And so, the day ran smoothly. Although he woke with Anna, Derek made sure to leave her soon after. A goodbye kiss shortly before he made his way downstairs to break his fast on his own, then it was off to the chapel to ready himself for the day — and to make sure that everything else was ready also.

When Derek had first started preparing the ceremony, he had been more than willing to accommodate Anna's more modest tastes, again to show her that he was in this for her and would do whatever he had to so she might be happy.

“What do you mean, a modest ceremony?” Anna had asked with apparent confusion.

“Oh...” Derek had balked. “Well, I just thought that... that seeing as you weren't exactly ah... big on —”

“Will you just say it,” she had teased.

“You don't like people,” Derek had then said flatly. Her face had dropped and he had hurried to clarify. “Meaning, that I know you're not very big on public gatherings and events as such. It's perfectly natural that you might not want that for your own wedding, is all that I meant.”

To this, Anna had smiled warmly and then kissed him on the forehead. “You know, a marriage isn't supposed to be just about the bride.”

“I know that.”

“Then what do you want?” she had asked.

“Oh...” Derek had blinked. “I guess that I ah...”

“Say it,” she had pushed.

“I love you,” he had said. “And I want everyone to know it. I don’t care what they might think of you, or me, for that matter. And I want them to see that.”

“A big wedding then,” she had said as she pressed her lips together to keep herself from smiling. “Who knows, I might even like it.”

There were over four hundred people attending. Some were family members of Derek and Anna, mostly extended family, and many people whom neither of them had met. Most were friends of theirs, and then close friends of those friends as Derek knew just about everyone in the *ton* to some degree or another. And few unlucky individuals were even enemies.

“You’re sure?” Derek had asked when he’d joked about inviting Lord Ashville.

“Oh yes,” Anna had said with a most serious nod. “He must come. And Lord Tywin too, and Chester. And anyone else connected with their little circle. I want their invites sent and then spoken about, so everybody knows.”

Derek had studied her quizzically. “What are you thinking?”

She had flashed her eyes. “Nothing,” she promised. “Although... it might be nice to ask him how my old friend the priest is doing? Now that his little project has been shut down. I just worry about him, you know.” Her smile was smug, as it very well deserved to be.

“Ha!” Derek had roared and shaken his head, whilst his entire body heaved. “I really do love you, you know.”

“I know,” she had giggled.

It was a most bizarre thing, seeing Lord Ashville arrive at his wedding. And he did too, by carriage, dressed in his finest, at the precise time that the invitation had specified. He came with Lord Tywin, and they walked with their chests puffed out and their chins pointed to the heavens; as regal and respectful as they could appear.

“Your Grace,” Lord Ashville said when Derek approached him in welcome. “I want to say...” he sucked through his teeth but kept his poise strict. “What an honor it is to be invited today.”

“And congratulations,” Lord Tywin had added pathetically. “Really, you’re a lucky man.”

“Thank you both for coming,” Derek had said to them. “And for ensuring that this wedding was able to happen in the first place. I dare say that out of everybody here, the two of you are most responsible.”

This had Lord Ashville’s lip curling, but he was quick to straighten it. “You are most welcome,” he said with an

expression that suggested he might have just taken a mouthful of sour milk.

Although he knew that he shouldn't have been at all surprised, it was strange to Derek how quick Lord Ashville had been to change his tune. No doubt the man still thought his actions correct, and likely wanted nothing more than to cart Anna back off to Cambridge... not that this was an option.

Within days of arriving back from having saved Anna, Derek made it his mission to ensure that no woman, whoever she might be, would have to go through such a thing as Anna nearly did. Together, the two worked tirelessly to see the chapel shut down and the priest kicked from the clergy.

And, as had been expected, during all of this, Lord Ashville did what he could to distance himself from the operation, pretending that he had nothing to do with it whatsoever. In fact, he was grateful that Derek had put a stop to such a thing!

As more of the guests began to arrive, Derek was quick about making himself scarce. He ducked around the back of the chapel and into one of the anterooms, and then hurried himself in getting ready. Hugh was there of course, as was another friend, Lord Humphries. They fussed and carried on and Derek ignored it, already thinking to the future and what tomorrow might bring.

It was wrong to say that Derek was once against marriage — although there was no doubt that more than one guest would surely whisper such a thing today. Rather, Derek had been against marrying for the wrong reasons. Too many friends of his had done so because they thought they must, and he had seen what it had done to them, how their marriages had transpired, and the unhappiness that followed.

For Derek, it had always been about waiting for the right woman to come along. Of course, he had assumed she did not exist, so had long since resigned himself to a life lived in loneliness.

But there was no fear of commitment or worry that he might be doing the wrong thing. When one of the altar boys popped his head in to tell Derek that they were ready to start, Derek was the first out the door. And when he stood by the nave of the church, under the altar, awaiting his bride, his leg shook not because he was having second thoughts, but because he wished for things to start sooner.

Anna appeared at the end of the aisle, all whispers stopped and all eyes turned, and her beauty and radiance seemed to swell to the size of the chapel, Derek knew in his heart of hearts that he could stop searching for the ‘right one,’ for he had found her.

Anna beamed at him as she walked down the aisle. Her emerald green dress shimmered down her body. Her dark hair shone and her blue eyes sparkled. Each step had Derek’s heart singing, as women broke into tears and men’s jaws dropped. She, his future wife, his one true love, was the most gorgeous woman he had ever known.

And what was more, she was the only woman for him. Derek had made the right choice, he knew. And now, he could not wait to start the rest of his life with her. His only regret was that he hadn’t done so sooner.



## EPILOGUE



“*I*’m giving her one more day,” Anna said from the comfort of her bed. This was despite the fact that she was, at the moment, very uncomfortable. Perhaps the most she had ever been.

“Giving who one more day?” Derek asked from his chair, propped up beside the bed, right by her head. He might have liked to have lain with his wife, but there was no way Anna was allowing it. She was too hot, this room too stuffy, and the bed too small. At least that was how it felt.

“The baby,” Anna said. “I’m giving her one more day.”

“Her?” Derek raised an eyebrow at her and smirked. “Did I miss something? I wasn’t aware there was a method to find out the baby’s sex until after it came out.”

“Well, you would be wrong,” Anna said rightly, as if she was speaking complete sense. “As a mother, we have this thing called mother’s intuition.”

“Ah, I see.”

“And what this intuition does is allow for us to know things about our child, even before it takes its first breath.”

“Is that right?” Derek asked with a chuckle.

“It is,” she nodded her head. “For example, she is going to have my blue eyes, but your tanned skin — which I think is going to look just wonderful, don’t you? She’s going to be a beauty.”

“Anything else?” Derek continued to laugh.

“She’s going to be adventurous like me, but she’s going to have your good sense, so she’ll know when she is taking things too far and will be more likely to stop before doing anything foolish.”

“Unlike her mother?”

“Exactly. And for now...” Anna touched at her swollen belly and concentrated. “I can’t tell exactly whose sense of humor she is going to have... yet. But hopefully it’s mine.”

“Wow,” Derek pretended to act impressed. “You can tell all that?”

“I can,” Anna nodded seriously, doing what she could at the same time to not moan for the pain she felt in her belly was such that she worried the baby might begin to claw its way out.

“And yet, even still,” Derek continued as he began to grin in what appeared triumph — a point he hadn’t made yet but could not wait to. “You can’t predict when the baby is set to arrive? Are you sure it’s intuition you’re feeling? And not just an upset tummy?”

Anna’s face fell flat. “Don’t make me kick you out again.”

“You wouldn’t?” Derek gasped playfully.

“I would and I will- you’re supposed to be comforting me!” Anna then protested. “Not making fun. Honestly, if this is the life the baby has to look forward to —”

“She,” Derek corrected.

“Exactly,” Anna nodded. “If this is the life she has to look forward to, then she can stay put for all I care.” She nodded again and Derek looked down his nose at her. Anna grimaced. “Maybe not. But only because I am so uncomfortable right now that... well, as I said, I am giving her one more day!”

“And then what?”

“And then I’m done with her,” Anna sighed, nearly cried out for the frustration she was feeling. “If this baby does not come out by the day’s end, then I’m taking her back. Returning her. I tried, we gave it our best, but it just wasn’t meant to be.”

Derek frowned. “I don’t think that’s quite how it works, dear.”

“Oh?” Anna sat herself up on her elbows. She would have sat up further, but with the little strength she had left in her body, that was all she could muster. “I wasn’t aware that you were a woman, capable of giving birth?”

Derek’s rolled his eyes at her. “You know that I’m not.”

“I also know that you don’t know what you’re talking about!” she snapped. “So, either get onboard and support me in this, or get out. Those are your two options.”

Anna was being harsh to Derek, she knew, but at the moment she also didn’t care. She was tired. She was hungry. She was somehow boiling hot, while also cold. Her entire body was rebelling against her — as it had been doing for the past nine months — and where it was supposed to have been over with several days ago, as things currently stood, there was no end in sight.

But Derek was her husband, and he loved her infinitely. When she snapped at him, he just smiled, took her hand, and gave her the back of his head a loving kiss. This love was matched by the smile on his lips and the twinkle in his eye.

“How about a third option of me staying right by your side, so that you might abuse me as you see fit? I know how much you love it.”

“I don’t love it,” she mumbled to herself. “Although...” she then broke into a small smile. “It does help distract me.”

“Then I insist you keep at it,” Derek said. “You know... for the sake of our daughter.”

“Told you.”

“I never doubted it,” he laughed. “And at least now we know that she’ll get her stubbornness from her mother, also. Let’s hope it’s not too much however, otherwise she might never come out.”

“Don’t even joke!” Anna gasped.

It was a conversation that they had nearly every day now, or at least a variation of the same one. For the past five days straight, Anna had lain in bed the way she was, and Derek had sat by her side throughout. Anna had complained and argued and even cursed, whilst Derek had comforted and looked after and happily taken the abuse that she had given him. But Anna knew Derek didn’t mind, and she was beyond grateful for how forgiving he was being. It was a quality that would serve him well when the baby eventually came.

If the baby ever came! It was a little over nine months ago now when Anna had learned of her pregnancy, which was about one month after the marriage. When she had found out, she’d been conflicted in her feelings. But that had lasted all of two minutes.

“You’re sure?” Derek has asked when she told him. He’d been sitting outside on the deck reading, and Anna had broached the possibility of a pregnancy to him. This had seen him jump up and excitedly grab at her.

“I think so...” Anna had grimaced. “But I’m not sure.” She had been sure of the baby at least. What she hadn’t been sure of was how she felt.

“That’s wonderful!” Derek had cried.

“I suppose,” Anna had sighed as she tried to pull away from his embrace.

“Isn’t it?” he had chuckled. “You don’t sound particularly thrilled.”

“It’s not that,” Anna had assured him. “I am happy. I am.”

“But...”

“But,” she had continued. “Well, it’s just so permanent, isn’t it? A marriage is one thing, but a baby.” She had then giggled to herself. “Now, I’ll never get rid of you.”

Anna had been joking about that at least. She and Derek had only been married for a single month at that point, but already she had fallen in love with the arrangement, and even more so with the man whom she had married. It was all just so easy, and fun, and wonderful in every sense of the word. Truly, where Anna had feared that getting married might see her lose a sense of independence for which she was known, marriage to Derek was the complete opposite.

And it wasn’t that the two didn’t spend time together, or that Derek left her alone often so she might be able to pretend that

she was still independent and reliant only on herself. It was more the fact that she preferred to spend time with her husband than on her own.

But with a baby on the way, there was a fear that things might change, and Anna would finally be forced to settle down fully and live a life she had spent her entire youth being terrified of.

“It’s going to be all right,” Derek had assured her as he pulled her onto his lap.

“I know,” she had sighed. “It’s just...”

“You worry that things are going to change,” he said for her. She nodded and looked away and he chuckled and stroked at her hair. “Of course things will change,” he had then said. “But that’s a good thing.”

“You think so?”

“Of course. I mean, this baby is going to be raised in a loving household, by a mother and father that adore it, correct?”

“Correct,” she said slowly as if considering.

“And you’ll be there for me always, and I’ll be there for you — and the baby. Correct?”

“Correct...” she had said again.

“Then that’s all that matters,” he had assured her. “Change is natural and a part of life. Often, we can’t control it. But what we can control is who we make these changes with. And I don’t know about you, but the choice I made last month still feels like the right one to me, don’t you think?”

As was usually the case, Derek had been right. And as was usually the case, his words had a remarkably calming effect on Anna. From that moment onwards, she had found herself excited about having a child, and as the months wore on, she began to look forward to it more than she might have ever dreamed.

But then the due date arrived... and then it passed. And then the next day came and then it went. And then the next day, and the day after that. Each day came, and with it, Anna’s baby refused to follow. It had now been nearly a week since she was supposed to have given birth and still, nothing.

As such, Anna had been resigned to lying in her bed, not allowed to leave it for anything — even if she had wanted to, she might not have had the strength. She was bored. She was uncomfortable. She was angry at being made to feel so useless. The only thing that kept her going through all of this was Derek, for not once did he leave her side.

“You’re going to be an amazing mother,” Derek said suddenly, still holding her hand. “I want you to know that.”

“I know...” Anna narrowed her eyes and looked at him. “Why did you say that?”

Derek grinned. “Should I not have?”



“It just felt a little random. Are you trying to scare me!”

“No,” Derek laughed, his eyes flashing their excitement at her. “I’m just trying to prepare you.”

“Well, you really ought to have started nine months ago,” Anna sighed. “But better late than never.”

“Late?” Derek frowned as his eyes flicked down Anna’s body toward her legs. “From the looks of things, I’m right on time.”

Anna frowned at her husband and his odd response. “What does that mean?” She then followed his eyes down her body toward her legs, and that was when she realized. “Oh! Oh!”

“You feel it?”

“My water!” Her water had broken, and Anna hadn’t even realized! She supposed that was because her entire body right now was in a state of rebellion, and she might not have even felt an entire bucket of water being doused on her head.

“I’ll fetch the nurse.” Derek was up and about to leave the room when Anna grabbed him by the hand.

“Derek.”

“Yes?” he turned back and fixed her with a soft, loving expression.

She did the same. “Thank you,” she said.

“For?”

“For everything,” she continued. Anna was feeling strange now, a sort of melancholy taking over that had her wanting to express her love a thousand times over. “And not just the past few days, but these past few months. Since I met you really, I’ve —”

“Anna,” Derek smiled at her. He dropped to one knee and gave the back of her hand a kiss. “I know,” he said. “And you should know that I’d do it all again. A million times if needed.”

“I love you,” she said.”

“And I love you.” He then leaned forward and kissed her belly. “As I will love this baby when it comes out of you.”

“Her,” Anna corrected him. “As you will love her.”

“Right, my mistake,” he grinned. Then he watched her for a moment, love pouring from him like water from a faucet. “I’ll fetch the nurse.”

“You should.”

“I’ll be right back.”

“Go.”

He hurried to the door, turned, and looked at her a moment more, and then ducked down the hallway. Anna could hear him calling for the nurse, and she could picture that big smile on his face as he shouted, how eager and excited he was, how thrilled. Derek, she knew, would make a great father. She just hoped she would make an equally great mother.

But she also didn't worry herself too much with that ill-placed fear. If there was one thing that Anna had learned through all of this, from her meeting of Derek to right here and now, was the importance of having someone else in your life to rely upon. It wasn't a weakness as she had once thought, but a strength. Derek wasn't just a husband to her, but another half, and a better half that made her whole. That was what love was all about.

And when this baby came, it would only add to their two halves and complete the picture further. They'd make a family, a nucleus that would be there for one another through the hard times and the good. It would be a family built on love and companionship, and most of all happiness.

As Anna lay in bed, now well and truly feeling the baby start to move, she heard Derek's hurried footsteps coming down the hallway toward her. For a moment, she wondered how her aunt would feel if she was here; both about Derek and the baby. But this just had Anna smiling for, like Aunt Diana, Anna had managed to find her soul mate, and for this her aunt would surely be overjoyed.

Anna was sure of it. She was happy and in love. She was about to start a family. Today was the first day of the rest of her life and truly, she could not wait to see what the morrow brought. It would be gorgeous she knew, so long as Derek was by her side.

*The End?*

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PREVIEW: A DUKE TO SAVE  
HER



# PROLOGUE



London, England, 1802

“Good morning, My Lady. It’s time to wake up,” Eloise Snowden’s governess said, pulling back the curtains in the nursery to let in the sunlight.

Eloise rubbed her eyes and sat up. She had been having a delightful dream about riding her horse across the parkland with her sister, Alice. She threw back the covers and jumped out of bed, running across to the window to gaze out over the gardens.

“It’s a beautiful day, Martha. I’m going to go riding. Do you think Alice would be willing to come with me?” Eloise asked.

Her governess, who was not as strict as her prim and proper demeanor might suggest, laughed. “Well, My Lady, that’s up to your sister, isn’t it? Why don’t you go and wake her and ask? But you’ve your lessons first,” she said, and Eloise smiled.

“Oh, Martha. How can you think of lessons on such a beautiful day? Wouldn’t you rather be riding out on horseback across the parkland on a day like today?” she appealed.

The look on the governess’ face suggested she would, and without waiting to dress, Eloise hurried out of the nursery and ran down the corridor to her elder sister’s bedroom. Eloise was ten and her sister, Alice, was twelve. Alice had outgrown the nursery, and now she had a bedroom in the east wing of



Fairclair Grange, the London home of their father, Viscount Snowden.

“Don’t make too much noise, Eloise. You know your father doesn’t like to be disturbed,” the governess called out, but Eloise was too excited to listen.

She loved to ride out across the parkland with her sister. Fairclair Grange stood close to the river, near Greenwich, and they could ride for several miles on their horses – a black pony named Threadbare, and a chestnut mare named Bolt – through the parkland at the water’s edge. Eloise was devoted to her sister, and Alice, in turn, was devoted to her. Now, Eloise came to her sister’s bedroom door and knocked.

“Alice, are you awake? I had the most wonderful dream. We were both riding across the parkland together, and you charged ahead, and I followed. It was wonderful,” she called out, knocking loudly at her sister’s door.

There was no reply. Eloise thought it strange. Her sister was always awake at this time, and now Martha came hurrying down the corridor.

“Please, Eloise. You mustn’t shout so. Your poor sister needs her rest,” she chided, as Eloise listened at the door.

“I don’t think she’s there,” she said, and she tried the door, which opened to reveal an empty room.

The bed was made, as though no one had slept in it, and the dressing table had been cleared of her sister’s jewelry box and other trinkets, which Eloise had sat playing with only yesterday. She looked around her in confusion. There was no sign of her sister anywhere, and it was as though she had entered the wrong bedroom.

“Oh... that’s odd,” Martha said, looking at Eloise with a confused expression on her face.

“Alice? Where are you? Are you playing a game?” Eloise called.

“Perhaps she’s already downstairs. Come back to the nursery and get ready, Eloise. You can’t go down to breakfast like that,” Martha said, taking Eloise by the hand.

Eloise was still wearing her nightgown. Reluctantly, she allowed the governess to lead her back to the nursery where she washed and dressed hurriedly, anxious to find her sister. She felt confused as to why Alice's bedroom felt as though her sister had never been there.

"But I don't understand. All her things were there yesterday, weren't they?" Eloise wondered as Martha brushed her hair.

"I'm sure she's just been tidying up. Or perhaps one of the maids came up early and made the bed. Come now, let's go downstairs. You must be hungry," Martha said, and Eloise followed her out of the nursery and down the corridor to the landing.

Fairclair Grange was Eloise's father's favorite house. A rambling manor with gabled ends and ivy-clad walls, built in red brick and with delightful gardens and parklands on each side. He had an estate in Suffolk and a townhouse in Bath. But it was in London where he spent most of his time, and thus Eloise and her sister had known little of life outside the capital, even as the house itself was somewhat removed from the hustle and bustle of the city center. Their mother, Annabella, died when they were young, and it was their father, a strict man, who had raised them with the help of Martha and their aunt, Hortensia, who lived in Brighton and would descend on them occasionally for the summer social season.

"It's not like her to go out without telling me though," Eloise said, feeling somewhat hurt by the fact that her sister had disappeared without so much as a word.

They did everything together, and Eloise had been looking forward to riding with her sister before breakfast. As it was, she and Martha now came to the door of the dining room, which was slightly ajar. Eloise could see her father sipping a cup of coffee and reading a periodical. She had always been somewhat afraid of him, even though there was no reason for her to be so. He had always doted on both his daughters, and now Eloise glanced up at Martha, who nodded.

"You can go in," she whispered.

Eloise had expected to find her sister sitting at the opposite end of the table. She was going to pull a face at her and chastise her for not waiting before she came down. But the dining room was empty, save for her father, an elderly man with graying hair and a furrowed brow, who now looked up at her questioningly.

“Aren’t you taking your breakfast in the nursery? I’ve got a lot of work to do today, Eloise. I don’t want to be disturbed,” he muttered, as Eloise looked around in confusion.

“Where’s Alice?” she asked. Her father cleared his throat and folded his periodical, which he set down by his side, before fixing her with an imperious look.

“She’s not here,” he replied, and Eloise’s eyes grew wide with shock

“I... what do you mean?” she demanded, and her father shook his head.

“She’s gone, run away. I don’t understand it... I... well, who knows... but she’s not here,” he said.

Eloise did not understand. Why was her father drinking coffee and reading a periodical when his daughter was missing? It seemed... unbelievable. Tears welled up in Eloise’s eyes, and she shook her head, hardly able to take in her father’s words.

“I... what do you mean? She can’t have done... where is she? I saw her last night. She was here, and now... no, she can’t have. She’d have told me,” she cried, and she sank to her knees, sobbing uncontrollably.

Her father tutted and stooped down. He picked her up off the floor and called for Martha to assist him

“I don’t want any of this nonsense. Pull yourself together, Eloise. You won’t bring her back by crying!” he exclaimed, as Eloise looked up at him in disbelief.

“I wanted to go riding with her,” Eloise wailed.

“There, there, Eloise, let’s take you back to the nursery,” Martha said, taking Eloise by the hand.

“But where is she?” Eloise cried, refusing to believe her sister would have just run away without a word.

“She’s gone, Eloise, and that’s that!” her father shouted, and he banged his fist on the dining table as Martha hurried Eloise out of the room.

“She can’t have...” Eloise whimpered, shaking her head and clinging to Martha, who stooped down and put her arms around her.

“Oh, My Lady, you poor thing... we’ll find her, I promise,” she soothed.

# CHAPTER 1



London, England, 1812

Alice was never found. That day, she disappeared, never to be heard from again. Eloise tried everything she could to find her sister, but as the years passed and the anniversary of her disappearance came and went, Eloise found it harder and harder to believe she would ever see her darling sister again. She was twenty years old now, and Alice had been missing for ten long years. Eloise had grown into a young woman, coming out into society at the age of eighteen, with all the hopes and prospects of life lying before her. But in everything she did, there was something missing. An emptiness hung over her, and try as she might, Eloise was never truly happy.

She missed her sister dreadfully and thought about her every day. She wrote her letters, sent them to nowhere, and bought her presents for her birthday and Christmas. Alice was her first thought in the morning and her last at night. Every morning, she waited for the post, hopeful that it would be the day her sister finally got in touch. But every morning was a disappointment, and the more she longed for Alice's return, the more her heart ached with disappointment for it not happening. It was her only prayer, her only wish, her only longing...

"Anything this morning, Anderton?" Eloise asked as the butler entered the dining room bearing a silver tray on which laid the day's correspondence.

“Only this, My Lady,” the butler said, lowering the tray.

Eloise glanced at the letter and sighed. She recognized the handwriting, and it was not that of her sister. The letter came from Lady Cybil Sykes, a distant cousin, and Eloise knew what it would contain without opening it.

“The Mayfair Ball,” she sniffed, taking the letter and tossing it down on the table.

Her father folded his periodical and looked up, narrowing his eyes.

“And why the long face? What of the Mayfair Ball? It’s a highlight of the social calendar,” he said, as the butler lowered the tray for the Viscount to retrieve his own correspondence, which he now began to examine.

“Another dull ball,” Eloise replied.

She did not enjoy such occasions, or rather, she did not enjoy such occasions on her own. She had spent her early years imagining such events alongside her sister. They would dress in beautiful ball gowns and dance with handsome men, and afterwards, they would share the secrets of snatched kisses and the amusing words of men who would tell them they were in love after just one dance. Eloise had never enjoyed balls, soirees, dinners, picnics, or whatever other occasions the expectations of her rank forced her to attend on her own.

“Dull balls are the means of finding a husband, Eloise. You know what I told you. One more season,” her father said as he used a paper knife to open the first of his letters.

Eloise looked up at him and scowled. At the beginning of the Season, her father issued an ultimatum. She had this final opportunity to find a husband, or he would do it for her. The prospect of a forced match was too awful to comprehend, and Eloise could only imagine the sort of man her father would choose. She had had suitors over the years, and she was never short of a man to dance with. But as for falling in love...

“You can’t force these matters, Father. I’ve not met anyone whom I felt was right for me...” she argued.

But it was not only a suitable match Eloise was lacking but a suitable will. Since her sister's disappearance, Eloise had felt as though a part of her had disappeared. She had grown up without a confidant, and with no one whom she could entirely trust with her secrets. She had friends, but it was not the same as a sister, and her heart ached for want of that companionship she had once taken for granted.

"And do you even try? No, Eloise, you don't," her father snapped.

"Then you'd have me married off to whomsoever you choose? And what kind of man would that be?" Eloise demanded.

"Any man. You've shown no attempt at trying yourself. The end of the Season, Eloise. No more. And enough of this obsession with finding your sister," he said, rising to his feet.

There was the twist of the knife. It was always the same. Whenever a discussion of Eloise's future took place, it was coupled with an argument about her sister. Her father accused her of wasting time in search of her sister and that she had neglected to look to her own future, whilst Eloise retorted that her father cared nothing for Alice and had shown not an ounce of concern for her well-being in the years following her disappearance. His answer was always the same Alice had run away, and she was not coming back. He had made no attempt to find her, or so Eloise believed, and it was as though he had entirely washed his hands of his elder daughter, neglecting even her memory.

"And if I don't seek to find her, then who will? You've never tried. I made a vow, Father. A vow that I'd never stop searching for Alice. Not as long as I live," Eloise insisted.

"But it's to your vows you should look now, Eloise. The vows you're to make to a husband, whomever he might be," her father retorted.

He stormed out of the dining room, slamming the door behind him and leaving Eloise alone. The butler had already made a hasty retreat. Eloise sighed and poured herself a cup of coffee. But she remained no less determined to do whatever it took to find her sister. Over the course of the years, Eloise had sent

letters to every corner of the land, seeking information from whomever she could think of. But the answers were always the same. Alice had disappeared and there was no telling where she was or when she would come home.

“I won’t ever stop looking for you,” Eloise promised, turning to the portrait of her and her sister on the wall.

It had been painted when they were still very young, each of them dressed in a matching blue smock and bonnet. It made Eloise smile to look at it, even as she missed her sister more with every passing day. There was so much she wanted to tell her, and so much she wanted to ask her. But with every passing day, her hope seemed further diminished, and Eloise was beginning to despair of ever seeing Alice again.



## CHAPTER 2



“*B*reathe in, My Lady, and I’ll tie you up,” Eloise’s maid, Delphine, said, as Eloise stood in front of the mirror.

It was the night of the Mayfair Ball, and Eloise was dressed in a peacock blue ball gown with a purple sash and shawl. She was wearing a tiara that belonged to her mother and a string of pearls that her father had given her on her eighteenth birthday. She looked very pretty, or so her maid had told her. But as with any such occasion, Eloise’s opinion of herself was tempered by the absence of her sister.

“I wish I wasn’t going to this ball. It’s always the same, a procession of women all seeking a husband, and a collection of men who stalk them like wild prey,” Eloise sighed, as her maid tied up the last of her strings.

“But don’t you want to get married, My Lady? You’d make a beautiful bride, and it would please your father so very much,” Delphine said

“But I don’t want to please him. I’ve no desire at all to please him,” Eloise protested.

Ever since her sister’s disappearance, Eloise’s relationship with her father had drifted. They had been close when she was a child, and there was no doubting the comfort that her father had brought her in the wake of her mother’s death. But ever since Alice’s disappearance, Eloise had questioned how much he really knew.

His lack of concern on the day she had run away and his half-hearted attempts to find her had caused her to wonder if her father was keeping a dreadful secret. In the extremes of her imagination, Eloise wonder if Alice was dead – a terrible accident their father covered up – or if she had been abducted and a ransom so high it could not be paid had been demanded.

“And what about yourself, My Lady? You deserve the happiness of a husband and a family,” Delphine said, as she now began to comb Eloise’s long, golden hair.

But Eloise had vowed her denial. She would not be happy. Not with a husband, not with children, not with a grand estate, not with a title. Eloise would only be happy when her sister returns to her. Nothing else would do, and she vowed not to allow herself to even think of happiness when such a dark shadow hung over her.

“And what of my sister’s happiness, Delphine? Does she even know of it? I can’t bear the thought of living my life without her, even as I’ve been forced to do so these last ten years. If I’m to marry, I want her here next to me, as a sister should be,” Eloise maintained.

A knock now came at her bedroom door, and her father, dressed in his faded military regalia, entered the room.

“It’s time to leave, Eloise. Come now, we don’t want to be late,” he said, beckoning her.

The Viscount had served in the early years of the Napoleonic wars. Eloise could remember him leaving shortly after Alice had disappeared. She had been left with her governess, Martha, and had wondered if his departure was to be another abandonment. But whilst Alice had not returned, her father had, and whilst he would never speak of his absent daughter, he liked to be reminded of one more glorious military past.

“Why do you wear your faded uniform, Father?” she asked, as he led her downstairs.

He turned to her with a look of anger, as though even questioning such a thing was an insult.

“I’m entitled to do so, Eloise. I fought for King and Country against the Napoleonic threat,” he said, and Eloise grimaced in annoyance.

“Clinging to a past you no longer possess,” she muttered.

She was angry with her father that day and cared little about insulting him. They had drifted so far apart in the years since Alice’s disappearance that it was as though she hardly knew him anymore.

“You speak of clinging to the past, and yet you sat again this afternoon writing endless letters in the hope of finding your lost sister. She ran away, Eloise. And when a person runs away, they rarely return home. It’s been ten years. If I’m to stop living in the past, then you should do so yourself,” he snapped.

A carriage was waiting for them outside. Eloise put on a shawl held out by the butler, before making her way down the steps and climbing into the compartment. It was early summer, and the evening was bright and warm, with the sweet scent of the garden perfuming the air. Her father climbed in next to her, sitting rigidly as the carriage took off.

“You must miss her though,” Eloise said.

She was not usually this forceful, but she could not hold back, knowing what her father intended for her, too. Perhaps it was he who had forced Alice away. Perhaps he threatened to force her into marriage, too. But Alice had only been twelve years old when she had left, or when something worse had happened to her...

“It’s been ten years, Eloise. You’re always like this around the time of the anniversary. It’s like you can’t let go. We mourned your late mother, didn’t we? Well, we’ve mourned Alice, too. But there comes a time when we must no longer continue to mourn and instead look to the future,” he said, folding his arms.

Eloise scowled at him. He did not seem to care, even as her own heart was broken. She could not mourn the way she had done for her mother. She had no certainty of what had

happened, no finality to cling to. If her sister were dead, then she would grieve. But whilst hope remained, Eloise would not forget her.

“A future you would decide for me?” she asked, and her father drew in a heavy breath.

“I want what’s best for you, Eloise. But what’s best for you isn’t necessarily what you might think. You’ve done nothing to secure a match for yourself. I’ve been very lenient in the matter. Most fathers would’ve decided long ago and left the matter there. You had two seasons, and now it’s your third. No... my mind’s made up,” he declared.

They drove on in silence, crossing the Thames at London Bridge and then on past the Palace of Westminster into Mayfair. The ball was to be held in a grand assembly room, the front of which was decked with banners and lit torches, with footmen lining the steps as fashionable young women and immaculately dressed gentlemen made their way inside.

“Let’s get it over with then,” Eloise huffed, as the carriage door was opened for her.

“No, let’s see you enjoy yourself, Eloise. That’s what. I don’t want any more of your nonsense. Come now, there’s someone I want you to meet,” her father said, offering Eloise his arm as they made their way inside.

Eloise sighed. She had a feeling she knew who this person would be – Lord George Crawford, son of the Earl of Mismarch. Her father had mentioned him on several occasions over the past few weeks. They had met at Boodles Club, and Eloise’s father considered him a suitable match. But Eloise thought differently. She had heard of Lord Crawford’s reputation and had the unfortunate luck of encountering his sisters, Penelope and Claudia, at dinner earlier in the year. They were twins, and what one said, the other agreed with. They were haughty and arrogant, and had looked down their nose at Eloise, and passed comment on her, according to them, allegedly missing sister.

“If it’s Lord Crawford, I’m not interested in him,” Eloise hissed, as they stepped into the grand entrance hall of the

assembly rooms.

“You’ll do as I say, Eloise. Do you understand?” her father ordered, as now they were announced by the Master of Ceremonies.

“The Right Honourable The Viscount Snowden and his daughter, Miss Eloise Snowden,” he declared, bowing to them, as Eloise’s distant cousin, Cybil, came hurrying over.

She was a confirmed spinster, not related to the Viscount save by marriage on Eloise’s mother’s side. Seven seasons had not seen her achieve any success in finding a husband. But without a father to force the issue, Cybil had remained unattached. She was an orphan, but with ample inherited means by which she lived a comfortable life, spending her time flitting between salons and soirees, interfering in other people’s business and never minding her own.

“Oh, Eloise, how lovely to see you!” she exclaimed, kissing Eloise on both cheeks.

She was a short woman, her height extenuated by a large peacock feather worn in her hair, which was pinned up to add extra height. She wore a pretty peach dress, though her figure was too round to carry it well, and she looked as though her seams were about to split.

“Cousin Cybil, how nice to see you,” Eloise said.

Eloise’s father cleared his throat.

“I want you to meet Lord Crawford,” he said, ignoring Cybil, whom he had never made any pretense to care for.

“Oh, he’s over there helping himself to the punch,” Cybil offered, pointing towards the refreshment table.

Eloise could see a tall man with short, black hair, wearing a blue frock coat and a high starched collar. Behind him stood the two Crawford sisters, watching the proceedings of the ball from behind their fans.

*And no doubt passing the most vicious comments.*

She had no desire to be the object of their attentions, but now her father stepped forward, calling out to Lord Crawford, who

turned to greet him.

“Ah, Viscount Snowden, how pleased I am to see you, and... you, too, Miss Eloise Snowden,” he said, holding out his hand to Eloise, who took it and nodded.

She could feel the eyes of Penelope and Claudia now fixed on her and almost hear their barbed thoughts, as Lord Crawford smiled at her.

“A pleasure, I’m sure,” she said.

“But the pleasure’s all mine, Miss Snowden. Your father has told me... all about you,” he continued.

Eloise could only imagine what her father had told him about her – her need for a husband, her obsession with her sister’s disappearance, her lack of will for remaining anything but a spinster. It was hardly an attractive proposition, and she wondered if perhaps her father had said nothing save praising her as a wallflower ready to bloom.

“I’m sure he has, Lord Crawford,” Eloise remarked, glancing at her father, who nodded.

“I’m sure you’ll find plenty in common with one another,” he said, stepping back and disappearing into the throng.

Lord Crawford smiled at Eloise and offered her his arm. He was not an unattractive man for he possessed a handsome face and an aquiline nose. But it was his demeanor that gave Eloise cause for concern. He had a thinly veiled sneer on his face, as though he knew he was taking pity on her. The thought of spending the evening in his company filled her with dread.

“Won’t you have some punch, Miss Snowden? It’s rather good,” Penelope said, giving Eloise a smile a snake might give before it strikes.

“Oh, thank you.” Eloise took the proffered cup.

But as Penelope handed her the glass, she appeared to lurch forward, quite by accident, of course, spilling the contents down Eloise’s dress and expressing the sincerest apologies as she did so.

“Goodness me, look at you, you’re soaked!” she exclaimed, as Eloise stepped back and looked down at her dress.

Penelope was right. Her dress was soaked through, and all she could do was pull her shawl around her and hope no one noticed.

“How clumsy of you, Penelope,” Camilla said, shaking her head and smiling apologetically at Eloise, who sighed.

“It’s quite all right, I’m sure,” she murmured.

“A little dancing might help,” Lord Crawford proposed.

The musicians were getting up a waltz. He took Eloise’s arm and led her towards the dance floor. His grip was strong and forceful, and Eloise had no choice but to follow. He was nothing but a rake, and the thought of dancing with him horrified her.

“I’m not much of a dancer,” she admitted, as he slipped his arm around her waist and pulled her into his embrace.

“Your father suggests you’d benefit from some... teaching,” he said, as he whirled her into the waltz.

Eloise gasped. She was not used to men being so forward. What had her father said to him to make him think he could behave like this?

“Teaching? I don’t understand.” She hesitated, and he smiled at her, pulling her into his embrace so that her wet dress was pressed against his shirt.

“The teaching of a man who knows how to please a woman.” He brought his face close to hers, their lips almost touching as she tried to pull away.

“I don’t need anyone to teach me,” she asserted, confused by his words.

“The matter of your sister, your failure to find a husband... your father didn’t need to tell me. I knew it well enough. You’ve been foolish to spend all this time searching for her, Eloise. She’s gone, she’s not coming back. Why not allow yourself some pleasure...” he trailed off, and once again, using the music as a pretext, he pulled her into his embrace. He

touched his lips to her cheek, breathing in her scent and exhaling with a deep sigh.

“Please, Lord Crawford, this is too much,” Eloise gasped.

She tried to free herself from his grip. Surely, her father did not want this for her – a man who would behave so scandalously, and in public, too.

“Too much? I’m only just getting started. No, I know what you need, Eloise. You need a man to take charge of you. You’re a shy wallflower, Eloise, but I’ll tame you like a trailing rose and blossom you,” he taunted, leering at her.

She pushed him away, but he caught her and pulled her back into his embrace. No one around them noticed for it seemed they were merely caught up in the dance. She wanted to scream, but the music was drowning out the surrounding noise. He had her in his clutches. He ran his hands up her waist and across her bosom, his eyes glinting with lust.

“Please, let me go, Lord Crawford. I don’t want to dance with you anymore. I want to go home,” Eloise begged.

Her eyes were filled with tears, and she was struggling in his arms.

“Just one kiss, Eloise. Your supple beauty, the look of your breasts through your wet dress, it’s enough to drive a man to ecstasy,” he cried, and now Eloise kicked his shin, causing him to cry out in pain.

For a moment, his grip loosened, and Eloise pushed him away before hurrying off through the throng, glancing behind her to check he was not following. He scowled at her and waved his hand dismissively. Tears ran down her cheeks as she hurried towards a set of doors that led out onto the terrace. She was hot and breathless, the left shoulder of her dress hanging down and her hair disheveled.

“Oh, how awful, how terrible,” she gasped, leaning on the parapet and breathing in deeply.

She had never known such treatment from a man – his words, his actions, his sense of entitlement. She was shaking with fright and looked around her desperately for a kind face or



shoulder to cry on. But she was alone, the other guests still dancing the waltz she had just escaped from. She wanted to go home, even though she knew her father would be angry with her for how she had rejected the match he made for her. She would be the one to blame, not the rakish Lord Crawford.

“Wicked man,” she cringed, straightening her dress and sighing.

Her breathing had returned to normal, and now she looked out across the garden, where the moon was rising in the distance as the sun set over the trees. It would have been a pleasant place had its image not been tarnished by the atrocities she had just been subject to. Her dress was still wet, and she dared not return inside lest Lord Crawford seeks her out again. Instead, Eloise made her way down the steps to the garden, which was laid out formally with box hedges and rose beds, the paths leading to a central point with a fountain and a sundial.

*It would be pretty... oh, why am I here? Why all this nonsense? I don't want to marry, and I'm certainly not going to marry Lord Crawford.*

She would rather suffer her father's wrath than give in to his demands. Eloise would never have chosen a man like this, and she could only imagine what venom he was spitting to his two sisters, who would no doubt take it upon themselves to find a way of humiliating Eloise further. The spilled punch had not been an accident. It had been a warning.

*But I'm not going to be a pawn in anyone's game.*

She sat down on a stone bench by the fountain and watched as a plume of water spurted up from the mouth of a stone cherub, who was balanced disbelievingly on the lips of a stone fish, which appeared to be leaping from the water's surface.

She was so taken up with the sight of the water that at first she did not hear footsteps approaching, until with a sudden gasp, she turned and found a man approaching her...

**Want to know how the story ends? Tap on the link below to read the rest of the story.**

**A Duke to Save Her**

**Thank you very much!**

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Born in the Sunshine State of Florida, but of both British and Nordic descent, **Scarlett Osborne** grew up reading historical romances from the land of her ancestors. Fascinated with the British society of the 1800s and armed with a wild imagination, she obtained a degree in Creative Writing and immediately started her career as a Regency romance author.

A daydreamer extraordinaire, Scarlett likes to jump in the shoes of her heroines, immersing herself in her own stories, living the adventures that she wished she had experienced as a child. An avid reader and fan of the outdoors, Scarlett spends her free time either reading or going on long horseback rides along with her two sons.

Get lost in a land of enchantment, where adventure and love await around every corner...Scarlett hopes that through her heroes, you too will get to live a whirlwind romance in the Regency era, when fairytales were real and all dreams possible!

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